Secret theatre

*Off-the-grid performance practices in socialist Poland and Czechoslovakia*

Ryabets, O.

Publication date
2019

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction

In her autobiography, the superstar of the Bolshoi Ballet, Maya Plisetskaya, relayed the confusion around numerous dinner invitations sent to her by foreign embassies in the late-Soviet decades (1953–1991). While accepting such invitations during Stalin's lifetime would mean, in the ballerina's words, a “one-way ticket to Siberia...”\(^1\), the appropriate reaction became less obvious from 1953, which marked the year of Stalin’s death and the beginning of relatively liberal reforms in the USSR, known as the Thaw. Plisetskaya wrote about how she would receive a phone call from the theatre director's office, informing her of a specific invitation. She recalled the type of advice that would accompany this conversation: “It is not recommended that you go. However, decide for yourself. But I wouldn't go. We, just to be on the safe side, have already reported that you are busy.”\(^2\) On other occasions, though, the process would be inverted, and the ballerina would be informed that “[t]here was a call from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maya Mikhailovna. It is very important that you be at the French reception tomorrow. The ambassador himself is a big fan of yours.”\(^3\) Plisetskaya eventually realized that her attendance at embassy dinners lay at the crossroads of two powerful government organizations – the KGB and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since both organizations had different interests, the ballerina was alternatively advised to attend or not attend the same type of events.

Plisetskaya's anecdote illustrates a common leitmotif of Soviet life, both within the USSR and in its sphere of influence. One of the characteristics of socialism in the Eastern Bloc\(^4\), starting with the immediate post-World War II period and up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, was an ever-evolving debate over what was allowed. Soviet policy regarding this matter was often inconsistent and opaque, with a high degree of censure and a non-systematic approach.\(^5\) The resulting cultural environment pushed many artists, academics and individualists out of the public eye. The system’s concern with what could and could not be publicly permitted unwittingly enabled the creation of a shadow world: intellectuals and artists began to carry out activities normally intended for the wide public – such as theatre performances or book publishing – in private. Their move to private domains resulted in cultural hybrids, where the public and the private domains coexisted – self-publishing (*samizdat*), underground universities, apartment theaters, exhibitions and concerts.

These activities and pastimes could have a variety of motivations: from political activism to education, artistic experimentation or entertainment through to a complete removal from the social system. Frequently, these undertakings were decidedly apolitical, yet managed to disrupt the status quo. Scholars have coined a number of terms for such fringe, off-the-grid practices and the study thereof:

---

\(^1\)Plisetskaya:1994, 171

\(^2\)Ibid

\(^3\)The ballerina's full story looked like this:

...позвонят тебе по внутреннему телефону на репетицию, пять раз извинятся: - Мая Михайловна, для Вас на четверг приглашение есть. Зайдите, будьте добры, как закончите, в ложу дирекции... Зайдешь, а тебе совет дают...- Ходить не рекомендовано. Впрочем, сами решайте. Но я бы не пошел. Мы, на всякий случай, уже сообщили, что Вы заняты. Но - сами решайте... Но бывало и наоборот. - Звонили из Министерства иностранных дел, Мая Михайловна. Очень важно, чтобы Вы были завтра на приеме у французов. Сам посол - Ваш большой поклонник. Слишком поздно я смекнула, что у двух могущественных организаций - КГБ и Министерства иностранных дел - два разных интереса. (Плисецкая:1994, 171)

\(^4\)Ibid

\(^5\)The Eastern Bloc consisted of Communist-controlled states stretching from Central and Eastern Europe to East and Southeast Asia largely controlled by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It included Poland and former Czechoslovakia.

\(^5\)Yurchak:2016
the informal public (Zdravomyslova, Voronkov: 2003), deterritorialized places (Yurchak: 2016), strange places (Heczková, Svatoňová: 2016), islands of freedom (Stárek: 2010), archeology of the everyday (Boym: 2014) and anthropology of the everyday (Sulima: 2000). Although all of these terms address the same types of phenomena, they are not synonymous. For instance, Voronkov’s informal public refers to places of individual freedom as specific locations, while Yurchak’s deterritorialized places are more conceptual in nature. Heczková, Svatoňová and Stárek work in a specifically Czech context, although their terminology could be extended to other regions. For Boym, archeology of the everyday means uncovering a specific type of memory, while Sulima has developed new theories around post-Soviet Polish supermarkets or the aesthetics of children’s rooms.

This study examines such informal practices in Poland and former Czechoslovakia between 1950 and 1989. The analysis focuses on four projects that centered around theatrical performances or similar activities – two Polish and two Czech: the Theatre on Tarczyńska Street (1955–1958, Warsaw), the Separate Theatre (1958–1963, Warsaw), Footprint on the Window (1973–1975, Brno) and the Pataphysics Collegiate of Teplice (1980–1986, Teplice). I analyze each within its respective socio-political context and in relation to the locations in which they took place: private apartments or public areas. My sources come from two years of work in Prague and six months in Warsaw, and they combine scholarly studies in Czech, Polish, Russian, English and French, along with out-of-print editions, underground press, personal archives and interviews. In addition, I have spent five years living and working as a theatre director in Prague – this may explain, in part, the somewhat more prevalent number of Czech cultural references and historical examples in my study.

While a contribution to the historical debate is not the primary goal of this project, historical positioning is important because my case studies cannot be examined separately from their context. In addition, my use of certain terminology, especially that of Alexei Yurchak, orients my project towards the growing body of works that have refined the understanding of the Soviet Union, such as Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era (2016), edited by Dina Fainberg and Artemy M. Kalinovskiy, which includes studies that “complicate Alexei Yurchak's notion that Soviet citizens perceived late socialist reality as quite stable,” among others. This contribution on the part of my project is also timely against the backdrop of contemporary media's framing of the Cold War era and a so-called New Cold War.

While the term New Cold War is of fairly recent coinage, the topic has already managed to elicit a number of scholarly articles. In the most recent one to date (2018), the author Vasile Rotaru has observed a “resuscitation” of Cold War narratives in contemporary Russia. Others, such as Ionela Maria Ciolan, have claimed that the New Cold War is a “... symbolic concept used to strengthen Russia’s great power narrative.” In view of observations such as these, it becomes important to keep in mind the reality behind the original Cold War rhetoric. Just as during the 1980s, it is easy to fall back on binary interpretations of complex cultural processes. To avoid this, historian Patryk Babiracki has advised an examination “not at the very top, but mid-level, among the people who lived the experience on both sides.” Although in Babiracki’s case, this means careful consideration of ground-level experiences of “individual soviet officials, cultural figures, and activists drawn into the process of remaking Polish culture,” I take a cue from him when it comes to re-evaluating the binary interpretations of the history of Eastern Bloc countries and the Soviet Union. Babiracki has explained that “[s]cholars have closely studied the effects of Soviet actions in eastern Europe; but these same

---

6 Fainberg, Kalinovskiy:2016, xvii
7 Rotaru:2018
8 Ionela Maria Ciolan:2016
9 Babiracki:2015, 155
10 Ibid
Soviet actions were often expected to speak alone about the expansive nature of the Soviet system.” Babiracki, along with other scholars, such as Alexei Yurchak, has advised a more nuanced approach.

**Research Question**

I have set up several limitations in order to delineate my case studies from other, closely related types of activities. To this end, my case studies are not examples of self-defined oppositional projects or movements, such as Czech Charta 77 or Polish Solidarność nor are they projects undertaken by well-known or established artists, such as Vlasta Chramostová, Václav Havel, Tadeusz Kantor or Miron Białoszewski (at a later stage in his career). They come close to subcultures as defined by Juliane Fürst in her work on *dropping out* of Socialism because Fürst discusses “the creation of alternative spheres.” However, my case studies do not quite fit Fürst's definition, because, rather than choosing “non-participation” (as the cases in her book), the creators of my case studies chose rather to participate differently by rearranging (or, to use the terminology of cognitive studies, re-blending) various elements of the main culture. This is especially true in Eduard Váček's case (see Chapter 3).

From the perspective of cognitive studies, namely the advanced blending theory, humans are able to collectively construct and inhabit an imaginary space or a world – for example, during a theatre performance such a space is created through the collaboration between the actors, the technicians and the audience. Constructing a theory of imaginary worlds, J.P. Wolf defined them as “the surroundings and places experienced by a fictional character (or which could be experienced by one) that together constitute a unified sense of place with is ontologically different from the actual, material, and so-called 'real' world” which may be “…as large as a universe, or as small as an isolated town.” As I discuss later on, imaginary spaces and their relation to reality also appear in the work of Michel Foucault (heterotopia) and Henri Lefebvre (representational space). In post-soviet scholarship, we can see them in Yurchak's Imaginary West and *determinitorialization*, Heczková/Svatoňová's *strange places* or Roch Sulima's anthropology of Polish everyday life. According to theories of imaginary worlds and studies of imagination in cognitive science, an imaginary world is closely related to the so-called “real” or what Lefebvre called “physical” world.

In view of the above, this study asks the following: can Theatre on Tarczyńska Street, the Separate Theatre, Footprint on the Window and the Pataphysics Collegiate of Teplice be interpreted as imaginary spaces that bypass reality by engaging multiple inversions of it? In other words, could they be interpreted as imaginary micro-worlds constructed on several separate occasions through interventions into the collective cognitive blends of the participants? What does this interpretation mean to Yurchak's notion of deterritorialization?

**Central Concepts**

This project draws on recent insights in sociological, anthropological and cultural-historical studies to explain how personal identity formation relates to space and to delve into the informal performative projects in Soviet-influenced societies. To understand how space and identity interact within such phenomena as apartment theaters (Ch.2) or public performances (Ch.3), I rely on Alexei Yurchak’s notion of *determinitorialization* – a term that Yurchak borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin and which, in both Yurchak’s and my contexts, means “…conceptual spaces that the system cannot describe and does not expect, because they do not coincide with its discourse, but are not in opposition to it.” To describe

---

11Ibid
12See Fürst:2016
13See McConachie and Hart:2006, Introduction
14Wolf:2017, 377 (quoted in Hynes)
15ibid
16Yurchak:2016, 16
how such deterritorialized spaces appear within a home, I build on Michel Foucault’s thinking about heterotopias – spaces of otherness, where mainstream reality does not apply.\textsuperscript{17} A heterotopia is traditionally a place that is removed from society’s established system – for instance, a prison, a graveyard or a theatre. In such places, behaviors are structured differently than in the primary reality. In this study, I am interested in how a heterotopical space is constructed. For example, this occurs (as I discuss in detail in Ch.2) when a public lecture, theatre show or concert is delivered in a private apartment. After inspecting domestic heterotopias, I turn to deterritorialized spaces outside the domestic sphere. To approach these, I rely on a new term from Czech scholarship that describes heterotopical pockets in the everyday cultural life of socialist Czechoslovakia. This term is \textit{strange places}, and it was coined in 2016 by Czech cultural analysts Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová.\textsuperscript{18} A strange place is closely related to a heterotopia, but differs in one important way: a heterotopia is a space in which different rules apply and in which our behavior is adjusted accordingly (for example, in a theatre, we act differently than in normal life), whereas a \textit{strange place} is a regular space that is, inversely to a heterotopia, \textit{rendered} strange by a particular set of irregular behaviors (for example, a pub chosen as a site for an event is transformed). To elaborate on how strange places were formed within a socialist system, I look to a 2002 study by Russian scholars Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov. Their study defines the phenomenon of the \textit{informal public} as a sphere of individual freedom and an alternative to the binary private-public.\textsuperscript{19} I introduce each notion in more detail within the appropriate chapters.

These terms – “\textit{strange places},” “heterotopia” and “deterritorialization” – help us to understand how off-the-grid performance cultures in Eastern-Bloc Czechoslovakia and Poland worked. In addition, this study operates under the overall notions of \textit{non-narrative identity} and \textit{soviet system}. These two concepts provide the foundational background to my analysis. For this reason, I define both ideas here in the introduction and then refer back to them throughout the study.

\textbf{The Soviet System}

Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, along with Johnathan Bolton, Natalia Lebina and others to whose analyses I return in the later chapters, takes issue with binary terminology that interprets Soviet and socialist history in terms of a series of oppositions, such as dissident-regime, oppression-freedom, and so on. Yurchak employs the term \textit{system}, rather than regime or something similar, to address the structure of Soviet society. He takes his time to explain what he means by “system,” and I will pause here to provide a definition as well. According to Yurchak, “[u]nder ‘system’ we understand a configuration of socio-cultural, political, economic, legal, ideological, official, unofficial, public, personal and other types of relations, institutions, identifications and meanings, from which the living space of citizens is composed.”\textsuperscript{20} This set of characteristics developed from the fact that “… the ‘Soviet system’ constantly changed and experienced internal shifts …”\textsuperscript{21} As a result of this flux, the system “… included not only strict principles, norms and rules and not only declared ideological attitudes and values, but also a multitude of internal contradictions to these norms, rules, attitudes and values. It was full of internal paradoxes, unpredictability and unexpected possibilities, including the potential

\textsuperscript{17}Foucault:1971
\textsuperscript{18}Heczková, Svatoňová:2016
\textsuperscript{19}Zdravomyslova, Voronkov:2002
\textsuperscript{20}“Этот термин, как и любой термин, имеет некоторые проблемы, и мы будем его использовать определенным образом и лишь время от времени, ради простоты и ясности изложения. Под "системой" мы понимаем конфигурацию социально-культурных, политических, экономических, юридических, идейных, официальных, неофициальных, публичных, личных и других видов отношений, институтов, идентификаций и смыслов, из которых слагается пространство жизни граждан.” (Юрчак:2016, 36-37)
\textsuperscript{21}“...'советская система' постоянно менялась и испытывала внутренние сдвиги..."(Юрчак:2016, 37)
possibility to collapse quite quickly under certain conditions (as happened at the end of perestroika).”

Such a system allowed for the creation of the phenomena I address in this study, and for this reason, it is important to understand how this system functioned.

Yurchak uses the term to talk about the Soviet Union and Soviet Russia in particular. However, as Bolton confirms, the nature of Soviet-style socialism was just as complex and fluctuating in other countries. For instance, we can observe this system at work in post-1968 Czechoslovakia, where the occupation resulted in, at first glance, a straightforward occupants-victims situation but, on closer examination, caused vertical and horizontal societal shifts, generated a theatrical double-ness in political circles and engendered a contradictory new social stratum. As an example of the systematic paradox and unpredictability, we can look at the societal flip, which resulted in the post-1968 wave of professional purges in former Czechoslovakia (I return to these in some detail in Chapter 1). Following the invasion by the Warsaw Pact troops, a large number of people lost their jobs, starting with the party ranks and moving on to various professional organizations. The change landed many devoted communists in the same boat as the dissidents, since both of these groups suddenly found themselves in a similar situation: unemployed and out of grace with the Communist Party. Eduard Vácek, whose project I address in Chapter 3, recalls how the purges affected his own family:

Time passed quietly, but when the year 1968 came, along with the entry of the so-called friendly troops, the situation in our family changed ... My father was thrown out of the party and had a nervous breakdown as a result of this sudden termination of his career. He went into disability retirement, had trouble with his heart and never recovered. Those of his friends who were also ejected from the Party started to meet up in our house, drinking and nostalgically remembering the “old times.”

The case of Vácek's father is an individual example of a shift within the entire system, which declared a punishable offense today that which only yesterday was encouraged. The motivation for post-1968 purges is fairly clear: they were an extension of the process that began with the invasion. However, the regulating forces of such shifts where frequently unpredictable and could not be plausibly explained even by the party itself. In Czech scholarship, such processes are sometimes described as a theatre of the absurd, not only because of their public, performative nature but also because, as Bolton explains, they “... were not only intended to choose people for further persecution, but created a institutionalized a strange type of political theatre, based on ritual humiliation and showcase of insincere obedience, and all of this expressed itself in the absurd newspeak of bureaucratic communism.” In other words, the framework of the system remained the same (Socialist Czechoslovakia), but the system itself experienced an internal shift. This change caused rifts which, as I explore in later chapters, allowed for the growth of non-oppositional parallel worlds.

22“...она включала в себя не только строгие принципы, нормы и правила и не только заявленные идеологические установки и ценности, но и множество внутренних противоречий этим нормам, правилам, установкам и ценностям. Она была полна внутренних парадоксов, непредсказуемостей и неожиданных возможностей, включая потенциальную возможность довольно быстро разрушиться при введении определенных условий (что и произошло в конце перестройки).” (Юрчак:2016, 37)
23Just, Bolton, Pánek, Tůma et al, Vaněk
24Year of invasion of Czechoslovakia by the troops of the Warsaw Pact
25Vácek:2015, see Appendix A of this study
26Bolton:2015, 92
In addition to the idea of Soviet system, I rely on the concept of non-narrative identity as a foundational notion of this study. I borrow the term from cognitive science and psychology and then build upon it with the assistance from Gilles Deleuze. The cognitive scientist Mark Turner explains an “identity” as “a compression, which we carry around with us and expand on the spot to fit what we need to think about.” It is a useful mechanism that allows us to manage large mental webs, which span long time periods and include millions of connections. According to Turner, “an idea like the cyclic day or the Supreme Court of the United States is a manufactured, compressed identity.” The following is an example of how our minds compress large quantities of data into identities: we are not capable of processing all the days we ever experienced or will experience. To manage such a large amount of information, we take all the individual days and compress them into an idea of a cyclic, repeatable day. This is now an identity.

Our notion of a stable self is also such an identity. The self is a single idea that is actually a compression of many different selves over a long stretch of time: past, present and future. Turner argues here that there are two sides to a self – the one we perceive as a stable, single identity and the other, which is a vast and fluctuating mental web. The seemingly stable identity is one we can easily narrate – evidenced by our ability to compose autobiographies. The mental web, however, seems to be generally less available to our consciousness and is thus not easily (or at all) communicated. In other words, we are in possession of a narrative and a non-narrative self.

Identities of self are necessarily, also, cultural identities. According to the psychologists Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean (2013), “narrative identity is a person’s internalized and evolving life-story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of meaning.” Narrative identity is “exquisitely contextualized in culture,” depending on the stories we tell, and it presents “semantic conclusions from episodic information.” Turner confirms that “[c]ultures ferociously support, maintain and enforce such blended conceptions of an abiding self. Cultures invest a great deal of language in providing fixed names to the personal self in the blend,” and “[s]trong rituals are invented by culture to magnify and increase the analogical connections over time, such as birthdays.”

However, while this identity is indispensable for our ability to manage the vast mental web of “self,” it necessarily excludes an entire range of experiences that are anachronistic, episodic, paradoxical, impossible to verbalize and otherwise unfit to integrate into a narrative to be shared with others. McAdams and McLean say that it is the ability to gloss over “contradictions and paradoxes of life experiences.” The more inclusive alternative would be what Marek Pienazek calls a “non-narrative method of constructing identity.” In essence, the creation of deterritorialized spaces and heterotopias is the process of constructing such non-narrative identities. For example, when Miron Białoszewski developed his apartment theatre, he created a space where his (and his visitors’ and co-creators’) non-narrative selves could flourish away from prying eyes (see Chapter 2).

Gilles Deleuze echoes this cognitive duality in his essay Politics, where he identifies two sets of “lines”

27 Turner: 2014, 59
28 ibid.; italics in original
29 Adams, McLean: 2013, 235
30 ibid
31 ibid
32 Turner: 2014, 65
33 McAdams and McLean: 2013, 235
34 “...o nienarracyjnym sposobie konstruowania tożsamości we współczesnej kulturze...” (Pieniążek: 2010, 88)
that make up who we are. One – the line of, say, school or work – is rigid and segmented, and it is our official history. The other is a “molecular” flow. Deleuze writes that “[m]any things happen along this second line – becomings, micro-becomings – that don’t have the same rhythm as our ‘history’.”

Rather than a line per se, this is an ephemeral current composed of a myriad of moments too small to notice in isolation. This current forms a background to our official history in the form of everyday life, especially private and domestic life, which is the source of Deleuze's “molecular flow.” From the above, it follows that to understand narrative identity, we must explore the public, the narrative, the chronological and the semantic, since narrative identity “builds slowly over time as people tell stories about their experiences to and with others.” By contrast, to understand the non-narrative, we must turn our attention away from the public and the describable, towards the private, the secret, the anachronistic and the undefinable or unnamable.

The notion of non-narrative identity matters to my analysis of Czech and Polish projects because it helps to explain why these projects were necessary and satisfying for their creators and audiences. While narrative identity can be rigid and heavily dependent on external social forces (for example, if a CEO is downsized from her job, then she is no longer a CEO), the non-narrative component of human identity (the part of the CEO that is not affected by things such as downsizing – for instance, the complex range of emotions she experiences when smelling a cinnamon bun) leaves some room when it comes to experimenting with the type of activities I examine in the upcoming chapters. An understanding of the difference between narrative and non-narrative identity construction (and how my case studies operated between the two) helps to illuminate why informal, non-oppositional activities created a sense of freedom for their makers and audiences and how this freedom provided a temporary release from the narrative.

Existing Literature

Between 1989 and today, scholars have produced an undeniably wide scope of literature about informal cultures and everyday life in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc – in Russian, Polish, Czech, German and English, ranging from popular journalism by Mariusz Szczygieł (2007, 2011) to scholarly works by František Černý (2008) and Vladimír Just (2010) or Ivan Klimeš (2016). However, the majority of studies on the topic have focused on one region or dissident activities, and hardly any of these volumes acknowledge and address life beyond and outside the historical narrative. Information on informal practices has been found mostly in personal archives and memoirs, such as those of writer Pavel Kohout (1987), historian Hanna Kirchner (1996), actress Vlasta Chramostová (1999) and poet Miron Bialoszewski (2012), as well as collections of interviews (Straková, Linková: 2017; Miroslav Vaněk: 2009). Autobiographic writing and interviews provide us with valuable information about the everyday; however, these recollections remain, by their very nature, constrained to a small group of people and usually one or two locations; moreover, they do not analyze the larger historical, sociological and/or cultural-analytical implications of the narrative.

A number of publications have approached the subject from a wider or scholarly perspective, although none have done so in a cross-cultural and multidisciplinary way, meaning that they focus on one country and do not stray beyond the boundaries of one field (such as history or theatre studies). These publications include Gramatyka i Mistyka (Grammar and Mysticism, 1997), which is Jacek

---

35Deleuze and Parnet, in During:2008, 173
36McAdams and McLean:2013, 235
37Gramatyka i Mistyka by Jacek Kopciński (1997); Baráky, Souostrovi svobody by Jiří Kostur and František Čuňas Stárek (2010); Człowiek Miron by Tadeusz Sobolewski (2012); The Kingdom of Insignificance: Miron Bialoszewski and the Quotidian, the Queer, and the Traumatic by Joanna Nizyńska (2013); Permanentní avantgarda? Surrealismus v Praze by Anja Tippnerová (2014); Kultura a Totalita edited by Ivan Klimeš and Jan Wiendl (2016)
Kopciński’s detailed analysis of Miron Białoszewski’s theatre; *Baráky, Souostrovi svobody* (Cottages, Islands of Freedom, 2010), Jiří Kostúr’s and František Čuňas Stářek’s collection of archival materials highlighting Czechoslovak cottage culture; Tadeusz Sobolewski’s *Człowiek Miron* (Person Miron, 2012) and Joanna Nizyńska's *The Kingdom of Insignificance: Miron Białoszewski and the Quotidian, the Queer, and the Traumatic* (2013), both of which take a closer look at Białoszewski’s personality; and Anja Tippnerová’s *Permanetní avantgarda? Surrealismus v Praze* (The Permanent Avantgarde? Surrealism in Prague, 2014), which is an analysis of Czech surrealists. In addition, a growing selection of literature exists on informal culture in the Soviet Union – for instance Vladimir Paperny’s *Culture Two* (1985) on space and power; Natalia Lebina’s volumes on late-Soviet relationship to identity, gender and everyday life (1999, 2016, 2017); Ilya Utekhin's studies of Soviet communal apartments and everyday urban rituals (2001, 2012); Svetlana Boym's analyses of post-Soviet nostalgia and everyday spaces (1994, 2001); and Alexei Yurchak's book on late-Soviet decades, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* (2006, 2016 in Russian edition, which is the one used in this study). These works provide valuable information on Soviet policies towards identity building and everyday practices, many of which have extended beyond Russia.

This study aims to open scholarly discussion on informal Czech and Polish culture that is both attentive to the reality of life in those conditions and is aware of a larger context that can demonstrate these phenomena as a cross-cultural set of cultural practices. Historian Jonathan Bolton has already offered such a discussion in the introduction to the Czech edition of his *Worlds of Dissent* (2015). Bolton has sought to “offer an alternative to the existing interpretations, which ... perceive [opposition] mainly as a political strategy.”  

He has moved away from what he calls “narratives” of dissent, which, according to him, necessarily exclude and conceal the more subtle aspects of history. However, Bolton has focused on the everyday lives of famous dissidents, such as Václav Havel; by implication, his work sheds little light on those activities which were not strictly, not even by self-definition, oppositional. The growing field of informal studies has been a further source of research materials for this thesis. This area is undoubtedly helpful, yet existing studies indicate that my work fills a gap in existing scholarship. For example, an expansive, two-volume collection of essays titled *The Global Encyclopedia of Informality* (2018) and edited by Alena Ledeneva, promises “... to explore society’s open secrets, to comprehend unwritten rules and to uncover informal practices.” However, out of two volumes, only one essay is devoted to Poland and another to the Czech Republic. Neither essay deals with Soviet-era informality. Nevertheless, there are volumes specifically devoted to informal practices in the regions, and they are of interest to me. These volumes include the already-mentioned *Antropologia Codziенноści* (The Anthropology of the Everyday, 2000) by Roch Sulima and *Kultura a Totalita IV – Každodennost* (Culture and Totalitarianism IV – The Everyday), which is a 2016 collection of essays on Czechoslovakia. Neither of these, however, is available to a wider, respectively non-Polish or non-Czech audience, nor do these volumes offer a cross-cultural analysis.

My study focuses largely on projects that, in some or other, involve performance. However, perhaps with the exception of Miron Białoszewski’s Separate Theatre, one will not find mention of my case studies in theatre history books. This is not only because of the fringe status of these endeavors but also because they evade categorization, comprising elements of theatre, performance art and urban ritual. At the same time, the theatrical roots of my case studies must be acknowledged. For instance, the Polish projects I analyze were deeply inspired by the French 1920s project *Theatre Art et Action*. Almost no information is available on this group, save for a thorough collection of archives by Michel Corvin.

---

38barak - similar to Russian and Polish dacha and also knowns as chata or chalupa in Czech

39Bolton:2015, 12

40ibid

41Ledeneva:2018, vii

Some gems I came across along the way include the original 1911 publication of Alfred Jarry's *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien*; hand-typed transcripts of lectures from the underground university that was run by Ivan Havel (Václav's younger brother) in socialist Prague; a manuscript of a collection of short plays by the Prague Surrealists, performed in the apartment of Vratislav Effenberger sometime in the 1920s; and recordings of Miron Białoszewski staging his Separate Theatre plays for radio.

Each of these studies and sources has informed and enriched my thinking about the history of Czech and Polish performance practices. However, while they have chronicled and isolated instances, they have not examined what I highlight as perennial to Central and Eastern European underground culture: its wave of activity traceable across borders and decades. My project examines informal performances not as separate historical occurrences but as a whole. In this way, my study fills a gap in the current understanding of post-WWII Polish and Czech culture as well as the Soviet system in general.

It is important to note that Yurchak, along with many others whose work contributes to my conceptual framework, is a Russian-American scholar writing about Soviet Russia. I therefore apply his (and others’) concepts to my material carefully and with due attention paid to the nuance with which the Soviet system (homogenous to a degree) manifested itself in Poland and former Czechoslovakia. At the same time, as Svetlana Boym has pointed out, “[w]hile there are vast differences between the USSR and Eastern and Central Europe, one could speak about one common feature of the alternative intellectual life in these countries from the 1960s to the 1980s” a development of ‘counter-memory’ that laid a foundation of democratic resistance and arguably was a prototype of a public sphere that already emerged under the Communist regime.”

In this way, when we discuss the emergence of the *performative shift, heterotopias* or *strange places* across Eastern and Central Europe, we can arrive at conclusions that are parallel to (though not synonymous with) post-Soviet scholarship.

**Analytical Structure**

The study consists of three chapters, bracketed by this Introduction and the final Concluding Notes. I have also included an English translation of my interview with Eduard Vácek, which is integral to Chapter 3, as an Appendix. Chapter 1 deals with the historical context. In Chapters 2 and 3, I offer a cross-disciplinary reading of the following case studies: the Theatre on Tarczyńska Street (Warsaw, 1955–1958), the Separate Theatre (Warsaw, 1958–1963), Footprint on a Window (Brno, 1973–1975) and the Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate (Teplice, 1980–1986).

Chapter 1 concerns itself with a stretch of Polish and Czech history from the end of World War II (1945) to the formation of Solidarity (1980) and the Velvet Revolution (1989). I provide relevant definitions – such as the *performative shift, deterritorialization* and *places of vnenahodimost* – which

---

42Boym:2001, 61
are applied in the analysis of case studies in later chapters. This chapter also explains social changes that were instrumental in the establishment of the specific cultural environment of the late Soviet Union. The idiosyncrasies of this cultural environment are largely responsible for the need for heterotopical apartment theaters or strange places on the one hand and, on the other, the systematic inconsistencies that allowed such projects to exist.

Chapter 2 looks at apartments as places of deterritorialization or heterotopia. I rely on recent theories of cognition to explain how the non-narrative self (the aspect of human self-identity that cannot be narrated; see Central Concepts above) is formed in the context of the domestic space. Then, I zoom in on the history of a specific type of apartment housing: that in socialist cities. I examine how this highly specific cognitive blend emerged and I explain how this particular environment allowed for heterotopical bubbles to appear. In the final section, I explain how performance experiments turned a select set of socialist-era apartments into heterotopias. Among the apartment experiments discussed, I devote special attention to three apartments where the performance space was instrumental in the creation of the project – so, rather than ending up in an apartment for, say, security reasons, the projects were inspired by the apartments that housed them. In chronological order, these are the Theatre on Tarczyńska Street (Warsaw), Separate Theatre (Warsaw) and Footprint on the Window (Brno).

In Chapter 3, I continue to identify off-the-grid practices; however, I take them out of the apartment. This chapter introduces the notions of strange places and the informal public. It is then devoted to the Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate, an independent group of artists and intellectuals founded by the Czech writer and chief pataphysician, Eduard Váček. Founded at the beginning of the 1980s, the group was forced to pause their activities with Váček's arrest and imprisonment in 1986 but later resumed meetings and is active to this day. This chapter unpacks the group's founding philosophy – Alfred Jarry's pataphysics – and analyzes how the group materialized Jarry's theories by way of focusing on events staged by the group. The chapter demonstrates how Váček's interpretation of Jarry allowed the Collegiate to deterritorialize public spaces (such as the bus or the park pond). This last chapter of my project is more condensed, with a focus on one case study, and it is accompanied by Váček's interview. Concluding Notes are devoted to the discussion of the outcomes and impact of this study.