Secret theatre

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

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Chapter 3. Strange Places and The Science of Imaginary Solutions

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter deals with a series of performative interjections at a variety of non-domestic locations, all arranged by a Czechoslovak collective called The Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate (1980-86). I approach these events using Alexei Yurchak's thoughts on certain nuances of *vnenahodimost* in combination with the notions of *strange places* (Heczková, Svatoňová) and *the informal public* (Zdravomyslova, Voronkov).

The Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate was founded by the Czech personality Eduard Vácek on the principles of Alfred Jarry's invented pseudoscience of pataphysics and a long-standing Czech tradition of grotesque. At first glance, the activities of the group resemble Czech Action Art or Happenings of Tadeusz Kantor. However, the members of the Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate did not consider their efforts to be art. Rather, they positioned themselves as adherents to a pataphysical doctrine and their events as attempts to materialize the principles of pataphysics in real life. In this way, as I discuss below, they can be likened to what Yurchak calls “deterritorialized lifestyles.” However, in contrast to Yurchak's examples, the members of Vácek's collective led regular lives outside of the pataphysical acts. I propose that their events can rather be interpreted as temporally limited *strange places*, a notion similar to a heterotopia, and examine how the group applied what Yurchak calls the *irony of vnenahodimost* to various tensions in “normalized” Czech space to compose an imaginary “pataphysical” reality.

This chapter is somewhat different from the previous ones: it is shorter, consisting of only one case study and focuses on former Czechoslovakia only. It also leans more heavily on fieldwork in addition to existing historical sources. The fieldwork in this case consisted of personal meetings with the various members of the Libri Prohibiti (Library of Banned Books) in Prague and archival research at this library, resulting in an interview with the founder of The Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate, Eduard Vácek. This interview, transcribed and translated, supplements this chapter as an Appendix and is included at the end of this study.
3.2 Strange Places

Czech scholars Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová introduce the concept of “strange places” in their contribution to the collection of essays *Culture and Totality IV – the Everyday*. To formulate their concept, the authors build on Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization, which to him meant a technique of altering the perception of an audience, to formulate their concept. Heczková and Svatoňová define strange places as “various types of displacement” or “changes in the viewpoint” that can occur as a result of both deliberate activity and changes in circumstance. According to this definition, strange places can appear “at different levels of cultural processes and artistic expressions – for example, in the field of artistic genres, topography, language, thinking, imaging of institutional practices.” The historians point out that the appearance of these places is closely linked to totalitarian societies or “normalized” everyday conditions. This definition also distinguishes strange places from non-places, a term coined by Marc Augé that denotes transitory spaces where people gain a state of anonymity, such as hotel rooms or highways. Heczková and Svatoňová write that, in contrast to non-places, which draw a blank on tradition and identity, “strange places are spaces in which the various traditions overlap, the places overlaid with ‘strange’ meanings, at first glance perhaps invisible.” Their elaboration on the paradoxical relationship between strange places and the dominant system within which they tend to occur is closely reminiscent of Alexei Yurchak’s places of *vnenahodimost* or deterritorialization, which I discussed in detail in earlier chapters. Similar to Yurchak’s concept, strange places “often become a paradoxical knot in which an official, unofficial, and forbidden culture encounters where forbidden is allowed, restrictions are loosened, and official outputs can carry unintended connotations.” In addition to Yurchak’s notion of a place existing in parallel to the dominant system, Heczková and Svatoňová also stress the flexibility of such spaces, concluding that “[s]trange places can be understood as activities and spaces, which are accompanied by the necessity of adaptation and adaptability ...” In a way, a *strange* place is akin to a Brechtian concept of *estrangement*, although the Shklovskian notion predates Brecht, and *strange places*, in an important difference to Brechtian political energies, stem from a need to remove oneself from a politically active role or, indeed, the prevalent socio-political system. In the context of this study, strange places are closely related to the heterotopical and deterritorialized spaces discussed in previous chapters, and they represent another, specifically Czech, way to address similar phenomena.

Non-domestic strange places can be loosely categorized into urban (occurring in cafes or in public transit) and rural (occurring in forests or at cottages). At the same time, they can be examined by the type of movement: for instance, the wave of Czech Action Art encompassed both urban and rural settings; the Czech “islands of freedom” primarily focused on cottages and form an example of the role that *dacha* as a second home played in socialist society, not only in Czechoslovakia but also in

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298*Kultura a totalita IV – Každodennost* (2016, Ivan Klimeš, Jan Wiendl eds.)
299*Heczková and Svatoňová use the Russian word – ostranenie – which Shklovsky introduced it in 1916 and is translated into Czech as ozvlášťmění/defamiliarizace or a weirdening/defamiliarization.
300*Libuše Heczková, Kateřina Svatoňová:2016, 326
301*Hecezková, Svatoňová:2016, 326
302*Augé, Marc. *Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Le Seuil :1992)
303*Heczková, Svatoňová:2016, 326
304*ibid
305*ibid
306*Morganová:2015
307*Stárek:2010
308*Schindler-Wisten:2017
Poland\(^{309}\) and the Soviet Union\(^{310}\); and Białoszewski experimented both with rural performance in his 1940s Forest Theatre\(^{311}\) and with urban deterritorialization during his nighttime city walks, for which he was well-known\(^{312}\) and which positioned him as a sort of inverted, nocturnal \textit{flaneur}.

As Heczková and Svatoňová point out, a strange place can be a location or an action. In other words, it can be a place that has been permanently designated as \textit{strange}, similar to how cemeteries or theaters are heterotopias to Foucault, or can become temporarily \textit{strange} via an activity, the way Stefański's apartment did during a performance. In the first case, simply walking into or standing at such a place afforded a participant a degree of deterritorialization because the location somehow bypassed or inverted everyday reality. In the second case, effort would be made by one or more individuals to deterritorialize a location by inverting or otherwise altering the spatial relationships within it. The location would then remain deterritorialized for the duration of the action, but would cease to be such after the action was over and the relationships within the location would be restored.

Permanently \textit{strange} places in the Normalization-period Czechoslovak context have been categorized by the Czech Underground activist František Stárek. He calls them spaces for \textit{free youth} and catalogues them into four groups. According to Stárek, these were specific pubs, certain street spaces, so-called “open apartments” and workplaces that allowed for living at the location of work. I briefly elaborate on each of Stárek's categories here:

1) Pubs – much like Leningrad’s legendary Café Saigon or Prague’s famous Cafe Slavia, where Václav Havel would meet with other dissidents, pubs were informal gathering places. However, they were different than the well-known dissident cafés. These places, though still officially licensed bars, had a rougher edge to them and were not so much teeming with internationally known intellectuals and StB agents trying to spy on them, as they were with hordes of rowdy, long-haired youths. Some examples of these watering holes in Prague were Na Klamovce, Demínka, U parapliček and many others not only in Prague but also in Teplice, Plzen and Brno, among other areas.

2) The “outside” – this term represents a set of outdoor urban locations that were informally known as meeting points around the city. In Prague, these were the steps in front of the National Museum or the atrium of the Time movie theatre.

3) Open apartments were, as the name suggests, apartment spaces that were openly available for entrance. One of the first such places was Milan Knížák’s home in the center of Prague.

4) The last category of strange places occurred when a place of employment allowed for the person to live on site. Such places were, for instance, the boiler rooms I addressed in Chapter 1.\(^{313}\)

When it comes to temporally limited strange places, simple, everyday actions were frequently used. An example can be seen in the work of the Aktual collective. Aktual was a Czech action art movement, founded by artist and performer Milan Knížák (1940–). Knížák’s aim was to blur or dissolve the boundary between art and life. The resulting body of performances and the first manifesto of \textit{Aktual}...
Art (1964) were hybrids of ritualized and everyday actions. According to Czech art historian Pavlina Morganová, Aktual’s projects at the time were intended to “… strengthen human solidarity and do away with lethargy …” The action that the group used to achieve these aims ranged from the straightforward, such as shaking hands, to those requiring more effort. For instance, Knižák invited his followers to “[s]et up a table in front of your home and have lunch. Invite anyone who passes by to join.” Aktual’s manifesto clearly stated that their focus was to be on “… simple anonymous activity. Walks, lunches, excursions, games, festivities, taking the tram, shopping, conversations, sports, fashion shows, etc. … just a little different. Spontaneous street rituals.” In 1966, Knižák was joined by Robert Wittmann, who “… drew attention to himself with the action Exhibition of Street Reality (Výstava skutečnosti ulice, 1966) … In this action Wittmann hung empty picture frames along a street as to present scenes from life itself: cobbled stone, a chipped wall or random passerby. He was also publishing and distributing various sets of instructions at this time such as: ‘Open a window and listen undisturbed to the piece composed by life’.” Sometimes, Wittmann handed tiny pieces of paper to people on the streets. The piece of paper would carry messages such as “[n]otice the changing pictures when looking at the ground as you walk.”

Along with urban activities, we can also observe a wave of strange places occurring outside of cities. This tendency was, on the one hand, rooted in the perceived neutrality of nature as compared to the ideologically complex urban centers and, on the other, had to do with the resulting increase of privacy and looser control of rural areas. As Utekhin notes, “[t]he closer to the centre, the tighter the control,” meaning that high-rise neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities or rural areas were less strategically important and therefore less monitored. Indeed, while a place such as a busy boulevard in central Prague or Warsaw would certainly be tightly controlled, the further one moved away, the more ambiguous certain rules became. This rule applied not only to the cities but to entire regions, meaning that the further one got from the capital (or a large city), the less likely he or she was to be monitored or arrested. Many artists took advantage of this fact, making the most out of their dachas and chatas or conducting artistic experiments in nature or among the gritty labyrinths of high-rise neighborhoods.

Here, however, simple actions remain a focal point, for example the actions of Miloš Šejn, whose performances consisted of walking alone through a forest or sleeping in a pile of leaves (both 1969). At the same time, colonies that Stárek calls “islands of freedom”, which I mentioned previously, frequently sprung up during the 1960s and 70s in rural dachas. These could be vaguely compared to the American hippie communes and, indeed, were modeled after them to a certain extent. Stárek conducted an extensive series of interviews with former members of these groups, categorizing them by location (see above). Ritualized performance, containing many hybrid elements, was a stable component of these gatherings, accompanied by large doses of irony and alcohol. Marie Benetková, who is one of the people interviewed by František Stárek for his collection of memoirs, recalled an invitation to a private theatre festival from one of the neighboring farms. To prepare for this festival, Benetková and her partner created a performance called That Little Red Skirt, which consisted of four acts: Grandpa Dies, Birth, Wedding and Plague Wound. The performers were costumed in a variety of outfits ranging from a white cloak and a laurel wreath (the character of the
Bride/Magician/Doctor/Announcer) to a “purple denim suit from Poland” (the character of the Executioner). The acts played out in a yard, in the middle of a circle of spectators. The front row of the audience was taken up by so-called “Computer Sons,” whose job was to ignore the performance and discuss computers the entire time. By way of musical accompaniment, the performers sang Czech folk songs save for a brief episode in Act 4, where the Dying Swan from Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake was heard. Benetková’s concluding note on the performance states, “[w]e were not understood.”323 This comment suggests that the point of the activity was not to share a cohesive narrative or impart clear meaning. Rather, the creators of That Little Red Skirt aimed to deterritorialize and hence free the shared space of performance for the duration of the activity.


The Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate is an independent group of artists and intellectuals founded by the Czech writer and chief pataphysician, Eduard Vácek (Fig.3.1). Founded in 1980324, the group was forced to stop its activities after Vácek's arrest and imprisonment in 1986; however, it later resumed meetings and is informally active to this day. In many ways, Vácek's collective carved out a place of vnenahodimost for itself. However, a full discussion of the Teplice project would not be possible without first discussing pataphysics and its significance in a wider Czech context. Therefore, this section of the chapter explains pataphysics and then illustrates how Vácek and his collaborators relied on pataphysical principles to construct deterritorialized or strange spaces. Overall, Vácek's project is a strong example of what Alexei Yurchak calls the irony of vnenahodimost, a specific quality of deterritorialization that I discuss in more detail below.

Pataphysics is a pseudoscience and a philosophy that was invented at the turn of the 20th century by the French playwright and enfant terrible, author of the scandalous Ubu Roi,325 Alfred Jarry (1873–1907). The official document on pataphysics, published posthumously in 1923, is Jarry’s novel Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician, although clues as to the nature of pataphysics appear in other works by Jarry, such as his play Caesar-Antichrist (1895). According to Jarry’s biographer, Alastair Brotchie, Jarry brought the term “pataphysics” with him to Paris from boarding school.326 This imaginary concept historically enjoyed some real success, with the first Pataphysics Collegiate being established in Paris in 1948.327 The first definition of the term, as written in Faustroll, appears in the original edition highlighted in italics and preceded by the capitalized word “DEFINITION.”328 Pataphysics itself is explained as “… the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attribute the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.”329 In other words, pataphysics concerns itself with imaginary realms that go beyond physics and metaphysics. Later on, Jarry expanded this definition, describing pataphysics as “[a]n epiphenomenon” – something that “is superimposed upon a phenomenon.”330 These descriptions place pataphysics in the same realm as heterotopias and strange places – that is, a set of notions concerning imaginary spaces and parallel

323Benetková in Stárek:2010, 70-73
324Borecký, Kopáč
325Ubu Roi or is a, 1896 puppet play set in a fictional kingdom of Poland (which was absent from the maps of Europe at the time). The play scandalized Parisian audiences during its opening by being the first instance of an (almost) curse word being uttered on stage (in this case, merdre! [shit] – see earlier in this study)
326Brotchie:2011
327Brotchie:1995, 11
328Jarry:1911, 5
329“La pataphysique est la science des solutions imaginaires, qui accorde symboliquement aux lineaments les proprietes ses objets decrits par leur virtualite.” (Jarry:1911, 22).
330Brotchie:2011, 29
Jarry’s invention of pataphysics has rich philosophical roots. Brotchie notes that, “[b]iographically speaking, Pataphysics may be considered as the epiphenomenon of Jarry’s attending the class of ... Henri Bergson” and elsewhere adds that “[t]he most immediate effect of Bergson’s teaching ... was to provide the philosophical underpinnings for the young Jarry’s initial formulations of Pataphysics.”

Henri-Louis Bergson (1859–1941) was a well-known French philosopher and Nobel-prize winner, active in the first half of the 20th century. Bergson emphasized intuitive knowledge and direct experience as more important than rational thought. Prior to becoming a person of wide importance, Bergson taught history of philosophy at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris, where Jarry was a student. According to Brotchie, Jarry joined Bergon’s class in 1891, at the age of 18. This was a class that Bergson “endowed ... with a personal slant, and his course commenced with the epistemological problems posed by the interaction of mind and matter. Otherwise, this course of Bergson’s appears to have been quite as peculiar as his own philosophy; it traveled down all sorts of forgotten paths and eccentric dead ends in the history of ideas, and any number of unusual theories were explored.”

Brotchie notes that “[i]deas originating in Bergson’s course would influence much of Jarry’s future writing.”

One of the defining characteristics of pataphysics is the deeply two-faced nature of the concept. Jarry’s sense of humor, combined with his sound philosophical background, meant that pataphysics is, at its core, somewhat of a paradox. Brotchie takes it upon himself to answer the following question: are we to approach pataphysics seriously as a philosophical standpoint or simply take it for an elaborate intellectual joke? According to Brotchie’s sources, the answer is to be found not in Faustroll (the “official” treatise on the subject), but in Jarry’s earlier work — his 1895 play Caesar-Antichrist.

Brotchie carefully traces this “principle of the identity of opposites” from Heraclitus to Coleridge to Gustav Theodor Fechner, bringing them to the table as those who, along with Bergson, made an impact on Jarry’s thought. The sum of these, in Brotchie’s view, totals Jarry’s conviction that the “... distinctions between the serious and the comic were henceforth to be considered invalid.” Instead, they present a hybrid which blends opposing principles to produce an epiphenomenon endowed with new meanings and possibilities.

However, the Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate did not originate from Jarry’s work alone, but was rather built on a specifically Czech tradition of grotesque humor dating back to the Czech National Revival (the 19th and 20th centuries). Czech cultural analyst Vladimír Borecký maps a long tradition of the grotesque in Czech culture in his analysis of Jarry’s pataphysics in the Czech context. Borecký also illustrates Czech prewar artists’ extended fascination with Jarry. For instance, popular comic actor Jiří Voskovec translated Ubu Roi into Czech (published in 1930), and director Jindřich Honzl staged the play in 1928 at Prague’s Liberated Theatre (Osvobožené divadlo). In 1944, during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, Honzl’s students prepared a semi-secret performance of Ubu Roi in Prague's Smetana Museum. In the period immediately following the war, the poet Josef Kainar wrote two plays inspired by Jarry’s original — these were Ubu Continues and Ubu Returns. The latter was performed in
1949 at the Theatre of Satire in Prague and was the last play running before the theatre was shut down because of censorship. Even though, as Borecký points out, neither Voscovec nor Kainar were directly interested in pataphysics, their active introduction of Jarry’s ideas to the Czech stage paved the way for other groups. Borecký notes that the establishment of Soviet power in former Czechoslovakia “led to the appearance of a series of semi-secret groups that were akin to the pataphysical standpoints of absurd comedy.”338 As examples, he cites the work of the poets Egon Bondy and Bohumil Hrabal and notes the 1961 Czech publication of Jarry’s Dr. Faustroll as a turning point for Czech pataphysics. Although a number of Pataphysical Collegiates sprung up during the second half of the 20th century, Vácek's seems to be the only one that sought the practical, real-life application of Jarry’s philosophy, and in that the experiment remains worthy of special attention. In order to gain a deeper understanding of Czech pataphysics, I met with Eduard Vácek in 2013 to discuss his views of pataphysics, his work and his imprisonment.

Duality and a combination of the incompatible have followed Eduard Vácek since early childhood. Vácek was born in 1947 in a Czech town, Hradec Králové,339 into a family with opposing (and strong) political traditions. His father came from a long line of devoted communists – indeed, according to family lore, Vácek's great-grandfather was a senator and one of the founders of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Vácek's paternal grandmother was a party member and raised her son (Vácek's father) in the spirit of communist beliefs. Vácek's father left his job at a printer for a position of the Regional Secretary of the Scientific and Technical Society,340 which was a bureaucratic Party job. According to Vácek, this move was not a pragmatic career decision, but rather the result of communist fervor and unconditional trust in socialist ideals. Vácek's mother, on the other hand, was a daughter of a Czech Legionary341. Having returned from service in Russia, her father (Vácek's maternal grandfather) joined the regular police force but remained a sworn “Masarykovian”342 – a devotee of the democratic president of the First Republic, Czech politician and philosopher, T.G. Masaryk. In this way, Eduard Vácek was born into a household marked by duality, opposition and ongoing heated political debate. This is perhaps the inheritance to which Vácek refers when, reflecting on his independent views, he says, “[d]ecisive influence in this had, undoubtedly, my genetic makeup, that I inherited after my ancestors”343. Indeed, his answers to questions of concepts such as identity or freedom reveal a paradox marked with a deep, passionate belief in a universal truth that then goes curiously against the grain of the ambiguity and duality of his pataphysical convictions. Vácek himself refers to this paradox of personality: “Despite having a truly pronounced sense of truth, I also love mystification. I’m aware that this sounds like inner opposition ...”344

Eduard Vácek became interested in pataphysics around the same time that he became active in the cultural underground, publishing in the samizdat magazine Vokno, joining an informal group of poets KAT345 and exhibiting his visual work with the Terč group. Vácek first became aware of pataphysics through an article in a journal – in his case, World Literature346 – which in 1969 published a five-part

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338Borecký:2004, 18
339Hradec Králové is a Czech town that is known for its yearly Regional Theatre Festival and as the seat of Divadlo Drak (Dragon Theatre) – a puppet theatre founded and for many years ran by the banned-from-Prague director Josef Krofta.
340krajský tajemník vědecko-technické společnosti
341Czech (or Czechoslovak) Legion
342Masarykovce
343“Rozhodující vliv měla bezpochyby moje genetická výbava, kterou jsem zdědil po svých předcích.” (Vácek:2015, see Appendix A of this study)
344“Přesto, že mám opravdu vyhraněný smysl pro pravdu, zároveň miluji mystifikaci. Uvědomuji si, že to zni jako vnitřní rozpory...” (ibid)
345Klub Autoru Teplicka
346Světová literatura
series on Jarry’s science and the Paris Pataphysics Collegiate. Albert Marenčin was the author of the piece, and the series was called The Annals of Pataphysics. After meeting with Marenčin in Slovakia to find out more, Vácek returned to Teplice and began to introduce elements of pataphysics into Christian lectures, which were then popular with young Teplice intellectuals. Vácek claims to have gradually replaced the Christian content of these lectures with pataphysical teachings. According to him, this eventually resulted in talks that included only pataphysics and no Christianity, at which point, Vácek recalls, the group left the Christian center where they were meeting to pursue pataphysics openly. In this way, Vácek and his collaborators founded the Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate in 1980. With time, the makeup of the group changed as various members finished school and moved on to work at orchestras or to study at universities, and others, such as Mira Vaněk, musician from the well-known Czech band We Are Home, photographer Petr Kuranda; and painter Václav Lukášek, joined in. Having formed, the group began carrying out (and still does) two ongoing projects: the publication of a samizdat magazine PAKO and a series of events that can be loosely described as a ritualistic performances with audience participation. Deeply ironic and satirical, these events present carefully orchestrated situations at once seemingly absurd and endued with hidden meaning. Although all the events are of a performative nature, they also carry an air of ironic scientific enquiry. As such, the activities of the group usually consist of an application of scientific or academic method of enquiry (a seminar) applied to an absurd or obscene phenomena (such as defecating).

On an unspecified date, the group boarded a city bus in the town of Dubí with the intention of carrying out an editorial meeting of their samizdat magazine PAKO on the back seats of the bus. PAKO was a collection of pataphysical articles and pictures, intended (in Vácek's words) “to ensure that [our] thoughts will not wilt and [our] spirit will not rot,” and arranging an editorial meeting on a bus was meant to involve the so-called masses in the intellectual process. However, considering the content of PAKO, the response of the “masses” was not favorable. Inspired by Jarry's taste for shocking vulgarity in combination with the tradition for grotesque, PAKO mostly consisted of a combination of philosophical ruminations, fecal humor and pornographic images. For example, the cover of a later (1994) reprint of an issue (now called Clinamen) features a collage of a nude woman, assembled as to give the woman three breasts (Fig.3.2). Another issue has an “advert” on the back cover: a photograph of a woman (also nude) shaving her legs and a caption that reads as follows: “Does your mother have a fur coat? Mine already lost hers!” (Fig.3.3) Vácek described the reaction of the passengers on the bus as follows:

I turned to one worker, who was going to work and was dangling over us on the bus rail. I asked him: “What do you think, comrade, could we include this in our magazine?” And he said: “Such bullshit, go screw yourselves.” Then the bus stopped at a stop, the doors opened, a wind blew, a couple of sheets flew out. I held the doors, so they wouldn’t close and one of us started gathering the sheets outside. The commuters were watching us. I was apologizing to them but also recruiting them at the same time. “We’re having an editorial meeting here, would anyone like the help us?” In this way, we joined the people and became part of them.
On another unspecified date, the group conducted an event titled *A Seminar on Therapy for Trauma from Defecation in Panel Buildings*. The seminar was announced as an international conference. However, it took place in a small restaurant called Little Cottage in Dubí. Vácek described the place as a “weird little pub in a makeshift wooden building that was a favorite among the visitors of the local spa.” What made the event “international” were the invitations the group issued to various guests from abroad, none of whom made an appearance. Another seminar arranged by the group took place in a field outside of Teplice. Officially, the seminar was devoted to a discussion of environmental preservation and included a performance by the students of the conservatory, who played classical music standing waist-deep in a pond. The music was intended to improve the living conditions of the pond flora and fauna. One snowy afternoon, the Collegiate held a *Race in Crystallized Water*. Dressed in swimsuits, some carrying inflatable swim rings and flutter boards, the members of the group met in a public park of a high-rise building neighborhood. They proceeded to “swim” in the snowbanks. The event concluded with an award ceremony for the “winners” of the “race.” During an outing to Macha Lake, the pataphysicians constructed a large comb using a boat paddle for a handle. They then used this instrument to “comb” the bottom of the lake. This activity was inspired by the legend of the Loch Ness Monster in the Highland lake and was conducted in the hopes of locating a local version of the legendary creature.

The above activities share one defining characteristic – they can all be interpreted as ironic takes on popular Normalization-era slogans and events which, as I discuss elsewhere, is an important aspect of *vnenahodimost* as defined by Yurchak. For example, the bus trip was motivated, according to Vácek, by a decision to address the communist allegation in the press that intellectuals were being cut off from the masses. The irony here comes from the collective's literal interpretation of this statement which resulted in an attempt to physically integrate themselves with the so-called “masses” by invading public transit and inviting factory workers to contribute to an editorial meeting. The “international” conference in an obscure pub and the classical concert in the pond ridiculed academia. The nonsensical snow race made fun of the socialist penchant for ceremony and ritualization, which I addressed earlier. Macha Lake is a legendary artificial body of water founded, according to Czech lore, by in the 14th century by Charles IV, who was hunting in the area and decided it would be a good location to set up a lake. It has a long tradition as a popular summer holiday spot. However, after the war, the bottom of the lake had to be combed to remove military debris left behind by the retreating German forces. The construction of a giant comb and the subsequent search for the Loch Ness monster at the bottom of the lake was both a caricature of the post-war lake combing and of the 14th century legend.

Although imprisoned for a year for these activities and for publishing PAKO, Eduard Vácek does not consider them oppositional, nor does he identify himself as a dissident. Rather, he defines his lifestyle as “outside of the game ... like if you were talking about a game of chess and a pataphysician plays outside of the board. But sometimes returns when needed. But does not feel bound by the rules. Because he did not come up with them, did not sign a promise that he will follow these rules, it’s simply his choice.” Yurchak explains that “it is incorrect to view such ironic non-involvement as a passive or apolitical position, or as a departure from the sphere of political action into a state of negative Freedom.” Yurchak borrows the notion of negative freedom from the work of Isaiah Berlin, who defines it as “‘Freedom from’ – that is, the ability of the subject or group to take certain actions in

354 Chaloupka
355 Vácek:2015, see Appendix A of this study
356 See Chapter 1
357 Vácek:2015, see Appendix A of this study
358 “...подобную ироничную невовлеченность неверно рассматривать ни как пассивную или аполитичную позицию, ни как уход из сферы политического действия в состояние негативной Свободы.” (Юрчак:2016, 268)
the absence of external intervention.” Yurchak explains that Freedom from lies in opposition to Freedom for, or the “the ability of the subject or group to take certain actions in the presence of external intervention.” To Yurchak, the lifestyle of someone such as the Teplice pataphysicians, escapes both these notions of freedom, since it denies any kind of relationship or position towards the system. Yurchak writes that a lifestyle such as this was not an expression of an act committed in spite of external interference, nor an act committed within the framework of this intervention. In this way, collectives such as Eduard Vácek's illustrate what Yurchak defines as a “special...position” of the 1970s. This position was characterized by an “active pursuit of nothing,” according to Shinkarev, who is cited by Yurchak as having deciphered the position as an “active desire not to oppose anyone, not to humiliate anyone and not to strive to achieve personal success.” Through this analysis, Yurchak arrives at a definition of another type of freedom – a freedom of vnenahodimost. In other words, through the creation of ironic experiences, and by integrating these experiences into their everyday lifestyle, the Teplice pataphysicians embodied Vácek's idea of existing “outside of the game.”

3.4 Chapter Conclusion

The events staged by The Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate took place at public locations – meaning that they were accessible to anyone at any time. More specifically, the Pataphysics Collegiate appeared on a city bus, among high-rise urban complexes, in a pub, in a park and at Lake Mácha, a popular summer swimming spot. However, these venues were also examples of what Heczková and Svatoňová call normalized spaces, or spaces where systematic rules of behavior were implicitly enforced. A normalized space is akin to what Zdravomyslova and Voronkov designate as official public. In a normalized space, the “official public life and its relevant practices were controlled by party-state ideological norms and regulated by the relevant rules of communication and social integration as established by the state.” Ilya Utekhin writes that such public spaces presented a “symbolically significant center...clearly defined by the requirements of monumental propaganda.” It would be easy, then, to interpret the events of the Pataphysics Collegiate as direct interjections into these normalized public spaces. However, when it comes to socialist space, Zdravomyslova and Voronkov “...see the ambiguity in the classic divide of public and private that we find in political and social theory...” because the official public mingled with a so-called informal public. They further point out that “[t]otalitarian control over the individual was never achieved in Soviet society, and multiple examples of state-independent activities were evidences of this.” The result was what Voronkov calls “places of individual freedom,” and, similarly to Yurchak, Morganová and others confines them to

359“Свободой от то есть способностью субъекта или группы к тем или иным действиям, при отсутствии внешнего вмешательства.” (ibid)
360“...способности субъекта или группы к тем или иным действиям при наличии внешнего вмешательства.” (ibid)
361“...не являлся выражением ни действия, совершаемого вопреки внешнему вмешательству, ни действия, совершаемого в рамках этого вмешательства.” (ibid)
362“...особую позднесоветскую позицию.” (ibid)
363“...активным стремлением к ничему.” (ibid)
364“...активное желание никому не противостоять, никого не уничтожать и не стремиться к достижению личного успеха.” (ibid)
365 Zdravomyslova, Voronkov:2002, 52
366“Ушедшая культура была построена на медиийной монополии идеологически выверенного официального дискурса, и те месседжи, транслировать которые могли бы общественные места символически значимого центра, были четко определены требованиями монументальной пропаганды, а не заказчиками коммерческой рекламы, как это происходит сегодня.” (Утехин:2012, 17)
367 Zdravomyslova, Voronkov:2002, 52-53
368Zdravomyslova, Voronkov:2002, 52
369ibid
later decades of the Soviet period (1960s–1980s). Within these places, “individual initiatives, collective actions, and state-independent communication could take place. These initiatives were never totally controlled or suppressed by the party-state and escaped the rigid regulations of Soviet collectives. They took place in social settings, especially in the so-called leisure sphere, although one cannot call them solely private.”\textsuperscript{370} As Utekhin points out, “[a]lthough we call these places public, public and private are not separated in them, in the sense that even in the square, friends standing in a circle form a completely private spatial configuration with their conversation and arrangement. Once in a public place, people often ‘set up camp,’ sit down to do their work in this temporarily occupied territory.”\textsuperscript{371}

Further, the events staged by The Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate were \textit{inappropriate} – meaning that they inverted or bypassed a type of activity generally expected at any given location. Here, again, it is tempting to explain the alienating effect of their events through a direct inversion of socially appropriate activity. However, a certain paradox of propriety existed within a normalized code of behavior, not unlike the paradox of censorship I discussed in Chapter 1. Ambiguity concerning appropriate behavior in public manifested itself through the widely accepted code of such behavior\textsuperscript{372} and the somewhat fluid application of this code to real-life situations. As the Czech art historian Pavlina Morganová points out, “[t]he degree of tolerance and severity of the police action depended on the individuals or the specific situation in the various institutions, which led to a certain vagueness of what was allowed and what was not, and to a general unpredictability of this border that many actively tested and tried to shift.”\textsuperscript{373} In other words, behavior that was viewed as inappropriate could become appropriate depending on the context and those who were performing the behavior. In short, behavior in a public, normalized space was expected to conform to a certain standard, which was, however, liable to interpretation. The lack of clear division of private/public as well as a certain ambiguity towards what was considered permissible public behavior complicate the interpretation of Vácek's activities are wholeheartedly subversive.

The manner in which the Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate created \textit{strange places} can be interpreted via Yurchak's research. In his work, Yurchak identifies a certain \textit{irony of vnenahodimost}\textsuperscript{374}. In Yurchak’s words, this irony consisted of “the unusual, ironic behavior” that certain people “invented, described, mythologized and in many ways embodied in their daily lives.”\textsuperscript{375} He provides two soviet examples of artistic collectives that heavily relied on irony\textsuperscript{376} and writes that the appearance of such groups at the end 1970's and early 80's was a “symptom of a shift of the entire soviet system towards increasing vnenahodimost.”\textsuperscript{377} This type of irony, according to Yurchak, is constructed from two elements: \textit{over-identification} and \textit{decontextualization}.\textsuperscript{378} Over-identification implies a relationship between the subjects (in our case, the members of the Teplice group) and the object of irony (so, for instance, a headline of a newspaper) that is set up in such a way that it is not entirely possible to discern if one is faced with a “sincere support of the object, subtle mockery or a strange combination of both.”\textsuperscript{379} Decontextualization

\textsuperscript{370}ibid
\textsuperscript{371}“Хотя мы и называем эти места общественными, публичное и приватное в них не разделены – в том смысле, что и на площади друзья, стоя в кругу, образуют своим разговором и расположением вполне приватную пространственную конфигурацию. Оказавшись в публичном месте, люди зачастую «разбивают лагерь», присаживаются, чтобы заняться своим делом на этой временно оккупированной территории.” (Утехин:2012, 17)
\textsuperscript{372} in Russian, the notion of \textit{kulturnost} or good manners
\textsuperscript{373}Morganová:23, 2015
\textsuperscript{374}“dead irony” in the earlier, English edition of the book
\textsuperscript{375}“...необычного, ироничного поведения, которое они придумали, описали, мифологизировали и во многом воплотили в свою ежедневную жизнь.” (Юрчак:2016, 268)
\textsuperscript{376}Mit’ki and Nekrorealists
\textsuperscript{377}“...симптом сдвига всей советской системы в сторону нарастающей вненаходимости” (Юрчак:489, 2016)
\textsuperscript{378}Юрчак:2016, 490
\textsuperscript{379}Юрчак:489, 2016
involves placing the object of irony in an unusual context, as the Teplice group has done with the editorial meeting on a bus, an academic seminar in a small pub or a swimming race in a snowed-in park.

I propose that The Teplice Pataphysics Collegiate constructed their *strange places* by way of irony of *vnenahodimost*. At the same time, the events of the group can be seen as temporally limited heterotopias, meaning that they succeeded in alienating or inverting normalized space. This was possible, in part, due to the ambiguous relationship between the *formal* and *informal* public along with malleable notions of propriety, which I mentioned above. As Utekhin writes, “[t]he spontaneity of a mass unidirectional movement or standing on the street, disrupting the daily regularity of using the place, conceals a danger to order, almost a challenge to the authorities: there seems to be nothing forbidden, but uncertainty is created.”\(^{380}\) In other words, the Teplice group achieved the deterritorializing effect through noticing and capitalizing on this tension/uncertainty by use of irony, pushing it to the level of the absurd and thus making it palpable. For instance, Vácek reported that the passengers of the bus were upset by the intervention, yet nobody took steps to actively prevent the group from proceeding. This indicates that the activity, which – as I discussed earlier – was an ironic interpretation of a newspaper article, set up an ambiguous situation. For the duration of the activity, the passengers of the bus were uncertain how to respond because familiar rules of behavior in public transit ceased to apply, that is were not observed but not clearly broken, either. In this way, the bus temporarily became a deterritorialized or strange place.

\(^{380}\)“Спонтанность массового одннаправленного движения или стояния по улице, нарушающая повседневную регулярность пользования местом, таит в себе опасность для порядка, почти что вызов власти: вроде бы ничего запрещенного не происходит, но создается неопределенность.” (Утехин:2012, 18)
To approach my case studies, I constructed a methodological framework around Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia along with Alexei Yurchak's work on deterritorialization/vnenahodimost. In addition, I involved a number of other concepts and theories, such as strange places (Hečzková, Svatohová), abstract space (Lefebvre) or imaginary worlds (Wolf). Some of these ideas, especially Yurchak's, are imbedded in the history of the Soviet Union, namely in the period starting with Stalin's death in 1953 up to the dissolution of USSR in 1991. As such, studies that rely on Yurchak's terminology tend to focus on the understanding of the Soviet experiment (Fainberg, Kalinovsky:2016, Fürst:2017). However, this project is not primarily a contribution to the Soviet debate. By relying on a combination of historically anchored theoretical notions and concepts from other disciplines, such as cognitive studies (Turner) or philosophy (Foucault, Bachelard, Lefebvre), this study sought to bridge several type of analysis. The central aim of this study was to test how historically rooted concepts can be used in combination with notions of other disciplines to build a trans-disciplinary and cross-cultural approach.

My findings and the interpretation of my case studies as *imaginary micro-worlds* allow me to transplant Yurchak's terminology to a different scholarly discussion: that of *otherworlds* or *imaginary worlds*. These notions come from a wide range of disciplines. For instance, an *otherworld* is a term from medieval literary studies (Byrne:2016) while *imaginary worlds* (Wolf:2014) originates in literature but is also applied to analysis of other cultural phenomena, such as computer games. I propose that it is possible to use an analysis of projects like Theatre on Tarczyńska to answer an entirely different set of questions about how human imagination works and how we collectively construct and uphold our realities. This can be achieved by going outside of a historically rooted analysis and thus gaining access to a wider network of conceptual frameworks. For example, in her work on *otherworlds* in medieval literature, Aisling Byrne explores the building blocks on imaginary realms. One of these, according to her analysis, is what she calls *pseudo-mimesis* and it refers to detailed descriptions of imaginary environments that create “an illusion that what they are describing might actually exist.”

Pseudo-mimesis involves detailed descriptions of small, minute details of a landscape or a world that, according to Byrne, serve no apparent narrative function – she calls such descriptions “ornamental” and compares them to what Roland Barthes called “insignificant notation.” In other words, Byrne's notion of pseudo-mimesis illustrates the importance of non-narrative elements in believable world-building. This can be related to Mark Turner's work on how humans construct environments. I discussed this in some detail in the Introduction and in Chapter 2, pointing out the cognitive significance of non-narrative aspects of reality to how we forge self-identities.

This dissertation demonstrated theoretical, historical and empirical approaches towards largely unknown (to an English-speaking reader) performance projects. In this way, it has contributed a new page to theatre and performance studies. In addition, this study opened opportunities for other kinds of encounters – for instance, that between theory and artistic practice. This dissertation laid groundwork for practical research projects geared towards the understanding of imaginary space construction. Over the course of this study, I have focused on imaginary spaces not only from a theoretical standpoint but also on their use in performance. To this end, I have explored (and am exploring still), the role of gaps and misinterpretations in human perception, which are necessary for our ability to imagine.
In practice, such analysis relies on the imagination of a group to create a space that exists in the mind of the participants and then to overlay that imaginary space over the real one. For example, in May 2016, I conducted a workshop with professional actors in Oporto, Portugal. In an hour-long session, I have asked the participants to explore a previously unknown space. The participants were asked to keep their eyes closed for the duration of the experiment. The space was an attic of a large house. None of the participants have visited the space before. I led them into the space one by one and lightly navigated them, with minimum interference but ensuring their safety, through the hour. I then led them out, one by one. During the second part of this session, I gave each participant a differently colored marker and asked them to draw a map of the place they have just explored. The resulting map is a space that does not exist – it is a blend of the sensory memories of each of the participants (Fig 4.1). In other words, this study offers possibilities to further develop a practical body of work which seeks to create heterotopical milieus through performance. In addition, this study has also inspired the creation of a yearly international symposium, which I have conducted in Prague since 2017, and a body of practical research in heterotopical acting techniques, which I am developing within the Centre for Aliiative Research (CenAR)\(^3\), an independent organization I founded in 2009. Both of these initiatives present venues for future research to which this project is foundational.

\(^3\)Www.aliatology.com
FIGURES

Figure (1.1)  
“Overwhelmed with emotion, this Czech mother kisses a Russian soldier in Prague, Czech Republic on May 5, 1945, thanking one who fought to free her beloved home.”  
Source: www.theatlantic.com

Figures (1.2 – 1.3) Two of the many photos depicting Soviet liberators with Czech children, always girls, dressed in national Czech costumes. Source: www.tumblr.com
Figures (2.1-2.2) The cover and inside pages of Przekroj magazine (1956) showing scenes from Theatre on Tarczyńska

Figure (2.3) Theatre on Tarczyńska "Osmęduše" – Harfiarka. 1956. Source: Polish National Digital Archive

Figure (2.4) Lech Emfazy Stefaniński, 1957. Photograph by Irena Jarosińska. Source: www.news.o.pl

Figure (3.1) Eduard Váček (right) early 1980's. Source: E.Váček, personal archive

Figure (3.2) Cover of the Pataphysical journal Clinamen, 1994. Source: E.Váček, personal archive

Figure (3.3) “Does your mother have a fur coat? Mine already lost hers!”, back cover of Clinamen, date of publication unspecified. Source: E.Váček, personal archive
Figures (3.4-3.5) Snow race with award ceremony, Pataphysical event, early 1980's. Source: E.Váček, personal archive

Figure (4.1) Collective Mapping, an imaginary attic. O.Krása-Ryabets, Oporto, 2016
To begin, tell me a little about yourself - where are you from, where were you born, what was the situation in your family like?

I was born in Hradec Králové in 1947. My father was a member of the Communist Party, which he trusted completely. My great-grandfather even co-founded the party and he represented it in the Senate. Although, before that, he was a member of the Social Democrats, which split up and a part of its members founded a new party. Also, his daughter - my grandmother, was influenced by his ideology, she was in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) and she brought up my father in the same spirit. Thus, my family line from my great-grandfather until my father were all communists. In my case, this ended. My father worked as a regional secretary of a science and technology company, it was a political office. Originally, he studied lithography and his great skill in the field was that he knew how to mix colors. He was a sought-after specialist. He would have certainly been far happier doing his craft, but he accepted the offer from the KSČ functionaries who assigned it to him.

My mother was from a family of a former Czechoslovak Legion member, who, after his return from Russia, became a local policeman and a devoted follower of President Masaryk. They used to argue about politics with my father and as a young boy, I sided with my grandfather, since he had a pistol and a police uniform, and he showed me old thick books about the war in Russia. Unfortunately, he shot himself quite young when he could not stand the pain caused by bladder cancer. My father worked as a printing press operator at that time and he used to show me big printing machines, which scared me with all the noise and the incomprehensible movements. My father eventually left this job and thanks to his political commitments he was charged to do political tasks. Time went on at a quiet pace, but when 1968 came and soon after the armies of our so-called allies entered the country, the situation in our family changed. Nevertheless, the change affected the whole society. Those who held some offices, but also the administrators, were subjected to a review by vetting committees. The same went for my father and many of his friends. Some of them immediately lost their offices and jobs. The reasons were their wrong answers to the questions they were asked as well as the fact that some of them were mere careerists and accepted the Party offices only as a part of their professional career ladder growth since their employment was conditioned by membership in the KSČ. If these people did not pass the questionnaire and were unable to respond to the questioning of their opinions, they were mercilessly fired. My father had a breakdown as a consequence of the sudden end of his career and he entered a disability retirement; he suffered from heart problems and he never really recovered from it.

All these fired friends started to meet, get drunk and reminisce the good old days. I remember one former policeman who had held a high police rank before he was fired. He got drunk, started crying and asking for answers to his questions: „I was fired from the Party, me, who put compromising objects to flats of people so that we could imprison them, and now they rewarded me by firing me.“ Then he told us about how the StB (Czechoslovak State Police) visited him and asked him to return his honours and various prizes, even a medal that he received from the president and he told us how he pushed them down the staircase. Such an environment was absolutely unacceptable for me. I argued with my father and his drunk friends because I had different points of view.

How did you deal with your situation?
The arguments were really violent, my father always kicked me out and told me that I was silly, young and that I did not understand it. I had just finished the army service when the occupation of Czechoslovakia started. The mood in the family was unbearable after my return. The situation went so far that I left my family and moved from Hradec Králové to Prague, where I was looking for some job with accommodation. Finally, I started working for the Army Constructions as an electrician, they promised me some decent dorms in Vysočany, but I ended up in a settlement nicknamed China in temporary mobile homes near the ČKD (Českomoravská Kolben-Daněk – national heavy industry company), which used to be occupied by pimps and prostitutes during the First Czechoslovak Republic. It was dirty and very undignified accommodation. After a while, the State Farm in Ďáblice offered me a job, which I took because it came with an apartment that was to be completed soon. They showed me my soon to be flat in Ďáblice and I was supposed to receive a decree for it. But once again politics stepped into my life. The communists were progressively continuing their purge also in the higher parts of the public administration. The new director of the State Farm had friends at the Ministry of Agriculture. And one of his friends, an administrator from Slovakia with his family was fired from the ministry and, therefore, lost the possibility to live in Prague, so he was offered by the director to take my flat. I had no chance to appeal against it, I had no contract, the promise was only verbal. No one counted with me.

In the meantime, I got married and I really needed a flat. We had no place to stay in Prague and I did not want to return to Hradec Králové to my parents’. Therefore, I traveled in the north of Bohemia and searched for some decent job with accommodation. It was difficult, most of the offers were in the brown coal industry with bad working conditions, badly paid, with neglected dirty dorms for drunks and people on the edge of the society. My wife lived in a studio flat of her sister who lived in Italy and returned home after a government appeal. Those who did not obey the call were considered emigrants and enemies of the state. When I travelled between the northern towns by hitchhiking, I stopped a familiar driver. It was an old friend of mine from the army service. We had served together in Cheb and now he was transporting meat for a slaughterhouse in Teplice. Within a short time, he convinced me that the spa town of Teplice was the place I had been searching for and he gave me some tips on where to ask for a job and accommodation. He was right, the OPBH (District Housing Company) offered me a job and I even got a key from an unutilized studio flat. My friend offered to help me move my belongings from the Zdiby Castle in Prague where I had my previous accommodation from the State Farm.

We put everything in his truck and left for Teplice. There was no stove in the flat, it was snowing outside and so I asked him to take me to the OPBH office to get some older stove. That was a mistake, the comrade, whom I talked to, was a KSČ official. She cunningly ripped the keys of the flat from my hand and said that I had no right of accommodation because the decision had to be made by the housing committee that met once every six months. I told her that I had all my furniture in the car in front of the flat. She did not care at all. She was a completely dehumanized example of a comrade who cared about the party ideology and who maintained order and peace for work.

I went to my colleague with my tail between my legs and told him what happened. He offered that I could put my belongings in the attic of his house and stay with my wife at his place for a few nights. Within a week it became evident that it would not work; his girlfriend was hysterical and repeatedly pretended a suicide attempt. I was wondering what to do. There was an abandoned concrete bunker in the hill above Mlýnská street. It was one small room with no doors or windows, but it had a roof. We were searching for a solution in the attics of houses. My friend helped me find an old door, he helped me seal a window, we found an old stove with a pipe and then we only needed to gather some dry wood from the Letná hill. That night we already had heating. When the stove went off, it was...
immediately freezing in the bunker. My wife got sick and left to her parents’ in Pisek to recover. I resisted. The news about a strange person living in a bunker spread all over the Housing Company and many people came to look at me. They could not understand why I lived in a bunker while working for a company that managed housing. I got sick as well quite soon. In the mornings I woke up with frost in my moustache. I was one of the first homeless people - and one who worked!

To turn the situation around, I went to the Housing Company and visited the Department of Civil Defence. There was a head official cleaning and oiling his pistol. I told him that I was living in a bunker since I had no other choice and that I would have liked to have a post number assigned to receive the mail. The comrade stood up and said in a serious tone: “You will be considered fully responsible for arbitrarily occupying areas of civil defense.”

I suggested that OPBH should move me out on the street, that it was probably the only solution. My colleagues told me about some flats that they had recently been reconstructing. We went to check one of them. It was an old disused basement flat with rats, its floor had a dry rot fungus, it was humid and had a number of imperfections, but it was a flat with a relatively stable temperature. They helped me repair the flat to become suitable for living. I met some people from the underground, we were close in terms of our “class”. It was Čuñas - F. Stárek, Kabelka, and others. My neighbours denounced me as a dubious individual. By then, I was already doing visual art and so I transformed all that mould on the walls into paintings. I started visiting KAT (Klub Autorů Teplica - Club of Authors of Teplice), an informal group of young creators. I also became a member of the art group called Terč. I started doing exhibitions with them and so I became of interest in terms of ideology to the culture supervisors from the Local Cultural Centre. Those were my first conflicts with the secretaries, administrators and finally also with the StB (Státní bezpečnost – State Police).

After all the twists and turns, the OPBH finally repaired my flat and I lived there for around twenty years. My two children were born there. As time passed, I started to write a bit, publishing in underground magazines such as Vokno, Jazzstop, and others. The only ones who helped me were my colleagues who were Jehovah's Witnesses. Obviously. I wanted to know why these people helped me when everyone else ditched me. And thus, I accepted the offer to study the Bible. I spent a full 7 years with them and became the choir senior. I was doing preaching service and reached several important posts.

I started receiving their magazines and literature and many times I was astonished by what kind of crap was in there. Some young high school or music academy students were coming to me to study. When we were reading and analyzing those texts, I remembered the Annals of Pataphysics by Albert Marenčin presented in 1969 in the World Literature Magazine. I could not understand that people could believe some of the ideas. Moreover, I met a man who lent me some old writings of the Bible Students (former name of the Jehovah’s Witnesses) from 1917. This was pure pataphysics. Here, I understood what Alfred Jarry meant when he said that pataphysics goes beyond metaphysics the way metaphysics goes beyond physics. I could not help myself and started to bring the methods of pataphysics to the choir and apply them while studying the materials by the Watchtower society. I could not resist emphasizing some of the topics I found absurd or comical. These young people picked up on it, they got the game and joined. Each time we had somebody new, he could not understand, he had no idea what was going on. This was, in fact, the beginning of the Pataphysical College in Teplice. Later we all said goodbye to the Witnesses, we accepted some more people interested in joining and founded the Pataphysical College of Teplice.
By this, we moved immediately to a higher level of pataphysics. After a while, the students finished their studies and left. Some of them entered orchestras or other musical bodies, others continued to university, and so on. In the meantime, I met some new friends, for example, Mira Vanek, the musician from “Už Jsme Doma”, Petr Kuranda, the photographer, Václav Lukášek, the painter. We simply went on with our various activities. For example, we celebrated the end of the Thirty Year’s War, we created our first seminars, one of them was named: “Removal of the trauma from excretion among panel constructions”, and so on.

I am particularly curious about all the events you organized. Could you describe them in more detail?

The communists at that time reproached intellectuals that they were separated from the masses. We were publishing a small almanac - PAKO (PAtafyzické KOlegium - Pataphysical College; “Pako” meaning “silly” in Czech). We published it so that the ideas kept flowing and the spirit would not get stale. Thus, we decided to make the editorial board meetings somewhere among the people to engage them in the creative process. We got on a workers’ bus transporting workers to a glasswork factory in Dubí. All the way in the back those old buses used to have an arrangement of four seats facing each other. We put wooden boards on our knees and created an improvised editorial table. We put sheets of the magazine on it, somebody read his article. I turned to one worker commuting to work who was hanging on the pole above us. I asked him: “What do you think, comrade, can we put this in our magazine?” and he said: “Such bullshit, go to hell with that.” Then the bus stopped at the bus stop, the doors opened, the wind blew, and some sheets flew out. I held the button so that the door did not close, and someone was collecting the sheets outside. All the passengers were watching what we were doing. I excused us while recruiting them at the same time: “We have our editorial board meeting here, would you help us from time to time?” In this way, we joined the public and became part of it.

Obviously, the StB found out, it was around the time when Seifert, the poet, died. One of the listeners of the RFE radio made invitations to Seifert’s funeral and distributed them around the city. He put them in the mailboxes. The police started searching for this man. When they were in my flat because of the underground magazine Vokno a few months before that, they found several issues as well as a couple of our PAKO almanacs. Their priority was Vokno then, so they left us alone, they just asked me some questions, if I knew Stárek, the magazine’s publisher. They found out that I wrote some articles for Vokno. Václav Lukášek, one of our colleagues escaped abroad. At the RFE he was talking about the Pataphysical College in Teplice, our activities, our almanac, the seminars, etc. The StB used the activities around Seifert’s funeral and with the information broadcasted on the RFE by Václav Lukášek, they came to arrest me.

I would like to learn about the seminar you mentioned. Where did it take place?

The seminar named: “Removal of the trauma from excretion among panel constructions” took place at a restaurant called Chaloupka in Dubí. It was a strange pub in a temporary wooden construction, which was popular among the patients of the local spa. We approached the seminar as an international one since we invited some foreign guests, but none of them came. Unfortunately, neither did Albert Marenčín from Bratislava, who was the Regent of Ubudoxology for Eastern Europe and Adjacent Areas. He excused himself and we received a salute from him. It was the date of the daylight-saving time change when the summer time changes to winter time. The StB came to arrest us, but because of the time change, they arrived one hour late when the seminar had already been over.
Then the winter came, and we organized a swimming contest in the icy water. We put on the normal swimmers, someone brought an inflatable swim ring and rubber pads for aquatic sports, we organised contests. We still have some photos documenting that.

**Any other activities?**

We searched the surface of Máchovo lake using a huge comb attached to a pole to check if we do not find some monster like in the one in the Loch Ness lake in the Highlands. In Věšťan ravine behind Teplice we organized a seminar about energy use and savings with some demonstrations, it was called “Sausages with poetry”, students of the music academy entered the lake up to their waist and as a quartet they performed for the aquatic animals... After the presentation by V. Lukášek on the RFE, somewhere at the regional committee of the KSČ, they decided that those pataphysicists from Teplice presented a grave danger to the society and they were waiting for an opportunity to intervene. When that man distributed flyers about Seifert’s funeral, it was their call for action. At around 4 a.m. the police commando came to my flat and they searched it. They suspected that I had a hand printing machine called cyklostyl. I was in my pyjamas and sick, but they did not care. They borrowed some suitcases from me and filled them up with the so-called banned or foul literature found in my flat. After their search, they took me to the detention where I spent 2 months. They wanted to charge me with incitement of riots but finally, they changed it to disorderly conduct. The judge sentenced me to one year of prison custody. I am the only pataphysicist who was sent to prison and served the entire sentence.

**How did you get into pataphysics?**

I used to read the Světová literatura (World literature) magazine. Under the chief editor Řezáč, this magazine started to also present various artistic topics. Albert Merenčin published a series called: Anály patafyziky (Annals of Pataphysics) in 1986, he wrote there about Alfred Jarry and the French Pataphysical College. I read that and told myself: “What the hell is this?” I did not understand it much, it was presented scientifically, but there was something strange about it. They were talking about the “Big belly order”, etc. It was bothering me, I could not let it go. And suddenly, as the Christians always say, the light came from heaven and I was enlightened. I got it and since then I became a conscious pataphysicist. Thus, Albert Marenčin actually helped me. I went to meet him in Bratislava and asked him how he became a pataphysicist. He told me that he was translating Ubu Roi into Slovak. He was working at the Slovak National Gallery and from time to time they had some foreign guests coming to give lectures. Some man named Satrapa came from France and Marenčin told him that he had just translated Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi into Slovak. During the discussion, he learned about the Pataphysics College in Paris and soon after they made him the Regent of Ubudoxology and entrusted him with educational activities in the unexplored areas. Thanks to Marenčin I got to know the Annals of Pataphysics before I became Jehovah's Witness, which turned out to be fatal with regards to my personal development.

**When you were describing your childhood, you said that you grew up in a different environment and that the communist tradition in your family was quite long. I would like to know how somebody can accept a different opinion.**

The most important influence was certainly my genetic equipment inherited from my ancestors. Although I have a very strong sense of truth, I love mystification. I realize that it might sound like an
inner contradiction. Let’s be honest, many consider pataphysics as a sort of an intellectual rash. But it is a life attitude. It is a state you get in when you get out of the projects of the others and live your own life. Obviously, all the conscious pataphysicists like to play, it is simply the great game (le grand jeu) with something that Alfred Jarry discovered as the world ruling principle always controlled by the same doctrine. Ubu Roi as a pseudo-messiah and doctor Faustol, who is a composition of the corrupt scientist Faust and a troll, a goblin of Ibsen’s type. This is the basic driving principle of the modern world. Ubu Roi is a totalitarian character and a coward at once. Mama Ubu helps him to obtain absolute power. That is the money pitchfork and courts depending on secular power, in fact, it is a pseudo-justice. Ubu Roi is essentially the driving principle of any contemporary society. Our last two presidents are the perfect personifications of Ubu, however, they do not reach the level of Ubu himself, they are more like the crown princes of the Ubu’s house, heirs of his legacy. Most of the contemporary European leaders are the same. If you analyze their actions, you will think to yourself what kind of scum they are, while they present themselves as saviours. This is a typical pseudo-messianism. The only real messiah should have been Jesus Christ. Everybody was waiting for his second arrival when he was supposed to win against Satan. But Christ did not come, instead, the pseudo-messiahs came. They came and occupied leading offices. At first, they needed some god. The first big pseudo-messiah was Constantine the Great who persecuted Christians and then his strange conversion happened. He was a politician in the first place and in the situation when Rome could not handle all the enslaved countries, he started using ideology. He changed his attitude by accepting Christianity and pronounced the well-known phrase: “I had a dream in which I saw a burning cross and I was told: In this sign, you will conquer.” He went on with murdering and robbing but under the sign of the cross. Thus, he became the first big pseudo-messiah. Alfred Jarry discovered and named pseudo-messianism. Doctor Faustroll represents empty scientism. He is someone who serves the evil consciously. Ubu needs his Faustrolls or pseudo-scientists. If Marxism comes to your mind, you are not far from the truth. These are corrupt politicians, political scientists and political elites who help to enslave and exhaust humanity in the name of some noble goals.

You were saying that some people have an inherent sense of truth?

Yes, that is right. A man is born with a sense of truth, he is capable of love and compassion as a good creature. Even though they are often brought up in a bad environment of a dubious family, children can intuitively feel that all of that could and should be completely different. Because of this, I consider it completely senseless and I was always against the persecution of children for acts of their parents. It does not make sense. I am myself a good example that we can take our own path regardless of the path of our parents. Arabic or Muslim concept of revenge is devious and unacceptable. Every person must be judged for his own actions.

I could not agree with you more. The way you describe the totalitarian period, the meeting of the PAKO magazine editorial board on the bus – under normal circumstances you would do it at home, right?

Of course. It was an intellectual reaction to the idiocy of the politicians who were saying nonsense and crushing the freedom of speech and expression.

Hence, you published it and at the same time, you describe how in your private space - your flat, someone simply comes at 4 a.m. and does whatever he wants. It seems to me that this period absurdly inverted the private and public space. That everything was turned upside down.
Yes, it was really like that. The unlimited power of the state controlled by one political party that reserved for itself the right for the freedom and even for the thoughts of its citizens. By doing so it made them lack freedom.

I wanted to ask as well if you agree with me that you missed your private space, or if there have been more examples like that about how it was all turned upside down.

If you ask me about privacy, I consider that very important. The state has only one role: to protect your privacy and your private property. You do not need the state for anything else. Everything else is just a question of your inner liberty. If you have it inside, if it is ingrained in you and you are also able to strengthen it, then for you there is no problem brought by totalitarianism that tries to limit your privacy. We made fun of totalitarianism. We made it part of the game. I continued with that even in prison. I even wrote a book there. In fact, I wrote two books thanks to my imprisonment. One of them is a fairy tale, it is called “Cesta” (“The Path”), the other one is a description of my arrest by the police and what happened until I left prison. It is called “Občanský průkaz, prosím” (“Your ID, please”). I went to prison knowing that I was going to a new environment where I would discover something new. It was something that deeply transformed my life. A year after I returned from prison, in 1989, the political change came. I was elected a deputy of the Czech National Council and I became the president of the Prison Committee. Hence, I went directly to take a look at the prison in Pardubice where I had served my sentence.

Mrs. Burešová, the chairman of the Czech National Council lent me her beautiful white Škoda 613. I came there and all the staff starting with the director were lined up. They were expecting some big shot while an ex-criminal got out of the car. They all knew me there, I had been there a year before. It was a huge surprise for them. And I was looking forward to it, these are the pataphysical chains of events, those strange turns life offers us from time to time. But I must admit that it was a strange period, which occurs quite rarely in history. At one moment you are homeless in Teplice, with no place to stay, the police are hunting you. Then you become a vice-chairman of the Committee on Legal Protection and Safety by the Czech National Council. Then a spokesperson of the Prison Service where I was offered to publish a specialized journal for ten years for my former incarcerators and guards to make them human. After that, I had an opportunity to study the history of prisons and started to publish a magazine titled “Historická penologie” (“Historical penology”). I was searching for injustices in archives and I was writing specialized articles about them.

If I was to resume my feelings related to the new post-revolutionary period, I have to admit that if there has been any freedom without attributes, which I could call that way, then it was only in the nineties. Since the fall of the Twin Towers in America, the totalitarianism came back. The officials have once again raised their heads. It is not the same totalitarianism as during the communist reign, but this one is hidden creeping totalitarianism. Once again it is possible to apply pataphysics.

I think that this is particularly important. Obviously, there are other matters that we can observe as well. We know about a not very well-known society called the Centre for Alternative Research, which shares several characteristics with pataphysics, with some variances, indeed. You said two rather interesting things. We watched a short documentary with my husband, its title is “V zajetí železné opony” (“Captured by the Iron Curtain”). You describe politics of that period as some kind of space. I would like to understand what you meant.
I meant it as a space for creation. If they place you among fools, you basically have two options. Either you will fight the foolishness and physically resist it. Fools will make your life hell and in the end, they will kill you. That is the case of the story from the movie “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and other examples from particular environments that we could say house a large number of people. It resembles the period when Dadaism was formed. The world had gone mad, World War I began. In this case, not all the world had gone mad, just a part of it, to which we belonged. It was a rule of the insane, or half-insane psychopaths, but what was difficult to understand, is that most of the nation took it as a fact, as a standard. But who was the lunatic? Those who organized it and who required it, or those who more or less voluntarily served it and pretended that it was right that way?

For me, both these groups were just one lot. Those who were organizing it and the others who were making it happen and who were living inside of the defined barriers. I did not belong to this common group. There were some situations when I went to see it, as in for a visit, out of curiosity. A conscious pataphysicist sometimes goes for an excursion, he goes to please himself with some frequently complicated non-sense and then he returns back to his neutral uselessness. And he says HAHA! to himself.

But that means that pataphysical activities were intentionally in opposition?

They were not in opposition.

How was it then?
They were not in opposition. The opposition is an integral part of the game. The attitude of a conscious pataphysicist is not bounded with the rules of this game since it is outside of the game, it is above the game. It is similar as if you would talk about the game of chess, the rules are well defined, but a pataphysicist sometimes plays outside the board. He did not commit to respect the rules, he was forced to do so. He did not choose this game. That is why he does not consider himself bound by its rules.

Did you consider yourself a dissident?

No, I had never been a dissident! Nevertheless, I received awards and a medal, and I was an active member of the third resistance. But this is merely another character in a play directed by somebody else. I think that I was primarily a free man and I insisted on it. And I did not let go of my right to freedom, which I was convinced myself to be entitled to as a free human being. I never gave up on this claim.

So, could you say that it was a game with power that you were forced to play by the political powers and that the space of ideas and politics where all was formed was also the space where you founded the Pataphysical College, however, it was not controlled or indoctrinated by this political power?

That’s a rather precise way of saying that. We were the fifth column for political power. We didn’t have any political ambitions though. We didn’t want to make the regime collapse or to fight against it using political measures. Why? People chose it, they went to the polls, every four years the communists reached 96% and more votes. Then you can have it, we don’t care. But I didn’t go to the polls, I didn’t pledge to support it. To me, all those big shots were just UBU-style crown princes. We merely created
our free space where ideology was not allowed. They would have liked to get there, obviously, to create their order with us. They considered it a sort of sabotage. But they were not able to get there. They tried to at least gain some control via their cops. When they were investigating me at the StB and later when the investigator was writing the statement with me before they sent me to prison, I could see that they were somehow at loss as to how to handle it. He didn’t know what to imprison me for. But they had to come up with something and make me a criminal at any cost. I had a friend who was moving abroad. In his drawer, he had two or three porn magazines. Something like that was not available here during the Communist era. So, I thought, to hell with it, if I cut it – those legs and arms, I could make a nice group collage out of it. Then we could make it into some surrealist illustration in the PAKO magazine. I took it from him. The StB found it while they were searching me and, finally, they had their case. “He was spreading pornography.” At the court, the judge asked me whether I had any pornographic magazines. “I did.” “And what did you have them for, did you lend them to people?” “Yes, the editorial board of the almanac saw them, so, I lent them to whoever wanted to see them, nevertheless, I never forced them to anyone.” “And what did you have them for?” I said: “I wanted to make a collage out of them for our almanac.” and the judge dictated to the writer: “Write, the accused claims that he wanted to make a cake (the word for cake in Czech - koláč sounds similar to the word for collage - koláž) out of pornographic magazines.” I realized with astonishment that he did not know what collage was. I told myself, that he was once again a crown prince from the house of Ubu. A cake? It was completely absurd, I was supposed to cut it and put as stuffing into the cake, or make it into a crumb, or what? Until it dawned on me, I had no idea how he meant it. But obviously, it fit well with their justice thing that I had them. There were various scientists coming to the court, it was an amazing spectacle. If I had not been there as the accused party, I would have laughed until they would have sent me out of the room, because it was an absurd theatre.

The judge judged dissidents, he was specialized in persons who were against the regime. However, the investigator was involved in some minor criminal activity. When they let me out of prison a year later, I went to the investigator for an interview. It was supposed to be some kind of prevention. So, he warned me again: “Do not continue with your criminal activities!” I saw that he had my luggage on top of his cabinet, the one they filled up with part of my books and took away during my house search. “Isn't that my suitcase? Why is it here in your office?” And he said: “You see? And I was still wondering who I borrowed it from.” And I said: “You did not borrow it, you took it when you took my books away and you used it to carry them.” He cleaned it with a piece of rag, it was all dusty and I went home with it. The world around us was completely absurd, it was a pataphysical world and we did not have to create it artificially at all. We were just looking for various chains of events and focused on them.

And were you not afraid?

I don’t know about others, but I was not afraid at all. It was a game for me. Le Grand Jeu. But I had one problem. When I went to prison, I left two small children at home. After the house search and my arrest, my wife took the house search statement together with the list of all the things they confiscated and took it to Prague to somebody from Charter 77. At the end of the statements, there were signatures of all those who participated in the house search, around five persons from the regional administration of the StB and some comrade - a non-participating person. Quite soon it was published in the foreign press, they spoke about it on the RFE. That exposed the whole group of the StB officers. The police came all angry to my wife and they yelled and threatened her: “We will put you in prison as well, the same as your husband, and your children will be sent to an institution.” That was a hard moment for me. But we survived it because the case became well-known and they would not take the chance.
This was happening quite often, they would permit themselves a lot, but they were afraid of the foreign countries.

They were afraid of personal responsibility - that their names would become well-known. They were afraid that one day it (might) change and that they would be the ones punished, that they would have to take the responsibility. The situation was far different from the fifties. Perhaps the smarter ones learned from the past, they knew that in the fifties the political mill grained even those who served the party faithfully.

That seems like some kind of double deception, they must have been devoted to something after all, no?

No, no. They were not devoted to the party. Only a fraction of them were fanatics. But the majority of them took it as a profession. Some of them loved the power that had been entrusted to them. They were well paid, people were afraid of them, they enjoyed it. Simply the power to scare and to torture people. There was probably a very little of positive motivation.

But how is it possible? How can something like that occur?
It can. The Nazis, Gestapo, Bolsheviks, Jesuits and others, their motivation was similar. After all, it is still all around us. It was not an exceptional period at all. It happens every time when it gets an appropriate space. People stay, only historical background changes.

I describe similar kinds of events. We are talking here about quite big matters in my book I try to relate them. You were talking about swimming contests or an editorial board on a bus, this seems quite important to me, but it is not described in any literature. That is why I am looking for concrete details. How many people participated? What did it look like?

The pataphysical scene was quite small at the time. We were five or six, but we had a large circle of supporters. People knew about us. Only in retrospect, I found out that we influenced even the generations of younger people. Amateur theatre actors, performers, musicians, writers. Perhaps they are not conscious pataphysicists, but they transposed the spiritual climate into their music, their literature, into their lifestyle. For some of them, I am some kind of a father – the founder, the greybeard; I can feel it, but I try to resist it, I do not want it that way. Perhaps even other former members of PAKO feel the same. But certainly, it had that inspirational meaning. Those young people mainly felt that we had the strength, that we were not afraid to be free. Once they put me in prison, PAKO fell apart. Svatava Antošová left Teplice to wash dishes at Sfinx in Budweis, the others disappeared somewhere, but before that, they had to face the police committee, they received warnings, they were promised that their lives would be destroyed, went through house searches, had a lot of their things confiscated. They were scared and threatened. That is why my charge contained some wording that might have made some people regret. It was not easy to resist. I could understand that. After two months of detention, I went home for a while, I had a break of about one or two months before I was lawfully convicted. I did not want to sell my skin cheap, so I wrote the first part of my book “Občanský průkaz, prosím”, where I described everything that had happened since my arrest. The text was published in the Prisoner Almanac of Charter 77. I met some friends during the break between my detention and imprisonment. Some of them were afraid, looking around to see if anyone was watching and they were saying: “You gave us quite a hard time...” “What? Me? They did to all of us and to me the most. Did I force you to anything?” I could see how their
character had been broken, how they accepted the police rhetoric without any resistance. Not all of them were strong. Obviously, they were pub friends, they enjoyed playing and those intellectual loops, humour, and creative ambiance, but most people get scared when it starts to get rough. They are not heroes. If they could choose, they would keep the side.

Did you invite an audience when you were preparing something? Or it was rather a private thing?

Only friends and friends of friends. Everybody had their families, friends, so around thirty, forty people gathered. Nobody was completely unknown. For example, in the ravine of Vješťan, near Suchá village in Teplice region, we had a performance we would say today, about energy use. The name was “Sausages with poetry” there were some short lectures and practical demonstrations. Some people climbed up the rock on a rope, the others went on foot at a relaxed pace with breaks. Someone counted how much energy we save by going on foot at ease and there was a lecture about what practical use that can have for socialism. We might have slightly devalued the sports performances since we came to a conclusion that from an ideological point of view it had no use at all. V. Lukášek prepared a surprise. He exposed a five-liter bottle with shit in it. The bottle label read: “Nation to itself.” In that smutty period when everybody collaborated with the communists we stood up, applauded and we paid tribute to new values.

The ravine of Vješťan is a pub?
It is not a pub, it is a natural amphitheater, the remains of volcanic activity in the Czech Central Mountains. There is a rock on top and a fireplace below used by tramps and to get there you had to cross a field. It would have been difficult for the cops to come there without being noticed. But there was no permanent informer around the Pataphysical College. When I was cooperating with a group of informal visual artists led by Valis (Zdeněk Jelinek) in Česká lípa, they were doing exhibitions in Robeč creeks meanders in an area called Peklo (Hell), there was an informer almost every time. The police hunted us in cars and with dogs, they knew exactly where it would take place and they circled the space; that was worse for the participants. But that was another group, a different participant composition, they were expecting it. That was underground. And they kind of enjoyed the hunting and the police maneuvers. Sometimes I had a feeling that some participants would be somehow disappointed if the police would not come.

Was it a sort of a game?
Yes, it was. You have to keep in mind that real socialism was infinitely boring. Nothing was happening. It resembled a situation when an old woman looks out of the window and watches the street, but nobody is passing.

And I wanted to ask you if some of your activities were completely private? In the flats for example?
Yes, once a week we met at my flat, all the meetings originally took place there, especially in bad weather. The air outside was foggy, filled with carbon products; to stay out of closed areas meant to risk your life.

How often, or how long?
The members of the College were usually creating something together. They wrote poetry, drew, wrote texts, some of them were doing photography. I had “The Annals of Pataphysics” from Albert Marenčín that were published in Světová literatura in 1969 and some other books and magazines from that period before the intellectual life was covered by fog of the real socialism. We read all that and discussed it. Eventually, the time had come for us to start editing our own almanac. The reason was not to let the ideas get lost and the spirit get stale. It was an irregular journal where we put our creations. It was written on a typewriter on a thin paper in 12 copies. Each time the first and the last copy was hardly legible.

First, there was a police hysteria surrounding the underground magazine VOKNO where I published some articles from time to time. I had my first house search because of VOKNO, the police also took a few copies of our PAKO almanac. The second time they were searching the invitation to Seifert’s funeral and at the same time, they were searching for our PAKO almanac. They confiscated it from the people who used to receive it and investigated them. PAKO never had political content, but it used to take a different point of view on all that ideological occurrence. As Alfred Jarry said, we tried to give a crooked mirror for a crooked muzzle, it was a double crooked projection that let the truth appear. The StB was trying hard to find all the copies even in Slovakia from Albert Marenčín.

When you were meeting at your flat, was it for the almanac or did you also have some events there?

Our flat was mostly about privacy. We needed that privacy in order to be able to communicate freely. The flat was a replacement of a club, which one may visit in a normal democratic society. Therefore, the flat had several roles. We talked there, presented our texts, painters were coming to show us their sketches or paintings, photographers brought their photos. The College members presented their latest creations to one another.

The comrades from the Cultural Department ONV (Regional Cultural Centre) made it hard to organize exhibitions in Teplice for the art group called Terč because of me. I irritated them a bit with my views. For example, I painted a black LP with various small structures, and I called it: “Murmurs of descending smog.” Back then, Teplice and the entire North Bohemian Basin was almost continuously affected by a smog cloud. When it was raining the trickles streaming down the windows were completely black. It was soot and it formed deposits on the window sills, which needed to be wiped constantly. The smog was provoking cough, you couldn’t breathe, children suffered from bronchial pneumonia, it was literally a life-threatening situation. So, from me, it was a caprice, a poke in the ribs. Since then the comrades set their eyes on me. Hence, I preferred to stop exhibiting with the group and with some of them I was meeting at home - in my flat. Then, my flat served as a club and at the same time as a refuge from the smog. In that period the community was very important because if you live in a madhouse, in terrible living conditions and you are locked as if in prison and under surveillance, you need to find someone or a few people need to meet who are not crazy and do not have the prisoner spirit. But they will also happily wear the madmen’s clothes when they are in that environment. It was a kind of a mimicry; however, it was important to be able to step out of it anytime.

And was there a certain regularity to those meetings?

There was a regularity, the meetings took place around once a fortnight or weekly.

And was there some associated ritual? Or some custom?
Sometimes we greeted each other by some pataphysical greeting, for instance: Buggery pshite, pshitey buggery! These were often paraphrases of Ubu Roi. Sometimes my wife baked something nice, sometimes we drank wine. It was quite festive; my colleagues would look forward to those meetings. To meet their friends, to learn some news and enjoy a glass of wine. My flat was an asylum.

When you read those different texts or you had exhibitions or showed new things, was it always the group of people or were friends invited as well, or were these friends invited to bigger events?

Official exhibitions were not possible without surveillance and a complicated approval system. The comrades often banned them or there were ideological committees who came and started selecting those paintings they didn’t like, which they couldn’t understand, or which offended the constructive effort of the working people. What remained were landscapes or unambiguous figures, but any surrealist features, Dada, Informalism or Divna Poetry were not tolerated. For example, I created a unique thing and called it: “A secret object for peaceful purposes”. The committee came: “What is it? What is it?” and “What are you trying to say by that?” When the StB came for an inspection into my flat, they said: “How can this hang here? Mrs. Vackova, I would take that and throw it out of the window and downstairs I would step on it and burn it all.” They felt like the entire world belonged to them. They wanted to own one’s soul. And they also wanted to prescribe what everyone should think. It went to ad absurdum the entire situation. That’s why most people succumbed to that pressure. I do not blame those people, it was their weakness. They were afraid of them because they could do anything they wanted to them. When I went to visit Ladislav Lis with my wife in a motorbike, the cops would inspect me on the road three or four times, for instance. And that was just 50 km from Teplice to Sosnová. But they eavesdropped it from somewhere that we would be going there and so they invested so much energy, you couldn’t even understand that. All those constant warnings: “Why are you going to see that person? He will lure you into some trouble.” Those were incredible things. So in this atmosphere, it was impossible to invite completely unknown individuals into the flat. Those who wanted to join us somewhere outside at occasional events, only found out last minute through a friend.

And now a few more things. First, in the documentary called V zajetí železné opony Mr. Gruntorád said that if all the pataphysical activities took place in Prague, they would have probably left you alone and that your issues were because of Teplice.

Charter and other political activities divided according to ideological groups or they were active in certain sectors. The Catholics were meeting at U Bendů and U Němců, the underground circle was around Magor and Čuñas in so-called baráky (barracks), Trotskyists used to go to Uhel, jazz fans had their Jazz section, Havel held the philosophical Mondays at the riverbank, etc. There were more activities in Prague and its surroundings. We lived in a different region where there were a lot of the StB members specialized in fighting anti-government activities but there were not as many independent citizens in the north as there were in Prague. We were a kind of a marginal group. And if we had not been here but in Prague, the cops would probably focus more on the political stuff and they would probably leave us – the cultural and marginal ones – alone. They would not have had time for us. That is most likely what Jirka Gruntorád meant.

Nevertheless, the police and judicial sanctions on people outside Prague were more dramatic and frequently their impact was also harsher. These people had major issues precisely because the StB guys could pay more attention to them. Those regional and aerial subsidiaries had to show some activity. Imagine that you are among the three or four so-called “anti-governmental groups”. There is also
someone from the underground group and then a few strange individuals who stand out in some way and as such, they are also under surveillance. The StB guys have a map on their wall, the centres are marked with pins. They build a network of snitches around you, they get informers. They surround you. Well, then there is a question of what is more and what is less important for the Regional Department of the Communist Party. They had the need to watch out for those identified people and keep them strung up. Prague had a million inhabitants. And there were significantly more dissidents and Charter signatories. Therefore, it was all about power distribution.

One last thing then, you said that the totalitarian regime is back and that it is sort of secret.

Yes, it is back here. It is not so obvious anymore, but latent – creeping. Once the real socialism was over in 1989, we really felt relieved. Then came the free nineties but together with the collapse of the Twins in the USA, the officials lifted their heads again.

And that’s one thing that for instance the younger artists’ generation pays a lot of attention to. So I am wondering if you could comment on that. For instance us, we feel that it is happening, but we are unable to describe why.

Well, I will tell you my opinion. I think that the totalitarianism is essentially made by bureaucracy. By more or less anonymous officials. And perhaps not even by the government itself, by the elite. They hold various posts of the executive power as high- and low-ranking officials. The high-ranking ones need to show some activity in order to advance. The low-ranking ones (administrators) just do or start working on the tasks given by the high-ranking officials. Once a new minister takes office, he brings his secretaries and they bring a number of others with them. They have their friends and relatives to whom they are already indebted in one way or another and they need to place their people in the offices. They will start with purges and fire those who get well paid and do not have to do much. Until recently they kept the hard-working red ants, the administrators. But the politicians’ greed is so big that they decided to fill the administrators’ posts, too. Therefore, they will eventually fire even the administrators and they will replace them by their persons of interest, e.g. their recently graduated children. Now, suddenly, it turns out that the office is supposed to do some work but there is no one who knows how to do it. What do they do? They pay a company to do it for them. So they have this club of kindred spirits whose only qualification is their loyalty and then there are the so-called managers who search for the private services to whom they pay to do the work for them. That’s why officials’ work is getting so terribly expensive. It makes public administration so terribly expensive. And the connection to totalitarianism? Totalitarianism is their power tool because sometimes there are still some contemporary witnesses in the offices who see through it. They need to corrupt them or scare them or get rid of them; they need to remove the dangerous criticism. This is a case of absolute power. The Czech Constitution stands on three legs. Legislative, executive and independent judiciary power. And now, see how the political parties took over all the three legs. For instance, political parties have the right to legislative power. They have the parliament, they were elected there and that is where they should be active using the delegated political will and promoting it. Nevertheless, it is not enough for them. They also need executive power, so they pushed for their secretaries to have some political competence. Then there was a fight over whether there should be any political secretaries. And obviously there are and there will be. Even if the executive management belongs to professionals, they want to manage it politically. Politics should not step in this area. In the past, political parties occupied the entire country. Unofficially, they even had their investigators, prosecutors, judges and perhaps even prison guards and cops. When they wanted to remove someone, they threw them into that judiciary of
theirs. They took the case all the way to prison. If they needed to free someone who was a convicted
thief or criminal, they also threw them into their judiciary. And it let those cases rot in a way that they
never even reached the court. Basically, someone lost it, extended the legal period, etc. That’s the third
leg, the independent judges who are obviously not independent; they work for one of the political
parties or for the mafia. The economic and political mafia split the entire public administration and they
abuse its mechanisms. That is the hidden totalitarianism. Those who control the public administration
mechanisms, gain absolute power. Sometimes the mafias agree among themselves and divide the
spheres of influence and territory, at other times they enter irreconcilable disputes. Violent disputes
over resources, influence, and power.

Is there a way out of that?

I don’t know if there is a way out. But in order to even get to its beginning, the young educated people
would have to start gradually changing the situation. It is a marathon. These new people must not
engage in egoism and they need a strong desire for change. They need the love of the truth, sense of
fair-play, love of freedom not only for themselves. There are very few such people; because people are
their parents’ children and see how the parents act, the parents essentially prepare their ground, they
provide them with education, give them too much money because they do not have enough time for
them or buy them expensive gifts. They bring them up to become egoists. This nation is a nation of the
deprived who need to start the healing process. That’s where it should all begin.

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Summary

Secret Theatre: off-the-grid performance practices in socialist Poland and Czechoslovakia

This study investigates off-the-grid performance practices that took shape in socialist Poland and former Czechoslovakia, between 1956 and 1989. The analysis challenges existing views on nonconformist creative practices as practices that are in binary opposition with topdown cultural initiatives. To unpack the network of interactions between the performances and their venues, I build on theorizing about deterritorialized spaces (Yurchak 2016) and heterotopias (Foucault 1971). Both terms, in distinct ways, refer to spaces that exist within the social system, but are not part of it; that ignore the system's narratives, yet do not actively oppose them – in short, spaces where dominant social narratives cease. My analysis reveals how performances blend with specific venues to create late-Soviet instances of deterritorialization or heterotopia. I thus refine our understanding of the Eastern Bloc experiment – an aim that is particularly urgent against the backdrop of contemporary media framing of the Cold War era and a so-called New Cold War.

Samenvatting

Geheim Theatre: off-the-grid-uitvoeringspraktijken in het socialistische Polen en het Tsjechoslowakije