

# Introduction

## Jokes of Repression

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In his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously defined comedy as “an imitation of inferior people.” However, as the philosopher specified, not every defect is an object of the comic ridicule: “The laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction: for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but it does not involve pain.”<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s equation of the laughable with painless mockery usefully points to several important aspects of laughter discussed in this cluster. The comic genre provides symbolic mechanisms for simultaneous description of and distancing from the disgraceful. Yet this (comic) desire to distort and caricature is accompanied by a particular process of affective translation. The disgraceful does not become a cause for disgust or recoil; instead, it acts as an object of scoffing attraction, if not attachment. In a sense, this laughter is a laughter of reconciliation, an acoustic and bodily analgesic—a socially acceptable painkiller that modifies the perception when the perceived situation cannot be changed.

Coming from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, the authors who contributed to this cluster share the same basic motivation: not unlike Aristotle, they all are interested in understanding the work of the comic outside the usual framework of pleasurable entertainment. Socialist comic genres emerge here as *jokes of repression*, which is to say, as cultural acts that both were produced by mechanisms of artistic censorship and political pressure and, simultaneously, were extremely self-reflective about the emotional proximity to the things being mocked.

Neringa Klumbyte defines this peculiar socialist dynamic of attraction to and negation of the disgraceful as “political intimacy,” as a certain affective regime that is built on emotional reciprocity *within* hierarchical political relations. Malfunctioning and often distorted, this form of cultural exchange nonetheless legitimized expressions of dissatisfaction, demarcating a social environment where dominant ideological values could be destabilized and reshaped.

The language of these jokes of repression is far from being “the language of free and fearless truth” that Mikhail Bakhtin associated with the culture of laughter in the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Twisted, slippery, and elusive, socialist jokes of repression highlighted awkward situations without suggesting any resolution. In a sense, they provided an impromptu manual, a curious cultural guidebook to pitfalls and idiosyncrasies of socialism. Bill Martin in his study of Slatan Dudov’s comedies perceptively traces this socialist obsession with “the uncoupling of laughter from any necessary association with happiness.” Again, what is at stake in this version of the comic is more a recognition of human

weaknesses rather than an attempt to eradicate them. Framed as “positive critique,” laughter here confirms personal flaws, making them a constitutive part of larger social and political narratives.<sup>3</sup>

This personalization of flaws, as well as a more general withdrawal into the realm of the everyday and private, is a well-known feature of socialist humor and satire. The system’s failures never seemed to be systemic enough and had to be publically reframed and re-dressed as imperfections or mistakes of concrete individuals and groups. Maria Ioniță creatively explores this overall tendency of reducing the political to the personal by drawing attention to what she calls “the act of private laughter,” a micro-act of civil disobedience of sorts, a historically specific way of bypassing political pressure through various forms of creative encoding and doublespeak. Discursive “lizards,” a genre of oblique speech, were a form of mimetic resistance that employed literary camouflage to avoid the constraints of censorship. Yet, as Ioniță documents, these “lizards” were also a means of establishing some version of political intimacy. Fooling the censor was only a part of the story. Establishing “the winking alliance” between the writer and the reader, creating an invisible community of those who were “in on the joke” was just as important. Neither especially powerful, nor strikingly political, these communities, nonetheless, created a certain climate of coexistence with the regime, making things and situations that could not be avoided more palatable.

This adaptive and mitigating function of laughter under socialism is conceptualized further in the essay by Alena Ledeneva. Like in the previous articles, laughter here—or, rather, the knowing smile—was also a way of building a community, it was also a mechanism for separating those “in the know” from mere passersby. Establishing channels of emotional reciprocity, knowing smiles revealed systemic flaws. But also, and perhaps more importantly, they tacitly manifested a form of social knowledge, a particular cultural competency for dealing with moral ambiguity, which was inherently linked with the system. Far from being a laughter of joy, the knowing smile was simultaneously a “sign of awareness of transgression” and a recognition of complicity, a gesture of symbolic disengagement from situations that could not be controlled and from frameworks that could not be changed.

The essay by Costica Bradatan that concludes the cluster offers a polemical alternative to the dominant attempt of seeing the comic as a somewhat conservative social mechanism aimed at integrating and reconciling the individual with the conditions of his/her existence. There is nothing “socially accommodationist”<sup>4</sup> in Bradatan’s version of laughter. In fact, there is very little that can be socially acceptable in his account of the divine comedy that went totally off track in Eastern Europe. Instead, “laughter at oneself” is seen here as a gesture of a radical self-evacuation—from time and space, from the available history and geography. As Hayden White reminds us, this return of the romantic perception of history as tragedy (and the individual—as a lonely hero fighting an ineluctable fate) is a reversal of the social opportunism of the comic only to a point. Despite their stylistic differences, both approaches—history as comedy and history as tragedy—are driven by the same conservative predisposition.<sup>5</sup>

Locating social rules outside meaningful forms of social practice, they either perceive social arrangements as an invitation to exercise “strategic immoralism”<sup>6</sup> or to reject these arrangements altogether in an act of heroic self-annihilation.

Jokes of repression are not the only genre that channeled comic content during socialism. Yet, unlike many other forms of publically circulated laughter, they expressed in an unusually salient way how the regime we loved to hate became an object of our affective—albeit negative—attachment: A political intimacy with a crooked smile, achieved through mocking and ridicule.

## Notes

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 9.
2. “Materialy k zashchite dissertatsii M. M. Bakhtina ‘François Rabelais v istorii realizma’” (15 noiabria 1946 g). M. M. Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4 (1) (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2008), 990–91. See also Mikhail Bakhtin, “K voprosam teorii romana. K voprosam teorii smekha (O Maiakovskom).” M. M. Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1996), 49.
3. For more on positive critique and socialist laughter see my essay: “Laughter under Socialism: Exposing the Ocular in Soviet Jocularities,” *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2 (2011): 247–55.
4. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 27.
5. Ibid.
6. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 389.

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# Political Intimacy

## Power, Laughter, and Coexistence in Late Soviet Lithuania

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This article explores intersections between power, subjectivity, and laughter by focusing on *Šluota (The Broom)*, a humor and satire journal published by the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party during late socialism (1970s to mid-1980s). In Lithuania, while the official newspapers and journals were commonly distrusted, *The Broom* was perceived as a grassroots media. In this article, the author asks how officially sanctioned socialist humor was translated into readers' sincere laughter; how sensual and political dialogue was created between state authorities, artists, and readers. The author shows that in the case of the official culture of humor presented in *The Broom*, laughter cannot be easily classified as performance of resistance or support for the regime. In *The Broom*, the discourse of power was never monologic and simply oppressive. It was situational, contextual, and changing. Officially sanctioned laughter was infused with and mediated by private emotions and values. Moreover, the journal provided space for artistic creativity and self-expression that reshaped official political aesthetics. Laughter blurred the distinctions between the state and the citizen, the public and the private, the hegemonic and the sincere. The author argues that laughter is an experience and a performance of political intimacy through which various agents imagine a self, society, and the state and reproduce various power orders. Political intimacy refers to coexistence of state authorities and other subjects in fields of social and political comfort, togetherness, and dialogue as well as in the zones of shared meanings and values.

**Keywords:** *political intimacy; laughter; power; subjectivity; Lithuania*

In Soviet times the jokes were so ubiquitous that reflexive “jokes about jokes” evolved.<sup>1</sup> During the Brezhnev years, jokes were told eagerly at home, in smoking areas at work, in corridors of schools and universities. Officially, jokes circulated in humor and satire journals, TV shows, and public events. Laughter filled relatively grim Soviet space and added lightness to the Soviet culture of seriousness.<sup>2</sup> Turning one's gaze at the late socialist everyday, one is tempted to ask what was funny in a not very funny milieu.

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This article explores intersections between power, subjectivity, and laughter by focusing on *Šluota* (*The Broom*), a humor and satire journal in late socialist Lithuania (1970s to mid-1980s). Laughter seems to be resistant to terror, control, and discipline. It looks impenetrable by the state, exclusively private and sincere. Indeed, in various studies on socialism, laughter often provides evidence for resistance, for creativeness to overcome the system and its power regime, and for ability to survive socialism.<sup>3</sup> Laughter, however, can also be hegemonic and reproduce ideologies and values of the state or the dominant class.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of *The Broom*, the “state” and people laughed together. I show that in the official culture of humor presented in *The Broom*, laughter cannot be easily classified as performance of resistance or support for the regime. In *The Broom*, the discourse of power was never monologic and simply oppressive. It was situational, contextual, and changing. Editors, journalists, artists, readers, and even censors were active participants in creating this discourse. Thus, officially sanctioned laughter was also infused with and mediated by private emotions and values. I argue that laughter is an experience and performance of *political intimacy* through which various agents imagine a self, society, and the state and reproduce various power orders. *Political intimacy* refers to power relations, to coexistence of state authorities and other subjects in fields of social and political comfort, togetherness, and dialogue as well as in zones of shared meanings and values. In these fields, the distinctions between the state and the citizen, the public and the private, the hegemonic and the sincere, the powerful and powerless lose their analytical relevance.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Broom: From Revolutionary Humor to Humor Decadence***

*The Broom* was first published in 1934 illegally by Lithuanian Communist Party artists-revolutionaries in Kaunas.<sup>6</sup> The 1934 *Broom* reflected pan-Soviet tendencies in humor. Lesley Milne reminds us that after the Russian Revolution, Russian humor and satire became heavily politicized.<sup>7</sup> There was a requirement that all humor should be “serious” in the sense that it could be interpreted as satirical in intent. In official Soviet culture, humor was co-opted into the great task of building socialism. It was valued “as a corrective, “scourging,” “lashing,” or otherwise castigating “relicts of the bourgeois past,” which were impeding the development of the new, healthy socialist society.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1936, the publishing of *The Broom* was discontinued most likely because of the persecution or relocation of the journal’s major contributors.<sup>9</sup> The next and the first legal issue of *The Broom* was published on 12 July 1940, nine days before Lithuania officially became a new Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR. Despite the victory of communism, there was a lot of work for *The Broom*. It continued its ideological and political struggle against “the trash of the past—bourgeois nationalists, exploiters and capitalists, landlords and kulaks, and all those who [now] tried to accommodate to or oppose the new life, to camouflage themselves and speculate.”<sup>10</sup> In 1941,

when Stepas Žukas, the editor-in-chief at that time, left Lithuania after the Nazi army occupied it, publishing of *The Broom* stopped again. From 1956, when the political climate allowed for national humor journals, *The Broom* was published by the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party in Vilnius.

After 1956 *The Broom* is more cynical and detached. The motive of the broom, of purifying and cleaning society, disappears from the pages. The communist rhetoric of class struggle, exploitation, bourgeoisie, and proletariat also vanishes. In late socialism, readers even did not know how *The Broom* got its name. Among many readers, artists, and writers, *The Broom's* former revolutionary spirit would have sparked a wry smile since many did not identify with its former revolutionary agenda. In the pages of the journal there was no revolutionary critique of social vices with a belief in a bright future and a perfection of society anymore. Rather, it was a routinized and often cynical critique that manifested a distance from various types, whether bureaucrats or pilferers. Various comic figures that seeped into pages of *The Broom* illustrated absurdities of everyday life. Professional artists, a new elite group, were primarily interested in humor as an art rather than art as a powerful weapon to change society and build a socialist future.

The popularity of *The Broom* rose from twenty thousand copies in 1956 to more than one hundred thousand copies in 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Thus, at its peak, there was approximately one journal copy per thirty inhabitants. Although the actual number of copies sold is unknown, this journal was widely known and read in late socialism. It was the only journal of humor and satire in the Lithuanian language, much more popular than the pan-Soviet and Russian *Krokodil*. Moreover, *The Broom* was profitable unlike many other newspapers and journals, such as *Tiesa (The Truth)* and *Komjaunimo Tiesa (The Komsomol Truth)*. Not only numbers, but also reader's memories, indicate very positive reception of *The Broom*. During the interviews, informants pleasantly smiled when I asked about *The Broom*. They remembered reading, collecting, purchasing, and sharing *The Broom* with others. Some of the former readers of *The Broom* remembered lines by kiosks that sold the journal. Others recollected that at work they were required to order several newspapers and journals; thus, they used to order *The Broom* among other journals. Some of *The Broom* folklore is still alive at present, and I happened to hear several people quoting *Broom* jokes during my summer research in 2009.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, not everything in *The Broom* was equally liked, but there were many things to enjoy as well.

In 2008, Jurgis Gimberis, the writer and satirist, regretted that *The Broom* did not survive post-Soviet times.<sup>13</sup> After independence, "Big hopes. Sacred things. Sacred slogans. There was no place for laughter, critique, satire. How can you cut the sacred tree? [Literally, "cut the branch" on which you presumably sit.]" According to Gimberis, *The Broom* in Soviet times was very balanced, "there was serious, and simple, vulgar and intellectual humor. Everything you want. Now it is hardly possible to revive it. Maybe that's why I am not interested in humor anymore. I almost don't write. I earn money translating foreign literary works."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Jonas Varnas, a well-known artist and regular contributor to *The Broom*, regretted that now

people like political jokes and nobody is interested in “pure humor.” Pleasant smiles and memories of the readers as well as Gimberis’s commentary indicate that socialist-time laughter was also their own.<sup>15</sup>

## Laughter and Power

In studies of laughter, the interconnections between laughter and power range from laughter as an expression of superiority and hegemony to laughter as opposition and resistance. Various studies illustrate how humor shapes social and political values and orders in different periods of history. In the case of the Roman Republic, according to Anthony Corbeill, humor created and enforced the community’s ethical values and was a means of ordering social realities.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the Soviet Union, as Stephen Norris in his analysis of Boris Efimov’s cartoons demonstrates, laughter “provided Soviet citizens with the rhetorical tools necessary to be ‘good people,’” and this way reinforced and normalized state ideologies. The sharp weapon of laughter gave people not just something to laugh at, but something to believe in.<sup>17</sup>

The studies that speak of jokes as tiny revolutions, of laughter’s subversive and counterhegemonic power, emphasize individuals’ liberation from and transgression of the dominant social structures, power regimes, and official discourses.<sup>18</sup> In his classic study on jokes, Sigmund Freud argued that joking serves a need to liberate oneself from critical, imposed judgment; from inhibitions of shame and respectability; from the fetters of social, familial, and marital institutions; and from “proper” speech and “correct” behavior.<sup>19</sup> Mary Douglas conceptualized joking as a momentary escape from “structure” into “non-structure,” a moment of enjoyment “beyond the bounds of reason and society,” and as “temporary suspension” of and “little disturbances” in social structures.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, many studies of Soviet humor also approach humor as liberation from social and political ideologies and structures. Anna Krylova claims that Soviet humor can be seen as a form of social resistance to authoritative discourse and as an attempt to break out of the official interpretive framework by creating a counter framework.<sup>21</sup> According to Krylova, “The joke reflects and internalizes the “discourses of authority,” and at the same time attacks, reinterprets, and reimagines it.”<sup>22</sup>

In studies of Soviet history and society, different perspectives on “power” and “the political” inform theoretical considerations. Sovietology studies of totalitarianism,<sup>23</sup> mainly represented by political scientists, advanced the approach of the Soviet state as an institution exercising near total power over society through secret police, propaganda, and centralized control over the economy. In this view, society existed as a collection of atomized individuals either inculcated or repressed by the mighty state apparatus. Although totalitarian theory was developed to describe the Stalinist regime, the binaries that it produced, such as the state and people or oppression and resistance, have been continuously used in later interpretations of Soviet history.



Revisionist and postrevisionist historians approached power as a more diffuse phenomenon, something that had been secured by the state through means of social control, discipline, and mass support.<sup>24</sup> Postrevisionists promoted a new research agenda, focusing on what it meant to be Soviet, how Soviet values were internalized, how individuals learned to speak Bolshevik,<sup>25</sup> how they self-represented themselves,<sup>26</sup> and how they created a Soviet citizen through performance of “Sovietness.”<sup>27</sup> In these studies, being a Soviet, sharing Soviet values, and speaking Bolshevik reflects individuals’ political subjectivities. Many of these studies still presume the state/people dichotomy, only in this case the relation between the state and people is positive, the one of support.

Some anthropological studies recently have questioned state/society dichotomies and the Cold War binaries that still inform scholarship of Soviet history and politics. Alexei Yurchak prominently argued against the Cold War binaries, such as “oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, the state and the people, official economy and second economy, official culture and counterculture, totalitarian language and counterlanguage, public self and private self, truth and lie, reality and dissimulation, morality and corruption, and so on.”<sup>28</sup> The author claimed that the Soviet system was always felt to be both stagnating and immutable, fragile and vigorous, bleak and full of promise. Soviet citizens were able to lead meaningful, happy, and interesting lives and be “normal people.”<sup>29</sup> They were not interested in politics and largely perceived their everyday roundabouts as apolitical.<sup>30</sup> Serguei Oushakine showed that the categories of the dominant and the dominated, public and private are problematic in understanding resistance of Soviet dissidents in the late 1960s and 1970s. The author claimed that dissidents’ public performance was largely framed by existing public discourses on Soviet law and civic and human rights. In the case of samizdat texts, there was no clear watershed between “public” and “private” transcripts of the dissidents, but instead there existed a gradual continuum from underground to official recognition.<sup>31</sup> The dissidents’ resistance expressed itself in amplification of the discourse of the dominant, rather than in its subversion.<sup>32</sup>

In studies of Soviet humor and satire, an important contribution to understanding of Soviet power is provided by Gregory Carleton, who emphasized the presence of different and contradictory discourses of power along with changing contexts, agents, and norms that shaped power circulation. Carleton illustrates that in the case of Soviet satirical literature, there was no single censorship canon after the Revolution and under Stalin. There was rather “a plurality of differing and often contradictory canonettes.”<sup>33</sup> Discussing Western and post-Soviet interpretations of Mikhail Zoshchenko’s works, Carleton argues that the satirist is situated “against a fixed background of something called “the state,” “the party,” or “the system”—always employed in the singular so as to enforce the impression of an omniscient, omnipresent controlling voice of doctrine against which one can only agree or disagree.”<sup>34</sup> The tendency to speak of state, party or power in the singular can make us



believe that there was a unified platform which is not true.<sup>35</sup> Even Glavlit did not operate in consistent or predictable fashion.<sup>36</sup> According to Carleton, official interpretations of Zoshchenko works kept changing and were subjected to multiple reevaluations throughout the Soviet period.

Building on the above works, I suggest to look at power as mutable, situational, and contextual. I focus at its specific circulation in contexts of political intimacy among various agents. It is not the property of the state or its citizens but, rather, a product of interaction and communication among different agents in the context of circulating ideologies and values.<sup>37</sup> *The Broom* was an arena where interaction and communication among censors, the Central Committee and the KGB, editors, journalists, artists, other contributors, publishers, and readers took place. In late socialism, as I show below, *The Broom* created an arena for self-expression, individual creativity, and active involvement that shaped socialist society as well as selfhood. It recirculated official values and ideologies and fostered national sentiments. In all of these periods *The Broom* did not speak in one voice, but inhabited multiple and changing voices, and reproduced different power and ideology articulations. Laughter was expressive of power, of the intimacy between the state and the citizens, and in many cases of the comfort and pleasure of being a citizen in late Soviet times.

## Political Intimacy

Jonas Varnas, an artist, remembered that he did not produce cartoons that would challenge the existing norms of critique and laughter. He did not want to spoil his relationship with the editor and compromise the editor's reputation in front of censors and others in case his transgressive cartoon was published and identified as such. He also recollected that in Soviet times he used to participate in exhibitions. Before the opening of an exhibition, someone from Glavlit, the central censorship institution, used to inspect it. The artist claimed that the censor was nice and tolerant; he just made sure nothing very explicitly anti-Soviet was there. In the first case, it was a relationship of political intimacy between him and the editor that prevented this artist from portraying some themes. Loyalty, recognition, and respect of rules and statuses informed this relationship. In the second case, which also illustrates a relationship of political intimacy, the assertion about nicety and tolerance of the censor meant that the artist recognized him as a person to whom he could relate. Thus, a censor, an embodiment of Soviet ideology and power, was in this case a friendly negotiator, willing to ignore some transgressions if they were not explicitly against the Soviet state and socialism.

By *political intimacy*, I mean relations of power entailing mutual closeness and belonging. It is a familiar and close affective connection that requires dialogue and reciprocity. Within particular cultural settings, an intimate relationship between people also implies shared knowledge and values.<sup>38</sup> In the case of comic culture analyzed in this article, political intimacy defines relationship between a

editor and a reader and an artist. Laughter is an expression of political intimacy, of closeness and coexistence among subjects. It produces a sensual dialogue among unequals informed by values that make their relationship meaningful. In the case of *The Broom*, those who laughed shared moral and civic values, such as collectivity and equality. While cracking jokes, they exchanged their anger and discontent about transgressors of public order. But in many other cases, laughter that united political intimates was expressive of positive emotions, such as joy and excitement.

Political intimacy displays emotional attachment through manifestation of recognition and loyalty. *Recognition* means that people do not question power relationship between them. *Loyalty* is a disposition to persist in an associational attachment that involves a commitment to secure or at least not to jeopardize the interests or well-being of the object of loyalty. In Soviet times, Justinas Marcinkevičius, one of the most prominent Lithuanian poets, was allowed to create national poems, because he also created poems about communism. Like *The Broom* artists, he reproduced socialist values, but also was able to negotiate and reshape the existing meaning orders because he was loyal to and trusted by authorities. Thus, it is possible to negotiate official values, resist the regime, and share political intimacy with authorities, as in the case of Marcinkevičius and the artists of *The Broom*.

Relations of opposition among people who were political intimates were not outlawed. In words of Kęstutis Šiaulytis, another *Broom* artist, sometimes accidents happened and more serious confrontations occurred. Šiaulytis recalled that for the one hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth, a cover picture showing a round circle of 100s was produced. However, if 100s go in a circle, at the point they meet the number can be read as 001. There was a big scandal, and the editor-in-chief was invited to the Central Committee "on the red carpet" (for investigation). Such "red carpet" events were the ones that, as Varnas claimed, many artists tried to avoid. Šiaulytis also confirmed that such scandals were rare. These cases checked loyalties, reaffirmed power boundaries and rules of coexistence. While political intimacies were revised by different parties, in most cases they prevailed.

Like cultural intimacy,<sup>39</sup> political intimacy is produced as different actors mobilize commonly shared idioms, such as the idioms of humor and critique in *The Broom*, that simultaneously produce a sense of belonging and create room for opposition and reformulation of state power.<sup>40</sup> In the case of *The Broom*, the "state" appropriates for its own purposes the local idioms of morality, custom, and solidarity. And it appeals to values of everyday life. "Cultural intimacy" explains nationalist sentiments and people's relations to the nation-state. Political intimacy extends to various other political experiences. Moreover, unlike cultural intimacy, political intimacy explicates relations of power, not only cultural sociality. Political intimacy is, thus, about intersubjectivity, imagined and real, about active, but almost never horizontal relations, loyalties, attachments, trust, and friendship. Conceptually, Michael Herzfeld argued, the nation-state is constructed out of intimacy.<sup>41</sup> This intimacy, although in different forms, is a basis for socialist ideologies that were shaped by *The Broom*.

## Socialist Laughter and Power in Late Socialism

Alexei Yurchak, in his study of power, ideology, and anecdote in late socialism, argues that people did not take most official symbols at face value.<sup>42</sup> They disbelieved in the official ideology and at the same time misrecognized that they disbelieve in it. They were cynical subjects who, in Peter Sloterdijk's words, "know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it."<sup>43</sup> In late socialism, neither producers of official ideology nor citizens took official ideology seriously.<sup>44</sup> According to Yurchak

the late socialist hegemonic power had all the means of maintaining its claims on the scale and to the degree that a normal subject, who saw the truth behind the mask, had no other choice but to pretend that the mask was the actual true face. This situation produced a particular type of humorous procedure, in which one admitted not only one's inability to struggle against the official ideology, but also one's inability to struggle against one's own simulated support of this ideology. Sloterdijk calls this type of humor, the "humor that has ceased to struggle" (1987: 305); Žižek calls it "totalitarian laughter" (1991: 27).<sup>45</sup>

However, even if people did not believe in official ideology that was reproduced in slogans and banners at parades, as Yurchak argues, they did share many values consistent with official moral and political visions of society. Monika, a high school teacher in her midforties from Kaunas, born in Siberia, where her parents were deported, remembered that when she was defending her thesis, she wrote in the Soviet-style rhetoric:

I remember I was working on my master's thesis on vocational camp reconstruction in Palanga. . . . I started my work without thinking. Without thinking that one could write otherwise. That every individual has a right to recreation. Then I explained what a vocational camp is and so on. I remember how my opponent teased me. . . . Well, not teased. He looked at it and said: "It is a poor [pitiable] Soviet product."

What Monika misrecognized was not that she disbelieves in the official ideology but that what she believes in *is* the official ideology. She did take it seriously. Indeed, what was official and what was personal was blurred in many cases. As Monika's example illustrates, she shared official values. But she was not simply a subject "mimicking the state"; she was actively using, reinterpreting, and changing these values.

In his more recent work *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More*, Alexei Yurchak acknowledges different relationship between a subject and the state. He shows that subjects were displaced in the state at the same time as they were embedded within it. These subjects were a kind of de-territorialized public.<sup>46</sup> This public neither supported nor opposed the state, but lived in a de-territorialized milieu that they perceived as "normal." Soviet May and November parades, thus, provided for

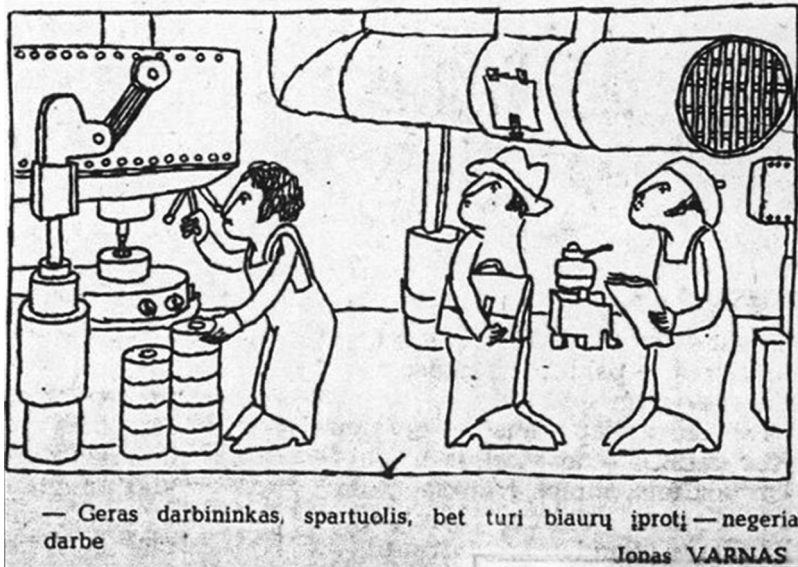
appealing celebrations. They were a powerful machinery for cultural production of the de-territorialized publics, who marched together through the streets, carried the same portraits and slogans, but were not bound by their literal sense. It was a space to have fun and meet friends.<sup>47</sup> Yurchak concludes that the system was internally mutating toward unpredictable, creative, multiple forms of “normal life.”<sup>48</sup>

The acclaimed personal normality that extends to normality of the Soviet milieu involves particular power relations, not addressed by Yurchak. In other words, “normal life” is a political process, as this article shows, and “normal people” are political subjects even if they refrain from active political participation. If we agree with Yurchak that constant displacement and de-territorialization of the authoritative discourse profoundly changed the Soviet system itself and made the new era imaginable and possible, Soviet normality indeed was a significant political development brought about by the interaction, exchange, and creative adaptations of different Soviet “normal people.” In fact, dissidents, whom many of Yurchak’s informants claimed not to know, might have been silenced, invisible, and careful and, thus, less subversive than the “normal” people themselves. A case of laughter culture in Soviet Lithuania illustrates exactly this aspect—many artists, writers, journalists, and readers who in most cases neither supported nor resisted the state, who also admitted not to be interested in politics, were profound political subjects negotiating and shaping official values in their “normal” daily activities and through laughter. In other words, what was “normal” was also political; *The Broom* subjects existed not in the de-territorialized milieu but in the shared spaces of political intimacy that made “normality” itself possible.

A case of *The Broom* illustrates that many artists and journalists, other contributors to the journal, as well as its readers, believed what they laughed at. Thus, their laughter, which in most cases was also the officially sanctioned laughter, or the laughter of the “state,” was sincere. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, *The Broom* published various cartoons and stories that ridiculed predominantly everyday situations, including family, interpersonal, and work relations. These cartoons and jokes addressed officially approved values, such as the importance of productive labor and communist morality.<sup>49</sup> Artists and writers engaged various topics not because they had to, but because they found them appealing. Consistent with official agendas, poor work ethics such as procrastinating at work, drinking at a workplace or coming drunk to work, and pilfering received a lot of attention in cartoons, jokes, and satirical stories. Similarly criticized and laughed at were those who procrastinated by taking a sick leave and by going fishing or on vacation, who used work space for personal gain, and put self-interest above the public one. Undermining the work collective is wrong, Jonas Varnas laughs, even if by not drinking together (see Figure 1).

Like in the case of work, concerns with family illustrate how official values were shaped by artists’ or writers’ laughter. The 1961 moral code as well as Brezhnev-era moral theories called for conscientious fulfillment of familial obligations. The family had to take an active role in moral upbringing or *vospitanie*

**Figure 1**  
**He is a good worker, a shock-worker (*spartuolis*),**  
**but he has a very bad habit—he does not drink at work. Author:**  
**Jonas Varnas. *Štuotos kalendorius* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1976), 17.**



(Lithuanian *auklėjimas*, education, upbringing, and shaping of personality and values) of Soviet citizens. Vestiges of the past included old morals in relation to women, family, and the destruction of rules of common living (alcoholism, hooliganism)<sup>50</sup> as well as religious practices and the problem of *meshchanstvo*, which incorporated materialism, small-mindedness, and an exclusive concern with family and personal life and a corresponding lack of social involvement.<sup>51</sup> Soviet moralists condemned the failure to sacrifice personal comfort for the greater good, as communist morality demanded.<sup>52</sup> Family was an important agent in building a socialist society and its disintegration and immorality was a public as well as private concern.

*The Broom* amusingly mapped the moral landscape of Soviet citizens:

A husband returns in the evening angry and tired:

—Why are you so unhappy?—asks his wife.

—That's your fault! You told me to go to the parent-teacher conference, but you didn't tell me where our kid goes to school.<sup>53</sup>

*Broom* artists also addressed problematic marital relations. They portrayed men as incurable drunks, while women were devoted fighters for family's goodness. Some women gossiped and craved for material goods, but these vices seemed to be minor when compared to the degradation of men. *The Broom* cites:

An explanation to an employer: I drank all work day because my wife gave birth. She is responsible for my drinking.<sup>54</sup>

Alcoholism was among the most important social and individual problems emphasized in the pages of *The Broom*. According to Bronius Kuzmickas, a Soviet-time moralist, alcoholism is "immoral because it numbs people's consciousness and moral activity. Alcoholism weakens spiritual powers, destroys us as morally responsible people, as moral subjects."<sup>55</sup> It seems that the state, the guardians of communist morality, and *Broom* writers and artists shared a concern with readers on the drowning morality of men.

A note from the hospital: "To the office of internal affairs [the police]. Antanas Brazgys, born 1953. His blood test showed that THERE IS NO BLOOD IN ALCOHOL. Doctor's signature"<sup>56</sup>

Consistent with the official agenda, many readers used *The Broom* as a public forum to expose various social problems. The readers were sincere guardians of certain official values that they also shared. Readers wrote to *The Broom* about negative encounters with speculators, indecent officials, and dishonest neighbors. Actual people, who were the swindlers and crooks, were portrayed in *The Broom* together with cartoon characters, this way becoming the objects for public ridicule. Such reports with pictures of real people must have been a powerful way to reassert public moral values by denigrating, belittling, and shaming people. For example, in a 1975 issue, one could read about Paulina Ališauskienė from Mažeikiai, who on the streets of Vilnius used to offer people "foreign" sweaters which were actually produced in Lithuania.<sup>57</sup> Another issue helped people to identify crook Aldona Jočiūnienė, who sold the same apartment for different people.<sup>58</sup>

Complaining was so popular that *The Broom* alone received thousands of letters in the 1980s<sup>59</sup> and employed three journalists who were responsible for checking readers' reports, interviewing the wrongdoers, and writing responses. Among people I interviewed, if they wrote letters, in some cases they received responses, in others, they did not, but in all cases they were proud to tell me about fulfilling their civic duty that was neither specifically Soviet, nor political from their point of view.<sup>60</sup> They did not see it as a case of communist activism, but as something very casual that they had to do on behalf of others and themselves. Nevertheless, their actions as well as cartoonists' actions were political since they promulgated socialist values and supported official agendas that targeted everyday life.



The cartoons and jokes about work and family relations as well as various contributions by readers illustrate that official agendas and personal interests and values resonated in each other. Through interactive communication in *The Broom*, various parties recirculated the power of the “state” by disseminating its ideology. However, they also felt empowered themselves, and they only laughed at what was funny for them. In many cases readers and artists shared values about work and family, and they also wanted to live in a just and orderly society. This coexistence of voices, values, and meanings created spaces of political intimacy between censors, artists, writers, and readers.

### Reshaping Political Aesthetics

Artists not only “mimicked the state,” as the previous sections showed, by reproducing its agendas; they also actively changed it. References to sex; nationalist themes; violence; and explicit critique of the Communist Party, the socialist regime, or Soviet leaders were not welcome in the journal. According to artist Algirdas Radvilavičius, some of the requirements were strange: “I never learned why we could not draw a dessert island. I understand why we were not allowed to draw bums: there were no bums in the Soviet Union, but a dessert island?!”<sup>61</sup> Several artists whom I interviewed admitted that they did not feel these restrictions to be burdensome. Since they were so used to them, they almost never questioned the rules. Censorship worked at several levels: artists and writers engaged in self-control while choosing the topics, then the editor-in-chief checked every issue before it went to the Central Committee publishing house for approval, and lastly censors reviewed the issue before it was published. If something happened, the editor-in-chief had to account to the Central Committee, in most problematic cases to the KGB. All of these agents, including artists and writers who reproduced officially sanctioned discourse, were different representatives of the state with certain official privileges and powers. As argued above, they shared political intimacy; their job positions, privileges, and partly social life depended on mutual recognition, loyalty, and respect.

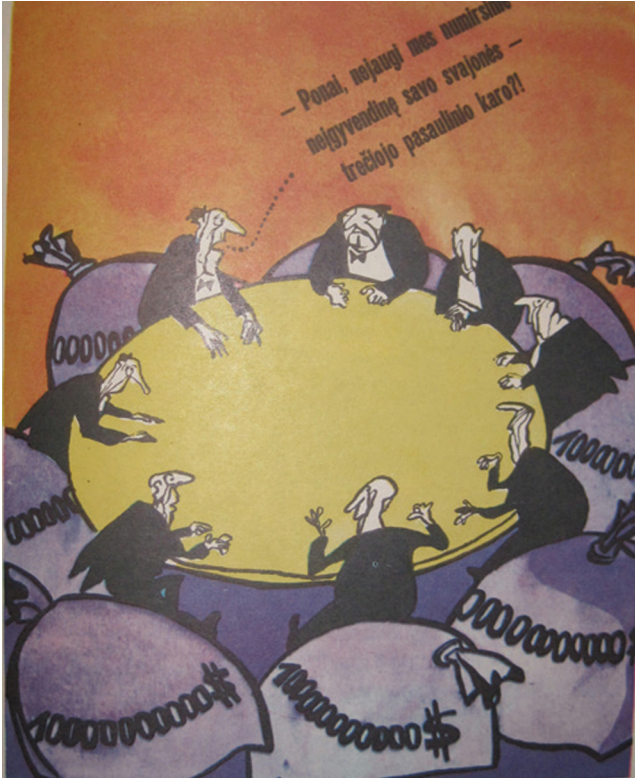
Power relations between artists and censors and other *Broom* publics were always shifting. Power, as argued above, was contextual and situational; it was constituted through interactions and aesthetic dialogues. The Aesopian aesthetics, national reinterpretation, and silence employed by artists were among the common techniques used to rearticulate some socialist values and power orders. Thus, *The Broom* provided space for artistic creativity and self-expression that reshaped political aesthetics and challenged power relations.

One had to be a skillful reader to identify a text behind the text, to be able to dissect intertextual context in which a cartoon or a satire was placed. For example, Kęstutis Šiaulytis’s cartoon on the back cover of the 1982 issue of *The Broom* shows old government officials sitting by a round table on bags of millions of dollars (see Figure 2). One of them claims, “Gentlemen, are we going to die without



**Figure 2**  
“Gentlemen, are we going to die without fulfilling our dream to launch World War III?!” Author: Kęstutis Šiaulytis. *Šluota*, 1982.

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fulfilling our dream to launch the World War III?!” At the first look, the cartoon seems to express the Cold War mood and a common Soviet critique of Western militarism. A closer look allows for another interpretation: the faces of the old officials remind us of the old Soviet Central Committee CP members, including Brezhnev (with a round face in the front), rather than the American government. Šiaulytis recollected that this cartoon reached the KGB office because someone identified Brezhnev in it. He was shown his own cartoon with the mark-up “CK” (the Central Committee).<sup>62</sup>

Figure 3  
 “United States?” “No, Union Soviet . . .” Courtesy of Kęstutis Šiaulytis.



Writing “US” on cartoons criticizing the West, capitalism, and militarism was another Aesopian device to express something else—it was the “Union Soviet,” not the “United States.”<sup>63</sup> During perestroika, Kęstutis Šiaulytis translated the “US” in one of his cartoons for the broader audience (see Figure 3).

Many other cartoons and jokes created space for different readings, thus reinterpreting certain official values that artists and readers did not share. For example,

Fridrikas Samukas's cartoon in 1976 depicts an old lady with a scarf who reads a book, most likely a Bible. Above her there is a picture of St. Mary and Jesus. A guy, unshaved and most likely drunk, with an untidy appearance, a cigarette in one of his hands, and another hand in his pocket (both are signs of disrespectful behavior), stands close to the old woman. Behind him, in the corner of the room, there are ten empty bottles. The man tells the old woman, "Don't be superstitious, ma'am, think about life soberly!"<sup>64</sup> One may think that the critique goes both ways—towards the old lady and the drunk man. The readers, however, most likely laughed only at the drunk man. In that case, they reinforced official agenda to criticize alcoholics and undermined the critique of religious believers. The artists this way negotiated official values and reshaped official political aesthetics.

Similar multitextual cartoons that re-created the discourse of laughter and power became routinized in late Soviet times. As a result, many readers of *The Broom*, cartoonists, and writers also read the critique of workers, their work ethics, poor leaders, and bureaucracy as a critique of the Soviet system. In "the Audit," another cartoon by Fridrikas Samukas, a man who happily drowns at a work desk is interrupted by the auditors.<sup>65</sup> He panics and sweats while the auditors check his papers. The last picture shows all the books on the floor while the two happy auditors and a man enjoy drinks and snacks. The cartoon mocks corrupt behavior of all three characters. The artist and skillful readers, however, generalized the message in the cartoon to the Soviet system itself. A cartoon, then, became a metonymy of the corrupt Soviet system.

In the case of Lithuania, laughter expressed and shaped national sensibilities. The Aesopian critique of the Soviet system often implied negativity toward the foreign regime, communism, and the Communist Party. As Sigmund Freud argued, "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter."<sup>66</sup> Censors, editors, artists, and readers might also have been united in the nationalist laughter at the "Soviet" other. This way they reasserted national identity and reimagined a national community. The nationalist movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s brought this hidden language to the surface—it was "they," "the communists," who were seen as responsible for country's economic and social backwardness; for various social ills discussed in *The Broom*, including corruption, alcoholism, and corrupted moral values; and for destruction of the nation.<sup>67</sup> Thus, *The Broom* in some cases embedded seeds of national resistance at the same time as it reproduced socialist values.

Silence, like the Aesopian language or language hiding nationalist sentiments, was another rhetorical device that re-created official political aesthetics. Some of the topics that were prominent in official discourse were not popular in *The Broom*. For example, there was almost no antinationalist or antireligious critique; cartoons, poems, humoresques, and satires did not reinforce the ideals of devotion to the communist cause, love toward the socialist motherland and socialist countries.<sup>68</sup> Šiaulytis

remembered that in some cases they were invited to write positive, glorifying articles about good collective farm workers or good sailors. He, a columnist, and a poet used to go to a collective farm with this task. However, the artist argued, it was very difficult to express positive glorifying ideas through the genre of humor. Therefore, such experiments were not very common.

*The Broom* editors, artists, and writers, thus, were powerful agents in constituting what is funny and what is not and creatively reshaping official political aesthetics. Laughter, thus, was a communicative process through which the laughing created values, meanings, and power orders. It was a mediated discourse of power, neither a weapon of the weak, nor a hegemonic tool of the state. It emerged in interactions and through dialogue and renegotiation of prevalent aesthetics among political intimates, including censors, editors, artists, writers, and readers.

## Conclusion

While the official newspapers were commonly distrusted, *The Broom*, even if censored, was perceived as grassroots media. According to Šiaulytis, “It was a window to another world, because all other journals were very ideological with ideological articles, pictures, heroes . . . that didn’t show up in *The Broom*.” This effect was achieved because of laughter, which was very personal and sincere. It does not mean that laughter was not ideological: it did reproduce official values and orders. In many cases, hardly any citizen could suspect, if he laughed, that he is taking a class on the socialist ethical citizenship. But even if he did—did it matter? He laughed at something that was also personal. The official public values and the personal values in many cases overlapped in laughter; they resonated in each other, making the distinction between personal and official meaningless. Laughter produced a comfort zone of political intimacy where ideals about the self, society, and the state were being shaped.

*The Broom* gives evidence for at least two codes of power that circulated in late socialism—power emerging from common laughter of various state authorities, *Broom* artists, writers, and readers; and power emerging through Aesopian discourse, silence, and national reinterpretation of socialist values. In the first case, official ideologies were reaffirmed; in the second, they were renegotiated. Power circulated among different agents, empowering some for certain actions and endangering others. Both codes of power coexisted together and were neither clear examples of support, nor of opposition or resistance. In most cases they were expressive of political intimacy as well as togetherness and the comfort of being a citizen in late socialism. The rare scandals and confrontations that occurred were part of the process of negotiation and dialogue about what is or should be laughable. Any intolerance and opposition were contextual, relational, and temporal processes rather than single idioms informing communication between those who laughed.

The concept of political intimacy illustrates that in late socialism, experience of power can be characterized not only by resistance and oppression, sincere belief and support, or misrecognition and simulation. These categories do not grasp relations of affective belonging and coexistence that I characterized as political intimacy, which informed many interactions in late socialism. Political intimacy implies active negotiation, belief and resistance in certain contexts and situations, which did not challenge loyalty and togetherness of the parties involved. The culture of laughter illustrates how the utility of analytics of private and public, official and private, state and people can be challenged in the case of *The Broom*.

## Notes

1. The well known are variations on the numbered anecdotes. For example, in a prison all the jokes have been told a thousand times, so the inmates number them so as not to waste time.

“67!” Laughter.

“52!” Laughter.

“41!” One inmate starts laughing like mad.

“What’s with you?”

“I’ve never heard that one before!” See Seth Graham, “Varieties of Reflexivity in the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot*,” in Lesley Milne, ed., *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture* (London: Anthem, 2004), 167–79, at 169. See also Lesley Milne, “Introduction: Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture,” in Milne, ed., *Reflective Laughter*, 1–14, on jokes in Russian culture.

2. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), on the Soviet culture of seriousness.

3. Bruce Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-Century Soviet and Russian History in Anecdotes* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005); and Slavenka Drakulić, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1993).

4. Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Donna Goldstein, *Laughter out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2003).

5. In this article, I draw on the ethnographic research in Lithuania that I have been conducting since 2003. In the summer of 2009, I conducted a follow-up research specifically focusing on *The Broom* and its history. I carried out archival and media research and interviewed readers and several artists who either contributed to *The Broom* in Soviet times or were the members of the editorial board in late socialism.

6. At this time Lithuania was an independent presidential republic with Kaunas as its provisional capital.

7. Milne, “Introduction,” 2–3.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. Jonas Bulota, “Šluotos Kelias,” in Jonas Bulota and Arvydas Pakalnis, eds., *Šluota* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1984), 6.

10. *Ibid.*, 7.

11. According to the official publication records, in 1971 there were 120,082 copies published. High publication numbers persisted throughout the 1980s; in 1986 publication rates are still as high as 112,053. The numbers decreased in the early 1990s.

12. Specifically, I heard people quoting jokes about Kindziulis, a popular joke series in Soviet times.

13. Interview with J. Gimberis by Ferdinandas Kauzonas, “Kaip mudviem su J. Gimberiu nepavyko” [How I and J. Gimberis failed], *Respublika* 3 Apr. 2008. See <http://www.kamane.lt/lt/atgarsiai/literatura/litatarsis231> (accessed 20 Mar. 2009). Actually, *The Broom* with short breaks has been published in post-Soviet times. The journal format has been much smaller, and the quality of publication yields to the

quality of the journal in Soviet times. This illustrates, according to some artists, not only the state of the journal, but also the troubled life of post-socialist humor (personal communication with Šarūnas Jakštas, July 2009). *The Broom* was not published in 2009.

14. J. Gimberis interview. The decline of humor is also noted by some scholars in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern European countries. See Adele Marie Barker, "Introduction," in Adele Marie Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), 243–65; Alexei Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the Anekdot," *Public Culture* 9:2(1997): 161–188, at 182; and Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 96.

15. Similar attitudes are expressed by other writers and artists who contributed to *The Broom* in Soviet times. See Jurga Petronytė's interview with Valdemaras Kalninis, "Linksmajai dailei-podukros dalia" [Humor art is like a stepdaughter], <http://www.vv.lt/?rub=1065924826&data=2006-03-31&id=1143728862> (accessed 22 Dec. 2009).

16. Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter*, 6.

17. Stephen Norris, "'Laughter Is a Very Sharp Weapon': Boris Efimov and Soviet Visual Humor" (Paper delivered at the conference "Totalitarian Laughter: Cultures of the Comic Under Socialism," Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 15–17 May 2009), 11.

18. Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia*; Barker, "Introduction"; Goldstein, *Laughter out of Place*; and Anna Krylova, "Saying 'Lenin' and Meaning 'Party': Subversion and Laughter in Soviet and Post-Soviet Society," in Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia*, 243–65.

19. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976), 183.

20. Mary Douglas, "Jokes," in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 305.

21. Krylova, "Saying 'Lenin' and Meaning 'Party,'" 250.

22. *Ibid.*, 247. Unlike many other studies of humor, research on Soviet humor tends to focus on laughter and (state) power. See Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia*; Александра Архипова and Михаил Мельниченко, *Анекдоты о Сталине: тексты, комментарии, исследования* (Москва: О Г И, 2008); Norris, "'Laughter Is a Very Sharp Weapon'"; Natalia Skradol, "Exceptional Laughter" (Paper delivered at the conference "Totalitarian Laughter: Cultures of the Comic under Socialism," Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 15–17 May 2009); and Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism." Soviet laughter is often approached as a political event (usually subversive of state power) and a weapon of relatively powerless. Indeed, laughter can be seen as a ubiquitous political act if we think of the Soviet state as aiming to accrue total power. In another context, Rio de Janeiro shantytown, Donna Goldstein similarly argued that it is important to recognize that every act that is mitigated through class position is implicitly a class act and, thus, political, since it reflects, reinforces, and enacts class relations. She agrees, though, that an act cannot be termed resistance merely because it took place in the context of domination. Goldstein, *Laughter out of Place*, 9. See also Marshall Sahlins ("What is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28(1999): i–xxiii) on his critique of the approaches that presume that "all culture is power" or that cultural communication can be translated in terms of domination and resistance.

23. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956); and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1951).

24. See, for example, the works of Arch Getty, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Moshe Lewin, Robert Thurston, Oleg Kharkhordin, and Stephen Kotkin.

25. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995).

26. Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).



27. Brigid O'Keeffe, "Backward Gypsies, Soviet Citizens: The All-Russian Gypsy Union, 1925-28," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11:2(2010): 283-312.

28. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.

29. *Ibid.*, 4.

30. *Ibid.*; and Alexei Yurchak, "Necro-Utopia: The Politics of Indistinction and the Aesthetics of the Non-Soviet," *Current Anthropology* 49:2(2008): 199-215.

31. Serguei Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* 13:2(2001): 191-214, at 202.

32. *Ibid.*, 203. In the case of dissidents' texts in Lithuania, a similar argument was made by Jūra Avižienis, "Learning to Curse in Russian: Mimicry in Siberian Exile," in Violeta Kelertas, ed., *Baltic Postcolonialism* (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), 187-202.

33. Gregory Carleton, "Escaping the Past? Re-reading Soviet Satire from the Twenty-First Century: The Case of Zoshchenko," in Milne, ed., *Reflective Laughter*, 97-107, at 105.

34. *Ibid.*, 100.

35. *Ibid.*, 104.

36. *Ibid.*, 104-5.

37. Following Herzfeld, by the "state" I mean a shifting complex of people and roles. The "state" in this article primarily refers to authorities, such as people in the government or other public institutions like the censorship office or the publishing house. Since the Soviet state controlled most of public institutions including publishing houses, many people who worked here were Communist Party members and represented state authorities. An artist who worked for the publishing house, even if he or she was not a Party member, represented a state institution as well. In this context the "state" was represented by people and shaped by their values, emotions, relations, and interactions. Thus, the "state" in my context is bound to human agency rather than a symbol of a Soviet system and the regime. On "thingness" of the state, see Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 5.

38. In this article, I am dealing with comic form of political intimacy in late socialism. Other forms of political intimacy can be identified between political leaders and their followers, among people in work collectives, candidates and voters, members of social movements, or people on strike. All these different forms are examples of intersubjective forms of intimacy. "Nation" can be an example of imagined political intimacy which presupposes a relationship of closeness and common belonging among nationals.

39. Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy*.

40. I thank Jessica Greenberg and Serguei Oushakine for this point.

41. Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy*, 13.

42. Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism."

43. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), cited in S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1991), 29.

44. Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism," 178; see also Philip Boobbyer, "Truth-Telling, Conscience and Dissent in Late Soviet Russia: Evidence from Oral Histories," *European History Quarterly* 30:4(2000): 553-85.

45. Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism," 178.

46. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More*, 114-17.

47. *Ibid.*, 121-22.

48. *Ibid.*, 125.

49. In socialism, productive labor was an important aspect of state ideology, and the workplace was to be central to social life. On labor in socialism and post-socialism, see Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999); Elizabeth Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2004); Sarah Ashwin, *Russian Workers: The Anatomy of Patience* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999); and David Kideckel, *Getting By in*



*Postsocialist Romania: Labor, the Body, and Working-Class Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2008). Productive labor was also a key aspect of communist morality. "The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism," the single most authoritative and enduring statement on the nature and content of Soviet morality issued at the Twenty-second Communist Party Congress in 1961, emphasized hard work and collectivism among many other moral dispositions (*XXII S"ezd KPSS*, no. 3: 317–18). On communist morality and family values, see Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2007).

50. A. F. Shishkin, "Stroitel'stvo kommunizma i nekotorye problemy Marksistkoi etiki," in *Voprosy Marksistko-Leninskoi etiki* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1960), 55–56; see also S. Kosolapov and O. Krutova, *Nravstvennye printsipy stroitelia kommunizma* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1962), 63.

51. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia*, 13, 16.

52. *Ibid.*, 16.

53. *Šluota* 3 (1970): 7. Many short anecdotes in *The Broom* are cited without an author.

54. *Šluota* 4 (1980): 9.

55. Bronius Kuzmickas, "Dorovinė asmenybės regresija," in Antanas Gaidys, Edmunda Krakauskas, Bronius Kuzmickas, et al., eds., *Dorovinė asmenybės brendimas* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1980), 37–53, at 39.

56. *Šluotos kalendorius* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1971), 96, emphasis in original.

57. *Šluota* 5 (1975): 7.

58. *Šluota* 3 (1980): 7.

59. See Bulota, "Šluotos Kelias."

60. During my research in Lithuania in the mid-2000s, villagers in several occasions remarked that now there is nowhere to turn to with their problems. Even if they did not write complaint letters themselves earlier, many of them knew other people who did. In W. Becker's film *Goodbye, Lenin!* Alex's mother writes similar letters of complaint, which is the only publicly meaningful activity that she can undertake while being sick.

61. Jūratė Kuzmickaitė's interview with Algirdas Radvilavičius, *Kauno Diena*, 5 Mar. 2005, <http://kauno.diena.lt/dienrastis/kita/apkunus-elgetos-su-nosimis-agurkeliiais-26309> (accessed 9 Oct. 2009).

62. Personal communication with Kęstutis Šiaulytis, July 2009.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Šluotos kalendorius* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1976), 19.

65. *Šluota* 6 (1985): 6.

66. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 103.

67. See Neringa Klumbytė, "Ethnographic Note on *Nation*: Narratives and Symbols of the Early Post-Socialist Nationalism in Lithuania," *Dialectical Anthropology* 27:3-4(2003): 279-295.

68. According to Algirdas Radvilavičius, a former *Broom* artist, every issue of the journal had to have a "political cartoon." Political cartoons had to target the West, capitalism, and capitalist life style. See Radvilavičius interview.

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# Slatan Dudow's *Christine* (1963/1974) and the Social Comedy of Character

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Comedy provided the Bulgarian-born East German film director Slatan Dudow with an approach to realism that was distinct from, and ran counter to, simplistic versions of socialist realism of the time and was central to his unorthodox, practical understanding of socialist political aesthetics. It is this thinking that I propose to reconstruct in this article, discussing its emergence in the montage technique of Dudow's first film, *Kuhle Wampe* (1931/1932), its development in published and unpublished writings in terms of what he called the "social comedy of character" (soziale Charakterkomödie), and its enactment in his final, unfinished film, *Christine* (1963/1974).

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"I don't know whether to laugh or to cry," says Heinz, the Party member and statistics instructor, toward the end of Slatan Dudow's last (and unfinished) film, *Christine* (1963/1974). The title heroine has just informed him, her fifth and most promising paramour, that she is expecting yet another child: his. But when he tells her of his plans to move to another city to finish his education, whatever happy ending the story might have promised seems like it will be deferred indefinitely. Even Christine's spontaneous decision at the extant film's end, to take all four of her children home with her from the state children's home and at last assume her motherhood, is hardly a resolution. And in case Heinz's—and presumably the viewer's—ambivalence about her situation were not enough, everything about Christine's character runs counter to official prescriptions of both the socialist hero and socialist personality, as well as of comedy itself. As the film's first East German reviewer points out: "Dudow—that was plucky of him—made a madonna out of a woman who anywhere else would have been called asocial; he very evidently took her side, passionately endorsing a contradictory development in our society. Her character evokes an issue that still raises hackles in 1974."<sup>1</sup>

Dudow, who is known today as the director of *Kuhle Wampe* (1931/1932), the proletarian film classic that he produced collaboratively with Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, and Ernst Ottwalt, had been a Party member since the 1920s and understood

himself as a socialist artist producing political art. Following the National Socialist regime and the war, during which he lived in exile in France and Switzerland, he returned to the Soviet zone of Berlin, where he became one of the two highest-paid film directors for the East German film studio DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft) throughout the 1950s until his death in the early 1960s. Despite this high position and Party credentials, and no doubt licensed by the same, Dudow's work and public statements were often at odds with the Party's doctrinaire aesthetic positions. His films *Frauenschicksale* (Destinies of Women, 1952) and *Verwirrung der Liebe* (Love Confused, 1958)—both of which, like *Christine*, he conceived, wrote, and directed—ignited considerable controversy. But he saw no necessary contradiction between his affirmation of socialist realism as “the only [artistic method] corresponding to our world view”<sup>2</sup> and his appreciation of the officially censored formations of Italian neorealism, the French new wave, and contemporary, stylistically innovative cinemas in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> As one somewhat cagey, studio-internal statement on an early draft of the script for *Christine* has it: “The thoughts that [Dudow] delivers [in the film] are the thoughts of a Marxist; but they are his thoughts.”<sup>4</sup>

Dudow's thinking about comedy was central to his practice as a filmmaker and dramatist, and it provided him with an approach to realism that was distinct from, and ran counter to, simplistic versions of socialist realism of the time. It is this thinking that I propose to reconstruct in this article, discussing its emergence in the montage technique of *Kuhle Wampe* (1931/1932); its development in Dudow's published and unpublished writings in terms of what he called the “social comedy of character” (*soziale Charakterkomödie*); and its enactment in *Christine*. I would also like to situate the film—which has rarely been seen, let alone written about—against the background of both Dudow's theory and the contemporary ideological discourse of the socialist personality.

## Biographical and Intellectual Background

Despite the relative renown of *Kuhle Wampe* Dudow has largely fallen out of view in the historiography of European and German cinema. While the seven features he made for the DEFA are typically surveyed in histories of the studio, there is scant scholarship on the body of his work,<sup>5</sup> and when he does get mentioned outside the national, studio-specific context, it is usually in a footnote in relation to Brecht. Nevertheless, Dudow is important historically for his professional and personal links both to Brecht and other Weimar and Soviet artists like Sergei Eisenstein, Sergei Tretiakov, Erwin Piscator, and Hanns Eisler, and to a younger generation of DEFA filmmakers that included Gerhard Klein, Wolfgang Kohlhaase, and Heiner Carow. Transversely, on the cultural landscape of the GDR, he cultivated and defended a political-aesthetic middle ground between the experimentation of Brecht on the one hand and the official

doctrine of Party heavies like Sepp Schwab on the other; he thus represents a significant intermediary position in the discursive conflict of the early GDR.

While Dudow's friendship and collaborations with Brecht were invaluable for his work and the development of his ideas, he strove to establish an independent aesthetic. It is important to keep this in mind since, while there were many points of common purpose, there were others where the two artists diverged significantly in their views; and while Brecht certainly influenced Dudow, Dudow was an active partner in their collaborations, initiating projects—such as *Kuhle Wampe*, *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar*, and *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches*—and quite possibly influencing Brecht at times.<sup>6</sup> Eisenstein, specifically with regard to his theories of montage and pathos, was arguably as influential on Dudow as was Brecht. In the context of these associations and of recent reevaluations of (East German) socialist realism and culture in terms of the complexity of its development, individual artifacts, and ongoing legacy,<sup>7</sup> Dudow's work can be understood as a significant feature on the topography of mid-twentieth century left modernism in both Germany and the Soviet sphere.

Born in 1903 in Tsaribrod, Bulgaria,<sup>8</sup> Dudow emigrated in 1922 to Berlin, where he studied at the newly established Institute for Theater Studies under its director, Max Herrmann. There he had opportunities to become involved with theater productions by Piscator, Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jeßner, and Jürgen Fehling, and to observe the production of Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*. Inspired by the 1926 exhibition of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and other Soviet films distributed by the newly founded left-wing Prometheus Film Collective, Dudow spent the summer of 1929 in Moscow, where he met Mayakovsky, Gladkov, Eisenstein, and Tretiakov. Through Tretiakov, he met Brecht on his return to Berlin, an acquaintance that led quickly to collaborations on Pabst's film adaptation of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Three-Penny Opera, 1931)<sup>9</sup> and the plays *Die Maßnahme* (The Measures Taken, 1931) and *Die Mutter* (The Mother, 1932).<sup>10</sup> He was already working at the time on documentaries by Prometheus director Albrecht Viktor Blum<sup>11</sup>; and in 1930 he directed his first film for Prometheus, *Wie der Berliner Arbeiter wohnt* (How the Berlin Worker Lives, 1930), a short documentary about the straitened circumstances, including forcible eviction, of unemployed workers in Berlin.<sup>12</sup>

Following *Kuhle Wampe*, Dudow directed his first work of comedy, *Seifenblasen / Bulles de savon* (Soap Bubbles, 1934). A satire about the petit bourgeoisie's simultaneous commitment to and exploitation by big industry, Dudow's first solo feature was filmed in Berlin in the summer of 1933 and completed the following year—following his brief internment in a Nazi detention camp, escape, and smuggling of the rough cut out of the country—in Paris, where it was edited, subtitled in French by Jacques Prévert, and favorably received, evidently with comparisons made to Chaplin's work. Given the legal obstacles to producing films as an exile in France, Dudow continued his work in the genre by writing a quartet of comedies for the stage: *Der Feigling* (The Coward), *Das Narrenparadies* (The Paradise of Fools), *Der leichtgläubige Thomas* (Gullible Thomas), and *Der Weltuntergang* (The End of the World).<sup>13</sup> He remained in Paris until 1940, then spent five years in Switzerland before returning to postwar Berlin.

Hermann Herlinghaus, the only East German scholar to have written extensively on Dudow, points out that his early work with Brecht coincided with the most intensive period in Brecht's development of the *Lehrstück* and epic theater. Herlinghaus argues in his monograph that these collaborations laid the foundation for Dudow's later film aesthetic and, specifically, that they involved an elaboration on Eisenstein's documentary-like portrayals of individuals as representative of the historical experiences of groups, that is, as *types*, along with an increasing interest in the capacity of "artistically formed characters both to represent critically and to interpret a particular social process."<sup>14</sup> While both Brecht and Dudow shared a belief in the transformative potential of the dramaturgical presentation of characters, Dudow was not primarily interested in the actor's relationship to his or her role or in the other practical elements of epic theater. Rather, the viewer's mimetic relationship to the character was central for him, and he placed equal importance on processes of viewer identification and distantiation.

Dudow's thinking about comedy can be reconstructed based on a handful of published articles, letters written in exile, and his film and theater productions. His central statement is the 1947 essay "Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung" (Comedy and Its Social Significance), which was published under a pseudonym as the introduction to *Das Narrenparadies* (The Paradise of Fools).<sup>15</sup> This essay presents a theory of comedy and laughter that draws on theories of Freud, Bergson, Hegel, and Lukács, adopting the theses that humor is historically conditioned and produced by means of "its method of contrasting." Dudow focuses on four elements that are key for his approach to comedy: (1) laughter, conceived as a social phenomenon linked to the production of specific cognitions; (2) the feeling of pleasure in laughter (distinguished from the feeling of happiness), which "directs the laughter . . . but does not determine it," the implication being that certain cognitions can be smuggled into audience's minds under the cover of positive affect; (3) the differences between satire and comedy proper, both of which have a moral objective, but aim at it through different affective registers and modes of representation; and (4) the comic character, which is constructed by means of typification and with which the viewer is expected to identify, thus engendering self-recognition and, hence, both personal and social transformation. On this basis, Dudow suggests the utility of comedy for postwar social reconstruction, such as it was then being conceived in the Soviet zone.

The essay was no doubt meant to forestall criticism of his play,<sup>16</sup> but it also serves as a defense of the genre, whose contemporary detractors, referring to the ideologically fraught film comedies of the Third Reich, rejected it as having any place in a country that needed an ideological reconstruction even more urgently than an economic or material one.<sup>17</sup> Given its oblique critique of György Lukács's anomalous 1931 essay "Zur Frage der Satire" (On the Question of Satire)<sup>18</sup>—in which Lukács defends satire, against Hegel's disparagements, rather surprisingly on the basis of its mimetic immediacy and tendency to the fantastic and the grotesque—Dudow's essay can also be read as an oblique intervention in the ongoing political-aesthetic conflict over realism and formalism.<sup>19</sup>

## *Kuhle Wampe* and the Origins of Dudow's Theory of Comedy

It is tempting to trace the beginning of Dudow's engagement with comedy to the rhetorical montage of *Kuhle Wampe*. Initiated by Dudow and made in collaboration with Brecht, the composer Hanns Eisler, and the novelist Ernst Ottwalt, the film was an opportunity for Dudow to advance the political substance of his own work for Prometheus combined with Brecht's dramaturgical ideas and the formal possibilities represented by Soviet montage.<sup>20</sup> Censored twice before its premiere in May 1932, the film describes the same social terrain as in Dudow's earlier documentary, but organizes it around the fiction of four family members' contrasting responses to their troubled circumstances. The son, unable to find work and maligned by his petit bourgeois parents,<sup>21</sup> commits suicide; not long afterwards the family is forcibly evicted from their tenement. The daughter, Anni (Hertha Thiele), the only breadwinner, seeks help from her boyfriend, Fritz (Ernst Busch), and on his suggestion the family moves to a tent settlement outside Berlin known as *Kuhle Wampe*. The film introduced another plot element that would reappear in Dudow's later films *Frauenschicksale* (Destinies of Women, 1952) and *Christine*: the extended trope of Anni's unwanted pregnancy, Fritz's ambivalence about marrying her, and her decision to go it alone, in this case with the support of her friends, members of a proletarian sports club.

Marc Silberman offers a strong reading of *Kuhle Wampe* as an example of a Brechtian "epic cinema." Like Herlinghaus, he links this to the Soviet example; but unlike Herlinghaus, he understands the film in terms not of the "socially-linked gestures, movements, facial expressions, and utterances" of the actors but of the rhetoric of montage:

[*Kuhle Wampe*] draws formally on the rhetorical model of Soviet montage in order to elicit cognitive activity such as persuading, deciding, and seeing. Premised on interruption, montage editing connects the spectator with the image by insisting on being "read." Seeing the context that has been interrupted becomes the basis of a pedagogical model of spectatorial activity . . . the film relates images to the context in order to reveal social processes.<sup>22</sup>

*Kuhle Wampe*'s "dynamic relation of contradiction between continuity and discontinuity" (46) involves not only interruption but also juxtaposition, as in the well-known Mata-Hari scene, which as Silberman states is "modelled after Sergei Eisenstein's notion of the polyphonic montage that produces an abstract idea from the collision of the parts" (45). In "Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung," Dudow attributes this effect directly to laughter:

With laughter a new cognition [*Erkenntnis*] is redeemed as a sign that we have seen through matters and uncovered their innermost core. In this way we rid ourselves of false impressions and advance toward increasingly more correct ones.<sup>23</sup>

Another scene where this polyphonic montage-produced laughter is especially evident is the engagement party sequence toward the film's ending, with its depiction

**Figure 1**  
**Uncle Otto (Actor Unknown) Devouring a Drumstick During the Engagement Party Sequence in *Kuhle Wampe* (1932) (Defa Film Library, 2009).**



of the drunken guests, whose satirized revelry—their *gest* an index of petit-bourgeois mentality—is contrasted both with their own dire reality as evictees living in a tent city and with the trouble brewing in the narrative foreground between Anni and her reluctant betrothed.

Humor is not, of course, necessarily produced by the perception of an incongruity, let alone of montage. As numerous theorists have pointed out, something else—the recognition of a situation, trope, or character or the sudden deflation of an acute expectation—is needed. One moment in the party sequence demonstrates, through a single jump cut, the comic possibilities of montage in *Kuhle Wampe* and presages the deadpan humor one finds in Dudow's later DEFA films. After a series of close-ups and establishing shots have described the contrast between the guests' petit-bourgeois habitus and their intemperate (i.e., poverty-conditioned) appetites, the camera settles in medium close-up on two guests for a two-shot visual joke. A well-dressed man (Uncle Otto) and a woman are shown raptly eating at the corner of the table in the first shot; in the second—the passage of time having been marked by a conspicuous



**Figure 2**  
**Uncle Otto (Actor Unknown) Swilling, Post-Wipe, While His Companion**  
**Continues Eating Intently (*Kuhle Wampe* [1932]; Defa Film Library, 2009).**



wipe, with a black bar sliding across the frame—the man is shown in his undershirt, sweating profusely, punch-drunk, a mug of beer in his careening fist, nine empties on the table before him, while the woman carries on eating, obliviously, exactly as before (see Figures 1 and 2). The humor of this detail-segment is flagged by the marked transformation of Uncle Otto into the recognizably comic figure of the drunk, but inheres in the contrast provided by his unmarked, but all the more conspicuous, female counterpart.

This montage “gag” serves to represent synecdochically the social circumstances at *Kuhle Wampe*; the audience is asked to recognize the absurdity of its residents’ situation. However, as Dudow argues in a key passage in “Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung,” this sort of recognition is not an end in itself, but instead necessarily induces viewers to recognize and understand the absurdity in their own lives:

Who in the world willingly displays his own laughableness? Regardless, people are both eager to learn about their inadequacies and, if possible, to laugh. The best way for them to do that is through a third party in whom they recognize their own weakness and laugh

at their own ridiculousness. When what is laughable in both a represented character and in his or her society have been unified, so that the laughter at both constitutes an *unisono*, then is the comedy perfect. Such laughter is deepest and longest-lasting, whether one wants it to be or not.<sup>24</sup>

Laughter's involuntary, necessary aspect, which for Dudow was integral to the pedagogical value of comedy, is articulated directly at the end of the party sequence, in a comment that will be echoed in Heinz Rehfeld's remark in *Christine* and like it serves as a placeholder for the spectator's anticipated reaction. After Anni decides to leave Fritz and Kuhle Wampe, her parents—the ringleaders of the petit-bourgeois circus of the engagement party—attempt to console him: “Don't worry, Fritz. We'll stay with you,” his would-be mother-in-law says. To which he tartly replies: “Da kann ick bloß lachen” (all I can do is laugh).<sup>25</sup> This recognition marks a key turning point in the film, after which Fritz changes his attitude and tries to win Anni back.

Dudow was preoccupied in most of his later work with the question of laughter's relation to cognition and of its ambiguous relation to affect, and he addresses them as his point of departure in “Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung”:

The question I asked myself over and over [during the war and Third Reich] was: why does a person laugh? When a person feels extraordinarily happy, he expresses his satisfaction through laughter. That seems somehow self-evident. But there's another side of laughter, too. We break into laughter when we discover something about an event to be laughable. . . . But such laughter has the odd quality of coming about even when a person is not in particularly high spirits; and this is often the most powerful kind of laughter.<sup>26</sup>

The uncoupling of laughter from any necessary association with happiness at the beginning anticipates the reframing of those views later in the essay, linking the pleasure of comedy to the production of knowledge rather than the consumption of entertainment.

While laughter bears a contingent relation to happiness for Dudow, it appears at the same time necessarily to produce the feeling of pleasure; and it is this feeling that he sees as marking its potential for generating knowledge, with or without the subject's awareness. As he puts it,

Laughter is directed by the feeling of pleasure, from the enjoyment of laughing, but it is not determined by it. The laughter conceals a deeper meaning, whether the one laughing knows it or not. A man goes from feeling pleasure to procreating—at first he gave no thought to reproduction, since he was not even conscious of it—and that is exactly how it is with laughter.<sup>27</sup>

Dudow's emphasis on laughter's transformative potential as an organic process echoes Eisenstein's theory of pathos and ecstasy, which was developed as part of his theory of montage.<sup>28</sup>

This attention to affect marks one of Dudow's dramaturgical departures from Brecht, who was concerned mainly with generating thinking processes and a conscious, intellectual relationship between viewers and the events and characters on the stage. Their differences were central to an argument over Dudow's 1938 production in Paris of Brecht's *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reichs* (Fear and Misery in the Third Reich), which was presented under the title suggested by Dudow, *99%*.<sup>29</sup> In their correspondence, Dudow expressed his concern "to make the performance feel finished and above all positive," softening the work's satirical "pointedness and sharpness" so as not to alienate those audience members who might feel "demoralized and weak" as a result,<sup>30</sup> while Brecht countered with the view that "the impression made by an unalloyed, realistic, and level-headed portrayal of circumstances does not have to be depressing, in fact, in my opinion, there is no way that it *can* be depressing. But when one starts tinkering with it, then everything becomes questionable."<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, in his review of the production, described it as adapting epic theater to the special circumstances of the German émigré community; but, as Erdmut Wizisla points out, he subtly criticized it for its reliance on the bourgeois (Aristotelian) principle of empathy.<sup>32</sup> Dudow's aesthetic departure from Brecht appears also to have involved an application of the comic. Another element of the performance, which Benjamin does not mention but that was remarked on in two other reviews, was the contrast between the horrific circumstances represented on stage and the audience's laughter.<sup>33</sup>

### Dudow, Brecht, and the "Social Comedy of Character"

While Dudow's thinking about laughter and the production of cognitions may have emerged from his early work with Brecht and his experience with montage, his later repositioning with regard to Brechtian dramaturgy revolved around the element of character, which Brecht conceived primarily in relation to the actor, and Dudow in relation to the viewer.

This thinking about comedy involved a distancing from Brecht's *Lehrstück*, and more generally from his antimimeticism, and a turn to what Dudow called the "social comedy of character" (*soziale Charakterkomödie*) and the advancement of viewer identification. As he wrote in a July 1943 letter to a colleague,

Your conclusion that my comedy is intentionally pedagogical [*Lehrhaft*] worries me a great deal, because what I'm aiming for is something different. In this regard I am an Aristotelian and desire to have a moral effect, no more or less than Aristophanes, Molière, and Gogol, etc. did with their comedies. The pedagogical, in Brecht's sense, demands more however, and that is why what is a strength in Brecht's plays would be a weakness in my comedies. My goal is a kind of social comedy of character, and as the titles of my first comedies (*The Coward*, *Gullible Thomas*) suggests, I am especially concerned with the successful construction of character.<sup>34</sup>

In a later letter to the same colleague, Dudow formulated his differences with Brecht more explicitly, in terms of the distinction between satire and comedy proper, understood with regard to affect and morality:

There is another difference, one independent of theory, between Brecht and me. Brecht is a satirist and I'm not! What I'm after belongs to the realm of comedy, i.e. a neighboring realm. And although satire and comedy often make contact—indeed, their realms often overlap—the opposition between the two genres is formidable. Satire is mostly satisfied to lay things bare, to prove things hollow or false. Comedy, by contrast, castigates human weaknesses and social conditions, but always with a view to something positive.<sup>35</sup>

Integral to this “something positive” is the viewer's relationship with the comic character, which as the earlier extract from “Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung” suggests, was conceived as a kind of mimetic, identificatory exchange in which viewers “recognize their own weakness and laugh at their own ridiculousness.”<sup>36</sup> This exchange involves recognizing as a general equivalent whatever makes that identification possible. It seems likely that Dudow was inspired by Marx's comparison of the human being with the commodity form.<sup>37</sup> The comic character thus resembles the rhetorical structure that Silberman identified in the montage of *Kuhle Wampe*; only here, instead of a hermeneutic insistence connecting the spectator with the image through the interpretation of montage, the spectator is expected to identify with the character and through that identification to produce a particular understanding.

Dudow's rejection of Brecht's antimimeticism was generalized as a critique of modernist dramaturgy as a whole, which he castigated for its neglect of the “human being”: for having become “sterile . . . altogether too meticulously sanitized, with the human being failing precisely because of that mathematical sanitarianess.” As an antidote to this situation, he argued for a renewed emphasis on character, and specifically the comic character, drawing on the tradition of the mime:

We need to salvage the fundamental elements of the theater, and this means resurrecting the mime [*Mimus*]; in the realm of comedy, he is known as Hanswurst, and has various names in other countries. It was no doubt very wise of La Neuber<sup>38</sup> to banish Hanswurst from the theater, but it was even wiser of Lessing to call for his rescue. What I mean by this is that, as ever, I do support the theater having been modernized, because it was necessary. But now it is time to return the human being to center stage, which cannot happen without a revitalization of the mime [*der Mimus*].<sup>39</sup>

Dudow does not return to the mime elsewhere in his published writings, but recognizable mime figures and other influences of the *commedia dell'arte* and the *Volkskomödie* are evident in all of his stage and film comedies. Traditionally associated with realism and the problem of character types, and considered so provocative that it was largely ignored in critical reception, the mime clearly

provided a compelling model for Dudow's "social comedy of character," and this is arguably nowhere more manifest than in *Christine*.

### *Christine*, a Socialist Realist Mime

The least preserved of the classical genres, mime traditionally covered "any kind of theatrical spectacle that did not belong to masked tragic and comic drama" and presented "everyday-life scenes of an intensely sexual and satirical content with occasional outspoken comments on political issues."<sup>40</sup> Heterogeneous and provocative, Graeco-Roman mime was distinguished from comedy and tragedy by its subordination of plot to character; its improvisational nature; its vulgar, sometimes obscene, language and subject matter; the absence of masks (hence the unavoidably public nature of the actors); and the fact that women played female roles.<sup>41</sup> The form of the mime was linked to that of character types, which were typically identified by specific vices or occupations.<sup>42</sup> Hermann Reich, whose two-volume study of the mime Dudow would have had access to, discussed classical mime largely with reference to the Hellenistic authors Sophron and Herondas and identifies it as a source for Aristotle's empirically grounded Nicomachean Ethics. He devoted special attention to its influence on Theophrastus, whose *Characters*, he argued, draws on the kind of characterization typical of mime inasmuch as it eschews directly mocking or satirizing its subjects, and instead adheres to "purely objective representation" of them, "leaving all judgment up to the reader alone."<sup>43</sup>

While Dudow's next-to-last film, *Verwirrung der Liebe*, with its narrative peripeties culminating in a double marriage, can easily be categorized as a comedy of errors, *Christine* resuscitates the Graeco-Roman mime with its open-ended depiction of a primary female character who provokes the viewer's ambivalence. The film was never finished: Dudow died following a car crash after a night of shooting in July 1963; and the version we have today is a rough cut, based on slightly more than half of the planned total footage. Despite its status as a "film-fragment," both the extant film and the screenplay demonstrate *Christine*'s resistance to representing its protagonist along the often simplistic, hegemonic ideological lines typical of socialist realist character studies. Referred to hedgingly in studio-internal documents as "the unusual story of an unusual girl,"<sup>44</sup> *Christine* presents a feckless but charismatic young woman who lives and works on a collective farm, where, despite her evident intellectual talents (which entitle her to attend night school to train as an agronomist), she keeps making the same mistake: she meets, sleeps with, and bears the respective children of four different men, unloads each child in turn at a state-run children's home, and almost marries a fifth man out of desperation. Given the official discourses of socialist morality at the time, even a plot summary of *Christine* must have raised eyebrows; and pre-production communications between Dudow's production team, the KAG Berlin, and the DEFA administration demonstrate the difficulties that Dudow both anticipated and faced.

**Figure 3**  
**Christine (Annette Woska) Gazes Off-Screen at an Approaching Gorgi (Günter Haack) at the Beginning of *Christine* (1963/1974) (Archival Video, Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv)**



From the beginning, the title character is presented as an object of simultaneous attraction, identification, and critique. The film opens with an eleven-and-a-half-minute sequence that takes place at a fairground at night and unlike the rest of the extant film, which is accompanied by direct sound, is entirely silent.<sup>45</sup> A first film role for the nineteen-year-old drama student Annette Woska, Christine is introduced jumping off a gondola swing in the deep space of a fifteen-second long shot. She clearly recognizes someone out-of-frame, to the left of the camera, and walks into the crowd, slowly and almost voluptuously, toward the viewer. Her form-fitting white dress, moon-like face, and short blonde hair—Woska's face recalls Renée Falconetti and Jean Seberg in their respective renderings of Joan of Arc—set her figure off from the dark-clad mass of other carnival-goers. The purity signaled by her appearance also contrasts with the sensuality of her movement; and the ardor with which she gazes off-screen seems both naive in its directness and to verge on lascivious. These are not the only contradictions: as Christine stares, she is herself ogled by two teenaged men of whom she takes no notice. But when the object of her gaze, the swings operator Gorgi (Günter Haack), enters the frame and passes her by, attending to his ride without so much as glancing in her direction, it is Christine's turn to be ignored. The camera dollies backward as she walks into the foreground and out of frame, so the viewers can see Gorgi in the deep space, gazing back at her, after all, and smiling, even as they witness Christine's face transform from radiant to crestfallen, looking as if she had just been made a fool of (see Figures 3 and 4). The narrative of this single, very brief segment introduces Christine as the subject



**Figure 4**  
**Having Just Passed by Without Acknowledging Her, Gorgi (Günter Haack)**  
**Looks Back at Christine (Annette Woska) (*Christine* [1963/1974];**  
**Archival Video, Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv).**



of a series of subtle incongruities. It functions as a micro-comedy of its own, in fact, narrated entirely by the camera; but along with the missing soundtrack, it is denuded of comic markers that would reinforce expectations of those incongruities being resolved. As with most of the joke structures in the film, the *pointe* or punch-line is withheld.

Throughout the film, Christine exemplifies a psychologically complex comic character, while her partners are treated more or less uniformly as types, each occupying a recognizable position in the ostensibly residual bourgeois society of the early GDR, and this allows them to attract specific satirical energies in the narrative as they each fail in turn as partners and fathers. When the transient carnival worker Gorgi leaves town, for instance, his departure is attended by two of his other flings that season. After the government functionary Eugen Breuer (Horst Schulze) stands Christine up on New Year's Eve, she calls his home in Berlin—and finds herself unexpectedly speaking with his sardonic and sophisticated wife. The lapsed seminarian Willibald Güttler (an early role for Armin Müller-Stahl) realizes only after fathering Christine's third child that he cannot square his suddenly ardent Catholicism or his aunt and uncle's admonitions with her status as an unwed mother. And the misogynist bon vivant Hubi (Friedo Solter), who offers to marry Christine and be a father to her children while belittling her desire for education, absconds to West Berlin on their wedding day together with the contents of her savings account.<sup>46</sup> The only two male figures who are not depicted satirically are Christine's coworker Nico (Günter Schubert), who carries a flame for her to the chagrin of his wife, Jutta; and the brigade leader Ottfried (Albert Garbe), who arranges



**Figure 5**  
**Christine (Annette Woska) Confesses to Her Brigade Leader Otfried,**  
**“I Know . . . I Messed Up” (*Christine* [1963/1974]; Archival Video,**  
**Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv).**



for Christine to study, but otherwise seems atypically—for a positive hero—detached from the life of the collective.

The story is shaped episodically through repetitions of and variations on a basic formula: romance, childbirth, and abandonment of the newborn. By the time Christine is left at the altar, a good seven or eight years have passed since the narrative's beginning in 1946, although there are few signs of the passage of time in the extant film: Christine does not visibly age, nor does the collective farm appear to develop; only her three sons, whom she visits once in the children's home, have obviously grown. Having shirked her studies, Christine returns to the classroom in earnest, but feels defeated by life: "I know . . . I messed up," she complains to Otfried at a critical juncture in her relationship to the collective (see Figure 5). Her teacher, a Party member named Heinz Rehfeldt (Günter Ott) who instructs her in both statistics and the Marxist feminism of August Bebel, pulls strings to arrange a two-bedroom apartment for her in the nearby village and helps her move in and decorate. Unsurprisingly, they begin a romance, one that seems like it might actually work. But just before she informs him that she is pregnant, he tells her of his decision to move away (see Figure 6). The final scene of the extant film shows a frustrated Christine with her newest infant in the children's home. This time, unhinged by the nurse's refusal to allow her to leave yet another child there, she decides spontaneously to take all her children home (see Figure 7).<sup>47</sup>

Most viewers would probably hesitate, initially, to call *Christine* a comedy. Not only does the protagonist's situation remain unresolved, but the film marks a stylistic

Figure 6

“I Don’t Know Whether to Laugh or to Cry” Says Heinz (Günter Ott) to Christine (Annette Woska) When She Tells Him That She’s Pregnant Again and With His Child (*Christine* [1963/1974]; Archival Video, Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv).

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Figure 7

Christine’s (Annette Woska) Spontaneous Outburst to the Nurse (Johanna Clas): “I’ll Take All Four of Them With Me!” (*Christine* [1963/1974]; Archival Video, Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv).

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departure from other East German film comedies of the time and from Dudow's own previous work in the genre.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, not only do the repetitions structuring the narrative mark it as comedic, but the emphasis on her character—and specifically the incongruities between it and conventional expectations—marks it as a mime. Viewers' affective responses to the film presumably would have generated the “new cognition” that Dudow saw as being concealed in laughter—even if laughter was never produced. As Mary Douglas points out, “It would be wrong to suppose that the acid test of a joke is whether it provokes laughter or not.” Douglas's 1968 essay on jokes, in fact, presents a theory of humor that shares some commonalities with Dudow's. She argues for instance that the pleasure of the joke involves the “enjoyment of a hidden wit, the congruence of the joke structure with the social structure,” and that a joke “corresponds to the form of the social experience.” But she goes on to argue that “the experience of the joke form in the social structure calls imperatively for an explicit joke to express it. . . . Hence the enthusiasm with which a joke at the right time is always hailed.”<sup>49</sup> Douglas's thesis allows us to ask a methodologically useful question about *Christine*: if the joke of Christine's character had been told on time, what would its corresponding “joke form in the social structure” have been?

### A Socialist Personality Viewed Through the Lens of Comedy

As Director of the Institut für Filmwissenschaft (Film Studies Institute), the film historian Hermann Herlinghaus had been invited by the KAG Berlin members to view the rough cut of *Christine* and to provide them and the DEFA management with his expert opinion as to what to do with the film following Dudow's death.<sup>50</sup> His response shows that the problem *Christine* represented for official socialist realism was a matter as much of dramaturgy as of the ostensible narrative:

Voska [*sic*] is weak, and even weaker where she speaks. Dudow, who has such a gift for details, failed utterly in some places. . . . All the sequences with Garbe struck me as completely uninspired, both in the acting and in the directing, which is unheard of for Dudow. . . . Wherever Dudow brings a satiric undertone into play, the scene comes alive. . . . But my criticism still stands: the source of creative energy that the positive hero, whether Voska [*sic*] or Garbe, draws on, is static and feeble, since the author always seems to come to the resolution too soon. What should be a miracle becomes a ledger entry. Probably the most important thing is missing: the intimate scene, the love story and the contrast it might have provided. One keeps believing, fearing, and hoping for Christine, that things will finally work out for her; and every time, things go awry. That is to say, the filmed scenes give a sense of what is missing, what would have to take place in order to refute this initial impression.<sup>51</sup>

Herlinghaus's criticism of Voska's “static and feeble” acting style and the plot's resistance to finding a positive resolution indexes a horizon of expectations that by the early 1960s had become pronounced in the GDR public sphere. These expectations involved

not only conventions of the positive hero, but official discourses of socialist personality and morality as well. The simultaneous identification and ambivalence produced by the mime figure of Christine arguably allowed Dudow to draw attention to and critique contradictions in these discourses, which emerged as part of a process of ideological education that would generate increased worker productivity, a remedy to the economic crisis in which the country was then embroiled.

At the Sixth SED Party Congress in January 1963, which ended one week before *Christine* went into production, First Secretary Walter Ulbricht reissued the “Ten Commandments of Socialist Ethics and Morality” that he had first decreed at the previous Party Congress in 1958. In them, “the person in the socialist society” was defined as being “eager to become a knowledgeable person, a universally educated personality, to consciously shape his own life, and to take an active part in the development of our socialist democracy.”<sup>52</sup> This psychological definition of the GDR subject was considered integral to the rationalization of worker performance and consciousness and went hand in hand with the “New Economic System for the Planning and Management of the National Economy” introduced at the same Party Congress.<sup>53</sup> The discourse of the socialist personality (*sozialistische Persönlichkeit*) would become a fixture in GDR public culture until the very end. However, despite blunt assessments like the one made by Erich Apel—“Political consciousness can be measured in manufacturing output”<sup>54</sup>—the concept and its precise relation to worker morale remained under-formulated. As Christiane Lemke points out, despite the great importance given to developing such socialist personalities, the question “as to which social preconditions affected a person’s attitude toward work . . . was never systematically discussed. . . . The concept of [socialist] personality thus appears not as the result of an analysis of contradictory social relations, but as the synonym for a bundle of virtues, a positive pedagogical model.”<sup>55</sup>

Models for the socialist personality were pervasive in the East German public sphere in the early 1960s, not only in official injunctions such as Ulbricht’s but in nonfiction and fictional narratives distributed in print media, film, and television. *Christine*, in fact, was presented as one of these at the treatment and scriptwriting stage, as the story of “a woman . . . who, faced with quite particular personal difficulties, finds her way, and to whom our social order provides the possibility of developing into an authentic personality.”<sup>56</sup> Typical of such models were the portraits of ideal workers published in Party organ *Neues Deutschland*. “Lydia Is the Head Dairywoman,” for instance, begins with a thumbnail narrative: “This capable girl—who has since become brigade leader—was utterly open to whatever was new”<sup>57</sup>—the word “new” being keyed to the discourse of innovation and the “innovators movement” (Neuererbewegung) launched in 1958. Another example provides more specific predicates: “Indeed, Gisela Schlösser, at twenty-five no doubt the youngest nurse out here, is an optimistic, progressive woman, realistic and modern. . . . For the human face’s noblest features are drawn not by the modest consignment to fate of the attending Samaritan, but by a knowledgeable and aggressive affirmation of life.”<sup>58</sup> These portraits, which presumably interpellated readers over their morning coffee or on

the commute to work, were uniform and simplistic, depicting everyday people in heroic terms with adjectives—*knowledgeable, realistic, optimistic*, etc.—whose descriptive value was subordinate to their political valency.

A more complex model of socialist personality was presented by the positive hero Bakhirev of Galina Nikolaeva's production novel *Bumëa v nymu* (Battle Along the Way), which was published in German as *Schlacht unterwegs*<sup>59</sup> in mid-1962 in tandem with the exhibition of Vladimir Basov's 1961 film adaptation of it. The importance of this work for framing the anticipated reception of *Christine* is shown in the KAG Berlin's final report:

We are right in dealing so intensively with the film *Schlacht unterwegs*. Just as that work is narrated in the sphere of production and deals with the manifold transformations in people's relationship to each other, so does *Christine*, in our opinion, narrate the "battle along the way" in the moral sphere, with all the same aspects and aspirations.<sup>60</sup>

*Neues Deutschland* ran a number of articles and dispatches from public discussions about *Schlacht unterwegs*, which mostly emphasized Bakhirev's heroic reform of his factory—one that adumbrated the reforms of the New Economic System<sup>61</sup>—while eliding discussion of his adulterous relationship with his coworker Tina.<sup>62</sup> These articles were generally prefaced with headlines like "When Will We Get Bakhirevs in the Foundries?"<sup>63</sup> "Young Innovators at Zeiss Follow Bakhirev's Example,"<sup>64</sup> or "Bakhirev Helped Them Out."<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the combination in Bakhirev of character flaws and workplace heroism suggested that more complicated depictions of imperfect positive heroes would now be welcome—provided they contributed to the improvement of productivity.<sup>66</sup> Perceived dramaturgical deficiencies in *Christine*, however, would prove critical for the DEFA following Dudow's death, as it decided the fate of the unfinished film.

The SED's aggressive propagation of the doctrine of socialist personality was never a far cry from its policies regarding, and representations of, the socialist woman; and *Christine* is represented in contradiction to the prescribed character traits of both. Despite occupying the subject position of the young, upwardly mobile, innovation-minded female worker, *Christine* is not "optimistic, progressive . . . realistic [or] modern," but impulsive, inconsistent, in no way avid about work, her studies, or ways to improve production, resistant to learning from her mistakes, self-absorbed, a little sad, and sexually promiscuous. The realism of Annette Woska's characterization of *Christine* indicates contradictions between official representations of the single woman or "alleinstehende Frau" (woman standing alone)<sup>67</sup> and working mother and their actually existing situation.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, *Christine*'s repeated unloading of her newborns at the state children's home would no doubt have called to viewer's minds the controversial issue of abortion, which in 1963 was illegal in the GDR and recently made even harder to come by with the loss of access to West Berlin abortionists.<sup>69</sup> Abortion is addressed directly in the screenplay when the father of *Christine*'s second child, the government functionary Eugen, successfully dissuades her from the idea: "There could be serious repercussions for you, as a woman . . . and otherwise!" What the "otherwise" means is left open, but Dudow expresses his ironic

recognition of Christine's predicament with Eugen's promise to her that he "won't let her down."<sup>70</sup> This scene did not make it into the extant film, however.

By subtly invoking controversial discourses such as these, Christine's character functions as a site for unsettling GDR Party doxa—echoing the classical mime's commentary on political issues. This is indexed by the discrepancies between her "official" presentation in the screenplay, studio-internal documents, and promotional materials such as publicity photographs, and in her actual performance, which is confirmed by the disappointment expressed in the studio's evaluations of the rough cut. Following Hermann Herlinghaus's assessment, the decision not to finish the film appears to have rested mainly on the KAG Berlin's bewilderment over Dudow's direction of Annette Woska:

Of course it is difficult to say what accents Professor Dudow would have given to his work had he been able to complete it. What can be said is that the available material in no way makes his intentions clear. It seems to us that Dudow failed to find in actress Anette [*sic*] Woska an expressive medium suited to the material. So the story is uncentered. Emotions and thoughts refuse to congeal into the style of the film; its poetic intention remains unclear; didactic utterances and sociologisms are pushed into the foreground. The presentation and direction of the protagonist stands in the way of her relations with the other characters, which would have helped to explain the narrative. One is unable to experience the human story of the girl "Christine."<sup>71</sup>

The "human story" of Christine would have been understood as necessarily consistent with the ideologically legible "great process . . . by which a woman becomes a member of our society in full standing"<sup>72</sup>—as the narrative was framed in an early statement on the screenplay draft; but Dudow's direction of Woska interfered with that consistency.

Dudow's intentions for the film were no doubt more apparent to the DEFA's evaluation team than the final report indicates. Not only had the treatment and screenplay for the film been hotly debated and substantially revised at the studio's insistence,<sup>73</sup> but his views on character and cinema were hardly a secret. Even a West German, the film scholar Wilhelm Roth, had no trouble understanding Dudow's take on Christine's "human story":

Dudow never reprimands his protagonist; he has understanding for her, even when she acts naively. He completely does without melodrama, trusting in comedy's capacity to help produce insights. The open-ended dramaturgy inspires not so much sympathy [*Mitfühlen*] as a kind of collaborative thinking [*Mitdenken*]. The film is characterized by jumps and compressions even in the completed sequences.

Roth's assessment here suggests that he was aware of Dudow's work with Brecht and the principles of epic theater; and he may have been familiar with his writings on comedy as well. At any rate, he perfectly encapsulates Dudow's approach.



*Christine* remains an important artifact for understanding GDR culture, despite being only a “Filmfragment” and its very limited circulation. And it is arguably the clearest manifestation of Dudow’s theory of a social comedy of character—a theory and practice that allowed this socialist artist to navigate the shoals of mid-twentieth-century Left modernism and to enable a critical optic on hegemonic socialist culture. In many ways, the character of *Christine* may be understood as standing in for the young person Dudow imagined in his defense of his previous film *Verwirrung der Liebe* (1959), which was published during the controversy that followed its release:<sup>74</sup>

Everywhere one hears complaints about the deficient morality of young people. That is only partly true. How often does one meet young people possessed of a strong ethical sensibility . . . [but who] nevertheless commit natural mistakes, succumb to error, and create confusion for themselves and others.<sup>75</sup>

And Dudow’s approach in his direction of *Woska*, so troubling to Herlinghaus and the evaluation team, demonstrates the same open-endedness he intended in the earlier film:

[*Verwirrung der Liebe*] provokes a number of questions that it does not pose, and it demands from its viewers a suitable answer, which it does not itself provide. This is the crux of all the discussions. The dramaturgy of the film—this was one of its artistic intentions—called for such a debate. But now I feel like the Sorcerer’s Apprentice: I cannot get rid of the spirits I’ve invoked. Nevertheless, I think this debate will be more useful to the development of the new morality than if I had offered some quick and easy recipes [*fertige Rezepte*].<sup>76</sup>

In a context in which the “quick and easy recipe” was the rule, *Christine*, even more than its predecessor, was—and would have been, had it been finished—a distinct exception. No doubt because no one in the KAG Berlin, let alone the DEFA directorship, was willing to take on the defense of such a film, it remained unfinished. The rough cut was shelved at the State Film Archive until 1974, when it was reconstructed and screened publicly for the first time to a small group of DEFA studio employees, Party officials, and critics as part of the ideologically saturated festivities celebrating the GDR’s twenty-fifth anniversary. Even then, eleven years later, the delayed “joke” of *Christine* remained controversial.<sup>77</sup>

## Notes

1. The reviewer goes on to assert the film’s ongoing relevance: “Just think of the much-discussed *Der Dritte* [Her Third]! Dudow’s film is more than ten years old: a present-day film [*Gegenwartsfilm*] then, and, astonishingly, a present-day film today.” (J.V., *Sonntag* [Berlin], 27 October 1974 [no page number, clippings archive, library of the Konrad Wolf Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen, Potsdam]).

2. Slatan Dudow, “Die beste künstlerische Methode” (talk given at the 1st Creative Conference of Filmmakers from Socialist Countries, Prague, December 1957), *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982), 250 (reprint from *Deutsche Filmkunst* 2, supplement [1958]: 2).

3. Dudow points out that all three formations were inspired by Soviet film in the 1920s, whose reevaluation he called for (Dudow, “Die beste künstlerische Methode,” 250); see also Slatan Dudow, “Die Filmkunst



vor grossen Entscheidungen,” *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982): 277–78 (reprint from *Neues Deutschland* [30 March 1961]: 4).

4. “Die Gedanken, die er vorträgt, sind die Gedanken eines Marxisten, aber es sind seine Gedanken” (KAG Berlin [signed Anne Pfeuffer], “Stellungnahme zum Drehbuch ‘Christine,’” no date [shortly after 11 September 1962], BArch DR 117 vorl. BAI 1952).

5. There are two book-length studies: Hermann Herlinghaus, *Slatan Dudow* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1965); Yves Aubry, “Slatan Dudow, 1903–1963,” *Anthologie du cinéma* 6 (1971): 385–440. Dudow’s early work and collaboration with Brecht is discussed in Wesselin Natew’s “Slatan Dudow in den dreissiger und vierziger Jahren,” *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982): 6–46. Günter Netzeband’s five-part series of articles “Stationen im Schaffen Slatan Dudows” ran from February through June, 1963, in the East German monthly *Film Spiegel*, and seems to have been based on interviews with Dudow. Two studies of individual films have so far appeared in English: Joshua Feinstein’s chapter “A Case of Love Confused? Slatan Dudow’s *Verwirrung der Liebe* as a Meditation on Art and Industry” in *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 78–109 (which includes a brief discussion of Dudow’s theory of comedy); and Marc Silberman’s “The Rhetoric of the Image: Slatan Dudov [*sic*] and Bertolt Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe* or *Who Owns the World?*” in *German Cinema: Text in Context* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 34–48. A highly insightful discussion of the film, Silberman’s article is careful to give credit to Dudow, though his analysis suggests that Brecht was the intellectual force behind the film. Most other references to *Kuhle Wampe* rather carelessly attribute it to Brecht alone. But the collaboration was clearly more complex, and Dudow’s involvement was integral. See note 20 below.

6. Loren Kruger discusses Brecht’s apparent “retreat from a global application of *Verfremdungseffekte*” and “incorporation of techniques attributed to Stanislavsky” in his stagings of two comedic plays, Erwin Strittmatter’s *Katzgraben* (1953) and his own “recontextualized Volksstück,” *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* (1951) (*Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance, East and South* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 66–83). Brecht’s immediate motivations for this are unclear; but what appears to have been a compromise with the SED’s antiformalism campaign of the early 1950s echoes Dudow’s adoption of Aristotelian dramaturgy in his 1936 staging of Brecht’s *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reichs*.

7. See Julia Hell, Loren Kruger, and Katie Trumpener, “Dossier: Socialist Realism and East German Modernism—Another Historians’ Debate,” *Rethinking MARXISM* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 36–79; Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Loren Kruger, *Post-imperial Brecht*; John Urang, *Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), among others.

8. Tsaribrod was ceded to the newly formed Yugoslavia in 1917, and is now called Dimitrovgrad. The biographical information here is drawn primarily from the previously cited studies of Dudow. I have also consulted copies of Dudow’s letters, mainly to Brecht and Margarete Steffin, in the Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv (BBA) in Berlin, the originals of which are housed in the Archive Nationale in Paris.

9. According to Netzeband, Dudow was hired on as assistant director to Pabst at the request of Brecht, but withdrew from the project in conjunction with Brecht’s altercation with Pabst (“Wessen Welt ist die Welt: Stationen im Schaffen Slatan Dudows 2,” *Film Spiegel* 3 [1963]: 20).

10. According to Laura J. Bradley, both script and production of Brecht’s *Die Mutter* were coauthored with Dudow, Hanns Eisler, Elisabeth Hauptmann, and Günter Weisenborn (*Brecht and Political Theatre: The Mother on Stage* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 8, 27).

11. Netzeband indicates that he was an assistant editor; Herlinghaus has him as assistant director.

12. For a brief history of Prometheus and the only discussion so far in English of Dudow’s film, see Jan-Christopher Horak, “Prometheus Film Collective (1925–1932),” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 26 (December 1981): 39–41.

13. At least the first of these, *Der Feigling*, was originally conceived as a film project, however. Letter from Dudow to Brecht, 30 September 1935, cited in Wesselin Natew [Veselin Natev], “Slatan Dudow in den dreißiger und vierziger Jahren,” *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982), 17, 5n.

14. Hermann Herlinghaus, *Slatan Dudow* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1965), 11–12.

15. Stefan Brodwin [Slatan Dudow], *Das Narrenparadies: Komödie in sieben Bildern. Mit einer Einleitung: Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung* (Berlin: Verlag Bruno Henschel und Sohn, 1947).

16. *Das Narrenparadies* is a farcical, grotesque allegory of totalitarianism in which the hapless protagonist Gocki attempts to rescue his beloved Sylvia both from marriage to a courtier of the tyrant Häuptling [Little Chief] and from the customary prenuptial gang rape by the tyrant and other courtiers. A far cry stylistically from the aesthetic doctrine recently relaunched in the USSR by Zhdanov, it was never staged.

17. The problem of “popular entertainment films” (*Unterhaltungsfilme*), generally understood as light romantic comedies, was an issue for the DEFA from the beginning. Cofounder and leading director Kurt Maetzig castigated film comedies as “forms of art . . . so thoroughly compromised [by the Nazis] as to render them useless for a long time to come” (*Der Deutsche Film. Fragen, Forderungen, Aussichten. Bericht vom Ersten Deutschen Film-Autoren-Kongress, 6.–9. Juni 1947, Berlin* [Berlin: Verlag Bruno Henschel und Sohn, 1947], 31), while others condemned them for their “social irrelevance” and for satisfying “the public’s naive desire for diversion” (Thomas Heimann, *DEFA, Künstler und SED-Kulturpolitik. Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 46 [Berlin: VISTAS Verlag, 1994], 114). This view would continue to obtain until the Party’s “New Course” of 1953 ushered in a diametrically opposite policy, with First Secretary Walter Ulbricht averring that “it is gratifying that discussions about film comedy have already taken place. It is necessary to satisfy the people’s need for entertainment by means of feature films . . . and at the same time to educate them in matters of taste” (Walter Ulbricht, “Der große Aufschwung der Volkswirtschaft im Fünfjahrplan” [The Country’s Economic Boom in the Five-Year Plan“], cited in: Dagmar Schittly, *Zwischen Regie und Regime: Die Filmpolitik der SED im Spiegel der DEFA-Produktionen* [Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2002], 79).

18. Georg Lukács, *Werke*, vol. 4, *Probleme des Realismus I: Essays über Realismus* (Neuwied & Berlin: Luchterhand, 1971), 83–107.

19. Brought to life in 1937–1938 in the pages of the Moscow-based German émigré journal *Das Wort*, this “debate” was resurrected in the Soviet Union after the war by Alexander Zhdanov and in the Soviet Zone of Germany by Alexander Dymshitz, and again in the GDR in the early 1950s, when it was renamed the “Formalism Debate,” with variants such as the “Brecht-Stanislawski Debate.”

20. *Kuhle Wampe*’s producer, Georg Höllering, in a 1974 interview with Ben Brewster and Colin MacCabe, elucidates Dudow’s role in the film: “[Dudow] was the first one to talk about Kuhle Wampe, who had been to the place, and in that sense most of the ideas came from him. He talked about it to Brecht; Brecht and Dudow were great friends and had a great respect for each other, but Dudow knew exactly how to use Brecht and where to use him. Dudow was the driving force behind the film and I think the greatest credit belongs to Dudow, rather than to Brecht. Brecht of course was responsible for all the texts, everything was written by him. Ottwald was a script-writer, but Dudow was such a dominant personality that he quickly got what he wanted from Ottwald” (“Making *Kuhle Wampe*: An interview with George Hoellering,” *Screen* 15, no. 4 [Winter 1974/1975]: 71–79; here 71–72). Höllering, who did not know any of the filmmakers prior to the project, indicates that while Brecht directed occasional scenes, especially given Dudow’s “problems . . . with running over time” in rehearsals, Dudow was responsible for most of the directing and the editing of the film: “Dudow was particularly good, in the editing as well—to the best of my knowledge, he had never edited a film before. Prometheus were worried about that. But I knew from the way he talked and picked my brains that he would be able to edit the film. We just gave him a very good joiner, an old woman who had joined hundreds of films, and could give him technical advice when needed. We saw the rushes, day by day, and they were excellent” (75).

21. Marc Silberman points out that unlike most German left-wing films of the time, *Kuhle Wampe* “thematizes petit bourgeois behavior as a reality of the working class” (“The Rhetoric of the Image,” 39).

22. “The Rhetoric of the Image: Slatan Dudov [*sic*] and Bertolt Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe* or *Who Owns the World?*” in *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, ed. Marc Silberman (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1995), 34–48; here, 40–41.

23. Slatan Dudow [pseud. Stefan Brodwin], “Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung,” introduction to *Das Narrenparadies. Komödie in fünf Akten* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1947), 8–9.

24. Slatan Dudow, “Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung,” 15.

25. In the English subtitles of the newly restored *Kuhle Wampe* this is translated more colloquially as “What a joke,” which captures the tone, but not the precise content, of the original.

26. Stefan Brodwin [Slatan Dudow], *Das Narrenparadies: Komödie in sieben Bildern. Mit einer Einleitung: Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung* (Berlin: Verlag Bruno Henschel und Sohn, 1947), 5–6.

27. Slatan Dudow, “Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung,” 8.

28. “The effect of the pathos of a work consists in bringing the view to the point of ecstasy. . . . But this is not sufficient: ‘to be beside oneself’ is not ‘to go into nothing.’ To be beside oneself is also unavoidably a transition to something else, to something different in quality, to something opposite to what preceded it” (Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 27).

29. Following the success of the one-act *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar* (Frau Carrar’s Rifles) in October 1937, Dudow commissioned Brecht’s series of short one-acters—which Brecht continued to expand and develop afterwards—and staged them in May 1938 under the title *99%*.

30. Slatan Dudow to Bertolt Brecht, Paris, 10 April 1938 (BBA 2575/1-3; original in the Archive Nationale in Paris). The argument extended to the title of the work, which Dudow insisted “must make no outward reference to Germany, but contain something positive for the audience” (Dudow to Brecht, 10 April 1938). He rejected Brecht’s various suggestions for the title as “too political and that might put the performance in danger. The words Germany and swastika cannot be mentioned, otherwise we’ll have problems with the authorities. The situation here is so volatile, it’s impossible to tell whether we’ll still be able to put on a production like this in a few weeks” (Dudow to Brecht, Paris, 17 April 1938 [BBA 2577/1-4]). Suggested by Willy Lohmar, the title *99%* was an ironic reference to the National Socialists’ claim of 99% majority approval in both Germany and Austria of the 10 April 1938 referendum on Austria’s annexation.

31. Bertolt Brecht to Slatan Dudow, [Svendborg, between 10 and 22 April 1938] (BBA 2613/1-2; original in the Archive Nationale in Paris).

32. Walter Benjamin, “The Land Where the Proletariat May Not Be Mentioned: The Premiere of Eight One-Act Plays by Brecht,” *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3: 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 331–32. For a reading of Benjamin’s ambivalent review, see Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, translated by Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 126–27.

33. Wesselin Natew (“Slatan Dudow in den dreissiger und vierziger Jahren,” *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 [1982]: 30–39, here 34) cites two reviews of the performance that registered this discrepancy, one in the German émigré press in Paris: “During the performance of the eight episodes . . . one thing was even more disturbing than the events on stage: at a number of points, the audience laughed” (*Pariser Tageszeitung* 693 [24 May 1938]: 3); the other in the National Socialist press in Germany: “[the eight horror stories] were intended to scare the living daylights out of the other émigrés. That’s what Bert Brecht wanted; that’s what the ‘critics’ expected. But surprise, surprise: the effect was quite different, the people laughed. . . . That must be quite embarrassing, when Brecht’s émigré Jews no longer know when they’re supposed to scream and when to laugh” (“Und die Genossen lachen,” *Schwarzer Korps*, 7 July 1938, cited in Hans-Christof Wächter, *Theater im Exil: Sozialgeschichte des deutschen Exiltheaters 1933–1945* [München: Hanser, 1973], 56).

34. Dudow to Paul Schmid, Ascona, Switzerland, 25 July 1943, *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982): 84.

35. Dudow to Paul Schmid, Ascona, Switzerland, 31 August 1943, *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982): 92–93.

36. Slatan Dudow, “Die Komödie und ihre gesellschaftliche Bedeutung,” 15.

37. “In a certain sense, a man is in the same situation as a commodity . . . a man first sees and recognizes himself in another man. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognizes his likeness.” (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes [New York: Vintage, 1977], 144).

38. Friederike Caroline Neuber, a.k.a. *Die Neuberin*, 1697–1760, actress, founder of the Neuber Comedian Society, and coreformer (along with Gottsched) of the German theater.

39. Slatan Dudow to Adolph Spalinger, Ascona, no date (probably 1941–42), *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982): 68–69. Adolph Spalinger (1915–2004), an actor with the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, emigrated to Switzerland in 1941, where he joined the ensemble of the Berner Stadttheater.

40. Costas Panayotakis, “Comedy, Atellane Farce and Mime,” in *A Companion to Latin Literature*, ed. Stephen Harrison (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 130–47. Mime remains less well known than Graeco-Roman comedy or tragedy because the material record is so meager—Panayotakis points out that of the Roman mime, only 241 lines exist today—and this has to do not only with the genre’s low status, but also the ambivalence and contempt with which it was regarded by contemporary critics, like Cicero and Diomedes, and its later denunciation by Christian writers. Despite this critical reception, however, mime was hugely popular in its day and had considerable influence on other Roman writers. See also R. Elaine Fantham, “Mime: The Missing Link in Roman Literary History,” *The Classical World* 82, no. 3 (1989): 153–63.

41. This specific relation of the mime and gender performativity had repercussions within the broader Roman public sphere: mime actresses, who often enjoyed celebrity status, were held up as “social scapegoats to preserve the chastity of decent wives, whose role was to be faithful to their husbands and produce legitimate children. In fact, the body of the mime-actress seems to have been exploited to such an extent that it became a stereotypical source of entertainment” (Panayotakis, 141).

42. According to Fantham, Cicero refers to “the Badtempered Man, the Superstitious Fellow, the Suspicious Man, the Boaster and the Fool” in his critique of mime; and she further lists the titles of several popular mimes of which only “miserable fragments” remain: “*The Dyer, The Patchwork Tailor . . . The Salt Seller . . . The Weaving Girls*” (Fantham, 155–56).

43. Hermann Reich, *Der Mimus: Ein literar-entwicklungsgeschichtlicher Versuch*, vol. I (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1903), 309–10. Viewed today as “the first great synthesis, too wide ranging, however, for a clearly defined picture of mime in any specific century” (R. Elaine Fantham, “Mime,” 162), Reich’s work is nevertheless useful as a primary historical document. The connections he draws between mime as a plebeian genre and as a forerunner of literary realism (19–37) would likely have attracted Dudow’s attention. Dudow’s interest in the mime, as expressed in his undated letter to Adolph Spalinger, may have been resonant with Brecht’s roughly contemporary rehabilitation of the *Volksstück*.

44. “Die ungewöhnliche Geschichte eines ungewöhnlichen Mädchens” (“Schlußbericht für den Spielfilm ‘Christine’ F 389” [BArch DR 117/23243], 4).

45. Almost no dialogue was scripted for this sequence, and the missing sound probably would have been furnished by a mélange of carnival noises and a musical soundtrack; gesture, blocking, and camera movements and angles remain the primary elements in producing meaning.

46. Ironically, at the same time as Dudow and the KAG Berlin were shooting *Christine*, Friedo Solter was being filmed for the television feature *Der Neue* (The New One, 1963, dir. Gerhard Respondek), which was broadcast on 30 June 1963 in honor of Walter Ulbricht’s seventieth birthday. Solter’s role as Hannes Fröhlich, the innovation-minded new chairman of a backsliding collective and model “socialist person” could not have been more opposite to that of the sybaritic and duplicitious Hubi in *Christine*. See Horst Knietzsch, “Bericht vom Sieg des sozialistischen Menschen. Fernsehfilm ‘Der Neue’ in Markkleeberg uraufgeführt,” *Neues Deutschland* (11 June 1963): 4.

47. The screenplay continues the narrative for another seven scenes, ending with a socialist naming ceremony for the newborn (Karl, after Marx) and the establishment of an ambivalent union between Christine and Heinz, which is mediated not by love but by references to the paternalistic state (Slatan Dudow, *Christine: Ein DEFA Film*, unpublished screenplay [Potsdam-Babelsberg: VEB DEFA Studio für Spielfilme, Gruppe “Berlin,” final version 19 December 1962], 245–66).

48. *Christine* was shot in black-and-white and Totalvision—a GDR analogue to Cinemascope—a combination that was used at the time primarily for Cold War dramas and other serious films such as Frank Beyer’s *Nackt unter Wölfen* (Naked amongst Wolves, 1963) and Konrad Wolf’s *Der geteilte Himmel* (The Divided Heaven, 1964).

49. Mary Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception,” (reprinted from *Man* 3, no. 3 [September 1968]; London: Routledge, 1999), 361–76; here 368.

50. Albert Wilkening to Müller, Director of VEB Progress Filmvertrieb (film distribution company), 4 September 1964 (BArch DR117 vorl. BAI 1952).

51. Hermann Herlinghaus to Jochen Mückenberger, 31 August 1964 (BArch DR117 vorl. BAI 1952).

52. "Programm der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Einstimmig vom VI. Parteitag der SED beschlossen)," *Neues Deutschland* (25 January 1963), special supplement.

53. By 1962, the GDR found itself in an economic crisis that was fueled by its attempts to overtake West German rates of production and consumption and by the collectivization of agriculture. Prior to the announcement of the "New Economic System," the country had overhauled its economic plan in 1959 and 1962, and closed the border with West Germany in 1961 (in order to stem the hemorrhaging of the country's workforce). See Dietrich Staritz, *Geschichte der DDR*, new expanded edition (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 213. See also Ian Jeffries and Manfred Melzer, "The New Economic System of Planning and Management 1963–70 and Recentralisation in the 1970s," *The East Germany Economy*, ed. Ian Jeffries and Manfred Melzer (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 26–40.

54. "Politisches Bewußtsein mißt sich am Produktionsausstoß" (Erich Apel, cited in Staritz, 212).

55. Christiane Lemke, *Persönlichkeit und Gesellschaft: Zur Theorie der Persönlichkeit in der DDR* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1980), 24.

56. "Stellungnahme zum Drehbuch 'Christine' von Slatan Dudow" (BArch DR 117 vorl. BAI 1952).

57. "Lydia ist Melkmeisterin" (*Neues Deutschland*, supplement [10 November 1962]: 6)

58. "Der gute Geist der Station 6. Von der aufrichtigen Liebe zu einem menschlich anspruchsvollen Beruf" (*Neues Deutschland*, supplement [18 August 1962]: 6).

59. Galina Nikolaewa, *Schlacht unterwegs*, trans. Ellen Zunk (Berlin: Verlag Kultur und Fortschritt, 1962).

60. "Schlußbericht für den Spielfilm 'Christine' F389" (BArch DR 117/23243).

61. "Bakhirev makes the controversial suggestion that abuses and inefficiency in Soviet industry may be caused by the failure to give people sufficient material incentives for their work. . . . Nikolaeva thus advances views which had never before been discussed in Soviet literature, expressing in popular form ideas similar to those of Liberman" (Rosalind J. Marsh, *Soviet Fiction Since Stalin: Science, Politics, and Literature* [Beckenham, UK: Croom Helm, 1986], 92).

62. One interesting exception was a commentary by Rudolf Bahro, the later Green Party politician, which focuses on the relationship between Bakhirev and Tina and ends by proposing Bakhirev as a model for "the Faust of our era" ("So wie Bachirew muß wohl der Faust unseres Zeitalters sein") ("Man spürt einen Bachirew-Konflikt. Unsere Diskussion zu 'Schlacht unterwegs,'" *Neues Deutschland*, supplement [14 July 1962]: 2).

63. *Neues Deutschland* (29 May 1962): 3.

64. *Neues Deutschland* (24 July 1962): 1 (front page).

65. *Neues Deutschland* (6 September 1962): 3. The report covers an FDJ (Free German Youth) meeting to discuss the book.

66. Kurt Hager, Director of the Politbüro's Ideological Commission, averred during a consultative meeting in March 1963: "Our position as to how literature can help resolve economic tasks and contribute to increasing worker productivity, finds its classical embodiment in [*Schlacht unterwegs*]" (cited in: John P. Wiczorek, *Between Sarmatia and socialism: The life and works of Johannes Bobrowski* [Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999], 206).

67. The single, divorced, widowed, or separated working woman who was a discursive ideal in GDR society throughout the 1950s, her identification with the workplace and politicization considered a given. Unemployed, married women (housewives), on the other hand, were seen as a "'problem group' targeted for integration" into both the workforce and socialist society (Elizabeth D. Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 185).

68. Paradoxically, married women enjoyed legal advantages over single women, including widows, and received special benefits for joining the workforce; and even nonworking married women without children were afforded the infamous "housework day" (a state-subsidized paid day off), all of which left



working mothers, especially, feeling penalized by the state. Furthermore, although single mothers had preferential status for limited child-care resources, the state "was far less active in promoting child-care than its rhetoric might suggest," and there were more children than could be accommodated in nurseries and residential homes (Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make?* 204). See also Donna Harsch, "The Dilemmas and Evolution of Women's Policy," in *The Workers' and Peasants' State: Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945–71*, ed. by Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002).

69. The newly formed GDR state faced a population crisis, and in 1950, with the Law for the Protection of Mother and Child and the Rights of Women, it made abortion illegal (in accord with its pre-1933 policy, the KPD had legalized it in the Soviet zone directly after the war) and introduced financial incentives for having large families. Women continued to have abortions illegally, however, many of them crossing to West Berlin to do so. Donna Harsch argues that with the closing of the border in August 1961, "the loss of access to West Berlin abortionists made the restrictive policy more intolerable," but that this led to a gradual easing of restrictions against abortion and to the eventual legalization of abortion in the first trimester in 1972 (Donna Harsch, "Society, the State, and Abortion in East Germany, 1950–1972," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 1 [1997]: 53–84).

70. Slatan Dudow, *Christine: Ein DEFA Film*, unpublished screenplay (Potsdam-Babelsberg: VEB DEFA Studio für Spielfilme, Gruppe "Berlin," final version 19 December 1962), 107.

71. "Schlußbericht für den Spielfilm 'Christine' F 389" (BArch DR 117/23243), 4.

72. "Stellungnahme zum Drehbuch 'Christine,'" no date [shortly after 11 September 1962], (BArch DR 117 vorl. BAI 1952), 4.

73. See the various statements and correspondence by and between the KAG Berlin, Dudow, and DEFA Director Jochen Mückenberger included among the papers of DEFA's Technical Director Albert Wilkening (BArch DR 117 vorl. BAI 1952); Heiner Carow's reminiscence of Dudow in "Kräftig, mutig und jung. Slatan Dudow, Klassiker des sozialistischen deutschen Films," *Der Morgen* (Berlin), 16/17 July 1988 [no page number, clippings archive, library of the Konrad Wolf Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen, Potsdam]; and Anne Pfeuffer, "Erinnerungen an Slatan Dudow (1903–1963)," *Filmspiegel* 2 (1983): 10–13.

74. Wilhelm Roth, "Mutter Christine und ihre Männer. Nach elf Jahren ist jetzt in Ostberlin Slatan Dudows letzte Filmarbeit zu sehen" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* [München], 20 October 1974 [no page number, clippings archive, library of the Konrad Wolf Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen, Potsdam]).

75. Slatan Dudow, "Die Heiterkeit und das Schöne," *Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 23, no. 5 (1982), 266 (reprint from *Sonntag* 10 [1960]: 3). For a useful discussion of the controversy around the ending of *Verwirrung der Liebe*, see Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema, 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 90–94.

76. Slatan Dudow, "Die Heiterkeit und das Schöne," 266.

77. Official reluctance to draw attention to the film is suggested by the fact that the first GDR review of it appeared only a full week after Wilhelm Roth's was published in West Germany. If most GDR reviewers did not expressly point to *Christine*'s capacity to "raise hackles," they did compare it to later GDR films with ideologically problematic female characters, such as Egon Günther's *Der Dritte* (Her Third, 1971) and Heiner Carow's *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1974). Ironically, while *Christine* arguably influenced those later films through a studio-internal duct of reception (Carow, for instance, had been a member of the KAG Berlin evaluation team), it probably could not have been shown in the GDR without the slightly more open discourse that the controversies around them had ushered in.

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# Hunting Lizards in Romania

## Oblique Speech and Humor in Ioan Groșan's *2084: A Space Epic* and *Planet of the Mediocres*

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During the communist regime, but particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, a significant portion of the critical discourse expressed in Romanian literature took the form of “lizards.” The lizard was a type of short, highly codified, oblique text, often humorous or ironic, “planted” in a seemingly innocuous literary piece. This article serves a double purpose. Its first half is an attempt at literary paleontology: an outline of the origins, evolution, and morphology of the Romanian lizard, particularly in relation to humor and satire. The second half is an illustration of the lizard “in its natural state,” so to speak—an analysis of *2084: A Space Epic* and *Planet of the Mediocres*, two short satirical science fiction novels by the Romanian writer Ioan Groșan, both published shortly before 1989.

**Keywords:** *contemporary Romanian literature; Ioan Groșan; subversive discourse under communism; humor; lizards*

### 1. Evolution

At first sight, the history of artistic censorship<sup>1</sup> in Romania seems no different from that of other Eastern European countries. The extreme repression of the 50s, when most prewar literary works were at best severely stunted and at worst removed from circulation altogether, gradually morphed into a relative thaw which reached its high point in the late 60s. By the time in 1968 when Nicolae Ceaușescu stood in Bucharest’s biggest public square and announced he would not send troops to Czechoslovakia, he was hailed as Eastern Europe’s maverick president, and his popularity skyrocketed both at home and abroad. Between 1965 and 1971, Romania enjoyed an almost unprecedented cultural thaw,<sup>2</sup> which marked the apex of its pre-1989 cultural openness. Nevertheless,

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the next decade started ominously with the publication, in 1971, of the Chinese and North Korean–inspired “July Theses,” aimed at purging Romanian culture of “unhealthy” influences, strengthening nationalism, and paving the way for the grotesque cult of personality that characterized the late 70s and 80s.

The consequences of the Theses were devastating, reflecting the leadership’s, and Ceaușescu’s in particular, fear of the potential for dissent that the brief thaw was beginning to create among intellectuals and students. Most of the cultural initiatives promoted during the previous five years vanished almost overnight, and even the vaguest hints of intellectual opposition were stifled via the removal or sidelining of any Party members or leaders of opinion who failed to subscribe to the aggressive nationalism that had become the official doctrine. Several measures were adopted in the following years, all aimed at strengthening the Party’s control over mass media as well as cultural activities.<sup>3</sup> Worth mentioning are the Press Law of 1974, which spelled out the conditions for the functioning of mass media by subordinating them, ideologically and technically, to the Communist Party; as well as the introduction for certain categories of intellectuals of a fidelity oath to the Party. At the same time, works with religious themes (even if only obliquely presented) and works belonging to artists who had left the country were removed from circulation, and it became forbidden to even mention the names of their authors. In their place sprang a vulgar and increasingly disturbing cult of personality of both Ceaușescu and his wife Elena (complete, especially in the 80s, with North Korean–style mass games), stressing the infallibility of the presidential couple in every conceivable aspect of science, technology, and art.

Paradoxically, the same decade that saw the gradual closing up of the country and its slide into increasingly irrational forms of control and oppression also saw the official abolition of the institution of censorship. This was, however, a mere technicality: the only thing that disappeared, in 1977, was the Press and Print Department (Comitetul pentru Presă și Tipărituri)—which had previously functioned as a censor’s office. The practice itself continued with a vengeance, spread out in a newly created diffuse apparatus of Byzantine proportions. Under the tutelage of the Council for Socialist Culture and Education (Consiliul Culturii și Educației Socialiste) censorship became the responsibility of publishers, editors, “external advisors” (specialists from outside the publishing houses who would compile reports about the suitability of manuscripts for printing), and, last but not least, the authors themselves. The result was that the liability for any potential misstep was now distributed among a network of individuals, each protecting a precarious position, and each attempting to fulfill a personal agenda. The writer Adriana Bittel (one of the editors of *Literary Romania* [*România Literară*], one of Romania’s oldest and most prestigious literary journals) summarizes the practice thus:

The most diabolical invention was, by far, the fact that the editor of the book himself was under pressure; he would be fired if he allowed uncensored manuscripts to get past him and reach higher persons. This was a very complex situation because the editor was a professional, and, more often than not, a friend of yours. He had his own family and life; you could not ask him to risk his job for you.

So there were several stages: self-censorship, the benign censorship of the editor's sentimental blackmail, which often proved to be worse than the child who dreads fire after having been burned once, and trying to foresee all possible objections the censor might have; and finally the real censors with their lists. . . . The author was never supposed to know who suggested changes or mutilations of the text. As a matter of fact, the censors did not forbid anything. They "discussed," that is, imposed changes on the editor. The editor did that himself, so no concrete documentation of censorship remained, because censorship had officially been abolished.

After the book had been printed, a thorough "postcheck," as it was called, was made on the first copy of the book. The censors from the Council of Culture (called "instructors" or "readers") checked whether or not their instructions had been followed. If they had not, the books were destroyed. Party or administrative punishment followed: anything from fines to firing.<sup>4</sup>

It was in this dense jungle of increasingly irrational rules and regulations that the Romanian lizard thrived.

## 2. Morphology

While the origins of the term are quite murky,<sup>5</sup> the widespread existence of the Romanian lizard is a well-documented fact, especially in the culture of the 70s and 80s. The lizard is a small, yet slippery, act of rebellion: it hides between lines and words, camouflaging itself with the adaptive coloration of double entendres, scurrying away from the heavy-footed censors and daring the alert readers to uncover it, resting patiently on the page, barely visible among heaps of innocuous phrases. The climate of the 50s, with its constant threat of aggressive repression and physical annihilation had seen the flourishing of "vipers"—poisonous yet inefficient detractors, waiting to be crushed under the heel of the victorious communist revolution; it may well be that these vipers later mutated into the somewhat less offensive but far more persistent lizards. The relative relaxation of repressive practices (that is, the lowering of the risk of physical annihilation), along with an increasingly irrational censorship, created an ideal climate for these little literary reptiles to prosper.

The use of lizards and reptiles as metaphorical carriers of subversion was by no means limited to Romania alone: in 1937 the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil* printed an article titled "The Life of Animals"; one of its illustrations depicted an anthropomorphized chameleon dissimulating itself in an office, on a factory floor, at a meeting (where it cunningly doffs a worker's cap to better blend in): "The enemy is taking on the color of his surroundings: 'The lizard has a remarkable capacity to change its color.'"<sup>6</sup> Beyond the rather amusing zoological contortions required to make a harmless species like the chameleon into some kind of poisonous vermin (in a magazine bearing the name of a more naturally dangerous reptile, no less!), this case testifies once more to the clearly charged symbolic potential of reptiles and lizards in the communist bestiary. I believe,

however, that the Romanian lizard is the sole instance where this potential was eventually turned on its head, changing from negative and anthropomorphic—lizards and snakes as “official” symbolic representations of enemies of the regime—to positive and semiotic—lizards as subversive linguistic acts, undermining the regime from within.<sup>7</sup>

The Romanian lizard is therefore a special type of parody, which thrives in a rather fuzzily defined liminal space. A precondition for the success of a parody is the strength and validity of its target: the greater this strength, the easier the target is to recognize, and the more acute the parodic subversion and mockery. On one hand, one may argue that, as the lizard speaks of the daily realities of life under communism, the very nature of the authoritarian enforcement of communist rules and laws provides it with a “strong” target. On the other hand, however, the sadly special case of Romania had made it so that by the end of the 70s, propaganda had reached such surreal heights that its ruthless implementation only made its hollowness more obvious, thus rendering parodies almost tautological. A few examples should suffice: the obligation to print dithyrambic odes to Ceaușescu and his wife Elena in all newspapers and magazines (culminating in the frenzied heights of adulation on their respective birthdays, when every paper in the country dealt exclusively with the occasion); the two hours a day of TV programming (four on Sundays), which, again, often showed nothing than the accomplishments of the presidential couple; the unremitting claims that Ceaușescu was competent in every science and art known to man; the insistence on Romania’s constantly record-breaking industrial and agricultural outputs; and so on. All these took place against a backdrop of obvious lack and deprivation, where by 1989, huge lines were the norm for the purchase of even the most elementary provisions, where procuring food had become a national obsession, and where the fear of the seemingly ubiquitous secret police was prompting people to smother their phones with pillows and blankets when giving a party. Consequently, the reflex of an almost Orwellian doublethink had become so pervasive that the mimicking of the official discourse could coexist, on almost every level, with a dissimulated subversive discourse, whose most readily available public form was the political joke. The regime had indeed turned (perhaps more in Romania than anywhere else in Eastern Europe) into its own parody.

The lizard thus becomes the parody of a parody—the inevitable reflection and subversion of a social and political order built on Potemkinian levels of dissimulation and hollow contradiction, where ubiquitous lack is presented as abundance and constant repression as freedom. A strange affinity can in fact be detected between the involuntary irony of the propagandistic language of the time and the oblique irony of the lizard: a favorite expression of the regime like “years of light,” for example, could turn subversive on a dime in a country where blackouts were a daily occurrence. Indeed, nothing sums this symbiotic relation between lizard and propaganda better than the following joke: At the movies, a man sees Khrushchev and Kennedy in a newsreel and exclaims, “Look at the pig!” He is promptly arrested by the secret police. He protests, “But I was talking about Kennedy!” and the secret police reply, “We know better who you were

talking about.” The joke circulated, with various protagonists (Ceaușescu and Reagan, Ceaușescu and Gorbachev, etc.) in Romania as well.

This remarkable ability of lizards to imitate the official ideology explains perhaps why so many Romanian readers and writers (not to mention the censors) had turned into genuine literary herpetologists. The intricate network of censors, as well as an increasingly illogical list of prohibitions that was growing exponentially, helped create a climate of frenzied interpretation where even the most innocuous words and contexts became suspicious. By the late 70s and early 80s, the list had turned into a black comedy, including, alongside the usual suspects like “God” or “priest,” such baffling words as “old man” and “hag” (they could refer to Ceaușescu and his wife<sup>8</sup>) and “balcony” (triply dubious because it designated the dictator’s favorite platform for delivering his speeches; the space of potential rebellious discourse; as well as the locus of a constant battle between the state and its citizens, who were closing off their balconies to insulate their increasingly cold apartments—a practice that was technically illegal). Other questionable choices were “coffee” and “meat” (both of which had virtually disappeared from stores), “cold” (ubiquitous in every home and public building during winter), “dark,” “food lines,”<sup>9</sup> and so on. In this atmosphere of paranoid semiosis any slight contextual rustle could signal the presence of a lizard, and often the first knee-jerk reaction was to excise the dubious expression, thus creating a whole subset of “false lizards”—phrases devoid of any subtext, but nevertheless considered dangerous. Such was the case of titles like *Silence Required* (seen as an allusion to Ceaușescu’s endless speeches<sup>10</sup> and thus forbidden) or *Nero* (the original title of a novel, changed to *Roman Sequence* to avoid a possible hint, again, to the dictator’s practices<sup>11</sup>).<sup>12</sup>

Still, the system was far from infallible, and there were ways to bypass it. Somewhat more overt criticism or nonorthodox themes were allowed as long as they were presented as taking place in the “corrupt West,” and so sometimes poems or essays would suddenly turn out to have been written in Paris, Lisbon, or Madrid, places that oftentimes the author had never visited. Quite irrationally, a certain degree of fame also allowed one more freedom: the Byzantine nature of censorship ensured that various factions would be battling for influence, protecting certain authors and sidelining others, and also that literary celebrity would permit the editors and publishers to press harder against the censors. The publishing process itself was a constant and exhausting struggle between author, editor, and censors, each pulling in a different direction, thus allowing for the creation of small breaches, exploited by particularly slippery lizards. The transcript of a 1973 meeting of the Press and Printing Direction confirms this tense atmosphere, where censors and publishers fight for interpretive authority, and where the animosity is often quite palpable. The speaker is Cornel Burtică, a high-ranking Party member and secretary of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party:

Today’s discussion shows clearly, and with specific examples that the responsibility is diffuse. George Ivașcu [vice president of the Romanian Journalists’ Union, literary critic, and editor-in-chief of *Literary Romania*] has asked if the Press and Printing Direction

knows everything, if it has scientific credentials as well. Someone has to take responsibility for the whole thing, knowledge or no knowledge. The second idea is that the Press Direction only deals with what is absolutely necessary. We think that an opening paragraph on the first page can show quite clearly what is absolutely necessary, and that is “to prevent the publication, dissemination, transmission or communication of materials that are non-constitutional and immoral. . . .” I think that what is absolutely necessary must and will be clearly defined, with the help of the Council. Otherwise, out of excessive caution we may go way beyond what is strictly necessary.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Paleontology

Another peculiarity of Romania under communist rule was the almost total absence of an organized, meaningful dissidence, particularly at home, but also abroad. While individual protesters would sometimes draw the attention of the West (one of the most famous cases is that of Paul Goma and the “’77 Charter”), and the Romanian broadcasts of both Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America were very popular, the inability of a strong critical discourse to take root in Romania is even more remarkable, given the amount of muffled rumbling often taking the shape of lizards and political jokes. The persistence of a hard-line Stalinist model of government;<sup>14</sup> the fear of surveillance, embodied in the extensive network of informants employed by the secret police (about one in about thirty Romanians, by some estimates); as well as the enormous expense of time and energy required to procure even the most basic necessities of life ensured that whatever critical speech could emerge did so very often only under the guise of private discourse (jokes, only told to trusted family and friends), or in the highly dissimulated form of lizards.

This explains why seen today most of these lizards appear somewhat bathetic—not crocodiles but little chameleons, scurrying about in texts, both inviting and evading readership, and whose existence was often more important than their message. The novelist Norman Manea summarizes the sadness and bitterness of the Romanian lizard-master: “The code was more important than the text, backstage more important than the performance. Life went on underground for most.” The act may have been one of rebellion, but its results proved strangely fragile: most lizards never survived their heyday, as their oblique, *Æsopic* nature concealed too often nothing but “banal assertion[s].”<sup>15</sup> Today, twenty years after they became obsolete, most Romanian lizards have turned into dinosaurs: their bones have to be pieced back together to make sense, they need heavy decoding and the reconstruction of a specific context for their meaning to emerge, but the resulting beast is often too clumsy or alien to be relatable.

None of these extinct literary creatures seem to have been better preserved, though, than the comic ones, perhaps because they alone reflected the clearest a way of life

that, as I have said before, had already turned into a parody. Among them one can find some surprisingly transparent critiques of the regime, which had reached the public with various degrees of success. I should mention only two—a poem published in a children’s book by Ana Blandiana, a well-known poet and critic of the regime, and featuring a cat whose habits (bullying the other animals on the street, demanding applause and an entourage, etc.) appeared to mirror quite closely those of Ceaușescu. The poem led to the banning of the book and a publication interdiction for the author. The second is a song (not published until 1990 but occasionally performed live) titled “On the News,” by Alexandru Andrieș—a little jaunty mantra of lack whose lines said, “Tonight on the news/I saw Swiss cheese./ I watched the rest of the program as well/ But it didn’t show up again/ Even though I stayed until the end./ But it doesn’t matter because/ Tomorrow on the news/ I will see Swiss cheese again!”<sup>16</sup>

The possibility of rebellion was therefore small but by no means negligible, and it appears that the most memorable lizards were those that reflected most openly, like Andrieș’s song, the surreal levels of propagandistic hollowness and material deprivation that characterized 1980s Romania. The fact that they were almost all comic is, I believe, explainable by the private nature of dissent in Romania, reflected in the tremendous popularity of political jokes. Humor of the type that I will be describing shortly is mostly descriptive: it merely presents a state of things and can therefore be enjoyed privately, by a like-minded public (usually small) who can share in the experience, as well as the joke. A more somber act of dissent, like a protest, is a cry for help: it demands public action, the taking of a stand. Humor, on the other hand, acts as a temporary release: in the act of private laughter, the regime and its propaganda are temporarily diminished, but paradoxically, the same act ensures the continuation of the doublethink paradigm that characterized life in the Romania of the 70s and 80s. Private laughter satisfies the need for rebellion, via the winking alliance established between the writer, who has managed to fool the censors, and the readers, who were similarly smarter than the censorship and “in” on the joke. But this audience is almost always profoundly dissipated—astute readers, or spectators, each internalizing and appropriating the subversive act, all the while ensuring that public criticism becomes less and less likely.

That is not to say that lizards cannot display profound and powerful criticism, just that this criticism is rarely prone to leaving the relatively safe confines of the writer/reader alliance. What makes special *2084: A Space Epic* and *Planet of the Mediocres*, the two short novels that I will analyze in the remainder of this article, is precisely the incredible audacity and directness of their critical discourse. While they are, technically, science fiction, and therefore ostensibly about the future, almost no effort is made to hide the obvious references to communist Romania. Their publication in a somewhat “niche” magazine gives them the slight opacity associated with lizards; nevertheless, this opacity is very nearly cancelled by the openness of their criticism, making them almost transcend their “lizardly” qualities.



#### 4. Robotic Lizards Search for Space Turnips

Written by the prose writer Ioan Groșan (b. 1954), but published under the label of *Ars Amatoria*,<sup>17</sup> *2084: A Space Epic* and *Planet of the Mediocres* appeared in serialized form between 1987 and the spring of 1989 in *Science and Technology* (*Știință și tehnică*)—a weekly magazine of scientific popularization, subordinated to the Union of Communist Youth (Uniunea Tineretului Comunist), whose eclectic public ranged from high school students to engineers and technology aficionados. The magazine had also put out a collection of science fiction prose, discontinued in 1974, apparently because Ceaușescu had declared space exploration useless,<sup>18</sup> but continued to publish science fiction in almost every issue. *2084* ran its full course (fifty episodes), but *Planet of the Mediocres* was halted by censors after only fifteen installments. Nevertheless, the sixty-five weeks of continuous publication of the two novels are in themselves a small marvel, explainable up to a point by the strange network of insider protection and favoritism that sometimes gave rebellious discourse a narrow outlet.

From the point of view of the plot, the texts present themselves as a rather clichéd type of science fiction, with the episodes connected by a very loose narrative thread: in *2084*, a robot-manned spaceship is sent out to find and retrieve the New Century agricultural natural satellite, famous for its fabulous red peppers, which had suddenly disappeared from orbit. The crew (the commander Felix S23; the computer-robot Dromiket 4; and young Stejeran 1, the cleaner TESA robot) eventually find it and return home. In *Planet of the Mediocres*, a spaceship crashes on the titular square planet, and the two stranded astronauts (commander Ion Aciobăniței and pilot Vasile Amărășteanu) attempt to understand the local way of life and settle there (they are unable to leave due to a powerful gravitational field). The science fiction is present only as a thin veneer, to be stripped away to expose the real thing within: a relentless and often savage satire of communism in general and of the Romanian regime in particular.

In the brief introduction, the author wonders how the magazine was able to get away with publishing the serials for this long.<sup>19</sup> He also calls them a “personal exorcism” (p. 5)—a fitting label considering the amount of “lizards” and satirical allusions that are packed in the two texts. The final episode (“Technical Malfunction”) of *Planet of the Mediocres* bitterly concludes that “anticipation is running the risk of becoming protochronistic,<sup>20</sup> and that which we had thought to be thousands of billions of kilometers away, may turn out to be, to our great surprise, only a few light years away” (p. 276). “Light years” (or more accurately “years of light”) was a favorite expression of the official propaganda to designate Ceaușescu’s regime (a turn of phrase made even more bitterly ironic by the fact that during the late 80s the country was plagued by a chronic energy shortage and blackouts were a daily occurrence), and indeed, the best way to read the two novels is as a representation of not only daily life in Ceaușescu’s Romania but also of the “bright future” that seemed to logically follow from it. Accordingly, the texts hover between a sort of ironic comic not unlike that of Ilf and Petrov, highlighting the accumulation of exasperating daily absurdities, and

bitter Swiftian satire (most evident in *Planet of the Mediocres*, which at times seems to forgo the comic mode almost completely).

Perhaps the closest equivalent to Groșan's vision of the future is the Matt Groening–produced animated show *Futurama* (1999–2003, 2010–), where the technological advancements of the year 3000 produce cumbersome or useless artifacts like the “Smelloscope”—which allows one to smell, rather than see, distant stars. To a certain extent *2084* and *Planet of the Mediocres* are an Eastern European *Futurama* (“Worker and Parasite” style!), where future technology is retrofitted over inefficient agricultural practices and used in pursuit of paltry goals like growing turnips and raising pigs in outer space. The novels exploit this tension between their ostensible genre (science fiction) and the retrograde future they present by subverting some of the horier clichés of Eastern European science fiction: the encounter with an alien civilization (which would be inevitably more enlightened than that on Earth—that is to say, egalitarian, peace-loving, and nonindividualistic), the pretense to cosmopolitanism (the Earth crews would be very ethnically varied), predictably offset by the fact that the alien civilization is always in danger of being corrupted or even exterminated by the venality of Western (American, English, German, even the occasional Canadian) scientists,<sup>21</sup> and so forth. At the same time, *2084* and *Planet of the Mediocres* also mock the ideological potential of the genre, by exposing, through their depiction of a rickety, shoddy future, the fatal contradiction that lies at the core of narratives that depict technologically advanced utopias for a society deeply suspicious of “bourgeois” sciences like cybernetics and informatics.

Narratives where explorers wax enthusiastically about discovering lead in outer space (“The demand for lead is always growing!”) lend themselves very easily to ridicule,<sup>22</sup> but they also function as perfect outlets for the utopianism and millenarianism inherent in communist ideology. Mitchievici notes that under communism, science fiction tends to be read as truth rather than speculation<sup>23</sup>—the vision of a perfect yet ever receding future, always distant, yet always tantalizingly attainable. Lucian Boia describes in some detail the dialectical gymnastics that the communist imaginary performs to reconcile its scientific aspirations (“organizer scientifiquement l’humanité”<sup>24</sup>) with its distrust of newer, more sophisticated technologies and sciences like informatics and cybernetics. Since everything proceeds from downwards upwards, from the masses rather than the elites, science must always be the product of physical labor, hence the figure of the worker scientist,<sup>25</sup> as well as the excessive valorization of engineers.<sup>26</sup> For all its stress on science, the communist imaginary remains welded to nineteenth-century-style gargantuan technologies, manned by barely literate (but of healthy origin) peasants-turned-proletarians-turned-engineers.<sup>27</sup> It is a contradiction to which propaganda remained seemingly oblivious. However, when pushed to their logical conclusion, the persistence of Stalinist ideological tropes in Romania—the valorization of hard, manual labor; of “healthy,” poor, peasant or proletarian origins; as well as the exaltation of practical science (like engineering) combined with a mistrust of theoretical “bourgeois” science create the comedy of the devolved future of *2084* and *Planet of the Mediocres*.

Since a lizard's survival depends on its ability to pass for innocuous discourse, the humor of the novels emerges from two principal sources: on one hand, there are the slight mutations of the official, wooden language, most evident in the treatment of propagandistic slogans, like those in the model Cosmic School: "Don't forget: 4273 times 391 is 3,211,963!"<sup>28</sup> "Stay away from the operating range of the crane!" "A small step for man, a giant step for mankind"; "By collecting more meteorites, you can increase the gravel stock!"<sup>29</sup> "Our Martians did not fight in vain!" (p. 177). In a similar manner, commander Felix S23 updates a well-worn Marxist-Leninist cliché, proclaiming proudly, "Labor turned animal into man and, eventually, man into robot" (p. 42). The other source of humor is sarcasm, as a lot of comic effects are drawn from shifting the discursive stresses slightly, again, to reflect well-known real-life situations. Such is the case of the cosmic pigs bred on the pilot station "Red Andromeda." In the last years of communist rule, meat had become increasingly scarce in Romanian stores, and in the rare instances it was available, it consisted mostly of bones and gristle (pigs' feet were popularly dubbed "sneakers"). The cosmic pigs, bred in a zero-gravity environment, are nothing but bones and gristle, as they need huge ears, tails, and feet to propel themselves towards the food: "Because we feed them this way, they are forced to develop, even as piglets, the body parts which help them reach the food faster: the ears, the feet, the tail. It's why we breed them. This is only the second generation to be fed in outer space, but we have already noticed that some third generation piglets are showing a sort of flap of skin between the neck and the front legs. Even better, this elastic skin makes great pork rinds" (p. 194).

Lizards survive through ambiguity and feigned neutrality, and consequently, they present, never state. It is up to the reader to draw the conclusion, and science fiction offers the ideal cover for ambiguity by transferring the events in a distant, somewhat whimsical future, populated by robots. In the Romania of the 1980s, where food was more than scarce, and agriculture had become a national fixation, Ioan Groșan's future is low-tech, decidedly shabby, and distressingly agricultural, with the characters permanently obsessing about crops and food. Stejeran 1, the young robot who does the menial tasks on the spaceship "The Bison," is an ideal communist citizen—pliable (he is not programmed for sentiments, and can only dream preprogrammed "group dreams" [p. 52]), always preoccupied with saving energy, and hardworking in a mechanical (of course!) way: "during the annual competition 'From among Hundreds of Robots'<sup>30</sup> he had placed first, after he managed to calculate and report in under a second the area he had planted and irrigated in less than an hour using only 4 kW" (p. 24). Again, Stejeran's impressive feat reflects and mocks a very real obsession of the regime. The "reintegration of land into the agricultural circuit," as it was pompously called, entailed intensive (and also ecologically disastrous) farming, as well as the razing of villages and the halting of any urban development (to ostensibly reclaim more land for planting), doubled by Stakhanovist reports of fabulous crops (which broke some kind of record every year) and heroically dedicated workers. The statistics were notoriously false—not

that it mattered much to the population: Ceaușescu's pathological need to prove his independence by paying off Romania's external debt meant that everything (including those fabulous crops) that could be exported, was. The consequence was a chronic shortage of food—with grocery stores displaying endless, creatively arranged piles of pickle jars, canned beans, and Vietnamese shrimp chips—as well as a very well-developed subterranean barter system. Accordingly, when Felix S23 and his crew arrive at the Tîncăbești interplanetary station they find “cans of stewed vegetables and jars of pickles in vinegar, arranged into pyramids” (p. 73). They also find out that they can only have “Apahida oil” with food (p. 73)—another common practice in real-life Romania, where beer (in the rare instances when one could find it) was only served with food.

The future is also extremely provincial—in total opposition to the fraternal cosmopolitanism of traditional Eastern European science fiction tropes. Wherever they go, the protagonists are never really far from home, as the Romanian model seems to have spread throughout the cosmos. All toponyms (the “Tîncăbești First Class Interplanetary Station” [p. 72], “The Centre for Intergalactic Recuperation Lehliu Gară” [p. 127], the “Teleorman experiment” [pp. 196–97]) are Romanian—provincially Romanian, to be more specific: names of small, unremarkable villages and towns. There is no significant difference between 1984 and 2084: outer space is merely a vastly extended Romania of the late 80s, crisscrossed by shoddy vehicles in a permanent state of near collapse.

From the very beginning we find out that space travel relies on barter—but not of the type practiced in *Star Trek*. Before leaving Earth the crew of “The Bison” drop by a supply store, where they get “everything they needed for a long distance mission: transistors, integrated circuit boards, diodes, bolts, stabilizers, blue jeans for bartering, capacitors, ‘Dero’ laundry detergent, transceivers, ‘Boicil’ [a plant-based analgesic ointment] for the Saturnians, oils, uniforms, *The History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas*<sup>31</sup> by Mircea Eliade, blenders, mineral salami from Sirius, postcards, spark plugs, backgammon sets, coils, kitschy knick-knacks for the Martians, ‘Gerovital’ [another Romanian cosmetic cream, of some repute, due to its purported rejuvenating qualities], flip-flops, etc.” (p. 19). This motley list offers a fairly accurate overview of the experience of traveling abroad as a Romanian. Since exchanging currency for tourism purposes was impossible, even when traveling within the Eastern Bloc, any traveler had to rely on a sizable supply of things that could be exchanged for money or other provisions. Each country had its own preferences, and a successful trip depended on the ability to procure as varied a selection of products as possible for later barter.

“We are all the sons of peasants, otherwise how would we have gotten into outer space?” (p. 236), Commander Aciobăniței asks rhetorically in *Planet of the Mediocres*. His name conveys his humble origins (it is derived from *cioban*—“shepherd” in Romanian), in the same way in which Amărășteanu, his pilot's name, conveys a state that would have been all too familiar to the readers (it means “miserable” or “poor” fellow). Communism's need for social purity, expressed in its preferential treatment of citizens with “healthy origins,” has generalized to such an extent that even the

robot-heroes of *2084* get promoted to astronauts only after a stint in the fields and pastures of the mother land: Dromiket 4 (the product of a family of “agricultural robots” [p. 57]) finishes his BSc with “an interdisciplinary thesis on quasars and quantum mechanics, after which he was sent to the tractor maintenance workshop serving the ‘Mountain Andromeda’ state orchard, in Vrancea county” (p. 57). Even if they are commanders or space pilots, the heroes of the two novels are decidedly not particularly educated—they behave more like truck drivers than interstellar navigators. Futuristic technology exists only in name (spaceships and lasers, and the like), and if anything, even twentieth-century technology barely survives: on the Planet of the Mediocres, the two astronauts are told that what the population needs are “scythemen and tinsmiths” (p. 252). The world of *2084* fares slightly better: here the problem is not as much the lack of technology as its shoddy, patched-up quality. The space pirates who attack “The Bison” discover that the robots have aluminum and plastic parts, rather than gold and platinum (they also find nothing worth robbing: only “Dero” and prunes—so they give the crew a sack of trinkets out of pity [pp. 134–38]).

Centralized organization hampers whatever still functions: “We live as well as we can, but as far as organizing goes, we are the best” (p. 242), says one of the Mediocres. On the “Elite mushroom farm ‘The Progress’” mushrooms have grown as big as trees: “. . . if you don’t pick them while they’re still small, you can’t stop them from growing, and then you have to cut them down with a chainsaw, and you can’t even use them for furniture, ’cos they’re full of worms. And all because of ‘Transcom.’ Last year it was the same with the parsley. Instead of picking it in April, we picked it in June with dynamite, because we had turnips to plant” (pp. 168–69). Even the New Century’s famed red peppers refuse to grow in outer space, so the Central Command solves the problem, by sacking the technicians and maintaining the crop (p. 212).

At the end of *2084*, this shoddy world has regressed even more: by the time “The Bison” returns, The Cosmic Research and Revitalization Center has turned into an agricultural cooperative. It all happened as a result of “evolution,” its director points out: “Here on Earth, we didn’t stand still, we evolved, we developed, we couldn’t just sit idle. The Centre for Cosmic Research wasn’t paying off any longer, it was eating up too much tillable land, too much pasture, too much oil” (p. 216). It is not a matter of developmental lag but rather one of conscious choice—between space travel technology and agriculture, between cosmic exploration and menial labor, agriculture and menial labor win. An already provincial universe has thus shrunk even further, paving the way for the not-always-funny world of the Planet of the Mediocres where nobody can leave and everybody sleeps in unison: “nowhere in the world do people sleep more beautifully than here” (p. 270). On this world everybody works the land unquestioningly and everybody is very lucid: “You have no idea how good it is to be lucid since childhood, to realize what the future has in store for you when you grow up, and when you finally do grow up, to have happen to you exactly what you thought it would as a lucid little kid!” (p. 268). In this pastoral landscape, Commander Aciobăniței drinks water from a well, using a metal cup chained to its rim, and remembers how

as a boy, he would drill holes in such cups so that passers-by would get drenched: “It was a beautiful time, when a lot of people didn’t realize they had spilled something all over themselves until they had drunk the whole chained cup” (p. 263).

Dystopia is inevitably built into the structure of both novels (after all, *2084* references Orwell directly), given the historical context they reference, but it is a dystopia of the same order as Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*, for example: a satirical vision of a future that has devolved not because of some terrible catastrophe but, rather, as a result of “progress” and bureaucratic “efficiency,” and whose inhabitants are mostly oblivious to the phenomenon. In the case of Ioan Groșan’s novels, the self-aggrandizing tropes of inevitable progress and communal development on a cosmic scale are suddenly deflated when confronted with their funhouse mirror image of barely competent astronauts flying rickety ships in search of space turnips. Science fiction also allows for the savaging of protochronism. The inferiority complex, whose repression gave rise to the disreputable trend is enthusiastically embraced in both novels (we must note that in *Planet of the Mediocres* the spaceship is a Romroyce), and exploited for maximum comic effect in the representation of a future where Romania, rather than changing to reflect the diversity of the universe, has managed to model it after its own image.

This is definitely a cruel type of comedy: one only needs to peel away the silly but thin veneer of the adventures of the bumbling crew of “The Bison” to expose the wickedness of the reality they reflect. It is why the future orientation of the two narratives has, even today, a decidedly unsettling dimension. The transparency of the lizards, and the directness of their critique, ensures that very little decoding is needed, and so, many of the events in Ioan Groșan’s novels appear less as anticipation, as the inevitable offshoot of an increasingly irrational present. The image of the cosmos as an endless stretch of Romanian countryside must have resonated in rather disturbing ways with the readers who were looking at *Planet of the Mediocres* and *2084: A Space Epic* at the end of the 80s. Back then, a future where “if you do your own job well, nobody will ask you why you are not mediocre” (p. 245) seemed plausible if not downright possible. Luckily, history would soon prove them wrong. But even today, in a comic vein, the two novels paint a remarkably accurate picture of everyday life in Romania at the twilight of communism: a lizard smile through clenched teeth.

## Notes

1. The scope and space of this article are obviously too limited for anything but a reductive history of censorship in Romania. For a much more detailed overview of the matter, see chapter 3 of the 2006 *Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (Raportul final al comisiei prezidențiale pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste în România)*, coordinated by Vladimir Tismăneanu ([http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT\\_FINAL\\_CPADCR.pdf](http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf)).

2. The “unprecedented” nature of this thaw comes with a few caveats. Compared to what had come before, and what was to follow, these six years testify indeed to a certain liberalization of culture: numerous translations were published (among which, some of the fundamental works of Western philosophy, as well as important works of literary theory and criticism), along with long-indexed works of prewar Romanian



literature; writers who had been formerly banned from publication were allowed to publish again; and some of the most recent films from the West made their way into Romanian cinemas. Alas, as the critic Eugen Negrici points out, this was only a “small liberalization”; and even before the infamous July Theses, disconcertingly aggressive censorship was still possible. See Negrici, *Iluziile literaturii române* [The Illusions of Romanian Literature] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2008). Such were the cases, among others, of an anthology of Romanian Symbolist poetry taken out of circulation and destroyed in 1967 (sixty thousand copies had been printed) because of the inclusion of certain still-“undesirable” poets or, in 1970, of Lucian Pintilie’s film *Reconstituirea* (*The Reenactment*), banned shortly after its premiere.

3. Dates, details, and figures regarding censorship activities in the 70s and 80s are taken from Tismăneanu, *Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania*, unless otherwise indicated.

4. Adriana Bittel, “Evil Sieve,” in Lidia Vianu, ed., *Censorship in Romania* (Budapest: Central European Univ. Press, 1998), 162–64.

5. A popular explanation locates the origin of the term in a TV comedy sketch from the 70s written by Dan Mihăescu and Grigore Pop, and featuring Toma Caragiu, a very popular Romanian theater and film actor. See Mihăescu and Pop, “Omul cu șopîrla” [The Man with the Lizard] ([http://www.romanianvoice.com/poezii/umor/tc\\_soparla.php](http://www.romanianvoice.com/poezii/umor/tc_soparla.php)); and Ana Vinea, ed., *Mărturii orale: Anii '80 și bucuștenii* [Oral Testimonies: Living in Bucharest during the 80s] (Bucharest: Paideia, 2003), 307. In this sketch, the lizard is presented as a minor form of backstabbing, the creation of envious friends and “well-wishers” eager to sabotage someone’s achievements: “I found out there’s more than one kind of lizard. Some live in the forest, some in people’s back yards, and some close to employees’ files—the ‘fileus’ lizard.” Still, the potential for insinuation and subversion is already embedded in the term, and it may be possible that the sketch, rather than creating it, only reflects the popularity of the term, thus turning into a “meta-lizard”—a lizard about a lizard.

6. Igal Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh, PA: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

7. I would like to thank Serguei Oushakine for offering me this great example of a communist “lizard within a lizard.”

8. Cf. Bittel, “Evil Sieve.”

9. Cf. Norman Manea, *On Clowns. The Dictator and the Artist* (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), 70.

10. Dan Verona, “The Nightmare,” in Vianu, ed., *Censorship in Romania* Vianu, 169–88, at 169.

11. Vinea, *Mărturii orale*, 95.

12. There were nontextual nonlizards as well: such as the odd prohibition of publishing an author’s photo in a book. Only group photos were permitted; the single portrait was a privilege afforded only to Ceaușescu and his wife. The irony of the situation was that often the public would will itself into believing that these “false lizards” were in fact genuine examples of subversion.

13. Liliana Corobca, “Declinul cenzurii comuniste” [The Decline of Communist Censorship], *Asymetria—Revue roumaine de culture, critique et imagination*, 24 Mar. 2009, <http://www.asymetria.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=711>. All translations from Romanian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

14. For an exhaustive analysis of the persistence of the Stalinist political model in Romania between 1947 and 1989, see Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

15. Manea, *On Clowns*, 153, 151.

16. Alexandru Andrieș, *Interzis* [Banned]: LP (Bucharest: Electrecord, 1990); Ana Blandiana, *Întîmplări de pe strada mea* [Tales from My Street] (Bucharest: Ion Creangă, 1988).

17. Ars Amatoria was a loosely connected group of writers and journalists, who specialized in various types of what can only be termed as “guerilla parodies.” In some cases these parodies took the form of newspaper articles—selections from the works of nonexistent poets, invented events presented as reality, and so on. See Vinea, *Mărturii orale*, 308; and Tudorel Urian, “Lecturi la zi: Postmodernismul (anti)comunism” [New Books: The (Anti)Communist Postmodernism], *România literară*, no. 15 (2008), [http://www.romlit.ro/postmodernismul\\_anticomunist](http://www.romlit.ro/postmodernismul_anticomunist).

18. Elaine Kleiner, "Romanian 'Science Fantasy' in the Cold War Era," *Science Fiction Studies* 19:1 (1992): 59–68, at 64.

19. The introduction states that the serials were only stopped when they had begun to gather a certain fan base, and finally drew the attention of the "competent organs"—therefore a possible answer to this question could be that the magazine was judged to be too small and too irrelevant to be given any special attention. It was also the merit of the editor-in-chief, Ioan Eremia Albescu (whom Groșan affectionately calls a "dissident through humor" [p. 6]), who kept the serials in print until he was forced to cancel them. See Ioan Groșan, *Planeta mediocrilor. Precedată de Epopeea spațială 2084* [Planet of the Mediocres. Preceded by 2084: A Space Epic] (Bucharest: Polirom, 2008). The reality is most likely more complex, as Ioan Eremia Albescu was, it turns out, a far more complicated figure. His name appears on a recently published list of informants in the press as a "source for the Communist Party" (see Andreea Pora, "Dosarul 'Presa'" [The "Press" File], *România liberă*, 24 Aug. 2006, <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1161307-dosarul-presa.htm>). Whatever this qualification entailed, it is quite likely that it also afforded him a certain degree of protection and, paradoxically, the freedom to publish for a surprisingly long period the openly vitriolic satires of *2084* and *Planet of the Mediocres*.

20. Protochronism was a type of literary criticism (vaguely genetic in methods and highly nationalistic in tone) that flourished starting from the mid-1970s and that purported to demonstrate the superiority or at least chronological precedence of Romanian scientists and writers in most domains—thus, Romanians conceived of (if not invented) things as varied as electricity, the theory of relativity, internal combustion engines, space travel, fountain pens, and so on. At its most elevated, protochronist criticism was dubious and misguided scholarship; at its worst, it laid bare the inferiority complex of Romanian nationalism, evident in the distorted image it produced, of an inquisitive, intelligent nation, eternally robbed of its achievements by the envious West.

21. For a detailed discussion of the tropes of mainstream science fiction in communist Romania, see Angelo Mitchievici, "SF-ul în sprijinul construcției socialismului" [Science Fiction in Support of the Development of Socialism], in Paul Cernat, Ion Manolescu, Angelo Mitchievici, and Ioan Stanomir, eds., *Explorări în comunismul românesc* [Forays in Romanian Communism], vol. 1 (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 47–94; as well as Kleiner, "Romanian 'Science Fantasy' in the Cold War Era"; Patrick Major, "Future Perfect? Communist Science Fiction in the Cold War," *Cold War History* 4:1(2003): 71–96; and Florin Manolescu, "A Short History of Romanian Science-Fiction," *Romanian Review* 42:5(1988): 112–25.

22. Mitchievici, "SF-ul în sprijinul construcției socialismului," 64.

23. *Ibid.*, 80.

24. Lucian Boia, *La Mythologie scientifique du communisme* (Caen, France: Paradigme, 1993), 30.

25. *Ibid.*, 115–16.

26. *Ibid.*, 123–25.

27. *Ibid.*, 106, 109.

28. As an added joke, the result is incorrect, and also much bigger than the actual one (1,670,743)—most likely an allusion to the common practice of inflating statistics and production figures.

29. The scourge of mandatory collection drives was well known to Romanian grade-school students. Initially, the drives were supposed to cover recyclable materials, like glass and paper, but by the mid-80s they included such perplexing items like medicinal plants, horse chestnuts, cork, scrap iron, and mulberry leaves (some schools were required to raise silkworms). Quotas were enforced under penalty of low or failing grades, but most materials collected (with the possible exceptions of paper, iron, and glass) were never used, because of their low quality or lack of adequate storage space.

30. An allusion to the title of a very famous poem from the nineteenth century, "From among Hundreds of Ship Masts." Written by Romania's most celebrated poet, Mihai Eminescu, the piece has been ground into a cliché by its relentless overuse in textbooks, poetry recitals, songs, commercials, etc. The title was also one of the most frequently used (with the appropriate variation, as in this case) as the name of amateur poetry competitions.

31. The story of the first (reasonably complete) translation into Romanian of Mircea Eliade's opus merits mentioning. Eliade had long been persona non grata in the Romanian letters both because of his earlier affiliations with right-wing ideologies, and for the perceived "mysticism" of his works. The translation of *The History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas* was published in 1981 amid great commotion, and the book soon proved impossible to find in bookstores. It had become a fashionable accessory in many homes, including those of the Party hierarchy, who had acquired it through "special channels" (Manea, *On Clowns*, 22), eager no doubt to experience the thrill of possessing a "dangerous" book by a "dangerous" author. Consequently, Eliade's work had become valuable currency for the underground barter, which explains why "The Bison" would be carrying it. It was not the only book to be thus treated: other volumes that could be exchanged for valuable goods and services included Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and, somewhat anticlimactically, James Clavell's *Shogun*.

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# Open Secrets and Knowing Smiles

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Given the importance of informal ways of getting things done in postsocialist societies, research into the field of unwritten rules and informal practices has been slow to develop. In studying such rules and practices, the researcher often encounters skepticism or hostility stemming from the ways in which people relate to tacit agreements, or else she or he is greeted by an ambivalent smile of complicity—a knowing smile. This article draws a connection between knowing smiles and open secrets and argues that these notions illuminate a great deal about how the “grey areas” of social life function. It also suggests that such seemingly trivial aspects of everyday life can reveal profound features of social institutions and point in the direction of innovative research.

**Keywords:** *open secrets; knowing smiles; unwritten rules; tacit knowledge; informal agreements; everyday life*

This article is the outcome of years of exposure to people’s reactions to my research in Russia. When I did my fieldwork there in the 1990s and asked people to talk to me about *blat*—the use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply and for circumventing formal procedures—they smiled knowingly but then almost universally responded, “Why ask me?” Reassured that I only want to know “what everybody knows,” most of my respondents were happy to discuss *blat* matters frankly, talking about others, in generic terms, or about the past, but also coming up with personal examples.<sup>1</sup> There were stronger reactions—my Russian academic advisor almost threw me out of her home when I explained which PhD topic I was working on, dismissing it as trivial or “Westernized.” Fellow Russian academics sometimes refer to it in a disparaging way, people from Russian regions show disbelief that such a topic could constitute a subject matter of serious analysis, and the witty come up with the pun “a PhD by *blat*, you mean?” Similar reactions followed my subsequent research into practices of *black and grey piar* (methods of political marketing and campaigning), related practices of *komproimat* (use of compromising materials), financial and barter scheming, *telefonnoe pravo* (oral commands and pressure on the judiciary), and other informal practices widespread in post-Soviet Russia.

I refer to one country, my country of origin, but I believe that my findings might be relevant for comparative study. My question is, “Why do people smile about

commonplaces that are strictly speaking neither funny nor enjoyable in any obvious way?" I split this question into three components: what is smiled at, how it is smiled at, and what these smiles do. First, I argue that knowing smiles are indicative of open secrets, elusive in nature and intentionally ambiguous. Second, I analyze ambiguities of open secrets that knowing smiles disclose. Third, I offer an interpretation of the subtlety and depth of seemingly superficial interactions exchanged in passing. I rely on the secondary analysis of materials used in my books and some new interviews but from an angle entirely left out of my previous research.

When writing about theoretical commonplaces, Svetlana Boym recalls a peculiar form of "understanding with half-words" among Soviet intelligentsia as a mark of belonging to an imagined community that exists on the margin of the official public sphere. "Communication with half-words secures the unspoken realm of cultural myths and protects the imagined community from outsiders and, in a way, from its own members," she writes.<sup>2</sup> I argue that knowing smiles are a visible sign of sharing and belonging, but are at the same time an expression of ambivalence. They are the signals of competence similar to a reaction of laughing at a joke but expressed in a nonhumorous context, thus being robbed of the nature of the smile and loaded with the pressure of knowledge. "Knowledge of what?" is our first stop.

## Unwritten Rules

Consider Russia's popular wisdom: "*Russia is a country of unread laws and unwritten rules.*" Or, as they say, "the imperfection of our laws is compensated for by their non-observance" (*nesovershenstvo nashikh zakonov kompensiruetsya ikh nevypolnieniem*). This is a hint that would cause a flicker of a knowing smile or a chuckle. It is not that the requisite components of the rule of law are absent in Russia; rather, the ability of the rule of law to function coherently has been diverted by a powerful set of practices that has evolved organically in the post-Soviet milieu. An immediate grasp of the gap between the way things are claimed to be and the ways things are in practice constitutes an advantage enjoyed by an insider over outsiders, much more reliant on written sources of competence. The unwritten rules are non-verbal yet essential in understanding the order of things, whether in politics, economy, or society.<sup>3</sup>

Unwritten rules are not about knowing the rules; they are about shared rule-following. Knowing a rule does not imply an ability to follow it, or mastery of it, just as knowing a recipe does not ensure practical skill in its implementation, or knowing the literal meaning of a word does not automatically mean that one will use it correctly in context. In Wittgenstein's terminology, there are practices of "rule-following" (i.e., being able to continue the sequence of numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, . . .) that are distinct from rules interpreted, explicated, and understood (i.e., an ability to figure out the

formulae of this sequence). In a classic example of chess playing, Wittgenstein shows that certain mastery and expertise can only be achieved by dealing with constraints in practice.

A distinction between a rule and mastery of the rule can be illustrated by the metaphor of driving in Russia. To drive “properly,” one has to mix both formal (traffic rules) and informal codes (conventions); to apply them as needed in appropriate contexts and to switch fluidly between them; and crucially, to negotiate oneself out of trouble if caught. This is apart from struggling to avoid potholes or traffic jams on the road by radical maneuvers and preserving an informal hierarchy of vehicles doing the same. In other words, unwritten rules are not only about how to follow the rules of the game but also about how to break them.

Unwritten rules are the know-how needed to “navigate” between formal and informal sets of constraints. Without being articulated, they “prescribe” which rules to follow in which context and “set” the best approach for getting things done. Applying one formal rule rather than another, using restrictions (quotas, filters, etc.) and small print, enforcing some decisions but not the others are examples of how constraints can be mediated. The focus of unwritten rules is not on constraints *per se*, as in the case of formal and informal codes, but on the enabling aspects of those constraints. To put it more bluntly, unwritten rules define the ways of circumventing constraints, both formal and informal, of manipulating their enforcement to one’s own advantage, and of avoiding penalties by combining the three elements of the rules of the game creatively.<sup>4</sup>

Unwritten rules exist in all societies but predominate (and even become indispensable) in conditions of overregulation and underenforcement of formal rules, and especially where formal rules and informal codes do not constitute coherent rules of the game. North shows that when people perceive the structure of the rules of the system to be fair and just, transaction costs are low and enforcement costs are negligible, which helps the efficiency of the economy.<sup>5</sup> When people perceive the system to be unjust, the costs of transactions go up. In other words, if one cannot follow both formal and informal sets of constraints coherently, this will be reflected in their merger and certain patterns of rule-following or unwritten rules. It might be tempting to think that unwritten rules are generally disadvantageous for the system. This is only true, however, if the rules of the game—formal and informal constraints and their enforcement—were tied to the public interest and were beneficial to economic performance. As this has not always been the case in Russia, the impact of unwritten rules is rather ambivalent.

Cultural traditions in Russia separate the concept of justice from that of formal law, which is grasped in a discrepancy in connotations between the terms *spravedlivost’* (justice) and *zakonnost’* (lawfulness). In his study of “Muscovite Political Folkways,”<sup>6</sup> Edward Keenan explains such a gap between the informal and the formal in terms of political culture and distinguishes its enduring elements:



- the operational basis of each setting is informal and traditional (lacking a necessary connection between real power and formal status);
- decision-making is corporate and conspiratorial;
- stability and risk-avoidance are favored over innovation and progress; and
- there is a reluctance to promulgate systematic codified law (those who need to know the rules know them).

Keenan's conclusions about the nature of the Soviet system (his analysis predated the end of the USSR) have relevance for the examination of the post-Soviet era as well. These attributes of the system have not changed much during Russia's transition to a market economy. In the same way that the planned economy was not really a planned economy and was actually run with help of *tolkachi* ("pushers" for the plan completion in industry), *blat* (use of personal networks for getting things done), *pripiski* (false reporting) and other informal practices, the market economy today is not really a market economy. This is due primarily to the key role that unwritten rules still play in the system.<sup>7</sup> The state is partly responsible.

Over the course of the 1990s, the public felt betrayed by the outcomes of privatization and placed all the blame on state institutions and bureaucrats who found ways to prosper, while abandoning the general population to its own devices—which facilitated petty corruption. At the level of "state capture" and political corruption, the role of the state as a major shareholder in many large corporations is noteworthy. Insider deals have prevailed (particularly since 1995) as a method of state assets disposal, and other opaque corporate governance arrangements have proliferated.<sup>8</sup> Since the 2000s, similar methods have been used for the state to reassert its control over the strategic sectors and key industries. These deals are impossible to decode without understanding the gap between formal institutions and informal ways of operating them, just as it is impossible to fully decipher the "information wars" and "*kompromat* (compromising material) wars" omnipresent in Russia of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Unwritten rules also have played part in regulating nonmonetary exchanges. Barter chains redistributing income among the "inner circle," as well as among firms and their multiple subsidiaries, have revolutionized practices of "give-and-take" and have provided them with a legally amenable form.<sup>10</sup>

All of these phenomena of the new Russian economy share an important feature—agents at all levels employ practices that have come to be known as extralegal or informal—that is widely recognized. Yet the competence in agents' mastery of unwritten rules is highly stratified. We might all smile in recognition of the gap between formal pronouncements and realities of the post-Soviet period, but these general "open secrets" about Russian privatization will remain "secrets" for the majority of the public when it comes to detail. The stratified nature of open secrets (in particular professions, institutions, industries, enterprises, and even collectives and networks) is of direct relevance to our analysis of "knowing smiles" and is to be considered next.<sup>11</sup>

“Common knowledge” about the gap between the official discourse (whether on planned economy or market democracy) and the ways in which things are done in practice (like *tolkachi* and *blat* or offshore financing and managed democracy) constitutes an open secret. Exploring that gap and the ways in which it is bridged in a particular domain, identifying “grey areas,” and distinguishing “shades of grey” are challenges for both researchers and policy makers. Commonplaces and other trivial aspects of day-to-day life can sometimes reveal profound features of societies that are hidden when tackling them directly. My method here can be illustrated by Freud’s celebrated example of art forgery. To discover whether a painting is a forgery, the most effective way is to focus on minor details, such as how the painter depicts fingernails or the slope of a thumb. Most forgers can fake the major aspects of what is portrayed—it is the tiny details that give them away. Freud argued the same is true of “trivial” aspects of day-to-day life, like slips of the tongue. The apparently trivial elements are the key to understanding core dispositions of the personality, and I am making the same argument about the “disclosure” of open secrets that the knowing smile represents. In developing this point, I draw upon a variety of sources—Freud, Goffman, Simmel, and Bourdieu—and seek to bring their insights together. I have had to be inventive. So far as I can trace, neither knowing smiles nor open secrets have been analyzed in the social sciences, let alone the relationship between them.

## Open Secrets

As a concept, an “open secret” has some resemblance to Torstein Veblen’s paradoxical concepts of “trained incapacity,” “conspicuous consumption,” and “business sabotage” or to Peter Sloterdijk’s model of “enlightened false consciousness,” which clash mutually exclusive parts to create a new meaning.<sup>12</sup> People’s reactions to the paradox of “unread laws and unwritten rules”—the knowing smiles—are the acknowledgement of understanding of such meaning, the meaning of the failed purpose. For example, in the famous folklore definition of the six paradoxes of late socialism, every paradox pointed to an open secret—an informal practice, widespread but hidden from outsiders: absenteeism in “no unemployment but nobody works”; false reporting in “nobody works but productivity increases”; shortages in “productivity increases but shops are empty”; *blat* in “shops are empty but fridges are full”; unfair privileges in “fridges are full but nobody is satisfied”; cynicism in “nobody is satisfied but all vote unanimously.” These practices were not really unknown but “shameful” for socialism and therefore hidden from the official discourse—thus making them the open secrets of socialism. Practical, or tacit, knowledge of the tensions expressed in paradoxes make smiles even more knowing.<sup>13</sup> For insiders, it is not only about knowing an unwritten rule or an open secret in question, but also about social competence of handling them with an appropriate knowing

smile in an appropriate context. Belonging and complicity expressed in knowing smiles reflect the key paradox of the totalitarian power that generated a “*Homo Sovieticus*” who brought it to its end. So went the seventh, postsocialist paradox: “all voted unanimously but the system collapsed anyway.”

One might think that an open secret is not a secret at all, since it concerns things that “everyone knows,” whether within a particular group or more widely in a society. This view would be a mistake, however, because open secrets are only partly open. Open secrets are *secrets* in the sense that they are excluded from formal or official discourse; but they are *open* in the sense that they are familiar and referred to in idioms and language games, though these often require explanation for outsiders. The ambiguity involved is a real and significant one. There is a tacit acceptance that what is known should remain unarticulated. Open secrets occupy areas of tension, where a public affirmation of knowledge would threaten other values or goods that those involved want to protect. This point is noted in Georg Simmel’s discussion of secrecy, which reveals its complexity and subtlety. Simmel defines secrecy as “consciously willed concealment”—open secrets are clearly still secrets according to this definition. Simmel makes the point that secrecy is a relative phenomenon, at least as soon as it is shared: “a secret that two know is never a secret.”<sup>14</sup> Goffman takes the idea further by opposing diplomatic, official, and strategic secrets to secrets that presuppose everyday familiarity with one another’s doings.<sup>15</sup> The degree of openness is likely to correspond to the reaction when the secret is revealed or spoken about.<sup>16</sup> However, he does not use the concept “open secret” as such; nor does he pursue an argument as stated in this article. I define an open secret as unarticulated knowledge that everybody who is party of a transaction knows about but that no one discusses in a direct way. There is considerable continuity in attitudes to open secrets between the later years of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet period, so we have to retrace briefly the evidence of open secrets that surface in the Soviet satire.

Late Soviet movies—such as Danelia’s *Afonia* (1975), *Mimino* (1977), *Osennii marafon* (*Autumn Marathon*, 1979); Riavanov’s *Ironiia sud’by* (*The Irony of Fate*, 1975), *Sluzhebnyi roman* (*An Office Romance*, 1977), *Garazh* (*The Garage*, 1979); and Bortko’s *Blondonka za uglom* (*The Blond around the Corner*, 1984)—convey attitudes regarding informal practices that are light and playful, even if meant to be corrective.<sup>17</sup> They are “satirized” rather than genuinely satirical and target particular groups that engage in these practices rather than the practices themselves. Similar to *Krokodil* images, satirical films sought to co-opt Soviet audiences into a stigmatizing laughter, but at the same time they introduced techniques of handling open secrets and defined the boundaries of what was considered possible.

Commonly recognized but rarely registered in written sources, apart from their “satirized” or “critical in a controlled way” images, inevitably linked with the defects of particular individuals rather than attributed with a systemic character, these practices testified to various ways in which socialism failed to satisfy individual needs.

“Satirized” images of *Krokodil* were acceptable because they never targeted the intrinsic failures of the Soviet system. Just about every part of everyday life was satirized, if not in the controlled discourse of *Krokodil*, then in *anekdot*. The failures of the system were out in the open but not acknowledged as systemic. They did not appear in the proceeding of the Central Committee. That is what censorship did—it did not allow the formal admission of a failure on the part of the system—while reading official sources, one could never come to the conclusion that the system that had emerged in the Soviet Union intrinsically was doomed to failure.<sup>18</sup> The system could not exist without people circumventing the declared principles and was in fact dependent on people to take care of the systemic defects and to lubricate the rigidities of its constraints.<sup>19</sup> The failures of the Soviet system, which all the insiders were complicit in reproducing, were its main open secrets, satirized, smiled at, but . . . kept!<sup>20</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, *blat* was commonplace, and its instances could make the front page of *Krokodil* in 1980s (without using the word *blat*). On the other hand, the political system kept its reliance on informal practices hidden and shifted the responsibility for engaging in informal practices to individuals. *Krokodil* helped to promote the narrative of the “grand misrecognition game”: everybody does it (engages in informal practices, unofficial discourse, “doublethink”), but it has nothing to do with socialism. Although designed to create humor, *Krokodil* could not help being part of the political repressive machinery designed to introduce and reinforce moral/political standards. Uncovering a form of politics that pretends to be humor reveals a dimension of power that Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence.

As a form of controlled critique, *Krokodil* exercised the power of tension management in a number of ways. Being the main official publication that referred to informal practices, *Krokodil*—itself perhaps being a form of false reporting—declared to perform the functions of producing Soviet satire, of eradicating social ills, and of giving a platform for revealing critique and self-critique (*samokritika*) for the system but could not deliver. Officially published and therefore working within the boundaries established by the ideological constraints, *Krokodil* was only partially about the satire—but partially it was about adequate “framing” of social ills and their “satirization.” By introducing themes and boundaries—what to smile at, how, and where—*Krokodil* socialized and instructed the Soviet public on the matters of everyday life.<sup>21</sup> On its pages one can see some depictions of the 1930s, 1950s, and 1980s, but not others, and therefore conclude what can be discussed, criticized, and satirized and what cannot (this function of *Krokodil* would be similar to satirical publications in other societies). While claiming the task of eradication of social ills, *Krokodil* also was engaged in educating the public on how to react to certain themes and concerns. It was a pedagogical device, like most Soviet mass culture, assisting the “misrecognition game” of every historical period.<sup>22</sup> The ways of revealing social ills to the public were also the ways of concealment. Most importantly, *Krokodil* inverted the role that satire has in other societies—to criticize—into the one that it does not have in other

societies—to demoralize people and to make them complicit in the failures of the regime. It was not just about force, oppression, rewards for co-optation, or inclusion that brought people into that system—it was through the smile and shared mastery of the system.

By the 1980s, understanding of the formal (and enabling) nature of constraints and acknowledgement of the possibility of circumventing them became almost universal—a variety of know-how was shared by insiders of a circle, a group, or society as a whole. Depending on the reference group, open secrets varied in degree of openness. *Blat* is an example of a widely acknowledged open secret—even twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, only 7 percent of an all-Russia national survey found it difficult to define *blat*, in contrast to 30 percent having difficulty in defining another late Soviet practice of *telefonnoe pravo* (telephone justice), standing for oral commands to the judiciary.<sup>23</sup>

### Knowing Smiles

In a way, the very question “Why do people smile about open secrets that are neither funny nor enjoyable in any obvious way?” may already suggest an answer. A knowing smile is not a smile of joy or laughter. Even if reminiscent of the Russian literary tradition of “laughter through tears,”<sup>24</sup> the knowing smile is relieved of intense emotions because of the mundane nature of open secrets—the familiarity that brings contempt rather than laughter or tears.

I identify a knowing smile as a routine signal of acknowledgement and competent mastery of open secrets, where the emotional content is minimal. Conceptually, the knowing smile is not about facial expressions of emotions. Ekman describes many kinds of smiles, from the “felt” smile to the fear smile, the contempt smile, the dampened smile, the miserable smile, and a number of others but warns against a non-specialist deciphering the person’s less routine signals.<sup>25</sup> He points out that until very recently, both scientists and laymen knew very little about emotion, despite its importance in human lives, and there are reasons for it: “it is in the nature of emotion itself that we would not fully know how emotions influence us and how we recognize their signs in ourselves and others.”<sup>26</sup> Ekman argues that emotions can begin and change so quickly that our conscious self does not participate in or even witness what in our mind triggers an emotion at any particular moment.

I therefore do not seek to identify or interpret emotions behind the knowing smiles that I tend to come across in the field. In tune with analytical bias of social sciences, I am more interested in knowing smiles as pointers to the open secrets and the nonarticulated knowledge that people prefer to leave ambiguous. Using material from my previous and current research, I construe ideal types of knowing smiles that reflect possible patterns of mastery of *blat*, as a proxy of an open secret, based on

emotions displayed, identified, or used for rationalization by my respondents. Knowing smiles about *blat* can be associated with three basic attitudes to open secrets—“positive,” “neutral,” and “negative”—perhaps concealing a varying degree of personal involvement and illustrating forms of dealing with ambivalence.

At a very basic level, chats about *blat* produce a smile of linguistic recognition. As was expressed best by Zhvanetskii, “only those who belong would understand . . .” (*tol’ko svoi ponimaet kak prinosit’ pol’zu obschestvu vopreki ego zhe zakonom*). The pleasure of sharing untranslatable “games of words,” behind which, in Zhvanetskii’s satirical piece, hide the untranslatable “games of deeds”—the ones I call informal practices—provides a sense of belonging to a circle of people who “know how.”<sup>27</sup> Just as it is a pleasure to recognize a foreign idiom or understand a joke, it is enjoyable to recognize a native “language game” that points to an open secret that might be tricky for a foreigner to understand. A knowing smile of belonging (“we are all complicit in our own oppression and in our own corruption”) is most common, but it also has an implication of dividing us and them, “subconsciously indicating secret pleasure from co-operation” between us against them. “Us” implies complicity of people of the circle who care about each other. “Them” refers to the state, strangers, or outsiders, who take care of themselves. Such division is representative of what Gudkov has referred to as “negative identity.”<sup>28</sup>

Other knowing smiles associated with guilty pleasures include the one of the “pleasure of doing something wrong”; the “pleasure of perversion”; the “pleasure of crossing boundaries in the society which is overregulated”; or, in Sloterdijk’s phrase, “the crooked smile of open immortality.”<sup>29</sup> Empowering an individual through crossing some boundaries, conscious or unconscious, feeds into one of the central themes in my study of informal practices—the *enabling power of constraints*. Knowing smiles (audacious, mischievous, or naughty) can imply active use of constraints—“positive opportunism,” experience of turning the weaknesses of the system (*prokoly sistemy*) to one’s advantage, known as “cheating the state” or “beating the system,” all pointing to the satisfaction from covert systems of rewards and abuse of state institutions in totalitarian regimes.

Reactions associated with indifference and a weak emotional charge—the knowing smiles associated with ignorance, apathy, or acceptance—are no less important. Dismissive smiles “undermine the significance of the issue or indicate lack of interest or concern”; while accepting smiles can display anything from admission of the necessity of *blat* on a daily basis and the individual helplessness vis-à-vis the regime to the overall acceptance of the ways things are, failure or not. Often, the knowing smile is a way of disguising ignorance and erroneous associations.<sup>30</sup> In such cases, the knowing smile is a cover for not understanding the processes at work—“of course I understand what’s going on”—when in fact it is a form of laziness. Neutral smiles not only emphasize the openness of open secrets, say the vast scale of *blat* practices, but also provide an escape route from taking them seriously by turning



them into a smiling matter. They tackle uncertainty and display a passive habit of acceptance, the *habitus*<sup>31</sup> of *Homo Sovieticus* that ensures that one does not articulate or even question what the open secret really is about while smiling knowingly. Neutral knowing smiles are similar to what Goffman identifies as “civil inattention,” and are thus most functional in *signaling and testifying normality* (“the unserious nature of practices as opposed to the big corruption scandals”) and enabling people to “go on.”<sup>32</sup>

More negative knowing smiles can be associated with containment of embarrassment, shame, or guilt. These smiles (shifty, awkward, uncomfortable, nervous smiles) present a way of “easing out of the situation” or a defense reaction. Following Bourdieu, I describe a number of strategies by which one can be involved in *blat* transactions while also misrecognising doing so—misrecognition as a system of denial, as a system of ambivalence, and as a system of power.<sup>33</sup> The intermediation of *blat* transactions is essential to protect one’s positive and altruistic self-image and to misrecognize one’s own experiences: one helps a friend, not oneself, and that friend returns a favor eventually. Both parties maintain a “good friend” self-image while using public resources for “nonselfish” purposes. When the moral norms prescribe that one must help a friend but also that *blat* is immoral and unethical, the “misrecognition game” is the way out. This is the key function of the “misrecognition game”—to serve the situations of moral or logical squeeze, to deal with the paradoxes of the system, and in this particular case to allow personal engagement in *blat* practices while blaming it as a generic practice. “*Blat* is everywhere, but what I do is not *blat*” is the key defensive narrative of respondents.<sup>34</sup>

The subtlety of the *misrecognition game* has informed my methodology of research on informal practices: speak about generic practice, not personal experience; let the experience trickle down through narrative; speak about others (neighbors, other firms, friends); speak about the past if the research is about know-how that is no longer in use. That is to say, one cannot study open secrets by speaking about them directly—they have to be taken into a comfort zone. In a way, studying paradoxes requires a correspondingly paradoxical methodology: the most direct way of studying an open secret is to study it indirectly, to find it one should not look for it, to develop marginality to see what is on the inside, to go away to see the bigger picture—in other words, to use the rear mirror methodology. In the context of studying open secrets, knowing smiles are essential, following Goffman, to assess the most profound features of societies through seemingly trivial aspects of everyday behavior. Sensitivities displayed in people’s accounts and explanations of knowing smiles provide insights on their own relationship with the open secrets, as well as on relationships within their networks and possibly also their projection of the interviewer.<sup>35</sup> An additional challenge for a researcher of sensitive practices is to historicize their elusive meaning defined by period, place, and context (including all varieties of collective identities)—a challenge taken up by the growing field of the history of emotions.<sup>36</sup> In the beginning

of the 1990s, it became possible to ask people to articulate their views on Soviet informal practices without constraint. Just as in the 1950s, those who left the Soviet Union were able to describe their *blat* experience in the Harvard Interviewing Project,<sup>37</sup> the collapse of the Soviet Union have made *blat* a matter of the past and thus enabled people to articulate it.

### What Do Knowing Smiles Do?

When reciprocated, the knowing smile is a sign of sharing awareness and ability “to read between the lines,” “to see behind the façade,” with some complicity in “beating the system” but without shouting out the “emperor has no clothes” secret. To put it in Simmel’s terms, “although at first sight an empty form, [a knowing smile] is an excellent symbol of that reciprocal apprehension, which is the presumption of every social relationship.”<sup>38</sup> The “emptiness” of the knowing smile may signify the inability to articulate tacit knowledge (the actual workings of paradoxes are complicated),<sup>39</sup> but it enables the reproduction of daily interactions without pressure of recognition of one’s own compromised behavior or the failures of the system. It allows people to go on with their everyday lives and helps the system to reproduce itself. The “emptiness” of the knowing smile is also relevant in the sense that knowing smiles in the stagnation period would not be the same as the knowing smile under Stalinism—its content is contextual and defined by whatever social competence may involve in a particular period.

All types of knowing smiles have a common denominator—the social competence of handling open secrets and dealing with situations of moral ambiguity or ethical squeeze, regardless of expressed attitude or emotional load. Social competence embraces tacit knowledge about what is normal, the ability “to go on,” a skill to turn formal constraints to one’s advantage, and a capacity to play the “doublethink” game in self-defense and in the defense of the system people lived under. It implies ambivalence about the idea of being honest, upright, and dedicated to official goals. “Someone who readily believes whatever official discourse says has no independent thought.”<sup>40</sup> “Independence,” “individualism,” “civic rights” in totalitarian societies are channeled through distance, “doublethink,” and “double-deed.” In his classic novel *1984*, Orwell defines *doublethink* as “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously.”

The Party intellectual knows in which direction his memories must be altered; he therefore knows that he is playing tricks with reality; but by the exercise of *doublethink* he also satisfies himself that reality is not violated. . . . [T]he essential act of the Party is to use conscious deception while retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty. . . . To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them . . . all this is indispensably necessary.<sup>41</sup>

Taken out of humorous contexts and into the everyday workings of society, the knowing smile—whether as a sign of recognition, misrecognition, or both—serves to point out open secrets, tensions, or ambiguities that individuals are forced to resolve themselves whether they deny, accept, fight, or benefit from the existing gap between the official discourse and the way things get done in practice. Bridging that gap is left to individuals, which is well illustrated in an early Soviet *anekdot*. A politburo member is giving a speech about industrialization and twenty-story skyscrapers recently built on Karl Marx Street in Kharkov. Suddenly one of the listeners interrupts him:

“Comrade Kalinin, I am from Khar’kov. I walk down that street every day, but I have not seen any skyscrapers!”

“Comrade,” replies Kalinin, “instead of loitering on the streets you should read newspapers and find out what’s going on in your city.”<sup>42</sup>

In tune with this folklore, Arendt theorized totalitarian ideologies as those aiming not at the transformation of the outside world but at the transformation of human nature.<sup>43</sup> Within two decades of her analysis, Zinoviev published his *The Yawning Heights* and *Homo Sovieticus*, and Levada provided the post-Soviet empirical evidence for the *Homo Sovieticus* diagnosis:

The Soviet experiment produced not so much a new human type as an individual who was wholly adapted to Soviet reality, one willing to accept it as a given, with no alternative. A society that was closed on all sides, even from its own historical reality, raised generations who could not imagine any way of life except the one they were given. The lack of alternatives turned the universal practice of adaptation into a habit, a mass behavioral structure that was neither dissected nor subject to analysis.<sup>44</sup>

In his 2001 analysis, Levada phrases it sharply and suggests little change in the *Homo Post-Sovieticus*’s attitude to ethics.

At the individual level, the whole system of deals made with the state, which was intrinsic to the Soviet arrangement, inevitably led to moral corruption, the acceptance of sham, the padding of figures, string pulling, bribery, and doublethink. These conditions were necessary if society and the economy were to function. The collapse of the Soviet system did not introduce anything fundamentally new; it only eliminated the social and institutional (punitive) regulators that had limited the effect of the corrupting mechanisms.<sup>45</sup>

In his deconstruction of the dichotomy between “officials” and “people,” Alexei Yurchak analyzes the role that political ridicule by the powerless played in expressing their relationship with the authority. He argues that the stagnation resulted in people’s perception of official ideological representation of social reality as largely false but at the same time as immutable and omnipresent. “In such conditions it became irrelevant whether people believed official ideological messages or not.”

Instead, the relation to the officialdom became based on intricate strategies of simulated support and on “nonofficial” practices. Yurchak argues that such a changing relationship between citizens and power eventually resulted in the ideological change that occurred in the mid-1980s.<sup>46</sup>

Given the importance of socialization in producing knowing smiles, one might imagine that changes in bringing up younger generations could lead to the evaporation of Soviet-style practices in post-Soviet Russia. Yet the legitimacy of informal practices among the younger generations remains in place.<sup>47</sup> Levada’s research data suggests that groups under forty find evasion of military service justified: the youngest respondents, directly subject to conscription, are more than twice as likely to justify draft evasion as to condemn it.<sup>48</sup> Consequent knowing smiles, competence in draft evasion know-how, and the doublethink about civic duty are thus set in motion. Unless such open secrets are articulated, explained, or integrated into policies and cultural exchange, the fundamental nontransparency of societies is not going to diminish.<sup>49</sup>

The near-ubiquitous exchange of knowing smiles in everyday contexts and their capacity for maintaining ambiguity up to now mostly has escaped dissection and analysis. Yet such exchanges are the basis of normality and routine interaction that is so fundamental for the *modus operandi* in societies according to Goffman.<sup>50</sup> The function of knowing smiles is that by *dismissing* their importance and by *accepting* commonplaces that rule out reflection upon them, they reproduce unwritten rules and open secrets and thus the system of power based on everybody’s complicity in it. In other words, smiling at open secrets is an acceptance that is conducive to the noncontestation of power. Knowing smiles are the integral part of maintaining the ambiguity about the official discourse of power elites and the unwritten rules they rely on to continue to stay in power. One is forced to keep open secrets secret while also following the unwritten rules and fluently engaging in informal practices that bridge the gaps between formal constraints of the system and its informal impositions. Such an arrangement makes one the insider of the system but also makes one complicit and fundamentally dependent on the system. The system makes people complicit in their own demoralization and their own corruption.<sup>51</sup>

My experience in Russia is not unique. In his recent book on talk and silence about corruption in the Pacific Islands, Peter Larmour observes that when he mentions he is doing research on corruption, peoples’ faces tend to “light up.”<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the dangers of studying corruption, intricacies of fieldwork abroad, and epistemological taboos of research into “shadows,” as Carolyn Nordstrom calls it,<sup>53</sup> my focus here is on mundane behavior. Smiling at open secrets is no doubt in some ways a universal practice, not restricted to the Soviet doublethink or to its post-Soviet reincarnation. People do not have to live under the Soviet system to smile at the *anekdot* about its six paradoxes. The context of telling an *anekdot* prepares one for smiling and provokes a smile of recognition of a different kind, not necessarily of familiarity with the reality of socialism but of ambiguity, or the unfolding of

paradoxes, or by proxy of one's own experiences. The manipulative use of the formal rules and using them to one's own personal advantage may be particularly strong in repressive systems but is not limited to them. This is illustrated by the studies of corruption and rent-seeking behavior in the Middle East, Asian, Latin American, and African resource-rich economies, as well as in the recent analyses of the 2008 sub-prime crisis elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> On a wider scale, Sloterdijk identifies a universal trend of diffuse cynicism in modernity and an ironic treatment of ethics and of social conventions, "as if universal laws existed only for the stupid, while the fatally clever smile plays on the lips of those in the know."<sup>55</sup>

Reflection on my years of fieldwork in post-Soviet Russia has helped to generate further questions. Knowing smiles are partially about smiling, partially about knowing. Knowing open secrets is partially about knowing, partially also about not knowing and not questioning. It is sign of awareness of transgression but also of recognition that it does not need to be spelt out. Masked hostility—expressed through ribbing—towards the researcher "daring" to expose all this to the light is indicative of these tensions. The semitaboos against knowing, the complicity to leave things unarticulated, the ambiguities hidden behind open secrets are all pointers to sensitive subjects that invite innovative research.

## Notes

1. Alena Ledeneva, "Informal Institutions and Informal Networks: The Study of Blat" (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, UK, 1996); Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, 1).

3. Oxbridge unwritten rules are spelt out in F. M. Cornford, *Microcosmographia Academica* (New York, 1964. Reprinted by MainSail Press, 1993).

4. Alena Ledeneva, *Unwritten Rules: How Russia Really Works* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2001), 4–5.

5. Douglass North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

6. Edward Keenan, "Muscovite Political Folkways," *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 115–81.

7. Some Moscow observers note that under President Putin the law enforcement is just as selective, and law enforcement agencies appear to be pursuing corruption allegations almost exclusively when they involve known opponents of the Kremlin. A variety of "official" legal, administrative, and economic sanctions can be levied against "selected" victims. To start with, the fire brigade, tax police, and sanitation department can be called upon to issue citations for tax irregularities or violations of fire, safety, and public health codes on request. If necessary, this can be followed by further economic sanctions, informal arm-twisting, negative publicity in the press, etc.—a whole menu with legal changes for desert.

8. Yuko Adachi, *Building Big Business in Russia: The Impact of Informal Corporate Governance Practices* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

9. According to Interfax, Vladimir Makarov, the deputy head of the Interior Ministry's economics crime department, said that up to 45 percent of the country's goods and services are part of the shadow economy. He also said that more than forty Moscow banks are involved in what he called "serious" shady

deals. These comments were echoed by Duma Security Committee chairman Alexander Kulikov, who told RIA-Novosti the same day that the treasury receives only 5 percent of taxes owed because of operations in shadow economy (quoted from *RFE/RL*, vol. 5, no. 28, pt. 1, 9 Feb. 2001).

10. See Paul Seabright, *The Vanishing Rouble* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

11. Personalities and relationships are just as essential to the understanding of knowing smiles. See Charles Tilly, *Why?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 19–20.

12. Torstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: The Challenging Analysis of Social Conduct That Ironically Probes Misused Wealth and Conspicuous Consumption* (New York, NY: Vanguard, 1962); and Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

13. See Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), on practical knowledge; and Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), on tacit knowledge.

14. Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrets and of Secret Societies,” *American Journal of Sociology* 11:4(1906). Sharing a secret is often compulsive: when one cannot bear keeping a secret to oneself, one reloads the burden on another person to keep it.

15. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), 7–14.

16. See the discussion of sociology of secrecy in Kim Lane Scheppele, *Legal Secrets: Equality and Efficiency in the Common Law* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3–23.

17. Lesley Milne, ed., *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture* (London: Anthem, 2004), Introduction. From the perspective of informal practices, I would not separate humor into official culture and unofficial culture that is co-opted in the building socialism and the alternative *anekdot*. Both helped to reproduce the façade of socialism.

18. Note the censorship of Amalrik’s *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?*

19. See Robert V. Daniels, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Timothy M. Frye, *Brokers and Bureaucrats: Building Market Institutions in Russia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Alena Ledeneva, *How Russia Really Works: Informal Practices in the 1990s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

20. The Soviet system also failed to change individual needs, despite all its repressive potential and “experimental grounds of the concentration camps” Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt, 1968).

21. These boundaries are shifting as the implications of “smiling” in the 1930s are different from, say, the 1950s and 1980s, as well as the implications of not smiling at the right times.

22. Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours*, 79.

23. Alena Ledeneva, “From Russia with Blat: Can Informal Practices Help Modernize Russia?” *Social Research* 76:1(2009); and Alena Ledeneva, “Telephone Justice in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 24:4(2008): 324–50.

24. Gogol, Griboedov, and Saltykov-Shchedrin quoted in Milne, *Reflective Laughter*.

25. According to modern communications research, understanding of emotions is instinctive and mostly wrong. As Paul Ekman says in his classic work, *Telling Lies*, nonverbal communication reliably signals the presence of emotion, but not the specific emotion. Paul Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics and Marriage* (New York, NY: Norton, 1993). See also Daniel McNeill, *The Face: A Natural History* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1998).

26. Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Understanding Faces and Feelings* (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), xiv.

27. Mikhail Zhvanetskii, “*Nepevodimaia igra*,” in *Izbrannoe* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2009), 131–33 (originally recorded at the 1986 New Year eve performance).

28. Lev Gudkov, *Negativnaya Identichnost’: Stat’i 1997-2002 godov* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2004).



29. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

30. In contemporary Russia, for example, a simple reaction to success is to associate it with connections, corruption, or *siloviki* when it is really is not just about that. "You can blame it all on blat when in fact it's not blat."

31. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1989).

32. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*.

33. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours*, 59–72.

34. *Ibid.*, 60.

35. As one gender studies specialist pointed out, "It's a gender thing"—people smile because you are a woman and would be different in case a male researcher approached them on a similar subject.

36. The AAASS panel on history of emotions in 2004 in Boston provided an inspiration, especially contributions by Sheila Fitzpatrick and Ronald Grigor Suny on hatred. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Happiness and Toska: An Essay in the History of Emotions in Pre-war Soviet Russia," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 50:3(2004): 357–71. See also Carolina Humphrey, "Inequality and exclusion: A Russian case study of emotion in politics," *Anthropological Theory* 1:3(2001): 331–53; Golfo Alexopoulos, "Soviet Citizenship, More or Less: Rights, Emotions, and States of Civic Belonging," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7:3(2006): 487–528; and Serhy Yekelchuk, "The Civic Duty to Hate: Stalinist Citizenship as Political Practice and Civic Emotion (Kiev, 1943-53)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7:3(2006): 529–56.

37. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Blat in Stalin's Time," in Stephen Lovell, Alena Ledeneva, and Andrei Rogachevskii, eds., *Bribery and Blat in Russia: Negotiating Reciprocity from the Middle Ages to the 1990s* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000); and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

38. Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy," 442.

39. See Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Cornell University Press, forthcoming in Spring 2011).

40. Mayfair M. Yang, *Gifts, Favours and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

41. Quoted in Iurii Levada, "Homo Post-Sovieticus," *Sociological Research* 40:6(2001): 17.

42. Quoted in Seth Graham, "Varieties of Reflexivity in the Russo-Soviet Anekdot," in Milne, *Reflective Laughter*, 176.

43. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 458.

44. Levada, "Homo Post-Sovieticus," 6–7.

45. *Ibid.*, 9. See also James Millar, "The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive Socialism," *Slavic Review* 44:4(1985).

46. Alexei Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretence, and the Anekdot," *Public Culture* 9 (1997): 162.

47. For example, when a survey shows that among Russians today only 11 percent can say that they have "never lied to anyone," and only 32 percent can say that they "have never taken something that belonged to someone else without permission," it attests to one of the simplest and most widespread types of human deception. This type is based on the diversity of normative fields themselves (social, group, role, and other fields), which determine the orientations and frameworks of each individual's activity. What interests us, however, are the more specific types and structures of "deceptive" behavior that are linked to the specific functioning of social norms in particular historical and nation-state conditions—for example, the evasion of civic obligations and disobedience to the traffic rules (Levada, "Homo Post-Sovieticus").

48. Levada, "Homo Post-Sovieticus"

49. The proposed analysis of open secrets and knowing smiles poses an empirical question of their universality/specificity. It is also worth pondering what forms of research might deepen our understanding of societies. Finally, one could pursue the line of analysis of the emotional content of corruption.

50. See Anthony Giddens, "On Rereading the Presentation of Self: Some Reflections," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 72:4(2009): 290–95; and Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*.

51. Now with a rear-view image of the Soviet system, with all these things coming to the fore, we can start seeing without worrying if it is going to upset those who were complicit in their own repression.

52. Peter Larmour, *Understanding Corruption in the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming).

53. Carolyn Nordstrom, *Shadows of War: Violence, Power, and International Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

54. See the materials of the British Council Conference, "The Inner Life of Cultures," Brussels, 25–26 Feb. 2010, at <http://www.counterpoint-online.org/the-inner-lives-of-cultures-papers>.

55. "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness," chap. 1 in Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 3–4.

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# To Die Laughing

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The article proposes an interdisciplinary introduction to the notion of the political world as farce. More exactly, it advances the argument that, despite experiencing the world as a joke of cosmic proportions, an individual can still create meaning even in the most meaningless conditions (concentration camps, totalitarian societies, etc.). The article traces the presence of the topic in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* and discusses the particular case of Milan Kundera, for whom the historical world appears as nothing but a cruel joke. The treatment of the topic is framed in relation to the *theologia ludens* tradition, the theatrical elements of Communism, as well as the process of meaning creation in conditions of meaninglessness.

**Keywords:** *Milan Kundera; Primo Levi; Fyodor Dostoevsky; world as farce; totalitarianism; totalitarian laughter; theatrical elements in Communism; history as laboratory*

## Prelude

In the second chapter of his *Se questo è un uomo* (significantly called “On the bottom”/“Sul fondo”), Primo Levi describes the experience of his first encounter with the concentration camp. In an attempt to make some sense of it, he first seeks to convey his experience employing the imagery of the Inferno—an out-of-the-ordinary imagery, no doubt, but still, in a certain sense, a familiar one, if one may say so:

This is the hell. Today, in our time, the hell must be precisely like this, a large and empty room, with us dead tired standing on our feet; there is a faucet from which water drips, but the water is undrinkable, and we are waiting for something certainly terrible to happen and nothing happens and nothing keeps not happening (*non si succede niente e continua a non succedere niente*).<sup>1</sup>

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**Author's Note:** An earlier version of this article was presented at a Brackenridge seminar dedicated to Simon Critchley and hosted by the Department of Philosophy and Classics at the University of Texas–San Antonio. I am grateful to Simon Critchley and the other seminar participants for their helpful feedback. I researched and wrote this article while I was holding a Solmsen Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research in the Humanities. I am grateful to the Institute and in particular to its director, Professor Susan Stanford Friedman, for their very generous support.

Let us notice that the word “nothing” (*niente*) occurs twice, in quick succession, within the same sentence. Then, Levi goes on with his account, trying to record, with characteristic matter-of-factness, as much as possible. One may reasonably expect that he will produce a faithful description of what he saw, heard, felt, however terrible that must have been; after all, he is famous for his precise prose and, to this extent, there is always a promise of thoroughness in his writing. Nevertheless, only a few pages later, despite Levi’s best intentions, we come across a point where his narrative is about to collapse. This is obviously not a matter of skill: no writer, no matter how good he is, can say it. The problem does not lie in the writer, but in the language itself. Thus Levi ends up confessing that he has reached a threshold beyond which language is overtly impotent: “our language lacks the words to express this indignity (*offesa*), the demolition of man” (*la demolizione di un uomo*).<sup>2</sup> Such an experience is simply too much for the poor language to bear. To put this infinite *offesa* into words would be like attempting to pour the ocean into a cup.

The absolute silence that thus environs him turns out to be, in fact, a form of revelation. Ordinarily, revelations compel one to speak (if in tongues); in Levi’s case, however, his revelation makes him mute. The “reality that is revealed” to him, through a “quasi prophetic intuition,” is that he, along with the others around him, has “reached the bottom”: *siamo arrivati al fondo*.<sup>3</sup> Deeper than this they cannot sink simply because there is nowhere to go:

Lower than this one cannot go: a more miserable condition than ours is not possible, not even thinkable. Nothing is ours anymore: they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even the hair from our head; if we speak, they don’t listen to us, if they listen, they don’t understand.<sup>4</sup>

In the process of their demolition, these people seem to have unwittingly crossed the line that separates humanity from nonhumanity: *se parleremo, non ci ascolteranno, e se ascoltassero, non ci capirebbero*. If you happen to find yourself beyond this thin line, you are not recognizable as a human anymore: you speak and, as though separated by a perfect soundproof glass screen from the one to whom you speak, your words die at the very moment you utter them; nobody can make them out. Jean Améry, who went through the same experience, says something very similar, although in a slightly different context: “In the camp the intellect . . . could be used for its *own* abolishment. . . it nullified itself when at almost every step ran into its uncrossable borders.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, ontologically, if you cross the boundary that separates humanity from nonhumanity, you don’t just bump into some other animal species, but into *nothing*—you find yourself, if you do at all, in a state of total void, of “solid nothingness,” as Leopardi would have put it. Had the word not been overused and turned into a fashion by philosophers, we may call this state one of utter “nihilism.”

Then, we come across, in the same chapter two of Primo Levi's book, an extraordinary insight, one that may help us get a firmer footing on this particularly unfriendly ground. Overwhelmed by the experience of his first encounter with the camp, Levi observes, "My impression is that all this is a huge machine [whose purpose is] to laugh at us" (*la mia idea è che tutto questo è una grande macchina per ridere di noi*).<sup>6</sup> He drops this note somehow in passing and does not in general pay much attention to it. Yet, his insight can be of enormous importance for making some sense not only of the otherwise meaningless situation in which Levi personally found himself at that time, but also for understating other, equally meaningless, totalitarian contexts. For, paradoxical as it may sound, if somebody or something is laughing at your suffering, this suffering is, in a sense, not redeemed, of course, but somehow graspable, *made* graspable. If you can say that your ordeals, terrible as they are, have been *meant* by an entity—if an evil one—as a way of laughing at you, that's already a *promise of meaning*. There is something here that transcends the sheer factuality of suffering, pointing to the possibility of a broader frame of reference, one within which meaning can still be possible. For what's particularly humiliating about an experience like the one Levi went through is not so much the physicality of pain, hunger, exhaustion, as it is the infinite mental anguish that accompanies the whole process: the realization that your unspeakable suffering is, and will remain forever, utterly meaningless. Let me give an example: Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella*. There is in Benigni's story as much suffering as in any other Holocaust movie. What, in narrativist terms, distinguishes Benigni's approach is, however, the formal angle from which he decides to tell his story, the framework that he uses to tame the anguish. The suffering he describes thus becomes part of a game (*gioco*), the cruelest of games, no doubt, but still a game, something you can play, engage in, or just follow. The cathartic laughter that the film occasions in the viewer is triggered precisely by the realization that Guido Orefice decides to play along. And to the extent that he *can* still join the game, he is not completely crushed. The "machine" laughs at him, but at the same time this is precisely what "saves" him in a way. He joins in the laughter and, in so doing, shows that he still has some autonomy left: that he can decide to do or *not* do certain things, which still means a lot when you are in a limit-situation. The machine kills him in the end, but it cannot crush him. He is "saved" by his laughter, and ours. There is thus a sense in which Benigni's film comes very close to Levi's insight, if it is not born right out of it.

*(When Tadeusz Borowski found his fiancée, in the Auschwitz camp where he had been sent to pick up corpses, he found out that her "head was shaven, and her entire body raw with scabies. Tadeusz was reported to have said: "Don't worry; our children won't be bald."')*

In this article, I propose to examine the following issue: how is meaning possible in a world (experienced) as farce—be it a political, historical, metaphysical, or cosmic farce? One of the assumptions guiding my approach is what Simon Critchley sees as a redefined “labor of interpretation.” In *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* he observes that “the task, the labor of interpretation—whether religious, socio-economic, scientific, technological, political, aesthetic or philosophical—is *the concrete reconstruction of the meaning of meaninglessness*.”<sup>8</sup> Primo Levi’s world, the world of Auschwitz and of the Gulag, the world of the totalitarianism is a world of meaninglessness, and what I seek to do here is precisely to see how meaning can be created against a background of meaninglessness. Even though my approach may take me in a different direction, I owe Critchley the framing of my exploration precisely in these terms.

I will therefore be approaching the issue of meaning creation in totalitarian conditions from a specific situational angle (the world considered as farce). Thematically, this perspective could be seen as part of *theologia ludens* tradition,<sup>9</sup> the vision according to which God creates the world just like an artist creates a work of art—that is, by way of playing with it.<sup>10</sup> For a *Deus ludens*, we are nothing but a “plaything,” something “very little . . . almost nothing” at the mercy of a playful divinity.<sup>11</sup> In this article, I take farce to be a form of play and “world as farce” to be part of *theologia ludens*. Moreover, I take *Deus ludens* to be a “god of many names”: those who come to experience themselves as being “toyed with” don’t always call it “God”; sometimes they call it “the Will” (as Schopenhauer does) or “history” (as Milan Kundera does), or, as we just saw in the case of Primo Levi, the “laughing machine.”

My article has several parts. First of all, since it is necessary to provide a brief philosophical clarification of the notion of the world as farce, I will discuss its presence in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky’s novel is worth engaging with not only because of its intrinsic literary merits, but also because the notion of the universe as a divine joke, as the novel presents it, could offer a glimpse into the mechanisms of the more general vision that the world in which we live may be a farce of some sort or another. We can easily remove God from this *schema* and replace it with some other string-puller (the Will, Auschwitz, history itself), but the fact remains that the individual thus trapped, should she have a voice, will recognize herself in Ivan Karamazov’s rebellious philosophy. Above all, just like Ivan, she will likely make the same desperate attempts to extract, in Simon Critchley’s terms, concrete meaning from the experience of the meaninglessness. In the ensuing section I will explore the notion of history as “God’s playground” (or as “laboratory”). The notion is quite popular among members of the Central European intelligentsia, who have at times gone to great lengths to articulate collective self-representations almost drunk on historical pessimism and geographical fatalism. Then, in a somehow parallel move, in the next section I briefly review the theatrical component of Communism and the important function that the theatricalization played in all spheres of life in any given Communist regime: politics, economy, propaganda, even private life. The notion of



Central Europe as “God’s playground” and the theatricality of Communism fuse in a rather spectacular fashion in the work of Milan Kundera, to whom I will dedicate another large section. In particular, I will discuss his novel *The Joke* (one of his most autobiographical), where one comes across a clearly articulated vision of the world as farce and history as fond of playing cruel jokes on people. Finally, in the last section of the article, I will sketch a possible philosophical response to the “totalitarian laughter” that people sometimes hear when a farce-loving history comes to crush them.

### The “Cosmic Farce” Argument for God’s Existence

Curiously enough, we owe the notion of the world as a (divine) farce not to any philosopher “in flesh and blood,” but to an *imagined* philosopher, namely, to Ivan Karamazov.

*(According to a widespread and pernicious prejudice, philosophers have to live “in flesh and blood” to be considered philosophers proper. There is nothing farther from truth than this. Many invented philosophers are significantly more alive, more original, and certainly more charming than the vast majority of the American Philosophical Association members.)*

The unspoken assumption on which my considerations on Ivan Karamazov are based is Mikhail Bakhtin’s insight that Dostoevsky’s characters are relatively autonomous creatures, independent from their author, that they are “voices” whose utterances are not at all reducible to Dostoevsky’s personal opinions and beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Trying to identify “Dostoevsky the thinker” (as does, for example, John Scanlan in an eponymous book<sup>13</sup>), to single out one voice that speaks through all his characters, is, it seems to me, a reductionist approach; it is an impoverishing hermeneutic exercise that not only does injustice to Dostoevsky’s work, but also drastically undermines the meaningfulness of literature as such. According to the interpretation I propose, Ivan Karamazov has all the right to be considered an actual, full-time philosopher. That he never authored philosophy books or published papers in academic journal cannot be a counterargument. Neither did Socrates. Or, to give another example, what is extant from each of the pre-Socratic philosophers is significantly less than what Ivan Karamazov says in *The Brothers Karamazov*. By pre-Socratic standards, “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” is quite a lengthy treatise.

My primary interest here is in Ivan Karamazov as the proponent of a vision of the universe as farce, as a world that God has “made in mockery.” Truth be said, Ivan is not completely original in this respect as he, appropriately enough, borrows the topic from his clownish father Fyodor Karamazov. In one of his few moments of intellectual brightness, Fyodor has the following exchange with Ivan:

Is there a God or not? But seriously. I want to be serious now.

No, there is no God . . .

And is there immortality, Ivan? At least some kind, at least a little, a teeny-tiny one?

There is no immortality either.

Not of any kind?

Not of any kind.

Completely zero? Or is there something? Maybe there's some kind of something?

At least not nothing?

Completely zero. . . .

Lord, just think how much faith, how much energy of all kinds man has spent on this dream, and for so many thousands of years! Who could be laughing at man like that, Ivan? For the last time, definitely: is there a God or not? It's the last time I'll ask.

For the last time—no.

Then, who is laughing at mankind, Ivan?<sup>14</sup>

“If God does not exist, then who is laughing at us?” This is an indeed an extraordinary statement. No wonder that, in the economy of Dostoevsky's novel, it takes a profoundly vicious person, a compulsive liar and constantly inebriated person like Fyodor Karamazov to utter it. As I showed above, the topic of the world as God's plaything has a long history. Importantly, as Giuseppe Mazzotta argues,<sup>15</sup> the tradition of the *theologia ludens* conceals an aesthetic program and involves a celebration of God through the beauty of his creations. Fyodor Karamazov, however, twists the central argument of the *theologia ludens* in such a way as to make it almost unrecognizable. Whereas in *theologia ludens* an artist-God is first postulated in order then to account for the beauty of the created world, Fyodor first notices the senselessness of the word only to infer from it not God's inexistence (as any orthodox atheist would do), but precisely its scandalous . . . existence. To put it differently: the world in which we find ourselves is so poorly conceived, so unpalatable and fundamentally flawed, that there is no better way to describe it than to call it a farce, a bad (metaphysical) joke.<sup>16</sup> Yet, any farce must have an author, someone has to *want* to make fun of us (“laugh at us”), because farces don't just happen to float around. Therefore, God must exist.

*(If, for reasons of patenting, one needs a name for it, one might well say that, just as there is an ontological argument for God's existence, a cosmological argument, and so on, in a similar fashion, there is what may be coined as the “cosmic farce” argument for God's existence.)*

## The Return of the Admission Ticket

Notwithstanding his initial reluctance, Ivan ends up adopting and refining Fyodor's idea of the world as divine farce. One of his most characteristic passions is to collect peculiar facts and anecdotes, expressive incidents that can cast an embarrassing light

on God's creation: "I am an amateur and collector of certain little facts; I copy them down from newspapers and stories, from wherever, and save them . . . , certain kinds of little anecdotes."<sup>17</sup> Dostoevsky is quite unequivocal about this: Ivan gathers these "little facts" in the way someone gathers "evidence" to build a "case." Moreover, we should remember that, at the beginning of the novel, Ivan is introduced as a writer, already of some fame: he is the author of "ten-line articles on street incidents, signed 'Eyewitness.'"<sup>18</sup>

Later on, when he has the crucial conversation with his brother Alyosha, Ivan does not forget to bring with him and make extensive use of the huge file on God he had been compiling. What he reveals in this discussion is a complex philosophy of divine playing, a paradoxical theology according to which the world—as the site of the most incomprehensible of sufferings—is nothing else but a farce of enormous proportions that God is continually staging for its own amusement. Following closely in his father's footsteps, Ivan sees the human beings as "unfinished, trial creatures created in mockery,"<sup>19</sup> just as he observes how "millions" of "God's creatures have been set up only for mockery."<sup>20</sup> To him the universe was only created to satisfy God's strange sense of humor—at any rate, there is no other way of making sense of such a senseless world. To support this claim, Ivan produces a long list of indignities, absurdities, and anomalies (torturing of children, sadistic killing of innocent people, etc.). Right at the top of Ivan's list, there figures prominently the special pleasure some adults find in torturing little children:

I positively maintain that this peculiar quality exists in much of mankind—this love of torturing children, but only children. These same torturers look upon all other examples of humankind even mildly and benevolently, being educated and humane Europeans, but they have a great love of torturing children, they even love children in that sense. It is precisely the defenselessness of these creatures that tempts the torturers, the angelic trustfulness of the child, who has nowhere to turn and no one to turn to—that is what enflames the vile blood of the torturer.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence, Ivan wants to remain a fair judge and not rush things. He is ready to admit that, from a strictly philosophical standpoint, there may be some mysterious superior order, some abstract harmony for whose accomplishment all these sufferings are needed, however incomprehensible they might appear to us: "absurdities are all too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and without them perhaps nothing at all would happen."<sup>22</sup> The unpleasant things may be necessary precisely to make the good things appear more prominently, in a better light, just as in a play, or a novel, or a movie, it is the "bad guys" that help the "good guys" to reveal themselves as such. It is precisely through the dialectical play of contrasts and antinomies that beauty is made possible; without contrasts the entire universe would be nothing but an amorphous mass: no form, no configuration would ever be possible. Therefore, considered in itself, something may seem bad, or ugly,

or imperfect in some way or other; but when we consider the bigger picture, the imperfection is redeemed, so to speak, by playing a certain role in the unfolding of God's grander plans. God's creation is not a static, dead entity, but a dynamic whole, one in which the beautiful is born out of the ugly, the truth out of falseness, the good out of evil, the virtue out of sinfulness and remorse. Thus, Ivan Karamazov is not an atheist in any conventional sense. On the contrary: he theoretically accepts God's existence and his role as director of the cosmic show: "I accept God, not only willingly, but moreover I also accept his wisdom and his purpose, which are completely unknown to us; I believe in order, in the meaning of life, I believe in eternal harmony, in which we are all supposed to merge."<sup>23</sup>

*(What each individual philosopher throughout the history of philosophy does, through painstaking efforts and lifelong endeavors, is to become one philosopher. That would be the supreme achievement of any philosophical life. If one is lucky enough, if she is extremely diligent and hard-working, she will manage one day to come up with something significant, something that will have an impact on others' ideas and ways of thinking. Unless one is Wittgenstein or schizophrenic, one will always only become a single philosopher at most. That's precisely why Dostoevsky's accomplishment is all the more praiseworthy. He managed to be several fascinating philosophers at the same time: Ivan Karamazov, Raskolnikov, Kirillov, Shigalyov, the underground man, and so on. Dostoevsky invented these thinkers, with their distinct worldviews, with their irreducible flavor and originality, and—what is remarkable—did so with disconcerting ease. What is even more remarkable is that, having done all this, Dostoevsky still found the time to write newspaper articles, become a Socialist, go to prison, become a Slavophil, travel abroad, become a reactionary, gamble, marry, give up gambling, cheat on his wife, marry again, become a prophet, and so on.)*

Ivan's considerations so far are in agreement with the Christian theodicy traditionally conceived. Moreover, this also turns out to be the expert opinion of the devil himself, when it visits Ivan in the famous scene. In a most ironical manner, the devil's speech echoes Ivan's views that I have just examined. For "a simple devil," the old gentleman is a remarkably orthodox theologian:

By some pre-temporal assignment . . . I am appointed "to negate," whereas I am sincerely kind and totally unable to negate. No, they say, go and negate, without negation there will be no criticism, and what sort of journal has no "criticism section"? Without criticism, there would be nothing but "Hosannah." But "Hosannah" alone is not enough for life, it is necessary that this "Hosannah" pass through the crucible of doubt, and so on, in the same vein. . . . So they chose themselves a scapegoat, they made me write for the criticism section, and life came about.<sup>24</sup>

The devil's role is precisely to add to God's creation the necessary dark shades so that the luminous entities in it can appear more magnificently and be better perceived.

The devil is in the spice business, so to speak. His job is precisely to make sure that the cosmic comedy is sufficiently tasty: it intensifies the plot, keeps it in motion, and makes it as entertaining as possible. In show-business terms, the devil—the devil that Ivan talks to, that is—is an assistant director of sorts. Without the devil’s work the director’s job would be not only incomplete, but also terribly boring:

We understand this comedy: I, for instance, demand simply and directly that I will be destroyed. No, they say, live, because without you there would be nothing. If everything on earth were sensible, nothing would happen. Without you there would be no events, and there must be events.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, Ivan takes a significant step in a new direction, a step that Dostoevsky calls “rebellion.” Ivan decides that, although he has to accept God philosophically, he does not want to accept God’s world: “I do not accept this world of God’s, I do not admit it at all, though I know it exists.”<sup>26</sup> He understands the greatness of the divine project, but precisely for this reason he *rejects* this arrangement. For him, there are in God’s world indignities, wounds of such a grave nature that no “final harmony” can redeem them. Whether we place them within a bigger picture or not, they will always remain unaccounted for:

If everyone must suffer, in order to buy eternal harmony with their suffering, pray tell me what have children got to do with it? It’s quite incomprehensible why they should have to suffer, and why they should buy harmony with their suffering. Why do they get thrown on the pile, to manure someone’s future harmony with themselves?<sup>27</sup>

For Ivan Karamazov there is a structural incommensurability, so to speak, between the notion of a final harmony, on the one hand, and the suffering of the innocent, on the other. Certain sufferings are simply unjustifiable, no matter what standards we use. They are sufferings of such a unique nature that they will remain eternally unjustified: even if God himself would be an accountant, he could not, in Ivan’s view, come up with anything to justify them. Sufferings of this kind are a *metaphysical scandal*: in a certain way, they are imputable not only to those who actually caused them, but also to God himself:

I do not . . . want the mother to embrace the tormentor who let his dogs tear her son to pieces! She dare not forgive him! . . . she has no right to forgive the tormentor, even if the child himself were to forgive him! . . . I don’t want harmony, for love of humanity I don’t want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I’d rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*.<sup>28</sup>

Then, Ivan does something extraordinary: he “respectfully” returns the “admission ticket.” God’s world may a great show, but he finds it far too expensive:

They put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket. And it is my duty, if only as an honest man, to return it as far ahead of time as possible. Which is what I am doing. It's not that I don't accept God . . . I just most respectfully return him the ticket.<sup>29</sup>

The “return of the admission ticket” is one of the most plastic images of Ivan's rebellion: in a straight, highly expressive fashion, he turns his back on God's world, unwilling to pay the price for the show and uninterested in watching it. There is an irresolvable crisis at the heart of God's creation, a structural ontological flaw, which turns the whole thing into a farce, and Ivan does not want to be part of it, not even as a passive spectator: “If the suffering of children goes to make up the sum of suffering needed to buy truth, then I assert beforehand that the whole of truth is not worth such a price.”<sup>30</sup> In short, Ivan indicts God for running a metaphysically indecent show.

### God's Playground

“God's Playground” is the title of a classic history of Poland.<sup>31</sup> For obvious reasons, the author (Norman Davies) feels that an explanation would be in order here: the title he chose for his book is one of the possible translations of an old Polish phrase (*Boże Igrzysko*), which first appears as the title of a sixteenth-century verse, *Człowiek—Boże Igrzysko* (“Mankind—Bauble of the Gods”).<sup>32</sup> The term has since been a recurrent presence in Polish literature and, says Davies, it can be “aptly used as an epithet for a country where fate has frequently played mischievous tricks, and where a lively sense of humor has always formed an essential item of equipment in the national survival kit.”<sup>33</sup> To the extent that Davies is right, the Poles, squeezed as they are between various empires, seem to have developed a collective self-representation according to which they have perpetually been “toyed with”: they have never decided for themselves, always others have; they have never been the “agents” of history, always its “victims.” To be a Pole is to experience history as an oppressive force, something that will always play tricks on you and that “laughs” at you. In good Polish tradition, Krzysztof Kieślowski<sup>34</sup> notices at one point:

I really bear a grudge against history, or perhaps against the geography which treated this country the way it did. No doubt, that's how it has to be—that we'll get thrashed, that we will try to tear ourselves away from where we are and will never succeed. That's our fate.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, there is a sense in which the Poles' self-representation as “guinea-pigs” of history is not limited to Poland, but can be found, in different degrees and under various guises, throughout Central-East Europe. This type of historical pessimism (the vision of history as an enslaving force) characterizes many Central-East



European thinkers; in any case, despite whatever divides Eastern Europeans ideologically, philosophically and culturally, history as “God’s playground” is one of the few things they always tend to agree on. For example, in his memoirs (*Arrow in the Blue*), Arthur Koestler christens Central Europe “the laboratory of our time.” What he has in mind, more specifically, is that, especially during the twentieth century, this place has been cruelly “experimented with.” His own biography was, in a substantial way, part of a grand-scale historical experiment during which he first witnessed “the financial, then the physical destruction of the cultural stratum from which I came.” Koestler’s assessment doesn’t need any commentary:

At a conservative estimate, three out of every four people whom I knew before I was thirty were subsequently killed in Spain, or hounded to death at Dachau, or gassed at Belsen, or deported to Russia, or liquidated in Russia; some jumped from windows in Vienna and Budapest, others were wrecked by the misery and aimlessness of permanent exile.<sup>36</sup>

A few decades later, Milan Kundera will use an almost similar terminology: “in Czechoslovakia . . . history staged an unprecedented experiment.”<sup>37</sup> It would not be completely accurate to say that life under these conditions is unfree. What characterizes life, according to this collective self-perception, is not so much one’s *lack of* freedom, as it is the fact that everything here is done *against* one’s freedom. In other words, to live in Central-East Europe is to experience not just collective imprisonment, but rape on a grand historical scale.

There is possibly no better illustration of this intrusiveness of history than the story of a street in twentieth-century Prague, which Kundera tells in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. It is the street on which one of the characters (Tamina) was born. The name of the street was Schwerin:

That was during the war, and Prague was occupied by the Germans. Her father was born on Cernokostelecka Avenue—the Avenue of the Black Church. That was during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. When her mother married her father and moved there, it bore the name of Marshal Foch. That was after World War I. Tamina spent her childhood on Stalin Avenue, and when her husband came to take her away, he went to Vinohrady—that is, Vineyards—Avenue. And all the time it was the same street; they just kept changing its name, trying to lobotomize it.<sup>38</sup>

Other writers from the region will convey a similar impression: here it is not people that make history. On the contrary, it is history that makes and remakes the people.<sup>39</sup>

(“*Right in the middle of Prague, Wenceslaus Square, there’s this guy throwing up. And this other guy comes along, takes a look at him, shakes his head, and says: ‘I know just what you mean.’*”<sup>40</sup>)

## Totalitarian Theatre

“Stalinism was not merely a political system but also a mentality, a way of life and a grand totalitarian spectacle that needed to be continually reenacted.”<sup>41</sup> This is how Svetlana Boym characterizes life in Soviet Union under Stalin. Yet, the theatrical dimension of Communism was not at all limited to Stalin’s Russia: in an important sense, Communism—as Russia and Eastern Europe knew it in its different phases—was a stage production of grand proportions. Things are not as they really are, but as we make them appear to be—this could serve as the maxim of any Communist regime, regardless of its disguise. At its all stages, the Communist system relied massively on a strong theatrical component, which structured not only the public sphere, but also people’s private lives; not only the political life, but also the economy, the social services, and the public administration;<sup>42</sup> not only the propaganda, but also the cinema, mass-media and the arts.<sup>43</sup>

*(“We will fight for peace until there isn’t one stone left standing on another.”—Soviet folk saying<sup>44</sup>)*

Communism as a theatrical system had several performative layers, and it would certainly take several volumes to cover them all. Within the very limited space of this section, I can only mention those that are directly relevant for the present discussion. First of all, there was the *official* theatrical version of reality: the *constructed* reality that the regime wanted to exhibit, either domestically or abroad, or both. This included fake statistics, Potemkin villages, show trials, various propaganda items, invented news, as well as various idealized narratives about the “happy life” under Communism. This was a somehow parallel reality, with its own logic and rhetorical rules. Even when it became obvious that nobody believed anymore in this theatrical version of reality, significant resources were still allotted for its production and reproduction. It can be safely inferred that the construction of this reality was dictated not by any need to “represent,” however loosely, the everyday reality, but rather by a vaguely felt need to “fantasize” about it and “dream” of a better world. It must have thus functioned as a mechanism of psychological compensation.

Another important form of political-theatrical performance was indirectly official: based on publicly available information, public events and various visible occurrences, an expert observer could infer some major, but nonapparent, events, changes and developments. For example, when the picture of a Party official was taken away from public spaces (or only his individual figure removed from a group picture), that was a clear indication that the official himself had been removed from his position and, depending on the case, arrested, possibly executed or deported.

*(“Tamara was only twenty-one; a dark-eyed beauty with delicate features and fine limbs. . . . There was a literary circle at her university and she was one of its leading lights. At the meetings of the circle the students discussed literary problems and read*

*aloud from their own works. It was quite a happy life, but one day Tamara read a poem she had written entitled 'Hymn to Freedom.' Shortly afterwards she was arrested by the GPU and charged with 'Preparation for terrorism.'''<sup>45</sup>)*

As a result, public life in a Communist country was always a complex semiotic system. Since the public dissemination (let alone transparency) of information was carefully controlled, it always required expert knowledge, an astute eye, and interpretative skills to make deeper sense of what was really going on. Even the slightest changes, new promotions or demotions, could be deciphered in this fashion. Arthur Koestler gives an excellent example:

The standing of a political leader, for instance, which in other countries is dependent on achievements, election results and popular favor, is in the Soviet Union defined by (a) the place allotted to him on the official platform at the annual parades on May Day and at the October Celebration; and (b) the place which his name occupies on the official list of those present at a meeting or ceremony. Foreign diplomats and journalists have learnt to take their cues from this Byzantine ritual.<sup>46</sup>

Another important form of theatricalization of life in Communism was the transformation of citizens into involuntary actors. This was a direct result of generalized fear, police pressure, and sometimes state-induced terror as forms of political control. Constant self-censorship led to the creation of a complex set of acting skills, techniques of deception and concealment, which in most cases were precisely what it took to survive politically, socially, or professionally under Communism.<sup>47</sup> In *The Captive Mind*, Czesław Miłosz describes the phenomenon with particular insightfulness:

It is hard to define the type of relationship that prevails between people in the East otherwise than as acting, with the exception that one does not perform on a theater stage but in the street, office, factory, meeting hall, or even the room one lives in. Such acting is a highly developed craft that places a premium on mental alertness.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, unwittingly, the Communist regimes triggered highly sophisticated forms of social interaction among their subjects. Ordinary communication between people was not a straightforward process anymore, but a ciphered ceremony, an elaborated ritual performed with utmost care and unflinching attentiveness:

Before it leaves the lips, every word must be evaluated as to its consequences. A smile that appears at the wrong moment, a glance that is not all it should be an occasion dangerous suspicion and accusations. Even one's gestures, tone of voice, or preference for certain kinds of neckties are interpreted as signs of one's political tendencies.<sup>49</sup>

Probably the most dramatic (and consequential) manifestation of the theatrical in the Communist totalitarianism is the very way these systems functioned: a power elite (sometimes one family or one person) had the means to control whole societies, to

“stage” political; economic, and social processes of ample proportions; to “direct” developments in all spheres of life; to treat entire populations at best as “pawns,” in most cases as “extras.” At times this theatrical element took chilling forms, as, for example, when Stalin, the grand puppeteer, decided to eliminate hosts of real or invented adversaries, kill some and spare others, move entire populations from one corner of the empire to the other overnight, starve millions to death, arrest a million others just to turn them into slave labor. Firsthand accounts often portray Stalin as very fond of playing God, overtly so. That is hardly surprising.

*(“At that time [1937] a joke went the rounds in Moscow ‘They’ve taken Teruel. Have you heard?’ It was the time of the Spanish Civil War. ‘You don’t say so. And his wife as well?’ ‘No, no. Teruel’s a town.’ ‘Good heavens! They’ve started arresting whole towns?’”<sup>50</sup>)*

### Ein Meister aus Zentral Europa

In a certain sense, much of Milan Kundera’s *oeuvre* is a constant, ongoing dialogue between the two themes that I have just discussed: the perception of the historical world (especially in Central Europe) as a grand-scale “laboratory,” a space specially designated for toying with people and ideas, on one hand, and the acute awareness of the theatrical component of totalitarianism, on the other. Kundera’s lifelong obsession with “the tragedy of Central Europe” is equaled in intensity only by his passionate preoccupation with the farcical aspects of existence and the theatrical side of life. On one side, he perceives history as “an alien force” that we “cannot control,”<sup>51</sup> openly admitting that “all my novels breath a hatred of history, of that hostile, inhuman force that—uninvited, unwanted—invades our lives from the outside and destroys them.”<sup>52</sup> On the other side, he praises (for instance, in an interview with Alain Finkielkraut) Jaroslav Hašek for creating an unforgettable character whose main task is to undermine systematically the presumptions of the *status quo*, wherever he could find it: “Jaroslav Hašek’s brave soldier Švejk imitates the ceremonies of the surrounding world with such zeal that he transforms them into an enormous joke.”<sup>53</sup> Kundera is one of Hašek’s greatest admirers and does not hesitate to place him in the proximity of Rabelais, as brilliant representatives of the same tradition of the European novel of popular inspiration.

*(Švejk: “I never imagined that they’d sentence an innocent man to ten years. . . . Sentencing an innocent man to five years, that’s something I’ve heard of, but ten, that’s a bit too much.”<sup>54</sup>)*

One of the most obvious instantiations of this ongoing dialogue is probably to be found in Kundera’s novel *The Joke* (*Žert*, 1967), which many consider to be one of

his most autobiographical pieces. The whole plot is set in motion by what, under normal circumstances, should pass as an innocent joke. It is the early 1950s. Ludvik Jahn, a promising Prague student and ardent supporter of the freshly installed Communist regime, sends a short postcard to a female colleague whom he saw as a bit “too serious” about everything and whom he was trying to seduce. The postcard reads, “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!” In no time the joke is denounced as subversive anti-Communist propaganda; Ludvik is expelled from the university and from the Party and has to go into the army and work in the mines, in almost murderous working conditions, for the next several years. He manages, however, to rescue himself and resume his studies. Even though the experience doesn’t completely ruin his life (he eventually becomes a successful scientist in Prague), it shatters profoundly his trust in society and turns him into an embittered cynic. One day he chances to meet Helena Zemanek, a radio journalist and the wife of Pavel Zemanek, a former university colleague who played an important part in his expulsion and public disgrace. Realizing that he could finally exact revenge on Pavel, Ludvik elaborates a complicated plan to seduce his wife. The plan is successful, the wife seduced, and Ludvik is about to savor his long-awaited and carefully prepared revenge. It is then, however, that he realizes that he has fooled nobody, except himself: Helena didn’t actually have to be seduced as her husband didn’t care very much about her and was only too happy to let her go (they had not lived like a married couple for quite a while). This is, very briefly, the plot of the novel.

Beyond the plot level, however, *The Joke* occasions a serious of meditations on the political world as an immense farce and on history as fond of making jokes, of setting traps and turning us into its “playthings.” The topic of the world as a stage, where opposite forces continually clash, appears early on in the novel, as if to frame its underlying philosophy. Ludvik, who plans on using Kostka’s apartment as a “stage” for accomplishing his original revenge, has an enlightening conversation with the latter. Kostka, unaware of all the details of Ludvik’s plan, expressed hope that his flat would bring him “something beautiful.” Yes, yes, “a beautiful demolition,” says Ludvik. When Kostka wonders how a “demolition can be beautiful,” Ludvik reveals his vision of the world as a grand theater:

I know you’re a quiet workman on God’s eternal construction site and don’t like hearing about demolition, but what can I do? Myself, I’m not one of God’s bricklayers. Besides, if God’s bricklayers built real walls, I doubt we’d be able to demolish them. But instead of walls all I see is stage sets. And stage sets are made to be demolished.<sup>55</sup>

Ludvik speaks convincingly, as one does of things one has learned from painful personal experience. His political disgrace and subsequent underground life must have given him access to a deeper form of wisdom, which allowed him to see beyond the skin of things. He has developed a special sense for deconstructing the surrounding

world and seeing it *sub specie ludi*, as Huizinga would have put it. The people he encounters are nothing but “masks” and “actors,” the objects he sees around are “stage sets,” and so on. For instance, coming across a group of youngsters who were having fun in a country pub, he notices with contempt: “I could see nothing but actors, their faces covered by masks of cretinous virility and arrogant brutishness”<sup>56</sup> He talks of the “eternal theatre of shadows”<sup>57</sup> and cannot help seeing the world as a fake reality, the province of imitations and copies. He becomes a Platonist *malgré lui-même*: watching a bronze statue, for example, he has the impression that

we too had been *cast out* into this oddly deserted square with its park and restaurant, cast out irrevocably, that we too had been broken off from something; that we imitated the heavens and the heights in vain, that no one believed in us; that our thoughts and our words scaled the heights in vain when our deeds were as low and the earth itself.<sup>58</sup>

Under Ludvik’s disenchanting gaze, nothing remains untouched; everything is deconstructed, reduced to its bare essence. His is a life now fully dedicated to exposing the theatrical nature of the world around. Employing an imagery dear to many Central-East Europeans, Ludvik sees history as nothing but a playground:

history is terrible because it so often ends up a playground for the immature; a playground for the young Nero, a playground for the young Bonaparte, a playground for easily roused mobs of children whose stimulated passions and simplistic poses suddenly metamorphose into a catastrophically real reality.<sup>59</sup>

Despite his deep insight into the “theatre of shadows,” however, Ludvik’s understanding of the world as theatre is still theoretical: to completely internalize this insight, he has one more lesson to learn. For in a world of “masks,” “actors,” and “stage sets,” Ludvik still entertains the illusion that he is not an actor like anybody else. He deludes himself that he is somehow different, that he has some directorial role to play, if on a limited scale: he cannot help framing his own revenge in theatrical terms. Under this illusion, Ludvik conceives the whole affair as a play that he himself has scripted, directed, and produced: “Everything that has happened between myself and Helena was part of a precise and deliberate plan. . . . I . . . had from the start acted as a meticulous stage manager of the story I was about to experience, and had left nothing to the whims of inspiration.”<sup>60</sup>

In the end, the failure of his plan is exactly what it takes for him to wake up—that is, to realize the full depth of his insight that the world is indeed an inescapable farce. For the comedy to be complete, the one who has thought he could fool others, has to be fooled himself: Ludvik has been thinking that he was toying with others, whereas all this time he was in fact *toyed with*. The revenge he has been preparing for a long time has turned out to be the trap in which he himself fell:



[Helena's] body was there, a body I had stolen from no one, in which I'd vanquished no one, destroyed no one, a body abandoned, deserted by its spouse, a body I intended to use but which had used me and was now insolently enjoying its triumph, exulting, jumping for joy.<sup>61</sup>

This realization is only the beginning of a painful awakening experience, the most unwanted of all awakenings: you realize not that you have just got *out of* a nightmare, but that you have got *into* a nightmare. Your own life is nothing but a nightmarish story because it is projected against the background of a cosmic joke. Ludvik realizes that it is not one joke or another that has affected his destiny. It is more than that. His entire destiny is nothing but a series of jokes:

the *entire* story of my life was conceived in error, through the bad joke of the postcard, that accident, that nonsense. . . . I was horrified at the thought that things conceived in error are just as real as things conceived with good reason and of necessity.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, there is no way you can *correct* this fake life you lead, no way to stop the joke, unless you put an end to your life, which would only mean that the joke has finally reached its goal. Then, you are a *complete joke*. Ludvik would very much like to "revoke the whole story" of his life, but he is faced with a very important question: "how could I do so by my own exertions when the errors it stemmed from were not only *my errors*?" These errors, he observes, were "so common and universal that they didn't represent exceptions or faults in the order of things; . . . they constituted that order."<sup>63</sup>

(*Švejk*: "It gives me a headache to think how they are going to put all his pieces together when the day of the last judgment comes."<sup>64</sup>)

The obvious question is, of course, Who is, after all, the author of the joke? Who is behind the farce? Thus Ludvik joins the large chorus of all those, like Primo Levi and Fyodor Karamazov, who desperately ask, "Who is laughing at us?" In Ludvik's case, the accusing finger points to one direction: history itself. For him, history seems to be at the root of all destruction, corruption, and unfreedom:

What if history plays jokes? . . . I realized how powerless I was to revoke my own joke when throughout my life as a whole I was involved in a joke much more vast (all-embracing for me) and utterly irrevocable.<sup>65</sup>

## Surviving the Totalitarian Laughter

*The Joke* ends on this gloomy note, and does not offer any solution for redemption, in case you expect one. Kundera's silence may well be taken to mean that when

it comes to facing the totalitarian laughter, when you find yourself confronted with the grand farce, you are on our own. The solution cannot be but highly individualized. It is up to us, each one of us, individually, to face the farce as we see fit, with the means we can get hold of, and the courage we can muster. If I am proposing something here, it is under the important proviso that this “solution” is not only personal, but also provisional. It is, incidentally, something that resonates with what I could gather from Kundera’s other writings. Here it goes.

If there is a conceivable way out of the oppressive totalitarian laughter, it is to start laughing. More exactly: laughing at yourself. “Laughing at others” and “laughing at oneself” is one of the important distinctions that Simon Critchley makes in his *On Humor*, and he hastens to add that only the latter is an authentic form of humor: “true humor does not wound a specific victim and always contains self-mockery. The object of laughter is the subject who laughs.”<sup>66</sup> It is only by “laughing at yourself” that you can catch the system off-guard: this is something that they expect the least of you. “Laughing at others” is precisely the principle on which the system is based. Should you laugh at others you would only help the system accomplish its mission as it would multiply the totalitarian laughter *ad infinitum*, generating more and more cruelty, making more and more victims; whereas laughing at oneself is something the author of the farce (the totalitarian system, history, whatever it may be) is unlikely to anticipate. Therefore, the trick we should use to defeat the trickster is to hijack its laughter. We can only break the vicious circle of the totalitarian laughter if we learn how to laugh at ourselves. Laughing at ourselves is what elevates us, precisely because it takes us closer to who we are: we are by nature vulnerable creatures, and by laughing at ourselves we show that we are only too aware of the fact, which is already a significant strength. *Of course* they can destroy you—the whole point is, however, not to let them destroy your sense of who you are, your self-representation and self-respect. If you are the first to laugh at yourself, what else can they do to you?

This superior, redeeming form of humor is what Critchley calls *risus purus*, which he describes as “the highest laugh,” the laugh

that laughs at the laugh, that laughs at that which is unhappy. . . . Yet, this smile does not bring unhappiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation. This is why, melancholy animals that we are, human being are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness.<sup>67</sup>

Milan Kundera certainly knows about the virtues of “laughing at oneself.” He once said in an interview, “I was born on the first of April. That has its metaphysical significance.”<sup>68</sup> Not unlike Critchley’s understanding of authentic humor as *risus purus*, Kundera relates humor to a healthy sense of relativity that we ought to display when judging facts, things and people. True humor means “to know one’s place,” to know that humans’ most important quality is imperfection, a statement that—commonsensical

as it may seem—in Kundera has something spectacular about it. For example, in *Testaments Betrayed*, he talks in exalted terms about humor as “the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others” or “the intoxicating relativity of human things” or “the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty.”<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, Kundera elaborates what may well be coined as a “metaphysics of laughter.” In *Testaments Betrayed*, he puts laughter at the foundation of the European novel, and the European novel at the very foundation of the modern civilization. His reading of the history of the European novel is certainly idiosyncratic, but it is all the more worth noting that the novelists he values most highly are “masters of laughter”: Rabelais, Cervantes, Hašek. A self-declared atheist, when it comes to humor and laughter Kundera suddenly turns theologian. For example, playing with a Jewish proverb (“Man thinks, God laughs”), he goes almost as far as to suggest that the European novel is of “divine origin”: inspired by the Jewish proverb, Kundera likes to imagine that “Rabelais heard God’s laughter one day, and thus was born the idea of the first great European novel. It pleases me to think that the art of the novel came into the world as the echo of God’s laughter.”<sup>70</sup> Theological insights like this are enlightening, but when they come from atheists, they border on the miraculous.

This is why I would like to conclude my article by quoting at length a passage from Kundera “the theologian of laughter.” The fragment is from what is probably one of the most mysterious chapters in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*:

The first time an angel heard the Devil’s laughter, he was horrified. It was in the middle of a feast with a lot of people around, and one after the other they joined in the Devil’s laughter. It was terribly contagious. The angel was all too aware the laughter was aimed against God and the wonder of His works. . . . [U]nable to fabricate anything of his own, he simply turned his enemy’s tactics against him. He opened his mouth and let out a wobbly, breathy sound in the upper reaches of his vocal register . . . endowed it with the opposite meaning. Whereas the Devil’s laughter pointed up the meaninglessness of things, the angel’s shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, . . . good and sensible everything on earth was.<sup>71</sup>

This quote may well provide the explanation for something otherwise hardly comprehensible: namely, why we laugh so heartily while watching a Holocaust film like *La vita è bella*. We simply laugh at ourselves as we recognize ourselves in Guido Orefice who is about to be devoured by the laughing machine. We laugh, and in so doing, we are able to come up with an “opposite meaning.” Guido dies, and so do we, but this meaning remains, and that’s almost more than one can hope for.

## Notes

1. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), 31.
2. *Ibid.*, 36.

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits. Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980), 19.
6. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, 33.
7. Jan Kott, "Introduction," trans. Michael Kandel, in Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, selected and translated by Barbara Vedder (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976), 16.
8. Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing. Death, Literature, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 27.
9. For an introduction to this topic, see my essay: Costica Bradatan, "'I Was a Stranger, and Ye Took Me Not In.' *Deus Ludens* and Theology of Hospitality in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*," *Journal of European Studies* 39:1(2009): 58–78, esp. 58–63.
10. For the relation between art and play, see Johan Huizinga's classic, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1950).
11. For the notion of *theologia ludens*, I am indebted to the ground-breaking work of Giuseppe Mazzotta. See, for example, his *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 227.
12. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, introduction by Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).
13. James Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).
14. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated and annotated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 14.
15. Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision*, 227.
16. Of course, Fyodor Karamazov touches here on the old Dualistic (Gnostic, Manichean, Cathar) notion of the world as the creation of an "evil god" ("principle of darkness"). Fascinating as it is, a discussion of Fyodor and Ivan's position in relation to the Dualistic theology exceeds the scope of this article.
17. Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 239.
18. Ibid., 16.
19. Ibid., 261.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 241.
22. Ibid., 243.
23. Ibid., 235.
24. Ibid., 642.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 235.
27. Ibid., 244.
28. Ibid., 245.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Norman Davies, *God's Playground. A History of Poland*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984).
32. Ibid., vol. I, xvi.
33. Ibid.
34. On Kieślowski's historical pessimism, see also my essay: Costica Bradatan, "Transcendence and History in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Blind Chance*," *East European Politics and Societies* 22:2(2008): 425–46.
35. Danusia Stok, ed., *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 141.

36. Arthur Koestler, *Arrow in the Blue. The First Volume of an Autobiography: 1905-1931* (London: Vintage, 2005), 131.
37. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, NY: Knopf, 1980), 13.
38. *Ibid.*, 158.
39. For more on this see my essay: Costica Bradatan, "Geography and Fragility," *Angelaki* (forthcoming).
40. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 7.
41. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 110.
42. For this, see, for example, Larry Holmes, *Grand Theater: Regional Governance in Stalin's Russia, 1931-1941* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).
43. See, for example, Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual. Exploring Forms of Political Theater* (London: Routledge, 2005).
44. Alexander Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus*, trans. Charles Janson (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1985), 7.
45. Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1950), 115.
46. Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing. The Second Volume of an Autobiography: 1932-40* (London: Vintage, 2005), 74.
47. This form of theatrical performance is particularly important, as it has turned out to have the most lasting effects on the mindsets of those involved: you can still see these effects in Eastern Europe and Russia.
48. Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonka (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), 54.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, 9.
51. Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, trans. Linda Asher (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995), 16.
52. *Ibid.*; see also Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *New York Review of Books* 31:7(26 Apr. 1984): 33–38.
53. In Peter Petro, ed., *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera* (New York, NY: G.K. Hall & Co, 1999), 42.
54. Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, trans. Cecil Parrott (London: Penguin, 1974), 47.
55. Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (New York, NY: HarperCollins), 7.
56. *Ibid.*, 314.
57. *Ibid.*, 295.
58. *Ibid.* 179.
59. *Ibid.*, 87.
60. *Ibid.*, 175.
61. *Ibid.*, 201.
62. *Ibid.* 288.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, 54.
65. *Ibid.*, 288–89.
66. Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (London: Routledge, 2002), 14.
67. *Ibid.*, 95.
68. Kundera in Maria Nemcova Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox. The Novels of Milan Kundera* (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 3.
69. Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 32–33.
70. *Ibid.*, 1.
71. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 61–62.

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