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Center and Periphery, or How Karel Vachek Formed a New Government¹

New Hyperion (*Nový Hyperion*), the first film in Czech documentarian Karel Vachek's Little Capitalist Tetralogy, begins with the following title:

A real and incomplete story of philosophers, heads of state and church, artists and party secretaries, scientists, ministers of the Federal Government and the governments of the Republics, pensioners and prisoners, trades-unionists and officials, dissidents and the twilight zone, priests and armed men, the radical right and left, past and present, citizens and their representatives concerning the free election comedy—
Czechoslovakia 1990.

This paragraph is a concise reduction both of *New Hyperion*, which documents the Czechoslovak elections of that year, and of the Tetralogy itself, which is populated by characters ranging from politicians in the highest positions to ordinary citizens. Taken together, the Tetralogy's four films—*New Hyperion or Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (*Nový Hyperion aneb Rovnost, volnost, bratrství*, 1992); *What Is To Be Done? A Journey From Prague to Český Krumlov or How I Formed a New Government* (*Co dělat? Cesta z Prahy do Českého Krumlova aneb Jak jsem sestavoval novou vládu*, 1997); *Bohemia Docta or The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart (Divine Comedy)* (*Bohemia Docta aneb Labyrint světa a lusthauz srdce* (*Božská Komédie*, 2000); and *Who's Gonna Watch the Watchman? Dalibor or The Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin* (*Kdo bude hlídat hlídače? Dalibor aneb Klíč k Chaloupce strýčka Toma*, 2003)—are an impressive document of the shifts that took place in Czech politics and society from the Velvet Revolution to European Union accession. Each over three and a half hours long, garrulous and philosophical, Vachek's

films are nonetheless hardly political documentaries in the traditional sense. In fact, as the Tetralogy progresses, the films move away from these “heads of church and state” and come to focus on a set of characters in the political periphery—artists, intellectuals, and former and current dissidents. In this process, Vachek interrogates the very constitution of the Czech periphery, delineating a virtual second society, or what might be termed a post-communist “underground” that represents the director’s own philosophical and idiosyncratic blueprint for an ideal—and ultimately fictional—state.

Fig. 1: Karel Vachek

Major and Minor, Nonfiction and Fiction

The many characters who occupy the Tetralogy can be divided into two principal categories. First are the “major,” politically central, characters, those involved in the History-writ-large that the films capture: the concrete political and cultural events that mark the Czech lands’ transition from communism to democracy and free-market capitalism. These are figures like Václav Havel, Alexander Dubček, and Václav Klaus; characters whom Vachek films in government chambers, receptions, and official meetings, as they go about the task of creating and governing a new state.

The second category of characters in the Tetralogy, and its most important, are its “minor,” or peripheral, figures; individuals not involved in the political actions the films capture but who nonetheless exemplify the questions and complications of the political transition at hand. This set of characters can be further categorized according to their relationships to both the communist and post-communist regimes. Some, like sculptor Milan Knížák, a former underground figure who now curates Prague’s National Gallery, have, like Havel and others, become members of the cultural “center,” but unlike Havel, maintain a maverick stance within it. Others, like musician Jim Čert and philosopher/poet Egon Bondy,

are former members of the underground who remain on the periphery of post-communist Czech society, but were nevertheless accused of collaboration with the communist Secret Police. Still others, such as philosopher Ivan Svítak and writer Eva Kantůrková, are formerly “peripheral” characters who became central to life after the revolution; Kantůrková through her involvement with the Society of Writers (Obec spisovatelů) and Ministry of Culture, and Svítak as both a politician and public intellectual before his death in 1994. Finally, and most essentially, are individuals who were on the periphery of society under communism, and who remain decidedly on its outskirts. Primary among these are poet and art critic (and former manager/spiritual leader of the Plastic People of the Universe) Ivan “Magor” Jirous and poet Andrej Stankovič.²

In accordance with their former or current “outsider” status, all of Vachek’s “minor” characters function as critical or thinking presences in the Tetralogy, offering a complex and nuanced perspective on the movement of periphery to center that the films capture. Their criticism takes different forms, depending on their métier: Jirous reads from his “Swan Poems” in *New Hyperion*’s opening moments; in the same film, Ivan Svítak delivers philosophical speeches and Pepa Nos sings off-the-cuff folk tunes that comment on politics, both in Czechoslovakia and in the world at large. Often the most trenchant critiques of the country’s political transition are legible in these figures’ biographies, which challenge the neat division between past and present, communist and post-communist, that the revolution of 1989 and its consequent political developments attempted to impose.

Vachek, however, does not choose his minor, peripheral characters merely on the basis of political conviction, but also according to his own philosophical taxonomy of character. There is a clear hierarchy of figures in the Tetralogy, with characters like Jirous and Stankovič occupying its highest ranks. The most important characters in his films, the director says in a 2003 interview in *Revolver Revue*:

are absolutely dignified.... I took great care about this, because [my films] compos[e] a particular and defined image of positive thinking in the Czech Republic. For me, this image is made up of a number of things about which we do not talk much. In [these individuals], there are many seeds of change for the future. (Krumphanzl and Vašicek 169)

The notion of “dignity” corresponds with Vachek’s category of “centeredness,” a state of being in which a person

listen[s] to an inner intuitive sense (wisdom) until ... [they] begin to say important things, even when the time does not want to listen to them and what they are saying appears totally stupid to the time. Centeredness depends on the fact that I do what I have to do (listening to the center of my being, not to fate). (Krumphanzl and Vašicek 170)

The films of the Tetralogy, the director says, are focused around moments in which individuals display “centeredness,” in which they talk about issues that are not generally discussed, despite the fact that in doing so, they mark themselves as out of step with the world around them (Vachek, personal interview). These moments allow us to read dissent in Vachek’s films as a philosophical, political, and deeply personal state of being; a general condition of outsidership.

A final character in the Tetralogy is the director himself. Vachek is the protagonist of his own films: he is present in many of their scenes, either in conversation with his subjects or in acted set-pieces in which he explains philosophical concepts to the camera. In the Tetralogy’s episodic and deliberately non-linear structure, which weaves narrative fragments in and out of one another, the director is a uniting element. Misanthropic and often combative in his conversations with his subjects, he relies on his own history of exile to create the image of the ultimate outsider. This image is hardly fictional: Vachek was forced

to leave Czechoslovakia in 1979, after two banned films—*Moravian Hellas* (*Moravská Hellas*, 1963), a satirical, partly-staged documentary about the Strážnice folk festival, and *Elective Affinities* (*Spřiznění volbou*, 1968), a film about the Czechoslovak elections of that year—left him unable to find a job in the film industry. After sojourns in Germany and France, he emigrated to the United States, where he worked, at one point, in the darkrooms of *The New York Times*. Vachek returned to Czechoslovakia in 1984, and worked tending high-pressure boilers and as a truck driver until his return to filmmaking in 1989. In the last paragraph of his book, *The Theory of Matter* (*Teorie hmoty*, 2004), he summarizes this experience: “I leave when no one is leaving and I return when no one is returning, and I think that that is my fundamental life situation” (128).

Vachek’s continued outsidership is also visible in his stubborn adherence to somewhat anachronistic aesthetic standards in filmmaking. All of the Tetralogy’s films are over three hours long and all are shot in 35mm, a type of film more commonly used to shoot fiction films than documentaries.³ In keeping with their format, Vachek’s films straddle generic boundaries. The Tetralogy hinges on the handheld, *cinéma vérité* style in which much of it—primarily scenes in which “major” characters go about their political business (rallies, meetings, performances, etc.)—is shot. Elections are, naturally, a major theme in both *New Hyperion* and *Elective Affinities*, and the latter, one of the first *cinéma vérité* films to be made in Czechoslovakia, bears more than a passing resemblance to Robert Drew and Richard Leacock’s *Primary* (1960), an idea to which I will return later. Furthermore, Vachek continually locates himself and his crew within the frame, a traditional device of *vérité* filmmaking, and one that appears for the first time in *Moravian Hellas*, in which young brothers Jan and Karel Saudek stand in for the director, conducting provocative interviews with folk artists and performers.

Whereas in some *vérité* films, the filmmaker's presence serves to authenticate the events documented, in the Tetralogy, Vachek's presence calls the documentary status of these events into question. The four films are filled with long conversations, often staged in symbolically resonant locations, between the director and "minor" characters, as well as periodic staged sections in which Vachek performs for the camera, demonstrating philosophical or literary concepts. In *Bohemia Docta*, for instance, Vachek films a conversation between himself and Egon Bondy among the massive canvases of painter Alfons Mucha's *Slav Epic (Slovanská epopej)*. And in *Dalibor*, the director marches in riot gear, holding a shield and baton, as Jan Vodňanský sings "the generals are coming." The fictional aspects of Vachek's Tetralogy are as, if not more, integral to its construction as the *vérité* aspects: the director refers to the four parts of the Tetralogy as "film-novels," and the films take their names from books: *Elective Affinities* from Goethe, *New Hyperion* from Hölderlin, *What Is To Be Done?* from Chernyshevskii, *Bohemia Docta* from Komenský, and *Dalibor* from Smetana's opera.

Like other documentarians who are characters in their own films—such as Nick Broomfield or Michael Moore—Vachek is often accused of being unnecessarily provocative, manipulative or bullying. His detractors claim that the dialogues in the Tetralogy reflect the filmmaker's own views instead of his subjects', and that the films' considerable length is pretentious or self-indulgent; that the Tetralogy, as a whole or in individual installments, is unwatchable.⁴ This is, perhaps, the reaction Vachek desires: in provoking arguments and stating controversial hypotheses, the director aligns himself with characters like Jirous or Stankovič, "centered" outsiders with the agency to comment authoritatively on current events—or, to return to a quote used earlier in this essay, "say important things, even when the time does not want to listen ... and what they are saying appears totally stupid..." (Krumphanzl and Vašíček 170). Alternately, in keeping with the films' literary nature, we

might read Vachek as a *picaro*, a traveler through the Tetralogy's various episodes and the consciousness through which its viewpoints are refracted. More specifically, Vachek might be described as a Švejk, in keeping with the importance of Jaroslav Hašek's novel to the Tetralogy's structure, its version of nationalism, and its iconography.⁵ Indeed, as the Tetralogy progresses, Vachek leaves less and less room for the contingent moments of *cinéma vérité*, and comes to rely increasingly on these literary or fictional strategies. The director describes his ostensibly nonfiction films' increasing resemblance to fiction as a "progression towards total theater" (personal interview, September 2002), and this progression, in turn, reflects Vachek's gradual abandonment of the *Realpolitik* of the Czech state in favor of the philosophical second society that the four films metaphorically build.

From Center to Periphery

New Hyperion, filmed in 1989 and 1990, captures a moment in which it seemed possible for the dissident community to merge with official state structures and institute new, democratic rules of governance. In this film, the narrative of political reversal that the Tetralogy as a whole captures is established: the old guard of apparatchiks and collaborators leaves politics, and a new guard enters the government. We meet such a formerly-central politician in Josef Bartončík, who was forced to leave office after Secret Police files demonstrated a history of collaboration. Vachek films Bartončík in a hospital bed, as he shows the director and his crew a copy of the newspaper that claims his history of collaboration and points out the article's errors and inconsistencies. Conversely, the previously invisible Czechoslovak cultural and political underground becomes visible again, as former dissidents move into politics: Petr Cibulka, the creator of "Cibulka's List," a list of political figures who (Cibulka claims) collaborated with the communist Secret Police,⁶ is present in government chambers, debating the rules for the new election and claiming that the

voting system is corrupt; and the newly-presidential Havel awkwardly addresses his entourage, wearing a T-shirt and holding a beer. Throughout *New Hyperion*, Vachek remains optimistic about the political potential of the movement of the periphery to the center; about the possibility for “centered” individuals to become the core of Czechoslovak politics. Simultaneously, the Czechoslovak political system, with the institution of the 1991 lustration law—in which lists of Secret Police officers, collaborators, and informants was publicly published, and former officers and collaborators forbidden from holding public office for five years—appears prepared to facilitate this transformation.

Fig. 2: Alexander Dubček in the opening moments of *Elective Affinities*

In its confident outlook, as well as in its *vérité* style, *New Hyperion* resembles Vachek’s *Elective Affinities*, a film that, twenty years earlier, chronicled the rise to power of a government that promised a new and just form of governance. In the later film, characters from *Elective Affinities* (most notably Alexander Dubček) return, but in a more important sense, *New Hyperion* exemplifies the same striking intimacy with which Vachek approached the reformers in 1968, an intimacy enabled by the techniques and technology of *cinéma vérité*.⁷ *Elective Affinities*’ roving handheld camera captures moments that would have startled a contemporary viewer accustomed to mediated, distanced images of communist politicians: close-ups on the faces and hands of politicians at a cocktail party (a gathering that bears a striking resemblance to the aforementioned gathering in *New Hyperion*, in which Havel addresses the newly-successful government); unscripted moments with Josef Svoboda within governmental chambers. On one level, these moments exemplify, quite literally, Dubček’s now-mythical ideal of “socialism with a human face:” in these images, the human aspects of politicians—their faces, their hands, their voices—became accessible to viewers. These shots, and their social import, echo similar moments in *Primary*, one of which is described by Brian Winston thus: “... the ... cutaway of Jacqueline Kennedy’s hands, linked

behind her back ... seemed to convey an intimacy with the subject, a candour, which ... looked utterly fresh and new” (152).

Fig.3: A statue of T.G. Masaryk is removed from Na Příkopě Street in Prague (*New Hyperion*)

On another level, in *Elective Affinities*, just as in the moment it captures, the political system itself becomes something with which everyday men and women can interact, a formerly-obscure institution whose workings are laid bare by the immediacy that *vérité* technology and style offered. The revolution of 1989 held similar promises of transparency, proximity, and accessibility for Czechoslovakia. Vachek has called the Tetralogy a process of “waiting for something better” (personal interview), an ideal whose political origins might be traced to 1968 and the Prague Spring, and, in this sense, it is not unreasonable to view *Elective Affinities* as the Tetralogy’s zero hour, or, alternately, to view *New Hyperion* as simply a continuation, after an intermission, of the earlier film.

The Tetralogy’s second film, *What Is To Be Done?*, released in 1996, is markedly less optimistic about the prospects for post-revolutionary Czechoslovak government and society. By the time this film was released, Slovakia and the Czech Republic had separated, Havel had settled into his presidency, and the concrete tasks of state-building had become less pressing; the euphoria of 1989 muted. In *What Is To Be Done?*, which is subtitled *A Journey From Prague to Český Krumlov, or How I Formed a New Government*, Vachek brings many of *New Hyperion*’s “minor” characters—Jirous, Stankovič, filmmaker Jiří Krejčík, and others—together in the eponymous bus trip from Prague to the South Bohemian town of Český Krumlov. During the trip, these “minor” characters engage in lengthy discussions of philosophy, politics, art, and history. This group comes to symbolize the new government that the film’s title suggests, constituents and rulers of a state that is centered in the geographic and political periphery.

This peripheral government, however, ultimately redefines the very idea of the periphery, largely in step with Vachek's philosophy of character. This is most visible in a subplot of the film that centers on Ivan Jirous, who, as the film progresses, gradually distances himself from his fellow travelers in the bus, drinking heavily and insulting them. By focusing his film's narrative on Jirous, Vachek again holds up the ideal of "centeredness" that the former exemplifies, in the process shifting and narrowing his definition of the "periphery" to exclude formerly-peripheral characters who have gravitated to the "center" in the years since 1989. At the same time, figures like Havel and Klaus become further distanced from the film's action, visible only in distanced, media-ready images, often photographed at events designed for the press.

Fig. 4: "Centered" figures from Vachek's hand-sewn flag, which makes its debut in *What Is to Be Done?*

The shift in the constitution of Vachek's "periphery" that takes place in *What Is To Be Done?* is further developed in *Bohemia Docta* (2000), which also experiments with the idea of creating a new state and a new government. Here, Vachek seeks "centered," peripheral characters in figures "resurrected" from the past. Placing a water-soaked picture of Komenský in a spent light bulb, for instance, the director brings the author of the text that provides one of the film's subtitles, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, to life again. Jan Lukeš's interwar socialist opera *Uderka* is revived by present-day artists and philosophers. And painter Alfons Mucha is present in the film through his *Slav Epic*. Resurrection, in this film also signifies the return to public life of individuals who had been silenced and invisible under the previous regime. As Vachek tells Milan Knížák as the two walk through the pathways of Vyšehrad's Art Nouveau cemetery: "I am making a film about the rising of the dead."

Fig. 5: Egon Bondy in front of Mucha's *Slavic Epic* (*Bohemia Docta*)

This “resurrection” of long-dead figures, however, also represents another important element of the Tetralogy: Vachek’s concern with exploring and preserving Czech national identity. This identity is one that was born with the writings of figures like Komenský in the 16th century, linguist Josef Jungmann in the 18th, historian Frantisek Palacký during the Czech national revival in the 1840s (Gellner 140-141), and that flourished during the interwar Czechoslovak Republic. It is rooted in geography, language, and, crucially, culture. Through the metaphor of resurrection, *Bohemia Docta* establishes a parallel between the idea of founding contemporary Czech political culture on this version of national identity and forming a government around a peripheral figure. Both acts appear to be, in Vachek’s perspective, of vital importance to the political future of the Czech lands—perhaps largely as a response to the very different, populist brand of nationalism that arose in Central Europe after the fall of communism.⁸

The concluding film of the Tetralogy, *Dalibor: The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Who’s Gonna Watch the Watchman*, unites peripheral characters in the present-day Czech Republic, as well as icons from the nation’s past, within Prague’s National Theater. The film takes as its core a full-length piano rehearsal of Smetana’s opera *Dalibor*, whose story pits the inhumanity of the medieval Czech nobility and royalty against the consummate humanity of one individual, the knight Dalibor. Between sections of the opera, which Karel Slach films in a fluid handheld style, moving among, above, and below the actors, Vachek inserts conversations with various individuals, whom he places in the theater’s seats and boxes. Alongside many of the Tetralogy’s core characters, *Dalibor* also features characters who echo the film’s interest in a new set of political questions and problems. These characters, like the anarchist Jakub Polák and members of the group Ya Basta, who were instrumental in organizing the 2001 anti-WTO riots in Prague, represent a new generation of dissidents. Polák and others are concerned with the issues facing the Czech Republic in the new

millennium, as the country prepared to enter the European Union: globalization, environmental concerns, discrimination against the Roma population. *Dalibor* is filled with a pervasive sense of crisis, as if the theater's walls are a protective shell against the destructive elements in the 21st-century world.

Fig. 6: Vachek and books in Prague's National Theater

The notion of the theater as shell rearticulates the centrality of Vachek's version of Czech national identity to the Tetralogy. Prague's National Theater is a monument to this sort of nationalism: above its stage is emblazoned the phrase "Národ sobě," or "The Nation for Itself," and the myth of the theater's founding holds that, after Prague's German-language theater burned down in the 19th century, Czechs collected donations from their countrymen to build a construction in which performances would be held in the mother tongue.

Additionally, however, in *Dalibor*—a film in which *Elective Affinities*' and *New Hyperion*'s hope for a government based on morality and philosophy, in which the political periphery would come to rule justly, has been abandoned—the walls of the theater take on new meaning. In evolving from a *vérité* portrait of Czech politics and culture after 1989 into a vision of an ideal political sphere populated by these individuals, the film creates a hermetic space in which its characters—now, solely those who approach social and political change through radical methods—are kept out of official politics, just as official politics are kept outside of the Tetralogy. *Dalibor* represents the end-point of Vachek's "progression towards total theater." Nothing in the film is accidental: Vachek casts his characters carefully; films an opera rehearsal; and acts out small roles himself in the drama. The contingencies—*vérité* moments—of the outside world enter the film only in an already-mediated version, through a small television set placed in one of the opera boxes, and the images we see of this world (primarily footage of a plane hitting one of the World Trade Center towers) are terrifying.

A Second Society

While the walls of the National Theater are a striking metaphor for the segregation of Vachek's second society from the first, the 16-plus hours of the Tetralogy itself might also be read as a meta-expression of this society's boundaries, and as a chronicle or map of its shifts and changes. The idea of a second society is central to the intellectual history of Czech (and, broadly, Central and East European) communist-era dissent, of which a crucial moment was the 1978 samizdat publication of Czech philosopher Václav Benda's essay "The Parallel 'Polis'." Here, Benda writes: "I suggest that we join forces in creating, slowly but surely, parallel structures that are capable, to a limited degree at least, of supplementing the generally beneficial and necessary functions that are missing in the existing structures" (36). In developing the idea of the parallel *polis*, Benda borrowed from the Czechoslovak cultural underground, writing that "the Second Culture [cultural underground] is the most developed and dynamic parallel structure. It should serve as a model for other areas..." (38). Ivan Jirous describes the cultural underground's social configuration in his seminal 1975 essay "Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival":

... the goal of our underground is to create a second culture, a culture completely independent from all official communication media and the conventional hierarchy of value judgments put out by the establishment. It is to be a culture that does not have as its goal the destruction of the establishment, because by attempting this, it would ... mean that we would fall into the trap of playing their game. (64-65)

As the above quotation illustrates, the cultural underground was deliberately non-political—the members of the Plastic People of the Universe, for instance, were brought into politics during their trial in 1976, after which they were adopted as a *cause célèbre* by Havel and the Czechoslovak dissident movement. Benda's parallel *polis*, conversely, adopts a

political model both in name (the Greek *polis*) and structure. Despite their differences, however, both “second societies” (the parallel *polis* and the cultural underground) were independent and self-sufficient, designed to function outside the totalitarian system, which the authors and the cultures they were part of perceived as corrupt, bereft of meaning, and dangerous. Vachek’s second society combines characteristics of each. It prizes, as the communist-era cultural underground did, independence from official culture and its deliberately maverick nature (both emphasized in the films’ formal characteristics), while at the same time maintaining a concern for political structures and political history (the Tetralogy never truly abandons the idea of the state or of government).

The Tetralogy’s second society also retains structural characteristics of the cultural underground and parallel *polis*. Central among these is the idea of conversation. In communist Czechoslovakia, the underground in all its manifestations adapted its communication strategies to ensure secrecy and protection from the bureaucratic and repressive “first” society. Conversation, more difficult to censor than television, radio, or print publications, came to stand in for these mass media, and news of underground occurrences was disseminated in a fashion that replicated dialogue: passed from person to person and gradually distributed throughout the web of the underground. Furthermore, conversational models became the standard for the circulation of texts within these communities. *Samizdat* and *tamizdat* materials changed hands between friends, were read or played aloud to private gatherings. Thus, in addition to their informational capacity, the underground’s communication networks also reinforced social networks and the idea of community among its constituents, who were often geographically dispersed.

Vachek’s films, as I have argued, are constructed around conversations, generally between the director and his subjects, but also within larger groups of individuals. In these conversations, Vachek, like the Chartists, builds a community within his films, albeit a

community that is centered on the director himself. Conversation is the tissue that links the individuals in his films to one another, creates continuity between the four films of the Tetralogy, and that, in turn, links the politics of Vachek's films to the politics of the recent past. The idea of conversation and its resulting social networks also finds metaphorical expression in *Bohemia Docta*, which uses the mycological concept of the rhizome to explain the notion of the underground, a metaphor that also extends to the Tetralogy's "underground."⁹ *Docta* is interspersed with references to mushrooms: in interviews with ecologists, a conversation with Vaclav Hálek, a musician who composes by listening to mushrooms, and in stand-alone shots of native Czech mushrooms that appear throughout the film. Mushroom-picking is a cherished activity for Czechs, many of whom have a practically encyclopedic knowledge of the mycological populations of their forests. Beyond expressing the structure of the underground's social (conversational) networks, then, the metaphor of the rhizome is also a quintessentially Czech cultural reference. If, in *Dalibor*, the 21st-century world appears terrifying and almost apocalyptic, this world remains outside the film. And perhaps, within the "parallel *polis*" of the Tetralogy—as in rhizomes that exist invisibly below the surface of the world—lie, as Vachek has said, "seeds of change for the future."

Afterword

The hope for the future that Vachek's Tetralogy embodies, despite Czech society's failure to deliver on the promise of 1989, is also visible in the director's pedagogy. The theme of the rhizome offers an apt illustration of this point, as it forms the core of former Vachek student Vít Janeček's documentary *Fungus (Houba, 2000)*. Many of Vachek's students have seen remarkable commercial and critical success in the Czech documentary scene of the late 1990s and 2000s. In addition to Janeček, Vachek, in his capacity as professor in and now chair of the Documentary Department at FAMU, the Film and Television Faculty of the

Prague Academy of Performing Arts, has advised filmmakers such as Jan Gogola, Jr., Filip Remunda and Vit Klusák, Erika Hníková, Lucie Králová, and Martin Mareček. All seven have adopted Vachek's performative strategies to address questions crucial to Czech society today—from the legacy of the Holocaust (Králová and Miloslav Novák's *The Ill-Fated Child* [*Zlopravěstné dítě*, 2002]) to immigration (Gogola's *Borderless České Velenice* [*České Velenice bez hranice*, 2004]); from the country's NATO membership (Janeček's *Do We Have NATO?* [*Máme NATO?*, 2003] and *Rules of the Game* (*Pravidla hry*, 2005) to women and body image (Hníková's *The Beauty Exchange* [*Ženy pro měny*, 2004]). The performativity of their work ranges from the grand theatricality of Klusák and Remunda's *Czech Dream* (*Český sen*, 2004) to quiet and insistent on-camera questioning by Hníková and Janeček, but in each case it is at the center of the films' social praxis. To put it differently, Vachek's students, following their professor's lead, are asking important questions in a society where the intimate interactions with politics one sees in *Elective Affinities* and *New Hyperion* are no longer possible.

Fig. 7: At the pet cemetery in *Záviš*

And as his students are moving further into the tangles of Czech politics and society, Vachek is distancing himself from them. His new film, *Záviš: The Prince of Pornofolk Under the Influence of Griffith's Intolerance and Tati's Mr. Hulot's Holiday, or the Rise and Fall of Czechoslovakia, 1918 - 1992* (*Záviš, kníže pornofolku pod vlivem Griffithovy Intolerance a Tatiho Prázdnin pana Hulota aneb vznik a zánik Československa, 1918 - 1992*), which premiered at the Jihlava Documentary Festival in October 2006, follows the path the Tetralogy establishes, relying less on *vérité* camerawork and more on still and staged shots; less on current events (although they continue to be a concern) and more on the natural world, the artistic world, and the absurd.¹⁰ Unlike the films of the Tetralogy, whose epic length merged film-time with real-time, this new film runs approximately two and a half

hours, slightly closer to a traditional feature film. I am certain that the shorter running time of Vachek's new film is not a response to the critiques of the Tetralogy's length. It is perhaps better read both within the trajectory of the director's work since the early 1960s—as another step in a gradual movement towards fiction—and also as a necessary response to the constraints of the increasingly commercialized Czech film market; the same market for which his students are adapting Vachek's older style as they interrogate the politics of a new millennium.

Filmography

- The Beauty Exchange (Ženy pro měny)*. Dir. Erika Hníková. Czech Republic, 2004.
Bohemia Docta or The Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart (Divine Comedy) (Bohemia Docta aneb Labyrint světa a lusthauz srdce (Božská Komédie)). Dir. Karel Vachek. Czech Republic, 2000.
Borderless České Velenice (České Velenice bez hranice). Dir. Jan Gogola, Jr. Czech Republic, 2004.
Czech Dream (Český sen). Dir. Vit Klusák and Filip Remunda. Czech Republic, 2004.
Do We Have NATO? (Máme NATO?). Dir. Vit Janeček. Czech Republic, 2003.
Elective Affinities (Spřiznění volbou). Dir. Karel Vachek. Czechoslovakia, 1968.
Fungus (Houba). Dir. Vit Janeček. Czech Republic, 2000.
The Ill-Fated Child (Zlopravěstné dítě). Dir. Lucie Králová and Miloslav Novák. Czech Republic, 2002.
Moravian Hellas (Moravská Hellas). Dir. Karel Vachek. Czechoslovakia, 1963.
New Hyperion or Equality Liberty Brotherhood (Nový Hyperion aneb Rovnost volnost bratrství). Dir. Karel Vachek. Czech Republic, 1992.
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² Stankovič is a figure in all four films of the Tetralogy despite the fact that he died in 2001. In *Dalibor*, he is invoked in a conversation between his friends and family.

³ The shooting ratio for Vachek's films is also remarkably low, hovering around 1 to 2.

⁴ The films of the Tetralogy were all screened at least once on Czech Television and in festivals and retrospectives throughout the Czech Republic and internationally, though none

saw extended commercial theatrical releases and all are deeply polarizing films, attracting both devoted supporters and devoted detractors from all walks of society.

⁵ In *The Theory of Matter*, Vachek describes Švejk as a “nearly perfect example of a centered figure” (31).

⁶ Cibulka’s list, which is frequently updated, is now maintained online at www.cibulka.com.

⁷ *Vérité* technology’s centrality to the film is signaled in its poster, which announces *Elective Affinities*’ subject: “Ten filmed days with Dubček, Šik, Smrkovský, Goldstücker, Cisář, Černík, Svoboda and others—between March 15th and 20th, 1968. With an Éclair camera (16mm) and a Nagra [tape recorder], 6 hours and 20 minutes of rough synchronized footage were shot, out of which was assembled the “image” of the fourteen days that preceded the elections of the president of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.” [Translation is mine.]

⁸ The latter is discussed in Tismaneanu (chapter 3).

⁹ While the idea of the rhizome has become a common concept in philosophy, following Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in botany, a rhizome is the multi-armed underground stem structure of a plant. The visible aspect of mushrooms is only a tiny part of the plant, with the rhizome underneath spanning, in some cases, many meters.

¹⁰ The 2006 Summer Film School at Uherské Hradiště describes the film, which it pre-screened, thus: “On the heels of a three-legged dog and a two-legged director on a journey through the Czech present and the Czechoslovak past: four-year-old Edvard Beneš saves the life of his family, sixty-year-old Václav Klaus plays and doesn’t play tennis, a statue hits its head against a wall. People fight in ketchup and bury their dogs. A collapsed house, a house made of marijuana, and a businessman’s billion-crown villa. Polar bears, hawks, foxes. The songs of Milan Závěš Smrčka. The world according to Karel Vachek”; [http://katalog.artfilm.cz/film/M16826:me\\$popup](http://katalog.artfilm.cz/film/M16826:me$popup). [Translation is mine.]