

RETRO REAPPROPRIATIONS

RESPONSES TO THE THIRTY CASES OF MAJOR ZEMAN IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Veronika Pehe

School of Slavonic and East European Studies
University College London
16 Taviton Street, London, WC1E 6BT
United Kingdom

veronika.pehe.10@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract: The first post-1989 rerun of the 1970s television series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* ('The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman,' or in short 'Major Zeman') in the Czech Republic generated a heated controversy in the media. This article will examine why *Major Zeman* became such a contested topic and presents an analysis of responses to the series. The paper suggests that the rescreening consolidated a particular 'retro' reception of the series, which reappropriates socialist popular culture and ascribes it with an ostensibly apolitical, postmodern, ironic sensibility. The paper will consider how such a response can be reconciled with more explicitly political approaches to the series, arguing that retro has a political agenda of its own.

Keywords: *Major Zeman*, Czechoslovak television, Retro, Television reruns, Post-socialist nostalgia

The late 1990s were a significant period in the Czech Republic for the development of nostalgia for socialism. Although several films that portrayed the socialist period with a benign, nostalgic gaze, were produced earlier in the 1990s,¹ the years 1998-1999 witnessed a proliferation of nostalgic events. After [Michal David](#), king of 1980s Italian-inspired disco, experienced a triumphant [comeback](#) in 1998, Jan Hřebejk's successful film comedy set in the 1960s, *Pelíšky* (Cosy Dens), was released to critical acclaim in the spring of 1999. In September of the same year, the 1970s television series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* ('The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman,' 1974-1979) was rescreened on the first channel of Czech Television, the public service broadcaster, for the first time since the fall of the communist regime. Discussions of post-socialist nostalgia, led by the large body of literature on its German version, 'Ostalgie,' have focused largely on the material culture of socialism.² However, I suggest that in the Czech context, the popular culture of the socialist era plays a more prominent role in memory practices relating to the period, an area that remains largely unexplored in other post-socialist contexts.³ The re-scheduling of socialist-era TV series in particular, as Irena

¹ The earliest significant nostalgic narrative of the socialist period was Michal Viewegh's 1992 novel *Báječná léta pod psa* ('Wonderful Years that Sucked'), adapted for the screen in 1997 (dir. Petr Nikolaev). Other films which handle the period with benign humour, if not explicit nostalgia, include *Tankový prapor* ('The Tank Battalion,' dir. Vít Olmer, 1991) and *Černí baroni* ('Black Barons,' dir. Zdeněk Sirový, 1992), as well as the musical comedy *Šakalí léta* ('Jackal Years,' dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1993).

² See, for example, Roger F. Cooke, 'Good Bye, Lenin!: Free-Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism,' *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 43, 2, 2007, 206-219; Martin Blum, 'Remaking the East German Past: Ostalgie, Identity, and Material Culture,' *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 34, 3, 2000, 229-253; Daphne Berdahl, "'(N)Ostalgie" for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things,' *Ethnos*, 64, 2, 1999, 192-211.

³ The continued popularity of Soviet popular culture, specifically music, has been discussed by Kevin Platt and touched upon by Maya Nadkarni and Olga Schevchenko. See Kevin M. F. Platt, 'Russian Empire of Pop: Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the "New Wave" Competition,' *The Russian Review*, 72, 3, 2013, 447-469; and, Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, 'The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices,' *Ab Imperio*, 2, 2004, 487-519.

Reifová has remarked, is one of the most specific and powerful manifestations of post-socialist nostalgia in the Czech Republic.⁴

However, this nostalgia has been a divisive topic within Czech public discourse. The rescreening of *Major Zeman* was accompanied by a clamorous debate. All of the major daily newspapers published numerous articles in reaction to the news of the planned rescreening, as well as reviews of the show once its broadcast began, with whole thematic supplements dedicated to the event.⁵ On an institutional level, the debate took place within the Council for Television and Radio broadcasting, which was largely against the release of the series.⁶ The parliament-appointed Council of Czech Television, however, ultimately decided that rebroadcasting the series was not in violation of any existing law, in spite of fears that the propagandistic nature of the series might be seen as an unlawful public promotion of an oppressive regime.⁷ Nevertheless, the decision and the rescreening itself did raise voices of protest, mainly from the Confederation of Political Prisoners, an organization representing the victims of Communist oppression, who even filed a lawsuit against Czech Television, as well as from the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS), and the centre-right Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL).⁸

Why was *Major Zeman* so controversial, when other staples of socialist television entertainment, such as the series *Inženýrská odysea* ('The Engineer's Odyssey,' 1979) or *Rozpaky kuchaře Svatopluka* ('The Hesitations of Chef Svatopluk,' 1984) had been rescreened without comment earlier in the 1990s?⁹ In this article, I will propose a typology of responses to the rescreening of the series through an analysis of reactions in the media. The responses to the series will be considered primarily through articles published in the daily and weekly press between the periods when a possible rebroadcast of the series was first mentioned (May 1996) until the end of the rerun in 2000.¹⁰ This article also takes into account the attitudes taken by various participants in the television debates that accompanied the broadcasting of the series.¹¹ Based on these responses, I suggest that the series can be interpreted as a 'retro' artefact. While established discussions of post-socialist nostalgia often operate with a set of dichotomies,¹² in this article I propose that introducing the concept of retro provides a framework to integrate the complex interactions of various, even seemingly contradictory, responses to socialist popular culture.

⁴ Irena Reifová, 'Rerunning and "Re-Watching" Socialist TV Drama Serials: Post-Socialist Czech Television Audiences Between Commodification and Reclaiming the Past,' *Critical Studies in Television*, 4, 2, 2009, 53-71.

⁵ The series premiered on 16 September 1999. In the period between 10 and 20 September, 221 newspaper articles, radio broadcasts and television programmes mentioned the event. On 16 September, the daily *Lidové noviny* brought news of the rebroadcast on its title page and ran a thematic section dedicated to the series on pp. 2-3. The daily *Mladá fronta Dnes* also featured an article on *Major Zeman* on its title page, and printed several articles on pages 6 and 13 in relation to the series (in the domestic news and opinion sections respectively). *Právo* featured three articles on the topic in its culture section on p. 14 and *Slovo* had 5 articles on p. 2 (domestic news). The most popular daily tabloid *Blesk* brought three articles about the series on its second page and the Czech-language versions of Radio Free Europe and the BBC World Service also mentioned the rescreening that day.

⁶ Anon., 'Odpor proti "majoru Zemanovi" roste,' *Hospodářské noviny*, 15 September, 1999, 4.

⁷ For the perspective of the Council of Czech Television, see the web release from the Council's meeting on 15 September 1999, http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/pub/radact_zpravy/27.pdf, last accessed 22 April 2014.

⁸ See, for instance, bad, gas, 'Politici vězni žalují ČT kvůli majoru Zemanovi,' *Lidové noviny*, 9 September, 1999, 2; Libor Budinský, 'Politici vězni stupňují útok proti majoru Zemanovi,' *Lidové noviny*, 10 September, 1999, 1; Barbora Silná, 'Liberecká ODS je rozlícena vysíláním majora Zemana,' *Právo*, 9 September, 1999, 12; Anon., 'Odpor proti "majoru Zemanovi" roste,' *Hospodářské noviny*, 15 September, 1999, 4.

⁹ See Jiří Peňáš, 'Nesmrtelní hurvínci,' *Respekt*, 5 May, 1996, 3; Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring*, Cornell University Press, 2010, p. 237.

¹⁰ The corpus of articles which inform the analysis in this paper is taken from the dailies *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, *Právo*, *Hospodářské noviny*, *Zemské noviny*, *Slovo*, and *Haló noviny*; and the weeklies *Týden*, *Respekt*, and *Literární noviny*.

¹¹ A total of nine accompanying studio debates were broadcast over the course of the thirty episodes. As the press reaction to the first two debates was largely negative (see, for instance, man, čef, kv, 'Třicátý první případ majora Zemana,' *Týden*, 20 September, 1999, 20; Štefan Weber, 'Major Zeman a spory o tlustou čáru za minulostí,' *Zemské noviny*, 25 September, 1999, 7; Michal Pavlata, 'Vysílání majora Zemana není ve veřejném zájmu,' *Lidové noviny*, 15 October, 1999, 1), Czech Television replaced host Marek Wollner with Marie Křepelková after the first two debates.

¹² Svetlana Boym's division of nostalgia into 'reflective' and 'restorative' strands has been particularly influential. See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, 2001.

1. Propaganda versus Quality

What makes *Major Zeman* singular within the corpus of Czechoslovak television production is its explicit political content. Made to showcase the good work of the communist police – allegedly with direct guidance from the Ministry of the Interior¹³ – *Major Zeman* has been perceived as the most heavily ideologized product of socialist television in Czechoslovakia. The series reconstructs the history of the years 1945–1973 through the life-story of the policeman Major Jan Zeman (Vladimír Brabec), with some episodes based on real-life events, narrated in such a way as to highlight the role of the Communist Party in post-war Czechoslovakia.¹⁴ The proposal of Czech Television to rescreen the series in the 1990s garnered extraordinary attention from the first instant it was publically mentioned.¹⁵ Claiming that it wished to stimulate a public debate, and perhaps inspired by Slovak commercial channel Markíza's successful rerun of the series in 1998,¹⁶ Czech Television began rescreening *Major Zeman* in September 1999 on its first channel in weekly instalments at a prime-time 8pm slot, accompanying each episode with a thirty-minute **documentary**, which aimed to reconstruct how historical events, distorted in the series, had 'really' unfolded. In addition, after the documentaries, Czech Television also irregularly broadcast a series of studio debates with historians and other relevant specialists, who discussed – at times quite heatedly – key aspects of the socialist past.

The responses to *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman*, I suggest, can be divided into several camps.¹⁷ What could be called the 'repressive approach' was propagated by the anti-communist section of the press and public, led by the Confederation of Political Prisoners, who protested loudly against the allegedly insulting nature of the series towards victims of communist oppression.¹⁸ Generally, adherents of this view felt that it was morally reprehensible for the country's public television station to show a programme so blatantly defending an ideology they considered criminal.¹⁹ Concern was expressed about the effect the rescreening might have on young viewers;²⁰ others compared the obvious propagandistic intentions of *Major Zeman* to the films of Leni Riefenstahl.²¹ The *Zeman* controversy thus drew attention to the problematic moral legacy of socialist popular culture in the Czech Republic, but also pointed to an unwillingness to address this legacy explicitly. The second studio debate accompanying the series demonstrated particularly clearly that participants were hesitant to broach the topic of the specific measures of coming to terms

¹³ Petr A. Bílek, 'The 30 Cases of Major Zeman: Domestication and Ideological Conversion of a James Bond Narrative in the Czech TV Series Context of the 1970s' in *National Mythologies in Central European TV Series: How J.R. Won the Cold War*, ed., Jan Čulík, Sussex Academic Press, 2013, p. 49.

¹⁴ The series attempted to narrate the establishment and development of the Communist police force. Zeman is thus a regular police officer, who through his good work and the support of his long-standing friend Colonel Kalina (Miloš Willig) eventually moves from the provincial town where he started his career to the criminal investigation force in Prague. Working closely with the Secret Police through his friends Lieutenant Colonel Žitný (František Němec) and Major Hradec (Rudolf Jelínek), Zeman helps to resolve a number of major cases which consolidate the role of the Communist police forces in Czechoslovak society. Providing an ideologically 'correct' interpretation of certain key episodes in post-war Czechoslovak history (the Communist takeover in February 1948, the resistance of the Mašín brothers against the regime, the murder of three Party functionaries in Babice in 1951, the events of the Prague Spring, etc.), the series was also designed to offer an unfavourable picture of potential threats to the regime, including Western agents, the CIA, kulaks, the former aristocracy, the church, or dissidents. Originally broadcast between 1976-1980 on Czechoslovak Television, in the post-socialist era, the series was first re-broadcast on Slovak commercial channel Markíza in 1998. The first rescreening in the Czech Republic in 1999-2000 on Czech Television, the public broadcaster, received an average rating of 17.6 % (see <http://img6.ceskatelevize.cz/boss/image/contents/sledovanost/byli-jsme-pritom/zeman.pdf>, last accessed 21 April 2014). This was then followed by rescreenings on private channels (TV Prima 2004-2005; TV Barrandov 2009-2011; 2013-2014). The series was released on DVD, without the accompanying documentaries and debates, in 2007.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Anon., 'Železný váhá směřit kanál s Premiérou kvůli mjr. Zemanovi,' *Právo*, 27 May, 1996, 2; Jiří Franěk, 'Dilema,' *Právo*, 14 August, 1998, 6; Jiří Hanák, 'Kráľ, Zeman a víra v čerta,' *Právo*, 19 September, 1999, 6.

¹⁶ Jindřich Šídlo, 'Třicet případů majora Puchalského,' *Respekt*, 30 November, 1998, 5.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Jan Kohoutek's analysis of responses to *Major Zeman* in 'Veřejná polemika o uvedení seriálu Třicet případů majora Zemana v České televizi po roce 1989 (diskurzivní analýza českého celostátního tisku)', MA dissertation, Masaryk University Brno, 2011.

¹⁸ See, for example, Anon., 'Major Zeman se vrací na obrazovky,' *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 1 October, 1998, 6; Mirka Spáčilová, 'Česká televize hledá argumenty pro uvedení Majora Zemana,' *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 September, 1999, 6; Jaromír Chochola, 'Protestují vězni, poslanci i odboráři,' *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 September, 1999, 6.

¹⁹ While the rerun of another heavily ideological Normalization-era series, *Žena za pultem* ('The Woman Behind the Counter,' 1977) on the commercial channel Prima also drew negative press, this reaction was not nearly as strong precisely because of the station's commercial status.

²⁰ Many press articles make reference to the 'morally corrupting' potential of the series for young viewers, but then go on to refute it. Lidové noviny, for example, published an article entitled 'Young people are not interested in Zeman at all' (Marek Kerier, 'Mládež se o Zemana vůbec nezajímá,' *Lidové noviny*, 17 September, 1999, 4).

²¹ Jan Rejžek, 'Major Zeman na hrad?,' *Literární noviny*, 10, 39, 1999, 4.

with the past. Vague statements that ‘things should have been named clearly long ago’ abounded on the part of both former political prisoner Jiří Stránský and columnist Tomáš Vystrčil, though an articulation of what these things might be never occurred.²²

If Czech Television promised a nationwide discussion of the past through *Major Zeman*, it failed to deliver – commentator Jiří Peňás’s call for *Major Zeman* to become the equivalent of the German ‘Historikerstreit’ did not materialize.²³ Instead, the competing ‘quality narrative’ pointed to the perceived continuity of socialist popular culture in certain sections of society. Svetlana Boym has theorized nostalgia as falling into two narrative categories – reflective and restorative:

Restorative nostalgia stresses nostos and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in algia, in longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately.²⁴

What could be termed the ‘quality approach’ is perhaps nearest in character to Boym’s restorative nostalgia. Significantly for the context of *Major Zeman*, Boym also argues that ‘restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition.’²⁵ The adherents of this view wished to reclaim a lost site of socialist popular culture, which they saw as traditional and good quality entertainment. This particular narrative, then, is interested in the continuity of popular culture and of the original viewing experience. The argument made is that *Major Zeman*, in spite of its ideological content, is in fact a solid piece of filmmaking and an entertaining detective series, superior to excessively violent and sexualized Western productions.²⁶

2. Decoding the Major

A complex reading landscape thus begins to emerge, where different strategies compete with one another. Within literary studies, it is a well-documented phenomenon that readers searched for signs of ‘Aesopian language’ in socialist literature – a code of political metaphors and allegories, which could be interpreted as being critical of the regime or somehow subversive.²⁷ The same mode of reading can be applied to television as well. In the present-day situation where socialist television production has lost its political frame of reference, a rejection of Aesopian reading strategies leads to simply attending to the genre of the series and producing the ‘quality’ narrative. In other readings, however, attempts at decoding persist. ‘Seeing through’ the obvious ideological content of *Major Zeman* thus becomes a significant part of its viewing pleasure for certain sections of the audience. This could be termed the ‘educational approach’ – a number of contributors to the debate argued that the obvious ideological intentions of the series made it an excellent didactic tool for learning about the functioning of communist propaganda.²⁸ This was also the view propagated by academic writing on the subject. Petr A. Bílek summarizes this position effectively:

²² Debate accompanying the series *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* entitled ‘Tlustá čára za minulostí?’ (‘A thick line behind the past?’), *Czech Television*, broadcast on 23 September 1999.

²³ Jiří Peňás, ‘Asimilovaná lež,’ *Respekt*, 12 October, 1998, 19.

²⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, 2001, p. xviii.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Martin Komárek, ‘Jedni tajrlíci se vracují, druzí už tu jsou,’ *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 13 November, 1998, 15. This attitude was also particularly marked in responses from newspaper readers, for example, ‘Hlasy čtenářů: Návrat majora Zemana – je to vtip, či nebezpečí?’, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 7 August, 1998, 11.

²⁷ See Lev Losev, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*, trans. Jane Bobko, Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1984; Andrei Terian, ‘The Rhetoric of Subversion: Strategies of “Aesopian Language” in Romanian Literary Criticism Under Late Communism,’ *Slovo*, 24, 2, 2012, 75-95.

²⁸ (spa), ‘Je to skvělá studijní látka...,’ *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 September, 1999, 6. The educational values of the series were also one of Czech Television’s official arguments for rescreening *Major Zeman*. See, e.g., Anon., ‘Major Zeman bude od září na obrazovkách ČT,’ *Právo*, 26 August, 1999, 1.; or, Jindřich Šídlo, ‘Třicet případů majora Puchalského,’ *Respekt*, 30 November, 1998, 5.

In the stories about Major Zeman, all ideological propaganda is so transparently obvious that the fear that, through watching the series, the viewer would believe in the positives of a satisfied life under communism is somewhat paranoid.²⁹

The official rhetoric adopted by Czech Television also had a didactic remit, and the inclusion of the paratextual materials contextualizing and explaining the period in which the series was set contributed to giving the rescreening an educational frame.³⁰

The decoding of Aesopian features however generated another kind of response. This could best be labelled a 'joking' or 'ironic' approach. This mode of reading is perhaps most adequately captured in the concept of 'recese,' a Czech word which has no direct English equivalent, but has an established meaning within Czech culture. 'Recese' denotes a certain type of practical humour or even prank, and as a strategy in cultural representations it can be detected already in the work of Jaroslav Hašek, author of archetypal character Švejk, or in Danny Smiřický, the protagonist of Josef Škvorecký's novels, who treats everything around him with a deprecating irony. At first glance, such a joking approach does very little to reflect on politics. It is interested in the aesthetic level of nostalgic practices and representations and thus takes a kind of ironic, postmodern view – it uses socialist aesthetics for the purposes of its own playful pastiche of the past. This reading mainly arose at a point when a certain generational exchange had taken place: ironic approaches to the series largely occurred when the viewer did not have a strong experiential investment in the period in which the series was made and was thus able to consider it with the kind of detachment that facilitates irony.³¹ In the first television debate accompanying the series, Michal Zavadil represented the generation of viewers who initially saw *Major Zeman* as young children. As chairman of the now apparently defunct Společnost přátel Majora Zemana ('Society of Friends of Major Zeman'), he called the series 'wonderful postmodern entertainment'.³² An ironically adorational attitude to the series continues to live on through its [fanclub](#).

3. Major Zeman as Retro

The ironic approach turns *Major Zeman* into a retro artefact. Zavadil's description of *Major Zeman* as 'postmodern' is significant for the reading of the series as retro, a term that I am here using to designate a type of nostalgia devoid of affect that Fredric Jameson has identified as symptomatic of postmodern culture;³³ it is, in the words of Elizabeth Guffey, 'a non-historical way of knowing the past.'³⁴ Paul Grainge notes that 'retro is the word that perhaps best describes versions of postmodern nostalgia: playful, ironic, and where the past is a storehouse of fashion.'³⁵ Replete with irony and concerned primarily with style and surface, retro, as Grainge adds, 'borrows from the past without sentimentality, quotes from the past without longing, parodies the past without loss.'³⁶ Approaching the series as a joke or prank – a form of 'recese' – makes the past available for precisely such playful reappropriations. Such a reading thus ostensibly turns away from an engagement with the politics of the past, revelling instead in its aesthetic surface; it arises from viewing the series with a certain camp sensibility – or, as Irena Reifová has identified it, an 'affection for "socialist kitsch"'³⁷ – which revels in the series' aesthetic and generic deficiencies. The concept of retro has not been widely applied to discussions of post-socialist nostalgia; in the post-Soviet context, Kevin Platt has used

²⁹ Petr A. Bílek, 'Předmluva', in Petr A. Bílek, ed., *James Bond a major Zeman: Ideologizující vzorce vyprávění*, Pistorius & Olšanská, 2007, p. 9.

³⁰ Jan Müller, 'Co vedlo Puchalského k rozhodnutí vysílat propagandistický seriál,' *Lidové noviny*, 1 July, 1999, 19.

³¹ The generational 'split' amongst the potential and actual audience was remarked upon in the press, see for instance ej, 'Přeberou si diváci demagogii Majora Zemana?,' *Slovo* 17 August, 1998, 3; Jan Müller, 'Co vedlo Puchalského k rozhodnutí vysílat propagandistický seriál,' *Lidové noviny*, 1 July, 1999, 19; Karel Vrána, 'Bič boží v opeře,' *Týden*, 2 May, 2000, 32.

³² See the untitled debate accompanying the series *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* [Beseda k seriálu Třicet případů Majora Zemana], *Czech Television*, broadcast on 16 September, 1999.

³³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, 1991.

³⁴ Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival*, Reaktion Books, 2006, p. 20.

³⁵ Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America*, Praeger, 2002, p. 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁷ Reifová, 66.

this term to signify a response where the past is viewed both with ironic distance and yet constructs a narrative of a continuation of traditions.³⁸ Retro thus provides a way of speaking about nostalgic practices that do not indulge a sentimental mobilization of memory. Elaborating on these observations, I will propose in the remainder of this article that retro provides a useful framework to reconcile the various at times contradictory temporal and political impulses in responses to socialist popular culture.

Over-the-top performances and over-coding of certain phenomena, such as the exaggerated portrayal of drug use in the twenty-ninth episode, 'Mimikry' (Mimicry, 1: 29), create a kind of hyperbolic mode, which invites ironic readings. This episode allows the viewer to engage in several levels of decoding and to thus partake of an 'in-joke' situation – the pleasure is derived from a kind of intellectual flattery of the viewer who can congratulate him or herself on recognizing the reference. Watching the series thus becomes a game of spotting ideological fabrications. The overt purpose of this episode is to suggest to the viewer that a real-life hijacking of an airplane in 1972 was carried out by a group of underground rock musicians. Furthermore, the series would have us believe that the hijackers were drug users. However, viewers even rudimentarily familiar with the historical context will know that the hijacking had nothing to do with the underground rock scene and that neither the hijackers, nor in fact members of the band The Plastic People of the Universe, whom the episode is attempting to parody, were actually heroin addicts. Such a seeing through then allows viewers to enjoy the humorous irony of the fanciful portrayal of heroin use in the episode.

4. Resistant Readings

Andrew Roberts interpreted the revival of Czech socialist television series as apolitical, comparing it to American pop culture nostalgia, to which whole television channels are dedicated: 'Usually such nostalgia is either a mindless surrender to the atmosphere of one's youth or a knowing wink at the campiness of the past. In neither case is politics much in evidence.'³⁹ However, while retro readings of *Major Zeman* may not be explicitly political, I suggest they do operate with certain assumptions. The aforementioned practice of 'seeing through' and laughing at the overly ideologized elements of the series enables the viewer to create a resistant reading. Re-visitations of the past through popular culture afford the viewer the possibility of setting him or herself 'above' the period ideology and reaffirming the ideology of the present. In this way, they retrospectively ascribe a narrative of everyday dissidence onto the viewer performing this reading.

Significantly, the different reading strategies outlined are not mutually exclusive. A resistant reading of *Major Zeman* can complement aesthetic surface readings: because *Major Zeman* is so heavily ideologized, attending only to the aesthetic level is already a form of setting oneself 'above' the ideology. A comparison can be made here with the current American retro television series *Mad Men* (2007-present), set in 1960s New York, where a similar response can be observed: the audience can see through the period ideology, i.e. the sexism and racism of the period, and this sense of being above this ideology allows viewers to enjoy its aesthetic trappings or surface. Yet there is a vicarious element at play here of indulging in forbidden fruit. Martin Franc detects a similar reading in relation to Czech socialist popular culture, while also hinting at how this can compete with other readings:

Though the popularity of television series of the 1970s and 1980s is, for a certain section of the audience, truly influenced by their at least partial agreement with the thoughts and visions that these series overtly or covertly present, a significant part of their popularity lies in an element of provocation or pleasure from a fruit that at least some wish to forbid.⁴⁰

³⁸ Kevin M. F. Platt, 'Russian Empire of Pop: Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the "New Wave" Competition,' *The Russian Review* 72, 3, 2013: pp. 447-469.

³⁹ Andrew Roberts, 'The Politics and Anti-Politics of Nostalgia,' *East European Politics & Societies*, 16, 3, 2002, 764-809.

⁴⁰ Martin Franc, 'Ostalgie v Čechách', in Adéla Gjuríčová and Michal Kopeček eds., *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989*, Paseka, 2008, p. 201.

In such a reading, viewers, on the one hand, return to an aspect of their everyday practices during socialism, but at the same time the re-viewing experience necessarily operates with retrospective knowledge, which creates a sense of ironic detachment and moral superiority to the ideology displayed. The practice of retrospective reviewing necessarily produces a sense of distance; the original viewing experience can never be recreated. A sense of historical awareness is thus embedded in the reviewing of the series, even if this reviewing strives for a restorative or quality narrative.

Such an effect is intrinsic to the practice of watching reruns. Writing about the American television network Nickelodeon, which reprises 1950s sitcoms under a nostalgia label, Lynn Spigel argues that:

Despite this nostalgia, the idea that the viewer is somehow more enlightened than the characters (and audiences) of the past is absolutely central to the interpretation the network solicits. Thus, both in its individual texts and in its institutional strategies of syndication, television recontextualizes the past in terms of contemporary uses and perspectives. (...) Television engages in a kind of historical consciousness that remembers the past in order to believe in the progress of the present.⁴¹

The ironic distance in rewatchings of *Major Zeman* also implicitly endorses the present and its progress over the socialist period. This view was at times corroborated by the 'quality narrative', where the discussion of quality focused on the allegedly superior craft of the series, while assuming that the politics of the series had been overcome, or was not relevant to the viewing experience.⁴² The disdain for the ideology of the period which is present in the various readings of the series does not produce a nostalgia for the politics of the socialist era, but conversely contributes to a wider public discourse in the Czech Republic that views the socialist period and left-wing politics as a failure.

5. Conclusions: The Dynamics of Progress

The case of *Major Zeman* demonstrates the variety of responses that socialist popular culture produced at the end of the 1990s in the Czech Republic. Emerging significantly from these debates is the sense of nostalgia as divorced from affect and longing, replaced instead by a postmodern, ironic sensibility, best summarized under the term retro. Retro thus becomes not a characteristic of cultural representations, but a reading strategy, which, however, does not necessarily preclude other, more politicized responses. The analysis in this article has set out to complicate neat divisions between restorative and ironic forms of nostalgia in relation to socialist popular culture. The explicitly ideological nature of *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* demonstrates particularly well a paradox of the Czech case: the object of nostalgia lies not so much in the politics of the socialist period, but, on the contrary, in a sense of its overcoming. The various responses to the series intersect in their dynamic of progress from socialism, which is achieved through readings which set the viewer above the ideological content of the series. Through this linear dynamic, retro constructs a narrative of continuity between the socialist and post-socialist periods, which ultimately reaffirms the politics of the present.

⁴¹ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 361-362.

⁴² See the responses of Pavel Dvořák and Marcel Novotný in 'Hlasy čtenářů: Návrat majora Zemana - je to vtip, či nebezpečí?', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 7 August, 1998, 11.

Biography:

Veronika Pehe is currently working towards a PhD at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. She holds an undergraduate and postgraduate degree in Comparative Literature from King's College London and University College London. Her thesis is an interdisciplinary examination of discourses of post-socialist nostalgia in the Czech Republic.