

Subverting space: Private, public and power in three Czechoslovak films from the 1960s and '70s.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on three Czechoslovak films from the communist era: two New Wave features, *Ostře sledované vlaky/Closely Observed Trains* (Jiří Menzel, 1966) and *O slavnosti a hostech/The Party And The Guests* (Jan Němec, 1966), plus a key post-Prague Spring film, *Ucho/The Ear* (Karel Kachyňa, 1970). All three films were banned following the 1968 Soviet invasion. This article argues that the films' subversive content is primarily articulated through spatial strategies. Specifically, the article examines a filmic discourse of political and social subversion, which hinges on the negotiation and appropriation of space. Starting from the notion that space is produced by social agency and interaction, and from Michel Foucault's assertion that 'we do not live inside a void, inside of which we could place individuals and things [...] we live inside a set of relations', this article will look at the dynamic relationship of the films' characters to their allotted spatial situations.

A pivotal scene of *Ucho/The Ear* (Karel Kachyňa, Czechoslovakia, 1970) shows the protagonists' discovery of what they had long suspected: their home, a villa in a well-to-do area of Prague, is kept under constant surveillance by the communist government, through a system of listening devices. After a frantic search through the house has revealed microphones hidden in every room, from the cellar to the bathroom, the protagonists, a married couple, look at each other in dismay: 'where can we talk?' whispers the wife, Anna (Jiřina Bohdalová), to her husband, Ludvík (Radoslav Brzobohatý), who replies: 'nowhere'. Yet talk they do, incessantly, throughout the film, before and after finding the proof of their being listened to: apart from some flashback scenes, showing the couple attending a government party earlier the same evening, *The Ear* is characterized by rapid and intimate dialogue between the two protagonists, unraveling the complexities of their relationship to each other and to the communist Establishment. Verbal and factual narratives take place in the confined and claustrophobic setting of their house, a government-haunted space where the couple are often shot in a restricted frame, partially obstructed by furniture, and in some of the smallest rooms such as the toilet. Far from being a mere backdrop, however, the setting provides the film with a vital part of its overall narrative: as the couple's ongoing sparring combines with a dramatic interaction with the space they inhabit, this very space ceases to be an inert agglomeration of walls and furniture, becoming instead a site of negotiation between the protagonists and the external power that seeks to control them. While the house is, on one hand, Anna's and Ludvík's own space, it is just as much a space belonging to *them*, the communist authorities: not only literally, as the house has been given to the couple by the government, who is Ludvík's employer, but also

effectively through the use of round-the-clock surveillance. The fact that the ever-present listening system is nicknamed ‘the Ear’ by the couple, and referred to as such throughout the film, highlights the active, ‘live’ nature of the house, an intelligent force that monitors and controls the protagonists’ lives. Narratively and visually, then, the film’s plot unfolds on a spatial level, motivated by the protagonists’ deepening involvement with the bugging system invading their home.

The foregrounding of spatial narratives is not unusual in Czechoslovak cinema of the 1960s and early 1970s; this article will consider *The Ear* together with two of the most significant productions of the time, *O slavnosti a hostech/The Party And The Guests* (Jan Němec, 1966) and *Ostře sledované vlaky/Closely Observed Trains* (Jiří Menzel, 1966); it will argue that spatial organization and narratives provide the films’ prime motivation, articulating a discourse of political and social subversion, which hinges on the negotiation and appropriation of space. The article’s theoretical framework rests first of all on Michel Foucault’s assessment of spatial divisions:

there are [spatial] oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example, between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred. (Foucault 1988: 229–236)

The films analysed here are built on the flaunting, subversion, and ultimate ‘desecration’ of these oppositions; at the same time, the films also illustrate Foucault’s observation that ‘we do not live inside a void, inside of which we could place individuals and things [...]’

we live inside a set of relations' (Foucault 1988: 229–236). The films' characters live indeed inside a set of relations: the multiple tensions and on-going negotiations between inside and outside, rebellion and conformity, restriction and freedom. The consideration that these spatial relations are inherently unstable is based on the assumption that space is not passively filled or lived through, but it is rather a product and a producer of human action and experience. A vast body of research has dealt with the interaction of human beings and their environment; for the purpose of this article, and in the light of Foucault's assessment of spatial divisions, the work of Henri Lefebvre and Gaston Bachelard is particularly useful, as it may help to conceptualize dialectic processes in the films' articulation of spatial meaning. However, before turning to a spatial criticism of the films in question, it is necessary to consider the historical and cinematic contexts in which they emerged, in the attempt to understand the factors that may have influenced the recourse to the creative manipulation of screen space.

Czechoslovak cinema of the communist era is far from being a uniform product; indeed, the period of communist government was itself so long (1948–1989) as to make generalizations impossible. Film scholars have traditionally singled out the years 1963–1968, when a veritable explosion of new cinematic talent gave rise to what is known as the Czechoslovak New Wave; as Peter Hames has shown, however, New Wave directors and scriptwriters did not emerge in a cultural vacuum, but were preceded and followed by a number of significant films and film-makers. In some cases, New Wave directors had themselves been active before 1963, and both new and established film-makers managed to produce and release uncensored films after the 1968 Soviet invasion, even though these films were eventually banned once the process of communist 'normalization'

caught up with them (Hames 2005: 29–77, 239–236). It is therefore possible to identify a substantial body of work, produced before, during and after 1968, which is defined by some key characteristics usually more readily associated with the New Wave only: namely, an ‘art’ cinema set of aesthetic conventions, an anti-Establishment attitude, and a commitment to represent the experience of ordinary Czechoslovak citizens. While the concern with everyday life is naturally more prevalent in what Hames identifies as the ‘realist’ school among Czechoslovak directors, exemplified by the work of Miloš Forman (Hames 2005: 29–77, 239–240), surrealistic or absurdist elements are very often found in these films; likewise, the disturbingly Kafkesque situation posed by *The Party And The Guests* could still powerfully echo the experience of ordinary people (the film would not have been banned if it hadn’t).

All these films shared an attitude of profound criticism towards the dominant political discourses of contemporary Czechoslovak society; rather than directly engage with ideology, however, they frequently focused on the experience of living under a totalitarian regime, often metaphorically by setting the narrative in the past, as in the case of *Closely Observed Trains* or *Démanty noci/Diamonds Of The Night* (Jan Němec, 1964). Alternatively, the films may be set in an unspecified time or place, as in *The Party And The Guests*, and *Skřivánci na niti/Larks On A String* (Jiří Menzel, 1969). A strong anti-authority mood characterizes most of these films, regardless of genre: from two girls having fun at patriarchy’s expense in *Sedmikrásky/Daises* (Vera Chytilová, 1966), to the biting mockery of officialdom in *Hoří, má panenko/The Firemen’s Ball* (Miloš Forman, 1967), this corpus of Czechoslovak films carried out a concerted attack on the Establishment. Many of these films were the work of young directors, and thus more

obviously linked to the new, rebellious youth culture that had emerged in Europe and the USA after the immediate post-war; dissidence, however, was not a prerogative of youth, and indeed director Karel Kachyňa was 45 when he collaborated with 40-year-old screenwriter Jan Procházka on *The Ear*. While films made before the 1968 invasion benefited from a relative relaxation of censorship, under the reformist Dubček government, they were produced within a society still smarting from the Stalinist purges of the 1950s, and which continued to be largely controlled by the powerful KSČ (Komunistická strana Československa), the national communist party. Although the end of the 1968 Prague Spring signalled the unequivocal return of an oppressive, philo-Soviet regime, it would be disingenuous to posit a complete break between pre- and post-invasion conditions in Czechoslovakia; the purges of the 1950s had removed from power some 136,000 'radical' individuals, weakening the Opposition, and even in the early '60s the communist machine had been aggressively present, sentencing the reformist politician Rudolf Barák to fifteen years' imprisonment, during a secret trial in 1962 (Hames 2005:22). An uneven progress towards a more democratic system had been taking place since 1956, in the wake of Khrushchev's historic speech at the Kremlin that criticized Stalin for the first time, and would indeed continue until the 1968 invasion; however, the enduring power of the ruling communist party, the KSČ, makes it possible to identify an experiential thread running through the 1960s and 1970s. This experience was one of life in a climate of ambiguity, suspicion and often direct repression, of blame, complicity and guilt, in the shadow of a corrupt government, which ruled through a vastly inefficient bureaucratic system.

Defined by a combination of oppression and absurdity, communist totalitarianism on one hand fostered a sense of distance and alienation in Czechoslovak citizens; a separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ characterized perceptions of social identifications, and inserted a sense of dispossession in the relationship between ordinary people and their environment. At the same time, to survive under the communist regime demanded a degree of acquiescence, if not of complicity. Ex-Czech president and dissident Václav Havel thus describes the requirements for individuals to live in Czechoslovakia in the years after Stalin’s death: ‘[...] they must *live within a lie*. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system’ (Havel 1987: 44–45).

In cinematic terms, this situation often led to a militant rethinking of mainstream filmmaking practices, and to the insertion of oppositional narratives in film texts; indeed, Czechoslovak cinema of the period has been primarily assessed in terms of thematic and stylistic innovation, and of its placing in a context of censorship and totalitarianism. I suggest that these films’ use of space may be crucial to their articulation of difference and resistance; as narratives are organized around the negotiation and appropriation of physical environments, and subjectivity is channelled through the battle for boundaries carried out by the protagonists, the latter are both *signified* and *located* by spatial constructions.

In the three films here under discussion, the protagonists are either placed in spaces not of their own choosing, or which, if nominally theirs, are still subject to outside domination. In all three cases, the environments inhabited by the protagonists are claustrophobic,

monitored and controlled by hostile forces; the films' narrative and visual texts rest, to a significant degree, on a battle over spatial borders.

Closely Observed Trains is set during WWII, in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia; the film charts the progress of Miloš, a young railway station apprentice, whose prime ambitions – like those of his young colleagues – are to avoid work and to instead have sex, mostly in the workplace. These ambitions motivate the film's plot, despite and against a background of war, Nazi occupation, and daily routine in a bureaucracy-ridden job, where various authority figures try to curb the protagonists' fun. After a succession of disheartening experiences, including a failed suicide attempt, Miloš finally achieves sexual fulfillment; the woman who seduces him in the railway station is a glamorous Resistance fighter. Shortly afterwards, with newly-found confidence, Miloš plants a bomb on a German ammunition train; the bomb duly explodes, destroying the enemy convoy, but Miloš is immediately shot dead by a German soldier on the train. While his body falls on the train's roof and disappears off-screen, the hero is cheered from a distance by his colleague and sexual mentor Hubička, still unaware of Miloš's death and intoxicated by the latter's achievements.

Sex-driven and rebellious, the film's narrative unravels as a contest between the pleasure-seeking, independent-minded protagonists and their allotted spatial and symbolic location. This essential conflict is played out mostly in interior and confined settings, the rooms of the little railway station; the feeling of physical and emotional claustrophobia is emphasized by an abundance of close-ups and extreme close-ups, not just of the actors, but also of objects and furniture. The characters officially connected to this oppressive place, the station master and various local authorities, including a Nazi supervisor, try to

stop the protagonists from pursuing their personal aims: as the balance of power constantly shifts, the film blurs the boundaries between repression and freedom, private and public. This blurring produces a spatial ambiguity that is at the core of the film text: as the protagonists negotiate their boundaries, they also problematize them. Are Miloš and his friends inside or outside their given spatial and metaphorical place? Are they constricted or free? Are they excluded from something (and therefore ‘out’) or included in their own peculiar, preferable world (and therefore ‘in’)? And finally: are they ultimately restricted by their confinement, or do they subvert it by triumphing over its limitations and rules?

A similar set of spatial questions characterizes *The Ear*. Ludvík and Anna are also ambiguously related to the system that tries to control them: this relation is narratively expressed by their privileged position in relation to the government – corroborated by the numerous flashbacks to the sumptuous party they attended that evening – and by their obvious fear and dislike of that same system, which controls and humiliates them throughout the film. Visually, an intense feeling of claustrophobia is constructed through *mise-en-scène* and camera movement, as well as by the visible effects of the Establishment’s power, symbolized by the Ear: the electricity is mysteriously cut off, leaving the couple stumbling around in the candle-lit house for a considerable part of the film. As the hidden microphones and wires are discovered one by one in every room, they are often shot in extreme close-ups, filling screen space with their deceptively simple image: small rectangular boxes and cables, the faceless invaders of Anna’s and Ludvík’s private environment.

The ambiguous relationship between the protagonists and the communist power is crystallized at the end of the film: after coming to believe that he is soon to be arrested, as it has happened to some of his closest colleagues, Ludvík receives a telephone call from the authorities, in which he is told that, far from being sent to jail, he has been promoted to the rank of minister. Stunned by the news, the couple are momentarily silent, until Anna pronounces the last words in the film: 'I'm afraid'. This is the final, perverse twist in the cat-and-mouse game played between the protagonists and the Ear: the irrational reversal by the power they have sought to defeat throws the couple's precarious balance in a state of open chaos. After fighting over spatial and metaphorical boundaries for the whole night, the protagonists cannot determine anymore their position: are they inside or outside the system? This unresolved ending is, of course, the culmination of the essential dilemma which has provided the film's motivation: how to survive while dealing with a repressive and invasive external power.

This crucial question is at the core of *The Party and The Guests*. The film's plot is deceptively simple: a group of friends are invited to a party in the countryside by a mysterious host, whom they suspect to be a high-ranking figure in the government. As they make their way to the location of the party, in secluded woods by a lake, they are stopped and harassed by a group of thugs, who turn out to be their host's thinly disguised secret police. The thugs' approach to intimidation takes a particularly sinister form: they force the friends to group in a restricted area in a clearing, which they delimit by tracing a mark in the dusty ground, telling them gleefully that they have now been locked up, that the key has been lost, and that they will have to remain standing where they are. Feeling increasingly scared and helpless, the friends are rapidly cowed into compliance. In the

short time it takes the host himself to arrive on the scene, apologizing for the guests' rough treatment at the hands of his men, the group has learnt to fear and adapt to the oppressive power the thugs represent; led by the host, they readily join the party that is now beginning, lavishly organized and catered by uniformed waiters under the trees. But as the guests take their place at the table among the secret police, one of the friends is missing: he has clearly fled, unwilling to participate in the celebration of their all-powerful host, leaving the rest of the group embarrassed and baffled by his escape. The film ends with a dog chase being organized to find the dissenting guest; ominous, off-screen barking signals his capture, and the grim return to order.

The Party and The Guests was considered so dangerous by the Czechoslovak authorities that it was banned 'forever', and it is easy to see why: its representation of a totalitarian society resting on fear, complacency and hypocrisy continues to strike a chord with audiences today. A remarkable achievement of the film is its construction of a totally claustrophobic atmosphere, despite the absence of interior scenes; as in the two other films discussed, spatial organization is crucial to the development of screen narrative, but it serves a different function. While the protagonists of *The Ear* and *Closely Observed Trains* resist and manipulate the external power that threatens to suffocate them, in *The Party and The Guests* it is the system alone that shifts and blurs spatial divisions. Inside and outside are still ambiguous concepts, but the passive group of friends does not interfere with 'sacred' oppositions: the negotiation of boundaries here swiftly becomes a non-negotiation, as they simply adapt to the confines dictated by a dominant force. It is no coincidence that the group's one dissenting character carries out his defection entirely off-screen, after having scarcely spoken throughout the film: his own narrative is

incompatible with a system that successfully demands blind obedience of his friends, and his option is no subversion, but escape. Needless to say, the film's ending reflects a profound pessimism on anyone's chances of survival outside the status quo.

Myrto Konstantarakos has argued that the articulation of spatial oppositions, especially of inclusion and exclusion, is a central preoccupation of European cinema, and one which she links to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, that textual juncture where all narratives strands are connected (Konstantarakos 2000: 3–4); in the three films discussed here, chronotopial meaning occurs in spaces that are characterized by instability, and subject to the constant shifting of spatial boundaries. The house, the railway station and the woods are locations for the struggle between protagonists and hostile external powers, spaces where all narratives knots are tied into the question: 'can the dominant system be resisted, and how?' Narratives of subversion are constructed by exposing the mechanisms by which space is manipulated, revealing its essential instability and, thus, highlighting the possibility of resistance. In order to specifically consider how this is achieved in the films, it is useful to refer to Henri Lefebvre's seminal analysis of the production of social space. Lefebvre posits a triadic model, where space is differentiated into 'spatial practice', 'representations of space' and 'representational space' (Lefebvre 1991: 38–39). 'Spatial practice' denominates the meaning of a spatial location as it is popularly perceived; 'representation of space' is instead a conceptualized type of space, official and deliberately conceived, while 'representational space' is 'linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life' (Lefebvre 1991: 33). Lefebvre concedes that these three concepts share a 'dialectical relationship' (Lefebvre 1991: 39), therefore allowing for a

potential fluidity inherent in the very notion of spatial division; this idea is discussed in depth by Gaston Bachelard, who states that ‘outside and inside form a dialectic of division’ (Bachelard 1994: 211), indeed that ‘outside and inside are both intimate – they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility’ (Bachelard 1994: 218). Reversal and mutual antagonism are the basis of the spatial narratives defining the films under discussion; I would suggest that notions of inside and outside, as much as Lefebvre’s three concepts of space, are here more useful if considered as modes, rather than models. In these films spatial fluidity is reflected in the merging of spatial practice (perceived space) with representational space (clandestine space), as protagonists are both users and producers of their environments; all the time, however, the very same space is also made official, becoming a representation of space, an externally conceived locus.

The narrative of *Closely Observed Trains* is virtually all set in public spaces: the protagonists’ lives unfold in a situation of almost constant exposure, as even the rare scenes set in private homes see them being policed by intrusive parents or relatives. Miloš’s suicide attempt takes place in a brothel, and his rescue is due to a workman who, having made a hole through the wall, is able to check what is happening in the room where Miloš has just cut his wrists. Confined and monitored, the film’s main characters thus inhabit environments that are simultaneously sites of social practices and conceived spaces. The small train station, the film’s chronotope, functions as an ordinary railway outpost, presenting Miloš and his colleagues with a popularly sanctioned range of behaviours, work duties and limitations. At the same time, the station is also a place where officially designated authorities rule and connive with the occupying Nazis, who

affix war maps on walls and tables and interfere with the station's daily administration; even more poignantly, the station is a key junction along the route of German 'closely observed trains', which carry ammunitions for the Nazi army. Faced with this formidable combination of routine discipline and exceptional oppression, the film's protagonists, nevertheless, subvert their surroundings to a drastic extent. Miloš's sexual initiation, the culmination of a sex-driven plot, takes place in the uninspiring setting of a shabby and cramped station room, surrounded by railway machinery: the place, however, is turned into a boudoir, where fantasies are enacted and emotions fulfilled. Earlier on in the film, two other young and bored employees had indulged in erotic play in the station's operative office, amid wall-to-wall rows of noisy machines, a running telegraph and stark wooden furniture. The station is thus transformed into a representational space, a space of the imagination, where characters are free to express themselves and to revel in intimacy, both with each other and with their own fantasies. According to Bachelard, any place that is thoroughly lived in assumes the connotations of a home: 'all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home' (Bachelard 1991: 5). The very idea of 'home' has private associations that clash incompatibly with concepts and practices of external authority, or foreign invasion; through their subversion and resistance, the film's protagonists turn an officially conceived building into an intimately used house. Bachelard adds: 'the house shelters daydreaming' (Bachelard 1991:6), and indeed the railway station becomes an unlikely site of protection from the very same forces that invade it. It is important to bear in mind that if *Closely Observed Trains* constructs its world as an interior structure, this implicitly signals the presence of exterior, off-screen space, a dimension that defines yet complicates narrative borders. The mostly unseen

outside space does not only represent urban Czechoslovakia with all its opportunities, and freedom from work in the station, it also stands for the perverted ‘normality’ of WWII and Nazi occupation. The protagonists’ intimate dramas and pleasures, which define their appropriation of the train station, highlight its potential as a representational space, as a place outside normative discourse: the ‘inside’ of their oppressive workplace keeps the protagonists ‘outside’ of the implied but never seen horrors of WWII.

Off-screen space is always constantly implied in *The Ear*, in the form of an overarching system, holding the protagonists’ house enmeshed in its dangerous web. Anna’s and Ludvík’s home is first of all a representation of space, conceptualized as a site for the controlling and curbing of the couple’s activities; the very fact that the house has been bestowed on them by the government, according to the criteria of rank and relation to the system, turns it into a reflection of that same system, a secure structure that keeps its occupants in an externally organized position. The house, however, is also a site of social practice: a dwelling for a middle-class Czech family (husband, wife and son), where space is organized according to well-established and popular notions of what such a house should be. The film emphasizes this by shifting the action from room to room, presenting each distinct environment as in a gallery of domestic life: from the cellar to the kitchen, from the two toilets to the balcony, each room bears traces of daily living, with unwashed dishes, leftover food and discarded clothes expressing the essential banality of the couple’s existence. But parallel to the house’s official and social dimensions, in the same untidy rooms and occupying the same topography of walls and floors, it is found the ongoing development of the couple’s construction of a representational space. In spite of the government’s power of control, Anna’s and

Ludvík's own private system claws back inch by inch the invaded home: this is not only done at a practical level, by ripping off the wires and microphones that fill the place, but also, and primarily, at the symbolic level of the imagination. The house becomes a site for the government's failure to control the protagonists, who reduce external oppression to the derided 'Ear', and indulge in forbidden activities, such as criticizing the Party, affirming their detachment from it and imagining themselves free from its repressive clutches. If, on one hand, the communist authorities enter their space by force, Anna and Ludvík invade the authorities' space too, insofar as the house is both owned and dominated by the Ear: in so doing they effectively 'desecrate' the division between themselves and the system, between representation of space and representational space. Social practice is both highly emphasized and highly subverted in *The Party and The Guests*. The beginning of the film sets the action in the countryside, represented as a place of relaxation, frolicking and fun. The group of friends are initially shot while laying on the grass, leisurely eating the last courses of their picnic, carrying out lazy conversations; shortly afterwards, they are shown bathing in a stream, in a happy and carefree mood. This ordinary view of the countryside, though, is injected with hints of claustrophobia from the start, as the seven characters are shot in close-ups and extreme close-ups, their bodies and faces almost totally filling the frame. Some foliage is shown at the screen's edges, and later some trees, and the path walked on by the friends are briefly shown; but the woods are otherwise scarcely visible, and never presented as a sight in themselves. For all their associations with freedom and amusement, the outdoors are clearly not only, and not simply, an innocuous space to be enjoyed. It is soon made clear that the protagonists have not freely chosen to spend a day out of town, but that they have

been summoned there; and indeed their jocular mood is interrupted by the arrival of the mysterious thugs. From that moment, the countryside loses any link with established social practices, becoming instead a site of sinister, incomprehensible threats and dangers; through the actions and words spoken by the thugs and the host, the space in which the friends find themselves now turns into a highly official, externally controlled location, where powerful rules and hierarchies apply. In its most immediate application, the countryside becomes a tightly locked jail, guarded by its appointed police and subject to the will of the host. But it is the last part of the film that most perfectly shows the unstable boundaries between social practice and representation of space: the celebratory banquet takes place by a lake shore, and consists of over-elaborate dining arrangements and catering, with high-backed embroidered chairs, and illumination provided by candelabra. In this bizarre festive structure, itself a perversion of traditional countryside celebrations, the host's secret police take place among the guests, imposing an atmosphere of subdued dread over the party. The host's last decision is to unleash his dogs onto the missing guest, and this action completes the transformation of the countryside from a place of fun to a place of fear and oppression. Nothing, however, is casual or accidental: the place turns into a high-security prison because of a precise, concerted design on the authorities' part, in a true 'conception' of spatial administration. As for representational space, the space of the imagination and clandestine activities, this remains absent from the film, though not non-existent: the one friend who attempts, vainly, to escape from the party, is the custodian of such spatial dimension, the symbol of another way of inhabiting the world.

In the three films discussed, spatial construction assists the articulation of a subversive narrative, which exposes the Establishment as both a manipulator and an entity vulnerable to manipulation. At the same time, spatial fluidity and ambiguity testify to the ambivalent connection between protagonists and social context, as much as to the necessarily oblique socio-political criticism the films provide: space may be manipulated and appropriated, but only temporarily and to a limited extent. No radically permanent change takes place, and no revolution is openly advocated; spatial narratives in the films are functional to what the characters achieve, as much as to what they fail to achieve. The protagonists of *The Ear* enjoy a satisfying, if fleeting victory against the external power that controls them, by uncovering and dismantling the bugging system invading their home; but Ludvík's promotion to minister makes the future look frighteningly uncertain, and subject once more to the vagaries of the government. In *Closely Observed Trains*, the main protagonist, Miloš, dies; before dying, however, he not only manages to lose his virginity in the train station, but from the same place he carries out a successful action against the Nazis. He dies, but his exit is an act of resistance. *The Party and The Guests* mercilessly exposes the Establishment's powers of repression, but confines opposition to off-screen space; the implied capture of the dissident friend signals the difficulty, or even impossibility, of beating the system. These films thus highlight the potential as much as the limited scope of transgressive spatial positioning; their protagonists are necessarily poised between opposition and acquiescence, in a precarious and constantly shifting balance. According to Phillip E. Wegner, the permanent re-appropriation of space by any 'subaltern publics' can ultimately only happen through a radical re-construction of that space: he points out that Lefebvre himself, as well as Jacques Derrida, see subversive

spatial fluctuations as an initial step, to be followed by more radical action, as ‘the real aim always remains the “production” of new kinds of spaces’ (Wegner 2002: 179–201). The three Czechoslovak films discussed in this essay reflect a historical position in which radical upheaval was not possible; instead, their protagonists engage with social and national contexts in an intricate form of rebellion, attempting and often achieving resistance by means of quiet subversion.

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