

Visual Construction of Youth in Czechoslovak Press Photographs: 1959-1989

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Abstract—This text focuses on the visual construction of youth in press photographs in socialist Czechoslovakia. It deals with photographs in a magazine for young readers, *Mladý svět*, published by the Socialist Union of Youth of Czechoslovakia. The aim of this study was to develop a methodological tool for uncovering the values and the ideological messages in the strategies used in the visual construction of reality in the socialist press. Two methods of visual analysis were applied to the photographs, a quantitative content analysis and a social semiotic analysis. The social semiotic analysis focused on images representing youth in their free time. The study shows that the meaning of a socialist press photograph is a result of a struggle for ideological power between formal and informal ideologies. This struggle takes place within the process of production of the photograph and also within the process of interpretation of the photograph.

Keywords—Ideology, press photography, socialist regime, social semiotics, youth.

I. INTRODUCTION

AFTER the so called “visual turn” [1], the history of photography went through several stages of development. Photography as a medium of expression became essential to the visual strategies of government and other societal elements, and hence, for understanding communication in modern societies. However, today the scholarly research on historical photographs has a quite asymmetrical character. On the one hand, there are critical, complex, sophisticated debates about the role of photography in liberal societies. On the other hand, there is not much of a similar debate relating to socialist societies: the main approach to analysis of photography in those societies has focused on the simplistic concept of propaganda. Moreover, scholars mostly study photographic representations in the former East Germany (DDR) and the USSR [2]-[5]. The aim of this study is to uncover the communist ideological messages and possible alternative ideological messages in the strategies for the construction of youth in press photographs in socialist Czechoslovakia.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1948 the Communist Party took over political power in Czechoslovakia. This signified the first step toward deep and crucial changes in Czechoslovak society. The Communists started a general reconstruction of the social order in the country according to the Soviet model of economic and political systems. One of the main changes was an early,

concerted effort to gain as much centralized control over society—including the media—as possible. However, during the second half of the 1950s, the political pressure began to ease. This relaxation primarily affected cultural life and art, but it also had an impact on everyday life. The 1960s were characterized by gradual liberalization and democratization of public life. It brought about a stronger relationship to Western countries, at least among the people, and enabled the re-development of critical thinking among them. The fate of Czechoslovak periodicals in this period was, on the one hand, determined by the media policy of the Communist Party, whose objective was to build a vertically-segmented and symmetrical structure of periodicals published by the Party, while on the other hand, due to the liberalization process, a trend of founding new periodicals began [6].

During 1968, reform efforts known as the “Prague Spring” evolved, aimed at changing the economic, social and political deformations since 1948 for which the communist government in Czechoslovakia was responsible. One of the crucial aims of the reform movement was the positioning of the media as the standard bearer for freedom of speech. For one short period, censorship of the media was abolished. The more open and creative climate in the society resulted in noticeable changes in media content. However, the reform process was soon stopped by the invasion of troops from five countries of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968, with the purpose of “normalizing” the internal political situation in Czechoslovakia. Thereafter, democratization of the media was understood as a threat to the dominant role of the Communist Party. One of the objectives of the invasion was therefore to regain control of the media. Between 1968 and 1971, political opposition to the “healthy core” of the Communist Party was suppressed by political and power means. The most powerful methods used in the process were repressive interventions in media content and dismissal of individual reform-minded journalists from their positions within the media.

The Czechoslovak media of the 1970s and 1980s was viewed as a tool and an expression of the normalization process. The invasion meant not only the end of the reform process, but in many aspects also a throwback to the conditions prevailing before 1968. Finally, in 1985, media content began to change under the influence of Moscow’s acceptance of greater plurality of opinion in public communications. To sum up, the media played a significant role in the plans for normalization of politics. On the one hand, the media were understood to be an important instrument for shaping public opinion, and on the other hand,

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the media themselves were considered to have been important actors during the reform period [6].

Mladý svět was a weekly magazine published beginning in 1959. The concept for this magazine was presented to the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth by its first chief editor as a news magazine for young people between 14 years and 23 years old with a focus on cultural-political and entertainment content. "Its aim was... to assist with all available forms of journalism in the education of youth for socialism and communism, to influence their moral profile, to satisfy their various interests in good entertainment, knowledge, romance and their curiosity. The magazine has to be young not only in terms of its graphic design, but also in its content." [7] The visual quality of Mladý svět magazine was highly unique within the Czechoslovak media context: "Photography in the Czech press was traditionally limited to the role of an illustrative complement to text; with the exception of Mladý svět magazine and a few other culture weeklies, photography never became a dominant element of journalistic reporting" [8].

In the 1950s, the young generation in Czechoslovakia was educated according to the Soviet model and fully experienced the rise of communism. From the beginning of the 1960s, communist ideologists increasingly confronted the public with concern about the issues of vandalism and hooliganism [9]. Much was said about the negative influence of informal social groups—so-called "gangs". The ideologists' critique contained two main arguments: first, the youth was being strongly influenced by the consumerist popular culture of the West, and second, young people were apathetic to any public activities. In the second half of the 1960's, the Czechoslovak Union of Youth reacted to these problems by trying to take control of all non-institutional pastimes of young people, even at the cost of making some ideological concessions. Nevertheless, the tendency toward "de-politicization" of youth was not suppressed. The most difficult-to-control group remained the university students. Their activities were officially considered the most problematic [9].

During the Soviet occupation, young people were at the core of protest and they remained loyal to their ideas for many months and years after 1968. At the beginning of the consolidation process, however, some members of the young generation behaved differently. After mass purges and communist campaigns against revisionists, many young people took advantage of the shake-up to start their political careers. The Czechoslovak Union of Youth broke up and in 1969, and the Socialist Union of Youth was established by the most loyal members of the former Union. In the 1980s the discussion about criminality among the youth revived. This time, the communist critique was mostly about rising aggressiveness among young people. The youth was understood as a potential source of social disruption and dangerous revolutionary acts. By the end of the 1980s, communist ideologists more and more often expressed fear about being unable any longer to reliably suppress generational conflicts or to protect the traditional communist social hierarchy [9].

III. PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY AND IDEOLOGIES

Photography can be viewed as a medium that constructs meaning through signs in relation to the social and cultural context of its production and dissemination, while its audience constructs their meaning of those signs in relation to the social and cultural context they use to interpret them. Although press photographs are as socially constructed as any other form of news discourse, they are still widely seen as a window on the world, capturing reality [10]. There are always some actors behind the pictures who decide what is "newsworthy", and other actors who interpret those pictures and tend to perceive them as a true mirror of reality. Analyzing press photographs from a constructivist point of view thus challenges the viewer to study the institutional context in which the process of producing the photographs took place, as well as the broader social, political, and cultural context of their production.

Images are understood to be instruments, through which ideologies are reproduced and onto which ideologies are projected. Representations in the form of images can then be used to convince the audience to share or reject certain opinions or values. Because images are always produced within specific social and aesthetic conventions, they are believed to be ideological and visual expressions of their time, and they are also believed to play an important role in the perception of the power relationship between individuals on the one side and institutions on the other side. This is because the images in mass media reproduce ideologies with the help of their viewers, who desire to be like "the others" depicted and to emulate them. The media have the ability to create homogenous images that present a "perfect" appearance of the world to us and those visual representations have the ability to form the way we perceive ourselves and the outside world [11].

Photography is a tool of surveillance, record and evidence. These functions of photography are a result of the struggle for maintaining existing discourse conditions [12]. What Roland Barthes called the photographic power of evidence [13], Tagg considers a complex historical outcome that photographs only show within a specific institutional practice and a specific historical context; therefore, history, which comprises unambiguous techniques and practices, specific institutions, and unique social relations (i.e. relations of power), owns a complete notion of what constitutes photographic evidence. Photography in this context does not have any power by itself, but is rather understood as an instrument used by those actors who have the power to impose their conceptions of the world on the actors who do not have the power. This process of instrumentalization is not a given, but is rather the unstable effect of a specific discourse [14].

IV. ANALYSIS OF PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

To understand the meaning of a photograph means to interpret the structure of the image itself and also to interpret the system of knowledge within which the image was produced. A traditional structuralist perspective for analysis of press photographs is introduced in Roland Barthes's work.

Barthes presented his concept of the *rhetoric of image* and offered a detailed approach to interpretation of press photographs. According to him, photography is not merely a product or an instrument, but is also an object endowed with structural autonomy [13]. He distinguished between three levels of interpretation of photographs: first, *textual analysis* seeks out the relationship between the image and its caption; second, *denotation* describes the literal reading of the image; and third, *connotation* uncovers the ideological and mythological interpretation of the image [13]. If we assume that connotations are formed historically and culturally, then they can be described as meanings influenced by the cultural context. The connotation of a photograph comprises more complex associations, ideas and feelings evoked in viewers of the image, and the intervention of the photographer in the image becomes evident on the level of connotation as well [15].

Stuart Hall proposed the concept of the *determination of press photographs*. He claims that interpretation of press photographs takes place on two levels. The first level is a literal interpretation of the *news value* of images. Similar to Barthes' concept of linguistic and denotational levels of meaning, the news value of a photograph refers to what our common sense constitutes the image. The second level explores *ideological messages*, which along with the connotative themes that belong to the sphere of moral political discourse. Hall assumes that an explication of the relationship between press photographs and social life emerges only from analysis of both levels. As he claims that photographs broaden the fund of knowledge of every culture, and also gain from it, it is important to interpret not only both levels of signification, but also the system of knowledge and the broader cultural context of the photographs [16].

Sartwell's concept of *political aesthetics* is also an important theoretical contribution to the study of the relation between ideologies and images in the context of the socialist regime. Sartwell states that all politics is aesthetic and that all political ideologies are basically aesthetic systems. Visual styles comprise specific indexical elements and their meaning can be constructed only within the general context of their production. Therefore, political aesthetics can be understood only in terms of its cultural framework, and that framework is understandable only with regard to the period of time in which it appeared. Different political regimes may use visualization in various ways for propaganda purposes or for controlling and changing public opinion. The political content of ideology can therefore be perceived as its formal or stylistic aspect. "Ideology is an aesthetic system, and this is what moves or fails to move people, attracts their loyalty or repugnance, moves them to act or to apathy [17]." Photography, as a complex of indexical signs, can therefore be understood as the visual form of the political content of ideology.

Discourse theorists generally understand ideology as the system of ideas, values, attitudes and beliefs of a specific social group [18]-[20]. However, such a definition of ideology cannot easily be applied to the study of totalitarian regimes because it describes the ideology of capitalist, liberal, and

democratic societies. If we seek the right definition of ideology for a study of post-war societies under the authoritarian control of a specific political doctrine, we need to define the notion of ideology by focusing on regimes where the power of dominant classes depends on the ownership of political, rather than economic or cultural capital. One can distinguish between a *formal* (institutionalized) and an *informal* (non-institutionalized) ideology. While informal ideologies depend on the ownership of economic or cultural capital, formal ideologies depend on the ownership of political capital. Formal ideologies have three aspects: a) dominant status is maintained legislatively and does not have to be negotiated, b) they are central (placed at the very center of social life), and c) disagreement or opposition to them is sanctioned not only by subordination and marginalization, but also by infringement of basic human rights [21]. Interpreting socialist press photographs with respect to ideologies means seeking the visual construction not only of formal, but also informal ideologies.

V. SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Social semiotics is inspired by Barthes' structuralist semiotics and Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. While the objective of the structuralist semiotic approach to representation is identifying cultural codes and understanding how people communicate while attributing the same meaning to certain signs, the functional linguistic approach seeks to uncover the specific functions of textual systems. The contribution of this theory to traditional semiotics is that it takes into account the social context of the production of codes and power relations in the meaning-making process and that it accepts changes in the semiotic system that depend on shifts of power in society [22]. The main aim of social semiotics is to detect the strategies of systems of representation and determine how the systems function to mediate specific meaning within specific social practices and institutions. Social semiotics generally deals with the social contexts of meaning, practices of power, and interpretations of signification [23]. It focuses on the ways that ideologies and social interests construct semiotic systems and it also studies how those systems change and how they are perceived in the course of a transformation of a society [24].

VI. METHOD

The main aim of this study is to find the *news values* (on the denotative level of meaning) of pre-1989 photographs of Czechoslovak youth and to detect the *ideological messages* (on the connotative level of meaning) that are mediated by those pictures.

The overarching research question is: How is the image of Czechoslovak youth constructed in the photographs in *Mladý svět* magazine from the period 1959-1989?

- Q1: What main news values are represented in the photographs?
- Q2: What ideological messages are mediated through the photographs?

A quantitative content analysis was applied to answer the first research question, and a social semiotic analysis was applied to answer the second research question. This content analysis was applied to all the photographs of young people published on the front pages of *Mladý svět* magazine over the years. All issues of the weekly that were published between 1959 and 1989 were coded [25]. It was presumed that some of the news values represented were characteristic of all the photographs throughout the whole period researched, while other news values varied during the period, depending on the broader context of the production of the photographs. After the exploration of news values, the most typical photographs (i.e., photographs that contained the most frequent value categories) were selected and then qualitatively interpreted using a social semiotic approach to uncover possible mediation of messages of formal and informal ideologies.

The social semiotic approach to image analysis in this study is inspired by the *grammar of visual design*, which takes into account the systems of meaning-making of images. It considers the way signs are used in combination to create meaning, as one sign can mean different things in different combinations. From this perspective, the meaning of a sign is more potential than fixed, and it is couched in a system of visual grammar [26]. Images fulfill three major functions: representation, interaction and composition. Within the *representational function*, we set up a dichotomy between narrative and conceptual images. The narrative visual structure presents unfolding actions and events, processes of change, and transitory spatial arrangements. The conceptual visual structure presents participants in terms of their more generalized, more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, structure, or meaning. *Interactional meanings* in images involve several kinds of interpersonal relationships. These may be relationships created within an image (between actors represented in the image); they may be relationships created by means of an image (between the producer of the image, who in the case of press photographs may be a media organization as an institution, and the viewer of the image); or they may be relationships created between the actors represented in the image and the viewer of the image. Interactive meanings in photographs are established in three ways that concern the relationships between the viewer and the represented actors: contact (through gaze and posture of the represented actors), social distance (through the type of camera shot and the size of the frame) and attitude (objective or, in the case of press photographs, subjective). *Compositional meanings* in images are established in four ways: information value, salience, framing and modality [27].

VII. RESULTS

We coded 715 photographs on the front pages of *Mladý svět* magazine. The images were interpreted within five time periods that correspond to the changes in the broader institutional and social context during the researched era in Czechoslovakia: 1959-67, 1968, 1969-71, 1972-84 and 1985-89. After the quantitative survey of the visually represented news values, we present a social semiotic analysis of the

images that were coded with a “free time” value in the “theme” category [28]. “Free time” is one of the values with the highest frequency of representation in the photographs from the whole period we researched. One image in each period, containing the “free time” value, is then analyzed qualitatively to uncover latent ideological messages.

A. Results of the Quantitative Analysis

1. 1959-1967

A total of 194 photographs from this era were analyzed.

The main news values of the photographs: Youth and its relation to sport (23%), art (16%) and free time (14%).

Other represented news values: Youth and its relation to romantic love, fashion, politics, industry, the Spartakiad (a mass gymnastics event held in Prague every five years during the communist period), education, the army, travelling, traditions, agriculture, family life and erotica.

2. 1968

23 photographs were analyzed from this year.

The main news values of photographs: Youth and its relation to free time (22%), art (13%) and fashion (13%).

Other represented news values: Youth and its relation to sport, romantic love, social problems and service work.

3. 1969-1971

A total of 67 photographs from this era were analyzed.

The main news values of photographs: Youth and its relation to art (16%), sport (15%), fashion (12%) and free time (12%).

Other represented news values: Youth and its relation to politics, romantic love, culture traditions, science, agriculture, the army and family life.

4. 1972-1984

A total of 335 photographs from this era were analyzed.

The main news values of photographs: Youth and its relation to art (23%), sport (22%) and free time (10%).

Other news values: Youth and its relation to fashion, family life, politics, industry, agriculture, education, traditions, the Spartakiad, ecology, science, travelling, romantic love, service work, the army and illness.

5. 1985 – 1989

A total of 96 photographs from this era were analyzed.

The main news values of the photographs are: Youth and its relation to sport (23%), art (17%) and free time (9%).

Other represented news values: Youth and its relation to industry, education, family life, fashion, ecology, the army, politics, travelling, cultural traditions, illness, agriculture and science.

B. Results of the Qualitative Analysis

Five selected images representing youth in their free time are interpreted in two ways: first, with respect to formal (communist) ideology, and secondly, with respect to informal (alternative) ideologies.

1. 1959-1967

The formal ideological message: The viewer has control over the young people who are actively spending their free time. The youth strengthen their relationships by participating in the same activity, where coordination within the collective is the most emphasized feature. They make their way directly and fearlessly toward a better future. By joint effort they are overcoming obstacles in the wild. Each of the groups of young people on a boat is following the right course established by the foregoing group and this succession is endless. They are looking up to the viewer as though he is their idol. They are representing the happy, young, strong, courageous and eternal future of the socialist society.

The informal ideological message: The viewer is observing young people, who are going down a river and having fun. They are in a good mood because the weather is nice and because it is also nice to meet their friends elsewhere than in town or school. This image is a narrative, because the people are actively overcoming the obstacles in the river. That makes them feel stronger. They do not want to be led only by the flow of the river; they also need to make their way under their own control.



Fig. 1 Youth and free time (1961) [29]

2. 1968

The formal ideological message: The two girls look quite bored and untidy. The flowers in their hair make them look childish and uncivilized. The flowers reference the “flower children” in the West, and western ideologies are a threat to the socialist system. The girls are not spending their free time appropriately and in good company, and this is why they do not seem happy. The viewer is watching the girls from slightly above, which distances him from their social group and makes him more of an observer.

The informal ideological message: Two friends are spending their free time during some public event. It seems

there is nothing to catch their attention at the moment and they do not aware that anyone else there, so they are just waiting for something to happen. It is summer and they like to spend the time outside in the nature, so they are dressed appropriately. The flowers in their hair may refer to natural values such as purity, beauty or freedom. They seem to be themselves, not pretending any formal role. They are in the company of other people, where they feel safe and are not stressed. The girls are not looking at the viewer, which does not create a close relationship with him or her. The modality of the picture is high because of the natural, spontaneous appearance of the girls. This image can be understood as a representing a concept of freedom. Even if there is not a direct link to the viewer in terms of their regard, the girls seem free and unattached, and are physically attractive. They implicitly offer a possibility of spending a pleasant time with the male viewer.



Fig. 2 Youth and free time (1968) [30]

3. 1969-1971

The caption says: “JAWA 50 motorcycles are the time for first kisses – stronger motorcycles are the time for loving.” The text inside the issue is a report on youth in a particular Czech village and the way they spend their free time.

The formal ideological message: The young couple in a village is proudly showing the motorbike, on which the boy probably worked hard in his free time. It is a good example of how the socialist youth can improve their skills in their free time to achieve a better standard of living. The young anonymous girls and boys from small towns are very important to the socialist society. Although they are still children, they already like to play the role of adults, who are responsible for a better future. The hint of a church wedding denies that there is no religious freedom in socialist Czechoslovakia.



Fig. 3 Youth and free time (1971) [31]

The informal ideological message: It is a common activity for boys in Czech villages to own a motorcycle and to take care of it, because there is not much else to do in their free time. The motorcycle is traditionally a sign of strength and therefore higher social status among the boys in the village, which can attract the girls. Here the young boy and the girl are playing an adult role for the photographer. They are on their way to a wedding, just to have fun and to feel more independent. They make confident eye contact with the viewer, but they are turned away from him, as though they do not want to be observed and disturbed by adults anymore. It can all be viewed as a narrative of youth's path to adulthood.

4. 1972-1984

The caption says: "Place of Birth: Rybníky". The text inside the issue is a report on a Czech village called Rybníky and the everyday life of its inhabitants.

The formal ideological message: The youth in Czech villages spend their free time actively in a collective that spans the generations. They learn from their parents and other adults the right way to spend their free time. Central to this picture is the young boy, who observes the activity of the young adult man. The older boys, who are communicating with each other, stand out because of the red color of their clothes. The women are observing the whole situation from above. The message is that building strong family relationships is very important for the happiness of people in the socialist system. This village is proof that such an approach leads to a contented and unproblematic life. The image has a narrative that emphasizes the way young people learn from adults.

The informal ideological message: People from that village gathered because they knew beforehand that the journalists and the photographer would come to do a report. On this occasion, they prepared this activity, maybe they got some instructions about what they should do. Although it is their free time, they are dressed quite formally. The distance of the actors from the camera is long, which makes the viewer feel as

if he or she is a visitor who does not belong to their social group. This is probably a rehearsed, staged image of how free time is spent in a Czech village. Thus the modality of the photograph is not very high.



Fig. 4 Youth and free time (1973) [32]

5. 1985-1989

The caption says: "Summer has begun with Sušice. During the last spring and first summer days, the gateway to the central Šumava mountains belongs to the youth". The text inside the issue is a report on the official meeting of the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of Youth in Sušice, a prominent town in Southern Bohemia.

Formal ideological message: The members of the Socialist Union of Youth are very happy to attend their meeting. The viewer is looking down at them from above as an observer, but they do not mind, they are content with their position, as though waiting to get some instructions from a leader. The program of the meeting is very interesting and everyone is enjoying it. This is the right way for young people to spend their free time because it makes them happy—and a happy socialist youth is a condition for building a happy socialist future. Positioning the actors at the bottom of the picture makes them look real, and the identical color of their uniforms emphasizes their solidarity. The conceptual meaning of the image is the happiness of obedient youth.

Informal ideological message: The meeting is an event of the Union with mandatory attendance. Those who are already active members of the Union probably do not mind going to such events. They may really enjoy the program, because they find it interesting, but they may just be laughing at something "human" that has just happened. The young people on the photograph make eye contact with the viewer, which draws him or her into the represented event and emotion. The viewer is also someone who is in a position of power over the youths, which gives him or her the privilege to decide if he wants to be part of the organized group or not.



Fig. 5 Youth and free time (1986) [33]

VIII. CONCLUSION

The results of the quantitative analysis showed that the main news values of the visual representation of youth in *Mladý svět* magazine did not radically change over the period of socialism in Czechoslovakia. What distinguishes the five selected time periods is the frequency of representation of the main news values, and also the type and frequency of other news values that are represented. During the whole era, with the exception of the year 1968, the main news values represented were youth and its relation to sport, youth and its relation to art and youth and its relation to free time. In 1968, fashion became more popular than sport. The year was also exceptional in another way—there were many fewer types of news values represented visually than in the other researched periods. It can be stated that the denotation of visual representation changed as the social context of the production of press photographs changed dramatically. The main news values of the photographs remained more or less the same during the whole researched era, while other, less prominent values varied.

The results of the social semiotic analysis of the photographs representing youth in their free time showed that the connotative meaning of a socialist photograph depends on the outcome of a struggle for ideological power between formal and informal ideologies within the process of production of the photograph on one side and the process of interpretation of the photograph on the other side. Distinguishing between the formal (communist) ideology and the informal (alternative) ideologies may offer a methodological tool which can help the critical viewer to read the images with more sophistication. To get the clearest understanding of the reality being represented visually, the viewer also needs to keep in mind that the overall meaning of a press photograph, which includes both news values and ideological messages, is formed by the context and by the

system of knowledge that surrounds the processes of production and interpretation of the image.

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