Signs of disintegration:
Subversive visual expressions of processes of social transformation and ideological clashes in a Czech graphic novel series about political history

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with (re)presentations of conceptual – political and ideological – content in the form of comics and how the semiotic potentials of non-representational ideas associated with social upheaval and political crises are expressed. After considering the possibilities offered by the code of comics for the expression of abstract (non-depictive) concepts we examine three Czech graphic novels, which concern crucial moments in Czech political history: the Austrian-Hungarian Empire's collapse and the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918; the disintegration of Czechoslovakia after the Nazi occupation in 1938; and the reformists' defeat by the invading Warsaw pact armies in the Prague Spring of 1968. In each case, we investigate the semiotic resources chosen by the individual artists to present these concepts. Finally, we describe how the selected historiographical graphic novels reflect the ideology of a transforming nation and express a sense of non-self-evidentness for the nation and its own independent state.

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Introduction[1]

Comics, including its perhaps more complex and 'adult' form known as the graphic novel, is a purely visual phenomenon communicating with its audience through visually perceptible

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semiotic resources, i.e., it constitutes "a visual semiotic system" (Bramlett 2020:33). Firstly, obligatorily, it consists of pictorial signs, artistically (by drawing, painting, etc.) represented images arranged in sequences. Secondly, written, verbal signs contribute a facultative but empirically widespread form of expression. When it comes to the representation of qualities that are usually (in common everyday communication) perceived by senses other than the visual, comics relies on the construction of a specific 'visual synesthesia': It seeks out, for instance, expressive means to convey the intensity of sound, the quality of music, or the olfactory characteristics of depicted objects through visual signification. Some of these signs are fully conventionalized as part of a widely familiar and understandable code.[2]

However, what about conceptual – political and ideological – content, not exclusively expressed verbally? What possibilities does comics offer for expressing these non-representational (non-depictive) ideas? Our study examines these questions by focusing on a corpus of Czech graphic novels that deal with foundational moments in the political history of Czechoslovakia, moments associated with social upheaval, and political crises.

1. The code of comics and its affordances for expressing non-representational ideas

The editors of the *Comics Studies Reader* have described the focus of theoreticians of comics on the formal aspects of comics as part of a *formalist turn* (cf. Heer and Worchester 2009: xiv). This includes the notion that every work of comics is seen to fulfill some formal requirements typical of comics *per se*. One of the manifestations of this belief is the conceptualization of comics as a specific *medium*. While one of its origins lies in the work of the 'theorizing practitioner' Will Eisner (1985),[3] it was later explicitly summarized in the phrase "the *medium* – known as comics" by Scott McCloud (1994:6, original emphasis) as part of his (naively semiotic) approach. As a 'theorizing practitioner' himself, he petrified this concept in his highly successful and influential treatise, the 'metacomics' *Understanding Comics*. The figurative comparison of 'pure form' to an empty jar that contains the topics of the various comics like a fluid, apparently 'distilled' from all kinds of genres and content 'additives,' illustrates the core of this idea, which *Understanding Comics* popularized far beyond the boundaries of emerging (academic) comics studies.

This shift towards an understanding of comics as a medium, which is nowadays widely accepted and foundational of contemporary comics studies, is reflected in the gradual acceptance of the usage of the singular form of the word 'comics' as opposed to the previous plural form in American English (cf. Witek 1992:73). The conception of comics as a medium has already been present (at least implicitly) in the semiotically

[2] The question of synesthesia in comics is a research area that exceeds this study's scope. For more on this, see Salgueiro (2008).
[3] Lawrence L. Abbott (1986) also uses 'medium' when referring to comics as a '*narrative medium*.'

oriented Francophone studies in communication, which turned to comics since the 1970s (cf. Miller and Beaty 2014:63). Here, there has been a similar tendency to examine not only specific works of comics but also comics *per se*. Thierry Groensteen, whose *Systéme de la bande dessinée* (1999, published in English as *The System of Comics* eight years later) represented in some ways the (temporary) culmination of a French 'general theory' of comics, defines his ambitious system primarily as a kind of "conceptual frame in which all of the actualizations of the 'ninth art' can find their place and be thought of in relation to each other, taking into account their differences and their commonalities within the same *medium*" (Groensteen 2007:20, emphasis added).

However, from the semiotic point of view, it is very difficult to give any specific meaning to the concept of 'medium' in relation to comics terminologically. Comics is not a medium in the sense of a specific technology or one specific apparatus (cf. Aumont 1997) – unlike, for example, film or television (for a discussion of the issues of the mediality of comics cf. Wilde 2014, 2015).

Some theorists have worked instead with the concept of a 'language' when describing comics (cf. Saraceni 2003; Varnum and Gibbons 2001; Frahm 2010). The metaphor of a 'language of comics' has seen many shifts, from a general comparison, analogy, or parable to an ambitious, cognitively based concept and empirical research into 'visual language' (cf. especially Cohn 2013). The derived analogy of several co-existent 'dialects' is also inspiring: comics, BD, and manga are subsequently construed as 'dialects' within the 'language' of comics. While Cohn considers this an empirically grounded description, others have insisted that comics can only be considered a language through a metaphor (cf. Bramlett 2012:1). Although functional in many ways, this is inaccurate and could be misleading as a theoretical concept (seeming even "mystical," Davies 2019:5).[4] We might enforce a distinction by reserving the designation 'language' as a term for codes that involve speech, for which the term holds a certain exclusivity – in which case "comics cannot be a language" (Bramlett 2020:34). However, language metaphor is undoubtedly very tempting, and even Groensteen refers to his proposed system in some parts of his book as "the *language* of the ninth art" (2007:23; emphasis added). From the point of view of social semiotics, comics are a kind of "communicative action" (Davies 2019:2), a "pictorial utterance" with "language-like functions" (4). Davies, therefore, proposes "to use a model of linguistics that will be appropriate to describing the resources comics use" (5). We will summarize these aspects by referring to the *code* of comics instead.

Along these lines, through a comparison with purely verbal expressions (texts), comics do not appear as a 'language' but rather as 'literature' if we remain with metaphors, i.e., as a specific ('artistic') usage of language (cf. Groensteen 2007:18). A particular work

[4] Cf. "The metaphor of 'comics as a language' is powerful and very common, but comics studies must evolve away from this metaphor because it unnecessarily limits our vision of what comics are. While no definition is perfect, the idea of 'comics as a language' is flawed" (Bramlett 2020:34).

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of comics is always artistic (or at the very least an artifact, a work of craft). The degree to which its systemic features and means are binding varies widely but is always fundamentally less than the binding power of the natural language rules and determined by creative, artistic intentions and decisions. On the one hand, any one work of comics can never exhaust all the systemic elements offered by the code. On the other hand, in each particular work of comics the rules of the 'language' might not only always be renegotiated, but are in fact always re-established.

The terminology of semiotics offers a more appropriate concept to accurately describe the nature of comics: the concept of *code* – eventhough it has never been defined consensually (cf. Nöth 1995). Yet, for a semiotic approach it seems most precise and useful to treat comics as one specific *kind of code* (alongside other codes, 'media,' 'languages,' or 'art forms': such as literature, visual arts, film, theatre, etc.). The concept of the code intended here is to be defined not only as "a system of organization of signs" (Bignell 2002:10) but more precisely as something that "provide[s] the rules which generate signs as concrete occurrences in communicative intercourse" (Eco 1976:55), i.e., something that goes beyond specific rules and towards a more general 'framework.'

Strictly speaking, comics constitutes a *meta-code*, because it includes other (primary) codes, which it more or less integrates into itself. Davis, for example, talks about the "complex set of codes that comprise comics" (2019:5). In the most general sense (and one most frequently treated in theory), comics is a specific combination of 'images' and 'words,' i.e., a pictorial code (images, 'art') and a verbal code (words, 'literature'), an 'imagetext.'[5] It is an intertwined, specific combination of verbal and pictorial signs. Although comics as a (meta-)code uses resources from these two basic semiotic systems, it is unified in its duality, leading to a significant blurring of the lines between these 'source codes.' At the same time, however, what makes the code of comics specific is "on the one hand, the simultaneous mobilization of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitute it, and, at the same time, the fact that none of these codes probably belongs purely to it" (Groensteen 2007:3).

Moreover, the usage and combination of these two codes are far from capturing the entire nature of the (meta-)code of comics. In particular texts, we can find a range of different codes: a graphic code (in the way images and words are designed, especially in the case of lettering); a typographic code (from the form of the lettering to the layout/composition of the pages, etc.); visual artistic codes (various formal procedures, techniques, styles, etc., which further differentiate the pictorial elements); quasi-nonverbal codes (representation of conventional facial expressions, gestures, etc., in a transformed, artistically

[5] We may leave aside a certain number of wordless comics in this context. From a semiotic point of view, it seems appropriate to consider the presence of verbal code in the meta-code of comics as optional (facultative): "[S]ilent comics operate in the same ways we see in the verbal/visual texts; that the same operations and functions occur, but with the images alone now handling all of the work" (Davies 2019:6). Groensteen (2007:3), however, argues for the "primacy of the image and, therefore, the necessity to accord a theoretical precedence to that which, provisionally, I designate under the generic term of 'visual codes.'"

expressed form); the use of colors, as well as literary, narrative, aesthetic, but also stylistic, rhetorical, genre codes, etc. The proposed specific (meta-)code of comics works with (even more than) the codes mentioned above as its sub-codes and structures them according to its own rules. These codes intertwine in a specific way determined by the formal characteristics of comics. The usage of the same codes differs more or less in other forms/meta-codes (e.g., animation, picture books, advertising, etc.). For example, even though animation combines pictorial and verbal messages as comics do, they do so differently (in a dynamic mode instead of a static one, with spoken words instead of written ones, etc.). Moreover, since works of comics are 'literary' rather than 'non-literary' (see above), their components can take various forms, being the products not of some 'common language user,' but of the creative activity of the author, the 'artist.' Knowing (and describing) the primary system, which is of course open to disruptions and innovations, can make it possible to understand, describe, and analyze how comics as a form of expression (a metaphorically understood 'medium' or 'language') has developed and continues to do so.

Suppose we need to express some conceptual content (e.g., non-representational ideas) in the comics code. This is possible through a verbal component or a pictorial component. The verbal code uses its means, words, to express concepts (explicitly or implicitly), similarly to literature or everyday speech, which also operate with a verbal code. The dominant part and a particularly privileged position in the code of comics is held by pictorial messages (images in panels), which is how the (meta-)code of comics differs from the code of literature (with which it otherwise shares some modalities/media). It is the pictorial component of the (meta-)code of comics that is fundamental since the recipient "has access to the formal system of the comics through his visual sense" (Lefèvre 2000:n.pag.). Within the pictorial code, the abstract (non-depictive) content can then be expressed either by conventionalized forms of expressions (part of the code or sub-code) or by devices created ad hoc. Its design falls entirely under the authority of the author (artist), and its function and validity are established within the particular work.

When political concepts are visualized in this way, it should not be forgotten that understanding the rhetoric of sign usage requires an adequate description of its ideological dimension (cf. Barthes 1972). The following analysis finds how the chosen comics artists express these political and ideological concepts and whether or how these authors' choices carry an ideological message. Individual creative choices in the representation of historical events carry not only clearly identifiable historical references (denotations) and the meanings associated with them because of the particular context and presentation (connotations), but also more general ideological (or mythological) meanings associated with a general perception of national history that becomes naturalized through their signification. As Barthes argues, these meanings are often alluded to indirectly, through secondary signification, and can only be paraphrased through neologism in the general code. The case of the Czech nation's 'non-self-evidentness' is very much in point.

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2. Code transpositions of *The Czech Century*

In the context of exploring the semiotics of politics and ideology, the series of nine separate graphic novels *Češi* [*The Czechs*] (2013–2017) is doubly interesting. Firstly, due to the specifics of its genesis: The comic is a creative re-coding of a given source material, the scripts written for the TV series *České století* [The Czech Century] (2013–2014), for a form (or medium) different than originally intended. Thus, the creators had to deal with decisive differences in terms of code/sign dispositions of the two forms involved. Secondly, the series' themes are rather non-representational (non-depictive) since the main content communicated here concerns political theses and considerations.

2.1. Czech comics, *The Czechs*, *The Czech Century*, and the changes of codes

Czech(oslovak) comics had a rather complicated history during the 20th century, mainly due to totalitarian political systems: first, the occupation by Nazi Germany, then four decades of Communist rule as a satellite state under the Soviet Union (whose close power surveillance is the topic of one of the graphic novels discussed below), as well as ideological objections to the format of comics as such (cf. Alaniz 2017), leading to some specific self-defensive strategies of Czech comics during communism, both at the level of form and content (cf. Kořínek 2020). In the current phase of its development, beginning after the year 2000, Czech comics seems to be in good shape and continuously developing. Above all, the domestication of the genre of graphic novels has produced several remarkable works (for this, cf. Foret 2012), some of which have already been translated into some neighboring and major world languages with more added with increasing frequency. Together with the natural generational changes of audiences and the related change in cultural preferences, the position and perception of comics in Czech society have changed fundamentally because of recent Czech works in addition to a substantial amount of translated works. Finally, Czech comics also became significantly focused on social, historical, and political themes, which now represent a substantial – and commercially quite successful – segment within the domestic production of comics.

However, the 824-page series entitled *Češi* [The Czechs] represents an unmissable, ambitious, and significant project even in this context. This is despite the fact that it was created as a by-product of another, even more ambitious, project: a series of nine television films entitled *České století* [The Czech Century] (2013–2014), mapping out critical political events or defining decisions in Czechoslovak history (the 'big,' political moments), set in 1918, 1938, 1941, 1948, 1951, 1968, 1976, 1989, and 1992.

From a social semiotics point of view, the very names of the twin projects imply an ideological shift. Their subject matter is the history of *Czechoslovakia*, i.e., the joint nation-building project of Czechs and Slovaks. The series starts with the invention,

negotiation, and creation of the state and ends with the state's disintegration and dissolution. However, the TV series is called "The *Czech* Century," and the comics series is called "The *Czechs*," although the protagonist of at least one of the episodes or volumes is a Slovak, i.e., a politician of Slovak nationality. Of course, the 'Czech voice' is dominant in this project produced by Czech Television, the national public service broadcaster. The naming implies a powerful statement and brings with it several meanings (denotative, connotative, and mythical, to use Roland Barthes' terms), and says a great deal about the perception of the shared state as a primarily Czech project (for better or for worse). After all, the last episode of the TV series is called *Ať si jdou* [Let Them Go] (2014), 'them' meaning the Slovaks, as opposed to 'our' common state.

The individual volumes also have different titles from the TV episodes. On TV, the titles comprised two to four words and mainly expressed some kind of statement (e.g., *Velké bourání* [The Great Demolition] for 1918 and the end of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, or *Musíme se dohodnout* [We Have to Make a Deal] for 1968 and the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union led Warsaw Pact armies). The titles of the individual volumes of the series of graphic novels follow a unified form, namely 'how someone did something' (from the first *Jak Masaryk vymyslel Československo* [How Masaryk Invented Czechoslovakia] to the ninth *Jak Mečiar s Klausem rozdělili stát* [How Mečiar and Klaus Divided the State]). This form perhaps refers to the creators' intention to focus on the thoughts and motives of the protagonists.

2.2. **Specifics of TV coding**

The entire project and the individual television films were presented as a powerfully creative project and an authorial vision or interpretation of the events they portrayed. The opening credits introduced each episode as part of the cycle "The Czech Century *According* to Pavel Kosatík and Robert Sedláček" (emphasis added). Both creators, the scriptwriter, and the director, presented their collaborative work as the outcome of their discussions and interpretation of the events in question.

The individual episodes of the series were weekly broadcast over two periods: the first five episodes between October 27 (topically fitting on the eve of the national holiday for the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic) and November 17, 2013, and the remaining four episodes a year later, between November 16 (again on the eve of a national holiday, this time not directly related to the theme of the episode) and December 7, 2014. The individual episodes vary considerably in terms of the period they cover. Some take place over a few days (a week or two), while others encompass several months or even several years (more rarely, as in the case of the first episode).

The television project, like the comics series, is based primarily on reimagining (not necessarily on an accurate or adequate reconstruction) the conversations between

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
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the protagonists of 'grand' (political) history, especially leading politicians, which proved decisive for the given historical turning points in Czech(oslovak) history. These specific dialogues of specific individuals are what the scriptwriter presents as decisive moments through which 'history has been made.' The declared aim was to look 'inside the minds' of the individual protagonists, their motivations, and the thought processes which led to those truly historical decisions and actions. These were made in tense situations that would fundamentally affect their lives and their loved ones, and the entire state or nation. Often, the protagonists were aware of this when they took these actions. The series seeks to portray their doubts, conflicts, painful deliberations, and impulsive decisions.

This intention fits well with the chosen form of principally feature-length films (between 65 and 83 minutes) and, above all, with the made-for-television film format. The creators referred to Frank Pierson's television film *Conspiracy* (2001) about the Wannsee Conference and Sidney Lumet's film classic *12 Angry Men* (1957) as their sources of inspiration. Concerning the cinematographic codes used, the film relies primarily on the signifying resources of the actor's expression and action, which can dynamize and emotionally color even the thesis-like dialogue. Television production is also best able to cope with the genre of 'talking heads,' traditionally used in television (despite the development of quality television and the formal innovations associated with it) and still quite widespread (at least in some of the major television genres).

For the given intention, i.e., the (re)presentation of foundational historical conversations, the casting of the individual parts was crucial and decisive for the message; these long dialogues had to be *acted out* to avoid a simple declamation of theses. The casting of particular actors was also essential, made even more complicated (and discussed in public even before the films were released) for the more recent historical periods, as the audience still remembers the figures in question from contemporary factual genres (especially the news). In the case of a historical film, "audiences recognize the existence of a system of knowledge that is already clearly defined – historical knowledge, from which filmmakers take their material" (Sorlin 2000:37). Even for individuals from earlier historical periods, who no longer exist in the living memory of the audience, their image is given, fixed, and considered to a large extent obligatory, even canonical. The filmmakers had to take this canonical presentation into account.

2.3. **Code limits of the 'Derivative' graphic novel series**

The companion series of graphic novels began publication when the first episode was broadcast, but the synchrony broke down immediately after the first volume was published. The following volumes were published significantly later than the broadcasting time and in non-chronological order. The second volume was thus one

of those published last, three years after broadcasting the related TV episode. Due to the different production conditions, the books' publication pace was different and significantly less frequent than that of the TV series' broadcasting. Although the publisher intended to publish the remaining volumes in chronological order, the production requirements and the artists' capabilities made this impossible.

Some artists could not see how the film director and his crew realized the script. Nevertheless, according to scriptwriter Kosatík (2013b), some often chose similar solutions as the director. Others only worked after the television adaptation had already been broadcast. They and their readers could be familiar with the television version and compare the two 'incarnations' of the story. All artists had the same source material for their work as the director, i.e., the original script created to produce the episode of the TV series (cf. D'Amico 2016). The scriptwriter did not adapt his scripts for the different medium of comics with its different means of expression.

Although this placed artists in an uncomfortable position, they were somewhat compensated by their absolute creative freedom. All nine artists had to reduce the dialogue parts, which were unacceptably extensive for comics, and present them in a 'media-appropriate' way. More importantly, they had to find the semiotic resources by which to express some of the abstract (non-representational or non-depictive) theses and processes associated with the social upheavals and political crises that are the dominant topics of the series.

The scriptwriter also stated that the television and comics adaptations targeted different audiences, even demographically (cf. Kosatík 2013a, 2013b). The comics project was intended, right from the very beginning, for a younger audience than the TV series, mainly because younger viewers do not watch as much television, either in general or for this format specifically. At the same time, older Czech audiences do not read comics as much for historical reasons. Therefore, the look of a comics project must "correspond with the times and the speed of the reception of information" (Kosatík 2013b:n.pag., translation by the author). He also mentioned that the comics version has a "less serious" tone than the film version, not only because of the target group mentioned above and the younger participating artists but also because "drawing is evaluative, drawing is always an opinion" (2013b:n.pag.). Since a drawing always omits something and (thereby) emphasizes something else (cf. Barthes 1977), it tends (especially in comics) towards the mode of caricature. The examples analyzed below range on a scale from simply capturing pertinent features that "must be *expressed*" (cf. Eco 1976:206; original emphasis) to recognizing the depicted objects, especially historical persons, to express no more than a particular artist's opinion about them.

While the director of this kind of (television) film works with a particular actor, his acting type, and the degree of his resemblance to a historical figure as a means of expression (not only in visual form, but especially in gestures, diction, and other

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
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non-verbal expressions typical for each individual), the comics artist has to choose completely different means. At the same time, as far as the similarity ('recognizability') of a real historical person prefiguring a character is concerned, the comics artist is limited only by his drawing style. In contrast, an actor too different from the figure portrayed may fail. This challenge includes many components of expression that the (meta-)code of comics does not cover (and is not expected to), such as the difficult phase of 'likening' an actor to a perceived original. Here, the difference should not be distracting but balanced, so that overstated resemblance does not cross into imitation or parody.[6]

Apart from depicting actual historical figures whose appearance is familiar to the readers, the realization in the form of comics makes specific demands of the artists in terms of visualizing those mentioned above, primarily non-representational, or non-depictive processes. Each artist coped with this task differently. Some modified the original script for their own needs as authors and the needs of the comics form. In some cases, moreover, they added material entirely of their own making, such as non-script-based scenes and additional plot lines that provided a framework and interpretation for the scripted historical moment or process. Thus, in the volume *1992 – Jak Mečiar s Klausem rozdělili stát* [How Mečiar and Klaus Divided the State] – Dan Černý incorporated into Kosatík's story segments which represent the experience of his generation; an age group which perceived the events presented, i.e., the actions of politicians regarding the dissolution of the shared state, as children. In this way, the comic tries to understand the impact of these events on children's lives. Karel Osoha also worked with a micro collective of children in the volume *1948 – Jak se KSČ chopila moci* [How the Communist Party Seized Power], a story about the Communist coup and the seizing of power over the entire state. He not only frames the situations written by Kosatík, but he creates a semantic parallel in the children's world. On the one hand, he thematizes the competition between the individual parties (for control of the territory and about who will win in the announced race); on the other hand, he depicts the bewitchment of power offered by the mysterious 'sorcerer' Klement Gottwald who controls people in irrational ways. *In 1952 – Jak Gottwald zavraždil Slánského* [How Gottwald Murdered Slánský], Vojtěch Mašek does not add other plot lines but fundamentally transforms the whole ambiance of the volume following the poetics of his creative work (cf. Kuhlman 2020). On the other hand, while this narrative appears as a kind of political thriller about the struggle for power in the script and the television adaptation, in Mašek's work, the story takes on a much more paranoid and bizarre form, which is delivered in a manner significantly different to the film.

[6] An example is the rhotacism in the speech of the dissident and later President Václav Havel.

3. Different semiotics of disintegration: The (meta-)code of comics and the expression of political ideas

In the context of this study, we selected three volumes of the series for a more detailed analysis, all of which are linked by the theme of disintegration: the collapse of the Austria-Hungarian Empire and the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the disintegration of Czechoslovakia after the occupation by Nazi Germany in 1938, and the disintegration of the efforts of the reformists within the Communist regime during the Prague Spring of 1968, after the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact under the leadership of the Soviet Union. In the context mentioned above, the analysis aimed to identify, describe, and interpret how these abstract political processes are expressed in the graphic novels of the series.

3.1. Visualizing the duel of ideas

The opening volume of the series concerns the earliest historical events. It is entitled *Jak Masaryk vymyslel Československo* [How Masaryk Invented Czechoslovakia] and refers to 1918. However, only a marginal part of the story occurs in that year, comprising mainly of the last scene in which Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk arrives in the already established independent state as its president. Otherwise, the volume deals with Masaryk's activities between 1914 and 1916, emphasizing the events of 1914 and the beginning of his campaign. The keyword in the title is 'invented' – the corresponding scenes show Masaryk convincing his contacts of the importance of the Czechoslovak question and its global significance and explaining the ideological context of his political concept against the background of the ongoing World War between the European powers. Consistent with the entire project's character as mentioned above, the book's main content consists of presentations of situations in which Masaryk converses with someone (or gives a speech). The content of his speeches is primarily abstract, and the aim is to convince an individual or large audience of the claims presented.

Conveying such content through the semiotic means of the (meta-)code of comics is somewhat complicated. The artist of this volume, Petr Novák, working under the moniker Ticho762, with the assistance of the scriptwriter Martin Šinkovský hence added a parallel plotline about the army boxer Josef Vávra to the narrative of Masaryk's negotiations. Vávra's fights intertwine with Masaryk's critical conversations. These negotiations are performed through a physical, literal fight – the battle of ideas becomes a boxing match; the authors referred to this sport's popularity at the time. In the panels, the graphic depiction of punches in the ring between Vávra and his opponents are accompanied by speech balloons and by alternating images of Masaryk

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
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and his interlocutors, depicted while in conversation (Figure 1). While these dialogues take place in the opulent spaces of the mansions inhabited by these persons of high status, Vávra's duels are set in the small space of the ring. Both scenes are connected by a chain of linked speech balloons presenting the ongoing conversations, which run across the (double) pages, floating freely through the space, and referring with their pointers to figures depicted in panels and pages before or after. The chosen signifying resources represent situations that show conflict more vividly – which the merely reported dialogue would not allow within the (meta-)code of comics.

Hermeneutically, it seems somewhat surprising that the last conversation and match presented, the story's conclusion for the comics reader, does not end with victory for Masaryk or Vávra. Instead, Masaryk failed to convince David Lloyd George, United Kingdom's Prime Minister, of his conception of the Czechoslovak question. Unable to refute George's arguments, he leaves the meeting defeated in the same way that Vávra, unable to deflect his opponent's hard punches, leaves the ring to the victor. While in the script and the television film, the dialogue between Masaryk and David Lloyd George ends as the argument is won, the comics end on showing Vávra being knocked out by 'The Limey,' his opponent. However, the theme of the subse-

Figure 1. Masaryk is persuading Vávra is boxing. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[50])

quent final scene of both the graphic novel and the film is Masaryk's triumphant arrival at Prague, already Czechoslovakia, as president of the newly proclaimed state. This happens ahead of an epilogue describing Masaryk's meeting with his wife in a sanatorium after a long separation, also included in both versions.

The metaphor of the physical fight in the comics thus magnifies a semantic moment in the script and its television adaptation: failure is rewarded with success. However, this is a kind of dramaturgical error or a signal towards an interpretation that the victory was not the result of Masaryk's work or arguments but a constellation of the wills of the representatives of the Great Powers? For many Czechs, this is a strong view of the 20th-century developments and reinforces the impression of Czech(oslovak) state formation as 'non-self-evident.' As Vlachová and Řeháková argue (2009:258): "An important factor in this regard is the 'non-self-evident' nature of the existence of the Czech state […] following the contingency of its foundation." Via Klimek (2001), this idea refers to Milan Kundera, who in his remarkable speech at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers in 1967 declared: "For there has never been anything self-evident about the existence of the Czech nation and one of its most distinctive traits, in fact, has been the unobviousness of that existence" (1971:172). He repeats this idea later: "[F]or them their existence is not a self-evident certainty but always a question, a wager, a risk; they are on the defensive against History, that force is bigger than they, that does not take them into account, that does not even notice them" (2007:33). Kundera, in turn, is explicitly referring to the ideas of Hubert Gordon Schauer, published three decades before the founding of Czechoslovakia (cf. Orság 2019). So, this victory is not presented to the reader as deserved but rather as 'given from above': it did not have to turn out this way, and it is not clear to the reader why it turned out this way – depicted is only the fiasco.

It is interesting that, throughout the graphic novel, this juxtaposition between Masaryk's ideological duels and Vávra's physical fights does not always work in a strict parallel in terms of the presented relevance of each argument and punch. In the first conversation between Masaryk and Prince Franz Anton von Thun, the Habsburg monarchy's governor of Bohemia, Masaryk's argumentative superiority was certainly less convincing than Vávra's physical fight in the ring. However, in the dialogue with David Lloyd George, the visual metaphor is accurate. Every argument presented in the text in the speech balloon undermining Masaryk's propositions is precisely mirrored by a punch that Vávra takes from his opponent in the corresponding panel. While in the first case, Masaryk leaves the conversation with Thun with the conclusion that they have not found common ground because they live in different worlds and fundamentally differ in their beliefs and mindsets, in the second case, Masaryk leaves the dialogue with George defeated in a genuine sense (by arguments); thus, the visual metaphor works precisely.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0020 | **punctum.gr**

Figure 2. Presence of The Providence with the discussant Masaryk. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[35])

Figure 3. Providence stands behind/for Masaryk. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[34])

Apart from presenting the duel of ideas or concepts as a physical fight, the artist uses another significant way to visualize an abstract idea through pictorial means. In an interview with British journalist Wickham Steed and historian Robert William Seton-Watson, the character of Masaryk says: "I am an instrument […] of Providence." Furthermore, when questioned, he adds: "I believe it guides us all. That I am here now, talking to you, is by the will of Providence" (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[34]). The dialogue line draws on a statement from Masaryk's biographical book *Hovory s T.G.M.* [Talks with T. G. Masaryk]. It was initially published in three volumes and based on Karel Čapek's interviews with the first Czechoslovak president in 1928–1935, authorized by Masaryk: "I believe in teleology, that is, I believe that each of us is led by Providence," as recorded by Čapek (1995:146). The concept of Providence is not necessarily political. However, for Masaryk, who referred to the concept frequently, it had this dimension (cf. Čapek 1990:184, 1995:193). In his system of thought as well as his policies, it played a fundamental role – as it did in the 'Czechoslovak question' itself, of which he persuaded politicians. Masaryk's Providence is presented in the comics in two ways: conventionally, with a traditional symbol such as the Eye of God (Figure 2), or inventively, with an artistic symbol as a female figure, a nude with animal-like ears and horns. Using black captions entering the panels from a different space, the authors additionally connect Providence with the figure of Masaryk's wife Charlotte (Figure 3), whom Masaryk leaves behind in his homeland in the prologue to return to her in the epilogue. Moreover, when Providence is present during Masaryk's decisive moments, a purple glow is drawn around Masaryk's figure, which the artist depicts inside and between the panels, presenting Masaryk in a trance-like state (he is proverbially "called by Providence"). This combination of means of expression thus allows the artist to express the connection of the figure of Masaryk with God, his homeland, and his wife left behind in his homeland (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Charlotte and Providence, identification of voices. (Kosatík and Ticho 762 2013:[69])

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0020 | **punctum.gr**

3.2. **Visualizing the disintegration of the state**

The second volume in terms of historical chronology was published second to last. Entitled *Jak Beneš ustoupil Hitlerovi* [How Beneš Gave in to Hitler], it focuses on 1938, the year of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia as understood in the context of Masaryk's project, which was the climax of the previous volume. The events presented here take place over two weeks, between September 21 and October 5, 1938. The episode concerns the Czechoslovak state representatives dealing with the ultimatum demanding the cession of the territories on the border to Nazi Germany and the subsequent dictate at the Munich Conference, where the representatives of Great Britain, France, and Italy reached an agreement with Adolf Hitler on the future situation of Czechoslovakia. The central figure is Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš, also mentioned in the title. This time, the conversations depicted happen between him and his generals who represent the Czechoslovak army, with the central dramatic conflict occurring between Beneš and Colonel Emanuel Moravec.

Artist Štěpánka Jislová depicts the rapid change of the situation both in terms of the geopolitical position of Czechoslovakia and the position of President Beneš as the leading politician of the state through the graphic conception of a scene in which the escalating dialogues take place. First, she uses symptomatic colors as a means of meaning-making. While Beneš's first conversation takes place in the president's office, depicted in vivid colors, the second conversation takes place in an exterior setting where the colors are toned down. Finally, the third conversation is designed only in black and white.

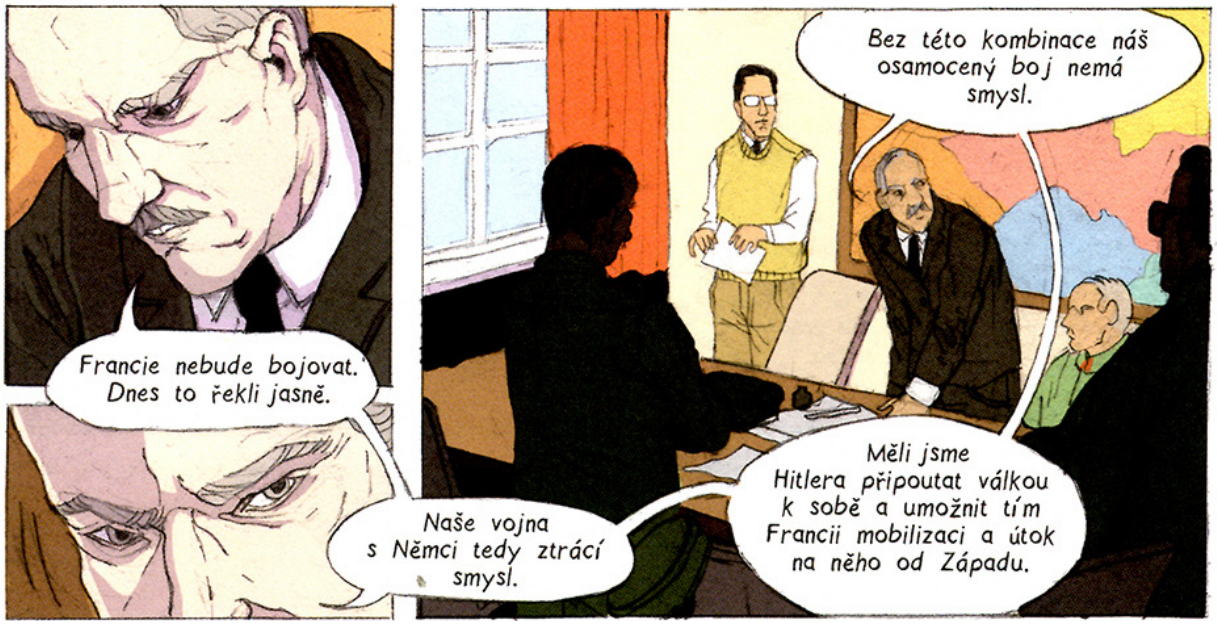

Figure 5. Benes is having a meeting with the generals in the standard office… (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[8])

Accompanying this change of color, the artist uses the gradual disintegration of space to express the nature of the situation. Whereas the first meeting between the president and the generals is depicted in a sparse but still fully equipped room (Figure 5), in the second meeting, the space appears somewhat dilapidated, with cracks on the walls and floors, plaster falling from the walls, and the room furnishings evoking a provisional space such as a field headquarters (Figure 6). There is no longer a conference table in the third conversation, and all the figures are depicted standing in a makeshift environment (Figure 7). After hearing Beneš's decision that the Munich dictate should be accepted,

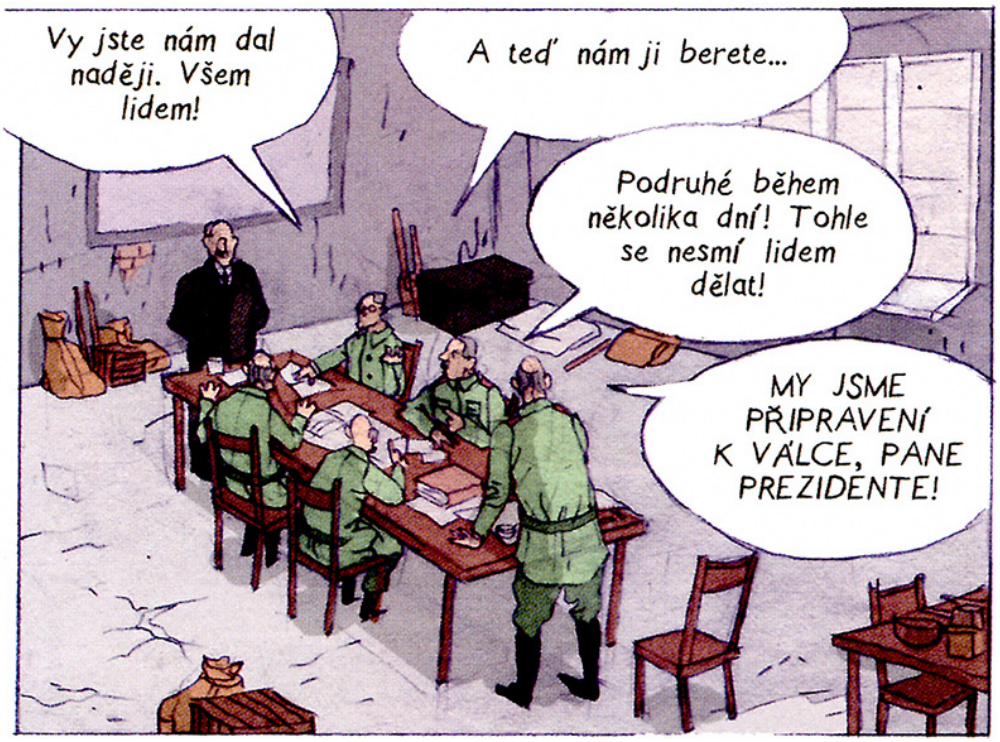

Figure 6. ... in the room depicted as the 'field office'… (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[32])

Figure 7. ... in completely emptied room. (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[40])

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0020 | **punctum.gr**

and the army be demobilized, half-collapsed walls are depicted behind the generals. The critical schism of opinion between President Beneš and Colonel Moravec is explicitly expressed by depicting the rupture between the two figures, which grows larger and larger as the number of panels increases and the conversation continues. As the debate progresses, the walls gradually collapse; pieces of falling plaster are drawn around the figures until finally, the figures are depicted on the remains of a plank floor surrounded by the black-colored surface of the panel (representing mere darkness, Figure 8). In the final scene, the rupture between the two protagonists widens until the remains of the floor beneath the figure of Moravec crumbles, and he falls into a dark abyss (Figure 9). The epilogue then depicts Moravec as a loyal servant of the Nazi occupants in 1942.

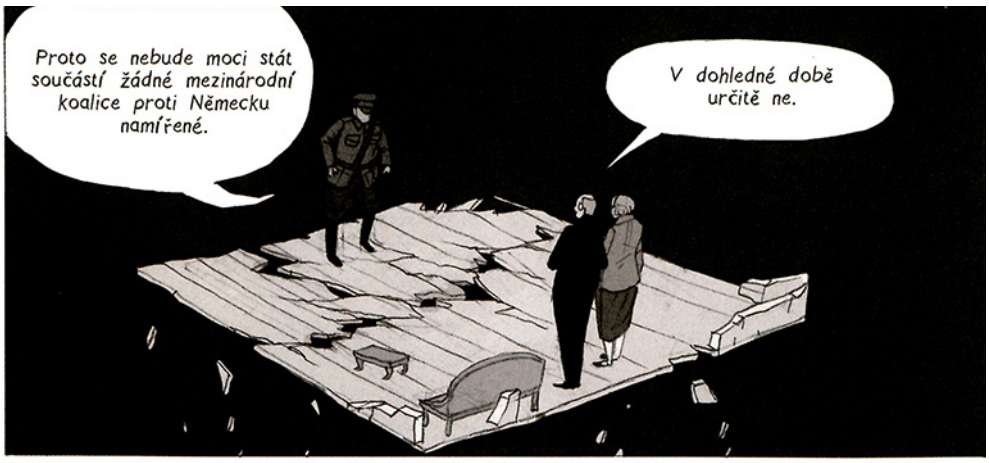

Figure 8. The world of Beneš and Moravec is sinking into darkness. (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[58])

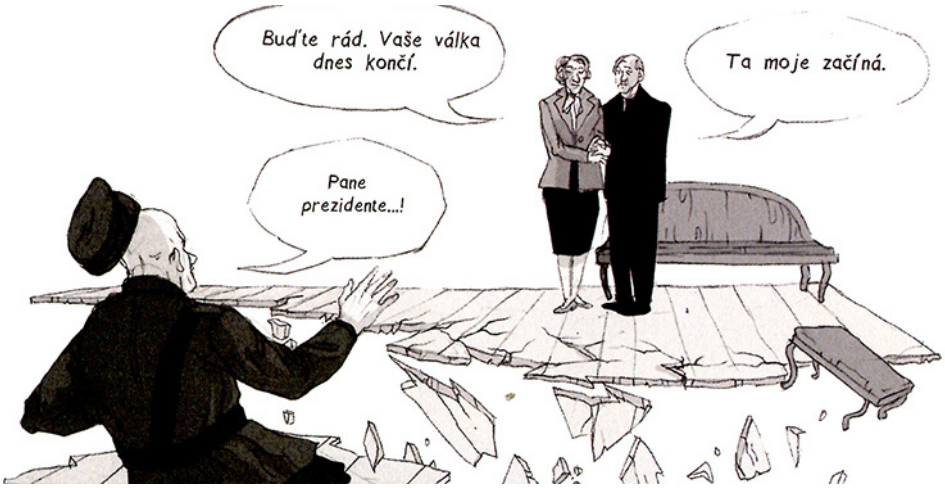

Figure 9. Moravec's world has fallen apart and he has lost ground beneath his feet. (Kosatík and Jislová 2016:[59])

Escalated geopolitical issues, such as the annexation of border areas by the Nazi German Reich, i.e., the loss of the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic, usually depicted in the symbolic form on the map, is thus visualized through the absence of specific spatial attributes of the depicted rooms. Regarding the central figures of President Beneš and Colonel Moravec, the means of expression used become a direct visualization of idioms that similarly express a particular liminal and hopeless situation – from 'being cornered,' through 'standing at the abyss,' to 'his world has fallen apart,' and 'he is losing ground.' Both protagonists are thus presented as having been forced by external circumstances into a situation in which their space for decision-making is fundamentally diminished. Their actions are determined from the outside by other, larger states. In the new situation, the powers that had supported the creation of the independent state left it at the mercy of an expansionist neighboring state (Nazi Germany). The figures themselves, who represent opposing opinions of Czechoslovak society, are presented in a way that does not allow for any action other than accepting an externally forced decision.

3.3. **Visualizing the clash of political doctrines**

The sixth volume in the order of historical events, entitled *Jak Dubček v Moskvě kapituloval* [How Dubček Capitulated in Moscow], deals with the political crisis in socialist Czechoslovakia in 1968 when the intervention of the Soviet Union ended the reformist efforts of some Czechoslovak Communists. At that time, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was undergoing a so-called 'process of revival,' accompanied by a gradual liberalization of the existing rules and sentiments throughout Czechoslovak society (e.g., the abolition of censorship). As a result, leading reformist politicians received unusual and very strong support from the population. However, the leaders of other states in the Soviet sphere of influence observed this process with extreme skepticism and concern, especially as Czechoslovakia was on the geographical edge of the Soviet sphere of influence at its border with the West. This eventually led to military intervention. The story of the volume takes place over one week, between August 20 and 27, 1968. It begins with the night the territory of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was occupied by the Soviet Union led Warsaw Pact armies and ends with the return from Moscow of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia representatives led by its First Secretary, Alexander Dubček, whereto they had been abducted after their internment on that first night. At the center of the volume's plot are the negotiations between the abducted Czechoslovak politicians and the representatives of the Soviet Union, led by Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The negotiations between the abductees and their abductors, the representatives of the satellite state, and the party leaders of the hegemonic Eastern bloc took place in an environment of fundamental inequality and under coercion. These

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0020 | **punctum.gr**

were not dialogues in the true sense of the word but the power dictates of one side and the coming to terms – personal and political – with these dictates by the other side.

Artist Karel Jerie's concept once again employs a powerful visual metaphor. Here, unlike the symbolic parallelism of conversation and boxing match in the volume designed by Ticho762, or the symbolic representation of disintegration through a crumbling environment created by Jislová, the main protagonists are depicted as animals, more precisely as prehistoric dinosaurs.

Depicting people as animals or at least with animal features (usually in the face or the whole head) has a long tradition as a specific code of caricature at least since the work of Grandville, who, in his metamorphoses of the late 1820s, 'puts a dog's head' on his figures. This code was subsequently transferred to comics and applied in various modifications and meanings in different comics works, from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* to Juan Guarnido's and scriptwriter Juan Díaz Canales *Blacksad* (cf. Herman 2017). Jerie puts a dinosaur's head on the Communist figures, expressing human characteristics through animal facial features like Grandville but now in a sequential narrative.

Apart from the fact that dinosaurs featured significantly in his paintings, Jerie (2016) stated that his primary motivation for this creative device was that the late 1960s was already a kind of distant 'prehistory' for the comics' anticipated readership. In addition, the image of politicians as dinosaurs and their interactions, according to him, enables reference to "the strong eating the weak" as a principle persisting in politics. Jerie's visual metaphor, however, is even more meaningful than that.

Considering the genre of historical comics, the primary and essential similarity and recognizability of the depicted figures to the actual historical protagonists is

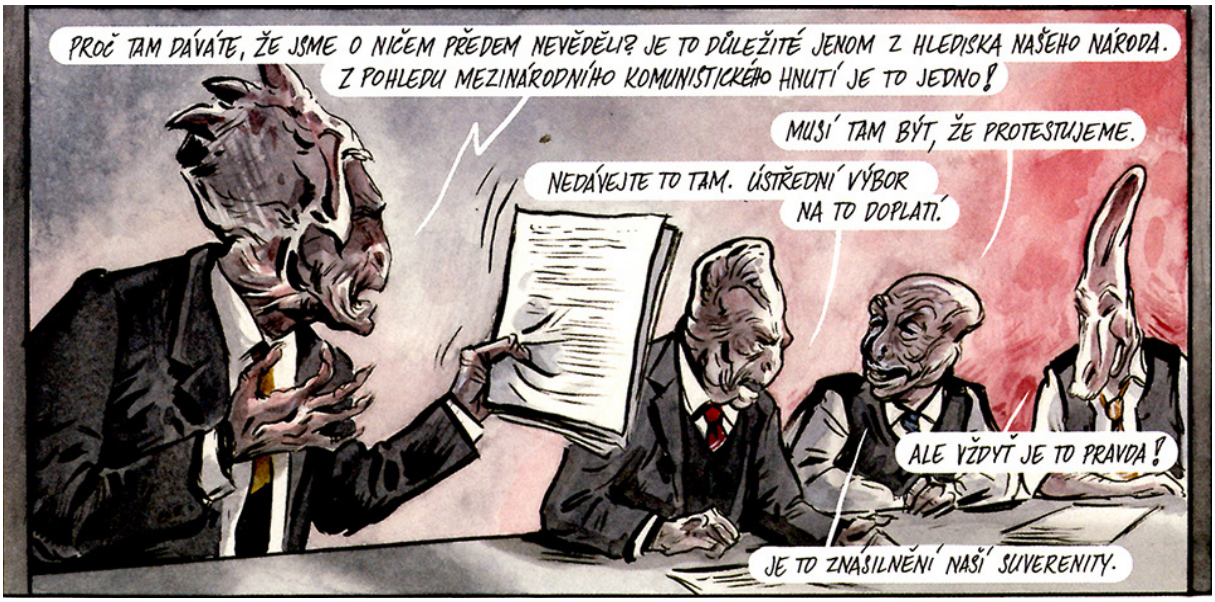

Figure 10. Different kinds of communists, different types of dinosaurs. (Kosatík and Jerie 2016:[14])

of crucial importance. Jerie is a skilled cartoonist who draws on the physiognomic features of individual figures. The image of the individual characters is easily recognizable despite the specific stylization, as he approximates these features in his caricature into the features of various kinds of dinosaurs. These hybrid significations allow him to visually depict the personality of specific figures or their outsized role in the story and indicate their motives. Moreover, they allow him to work more expressively with facial expressions. The general dimension of 'dinosaur-ness' was crucial for him – another instance of a visual device expressing an ideological idea only representable by neologisms. However, there is another symbolic meaning that we can be trace besides this, which is a visual expression of the conflict between Czechoslovaks and the Soviets, or between reformist and conservative Communists, as some figures evoke herbivorous, others carnivorous dinosaurs (Figure 10).

The conflict between two political doctrines is thus expressed as a conflict between two different types of these prehistorical species. While the general 'dinosaur-ness' was clearly primary, and it is impossible to relate the image of each of the figures to specific types of dinosaurs, the essential distinction between herbivores (reformist, defensive, Czechoslovak, ultimately defeated) and carnivores (conservative, offensive, Soviet, or pro-Soviet, ultimately victorious) is obvious.

For the main protagonists, it is even possible to specify their particular species. For example, Dubček takes a parasaurolophus-like form, which connotes herd-mindedness and unassertiveness. In contrast, Brezhnev takes a tyrannosaurus-like form, which refers to one of the most dangerous, predatory dinosaurs (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Politicians with dinosaur features… (Kosatík and Jerie 2016:[63])

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0020 | **punctum.gr**

This contrast is most clearly expressed in two double-page scenes Jerie added to the script's plot. In them, we no longer see politicians with mere dinosaur-like features but whole dinosaur bodies that retain some of the features of the politicians in question (Figure 12). The first represents a dream that a stressed Dubček has on a plane during his abduction to Moscow and depicts an attack on Parasaurolophus-Dubček (and, metaphorically, Czechoslovakia) by a much larger Tyrannosaurus-Brezhnev. In the second, Dubček then sees himself as a meal for the carnivorous Soviet Communists dinosaurs at the final reception after the signing of the Moscow Protocol. This visual metaphor expresses not only the feelings of a politician who has failed but also the situation of the state under occupation. Like the situation with the Munich Agreement, the interpretation suggested is that it was a foreign power that authoritatively decided on the subsequent development of the Czechoslovak state's domestic policy.

Figure 12. … and dinosaurs with features of the politicians. (Kosatík and Jerie 2016:[30-31])

Conclusion

The analyzed material demonstrates that while the television (meta-)code (ultimately a cinematographic code but bent towards a specific audience) can cope with mere quasi-dialogical interaction, the comics adaptations tend to use pictorial means to highlight some inherent meanings. For example, in the selected graphic novels, the artists' primary strategy in depicting abstract historical processes and political concepts is choosing visual metaphors that have a more general meaning – each represents one general idea applied throughout the story. In the first case, the metaphor of political conversations, i.e., ideological contests, as boxing matches or physical fights; in the second case, the metaphor of a collapsing structure and the gradual loss of national and state ground beneath one's feet in political negotiations and decision-making; and in the third case, the metaphor of the conflict between two variants of one ideology, reformist and conservative, as two types of one group of animals, more radical and aggressive (carnivorous) and more moderate and defensive (herbivorous). In all three cases, these are means expressions that do not come from the script and are not present in the script's TV adaptation.

These visual metaphors do not belong to the inherent systematic resources of the (meta-)code of comics but rather hail from more general artistic and graphic means. For example, it is easy to imagine using the same semiotic resources of visualization in another pictorially based medium or form – especially in animation, where these described visual metaphors could be used in the same way, and to a considerable extent also in single drawings and paintings. Perhaps the only device discussed above that does not lend itself to any form besides the comics is the symbolic connection between the Providence to which Masaryk felt called and his wife Charlotte, whom he left behind in his homeland. The code of comics allows the representation of verbal messages in neutral typeset, which can visually merge several voices into one. At the same time, the speech of a particular character would have specific individual characteristics in an audiovisual medium that would uniquely identify that character; neutral typesetting obstructs this possibility of symbolic identification.

The primary carrier of conceptual – political and ideological – content in the graphic novels in question is the written word, usually presented in a neutral, featureless manner. Because their main task was to present or adapt lengthy dialogue exchanges through comics, it is quite surprising how minimally the artists of all three volumes work with the possibilities of the signifying resources that the code of comics offers in terms of presenting the paralinguistic components of dialogues, i.e., capturing the sound characteristics of the presented speech (volume, intonation, tone, speed, and tempo of speech). In these comics, the speech balloons are almost always standardized. They have the style consistently used throughout the particular graphic novel, and consequently, the individual realizations of specific dialogue segments do not differ; the artists do not work much with their shape and size.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **07:02:2021**
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0020 | **punctum.gr**

In the same way, the dialogue form does not work all that much with the possibilities of lettering. There are almost no highlighted or otherwise emphasized parts to the text. However, the font size is primarily standardized, and featureless, and different parts of the dialogue are hardly differentiated. It is noteworthy that in the rare cases where a dialogue line is visually emphasized in the graphic novel, the TV actors deliver the same sentences without any emphasis.

Through the visual metaphors used, all three analyzed graphic novels then express and reinforce the mythical idea of Czech(oslovak) history as a process in which historical figures from among Czech politicians only play the role of extras; the development of the Czechoslovak state is decided elsewhere, outside the territory, and by other, non-Czech politicians. This mythological reading may thus reinforce the Czech audience's perception of the non-self-evidentness of an independent Czech state of its own.

At present, or more precisely for the last ten years or so, graphic novels of the historical genre dominate Czech comics. This is true in terms of the number of titles published and their commercial success. However, most of them are intended to serve remembrance or education with little artistic ambitions or features. They work with the possibilities of the code of comics in a relatively limited or subdued way – and where they do deal with more general political or ideological concepts, it is purely in terms of the written word. The three titles analyzed above thus represent an exception, both in the context of the entire nine-volume series of graphic novels and, more generally, within the Czech comics production. Within European comics, the genre under study is not as dominant, although undoubtedly abundantly represented, and even more so on a global scale. The findings obtained based on this material could thus be interesting for further comparisons with graphic novels from other traditions.

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