


Saudek and Macourek's *Muriel*: (After)Lives of a Czechoslovak Anti-Normalisation Superheroine

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Abstract. This paper presents a symptomatic rereading of four of Kája Saudek and Miloš Macourek's collaborative works around the female double-heroine of Muriel/Jessie through the lens of critical theory. The film *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* (*Kdo chce zabít Jessii?*) (Vorlíček 1966), the two first and only existing episodes of the Muriel comics series *Muriel and the Angels* (*Muriel a andělé*) (Saudek and Macourek 1991) and *Muriel and the Orange Death* (*Muriel a oranžová smrt*) (Saudek and Macourek 2009), as well as the comics-comedy *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling* (*Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku*) (Lipský 1971) are conceived of as intermedially connected and socio-politically relevant to date. By analysing in particular the political context in which these works were created and extrapolating the underlying, yet often ironic critique of ideology inherent to them, the present study for the first time methodologically foregrounds their investigation along political and ideological lines. Special attention is paid to the counterfactual openings and the political imagination at work that can be designated as communist utopian. The paper thus aims at demonstrating that it is not enough to praise the import of American-style imagery, or the comic genre itself, into the Czechoslovak pop culture of the 1960s, if we are to grasp the continuing significance of one of its most famous super heroines (Muriel/Jessie) and creative duos (Saudek and Macourek).

Key Words: Czechoslovak comics, communist comics, Czechoslovak film, post-socialism, communist utopia, ideology critique, counterfactual narratives, female comic heroes, comics-comedy

***Muriel* Saudeka in Macoureka: (po)življenja češkoslovaške protinormalizacijske superjunakinje**

Povzetek. Članek podaja simptomatično ponovno branje štirih del Káje Saudeka in Miloša Macoureka o dvojni junakinji Muriel/Jessie skozi lečo kritične teorije. O filmu *Kdo hoče ubiti Jessie?* (*Kdo chce zabít*

Jessii?) (Vorlíček 1966), dveh prvih in edinih obstoječih epizodah serije stripov o Muriel – Muriel in angeli (*Muriel a andělé*) (Saudek and Macourek 1991) ter Muriel in oranžna smrt (*Muriel a oranžová smrt*) (Saudek and Macourek 2009) – ter stripovski komediji Štirje umori so dovolj, draga (*Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku*) (Lipský 1971) razmišljamo kot o intermedialno povezanih ter še danes družbenopolitično relevantnih. Z analizo političnega konteksta, v katerem so bila ta dela ustvarjena, in ekstrapolacijo temeljne, a pogosto ironične kritike ideologije, ki je v njih inherentna, pričujoča študija prvič metodološko postavlja v ospredje raziskovanje avtorjev v politični in ideološki smeri. Posebna pozornost je namenjena protidejstvenim vrzelim in politični imaginaciji na delu, ki jo lahko označimo za komunističnoutopično. Članek tako želi pokazati, da ni dovolj samo hvaliti uvoza podob v ameriškem slogu ali stripovskega žanra nasploh v češkoslovaško pop kulturo šestdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja, če hočemo razumeti trajni pomen ene njenih najbolj znanih superjunakinj (Muriel/Jessie) in ustvarjalne dvojice (Saudek in Macourek).

Ključne besede: češkoslovaški strip, komunistični strip, češkoslovaški film, postsocializem, komunistična utopija, kritika ideologije, protidejstvene pripovedi, stripovske junakinje, stripovska komedija

A Strange Fairytale

In the short text 'Podivná pohádka' (A Strange Fairytale) (Saudek 1991), which oscillates between preface and prologue, Kája (Karel) Saudek, probably the best-known Czech comics illustrator, retraced the peripeties of the convoluted and much deferred publication history of his Muriel and the Angels (*Muriel a andělé*) (Saudek and Macourek 1991). Ever since 1969, when Saudek, together with the scenarist Miloš Macourek, planned a series of twelve graphic novels narrating the adventures of the young, smart and extremely attractive physician Muriel, the first episode had been waiting in the drawers of Mladá fronta.¹ It eventually saw the light of day on the Czechoslovak book market in 1991, only to become one of the author's most appraised comic strips. A Strange Fairytale amounts to a comico-cinematographical note where Saudek's hopeful race to the editorial office not only transpires the spirit of the just kicked-off Velvet

¹ Founded in 1945, Mladá fronta (The Young Front), was one of the most important publishing companies in post-war Czechoslovakia. As with any other publisher, it was subjected to state censorship in varying degrees throughout communist dictatorship. After a turbulent, and later much criticised, privatisation in the 1990s, the publishing house ceased to exist in 2021.

Revolution, but also textually evokes comic bubbles – ‘Uf! Gasp!’ (1991, 2). Saudek had made it to the office just in time, yet without achieving any publishing perspective. In the same vein, a couple of (seemingly rhetorical) questions and exclamations are addressed to the readership of an unsteady ‘post-revolutionary’ time which appeared to have only little in common with the equally uncertain moments of the Prague Spring and its disillusioning aftermath two decades earlier.² That is to say, also with the moment when *Muriel* and her fantastically utopian multi-temporal world were born. Remembering that context of hopeful change, Saudek asked ‘Would all of this [the crazy genesis of *Muriel* in the liberated momentum of 1968] *still* be true *today*, in a time of videos, *devoid of ideas* and inflationary in about every sense?’ (1991, 1, emphasis added).³

It is precisely this presumed lack of ideas that stands in stark contrast with the political imagination and audacity of Saudek and Macourek's erstwhile *Muriel* story. A story full of scathing socio-political and ideological criticism, unfolding both on the level of its scenario, including interplanetary journeys, time travel and alternate history (Macourek), as well as on the level of its visual execution full of irony, intericonic and intermedial citations and Western, mostly American, references (Saudek). *Muriel*'s universe includes versions of a different utopian future where the idea of communism seems to have been fully realised (*Muriel* and the Angels) as well as a scenario of how such a historical trajectory could be hampered by the invasion of orange monsters, which bears strikingly analogous resemblances to the 1968 Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia (*Muriel* and the Orange Death). Even in the face of outspoken censorship and the sweeping political shifts that stifled the country's spring-time awakening and converted it into the depoliticised apathy of the so-called ‘normalisation’ – both of which rendered regular publication of the first two and only existing *Muriel* episodes impossible – Saudek would find ways to smuggle *Muriel* into other media he was working on, such

² Whereas the Velvet Revolution of 1989 quickly ushered in the demise of Czechoslovak state socialism and subsequently led to the splitting of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the Prague Spring of 1968 had aimed at realising ‘socialism with a human face,’ but was soon crushed by a Soviet invasion. The years following the end of the Prague Spring are commonly designated as ‘normalisation.’ The term is problematic in itself as it reproduces the reactionary perspective of the occupier since what had to be normalised were the reformist tendencies of 1968 deemed too liberal.

³ ‘Platilo by tohle vše *ještě dnes*, v době videí, *žádných idejí* a inflace všeho?’ (Saudek 1991, 1, emphasis added); all translations from Czech are by the author.

as the feature-length comics-comedy *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling* and the movie poster of Roger Vadim's *Barbarella* (1968) for Czechoslovak distribution (Diesing 2013, 278, 374–375). Thus, a lack of ideas and, especially, political imagination would be the last things that come to mind to characterise Saudek and Macourek's work. It comes as a striking sign of foreclosure, then, that exactly such a fear is uttered in the face of the 'democratic transition' and 'economic transformation' Czechoslovakia was about to undergo in the 1990s (Offe 1991) and, moreover, as history seemed to have ended (Fukuyama 2006) and the new uni-polar world rid itself of any alternative utopias. In what follows, this fear will be read as a symptom for the unrealised utopias whose loss we continue to mourn in the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Comics and Politics

The current paper proposes a (re)reading of Saudek and Macourek's *Muriel* and her multiple lives by politically and ideologically contextualising them and, thus, opening a perspective of comics studies that, in the 'post-socialist' predicament of Central Europe, has been widely neglected for the benefit of mostly depoliticised chronological and positivistic accounts (Kořínek 2010; Pospiszyl 2015). These hitherto prevalent methodological choices symptomatically indicate the ongoing failure to grasp the discrepancy between 'actually existing socialism (a later expression)' (Jameson 2017, 269) on the one hand and a utopian communism on the other, the latter being far from absent in Saudek's comics. For instance, Tomáš Pospiszyl attests to the most ambitious project thus far of mapping the History of Czechoslovak Comics in the 20th Century (Prokůpek et al. 2014) and the effort to go beyond 'the creation of a detailed factography lacking necessary interpretation,' only to ascertain the adjournment of a more theoretical approach (Pospiszyl 2015, 767). In his review of the most extensive monograph on Saudek to date (Diesing 2013), Pavel Kořínek (2010, 685) goes so far as to conclude that, '[u]nfortunately, the accompanying text could not shift away from elementary descriptiveness.' In 'Comics, Comics Studies and Political Science,' Kent Worcester, himself a political scientist and co-editor of *A Comics Studies Reader* (Heer and Worcester 2009), more generally states that '[t]o date, scholars of comics have done a better job of analyzing individual narratives, and recovering the lives and works of past cartoonists, than of finding ways to measure the social, political, and economic impact of comics and cartoons' (Worcester 2017, 692). Furthermore, such assessments not

only hold true with regard to secondary literature, but can also be applied to the presentation of comics in an exhibition context. When I first researched this paper in 2023, there were altogether three distinct shows on display in the Czech Republic where the work of Kája Saudek in general and *Muriel* in particular prominently featured. Whereas one Prague exhibition at the Dancing House Gallery was completely monographic, the shows at the Western Bohemian Gallery in Plzeň and the Moravian Museum in Brno focused on genealogies and authoritatively displayed the work of Saudek in his capacity as 'the king of Czech comics'⁴ (Galerie Tančící dům 2022; Moravské zemské muzeum 2022; Bendová and Šlach 2022).⁵ However, *Muriel* and the Angels were reduced to pop icons, superheroes and fantastic creations without any emancipatory potential. Their visual qualities were preferred to narratological or utopian ones where the protagonists' features were reduced to iconographic innovation and their main strength perceived in the import of Western pop culture syntax. Finally, in the introduction to *Comics and Ideology* – the very first book to directly link comics with questions of ideology⁶ – the editors laconically observe that '[c]ertainly much research about comics has focused on elements other than ideological' (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 2001, 3). Pointing out both comics' formal specificities and social significance (2001, 3–4), they go on to formulate two questions: 'Why

⁴ It is not only in light of the collective background of the creations here examined – all of them emerged in cooperation with Miloš Macourek as scenarist and others with regard to the motion pictures – that we abstain from the *ex post* designation of Saudek as 'the king of Czech comics' ('král českého komiksu'). Furthermore, such a title does not reflect the historical reality of the Czechoslovak state, given the importance of Slovakia as a publication site, especially in *Technické noviny* (Technical News), when printing Saudek's comics in the Czech half of the state had become increasingly difficult throughout the 1970s (Prokúpek 2014a, 570; 2014e, 657). It is, in the geographical context of this journal, noteworthy that, in 1971, Saudek managed to publish a double-page spread comic strip on Jan Hus as the founder of the Czech reformation ('Jan Hus – osnivač češské reformace') in issue no. 37 of the Croatian youth magazine *Sve oko nas* (Prokúpek 2014a, 569; Diesing 2013, 322–323).

⁵ The exhibition in Plzeň was entitled *Linky komiksu* (The Lines of Comics) which, however, were based on associative conjectures rather than historiographical genealogies and did not really take into account the lines singled out in the History of Czechoslovak Comics in the 20th Century (Prokúpek et al. 2014; Schmarc 2015, 773). Yet, both genealogical approaches attribute one specific 'line' to Kája Saudek and his stylistic followers.

⁶ We subscribe to the understanding of ideology as 'a theory of [sic] which is necessary for an understanding of constituted interests within systems of representation' (Spivak 1999, 252).

and how may comics challenge and/or perpetuate power differences in society? Do comics serve to celebrate and legitimize dominant values and institutions in society, or do they critique and subvert the status quo?' (p. 2). These queries are of equal importance to the present endeavour, as we shall examine both Saudek's particular use of American-style comic features to subvert and ironise the official discourse on comics of 1950s and 60s Czechoslovakia as well as the (lack of) reception of Muriel in the early 1970s and then again after the demise of the state socialist regime.

Let us return, for a last time, to Worcester's review on comics and political science in order to further pin down our methodological approach. The author continues by broadly distinguishing 'three very different approaches to the challenge of mapping the relationship of politics and comics' (Worcester 2017, 692). First, area studies most often group comics along geographical lines – e.g. *A History of Czechoslovak Comics in the 20th Century* – and enable comparatist perspectives. Second, there is a more theoretical approach aimed at applying the methodological tools developed by social theory as well as postcolonial and cultural studies to graphic narratives in order to identify how power relations and cultural struggles are negotiated, yet often without touching upon the medial specificities of the comics form. A third approach finally consists in taking formal considerations of the comic genre more seriously into consideration and exploring its unique possibilities of pictorial, spatiotemporal and medial rendering of (political) narratives. It elaborates 'the medium's capacities, advantages, and liabilities when it comes to presenting political material' (p. 693). Even though such an approach has been associated with the comic journalism of Joe Sacco and its engagement with history, it turns out to be equally useful for older comics, especially when they closely interacted with other media (such as film) and enacted the concept of time and interplanetary travel – a particular form of the 'abrupt shifts in chronological and spatial location' that 'comics tend to comfortably accommodate' (p. 698).

While it would make no sense to dogmatically uphold Worcester's threefold distinction, it is mostly the third approach, with some allegiances to social theory questions, that best underpins my own revisiting of Macourek and Saudek's work. This quest is, however, also a visit *tout court* as Saudek's comics have to this date mostly been analysed from the perspective of area studies. Moreover, they have frequently been framed along black-and-white anti-communist narratives, according to which we would have had to partake in the following trajectory. First, the artist's early private works remained secluded from a wider audience,

given Saudek's 'bourgeois' class background. Second, his public productivity finally gained some traction under the impression of Prague Spring liberalisation tendencies in the late 1960s, only to be crushed by Soviet-imposed censorship in the course of the so-called 'normalisation' period, i.e. after Czechoslovak society had gone too far in its quest for 'socialism with a human face.' Finally, Saudek's work could be published after communist dictatorship ended, albeit the 'wild 1990s' with their uncontrolled deregulation and rise in criminal activities would bring along tedious legal and editorial struggles that only gradually enabled the author and, after his 2015 death, his family to recover the abducted or missing comic panels for an eventually wider publication (Diesing 2013, 269).⁷ However, the regime's relationship to the comic genre had become far more nuanced (Foret 2014, 550–554) and Saudek turned out to be a proficient visual contrabandist. As for the publishing turmoil, it was Mladá fronta which refused to publish *Muriel* and the Angels after 1989 because of an alleged lack of profitability (Saudek 1991, 2).

Despite the consistent censorship and marginalisation of his work by the Czechoslovak state authorities in the 1970s and 80s, we will also argue that the artist-cum-author's relationship to communism *as a promise* (Derrida 1994, 74) was far more complex than the often too quickly assumed straightforward opposition. Our preliminary thesis would therefore be that it is *Muriel*'s status of ambivalent superheroine who is fighting for peace and universalist ideals, as well as Saudek's untimely appropriation of American comics visuality and prototypes, that seem to have made this compound of work so apt of subversion. In what follows, we will moreover focus on the strategies of intericonicity and intermediality, interconnecting both comic strips among themselves and with movies. Also, the use of counterfactual narratives will be taken into account. As the editors of a recent anthology on Counterfactual Narrations and Culture of Remembrance (Nicolosi, Obermayr, and Weller 2019, 3–6)

⁷ This line of historico-biographical interpretation, further underpinned by the biological metaphor of awakening, heyday and decline, can be easily followed by taking a look at the titles of the chapters dedicated to Saudek in *A History of Czechoslovak Comics in the 20th Century*: Saudek's Belated Debut ('Saudekův opožděný debut'), Searching for an Emergency Exit [from censorship] ('Hledání únikového východu'), A Light at the End of the Cave [Saudek was drawing for the Czech Speleological Society in the 1980s] ('Světlo na konci jeskyně'), Out of the World of Stalactites ('Ven ze světa krápníků'), A Somehow Unhappy Happy End ('Poněkud nešťastný happy end'), Saudek Is Leaving ('Saudekovo odcházení') (Prokůpek 2014d, 467–472; 2014a, 565–570; 2014e, 653–657; 2014f, 739–742; 2014b, 832–837; 2014c, 914–917).

pointed out, every counterfactual project is always also an intervention in time and expresses a desire to have the present changed by altering the course of history at a decisive point of bifurcation, i.e. a moment (nexus) in time where events turned out differently from how history had recorded them: a retroactive opening (also Morson 2003). Hence, Saudek was juggling with official discourses on the trajectory towards communism and, at the same time, appropriating the motif of a technological race towards the conquest of space much popularised by Soviet discourse (Schaber 2019). Eventually, it was the control over time as frequently displayed in contemporary sci-fi films and especially in comedies succeeding the Czechoslovak *Nouvelle Vague* cinema in the early 1970s that was at stake (Selingerová 2016). In pursuing these lines, we will focus on four of Saudek's works associated with or directly featuring what we call an 'anti-normalisation superheroine.' These are, in chronological order, the film *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* (*Kdo chce zabít Jessii?*) (Vorlíček 1966), the two first and only existing episodes of the Muriel series – Muriel and the Angels (*Muriel a andělé*) in 1969 (Saudek and Macourek 1991) and Muriel and the Orange Death (*Muriel a oranžová smrt*) in 1970 (Saudek and Macourek 2009) – and finally the comics-comedy *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling* (*Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku*) (Lipský 1971).

Whoever Wants to Kill Jessie Is Denying Freedom to the Dreams

Although the movie scenarist Miloš Macourek and the comics illustrator Kája Saudek had known each other since 1960, it was only in the second half of the decade that their joint work would intensify and yield fruits. Together with filmmaker Václav Vorlíček, who initially had the idea to introduce comic characters into a film strip (2004, 94), they came up with a complete formal and genre novelty. *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* consisted in the conflation of film and comics for the first time in Czechoslovak cinematography (Vacovská 2016, 105–106, 110). The use of 'a unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels' (Chute 2016, 4) in a motion picture included not only the interjection of comic strips in the opening credits of the film and the dreams of the male anti-hero, engineer Jindřich Beránek, but also integrated speech bubbles into the very film once the comic strip's protagonists had exited the world of dreams.⁸ Sig-

⁸ There is a whole history of how speech bubbles fought their way into Czech comics, which is echoed by the trouble Macourek and Vorlíček encountered upon introducing comics and their bubbles into film (Kořínek and Prokůpek 2014a; Vorlíček 2004).

nificantly, we have to deal with the breakup of the, albeit always fuzzy, boundaries between dreamlands and reality. Jindřich's tyrannical wife – docent⁹ Beránková whom we could describe as a ruthless careerist loyal to the interests of a state-owned positivist science – had successfully developed a technology by means of which the subject's dreams could be optimised.

Upon application, nightmares and disturbing elements in the oneiric realm are supplanted by what are deemed to be pleasant and uplifting replacements in order to optimise the day-time labour productivity of the worker. The work of dreams (Freud's *Traumarbeit*) is taken over by the state and its ideologists who effectively undertake the displacement of objects (*Verschiebung*). There is only one catch, namely that the undesirable elements which make up our agitated nightmares escape from these only to enter reality and cause even more terror.¹⁰ It is tempting, following Slavoj Žižek (Fiennes 2012), to read this kind of experiment not only as an ideology critique of the communist dictatorship aiming at controlling the dreams of its subjects, but also as a meta-medial critique of cinema as the supreme machine of dreams itself, an aspect going well beyond the bipolar world view of the Cold War. That the end of such bipolarity would not automatically lead to a utopian state of peace was very clear to Macourek and Saudek, as is demonstrated by the peripeties of their *Muriel* story where only time travel and interplanetary journeys with their interventions in history pave the way for a truly anarchic and peaceful future.

Jessie is an extremely good-looking blonde female heroine played by Saudek's earlier love Olga Schoberová, whom engineer Jindřich encountered in the comic strip episode of the fictitious journal *Svět techniky* (World of Technics) and who then appears in his dreams. The fact that she is an inventor herself precisely does not identify her with the dogmatist docent Beránková. On the contrary, she is trying to save her invention – anti-gravitational gloves – from *the* icon of American comics, i.e. Superman, who is accompanied by his Wild West villain aide (called Pistolník, the gunman). In what seems to be an inversion, the best-known

⁹ At that time, it was not yet today's gendered title 'docentka.' In its abundant use, however, the appellation designating university faculty in the broadest sense conspicuously demonstrates the contemporary 'titulomania.'

¹⁰ In Lacanian terms, one could argue that they *are* the Real hitting back at the regulations of the Symbolic Order.



Figure 1 Left: Kája Saudek, *Kdo chce zabít Jessii?* (*Who Wants to Kill Jessie?*), 1966; Right: Kája Saudek, *Kdo chce dobít Bessie?* (*Who Wants to Recharge Bessie?*), 1966 (Film Posters, Courtesy of Berenika Saudková)

American comics hero, who had historically been chasing fascists (Krohn 2019), appears as a wretch. Once more, formerly clear division lines are turned upside down and make it difficult to reproduce Cold War reception schemata such as the general rejection of comics as an American imperialist and decadent genre widespread in Czechoslovak post-war discourses (Foret, Jareš, and Prokůpek 2014).¹¹ It remains nonetheless unclear to what extent such an interpretation of the film was common among contemporary viewers, since they were, unlike Saudek and a small esoteric circle,¹² not acquainted with the standard visual and narrative

¹¹ The question of ideological import when it comes to the role comics are set to play in different (geo)political contexts has been singled out by McAllister et al.: ‘How these comics fit in with the socio-political context of these countries, given the different roles that the comics may play in these countries, is a question of ideological import, as is the potential of the role of the comics in the creation or resistance of cultural identity and imperialism, given the economic and cultural dominance of such countries as the United States and Japan’ (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 2001, 4–5).

¹² The question of motivation remains in part open also with regards to Saudek himself, since he mostly knew about American superheroes from comic strips printed in newspapers that the food his family received from relatives in the US after World War II was



Figure 2 Still Frame from *Kdo chce zabít Jessii?* (Vorlíček 1966, 28:30) (Courtesy of Czech Film Fund, Národní filmový archiv, Prague)

features of American comics and might not have perceived the incongruities of the film's cast. What certainly must have been perfectly understandable to everybody, though, was the variation of the first encounter between Jessie and her persecutors which makes appearances in a one-page comic strip both in the movie and on its promo posters (figure 1) (Diesing 2013, 151, 154). The variation shows a different continuation as the movie poster was torn off by a censor named Prokop Fišer who seems to have been disgusted by the display of explicit material – the ever-erotic intensity of the fight between Jessie and Superman taking a sexual turn – only to be transposed into a dumb workers' story. Following a different script of 'Com[munist] Comics,' comrades Superman and Jessie attend a meeting of the labour brigade after which they are told to get back to work, i.e. to perform an activity they do not really master. The slight yet significant shift in the title to *Who Wants to Recharge* [being a pun on conquer in the Czech title] *Bessie/the Beast?* (*Kdo chce dobít* [dobýt] *Bessii/bestii?*) makes things even more ambivalent, ironically evading the all-too-omnipresent grip of censorship.¹³

The attempted censorship even of dreams is openly broached in the

wrapped in, and had to creatively make sense of them (Průkopek 2009, 147–148; Diesing 2013, 21).

¹³ The threat of censorship is similarly addressed in the one-page comic strip entitled *Confrontation of the Century* ('Soubor století') Saudek was privately working on in the second half of the 1960s. While the foreground confrontation is between two female superheroes embodying Olga Schoberová and his wife Johana, a giant intruder destroying the entire setting and emblazoned with the lettering 'Censura' might well have signified the real 'confrontation of the century' (Diesing 2013, 150, 157).

movie when Superman interrupts his vandalism in Beráněk's flat to exclaim 'Svobodu snům!!!' ('[I demand] Freedom to Dreams!!!'; figure 2), which is to be read as a direct answer to apparatchiks like docent Beránková who had just denied the right to freedom to dream-like phenomena in a preceding conversation with her husband.¹⁴ That this speech bubble was unmistakably interpreted along such lines is confirmed by the reportedly enthusiastic reactions it received during the first live projections of the film (Vorlíček 2004, 95, 98). Toward the end of the movie, Jessie and the gunman are introduced as the new (dream) workers to engineer Jindřich's superior – a pun working around the semantically decisive disappearing 's' of 'snoví pracovníci' ('new *dream* workers'). In the meantime, docent Beránková was herself swallowed by the dreamlands of her dog Czar, whither she blindly followed Superman by means of an antidote, thus ending the controlling grip on her husband's and society's dreams. Or so it seems, as the assumption of a dream come true with Jindřich and Jessie eventually united in his bedroom is thwarted as soon as the heroine unlearns her speech bubbles only to start speaking like docent Beránková and ordering Jindřich what to dream of.¹⁵

Muriel and the Angels

Muriel (or Jessie) is certainly an atypical name for the Czechoslovak context, mostly reminiscent of the Anglophone role models in Saudek's work but maybe also alluding to the archangel Uriel. The whole *Muriel* story can be considered a pastiche of the American superhero plot with a remarkable gender inversion. The import of American (or more broadly speaking Western) pop culture and imagery is certainly one of the subversive aspects that are worth emphasising in Saudek's work. We have to deal with a formal circumstance that was in itself already perceived with scepticism and aversion by the state authorities, since it no longer actively undermined or ridiculed a visuality which had been considered to be a product of bourgeois degeneration with particularly deleterious consequences for young readerships (Foret, Jareš, and Prokůpek 2014). Let us, in this regard, exemplarily mention the artist's usual signature,

¹⁴ 'Takový zjev nemá právo na svobodu!,' 'Such phenomena are not entitled/have no right to freedom!' (Vorlíček 1966, 28:01).

¹⁵ It is noteworthy that a particular structure of temporal circularity and repetition, much popular in the post-*Nouvelle Vague* Czechoslovak films of the 1970s, is foreshadowed here. The author's study on this temporal configuration, especially in the films of Jan Švankmajer and the so-called 'crazy comedies' of the 1970s, is in preparation.

'kresby Kája Saudek,' which is a condensed play on words conflating the Czech plural of 'drawings' ('kresby') and the English 'drawn by.' It is not insignificant that this gesture allowed Saudek to avoid the use of the seventh Czech case, the instrumental, which has no equivalent in the English language and would have profoundly impacted the Western aspect of his signature if applied, e.g. by writing 'kresleno Kájou Saudkem.' Also, Saudek playfully combined the 'o' of Macourek with the 'i' in *Muriel* on the cover page for *Muriel* and the Angels so as to make his surname sound Irish: MacOurek. Finally, he opted for the Anglophone 'comics' instead of its Czech counterpart 'komiks' and, later on, would even use 'k/comix,' the appellation used for underground comic strips in the West since the 1960s (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 2001, 8–9). Yet, as we are showing in the unfolding of the plot, Saudek was not uncritical of (American) forms of militarism and imperialism and it was a very particular United States pop culture he turned to, namely that of the civil rights, peace and hippie movements (Diesing 2013, 257, 268).

Enthusiastic about their introduction of comics into film and infused with the freer atmosphere of the Prague Spring which enabled the imagination of all kinds of futures, Saudek and Macourek (1991) were ready for their next joint venture: *Muriel*. This time, a female superheroine, whose visual and character genesis can be directly traced back to Jessie, is set in a not-too-distant future – the late 1980s – where she works as a physician for the United Nations which by then has taken over the world government. While the Cold War seems to have ended, the rule of force and capital are still in place and the UN present themselves as a techno-military complex.

After a UN plane and a UFO crash over the Atlantic, *Muriel* takes care of the fatally wounded passenger from another time. While she cannot save what appears to be an angel and with whom she immediately falls in love, soon enough the united armed forces of humankind capture another UFO and question its angelic occupant in front of the World Assembly. It turns out that the angels are highly sophisticated and genetically optimised humans coming from the tenth millennium AD. Since they retrieved 'an age-old book which was created at the dawn of history, a book called Bible' (1991, 29) wherein they most identified with the angels of God, they decided to develop wings with which to fly. Of course, they can also resuscitate *Muriel*'s deceased lover, the angel Ro. In the end, humankind sends two delegates to accompany the angels to the future: *Muriel* and Xeron, the sergeant-general of the UN armed forces whose name badge –

EGO ARMY – epitomises both his character and his synecdochical function with regards to the army.

Travelling through time and space, they end up on a geographically completely changed planet with an island of love in its centre. What seems to be a quasi-paradisiacal, anarcho-communist world, a remake of the garden of Eden depicted in colourful, flowery and psychedelic tones, where free love among humans and complete harmony between all species reign, where money, armies or weapons belong to the things people know only from history classes and museums and where the only punishment imaginable is to temporarily deprive someone of their glasses, which render the others visible, soon, however, turns out to be based on the exploitation of other planets and their equally anthropomorphic, yet giant inhabitants. While the amazed Muriel explores everything alongside her requickened partner Ro, general Xeron could not be more displeased by what he sees. As soon as he learns about the historical role of their 1980s contemporary Mike Richardson who would be responsible for abolishing the military and bringing about lasting peace, he decides to change the course of history and kill that youngster once back in the present. It comes with no surprise that he can also not understand how consensual love has become the standard, as, in his view, violence and hierarchy seem to have made sex attractive in the first place. Xeron vainly attempts to impress the local beauties with his phallus both in the Jungian (represented by his 20cm-long cigarette) and Lacanian senses (his general-cum-macho-style indecency failing) (Saudek and Macourek 1991, 54; Žižek 2008, 175–176), only to be chastised for sexual harassment. Of course, the angels are aware of the dangerous insights Muriel and Xeron gained, which is why they take some amnesic measures before the two return to the intradiegetic present day. Nevertheless, everybody involved manages to keep their memories and, once back from the future, a race to save Mike and thus that very future begins.

In this brief summary of *Muriel and the Angels*, we can discern a conflation of utopian, sci-fi,¹⁶ futurist and also always counterfactual patterns. The latter is not unusual for how comics work with history (Zimmermann 2019, 20), especially in the context of time travel (Weller 2019, 167), and serve as a contrasting programme of ideological worldviews. Al-

¹⁶ While on their exploratory trip to retrieve the resource that ensures the humans of the future their 'relative immortality,' the angels compare their mission to the plot of some 20th century film (Saudek and Macourek 1991, 65–66).



Figure 3 Kája Saudek, *Muriel a andělé* (Muriel and the Angels), 1969; First Published in Saudek and Macourek (1991, 96–97) (Courtesy of Berenika Saudková)

ternative futures near and distant are thus imagined, but always already threatened, as prefigured in the opening credits where Muriel and the angels sit not only on the comic strip's title but also above a huge pair of glasses reflecting the cosmic changes to come. This is probably most strikingly illustrated by the quasi-cinematographic cut between the two worlds and eras, between pages 96 and 97 of the comic strip (figure 3), as flowers rain down onto the UFO taking Muriel and Xeron back through space and time to the 1980s. Upon return, the spacecraft flies over a desperate scene of drudging workers. The shot is framed with signs reading 'Dig we must' and 'Danger' as well as an empty bottle characterising the proletarian condition (of alcoholism) and filled with intermedial citations including *Honza Hrom*, with a Saudek comics in his trouser pocket, and Karel Kanál,¹⁷ as well as the inscription 'Fanny Hill,' referring to the pornographic paradigm of sexuality as explored in John Cleland's homonymous erotic novel (1748). The hyperbolic use of ironical allusions and puns which characterises the entire fight for the future, however, also constantly undermines the seriousness of any underlying (ideology) critique. For instance, we read about Mike Richardson that he is the front singer of The Flowers, performing at a Woodstock-like festival, and that he is going to sing peace songs by the 'national artist' ('národní umělec' –

¹⁷ The two protagonists were taken from another of Saudek's partially censored comic strips which was published in 1968 in the magazine *Pop Music Expres* (Prokůpek 2014d, 469; Diesing 2013, 220–227).

a typical distinction for culture workers in socialist Czechoslovakia) Bob Dylan. The festival's poster ends with the motto 'Make Love Not War' now pointing towards US counterculture. While such chiasmic designations – combining communist jargon with evident American references – clearly made fun of the socialist state nomenclature and the 'titulomania' characteristic of its cultural politics, the very end of this first *Muriel* episode – Mike was saved and evil Xeron escaped into outer space with a stolen UFO – enacts and parodies the typical filmic zoom-in of any romantic happy ending, the only thing missing being the voice-over stating that they – Muriel, Ro and Mike – lived happily ever after (Saudek and Macourek 1991, 126–127). Yet, *Muriel* was to be continued ('pokračování příště') ...

Muriel and the Orange Death

Even though the publication of *Muriel and the Angels* was announced several times in the print media of the publishing house Mladá fronta – in 1969 the first 29 pages were even printed in the guise of a preview in the weekly *Mladý svět* – it had to be postponed given the tragic events of August 1968 (Prokůpek 2014d, 471). Already, Saudek and Macourek were working on the second episode of the series as they readily reflected the change in political circumstances – the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact forces and the crushed Prague Spring hopes – yet without realistically anticipating their ultimate societal and cultural consequences. *Muriel and the Orange Death* (Saudek and Macourek 2009) can be considered a title in displacement, whereby the colour orange takes the place of red and the announced death comes, once more, from another planet. All of this is from the outset staged as a filmic intro reminiscent of *Jessie* and, most of all, anticipating *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling*. It is exactly this Orange Planet where *Muriel* is kidnapped to by one of its secret agents who took the happy family triangle – Muriel, Ro and Mike – by surprise as they were having a picnic in the forest and, thus, smashed their idyll just in time to prevent them from turning into mediocre petty bourgeois.

Saudek's depictions of Orangeland show a desperate, highly mechanical place where some sort of artificial intelligence – the central brain – controls almost everything, from what its inhabitants think to how their humours and emotions go. This kind of mental *Gleichschaltung* is ensured by means of little antennae that are implanted on everybody's heads and directly oversee their brains by transmitting the central computer's mind

control. While all able men are part of the armed forces, women carry out the necessary physical work, including ploughing fields and digging tunnels for a gulag-like system where prisoners from other planets and rebels are kept in forced labour. There is no parental education and children are directly taken care of, i.e. militarised, by the central brain. Only presumed everyday activities are left to individual decision-making but, as the people's wardrobes are empty, there are not many outfits to choose from and this kind of derived freedom turns out to be obsolete. One needs no particularly gifted imagination to recognise many features of a Stalinist, or indeed any totalitarian, regime in the state organisation of the Orange Planet, including the abovementioned lack of consumer goods.

By accident, Muriel and her abductor collide with Xeron's UFO while on their way to the Orange Planet. Still highly opportunistic and thus without any committed ideological position, the general seizes the chance of leading the Orange Army to invade planet Earth. As Saudek would later write (1991, 1), Xeron's character traits were inspired by Jan Šejna, a fraudulent general who had made a splendid career in the Czechoslovak Communist Party after World War II only to escape into exile and collaborate with the CIA in early 1968 once his crooked business had been exposed (ČT24 2012). As the comic strip unfolds, Mike and Ro had been frantically driving across America, meeting Batman on the way for the first and only time in Czechoslovak culture (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 44; Prokůpek 2009, 150), and realising how 'škoda,' 'what a shame' it will be to sell their sports car¹⁸ in order to get the angelic walkie-talkie fixed so that they can call the future for help. Yet, all their projects fail as the invasion of the Earth has started and is live-streamed on a hijacked TV channel – certainly not how the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia could be covered. Xeron, in a Herodian gesture, has his lackeys capture all youngsters who look like Mike Richardson as he still wants to eliminate him and secure a bright militaristic future.¹⁹ As Xeron goes on to confront the World Assembly, we also learn more about the continuous ideological differences among UN nations – from the Frenchman's elegant

¹⁸ The Czechoslovak car brand Škoda literally means 'pity' and Saudek might well have lamented the fact that his passion for fast American engines was never met by the state-owned car producer.

¹⁹ The comparison to Herod is explicitly made by Muriel in the opening sequence where she inserts the hitherto adventures into a teleological narrative common to both Christian salvific history and the Marxist-Leninist understanding of a directed History (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 8).

remarks while hiding away his Scandinavian porn²⁰ to the Soviet and Chinese references to the proletariat's force of resistance – not without a pungent thrust against Maoism when the chairman's portrait bears the small-lettered title 'Haepatitis Epidemica' (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 81). On the ground however, all states have quickly fallen and we see the last fighters fleeing from the orange terror intermedially accompanied by Pat Boone's 1960 *Exodus* film score 'This Land Is Mine' (p. 78) or the gospel-cum-protest song 'We Shall Overcome' (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 63; Diesing 2013, 268; Prokůpek 2009, 151). Again, it is a very particular America that Saudek is referring to – that of the civil rights and peace movements – and Western capitalism is not spared from (indirect) criticism. It is notable that companies such as Nestlé and IBM are depicted in relation to the Orange Planet where the first seems to be carrying out some extraction works (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 94) while the latter is the brand which had produced the hardware for the central brain (p. 137), i.e. the planet's totalitarian ruler.

Unlike the aftermath of 1968, where nobody came to help protesters in Prague, Bratislava and elsewhere, the inhabitants of the tenth millennium get soon informed, in fact ripped out from their land of 'Flower Power' (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 97) and 'Super Kyč' (p. 98),²¹ and send a heavenly army to disband the orange forces. Whereas these will still try to break the morale of their abducted prisoners and manipulate young Mike into docility by implanting in him invisible antennae, Muriel, who is by now allied to the underground resistance on the Orange Planet, will destroy the central brain just in time to prevent the execution of all our heroes. While jobless General Xeron once again escapes into orbit, we end up with a family reunion that echoes the finale of *Muriel's* first episode

²⁰ Pornographic literature again plays an important role and underscores the sexual subtext of the 20th century paradigm depicted, as it also happens to be the main source material the erstwhile secret agent from the Orange Planet had retrieved (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 23). While most of Saudek's visuality partakes in heteronormative stereotypes (Playboy-style beauties in need of male salvation being rescued by hypertrophic athletes), however, the orangers' study of humankind is further ironised as they mistake the almost naked Ro and his angelic companion Bur for homosexual wrestlers, remembering a gay nudes ad from the March/April issue of the 1969 *International Times* which Saudek collaged into the comics bubble (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 111; 'Gay Young Men, With Style & Pose & Lack of Clothes' 1969).

²¹ Both are written with flowers and vegetable patterns, respectively, adorning the island of love which, in this *Muriel* sequel, has put forth blossoms in the form of hearts and breasts (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 102; Diesing 2013, 268).

and, inversely, raises the expectations for another continuation. Finished by early 1970, with *Muriel* and the Angels still unpublished, it must however have been clear to the authors of this overtly anti-normalisation instalment staging any orange/red occupation as temporary, that *Muriel* and the Orange Death would not meet its audience through any official channel any time soon. Indeed, Tomáš Prokůpek (2009, 149) goes so far as to perceive in Macourek's scenarios the only optimistic answer to the overthrow of the Prague Spring.

***Four Murders Are Enough, Darling* or Why Four Times Saudek Are Still Not Enough**

It was certainly in great part thanks to Macourek's manoeuvring aptness that Saudek, in spite of being increasingly hindered in having his comic strips printed elsewhere, could collaborate on another movie in 1970/71, this time with filmmaker Oldřich Lipský. *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling* was presented as a comics-comedy ('komixkomedie') and the Saudek-Macourek duo did not omit any chance to smuggle the artist's comic strips, and mainly *Muriel*, into the film. To start with, the front credits of *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling* can be considered to be a citation from the opening of the two *Muriel* episodes, but especially *Muriel* and the Orange Death, with one of the panels used being a direct variation of Ro fighting the orange monsters (Saudek and Macourek 2009, 121). Furthermore, there are several flying comic panels throughout the film that are directly taken from that unpublished book, including page 61, which explicitly depicts the attack of the Orange Planet, imitating a bottom-up film shot showing two girls jumping over a crimson puddle of blood and shrieking. We can observe a similarly contrabandist gesture that Saudek had undertaken with the Czechoslovak 1971 movie poster for Roger Vadim's *Barbarella*. Jean-Claude Forest's comic strip of the same name had been both Vadim's as well as Macourek and Saudek's literary model for *Barbarella* and *Muriel*, respectively (Prokůpek 2014d, 472; Diesing 2013, 374–375; Kořínek and Prokůpek 2014b, 546). The knowing eye will therefore immediately have identified the poster's protagonist with *Muriel* and have recognised Ro in the flying angel next to her. Also, a folded page ripped from *Muriel* and the Angels is among the mangle of flying objects surrounding *Barbarella* (Jane Fonda).

While the convoluted plot of *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling*²² shall

²² A rich gentleman carrying a cheque over 1 million dollars from the central bank of the

not interest us in detail here, it is once more a refined intermedial play that Macourek enacts with the help of Saudek's comics in order to blur the lines between 'reality' and the fantastic world of the comic strip. Indeed, this happens *ex post*. The opening scene in a train compartment prominently features one of Saudek's comics as the nervous money courier is trying to dissipate his fears by reading the strip and is soon surprised by the first gangsters. The plot carries on and the scenes are always segued by means of drawn images and interrupted in the manner of TV ads featuring non-existent commodities. The very existence of comics-style advertisements, which would have been unthinkable in 1960s Czechoslovakia, is made plausible inside the movie. At the very end of the film, after the dénouement has already happened, the camera returns to that same train compartment where our initial carrier has just finished reading the entire plot of the film in his comic strip. This circular configuration of time²³ is taken even further when the protagonist opens the compartment door and a corpse falls onto him just as it happened countless times during the entire film, which now, in a sort of *mise-en-abyme*, starts all over again, redoubling the circularity of time.

The movie can thus also be read as a meta-commentary on comics, especially in the advertisement breaks and with the integration of comic signs indicating movements and sounds. Furthermore, the comic strip is materially present at various locations throughout the movie (both in the classroom of the foolish literature teacher who despises comics and in the press office where they are being prepared for publication). The metaphorical or medial use of the comics and comics' aesthetics is a guiding thread when the panels are turned into a film inside the film, a story inside the story, thus becoming a kind of paratext. Finally, we also have to deal with a commentary on the authority position regarding comics, which come to play an important deictic role as the filmic plot unfolds. Yet, at times, the panels deal with censorship directly – as the poster deemed too lascivious by a 'Bonzensor,' i.e. a censor of Bonzania, is quickly removed (Diesing 2013, 179) – and indirectly as in the surreptitious instances of *Muriel's* appearance. When comics are derided as an inferior genre by the equally ridiculous figure of the literature teacher who does not understand their popularity and discredits himself for fail-

fictitious state of Bonzania is being chased by two opposite mafia gangs whose members are continually murdered as they try to get hold of the money.

²³ Not unfamiliar to Czech filmmakers of the *Nouvelle Vague* and beyond; see footnote 15.

ing to grasp different registers of language, he rebuts his erstwhile claim by eventually morphing into a comic hero himself and thus underlines the genre's significance in a self-sabotaging way.

Is it then the kind of restart, of reset enacted at the end of *Four Murders Are Enough, Darling*, the kind of rolling things back only to let them start again, yet in a slightly different way, that makes for the seriality of the comic strip and interconnects it with the kindred medium of film? Can we then assume that every narrative and its mediations can have different issues, different lives, afterlives (in the full Benjaminian meaning of *Nachleben*; Weidner 2011; Vargas 2017)? And what would the afterlives of the declared anti-normalisation superheroine Muriel look like 'after communism,' i.e. after the fall of state socialism when her only destiny was to be commodified? That is also a predicament where the very utopia of communism has become unimaginable (Fisher 2009), while the old scenarios of war and exploitation seem to be repeating themselves in the absence of new ideas (Saudek 1991). Unlike those critics who deemed the *Muriel* plot 'a nostalgic memory of the naive ideals of the 1960s' (Prokůpek 2014b, 832), its rereading along socio-political and ideological lines seems to make all the more sense in the second decade of a millennium that has not only undone the alleged 'end of history' (Fukuyama 2006) but, in instances such as censorship and the lack of political alternatives, seems to be regressing even further. Or are we maybe going too far in asking these questions so seriously and forgetting Saudek's life-long (self)ironical stance? After all, the name he chose for his personal company spoke of Duté fráze bezduchého kýče, that is Hollow Phrases of Soulless Kitsch. Yet again, this appellation consists of a combination of the most frequently uttered allegations against comics ever since the late 1940s (Foret, Jareš and Prokůpek 2014, 419–420), i.e. their being a form of simple-minded kitsch.²⁴ It is therefore another highly connoted intertextual allusion that raises the ideological premises of its socio-political situation only to immediately ironise them.

By highlighting the political and ideological dimensions embedded in the narrative enactments of four of Saudek and Macourek's joint works – two movies and two comic strips – the present paper has tried to demon-

²⁴ The words 'prostoduchý' ('simple-minded') and 'kýč' ('kitsch') figured in one of the most poignant attacks on a comic strip: Václav Stejskal's 1947 lampoon article against Jaroslav Foglar's *Rychlé šípy* as published in the weekly paper *Vpřed* (Foret, Jareš and Prokůpek 2014, 419–420, 424).

strate that it is not enough to praise the import of American-style imagery, or the comic genre itself, into the Czechoslovak pop culture of the 1960s if we are to grasp the continuing significance of one of its most famous superheroines. Muriel, or Jessie, still manifest anti-normalisation qualities in the sense that their character traits and their actions point to unrealised utopias whose very possibility has been erased from a globalised post-historical imaginary. A symptomatic rereading of Muriel's adventures through the lens of critical theory is thus far more than a nostalgic return. The missing continuation of her story does not merely point to Saudek and Macourek's incomplete lifetime achievement as most of comic studies hitherto would have it. While it partakes in the ongoing lack of historical agency, it also hinges on the necessity to think anew the world historical. In the absence of the presumably ten missing Muriel episodes, it is thus first and foremost given to her readers to continue imagining the very possibility of a utopian communism.

Note

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