



Fragments of the Body: Woman in Socialist Screen Advertising

Lucie Česálková

To cite this article: Lucie Česálková (2022): Fragments of the Body: Woman in Socialist Screen Advertising, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, DOI: [10.1080/2040350X.2022.2085363](https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2022.2085363)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2022.2085363>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 16 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 408




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Fragments of the Body: Woman in Socialist Screen Advertising

Lucie Česálková 

Department of Film Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

The advertising of state socialism is often referred to as a paradox or oxymoron, yet it has produced images that shaped the consumer imagination and consumer values of socialist society. One of the critical topics in Czechoslovak socialist television advertising discourse was using an actor or a model. The socialist values of leveled consumption refused to promote consumption for property and create social distinctions through advertising and consumption. These beliefs fundamentally shaped the image of the body in socialist advertising. In this text, therefore, I discuss how the morality of socialist advertising, together with the evolving gender discourse, supported the methods of hiding, masking, or fragmenting the female body in socialist screen advertising. Based on the analysis of a vast corpus of advertisements, I follow the development of this trend from the 1960s to the 1980s, compare screen advertising with other types of advertising media, and argue that the reason for restraint in the explicit representation of the female body was, among other things, the specific hierarchy of the media in the geography of the consumer imagination of socialist Czechoslovakia.

KEYWORDS

Socialist advertising;
gender; visual culture;
consumer imagination;
body image

In 1960, Czechoslovak copyeditor and advertising screenwriter Ivan Crha described one of his professional experiences with commercials: ‘Recently, the Film Studio of the Advertising Company had the task of producing a television ad promoting a metal sector kitchen. During the negotiations about this film, it was said with absolute certainty that a young housewife would appear in the film, who would explain all the advantages of the kitchen. However, we [Crha and the director] were of a different opinion. We proposed a trick solution: a film without living people, where the kitchen would open, fill with dishes, cutlery, and supplies itself. There is nothing in the image other than the advertised object, and, by animating the dead things, the film attracts the viewer’s attention, which is not distracted by anything secondary’ (Crha 1960, 55). This commentary, which describes the idea of replacing a woman’s body with animation of a perfect machine-like-operated kitchen, provides a behind-the-scenes look at negotiations regarding state-socialist advertising and reveals several aspects of thinking about specific ways how a film should work in Czechoslovak socialist consumer imagination.

CONTACT Lucie Česálková  Lucie.Cesalkova@ff.cuni.cz  Department of Film Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Significantly, Crha demonstrated his preference for a trick instead of depicting a woman-housewife in the example of an advertisement for a modern kitchen, a place that has become a political arena for Cold War debates about socialist lifestyle and womanhood (Reid 2002, 2005). Although the socialist states tried, in the spirit of Khrushchev's efforts to suppress traditionalism and backwardness in the home-life environment, to rationalise housing and modernise kitchens, they often remained halfway due to problematic planning. The promotional messages communicating these ideas visually were also ambivalent. In Czechoslovakia, the first very successful household product of the late 1950s – the Pragomix blender – was promoted based on research into the motivations of female consumers under the comprehensive slogan 'The Employed Woman's Dinner' (Rejmánek 1959). Similarly, as Pragomix, modern kitchens and household products were presented as making housework easier for women, but instead of emphasising the ideal of housekeeping, advertising reinforced emancipated femininity. At the same time, various advertising media (printed advertisements, posters, films) communicated the image of a woman differently, and in film and television advertising, women's bodies in consumer situations were mostly replaced by animated representations of goods. As I assume in this text, the differentiated approach to the representation of a woman in socialist advertising resulted from a specific hierarchy of advertising means in socialist media geography and was influenced by technological and ideological aspects of advertising production.

As we have seen, in the early 1960s, Crha preferred the depiction of goods to the human figure, specifically the woman, because, according to him, this was a more audience-attractive advertisement. He presented an animated film in which otherwise 'dead' goods move, and he also implied that the actor would, on the contrary, inappropriately distract the viewer's attention. This idea was rooted in the more general concept of socialist advertising, was related to the object-centric focus of the socialist industry and corresponded to the requirements of socialist morality applied to advertising. However, it also reflected the technological situation of the advent of television. In this study, I will focus on how the theses presented by Crha (and the Advertising Company) in the early 1960s were manifested in the representation of the human body, especially the female body, in Czechoslovak socialist television advertising over the next thirty years. I want to point out the dynamics of structural (organisational and technological) and ideological circumstances that influenced the production of these images and analyse specific strategies of individual films. By comparison with other types of visual advertising production, I will show that the film and television were subjected to stricter criteria regarding the depiction of the female body than any other advertising media, mirroring specific hierarchies of media geography of consumer imagination. Therefore, this study will explain that the image of women and gender discourse communicated by socialist advertising has been rooted in the role that contemporary marketing specialists have ascribed consumer culture and advertising in socialist society and the importance of the human body in communicating consumer messages.

Socialist Consumption and Advertising

It has long seemed inappropriate to discuss whether socialist consumer culture existed at all. Nevertheless, each society that produces goods for a purchase creates specific consumption patterns, a unique consumption culture shaped by historical traditions and contemporary political, economic, and socio-cultural circumstances (Gurova 2018, 102). In this

respect, state socialism is no exception. Consumer policy became a key instrument for legitimising state socialism in most countries of the socialist bloc. Based on Jane Zavisca's research (Zavisca 2004), Natalya Chernyshova has argued that 'in return for the Party's proclaimed commitment to citizens' consumer interests, people were expected to abide by the boundaries of 'rational consumption' and, most importantly, remain committed to the main political principles of the state' (Chernyshova 2013, 5–6). In Czechoslovakia, it also became apparent, as early as the late 1950s, that while emphasising work discipline and full employment strengthened the population's purchasing power, prioritising heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods gave the population few opportunities to wield it (Franc and Knapík 2013; Tábořský 2020). The people's dissatisfaction with this situation created the need to redefine some vital Marxist-Leninist precepts concerning consumption or specify and update what they meant.

In this regard, a socialist citizen's (personal) needs were a key concept bringing together consumption, living standards, and lifestyle. Personal needs began to be re-discussed more urgently in the late 1950s when the vagueness of the slogan 'To each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' became more and more apparent. In the 1950s, state socialism was able to satisfy only a limited number of such needs while requiring a steady increase in work efficiency. Even decent housing had proved to be a problematic issue at the time and the process of equipping households with modern appliances was only beginning. The dominant ideological view that the socialist economy differs from the capitalist economy in that it presupposes a society that renounces personal needs for the benefit of the whole and whose needs are 'cultivated' directly by regulating the supply through central planning started to be reconsidered during the 1960s.

Although Czechoslovak economists and government leaders were realising that 'consumption was not only a result of economic activity' (Bárta and Janáček 1977, 57) but also a fundamental socio-cultural factor which significantly feeds back into production and plays a crucial role in proportion planning within the national economy, including in the structure of the industrial output, investment, and labour allocation, they had long been unable to put this theoretical thinking into practice. Just like the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia also used the surrogate terms 'rational consumption' and 'cultured consumption' (Chernyshova 2013, 47) to refer to state-socialist consumer concepts. In their joint work *Architekt a ekonom k socialistickému stylu života* [An Architect and an Economist discuss the Socialist Lifestyle], the architect Jiří Gočár and the economist and member of parliament Josef Toman collectively defined this concept as follows:

Satisfying real needs in a rational way is a necessary prerequisite for the development of a socialist consumption style, characterised by the basic criteria of free choice (unaffected by either consumer prestige or producer speculation) and 'culturedness', that supports the physical and mental development of man. (Gočár and Toman 1977, 340)

According to Gočár and Toman, production and consumption were part of a single cycle, which was supposed to develop needs, lifestyle, and well-being. Taking the concept of 'needs' into account as part of socialist consumption more consistently was increasingly on the political agenda in the mid-1970s. The 15th Congress of the Communist Party in 1976 recognised that 'the refinement of people's needs in all their dimensions and diversity was becoming an important factor in the development of the socialist economy' (Komanický 1976, 93). However, the planning of state production meant that these needs would, to a

certain extent, be regulated by the state, which, therefore, involved efforts to cultivate and educate citizens/consumers to rationalise their needs (Hájková 1981). According to Natalia Chernyshova, the very concept of rational needs in socialist society obscured natural consumer desires and, in the long run, could not systemically improve the way the personal needs of a socialist citizen were satisfied (Chernyshova 2013, 83).

The concept of rationalisation of needs was, to some extent, supposed to prevent problems in the relationship between production and consumption typical of centrally planned economies. The Hungarian economist and analyst János Kornai described the chronic excess of demand over supply as a critical feature of the socialist economy, which he referred to as the 'economy of shortage' (Kornai 1992). However, as the anthropologist Sergei Oushakine noted, it was also an 'economy of storage', manufacturing unnecessary products for which there was no demand and remained warehoused and completely unused (Oushakine 2014, 198–236). These two closely-related dynamics show that the central planning system was very unstable and fragile, unable to take into account consumption, and thus failed to prevent regular unavailability of commodities for which there was demand and the accumulation of commodities for which there was none. In this model, the rationalisation of needs was supposed to regulate consumption preventively.

The tool to communicate these state regulatory needs to the people was advertising. Socialist advertising, distinguished from capitalist in all the states of Central and Eastern Europe as not profit-oriented, competitive, and prestige-driven, should, on the contrary, simply navigate consumers within supply so that they make rational and well-informed consumer decisions. In state-socialist countries, advertising has been involved in promoting and regulating consumption and, as Elza Ibroscheva claims, shaping socialist aesthetics (Ibroscheva 2013). In this frame of meaning, an important role was attached to the image of goods. As Krisztina Fehervary showed, the socialist economy focused on objects (Fehérváry 2009) and this object-centric logic prioritised goods in the consumer imagination over any other motive. The socialist rationalisation logic claimed usefulness on the goods and their presentation – the advertising should present them as corresponding to the consumer's needs, cultivating their lifestyle and taste. This attitude, predominant in the 1960s, was, however, re-evaluated by the expert-based approaches of the late 1970s, which, following the findings of marketing and market psychology, began to draw attention to the shortcomings of object-centrism. These were namely suppression of depictions of consumption situations, weak targeting of consumption groups and creating a homogeneous image of consumption.

Socialist Screen Advertising as an Expert Field between Media and Marketing

Czechoslovak advertising of state socialism was a legitimate professional branch in which thousands of creative workers were employed (copyeditors, scriptwriters, photographers, filmmakers, designers) and in which, from the mid-1950s, advertising agencies Rapid (foreign promotion oriented), Merkur (domestic market oriented) and Erpo (for Slovakia) played a key role. Four entities could produce film and television advertising within the Czechoslovak advertising industry: the cinema institution Krátký film, advertising agencies Merkur (based in Prague), and Erpo (based in Bratislava, Slovakia), and Czechoslovak

Television. Although state-owned under the state-socialist mode of production, these entities did not always share the same interests, were partly in competition with each other and were specifically interdependent (Česálková 2020). Without going into the details of the specific relationships between these actors, it is necessary to be aware that these interdependencies, together with other structural circumstances (in particular the relations of media institutions to production and commercial enterprises and the budgets spent on advertising), significantly influenced the production and distribution of socialist screen advertising.

First, distributing companies, not manufacturing companies, had larger advertising budgets in Czechoslovakia. As a result, for example, most food advertising was not commissioned by food producers but by the Pramen department store chain. This seemingly banal fact is crucial for understanding the whole system of advertising, but especially the structural circumstances that affected the form of advertising. To this day, stores use different communication and marketing strategies than brands. One of the specifics of store advertising is that they promote multiple types of goods and brands at once. In the state-socialist mode of advertising production, relatively low budgets for audiovisual advertising and uncertainties regarding broadcasting further supported this effect. Manufacturers thus tended to use resources and broadcasting opportunities effectively and combined several products into one advertisement. Secondly, at least since the mid-1970s, Czechoslovak Television did not guarantee the broadcasting times of commercials; it acted very unpredictably and, apart from the main block before the television news programme, it filled commercials in the so-called 'dead times' in the way it suited its purposes (Štěpánek 1990). The situation did not improve in this respect until the end of the 1980s, despite persistent complaints from advertisers. The third important aspect of the status of state-socialist advertising was the expansion of theory over practice, related to the growing expertise of the field in the 1970s and 1980s.

This period is a period of the Communist Party's emphasis on scientific knowledge when the Party supported the work of various research institutes. In some of them, paradoxically, it was possible to develop expert knowledge closely connected with foreign trends. For advertising, the most important influence represented developments in the psychology of consumption, consumer behaviour, marketing practice, and research into the effectiveness of advertising. However, what turned out to be a long-term problem was a very weak penetration of this knowledge into practice.

While the ideas of advertising theorists, its clients, and the needs of consumers differed significantly, one of the leitmotifs of the discussion in this period was the need to target advertising to specific consumer groups and to use images of goods in situations of their consumption. The key proponent of this opinion was the psychologist Vladimír Bárta, who worked at the Research Institute of Trade [Výzkumný ústav obchodu] and at the same time chaired the juries of the annual Alpha Video advertising film festival. In 1977, Bárta evaluated the festival selection very critically and commented on, among other things, how little acting is used in advertising, when: 'The actor is one of the specifics of film advertising, which allows to revive the association and realise the idea of product use' (Bárta 1977, 2).

Bárta called for advertisements to address specific target groups of consumers more consistently, which will be difficult if they do not use the human body. Bárta's writing about these issues during the late 1970s and early 1980s point out that even contemporary

debate was aware of the insufficient use of images of people (actors or models) who would use the goods in advertisements. It does not mean that people did not appear in ads at all. However, it was not a rule, and the ads did not always present them in such a way as to create aspiration patterns or reinforce clear associations or emotions associated with a particular product or service. Although the ways of portraying the body in late-socialist advertising began to change due to expert knowledge and criticism of period production, these new trends went against the social situation. In the 1980s, the country's overall problematic socio-economic situation, rising prices, and, at the same time, an underdeveloped supply and availability of goods that matched consumers' perceptions contributed to the escalation of social dissatisfaction with the current economic and consumer order (Vilímek 2008).

'Pleasant Someone': A Discourse about the Human Body in Socialist Advertising

There were, of course, more reasons for restraint in depicting human bodies, emotions, and consumer aspirations, and the emphasis on each of them changed during the 1960s and 1980s. The beginnings of thinking about the role of the human body in socialist advertising coincided with a massive entry of television into the everyday life of Czechoslovak society in the early 1960s. The theory of socialist advertisement highlighted its educational role and was distant from the idea of consumption for a property. On the other hand, rationalising and cultivating advertising should lead to the formation of shopping that develops 'culturedness' and 'cultural' personality in the socialist lifestyle (Pejčoch 1964). However, neither the socialist economy nor propaganda provided convincing ways of such imagination. Despite establishing coordinating bodies that were supposed to manage the advertising, there have been several problems in communication and cooperation between industry, trade, and advertising producers and creators. A typical consequence of this miscommunication, further complicated by administration and approval processes, was that the advertising often narrowed its function to the information about specific goods currently in stock (Česálková 2016). Advertising thus often did not strive to create any specific image of the socialist lifestyle, seldom depicted imaginary consumer situations and did not specify the role of the socialist goods within it. The most important role in advertising was to be played by goods and their utility value.

The emphasis on the goods suited the technological conditions of the advent of television and the effort to shift most of the audiovisual advertising on television screens, which were very small on the first receivers. The first televisions looked more like pieces of furniture (Chambers 2019), similar in type to earlier radios, and the screen filled only part of the device. These technological developments led the advertisement creators to consider how to present the goods in the ad to stand out sufficiently. Therefore, they suggested not to show more miniature goods with a living person whose presence in the frame would force the cameraman to re-frame from close-up to a full shot in which the goods would completely disappear. On the contrary, they preferred the goods to stand out in the picture, ideally rhythmically moving (Česálková 2020).

In addition to the technological aspects, contemporary notions about the television viewer's attention were considered. Contemporary theorists have pointed out that the

television reception is scattered and that short work, such as a one-minute or two-minute advertisement, must attract the viewer and focus his attention on the goods. One of the key creators of the commercials, above mentioned copyeditor Ivan Crha, wrote: 'The living person in the film attracts attention, which is not desirable for our purposes. Let's not increase this disadvantage by using striking types' (Crha 1960, 55). To suppress the role of well-known personalities in advertising in favour of displaying the goods was also the idea of film and television advertising theorist Miroslav Lukeš formulated a decade later. He mentioned that in the commercial should not appear 'a person with essential qualities, which are manifest in appearance, mimicry, gesticulation, but a pleasant someone with whom as many viewers as possible can identify, no irreplaceable face, but a man or woman that we can consider to be what we like' (Lukeš 1972, 10). This long-term tendency to reinforce commonality versus exceptionality meant that well-known actors, singers, and other personalities did appear in advertisements only rarely, in specific situations (more in the following subchapter). Actors in advertising were perceived as an ideal provoking hatred or envy, as their irresistible professionalism gives them complete assurance of movement, gesticulation, and vocal expression. According to period advertising professionals, such a person draws attention to himself, his performance, and the goods and service often remain in the background. As a result, as Lukeš argued, 'often we do not remember what was advertised, but what the actor was doing' (Lukeš 1972, 10).

These types of considerations had two specific implications for the practice itself. First, they aimed to prioritise animated advertising over any other type of advertising, where the image of the consumer was suppressed, while the goods appeared as part of a fairy-tale or mythical narrative, which created a motivic link with the goods (for example, the old Czech legend of the strong Bivoj introduced a puppet advertisement for cottage cheese). Second, they supported images of the 'ordinary consumer' with whom 'ordinary people' could identify. On the contrary, they explicitly warned against creating images of unattainable beauty. This trend stabilised in the discourse on television advertising and lasted until the late 1970s, when screens began to expand, and the technological aspect did not play such an important role. Even in the early 1970s, instructed by research into television advertising, creators and theorists believed that acting in advertising was neither necessary nor desirable. If the ads were to show people, then these people should not 'be too superior to the potential consumer in any way so as not to arouse envy', yet they should be 'an ideal in something, but an ideal attainable' (Lukeš 1972, 9). Moreover, a period survey of the audience showed that viewers do not prefer actors in advertising but instead want to learn as much information about the goods as possible (Hanzl 1979, 1983).

The preference for animation was only reconsidered in the late 1970s when the discourse on advertising began to be influenced by the experts mentioned above in market psychology, who remained in contact with foreign trends and sought to achieve consumption heterogeneity. They enforced the production of ads responding to the different needs of different target groups and tended to adopt socialist advertising to emotional appeals. Experts trained in market psychology and consumer research, such as Vladimír Bárta or Vladimír Hanzl, also criticised domestic advertising with human figures as amateurish, supported training directors and actors specialised in advertising film (Kokoška 1981), and sought more significant involvement of human action and human bodies as attractive aspiration models in advertising.

Body Fragments: Strategies for 'Masking' Female Body in Czechoslovak Screen Advertising

From the development of organisational circumstances and thinking about the use of acting and performance in socialist advertising outlined above, it is clear that the representation of the human body encountered technological and ideological barriers that created new creative challenges. In short: socialist television advertising was supposed to prefer displaying goods, lagging actors, or overly beautiful models, at least until the end of the 1970s, not creating sources of envy and aiming at civility rather than provocativeness. In the following paragraphs, I would like to outline what solutions the creators of ads used to represent the body. My analysis is based on a general corpus of more than three hundred ads from the period under review. Although this number represents only a small portion of all advertisements produced in the period, the sample consists of the majority of advertisements preserved and accessible for research purposes in key Czech and Slovak institutions (namely National Film Archive, Slovak Film Institute, Archive of the Czech Television, National Archive, and Krátký film). It covers the period from the late 1950s till late 1980s, while all three decades (1960s, 1970s, and 1980s) are represented equally. It is worth noting, however, that the majority of the corpus was intended for television, produced by Krátký film or Merkur, and that precise information about the authors or the year of the production is rarely available. All these advertisements were catalogued within the internal research database in order to identify specific features of the corpus (formal and stylistic aspects, content, selling points, intertextuality, motives and tropes, emotions, specific conventions typical for distinct product categories, etc.). According to this data 32% of all advertisements (more than 100) featured women.

Gender discourse in Czechoslovakia was embedded in socialist values of ownership and the idea of an employed woman emancipated from the household routine, yet still married and caring for household children (Šiklová 1993; Lišková 2018). As Alena Wagnerová aptly summarized, the socialist model of emancipation, typical for Czechoslovakia, 'underestimated, or rather overlooked, the fundamental importance of the new division of labour [between a man and a woman] for the emancipation of a woman'. Wagnerová sees reason in the fact that socialist emancipation stems from the dual role of a woman (biological and economic) and seeks to suppress the 'negative consequences' of this fact, not to eliminate this duality as such (Wagnerová 2017, 155).

Consequently, advertising did not address women as a specific target advertising group, contrary to the Western standard. One of the period surveys of TV audiences complained that it is impossible to target any advertising specifically to women when they are not regularly at home, working and returning to the screens in the evening, together with men (Kadlecová 1967). Nevertheless, in most ads displaying women's image, the remnants of patriarchal discourse merged with liberalism and egalitarian ethics. This clash of different visions and discursive frameworks further complicated the fact that the image of a woman varied in the media geography of consumer imagination. The way of contemporary thinking about the possibilities of depicting a woman in various advertising media captured well marketing researcher Vladimír Hanzl. Following contemporary media theories introduced by Marshal McLuhan, he claimed, that in a 'hot medium' of television, 'mannequins showing off women's underwear will cause outrage, while women in the same outfit can be shown in the press without much fuss' (Hanzl 1979, 7). This view deepened the conservative

position of television, while other media presented much bolder consumer images in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s. However, it was not the print that Hanzl wrote about, but rather the promotional items that entered the private environment, not public space, distributed primarily as gift items among business elites, namely calendars, pocket calendars, or stereoscope discs (Táborský 2021). Hiding sexuality as an element of consumer imagination demonstrates knowledge of the tendencies of Western advertising, but distributed exclusively outside the public sphere, where, on the contrary, a mix of new expressiveness prevailed, but still within the framework of restraint in the representation of consumption patterns. Distinguishing four typical modes of women's representation, in the following paragraphs, I assume, that the aesthetic of restraint in the authenticity, emotionality and expressiveness of the female body is a typical feature of Czechoslovak television commercials of the 1960s–1980s.

Luxurious Realism and Western Mimicry in Cosmetics Ads

A specific group of advertisements clearly targeting female customers were those for cosmetics, most often for hair. This product category was characterised by one essential feature – the Czechoslovak market was partly made up of products manufactured under a foreign licence (especially partial brands under Schwarzkopf, such as Taft, Palette, etc.). This meant that Czechoslovak advertisements for these products more often imitated the Western iconography typical of these products. For example, advertisements from the 1960s typically depict beautiful, well-groomed women applying hairspray in front of massive mirrors, for various social occasions – to work, to theatre visit, etc. (Figures 1–3). In these advertisements, the homely role of the woman is completely suppressed, but they are very long, their commentary is descriptive and emphasizes, in addition to the multiplicity of uses, also the useful characteristics of each type of product. The requirement of a consistent rationalization of consumer decisions thus enters into the relationship with an emancipated image of woman as well as with features of Western advertising iconography and creates a specific differentiation. The trend of presenting attractive women's beauty is also followed by the advertisements for Palette vital from the 1970s. However, the depiction of a woman in a swimsuit at a pool as emancipated is complicated by highlighting her role as a mother offering fruit and juice to children (Figures 4–6). It is the establishing theme of refreshment (water and juice) on hot days that is also followed by the introduction of Palette hair cosmetics as refreshment for hair. Thus, although cosmetics advertisements were closest to



Figure 1–3. Hairsprays ad from the 1960s.



Figure 4–6. Platte vital ad from the 1970s.

depicting an attractive emancipated woman, they also showed elements of restraint in women's emotionality or independence.

Celebrities in Animation or Slapstick-Style

In Czechoslovakia, the long and successful tradition of animated film, which was made famous by personalities such as Jiří Trnka, Hermína Týrlová, and Karel Zeman in the 1950s, supported the dependence of the advertising film on animation (Česálková 2020). At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, animated advertising thus became an utterly dominant mode of production, including puppet or combined techniques. Instead of real people, cartoon or puppet characters appeared in commercials, often in fairy-tale or poetic stylisation. The emphasis on animation in Czechoslovak advertising continued even in the 1970s when pop-cultural references also began to appear in the series of advertisements for the Pramen department store. Many food advertisements thus began with an animated sequence based on the motifs of a well-known television song (video clip), which brought the famous personalities of the singers into the consumer imagination, but in their animated form. This procedure affected women in the same way as men, and cartoonish singers Hana Zagorová, Ljuba Hermanová (Figures 7 and 8), and Jiří Korn, for example, appeared in advertisements. The animation distorted their true physiognomy but at the same time, highlighted the typical, recognisable features as we know it from cartoon drawing. Thus, on the one hand, the advertisement associated the consumption of the product with a famous person, but that person was not portrayed realistically, only as a caricature, creating an impression of distance and distortion.

A series of advertisements for the state insurance company, which used acting, but in the slapstick mode, represent another layer of stylised distortion of the acting body. Actresses such as Stela Zázvorková and Olga Schoberová (even considered one of the sex symbols of the 1960s) performed here in comedy roles and often in costumes from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Figures 9 and 10). Insurance ads typically showed a catastrophe that would happen to a careless person, and they offered different types of insurance as a solution. Famous actresses appeared in these commercials not as role models worthy of imitation but as stylised examples of behaviour that needed to be prevented. Their actions were naive, stiff, or stupid, and they even could be ridiculed. Schoberová's attractiveness, for example, did not serve as a recommendation for a luxury product, such as cosmetics, but was distracted through her backing in a supportive role, in a stylised

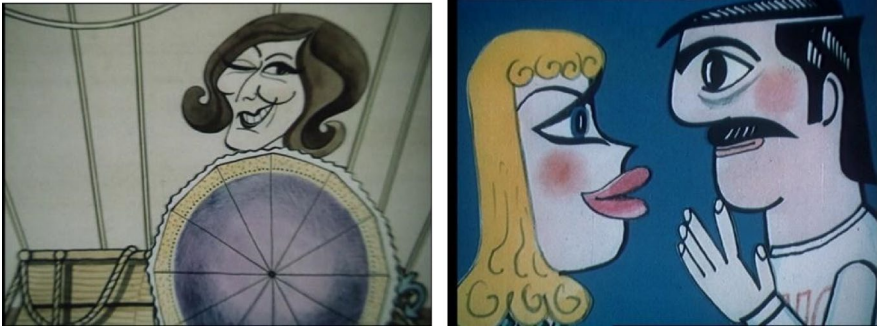


Figure 7–8. Popular singers Ljuba Hermanová and Hana Zagorová in cartoon advertising.



Figure 9–10. Actresses Stela Zázvorková and Olga Schoberová in comedy-like commercials.

historical costumes and representation in full shot in a commercial for a different type of flashlights.

Body in a Play, Framing and Fragmenting

A prevalent technique of Czechoslovak advertising, especially in the late 1950s and 1960s, was the use of a so-called trick or combined film, in which photographic and animated representations merge on the principle of collage. This method made it possible to develop modern imaging techniques, including op-art and pop-art inspirations (Figure 11). In these cases, the human body is represented as a photographic clipping, further manipulated, overlapping with other clippings and drawing in stylised college composition (Figure 12). Although some of these images show elements of provocativeness, such as a 1970s advertisement for delicacies featuring a cartoonish depiction of the actor and singer Jan Werich, the form of the clipping and especially the advertised goods alienate it. The bodies here function fully ornamentally, as the women often have their eyes closed and lie motionless like sleeping puppets, or they flicker through the advertisement and disappear again.

Moreover, in an advertisement for delicacies from the Pramen department store, such depiction of the female body has no aspirational role. It is bound only to the lyrics of a song sung by Werich – about the diversity of female beauty, while the lyrics of the song are linked associatively to the lyrics of the voice-over, which draws attention to the same diversity of

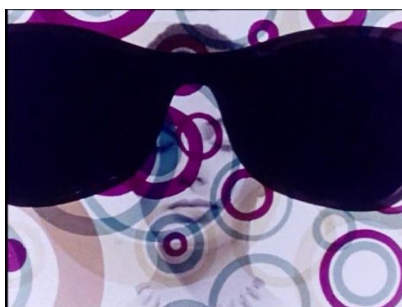


Figure 11. Okula glasses commercial.



Figure 12. Clippings in Pramen chain store commercial with Jan Werich caricature.

delicacies. A woman is not shown as an object of desire, but a generalised female beauty is likened to a symbol of socialist consumer abundance – a deli counter in a department store. Such humiliation underscored by a humorous tone and confirmed by the authority of the ‘national artist’ Jan Werich is a demonstration of a surprisingly disrespectful depiction of a woman in a line of patriarchal playfulness trivialising gender issues in Czechoslovak socialist advertising.

A similar kind of value ambivalence also appears in an advertisement for various brands of Czechoslovak cosmetics, which presents a cartoon character of a man who looks around for beautiful women. Through montage, the ad evokes the impression of a man’s gaze until he stares at women in swimsuits, women dancing the cancan, and the like, depicted in a classic photographic representation. On the one hand, this advertisement replicates the stereotype of the male gaze on attractive women, but in various ways, it complicates it. The relationship between looking and observed objects is disturbed because the man is drawn, and the woman is captured photographically. So, it is not a relationship between identical subjects. Due to his cartoon nature, the man is in a way degraded into an ‘unreal’ figure, to which, moreover, women are not available. The ad shows several men’s attempts to get closer to women ending with a bump into the frame. Despite the possibility of looking, he remains alone, incarcerated in an empty room, longing for inaccessible women. He can gaze on provocative bodies, but this gaze is paralyzed. In addition, women in swimsuits are shown, with one exception, without a head and legs, only in the details of various ingenious fastenings. Their bodies are so mostly deconstructed, as in the collage illustrating the man’s sigh, ‘Why are they all so beautiful?’ – then the cut bodies playfully fold and unfold into a slender and wide variety of women, which

the man finds both attractive (Figures 13–18). This advertising thus reflexively thematises the masculine gaze as one of the prominent aspects of the display, and at the same time highlights the impasse of a visual pleasure when it degrades men to an animated figure, exposes him to the barrier of a frame, and cuts and fragments women in various ways.

In addition to the collage technique, deconstruction and fragmentation of the female body were also applied in ads, employing variants of the ‘frame within a frame’ technique. Even cosmetics advertisements mentioned above did not always present women explicitly – they usually resisted looking at the camera and complicated the usual ways of representation. One standard solution was to use bigger and smaller mirrors that showed the reflection of a combing woman or trimming the head with masks inside the frame or by the frame itself. Other commercials also used a split-screen to represent three women simultaneously, moving their heads to best show the product, such as a hat (Figures 19–21). The viewer’s attention to this type of advertising becomes distracted. The viewer does not focus on a specific woman but is confronted with the variability of hat types.

Women with eyes closed; women who look at the camera briefly and immediately turn away; women blurred in the background behind the sharp detail of goods; women shown as silhouettes; women as black theatre actresses of whom we can only see heads, but the vacuum cleaner hose wraps their invisible bodies, and so on (Figures 22–24). These



Figure 13–18. Cosmetics commercial.



Figure 19–21. Frame within a frame and split-screen in socialist commercials.



Figure 22–24. Incomplete bodies in advertisements for jewellery, vacuum cleaners and lipsticks.

representations occurred both in film and print, most often photographic advertising, and the resulting impression was again incompleteness, an attempt to cover up, hide, and suppress explicit representation – and highlight the goods. At the same time, the women in the image remained attractive, often provocative, sometimes mysterious, classy. However, the film alienated, disrupted, and deconstructed their attractiveness, and this camouflage strategy then had a surprising result. In some cases, the partly technologically and partly ideologically motivated effort to avoid provocativeness and depiction of the female body as an object of desire and consumer aspirations resulted in experimental or artistic advertising representations.

Besides these strategies, some ads relied on a documentary look, others on expressivity, supported by advertising theorists' desire for heterogeneity of consumer goals. The Czechoslovak consumer imagination was given impetus by Western iconography through products (especially hair cosmetics) manufactured under a foreign licence. At the end of the 1980s, erotic motifs also entered advertising production, but this was entirely outside of film, on in some way hidden media, such as corporate gift calendars, pocket calendars, or stereo-discs. This practice also carried with it the tendency to conceal or disguise the female body in advertising, thus mitigating the explicit nature of its portrayal.

Perestroika Youth

Following the demand of advertising psychologists and marketing researchers, in the period of late socialism, advertising representation began to turn to more explicit depictions of the human body, in the case of women to sexual attractiveness and provocativeness. The images, which have appeared in the private media (advertising calendars) since the early 1980s, also appear in television advertising at the end of the decade. This trend was related to the overall turnover of marketing to the younger generation and the outreach of youth as one of the target groups of advertising. The dominant way of depicting youth in advertising then became the expressiveness of joy associated with the dynamics of movement – most often through dance or sport settings. In one of the perestroika's commercials on savings, women dance at a small disco in a swimsuit and a fur coat; at other times, women cheerfully jump in sportswear in a milk commercial, following the aesthetics of aerobics typical of the late socialist adoption of Western trends of youthful entertainment.

Following Jiřina Šmejkalová's thesis, Elza Ibrosheva perceives post-socialist hypersexuality as a reaction to the asexualism of previous (socialist) decades, understood as

‘oppressive social restriction of the communist ideology’ (Ibroscheva 2020, 50). However, the shift to expressive sexuality in advertising (and broader visual culture) must be seen as a process that was already underway in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s, when it gradually made its way from calendars to television advertising in line with the contemporary effort to highlight the unfettered youth as a consumer value and the more general adoption of Western trends related to the younger generation (dance music, aerobics, etc.), and which complicates the understanding of the post-socialist era as a definite change in this respect.

Conclusion

As Libora Oates-Indruchová showed, the gender discourse of late socialism was not unequivocal in Czechoslovakia but was manifested by the conflict of the residual patriarchal discourse and several alternatives (Oates-Indruchová 2012). The still under-researched image of women in socialist screen advertising is one of the other examples of diverse gender discourses in state socialism. Advertising is usually criticised for depicting women in traditional and domestic roles and depriving them of empowering roles and professional settings. In socialist advertising, a woman often stood out from the typical roles of a mother or worker. Nevertheless, her image was not fully emancipated. As my analysis proved, one of the prevailing modes of representation of female body in television commercials is based on abstraction and play, within which a body becomes a flat cutout image that is manipulated by a trick collage; other times it is sophisticatedly framed or cut by the frame, it also can become the object of consumer attention of men and other women, but of attention that was consciously reflected, thematised and commented within the commercial itself. As a result, the image of women in Czechoslovak television commercials unexpectedly confirms almost none of the stereotypes set by Erving Goffman in his influential book *Gender Advertisements*: relative size, feminine touch, family settings, ritualised subordination, or licensed withdrawal (Goffman 1976). On the contrary, in many advertisements for men’s products (Astra razor blades, Romulus and Remus toilet water, Biova after shave gel, Luxus men’s suits) women serve as an arbiter of quality and authority, according to which men make their consumer decisions.

Residual patriarchal discourse, described as still prevailing in the 1980s by Oates-Indruchová (2012), thus clashed with the needs of informed socialist propaganda and the premises of socialist advertising ethics in depicting the human body, and this conflict resulted in a specific mode of representation based on the movement just on edge between hiding and revealing, objectification and emancipation. In this respect, the period of late socialism must be understood as a period of significant cultural transformation in Czechoslovakia, a transformation characterised by an interest in youth and its image, supported by the advent of video and postmodern tendencies in photography and visual arts (Pospěch 2014, 147–159), when the dynamics of youth, music, dance and sport penetrate the period visual culture, including advertising imagery. However, if some socialist advertisements seem to us to be hybrid, it is the result of an interplay of factors that complicate the resulting representation. On the one hand, it is the structural circumstances that influenced the production and distribution of advertisements, at the same time the value anchoring of the role of promotion in the socialist economy and culture, the general preference for goods in industry and promotion, and the fact that socialist advertising adopted some elements of Western advertising iconography but incorporated them in a socialist value system.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project ‘Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World’ (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

Notes on contributor

Lucie Česálková is an Associate Professor at the Department of Film Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, and an editor at Prague’s National Film Archive. In her research she focuses on nonfiction and documentary film, educational and advertising film, on film exhibition and moviegoing. Her research outputs appeared in journals such as *Film History*, *The Moving Image*, *Memory Studies*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, or *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, as well as in edited volumes (*Films that Sell. Moving Pictures and Advertising* (Palgrave 2016); *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context* (Palgrave 2018); *Animation and Advertising* (Palgrave 2019); *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (Routledge 2019).

ORCID

Lucie Česálková  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0416-6783>

References

- Bárta, Vladimír. 1977. “Co přinesla přehlídka propagačních filmů 1976?” *Propagace* 23 (8): 1–2.
- Bárta, Vladimír, and Kamil Janáček. 1977. *Prognózování spotřeby*. Praha: Academia.
- Česálková, Lucie. 2016. “The Five Year Plan on Display: Czechoslovakian Film Advertising.” In *Films That Sell. Moving Pictures and Advertising*, edited by Bo Florin, Nico de Klerk and Patrick Vonderau, 145–162. London: BFI.
- Česálková, Lucie. 2020. “Zboží především. Československá animace a reklama na počátku 60. let 20. století.” *Iluminace* 32 (4): 29–46.
- Chambers, Deborah. 2019. “Designing Early Television for the Ideal Home: The Roles of Industrial Designers and Exhibitions, 1930s–50s.” *The Journal of Popular Television* 7 (2): 145–159. doi:10.1386/jptv.7.2.145_1.
- Chernyshova, Natalya. 2013. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. London: Routledge.
- Crha, Ivan. 1960. “Herec v televizním filmu.” *Reklama* 6 (3): 55.
- Fehérváry, Krisztina. 2009. “Goods and States: The Political Logic of State-Socialist Material Culture.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 (2): 426–459. doi:10.1017/S0010417509000188.
- Franc, Martin, and Jiří Knapík. 2013. *Volný čas v českých zemích 1957–1967*. Praha: Academia.
- Gočár, Jiří, and Josef Toman. 1977. *Architekt a ekonom k socialistickému stylu života*. Praha: Svoboda.
- Goffman, Erving. 1976. *Gender Advertising*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gurova, Olga. 2018. “Consumer Culture in Socialist Russia.” In *The Sage Handbook of Consumer Culture*, edited by Olga Kravets, Pauline Maclaran, Steven Miles, and Alladi Venkatesh, 102–123. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Hájková, Eva. 1981. *Mládež, práce, společnost*. Praha: Horizont.
- Hanzl, Vladimír. 1979. *Poznatky z výzkumů propagace*. Praha: Výzkumný ústav obchodu.
- Hanzl, Vladimír. 1983. *Faktory účinnosti propagace na vnitřním trhu*. Praha: Merkur.

- Ibroscheva, Elza. 2013. "The Unbearable Lightness of Advertising: Culture, Media and the Rise of Advertising in Socialist Bulgaria." *Consumption Markets & Culture* 16 (3): 290–310. doi:10.1080/10253866.2012.668365.
- Ibroscheva, Elza. 2020. "From Socialist Amazons to Bodies on Full Display: Gender Stereotypes in Bulgarian Advertising during Socialism and the Post-Socialist Transition." *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 7 (2): 45–61.
- Kadlecová, Zdenka. 1967. *Rozhlasový posluchač a televizní divák*. Praha: Československý rozhlas.
- Kokoška, Vladimír. 1981. "Nemáme se čím chlubit." *Propagace* 27 (10): 24.
- Komanický, Peter. 1976. *Plánovité řízení národního hospodářství ve světle závěrů 15. sjezdu KSČ*. Praha: Svoboda.
- Kornai, János. 1992. *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lišková, Kateřina. 2018. *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lukeš, Miroslav. 1972. "Propagace na televizní obrazovce: Hrdinové propagačního filmu." *Propagace* 18 (2): 9–10.
- Oates-Indruchová, Libora. 2012. "The Beauty and the Loser: Cultural Representations of Gender in Late State Socialism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37 (2): 357–383. doi:10.1086/661714.
- Oushakine, Serguei Alex. 2014. "Against the Cult of Things: On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination." *The Russian Review* 73 (2): 198–236. doi:10.1111/russ.10727.
- Pejčoch, Jaroslav. 1964. "Propagace a kulturnost prodeje." *Propagace* 10 (8): 157–158.
- Pospěch, Tomáš. 2014. *Myslet fotografii. Česká fotografie 1938–2000*. Praha: PositiF.
- Reid, Susan E. 2002. "Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev." *Slavic Review* 61 (2): 211–252. doi:10.2307/2697116.
- Reid, Susan E. 2005. "The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution." *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2): 289–316. doi:10.1177/0022009405051554.
- Rejmánek, Evžen. 1959. "Akce Pragomix." *Reklama* 5 (8): 175–177.
- Šiklová, Jiřina. 1993. "Are Women in Central and Eastern Europe Conservative?" In *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*, edited by Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, 74–83. London: Routledge.
- Štěpánek, Jan. 1990. "Návrat ke svéprávnosti (možnosti propagace na vnitřním trhu)." In *Impuls 90 – současnost a propagace*, edited by Dušan Pavlů, 21–28. Brno: Dům techniky ČSVTS.
- Táborský, Ondřej. 2020. "From Advertising to Propaganda and Back Again. Advertising Production during the First Decade of the Communist Dictatorship in Czechoslovakia." In *Cold Revolution (Central and Eastern European Societies in Time of Socialist Realism 1948–1959)*, edited by Jérôme Bazin and Joanna Kordjak, 114–120. Milan: Mousse Publishing.
- Táborský, Ondřej. 2021. "Krásky v mlžném oparu. Erotický akt v pozdně socialistické reklamě." *Umění* 69 (3): 283–297.
- Vilímek, Tomáš. 2008. "K příčinám pádu režimu v ČSSR a NDR v roce 1989." In *Pět studií k dějinám čs. společnosti po roce 1945*, edited by Oldřich Tůma and Tomáš Vilímek, 130–204. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny.
- Wagnerová, Alena. 2017. *Žena za socialism. Československo 1945–1974 a reflexe vývoje před rokem 1989 a po něm*. Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství.
- Zavisca, Jane. 2004. "Consumer Inequalities and Regime Legitimacy in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia." PhD thes., University of California, Berkeley.