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Victims of Modernity. The Image of Capitalist Modernisation in Jaroslav Rudiš's Fiction

Abstract: In this article, the author analyses the novel *The National Valley* (2016) by the contemporary Czech writer Jaroslav Rudiš. The main argument of the analysis focuses on the concept of modernity and modern subjectivity as outlined by the American philosopher, Marshall Berman, who in his book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1988) describes modernity as a process of constant changes in reality. The author of the article interprets the Czech capitalist system after 1989 as a process of modernisation that forces certain elements of reality to disappear. Using the tools of semiotics provided by Yuri Lotman (1984), he analyses the structure of space in the novel, whilst also focusing on the issues of masculinity, family relations and subjectivity in capitalist modernity. The protagonist of the novel, shaping his identity in opposition to the current model of modernity, has only limited possibilities of achieving subjectivity. The values he considers important do not fit into the realities of modernity, which means that the protagonist, as well as the milieu he inhabits, is doomed to marginalisation.

Keywords: Jaroslav Rudiš, contemporary Czech literature, capitalism, modernity, masculinity, space.

Abstrakt: W artykule dokonano analizy powieści współczesnego czeskiego pisarza Jaroslava Rudiša pt. *Aleja Narodowa* (2016). Punktem wyjścia analizy jest koncepcja nowoczesności oraz nowoczesnej podmiotowości amerykańskiego filozofa, Marshalla Bermana (2006), który w książce *Wszystko, co stałe, rozplywa się w powietrzu* (2006) opisał nowoczesność jako proces nieustających przemian rzeczywistości. Autor artykułu rozpatruje czeski system po 1989 roku właśnie jako proces modernizacji, który określone elementy rzeczywistości skazuje na zanik. Korzystając z narzędzi semiotyki dostarczonych przez Jurija Lotmana (1984), analizuje strukturę przestrzeni w utworze. Skupia się także na zagadnieniach męskości, relacji rodzinnych oraz kształtowania podmiotowości w kapitalistycznej nowoczesności. Bohater powieści *Aleja Narodowa*, kształtujący swoją tożsamość w opozycji do aktualnego modelu nowoczesności ma ograniczone możliwości osiągnięcia podmiotowości.

Wyznawane przez niego wartości nie spełniają wymogów aktualnego procesu modernizacji, przez co bohater, podobnie jak zamieszkiwane przez niego osiedle skazany jest na marginalizację.

Słowa kluczowe: Jaroslav Rudiš, czeska literatura współczesna, kapitalizm, nowoczesność, męskość, przestrzeń.

More than thirty years have passed since the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. During this time, numerous changes in socio-political life have taken place. Looking at the legacy of 1989 from the perspective of more than three decades, it is easy to realise that the transition to a capitalist and democratic model, in addition to the obvious and undeniable benefits, also meant numerous problems for society. Not everyone has experienced the transition as positive.

Dušan Radovanovič helps us better understand the atmosphere surrounding the changes following the November 1989 demonstrations. He points out that the then newly adopted neoliberal, right-wing pattern was assumed as an axiom. Models adopted from the West were treated uncritically and any criticism of the existing order could be interpreted as a manifestation of fascism or communism. The status quo constructed in this way was perpetuated primarily through media discourse. In time, however, it was to become clear that not everyone was happy with the country's situation. In addition to a group of successful people, the new system developed also a wide range of victims of the political transformation process. Ignoring the existence of this large group and marginalising their position in the debate led to its gradual radicalisation. A significant moment was the 2008 economic crisis, to which the Czech government responded by cutting spending on public institutions. Thus a strong division has developed in Czech society between the centre (primarily Prague) and the peripheral areas heavily affected by the recession. The hitherto marginalised layers of society have begun to manifest a rebellion against liberal values, identified primarily with elite circles. Radovanovič emphasises that these people show resentment not only toward the political elite, but also toward the beneficiaries of the post-November 1989 order, namely the financial and cultural elites (Radovanovič 2019, 275–284).

In turn, Karel B. Müller draws attention to the Czechs' growing distrust in politicians and the actions of public institutions dominated by the interests of the aforementioned elites. The division thus generated between "good, ordinary people" and "degenerate elites" can be easily exploited by populists (Müller 2019, 285–292).

In my article I would like to discuss Czech 21st-century capitalism as a modernisation process. My inspiration will be the concept of modernity proposed by American philosopher Marshall Berman. In his book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, he focuses on what modernity is from the perspective of the individuals who experience it. As he writes:

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change the world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold on to something real even as everything melts (Berman 1988, 13–14).

This definition of modernity implies that the modern subject must be ready to take action to transform reality according to their own idea. The paradox of modernity is that no goal that has been achieved can be treated as given once and for all. The process of modernisation is constantly progressing, and to stop trying to influence reality is to fall to its margins, to become its object and to lose subjectivity.

For Berman, modernity is strongly linked to the capitalist system. This is because an important inspiration for the author is the philosophical achievement of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially *The Communist Manifesto*. It is not surprising, then, that the roots of Berman's modernity go back to the formation of the capitalist (or bourgeois) system. In the chapter devoted exclusively to the analysis of *The Manifesto*, Berman points out several key issues in connection with modernity and capitalism. He notes that for Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie was a class with strong revolutionary potential (Berman 1988, 92). After a moment, however, he adds that Marx's recognition of the bourgeoisie has its limits and addresses what will be central to my further discussion. I am referring here to the dynamics of modernity, the very foundation of which is the market economy. Berman emphasises, following Marx, that the constant innovation inherent in the process of modernisation also has its destructive side.

Everybody within reach of this economy finds himself under pressure of relentless competition, whether from across the street or across the world. Under pressure, every bourgeois, from the pettiest to the most powerful, is forced to innovate, simply in order to keep his business and himself afloat; anyone who does not actively change on his own will become a passive victim of changes draconically imposed by those who dominate the market. This means that the bourgeoisie, taken as a whole, "cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the means of production." (Berman 1988, 94).

The modern world is unstable. Any form of stagnation is doomed to disintegration. What has been achieved may "melt into air" after a while. In conclusion, the entanglement of modernity and capitalism understood in this way will mean the disappearance not only of economic entities, but of entire social and cultural formations.

Since the march towards progress involves the disappearance of certain things and phenomena, this means that the process of modernisation involves a kind of catastrophism. An interesting dimension to modern catastrophism has been noticed by Przemysław Czapliński. Analysing the poem titled "Potop" ["Deluge"] by Polish writer Salcia Hałas, he observes that the end of the world described in the poem has a local rather than universal specificity (Czapliński 2020, 90). It is precisely such small, easily missed ends of the world that I feel are characteristic of capitalism.

Berman's view seems appropriate to me mainly because it focuses on both the creative and destructive aspects of modernity. By focusing on the experience of modernity, he draws attention to the perspective of those who must construct their subjectivity in a dynamically changing world. Such a theoretical proposition seems to me to be appropriate in the analysis of a literary text, which I wish to treat as a material that gives insight into the perspective of an individual trying to find their place (or even to struggle for it) in the surrounding reality.

After 1989, Czech literary creativity entered a new era; the rules of the game began to differ significantly from the status quo of the previous system. Writers no longer acted as "spokesmen for the people" and the weakening of their social authority had to do with the emergence of free journalism, which took over this role from them. Lubomír Machala adds that Czech authors consciously eschewed such a role, adhering to the principle that literary works should not engage in the political sphere. What is particularly interesting is that they avoided the topic of the recent Velvet Revolution (the researcher literally mentions the fear associated with this topic) (Machala 2008, 277–278).

Hana Blažková also writes about the disconnection between literary creation and politics. The researcher points out that in the 1990s the discourse on literature was dominated by a narrative according to which 1989 represented a return to the natural state of affairs. The marker of the aforementioned return was supposed to be the liberation of literature from politics. From this came the reluctance of researchers and critics to read literary works in a political context (Blažková 2022, 7–24).

Recently, this trend has been changing. Voices critical of capitalist reality are appearing in the texts of contemporary Czech authors counted among the literary mainstream. Looking at the lists of nominees and winners of what is perhaps the most prestigious literary competition in the Czech Republic, the Magnesia Litera Prize, one can see that in recent years a significant portion of the nominations have been texts that refer critically to the post-1989 socio-economic situation. The most important among these works are: *Únava materiálu* (Šindelka 2016), *Hodiny z olova* (Denemarková 2018), *Vytěžené kraj* (Bendová 2019), *Tři kapitoly* (Hradecký 2020), *Chlapec s rybí hlavou* (Beranová 2021) and *Destrukce* (Biler 2021). In the aforementioned works, Czech writers return to the role of commentators of the surrounding world. They focus on what functions badly in the contemporary system and what thus raises legitimate concerns.

In this article, I would like to focus on a text by Jaroslav Rudiš that is part of the trend in Czech contemporary literature outlined above. This book is titled *Národní třída* ["National Avenue"] (Rudiš 2016). I will first try to place it in the context of the Czech literary tradition, and then move on to a proper analysis of the novel.

Rudiš addresses several themes in his writing. One of the most important themes in his books is Czech-German cultural contacts and their legacy. There are also numerous references to the history of Central Europe, especially to the 20th century, as the author's characters struggle with the experiences it brought. Rudiš is regarded as one of the representatives of Czech mainstream literature.

Alexander Kratochvíl described his debut as pop-literature. This term is applied to those works by Rudiš which have a light, pleasant form aimed mainly at a young audience. The use of this term is further justified by the writer's references to popular music and youth subcultures (Kratochvíl 2006). On the other hand, Czech literary scholar and critic Erik Gilk has pointed out how Rudiš's writing has been inspired by Bohumil Hrabal's literary style, which is visible in his devotion to characters from the social margins, whose lives are described with a great deal of understanding, but also from an ironic distance. Another element common to both authors is the use of colloquial language and the transfer of elements of oral culture to the literary text (Gilk 2014).

It is this reference to the Hrabalian tradition that makes Jaroslav Rudiš's works an interesting research material in the context of representing the life of the lower strata of Czech society. *Národní třída* is part of such poetics, as the novel focuses on contemporary Czech social life. This work addresses the question of the experience of modernity by a protagonist shaped primarily by the previous political regime. I would like to demonstrate how the protagonists' subjectivity is shaped against the background of the ongoing capitalist modernisation. For the purpose of this analysis, I will use the Polish edition of the novel translated by Katarzyna Dudzic-Grabińska.

The main character and also the narrator of the short novel *Národní třída* is Vandam. For the most part, it is from his narrative that we gain knowledge of the world presented in the novel; for this reason it is crucial to analyse how he describes the world around him. The text consists of nineteen chapters, but in my view it is reasonable to divide it into three main parts. Each of them differs significantly in the way they provide information about the novel's characters. The three parts I distinguish are as follows:

Chapters I to IX constitute the first part, from which we learn how Vandam perceives the world around him and see his attitude to the various elements of his reality. This part uses first-person narration from the point of view of the main character.

The second part is the only chapter that has a title ("Scars"). Here Rudiš switches to a third-person narrative. This momentary suspension of the main character's perspective allows the readers to confront his narrative with the perspective of another character, Sylva. This confrontation leads to a negation of the image of reality construed by Vandam.

Chapters IX to XIX make up the third part of the book, in which we return to first-person narration and the perspective of the main character. The narrative here differs significantly from that in the first part. This is because by this point Vandam's reality has been shattered.

Below, I will try to trace how the fate of the novel's protagonists is linked to the issue of capitalist modernity and discuss the ensuing consequences.

Let me start with how the main character describes himself and his view of the world. His nickname has to do with physical prowess – like the famous action movie actor, Jean-Claude Van Damme, he does 200 push-ups a day. He tries to be prepared for anything. According to him, the world is a battlefield, and all

spheres of life are based on a simple, violence-related scheme. His investment in physical strength rises to the level of preparing for an impending war. He also does not hesitate to use it to resolve conflicts, which is well illustrated by a brawl with a visitor from the nearby city of Brno, who gets into a fight with Vandam and is beaten up by him.

It is worth noting that Vandam is a hero from the social lowlands. He does unskilled, repetitive and most likely low-paid work: he paints roofs in a housing estate. Moreover, having little financial, cultural and social capital, he is a character with no chance for social advancement.

As Jan Balíček notes in his book *V chapadlech murmuru*, for people from low social class, subject to marginalisation, the body is the only thing they have left (Balíček 2022, 81). Byung-Chul Han comes to similar conclusions, while linking concern for the individual body and health with the atomisation of society and the erosion of social ties (Byung-Chul 2022, 76–77). Thus, for Vandam, the body remains the only capital at his disposal.

The cult of physical strength is closely connected to the radical views of the protagonist. He questions the prevailing narrative of the present social order: he considers it illusory and false. He admits that he received a suspended sentence for performing the Roman salute during a football match. Even though he repeatedly distances himself from Nazism, during a party at an inn he shouts racist, nationalist slogans with his friends, which he considers a display of Czech humour.

His approach to the subject of masculinity and femininity is also interesting. It is well illustrated by the quote: “Today chicks shave. Today women want to be like children. So do the boys that shave down there. Half-chicks and half-guys. This softening leads to no good” (Rudiš 2016, 35). Vandam has a negative attitude towards “today’s” boys and women, because they give up certain models of manhood and womanhood. I will cite one more quote that shows the attitude of the protagonist towards women and male-female relations:

The only one you can count on is our Sylva behind the bar. She’s new, she pretends to be tough, but today they all do, I tell you they just want to irritate you and provoke you so that you will be even tougher. So that you win them over. Only then, they will love you. No girl wants a soft and nice guy, even though they say so. Nice means stupid. Remember this. Sylva is a good woman. Not a half-woman, but a woman of the woods. She has everything in its place. Dyed blond hair. A nice ass. Slim legs. Breasts just right for the hand (Rudiš 2016, 38).

Vandam’s idea of romantic relationships becomes apparent in the quoted passage. A woman must be dominated, because this is the only way to win her favour. Love, like other parts of reality, takes on the character of a conflict in his narrative, from which one must emerge victorious. The role of a woman is to satisfy the gastronomic and sexual needs of her partner. It is not without reason that Sylva works as a bartender at the local inn. She fits into Vandam’s notion of a “real woman” because she is physically attractive and her job is to serve the pub’s regulars, primarily men. Significantly, this is a patriarchal model of relationships that corresponds to the one the protagonist knew in his own family home.

A key role in the structure of Vandam's identity is played by where he lives: in one of Prague's apartment block estates – the Northern City. It is bordered by a forest and a swamp. The hero stresses that it was built by his father and other fathers. The act of creating houses is something Vandam feels proud of; it is a modern act of overcoming nature by man. For him, the estate becomes a legacy to be cared for. He emphasises: "My old man built this here. And I take care of these buildings now" (Rudiš 2016, 29). In this way, he expresses his attachment to the remnants of socialist modernity created by his father's generation. In addition, the blocks of flats serve as a spatial metaphor in *Národní třída*.

At this point I would like to refer to the idea of spatial modelling described by Juri Lotman, which will allow us to better understand the role of space in the structure of the analysed text. The Soviet semiotician mentions "the possibility of spatial modelling of concepts that by themselves are not spatial in nature" (Lotman 1984, 311). The notion is based on the use of certain binary oppositions. For example, the spatial opposition high–low is usually assigned the meaning valuable–worthless (Lotman 1984, 310–312).

Due to its geographical location, Vandam's apartment blocks estate is placed higher than the city centre, thus the narrator metaphorically values its reality as superior. He himself emphasises that the Northern City and the Northern Inn are a world of residents in which strangers are not assured a place. A similar spatial relationship is established between the blocks of flats and Vandam's brother's place of residence – a house with a swimming pool in the city's villa district. In this case, however, we are dealing with a "near–far" relationship, which we can interpret as the opposite of "familiar–strange." The brother, like the tourist from nearby Brno, and the spaces they inhabit are something alien and hostile in their relationship with the estate. They are the fragments of reality that the protagonist wants to distance from himself, because they are connected to a world with which he does not want to identify. For Vandam, the estate is the spatial core of his identity.

The protagonist's identity undergoes a complication in the second part of the book. As mentioned, it consists of the only chapter with a title ("Scars"), and its third-person narration allows us to distance ourselves from Vandam's perspective. In this part, Vandam and Sylva become sexually intimate, and later engage in a conversation that turns into an argument. It transpires that Sylva as a woman differs significantly from Vandam's perception of her. She does not feel a connection to the estate and its residents and declares her desire to move out. We also learn about the main character's family relations, namely his relationship with his brother, who is the opposite of Vandam. He moved out of the estate, achieved financial success and cut himself off from his family, of which he is ashamed. The character of the brother represents a separate value system from that of Vandam. His success after the fall of the communist system is due to his intellectual prowess.

Most importantly, however, in the analysed chapter, Sylva completely disassociates herself from Vandam's worldview. She also reveals that the main character was a drug manufacturer and drug addict in the past, which led him to prison and

then to a rehab in a psychiatric hospital. The chapter ends with an escalation of the argument and Sylva's exit from the disgraced man's apartment.

As signalled, in the third part, first-person narration from Vandam's perspective returns. The difference, however, is that the protagonist's value system is now shattered. Catastrophic themes run through the monologue. The following passage depicts the inner struggles of the man:

Sometimes, as I stand on the edge of the roof and look up into the distance and down again and away and back to the forest and down again and as the wind blows and I have a paintbrush in one hand and a cig in the other, I wonder what it would be like to fall down. What it would be like to drop down onto some car at the bottom. To lean over the railing, like my old man, and crash in complete silence. To be dragged into earth's grave. To manure those growing trees that will one day engulf this neighbourhood again. And as I touch the edge of the roof, I swear I feel a vibration. I can feel everything slowly, utterly slowly sliding back into the swamp.

I'm looking forward to this disappearance.
This disappearance is my goal.
Only when something old disappears, something new can appear.

Right now, up there, I'm wondering what it would be like not to be. To have no worries. To not fight. But after a while I say to myself, Vandam, you fool, what the hell are you talking about? (Rudiš 2016, 126–127).

Vandam is plagued by suicidal thoughts and fears, which he tries to hide under the mask of a tough man. The motif of disappearance is worth highlighting here. The estate is about to disappear, but also the main character feels the temptation to disappear. Thus, the theme of modernity and its relationship to subjectivity returns.

It turns out that the narrator is aware that the reality he represents is doomed to collapse. Capitalist modernity deprives Vandam of his subjectivity. The protagonist becomes a mere "hindrance" to the process of modernisation. This becomes apparent in the last passages of the book when he tries to save Sylva from the bailiff. Trying to stop the official, he is beaten first by him and then by two policemen. The bailiff utters the following sentences:

And he says: But we know each other. You are this famous local junkie that got messed up in the coconut from junking and drug-making, and blathers on about rubbish. Saving the world. The Last Roman. The saviour (Rudiš 2016, 137).

Thus Vandam's entire earlier narrative is reduced to the gibberish of a drug addict. His self-creation is not taken seriously by the bailiff. From the perspective of capitalist modernity, the protagonist is no longer a subject. His monologue, which we have followed for most of the novel, is a desperate attempt to preserve subjectivity in a world that condemns individuals like Vandam to objecthood. The main character represents a different model of modernity. At the end of the novel, we learn that during the communist period Vandam was an officer of the communist security service. His role in the process of political change was symbolic, as he was the one who struck the first blow during the demonstration on the eponymous National Avenue in 1989. The person he struck was his protesting brother. As he states in his conversation with Sylva, he did this because he could not bear to look

at the peacefully protesting students, so he decided to “set history in motion” with a blow (Rudiš 2016, 96–97). This way, he set in motion the course of events that led to the fact that “his” modernity had to crumble.

Viewed through the optics proposed by Berman, Vandam is a figure who sided with the exhausted project of modernity. This project was associated with a communist, oppressive state, in which the *raison d'être* of the values he professes to this day was still valid. The modern process, however, did not stop. It turned in a direction that condemned individuals like the hero of *Národní třída* to marginalisation.

Finally, there remains the question of subjectivity in the modern world captured by Jaroslav Rudiš in the analysed text. In the modernity described by Berman, is it possible to maintain subjectivity without remaining modern? This is what Vandam attempts to do. However, it is a subjectivity for which the reference point is the protagonist himself, and it cannot succeed in a broader social context. Viewed from the perspective of the modern world, it is Vandam and his apartment blocks estate that are the periphery doomed to “melt into air.”

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