

# Czech TV's *Volha* is hard to watch because it's a bad show. We should stop caricaturing late socialism

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**THE TV series *Volha* (Volga) relies on our weariness with pop culture's idealization of 'normalization' (the conformist period after the Soviet-led invasion of 1968). Unfortunately, it only offers a counterpoint to cute retro comedies in which everyone is terrible. Even its simplification comforts us where it should not.**

"You know, real dudes don't elevate themselves above other people," Standa Pekárek, played by Kryštof Hádek, lectures the TV director Válová, who is apparently based on real life film director Věra Chytilová, played by Anya Geislerová. She sighs that it is a pity that she is the one on duty in the archives that day and not her colleague. "At least she doesn't pretend that she hasn't had a nap for three days," adds the anti-hero of the miniseries *Volha*, at that time a celebrity driver in the editorial office of Humour and Folk Entertainment at Czechoslovak Television. This moment, coming in the first third of the penultimate episode, seems as important to the story as all of Standa's childish and dirty jokes and his opportunistic antics. It's a sentiment that characterises, even iconises, his character in the show - you can come across memes on the internet of the character leaning against the bonnet of a car with the words FORREST CUNT written on it.

The online world, able to quickly break the products of popular culture into small pieces and name the similarities and connections they suspect, quickly recognized in him an archetypal male figure associated with the Czech normalization years. A product of socialist consumerism who understood that in a system based on contacts, favours, minor and major corruption and spinelessness he could find a warm place, an apartment, gifts and holidays on Lake Balaton. A simpleton who, thanks to corrupt times, can determine the lives of the more capable, talented and sensitive. A symbol of the times. But the creators of *Volha* do not develop this symbol from the novel by Karel Hyníe any further. It is enough as it is. An idiot without feelings, surrounded by cynical normalisation scenery and people divided into swine and cowards.

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## Vulgarity is normalised

The whole five-part spectacle (the episodes are around an hour and twenty) is a drawn-out, unstimulating bore, benefiting from its setting in a milieu of television producers and celebrities, and the audience's willingness to be entertained. Instead of the sticky kindness of the "ostalgic" comedies that the *Volha* fan base demand (even though what we see here relates more to the restoration of capitalism in the 1990s), what we have here is a concentration of dirty jokes, sexism, boorishness, and opportunism that allows us to define ourselves in black and white, against the previous era, and show the series to the younger generations as evidence of the marasmus of the

previous regime.

The films [*Pelíšky* (*Cosy Dens*)-> <https://www.netflix.com/sk/title/81191327>] and *Vyprávěj* (*Tell me about it*) were an opportunity to justify one's own conformity during the previous regime, *Volha* presents the same opportunity, only from the other side. We can sigh at how terrible and unchanging normalisation was for the common man, while appreciating the retro authenticity of pointy bras and dusty streets. Czech society is probably at the stage where we want to see normalisation simplified so much that watching it is not too disturbing for us.

### **Communism is crap and the Bolsheviks are crap**

I personally don't view *Volha* badly because it reveals some uncomfortable "truth" about normalization, but rather because it flattens it in an unproductive way. The choice to show normalisation Prague as a world of ridiculous, unscrupulous and dead-eyed characters who mainly like to eat, drink and have sex has already been handled in a more sophisticated way, for example by the films of Věra Chytilová who this series parodies. Since the Revolution, other films and series about the previous regime have been made, entertaining without the idealising simplification of *Pelíšky* or *Vyprávěj*. We have seen, for example, the ambivalent framing of characters in Hřebejk's *Pupendo*, or Štěpán Hulík's uncompromisingly critical, black-and-white view of normalisation in *Hoříčí keř*. Hřebejk and Jarchovský's *Učitelka* (*The Teacher*) is similarly black and white (communists bad, non-communists good).

The genre treatment of another HBO series, *Bez vědomí* (*Without Consciousness*, 2019) in which Martin Hoffman plays a sympathetic StB (secret police) officer, may be set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it is actually more indicative of earlier decades. It shares this in common with what is probably the most comprehensive television miniseries to date that touches on the decades before the revolution - Mira Šifra and Jan Hřebejk's *Redl*. We can also recall Štindl and Špaček's thriller *Pouta* (*Walking too fast*), which tells the story of a secret policeman Estébánik torn from his chain, while Luboš Veselý plays the character of a ridiculous dissident.

Even in *Volha*, most of the time the dissidents are ridiculous. And it is only in the confrontation of one symbol of the times with another - the opportunistic idiot Standa Pekárek and the indomitable dissident Válová, from which Standa emerges victorious - that *Volha* seems to have something to say. The miniseries portrays Válová as an unpleasant cow who likes to talk about freedom and courage. But the chosen satirical simplification and the repetitive, often clumsy dialogues do not allow the miniseries to develop this convincingly. All the characters are caricatures, characterised by two or three sentences that they repeat over and over again. The TV producer Horáček repeats several times that he has "that emigrant brother," while Válová is just blathering on about courage. Nothing happens after Standa's insults, because this is not the moment when the miniseries makes its point. There is in fact only one point, expressed from the beginning, and it doesn't change or gain any nuance.

Still, *Volha* is clearly on the side of the dissidents, and so anchor itself on the right side with at least the minor supporting character of a FAMU film school student who never sells out. In the end, when the Velvet Revolution occurs, the series gives full rein to the deadbeats who privately claimed to be against the regime only to look good. Or are even perhaps to be considered morons? It's hard to say. At this point, for the miniseries to make a coherent statement, rather than vacillating between a set tone and the need for a final piety, it would have to be more complex, more honest from the start, and want to say something more complex than "communism is bullshit and the Bolsheviks are bastards," as was of course written on a piece of paper that Jaroslav Dušek's character in *Pupendo* leaves hidden behind a decorative mosaic.

## Sticking to the well-known

Czech Television's choice to give the green light to the *Volha* project is not surprising. This is not an institution that follows foreign trends and tries to push the local reflection of history by supporting authors who bring unexpected, new perspectives on local painful topics. So, when we found out in the last decade that Czechs were not only interested in Netflix, but also in quality, comprehensive television, and when the ratings showed a great interest in Czech series, people in decision-making positions at the public Czech Television decided to stick to the tried and tested. And for them, this is represented primarily by the names of specific creators - Jan Hřebejk, Jiří Strach and, in this case, the creator of *Circus Bukowski* and *Rapl*, Jan Pachel. Instead of a new framing of the normalization period, we have thus belatedly received a reaction to the former nostalgia, riding on the popular narrative of the impenetrable normalization marasmus. Not that normalisation is not reprehensible, but for liberal-minded audiences, *Volha* is just another opportunity to relax watching their simplistic views on television.

And yet, television series have now reached a stage where they are able to provide a much more comprehensive reflection of the past. Of course, this means making the characters less ambiguous, letting them speak more, viewing events from multiple perspectives. Not pretending that normalisation was a bad joke, but rather portraying it as a period in which different people lived different lives. We could also, for once, stop insisting that we have been misunderstood if the whole piece doesn't explicitly scream in every sentence how awful the previous regime was. We can mostly agree on that, and doing so opens up the space to see the decades of normalisation between the Soviet-led invasion of August 1968 and the fall of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in December 1989 in detail and from many angles. Not every story has to touch on the secret police and collaboration. A prime example of a series that comprehensively reflects the era might be the American *Mad Men*, which deconstructs the 1960s through the stories of employees of a prestigious advertising agency. But even recent European series and miniseries are able to look at specific historical periods from surprising angles, such as Norway's *Happy Land*, Britain's *Would It Be a Sin* or *Sherwood*, and Poland's *King of Warsaw*. All of these examples are not afraid to present historical twists and turns to the audience through the eyes of people who have not yet told them, or to add different interpretive perspectives.

Personally, I feel that Czech idealizing or satirizing simplifications do not allow us to see normalization in a way that would advance the social debate here. Nor can they be used as an opportunity to heal collective traumas and truly reconcile with the past. As long as we caricature normalization, we will not understand it. Nor its connection to the present.

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