

teorii a příbuzné zóny
Sešit pro umění, Notebook for art,
(VIII)
related zones

Radek Pilař – Dual-Track Video Art¹

Martin Blažíček

1 This on-line content is the English translation of an article published in the print journal *Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones*. The original was published as: Martin BLAŽÍČEK, “Radek Pilař – dvoji český videoart,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny/Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones*, 2022, No. 33, pp. 10–37. Translated from the Czech by Phil Jones.

This study, using the example of Radek Pilař, summarizes a specific type of video artists' involvement at the time of the Czechoslovak political “normalization” of the 1980s. It focuses on the difference between positions of artists within official and unofficial art, related institutions, technological and creative limitations. From this perspective, using the example of the video industry, the SČVU [Union of Czech Visual Artists], and the production unit Supraphon Music Video, the author describes negotiating strategies in the promotion

of video art as a creative discipline within state cultural organizations. The study discusses Radek Pilař as an artist introducing current themes of contemporary art into the beginning of normalization, but soon successfully establishing himself in the field of art for children. Thanks to his quickly acquired reputation in this area, he became an ambivalent actor who could negotiate effectively with state authorities, but at the same time did not always fulfill his own creative emancipation.

Keywords

video-art – fine arts – normalization – experimental film – SČVU [Union of Czech Visual Artists] – Supraphon Music Video – official and unofficial art – culture politics

The author is the head of the Center for audiovisual studies at FAMU Prague and a member of the NFA videoarchive. The article is a part of the project *Videoarchiv Radka Pilaře* (Radek Pilař's videoarchive) sponsored by the Czech Film Fund.

martin.blazicek@famucz

Radek Pilař (1931–1993) was an artist with a wide range of interests. He became famous as an illustrator of children's books, and is known as a university lecturer and founding member of a number of institutions and schools. But he was also a strong advocate of video, still a new medium in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s. Pilař is an ambivalent figure within cultural life, straddling the boundary between "official" and "unofficial" art. Though he was active within the sphere of official art, a significant part of his work took place in private, and these two positions were in constant interaction with each other. His popularity in the 1980s meant he was able to enter various negotiating positions as an institutional actor and move freely between these roles.

This study will concern itself with two basic levels. The first involves the genesis and later mediation of Pilař's artistic language, based on the post-avant-garde movements of the 1950s and 1960s. I will draw on specific instances to show how formative the period of the late 1960s was for Pilař, how this artistic language was later transformed by the medium of video, and how it later became embedded in the aesthetic foundations of the video division of the Union of Czech Visual Artists (SČVU) during the 1980s. The second line of inquiry will look at Pilař as an institutional actor – his self-image as an artist rejected by the state and his later return to the cultural scene through the medium of video. Within this framework, a key role will be played by the presumed versus the actual relations pertaining between the filmmaker and the state production units, the degree to which work being created in this way was accepted by the state, and the way this relationship was developed within the conception of the new division of the Union. Pilař's own video archive, an extensive corpus containing a number of works in various stages of development, will be our guide, along with materials from the family archive of texts and newly conducted interviews with people active on the cultural scene during the 1980s.

The Pilař archive brings together almost 400 cassettes² containing work stretching from 1985, the year in which he purchased a Betamovie amateur video camera, until his death in 1993. Research into large collections usually holds out the promise of uncovering unexpected secrets, as yet undiscovered works, or unknown variations on known works, and Pilař's archive does not disappoint in this respect. A large part of the digitalised recordings is now available on the portal videoarchiv.nfa.cz. Perhaps even more interesting than the discovery of rare footage, however, is the representation of genres in the collection. Though Pilař was especially well known as an author of animated characters for children, his archive contains only the bare minimum of this type of footage. On the contrary, the vast majority of his work comprises derivatives, copies, and working or alternative versions of video artworks that he created from 1985 onwards. It seems that Pilař successfully separated his professional life as an animator and artist from his private creative space.

The archive contains three large segments. The first contains remediations from around 1984 of original film experiments dating back to the 1960s. The second features video experiments up to 1989, culminating in the series *Musica Picta* (1985–1991), and the third involves work created mainly in private video studios between 1990 and 1992.

This study would not have been possible without the many hours of work put in by Anna Krivenko, who compiled records of Pilař's tapes, the research conducted by Klára

2 Pilař's private archive contains virtually all available data storage devices dating back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially the VHS, U-matic, Betacam and DigiBeta formats, and to a lesser extent Betamax, Hi8 and VHS-C.

Trsková, who put together an exhaustive set of catalogues and publications relating to Pilař's artistic practice, and Jakub Jirka, who offered a technical assessment of the quality and relationships of all of the digitalised media in the archive.

Between public and private production

Pilař has always been regarded³ as an artist who overcame his modernist upbringing (received from Vlastimil Rada and Emil Filla) and began to create his own intermedia language under the influence of the new art of the 1960s. In this endeavour he was guided by the Nordic group Cobra, from which he adopted elements of Surrealism and expressive figuration, and by Pop Art, which he came into contact with at the 1963 Paris Biennale.⁴ Over a short period of time in the mid-1960s, he abandoned the modernist obsession with urban nooks and crannies, instead beginning to experiment with expressive painterly gestures and non-artistic materials. In this he was inspired by the early work of David Hockney and Peter Blake, Niki de Saint Phalle, Richard Hamilton, and the *décollages* of Mimmo Rotella.⁵ From the cinematic world he was influenced by Norman McLaren, especially the latter's synaesthetic works, in which he painted over an exposed film strip.⁶ During the 1960s, Pilař began to apply these influences in his painting and film work. Expressive figures and pictograms appeared in his paintings, and he incorporated various materials, objects, photographs and magazine cuttings. The process of creating assemblage, in which materials of various origins are layered and affixed over each other, later led to his discovery of "destructive animation", a process in which objects gradually disintegrate in front of the camera. By destructive animation, Pilař had in mind a technique similar to *décollage* or *assemblage*, in which it is impossible to go backwards, since the objects used decompose or are permanently deformed, a process similar to Pop-Art assemblage. Elements of destructive animation included liquids being poured, overpainting and the tearing of animation templates, and the physical destruction of objects, for instance through thermal deformation and the burning of plastic.⁷

For Pilař as animator, this relatively demanding technique no doubt represented the antithesis of the "economised" technique of cutout animation. In an undated handwritten text in the archive, Pilař debates whether the cutout animation technique is even appropriate, since the biggest argument in its favour revolves around reducing television production costs. He even calls it a "pseudo-drawn film", which must necessarily seek its own creative language in order to stand as autonomous work.

Pilař's first films from the 1960s were studies and experiments with new forms rather than completed works. He used such experiments to test out strategies similar to those that he was discovering in parallel as a painter. He would scratch the basis of found film

3 For instance, Jan KŘÍŽ, "Radek Pilař – malíř", in: *Radek Pilař*, Praha: Nakladatelství Slovart 2003, p. 11.

4 *Biennale de Paris*, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 28 September – 3 November 1963.

5 Pilař captured some of those mentioned at the Paris Biennale in his journal-style film *Paříž* (Paris, 1963), along with other typically Parisian features. Some parts of the film are hand-coloured.

6 McLaren's films were not entirely unavailable in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s, though it is not clear where exactly Pilař met him. McLaren's film *Begone Dull Care* (1949) brings to mind Pilař's experiments in animation.

7 Pilař used these techniques in *Pinup* (1965), and they appear regularly in other works, e.g. *The Time* (1983), *Botička* (Little Shoe, 1988) and *Virtuální opona* (Virtual Curtain, 1992).

materials⁸ and apply paint lavishly, or bring together patches of colour into simple animations. Two reels of 16mm film, 4.5 and 5.5 minutes long, were made in 1963 using this technique. Inspired by McLaren, he also viewed his films as synaesthetic complements to music, in this case recordings of the Modern Jazz Quartet. In another experiment, later called *Filmová skica* (Film Sketch) or *Malování do vzduchu* (Painting in the Air), he depicted the family of the poet Václav Fišer in the baroque grounds of the Skalka pilgrimage site overlooking Mníšek pod Brdy. In this black-and-white film, children play with patches of colour that were later painted with a brush onto the surface of the film in such a way as to correspond to the movements of the characters. During the 1960s, Pilař completed only two films. Jacques Prévert's poem *Chanson des escargots qui vont à l'enterrement* (Song of the Snails on their Way to a Funeral) provided the inspiration for a film with the same name, *Píseň hlemýžďů jdoucích na pohřeb* (1965), in which he combined cutout animation with recordings of splashing paint and liquids. His second finished work was a filmic *décollage* of fashion magazines entitled *Pinup* (1965), evoking Mimmo Rotella's collages, again supplemented by destructive techniques, poured paint and paper being scattered in front of the camera.⁹

During the 1960s, Pilař began to experiment with forms, materials and objects and to search for intermedial connections. The outcome of this short period, however, was not the further development of experimental techniques, but a step towards illustrations and animations for children. At the same time, he was working as a designer of animated and puppet films for television¹⁰ and collaborating with the magazines *Mateřídouška* (meaning "thyme", as well as being a translation of the Latin *matris animula* or "soul of the mother") and *Sluníčko* (Little Sun). In 1965, he created the figure of *Věčerníček* (for a TV programme of the same name, meaning "little bedtime story"), and the following year he started working on an animated series about the gallant robber Rumcajs. By the mid-1960s, he already had two successful artistic careers on the go: as an experimenter with new artistic methods; and as an increasingly successful children's illustrator. His experimentation sometimes crossed over into his television and magazine work. Václav Bedřich's *Písnička pro sklíčka* (Kaleidoscope, 1967), on which Pilař worked as designer, uses material techniques he had already tested out in *Píseň hlemýžďů* (Song of the Snails) and *Pinup*, namely, the irreversible destruction of materials under the camera, animated stroboscopic effects, layered materials, and the surreal animation of objects into zomorphic shapes. Pilař continued working with these methods into the 1980s in the film *Botička* (1988) and a series of works for the Swedish IVOS Film & Video Stockholm in 1983–1984.¹¹ All of these films continue working with techniques that Pilař had discovered in the 1960s to such an extent that they sometimes appear to be from that period. We may also assume that they represent a retrospective realisation of the themes that he had

8 It is not entirely clear what material was involved. It was probably one of the programmes of the television show *Vysílání pro mateřské školy* (Nursery Programmes), for which Pilař created the jingle in 1963. However, in this case the communication between colour painting and the original material on the film strip was not targeted.

9 The new, refined dating of the works mentioned, based on research into Pilař's private archive, differs from that given in various materials from the 1980s and 1990s, in which these works are ascribed various dates between 1962 and 1965.

10 E.g. *Čuťanovy kopačky* (1963); *Pohádka o semaforu* (1963); *Pohádka o dudlavém klukovi* (1963); *O dráčku papíráčku* (1964); *Kluk a kometa* (1964); *O mýdlové bublince* (1964), et al.

11 These are the film *The Time* (1983) and the four-part series *V jablčku bydlí panenka* (In Applena Bör en Decka, 1984).

intended to address at Krátký film in 1968, a plan he was unable to realise since the studio rejected his films under the influence of the normalisation period in Czechoslovakia. Whatever the case, the mid-1960s became a reservoir of forms and visual techniques for the future, to which Pilař returned repeatedly even after he had begun to work with the medium of video and computer technology.

At the same time, the two-track trajectory of Pilař's work is already apparent in the 1960s, foreshadowing the concept of art during the normalisation period. The two types of work, public and private, also represent two different production strategies. In his experimental work, Pilař is an independent artist, inspired by the global art scene, financing his own work and receiving assistance on production from friends. However, these films were never shown in public at that time, but were only ever screened to a small circle of acquaintances in his studio. In contrast, the works he created for the Jiří Trnka Studio and Czechoslovak Television, mostly cutout and puppet animation, are intended for a wider audience. They soon gained huge popularity and Pilař became synonymous with children's work in the eyes of the public.

This two-track career path could also be interpreted as reflecting a privileged position, in which Pilař was able to utilise his private experiments as a kind of innovative capital within an official environment. With the benefit of hindsight, some of his films can be perceived in this way. However, most artists active during the normalisation period viewed private and official art as distinct spheres. This separation was accompanied by certain tropes, such as: "we only did what we were allowed to do", "most of our ideas were not accepted", "my experiments were hidden [from the viewer's attention]", "there was no way I was going to be published", "this was simply inconceivable", etc.¹² Public and private (i.e. official and unofficial) roles were strictly delineated, shown in different spaces for different audiences and subject to different economic laws.¹³

Although Pilař was a member of the Union of Czechoslovak Artists during the 1960s, he nevertheless had to overcome many obstacles. The presentation of themes was selective and subject to approval by Krátký film, and Bedřich's *Písnička pro sklíčka* was just one of the projects Pilař planned to realise there. Other themes of a more artistic or abstract nature that he submitted to the studio were not accepted. And so while the latter half of the 1960s did provide Pilař with the opportunity to mount an official production of *Písnička*, he did not look back on this period with any great fondness or as in any way exceptional in terms of artistic freedom. The 1960s are rarely interpreted positively in Pilař's texts, and if so, then only framed by the 1950s:

Since the 1950s, the visual arts were under the direct control of the state, influenced by laws that deprived artists of freedom, the possibility of publication, exhibition opportunities, etc., unless they belonged to Party or select cadres. The visual arts from the 1950s

12 Petr Skala, for example, speaks similarly about his work. He made abstract animated films from the end of the 1960s onwards, though most of his work remains unknown. Cf. Bohdana KERBACHOVÁ, *Alchymie světla. Experimentální tvorba Petra Skaly*, Písek: Prácheňské muzeum v Písku – Nakladatelství Vltavín Praha 2017, p. 27, and Bohdana KERBACHOVÁ, "První schůzky naplňovalo snění. Rozhovor s Petrem Skalou," *Illuminace*, Vol. 18, 2006, No. 2, pp. 189–190.

13 Cf. Martin BLAŽÍČEK, "Paralelní média pozdního socialismu," in: Sylva POLÁKOVÁ – Martin MAZANEC (eds.), *Mapování pohyblivého obrazu. Média, aktéři a místa v českém prostředí*, Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2022 (unpublished draft).

onwards were organised by laws in such a way as to ensure the artist was dependent on the state. Outside this category there were many artists who worked in accordance with their own ideas outside the realm of official art. (...) The 1960s represented a relaxation and opening up of these issues for a short time, brought to a close by the entry of the [Warsaw Pact] troops. (...) In the film world the situation was even worse. The film industry was also part of the state monopoly, and independent artists could not even purchase the basic materials they needed for professional work, e.g. 16mm film, nor the necessary apparatus. They were not permitted to use state labs in order to process their film.¹⁴ Experiments involving the film image were conducted on the side, under amateur conditions, without any hope of a wider audience. The form in and of itself was deemed hostile to the politics of the time. This led to the artists shutting themselves away in their workshop, and to depression and despair.¹⁵

One cannot help feeling that the late 1960s was not a particularly happy time for Pilař. In 1969, the situation was compounded by his expulsion from the Union (which he did not rejoin until 1979), which limited his opportunities to participate in large, prestigious exhibitions. However, he continued to exhibit his illustrations and work for children in smaller, regional galleries.¹⁶

The idea of a two-track artistic career, private and public, which was taken up by many artists in the 1970s, was a response to the idea of a parallel society in which only a limited number of activities can take place in public space, while only the private space remains truly free. However, the antithetical nature of public and private, which the case of Pilař seemingly underlines, does not necessarily mean impermeability, and individual actors were able to move easily between the two environments.¹⁷ Even though at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s there was a group of artists who found themselves isolated in one or other of the extreme positions without the possibility of compromise,¹⁸ more often

14 This claim regarding the inaccessibility of film material and technology is not entirely true. In the 1960s, an amateur film movement flourished in Czechoslovakia, producing hundreds of films a year in 8mm and 16mm formats. In addition, the BRNO16 film festival was established in 1960, which enjoyed great success over the next few years. See, for example, Emil PRAŽAN, *Kronika českého amatérského filmu*, Praha: Národní informační a poradenské středisko pro kulturu 2005, p. 134.

15 Radek PILAŘ, "Podmínky pro vznik videa v Čechách," the manuscript of a speech for a meeting of video artists in Paris 1990 (archive of Radek Pilař's heirs).

16 E.g. the *5th Biennale of Applied Printmaking*, Brno: Moravská galerie 1972; *Radek Pilař dětem*, Praha: Galerie Albatros 1973; *Ilustrace Radka Pilaře*, Olomouc: Divadlo hudby 1974; *Radek Pilař: Kresbou, barvou, kamerou*, Cheb: Galerie výtvarného umění 1976; *Čeští ilustrátoři dětem*, Praha: Mánes 1976; *Vyznání životu a míru. Přehledka československého výtvarného umění k 40. výročí osvobození Československa Sovětskou armádou*, Praha 1985; et al.

17 Cf. Josef LEDVINA, "České umění kolem roku 1980 jako pole kulturní produkce," *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, 2010, No. 9, p. 35.

18 On the one hand, underground filmmakers whose work eschewed the public space (Milan Kohout, Pablo De Sax), and on the other, for example, directors from the circle surrounding Czechoslovak Television, who conducted interesting experiments as part of the editing of music shows (e.g. *Kouzelný kolotoč*, dir. Jan Bonaventura, 1987. Available on YouTube, recorded by user RETRO SHOW OK3 October 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGHS8OTFe3Y>, [accessed June 22, 2022]).

than not artists were free to move between the two poles on the basis of an ongoing negotiation.¹⁹ For Pilař, this approach did not require any great compromises, since his work was virtually devoid of a political dimension. Rather, it was a case of fulfilling the expectations of his respective audiences. He turned his attention away from film projects that, in any case, were destined to remain unrealised, and focused instead on photo-assemblages. These he created privately in his studio, while simultaneously working on popular animated characters. The latter won him a number of awards in the 1970s, including an Honourable Mention from the Literary Fund for *Kluci, pozor, červená!* (Boys, Beware, a Red Light!),²⁰ the award for Best Children's Production for *Jak se stal Rumcajs loupežníkem* (How Rumcajs Became a Robber) at the Mahen Theatre, Brno (1970), and an award at Ars film Kroměříž (1970). On one side, there is private work that was not displayed in public, and on the other, Union-organised exhibitions and film or television commissions, which involved difficult negotiations and many compromises.

The marginalisation of domestic or “unofficial” work by the artists themselves became a characteristic feature in Czechoslovakia and appeared frequently in conjunction with references to the inaccessibility of official art. “In the early 1960s I made experimental films using cheap waste materials. They couldn't be used or shown to anyone, and so only a few friends saw them at screenings in my studio,”²¹ Pilař later said, speaking of that decade. His contemporary Petr Skala had similar things to say regarding the fate of private work presented only to a close circle of friends.²² If this was the situation artists found themselves in during the period of political normalisation, we might ask whether there potentially was another model of audio-visual production, which for some reason was not drawn on in Czechoslovakia. The utilisation of non-professional methods or presentations outside the framework of large exhibitions or distribution systems does not necessarily have to be a sign of precarisation. In independent American film, for instance, such strategies gave rise to the Film-Makers' Cooperative,²³ and in the UK to the concept

19 One form such negotiations took involved architectural projects commissioned by the state. Although these were a lucrative source of income for many artists, the thematic content of such works was driven by political considerations and reinforced the prevailing political doctrine. Artists often responded by approaching the work in a completely abstract way, seeking some form of compromise between creative invention and meeting the political brief. Examples would include *Atomový věk* by Ladislav Janouch, Smíchovské nádraží, Prague, 1976; the ceramic panelling *Mladost – radost z práce* by Vladimír Groš, Bzenec, 1987; and the large glass work by Libenský and Brychtová on the theme of Peace for the Prazhskaya metro station in Moscow, 1985.

20 Lenka VOSKOVÁ – Jiří HAVEL – Radek PILAŘ, *Kluci, pozor, červená*, Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství 1979.

21 Magdalena LAUTNEROVÁ, “Rozhovor s Radkem Pilařem,” *Učitelské noviny*, 1990s. Based on a transcript of the interview from the archive of Radek Pilař's papers.

22 Bohdana KERBACHOVÁ, “První schůzky naplňovalo snění,” pp. 191, 195–196.

23 The Film-Makers' Cooperative began as a New American Cinema project in 1961 and spread through Western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During the 1970s, alternative ways of producing and distributing “other” film were developed in Western Europe. See, for example Sue CLAYTON – Laura MULVEY (eds.), *Other Cinemas Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. 2017.

of the Arts Lab.²⁴ In Eastern Europe, schools²⁵ and student incubators²⁶ played the role of alternative, unofficial producers. Although it was never going to be possible to create non-state institutions or art associations under the conditions of normalisation pertaining in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 1980s, alternative models did not gain much traction, either as a way of effecting internal reforms of state institutions or as temporary structures created through negotiation. Although parallel institutions such as underground collectives and film festivals did exist,²⁷ they remained completely outside the system and as a result their greatest ambition was not to become a public actor and to avoid any kind of negotiation or compromise.

The narrative according to which only the private personifies the notion of freedom, whereas the public is virtually synonymous with moral degeneracy, was already being heard during the 1970s,²⁸ but only fully resonated in the 1990s. Vlasta Čiháková-Noshiro articulates it in the catalogue to Pilař's exhibition project *Absolutní opona* (Absolute Curtain, 1991):

The moment had come for the artist [Pilař] to take up the film camera and, in accordance with ideas of the time, to devote himself to experimental film and further develop his notion of animated visual assemblages. However, his first attempts included *Písnička pro sklíč-ka*, a fanciful creation of fragments of puzzles, slides for children, and this was doomed to failure in the form of a short film. And so instead of freely experimenting with a fusion of the painterly and photographic image, instead of animating the assemblages, the painter was forced to relinquish the camera, return to the traditional drawn reality of the animated image and respect the straight-laced concept of our painting. It is only thanks to the nobility of his moral profile, his love of children²⁹ and the existential necessity of survival that Pilař, leaving aside his private photo-assemblages incorporating fragments of photography into the original plan of the painterly idea, succeeded in attaining a degree of artistic enrichment in dialogue

24 Cf. David CURTIS, *London's Arts Labs and the 60s Avant-Garde*, New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing 2020.

25 E.g. the Łódź film form workshop, see Ryszard W. KLUSZCZYŃSKI, "The Mechanical Imagination – Creativity of Machines: Film Form Workshop 1970–1977," in: Kamila KUC – Michael O'PRAY (eds.), *The Struggle for Form: Perspectives on Polish Avant-Garde Film, 1916–1989*, New York: Columbia University Press 2014.

26 One example is the Balázs Béla Studio, created in Hungary in the 1960s as an experimental space for graduates fresh out of film school. See Gábor GELENCSÉR, "Continuing the deviating tradition of Hungarian experimental film art: András Jeles's Joseph and his Brothers – Scenes from a Peasant Bible," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, Vol. 10, 2015, No. 9, pp. 23–37.

27 Cf. Martin BLAŽÍČEK, "Čarodějné filmy pro lid. K československému filmovému undergroundu 80. let," *Illuminace*, Vol. 29, 2017, No. 4, p. 12.

28 For example, in the form of Benda's "parallel polis", or Jirous's concept of the "second culture". Cf. Václav BENDA, "Paralelní polis," in: Patrik BENDA (ed.), *Noční kádrový dotazník a jiné boje: Texty z let 1977–1989*, Praha: Agite/Fra 2009, pp. 56–66; Ivan M. JIROUS, *Zpráva o třetím českém hudebním obrození*, Měšice: samizdat 1975.

29 Pilař turned his attention to work for children after the birth of his daughter Barbora in 1966. Over the next few years, his family appeared in many private studies, and during the 1980s in video experiments undertaken at the Supraphon publishing house.

with the world of children, which is virtually impossible in the world of adults.³⁰

Pilař himself commented on the fracture of the public and private worlds wrought by normalisation in an interview for the newspaper *Práce* conducted in the 1990s:

RP: Freedom is expensive. You often pay for it with your life. I could only paint and work freely in my studio. Painting and play were in themselves already interpreted as something unacceptably antisocial and dangerous. Without the possibility to exhibit and publish, this isolation resulted in depression and often a lack of faith in the meaning of work. I never stopped painting, but I was only allowed to travel around the countryside with my own exhibitions.

ML: But you were never officially presented as a problematic artist.

RP: I always had problems. The all-seeing commissions were made up of morally degenerate individuals. I was never considered an “official” artist. From 1969 to 1979, I was not a member of the Union of Fine Artists and lived in constant fear that everything could come tumbling down.³¹

The narrative of privately authentic versus publicly censored art was slowly consolidated during the 1990s as a way of signalling the new moral values of the emerging post-communist regime. According to this narrative, it was above all the activities conducted outside of the system during the 1980s, especially those of dissident and opposition movements, that were deserving of moral capital. During the 1990s, when the trauma induced by the end of the regime provoked an intense need to dissociate oneself from anything that in any way recalled the normalisation period, there were few people who were prepared to defend official art. This is why the official art of the 1970s and 1980s is still marginalised, and when exhibited, then more as a “symptom of the times”, its political overtones being of more interest than its aesthetic qualities.

Although Radek Pilař refused to describe himself as an official artist, he certainly was one and exhibited all the internal contradictions and ambivalences characteristic of that standing. As I have indicated, official art was not necessarily defined in terms of complete freedom within artistic practice. It was not a distinct privileged position, but rather a spectrum of attitudes and negotiating tactics that artists exercised towards institutions. For Pilař, who had spent a decade moving between private studio, the editorial boards of children’s magazines and the creation of animated characters for children, the culmination arrived in the early 1980s with the advent of the new medium of video.

30 Vlasta ČIHÁKOVÁ-NOSHIRO, “Superrealita spektakulárního prostoru,” in: *Radek Pilař – Absolutní opona*, Svitavy: Městské muzeum a galerie ve Svitavách 1991, p. 2.

31 Marcela LIMPRECTOVÁ, “Svědomí je nejlepším měřítkem hodnoty vlastního života,” *Práce*, December 22, 1990.

Video as a negotiating tool

When we speak of negotiation, we cannot assume a completely symmetrical dialogue. In Pilař's case, as far as we can tell, negotiation involved written appeals sent to institutions with authority in his sphere, e.g. the leadership of the Union, or a beseeching tone to be found in articles and interviews. In all of these cases Pilař used his authority as an officially established artist in order to advocate for the medium of video within the framework of the official art scene, notwithstanding the fact that in many cases it is not at first sight clear to whom such a general appeal might be addressed. His aim appeared to be the reform of institutions and the incorporation of new elements into their structures. Pilař's ambition as negotiator, then, was to acquire new positions within an already defined territory. His successes would include the establishment of a video department at the Union and the launch of video-art study programmes at universities.

The process began around 1984, when, after a short artistic residency in Sweden, Pilař bought a Betamovie video camera and started to experiment with what was for him a new medium. The first works recycled his film studies from the 1960s. Films originally shot on 16mm were projected onto the wall in Pilař's summer studio at his cottage in Jarkovice, as well as onto other surfaces and materials, including artistic assemblages or the bodies of his friends. The video recordings of these screenings became the source material for further experimentation, and later Pilař added colour and other video effects.³² This is how the versions he later presented of the films *Malování do vzduchu* (1984), *Pinup* (1984) and *Barvy* (1984) were made. Video allowed him to continue with the intermedial programme he had begun two decades earlier. He began to combine video effects with graphic art, set design, illustrations and performances involving actors. This new *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a kind of "painting by camera", he called "integra art", and later on "absolute painting". The pilot works of this cycle were the video studies made in and around Jarkovice, in which he attempted to capture the transformation of the surrounding countryside. They include the artistic study *Země, světlo, vzduch* (Earth, Light, Air, 1984), *Grafika podzimu* (Graphics of Autumn, 1985), in which he placed his lithographs in nature, and *Zrcadlo času* (Mirror of Time, 1985), which was an attempt to create a new form of music video accompanying a composition by Miroslav Vitouš. Apart from the first, these were not visually ostentatious works. The camera lingers on the surface of water, romantic shots of nature, dry leaves and the sky, all complemented by Pilař's drawings and prints. As in the previous period, however, the dual-track nature of artistic practice continues, with Pilař creating the animated series *Pozrite sa!* (Look!, 1983–84) for Czechoslovak Television in Bratislava at the same time.

While Pilař was working on a new programme of video painting, in 1985, a decision was taken at the Supraphon publishing company to create a new department for the

32 Given that the simple Sony Betamovie cameras (recording on Betamax cassette format) did not include video effects or other advanced features, it is not entirely clear how inversion and colourisation found their way into the videos. Pilař's later works from Supraphon's JVC studio contain far more advanced effects than those in the first videos. The early videos usually feature only simple colour transformations, while the later ones work with slow motion, posterisation, chroma keying or complicated picture-in-picture effects.

creation of music videos following foreign examples.³³ Jiří Hubač oversaw the creation of the Supraphon Music Video Division. He recruited a group of technicians to work with him and managed to get his hands on some older production trucks. Although the new video department did not initially inspire much enthusiasm at Supraphon, it soon became clear that it had the potential to become a significant means of monetising the music portfolio, especially as regards recordings of classical music. Audiovisual recordings of concerts given by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra became an important commercial item, which Hubač secured thanks to his friendship with the chief conductor Václav Neumann. These recordings sold well around the world and represented a strong economic argument for the continued existence of the new division. Though the cornerstone of the department were its live concert recordings, these were soon joined by videos of ballets and pop music clips. Supraphon also shot music videos of Michal David, Karel Svoboda, Anna Rusticano and Karel Gott. The videos were primarily intended for television broadcasting, but shortly after the advent of VHS technology, the idea was born of selling video cassettes in music stores.

It was around this time that Pilař joined Supraphon Music Video. His reputation was based mainly on his success in children's films, and the initial plan was for his animated cartoons to be released on Supraphon video cassettes. In 1985, however, Pilař was far more attracted by the idea of a new form of music video, in which he could apply his artistic ideas and newly discovered video technology. The studio had a production truck with JVC video direction and the professional U-matic HB format, which made it possible to create advanced video effects such as chroma keying³⁴ and basic television graphics, in addition to filming outdoors in locations of choice. Pilař and Hubač quickly came to an agreement, according to which experimental video clips for classical music from the Supraphon back catalogue would be created using studio technology.³⁵ Right from the start it was clear that this would not be as commercially lucrative as pop music videos or classical concert recordings. However, for Supraphon it meant the possibility of creating an interesting project under the aegis of a renowned artist with a flair for experimentation. Pilař, in turn, gained access to professional video equipment and cooperation with sound engineers. The choice of Pilař included the possibility of experimentation over and above what was usual for television. On the other hand, Pilař was perceived as a relatively conservative artist. The use of artistic techniques in Supraphon's video production was subject to the dramaturgical law, according to which every creative effect had to be necessary and all irrelevant elements removed. Jiří Hubač had the following to say on the subject:

33 The section devoted to Supraphon Music Video is based on interviews with the producer Jiří Hubač and the sound engineer Jan Kotzmann. The interview with Jiří Hubač was conducted by Martin Blažiček on 2 June 2022. The interview with Jan Kotzmann was conducted by Martin Blažiček on 6 June 2022. NFA Oral History Collection.

34 The process of chroma keying mainly involves detaching characters or objects from the background and placing them in another image. This is usually achieved by filming them against a blue or green background.

35 The musical works were selected for Pilař by Supraphon dramaturge Jiří Pilka. They involved eight programmes of varying length set to Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, Josef Suk's *Fairy Tale*, Dvořák's *String Quartet in F Major*, Benjamin Britten's *Simple Symphony*, Chopin's *Fantasy Impromptu in C sharp minor*, Respighi's *Roman Festivals*, Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* and Romberg's *Children's Symphony*.

It wasn't that the director no longer knows what to do, so he prepares something, modifies it, and for reasons unbeknownst to the viewer suddenly it's special. With Radek Pilař it was about the search for a pure artistic idea. (...) He had a clear idea of what he wanted to achieve. Of course, the three or four-minute video had its own story and scenario, which everything had to conform to. This wasn't just a random thing. It was a really creative process. The phrase video art, so redolent of Radek Pilař, refers to something he was present at the birth of and went on to develop.³⁶

As a "prototype" of the music video, Pilař brought with them the recently completed *Zrcadlo času*. This was later included in a series of eight videos that Pilař began to work on at Supraphon and which, in the process, acquired the umbrella title *Musica Picta*.³⁷ Its first and most formally elaborate work was *Čas radování*³⁸ (Time of Rejoicing, 1985), set to Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. Pilař worked with a group of mime artists (e.g. Boris Hybner and Markéta Šebestáková), and combined a number of trick shots and animations. He availed himself of just about all the techniques that he had already tried out in animated films: pixilation, zoomorphic compositions from natural materials, an animated painting process and animated assemblages. Work on the cycle was sporadic. Pilař had only limited use of the studio, and to begin with the scope and concept of the cycle was not entirely clear. Even the already completed works underwent revisions, and more works were gradually added up to 1990. The overall feel of the work was influenced by the way it was to be distributed, namely, on freely sold VHS cassettes, and this required a duration of at least one hour. The manner in which individual works were produced varied greatly, and ranged from complex animations (*Hodina slavnosti* [The Festive Hour], 1987; *Minuty strachu* [Minutes of Fear], 1990) via simpler animations (*Chvilé něhy* [Tender Moments], 1988), to live-action sketches (*Čas veselosti* [Time of Mirth], 1989) and more statically composed visual fantasies (*Čas smutku* [Time of Sorrow], 1987). In several cases Pilař incorporated earlier films into the series (*Čas tance* [Time of Dance], 1989).

Work on the cycle came to an unhappy end, since the plan to release VHS cassettes was abandoned in 1991.³⁹ However, the new mode of video production in the state-owned

36 Interview with Jiří Hubač (edited).

37 *Zrcadlo času* is an interesting illustration of the ambivalence of relations that accompanied official art at that time. The original music by Miroslav Vitouš proved unsuitable, since the composer had been living as an emigrant in the USA since the 1960s. At that time, Pilař was working at Karel Svoboda's unofficial home studio Elektrovox on the soundtrack to the animated series *Pozrite sa!* Members of the then banned Pražský výběr were also working in the studio. Pilař met Michal Pavlíček and Michael Kocáb there and used one of their ambient compositions for *Zrcadlo času*, which had originally been recorded for other purposes. (On the basis of an interview with Jan Kotzmann.)

38 In the cycle *Musica Picta* there are two different titles: *Čas radování* and *Čas radosti*. Pilař several times confused these titles.

39 After 1990, the video division was removed from Supraphon by what was known as delimitation, and continued to operate as the state-owned Bohemia Video Art, but only with the rights to visual recordings. As part of the privatisation process the company was made a joint-stock company, and for several years was active in the sphere of live broadcasts and recordings of classical music concerts, especially thanks to its exclusive cooperation with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1995, the majority of shares in Bohemia Video Art were sold, and the firm gradually wound down its activities. Some of its employees continued to work for BVA International s.r.o.

enterprise provided Pilař with a functional alternative to the public/private, official/unofficial, dual-track mode of existence. Although Supraphon's videos may have appeared conservative, subject to many production and aesthetic restrictions and marginalised within the organisation as a whole, it was nonetheless a certifiably official video-art project at a socialist state-run enterprise. Pilař was able to apply creative ideas that he had been unable to at Krátký film or Czechoslovak Television. Moreover, videos from *Musica Picta* started to appear in his solo exhibitions as a logical outcome of the assemblages and over-painted photographs from the 1970s. In this case, Pilař saw video as a media extension of his artistic work, just as he had combined film and material experiments in the 1960s. For him, the camera was analogous to the "electronic brush" and the video image was a space for the realisation of new creative forms. In the catalogue to the solo exhibition *Radek Pilař Video* (1988), he comments on the series in progress:

(...) we rely on the basic concept, which is not just about illustrating music with images, but about a free artistic accompaniment that fully respects the priority of the music and is subordinate to its idea. It should highlight this idea, while at the same time allowing the listener room for his or her own perception. The visual interpretation should therefore avail itself of the specific artistic means made possible by television technology, in which the camera becomes a kind of additional musical instrument. In this way, both image and music can work in a polyphonic way, rather than being in a relationship of illustrative subordination. It is a way of listening enriched, as I say, by visual hearing, a synthesis of musical and visual perception...⁴⁰

Individual works from the series also appeared in various contexts at other exhibitions and festivals after 1988, including the *Salon užitého umění* at the Výstaviště exhibition grounds in Prague (*Den videa*, 1989), MIDEM (Cannes, 1989), *Festival de création vidéo* (Clermont-Ferrand, France, 1990) and at the exhibitions *Video 1985–1990* (Václav Špála Gallery, Prague, 1990), *Absolutní opona* (Svitavy, Prague, 1991) and *Český obraz elektronický* (Mánes, Prague, 1994).

In the mid-1980s, Pilař was an established artist on several levels. He was a renowned children's illustrator, animator, and, thanks to his collaboration with Supraphon, had found a way of creating video art within the structures of the political system. In addition, he was a lecturer at several art schools, and in 1985, he set up a Faculty of Animation as a member of the artistic council at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU).⁴¹ From 1979 onwards, he was again a member of the Union of Czech Visual Artists. He was perceived as a natural authority by his followers among the video art community, and is often referred to as the founder of the genre. This afforded him a certain bargaining position within the official art scene, thanks to which he was

40 Aloisie RAMBOSSKOVÁ, *Radek Pilař. Radek Pilař Video*, Vsetín: Okresní vlastivědné museum Vsetín 1988, p. 5.

41 In 1986–1989, the department was part of the Faculty of Documentary Production as a specialised subject for distance learning. A separate Department of Animation was only created in 1990. Pilař lectured here until 1992.

able to begin promoting the creation of a special video division⁴² within the Union. At that time the organisation was divided into the disciplines of painting, photography and printmaking, applied and industrial art, restoration and theory. The creation of a video division would symbolise the recognition and confirmation of the existence of this new artistic discipline. It would also have practical outcomes. It would mean that video artists who were members of the Union would be able to apply for state commissions and thus bypass the production system of Krátký film and Czechoslovak Television. In turn, this would mean they could participate in competitions for the creation of video programmes, in the same way as they participated in architecture competitions.

The video division, opened at the Union in 1987, was designed as an interdisciplinary practice that would include not only video production itself, but the establishment of a video library and the creation of a fund for the promotion of the Czech visual arts, educational activities and video theory.⁴³ The concept of a centre that would bring together production, educational, conservation and distribution activities is ultimately close to the concept of the film cooperatives of the 1960s. One of Pilař's wishes was the creation of a video service. In one of his speeches shortly after the video division was formed, he asks that

(...) the SČVU [Union of Czech Fine Artists] make available technical, material, spatial and personnel resources in order to meet the video division's plans. (...) The members of the division should be granted suitable financial conditions and the cheapest rental of equipment so that they are able to realise their artistic intentions in the sphere of video art or any other type of creative endeavour that relies on electrical recording and processing, for instance computer animation, video performance, the electronic and temporal processing of petrography, etc.⁴⁴

A similar document was also addressed by representatives of the video division to the National Gallery,⁴⁵ which was to be involved in the video workplace and to have its own representation. None of these plans came to fruition, though the division remained a part of the Union until 1990, when the interests of its members began to be represented within the new free-market environment by the Association of Video and Intermedia Production. Among its greatest successes was its participation at the summer *Applied Art Salon* at the Výstaviště Exhibition Grounds in Prague (1989), where the work of its members was presented on a larger scale for the first time as part of the *Video Day*. However, not even after the dissolution of the Union in 1990 did Pilař give up his advocacy of

42 When it was opened the division was simply the "video division". However, like other disciplines, it soon became the "Video Division", as though it were the name of an art group, which in fact it was actually reminiscent of – it entailed artists meeting in the premises of the Mánes exhibition space. This is how other texts still refer to the division. This study sticks to the older way of referring to the video division, as other divisions of the Union were labelled.

43 See "Obor video. UP sekce Svazu českých výtvarných umělců," a transcript of a speech by Radek Pilař after the founding of the department as part of the Union of Czech Visual Artists, undated, circa 1988, p. 2. Archive of Radek Pilař heirs.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

45 Jaroslav VANČÁT, "Stanovisko k plánu oboru video SČVU v souvislosti s uplatněním videotechniky v Národní galerii," manuscript, circa 1988. Archive of Radek Pilař heirs.

the division. Referring to its active participation in the documentation of the events of November 1989, he once again approached the Civic Forum with a request that it furnish Mánes with video equipment so that they could offer screenings of information materials pertaining to the Velvet Revolution.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Radek Pilař embodies a special kind of actor on the Czechoslovak official art scene of the normalisation period. He does not fit snugly into the categories of either official or unofficial art. During the 1970s and 1980s, he occupied and deployed many different positions and negotiating strategies. On the one hand, he was an artist who was “not permitted to create”, and many of his works were made in private and available only to a small, closed circle of friends and associates. On the other, he was a successful, much loved illustrator of children’s books and the creator of dozens of animated films. These contradictions persisted into the 1990s and intensified after 2000, when he was rediscovered as the creator of the well known character of Rumcajs, whose experimental work was unknown to the public. His work for Supraphon Music Video reveals the multilayered nature of artistic practice at the time, which was defined by the principles of the grey economy⁴⁷ and political compromise, but also by the personal relationships and social capital of its actors. It is therefore impossible to distinguish in the roles of its participants whether they were persecuted for the positions they adopted, or whether by means of these positions they exploited the system to their own benefit. Nor is it entirely clear whether their work reinforced the system of cultural politics or eroded it. In this respect, a significant moment came in 1985, when Pilař met with the recently banned rock group Pražský výběr, who were recording in Karel Svoboda’s unofficial home studio,⁴⁸ in order to select a song to accompany his first video artwork.

It is also worth noting that none of the artists at that time described themselves as belonging to the official art scene, even though the interplay of public and private described above created this effect. On the contrary, all of them emphasised the problems they were having with the system and the difficulties involved in promoting their work. They had the feeling that there was no place for them in any institution and that they did not “belong” in the system, due, for example, to their reluctance to join the Communist Party, the excessively formal extravagance of their work, and the incompetence of the managerial midwits in positions of leadership at these organisations. This then gave rise to a need to transgress by disobeying the rules, or, on the contrary, to make occasional political compromises. Pilař long tried to play the role of mediator within this system. He used his influence in order to promote new possibilities for institutionalised support at universities and art schools, in the Union of Czechoslovak Fine Artists, the National Gallery, and when obtaining technology and exhibition opportunities for Union members. In this sense he was a mainstream team player. He did not seek to destroy the system, but

46 Transcription, collection of Radek Pilař correspondence. Archive of Radek Pilař’s heirs.

47 This includes the semi-official practice of Karel Svoboda’s home studio, in which commissions were realised using an alternative economic model to that of official art. Cf. fn. 36.

48 Karel Svoboda was one of the most famous composers of popular and film music in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. He worked with stars of the normalisation period such as Karel Gott and Hana Zagorová.

rather to maintain and shape it to his own benefit and that of those around him. Thanks to his influence, video art established a firm footing relatively early on the systemic level of cultural policy, even though in comparison with Poland, for example, there was a delay of more than ten years. On the other hand, there are countries in the Eastern bloc where video art never gained a foothold. It is questionable whether the strategy of creating a video division and “changing the system from within” was successful in comparison with the hypothetical alternatives that would include art school workshops or independent production units operating outside the system.⁴⁹ The creation of a central organisation for video production legitimised Pilař’s concept of video as an artistic medium. This was manifest, for example, in a set of educational materials in which video is presented as a medium that extends classical artistic techniques, painting, the electronic brush, drawing and the colour palette.⁵⁰ This meant that other roles the medium of video could play were overlooked, though this was probably the reason that video art as a discipline was integrated so seamlessly into the Union – these were visual images free of political content.

While in other countries, the dominant discourse was one that welcomed the potential of video as a communication medium, for Czechoslovakia, even at the end of the 1980s, a key theme was “the play of artistic forms”. The question arises as to how much of this is the result of Pilař’s dominance in the discipline, the inevitable effect of the surrounding social climate, or the negotiating strategies adopted in the Union. However, after 1989 Pilař began to incorporate political content into his work. This can be seen, for instance, in the versions of several of his older videos, in which he incorporated the famous speech by Miloš Jakeš (General Secretary of the Communist Party at the end of the 1980s), given in Červený hrádek, or the video *Čas zkoušky* (1990), which inserted his own footage of the events of 17 November from Národní třída and post-revolutionary events into a concert by Irena and Vojtěch Havel. In December 1989, he participated in the activities of the video division under the banner of Video Mánes, which included screenings of independent reportage in the Prague exhibition hall of the same name.

However, these works are somewhat marginal and do little to dent the overall impression that Pilař’s work was generally characterised by its distance from a non-aesthetic conception of video art. There are almost no elements of media criticism in his work, and the few that exist are genuine criticisms of Czechoslovak Television *qua* institution (and specific programmes it had created). Conceptual video art is also foreign to him, although he attempted something of the kind in his private work, for instance in the video *Slovo* from the 1980s. However, these experiments failed to become embedded, and during the 1990s Pilař continued to conceptualise video as the “new electronic paintbrush”.

It is questionable just how influential this outdated concept of video art was for the first generation of video artists of the 1980s (e.g. Jitka Svobodová, Věra Geislerová, René Slauka, Martin Hřebačka). In 1980s Czechoslovakia, important themes surrounding identity, gender and neo-formalism, which completely dominated video art in neighbouring Poland, for example, were completely absent. On the other hand, this concept later

49 An example of such a unit in Czechoslovakia was *Originální Videojournal*, which, however, was almost exclusively oriented towards the news reportage format, with video more a distribution channel rather than an artistic challenge. Nevertheless, this can serve as an example of a successfully existing parallel organisation. In the sphere of electronic image art, no similarly important organisation emerged in Czechoslovakia during the 1980s.

50 E.g. Jaroslav VANČÁT, “Pilařovo video,” *Český deník*, November 1, 1991.

became the core reason for the rejection of the discipline of video by the emerging generation of young video artists after 1995.

In its time, however, video was a catalyst for change that succeeded, at least for Pilař, in bridging the gap between personal and public activities, one of the main schisms of the cultural world during the normalisation period.