Surplus Material: Archives, History, and Innovation in Czechoslovak Army Films

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SURPLUS MATERIAL

ALICE LOVEJOY

Archives, History, and Innovation in Czechoslovak Army Films
Director Andrzej Wajda’s 1976 *Człowiek z marmuru (Man of Marble)* is a film about a struggle to make a film. Throughout its over two
and a half hours, its documentary-director heroine, Agnieszka,
does battle with a series of bureaucrat gatekeepers as she searches for information
about Mateusz Birkut, a fictional political figure of the 1950s whose fall from grace and
erasure from history were as meteoric as his orchestrated rise. Agnieszka’s endeavor
to see *things* (be they a statue of Birkut in a museum storeroom or film in an archive) is
highly allegorical: drawing an equivalence between these closely guarded, controlled,
and censored artifacts (above all, archival footage) and history itself, it suggests the
contemporary state’s complicity in crimes of the recent past.

Agnieszka, it is clear, is a persona non grata in communist Poland’s national-
ized film industry: footage she chooses for her film is mysteriously held by the studio,
and her producer cuts off her funding when her work threatens “official” understandings of the 1950s. And while in this way, *Człowiek z marmuru* tells a familiar story about the relationship between artists and state cultural institutions in communist Eastern Europe, a comparable narrative, in which film archives and their content hold the possibility for articulating oppositional histories, is paradoxically also visible from the “other side,” in the history of Czechoslovakia’s Army Film studio (Československý armádní film, or ČAF). In the mid- to late 1960s, this studio, which had, earlier in the decade, established itself in the field of compilation filmmaking, produced a series of films that used unique and often experimental approaches to archival material to challenge official histories of the postwar period.

As the comparison to *Człowiek z marmuru* (a key work of the Polish Cinema of Moral Concern) suggests, these films may be read as a product of the East European thaws of the late 1950s and 1960s, of which the Prague Spring was one, and which resulted, if only temporarily, both in expanded creative possibilities and revised histories of the recent past.¹ They are also part of the regional and global history of compilation filmmaking, a format that underwent a resurgence after World War II and particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While many of these films examined the history of the war, in Eastern Europe, newly unearthed Nazi material was at the core of films that legitimized postwar communist governments by emphasizing their antifascist nature.² Numerous Czechoslovak compilation films of the early 1960s—among which Army Film’s productions figured prominently—followed this model.³ Yet, in tracing the military studio’s policies and practices surrounding archival material, we can see the ways in which the alternative histories and experimental approaches of Army Film’s later productions emerged from these more aesthetically and politically conservative roots—and more importantly, from the studio’s very relationship to the archive.⁴

Military cinema had existed in Czechoslovakia in various institutional configurations since 1919, but its postwar incarnation, the Czechoslovak Army Film studio, was established in 1951. Archival footage was an important component of Army propaganda from this year onward and, in the early to mid-1950s (the period that Agnieszka investigates), was frequently used in ways that recall *Człowiek z marmuru*, which envisions the content of film archives as transparent and purely evidentiary—proof of past events. For instance, in the opening moments of *Přehlídka 1951* (Military parade 1951, dir. Ivo Toman)—one of the army’s first major postwar productions—we see two brief shots of Prague’s Old Town Hall in flames. As the film cuts to footage of Red Army tanks driving, in triumph, through the city’s streets, a voice-over intones,
Six years ago, on the direct order of Generalissimo Stalin . . . the Soviet Army liberated the Nazi-occupied city of Prague. Six years ago, a new freedom blossomed in our land. Six years ago, all the creative powers of a new life were set free.

The film then departs from the images of “six years ago” and focuses on the present, with shots (captured expressly for the film) of working people of various ages, genders, and professions. The archival images with which Přehlídka 1951 begins thus offer incontrovertible proof of the Soviet Union’s role in Czechoslovakia’s liberation, while also anchoring a confident historical progression from past to present—from Nazi occupation to Soviet liberation to the construction of the postwar socialist state.

If this was an orthodox historical narrative, “orthodoxy” might also characterize the film’s use of archival footage, which was echoed throughout Czechoslovak documentary of the same period. Documentary critic Antonín Navrátil describes this polemically in a March 1964 essay in the Czechoslovak journal Film a doba (Film and time), in which he notes that during the early and mid-1950s, the use of archival footage was limited to specific clips of “jubilee” historical moments that “moved from editing room to editing room” (among them the footage of the Red Army’s liberation of Prague used in Přehlídka 1951). He compares restrictions on the use of such material to those on scholarship, writing that, at this time, “a great deal of authentic footage was, due to . . . its topics, made top-secret. . . . This was just as it was in historiography. . . . Scholars and artists could only study materials about chirping sparrows, so to speak.” Indeed, constantly repeated, these clips offered a visual shorthand for a set of canonical historical events that the public was meant to recognize and to know how to interpret.

When compilation filmmaking reemerged at the end of the 1950s, this treatment of archives as a source of evidence had changed little. However, the notion of how archival material offered evidence shifted radically. In place of the tightly controlled shorthand use of historical footage, filmmakers sought out ever greater amounts of material; in place of an understanding of meaning as immanent, literally visible in historical footage, it was seen as arising through editing. Jan Hořejší characterizes this shift in a September 1961 article on compilation film, where he writes that “a clear answer to the question ‘how could that have happened?’ or ‘how was it really?’ cannot always be given by a shot alone. . . . The camera captures a certain reality. Editing offers the sense of this reality and its interpretation.”

Although Hořejší begins this passage with Pudovkin’s famous axiom “the foundation of film art is editing,” the models for Czechoslovak compilation films of this
period were not only the seminal works of Soviet documentarians (Shub, Vertov) but also—and more importantly—contemporary East German compilation films. These, as Eric Barnouw writes, were part of the postwar trend of using archival film and photographs as a source for knowledge about World War II (reflected in, among many others, Erwin Leiser’s 1960 Mein Kampf and Paul Rotha’s 1961 Das Leben von Adolf Hitler [The life of Adolf Hitler]). Yet they were also uniquely positioned to explore the history of Nazi Germany from the perspective of its own audiovisual productions, as when Germany was divided, numerous film archives found themselves located in the German Democratic Republic. (In Jay Leyda’s words, “the division of Germany made it possible for the first accusations against Germany to come from Germany.”)

The most prolific of the East German compilation film directors were Andrew and Annelie Thorndike, a married couple working in DEFA’s (the East German state film studio’s) documentary film studio, who, in Leyda’s estimation, pioneered “a method for German compilation films.” In the Thorndikes’ films (such as Du und mancher Kamerad [You and many a comrade; 1955] and the suggestively titled series Archive sagen aus . . . [The archives testify . . .]), extensive and carefully researched archival material is used as a “devastating weapon of accusation,” frequently against West German figures and organizations with ties to the Nazi past. The archives thus, indeed, “testify,” not only to political crimes but also, by extension, to the necessity of the East German state. Such geopolitical questions reached a climax around the time of the Berlin Crisis—which began in 1958, sparked by Soviet fears of American-aided West German rearmament, and culminated with the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961—and, in these years, were reflected in compilation films produced throughout the region, many of which followed the “Thorndike model.” In East Germany, for instance, Karl Gass’s 1962 Schaut auf diese Stadt! (Look at this city!) offered a historical justification for the construction of the Wall; in Czechoslovakia, which shared a border with both East and West Germany, compilation films framed the latter state as a revanchist threat and thereby justified the strict border policies of the cold war.

Among the earliest Czechoslovak compilation films to do so was Emanuel Kaněra and Jiří Mrázek’s 1958 Malá neznámá země (A small unknown land), which, according to its release details, “shows . . . that the end of the Third Reich did not mean the end of fascism, which, under Adenauer’s leadership in West Germany, is rearing its head again.” Later films produced, like Kaněra and Mrázek’s, by Czechoslovakia’s State Film studio included Josef Kořán’s 1961 Ochránci (Guardians), which “reminds us of . . . the voices of those in West Germany who are calling for the same kind of European society that Hitler and his followers established in Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939.”
language in these descriptions—emphasizing the urgency of the West German threat—was echoed in contemporaneous essays about compilation filmmaking. Jiří Hrbas, in the magazine *Kino* (Cinema) in 1962, wrote,

In thinking about . . . political documentaries today, in 1962, it seems to me that their importance is exceptionally great, especially at this time. . . . These films . . . WARN us against the repetition of disastrous events . . . MOBILIZE all progressive powers against fascism, which, although damaged during the last war, was decidedly not wiped out!  

Simultaneously with the larger State Film, Army Film dove enthusiastically into compilation filmmaking at the end of the 1950s, producing a series of films that mirrored these concerns and approaches. One of the earliest of these, *Svědectví* (Witness, dir. Pavel Háša and Ivo Toman; 1961)—on which filmmakers worked for nearly three years, and whose two parts total an epic three hours—in fact proved to be the most popular compilation film yet to be produced in Czechoslovakia. The film won the German Film Critics’ Prize at the 1961 Leipzig documentary film festival and, according to Army Film’s studio chief, was the most successful Czechoslovak film abroad in that year, having been screened in “more than sixty countries of the world, sometimes even on television, as in the Soviet Union and Cuba.”

*Svědectví* might be seen as the *Why We Fight* of Czechoslovak cinema, offering an exhaustive overview of the history of the Czech and Slovak lands from the interwar period to the present. Part 1 (*Zrada* [Betrayal]) begins at the brink of the Great Depression and continues through the Spanish Civil War, the *Anschluss*, and the titular betrayal (the Munich Agreement of 1938, in which Czechoslovakia’s western border region, the Sudetenland, was, with the blessing of France, England, and Italy, annexed by Germany). Throughout, the film emphasizes that “betrayal” signifies both the events at Munich and the West’s neglect of Eastern Europe thereafter, a rhetorical gesture that allows the Munich Agreement to justify the region’s communist government and Soviet influence. Part 2 (*Vítězství* [Victory]) focuses on World War II. It begins in occupied Prague in 1941 and continues to the 1942 assassination (by British-trained Czechoslovak paratroopers) of Reinhardt Heydrich, *Reichsprotektor* of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; Czech communist journalist Julius Fučík’s execution in 1943 by the Nazis; and the 1944 Battle of the Dukla Pass, a key event in the liberation of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. It ends with the proclamation that “history will never repeat itself; the world is changing. The Communist Party has decided this; we have decided this.”
This concluding statement is intriguingly reflexive. For despite its orthodox vi-
sion of recent history (progressing from World War II to the socialist present), Svědectví, in fact, represented a more detailed engagement with the past than had theretofore been seen in postwar Czechoslovak documentary. The material from which the film was composed was gathered not only in the Czechoslovak Film Archive but also in East Germany’s film archive, the Gosfilmofond archive in Moscow, and in collections in Kiev and Bratislava. The filmmakers also, in response to advertisements that they placed in newspapers, collected a vast amount of privately owned and home movie footage. The result was a compilation of material that few viewers had seen before, including UFA newsreels; amateur films; Depression-era footage by the interwar Czechoslovak leftist group Levá fronta (Left Front); previously unknown recordings of the country’s first communist president, Klement Gottwald; and material shot during the Spanish Civil War.

Though the breadth of the filmmakers’ discoveries dazzled critics, it was also the source of critique: Navrátil, in his essay in Film a doba, complained that “Army filmmakers could make Svědectví and wonder at its unknown material only because ‘civilian’ filmmakers did not have access to it.” Army Film’s head dramaturge (and author of the film’s screenplay) Roman Hlaváč repudiated this in a letter to the editor in June, writing that “the filmmaking team for Svědectví found the material for this film primarily in the ‘civilian’ Czechoslovak Film Archive, where they worked under the same conditions as numerous filmmakers before and after.” Navrátil’s critique was, however, prescient, for apart from its sheer scale and breadth, what distinguished Svědectví was the Army studio’s institutional relationship to the material that comprised it, a relationship that, with this film, began to shift from an equation between historical footage and evidence to a sense that this material had other temporal and formal dimensions.

This is legible in the history of the film’s production: while Svědectví was in preparation, its assistant director, Rudolf Krejčík (a recent graduate of FAMU, the Prague Film Academy, performing his military service in Army Film), was assigned to choose footage for the film at the Czechoslovak Film Archive. During this process, Krejčík arranged with Miloslav Jílovec, Svědectví’s production manager, to reserve a certain amount of material for his own use. He ultimately gathered approximately five thousand meters of footage, most of it German or Czechoslovak collaborationist material (newsreels, home movies, and amateur films) that showed the wartime years and the development of the Sudetendeutsche Partei (Sudeten German Party)—the Nazi party that emerged in the Sudetenland before its cession to Germany—through its own eyes. When his Army service was over and Krejčík moved on to a career at the Czechoslovak State Film’s documentary studio, this material became the foundation
for his compilation film *Všední dny velké říše* (Every day in the Great Reich; 1963).²⁵

Despite the fact that *Všední dny velké říše*’s politics and narrative in certain ways reiterate *Svědectví*’s, the film’s approach to historiography is considerably different. This is clear both in its title, with its invocation of the “everyday,” and in parts of its narrative that address cinema’s temporal and historical properties. Early in the film, for instance, the voice-over, speaking from a present-day perspective, describes what we see—amateur footage of a Sudeten German cultural celebration in 1927:

>This was all a very long time ago. But it hasn’t been forgotten. . . . The greatest attraction was the film camera. . . . That was something for us. . . . Yes, it was something, to celebrate our national past as if it were alive . . . at that moment, everything was in the present . . . everyone tried to look like people looked in the biograph. . . . But film is such an uncanny witness—film, which, with an impersonal precision, records a moment, a likeness, a gesture at an insignificant event in the past . . . a moment that, simply in the fact that it was captured and can be repeated, is given a certain hidden meaning. But then—then it was only the present.

The film does not fully incorporate these initial explorations of the present into its structure and narrative. Its final shot depicts Germans being expelled from Czechoslovakia, and as they walk away from the camera, the voice-over (again suggesting the thoughts of the figures on screen) concludes, “This can probably never happen again. . . . We have left forever.” Nevertheless, by acknowledging the complex interplay between past and present in cinema, Krejčík’s film disavows the conclusiveness of this final statement, framing its constituent footage as more than merely evidence for the historical teleology within which, in *Svědectví*, similar material is inscribed. The voice-over, moreover, echoes Jeffrey Skoller’s observation—in reference to archival material in contemporary experimental films—of the ways in which, “by being recorded and stored in one moment in time and then experienced at another,” “a moment” is “turned into an object.”²⁶ This link to the avant-garde is appropriate to *Všední dny velké říše*, for the film’s treatment of archival films and photographs not as “facts” but as “objects” indeed presaged the more explicitly avant-garde approaches that would define later Army productions, whose logics of assembly—many of which follow the model of collage—are markedly different.

This departure from *Svědectví*’s conception of archival material was nonetheless rooted in the earlier film. For though *Všední dny velké říše* was not officially an Army
production, it was made because the army allowed Krejčík—who, as a soldier performing his basic service, was paid very little—to “steal” (in his own ironic framing of what occurred) footage for his own use. This instance of a secondary, unofficial economy in the studio, in which “surplus” footage was an alternative form of payment, is significant in two ways. First, the notion of archival footage as, in a sense, a commodity underscores Všední dny velké říše’s treatment of such material as “objects” and not transparent evidence of history—objects, moreover, that are moveable, transferrable, and thus ripe for use in collage. Second, it reflects a crucial dimension of Army Film’s history in the 1960s, when the studio’s administration—led by Hlaváč as well as, from 1961, studio chief Bedřich Benda—was defined not by the conservatism one might expect of the military but rather by attitudes ranging from benign neglect to open encouragement of political and aesthetic diversity. As a result of this, Army Film often allowed—whether simply through a lack of oversight or through “practical” arrangements such as Krejčík’s—experimental, and at times, politically critical, films to be produced alongside works that fulfilled the political and educational role we traditionally ascribe to propaganda.

Beyond its links to Army Film’s institutional culture, the approach to the archive in Všední dny velké říše must also be seen in light of the moment at which it was made. The year 1963, when the film was released, marked the beginning of Czechoslovakia’s belated de-Stalinization. Although Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s 1956 “secret speech” had heralded the beginning of critical discussions of the recent past across Eastern Europe, in Czechoslovakia, these discussions only truly began with the 1963 rehabilitation of the victims of the country’s early–1950s show trials. They quickly spread to the realm of culture, where literature, film, and other arts started to engage with ideas (many of them historical) that had not fit into public discourse before this period. In his essay in Film a doba, Navrátil draws an analogy between these historical discussions and archival material through reference to Všední dny velké říše (which had just been awarded honorable mention at the Karlovy Vary Short Film Festival [Dny krátkého filmu v Karlových varech]). He praises the film’s form and writes of it as an engagement with formerly taboo histories, calling on other filmmakers to start using the “tens and thousands of meters of footage [in Prague and Bratislava] whose content is almost entirely unknown” to make films about topics other than “obligatory themes like Munich.”

Over the following years, Army Film did just this, becoming known within Czechoslovakia’s film community for its work with archival material. Some of the studio’s films, like their predecessors, addressed topics having to do with World War II (e.g., Pavel Háša’s 1965 Lidice); others, however, followed Všední dny velké říše in their
unorthodox approach to historiography. Most important among these was a second major compilation film by Hlaváč and Háša, *Devět kapitol ze starého dějepisu* (Nine chapters from ancient history), on which the filmmakers began work in 1963 but which they did not complete until 1969. Using material from archives in the Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia, France, England, and Czechoslovakia (particularly the army’s Legionnaire Film Archive), as well as excerpts from foreign compilation films, *Devět kapitol ze starého dějepisu* narrates the history of the Czech and Slovak lands from the late nineteenth century to the interwar First Republic. Whereas *Svědectví*, made almost ten years earlier, frames the interwar period as defined by economic and social errors, *Devět kapitol ze starého dějepisu* valorizes it, culturally and politically. Even more heretically, it restores the Austro-Hungarian Empire to historical validity, going so far as to include, in a title card, the quotation “He who did not live before 1914 does not know the sweetness of life,” by Czech–German writer, biographer, and friend of Franz Kafka, Max Brod. All this did not go unnoticed by censors, who eventually banned the film.34

If, as Navrátil’s quote suggests, these films’ historical context was important, their institutional context was, once again, equally so. The films were part of a broader attempt, spearheaded by Hlaváč, to widen military cinema’s appeal to civilian audiences. Presumably inspired, in part, by *Svědectví*’s success, archival filmmaking figured prominently in Hlaváč’s plans, and in keeping with this, the studio’s relationship to the archive shifted again—this time, as it sought to collect more material and archive it for future use. This is reflected in the minutes of a 1962 meeting of Warsaw Pact filmmakers in Prague. During this meeting, the studios—who had, to date, rarely discussed their artistic and military goals—agreed to begin a collaboration, important components of which (encouraged by the Czechoslovak delegation, Hlaváč and Benda) were to be the “regular exchange” of newsreel footage, “collaboration between the archives of individual studios,” and “mutual aid in negotiating access to the state film archives of individual countries.”35

Hlaváč’s interest in foreign newsreel material was linked to his broader goals for the reform of the studio, of which the newsreel division was an important part. Army Film had produced newsreels since 1951, but by the early 1960s, these had grown stale and repetitive, spurring Benda and Hlaváč to radically alter this branch in early 1962, firing its editorial board and bringing in, in Benda’s words, “young comrades who have succeeded in removing [the newsreel’s] formulaic elements and energizing it with new and fresh ideas.”36 The studio was now to produce two newsreels: one, for military audiences, was to be distributed within army cinemas, while the second, *Armádní filmový měsíčník* (Army newsreel), was to address topics of civilian interest and be shown on
Czechoslovak Television. “We are trying to give [the newsreel] wider applicability,” Hlaváč noted during the Warsaw Pact meeting. “Young people work on it, among them soldiers during their years of basic military service. We want the newsreel to be young, a vibrant platform, a school for viewers and filmmakers.” Footage received within the Warsaw Pact exchange would be an integral part of this newsreel, yet, Benda was careful to note, it was to be used by the young directors—many of them recent graduates of FAMU—any way they wished. At the same time, the footage could be used in future compilation films and would help build up Army Film’s own archival collection.

The studio’s heightened interest in archival material, the creative possibilities of editing, and the work of young filmmakers—combined with the increasing political freedoms of the mid- to late 1960s—saw their most explicitly avant-garde manifestation in the work of another filmmaker serving in Army Film in this period: Karel Vachek. While Vachek’s Army films are not composed strictly of archival material, in them, historical footage as well as various sounds and images captured expressly for the films are treated as a series of objects—elements that are central to the nearly surrealist collages that the films represent. Vachek’s interest in editing and his surrealist tendencies were already evident in his 1963 FAMU thesis film, *Moravská hellas* (Moravian Hellas)—a bitingly satirical view of “official” folk culture in communist Czechoslovakia—and had landed him in trouble: the film was, in 1964, personally banned by then president Antonín Novotný and not screened publicly until after August 1968. However, when he was assigned to work primarily on newsreels in Army Film, the editing-heavy assignments not only lent themselves naturally to his interests and skills but also, and paradoxically, gave him an unexpected opportunity to extend *Moravská hellas*’s political critique.

*Armádní filmový měsícíčník 5/1965* (Army newsreel 5/65), for example (credited to Vachek and Ondřej Očenáš), is composed entirely of Warsaw Pact military material, showing its constituent armies in action. To these images and an “informational” voice-over, Vachek added, as absurd counterpoint, a sound track of popular music. For a later edition of the newsreel, Vachek reports having cut together various shots of weaponry from Warsaw Pact material, taking, in Vachek biographer Martin Švoma’s words, “its militaristic dimensions ad absurdum, so that it became a parody.” Although Vachek recalls that he was threatened with dismissal from the studio for this and that the newsreel episode was never distributed (despite that it was a “great success” with fellow Army filmmakers), we see here the effects of Benda’s stipulation that Warsaw Pact material be used any way filmmakers chose: in his films, Vachek disregards the context and intended meaning of this material. Instead, he treats it as found footage, in a way that corresponds with William C. Wees’s characterization of found-footage filmmakers as “artist–
archeologists of the film world . . . sift[ing] through the accumulated audio-visual detritus of modern culture in search of artifacts that will reveal more about their origins and uses than their original makers consciously intended . . . bringing[ing] their findings together in image–sound relationships that offer both aesthetic pleasure and the opportunity to interpret and evaluate old material in new ways."45

An approach to archival material as found footage is also visible in the director’s Stoletá voda (Hundred-year flood), which documents the Czechoslovak Army’s rescue efforts during catastrophic floods in Slovakia in June 1965 (the film was released in 1966).46 Although Vachek and Ivan Koudelka are credited as the film’s codirectors, Koudelka was primarily responsible for shooting the material and Vachek (who did not partake in the filming) for editing it.47 In this sense, the film, like Vachek’s work with the Warsaw Pact material, might also be thought of as an archival project. And indeed, the strategies of collage and counterpoint that Vachek employed in his newsreel segments are central to Stoletá voda, in which he sets extraneous objects against (and often superimposes objects on) the documentary images of the floods. These objects, most frequently, text pulled at random from newspaper stories about the flood: the title “YES” is superimposed over the film’s opening image of the river and over a statue caught in the flood, the title “PLANKTON” over the image of a flooded house, and the meta-title “REAL AND NOT-REAL” in another part of the film.48 In addition to the film’s voice-over commentary, nondiegetic sounds are also interjected as objects, seemingly at random, throughout the film: a dog barking, a cow mooing, church bells. The sum effect is that of a collage rather than a reportage of the disaster, an idea that is confirmed by Navrátil,
who reported on the film from the Karlovy Vary Short Film festival: “Vachek isn’t trying to make a reportage or an exposé, but his film . . . attempts to support its concreteness by pulling authentic quotes from print—which, in their chronological and thematic disorder, achieve just the opposite effect.”

This near-total disregard for the “meaning” of archival material and emphasis on images and sounds as objects, finally, defined another newsreel segment produced by Vachek during his tenure in the army, *Armádní filmový měsíčník 3/1965* (Army newsreel 3/1965). Like *Stoletá voda*, this segment was not composed of archival material. Yet, in the film, collage strategies permit Vachek to decisively undercut the historical myths and questions of political legitimization that propelled many of Army Film’s earlier compilation films—in this case, through an ostensible celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the 1945 Soviet liberation of the Czech city of Ostrava. *Armádní filmový měsíčník 3/1965* is structured similarly to *Stoletá voda*, with found sounds and images integrated into what appear, at first glance, to be straightforward narratives. The opening voice-over announces that the viewer will see five “notes about war and life” from “Ostrava soldiers,” the first of which begins with a young, bored-looking miner. Leaning against a wall and looking occasionally at the camera, he recites a seemingly memorized monologue about his life in the army, and then his life in Ostrava, where, besides being a miner, he is an amateur boxer. His wife stands next to him, looking equally bored, and eventually takes the microphone and recites her addition to this story. The characters look screen right, and the camera, on cue, pans swiftly in the same direction to focus on a boxer training with a punching bag.

The flattening effect this scene’s construction and camera movement have
on space is emblematic of the film as a whole. Vachek frames Armádní filmový měsíčník 3/1965 in straight, two-dimensional shots in which characters recite dialogue in emotionless voices and in which actual two-dimensional images (magazine clippings, natural-history drawings of plants, family photographs of the subjects) figure prominently. He also frequently cuts away from his interviews to zoom in on another two-dimensional found image: a crumbling concrete building in a snowy field, the cracks in whose walls approximate the shape of a tree. This two-dimensionality is central to the film’s collage effect (which, as a structuring concept, effectively makes the film itself a two-dimensional object) as well as to a broader distancing effect whereby, as the superimposed text in Stoletá voda does, Vachek asks the viewer to question the import of what she is seeing.

As the film gravitates toward progressively absurd stories, this sense of distance increases. The second note introduces a former soldier who is, as a hobby, assembling a ball of aluminum foil, and the third introduces a tank driver who escaped to the USSR to work with the Czechoslovak troops in World War II and now directs traffic
from a box positioned high on a street corner. The fourth note introduces an “artist,” a woman who worked in military circus troupes and now performs an acrobatics- and-juggling show at the Palace Hotel in Ostrava. Her live performance is overlaid with contemporary Czech pop music and intercut with fan photographs of Henry Fonda and Brigitte Bardot, Beatles album covers, and book covers for the popular German author Karl May’s American western adventure stories.

In contrast to these notes, whose absurdity amplifies the film’s distancing effects—showing not the gravity and heroics of war but its bizarre or banal underbelly—the film’s final note is more sober, both in terms of the story its characters tell and in terms of the parallel story the film’s form tells. Here a couple sits in their parlor, two meters from the stationary camera, and recounts their experiences fighting in the Battle of the Dukla Pass. The pair recite their narratives with the same tone evident in the film’s other sections, but instead of being stale or humorous, their stories are harrowing: the woman recalls working in a Red Army unit alongside her first husband, who was killed during the battle, and recounts seeing him “pulled to pieces.” The flatness with which she narrates this memorized passage and the camera’s impassivity sit uneasily with the drama of the narrative, forming an internal contradiction that suggests the inhumanity
of both war and its commemoration—a clear antimilitary statement that is supported by *Armádní filmový měsíčník 3/1965*’s earlier, smaller, absurd stories. At the same time, the film refutes the historical narrative visible in films like *Svědectví*, in which the end of World War II is a legitimizing moment for the postwar communist government. Crucially, it does so both in its narrative and in its collage dimensions, which, in their flatness and
disjunction, work against the very idea of progressive historical development.

The importance of the fact that Vachek’s film was produced by the army’s newsreel division cannot be understated, for Armádní filmový měsíčník was, in these years, regularly programmed on Czechoslovak Television. Moravská hellas’s banning can contextualize this: Armádní filmový měsíčník 3/1965 is, in many ways, more directly condemning of certain founding myths in communist Czechoslovakia than Moravská hellas, yet, because it was produced by Army Film (with its supportive administration), it was not subject to the stringent censorship within the Czechoslovak State Film system and was shown widely. Vachek’s military-produced antiwar newsreel even merited mention in an extensive article on the New Wave in Film a doba, where its meaning was not lost on critic Jaroslav Boček: “Vachek does not restrain his pointed sense of absurdity: in the Ostrava episode of the Army newsreel he allows a man to speak who passed through the front, survived a difficult battle, and after all that, all that is left to him is a pile of medals.”

Boček’s “pile of medals,” flat and inconsequential, might serve as an emblem for this essay as a whole. For while this image encapsulates the ways in which Vachek’s collage approaches permitted him to dismantle historical myths, it also characterizes Army Film’s relationship to the archive at this moment, when the studio was devoted to the idea of archival material as, precisely, material—to be collected, archived, and creatively reworked. This relationship, as I have argued, represented a shift from earlier, radically different metaphors by which army films conceived of archives and their content: the conception, in films such as Přehlídka 1951, of archival material as a transparent window onto history; the idea, circa 1960, that historical films and photographs were building blocks that, when edited together, revealed latent historical and political truths; and the more dispassionate envisioning, during Svědectví’s production, of this material as an object of essentially monetary exchange.

Although buoyed by the permissive historical moment, the transitions between these ways of understanding the archive were largely facilitated by the studio itself. Army Film’s entry into archival filmmaking occurred with Hlaváč’s encouragement, and the production process on its first major compilation film, Svědectví, put outtakes in the hands of Rudolf Krejčík, initiating a movement toward increasingly complex uses of archival material. Svědectví’s success in the civilian sphere spurred Hlaváč to produce more such films, giving Army Film a prominent area of specialization and prompting the studio to collect further material for use in edited films and newsreels. The latter, finally, were, under Hlaváč, assigned to young filmmakers, many of them future members of the New Wave, who were given an extraordinary degree of creative freedom and a very
public platform in an attempt to appeal to civilian youth.

The evolution we see here within the space of a single institution—from an aesthetically and politically conservative practice of compilation filmmaking to experimental, critical collage—is similar to one that Wees describes in the National Film Board of Canada, in which filmmaker Arthur Lipsett, in the 1960s, “used the facilities of the Board to radically revise and implicitly critique the documentary compilation film” in his found-footage films.51 And if the parallels between these two cases call attention to the importance of the context (institutional or otherwise) in which experimental filmmakers practice, it is this that, finally, returns us to Wajda’s Agnieszka and her fight for the space and tools to make her historical critique. For not only do we see, in Army Film’s avant-garde productions, a reversal of the familiar trope of the auteur against the system, but in the studio’s complex engagements with archival material, we also see the multifaceted dimensions of the system itself.52
NOTES

I am grateful to Devin and Marsha Orgeron as well as two anonymous reviewers for The Moving Image for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

The majority of the Czechoslovak films discussed in this essay are in the collection of the Czech Republic’s National Film Archive [Národní filmový archiv, http://www.nfa.cz/]; some are held by the Military History Institute in Prague [Vojenský historický ústav Praha, http://www.vhu.cz/]. Karel Vachek’s Moravská hellas may be purchased at http://www.radimprochazka.com/en/shop/. Some of the East German films discussed may be purchased or rented from the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst [http://www.umass.edu/defa/].

1. Although Człowiek z marmuru was not released during the first thaw (the period, circa 1956–58, following first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret speech,” which began the process of de-Stalinization across Eastern Europe), Wajda had, in fact, begun work on the film in 1962. Yet, after the screenplay was published, as he recounts on his Web site, the project was shelved for fourteen years. “Człowiek z marmuru [Man of Marble],” http://www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/film20.html.


3. In Czech, the term stríhový film, or “edited film,” is typically used to describe this mode of production.


5. Director Ladislav Helge, who served in Army Film in the early 1950s, observed that a large proportion of the studio’s so-called nonfiction films were staged. “The ‘spirit of the times,’” he says, “was given as an order . . . a dramaturgical order.” Ladislav Helge, interview with the author, Prague, March 13, 2008. This and all other translations from Czech in this essay are my own.


8. Barnouw, Documentary, 199.

9. Ibid., 175.

11. Ibid., 87.

12. Ibid., 82.


14. Hostility between Czechs and Germans far predated the twentieth century; Germany was, in H. Gordon Skilling’s words, a “hereditary enemy” for Czechs. H. Gordon Skilling, *Communism National and International* (1964; repr. Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 86. In addition to the Nazi occupation, however, postwar tensions between Czechoslovakia and West Germany also centered on the expulsion, in 1945 and 1946, of approximately three million German-speaking Czechoslovaks—close to a third of the state’s postwar population. Benjamin Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

15. “Malá neznámá země,” *Filmový přehled* [film bulletin] 40 (1958): 3; “Ochránci,” *Filmový přehled* 43 (1961): 13. Czechoslovakia’s film industry was nationalized by decree in 1945, after which point the majority of its films were produced by the state-administered Czechoslovak State Film studio (Československý státní film). Although it was also administered by the state, Army Film was, exceptionally, exempted from the nationalization decree and thus had a considerable degree of institutional autonomy. Dekret presidenta republiky o opatřeních v oblasti filmu [The president’s decree regarding measures in the field of film], no. 50/1945 Sb., http://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1945-50.


17. Among these were two films by Vladimír Horák, *Křižáci XX. století* [Battleships of the twentieth century, 1960] and *Bundeswehr pochodoje* [Bundeswehr on the march, 1964].


19. The German occupation followed the Munich Agreement, as did the division of Czechoslovakia into two political entities: the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the Slovak State, which was a German puppet state.


25. Ibid.
27. Krejčík, interview with the author. Throughout his career, in fact, Krejčík specialized in archival films.
28. Hlaváč had been a dramaturge in the studio since 1951.
29. The Czechoslovak New Wave, for instance, can be seen as exemplifying the critical examinations of history and the present characteristic of the thaws. Elsewhere in the region, this occurred in the films of the Polish School, e.g., Wajda’s *Pokolenie* [A generation, 1955], *Kanal* [1957], and *Papiol i diament* [Ashes and diamonds; 1958], Andrzej Munk’s *Człowiek na torze* [Man on the track; 1957]; and films of the Soviet thaw, which Josephine Woll demarcates as the period between 1954 and 1967. See Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* [New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000], x.
32. Antonín Navrátil, *Cesty k pravdě či lži: 70 let československého dokumentárního filmu* [Paths to truth or lies: 70 years of Czechoslovak documentary film] [Prague: AMU, 2002], 223.
33. Ladislav Tunys, “S Romanem Hlaváčem o celovečerním dokumentu, který vzniká v ČAF” [With Roman Hlaváč about a feature-length documentary being made by ČAF], *Film a doba* 11 [1968]: 598–99.
34. Petr Zvoniček, “Dokumenty jako fēmen” [No springtime for documentaries], *Lidové noviny* [People’s news], August 7, 1990.
35. SA AČR Olomouc, fond č. 397, k. č. 2, i.č. 15/12 [Obyčejné spisy 1962], “Teze k jednání s vojenskými filmovými pracovníky spřátelených armád” [Notes on the meeting of military film workers of the brotherly armies], September 19, 1962.
37. SA AČR Olomouc, fond č. 397, k. č. 2, i.č. 15/12 [Obyčejné spisy 1962], “Zápis z jednání dne 1.9.1962” [Transcript of the meeting on September 1, 1962].
38. SA AČR Olomouc, fond č. 397, k. č. 2, i.č. 15/12 [Obyčejné spisy 1962], “Protokol ze závěrečného jednání dne 5. září 1962” [Minutes of the final meeting on September 5, 1962]. These young directors included members of the Czechoslovak New Wave, most of whom served their required military service in Army Film at some point in the 1960s, among them Ivan Balad’a, Jaromil Jireš, Pavel Juráček, Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, Jan Schmidt, and Karel Vachek.
40. Vachek’s proximity to surrealism has been evident throughout his career, which encompasses work in poetry and painting as well as in film. In *Czech and Slovak Cinema*, Peter Hames notes that “in the first issue of the surrealist magazine *Analogon*, published in 1969, [leader of the Prague Surrealist


42. Ibid., 49.


44. Švoma, *Karel Vachek*, 49.


47. Ibid.

48. Antonín Navrátil, “Na závěr dnů krátkého filmu: Dobrý rok dokumentaristů” [At the conclusion of the Short Film Festival: A good year for documentarians], *Rudé právo* [Red right], April 3, 1966.

49. Ibid.


51. Wees, “From Compilation to Collage,” 5.

52. The echo, here, of André Bazin’s—and Thomas Schatz’s—use of the term *system* is intentional.