

Opráski sčeskí historje: Contesting National Narratives through Comics

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Opráski sčeskí historje: Contesting National Narratives through Comics

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Abstract: This article presents and analyses Opráski sčeskí historje, a Czech web-comic satirizing primarily Czech history, culture, and politics. Opráski sčeskí historje is juxtaposed to the national narrative within the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson's and Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualisation of the nation. It argues that, by virtue of the comic's aesthetic and linguistic poverty, Opráski sčeskí historje is often semiotically ambiguous and thereby prompts the audience to find more information and form their own interpretations of history beyond the national narrative. Ultimately, this article argues that the comic uses the tactic of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call the "rhizome" in order to expose, critique, and contest national narratives without creating a substituting power-structure.

Keywords: national narrative, comics, Opráski sčeskí historje, culture, history.

"Historical memory is not a matter of the state, or even of historians; it is a matter of the citizens."¹

– Dušan Třeštík (*Hospodářské noviny*)

A national narrative is a specific rendering of a nation-state's history that helps establish a sense of collective national identity and unifies the current members of the nation with those from the nation's past.² The national narrative consists of a representative canon of myths, events, figures, wars, births, and deaths, which are disseminated via education, state holidays, monuments, and

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¹ Original Czech quote: "Dějinná paměť není věcí státu, dokonce ani historiků, je věcí občanů." All translations from Czech to English in this article are my own.

² This is my own definition of the term "national narrative" that I have synthesised from my readings of Benedict Anderson and Homi K. Bhabha, who write about the subject, yet refrain from proposing any clear definition of their own.

national symbols among other, government-controlled, means. The most obvious issue with the national narrative is that it omits certain historical records and voices in favour of others. In the case of the Czech Republic, for example, one wonders why primary and high school students are taught how the Přemyslid dynasty established and cultivated Bohemia and Moravia, but are never told that the kingdom was built by the taxes coming from the slave trade that was taking place right under the symbolic Prague Castle. Furthermore, the national narrative recognizes only a specific representative or even idealised body of citizens. For example, the Czech national narrative predominantly depicts its ancestors as white-skinned, brown-haired Slavs, and thereby ignores the nation's Germanic heritage and those Czech passport-holding members of the state, whose bodies and ethnicity differ from the stereotype. This insidiously exclusionary nature of the national narrative is especially dangerous during the rise of right-wing, nationalist tendencies of the kind that we are currently witnessing in Europe and elsewhere. One might thus optimistically ask — is there an antidote to the national narrative? I, perhaps naively, believe there is.

This article investigates how the Czech web-comic *Opráški sčeskí historje* exposes, critiques, and contests the Czech national narrative and potentially provides an escape out of the latter's rigid and seemingly univocal presentation of history. *Opráški sčeskí historje* can be loosely translated as "Images of Czech History," and, as the title hints, the serial comic usually satirises historical events and figures in four-panel strips. *Opráški sčeskí historje* (from now on referred to as *Opráški*) initially mimicked the aesthetic of memes as the strips were created with basic brushes, colours, and fonts in Microsoft Paint. Today, *Opráški*'s visual style is slightly smoother and more refined, but nonetheless still essentially minimalistic. The comic also "butchers" the Czech language, by writing phonetically, making intentional grammar mistakes, and mixing syllables to create puns with multiple meanings (for example, the title *Opráški sčeskí historje* in correct Czech should be "Obrázky z české historie"). *Opráški* is created by an anonymous author working under the nickname Jaz, who publishes the comic primarily on Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and recently also Instagram. Editions of *Opráški* are also printed in book collections by the academic publishing house Grada. Despite its seemingly anti-nationalist nature, *Opráški* has become popular among official institutions and the wider public. In 2013, the first book was sold out within three days and since then Jaz has continued to publish his comic online and in print (Saiver §1). Currently, over 1400 images exist, spread over the comic's official Facebook page, eleven books, six calendars, at least four exhibitions, a map, and a card game. In addition, *Opráški* and its drawing style have also been used in magazine articles and projects

about Czech history. *Opráški* has been exhibited in spaces of great national and historical importance, including The National Museum in Prague (2014) and Castle Špilberk in Brno (2016). Most importantly, it was exhibited on 17 November 2018, the Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day, at the National Avenue in Prague during a crucial national celebration (the National Avenue is a key space for this date). Since the humour of *Opráški* is grounded in language tropes and historical references, it presupposes and requires readers who speak Czech well enough to understand the text despite structural and linguistic abnormalities and who have at least a passing knowledge of Czech history. *Opráški* therefore *depends* on the existence of the Czech nation — a community of people who share a language, are aware of the constitutive elements of the Czech national narrative, and have at least a latent sentiment of a Czech identity. By using the Czech language and national narrative as “the butt of the joke,” *Opráški* reinforces the existence of the very concepts it ridicules, deconstructs, and contests; the comic’s antithetical relationship with the national identity therefore makes it an intriguing and productive object of study.

In order to investigate this relationship between *Opráški* and the Czech nation, we must first understand the nation as a concept. The first section of this essay will thus build upon Benedict Anderson’s 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, in which he argues that the nation is “an imagined political community [...] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). I will look closely at the role that the national narrative plays in this imagining and how this process imposes a dual temporality onto the people of the nation. This double temporality will then be further expanded upon via two rhetorical strategies of narrating the nation (the pedagogical and the performative) as proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, editor of the collection *Nation and Narration* (1990) and author of one of its essays, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” In light of Bhabha’s theory, I will argue that instead of supporting the “pedagogical” grand Czech narrative taught in schools, *Opráški* takes up the “performative” strategy of satirizing historical as well as contemporary events, figures, and culture. By bringing *Opráški* into dialogue with Anderson’s dual temporality of the nation and Bhabha’s pedagogical and performative strategy of narrating the nation, I will argue that the comic in some ways actually helps to “underwrite” the nation. From there I will take a closer look at Bhabha’s concept of “cultural difference” in the second section in order to understand how *Opráški* simultaneously also works to contest the national narrative. I will then move on to link Bhabha’s account of “cultural difference” to

the “rhizome,” a concept proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). By deploying this theory, I will show how the marginal position of *Opráski* and its non-chronological, non-hierarchical, decentralised structure and semiotically ambivalent content ultimately “unwrites” the nation.

Underwriting the nation

I conceptualise the Czech nation as a social collective much larger than the relatively small number of Czechs I will actually encounter during my lifetime. A nation can thus be thought of as an imagined collectivity of individuals who remain largely anonymous to each other. Anderson explains that this imagined/virtual nature of the nation is maintained through the awareness of people being in “temporal coincidence” with their unknown comrades (24): what connects the members of a nation is their shared situatedness in space and perpetual time, in the “here and now” within the borders of the same nation-state. Concurrently, they are aware of their ancestors, who lived “here” before them, as well as their own descendants, who will live “here” after them within those national borders. However, as Anderson argues, while this present moment, this “here,” may seem constant across the historical span of the nation, it is subject to change in accordance to the shifting political delineation of the state; what are felt to be rigid national borders are permeable and prone to being redrawn. Consequently, the way in which a nation understands itself at any given moment in time may differ markedly from how its citizens understood themselves in the past or how they will understand themselves in the future. Members of a nation thus *imagine* they are linked to other members of the nation through shared geographical space and time, despite the fact that these concepts are fluid.

According to Anderson, people’s awareness of this shared temporality was engendered by two forms: the newspaper and the novel (24). Although the newspaper consumer might be alone in her reading, she is aware that the same mass printed edition is read “simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence [she] is confident, yet of whose identity [she] has not the slightest notion” (Anderson 35). Comparably, the reader of a classic novel is not only able to follow multiple members of a fictional community across time, but, more importantly, sees the simultaneous activities of multiple characters in *one time segment*, even though these characters might be completely unaware of one another. Like the characters in a novel, the members of a nation are tied to two coinciding temporalities: the present one “measured by the clock” and the overarching, continuous one measured by “the calendar” (Anderson 24). The clock is timeless: once it runs its course of twenty-four hours, it starts over again and it

shows the same time every day. In contrast, the calendar marks time unequivocally. We might look down at our watch to see it is 18:30 and do the same tomorrow and see the same number again. The date will, however, be different to mark we are not in some limbo as the clock suggests, but progressing through time as the calendar so uncompromisingly reminds us of. Hence, the clock measures “the now” that the current members of a nation share with one another, while the calendar contextualises their present within a continuum in order to link the inhabitants of the nation to both their ancestors in the past and their descendants in the future — with previous and future iterations of their nation.

Opráski notably reinforces this double temporality of the nation. Czechs can read (and expect others are reading) the newest edition of the comic published on social media, where the shared “now” of the nation is immediately manifested by the number of likes on the post and the people’s interaction in the comment section. Czechs can also purchase *Opráski*’s calendar, which they can follow the whole year round, to be reminded of their nation’s past, as well as their own progression through time. The idea of a nation thus imposes two temporalities onto its subjects: that of (historical) continuity and (present) simultaneity.

While simultaneity is a key temporality for inhabitants to understand the imagined community of the nation in the here and now, equally important is a conception of the nation — and its inhabitants — moving through linear time, from the past into the present and on into the future. Most important in this linear temporality are the people that exist in the present — if there are no identifiable “people of the nation” in the present, there can be no ancestors in the past or descendants in the future. In other words, there is no exposition and denouement without a climax, so we need the coordinates of a specific point to trace its continuum. Consequently, if the determinative temporality of the nation is the present, then its corresponding history is contingent on and derived from the present. This means that the nation’s “biography” always depends on the current national consciousness and that the content of the national narrative changes with any shift in that consciousness (Anderson 204-5). This ever-shifting delineation of the national identity is illustrated by *Opráski*’s calendar cover for the year 2018 (figure 1). The image points out that the year 2018 has been saturated with national celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of the Czech Republic by underlining the year 1918 in the speech balloon of the first Czechoslovak president, T. G. Masaryk. The author, however, also depicts prominent historical figures and their respective years of commemoration, but since the originary present is the year 2018, all included numbers also end with the digit 8 to keep with the theme. In the bottom right-hand corner, we can also see various forms of the national flag lying on top

of each other on the floor as a reminder that the symbols of national identity have been subject to change throughout history. *Opráski* thereby foregrounds how various mutations of the national consciousness and corresponding originary presents have traced their narratives differently.



Figure 1 Jaz, *Opráski sčeskí historje* "2018," calendar cover, *Kritiky.cz*, 17 November 2017

Indeed, *Opráski* itself actually marks a shift, or even a turning point, in the Czech national consciousness. In fact, the title *Opráski sčeskí historje* refers to the materialised epitome of the Czech national narrative — *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* ("Images from Czech History and Legends"), a comic book that presents a chronological overview of the key national legends, battles, events, and figures (whose deaths are dated with historical precision). *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* has been used in primary schools to enliven history lessons and continues to influence the way generations of Czechs remember their national history. It was first published serially in the popular children's magazine *Mateřídouška* from 1971 until 1975 and in 1980 the short instalments were collected in a book. Since then, *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* has had nine editions, each one slightly updated to fit new political agendas, with most crucial changes made after the fall of communism (Mejstřík 5-8). *Opráski* can be perceived simply as a parody of *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí*, but I think it is more accurate to recognise it as a substitute: the images of history as seen from the eyes of a consciousness submerged in late capitalism, with social media and memes in place of the

communist, oppressed, and timid consciousness of the 1970s and 1980s. Although representations of the national narrative like *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* might render the content of the narrative invariable, *Opráski* exposes the fact that the national narrative and identity are not, in fact, fixed.

Nevertheless, the ways in which national communities tend to understand themselves is akin to that of a singular "social organism" slowly moving through time, like one person with an identifiable date of birth and death set in the unknown future (Anderson 26).³ Yet writing a person's biography is very different from that of a nation. A person usually has a birth certificate, clearly noting one's place and date of birth, as well as one's parents'. In juxtaposition, a nation does not have the luxury of such "proof" of birth, and thus lacks any clearly identifiable birth according to Anderson (205).⁴ But if there is no beginning, then the nation's biography "can not [sic] be written evangelically, 'down time,' through a long procreative chain of begettings" (Anderson 205). Instead, it must be designed "up time;" by taking the present as a starting point and looking at what preceded it. This creates "a curious inversion of conventional genealogy," since the nation's biography is told from "an originary present" (Anderson 205). This achronological method "meets" historical events and figures via their endings, their deaths, which is why the "exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts" hold such a prominent place within the national narrative (Anderson 206). Their dates, figures, and events are then neatly woven into the national narrative, solidified and transmitted through historiography, textbooks, national museums, and national holidays. The newness of the national narrative inherently linked to its construction from the originary present is nevertheless paradoxical to the idea of the nation as a continuity; the nation can be imagined as constant and uninterrupted only if its identity and narrative is perceived as equally fixed. The carriers of the national narrative thus erase evidence of its achronological design by presenting history in traditional chronological order, so that only the obsession with deaths remains as an inconspicuous testimony to its true design.

³ One might think of the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), where the subjects of a state are united in one body, whose head and (governing) hands are that of the state's ruler.

⁴ Here it should be noted that the nation and the political entity that confines it are two different things; while the political state might have a founding document, declaration or a constitution, the ancestors of the people of the nation can be traced indefinitely all the way to Adam and Eve, so to say.

OPRÁSKI SČESKÍ HISTORJE

JAK NA VELIKOŽŤ ZÁLEŠÍ



Figure 2 Jaz, *Opráski sčeskí historje* "Jak na velikozť záleší" ["How Size Matters"], 13 December 2013

Opráski is invited into and supported by national institutions for aiding the representation and popularisation of "important" deaths, figures, and events in the Czech national narrative from the point of view of the current national consciousness. Yet *Opráski* strips the sacred auras built around specific myths, figures, and events by ridiculing their symbolic status, and portraying revered figures as ordinary people who make foolish decisions. For example, "How Size Matters" (figure 2) depicts the Czech artist Alfons Mucha exclaiming: "I will create a painting celebrating Slavic patriotism! Not just one... more! An entire cycle... AN EPIC!" The comic here references Mucha's nationally significant series of very large paintings *The Slav Epic* (1912-1926). *Opráski* also takes advantage of the fact that the artist's name is the non-standard form of "moucha," meaning "fly," and depicts the artist as an actual fly, spreading its wings in panel 3. Panel 4 cuts to a gentleman asking: "Where is the portrait of lord emperor?" and the innkeeper responding: "Well... flies were crapping on him!" This line, as well as the image, is adapted from a Czech classic: Jaroslav Hašek's *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk During the World War* (1923). Thus, while *Opráski* acknowledges two works from the Czech cultural canon, it also makes fun of a highly valued artist: the comic reduces Mucha to an unimportant fly and his renowned large-scale epic to fly faeces. But then again, *the time* during which *Opráski* chooses to refer to Alfons

Mucha and his *Slav Epic* is perhaps more telling than the actual content. It is no coincidence that "How Size Matters" was published just one day after the National Gallery in Prague issued a statement that their exhibition of *The Slav Epic* would be extended for another two years. So, while it might seem that *Opráski* challenges the national narrative by ridiculing the status of certain figures, the practical outcome is that the comic revitalises national culture and history in compliance with the current originary present of the national narrative. This once again highlights the fact that the national narrative is derived from the current consciousness of a nation, and is thus subject to change in concert with the changing national identity.

In his essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi K. Bhabha explains the liminal state of national identity via two concurring rhetorical strategies of "writing the nation:" the pedagogical and the performative (297). Bhabha builds on Anderson's exposure of the nation's imaginary nature and the state's use of the national narrative to establish, shape, and reinforce the idea of a nation to argue that the concept of a nation is "a narrative strategy — and an apparatus of power" (292). Bhabha places emphasis on narration as the key form of imagining the nation, since "[n]ations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (1).⁵ Bhabha thereby builds on Anderson's account of the ways in which national biographies are traced back from the originary present. Hence, the production of the nation as narration is marked by ambivalence: "there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative" (Bhabha 297). For Bhabha, the pedagogical is a strategy for describing or even prescribing the nation's history and thereby educating current nationals about "their past." This history must be taught, since the current members of the nation have not experienced it and therefore cannot remember it themselves. A perfect example of the strategy of the pedagogical would be a conservative carrier of the national narrative like *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí*, which represents the constant, linear, chronological, calendrical temporality of the nation.

In juxtaposition, the performative is a strategy for reflecting the current national identity, mood, and culture in order to demonstrate how the nation has progressed from the past that is encapsulated in pedagogical narratives and lives on in the present. *Opráski's* anachronistic approach to producing new iterations and mutations of past events for a modern Czech audience demonstrates the

⁵ This is actually the opening sentence of Bhabha's 1990 collection *Nation and Narration*.

performative strategy of depicting the unique perspective and identity of the present national consciousness. Attentive readers might have noticed that the two strategies actually adhere to the dual temporality of the nation as described by Anderson: the pedagogical reinforces the historical continuity and the performative effectuates the present simultaneity. The two logics of the na(rra)tion render the people as unchanging “historical ‘objects’ of the nationalist pedagogy” and at the same time the “subjects” that must produce a new conception of the nation-people to ensure the image of the evolving social organism (Bhabha 297). This allows the new iterations of the national identity to contest and (under pressure) transform the linear national narrative, at the same time as they simultaneously progress, develop and reinforce the self-same narrative.

It is thus the role of cultural products like *Opráški* to “perform” the national progression — to establish the new coordinates of the originary present — by expressing their fresh outlook on the past. *Opráški* does not just spring out of the internet abyss to present a completely different history of the Czech nation. The comic keeps the canonical figures and events, but it uses them as a substance for jokes or refers to them in relation to current events. For example, “How Size Matters” addresses Alfons Mucha in the event of the artist’s exhibition in the National Gallery in Prague. The comic thus presents specific elements from the national narrative when they become relevant to the present. Each edition of *Opráški* cherry picks its historical targets in response to the present demands of the nation, which allows the comic to be flexible. Nevertheless, the comic somewhat relies on the existence of pedagogical sources that instruct the nation about the figures and events of Czech history. *Opráški* can thus present Czech history in anachronic fashion and remix the same event many times. *Opráški* uses a contemporary visual style (a kind of meme aesthetic), humour, and cultural references in order to produce new iterations of the past that reflect the current national consciousness. Hence, *Opráški* “performs” how the nation has progressed by presenting national history in a way that reflects the humour, events, moods, and culture of the current national consciousness.

OPRÁSKÍ SČESKÍ HISTORJE

JAK BOBESLAH PÍCH VÁLCAVOVI



Figure 3 Jaz, *Opráski sčeski historje* "Jak Bobeslah pích Válcavovi" ["How Boleslaus Had Wenceslas's Back"], 26 November 2012

This "performative" aspect of *Opráski* is most evident in the manner in which it parodies the more pedagogically-oriented comic *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí*. Although *Opráski* follows in the tradition of presenting Czech history "in images" (comics), its presentation is adjusted to match the current national consciousness. *Opráski's* connection to *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* is honoured not only in the title (as explained earlier), but also through parody of the older comic. One of the early editions of *Opráski*, "How Boleslaus Had Wenceslas's Back" (figure 3), adapts the story of St. Wenceslas's death, while conspicuously referencing *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí*. The latter depicts Duke Wenceslas as a pious and educated ruler, who was foully killed by his greedy and treacherous brother Boleslaus, because he wanted "to rule by himself" (Adla et al. 37). Wenceslaus is thus rendered as a martyr in order to justify his sainthood and prominent position within the national narrative. Although *Opráski* depicts the two figures in the same colours and style of clothing as *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí*, it provides a completely different interpretation of the same event. While *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* establishes Boleslaus as the villain, angry at his brother for "colluding with that German Jindřich Ptáčník" and giving him silver and

oxen (Adla et al. 37), *Opráski* transfers Boleslaus's blame together with the content of his speech balloons onto Wenceslas. Panel 1 of *Opráski's* "How Boleslaus Had Wenceslas's Back" portrays Wenceslas exclaiming: "Oxen, silver, Škoda, all into the Reich!"⁶ and in panel 2 he confesses to his brother that he is "colluding with Ptáčník from Germany."⁷ *Opráski* presents an altered summary of the events, letting Wenceslas and Boleslaus share the blame, which might be surprising to some readers accustomed to the version promoted by the national narrative. Although the comic reinforces the significance of St. Wenceslas's death and the national continuum as such, *Opráski* unarguably disrupts the widespread version of this incident and exposes the biased nature of the national narrative by using its performative strategy to "remake" its pedagogical predecessor.

Due to its close connection to the current national consciousness and prominent position in Czech popular culture, *Opráski* effectively achieves what a historian might vainly try to accomplish throughout his entire career. By making St. Wenceslas testify to colluding with Germany, "How Boleslaus Had Wenceslas's Back" actually demonstrates the false idolisation of Saint Wenceslas within the Czech national narrative and the paradox of celebrating "Czech Statehood Day" on the anniversary of his death. *Opráski* adapted this idea from the appeals of the Czech historian Dušan Třeštík, who spent his career challenging the grand Czech narrative. Třeštík is known for his statement that if Wenceslas I had not been killed by his brother Boleslaus, the Czechs would probably speak German today and the Czech nation would not even have existed (Čechtický §1). Třeštík thus believed Wenceslas I (remembered via a national holiday on 28 September and a memorial statue, under which key gatherings and demonstrations are organised) should not be perceived as a symbol of Czech statehood (Vališ §2-3). While Třeštík's appeal remained unheard, *Opráski* adapted his message and turned it into one of the comic's most iconic editions. I would contend that this shows that using the pedagogical strategy, like writing historical books about the Czech nation in Třeštík's case, is not enough to counter the strength of the national narrative. Instead, the pedagogical "official" accounts of a nation's history can be better "fought" by a more performative approach. *Opráski* thus demonstrates how

⁶ Here again *Opráski* connects history with the present, as Škoda, the car brand manufactured in the Czech Republic, clearly did not exist in 935. Nevertheless, one of the products Czechs are proud of and perhaps known for abroad was sold to the German Volkswagen in 1990. *Opráski* thus highlights the continuous pro-German relations of the Czech Republic.

⁷ *Opráski* specifically uses the verb "paktovat se," which is the same verb that was used by *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí*.

performative power can bring public awareness to certain marginalised perspectives on history that contradict the standard national narrative.

However, the inconspicuous problem with this re-interpretative approach is rooted in the fact that, as Bhabha explains, the nation — its identity, narrative, and culture — is liminal: it is an ever-developing narrative, yet transitions can be difficult to notice, since the structure — the book's binding — of the continuum imposes singularity. In other words, the nation *must continuously change* because that is the only way the narrative continues to develop further, day after day, chapter after chapter, iteration after iteration, but this sense of progression erases the fact that the "original" or some other previous version of the nation might have been unrecognisably different from the present one. Hence, the parodies and remakes of the content of the national narrative or na(rra)tion help the imagined community to persist. Reviewing the symbolic value of Wenceslas does not actually threaten the nation as narration, since textbooks can be rewritten and *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí* can be re-edited again and again. To only introduce marginalised voices and content into the national consciousness is not really a solution to the inherent omissions and forgetting of the nation. As a consequence, cultural production compliments the rigid pedagogical continuum by perpetually creating a "new" version of the national identity in the originary present; yet the "new" is only an iteration of the old without changing the faulty structure that made the old version insufficient in the first place. Culture's challenge thus lies in contesting *the act of writing* the nation and its source of authority: the following section will therefore investigate how *Opráski* contests the national narrative as an apparatus of power and thereby "unwrites" the nation.

Unwriting the nation

The dual temporality and rhetoric of the nation as narration — historical continuity enforced by the pedagogical strategy and present simultaneity reiterated via the performative strategy — makes national identity liminal and therefore subject to perpetual change. New iterations of the nation fill in gaps, amend contradictions and subsume marginalised voices, in order to show that the nation has *progressed*. But how does one contest, challenge, or transform something that feeds on variance? How can one add without progressing; create without substituting; displace without replacing? Bhabha asserts that one must acknowledge and contest the source of power and knowledge from a marginal, outsider, or subaltern position. Using Bhabha's theory, I will explain why this subordinate position is crucial for "unwriting" the nation and show how *Opráski* occupies such a position to contest the Czech national narrative. Ultimately, I will argue that *Opráski*

effectuates Bhabha's theory by representing history in the acentred, non-authoritative manner of the "rhizome" as conceptualised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Essentially, Bhabha's main issue with the nation lies in its boundaries, that are made liminal and ambivalent through its two complementary narrative strategies (Bhabha 300). The nation is a political strategy for establishing a community of people. For this purpose, the nation must construct a national identity to mark who "belongs." In a similar fashion, the national narrative identifies specific "memorable" figures and events. But if someone belongs, then there must be also someone who does not. Similarly, if certain elements of history are "memorable," there must be others that are "forgettable." And yet, the nation is a positive concept and therefore highlights only who or what *is* included, despite the fact that the act of delineation or inclusion makes the nation concurrently also exclusive. Pedagogical narratives sanctified by the state take care of presenting the current, official boundaries of the nation and its narrative.⁸ However, performative narratives reflect how the current reality of the present nation does not fit the definition proposed by the pedagogical narratives. Culture therefore challenges and eventually redraws the boundaries of the national identity. This updated version is ultimately officially legitimised and added to the pedagogical narratives, and so the cycle begins anew. Although culture temporarily disrupts the official narrative, it actually helps expand and "improve" it in the long run. Hence, the performative strategy of culture introduces novelty only to reinforce the nation as a holistic entity — a social organism. By *making the nation complete again*, culture erases the evidence of the structure's inherently exclusionary nature.

This is why Bhabha calls for using "cultural difference" to displace the source of authority controlling the boundaries of the nation and its narration. Cultural difference is a strategy of re-articulating knowledge from the perspective of the excluded/marginal/subaltern Other in order to expose an established hierarchy (Bhabha 312). It is exactly this subaltern position that *Opráski* occupies in order to expose and undermine the dominant hierarchy within the national narrative. After visiting the exhibition of *Opráski* in the Czech National Museum in 2014, the Czech linguist Otakar Šoltys wrote:

⁸ These pedagogical narratives may include objects that are incorporated into the educational system, like textbooks and *Obrázky z českých dějin a pověstí*, as well as other carriers of the national narrative and identity that are sponsored by or under the patronage of the government.

Images of Czech History [Šoltys intentionally wrote the title of *Opráski* in the correct Czech form] are a humiliation and offence of the Czech national pride, they hinder pictorial and linguistic development and raise children to become morons. Such behaviour, which can only be motivated by financial gain, would not be tolerated by any developed European nation or state.⁹ (*Historje.tumblr.com*)

Šoltys's biggest concern is *Opráski's* "immature" visual and linguistic representation of the world, akin to the dexterity and competence of a small child; Šoltys would probably prefer the comic to be drawn by Alfons Mucha and written by Jaroslav Hašek, the "true" national masters. Yet, *Opráski* cannot be appraised or criticised for its language or aesthetic quality — any attempt to do so only inherently ridicules itself. What Šoltys might not understand is that *Opráski* denounces talent in favour of the meme aesthetic; badly drawn images are combined with the most basic font (Arial) and the overall composition often lacks elaborate graphic design. The non-standard, phonetic, and by now idiosyncratic version of the Czech language that *Opráski* invented is essential to its jokes, as the text creates puns and a multiplicity of meanings. These devices make it often hard to "decipher" certain editions, so the interpretation of the comic actually requires some extent of maturity and background knowledge. *Opráski's* aesthetic and linguistic poverty counters the "professional" and ultimately authoritative approach of pedagogical narratives that impose their power over the national history. *Opráski* celebrates its inferiority by employing aesthetic and linguistic poverty to challenge the polished pedagogical representations of the national narrative.

This minimalism could be understood through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the "rhizome" outlined in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). In botanical terms, a rhizome is an underground stem that contains root- or shoot-generating nodes and grows perpendicularly to enable shoots to grow above the ground. This means that a rhizome is "acentered" and "non-hierarchical" (Deleuze and Guattari 21). In the philosophical sense, a rhizome can be conceptualised as a network that "ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze and Guattari 7). In contrast to the rhizome,

⁹ From the Czech original: "Obrázky z české historie jsou ponižováním a urážkou české národní hrdosti, brzdí vývoj obrázkové i jazykové semiózy a vychovávají z dětí dementy. Takové jednání, které může být motivované finančním ziskem, by si žádný vyspělý evropský národ a stát nenechal líbit."

a tree or a root “plots a point, fixes an order;” the tree/root-system is centred and operates with “hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths” (Deleuze and Guattari 7, 21). Analogously, the national narrative stems from the originary present and develops according to a strict chronological order; it is rooted in national myths, its trunk composed of key historical events and figures remembered by state holidays, its branches adorned by contextual details. The national narrative reproduces through the double-time of continuity and simultaneity and thus “imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and... and... and...’” (Deleuze and Guattari 25). In other words, the root has a trunk that is the main “project” of its growth; like the nation, the root follows a line, a continuum that progresses in one direction — the root “is” 10 cm long, but it “was” 5 cm long last month and it “will be” 15 cm long next month. Each new centimetre of the root at once progresses the trunk and replicates its shape. The root thus follows the same dual temporality and narrative strategy of the nation: the “continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical” that traces the nation’s/root’s historical continuity and “the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” that reiterates its structure. In contrast, the rhizome grows endlessly without prioritising any specific shoots or directions: it cannot continue because it has no beginning and it cannot be recursive because it has no specific aim or trunk to return to. By endlessly creating connections and spreading in all directions, the rhizome resists totalisation, genealogy, and memory. Unlike the nation that can be enclosed by its imagined borders or the national narrative that can be traced from the originary present to its mythological beginning, the rhizome’s acentered, non-hierarchical, complex, ceaselessly expanding character protects the structure from such exclusionary practises.

Opráski seems to demonstrate the characteristic features of the rhizome. *Opráski* shows history out of its chronological order; one can never predict what event or figure the comic’s next edition will focus on. *Opráski* also spills over the nation’s borders to depict international history and culture; the comic has recently started an English profile on Instagram called *Wurld Hiztri In Picturz* containing translated editions. *Opráski*’s unpredictability and large scope actually makes analysing the comic or using it in an educational way rather tricky, since in order to find a specific edition, historical period, or figure, one has to scroll through hundreds of other non-related ones. This anti-memory approach is also visible in *Opráski*’s 2018 calendar cover, in which historical figures could easily be lined up chronologically, yet they occupy the space in no apparent temporal order. *Opráski* further eschews the dogmatic and factual presentation of history according to the verb “to be” (was, is, will be) by rendering what has not happened or even what

could not possibly have happened. "How Size Matters" does not actually try to represent how Mucha painted his epic — on the contrary, the comic inserts references to a historical event into Hašek's fictional narrative. *Opráski's* editions, like the rhizomatic nodes, tie together multiple elements, temporalities, cultural objects, figures, and more in ever new remixes of reality and fiction, satiating the "and... and... and..." impetus. "How Sons Were Imprisoned" (discussed below) thus combines a current political scandal with the life of a former king and "How Size Matters" inserts the painter Mucha into a famous piece of Czech fiction. Both artificial connections actually shed new light onto its constituents. For example, we could perceive Mucha's epic as a method of culturally defecating onto his Habsburg ruler. Through the use of fiction, *Opráski* does not ever have to "close" history, since the possibilities of abstracting events are endless.

Opráski's biggest power to establish "connections between semiotic chains," as Deleuze and Guattari would have it, lies in the comic's controversial use of language. "How Sons Were Imprisoned" depicts Charles IV telling readers how his father imprisoned him at Castle Locket during his childhood (figure 4). In panels 3 and 4, Charles IV comments that his father called it "a long vacation," but that he perceived it as a more of a prison ("krim" being a non-standard shortening of the Czech "kriminál"). However, the text correlates and mixes this historical event with the current political scandal of the Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš forcing his son to go on a "vacation" to Crimea (in Czech "Krym," which is pronounced the same way as "krim") in order to avoid a police investigation into the latter's role in the misuse of a fifty million CZK subsidy from EU funds ("Čaulidi" in panel 1 and "Soriako" in panel 2 have become catchphrases of the prime minister). This edition once again shows the rich as well as the problematic quality of its methods which could be discussed at length; however, I would like to focus on its linguistic play. The semiotic ambivalence of the language employed in "How Sons Were Imprisoned" opens up varied avenues of interpretation: for example, the word "krim" and the images in the comic strip produce multiple significations in reference to its historical and contemporary context.¹⁰ But the fact that *Opráski* works with an "artificial" version of Czech highlights the artifice intrinsic to any representation of history. Surely, Charles IV did not use the current standard version of Czech because the fourteenth-century form of the language was entirely

¹⁰ It is, of course, rather hard to discuss an absurd and bizarre version of the Czech language in an article written in English for non-Czech readers. Even my translation of the comic can be misleading, since I am practically translating *Opráski's* version of Czech into standard Czech and then into standard English (we all know the Chinese whispers game to realise the pitfalls of this approach).

different. *Opráski* therefore uses its artificial Czech to highlight the foreignness of the past in light of the present, which the national narrative tries to erase in order to retain the historical continuity of national identity. Since *Opráski's* language is foreign¹¹ to both the past and the present, it positions the comic outside of the continuum of the national narrative. The foreignness of *Opráski's* language positions the comic outside of linear time and produces semiotic ambivalence that further evades conclusive interpretation. *Opráski's* resistance towards totalisation forces readers to continue searching for meaning in the "and... and... and..." fashion of the rhizome.



Figure 4 Jaz, *Opráski sčeskí historje* "Jak se sinové za vírali" ["How Sons Were Imprisoned"], 14 November 2018

¹¹ Bhabha actually compares cultural difference to the "borderline moment of translation" described by Walter Benjamin as "foreignness of languages," since translation shows how inadequate, liminal and ambivalent language actually is in providing signs for its signified (Bhabha 314-15).

OPRÁSKÍ SČESKÍ HISTORJE

JAK PŘEMISLA AUTOKARA II. DOBJEHLI



Figure 5 Jaz, *Opráski sčeski historje* "Jak Přemisa Autokara II. dobjehli" ["How They Outwitted Ottokar II of Bohemia"], 3 December 2012

Furthermore, *Opráski* structures history or information about history into a rhizomatic network. The comic renounces the pedagogical approach of producing pre-processed, seemingly compact, and undisputable knowledge bites handed to the audience on a silver platter and instead provides minimal visual and textual guidance. For example, in "How They Outwitted Ottokar II of Bohemia" (figure 5), each panel of the comic is designed to confound readers not conversant in the historical background of the Marchfeld battle, yet rewards the well-versed. In panel 1, an unidentified king invites Ottokar II of Bohemia to his "field" to "dát si do nosu," which has a double meaning — either to enjoy tasty food or to fight. Panel 2 portrays Ottokar eating a drumstick and being asked by the foreign king if "the turkey isn't too dry." Ottokar begins to suffocate and ultimately dies; the final panel depicts Ottokar's sly killer pulling "iron" out of his corpse with a horseshoe magnet. The strip can only "teach us" that Ottokar II of Bohemia died in the year 1278 and that Marchfeld — the Moravian field — lies "in fact in Austria." The rest of the content does not really make sense unless the readers have relevant knowledge prior to reading the comic or ascertain the necessary information when realising their ignorance. By refusing to impose its authority to teach, that is to engage in an act of pedagogy, *Opráski* makes historical and cultural knowledge open to

debate and motivates readers to navigate their way through the history of their nation-state and form their own opinions. In other words, an edition of *Opráski* dedicated to a certain event like the Marchfeld battle, will not give us all the information necessary to understand the event. Instead, *Opráski's* condensed account of the Marchfeld battle will raise more questions than it answers. These questions can be perceived as loose ends of the rhizome that need to be indefinitely connected to other sources of historical knowledge.

Furthermore, *Opráski's* constant use of fiction, hyperbole, zoomorphism, and ridiculousness, among other devices, prevents readers from reaching conclusive interpretations. Even if readers possess the necessary historical background, the comic's minimalistic equivocal visual and linguistic expression combined with the fictional rendition of events prevents interpretative finitude. By disregarding correct grammar and syntax, as well as interchanging and re-ordering letters, *Opráski* pushes the Czech language to its limit; it removes the skeleton (grammar rules and syntax) and merely presents the volatile substance of letters recognisable only to those who know the original form. The minimised language nevertheless produces ambiguity, which in effect enables multiple layers of reference and interpretation. Hence, *Opráski* employs the rhizomatic tactic through fiction, visual and linguistic poverty, equivocalness, cross-referencing, and mixing in order to "unwrite" the nation. *Opráski's* rhizomatic tactic also functions as a form of Bhabha's cultural difference, since its aesthetic and linguistic poverty coupled with semiotic ambiguity cause the comic to appear "inferior" to the pedagogical narratives of Czech history by the likes of Otakar Šoltys.

Conclusion

Once we are born, we unknowingly and without consent become a part of several communities — the family, the neighbourhood, and ultimately the nation. We might know most of our family members and neighbours, as well as the collective characteristics and values of these social groups. We are aware of being members of these communities through personal contact and the relationships we form with other members. Yet the nation, as Benedict Anderson made us realise, is an abstract, virtual, perhaps even artificial community of people. Hence, in order to conceive of ourselves as constituents of this *imagined community* we must be taught about its existence, members (their lives unfolding simultaneously with our own), and values. The nation-state achieves this by imposing its governing power, through official ceremonies (like "Vítání občanů" in the Czech Republic, whereby new-borns are officially received by the secular system), compulsory education, national symbols, and state holidays, among other means. The "writers" of the

nation thus hold great control over the definition of that particular nation, over who is allowed to be a part of it and who is not, over what each member can do within and outside the borders, over how the nation's history will be constructed and remembered, over what will be in the school curricula, over funded research, and so on. The state's monopoly on knowledge production, dissemination, and effectuation is so extensive and omnipresent that the nation's people might not even be aware of its influence. Consciousness of the state's knowledge monopoly usually arises only once we hit the wall of its limits.

The common strategy in dealing with these limits is to stretch, shift, and reshape them. What might actually be counterintuitive is that the nation requires and feeds off these changes in order to progress its narrative; to show that there actually is a continuum, a narrative, to be advanced, as Benedict Anderson highlights. This constant state of transition, or liminality as Homi K. Bhabha calls it, is a product of the dual temporality of the nation: historical continuity demonstrated by the linear, chronological, accumulative strategy of pedagogical narration and present simultaneity generated by ever more novel means of performatively reiterating the past. Bhabha questions the performative strategy of culture for only producing new iterations of the past that can be easily added to the accumulative and linear strategy of the pedagogical narration. Cultural production that tries to expand the content of the nation's narrative fails to recognize that the source of the problem does not lie in inadequate content, but in the source of authority or power structure that made that content insufficient in the first place. According to Bhabha, we must challenge the position of this authority in order to truly amend the problem: culture must position itself at the margin of this hierarchy to expose the fact this hierarchy or uneven distribution of power and authority exists. Hence, cultural products should assume a subaltern position in order to acknowledge the existence of the national narrative that has superordinate power over the way the nation's history is remembered. We must, nevertheless, be wary of creating new authorities which would only reiterate the problem. Such an escape might be achieved by (un)structuring knowledge in a rhizomatic manner, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose. In juxtaposition to the tree-root system of the national narrative, the rhizome grows endlessly in all directions, while enabling new shoots to rise up from the ground. The rhizome thus resists totalisation, hierarchy, memory, and most importantly central accumulation of power.

Opráski českí historie occupies an inferior position of an intentionally "badly" drawn and written web-comic that challenges the polished, totalising representation of history in school textbooks and other forms of disseminating the

national narrative. The comic exposes the issues related to the source of narration in terms of its unequal distribution, limiting perspectives, contradictions in logic, and falsely factual and conclusive presentation of information. Nevertheless, the comic is also caught up in underwriting the nation by reminding its readers of the important figures and events that hold a prominent position in the national narrative. *Opráski* thereby re-enforces the idea of the Czech nation by presenting *images from Czech history*. But what is perhaps more productive than trying to erase the existence of a nation is to provide an alternative space and language to talk about the nation and its history. *Opráski's* great potential thus lies in the way it employs the tactic of the rhizome to unwrite the dominant narrative and liberate knowledge of Czech and international history: the comic eschews chronological order, hierarchies, knowledge monopolies, factual remembering, and straightforward interpretations. Ultimately, rather than replicating the way the national narrative imposes its authority on knowledge through education, *Opráski* leaves power in the hands of its readers by inviting or even motivating them to investigate and learn on their own terms.

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