

# **Czech Dream in a capitalist republic:** an interview with Czech film-maker Filip Remunda



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Text by **Roderick Coover**

**Film Title:** *Cesky Sen (Czech Dream)* / **Directors:** Vit Klusak and Filip Remunda / **Starring:** Residents of the Czech Republic  
**Screenplay:** Vit Klusak and Filip Remunda  
**Production:** Filip Cermák / **Producers:** Hypermarket Film Ltd.  
**Co-producers:** Czech Television, Mirage, FAMU /  
**In cooperation with** SPI Int., Taskovski Films Ltd. UK

IT IS 2003, and the Czech government is in the midst of a media campaign to build public awareness and support for the European Union. They contract a major marketing firm to help sell the concept. A new corporate-capitalist brand of media rhetoric has replaced that of the Soviet propaganda machine, which in turn had erased the fascist media of the German occupation before it.

In an audacious act of subversion from within, film-makers Filip Remunda and Vit Klusak use that very same advertising firm to launch a fake marketing scheme. At first glance, the film, funded both by government ministries and by a long list of corporate sponsors, is about advertising; the film-makers have enlisted a team from a top agency to hype the launch of a new department store, or *hypermarket*. They call the store *Cesky Sen* – or *Czech Dream* – and announce its opening through a campaign of television spots, billboard advertisements, flyers and more. The store will be the newest of many hypermarkets that have been opening around the Czech Republic since the fall of communist rule, each with its promise of remarkable prices and wide-ranging goods never before available to the general public. A little out

of town, on a lonely field by a highway sits the huge façade of this new store. One sunny Saturday afternoon, thousands of Czechs will arrive to shop and find nothing behind the vast fake storefront but an empty field. As with billboards and campaign slogans, the façade is all there is. The store does not exist. The film-makers are recording the production and performance of a hoax.

The resulting film, *Czech Dream* (2004), embraces a storytelling format offering viewers a step-by-step tale of how two rag-tag film-makers work the system – learning many lessons en route – to stage a big joke about a serious matter. The film uses a simple chronological structure; it is conventional storytelling and the storytellers are not wise performance artists but film students learning their way through the emergent commercial/industrial system. In recording an illusion that is staged and ‘acting’ roles, the film-makers blur borders of narrative and documentary form at least to the degree that they demonstrate how distinctions between fact and fantasy in a world plastered with commercial imagery become meaningless. Their aesthetic offers a relaxed, absurdist view of how abstract ideas are given forms through iconography. Their humour turns

## Feature Filip Remunda

upon itself when the film arrives at one of its most ominous images; the hoax is over and billboard advertisements for the faux hypermarket at city bus stops are being replaced by those offering the 'real' products of the new world order – a system that will likely not disappear as quickly.

One of the inspirations for *Czech Dream* was Petr Lorenc's art project that advertised a fictitious supermarket called GIGADIGA. The project involved distributing flyers to advertise a shop that did not exist. Shoppers who followed directions to the store would find themselves in a field facing a banner that read: 'Better take a walk in the woods instead.' In *Czech Dream*, the film-makers construct the hypermarket's ironic campaign around the theme, 'Do not come, do not spend your money.' Ads provocatively announce: 'Don't stand in line – Opening 31 May at 10 a.m.! Where, you'll find out soon!'

Although these advertisements offer nothing, they are laden with the suggestion that those who take the chance will be rewarded. Billboards tell shoppers they will not leave empty handed and this, too, is true, as some clients later point out. Those who arrive to shop on opening day are handed little pins and paper flags to wave when the ribbon is cut by the (increasingly nervous) company 'owners', Klusak and Remunda. The flags and pins are comically absurd rewards for the 1,500 shoppers who soon ascend the gentle slope towards the façade to find themselves on an empty field.

Klusak and Remunda were trained at FAMU, the Prague Film and Television School of the Academy of the Performing Arts, and their film sits within the tradition of satirical Czech storytelling. Their major influences include Karel Vachek and Jan Gogola. Karel Vachek, head of FUMA's documentary department, returned to the film scene in 1989 with his series *Little Capitalist*, after twenty years of being banned from film-making by the ruling communists for his film *Elective Affinities* (1969). A director, scriptwriter and dramaturg for Czech Television and also a professor at FAMU, Jan Gogola is known for his use of metaphor and absurd comedy, and he served as an advisor to *Czech Dream*, which began as the film-makers' MFA (Master of Fine Arts) project.

At the same time, the film embraces the situationist and agit-prop methods of internationally prominent documentary film-makers such as the Yes Men. Klusak and Remunda assume the roles of business executives. They are coached in their presentation methods, and backed by an array of skilled marketing agents.

At many points, their project might have failed, the most significant fears being if news of the hoax got out before 'opening day' or if the crowd responded violently. Perhaps what the film-makers had prepared for least was the critical controversy about the film that arose when the hoax was performed but before the film could be edited

and shown as justification. The controversy and critique was fuelled from both left and right. They were accused of simply being pranksters who should not have been allowed to use public funds to stage a hoax, and they were attacked for false advertising, something which they claim is not true. Are these students courageous or shameless? Yet, for its sins the film offers no simple judgement or moral solution; for the film-makers the film simply reflects how the new order constructs desire.

Two of the most poignant examples occur through the use of song. The first is during a morning spent shopping at a competitor's market with a mother and her children, and the second is at a rehearsal for the films' anthem. The scenes of shopping are not without displaying admiration for the happy shoppers who take great pleasure in the new market – so different from the barren offerings of the Soviet era. In fact the family are so happy with their day they break into song there in the shopping-centre car park. The rhythm of the song is upbeat and cheerful although ironically, Remunda notes, it is an Irish song from the time of the potato famine. The film-makers take no stance on this joyous moment except to observe. Their response, rather, comes later in carrying this spirit into the production of the film's anthem, which was written by Tomáš Hanák and Hynek Schneider. The anthem plays equally on how shopping can satisfy both personal and national fantasies with lines such as: 'Try to see as a child/Many things will seem wild' and 'We're just a tiny land/We're just a little place/But we can take nothing/And build castles up into space.' Castles made of sand may be just what they are offering as they coyly manoeuvre from the abstract question 'What is happiness like?' of the opening line to the crass response of the last one, 'Don't be a sloth/Come grab a cart/Don't blow it off,' all cheerfully sung by Sedmihlášek children's choir and Linda Finková. During the press conference that followed the opening (and uproar) the directors played the song while objects disappeared one by one from the shopping cart, until there was nothing left.

*Czech Dream* is not a critique of shopping *per se*. Nor does the film confront the issues of European unification. Rather, its battle is with the advertising agencies' aggressive assault and emancipation of a national psyche, with the government's use of media to 'sell' political ideas and, most generally, with the insultingly reductive style of media 'campaigns', whether the campaigns are used to sell soup, cola, or a political concept. Filip Remunda and Vit Klusak mock the daily spectacle of commercial iconography with a performance of their own, undermining illusion with illusion in an act of parody. Mimicking a process many take very seriously not unpredictably caused outrage, and this was particularly vented at the national television and the national cultural ministry that supported the project with public funds. The film-makers were

## Feature Interview

pushed to agree that they would return these funds if the film made a profit, and one cannot be sure the degree to which the political statement of their stunt was brought further to the forefront by the need to justify their work during the tense period between the dramatic day of the ‘opening’ of the supermarket and when the film could finally be shown as evidence of their goals. A film is a final record of a process. The result is a film that, according to Remunda, might offer strategies for the resistance to globalization, even if it may equally reveal a deep pessimism that the public can be so easily led by base desires.

Of course, as an advertising campaign *Czech Dream* wasn’t so successful; the figures of 1,500–4,000 shoppers on the opening day might well be considered a failure for a real store after such a massive media blitz. Perhaps the campaign was too mysterious. Or, perhaps many did indeed see through the hoax, with its flyers advertising absurdly too-good-to-be-true prices, such as \$19 televisions. As for the vote for joining the European Union, the film may have raised awareness about the superficiality of the campaign propaganda, but it is unlikely that it had any effect on the vote itself. With a 55.2% turnout, the vote in support of joining the European Union was 77.3% Yes to 22.7% No.

RODERICK COOVER (R.C.) *Czech Dream* is a bold film that raises hard political questions without offering simple solutions. Why?

FILIP REMUNDA (F.R.) I begin with the European Union (EU) campaign. For me the problem is not that the idea of the union is an illusion for the Czech citizens, but that

there was almost no discussion of ideas of unification. Instead, there was just a marketing campaign, which, believe it or not, was created by the same advertising company that invented the campaign for our hypermarket *Czech Dream*. Two creative units of the same agency were working these two campaigns – one for a supermarket and the other for a referendum in the EU. When people watched *Czech Dream* they were inevitably finding comparisons with the EU campaign at the same time. What concerns me is how politics is often using the tricks of classical advertising. It provokes the question, ‘What is democracy?’ Does it mean that democracy is about who has the most money for a campaign? I ask you as an American citizen – is this how your democracy functions? R.C. Well, for one, I don’t think this film could have been made in the United States for fear of lawsuits if not also, in public television, the fear of a scandal undermining their funding. F.R. German producers told me the same thing: that Ger-



Above ‘You see the stones, they will be used on us’: *Czech Dream*

‘At first, the corporations accepted the film as a platform for their style, so it was also a contract with the devil. As in judo, you may not be as big as your opponent, but you use his own weight to beat him down.’

## Feature Filip Remunda

man producers would similarly never take the risk of a project like this – neither the financial risk of making the film nor the legal risk of staging the artificial national advertising campaign that was at the centre of the project. And, it is true that the government agencies that supported us had some trouble in the media due to outcries on the grounds of false advertising, that the film violated audio-visual laws. But for me, documentary doesn't mean just distributing information. It is not journalism. For me documentary is free space where I can mix fiction and experimental methods with classic documentary form. Thank God there is a vibrant tradition in the Czech Republic of using humour as a form of resistance, so the film could be understood in a historical context.

*R.C. One of the unique aspects of how your film builds on these traditions is how it takes on new forms of power.*

F.R. The environment in the Czech Republic may be a better place to encounter these ideas than more-developed western nations, because it is still new and because we have a tradition of using humour-based resistance in the face of our colonizers – whether the Germans, the Russians, or now big money. My colleagues from surrounding European countries tell me that *Czech Dream* was a natural Czech project because it fits in these traditions. The film was supported by Czech Television, by the academy of film in Prague, which is also a state institution, and by the state fund for the support of Czech cinematography, which is run by the Ministry of Culture. So, the state supported a very controversial project. At the same time, the people who were working for the state apparatus under the communists are now working for the capitalist system. Each of us must make the decision of how to participate. During protests in the Soviet era, Klusak's mother was arrested by police just after Klusak was born. She had to decide whether to cooperate with the police and be able to return home to take care of her baby, or else be locked up, perhaps for months. She said no and was sent to jail. But what is the choice today?

*R.C. One of the characteristics of your documentary style is its observational approach; by which you let the characters take you in differing directions. In the middle of the film, for example, you take viewers on a research trip to another shopping centre and you interview a family who has been shopping. They are happy with their shopping experience and sing a song for the camera. The song draws us into a sense of genuine passion; the song becomes a theme for the movie.*

F.R. We were fully aware that we would need some structure to make the film. We had developed this scene with the family who had won a shopping spree at another superstore and in classical documentary style we were following their actions unscripted. This is one of those moments when something great happens when no one is expecting it. She gives us an Easter gift as thanks

for spending the day with her family and it opens the discussion, which we begin to record even though the sound people and crew are not there. The conversation turns to what makes one happy, and she talks about reading, crafts and singing. So, we ask her if she would sing, and when she agrees, the daughter asks if they can sing the English song 'Hey ho, Hey ho...' It is the song from the famine in Ireland. How ironic to sing that song here in front of a hypermarket full of food and other products! This moment was possible because we were open to the situation. The film is made with this open structure and that is why there is no simple message.

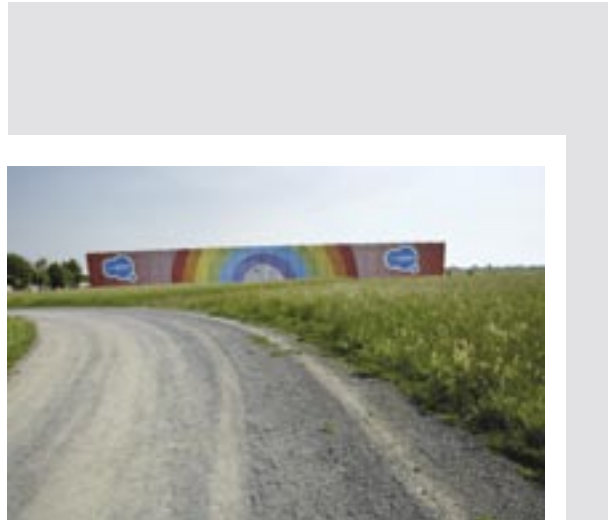
*R.C. On the other hand, another message of the film is the courage it takes to make such a film, and the lessons of the results that come from it. In the climactic scene, for example, you must await a throng of shoppers soon to be shocked and disappointed at how their expectations for the day will be turned upon them. And, of course, we don't know if the joke will end on them or you, or if you will all laugh together. It must have been a scary moment.*

F.R. I was scared the entire time that we did the project from the first frame until the grand opening of the hypermarket. It was a big tension to be facing the reality surrounding the project. At one moment, some journalists broke the truth that *Cesky Sen* is not a hypermarket at all but just a film project run by Czech Television. I was having nightmares that more media would be interested in the story, that major media would pick it up and, then, major commercial television would warn our potential clients that it was all a hoax. Luckily we had a major PR agency that effectively fought these first stories. They used strategies based on the ad campaign, 'Do not come!' If the media told people not to go, they would say 'Yes, we were telling you do not come! This is all part of the campaign strategy and we are happy you are supporting our campaign.' The journalists also accused the campaign of costing hundreds of thousands of crowns. Again, we turned the accusation to our advantage saying, 'No! It is costing millions of crowns!' It is like a game – the last article is the only one people remember, and ours were always dramatic.

But, I was having nightmares all the time. I remember the morning of the opening. The agency told us there would be all these people sleeping there in their sleeping bags and small tents. We were hoping to film it, but when we arrived that morning, there were only a few people along with an army of journalists. I was thinking this would be the biggest shame in the history of Czech cinema – we have spent so much money and no one has come. We have everything ready including a big parking lot of security personnel sitting in front of the façade of the market and no one was there! The next shock came a couple of hours later when there were suddenly 1,500 people there, waiting. They looked like a small army, and

## Feature Interview

we were only two, plus maybe fifty security guards. We discussed the situation with specialists from the Czech army who warned us about the circumstances we could be facing. They told us: 'You see the stones, they will be used on us. You see how the front of the false market is made of plastic, they will burn it, and it will be very dangerous. Out of every one hundred heads in the crowd there will be at least four aggressive individuals, and they will incite others to join them.' The constant fear was coupled with a sense of responsibility because it had to be so well organized to ensure there would be no violence and that no one was injured in any way. We even had a



Above Faking It: *Czech Dream*



'It is important to remind society that billboards are not a natural part of nature.'

medical team there, because you can imagine the different meanings of the film if something had happened.  
*R.C. You make fun of this fear. Contrary to the 'truth' of the film, in your publicity the crowd does beat you and Klusak. You are shown being chased by an angry mob with blood streaming down your faces.*  
*F.R. A year later when we were thinking about how to make a promotional campaign for the film – which is dealing with issues of promotional campaigns, we developed this provocative material based on the idea that we were beaten up by the clients. We have ketchup on our faces and shirts. And we used symphonic music from Hollywood action films to produce the atmosphere of an action film – we bought the music, about \$500 for 10 seconds.*  
*R.C. Along with your public funding you had a significant corporate sponsorship. Your credits include a long list of corporate logos. And, indeed, part of your success is in the way you are able to reveal the world of marketing from within. You offer very genuine material about working with marketing companies to create an entirely false product. How did your corporate sponsors respond?*  
*F.R. At first, the corporations accepted the film as a*

platform for their style, so it was also a contract with the devil. As in judo, you may not be as big as your opponent, but you use his own weight to beat him down. We used small tricks to be subversive, and we were successful. In the end, they were not happy with the film, and they tried to stop the film from getting distributed. In the Soviet era, Czechs had films banned under the communists and we were thinking this might be the first film banned in the capitalist era. However, their interest in the marketing campaign was also interesting. They wondered who was running the campaign and how our hypermarket might challenge their slice of the market? In one case, a printing company we were going to use was blocked from working with us by another supermarket that was also using it. And, a funny event occurred three days prior to the opening when we already had security guards around the market. A red truck approached, and a guy with sheets of paper demanded that the guards give him the telephone number for the *Czech Dream* purchasing department. The

## Feature Filip Remunda

guards said they could only give them the PR number, and he insisted, 'No, I have tried to call them a couple of times without success, and my boss will kill me if I don't get the information – maybe you are not aware but you don't have Coke yet!' The example shows how proud these corporations are in thinking that, without their products, it cannot be possible to run a business. R.C. *The final images, however, are ominous. The advertisements for Czech Dream are being taken down and replaced by ads for Lucky Strike cigarettes and Mastercard. You've had a period of play but this is the real thing – the real corporations are moving in...* F.R. It would be nice to have enough money to establish groups that could take over these billboards, to offer other ideas but this will never happen because it will never make a profit. Local authorities are selling the licences for this big machine which functions independently of our wishes. So there is a question of how we can control this corporate machine. It is important to remind society that billboards are not a natural part of nature. But we all feel we can do nothing about them. The alternative is at least to put myself in a position of playing a game with this 'no-alternative' situation, and better, to insist on local resistance, such as in Vermont in the USA, where I believe it is forbidden to have billboards in public spaces. In the USA, you actually have less advertising than in my small country, where it can be terrify-

ing. In contrast to the excess of advertising we have, it is a relief to be in the United States – ironic, isn't it? ●

Along with co-directing *Czech Dream*, Remunda is a founding co-director of Institute of Documentary Film (IDF), which started in 2000 in the Czech Republic as an educational and promotional centre for Czech and East European films (<http://www.docuinter.net>).

### Contributor details

Roderick Coover's works include *Cultures in Webs: Working in Hypermedia with the Documentary Image* (Eastgate, 2003) and *The Language of Wine* (Natural Words, 2005). He teaches in the Department of Film and Media Arts at Temple University, Philadelphia. URL: <http://astro.temple.edu/ffircoover>.

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# DAVID CRONENBERG



**David Cronenberg:**  
Author or Film-maker  
By Mark Browning  
£19.95 / \$25

For more than thirty years, David Cronenberg has made films, such as *Scanners* and *A History of Violence*, which aim to disturb, surprise, and challenge audiences. He has also repeatedly drawn on literary fiction for inspiration, adapting themes from authors William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and Patrick McGrath for the big screen.

*David Cronenberg* is the first book to explore how underground and mainstream fiction have influenced – and can help illuminate – his labyrinthine films. Film scholar Mark Browning examines Cronenberg's literary aesthetic not only in relation to his films' obvious source material, but by comparing his movies to the writings of Vladimir Nabokov, Angela Carter, and Bret Easton Ellis. This groundbreaking volume addresses Cronenberg's narrative structures and his unique conception of auteurism, as well as his films' shocking psychological frameworks, all in the broader context of film adaptation studies. *David Cronenberg* is an essential read for anyone interested in the symbiotic relationship between literature and film-making.



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