

Akademie výtvarných umění v Praze
Studijní program: Volné umění
Ateliér Nová média I

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE
“TĚŠÍ MĚ”
“NICE TO MEET YOU”

Vypracovala: Keya Singh
Vedoucí diplomové práce: doc. MgA. Tomáš Svoboda, Ph.D.
Oponentka diplomové práce: MgA. Lucia Repašská, Ph.D.

Akademický rok 2025/2026

ch. #1: THE PROJECT AND ITS ORIGINS

Q. WHAT IS IT?

A. *Těší mě* is a scripted docu-soap/mockumentary, featuring 4 lead characters (Eva and Peter, Marina and Tom), characters from the Czech language textbook – Czech step by step (A1/A2). We follow their lives and relationships, as they navigate language learning, their love lives, their friendships and simultaneously getting to know the Czech Republic. The primary narrative thread follows the textbook while the confessional/studio interview scenes are using self-reflective, referential material to fill in philosophical gaps about the reality of this world. It is structured to be 5 episodes (~10 mins per episode). This project argues that reality tv and language learning textbooks similarly construct reality and attempts to find out what happens when one influences the other.

Q. WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

A. There are several reasons for its selection:

- i. My experience of studying Czech at UJOP in Prague was the main trigger of this project. Studying a new language as an adult, in an intense school system changed things in my way of being and thinking. Part of the intensity was the sheer hostility performed by parts of the staff (including my main teacher). In the face of such hostility, my desire to persevere turned out to be stronger and presented itself by critically consuming the teaching material given to me. I began noticing the storylines hidden under the pedagogical instructions of every exercise. I also began to analyse the image of Czechs, foreigners and Czech republic in general that was being presented to us as language learners.
- ii. Inspired by my lived experiences of being in the Czech Republic for 8+ years.
- iii. This work is a continuation of my existing artistic practise wherein I intervene and adapt existing cultural scripts found in popular and internet culture.

Q. WHY TELEVISION?

A. The episodic format of television is a personal curiosity of mine. I wanted to explore the potential of serialised storytelling contained within the framework of one TV show. Besides this, I have always gravitated towards shared viewing experiences in my video practise. This is rooted in my childhood, which like many others, very often meant sitting down with family and friends in my living room and watching the television together. I have learnt a lot about the world I live in through television. It always created intrigue and curiosity in me about the reference points used by writers and makers of television shows across the world.

ch. #2: FORMAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Q. WHAT IS THE TEXTBOOK DOING IN THIS WORK?

A. The textbook acts as the primary source of themes, dialogues and plot lines. Using this textbook as the stage of performance, I am directly employing the scripts we were taught to employ in “real life”.

I did not just lift dialogue. My critical readings of the text as a student at UJOP became the formal method of this project. I analysed each chapter, identified its structural and thematic logic, and built the episodic narrative directly from that analysis. The textbook's own temporal

understanding — its way of moving through topics, relationships and situations — informed the show's structure, producing a rather unconventional way of depicting time in TV: unclear, disjointed, with jumps that reflect how language learning actually feels rather than how television usually moves.

Q. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK MEETS REALITY TV?

A. The textbook presents a mostly frictionless reality of Czech society and life here, which I find deceptive to say the least. Reality TV or scripted docu-soap presents a reality of its chosen subject, but most often leaves viewers with awareness of its construction and disbelief in its reality. The choice to collapse these two constructions is a formal choice that allows one to "complete" the other while also commenting on the other. The scripted documentary format helps to fill the gaps, reveal the performance and reflect on the lived-reality of its participants. Metamodernism is the formal grounding for this collision. I am working with the oscillation between irony and sincerity along with metamodernist reflexivity, which "indicates an intensified looking back upon the self that draws attention towards felt experience" (Dember, 2024). The confessional/studio interview scenes are the primary device for this: they acknowledge the construction of what you are watching while performing earnestly within it. *Těší mě* says this is staged, and yes, we mean it anyway. The textbook is didactic and constructed. The reality TV format is performed and constructed. The confessional is where the real pushes through both.

Q. WHAT ARE MY FORMAL REFERENCES?

A. I have two main references regarding television:

- i. The Rehearsal by Nathan Fielder (2022-currently) is my reference for tone and its use of collapsing rehearsal and reality. *Těší mě* collapses performance and lived-experiences through its casting and acting choices. Fielder has been working with feigned realism throughout his career. In 2020 Benny Safdie wrote the following about Fielder's work: "When you become obsessed with creating realism you create something fake. When you become obsessed with recreating reality you can create something hilarious". These lines inspire the tone and performance of my project as well.
- ii. Community by Dan Harmon (2009-2015) is my reference for screenplay structure, genre bending and metamodern aspects. *Těší mě* was written with direct influence from Harmon's story circle, which is his evolution of the "hero's journey" story structure bringing more focus and strength to character than narrative. And this intention leads my way of working with the characters too.

Q. WHAT ARE THE POLITICAL STAKES?

A. The political stakes of this project lie in reading the Czech language class as a site of power rather than neutral instruction. The textbook presents a particular type of Czech life as sanitised and standard. The actors perform versions of these characters through their specific bodies and histories, producing something the book does not contain. Each character's relationship to Czech is structurally different: Eva's authority carries a gap the show never names; Peter's code-switching maps the Czech/Slovak asymmetry (Nábělková, 2007; Pátková, 2024); Tom's ease reflects mobility rather than belonging; Marina's B1 Czech after eight years is not simply a failure of acquisition — it is the product of survival taking priority over assimilation, and of a conscious resistance to performing fluency when it does not feel

inhabited. The textbook imagines language learning as frictionless progress. Marina is the show's refusal of that fantasy. Czech identity is also carefully not positioned as a simple dominant — it is itself post-colonially formed, shaped by its own historical subordinations (Slačálek, 2016), which means the power dynamic the project explores is neither binary nor linear. In these ways, the project draws on post-colonial and sociolinguistic frameworks, seen through concepts of the third space, mimicry and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Mesthrie et al., 2009).

ch. #3: PRODUCTION AS EXTENSION OF THE CONCEPT

Q. WHO MADE THIS AND WHY DOES THAT MATTER?

A. About the crew:

- i. The crew comprised almost entirely of non-professionals. Many of them are ex-students of mine from when I used to do part-time lectures for BA Fine Arts Experimental Media students at Prague City University. Besides them, we found a couple of strangers through Facebook crew calls. The music in this show is comprised of underground and alternative artists from the Czech, Slovak and Indian scenes — extending the same logic as the casting: people with lived relevance to the subject matter, working outside institutional structures.

And about the cast:

- i. The cast was made of non-native speakers and non-actors, many of whom are associated to AVU through teaching and other working positions. With these combinations of institutions and backgrounds, I was able to work directly with everyone's lived experiences, both with these institutions and with the Czech republic. Lived experiences of the actors directly informed their characters, for example, Marina played by me, is directly influenced by my own life—allowing her to become an extension or reflection of me (as opposed to the textbook where she is a Bulgarian woman). Additionally, Eva is played by Angie (a young South Asian woman), and her character's ethnicity is not directly “answered” or explored as a choice of mine to not delve into superficial identity politics and instead use the opportunity to comment on who gets to “be Czech”. It was crucial to me to work with people who had relevant experiences to the subject matter of this project. Especially when it came to casting, I wanted to work with very specific performers. By choosing non-native and non-fluent Czech speakers, the performances naturally commented on my central argument of performance of belonging and authenticity.

Q. WHERE WAS IT MADE AND WHY DOES THAT MATTER?

- A. This project was filmed primarily in various AVU locations, 2 flats (including mine) and several outdoor locations around Letná. By situating the scenes mainly in AVU, I was able to create a self-referential work that is immediately recognisable to anyone familiar with this institution. Of course, this was born out of my lack of means regarding this production and filming of over 40 pages of screenplay. At the same time, I believe the complete reliance and use of resources within the institution helped to add meaningful commentary regarding the reality of cultural production today. Further, the cast and extras were mainly from the academy as well.

This project found a balance between industry standards of filmmaking and guerrilla art school methods of creation.

Q. WHAT WERE THE CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION?

A. The production of this work was made with the AVU Diploma Grant prize I had received (21000czk) and additionally with financial support from the New Media 1 studio (8000czk).

From these funds, I spent on:

- i. homemade South Asian food on set (for all 8 days of filming, 15-30 cast/crew members)
- ii. transport of equipment and people between the 15 locations
- iii. materials for art direction and costume

Besides the costs, I was extremely conscious of being transparent about my means with the whole team, so everyone joined it on volunteer basis for several reasons. The reason that I heard often and thought was the most significant, was the fact that most of them joined because of genuine shared connection to the subject matter. This brought a lot of value to the project. And immense gratitude in me! I am currently developing 15-second 4:3 ads using BTS footage/stills featuring the cast and crew, effectively using metamodern methods to continue commenting on the construction of this work. This would also be my personal attempt at promoting the work of the crew and cast through ad space, since payments were impossible.

ch. #4: PROCESS AND REFLECTION

Q. HOW DID IT DEVELOP?

A. The work moved through several stages: reading and research, analysing the textbook chapters and building the episodic structure from them, adapting specific textbook conversations and exercises into screenplay, locking cast and crew, and principal filming. A significant moment was a consultation with professors at New Media 1, which returned the project to the textbook when early drafts were drifting toward sitcom territory. By returning to the textbook, I was able to return to the comedic possibilities of the didactic ways of speaking and storytelling in the book—which during filming produced more affect, than I could have produced by writing.

Before filming began, I organised three workshops with the main cast — covering line reading, chemistry work, and an acting workshop led by a student from DAMU. The intention behind these workshops was mainly to have them to spend time with each other as we were going to film fairly quickly once filming began. And cast input also directly shaped individual characters. Anecdotes and contributions from them impacted their characters' stories and dialogues, only allowing the lived-experience logic of the project to write itself sometimes. One day before filming began, the actress originally cast as Marina was unable to commit to the full shoot. I took the decision to perform the role myself. This meant rewriting Marina's character entirely — her background, her details, her interiority — so that she became a direct extension of my own life and experience in Prague.

Q. WHAT WAS ABANDONED AND WHY?

A. Personal health issues disrupted my timeline significantly. One narrative thread was lost as a result — Eva's content creator angle, intended as an extension of the TV narrative and subtextual commentary on the financial realities of a full-time worker using social media. I see the loss of this thread as a lesson in knowing what is crucial to the project and what isn't.

Q. WHAT DOES THIS PROJECT OPEN TOWARD?

A. I can imagine further expanding the screenplay, including returning to the abandoned content-creator thread. The post-colonial theoretical framing was not developed as deeply as I would have preferred and remains an area I want to continue working in. During my Erasmus exchange in Julian Rosefeldt's studio in Munich last year, I made my first exploration into narrative storytelling and filmic work. And *Těší mě* is now my first narrative adaptation of a text, my longest video work and my largest collaborative project to date— and perhaps most honestly, the thing that came out of being at UJOP for a certificate and being reminded instead of every system that had ever asked me to perform understanding rather than feel it. This project is what happened when I stopped trying to pass the test.

REFERENCES:

Bhabha, H.K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551> (selected chapters)

Dember, G. (2024) Say Hello to Metamodernism!: Understanding Today's Culture of Ironesty, Felt Experience, and Empathic Reflexivity. Exact Rush Multimedia Publishing.

Detmering, L. (2014) '"Just tell me the rules, and I will follow": active viewership, community engagement, and Dan Harmon's *Community*', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 37(1), pp. 39–56. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24332699>

Janík, M. and Goldberger, M-A. (2024) 'Homogenization through inclusion: exploring language regimes at four multilingual schools in the Czech Republic', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 27(3), pp. 285–300. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2023.2192336>

Mesthrie, R., Swann, J., Deumert, A. and Leap, W. (2009) *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. 2nd edn. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Available at: <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-introducing-sociolinguistics-2nd-edition.html> (selected sections)

Nábělková, M. (2007) 'Closely-related languages in contact: Czech, Slovak, "Czechoslovak"', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 183, pp. 53–73. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJSL.2007.004>

Pátková, J. (2024) 'Between paternalism and colonialism: Czechs and Slovaks from the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century', *Studia Slavica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 69(1), pp. 79–90. Available at: <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1304913>

Rennebohm, K. (n.d.) 'Finding Fielder: *The Rehearsal*'. [Unpublished manuscript]. Concordia University. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/88426038/Finding_Fielder_The_Rehearsal

Safdie, B. (2020) 'The Gag of Realism: Nathan for You', *Cinema Scope*, 23 June. Available at: <https://cinema-scope.com/features/gag-realism-nathan/>

Slačálek, O. (2016) 'The postcolonial hypothesis: notes on the Czech "Central European" identity', *Annual of Language & Politics and Politics of Identity*, X, pp. 27–44. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/alps-2016-0002>

Vermeulen, T. and van den Akker, R. (2010) 'Notes on metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>