

NEPŮJDU, MÁME NEDĚLNÍ SMĚNU PRO REPUBLIKU.....

JEN ABY MNE NEZAVŘELI PRO RYCHLOU JÍZDU

HA!
MYŠLENKA!

BUDOU Z NICH DVA NOVÉ DOBRÉ KLUBY, ČESTNĚ SPOLU ZÁVODÍCÍ.

PST!
NEDĚLEJ OSTUDU!

ČLOVĚK ABY JED' VČEREJŠÍ ROHLÍKY!

CO TO ŽVANÍTE
VY CHUDINKO...?!

-NENÍ NIC!

CO BYSTE PŘÁLI
PRODEJCŮM?

JEN ŽÁDNÉ SLZY,
SLEČINKO...

V PRAVO, V LEVO
SAMÍ BROUCI
OČI NÁM
MOHOU VYTLOUCI.

THUM!

RÁD VÁS
POSLECHNU...

TO, JSEM
JEŠTĚ
NEVIDĚL.

**FANTASTICKÝ
VÝSLEDEK!**

JÉ, TO JE
KRÁSA!

...EVRYBĚDY EVRYBĚDY
PROTESTSONG...

JÁ TI DÁM
SE MI
POSMÍVAT!

A ЧТО ЭТО
БЫЛО?

NERUŠTE!

**rrr
af!**

Signals from the Unknown

CZECH COMICS 1922—2012

TI SI
DÁVAJÍ!

Co máš
za lubem?

JENŽE TO NEBUDE
NÁŠ KONEC, ALE VÁS...!

TOMU SE
V ANTICE ŘÍKALO
DEUS EX
MACHINA...

COŽE???
NĚCO BYLO POD
POSTELÍ...?!!

CHROCHT!

JENE, NOŽKY
MI UMDLĚVAJÍ

**UŽ
BRZDÍM!**

CÍL ZNIČEN!

A POČASÍ
NÁM
PŘEJE

TÁK!

JÁ VĚDĚL, ŽE
SE VŠICHNI
SEJDEME.

KDYŽ SE DVA PEROU
TŘETÍ SE SMĚJE!

NO-KDYŽ
MUSÍŠ
TAK POJÍ!

NEVÍDÁNO,
ASPOŇ SE
JEDNOU
UMYJEŠ!

VÍC VÁS
NEBUDE?

NELKEJ, JÁ UŽ S
NIMI ZATOČÍM!

**NE, NEOHLÍŽEJTE
SE, NA TO
NENÍ ČAS!!**

ZÁZRAK!
BOHOVÉ
SESTUPUJÍ
Z NEBE!

HIMBAJS, TO
BYLA ALE
ŠLEHA - CO ?!

PODÍVEJ, DNES
JSOU VŠECHNY
LAVIČKY
VOLNÉ

STÁLE JEŠTĚ
PÁTRÁME...

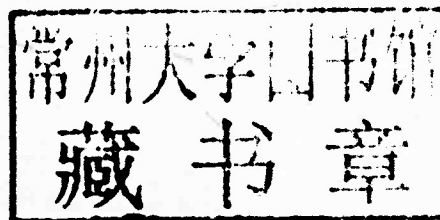
..DVA-

ČTE VY NA DOVOLENOU?

PAVEL KOŘÍNEK & TOMÁŠ PROKÚPEK

Signals from the Unknown

CZECH COMICS 1922—2012



ARBOR VITAE

The book has been produced with the help of the Czech Science Foundation, the project *Comics: History - Theory* (P406/10/2306), implemented at the Institute of Czech Literature of the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic, and at the Faculty of Philosophy of Palacký University in Olomouc.

Reviewed by: Petr Bílek (Charles University in Prague),
José Alaniz (University of Washington, Seattle)

Concept © Pavel Kořínek, Tomáš Prokůpek, 2012

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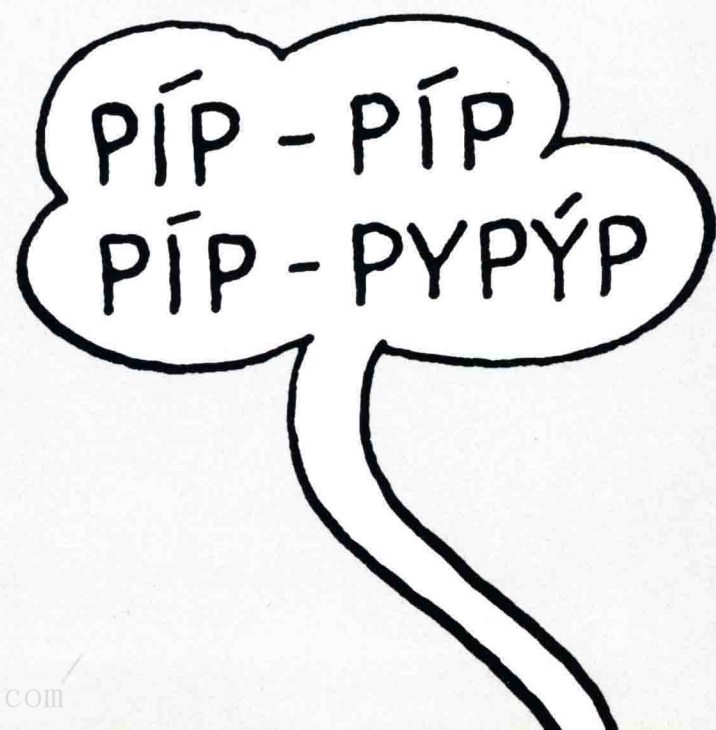
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BREAKING THE CYPHER

Looking for the Key to Signals from the Unknown

At the start of the third millennium Czech comics have gained a new lease on life. The present generation of authors is in touch with world events, is reacting to the latest trends and almost for the first time in a local context is genuinely free to create, unbound by the restrictive directives of censorship and cultural and social rejection. And at the same time, comics have succeeded at least in part in throwing off the stereotype which used to link them with leisure-time reading for children or as trashy and trivial content intended to kill time. As Czech comics gain in self-confidence (and self-respect), we are slowly beginning to explore both the famous and the less well-known periods in the history of Czech comics.

Such excursions into the history of the nation's comics almost always turn into great adventures: archives, forgotten periodicals and occasional book prints and leaflets often hide dusty treasures of an incalculable value. Again and again discoveries of different images (*panels* in the terminology of comics), both scintillating and dull, make it difficult to define the coordinates of the space of Czech comics, even those that seemed clear at first. After long lost stories are found, they always add to the image we have about the history of Czech comics.

¶ The roots of the local comics tradition go back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when the first satirical magazines were founded in the Czech milieu. It was in these magazines that the first sequential cycles began to appear (certainly influenced by prototypes from abroad).

These humoristic and journalistic caricatures and series of illustrations with their juxtaposed images, that is set next to and mutually influencing each other, are close formal forerunners of modern comics as we know them today.

¶ Comics in a strict sense, that is using *speech (or word) balloons*, began appearing in the Czech press soon after 1900, however, we consider the year 1922 to be the turning point for our following "cryptographic" work. It was then that Josef Lada began publishing the series **Šprýmovné kousky Frantíka Vovíška a kozla Bobeše** [**The Pranks of Frantík Vovísek and the Goat Bobeš**], the first Czech modern series with returning characters. Also Ondřej Sekora introduced his first returning character, **Pan Broušek** [**Mr Broušek**], in a narrative sequence. The comics pioneer Ladislav Vlodek returned to his native Czechoslovakia after emigrating to America. Modern Czech comics began their convoluted journey through the twentieth century, a journey which was often interrupted involuntarily and later continued only with great difficulties.

¶ Up to the end of the 1930s local changes in this narrative form, combining visual and storytelling elements, reflected trends in other countries in Europe. At the same time as other places in the old continent,¹ we can distinguish two competing tendencies in the local milieu as well: domestic (European) and conservative *captioned series with commentary* (with the text printed below each panel), found in the pages of Czech periodicals, children's pages and humoristic magazines, in a struggle with the more progressive American wave of modern *comics* with speech balloons. The first category, perhaps for its naive verses, was usually considered more valuable and suitable for the reader (certainly for children, there was no doubt about that). The second category, despite all the critical condemnations, was gaining in strength thanks to the popularity of the newly emerging animated cartoons with their amusing animal protagonists.

¶ With the birth of **Rychlé šípy** [**The Fast Arrows**] it seemed that comics were winning in this struggle, that it was settled for good in the Czech cultural milieu, whether in one form or another. But the rise of the Nazi and then Communist regimes interrupted and distorted the natural evolution of comics medium. In spite of this the production of comics in the country never quite died out, occasionally taking on distinctive, if not bizarre, forms which differed markedly from those familiar in countries with an established and developing comics tradition such as the USA, France and Italy. Short periods of relative growth (1945-1948, 1966-1970) alternated with poorer phases of rigid monitoring and fierce prohibition (1949-1956, at some point also 1971-1985), but in spite of the frequent interruptions this continuity was never quite suppressed. Czech comics continued to shine through all the periods of our twentieth century history, even if their isolated occurrences occasionally called to mind not so much an ongoing tradition as mysterious, *sui generis* signals from the unknown.

¹ An exception to this is the Francophone regional variety *bande dessinée* which, since its inception, has developed somewhat differently.

¶ The favourable situation, in which the production of comics is currently found, is a call to action. It commits us to a detailed and long overdue research on the history of Czech sequential art in all its forms and variety. However, the research cannot end with the actual finding of individual and forgotten comics and sequential series, those pieces and fragments of the universe of Czech comics. The second fundamental challenge that is facing the historiography of Czech comics for the next few years is the task of processing this invaluable yet inevitably chaotic collection, to contextualize and interpret it.

¶ Our existing knowledge of Czech comics resembles a medieval map where the more visited and known areas described in detail alternate with vast areas of terra incognita. Individual comics from these parts (the less known periods) resemble a mysterious signal caught from outer space. A signal from the unknown, just in its very presence, calls out to be deciphered.

¶ The dozen studies in this book do not have a unified methodological point of view. They are not interconnected through a dominant organizing principle or easily comprehensible system: there is no historical chronology in the book, nor is there the often customary use of elaborate interpretation. Chapters focused on dominant genres (funny animals, adventure stories and science fiction, “club” series, underground comix) alternate with sections outlining trans-media connections (comics and film, comics and fine art) and the use of comics in the service of ideology and marketing. Monographic chapters both on artists (Kája Saudek) and groups (Polylegran) are accompanied by essays on inherently formalistic and chronological-formalistic aspects (comic magazines, new heroes).

¶ We are convinced that dispensing with purely chronological and historical description allows us to focus on the connections between motifs as well as the personal and media contexts and thus view the transformations of Czech comics of the studied period from a new and often – we believe – unusual perspective. Together with the curators of the exhibition and the editors of this book, the authors of the individual chapters include other specialists in comics and professionals from related fields such as art history, film studies and literary studies.

¶ We do not conceal the fact that the chosen method through which different scholars-cryptographers reveal individual and in many ways defined bits of the Signal brings with it many dangers. It is hard to avoid a certain randomness, that gives more attention to some phenomena, genres and personalities while leaving others outside the scope of interest. Although we would like to, we are not completely able to rid ourselves of our initial pre-conceptions which define the way we think about the area of comics: there are pre-conditions which dictate what we pay attention to and what we consider to be secondary in the given moment. However, we believe that the possible shortcomings inevitably caused by this loose organizational structure will be made up for in the individual chapters. We are convinced that using such a free and interdisciplinary approach will make it possible for us to extract from this blur of tempting yet enigmatic artefacts, obscurities and art works a provisional and partial, yet slightly more complex image of Czech comics. We hope that in the distorted and imperceptible sounds of the elusive signals we have managed to capture, perhaps we have also uncovered an understandable code of the local comics tradition.

Such an extensive project like Signals from the Unknown, both the exhibition and the monograph, would not have been possible without the help of many cooperating institutions and the selfless assistance of many individuals. It is impossible to mention all those involved, let us therefore remember at least a few of them.

¶ We would like to thank all the institutions which provided art works from their collections for both the exhibition and reproduction (Brno Museum, Film Studios Bonton Zlín, Libri Prohibiti, Moravian Library, Museum of Czech Literature, Museum of Polabí, Poděbrady, National Film Archive, National Gallery, National Pedagogical Museum and Library of J. A. Komenský, Scientific Library in Olomouc, Short film a.s.) and to the institutions that made it possible to prepare the project (Institute for Czech Literature at the Czech Academy of Sciences, Palacký University in Olomouc, and the Czech Science Foundation). We are equally grateful to all the individuals and publishers, authors, artists, collectors and heirs without whose kind assistance it would have been impossible to even consider such a vast project.

¶ The editors would like to thank the organizing institutions which provided the necessary support that allowed us to begin deciphering. Therefore we are much obliged to The Brno House of Art and to all its employees, namely to the director Rostislav Koryčánek, to the gallery DOX Prague and the publishing house Arbor vitae and to Martin Souček and Lev Pavluch. We also thank the graphic designers of the whole project, Braňo Matis and Matúš Lelovský. We greatly admire their professionalism and ability to respond to our most capricious desires and requests.

¶ At the very end we give thanks to those whose contribution is perhaps the most difficult to describe but no less vital and important: Pavel Herian, Radka Chlupová, Petr Kalač, Filip Konečný, Milan Krejčí, Jean-Gaspard Páleníček, Miroslav Smilowski and Vladimír Tučapský. And – most especially – to Lucie Peisertová and Pavlína Prokůpková.

In Prague and Brno, June 30, 2012

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

012

1969

the birth of *Čtyřlístek*,
the longest published Czech
comics magazine ever

1989-92

Kometa magazine is published
along with many other experiments
in comics periodicals

1997

the birth of *Crew*
magazine focusing on the
Anglo-American mainstream

2008

the magazine *KomiksFest!* revue
appears after the comics
festival in Prague

1926-28
the first Czech comics
magazine *Koule*

1933-35
Malý zpravodaj focuses
on sequential art

1935-42
Puntá magazine

1967-71
the comic book *Rychlé šípy*
transforms into the eponymous
comics magazine

2000
the birth of *Aargh!* magazine
focusing on Czech comics

2011
the first issue of the alternative
“comics journal” *Kix*