

**Janez Janša**  
*Das KAPITAL*

“Marx’s assertion that capital transforms human dignity into a commodity has never seemed truer than now.”<sup>1</sup>

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A street artist is a re-interpreter for hire. His or her work consists in re-interpreting - often only for a few pence - a character, icon, scene or historical event, ad infinitum, for the benefit of passing tourists (a typical product of our consumer society). The payback, for the latter, lies in recognizing the icon or event in question as part of their own culture, and in seeing it presented in an accessible, human and vaguely ludicrous form.

Attracting six million visitors a year, Prague, the modern day capital of the Czech Republic, is one of the hot destinations for cultural tourism. Its appeal lies not only in its Habsburg history (as the golden city, and the city of the hundred towers) and its magical aura (the Jewish cemetery, the legend of Golem), but also in its more recent past. What occurred between January and August 1968 - the extraordinary period of liberalization known as the Prague Spring which was bloodily repressed by the troops of the Warsaw Pact on 20 August 1968 - was one of the Soviet block’s first signs of weakness. When the Soviet Union entered the city with more than 7,000 armoured vehicles to quash the Czechoslovakian Communist Party’s internal reform, it inflicted a deep wound on the conscience of the western left, while in the capitalist democracies the martyrs of the moment were viewed as heroes, including Alexander Dubček, leader of the reformists, and the student Jan Palach<sup>2</sup>, who burned himself to death on 16 January 1969 in Wenceslas Square as a political protest. After Palach’s death the Czechoslovakian authorities initiated a process of *damnatio memoriae*, and attempts to rehabilitate his memory only began in 1989, when there were demonstrations on the anniversary of his death, which preceded the so-called Velvet Revolution, in November of the same year. A memorial cross was erected in his honour in front of the National Museum, at the exact spot where he fell, and there is an asteroid named after him. His story is linked to that of Jan Hus, a Bohemian religious thinker burnt at the stake in 1415 for his ideas. In 2003 Palach was even emulated by some Czech teenagers, for reasons as yet unknown.

Given these circumstances, on 7 October 2006 the tourists in Wenceslas Square were probably not overly surprised to see the performer Mare Bulc staging Palach’s spectacular suicide in typical street artist style. They would however have been struck by some of the details orchestrated by the Slovenian

artist Janez Janša. The performer was up on a pedestal, holding a remote control which controlled both the movements of a toy tank, and a fan hidden inside the pedestal. There was a little camera mounted on the tank to film the action, along with the logo of the performance, which was entitled *Das KAPITAL*. The fan started up as soon as the tank passed over a large map on the ground representing the territory of the Czech Republic, at which point fabric flames rose up, celebrating Palach's martyrdom.

The meaning of *Das KAPITAL* seems to be hidden behind a screen of banality (the street artist staging Palach's sacrifice to entertain tourists). It is all in the details, even the tiniest ones. Take the name and the logo of the performance, for example. *Das Kapital* is the German title of Karl Marx's *Capital*, held to be the founding work of Marxism. In the performance logo, the name takes the form of a tank, and the red star of Communism symbolises a shot being fired. The symbolism is evident, almost scholastic: both the Soviet troops and the Czechoslovakian student are fighting to defend their own interpretation of the same utopia. From this point of view, *Das KAPITAL* could be viewed as a metaphorical translation of Palach's gesture, rather than a simple re-interpretation. But there is more to it than that. The tank does not enter the map of Czechoslovakia as it was in 1968, but that of the geopolitical form the country assumed in 1993, when after the fall of Communism Czechoslovakia split into two separate countries - the Czech Republic and Slovakia. And it was then that Prague suffered yet another invasion, that of Western capital – which was heavily invested in post-Communist countries, with many businesses moving there – and liberal capitalism.

The current face of the city has been strongly influenced by this invasion, and Prague's current economy, based on tourism and its use as a film set for international production companies, is the most glaring evidence of it. Thus the metaphor of the performance becomes allegory: an event of the past is translated into symbolic form and used to talk about the present. In other words, in Janez Janša's remake Jan Palach is no longer protesting against the invasion of Marx's *Capital*, but capital in general<sup>3</sup>, which is transforming the city and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. It does this by adopting a language that addresses tourists (the living, omnipresent symbol of this invasion) and means (toys and technology) which are also emblematic of the new invasion. In a single gesture, the city's history is vulgarized and abridged for the tourists while at the same time being used symbolically to combat its present. Which is probably what Jan Palach's modern day emulators were trying to do, as victims of the consumer society, not unlike the students involved in school shootings.

**Domenico Quaranta**

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Translated from Italian by Anna Carruthers

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<sup>1</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Lo storico discorsetto di Castelgandolfo”, *Corriere della Sera*, 22 September 1974.

<sup>2</sup> For Jan Palach, see *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan\\_Palach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Palach).

<sup>3</sup> The police must also have realised this, as they attempted to stop the performance, making it more difficult to document.