

“POP-RURALITY”: RURALITY INTERDISCOURSE IN THE VILLAGE OF THE YEAR COMPETITION¹

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Abstract: *The Village of the Year in the Czech Republic is a national competition held since 1995, announced annually by the Ministry of Regional Development. Its aim is to promote the “restoration” and “development” of the Czech countryside through communal projects carried out by villagers themselves. Each year hundreds of Czech and Moravian villages enter the competition.*

Being focused on the countryside, the notion of rurality is one of the competition’s defining features. But what kind of rurality is it? What are its constituents? How it is performed in the village competition projects? And what are the sources of the forms it takes?

Our analysis of media representations by village competitors (web sites, video presentations, etc.), alongside materials provided for competitors by the Ministry and other participating organizations (competition rules, official documents, etc.) and various media representations of the competition (television reports, etc.), reveals how the discourses involved operate and how they create a certain “ideal” village that is to be seen as a model to be followed.

We argue that the several discourses of rurality interwoven in the representations of villages within the competition (those of experts/academics, public/media, villagers, and policymakers) form an interdiscourse of “pop-rurality”, which is a rurality deterritorialized, enriched with shared global (pop-cultural) elements, and re-territorialized again, to then float freely in public (especially virtual) space.

Keywords: *rural anthropology; social representations; imagined rurality; discourse analysis; Czech Republic*

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“The fact that I am here is not just the result of the work of the last years, but rather of a long-term process [...] What we have lived through in recent years – the emotions, the enthusiasm, the effort to get Pysk further – meant for us not only many beautiful shared experiences, but also resulted in this beautiful joint success: the title of ...” (mayor’s acceptance speech upon Pysk being awarded second place in the national round of the Village of the Year Competition, 2016)²

The Village of the Year Competition in the Czech Republic, held annually since 1995, is a joint venture of governmental, non-governmental, and EU institutions for rural community development. The competition is open to municipalities of up to 7,500 inhabitants which have the character of a rural settlement, regardless of whether they have official village status. The competition is held annually in two consecutive rounds, regional and national, the winner qualifying for a biennial pan-European competition. *“The aim of the competition is to try to encourage people living in the countryside to actively participate in the development of their own homes, to introduce variety and diversity in the implementation of village revitalization programmes, and to draw the attention of the general public to the importance of the countryside; the competition also aims to highlight activities of the municipality, their representatives and citizens, who strive not only to improve their home village, but also to develop local traditions and engage in the social life of the municipality.”*³ An expert committee adjudicates the competition directly in the locality. At the same time, the competition lives a virtual life on its dedicated web site, on the web sites of individual municipalities, and on many other sites of virtual space. Competition winners also appear on TV and radio shows.

All these aspects of the competition – the interconnectedness of its real and virtual life, its oscillation between global and local politics, the “expert” evaluation of what it is to be a “proper” countryside community, with an emphasis on global morality (Eriksen 2007: 246–8), and the actors’ practices and their representations – stand at the core of our interest in the Village of the Year Competition in the Czech Republic.

Another motivation for analysing the Village of the Year Competition stems from our ongoing ethnographic research into Slovak villages, begun in 2008.

² Obec Pysk. 2017, February 8. Vesnice roku 2016 Libereckého kraje [video file].

³ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. O Soutěži [online].

As socio-cultural anthropologists/ethnologists,⁴ our notion of a village at the beginning of this research was that of a specific place with specific actors, ideas, and practices (Hoggart 1990). However, upon gaining deeper knowledge of the dynamics of the field, this definition of countryside/rurality proved insufficient; it became increasingly clear that to adequately interpret our data it would be necessary to employ theories that see rural space in more complex ways. As Cloke (2006: 22) claims: "If at some time in the past, some 'real' form of rurality was responsible for cultural mappings of rurality, it may now be the case that cultural mappings precede and direct the recognition of rural space, presenting us with some kind of virtual rurality."

The term *virtual rurality* is used by Cloke to comment on Halfacree's (2006) three-fold model of rural space. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theories of space, Halfacree conceptualizes the totality of rural space as comprised of three interlocking facets: *rural localities*, *formal representations of the rural*, and *everyday lives of the rural* (Halfacree 2006: 51). It is precisely the social representation of the countryside, which is produced and reproduced through the means of various cooperative discursive formations and practices (e.g. Cloke 1996; Mormont 1990; Bell 2006), that emerges as a significant component of the two other facets in our own ethnographic research. *Rural localities* are "inscribed through relatively distinctive spatial practices linked to either production or consumption," and *everyday lives of the rural* incorporate "both individual and social elements in the negotiation and interpretation of rural life, and which are 'inevitably incoherent and fractured'" (Halfacree 2006: 51, in Woods 2011: 10). According to Halfacree, the social representation of the countryside "refer[s] to the way the rural is framed within the (capitalist) production process; specifically, how the rural is commodified in exchange value terms" (Halfacree 2006: 51). Halfacree (2006: 50) thus associates social representations of the countryside primarily with those in power, singling out "capitalists, developers, planners, scientists and academics" as those who articulate formal conceptions of space. However, he also points out that "formal representations never completely overwhelm the experience of everyday life – although they may come close – and the extent to which formal representations and local spatial practices are unified is also uneven" (Halfacree 2006: 51–52).

⁴ For more about our ethnographic research and the problem of different perspectives of disciplines and paradigms, see Novotná, Heřmanský and Bittnerová (2010).

This social constructivist model therefore takes into account that “the rural has become deterritorialized, as the meaningful signs and symbols of rurality have become increasingly detached from their referent geographic spaces, and reterritorialized as more abstract significations begin to define the essential nature of rural space” (Cloke 2006: 22). As such, Halfacree proposes interconnecting the material and imaginative conceptions of rural space through their intersections in particular practices. Our adoption of this perspective evolved into a need for a deeper analysis of the social representations of rurality, and this we carried out for the Village of the Year Competition. After all, as Cloke points out, “part of the task for rural studies, then, is to identify key practices with which to express both internal and external connections between the material and imaginative worlds of the rural” (Cloke 2006: 24).

In this paper we aim to capture the dynamics of negotiations of the “politics of the rural” within the discursive practices associated with the Village of the Year Competition. A key reason for choosing this competition lies in those traces that it leaves behind. Inspired by Murdoch’s (2003) thoughts on the rural as composed of hybrid assemblages of human and non-human actants, we consider both the competition itself and the associated discursive formations and practices as actants involved in the construction of the social representation of rurality. Consideration of both these actants reveals that the social representation of the village is constructed through the negotiation of various discourses, in ways specific to each and elucidated in the course of the analysis that follows.

Our ongoing ethnographic research has led us to the firm belief that academic discourse substantially influences the negotiation of the social representation of rurality, and for this reason we declare from the outset the effect this has on our epistemological position. While internationally there are a number of studies building on the research of contemporary rural space based on social constructivism and post-structural epistemologies of hybrid rurality (see Cloke 2006; Woods 2011), contemporary Czech social sciences have only sporadically theorized the concept of rurality. However, as we suggested above, it is precisely this theoretical background that has informed our choice of the research topic under consideration in this paper.

Since the 1990s in the Czech Republic, literature in the field of ethnology on the subject of the contemporary village is sparse and draws on the long-standing tradition of critical realism or functionalism, understanding the village as a culturally specific space (Skalník 2003, Kandert 2004b, Válka a kol.

2007, Šalanda 2008, Válka 2011, Kłodnicki – Luković – Slavkovský – Stoličná – Válka 2012). The paradigms on which these studies are predicated largely precluded theoretical discussion of the concept of rurality. On the other hand, the conceptualization of the rural in these studies significantly influenced the discourse practices of negotiating the social representation of rurality, as will be shown below.

In contemporary Czech social anthropology the topic of the countryside is rather marginal. Key ethnographic studies of the contemporary village (Kandert 2004a, Haukanes 2004) have not crossed the boundaries of interpretative anthropology. A turning point can be seen in the synthesis of long-term ethnographic research undertaken by Horáková and Fialová (2014), which, through the analysis of the “Dutch village”, thematizes the construction of modern rurality in post-socialist space.

Similarly, in the field of sociology “the work of Czech authors on the countryside is dominated by descriptive approaches, sociocultural definitions appearing only rarely” (Pospěch et al. 2014: 29); for a more detailed account of rural sociology in the Czech Republic, see Majerová et al. (2003). In the context of the ethnography of the post-socialist village, the most inspiring studies have been those of Blažek (2004) and Librová (1994, 2003). Social-constructivist or hybrid concepts of the countryside can only be found in the work of Majerová (2003), in a study by Hruška (2014) that reflects the changes in the paradigmatic and conceptual background of rural sociology and social geography, and in an analysis by Pospěch et al. (2014) of changes in the Czech countryside after 1989. The last-named authors have also written on the Village of the Year Competition in the Czech Republic (Pospěch et al. 2014: 139–152; Pospěch, Spěšná – Staveník 2015). The aim of their study was to deconstruct the image of a “proper” village by analysing the visual self-presentation of competition participants. Drawing on the research tradition of social representations of rurality and discussions of the discourse of countryside and rurality, they theorize the issue on the basis of the rural idyll (e.g. Bell 2006). Pospěch’s study was explicitly drawn on in the study of Kumpulainen (2016), who analysed the same competition in Finland. Kumpulainen, however, points out that “the representation of a rural community is more complicated and multi-dimensional than the timeless and peaceful rural idyll. Rather, according to their [Pospěch’s] study, the image of a good village emphasizes the social and everyday life of local people. The social dimension is obviously an important element when studying representations of communities, and the more interesting question is how social

is represented and with which other elements it is connected” (Kumpulainen 2016: 57). The author further emphasizes “the direction the transformation of rural communities is taking, and how these changes are related to policy-level objectives” (Kumpulainen 2016: 56–57).

Our analysis of the Village of the Year Competition in the Czech Republic focuses primarily on the negotiation of the village’s social representation and the nature of its construction. However, we emphasize Cloke’s (2006: 22) commentary on virtual rurality as an image of a countryside that is not embedded in a specific locality, but rather “floats” in space (Hruška 2014: 590). Virtual rurality – similarly to the countryside per se, which cannot be conceived as a single space but rather as a multiplicity of social spaces (leading Murdoch and Pratt (1993) to the concept of post-rurality) – has to be understood in a multiplicity of social representations.

In our analysis we draw on the varied data sources that comprise the traces that the Village of the Year Competition leaves behind in virtual space, specifically those left by winners of the regional and national round of the competition between 2011 and 2017. These include the results of the competition published on the official website, where each of the winners has its own “profile”, consisting of a declaration of the reasons for the award and of representative photos; the self-presentations of the villages, which form part of the competition application process, and which the villages publish on their own websites and/or social networks; videos of the judging committee’s visits, serving as another, usually stylized form of the village’s self-presentation, as well as videos of the usually less formal celebrations after winning awards; and finally, items in the media covering the results of the competition.

For our data analysis we rely on Foucault-inspired discourse approaches (Foucault 2002), in the sense that discourses “represent highly regulated clusters with internal rules that are typical of a given discourse [...] Statements do not exist in isolation: there are structures of discourse that allow them to exist” (Schneiderová 2005: 24–25). While analysing discourse, our background in social anthropology makes us read even this this type of data ethnographically, that is, as a multilayered structure, by which, according to Link (as quoted in Schneiderová 2005: 83–84), one “understands discourse in the Foucauldian sense as institutional knowledge, including ritualized forms of speech, ways of acting and power effects. What is important, however, is the concept of interdiscourse, which is defined as a set of all elements of discourse that are

common not just to one special discourse but which can be found in several different discourses. The point is that the discourse elements ‘wander’ and pervade a number of different discourses ...” As Farnell and Graham (1998: 411) point out, discourse analysis is useful in social anthropology because it enables “focusing on the dialogical processes through which persons, social institutions, and cultural knowledge are socially constructed through [spoken] discourse and other signifying acts/forms of expressive performance.” The reason for this is that all of these representations act; they are endowed with and actually employ an agency of their own. After all, as the mayor of Pysk stated in his acceptance speech already quoted in the epigraph to this paper: *“When I joined the office fourteen years ago, I watched with admiration those villages successful in the competition. At that time, it [to win the competition] was an unattainable goal [...] In our first year as competitors in 2005, we were awarded, apparently as an act of compassion, the Green Ribbon for caring for green spaces [...] At that time we did not yet know what needed to be done or how our village should look in order to have a chance of winning the highest awards...”* And before saying this he even invited on stage, among others, *“the person who watched the most videos from the Village of the Year Competition in order to gain inspiration.”*⁵

The Competition

The Village of the Year Competition was inaugurated in the Czech Republic in 1995 as part of a rural development programme organized by state authorities and several NGOs.⁶ The competition is divided into two rounds, regional and national, and the winner qualifies for a similar European biennial competition. In both rounds there is an award for the overall winner and awards for winners in particular categories regarded as important for the countryside.⁷ All winners

⁵ Obec Pysk. 2017, February 8. Vesnice roku 2016 Libereckého kraje [video file].

⁶ Organizers: Office of the President of the Republic, Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Regional Development, Ministry of Agriculture, and their regional representations; Czech Landscape and Garden Society, Association of Library and Information Professionals of the Czech Republic, Association of Local Administrations of the Czech Republic, Association for Revitalization of Countryside, Union of Towns and Municipalities.

⁷ Awards: Gold Ribbon (overall winner), Blue Ribbon (for societal life), White Ribbon (for youth activities), Green Ribbon (for environmental care), Orange Ribbon (for cooperation with agricultural enterprise), Hope for Living Countryside Award (for associational and civic activities), Golden Brick of Rural Development Programme (for construction of exemplary buildings).

are given financial awards that substantially increase their municipal budgets. According to the competition web pages, where the rules of the competition are published, the key evaluation categories are: “*policy documents, societal life, civic activities, entrepreneurship, maintenance of construction resources and cultivation of the village image, civic amenities, utilities and energy saving, maintenance of public space, natural elements and greenery in and around the village, landscape management, planned projects and information technology of the municipality*”⁸.

Many of these evaluation categories are applied by the state with respect to citizens and settlements more widely, not just to villages and villagers. The state claims supervision of the administrative agenda, takes an interest in municipal infrastructures, and by means of the competition affirms the philosophy of sustainable development. Integration of the competition into the rural development programme on the one hand brings the Czech countryside within the scope of European Structural Funds, and on the other hand serves as a discursive critique of the “socialist state”, which devastated the Czech countryside (in terms of ecology, social structure, and culture). The competition promotes the reduction of harmful ecological impact and the maintenance of material and immaterial cultural heritage. It also advocates a civic society of active and responsible individuals, who direct their activities for the benefit of society as a whole, while also encouraging educational programmes for children and youth.

Among the competition rules, however, there are several that are specific to villages. In the first place, there is the ethos of locality and the relation of the individual to it. The village is seen as a place where a stable, non-migrating community is closed off from the surrounding world. Cooperation with other localities elsewhere does not feature among the evaluation categories; on the contrary, emphasis is given to internal cooperation and cohesiveness within the village. The village is posited as a place to call home, concentrating all that life has to offer and producing life’s meaning. Integral to the image of the village is local production, particularly agricultural, i.e. local food produce and hand-crafted goods along with their distribution (e.g. farmers markets).

The same ethos of locality underpins the accent placed on *local traditions*. Similarly distinctive is the requirement that the municipality has a *countryside character*. However, nowhere is it defined what is meant by “countryside

⁸ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. O Soutěži [online].

character": it is simply assumed that everyone knows. This requirement is however an important one, exemplified by the fact that some small towns appealed to their countryside character as an argument to declare themselves a village for the duration of the competition.

Participation in the competition is voluntary. Every municipality that enrolls in the competition is assessed by a judging committee chaired by the mayor of the municipality that won the competition in the previous year. Municipalities are evaluated on the basis of "*the presentation of the municipality (which also consists of interviews with municipality representatives), the guided tour around the municipality [the committee visit is announced to the mayor in advance], and the supporting materials submitted by the municipality as part of its application for the competition.*"⁹

Even if some parts of the competition take place in the physical world (judging committee guided tours, ceremonial announcement of winners, formal and informal celebrations), all of them leave traces in the virtual space of the Internet. These traces are however endowed with their own agency, and thus the whole course of the competition (also) takes place in virtual space.¹⁰

The competition has its own web pages and Facebook profile. According to the competition rules, winners are obliged to post the status of "Village of the Year" on their web pages. Competitors post their presentations (originally intended for the judging committee) in virtual space, as well as recordings of judging committee guided tours, recordings of victory celebrations or discussions of why they failed, advice to other villages, etc. Successful villages are covered by news reports in public and even private mass media. Representatives of victorious villages participate in public debates on municipal self-governance at a local level. To put it differently, the Village of the Year Competition leaves both institutionalized and spontaneous traces in public space – traces that are a result of intentional selection aiming to represent, but also traces of individual invention and creativity. The competition thus creates a space for establishing knowledge that is used to define the exemplary contemporary village in the Czech Republic (i.e. in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia).

⁹ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. O Soutěži [online].

¹⁰ One could even argue that these traces are more important in creating the construct of rurality than the events they depict.

Strategies of Representation: How to Make a Village Look Rural

Villages enrolled in the Village of the Year Competition prepare a body of evidence with the aim of persuading the judging committee that the village is a “proper” rural one according to the competition criteria. This is carried out by two means (in addition to the written application documentation, which is not in virtual space, and therefore not included in our analysis): the creation of a presentation video and a guided tour through the village prepared for the judging committee (also recorded on video or by photographs). It is important to emphasize the fact that both of these are not representations of everyday village life but staged performances intended to create a particular impression. Of course, each of these representations uses a different language. The composite video attempts to cover the “positive” picture of the village in a relatively balanced way, while the interactive live performance focuses on dramatic moments aimed at exciting the interest of the judging committee. By analysing both these types of representation for villages that have been successful in the competition, we shall observe how they relate to the discourse of rurality and, therefore, how they at the same time (re)create this rural discourse. Put briefly, the representational strategies that villages usually use are based on materialized and performed traditions (both ethnocultural and/or invented) on the one hand, and on social cohesion on the other. Naturally both of these strategies are intertwined, with either of them being able to take the lead in different situations. Rather than responding to any of the above-mentioned competition criteria, we believe that both these strategies rest primarily on the implicit notion of *countryside character*, i.e. the discursive formations/constructs of rurality, which are at the same time (re)created precisely by these representations.

The Past, Roots, and Continuity: Materialized and Performed Tradition

Josef Kandert (1998: 41; 2004a: 225), based on his ethnographic research on the villages of South Bohemia, distinguishes between two types of tradition. The first is tradition in the sense of the transgenerational transmission of cultural elements or phenomena that can be identified in the “living experience” of villagers; this tradition is not referred to as “traditional” from an emic perspective, but rather perceived as “this is how it has always been done.” The second is tradition in the sense of phenomena and events codified by the world outside of the village per se. However, Kandert emphasizes that not all

practices that are maintained in the locality for a long time need be considered traditional from an emic point of view. According to the discursive concept of rurality and its social representations, tradition is to be understood as a construct in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). An accent placed on the continuity of the past or, in Hobsbawmian terms, on the illusion of the continuity of the past, appears to have been a key element in the social representations of municipalities that were successful in the competition. The past in this context refers primarily to the “traditional” Czech/Slovak village as a stable cultural system (Slavkovský 2009: 14), a construct of a predictable, clearly structured, safe world (Danglová 2005: 54), which is part of our cultural heritage. In this world “a regulative normativity existed, based on cultural patterns [that] were regarded as the ideal model for life activities of individuals and even whole generations in the respective culture [and at the same time] constituted a criterion for their values petrified by tradition” (Slavkovský 2009: 114). The construction of this system of values and norms can be seen for example in the work of the Czech sociologist Inocenc Arnošt Bláha, who created a model of the ideal type of peasant (in comparison with workers), to whom he attributed “earthiness”. “Earthiness” is then related to two triads: soil–nature–God and lineage–custom–tradition (Bláha 1925, in Lošťák – Hudečková 1995). Another important sociologist of the countryside, Karel Galla (1939), attributed to the Czech peasant “patriotism, diligence, frugality, modesty, honesty, ancestral heritage, land ownership” (Galla 1939). The prototype of the peasant forms a basis for the construct of rurality, which despite all the geopolitical upheavals is still produced and reproduced to this day. Paradoxically, as we shall see, the only feature that has disappeared from this discursive formation/construct of rurality, designated by Danglová (2001) explicitly as a romanticized myth, is that of the “peasant” as a cultivator of the land, i.e. as a farmer. However, the discourse of “depersonalized” or “peasantless” rurality is still (re)produced and (re)constructed through relating to the past on three distinct levels. We shall describe the operation of these levels in the social representations of municipalities in the Village of the Year Competition, which consist of implicit elements of rurality, explicitly expressed references to local history, often in relation to the national discourse, and also the past constructed through various performances.

The most common form of implicit rurality is the *landscape*, be it the landscape in which the village is located or the landscape of the village itself. Video presentations of individual municipalities generally begin with a panoramic view of the village set amid woods, meadows and fields, interwoven with shots of natural scenery, such as woodland edges, water features, views through trees, and close-ups of plants and animals. Landscape is thereby represented by “unspoiled” *nature*: a butterfly on a daisy, a frog under a burdock, the bewitching gaze of a roe deer, a forest spring, a blooming orchard. However, those landscapes that lack poetry, e.g. fields of corn or rapeseed, are deemed inappropriate. “*Nature is beautiful here*,” says the narrator of the village Kašava’s video presentation¹¹. All this is to suggest that proper rural landscape consists in unspoiled nature, where the presence of humans can only be inferred from shots of the village itself. Somewhat paradoxically, this unspoiled nature is in fact a cultural, i.e. cultivated, landscape. Daisies are found on regularly mowed meadows and frogs near springs maintained by human agency, roe deer live in the preserves of gamekeepers, and orchards without the care of an orchard keeper run wild. *Protection of the landscape* and *nature as heritage* that has been passed on to us are thus almost always present in the idea of rurality, at least implicitly. The image of a village set in beautiful natural surroundings also supports the rhetoric of nationalist ideology, for which love of the landscape is one of the attributes of national identity (Hroch 2004). This image also became part of local identity (Roubal 2003), in which picturesque villages under the mountains are regarded as essentially synonymous with home. On the other hand, cultivated fields fit neither the discourse of *conservation*, nor the discourse of *heritage*.

A similar situation obtains for the landscape of the village, i.e. its residential and architectural character. Only the “old”, “original”, “unspoiled” cottages and farmhouses correspond to the local regional character, and these must be “well-tended”,¹² alongside churches, chapels, and Ways of the Cross. The image of the village landscape closely resembles pictures by Josef Lada,¹³ only without any people. It is as if the landscape of the village, both in its residential areas and surroundings, became a kind of open-air museum in which to take

¹¹ Obec Kašava. 2015, August 4. Obec Kašava [video file].

¹² Kovář, Milan. 2014, May 21. Prezentace obce Hošťálková [video file].

¹³ Dostál, Marek. 2014, September 4. Vesnice roku Olomouckého kraje 2014 Nová Hradečná [video file].

edifying walks, improve fitness, and gain aesthetic experiences. However, such a non-problematic image of the village as an integral part of landscape and nature is only manifested in video presentations to a marginal extent. This is curious because rural society/culture grew in close connection with nature: the cycles of nature determined the rhythm of villagers' lives, with even the church calendar based upon them. In this conception, nature was not a subtle commodity, but a strong opponent in the peasant struggle for subsistence/bread. Nature was both a partner and an enemy, which had to be repeatedly bound (Gurevič 1978; Sokol 2004: 40–42). While the landscape of the village itself and that of its surroundings are both inevitably present in the video presentations submitted to the competition, they almost completely disappear from the performances prepared for the judging committee, as if a "picturesque village in the middle of virgin nature" was somehow taken for granted to the extent that there is no need to give it further emphasis.

From implicit elements of rurality we now proceed to the second mode of relating to the past in the Village of the Year Competition that we highlighted above, namely the explicit reference to local history. Obligatory is to give the date of the foundation of the village or the first written record of its existence. Then various mementos of the village's past usually follow, materialized in historical photographs or postcards that represent the character of the village at the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. The architecture and social life of the village in the past is generally shown in this manner (e.g. Kašava). This visual evidence of the village's *continuity* is usually documentary in nature, whether it be a sequence of pictures in the video presentation or on a community web site, or an exhibition of historical photographs organized for the occasion of the judging committee guided tour. This evidence of the past is often accompanied by commentary on the development of the socio-demographic composition of the population or the development of life in the community. Just as visual evidence does not reach much further back than the late 19th century, the same holds for this commentary.¹⁴ Here, however, some of the contestants begin to tread on thin ice. The 20th century is a troubled period in Czech history, in many places seeing a partial or complete change in the country's population, especially during the Second World War. It began with the transfer of ethnic Czechs from the Sudetenland, was followed by the extermination of Czech Jewish and Romani minorities, and ended with the expulsion of most of the German-speaking

¹⁴ Obec Kašava. 2015, August 4. Obec Kašava [video file].

population from Czech territory. These shifts in population were accompanied by severe disruptions to the sociocultural system of villages. The rise of the Communist regime directly influenced the countryside through collectivization, which from 1949 led to the implementation of a centrally planned economy, involving the expropriation of or loss of property rights to farm assets and disincentives to private enterprise or its prohibition. These developments also affected the non-agricultural population of villages (see e.g. Blažek – Kubálek 2008). However, references to these historical milestones are missing from village presentations. Such references would disrupt the *continuity* indispensably bound to rural discourse and jeopardize connections to roots: the interruption of genealogies, both imaginary and real, would lead to the absence of denizen families, casting doubt on the nature of the village as a space of dependable and close social relationships (Kandert 2004a). But at the same time, such a representation of an unproblematic national past is part of Czech national discourse. The “ancestors” left us with a heritage and we are to preserve and develop it; in the end it does not matter who those ancestors were precisely, what matters is the *heritage* that remains. This accent of national discourse is emphasized by references to an acceptable past, e.g. commemorative plaques referring to major historical events (victims of both world wars) or places where famous people stayed, worked, or lived. However, these monuments represent cultural memory, i.e. memory socially codified and embodied in material form (Assmann 2001: 50) and even these codified commemorations of the past rarely appear in the video presentations of villages. What is missing as a rule in these representations is any connection to the second half of the 20th century, the period of Communist Party rule.

What remains is a hazy picture of the past framed by the founding of the village in the distant past and frequently unspecified pictures “from the past of the village” at the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century. How is it possible then to manifest *continuity*, a quality that appears to be significant in the discourse of rurality? This brings us to the third mode of relating to the past, namely by its performance. While implicit or explicit material references to the past are primarily present in pre-recorded videos “about the village”, the construction of the past through performance is present to almost the same extent in both video presentations and recordings of guided tours given to the judging committee. It is therefore important to analyse the strategies behind the construction of (the illusion) of the past together with the strategy of social cohesion.

Jan Assmann (2001: 46–56), in relation to the construction of the past, distinguishes between two types of memory. The first, called cultural memory, is stable, codified by social acceptance, fixed and usually embodied in the form of corpora of texts, images, and rituals typical of a given period, i.e. memory objectified and institutionalized. The vast majority of the above-mentioned representations of the past draw on such cultural memory, or at least implicitly refer to it. The second type of memory Assmann identifies is communicative memory, describing how the past is transmitted on an everyday basis, by direct or closely mediated experience. While Assmann focuses his analysis primarily on speech and scripture, Paul Connerton (1989) concentrates on performative forms of relating to the past. Connerton stresses the relation of memory and body and establishes the concept of habitual memory, which is constructed and transmitted through various commemorative rituals and corporeal practices. Zandlová (2015: 226–240), using the concept of habitual memory in her analysis of the ethno-revitalization movement of the Bulgarian Aromanians, refers directly to “folklorism as a manifestation of memory sedated in bodily/corporeal positions, activities, techniques, movements and gestures” (2015: 303). Based on the analysis of our data, however, it seems that this “embodied memory” is not necessarily just seen in the construction of ethnocultural traditions (whether we call it folklore or folklorism), although it is here where it is most obvious. The key category in this context is *continuity*, or more precisely *roots*. Rather sporadic, but certainly employed, are strategies of a performative construction of the “ancient” past, i.e. a past which is so distant that it can be disconnected from any grounding in historical time or rural discourse. An example is the invention of “Celtic” rituals in the South Bohemian village Holašovice,¹⁵ in which a villager built a complex of megalithic stone circles (called “cromlechs”, inspired by Stonehenge) on a meadow near the village¹⁶ where Celtic fire festivals are celebrated each year.¹⁷ Holašovice, however, can and does relate to *roots*, *continuity* and *heritage* in many other ways (the village was added in 1998 to the UNESCO World Heritage List for its “village character”, exemplifying rural Baroque style). This performed past in the form of an invented tradition is therefore rather a way of subverting the aura of an “open-air museum”, albeit through the construction of an alternative “open-air museum” displaced in

¹⁵ While this data exceed the time span of our research sample, we decided to include these to better exemplify this kind of representation.

¹⁶ Jihobrik, © 2010–2017. O Holašovickém Stonehenge [online].

¹⁷ Obec Holašovice. © 2017. Slavnosti slunovratu a keltská ohňová noc [online].

both time and place (notwithstanding that Celtic settlements in the territory of the Czech Republic have been documented). In contrast to Holašovice, the North Bohemian village of Pysk, affected by an almost total displacement after the Second World War, its population now composed almost exclusively of the newly settled and cottage owners, can only with great difficulty follow up the discourse of *roots* and *continuity*. Yet they also choose the “distant past”, ungrounded in time, or at most partially so, to perform their relationship to *roots* and *continuity*, putting emphasis on achieving *groundedness in local space*. Drawing inspiration from historical postcards from the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century, the villagers decided to chop down the trees on the hill above the village so that the rock underneath was exposed and placed at its peak an inflatable castle, thereby restoring a semblance of its past appearance.¹⁸ The whole performance, from deforestation to inflation of the castle, was held as a communal event attended by the entire village. The case of the stone circles of Holašovice was initially an individual affair, tenuously related to the locality and its history, which, through its adoption by the village and performance of “rituals” on a regular basis, became a habitual memory in the sense of Connerton. The case of the castle of Pysk was a one-time event, which was, however, widely shared by the villagers (according to the available data) and was significantly grounded both locally and historically (at least in part). While Holašovice attempted to create a habitual memory by an invented tradition, Pysk sought rather to establish a place from a non-place (Augé 2010) or even to construct a site of memory (Nora 2010). Such a performed past, drawing on distant history and not adhering to rural discourse, is however more the exception than the rule in village representations. More frequent is the performance of a past that is also in a sense timeless, but that does belong to the repertoire of rural discourse. This repertoire consists of ethnocultural traditions that manifest continuity (imagined or real) based on local folk art and folklore. In their video presentations, many contestants show folk architecture, folk costumes, annual customs, and traditional technologies or products, all to the background accompaniment of folk songs. Folklore demonstrations are also seen as a suitable component of the guided tour given to the judging committee, as for example in the series of examples of local folklore put together by the village of Hošťálková:

¹⁸ R TIMCZ. 2017, July 22. Pysk (2014) [video file]; R TIMCZ. 2014, June 19. Hrad Pysk 2014 [video file].

It started with folk music, during which local slivovitz and pies were served. After this came the mayor's speech, a ride on a horse-drawn wagon, a goat-milking demonstration, a meeting with the beekeeper, who offered mead to the committee, a visit to a log house (roubenka), where a soup from the local cuisine (kyselica) was served, and where there was an exhibition of traditional hand-crafted products and food. The visit ended with a folklore performance by the children's ensemble. Rurality actually evoked sentiments of emotion, joy and pride. This guided tour for the evaluation committee was a well-worked out theatrical performance, where only the mayor (as its director) and the representatives (as his support team) were not in rural “mode” (were not wearing folk costumes, but formal dress).¹⁹

This and similar performances indicate that the construct of rurality based on ethnocultural traditions devised in the nineteenth century and its manifestation are regarded as important by villages and their representatives. Such a “rurality” in the form of folklore confirms that the village has not lost its substance, and by its continuous maintenance the village retains its roots. Folklore serves as a metaphor of uninterrupted continuity. Moreover, folklore is perceived as locally specific while at the same time being part of national discourse. However, this is not an inherent quality of folklore but rather the result of political, scientific and artistic activity during the ethno-emancipation of the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The aim of these endeavours was not only to find evidence of authentic Czech culture and thus prove the continuity of the Czech nation (Moravcová 2008), but also to include the villager, until that time on the margins, in the society of the nation (Pavlicová – Uhlíková 2011). The inclusion of the villager in Czech society was achieved by constructing an image of the countryside as a place of pure Czechness, in which sprung the creativity of the Czech people and over which reigned high moral values. The glorification of the village and villagers was established by romanticizing folklore. Academic discourse, alongside political and public discourse, contributed to the fact that various manifestations of folklore became part of an invented tradition (Hobsbawm 1983). Because of this, even though it might not be evident at first sight, the performance of folklore is more than just a manifestation of local character: it counts as a proof of a healthy and self-confident local society that has not lost connection to its own *roots* and that has retained its authenticity. Village presentations may further legitimize authenticity by the support of

¹⁹ Kovář, Milan. 2014, May 21. Prezentace obce Hošťálková [video file].

a contributions by experts, such as the following words spoken to the judging committee by an ethnographer who had conducted long-term research on folk culture in the village of Kašava: *“Folklore ensembles started from scratch [in the 1960s] because men from here were leaving for Ostrava long before people in Haná and Slovácko started to take off their folklore costumes and to abandon their customs [...] the representatives show common sense [...] because they have set themselves the sensible goal of making Kašava not only a place of residence for its inhabitants, but also a home, where they can find the roots of their identity.”*²⁰

Even though rural “tradition” has not been continuously preserved in most villages of the Czech Republic, the absence of such a tradition is perceived by villages themselves as a serious disadvantage. Folklore (or folklorism) symbolizes a healthy and authentic society even for municipalities where the continuity of the tradition has been interrupted.²¹ This is accounts for why folklore or revived or newly created ethnocultural traditions are included in village presentations (Toncrová – Uhlíková 2014). For example, Nová Hradečná, a village near the German border, presented a series of rituals that do not originate from the locality, but which draw inspiration from public discourse. As part of their presentation they staged rituals such as the Three Kings, a Masquerade Ball, Burning of the Witches²², Halloween, and St. Nicholas Day, whose form was based on a shared stereotype produced by the media.²³ Municipalities that do not include folklore (ethnocultural traditions) in their presentations (because they do not possess any), comment on this shortcoming, as does for example the mayor of the village of Krásná: *“Of course, it will be difficult to compete with those beautiful Moravian villages. But we will see. Our community is strong.”*²⁴

The manifestation of religiosity, or more precisely Christianity, can also be interpreted as an expression of roots and cultural heritage. Shots of sacred buildings – churches, chapels, and Ways of the Cross – are most often used to

²⁰ Obec Kašava. 2016, September 21. Krajské kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2016 v Kašavě [video file].

²¹ In many villages folklore was lost due to the selective intergenerational transmission of culture (since the 19th century) or due to population changes (especially after 1945, which saw displacement, migration to cities, and the arrival of seasonal cottage-goers).

²² The Witches (*Čarodějnice*), or Burning of the Witches (*Pálení čarodějnic*), is a ritual of the traditional annual cycle, held on Walpurgis Night (30th April). It consists primarily of burning bonfires to prevent the influence of evil forces, which, according to folk belief, are in effect on that night.

²³ For example, Obec Nová Hradečná. 2014, September 11. Celostátní kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2014-02 [online].

²⁴ Toman, Petr. 2015, August 10. Krásná je krásná. Porotci zvolili vesnici roku 2015. *Idnes.cz* [online].

illustrate this. However, in relation to habitual memory, it is the commemorative ceremony itself, the church service, which is the most significant. Municipalities with a strong religious practice use footage of worship and the presence of the clergy during the guided tour of the judging committee in order to manifest the stable normative value system with which religion is associated. Local clergymen are also presented as representatives of local society. Both Wallachian municipalities (Kateřinice and Kašava), winners of the competition in 2014 and 2016, respectively, used faith and the local priest as one of the central features of their representations. The connection between faith, the past, and the image of the world order was explicitly formulated by the ethnographer already quoted above during the judging committee guided tour of Kašava: *"There have been three pillars since the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire [and] if these three columns are in concordance, then [everything] works well. These are the village, the school, and the presbytery."*²⁵

The notion of continuity does not only involve looking to the past. Presentations often include children, who themselves evoke the future of the village and who will continue as successors in village leisure activities, seen for example in the child apprentice firefighters of many villages (eg. Krásná)²⁶ and in the young musicians of Kašava.²⁷

Social Cohesion: Community and Originality

Habitual memory, as well as relating to the distant past, to timeless past, or to a past codified as properly rural (manifested in folklore and perhaps also religion), also informs the construction of local identity. We must therefore also consider other forms of performance that take place in the context of the competition by which this habitual memory is formed. An indispensable part of the social representations of municipalities are performances, which within the construct of rurality designated as the "countryside character" emphasize the aspect of social cohesion. Social cohesion is created and consolidated through relationships, feelings of proximity, frequency of interaction, common activity and trust, all of which are necessary for the sharing of group norms and values (Novotná 2010: 33–34). This corresponds with the image of the traditional village community, built on the principle of informal social control and neighbourly

²⁵ Obec Kašava. 2016, September 21. Krajské kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2016 v Kašavě [video file].

²⁶ Růžička, Jiří. 2015, September 6. MTJ VIDEO 140 Celostátní komise v Krásné [video file].

²⁷ Obec Kašava. 2016, September 21. Krajské kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2016 v Kašavě [video file].

assistance, which ensures the moral and existential dependence of its members. The rituals performed by local communities then reaffirm shared values and reinforce the notion of belonging (Durkheim 2002).

According to expert discourse, villagers see and present themselves as a distinctive and autonomous group (Kandert 1998: 37). They are presented as a group that, despite the various interests of their members, demonstrates its unity vis-à-vis foreigners and as a result are not seen to have any disputes (Pospíšil 1997). They see their village as local patriots (Kandert 2004a: 46, Kandert 2004b: 288). This is also shown in village presentations emphasizing the local boundedness of their community. Everything happens within the compass of the village boundaries and the circle of locals, into which seasonal cottage-goers are only admitted if they substantially contribute to the social life of the village (Prysk²⁸). Presentations of successful villages emphasize that everyone knows each other, knows everything about each other, and participates in every communal activity. The mayor always takes the role of guide to the judging committee, while other villagers take minor roles as extras manifesting a cohesive mass. The mayor often acts not only as an expert in the life of his/her village, but also as a person who has the broad support and absolute trust of the villagers. Sometimes the villagers even joke about it, as in Kašava, where as part of the welcome show it was said in jest to the committee *“And if you do not like something, remember: the mayor is always right.”*²⁹ Putnam even claims that such paternalism is important in maintaining social cohesion (Keller 2009: 65). Another aspect in which the boundedness of the village along with its autonomy is manifested is the role played by the village school or kindergarten. The school not only educates the young generation of villagers but also participates in local events, as well as participating in development projects. The image of an autonomous and functioning bounded local community may further be exhibited by the enumeration of successfully implemented projects; the image of cohesion is strengthened by deliberately omitting from such enumerations the names of individuals who contributed to the successful implementation of projects, which are always presented as an achievement of the village as a whole.

The manifestation of the Romantic myth of a cohesive and socially and economically isolated rural community that possesses a distinctive culture

²⁸ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Prysk – 2. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

²⁹ Obec Kašava. 2016, September 21. Krajské kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2016 v Kašavě [video file].

(Dangřlová 2001), as described in ethnological literature (see Válka 2011), is realized both by referring to continuity and by demonstrating forms of cooperation common in contemporary society in general. Because many aspects of social cohesion from the past have either been weakened or have vanished (e.g. neighbourly assistance, informal social control, institutionalized affiliation to a church, a lord or common workplace), there has been an increasing need for activities that give alternative ways to integrate people that have diverse livelihoods, economic opportunities and knowledge, and to bridge the parallel membership of villagers in many other social groups. Putnam (in Keller 2009: 64) highlights the importance of the various voluntary organizations based on people's own initiatives for building cohesion in contemporary society. Those organizations form the basis for "the virtue of the community embedded in interpersonal relationships" (Putnam in Keller 2009: 64). It enables people to create "informal contacts between those who feel a certain social, professional, expert or interest-related affinity" (Keller 2009: 67). Social organizations thus acquire not only social but ultimately political importance (Keller 2009: 64).

Therefore it is not surprising that social cohesion is also represented in an array of activities organized by village associations. Although their repertoire varies according to locality, associations unequivocally manifest the involvement of villagers in the social and cultural life of the village. An abundance of organized leisure activities also manifests the notion of a high quality of life in the village. Many associations are presented in direct connection to the continuity of local society. These need not just be folklore ensembles or associations concerned with traditional folk culture referring to a local past: there are also firefighters (showing both contemporary and historical machinery and uniforms), gamekeepers, amateur actors, football players, scouts, and the gymnastics organization Sokol for all ages. The village also represents itself with leisure activities that draw on the repertoires of contemporary state-nationalist and global discourse – sports and dance clubs (cycling, floorball, motocross, skiing, aerobics, Zumba), musical ensembles (brass bands, bell-ringers, contemporary folk bands), civic associations focused on the organization of social life (Krásenské Buchty³⁰, Association of Supporters of Kateřinice³¹). In addition to associations, presentations also often include "flagship" factories and

³⁰ Růžička, Jiří. 2015, September 6. MTJ VIDEO 140 Celostátní komise v Krásné [video file].

³¹ solano620. 2014, September 8. Presentace obce – Kateřinice 2014 celostátní [video file].

production companies, even if what they produce does not have any traditional pedigree. For example, Kateřinice repeatedly presented themselves by their production of hockey pucks,³² drawing on the fact that hockey is considered the Czech national game, through which the national identity is negotiated. Even individuals successful in both local and national sports competitions have their place among the presented activities of the village. For example, Kašava (2016) mentions the outstanding performances of a local junior athlete.³³ During a judging committee guided tour the presentation of villagers' activities usually takes the form of a fair or exhibition panels are used. Each activity is assigned a stand or a panel, and the judges and the audience, respectively, have the opportunity to see the repertoire of activities of each association in one place. However, organized leisure activities are not only presented in such a static form, even if this form is to some degree compulsory. An important role is played by performances, which usually take a collective form in order to express the team spirit of the villagers, and in which villages strive for originality and distinctiveness in order to gain a competitive edge over other villages. Commenting on the guided tour put on for the judging committee, the mayor of Jeseník nad Odrou said: "*They were pleasantly surprised by the overall concept of the presentation [...] that we did not walk them around the village [...] but symbolically moved parts of the locality into the sports complex. They really acknowledged that [...], since they saw it for the first time.*"³⁴ However, as Bauman points out (1995: 20), the idea of independent, individual, and autonomous creation is illusory, consisting rather in a selection of a plethora of "prefabricated" elements – it is this selection that makes up the supposed authenticity and originality. At the same time, it is necessary to choose "what glitters the most, what attracts the gaze, what is pleasant to look at..." (Bauman 1995: 45, translated by the authors). Accordingly, villagers have a propensity for ostentatious performances; the vainest villages are also the most successful (see Girard 1998).

In their "hunt for a bit of sparkle" villages put on musical, dramatic, or sports performances that are generally comprehensible, shared, and accepted. Such performances either showcase the activities of local associations, and sometimes of the whole community, or are specially put together for the

³² solano620. 2014. May 14. Prezentace obce Kateřinice [video file].

³³ Obec Kašava. 2015, August 4. Obec Kašava [video file].

³⁴ Jeseník nad Odrou. 2013, September 5. Celostátní komise vesnice roku 2013 [video file].

competition with the aim of creating an atmosphere of cohesion and displaying common social activity. Examples of the former (often drawing on invented traditions) include fire-fighting sports³⁵ (Sebranice³⁶), majorettes (Lkáň³⁷), extracts from theatre plays (Úsilné³⁸), local legends (Úsilné³⁹), Burning of the Witches⁴⁰ (Nová Hradečná⁴¹, Kolečov⁴²), Christian processions (Sebranice⁴³), musical productions of folklore ensembles or bands playing folk, bluegrass, or brass music. Some villages even created their own anthems (e.g. Kateřinice 2014⁴⁴). The latter type of performance often makes use of the media, particularly of present-day pop-culture, such as sketches inspired by film and television about villages and the countryside. For example, footage of judging committee guided tours of Kateřinice⁴⁵ and Hošťálková⁴⁶ in 2014 shows villagers dressed as characters from the film *Babovřesky* by Zdeněk Troška.⁴⁷ However, many scenes transcend the theme of the village and the region and refer to various pop-cultural motifs that do not relate to villages at all. In *Rádlo*, a judging committee was guided by characters from the popular Czech animated TV series, *Mach a Šebestová*.⁴⁸ Another such motif is retro, used, for example, in *Kašava*, where video footage of a guided tour for the judging committee shows a youth Spartakiad event accompanied by the hit "Poupata" performed by Michal David,

³⁵ Czech: *požární sport*. All Czech municipalities must by law have a volunteer fire department, and local competitions testing fire-fighting skills have taken place since 1967, in this influenced by the fire-fighting sports that began taking place in the Soviet Union in 1937. The competitions, however, retain their popularity to this day.

³⁶ Sebranice u Litomyšle – Official video kanál. 2016, November 9. Sebranice | Oficiální kanál – Návštěva celostátní komise Vesnice roku 2016 | 31. 8. 2016 [video file].

³⁷ archiv old. 2013, June 12. vesnice roku 2013 [video file].

³⁸ FaktorTeam. 2014, October 30. Úsilné – Vesnice roku – komise ČR 2014 [video file].

³⁹ In *Úsilné* (see note 38 above) the judges were guided around the village by a monk character of local legend.

⁴⁰ See note 21 above.

⁴¹ Obec Nová Hradečná. 2014, September 10. Celostátní kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2014-01 [online].

⁴² Ďuran, Pavel. 2014, June 20. KOLEŠOV VESNICE ROKU [video file].

⁴³ Sebranice (see note 36 above) organized a Christian procession on the day of the judging committee guided tour, and the large crowd that attended effectively demonstrated the social cohesion of the village.

⁴⁴ solano620. 2014, September 8. Prezentace obce – Kateřinice 2014 celostátní [video file].

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Krchňák, Jiří. 2014, September 23. Hošťálková Oranžová stuha 2014 [video file].

⁴⁷ A slapstick comedy caricaturing the Czech countryside, which was the most popular Czech film of 2013.

⁴⁸ Čiháková, Zuzana. 2014, December 20. *Rádlo vesnice roku 2014* [video file].

pop star of the normalization period.⁴⁹ Similarly, in Úsilné a villager appeared dressed in the uniform of the Czech Communist police.⁵⁰ In the field of music villages do not hesitate to draw on global discourse. Video presentations of several municipalities have American country as background music. Videos from Kateřinice feature the local ensemble “Good News Bells” (*Zvonky dobré zprávy*) playing not just the anthem of the Czech Republic but also the anthem of the European Union.⁵¹

But global inspiration is not just limited to music. In Kašava, reference was made to the migration crisis of the time⁵² and Krásná performed a sketch featuring pirates inspired by the film series *Pirates of the Caribbean*,⁵³ while men from Dolní Újezd wearing kilts performed their take on Scottish “traditional” dancing.⁵⁴ The most transparent example of cultural syncretism can be seen in the video “Dolní Újezd žije!”⁵⁵ created for the competition in 2013, in which a story is created from a series of sketches referencing several motifs, both pop-cultural and belonging to invented traditions.⁵⁶

Both music and drama performances oscillate between ritual and play (or carnival). Both of these forms of social interaction offer elements by which social cohesion is established: sharing, common goals, common experiences, and a sense of specificity based on deliberate isolation from others (see McKenna 1994). Ritual and play serve different functions, however, even if both refer to shared norms and values. It is not just a case of ritual being bound exclusively to local discourse while play draws from the media or global discourse. Rituals confirm and consolidate, and eventually also redefine and negotiate the values

⁴⁹ Obec Kašava. 2016, September 21. Krajské kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2016 v Kašavě [video file].

⁵⁰ FaktorTeam. 2014, October 30. Úsilné – Vesnice roku – komise ČR 2014 [video file].

⁵¹ solano620. 2014, September 8. Prezentace obce – Kateřinice 2014 celostátní [video file].

⁵² Obec Kašava. 2016, September 21. Krajské kolo soutěže Vesnice roku 2016 v Kašavě [video file].

⁵³ Růžička, Jiří. 2015, September 6. MTJ VIDEO 140 Celostátní komise v Krásné [video file].

⁵⁴ Hladík, Stanislav. 2013, September 10. DOLNÍ ÚJEZD ŽIJE [video file]; Vesnice roku. 2013, October 22. Skoti v Dolním Újezdu [video file].

⁵⁵ Hladík, Stanislav. 2013, September 10. DOLNÍ ÚJEZD ŽIJE [video file].

⁵⁶ The video opens with the motif of the chairman and officials of the Agricultural Cooperative alongside Cecilka from Troška’s film *Slunce, seno a pár facek* (Sun, Hay and a Few Slaps), followed by a dramatic song from the TV series *Fort Boyard*, during the course of which the villagers assemble. After this, members of Sokol arrive to the accompaniment of the song *Sokolíci*, followed by youth in folk costume. Among other motifs are the main theme of the TV series *Nemocnice na kraji města* (Hospital on the Edge of Town), the song “Ne, pětku ne” (No, not an F!) performed by Pavel Horňák, another pop star from the normalization period, and the main theme of the DIY and amateur gardening TV show. *Receptář prima nápadů* (Recipe Book of Great Ideas).

shared by the community (Durkheim 2002). In this respect, many performances by competing villages may be understood as ritual. They often refer to the value of continuity, usually via invented traditions, examples being church services, singing of village anthems (Kateřinice, Kolečov), performances by folklore ensembles, but may also include performances referring to outside the locality, such as the playing of the European Union anthem that we mentioned above. Rituals of individual villages are usually repeated in presentations both on various occasions in the same year (presentation video, judging committee guided tour, victory celebrations) and over the years. From the records, it is apparent that the participants involved perceive such rituals with all seriousness, pride, and emotion.

As well as ritual, villages also represent themselves by means of play; it can be even argued that play is indispensable in their presentations, as was explicitly remarked by the deputy mayor of Pysk. Above all, such play takes shape in the choreography of performances prepared for the judging committee, and the short (often humorous) sketches that flirt with shared values or, even more often, with expected norms. Absurdity is often a factor, as in the pirate performances in Krásná or the car inspections by the throwback Communist policeman in Úsilné. In the mode of play anything goes, which gives another dimension to village presentations. The mode of non-seriousness (Sokol 2004, Fink 1993) enables themes and issues not consonant with the seriousness of rurality to enter village space. Play, firstly, encourages moments of volition and spontaneity (Caillois 1998), which turns out to be a key element in the social cohesion of villagers. Secondly, play helps give a sparkle and glamour to proceedings. The image of the village as a merry carnival consists not just in taking on costume but also in the reliably popular comedy sketch. As such, performing scenes from the Russian fairy tale film *Morozko* (Father Frost), very popular in the Czech Republic, in which the dialogue is exaggerated to an extent bordering on parody, guarantees success (Jeseník nad Odrou⁵⁷). Thirdly, many presentations are able to convey the notion that the village is not only a place of conservative rurality. For example, masks inspired by the musical *Grease* (Pomáda) may feature in the village masquerade (Krásná⁵⁸) rather than masks drawing on (invented) traditions. In several performances prepared for the judging committee, the representation of the village was even in part lifted out of its own time-space and

⁵⁷ Jeseník nad Odrou. 2013, September 5. Celostátní komise vesnice roku 2013 [video file].

⁵⁸ Růžička, Jiří. 2015, September 6. MTJ VIDEO 140 Celostátní komise v Krásné [video file].

set into a non-rural context of play. Examples include performances prepared in Prysk and Hošťálková. In Prysk the nearby football pitch was transformed into an airport with pilots, flight attendants, and passengers.⁵⁹ Hošťálková in the 2017 competition ceased to be an open-air museum, as it was in the 2014 competition, and became a village in which a partisan unit was operating.⁶⁰ However, play does not solely consist of the violation, overturning, or hyperbolic distortion of values and norms, but also lies in the ambiguity of a performance, as is clearly illustrated by the performance of the village's partisan past. Pointedness and novelty, often goals of a presentation, were here created by double entendre and by the transformation of original meanings into new ones. By means of jokes and absurdity, the performers contest their roles as solely being villagers isolated in bounded space. The reversal of values during play opens the possibility for different, often ambiguous interpretations that are connected to a multiplicity of worlds outside of the village. The "Scottish" dancers in kilts mentioned already above can be understood in the context of a South Bohemian village as being a homage to Scotland as well as a joke on account of gender roles. Caricature of village gossipmongers (inspired by Troška's film *Babovřesky*) can be a way to exaggerate the stereotype of a villager, thereby both denying its validity as well as affirming it (Allport 2004: 172).

Social cohesion is clearly manifested, especially in recordings of judging committees guided tours, as a fundamental value of the local community of the village. It is performed at two levels, the first concerning common roots and continuity, and the second concerning collective activity based primarily on the will to be together. This means that society is not cemented so much by shared values as it is by creative activity capable of establishing such values. The values that correspond to the representation of the 19th-century village (related mainly to local and state-national discourses concerning the village) are presented through performed rituals (such as church services, the bread and salt greeting ceremony, erecting a maypole, etc.). The values of modern global society (related to global and state-national discourses transcending the village) are presented through play as a mixture of diverse activities inspired by the various repertoires of media discourse.

The village is presented as an ambiguous place, where polysemy can be harmonized: not by establishing new values, but by making everything part of

⁵⁹ Obec Prysk. 2016, July 1. Vesnice roku v Libereckém kraji [video file].

⁶⁰ Graclíková, Hana. 2017, June 21. Obec HOŠŤÁLKOVÁ – krajské kolo Vesnice roku 2017 [video file].

play. It is precisely in play that local, state-national, and global discourses meet, as well as seriousness and non-seriousness. Play does not impose any values to be revered, and does not create any interconnected moral order of the village. On the contrary, play is a tool which enables the village to be understood as part of national society and global society too.

Judging Committee Representations of Victorious Villages: Legitimation of Rurality

The image/representation of the village is also constructed by the judging committee, the voice of which is heard on various fora. The judging committee determines the winners on the basis of presentations and other materials provided by the competing villages. The committee does not justify its decision but posts its verdict on the competition website, giving a summary of the strengths of the victorious villages, accompanied by photographs of the villages. The judging committee's attitudes and perspectives are also revealed on Facebook, by their assessments of submitted presentations, and at award ceremonies.

Eriksen (2007) draws attention to the fact that the policies of international and even national organizations can affect social reality. He shows how UNESCO, through its statements and recommendations, has an impact not only on how cultural heritage is cared for, conserved and presented, but also on people's attitudes, knowledge and identities. Eriksen further demonstrates that the policy of this particular international organization in many respects refers to or directly draws on expert discourse dealing with issues of ethnic and local culture. The impact of such organizations is considerable, not only because they are part of the bureaucratic apparatus and are endowed with rational-legal authority (Weber 1998), but also due to the fact that, according to Bourdieu and Foucault, dominant discourse is a tool of power as well as a means of its expression. Power is always a matter of relationship, it is "a way in which certain actions modify others" (Foucault 1982: 788). Bourdieu argues that holders of symbolic power, i.e. representatives of a dominant culture, have the ability to construct meanings and reality (Bourdieu 2010). An important role is played not only by institutions but also by experts. However, the operation of power is not unilateral, for "agents apply to the objective structures of the social world structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident" (Bourdieu 1989: 21). The village representations that are presented for the Village of the

Year Competition appear to be understandable and objective precisely because they arise from ongoing negotiations between actors. In this it is seen that “in the struggle for the production and imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world, the holders of bureaucratic authority never establish an absolute monopoly, even when they add the authority of science to their bureaucratic authority” (Bourdieu 1989: 22).

Foucault understands power and knowledge as interconnected and interdependent, the one instigating the other. Knowledge leads to control and the demand for control requires knowledge. This is the reason why Foucault uses the term power/knowledge, which can be productive as well as repressive (Foucault 2000a). As argued by Duineveld and Van Assche (2011), it is precisely this unity of power and knowledge that contributes to the creation of local politics: “Revisiting Foucault’s concepts of power/knowledge and discourse [enables] a detailed analysis of the process of emergence, solidifying and institutional embedding of new forms of heritage and nature as new discursive objects” (Duineveld – Van Assche: 2011: 79). The judging committee for the Village of the Year Competition is delegated with power and possesses knowledge that is formed in the context of exercising this power. Its power/knowledge is manifested on the Internet not only by the aforementioned websites with their unified and sophisticated design, cultivated language and professional photographs, but also by its demeanour throughout visits to individual villages, be it for the purpose of evaluation or for awarding prizes. The discourse created by the judging committee is unequivocal, having an unmistakably rural character in the spirit of *Volkskunde*, a discipline established through studies of the peasant population and the art of the late 19th and early 20th century. The discourse of rural idyll (Bell 2006) finds expression both in the means of presentation and in the themes that are selected.

The image of the village as comprised of material features is far more prevalent in the representations of the judging committee than in the presentations of the contestants. This is perhaps due to the modes of presentation available to the judging committee (written description accompanied by photographs, in contrast to the video presentations of contestants) and to the discourses of *Volkskunde* and art, the essence of which was the depiction of convincing rural scenes aimed to arouse the viewer’s emotions. Photographs chosen to characterize winning villages are always “picturesque”, either of the surrounding landscape or of the village itself, thereby supporting the idea of a village as set in a landscape of majestic trees, ponds, holloways and other such enduring

natural features. Such images of the village do not make reference to ecology. Statements of the judging committee on the competition web pages speak of “*a picturesque village at the foot of the White Carpathians*” (Kozojídky),⁶¹ or “*a village surrounded by the walls of the Carpathian Mountains, which from time immemorial has lived in some kind of isolation from the rest of the world*” (Kašava).⁶² The importance of history to the village is undeniable; the founding date of the village appears to legitimize its existence. Being grounded in the past is also manifested in stylistic and lexical choices. An archaic style evokes a nostalgic view of the village: “*the picturesque ‘dědina’ [village] of Nová Hradečná is located in the lee of the hill of Bradlo, the place of many local legends, ...*”⁶³ A similar effect is also achieved by the use of dialect (e.g. the vernacular “dědina”⁶⁴ instead of the usual Czech word for “village”). Photographs show buildings and their settings deemed typical of villages in the 19th and early 20th century. Any open-air museum would be happy to have such “stereotypical” photographs in its collection. The language used by the judging committee only serves to corroborate further the importance given to village traditions and folklore: “*The wine cellars and the belfry nearby were built in a way to harmonize with the rural style of the locality, which is indicative of the emphasis the village puts on maintaining its rural character...*” (Kozojídky).⁶⁵

The strategy of depicting a village we have just described shows the village as an exhibit worthy of admiration, not as a place for contemporary everyday life. This explains why there are usually no people in pictures, the only exceptions being situations usually considered rural in an ethnocultural sense (e.g. a carnival). There is a shared notion that the village itself shapes its inhabitants, who as a result possess such qualities as cordiality, openness, and hospitality, which are then positively evaluated by the judging committee. To continue the quotation above describing the village (“dědina”) of Kašava nestled in the Carpathian

⁶¹ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kozojídky – 3. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁶² Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kašava – 1. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ Moravian dialect, etymologically derived from “inherit”, from times when the role of the ruling master/family of a village was often passed on from generation to generation by inheritance.

⁶⁵ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kozojídky – 3. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

Mountains, its isolation from the rest of the world “allows the preservation of its apparent distinctiveness, evident both in the villagers’ manner of speech and their character and warmth” (Kašava).⁶⁶ Photographs from both official competition websites and Facebook show that the village is inhabited mostly by “fashion models” wearing folk costumes, whose only purpose in life appears to be to preserve and carry on folk traditions, i.e. local customs and the making of traditional dishes and traditional products. Captions to photographs reinforce such an impression of village life, for example one saying that “local traditions are preserved in the village – a feast in folk costume with roasting of a he-goat,⁶⁷ fašank⁶⁸, Mother’s Day, Children’s Day, wine tasting, and for over forty years also the October exhibition of fruits and vegetables” (Kozojídky),⁶⁹ and another saying that “the village is proud of its traditional glass production” (Prysk).⁷⁰ Tradition is here understood as transcendently present, site/location-bound, and intergenerationally transmitted, this kind of transmission being its essence. When no link is forged to an ethnocultural tradition – either because it is not possible to do so, or because such a link has not been (consciously) created, or a combination of both – this very absence may be appreciated by the judging committee, which still manages to refer to the rural and traditional in such cases: “Even with its handicap of post-war resettlement, [Krásná] dares to compete with inland villages” (Krásná).⁷¹

What remains of the past is always connected to the present. The judging committee in their evaluations relate continuity to care of the countryside, restoration of monuments (e.g. chapels, churches), commemoration of history, and maintenance of ethnocultural traditions. Using primarily words alone, the committee must justify the importance of rural representation as a heritage and tradition for future generations. Consequently, continuity is a vital notion for the village, and, as such, it must be actively promoted by the villagers.

⁶⁶ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kašava – 1. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁶⁷ This feast refers to the name of the village: Kozojídky consist of the words “koza” (goat) and “jíst” (to eat) and can be roughly translated as “Where the goats are eaten”.

⁶⁸ Final days of a carnival festival around Shrove Tuesday celebrated in Slavic countries, in the Czech Republic as Masopust, comparable to Mardi Gras.

⁶⁹ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kozojídky – 3. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁷⁰ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Prysk – 2. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁷¹ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Krásná – 1. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2015 [online].

In addition to the image of “permanently revived traditions”, the village is also defined by a “rich social and cultural life”. Statements of such a kind feature in the judging committee’s evaluations of every winning village. For example, in glass-making Prysk “*life is fully enhanced in the village through the activities of sports and cultural associations with the active contribution of cottage owners*” (Prysk),⁷² and in Kozojídky “*social life in the village is of a high standard, even though the village is located near the city*” (Kozojídky).⁷³ Such evaluations by the judging committee always mention the number of associations that are engaged with social cohesion in the community, and thereby guarantee its high level, while referring to the inventory of events and activities that are organized: “*This [inventory] corresponds with a rich social and cultural life, the maintenance of traditional customs and holidays, which are prepared, by civic associations and folklore groups, led by the famous [folklore group] Kašava with the help of the village [officials]*” (Kašava).⁷⁴ What exactly the village focuses on and the nature of the values they pursue is immaterial in this context; purely social, ecological, tourism- or youth-oriented activities are also highlighted, in addition to ethnocultural traditions. Also appreciated in the village by the judging committee are innovativeness and creativity. This can be observed particularly on Facebook, where there are photographs and videos of, for example, performances of a teenage pop-folk band⁷⁵, a children’s song about a leaf beetle⁷⁶, and a Scottish dance.⁷⁷ In 2017 the village Hošťálková was awarded a special prize for a commemoration of its Second World War partisan traditions.⁷⁸ Activities appreciated by the judging committee share in common their village-wide character. There is no room for celebrating extraordinary individuals. All activities must constitute a platform for social gatherings. What is important is the notion of a shared goal and the ability to work together. An emphasis is put precisely on community cohesion in the award speeches of the judging committee: “*We also wish you much love for each other, because it can’t*

⁷² Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Prysk – 2. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁷³ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kozojídky – 3. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁷⁴ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kašava – 1. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2016 [online].

⁷⁵ Vesnice roku. 2016, September 13. [Talentovaní hudebníci ze Sebranic] [video file].

⁷⁶ Vesnice roku. 2016, September 13. [Rozinky z Kozojídek] [video file].

⁷⁷ Vesnice roku. 2013, October 22. Skoti v Dolním Újezdu [video file].

⁷⁸ Krajský úřad Zlínského kraje. 2017, June 12. Slavkov byl vyhlášen vesnicí roku 2017 ve Zlínském kraji [online].

be filmed. [...] That you pull together, that cohesion and communality are intrinsically yours – these are qualities that you cannot pretend to have. It must be you!” (Kateřinice)⁷⁹. It is the construct of rurality that guarantees the character of an unspoiled village, and which we might see as a stereotype in the evaluations of winning villages: *“Many associations operate in the municipality and their activities supplement the unique atmosphere and image of the village. A natural philosophy of life and humility emanates from all the village inhabitants. To put it simply, ‘There is a good life in Kačice!’”* (Kateřinice).⁸⁰

The discourse of the judging committee is essentially based on three interrelated pillars: turn-of-the-20th-century national ideology (highlighted through literature and visual art), *Volkskunde*, and communal life policy (Keller 2009). The judging criteria derived from these prove important, despite the fact that the rules of the competition do not declare any of them. In this sense, the discourse of the judging committee supports the representation of the village as a rural idyll. By consolidating the idea of the village as a one-dimensional reality (a contained, coherent culture), this discourse does not concede the multi-dimensionality of worlds that might actually be in existence there (via global cultural flows). As a result, the dominant judging committee discourse on the one hand disciplines the contestants, so they do what is expected of them, and on the other hand also influences other public discourses, particularly media discourse.

After the Competition: Celebrating Victory

Villages that win prizes celebrate their victories in a number of events, video recordings of which are usually subsequently made available in virtual space. One of these is the announcement of the results of the national rounds; then there are the award ceremonies, which are always hosted by the regional or national winner, and are attended by representatives of organizing institutions, including state representatives. More revealing, however, are those victory celebrations that take place in the municipality of the winning villages when the municipal representatives bring back their awards. While the village’s official award ceremony is once again staged, usually in a specially designated public

⁷⁹ solano620. 2014, September 8. Presentace obce – Kateřinice 2014 celostátní [video file].

⁸⁰ Vesnice roku v Programu obnovy venkova. © 2011. Kateřinice – 1. místo v soutěži Vesnice roku 2014 [online].

area (since the ceremony takes place in summer, it can be held outside, with a stage, VIP tents, refreshment stands, etc.), informal local celebrations (usually without the presence of the judging committee or any other outsiders) ordinarily take place in a local pub or other public space, which need not be adapted to the gaze of outsiders (any rearrangement or decoration not being specific to this occasion but carried out in a like manner to other local celebrations). Although we have significantly less data for these types of representation, it is worth giving brief attention to them because they cast a revealing light on the previously mentioned representations and the construct of rurality created by the competition as a whole. First and foremost, the nature of these informal victory celebrations in individual municipalities may shed light on the following important question: Through which discourses can the lived local identity of competing communities be performed and habitualized and thus be a re/production of constructed rurality?⁸¹

While the official award ceremonies are framed in the same way as performances for the judging committee, and are therefore based on the dominant construct of rurality, informal victory celebrations have a completely different character. The key discursive framework for these informal celebrations is their grounding in the present rather than the past. The past, be it materialized or socially performed, therefore does not play a role in such celebrations: village landscapes (both of residential areas and the surroundings), references to (written) foundation records, monuments, sacred and folk architecture, ethnocultural traditions materialized in local dishes and folk costumes or externalized in stage interpretations of folk songs and folk customs – none of these find a place. This fact was plainly pointed out by a resident of Kateřinice, a village winning an award in 2014, in a voice-over to a video shot showing a pot of boiling sausages, which were being prepared for a local celebration: “*This is what celebrations are really like.*”⁸²

The aim of informal celebrations is above all social cohesion “in practice”, i.e. to celebrate together, to have fun together. The repertoire for this “fun” is therefore chosen to be appropriate to the (actual) taste of the village (majority). Instead of regional dishes, there are globally standardized ones, which are easily prepared in larger quantities (sausages, burgers, French fries, etc.). A diverse

⁸¹ However, even these representations are necessarily involved in the construction of rurality in the form of traces of “villageness”.

⁸² Drábek, Pavel. 2014, September 21. Kateřinice – VESNICE ROKU 2014 – spontální oslava a čekání na starostu [video file].

range of music is played both for listening and for entertainment (dancing). This may include music of various Czech genres (from country and contemporary folk music, through pop of the normalization period, and on to contemporary pop and rock), as well as the repertoire of Czech traditional folk music. Limiting the range to Czech music might occur due to the “demand” of villagers to sing along, thereby excluding non-Czech music. Performances part of such celebrations might include fitness/dance demonstrations by local women (Zumba or belly dance), informal youth activities (diabolo or flowerstick juggling), activities of the local elementary school or art school, or activities prepared by villagers specially for the occasion. Even in villages with some kind of a living ethnocultural tradition, folk costumes or other “traditional” uniforms (those of gamekeepers etc.) never appear during informal celebrations. If there is any local identity manifested through how people dress (suggesting some kind of uniformity), this is done by wearing T-shirts bearing the logo of a local association (e.g. Association of Supporters of Kateřinice⁸³) and never by donning folk costume.

Formal celebrations, where awards are announced by competition officials in the presence of state and regional representatives, are staged to a higher degree and therefore conform considerably more to the rural construct. The announcement of the winners of the national round takes place annually in Luhačovice as part of the International Festival of Children’s Folklore Ensembles called “Písni a tancem” (Singing and Dancing).⁸⁴ This setting explicitly places the competition in the context of ethnocultural traditions – the announcement of winners takes place between folklore ensemble performances. In addition to the announcement of the winning municipalities, there is also an awards ceremony, which takes place in the village that is the overall winner (winning the Golden Ribbon).

The awards ceremony is attended by delegations from all the other winning municipalities⁸⁵ and is organized by the overall winner, who also prepares its script. The awards ceremony is framed by means of the rural construct, which is apparent from the presence of ethnocultural traditions and in some cases also a religious context, and usually also includes some type of performance referring to social cohesion (e.g. the crowning of the mayor of the winning village, as in

⁸³ Ibidem.

⁸⁴ E.g. Vrba, Antonín. 2012, September 15. LUHAČOVICE-finále vyhlásování NEJLEPŠÍ VESNICE ROKU 2012: nejlepší byla vesnice z ČECH [video file]; Zlínský kraj. 2014, September 30. Kateřinice, které zvítězily v krajském kole Vesnice roku, získaly prvenství i na celostátní úrovni [video file].

⁸⁵ The regional round award ceremony is attended by all who won a ribbon; the national round award ceremony is attended by the thirteen winners of the regional round.

Prysk in 2016⁸⁶ or Kateřinice in 2014⁸⁷). Moreover, there is another aspect, absent in the other types of representation we have hitherto considered – a declaration (albeit sometimes inadvertent) that competition activities were actually designed primarily with the competition in mind, the main motivation being the prize money. The financial reward that comes with victory is explicitly mentioned not only in the speeches of politicians at both the regional (Prysk)⁸⁸ and national (Luhačovice, 2015, 2016)⁸⁹ awards ceremonies, but also in official calls for participation in the competition on its Facebook page (Facebook Village of the Year, 2017).⁹⁰ Financial profit was likewise mentioned by the mayor of Kateřinice during informal celebrations of the village’s victory in 2014, the relaxed mood of which was fuelled by the widespread consumption of alcohol, at which he was emboldened to explain his political and managerial strategies to another villager: “*Well, we have problems with the school budget. And every event such as this brings in money for the school, for the kindergarten, for the kitchen ...*”⁹¹

Formal celebrations of victory are carried out in a local-national discourse, in accordance with the construct of rurality, while informal celebrations are rather in a (Czech) glocal discourse fed by various popular sources. Although these informal celebrations are also conscientiously prepared, they are not prepared according to the image of the judging committee or other “strangers”, but on the contrary according to the image of the local inhabitants of the village. These are not attempts to impress the judging committee, but a genuine expression of social cohesion in the contemporary village.

Mass Media: Conventional and Axiomatic Rurality

Media coverage of the Village of the Year Competition includes reports about the winning villages along with interviews with their mayors, in newspapers (both printed and online editions), on the radio, and even on television. However,

⁸⁶ Obec Prysk. 2017, February 8. Vesnice roku 2016 Libereckého kraje [video file].

⁸⁷ solano620. 2014, October 11. Slavnost vesnice roku 2014 [video file].

⁸⁸ Obec Prysk. 2017, February 8. Vesnice roku 2016 Libereckého kraje [video file].

⁸⁹ LUHA TV. 2015, September 24. Festival Písní a tancem a Vesnice roku 2015 [video file]; Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj ČR. 2016, October 4. Ministryně Šlechtová vyhlásila v Luhačovických vítěze soutěže Vesnice roku 2016 [video file].

⁹⁰ Vesnice roku. 2017, April 25. Proč se přihlásit do soutěže Vesnice roku [video file].

⁹¹ Drábek, Pavel. 2014, September 21. Kateřinice – VESNICE ROKU 2014 – spontální oslava a čekání na starostu [video file].

television coverage generally consists of reports of just a few minutes in the Czech public TV documentary series dedicated to the countryside (Náš venkov)⁹² and to folklore (Folklórní magazín)⁹³.

In reporting on the competition results, the mass media de facto reproduce the discourse of the judging committee. In doing so, the mass media further legitimize the representation of the village based on the construct of rurality promoted by the competition, creating a context for the comparison of other reports about villages. The social representation of the village based on this construct of rurality may also be put forward as an axiom – a metaphor or message for all citizens, intended to implant in them a new sense of direction. In this case, the village's social cohesion, local communality and meaningfulness of existence is usually emphasized, as is evident in an interview with the mayor of Kateřinice: *“Our residents respect each other, help each other and cooperate together. Currently we have fourteen associations, the school and kindergarten are run perfectly, and young people have many opportunities to find employment. The children and youth here don't hang around bus stops thinking about what trouble they can get up to.”*⁹⁴

This does not mean, however, that the mass media simply reproduce official press releases: the larger the distance between locality and audience, the greater the stereotyping. National newspapers and the main evening news on national TV usually only reproduce what they have been delivered. Regional and local media, on the other hand, add their own topics into reports as well, seen for example in the following excerpt from the Carlsbad regional adaptation of the information from server idnes.cz about the winner that year, the village of Krásná: *“The biggest pain in the municipality, according to the mayor, is its socially excluded locality. However, he predicts that this will not last for long. ‘We are solving this problem. We would like to buy up all the real estate and build new flats there. We are also troubled by the condition of the road network, but in this we are certainly not an exception,’ revealed Pokorný [...] The mayor has one big dream, and that's an ice rink. ‘But it should be an open one, suitable for ice skating. We have to think about it,’ he indicated.”*⁹⁵

⁹² Řezníčková, Klára. 2014. Smíření nad Odrou [Television series episode].

⁹³ Česká televize. 2011. Vesnice roku Komňa – Slováký rok v Kyjově [Television series episode].

⁹⁴ Rozšafná, Michaela. 2014, September 21. Starosta Vesnice roku 2014: Těšíme se na evropské kolo, lidé už se učí anglicky. Lidovky.cz [online].

⁹⁵ Toman, Petr. 2015, August 10. Krásná je krásná. Porotci zvolili vesnici roku 2015. Idnes.cz [online].

There is not the slightest mention of excluded locality in all the available documentation for the competition (documents and presentation of the village, recording of the judging committee guided tour, village web pages, local newspapers). Even in the excerpt above the topic does not appear in the direct quotation of what the mayor said but is introduced into the text by the author of the piece. And the mayor is very quick to sweep things under the carpet by stating that the "pain" will be soon eased by buying up property. What will happen to residents of the excluded locality is no longer interesting and the mayor draws attention to other investments – improving the conditions of the road network and constructing an ice rink.

Overall, the mass media are both consumers of public discourse as well as its creators; with the national media being more the former and the regional media more the latter. The winning villages covered in the media might not only be seen as representations of rurality but also as representations of contemporary civil society in general, albeit clothed in rural attire.

Conclusion: Pop-Rurality as Interdiscourse

The aim of our text has been to analyse social representations of the village appearing in virtual space in connection with the Village of the Year Competition. The question that drove our investigation was whether and how the construct of rurality is re/produced in these representations. In other words, what is the nature of the "*countryside character*" which enables municipalities to win the competition, seeing that this notion is nowhere defined in the competition rules? We have argued that this "countryside character" is produced by the competition itself through its own practice, while villages successful in the competition reproduce and perform it, either in the documentation they send to the competition panel or in the activities they put on for the judging committee.

The construct of rurality is negotiated in various kinds of state-national and global discourses, each discourse operating with and on the concept of rurality differently and used by actors in specific ways. On the state-national level, we identified, in accordance with Jones (1995: 38), four distinct discourses: 1) expert (academic) discourse, i.e. scientific research on villages; 2) policymaker discourse, that is, of bureaucrats and/or politicians, 3) media discourse employed by newspapers, radio and television, including such diverse forms of art as literature, music, theatre and fine arts – indeed, any form of popularization;

and, last but not least, 4) the discourse of the village and villagers themselves. However, the social construction of rurality is also informed by global discourse, derived on the one hand from that of policymakers (especially of the European Union and global organizations such as UNESCO or the United Nations) and on the other hand from a kind of globally shared discourse around the construct of rurality which may be inferred from a comparison of our data with those of Kumpulainen (2016). In addition to these key discourse frameworks, we also identified the discourse of both state-national and global popular culture as an important resource for the construction of social representations of the countryside. While popular discourse may not refer directly to the village, it undoubtedly influences the construct of rurality both through its form and by its content.

The currently shared construct of rurality appears to be composed of several key elements, which are rooted in different discursive frameworks, and we have seen its character revealed by analysing the representations made for the purpose of the Village of the Year Competition by the municipalities themselves, by the judging committee and by the media. More precisely, the construct of rurality yields up its nature by attending to the tension between these “formal” representations and representations based on informal celebrations, and by identifying what might be missing in these representations.

The dominant construct of rurality and its basic discursive framework originates in the notion of the village as an independent, *locally (both territorially and socially) bounded and demarcated space*. This construct is based primarily on an expert discourse devised by 19th and early 20th century *Volkskunde*, which defined the village as a de facto isolated unit that is socially and culturally homogeneous, and almost fully self-sufficient in terms of subsistence provided by agriculture. The principle of boundedness and cultural distinctiveness was necessary to interpret the village, which was seen as a bearer of “traditional folk culture”, as a concentration of the ethnic specificity of the nation (Moravcová 2009). Here “unspoiled” folk, the creators and bearers of national values, lived – an idea of a people upon which it was possible to build the concept of the Czech national revival (in contrast to those living in the “corrupt” Germanized city). Even though the expert discourse of that time was obviously determined by the discourse of the policymakers (Czech national revivalists) of the period, discourse of this form is maintained to this day. This is to a certain extent thanks to the expert discourse of Czech ethnology, which emerged out of *Volkskunde* and whose

focus still lies primarily on the study of folk culture, its roots and contemporary forms. In this way Czech ethnology not only reproduces but also legitimizes the construct of rurality originating in *Volkskunde*. Ethnologists (understood as expert scientists) have appeared in some social representations put on by municipalities and emphasize the traditional local and ethnocultural specifics of the village. However, the viability of the village construct as territorially and socio-culturally bounded space is most evident in what is absent from all these social representations (be it those of the villages, the judging committee or the media): there are no “strangers” (in the broadest sense). The village inhabitants and the actors in the representations are “denizens” – locals (regardless of local socio-demographic changes) and ethnically “white” Czechs (certainly not Romani or people of other ethnicities). Even references to cottage-goers appear exceptionally. Neighbouring villages are present only if they can provide performances in which local denizens can participate (folklore ensembles, performances by kindergarten children). This aspect of local boundedness and the superior status of “proper” denizens is exemplified by a comment made during a guided tour for the judging committee that “*the show was prepared with the assistance of a lady from Lidečko*” (Kateřinice).⁹⁶ From the point of view of the discourse of current policymakers it is paradoxical that minimal reference is made to the involvement of municipalities in global economic discourse – town twinning, cross-border cooperation and national and European grant projects are mentioned only marginally. These factors certainly do not contribute to a village’s success in the competition (see the section titled “Judging committee representations of victorious villages”).

The second key element of the current construct of rurality lies in its reference to *roots and continuity*. The source again is the expert discourse of *Volkskunde*, which, according to pre-Romantic and Romantic ideas, sought and established the concept of the “soul of the nation” (as developed by Johann Gottfried Herder, and in the field of art by e.g. Johann Wolfgang Goethe) – or, to put it differently, the roots of the nation. Continuity is represented both materially (folk and sacred architecture) as well as socially (ethnocultural traditions, also materialized in a form of folk costumes, or invented traditions as the case may be). The viability of this construct can again be documented by what is intentionally omitted in representations. Footage is absent of buildings from the second half of the 20th century (such as housing estates, shopping centres, “šumperák”,

⁹⁶ solano620. 2014, September 8. Prezentace obce – Kateřinice 2014 celostátní [video file].

or Brussels-style houses⁹⁷, and virtually any other type of new residential housing). Absent too are references to the causes, processes and consequences of changes in the socio-demographic composition and socio-cultural life of villages over the course of the 20th century. The principle of continuity is based on the fact that the village was founded long ago, and that it carries and maintains an uninterrupted tradition. When such continuity has been disrupted, the village has to draw on other sources to restore its sense of an unbroken tradition (be it the ancient past, a past floating in time, or a performance of the past). Roots and continuity are constructed and manifested in many different ways in the construct of rurality. What they have in common is an air of indisputability, of being unproblematic. In this respect, policymaker discourse seems to be in line with village inhabitant discourse and, to a large extent, also media discourse. The village is represented in accordance with the concept of rural idyll (Bell 2006) as an idyllic, tranquil and safe place, or, more precisely, as a place that has been so since time immemorial. Thus the village cemetery is also omitted from any footage because it simply does not fit into the concept of rural idyll.

The concept of *rural idyll* is dominant in the third main element of the rurality construct – *picturesqueness*. The village is generally portrayed as a “picturesque hamlet set in the bosom of nature”. The character of this representation is primarily based on materiality and presented through the previously mentioned elements of *isolation*, *roots and continuity*. It is another, beautiful, unspoiled world. Again, we can find the discursive sources of this image in 19th century *Volkskunde*, although this time fed not so much by expert (academic) discourse as by contemporary media discourse, particularly by the artistic production of the 19th and early 20th century. It was typical of Romantic and to some extent also of Realist production of the 19th century, as it was for some schools in the first half of the 20th century following on from these movements, to depict the village as a rural idyll. Examples include Božena Němcová’s novella *Babička* (The Grandmother), the novels of Karolína Světlá, the operas of Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák, and the paintings of Josef Lada, Mikoláš Aleš, Josef Mánes, and Joža Úprka. This even applies to examples of work that included social critique, such as the novels of the Mrštík brothers and of Jindřich Šimon Baar, and Bedřich Smetana’s opera *Prodaná nevěsta* (The Bartered Bride) (Jeřábek 2004).

⁹⁷ Šumperák is a popular name for the “family house of the V type”, the production of which started in the 1960s. The popular name derives from the fact that the first house of this type was built for the director of the hospital in the town of Šumperk. The alternative name of Brussels-style house is owing to the fact that this building project was prepared for Expo 58 held in Brussels.

This discourse and its production have been kept alive and continually reproduced in cultural memory, being taught in schools as fundamental to Czech art, maintaining a strong presence in exhibitions and theatre; even contemporary artists refer to this discourse (even if sometimes critically). Picturesqueness and the rural idyll are preserved in the discursive framework of Czech state-national identity as a key element of collective memory.

The primary creator of the rural idyll in relation to the Village of the Year Competition appears to be policymaker discourse (through the judging committee representations). Media discourse (here not so much art as the mass media – newspapers, radio, television and new media) reproduces the representation of the judging committee almost without reservation. The construct of rurality as the picturesque is thereby translated, by words and pictures, into a truly ideal form of rural idyll. The principle of this construct can again be gleaned from what is absent from representations: there is no sign of any factory farming, industrial zones, or industry of any kind, no wind power plants, no waste disposal sites or waste separation containers, no suburban areas, no deprived areas, no social conflict, no marginalized individuals or groups, and none of the elderly, infirm, or unemployed. Nature trails are the only permitted incursion on picturesqueness – admitted into the rural idyll because they are routed along events of history (symbolizing *roots and continuity*) and/or natural landmarks (playing an important role in presentation of the landscape).

Nevertheless, the most significant element in the current construct of rurality appears to be *social cohesion*: should it be difficult to employ any of the other elements of the rurality construct then social cohesion can be used in their place. Performance by the village for the judging committee demonstrates both the principle of self-sufficiency and the local boundedness of the municipality; performance establishes roots and continuity as well as picturesqueness, i.e. the rural idyll. For a village at the turn of the 20th century social cohesion was an existential necessity, because agriculture-based subsistence without mutual co-operation, in the form of assistance from neighbours or agricultural cooperatives, was not economically viable (Válka 2011). Today, however, now that private farming has ceased for villages to be the dominant means of subsistence, the means of social cohesion have transmuted into various clubs and associations, primarily for leisure activities. Social cohesion is thereby sustained and its continuity represented by the activity of associations united in pursuing common civic goals (firefighters, gamekeepers) or continuing traditions (ethno-cultural, religious). In the social representations of municipalities the carnival,

however, figures as the most important agent of social cohesion. The construct of social cohesion as a shared play originates in the villager discourse. Indeed, social cohesion is given the greatest space in village representations prepared for judging committee guided tours. While the demonstration of social cohesion through play appears to be a modern phenomenon, carnival has a much longer history in rural culture, although its form is usually now petrified in traditions, often ethnocultural (e.g. Shrovetide, Burning of the Witches⁹⁸, etc.). Such carnival traditions may appear in the materials prepared for the competition in the form of videos and photographs as references to the continuity of the village. The plays that villages prepare for a visit of the judging committee, however, often lack inspiration from any tradition, either ethnocultural or invented. After all, these plays are one-off, unrepeatable events with original scripts and are often performed not just by associations well-established in the village but also by ensembles put together purely for this specific purpose. In terms of content, performances may be linked to a given locality (be it through ethnic or religious traditions, reference to local history, or emphasis of aspects of the present), but they tend to be – and often are – completely displaced (deterritorialized). Common to these performances, based on a shared play with carnival elements, is the use of a shared state-national and global discourse. However, this usage largely involves the forms established in these discourses only, not necessarily their content. For example, staging a Spartakiadian⁹⁹ performance or a Labour Day parade does not imply celebration of the Czechoslovak Communist past (to which both are related in collective memory), just as playing pirates does not mean that an inland village has any connection to pirates. Nevertheless, both performances benefit from a widely shared knowledge of phenomena deeply embedded in popular culture, both state-national and global. That these carnival performances are generally understood as hyperbole by everyone involved is indicated by the fact that they are not referred to in any representation created by the judging committee (policymaker discourse, adopted by media discourse), and are neither part of the award ceremonies, nor are they included in victory celebrations.¹⁰⁰ Despite the fact that social cohesion represented by carnival

⁹⁸ See note 21 above.

⁹⁹ The Spartakiad was a quinquennial mass gymnastics event first held in 1955 as a celebration of Czechoslovakia's liberation by the Red Army in 1945.

¹⁰⁰ The only exception to this rule is perhaps the play put on by the village of Hošťálková honouring its partisan past, where, apart from carnival elements, a hall of partisan traditions accompanied by expert commentary was also specially prepared, which resulted in an award from the judging committee. In

elements in practice does not appear in expert discourse, media discourse, or policymaker discourse, it appears to be an essential part of villager discourse. As can be seen on village Facebook pages, villagers watch and comment on each other's performance and try to make their own performance as original, sophisticated and ostentatious as possible. Again, the way social cohesion is manifested as a specific element in the construct of rurality, which substantively belongs to villager discourse, is best documented by what representations are left out. Strikingly absent are images of the peasant as land cultivators and/or farmers. The construct of rurality in the first half of the 20th century was fundamentally based on a culture determined by agriculture, and was for a long time also understood as such by expert and media discourse. Yet it is precisely this element that is rejected by villager discourse. Presumably the role of a peasant/farmer is not one with which contemporary villagers wish to identify, nor one against which they wish to define themselves.

This raises the question of what the relationships between the various discourses involved in the negotiation of the rurality construct are. Although each discourse (expert, policymaker, media, and villager) creates and reproduces the construct of rurality, they are not involved to the same extent. Expert discourse feeds the content of the rurality construct in terms of roots and continuity with "traditional rural culture", based on local specificity and diversity. Through its expert opinion, materialized in open-air and in-house museums, publications and statements in the mass media, it legitimizes the image of the village as a distinct socio-cultural space, and as necessarily different from other types of environment, in particular the urban. These productions of expert discourse are, in part, reproduced by media discourse (and almost as a whole in relation to the competition itself); however, they are primarily used in the discourse of policymakers, for example, in the representations of the judging committee and politicians' speeches at award ceremonies. Policymaker discourse itself, however, is more ambiguous. There are a number of categories in the competition rules that are only marginally relevant to the rural construct, or even not at all (though we cannot say to what extent the municipalities are really rated by these categories – this is not our goal). By contrast, "countryside character" is seen as a mere footnote to the competition rules, even if – through such notions as local boundaries, roots, continuity, and picturesqueness – it completely dominates the

this case the unproblematic interpretation of the Czech home resistance during the Second World War, uncontested under all regimes, and such unproblematic values as heroism and freedom, were undoubtedly influential, too.

judging committee's representations and politicians' speeches on the occasion of announcing the competition results (see below). The competition itself is based on the liberal ideology of local/sustainable development and is primarily a way of reallocating resources. The power to decide lies in the hands of the judging committee, composed of diverse actors who base their decisions on various discursive frames. Nevertheless, they must create a representation which supports their decision and which reaffirms what is meant by a "proper village" (Pospěch – Spěšná – Staveník 2015). However, such a representation corresponds neither with the categories deemed to be important in the competition rules, nor with the representations presented to the judging committee by the municipalities themselves, which float freely in virtual space. Policymakers thus appear to treat the construct of rurality only as an argumentative tool, and the discursive framework of policymakers is practically missing in public space (although media discourse, judging from the regional press, may find interest in topics such as subsidy policy or cross-border cooperation on the one hand, and social conflict on the other). In other words, the construction of rurality is not in itself an aim of the political negotiations of policymakers, but the rurality construct is used in their political practices, which further reproduce and legitimize it. Villager discourse oscillates between these discursive frameworks. It is based on the discursive framing of rurality of expert discourse, as reproduced by media discourse, while it is forthcoming to the discourse of policymakers to the extent to which it is legible to them. This means that while villages in their presentations openly declare what is publicly available on the official competition website as reasons for being awarded a prize (as can be seen from an analysis of traces), there is an underlying assumption that they also have to fulfil the criteria stated in the competition rules (which are, however, hidden from public view). These discursive frameworks are, however, applied to the local context of the villages to make them comprehensible not only to foreigners but also to villagers themselves. To attain this goal, it uses pop-cultural discursive frameworks, while enriching rurality discourse with an accent on social cohesion in the form of play with carnival elements. Such play can be understood as another way of habitualizing local identity parallel to the formation of habitual memory (Connerton 1989). This dimension, though perhaps only a by-product of the competition itself, carries great significance in that it attracts much attention in villager discourse.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Judging by those representations we analysed, it appears that villages that choreographed a sophisticated programme for the visit of the judging committee, in which carnival presentations

It may seem as though the Village of the Year Competition is a world of its own that produces specific practices bringing particular advantages to all the participating actors. It is undeniable that it brings self-validation to expert discourse. For policymakers it serves as an instrument for political communication and for the reinforcement of power. It confirms the legitimacy of media discourse as a source of dissemination of information. And for the villages themselves, the competition is a possible source of finance, maybe also a mark of prestige, and perhaps a tool for the establishment of social cohesion, too. Whatever the motivation of all these actors (and it should be remembered that we did not carry out ethnographic research in the villages participating in the competition themselves, but only analysed the traces that the competition has left in public space), most significant is that these competition representations (created by competing municipalities, the judging committee and the media) flow through public space with the label of "winners". And as such they create a specific discursive framework that furnishes other discourses with an image of a "proper" contemporary village.

Mormont (1990), Cloke (2006), Bell (2007), and others have emphasized the concept of an imagined countryside, which is based on the social production of meanings. They claim that differences between rural and urban are the greatest in the realm of the imaginary. The distinct boundary that is perpetuated in the imaginary realm becomes increasingly blurry in the realm of social reality (Cloke 2006). Imagined (virtual) rurality (Cloke 2006) is a representation of a countryside that is not based on any particular location but "freely flows in space." However, we assert that imagined/virtual rurality is not just rural idyll, just as it is not the universally and equally shared construct of rurality.

Based on our analysis, we argue that imagined rurality is based on an interdiscourse that carries the characteristic features of glocalization (e.g. Robertson 1995). The construct of rurality, which in Czech discourse has been built at least since the 19th century, has been deterritorialized, released from the burden of problematic elements (particularly of the consequences of socio-political change resulting in the disappearance of peasants), enriched with shared global (pop-cultural) elements, and re-territorialized again. We call the outcome of such a process "pop-rurality". The term pop-rurality is here used to address a (contemporary) construct of rurality that freely floats in public

played an important role, were successful in the competition. Conversely, no villages among the winners of the regional and national rounds "just" showed the judging committee around the village.

(especially virtual) space. And as such, it is freely available to “everyone”. It also represents values and norms that are acceptable and accepted by everyone. Pop-rurality can be thus seized by anyone, and those who grasp it well have the potential to be successful. Of course, pop-rurality may – with respect to its “*popular*” character, related to taste (Bourdieu 1984) – be variable at its periphery. It draws on actual local, national-state and global discourses and monitors their fluctuation, but only to the extent that innovation can be forced into the framework of a rural construct, namely the construct of the traditional village from the 19th century. This core is then wrapped in other layers, some of them replacing old ones no longer functional in contemporary society.

Pop-rurality, as a shared representation of the countryside floating freely in the (virtual) space of media- and ideoscapes (Appadurai 1990), is based on the representation of the village as an imagined space of objects, relations and practices. What makes the Village of the Year Competition special is that it materializes these images (through the representations of various discourses), fixes them in time and place, and returns them in this form back to the public space of media- and ideoscapes, where they are consumed, to be subsequently reproduced in the following year of the competition.

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