

# The Prague Underground: Youth, Art, and Alternative Culture

Lecturer: Pavla Jonssonová, Ph.D.

## Course Description:

This course offers a critical introduction to the key currents of Prague's alternative and subcultural life, including autonomous venues, graffiti and street art, punk music, political art collectives, human-rights initiatives, and queer cultural festivals. Students will engage with the distinctive legacy of Czech pre-1989 underground culture and trace how samizdat practices evolved into contemporary zine production.

Through seminal readings on the intersections of art and politics, subcultures, and protest movements, the course examines how "alternative" urban lives are formed and sustained in post-industrial society. Particular attention is paid to the political interpretations of youth subversion and to the mechanisms of power that such cultural practices expose or resist. Lectures are complemented by visual materials and field trips to graffiti hotspots, autonomous spaces, and other significant subcultural sites, offering students an embodied understanding of Prague's dynamic alternative scenes.

## Course Prerequisites:

None. The course is suitable for anyone interested in cultural anthropology, cultural studies, visual studies, sociology of music, semiotics, and creative fields.

## Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify and specify key Czech "alternatives" to mainstream consumer culture.
- Describe and contextualize the relationship between contemporary "alternative" culture and the historical avant-garde.

- Characterize the poetics and aesthetic strategies of at least ten alternative or punk Bands.
- Explain the connections between music, politics, and forms of cultural resistance.
- Recount and interpret the history of The Plastic People of the Universe (PPU) and their influence on Charter 77.
- Analyze street art using relevant theoretical frameworks and scholarly literature.
- Discuss Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city" and apply it to contemporary public-space practices.
- Practice and reflect on sound walking as a method of urban cultural inquiry.
- Research and evaluate music clubs as cultural and social phenomena within Prague's alternative scenes.

#### Course Requirements:

1. Reading Check and Reaction Papers:	20%
2. Reading Presentation and Debate Leader:	10%
3. Midterm Test:	20%
4. Final Project:	30%
5. Class blogs:	20%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

- 1. Reading check and reaction paper (20%): 10x** For each topic, upload a write-up for one of the required readings. 500 words. Format: The first page - check: Author's name, title, place, publishing house, year published. Learned outcome – use language of the reading. One initiated question for a great class discussion. Second page – reaction: your polemics, criticism, etc. Deadline: before the class.

2. **Reading presentation and discussion leader (10%):** I will sign you for your reading during the first class. This task includes ppt presentation with one slide of info about the author of the reading, and four slides with a content summary, with images. Last slide with at least three questions and polemic points for moderating the debate. Grading considers the accuracy in delivering main issues to the class and success in stimulating discussion. Extra images are a plus. Remember you are presenting the content of the reading; your comments are voiced in the debate part. *Note: the debate leaders do not submit the reading check.*
3. **Midterm Test (20%):** Students will complete an in-class midterm test assessing their understanding of covered topics and concepts. The test consists of questions related to our class discussions, presentations, readings, and co-curricular activities. Questions are provided in the syllabus as study questions.
4. **Final Project (30%):** At least 2250 words, research paper on a topic covered in class. The project is evaluated according to the following criteria: depth and focus – no overviews, summaries & simplistic comparisons. Database search of the topic required. Material covered in class, lectures and readings **MUST** be utilized to prove you have learned from the offered knowledge. A five-minute presentation is an integral part of the final project.

A creative project is a possibility, with a two-page description applying terminology of the class/showing your knowledge of critical theory. Creative projects like graffiti or other visual projects should be uploaded on YouTube with the name of the course.

## **5. Class blog 20% 10x2**

After class, share your thoughts in the class blog, ideally connecting the concepts and terms from the readings and the lectures with your observations from field trips, films or guest speakers. Each entry is minimum 200 words + photo.

## Grading Policy

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

### Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

### AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

### AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

### AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

## Weekly Schedule

### Week 1

*CEE Introductory Lecture Series*

AEP Introductory Lecture Series

### Week 2

#### **Introductions. Syllabus, tasks with models.**

**Lecture:** Concepts and Definitions. **From avant-garde to alternative.**

underground, subcultures. Theorizing alternative culture. Frankfurt and Birmingham School.

Film showing *Hair* by Miloš Forman, 1969

**Or Field trip:** The Island of Freedom Štvanice as an example of autonomous culture in Prague, Fuchs2, Bike Jesus

**Study guide:** Name three branches of the avant-gardes pertinent to contemporary culture, their manifestos, and their authors. Define counterculture, name its theorist and his book. Timeline and three personalities from Frankfurt and Birmingham school. Name two metanarratives of F. Lyotard. What is alternative, underground, subculture, define. Who is the director of musical film *Hair* and what else did he make with Oscar awards?

**Assignments/deadlines: none**

### Week 3

#### **Autonomous Prague case study: the island of freedom on the Vltava river**

**Description:** The revolutions since 1789 were a radical break with the past, requiring liberty for all. It was not only the struggle for commodities and economic welfare. Happiness does not mean just getting rid of poverty, but access to “jouissance”, joy as an “art of living” not only within the family, but it can and must happen in the city (see ancient Greece, Venice) freedom must blossom in a public place.

#### **Required reading:**

- Jonssonova (2022) 15 pp
- Pixová (2013) 20 pp.
- Pixová, Novák (2016) 34-45

Films:

- *Aimless Walk* Alexandr Hackenschmied 1930
- *Prague Sings* Pavla Jonssonová 2007

**Field trip:** Kasárna Karlín, Unijazz Čítárna, Kampus Hybernská

**Study guide:** What is TAZ. Who has coined the term? What does “squat” mean? Name three famous squats. What is Lefebvre’s right to the city? Who built Fuchs2 and when? What is happening in Bike Jesus and Villa Štvanice? What is your take on the Island of Freedom Štvanice, Kasárna Karlín, Čítárna Unijazz Name three famous squats from the lecture

**Assignments/deadlines:** R1 autonomous (one of the readings)

**Week 4**

**Graffiti: Politics or Urban Décor?**

**Description:** Since 1973, when the *New York Times* covered the tagging of Taki 183, we have been enjoying the new visual art genre, sometimes called “art crime”, because it is illegal and yet artful. Keith Haring made it artful, and the new subculture connected with hip-hop started to spread around the world. Thanks to MTV and Berlin writaz, Prague got inspired, and Vladimír 518, Point, Pasta, Masker, Tron, Sanny, Lela, and others left their mark on graffiti history.

**Lecture:** Artcrime

**Required reading:**

- Banksy (2005) p 47, p 130, p 234 and some unmarked pages.
- David Hána & Jan Šel (2021): “Political graffiti in the political symbolic space of Prague” 1-25.

**Assignment:** R2 graffiti

**Study guide:** What are graffiti genres/types? Name five of them. Name five graffiti artists we learned about in class. What are Banksy’s theories and thoughts on graffiti from Wall and Piece? Name three of Banksy’s projects. What is Banksy’s business strategy? What are some of the political graffiti spaces in Prague? What is *genius loci*?

**Fieldtrip Graffiti Legal Site Tesnov**

## Week 5

### Street Art Praha

**Description:** In 2007, journalist Istvan Léko took up a challenge to prove there is enough interesting street art in Prague and compiled all his photo documentation in a book and invited the art historian Tomáš Pospiszyl to describe the “new urban sensibility”, the DJ methods of combining pop icons with local topics and mixing it in a colorful whole.

**Study guide:** What terms does Pospiszyl use to describe street art in Street Art Praha. What was Kaláb’s Trafačka, “the temple of freedom”, and what is the new Kaláb’s Trafo Gallery like? What was Names Fest? How was the legal site Těšnov that we visited established by whom and when?

#### **Required readings:**

- Pospiszyl (2007), 5-19.
- Kaláb (2008), 1-10.
- Ellsworth-Jones (2014), 15-30.

#### **Assignment: R3 street art**

## Week 6

### Punk and postpunk: the last subculture

**Description:** Punk emerged in the mid-1970s, primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom, as a reaction against mainstream cultural norms, commercialized music, and socio-political complacency. Rooted in a DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic, punk encompasses a range of expressions including music, fashion, visual art, and political activism. Musically, it is characterized by raw, fast-paced, and often minimalist compositions that challenge conventional aesthetics. It has played a crucial role in amplifying marginalized voices, promoting anti-establishment ideologies, and reshaping understandings of cultural production and autonomy.

#### **Required reading:**

- Scott Stalcup. “Noise Noise Noise: Punk Rock’s History Since 1965” Studies in Popular Culture, Vol. 23, No. 3 2001, pp. 51-64
- Filip, Fuchs, “Czech Punk History”, in Maximum Rock’n’roll, 1984.
- Jonssonova, Pavla. “New Chicks on the Block.” In *Unearthing the Music*

- Spector Books, Leipzig, 2025 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: Meaning and style. Methuen: London, 1979 intro and 1<sup>st</sup>. Chapter

**Recommended:**

- Clark, Dylan. *Death and Life of Punk*. New York: Berg, 2003.
- Reynolds, Simon. *Rip It Up and Start Again*. Postpunk 1978-1984. London: Faber and Faber, 2005. Prologue xii -xxx

**Film showing: Don Letts 2005: *Punk Attitude* YouTube**

**Study guide:** name five British and five US punk bands. What is punk timeline?

Name five postpunk bands. Who was the mastermind of punk? Who was the main fashion designer? What are the ten commandments of punk according to V. Vale, publisher of Research and Destroy? How did punk evolve into post-punk?

**Assignment: R4 Punk**

**Week 7**

**Czech Underground**

**Description:** Czech underground 1968-1989 is a fascinating example of moral integrity under totalitarian rule. A group of young people refused to cut their hair, change their name from English, and agree with the Russian occupation of the country. Their arrest in 1976 inspired the Czech dissidents to unite and pen Charter 77, a major civil rights platform. For contemporary Czech youth, these participants of the third resistance (resistance against Communism) represent true heroes.

**Required reading:**

- Bolton, Jonathan. "Legends of the Underground". In: Worlds of Dissent. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2012.
- Hagen, Trever. "The Underground Ecology."
- [Tom-Stoppard-Did-Plastic-People-of-the-Universe-topple-communism-The-Times.pdf](#)

**Study guide:** Who was the main organizer of the Czech Underground? How does he describe the goals in his manifesto? What is the influence of the PPU on Charter 77? What forced them underground? Name three main bands and personalities. What strategies did these leaders propose to keep the culture alive during persecutions? Best album of the underground and the history of its release. What is samizdat? What is The Game Park on?

**Film screening and discussion:** *Plastic People of the Universe* 2000 by Jana Chytilová



**Assignment: R5 Underground**

**Week 8**

**Underground poetry:**

Topol, Jáchym. 1995. "Game Park." Prague: Yazzyk, 1995, 164-165

Pavel Z. *Time is a Mid-Night Scream*, Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1999.

Spotify: Zajíček Wasteland 2016

Ivan Martin Jirous. The Swan Songs

**assignment: R6 Underground Poetry**

**guest speaker Tomáš Míka**

**Week 9**

**Psychedelic Research**

**Description:** When Sandoz sent out samples of LSD (synthesized by Albert Hoffman in 1943) to labs across the globe to find what could be achieved with this new wonder substance, Czechoslovakia took the challenge seriously and was the most active among Soviet bloc countries to test LSD. The leading researcher Stanislav Grof has devoted his life to study and after LSD was banned developed "holotropic breathwork", a legal equivalent. Currently, Psyon Clinique in Prague is conducting **ketamine-assisted psychotherapy** as an alternative to common treatments (covered by insurance)

**Study guide:** What does "psychedelic" mean, who coined the term, and what is the scientific term for these substances? Who are the five main psychedelic researchers (ppt) and what did they work on? Who invented LSD, when, where? What is the straight edge? Name five songs inspired by drugs. What is holotropic breathing, who promoted it, and what is it used for? What is an entheogen? Name examples.

**Required reading:**

- Hofmann, Albert. LSD, My Problem Child (2017)
- Shapiro Waiting for the Man 1997
- Recommended:
- LSD Psychotherapy S. Grof <https://archive.org/details/lsdpsychotherapy0000grof>
- Leary, Timothy (1964), 1-12
- <https://psychedelicspotlight.com/berkeley-officially-decriminalizes-possession-of-psilocybin-mushrooms-and-ayahuasca/>

- Stan Grof, 'the depths of the psyche'

[https://youtu.be/3uCySQOMB-4?si=A153Yx3bchQDk\\_DT](https://youtu.be/3uCySQOMB-4?si=A153Yx3bchQDk_DT)

**guest speaker** Jakub Konig

**Assignments/deadlines:** *R7 Psychedelic*

## **Week 10**

### **Human rights**

**Description:** Judeo-Christian prescriptions against same-sex relationships took millennia to break. World Health Organization (WHO) de-classified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1990. Join the rapper Cupcakke (2016 Audacious) and Czech drag queens like Miss Petty and keep rolling with the LGBT!

#### **Required reading:**

- Sokolova. 2014. 82–108
- J. True Gendering State Socialism
- Zenker: Beyond Binary
- Da Silva 2025 15 pg

**Assignments/deadlines:** *R8 Human rights*

## **Week 11**

### **Political Art Collectives and Culture Jamming**

**Description:** Coined by Negativland in 1984, culture jamming refers to parodying and hijacking of billboards and artifacts and uses dada and surrealism. The Czechs have taken up the practice with a vengeance: David Cerny and his Pink Tank, Ztohoven, Guma Guar, Podebal, Bugle Boys

#### **Required Reading:**

- Klein, Naomi. "Culture Jamming." in *No Logo*. London: Flamingo, 2001.
- Harris, Stephen: "What is Cheaper than Nothing at All?"

**Film:** *Czech Dream* by Vit Klusak and Filip Remunda

**Assignments:** *R9 Culture Jamming*

## Week 12

### Sound Walk

**Description:** interdisciplinary academic practice which involves walking while attentively listening to the surrounding soundscape. Emerging from acoustic ecology, it was pioneered by R. Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project in the 1970s. It integrates methodologies from sound studies, geography, phenomenology, and performance art to explore sonic perception and environmental awareness. Sound walking fosters critical engagement with place, memory, and urban soundscapes, challenging visually biased modes of spatial understanding.

<https://sonicity.cz/en>

Listen Murray Shaffer <https://youtu.be/h-G7jbTVuv8?si=op9wUyG9aRPTkr6f>

Pauline Oliveros *Deep Listening* <https://youtu.be/4mHPSjiNpi4?si=oVlltde6WHcWT8in>

### Required reading:

- Westerkamp, Hildegard. "What's in a Soundwalk." Unpublished paper prepared for Sonic Acts XIII Conference 'The Poetics of space', Amsterdam. 2010.
- Butler, Toby. "A walk of art: the potential of the sound walk as practice in cultural geography." *Social & cultural geography* 7.6 (2006): 889-908.

### Assignment: R10 soundwalk

another possibility for week 11 is **Happening, Performance, Action Art, Social Art**

**Description:** Victory of ideas over matter. Knížák, Ságlová, Kovanda, Kozelka etc.

*A Walk through Prague. Actions. Performances. Happenings 1949-1989*

**Reading:** Morganová (2013), 220-235.

Chapter of your choice from Klienhamplova & Stejskalova (2015), 1-129.

Recommended: Morganová (2017) 1-99.

**Study guide:** name five Czech Action artists (reading) Three actions by Kovanda.

**Assignments/deadlines:** None

**Field trip** Rudolfinum/Everyday Rebellions

## **Week 13**

### **Final projects presentation and submission**

## Readings:

- Hána, David & Šel, Jan. (2021): "Political graffiti in the political symbolic space of Prague"
- Elsworth-Jones, Will. *Banksy: The Man Behind the Wall*. Aurum Press: London, 2013
- Filip, Fuchs, "Czech Punk History", in *Maximum Rock'n'roll*, 1984.
- Hagen, Trever. "The Underground Ecology." In *Living in the Merry Ghetto: The Music and Politics of the Czech Underground*. Trever Hagen, Oxford University Press (2019).
- Harris, Stephen: What is Cheaper than Nothing at All?  
([www.brightlightsfil.com/63/63czechdream](http://www.brightlightsfil.com/63/63czechdream))
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Methuen: London, 1979
- Jonssonova, Pavla. "New Chicks on the Block." In *Unearthing the Music* Spector Books, Leipzig, 2025
- Jonssonova, Pavla. Chapter "Island of Freedom on the Vltava River" in *Remaking Culture and Music Spaces. Affects, Infrastructures, Futures*. Ian Woodward, Jo Haynes, Pauwke Berkers, Aileen Dillane, Karolina Golemo (Eds.) Routledge: London, 2022
- Jurková, Zuzana Veselý Karel *To Touch the World: Czech Musical Alternative 1968-2013* Praha: Fakulta humanitních studií Univerzity Karlovy v Praze, 2013.
- Kaláb, Jan, Barenthin Lindblad, Tobias. 10-15 in: *Names*. Praha, Třafačka, 2008. 22-30
- Klein, Naomi. "Culture Jamming." in *No Logo*. London: Flamingo, 2001.
- Klienhamplova, Barbora, Stejskalova, Tereza. *Who Is an Artist?* Praha: Academy of Fine Arts, 2015.
- Morganová, Pavlína. *Czech Action Art*. Epilogue. Karolinum Press: Praha. 2013.
- Opekar, Aleš. "Rock in Czechoslovakia 1956-1989." (2017) 652-654 *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, Vol 11.
- Pavel Z. *Time is a Mid-Night Scream*, Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1999. pp. 1-42 166-176
- Pixová, Michaela "Spaces of Alternative Culture in Prague in a Time of Political-Economic Change" *Geografie* 2013/ 3 • 118
- Pixová, Michaela, Novák, Arnošt. Squatting in Czechia 34-45. "Post-1989: Boom, decline and renaissance." *Baltic Worlds* 9.1-2 (2016): Squatting in Czechia 34-45.

Pospiszyl, Tomáš, Lékó, István. 1-19 in: *Street Art Praha*. Praha, Arbor vitae, 2007. 17-21

- Sokolova, Vera. "State Approaches to Homosexuality and Non-Heterosexual Lives in Czechoslovakia under State Socialism." from *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- The Atlantic: Pervitin
- Tomkova, Denisa. *Citizen K by the Czech artist collective "Ztohoven"*. University of Aberdeen Academia 2022
- Topol, Jáchym. 1995. "Game Park." Prague: Yazyk, 1995, 164-165
- Westerkamp, Hildegard. "What's in a Soundwalk." Unpublished paper prepared for Sonic Acts XIII Conference 'The Poetics of space', Amsterdam. 2010.
- Zenker, Robin-James *Beyond the Binary of the Gender Game Exploring Experiences of Genderqueer+ Youth in the Czech Republic*, thesis, Oxford U. 2023