One of the most conspicuous changes in the appearance of Czech towns in recent years is the mushrooming of billboards. Although one could always find an occasional billboard, the spread of this type of advertising in its standard Western form commenced only after the 1989 political transformation. As a graduate fresh from a British MA in literature with a substantial focus on gender issues in popular culture, I was immediately attracted to this new phenomenon in Czech culture in early 1993, when I conducted my first research in this area, which resulted in an article in Sociologický časopis. In that first report I concentrated on the representation of women in advertising and noted that it differed significantly from the way in which male bodies and masculinity were employed. At that time, I did not find any billboards exploiting a male body as a sexual object or even emphasizing a man's physicality, or portraying men as fathers, while these were the standard attributes symbolized by women.

For the next four years, I conducted regular excursions to take pictures of the latest billboard campaigns using the human body or parts of the human body, or making a point of the physical absence of the body. The present essay looks at a sample from this rich 'harvest' of several hundred photographs from the period 1993 to 1997. It is perhaps proper that, after having looked at the differences which characterized the portrayal of the two sexes and the gender attributes associated with them in the previous research on representations of women, I now turn to men and masculinity in billboard advertisements. I take as point of departure Sara Mills's observation about the reading process:

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1. The English version of this journal appears as the Czech Sociological Review.
Very often the processes by which we form an interpretative framework are ones which are not of our own making and are informed at a deep level by ideological knowledges; these processes may seem to us to be "common sense" and in that way so self-evidently the only way to read that we may not be able to describe what it is that we are doing.3

For our purposes, this means that an interpretation of the advertisements in question employing the criterion of 'common sense' would depend, among other factors, on their relation to the discourses of state socialism and consumer capitalism.4 To argue for a substantially different reading within the framework of these two discourses, I first offer an interpretation of a set of billboard representations in terms of Western critical works on gender analysis. Then I shall suggest some problems with the theory and terminology concerning the relation or differentiation between discourse and ideology if we consider the pre- and post-1989 Czech environment. That will lead me to the discussion of further interpretative possibilities of the same representations, through the lenses of state-socialist ideology.

I divided the sample of billboards to be discussed into two groups by theme: the first group (Figures 1–5) focuses on men's bodies; the second (Figures 6–8) on attributes of masculinity other than bodily ones, although the body serves as a semantic vehicle even here.

The beer commercial for Velkopopovický kozel (Figure 1) and the Ray Ban (Figure 2) billboard both exploit the male body as a sexual object. The former is addressed to women—at least judging from the caption "Taste your Kozel": 'Kozel' means 'goat' in Czech, while in the figurative sense the word can be used to refer to a old, foolish man, and thus the advertisement speaks to women tongue-in-cheek, humorously deprecating their male partners. The advertisement shows the man in a submissive posture in relation to the woman: she is still dressed and on top, while he is already without the protection of clothing and lying on his back, that is, in the most vulnerable position—at least this would be the reading in terms of theatrical conventions, which, given the distinctly studio arrangement of the representation, seem wholly relevant. The second advertisement presents a much younger man. We do not know whether he is offering his body to a woman or to a man. Although his gesture suggests that he is offering something, he is far from passive—the well developed musculature of the chest and abdomen betray a long preparation for whatever is to come and the caption-commentary exclaims: "That's quite something!", but it can also mean, "What strength!". Both adverts equate the pleasure of consumption with the pleasure of sex, a phenomenon observed, for example, by Susan Bordo in her analysis of food commercials or earlier by Judith Williamson as a more


4. The term 'consumer capitalism' is used here to distinguish between two discursive environments and therefore may not be entirely in agreement with the use of the term in economics or political science.