



Capitalist Drive

A very personal account of one family and its links across two continents and three generations, despite political divides.

Synopsis

A very personal account of one family and its links across two continents and three generations, despite political divides.

In *Capitalist Drive*, award-winning filmmaker Barbara Chobocky turns the camera on her own extended family to discover how ordinary people cope with social and personal upheaval.

For 40 years, the conflict between capitalism and communism separated her parents and their children in Australia from relatives in Prague. Yet there are fascinating parallels between the challenges facing her enterprising cousins as they negotiate the first years of free-market democracy in the Czech Republic and the experiences of her father as a post-World War Two migrant to what he called 'the wild west'.

Each faced a new world with high hopes for the future, embarking on similar quests for economic prosperity. But freedom proved to be a double-edged sword...

Capitalist Drive looks at life in the aftermath of the historic changes that shook Europe in the 1940s and 1989, and the struggles involved in starting afresh - no matter where you are. It uncovers stories of love and loss, dreams and disappointments, including a father's drive to succeed and the impact it had on those around him. And as we get to know these characters and their pasts, we discover shared passions and ambitions, including a rather eccentric attachment to cars.

Curriculum Links

Curriculum links include Business Studies, Economics, English, International Studies, Media, Modern History, Politics and Studies of Society and Environment.

Introduction

This documentary is the story of winners and why they have succeeded in often horrendously difficult circumstances. Conversely, we also see sadness. Barbara Chobocky, the filmmaker, is careful to explore events and several sources of opinion which help us as viewers to form beliefs about why people act the way they do. She never simply judges their actions. The film explores much more than the political differences between the Czech Republic and Australia. It looks closely at what people do with their freedom, no matter where they find themselves, no matter the degree of freedom.

This study guide hopes to lead you to greater understandings of history, not as a set of facts and dates but as past events that influence present lives and future directions. Perhaps you will also conclude that by the way individuals react to events that come into their lives each and every day, they create not only their future but judge their past.

Who's Who?

Barbara's exploration of the notion that 'freedom is a two-edged sword' involves many very personal stories of her immediate and extended family. Widening her story brings greater and more varied evidence to her observations and our understandings. Here is a 'cast list' for the documentary.

Barbara Chobocky—writer/filmmaker/narrator

Victor (Vic) Chobocky—Barbara's younger brother

John Chobocky (Jr)—Barbara's older brother, named after her father

Charlotte Chobocky—Barbara's sister

John Chobocky (Sr)—Barbara's father who came to Australia in 1950

Maria Chobocky (nee Machek)—John's wife/mother of Barbara, Charlotte, John and Vic

Eva Har—John Chobocky's sister

Daniel (Dan) Machek—one of the twins. Maria's brother, thus Barbara's uncle

Samuel (Sama) Machek—the other twin. Maria's brother, thus Barbara's uncle

Otakar Machek—Maria's older brother, thus Barbara's uncle. John's best friend

Misha Machek—Barbara's cousin

Dan Machek Jr—Barbara's cousin

Vaclav Havel—the new president of the liberated Czech Republic
Professor John Kmenta—bookkeeper to Barbara's father in Sydney during the 1950s; family friend and Barbara's fiancé
Joan Kmenta—John Kmenta's first wife
Joyce Norman—confidante of Barbara's father John
Vitezslav Chobocky—John (Snr) Chobocky's Jewish father
Jiri Fabian—waiter in Prague restaurant

Important Locations

On a map of the world, note the following places of significance in this story:

Germany—John imported goods from Germany to sell in Czechoslovakia.
Lansberg, Germany—site of the concentration camp where Nazis killed Vitezslav Chobocky
Zurich, Switzerland— Maria stayed here whilst John went to Australia; Barbara's birthplace
Israel—where some Jews escaped to from Czechoslovakia under communism
Prague, Czech Republic—where Barbara's relatives lived
Brno, Czech Republic—In 1998 Dan opened the first retail Arena store here
Sydney, Australia—where John and Maria lived in the 50s, 60s and 70s
Forster, New South Wales—where Charlotte and Mike live
Slovakia—a new nation to the east of the Czech Republic; used to be part of old Czechoslovakia

- On the map trace John and Maria's journey from Prague.

Content of the Documentary

Terminology

Before you begin looking at some of the issues brought into focus within the documentary, make sure you understand the following economic and political terms: communism, capitalism, iron curtain, Zionist conspiracy, nationalised, free market, propaganda, totalitarian control.

Historical timeline

This task should help you understand the sequence of events and conditions mentioned in the documentary. It will involve research into the time periods mentioned in the film.

- Create a timeline to include both Czech and Australian history. You will see a wider picture if you trace national history as well as the family's personal history. Divide your timeline into the three major time spans indicated below:
 - * pre-1948 (Czechoslovakia an industrialised and democratic nation; Australia involved in WW1 and WW2 and subsequent recovery)
 - * 1949-1989 (Czechoslovakia under communist rule; Australia powering ahead as a democracy)
 - * 1990-2004 (Czech Republic post-communist era as a free nation; Australia's economy still functioning as a free market)

Plot the following dates to your timeline, adding any dates that are important to you personally. Work up a colour key to distinguish between Czech history, Australian history, events happening to Barbara's family in Australia and events happening to Barbara's family in the Czech Republic. Remember that the suggestions below are only a starting point.

Personal significance

John and Maria Chobocky flee the communist rule (1949)
John Chobocky arrives in Australia/goes into business for himself (1950s)
Dan receives home movies of John, Maria and family in Australia (1950s)
Maria Chobocky suicides (1975)
Barbara goes to Prague to make the documentary *Maria* (1990)
Dan has 6 employees and small showroom for Arena (1998)
Dan sponsors a Czech swimming team (1998)
Dan has 12 staff and expanded premises (2002)
Misha has a thriving accommodation business (2002)
Barbara makes *Capitalist Drive* (2004)

National significance

Nazis invade Czechoslovakia (1938/39)
Nazis annihilate Czech village of Lidice (1942)
Communists take over Czechoslovakia (1948)
Communists ousted from Prague (1989)
Free government reigns (1990)
Australia (as part of the Commonwealth) goes to war with Britain against Germany (1939)
Victory Day Australia—war ends (1945)
Snowy Mountains Scheme begins (1950)
Australia's migrant intake boosts economy (1950s)

The Title

Think about the meaning of the title.

- Suggest several possible interpretations for the words 'Capitalist Drive'.
- Could 'capitalist drive' be seen as a state of mind which can exist under a communist government? Are there examples of this in the documentary?
- Offer reasons why some people make successes of their lives no matter their conditions while others can have optimum conditions and still be unhappy.

Attitudes and Propositions

There are many core opinions and major threads running through the documentary. Some of them are explored in more depth below.

'Freedom is a double-edged sword'

After communism in Czechoslovakia collapsed in 1989, the free market was able to thrive.

- Discuss exactly what the phrase 'double-edged sword' means.
- Who controls the people under a Communist regime?
- What do you think happens to an individual's aspirations under a totalitarian government? Can you draw evidence from the documentary to support and to oppose your opinion? What conclusions can you thus draw?
- List conditions which must exist within people's minds before capitalism can deliver its best results.

John Kmenta says that after the communist takeover in 1948 *'we did not emigrate, we escaped from.'*

- Discuss the differences emotionally and economically.

One of the problems which arose in the transition from communism to the free market was that the cost of living skyrocketed.

- Why would inflation occur and what sort of problems might it bring for individual families?
- Why would major banks collapse in such circumstances?
- If your family lost all their savings in Australia, what would it mean to your life?
- List four other downsides experienced by many Czech citizens during the transition from communism to democracy.
- What does it mean that *'Czechs used to be prisoners in their own country'* and then regarded themselves as *'migrants in their own land'*?
- When the democratic Czech government restored communist-confiscated properties to their rightful owners, why did families 'become millionaires overnight but only on paper'?

In any country (including Australia), freedom brings responsibilities and well as expectations of access to certain conditions.

- List these conditions and discuss how access to them differs from a 'right' to have them.
- If a person has a 'right' to something, does that mean someone else is enslaved to produce it?
- Discuss the notion that in order to take advantage of freedom, one must take risks.
- Why did driving a taxi in Czechoslovakia under communist rule provide a little freedom and big risks?

Look at Dan's experience of being sued for unfair dismissal by an employee who was stealing from the shop.

- Why could this situation have not arisen under a communist government?
- A court will listen to two sides of this story. What are they?
- Do you believe that within a democracy an employer has a right to dismiss whomever s/he wishes? Support your answer with reasons.
- Given that if Dan wins the case he gets no monetary reward, but if he loses the case he will have to reimburse wages to his former employee and pay court costs, do you believe it's worth running a small business?

Think about what differences living under a totalitarian government would make to you at the moment. Choose five of the following headings and list the changes which would take place in your life: my ambitions, my shopping, my travel, my job, my entertainment, my opinions, my possessions, my education, my health, my happiness.

Barbara's childhood memories include sending clothes and food parcels to her relatives in Czechoslovakia. She always assumed that her 'family in Sydney were better off than (her) Czech relatives and friends' and it would stay that way even after the fall of communism.

- Discuss several reasons drawn from the documentary why she's 'not so sure now'. State the reasons you agree/disagree with her conclusions.
- Using evidence from the documentary, discuss what capitalism demands from the people of the Czech Republic.
- Imagine you are in a position to help dictate the future of the Czech Republic. Discuss the possible impacts the arrival of free enterprise might have on the groups and factors listed below:
 - * the country's economy
 - * the neighbouring European countries' economies
 - * officials of the deposed communist regime
 - * companies from the free world who wished to set up business in the Czech Republic
 - * the ordinary working man and woman.

In 2002 on a return visit to Prague, Barbara comments that parts 'now strike me as indistinguishable from Sydney or any other western city'.

- Why might this be?
- Does it matter? Give reasons for your answer.

Parallels

The major similarity tracked is the resemblance between what John Chobocky 'went through in Australia during the 1950s' to the experience of Barbara's relatives in the Czech Republic post-communism.

- Look at the timeline you created and note similarities in economic conditions within the two countries when they each flourished.

John Kmenta tells us 'individual initiative' was a key to what was going on in both countries.

- Compare John Chobocky's exploits in Australia in the 1950s to either Misha or Dan's activities in the Czech Republic post-1990.
- Find two other examples in the film of 'individual initiative' and comment on the value of this enterprise. Who did it benefit?



While human beings' experiences may differ according to the conditions under which they live, our emotions and feelings may have much commonality worldwide. Select a pair of people who display similar emotions even though their situations or living conditions vary.

- Trace what you think brought about their feelings.
- What emotion is displayed?
- Do their reactions have anything to do with economic systems?

Cultural Identity

This concept is about who you are in light of the society in which you live.

- What makes up a culture?
- Find two examples (one from each country) of people who adhere to their country's dominant cultural identity and state why you believe this is so.
- Find two examples (one from each country) of people who fly in the face of their country's dominant cultural identity and state why you believe this is so.
- List some factors which you believe help create any cultural identity, be it of the dominant or of the minority. Analyse each factor's contribution to an individual's cultural identity.

The Jewish Question

Barbara was extremely upset when she learned that the Communists obliterated from the synagogue wall in Prague, her grandfather Vitezslav Chobocky's name 'along with those of 80,000 other Czech Holocaust victims.'

- Look for reasons you believe she was upset by this action.
- Considering the Communist government only removed the victims' names but could not obliterate the concentration camps' history, what do you think they gained by their actions?
- Do you think the free government's action of reinscribing the names was an essential one? Why?

In the early days of their regime 'the Communist Party executed many prominent Jews...falsely accused of organising a Zionist conspiracy.'

- What factors motivated the Communists' hatred of the Jews?
- Research the label 'mishlings' which was applied to John and his sister Eva.

Men's hats, ladies' fur coats and make up (all trappings of bourgeois values) went underground during communist rule.

- What does 'bourgeois' mean?
- Whether people hide such possessions because they realise these goods draw adverse attention to them, or whether the government 'ban' them outright, do you believe that subsequent 'underground' discontent indicates brewing trouble? Cite incidents from your own society of outright bans and discuss their effect.
- In our Australian society, can you think of clothes or possessions which people avoid in order to not draw attention to themselves?

Barbara found a restaurant which offered a 'house specialty of pork Jewish-style.'

- Why is this incident included in the documentary?
- Why does the dish bring a smile to Barbara?
- What does Jiri mean by chicken breasts cooked 'Jewish-style'?
- Why is Jiri's comment about the dish 'created according to Czech traditions' significant?

Crime

The documentary tells of crime under both a communist and a democratic government. However the perpetrators' motivation is different in each case.

- What do you understand by the term 'political prisoner'?
- Why did the communist government imprison political prisoners (also known as dissidents)?
- How do dissidents differ from ordinary criminals?

Otaker Machek was imprisoned for five years under the communist government. His crime was harbouring a British agent. If he'd had Jewish connections he would have been executed.

- Was he a political prisoner or a criminal? Support your answer with evidence.
- What was a British agent doing in Czechoslovakia?
- List some personal characteristics you believe an individual would need to stand up against a dictatorial government.
- How do you think you'd react to an invasion by foreign despotic rulers?

President Vaclav Havel, himself a prisoner of conscience for 14 years under the communists, declared an amnesty for the majority of prisoners in Czechoslovakia.

- Why was it impossible for him to differentiate criminals from dissidents when he released thousands from prison?
- Is the meaning of the term 'political prisoner' different from the meaning of 'prisoner of conscience'?

We hear that this amnesty sparked a crime wave in the fledgling nation.

- When Misha was held up by an assailant in his cab, what do you think the man's motivation was?
- Do you think Misha was justified in shooting the man? Why?
- Is carrying a gun warranted in circumstances such as driving a taxi? What is law in Australia? Support your answer with reasons.
- What place in our lives has this 'sixth sense' which Misha says saved his life in alerting him to trouble?



Barbara's family

As viewers, we understand conditions in both Czechoslovakia and Australia much more because we do not see them in isolation but through how they affected Barbara's extended family.

- What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of this documentary approach?
- Do you believe that family members see each other objectively? Why might this be/not be? Find an example in the documentary where several opinions about one person change the overall picture of him/her.
- Why do we give credence to one person's opinion over another's in forming our judgements about people?
- Would it be difficult to expose the frailties of your family and yourself on film? Give reasons for your answer.
- What do you believe motivated Barbara Chobocky to reveal sometimes intimate detail in making this story?
- What clues do you have that the Chobocky family were survivors? Answer with specific examples.
- Make a case for Barbara's family being a technique used to convey content rather than part of the content itself.

How the documentary is told

Filmmakers carefully choose their infrastructure and filmic language so that they might accurately convey the heart of their film.

Bias

Stories can be told in subjective or objective ways depending on what 'truth' the writer/director seeks to convey.

- Do you think there is a bias to this documentary? Support your answer with evidence.

At the beginning of this guide, you defined capitalism and as you worked through the questions you may have come to the conclusion that the ideology of capitalism suits one personality type, while the belief system of communism suits another.

Using the format of the table below, look for an emerging pattern of behaviour which defines the systems. Can you discover which system the documentary favours?

| Person involved | Capitalistic behaviour | Communitistic behaviour | Reason for your classification |
|-----------------|--|-------------------------|---|
| John Chobocky | Sold watches, found best outlet through barber's shops | | Wanted to make more money so found the best outlets |
| | | | |
| | | | |

Methodology

Below is the beginning of a list of elements through which Barbara Chobocky tells the story. Add to the list and fill in the adjacent columns.

| Element | Example from film | Choice of element adds |
|----------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Home movies | Calypso party | Sense of relaxed fun of the 50s brought out |
| Black & white still photos | | |
| Interviews | | |
| Archival footage | | |
| Colour still photos | | |
| Voice over narration | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Symbolism

Symbols are a great way of communicating because they convey so much more than what is actually said or actually portrayed. They work hard on a connotative level where associations add more meaning than the simple object. A much-used symbol in this documentary is the car and the narrator even gives us the extended meaning '...cars are more than just a means of transport. They represent freedom and financial opportunity'.

- Can you find examples and show how they back up the above statement?
- What other symbols did you notice in the film?

Type of Shot

The type of shot used to convey information can add immensely to the texture of the story told.

Find an example of each type of shot listed in the table below and state what that choice of shot adds to the information conveyed in your chosen example.

| Type of shot | Example | What is added? |
|-------------------|---------|----------------|
| Close up | | |
| Tilt up | | |
| Tilt down | | |
| Zoom in | | |
| Pan left or right | | |
| Long shot | | |
| Freeze | | |
| Pull back | | |

Augment the list with any other type of shot you believe adds to the documentary's message.

Structure

How the story is told is just as important as its attitudes and propositions.

- What can you observe about the general shape of the documentary—the order in which it unfolds?
- What do you believe is the relationship between the beginning and the end of the documentary? Are there echoes of circularity within the film?
- What gives unity to the film?
- Find several reasons which you believe explain Barbara Chobocky's choice to tell her story in film rather than as print non-fiction.
- What is the importance of time and time passing in the documentary? What methods does the director use to ensure that you as the viewer understand these transitions?

Conclusion

Capitalist Drive takes us on a journey through circumstances that most of us are unlikely to ever encounter. The problems encountered in the Czech transition from communist rule to the free market are personalised and paralleled with migrant experiences in Australia during the 1950s. Human emotions of joy, despair, delight, satisfaction, guilt and contentment all contribute to provide accessibility to the situation and a personal stake in the outcome of the political situation.



References and Further Resources

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Capitalist Drive

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