

Czech art history and Marxism

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Czech art history after the Second World War was pursued in a state dominated by Soviet power and as such it presents a prominent example of the coexisting synergy and conflict between the Vienna School and Marxism. Research into this relationship may provide valuable insight into the character of Czech art historical tradition. I will attempt to show the role played by Marxist, Marxist-Leninist and Stalinist thinking in Czech art history against the background legacy of the Vienna School of art history.¹ The introduction of Marxism into Czech art history has to come to terms with this legacy, as before the Second World War the Czech art historical milieu was a self-proclaimed devoted and faithful follower of the Vienna School. The shape of Czech Marxism in art history, however, differs quite significantly from that which one might expect from the vantage point of the Western world. Frederick Antal, who personifies the contact between the two approaches, was unambiguously rejected, and authors such as Meyer Schapiro and T. J. Clark remained virtually unknown. Czech Marxist art history displayed pronounced disinterest in the social history of art and instead, solely concentrated on the problem of realism. The most interesting period was the 1960s, when the Viennese tradition was re-evaluated during the search for 'humanist Marxism', or Revisionism. Reframed, it was fundamentally strengthened as a methodology and considered the only truly scientific one. The only scholarly analysis devoted to Czech Marxist art history and published before the end of the 1980s was by Rostislav Švácha.² It is based on good quality research but is written from a position inside Marxism and not surprisingly, Švácha's study thus lacks a critical distance from its topic.³

¹ I have traced the character of the transition from Austro-Hungarian to Czechoslovak art history in my contribution to the colloquy organized by Matthew Rampley at The Royal Academy in London in 2009. The text will appear in a special issue of JAH edited by him. Other texts illuminating the position of Czech art history in the context of the Vienna School include Hugo Rokyta, 'Max Dvořák und seine Schule in den Böhmischem Ländern'. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst und Denkmalpflege*, 28, 1974, 81-89; Ján Bakoš, 'Viedenská škola a český a slovenský dejepis umenia' in: Ján Bakoš, *Štyri trasy metodológie dejín umenia*. Bratislava 2000, 41-66; Otto M. Urban, 'The beginnings of modern art history and art criticism in the Czech lands', *Centropa*, 5, 2005, 40-48; Matthew Rampley, 'History and the politics of empire: rethinking the Vienna School', *Art Bulletin*, 91, 2009, 446-462.

² Rostislav Švácha, 'Dějepis umění v současnosti' in: Rudolf Chadraba et al. eds, *Kapitoly z českého dějepisumu umění*, vol. 2, Praha 1987, 349-370. Cf. also Nicholas Sawicky, 'Modernist paradigms after the war: the case of Max Dvořák', in: Vojtěch Lahoda ed., *Local strategies, international ambitions. Modern art in central Europe 1918-1968*, Praha 2006, 47-52, who is the only one to briefly relate the Czech reception of Dvořák to Marxism.

³ This is true even more concerning the two period overviews by Luděk Novák, 'Výtvarná teorie v letech 1953-1960', *Umění*, 9, 1962, 160-176 (dealing more with the theory of artistic practice than with art history proper) and František Matouš, 'Teorie a dějiny umění 1945-1965', *Umění*, 11, 1965, 217-232.

Two methodological restrictions deserve a preliminary mention. Firstly, I will proceed within the framework of the history of discourse, while devoting only marginal attention to the history of institutions, art historical topics and biographical research. This restriction is dictated by the fact that general inquiry into the historiography of four decades of Czech history under the rule of the Communist Party (1948-1989) has only gained momentum in the past few years. Until now, there existed just a few historical studies explaining the processes of continuity and discontinuity between the strong left-wing cultural and political Czech tradition of the inter-war period, post-war years and the period of Socialism (after 1960), and Marxist Revisionism of the 1960s.⁴ Twenty years of disinterest can be easily recognized as an act of negative memory, of forgetting; the type identified as 'monological forgetting' by Aleida Assman. More than twenty years after the political revolution of the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the predominance of moral judgement has receded only slowly in Czech society and this has affected both membership of the Communist Party (the legal order contains a law from 1991 which declared the CP a 'criminal and despicable organization'), and also the reception and application of Marxism in scholarly research. As a result important creative personalities of the second half of the 20th century – in our case art historians – may have, at times, been members of the ruling Communist Party and information about them would have to be mined from personal archive files. Their membership may have had a decisive impact on their public activities and on the challenges they had to face in their careers. Besides, one definition of Marxism considers it to be a theoretical component of Communist activism and in fact its employment was deemed self evident for any CP member. As a result, it is often hard to decide whether published texts merely represent outer signs of loyalty to the political regime, 'just a camouflage' (as they are often summarily designated in retrospect), or whether they are the result of serious thinking and intellectual work. The question of honesty in Communist engagement, or rather its lack, is primarily considered in actual Czech discourse – paired with retrospective moral judgment. I will leave it to one side, however, and will also only refer to the institutional level marginally. Still, I am convinced that it remains feasible and legitimate to follow the relationship between Czech art historical Marxism and the legacy of the Vienna School of art history predominantly within the framework of published texts. My second restriction concerns the fact that the state of informative sources does not allow me to pursue the topic of both Czech and Slovak art historiographies in parallel with each other, in spite of the fact that the developments took place in the common state of Czechoslovakia (1918-1939, 1945-1992) and there existed a web of mutual contacts.⁵

The Czech intellectual milieu during the inter-war decades was characterized by a marked prominence of a Leftist orientation. The Czechoslovakian Communist Party was one of the strongest communist parties in Europe. In 1946 it

⁴ Jiří Knapík, *Únor a kultura: sovětizace české kultury 1948-1950*, Praha 2004; Jiří Knapík, *V zajetí moci: kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři 1948-1956*, Praha 2006; Michal Kopeček, *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce. Zrod a počátky marxistického revizionismu ve střední Evropě 1953-1960*, Praha 2009.

⁵ Both national art historiographies together are sketched with further references in Milena Bartlová, 'Art History in the Czech and Slovak Republics: Institutional frameworks, topics and loyalties', in: Matthew Rampley et al. eds., *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe*, Leiden 2012, 305-314.

became the only one to win a parliament majority in free elections and many artists were already members before the war. Among visual, literary and theatrical artists there was a strong Soviet-oriented vanguard movement including the prominent theoretician Karel Teige (1900-1951), who attempted to conciliate surrealism with Communism during the 1930s and 40s.⁶ The reason why art history did not join this prevailing trend is not immediately clear. It may have had something to do with the generally rather conservative taste of the central figures of the Czech art historical establishment. The director of the state art collections Vincenc Kramář (1877-1960), who already appreciated Cubism before the First World War, stood apart from his peers in this respect. He disregarded the otherwise strong insistence on the necessity of a 'time gap' which only enables art historical engagement with new art after thirty or fifty years have elapsed. The class affiliation of mainstream Czech art history was unambiguously bourgeois.⁷

The Czech art historical establishment rarely paid attention to the activities of the Prague Circle and to Jan Mukařovský's formation of structuralist aesthetics and theory in the 1930s.⁸ The Czech art historians felt satisfied and safe with the legacy of the Vienna school as represented by Vojtěch Birnbaum (1877-1934) at the Prague University. His student and successor to his chair Antonín Matějček (1889-1950) was himself a late student of Max Dvořák. The status of this latter method was confirmed by defending it against the indigenous tradition represented by Karel Chytil (1857-1934).⁹ The art historical methodology developed by Birnbaum, which has remained dominant until today, consists of two aspects which are loosely connected. One is a rigorously formal analytic approach coupled with positivist historicism as a double tool for art historical research concentrated on individual artworks. The main art historical target is, however, a narrative of linear artistic developments construed according to laws which, once discovered, are considered objective and true, not to be questioned but only applied. The whole methodological structure is generally indebted to Franz Wickhoff more than to Alois Riegl. This resulted in a sceptical distance from art historical theory (including Riegl), from methodological self-analysis as well as from new methodological inspiration. Another result was a rather strict concentration on local artworks that could be researched in the desired depth and detail and which conformed to the task of any research in humanities which was seen to confirm Czech national identity. Ideas of Dvořák's later years, which turned the history of art into a 'spiritual history'

⁶ Karel Srp ed., *Karel Teige 1900-1951*. Kat. výst. Galerie hl.m. Prahy 1994; Tomáš Hříbek, 'Karel Teige and the "wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung"', *Umění* 53, 2005, 366-384; Matthew S. Wittkovsky, 'Karel Teige,' in: Matthew S. Wittkovsky ed., *Avant-Garde art in everyday life*. Exh. Cat. Art Institute of Chicago 2011, 99-116; Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia and Other Writings*, Los Angeles 2000.

⁷ Brief portraits of the prominent Czech art historians between the wars are included in my paper 'The Czech Legacy of the Vienna School of Art History' (forthcoming). Their upbringing and family background seems to have been most often the Czech 'Bildungsbürgertum'. Unfortunately, Czech biographical research generally overlooks the matter of class (I am indebted to Marta Filipová for bringing this question to my attention).

⁸ Ján Bakoš, 'Der tschecho-slowakischer Strukturalismus und Kunstgeschichtschreibung', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 36, 1991, 63-66; Ján Bakoš, 'Česko-slovenský štrukturalizmus a dejepis umenia. Pražský lingvistický krúžok a dejiny umenia' in: Bakoš 2000, 161-220.

⁹ For more about the character of this antagonism cf. my paper 'The Czech Legacy of the Vienna School of Art History' (forthcoming).

remained present outside the academic establishment, with teachers at artistic academies.¹⁰ Against this background we will assess the two original art historical thinkers from two generations of Antonín Matějček's students at the Prague University: Pavel Kropáček in the 1940s and Jaromír Neumann a decade later.

Pavel Kropáček (1915-1943) started his career early, received his PhD aged twenty-four and his medievalist achievements were highly praised by his teacher. In the late 1930s he engaged with the fine art scene and became a theoretician of *Skupina 42* (Group 42). He died in Auschwitz, aged only 28, as a consequence of his participation in the underground Communist resistance movement during the war.¹¹ His dissertation on panel painting from the Hussite period – the indigenous Reformation movement in the first half of the 15th century – was published posthumously. Kropáček successfully combined the standard rigorous formal study of individual artworks with their inclusion in a different framework from the equally standard 'history of ideas' of Dvořák's followers. Uniquely influenced by Mukařovský, he adopted a broader structuralist approach that would need to be elaborated more deeply in order to bring more effective results. It was clearly Kropáček's individual fate that inhibited a further development of structuralism in Czech art history and thus a later parallel to Hans Sedlmayr's generation in Vienna. Because the Czech history of older - especially medieval - art was so strongly informed by the need to promote national qualities of artistic production, we would expect to find some fiery opposition to the German nationalism of the Viennese structuralists and consequently some kind of emancipation of the Czech art history from Vienna. Unfortunately, such a discussion was prevented from taking place by the historical situation – first during the war when Czech intellectual life was suppressed and then after the war because of the Communist takeover of power and ensuing severance of international connections with countries outside of the Soviet Bloc.

Jaromír Neumann (1924-2001) belonged to the generation of young Czechs who flocked to universities after the end of the war,¹² most of whom joined the Communist Party at the same time. Their belief in the moral superiority of the Soviet state, ideology, science and culture in the post-war period was genuine. Neumann belonged to the young people who formed self appointed 'revolutionary committees' in 1949-1950 under the auspices of the CP, which expelled professors and students from the universities who were not judged ideologically acceptable. Among the older generation of Czech art historians, Vincenc Kramář was the only one to enrol in the CP by 1945, aged sixty-eight, once again going against the mainstream of his peers. He declined the offer of becoming the director of the new National Gallery taking excuse in his failing health but he remained committed to

¹⁰ Václav V. Štech and Jaromír Pečírka, cf. the latter's afterword to the collection of translated essays by Max Dvořák, *Umění jako projev ducha*, Praha 1936. Translation of *Geistesgeschichte* as 'history of ideas' shifts the semantic focus away from Dvořák's 'spirit' which includes an important spiritual dimension.

¹¹ Eva Petrová, 'Pavel Kropáček', in: Anděla Horová ed., *Nová encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění*. Praha 1995, 409-10; Karel Stejskal, 'Pavel Kropáček' in: Chadraba 1987, 342-347 (Stejskal here refers to Kropáček as Marxist, a mistake I repeated in my paper 'Vývoj českého malířství krásného slohu v pojetí Pavla Kropáčka', *Ars* 1996, 156-159; Hana Rousová, 'Živý pes Pavel Kropáček', in: Jiří Ševčík et al. eds., *Alén Diviš: paralelní historie*, Praha 2006, 28-37.

¹² Czech universities were forcedly closed during the Nazi occupation between 1939 and 1945.

the new regime. The leading figures of a younger generation, Antonín Matějček and Jan Mukařovský only joined the party, as many others did, when it became a totalitarian ruling force after the successful Communist power takeover in February 1948. This was clearly in order to support their academic careers. From 1948 onwards, Marxism-Leninism became the sole approved and officially acceptable methodological approach to anything, including art historical research.

A brief clarification of terminology may be helpful at this stage. The object of our inquiry is the position and role of Marxism in Czech art history. Between the 1950s and 1980s however, the official ideology, whose primacy was embodied directly in the Czechoslovak Constitution, was Marxism-Leninism. Considered by its opponents as a major deviation or even treason against the legacy of Marx and Engels, the ideology was developed in the Soviet Union between the wars. The Leninist part consisted of an adaptation of Marxist philosophy to the social reality of underdeveloped Eastern European countries where industrialization was lacking and the proletariat formed a tiny minority of the population.¹³ One noticeable feature was the resignation of internationalism. In retrospect, the formative role of Russian Orthodox traditions, imperial politics and the political culture of Byzantine or Persian origin are evident. Marxist rhetoric remained obligatory but the decisive role was attributed to the collective wisdom of the Communist Parties – under the direction of the Soviet CP – as the sole source of legitimacy. This held true even more for Stalinism with its personality cult, which was a totalitarian regime whose practices were related to German Nazism. In Czechoslovakia the period of Stalinism in the 1950s, under strong and direct Soviet surveillance, should be distinguished from the 1960s when the search for pristine and ‘humanist Marxist’ philosophy rose and consequently the reading of original Marxist texts returned. This period witnessed an increased dialogue with the West that included Marxists outside the Soviet Bloc countries but not those intellectual developments which had elaborated on classic Marxism, like the Frankfurt School or the Althusserian circle. The 1970s and 1980s were affected by the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 and the ensuing establishment of a neo-Stalinist regime, weaker in political practice but authoritarian in ideology and rhetoric. Due to the self-proclamation of much of the period’s writing as ‘Marxist’ a precise differentiation may often be difficult. However the whole situation cannot be properly understood without discriminating between Marxism, Marxism-Leninism and Stalinism.

After the introduction of Marxism-Leninism as the only acceptable ideological and philosophical framework in 1949, Czech art history found itself in a peculiar position. Czech art history was not forced to denounce its own tradition from the first half of the 20th century, as was the case of the other humanities that had been influenced by semiotics and structuralism. It was also able to continue its own long-standing and highly formative discourse on the tense confrontation between Czech and German speaking cultures.¹⁴ The dispute fitted perfectly into the new political situation that followed the expulsion of the three-million German minority from the country in the aftermath of the Second World War, between 1945

¹³ Cf. Archie Brown, *The rise and fall of Communism*, London 2009; Eric Hobsbawm, *How to change the world. Tales of Marx and Marxism*, London 2011.

¹⁴ I have analyzed this background in my book *Náše, národní umění. Studie z dějin dějepisů umění*, Brno 2009. It is in the process of being published in German translation.

and 1946. In spite of its residual internationalist rhetoric, Marxism-Leninism allowed space to sustain the self-confirmation of national collectivism without having to renounce it in favour of class collectivism. Unlike historiography, however, Czech art history had no Marxist experience of its own. The theoretical writing of Karel Teige was not considered part of art history but as an aesthetic and critical stance concerning actual artistic practices. Moreover Teige's texts, written prior to his suicide in 1951, remained unpublished until 1966.¹⁵ The rapid settlement of this debt can be recognized around the year 1950 in the texts of prominent art historians. In the middle of the 1950s marked contributions began to appear by Marxist-Leninist oriented art historians of the younger generation. After the deaths of Stalin and his devoted Czech ally Klement Gottwald in 1953-54¹⁶ and the 20th Congress of the Soviet CP, the second half of the decade introduced what is probably the most interesting chapter of Czech Marxist art history, relying on Max Dvořák for a new synthesis of a Viennese legacy with Marxism, which was promulgated around 1960. At its core was a unique appropriation of iconology and participation in a wider stream of Revisionism in the Central European Soviet Bloc countries in their search for a 'humanist Marxism'.

The most interesting aspect of this development may be the fact that Czech art history's reorientation towards Marxism did not take place within the framework of social art history which was, on the contrary, sharply denounced as 'vulgar sociology' – a code-word used to label an adherence to original Marxism that disregarded the Leninist contribution.¹⁷ This caused a real split between Czech Marxist art history and its counterparts in the West. The overview of Marxist art history published by Andrew Hemingway does not pay any attention to art historical developments in the Soviet Bloc countries, including Czechoslovakia, and this is typical of such an overview.¹⁸ Seen from the other side it is symptomatic that Meyer Schapiro remained virtually unknown in Czech art history, even though he had close personal experience with pre-war Vienna.¹⁹ A plan to publish a selection of Meyer Schapiro's essays in the middle of the 1980s was undoubtedly supported by the Marxist affiliation of the author. It was protracted beyond the fall of the Communist regime and when the book finally appeared in 2006 almost all mention of Schapiro's Marxism had been omitted.²⁰ The Czech translation of Arnold Hauser's *Philosophy of Art History* was arranged in the 1970s by aestheticians and elicited no response among art historians.²¹ The synthesis of Nicos Hadjinicolaou has

¹⁵ Karel Teige, *Vývojové proměny v umění*, Praha 1966.

¹⁶ A joint obituary for both state and party leaders written by Jaromír Neumann introduced the first issue of the new central art historical journal *Umění* in 1954.

¹⁷ Rudolf Chadraba, 'Sociologie umění' in: Sáva Šabouk ed., *Encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění*, Praha 1975, p. 474-476.

¹⁸ Andrew Hemingway ed., *Marxism and the history of art: from William Morris to the New Left*, London, 2006.

¹⁹ Evonne Levy, 'Seldmayr and Schapiro correspond', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 59, 2010, 235-264.

²⁰ The afterword by the volume's editor Karel Srp was also published separately as 'Dějiny umění podle Meyera Schapira', *Umění*, 48, 2000, 22-40.

²¹ Arnold Hauser, *Filosofie dějin umění*, Praha 1975. In the standard Czech textbook of art historical methodology, Hauser is briefly mentioned together with Elias and Bourdieu in a short chapter entitled 'Sociology of Art History'. Marxist art history does not qualify as a research category at all, similarly

remained completely unknown until today and Horst Bredekamp's dissertation of 1975 has only been on record because its third part is devoted to that iconic topic of Czech history, Hussitism.²²

In contrast, Frederick Antal's *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*, a book of crucial importance for Marxist art history that grew from the orbit of the Vienna School, was translated almost immediately and appeared in summer of 1954.²³ The impulse behind the publication was undoubtedly the Viennese affiliation of Antal who had been Dvořák's student and thus the book was clearly expected to provide the desirable foundation for a Czech Marxist art historical methodology. In the afterword, Jaromír Neumann (aged twenty-eight at the time) harshly reproached Antal and argued that the book cannot be termed Marxist at all. Neumann found Antal's mistakes in his overly direct transition from a class analysis to a stylistic one and in his consideration of art as a mechanical product of social classes, or strata, to which the donors belong. In Neumann's opinion, Antal starts from a false concept of development and does not take into account the ideas of Engels and Lenin concerning historical development. As a result, Antal was made accessible to Czech readers but at the same time rebuked from a Stalinist vantage point. This criticism was prolonged into the second half of the 1950s and onwards, when 'sociologism' was deplored as unacceptable. Social art history in the Czech context was at least partially vindicated in the 1970s but until very recently any approach that would account for the decisive roles of recipients of artworks and investors in them has been habitually denounced as unacceptably prioritizing the social environment over the artwork itself.

Instead of developing social art history, the art historians and critics who declared themselves Marxists or Marxist-Leninists concentrated on the debate over Realism. The discussion absorbed the energy of prominent art historians from three generations and revolved around Lenin's theory of reflection, which claimed to explain the epistemic role of visual arts. A highly interesting contribution to the debate was made by Vincenc Kramář who managed to sidestep Stalinist terminology. Kramář developed genuine Marxist principles in order to prove that Realism does not mean the simple replication of visible facts but their creative reformulation, and that Cubism was a successful example of realist art.²⁴ On the basis of private correspondence with Kramář, Karel Teige expressed the same idea more sharply and openly in a text written between 1949 and 1950 and not intended for imminent publication.²⁵ Teige, however, opposed Kramář's conclusion that Cubism specifically should be included in Realist art, but he stressed that the opposite derogatory label of 'Formalism' should apply neither to Cubism, nor to Abstract art. Both scholars clearly stated that the style propagated as 'Socialist Realism' reproduces petty bourgeois values and is supported by true reactionaries.²⁶

with books by Donald Preziosi or Eric Fernie. Jiří Kroupa, *Metody dějin umění I-II*, Brno 2009-2010, 279-283.

²² Horst Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium Sozialer Konflikte*, Frankfurt a.M. 1975.

²³ Frederick Antal, *Florentské malířství a jeho sociální pozadí*, Praha 1954.

²⁴ Vincenc Kramář, 'O realismu a formalismu', *Výtvarné umění*, 4, 1954, 45-48.

²⁵ Karel Teige, 'Pokus o názvoslovnou a pojmoslovnou revisi', in: Teige 1966, 9-139.

²⁶ Vincenc Kramář, *Kulturně-politický program KSČ a výtvarné umění*, Praha 1946, 7. While the CP proposed its political program of 1946 in order to cover up its true Stalinist aims before the takeover of

Jaromír Neumann's contributions around 1950, on the other hand, faithfully conformed to the official Stalinist terminology and practice. In his doctoral thesis, defended in 1950 and devoted to Realism in Bohemian seventeenth-century painting, Neumann explained Baroque art as a combative ideological product of late feudalism directed against the progressive because — early bourgeois in character — Renaissance and Reformation cultures.²⁷ The book was clearly written under the influence of Antal's concept of Marxism as social art history. In 1951, the year of its publication, Neumann performed a 'public self-criticism' ritual and confessed that it was only the teaching of Stalin and the CP that had helped him to turn away from the malignant influences of structuralism, as represented by Mukařovský, Kropáček and the Slovak structuralists.²⁸ Were it not for Neumann's shift in position, as clearly expressed in the afterword to *Florentine Painting* mentioned above, his dissertation could have formed a strong foundation for Czech Marxist art history. It would be methodologically incorrect to disregard the period rhetoric but it is still quite clear in retrospect that Neumann's criticism of Antal was far from implausible. Some recent criticism of Antal, Hauser and Max Raphael arrives at similar conclusions, while adding that such a 'rudimentary form of Marxist art history' could have only been brought to completion later by the followers of the Frankfurt School, with the help of Walter Benjamin's writings and after the rediscovery of Aby Warburg in the 1990s.²⁹

The widely held conviction that conformism to official Marxist-Leninist ideology only affected research in modern art whilst early art remained untainted, cannot be sustained. It was clearly present in the 1950s work of Jaroslav Pešina (1912-1992), the son-in-law of Antonín Matějček from whom he inherited the highly prestigious scholarly focus on medieval painting together with a respected position in the Czech art-historical establishment. His specialty in Late Gothic painting led Pešina to the topic of Hussitism which the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia construed as its crucial legitimating historical epoch. Pešina relied on the studies of the young Communist historiographers to show that, as an analogy to the privileged epistemic historical position of the proletariat, the Hussite revolution also had a fundamental meaning in history. From this it followed that artistic production related to the Hussites is not marginal and unimportant — as evaluated by standard art history — but on the contrary, it has a world-wide importance.³⁰ According to Pešina it is only logical, for example, that the use of Nuremberg originals as

power in 1948, Kramář shared the idealism of other leftist intellectuals in this remarkable booklet and defended the Communists' cultural politics. For context, see Knapík 2004.

²⁷ Jaromír Neumann, *Malířství XVII. století v Čechách*, Praha 1951.

²⁸ Jaromír Neumann, 'Boj o socialistický realismus a úkoly naší výtvarné kritiky a historie umění', in: *Za vědecké dějiny umění a novou kritiku*, Praha 1951, 19-79, esp. 51. On Slovak structuralism cf. Ján Bakoš, 'Česko-slovenský štrukturalizmus a dejepis umenia. Pražský lingvistický krúžok a dejiny umenia' in: Bakoš 2000, 161-220.

²⁹ Otto Karl Werckmeister, 'The Turn from Marx to Warburg in West German Art History 1968-90' in: Hemingway 2006, 213-220, esp. 214. While an anthology of Benjamin's texts was published in Czech translation already in 1979, both the Frankfurt School and Warburg remained largely unknown among Czech art historians until the 1990s. Cf. also Berthold Hinz, 'Kunst und Geschichte nach dem Mauerfall: Marx – zu Hegel – auf den Kopf stellen!' in: Andreas Berndt et al. eds., *Frankfurter Schule und Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin 1992, 183-190.

³⁰ Jaroslav Pešina – Mojmír Hamsík, 'Triptych monogramisty I.V.M. Příspěvek ke studiu problematiky českého malířství 15. století', *Umění*, 2, 1954, 21-40.

inspiration for art in Bohemia was delayed for more than three decades, as the difference conformed to the differences in the development of social productive forces between the two countries. Unlike Kramář or Neumann, Pešina used Leninist and Stalinist axioms of simplified textbook Marxism to construe his argument. It seems that in the beginning of the 1950s he has succumbed to the most seductive fallacy of Marxism, namely its capacity to provide easily understandable explanations and directions.³¹ Although Pešina abandoned this position after 1956, he relied on the results he achieved in this way in his further research. In 1959 he developed an argument concerning the popular character of artistic production in the Hussite period, and in 1964 he construed his explanation of the art of the Beautiful Style as being ethnically Czech and socially plebeian on the same basis.³² The work of a pupil may best exemplify the teacher's ideas. This is certainly the case with Karel Stejskal's (b. 1931) study on the Realist character of the style of the so-called Rajhrad Altarpiece (second quarter of the fifteenth century). He defended it against an allegation of Naturalism and characterized the measure of progressive Realism in the pictures by assessing 'the measure of closeness of the artist's approach to reality and his creative grasp of it'.³³ What may strike a reader today as an example of a narrow-minded ideological approach, was in its time a proclamation of a moderate opposition to the official propaganda, revealed in the subtleties of selected terminology and logic of argument which measured the progressive quality of creativity and did not judge it on the basis of class alone.³⁴

Ten years later, Karel Stejskal was among the protagonists of what I would call the 'iconological turn'. This was elaborated by Jaromír Neumann in his studies which were already published before 1960.³⁵ Neumann suggested that instead of a one-sided concern for a social dimension of art, art historians should devote their attention to the creative dimension, and to its source which is to be found in the artist's imagination. In contrast to his earlier criticism of Dvořák as a bourgeois thinker, Neumann now considers Dvořák's methodology as a valuable inspiration that may be of help in the search for an assessment of art as a creative – and not

³¹ Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, London 2008, 135 (citing Leszek Kolakowski).

³² Jaroslav Pešina, 'Studie k malířství poděbradské doby', *Umění*, 7, 1959, 196-227; Jaroslav Pešina, 'K otázce retrospektivních tendencí v českém malířství krásného slohu', *Umění* 12, 1964, 29-34.

³³ Karel Stejskal, 'Podoba císaře Zikmunda – prostředkem boje husitského umění proti feudální reakci', *Acta universitatis Carolinae 7 – Philosophica et historica*, Praha 1954, 67-75; Karel Stejskal, *Archa rajhradská a její místo ve vývoji českého umění první poloviny 15. století*, Universitas Carolina - Philosophica 1, Nr 1. Praha 1955, 61-94, esp. 64.

³⁴ Robert Suckale explained in similar way the qualitative difference between the texts of Wilhelm Pinder and the official Nazi propaganda in the early 1940s, cf. Robert Suckale, 'Wilhelm Pinder und die deutsche Kunstgeschichte nach 1945', *kritische berichte*, 14, 1986, Nr. 4, 5-17.

³⁵ Jaromír Neumann, 'K dnešním metodickým otázkám dějepisu umění: poznámky o výtvarné představivosti'. *Umění* 6, 1956, 178-188; Jaromír Neumann, *Umění a skutečnost: úvahy o realismu v uměleckém vývoji*, Praha 1963. The most important deficiency of the text by R. Švácha 1987 (as Note 1) is a complete omission of this initiative and creative role of J. Neumann in the methodological shift around 1960. Neumann is credited only with 'vulgar Marxism' around 1950 while the position of an authoritative protagonist of Czech iconology is attributed to Rudolf Chadraba. The reader should bear in mind that when the volume was being written in the middle of the 1980s, Neumann was expelled from the CP and was tolerated only on the margins of the field, while Chadraba was the main editor of the book and a vice-director of the Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences.

mechanical — reflection of historical consciousness.³⁶ While in 1956 Neumann still noted that Dvořák remained an insurmountable idealist, four years later he considered Dvořák's work as a possible foundation for Marxist art history thanks to his employment of dialectical method, his lack of materialism notwithstanding.³⁷ Iconology, retrieved by Neumann from Panofsky's recent books, offered a possibility to synthesize the Viennese — and specifically Dvořák's — tradition of 'spiritual scholarship' with the Marxist demand that historiography should provide knowledge of the ideological dimension of history. The 'idealistic' component of Dvořák's art historical method could be safely set aside while the main benefit resided in his dialectic; it was a dialectic which marked the decisive break from the 'dogmatic' ideology of Stalinist years. Iconology began to be understood as a method that enabled researchers to expose the thinking and ideology of times past through a direct analysis of an image, without recourse to social and historical circumstances, which were considered external and contingent. Instead of 'intrinsic' or cultural meaning of artworks, the entity thus revealed would be the ideological superstructure of an historical epoch, which did not need to be derived from its material, economical basis. Seen from a certain distance it seems clear that this methodological convergence was made possible by the intellectual habit of Hegelianism — shared by both the Viennese tradition and Marxism.³⁸ It was precisely this habit that was — together with the conviction about the direct epistemological role of a visual image — refused by thinkers who had turned towards inspiration in structuralism and semiotics.

The most interesting feature of the synthesis may be that although it considered itself Marxist, it completely disregarded class analysis of specific artworks, their production and consumption. The only exception seems to be Neumann's thesis on Baroque realism, discussed briefly above. The background from which the new interpretation of iconology, and of Dvořák's history of ideas, was developed was the one-sided interest in realism. The decisive character of art and style was seen in their direct epistemic role, regardless of social situation, which for Czech art history unambiguously remained an external factor. The Marxist twist of iconology continued to be attractive to Czech art historians for forty years. In the 1960s, iconology seemed to be an exceptionally sophisticated tool for exploiting the epistemic potential of artistic heritage. Its character was strongly indebted to Dvořák, as art historians did not consider it necessary to search for relevant period texts that would be used for the interpretation of artworks and none of Panofsky's original Neo-Kantian basis remained in place. The method was stripped of its strict consistency and reframed as a direct interpretation of the 'physiognomy of forms' (indebted to the *Gestalt* tradition). Motifs in images were interpreted as bearers of 'hidden symbolic utterance' without taking any recourse to semiotics. This hidden information could be interpreted as secular or as political, in both cases, as opposed to spiritual or church messages, which were labelled as merely covering up, with

³⁶ Sawicky 2006.

³⁷ Jaromír Neumann, 'Dílo Maxe Dvořáka a dnešek', *Umění*, 9, 1961, 525-575. The whole issue of the journal was devoted to reassessment of Max Dvořák.

³⁸ Cf. Ján Bakoš, 'The Vienna School's hundred and sixty-eighth graduate: the Vienna School's ideas revised by E. H. Gombrich' in: Richard Woodfield ed., *Gombrich on art and psychology*, Manchester 1996, 234-361.

the help of period ideology, what was really at stake.³⁹ After all, the method of 'reading between the lines', or the belief that the true meaning of public utterance can be encoded for reasons of safety and must therefore be deciphered as it could prove to be in opposition with the first superficial reading, was a common semantic practice for the inhabitants of Soviet Bloc countries in the 1960s, 70s and 80s: this was the proper way to read daily newspapers.

Similarly, the insistence on autonomous artistic development, as opposed to the idea of art as participating actively in the life of a society, conformed to the need to maintain creative artistic freedom in face of manipulations of artistic production on part of the authoritarian regime ruled by the Communist Party. The basic compliance between the Dvořák-type iconology and the tradition of the Czech branch of the Vienna School can be seen also in the fact that this platform could provide a common ground for art historians who set out from Marxism – as did Neumann and Stejskal – and for those who started from an ideologically opposite position, namely from Catholic spiritualism. It seems clearer now why Max Dvořák gained an almost sacred character in Czech art history. He was the great and world-respected Czech speaking member of the Vienna School of art history. But additionally, it was through his legitimization that Czech art history was, as early as the beginning of the 1960s, able to find a solution to the task of establishing a methodology that would be acceptable to the official ruling ideology. As a result of its 'iconological turn' the Czech art historical establishment could call itself Marxist and at the same time was able to retain a position of elitist 'bourgeois humanism'.⁴⁰ Suppressed and out of the focus of theory, bourgeois class consciousness was allowed to flourish in Czech art historical academic and museum establishments, perhaps aided by another officially repressed area of art historical competence, namely private collecting. In the 1950s as well as 1970s, art history departments were inhabited by finely dressed and elegant men with polished manners, both members of the Communist Party and its outsiders. The discipline was pursued as an elitist sanctuary of humanistic values, safely shielded by its scientific methodology from the excessive demands of the ruling ideology.

In the 1970s, iconology also became a starting point for researchers in modern art like František Šmejkal and Petr Wittlich, although they moved gradually closer towards psychoanalysis and semiotics. The sum of these approaches was called Marxist art history up until the end of the 1980s and managed to retain its strong bond with the Viennese tradition of fundamentally historical explanations of artworks.⁴¹ Was this Marxism, or was it not? As far as it considered itself to be so,

³⁹ The most ambitious books are Rudolf Chadraba, *Dürers Apokalypse – eine ikonologische Deutung*, Praha 1964 and Josef Krása, *Die Handschriften König Wenzels IV*, Praha 1971. They both gained international relevance because they were published in German and English. The topics of both Krása and Chadraba developed impulses of the leading Vienna School scholars, Julius Schlosser and Max Dvořák respectively.

⁴⁰ The situation seems to have been closely parallel in Poland with the prominent personality of Jan Białostocki. The fate, methodologies and politics of art history in the individual countries of the Soviet Bloc were, however, rather specific and the lack of relevant research forbids me to pursue a more detailed account of the topic here. For a recent survey see Ján Bakoš, 'Paths and Strategies in the Historiography of Art in Central Europe', *Ars*, 43, 2010, 85-118 and relevant chapters in Rampley et al. 2012.

⁴¹ Švácha 1987.

we may have to classify it as a specific branch of Marxist methodology. On the other hand it may be difficult to find a place inside any relevant definition of Marxism for an approach that explicitly disregards the social framework of art production and consumption, and does not attribute class analysis a central place.

Attempts at different methodological starting points remained isolated and had no followers: this holds, for example, for the semiotics of art proposed by the theorist Josef Zvěřina.⁴⁴ The intensity of the methodological tradition of the Vienna School can be discerned also in the fact that until today there has not been a great deal of understanding in Czech art history for those approaches that would disregard the history of forms as a basic framework of interpretation. This concerns first of all the Heideggerian phenomenology that became — thanks to efforts of philosopher Karel Kosík — the source of inspiration for ‘humanist Marxism’ or Revisionism in the 1960s.⁴⁵ We could say that the Dvořák-style iconology fulfilled a similar role to phenomenology within the Czech intellectual environment, but their mutual contact was not considered necessary. There was, however, one important exception, Václav Richter (1900-1970) from Brno University, who created a specific methodology by synthesizing phenomenological inspiration with the tradition of the Vienna School in spite of his sparse, or perhaps non-existent, contact with the contemporaneous texts of Kurt Badt or Lorenz Dittmann. Richter read Hans G. Gadamer (although he never cited him) and he reframed the Viennese epistemological basis using the concept of ‘mental model’. Following Heidegger himself, Richter attempted to interpret Baroque architecture as a bearer of meanings that could be recognized through sensually concrete bodily experience, and not with the help of information gained from research into historical ideas and ideologies. The letters exchanged between Richter and his close personal friend Jan Patočka - leading phenomenologist of European stature but banned from the philosophical establishment and institutions - reveal that Richter’s efforts were considered rather naïve by the professional philosopher.⁴⁶ Václav Richter had a creative follower in the 1970s, Ján Bakoš, who was a Slovak art historian, while Patočka’s teaching in the late 1960s influenced a small group of art history students in Prague.⁴⁷ Taken as a whole however, phenomenology never gained the influence in art history that could match its dominance in Czech philosophy, and there seem to have been no attempts at synthesizing it with Marxism.

The case of the second Brno professor in the art history department, medievalist Albert Kutal (1904-1976), confirms the original role of the marginal but

⁴⁴ Josef Zvěřina, *Umělecké dílo jako znak*, Praha 1970. Zvěřina was a Roman Catholic priest and theologian, persecuted by the Communist regime, and he did not participate in the art historical scene beside this delayed publication of his dissertation. Attempts at an officially acceptable convergence of semiotics and Marxism in theories of visual art were pursued, on a mediocre level and without much success, by Sáva Šabouk, ‘Teorie umění a umělecká kritika’, *Estetika*, 21, 1984, 19-29.

⁴⁵ Tomáš Hříbek, ‘Proti metodě: Karel Kosík o architektuře a urbanismu’, in: Marek Hrubec et al., *Myslitel Karel Kosík*. Praha 2011, 225-250; Kopeček 2009, esp. 263-270.

⁴⁶ Václav Richter, *Umění a svět. Studie z teorie a dějin umění*, Praha 2001; Ivan Chvatík – Jiří Michálek eds., Jan Patočka, *Dopisy Václavu Richterovi*, Praha 2001; Rostislav Švácha, ‘K “odstupu” a “parciálnosti” v soudobém dějepisu umění’, *Umění*, 29, 1981, 473-485; Rostislav Švácha, ‘Václav Richter’ in: Chadraba 1987, 284-294; Ján Bakoš, ‘Epistemologický obrat na ceste historika umenia’ in: Bakoš 2000, 109-123.

⁴⁷ Only Dalibor Veselý is known internationally from this group, all others published only in Czech.

intellectually potent Brno school of art history.⁴⁸ Kotal benefited from contact with an important historian of the younger generation at Brno University, Josef Válka, who mediated the knowledge of post-war French historiography. This enabled Kotal to elaborate on his interest in the social history of the Annales School tradition.⁴⁹ Although the relationship between Annales School and Marxism has not been unambiguous, it proved possible to employ this inspiration in Czech historiography without provoking official discontent. For Kotal, the French inspiration served to complement his methods, which remained within the framework of Czech methodological tradition combined with moderate iconological attempts, and a decent but never complete absence note of Czech national identification of form and contents of medieval artworks.

The concept of 'Marxism without classes' in Czech art history proved valuable once again after the demise of the Communist regime. Apart from several politically compromised individuals who had to leave the scene, Czech art history found itself in a comfortable situation after the turn of 1989. It has continuously upheld the position of an elitist humanistic discipline, which was only briefly engaged in Stalinist ideology and practice in the early 1950s but moved beyond them long ago, harmonizing with the appeal of the predominant neo-conservative atmosphere of the new capitalism in the 1990s. If more radically historically oriented approaches to old art have found their way into Czech art history in recent decades, inspired, for example, by Robert Suckale or Svetlana Alpers, the stress on the elements of volition on the part of donors and the public of artistic production is adversely confronted by the deeply rooted belief in the idea of autonomous artistic development. Its primarily formal character is still paired with the concept of an art history ruled by the laws of development, a field of research which can directly access and reveal ideas — even the Spirit — of history. From this vantage point it can be concluded that Czech art history is a faithful and devoted part of the legacy of the Vienna School of art history. Marxism, or Marxism-Leninism, opposed the local branch of Viennese tradition only briefly and essentially did not weaken but rather strengthen this deep seated continuity. At the same time, however, the distrust in art historical theory became stronger than before, as the Marxist-Leninist episode serves as an exemplary menace. As a result, Czech art history largely remains deeply suspicious of any fresh inspirations.⁵⁰

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⁴⁸ Ján Bakoš, 'Umeleckohistorické stanovisko Alberta Kutala', in: Bakoš 2000, 69-108; Milena Bartlová, 'Albert Kotal zum 100. Geburtstag', *Kunstchronik*, 57, 2004, 448-449.

⁴⁹ Martin Nodl, 'Otázky recepce francouzské historiografie v českém prostředí: totální dějiny, dlouhé trvání a mentality' in: *Dějepisectví mezi vedou a politikou*. Brno 2007, 139-171; personal communication of Válka's student Jiří Kroupa.

⁵⁰ I am indebted to Marta Filipová (Birmingham) for her informed corrections and insightful suggestions which helped me greatly in the final revision of the text.

history's history. Her book *Our own, national art* (*Naše, národní umění*, Brno 2009) analyzed the construction of national identity through medieval art history and the history of German-Czech relationship in the field. This year she published a book on performative theory of medieval image *Real presence: medieval image between icon and virtual reality* (*Skutečná přítomnost: středověký obraz mezi ikonou a virtuální realitou*) which she started to write as a fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study in Berlin (2008).

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