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Encounter in the question of reality : Exhibitions of Surrealism and Socialist Realism in Prague in 1947

ANNOTATION

Prague in 1947 remained a place of free expression, where various artistic trends and movements could manifest themselves. It was once again an international cultural space that, after the war caesura, re-established previous contacts in both the West and in the East, and was the home to personalities who were able to stand up to what was coming from abroad in an openly critical way. But this was soon to change. By exploring the theme of realism and reality in the light of two, perhaps seemingly contradictory, exhibitions of socialist realism and resurgent surrealist art in Prague, this study focuses on this pre-breakthrough period before February 1948 in Czechoslovakia and on the events in cultural discourse that already foreshadowed the later transformation of positions on the political and artistic scene. It involves not only the confrontation of these positions, but also their re-evaluation, and above all the effort to understand what Surrealism and Socialist Realism wanted to say about reality and how they wanted to deal with it.

SUMMARY

The year 1947 was still a period of renewal of cultural life in post-war Prague and the re-establishment of broken domestic and foreign relations, which included the organisation of a variety of cultural shows and social events, as well as stormy discussions about the nature of local culture and its direction. In this context, two art exhibitions were opened. The first of them, *Paintings by National Artists of the USSR* in the Great Hall of the Žofín Palace on Slovanský Island, lasted from mid-April to the beginning of May and presented paintings by four artists from the Soviet Union – A. M. Gerasimov, S. V. Gerasimov, A. A. Dejneka and A. A. Plastov (Figs 2, 3, 7, 9). Thus, for the first time it brought to Prague paintings in the style classified as Socialist Realism. The second exhibition, *International Surrealism*, in the Topič Salon on Národní Avenue, opened on 4 November and lasted only a month. Although it was not so monumental, it played a significant role for figures on the cultural scene. It affirmed the continuation of Surrealism after the war, pointed out the link with the Parisian Surrealist group, and, through a series of discussion evenings, opened up debates on the future direction of the movement and of culture and art in general.

Both exhibitions provoked a variety of reactions and were perceived at the time as representing contradictory artistic and ideological attitudes. The exhibition of Soviet painters was commented on by visitors as a showcase of art appreciated by the “ordinary viewer”, as “art of the people and for the people”, and was held up by supporters as an example to the domestic modernists (see the opposition review Matějka 1947, 26). Paintings by Soviet artists (Figs 8, 11–13) were supposed to depict the idealised world of the “Russian man” with its festivities, heroes of the people, carefree gaiety, fearless leaders and the struggle between good and evil, as depicted, for example, in the painting *The Defence of Sevastopol* by Alexandr Dejneka (1942, Fig. 13). Their supposed “realism” was described by many critics as “naturalism”, a mere rewriting of reality and a return to academicism. The reviews published in the press, especially the critical, oppositional ones, were collected and published by Otakar Mrkvička in a collection entitled *Encounter: Soviet Painting and Contemporary Art* (Mrkvička 1947a; Fig. 1) Only few pointed out the essential feature of some of the paintings, which was reflected in the speeches and ethos of the whole exhibition: the tendency to mythologise reality, to create a dream of an ideal world of socialism, which, according to the defenders of the style, was “within reach” even for the Czech man.

At first glance, the Surrealism exhibition stood in sharp contrast to this view of reality. The most prominent spokesman for Czech Surrealism, the poet, artist and theoretician Karel Teige (Fig. 4) spoke of an “unbridgeable gulf” separating the two exhibitions (Teige 1994, 453). The works on display obviously represented an irreconcilable opposition. They reflected the individual style of their artists; most of them abstract paintings, organic, amorphous forms, objects and creatures that could allow the artists and visitors to escape into dreams and fantasies for (Figs 14–18). Their relationship to reality was very unclear, and only the theory and the accompanying speeches, discussions and texts could suggest that here too there was a specific relationship to reality - one that was intrinsic and difficult to grasp.

If we focus on the texts that accompanied the exhibition, especially the studies written by Karel Teige, we cannot help but notice a certain similarity in the ideological background of the exhibitions. Even in the case of the Surrealism exhibition, we encounter the idea that art should transform reality, that it should dominate it and, on the basis of magical operations, subject it to human desire (Teige 1947, s. p.). Teige perceives Surrealist paintings as “faithful snapshots” of the inner world, and speaks of the magical realism of the exhibited works as “naturalistic-realistic”. In both artistic movements, fidelity to reality was seen as a positive value. At the same time, the relationship to reality was paradoxical in both cases, based on the simplicity of a faithful transcription of reality (visible on the one hand, inner, hidden on the other) and a grandeur directed towards the need to “subordinate reality to the will and desire of man” (Teige 1947, s. p.).

Such a relationship to reality proved unsustainable after the February 1948 coup, when the Communist Party took power. At that time, we learn of their disillusionment from the writings of figures such as Jindřich Chalupecký and Karel Teige. Chalupecký confesses to his misguided view of socialism, fully aware that the dream of realising a “paradise of peace” at any price leads to dire consequences (Brdek 2017, 87–88). Teige had come to a complete rejection of reality; his dreams and visions had also failed. Prague in 1947, however, offered a different view of reality. The harshness of reality became a central concept in the artistic and theoretical approach of the poet and art critic Vratislav Effenberger, and many artists and theorists yearned for a different approach to reality. In the poetry of Jiří Kolář, which approaches reality without reservation and without trying to control it, we find a possible alternative. His poems reflect ordinary and simple situations and use fragments, snippets of days, to penetrate something simple but valuable.

Fig. 1. Title page of the anthology *Encounter : Soviet Painting and Contemporary Art* (Mrkvička 1947a).

Fig. 2. Prague-New Town, No. 226, Slovanský Island. Opening of the exhibition *Paintings by National Artists of the USSR* in the Great Hall of the Žofín Palace. The speech is held by Valerian Alexandrovič Zorin, Soviet Ambassador to Czechoslovakia in 1945-1947, the light-haired man is the painter Václav Rabas, in the background the painting *The Defence of Sevastopol* by Alexandr Dejneka (unknown photographer, 12 April 1947, © ČTK, no. 0670481980).

Fig. 3. Prague-New Town, No. 226, Slovanský Island. The exhibition of *Paintings by National Artists of the USSR* in Žofín was also visited by the President of the Republic Edvard Beneš and his wife Hana (unknown photographer, 22 April 1947, © ČTK, no. 0670288984).

Fig. 4. Karel Teige, circa 1920s (unknown photographer, © ČTK, no. 0668712533).

Fig. 5. Title page of the catalogue of the Prague exhibition *Paintings by National Artists of the USSR*, 1947, with a reproduction from a detail of Alexandr Gerasimov's 1939 *Portrait of J. V. Stalin* (sine 1947b).

Fig. 6. Title page of the catalogue of the Prague exhibition *International Surrealism*, 1947 (Kotalík 1947).

Fig. 7. A – Alexandr Michailovič Gerasimov (* 1881 – † 1963), lithograph by Georgij S. Verejsky; **B** – Sergej Vasiljevič Gerasimov (* 1885 – † 1964); **C** – Arkadij Alexandrovič Plastov (* 1893 – † 1972); **D** – Alexandr Alexandrovič Dejneka (* 1899 – † 1969). Taken from sine 1947a, 24, 36, 48, 60.

Fig. 8. Alexandr Michajlovič Gerasimov, 1939: *Portrait of J. V. Stalin*. Oil on canvas, 136 × 113 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (published in Manin 2008, 348; taken from <<https://apps-cloud.n-tv.de/img/10165466-1361878956000/o/2436/2436/Stalin-Kunstwerk-Gerassimow.jpg>>).

Fig. 9. Prague-New Town, No. 226, Slovanský Island. Hanging of the painting *Tehran Conference* by A. M. Gerasimov during the preparation of the exhibition of *Paintings by National Artists of the USSR* on Slovanský Island in Prague (unknown photographer, 11 April 1947, © ČTK, no. 0670511307).

Fig. 10. Alexandr Michajlovič Gerasimov, 1945: *The Tehran Conference* (“*The Big Three*” Conference). Oil on canvas, 308 × 405 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (taken from <https://global.udn.com/global_vision/story/8664/7150665>).

Fig. 11. Sergei Vasiljevič Gerasimov, 1937: *Celebration at the kolkhoz*. Oil on canvas, 233.5 × 372 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (published in Manin 2008, 350; Bown/Lafranconi 2012, 140; taken from <<https://epampatras.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/sergei-gerasimov-a-collective-farm-festival.jpg>>).

Fig. 12. Arkadij Alexandrovič Plastov, 1942: *To the Partisans*. Oil on canvas, 115 x 164 cm, Tajikistan National Museum, Dushanbe (taken from Plastov/Sysojev 1979, s. p.).

Fig. 13. Alexandr Alexandrovič Dejneka, 1942: *Defence of Sevastopol*. Oil on canvas, 200 × 400 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (published in Bown/Lafranconi 2012, 170; taken from <https://www.reddit.com/r/MarxistCulture/comments/1cn0b6t/a_defence_of_sevastopol_oil_on_canvas_painting_by>).

/#lightbox>).

Fig. 14. Enrico Donati, 1945: *The Filter / The Rain Castle (Le philtre II)*. Oil, 100 × 76 cm (taken from Kotalík 1947, s. p.; colour reproduction available at <<https://www.wikiart.org/en/enrico-donati>>).

Fig. 15. Jacques Hérold, 1942: *A Birdwoman Reading an Eagle (La Liseuse d'aigle)*. Gouache and pastel on paper, 60 × 44.5 cm; private collection (taken from <<http://www.kurata-wataru.com/ruin/ruinb7bd.html>>).

Obr. 16. Toyen, 1946: *Mythe de la lumière*. Oil on canvas, 160 × 75 cm, Moderna Museets Vänner, Stockholm, inv. č. NM 6330 (© Toyen/Bildupphovsrätt 2024).

Fig. 17. A double-page catalogue for the exhibition *International Surrealism* in 1947 with a reproduction of Victor Brauner's 1946 work *Cup of One Hundred and Twenty Eros-magical Positions* (taken from Kotalík 1947, s. p.; colour reproduction available at <<http://surrelart.blogspot.com/2013/06/victor-brauner-1903-1966-paintings-paul.html>>).

Fig. 18. Frederick Kiesler, 1947: *Sketch for the Hall of Superstition (Esquisse pour l'Architecture de la Salle de Superstition)*. Reproduction in the catalogue of the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947* at the Galerie Maeght in Paris (currently in the LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur, Münster, inv. no. C-778 LM; taken from Breton et al. 1947, s. p.).

Translation by Linda Foster