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# Above and beyond reality: early hints of Surrealism in Czechoslovak cinema

"Surrealism in cinematography started by exploring the options of attacking, if not destroying the values held by thousands of viewers in the cinema. Anything that doesn't attack society and its institutions is not Surrealist."

Luis Buñuel

Traditionally, Surrealism is described as being born out of desire; the desire to find artistic expression for a human mind freed from the rule of reason.<sup>[1]</sup> In contrast to other art movements, Surrealism wasn't meant to be bound by any aesthetic or moral criteria limiting the use of psychic automatism, i.e. the free recording of thoughts, dreams (under the influence of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*) and other states of mind. This technique was first used in *The Magnetic Fields* by André Breton and Philipp Soupault in 1920; a year that also marks the foundation of the Surrealist movement in France. Four years later, Breton summarized the movement's programme in his *Surrealist Manifesto* and Surrealists started publishing the *The Surrealist Revolution* magazine. In 1929, the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* was published, opening an era of political Surrealism with greater inclination to ideas of the intellectual left and of the proletarian revolution.

In the inter-war period, surrealism spread from France to other countries; for instance to Czechoslovakia. The local Surrealist Group was founded in 1934 with several artists publishing the manifesto *Surrealismus v ČSR* (Surrealism in

Czechoslovakia) under the influence of meeting the French Surrealists in Paris. At the core of the Group, there were former *Devětsil* members and Poetists (as opposed to the Dadaist movement, which was the primary resource for Surrealism in France): Konstantin Biebl, Bohuslav Brouk, Jindřich Honzl, Jindřich Štýrský or Toyen. The main representatives and theoreticians were Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige. Before Nezval dissolved the Group in 1938 due to ideological disagreement, they had organized a Prague surrealist exhibition, several lectures (attended by Breton among others) or published *Mezinárodní bulletin surrealismu* (International Surrealist Bulletin). Nezval himself wrote several Surrealist poems (collected in *Absolutní hrobař* [Absolute Gravedigger], *Praha s prsty deště* [Prague with the Fingers of Rain] and *Žena v množném čísle* [Woman in Plural]) and translated French Surrealist literature.

However, convinced about the anarchist nature of the movement and thus aiming towards political independence of Surrealism, the former Group members lead by Teige continued in their activities, still maintaining contact with their French peers. The Surrealists' activities were only subdued during the Second World War and the German occupation. Some of the artists moved to the illegal group Ra founded in 1936 by Václav Zykmond and mostly opposed to automatism and psychoanalysis. However, due to political pressure and internal disagreement this formation fell apart as well after the 1948 communist coup. From the beginning of the 1950s, when most art movements opposing the doctrine of socialist realism were considered low and little helpful in building a better tomorrow, Surrealists could only work outside of the official art organisations.

Only in the 1960s, a new Surrealist group started emerging around the art theoretician, poet and essayist Vratislav Effenberger, whose flirtation with cinema this digressive text will now focus on for a while.

### **Vratislav Effenberger**

The literary works by Vratislav Effenberger, one of the most important representatives of the Czech after-war Surrealism whose essays were a mixture of Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism, still haven't been collected in an omnibus edition. Even though two books of his poems have been published, and so has been his sarcastic criticism of modern society and of the historical developments of the 20th

century *Republiku a varlata* (Republic and Testicles) or the collection of non-executable screenplays *Surovost života a cynismus fantasie* (Rohheit of the Life and Cynicism of the Fantasy), a much greater part of texts from the author's extensive literary legacy has remained unpublished and unknown to the public. These include his studies on film, among other things.

After graduating from secondary industrial school in 1944, Effenberger went to study chemistry and the history of art as well as aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts of the Charles University in Prague. Already during his university studies, this author of many unorthodox ideas joined the technical research department of the Czechoslovak Film Institute as a chemist. At that time, he wrote *K estetice filmu* (On the Aesthetics of Film), an almost 80-page text later renamed to *Poznámky o filmu* (Notes on Film).<sup>[2]</sup>

Later on, he published shorter theoretical articles on film in the *Blok (Problémy filmové kultury a Nová avantgarda filmové kultury* [Problems of Film Culture and the New Avant-garde of Film Culture]) and *Kvart (Studie o filmu* [Study on Film]) magazines. In 1954, Effenberger was dismissed from the Czechoslovak Film Institute, being a worker until 1966. To this profession he later returned again after being dismissed from the Institute for the second time for his political opinions at the beginning of the normalization period.<sup>[3]</sup> Between 1975 and 1977, he worked as a night watchman, spending the rest of his life on disability pension.

During the not very long time he spent in the Film Institute in the second half of the 1960s, Effenberger participated in the project *Obraz člověka v českém filmu* (Depiction of Human in Czech Film). Lead by Ivan Sviták, the research focused on sociological and social psychological aspects of film. The method was elaborated by the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois in November 1962. (The transformation of film language of the Czech motion picture was only dealt with later in the *Vývoj filmového vyjadřování* [Development of Film Language] project lead by Marie Benešová. For this project, Effenberger wrote a methodological manual called *Analýza struktury filmu* [Analysis of Film Structure].<sup>[4]</sup>) Effenberger's output from the project was a study carrying the name of the project – *Obraz člověka v českém filmu*. Here, on a sample of ten films from 1912, 1922, 1932, 1942 and 1952, Effenberger examines how certain ideological models reflect the mentality of the mass audience and presents a typology of Czech film heroes. Even though the matter-of-fact style of his paper is not very reminiscent of Surrealist works, the opposite is true for his

uncompromising description of the spiritual inferiority of the Czech bourgeoisie.

A deep interest in film and Surrealism were also mingled in the rich and varied works by Effenberger's close colleague, the psychiatrist, jazzman and film historian Ludvík Šváb, the author of non-executed screenplays and studies in history.<sup>[5]</sup> Quite an extensive overview of his activities (not only his Surrealist works) was recently provided in *Uklidit až po mé smrti* (Only Clean Away after my Death). We will conclude this digression and the overview of the beginnings of Czech Surrealism by saying that Šváb, Effenberger and the other Czech Surrealists were (again) forced to join the artistic underground after the August 1968 occupation.

### **Surrealism in film**

One of the first Surrealist films and the culmination of film Surrealism at the same time was *Un chien andalou* from 1929, made by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí based on their dreams and the tradition of Cinéma Pur.<sup>[6]</sup> Thick with Surrealism is also Buñuel's subsequent film *L'âge d'or* (1930), and we could find elements of Surrealism in most of his later films as well, even though their inclination towards Surrealist principles might „only“ manifest itself in breaking social taboos and revolting against bourgeois morality, and not in replacing causality and logical content by associative composition. Avant-garde authors close to Surrealism included Maya Deren (*Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943), Jean Cocteau (*Le sang d'un poète*, 1932) or Joseph Cornell (*Rose Hobart*, 1936). Another famous filmmaker whose work is almost uncharacterisable without using the word „Surrealism“ is David Lynch. However, for instance Luboš Ptáček makes the automatic connection between Lynch and Surrealism more problematic by saying that: „The difference between a Surrealist provocation and its Lynchian parallel thus lies in the fact that Surrealism confronts society, whereas in Lynch's films, it's the individual who is confronted.“<sup>[7]</sup>

First Surrealist film attempts in Czechoslovakia could already be found in the works of the *Devětsil* authors. However, in spite of the existence of associations such as *Klub za nový film* (New Film Club, 1927), *Film-foto skupina levé fronty* (Film/Photo Group of the Left Front, 1931) or *Československá filmová společnost* (Czechoslovak Film Society, 1936), advancing new methods and artistic values in the Czech film production, these attempts only remained limited to the literary level. Domestic

filmmakers largely had to conform to the requirements of the production companies they worked for (with the exception of Gustav Machatý who had more creative freedom as his works were attractive for the foreign market). During the First Czechoslovak Republic, there were no patrons having the courage to invest in a more ambitious Surrealist film (such as vicomte de Noailles, the patron of *L'âge d'or*).

The fictional film librettos by the *Devětsil* and Surrealist Group authors were not even made to be retold in the language of film; they were written out of pure joy and enchantment with the new medium and its visual language. For domestic Surrealist and Poetist writers, film was also a frequent poetic theme affecting the structure of their poems as well (series of images without beginning or end, fast „cuts“, parallel stories, merging of painting and poetry in visual poems). For instance *Konec starých časů* (The End of Old Times) was originally written by Vladislav Vančura, coming into contact with film through *Devětsil* as well, as a film, and not as a novel. At least on a theoretical level, the concept of modern film was elaborated by Vítězslav Nezval, Karel Teige or Artuš Černík.<sup>[8]</sup> In his study *Foto kino film* (Photo, Cinema, Film, 1922), in line with the spirit of Surrealism, Karel Teige called photography and film the most modern artistic disciplines potentially leading to revolution and fulfilling the ideal of a classless society.

Careful experimenting with artistic style can be seen in Josef Rovenský's lyrical films or in *Před maturitou* (Before the Finals, 1932), in which the above mentioned Vladislav Vančura participated as a consultant. Together with Vítězslav Nezval and the linguist Roman Jakobson, Vančura then made *Na sluneční straně* (On the Sunnyside, 1933), a social drama with occasional poeti(sti)c hints. However, in spite of the freedom Vančura was given by the A-B Company, the film enchanted neither the viewers, nor the critics. At the beginning of the 1930s, at least a few short experimental films were made; however, they were not primarily influenced by surrealism, but for instance by the Soviet montage theory (*Burleska* [Burlesque, dir. by Jan Kučera, 1932]), city symphonies (*Praha v záři světél* [Prague Illuminated by Millions of Lights, dir. by Svatopluk Innemann, 1928]), impressionism (*Bezúčelná procházka* [Aimless Walk, dir. by Alexander Hackenschmied, 1930]) or kineticism (*Světlo proniká tmou* [The Light Penetrates the Dark, dir. by Otakar Vávra, František Pilát, 1931]).

Domestic filmmakers got to know foreign avant-garde films better also thanks to the *Týdny avantgardního filmu* (Avant-garde Film Weeks) organized three times at the beginning of the 1930s by the photographing journalist, cinematographer and director Alexander Hackenschmied. During the Second World War and shortly after, young supporters of Surrealism wrote a few screenplays; however, these were never executed either. In case of the above mentioned Vratislav Effenberger, it was for instance *Zapomenutá noc* (Forgotten Night, 1944) or *V ulicích hlavního města* (In the Streets of the Capital, 1947).<sup>[9]</sup> Nevertheless after all, Effenberger managed to execute one screenplay produced by the Czechoslovak Film Institute with the help of the painter Josef Istler, cinematographer Karel Hollegcha and a 16mm camera. It was *Nástin studie o zlomku skutečnosti* (An Outline of a Study on a Fragment of Reality).<sup>[10]</sup> However, no copy of probably the only Czech film made before 1960 under the direct influence of Surrealism has survived. Effenberger's legacy contains the screenplay accompanied by photographs though.

Only from the 1960s onwards, we can observe a more marked influence of Surrealism on Czech cinema in the films of Jan Švankmajer whose understanding of Surrealism had been shaped by Effenberger, and of the New Wave authors (*Sedmikrásky* [Daisies, dir. by Věra Chytilová, 1966], *Valerie a týden divů* [Valerie and Her Week of Wonders, dir. by Jaromil Jireš, 1970]). It was at that time that Antonín J. Liehm formulated his thought on film Surrealism during a critical debate on *Panna zázračnica* (Miraculous Virgin, dir. by Štefan Uher, 1966); a thought that can be seen as a recommendation to filmmakers interested in Surrealism, and that's why we will use it to conclude our brief review of the beginnings of the Czechoslovak attempts to apply Surrealist poetics in film:

„While visual Surrealism adds another dimension of reality, I would like a film inspired by these sources to find another dimension of reality using its own means or to bring to the screen something that's above and beyond reality, but in my opinion, it needs to employ its own means.“<sup>[11]</sup>

## Notes:

[1] The name of the movement was derived from the French „surréalité“ meaning surreality. Surreality denotes a source of art inaccessible to reason and functioning without the influence of morality, intellect or will. In this sense, the term was first used by Guillaume Apollinaire describing his impressions of the ballet *Parade*, co-authored by Jean Cocteau, Eric Satie and Pablo Picasso. In the same year, Apollinaire called his play *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (The Breasts of Tiresias) a „surrealist drama“.

[2] For more information on the text containing reflections on film as a medium of expression, its social function and nature of the film art, see Bregant, Michal, Skutečnost zlomku. *Illuminace*, year 9, No. 3, 1997, pp. 107–116.

[3] Shortly before that, Effenberger wrote a short essay on Karel Vachek in *Analogon*, the Surrealist revue he was an editor of at the time. Effenberger, Vratislav, Nová vlna v českém filmu a Karel Vachek. *Analogon* No. 1, 1969, pp. 93–94.

[4] Benešová, Marie et al., *Zpráva o průzkumu vyjadřovacích složek českého hraného filmu*. Československý filmový ústav, Praha 1972.

[5] See Šváb, Ludvík, Filmové scénáře. *Illuminace* 1996, No. 3, pp. 117–145.

[6] A summarizing book on the relationship of Surrealism and film is *Le Surréalisme au Cinema* (Surrealismus in Film, 1953) by the Greek writer and filmmaker Ado Kyrou. In his opinion, film, or more specifically cinema, is Surrealist by nature as watching films in the dim cinema is reminiscent of dreaming.

[7] Ptáček, Luboš, Mýtus, symbol, médium. *Cinemapur*. 1994, No. 6, p. 42.

[8] See their texts in the anthology *Stále kinema*. Anděl, Jaroslav, Szczepanik, Petr, *Stále kinema, antologie českého myšlení o filmu 1904–1950*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2008.

[9] Another work by Effenberger, the film story *Tlučte hrbaté* (Beat the Hunchbacks), was made into a film called *Kino Effenberger* (Cinema Effenberger) in 2016 by Vojtěch Mašek and Jakub Felcman.

[10] For more information on the film see Bregant, Michal, Skutečnost zlomku.

[11] Szelepcsényi, J., Panna zázračnica. *Zprávy Svazu československých filmových a televizních umělců FITES* 1966, No. 10 (31.12.), p. 3.