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# METHODOLOGY AS DREAM AND PROGRAMME: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSTISLAV ŠVÁCHA ON ART HISTORY IN POSTWAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA VÁCLAV MAGID – JAKUB STEJSKAL

## 1

Rostislav ŠVÁCHA, “Dějepis umění v současnosti”, in: *idem* – Anđela HOROVÁ – Rudolf CHADRABA – Josef KRÁSA (eds.), *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění*, vol. 2, *Dvacáté století*, Prague: Odeon 1987, pp. 349–370.

## 2

The conference “Mezi Východem a Západem: Jak se v poválečném Československu psalo o výtvarném umění?”, Prague: Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, 27–28 October 2012. Rostislav Švácha’s contribution is entitled “Against One Cliché”.

Václav Magid: I would first like to ask you about the text “Dějepis umění v současnosti” (“Art History at Present”), published in 1987 at the end of *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění* (*Chapters from Czech Art History*).<sup>1</sup> You touched upon themes similar to those you had discussed in your contribution to the conference “Between East and West”.<sup>2</sup>

Rostislav Švácha: Without wanting to brag, I think I am probably one of the only people who has read virtually everything produced after 1945 by art historians in Czechoslovakia. I was commissioned to write the concluding chapter of *Chapters from Czech Art History* and took the task very seriously.

Jakub Stejskal: I think we can agree that this text remains definitive because, as you say, you were the only person who took the task on. Looking back, is there anything in the text you would now change?

RŠ: Some would say that I could have written the ending more diplomatically. I call for a genuinely Marxist art history and declare that we have still not written our own *Das Kapital*. After 1989, it was inevitable that this would be held against me. But to be honest, I don’t know if I would change it. At the conference we heard from Professor Milena Bartlová that Marxist

methodology has been neglected.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps art historians should devote more of their energy to traditional Marxist themes.

During the 1990s, Czech art historians were queuing up to tell us that art history after 1945 or 1948 had suffered under Marxism or that Marxism had been imposed from above. Perfectly respectable historians were making such statements. I believe the opposite. I see very little Marxism in Czech art history, with the exception of certain attempts at dogmatic texts from the first half of the fifties, especially those by Jaromír Neumann.

JS: As regards the fate of Marxism or Marxist methodology in Czech art history, to what extent can we detect signs of it as far back as the thirties?

RŠ: After the Communist takeover in 1948, the main trend was to counter rather than cultivate Marxism. Myself I would be asking why there was so little Marxism, and I think one reason is that there were very few attempts at a Marxist methodology during the First Republic (1918–1938). Of course there are exceptions, the most important being Karel Teige. Except that Teige focused on the history of modernist art and architecture. I see no real attempts to apply Marxist methodology to the interpretation of older art. In this respect I think a question mark hovers over Pavel Kropáček. His most important text, *Malířství doby husitské (Painting during the Hussite Period)*,<sup>4</sup> is in many ways structuralist rather than Marxist. Nevertheless, there are hints of Marxism present. Firstly, he is interested in the internal contradictions of a structure, which is typical of a Marxist approach to art history. And secondly, he is also interested in ideology.

JS: Josef Vojvodík is at present writing a book about the 1940s, a section of which is devoted to

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See Milena BARTLOVÁ, "Czech Art History and Marxism", *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2012, no. 7, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/bartlova.pdf> (accessed 14 Oct 2018).

### 4

Pavel KROPÁČEK, *Malířství doby husitské: Česká desková malba první poloviny XV. století*, Prague: Česká akademie věd a umění 1946.

5

Josef VOJVODÍK, *Patos v českém umění, poezii a umělecko-estetickém myšlení čtyřicátých let 20. století*, Prague: Argo 2016.

6

Pavel KROPÁČEK, "Budoucnost monumentálního umění", *Volné směry*, vol. 40, 1947–1948, pp. 60–74.

7

Jan KVĚT – Jaromír NEUMANN – Jaroslav PEŠINA – Vladimír WAGNER, *Za vědecké dějiny umění a novou kritiku*, Prague: Orbis 1951; Ideová komise při Svazu československých výtvarných umělců (ed.), *Otázky teorie a kritiky v současném výtvarném umění*, Prague: NČVU 1955.

Kropáček.<sup>5</sup> Having researched Kropáček's surviving documents, Vojvodík suggests that the text you have mentioned on panel paintings is the only place where Marxism features and that at that time in his career, Kropáček was far closer to someone like Jindřich Chalupecký. As far as Kropáček's structuralism is concerned, Vojvodík believes this was more a sop to Jan Mukařovský, Kropáček's dissertation supervisor at the time. How is it there are traces of Marxism in this particular work but in no others? Was it just a kind of fleeting fancy that appealed to Kropáček?

RŠ: Such doubts are entirely appropriate. As far as methodology is concerned, Kropáček's book on panel painting is somewhat obscure. During the fifties and sixties, several Czechoslovak art historians stumbled upon Kropáček in a desperate search for their own Marxist predecessors, and perhaps they were guilty of exaggerating his Marxist leanings. On the other hand, I personally believe the influence of Marxism is present in the book. In other respects, however, it is true that his essays, for instance on monumentality in art,<sup>6</sup> are very close in spirit to Chalupecký or, say, František Kovárna, who were not Marxists.

VM: Moving forward in time to the fifties, how was the requirement to deploy Marxist methodology communicated at that time?

RŠ: Several art history conferences were organised at which participants were basically instructed to cultivate Marxism in their work. However, if you read the papers delivered at these conferences, you realise that historians were looking for escape routes right from the outset.<sup>7</sup> They were happy to search for the laws of historical development. That sounded suitably Marxist. But in the early fifties, Jan Květ, for instance, as

well as other leading historians, stated that even the autonomous development of art was a law unto itself, that it was simply a fact that art develops autonomously, and in this way they pushed back against the Stalinist iteration of Marxism in vogue that time. However, this entailed going all the way back to formalist concepts from the start of the twentieth century.

VM: What were they pushing back against? Was it some kind of vulgar sociological trait in Marxism?

RŠ: Yes. The Stalinist variety of Marxism makes a point of tracking down an artist's class origins. The aim is to discover on behalf of what class they are speaking. This is indeed called vulgar sociology, and it was what our historians were being asked to practice at the time. However, they refused.

JS: On the other hand, there were people like Neumann, whom we've already referred to, who in the early fifties functioned as hatchet men, only to reconsider their position later.

RŠ: Personally I'd avoid the term hatchet man. A hatchet man is someone who takes the line that, if you're not for them you're against them, you're the "enemy", a tag applied to Teige at the start of the fifties. This was extremely dangerous situation to be in. Neumann rarely attacked anyone in particular, though it's true that he was dogmatic and doctrinaire, certainly during the first half of the fifties. Maybe it was the only way he could further his career as an art historian. His conduct was often unpleasant, but on the other hand he was one of the few to attempt to move on from formalism in art history.

JS: How influential was the social history being practiced by Marxist art historians in Hungary?

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Frederick ANTAL, *Florentské malířství a jeho společenské pozadí*, Prague: SNKLHU 1954  
(*Florentine Painting and its Social Background: The Bourgeois Republic before Cosimo de' Medici's Advent to Power: XIV and Early XV Centuries*, London: Kegan Paul 1948).

9

Jaromír NEUMANN,  
*Malířství XVII. století v Čechách: Barokní realismus*, Prague: Orbis 1951; *idem, Karel Škréta*, Prague: NČVU 1956.

I have in mind Dvořák's student, Frederick Antal, and Arnold Hauser.

RŠ: I read somewhere – I can't remember if it was Jaromír Šíp or someone else who said it – that people were talking about Antal as far back as the late fifties. His *Florentine Painting* was translated into Czech.<sup>8</sup> It's only natural it had some influence. Neumann adopts Antal's approach in his books on the Czech baroque.<sup>9</sup> He conforms to the basic premise of vulgar sociological art history and theory, namely that the more advanced the class, the more realist its art. And so the historian is obliged to research the class origin of an artist in order to determine how realist their work is. In *Florentine Painting* Antal does exactly this and very thoroughly too. It's almost pataphysical. As far as Arnold Hauser is concerned, I don't really know how well known he was in Czechoslovakia. Don't forget that the vulgar sociological method was a Soviet import, and though art history was by no means a favoured discipline in Russia, the outlines of this methodology could be gleaned through reading Soviet histories of literature.

VM: During the fifties, formalist tendencies persisted, albeit garbed in Marxist robes. How did writers manage to combine these two approaches?

RŠ: The books published during the early fifties usually consisted of two parts. In the first part the author would outline the historical backdrop against which the class struggle was being fought, etc. and in then the second part would offer a conventional formalist interpretation of the development of art. There was almost no connection between the first and second parts.

VM: So the second part would contain a description of the autonomous development of art, a kind of science of influence?

RŠ: Exactly.

JS: So in that case the first part would represent a concession made by these writers to the authorities?

RŠ: Basically, yes. Though of course you shouldn't forget that several of these writers believed this was the way forward.

JS: They may have believed it, but surely not without some form of cognitive dissonance. Here I am, beavering away on an analysis of relations of production, and suddenly I change tack entirely and return to a good old stylistic art history that examines the development of forms...

RŠ: I repeat, they believed this was a science. They regarded their formalist analyses as works of scientific research.

VM: At the conference "Between the East and the West", Pavla Pečínková spoke of what she called an ethical failure on the part of Czech art history after 1948. She was referring to the history of modern art and the tendency to prioritise academicism over modernism.<sup>10</sup> What are your feelings regarding the ethics of art history at that time?

RŠ: Art historians were undoubtedly at fault in the fifties by virtue of not applying their method consistently. What kind of conclusions would they have reached if, when researching someone like Max Švabinský, they had focused most on what class his works were speaking on behalf of?

I wasn't remotely surprised by the contribution from Pavla Pečínková, because I've known her for a long time. She was my classmate at Olomouc University and

even then we used to argue. She has always been a devout anti-communist and all her opinions ensue directly from that. I don't agree with anti-communism because I find it to be simply a mirror-image of communism. It is as rigidly ideological as that which it criticises for being excessively ideological.

VM: The failure you speak of is methodological. But I would like to know how you feel about the ethical failure.

RŠ: Art historians of the fifties had no idea of what lay in store for them. People had a very naive idea of what the communist regime would entail, and that included intellectuals. They were taken by surprise and simply tried to survive.

JS: As everyone knows, the Viennese School had a huge influence in Czechoslovakia through Vojtěch Birnbaum and his students. One branch of the school was interested in a kind of positivist or scientist interpretation of a kind of biology of forms, and the other was linked to the tradition that included Max Dvořák and Hans Sedlmayr and was closer to Hegelianism, i.e. to what we used to call the aesthetics of content. It seems to me that the formalist approach of Birnbaum and his students reached an accommodation with Marxism at the expense of a certain cognitive dissonance. But what about their relationship with Dvořák?

RŠ: The first person to examine Dvořák from a different perspective than that of his own students was Teige. His texts of the late forties and early fifties, in which he attempted a phenomenology of modern art,<sup>11</sup> show clearly that he felt Dvořák to have methodological potential by virtue of the sheer breadth of his perspective. However, this proved to be a dead end because Teige

was silenced by the communist regime and it was difficult for anyone to take his place (leaving aside the Czech surrealists such as Vratislav Effenberger, representing a trend that has remained on the margins of institutional art history). This only became possible in the sixties, when Jaromír Neumann reawakened interest in Dvořák. Having abandoned vulgar sociology, Neumann sought another path and Dvořák seemed to hold out hope. Neumann travelled to Vienna, where he met up with Professor Karl Maria Swoboda, one of Dvořák's students, who presented him with unpublished manuscripts of Dvořák's essays. These included "Idealism and Realism", an outline of what would become Dvořák's great essay on idealism and naturalism (which to begin with he referred to as realism). Neumann returned to Prague with photocopies of the manuscripts and persuaded the Odeon publishing house to release them in book form. However, the political changes that took place following the events of 1968 meant this project was shelved. Rudolf Chadraba, a pioneer of the iconological method, also took a keen interest in Dvořák. The last good essay Chadraba ever wrote, which was published in *Chapters from Czech Art History*, is about the Vienna School and offers an unusual take on Dvořák.<sup>12</sup>

VM: Staying with the late fifties and early sixties, I would like to hear more about the relationship of Czech art history to iconology and Erwin Panofsky.

RŠ: Somebody ought really to delve more deeply into this. I can only offer you my personal impressions. So we are still with vulgar sociology, i.e. the idea that the more advanced the class, the more realist its art. When Panofsky published his book on early Netherlandish painting, he basically crushed the life out of this theory.<sup>13</sup> He examined the meaning of realism or naturalism in the paintings of the Van Eyck brothers

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Rudolf CHADRABA, "Max Dvořák a vídeňská škola dějin umění", in: *idem–ŠVÁCHA–HOROVÁ–KRÁSA, Kapitoly*, pp. 9–56.

**13**

Erwin PANOFSKY, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1953.

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Jaroslav PEŠINA, "Max Dvořák  
a dnešní stav otázky umění  
bratří van Eycků", *Umění*,  
vol. 9, 1961, no. 6,  
pp. 576–607, especially  
pp. 602–603.

15

Rudolf CHADRABA, *Albrecht  
Dürer*, Prague: Orbis 1963;  
*idem*, *Dürers Apokalypse: Eine  
ikonologische Deutung*, Prague:  
Tschechoslowakische Akademie  
der Wissenschaften 1964.

and showed that it was not informed by any progressive content.

VM: So how did Panofsky's interpretation of realism in the paintings of the Van Eycks differ from the perspective offered by vulgar sociology?

RŠ: Panofsky discovers a deep religious and theological content informing the realism of the Van Eycks. Instead of a progressive naturalism, he reveals the "obscurantism of the church". This was deeply troubling to Jaroslav Pešina, who during the fifties had been a fan of vulgar sociology and the progressive implications of realism. He attempted to present the case against Panofsky in the pages of the journal *Umění*, but it was clear he was on a hiding to nothing.<sup>14</sup> The emergence of iconology was important in that it swept away the last crumbs of vulgar sociology. However, things are a bit more complicated than that. When Rudolf Chad-raba took up the iconological method, among other things he used it to look for progressive content. Perhaps his most important work is his interpretation of *The Apocalypse* by Dürer, in which he perceives a precursor of the German reformation.<sup>15</sup> According to Chad-raba, Dürer is speaking on behalf of progressive forces within German society at that time.

JS: And you think this is misleading because...

RŠ: I haven't said it's misleading. It may be a valid interpretation. However, the fact is that at that time Chad-raba had little option but to examine things from this perspective.

JS: So what is your opinion of this approach?

RŠ: I see absolutely nothing wrong with it. I believe it is a valid direction to take.

JS: Another important figure of the sixties was Václav Richter, who was inspired by the phenomenology of both Husserl and Heidegger. What do you think Richter's impact was on the way art history was thought of at that time?

RŠ: Václav Richter was an outstanding figure. I wrote at least two lengthy essays on him as far back as the eighties, in which I attempted to show why he was so important.<sup>16</sup> He was the first to publish a book that made no attempt to reflect the Marxist currents of thought at that time, i.e. the late fifties. *Raněstředověká Olomouc (Early Medieval Olomouc)*<sup>17</sup> already clearly displays the influence of Heidegger. Richter is unique in that he had already begun to systematically reflect upon the methods of art history as far back as the thirties. He began to harbour doubts as to whether Birnbaum's methodology, based on an analysis of influences, was sufficient, and gradually parted company with formalist approaches. Basically, he attempted to combine art history with Heidegger's existentialism, and pursued this path from the end of the fifties. Everyone has read his studies in *Umění* and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> However, his influence is not restricted to his Brno students. Some of these attempted to follow in his footsteps, while others, such as Ján Bakoš, set off in different directions. Nevertheless, all of them took with them an awareness of the importance of methodology.

VM: Did Richter's attempt to apply phenomenology or existentialism to art history have any equivalents in the West?

RŠ: Around the same time, Kurt Badt, a German who had spent the war in England, where he encountered Ernst Gombrich, was attempting something similar. His *Raumphantasien und Raumillusionen* of 1963 was a critique of a formalist history of art, especially as embodied in the work of Alois Riegl, from the position of

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Rostislav ŠVÁCHA, "Václav Richter", in: *idem*–HOROVÁ–CHADRABA–KRÁSA, *Kapitoly*, pp. 284–293; Rostislav ŠVÁCHA, "Metoda Václava Richtera", in: *30 let Krajského střediska státní památkové péče a ochrany přírody v Brně: Sborník*, Brno: Muzejní a vlastivědná společnost 1989, pp. 238–255.

**17**

Václav RICHTER, *Raněstředověká Olomouc: Stavební dějiny vzniku města*, Prague: SPN 1959.

**18**

Václav RICHTER, "Fischeriana", *Umění*, vol. 10, 1962, no. 5, pp. 507–523; Václav RICHTER, "Heinrich Gerhard Franz, Bauten und Baumeister der Barockzeit in Böhmen: Entstehung und Ausstrahlungen der böhmischen Barockkunst" (review), *Umění*, vol. 12, 1964, no. 3, pp. 313–322.

19

Kurt BADT, *Raumphantasien und Raumillusionen: Wesen der Plastik*, Cologne: DuMont 1963.

20

Christian NORBERG-SCHULZ, *Genius loci: K fenomenologii architektury*, Prague: Odeon 1994 (*Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli 1980).

21

Milada VILÍMKOVÁ, *Stavitelé paláců a chrámů: Kryštof a Kilián Ignác Dientzenhoferové*, Prague: Vyšehrad 1986.

a Heideggerian.<sup>19</sup> He emphasises the materiality and corporeality of architecture. Another such figure would be the Norwegian historian of architecture Christian Norberg-Schulz, who during the fifties and early sixties could probably best be described as a structuralist, but who later turned to Heidegger.<sup>20</sup>

JS: In your text “Art History at Present” you describe the seventies and eighties as marking a shift from the association of the Marxist method with the investigation of art as an expression of social relations toward a study, again Marxist, of the productive conditions of art...

RŠ: I perhaps overemphasised that. There are not many Czech historians who opted for that course. At this point it is definitely worth mentioning the monograph on the Dientzenhofer family by Milada Vilímková entitled *Stavitelé paláců a chrámů (Builders of Palaces and Cathedrals)*.<sup>21</sup> Vilímková was one of the first to examine the legal, economic and other conditions under which architecture was produced. But she has nothing in common with Marxism. She was originally an archivist and as far as I can tell felt the need to use the materials in her care differently to the way they tended to be used by art historians, for instance in a search for authorship. She discovered that much could be learned about practices in the construction industry during the baroque from the contracts drawn up between builder and client.

VM: It is strange that you say this has nothing to do with Marxism. Surely what she was doing was investigating the productive forces and the relations of production.

RŠ: The themes may be the same, but as I know from my personal contact with her, Vilímková wanted nothing to do with Marxism.

JS: What led you to study the methodology of art history? Who influenced you the most?

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Zdeněk KUDĚLKA, *Bohuslav Fuchs*, Prague: NČVU 1966.

RŠ: Even as a child I was interested in architecture, though I looked at it through the eyes of a historian. I had no desire to be an architect myself. I just wanted to look at it. However, neither did I want to be an art historian. I got a job with the Odeon publishing house and what I really wanted to do was publish books devoted to the methods of art history. With the help of Josef Krása, a key figure of the seventies and eighties, we got a series of books on methodology by foreign and Czechoslovak art historians published. This was my dream and my programme. In the end, however, I changed course, and in 1984 ended up here at the Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences, again thanks to Josef Krása.

As a student I had come across Václav Richter, whose work had a great influence on me. I never saw him lecturing, but knew him via his books. I then got to know perhaps his most important student, Zdeněk Kudělka, who published a monograph on the modern architect Bohuslav Fuchs.<sup>22</sup> I was preparing to write a thesis on Santini, but wasn't sure how to put such a work together. Reading Kudělka helped me enormously. My thesis was supervised by Ivo Hlobil, another of my teachers and models. When I moved to Prague, Josef Krása was the leading light amongst art historians, and everyone working in this sphere owes him a huge debt of gratitude to this day.

JS: In what way was he so important?

RŠ: Even after the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, Krása remained in his position and attempted to use it to the benefit of others. He used his authority as a way of shielding the entire discipline, though of course he had problems and throughout the seventies and eighties he was attacked by the Stalinists. I think these attacks

probably cost him his life, because he died relatively young of cancer. However, in the end he won, because he protected his colleagues and so permitted the entire field of art history in Czechoslovakia to flourish, relatively speaking.

JS: When you look at Czech art history from the eighties to the present day, could you identify a pivotal shift in methodology or at least a key work?

RŠ: The enormous political transformation of 1989 did not impact that much on the practice of art history. There was no spontaneous emergence of new methods. That's not to say that new trends didn't arise. For instance, the work of French sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu began to have an influence. My colleague Jindřich Vybíral was one of many who tried to apply Bourdieu's ideas to art history. Nevertheless, I don't think there was any great upheaval following the Velvet Revolution. The discipline continues to travel along the tried and trusted lines of positivist production. Occasionally someone on the margins will try out a new method, but the mainstream remains clearly positivist, just as it was prior to 1989.

JS: Is there a book by a local author that you find interesting from the point of view of method?

RŠ: If I had more time to think about the question, I would undoubtedly come up with candidates. I like to follow what my colleagues are writing about modernist architecture. I am more and more interested in baroque architecture, and in this respect Jiří Kroupa's books, for example *V zrcadle stínů* (*In the Mirror of Shadows*),<sup>23</sup> are very important. The influence of French sociology is clear, though Kroupa deploys it differently to Vybíral. Kroupa looks anew at the role of the client

and the building contractor. The term “assignment” or “commission” is crucial in this respect, since he is interested in the history of architecture as the history of commissions. This seems to me to be progressive and interesting.