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# THE BOUNDARIES OF EXPERIMENTATION

## JAN WOLLNER

In this text I shall show how the term “experiment” took on various, sometimes contradictory, meanings during the 1960s in Czechoslovakia. I shall also examine to what extent it infiltrated not only individual genres (film, literature, the visual arts, music, architecture and theatre), but also the spheres of art, science and politics. In the secondary literature on sixties art in Central and Eastern Europe, the term appears frequently, though usually without any theoretical underpinning. It functions simply as a label for a set of progressive artworks comprising an alternative to the official art of the authoritarian regimes of the Eastern bloc.<sup>1</sup> Immediately there is a problem, since the term “experiment” was used to describe not only the alternative artworks that defined themselves in opposition to the regime, but also the regime itself and attempts at reforming it. Experimentation was seen as both a source of authentic creativity and as merely a passing fad, a self-contained formalism and a robust scientific principle, a symptom of madness and a space of personal freedom. Using several examples I shall attempt to navigate a path through these contradictory meanings. I shall not draw much on artworks, since I am more interested in the dynamic of the term itself and in analysing the different ways it was used.<sup>2</sup> I am interested

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra TITU – Magda CARNECI (eds.), *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960*, Bucharest: Soros Center for Contemporary Art 1997; Vit HAVRÁNEK (ed.), *Akce, slovo, pohyb, prostor: Experimenty v umění šedesátých let*, Prague: GHMP 1999; Milena KALINOVSKA (ed.), *Beyond Preconceptions: The Sixties Experiment*, New York: ICI 2000; Ana JANEVSKI (ed.), *As Soon as I Open My Eyes I See a Film: Experiment in Yugoslav Art in the 60s and 70s*, Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The “internal life of official ideological terms” and the “semantics of reconstruction” were examined by Michal PULLMANN, *Konec experimentu*, Prague: Scriptorium 2011. Pullman deals with the period of reconstruction while also showing how several terms (“reform”) were discredited during the sixties and disappeared from “authoritative discourse”, while others (“experiment”) continued to be modified and used. Cf. especially pp. 15–39, 56.

in the extent to which this term contributed to creating the backdrop of the cultural and social boom of the sixties.

### **Juráček's symptoms of madness**

“You can only experiment with guinea pigs,” declared Pavel Juráček, scriptwriter, director and producer, in an interview conducted but a few days prior to 21 August 1968.<sup>3</sup> His comment was intended to express his fundamental misgivings regarding the reformability of socialism, socialism with a human face and the socialist experiment, and the events of August were to prove him right. A few years later, when he was barred from working at the Barrandov film studios, he was made to complete a questionnaire in which he was open in his condemnation of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. This questionnaire formed the basis of an agreement on the termination of work and was read out to him by the vetting commission, which asked whether Juráček wished to amend the wording in any way. Had he recanted at this point, he might have perhaps been permitted to stay on at Barrandov. However, he replied that the document contained only one error, in that it called him an experimental filmmaker when in fact he had never made any experimental films. Since he insisted that this error be removed, the committee chairman had no option but to “ask the secretary to delete the word ‘experimental’”.<sup>4</sup> It would not be stretching the point to claim that, for Juráček, more important than the opportunity of continuing to make films was ensuring that his work not be labelled experimental. In his voluminous journal he writes: “In the eyes of the post-occupation panjandrums [...] the word ‘experimental’ [...] is synonymous with decadent, antisocial, anti-socialist, disgusting, cynical, non-ideological, cosmopolitan, etc.”<sup>5</sup>

The word “experiment” was often to be found in the officially sanctioned texts of the normalisation period. According to the document *Poučení z krizového vývoje ve straně a společnosti po XIII. sjezdu KSČ* (*Lessons Drawn from*

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<sup>3</sup> Antonín Jaroslav LIEHM, *Ostrě sledované filmy*, Prague: NFA 2001, p. 360.

<sup>4</sup> Pavel JURÁČEK, *Deník*, Prague: NFA 2003, pp. 756–760.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 758.

the Crisis Development in the Party and Society after the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), the “so-called Czechoslovakian experiment was underpinned by an injection [...] of an international revisionist tendency”.<sup>6</sup> And according to the *Žlutá kniha* (*Yellow Book*) that followed the *Lessons*, during the latter half of the sixties, art displayed a “hypertrophic amount of experimentation”.<sup>7</sup> While the *Lessons* submitted a report on changes in the “party and society”, the *Yellow Book* was describing events in the Svaz slovenských výtvarných umělců (Union of Slovak Fine Artists). This is important since it shows that the concept of experimentation was used to describe developments in both the political and artistic spheres prior to 1968.<sup>8</sup>

However, in the case of Juráček, resistance to the term “experiment” did not appear until the early seventies, when representatives of normalisation used it to denounce the progressive art and politics of the previous decades. In 1963, Juráček shot his first film, *Postava k podpírání* [released in English under the title *Joseph Killian*], which was well received and won several awards. Comparisons were made with Franz Kafka and the film was deemed to be experimental. This was something that Juráček found intolerable,<sup>9</sup> since the New Wave of Czechoslovak cinematography, of which Juráček was a key representative, was associated with the emergence of the figure of the auteur and not with experimental films. An experimental film in the American sense of the world tested and deconstructed film as a medium,<sup>10</sup> while adepts of the New Wave attempted to offer complex and personal visions

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<sup>6</sup> [authors unspecified], *Poučení z krizového vývoje ve straně a společnosti po XIII. sjezdu KSČ*, Prague: Odd. propagandy a agitace ÚV KSČ 1971, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> [authors unspecified], *Za socialistické umenie*, Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ 1974. Cited in Daniel GRŮN, *Archeológia výtvarnej kritiky*, Bratislava: Slovart – VŠVU 2009, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Milan MICHALÍK, *Koncepce psychologické války a československý experiment*, Prague: Svoboda 1970.

<sup>9</sup> JURÁČEK, *Deník*, p. 758.

<sup>10</sup> At this point we are confronted by a problem of terminology. Film is spoken of as being experimental, absolute, abstract, avant-garde, structural, etc., yet the distinction between these terms can be hazy. From recent literature cf. Martin ČIHÁK, *Ponorná řeka kinematografie*, Prague: AMU 2013. As regards the period literature, cf. Gene YOUNGBLOOD, *Expanded Cinema*, New York: Dutton 1970; Standish LAWDER, *The Cubist Cinema*, New York: New York University Press 1970.

via film. Juráček himself is a good example of this. He began as a screenwriter and later directed his own scripts. He strove to maintain control over the soundtrack and the visual aspects of his film in order to create a precise and personal statement as auteur. He was thus irritated “whenever someone spoke or wrote of *Postava k podpírání* as being experimental”, claiming that such people “deem anything they don’t like as being experimental”.<sup>11</sup> Though it is true that during the sixties several writers called the film experimental more out of ignorance than malice, with the onset of normalisation the term was used quite deliberately. It would be perfectly possible to write a history of how a group of critics and journalists attempted, for political reasons, to declare the New Wave an experimental film movement, not because the term in any way did justice to its work, but so as to be justified in ascribing to it the attributes “decadent, antisocial, anti-socialist, disgusting, cynical, non-ideological, cosmopolitan, etc.”. Ludvík Toman, chairman of the commission that barred Juráček from working at Barrandov and newly appointed by the authorities as playwright and enforcer of normalisation policies in Czechoslovak film, wrote that, during the second half of the sixties, “excessive emphasis had been placed on formal experiments”.<sup>12</sup> Juráček observed “what pleasure that word [experiment] gives Toman” and how he used it “in order to spread his overwhelming contempt for what is known as the Czechoslovak New Wave”.<sup>13</sup> Inasmuch as anyone in what was still Czechoslovakia was involved in genuinely experimental film, it was not the internationally successful representatives of the New Wave, but artists whose activities had been pushed to the margins and hidden from the general public. One such would be Petr Skala, who made a living as a documentary filmmaker and then took home any unused material in order to conduct various experiments involving direct interventions in the film material.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> JURÁČEK, *Deník*, p. 758.

<sup>12</sup> Ludvík TOMAN, “Czech Feature Films: Variety of Forms and Subjects”, *Czechoslovak Film*, 1972, nos. 1–2, pp. 6–7. Cited in Peter HAMES, *Československá nová vlna*, Prague: KMa 2008, p. 266. Cf. the special issue of the journal *Iluminace*, vol. 9, 1997, no. 1, containing original studies, interviews and annotated documents on the beginnings of normalisation in cinematography, and the monograph Štěpán HULÍK, *Kinematografie zapomnění: Počátky normalizace ve Filmovém studiu Barrandov*, Prague: Academia 2011, in which Hulík describes Toman as the “having his fingers in every pie” (pp. 170–176).

<sup>13</sup> JURÁČEK, *Deník*, p. 758.

<sup>14</sup> Bohdana KERBACHOVÁ, *Petr Skala: Utajený experimentátor*, Prague: NFA 2005.

Everyone could access his documentaries; his private experiments, however, remained a secret. Another example would be Jaroslav Kučera, a cameraman who remained in the shadow of more famous directors like his wife Věra Chytilová. Kučera was fascinated by what would result if you filmed the texture of different materials and projected the result onto unusual surfaces and items.<sup>15</sup> Though other artists spring to mind (e.g. Jaroslav Cita, Jan Švankmajer, Václav Mergle, Zdeněk Seydl, etc.), their relationship with experimentalism in the strict sense of the word is problematic. Instead, let us remain with Juráček and focus on what he did after being thrown out of Barrandov. It could be argued that he involved himself in experimentation, though he himself did not see matters this way.

On 7 February, Juráček made the following entry in his journal: “I’m exhausted and I can barely hold the pen without spasms.” He tried writing on a typewriter but continued to complain:

Every other word I make a mistake. Yesterday I wasn’t even capable of writing the word KLOBOUK (hat). I wrote KLOUBOUK, KLOB-KOU, KOLBOUK, KLBOUK, KOLOBOUK. In the end I couldn’t even be sure if I was awake and if that really was what happened. It was. With clenched teeth I crossed out KOLOBOUK, focused my attention and glared at each typewriter key before I tapped it. After I had written an entire sentence, I read through it again and instead of KLOBOUKU I had written KOBOLOUK.<sup>16</sup>

The repetition of the same word with minor changes was one of the defining traits of the international trend of experimental poetry that spread rapidly during the sixties in Czechoslovakia. The technique was given the name “constellation”. Ladislav Novák describes adopting the constellation

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<sup>15</sup> Kateřina SVATOŇOVÁ, “Experimentální pohledy Jaroslava Kučery: Pokus o rozbor kameramanské mediální praxe”, *Illuminace*, vol. 26, 2014, no. 2, pp. 41–55. The article is based on contributions given at the conference “Hranice experimentu: Experiment ve výtvarném umění, architektuře, literatuře, filmu, ekonomii a politice 60. let 20. století”, which took place on 19 February 2014 at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague.

<sup>16</sup> JURÁČEK, *Deník*, p. 809.

as far back as the end of the fifties,**17** though many other authors had used a similar technique and it was unwittingly taken up by Juráček. Comparing these random errors as recorded in his journal with the carefully planned strategies of experimental poets might seem suspect, but Juráček was inspired to discover new words that he also recorded in his journal, and in this way genuinely began to follow a similar path to experimental literature.**18**

Somewhat later another accident was to take place that he recorded in this journal. Again, he was suffering writer's block and could not find the *mot juste*. Instead, he tapped out individual symbols on his typewriters, "arrows from full stops, from colons, from paragraphs, from dashes, from the plus sign + and the equals sign =" and created simple pictures from them using which he embellished the title page of his screenplays.**19** In his work up till then the visual dimension of texts had been arbitrary and transparent, merely a vehicle for the meaning of the text out of which emerged the individual characters of his screenplays. After being thrown out of Barrandov, Juráček lost hope in ever having his screenplays made into films and so figures could emerge from them. His texts began to obfuscate, losing their original meaning and attracting attention simply for their visual character. Words were broken down into individual symbols and all that remained were the meaningless typographic patterns comprising these symbols. In other words, these works became visual poems or experiments, the kind of thing that Juráček had until then despised.**20** No longer able to work at Barrandov, Juráček found himself in a somewhat paradoxical situation.

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**17** Josef HIRŠAL – Bohumila GRÖGEROVÁ (eds.), *Vrh kostek: Česká experimentální poezie*, Prague: Torst 1993. Ladislav Novák writes: "At the end of the fifties I became convinced that abstract painting must have some kind of literary equivalent. On the foreign radio I heard a reference to paintings by Victor Vasarely. They said the paintings were formed from black squares, some of which were distorted so as to inject dynamism into the painting. And so I took columns containing one word and inserted a similar word [...]. It was only at the start of the sixties that I learned that these forms were called constellations." (p. 184.)

**18** JURÁČEK, *Deník*, p. 809.

**19** *Ibid.*, p. 834.

**20** Juráček's typographic works are reminiscent of the experimental poems to be found in his archive, which were recently donated to the Václav Havel Library. The archive has not yet been organised and I would like to offer my warmest thanks to Pavel Hájek for tracking down several examples.

While he had defended his successful films of the sixties against ideologically motivated claims that they were experimental, he now devoted himself, with no prospect of film work in the future, to literary endeavours that inadvertently wandered into the realm of experimental poetry, despite having no experience of this form.

### **Hiršal and Grögerová's broken words**

From the end of the fifties onwards, the pioneers of experimental poetry and advocates of experimentalism per se in Czechoslovakia were the duo comprising Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal. In autumn 1959, at an exhibition of Austrian books in Prague, they saw a publication by the Wiener Gruppe “with the strange title *Hosn Rosn Baa – (Dialektgedichte)*”, the poems of which were arranged “above all on the basis of how they looked”. Hiršal and Grögerová had never seen anything like it and dubbed this new phenomenon “expanded poetry”.<sup>21</sup> In 1961, thanks to the well informed Jiří Kolář, they got their hands on the progressive West German magazine *Augenblick*, subtitled *Zeitschrift für Tendenz und Experiment*, and familiarised themselves with the latest events on the experimental literature scene, including constellations.<sup>22</sup> The term “experimental” soon became an established part of their discourse. In spring of the following year, the journal *Světová literatura (World Literature)* organised a working discussion on the theme of “Paths and Forms of Modern Poetry”. Hiršal was present and his contribution attempted to summarise everything he had recently learned from the magazine *Augenblick* and “to offer information regarding the state of affairs at present in the sphere of experimental poetry”.<sup>23</sup> A heated debate broke out, with the conservative faction represented by Václav Daněk and Eduard Goldstücker declaring that “this experiment is outside contemporary mainstream world poetry” and that it would lead “to complete and

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<sup>21</sup> Josef HIRŠAL – Bohumila GRÖGEROVÁ, *Let let*, Prague: Torst 2007, p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 307–309.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 346, 347–351. For an edited version of the discussion see “Cesty a podoby současné světové poezie”, *Světová literatura*, vol. 7, 1962, no. 5, pp. 169–191. Hiršal's contribution is on pp. 177–179.

utter sterility". Hiršal replied that "only time would tell how valuable the experiment had been".<sup>24</sup>

Hiršal and Grögerová continued to fly the flag for the most up-to-date trends. In December 1962, they gave a public lecture at the Mánes Fine Artists' Club entitled "On the Philosophy of Language, Statistical Aesthetics and Contemporary Literary Experiment", in which they offered to their sizeable audience a detailed theoretical introduction to the entire topic, illustrating their words with many examples.<sup>25</sup> A year later they followed this up with a "Lecture on Natural and Artificial Poetry" at the same venue.<sup>26</sup> By now, Hiršal and Grögerová had become pivotal figures in the cultural life of Prague and were slowly creating an international network of contacts linking up experimenters from all around the world.<sup>27</sup> They digested foreign theories and practical examples at great speed, as well as translating, organising and disseminating information to the local art community.

An opportunity to slow down and reflect on matters was presented by a two-day seminar entitled "Experimentation in Art" that was held in March 1966 at Štiřín Chateau.<sup>28</sup> The logic of experimentalism was reflected in the interdisciplinary character of the event, which featured contributions from representatives of literature (Hiršal and Grögerová), theatre (Přemysl Maydl), music (Václav Kučera), architecture (Jiří Štursa) and fine art (Luděk Novák). The seminar was officially opened by the aesthetician

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<sup>24</sup> HIRŠAL–GRÖGEROVÁ, *Let let*, p. 349.

<sup>25</sup> Josef HIRŠAL – Bohumila GRÖGEROVÁ, "Přednáška o filozofii jazyka, statistické estetice a současném literárním experimentu" (1962), in: Eva KRÁTKÁ (ed.), *Česká vizuální poezie*, Brno: Host 2013, pp. 43–100.

<sup>26</sup> lidem, "Přednáška o poezii umělé a přirozené" (1963), in: KRÁTKÁ, *Česká vizuální poezie*, pp. 101–157.

<sup>27</sup> More detailed information is to be found in their memoir HIRŠAL–GRÖGEROVÁ, *Let let*. The importance of international networking as regards experimental poetry and other progressive tendencies is examined by Klara KEMP-WELCH, *Networking the Bloc: International Relations in Late Socialist Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2019; *eadem* – Cristina FREIRE (eds.), "Artists' Networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe", *Artmargins*, vol. 1, 2012, nos. 2–3, pp. 3–13.

<sup>28</sup> *Experiment v umění. Sbornik materiálů ze semináře 8. a 9. března 1966*, Prague: Socialistická akademie 1967. I would like to thank Karel Císář for lending me the typewritten proceedings of the seminar.

Jaroslav Volek, who attempted to refute the idea that the success of a scientific experiment is based on its reproducibility while the quality of art was conditional upon its uniqueness, and that therefore both disciplines were incompatible. He explained that reproducibility is only essential in the case of a verification experiment. In addition, the scientific method was also well acquainted with the idea of an “exploratory” experiment, a comparison of which with the way things were done in art could be fruitful.<sup>29</sup> His lecture can be read as a riposte to older articles by Ivan Řezáč, which claimed that experimentation in art was a passing fad, “devoid of content”, and based on a false analogy between reproducible experiment and unique art, the condition of which was its irreproducibility.<sup>30</sup> Though Hiršal and Grögerová had written in their memoir *Let let* that the Štířín seminar “was successful and comprehensive” and “there were no crises regarding the contributions”,<sup>31</sup> their own appearance basically just recapitulated the ideas of the lectures given at Mánes drawing on ideas from abroad.

In parallel with their theoretical, educational and organisational work, at the turn of the fifties and sixties Hiršal and Grögerová were also working on their own literary experiments. One of their main motivations was to try and neutralise the exploitability of language, which the communist regime had discredited with its repetition of meaningless ideological slogans. By breaking up the conventional meaning of a word, they extricated themselves from the tentacles of the language of communist power, as analysed in a book by Petr Fidelius.<sup>32</sup> In their lectures on theory they served mainly as a conduit for ideas from abroad. However, their own understanding of what experimentation entailed was embodied in their literary endeavours and was closely linked with the social and political conditions under which they lived and worked. They explained in detail these circumstances and other aspects of their own creative work in a correspondence with the

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<sup>29</sup> Jaroslav VOLEK, “O experimentu v umění”, in: *Experiment v umění*, pp. 1–19.

<sup>30</sup> Ivan ŘEZÁČ, “Ateliér nebo laboratoř”, *Kulturní tvorba*, 26 March 1964, no. 13, pp. 3–4; *idem*, “Experiment a umění”, *Živá hudba*, vol. 3, 1965, pp. 31–37.

<sup>31</sup> HIRŠAL–GRÖGEROVÁ, *Let let*, p. 636.

<sup>32</sup> Petr FIDELIUS, *Řeč komunistické moci*, Prague: Triáda 1998.

Stuttgart-based literary critic and experimenter Reinhard Döhl. The three began communicating in March 1964, and in one letter Döhl proposes “replacing the term ‘experimental’ art with the term ‘progressive’ art”.<sup>33</sup> Hiršal and Grögerová rejected this idea vehemently: “Unfortunately, we find your suggestion that we discard the term ‘experimental’ in favour of ‘progressive’ unacceptable, since the situation we find ourselves in over here is the exact opposite. In our country the term ‘progressive’ has been debased to such an extent that it is an empty husk of a cliché”.<sup>34</sup> Döhl attempted to justify his suggestion by placing it within the context of ongoing experiments with progressive tendencies by the historical avant-garde, citing Velimir Chlebnikov as an example.<sup>35</sup> It is certainly true that the work of Hiršal and Grögerová can be seen in the light of a broader genealogy that would include Mallarmé’s *A Roll of the Dice*, Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*, Marinetti’s *Words in Freedom* and Chlebnikov’s adopted language. Hiršal’s relationship to literature in particular was shaped by the path taken by the avant-garde. In the sixties he would think back to his youth, when he found himself “helplessly tangled up in the enchanted network of the avant-garde”.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the avant-garde was a thorny topic for both Hiršal and Grögerová – especially its Soviet iteration – since it was associated with the political vanguard. It was for this reason that they rejected Döhl’s term “progressive”, too redolent for their tastes of precisely such connotations.

Of the participants at the Štířín seminar, closest to Döhl was perhaps Luděk Novák, for whom the term “experimental” related to the history of the avant-garde in general.<sup>37</sup> As regards the Soviet avant-garde in particular, which he was most interested in, he spoke of a “great experiment” embracing not only progressive artistic tendencies but also political, social and economic.<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>33</sup> Petr FIDELIUS, *Řeč komunistické moci*, Prague: Triáda 1998.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 465.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316. Cf. Josef HIRŠAL, *Vínek vzpomínek*, Prague: Rozmluvy 1991.

<sup>37</sup> Luděk NOVÁK, “Hranice umění a experiment”, in: *Experiment v umění*, pp. 63–76.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*, “Experiment. Avantgarda. Revoluce. Realismus. Konstruktivismus”, *Výtvarné umění*, vol. 17, 1967, nos. 8–9, pp. 420–427. Novák had almost certainly adopted the term “great experiment” from the book by Camilla Gray, known in Czechoslovakia both in the English original and German translation. Camilla GRAY, *The Great Experiment. Russian Art 1863–1922*, London: Thames and Hudson 1962.

approach taken by Hiršal and Grögerová was the exact opposite. They believed that experimentalism should ensure autonomy for art. In short, by breaking down the word they attempted to extricate language from its dependence on politics, protect it from being misused, return to words their original energy, and create a personal space of freedom. A piece of paper and a typewriter sufficed for this purpose. The free handling of individual words and symbols unshackled from conventional syntax and semantics corresponded to the longed-for space of freedom, an image of which sprawled across the surface of the page covered by “liberated” symbols.

In the case of visual artists whose work can be included under the heading of experimentalism, the space of their studio played a similar role. Karel Malich, for instance, who first met Hiršal in 1959 on a trip to Poland, noted in a sketchbook at the end of the sixties that he had lived enclosed between the four walls of his studio.<sup>39</sup> He did not simply create the definitive form of the artwork in his studio. He arranged wires in different ways that became the medium of spatial drawing or a three-dimensional sketch. He also worked with other materials. The choreography of his movement in and around the studio generated ephemeral art forms that quickly disintegrated and were transformed into other configurations. A procedural creativity without predefined outcomes is entirely in keeping with the logic of experimentalism. The restriction of a room or piece of paper created a closed framework or set of rules in which registers of experimental techniques were generated and an illusory or relative autonomy created at odds with the hostile exterior environment. The arbitrary handling of art forms, words and symbols between the four walls of a room or on the surface of a piece of paper designated a space of freedom as opposed to official monumental art and the bureaucratic language of communist power.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> I would like to thank the Academic Research Centre of the Academy of Arts in Prague for allowing me access to Malich's unpublished notebooks. A brief selection was published by Karel SRP, *Karel Malich: Skicáký 1964–1980* (exh. cat.), Prague: GHMP 1994. A more comprehensive selection is being prepared by the Galerie Zdeněk Sklenář.

<sup>40</sup> Paper was regarded as an easily accessible medium that was simple to work with and suitable for experimentation. See Jiří VALOCH, *Mezi tradicí a experimentem: Práce na papíře a s papírem v českém výtvarném umění 1939–1989* (exh. cat.), Olomouc: Muzeum umění 1997.

In the case of Juráček the situation was different. He was forced to remain at home because he had no work and no money. He drank, took phenmetrazine (an amphetamine), his hands shook and he had hallucinations. His second marriage foundered on the same rocks as his first. The fact that instead of creating significant film scripts he trifled with meaningless graphic designs made of individual symbols was the consequence of his tragic situation in Czechoslovakia during normalisation. For Hiršal and Grögerová experimentation was a space of freedom, for Juráček a symptom of madness. Experimentation enabled Hiršal and Grögerová to create a bulwark against communist power: experimentation was responsible for Juráček succumbing to that same power.

### **Václav Havel's existential experiment**

The link between Juráček and experimental poetry might seem tenuous or arbitrary. However, let us not forget that he numbered among his close friends one Václav Havel, who in 1966 published *Anticodes*,<sup>41</sup> a collection of typograms that earned him a reputation as an experimental poet. However, Havel occupied a special place in this group. The international experimental poetry movement of the sixties drew heavily upon the technological optimism of that decade. Its ideological ground plan included information aesthetics, cybernetics, early computer technology, modern graphic design, and visual communication. At the risk of simplifying matters, one could argue that experimental poetry was a type of art that corresponded to the age of scientific technological revolution and signalled the transition from an industrial to an information society. This was certainly the backdrop against which Hiršal and Grögerová operated.<sup>42</sup> The idea was that technological

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<sup>41</sup> Václav HAVEL, *Protokoly*, Prague: Mladá fronta 1966, pp. 77–122.

<sup>42</sup> The outcome of their international contacts and a statement of the technological backdrop of experimental poetry was the anthology Josef HIRŠAL – Bohumila GRÖGEROVÁ (eds.), *Slovo, písmo, akce, hlas: K estetice kultury technického věku*, Prague: Československý spisovatel 1967. Cf. Max BENŠE, *Teorie textů*, Prague: Odeon 1967. This publication was also prepared by Hiršal and Grögerová.

progress allow experimental poetry to become a new universal language. “But how can we make it possible for generally intelligible information to be exchanged between a person of colour from Cape Town, a Parsee from Bombay and a Chinese tailor from Honolulu?” the pair asked with a trace of (neo) avant-garde utopianism in the introduction to their lecture of 1962.<sup>43</sup> The answer, derived from the theories of Max Bense, was to place one’s faith in the calculability of the communication flow of information on the basis of an absolute data unit.

However, the dynamic of experimental poetry in Czechoslovakia is bound up with the fact that Václav Havel, another of its key figures, represented an almost diametrically opposed line of thinking. During the fifties, Havel had been deeply influenced by the famous book on phenomenology by the philosopher Jan Patočka, *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*. This book, picking up ideas expressed in the late work of Edmund Husserl, actually expresses scepticism towards technological progress. “Science has divided the world into parts,” writes Patočka in the introduction to his highly influential book.<sup>44</sup> It is worth comparing this idea to the thesis propounded by Max Bense, cited by Hiršal and Grögerová in their lecture of 1962: “We inhabit a technical world. [...] We have tightened this world like a net around the whole of nature. In many places this network has taken on the appearance of real skin.”<sup>45</sup> According to Patočka, for all their success, science and technology had lost a sense of how their actions related to the whole, had divided up competences amongst specialised disciplines that did not understand each other, and had fractured the natural experience of man by means of abstract models and caused its fragmentation. For Bense on the other hand, the importance of science and technology resided precisely in their unifying potential, and he compared them to a skin that covered the entire globe and created a kind of second, technical nature.

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<sup>43</sup> HIRŠAL–GRÖGEROVÁ, “Přednáška o filozofii jazyka”, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Jan PATOČKA, “Přirozený svět jako filozofický problém”, in: *Fenomenologické spisy I*, Prague: OIKOYMENH 2008, p. 132. Cf. also Edmund HUSSERL, *Krise evropských věd a transcendentální fenomenologie*, Prague: Academia 1972.

<sup>45</sup> Max BENSE, *Plakatwelt: Vier Essays*, Stuttgart: Dt. Verl.-Anst. 1952. Cited by HIRŠAL–GRÖGEROVÁ, “Přednáška o filozofii jazyka”, p. 49.

Patočka's thinking was formative for Havel and there are echoes of this in Havel's typograms. A mistrust of technology is most evident in the typogram in which the equation "e = mc<sup>2</sup>" is repeated again and again until it forms the shape of a mushroom cloud.<sup>46</sup> Other typograms explore the feeling of alienation. They take the word *člověk* (*person*), divide up its individual letters and use them to construct a kind of mathematical graph. Or they surround the letters by a chaotic jumble of other letters and symbols, most often the bureaucratic symbols "%" and "§".<sup>47</sup> In another typogram Havel took the word "freedom" and used it to create a pattern resembling a grille, so that the meaning of the word "freedom" is undermined by its layout on the page.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Havel was one of the few to visit Juráček in the apartment where he lived under a form of house arrest during the normalisation period and in which the first signs of his madness were apparent. Juráček's typographical creations, reminiscent of experimental poetry, were based on similar feelings of imprisonment, alienation and threat that Havel expressed, and comparing them to experimental literature is by no means as farfetched as it might first appear.

### **Stuchlík's diagnosis of the experiment**

A space of freedom or a symptom of madness? The range of meanings expressed by the term "experiment" was even wider. Comparisons of experimental literature with the behaviour of children or the mentally ill – the mumbling of someone who cannot speak or the scribbling of someone who cannot write – were frequent and not always negative. Let us look at two newspaper articles from 1964. The editor of *Rudé právo* mocks the experiments of Ladislav Novák, and in an article saturated from beginning to end with irony portrays him as a madman who does not have to be taken seriously.<sup>49</sup> In *Literární noviny*, Hiršal's experiments are adjudged to be childish,

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<sup>46</sup> HAVEL, *Protokoly*, p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112–113.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> mv [Miloš Vacík], "Až na samu dřev", *Rudé právo*, 1 January 1964, unpaginated supplement.

but in the positive sense of the word, and Hiršal even earned the writer's respectful nickname "Mr Experiment".<sup>50</sup> Apart from the Hiršal-Grögerová duo, one of the first and key figures in Czechoslovakia exploring the boundaries of traditional poetry was Jiří Kolář, who created an entire dictionary of experimental poetic and visual techniques.<sup>51</sup> It was Kolář who came up with the words "analphabetogram" and "cvokogram" [*cvok* means loony or nuttier and might be translated as "crazigram" or "loonygram"] to describe the outcomes of some of these procedures. He was inspired, as he put it, by the question of "how someone who could not read and write would create a poem" and "what kind of poem someone with a personality disorder would write".<sup>52</sup>

Experimental poetry even aroused the interest of psychology. The internationally renowned Professor Jaroslav Stuchlík had been studying the visual and literary output of people with mental health issues since before the war, mainly during the 1920s in the psychiatric ward of Košice Hospital. After a period during which he was unable to publish, he returned to the topic in his late work during the fifties and sixties.<sup>53</sup> He was particularly interested in neologisms, which he believed came into being either through an objective attempt to name new phenomena and relations within a changing world, or through the subjective need to escape from everyday reality we often see in children and sometimes in adults, in whom the creation of this kind of neologism is either conscious, e.g. in art, or unconscious, in which case it is pathological. Though he focused on pathological neologisms, he was aware of the links with artistic practice, and so in the interests of research reached out to several representatives of experimental literature and cited their work in his psycho-linguistic studies.<sup>54</sup> He put

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<sup>50</sup> Jan NEDVĚD, "Pan experiment", *Literární noviny*, 10 April 1964, no. 15, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Jiří KOLÁŘ, *Slovník metod*, Prague: Gallery 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Vladimír BURDA, „Hesla z Kolářova slovníku“, *Výtvarné umění*, vol. 18, 1968, nos. 9–10, pp. 428–436.

<sup>53</sup> This stage of Stuchlík's work is contained in an annotated edition of his uncompleted book: Jaroslav STUHLÍK, *Neofatické polyglotie psychotiků*, Prague: Triton 2006. The book contains biographical and bibliographical information.

<sup>54</sup> Jaroslav STUHLÍK, "K fenomenologii patologických jazykových novotvarů", *Slovo a slovesnost*, roč. 21, 1960, č. 4, pp. 257–265.

together a detailed classification of neologisms, according to which “neologisms arising from fragments of common words” were *druse words* or *words joined to one another*, which in the case of abbreviations or surrealist poetry could have a non-pathological origin. However, Stuchlík was “only interested in pathological cases”. Nevertheless, one of his examples of a neologism, “velrybaba” [*velryba* meaning whale, *baba* being the diminutive of *babička* meaning grandmother or old woman in general],<sup>55</sup> which had not long before appeared in the sphere of conscious (i.e. non-pathological) literary experiment, he included in the category of pathological *druse* words. Hiršal and Grögerová had translated the title of one of Morgenstern’s poems from his collection *Galgenlieder* (*Gallows Songs*), published in Czech translation in 1958,<sup>56</sup> as “velrybaba”. Stuchlík met up with the duo several times in order to discuss the topic in which their interests intertwined.<sup>57</sup> In a study from 1960, he conducted an analysis of “velrybaba” and an extract from an experimental poem by Ladislav Novák, without making clear by means of precise citation that these examples differed from the pathological manifestations of mentally ill people.

The case of Novák is both curious and indicative. He might be deemed mad from no fewer than three perspectives. According to Kolář, this kind of madness was a positive quality and an authentic alternative to bureaucratic, exploitable language. According to the editor of *Rudé právo* it was a negative quality reflecting an inability or unwillingness to adapt to the ideological precepts of “literature”. And according to Professor Stuchlík it was a neutral subject of scientific analysis and diagnosis. And the case of Juráček? I do not claim that his typographic creations should immediately be inducted into the canon of experimental literature or subjected to strict psychiatric diagnosis. Instead, I have attempted to show that it is relevant to think of them as experiments within the context of period debates.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 259–260.

<sup>56</sup> Christian MORGENSTERN, *Šibeniční písně*, Prague: SNKLHU 1958, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> HIRŠAL–GRÖGEROVÁ, *Let let*, p. 338, 407–408, 423.

## The gay science of Jiří Pechar

As in the case of Juráček, though the secondary literature does not regard Jiří Pechar as an experimental author, a clear case for this can be made. During the 1960s, Pechar was a literary critic and translator. In 1968, he published his first book, *The French "Nouveau Roman"*,<sup>58</sup> which he based on a thorough knowledge of the original French texts, several of which he had himself translated. One such book was the novel *Le Fiston* by Robert Pinget, in which the figure recurs of a father who writes a letter to his son that he never sends. Pinget's writing has a therapeutic character and at one point changes into a kind of pathological soliloquy composed of meaningless coinages: "La nier du mordofilie est corte. L'enterdi eu a jeu linier derment. La Chinzille et pelquame ersonnes. Famère étout recrêmoire un pouverte ron nelloyait mientant niexvelle cherpinze lostait coirume oireau echon memain lonla fetit plusemme. Gerol isoit. Simassedet. Pailitalé malareinsade. Ma."<sup>59</sup> Inasmuch as the nouveau roman was perceived as an experiment conforming to the traditional rules of the genre of the novel,<sup>60</sup> the passage quoted would then be an experiment with the very texture of language. Pinget's book is an experiment, and within this experiment there is another experiment of a different kind.

When Pechar brought his creative faculties to bear upon this passage, he deployed very similar strategies to those of the experimental poets. It is the element of translation that distinguishes him from the Hiršal–Grögerová duo, whose own experiments in the realm of poetry began after they met the writer of nonsense verse Christian Morgenstern, whom they read enthusiastically and translated imaginatively. The Czech translation of *Gallows Songs* was published in 1958 by the Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění (State Publisher of Beautiful Literature, Music and Art), and the German poet became their lifelong obsession. In the epilogue

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<sup>58</sup> Jiří PECHAR, *Francouzský "nový román"*, Prague: Československý spisovatel 1968.

<sup>59</sup> Robert PINGET, *Le Fiston*, Paris: Les Édition de Minuit 1959, p. 89.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Kurt WILHELM, *Der Nouveau Roman: Ein Experiment der französischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Berlin: Schmidt 1969.

to their own pioneering collection *JOB-BOJ*, written in 1960–1962 but only published in 1968, they recall how two factors played a role in the creation of their experiments. The first was their reaction to the “moral misuse of speech”, “profanation of language” and “absurdity of phrase”, and the second their activities as translators and their interest in “the mother tongue, not only as a tool, but also as material”.<sup>61</sup>

Another tireless experimenter was Jiří Kolář. If we examine Pechar’s translation of the passage from *Le Fiston* more closely, we find a close affinity with certain of Kolář’s procedures. By shuffling the syllables somewhat, the seemingly incoherent combination of neologisms “ševcera zemova přela” yields the information “ševcova dcera zemřela” or “shoemaker’s daughter died”, which is the opening sentence of Pinget’s novel and is the news that the father wishes to impart to his son by letter. The neologisms created by jumbling up the syllables between neighbouring words was a technique Kolář had been using since his breakthrough collection Y61: “Po mitnácti panutové / náměně výzorů / se diplomaté dihodli / aby se schůšti příze / zínala kotra v 15 hod. stř. č.”<sup>62</sup> He used the same principle in his works for children.<sup>63</sup> As an aside it should be added that Pechar was personally acquainted with the protagonists of experimental poetry. He met Hiršal through the Union of Translators and first came across Kolář in Café Slavia, where he was a frequent visitor.<sup>64</sup> He himself discerned the link between the passage quoted from *Le Fiston* and experimental poetry. In his book *The French “Nouveau Roman”* he characterised the passage as follows: “The chaotic breakdown is conveyed not only by sentences but individual words disintegrating into a bizarre jumble of syllables that cease being the bearers

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<sup>61</sup> Josef HIRŠAL – Bohumila GRÖGEROVÁ, *JOB-BOJ*, Prague: Československý spisovatel 1968, p. 129.

<sup>62</sup> “Po patnáctiminutové / výměně názorů se diplomaté dohodli / aby se schůze příště / kovala zítra v 15 hod. stř. č. (After a fifteen-minute / exchange of opinions / the diplomats agreed / that the next meeting / would take place tomorrow at 3 PM Central European time.)” Jiří KOLÁŘ, *Básně ticha*, Prague: Český spisovatel 1994, p. 67. The collection Y61 dates back to 1961. Kolář later included it in his anthology *Básně ticha*, which marked his transition from poetry to fine art. The anthology was set for publication in 1970, but was banned.

<sup>63</sup> *Idem*, *Nápady pana Apríla*, Prague: SNDK 1961, p. 67.

<sup>64</sup> Jiří PECHAR, *Život na hraně*, Prague: Torst 2009, p. 106.

of meaning and in certain lettrist poems<sup>65</sup> allow us only to guess at the original linguistic structure subject to this explosion.”<sup>66</sup> As in the case of Juráček, here there is a return of the association between experimental poetry and madness. Pechar goes on to compare that same passage with, as he puts it, the “autistic babbling of a schizophrenic”.<sup>67</sup>

Pechar touched on the principles of experimental literature not only when translating but in his own work, which is situated on the boundary of literary criticism and practice. While traditional verse is based on the demands of rhyme and rhythm, experimentalists sought other rules by which to organise poetry. Pechar includes in this category surrealist automatic writing, which gives rise to different metaphorical relationships and poetic associations through rapid writing that bypasses rational control, thus narrowing the range of words available at any particular moment.<sup>68</sup> A similar role is played in later experiments of the sixties by various rules that the poet must observe. One of these is the requirement that “after the first free verse the next free verse be put together using only the sounds contained therein”.<sup>69</sup> Pechar adds that he has himself experimented with this method and encourages the reader to do so too. Here we are witness to an interesting moment in which, from the position of literary critic, Pechar not only analyses experimental poetry but practices it, as though going through the same motions as its creator in order to verify its validity. This is a scientific experimental method and its subject is experimentation. The close connection between theory and practice is typical of artistic experimentation, and Hiršal and Grögerová are its quintessential practitioners.

The mistrust of secondary literature that is unquestionably derived from his work as a translator and his insistence on seeking out primary sources appears in other areas of Pechar’s work. In a study of 1968, he is critical of

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<sup>65</sup> Here we stumble across a problem of terminology. The post-war break with traditional poetry was given various names: experimental, visual, artificial, concrete, lettrist, new poetry or expanded consciousness. The distinctions are not set in stone.

<sup>66</sup> PECHAR, *Francouzský “nový román”*, p. 127.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>68</sup> Jiří PECHAR, *Dvacáté století v zrcadle literatury*, Prague: Filosofia 1999, p. 131–132.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

an early essay by Jan Mukařovský on *Máj* (*May*) by Karel Hynek Mácha.<sup>70</sup> In this well known work, Mukařovský attempts to discover how the intriguing musicality of this work operates. He concludes that similar sounding vocal formations and sonic elements within the individual verses correspond on the basis of a gradual and inverse parallelism. Pechar had reservations and put the theory to the test by means of a “simple experiment”.<sup>71</sup> He selected at random an extract from a newspaper, which he divided into artificial verses. What he discovered was that the same phonic correspondences appeared as Mukařovský claimed to have discovered in *Máj*. In essence, these correspondences appear in any randomly selected Czech text and in no way help us pin down the specific quality of Mácha’s poetry. Pechar’s approach relates on the one hand to the process of replication and verification characteristic of the natural sciences, and on the other displays strong links with the practices of experimental literature, especially those of Jiří Kolář. One of his methods Kolář names “discovery”.<sup>72</sup> This involves authentic, non-poetic texts that he appropriated similarly to the way that Pechar had selected at random a text from *Rudé právo* on the expulsion of Germans from border regions. This virtually identical activity was for Pechar a component of his research activity, while for Kolář it was part of the creation of an artwork. However, both authors used the term “experiment” to describe their activities, in one case a scientific experiment and in the other an artistic experiment.

The motive behind Kolář’s appropriation of non-poetic texts was similar to that of Hiršal and Grögerová. Like them, he sought to find a source of authentic creativity in a debased language. However, unlike them he did not link the misuse of language and letters exclusively with the authoritarian regime, but with an almost anthropological essence of humankind. Here he was drawing on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who claimed that writing came into being in order that thousands of people could gather in one place and be “compelled to carry out exhausting work”. “The primary

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<sup>70</sup> Jiří PECHAR, “K otázce eufonie v Máchově verši”, *Česká literatura*, vol. 16, 1968, no. 3, pp. 355–356.

<sup>71</sup> Jiří PECHAR, “K eufonii Máchova Máje”, in: *Interpretace literárního díla*, Prague: Filosofia 2002, pp. 129–136

<sup>72</sup> BURDA, “Hesla”, pp. 428–436.

function of written communication is to facilitate slavery”.<sup>73</sup> Kolář did not speak French and took the quote from the Czech translation of Lévi-Strauss’s *Triste tropiques*, which had been translated in 1966 by Pechar himself.<sup>74</sup> The upshot was that Kolář drew on Pechar’s research when conducting his experiments, and Pechar drew on Kolář’s experiments when conducting his research.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to indicate what significance the term “experiment” had in Czechoslovakia during the sixties and to what extent it threaded its way through individual genres of art and spheres of art, science and politics. The frequency with which the word appears in many different, often surprising, contexts, is such that it cannot be merely coincidental. The dynamic of the word played an important role in the cultural and social boom of the 1960s and I am convinced that this touches on a key aspect of the decade in question. As well as well known aesthetic experimentalists headed by Jiří Kolář, Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal, I have referenced Pavel Juráček and Jiří Pechar, not usually mentioned in the same breath as experimentation in the arts. This is in order to illustrate the surprising contexts in which discussions pertaining to experiment are relevant. In the case of Juráček I have emphasised the link with politics, since his work was condemned as experimental for the sake of political expedience. The example of Pechar has revealed the proximity of the artistic and scientific approaches. By maintaining the triad art-science-politics I have attempted to avoid simply packing as many artworks into the term “experiment”. My interpretation is based on a thorough reading of Juráček’s *Journal* and the memoir *Let let* by Grögerová and Hiršal, firstly for the wealth of information these volumes provide, and secondly because I regard them as two of the best literary texts written in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War.

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<sup>73</sup> Vladimír BURDA, “S Jiřím Kolářem o evidentní poezii”, *Výtvarné umění*, vol. 18, 1968, nos. 9–10, pp. 429–443.

<sup>74</sup> Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS, “Lekce psaní”, in: *Smutné tropy*, Prague: Odeon 1966, p. 211.