

Milena Bartlová

## Marxism in Czech art history 1945–1970

In the early 1970s, a graduate student from the Marburg University came to Prague to study the topic of Hussite iconoclasm in local archives for his doctoral dissertation. His name was Horst Bredekamp (1947-), and his dissertation was based on Western Marxism. Czechoslovak intellectual life was on its absolute low in the beginning of the nineteen-seventies as a result of the successful and energetic Neo-Stalinist revenge against the Prague Spring in 1968. Prominent intellectuals were mostly expelled from the Communist Party and consequently lost their academic jobs, books were being banned and destroyed, and Revisionism became the catchphrase for branding the enemies constructed by the new regime. Official rhetoric proclaimed a renewal of true Marxist-Leninist principles in all areas of social life, including art history. The young scholar from Western Germany was assigned to spend his several months at the Institute of Art History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (*Ústav teorie a dějin umění Československé akademie věd*) where he could meet the peer group of Czech medievalists. One of them recalls the total mutual incomprehensibility: how can a young scholar from the free world believe in Marxism?<sup>1</sup> And why was he unable to find anything that would resemble Marxist art history in Prague after twenty-five years of Communist rule? I will attempt to examine this forty-year old impasse through an analysis of the history of Czech art history. I hope it may reveal some of the inner workings of the discipline during the two phases of the authoritarian regime: first in the Stalinist period of the 1950s, and later in the 1960s leading up to the Prague Spring in 1968 and the onset of the so-called Normalization a year later.<sup>2</sup>

My attempt at finding a convincing answer will start with a brief sketch of the situation in the 1950s. In just a few years after the takeover of power by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ) in 1948, Marxism-Leninism

had become the sole applicable and, in fact, the sole permitted ideology, philosophy and also methodological approach in humanities. There was a tradition to follow: between the wars and immediately after 1945 there was not only a pronounced Slavophile inclination, but also a strong Leftist tradition in the Czech part of the country. In 1946, the Czechoslovak Communist Party was the strongest in Europe and the only one to have won a parliament majority in free elections.<sup>3</sup>

The Institute of Art History at the Prague University (*Katedra dějin umění Univerzity Karlovy*) was founded already in 1874 as one of the first ten in German-speaking countries. Six years later the University split in two, and there were two Institutes in Prague, the Czech and the German one, until the mass expulsion of Germans in 1945-1946 and the closing of the German University.<sup>4</sup> Following the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the Czech art history institute was taken over by the pupils and followers of the Vienna School of art history who centered around the Czech speaking Max Dvořák (1874-1921) before his death.<sup>5</sup> In fact, they occupied completely the art historical positions in museums, art schools and state heritage institutions. Men of bourgeois descent, who maintained the elitist character of art history, sustained the liberal and secular rhetoric of the Czechoslovak state. The only one among respected art historians who was led by his interest in social art history towards Marxist ideas was Vincenc Kramář (1877-1960), well known for his recognition of early Cubism.<sup>6</sup> Kramář, however, worked hard to create a state museum of art, the later National Gallery, and refrained from extensive publishing. He joined the Communist Party in 1945, wrote a defense of the Communist cultural politics the next year but at the age of seventy-three, he declined the possibility of engagement in the newly reformed art historical institutions in 1950.

Czech mainstream art history between the wars preferred the formalist inquiry and “art history as history of ideas”, as proposed by Max Dvořák in his later years, to interests in either social history or structuralism. As a result, Czech art history in 1948 was found lacking any Marxist tradition of its own and set itself apart in this respect from the artistic scene including criticism. The leading personality in that field was the pre-war Marxist, surrealist and constructivist theoretician Karel Teige (1900-1951), who was, however, denounced as Trotskyist by the new regime, banished from public activity, and his works were banned after he had died in 1951, to be published again only in 1966.<sup>7</sup> Both before and after World War II, there was no lack of Communists and Marxists among people active in Czech arts, journalism and politics, but the academic élite, including Czech and German written historiography, ostensibly ignored Marxist initiatives.<sup>8</sup>

The newly established Stalinist regime after 1948 needed to reform thoroughly the intellectual scene, and the state ruled by the Communist Party (CP) proceeded quickly.<sup>9</sup> The Czech university had been closed during the Nazi occupation. Among the large numbers of students, who entered the university after 1945, the most ambitious ones actively participated in the political purges of higher education institutions. By 1950, the leading professors either joined the Communist Party or their teaching was suspended, and many were forced to leave the University. Others compensated for not joining by expressing their loyalty to the ruling ideology even more strongly than the members of the CP. The need to generate a new cohort of faithful Communist scholars caused an extreme shortening of academic procedures and the leaders of the new generation defended their doctorate theses aged twenty-three. Together with their teachers they participated in ideological conferences where Stalin’s linguistic theories were applied to art history.

A typical example of these processes and, at the same time, the leading personality of the field during the next decades, Jaromír Neumann (1924-2001) of the Charles University (*Univerzita Karlova*) identified Realism with progressive classes in his dissertation on Realism in 17<sup>th</sup> century Bohemian painting, which he defended in 1951.<sup>10</sup> Neumann attempted to construe a direct interrelationship between the formal character of

art and its social framework. Later the same year, however, Neumann performed the public ritual of self-criticism and denounced his alleged retaining of the structuralist heritage that he had learned from Jan Mukařovský (1891-1975) and from which he was rescued only by reading the great Stalin.<sup>11</sup> However vague the presence of structuralist tradition in Neumann’s dissertation may seem to us nowadays, it was correctly considered to be the most important intellectual danger to the Prague students. Jan Mukařovský himself completely refuted his former theories around 1950 and adhered strictly to Marxism.<sup>12</sup> Three years later, in an afterword to the Czech translation of Frederick Antal’s (1887-1954) *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*, Neumann harshly criticized the author from a Stalinist position and denounced his adherence to the so-called vulgar sociology.<sup>13</sup> He saw Antal’s main mistake in the too close attention to Marx and Engels while neglecting the teachings of Lenin and Stalin. The other part of Neumann’s criticism, however, seems relevant even today, as he reproached Antal for directly proceeding from the stylistic to class analyses and considering art to be a mechanical product of the donors’ class or stratum. Although Antal’s seminal book of Marxist art history was thus made accessible to the Czech readership just a few years after its publication in London, it was at the same time clearly branded as methodologically unsuitable.

The denouncement of Antal was no accident. Czech art history and criticism have never been interested in social and contextual approaches towards art. On the contrary, they have both, continuously and decisively, relied on the idea of artistic autonomy and on the concept of the dominance of art’s formal and noetic roles. The methodological orientation of Czech art history towards autonomous formal problems and its disdain for concepts of social inclusion of artistic practice derived originally from a narrowly conceived heritage of the Vienna School pursued in a provincial situation during the interwar period.<sup>14</sup> In the 1950s, the avoidance of social contextualization led Czech art history to an exclusive concentration on the stylistic topic of Realism. It is well known that whenever the “classics of Marxism-Leninism” wrote about art, they discussed Realism in literature. While art criticism demanded the produc-

tion of current artworks in the style of so-called Socialist Realism, art history was assigned the task to research the progressive role of realist art in the past and, specifically, to construe the category of “progressive Realism” in Czech national art. The distance of Czech art historical tradition both from social contextualization and from structuralism enabled a certain responsiveness towards the actual political demands and a smooth transition towards the concentration on the theory of Realism.

In the years of the so-called Thaw after 1956, Czech art history together with other academic fields searched for more intellectually ambitious approaches that would be compatible with the official Marxism-Leninism. It was Jaromír Neumann who succeeded to find the way ahead by 1960. He concentrated first on the psychological category of individual artistic imagination that he recognized at the core of artistic creativity.<sup>15</sup> He went to Vienna where Karl M. Swoboda (1889-1977) hosted and helped him in his studies for several months in 1958.<sup>16</sup> Swoboda had been professor at the German Art Historical Institute in Prague between 1935-1945 and after his eviction took over Sedlmayr's Vienna institute. Neumann reported that he studied late Dvořák's papers in Vienna and found in them the inspiration for his decisive methodological turn. From retrospect it is clear, however, that reference to hitherto unpublished Dvořák papers served above all to legitimate the new approach by referring to the venerated founding father of Czech art history.<sup>17</sup> But Neumann must have studied more than Dvořák in Vienna. Extensive references to Erwin Panofsky's post-war iconology can be found in Neumann's articles in 1960s, namely to *The Early Netherlandish Painting* of 1953, a volume inaccessible in Prague libraries at that time. Most important, the decisive stress on intuition as a structural element in art historical interpretation in Neumann's new concept must be derived from the *Strukturforschung* of the pre-war Hans Sedlmayr. Neumann never cites him, because the former Nazi follower and pronounced Catholic conservative was an unacceptable model “revanchist” in the 1960s Czechoslovakia.

Neumann came home with the concept that I suggest to call “iconological turn of Marxism”. According to the new reading of Dvořák, his employment of the dia-

lectic method compensates for his lack of class-consciousness. Dvořák's concept of “art history as the history of ideas” is now coupled with an appropriated and refashioned iconology. Together they are newly construed as a method, which enables art historians to intuitively and directly contact the ideologies of the past centuries that are embodied in artistic styles. Thanks to this operation, art history now could claim to bring original and important contributions to the studies of historical materialism, because ideologies of the past could be deduced directly from the forms of visual art. The specific stress is on the immediacy of the method, which does not have to rely either on studying the concrete social environment nor the textual background of artistic production, but proceeds solely through the focused intuitive interpretation of forms. Such a “formalist iconology” was able to provide secular interpretations of Medieval and Baroque Christian art whose secular meaning could be deciphered under the religious veil. The danger of vague and fancy interpretations was downplayed for many decades. After all, the procedure conformed to the intellectual practices that were common in everyday life in Communist countries: it was normal to read daily newspapers and search for the true meaning which may lay hidden between the lines and under the superficial layer of the obvious meaning. There was no need for scruples of semiotics, which was considered the most dangerous enemy of Marxist-Leninist scholarship, together with structuralism.<sup>18</sup>

Such Marxist, or formalist iconology was disengaged both from Panofsky's constructs and from the social art history developed in Western Marxism in the tradition of Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser. It was considered to follow from the late Max Dvořák and his attempt to create an art history that would uphold the spiritual idealism of humanist tradition, which seemed to be irrevocably lost in the impoverished Vienna after 1918. In the reality of Communist dictatorship the inclination to deal only with the autonomous formal character of art served well to maintain a phantasm of independence from political engagement and the pristine idealism of art historical scholarship. If art is rooted in purely formal problems and governed by autonomous rules of formal development, then any demands for current political engagement of both art and art his-

tory simply miss the point and must remain ineffective. The most successful results in Czech art historical writing was Neumann's survey *Baroque Art in Bohemia* and the secular analysis of the illuminations in the *Passional of Abbess Kunigunde* by Karel Stejskal. The monograph on Albrecht Dürer by Rudolf Chadraha was published in German in 1964. The still useful monograph on the manuscript illuminations made for Wenceslas IV by Josef Krása, again published both in English and German in 1971 and 1974, may be the best result of the "Marxist iconology".<sup>19</sup> By the way, the similarities between the iconological projects of Neumann and Jan Białostocki, primacy of either or perhaps their collaboration should be studied in the future.

Jaromír Neumann himself was gradually banned from teaching and publishing after 1969 when he was expelled from the CP (KSC) because he disapproved of the military occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact forces. His last internationally accessible book was *Renaissance Art in Bohemia*, which testified to his capability to go beyond the limits of his own "formalist iconology" and to embrace new methodological impulses from the West.<sup>20</sup> Other Czech art historians who remained affiliated to the institutional establishment of the field during the Normalization period, remained rather locked in it. An interesting methodological hybrid which grew from the "formalist iconology" appeared in 1971 in the book by Rudolf Chadraha that dealt with the sculptural decorations of the Bridge Tower in Prague. The ardent admirer of Dvořák connected extensively intuitive and vaguely grounded iconological analyses with the positions of Josef Strzygowski in order to show how the art at the Prague court of Charles IV was derived directly from the Middle East and Persia.<sup>21</sup>

The specific construct of "formalist iconology" was capable to serve several purposes for Czech art history. Under the Communist regime, it functioned as the necessary Marxist-Leninist method which conformed to the demands of the state: its results contributed to the historical materialism by gaining a direct knowledge of ideologies of the past and by providing secular interpretations of religious art. At the same time, its persistence on the total autonomy of art allowed Czech art history to maintain the position of a bour-

geois and elitist humanistic field and to endorse the self-affirmed position of art historians who felt themselves safely distanced from ideological collaboration. Another result was, however, the lack of any confrontation with new methodological trends in the West, in the 1960s, 70s and 80s as well as after 1990. Distrust towards any methodology oriented on social and political framing of artistic production and meaning, as well as mistrust of semiotics pervades the mainstream Czech art history until today. Horst Bredekamp might find himself missed by the majority of Czech art historians today, just as forty years ago.

## Endnoten

1. Personal communication of Zuzana VŠ etečková with the author.
2. This contribution relies in part on my more extensive article Milena Bartlová, *Czech art history and Marxism*, in: *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 7, December 2012, <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/bartlova.pdf> (01.12.2015), which is to be followed by a comprehensive study of the history of Czech art history in the second half of the 20th century. – In the present contribution, I am referring primarily to publications in internationally accessible languages, if such are available.
3. Mary Heimann, *Czechoslovakia, the State that Failed*, New Haven / London 2009, Chapter 6, p. 150-176.
4. Milena Bartlová, *Naše, národní umění. Studie z dějin dějepisu umění* [Our own, national art. Studies from the history of art history], Brno 2009, p. 67-98. The book is to appear in German edition at GWZO Leipzig in 2016.
5. Milena Bartlová, *Continuity and Discontinuity in the Czech Legacy of the Vienna School of Art History*, in: *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 8, June 2013. <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/bartlovc3a1.pdf> (01.12.2015); Ján Bakoš, *Discourses and Strategies. The Role of the Vienna School in Shaping Central European Approaches to Art History & Related Discourses*, Frankfurt am Main 2013; for the sketch of a larger picture see also: Milena Bartlová, *Art History in the Czech and Slovak Republics: Institutional frameworks, topics and loyalties*, in: *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe*, eds. Matthew Rampley, Thierry Lenain, Hubert Locher, Andrea Pinotti, Charlotte Schoell-Glass, Leiden / Boston 2012, p. 305-314.
6. Vincenc Kramář, *From Old Masters to Picasso*, ed. Vojtěch Laho-da, Exh. Cat. National Gallery in Prague 2001. The volume does not deal with Kramář's relationship to Marxism nor his Communist engagement. Vincenc Kramář, *Kulturně-politický program KSČ a vý tvárné umění* [Program of the Culture Politics of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia], Praha 1946.
7. Tomáš Hříbek, *Karel Teige and the 'wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung'*, in: *Umění*, vol. 53, 2005, p. 366-384; Matthew S. Wittkovsky, *Karel Teige*, in: *Avant-Garde art in everyday life*, ed. Matthew S. Wittkovsky, Exh. Cat. Art Institute of Chicago 2011, p. 99-116.
8. Vítězslav Sommer, *Angažované dějepisectví. Stranická historiografie mezi stalinismem a reformním komunismem* [Engaged Historiography. Party Historiography between Stalinism and Reform Communism], Praha 2012, p. 98-119; Jiří Křesťan, *Zdeněk Nejedlý, politik a vědec v osamění* [Zdeněk Nejedlý, the Lonely Politician and Scholar], Praha 2012, p. 207-268.
9. Jiří Knapík, *Únor a kultura: sovětizace české kultury 1948-1950* [February and Culture: Sovietization of Czech Culture 1948-1950], Praha 2004; Jiří Knapík, *V zajetí moci: kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři 1948-1956* [Captive of Power: the system of Cultural Politics and its actors], Praha 2006.
10. The thesis was immediately published as Jaromír Neumann, *Malířství XVII. století v Čechách* [Painting of the 17th Century in Bohemia], Praha 1951.
11. Jaromír Neumann, *Boj o socialistický realismus a úkoly naší výtvarné kritiky a historie umění* [Fight for Socialist Realism and the

- Tasks of our Artistic Criticism and Art History], in: *Za vědecké dějiny umění a novou kritiku* [For the Scientific Art History and New Criticism], ed. Jan Květ, Praha 1951, p. 19-79.
12. Ján Bakoš, *Der tschecho-slowakische Strukturalismus und Kunstgeschichtsschreibung*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. XXXVI, 1991, p. 63-66.
  13. Frederick Antal, *Florentské malířství a jeho sociální pozadí* [Florentine Painting and its Social Background: The Bourgeois Republic before Cosimo de' Medici's Advent to Power, London 1947], Praha 1954, Neumann's afterword p. 283-298; cf. Otto Karl Werckmeister, *The Turn from Marx to Warburg in West German Art History 1968-90*, in: *Marxism and the history of art: from William Morris to the New Left*, ed. Andrew Hemingway, London / Ann Arbor 2006, p. 213-220.
  14. Cf. literature in note 5.
  15. Jaromír Neumann, *K dneš ním metodickým otázkám dějepisu umění: poznámky o vý tvárné představivosti* [On actual methodological questions in art history: notes on artistic imagination], in: *Umění*, vol. VI, 1956, p. 178-188.
  16. Jaromír Neumann, *Dílo Maxe Dvořáka a dneš ek* [The work of Max Dvořák today], in: *Umění*, vol. IX, 1961, p. 525-575.
  17. For more on the role of Dvořák in Czech art history see Nicholas Sawicky, *Modernist paradigms after the war: the case of Max Dvořák*, in: *Local strategies, international ambitions. Modern art in central Europe 1918-1968*, ed. Vojtěch Lahoda, Praha 2006, p. 47-52, and Bartlová 2013, Continuity (cf. Note 5).
  18. Cf. relevant entries in, *Encyklopedie českého vý tvárného umění* [Encyclopaedia of Czech Art], ed. Sáva Šabouk, Praha 1975.
  19. Jaromír Neumann, *Český barok* [Czech Baroque Art], Praha 1974; Karel Stejskal, Emma Urbánková, *Pasionál Přemyslovny Kunhuty* [The Passional of Kunigunde the Přemyslid], Praha 1975. Rudolf Chadraba, *Dürers Apokalypse – eine ikonologische Deutung*, Praha 1964; Josef Krása, *Die Handschriften König Wenzes IV.*, Praha 1971.
  20. Jiřina Hořejší et al., *Renaissance Art in Bohemia*, London 1979. Typically, Neumann does not figure as editor. The book was published only in English and German in cooperation with the Hamlyn publishing house and was never distributed in Czechoslovakia.
  21. Rudolf Chadraba, *Staroměstská mostecká věž a triumfální symbolika v umění Karla IV.* [The Old Town bridge tower in Prague and the triumphalist symbolism in the art of Charles IV], Praha 1971. The core of the argument here is backed by citations from Strzygowski.

## Summary

Czechoslovakia was subject to authoritarian rule of the Communist Party since 1948 and any research had to comply with Marxism-Leninism as the sole acceptable scientific method. Czech art history (as different form art criticism) lacked any experience with Marxism. Around and after 1950, there continued the quest for a method that would be both compatible with the scholarly tradition following the Vienna School and acceptable to the ideologues of the political regime. Jaromír Neumann found the best result in his invention of “formalist iconology” around 1960: a strange hybrid of Panofsky's post-war iconology and the late Dvořák's “spiritual art history” has served Czech art history well until today.

## Autorin

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## Titel

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