

Vladimír Birgus, ed. *Czech Photographic Avant-Garde, 1918-1948*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002. Bibliography. Index. 311 pp., \$50.00 (cloth).

This book represents a valuable addition not only to the growing literature in English on the interwar Czechoslovak avant-garde but also to the general history of modernism in the visual arts. The current contribution is especially welcome as it thoroughly documents an area that has received scant attention till now: Czech avant-garde photography.

That most of the photographers discussed in this book have remained fairly obscure names is unfortunate for several reasons. First, much of their work was groundbreaking. The volume informs us, for example, that in 1919 Jaroslav Rössler created what some art historians judge to be the “first known Constructivist photograph in Europe” (102). Second, even a casual perusal of the many beautifully reproduced photographs will convince most readers that Rössler, Jaromír Funke, František Drtikol, Eugen Wiškovský, Josef Sudek, and Emila Medková (to mention just a few names) were first-rate artists whose work remains compelling, and indeed often breathtaking, today.

The high-quality reproductions undoubtedly constitute the heart of this volume, and make it attractive for anyone with an interest in modern visual culture. The book is a translation of a Czech volume that appeared in conjunction with the first major exhibition of avant-garde photography since (at least) World War II. Thus (despite the editor’s apology for focusing on characteristically “Czech” photographers) few readers will find reason to complain of lack of comprehensiveness: genres represented include abstract compositions, still lifes, portraits, nudes, surrealist images, book covers, photomontages,

and “picture poems” (a genre unique to the Czech avant-garde of the early twenties). The work of the major artists is represented in depth.

The book opens with an introductory essay by Vladimír Birgus placing the Czech avant-garde within the context of European modernism. The essay is noteworthy for its discussion of connections with German modernism, rather than the more standard emphases on French and Soviet influences. Essays by various authors follow on topics such as abstraction, socio-critical photography, surrealism, book design, and photography and the theater. Useful chronologies of Czech art and photography and brief biographies of artists are provided at the end of the volume. The essays, while complementary, have not been coordinated into a single narrative: there are no cross-references between them and information is frequently repeated (occasionally in conflicting versions). The majority of photographs appear in pictorial sections following the essays they “illustrate,” which means that they can be very distant from the text where they are discussed. Much flipping and searching through pages would be saved if the photographs had been numbered and referenced in the text.

The essays focus on providing historical and contextual information. While the documentary nature of the texts makes the volume useful as a reference work, certain essays seem unnecessarily dry. An example is the essay on the intriguing topic of “Avant-Garde Photography and Advertising.” One might expect such a chapter to raise questions about the co-option of avant-garde techniques by commercialized art, or perhaps to discuss the widespread fascination among Czech avant-gardists with the “functionality” of advertising. But the essay reads largely like an enumeration of artists and advertising commissions, barely discussing avantgardists’ explicit theoretical

statements on this topic. Josef Šíma's essay "Advertising," for example, which appeared in the seminal avant-garde publication *Life II* in 1922, goes unmentioned in the chapter. Further, relevant information discussed in other essays in the volume – such as the use of advertising signs in Jindřich Štyrský's surrealist collages, or the use of avant-garde book covers by certain publishers in effect as advertising posters – is referenced neither in this essay nor in the concluding index.

The text of the entire volume, unfortunately, is riddled with typographical errors and inconsistencies in translation. There are large sections where typos occur on practically every page, and pages with two or three errors occur with disturbing frequency. Certain errors are so obvious that they become baffling: at one point we read that "other [of Karel Teige's surrealist] collages featured the pole of a traffic sign instead of the [sic] woman's legs [...], or coffee-house tablecloths in place of the breasts" (194). A quick glance at the collages themselves shows the exact opposite: a woman's legs in place of the pole of a traffic sign, and breasts in place of tablecloths. Further, the captions to the illustrations seem to have been neither corrected by a native English speaker nor harmonized with the main text, resulting in many awkward, inconsistent, or even incorrect formulations. In the chapter on socio-critical photography, for example, Oldřich Straka's close-up of a beggar child's feet is entitled "Legs" (182; Czech commonly uses the same word for feet and legs), and the title of a photomontage by the German artist John Heartfield becomes in translation: "As Many Pictures You Take Out, So Much Will the Reality Be Clear" (33). Even a reader with knowledge of German may stare a moment before that becomes clear. Titles are routinely translated one way in the text and another way in the captions, making cross-references difficult or impossible. For

example, Teige's book *Svět, který se směje* appears on page 60 as *The World Which is Smiling* (an incorrect translation) and on the very next page as *The Laughing World*.

The cumulative result of all these errors is that the book speaks with a strong Czech accent, which is unfortunate since it will make some readers hesitate to rely on or quote the formulations that appear in the text. Especially in the discussions of Surrealist works readers may have trouble deciding when a strange-sounding title represents an intentionally odd formulation and when it simply represents a poor translation. (For example, the mysterious title "Seeking Remained without Result" (251) translates a straightforward Czech title meaning "The Search Produced No Results.")

One wishes greater care had been taken with textual details, but the publisher clearly wagered that the volume would ultimately be judged on the merit of the visual material. On that score, this is a fascinating and beautiful book.

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