

No. 5

Josef Capek: Nejskromnejsi umeni

(Prague: Aventinum, 1920)

(Collection of essays written and published in various periodicals,

1917-1918)

Josef Capek: The Humblest Art

CHVALA FOTOGRAFIE (IN PRAISE OF PHOTOGRAPHY)

KACIRSTVI (HERESY)

This is something I have been observing again and again: when we want to condemn some spiritless ~~picture~~^{painting}, some materialistic desert which, unable to elevate the object by the path of creation is in fact dragging it down into the dirtiness of superficial details and imitations, ~~pretending~~^{pretending} misleadingly that it is telling the truth when in fact it does not enunciate anything, then we say--and usually it is us, the young ones--that that spiritless ~~picture~~^{painting} is like a color photography. Others also say that; I have read in the "Destroyer of Genuine Old-Fashioned Artists", that the very slick ~~pictures~~^{paintings} of one such ~~painter~~^{artist} are not like photographs, because painting allegedly deviates from photography. Of course, it did not say how and why it deviates. ~~++~~ We, the youngest ones, who deviate from photography more than is agreeable, would probably have the greatest right to oppose it.

Nobody today has any doubts that, compared to a good painting, photography is nothing but pure boredom and a mechanical monstrosity. That is why some painters keep clear of any drawings, why they color this way and idealize that way their ~~paintings~~^{would be} so that they ~~do not~~ resemble photographs. Photography is solely a documentary account, and here a

painter realizes that either he should not be documentary or, that he should plastically add excessive salt to his documentary accounts. Thus sometimes exceedingly colorful pictures are painted, because photographs are only brown, and since there is this desperate need to escape photography, some paintings are very cursory, sketchy, spotty, fatty and scubby because photographs are smooth, precise and sober. Photography really is a very ruthless competitor of present-day run-of-the-mill art, that offensive graceless common mutt produced by repeated and inappropriate cross-breeding of realism, naturalism and impressionism, or the greyhound of academism, aristocratic but also excessively cross-bred in the wilting innards of the past century.

Yes, photography sits heavily on the shoulders of the run-of-the-mill art and forces it to commit many extremes which could otherwise probably be avoided, for the development of XIXth century art indicates, among many other things, that if by chance there were no photography, some painters themselves would have invented it by the way they paint; but photography overtook them, and that is where all this certain hesitation and enmity come from.

And on top of all that, photography decided in the past few years to become artistic. The painters sought refuge in the slushiest impressionism and moods, but even here photography is in hot pursuit: it has become moody and--let us be frank--has come a long way in this field; quite often we could mistake it for a painting or a graphic. The painters fled to Whistler-like attitude, also to demonism, also to a cabaret ~~club~~ even to gallery darkness, but photography, too, acquired

~~club~~
chic

attitudes, delicacy, *chairoscuro* and Old Master look at will. A gentleman photographed today can look like his ancestor, so Old-Masterly can he be presented; and a lady can seem to be a theatrical or high society personality, captured for the public in piquant intimacy. Everything is there: the enchantment of a high paravent gesture, a tango movement, a brilliant smile, a touch of slightly perverse flavour, the feline stance from *Elegante Welt*; oh definitely, in any case an unusual personality, a very special, seductive and complex woman, lovely shoes with high heels, the pert little nose framed in furs.

(maga
Zlu

It is a fact that the so-called artistic photography has taken hold of everything that before wouldn't even have dreamed about. In no way do I wish to condemn it for that; quite the opposite, it has delivered us very often of a pretty horrible boredom with which portraits made only a few years ago used to yawn at us, not being blessed with the seductive possibilities of this new fashion.

Here, the materialistic age really had what it deserved and what spelled it out in full: rudeness, emptiness, stuffiness, even sentimentality of the petty bourgeois. We had seen too often in the store windows photographs depicting--with revolting nonchalance, with a refined superficiality, and generally in the most disgusting form--such indifferent and empty faces that the spectator, after seeing them, turned into a die-hard misanthrope. Truth is, the photographer couldn't do it any better in those days and humiliated his clients by common materialism whose servant he was through the misery of his craft. Materialism in whose immaterial he did not believe and yet afraid to submerge in the

matter; he was content with the surface, indeed, surface of the surface, any garbage.

Today, however, art itself is now penetrating the emptiness and mechanism of photography, captivating and expressively harmonious. A photographer enters physical and chemical laws with artistic ideas, with a new ambition to achieve uncommon results. Let me say right away that that is very little and that it is not enough. It is barely half the way, and not only because there ^{are} too many parallels with contemporary artistic crises, like the sly looks straying away from own estates, lots of false imitation, stylish masked balls and borrowings from galleries. The best and undoubted results were achieved where the renewal followed the honest way of attempting to ennoble the technology, where the mechanical character of photography found refinement through sincere attempts for beauty as such and the perfection of work.

I have talked about photography and painting. The judgment "it's like a photograph" has become a vengeful memento, photography is the Erynia of bad artistic conscience, of non-stylish and un-individual expression. That, precisely, was symptomatic for the period: the majority of painting oriented towards the public has had no individual magnitude, or even style. It is empty and spineless and spiritless in the same proportion human crowds did not have spiritual spines, or any faith, or any mission, nor even any knowledge and conscience. In the end, nothing more or better could be seen than what a cheap photographic instrument can see, because style was sought in aping and exploiting of the past, in simple and insincere maquillage, and that was quite enough for the general public.

Here I can say quite sincerely, that I shall always prefer a photograph to a painting which does not say more and often even less than an average photograph. It is less materialistic, also less lifeless, to me much more expressive, it can move more profoundly and delicately than many and many paintings.

Life, events, people, things and landscapes are photographed. And a proper photograph is faithful, it cannot deny what a painter, who is a small and barren man without soul and without heart, with only a little bit of technique, may not seem fit to see and recognize. Yes, the look of the camera is straighter and deeper, it usually is not so superficially distracted as such a person. It can, therefore, bring out much more truth from the visible world. And much more beauty. The material truth of the world, as probably presented only by photography, is not--I can assure you--so utterly low and short on beauty and wonder. The sin and materialism is more likely in the shallowness of art, which makes it superficial, ugly and devoid of power.

After all, photography is limited to the truth; it does present it as an optical matter, but at least it presents it naked and complete, it does not devalue it by ~~deceptive~~ tricks of color grease, painters' smokes^gshops and powders. Let us say that photography merely states, but a stupid painted landscape does not state anything that could not be better caught in a photograph. So it is better to look at the world through a photograph than through the half-bakedness of the so-called art, regardless of the fact that the quiet grey and brown hues of the photograph are much more pleasing to the eye, that they have more of a

spiritual impact than many of the colorful chaoses. - Besides, photography solves the dimensionality of things in a plane just as the run-of-the-mill art, and then it of course happens that it remains on top as far as good modelling is concerned.

I confess that photography has often given me more, that it has instructed me better about matter and spirit, that it has shown them to me much purer, more encouragingly and even humanly than lots and lots of paintings. Many a photograph has spoken to me better or more sincerely and more gloriously about the beauty of this world, wishing to give honest testimony about it. By revealing the world to us clearly and greatly, it then ceases to be the mouthpiece of empty matter; indeed, at times it seemed to me that with the unintentional faithfulness of presenting the face of the world it did at times present even the immaterial. Here are all the elements, fire, water, air and earth, elements in their glory and power, the wide glory of the sea, clouds, heavenly bodies, waterfalls, stones and earth, desert, polar landscape, animals and previously invisible mysteries. And amongst them the man; it has surprised me quite often with the revelation that the man could look like this; he did not appear to be the least monumental component on the earthly clod among elements, soil, plants and animals, he appeared great and still related to the divine family with natural powers and laws. Clairvoyance is not needed to see our world largely and sufficiently; it is only necessary to see clearly. Photography can see clearly and it can also view more seriously, without the ape-like playfulness of the palette and evasive ornaments of painter's superficiality that have nothing more

to say than a technical phrase. I have seen solid photographs of flowers and it was surprising how much beautiful enchantment and--I do not hesitate to say so--even mystical tenderness they contained than most flower still-lives from painting exhibitions; their sweet contours, ascending and opening up, let us feel directly the mysterious miracle of life and creation.

Naturally, I am talking here about good photography and bad art; otherwise, I could not praise it so much.

FOTOGRAFIE NASICH OTCU (PHOTOGRAPHY OF OUR FATHERS)

Photography has, or at least should have behind it quite a bit of tradition, and it is not a bad tradition because there are some darn good old portraits from the time of broad seventies, which convince us that, in fact, ^{it has} had later a bad downfall. In those days ^{the technology} man was a dignified ^{human kind} object to which significantly apply the new miracle, becoming later ^{people became} mere victims of snapshots, materialistic superficiality and ~~the entire~~ ^{of materialism} crisis. It seems that the older approach appreciated man much more. And it had better taste, more sense of greatness. Some of the unintentional Old Mastership was still surviving there, underlying the sensibility as an unconscious memory, as a piece of good sense. The newer time wanted to introduce more of the so-called naturalness into photography creating superficiality and muddle. The time had a petty, devalued, too cheap and unscrupulous view of life, and wherever it penetrated with that view, it produced havoc, stupid profanity and decline.

The older way respected ^{human beings} ~~men~~ much more. It made ^{them} ~~him~~ participate in

the new possibility with greater piety and dignity; it wanted to celebrate ^{them} ~~him~~ by wishing to preserve and obtain a lucid document, while the newer way was drowning in spiritless production. Earlier, man was seated properly and seriously, while later he just had to pose. The older group photography cared for harmonious composition, for good balance of the figures, light and dark tones, for calm, clarity and fullness of the whole. All this, still an affair of natural feeling and conscientiousness for the elder ones, becomes in later group portraits evidence of the photographer's lamentable embarrassment, evidence of confusion and ineptitude with which he piled together the greatest possible unnaturalness and discord. The pleasantness, grandezza, seriousness and clear expressiveness of the old photography have become lost in empty air, in cheap gestures, in hasty superficiality. Same goes for the old portrait: the face is simply outlined, it piously retains the simple light of the day, the masses and hues are safely, seriously and melodiously set side by side; some such old photographs remind one of the expressiveness, grandiousness and simplicity of Derain's figures. The modern manner suffered from lack of clarity, from fogginess, emptiness and cheap old hat style. The modelling is insufficient, disturbing, totally disharmonious, more so in those instances where effects were being chased; the general tone of the photography is boring, blind, disrupted, devoid of richness and consonance, and the plastic summary is completely lacking in expression.

I believe that there is nothing artificial and intentional in all those things in which the old photography surpassed the new one. First

of all, it is solid work, done conscientiously, not factory-like. It is certain that while the photographer did not mean to paint with his camera and developers, he knew how to look at things more profoundly and the respect for the subject of his work and for the work itself proved to be his best guide through the maze of the mechanics, physics and laboratory of the craft; his portraits are a touching expression of this piety, seriousness and taste. Recently I saw in an illustrated weekly the portrait of Eliska Krasnohorska from her younger years and on the opposite side was the reproduction of a female portrait by an esteemed Czech painter. Well, I can say, that compared to that hand-made counterpart this old photograph was powerfully surprising by its beautiful pictorial values. None of its aspects seemed to be raw, none manifested a shallow materialist point of view that would be ascribed to a photograph when compared to a painting. Quite the opposite, it struck me as poetic, subtle, inspired and monumental; nothing disgusting, nothing disharmonious, trashy or gross about the entire composition. Everything serious, pure, simple and clear; harmony and balance, gentle and safe modulation, transitions between shadows and lights and vice versa without shocks, without heaviness or lack of clarity; nowhere was there petty overcrowding or false effect. The whole was light, expressive and lightness, and made one think of the old pictures, of good, balanced drawing and modulation.

Someone might argue here that I am replacing art with photography. I do not maintain that it is an art, however, I did find many times that it obtains similar effects, and I have felt enjoyment, surprise, quite

similar to the pleasure one derives from artistic depictions. That is so not only because photography can reveal much to us, but because the very manner in which it depicts things may not be devoid of enchantment and power. And that cannot be just happenstance from which personal merit and higher expectations necessary for any outstanding human work, are totally absent. A good photograph is a matter of good view and taste, and so a great lot depends on how the photographer ^{can} views and feels the world and what he wants to carry over across the difficult tracks of his métier. One could almost say that the camera looks into the world just like its owner.

ORBIS PICTUS

Photography and film are both basically documents and arts of the spectacle. First of all, this applies to reporter photography, the one with which modern illustrated weeklies are made. I don't think I have to prove extensively their value and meaning: after the flyers, looking glasses and market picture stories of past ages the illustrated weeklies are a natural necessity just like newspapers. We want to learn about the world, things and events through pictures, too, and so each week faces, events and places run in front of our eyes forming the image of the world and of the present. What do these news that come flying by leave in us? Can they enrich us in some way, or do they offer an image of the world that is too shallow and insufficient? Perhaps it does not merely satisfy our curiosity, it undoubtedly widens our knowledge in many respects, and thus how it shows us all these things should not be a matter of

indifference. The newspapers say that Foch and Hindenburg are great generals and we would welcome the chance to confirm this through pictures and form a piece of our own opinion. Then it is not all the same if they look like dim bubbles in the picture, we would like to see them clearly, and so it becomes necessary that reporter photography have its perfection and form.

Before the war, the illustrated weeklies available to us included mainly the "London News" (*), Sketch, Illustration, from Germany Woche and Leipziger Illustrierte, from Austria the typical Das Interessante Blatt, and finally, Czech ones like Svetozor (Worldview) and Cesky Svet (Czech World). The English and French illustrated weeklies are undoubtedly the most perfect, the German ones quite weak, and the Austrian ones outright miserable. Svetozor and Cesky Svet have sometimes had something good in their intimate way; during the war they declined considerably in both the technique and content and I do not think that this ^{was} due only to the shortage and inaccessibility of better pictorial material.

Already before the war the illustrated magazines from the West were much better compared to the German ones, most and foremost by their technical capabilities. It is necessary to admit that the Germans were trying to compete in various ways, and already before the war they did make an effort to catch up with the good values of Western photography. Even today, when censorship allows the printing of a shot from the enemy trenches, we can see right away that such depiction appears to be much

Translator's Note: Capek probably means the "Illustrated Londown News."

dramatic, fatal element; but it should not be admiration for technology and size because life itself is neither technology nor size; what matters is where it is, where it is being limited and what supports it, what paths, speed, power and, above all, value it may choose. It is wrong to admire, for example, industrialization, although we do need a sufficient cognizance that it also includes human spirit, pride and humility, our life, misery and riches. We have to say and show in all the things of our world what is modern life and what is ^{human beings} ~~man~~ so that we can truly see and learn it, and we have to seek ^{it} ~~him~~ with all seriousness, and even anxiety, so that we may really find ^{the} ~~him~~ ^{humanity} behind his machines, behind his ^{the} ~~his~~ fictions and inventions, behind his ^{the} ~~his~~ courage and ~~his~~ errors, baseness and poverty. If we do not believe in God, then we must at least believe in ^{humanity,} ~~man~~, otherwise our world will be nothing and shall crumble.

If we keep closing our eyes we will not know our true likeness, we shall not know ourselves through unifying knowledge, neither we shall have our art, because just like God created man in his own image, so man creates art in his own image. Thus it is necessary to see the great, bad, good and wonderful as the great, bad, good and worthy of wonder as it really is. Photography also has that capacity and it is wrong if it gives less than there really is; it should present the many meanings of modern life drama, let it do so greatly, wisely, with a powerful sweep and in a lapidary fashion. There is a side of the world that is stormy, hard, powerful and bad, and if performance, life risks, courage are considerable components of modern events, then let photography be their living testimony, but let ^T ~~it~~ also be an equally expressive and

conscientious witness of ~~things~~ less brilliant and striking things, of intimate things, of flowers, of everything that is free of sin, of poverty and mystery of suffering. Not only photographer's plate must be very sensitive, extreme sensitivity of his mind is equally important.

Well then, a photographer (is to) present the world in pictures, (to be) ~~and is~~ and is both a chronicler and a participant of the life of humanity. Much of that has already attracted and excited modern poets and painters, and ~~they were~~ they were ~~they were~~ not ~~include~~ only the poets of the exaltation of reality and the futurists. Of course, we are not here just to let ourselves be drugged by modern life and become idolators of its chained and unchained forces, but it is equally certain that we cannot reject it or escape it without penalty. Perhaps we have not yet seen it in its entirety; assuredly it is not composed only of dazzling paroxysm of technology, of gigantic bridges, aeroplanes and records, of electricity and speed. However, it still remains an unanswered question—is it anything of substance, does it have its own particular form, does eternal man's heart beats with pride or fear amidst the steel and electricity. If it does have its essential shape, then photography must seek it, it must seek what of its multifaceted face can be captured both in a snapshot and in a time exposure.

Western photography had tried to do that successfully. That is why it tried not only to improve the material and the quality of work, but also to elevate its meaning. It is ~~rotable~~ ⁺ ^{for} its quite ~~manly~~ attitude toward the world. It has a fearless, penetrating and quick overall look: the depicted thing should be clear and plastic. Furthermore, it has a

poetic spirit; in the world, there are events, personalities and performances full of wonder; photography must not diminish them; quite the contrary. Within its possibilities, it must celebrate them and make them tower above the indifference of daily hurries and pleasures. Finally, it must have a feeling for the charm and sincerity to life, tenderness for intimate things, for women, children, cordiality and a sense of respect and honor. Thus it balances things (out of the world with lively compassion, with inner sincerity; it definitely is not merely a matter of capturing their superficial likeness on the plate. This presence of natural sentimental element is one of the noticeable advantages that American films have when compared, for example, to German films.

Western photography is characterized by its soaring, by its powerful capture and even lyrical exaltation, while our photography too often is only pitiable picture-making. I could name lots of beautiful examples, but it is difficult to bring them alive by description alone. There are great events which touch the mind of the public, and American photography can present them with greatness, in a documentary fashion and also poetically. I saw two photographs of American soldiers going to battle, and each of them was an epic poem and a brilliantly conceived picture.

Today, Americans are the ones who are developing a fresh new sense for the art of the spectacle. If it is considered to be somewhat artistic to set up tableaux-vivants according to painted pictures, how much artistic then is the immediate live creation, or art, or the invention of the spectacle?

American soldiers are filing past before leaving for the battlefield,

and thus the entire photography is filled with a picture of a completely transparent flag, so that one can see deep down, into the street, because processions in the city of tall houses are made for a view from above. Well, this is entirely and solely a picture of the flag of the United States, in which dark and light stripes alternate horizontally, stars at the top, and through them lightly outlined, like a mirage, a wide American street. And the successive ranks of the marching army disappear and emerge in those light and dark stripes, as if they were the mobile rhythmic element of the national flag. It is truly a beautiful picture, capable of impressing the mind. Another picture of the army leaving for battle: the entire surface all the way to the smallest place is filled with a directed human mass, without limits or borders. Once more the picture is from a slight overview: we can somewhat discern the slight tilted figures of the soldiers, faces shaded under wide hats, innumerable and parallelly angled and running lines of rifles, everything dense, marvelously monolithic and moving in a single direction. The picture represents army on the march, but in itself it is also a picture of movement, all of it is a progressing mass, a single action, a crushing, firm, compact, never ending and unlimited rhythm. That is truly poetic invention and celebration; we shall not hold against any nation that it values its living idea and strength. And we can rest assured that the American will depict with similar greatness his soldier also in the midst of danger, in the infernal suffering, in the clods and holes of the battlefiled, as well as all the rest of life which is not soldier and war: the life and work of peace.

That is a capacity which can really do something with its task, an effort to achieve the best result possible. Only two example from the few that we were able to see here; the Central European standard is incomparably lower, imperfect and spiritless picture, typified by Woche, a magazine lacking all invention and form. The Central European pictorial journalism did not, on the whole, managed to surpass the standard of average amateur photography. It only industrialized it. In the most recent years the influence of the West did make itself felt in Germany, but it is not profound or aimful enough to fundamentally change the production.

Our picture magazines suffer from the absence of a more conscious plan, as to what actually should be their role, and underdeveloped form and technique. If they occasionally do bring something better, it is much more likely to be a succesful amateur or the ^{artistic to} so-called photograph of ~~the entirely~~ intimate variety, or some good foreign shot which strayed here. The Magazine technology is insufficient. Larger ^{plates} ~~boards~~ are today quite expensive, but that cannot be the reason why ^{larger pictures} they should be replaced by a ^{endless} redundant multitude of small and often petty pictures. It would not be good if the cause of this at times ephemeral projection of the world on the pages of a reporting magazine were to be sly looks at the public, an effort to gain their favor by the appearance of abundance and richness of material, as if quantity outweighed quality. Precisely here, a subscriber policy for which the good standard of things would be too easily sacrificed would be very unhealthy and damaging. Here we still have to educate the public, and we therefore should not cater to

its every whim; otherwise we shall drown in the worst mediocrity. Still, it is equally true that it is possible to thrust forth good things here and they take root. But how far would our illustrated weeklies go and where would they end if they already offer "candy" to the subscribers, uncle Vaclav picking pears, little Frantisek with a litte sabre and a litte Army cap, Ruzenka with her new doll, Anicka in her new dress, an amateur theatrical performance in Kozolupy, weddings of daughters of assorted imperial counsellors, though it is all flicked in the miserable 4 x 6 centimetre format pictures? While such catering to the vanity of the subscribers may be profitable for the magazine, it would dishonor the nation, especially if things much more worthy of interest would be neglected. If our picture magazines were not to serve their proper and higher mission, that is, improve their own work and really educate and elevate the public, they would, in the end, become a demoralizing element. If we are a healthy and mature nation and if we are to progress and compete as equals of other nations, we must be brief and pure, we cannot drown in stupidity and embarrassing vanity when our task is to improve, work well and have a good goal.