

PART 3

Stanislav K. NEUMANN: "Pictures, Little Pictures, Tiny, Tiny Pictures" /Obrazy, obrázky, obrážky/
in "At zije zivot!" /Long Live Life!/
(Fr. Borový, Praha, 1920)
Pp. 168-181

Recently somebody somewhere inveighed quite sharply against the excessive surge in illustrated weeklies and other periodicals filled with reproductions of more or less timely photographic images. To a certain extent, he was right, but he did not tell the entire truth. This phenomenon is just like the cinematographic theatres and similar contemporary attractions for the widest public. They must be considered as an inevitable consequence of serious causes. Our point of view must be given by a positive attitude towards modern life, and so we are not going to wail that they exist, but we shall first of all ask why they exist, and then--here we shall touch on the main topic--examine whether they really meet the given need, and if they do, whether they do it well or badly. That is the only correct way towards an appropriate opinion, which should not be a priori vain, but usefully critical and fruitful.

We cannot destroy something that has a healthy root by some cheap anathema, unless we also can or want to remove the roots from its soil. If people of today thirst for contemporary

images of the close and distant worlds, they are going to get them all the ire of the moralists notwithstanding. And they really do thirst for them, because to all of us, regardless of party allegiance or intelligence, these images have become, to a certain extent, a need.

I do not belong among those who feverishly gobble up life. I am not urged to engage in mad flight by a desire for riches or impatience of awaited success, or eagerness for pleasures. I am not in a hurry about anything and I can make do without much. Mainly, I like to taste slowly and thoroughly. One proper experience lasts me a long time. Sometimes I think that life is like a good wine, which should be piously sipped.

In reality life is much more like a great feast with far too many dishes. For that it is necessary to have a well-trained stomach, not mentioning a well-stuffed wallet. If we do not have them, what is to prevent us from eating two, three dishes to satiety, and then, fed and satisfied, perhaps even a little ironically, we can observe how a nice dish follows after another? At least the eyes can have their pleasure, although the stomach is already indifferent.

Sometimes I am sated like that, filled to the hilt with an idea, experience, effort, worry, nothing more can enter my innards, but the sight, hearing, smell are nevertheless, due to an incurable habit, on guard: although very much involved with my matters, something would be missing if, for example, I did

not receive my newspaper in the morning. Perhaps I will just skim over the titles of the articles and some local news items, maybe I will not hold the periodical in my hands for more than 5 minutes, but once I did, only then does my little soul find peace.

And as I need, from time to time, newspapers, sometimes more and sometimes less, and even some contemporary pictures from the world, so I also need a man to talk about those things which are not mentioned in public. And I know that everybody today needs such reporters, unless he is retarded, or crotchety or otherwise mentally unhealthy.

If we wish to be informed, if we wish to be at least cursorily informed, even if we ourselves like life of a calmer tempo, we want to follow, at least from a distance, the rhythm of contemporary life if we cannot or will not experience it in its very focus. That is one of the consequences of the primeval human desire to learn, which had been awakened, generalized and democratized by the modern communication media and facilities. Our entire life is already constructed on it, today everything happens with the expectation that all can learn about it in the shortest time possible. This trend of our life can only be widened and deepened, it cannot be reduced, it cannot be stopped or deflected.

That is why uninformed people are like people who have been sold, they are not fit for anything healthy, not for a

foundation or even as material. Only the swindlers (men) count on uninformed people, and clericalism--the extract of all swindles--consistently builds on uninformed people. We can bravely say that its organism best functions there, where there is the greatest lack of information, and functions worst where such lack is the smallest. And the natural development of our world requires ever more perfect information.

If the information function of the appropriate authorities is not yet as perfect and reliable as we would expect from the state of communication media and new inventions, the general trend of our social development is not at fault. At fault is regularly the ill will of a minority, the disharmony in the womb of the society, the internal difficulty of the economic system which on one hand commands that much should be kept secret and falsified, and on the other is in no hurry to elevate the information level for the widest strata.

To be informed is an inevitable complement of modern man's education and enlightenment and, in fact, modern life is more likely to pardon some gaps in education of an ordinary citizen than his lack of information.

However, there is another reason why we wish to follow with keen interest the rhythm of contemporary life. There is something vertiginous, uplifting, strength-giving and captivating in this rhythm, although it tends to be more feverish and precipitous than perhaps would be healthy. It is

not even necessary to adjust to all its fevers and madnesses in order to feel its beauty and dignity and to become internally one with it.

The immensity, the mightiness, the complexity of the modern effort, without equal in the West and even much less in the East, prove that all those who today seek God and the new deists are led astray by futile and fruitless speculation. They seek God and a new religion out of habit, out of momentum, they search the forest among the tress, unable to find viewpoints that would allow them to embrace with one glance the sea of its beautiful tree tops, majestically singing and rumbling, and to feel the power of the enthusiasm, from which everything is born and which springs from the eternal human urge. And this urge for a more intensive earthly life needs only a free way, not any treatises on the niggardly nature and matter, no professorial staking out of the road to the superman, and even less any dogmata and theology, in order to rise into that enthusiastic "yes" to life, from which moral strength and heroism are born...

I shall return to this matter of "new deism" here or elsewhere in the article, since it does require a special chapter. Thus I can conclude only briefly: captivated by the rhythm of modern life, by its intoxication and depth more than by its speed, we feel at one with it, and it does offer us the gifts of faith and power before which falls silent, all the old-time pondering about the futility of everything as about the

divine creator, everything which repelled us from the earth and life to the supernatural or to nirvana grows silent. And that is what we need for us and for each of our fellow citizens: that unification with the earth, with life, with cosmos, whereby all the hypochondrias are countered; that sense of certainty superior to the ancient pantheism and modern monism, a hundred times more beautiful than all deisms; that feeling that already overflows the lips of new poets as the song in the little throats of nightingales.

We would envy our fellow men the supreme joy of life if we would oppose the spreading of this feeling, this intuitive understanding of the dignity of life. And that would happen if we were, in any way, to oppose the increase of information.

I often remember the insight presented here some time ago by Mr. Frant. Langer in the article on the cinematograph. He had heard a girl expressing the view that she will take much more pleasure in working at home now that she had seen in the cinema how well it looks. I believe that it could be generalized as follows: the more varied the life that people will daily see pass by them as if on a theatre stage, the more that life and its rhythm will captivate them, turn them into participants, thus leaving them less time for thoughts which cripple them and lead them astray from the earth and the world. The results of that can be immense. Let us therefore be happy, that people today express such great hunger in this respect, and let us wish

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them a thorough satiety.

The upsurge of cinematographs and magazines with reproductions of contemporary photographs proves that information through words and letters awaited its pictorial complement. That is something that the nation of Komenský*) should have no trouble to understand. However, if compare the speed and all-rounded way in which information by letters, naturally mostly in newspapers, used to take place with the present information through pictures, we shall find that the latter still has to be considered as greatly insufficient, primitive and slow. That represents even less justification of the voices protesting the "picture mania".

The contemporary inventiveness in the corresponding areas anticipates something quite different, Probably the time when cinemas--and it seems to me that already the informative and

*) Translator's note: Jan Amos Komenský, known also as Comenius, a 17th century philosopher, theologian and pedagogue, famous for his work "Orbis pictus" /World in Pictures/ in which pictures were for the first time used for teaching. He was also the last bishop of the Unity of Czech Brethren, forced to emigrate after the Habsburg edict that no Protestants could remain in the Kingdom of Bohemia. Some of the Czech Brethren emigrated to the English colonies in North America and their descendants are known as the Moravians.

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instructional aspects are gaining there the upper hand over vicious properties--shall turn into "live journals," and pictorial weeklies will become dailies...

Let us, however, stay with what we have, and for the present namely with those pictures and little pictures. We have "Ceský Svet" /Czech World/, "Svetozor" /Worldview/, "Týden Svetem" /Week in the World/ (that, I believe, is how the name of that third weekly goes), besides the two "Illustrované Listy" /Illustrated Pages/ of a very low quality. Three such weeklies would not be much and yet it is. If it does not happen, it could very well happen that we can see the same or practically the same little picture in five weeklies simultaneously, and moreover also in "Zlatá Praha" /Golden Prague/, also a weekly, and then there are "Rudé Květy" /Red Flowers/, published every fortnight. There are even other possibilities.

In our constrained circumstances, therefore, it would be healthy if at least the three competitive weeklies, dedicated to pictorial information of a nobler kind, would somehow specialize in their main sections, leaving only a lesser part to the contemporary little pictures, without which they seem not to be able to do. Thus they would at least double their information importance. They could even triple it, if they only would exclude all those unimportant, stereotypically repetitious scenes of high society pastimes or from the activities of indifferent associations and similar little pictures, which are

like egg look alike, do not instruct at all and please only the most retarded taste. Whenever futile or bad predilections of the public are at issue, a serious periodical should always consider whether anybody would actually miss such a bad thing rather than whether it will please if it appears in the periodical. If our periodicals really wanted to, many bad things would disappear from them without anybody missing them. We dictate the taste to the public much more than is generally held. ✓

The second defect of the pictorial periodicals is their text contents, especially fiction. A stupid rhyme or a story, or blabbering which would like to be a feuilleton, often spoil for people the pleasure of quite pretty and interesting little pictures simply because their presence can be felt even if no further attention is given to them. On the other hand, the textual accompaniment of the illustrations is often totally insufficient.

The social-democrat "Rudé Kvety" /Red Flowers/, is undergoing the characteristic development of an illustrated educational and literary monthly to a pictorial informational bi-weekly. As is the case of all social-democrat activities, less imitation of the "burger" manners and more originality would help. I thought of it recently as I was perusing the latest issue of "Styl" devoted to social art, or better said, to social, particular factory architecture. What a hymn

celebrating labor those factory colossi sang to me, particularly that exquisitely beautiful Behrens monster of the Frankfurt gas works, and with what daring irony did the brutal women's jail in Würzburg or the military stockade in Berlin look at me! And so the thought struck me how nice it would be if "Rudé Kvety" /Red Flowers/ were to decide to engage in a well thought-out composition of a hymn to labor from pictures, completely, resolutely, firmly, without any compromises. Naturally, they frequently do have little pictures from the life of the workers, from factories, etc., but it is all somehow happenstance, uninteresting, not edited for social expressiveness which would move and captivate....

It happens to be my weak point, that I like to dream about what people could do if they wanted and if, perhaps, there were fewer obstacles.

Thus, with these reservations, I consider the informative pictorial periodicals to be quite useful and good, regardless of the fact that nothing in the world, especially not the moralist anger, will stem, for the time being, that torrent of pictures, little pictures, tiny, tiny pictures, which will keep on growing and growing. Its all too human shortcomings notwithstanding it will be a blessing, bringing the glory of life from all parts to all corners of the world, helping man to gain the sense of unity with everything that is and flows.

This pictorial torrent, which, as I am convinced and have

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already said so, is only in its beginnings and promises at the very least great daily pictorial information newspapers, is being criticized for turning people away from "serious" art and "serious" literature, just as ^{cinemas} cinematographs are criticized from turning them away from "serious" theatre. If we stop to think about it, it is hardly a justified criticism. It is quite unthinkable that a serious lover of good art, good reading, good theater will let himself be turned away from these things by pictorial weeklies or cinematographic productions. And on the other hand, it will be no disaster, if some "Ceský Svet" or some cinema should at times turn away an average citizen from what is generally called serious art, theatre, literature. On the contrary, the average painting, writing and playing which is within reach of such a person, gives him much less use and pleasure than the varied information of the illustrated periodicals and cinematographic theatres. It is, of course, quite possible, that in certain circles the contemporary illustrated weeklies do push out other periodical literature, for example "serious" literary weeklies, such as "Máj" /May/ and "Zvon" /Bell/, but then the meaning is that people thereby get into their hands periodicals which are useful and read with interest, unlike those periodicals which were lying unread about the house, or if sometimes read, produced mortal boredom. There must be some progress even in such circles.