

Surrealism in the Plural: Guillaume Apollinaire, Ivan Goll and Devětsil in the 1920s

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Abstract

Through a series of examples from the Czech avant-garde group Devětsil, this essay aims to recapture the meanings that surrealism held in the 1920s for artists well acquainted with the official surrealist movement, yet operating at a distance from its Parisian headquarters. For Jindřich Honzl, director of the Devětsil drama wing, surrealism could animate ordinary objects and make them co-actors onstage, as proposed in Guillaume Apollinaire's play *The Breasts of Tiresias*, subtitled a 'surrealist drama.' The makers of Devětsil's 'picture poems,' a genre of photocollage, found their inspiration in Apollinaire's admirer Ivan Goll, director of the short-lived periodical *Surréalisme* (1924) and one-time rival of André Breton. Indeed, Goll's understanding of surrealism as cinematic, lyrical poetry with a political edge guided Devětsil members throughout their formative years (1922-1926). Photographer Jaromír Funke, meanwhile, understood surrealism as a kind of abstract, post-cubist visual art, epitomized for him (and for Devětsil leader Karel Teige) in the photographs of Man Ray. Funke's 'Abstract Photo' series of 1927-29, conceived as a polemic with the Rayograms, elaborates new possibilities for the camera and for post-cubist art rooted in an idea of surrealism—one of several, as it turns out, that were in circulation during the 1920s, before an orthodox definition and a single, official chronology had yet been formulated for the movement.

Discussions of surrealism have long been guided by definitions and chronologies. One of the French group's most memorable projects, for example, was the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (*Concise dictionary of surrealism*), published in 1938. Histories and memoirs of the movement, meanwhile, tend to be sectioned into developmental stages (1919-24, 1924-29, 1929-34) that curiously resemble five-year plans. The impulse to define and chronologise was there from the beginning, at least if one begins with André Breton. Breton wrote the movement's founding manifesto, in 1924, as if it were an entry in the Encyclopédie Larousse, providing an etymology of the word 'surrealism' and a history of its usage in French literature from Jacques Villon and Jean Racine to the co-signatories of his manifesto. Indeed, the list of these latter names (Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard and others) figured within a mock dictionary definition: 'Surrealism, noun, masc. ... pure psychic automatism by means of which one proposes to express, either verbally or in writing, or by any other means, the real functioning of thought. ... *Philos.* Surrealism rests on the belief in a higher reality ... in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought.'

The understanding of surrealism as a definition linked to a timeline has given this movement a level of coherence unusual among the -isms of the historical avant-garde. For



several decades, surrealism's common denominator was sought for in formal themes and elements of style. Since the early 1980s, ambitious writing on the movement has proposed unifying models that are grounded, like Breton's foundational definition, in the realm of pure thought: semiotics, for example, or the Freudian concept of the uncanny. Czech surrealist work, the work that came out of the Devětsil group and the influence of Vítězslav Nezval, Jindřich Honzl, Teige and others in the 1930s, has figured marginally in international scholarship on this movement. The task facing historians today who are interested in Czech surrealism is, I believe, not just to find a place for the Czechs within Francocentric definitions and chronologies. It is more fundamentally to determine what Devětsilers and other Czechs themselves understood surrealism to be, and when they understood it.

This essay serves as an initial foray into that question. It is intended to suggest that the answer involves recasting surrealism as a movement that had not one but several productive definitions, at least in the 1920s, and that it advanced variously, along a timeline in which the year 1924 is not the equivalent of 1 A.D. Certainly, I believe that the members of Devětsil were ultimately eager to accept the Bretonian calendar, once they had aligned it with their own history of poetism. At issue for me here are acceptations of surrealism during what has come to be regarded, I think unfortunately, as the 'prehistory' of Czech surrealism, those years in the 1920s when the word circulated among Czech artists and writers without a dictionary definition attached to it.

Honours for the first conscious use of the term 'surrealism' go to Guillaume Apollinaire, who subtitled his 1917 play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*) a 'surrealist drama.' The sense of that term, as Apollinaire developed it in the play, is a creative disruption of meaning whereby the ordinary connotation of words, objects and situations shifts onto the plane of the fantastic: in the first scene, for instance, a character picks up a bedpan and calls it a piano. To give another example, the play's action takes place in front of a single stage setting, which we are told is in Paris and Zanzibar simultaneously, and at one point comes near the American state of Connecticut. Devětsil theater director Jindřich Honzl was extremely impressed with Apollinaire's script. He studied it closely in 1924, transcribing most of the preface into his diary, and seems to have proposed staging it at the National Theatre that year. Honzl was particularly struck by Apollinaire's lapidary explanation of his own



neologism: 'When man wanted to imitate walking, he invented the wheel, which does not resemble a leg. In this way, he made surrealism without knowing it.'¹

In Honzl's book-length manifesto on the theatre, *Roztočené jeviště* (*The Spinning Stage*, 1925) he paid tribute to Apollinaire's notion of surrealism, but he modified it as well. 'Just as the wheels of a motor car are not analogous to human legs (Apollinaire), theatre construction is analogous neither to a forest nor to a rococo salon. It is a work created by a human being,' Honzl wrote.² Surrealism in Honzl's view meant abandoning naturalistic imitation, as it did for Apollinaire, and both men wanted the stage to address modern life. Honzl's approach, however, was to celebrate modern life as theatre. Where Apollinaire simply contrasted the human leg with a wheel, Honzl introduced 'the wheels of a motor car.' The automobile was a prop, an object that helped theatricalise daily life with its speed, its novelty, and its encouragement of fantasy (fig.1).

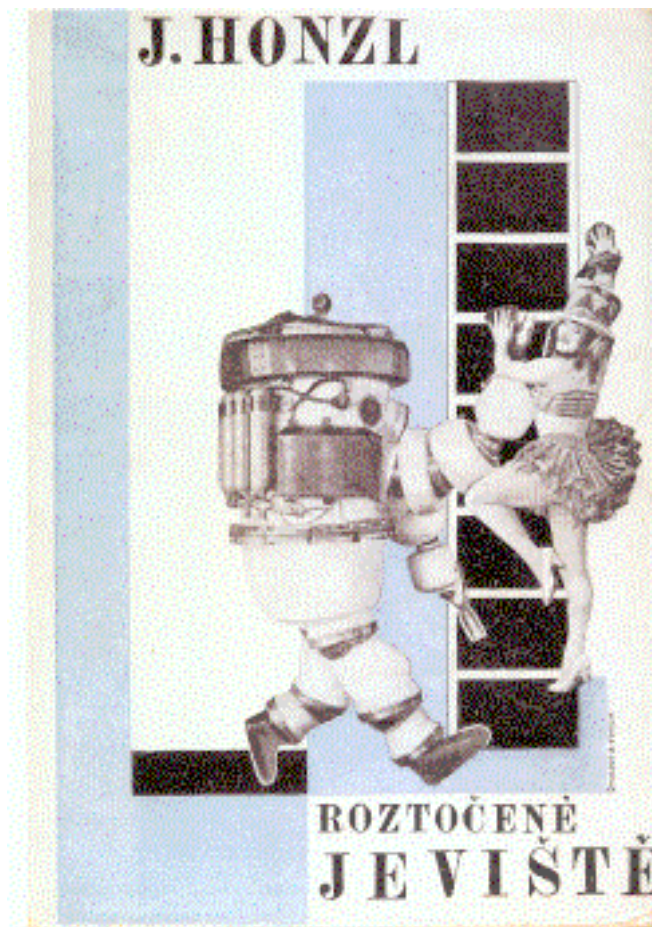


Fig. 1: Jindřich Honzl, *Roztočené jeviště* (*The Spinning Stage*). Prague: Odeon, 1925. Cover design by Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (Marie Čermínová). Private Collection



Honzl produced *The Breasts of Tiresias* in 1926, during the first full season of the Devětsil theatre section, 'Osvobozené Divadlo' ('The Liberated Theatre'). He greatly multiplied the number of props called for in the text, using everything from pistols and balloons to bedpans and photographs of Niagara Falls, and through their sheer excess these props took on the character of participants in the drama, becoming additions to the human cast. In the opening scene, where Thérèse becomes Tiresias, she loses her breasts with the cry: 'fly away, birds of my weakness.' A design for a half-human newsstand by Otakar Mrkvička, meanwhile, gave a consummate example of daily objects, in this case newspapers, brought to life in the theatre (fig. 2).

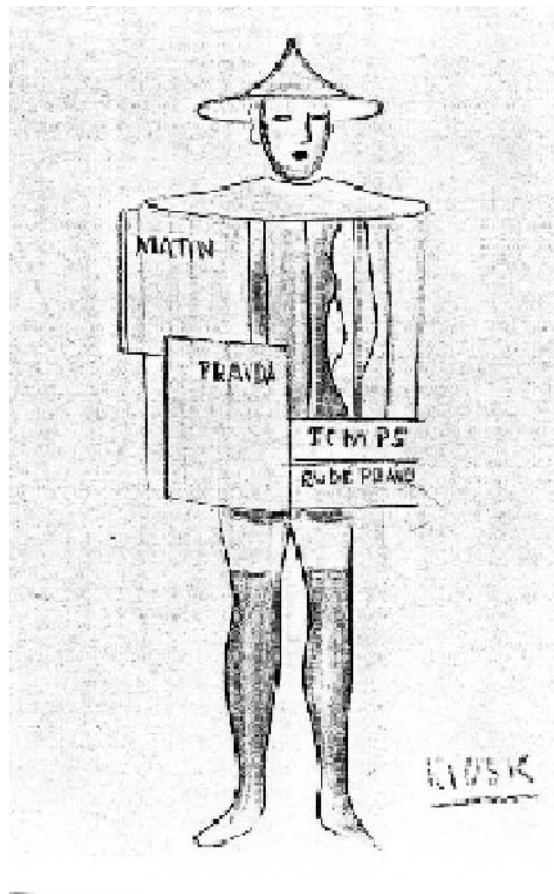


Fig. 2: Otakar Mrkvička, design for 'Kiosk' character in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Prsy Tiresiovy/Les mamelles de Tirésias*, Liberated Theatre, Prague, 1926 (from Věra Ptáčková, *Česká scénografie XX. Století*, Prague, 1982)



Honzl embraced orthodox surrealism around 1930, but it is important to see that he spent years working through his own version of the term, adapted from the example set by Apollinaire. The use of props, that is, inanimate objects, as co-actors, for example, was common to Honzl's productions at 'The Liberated Theatre.' Honzl's version of surrealism also served to express class struggle; in his staging of *Methusalem* by Ivan Goll, in 1927, for example, a crowd of rioting workers emerges in the final confrontation from behind an assortment of living room furniture, to suggest that the proletariat has liberated itself from the objects it normally labours to produce. This suggestion was in the play itself, which Goll wrote in 1922 under the title *Methusalem or the Eternal Bourgeois (Methusalem oder der ewige Bürger)*, with costume illustrations by George Grosz.³ (Mrkvička reworked Grosz's ideas for the Czech production.)

Ivan Goll was a terrific admirer of Apollinaire, and he particularly championed Apollinaire's idea of surrealism. In fact, I would venture that it was Goll who brought surrealism as a phenomenon to the attention of Devětsil. In a eulogy to Apollinaire, written just after the poet's death in 1918, Goll expressed his own understanding of surrealism as a literary model: 'Guillaume, you gave the fact, proven through centuries of poetry - that the deepest melody pours out of the smallest daily experience - theoretical meaning and also the baptismal name: "surréalisme," which has nothing in common with realistic naturalism.'⁴ As a definition, this was vague, but as an impetus to creativity it proved fertile, first for Goll and then for the Devětsilers. Goll's witty and politically incisive poem, 'The Chaplinade' ('Die Chaplinade') of 1920, which describes a cinematic odyssey for Charlie Chaplin, likely inspired Vítězslav Nezval's short filmscript 'Charlie in Court' ('Charlie před soudem'), in 1922.⁵ Goll also wrote a pair of short plays in 1920 called *The Immortals (Die Unsterblichen)*, which he subtitled 'Überdramen' or 'sur-drames,' again in homage to Apollinaire. Devětsil affiliate Jiří Frejka staged the first of the plays in 1925, and it was featured in the 'Liberated Theatre' repertoire one year later. Meanwhile, Honzl considered *Methusalem* one of his most important plays, in terms of its staging and its political message.

Goll's first influence on Devětsil creations was not in theatre but in poetry and collage. Karel Teige first noticed Goll thanks to his poem 'Paris is Burning' ('Paris brennt'), which appeared in October 1921 with the Belgrade journal *Zenit*. Although this precedent has never



been explored, it seems undeniable that the layout and style of 'Paris is Burning' had a direct effect on the development of the Devětsil picture poem ('obrazová báseň'). Alongside his verses, Goll reproduced postcards of popular attractions in Paris - the Eiffel Tower, the great ferris wheel, the Bal Tabarin music hall - as well as photographs of athletic competitions and a joyous Victory Celebration (*Fête de la victoire*) (fig. 3).⁶



Fig. 3: Ivan Goll, *Paris Brennt* (*Paris is Burning*), Belgrade, 1921 (from Johannes Ullmaier, *Ivan Goll's Gedicht 'Paris Brennt'*, Tübingen, 1995)



'Paris is Burning' is Apollinaire electrified; it is, to mate Apollinaire with his Czech followers, *Zone* (translated into Czech as *Pásmo*) on wheels. In the very first lines, Paris is compared to a 'Scarlet ship'; angels fly around the belfry of St. Sulpice Church in 'invisible lifts'; 'Apocalyptic freight trains / Slowly enter rainy stations / Bringing the golden oranges of sunrise / They are loaded onto the first buses / Headed for Châtelet.' After steering us around Paris by ship, elevator and bus, Goll takes off on a round-the-world voyage that moves at the quickly edited pace of a cinema newsreel. In a stream of telegraphic, montaged observations, we get flashes from America ('Three million dead arisen / Over New York'), from Madagascar and Gibraltar, and of course the racier sights and sounds of the French capital: 'The pensioner's whores / Dancing the tango to every two-franc song.'

Within weeks of its publication in Belgrade, the poem 'Paris is Burning' appeared in Czech translation in *Červen*, the first organ for Devětsil views, along with a lengthy editorial that stressed the imagistic quality and many postcard reproductions in Goll's original layout.⁷ In July 1922, Teige and Seifert met Goll during a nearly month-long stay in Paris, and the contact between them strengthened. Fernand Léger's illustrations for *The Chaplinade* appeared that fall in *Devětsil Revolutionary* (the anthology *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*) and a plan was announced in Devětsil's second collection, *Life (Život)* to translate *The Chaplinade* in its entirety for a future 'Devětsil book series.' Goll was also named 'Paris correspondent' for the Devětsil journal *Disk*. Anyone familiar with the poetry and artwork of early Devětsil will recognize affinities with his text. The seeds of Nezval's *Message on Wheels (Depeše na kolečkách)* are here, for example, as well as the fast-paced saga of his *The Wondrous Magician (Podivuhodný kouzelník)* which fellow poet Josef Hora called 'something between a cabaret and a fairy tale.'⁸

The Devětsil picture poems produced from 1923-26 seem especially close to 'Paris is Burning' in their themes and their composition. The mix of postcard images and slogan-like phrases, the celebration of exotic travel, dancing, sports, and fairground attractions - all of this appears in the picture poems with the same high-keyed lyricism as in the poem by Goll. Teige's *Travel Greetings (Pozdrav z cesty)*, from 1924, provides a filmic, montage-like experience of modern travel, for instance. *Souvenir*, by Jindřich Štyrský, from a year earlier,



navigates the same territory as Teige - both geographical and conceptual - but in a more disorienting way (fig. 4). An X marks the spot of my summer vacation on the Riviera, Štyrský indicates, and it also marks the girl I met unexpectedly on that vacation, as she posed coquettishly with her girlfriends on the beach. Each of the young bathers in this collage displays a strange patch, prominently, over some part of her body, with words that cannot be deciphered -- an unsettling detail. The collaged elements of aquatic and arboreal life, meanwhile, seem far from their native habitat, particularly the X-ray-like silhouette of a moon-fish ('poisson lune') at bottom. One associates these elements of chance love, fragmentary remembrances, and poetic names for strange creatures (a moon underwater!) with André Breton's notion of the marvellous. Like Honzl, Štyrský developed an increasingly strong orientation toward orthodox surrealism, and he showed in the 1930s a profound understanding of the aims and interests predominant in the French movement. But we should not forget that the imagery and themes of this and other picture poems of the mid-1920s also resonate with Goll and his adaptation of Apollinaire, which Goll proudly called surrealism as well.



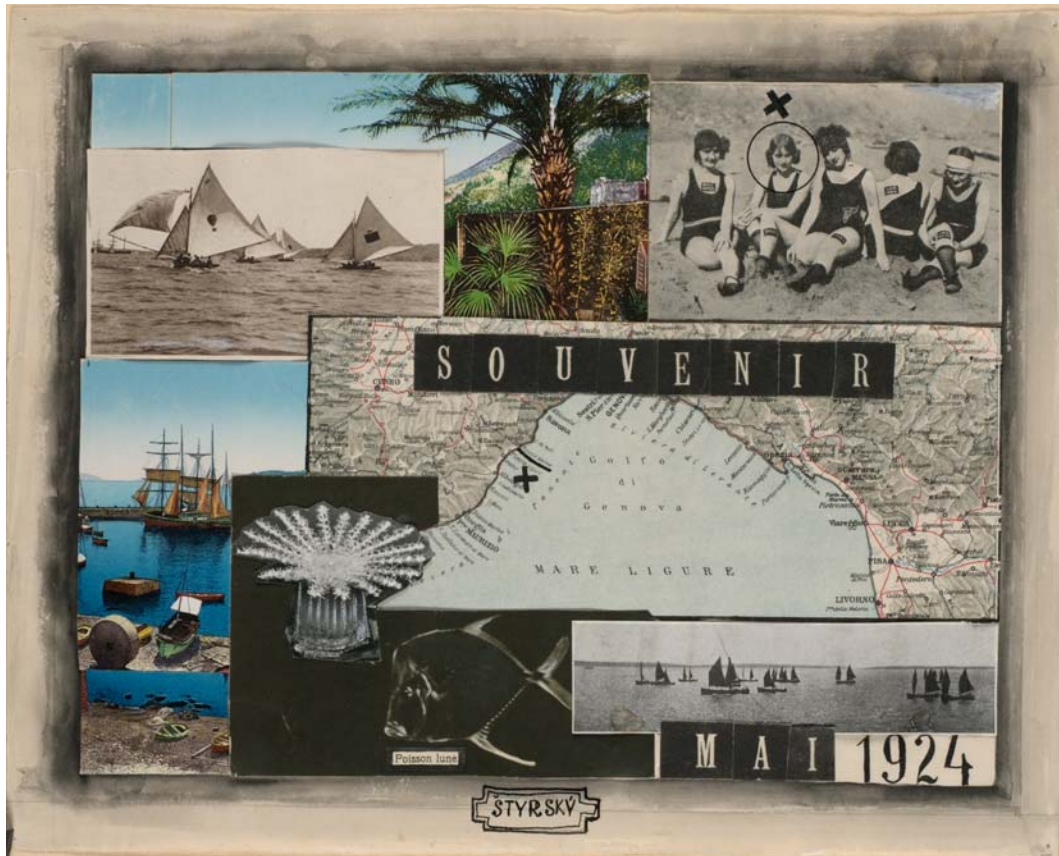


Fig. 4: Jindřich Štyrský, *Souvenir*, 1923, collage of photographs, printed matter and ink, 23.9 x 30.2cm © National Gallery, Prague

One of the earliest mentions of the word 'surrealism' in Czech writing is in Karel Teige's essay 'Foto kino film,' published probably in the spring of 1923, in the Devětsil anthology *Life*. Teige introduced Man Ray to a Czech audience with this important essay, in which he claimed that certain forms of photography held the key to an autonomous, revolutionary art practice. Writing about Man Ray's recently published portfolio *Delicious Fields* (*Champs délicieux*), Teige claimed admiringly, 'Photography acquires here its own, self-determining, autonomous speech...Photography can never leave reality, not even here, but it can become *surrealistic* ('*nadrealistická*'). *Surréalisme* is the quality possessed by Man Ray's photographs. It is the quality of modern painting. And thus Man Ray is the brother of Juan Gris.'⁹

Man Ray did of course become a leading member of the French surrealist movement after 1924. At the time that Teige first championed his work, however, Man Ray was associated entirely with Dada, and Teige was one of the first, perhaps the very first, to call his work surrealist. This does not mean that Teige fits precociously into the chronology of



orthodox surrealism. On the contrary, with Teige, the term 'surrealism' gains yet another unorthodox valence. In contrast to Breton's initial emphasis, and to the explanations of Apollinaire by Goll, Teige associated surrealism not with literature but with the visual arts. Surrealism, as he described it, was an agency of equivalence between photography and painting, and Teige implied that it was also a means to loosen visual signs from the objects to which they conventionally referred. His definition is expansive, like those of Honzl, Goll or Apollinaire. Surrealism seems to mean 'reality set free,' where reality, to judge by the examples of Man Ray and Juan Gris, signifies the world of daily experience and banal objects: cafés and playing cards, lampshades and drinking glasses.

Teige's 1923 article was read with enormous interest by Jaromír Funke, a young and ambitious amateur photographer. Funke was evidently impressed by Teige's description of Man Ray and the possibilities for surrealism in photography, and he returned more than once to this article in his own writing over the next several years. Funke differed from Teige, however, in his estimation of the photogram, that is, a photograph made by laying objects directly on photosensitive paper and exposing them to light. Eliminating the camera and the photographic negative, for Funke, meant abandoning the creative basis of photography, which he argued should always be rooted in the record of a pre-existing visual reality. Funke articulated this position precisely around the issue of surrealism. He disagreed that surrealism could apply equally in painting and photography, and stated as much in a 1927 article devoted to Man Ray. Answering Teige's claims four years later, Funke wrote: 'It is said that photography cannot abandon reality (which is correct), but that it can become surrealistic, or put more sharply, abstract (which is incorrect). This surrealism is a quality of modern art, but it cannot be a quality of photography, and Man Ray cannot compete with post-cubist painting.'¹⁰

Surrealism for Funke thus signalled abstraction, yet a further shift in meaning for this term in Czech circles. Funke claimed to oppose this notion of surrealism or abstraction, but he was clearly impressed by Man Ray's work. The very title of his series *Abstract Photo* (*Abstraktní foto*) of 1927-29, which completed half a decade of systematic experimentation prompted by Teige's article, suggests the force of his competitive ambition regarding surrealism as he understood it. For these works, Funke took household objects, such as an eggbeater, or photographic supplies like glass negatives and mat board, and arranged them



in the light of a bedroom window. Using the camera, which in his estimation constituted the basis of all 'true' photography, Funke then photographed the cast shadows as reflected still lives (fig. 5).

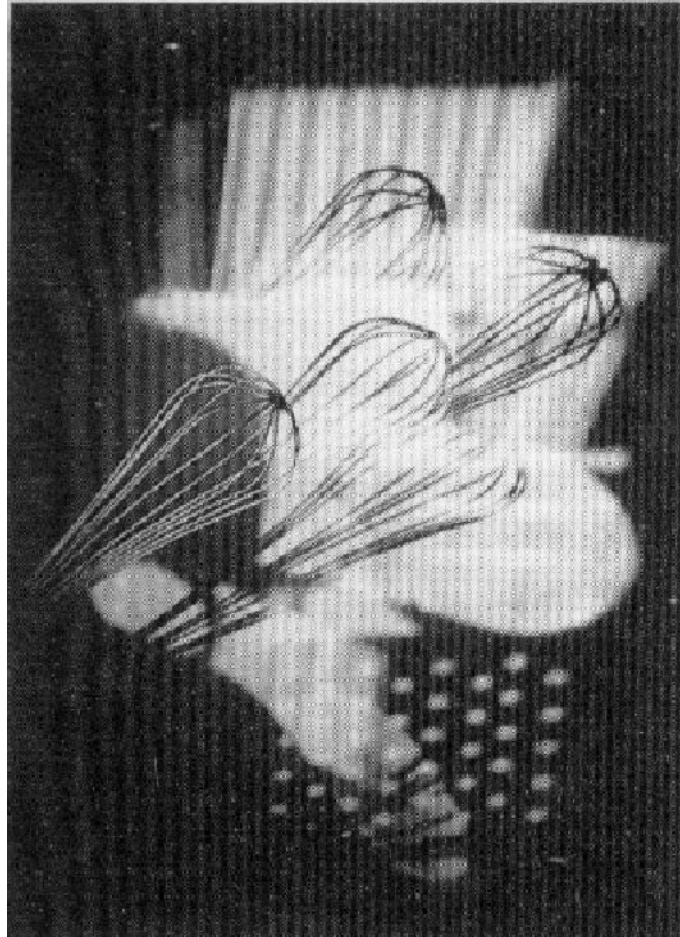


Fig. 5: Jaromír Funke, *Abstract Photo*, 1927-29, gelatin silver print, 40 x 28cm, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague (reproduction courtesy M. Rupešová, Prague)

The resulting works follow Teige's insight: they create a connection between experimental photography and cubist painting or, better yet, cubist collage. There is a game in cubist collage between real surfaces and planar representations of surface - an actual piece of wallpaper, for example, set next to an imitation of wallpaper in paint - and Funke transposed this game to the realm of shadow and light. The shadows are the subject of these still lifes, and all shadows are cast by objects, but looking at the photographs, one has trouble deciding to what objects these shadows refer; more intriguingly still, there is a confusing equivalence between cast shadows and their imitations, constructed within the two-



dimensional plane of the still life. In one example, two triangular shadows balance each other in a symmetrical relation, one near the upper left, the other toward the lower right of the picture (fig. 6). The left-hand triangle is defined by the meeting points of three shapes of light, and it appears clearly to be an actual shadow. By contrast, the triangle at right breaks that plane of light and shadow; it is not a cast shadow but a hole, if you like, formed by the intersection of three pieces of paper. This juxtaposition of 'real' and 'imitation' shadows provides an eloquent thesis on representation, questioning the very nature of shadows, and by extension the process of photography as a means to depict the objects that cast them.



Fig. 6: Jaromír Funke, *Abstract Photo. Composition*, 1927-29, gelatin silver print, 40 x 29.8cm, Moravian Gallery, Brno (reproduction courtesy M. Rupešová, Prague)

Funke's innovative body of work certainly may be understood in terms of a surrealist dialectic between reality and a psychic imaginary. His preoccupation with cast shadows has many precedents in the avant-garde art of the period, most famously in the works of Giorgio de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp and, once again, Man Ray, and surrealists in particular returned obsessively to this theme.¹¹ Because Funke polemicised with the term surrealism, however, scholars of Czech photography usually make a point of distinguishing his work from the



movement as it developed in France or Czechoslovakia. At the same time, the *Abstract Photo* series frequently figures as a precursor to what are called the official beginnings of Czech surrealism around 1930. To oppose Funke to orthodox surrealism is misplaced, while to see in him a harbinger of Czech surrealism is limiting. Both positions fail to deal with Funke's polemic, namely, the particular view he held of surrealism (borrowed from Teige) and his struggle to relate it to advanced painting on his own terms. Funke may have misunderstood surrealism, according to dictionary definitions of the term - but again, it seems unhelpful to keep referring to the dictionary. Instead, one should take account of the fact that, beginning in 1923-24, Funke was moved to define the parameters of photographic creation on the basis of an encounter with surrealism, in one of its many Czech acceptations.

To focus, in conclusion, on that fateful year of 1924: Goll and Breton clashed openly, at one point literally coming to blows over the rights to use their favourite word. In the end, Breton won the battle through tactical and numerical superiority. He effaced Goll entirely from his etymological account in the *First Surrealist Manifesto*, and disparaged Apollinaire as a writer who 'only had *the letter* of surrealism, not yet perfected...' but never possessed the spirit of the word.¹² In the skirmishes that preceded this triumph, Breton's group published a collective declaration to warn the press that they opposed 'the literary wave imagined by Monsieur Goll.' Charges followed from the enemy camp that Breton was a myopic, 'fidgety little person,' and then counter-charges that Goll and his associates amounted to 'phonies and nitwits.'¹³ In the lone issue of his quixotic journal *Surréalisme*, Goll published his own manifesto to attack the one by Breton: 'And this falsification of surrealism that some ex-dadas have invented to bluff the bourgeoisie will disappear once more [...] Their "psychic mechanism based on dreams and the indifferent play of thought" will never have the strength to destroy our physical organism, which teaches us that reality is always right, and that life is more real than thought.'¹⁴

Goll lost the battle, and not just because he lacked Breton's erudition or force of character. Goll was sporadic and eclectic in his judgments, too accepting of variant ideas and personalities; Le Corbusier, George Grosz, Erik Satie were all on equal terms with him. He came from a region of multiple ethnicities, he was Jewish, he looked equally toward French and German youth culture, he was a socialist with a love of Charlie Chaplin and lyrical poetry.



His greatest aspiration was to be modern and international. Really, Ivan Goll could just as easily have been Czech.

This essay was first delivered as a paper at a conference on Czech surrealism organized by the Slavic Department of the Universität Potsdam in March 2003. I would like to thank the organizers of that conference, Prof. Herta Schmid and Dr. Birgit Krehl, for their invitation to participate, as well as the audience who responded generously at this reading. My appreciation goes as well to Dr. Donna Roberts and the staff of the AHRB, whose breadth of vision in surrealism matches and exceeds that of the movement's founding members. As always, Janine Mileaf is to be commended for expert and excellent commentary on the manuscript. Translations are my own except where noted.

¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (1917); reprinted in Apollinaire, *L'enchanteur pourrissant, suivi de Les mamelles de Tirésias et de Couleur du temps*, Paris, 1957, 94. Honzl's diaries are held in the Honzl family archive, Prague.

² Jindřich Honzl, *Roztočené jeviště*, Prague, 1925, 100.

³ *Methusalem oder der ewige Bürger*, Potsdam, 1922; reprinted Berlin, 1966.

⁴ Ivan Goll, 'Brief an den verstorbenen Dichter Apollinaire' (1918), published 1919 in *Die weißen Blätter*, reprinted in Yvan Goll, *Dichtungen. Lyrik, Prosa, Drama*, ed. Claire Goll, Darmstadt, 1960, 42-43.

⁵ Cf. Eusebio Ciccotti, *Avanguardia e cinema in Cecoslovacchia*, Rome, 1989, 23-24.

⁶ Thanks to Jindřich Toman for discussing this point with me.

⁷ Ivan Goll, 'Paříž hoří,' trans. Jaroslav Seifert, *Červen* 4:26 (8 December 1921), 357-361.

⁸ Josef Hora, 'V. Nezvalova Pantomima,' *Rudé právo* (26 October 1924), 3.

⁹ K. Teige, 'Foto Kino Film,' *Život*, Prague, 1922 [1923], 74.

¹⁰ Jaromír Funke, 'Man Ray,' *Fotografický obzor* 35 (1927); reprinted in Antonín Dufek, *Jaromír Funke. Průkopník fotografické avantgardy/Pioneering Avant-Garde Photography*, Brno, 1997, 30.

¹¹ On this subject, cf. Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows,' trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 69 (Summer 1994), 111-132.

¹² André Breton, 'Manifeste du surréalisme' (1924), reprinted in Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Marguerite Bonnet, Paris, 1988, 327.

¹³ Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, Chicago, 2002, 65-66.

¹⁴ Goll, 'Manifeste du surréalisme,' *Surréalisme* 1 (October 1924); reprinted in German in *Dichtungen*, 186-187.

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