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## LITERATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY: MEDIA'S QUEST TO DECIPHER THE MYSTERY OF THE EVERYDAY

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**Abstract:** This article examines the intersection of literature and photography, focusing on their ability to capture everyday life. It explores the evolution of photography in 1930s and 1940s Czech culture, a period marked by aesthetic debates about its legitimacy as art. By analysing the works of Miroslav Hák and Jiří Kolář, the article highlights a paradigm shift from traditional "great art" to an appreciation of the mundane. The fascination with the banal, which was transformed into art through various, most often surrealist, methods, had already manifested itself in Czech culture. Still, it was not until the establishment of Art Group 42 that the everyday and the mundane were used to express existentialist reflections. Hák and Kolář introduced into Czech culture a new type of sensibility for reality in that they did not hide reality or dull its edges through lyricism. For them, it was more important to recognise just what kind of world we live in. Thus, the stimulus for their poetic creations was not necessarily artistic in nature, but ontological: Who are we, where do we live, and how are we supposed to grasp and understand these facts?

**Keywords:** Literature, Photography, Modernity, Existentialism, Everyday Life, Intermediality, Miroslav Hák, Jiří Kolář.

The 1940s in Czechoslovakia were marked by highly unfavourable conditions for the free development of culture. On 15th March 1939, Nazi Germany established the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, creating a state entity with minimal autonomy under the Reich's control. The Nazis regarded this territory as a space where the former dominance of German culture would be restored (Janoušek 23). This vision was to be realised through the enforcement of rules using a carrot-and-stick approach. A fundamental prerequisite for the success of the German plan was securing control of the media. As Czech historian Pavel Janoušek notes, "The German authorities were aware of the great power of the communications media in modern society and therefore sought to modulate Czech public opinion through controlled information regulation. The aim was to educate the Czech population to imperial consciousness" (Janoušek 55). To successfully dismantle the Czech national consciousness, structural changes in the cultural sphere were necessary; plans were implemented to regulate and centralise the Czech artistic space and, above all, to subject it to pro-German control (Janoušek 59). Under the Protectorate system, the central regulatory body overseeing art, the Cultural Department, was tasked with suppressing the influence of undesirable books and other works of art. "Unsuitable" writings of all kinds — including not only fine literature but also scientific, historical, philosophical, and political texts — were banned (Janoušek 63).

Although such an atmosphere could not logically foster artistic invention, it paradoxically gave rise not only to several significant works of art but also to an artistic group. This creative collective, formed amid war and occupation, eventually named itself Group 42, after the year it was founded. The impetus for its creation was its members' dissatisfaction with the direction of modern art, which, by challenging traditional forms, elevated metaphor to become the sole content. This rendered art athenatic and detached from humanity and its experiences (Chalupecký, *Obhajoba* 69).

The interwar avant-garde, with its specific approach to art, was thus the unintentional initiator of Group 42. Representatives of avant-garde artistic movements (Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism, Surrealism, Poetism) sought to radically criticise the function of art in bourgeois society, rejecting the determining

influence of moral and aesthetic conventions and undermining the foundations upon which art had traditionally been built (Nünning et al. 54). Peter Bürger has described this approach as the most radical attempt to question the “institution of art” and its subsequent collapse (Bürger 20–128). While the revolutionary character of avant-garde art aligned with the ideas of progress widely embraced during the interwar period, its preference for form over content led to a rapid exhaustion of creative possibilities. The avant-garde’s brief popularity yielded several interesting and often artistically valuable artefacts, but for the reasons outlined above, it could not provide a lasting perspective. Criticism from the avant-garde’s detractors ultimately compelled artists to abandon its foundations and seek new directions. One such direction was the path taken by the artists of Group 42.<sup>1</sup>

However, the torchbearers of Group 42’s new aesthetic, who began creating art in the late 1920s, were not writers but painters František Gross and František Hudeček, and sculptor Ladislav Zívř. What began as a small community of artists—bound not only by friendship but also by a shared enthusiasm for similar artistic ideals—gradually developed into a larger artistic group whose significance extended far beyond its regional character. The core of Group 42 eventually comprised a diverse array of artists representing various disciplines. In addition to the aforementioned members, it included painters Jan Kotík, Kamil Lhoták, Bohumír Matal, Jan Smetana, and Karel Souček; poets Ivan Blatný, Jan Hanč, Jiřina Hauková, Josef Kainar, and Jiří Kolář; theorists Jindřich Chalupecký and Jan Kotalík; and photographer Miroslav Hák. Although each artist was unique, differing from the others in many respects, they were united in their willingness to set aside personal priorities for the collective good. Their work shared a common denominator. Belonging to the group provided them with an anchor during difficult times; they all

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<sup>1</sup> The definitive end of the avant-garde in Czechoslovakia was then sealed by the intolerant attitude of the Nazi regime, which considered artistic experimentation to be a sign of decline (Janoušek 24), followed by the equally intolerant attitude of the post-war Communist totalitarian regime, which, despite the revolutionary nature of the avant-garde, condemned its formalism and misguided political orientation (Nünning et al. 55). However, K. Teige, the leading figure of the Czech avant-garde, continued to oppose accusations of formalism. He argued that form could not be separated from content because each component of a work was form and content simultaneously (Teige, *Vývojové* 72-73). In Teige’s view, “the rapidly alternating -isms of the last half century, which have often been disparaged as fashionable episodes without tomorrows, are in fact stages in the crystallisation of a single poem, a single idea of the new art” (Teige, *Vývojové* 65). He thus understood art in terms of constant progressive development, each epoch as a link in a chain, and in the then “actual historical stage of the progressive negation of the external model”, abstractionism was, in his view, the most developmentally acute (Teige, *Vývojové* 392). Even such arguments, however, failed to overturn the negative view of avant-garde art held by Communist cultural leaders, and Teige’s death in 1951 was, in fact, also the symbolic “death” of the avant-garde in Czechoslovakia.

“came together in a kind of self-preservation as artists, trusting in the power of art in life and life in art, and because they didn’t want to talk about war” (Petrová 416).

From a global perspective, art produced during this period was characterised by an enigmatic quality, with the surface meaning of artworks often concealing a deeper symbolic layer. This symbolic dimension frequently defined psychological prose (e.g. Řezáč’s *Černé světlo* and *Svědék* [Janoušek 329]), historical prose (e.g. Schulz’s *Kámen a bolest* [Janoušek 368–369]), film adaptations of classical literary works (e.g. Čáp’s adaptation of Božena Němcová’s *Babička* [Janoušek 602–603]), and paintings (e.g. Istler et al.’s anthology *Roztrhané panenky* [Janoušek 322–323]). Beneath their literal surfaces, these works explored existential questions relevant to the times and the broader place of humanity in the world. It was within this semantic climate that the works of artists associated with Group 42 were created. Images of the city and its desolate periphery – whether depicted in poems, paintings, or photographs – served as a medium for expressing the ontological weight of human existence.

Although Group 42 introduced a new perspective to art with its focus on the everyday, its work maintained continuity with the achievements of its predecessors. Many of its members were associated with the Surrealist, Cubist, or Expressionist movements of the 1930s, drawing clear inspiration from figures such as Picasso, Braque, Ernst, Miró, and Klee (Klimešová 13). Features typical of these earlier artistic tendencies are evident to varying degrees in the work produced by Group 42 members in the 1940s, despite the militant anti-Surrealist attitudes of the group’s main theorist, Jindřich Chalupecký, both during and after the war (Klimešová 33). However, these intertextual connections extended beyond the mentioned foreign artists. The work of Group 42 was also profoundly influenced by Anglo-American authors, whose writings inspired many poets (Hauková, Kolář, Blatný, Hanč) with “that special realistic and holistic view of reality, by which literature does not stand out from the circle of other reactions to life, even where we speak of hermetic poetry (e.g. Dickinson)” (Grossman 7).

Creative parallels can also be observed between the texts of Group 42 authors and the free verse of W. Whitman, T.S. Eliot, and C. Sandburg (Petrová 208–28). Additionally, J. Joyce’s prose exerted significant influence on both the writers and the visual artists of the group. Poet I. Blatný, in particular, was inspired by Joyce’s use of stream of consciousness and the artistically effective incorporation of argot

(Kundera and Blatný 114–115). In the visual arts, Joyce's influence is evident in a leitmotif characteristic of F. Hudeček's paintings: the "night walker" roaming the city streets. This aimless figure evokes the image of Ulysses wandering through Dublin.

The origins of Group 42, however, can be traced back to the 1930s and early 1940s<sup>2</sup>, as evidenced by exhibitions where its later members presented their works together. These exhibitions were instrumental in shaping the collective's aesthetics, focusing on everyday objects from "the world we live in" but placing them in irrational contexts (Petrová 416). Examples of such works include Hudeček's assemblage with rags, *Faidros a Sokrates (Phaedrus and Socrates, 1934)*, a material experiment based on the banality of its components; Gross's drawing *Strojek před domem (Machine in Front of the House, 1938)*, which combines elements of analytical Cubism and primitivist Constructivism; and Lhoták's Surrealist collages *Postava-stroj* and *Žena-hřib (Figure-Machine and Woman-Dove, 1940)*, assembled from old woodcuts. Despite the considerable heterogeneity of their work, a number of common features can be traced across these artists' individual pieces, stemming from their shared approach to banality and urban themes (Klimešová 37).

Initially, however, the artists themselves were not fully aware of these commonalities, and their realisation of a collective identity emerged only later (Chalupecký, Počátky 6). What some of these artists shared was not only a common semantic intention but also the experience of a kind of mystical epiphany, where everyday reality took on the quality of a miracle. This is exemplified by F. Hudeček's 1931 account of "a moment of enlightenment, when suddenly, in an 'unspeakable second of concentration' while walking through Letná Park, reality 'transformed'" (Klimešová 18). Similarly, V. Zívr reflected on a seemingly mundane walk through an urban environment: "a moment of 'seeing' can sometimes lead to the discovery of a new path; it can cause a revolution in the conventions of creation, especially if it is a match between theoretical initiative and the progressiveness of the creator. Thus, my first works in the spirit of the next Group 42" (Zívr 53).

The fascination with the banal, transformed into art through various—most often Surrealist—methods, had already appeared in Czech culture (Klimešová 13). However, it was not until the establishment of Group 42 that the banal and the mundane were employed to convey existentialist reflections. Although Group 42

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<sup>2</sup> The so-called Salons in the Corridor, organised by the distinguished playwright and director E.F. Burian, gradually spread from the centre of Prague to the Bohemian and Moravian countryside (Kladno, Zlín, etc.)

never issued an official manifesto—and its most prominent theorist, J. Chalupecký, even ostentatiously proclaimed “anti-programmatism”<sup>3</sup> in opposition to the proliferation of contemporary “isms” (Chalupecký, *Počátky* 9)—the group’s fundamental principles were outlined in Chalupecký’s essay *Svět, v němž žijeme* (*The World We Live In*). In this essay, he criticised the shortcomings of contemporary art and proposed the requirements for a new art.

The modern “formless” experimentation with form was to be replaced by a new “mythology of modern man”. This mythology could only emerge by capturing raw reality, yet filtered through a fresh perspective. Viewed through a mythological lens, the urban periphery was reimagined as a mysterious realm, a space where the existential essence of humanity could be unveiled. To the group’s founders, only this vision of art—free from ornamental excess and revealing dissonant, timeless existential truths behind every banal detail—could serve as the foundation for modern art. As Chalupecký stated, “The meaning and purpose of art is nothing but the everyday, terrible, and glorious drama of man and reality: the drama of mystery facing the miracle” (Chalupecký, *Obhajoba* 73).

Penetrating the essence hidden beneath the phenomenal world is an arduous, and ultimately unattainable, task through rational effort. Yet it is through “the courage to be and not to understand” that the “mythology of modern man” can be captured in art (Klimešová 45). This heightened realism perpetually teeters on the edge of irrationality because, as Petrová observes, “Art always begins in a sudden contact with reality, not included in the rational system, out of it, and therefore exposing the sensibility of the spirit and mobilising its forces, trying to seize it” (Petrová 420).

Within this framework, it is possible to speak of a form of “magical civilism” underpinning the work of Group 42 artists (Klimešová 46). The ordinary setting of the urban periphery, with all its attributes, is transformed into a mysterious space imbued with symbolism. Poems, paintings, and photographs interweave motifs of modern civilisation—gas pipes, telegraph wires, railway stations, cranes—with traditional symbolic leitmotifs such as night, celestial bodies, and birds. This interplay generates an atmosphere suggestive of mythological laws. Figures of

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<sup>3</sup> This proclaimed “anti-programmatism” is somewhat contradictory to the rigour with which deviation from the group’s artistic ideas was judged. This internal uncompromisingness is evidenced, among other things, by the following observation made by Eva Petrová: “Nowhere were possible shortcomings and mistakes exposed so relentlessly; no criticism had such a sharpened edge as this internal criticism” (Petrová 416).

walkers are reimagined as existential pilgrims, Wandering Jews navigating the labyrinth of the modern world. Urban realities metamorphose into metaphysical objects; form is transfigured into sign (Klimešová 78). The inclination towards a sacred or mythological interpretation of the mundane was further enhanced by the framing of certain Group 42 paintings. J. Kolář created frames in such a way that paintings depicting urban motifs conveyed the feeling of viewing a kind of medieval altar, reminiscent of van Eyck's works. The profane and the sacred were thus united in an evocative synthesis (Klimešová 73).

Given its mysterious and existentially sombre character, it is unsurprising that Group 42 dissolved soon after the Communist coup in 1948. Such artistic tendencies found no place in an ideologically controlled culture that demanded a straightforward, optimistic portrayal of reality. The group's members went their separate ways: some adapted their work to align with the ideals of the new regime (e.g. F. Gross), while others maintained their integrity by refraining from pro-regime activities (e.g. M. Hák). Most courageous of all was J. Kolář, who openly defied the totalitarian system through his art (Klimešová 171).

Despite these challenges, Group 42's capacity to inspire was not exhausted during the brief post-war period. Its efforts to explore humanity's existence within modern civilisation, focusing on the ordinary and the mundane, represent a vital link in the chain of Czech avant-gardes. This link retained its relevance, resurfacing in the twenty-first century to facilitate a rediscovery of a direct, unmediated relationship with reality (Pešat 449).

Miroslav Hák's 1942 photograph *Městský kout* (*A Corner of the City*) is characterised by its simple composition. To create it, he used a lens with a focal length similar to that of the human eye. Its formal structure is straightforward, showing no evidence of experimental techniques such as zooming in on objects (as in the photograph *Den a noc*, 1935), freezing motion (e.g. *Za městem*, 1938), or breaking up solid forms through "playing with technology" (e.g. the chemical process used in *Struktáž*, 1937). In *A Corner of the City*, we also see no overt traces of Hák's affinity for surrealism, unlike in his 1945 photograph *9. května* (*May 9*). In that image, taken during celebrations of Czechoslovakia's liberation, torsos of shop-window mannequins appear as irrational elements permeating the scene. This wartime photograph of armless, legless mannequins allowed Hák to suggest that the situation was more complex than it might have seemed. With this concept,

transparently expressing his concern for humanity, he was following the poetics of the Ra Group and its anthology *Roztrhané panenky* (*Torn Dolls*, 1942).<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, *A Corner of the City* appears far simpler in terms of motifs and forms. It depicts paving stones, a cart, a lamp with a ladder leaning against it, a wooden fence obscuring a courtyard, and a residential building inhabited by unknown people. In the words of Karel Teige from his 1947 article “Cesty československé fotografie” (*The Paths of Czechoslovak Photography*), this photograph is among the “realistic, documentary-exact images from that labyrinth of the everyday” (Teige, “Cesty” 82). This case study seeks to reconstruct the stimuli that led to the emergence of a new model of cultural production — photography of the mundane — being recognised as art, or even as poetry.

Since his youth, Jiří Kolář was captivated by photography, a medium he would later incorporate into his art: “He worked with it when he created his collages, when he used the works of artists from different periods, and in his own way turned them into eight-millimetre-wide strips, deformed creations, unexpected contexts, objects of glued-together scraps, fragments, and clippings of images or texts” (Bauer 109). Kolář was also close to Hák. Hák’s first solo monograph, *Očima, svět kolem nás* (*Through the Eyes: The World Around Us*, 1947), included not only an introduction by Lubomír Linhart but also a poem by Kolář. Kolář later wrote the introduction to Hák’s 1959 collection *Fotografie z let 1940–1958* (*Photography, 1940–1958*), the second volume in the *Artistic Photography* series published by the State Publishing House for Literature, Music, and Art.

In the late 1930s, when Kolář and Hák first began collaborating (in 1937, they held a joint exhibition in the hallway of E.F. Burian’s theatre D 34, where Kolář presented collages and Hák exhibited photographic *struktáže*), photography as an art form had yet to gain full recognition within the Czech cultural scene. Evidence of this can be found in *Světobzor* magazine’s 1937 poll, “Is Photography Art?”, which sparked

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<sup>4</sup> Artists belonging to the Ra group (e.g. V. Zykmond, B. Lacina, J. Istler, L. Kundera) had a close relationship with Group 42, used similar creative methods, and participated in joint events and exhibitions (Petrová 419). This group represented one of the offshoots of Neo-surrealism in the 1930s and 1940s, building on stimuli from the original Surrealism, but opposing the dogmatic practice of the psychoanalytic method of creation (Vykoukal 461-65). Surrealist images, corrected to a certain extent by a rational approach, could optimally express feelings of contemporary scepticism. This was also the case with the *Roztrhané panenky* anthology. The drawings and texts depicting fragments of the human body it contains suggested the idea of “tearing apart” the existential certainties of modern man: “Like the visual and literary part of the collection, *Torn Dolls* is an intersection of several influences. First of all, it was the monstrous and symptomatic reality of the World War, the myth of decay and destruction, the grimness of death and the uncertainty of the future, which significantly shift the poetics of the published texts towards the primary existential feelings of man” (Vykoukal 454).



an essentially aesthetic debate between critics and supporters of photography as a form of artistic expression. Opponents — including painter and writer Josef Čapek, art critic Karel Šourek, and art historian Václav Vilém Štech — argued that photography was not art, as it relied on mechanical and technical processes to create images and lacked creative intent. They viewed the medium as primarily a tool for documenting reality.

But let us return to Miroslav Hák's photograph *A Corner of the City*. Its depiction of mundane reality in all its banality is perplexing precisely because it is so easily comprehensible. Images created using this modern technology and its novel perspective confronted people at every turn. Yet, if we take a closer look at this meticulously composed photograph, we notice that it was taken from a slightly low angle. This low-angle perspective changes the relationship to the fence and the apartment building, vertically stretching the entire tableau and drawing the viewer more strongly into the image.

This fragment of urban life lacks a human protagonist; indeed, it is entirely devoid of people. This artistic decision recalls the work of Eugène Atget (1857–1927) and Jan Lauschmann (1901–1991), who used photography to depict similarly empty urban scenes. The central element in the image is a cart, the only indication of recent human presence. Who left it there? Is it simply something discarded, like so much else associated with civilisation? These unanswered questions evoke feelings of loneliness and anonymity. To dispel these emotions—or to truly understand what life might have been like in a block of flats on the edge of the city—one would need to shift perspectives: to peer into the courtyard, enter the building, or have the keys to every flat. But the photograph offers none of these possibilities. It provides only a view of a city corner. In a certain sense, however, this urban tableau is sufficient as an expression of how humans have transformed “nature”; although no people are visible, their presence is implied through the houses, buildings, sidewalks, ladders, and windows.

Thus, the camera's thoughtful focus, alongside the imaginative selection of depicted objects, clearly allows the viewer to choose from a wide range of interpretative possibilities and to decide what meaning to ascribe to Hák's black-and-white polysemic puzzle. Examining this photograph in greater detail through the lens of existentialist philosophy, one of the core reflexive currents of European culture in the 1940s, further expands the number of possible hermeneutical insights. It is

undeniable that many of the motifs captured within the relatively small area of this black-and-white image not only express the current state of mind of an individual affected by the atmosphere of war but also provide insight into the existential nature of humanity as such.

Every detail holds symbolic potential, and if the recipient can decipher the symbolism, he or she may uncover the mystery of the mundane concealed within the new mythology of modern man, as mentioned above. The central existentialist reflection, proclaiming human determinism that leads to complete alienation from everything and everyone, finds its objectification not only in the motif of the fence but also in that of the scratched walls. Both suggest limitation, the impossibility of making contact with anyone who might be nearby.<sup>5</sup> The crumbling walls correspond to the erosion of humanity and are intended to characterise the space of people, the city. Moreover, the chipped plaster alludes to another key existentialist idea (reflected particularly by M. Heidegger), which emphasises the fatal temporal dimension of existence. Human creation, represented by a decaying wall affected by the ravages of time, thus symbolically embodies the philosophical notion of “being-towards-death”.<sup>6</sup>

Observing the tall apartment buildings, which evoke a sense of darkness and coldness, unconsciously creates an intertextual bridge to the work of Franz Kafka. Behind the grey walls, the recipient may sense a scene reminiscent of Kafka’s novel *The Trial* (published in 1925),<sup>7</sup> where an individual, abandoned by all, gradually and helplessly accepts his or her tragic fate and reconciles with the punishment for an incomprehensible yet all the more severe guilt. Hák’s photograph, however, feels even more harrowing than Kafka’s prosaic scene. Whereas in Kafka’s work we at least

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<sup>5</sup> The motif of walls, fences, and enclosures is one of the most frequent symbolic leitmotifs of existentialist writers, and is encountered in various variations in prose and poetry, from Sartre’s collection of novels *Le Mur* (*The Wall*, 1939) to Holan’s post-war poetry cycle *Zdi* (*Walls*; published in the collection *Nokturnál*, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> The problem of temporality and mortality, connected with human “being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) and conceiving human existence in terms of conscious “being-towards-death”, is a fundamental theme in Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, 1927).

<sup>7</sup> “He had assumed he would recognize the building from a distance by some sign or other, though he did not have a precise idea of what that would be, or by some particular movement outside the entrance. He stood for a moment at the beginning of Juliusstrasse, where it was supposed to be, but the street was lined on both sides with almost identical houses, tall, grey tenements where poor people lived. (...) It was quite a long way to the house, which was quite unusually extensive. The gateway especially was high and wide, obviously intended for goods being delivered to the various warehouses which, closed at the moment, surrounded the large courtyard and bore the names of firms, several of which were familiar to K. from the bank. He stood at the entrance to the courtyard for a while, taking in, contrary to his usual habit, all these superficial details. Close by him a man with bare feet was sitting on a crate, reading a newspaper. Two boys were in a handcart, rocking to and fro” (Kafka 29).

encounter a man sitting and reading a newspaper and two children swinging on a handcart, here there is not a single living creature, and the cart is completely deserted, perhaps suggesting to the viewer the image of an artillery gun carriage. Thus, another hypothetical piece is added to the mosaic of disillusionary symbolic motifs: the cruelty associated with killing.

Yet the symbolic potential of Hák's photograph is not exhausted; there are additional possible hints of an existentialist vision. Focusing on the windows of the apartment buildings, we see no signs of life behind them—not a human being, nor even a potted plant. Instead, all we see is the dim reflection of the grey sky in the glass. The empty dark sky, devoid of any light source, finds its counterpart in the mirrored surface of the windows.<sup>8</sup> This man-made reflective glass thus becomes a mirror of the human soul. Man is left only with the “empty sky” and must come to terms with this “fall of God” and the loss of transcendent certainties in a Camus-Sartrean sense. Even Jacob's ladder to heaven, represented in the photograph by the vertical streetlamp, provides no help. The light source at the top of the lamp is too low, much lower than the walls of the “tenement of human determination” rise. The entire photograph, therefore, forms a vast mosaic of existentialist symbols, a notion reinforced by the lower portion of the image. The cobblestones not only represent the existential alienation of “stone hearts”, which remain trapped in their immobile solitude despite their shared existence within one “pavement”, but also allude to the fragmentary nature of reality, where overall meaning is constructed only through the sum of signs and symbols.

All these observations testify to the aesthetic contribution of the photographic medium, suggesting its artistic nature and thereby serving as an indirect defence of photography as a means of expressing the innermost being of the subject. After all, the stylistic elements captured by the photographer's eye argue against the notion that photography is merely a mechanical recording of reality. Here, Hák's formal strategy relies on his use of the medium as a form of artistic expression. This expression ultimately evolves into a semantically open, autonomous entity, detached

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<sup>8</sup> The motif of the window as a mirror is characteristic of Group 42 artists; it often has symbolic meaning, as it does here. Mirroring is seen in various forms in works by Group 42 members, whether as a reflection of objects in mirrors (at a hairdresser's, at a crossroads, etc.); as reflections of people, things, and the sky in the glass parts of buildings, in shop windows, or in tram windows, putting into context the living and the inanimate, the object and the transcendent; or as a reflection in the surface of water, having a similar symbolic validity (on mirroring in the works of Group 42 artists, see the work of Jana Zaoralová [Zaoralová 33-38], also available at <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11956/7441>).

from its creator. In the spirit of J. Chalupecký's aesthetics, it is, therefore, a purely artistic method.<sup>9</sup>

Chalupecký's thesis regarding photography's aesthetic application has been corroborated by other artists and theorists, particularly those who, in the aforementioned survey *Is Photography Art?*, opposed the detractors of photography as an art form. In this debate, Karel Teige, Jaromír Funke, and Václav Navrátil criticised the anti-photography stance taken by J. Čapek and other like-minded thinkers. The highly influential avant-garde theorist Teige and photographer Funke argued in the poll that photography is far more than a mechanical recording process; instead, it creates a new type of photographic reality. Funke, in particular, stated: "Photography is the detail of space and time. Connecting reality in this detail creates a new photographic reality. If this combination is made consciously and intentionally, based on an inner photographic fantasy that chooses preferences, shots, and composition, a photographic image emerges that possesses its own emotive force. Thus, it becomes art" (Funke 486).

These proponents of photography as art legitimised their perspective by drawing comparisons between photography and poetry. When speaking about photography, they invoked terms such as poetic prescience, poetic effect, recording poetic images, and photogenic poetry. This comparison helped distinguish fine-art photography from photography that conventionally documents the ordinary. Viewing a photograph as a poem is akin to asserting that the medium of photography holds the potential traditionally attributed to classical art. Yet, photography was a new art form—one that, outside the confines of the avant-garde, was not always comprehensible.

While classical art is associated with concepts such as the idea (as Erwin Panofsky explains in *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* [2015], where the idea is central to the discourse on artists and plays a critical role in interpreting Renaissance art, wherein the artist uses his talent to physically embody this idea) and *imagination*,<sup>10</sup> and is linked with visionary artists who perceive the essence of things, the avant-garde remains on the surface. A new type of perception replaced traditional

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<sup>9</sup> According to J. Chalupecký, every work of art (whether a poem, a painting, or a photograph) is a sign, so it can never be identical with the thing it represents. It is an artistic means that has its own artistic goal; it is not a mere message or document. A work of art in this sense is autochthonous, independent of its creator, living its own life. (Chalupecký, *Obhajoba* 75-80).

<sup>10</sup> In "„Je fotografie umění?" Josef Čapek explains that "artistic creation contains within itself a certain ethos (...)" (Čapek, *Je fotografie* 484).

imagination—namely, photographic seeing, which is distinctly modern. This new vision opposed older visual forms, introducing new visual experiences.

It is evident, therefore, that modern artistic methods, bringing new visual experiences, represent a paradoxical interplay of opposites. Photographs that capture seemingly superficial and banal realities activate processes in the recipient's mind, transforming the mundane into symbols and elevating mere documents into works of art. Such works pose a significant challenge to viewers, as their intentional banality and enigmatic subtext place considerable responsibility on the audience for constructing the resulting semantic meaning. This meaning, due to the dynamic nature of art, can take on many forms and evolve over time.

Our further path, resembling a centripetal spiralling that hovers over the mystery of the everyday, thus logically leads us to Group 42 and what Josef Vojvodík characterised as “an attempt at a new approach to the problem of reality and the related reinterpretation of myth as the myth of the everyday and the commonplace” (Vojvodík 29). Here, let us pose the question: what is the everyday, the commonplace? It certainly includes things we do not pay attention to, things that fail to surprise us, things that help us function on a daily basis, and things that cause no problems. But if we examine it from a different, “new” perspective, we find that “sailing through the everyday” is a trap and that perhaps the only true possession we have is this “different perspective”. Suddenly, it seems that reality is so strange that we no longer need to search for metaphysical meaning. We do not need to visit museums or galleries; they are present the moment we step outside. From this new perspective, the commonplace becomes uncommon, surprising, even magical. We no longer need to compensate for it. Both Hák and Kolář sought to make the common uncommon, revealing the commonplace as a construction—the result of automatic behaviours.

Once again, we arrive at the discovery of a new, modern way of seeing, a medium capable of capturing the ephemerality and elusiveness of the commonplace. Everything unnoticed is automatic. The everyday surrounds us, and the artist can use a camera to imprint it onto photosensitive material. Susan Sontag and Rosalind Krauss, in their writings on photograms and photography's ability to directly transfer reality onto photosensitive material, refer to this process as “imprinting”. In one work, Krauss defines photography as:

[A]n imprint or transfer of the real; it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to the thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables. The photograph is thus generically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches (Krauss 110).

Photography is thus an imprint of the real, a technology that, along with film, enables modern artists to “best” capture reality. The artist now possesses a subjective yet neutral medium rooted in a purely chemical process.

In *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1968), Henri Lefebvre asserts that modernity was the first to discover the everyday, as modernity liberated it from its social context and stripped it of its cultural-historical dimension. At the same time, photography proved well-suited to modernity, for it introduced new models of artistic practice while simultaneously, as an extension of the human eye, providing a deeper insight into things (as Walter Benjamin also observed):

In the introduction to the book *Fotografie z let, 1940–1958* Jiří Kolář wrote,  
 I am walking along Národní třída Avenue with Miroslav Hák,  
 We are speaking about banal things, not thinking about photography  
 And all of a sudden I observe how his entire being  
 is whipped up by some voice.  
 I take a look around myself and find nothing remarkable.  
 We continue and again talk about ordinary things  
 and again that invisible lightening.  
 This keeps repeating until we must say good-bye.  
 And it is now that he tells me what happened at this and that moment,  
 when we were crossing at the intersection with Na Pernštýně,  
 What he saw in the reflection of a shop window with an engraving by František Tichý,  
 How Jungmann looked,  
 What was unfolding in the flock of approaching pedestrians... (Kolář, Úvod 9–10)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Jdu po Národní třídě s Miroslavem Hákem,  
 mluvíme o lhostejných věcech a nemyslíme na fotografii  
 a najednou pozorují, jak celou jeho bytost  
 zburcuje nějaký hlas.  
 Pátrám kolem sebe a nenalézám nic pozoruhodného.  
 Jdeme dál a opět mluvíme o běžných věcech  
 A zase ten neviditelný blesk.

Here, Kolář recounts a situation in which he and Miroslav Hák are walking down the street. The poet is fascinated by what his friend is doing with his camera—how he engages with the tangible world while simultaneously maintaining a certain distance, remaining disengaged. Is Hák seeking out slices of street life, or is he merely noticing them? What is his role? Does he aim to make the ordinary extraordinary at any cost? Whatever the answer, the photographer and the poet abandoned the notion of capturing the whole and instead reconciled themselves to representing only fragments of it. That which can be overheard somewhere suddenly becomes sufficient. For Kolář and Hák, everydayness serves as material; anything can be plucked from its surroundings and transformed into an artistic image, just as any word can be woven into a poem.

How does this “drawing-in” occur? In *Cinema and Modernism* (2007), David Trotter critiques simplistic descriptions of the relationships between literature and film in terms of analogous techniques. Instead, he examines how parallel phenomena create a discursive network, exploring concepts such as the will of automatism, the automatism of the camera’s eye, and the effects of non-living agents. Trotter understands literature as a representative medium, whereas for him, film is a “recording” medium. He hypothesises: “some modernist writers found in film’s neutrality as a medium a stimulus to the reintroduction or re-enactment of the neutrality of literature, or in some cases of writing itself, as a medium” (Trotter 9). Engaged in an artistic game, film and photography may thus become tools of neutrality, a model of artistic practice that resonates with certain writers, who similarly apply this approach.

Trotter continues, “The will to automatism was the Modernism and Visual Culture instrument by which writers and film-makers explored the double desire at once for presence to the world and for absence from it” (Trotter 11). The “presence to the world” is evident; we can clearly identify the city, the street, and the buildings in the images. However, the camera facilitates “absence from the world”, enabling

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To se opakuje, dokud se nemáme rozloučit.  
 A teprve nyní mi vypráví, co se stalo v tom a tom okamžiku,  
 Když jsme přecházeli křižovatku na Pernštýně,  
 Co spatřil v odrazu výkladního skla s rytinou Františka Tichého,  
 Jak vypadal Jungmann,  
 co se od odehrálo v hloučku přicházejících chodců... (Kolář, Úvod 9-10).

objectivity. Looking through a camera lens distances us from the act of creation; all we need to do is press a button. In this way, the camera and photography provide an objective model, particularly well-suited to artists seeking to represent ordinariness. Trotter's notion of a "double desire" applies here too. On the one hand, as Jiří Kolář states: "The job of a photographer also is not to find and look for unordinary or surprising subject matters, nor is to express himself in some unusual way, but it is to work with such subjects so that they become self-evident, so that we can imagine them" (Kolář, Úvod 11). But on the other hand: "Reality by itself cannot be beautiful without the touch of human fate; it can elicit feelings, stirrings, feelings of love, captivation, which are close to poetry, but it cannot elicit feelings, stirrings, feelings of love, or captivation without human involvement" (Kolář, Úvod 11).

Turning our attention to Kolář's poetry, we find several poems in his oeuvre that clearly reflect this detached approach. Like photography, Kolář's poems "show" a slice of reality, but these are not mechanical depictions. Let us now consider a poem from his 1948 collection *Dny v roce* (*Days in Year*, 1948):

THE ENTIRE STREET KNEW

What she was doing to him,  
 when he left for the mine.  
 Only he didn't know  
 and didn't want to hear.  
 But once he was injured  
 and came home  
 not at the usual time;  
 he forced them both out the window,  
 in underwear,  
 as he had found them.  
 Even the newspapers wrote about it.  
 Those two married  
 and today it is he  
 who warms the bed, when the seducer  
 Must be at work<sup>12</sup> (Kolář, Dny 105).

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<sup>12</sup> CELÁ ULICE VĚDĚLA  
 co mu provádí,  
 když odejde na šachtu.  
 Jen on neviděl



A poem may provide a close-up view of ordinary things such as work and infidelity. Often, however, such a “negative” of everyday reality, as in the case of a photograph, can eventually be transformed in the mind of the recipient into a “positive” of a super-personal existential given:

I loathe to eat, drink, and I must lie with him,  
 with a fat cash register with my father's signature on it.  
 I'm thinking about the crime in these walls.  
 Run off somewhere?  
 A greater dungeon awaits if you do not have for me  
 a piece of word, have mercy, come for me,  
 he's poor, he can't see  
 my sorrow, he offers  
 the moon, everything that cannot be accepted  
 to a desperate man who does not have enough strength  
 to spit in a dog's face.  
 All I have left is the rope  
 or poison, if I don't want to go straight to the madhouse (Kolář, Dny 73)<sup>13</sup>.

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a nechtěl slyšet.  
 Až jednou při zranění  
 vrátil se domů  
 v nezvyklou dobu;  
 vyhnal je oba oknem,  
 ve spodním prádle,  
 jak je našel.  
 I noviny o tom psaly.  
 Ti dva se vzali  
 a dnes chodí on  
 zahřívát postel, když svědce  
 musí být v práci (Kolář, Dny 105).  
<sup>13</sup> Štítím se pít, jíst a ležet musím s ním,  
 s tlustou pokladnou s otcovým podpisem.  
 Myslím na zločin v těch zdech.  
 Utéci někam?  
 Žalář větší čeká, když pro mne nemáš  
 kousek slova, smiluj se, přijď si pro mne,  
 on je chudák, nevidí  
 můj žal, nabízí  
 hory doly, vše, co nelze přijmouti  
 zoufalému, jenž nemá dosti síly  
 naplivat do psí tváře.  
 Zbývá mi provaz  
 či jed, nechci-li rovnou do blázince (Kolář, Dny 73).

In the words of Karel Srp, Kolář nullifies poetic language. We understand what Kolář is writing about—it is the stuff that surrounds us, the ordinary. It does not surprise us. Yet, when someone shines a light on such a slice of life in a poem, not everyone accepts it as art. Readers often expect something different from poetry, something they do not find here.

Although this slice of life reveals ordinariness, the medium that reveals it cannot be ignored. We must always view such scenes through something. The distinctive nature of Hák's and Kolář's shared approach to art lies in their attempts to reject "great art", to strip away embellishment, to discard the notion that poems must conform to a specific form. They sought to liberate the writer from the constraints of literary history and visual experiments, and to separate photography from the conventions of art history. Their efforts unfolded within a network of connections between literary texts and the media forms of photography, both of which are embedded in a broader socio-cultural context.

Contemporary intermediality studies have moved beyond attempts to define strict boundaries between media. As Gabriela Rippl observes: "it seems that the narrow use of the term medium, which focuses solely on technological and sociological aspects and highlights media differences and specificities, is now passé" (Rippl 9). This view is compelling and highly applicable here. After all, creators of literary texts and creators of photographic images work in similar ways; they merely use different materials. The choice of details and the way they are captured in Hák's photographs parallel the selection and stylisation of verbal material in literature. Similarly, a photograph rendered in this way carries no less of an "artistic" quality than a literary text. Features of the written text, drawn from the spectrum of everyday language but interpreted through Mallarméan symbolism, serve a function akin to the selected "everyday" details in photography. In both media, these details convey the same "kabbalistic" meaning, aiming to reveal a new myth.<sup>14</sup> The phenomenon of epiphany serves as an intermedial keystone here.

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<sup>14</sup> Mallarmé himself likened his method to the Kabbalah; experimentation with language is perceived in an esoteric spirit, and all the words, images, and figures used have their reflection in transcendence (on the connection between Mallarmé's work and the Kabbalah, see e.g. Joëlle Molina's article [Molina, "Mallarmé"], available at <http://publis-shs.univ-rouen.fr/ceredi/index.php?id=655>).

In modern art, the dividing line is no longer drawn so much between different media but between different ways of perceiving reality. However, when there is consensus on how reality is perceived, different media can, within their unique possibilities, complement each other remarkably well. In this context, we enter the realm of transmedia. Photography, as a technology, taps into an existing space, pushing the boundaries of how far we can go in capturing reality and offering new representational models.

Hák and Kolář introduced into Czech culture a new sensibility towards reality by refusing to obscure it or soften its edges with lyricism. In a certain sense, we might even say they avoided falsifying it. For them, the priority was to confront the reality of the world we inhabit. Their poetic creations were not necessarily artistic in motivation but ontological in nature. They posed fundamental questions: Who are we? Where do we live? How should we grasp and understand these facts? Through their works, Kolář and Hák illustrate that the older frameworks defining cultural production were no longer fruitful, as the critical focus now lay elsewhere.

For them, it was enough to assert: some people live here, in this place—people whose ontological essence has always been, and will always remain, the same, despite the inevitable changes. Thus, every “here and now” scene, no matter how ordinary, speaks to the experience of people “everywhere and always”. In other words, it creates a myth that can only be understood by deciphering the code to the mystery of the everyday.

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