

Subjective Documentary Photography in ‘Normalised’ Czechoslovakia (1968-89). Decoding Vladimír Birgus’ Work

Fotografía documental subjetiva en Checoslovaquia durante el periodo de Normalización (1968-89). Descodificando la obra de Vladimír Birgus

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the use of a ‘subjective’ view in Czechoslovakian photography through documentary practices developed during the period of ‘normalisation’ (1968-1989). Its intention is to analyse how are we to understand the notion of ‘subjective’ in Czechoslovakian documentary photography and its significance during the last two decades of communist rule in the country. Through the analysis of Vladimír Birgus’ work, the article discusses how the principles of ‘subjectivity’ in photography aided Czechoslovakian photographers to express their reactions against the established power; a reaction that, thanks to the attributes of this ‘subjective view’, was able to remain ‘under-cover’ through the use of a coded visual language in the photograph.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es estudiar la aplicación de una ‘mirada subjetiva’ en el documentalismo fotográfico desarrollado en Checoslovaquia durante el periodo de Normalización (1968-1989). La intención del texto es comprender cómo debemos entender la noción de lo ‘subjetivo’ en relación a la fotografía documental Checoslovaca y su relevancia artística durante las últimas dos décadas de régimen comunista. A través del análisis de la obra de Vladimír Birgus, el artículo estudia cómo los principios de subjetividad fotográfica permitieron a determinados fotógrafos Checoslovacos expresar su crítica hacia el régimen comunista mediante el uso de una serie de mensajes codificados en sus fotografías.

Keywords: Czech photography; Slovak Photography; Normalization; Objective Documentary Photography; Vladimír Birgus.

Palabras clave: fotografía checa; fotografía eslovaca; normalización, fotografía documental subjetiva; subjetivismo fotográfico; Vladimír Birgus.

The aim of this paper is to study the development of subjective documentary practices in normalised Czechoslovakia (1968-89). In doing so, the text intends to offer a better understanding of the creative strategies used by some Czechoslovakian photographers to avoid official censorship and maintain their artistic autonomy throughout these years. The article starts by discussing the political peculiarities of this period and how censorship operated in Czechoslovakia during the so-called 'normalisation'. It then offers an overview of the country's photography scene during those years, including the functioning mechanisms of different photography publications and the possibilities of exhibiting or selling art photographs within the country. Following this analysis, the paper moves on to discuss how was 'subjectivity' concretely articulated in the work of Czech photographer Vladimír Birgus, whose *oeuvre* constitutes one of the most relevant examples of Czechoslovakian subjective documentary photography from the period of normalisation. It will be argued that, in the lack of explicit messages, the approach in the treatment of social topics through the use of complex visual metaphors allowed photographers like Birgus to reflect on political matters while avoiding a direct confrontation with the official power, and thus preserve a 'genuine meaning' in their artwork.

1. The Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Establishment of a Normalisation Period (1968-1969)

The cultural situation during the last two decades of Communism in Czechoslovakia was marked by the so-called 'normalisation period' (1968-1989). Following the invasion of the country by Soviet troops in August 1968, normalisation was established through the Moscow protocol under the lead of Communist Party leader Gustáv Husák. The attempts at reform known as the 'The Prague Spring' (January – August, 1968) were revoked and full Party domination was re-established. Reformist leaders were progressively removed through a wave of political purges, censorship was strictly imposed

and Soviet powers started to directly supervise the security apparatus. This rigid status quo continued until the collapse of Communism in 1989 (Crampton, 2015, pp. 336-341). Under such restrictive conditions, the government 'pacified' the public sphere and the repression of art dissidents and intellectuals turned especially tough during this period (Mazzone, 2009, pp. 79-84). By 1974, two thirds of the members of the Writer's Union lost their jobs, one thousand university teachers were fired and twenty one academic institutions were closed. The security forces were also highly re-enforced and a new criminal law facilitated the prosecution of 'ideological enemies' (Crapton, 2015, pp. 346-347).

But not all citizens could be so easily bought. Within large parts of the civil society, anti-Russianism grew and Communism was seen more than ever like a foreign imposition. A number of intellectuals including Jirí Hájek, Václav Havel and Jan Patočka, decided to remain active. In 1977, they formed the Citizens' Initiative and published the now legendary Human Rights document known as 'Charter 77'. Its aim was to observe that individual civil rights guaranteed in the Czechoslovakian law were being respected. The circulation of this document constituted a crime and most of their signatures suffered the consequences of the state's repression in different forms. However, by 1980, around one thousand signatures had adhered to the initiative, which turned the movement into a key nexus between Czechoslovakian reformers and Western sympathisers (Crampton, 2015, pp. 347-348). As a consequence, the secret police stayed more vigilant than ever throughout the last decade of communist rule.

It is evident that in order for censorship mechanisms to be activated there needs to be an actor ready to be censored. It appears clear that by vanishing certain content the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia reinforced their ideological principles and thus its totalitarian power. Censored activities (whether artistic, intellectual or cultural in any form) served on the one hand to materialise a categorisation of conducts that constituted an anti-revolutionary behaviour. On the other hand, by labelling such activities as subversive and attributing to their authors a threatening action towards the

correct functioning of the socialist state, the power reinforced its presence as a guarantor of 'permanent peace'. But this possibility of subversion, in so far it acknowledges as well the existence of a potential space of freedom, also allowed the precursors of such activities to negotiate the exercise of their freedom, while it motivated the construction of a complex web of strategies to protect it (Gortázar, 2018, p. 97).

In this scenario, art photographers were sought to fight tirelessly to preserve their artistic autonomy. But the harsh oppression also provoked a tension that in many ways stimulated artistic creativity. As expressed by photo historian Antonín Dufek, taking photographs constituted a space of freedom for many art photographers during the times of normalisation (Dufek, 2009). Some of them confronted the system producing work that was clearly critical towards the regime. Others instead took photographs that were not regarded as dangerous and enjoyed certain tolerance in its communication process, while a few decided to keep their work completely secret. One way or another, art photography produced since 1968 opened an alternative window to the regime's official (and utterly unrealistic) vision of the country.

2. Operating under Normalised Rules

The absence of a centralised censorship organisation in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia was replaced by a series of focalised censorship mechanisms that were activated case by case by the different 'actors in charge'. When it came to publishing images, the decision was made by the editors-in-chief of each publication. Their level of tolerance depended mainly on the nature of the publication; press photography for instance was a lot more restricted than art photography shown in journals like *Revue Fotografie* (Birgus & Mlčoch, 2005, p. 197). This was probably because the first, with its illustrations of the 'good news' of the Czechoslovakian society, was directed to the masses, whereas the object of the second was art photography and its public was therefore far more reduced and specialised.

Meanwhile, the printing and distribution of art books was in hands of the state publishing house Odeon (previously named SNKLHU). Throughout the two decades of normalisation, the editorial published a significant amount of work by international authors but only a few on Czechoslovakian photography, like Dagmar Hachová's monograph in 1984. Another editorial, 'Pressfoto', which concentrated on tourist photo books of Czechoslovakia, also published some art photography during this period, but with very few exceptions, like Jiří Všetěčka's *Pražský chodec (A Prague Flâneur, 1978)* or Jan Ságľ's book of Paris *A co Paříž? Jaká byla? (What about Paris? What was it like?, 1987)*, the publication of Czechoslovakian books on art photography was very rare under normalisation (Birgus & Mlčoch, 2005, p. 169).

The difficulties for publishing and exhibiting artworks in the officially sanctioned sphere stimulated the activity of independent curators and underground galleries. Compared to the censorship wall that photographers encountered when it came to selling and publishing their photographs or participating in public photographic commissions, the exhibition activity outside the publicly sanctioned sphere during the years of normalisation remained relatively fluid, as long as both the curator and the exhibitors either abstained from including works with political content or were able to 'code' the critical message in their photographs through a series of creative strategies¹. These type of strategies allowed a so-called 'Grey Zone' to function during the normalisation period. This 'zone' makes reference to the space standing in-between the official and underground art scenes that operated simultaneously in Czechoslovakia from 1968 to 1989 and it covers a range of strategic activities through which numerous artists and curators attempted to preserve a 'normal functioning' of the art scene in the repressive atmosphere of the time (Morganová, 2012, pp. 23-25).

On the one hand, the Grey Zone operating within the public sphere was formed by a few micro-spaces where the conditions for the dissemination of

¹ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

photographs allowed certain practitioners to enter the official realm without compromising their artistic autonomy. These exceptional conditions were present in a small number of places, like the public photographic collection at the Moravian Gallery in Brno or the pages of the journal *Revue Fotografie*, but their existence was never the less highly significant for the development of art photography during normalisation². On the other hand, the so-called Grey Zone of the underground photography scene was formed by the numerous unofficial exhibitions, which were privately organised but publicly presented, and where, precautions being made, virtually any citizen could enjoy the works on display. We could argue that it is mainly thanks to the existence of this Grey Zone and the efforts made by its precursors to protect it that art photography practices managed to stay alive and progress during the period of normalisation (Gortázar, 2018, pp. 315-319)

3. The Subjective Eye in a Normalised Reality

Among the different photography genres explored during this period, social documentary practices played an essential role in the documentation of Czechoslovakian reality, depicting an alternative version from that exposed by official sources. This however could potentially turn into a rather risky exercise, since the authorities would censor any photograph that, according to their understanding, constituted a 'pessimistic vision' of the socialist state. Due in part to the restrictions encountered by social documentary photographers, some practitioners started to produce subjective documentary work. These photographers moved away from descriptive representations of society. Instead of presenting the subject as a 'document',

² The photographic collection from the Moravian Gallery in Brno was established in 1962 under the chairmanship of photo historian Rudolf Skopek. During the first years, a National Biennale of Photography served as a basis for the gallery's acquisitions. The show was free to enter by any amateur photographer. A maximum of two works could be acquired from each photographer at a price set unilaterally by the Moravian Gallery. Most photographers however donated unselected photographs too, which enabled the collection to grow at an astonishing speed. The last exhibition of this type was held in 1973, from there on, a permanent acquisition committee remained in charge of buying photographs; most of the times at a rather symbolic price. In this regard the Moravian Gallery acted somehow as a substitute for the private art market; inexistent during communist times. See (Dufek, 2011, pp. 17-18).

depicted realities often seemed auxiliary to the formation of photographic meaning. As a result, the process of decoding their images became a rather difficult task for the official authorities, who found it very difficult to understand the meaning underlying behind the work. But compared to the popularity of social documentary photography, this subjective approach was only perused by a reduced number of practitioners, many of whom were influenced by subjective documentary work that was being produced in the USA since the late 1950s by members of the so-called New York school. But if the development of subjective documentary practices in the United States grew out of a rejection of the official, 'idealised' representation of post-war American society, the rise of a subjective view in Czechoslovakia during the period of normalisation (1969-1989) constituted a response to an entirely different context.

While the vast majority of documentary photographs produced in the country during this period responded to a socially committed action with the purpose of evidencing the state of an exhausted society, some photographers started to mirror their intrinsic concerns within the frame. Depicted social realities were no longer at the centre of the photographic message but rather served the photographer as a vehicle for their individual reflections. The traditional system of visual codes gave place to a world where depicted signifiers and their apparent signified meanings inhabited separate dimensions. Such ambivalence was both infinite and highly practical, as it allowed the formation of individual visual languages hardly possible to understand by the watchful authorities of normalised Czechoslovakia. The range of possible, open-ended meanings found in these photographs might also respond to a need of 'covering up' their disconformities with the regime. In this sense, the use of a coded visual language turned into one of the greatest weapons for some practitioners, since it allowed them to skip censorship mechanisms while preserving their artistic autonomy.

In his essay 'The Photographic Message', Barthes explains the ability of the photograph to offer multiple readings through what he calls 'the photographic paradox' (Barthes, 1977, pp. 15-31). On the one hand, he

argues, a photograph constitutes an image without a code. It presents an 'analogue' of reality which, by its intrinsic nature, seems to offer a final denoted message; a 'message which totally exhausts its mode of existence' (Barthes, 1977, p. 18). On the other hand, however, the photographic message is always connoted. This process of connotation occurs both at the levels of production and reception. Firstly, he explains, the representational choices made by the photographer, such as the pose, composition, edition or latter manipulation of the print, charge the image with a series of connoted meanings that 're-shape' its apparently denoted message. Secondly, during the process of communication, the reader's particular knowledge of the coding system and his cultural situation plays a final role in the connotation process. According to Barthes, the reading of a photograph by an individual will depend on their ability to grasp three different levels of connotative systems: the perceptive, the cognitive and the ideological (Barthes, 1977, pp. 19-25).

The perceptive connotation would be the first to arrive in the reading process though the internal verbalisation of the denoted message. Perceptive connotation thus coincides with the categories of language. Following this perceptive process, the cognitive connotation is achieved by means of an understanding of the cultural contexts that direct the reading of depicted objects. But it is the ideological connotation that plays a definite role in the reading process. This is certainly the most complex of all three, since, as Barthes explains, it requires the emergence of a 'highly elaborated signifier' (Barthes, 1977, p. 29). To reach the ideological signification the reader needs to handle and combine both perceptual and cognitive connotations systems, which once added up and put in common in a given society, could eventually constitute an ideology. This ideological connotation might procure opposite readings of an image when presented to different cultures.

Thus, in normalised Czechoslovakia, while the perceptual connotation of subjective documentary photographs might have been accessible to reach, the censors lacked the necessary cultural knowledge to understand any cognitive connotation of depicted elements. Through a process of a rather

elaborated 'estrangement' (in Shklovsky's sense) subjective documentary practitioners hindered the 'analogical plenitude' of the photograph (Shklovsky, 1991 [1925], pp. 1-14)³. Thereafter, without the appropriate cognitive tools, the censor officials were left with a rather incoherent set of denotative meanings. As a result, the ideological content within their work was hardly possible to be perceived in the eyes of the authorities.

The symbolic visual metaphors found in Viktor Kolář's images from Ostrava after his return from exile in Canada in 1973 are a clear example of this type of attitude. During the 1970s and 1980s, after twenty years of totalitarian dictatorship, Kolář captured the destructive homogenisation of the faces he encountered (Birgus & Mlčoch, 2005, p. 156). At a first glance however, his images do not represent an explicit critique against the communist rule, since the 'pessimistic view' feared by the authorities is not easily readable within the frame. But by looking for example into his work from the series *Ostrava 1984*, it can be observed how by means of composition and juxtaposition, Kolář divides his images in several layers or scenes that disclose additional levels of meaning and arise a feeling of social tension (F1). Moving away from the descriptive document, Kolář incorporates a sense of ambiguity that would led him to become one of the most important representatives of the so-called subjective documentary movement in Czechoslovakia. Further successful attempts to render the snapshot subjective can be found in the works of Bohdan Holomíček, Pavel Jasanský or Bořek Sousedík among others⁴. From all these practitioners, the photographs of Vladimír Birgus deserve special consideration.

³ According to Shklovsky, the everyday perception of objects on an unconscious level translates into 'automatism' that prevents the viewer from sensing those objects. 'Gradually', he argues, 'under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away'. In order to 'feel' the presence of reality, to 'return sensation to our limbs', the device of art must complicate the perceptual process by 'estranging' the objects it refers to, making such a process 'long and laborious'. 'The purpose of the literary image', explains Shklovsky, is to 'lead us to a vision of the object rather than a mere recognition'. We might then argue that it is in this creative process of estrangement that the subjective contribution of the author to perception succeeds as an artistic expression.

⁴ The so-called Czech 'visualists' also explored the notion of photographic subjectivity during the 1980s. Although their work had certain similarities with subjective documentary practices, such as the fragmentation of depicted objects and the use of abstract views, their style derived mainly from the theory of 'Elementary Photography' developed by Polish artist



F1. 'Untitled', from the series *Ostrava*, 1984. Photograph by Viktor Kolář. © Viktor Kolář

4. Vladimír Birgus: In Search of the Grey Matter

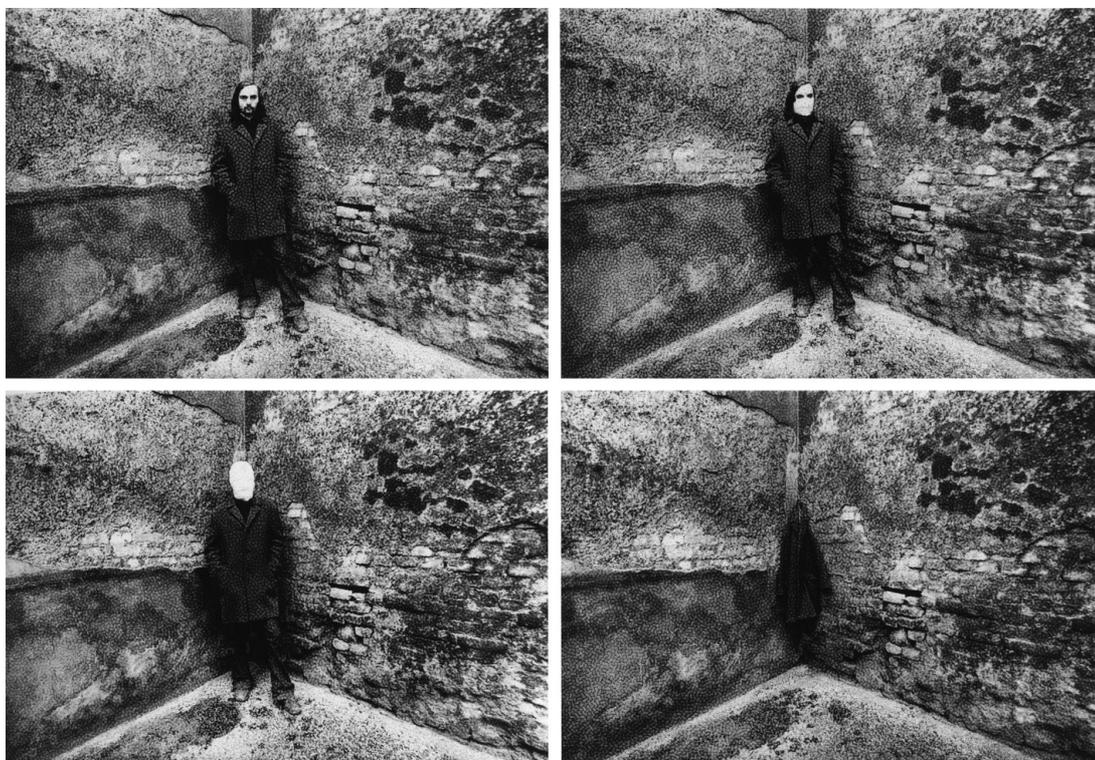
Born in Fridek-Mistekín in 1954, Birgus soon proved to be a photography prodigy. At the age of ten he attended afternoon lessons at the photo club of his primary school with amateur photographer Rudolf Jarnot (b.1934). After practising with a family camera (a Flexaret) for just over a year, Birgus won his first award in a national photographic competition for children⁵. The prize consisted of the opportunity to travel to Prague and participate in a variety of photography activities and seminars for children. There he met historian of photography Rudolf Skopec and photographer Karel Hátek; two encounters that meant a great impulse for the development of Birgus' early passion (Bielešová, 2014, p. 9).

In 1971, the artist had his first solo show at Galerie v podloubí in Olomuc, a small but very active gallery where he would also initiate his career as a

Jerzy Olek in 1984 (Gortázar, 2019).

⁵ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

curator, organising a series of underground exhibitions (Bieleszová, 2014, p. 9). Although the gallery officially belonged to the District Committee of the Socialist Youth Organisation, the exhibition programme was independently designed and they were able to exhibit works that could have never been shown elsewhere at the time⁶. These exhibitions usually ran without problems and only on some occasions few specific works had to be put down following official orders. To keep things running in this rather comfortable manner, Birgus and his fellow curators took care in the use of exhibition titles and abstained from writing politically about the shows they organised⁷.



F2. *Leaving 1-4*, 1972. Photograph by Vladimír Birgus. © Vladimír Birgus

During the late sixties and early seventies, young Birgus started to experiment with staged photography inspired by the 'New Wave' of 1960s Czech cinema. As we can observe in his series *Leaving*, the photographer applies absurd humour alongside coded symbols to reflect on his country's political situation (F2). The first photograph shows a male figure standing

⁶ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014.

⁷ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014.

trapped against a corner as he stares daringly at the observer. In the following image, a cloth covers his mouth preventing him from speaking, but the man stays firm, using his sight to persist in his oppositional attitude. The cloth eventually covers his entire head and his gaze is annulled. The possibility to express has totally vanished. And then a jacket politely hanged (perhaps as a sign of dignity) is all that remains of his fleeting existence. In the meantime, on a closer inspection, the reticulation of the chemical emulsion produces a worm-like pattern, inviting the viewer to determine the role of these animals in the course of events.

Following few other experimental works of staged photography, Birgus soon turned his attention to documentary practices⁸. For his generation of independent photographers working during the times of normalisation, who were constantly bombarded with the staged propaganda reportage typical of the time, the influence came mostly from humanist photojournalism that was being developed at Magnum Agency (Bieleszová, 2014, p. 10). For Birgus however, the inspiration arrived mainly from the New York school, with the work of photographers like William Klein and Robert Frank (Pospěch, 2003). The fact that the regime did not see an obvious threat in social documentary photography produced abroad was very beneficial for young Czechoslovakian photographers at a time where any foreign information was scrutinised to the maximum detail before crossing national frontiers. The work of Magnum photographers like Cartier-Bresson was exhibited in Czechoslovakia on repeated occasions and many practitioners became fascinated with the social empathy achieved through his close, decisive snapshots⁹.

⁸ Other series of staged photography produced during this period include *Counterpoint* (1972 – 1974); a set of close-up photographs confronting a man's black skin to a white woman's body. The work was exhibited at Galerie mladých in Brno in 1976 (Šlachťová, 1976).

⁹ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.



F3 and F4. *Prague, 1978*. Photographs by Vladimír Birgus. © Vladimír Birgus

Throughout the 1970s, while the artist was studying a degree in Literature, Theatre and Film in Olomouc, he worked simultaneously on his personal documentary work¹⁰. Initially Birgus focused his attention on public life. He explored the relation between the individual and the omnipresent state's power, which he searched through gestures of apathy and discontent during the numerous national celebrations organised by the Communist Party¹¹. It was a period when enforcement authorities would often question the reasons of your activity and remove your film out of the camera if your 'apolitical' artistic intention was not convincing enough (Bieleszová, 2014, p. 10). Birgus explored the progressive decline of Communism through the gazes of hundreds of men and women forced to attend to these events time after time, always carrying the same heavy banners of mass murderers (like the bloody Czechoslovakian ex-president Klement Gottwalf) and repeating the now-meaningless slogans about the power of workers, whose monotonous,

¹⁰ In 1977, Vladimír Birgus funded the 'Dokument' group with his friends Petr Klimpl and Josef Pokorný. The group collaborated until the late seventies in the production of a series of socially engaged documentary projects with the aim of recording and communicating marginal topics that would have never been covered by official photojournalism. Their most important project was *Productive Age*, which focuses on the life stories of middle-aged individuals who were socially struggling.

¹¹ During the period between 1974 and 1978, Birgus was also a distant student at FAMU academy, where he would later become a lecturer and Professor for over twenty-five years between 1978 and 2005.

constrained existence, had never come near the long-promised aspirations made by the Party. Some of these images can be found in his series *Prague* from 1978 (F.3 and F.4)¹². In a reality where the spoken and written word was tirelessly monitored by thousands of anonymous watchdogs, Birgus found in the silence, boredom and weariness of the attendees' faces a powerful testimony of the regime's fatigue and its decadence.

Among Birgus' talents, his most practical ability was probably his astuteness. In a period where most aspects of private and public life were regulated by law, where taking the lead of one's future was usually out of hand, he often found the smart way around it to reach his goals. And one of his most important goals had always been to travel abroad as often as possible¹³. During his student years at University, he visited various cities in Western Europe and the Eastern Bloc, working as a volunteer through the 'International Work Camp' programme¹⁴. Later on, as a curator, he managed to travel abroad on repeated occasions thanks to the help of his foreign friends who would sometimes open a bank account under his name in the country where he meant to travel¹⁵. These mechanisms, which probably sound a lot simpler than what they really meant for most Czechoslovakian citizens, allowed him to enrich his artistic work and expand his professional network in Europe throughout the seventies and eighties¹⁶.

¹² Klement Gottwald (1896-1953) was the Communist Czechoslovakian Prime Minister between 1946 and 1948 and President of Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1953.

¹³ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

¹⁴ This was an international volunteering programme where youngsters from different countries in the Eastern Bloc had the chance to travel both to Western and East European cities in order to undertake voluntary work at farms, construction sites or social institutions in exchange for their travel expenses. See interview with Vladimír Birgus in (Bielešová, 2014, p. 158).

¹⁵ During the times of Normalisation, one of the ways of obtaining a visa to travel outside the Eastern Bloc was to prove that you had a bank account under your name in the destination country. Interview with Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, Prague, 17/10/2014.

¹⁶ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014.



F5. 'London', from the series *Sleepers*, 1976. Photograph by Vladimír Birgus. ©Vladimír Birgus.

The first of these trips took place in 1972, just after he had turned eighteen. That summer Birgus joined a volunteering programme and travelled to Belgium, where he worked in a home for mentally impaired children¹⁷. A few years later in 1975, he went to Britain for the first time and undertook further

¹⁷ Interview with art historian, photographer and curator Prof. Vladimír Birgus, conducted by Paula Gortázar, 17/11/2014, Prague.

volunteer work taking care of immigrant children from India and Pakistan¹⁸. In 1976, during a second trip to the United Kingdom, he shot his series *Sleepers*, which depict scenes from Bradford and London's East End (F.5). The project constitutes a clear shift in his visual narrative. In this series, Birgus seems to abandon his interest for immediacy and the presence of the sitter becomes now accessory to his intentions; acquiring a universal character that allows him to treat global, existential themes.

This turn from humanistic reportage to subjective documentary, from the locally concrete to the generally applicable, does not occur at a random moment in his career. On the contrary, it becomes evident that he was deeply affected by his experiences abroad. While most of his colleagues were focused on recording the struggles of Czechoslovakian society during the times of normalisation, Birgus witnessed how certain human dilemmas occurred worldwide, no matter what the ruling system was. He was able to identify the world of loneliness and strangeness we were all part of, regardless of its geographic region or the period of history to which each of us belonged. In fact, the date and place used by the artist to caption his photographs seems less relevant to understand his work.

As he continued to travel frequently throughout the Eastern Bloc and Western Europe during the eighties, the photographer progressively developed a rather sophisticated use of irony, and his photographs become more complex. His photograph *Provence*, from 1980, constitutes a clear example of this creative move (F6). Despite the immediacy of the shot, Birgus manages to thoroughly charge every element of the photograph with a symbolic meaning. The calculated and deconstructed compositions of his images become central to the work. Each scene is built of different layers, but unlike the hierarchy applied in classic *tableaux vivants*, all planes carry here a similar weight, even if the elements within them appear randomly cropped out. The same could be said about human and static beings: both are attributed equal prominence. People often appear covering their gaze, facing us backwards or too distant from the camera to offer any relevant gesture.

¹⁸ Interview with Vladimír Birgus, 17/10/2014.

What does seem to matter the most is the geometric relation between the different forms and the delicate balance among their volumes. It is precisely here, in the tensions between the few minimal, but carefully chosen elements, that the scene becomes highly psychological. The characters, deprived from their subjectivity, are relegated from reality and placed under a secondary dimension where only Birgus - and his grey matter - belong. He seems to trigger precisely that point of the viewer's consciousness that can make us deeply affected by the oddness of his parallel, phantasmagorical world.



F6. *Provence*, 1980. Photograph by Vladimír Birgus. ©Vladimír Birgus.

In the early 1980s, the photographer makes the pioneering choice of introducing colour in his scenes, moving away from the mainstream of documentary work that was being developed in his country. Inspired by photographer William Eggleston and the paintings of Edward Hopper, Francis Bacon and Eric Fischl, Birgus introduces a rather 'alien' chromatic universe to his images (Bieleszová, 2014, p. 13). As it can be observed in his photograph *Kyrgyzstan*, from 1981, the intense shades of yellow and blue are not treated as mere properties of the structures; they coexist in equal

relevance with the forms and volumes of objects depicted (F7). This chromatic experience removes every trace of narrative from his work, it dominates the image, setting up the psychological mood of each scene from an abstract perspective. The different tonalities immerse the sitters in a world filled with confusion and disorientation, which pushes them further away from reality and leaves the viewer wondering about the 'probability' of such visual effect.



F7. *Kyrgyzstan*, 1981. Photograph by Vladimír Birgus. ©Vladimír Birgus.

Although the 'taking' of the photograph is pursued through a 'reportage' strategy, the author does not leave anything to chance. Every single element of the picture constitutes an essential part in the construction of his symbolic language. This speed in visualising the potential metaphorical meaning of the scenes he depicts becomes even more meritorious when colour is added to the photograph. In a matter of seconds, the author devises a precise,

unrepeatable balance among the elements in the frame, which despite the apparent banality of depicted events, enables the appearance of a rather unfamiliar atmosphere filled with anguish and distress.

The uncanny perception is achieved by means of a recurrent opposition that is present in three main variants. Firstly, he exercises a constant confrontation between neutral subjects and garish backgrounds. Coloured areas (be it landscapes, walls or pieces of furniture) appear oversized, imposing their presence and eccentric mood over weak, monochromatic human figures. Secondly, we could argue that the author applies a 'bipolar' treatment of the sitters by giving them an apparent relevance through their intentional placement inside the picture, while simultaneously relegating them from their subjectivity. Anonymous and lonely, they stand in uncoordinated pace, looking elsewhere outside the frame and even blinking or closing their eyes as if rejecting our direct contact. Finally, the photographer seems to enjoy the frequent juxtaposition between light and shadows; sometimes even his own silhouette is present in the frame. These dark areas often serve as a compositional tool, dividing the image into segments in the style of avant-garde Constructivism. But they can also operate as reminders of the inaccessibility of Birgus' metaphorical message. They are ultimately false clues; in the lack of projecting objects, these cast shadows turn into uncompleted signifiers of uncertain existence outside the proposed stage.

The 'optical unconscious' described by Walter Benjamin in his essay *A Short History of Photography*, comes to mind when looking at Birgus' work. According to Benjamin, while it is possible to describe the way someone walks, it is impossible to say anything about the fraction of a second when a person is about to take the first step. It is the photographic technology (with its various aids) that can make the viewer 'aware for the first time the optical unconscious' (Benjamin, 1978 [1931], p. 7). As Benjamin observes:

It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one that addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that, instead of a space

worked through by a human consciousness, there appears one which is affected unconsciously (Benjamin, 1978 [1931], p. 7).

From the 1980s onwards, Birgus seems to make a constant search for the optical unconscious in Benjamin's sense. The reader might have a feeling that something 'very relevant' is just about to be put in motion right after Birgus freezes the scene. Then of course what follows is just a guess. What is most interesting, however, is the tension arisen through the visibility of this optical unconscious. The uncertainty of the subjects' future actions moves the scene into a grey zone that escapes our rational control. The 'logics' of temporal narrative are constantly being put at stake. It is as if breath needed to be held. Then released before moving into his next photograph before holding it again. Of course, Birgus is not the first to search for this optical unconscious. From Edward Muybridge in late nineteenth century to Harold E. Edgerton in the 1950s, numerous photographers have explored the ability of the camera to observe reality beyond the possibilities of the human eye¹⁹. But while the visual result of ultra-fast exposure has long been deemed and no longer constitutes a novelty, Birgus' photographs, with his search for the 'unconscious' temporal space, still awakens an intense captivation and intrigue.

The artistic evolution of Vladimír Birgus' work seems both coherent and challenging. His integrity in the treatment of existential themes throughout the decades, together with an innovative approach in the study of sociological themes and the meticulous construction of a sophisticated system of visual codes to communicate complex philosophical issues, have allowed him to achieve a clearly identifiable style and placed him at the top of the Czech photography scene. He has constantly tried to push photographic boundaries, elevating his style to a universal realm where time and space

¹⁹ Edward Muybridge (1830-1904) was an English photographer who conducted a series of pioneering photographic experiments on motion. Among his most famous works, he took a series of pictures of a running horse using twelve different cameras. The resulting photographs demonstrated that there was a moment when the horse's legs were all simultaneously in the air. Harold E. Edgerton (1903-1990) was Professor in electrical engineering and a photographer from the USA who used flash light to capture extremely fast moving objects at the speed of ten microseconds. Some of his most iconic images include *Bullet through Apple*, 1964.

become inseparable companions of his thoughts. Often transpiring in metropolitan settings, he is able to conceive highly elaborated tensions, which are perceived both among human beings and in confrontation with the ambiguous structures surrounding them. In this sense, his work certainly complies with the ideas of subjective documentary as developed by Frank and Klein²⁰. The document as such (understood as a specific reality that is being recorded) seems to lose its representational qualities and it is the content of the artist's soul that seems to be at stake. We are in charge, with Birgus' guidance, of resolving a complex existential challenge where very few clues are rationally presented. The viewer however should see no need in answering the artist's question. After all, the unbearable uncertainty of human existence is not meant to be resolved so promptly from our worldly realm.

5. Conclusions

It has been discussed how a number of photographers producing documentary work during the period of normalisation (1968-1989) found in the application of subjective principles a great ally to 'safely' preserve their artistic autonomy. While many of these photographers were aware of the subjective documentary work produced in the USA by members of the New York school, their motivation in the application of such a style differed substantially from their North American counterparts. During this period, communist authorities would censor documentary photographs that, according to their understanding, depicted Czechoslovakian society through a 'pessimistic' gaze. Moving away from the descriptive approach embraced by nonconformist social documentary photographers, some practitioners explored their social concerns in a less explicit way, from a rather existential point of view. They applied an elaborated visual language in their photographs that was often impossible to decode by the authorities. Their

²⁰ One of his students, Dr. Tomas Pospěch, repeatedly refers to Birgus' practice as 'subjective documentary' throughout the introductory text of the photographers' monograph *Vladimír Birgus: Something Unspeakable*, Prague: KANT, 2003.

approach in the treatment of social topics through the use of complex visual metaphors allowed them to reflect on social and political matters while avoiding direct confrontation with the official power. We could argue that thanks in part to the work produced by subjective documentary photographers, Czechoslovakian art photography continued to flourish despite the artistic barriers imposed throughout the communist rule.

One of the most relevant representatives of Czechoslovakian subjective documentary is the Czech Vladimír Birgus, who from the mid-seventies started to develop a body of work exploring a broad range of humanist topics. But despite the universal character of his work, we must not forget that Birgus was a Czechoslovakian citizen subdued to the laws of the Communist Party for over forty years of his life. For a very long period, Birgus was forced to 'bite his tongue' in order to guarantee his limited possibilities of personal and professional development²¹. He soon identified the point where state boundaries became insurmountable, but was usually able to detect an alternative route to reach his objectives. This exhausting exercise of containment, especially at a younger age, must have meant a great deal of effort to the artist, which he somehow managed to safely release through the cleverly-designed communication codes applied in his photographs. Looking at his work, we might find indeed a series of remainders of this unbalanced relation between men and the omnipresent state's power. The progressive loss of subjectivity, the anonymity and loneliness attributed to the sitters inhabiting deeply disturbing atmospheres, their confusion, anguish and the sense of distress caused by their inescapable submission to ever threatening surroundings, must represent to a certain extent the author's state of mind during the period of normalisation.

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