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Retrospective and Reinterpretation. Ethnographic Photographs from the Turn of the 19th and 20th Century

The text deals with ethnographic photographs from Moravia and Slovakia, from 1880 and later, and is based on the photographs' collection of the Ethnographic Institute of Moravian Museum, Brno (Czech Republic). This rich database contents visual documentation of many aspects of material and spiritual folk life. Through icons of ethnographic photographs, the paper tries: to unite at first sight fragmented effort of photographers, to find paths to synthesis, and to show possibilities and potential of these images for present and future ethnologic studies.

Key words: folk culture, photography, Moravia, Slovakia, document, art, studio photographs

Ретроспектива и реинтерпретација. Етнографске фотографије на прелазу из 19. у 20. век

Овај текст се бави етнографским фотографијама из Моравске и Словачке (од 1880. године), а на основу фотографске збирке Етнографског института Музеја Моравске у Брну (Чешка Република). Ова богата база садржи визуелну документацију многих аспеката материјалног и духовног живота народа. Пратећи низ икона етнографске фотографије, овај рад покушава да сједини наизглед фрагментисане напоре фотографа, изнађе пут ка синтези и укаже на могућности и потенцијал ових слика за садашња и будућа етнолошка истраживања.

Кључне речи: народна култура, фотографија, Моравска, Словачка, документ, уметност, студијске фотографије

In the last quarter of the 19th century, ethnography separated itself from historical sciences and became an independent discipline (Brouček & Jerábek 2007, 192-193) centred on the study of rural strata whose sole living – or its major part – was made through agriculture. The key and determining context of the interest in folk culture involved efforts to support national identity (actually leading to political autonomy). Czech ethnography, then still lacking theoretically sound methodology, started to employ field research as its preferred method, combined with the lat-

est technology: phonographs, cameras and film cameras (Dvorak 1922, 129–132, 148–150, 165–167). Ethnographic photography can be viewed through the prism of the history of photography as an autonomous part of or a parallel to documentary, social and realistic photography, or as a part of scientific photography. It can be viewed through the prism of the history of ethnology as a natural part of a research method.

Research, comparative study and individual and theme-based investigations conducted within an institutional plan, allow a comprehensive overview of, in particular, factors that shaped the origins of Czech and Moravian ethnographic photography in the late 19th and the early 20th century, and determined its further direction.

Ethnographic photography and theoretical starting points

Photography was available as a means of documentation ready for field work, and ethnography accepted it as a fast and more precise substitute for scientific illustration, as an instrument accompanying abstracting science results. The history of the discipline is inseparable from photography, and photography is inseparable from the discipline itself. To master field photography on a basic technical level has been for long considered a common capability of every researcher (Jerabek 1987, 5-7).

From a theoretical basis, it is not easy to determine what ethnographic photography actually is. The most simple cases are those photographs taken with the express purpose of documenting folk culture: Josef Klvaňa and his work may be given as an explicit example.

Similarly, it is not easy to define the position of ethnographic photography in the common history of photography – it includes classic photographic genres as portrait, landscape, still-life. For social sciences, including ethnology, essentially every photography brings usable information, not only in terms of the content, but also in terms of a very broad contextual framework. Scientific focus on the object of ethnographic study itself, and also a covert political inference, prevented ethnographic photography in the Czech lands from being introduced and presented in the context of the history of photography or as a part of the history of art.

Czech ethnographically-focused photography, too, has been recently presented not only in a closely ethnological context, but also within the overall history of photography, and appraised for its purely aesthetic values (Newhall 1975).

Material basis

The material basis has been formed over the duration of a century, which, even in a European context, represents a unique corpus of visual memory, thanks both to its thematic specialisation and qualitative and quantitative parameters. The collection was established in 1903 with the aim to utilise photography – the new

documentation medium – for a permanent, even “eternal”, as it was then believed, capture of folk culture. The intentions and plans were, at that time, modern, and demonstrated openness and European scope of the Brno museum environment. The collection represents a visual testimony of complex structure about many aspects of folk culture in Moravia, in comparison with neighbouring regions, and has an open and time-variable interpretation framework: apart from the primary purpose, being to provide visual information, it also opens wide possibilities of various contextual interpretations. Each photograph has its own author, whose education, intentions, opinions, and other given factors affected what they photographed and how they did it.

From the seemingly incomprehensible and illegible transfusion and overlaying of individual evolutionary layers, through sequential historical microprobes aimed specifically at profiles of particular authors and at thematically determined units, features gradually began to appear. These unified the efforts, apparently fragmented, of many generations of photographers.

The collection reflects the evolution of ethnography as a discipline in more directions: not only in the composition of photographs used (and by completely ignoring sources such as the production of rural photographic studios or private photographs), but also in the variation in preferred subjects: from clothes and ceramics as specific and visually the most exposed signs of folk culture, later dwellings and then photo-documentation of everyday culture and working methods, and with changing field conditions also phenomena on the edge of folk culture, stylish culture and ‘folklorism’. The possibility to observe the evolution of photography as a medium is rather a by-product of the collection building, documented by visual carriers from glass plate negatives and albumin positives to digital recording.

From art to document

The late 19th century in Bohemia was a time of exceptional all-society activities encouraged by national-liberation efforts: the forming and strengthening of the national and cultural identity included also educational activities focused on socially-heterogeneous strata and connected with advanced research work which disposed of such modern technical equipment as the photographic and film camera or the phonographic recording device. Participating in this were also the founders of Czech scientific ethnography Josef Šíma, Josef Klvaňa, and Jan Koula. Their ethnographic work, particularly in the 1880s, held a number of common features regarding technical, thematic and composition aspects. After joint beginnings in the 1880s, when they shared very similar photographic ideals, their individual methods and handwriting gradually crystallised. Josef Šíma (1859–1929), as a creative-talented drawer, replaced the drawn sketch with photography; he kept seeking and successfully negotiating the path between a purely descriptive document and the artistic endeavours of a photographic picture; his pictures displayed his artistic feel and creative potential.

In contrary, Josef Klvaňa (1855–1919) uncompromisingly preferred strictly scientific photography and consistently removed folk costume from the surrounding environment; influenced by his own exact natural-science education, he successfully photo-documented an exceptionally extensive range of material from south-eastern Moravia, while projecting – through a paradigm of positivistic ethnography – into the pictures of folk costumes, still-respected territorial classification as well as functional, generational and gender classification (Večerková 1989, 87-113).

Their research and exploratory work represented to a large extent private activities and ways, they defrayed photographic material and its processing from their own sources, or from public lectures and consequent publications.

Compared to other historical periods, Moravian and Slovakian rural areas of the late 19th century were a relatively safe and neither an ethnically nor confessionally conflicting world, in which time was firmly divided between work and feast. Such is its impression in the photographs of Šíma and Klvaňa.

Folk culture was, in repeated waves, the inspiration for style culture and, in the late 19th century, became also a utilisable basis and background for pursuing national and political independence. This is probably one reason why the oldest ethnographic photographs essentially ignored the social aspect and why such emphasis was laid not on everyday culture but on festive events, festive clothes, visually exceptional phenomena, and – subjectively and unjustifiably – the search for anthropological types.

Ethnographic photography of the late 19th and early 20th centuries gradually included a wider environmental context, which focused also on cultural landscape, space determined by human dwellings and farming activities, and also social relations.¹

From document to art

Country work, especially farming, was an important theme of painting in the second half of the 19th century. Photography, seeking its place beside painting as a full-value discipline of the creative arts, approached the themes and genres related to nature, too, and thus to the depiction of the life of rural people and landscape inhabited and transformed by man. Raising the level of photographic production, and the establishment of photography as an autonomous art discipline was facilitated by various means – from flexible processes requiring manual intervention to the photographic picture, which approximated photography to paintings regarding material aspects, up to theoretical basis of argumentation.

The transfusion of painting and photography and their interaction found a particular form also in those cases where a photograph was a sketch on which a subsequent painting was based (Trnkova 2008, 10-12; Novakova 2004, 137-147; Valka 1998).

¹ See photographs attachment in Vaclacik (1930).

An entirely unique author, even in the global context, and representative of artistic photography is the highly reputed German trade photographer Erwin Raupp (1855–1931), who held an appropriate social and economical status. As one of the pioneers of the so-called instantaneous photography, he sought, and with his work formulated, the possibilities of “eternalising” moments in artistic photography. Instantaneous photographs came after static, staged, and manipulated photography, enabled by technical innovations and the gradual availability of hand-cameras in the late 19th century, and brought the possibility of impartial, relatively non-manipulated documentation. Erwin Raupp tested instantaneous photography during his stay in south-eastern Moravia in summer 1904, with excellent results. He differed from Czech photographers in his highly professional approach and wide coverage of everyday culture and environmental relations, and also in strongly accented social focus, which is almost completely missing in classical Czech ethnographic photography from the turn of the century. Raupp’s perspective was that of an artist with social feeling and geographical distance, who was not at all bound by hidden national meaning or relations. The specificity of Moravian folk culture was not a political argument for off-artistic objectives for him. Raupp’s positives survived, for almost a century forgotten, but fortunately without any permanent damage. Their technical processing, especially the usage of fine techniques of gum printing and carbon printing, and a unique large size emphasising the material aspect of photography as such, brought a photograph closer to a picture, and photography to painting. Although Raupp’s view and segment of reality was one of many possible ones, the overview of locations and themes he eternalised with his camera depicted the essence of the folk element in southern Moravia of the early 20th century. Raupp arrived to Moravia with a rather romantic conception of the life and intactness of folk culture in the region and he wanted to photo-document folk culture of a “reservation with a fully preserved and intact bloom of specificity”. In the history of world photography, Raupp’s photographs represent a departure from closely aesthetic abstract aims towards documentary functions and a broader social influence for photography (Kargl et al. 2008; Dufek et al. 2010).

Raupp’s method of photographic work and his artistic principles, or a combination of artistic and documentary principles, basically remained without response in the Czech lands. But the comparison of Raupp’s signed positives with the negatives of Josef Braun, demonstrated obviously shared signs, particularly in theme and composition. Braun’s photographic work has seemed to be an exception without any or only with suspected relations. While Erwin Raupp was a self-conscious professional with an excellent reputation in the “big” photographic world, and disposed of the latest equipment, Josef Braun was a photographic amateur and enthusiast par excellence. Similarly to Raupp, Braun concentrated on the world of children, not only their games, but also on the integration of children in the work of the village community. A frequent motif of his photographs is female portraits (Berankova 1999).

Studio photography

The production of photographic studios, and also trade photographers, represents an iconographic source which social sciences, including ethnology, had long ignored. Only in the late 20th century did social sciences realise that this visual testimony may be, if certain limitations were respected, utilised for ethnological studies; not only on clothing, but also family customs, as well as festive cycles, relationships inside families and within a broader community.

It is known with what selection criteria the documentation of photography was approached by Josef Klvaňa types of people that, in his opinion, represented the Moravian or Slovak folk element, and being well-informed on the contemporary folk costumes and their historical evolution, he organised also dressing in those garments that had been put away. Thus he manipulated the real picture in the interest of his expert hypotheses. An external expert selection, although fortunately not consistent, was followed also by Erwin Raupp, who respected his predecessor and interpreter opinion.

The authenticity of studio photographs is limited in a different way – the people photographed are stylised into roles in which they perceived themselves or, more often, in which they wanted to be perceived.

Trade photographers were mapping life in locations with recent manifestations of traditional culture as well as in locations literally overwhelmed by the onset of factory mass production, the ethnically homogenous as well as those with ethnic minorities permanently or temporarily coexisting. Trade photographers were relatively well acquainted with both technical and compositional trends and applied them in their studio work particularly with middle-class customers, while fully respecting the conservative taste and wish of their rural customers (Berankova 2000-2001; Botik 1998).²

Genius temporis and genius loci

The visual testimony mediated by ethnographic photography (or by studio, artistic, and reportage photography brought to context) is – with documentation limits respected – an important source of information and subject of scientific reflection. All-society interest in the issue of regional and local specific aspects, in the support of identity, in the way and conditions of the origins of cultural differences, and the concept of an eco-friendly and permanently sustainable way of life necessarily reflect and utilise already proven and ethnologically documented phenomena of traditional culture and traditional natural sources. Photography plays an inimitable role here.

² Other information concerning some Czech studio photographers see in: <http://www.ondrejknoll.cz/>; http://www.seidel.cz/docs/cz/seidel_home.xml; <http://www.filokartie.com/?cla=139>. All cit. 30/11/2017.

A visual testimony to the past world, not existing anymore, preserved and passed on through photographs, is a part of the all-social memory. This study, too, intends to be a partial contribution to answering the question as to what purpose ethnographic photography serves and how visual memory can – against the historical axis background – enrich our perception of the surrounding world in both rational and emotional levels.

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Примљено / Received: 05. 02. 2018.

Прихваћено / Accepted: 03. 05. 2018.



1. Karl Katholický: Pilgrimage procession. Hlína, West Moravia, 1890.



2. Josef Šíma: Girl from Hrubá Vrbka, South-east Moravia (Bětka Jurgošová).
10. 9. 1887.



3. Josef Šíma: Building of railway. Uherské Hradiště, ca 1886.



4. Jan Koula: Agricultural workers from West Slovakia. Bojkovice, South-east Moravia, ca 1890.



5. Josef Klvaňa: Young girls. Javorník, South-east Moravia, 1895.



6. Erwin Raupp: Blind violinist. Velehrad, South-east Moravia, 1904.



7. Erwin Raupp: Portrait of an old man. Javornik, South-east Moravia, 1904



8. Josef Braun: Sunday mass. Uherský Ostroh, South-east Moravia, ca 1905.



9. Josef Braun: At a meadow. Jarošov, South-east Moravia, ca 1905.



10. Unknown photographer: Family portrait of Czech emigrants in Romania.
Svatá Helena, Banát, Romania, ca 1910.



11. Unknown photographer: Beggars. South-east Moravia, ca 1900.



12. Photographic studio of Ferdinand Hejlik: Girl in festive clothes.
Břeclav, South Moravia, ca 1910.

All photographs are from the collection of the Ethnographic Institute of Moravian Museum, Brno.