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Jan Kříženecký and the reality of the turn of the century

The photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph). The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance), but to attest that what I see has indeed existed. Now, this is a strictly scandalous effect. (Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida)

Year 2018 marks several important anniversaries related to the beginnings of Czech cinematography. It has been 120 years since the first Czech films were shot and subsequently screened at the Architecture and Engineering Exhibition in Prague and 110 years since the Jubilee Exhibition of the Chamber of Trade and Commerce (also in Prague) that meant further accumulation of Prague film documentaries. On 20th March, we also commemorated the 150th anniversary of the birth of Jan Kříženecký, who stood behind the camera during both these waves of early Czech films.

The beginnings of cinematography can be traced to the period of technical development at the turn of the 19th century. They are traditionally connected to the Lumière brothers and the year 1895, but the first “moving pictures” appeared sooner and the boundary between prehistory and history of film is not entirely clear. In Bohemia, one of the first pioneers of the phenomenon of film was a photographer and the founder of the famous family photographic studio, Ignác ŠechtI[1] from Tábor who on 6th October 1896 acquired a trade licence for cinematographic performances.[2]

About two years later, the ranks of Czech pioneers of film were expanded by a young Building Authority clerk and amateur photographer Jan Kříženecký. After finishing middle school, he started studying architecture and civil engineering. While his older brother Rudolf found fame in this field, Jan didn't finish his studies. Nevertheless, he remained in this field working at first in his brother's office and later, in 1897, moving

to the Prague Municipal Authority. As a support technician, he helped to organise the Architecture and Engineering Exhibition which was planned for summer 1898. He was so captivated by his visit of a film screening that he decided to take part in the exhibition with his own cinematographic display. He bought a device which was at the same time a camera, projector and copier and several films and film stock from the company of the Lumière brothers. And that's how the attraction called Czech Cinematograph was created. We need to mention that this was a collective effort as Kříženecký's friend and colleague Josef František Pokorný played an important role in this venture. In his study about the Czech Cinematograph, Ivan Klimeš points out that Pokorný was de facto the first Czech film producer.[3]

As suggested above, when the Czech Cinematograph was installed in the exhibition space in Prague's Royal Game Reserve, film was not a novelty anymore and the cinematograph probably didn't belong to the top attractions of the exhibition.[4] But as a source of visual experiences typical for social life of the late 19th century, it was certainly at the right place. As a part of the same Architecture and Engineering exhibition, Luděk Marold's panorama painting *Bitva u Lipan* (The Battle of Lipany) was unveiled and a number of other displays were also based on visual spectacles and optical effects. And calling the cinematograph "Czech" was in line with the period efforts to strengthen national self-confidence in the fields of technical development and culture.

But what was crucial for film history was the fact that Kříženecký screened his own newly shot films in which he proved himself to be a quick-witted documentarist with a feeling for visually attractive action. As his equipment enabled him to use only 17 meters of film, i.e. shoot only a few seconds, this feeling was indispensable. Plus, the film stock was expensive. The screenings started on 19th June and already on the first day, Kříženecký screened his films *Svatojanská pouť v československé vesnici* (Midsummer Pilgrimage in a Czechoslovak Village, 1898), *Polední výstřel na Mariánských hradbách* (Noon Cannon Firing on the Marian Walls, 1898) and *Purkyňovo náměstí na Královských Vinohradech* (Square of Purkyně in Královské Vinohrady, 1898) which can be considered the oldest Czech films made.[5] The first two were preserved until this day. Neither these, nor other films made after the cinematograph was exhibited, were not given official names and therefore they are known today under several titles which usually describe what the films portray. They

portray both extraordinary and ordinary events from Prague, often directly from the exhibition. In three cases, the films revolve around scenes performed and most likely written and directed by comedian Josef Šváb-Malostranský.

Kříženecký's favourite topic throughout his film career were the exercises and trainings of the Czech gymnastics organization Sokol. In 1898, he made a short film titled *Cvičení s kužely Sokolů malostranských* (Exercises with Indian Cubes by the Sokol of Malá Strana) and in 1901 and 1907 he filmed reports from the Sokol mass gymnastics festivals called "Slets". In 1908, he took his camera to Prostějov, where he filmed a Sokol parade and Slet held on the occasion of opening a new Sokol gymnasium.[6]

Year 1908 also meant a significant increase in number of films shot in Prague – at the Jubilee Exhibition of the Chamber of Trade and Commerce, at some other events and also during the city's everyday life. In the footage filmed at the exhibition we can see the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and in the film *Slavnost otevření nového Čechova mostu* (Opening Ceremony of the Čech Bridge, 1908), we can see Prague's mayor Karel Groš. Czech films made before the First World War are sometimes retrospectively criticised for not being able to keep pace with the world and not making any significant technical progress since 1898.[7] Even though this criticism to some extent applies to Kříženecký's reports (they were filmed with the same obsolete Lumière camera only modified for longer film stock lengths), we can't deny their historical value and the cinematographer's evident passion.

From the films made in 1908 outside the exhibition area, one particularly stands out – *Jízda Prahou otevřenou tramvají* (Ride through Prague in an Open Tram, 1908). By placing a camera in a moving tram, Kříženecký managed to use the short film stock (the preserved copies are around 50 meters long) to capture a rather long portion of the Vltava embankment including a moving walkway to Letná and the bridgehead of the Čech bridge where preparation works for the construction of the Faculty of Law were already taking place (the building was eventually finished in the 1930s). And also Jan Kříženecký's probably last film *Pomník Františka Palackého před dokončením* (František Palacký Monument Prior to its Completion, 1911) is a distinct documentary combining his professional interest in urban space with a refined cinematographic vision.

Long before getting acquainted with film, Kříženecký became an amateur photographer with passion in sceneries of old and changing Prague. In 1893, he became a member of the Amateur Photographers Club in Prague and he even successfully exhibited his work.[8] Born in Prague, Kříženecký lived on several addresses in the city. Apart from his undeniable personal relation to the city, the distinctiveness of his photographs is characterized by his feeling for composition and the inner suspense of the photographs.

After the year 1900, photography became an important part of his work as he was commissioned with making photo documentation of the city. Turn of the century Prague was marked not only by technical development, increasing road traffic and the aforementioned exhibitions, but also by extensive redevelopment. After several years of negotiations about the concept of the city regulation, on 11th February 1893, a new sanitation plan was finally approved. This act was subject to harsh criticism from the public and an artistic committee serving as an advisory body. [9] But despite these protests, a large part of the city centre has turned into a seemingly permanent construction site. For Jan Kříženecký, this process became the central theme of his photographs. He documented the demolition of the old Jewish ghetto in Josefov, the redevelopment of Podskalí and also individual historical layers of the city as the workers unfolded them during the demolition works. These photographs were made for the committee to document the sights. One of the members of this committee was Jan's brother Rudolf Kříženecký who was also taking photographs in the sanitation zone. The whole process was extensively documented also by Jindřich Eckert and other photographers and artists.[10]

Outside the sanitation zone, Kříženecký photographed for instance Libeň. He documented the fading beauty of the Libeň chateau and the life of institutionalized young boys in the nearby Neo-Baroque building called Vychovatelna (now part of the Bulovka Hospital). According to Czech newspaper *Národní Listy*, Jan Kříženecký was the architect of this building which opened in 1908. The children moved there from the Libeň Chateau which could no longer serve as a youth detention centre.[11]

In contrast with documenting historical sights and opulent new buildings, Jan Kříženecký also photographed candid photographs of everyday life in the city capturing markets, waste collection and public toilets.

Another transformation of Prague and its atmosphere was brought about by the First World War. In 1914 and 1915, Kříženecký's camera photographed for example the district draft committee on the Střelecký Island or transformation of schools and historical buildings into food storages.

Jan Kříženecký's professional photographs could be expected to be impersonal and purposive, but we can often see a specific mood, humour and other visual elements.[12] They are definitely a significant part of Kříženecký's creative work. A collection of his glass negatives is stored in the Prague City Archives. His photographs were also reproduced in several publications and in 1981, a short film documentary was made about them – *Praha Jana Kříženeckého* (Prague of Jan Kříženecký, dir. by Miro Bernat, 1981). But despite this, his photographic work was for a long time overshadowed by his role as a pioneer of Czech film. Some of the firsts in the history of Czech film attributed to him can now be questioned and relativized[13] but it does not diminish the significance of his documentary work, be it films or photographs.

Notes:

[1] Originally spelled Schächtl.

[2] Scheufler, Pavel, *Osobnosti fotografie v českých zemích do roku 1918*. Prague: The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, 2013, page 346.

[3] Klimeš, Ivan, Český kinematograf v Královské oboře. In *Kinematograf! Věvec studií o raném filmu*. Prage: National Film Archive– Casablanca, 2013, page 36.

[4] Ibid., page 37.

[5] Ibid., page 32.

[6] The Prostějov films by Jan Kříženecký were in detail explored by Karel Tabery: Tabery, Karel, Sto let stará reportáž ze sokolského sletu v Prostějově aneb Nejdelší a nejnákladnější film Jana Kříženeckého. *Illuminace* 20 (2008), no. 4, pages 155–161.

[7] See for example Brichta, Jindřich, Kus kroniky vývoje natáčecí techniky 1. *Film a doba* 3 (1954), no. 3, pages 506–513.

[8] Scheufler, Pavel, *Osobnosti fotografie v českých zemích do roku 1918*. Prague: The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, 2013, page 196.

[9] See Hrůza, Jiří a kolektiv, *Pražská asanace. K 100. výročí asanačního zákona pro Prahu*. Prague: Prague City Museum, 1993.

[10] See *ibid.*

[11] Nová budova vychovatelny v Libni „Na Rokosce“. *Národní listy* 48 (1908), no. 272 (3rd October), page 3.

[12] Pavel Scheufler mentions that in their time, they were criticised for lack of objectivity. See Scheufler, Pavel, *Osobnosti fotografie v českých zemích do roku 1918*. Prague: The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, 2013, pages 196, 198.

[13] Jan Kříženecký was incorrectly attributed with credit in live-action film. See for example Kolár, Jan S., Jan Kříženecký jako filmový režisér. *Film a doba* 5 (1959), no. 2, pages 124–126.