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Petr Skala

Petr Skala is one of the few artists who under the communist regime took up experimental film, a field completely expelled from the public domain at that time. In the 1980s, he followed up with these efforts in his pioneering activities in video art.

Skala was born on 5 May 1947 in Písek. He attended the local grammar school and later pursued his studies at the Film Secondary School in Čimelice. During his studies at the Film and TV School at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) in the early 1970s, he was already systematically thinking through his experimental film work while also practically carrying it out, but he was not able to present the results of his work under the condition of the communist normalization era cinematography. After his graduation in documentary film, scriptwriting and directing at FAMU in 1975, Skala's work took two directions: on the one hand, he was doing ordinary film assignments for Krátký film, where he was an external director, and on the other, he was making original experimental films, created privately, without a chance of distribution outside the range of his friends.

In the first half of the 1980s, after Skala had been forbidden to work for film, he started cooperating with the Czechoslovak Radio, where he made hundreds of radio shows, plays and composed programs. He had a new chance to find a job in the film industry after 1986 change in the leadership of the Krátký film (Short Film) company. He worked there for another five years. In 1993, he became a teacher at FAMU, where he led the workshop of alternative filmmaking. In addition, he was the director of a number of Czech Television documentaries during the 1990s. Video and art film, however, remained the main focus of Skala's work.

Experimental films

Skala had started working on his first film experiments as early as in the late 1960s. He knowingly followed up with the line of non-objective film (Len Lye, Harry Smith,

Stan Brakhage, among others), consisting of making adjustments by hand directly on the film stock. For the sake of a better application of different techniques – painting, drawing, scratching, engraving and chemical processing – he used broader 16mm film stock. The 35mm color film was unavailable under the late communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Skala was only able to make several films with the use of this material in the late 1980s.

His early films were made on discarded blank material unexposed to light that film laboratories were trashing as useless waste. Skala worked with the material following a strictly pre-set procedure that he himself further varied and polished over the following years. The basis of this work was action painting applied on film stock, subsequently arranged in a composition given by a pre-existing score, stating the length of individual shots and the manner of putting them in order. In the overall composition, however, Skala was not interested only in the visual effect as such, but also in the links between shots that gave each film its distinctive rhythm. He also tried to evoke broader thematic contexts, derived from his interest in spiritual disciplines.

Skala's first films, such as *Struktura* (*Structure*, 1969) or *Magické písmo* (*Magic Writing*, 1970), are characterized by the absence of color. He painted abstract forms into film frames, using black or brown Indian ink, evoking organisms and natural elements in incessant pulsing motion. Basic image elements are complemented with scratches or cracks, and duplicated in multi-exposures, created with a custom-made optical copier.

Skala soon turned to color, making it the main expressive means of his mature film work. Application of intense, bold colors, created ever more complicated structures, often made in several overlapping layers without the use of a copier, showing the natural process of light decomposition in a fractured color spectrum (works including *Šepot hvězd* /*Whispering Stars*, 1971/, *Dies Irae* /1972/ or *Geometrie paměti* /*Geometry of Memory*, 1975/). Under the conditions of the era's non-professional cinematography, however, it was not possible to develop color film material in the desired quality. Nonetheless, Skala benefited from his acquaintances among cameramen and film technicians, and had his films processed secretly in professional film laboratories.

Skala's interest in abstract color film culminated in the late 1970s in a series of rather expressive works (*Záblesk světla* /Flash of Light, 1977/, *Prostorová deformace* /Space Deformation, 1979/), characteristic for its abrupt changes of shapes, dynamic rhythm and ever more massive layering of color on the film material. The author freed himself from any conscious procedures and started to create his films with completely spontaneous gestures expressing his state of mind. In the context of Czech art, it was a unique attempt to transfer the procedures of abstract expressionist painting into the field of moving image. In Skala's particular case, it was an artistic response to the deteriorating social atmosphere related to the political repressions of the high normalization era.

In the early 1980s, Skala abandoned pure abstraction and started to incorporate figural elements into his work, a feature he had been partly using already during the 1970s. He used the leitmotiv of a pregnant woman, differentiated by color from the background and also the fetus in her womb. Using different color variations, Skala sought spiritual connections between the world/ universe/society and the microcosm of the human individual. These tendencies later resulted in a series of cosmogonic works made in 1984 (*Dva vesmíry*/Two Universes, *Sílokřivky*/Force Curves, and others). „It was no longer the question of the secret of human body or the place of man in the cosmos. The theme of cosmology that he had elaborated on in his previous creative period had subsided to make space to deeper cosmogonic visions, commenting on the elementary questions of origin and termination. The abstract cipher associated with the cyclical arrangement of film images enabled the author to depict the perpetual repetition and return.“^[1]

Skala's work from the early 1980s, linking abstraction with figurative art, also meant a shift in the use of sound and electronic image. For the very first time, the author had his films accompanied with sound; atonal electroacoustic music, corresponding in its style to the experimental nature of the visual elements. As for the image, Skala made a start on the use of video technologies, whose introduction, much delayed and drawn-out, was only taking place in socialist Czechoslovakia at that time. His films from that period were first processed on the classical black-and-white film strip, and then projected on a white wall and recorded on a video camera. The resulting material was then color-processed with the video equipment of the Czechoslovak Television and later the Secondary Industrial School of Printed Circuits, whose equipment was

made available to Skala thanks to his personal connections. These experiments represented the transition from pure filmmaking to video art, on which Skala started to work systematically in the second half of the 1980s.

Video art

For Skala, the ever more available video medium meant easier manipulation with technologies, as well as new possibilities of artistic expression, and last, but not least, a connection with contemporary tendencies in the art of moving image, dynamically developing especially on the other side of the Iron curtain. Skala gained first information about Western video art in the mid-1980s through Austrian TV signal, receivable in some areas of Southern Bohemia and Moravia. His meeting with filmmaker and artist Radek Pilař, mediated by painter Dimitrij Kadrnožka, was another breaking point. At that time, Pilař too was occupied with video art, both in theory and in practice. His and Skala's common ideas later gave rise to an initiative to found an official platform of Czech video art. The two artists first gathered a loose grouping of artists and theorists with similar views, who gradually transformed into *Obor videa* (Video Department), registered by the Union of Czechoslovak Visual Artist in April 1988. Among its members, besides Skala and Pilař, there were artists such as Tomáš Kepka, Michal Pecina, Ivan Tatíček, Lucie Svobodová, Věra Geislerová, and others. Jiří Lehovec, who had already been an active participant of the group's earlier meetings, became a honorary member and the sponsor of Czech avant-garde. At the end of the communist era, the sponsorship of an official professional structure finally allowed Skala to stop working illegally and to present his work publicly.

In May 1988, a big public screening of Skala's video art took place in the Hroznová Art Gallery in České Budějovice. Further projections followed, including one in the Amfora youth club in Prague in 1989, and another two in Cultural Centre Prosek and in the Gong club a month later. The highlight of the cultural efforts of the Video Department in the pre-revolutionary era was the first collective exhibition of Czech video art, entitled *Den videa (Day of the Video)* and organized in July 1989 in the Industrial Palace in Prague. There, Skala introduced his video installation *Obrazy noci (Pictures of the Night)*, in which he „reflected the dialectics of the material and the immaterial code by confronting a kinetic video shot with a three dimensional object.“

[2] After the change of regime in November 1989, the Video Department platform

transformed into the Association of Video and Intermedia Creation (Asociace videa a intermediální tvorby). Free working conditions enabled the association to further develop their activities. Besides admissions of new members (Petr Vrána or Tomáš Ruller), they now could organize exhibitions, projections, discussions and lectures of both national and international guests (including Steina and Woody Vasulka, Peter Weibel, Eva Königová, and others). They also had the chance to introduce Czech video art internationally – at the festivals in Linz, Madrid or Nimes. For Skala, the most significant acclaim came from abroad, too: in 1993, his video *Jen smrt... (Only Death..., 1988)* was included in the 50 most important video art works in the world at Deutscher Videokunst Preis in Karlsruhe. Later that year, following Radek Pilař's death, Skala was elected president of the Association. Under his leadership, another collective exhibition, *Český obraz elektronický – vnitřní zdroje (Czech Electronic Painting – Internal Sources)* was held in July 1994, establishing a relation between the origins of local video art and its contemporary situation. After the exhibition, however, public activities of the Association started to gradually fade out with its members ever more concentrating on their individual activities.

Skala's work with video picked up the threads of his previous film experiments. He retained its purely visual character connecting abstraction and figurative representation, while the use of colors still remained the key element. Skala does not understand video art as an art completely independent on filmmaking, but rather a new phase in the creation of moving image. „I would liken the process to the invention of oil painting, or to the transition from the use of wooden panels to the frame with stretched canvas (...) In their times, these were also revolutionary technologies. I don't think, however, that these and many other changes influenced fundamentally the character of visual arts. What they did influence, though, is the way we create, as each of them brought a greater possibility of freer expression. And this is mainly where I see the analogy with video, as well as the difference between video and film.“^[3]

Besides „traditional“ formal aspects, Skala's video art takes on some new features as well: a certain sign of naivety is perceivable, he works with different aspect ratios or confronts the image with language through the use of letters and words. His main working method is however the *found footage*: Skala intersperses his works with old film footage, made many years earlier, but he transforms it visually and puts it in new

context of meaning. In his video *Jen smrt...* it's the short fragment of a girl's face, taken by Skala more than two decades ago; *Stín času* (*Shadow of Time*, 1992) uses material made in the 1970s and *Pláč země* (*Weeping Earth*, 1993) is made around footage discarded during editing at the Krátký film company. All of these diverging image themes, however, shape by a compact poetic style, in the heart of which we find the theme of memory, time, and the „dialogue“ between the two media – film and video.

Notes:

[1] Kerbachová, Bohdana. *Petr Skala – utajený experimentátor* (DVD booklet). Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2005, p. 20.

[2] Kerbachová, Bohdana, Počátky českého videoartu. *Illuminace* 2006, vol. 18. no. 2, p. 142.

[3] Kerbachová, Bohdana, První schůzky naplňovalo snění. Interview with Petr Skala. *Illuminace* 2006, vol. 18. no. 2, p. 197.