

The Marvelous in the Everyday: The Surrealist Photography of Jindrich Styrsky

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Painter, photographer, typographer, graphic designer, set designer, illustrator, poet and theoretician—Jindrich Styrsky (1899 – 1942) was one of the most important and influential Czech avant garde artists; yet, with the exception of France, he has received little recognition in the West. He was a founding member of virtually all the Czech modern art “isms” (e.g., Devetsil, Poetism, Artificialism, Surrealism) prior to his premature death from pneumonia.

Aside from Styrsky’s book jackets and the unique, erotic photomontages that accompanied his *Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream* (*Emilie Prichází ke mne ve snu*, 1933), all of Styrsky’s photographs are records of immediate reality. They depict found, rather than constructed or staged, objects and situations. Most of them were made between 1934 and 1935 in Prague and Paris. Styrsky divided them into the series *Frog Man* (*Zabí muz*), *Man with Blinders* (*Muz klapkami na očích*) and *Paris Afternoon* (*Parížské odpoledne*). A free selection of photographs from these cycles was published with verses by Jindrich Heisler (1914 – 1953) in *On the Needles of These Days* (*Na jehlách těchto dní*, published clandestinely in 1941 with original photographs and more widely in 1945 with gravure reproductions). Styrsky’s photographs received a manifesto-like emphasis from the Surrealists, seventy-four appearing in the *First Exhibition of the Surrealists Group in the Czechoslovak Republic* (*První výstava Skupina surrealistů v CSR*) in 1935, and with strong representation in subsequent solo and group exhibitions (including Styrsky’s major posthumous 1946 exhibition in Prague).

Like few others, including the Czech, Jaromír Funke, and the Frenchman, Jacques-Andre Boiffard, Styrsky continued in Eugène Atget’s footsteps. In Atget’s photographs, which were published in 1926 by the Paris Surrealists, the Surrealists found confirmation of Breton’s fundamental thesis that a supra-reality is contained in reality itself, rather than someplace above or outside it. Styrsky was intrigued by the “concrete irrationality” of objective reality as interpreted directly by photography. His point of departure was the *objet trouvé* or found object theory and Surrealist interpretations of the object in general. In Czech Surrealism, special attention was devoted to the theory of the object. In the article *An Attempt to Understand the Irrationality of Photography* (*Pokus o poznání iracionality fotografie*), one of Styrsky’s photographs is interpreted in the form of a questionnaire answered by the poet, Vítězslav Nezval, and Styrsky. Interpretations of objects and photographs were published by these and other Surrealists aid in the “reading” of their photographic works.

Styrsky’s photographs are images of an urban environment dominated by cultural products, be they store windows, posters and still lifes from fairs and markets, or graffiti found on walls and fences. Styrsky was fascinated by kitsch, primitive art, fashion and hairdressing salon mannequins, prostheses and artificial simulations of human bodies, chance encounters of object, symbolism, eroticism, obscurity, mystery, and culture reduced to the grotesque. His photographs are an expression of the principles of Breton’s *Nadja* (the accompanying photographs were by Boiffard) and similar texts, which embody the “marvelous in the everyday” essence of Surrealism.

In keeping with the principle of *objet trouvé*, Styrsky’s images represent objects liberated from function and revitalized through contact with the observing eye. According to the eminent Czech artist and theoretician, Karel Teige (1900 – 1951), Styrsky’s photographs “capture commonplace and bizarre realities with documentary fidelity, doing so with merciless precision and unusual, quite impersonal technique, without any intentional or artificial arrangement of the theme, nor awaiting interesting light conditions.” Even Funke, the professional photographer, was unconcerned with the formal value of his “documentary” series, which most closely correspond to Surrealism. This lack of concern was intentional. In the context, Surrealism was as important for photography as photography was for Surrealism. While much of creative photography attempted to differentiate itself from a document, Surrealism sparked work whose documentary quality—in the sense of maximum preservation of the authenticity of the depicted object—was

the fundamental condition. The less than brilliant execution of the prints and the taking of “banal” shots that failed to attract attention with their composition magnified the authenticity of photography. The immediate linkage of photography to the concrete reality of its subject, that capacity of the medium to preserve the “here and now,” produced an exciting, aesthetic contrast between unstylized reality and imagination, between the external and the internal model, between the reality “such as it is” and a fantasy of the perceived subject.

In photography influenced by Surrealism, the main intent was not to follow the formation of objects or to grasp their material character subject to natural laws and functions, but to recognize the dependence of the object on the perceiving subject and to produce a new interpretation of reality that expressed an age in shock, an age that had lost its belief in optimistic rationalism. As photography began to grasp the “concrete irrationality,” objects were partly dematerialized, perceived now as symbols or expressions of motivations whose character and meaning lack absolute certainty. Photographs by Stryksy and others practicing in a related vein suggest that things created for a purpose are not exhausted by their function. Function merely protrudes above the surface of mystery, a mystery that triggers the memory, fantasy and emotion of the spectator. Surrealist photography offers access to an interpretational freedom that allows individual acquisition and internalization of external reality. Should the spectator prove unable to an interpretational freedom that allows individual acquisition and internalization of external reality. Should the spectator prove unable to engage in such acquisition, the depicted object remains a mysterious, even indifferent, fetish.

Stryksy’s images generally are viewed in the context of books or exhibitions on Surrealism. With the passage of time, another context emerges. The photographs of this prominent Surrealist can also be seen as fascinating documents of a civilization now extinct, similar to the photographs of Walker Evans. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of post-World War II art, Stryksy can be considered one of the important forerunners of Pop Art.