

# FINE ARTS AS MEANS FOR STUDYING MEDIA HISTORY

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**Abstract:** Studying art as a manifestation of cultural memory can help us understand both collective and individual identities. Specific works of art can give us a sense of the artist while the content can also present a more general theme or social issue of a given era. Considering the number of artworks that reference (either as a major or minor topical element) mass communication, media seems to be a feasible theme. The topic of media and its specific appearances has varied significantly throughout the history of both art and media. The aim of this paper is to introduce a unique analysis that combines artworks that display the use of mass communication in Czech fine arts. The collected items were the subject of an interdisciplinary analysis – both historical and semiotic. So far, the relationship between media and art has not been explored within Czech media studies. Finding the connection between fine arts and the media can broaden the horizons of historical and social sciences. Representation of media by art points to the importance of media in any given historical period. Some examples can clearly show us how media were produced and consumed, as well as, in the later periods, used as a material for the creation or the art itself. The objective of this paper is to show the perspectives and limits of art as a source of knowledge about cultural

memory and advantages and disadvantages of combining historical and semiotic analyses as applied to specific artworks.

**Keywords:** Media History, Fine Arts, Media Reception, Newspaper, Press, Reader, Czech Art

## I INTRODUCTION

The transmission of information has always been done via the media. The most basic transmission was oral speech followed by an evolution of increasingly complex means of communication. Cultural memory is based on communication through media and more sophisticated media technologies have broadened the range of remembrance (Erll, 2008 : 389). Each medium has its own specific manner of remembering; each one can offer a different point of view on a given subject of the cultural memory. Over time, the media themselves have become the subject of other media's contents. The convergence of media and intermedia linking have become part of our everyday media consumption. We read books about the Internet, watch movies about the invention of the printing press, or follow television shows set in the journalistic world. Various combinations exist. Some we perceive as ordinary and common. Others may not even cross our minds. One such combination is the connection between media and fine arts.

Visualization of communication has been thoroughly discussed, especially since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Vilém Flusser image is simply a space or a surface that has a meaning. Pictures have played different roles and have taken on various forms throughout history. Classifying or defining the essential features of an image is very complex due to the diverse processes of its production, circulation or reception. The complexity of studying images is reflected by the shift from the study of fine arts and art history to the study of visual culture. The main change within this shift is the increasing focus on the broadening contexts of an image, including the social, cultural, technological, economic or political influences. The other difference that has become important recently is the interest in studying genres that were once perceived as lowly, such as illustrations, comics, photography or posters. An effort to describe images from the perspective of studying signs became more important in recent decades as well. In comparison to (for example) the study of the nature of language, these genres were essentially neglected. Semiotics, therefore, has been gaining more importance in analysing images (Reifová, 2004 : 169-170).

The modern era is sometimes referred to as the culture of the book or the Gutenberg Galaxy. The postmodern era can be then described as the era of the image. Although the turn towards the visual has become an important subject of academic study only recently, communication through images has been important ever since people began to communicate. The role of visual representation was key long before the written word became widespread throughout the general population. Visual communication has also always played an important role as a part of persuasive communication. Basically: pictures were the primary means for telling stories.

## II ART AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Artistic expression has developed alongside human civilization since 40,000 BC. The motivation for artwork has naturally changed since then. According to Psychology of Art, art performs several functions. Some of these, such as self-presentation, evaluation function or cognitive function, are always present and we mark them as the main roles of art. However, besides the obvious aesthetic function, it is also the self-expression of an artist, even though this view has since changed. According to Etienne Gilson, the history of art can be divided according to the way a picture is perceived. Until Giotto, the picture was an object; since him, it has become the representation of an object. This notion is the key to an analysis of art's content (Kulka, 2008 : 28).

Additionally, there are functions of art that can be marked as secondary but in the context of this study they are no less important. Such functions include signalling, advertising or documentation. The documentary function is key to the analysis of the relationship between art and its role in media studies. The primary function of an art piece can change throughout history; it is the point at which the art piece can begin to lose its decorative and aesthetic function that it becomes a means of documentation (Kulka, 2008 : 21-22). A piece of art is a reflection of reality as seen by the artist and it can serve to show a certain perspective on life in a given era. A Dutch still life can display what people were eating in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Netherlands; a genre painting of a wedding shows how people celebrated matrimony in their country. The same principle can be applied to studying media history. A painting, a lithography or a sculpture can serve as a documentary, especially from times lacking other means of recording such as

photography or cinematography. Art is a source of information. However, the fine arts can inform us about much more than simply a historical context. Any given piece can further the understanding of the role of media and its perception through the eyes of an artist. Art is a means of communication.

Media nowadays serve as a source of information. It was not always like this, however. To define what we today call mass media is not a simple task and it is not always possible to date it simply from the year of the invention of the printing press, although this is indeed a major landmark for mass media. Even before the printing press people were able to share information throughout a wider scope. Letters, leaflets, pamphlets, hand written newspapers or human messengers enabled news and information to spread. Since the middle ages, the church was an important institution as well as a key source of information. The church's knowledge was spread via various channels. Ordinary people gained access to this information by attending masses. The main conduit of information at church was, naturally, the priest. However, dissemination of information was not limited to the priest. The church also used architecture to show people the greatness of God and images to tell people the stories of the Saints and the life of Jesus Christ. Art was therefore a means of communication and a source of knowledge. This principle can be found throughout the art world in general. Fictional art, including the fine arts, is also characterized by its power to shape the collective imagination of the past (Erll, 2008 : 389). This means that a piece of art as medium is always transmitting specific information that forms a viewer's perception of a given topic or subject.

The term "media" began to be commonly used in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The middle

of the last century is referred to as a period of communication revolution. However, interest in the methods of human communication is much older, dating back to ancient times and the art of rhetoric. The interest in other communication forms, such as persuasive communication, arose during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Propaganda became a much-discussed topic in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Briggs, Burke, 2002 : 1).

### III MEDIA IN CZECH FINE ARTS

The topic of media in fine arts has varied significantly over time, as have its specific appearances. The evolution of Czech media, especially if we focus on the press, was delayed when compared to countries such as France, Germany or the United Kingdom. Czech periodicals did not become an important social institution until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This probably contributed to the lack of discussion of media in Czech fine arts before that time.

The first wave of artistic interest in the topic of media arrived no sooner than the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and continued significantly throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is, however, possible to find pieces involving the media as a topic originating before this time. Such pieces can serve as unique artefacts, documenting the development of media, and as such they can be considered especially important. Their significance is greater still because they can be traced back to specific artists who were not, when creating the pieces, participating in larger artistic movements.

A number of themes can be identified in the selection of collected artworks. Firstly, the theme of media reception. This is where the artwork portrays

people consuming the content of media. The topic of reception flourished in conjunction with the growing importance of newspapers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In terms of gender, men were mostly dominant. On the other hand, distribution among different social classes is fairly even. We can find paintings both from the city and the countryside, of both the rich and the working classes.

The second prominent theme is that of the production and distribution of, as well as the technology behind, the media. There are pieces showcasing the process of printing or various artworks documenting the distribution of printed news, such as the news stand on the corner or the shouting newsboy selling papers. Artists have also portrayed professions connected to media: journalists, photographers, or cameramen. As far as the theme of media in fine arts, this second selection contains some of the oldest examples, even though the theme didn't fully flourish until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This is due to the period's fascination with technological advancement – this new means of communication influenced this art period significantly.

Aside from art portraying media in its natural environment, it is possible to identify several other contexts that appear frequently. One such context is still life. The relation of this genre to media flourished especially during the cubist era. Other pieces that can be seen as thematically connected are ones where the artist used newspapers as material. Examples of this include collages, which incorporate newspapers as part of the artwork, and can also use newspapers as base material, instead of canvas or common paper.

#### IV READING BLACKSMITH

The Czech painter, Karel Purkyně, created the painting *Portrait of the Blacksmith Jech* in 1860. This example can serve both as a description of the historical and media context and as a semiotic analysis of various aspects and symbols within the piece. As we analyse the piece, we learn more about the socioeconomic circumstances and the artistic period in addition to the specific intentions of the author. Karel Purkyně, the author, was a leading realistic portraitist of his time. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, popular and prestigious art were mainly historical and genre paintings. The *Portrait of the Blacksmith Jech* is neither a genre painting nor a portrait nor a still life; it is, however, a combination of all three. We see an elaborate portrait of a concrete character but the surrounding environment joined with the other topics and genres allow the viewer to understand the complexity of the piece. The blacksmith is placed in his natural setting. The painter even lets the viewer look into the depths of the smithy at the left side, which gives the painting the characteristics of a genre painting. Apart from that we can see two still lives as well. One is right next to the blacksmith's hand holding newspapers on the table including the pitcher and the glass half full of beer. The other one is above the blacksmith's head and it shows us the various tools used in the smithy.

The painting stands almost one and a half meters. Such canvas size was unusual for portraits at the time. During Purkyně's period it was common to portray important or famous people. Purkyně didn't follow this trend. The subjects of his portraits came mostly from his close circle of friends and family. The blacksmith in particular was the painter's close

friend. The painting stayed in possession of the blacksmith's family for a couple decades until 1923 when the Jech family sold it to the National Gallery in Prague where it is still housed.



**Fig. 1** Karel Purkyně: Portrait of the Blacksmith Jech (1860), Fotografie © 2013 Národní galerie v Praze

#### *A. What Is the Blacksmith Reading?*

At first, the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century did not bode well for the evolution of Czech art at all. Eventually, however, this period became one of the most prolific

eras of Czech culture. The revolutionary year 1848 seemed, at first, as if it would be promising for the Czech nation. However, the Czechs had to wait until the end of World War I to create an independent state. The political oppression of the Czech lands facilitated an emancipation of Czech culture despite constant efforts to keep the old social order. At this time the Czech bourgeois class started to play an important role. Artists, including painters, writers, composers and playwrights became significant contributors to the Czech national identity. Art was gaining more and more space and opportunity to address the public sphere (Pavel, 1978 : 180). The Czech lands also represented some of the most literate parts of the Austrian Empire – later Austria-Hungary. The 1860s were marked by an effort of the Czech society to allow both public life and media to become more liberal. A desire for the establishment of a Czech newspaper, free and political, was on the rise.

The evolution of the Czech media in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century reflects the changes within the Czech society of that period. The industrial revolution significantly affected the media. The distribution of news and information in general became easier and faster than ever before. The greatest benefit was the continuing expansion of the telegraph and its use within journalistic work (Bednařík, Jirák, Köpplová, 2011 : 92). The role of the press was key to building new principles and new organizational units of society – including whole states, political parties or even hobby clubs. This evolution was reversed within the Czech society, however. Firstly, various associations were formed. Some of them later turned into political parties who then, decades later, participated in the creation of the independent country. The press has become

the embodiment of the people controlling public agenda, keeping the public interest on important issues and allowing public discussion (Bednařík, Jirák, Köpplová, 2011 : 98-99).

This promising evolution was, however, stopped in its tracks by the reintroduction of the Austro-Hungarian absolutism reign in 1851, which had an unfortunate effect on the emerging Czech media (Bednařík, Jirák, Köpplová, 2011 : 107). The blacksmith in the Karel Purkyně's painting is shown reading newspapers. It's obvious at first glance that the character was literate and interested in the activities of his homeland. The title of the periodical is "Slovak Newspaper", which was a journal printed in Vienna – the centre of the Empire. Therefore it primarily represented the views of the Habsburg dynasty sympathizers – of those suppressing the Czechs. The Slovak Newspaper, as an official press, was also subject to censorship. The governance subjected the media to strict scrutiny throughout the monarchy. The Slovak Newspaper was published between the years 1849 and 1861, which was a period of the stiff absolutism. The publisher was Daniel Gabriel Lichard, who was a Slovak teacher, writer and the first professional journalist and publisher.

There were only three Czech language political newspapers published in Bohemia and Moravia left by the year 1851. Moreover, one of them served only as an administrative periodical giving information concerning various regulations and official communications of the Viennese government. The situation for the literary, scientific and entertaining periodical was a bit more favourable because it did not need to fight such tough restrictions (Bednařík, Jirák, Köpplová, 2011 : 107). We can't help but wonder why the blacksmith in Purkyně's portrait is

reading the Slovak Newspaper when he hails from the Czech city of Prague, the seat of two out of three Czech political newspapers.

#### *B. How Does the Blacksmith Read*

Nothing is older than yesterday's newspaper, goes the well-known saying (Laabs, 1987 : 11). This means that one-day-old news has already lost its information value. Nowadays, in the age of digital technologies and the on-line media coverage this applies even more. However, if we focus on the topic of media in fine arts this perspective changes. The medium transferred to canvas keeps its information value for as long as people will look at it. The informative role of the painting is naturally changing since its creation, but it always keeps a sort of evidence value.

The art of Karel Purkyně, including the Portrait of the Blacksmith Jech, was provocative for the contemporary audience. His painting style, in all its aspects, stood out from the usual painting practices. Karel Purkyně represented a new type of artist. He was an intellectual, a painter and a critic who cared little for the views of, or criticism by, others. His painting was not very well received by the professional public at the time. Sometimes even his small circle of friends and family did not understand him. Purkyně's art was distanced from the calm rhythm of Prague bourgeoisie life of his era. It had no embroidery, sentimental story, nor pathos inside. The painter had two main sources of inspiration – the old masters and nature. During the fifteen years of active output he mostly concentrated on the art of the portrait and the still life, combining the two genres in a masterful way (Macková, 1962 : 5). His work was realistic and straightforward. Because of

this, his work was not appreciated until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. One of the reasons the Portrait of the Blacksmith Jech attracted inconsistent attention was the context the painting presents. If we look at the piece we see an opinion – of the blacksmith, of the artist, of the nation.

The painter portrayed the blacksmith at a moment of rest. He is shown drinking a beer, his work finished, reading the news. The blacksmith was painted in the natural environment of his workplace. This lends the image authenticity, which is mostly missing in the stylized portraits of the rich citizens and bourgeoisie. We can only see a small part of his face, which is an unusual element as well. Most of his face is covered in a shadow that evokes a feeling of distraction and contemplation. The blacksmith represents the Czech working – but educated – class that was developing at the time. In the face and body language of the blacksmith we can clearly see his political views. In light of this, it comes as little surprise that the painting was originally titled *The Political Blacksmith*. He appears to be frowning, and his hand is clenched. It is obvious that the character does not like what he's reading and disagrees with the content of the portrayed media. The blacksmith represents the effort of the Czech nation for its independence. The viewer of the painting can read the title of the newspaper the character is reading without any difficulty. This clearly indicates the painter's intention. Karel Purkyně wanted the viewer to know what the blacksmith is reading and thinking – he wanted to show the viewer the blacksmith's political views. A questionable issue about the painting is that it is clear that the blacksmith is reading the last page of the newspaper, which was usually dedicated to lifestyle topics such as the lottery. On the other hand it is possible that the

painter did not consider this detail and it was more important for him to show the title of the periodical.

Although we are looking at a specific person we cannot consider it a typical portrait. The choice of position that conceals a significant part of the body declares the painter's intention of painting more an archetype than a person. The subject of the blacksmith was often used both in painting and literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Vulcan, the god of fire according to Greek and Roman mythology, is the blacksmith who hammered the weaponry for gods and heroes. He was a tutor to the first human (Hall, 2008 : 491). The blacksmith is also believed to have healing powers as Jesus Christ according to Christian understanding. The Blacksmith's symbol is the hammer, which, within mythology, is believed to have magical powers to fight enemies. The hammer blow has the power to chase away villains. The hammer also has the power to adjudicate disputes, nowadays it is used by judges while declaring a ruling (Lurker, 2005 : 234). The blacksmith has always been the embodiment of strength. The painter could therefore not have chosen a more apt character to represent the drive to establish the nation's brighter future. The blacksmith is ready to fight injustice. He is a symbol of courage and moral authority.

## V CONCLUSION

The relationship between culture, cultural memory and media has emerged to be an important issue for interdisciplinary research in various fields of the humanities. Finding and learning more about the connection between fine arts and media can greatly improve the understanding of both historical and social sciences. Such a connection can disclose more about the history of media and

its development, as well as the role of media in the society of each era and nation. Analysis of a piece of art can lead to possibilities of deeper understanding of several aspects, including factual information from history, the motivation for its creation and the role of media as seen by the author.

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