

Derek Sayer: *Praha, hlavní město 20. století: Surrealistická historie*. Praha: Volvox Globator, 2021, 516 pp.

It has been almost 10 years since Derek Sayer's *Prague: Capital of the Twentieth Century, A Surrealist History* was first published and yet the 'dreamworlds' he revealed continue to 'haunt' those of us who have completed this ambitious voyage. This year (2021) sees the first edition of this important work to be translated for a new Czech-speaking audience who will no doubt feel equally captivated by the author's narrative style as by its vivid connection to the capital. Sayer invites us to consider Prague, situated in the heart of 20th Century Europe, as being at the forefront of numerous modernist fallacies and contradictions that were experienced by the surrealist artists who lived or at least visited the city in the first half of that century. This impressive tome does not only dwell on Prague as a city but introduces many characters whose lives, though they spent them mostly in places like Paris and Berlin, held a special connection with the city of a thousand spires. This connectedness, explored throughout the book, perhaps better describes Prague as one of several rotating cogs of modernity rather than the 'capital' as the title suggests. Nevertheless, the importance of Prague as the stage for many ideological battles of the surrealist movement becomes apparent when traced through the histories of some of its inhabitants.

The subtitle 'A Surrealist History' describes both his preoccupation with Czech surrealism (although a large amount of room is given to the French movement as well) and, to a degree, his methodological process. The book meanders through Prague via the artists, the movements and also the architecture of the city and relays tenuously connected historical events alongside his own imaginings. His 'rummage amid the rags and refuse' of modernity have lent his work a rambling feel which is not unsuited to the subject matter and gives the reader some choice nuggets of historical storytelling. Whilst Sayer greatly admires Walter Benjamin's collage-like approach in *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, he adopted a more conventional

chronological narrative in *Prague* which pulls the reader through the ebbs and flows in the history of the capital. Within this chronological structure, Sayer offers a more fragmented style of narration by collecting together loosely connected excerpts of the 'mundane' which highlight the surrealist concept of *derive*: the aimless strolling through a city in search of 'marvels'. The selection of the quotidian is however, not random but rather carefully selected examples of the surrealist experience of 'modernity' through the lens of both the artists themselves and their historical events. Where those looking for a more historical approach may take issue is the addition of various speculations about thoughts and opinions of the characters which are seemingly unevicenced.

Although Prague's architecture is the backdrop to many points of narrative intrigue, the potted history of the capital is what underlies Sayer's assertion that Prague is the centre of the various expressions of modernity. This is explored through the various actors he introduces who faced difficulties in reconciling their surrealism and the fraught contemporary politics. Sayer begins with a discussion of the arrival of the French surrealists (most prominently André Breton and Paul Éluard) to Prague in 1935 who greatly admired the city's surrealist movement and yet never managed a return trip. This opening chapter explores the apparently fruitful meeting of the Czech and French movements and examines the conflicting influences of art and politics on the movement during this tumultuous political period. The feeling of foreboding imparted by the conflicts within the 1930s avant-garde movement are not relieved by the following two chapters, which draw out the book's underlying theme of Prague as being in a state constant metamorphosis. This is illustrated through Guillaume Apollinaire's description of his own visit to Prague where the pull of the ancient 'magical' capital of Emperor Rudolph II and the legends of the city are uneasily positioned next to modernist ideals. Descriptions of the city of Franz Kafka and the wider Jewish community at the fin de siècle are interspersed with those of the artistic haunts of the 1930s avant-garde, suggesting modernist culture was

still constrained by the spectre of the previous generation.

'Modernity in the plural' is the focus of chapter 4, with an exploration of the architectural changes the first half of the 20th century had wrought on Prague with its competing conceptualisations of 'progress'. Alfons Mucha, the darling of Parisian Art Nouveau, is given as an example of these contradictions; his *Slavic Epic* exhibition having been dismissed by contemporary modernist critics as an 'anachronistic throwback' whilst at the same time being housed in Fuchs and Tyl's imposingly functionalist Trade Fair Palace. Once again the connection is highlighted between Prague and Paris, with Czech artists seeking inspiration and French modernity in their formulation of the Bohemian capital's identity. The contradicting pulls of what is meant by 'modernism' are therefore displayed through their surrealist juxtapositions within *Prague* and highlight the way modernity is 'shot through with bolts of darkness as well as light'.

In chapter 5 the author turns his focus to the ways in which the surrealists attempted to emancipate eroticism and the body as a riposte to the rise of totalitarianism in the 1930s. The 'easy-going, mischievous' art of Toyen (Marie Cermínová) and Karel Teige's alphabet book of photomontage contrast starkly with Nazi ideals of conformity and purity which were solidified by the infamous 1937 exhibit of "Degenerate Art". A recent exhibition of Toyen's work in Prague (Toyen: The Dreaming Rebel, Waldstein Riding School 2021) highlighted both the playful nature of her surrealism and the erotic signature of her paintings which the author has underscored in *Prague* in his assessment of the *Erotic Review*.

In the final chapters we follow the effect on the surrealist movement of the brutal political circumstances which plagued the Czech capital from the 1930s until after the 1948 Communist takeover. In doing so we become steered once again towards Paris where Czech surrealists took their place amongst the great French names such as Dali and Picasso who in turn were faced by the devastating internal divisions they experienced in response to the Stalinist Terror. The core conflict of politics and surrealism was eventually their downfall despite attempts to revive it

after the war. Their echoes, however, can still be glimpsed around the city today in the sense of recent attempts to 'project itself back into Europe' (p. 439) such as with Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunić's postmodern Dancing House.

The meandering style of the book and its frequent detours may be off-putting to those seeking a surrealist history of Prague however the creativity of the storytelling and the detailed explorations of individual elements are what gives the work its unique appeal. The focus on Prague through the lens of the European surrealists leaves the reader with the sense that Prague and Paris shared custody of title of 'surrealist capital of Europe. Indeed, the author states in his chapter on modernism in the plural, that the distance between the cities is "shorter, quite possibly, than the tram-ride taken by Franz Kafka from the Old Town to Žižkov". That being said, the influence of the Czech contributions to surrealism is not understated; whether it be on the surrealists themselves or the environs of the Bohemian capital, according to Sayer, they have left their mark. The lasting impression is one of a love-letter to the tenacity and survival of a movement which was beset by the conflicts of modernity and whose legacy is 'malé, ale naše'. In its entirety the book is a challenging read however the form of the 'petites-narratives' make it worthwhile even for those with little knowledge of the surrealist movement and will certainly be of great interest to the new Czech readers.

See Derek Sayer: *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 595 pp.

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Elzbieta Halas – Nicolas Maslowski (eds.):
Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe (Studies in Sociology: Symbols, Theory and Society Book 11). Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021, 304 s.

Tato kniha se zaměřuje na politiku symbolizace a na konflikty, které se mohou s těmito symboly objevit. Jde o svazek, jenž je součástí edice