The Persistence of Poetry in Karel Teige's Outlook

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SYNOPSIS

Karel Teige's enduring interest in the essence of poetry may help explain the outward promotion of his 1920s textual-visual works in contrast to his more muted treatment of the Surrealist photomontage collages that he produced from 1935 to 1951. Teige, a central figure of the Czechoslovak avant-garde, demonstrated throughout his voluminous theoretical pieces a continuous fixation on poetry. He wrote and published rationales for his earlier textual-visual works, yet left a lack thereof concerning his 374 Surrealist photomontages. Though Teige declared himself a Surrealist in 1934, Surrealism may not have interested him in the same way as Czechoslovak Poetism or the implementation of aesthetic concepts borrowed from his counterparts in Russia and Germany. In this essay, Teige's proclamations about pictorial matters, poetry, modern art ideologies, typography, and the 'inner model' theory have been applied towards his pre-Surrealist, textual-visual works, in contradistinction to his later photomontages, to suggest why he did not promulgate the latter artworks to the same extent as the former. Examples of his 1920s picture poems in a lucid Poetist style present harmonized layouts of words, symbols, and cut-outs arranged into semiotic order. As a typographer, Teige stressed the importance of the 'nature, rhythm, and flow' of poetic texts, and his works also reveal careful reflection on the design of graphemes. It is, however, his fascination with linguistic matters, e.g. poetry and letters — a matter in which many of his Surrealist collages appear not to have taken much interest — that remains most obscure, lacking any contextual explanation. Suffused with fragmented corporeal forms and erotic imagery amid variegated scenery, Teige's vivid post-1935 photomontages have drawn the attention and speculation of many art historians.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

Karel Teige; avantgarda; poetismus; surrealismus; dějiny umění; fotomotáž / Karel Teige; the avant--garde; Poetism; Surrealism; art history; photomontage.

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The widely varying forms of the avant-garde can be threaded together by a number of specific themes. In the transnational context, individual artists share a common orientation towards group activity as well as a rejection of conventions and the integration of visual art and text. The European avant-garde of the twentieth century frequently worked at the intersection of text and image, as we see in the case of Russian concrete

poetry and the cut-up method of the Dadaists. Czechoslovakia flourished during the interwar period, amid exchanges between East and West that produced everything from critiques of architecture to cultural events with their Parisian counterparts. Karel Teige, a central figure of the Czechoslovak avant-garde scene, demonstrated throughout his diverse, decades-long trajectory in the visual arts a fundamental interest in poetry. This helps explain his effort to promote his textual-visual works — an effort he did not make later in his career in the case of his Surrealist photomontages.

Though not generally known as a poet, Teige worked extensively with the written word, editing journals, translating, and writing numerous theoretical articles, as well as books on everything from interior design to cinema. He painted in his youth but eventually redirected his artistic energies to graphic design, typography, and photomontage. At a time when various arts and cultural movements were blossoming, Teige borrowed from the tenets of Russian Constructivism to develop a distinctly Czechoslovak artistic program in the form of Poetism, which was also a lifestyle and state of mind characterised by enjoyment and self-expression. Teige participated in group and joint projects, many of which involved graphic treatments of Czech poetry, applying visual arrangement to the typography and incorporating other media.

This essay aims to understand why Teige offered written explanations for his early verbal-visual works but remained curiously silent on his hundreds of Surrealist photomontages. It seems as well that Teige found Poetism — and the techniques he borrowed from artistic movements in Russia and Germany — to be more engaging than Surrealism. Examples of Teige's 1920s visual poetry and typographic work will be examined in contradistinction to his 1930s–1950s Surrealist photomontages. The selections from his oeuvre will be analyzed using statements from his writings pertaining to topics such as Poetism, typography, Surrealism, Constructivism, photomontage, and photography.

VARIED INTERPRETATIONS OF KAREL TEIGE'S PHOTOMONTAGES

In Teige's Surrealist photomontages one finds certain thematic continuities with his pre-1935 visual work. Esther Levinger writes that Teige's Poetist picture poems 'marked the ultimate distrust of words' and played on the arbitrariness of sign and signifier. According to Levinger, Teige considered art as a means to harness the non-objective word 'liberated [...] from its representational function to become a self-sufficient element of poetic structure' (Levinger 1999, p. 514). She continues her case about 'Teige's refutation of a mechanical accord between object and sign' (Levinger 2004, p. 402). While acknowledging the ideological and thematic differences between Teige's Poetist and Surrealist works, Levinger discovers a similar engagement with semantics based on the placements of signs and connections formed among them (ibid., pp. 413–414).

This essay offers an alternative approach to understanding Teige's individual and collaborative picture poems by highlighting certain Czech terms and semiotic sequences that form a matrix of meaning-making absent from his later photomontages. The argument will also refer to Teige's own view on his work with typography to underline a marked preoccupation with language systems. The following analysis

will also suggest that the 1920s picture poems by Teige and his Czechoslovak contemporaries offered the most characteristic manifestation of Poetism, a program that eventually grew too diffuse to be sustained, in spite of Teige's dogged rhetorical efforts.

Vojtěch Lahoda argues that Teige's photomontages could be classified as poetic artworks that reveal proto-Surrealist tendencies, pointing out various parallels between René Magritte's paintings and Teige's photomontages to demonstrate that, for the latter, 'collage was a means of representing "poetic images" and visual conceptions' (Lahoda 1994, pp. 14–15). He elaborates this claim with respect to Teige's 'poetic images', comparing the arrangement of pictorial fragments with poetic techniques that make use of the '"alphabet" of the female body' and '"script" of the object' as material for collages. He also cites Teige's work on *Alphabet* (1926), featuring photographs of the dancer Milča Mayerová posing in the form of letters, as a precursor of his later collage techniques (Lahoda 1999, p. 299). Notwithstanding Teige's breadth of corporeal (and erotic) imagery, it can be noted that both the dance moves and the graphemes Teige designed respect the Latin alphabet system and correspond with Vítězslav Nezval's poetry. While Teige speaks proudly of his graphic 'typofoto' techniques, he generally has little to say about his numerous solo Surrealist works.

This essay will deal more with Teige's engagement with (and regard for) poetry, and less with the 'poetic' imagery and Poetist tendencies of his visual works, with analysis based primarily on those aspects of poetry that characterise it as a literary form and that, as much as the boundaries between text and image may blur, comprise its fundamental linguistic and semiotic structures. The concept of the 'inner model' will be applied as a theoretical paradigm for understanding Teige's concurrent contemplations as he was creating his Surrealist photomontages. This essay will also build on Josef Vojvodík's assessments of Teige's periodic references to the 'inner model' and continuous emphasis on the 'dominance of poetry' that was considered to be the 'universal art of the spirit' vis-à-vis Teige's pictorial output (Vojvodík 2015, pp. 30, 39). Furthermore, analysis will focus on Teige's enduring interest in photography, also outlined by Vojvodík.

One could argue that the political circumstances that dominated Czechoslovakia from 1934 to 1951 played an important role in Teige's transition from his earlier Poetist period, characterised by his participation in group projects, to his later Surrealist photomontages, on which he predominantly worked alone. There is also the fact that Teige began to circulate his photomontages via publication and exhibition more frequently starting in the mid-1940s. But these observations do not fully explain why he so often chose not to give titles to his photomontages, or why he ceased to write about these works during his later career. It is then curious that Teige, as a person of letters and typographer, very seldom used text in his Surrealist images. Teige produced hundreds of works over a period of sixteen years, spanning the Second World War and Stalinist era (beginning with the 1948 Communist coup), as well as times of Czechoslovak sovereignty. Certain thematic continuities in the works of Teige's Surrealist works — severed body parts, landscapes, and architecture, all mixed together with erotic subject matter — compel us to approach the photomontages from a holistic perspective.

KAREL TEIGE: A POLYVALENT AVANT-GARDE FIGURE

Teige's career has many of the characteristics of an avant-garde working in 20th century Europe. His inclination towards group activity dates back to his work with the Devětsil group, which he helped to found in 1920. A number of prominent members of the Devětsil were poets and writers: Jaroslav Seifert and Vítěslav Nezval, for instance, whose output in the early 1920s reflected the forward-thinking attitudes propounded by Teige, the group's most prominent theorist (Srp 1999a, p. 23). Several collaborations with these poets in the 1920s would leave a lasting impact on Teige's outlook on artistic expression.

Teige also embraced the avant-garde tendency towards the international exchange of ideas and radical politics. It was also in the 1920s that Teige travelled through Europe extensively, establishing contacts with such prominent figures as Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, and André Breton of the Paris Surrealists. A 1925 trip to Moscow and Saint Petersburg made a strong impression on Teige, familiarising him with the Constructivist principles to architectural theory and typography that he would borrow in his own work (Frampton 1999, p. 6; Srp 1999b, p. 23). A consummate modernist, Teige embraced progress and technological advancement while criticizing the formalist aesthetics and classicism of the pre-war period. In terms of his politics, Teige was a committed believer of Marxist theory, a devotion that can be clearly seen in his own theories, even if it would eventually grow conflicted when he experienced communism first hand. Notwithstanding his faith in the proletariat and calls to upend the bourgeois lifestyle, Teige never joined the Communist (or any other) political party, expressing disapproval of Socialist Realist aesthetics, publicly denouncing the Stalinist trials of 1936, and becoming himself the target of Czechoslovak Communist government's denunciations, late in his life, as a rebellious 'Trotskyite' (Srp 1999b, p. 274; Aulický 1999, p. 385; Dačeva 1999, p. 381).

POETISM AND TYPOGRAPHY

The first manifesto of Poetism, written by Teige in 1924, is a typical example of his attempt to make a mark on the progress of art and to explain the significance of the integration of text and image. The program of Poetism advocated for an elevated universal human consciousness through a 'reign of pure poetry' and love of lyricism. Not strictly pigeonholed to a particular style or discipline, Poetism called for 'visual excitement over the modern world' as a complement to Constructivism (Teige 1999c, pp. 67–70). Acting as representative of the Czechoslovak Republic, which had only recently been founded in 1918, Teige aimed to disseminate the ideas of Poetism in the international context (Bydžovská 1999, pp. 48–49).

One of the purposes of the first Poetist manifesto was, according to Teige, to 'put in words the aims of a movement brought to life by several modern Czech authors' with respect especially to their integration of artistic and literary techniques. He mentions the 'fruits of poetry' that Poetism has engendered, such as picture poems, poetic puzzles, and anecdotes (Teige 1999c, p. 71). Teige personally produced a number of veritable picture poems in the 1920s that correspond to the optimistic tone of

FIG. 1. Karel Teige: *Pozdrav z cesty* (*Greetings from a Journey*), 1923, 331 × 235 mm. Collage picture poem. Image courtesy of Prague City Gallery.

the first manifesto (Srp 1999a, p. 26). Teige's *Greetings from a Journey* (1923; Fig. 1), for instance, exemplifies a work of 'purely artistic poetry without literature' comprised of words, symbols, lines, dots, and cut-outs (ibid., p. 32). Reading in sequence from the top-left corner down, we find the symbol of a flag, a seaside photograph, and the words 'Pozdrav z cesty' on the background of a starry sky and the cut-out of a map. At the bottom we find a stanza of poetry in the format of the front and back of a sealed, stamped envelope addressed to Jaroslav Seifert, fellow poet and member of Devětsil, in the Žižkov district of Prague. Teige created *Greetings from a Journey* around the time he journeyed to Paris, Vienna, and other major European cultural hubs, which suggests that it was inspired by his travels and international exchange of ideas, juxtaposed with a hyperlocal reference to Seifert's neighbourhood. By directly including Seifert in the *Greetings*, Teige may also be alluding to the collective synergy of the Devětsil group.

Teige's interest in the expressive power of text and image extended to his professional typography work as well. Whereas his fellow Devětsil poets expressed themselves through language, he, the typographer, would effectively give their work its final form. In his 1927 article 'Moderní typo' ('Modern typography'), Teige gives examples of his typographical accomplishments: 'In the design of Nezval's *Pantomima* ('Pantomime'; Fig. 2) of 1924, and Seifert's collection of poems *Na vlnách TSF* ('On the waves of TSF') of 1925, it was important for the typography to complete the poetic process and transpose the poems into the visual sphere' (Teige 1999b, pp. 104–105).
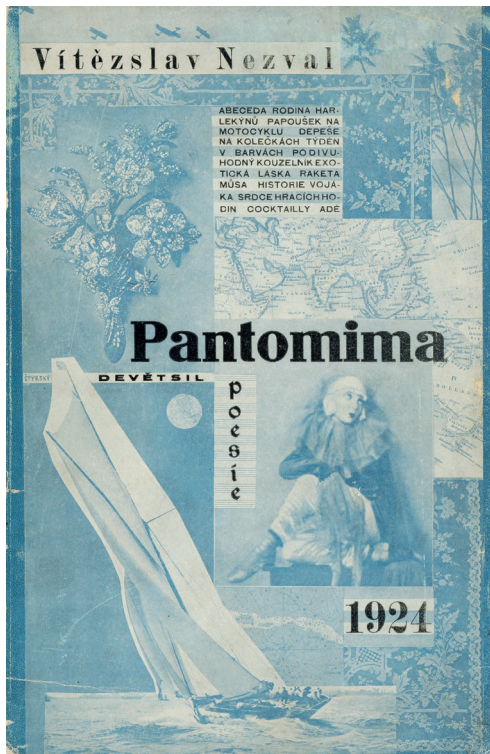
FIG. 2. Vítězslav Nezval: *Pantomima. Verše 1922–1924* (*Pantomime. Poems 1922–1924*), for Ústřední studentské nakladatelství a knihkupectví, Prague, 1924. Cover design by Jindřich Štyrský; typography by Karel Teige. Image courtesy of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague (UPM).

In Nezval's *Pantomime*, poems are presented in a highly stylized fashion: the lines of 'What Is Most Beautiful in a Café' appear atop rectangular, triangular, striped, and solid shapes; in 'Adieu' the line 'birds are flying away' is accented with letters arranged to resemble bouncing waves. In his experimental layout of the poems Teige makes good on the more concrete tenets of 'Poetism', giving an impression of playful 'poetic puzzles' whose piecing together emits a joyful radiance from the page.

Teige emphasizes his preoccupation with the aesthetics of poetry in 'Modern typography', suggesting that they must be treated with extreme caution. Among his numerous proposals for the 'progressive simplification' of type — balanced layout, legibility, clarity, liberation from academism and decoration — one finds various statements concerning the challenge of poetry to Teige in his practice as a typographer. According to him, the task of putting poetry to print differs markedly from managing the content of advertising billboards, commercial posters, and scientific books. The organization of the poetic text must correspond to 'the nature, rhythm, and flow' that the poem emanates. Teige expressed his frustration in dealing with publishers' insufficient stock of typefaces, especially in the case of 'poetic texts, which require a complicated visual image and rich typesetting full of contrasts' (ibid., pp. 102–105).

In 'Modern typography', Teige also refers to his collaborative Gesamtkunstwerk with Nezval, *Alphabet*, as a significant textual-visual accomplishment, writing: 'I tried to create a "typofoto" of a purely abstract and poetic nature, setting into graphic poetry what Nezval set into verbal poetry in his verse, both being poems evoking the

FIG. 3. Vítězslav Nezval: *Abeceda* (*Alphabet*), 1926. "A" typofoto. Poetry cycle with dance composition by Milča Mayerová; typography and graphic design with photomontage by Karel Teige; photography by Karel Paspa. For J. Otto, spol. s r. o., Prague, 1926. Image courtesy of Museum of Czech Literature/Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Library.
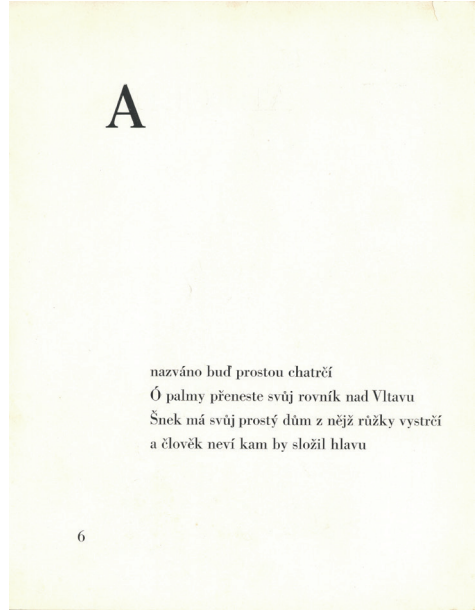

FIG 4. Vítězslav Nezval: *Abeceda* (*Alphabet*), 1926. "A" cycle. Typography by Karel Teige. Image courtesy of Museum of Czech Literature/ Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Library.

magic signs of the alphabet' (ibid., p. 105). In 1922, Nezval had been searching for a way to distance himself from the fervent ideological atmosphere and from debates over true 'proletarian poetry'. He found a solution by turning to 'the most abstract poetic object — the letter — as a pretext for the gymnastics of the mind' (Nezval 2001, p. 7–8), composing a 'cycle of rhymes' for *Alphabet* working with the 'constructive base' of the letters' sound, function, and shape. The arch of the A, for example, represented the physicality of a hut (Fig. 3–4). In *Alphabet* Teige not only set the typeface for the 25 poems but also designed striking Constructivist graphics to render the Latin letters as components of photomontage images (Fig. 5–6). Interspersed or integrated with the letters are photographs of avant-garde dancer Milča Mayerová, posing in the shapes of the letters.

The textual-visual work *Alphabet* has a twofold nature. On one hand, it makes use of the most elementary unit of language, the letter, as basis for a whimsical poetry removed from the social and political reality of its time. In spite of this, the work would subsequently become the 'constructive base' for an experimental project combining text, photomontage, and modern dance. Moreover, Teige described *Alphabet* as an example of 'typofoto', a term coined by Bauhaus artist László Mo-

FIG. 5. Vítězslav Nezval: *Abeceda* (*Alphabet*),
1926. "K" typofoto by Karel Teige. Image
courtesy of Museum of Czech Literature/
Památník národního písemnictví (PNP),
Library.

FIG. 6. Vítězslav Nezval: *Abeceda* (*Alphabet*),
1926. "G" typofoto by Karel Teige. Image
courtesy of Museum of Czech Literature/
Památník národního písemnictví (PNP),
Library.

holy-Nagy to describe the 'visually most exact and complete communication' (Teige
1999b, p. 99).

Teige champions Czechoslovak artistic achievements throughout 'Modern typog-
raphy' as well as the second *Manifesto of Poetism* (1928). Many of these arguments
point to innovations in the integration of text and image. For example, in 'Modern
typography', Teige considers Seifert and Nezval, in their efforts to create an ideal
typography, on par with Apollinaire and Marinetti (Teige 1999b, p. 102–103). In the
second *Manifesto of Poetism*, however, Teige censures Marinetti's and other Futurists'
turn towards phonetic poetry, quoting Nezval's claim that it represented a certain
backsliding: 'the stock of the auditory poets is falling with the slump in romantic
contemplation.' Teige further names Nezval as a true vanguard force in his work on
graphemes: 'Now that Nezval is versifying his Alphabet we stand on the threshold of
a new pictorial poetry' (Teige 2002, p. 594). A faith that should be seen to derive in
part from his own typofoto work for *Alphabet*.

In his work in typography, where he incorporates various international influ-
ences, Teige may have also seen himself as playing a role in advancing the Czech lan-
guage, especially as he lived and worked in the context of the westernmost of Slavic
languages, one moreover that uses the Latin alphabet in combination with the caron
háček and other diacritics. While a section of 'Modern typography' takes the form of
a manifesto-esque list explicating the tenets of Constructivist typography, Teige also

lists Russian script among the writing systems he believed were bound to become obsolete to make way for a standardized format of international communication.[1] He also paid respect to typography principles put forth by Bauhaus figures such as László Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer (Teige 1999b, p. 103), and even took on the task of updating the Bauhaus typeface (Bayer's universal font), publishing his proposals for the letters A, G, K, and X in *ReD* magazine (1928–1929). While the captions for the lowercase A–Z are written in Czech, the letters themselves are in basic Latin script without Czech diacritics — or German umlauts for that matter (Michalová 2018, p. 60 in Image Index). Similarly, *Alphabet* renders the Latin letters without diacritics. It is possible that Teige viewed his work with the alphabet as part of a concerted effort to streamline Czech orthography in view of a more universal format of communication.

PIVOT FROM POETISM, ONGOING FIXATION ON POETRY

Teige continued to write about poetry, poets, and poetic rhetoric even as his own endeavours gradually steered away from Poetism. By the end of the 1920s, several other prominent Devětsil members, such as Toyen, Josef Šíma, and Jindřich Štyrský, made headway in their painting pursuits as they took their cues increasingly from Paris. Teige's support for their creative development frequently involved comparisons of their painting styles to his own means of expression: poetry. When Toyen and Štyrský developed an abstract painting style known as Artificialism, Teige interpreted their use of elementary shapes and automatism as testimony to an aesthetics that had emerged out of a genealogy distinct from Surrealism and its Romantic lineage. Artificialism, according to Teige, could thus be considered as an analogy to poetry and its departure from the outdated formalist commitments of literature (Bydžovská 1999, p. 52). Even as the domestic press, towards the end of the 1920s, dismissed Poetism as outdated, Teige pointed to new developments in Czechoslovak art as proof that Poetism had matured (ibid., p. 48).

Teige would continue to regard Poetism in this way throughout his transition to Surrealism. In the article 'Surrealisté v Československu' ('Surrealists in Czechoslovakia') published in spring of 1934, just weeks before joining the newly formed Czechoslovak Surrealist Group, he stresses the importance of Poetism in the group's formation and how its leader, Nezval, and members (including Štyrský, who often clashed with Teige) were continuing in the traditions of Poetism. Teige added that he chose not to join the group because he neither considered himself a Surrealist nor identified with the ideology. His cooperation with its members, he argued, rested along the lines of solidarity with the intellectual left.

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1   Teige's typography for Konstantin Biebl's poetry — in the collections of poems *With the Boat that Imports Tea and Coffee* (1928) and *Rupture* (1928) — bring to mind the style of Russian concrete poetry books, such as Vasily Kamensky's *Tango with Cows* (1914) and El Lissitzky's *For the Voice* (1923), especially with the integration of text and shape. Even if Teige's aesthetic treatment of Czech poems for these books appears rather Eastern, it could simply be that he considered the use of Latin script in these cases as an improvement on the Cyrillic.

When Teige finally did join the group that May, he defended his decision in a lecture ('The Dialectics of Poetism'), arguing that the time had arrived for Poetism and Surrealism, formerly separate lines of development, to join together (Michalová 2018, pp. 389–390). He henceforth became a chief theorist of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group (Srp 1999b, pp. 261–263). In addition to his political allegiances, Teige seems to have come to terms with the futility of championing Poetism any further when his fellow Czech artists adopted a characteristically French Surrealist approach for their own creative pursuits. In 1934, a full decade after the first Poetism manifesto, the movement had yet to gain foothold in the international context.

Prague did not grow into a major centre of the movement in the way that Paris had with Surrealism. It may be that Poetism lost its appeal as an aesthetic approach in part because of the diffuse character of its application. By the time Teige had penned the second *Manifesto of Poetism* in 1928, the practice of picture poems — which represented its primary approach to the visual arts — had largely faded from Devětsil activities (Bydžovská 1999, p. 52). Throughout the text of the second *Manifesto*, Teige describes the essence of Poetism as 'poetry for the five senses'. The visual forms of the picture poem include such diverse practices as typography, liberated theatre, and even fireworks. Similarly, Teige lists flower arrangement and cuisine, respectively, as poetry for smell and taste (Teige 2002, p. 600). One could argue that the term Poetism was itself problematic, binding its program too closely to poetry, and leading to such strained claims that jazz and botany should be considered among its possible forms. Other movements with more flexible names, such as Futurism or Dada, were more successful in their application across disciplines.

TRIALS IN INTROSPECTION WITH SURREALIST COLLAGES

Influenced by Sigmund Freud, Surrealism encouraged artists to draw on the unconscious for inspiration. Surrealists thus engaged in such practices as automatic writing and drawing as well as the social game 'exquisite corpse'. Collage offered another format by which Surrealists could engage in automatism to produce images that challenge expectations based on commonly held views of reality. The year after Teige turned to Surrealism, he began to confine his work on collages to Sundays, completing a total of 374 Surrealist collages from 1935 until his death in 1951 (Michalová 2018, p. 430; Fig. 7). Untitled for the most part and identified by number only, his 'collages remained unpublished and unexhibited', except for a few instances, mainly towards the end of his life (ibid., pp. 439–440). Otherwise, Teige tended to keep his work to himself, or share it only among close companions. Exposition of the Surrealist works may have been secondary to Teige, who mostly constructed them as something of a hobby after his work for the week was done (ibid., pp. 430, 439). The imagery that Teige brings together in his Surrealist photomontages is explicit yet simultaneously perplexing. Many present fragmented corporeal forms out of context, for example, women's body parts exchanged with those of animals (*Collage no. 182*, 1941; Fig. 8).

Text very rarely appears in these works, which may seem surprising for an author who wrote extensively about the potential of the interplay between text and image,

FIG. 7. Karel Teige: *Collage no. 353*, 1948, 289 × 215 mm, inv. no. 77/72-473. Courtesy of Museum of Czech Literature/Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Arts Collections.

including an article in 1932 in which he analyses the process, 'About photomontage' ('O fotomontáži', 1932). It is here that Teige describes the 'advanced state' of photomontage in providing an 'effective and distinctive positioning' of photography with text, and designates Surrealism along with Poetism and Constructivism as primary contributors to its modern practice. In spite of this, he barely dwells on Surrealism or Surrealist photomontage in either section of the two-part article. Its contents tend more to map out the evolution of the groundbreaking art movements and graphic communication media (advertisements, political propaganda) that gave rise to photomontage and its many manifestations.

It is also in 'About photomontage' that Teige describes the advanced state of Constructivist photomontage and its function as 'agitative art par excellence', and presents reproductions of his cover designs for the book *Alamanach Kmene*, briefly describing how Poetism and picture poems influenced them (Teige 1932, pp. 107, 112, 178).

Underscoring a certain tension in the Surrealist photomontages is the fact that, as Karel Srp indicates, the 'principles guiding Teige's work with collage were never formulated in writing, just as he did not produce any written commentaries to accompany them' (Bagust 2000; Srp 1999b, p. 282). One could point to several parallels with the Surrealist paintings and illustrations of Teige's contemporary Toyen, namely the positioning of an fragmented figure with a horizon, a combination that can be found throughout Teige's later career up until his very last two works, *Collage no. 373* and *Collage no. 374* (both 1951). Teige's writings may also provide clues for understanding his collages. His architectural theories in particular, which call for minimalist dwellings to free women from the domestic context, seem to offer an explanation for his

FIG. 8. Karel Teige: *Collage no. 182 / Mallarmé's Swans*, 1941, 176 × 164 mm, inv. no. 77/72-156, photo by Miroslav Hák. Image courtesy of Museum of Czech Literature/Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Arts Collections.

juxtaposition of functionalist buildings and the female form, as seen in *Collage no. 155* (1941; Fig. 9).

Aside from all consideration of their content, a question about Teige's Surrealist photomontages arises: What happened to the poem? Do these collages qualify as manifestations of the essence of the poem? Earlier, in 1927, Teige did make an explicit analogy between poetry and the photomontage in his book *Soviet Culture*: 'its aim is to be a sort of pictorial epic and a poem of modern times' (Lahoda 1999, p. 282). As epic or modern as the later Surrealist works may appear, however, their semiotic organisation seems to align less with poetic narrative structures than with a central tension among the images. This is especially true when we compare them to the more naïve visual poetry that characterises Teige's work during the first half of the 1920s, when Poetism took a clearer form, as we see in his *Greetings from a Journey* and collaboration with Nezval on *Pantomime*. In 'About photomontage', Teige described photomontage and typofoto as 'new form[s] of writing and visual language'. Until that moment in human culture, he argues, the alphabet was the only written form of communication, and only 'after many experimentations will we learn how to control this new tool of communication, this new system of writing: we will be able to use it to write new news and challenges and new poems' (Michalová 2018, p. 426). With this in mind, could it be that Teige quietly carried out his work on photomontage in search of a new language? In terms of the alphabet and typofoto, it seems that Teige took immense satisfaction from his achievements in *Alphabet*, contributing to the 'magic' graphemes that informed the words of Nezval's poetry. His ambition to create a new form of expression that transcended the letter, on the other hand, was never realised in his later work on photomontage.
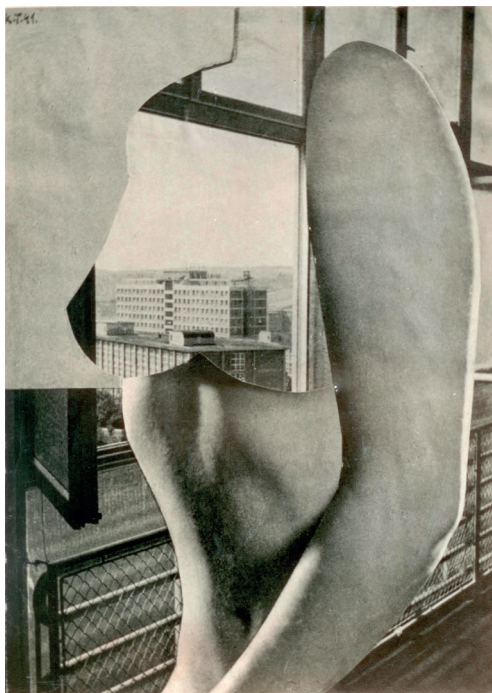
FIG. 9. Karel Teige: *Collage no. 155*, 1941, 176 × 125 mm, inv. no. 77/72-155; photo by Miroslav Hák. Image courtesy of Museum of Czech Literature/Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Arts Collections.

INNER MODEL, LATENT POETRY

Later in his career, Teige's theoretical article 'The Inner Model' ('Vnitřní model', 1945) testifies to his lasting regard for the essence of poetry in his creative process. Influenced by André Breton's concept of the 'interior model', Teige regarded photographic technology as a metaphor for the internal mechanisms of poetry and poetic process, writing, 'It is precisely the poet, the introvert given to reveries, who is ideally suited to transforming himself into a photosensitive plate [...] or a hypersensitive film of inner activity' (Petříček 1999, 334; Teige 1999a, p. 343). This claim demonstrates the profound influence for Teige of photographic terminology, and he described the subjective process of painters using such phrases as 'instant shutter' and 'automatic release button', recording 'a self-portrait of the psyche' that would emerge through 'the fixative bath'. Interestingly, the text does not pay much attention to the discipline of photography itself (Teige 1999a, p. 345), which he tends to write about as an automated, technical process for recording an external model, in contrast to imaginative painting, which requires the painter to transpose 'a snapshot of the world of imagination' onto canvas (ibid., pp. 340–342). Teige concludes the article with a discussion on the way people derive pleasure from a 'work of art' — i.e. 'a certain poem, painting, or piece of music' — with a direct reference to poetry: 'And yet, what has always deeply moved us in any artwork has been its latent poetry' (ibid., p. 346).

Teige wrote 'The Inner Model' after he had already produced numerous Surrealist montages using cut-outs of photographs. Still, in his later way of thinking, Teige argues that the purest form that an artwork can take is akin to the substance of words,

its 'latent poetry'. Aside from the many photographic references in his article, Teige does not invoke the metaphor of the 'latent image', the more obscure pictorial data on film that the photographic development process causes to emerge. In view of the article as a whole, this omission is not terribly surprising, considering that he mentions neither the photograph nor collage technique as art forms equal to that of poetry. Throughout Teige's transformation in theory and practice, the poem may have remained for him the most suitable paradigm for synthesizing the subjectivity of the artist.

PICTURES LEFT TO PUZZLE

After publishing 'The Inner Model', Teige would continue to produce photomontages for a number of years, and his work was featured in several publications as well as an exhibition in Paris (Michalová 2018, p. 440). Nonetheless, given the largely private character of his work, and the fact that he, a prolific writer, so rarely put words to them or furnished them with a title, it is possible that Teige never came to regard his later works with the reverence he had for poetry. Perhaps it was the material basis of photographs that did not interest Teige in the same way as the typography he had developed to 'complete the poetic process'. Perhaps he felt he could never fulfil the task of inventing a new alphabet with photomontage, and so did not see the units of photographed images on the same level as the 'magic signs' of the grapheme, as with *Alphabet*. What is clear is that Teige's hopes of promoting Czechoslovak contributions in the international context on the basis of the letter were subsumed by the general turn towards Surrealism that Teige came to embrace only reluctantly — Czech Poetism was simply not destined, in this sense, to play an analogous role in the modern development of art. Teige's Surrealist images, rather than engendering a distinctive magnum opus, would gain posthumous recognition as pieces in a post-Poetism puzzle, for later generations to assemble in search of a meaning.

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