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Key Concepts, Terms and Interpretation Strategies of Czech Marxist Iconology

My PhD research project focuses on the phenomenon of so called Czech Marxist iconology, representing a specific methodological approach to the interpretation of works of art that was established at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s as a methodological contribution of Czech art historiography to the world art history. In this method, which placed a new emphasis on the content – or rather ideological – aspects of the work of art, semantic dimensions were revealed mainly through the inspiration of the then fashionable Erwin Panofsky's iconology. In the Czech version, this type of Western iconology, originally rooted in humanism and Neoplatonism, was not simply replaced but remarkably enriched by Marxist worldview. Among Czech initiators of this transformation of iconology we may include such names of art historians as Rudolf Chadraba, Karel Stejskal, Josef Krása, Vlasta Dvořáková, and Jaromír Neumann. Even though any clearly declared manifestation which would serve as a guide on how to apply the method did not come out of their initiative, it is possible to conceive of methodologically distinctive approach or Czech iconological school which developed its interpretative strategies mainly on the praxis of analyses of medieval (later also baroque) art in order to reveal non-religious contents, at least in one of levels of meaning.

As a topic of a historiographical and methodological nature, research of Marxist iconology has the potential to answer more general questions in the field of art history, concerning the transfer and transformation of its methods. Its assessment can thus be also understood as a case study or a contribution to research in an increasingly important branch of historiographic research, namely the history of science. At the same time, it still remains in the focus of art history due to the fact that some concepts and interpretive matrices that Marxist iconology brought into the practice of Czech art historians, were essential for a further development of art historical scholarship (for example, iconology successfully assisted in questioning a primary relevance of realism in study of art in socialist Czechoslovakia). However, other of these concepts and matrices are still alive without being subjected to any critical reflection or efforts to identify their origin.

The aim of my dissertation project is to deepen and broaden the existing interpretive framework of the topic into two ways. Firstly, it is necessary to pay attention to individual agents (R. Chadraba, J. Krása, K. Stejskal, J. Neumann) by means of the analysis of their texts. My attention is focused on specific key concepts and topics with which Czech Marxist iconologists systematically dealt with (such as protohumanism, ancient tradition, utopia, triumphalism, identification portrait, astrology, typology and

dualism of content and form etc.). It is equally important to analyse what strategies enabled to bring these concepts and topics into conformity with Marxist categories (people, social class, work, alienation, progressive tradition etc.). It is also necessary to consider, to what extent each art historian was inspired by the Panofsky's model and to what extent each of them enriched his or her interpretation with anthropological and culture-historical aspects that are inherent to Aby Warburg's circle.

The application of semantic analysis of basic key concepts, as well as the contextualization of topics characteristic of this school, allow us, on the one hand, a more consistent understanding of the specifics of the Marxist version of iconology, and, on the other hand, to identify its Czech and foreign sources of inspiration.