

## Dušan Pavlů

# Theatre of the Street

---

Hundreds of advertising messages try to reach us every day, to win us with their content and hope that we will listen to the call they bring to us. We are in the same position – the creators of advertising contents and their recipients. Interestingly, both target groups only rarely realize how intensively and systematically these messages could form us, how they dynamically change the world around us and create a new culture – visual, auditive, typographic, architectural, and how they impact the contents of our free time and change our lifestyle.

I dare say that current Czech and Slovak professional literature has only a few publications able to deal, in an appropriate communication, culturological, arty, sociological, or economic scope, with the broader societal impacts of such a specific form of social communication such as the varied, internally richly structured world of marketing persuasion-advertising, promotion and marketing communication.

The Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague has produced an extensive collective publication:

*THEATRE OF THE STREET – Advertising and Window Display within the Context of Modernism 1918-1938.* It is a really large book, not only in the format and quantity of pages (369 pp.), and a lot of illustrative materials, but mainly because of the most remarkable width of scope and depth of the level of knowledge about the advertising world in the defined time period of the 1<sup>st</sup> Republic of Czechoslovakia. It contains five comprehensive, monothematic studies on different spheres of the visual and audio-visual commercial communication of manufacturers and traders with consumers: the world of urban iconography composed of shop signs, architecture and portals, façade advertisements, artful window displays, advertising photography and posters, and flashing neon signs and illumination. Evidently, it must have been an important branch of the creative industry, as, Miroslav Sutnar estimated that on average, a billion crowns had been invested in advertising in the 1<sup>st</sup> Republic, and in 1948, the volume of advertising investments reached 5 billion crowns.

Lada Hubatková-Vacková analyses the *Silhouettes of Linen Brides*. In fact, she pays attention to window dressing in that period's context. Shop window displays were at the centre of attention not only of retailers but also manufacturers: in the 1920s and 30s, they were definitely the most important medium of mass advertising communication in addition to advertisements and advertising posters. Manufacturers were very well aware of it and through their sales representatives tried to systematically influence retailers to take proper care of their products and pay adequate attention and company assistance to arranging goods. Large producers understood window displays as a kind of means of mass information, which in cases of compact and intensive advertising events could come up, in that time across the whole country, with integrated and consistent advertising information often supported by the central production of advertising panels, posters, window dressing tools and suggested designs for the uniform arrangement of window displays

across the country (e.g. *Baťa*, *Schicht*, *Palaba*, etc.).

The author's approach to the topic is indicated by the quotation of the prominent graphic designer and theoretician of advertising creation Zdeněk Rykr (1933): "*The window should be objective... Should go directly to the point, not waste time with a too elaborate arrangement, too extensive calling and drawing attention to it*". And it is exactly the objectivity, clarity of information, the concentration of attention from passing by viewers on the street on the communicated information that is the main line for the presentation of the topic. The author pays attention to the significance and architecture of shop window displays, follows the line of a gradual transformation from decorative forms of arranging goods to concentration on the product and possibilities of its use. She examines the attitudes of the avant-garde to advertising, studies the changes in architecture of high streets in relation to the communication options, covers typological transformations of mannequins and changes in their role in the composed statement of the entire shop window display. Like the other co-authors in their studies, she pays a great deal of attention to changes in professional education, which prepared future creators of window displays – graphic artists and organizers of visual presentations for companies, and does not forget professional unions, associations and their educational activities. She brings interesting observations related to transformation of

urban space, development of high streets, introduction of electrical illumination and glass surfaces to the street space, with the colour of goods, advertising panels and with the movement in the shop window. In this commercial communication environment, the famous names of artists happen to be in the new, revealing connections and wider cultural and artistic relations. At the same time, the author mentions that in this inter-war time the principle of a repeated commercial message ("*serial advertising*") has gradually become codified as a necessary condition for the effectiveness of this form of communication.

Lucie Česálková and Kateřina Svatoňová are at an illuminated crossroads – witnessing the mirroring of city and film as an advertising strategy. The subject of their interest is a new medium – film catching transformations of the city and at the same time used as advertising means in various commercial areas. City films – symphonies of a city – city symphonies – were, on the one hand, documentaries capturing the dynamic development of towns and cities, their new buildings, shops, public lighting, dynamics of movement, new architecture and new graphic art, icons of the modern world, typology of changes in the culture of clothing, shopping and spending your free time. All of that is documented in the titles of city films like Inneman's film *Prague Shining In Lights*, Vávra's films *Light Penetrates the Dark* and *Happy Journey*, Hackenschmied's film

*Aimless Walk*, Cikán's film *The Girl Behind the Shop Window*, Klos and Šestka's film *Take a Deep Breath*, and others. The authors follow film coming to shop windows and sales areas. They declare that, e.g., Baťa played the company newsreel *Window onto the World* in 800 stores as well as various promotional films produced by his own film studios. *The Schicht* company from Ústí nad Labem used, besides conventional forms of advertising, also lectures, radio broadcasts and animated films in their advertising activities. These films were delivered by external creators – e.g., Fr. Dodal with the use of mascots and animation (*The Metamorphosis of Uncle Bobby*, *Everything for a Scrambled Pancake*, *Hannibal in the Virgin Forest*) with a targeted and focused concentration of attention to the product and its usability and utility qualities. Film thus takes on three dimensions – it is documenting the dynamics of city development, entering the retail space and at the same time creating a new genre – advertising.

Antonín Dufek examines *Love at First Sight: Advertising, the Shop Window, the Neon City, and the New Photography*. The topic is introduced by quoting Jaromír Funke (1936): "*Advertising photography should be clear, interesting and standing out*". Incoming advertising photography comes from the ideas of poetism and constructivism and aim at simplicity and clear information. Zdeněk Rossmann formulated it like that: "*image in advertising is more and more important than*

the text. *The best image is the photograph for its exact ability of communication, objectivity and max convincingness*".

The writer documents various creative approaches to the advertising brief through examples from the works of some authors and information about their advertising activity (Rössler, Funke, Sudek, Schick, Vobecký, Nohel, Němec, Štýrský, Lukas, Šťastný and others) dealing with a variety of composition approaches, work with light and shadow. He also pays attention to professional schools preparing professional photographers including advertising ones, and the only inter-war exhibition specialized in advertising photography in Prague in 1937. The principle of "new objectivity" – the photography substitute for the real product advertised as perfectly as possible – is the main requirement for the then advertising photography where details play an important role. He mentions the arrival of some new techniques like solarization, American retouch, mirroring on glass surfaces and possibilities of their use in advertising creation.

Pavel Coufalík and Lada Hubatová-Vacková focus on *The Neon Glow: Illuminated Electrical Advertisements, Kinetic and Reflector Games*. We can't forget remembering František Křížík, who was first to light up the Czech lands with electric light at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His Light Fountain in the Czech General Global Exhibition in Prague in 1891 was a magical picture of the new

world of modernity. Křížík's arc lamp heralds a new era in terms of a gradual electrification and system of urban lighting as well as playfulness of neon advertising images in the Czech lands. The use of electricity in the retail network enabled significantly extending the time of contact of the potential buyer with the offer of goods in shop windows, "theatre" scenography arrangement of products and accompanying information, use of colour, and mechanical movement in the shop window (moving mannequins, revolving platforms, etc.). The authors underline the contribution of Zdeněk Pešánek, a prominent figure advocating the new urban atmosphere with the use of electric lighting and colourful shining neon tubes. Many examples document the communication power of light as a phenomenon concentrating the attention of passing-by potential consumers to the lighted object, sign or building.

Neon started to appear in our country around 1925. The authors pay attention to the inspirational and systematic contribution of the Electrotechnical plants of Prague city and of the Municipality of the City of Prague (Patera) aiming to use light rationally and meaningfully in advertising communication by the city. They mention the successful lighting realization – in particular, for department stores, creating light orientation elements in the city. The new possibilities for the application of lighted advertising panels naturally led to the rise of specialist firms – *Reklamon* in Kolín, *Neon* in Prague and in other towns across

the country. In its advertisement from 1935, the Prague firm declares it has already designed and installed 3,192 neon advertisements. The new possibilities of neon, primarily, in terms of the variety of colours and shape diversity of the light image allow a much more concentrated work with the attention of passers-by – constant light flow, pulsation, colour changes – all of that resulting in a different street atmosphere. Wenceslas Square of the 30s – as documented by contemporary photos – was a city boulevard full of light and colour.

Baťa founded their own electrical department with the standardized making of neon signs for the company's network of stores within the approved corporate. *The Baťa Department Store* on Wenceslas Square in Prague was an example of the brilliant advertising use of light and neon in a prestigious brand and corporate advertising of the whole building. *Brouk a Babka* was another company working with illuminated advertisements in the same style. The contemporary professional journals – especially, those dedicated to window dressing activity – brought examples of good and bad installations of neon. The vocational schools – SUŘ Brno and ŠUR Bratislava – paid attention in their curriculum to the basic principles of the application of neon advertising (Z. Pešánek, Z. Rossmann, F. Reichental).

The last study by Iva Knobloch is dedicated to new forms of typo-advertising in public space. The author revives the term:

typo-advertising used by Jindra Vichnar, a graphic artist in his book *TYPOADVERTISING* published in 1934. He works with the typography of advertising message, which, thanks to new technologies has new possibilities for an effective impact, especially in the context of other informative elements. Just remember how, e.g., *the Devětsil*, Russian Avant-Garde work with typeface and text, how František Halas in 1941 positively spoke about the links between poetry and advertising (methods, work with detail, atmosphere, etc.) to see that contemporary theory and practice attached great importance to the creative process of work with text. Creation of a typeface was perceived as an important creative activity and high art schools pay intensive attention to the typeface, its creation, with context and journals and books devoted to this topic being published (K. Teige, S. Tusar, K. Herain O. Menhart, J. Baruch, Z. Rykr, J. Solar, Z. Chodounský).

It is beyond doubt that the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague has achieved a great thing by the publishing of the book *THEATRE OF THE STREET*, looking at the advertising activities of the 1<sup>st</sup> Republic through the eyes of art historians and theoreticians and brings, in many aspects in new contexts, a number of revealing views and evaluations of the dynamically developing advertising world. The book, published simultaneously in Czech and in English, includes hundreds of

contemporary photos and drawings, and will definitely take the premier place in libraries of advertising creative professionals.

#### Reviewed Book

HUBATKOVÁ-VACKOVÁ, L. (ed.): *THEATRE OF THE STREET - Advertising and Window Display within the Context of Modernism 1918-1938*. Prague : Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, 2021. ISBN 978-80-88308-43-0.

#### Inserted drawings: Eva Kořátková

#### Author of the Review

Prof. PhDr. Dušan Pavlů, CSc.  
dusan151@seznam.cz

AMASIA EXPO  
Agentura pro výzkum efektivnosti  
veletrhů a výstav  
Paříkova 362/3  
19000 Prague 9  
CZECH REPUBLIC

