

Prague's experimental stage: Laboratory of theatre and semiotics*

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Abstract

The theoretical works of the Prague School's structuralist thought, which became the basis of the contemporary semiotics of drama and performance, were often inspired by concurrent artistic experiments. This contribution features a few theoretical concepts such as aktualizace, semantic gesture, stage figure, and their connection with the contemporary stage practice, especially the work of the Liberated Theatre, which made 'a specific contribution to the anti-illusionist theatre of the European avant-garde.'

Keywords: aktualizace; semantic gesture; stage figure; puppets; gestures.

The cry searches for the sign when the latter has lost its memory.

Today, the performance styles and themes of gestural theatre are becoming diversified and there is greater concern for the image and the object ...

—Lecoq (1996: 141, 143)

The semiotician of theatre and drama Keir Elam seems to describe the Prague School of Semiotics when he states: 'The semiotics of drama was born in Europe and in some ways born out of European theatrical practice' (Elam 2002: 199). Between the wars, Prague, located at 'the crossroads between east and west as well as north and south' (Veltruský 1994: 27), was one of the most important centers of modern theatre. Until 1938, it continued to be a meeting point where theorists and practitioners reacted to impulses coming from various directions, exchanged their ideas freely (Winner 1976: 434; Veltruský 1994: 30), and were well-informed about contemporary trends abroad. Moreover, Prague's highly original

stage experiments and their theoretical reflections of the 1930s and mid-1940s might be indicative of the potential development in Russia and Germany where, at the same time, the political systems disrupted the innovative stage practice and thoughts about drama and theatre.

Questions of literary theory, semiotics, sociology of literature, general aesthetics, and literary history were addressed by the *Pražský lingvistický kroužek* [Prague Linguistic Circle] (PLK) founded in 1926 in the fertile atmosphere of Prague after the First World War. In spite of its name, its members did not concern themselves merely with linguistic problems. Quite the opposite, as much as the art opened up to a variety of trends, PLK also incorporated the ideas of German and Czech aesthetics, phenomenology, Saussurean semiology, and Russian Formalism into a specific brand of Prague school structuralism, thus creating a transnational association of scholars and artists. In fact, PLK's creation of connections between theory and art, specifically theatre, is reminiscent of the relationship between Russian Futurism and its theoretical treatment by the Formalists. Correspondingly, the budding theory of performance and drama was not merely a domain of the theorists. Directors Emil František Burian, Jindřich Honzl, and other practitioners conceptualized their practical experience. On the other hand, there was the scholar Petr Bogatyrev, who carried over 'the concept of language phenomena to art' (Deák 1976: 90) and extended his examination of Russian folklore to Czech and Slovak folk theatre, who saw some of his ideas transformed in stage productions. That, for instance, was the case of E. F. Burian's program composed of folk poetry and songs called *Vojna* [The War] (1935). In a similar case, Burian's stage adaptation of *Krysař* [Ratcatcher]¹, a story by Viktor Dyk, in turn inspired the seminal study of dialogue and monologue by Jan Mukařovský.

The program notes of Burian's stage that appear until 1941, offer a great insight into the cooperation between this theatre and its audience, as well as the contemporaneous theory of PLK. In fact, some seminal studies by the 'linguists' Jakobson and Bogatyrev as well as by Mukařovský were presented there as written versions of their public lectures, some organized by Burian's theatre. Toward the end of the 1930s, the journal of the Prague School *Slovo a Slovesnost* [Word and Verbal Art] published a number of articles dealing with crucial questions of drama and performance. Another example of the mutual attraction of Czech stage and its theory is a book celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Liberated Theatre, with important articles from, for instance, Jakobson, the director Honzl, and the writer Vladislav Vančura (Voskovec and Werich 1937). Furthermore, local Czech and German media informed their readers on a regular basis about public lectures organized by PLK.

After the Munich accord of 1938, Jakobson, Bogatyrev, and many others had to leave Czechoslovakia. PLK, however, managed to continue its activity throughout the war, publishing even more of the most influential contributions on drama and theatre. Yet, stages such as the Liberated Theatre and Burian's theatre ceased to exist, never to be fully restored.

Following the Communist takeover in 1948, Czechoslovakia became suddenly part of the so-called Eastern Bloc where structuralism was branded as a bourgeois pseudoscience, formalism became an invective, and cosmopolitanism became a dangerous accusation. In the 1960s, however, the work of the PLK was taken up successfully by a new generation of scholars (Doležel, Červenka, Jankovič, Chvatík) and artists (Vyskočil, Havel, Grossman, Radok, Krejča, Kraus), who revisited the experiments and thoughts of their predecessors only to be censored again after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Hence, what Mukařovský suggests with regard to the relationship between literary science and literature applies also to the theory and theatre of the 1930s and the 1960s:

Between literary science and literature of the same time is necessarily a close relationship. That is to say, contemporary poetry is for literary science such primary material, which ensures that the theorist projects the work on the background of the same topical tradition as that of the poet and his generation. This is because this poetry condenses the communicative function in the poetic work to a minimum, reveals its formative medium, loves experiment. (Mukařovský, quoted in Novák 1932: 2n, my translation)

The cooperation between theatre and theory created 'theatre semiotics *in statu nascendi*' as the Polish semiotician Sławińska (2002) calls the Prague School. Quinn speaks about 'an ongoing, original approach to theatre study . . . shaping the emerging discipline of theatre theory' (1995: 2). In contrast, Deák claims that 'it is impossible to talk about structuralist theory of theatre' (1976: 94).² Yet as Veltruský says:

The different members of the Prague Linguistic Circle never conceived their writings about the theatre as organic parts of a single, gradually constructed doctrine. In fact, although they all belonged . . . to the same school of thought, they held widely differing views. It is only in retrospect that the sum of their writings can be perceived as a theory. (Veltruský 1981: 227)

In spite of the variety of connections between theatre and the nascent semiotics of drama and theatre, there are, to my knowledge, only a few studies on this topic. Most importantly Veltruský (1994) and Quinn (1995) refer to this bond and so does the German theatre semiotician

Schmid (1990). Jarka Burian's work (2000, 2002) introduces the corresponding stage experiments to the English reader, but does not mention their correlation with the theoretical output of the PLK. Moreover, a comprehensive collection of relevant texts by theorists and practitioners is not available in English or Czech.

The synergy of the concurrent cultural trends and PLK, however, certainly merits such an anthology and a separate lengthy study. The present contribution merely introduces a few theoretical concepts such as *aktualizace*, semantic gesture, stage figure, and dynamic and static signs and their connection with the contemporary stage practice, especially the work of the Liberated Theatre that made 'a specific contribution to the anti-illusionist theatre of the European avant-garde' (Schmid 1990: 106).

Like any historical investigation, this one also pursues its topic with a skewed optic. Inspired by the Czech literary historian Felix Vodička and his analysis of 'concretization' as 'the reflection of a work in the consciousness of those for whom it is an esthetic object' (Vodička 1982: 110), it attempts to uncover the past as a way of understanding the present stage practice and dramatic production, as well as to theorize it. To use the words of Doležel, 'If there is a lesson to be learned from historicism, it is this: that the past was what the present is — an actual space in which living people pursue intentional acting' (Doležel 1998: 800). Hence, the theoretical works reveal not only the complexity of the Prague school's structuralist thought, but they are also an important source of information about contemporary artifacts, and the historical context in which they emerged.

The works of the theorists, which reflect these experiments, are a collective effort (Veltruský 1981: 225–235) inasmuch as they refer to each other as well as focus on related problems, discuss each other's work, apply each other's terminology, thus reflecting the questions of communication in a 'communal' language.³ Corresponding with the tendency of that period to apply scientific approaches to literature and art in general and to create a new science, the synergy between some scholars and contemporary dramatic art resulted not only in 'a laboratory of Czech theatre' (Vančura 1990: 69) but also created a laboratory of theatre and drama semiotics.

1. Laboratory of theatre

Throughout the nineteenth century, theatre in Bohemia had mostly been a surrogate political arena for national and nationalistic arguments. But after 1918, when the first Czechoslovak republic had been established

as an independent full-fledged autonomous political system, the focus of interest shifted from ethnic to social issues, from history to utopian and dystopian treatment of time.⁴ The international acclaim of Čapek's *R.U.R.* heralded new modes in drama and theatre, breaking the illusion as well as the primacy of the word, fragmenting text and action, focusing on rhythm, and placing a new status of music and set design.⁵ Culture, in general, opened up to all kinds of trends and experiments regardless of their origin.⁶ Admittedly, corresponding with the revolutionary spirit after the end of the war, the impact of Russian art and staging practice was prominent.⁷ However, as the theoretician Teige argues, the artists of Prague went beyond their Russian colleagues achieving

a new theatre poetry, bare of any ideology, literature, psychology, and sentimentality. They made a real game out of theatre play, a hazardous game, a scientific game, a social game, in line with the circumstances, from case to case, difficult like the chess game, cheerful and dainty as tennis, and devastating as a poker game. This new stage lyricism . . . corresponds with those tendencies of modern poets . . . that we call Poetism. (Teige 1966: 162, my translation)⁸

Poetism as the only exclusively Czech artistic trend designates a blend between Dada and Surrealism. It emerged in the group *Devětsil* (literally 'Nine powers,' the word denotes the plant butterbur)⁹ founded in 1920 'devoted to revolution in art, life, and politics' (French 1969: 21), which became the epitome of Czech avant-garde. Organized in Prague as an association of young, prevalently Marxist artists (poets, critics, musicians, architects, and painters), *Devětsil* was first a platform for proletarian art. However, by creating poetism it soon responded to the revolutionary tendency in its own lyrical and ludic manner. The peak of the poetism movement lasted roughly between 1924 and 1929 and incorporated impulses from elsewhere, e.g., Bauhaus, Dada, and Surrealism. Elements of popular culture and the so-called submerged cultural values (*pokleslé umění, gesunkenes Kulturgut*)¹⁰ such as circus, jazz, boxing, and pulp fiction were other means of debunking the traditional didactic function of theatre and art as moral institution.¹¹

In 1925, *Devětsil* created *Osvobozené divadlo* [Liberated Theatre] as its stage. Teige alludes to its name when he proclaims that the aim of the theatre is:

. . . to liberate theatre. To get rid of all academic prejudices, negate all the obsolete recipes and rules that confine the expansion of the poetic fantasy, reject all decorations . . . to organize the play/game independently of literature and author's text, which is for a modern director merely material that has to be executed. (Teige 1966: 160, my translation)

Directors of the Liberated Theatre, Burian, Honzl, and Frejka, rejected realistic or psychological theatre as well as the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. They saw the performance as ‘an independent and integral poem, as the art of life spectacle, not as an organic compilation of different arts’ (Teige 1966: 161). This tendency became more prominent after 1927 when the Liberated Theatre was considered synonymous with its authors and actors Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich. Their acronym V+W became a brand name for a specific type of theatre, one that, according to the Viennese critic and writer Torberg, is ‘... in Germany divided up among six or eight different types of theatre, revue, and cabaret. From Bert Brecht to Paul Nikolaus, from Erich Kästner to Fritz Grünbaum’ (Torberg 1965: 126, my translation). Referring to the play *Osel a stin* (Voskovec and Werich 1965 [1933])¹², Max Brod raves about it juxtaposing an antic model (Lucian) and immediate reality, and claims that the play is ‘better (and to boot merrier) than the best work of this genre — The Beggars’ Opera’ (quoted in Torberg 1965: 124).¹³

Despite the divergence of the epic tendency in Brecht’s theatre and the poetist one of the Liberated Theatre, they shared the leftist position of artists whose work subscribed to collective cooperation of actors, dramatists, musicians, choreographers, and stage designers, and who, respectively, created their own specific version of anti-illusionist theatre.¹⁴ They each incorporated the tradition of popular culture such as, in Brecht’s case, the performances of comedian Karl Valentin and the so-called *Moritat*, songs reporting about topical issues, often gruesome crimes. The Liberated Theatre revived the practice of clowns and *commedia dell’arte*¹⁵ as witnessed by the Russian director Meyerhold (cf. Worall 1989) who attended a performance of the Liberated Theatre in 1936:

In 1913, my friend, the late poet Apollinaire, took me to the Cirque Medrano. After what we’d seen that night, Apollinaire exclaimed: ‘These performers — using the means of the *commedia dell’arte* — are saving theatre for artists, actors and directors’ ... Only tonight, October 30, 1936, I saw the ‘zanni’ again in the persons of the unforgettable duo of Voskovec and Werich, and was once more bewitched by performers rooted in the Italian improvised comedy. Long live *commedia dell’arte*! Long live Voskovec and Werich! (Holzknecht 1957: 79, my translation)

V+W questioned the traditional theatre conventions in a ludic way: by mocking well-known texts, events, and figures, and using linguistic games and situation comedy complemented by jazz and modern dance. Although their acting style was inspired by silent movies and slapstick comedies, their unique characters were rather a merge between circus

and commedia dell'arte tradition because of the abstract masks and the improvised dialogues played (not necessarily) in front of the curtain. Originally employed to bridge the changing of the set, these exchanges were soon regarded as an integral part or even the core of their performance. In these rarely recorded, often nonsensical ad libis both actors commented on current issues or on the stage action, hence constantly moving between the fictional world of the stage and the real world delimited by the proscenium.

Exploring 'the epistemology and semantics of fun' Roman Jakobson quotes one such dialogue from *Vest Pocket Revue* that mocks meaningless small talk:

Dust: And this is the best thing, a guy should right away, or like this . . .

Ashes: Yes absolutely . . .

Dust: . . . and by all means . . .

(quoted in Jakobson 1987a: 159)¹⁶

This example shows what Jakobson considers the 'most novel, most original, and most timely contribution' of the duo.¹⁷ Referring to their own early statement, he speaks about a 'free-floating, pure comedy, capable of introducing the viewers into the magical world of absurdity' (Jakobson 1987a: 156), which prefigures the techniques used in the Theatre of the Absurd (see below).¹⁸ In addition, as Veltruský notes with respect to Burian's experimental use of the corridor of his theatre '[t]he extension of the dramatic space into the auditorium is also synonymous with the activation of the audience' (Veltruský 1979: 80) typical of avant-garde stages.

Theatre experiments in Prague, however, were not confined to one stage. Burian, for instance, founded his own theatre company in the early thirties, where he experimented with lyric theatre, using his own invention, the so-called *voice-band*. Affected by jazz, Burian tried to parallel music by using the human voice as an instrument. In 1928, at a festival in Vienna he successfully presented his voice-band, a group of actors reciting poetry, 'wedding poetic text and musical expression' (Burian 1976: 96). He also cast metonymic images as in Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, where the eyes of the heroine were projected over the stage. In general, the artists were addressing an audience willing to participate in their assorted games, hence shifting the semiotic process of 'the communication axis from the inner communication between the dramatic characters into an external one between the stage and the audience' also typical for the transition to the Theatre of the Absurd (Schmid 1990: 133).

However, the stage experiments were slowly integrated into the contemporary performance canon, became the ‘aesthetic norm,’ (Mukařovský 1966, 1970) and entered more officially accepted stages such as the National Theatre, as well as the German Theatre in Prague. For instance, K. H. Hillar, the director of the National Theatre in Prague, invited J. Frejka, another director of the original Liberated Theatre, to cooperate. As a result, a number of plays by the former members of Devětsil were staged there. By 1945, as Mukařovský claims, the border between the official and avant-garde theatre was barely perceptible (Mukařovský 2000a: 417). The tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, however, resounded in the theory and practice of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the devices Burian employed were used as a point of departure for his successors, especially the directors Krejča and Radok. The linguistic games of V+W inspired the ‘Text-appeals’ of Vyskočil in the mid-1950s, as well as some techniques in the plays by Havel (see below).

2. Laboratory of theatre semiotics

With respect to the PLK’s contribution to semiotics of theatre and drama, the year 1931 is truly ‘an important date in the history of theatre studies’ (Elam 2002: 5), because of Zich’s *Estetika dramatického umění* [Aesthetics of Dramatic Art]¹⁹ on the one hand and ‘[a]n attempt at a structural analysis of a dramatic figure’ by Mukařovský (1982a, 2000a), on the other.²⁰ One cannot but agree with Elam’s conclusion that ‘the two studies radically changed the prospects for the scientific analysis of theatre and drama’ (Elam 2002: 5).

Zich’s book is a comprehensive examination of the most important aspects of what he considers dramatic art; that is, ‘drama [čínohra] and opera, in short a dramatic work that we perceive [see and hear] during the theatre performance’ (1986: 2). Dramatic work itself ‘consists of two concurrent, inseparable . . . heterogeneous parts, i.e., a visual [optical] and an auditory [acoustic] one’ (Zich 1986: 19). It presents a ‘real action, performed by real people, in a real space and real time’ (Zich 1986: 62).²¹ In addition, each performance is a unique work of art, so that each staging represents different dramatic works about the same text (Zich 1986: 17).

Although Zich did not use the word ‘sign,’ as Procházka remarks, his essentially semiotic work laid the ground for the semiotics of theatre (Procházka 1980: 117). The semiotic approach, however, distinguishes the Prague School from Russian Formalism. In Mukařovský’s words, ‘structuralism superseded Formalism in conceiving the structure as a set of signs’ (Mukařovský 1982b: 78).

... upon entering the theatre, the individual arts renounce their independence, penetrate one another, contradict one another, substitute for one another — in brief 'dissolve,' merging into a new, fully unified art. (Mukařovský 1978b: 205)

In his study on 'Drama as poetic work,'²² Veltruský contested Zich's exclusion of dramatic art from literature:

Theatre is not another literary genre but another art form. It uses language as one of its materials, while for all the literary genres, including drama, language is the only material — though each organizes it in a different fashion. (Veltruský 1977: 9)²³

To Veltruský 'all that is on the stage is a sign' (1964: 84). His contribution to the semiotic theory of theatre as much as that of Bogatyrev, the Russian 'forerunner of structural ethnography' (Součková 1976: 4), was essential. The latter addressed the issue of plurisignation on stage, according to which 'theatrical verbal expression is a structure of signs, composed not only of linguistic signs, but also of other signs' (Bogatyrev 1976b: 41).²⁴ Based on his analysis of folk theatre using costume as an example, he postulated a dichotomy of 'material object and sign' on stage (Bogatyrev 1976a: 20–32). Mukařovský applied this notion of the sign to art in general: 'A work of art draws attention because it is a thing and a sign at the same time' (Mukařovský 1970: 92).

While Veltruský presents a unique 'attempt to work out a structural conception of literary genre' (1977: 7), Zich might be seen as one of the founders of performance studies. Similarly, the aforementioned article on Chaplin by Mukařovský — Zich's successor as a chair of aesthetics at Charles University in Prague — is among the first structuralist studies on contemporary performing arts. Even if this text focuses on film and does not deal with theatre, Mukařovský conceptualizes some aspects essential for any performance analysis not only with regard to 'the icon of modernism,' Charlie Chaplin.²⁵

Moreover, this text is particularly remarkable for its transition between the formalist²⁶ and the budding structuralist theory noticeable particularly in the very first paragraph:

The conception of a work of art as a *structure*, that is a system of components aesthetically *deautomatized* [actualized] and organized into a complex *hierarchy*, which is unified by the *prevalence* of one component over the others ... (Mukařovský 1982a: 171, italics added)

As much as the terms *structure*, esthetical *actualization*, *hierarchy*, and *prevalence* echo the ideas of Russian formalists, they also underwent

crucial modifications by the Prague school. To begin with, Mukařovský's concept of structure develops Tynianov's notion of a system as 'a system of the functions of the literary order which are in continual interrelationship with other orders' (Tynianov 1978: 78). Mukařovský expands this thought: 'for structural esthetics, everything in a work of art and its relation to the environment appears as a sign and meaning. For this reason, structural esthetics is a part of the general theory of signs, or *semiotics*' (Mukařovský 1982b: 76).

Semiotics considers the protean character of the hierarchical principle implied already in the idea of a dominant used by Eikhenbaum²⁷ and presented later by Roman Jakobson.²⁸

Furthermore, it foreshadows the concept of the so-called semantic gesture he developed later as a 'constructional principle which is applied in every segment of the work, even the most minute, and which results in a unified and unifying systematization of all the constituents' (Mukařovský 1948: 239).

According to Striedter it

[p]resupposes the cooperation of the recipient, who from the formal construction of the artifact concretizes the unity of meaning of an aesthetic object, to which unity the subject of the author, as the unifying principle of the work structure, also belongs. (Striedter 1989: 118)²⁹

When Mukařovský concludes his article on Chaplin by stating that Chaplin's gestures are not subservient to other means of expression but dominant with respect to the protagonist's performance and the entire film, he in fact already describes semantic gesture without using the term.³⁰ Furthermore, his analysis is an example of the so-called zigzag method of the Prague linguistic circle that moves back and forth 'between universal categories and concrete descriptions ...' (Doležel 1990: 67). It also sheds light on a shift in modern performing arts in which the habitual central position of the language in, say, realistic drama is replaced by other means of expression on the present-day stage (e.g., projections in Radok's *Magic Lantern*, Pina Bausch's dance performances, Robert Lepage's use of movement and light).

Besides, Mukařovský's study illustrates the interest in film shared by Jakobson (1976) and many artists (Čapek, Vančura, and the Liberated Theatre) of that period. For example, as Honzl asserts, V+W disliked conventional theatre and preferred film (Honzl 1959: 96). Incidentally, their first film *Pudr a benzin* [Face Powder and Gasoline], directed by Honzl, derived part of its action from theatre, since it presented fragments of a theatre performance, thus combining both media and

parodying various genres of both (gangster movies, slapstick comedy, advertisement, vaudeville, and romance). In addition, both actors disrupt the illusion of the film by appearing as fictional characters and as stage actors V+W.

In fact, they reverse the practice of contemporary theatre, which would deserve a separate study. Here it can be summed up briefly: while film moved away from its theatrical heritage, projections on stage became part of theatre experiments (Burian, Eisenstein, Honzl, Meyerhold, and Piscator) for numerous purposes, such as to inform, to illustrate, to replace the set, and to disrupt the action, to defamiliarize, to provide a new point of view, and de-automatize habitual perception (see below). In the case of Burian's stage, they contributed substantially to his notion of lyric theatre, which challenged the audience's imagination and prefigured Radok's famous *Laterna Magika* [Magic Lantern], first presented in Brussels in 1958, which introduced simultaneity of live action, and projections on multiple screens in a performance. Radok achieved remarkable effects by combining the two media.

In addition, the confrontation between film and stage means also a collision between two- and three-dimensional media or, in Zich's terminology, between stable and variable elements. And as Mukařovský observes in 'A note on the aesthetics of film'

The theatrical actor is a living and integral personality clearly distinguished from the inanimate surroundings (the stage and its contents), whereas the consecutive images of the actor ... on the screen are mere components of the total projected picture, just as in painting, for example. (Mukařovský 1978a: 180)

Another aspect of this opposition is the relation between actor and object, which appears most prominently in Veltruský's (1964) article on man and object on stage, but also in texts by Mukařovský (1978b)³¹ and Honzl (1976a, 1976b). All of them speak about the potential interchangeability between man and object so typical of modern theatre.

Mukařovský's comments are clearly informed by the history of the modern stage but also inspired by Zich's notion of actor's figure (see below):

The immobility of a statue and the mobility of a live person is a constant antinomy of the poles between which the dramatic figure oscillates on stage. And when Craig posited his famous requirement of the actor — 'Übermarionette' ... he ... drew attention to this hidden but always present antinomy of the art of acting. What is usually called a 'pose' is clearly a sculptural effect ... the transition between the immobility of a solid mask and the make-up of a modern actor is quite continuous ... (Mukařovský 1978b: 206)

Mentioning Craig, Mukařovský evokes the topic of puppet theatre, to which he himself, along with Zich and Bogatyrev, had been attracted since 1923 (Zich 1987; Mukařovský 1987; Bogatyrev 1923). Implicitly, their interest is indicative of the increased theoretical attention to so-called submerged art and popular culture as well as the shift from a high culture audience to more diversified spectators. Zich stresses that puppets belong to the category of fine arts, a fact that shows an awareness of the proximity and cross-fertilization of different art forms already in the early twenties, i.e., before the manifesto of poetism and the foundation of the Prague School.

The phenomenon of the statue in literature was also addressed in Jakobson's article 'The statue in Pushkin's poetic mythology,' (1987b), which describes a trend widely used in film and on stage (e.g., *Don Giovanni*, *Golem*, *R.U.R.*, *Metropolis*, *City Lights*). As Jakobson notes '[i]n the drama, in the epic poem, and in the fairy tale, the image of the animated statue evokes the opposite images of *rigidified people*' (1987b: 326).

In a study of Disney's *Snow White*, Bogatyrev notes that, in contrast to live actors, Disney's characters are endowed only with those traits that are necessary for their role. A similar observation is also true of the puppet which is 'pure sign, because all of its components are intentional' (Veltruský 1994: 198). In 1923, Mukařovský raves about one of the first dramatic presentations of Hašek's novel *The Fortunes of the Good Soldier Švejk* in a puppet production and lists the advantages of such a theater. To Mukařovský, although puppets are rarely individualized, most of them are able 'to keep the audience in tension through ... gestures' (Mukařovský 1987: 36). He describes the reduced repertoire of mimicking signs that he parallels to the use of masks in the theatre of actors and insinuates a parallel between the strings of puppets and the (perhaps) invisible strings that lead our own actions (Mukařovský 1987: 35).

As a result, puppet theatre emphasizes the sign character of the 'actor' and the verbal quality of the text: '... in puppet theatre the stage figure is expressed partially through human voice and partially through a product of fine arts in motion' (Kolar 1987: 169). Most importantly though, in puppet theatre, unless a puppet pretends to be someone else, there is not an *a* that watches *b* who is pretending to be *c* typical of 'normal theatre' because in a puppet performance most of the time the positions of *b* and *c* merge. Hence, such a spectacle is not based on a tension between actor, character, and stage figure, but on the oscillation between the static and the dynamic, between the inorganic material and its animated appearance, between the mechanic and the anthropomorphic performance, and between fine arts (sculpture, painting) and performing arts.

Mukařovský notes another distinctive feature of Chaplin's performance: an 'interference between social gestures-signs and individually expressive gestures' (2000b: 466) that also shapes his mask. The facemasks, which V+W applied, also fluctuated between these two positions (see Schmid 1990 for a detailed discussion) while connecting them with a statue as well (Mukařovský 1978b: 206).

2.1. *Stage figure*

Abstract masks mark a transition from circus clowns to mimes, and accentuate the shifting positions between fictional and actual personae,³² as well as between stage figure and character. They also correspond with Zich's division between the stable and variable features of stage figure. The idea of *herecká postava* [stage figure] is among Zich's most original ones.³³ Zich distinguishes between the figure of the actor 'who appears on the stage and the dramatic character that exists not on the stage but in our consciousness' (Zich 1986: 92). In the words of Zich's editors, Procházka and Osolsobě, the stage figure is the signifier while the dramatic character is the signified (Zich 1986: 341).³⁴ Zich states:

As much as marble is not a sculpture, only shaped marble is, in much the same way, only the shaped actor is the character, with the difference that the actor himself accomplishes the shaping of the character, while being shaped himself. (Zich 1986: 45, my translation)

Based on the fact that in both cases the material of the character and the figure is a living human being, such homogeneity and resemblance between the performed and performing is, as Zich notes, unique in the arts to stagecraft, as well as to some extent to painting.

A deliberate separation between the character and the stage figure became one of the cornerstones of modern theatre, most prominently Brecht's epic theatre works with the instruction of purposefully breaking the illusion by disclosing the distance between the stage figure and the actor in order to prevent the spectator's identification with the characters on stage. V+W achieved a similar effect through their dialogues in front of the curtain. In their talks, they had disrupted the spatial and temporal continuity of the action in addition to establishing direct communication with the audience. They did so, however, without explicitly constructing disbelief and at first also without a clear political aim. Their comic innuendoes with respect to current issues, however, became increasingly

topical and therefore a frequent target of the censor (Kudělová 1997: 349–358).

2.2. *Ostranenie, aktualizace, verfremdung, defamiliarization, distancing, estrangement, foregrounding*

Elam, considers *foregrounding* a significant contribution of PLK: ‘... essentially a spatial metaphor and thus well adapted to the theatrical text’ (2002: 18). Admittedly, the proxemic connotation of the term appears to be ideally suited for semiotics of theatre, yet the meaning of the original denotes a temporal concept rather than the spatial one of the English translation since *aktualizace* literally means ‘topicalization’ and refers to the notion of the de-automatization of automatized words, devices (e.g., faded metaphor), or genres by reintroducing archaisms as well as long forgotten styles, drawing attention to the expression itself and reflecting PLK’s response to literary history. For instance, the revival of commedia dell’arte can be seen as a de-automatization of literary canon and ‘topicalization’ of old performance tradition.³⁵ Although Mukařovský does not explicitly mention *aktualizace* or *defamiliarization* in his Chaplin article, his analysis of Chaplin’s choice of gestures instead of words, especially in the time of sound cinema, points in this direction.

Searching for the dominant of V+W’s *technika komična* [comic technique], Jakobson concludes: ‘Fun in the theatre interferes with the automatism of habit and teaches us anew how to touch, and grasp, and evaluate a thing and a sign’ (Jakobson 1987a: 162).³⁶ Here Jakobson reiterates almost verbatim Shklovsky’s description of *ostranenie* without referring to it directly. *Ostranenie*, a phenomenon of making the familiar strange, distancing, defamiliarization,³⁷ or estrangement was described already by Aristotle.³⁸ The Russian formalist named and described it as follows:

The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way ... to lead us to ‘vision’ of this object rather than mere ‘recognition.’ (Shklovsky 1990: 13)

Ostranenie entered the vocabulary of literary theory as a distancing device used to impede habitual perception, thus making the audience/recipient see things anew. Incidentally, Shklovsky bases his explanation of *ostranenie* on a theatre performance that the character Natasha Rostova in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* watches without entering the expected contract between the audience and the stage, described by Coleridge as

suspension of disbelief. In contrast, by using Natasha's perspective, Tolstoy shows her disbelief; the heroine does not perceive the fictional *as if* world of the opera but sees the real world of the stage and, as a result, finds the performed action comic as does the reader of the novel who is made aware of this defamiliarization or distancing.

The quote from the dialogues by V+W mentioned above is another example of a similar process. They actualized different types of habitual use of language, hence producing what Jakobson calls *švanda* [fun]. It is this tradition, which two decades later was resumed by the small stages, which mushroomed in the Prague of the late fifties. Plays and poems by Havel were among the most important representatives of fun on stage, being based on linguistic games similar to the 'subjectless' comic of V+W poking fun at the contemporary catchphrase free from an explicit meaning. In addition, and using again Chaplin as a point of departure, Havel's essay on the anatomy of the gag appears to continue the thoughts of both Mukařovský and Shklovsky: 'The real subject of defamiliarization is . . . in the end the automatism of reality. The gag defamiliarizes one automatism by another' (Havel 1984: 17). Havel applies Shklovsky's thought, the theory of Russian formalists and Prague structuralists, to explain the phenomenon of the gag, which he develops in his dramatic work by continuing the poetic tradition of the Liberated Theatre. Havel makes the technique of the formulaic exchanges without a unifying subject of the dialogue the dominant device of his first play *Zahradní slavnost* [The Garden Party, 1963], where the protagonist — by questioning the basic deictic definition of a character — acts as a subject and object of both, of construction as well as of destruction of his own identity:

'Me? You mean who am I? Now look here, I don't like this one-sided way of putting questions, I really don't! You think one can ask in this simplifying way? . . . Truth is just as complicated and multiform as everything else in the world . . . and we all are a little bit what we were yesterday and a little bit what we're today; and also a little bit we are not these things. Anyway, we are all a little bit all the time and all the time we are not a little bit . . . some only are, some are only, and some are only not so that none of us entirely is and at the same time each one of us is not entirely . . . Check-mate!' (Havel 1969: 73–74)

Examples such as the last substantiate the relevance of the laboratory of theatre and drama and theatre semiotics for Havel and many other artists and theorists beyond its initial experimental stage. In fact, contemporary performance practice and theory places Prague not only at the geographical crossroads but also at a temporal intersection between past and present. Hence, as Doležel states, 'The Prague School project is not a historical monument, but a guide for the future' (1999: 23).

Notes

- * An earlier version of this article appeared in Czech in an unauthorized translation from English in Ambros (2004). I wish to thank Dr. Julie Adam for her suggestions and help.
1. It is a loose adaptation of the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.
 2. He says: 'The potential of structuralism in theatre was never fully tested by the Czech structuralists or by contemporary French and Italian structuralists and semioticians' (Deák 1976: 94).
 3. Elam concludes that what the Anglo-Saxon 'theatre semiotics and theatre practice did not have in common was precisely a semiotic medium, i.e., a shared language' (Elam 2002: 201).
 4. Josef Čapek's neologism *robot* was used here for the first time.
 5. The staging in Berlin for which Kiesler created the set belongs to the most innovative performances of modern theatre. According to Goldberg, '[i]t was a theatrical concept to create tension in space' (Goldberg 1988: 116).
 6. Vodička differentiates between the periods of so-called widening, i.e., the period in question and that of so-called narrowing, in which art focuses on regional and mostly indigenous impulses (cf. Vodička 1965: 47–53).
 7. Jarka Burian maintains that the Czech stages in the twenties were French in content and Russian in staging (Burian 1976).
 8. Teige uses the homonymous quality of the Czech word *hra*, which denotes both a game and a play, i.e., drama.
 9. The name alludes to the nine muses and, according to Seifert, refers to the fact that the organization originally brought together nine artists representing different branches of art (Seifert 1981: 152; Schonberg 1988: 23).
 10. Bogatyrev speaks with respect to *gesunkenes Kulturgut* [submerged cultural commodity] about the constant permutation of 'high' art and popular art (Bogatyrev 1976c: 53).
 11. Honzl (1959: 95) traces German models in this tendency of Czech theatre.
 12. The translation of the title *Osel a stín* is difficult as the Czech word *stín* means both 'shade' and 'shadow.'
 13. Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928).
 14. Piscator's staging of *The Fortunes of the Good Soldier Schweik* or Burian's theatre, which was conceived as a cooperative.
 15. They had two indigenous predecessors: the farce *Stará Historie* [The Old Story; 1883] by the Czech poet Zeyer, and the first one-act play of the Čapek brothers, *Lásky hra osudná* [The Fateful Game of Love, 1910–1911]. It was Zeyer's text that confirmed the genre was staged by Karel Čapek in 1921. In contrast, *Lásky hra osudná* mocks the conventions of commedia dell'arte. The text does not conclude with the anticipated happy ending, but with the death of one of the suitors, turning the comedy into a tragedy, hence presenting a parody of the genre. Instead of traditional masks, the characters wear makeup that evokes the prototypes of the Italian original. Yet, since the Čapeks call Dottore and Scaramouche *loutky* [puppets] and the play itself a *rozumové marionetářství* [rational marionettery] (Černý 2000: 28), they seem to play with a more recent stage convention, namely with Craig's notion of *Übermarionette*. Čapek's characters do not improvise, but are given static characteristics and masks. Their stiff behavior foreshadows the robots and the concurrent dehumanization of human beings in Čapek's *R. U. R.*, also performed in 1921.
 16. They make fun of the contemporary journal *Naše řeč* [Our Language or Speech], which provoked the PLK into the series of lectures on language published in Havránek and Weingart (1932).

17. See Jakobson (1971 [1937]) translated into English with a short commentary by Quinn in Jakobson (1987a). The original was a contribution to a collection of articles celebrating the first decade of the Liberated Theater.
18. The term 'free-floating' comedy used in Quinn's translation replaces the Czech expression *bezpředmětná komika*, which means roughly 'subjectless comic approach,' and which implies the absence of any reference or explicit target, hence activating the imagination of the audience.
19. It is a remarkable book that would not pass for a scholarly publication today, since Zich weaves in ideas of other authors without indicating his sources in any way. It consists of three parts: the first focuses on dramatic art, the second part deals with the dramatic principle, and the third one introduces the principle of stylization. Procházka and Osolsobě, the editors of the 1986 edition, provided an extensive commentary in which they tried to trace at least some of the origins of Zich's ideas. Sus provided some insightful observations in his preface for the 1977 reprint. Zich (1879–1934) who, apart from mathematics and physics, also studied aesthetics and music was not only a professor of aesthetics but also a composer whose operas were performed at the National Theater in Prague. By the way, his book, although published in 1931, contains studies written as early as 1913. Unfortunately, this important book has not been published in English, so that English readers have to rely on a small number of studies devoted to Zich such as Steiner (1984), Sus (1973), and Winner (1989).
20. The English title in Mukařovský (1982a) omits the reference to Chaplin and to *City Lights*.
21. Here Zich comes close to the ideas of his Polish colleague Roman Ingarden (1958); however, although *Das literarische Kunstwerk* [The Literary Work of Art, 1931] was published in the same year as Zich's work, Ingarden's appendix on dramatic art was added only to the 1960 edition.
22. This is the original title of Veltruský's study published in the collection of articles by the members of the Prague linguistic circle under the title 'Drama jako básnické dílo' ['Drama as poetic work'] in Havránek and Mukařovský (1942: 401–502).
23. This is a revised English version of the Czech original included in the collection mentioned above.
24. *Znaky divadelní* [Theater signs] in the original title (Bogatyrev 1938) is erroneously translated as 'semiotics.'
25. This is the subtitle of a collection of articles on Chaplin by leading theorists and artists of the twentieth century (cf. Kimmich 2003).
26. Quinn speaks about a 'formalist twist' (1989: 79, 1995: 74).
27. 'That which underlies the organization of any poetic style' Eikhenbaum (1971 [1927]).
28. 'The dominant can be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components. The dominant specifies the work. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure' (Jakobson 1971 [1935]: 82). This is from the Czech text of an originally unpublished lecture on the Russian Formalist school presented in 1935.
29. Here Striedter addresses an important shift typical of the PLK. He refers to the transition from the formalists' 'dominant' within the literary work to the structuralist concept of 'semantic gesture,' which presupposes the activity of the recipient and — as with Vodička's 'concretization' — foreshadows the reader response theories. Deák also writes '... the conceptual unity of semantic composition from the smallest unit to the general features of the work which locates it in the context of esthetic norms and values as well as in the social and political context' (Deák 1976: 90).
30. The cinema theorist and film critic Kracauer (2003) stresses Chaplin's gestures as well.

31. Mukařovský (1978b) was initially given as a lecture at the Circle of Friends of D41 published in Program D41, 1941.
32. References to their real names, for example in *Pudr a benzín* [Face Powder and Gasoline], expose this polarity and the popularity of both comedians four years after their stage debut.
33. The literal meaning of 'actor's figure or persona' has been replaced in English with 'stage figure.' More on the concept itself in Quinn (1989: 78) and more recently in Meerzon (2005).
34. The aforementioned dichotomy between an aesthetic object and a work of art explored later by Mukařovský.
35. 'In poetic language, foregrounding [i.e., aktualizace] achieves maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication into the background ... it is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place into the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself' (Mukařovský 1983: 168; originally in Havránek and Weingart 1932: 123–149). This concept, by the way, anticipates the notion of aesthetic function developed later by Mukařovský. Jakobson uses a very similar formulation to present his idea of poetic function, in his famous 'Linguistics and poetics.'
36. There is no reference to theatre in the original.
37. Hawthorn claims: 'Nowadays, foregrounding and defamiliarization are often used interchangeably' (1992: 35).
38. A detailed account of the history of this topic in the context of theatre can be found in Jestrovic (2006).

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