

Structuralist Literary Theory

NARD50

French Structuralism

- **what:** school of literary criticism and semiotics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, architecture...
- **where:** France, Paris
- **when:** 1960's – 1980's
- **who:** Gerard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov, Claude Bremond, A. J. Greimas, Roland Barthes...
- **sources:** structural linguistics of F. de Saussure and the subsequent schools of linguistics + structural anthropology of C. Lévi–Strauss + Russian Formalist School

Ferdinand de Saussure

(1857 – 1913)

- Swiss linguist and semiotician
- studied in Geneva, Leipzig and Berlin – Latin, Ancient Greek, Celtic and Sanskrit
- lectured on Sanskrit and Indo-European at the University of Geneva and also the Course of General Linguistics

Cours de linguistique générale (1916)

- published posthumously by former students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye

Structural Linguistics

- crucial concept: *linguistic sign* – consists of two components: a "signified" is meaning or concept, while the "signifier" is a means of expressing the signified, the sound pattern
- *sign* is thus an arbitrary (there is no direct connection between the shape and the concept) association of signifier and signified
- signs can be defined only by being placed in contrast with other signs
- SL – views language as a synchronic structure consisting of parts and their dynamic relationships

Claude Lévi-Strauss

(1908 – 2009)

- French anthropologist and ethnologist
- studied law and philosophy in Paris, practiced anthropology in Brazil and in the USA, taught anthropology in Paris
- *Structural Anthropology* and *The Savage Mind* and *Mythologiques*: application of language structuralism on savage societies, cultures and their myths (binary oppositions of units, structures, dynamicity, functionalism, idiosyncraticity...)

Claude Lévi-Strauss

(1908 – 2009)

- the paradox of myths: *“On the one hand it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. [...] But on the other hand, this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions. Therefore the problem: If the content of myth is contingent [i.e., arbitrary], how are we to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar?”*
- the reason is the mythical thought: *“Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution.”*

Structural Anthropology

- based on C. L.–S.'es idea that immutable deep structures exist in all cultures, and consequently, that all cultural practices have homologous counterparts in other cultures
- based on the dialectics: Lévi-Strauss argued that cultures think about the world in terms of binary opposites - such as *high* and *low*, *inside* and *outside*, *person* and *animal*, *life* and *death*
- cultures can be studied through their myths
- myths can be analyzed, described and compared
- myths consist of elements and parts which are connected in sequences in variable orders and constellations

Structuralist Literary Criticism

- **presumption:** there exists a general “grammar of literature” which determines all literary artworks and can be revealed
- **tools:** this structure can be examined by tools and strategies derived from the tool we use in linguistics + semiology, the science of signs
- **goal:** uncovering basic deep elements in stories, myths, and more recently, anecdotes, which are combined in various ways to produce the many versions of the ur-story or ur-myth

Birth of Narratology

- the term was firstly used by Tzvetan Todorov, who argued for a shift in focus from the surface level of text-based narrative (i.e. concrete discourse as realized in the form of letters, words and sentences) to the general logical and structural properties of narrative
- Todorov thus called for a new type of generalizing theory that could be applied to all domains of narrative
- special issue of the journal *Communications* (1966), programmatically titled “L’analyse structurale du récit” contained articles by leading structuralists Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Gerard Genette, A. J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, Christian Metz...

Classical Narratology

- **narratology** is a humanities discipline dedicated to the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation
- during its initial or “classical” phase, from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, narratologists were particularly interested in identifying and defining narrative universals
- systematic re-examination of the two dimensions of narrative already identified by Shklovsky, *fabula* and *sujet*, re-labeled by Todorov in French as *histoire* and *discours* and by Genette as *histoire* and *récit*

Narratology – Sources

- the most influential contribution from a narratological perspective was the formalist differentiation of *fabula* and *sujet*
- Plato's fundamental distinction between diegesis and mimesis anticipated the 20th-century opposition *showing vs. telling* and also prefigured analytical dimensions adopted by Genette
- Propp's *functional model* served as a fundamental point of reference for the elaboration of “story grammars”

Tzvetan Todorov

(1939 – 2017)

- French-Bulgarian historian, philosopher, literary critic...
- studied philology in Sofia and Paris

Théorie de la littérature, textes des formalistes russes (1965)

- the first introduction of formalist thoughts to French public
- translation of essential Russian formalist texts into French, which had a strong influence on establishing the French structural literary theory and narratology (Shklovsky, Jakobson, Tynianov, Eichenbaum, Propp, Vinogradov, Brik...)

Categories of literary narration **(1966)**

“Categories of literary narration” (*Communications*, 1966)

- introduces the crucial division between *story* and *discourse* (highly influenced by the formalist division between *fabula* and *sujet*, but not the same!)
- every narrative can be viewed as a story (actions, characters) or as a discourse (time, narrator): “At the most general level, the literary work has two aspects: it is at the same time a story [*histoire*] and a discourse [*discours*]. It is story, in the sense that it evokes a certain reality [...]. But the work is at the same time discourse [...]. At this level, it is not the events reported which count but the manner in which the narrator makes them known to us.”

Grammaire du "Décameron"

(1969)

- unified theory of narration = grammar of stories – an universal grammar underlying all languages and signifying systems
- “This universal grammar is the source of all universals and it gives definition even to men himself. Not only all languages but all signifying systems obey the same grammar. It is universal not only because it informs all the languages of the universe, but because it coincides with the structure of the universe itself.”
- “The grammar of narrative has three primary categories which are: the proper name, the adjective and the verb.” – syntactically the proper name correspond to the agent, the adjective corresponds to predicates ascribable to the agent, the verb corresponds to the actions performed by the agent

Grammaire du "Décameron" (1969)

- plot unit shown as a clause;
- characters as proper nouns; with adjectives; three actions as verbs – violate, punish, avoid
- actions with different statuses (e.g. negation)
- modality – legends – imperative, fairy tale – optative, a wish
- relations between clauses (e.g. causal, temporal, spatial);
- common sequence of a group of stories (punishment avoided)

Grammaire du "Décaméron" (1969)

- further analysis suggested:
- a. more concrete analysis of syntax -- each clause can be written as an entire sentence;
- b. thematic study: study the concrete actions;
- c. rhetoric study: examines the verbal medium
- goal – not knowledge of *Decameron* but an understanding of literature and plot

Poétique de la prose (1971)

- an outline of Todorov's own theory of prose – collected essays (1964-1969)
- “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?”
- “Though James's theoretical ideal may have been a narrative in which everything is subservient to the psychology of the characters, it is difficult to ignore a whole tendency in literature, in which the actions are not there to “illustrate” character but in which, on the contrary, the characters are subservient to the action; where, moreover, the word “character” signifies something altogether different from psychological coherence or the description of idiosyncrasy.”

Poétique de la prose (1971)

- Poetics and Criticism (plea for separating the task of poetics from that of practical criticism)
- Language and Literature (poetics must make use of modern linguistics but that, equally, literary categories must play a formative role in our grasp of the full nature of language)
- Introduction to Verisimilitude (the concept of referentiality of the literary work is replaced by the notions of vraisemblance and self-referentiality and verisimilitude has as its meaning the way in which one text or discourse is consistent with or coheres with another text and every attempt to seek some truth other than this will only run into another verisimilitude)
- How to Read?"(reading is distinguished from projection and commentary).
- The Grammar of Narrative, Narrative Transformations, Narrative Men (examine the modes of emplotment, that is, the kinds of plot found in narrative fiction, in order to develop a grammar of plots)

Algirdas Julien Greimas

(1917 – 1972)

- French-Lithuanian literary theoretician, semiotician and linguist
- inspired by the work of V. Y. Propp and C. Lévi-Strauss, L. Hjelmslev, L. Tesnière
- studied in Kaunas (law), Grenoble (linguistics) and Sorbonne (lexicography)
- taught at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris

Sémantique structurale: recherche et méthode (1966)

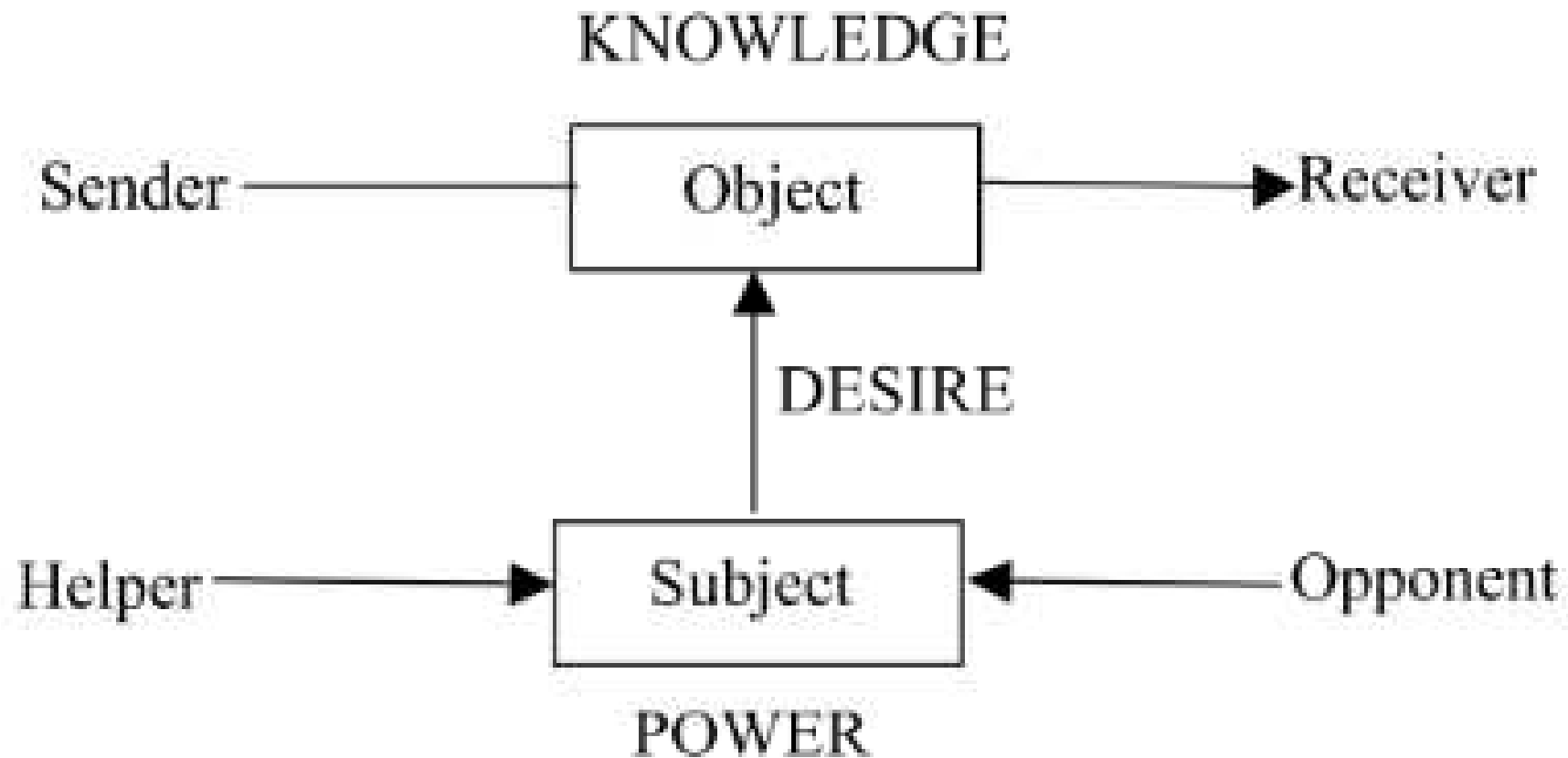
Sémantique structurale: recherche et méthode (1966)

- aim: to establish a general semiotic system – semiotics is understood as "a hierarchy that can be subjected to analysis and the elements of which can be determined by reciprocal relations (and by communication)."
- actancial model
- allows us to break an action down into six facets, or actants: *subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, opponent*

Sémantique structurale: recherche et méthode (1966)

- actants are divided into three oppositions, each of which forms an axis
- **axis of desire: (1) subject / (2) object**
- **axis of power: (3) helper / (4) opponent**
- **axis of knowledge: (5) sender / (6) receiver**
- idiosyncraticity: single element may be found in one, several, or even all actantial classes – actantial syncretism occurs when a single element, known as an actor (such as a character in the traditional sense of the word), "contains" several actants from different classes (for example, subject and helper simultaneously) or several actants from the same class that have separate actions

Sémantique structurale: recherche et méthode (1966)



Claude Bremond

(1929)

- French semiotician and literary scholar, inspired by the work of V. Y. Propp and C. Lévi-Strauss

La logique du récit (1973)

La logique du récit (1973)

- adopts the functional point of view, connects functions to particular characters: defines a function in terms of the action a character takes and its effect on the story
- *actions* are called *processes* and characters are either agents or patients: agent initiates a process, patient is affected by a process
- function is the relation between a character and a process and its effect on the unfolding of the narrative

La logique du récit (1973)

- process is divided into 3 steps: eventuality, action, result
- when a patient undergoing a process, receives influences that motivate them to act (initiate a process), they becomes a potential agent of the new (potential) process and when an agent initiates a process whose end result might modify the agent's own state, they becomes the potential patient of that (potential) process
- the potentialities are applied to each part of an action (eventuality, action, result) as well as each possible role(patient agent)

Gerard Genette

(1930 – 2018)

- French literary theoretician
- professor of French literature at Sorbonne

Figures I-III (1967-1970, selections of *Figures III* on narratology translated as *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, 1980)

Nouveau discours du récit, (1983, translated as *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 1988)

Fiction et diction (1991)

Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1983)

- canonical and the most influential text of modern structuralist narratology
- primarily focuses at the syntax of narratives
- five crucial concepts are used for an analysis of narratives

Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1983)

- *order*: the rules of connecting consequent actions of a story – anachrony: metalepsis and prolepsis
- *frequency*: of narrating events: singular, iterative, repetitive, multiple
- *duration*: discourse time x narrative time
- *voice*: who narrates and from which position – system of narrators + focalisation
- *mood*: depends on the distance and perspective of the narrator

Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1983)

- a narrator can be either *extradiegetic* or *intradiegetic*, meaning 'outside' or 'inside' of the world that is described to the reader
- extradiegetic narrator is “‘above’ or superior to the story he narrates,” intradiegetic narrator is inside the fictional world created by the story
- *homodiegetic* and *heterodiegetic* narrator (replacing the terms first-person and third-person narrator, respectively) is based on whether the person telling the story participates in it or not
- *homodiegetic* narrator takes part in the story in “some manifestation of his ‘self,’” a *heterodiegetic* narrator does not participate in the story at all and merely tells the reader about events involving others – an omniscient narrator

Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1983)

- narrative *metalepsis* is an intrusion by extradiegetic elements into the diegesis (and vice versa)
- anyone or anything can slip from one diegetic level to another if the boundary between the levels is porous, and he doesn't like it: "The most troubling thing about *metalepsis* indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative."

Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1983)

- a distinction should be made between narrative voice and narrative perspective
- the latter is the point of view adopted by the narrator, which Genette calls focalization
- "So by focalization I certainly mean a restriction of 'field' – actually, that is, a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience."
- these are matters of perception: the one who perceives is not necessarily the one who tells, and vice versa.

Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method (1983)

- 1. zero focalization: the narrator knows more than the characters and may know the facts about all of the protagonists, as well as their thoughts and gestures – the traditional "omniscient narrator".
- 2. internal focalization: the narrator knows as much as the focal character and filters the information provided to the reader – cannot report the thoughts of other characters.
- 3. external focalization: the narrator knows less than the characters and acts like a camera lens, following the protagonists' actions and gestures from the outside – unable to guess their thoughts.

Legacy

- FS represents one of the most influential originally literary theoretical approach of all times
- FS founded, defined and developed modern narratology
- FS caused a strong reaction among other approaches to literature and its investigation which exceeded the area of literature and arts – post-structuralism

The Prague School

- **what:** school of linguistics, literary criticism, semiotics, aesthetics...
- **where:** Czechoslovakia
- **when:** 1920's – ...
- **centre:** The Prague Linguistic Circle – founded in 1926
- **who:** Jan Mukařovský, Bohuslav Havránek, Felix Vodička, Miroslav Červenka, Zdeněk Kožmín, Milan Jankovič, Lubomír Doležel, Květoslav Chvatík...
- **centre:** The Prague Linguistic Circle – founded in 1926
- **sources:** Russian Formalism, structuralist linguistics, pre-structuralist aesthetics, semiotics, poetics...

Main principles, methods, and topics

- semiotics
- communication model
- Functionalism
- linguistics
- holism (mereology)
- aesthetics
- dialectics
- Structuralism
- phenomenology
- sociology

Main principles, methods, and topics

- **dynamicity**
- **diachrony**

- **textual analysis**
- **thematic analysis**

- **literary history – developing literary structure**
- **theory of fiction – poetic reference**
- **aesthetic function, norm, value**
- **literary artwork and its levels**
- **thematics**

Semiotics

- literary artworks are considered complex *structured signs*
- these *signs* consist of parts which can be analysed as such, in mutual constellations and with regard to the *whole*
- the parts compose a specific *structure*
- the relations between the parts are of dynamic nature (the dominant!)

Communication model



- literary artworks are specific pieces of information which can (and are!) be communicated
- literary artworks are objects of specific, aesthetic communication with a specific purpose

Linguistics

- language as a *synchronic* and *dynamic* system
- functionality of elements of language and the importance of its social function have been key aspects of its research program
- focus on the function of elements within language, their contrast to one another, and the system formed by these elements

Holism and mereology

- an *artwork* is considered a specifically structured *whole*
- the *whole* is a unique structure composed with its *parts*
- the parts are in *dynamic* mutual relationships
- the structure is due to a constant *change*
- the structure is *hierarchized*

Aesthetics

- tradition of Czech pre-structuralist aesthetics (Josef Durdík, Otakar Hostinský, Otakar Zich)
- tradition of German aesthetics (G. W. F. Hegel...)
- the *organic model* – literary artwork is considered a living organism consisting of organs
- intentionality of arts

The Prague Linguistic Circle

- established on October 26, 1926, following a lecture by Henrik Becker entitled *Der europaische Sprachgeist*
- founders: Vilém Mathesius, Bohumil Trnka, Bohuslav Havránek, Jan Mukařovský + Roman Jakobson, Nikolay Trubeckoy, Sergey Karcevsky
- presentations by E. Husserl, R. Carnap,...
- *topics*: not only linguistics but also semiotics, aesthetics, literary theory, ethnography, and musicology
- presentations at conferences and publications made PLC one of the most influential schools of linguistic thought of the twentieth century
- PLC used presentations, conferences as an opportunity to develop and present a set of ten theses for linguistic research, promoting a *functionalist* approach to the study of language

Jan Mukařovský

(1891 – 1975)

- Czech literary critic, linguist, aesthetician and semiotician
- studied linguistics and aesthetics at the Charles University in Prague and graduated in 1915
- 1922 received his doctoral degree
- 1929 received habilitation with the *Máchův Máj. Estetická study in aesthetics*
- 1934 appointed professor at the University of Bratislava in Slovakia
- 1938 appointed associate professor of aesthetics at Charles University in Prague
- from 1941 to 1947 Mukařovský worked as an editor
- 1948 appointed full professor and elected Rector, a post he held until 1953
- 1951 recanted prewar semiotic structuralism
- 1951 appointed the director of the Institute for Czech Literature of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences

Aesthetic function

- *Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts* (1936)
- JM distinguished four basic *functions* of language: the *representative*, *expressive*, *appellative* and the *aesthetic*
- AEF is firmly connected with other notions of Mukařovský's system of aesthetics
- "AEF is not a real quality of an object" – therefore, both, the aesthetic attitude of the perceiver as well as the "specific shape" of the object trigger the functioning of the aesthetic function
- as soon as the AEF is triggered the material artifact becomes an *aesthetic object*
- the aestheticity of the AEO causes the dominance of the AEF over other functions and also connects the AEO with specific reference
- the communication model thus changes its general form sender – material artifact carrying the message – receiver (author – book – reader) to the form specific for aesthetic communication: originator of an artwork – artwork – receiver of the artwork

Aesthetic norm

- omnipresent
- artistic and non-artistic aesthetic norms
- aesthetic norm exists in collective awareness
- *Although a norm tends to be binding [...] it may not only be violated but, conceivably – as is quite commonplace – two or more competing norms may coexist and be applied to the same specific cases sharing the same value on the scales. (Mukařovský)*
- *One may speak of a genuine norm only when there are generally accepted goals in respect of which a value is upheld independently of an individual's will and decision making; in other words when the norm exists in what is called collective awareness [...] Although a norm tends to be binding [...] it may not only be violated but, conceivably – as is quite commonplace – two or more competing norms may coexist and be applied to the same specific cases sharing the same value on the scales. (Mukařovský)*

Aesthetic value

- *aesthetic value* dissolves into individual extra-aesthetic values and becomes a general term for the dynamic totality of their mutual interrelationships
- AEV is not absolute and changes with different time periods or cultures in the decoding or encoding processes
- AEV is based in the collective awareness

Poetic (fictional) reference

- literary artwork as a complex structured sign has a reference
- “*An artwork as a sign [...] is designed on a dialectical tension by its double relationship to reality: by its relationship to the reality, which it means, and by its relationship to reality as such.*” (JM)
- the specific *double reference* creates an important comparative framework which makes the participant react to their reality by “*shaping the total attitude of man to the world.*” (JM)
- R. Jakobson speaks about the relationship between the poetic and referential functions: “*The supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous.*”

Teleology of a work of art

- literary artworks are specifically shaped, complex *signs*
- literary artworks are specific pieces information (messages) in a specific aesthetic communication
- *thematics*: Felix Vodička suggests that the works produce higher thematic units, so called contexts, which are listed by Felix Vodička as *plot, character* and *outer (external) world*
- *Thematics is precisely the layer of literary structure through whose mediation the contents of the practical interest and period problems of a community exercise the most powerful influence on the immanent evolution of the literary structure. (FV)*
- *By its thematics, a literary artwork is most distinctively bound to the reality of the extra-literary world. Even in the case of a literary artwork dominated by the aesthetic function can the polarity between the known reality and reality assumed by the reader become the source of aesthetic effect. (FV)*

Literary history

- the initial stage of the Prague School is known for borrowing from (synchronic) structuralist linguistics but also for turning its attention to the diachronic dimension of language and literature
- diachronic dimension of the study of literature is firmly embodied in one of the most important Prague structuralist axioms that considers literature to be a specific *developing structure* – of which the most important qualities are *energetic* and *dynamic*
- particular literary artworks are then part and parcel of this developing structure and their authors, individuals, guarantee the connection of this specific structure to structures outer: historical, cultural, political etc.
- Mukařovský explicitly stipulates that “the aim of structuralist literary history is to comprehend the development of literature in all its complexness, scope and regularity“
- Mukařovský, when analyzing the works of prominent Czech writers in both synchronic as well as diachronic relations combines the detailed structuralist investigation of structural aspects of particular artworks by placing these aspects into a wider developmental perspective regarding genres, trends, forms and themes and their (diachronic) metamorphosis

Second (third) generation

Miroslav Červenka (1932–2005)

- literary theorist, literary historian, translator, poet
- *The Meaning Built of a Literary Artwork* (1978)
- history of Czech verse

Květoslav Chvatík (1930–2012)

- philosopher, aesthetician, literary theorist
- *Tschechoslowakischer Strukturalismus. Theorie und Geschichte* (1981)
- *Structuralist Aesthetics* (1994)
- avant-garde, Milan Kundera, modern art

Second (third) generation

Lubomír Doležel (1922–2017)

- literary theoretician, historian of literary theory
- *Occidental Poetics. Tradition and Progress* (1989)
- *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds* (1998)
- Czech literature, world literature, linguistics

Milan Jankovič (1929–2019)

- literary theoretician and historian
- *A Work of Art as an Action of Sense* (1992)
- Czech literature, literary semiotics

Second (third) generation

Zdeněk Kožmín (1925–2007)

- literary theorist, critic
- *The Art of Style* (1967)
- Czech poetry, post-structuralism, interpretation

abroad: Ladislav Matějka, Petr Steiner, Jindřich Toman, Emil Volek, Jiří Veltruský...