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Prague structuralism and semiotics : western neglect and resulting fallacies

PRAGUE STRUCTURALISM AND SEMIOTICS:
WESTERN NEGLECT AND RESULTING FALLACIES

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1.   Introduction.

This essay will focus on the wide and deep lacunae continuing
today that are barely concealed in American (and British)
recycling of French structuralism and Russian formalism, the
latter introduced into France by Todorov in the sixties.
I refer to the ignoring or misreading of the Prague school's
pioneering and original programs for structural and semiotic
studies carried out from the late twenties. This movement has
been dismissed out of hand or misinterpreted as simply
a branch of Saussurean structuralism; most frequently it has
been identified with Russian formalism with which it has some
common roots although its spirit reverberates more to such
early   Russian   nonformalists   as   Bakhtin,   Vygotskij and
Florenskij and to Czech nineteenth-century scholarship.

2.   Ignoring the Prague school.

    But the Prague movement is not a simple continuation of
Russian formalism, nor can the term structuralism be simply
appropriated as a Saussurean static conception since it was
differently used in Prague. True, Roman Jakobson, one of the
founders   of   the   Prague   Linguistic   Circle,   began   his
intellectual and artistic career   in Russia as a major
participant in the Russian formalist movement and as a *zaum*
futurist poet who wrote his verse under the pen-name Aljagrov.
And true, in the twenties Jan Mukařovský's aesthetic was
strongly influenced by Russian formalism. But by the early
thirties Mukařovský had rejected much of the theories of the
Russians, witness his sharply critical review of the Czech
translation   of   Viktor   Šklovskij's fundamental formalist
treatise *O teorii prozy* (The Theory of Prose - Šklovskij
1925) and many statements in his own works as will be seen
(cf. Mukařovský   1934a,   1934b,   1934c   and later works).
Moreover, Jakobson's and Tynjanov's Theses of 1929 (Jakobson
and Tynjanov 1929) criticized the additive basis of Russian
formalism and static qualities of Saussurean structuralism,
advancing   instead the   view of   relational and dynamic
structures characterized by multifunctionalism and polysemy.
The Theses marked the inauguration of Prague structuralism as
an original movement which lead to path- breaking studies in

semiotics. While taking from the formalists the concern with
aesthetic texts, its dialectic orientation set it apart from
both the formalists and Saussure's rationalist doctrine.
I refer to only a few examples of such misinterpretations. In
Fredric Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language* (Jameson
1972), Jameson's brief mentioning of the Prague school
(51,92) equates it with Russian formalism, while the Prague
school is called "the Czech formalists", (52), and Jameson
views Saussure's, and not Jakobson's and the Prague
philosophical stance, as based on dialectical principles
(24). Jameson finds that it is Saussure's work that is
"a liberating influence" for "literary criticism" (39), not,
it is implicitly clear, Jakobson's work. And yet Saussure
never entertained a theory of poetics and aesthetics, the
great contribution of the Prague school.

Additionally, Jameson does not distinguish the
formalists' concept of "making it strange" (*ostranenie*) from
the fundamentally distinct Czech group's notion of
foregrounding (aktualizace). Only the latter is structural as
I discuss later. For Jameson the Prague circle simply
reformulated the Šklovskian doctrine (92), and he depicts
Tynjanov's (and Jakobson's, it is implied) ideas of evolution
of systems in a formalist perspective (93-4). Even farther
afield is Robert Scholes's identification of structuralism in
general with French structuralism and with Russian formalism.
While Jameson at least explored Garvin's early anthology
(Garvin 1964), Scholes seems unaware of the work of the Prague
school that he simply dubs a formalist school (1974:77).
Finding that all structuralism ignores contextual relations
(1976:111), he proposes his own "theory", as an "improvement"
over "structuralism", namely that literature is not immanent
since it is an act of communication and as such "points to
a phenomenal world" (106, 111). This was of course always
a part of the Prague structuralist program since context was
never ignored, no matter how self-focussing the work was.

Again, in 1983, after many texts of the Prague school had
become available the anglophone reader, the British literary
critic Terry Eagleton (1983) altogether oversimplifies the
Prague school's relationship to Saussure (96) and overlooks
its critique of Saussurean linguistics. Likening structuralism
in general to formalism was of course first a French
invention. It is true that both the French structuralists and
the Russian formalists ignored context, but the Prague school
did not. The Todorov-Ducrot encyclopedic dictionary
(Todorov-Ducrot 1972, 1979) views structural analysis as
devoted primarily to rhetorical figures and versification,
a fundamentally formalist preoccupation. And the distinguished
Greimas dictionary (1979,1982) only mentions the Prague with
Hjelmslev's Copenhagen school as a precursor of structuralism
and overlooks the fundamental differences between the
Copenhagen and Prague schools.

3. Assessment of Prague school assumptions and tenets.

3.1 Dialectic orientation.- The Hegelian dialectic orientation of the Prague linguists was not born in the twenties but is rooted in Czech tradition, going back to the writings of the Czech nineteenth-century linguist Josef Zubatý (1875-1931) who had already disparaged the neogrammarians' insistence on the regularity of historical changes in language and had begun to investigate the accidental and erratic quality of linguistic variation (cf. Mathesius 1931, 1982:429). At the same time, Vilém Mathesius advanced a dynamic form of synchrony, considering *parole* both in the vertical and horizontal spheres long before the appearance of Saussure's *Cours* which persisted in treating these two levels as essentially unrelated. In an essay of 1911 (Mathesius 1911) Mathesius called for the analysis of contemporary speech as both system and history (cf. Vachek 1966, I:8-9). The focus on living speech and on concrete artistic texts not divorced from structure remained central to Prague research.

3.2 Main specific concepts.- The development of Prague thinking, after its early phase, is independent of the formalist notions of immanence, and additive devices and "making it strange" (*ostranenie*), relying instead on certain interrelated concepts, most importantly those of *structure*, *function* and *value* and the elaboration of the device of *foregrounding* all cast within the Prague dynamic view of norms as rooted in context and as never fixed, but subject to violation, most notably by the aesthetic function.

3.2.1 structure.- Mukařovský's structure is not the formalists' bounded holism that overlooks interrelations between and within wholes (1940:452). For Mukařovský (1937:223), all evolving structures tend both to preserve and, antithetically, to suppress their identities. Thus the regularity implied by immanence carries with it an "antithesis, accidental elements repeatedly enters the structure from without to set it in motion" (*ibid.*). Such accidents are introduced by the individual creator or consumer of the message (Mukařovský 1948, I:19). Accordingly Mukařovský understands the evolution of an art form as an antinomy between the principle of continuous immanent evolution and the dynamics of creative impulses by individuals (authors and perceivers).

3.2.2 multi-functionality.- Structures were characterized by multifunctionality. The concept of function was ignored by the OPOJAZ group, and used in a special, still additive and fixed scheme by Propp. In general, additive devices of the formalists were superseded in the Prague program by a whole set of functions bound to the structure, the most dynamic of which is the *aesthetic function.* As early as 1929, the Prague school *Theses* (*Theses* 1929:35) adopted Bühler's definition of language as a "system of purposeful expressive means", and

accepted Bühler's functions, namely the expressive function (*Ausdrucksfunktion*) by which the speaker characterizes himself, the representative function (*Darstellungsfunktion*) which describes extralinguistic reality, and the conative function (*Appelfunktion*) which acts upon the receiver of the message. But the revolutionary addition by the Prague group was a fourth function, the self-focussing *poetic function*, later called the *aesthetic function*. Much later Jakobson's more ambitious six-function communication model (Jakobson 1960, 1976) was a further expansion. For in the Prague approach, functions attain a certain independence infused with the various goals oᶠ the human creators and receivers. Such an insertion of purposeful behavior implicates the vast area that Peirce called thirdness, namely choice and creativity within cultural context. In the Prague school view, one function dominates over others in human activity, organizing the total structure; but dominance is fluid, dynamic, and changeable. Various *functions* vie for control, and a new *dominant* gaining superiority brings about shifts between the parts of the structure. While the view of necessary dominance may be contested, it opens the way for the semiotic approach being born. A correlating concept is that the norm-violating aesthetic function, whether dominant or not, is essentially universal, potentially pervading all activity in implicit if not explicit ways.

In the thirties, Jakobson has elaborated considerably on the transforming qualities of this potentially universal function. While for Jakobson the boundaries dividing what is a work of poetry from what is not a work of poetry "are less stable than the frontiers of the Chinese empire" (1933-34:741), the poetic function, *poeticity* (*básnickost*), as he sees it, cannot be mechanically reduced to a number of elements since it is a transforming component of a complex structure that affects by its reorganizing (foregrounding) qualities the nature of the whole. Jakobson wittily compared the aesthetic function to oil. Neither a food in itself nor a chance additive to food, oil totally transforms the taste of any food of which it becomes a part. It may even be perceived as the dominant aspect of that food. Thus oil becomes a marker in a new name for a food, witness the change of the original Czech word for 'sardine' (*sardinka*) to *olejovka* (*olej-* 'oil' + *ovka* a derivational suffix). For Jakobson, only when a work acquires *poeticity*, a poetic function of determinative significance, can we speak of poetry (*ibid.*). The issue addressed is how poeticity is manifested and cannot be reduced simply to a shift in the relation between reader and text but also implicates the manner in which, by various acts of foregrounding, language ceases to refer to reality in an "indifferent" manner.

> (the) word is felt as a word and not as a mere
> representation of the object being named or an
> outburst of emotion, when words and their

> composition, their meaning, their external and inner
> form acquire weight and value of their own instead
> of referring indifferently to reality (*ibid.*).

Opening up later semiotic approaches, Jakobson foresaw
Barthes's notion of imbrication, calling the word in poetry
a special kind of sign, thus implying that the poetic word
loosens the bond between the signifier and the signified. But,
as opposed to Barthes, he introduces the necessary quality of
tension that results.

> Because besides the direct awareness of the identity
> between sign and object   (A is A_1), there is
> a necessity for   the direct awareness   for   the
> inadequacy of that identity (A is not A_1). The
> reason that this antinomy is essential is that
> without contradiction there   is no mobility of
> concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship
> between   concept and   sign becomes   automatized.
> Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of
> reality dies out (*ibid.*)

3.2.3 foregrounding.- We turn now to our third focal
concept, that of *foregrounding*, the aesthetic function plays
a crucial role in the shift from "making it strange" to
foregrounding. For the formalists, the devices of "making it
strange" such as versification, rhyming, sound repetition,
striking metaphors, etc.,impart freshness of perception by
inhibiting automatization as the reader is forced to focus on
the work itself, on how the text "is made". But for the Prague
scholars *foregrounding* (*aktualizace*) does not rely simply on
newness of perception   in Šklovskij's   terms, since it
incorporates complex structural properties that affect the
entire work. In other words, as the name *foregrounding*
implies, certain devices enable structural elements to be
perceived as shifting from the background to the foreground of
the text, bringing about an implicit reorganization of the
surrounding material.

Mukařovský   described *foregrounding*   as a   universal
principle similar to the aesthetic function, anchored in his
theory of creativity. Humans must forever perceive reality
afresh, approaching it from different perspectives a cultural
prerequisite for negotiating the contingencies of society.
Only the aesthetic function

> can preserve for man vis-a-vis the universe the
> attitude of a foreigner who keeps coming to unknown
> countries with fresh and acute attention, and who is
> always conscious of himself by projecting himself
> into the surrounding reality and is always aware of
> the surrounding reality because he measures it
> against himself. (Mukařovský 1942, 1966:57).

We are reminded here of suggest ons of Peirce's firstness which forces secondness, awareness of self as other, the basis for thirdness or creative and symbolic thinking.

3.2.4 Value.- We turn now to another focal concept, value. Mukařovský's *value* was not Saussure's *value* measured by its exchangeability. For Mukařovský aesthetic *value* is affected by the author and receiver who infuse the text with a certain orientation or function. And it is thus not immune to non-aesthetic values, such as truth or ethical values (Mukařovský 1936). But the great power of the aesthetic function is its referral back to the object in all its "thingness" (*věcnost*) (as opposed to the allied metafunction, later elaborated by Jakobson, which refers back to its *langue*-like character). In Lotman's discussion of the relation of text and code, he has rephrased the relation of the meta- and aesthetic functions as one of antinomy rather than separation, which was implicit but not elaborated in Jakobson's formulation (Lotman 1990). In general, for Mukařovský aesthetic value is related to the ability of the aesthetic function to impart ambiguous meaning and aesthetic pleasure which is powered by the ability of the aesthetic function to violate or reinterpret traditional norms. Mukařovský attempted to correlate some aspects of aesthetic pleasure to the tension it evoked in its relation to universal psycho-biological constitutional factors such as bodily rhythms, symmetry, etc., similarly to the later efforts of Lévi- Strauss, which while probably valid may be too general and less original than other of his concepts.

Like all aesthetic events aesthetic evaluation is never static but ceaselessly dynamic, being in the last analysis a process (*energeia*) rather than static (*ergon*), affected not only by the immanent development of the artistic structure (the traditions - *norms*- against which individual works are judged), but also by societal changes (43).

Thus form and content, *langue* and *parole*, immanence and context sensitivity, devices and the whole, synchrony and diachrony, norm and anti-norm, all such unequivocal dichotomies are reconceptualized in a dynamic relation that frame and underlie the Prague scholars' notion of *value* that refers to all the factors and functions of the aesthetic event.

4. The semiotics of literature and the other arts.

The import of the Prague school was to reach far beyond any static structuralism to a semiotics of art and even non-art, where dynamics of meaning and aesthetic creativity came more and more to the fore. In his first major essay in this direction, "L'art comme fait sémiologique" of 1934 (Mukařovský 1934c), Mukařovský saw the literary work as a sign. Mukařovský's sign is a "perceptual (*smyslová*) reality which relates to another reality outside itself, to which it points and which it evokes in the reader.

For Mukařovský the addressor (the author) fashions an artistic message at least subliminally directed toward a potential reader linked to the addressor, no matter how indirectly, by physical or psychological connections and by a code (a *langue*), or several codes one of which is the dominating one, and which must be at least partially shared by both author and perceiver. And as he stated (1943:91, 1946-47:61) the creator of a work of art also assumes the role of perceiver when, for example, during the act of creation, he steps back to see what he has put on the canvas, reads aloud the lines he has composed to hear how they sound, tries to play a passage he has written on the piano, etc. Here Mukařovský foreshadowed the reception theory of the Konstanz school. Similarly, Susanne Langer (1953:387), referring to painting and music, reminded us that hearing and seeing are indivisible acts, in other words the painter and the composer are not only producers but also consumers of their texts. Mukařovský also foresaw Lotman's autocommunication which is also indebted to Bakhtin's double-voiced dialogic text.

By the mid-thirties the Prague group extended semiotics to the nonverbal arts, film, music, the visual arts, architecture and the theater, considering the relation of the various arts to each other, going beyond the logocentrism implied in Saussure's call for a semiotics of culture. In this spirit, the later Moscow-Tartu school has revised its secondary modelling systems, where the primary system was language, seeing nonverbal systems as having properties not simply derived from verbal ones.

The exploration of a semiotics of all the arts by the Prague group was a natural development of the intense activity and collaboration between the revolutionary Czech artistic avantgarde of the twenties and thirties and the linguists and philosophers (cf. Winner 1990). For these artists played with the interrelation of verbal, visual and sometimes tonal qualities forever interacted.

The heurism of Prague school concepts is evidenced by further developments. For example, Jakobson's communication model of the sixties is the basis for Lotman's recent revision. Since Lotman holds that the reversible recoding/decoding implied does not work for the avantgarde arts. For Lotman, in such cases the receiver must start with the text, as a child does when learning a first language, and then proceeds to deducing the code (Lotman 1990:16). But this does not mean Prague school or Lotman's aesthetics lend themselves to the endless deconstruction of the text as a meaningful object even, in the American version of the French development, surrendering the evaporated text entirely to the audience. The French reaction is partially understandable as a response to the Saussurean dichotomy *langue* and *parole*, and the consequent neglect of meaning and pragmatics in any productive sense, and the essential inviolability of *langue*. But the extreme postmodern dissolution of meaning that seems to follow takes us far afield from the Prague school.

5.   Semiotics of culture and cultural history.

A compelling development of the Moscow-Tartu school, the
investigation of the semiotics of cultural history, most
recently developed by Boris   Uspenskij (1991), was also
forecast in early Prague school treatises. For example,
Mukařovský invoked social-historical context, although these
elements are transformed as the work is transplanted in time
and space. Thus the reading of a medieval work of art as
perceived by a reader of today who may be aware of a plethora
of post-medieval artistic codes, such as those pertaining to
the renaissance, neo-classicism, realism, symbolism, abstract-
ionism, etc., is a radically different from the one it had in
its own time.
Jakobson considered a semiotic perspective for history as
early as the 1930s, holding that different historical periods
have bestowed upon the individual arts varying orientations.
The age of Classicism favored the visual arts, Romanticism
music, and the age of futurism turned back to the visual arts
(1935b:358-59).
Shortly after the second World War, Mukařovský (1946-47)
elaborated a "system of systems", an overarching culture,
again anticipating the Moscow-Tartu program of semiotics of
culture and Lotman's semiosphere. (cf. Portis-Winner 1982,
1989 for a discussion of this school. See also Lotman
1990:123-204).   In Mukařovský's words,

> ...art is one of the branches of culture, and culture as
> a whole, in turn, forms a structure, the individual
> elements of which...are in mutual complex and
> historically changeable interrelations" (1946-47:50).
> Cambridge, Massachusetts, July, 1992

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