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The Prague School theory of theatre and drama

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5 ▶ The Prague School Theory of Theatre and Drama

5.1 ▶ The Prague School Heritage

Between *Poetics* and contemporary semiotics of theatre and drama there is a huge temporal gap that spreads over millennia from the point of view of the time elapsed, as well as over several crucial developments in the field of theory. Among these developments is the influential inquiry of the Prague School structuralism of the 1930s and 1940s and its further applications and variations of the 1970s and later, to the present, which, for the purposes of this work, cannot be omitted.

The Prague School had a seminal influence on the development of semiotics and its role within the tradition of the Western structural poetic tradition. Members of the Prague Linguistic Circle and Prague School theoreticians in general followed de Saussure's ideas about semiology and the theory of the sign, thus participating in the development of semiotics in the 1930s and 1940s. After historical and political circumstances disrupted their work, their heritage was revived in the late 1960s. At this time, their works also became better known to the broader academic public, as translations into Czech began to appear more frequently and helped to overcome the gap caused by the language barrier, which kept some of the early findings of the Prague School inaccessible to the non-Czech speaking readership. The semiotic study of drama and theatre gained new strength and viability when it continued in this line of research and capitalized on the Prague School's findings in the second phase.

Beginning in the 1960s, comparing, contrasting and merging the ideas of the Russian formalists and representatives of the Prague School together with the newly born French and Italian perspectives on semiotics, became possible. The process of a rediscovery of the Prague School's approach to semiotics by authors writing in English was under way in the 1970s and the application of semiotics to the study of drama and theatre fully blossomed after Elam's 1980 volume (see Aston and Savona 5-10).

In her article on the current (2001) state of semiotic theories with respect to the influence of the Prague School, Veronika Ambros provides her readers with an overview of authors writing in English who credit their sources to the Prague School structuralists. She is critical of their competence to see the Prague School influence in detail: "All authors I want to talk about here, except Quinn, are grounded on a greatly limited selection of

the Prague School's texts. In most cases it is texts published in the anthology *Semiotics of Art* [...] prepared by Ladislav Matejka and Irwin Titunik" (22). This anthology "is a book with three aims" (Clark 363). Besides being a selective anthology of texts by Prague School structuralists, it also "serves as a history of Prague School criticism [... and] most importantly, it illustrates the applications of semiotic theory to the understanding of art" (363). Among the authors included in this anthology are Mukařovský, Bogatyrev, Brušák, Jakobson, Honzl, Doležel and Veltruský. Ambros perhaps finds this anthology an insufficient source of the Prague School theory because "[one] would like to know more, for example, about the viability of the Prague tradition in its present scattered state" (365) as Clark, the volume's reviewer, supporting Ambros's critical view of the volume, claims.

It follows from Ambros's note that Quinn's book *The Semiotic Stage* represents the most complex source of the Prague School theory concerning semiotics of theatre and drama in the English language. It is also true that besides English and Czech, some of the Prague School's writings are also available in other languages. However, from the authors writing about semiotics whom Ambros considers, it is, with the exception of Quinn, only Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* that refers to these sources. "One of the most important contemporary texts on the semiotics of drama is a 1980 book by Keir Elam, which is grounded in the above mentioned sources in English (i.e. Matejka, Titunik and Steiner) as well as some translations of Prague School works available in Italian and French" (23), writes Ambros.

As these comments about the Prague School writings and their accessibility to the English audience suggest, there is no concise single overview of the Prague School's findings; a seminal all-encompassing text written by a member of the School. Still, Quinn claims that:

In retrospect, the theoretical orientations and analytic achievements of the various Prague School writers on theatre appear remarkably complementary. Though there is no consensus on certain points – a situation that would probably signal a lack of individual initiative or a limitation in perspective – the Prague School theatre writings can in my view be conceived as a coherent body of work. (1)

In order to study the Prague School's influence on the development of structuralism and semiotics of drama and theatre, one must make do with individual studies by Prague School members and followers, with Matejka and Tinunik's anthology and with Quinn's summarizing book. A collection of texts by the Prague School members dealing with theatre and drama in English has not yet been published. This debt to this area of theory and its development is still waiting to be paid.

The Prague School had an enormous influence on the later development of the study of drama and theatre, especially in the field of semiotics, because it analysed dramatic works with respect to the structure and meaning-productive processes initiated by dramatic and theatrical signs. The basic principle of the Prague School approach to a performance, that is, each emitted signal (verbal, visual, and auditory gestures) was to be received as a sign and thus accordingly available to study, "was restated in 1968 by the

Polish semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan [(Elam 20)]. Enlarged into a book which came out in 1975, it heralds the second wave of theatre semiotics. The driving-force was partly Parisian (post)structuralism and partly Italian semiotics” (Shepherd and Wallis 237). The source of this lies in 1931.

Elam finds 1931 an “important year” for the later development of theatre studies, and Quinn mentions the fact that the Prague School’s inquiry was consistent and long-term in nature: “Because of its long-term development of a specific theoretical approach, the Prague School theatre theory holds an important, still largely unacknowledged place in the history of theatre study” (2). Thanks to the publication of Mukařovský’s article “An Attempted Structural Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Actor”, “[the] year 1931 is an important date in the history of theatre studies” (Elam 4).¹³ In this paper, Mukařovský analyses acting as a sign. He shows that it is not just language that can be accessed from a semiotic perspective as a meaning-productive activity with a set of rules. Acting too has its rules and structures that can be studied. Mukařovský shows, using the example of Charlie Chaplin’s acting, that there are various types of actors that he approaches as phenomena; thus he can observe that various actor types lead to the production of various meanings which are dependent on an actor’s actions as well as on the context of the given performance as a whole (Mukařovský, “An Attempted Structural Analysis”). The step that Mukařovský takes in his essay is crucial for the history of semiotics. Mukařovský shows that there is also another level in a performance that can be studied as a sign or a series (or system) of signs.

The semiotic analysis of drama and theatre is not limited to what an actor says and what he or she performs on a stage. Costumes, stage design, sounds, spatial relations between objects and characters – these are all to be analysed as signs and, combined, they create the sign-system of a play. In order to analyse the text of a play, it is important to acknowledge the fact that a play-script serves as a basis for a stage representation or, in Elam’s words, it is “a mode of fiction designed for stage representation and construed according to particular (‘dramatic’) conventions” (2)¹⁴. Generally speaking, it was the ability to see through the limitations of one’s area of research, such as the structural analysis of language, which is among the reasons why the Prague School’s ideas about drama and theatre have become so influential.

The Prague School made it possible to connect various findings from the study of structural linguistics with aesthetic approaches to the arts. In this sense, “Prague is an indispensable link in the chain leading from Moscow to Paris,” according to René Wellek (qtd. in: Quinn 3). For one thing, the Prague School theorists saw the opportunities offered by formalist and structuralist perspectives in the sphere of performing arts. For another, they were able to apply their findings from one area of research on another, taking into consideration wider aesthetic and social contexts, while rigidly observing the

13) In the same year, Zich’s *Aesthetics of Drama* was published, which also makes the year 1931 an important date, as Elam mentions (4).

14) Elam thus distinguishes between “theatre” and “drama”: when Elam talks about *theatre*, he addresses the “complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction” (2) and while referring to *drama*, he resides within the realm of written fiction with specific conventions as quoted above.

principles of inquiry of the former during the application. In this sense, their endeavours may be regarded interdisciplinary and still topical:

the Prague School provides one of the first sociological models for critical understanding in which the interdisciplinary arts and scholarship of the post-modern era can be seen as more of a gain than a loss, more like a return to common sense than the sometimes strange separation of the arts and other human activities into disciplines – the forced, “organic” closures that more dogmatic theories had achieved. (Quinn 6)

The study of drama and theatre from the Prague School’s perspective was concerned with the structural elements within the work of art as such as well as the context and the whole line of development in which the artefact exists. Its study of drama and theatre can thus be viewed as a study of the whole artistic institution, which, according to Quinn, is an antecedent of “the institutional studies of Michel Foucault, like *The Order of Things*” (6, footnote). This broad sphere of interests of the Prague School also enables them to reformulate and change their predecessors’ views: they followed the Russian formalists’ morphological branch and they made additions to de Saussure’s linguistics, an example of which is the case of Jakobson’s identification “of the diverse functions of language [which] could not be accommodated within the Saussurean non-functional linguistic model” (Portis-Winner 124). Jakobson and Mukařovský’s theory of language functions in the field of linguistics and literary studies is the most significant one for the purposes of this book. The theory serves as a basis for the study of the role of the reportage technique in drama in general and in the technique’s various applications in the works by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson, as it helps to define the main mode of speech of the messenger, reportage. Jakobson distinguishes between several main language-functions which, in specific types of use, determine what happens in the plays. In other words, an interplay of various language-functions on the stage brings about various signs and, in effect, produces specific character-types such as the messenger-figure.

Jakobson worked on his theory of the functions of language for several decades. He left the phenomenological standpoint according to which “an object’s essence supposedly inheres in the object itself” (Quinn 24) and started exploiting the relationship between the object and the subject in his communication model. He added a structural element to the phenomenological approach to language. He studied “factors of communication, that are necessary for communication to occur” (Hébert 1). In a unit of language, the specific functions are present in the relation between the subject partaking in the communication process and the main factor of the communication object, that is to say, the main orientation of a given message. “Communication can thus be analysed from the standpoint of its functional orientation, with at least three perspectives on meaning inherent in any utterance. Some utterances serve primarily to clarify the sender’s position, some describe reality, and some orient the receiver” (Quinn 25).

These three forms of functional orientation are originally Bühler’s invention. However, the Prague School theorists of language supplied this three function model with a fourth aspect, because they also included the message itself into their inquiry:

The contribution of the Prague School to the functionalist approach to communication lies in Mukařovský's invention of a fourth aspect, the aesthetic function, which dominates the others especially when the focus of communication centers on the sign itself rather than its referentiality. [...] These four remain the essential principles of mature Czechoslovak structuralist aesthetics. (Quinn 25)

During the process of elaboration of the main four functions of language ((1) emotive, or expressive; (2) conative; (3) referential, or cognitive; and (4) poetic, or aesthetic functions) in the 1960s and 1970s, Jakobson supplemented the four function model with two additional factors and functions of language: "At this time Jakobson added two more factors in speech communication: (5) the code that is common to speaker and addressee, and (6) the contact between them, the medium by which they communicate" (Waugh and Monville-Burston XXIII), namely the metalingual (or metalinguistic), and phatic functions. It is, in accordance with Quinn, the aesthetic function which remains the most important invention of the Prague School in this area.

5.2 ▶ The Aesthetic Function

In the case of dramatic art, it is the aesthetic function that dominates the communication event between the sender and the receiver. However, other functions of language may remain present, but they are hierarchically subordinated to the main, aesthetic function. This is particularly important given the fact, that at any event when an artistic use of language is applied, such as in a theatre performance or in a dramatic text, the aesthetic function does not eliminate the others.

The Prague School approaches literary communication as a part of linguistic communication in general. It does not see it as an isolated artefact which exists independently in a situation. The approach, as it stems from the functional attitude of Jakobson and Mukařovský, is relational. This means that the understanding of what it is that constitutes the "aesthetic" is based on the understanding of the communication model where a message is necessarily coded and decoded.

The aesthetic then lies in the relationship between the code and the receiver where the subjective component (Mukařovský's model) is dominant in the communication. This functional understanding is a wider model of understanding literary art, as it focuses on communication as a whole rather than selectively based on a tradition of literature or the accepted canon. However, and Mukařovský stresses this point, the aesthetic function can at times become dominant even in other types of discourse than those which are common-sensically viewed as "literary". In *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* he explains that there is no strict boundary that would separate the literary from the non-literary in an impenetrable fashion: "Thus we only subscribe to the opinion that there is no solid boundary between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic area; there are no objects and actions that would be the carriers of the aesthetic function disregarding the time, place and evaluator, nor are there others that would be necessarily excluded from

its reach given their real set-up” (Mukařovský 19). Seen from a different perspective than in the above paragraph, the aesthetic function does not determine what a work of art is (or, where an artistic part resides), but it depends on the communicative situation. It is not definitive and inert, it is dependent on the context and subject to development. As Quinn puts it: “Instead of aesthetic function serving to define the art object as such, art exists as a particular occasion of aesthetic functioning in certain subject/object interactions. In artistic communication the aesthetic function usually dominates [...]” (27). An analogical situation holds for the other language functions.

The Prague School structuralists did not regard works of art as independent in the social context. For one thing, the aesthetic function may be present in any linguistic context; as Mukařovský begins in *Aesthetic Function*: “The aesthetic function has an important place in lives of individuals and the whole society. The circle of people coming into immediate contact is limited [...]; but art, by the consequences of its activity, also has impact on people who have direct relationship with it” (18). Mukařovský is aware of the potential accusation of panaesthetism, so he refutes this reservation by showing how linguistic functions combine in all kinds of social discourses – for example, scientific discourse may include aesthetic moments and, on the contrary, a work of art may make use of other functions than just the aesthetic one (although it remains the prevailing one in this case).

Furthermore, Jakobson describes how the aesthetic function penetrates into a general social discourse on the level of ideology¹⁵:

Similarly to the way the poetic function organises and directs a work of poetry without necessarily standing out and hitting the eye as a billboard inscription, a work of poetry equally does not protrude in the overall totality of social values, it does not predominate over the other values, but it still is a substantial and ambitious organiser of ideology. True poetry protects against automation and against rusting our formulations of love and hate, resistance and reconciliation, belief and denial. (“Co je poezie?” 32)

The functional model is an effective way of portraying the multilevelled communication between various uses of language as well as social situations. Literary art is one of the instances of such communicative activity – or, in Mukařovský’s terms, between a sphere of aesthetic and/or artistic phenomena.

Norms, which rule judgements about whether a work belongs to the artistic realm or not, are neither universal nor timeless. They depend on the current state of affairs. It is this view of the aesthetic function that brings a theoretically founded argument for this claim. The aesthetic function does not reside intrinsically within a work of art, but it is present in the sender-receiver communication, where the orientation on the receiver’s subjectivity prevails in the case of the aesthetic function. Mukařovský’s *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* develops, in depth, this idea of the socially constructed view of what art is in relation to art in general and concrete forms of art (for example, besides literature, in film and photography), as well as other creative activities (such as

15) That is to say, the prevailing social discourse.

crafts like jewellery) and non-creative ones (such as industrial production). For the purposes of this book, it is necessary to limit the general ideas in Mukařovský's paper to drama, which by its nature is a multi-craft institution, or, in semiotic terms, a conglomerate of various signs, or sign-systems.

5.3 ► The Referential Function

The functional view of the use of language in general, as Jakobson's contribution to linguistics and literary research establishes, and the application of this perspective to the study of a dramatic text and/or classification of speeches in theatre is an important point of reference in further defining the messenger's report in this work. Within the dynamic relationship among the functions of language, it holds that in a work of art the dominance of the aesthetic function of language is at times supported or supplemented with the referential function. The primary aim of the referential function of language is based on its orientation to the content, in other words on what is supposed to be communicated. Here, the sender of the information is primarily conveying a factual piece of information to the receiver in the communication process.

When analysing a dramatic text or speeches of a performance, it is sometimes the case that a character needs to speak about facts or events, that is to say, he is not primarily engaging in a dramatic dialogue that constitutes the action, but rather focuses on the delivery of a message – a narrative.

Pfister sees the referential function as dominant in those parts of dramatic texts that are mainly aimed at setting up the context (expositional remarks) or messengers' reports. He writes that in classical and naturalistic drama, these tendencies are necessary in theatre "in the purely verbal form of the narrative which, for economical or technical reasons cannot be enacted directly on stage" (106). This certainly holds true for the dramatic and theatrical genres which aim at avoiding literarization or, as the development of twentieth century theatre shows, epic tendencies such as in Brecht and, in a way, most of the dramas that preceded him.

If this kind of narrative report is only given a referential function in the external communication system because the information it conveys is redundant in the face of the addressee's existing level of awareness in the internal communication system, then the result will be a tendency to produce epic communication structures. Even if the reporting figure does not go so far as to step outside his role or address the audience directly and explicitly, the receiver will still regard himself as the primary addressee in view of the absence of a referential function for the report in the internal communication system. (106)

Pfister's analysis applies to most of the history of drama, as his remark about avoiding epic tendencies suggest.

However, this book focuses primarily on contemporary, post-Brechtian production. The chapter on Brecht's heritage, below, shows how the influence of his contribution to

the development of drama and theatre is indispensable. In short, Brecht's Epic Theatre shattered, to a degree, some of the conventions that had been used before for the whole history of drama and theatre; among these conventions, there is the convention of the messenger as a minor character without a name whose sole role is to produce a narrative about a fact or event outside the current frame of action on the stage; hence, the dominant referential function of its speech. The structural aim of employing a messenger is to push the action forward by disclosing new information, previously unknown to the others, all within the logic of the internal communication system of the particular play.

Brecht's radical influence in this respect lies in the fact that his Epic Theatre steps out of this communication system, disrupts it and calls in various other systems of communication such as a direct address (tearing down of the fourth wall), real-life reference (disruption of theatrical illusion), and so on. Since Brecht, the referentiality of the messenger's report becomes problematic, because the messenger has forever been uncovered as a convention whose applicability is problematic. It is Brecht's radical use of the referential function in his Epic Theatre that lays bare, to the contemporary audience, the convention of the messenger, and questions his authority as a dramatic agent. In other words, the messenger becomes as untrustworthy a convention as that of the *deus ex machina*. This is not to claim that the messenger is not used any more (or, for that matter, the *deus ex machina*). Quite to the contrary; it opens up new ways for using the referential function when it is necessary, for whatever reasons, to deliver information and focus on the content in the course of a play.

Knowledge of facts and events outside the frame of action and possibility to refer to the actual world is partly taken over by other characters. As soon as these characters (major characters with a name) meet certain criteria such as having an occupation which grants them access to the outside frame of action, and makes stepping out of their role possible in order to switch to the narrative mode and report (primarily journalists, teachers, scientists and many others), the opportunity arises for them to take over the messenger's roles. This chapter addresses the main formal aspects of reportage. Various applications and types of new messengers are the subject of the case studies.