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Pavel Drábek

Launching a Structuralist Assembly: Convening the Scattered Structures

The original version of this article was the opening paper that launched the Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited Symposium, organized by David Drozd at the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, on 27–29 June 2011. The symposium was provoked by a feeling of necessity and by a certain debt. Close to a century ago, a diverse and international group of theorists concentrated around the Prague Linguistic Circle were active in the 1930s and – to some extent – in the 1940s. Their works have influenced the language and the theatre worldwide. Known as Prague Structuralists, they built a metaphorical Tower of Babel that was scattered during the turbulent and traumatic 1940s in several waves. By 1950, one could not speak of live practice any more for a number of reasons – while among the philologists (linguists and some literary theorists) the school was surviving, the theatre thinkers had either moved out of the country (Jakobson, Bogatyrev, Brušák, Veltruský), were deceased (Frejka), shifted their activities and/or broken away ideologically (Mukařovský, Honzl, Pokorný, Burian, Kouřil). However, during this short period (between roughly 1932 and 1940, or perhaps 1948) the writings of the Prague Structuralists brought what we still believe to be a crucial contribution to the study of the theatre. The Symposium of June 2011 convened an assembly of theatre theorists from all around the world to discuss the current state of affairs and knowledge about the school, and propose plans for both paying off the debt to the school and further for developing the heritage. This article represents a revised version of the paper and intentionally retains the social tone.

Since the dissolution of theatre Structuralism, there have been several important attempts at reviving and reassessing it. Allow me to not name all these efforts – a number of those that have undertaken them are sitting in this room anyway. Besides it is for that reason that we have taken the liberty of inviting you here. In expressing our thanks we mean both the fact that you have accepted and come here, and that you have devoted your scholarly expertise to Czech Structuralist thought on theatre.

A few words may be needed to explain why this symposium is taking place here and what is meant by the abovementioned debt.

As a relatively new department, we are following up on the tradition established especially by Professor Bořivoj Srba and by Professor Ivo Osolsobě. We have worked to reconcile and weld it together with current trends in theatre studies and our own understanding of the specificity of the theatre culture in the Czech lands. Among the greatest debts we feel we owe to the discipline is a critical reassessment and rehabilitation of Czech Theatre Structuralism. There is much to be done.

About four decades ago, Roman Jakobson offered to Ivo Osolsobě that he would publish his theoretical work at Ann Arbor. In a generous gesture, Osolsobě retorted that Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Arts* had priority and that it should be published first. He then set out with Samuel Kostomlatský to translate this founding work of Czech Theatre Structuralism. Although the translation was completed, the circumstances made it impossible to publish either Zich or Osolsobě, and the gesture has remained an unfulfilled act – or, in concrete terms, a pile of manuscript papers in a drawer.

In the meantime, collections of critical texts were published – here and there, on several fronts, often unaware of each other. Given the different contexts in which, and purposes for which these were made, the Babylonian confusion of languages and tongues grew further. It has to be said that these efforts are what saved the heritage from oblivion while Czech academics at home did little – or had little opportunity. In other words, the Structuralist activities of the 1930s and 1940s were discontinued and never resumed. Our department has taken an immodest as well as slightly irreverent initiative. After enjoyable and inspiring discussions of this pitiful debt with Herta Schmid and Veronika Ambros, we devised a research project and were lucky enough to receive funding from the Czech Grant Agency for five years (2011–2015). It has to be said that a great inspiration for our endeavours to revive older theory was the publication of Petr Szczepanik and Jaroslav Anděl's English anthology of Czech film theory and criticism, 1908–1939, entitled *Cinema All the Time* (University of Michigan Press, 2008), which contains a number of texts written by the Czech Structuralists.

Our project is entitled *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: context and potency* and is improperly ambitious. The “context” in the subtitle is of a special importance as we believe in the historical/political/social conditionality of the theory – despite its seeming independence of any history/politics/society and the attempts by Czech theorists to see it as *apolitical* and *non-ideological* (though there is something to be said even about this approach). Why else would the Communist regimes in *Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren* and later in Czechoslovakia take any issue and oppose the theory? (The same is true of the precursor, Russian Formalism, and its fate in the Stalinist Soviet Union; cf. ERLICH 1969.)

However, the objective of our research is not to remain retrospective, let alone nostalgic; hence, the “potency” in the subtitle, referring to our attempt at inquiring into the potential and power of Czech Structuralist Theory for the study of theatre today. Many of you have already written on the topic – the opinions ranging from enthusiastic efforts at resuscitation, through attempts at developing the heritage, through subsuming it in more recent trends and schools of thought, to downright thinking that its time is over and Czech Structuralism is done with (cf. AMBROS 2008, MEERZON 2008, DRÁBEK 2010). Since there does not seem to be an agreement on the issue, we hope that this symposium will raise thoughts on it and provide some justifications.

Here are some of the objectives, aims and working hypotheses of our research project:

- 1) a critical reassessment of the original texts of Czech Theatre Structuralism (including manuscript and unpublished texts);
- 2) a reinterpretation of Structuralist concepts and uncovering its interpretive potency;
- 3) an English anthology of Czech Structuralist thought on theatre (to be published in 2014);
- 4) thematic fields to be covered by the research project:
 - Structuralism and theatre criticism,
 - Structuralism and theory of acting,
 - Structuralism and theory of scenography,
 - Structuralism and theory of audience,
 - Structuralism and theory of drama,
 - Structuralism in the context of Czech cultural and national identity,
 - Structuralism and its waning in the context of post-WW2 politics,
 - Structuralism and philosophical context,
 - Structuralism and the later critical theories.

Ad 1) A critical reassessment of the original texts of Czech Theatre Structuralism (including manuscript and unpublished texts)

Our aim is to establish a critical corpus of primary texts and studies. Given the troubled circumstances, some of the texts were published in corrupted forms or were never properly edited or even remained in manuscript. In doing so, we aim to assemble a sum of what belongs under the heading of Czech Structuralism.

Ad 2) A reinterpretation of Structuralist concepts and uncovering its interpretive potency

One of the crucial issues of Czech Structuralism is the fluctuation and instability of terminology. We are compiling a glossary of terms and concepts in order to clarify the Structuralists' usage of certain terms and their new taxonomies; some of the terms are new coinages, often intuitive and complex – such as Jan Mukařovský's idiosyncratic usage of the word “*soustavnost*” (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1945: 61): he does not mean “consistency”, a “systematic feature” or “steadiness” (which is its common meaning), but rather refers back to its etymology, derived from “*soustava*” (assemblage, framework or constitution), and his favourite term “*soustavnost*” then means “arrangement”, “organization” or simply “structure”. In many instances we may find a similar *defamiliarized* usage – or if you want to use the Russian Formalist/Czech Structuralist notion, a usage that is *estranged* or *aktualisovaný* (*foregrounded*). Such an innovative and rather poetic usage of terms threatens to cause much confusion. On the other hand, its metaphoric dynamics may still be a productive field of interpretation. As Donald Davidson observes, “one uses metaphors [...] to make people notice things” (BOWIE 2007:18); Mukařovský's metaphors may therefore be meant as dynamic formulations which are nominalistically unstable on purpose.

Ad 3) An English anthology of the Czech Structuralist thought on theatre (to be published in 2014)

This is a crucial point, and much of what we wish to address at this symposium is motivated by our plan of making a critical edition of key texts of Czech Structuralism. We have put together a tentative list of contents. As a sideline to this anthology, we wish to publish, finally, the English translation of Zich's *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Arts* since we realized that the dependence of the Structuralists on this founding work is so great that it would be difficult to work without it. The recent interest in 19th-century German Idealist philosophy raised in relation to philosophy of the arts (especially philosophy of music) is another impetus; Otakar Zich's work, stemming from the tradition of German aesthetics, would be a key contribution to the current discussion.

Ad 4) **Thematic fields to be covered by the research project**

Outside the textual research, there are the individual thematic fields of the research. This is also where we come closest to our daily reality of teaching.

One of our key hypotheses is the importance of contexts for Czech Structuralism. Although it may seem at first sight that it is independent of *politics, history* or *social issues*, arguably the opposite is true. It is no coincidence that Structuralism appeared in the newly established, more-or-less artificially patched-up country of Czechoslovakia, consisting of Bohemia, Moravia, parts of Silesia, Slovakia and parts of Ukraine – not to mention scattered minorities and groups. In the years 1918 to 1938 this political, ethnic and linguistic amalgam was in a desperate, and in many ways preposterous search for its identity. The ardent debates of “Czechoslovakism” of the mid-1920s – inventing what it means to be a Czechoslovak – were often an embarrassing cover-up for nationalistic anti-Germanism; some of the attempts at rationally defining nationality were later misused by the Nazis as a tool for ethnic separation and cleansing (such as Lubor Niederle’s anthropological features of the Slavic people).

The cultural, political, historical and social dependence on Austria (or Hungary) and Germany could not be ignored; there were attempts to replace it radically with the cultivated influence of France or Britain (or the US, politically). These are the times when English and French became academic fields of study. The linguists around Josef Zubatý and the journal *Naše řeč* [Our language] took explicit inspiration in the French system of state exams which systematically built a national sentiment among the people through the use of literature (cf. Terry Eagleton’s discussion of New Criticism in his *Literary Theory*, namely the chapter “The Rise of English”; EAGLETON 1983: 17ff.). *Naše řeč* published René Lote’s account of the French practice (LOTE 1920) and referred back to it as crucial and inspirational several years later on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Czechoslovakia (ZUBATÝ 1927: 30). The young Otakar Vočadlo, later an influential and authoritative English professor and Shakespeare scholar, in his 1926 treatise (or pamphlet), entitled *In the Captivity of Babel: German influences in our country* (V zajetí babylonském: německé vlivy u nás), advocates what he calls “cultural hygiene” (VOČADLO 1926: 7), and calls for adopting the British cultural and political influence. He explicitly talks about the pathological German and Austrian impacts on the Czechoslovak culture. Another work pertinent to this is *Kulturní aktivismus: Anglické paralely k českému životu* ([Cultural Activism: English Parallels to Czech Life], 1925) by the influential professor Vilém Mathesius. These trends harken back to the 1895 treatises of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (who eventually became Czechoslovakia’s first president), *Česká otázka* [The Czech Ques-

tion], and *Naše nynější krise* [Our Current Crisis]. In the latter book, Masaryk admonishes, somewhat obliquely,

Z příčin praktických i ideálních budeme se učit jazykům světovým a zejména *anglickému, francouzskému, ruskému*.

(MASARYK 1895: 425)

[For practical and ideological reasons we shall learn world languages, especially English, French, Russian.]

Although the French-English influence was predominant, it was far from unanimous; there was a group of people that recognized its hypocrisy.

What is of crucial importance in this context is the ongoing debate over cultural influences, nationalism and literary and linguistic studies. In 1922, Václav Ertl, in the language-purist journal *Naše řeč*, discussed the need for a state-funded institute for the cultivation of the language, arguing that,

péče o mateřský jazyk není jen věcí lásky a úcty k jazyku, k jejímuž šíření organizace spolková může ovšem dobře napomáhati, ale je především a hlavně úkolem vědeckým, nemá-li se zvrhnouti v diletantské brusičství anebo v závodní stíhání cizích slov, do jakého zapadaly časem na př. německé *Sprachvereiny*.

(ERTL 1922: 97)

[caring for the mother tongue is not only a matter of love and respect for language in which a free-lance organization may well be helpful, but it is a scholarly task in the first place if it is not to degenerate into *dilettante* cleansing or a race for the persecution of foreign words, which was eventually the fate of such organizations as the German *Sprachvereins*.]

These intellectual efforts formed a crucial background for the birth of the Prague Linguistic Circle. The disagreement between the nationalist and essentially conservative *intelligentsia* (or rather between the inevitable and omnipresent cultural processes of linguistic *purification* and *creolization*; cf. BURKE 2004: 169–172 and id. 2009: 88–90 and 112–113), and the more progressive intellectuals came to an open clash at this faculty (Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University), eighty years ago, in 1933, on the occasion of Roman Jakobson's habilitation (associate professorship). In 2005, Tomáš Glanc edited the documents produced at and after this embarrassing episode. For two of Bruno's leading professors, Jakobson was not to be tolerated. One of them was Antonín Beer (chief editor of *Naše věda* [Our Scholarship]) and the other was František Chudoba, our leading Shakespeare scholar. These two language pur-

ists would try anything they could to mar Jakobson's career. From protesting against his academic and scholarly expertise, through thinly veiled xenophobic attacks on his reputation as a foreign scholar, to spreading doubts about his date of birth, his primary education, the validity of the list of his former employments and the legality of his stay in the country. The motives behind this libel were simple: Jakobson was a harsh critic of language purism as practised by Beer's journal *Naše věda*.

The study that provoked the Brno professors most was his 1932 essay "O dnešním brusičství českém" [On Today's Czech Language Cleansing], in which he criticizes the politics of the journal *Naše řeč* and its attempts at purifying the Czech language of all unwelcome germanisms. The word "*brusičství*" [whetting, honing] was not in fact Jakobson's invention; in the above-quoted 1922 article in which Václav Ertl calls for a 'scientific' (or scholarly) treatment of language, which must not "degenerate into *dilettante* cleansing [diletantské brusičství] or a race for the persecution of foreign words" (ERTL 1922: 97). It seems to be this article that Jakobson explicitly alludes to when he criticizes the "pseudoscientific methods and objectives of such straightforward purism" (JAKOBSON 1932: 116). With disarming consistency Jakobson sums up that this linguistic policy is dubious and hardly valid. Rather than calling it *nationalistic*, he opts for "a more appropriate term" for it, which would be "racism". Germanisms are, on principle, persecuted only for their parentage, be it however distant" (JAKOBSON 1932: 119). Besides, Jakobson mercilessly points out the contextual implications of such racism. It forgets that the "Czech *intelligentsia* of the 19th century was bilingual, writing in German almost as equally well as in Czech" (JAKOBSON 1932: 96) and that the "inherited germanisms of standard Czech are the same cultural heritage of the past as, for instance, the close connection of Czech Romanticism with German or the link between the ideology of Czech national renaissance and German philosophy" (JAKOBSON 1932: 117). Such a scholarly *exposé* was a bitter pill to swallow for people like Beer or like Chudoba – who would, for instance, pester René Wellek for being born in Vienna (and to a Jewish family, I suspect) and daring to have critical ambitions in a Czech context at the same time.

This conflict does not only show the two opposing sides of the intellectual life of the 1920s – the nationalists and the more progressive intellectuals, it also shows the different practices of scholarship. While the internationalist Jakobson argues by examples from all over Europe, calling for a *functional* analysis of phenomena (i.e. how they exist, operate and assert themselves), the followers of *Naše řeč* derive their authority from other sources. Jiří Haller, one of the language purists whom Jakobson criticizes most, voices it explicitly: "By what right does *Naše řeč* pretend to be the arbiter of language? It is

simple: by the right of experts” (JAKOBSON 1932: 88). Against this superficial arrogance of ‘experts’ that argue *ad hominem* (be it their own greatness, their positions in the academic hierarchy, or the denigration of their opponent, when the time serves), the new *functional* approach – embodied by the Prague Linguistic Circle – strictly argues *ad rem*, analyzing the *phenomenon* as it is, without preferences for, or prejudice against political, historical or social contexts. In this *functional* approach, to be a Czechoslovak meant to *embody* the *inherent* and *inherited* qualities one has. It is no coincidence that the Structuralists were supporters of T. G. Masaryk’s and Edvard Beneš’s politics. (Recent research has shown that the Structuralists were, in turn, supported by Masaryk too, even financially. Since this was done covertly, there must have been a motive for pretending to their apolitical standing.)

This brings us logically – though perhaps with a little bit of seeming paradox – back to Structuralist terminology. It operates in a strangely dual habitat, between pragmatism (or functionality) and idealism. In a direct continuation of Russian Formalist practice, Czech Structuralists also used terms that were essentially *intuitive*. In 1921, Jakobson coined the term *literaturnost’* (literariness) as an abstract term, referring to the inherent qualities of a literary text (i.e. what makes a literary text a literary text), inviting to be filled with concrete denotation in the course of further study. Elsewhere he writes that “even imprecision, intentional vagueness/indeterminacy has its function” (JAKOBSON 1932: 111). Like the questioning of what it is to be a Czechoslovak, Structuralist terms are best understood not by their nominal definition but by their *functional* denotation.

From this perspective, Czech Structuralism is not a Theory (with a capital T) but rather *theory*, a tool for whetting (not cleansing!) and refining critical language. It is also a theory without an explicit political ambition; there does not seem to be (or at least it pretends not to have) a concrete political agenda or ideology behind it – which is the key difference between Eastern and Western Structuralisms. Within its historical context, however, it *did* have a political and even an ideological function – traceable in a dialectical relation to the current intellectual and political trends.

Despite the Structuralists’ focused analysis on the function of phenomena – be they language, literature, the theatre or Charlie Chaplin’s gags – what has been so far overlooked, but is of prime importance, is the social awareness of their writings, their understanding of the arts which is shaped by, and is, in turn, shaping community and society (cf. Vilém Mathesius’s notion of “cultural activism” as the task of scholarship). It is the awareness of the contexts that is crucial for Czech Structuralism and it is also one of the crucial hypotheses of our project.

The question that our research team want to pose on this occasion and ask this Structuralist Assembly to discuss is essentially: What function does and may Czech Structuralist thought on theatre have in today's scholarship?

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Summary

Pavel Drábek: *Launching a Structuralist Assembly: Convening the Scattered Structures*

The first version of this article was the opening paper of the *Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited Symposium* in June 2011. It outlines the research project *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: context and potency*, contextualizing it with current trends as well as the political and academic climate of the 1920s and 1930s. Several cases of contextualizing Prague Structuralism (its terminology, its political and intellectual standing, and its links) are used to illuminate the specificities of the theory and what has so far been neglected in its critical reassessment.



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