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Theatralia. 2012, vol. 15, iss. 2, pp. 24-36

ISBN 978-80-210-5571-1
ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/124410
Access Date: 16. 02. 2024
Version: 20220831

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The Legacy of the Linguistic Circle of Prague

I. Introduction

As Denis Bablet stated in 1971 in a brief introduction to Jindřich Honzl's article "La mobilité du signe théâtral",

> *[d]es le numéro I de* Travail Théâtral, *nous exprimions notre désir de tenir compte des propositions de méthodes qui dans le passe avaient pu être lancées ici et là, de révéler des textes théoriques inconnus ou méconnus susceptibles de nous aider dans élaboration progressive d'un nouvel usage de la critique. La publication du texte de J. Honzl "La Mobilité du signe théâtral" constitue une première réponse à ce souci.*
> (BABLET in HONZL 1971: 5)

At that time this was the only article known in translation about the Prague Linguistic Circle, and we will have to wait until the 1970s to see the publication of *Les theses du Cercle linguistique de Prague*, the 1970 Vodička translation of *Lingüística formal y crítica literaria*, the 1976 compilation by Matějka, Ladislav and Erwin R. Titunik's *Semiotics of Art, Prague School Contributions*, the translation, in 1990, into Spanish, of *Drama como literatura* by Jiří Veltruský, and the one by Eva Hajičová *et al.* in 1999, to have a more solid knowledge of the Circle's contribution to semiotics.[1] My contention is that

1 In 2000, the seminal work of Jan Mukařovský appears for the first time in Spanish, published by Jarmila Jandová and Emil Volek. This is a major contribution, not only with respect to Mukařovský, but also to the Linguistic Circle of Prague. This paper was part of a Symposium that took place at the Invitation to an International Symposium dedicated to Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre and Drama: *The Prague Semiotic Stage Revisited*, in the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts,

the *epistemological and theoretical foundations* of theatre semiotics was very much developed by the Prague School during the 1930s by scholars such as Petr Bogatyrev (BOGATYREV 1971, 1976, 1976a), Jindřich Honzl (HONZL 1971, 1976, 1976a), Jiří Veltruský (VELTRUSKÝ 1976, 1976a,1976b, 1989, 1990) and indeed later by the works of Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička and others; that is, they introduced the *paradigm* (in the sense of Thomas KHUN 1970), and what followed in the early 1970s was "normal science": the development of those foundations, and no important breakthrough came afterwards. They did the ground and seminal work, very much as the Russian Formalists did pertaining to narrative, literary history and poetic analysis.

My intention in this paper is to underline this contribution and the importance that, without any doubt, the Circle would have had if their work could have been known and published before the advent of the so-called School of Paris.

II. A Bit of History

As we know, the Russian Formalists introduced the formal paradigm during the first decade of the 20th century and they tailored their theory of the literary event to De Saussure's linguistic model, that is, right from the beginning linguistics provided the epistemological and methodological tools for the construction of their own model. This model, which would be developed to its epistemological limits during the 1960s and 1970s, would end in a total collapse by the excess of theory and the inapplicability and inoperability of its theoretical methods and by its epistemological exhaustion. It seems then, that there was a segment of time during the late 1920s and the 1940s, where the Circle was inscribed and their contributions ignored. But, this was not the only exclusion, we only have to think of Voloshinov, Bakhtin, and Pierce who, contemporaneously to the Russian Formalists and De Saussure, were already radically critiquing the very notion of the sign and their approach to literature and culture in general. I would like to make here two fundamental points: first, in my estimation, if the Russian Formalists had not been wiped out by Zhdanovist communists of that time, and would have had the time to develop, the initial evacuation of the meaning and interpretation from the text would have been introduced, and this is clearly demonstrated by the seminal text by Juri Tynianov, "De la évolution littéraire" (TYNIANOV 1965), and the ulterior development would have been drastically different. Secondly, if the contribu-

Masaryk University, 27–29 June 2011. One of the most important aspects of the discussions was the mistranslation of the members, particularly those on Mukařovský.

tions of Bakhtin/Voloshinov, and Pierce at the beginning of the 20th century, and those of the Linguistic Circle of Prague during the 1930s and 1940s, could have been accessible and known at the time of their production, certainly the outcome of the so-called Formalism and their notion of *Wissenchaft*, shared by De Saussure, would have been indeed radically different, and the so-called School of Paris, perhaps, would not have ended up where it did.

III. The Legacy of the Linguistic Circle of Prague

In what follows I would like to concentrate on an aspect of the great and rich contributions of the Circle: theatre semiotics. In order to make my approach clear, and with the objective to demonstrate the central issue of this paper, namely, that the theatre semioticians of the Circle provided the very epistemological and theoretical foundations of modern theatre semiotics, I would like to offer two heuristic categories from the philosophy of science, those of "paradigm formation" and "normal science", as elaborated by Thomas Khun in *The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions* (KHUN 1970), in order to support my central thesis. I do not need here to elaborate on these categories since they are very well known, and would simply remind us that the notion of "paradigm formation" refers to unprecedented emerging knowledge and, in our case, artistic practices, and "normal science" to the activity of a community of researchers, in our case, artists, that begin to work around and develop a given paradigm.

If the Russian Formalists introduced the Formalist paradigm at the beginning of the century, that is, they laid the epistemological and conceptual foundations of Formalist practices, the theatre semioticians of the Circle introduced the paradigm of theatre semiotics, and the also laid the very foundations of a nascent discipline. After this period, which runs roughly from 1920s and the late 1930s, there was a gap of development that lasted nearly thirty years, that is, it suggests that these early discoveries by the theatre semioticians of the Circle, were not followed or even known, and the work of Honzl is exemplary in terms of my argument. In the article mentioned above, Honzl establishes a tremendously important analytical component when he states that, "Toutes les réalités de la scène, le texte de l'auteur, le jeu de l'acteur, l'éclairage, sont des réalités que représentent d'autres réalités. Une manifestation théâtrale est un ensemble de signes" (HONZL 1971: 6).[2] This is stated in 1940 when the theatre was at best analysed only and exclusively from a literary perspective totally detached from its spectacular dimension, and which was the case until the

2 This article is a translation of the original article published in *Slovo a slovesnost* 6 (1940): 4.

1970s and even today. We will have to wait until the early 1970s to start approaching theatre not as a literary manifestation but also as a spectacular one in its own right. Honzl's anticipation pertaining to the theatre as a complex network of signs marks the epistemological and theoretical path of what is going to become standard in theatre semiotics during the 1970s and 1980s. His notion of the "mobility of the sign" was indeed a ground breaking and paradigmatic discovery. According to Honzl,

> on pourra ainsi citer quantité d'examples de cette particularité du signe théâtral, qui est d'interchanger les matériaux et de passer d'un aspect à l'autre, d'animer une chose inanimée, de passer du domaine acoustique au domaine visuel, etc.
>
> Comme nous l'avons dit, il et impossible de décider au théâtre une fois par toutes si ce que l'on nomme d'ordinaire un geste (d'acteur) ne sera pas exécuté par un élément de la scène, de prévoir si ce qui est phénomène pictural ne sera pas confié à la musique.
>
> Oui, c'est transformabilité du signe théâtral qui constitue son caractère spécifique. C'est grâce à lui que s'explique la transformabilité de la structure théâtrale.
>
> C'est dans cette transformabilité même que réside la principale difficulté d'une définition du fait théâtral. Ou bien ces définitions réduisent le théâtre à celui de nos spectacles traditionnels (dramatiques ou lyriques), ou bien au contraire ils l'éclargissent au point de lui faire perdre toute signification. (HONZL 1971: 14–15)

I have quoted these passages in order to demonstrate that Honzl's theory of the transformation and mutation of the sign was not a simple accident, but a well thought out theory, solidly based on performance analysis and not on pure theoretical speculation which will characterise semiotics in general, including theatre semiotics during the 1970 and 1980s. Stated in different terms, what Honzl achieved was to divest the sign from its purely iconic function, and to incorporate its indexical and symbolic ones. Again, Honzl goes beyond the Saussurian binary structure of the sign into non-binary Piercian triadic sign. At the same time, in the mutation of the function of the signs, he concentrates in the very materiality of the signifier, because it is the alteration and manipulation of the signifier where the mutation, and therefore mobility of the sign, takes place. In fact, when I was elaborating my own systematisation of the functioning of signs in the theatre in an attempt to be able to reduce them to a limited number, it was to Pierce and Honzl that I went. But there is more, Honzl moves away from linguistics in order to provide the very foundations of

a system of signs based on performance and not on the Saussurian linguistic model, and this was a central aspect to the theatre theoreticians of Prague. In fact, Jiří Veltruský refers to this separation from the Saussurian system when he refers to the actor's work: "The reason why everything centres on the actor is that he is a real, live person, so that the signs he produces with his own body cannot be reduced to a mere *signans/signatum* relation" (VELTRUSKÝ 1981: 230).

As the great Master, Jiří Veltruský, in a seminal article on the "The Prague School Theory of Theatre" (1981) states,

> [...] the Prague Linguistic Circle focused primarily on general linguistics, and literature overlaps with language so much that literary theory can draw on the linguists' findings quite heavily. That is not the case of the theatre. From this point of view, it is quite significant that the Prague School's work on the theatre was far superior in quantity and variety to its contribution to the study of the visual arts, music and dance, areas which are still further removed from linguistics.
>
> At the same time, precisely because it dealt with phenomena so different from language, the Prague School theory of theatre brought to light certain problems of the semiotics of art that would otherwise have remained hidden; which of course does not mean that it was always able to solve them. As a Polish scholar recently put it, this was the semiotics of theatre in *statu nascendi* which until quite recently was systematically disregarded by scholars claiming a pioneering role in this field.
> (VELTRUSKÝ 1981: 225)

From my point of view nothing was "*nascendi*" here, and any supposition of a second rate primitive semiotics as Bablet suggested, with his characteristic arrogance, is simply false: on the contrary the epistemological and theoretical foundations where clearly laid, and 'normal science' would not have been possible during the 1970s and 1980s unless those foundations were there. To think otherwise, amounts simply to disregard history and these accomplishments arrogantly. In fact, when we arrive at the late 1970s I was impressed by the depth and insight of the Prague theatre semioticians, by Veltruský in particular, and also by Mukařovský, Bogatyrev, Vodička, Brušák, and others.

The demarcation and recognition of the explosive theatricality of a theatre performance was paramount for the further development of theatre semiotics. There was also the attempt to arrive at a specification of the theatre performance well before the classical definition stated by Roland Barthes (1964 and

1964a) who followed Roman Jakobson's definition of literature: literariness/ theatricality. Honzl's conclusion is revealing:

> La transformabilité de l'ordre hiérarchique des éléments qui constituent l'art théâtral répond à la transformabilité du signe théâtral. En expliquant ces deux points, j'ai cherché à mettre l'accent sur cette transformabilité qui rend l'art scénique si divers et captivant, mais en même temps si difficile à comprendre. Ses métamorphoses protéiformes font que l'on a même été jusqu'à nier son existence. On admis celle du poème dramatique, de l'art du comédien, de la peinture, de la musique en tant qu'art indépendant – non celle de l'art théâtral, considéré comme simple entrepôt des autres arts. Le théâtre ne trouvait ni son centre ni son unité. Je veux prouver qu'il possède à la fois centre et unité, qu'il est, tout comme le Dieu trinitaire de Saint Augustin, un et multiple.
> (HONZL 1971: 20)

Honzl's contribution in this brief article does not stop here, he does what many Prague theoreticians of literature and theatre did: he incorporates the social, ideological and cultural context that their Russian counterparts ignored a couple of decades earlier, and he does that in the steps of Bahktin, Voloshinov, Mukařovský and the great master, Veltruský. Honzl had a clear idea of the transformation that was taking place, and this becomes evident when he states that,

> [j]e pense qu'en analysant la transformabilité du signe théâtral, nous avons abordé un tâche qui permettra d'éprouver le bien-fondé de nombreuses définitions du théâtre, et de voir dans quelle mesure leur correspondant les genres nouveaux et les genres traditionnels, nés au sein de structures social diverses, à des époques diverses, sous l'influence de personnalités diverses (acteurs ou auteurs), avec l'évolution de la technique, etc. Nous pensons redonner ainsi du lustre à cette veille théorie qui voit l'essence du théâtre dans *l'action*.
> (HONZL 1971: 15–16)

Petr Bogatyrev was insistent, throughout his work, on the very point:

> Theatrical verbal expression is a structure of signs, composed not only of linguistic signs but also of other signs. For instance, speech, which is supposed to signify the social station of the character, is uttered in accompaniment with the actor's gestures and is complemented by his costume, by the

> scenery, and so on, which are also signs of the social station of this character. In the theatre the number of fields from which theatrical signs, such as costume, scenery, music, and so forth, are drawn, is at times larger, at times smaller, but always is multiple.
> (BOGATYREV 1976: 41)

Another aspect developed by the "Prague School Theory of Theatre", as Veltruský called it, was the constitution of the theatre performance as an object of study that is autonomous of other artistic objects. This, again, at the time and as well as today, constituted a major accomplishment. Never before had the theatre been considered *as performance*, and in fact it was not considered in this fashion again until well into the 1970s. Veltruský was a pioneer in this area as he states:

> The theatre was perceived as an independent art in its own right. The same view was held with respect to acting. Yet it was fully recognized that not only the reciter's, but also the actor's voice performance, and through its intermediary, all the other components of the theatrical structure are more or less predetermined by sound structure and the semantic qualities of the text (Mukařovský, 1939; Veltruský, 1941). That was not a contradiction within the theory but rather an effort to study the antimonies and tensions existing in the art of the theatre itself.
> (VELTRUSKÝ 1981: 228)

From this clear demarcation, Veltruský's efforts and those of his colleagues will be directed to the study of every component that constitutes the performance event, by first analysing their independent functions within the performance, and then integrating them into a comprehensive whole capable of accounting for the functioning of the various systems of things present in any performance. However, there was an area that will only be successfully dealt with during the 1980s, namely the reduction of all theatre signs to a small number that focused on their function and not on their materiality. In fact, they addressed this issue recognising that it could not be solved at that time, as Veltruský stated:

> The theoreticians of the theatre also discussed this conception but never fully worked it out, especially not in writing. It would have required a far more advanced understanding of the common and the distinctive characteristics of different sign systems.
> (VELTRUSKÝ 1981: 231)

All other areas were treated, including the status of the text, the theatre discourse, etc.; as it is clearly presented by Veltruský in *El drama como literatura* (1990). At the same time he viewed theatre as a complex semiotic system that needed a specific approach to deal with polyphony of *signs in movement*. According to Veltruský,

> [i]t came to be seen that the theatre is a distinct semiotic system, using heterogeneous materials and drawing on other semiotics systems – language, pictorial signs, sculpture, architecture, music, gestures, etc. – while differing from them all.
>
> This fact has two paramount consequences. First, the theatre has many more, and much more varied, components than any other form of art. Secondly, each of the contributory semiotic systems tends to keep its own characteristic way of relating the *signatum* to the *signans* and, as a result, each type of sign to some extent clashes with all the others.
> (VELTRUSKÝ 1981: 228)

Umberto Eco once stated that the theatre is a system of signs of signs, and he named this "square semiotics", that is, the sliding of the sign considered as a real object and then as a sign in order to refer itself again to the object (ECO 1977: 112; 1975: 98–102). This idea was developed by Bogatyrev in 1940 when he stated that "[t]outes les manifestations théâtrales sont donc signes des signes ou signes des choses" (BOGATYREV 1971: 518), and this theorisation of the specificity of the theatre sign became central in later elaborations of the theatre sign, and indeed in my own work.

IV. Conclusion

There is much more to be said and written regarding the members of the Linguistic Circle of Prague. The breadth and scope of their work is yet to be properly evaluated, acknowledged, and credited. The incredible diversity of the work they accomplished in a very short period of time, between 1928 and 1939, is indeed remarkable. Among the areas of knowledge they confronted, we find linguistics and biology, linguistic and law, clinical phonology, linguistics and morphology, sociolinguistics, linguistics and society, linguistics and the brain, and reception theory among others. This in itself is a remarkable accomplishment.

I would like to conclude these brief remarks on The Prague School of Theory of Theatre with the introductory note I wrote in 1990 to *El drama como*

literatura by Jiří Veltruský, published in Buenos Aires, Argentina, by Editorial Galerna:

> The Master Jiří Veltruský does not need an introduction. He was a member of the prestigious research group named the Prague Linguistic Circle, also integrated by Mukařovský, Jakobson, Troubetzkoy, to name some of the most prominent members. Together with Jindřich Honzl, Petr Bogatyrev and others, Jiří Veltruský was one of the very first theatre semioticians, already in the 1930s, much before the claim of theatre semiotics from the 1970s. Their studies have been fundamental in the current work of theatre semiotics, in fact, the very epistemological and theoretical foundations, and the possibility of its development were established in seminal studies such as "Basic Features of Dramatic Dialogue", pp. 128–133; "Construction of Semantic Contexts", pp. 134–144; "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theatre", pp. 94–117 (in *Semiotics of Art. Prague School Contributions.* Edited by Ladislav Matějka and Irwin R. Titunik, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT Press, 1976; "The Prague School Theory of Theatre", *Poetics Today,* II, 3 (Spring 1981), 225–235.) The central characteristic of these studies resides on a form of theorisation that never lost sight of its object of study, a practice that later was lost in the profusion of theories of the 1980s.
>
> Without any doubt theatre semiotics has travelled a short but intense road since the seminal studies of The Prague School of Theatre Theory and *El teatro como literatura* by Jiří Veltruský. However, this study by the Master Veltruský is generic and in this sense it has a paradigmatic value. This is why we requested the translation of this most valuable study, which is and will become one more touchstone for those interested in the study and knowledge of the theatre.
>
> (DE TORO 1990: 1–2)

The history of the Circle, to say it in a Foucauldian manner, has been an ignored, neglected, and I dare to say, suppressed one; therefore, their contributions to the knowledge of the theatre have yet to be written, and I very much hope that the "revisiting" of the Prague Circle, initiated by Eva Stehlíková, Pavel Drábek and David Drozd, will yield a new understanding of their major contribution to knowledge. The colloquium of June 2011 is a start in the right direction, and the first step forward.

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From the left: Fernando de Toro, Marco de Marinis, Patrice Pavis
Photograph © Patrice Pavis

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Summary

Fernando de Toro: The Legacy of the Linguistic Circle of Prague

My contention is that the epistemological and theoretical foundations of theatre semiotics was very much developed by the Prague School during the 1930s by scholars such as Petr Bogatyrev (1971, 1976, 1976a), Jindřich Honzl (1971, 1976, 1976a), Jiři Veltruský (1976, 1976a,1976b, 1989, 1990) and indeed later by the works of Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička and others; that is, they introduced the paradigm (in the sense of Thomas Khun, 1970), and what followed in the early 1970s was 'normal science': the development of those foundations, and no important breakthrough came afterwards. They did the ground and seminal work, very much as the Russian Formalists did pertaining to narrative, literary history and poetic analysis. Thus, my intention in this paper is to underline this contribution and the importance that, without any doubt, the Circle would have had if their work could have been known and published before the advent of the so called School of Paris.