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Emil Volek

## Theatrology *an Zich*, and Beyond: Notes Towards a Metacritical Repositioning of Theory, Semiotics, Theatre, and Aesthetics

Homage to Ivo Osolsobě,  
from whom I have learnt that there is life and communication  
beyond semiotics and beyond language.

When we peruse current literature on theatre theory (I am thinking about Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 1980, Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Semiotik des Theaters*, 1983, Fernando de Toro's *Semiótica del teatro*, 1987, or Marco de Marinis's project of "new teatrology", 1988), the Prague School theory of theatre – indeed, its touted "theatre semiotics in *statu nascendi*" – seems amply recognized, and we could be proud of it. However, the first worrisome sign that not everything is so great is that the references point almost exclusively to the "classical period" (limited by Irena Sławińska to 1931–1941). Secondly, at a closer look we find numerous misunderstandings and also some well-meant references to works these writers could not have read first-hand for obvious reasons. On the other hand, when we realize that they had to rely mainly on some crude summary renderings of the Prague project (as those offered in DEÁK 1976), or even on those bordering on caricature (in SŁAWIŃSKA 1977, in Czech in 2002), we appreciate the savvy of these authors, who were able to get the gist of the matter out of that dubious material. A more balanced and coherent overview done by one of the leading theoreticians of the 'classical' period (VELTRUSKÝ 1981) came too late to influence the first and most 'authoritative' works that would weigh heavily on future scholarship in the field.

One case in point for the mentioned misunderstandings is the figure of Otakar Zich (1879–1934). The fact that his *Estetika dramatického umění* (Aesthetics of the Dramatic Arts), from 1931, is occasionally transformed into *Estetika dramatického umění* would be the least offence. Zich is a paradoxical figure. The concept of “a forerunner” does not do full justice to his position and work. While he was Jan Mukařovský’s postgraduate mentor, and Mukařovský got his chair in Aesthetics at Charles University in Prague after his untimely early death, Zich was not part of the famed Prague Linguistic Circle (1926–1948), much less of its literary Structuralist wing grouped around Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson as its prophets (at that time, this was a pretty dogmatic, sectarian, and combative group, mirroring the heightened Avant-Garde sensibilities). Zich was ‘out’, yet tied ‘in’ through the umbilical cord of Mukařovský’s allegiance; however, this was not enough for him to be included in the translation projects on the Prague School. Yet even these translations, outside of linguistics, came too late to influence the fast-paced transition to Theory in the 1970s (cf. VOLEK 2009a) and, outside of the Slavic area, left the Prague project, at best, for the erudite references at the bottom of the page (the same actually happened a generation earlier, in the works written from the 1940s by the very ‘movers’ of the ‘classical’ period, such as Jakobson or René Wellek, then centred on their own new work in progress).

However, Zich’s coherent and meticulously worked out ‘scientific’ theory of the dramatic art, formulated as early as in 1922, also presented a formidable challenge to the Structuralists working at that time mainly with literary texts, and only by the weight of the ‘new’ venturing, marginally though auspiciously, into film (Jakobson, Mukařovský). Mukařovský himself, in his extensive review of *Estetika*, tried to homologize Zich’s work with the emerging semiotic (specifically *semiological*) study (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1933), but his young followers, emerging at the end of the 1930s (from the seminar on “Aesthetics of Drama and Film”, 1937/1938, which would become the very launching pad for the Prague School’s focus on theatre), tended to dismiss or minimize Zich, because he did not refer much to the Avant-Garde theatre and did not use the semiological newspeak. While Zich was unavoidable for the budding semioticians of the theatre, he also proved hard to assimilate into the new semiological descriptive and interpretive paradigm. He was a thorn in the side. Strangely enough, the same situation would arise in the 1970s and 1980s when another series of appropriations is proposed (cf. VOLEK 2009a).

*Mutatis mutandis*, much of the same can be said about Ivo Osolsobě, if he appears in the theatrical literature at all. Through his concept of ostension (OSOLSOBĚ 1967), expanding on the “ostensive definition” (defining the concept by pointing to the object, say in a Zoo), Osolsobě brings to the fore the

“signifying thing” open for our epistemic inspection and consideration in the whole range of its potential meanings. Where he is referenced, he is probably unread, and where he is quoted or alluded to, he is misunderstood. Let’s mention, for example, the well-known Umberto Eco’s *take* on “ostension” (ECO 1977). Sure a drunkard, as well as anything, may be contextualized as an allegorical sign, and message, through his *type*; but when we look at an actor on the stage, do we see primarily a “type of an actor”? Secondly, of course, we can do many things with everything. Actually, what do we see when we look at an actor on the stage? Do we see a *sign*? Some semioticians, including those trying to re-appropriate Zich and ignore Osolobě, would have us believe so.

Another stumbling block for a good grasp of the whole scope of the Prague School’s semiotics is a poor understanding of Jan Mukařovský’s seminal study of the sign in his “Art as Semiological Fact” (1934). I have argued elsewhere that Mukařovský himself contributed to this outcome by his own unfelicitous translation, presenting his in principle “complex phenomenological inquiry into meaning” as a Saussurean all-too-simple “*sémiologie*”. The misnomer of *sémiologie*, anchored in the title of the piece, has then become Prague’s destiny, reinforced by the second generation of the Prague Structuralists and by practically all commentators on Prague Structuralism. Mukařovský’s readers took the title for the message. What was initially meant as an opportunistic appropriation of the term to refer to the then opening realm of the study of meanings, signs, and communication, i.e. what we now call “semiotics”, was interpreted as identification with the language oriented Saussurean doctrine of *sémiologie*.

Ślawińska, following on from Deák, reduces Mukařovský’s concept to the most banal version of the sign: signifier/signified and referent (although this is here “the total context of social phenomena”), adding to this evisceration “and some confusions”. In other words, “and some confusions” would summarize Mukařovský’s phenomenological work on the structure of meaning of the complex artefact as a sign. Elam takes out the redefined “referent” and leaves standing only the analogy to the Saussurean sign, where the “thing” is the signifier and the “aesthetic object”, already in Mukařovský lodged erroneously in the “collective consciousness” is the signified.

We may freely admit that Mukařovský’s quick outline of the multi-dimensional structure of complex “sign”, “meaning”, and “reference” is confounding at first sight; but it is well worth our close attention, since, in my mind, it is to this day the most subtle construction of the artefact as a *sign, meaning complex positioned in possible multi-layered correlations to the referenced realities*. Well understood in its implications, Mukařovský’s phenomenological concept of the sign would send packing the post-Structuralist confusionism of

Hayden White, Roland Barthes, and a host of other so-called “deconstructionists”, conflating literary and historical (i.e. referential) discourses, their constraints and liabilities.

### **The Range of Other Inputs Into the Prague Semiotics of Art**

Today, it is not sufficient to limit ourselves to carefully reading the Prague School and deciphering “what’s out there”. We must rethink its original path-breaking impulses within today’s contexts, and push those impulses to their limits, in order to put them to new use.

Paradoxically, Zich would have found striking correspondencies with Mukařovský’s semiotic *phenomenological* project, as the latter’s review makes clear; but his project has resisted all semiological attempts at appropriation, both then and later. But Zich is not the only one in Prague to resist the straightjacket of ‘semiologization’.

First, there was the seminal input of Valentin N. Voloshinov’s semiotics, through Petr Bogatyrev, pointing out the thing/sign dialectics (an object turned into a sign within a certain “ideological” context, and turned “back” without it), used by the latter in his study of folk costume. The costume is characterized by many possible sign functions (for example, features corresponding to a single or married woman, or unwed mother) and yet continues to be a thing, covering the body of its bearer (BOGATYREV 1936). This playful, voluble antinomy of the “thing” and the “sign” will be a key device explored by the Avant-Garde theatre. However, in Bogatyrev’s later writing on theatre, this innovation – that has nothing to do with the well-known “natural”/“artificial” sign categories – was almost forgotten, eclipsed by the mirage of his “sign of sign” illusion (BOGATYREV 1938).

Young Jiří Veltruský will struggle with the “thing/sign” heritage and will focus on the “dialectical antinomy” of object/actor on the stage: the object/thing turning into, or substituting for, the actor, and *vice versa* (VELTRUSKÝ 1940). After the communist *coup* in 1948, he settled in France and his embrace of *sémiologie* as his semiotic method became complete (only later, in the 1980s, he would express some dissatisfaction with the Saussurean signifier/signified dichotomy). On the other hand, the “thing/sign” mobility has implicitly translated into Jindřich Honzl’s concept of dynamic sign in theatre (HONZL 1940), which proved so fundamental for the theatre semiotics.

Second, if, as in Voloshinov, a thing – a natural object – may become a sign and, in appropriate circumstances, may revert back to a thing, in Viktor Shklovsky and in his banner Formalist Avant-Garde autotelic poetics – adopted in Prague as the initial aesthetic stance –, a verbal sign loses its transparency

and becomes a thing (“Word is not a shadow, it is a thing”, as he proclaims in his *Theory of Prose*, 1925), and thus draws attention to itself, to its material constitution, rather than to its orientation towards the reference and the referent. It was, however, up to the Czech Avant-Garde to explore the extent of the material potential of verbal signs (in typography, in visual poetry, in collage), since in literary theory this potential meaning, beyond general aesthetic statements and some partial explorations of the verse language (in the sense of the so-called “instrumentation”), went unreflected.

Third, this unorthodox and never fully theoretically explored line of “sign/thing” semiotics will re-emerge, within a different conceptual framework (cybernetic modelling), in Osolsobě’s already mentioned concept of “ostension” (a thing shown, scrutinized, put forward to be examined by us as a *thing*; that most surprising feat in the semiotics of theatre when *the chair is a chair*). However, Osolsobě has only opened a Pandora’s box of semiosis. A different version of ostension, as already mentioned, comes up in Eco: a token–object is scrutinized as a type or as an indexical sign (pointing to the empty glass instead of asking the waiter for more beer). These and other ‘special’ definitions of ostension (also in Dan Sperber’s “calling attention to”, SPERBER 1995) turn around the “ostensive definition” proposed in logic (in Wittgenstein and in Russell).

A general theory of ostension, following up on Thomas Sebeok, will be proposed in my “Habitats of Language” (VOLEK 2007): ostension as a basic “biological” *language* of the species (language destined not for communication among individuals but for the species specific *mapping* of the *Umwelt* of each individual). This truly primary a modelling system will be set into the interplay with the verbal language as the actually secondary modelling system, an ‘algebraic’ language emerging in *homo sapiens sapiens* for the sake of communication and culture. In this sense, the ostensive and the verbal languages will together constitute fundamental semiotic axes vertebrating the emergence of the modern human consciousness, making space for the whole range of consciousness endowed with specific different potential in each individual. As a consequence, powerful cultural theories that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as those of Freud or Lacan, based on verbal language only, will be found wanting.

Actually, Mukařovský himself (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1934) has anticipated some of the problematic involved in this line: the reference to Fechner’s “associative factor” in perception focuses on the *infra-signness* in visual arts; yet this materiality appears as significant without becoming a sign (this level of semiosis could be included into the “diffuse communication” of the so-called “autonomous sign”). On the other hand, we could add that while not becom-

ing a sign in the picture, it may become a distinguishing – indexical – “sign” of an artist’s art. While Mukařovský also mentions “thing”, the artefact–thing is conflated in him with the Saussurean sign/*signifiant* – the *signifiant* side of the sign – and the tantalizing thing/sign problematics is thus erased. Later, in 1943 (in “Intentionality”), Mukařovský will call “thing” the residue of the work resisting the readerly process trying to totalize its sense. In my mind, both concepts of artefact–thing are unsatisfactory and confusing (more on this in VOLEK 2012).

Saussure’s *sémiologie* moves strictly within the sign and within the space of the code (my space  $S_1$ , cf. VOLEK 2009a and b), and is modelled on the verbal language, while all the semiotic strands on hand in Prague go, in their different ways, beyond the sign as arbitrary – i.e. conventionally established – and self-centred verbal signifying entity. These specific limitations of *sémiologie* have later come to hinder semiotic studies of the theatrical art, as well as those of every domain to which *sémiologie* has been slavishly applied.

### A Sobering Reassessment

Returning to the equivocal praise of the Prague School, while we may still appreciate the compliments paid to the “semiotics in *statu nascendi*”, the real impact of the Prague Theory on the world stage appears as a bit more problematic. From this we can see the extent to which the theorists working in ‘minor’ languages are dependent on good and timely translations or at least on good summaries in world languages (which today is basically English). In our case, the first summaries (Deák, Sławińska) were too elementary and/or too sloppy, the translations were not always good (I shiver at the English perversion of Mukařovský’s *Function, Norm, and Value*), and many came late or were disseminated in hard to find publication.

The current version of theatre semiotics emerged in a ‘big bang’ in the 1970s: at that time, cultural initiative had already passed from the Slavic world to Paris; there, the self-centred Parisian Structuralism of the 1960s back-linked with Saussure and so happily by-passed whatever had happened in between, putting itself all too comfortably at the origin of structural thinking. The intoxication with the new semiotics, centred on the realm of signs, be it based on the Saussurean *sémiologie* or on the Peircean triad (only a slight improvement over the former), then censured whatever did not ‘fit in’. It is no surprise that ‘what came after’, and was hailed as “post-Structuralism”, had been there actually to a great degree ‘before’, in the “post-Formalist” period of the Russian Formalism, in the ‘dialogism’ of the Bakhtin group, and in the Prague School. But that awareness emerged only later, again too late for a fast-paced theory

on its way to Theory, too fast to bother with what does not fit or to notice that theoretical thinking may be moving in circles. Anyway, Paris set the stage for the semiotic research to come.

In that situation, Mukařovský's crippled and 'normalized' sign, equated with Saussure's *sémiologie*, will become the equivocal hallmark of the Prague semiotics. Bogatyrev's leap of faith to "sign of sign" (although reduced mainly to banal "connotation") will capture the imagination of the theatre enthusiasts. The concept is based on the fact that theatre tends to work, indeed must work, with fragments of things, with insinuations of situations, with synecdoches and metaphors, in other words with signs, with *signs of things* rather than with complete things alone. As far as "connotation" is concerned, it is usually not understood in terms of "sign of sign" but rather as the secondary, associated *meaning* of a sign only, of *any* sign, and beyond that, of any situation. "Sign of sign" is hence employed only metaphorically in Bogatyrev, and metaphors bite back if used indiscriminately in lieu of sound descriptive instruments. Roland Barthes will take this loose metaphoric use of signs and *sémiologie* to new heights. However, if we debunk the "sign of sign" concept, or inversely: if the "sign of sign" as connotation is found as potentially omnipresent, one of the key elements of the alleged "specific theatre semiotics" fizzles.

In my mind, the search for some specific theatrical signs is as futile as was the search for "literariness" in devices (*prijemy*), in "dominants", or in "semantic gestures": as has become ever more evident in the poetic or literary discourse using any type of language it deems fit, the theatre may also use any type of sign, or thing for that matter, it can put into action or as its support. The mirage of "specificity" is only created by the specific configuration of semantic impulses in a singular structure of meaning. The same goes for the specificity of the code, indeed, of the theatrical 'code' itself.

Finally, it will be Jindřich Honzl's concept of the dynamic theatrical sign that will exert its rightful impact on the best theoreticians, only hampered by the linguistic semiological model underlying much of theatre semiotics, dreaming about "theatrical text", "theatrical code", and clear-cut signifying units... However, what Honzl points to, in reference to the Avant-Garde theatre of his day, could perhaps be best expressed through the "chaos theory" as represented *avant la lettre* by the French mathematician and topologist René Thom: throughout the theatrical performance we do not face any continuous texture woven by homogeneous or not so homogeneous signs, but a surprising, unpredictable, and ever-changing *emergence* of shifting pivotal moments ("catastrophes" in Thom's newspeak) that call our attention and, as so many times over and over again, catch us off-guard. The very concept of the "text" creates the impression that it is something 'out there' that we can just 'read',



even in the comfort of a sofa, while the meaning of the most diverse perceptual impulses, including the speech of the characters, we receive during the theatrical performance must be *constructed as a meaning* first. The “text” – even leaving aside its influential ideological twists imposed by Roland Barthes and later by Derrida (see my absurdist take on this in VOLEK 2006) – has cast a long shadow of the underlying linguistic model lasting long beyond the hegemony of Structuralism.

### **Theory Against Itself**

How are we to react to this rather sobering reassessment of the Prague School’s influence on the semiotic stage? I think that we need to show that there is something substantially more or ‘different’, both in the ‘classical Prague period’ and after, that could impact on current impasses and problems and/or offer novel solutions to them. But we face a curious paradox here: while much of the Prague’s ‘classical period’ has been misunderstood by the lack of direct access, the semiological contributions – even the most spurious ones – have been worked quite successfully into the semiotic web of approaches that have characterized theatre studies in the 1970s/80s. In contradistinction to it, Osolobě’s work, even what has been directly accessible in world languages, as far as I know, has not reached the mainstream theatre semiotic studies and has remained on the margins of semiotics at large. The positive and the negative screening of possible contributions, exercised by the *sémiologie* or by the semiotics based exclusively on signs, could not be more evident in both cases. In one, it enhances by equivocal affinity, in the other, it censures what may be vital but does not fit.

The theory in this version may not only distort the possible input of some marginally accessible contributions, but its flaws may go deeper: instead of illuminating certain phenomena it pretends to study, it may rather obfuscate them, introducing its own specific interests, biases, problems and limitations. The theatrological discourse may turn into a scholastic exercise, struggling with the shadows of some of its own primitive theoretical formulations and misunderstandings, with its own poorly understood underpinnings, and with the even less understood realities. Let’s just recall how much ink has been spilled on the surprising remark of George Mounin – there is, of course, always some theory to support anything imaginable – that there is no communication going on in the theatre, so seriously discussed and continuously referenced as some pivotal problem in theatre semiotics. As if representation of communication was not communication. Actually, too much communication appears to be going on in the theatre simultaneously, as Roland Barthes not-

ed early on (BARTHES 1963). And Osolsobě will talk about “communication through communication about communication” as the defining feature of the theatre.

Therefore, we also need to address some latent issues in the very foundations of the theory that have hindered successful solutions or that have ‘railroaded’ the discussion in some highly seductive but, in the final account, equivocal directions.

### Otakar Zich to the Rescue

Zich’s pivotal concepts of “*herecká postava*” (stage figure) and “*dramatická osoba*” (*dramatis persona*, character) will take us a step further. At first sight, his own explanation of these terms appears as a bit confused and confusing (Osolsobě saw it correctly in “Pro a proti”, 1981). However, his is a complex phenomenological analysis (on Zich as the phenomenologist of the ‘first wave’ see more in VOLEK 2012), proceeding carefully step by step and turning the screw on the phenomenon of the *actor playing a role on the stage*, where the actor’s perspective alternates with the viewer’s, and, as a result, Zich’s complex, dialectical analysis frustrates the seekers of traditional simple definitions (including, paradoxically, the Prague Structuralists who had hard time with working his concepts into their later simple semiological matrix).

Let’s try to understand Zich better, and then see why the proposed interpretation of the “stage figure” as a “signifier” and of the “character” as the “signified” is only a very rough representation of the correlation outlined by the Czech Phenomenologist of art, and why it leaves out much of what is really important there. In other words, why the attempted semiologization of the correlation is not completely wrong, but is not right either.

Coming from the situation in other arts and from the then recently discovered *Kunstwissenschaft* (Max Dessoir) as separate from philosophical aesthetics, Zich differentiates between the “technical” aspect of an artefact (how it is made) and its “imaging” (*obrazový*) aspect (what it means, what it represents, what image it creates). At this point, “stage figure” would correspond to the “technical” aspect, and “character” to the representative, “imaging” dimension. One complication that surfaces precisely in comparison with the other arts is that in theatre the artist (the actor) uses as his material for creation *himself*, be it in full or at least in part (say, the actor’s voice, or even less, for example, in García Lorca’s *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, the noise of a man passing alongside the boarded up window). This is a unique and complicating factor since live actor – live human being – is normally part both of the stage figure and of the character, and thus contributes to the (con)fusion of these concepts.

At this point, then, the actor enters the stage and the stage figure is defined as “the figure created on stage by the actor”. Correspondingly, the character is the *dramatis persona* as represented by the actor’s stage figure.

However, Zich’s concept of theatre is audience-oriented. So, in the next step, the audience enters the purview of theory: while the stage figure continues to be created by the actor, the character is now what the audience can see and interpret as the image created on the stage. Then a kind of *Structuralism* enters the purview, and Zich posits a principle of correspondence between the stage figure and the character as the “technical” and the “imaging” semantic representations (*významové představy*). Actually, returning from another angle to the initial insight, the technical and the imaging aspects are two sides of the same phenomenon. Therefore, the audience does not see the “meaning” only (the character) but, according to its theatre experience and knowledge, a well-educated audience (such as existing in great theatre centres) can figure out “how it is made” (based on the elements of the stage figure), and much more.

Some such description of an intimately linked double-sided phenomenon would jump at the semiologist as the very embodiment of signifier/signified relation embedded in the sign. The fact that that relationship here is not arbitrary but closely iconic would be the least offence. More important is that the “stage figure” as a signifier is not created by some abstract sign elements, as in the phenomenological abstraction of the Saussurean *signifiant* in the space of the code, but by a real, material actor in a symbolic communicational setting (my “mapping” space  $S_3$ ), who brings a significant *surplus* of meaning to his creation (sometimes enhancing his “figure” and “character”, other times in conflict with them). The question does not lie simply in the absence of ostension in the semiological/semiotic *metalanguage* only because ostension is not limited to the ‘showing off’ of the physical actor on stage. The surplus of meaning the live actor brings in is filtered (positively or negatively) both into his “stage figure” and into the “character” he represents. In other words, the total meaning of the representation goes well beyond the figure created and the character represented, well beyond the signifier and the signified sides of the sign (unless we radically redefine these entities, turning the sign into a metaphor of complex meaning). Zich works with a “live actor”, but the same would be valid for substituting real material “acting device” (a mannequin, an object turned “actor”, or some projected image as used in *Laterna magica*).

And, finally in Zich, a realization creeps in that the actor does not only *create* the stage figure but also *represents* a character. In other words, he must be aware not only of *how* but also of *what* he is actually playing (and, at a meta-level remove, he can observe himself playing and can ‘play’ with his unfold-

ing performance in real time). Zich’s own summary (ZICH 1931: 57) falls short of his own analysis even if I improve on it a bit:

<b>Artist</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Work</b>	<b>Image/ Representation</b>
the actor as a citizen and as a physical being (A <sub>1</sub> )	the same actor as a physical being and as an artist having certain physique, experience, skills, and theatre history (A <sub>2</sub> )	the stage figure created by the actor (A <sub>3</sub> )	the character played by the actor recognized by the audience (Ch)

However, even this slightly improved-on schema does not express fully all the dialectical potential implied in Zich’s phenomenological conception as I have summarized it: while his theory is audience-oriented, the schema he offers follows to a great degree the actor’s perspective. On the one hand, the actor’s part does not stop at creating the stage figure: he is – must be – aware of the character he plays in such and such way. On the other hand, the spectators do not see only a seamless image of a “dramatic character” but are also aware, according to their capacity and theatre experience, of different technical aspects of how the character is being created by the actor, i.e. the “stage figure” defined in those terms. They cannot fail to see the actor showing himself both as physical being and author behind the stage figure.

Instead of a lineal succession – a straightforward progression – of the phases of the transformation of the actor into character, we have a clash of conflicting, ‘dialogical’ perspectives: these perspectives need not be, indeed never are, perfectly correlated (a perfect correlation between the sender and the addressee can be found only in the flawed Jakobsonian model of communication). The actor, his work and his intentions, need not dovetail with the spectators’ vision and interpretation of the former’s role, as well as of the ‘surplus’ meaning clustered around of the actor as the author of the stage figure and character. To understand Zich, we must go beyond him, although within his stated intentions.

Actually, a better representation of Zich’s proposal would seem to be to use the schema of “contextual accumulation” modelled on Husserl’s experience of

time, where the series  $A_1$  to  $A_3 \rightarrow \text{Ch}$  represents the transformation of the actor into the character and  $/ x /$  symbolizes the clash of – the irreducible fracture, refraction, and slippage – between opposing perspectives:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{Actor's perspective} \rightarrow & (A_1 A_2) & A_3 & \leftrightarrow & \text{Ch} / x / & A_{3x} & \rightarrow \text{Ch}_x \leftarrow \text{Spectator's} \\ (=organizes) & & & & & & \text{perspective} \\ & & A_1 & & A_2 & A_{2x} & \\ & & & & A_1 & A_{1x} & (=reorganizes) \end{array}$$

What the actors create out of themselves (the technical stage figure and the character he or she represents) and what the audience sees and interprets does not coincide exactly. There is a necessary shift between the two: the audience reorganizes and reinterprets the whole message together with its vehicle(s). In the process, the intentional aspects of actors' creation may be overlooked and the unintentional ones may be viewed as intentional. Firstly, we have the interference of the 'material' into the sign and representation: If the "stage figure" ( $A_3$ ) is considered as the "signifier" and the "dramatic character" (Ch) as the "signified", then the actor's "material" ( $A_1$  and  $A_2$ ) is both part of the signifier and of the signified. Secondly, there is a fundamental difference produced by the access to and the management of information stemming from the opposing perspectives on the "sign": the subject as *origo* has difficulties with the side of his own "signifier", since we as subjects do not see us as we are seen by others (though a mirror helps actors somewhat); conversely, we have privileged access to our thoughts (the "signifieds"). When we adopt the position of onlookers, we can see others in a way they cannot see themselves, but we have only limited access to their thoughts, even if they "speak up" and try to "explain themselves" to us. A radical asymmetry of access to information produces necessary disparities in interpretation of what which element means. We can further assume that, from the actor's perspective, his or her work ( $A_3 \leftrightarrow \text{Ch}$ ) will appear as a more *schematic* creation (in Roman Ingarden's terms) than from the audience's perspective, for which the theatrical performance is necessarily already concretized.

Further, our schema of the actor's work should not be read as a straightforward sequence of progression of determined stages. These stages can be played with, used and abused in many ways according to the theatrical artistic poetics, type of director's work, special effect desired, etc. For example, Stanislavskij or later Neorealism will use non-actors ( $A_1$ ) to represent themselves or somebody closely similar ( $A_1$  as  $\text{Ch}A_1$ ), or may contrast certain non-actors and the roles they are loosely 'playing' ( $A_1$  as Ch contrasted with  $A_1$ , cf. the paper by Andrés Pérez-Simón on the experimental staging of gypsy women in García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba*). Metatheatre may play free-

ly with all phases ( $A_3$  Ch mingling with  $A_2$  and even  $A_1$ ). Both types use for their purposes the partial sign-erasure as practised in Avant-Garde art, putting on display the “materiality”, the “reality”, the crude “incompleteness” of the artefacts in contrast to the meticulously polished symbolism of the *fin-de-siècle* artwork.

Conversely, in performance art, the performer rarely appears as simply him- or herself ( $A_1$ ), but rather strives to create certain *image*, inventing and adopting certain *persona* (character, Ch). It can be something *ad hoc* (enhancing a single performance or a ‘life-cycle’) or upheld laboriously throughout the lifetime. This persona can ‘take over’ the very self of the person, can be destined for performances only (the Beatnik poet’s Allen Ginsberg’s reading in rags his *Howl*), or be everything in between (the “gangsta” rap milieu). Some such *persona* may be dictated by the *niche* within certain genre or by the audience expectations (certain band’s image, ©). Some genres (pop) may require chameleonic transformations from its top performers (Lady Gaga). Where personal physique, age, or skills fail, cosmetic surgery and surrogates come to rescue. Sometimes, the image will be also sustained by ‘extracurricular’ activity, good (wholesale orphan adoptions, environmental activity) and bad (theatrics and continuous mishaps – calls for attention –, say Lindsay Lohan and so many other stars and starlets on the Hollywood circuit). *Personae*, performers, and actors mingle freely. The combinations are infinite.

We can now better understand why the reinterpretation of the stage figure and the character represented on stage in terms of the Saussurean sign – the signifier/signified dyad – does not work, or works only very approximately, since this crude appropriation cannot capture the rich dialogic, refractive, and asymmetrical nature of conflicting perspectives, and leaves out too much of the other aspects and ingredients of the semiosis taking place on stage.

### Post-Structuralist Exercise in Misunderstanding

While I have been pointing out with delight some inherited limitations in the ‘traditional’ formulations of the semiotic theory, I do not embrace at all the misguided ‘post-Structuralist’ critique of the sign and the sign system in Derrida or in Lacan. Both of them focus on the “space of communication” (our  $S_3$  mapping space, cf. VOLEK 2009a and b) and then assume, hastily, that the mobility of the sign in usage (such as the alleged “floating signifier”) somehow cancels out the constitution of the sign in the space of the “code/*langue*” (our space  $S_1$ ). As Sergej Karcevskij already showed back in 1929 in a paper for *TCLP* he scribbled – in a rapture of inspiration – on a napkin in a Prague restaurant, both spaces in which the sign operates, the code ( $S_1$ ) and the con-

text of communication ( $S_3$ ), complement each other, and what is only put in question in that interaction is the postulated rigidity, the strict monogamy imposed on the relation between the signifier and the signified – glued together – in Saussure.

The sign, contrary to Derrida's amateurish semiotics in this regard, is not pushed to the verge of obliteration, of being disestablished, but only becomes dynamic (and is endowed with different speed of change in different mapping spaces). Beyond that, to suit his alleged deconstructionist drive, Derrida reads only the first half of what Saussure has to say about the constitution of linguistic entities and values. It is also pathetic to read his railings against the "logofonocentrism": verbal language emerged in *homo sapiens sapiens* as a surprising *digital revolution* (cf. VOLEK 2007). The analytical – phonological – writing then only mimics the digital model established at a phonological level already. In our times of the apparently unstoppable rise of one digital revolution after another, his criticism of the Western phonological writing and his penchant for the Chinese ideograms is surprising to say the least. One could surmise that in this sly way, indeed so typical of him, the now incomprehensible Maoist illusions of his comrades from the Tel Quel group of the Parisian Neoavant-Garde writers come up uncannily to the surface. Instead of the deconstruction of the Western logocentrism, we have another dead end of enchantment with *chinoiserie*.

As for Lacan, who for his "deconstruction" of the sign has chosen to equate male and female railroad bathrooms, this striking hypothesis may lead some inquisitive minds to question whether the famous minimalist psychoanalyst has ever entered the reference space of a men's pissoir.

What was once hailed as a devastating post-Structuralist critique of logos, of sign, and of semiotics reveals itself as a baffling comedy of errors and misjudgements based on *naiveté* and perhaps much of the exquisite Parisian intellectual self-centred arrogance.

Zich's concepts of the stage figure and of the dramatic character as technical construction and as "imaging" representation will help us open our closing round of brief observations. Zich is asking two important questions: 1) how something is made, and 2) what does it mean. Obviously, we need to add a third fundamental question: 3) what it is worth. These apparently simple questions are actually surprising and have some big implications.

In the line of the Formalist–Structuralist thinking, inherited by theatre semiotics at least in its initial stages, the space of the first question was considered as all-important and as self-sufficient: somehow, it was assumed that the description of "how an artefact is made" would by itself answer all other ques-

tions: that the meaning and the value (including the aesthetic value) of the literary and theatre artefacts (the performance) would lie exclusively in their construction. From there came, in the budding semiotic teatrology, the equation of the theatre with performance. However, that attitude led to the atrophy of other heterological ‘mapping’ spaces or of their aspects where other questions may, and indeed must, be asked.

As a consequence, the meaning was reduced to *semantic* meaning (the ‘sign-meaning’), and the value was gauged according to the *innovative structure* of the artefact. Yet what about the meaning of the theatre as a cultural institution? Or, as a catalyst for change (see the role of the people engaged in theatre in the Velvet Revolution). And many other questions readily emerge.

The inherited ballast of Formalism and of the Avant-Garde aesthetics has also undercut Mukařovský’s path-breaking discovery of aesthetics not as the Avant-Garde celebration of autotelism, much less of the Formalist negation of ‘practical’ functions, but as the aesthetic organization of actual extra-aesthetic values. If the former is, as in Theodor Adorno’s terms (ADORNO 1970), a kind of “aesthetics of negativity” that empties artistic work, leading to the dubious pleasures of ever more vacuous texts, as Roland Barthes had the pleasure – certainly not the *jouissance* – to find in *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973), the new aesthetics discovered by Mukařovský does not prescribe nor exclude, and permits all kinds of artistic poetics, many of them still waiting to be unveiled. The theatre semiotics, forgetting its uncomfortable past (Zich) and new challenges (Osolsobě), is still waiting to open up its project to the whole range of theatre semiosis.



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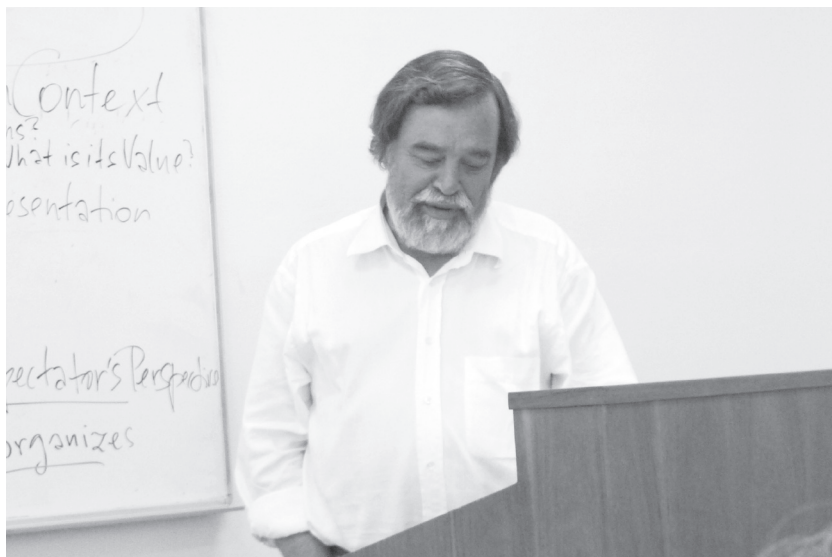
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### Summary

**Emil Volek: *Theatrology an Zich, and Beyond: Notes Towards a Metacritical Repositioning of Theory, Semiotics, Theatre, and Aesthetics***

*Theatrology an Zich, and Beyond: Notes Towards a Metacritical Repositioning of Theory, Semiotics, Theatre, and Aesthetics*

Study is a sobering reassessment of the ambiguous if not haphazard reception of the classical Prague School semiotics of theatre in contemporary theatre studies, mainly due to the lack of direct access to theoretical work written originally in Czech. Otakar Zich's path-breaking *Estetika dramatického umění* (Aesthetics of the Dramatic Arts, 1931) is singled out as the most obvious 'missing link' both for its historical achievement and for the underlying potential yet to be grasped and developed to its full potential (his phenomenological analysis of correlated pivotal concepts of "stage figure" and "character", among others). It would appear that Zich could come to the rescue in a number of other questions contemporary theatrology – and aesthetics in general – has been struggling with.



*Manfred Pfister during his concluding speech*  
Photograph © Patrice Pavis



*Organizers of the symposium*  
*From the left: Pavel Drábek, David Drozd*  
Photograph © Patrice Pavis