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Eva Šlaisová

The Prague School's Contribution to the Theory of Intermediality

The term intermediality, which refers to the “transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media of communication” (WOLF 2002: 17), first appears in 1983 in the study *Intermedialität und Intertextualität* by German Slavist Aage Ansgar Hansen-Löve, who created the term as an analogy to Kristeva's intertextuality (SCHNEIDER 2008: 9). Since the 1980s, intermediality has been one of the key concepts of scholarly discussions and research in the field of cultural studies. Yet, despite the relative youth of the term, artists and scholars as early as Aristotle, Horace, Coleridge, and Lessing, to name only a few, have reflected on relationships between arts and explained the nature of arts in comparison to others.

Inter-art relationships were also of interest to the Prague School scholars. Despite the relatively large body of texts which Prague School scholars devoted to the theme in question, their connection to the theory of intermediality has not been fully acknowledged. In this paper, I aim to show how the ideas of the Prague School preceded contemporary research on intermediality, namely in theatre and performance.

Comparative approach to arts

The Prague Structuralists perceived what we today call intermediality as part of a comparative exploration of arts (this lingo was used by Jan Mukařovský, but also by Jiří Veltruský at the beginning of 1990s, and Mojmír Grygar in 2008).¹ Mukařovský claims that the fundamental aim of Structuralist aesthetics is to “establish the system and method of *comparative*

1 See, for example, (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948f [1940], 1948c [1941]; VELTRUSKÝ 1981, 2012; GRYGAR 2008).

*semiology of arts*² (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948f [1940]: 23–4). Prague School scholars did not aim to compare separate phenomena extracted from the context of their structure, but to first describe the synchronic and diachronic relationships of each artistic branch separately, and then to analyze the relationship between the various arts (semiotic systems).³ In their articles, they, most extensively Mukařovský, touch upon two seminal relationships between arts which are discussed in contemporary theories of intermediality: first, transmediality which refers to the *transfer* of motifs/story and formal elements from one medium (art)⁴ to another;⁵ second, multimediality or plurimediality which applies to the *combination* of various media within a work of art (RAJEWSKY 2005: 51–2; WOLF 2002: 21–3).

Transmediality: intermedial imitation and transposition

Transmediality, in a broader sense, encompasses three types of intermedial relationships: intermedial imitation, intermedial transposition and intermedial translation.⁶ In Werner Wolf's typology, intermedial imitation refers to the transfer of formal elements (signifiers) between the arts, while intermedial transposition describes the transfer of motifs, characters or whole stories (signified) between the arts (WOLF 2002: 25). In his texts, as early as in the 1930s Mukařovský also works with these terms, however, he uses them interchangeably, suggesting that imitation and transposition both refer to the use of motifs or techniques of one art in another (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948e [1938], 1948d [1940], 1948f [1940], 1948c [1941]). However, as artistic praxis has demonstrated, the transfer of signifiers is not often accompanied by the transfer of signifieds and vice versa. For this reason it is more accurate to consider intermedial imitation and transposition as two separate types.

2 In Czech “vypracování systému a metody srovnávací semiologie umění”.

3 The term *sign system* has a wider meaning than the term *art*. More precisely, arts are only a subcategory of the broad realm of semiotic studies. These two terms, however, are used mostly as synonyms in the texts of the Prague School.

4 In this text, the term *media*, which various scholars define differently (mainly as a technical-material channel for transmitting the information or/and as a semiotic system), is used as a synonym for the term *arts*, which Lars Elleström defines as “aesthetically developed forms of media” (ELLESTRÖM 2010: 11).

5 In contrast to Werner Wolf's understanding, the term *transmediality* is understood here in a broad sense as a general term which includes all the intermedial relationships based on a transfer of formal or thematic elements from a work of art/semiotic system to another work of art/semiotic system. Wolf defines transmediality in a narrow sense as one type of intermedial relationships which concerns phenomena that “appear in more than one medium [...] and [...] do not have an easily traceable origin which can be attributed to a certain medium” (WOLF 2002: 18–9). For example, transmedial research focuses on characteristic artistic features of a certain period, such as the pathetic expressivity typical for all the eighteenth-century arts (drama, poetry, opera, music, and visual arts) (WOLF 2002: 19).

6 Translation is the most complex technique of transmediality as it includes the transfer of signifiers as well as signified. The founding principles of this wide conception of translation were laid by Roman Jakobson, who coined the term intersemiotic translation, which involves translation between two different arts, such as the transposition of verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting (JAKOBSON 1971 [1959]: 261, 266). To discuss the specific features of inter-art translation is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Prague scholars, including Petr Bogatyrev, František Deák, Jindřich Honzl, Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukařovský, and Jiří Veltruský, analyzed the interchange of techniques and motifs between various branches of arts, such as film, literature, music, painting, and theatre.⁷ Specifically, they focused on the transposition of poetic techniques, namely metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche, into theatre (HONZL 1956a [1927]), painting (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1966d [1936], 1966g [1938], 1948e [1938], 1948c [1941]), film (JAKOBSON 1933; MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1966f [1933]), and music (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948c [1941]). They also studied the transposition of painting into poetry (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948e [1938]), and stage work, that is, theatricalization of painting (DEÁK 1982). The transposition of musical principles (i.e. rhythm) into verbal aspects of works of art was also studied, mostly in relation to the theatre of E. F. Burian (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948a [1940], 1948d [1940], 1966b [1948]). In addition, Prague School scholars examined the use of devices of literature in film, namely Bogatyrev's analysis of the principle of retardation in Chaplin's films (BOGATYREV 1971a [1923]), and Mukařovský's construction of time and space in literature and film (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1966f [1933], 1966a). They also assessed the thematization of a statue in poetry (JAKOBSON 1937), the mutual transposition of techniques between film and theatre (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1933), and lastly, the relationship between statue and live actor (VELTRUSKÝ 1994 [1940]).

With a few exceptions, the Prague School scholars were concerned primarily with the movement of techniques between arts, rather than motifs. Regarding the transfer of techniques, Mukařovský points out that it is not possible to talk about the “mechanical transfer” of techniques, but rather about the complicated transposition of external impulses into the immanent evolution of an artistic branch (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948c [1941]: 274). In Bogatyrev's words, it is not a “passive reproduction” of a technique, but a “creative act” on the part of a different semiotic system which works with different materials (BOGATYREV 1971b [1931]: 59). In brief, arts aim to transfer their boundaries, but this is impossible due to the specific character of the materials of each art, from which these arts cannot escape. The importance of crossing boundaries is thus in the fact that an art discovers its new principles of construction and perceives its materials from an unusual perspective.⁸

Reflecting upon exchanges between arts, the Prague School scholars did not develop a unified theory of transmediality or “comparative semiology of arts”; rather, they produced a variety of studies dealing with different phenomena from diverse artistic branches, which reflected mostly upon the artistic experiments of the 1920s and 1930s (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948f [1940]: 23–4). Despite this fact, they produced several stimulating ideas, which in several aspects preceded the contemporary research of transmediality.

7 Their comments on intermediality range from brief notes to elaborated studies.

8 Discussions on material are very common in studies of the Prague School's scholars, including Zich, Bogatyrev, Honzl, Jakobson, Mukařovský, Veltruský, and they have been reflected in recent thoughts on intermediality (e.g. STEINER 1982; ELLESTRÖM 2010). To talk about this problem is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

Theatre: a multimedial (and intermedial) art

Multimediality or plurimediality is based on the combination or fusion of various media, that is, the direct presence of various semiotic systems in a work of art (WOLF 2002: 22). One of the most complicated artistic branches in terms of multimediality is theatre, which, as Mukařovský claims, has a special position among the arts, as it is a transitional form between one art and many arts, from which its structure is composed (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948f [1940]: 23). To talk about multimediality in theatre is thus to talk about the founding principles of theatre. Scholars of the Prague School aimed to explain some of these principles, of course without using the terms inter- and multi-medial, and created an innovative and complex conception of theatre as multi- and inter-medial art.

Disputing Wagner's conception of a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), one of the most famous theories of plurimediality in theatre, they asked: What are the relationships among arts? Is it one art with its own structural principles or the sum of separate arts? Are the relationships harmonious or struggling? What is the dominant and fundamental component of a theatrical structure? In Wagner's conception of drama/theatre, different media create a total, organic whole in which diverse media remain transparent. As such, theatre does not exist as a separate art, but as the sum of other arts. These arts are organized into a hierarchy, with music on the top, followed by dramatic text (word) and ballet (dance), with other arts, such as painting, architecture, and actor, in supporting positions (WAGNER 1849).

The Prague School's scholars were not the only ones to oppose and reconsider Wagner's theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. On the contrary, at the beginning of the twentieth century, several artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Hugo Ball, Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Tairov, Vselovod Meyerhold and Bertolt Brecht, questioned Wagner's thoughts on theatre. However, in contrast to the Prague School, these artists did not develop a generally valid theory of theatre as a multimedial/intermedial art. Rather, their critique of Wagner was linked with the creation of a new theatrical (cinematic) form (Kandinsky's monumental abstract theatre, Eisenstein's montage of attractions, or Brecht's epic theatre, which calls for a separation of elements, etc.) and with the explanation of the principles upon which this new type of theatre/film operates.

Otakar Zich, one of the predecessors of the Prague School, challenged Wagner's theories in several ways. He claimed that theatre is not the sum of arts, but a unified autonomous art (ZICH 1931: 36).⁹ This idea was placed into a semio-structuralist framework and further developed by the Prague School scholars. According to them, "theatre draws on other semiotic systems but constitutes a distinct structure with its own semiotics" (BRUŠÁK 1991: 144). The argument that theatre is an autonomous structure was linked with Mukařovský's

9 "A work of art [meaning performance, EŠ] appears to be compound, however, despite this fact, it is so unified that its individual components could only be separated violently, isolated artificially; in brief, they are non-independent." [Dílo jeví se sice jako složené, ale přesto je tak jednotné, že nám lze jednotlivé složky jen násilně oddělit, uměle izolovati; jsou krátce nesamostatné.] (ZICH 1931: 36; translation EŠ).

definition of a work of art as a close undissociable aesthetic whole (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1982 [1932]: 38, 1970 [1936]: 60). According to him, it is not possible to define a work of art (in this case, performance) by a list of its parts/components, “since each of its components acquires the value only in its relationship to the whole” (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1982 [1932]: 38; translation EŠ).¹⁰ For this reason, theatre cannot be seen as a “composition of individual arts,” but must be seen as “contexture (a weaving of strands together to create a texture)” (KATTENBELT 2006: 31).

Following Zich, the Prague School's scholars also questioned the absolute supremacy of some arts in theatre. Zich suggested that all arts are equal, by which he meant that one cannot label text, music and dance as constitutive elements, while actors, architecture etc. as supportive arts (ZICH 1931: 32–3, 40–1). The Prague School's scholars, namely Honzl and Mukařovský, developed this idea further, claiming that theatre consists of a vast number of components, but none of them can be considered the fundamental one (HONZL 1956b [1940]; MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948b [1937], 1966c [1937], 1966e [1941b]). According to Mukařovský, if one tries to claim that a certain component is a constitutive element of modern theatre (meaning theatre of 1920–1930s), then somebody would find a stage form in which the given component is missing and/or replaced by another (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948b [1937]: 154). According to Honzl, “stage could be represented by a sound, text by set, an actor may be a piece of wood or film projection, set may be represented by a verbal sign [*nápis*], etc.” (HONZL 1956b [1940]: 249, 254). Emphasizing the constant rearrangement of theatre's components and functions, and alteration of the dominant ones, Honzl and Mukařovský showed that theatre is not based on fixed rules and an unchanging hierarchy of elements in a theatrical structure, but on changing processes (HONZL 1956b [1940]: 260; MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948b [1937]: 154, 1966e [1941b]: 224).¹¹ Claiming this, they addressed the phenomenon which Richard Murphy described many years later as the loss of the dominant in relation to Avant-Garde art, and Hans-Thies Lehmann as de-hierarchization of theatrical means as a characteristic feature of post-dramatic theatre (MURPHY: 1999; LEHMANN 2006).

The quick rearrangement of components is linked with another feature of the Prague School's thoughts on theatre. That is conflict among arts within a theatrical structure. The emphasis on struggle distinguishes their thoughts on theatre from those of Wagner and Zich. According to Zich, “perfect dramatic works [...] are free from conflicts” (ZICH 1931: 41), while Brušák claims that “rather than creating a harmonic whole, theatre is made with a clash of tension and struggle among the arts as each one vies for the dominant position” (BRUŠÁK 1991:144).

Inspired by the Prague School's thoughts on theatre, Chiel Kattenbelt considers the rearrangement of equal components (media) and tension among them the fundamental prin-

10 In Czech “[...] protože každá její složka nabývá hodnoty teprve svým vztahem k celku.”

11 To use Elleström's terminology, the Prague School scholars considered theatre “a qualified medium”, which means that what one calls ‘theatre’ is “circumscribed by way of historical and cultural conventions and aesthetic standard” (ELLESTRÖM 2010: 29).

principle of intermediality in theatre and performance (KATTENBELT 2006: 31). He claims that theatre as a hypermedium is disposed more towards “diversity, discrepancy and hypermediacy [...] than to the idea of unity, harmony and transparency” (KATTENBELT 2008: 25–6). According to him “intermediality is about changes in theatre practice [i.e. theatrical conventions, *EŠ*] and thus about a changing perception of performance, which becomes visible through the process of staging” (CHAPPLE and KATTENBELT 2006: 12). In other words, Kattenbelt perceives intermediality as the result of the process of *aktualizace* (foregrounding, topicalization) of various media in theatrical structure, which in turn defamiliarizes our perception and understanding of theatre.

Aktualizace is a key concept of the Prague School, which lies beyond their thoughts on theatre. It describes the ongoing process of breaking theatrical (linguistic, literary, etc.) conventions, which results in a constant re-definition of the terms ‘theatre’ and ‘theatricality’.

The Prague School conception of theatre (that is, art based on the combination of various arts, which is full of tensions and strives to break conventional boundaries and incorporate new media into its structure) is both very modern and inspiring for contemporary research in intermediality in theatre (e.g. BAY-CHENG et al. 2010; ELLESTRÖM 2010; CHAPPLE and KATTENBELT 2006). This includes those scholars who explicitly refer to the theories of the Prague School, as well as those who arrive (most likely) independently at the same ideas and terminology placing them and reconsidering them in a contemporary context.

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Summary

This paper explores the contributions of the Prague School scholars to the theory of intermediality. Although the theory of intermediality did not yet exist in the 1930s, scholars of the Prague School presented a number of ideas that today would certainly be understood within the scope of the theory. They perceived what we now call intermediality as part of a comparative exploration of arts, and aimed to establish a *comparative semiology of arts*. In their articles, these scholars touched upon two important relationships between arts, which are discussed in contemporary theories of intermediality as transmediality and plurimediality/multimediality. With regard to transmediality, this study looks at the broad interest of the Prague scholars' in the interchange of formal and thematic components between various arts, such as painting and literature or film and theatre, and presents their thoughts on the nature of these inter-art relationships. Regarding plurimediality, the Prague School scholars focused mainly on theatre, which they considered one of the most complicated artistic branches. Comparing their thoughts on theatre with those of Wagner, Brecht, Kandinsky and others, this study reveals the uniqueness and complexity of the Prague School's approach to theatre and points to its potential for contemporary intermedial theatre studies.

Keywords

Prague School, comparative semiology of arts, intermediality, transmediality, plurimediality, Gesamtkunstwerk, theatre

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