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Otakar Zich's Invisible Actors and Creative Minds

"[Actors] are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time [...]" (*Hamlet* II.2)

For me, acting is not about showing my presence or displaying my technique. Rather it is about revealing, through acting, 'something else', something that the audience doesn't encounter in daily life. The actor doesn't demonstrate it. It is not physically visible, but, through the engagement of the onlooker's *imagination*, 'something else' will appear in his or her mind. For this to happen, the audience must not have the slightest awareness of what the actor is doing. They must be able to forget the actor. The actor must disappear. In the Kabuki theatre, there is a gesture which indicates 'looking at the moon', where the actor points to the sky with his index finger. One actor, who was very talented, performed this gesture with grace and elegance. The audience thought: 'Oh, his movement is so beautiful!' They enjoyed the beauty of his performance, and the technical mastery he displayed. Another made the same gesture, pointing at the moon. The audience didn't notice whether or not he moved elegantly; they simply saw the moon. I prefer this kind of actor: the one who shows the moon to the audience. The actor who can become invisible. (OIDA 1997: xvii–iii, italics MP)

Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy* (1986 [1931]) has become, over the last eight decades, the Bible of Czech theatre theory and its re-reading seems to be an unfinished project to which this paper is a testimony. We could mention only a few recent works which elaborate on Zich's book: Jaroslav Etlík's "Divadlo jako zakoušení. Vztah noetického a ontologického principu v divadelním umění" (1999; published in English as "Theatre as Experience: On the Relationship Between Noetic and Ontological Principles in Theatre Art", 2011) in which Zich is taken as a virtual scalpel critically re-assessing the developments and achievements of Czech theatre theory of the 20th century, including Zich himself; Emil Volek's paper "Theatrology *an Zich*, and Beyond: Notes Towards a Metacritical Repositioning of Theory, Semiotics, Theatre, Aesthetics" (VOLEK 2012), in which Zich is conceptualized within a wider context of emerging Czech Structuralism as a "Czech

Phenomenologist of art” (VOLEK 2012: 176). Nonetheless, Volek was not the first one who dealt with Zich’s potential phenomenological affiliations. In his paper “Sémantický problém ‘významové představy’ u O. Zicha a J. Volkelta: K počátkům sémantiky umění v moderní české estetice” (Semantic Problems of O. Zich’s and J. Volkelt’s “Semantic Image: On the Beginnings of Semantics of Art in Modern Czech Aesthetics”) from 1958 a Brno-based theorist Oleg Sus sought to decipher Zich’s troubling term *semantic image*, which Zich had already employed in his early work *Aesthetic Reception of Music* (ZICH 1981 [1911]). Unlike Volek, Sus did not follow the phenomenological path and analysed Zich as a pioneer of Czech semantics of art who had hybridised German psychologically-driven aesthetics with the legacy of Czech aesthetics. Prague scenology represents the last example of new readings of/into Zich, as it predominantly elaborates on Zich’s notion of internal-haptic (proprioceptive), kinesthetic or motoric sensations comparing them, for instance, with achievements of contemporary cognitive research and neuroscience (VOSTRÝ 2009).

Zich’s *Aesthetics* left behind a powerful mark and, to a certain extent, Czech theatre theory is still a footnote to it in the same manner as all philosophy after Plato is a footnote to his thought. Zich is open to new approaches, re-actualisations, semiologisation, semiotisation, phenomenologisation, scenologisation, cognitivisation etc., critical and meta-critical re-workings, corrections, intellectual or personal projections, and obviously contradicting discoveries. Despite that, there is a common understanding of *Aesthetics*, which is read as a book that (1) isolates dramatic art from other artistic disciplines, namely the literature; (2) gives “full appreciation to the phenomenon of acting as an autonomously creative, central, and dominant component, sufficient for the creation of the dramatic work and, at the same time, as an element without any independent equivalent in other artistic disciplines” (ETLÍK 2011: 185); (3) offers a distinct concept of theatre as dramatic art, which is audience-, or reception-oriented. As a very specific introduction to theatre studies, literally inaugurating theatre studies as an independent academic discipline, *Aesthetics* provides us with a relatively firm body of terms by means of which the subject matter could be systematically and logically articulated. Zich’s terminology is still relevant for our field and his trichotomy of actor–performer figure–dramatic person, as well as his dichotomy of representing–represented became an indivisible part of our (Czech) theory and pedagogical practice.

Yet, Zich’s book did not intend to be a linear description of actor (sender)–spectator (receiver) transactions via stage figure (often substituted with a ‘sign’ created by the actor) producing the dramatic person (often substituted with the ‘meaning of the sign’ deciphered by the receiver) since Zich, as a theorist but also a theatre practitioner, must have been aware of the non-linear and indeterminate character of the event of theatre performance, which lies in the heart of his work. That is, potentially, why he could not make do with the above-mentioned triadic relation and employed, after twenty years from the *Aesthetic Reception of Music*, the ambivalent term “semantic image”¹ (here only freely inspired by

1 I prefer the term ‘image’ related to the ‘imagination’ as a ‘creative mental ability’.

Volkelt's '*Bedeutungsvorstellung*'. This is rather a metaphoric abstraction than an exactly defined notion, by means of which he tried to capture the essence of the transitory nature of dramatic art). To put it bluntly, semantic image contaminates the linear, one-way interaction between the stage and audience.

Semantic image, as Ivo Osolsobě remarks in his 1979 paper "Sémiotika sémiotika Otakara Zicha" (Semiotics of Semiotician Otakar Zich; published in English in 1981),

is a complex, liminal, and interdisciplinary phenomenon about which a substantial body of papers have been written, the majority of them, though, only hardly touched the problem: systematic treatise on the phenomenon is still missing. Despite its everydayness – or everysecondness – it is a phenomenon for which applies Mathesius' words that "science is full of mysteries". It is a multi-levelled phenomenon: noetic, psychological, logical, linguistic. It is a phenomenon that escapes any adequate conceptualization. (OSOLSOBĚ 2002: 223, transl. MP)

I am far from solving the mystery, as it requires a detailed interdisciplinary, both synchronic and diachronic, and possibly life-long analysis of the whole phenomenon. Instead, I will try to offer some suggestions and doubts I have in respect of this issue. Actually, unlike Ivo Osolsobě, who says that Zich's *Aesthetics* is not about semantic image (OSOLSOBĚ 2002: 229), I have a certain suspicion that the semantic image is key for understanding Zich's book which is about this mystery.

Zich himself acknowledged that semantic image is a complicating concept, especially when there is not only one semantic image but two, which are, moreover, in an 'intricate' relationship that is, more or less, imperceptible in dramatic art: semantic technical image and semantic visual image. Semantic image seems to be, at times, a complicating concept for Zich himself, as well as for his readers and interpreters, since semantic technical image is, in particular, not clearly defined and acquires slightly different semantic shades throughout the book. For Zich, it is easier to define the semantic visual image, which is a crucial part of the syncretic, participatory outcome of emerging mental operations – the dramatic person. The dramatic person is based on two co-producing forces: from outside received precept of performing actor – his artwork, i.e. performer figure, which evokes or stimulates an internal but intentionally controlled process of associations, interpretations, and experiences, or better put, a whole cluster of conscious, as well as unconscious, individual, as well as collective spheres of spectator's mind (cf. ZICH 1986: 93–4), which then produces a complex semantic visual image that is reciprocally and mentally projected back onto the precept with which it converges and co-creates the dramatic person (obviously the whole process, here awkwardly reproduced, occurs in the totality of the perception which is not dissectible). In Zich's words,

[i]f 'dramatic person' exists already as a percept of purely mental nature, it is not exhausted by this percept. It is only 'induced', i.e. determined from outside; to this outer perceptual

component comes our own internal component, i.e. semantic image, which is stimulated by the percept on the basis of our own experience. [...] Consequently, the ‘dramatic person’ consists of two components: the first one is the above-mentioned percept, the second one complex image, or an aggregate of images called and reproduced in my mind by the percept. (ZICH 1986: 92, transl. MP)²

From this, we are not far from the argument that semantic visual image, however abstract it might seem, embraces a particular, mutual and participatory character of theatre which is based on co-presence and creative co-operation of performing actors and perceiving spectators: the outer precept, an emanating force coming from the performing actor, enters the spectator’s mind and stimulates production of a semantic visual image (it might be appropriate to call it semantic mental image), which, in the invisible or imaginative feedback loop, is transmitted back on the body of percepts, converges with them and results in the creation of a dramatic person. It is important to mention here that Zich despised any so-called active participation (once an actor literally enters the auditorium, the theatre performance is over). He preferred creative co-operation on the mental, or rather imaginative level. The two co-operative forces – emanation and stimulated reaction or projection – seem to correspond with Zich’s theatrical taste (and his book is about his distinguished taste, it is even his theatrical confession).

Not every Czech theorist would probably agree with me: for Jaroslav Etlík,

Zich’s deductive system was unable to cover the principles of the reception of dramatic work precisely and sufficiently even in the area of the dramatic theatre art itself, i.e. in the type of theatre Zich so ingeniously strived to define. The author of *Aesthetics* completely ignored the momentum of mutual feedback that always flows between the actors and the audience and that is the necessary prerequisite of the theatre performance. Zich did not really find a place for a reacting and ‘resonating’ spectator in his system, despite the fact that he conceived his book from the point of view of the recipient. (ETLÍK 2011: 188)

Ivo Osolobě and Miroslav Procházka, editors and commentators of the second edition of the *Aesthetics*, suggest more or less the same argument referring to the improvisation:

It seems that Zich didn’t utterly acknowledge – and totally ignored – the feedback moment [...] And it is the moment, which could be very well described in Zich’s terminology, the moment, in which the author’s and actor’s immediate vision (actor and author are here one unite) is immediately executed [...] and at the very moment ‘coalesces with percept’ – with the actor’s percept of his own performance, with spectator’s percept, with actor’s percept of spectators reaction, and with spectator’s percept of actor’s reaction on this percept... But –

2 In this respect it would be quite useful to compare Zich’s *Aesthetics* with Karl Bühler’s Organon Modell presented in his Sprachtheorie (BÜHLER 2011 [1934]).

in Zich's system, however, it is based on the perceiving spectator, there is actually no room for a spectator as a 'component' of theatre. (ZICH 1986: 347)

Zich himself, as it was mentioned above, was very careful about suggesting any kind of interaction between stage and audience except for the mental, imaginative reverberations between the percept of playing actor and the semantic visual image, converging forces that activate a spectator's imagination whose outcome is the creation of dramatic person/dramatic art (i.e. theatre performance), which I hesitate to call meaning. Nonetheless, even the visceral interaction allows Zich to admit that during the performance we also have certain motoric innervations:

This unintentional motoric component endows our percepts with extraordinary liveness, irresistibility, *activity*. It is then symptomatic for the 'dramatic' impression that, along with the visual and auditory components, an essential motoric component also exists, which reverberates the whole of our corporeal organism. (ZICH 1986: 39)

Such an approach to Zich's semantic visual image as a crucial agent in the spectators creative act sheds different light on Jan Mukařovský's semiological interpretation of the term as having a "very complex and multi-leveled meaning" (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1933: 319). If we accept Mukařovský's semiologization of Zich's *Aesthetics*, we could classify a semantic visual image as a decisive factor (the second or first decisive factor is obviously a precept of the performing actor) in creation of meaning, a mental antechamber of meaning, which then could be the dramatic person.

This 'antechamberness' of the semantic visual image – a mysterious space between stage and auditorium, art and life – made Ivo Osolsobě, in his above-quoted paper, interpret Zich's notion in the light of semiotics of an American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce as an *interpretant*. In Peirce's system interpretant is a mental sign produced by the interaction between the material sign (representamen) and interpreting mind; it is a mental effect of the material sign (Sign with capital S is a collaborative entity resulting from the mutual activity of representamen and interpretant): "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign." (PEIRCE 1974 [1931-1935]: 135) In this sense, a semantic visual image as interpretant can never be a meaning but only a mental sign co-created in the process of semiosis, which lies in the heart of Peirce's work in the same fashion as performance in Zich's system. It also tells us one fairly simple but quite often omitted fact: that semiosis as the subject matter of semiotics is not devoid of projection of an interpreting mind into the sign as representamen. In other words, a sign as a representamen stimulates the interpreter's mind, who co-participates in the creation of meaning by means of co-creation of a mental sign from which the meaning is engendered. That is also why sign as a representamen can never

really be a carrier of meaning, it can only determine it, regulate it, control it. The carrier of meaning is an interactive, imaginative, creative mind. Semiosis then is always a process of co-present subjects or objects that interfere with each other in an indefinite and indeterminate process of semiosis. To a large extent, Peirce's interpretant corresponds with Zich's concept of semantic visual image. However, Zich has two semantic images and the second one – semantic technical image –, according to Osolsobě, doesn't fit Peirce's system. Osolsobě argues that "semantic technical image' cannot be identified with a sign, unless it is described as a non-signifying (non-semantic, syntactic, material) interpretation of the percept of physical substrate of sign" (OSOLSOBĚ 2002: 222). The issue of absence of Zich's semantic technical image in Peirce might potentially provide us with new perspectives on both intellectuals.

Zich's semantic technical image is even more mysterious than the semantic visual image, although on page 43 of the second edition everything seems clear:

[...] during the theatre performance, as we have already suggested, we do not make do with one semantic image. The exact answer to the question "what is it?" is: in reality, what I perceive is an actor [i.e. not the performer figure, let alone dramatic person, *MP*]. This second semantic image does not come into my mind on the basis of resemblance with the percept; it is provided by my theatre experience [...]; I *know* that it is an actor, or as the case may be the actor A (according to the theatre signboard), although I see and hear someone else, e.g. prince Hamlet. [...] semantic image of an actor, which stems from our knowledge of theatre and its artistic practice, we will call semantic technical image [...]. (ZICH 1986: 43)

Interestingly, the editors of the second edition corrected Zich on this account in the commentary note and substituted the term 'actor' with 'performer figure' and 'performing actor'/'formed actor'. The question is whether this correction helps to clarify Zich's system. On the next page Zich adds: "[...] we will *extend the technical image* in respect to the material from which the artwork is made, hence not only what it is, but also what it is made of," i.e. for Zich the human body. However, later on he identifies a semantic technical image with the performer figure, i.e. the actor's artwork, even though on page 91 he again makes a note about "our secret notion that the person on the stage is an actor".

I dare not to correct Zich and prefer to accept his line of thought, taking the semantic technical image as a rather unstable, kaleidoscopic term, which includes actor as an artist, actor's materiality or corporeality from which actor carves out his artwork, as well as his work of art, i.e. performer figure. Obviously there is vast room for speculation into which I do not want to venture. The only certain result out of this is that we cannot be sure if semantic technical image is our competence stemming from our cultural background, or actor + material, or actor + material = performer figure, or everything altogether. The truth is that the performer figure is, one way or the other, a co-creation of all three factors, i.e. culturally conditioned competence for perceiving theatre as theatre, authorship, material – without these factors we would not be able to perceive the performer figure as an integrated

stimulus for the imaginative creation of a dramatic person in the spectator's mind – it would be, more or less, a person behaving strangely, or an immaterial entity. The point also is that all three factors have a tremendous impact on the performer figure, which is always localized within a particular cultural context, as well as within its own materiality. And if all three agents have an impact on the performer figure, they would certainly determine its corresponding dramatic person.

And here might be a potential link to Peirce: is a semantic technical image not a force emanating from the performer figure and as such participating in the creation of the so called interpretant? That is, an antechamber of the mind's creative act resulting in the dramatic person? Peirce's semiotic system, which also defines various types of interpretants – his logic line emotional interpretant, energetic interpretant and final interpretant as a convergence of former two, appear useful for us – would possibly correspond with this idea. The interpretant as an antechamber of a dramatic person would then be a result of a complex cluster of agents, which locates the theatrical event within a particular cultural milieu, as well as in the sublimated materiality of the imaginative and creative spectator's act. These issues and relations need to be thoroughly examined as they can help us understand Zich as a theorist who offered very useful apparatus for describing not only “a middle class realistic theatre of the turn of the nineteenth century” but also theatre *per se* (why did he exclude such art disciplines which accentuate materiality of performance – dance, mime, and even the constructivist scene? What would his system do with current performance art events or site-specific projects, in which materiality becomes the prevailing topic?).

At the end of my paper, I would like to go back to the introductory quotes, which are very much connected with the problem of the semantic technical image. Zich's interpreters usually accentuate Zich's achievement in rehabilitating acting as an autonomous art discipline. On the other hand, they stress that Zich more or less eliminated the actor from the theatrical event:

In his theory, the actor was made terminologically **insignificant**. This trick of theatre theory, excellent for its time, was also a stroke of genius in that it preserved both the actor's real existence onstage and his role as the sovereign author (mover) of the character, while at the same time making him '**invisible**' from the point of view of the act of perception. In one word, the author of the *Aesthetics* let the actor as a human being disappear behind the character he/she creates [...]. (ETLÍK 2011: 186–7, bold MP)

Zich himself expressed in the interview he gave in 1933 to Bohumil Novák that his book was for actors and about actors:

There were two personal motifs. First of all, I wanted to support acting. It seems to me that unlike earlier times, when it enjoyed its famous life, it is now suppressed from general interest

by the cult of the director. I love actors. That is why I wrote about their creative work to such an extent. I do like directors as well, but not the arrogant ones who take an actor as mere 'material' for their great work. The true director does not follow this path, they work with actors and are aware that they are from the same family. I was pleased to meet their recognition. Do you know that copyright law still refuses to recognize their creative art? I wish my book could help them in this task. (ZICH 1986: 347)

Nonetheless, if Zich disliked arrogant directors, he equally despised 'visible' actors, i.e. actors who contaminated the stage with their self-presentation:

The actor's task of making dramatic work public forces him to be in *contact with the audience* and it is well-known that all 'true' actors are, during the course of their performance, in such contact and they enjoy it. While entering the stage – transfigured and transformed – he senses an attraction of the dark mass of the auditorium from beyond the proscenium. For them he acts, for them he improvises [...] *he does not make public himself* but his 'figure'. All those infamous excesses of vanity, play for applause, tearing of decorations, 'exits', 'nuances' etc. are not a command of externalization; it, if you wish, is also a 'play for the auditorium' but in the bad sense of the word, because it addresses the actor's petite self and not the figure, which completely lacks any art. Like any other artist, the actor could be proud of his work, but not of himself; he will be celebrated for his performance. (ZICH 1986: 157, italics MP)

Gabriel Sofia in his paper on neurosciences mentions Eugenio Barba and Roberta Carreri's production of *Judith* about which the actress said:

It is not important to perform the action mechanically – to follow the shortest trajectory, as in everyday life, but through the phrasing of the action to evoke such images, which will change my in-tensioni (in-tension) and which will stimulate associations in a spectator's mind and offer him/her various levels of interpretation. An actor must know how to guide the spectator's attention. (SOFIA 2010: 63)

In this respect Sofia quotes Jean-Marie Pradier who, inspired by Carreri's production, called for the shift of paradigm: "from the aesthetics of simulation to the aesthetic of stimulation" and added:

I am attracted to *Judith* because Roberta is spiritually non-present as a human being who is immersed in the beloved work of music to the extent that she does not pay attention to the composer. The higher quality a stimulus attains, the lesser interest there is in the actor who produces it. [...] In other words, the high quality of an actor's presence implies non-presence of an actor or actress [...]" (PRADIER in SOFIA 2010: 63)

I have a suspicion that it is exactly what Zich discussed in his 1931 tour de force: the work of a virtuoso actor who knows his kata to such an extent that it is invisible, and so is he. Zich's actor has "that within which passeth the show." (*Hamlet* I.2)

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Summary

In his essay “Sémiotika sémiotika Otakara Zicha” (Otakar Zich’s Semiotics, 1981), Ivo Osolsobě seeks to illuminate one of Zich’s most troubling and mysterious terms: ‘významová představa’ (semantic image). For Osolsobě, it “is a complex, liminal, and interdisciplinary phenomenon about which a substantial body of studies has been written, though a majority of which only hardly touched the problem: a systematic treatise on the phenomenon is still missing.”

Nonetheless, Osolsobě succumbs to the theorist’s temptation and ventures into the investigation of the term and, following Mukařovský’s ‘semiotization’ of aesthetics, finds a relevant connection with C. S. Peirce’s semiotic notion of ‘interpretant’ which, in Osolsobě’s view, resonates with Zich’s notion of the semantic visual image. Surprisingly (or mysteriously) though, Osolsobě does not find in Peirce’s vast work any corresponding mirror term for Zich’s signifying technical image. In my paper, I try to re-read Zich via Peirce and vice versa and suggest a potential solution for the notion which strangely fell overboard while being transported across the Atlantic.

Key Words

acting, semantic image, Otakar Zich, C. S. Peirce

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