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Phenomenological Aspects of the Prague School Theatre Theory

As a Greek academic bred in the classical and the Anglo-American literary traditions and with French culture as a second option, I have always felt a frustrating gap in my first-hand communication with the German and Slavic languages and cultures. Especially in the domain of theatre theory the Greek academia is still under the strong influence of French (and also Italian) Structuralism and semiotics, enhanced both by theatre theorists, the majority of whom have pursued their graduate studies in France, and by the highly active Greek Semiotic Society, supported mainly by the School of Architecture. The influence of the Anglo-Saxon theatre tradition has been mostly felt in theatre historiography and performance practice and in Marxist/materialist criticism. So far there have been very few Greek academics to engage with theatre phenomenology. In the last decade or so a productive dialogue has started between the two opposite theories of the stage but the semiotic approach is still strongly encouraged among younger researchers, for most of whom theatre semiotics has been elevated to a kind of fetish or cult beyond judgment or future development.

My own encounter with phenomenology as an alternative analytical tool for the theatrical activity was in the late 1990s through my acquaintance with the newly emerging theory of theatre phenomenology in the U.S. first by Bert O. States and later, and more systematically, by Stanton B. Garner.¹ This discovery sent me back to a re-examination of the various branches of semiotic theory and to fruitful comparisons between leading semioticians of

1 The introduction of corporeality (with all relative notions of inter-subjectivity and interactivity) as a major destabilizing factor to the production and reception of performance revolutionized 20th-century stage theory and practice. See particularly Bert O. States's *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985) and Stanton B. Garner Jr.'s *Bodied Spaces* (1994), both pioneer works in the field of theatre phenomenology.

the West. Through this investigation I came across scattered references, for the first time, to the Prague School of Semiotics and to specific names and works that engaged with the reading of signs in the domain of theatre. What struck me was that the little acknowledgment of the contribution of the Prague Circle theorists was always oriented to the firmness and fixity of semiotic practice and never to the dynamism, changeability and flexibility allowed to the system of signs by various members of the Prague School. Reference, for instance, to Erika Fischer-Lichte's introduction in her relatively recent *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008) of the strategic term 'perceptual multistability' (FISCHER-LICHTE 2008: 88, 147) – an absurd concept in my view – can fortify the claim of my suspicions.

Motivated by my own findings, I organized an MA seminar on contemporary phenomenological theatre theory, which I based mainly on my personal re-reading of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in combination with Bert O. States and Stanton Garner's theatrical insights. However, part of my project was also to trace back, through my private research and academic seminars, earlier pioneer ideas in this direction beyond mainstream French and Italian semiotics. More specifically, my aim was to scrutinize some works by the Czech theorists Jan Mukařovský, Jindřich Honzl and Jiří Veltruský, in search of a link with contemporary phenomenological thinking. My inquiry targeted the long-established myth that Structuralism and, subsequently, semiotics are still the new 'Avant-Garde' of critical theory and to prove that phenomenology, which had been proclaimed dead,² was forcefully coming back, actually reinforced by the rediscovery of the boldness and innovativeness of some real pioneer thinkers from what had been wrongly perceived as the enemy camp of semiotics: and I mean especially the flexible shape this theory had taken in the work of several members of the Prague Structuralist Circle.

In this paper I shall try to retrieve some major phenomenological ideas or thoughts anticipating a phenomenological perspective that I have spotted in selected writings by Prague School theorists and present them in a more systematic critical perspective than done so far. But I would first like to set up the cultural and intellectual context in which I will then attempt to structure my argument.

Theoretical Perspectives and Tensions

The phenomenological tradition has always been alive in the German world and has had a close connection with the Prague Circle. In his book *The Semiotic Stage: Prague School Theater Theory* (1995) Michael L. Quinn, quite notably, mentions the visits of Edmund Husserl to Prague. The link to phenomenological philosophy is also emphasized in Peter Steiner's anthology *The Prague School: Selected Writings 1929–1946* (1982), which opens,

2 See for instance the special issue on "Phenomenology, Structuralism and Semiotics" of the *Bucknell Review* (April 1976), edited by Harry R. Garvin.

quite aptly in my view, with an epigraph by Martin Heidegger. Steiner also quotes the Swiss phenomenologist Elmar Holenstein proclaiming in 1976 that “the wind is now blowing in the direction of Prague” (STEINER 1982: ix).

By contrast, in other western countries such views were eclipsed by the rising enthusiasm of Structuralism, as clearly reflected in the conceding tone assumed by another theatre theorist, Harry R. Garvin, when he refers to the waning practice of existentialism and phenomenology in France and Switzerland in the 1970s (GARVIN 1976: 14). His introduction to a special issue of the *Bucknell Review* entitled “Phenomenology, Structuralism, Semiology” (1976) suggests that the natural flow of theory in the 1970s and beyond is the one reflected in the hierarchic taxonomy of his own title: phenomenology gives way to Structuralism which, in turn, evolves into semiotics.

Concomitantly, the Prague School Structuralism was misinterpreted as a mere transfer from Russian Formalism, as Steiner succinctly points out (STEINER 1982: 176-7). As a consequence, the Prague School’s pioneer work for the theatre received scant attention – if any at all – in the torrent of theatre semiotics studies that made their appearance around the 1980s. The only notable exception was Keir Elam, in his *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980), who did make full credit to the dynamic features of the Prague School theory (mobility, dynamism, transformability) even though he subsequently subjugated them to the rigorous Structuralist frame of his own theoretical orientation.

It was Steiner in the 1980s and Quinn in the 1990s, who actually tried to correct such misconceptions, pointed out the rigidity of French Structuralism and highlighted the dynamism and flexibility that was offered instead by the Prague Circle. In the meantime the systematic adaptation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theory of the 1930s and 1950s for the stage by Stanton B. Garner in his seminal book *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (1994) made western theorists potentially more attentive to the pioneering views of the Prague School intellectuals about the mobility of the iconic sign and even the linguistic sign in the domain of theatre (despite the fact that Garner himself did not seem to acknowledge the link).

In the context of my present comparative revisioning of parallel theoretical developments to the western Structuralist and post-Structuralist tradition, it is also necessary to point out that J. L. Austin’s theory on the performativity of language, his speech act theory (later adapted more for performance use by Judith Butler³), was published in 1962, that is nearly two decades after the Czech theatre director and theorist Jindřich Honzl first spoke of language as action in his groundbreaking essay “The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices” (1943)! Of course one major problem for this temporal gap in scientific and theoretical intercommunication is the language barrier, which even today creates asymmetrical access to new theoretical findings when published in less mainstream languages than English.

3 See her groundbreaking essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (BUTLER 1988). An illuminating short commentary on the link between Austin’s and Butler’s theory of the performative and its potential for contemporary performance theory is given in Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance* (FISCHER-LICHTE 2008: 26-9).

The international circulation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's pivotal book *Post-Dramatic Theatre* is a recent case in point. Originally published in German in 1999, it was translated into French only in 2002, that is three years later, with the English translation unforgivably lagging behind for another four years (2006)! Emil Volek makes extensive reference to the specific translation problems of Czech theoretical writings, which, he claims, relegated the whole Prague project to a footnote to the western scholarship in the field of contemporary theatre studies (VOLEK 2012: 168-9).

The worldwide circulation of the Prague School writings was and still is quite limited. The dissemination of the Czech semiotic theory of the arts to the English speaking world was very sporadic and spread out in four consecutive decades, starting with Garvin's collected volume *A Prague School Reader on Ethics, Literary Structure, and Style* (1964), to be followed by Matějka and Titunik's anthology *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* in 1976 and by Steiner's anthology *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929-1946* in 1982. Much more recent was the publication of Quinn's theoretical study *The Semiotic Stage: Prague School Theatre Theory* in 1995. The reappraisal, however, was also made difficult by the widespread influence of and the strong resistance by the French Structuralist tradition and its misreading of the Prague School as a mere Czech version of Russian Formalism (STEINER 1982: 175). Indicative of the lingering French prejudice is Patrice Pavis's defensive attitude in his very recent essay "Semiology After Semiology" (2012), where he claims vividly that semiology is in no need to be rescued (PAVIS 2012: 46). Part of his tactic, however, is to manipulate the Prague theory into a life jacket to keep his own semiotic theory afloat: "Semiology thus is not near or ready to disappear. What is disappearing is rather the theatre as semiology knew it, in Prague in the 1930s, and in the whole world from 1970, or even 1989" (PAVIS 2012: 47). Equally disorientating is Walter Puchner's review of Jiří Veltruský's posthumously published *An Approach to the Semiotics of Theatre* (2012), which forces the Czech theorist's undeniable recognition of diversity, heterogeneity and contradiction of theatre semiosis (VELTRUSKÝ 2012: 134, 182) into a "quasi-systematic overview of semiotic theatre" (PUCHNER 2012: 225, 226), thus disclosing again the persisting resistance of theatre semioticians to more open structures. He even brings in Fischer-Lichte's paradoxical term 'perceptual multistability' in support of his argument (PUCHNER 2012: 223).

On the other hand, today the reception of the Prague School theory has been rectified by the acceptance of its role as the best transition from Russian Formalism to contemporary French post-Structuralist theory (QUINN 1995: 2-3) and through a new emphasis on its phenomenological aspects coming from the fresh voice of Emil Volek. The major project currently undertaken by Masaryk University of Brno for a re-evaluation of the importance of the Prague School Semiotics for the contemporary theory of the arts, comprising international symposia, translation workshops and new English publications of the major works, is already bringing new helpful insights to the international map of scholarship.

A Phenomenological Revision of the Prague School

Some of the innovative ideas concerning the making and reception of theatre aesthetics, which were repeatedly (if not systematically) discussed by the Prague theorists and which – I want to argue – point to contemporary phenomenology rather than semiotics, are the following:

I. The first issue to be highlighted is **Otakar Zich's** pioneer work in the early 1930s (in his *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art*) on theatre perception and spectatorship dynamics; the antinomy created in performance between the fixity of the sign and the play of the imagination; and the possibility of inner fragmentation within a coherent system when one focuses on the spectator. Volek is right to retrieve Zich as a phenomenologist (VOLEK 2012: 176), whose theory was revised by **Jan Mukařovský** in 1941 and further elaborated by **Jiří Veltruský**. Reviewing the conceptual essence of theatre in Zich's fundamental aesthetic theory Mukařovský pointed out that “[i]n this work the theatre has been conceived in its entire breadth and complexity as a dynamic inter-play of all its components, as a unity of forces internally differentiated by intertensions and as a set of signs and meanings” (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1978b: 203). His own contribution in this revision, in his lecture of 1941 “On the Current State of the Theory of Theatre,” was to stress the spatiotemporal specificity of the spectator, which creates changeable tensions in the perception of a work of art, and thus to highlight the dynamics of theatre perception (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1978b: 203). In the same year, Veltruský, in his essay “Dramatic Text as Component of Theatre” (1941), stressed the contextual variability in terms of space and time and the interplay between actor and spectator (VELTRUSKÝ 1976b: 97-8).

II. Another important issue is the problematic position of the actor in the theatre semiotic system. Both **Mukařovský** and **Veltruský** point to the life component of the actor as sign. The former, in “On the Current State of Theatre Theory” underlines the difference between the immobility of a statue and the mobility of a live person (i.e. the actor) while the latter in his “Man and Object in the Theatre” observes the same in the comparison between man and object. In yet another essay, “Dramatic Text as Component of Theatre” (1941), Veltruský also focuses on the materiality of the performance and its ephemeral nature and scrutinizes the physical acts of the actor's body, particularly the face and the muscles. His sensory perspective is highly reminiscent of Artaud's theory of phenomenological, physical theatre.

III. Other theorists such as **Petr Bogatyrev** and **Ivo Osolobě**, though to a lesser degree, have also drawn attention to the materiality of the sign, which creates a tension between the sign and the object. Bogatyrev in “Semiotics in the Folk Theatre” mentions the dynamic relationship between denotation and connotation (BOGATYREV 1976: 33-4), even if his overall theory does not favour the phenomenological aspect of the sign. Osolobě, on the other hand, in “Ostensive Communication” concedes more phenomenological traits to the theatre sign system, talking directly about semiotic and non-semiotic tensions between signs and things (QUINN 1995: 64-5, 70).

IV. **Jindřich Honzl's** essay "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre" (1940) is also important because it gives the total problematic of a fixed theatre semiotic system. Revising its systemic taxonomy Honzl destabilizes it as methodically as he constructed it by stressing the human triumvirate of the theatre praxis, author-actor-director. He thus points to the different phases of the sign's changeability only to conclude that stage art is elusive of definitions as it is subject to protean metamorphoses (HONZL 1976a: 93).

V. Another essay by **Honzl**, "The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices" (1943), makes one more important phenomenological observation in that it turns its attention to the spectator's selective ability within the visual field, his/her ability to focus and eliminate (HONZL 1976b: 120) and therefore to create a subjective, emotionally charged 'seeing,' a transformative interpretation (HONZL 1976b: 124). This view is very close to Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenological perception and it certainly finds an echo in more recent readings of contemporary performance as, for instance, in Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008). It is in this pioneer essay that Honzl, drawing from the experience of Greek drama, also talks about the possibility of "perform[ing] acts through the word" (HONZL 1976b: 124), thus anticipating in a way J. L. Austin's speech act theory, which started taking shape only in the mid-1950s.

VI. An underlying inquiry into the problematic of imposing a rigid structural system to the western theatre tradition can also be detected in the otherwise traditional semiotic reading of the Chinese theatre by **Karel Brušák** in his essay "Signs in the Chinese Theatre" (1939). Brušák highlights Chinese theatre as the best example of the validity of theatre semiotics: a particular kind of theatre where there are "obligatory signs" (BRUŠÁK 1976: 59) and the "structure is sure of itself" (BRUŠÁK 1976: 73). In his analysis, however, the Czech theorist is careful to stress the particularity of the Chinese cultural conditions that validate his structural reading, while he refrains from applying it unconditionally to the Western theatre tradition, which, by contrast to the Chinese, he insightfully considers as highly "dependent on numerous chance shaping factors" (BRUŠÁK 1976: 73). His undisguised admiration for the intricate system of Chinese theatre, where production is "finalized beforehand down to the last ingredient" (BRUŠÁK 1976: 73) is interestingly segmented by frequent comparisons to Western theatre. These repeated comparisons seem to suggest an anxiety and a frustration on his part that living theatre practice in the West regrettably resists the fine semiotic model presented by the Chinese theatre; that it actually threatens the utopian fixity of absolute semiotic structures; that it may be in need of more corporeal readings that would accept such destabilizing human entities as 'a producer' and 'an actor' (BRUŠÁK 1976: 73).

VII. In his 1943 lecture "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art" as well as in his subsequent essay "The Essence of the Visual Arts" (1944) **Mukařovský** introduces a few more terms which have a key position in phenomenological theory. These are intentionality and subjectivity, which are related to orientation and attitude both in the production and the reception of the visual arts, including the theatre. Some thirty years later **Veltruský** returned to this notion in his essay "Some Aspects of the Pictorial Sign" (1973), where he

talks about the ‘psychophysical effects’ of the pictorial sign, which go beyond referentiality, therefore back to synesthetic perception (VELTRUSKÝ 1976c: 246).

VIII. One final notion raised in **Veltruský’s** essay “Basic Features of Dramatic Dialogue” (1942), which holds a key position in contemporary phenomenological theory, is the idea of intersubjectivity. Veltruský analyses it in the material situation of space and time, the here and now evoked in a dialogue situation, where speakers interact with other speakers. The crucial dynamism of the situation for Veltruský is created by the mutual relations and tensions which modify and transform the situation (VELTRUSKÝ 1976a: 128) according to the ‘attitude’ (VELTRUSKÝ 1976a: 129) of every single speaker, which thus “disrupt[s] the continuity of the play” (VELTRUSKÝ 1976a: 133). As a result, the intensity of the relationships is highly variable and “the dialogue comes closer to interaction between the participants” (VELTRUSKÝ 1976a: 129). To express it in the contemporary theatre vocabulary, Veltruský engaged with issues of performativity almost half a century before the invention of the relevant terminology!

In Conclusion

All these notions of instability and variability of the sign in the visual and performance arts, focusing mainly on spatiality and temporality, on the location and intentionality of the body of the actor and the spectator in action and perception, on subjectivity and intersubjectivity and the dialectics of the living body with the rest of the world and its things – all these notions put together prove that the functionalist character attributed to the Prague School Semiotics actually forms the bridge from the taxonomic rigidity of Structuralist poetics to the open, experiential and procedural character of contemporary theatre aesthetics, especially as postulated in performance theory and exemplified in post dramatic theatre practice. The Prague School Theory of the 1930s and 1940s was indeed pioneer in that it definitely discerned and articulated the ‘binocular’ nature of theatre mechanics, standing at the crossroads between a phenomenological and a semiotic reading of the world as Quinn rightly observes (QUINN 1995: 43). This is precisely the ‘binocular vision’ that the contemporary American theatre phenomenologist Bert O. States proposed in his groundbreaking for the English speaking world (but actually belated in the global sense), study *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985), claiming that “semiotics and phenomenology are best seen as complementary perspectives on the world and on art” (STATES 1985: 8). Although States seems to be vaguely aware of the preceding Prague Circle Theory on art and makes three references to Veltruský, he cannot avoid the diffuse western reductionist attitude to this theory as a closed formalist system of signs.⁴

4 See for instance his sweeping statement in the opening paragraphs of Chapter 1 “The World on Stage” that “If we approach theater semiotically we must surely agree with the Prague linguists that ‘all that is on the stage is a sign’ [...] However, if we approach theater phenomenologically there is more to be said” (STATES 1985: 19). In our revisionist thinking we now have to admit that this ‘more’ had to a considerable degree already been pinpointed by the Prague School theorists.

I would therefore like to reclaim the originality of this pioneer statement for the Prague Circle theorists and confirm their position at the forefront of contemporary theatre research through the dynamism and the interactive and transformative potential of their legacy for the arts.

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Summary

The rise of Structuralism and semiotics in Western thought during the 1970s and 1980s led most theatre theorists to misinterpret the Prague School contribution as a mere transfer from Russian Formalism. They consequently disregarded those aspects of several Czech theorists' work which pointed to the dynamism, changeability and flexibility of the system of theatre signs, thus going beyond the taxonomic formality of semiotics and actually anticipating contemporary phenomenological readings of the stage. A revisionist reading of a number of theatre-related issues, raised by various theorists of the Prague School, proves that their work was indeed pioneer in that it definitely discerned

and articulated the binocular nature of theatre mechanics and created a chiasmic perception in theatre studies between semiotics and phenomenology much earlier than any such theoretical perspective was conceived elsewhere in the West.

Keywords

Semiotics, phenomenology, performance, performativity, mobility of the sign, transformability of the sign

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