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Barbora Příhodová

The Specificity of Scenography: a Czech Contribution to the Theory of Scenography

In a preface to one of the most recent publications devoted to the visual components of theatre and performance: *Theatre and Performance Design: A Reader in Scenography* (2010), the renowned scenographer Pamela Howard states: ‘a decade ago, the word and the practice of scenography [which according to her represents ‘the totality of visual creation in the stage space’] were relatively unknown except in parts of eastern Europe [...but] it has arrived, and plenty of people are enthused and want to study, research and practice [it]’ (COLLINS and NISBET 2010: xxiii).¹ In a Czech theatrical world that has prided itself in a traditionally strong emphasis on both creating and theorising the visual aspects of performance, the notion of scenography has been well established for a long time now, together with the theoretical works that underpin it. This paper attempts to present what is probably the most elaborate of such theoretical treatises, *The Specificity of Scenography* by Vladimír Jindra (1920-1979) – one of the leading Czech scholars of Theatre Studies and the originator of the concept of the Prague Quadrennial, whose work deals primarily with scenography (GABRIELOVÁ 2007: 299).² Jindra’s influential volume was published posthumously in 1984 in

1 This paper was written under the auspices of a 2010 Fulbright-Masaryk Scholarship.

2 Vladimír Jindra was Jan Mukařovský’s student at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, in

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an edition by Věra Ptáčková.³

One of the artists who most actively promoted the term scenography in the western cultural arena from the 1960s was Josef Svoboda (BAUGH 1995: 112, McKINNEY and BUTTERWORTH 2009: 3). With his artistic strategies, as well as in numerous lectures and interviews he gave in the English-speaking world, Svoboda maintained that scenography is an inseparable component of theatre work and argued that it is distinguished by the necessity of integral collaboration between all elements.⁴ This distinctive, holistic approach to the visual components of theatre as part of a superior whole (which naturally penetrates its other parts) was not Svoboda's personal creation, however; rather it draws on a rich tradition of Czech scholarship in this field – and especially on the heritage of the major scenographic personality of the Avant-garde during the interwar years: František Tröster (1904-1968),⁵ whose works echo the Czech conception of theatre at that time.

Prague. He served as a 'specialist in stage design, visual documentation and exhibits' (*odborný pracovník pro jevištní výtvarnictví, obrazovou dokumentaci a výstavy*) at the Theatre Institute since its foundation in 1959 (PATOČKOVÁ 2009: 24). The Department of Scenography (*Oddělení scénografie*), of which he was the founder and the head, prepared numerous exhibitions both in and outside Czechoslovakia, established archival documentation of scenic designs and of Prague Quadrennial meetings, and pursued rather extensive editorial activities. Among others, the journal *Scenography* (*Scénografie*), one of whose issues included Jindra's study discussed in this article, was published irregularly from 1963 (PATOČKOVÁ 2009: 25-30). Jindra was also a lecturer in the Department of Scenography at DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts, Prague).

3 The exact year in which the study was written remains unclear, although the examples used as well as the complex concept of scenography it promotes (and as it was proposed for the very first Prague Quadrennial in 1967), suggest it was in the 1960s. Věra Ptáčková (b. 1933) is another important Czech scholar in scenography and Jindra's long-term collaborator; after his death Ptáčková continued to preserve, document and analyse the visual aspects of performance; she also started to work in the Department of Scenography at the Theatre Institute in 1959.

4 I refer to one of Svoboda's lectures held in the United States in 1972, recorded by Jarka M. Burian. Deposited in Svoboda's personal archive and in the Jarka Burian Collection at the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, at Ohio State University. For other discussions of Svoboda's concept of scenography see Jarka Burian's writings, for example *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda* (1971) or the scenographer's memoirs *The Secret of Theatrical Space* (1993).

5 One of the key elements of Tröster's work was his specific treatment of dramatic space. According to him: 'every play has its own constant space whose meaning relies on the construction of a spatial projection plane. This space, however, is not identical to the stage space, it overruns it in every direction, it has an independent shape and dimension, it is in the sense of the drama elastic and changeable, it reacts sensitively to changes of the action, and time is ascribed an active role' (in KOUBSKÁ 2007: 15).

Many theoretical works that discuss the visual aspects of performance are rooted in the theoretical school of Czech Structuralism.⁶ Additionally, other significant, though somewhat neglected, theoretical writings have appeared that appoint the visual aspects of theatre as the core of their philosophical enquiry. Besides the already mentioned *Specifičnost scénografie* (The Specificity of Scenography, 1984), one must also consider the treatise *Výtvarný projev v dramatickém umění* (The Expression of Visual Arts in the Theatre; written 1942, published 1948) by Růžena Vacková (1901-1982). Both of these works consider the first and the most important problem of understanding the visual aspects of performance: their very *essence*. Rather paradoxically, these two authors focus on this visual element of performance in order emphatically to testify to the inextricability of the ocular spectrum from wider phenomena within the theatrical register.

Although Vacková considers the visual components of theatrical production to be a kind of visual art, she vigorously draws attention to their specificity, which she argues rests in their service to deliberate theatricality and to the sense of temporality they evoke. Gradually, Vacková leaves the categories of ‘visual arts’ and ‘dramatic arts’ and denominates her subject of interest as ‘visual manifestation in dramatic art’, which is typically: ‘immanently present in all components of *performance*’ (VACKOVÁ 1948: 31). With this complex understanding of the visual aspects of a production, Vacková equated them with the subsequent notion of ‘scenography’. A similar vision of theatre art can be found in Vladimír Jindra’s writing.

6 One of its foremost representatives, Jindřich Honzl (1894-1953), following Otakar Zich and his work, pointed in 1940 to the fact that all ‘reality on the stage’ generates signs, thus holding meaning-making potential, and stressing that the characteristic feature of the theatre sign is its changeability (see ‘Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre’, in MATEJKA and TITUNIK 1976: 74). Action, as the essence of theatricality, does not in such a formulation need to be carried by a human, but by decoration, costume, light, sound or any other element of the structure, whereas the ability to carry action in the course of a performance permanently passes from one element to another. The idea of the ‘fluctuation’ (1964: 91) of dramatic action between a human and an object in the theatre was concurrently elaborated, albeit from a different perspective, by Jiří Veltruský (1919-1994) in his study ‘Man and Object in the Theatre’ (1940). According to Veltruský, ‘the existence of the subject in the theatre is dependent on the participation of some component in the action, and not on its actual spontaneity, so that even a lifeless object may be perceived as the performing subject, and a live human being may be perceived as an element without will’ (VELTRUSKÝ 1964: 84). These essays, both written in 1940, place visual aspects of performance on the same level of importance as other components and open up the space for their next elaboration. For a detailed discussion of Czech Structuralism and its appropriation of scenography, see the chapter ‘Semiotics of Stage Design’ in QUINN 1995: 101-115.

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The Specificity of Scenography reflects Czech scenography of the 1950s and 1960s as it was represented by ‘Svobodian-Trösterian’ artistic practice (Ptáčková’s introduction to JINDRA 1984: 6). In order to define ‘the specificity of scenography’, Jindra discusses the position of the visual elements of performance and their relationship to other elements of the theatrical phenomenon as they were gradually developing. For Jindra, there are historically four basic phases in the evolution of visual elements in performance: *dekorace (výprava)* (decoration (scenery)), *jevištní výtvarnictví* (stage design), *scénické výtvarnictví* (scenic design) and *scénografie* (scenography). Providing telling examples from practice, Jindra attempts to outline the principal properties of each developmental phase. It should be noted, however, that rather than creating a historical survey, Jindra traces transformations of the function that visual components have held within any given historical performance.

The first phase – *dekorace* (decoration), represented by stereotypical general patterns of a given locale (e.g. the decoration of a stage set to suggest a forest, a prison etc.), is characteristically passive, static and insensitive to the action of dramatic characters. It is an additive element and, if it is removed, the essence of the performance remains unchanged (JINDRA 1984: 16). Similar features of passivity and addition are assigned by Jindra to yet another expression (and approach) *výprava* (scenery), which, nevertheless, attempts to create a background or a milieu for spectacular events (like the grand ballets of the nineteenth century) and so ‘finds relation with the sense of the action [...] in that it creates a visual symbol, which in its context functions as a second, independent area, as a background’ (JINDRA 1984: 19).⁷

Another discussed notion is *jevištní výtvarnictví* (stage design), which is represented by the work of Vlastislav Hofman (1884-1964), one of the founders of modern Czech scenography; Hofman characteristically tended toward ‘heightened, bold expressiveness’ (BURIAN 2002: 170). In this phase, the ocular components of theatrical representation are completely dependent on the visual arts for their effect and, since a particular stage design is not transferable from ‘one play to another’ (JINDRA 1984: 21), design is shaped by a close bond with the dramatic text. In opposition to this, in the following phase of *scénické výtvarnictví* (scenic design) – belonging to the 1930s and defined by the director Jiří Frejka and his designer František Tröster – the relationship with the dramatic work is no longer a priority. ‘*Scénické výtvarnictví*’ here stands for: ‘an adequate constituent of the dramatic work, distinguished by its synthetic character’ (JINDRA 1984: 20). This

7 All translations from Czech are mine.

form approaches in its nature what Jindra termed ‘the zone of integration’, in which all elements spontaneously fuse (JINDRA 1984: 14). Given its use of the word *scénické* (scenic) in this expression, this term further reflects on the increased use of new and varied media, brought into the theatre as a result of their emergence in the era – through film, exhibitions and later television. As far as the last phase is concerned, *scénografie* (scenography) is a development characterised by the notion of ‘team work’ (JINDRA 1984: 76); Jindra accordingly anticipates:

The first and foremost task [of scenography] will be exactly the question of a complete specification of integrative possibilities, so that a new model of dramatic work can be completed, not plotted on too narrow synthetic relations of two components, direction and scenic design, nor on straightforward cooperation of direction, scenography, acting, dramatic text and music, but on variability, by the degree of intensity and by the rapidity of controlled relations of all elements with one another, so that their resulting creation appears as a crystalline spatio-temporal formation and so only confirms that this work of art is not a compound, but is rather a complex creation. (JINDRA 1984: 76)

As this definition is modelled predominantly on the work of Josef Svoboda, who famously experimented with various kinds of technological devices, it is clear that another substantial feature of *scénografie* is the integration of creative work with science and technology. These three aspects are interconnected by elements such as light, the stage (as a physical reality) or the ‘disposition of theatre space’ (JINDRA 1984: 92). The integration of art, science and technologies is what distinguishes *scénografie* from the previous form of *scénické výtvarnictví* (scenic design); once the latter phenomenon had absorbed the propositions of Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, Konstantin Stanislavski and other theatrical reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scenography accomplished an unprecedented complexity (JINDRA 1984: 92). In such a definition, creating scenography requires a conceptual approach and interpretation. The art of scenography thus involves directorial and dramaturgical work as well as skills and artistic vision in the plastic and creative arts.

A similar, although slightly less elaborate, distinction can be found in the recent *Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (McKINNEY and BUTTERWORTH 2009). The authors of this volume define *scenography* as a phenomenon discrete from *theatre design*, declaring that while *theatre design* is conditioned by dramatic text, *scenography* uses text as just one of the possible starting points; it is an ‘expressive

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and affective agent of the performance' (McKINNEY and BUTTERWORTH 2009: 5). This perspective suggests that the expressions signifying the visual elements of performance are not just freely interchangeable synonyms, but define particular authorial approaches, genres as well as evolutionary stages. Scenography itself is thus both a phase of historical development and a specific treatment of performance as well as of its visual elements.

Another step in defining 'the specificity of scenography' is Jindra's concise delineation of this field against other fields of art, above all the visual arts (painting, sculpture and architecture), from which the visual aspects of theatrical production are traditionally derived. It was Vacková who enforced the idea that in the art of the theatre, a specific kind of visual art distinguished by dramatic function is asserted. Jindra further elaborates on what distinguishes scenography from other (not only) visual disciplines. This step is also substantial in the process of creating the range of critical tools suitable for understanding it.

According to Jindra, it was the Russian theatre reformer Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) who realised that a painted image is not identical to a scenic one, and therefore must undergo an inner alteration into spatiality so as to hold its meaning in a theatrical context. The situation regarding architecture is similar, because just as with theatre art, theatre architecture shares the category of theatre space, significantly intervening into the structure of the visual components of performance. Architecture on stage essentially differs from regular architecture by the 'forming and composition of materials, by both disposition and semantic potential' (JINDRA 1984: 35). Architectonic elements, used on stage, are always subject to dramatic, not architectonic organisation. Similarly, a sculptural object must go through a structural reconstruction in order for it to be able to function on stage as a stage object. The key moment of the relationship between regular visual art and theatre art is thus the process of transformation (inner reconstruction), in which the role of 'catalyst' (JINDRA 1984: 57) is played by the object's dramatic function.

It is thus clear that mechanical assimilation of critical methods from architecture, painting, and so on cannot be by nature functional as means of deconstructing and comprehending performance. A similar approach can be found in Arnold Aronson's essay 'Looking into the Abyss' (ARONSON 2005) in which he deals with the differences between a painted and a scenographic artefact in the context of their possible methodological appropriation. Referring to Foucault's formal analysis of Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honour), Aronson maintains that a similar approach to that undertaken by Foucault is *not* applicable in theatrical analysis as a result of the instability of the scenographic object – an instability

that arises principally from temporality and the overabundant plurality of sign systems involved in the theatre (ARONSON 2005: 97-98). Scenography – or rather performance as such, as we shall see later on – needs its very own sets of critical tools.

Regarding the essence of scenography itself, Jindra clarifies that during the phase of *scénické výtvarnictví* (scenic design), whose representatives like Frejka and Tröster put in a claim for the specificity of their field, an atomisation of ‘elements’ (as defined by Otakar Zich) took place, which resulted in the differentiation of ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ sub-components (JINDRA 1984: 72). Material sub-components are related to the often neglected, nevertheless defining, pragmatic aspect of scenography (the economic, technical and organisational conditions of theatrical realisation), which, according to Jindra, prevents theatre work from becoming a source of impulses towards stylistic changes (and in the framework of stylistic evolution, is thus shifted aside into the role of passive receiver). The main significance in the sense of evolution is then carried by immaterial sub-components, among which are: space, time, movement, rhythm, light, colour and sound (JINDRA 1984: 73).

These immaterial sub-components then create the ‘specific and self-sustaining fund and potential’ of scenography (JINDRA 1984: 73). Only such smaller elements can come into contact with extra-theatrical and extra-artistic fields, mainly philosophy, because they are the originators of the transformation. Immaterial sub-components are the purest and moreover non-divisible elements of the theatrical artefact; they represent its constants, penetrate all layers of its components (and form the basis for acting, dramatic text, direction, staging and music). They are exclusively its matter. In the structure of a performance, they exceed their original use into principles, and all of them (not only time and space) dispose of the ability of integration. With this concept of ‘immaterial sub-components’, Jindra points to the dramaturgical and directorial quality of scenographic work.

The idea that (immaterial) sub-components form the theatrical artefact is not new. It was the theatre visionary Edward Gordon Craig who in 1905 stated that ‘the Art of the Theatre is neither the acting nor the play, it is not the scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed’ (CRAIG 2009: 73). Those ‘elements’ according to Craig include ‘action, words, line, colour, rhythm, [and] one is no more important than the other [...] in one respect, perhaps, action is the most valuable part’ (CRAIG 2009: 73). In the days when Craig dreamt of this ideal theatre work, such a synthesis was not achievable in practice. It took several decades before stage forms capable of fulfilling this

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idea emerged. Even though Craig discusses ‘theatre art’ as a whole, and Jindra appointed as the object of his study a mere part of it (*scenography*), the results the two theorists arrived at are principally the same: for if we accept Jindra’s idea of material and immaterial sub-components, which create a performance through the amalgamation and juxtaposition of all layers, we should accept the fact that the concept of scenography used as such (as well as any other titles we can possibly use for it) is also somewhat artificial, an associated construct, or rather a perspective, from which a performance can be viewed. It will be obvious at the same time that the criteria of this perspective will not be essentially different from the analysis of performance as a whole, including the human (both actor and spectator), who also participates in acts of performance.

As Jindra suggests, what really makes the differences and pushes forward the development of the visual elements of theatrical performance is the relation between these and other elements of theatrical representation. From that point of view, the twentieth century witnessed a gradual fusion of all elements into a rather complicated total synthesis, as represented by the work of Svoboda and others. Regardless of these historical affinities, according to Jindra’s definition, *dekorace* (decoration), *jevištní* or *scénická výprava* (stage or scenic design) and *scenography* are not to be understood solely as expressions for one of the parts of theatre work, but mainly as terms signifying a particular approach to our attempted understanding of the visual elements of a performance (particularly considering the manner *in* which and the extent *to* which visual elements contribute to the whole), in other words their *function*. That is the point at which, looking over the diverse artistic practice employed in contemporary theatre worldwide, we can appreciate Jindra’s contribution to our understanding of the visual elements of performance.

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