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Approaches to an Anthropologically-Oriented Theory of Literature and Culture in the Czech Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Prague Structuralism

1 The development of the concept of function in the Avant-Garde context

Function is one of the central concepts of the Czech Avant-Garde of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, it was discussed in the context of functionalist architecture (theory), while on the other hand the concept became first a linguistic and then later a largely anthropological model in the works of Prague structuralism. Particularly in the works of Jan Mukařovský, the close connection between general functional thinking, theory and criticism of (functionalist) architecture and the development of a functional aesthetics becomes clear. All three areas are subject to Mukařovský's basic assumption of a polyfunctionality inherent to man; he postulates that man always realises himself vis-à-vis his environment in several respects and not only with a single purpose, that is, in monofunctional fashion. It was not only Mukařovský who thought about function, functionality and hence concrete architectural functionalism by taking man as his point of departure; the anthropological concept of function was a specific feature of the Czech discussions on a concept that was of great importance in all European Avant-Gardes of art theory and practice (cf. Günther 1989, who compares the aesthetic-philosophical treatment of the concept of function in Mukařovský and the linguistic theory of the Formalist School and Iurii Tynianov's terminology in the field of literary studies).

The intellectual achievement of the mature Prague structuralism (cf. Mukařovský 1978c [1946]), building on the premise of the anthropologically-rooted concept of constantly reciprocal functions, was to think of structure also as a system of reciprocal influences and, moreover, as a process of dynamic development. With the concept of function, the representatives of Prague structuralism worked not only in the fields of linguistics and literary studies, but also in what today we would call cultural studies: for instance, Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev (1966 [1929]) used the concept in the field of ethnology. Prague structuralism was thus part of the scholarly discourse of the age in which function was a leading concept in such diverse disciplines as mathematics, (neo-Kantian)

philosophy, functional psychology and sociology (cf. Steiner et al. 1972). In the field of philosophy, mention must be made of the Marburg School; the works of Ernst Cassirer on *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (1910, *The Concepts of Substance and Function*) and the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* 1–3 (1923, 1925, 1929, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 1–3) were of particular importance. With their search for laws behind human actions and creation, both the Czech Structural School and (architectural) functionalism are also part of a tendency characteristic of the humanities and the social sciences in the first third of the twentieth century to follow the model of the natural sciences with its concepts of testability (e.g. the verification or falsification of hypotheses). It is particularly in this respect that Prague structuralism follows on from Russian formalism. A characteristic feature of the Czech variant is, however, that in searching for basic laws it stresses their systematic character and that the focal point of these reflections is man. In this sense, function is no longer merely an object's purpose determined by abstraction from unnecessary clutter – the Czech representatives of both the artistic and the architectural Avant-Garde were quick to oppose this monofunctionalist idea. Rather, it is man's constant manifold reference to his environment. Function, writes Mukařovský (2000 [1946]), is not to be thought of in terms of the object, but in terms of man. For Mukařovský, this anthropological foundation to the system of functions also provides the basis for considering art as an autonomous aesthetic phenomenon *and* as a social factor: art is not the reflection of societal conditions, nor does it directly influence them. Indeed, for Mukařovský the trademark of aesthetic function is that it directly refers not to a slice of reality, but to man's attitude to reality as a whole; if, however, the polyfunctionality inherent to man is thereby to become the yardstick, the very autonomy of the aesthetic sign guarantees its social potential. Both the focus on man's basic anthropological constants and the ostensibly paradoxical connection between the autonomy and the emancipatory effect of art are central points of the debate both in the nascent literary and cultural theory of Prague structuralism and in (Avant-Garde) artistic and architectural practice. These discussions are combined and concentrated in the concept of function.

For instance, the main theorist of the Czech Avant-Garde, Karel Teige, (especially in his manifesto *Poetismus* [1924, *Poetism*, 2002a]) uses the complementary principles of constructivism and poetism to develop a complementary model of culture that embraces the rational and functional conditions of modern civilisation (constructivism) while at the same time emphasising its need to be complemented by non-rational, creative, imaginative moments (poetism); a dignified life is to be made possible by equal consideration of both aspects.

Teige also seeks to preserve the parallel observation of the principles of poetism and constructivism with respect to functionality or utility. He defines

both areas in reference to man: functional is defined as whatever corresponds to man's needs. In architecture, the field Teige uses to illustrate the principle of constructivism (cf. Teige 2000), "*man is the measure for tailors*. He is, then, the stylistic principle that underlies all architecture" (Teige 2002b [1925], 586). In art, the core area for the application of the poetistic principle, the functionality of a work of art can be judged on the basis of the degree to which it is able to stimulate people's sensibilities.

The emancipatory function that the aesthetic function fulfils precisely due its purposelessness – as in Mukařovský's (later) conception – when it confronts man with his inherent polyfunctionality is already evident in Teige's rejection of proletarian tendentious art. For Teige, purposeful art is precisely that art that is without purpose, that without any revolutionary content is able to appeal to man's creative side and thereby liberate more than merely his senses (cf. Teige 1972 [1925], 195).

Admittedly, Teige's intellectual development from advocating proletarian tendentious art prior to 1922, that is, his defining avant-gardism in terms of art's social commitment, towards the poetist call for art whose avant-gardism lies in its following its own laws, is not without its contradictions (cf. Zusi 2008). Before writing his "Poetism" manifesto (1924), Teige had already rejected proletarian art by using the concept of function to justify his idea of art that derives its revolutionary potential from its very avoidance of ideological content, from its concentration on its own laws. This is the only way art can make its specific contribution to a comprehensive liberation of man; it is only as autonomous art that it can fulfil its emancipatory function, namely stimulating man's sensibility with specifically artistic devices, a process of sensory stimulation Teige increasingly thinks of in physiological categories. The only art he considers purposeful in this sense is "pure" art in its diverse manifestations, and hence he devotes much thought to the individual genres and their specific and hence "pure" means of expression, proclaiming for all genres the ideal of "pure poetry" (Teige 2002a [1924], 581). This term does not refer to the literary genre, but to the poetic or poetist mode he demands of modern art: the stimulation of the senses (including physiological stimulation) by the appropriate technical mastery of the respective material. The purist tendency evident in Teige's search for the specific means of expression inherent to each genre is also characteristic of his observations on architecture.

Even if Teige becomes entangled in aporias due to the sheer range of his conceptional terms and his tendency for puristic thinking in antinomies, his terminology often becoming imprecise, much of his thinking anticipates the intellectual movements Mukařovský was later able to capture systematically with his functional anthropology and aesthetics. For instance, Mukařovský also contests the artistic character of architecture because it can never permit the aesthetic

function to dominate (since this, he observes, echoing Teige, would transform an architectural creation into a sculpture; cf. Mukařovský 1978c [1937], 246), but he rejects the idea of architecture as a science. In this respect, it is certainly no coincidence that Mukařovský's statement on this subject, his study "Člověk ve světě funkcí" (1946, "Man in the World of Functions"), forms the preface to Karel Honzík's late avant-gardist book project *Tvorba životního slohu* (1946, *The Creation of a Lifestyle*). In this work, which offers a comprehensive blueprint of a lifestyle that does justice to 'modern' man and his 'real' needs, the original idea of functionalism reaches what Mukařovský calls a "consistent and developmentally inevitable conclusion" (Mukařovský 2000 [1946], 59).

In his study *K problému funkcí v architektuře* (1937, *On the Problem of Functions in Architecture*, 1978d), Mukařovský had warned against deriving the function of a building from a single given purpose. He recognises an association between the problem of function and the problem of the sign in the fact that a thing not only serves to fulfil certain functions with which it is applied to reality, but also determines these functions. As in the case of the sign, a distinction must be made between a structure of functions rooted in the collective conscious and a structure of functions given new and diverging shape by the actions of the individual. Here we can recognise the critical connection between Prague structuralism and de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, since in relation to the historical transformations in the formation of structures, Mukařovský accentuates not the abstract rulebook, but the dynamics of their application: "Hence we have arrived at a view of functions as a historically changeable structure of forces governing man's entire attitude toward reality" (Mukařovský 1978d [1937], 237–238).

For Mukařovský, the analogous observation of function and sign leads to the realisation that the functions the producer and user of a product of human activity ascribe to it can differ due to the fact that every action contains several and potentially even all of the functions rooted in man's anthropological nature (cf. Mukařovský 1978d [1937], 237–238). Architecture in particular is a prime example of such multifunctional production, and Mukařovský concludes his analysis with the observation that it "always appeals to man in his entirety, to all the components of his existence" (Mukařovský 1978d [1937], 243). This becomes apparent in the aesthetic function, which always steps in whenever practical functions retreat. As the dialectical negation of functionality par excellence and unlike the other, always purposeful functions, it is autotelic insofar as it renders the thing in which it is manifested a purpose in itself. Mukařovský provides the example of ruins which, having lost their practical function, are frequently considered beautiful.

Mukařovský develops the anthropological basis of his functional model with even greater clarity with respect to "The Place of the Aesthetic Function among the

Other Functions” (1978 f [1942], “Místo estetické funkce mezi ostatními”; on the status of the concept of aesthetic functions within Mukařovský’s structural aesthetics, cf. also the foundational study by Chvatík 2001, especially pages 65–73). Here, he again explicitly distinguishes between his concept of function from that of “original [...] architectural functionalism” (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 37), which he claims is based on the false assumption “that a building has a single, precisely delimited function given by the purpose for which it is built” (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 37). Mukařovský now calls for the perspective to be reversed: functions are to be determined not by looking at the object, but from the viewpoint of the subject. It will then become clear, he argues, that monofunctionality cannot exist: “No sphere of human action or human creation is limited to a single function. There is always a greater number of functions, and there are tensions, variances, and balancing among them” (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 37).

Here, Mukařovský defines function thus: “A function is the mode of a subject’s self-realisation vis-à-vis the external world” (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 40). This definition is phenomenological insofar as it refers to man’s conscious attitude. Moreover, it also contains the thesis that the ways in which man influences his environment are always forms of self-realisation too. This gives rise to an ideal yardstick: man is by his very nature polyfunctional, able to realise himself vis-à-vis the world around him in different ways. Historically speaking, the different functions only became differentiated in the course of cultural development; Mukařovský sees the tendency for monofunctionalism in the technology of the machine, which amounts to a deforming reduction of human nature.

For Mukařovský, however, one can assume a “basic polyfunctionality of human activity and the basic omnipresence of functions” (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 37). In his model, the aesthetic function is assigned the role of constantly reacquainting man with his (actual) polyfunctional nature. It is able to do this because, unlike the other functions, it does not refer directly to an excerpt of reality but points to reality as a whole via the aesthetic sign:

For the aesthetic function, reality is not an immediate object but a mediated one. Its immediate object (hence not an instrument at all) is an aesthetic sign which projects onto reality as a general law the subject’s attitude realized in the structure of this sign that nevertheless does not lose its independence. The aesthetic sign manifests its independence by always referring to reality as a whole, never to one of its individual segments. (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 43)

The reference to reality as a whole is bound up with man’s self-realisation insofar as reflection of this reality as a whole is “organized in an aesthetic sign according to the image of the subject’s organization” (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 42). However, it is via the aesthetic sign-ness of the artwork that man is made aware of

his participation in universal human existence. The ideal of man's polyfunctional self-realisation thus becomes the yardstick of his individual attitude towards reality.

Scholarship has often emphasised that by combining the artwork's autonomous and anthropological-social dimensions, Mukařovský essentially sought to connect the 'formal' Kantian and the 'content-based' Hegelian tradition of aesthetics (see for instance Günther 1973, 11; cf. also Zima 1995, 173–201). His form-oriented analyses, drawing on Russian formalism and Czech formism (herbatism), are an attempt to explain both the general specifics of the aesthetic and the historical and social transformation to which the idea of the aesthetic is subject.

Regarding the latter issue, Mukařovský was able to draw conceptually on the observations of the Russian formalists: in the course of his focus on problems of literary evolution, Tynianov (1967 [1927], 8) had distinguished between the synfunction of an element within the construction of its respective synchronous system and the autofunction as its correlation to a series of analogous elements of other systems, and hence with respect to diachronic series of developments; in the *Theses* he created together with Roman Jakobson during his stay in Prague in 1928, he had called for consideration to be given to the reciprocal relationship between systems and their evolutions and – in analogy to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* – between (literary) utterances and existing norm complexes, and ultimately demanded examination of the structural laws governing the correlation between literary and other historical series (cf. Jakobson and Tynianov 1995 [1928]). Mukařovský's observations on sociohistorical transformation underpinning the assessments of aesthetic function (cf. Mukařovský 1970 [1936], 1978a [1939], 1978e [1937]), aesthetic norms and aesthetic value were able to take up this approach.

However, the functional concept proves central not only to Mukařovský's consideration of sociohistorical processes within the system of structural thinking, but also to his integration of a dialectical element in his thought. For unlike the formalists, Mukařovský did not just consider the specificity of poetic language merely in opposition to everyday language, from which it is distinguished by the "set toward" expression, as Jakobson succinctly put it; first, in Russian as "ustanovka na vyrazhenie" (Jakobson 1979 [1919], 305), then later in English as "set [*Einstellung*] toward the MESSAGE as such" (Jakobson 1981 [1958], 25). Drawing on Bühler's communications scheme, with which he supplements aesthetic function in order to apply it to the situation of aesthetic communication, Mukařovský lends Jakobson's theory of the self-referentiality of the aesthetic sign a dialectical foundation:

The aesthetic function which is the cause of this reflexiveness of linguistic activity has appeared in our analysis as the omnipresent dialectic negation of the three basic communicative functions of language, and thereby as a necessary addition to Bühler's scheme. (Mukařovský 1977 [1936], 71)

Mukařovský also retains the concept of the aesthetic function's dialectical negation of the other functions in the later model of functions he further developed into an anthropology. The crucial element is that the aesthetic function is not restricted to the field of art, but is potentially omnipresent, while, conversely, in the work of art the other and hence also the practical functions are also present in addition to the aesthetic function, which by definition dominates. That those functions that always refer directly and functionally to a certain excerpt of reality are dialectically negated by the aesthetic function, which, in contrast, is without purpose, does not mean that they are suppressed or overcome; rather, their diversity is accentuated:

If the aesthetic function does not tend to any practical aim, this does not mean that it will obstruct the contact of art with the vital interests of man. Precisely because it lacks unequivocal "content," the aesthetic function becomes "transparent" and does not act inimically to the other functions but helps them. If other "practical" functions compete with one another when they are juxtaposed and strive to dominate one another, exhibiting a tendency toward functional specialization (toward monofunctionality, which culminates in the machine), then it is precisely because of the aesthetic function that art tends toward as rich and as many-sided a poly-functionality as possible, without, at the same time, preventing the work of art from having a social effect. (Mukařovský 1978c [1946], 12)

Hans Günther has fittingly summarised this position as the "idea of the humanising polyfunctionality of the aesthetic function" (Günther 1973, 30). The emancipatory potential of the works and their holistic reference to life is thus rooted in the complex structure with which they unite the reference to diverse practical functions to an entirely contradictory whole, a whole that is always in a dynamic process due to its inherent tensions and thus demands an active stance on the part of the recipient.

2 On the reception and non-reception of Prague literary-theoretical structuralism

The reception history of the model of a literary theory rooted in anthropology proposed principally by Jan Mukařovský has remained a history of non-reception for a remarkably long time. There are various reasons for this, largely connected

to the political situation and the related publishing restrictions, but also to what sometimes appears to be the unsystematic nature of Mukařovský's writing on the matter. Both factors particularly apply to the essay that might have provided the most points of contact and the greatest stimulus for literary-theoretical developments in Western academia, namely reception theory, but also post-structuralism: Mukařovský's treatise on "Záměrnost a nezáměrnost v umění" (1943, "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art", 1978b). Written as early as 1943, a paper for the Prague Linguistic Circle (given on 26 May 1943), it is thus from the time Oleg Sus (1997 [1971]) looks back on as the most open phase in Mukařovský's thinking, when he practised "Otevírání struktur" (1971, "Opening of the Structures"). However, the essay was not published until 1966, in *Studie z estetiky* (*Studies in Aesthetics*), a volume that was able to appear under the then loosened (cultural-) political conditions of the Prague Spring. It was by no means a matter of course that Mukařovský published this collection of studies clearly belonging to the structuralist paradigm, which he had thitherto kept at home and only some of which had appeared previously. For after the communists took power in 1948, Mukařovský had renounced the structuralist positions officially reviled as 'formalistic' and switched to a Marxist interpretation he attempted to justify using his earlier positions. Paradoxically, it was 1948 of all years that presented him with the opportunity to do this when he wrote a new foreword to the second edition of his collection of essays that had originally appeared in 1941 under the title *Kapitoly z české poetiky* (*Chapters in Czech Poetics*). Here he supplemented the description of his own scholarly development provided in the foreword to the first edition with a "convergence towards dialectical materialism" (Mukařovský 1948, Vol. 1, 12) that had taken place earlier but which he had not been able to mention under national socialist occupation. In fact, Mukařovský had strikingly contextualised the ideas of the aesthetic subject to historical transformations in the collective conscious of their respective eras in his 1936 monograph *Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty* (*Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, 1970), thereby associating questions of general aesthetics with those of sociology. Moreover, the studies collected in *Chapters in Czech Poetics* that Mukařovský republished in 1948 can by and large be attributed to the phase in his "creative process" predating what Oleg Sus identifies as a "transition from more or less closed to open research on structure" (Sus 1997 [1971], 121). However, in the period between the end of World War II and the communist takeover in 1948, Mukařovský then returned to the more closed conception of structure which includes the relationist understanding of aesthetic function as dependent on respective social contexts published in 1936 (cf. Sus 1997 [1971], 124) – perhaps also because such a conception seemed more compatible with the Marxist ideas towards which he was increasingly leaning.

Mukařovský's increasing gravitation towards Marxist positions finally culminated in his renouncing his earlier positions in the prevailing Stalinist spirit of 1951. In a retrospective, Miroslav Červenka, a proponent of what is generally known as the third generation of Prague structuralism, clearly articulated the traumatic consequences this had for Mukařovský's disciples (cf. Červenka 1999, 313). Paradoxically however, this break with structuralism created a secure space under the safety of his institutional leadership within which this generation of scholars was able to produce the work that could bring about a structuralist revival in the 1960s – until the defeat of the Prague Spring put an end to it:

By renouncing his former opinions in the early 1950s, Mukařovský retained in various institutions his prominent position, justified, paradoxically, by the very work he himself had rejected. The internal contradiction for us is that Mukařovský's self-denial became one of the factors enabling the existence of a scholarly enclave in which part of our generation of literary scholars grew up. (Červenka 1999, 313)

For Červenka, that this generation “revived Structuralism in the 1960s”, with the effect that it “became a theoretical basis for the then ongoing self-liberation of culture, independent of the narrow anti-dogmatism and the Reform Communism permeated with ideologies”, was in part due to Mukařovský's “publishing his significant, previously unpublished, earlier works whose existence we did not even suspect” (Červenka 1999, 313–314).

Beyond all the upheavals caused by Mukařovský's officious departure from structuralism in the early 1950s, it led to a belated, or indeed obstructed reception of the structuralist works he had written in his ‘open’ phase of the first half of the 1940s. This initially applies to domestic reception, these works only becoming available to his disciples twenty years later, in the 1960s. For instance, Milan Jankovič was not able to tap the potential of Mukařovský's observations on the intentional and the unintentional, on the work of art as a sign and as a thing before 1968, in his study *Dílo jako dění smyslu* (*The Work as a Semantic Process*). However, while this study was ready to go to print in 1969, it was no longer able to appear after the defeat of the Prague Spring. These circumstances too distorted the reception of what was probably the most innovative phase in Mukařovský's thinking, since Jankovič's study could only be published officially in 1992. Milan Jankovič later observed the extent to which domestic reception and discussion was subsequently inhibited by the political repressions by pointing out that questions “remained without answers, since there was nowhere to make them public”. The “foreign context” was a “certain substitute”, but was not able to replace the “lively exchange of thoughts” of “the sixties” (Jankovič 2005d [1993], 319).

Jankovič made these remarks – again with a delay of over twenty years, due to the political circumstances – in reaction to Oleg Sus's extremely critical assess-

ment marking the eightieth birthday of Academy Member Jan Mukařovský that had been able to appear in 1971, in the journal *Slovenská literatúra* (*Slovak literature*). Sus examined the various phases in Mukařovský's thought in terms of their respective conceptions of the category of structure, placing particular emphasis on those very phases in the first half of the 1940s concerned with "Opening of the Structures" in which he claimed Mukařovský had sought to "penetrate the boundaries of the relativism and sociologism of aesthetic value that still existed then and, indirectly, function too, by pointing to its anthropological constitution." (Sus 1997 [1971], 122)

Thus the category of structure also becomes a kind of focus collecting and concentrating the shifts in Jan Mukařovský's thinking – in his poetics, in universal literary theory and in aesthetics. The differentiating potential of this noetic fulcrum is itself subject to transformations or fluctuations, new adaptations and recourse to original points of departure. And it is here that we can find the striking traits characteristic of theory itself, of its 'energetic' plasticity, of that opening and filling of the structures with which the internal characteristics of Jan Mukařovský's work is almost essentially connected via its intersections. (Sus 1997 [1971], 117)

In this overview of Mukařovský's works, Sus criticised with remarkable clarity the fact that after 1945, in his later structuralist works already displaying Marxist leanings, he withdrew behind the anthropologically-oriented ideas and problematisations of the early forties instead of pursuing them further in order to later conceptually expand them.

However, as his essays, articles and treatises published after 1945 and together with them the second edition of *Chapters of Czech Poetics* (1948) demonstrate, Mukařovský did not undertake systematic reconstruction of the conceptual system, and some intersections of his universal conception in which he had actually already prepared certain premises lacked the development of an intellectual concept. [...] Hence a few years later, the preceding insights gained from a certain anthropologisation of Structuralism were not always employed where they could have come into their own. It would appear that between 1945 and 1948 Mukařovský's concepts and his methodology become stabilised, roughly in the sense that the final phase of his structural aesthetics also immediately reproduces his original theoretical premises in concentrated form, premises that were deepened and had undergone development [...]. (Sus 1997 [1971], 124–125)

Sus had thus recognised the shifts in the phases of Mukařovský's thought early on and very perceptively – albeit in an essay that remained isolated within the Czech- and Slovak-speaking world. It was not until 1997 that both Sus' essay (of 1971) and Jankovič's belated response to it (of 1993) appeared in German translation in the volume *Prager Schule: Kontinuität und Wandel* (1997, *The Prague School: Continuity and Transformation*) edited by Wolfgang Schwarz in collaboration with

Jiří Holý and Milan Jankovič – a volume intended to introduce the Prague School as a “source of inspiration [...], a legacy that is certainly not uniform and at times even displays contradictions” (Schwarz et al. 1997, vii). If the domestic reception of Mukařovský’s structuralist positions ‘open’ to an anthropological dimension were limited due to their delayed publication, but also due to their renouncement in the essays he produced later (but before turning to Marxism), this applies even more so to perceptions abroad.

A telling example is provided by Konstanz aesthetics of reception: although the focus on questions of literature and anthropology and the approaches towards reception theory would have offered them plenty of connections, this was not recognised until much later, essentially not until Milan Jankovič’s studies in the 2000s (collected and republished in Jankovič 2015), in which he compared his model of *Dílo jako dění smyslu* (1992, *The Work as a Process of Meaning*), which he had developed as a continuation of Mukařovský’s thought on ‘open’ structures, with more recent models of different provenance, such as Konstanz reception theory (but also that of Paul Ricoeur). The publication of Mukařovský’s *Studies in Aesthetics* roughly coincided with the development of reception theory in Konstanz. And it occurred during a time of intensive translation work: German Mukařovský anthologies appeared 1967, 1970 and 1974, although only the volume from 1974 included his essay on the intentional and the unintentional in art, which is so central to the phase in his thinking extended to questions of anthropology and the status of reception.

An important step in this process was the translation of a selection of Felix Vodička’s works from his volume *Struktura vývoje* (1969, *The Structure of Development*), which were published in 1976 under the title *Die Struktur der Literarischen Entwicklung* (1976, *The Structure of Literary Development*) by the Research Group for Structural Methods in Linguistics and Literature Studies at the University of Konstanz. The essays are prefaced by an extensive, heavy introduction by Jurij Striedter running to almost 100 pages, first containing his observations “Zum Verhältnis von tschechischem Strukturalismus zu russischem Formalismus” followed by “Zu Felix Vodičkas Theorie der ‘Konkretisation’ als Teil einer strukturalistischen Literaturgeschichte” (both of which he later integrates as the individual chapters “From Russian Formalism to Czech Structuralism” and “Felix Vodička’s Theory of Reception and Structuralist Literary History” in the book *Literary Structure, Evolution and Value. Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered*, already written in America in 1989). Striedter explicitly points out the “proximity to the contemporary historico-hermeneutic theory of reception and to the contemporary branch of literary history oriented to the aesthetics of reception” (Striedter 1989, 144), first discussed in Konstanz, which had however been “conceived [...] without knowledge of the Czech Structuralism theory of reception”

(Striedter 1989, 144–145). Beyond the “extensive systematic analogies”, he finds it worth noting that “Jauss, like the Prague Structuralists, developed his conception of literary perception and evolution while working directly with tenets and theorems [...] of both Russian Formalism and Marxist literary theory and criticism” (Striedter 1989, 145). Striedter thereby takes up Vodička’s version of the “Development of Theoretical Thinking in the Work of Jan Mukařovský” in the very same book (Vodička 1976) to which Striedter is writing his introduction. In this chapter, written in 1966, Vodička certainly does discuss Mukařovský’s recently published studies on aesthetics, unlike Striedter referring explicitly to those which Sus later described as ‘open’. He nevertheless reads them – in the publishing context of the time in Czechoslovakia – with a focus emphasising their compatibility with Marxist positions:

Mukařovský, who had been finding common ground with Marxism through his conception of aesthetics as a social fact, was now further reconciling with it on the basis of his anthropological premise when examining the forms of objectification to which man was subject, while asserting his entire human versatility to the world. (Vodička 1998, 479)

The anthropological dimension in Mukařovský’s thought of the early 1940s thus appears as an accessory or precursor to his Marxist ideas – whereby the stimulus it might have offered Konstanz’s then nascent field of research on literature and anthropology was not so much stated as hidden.

In discussions in Konstanz, however, Striedter clearly made Iser and Jauss aware of the parallels between their approaches and those of Prague structuralism. Of course, further ‘analogies’ consisted in the modification of Ingarden’s concept of indefiniteness by both Vodička and Iser in their work on reception theory. In Jauss, many footnotes express thanks to Striedter for his pointers. However, both authors only explicitly cite Mukařovský’s earlier essays, especially the study on aesthetic function, norm and aesthetic value as social facts (from 1936). Another factor was probably that René Wellek – enjoying the authority of a former member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, albeit with clearly critical undertones – had also claimed that this “pamphlet [...] provides the best statement of the theory” (Wellek 1970, 290). He had added the criticism that in concluding that “The work of art [...] is ultimately an assembly of extra-aesthetic values and nothing but such an assembly”, Mukařovský had reached a point where “aesthetics is asked to commit suicide” (Wellek 1970, 290). In a critical response in 1935, Wellek had already pointed to the limitations of an approach that failed to consider the “relation to the personality of the artist [...] and the question of a world view implied in works of art which is not a mere intellectual doctrine or statement” (Wellek 1970, 291–292). His own stance, as expressed in the *Theory of Literature* he wrote with Austin Warren in 1949, was characterised by the attempt

“to bring together the insights I had required as a junior member of the Circle with my new knowledge of American criticism” (Wellek 1970, 276). In his notes on “The Literary Theory and Aesthetics of the Prague School” in his survey *Discriminations* (which he includes largely unchanged as a subchapter on “Czechoslovakia” in Wellek 1991), Wellek does mention *Studies in Aesthetics*, published in 1966, as “a considerable surprise [...], which [...] adds unpublished papers written during the war years, before his conversion to Marxism” (Wellek 1970, 294). However, the first selection of Mukařovský’s works in English translation edited by John Burbank and Peter Steiner 1977, which Wellek furnished with an introduction, does not contain any of the essays from the volume of 1966. Wellek underestimated these studies when he observed that “Nothing new is added” (Wellek 1970, 294) and concluded by explicitly referring to Mukařovský’s “early work” as an “excellently thought-out, coherent scheme of literary theory” (Wellek 1970, 295):

The emphasis on the work of art as a totality which is conceived as a dynamic dialectical process rather than an organic body, the ideal, however difficult to realize, of an internal history of the art of poetry, the view of literature as part of a general theory of signs in which function, norm, and value interlock seem to me substantially valid conceptions even today. (Wellek 1970, 295)

He thereby points to “Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts”, the study whose German translation is indeed the most-cited in Jauss and Iser, who repeatedly refer to Wellek’s survey (cf. Iser 1976, 115, 142, 280). Scholarship may have repeatedly focussed on this study because it presented a coherent model – unlike Mukařovský’s very tentative explorations from the early 1940s. Jurij Striedter, the mediator of Prague structuralism for Konstanz aesthetics of reception, summarises retrospectively:

Mukařovský’s and Vodička’s focus on the ways in which works of literature have to be concretized by readers under changing historical conditions, together with Vodička’s investigations in the theory and history of literary reception, dovetailed with our attempts in Konstanz to elaborate different versions of the aesthetics of reception and the history of reception. It was only fair to acknowledge the ground-breaking work undertaken in Prague decades earlier, which was interrupted by political developments and remained scarcely known abroad because of the language barrier. Moreover, it was helpful and challenging to compare that early semiotic approach with our own approaches, which were rooted in the German tradition of historical hermeneutics or based on phenomenology (which also had played an important role in the discussions of the Prague Circle and in the formation of Russian Formalism). (Striedter 1989, 8–9)

But with the passing of time, he too is forced to recognise what scant traces ultimately remained of the reception of Prague structuralism’s concepts despite the proximity to its problems. One reason for this might be the very “tentative char-

acter” (Striedter 1989, 228) of Mukařovský’s ideas during the open phase of his thinking on structure: “[T]hroughout his life he continuously elaborated and modified his definition or descriptions of the aesthetic function and its place among other functions, keeping it open for further specifications and additions.” (Striedter 1989, 228)

It is mainly the dynamic concepts of the semantic gesture and the unintentionality or the idea of the work of art as a sign *and* a thing that would have offered points of contact not only for the aesthetics of reception – which, as Striedter notes, is ultimately hermeneutic – but also for a literary theory that, like French post-structuralism, departed from a static concept of structure. It may have been irritating for Western academia, which associated this with a clear break with classical structuralism, that Czech structuralism did not have to undergo this break with the previous generation. This becomes particularly clear in the works of Milan Jankovič, who with his concept of “open meaning”, of *The Work as a Process of Meaning*, repeatedly referred to Mukařovský’s work of the early 1940s as his “inspiration” (for instance in the essay “Inspirace nezáměrnosti” [1999, “Unintentionality as Inspiration”; Jankovič 2015, 42–55]).

3 Concepts of the ‘open’ phase in Mukařovský’s thought: The semantic gesture and the relationship between intentionality and unintentionality

Mukařovský’s concept of the *semantic gesture* has led to very different connections and repeatedly to irritations in the research discourse (cf. Červenka 1973; Schmid 1982; Schwarz 1997; Jankovič 1965, 1972 [1970], 2005c [1992], 2005d [1993]). The term combines the physical and the semiotic in paradoxical fashion. That Mukařovský very consciously uses the term *gesture* becomes clear in its terminological precursor, *motoric gesture*, in his stylistic analyses of the 1920s. Jankovič stressed this connection in his observations summarising the concept of the semantic gesture: in these early studies we already see Mukařovský’s “original understanding of individual style” (Jankovič 2005c [1992], 274; on the conceptualisation of individual style in Prague Structuralism, see also the study that appeared in German translation early on, Jankovič 1976, and Schmid 1997). Mukařovský, he writes, was interested in “a certain mode of arrangement that can apply to the organisation of the phonetic components or the syntactic structure that say something about the complex aspect of the view of the world that appears

everywhere in the mode of arrangement directly, i. e. not just by virtue of their mediation via the topic and the idea" (Jankovič 2005c [1992], 274). In his early study "O motorickém dění v poezii" (1927, "On Motoric Processes in Poetry"), published posthumously, Mukařovský based "his understanding of the poetic work on such contemporaneous French and German theories emphasising the dynamic character of psychic or associated physical phenomena (Janet, Paulhan, Ribot, Groos, Sievers)" and was inspired by Bremond's term *le courant* (the current) (Jankovič 2005c [1992], 275). Jankovič summarises:

Here we can already see the actual orientation of Mukařovský's interest: it isn't the uniqueness of the poet's personality, but the dynamic character of the unity of the work that attracts him. The term "gesture" is also connected to the idea of the energetic unification of the work: a movement that via the eloquence of its arrangement – here especially the phonetic arrangement, which however already implies the necessity of a complex approach – directly, physically suggests conscious content otherwise considered incommunicable. (Jankovič 2005c [1992], 275)

While Mukařovský did not publish his observation on the 'motoric gesture' or the 'motoric processes', he often used and specified the term 'semantic gesture' in his published studies of the early 1940s, with various accents.

In his study "On Poetic Language" (Mukařovský 1976 [1940]), he describes "the determination of the 'formal' but nevertheless concrete 'semantic gesture' by which the work is organized as a dynamic unity" as the aim of literary-theoretical composition analysis; "it is a semantic fact, a semantic intention, though qualitatively undetermined" (Mukařovský 1976 [1940], 57). This combination of concreteness on the one hand and dynamics and indefiniteness on the other has of course been the source of some irritation in the research debate. Milan Jankovič identifies in Mukařovský's shifting definitions of the semantic gesture a growing tendency to interpret the 'unity of the work' as dynamic instead of static (cf. Jankovič 2005c [1992], 277). In the studies on aesthetics from the early 1940s, he also increasingly dynamised the relationship between definiteness and indefiniteness, between unification of meaning and opposing aspects or, as he put it, "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art" (Mukařovský 1978b [1943]).

Here one must also think of Mukařovský's idea of the humanising potential of a work of art, which he sees rooted in the dialectical tension between the aesthetic function that is always dominant in the artwork and the other (practical) functions that are also present: function, he says, is not to be thought of as emanating from the object, but as from man (cf. Mukařovský 2000 [1946]). Mukařovský's system of functions thus relates not to language alone, but has an anthropological dimension, whereby he assumes a polyfunctionality inherent to man, that is, man's multifaceted self-realisation. Now, for Mukařovský it is characteristic

of the aesthetic function that it does not refer directly to a part of reality, but to man's attitude to reality as a whole; if, however, man's inherent polyfunctionality becomes the yardstick, it is the very autonomy of the aesthetic sign, its 'perceptible' quality of "being its own ultimate purpose" (Mukařovský 1978 f [1942], 42) that contains its potential to have a humanising effect.

In his pioneering study on "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art" (Mukařovský 1978b), the idea of the work as a sign, albeit of a very specific, namely aesthetic nature, goes hand in hand with the perspectivisation of the work as a thing. Mukařovský links the pairing of the work as a sign and as a thing with the terminological pairing of the intentional and the unintentional: "Intentionality allows the work to be perceived as a sign, unintentionality as a thing" (Mukařovský 1978b [1943], 128); the work always contains something that eludes a perception unifying meaning, which makes it appear to us as a thing that is not characterised by intentionality and is thus perceived as unintentional. The difference between intentionality and unintentionality cannot be explained by the work's genesis (it is, then, not a matter of discovering a work's underlying intention or distinguishing between its components the author intended and those that were included unintentionally). Rather, Mukařovský sees "the opposition of intentionality and unintentionality [as] the basic antinomy of art" (Mukařovský 1978b [1943], 128), which is not created by the producer, but is realised ever anew in the process of reception. The two poles of intentionality and unintentionality are subject to change in the course of reception history, their constant tension guaranteeing a work's sustained vitality. For it is the very sensation of unintentionality that repeatedly lends a work urgency, that makes it a "matter of vital import" (Mukařovský 1978b [1943], 122). And: "It is precisely as a *thing* that the work is capable of affecting what is universally human in man, whereas in its semiotic aspect the work always appeals eventually to what is socially and temporally determined in him" (Mukařovský 1978b [1943], 128).

If we combine Mukařovský's observations on the extensive effectiveness of the aesthetic function rooted in the autonomy of the aesthetic sign with his ideas on intentional, sign aspects and unintentional, thing aspects of the artwork, we arrive at the following model: due to the artwork's urgency, which resists attempts to unify its meaning and hence perceive it as a normal informative sign, man – not only as a rationally conscious being, but also in his physical corporality and his levels of unconsciousness – is always addressed anew. In this respect, Mukařovský's idea of the work as both a sign and a thing is concentrated in the concept of the semantic gesture.

This is the notion Milan Jankovič took up with his model of open meaning that cannot be taken for granted (cf. Jankovič 2005a [1991]), that is only grasped and indeed can only be grasped in the context of its process (cf. Jankovič 2005b

[1992]). In his interpretation, the semantic gesture is the basis of a complex reciprocal relationship between the work and the recipient, in the course of which new potential meanings constantly emerge. In stressing those aspects with which Prague structuralism takes up the theoretical thrust of the aesthetics of the *gestalt*, Jankovič sharpens the problem of the relationship between form and content that has always played a role in discussions about the semantic gesture thus:

Contained within the composition of the work is an important, perhaps the most important piece of information: [the work] actualizes formative aspects within which all meanings concretized by us are displayed; it actualizes the tension between its being and our “sense”. And this tension, this act of sense-making that emerges every time, and each time differently from the being of the work, from its very premises that create meaning, this process does not end with a single act of understanding, of grasping the meaning, but with each concretization returns to the work as the source – this being the actual, inevitably elusive content of the artistic work. (Jankovič 2005b [1992], 33)

Here, the ever-new encounter with the work as a source is certainly ‘moving’ for Jankovič, since the physicality implied by the concept of the semantic gesture is imagined as dynamic action, as the transfer of energy – ultimately that energy underlying life itself.

Here it is always about a formational process, whose purpose is not to reach a final form, but to pass on the formative energy, to turn man towards the world as well as towards the work of art in its processual state. The vitality of the work is provided *inter alia* by the extent to which it is able to retain said energy in its composition and to pass it on in changed external contexts. (Jankovič 2005b [1992], 85)

In summary, Milan Jankovič took up and elaborated central concepts and tendencies of Prague structuralism, especially the aesthetics of Jan Mukařovský. In doing so, he remained – quite in the spirit of Prague structuralism – a representative of an emphatic aesthetics of the artwork. However, as a consequence of this approach he also further pursued and honed those elements of Mukařovský’s later structuralist phase in which the processes of creating meaning both triggered by and occurring in the work of art are understood as a dynamic process involving both the creator and the recipient, a process whose result is not pre-ordained but is constantly realised anew in ever-new encounters with the work, thereby releasing an energy that is not of a semantic nature, but is palpable (in the sense in which Jakobson (1981 [1958], 25) characterised the poetic function as “promoting the palpability of signs”). In many respects, Jankovič’s continued development of the approaches of Prague structuralism towards a dynamic conception of the artwork displays parallels to post-structuralism. And hence Mukařovský’s terms and concepts of his ‘open’ phase in the early 1940s were

already related in a variety of ways to developments in French post-structuralism and deconstruction: while Miroslav Petříček rather emphasised the parallels between Prague structuralism and deconstruction (cf. Petříček 1991), Herta Schmid examined not only “convergences” but also “divergences between Czech Structuralism and post-modern thinking” (Schmid 1992). Schwarz et al. saw a “complementary model [or alternative model?]” emerge “from the system-based thinking of Prague Structuralism” “[v]is-à-vis the post-modern and deconstructionist theory of the dissolution of meaning” – a model that “interprets polysemy, variation in meaning, semantic oscillations, antinomic tensions not as deficits, but as *constructive* factors in dynamic, holistic-organic ‘open’ structures” (Schwarz et al. 1997, ix).

While French post-structuralism felt compelled to distance itself from classical structuralism’s static, binary conception of structure, the Prague variant had already replaced it with a dynamic understanding of structure as a system of various reciprocal relationships relatively early on. In this respect, Milan Jankovič developed a similarly open concept of the artistic text around the same time – but, unlike Western European post-structuralism, as a continuation of the work of his predecessor Mukařovský. Unlike the French post-structuralists, Jankovič adopted a gesture not of overcoming his predecessors, of breaking with them, but of productively taking up what had gone before him. It was only after the political revolution that Jankovič could discuss the parallels between such an approach and those writings that had emerged concurrently in Western academia.

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