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Czechoslovak Semiotics Past and Present

As far as I know, there exists only one report on the state of semiotics in Czechoslovakia, the classical one-sentence report contained in Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena*. Let us quote the whole of it:

Therefore, in the years before the second world war, in individual linguistic or linguistically oriented circles that were interested in the study of foundations (particularly in Czechoslovakia), significant attempts were made to study other sign systems than languages — in particular folk costumes, art, and literature — on a more general semiological basis.

In the footnote, Hjelmslev mentioned the principal works of Bogatyrev and Mukařovský. Nevertheless, the important semiological study by Mukařovský (1934) is noted without bibliographical data, because at that time Hjelmslev had only "an offprint, not provided with information about place of publication and so at present unobtainable".

However, the real situation of Czechoslovak semiotics of that period is somewhat more complicated. Actually, there are three decisive factors in Czechoslovak semiotics of the first period:¹ the analytic genius of Otakar Zich, the linguistic and semiological activity of the Cercle Lin-

¹ The 'prehistory' of Czechoslovak semiotics could be traced pretty far back; however, it has the same disconnected character as the history of modern Czech semiotic thinking. Among the predecessors of contemporary semioticians, great thinkers and semiotic reformers could be named, such as Constantin Philosophus (the inventor of Slavic characters) or Jan Hus (the reformer of Czech orthography who introduced the diacritical marks for soft consonants now generally used in Latin transcriptions of Russian words and titles), and principally Comenius, one of the greatest 'Cartesian semioticians', whose ideas on the relation of word and reality, of learning the language and learning the world, of language and theatre are still living. Cf. also footnote 4.

guistique de Prague (and, later, of the Cercle Linguistique de Bratislava), and the vanguard tendencies in contemporary poetry and theatre.

Otakar Zich never explicitly used the term 'semiotics' or 'semiology'. Also his terminology, especially in his early work (1910), published nearly simultaneously with the often quoted study by Mathesius on potentiality of linguistic phenomena,² is tributary to the contemporary experimental psychology as well as to the theories of Volkelt ("Bedeutungsvorstellung", cf. Sus, 1958, 1966a, c, 1972). However, Zich's analyses of art, particularly of the theatrical form (1931), his theories built — in spite of his empiricism — almost *more geometrico*, and his conceptual system are always aiming at the semiotic substance of play, theatre, and the art of the actor. This is genuine semiotics, as perceived clearly by Mukařovský (1933) in his review of Zich's *chef-d'œuvre*.

The second — and most abundant — source of Czechoslovak semiotics is the linguistic activity of the CLP, which naturally developed semiological trends, especially in the domain of poetics (Mukařovský, 1938a, b, 1940a; Jakobson, 1921, 1926, 1932a, 1933, 1937a), in the domain of linguistics of *parole*, today called 'translinguistics' (Skalička, 1937, 1948), linguistics of written language, today called 'grammatology' (Vachek, 1939, 1942), in musicology (Becking; Jakobson, 1932a, b; Helfert, 1937; Sychra, 1948), in esthetics (Mukařovský, 1934, 1936), in the theory of architecture (Mukařovský, 1937b; Honzik, 1946), in ethnography (Bogatyrev and Jakobson, 1929; Bogatyrev, 1923, 1929, 1936a, b, 1937a; Mukařovský, 1942), in the theory of cinema (Jakobson, 1933; Mukařovský, 1931), and especially in the theory of theatre (Honzl, 1939, 1940, 1943; Mukařovský, 1937a, 1940b, 1941; Veltruský, 1940, 1941a, b, 1942; Bogatyrev, 1937b, c, 1938a, b, 1940; Jakobson, 1937b, Kouřil, 1945; Burian, 1946; Pokorný, 1946).

The large number of studies dealing with the semiotics of theatre can be partly explained by the example of Otakar Zich. Zich's work was undoubtedly paradigmatic and inspiring: the greater part of the nonlinguistic contributions in *Slovo a slovesnost* [Word and Verbal Art], issued since 1935 (Zich died in 1934, only three years after his principal work was published), are articles dealing with semiotics of theatre, articles for the most part directly responding to or disputing Zich's arguments. There is, however, another reason. Czech structuralism, like

² According to Vachek's *Prague School Reader in Linguistics*, this study "anticipated much of the approach to be taken by the Prague group some twenty, or even more, years later". And the same could be said about Zich's early work and its relation to semiotic research in the thirties.

Russian formalism, was closely connected with artistic creation. Every artistic work is a semiotic experiment, an experiment with sign and meaning, an experiment in human communication. *A fortiori* this is valid about vanguard art and poetry. In addition to poetry, theatre especially was found to be an ideal ground for experimenting with sign functioning of different artistic elements, experimentation remarkable sometimes even more for its semiotic than for its theatrical value.³

The situation in Slovakia was very similar, the difference being that for Slovak semioticians the experimental laboratory was, for a long time, only poetry and painting. Nevertheless, theoretical interest in theatre experiments remained (Karvaš, 1947, 1948; Rampák, 1948). Zich's influence was not so strong as in Prague; in the years before the second World War, the young generation of Slovak scientists was influenced by Bogatyrev, Mukařovský, and Kořnek, then teaching at the Bratislava University. In contrast to Prague, Slovak structuralism was strongly impressed by the ideas of the Vienna Circle on the unification of science as propagated by Igor Hrušovský: symptomatically, the first forum for interdisciplinary meetings was given the name Society for Scientific Synthesis. It was in Slovakia that Bogatyrev published or finished his two most important semiotic works on folk costume (1937a) and folk theatre (1940); it was in the Slovak town of Trnava that the first representative anthology of Russian formalists was issued (Bakoš, 1941). And, in spite of persecution (the anthology was soon confiscated by the pro-Nazi government, cf. Popovič, 1970: 23-33; Bakoš, 1969: 225), the original Slovak contribution to semiotics began to increase. This process successfully continued in the first years after the war when structuralism suddenly became the leading, if not official, school in the humanities.⁴

The late forties and early fifties brought interruption of this progress and re-orientation of many scientists: sociological and historical methods seemed to be the only possible ones for scientific work; paradoxically some positive stimuli came from Stalin's theses on linguistics, an authoritative example of the synchronic (if not panchronic) approach.

³ One of the artists who never stopped experimenting is Josef Svoboda. The most impressive manifestation of his experiments was attained in 'Laterna magica' and 'polyecran' (multimedia) principles as demonstrated at Expo 1957 in Brussels. The experimental line in poetry, or rather, in the no-man's-land between poetry and visual arts is best represented by the work of Jiří Kolář.

⁴ In addition to the abovementioned works, the most important Slovak contributions to semiotics must be seen in the works of the ethnographer Melicherčík (1941, 1945, 1946, 1948), stylisticians Kochol (1947), Miko (1946a), Beniaková (1947), and linguist Blanár (1947, 1948) or sociolinguist Arany (1939). Cf. Popovič, 1970, 1971b.

Some authors, in their applications of Stalin's theses, even attempted to integrate some elements of structuralist linguistics (Kochol, 1953), or theatre (Pokorný, 1951) into Marxism. Probably it is as a result of the wave of applications prevailing at that time that the contemporary Czechoslovak semiotics has a certain immunity against linguistic applicationalism.⁵

The late fifties and sixties tried to restore the interrupted continuity with home traditions (Sus, 1958, 1964, 1966a, c; Chvatík, 1970; Popovič, 1970; Bakoš, 1969; Krausová, 1968; Jankovič, 1967), as well as with the developments abroad. Nevertheless, a revived vanguard is no longer a vanguard, and a restored structuralism becomes a national institution, a subject of diachronic study rather than a method of synchronic research. "The misfortune of a good tradition", it was called by a Polish structuralist (cf. Popovič, 1970). On the other hand, one-sided reliance on imported ideas must lead to epigonism and eclecticism. This is not the case of the late Jiří Levý (1926-67) and of his original contributions to prosody (1964, 1966b, 1968), semantics of literature (1963), theatre (1960), and especially his brilliant book on literary translation (1963, 1969), an art, according to Levý, akin in some respects to the art of the actor.

Czech structuralism was traditionally concerned with semantics of literature; some authors (Červenka, 1964, 1967, 1972; Kačer, 1968) try to synthesize Mukařovský's point of view with new stimuli coming from French *sémiologie*. However, the most imposing activity in the domain of literary semiotics is manifested in Slovakia. Literary semiotics, discussed by Miko (1966, 1967a, b, 1969, 1970, 1971a, b, c, d, 1972), Krausová (1962, 1970, 1971a, b), Ivanová-Šalingová (1962, 1968, 1969, 1971) or Popovič (1968, 1971a) who, in a sense, also continues the work initiated by Levý in the theory of 'the art of translation', attempt successfully to integrate into their systems the semiotic challenge from Paris, Warsaw, Moscow, and Tartu. Miko's system of 'literary communication' is probably, at present, the most important contemporary Czechoslovak contribution to the semiotics of art.

Semantics of visuals is studied by Šabouk (1969), Zvěřina (1971), and Zykmond (1970). At present Šabouk is endeavouring to integrate his semantics of art into the system of Marxist esthetics and gnoseology,

⁵ There are, as far as I know, only two semiotic publications of that period that did not conform to the contemporary 'applicationalism': Ducháček's book on mutual influence of morphology and semantics (1953), and an analysis of folk proverbs from the logical point of view, by Otakar Zich, Jr. (1956).

working with concepts of the theory of signs as well as with those of the theory of reflection, a system striving for esthetic universality.

The semiotics of film is investigated in articles and books by Zvěřina, Šmok, and Rajnošek.

Mukařovský's concepts of esthetic norm, esthetic value, and semantic gesture are further developed by Sus (1966b, 1967), Kačer (1968) and Jankovič (1972).

Traditionally, semiotics in Czechoslovakia developed in perfect union with esthetics; however, the new systems, integrating everything, end by becoming complicated. I do not pretend to foretell the future, but the divorce of semiotics from esthetics seems inevitable.

The linguistic approach is represented by the synchronic and diachronic studies of the semantic fields of French by Ducháček (1967), also known from their reviews in France. Synonymity in contemporary Czech is studied by the lexicologist Filipec (1961), structural semantics on the material of contemporary Slovak by Budovičová (1963). Linguistic as well as stylistic aspects are synthesized by Daneš, Hausenblas (1964, 1968), and Doležel (1960, 1969), author of the most important book on Czech stylistics (1960).

The mathematical approach is shared both by mathematically oriented linguists (Sgall, 1966; Nebeský, Pavel Novák, Palek, Pala, 1968) and by the language oriented mathematicians (Čulík, 1966a, b, 1967, 1968a, b; Novotný, 1966) or logicians (Tichý, Mleziva, Tondl, Berka). The direct semiotic concern can be found particularly in Palek's study on cross-reference conceived as a special case of denoting, or in Čulík's logical models of languages for theory and languages for empiricism (1968a), as well as in Tichý's theory of intensions in terms of Turing machines (1969), in studies on the semantics of question by Materna (1969, 1970) or Tondl (1968), who is also the author of a book on logical semantics (1966a), in the study of analyticity and sense by Mleziva (1969), etc.

The sociological and psychological approaches are best represented by Lamser's original study of communication networks (1969), the research work of Morávek and Menert (1965) in the domain of developmental psychology, and a book reviewing cybernetic contributions to psychology by Stríženec (1966).

A good deal has been done by interdisciplinary cooperation. Audiologist Sedláček and musicologist Sychra have joined their methods to examine emotionality and meaning in music (Sedláček and Sychra, 1962, 1969); after the death of Professor Sychra this partnership was extended by Miloš Jůzl.

Another hypothesis, based on interpersonal relationship and in some respects opposed to the preceding one, was worked out and experimentally verified by a group consisting of psychiatrists, psychologists, a musicologist and a mathematician (Knobloch *et al.*, 1964, 1968). Levý, Pala, and Sus have sometimes used computer generated poetry as an experimental verification of prosodic theorems (Levý and Pala, 1966). A cybernetic theory of modelling (Klíř and Valach, 1965) has served Osolobě as a springboard to his 'anti-semiotic' theory of human communication, an 'algebra of communication situations', step by step constructing play, language, theatre, quotation, parody, metalanguage, play within a play, etc.

At present, semiotic methods are applied and semiotic problems are dealt with in many centers in Czechoslovakia. The most important center is now in Slovakia, in the town of Nitra, where, at the Pedagogic Faculty, a 'Cabinet for Literary Communication' was established grouping the most important Slovak theoreticians and semanticists of literature (Miko, Popovič, Šmatlák, Kopál, Plutko, Zsilka, Knotek; cf. Popovič, 1970: 45). The Cabinet organizes seminars and work-groups; principal papers are published in the journal *Slovenská literatúra*. — Another important group was founded in Prague in 1971 by Šabouk, director of the Institute for Theory and History of Art of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science. The group has agreed to adopt a common terminology based on Šabouk (1972) in order to work on a common task, "Expression and Communication Systems of Art". The reports of the meetings will be published in the journal *Estetika*. Another set of semioticians, mainly logicians, logical semanticists and linguists grouped themselves around the mimeographed journal *Teorie a metoda* (Berka, 1969). A similar group arose some time ago in Brno around Jiří Levý (the Group for Exact Methods and Interdisciplinary Relationship).

Meanwhile Czechoslovak semioticians do not yet have a national forum. Whether this will be a National Semiotic Association or will take some other form is a question of further development.

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⁶ In this tentative bibliographical selection I list only original studies, not derivative or applicational books, reviews, and articles. 'Non-semiotic' esthetics, literary history, literary criticism, as well as logic or linguistics are omitted: this would extend the list enormously. It is true that all esthetics etc., and especially all linguistics is semiotics, but in a nation (in fact two nations) for which linguistics has been for centuries a form of national self-reflection and self-assertion this would lead to semiotics *sans rivages*.

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