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**ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

BEKE MÁRTON

STRUCTURALISM AND AVANT-GARDE IN JAN MUKAŘOVSKÝ'S WORK

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## INTRODUCTION

Czech Structuralism emerged with the establishment of the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926) founded by Vilém Mathesius, Bohumil Trnka, Bohuslav Havránek, and Jan Mukařovský, further including Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Sergejevich Trubetskoy, Sergey Kartsevsky, Josef Vachek, and Vladimír Skalička. The main features of the Prague School derived from its genesis:

(1) International character (among its members, numerous Russian emigrant scholars, most notably Roman Jakobson), with a marked impression of Russian Formalism.

(2) Cooperation with avant-garde art.

The dissertation explores the significance and reception of Mukařovský and Czech Structuralism in terms of the history of science: its initial impact in Czechoslovakia and parallelism with other European tendencies. It raised considerable international attention in the 1960s: international Structuralism and semiotics acknowledge it as one of their precursor, while neo-avant-garde art also takes keen interest in it. Yet another situation occurred with the emergence of postmodernism, which, especially in East European (post-Socialist or post-Communist) countries tries simultaneously to vanquish conservatism, modernism, and the avant-garde. As regards Poststructuralism, the Prague scholars were pioneers in more than one respect: hermeneutics, reception studies, and Deconstruction can likewise hint at their importance.

In Hungary, the reception of Czech Structuralism took peculiar detours. During World War II, the like-minded Hungarian linguist Gyula Laziczius established direct contacts with Roman Jakobson; in the second half of the 1960s, the Hungarian interdisciplinary “school” – linguists, literary theorists, ethnographers, art historians, sociologists, etc. – discovered the tendency together with Russian formalists, Lévi-Strauss, the Tartu School (Yury Lotman), or Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. In their popularization, such representatives of Hungarian literary science and Slavic Studies can be mentioned as Endre Bojtár and Lajos Nyírő.

The author holds that in several respects, Czech Structuralism continues to be relevant (or has regained its relevance) to the present day. Although contemporary art reveals a controversial attitude towards the avant-garde, the connection between science (primarily linguistics and literary theory, Structuralism and semiotics) and art can once again prove fruitful. The appearance of a cultural anthropological approach and the renewal of aesthetics can provide researchers with a new aspect. Furthermore, the objective scientific frame of the Structuralists can also become important in present-day aesthetics and art. The exploration of

yet unknown correlations may contribute to the methodology of analyzing artistic and historical processes and works of art.

The dissertation pays special attention to individual periods in Jan Mukařovský's oeuvre: (1) Czech avant-garde trends, theories, personages; (2) development and structure; the so-called "internal and external factors"; (3) the agreement of semiology and Structuralism with sociology, as well as Surrealism in Mukařovský's later work.

## **1. CZECH AVANT-GARDE TRENDS, THEORIES, PERSONAGES**

### **(Tradition and the Avant-garde)**

Crucial for the Czech avant-garde was the definition of tradition; while in other countries, modernism revolted more or less unambiguously against academicism as a tradition, Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval, and their fellows had to face a far more complicated image of the past. They had to transcend, first, the individualistic modernism occurring as early as the 19th century, then the tendencies of Symbolism, and finally they had to rediscover their inspirational sources in previous eras. Of the international contemporaries of the Czech avant-garde, they entered into an "elected kinship" with Cubism, Primitivism, the Naives, Constructivism, and Surrealism (others, such as Futurism or Expressionism, were rejected), but one of its typical manifestations was the Poetism represented by the Devětsil Group, with all its contradictions. Poetism was the first trend that the members of the Prague School could collaborate with.

Teige became the chief theoretician of the Devětsil Group and, hence, of Poetism and the entire Czech avant-garde in general; as an active artist, he later turned towards Surrealism. His social sensibility was matched by leftist sympathies; he announced a new society and, in connection with that, he began to study architecture and the new media (photo, film). His theory of artistic evolution is often in keeping with Marxist ideology. He was among the first to contact the Soviet avant-garde, while he developed Western affinities with Constructive trends (Constructivism, Bauhaus, De Stijl). For some time, Teige and the Devětsil Group tried to cooperate with all European avant-garde tendencies, and their periodicals, contacting the German Dadaists, emigrant Russian avant-garde artists, and Kassák and his fellow activists in Viennese emigration. From 1948 onwards, his services were dismissed by the Communist Party.

The Devětsil Group, initiated in 1920 (Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval, as well as Jaroslav Seifert, Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen, Jiří Wolker, and Vladislav Vančura), markedly rejected early avant-garde movements. As early as in 1921, it aligned itself with Communism and Proletarian art (Jiří Wolker). As opposed to art for art's sake, it promoted functionalism and the achievements of metropolitan life. Among these internationally oriented and renowned avant-garde activities, a new and not uncontroversial agent was introduced when Poetism appeared in 1923.

It was a movement of emphatically national character, acting primarily in the field of literature. It is here that we find the affinities of Jan Mukařovský's Structuralist aesthetics, with potential points of connection. It would, however, be a mistake to accuse Poetism with any kind of aestheticizing literariness. The new trend appeared in all areas of art (or, more precisely, it attempted to satisfy all the senses), aiming at least as much at painting, as at the theatre, dance, music, or architecture. It paid special attention to the movie cinema, the radio, the circus and variety. It further enlarged the aesthetic field of impact in non-artistic areas, including technology and science. Poetism advocated new interdisciplinary opportunities and new genres and media.

In its wake, a new aesthetic theory was born, whose characteristic manifestations were "carnivalization," the total rejection of logical links (Nezval), and the norm of its ideology was the autonomy of the work, with the primary method of "ozvláštňení" (selection, "peculiarization"). In textual terms, a pictorial attitude would push the verbal in the background. Poetism is, all in all, a positive philosophy of life.

The equivalent of Poetism in painting was "artificialism" (Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen), a distancing of art images from reality. That was also the first step of Czech Surrealism. In the formulation of Czech Surrealist aesthetics, a dominant role was played by Mukařovský, mainly through his dialectical-structuralist perspective, researching the work of Nezval, Vančura, Štyrský, and the other Surrealists.

Poetism, and especially the new aesthetic principles of Surrealism, created an intellectual climate in which Mukařovský's Structuralist and semiological researches, as well as Roman Jakobson's and the Prague Linguistic Circle's investigations could bring new scientific breakthroughs.

## 2. MUKAŘOVSKÝ: DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

At the beginning of Mukařovský's scientific career, the investigation of the language of Czech literature, as contrasted with the vernacular language, played a crucial role, extending to certain questions of Czech versification and formalist analysis (doctoral dissertation: *Contributions to the Aesthetics of Czech Versification*, 1922; habilitation lecture: *Mácha's "May": An Aesthetic Study*, 1929). This interest led him to the elaboration of a scientific set of methods to explore literature and art together, which striving was matched, he found, by the experience of the Russian formalists. The cultivation of linguistics, literary theory, and aesthetics, merged in the practice of Boris Eichenbaum and others with the experiments of the Russian avant-garde (Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velemir Khlebnikov's Futurism or Aleksey Kruchonich's poetry in the artificial "zaum" language). These new Russian tendencies were mediated by Roman Jakobson, who had settled in Prague in 1920. He drew the attention of Czech linguists to the fact that such "Bohemisms" of Czech tradition as the artificial literary language should not be cast overboard but incorporated into current creativity. A similar scientific *and* artistic achievement was the establishment of the term "objectlessness." A linguistic interest rose among artists as well; painter Josef Šíma, for instance, was concerned with the language of advertisement. Jakobson built excellent professional links with Teige, Nezval, and Vančura. This cooperation would continue down to the end of the 1930s, when Jakobson had to flee the German occupation.

Mukařovský adopted many new thoughts from his Russian colleagues (a separation of poetic and transmission language, the immanent development of the literary verse, a replacement of worn forms with newer, aesthetically specialized forms, a substitution of material and processing for the dichotomy of content–form), but it should also be remembered that the investigation of the structure of artworks, the research of their linguistic elements, had already been his major concern previously. His approach used in the late 1920s was presented in his lecture *O současné poetice* (*On Today's Poetics*), while its practical realization is eminently exemplified by his study of the poem "May" by Karel Hynek Mácha. By that early date, he had already arrived at the conceptual dialectic unity of content and form (form is the form of content and content is the content of form); he considered language as the object of study, which is permanently raped by the poetic (artistic) creation of form. In distinguishing everyday transmission from artistic communication, or addressing "lower" genres of

literature, he pioneered the study of mass culture while also testifying the validity of (Structuralist) art analysis as an immanent method.

Likewise, immanent development, or evolution, is also a Structuralist term; still, Mukařovský did not, as yet, accept the significance of “external” impacts in artistic creation and scientific investigation.

It is during the Structuralist analysis of M. Z. Polák’s *Nature’s Sublimity* (1819) that he formulates how all exploration remains hermetically closed without an acknowledgment of social influences, and vice versa: “Even if we once again feel it necessary today to investigate literature in relation to those connections which link it to the social environment to which it responds and on the basis of which it operates, we are not talking about traditional literary history. [...] it is not to say that we ought to abandon the concept of coherent and regularly immanent development, which has proved a lasting scientific achievement; in the future, we must never again conceive of literary history as an incoherent commentary of extraliterary phenomena, but only as a continuous line led by the development of society not unlike a riverbed leads the water.” From this recognition, the understanding of the social stratification of literary language as well as of the “external” influences of literature can be derived.

The next step was a reevaluation of the ideological framework and methodology of aesthetics as a science. The study on *Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts* (1936) formulates, on the one hand, the dichotomy of science and art, insofar as the avant-garde had *ab ovo* continually attacked the scientific set of norms, and, on the other hand, of the three terms listed, it is in the concept of “value” whose exploration gives way, in addition to the Structuralist method, to the competence of Mukařovský’s semiology (semiotics).

The internal contradictions of the work are connected to the dynamic tension that enables innovation as well as development itself. According to a later definition of structure (1947), “it is based on the internal unification of the whole through the mutual connections of the elements, and not only on positive connections – identities and harmonies – but also on negative ones – contradictions and opposites. Hence, the concept of structure is in a fundamental correlation with the dialectical mode of thinking. The connections between the elements, precisely because they are dialectical, cannot be derived from the concept of the whole; the whole is, in their relation, not a *prius* but a *posterius*, and thus their definition is not an object of abstract speculation, but fully empirical.” From all this, Mukařovský’s Structuralist interpretation of development derives.

He investigated the conflict of innovative and traditional works, of the “outstanding” and “typical” works of the given period, the contradictions of the very development itself. As

a natural consequence of all this, Mukařovský's critics (e.g. Mojmír Grygar) sometimes find contradictions within this theory of development.

Mukařovský's concept of development is ultimately linked with his concept of structure, introducing the permanent concept of anthropology, and thus we acquire such a complex historical formation in which structure – whether the development or the individual artwork – is permanent, whereas its elements undergo a continuous, dynamic alteration.

### **3. THE AGREEMENT OF SEMIOLOGY AND STRUCTURALISM WITH SOCIOLOGY; MUKAŘOVSKÝ'S CONNECTIONS WITH SURREALISM**

Mukařovský synthesized the Structuralist method with semiology, bringing his theoretical construction to completion. He introduced semiology in his 1934 lecture, *L'art comme fait sémiologique*, with a reference to Saussure and phenomenology. The basis of art structure as sign-object is the collective conscious (here a manifestation of the social context), while the theory incorporated its opposite, the collective unconscious, in consequence of the Surrealism which was gaining currency in Czechoslovakia as well. For Surrealism, the collective unconscious becomes objective reality.

The artwork is an autonomous sign pointed at reality, while that reality is the full context of social significations. This does not preclude the possibility of the (avant-garde) artist's turning on the social reality of their age. The constituents of the artwork *qua* sign are (1) the symbol of perception created by the artist (the so-called "object work"); (2) the "signification": the aesthetic object appearing in the collective conscious, evoked by the art object; this contains the structure proper of the artwork; (3) the "connection to the signified thing," which is, as a matter of fact, pointed at the full context of social phenomena, providing the social embedding of the works.

The communicative/transmission function of the artwork represents the topic of the work, its content, object, sujet, etc. The analysis of these drew Mukařovský's attention to the problematic of objectless (sujet-less, "gegenstandslos") art. In this relation – as with Teige also – the question of (functionalist) architecture as art and sign system emerges, involving architecture as communication. Naturally, in the agreement of structure and sign system, several new questions are raised, which in sum could be conceived of as the dichotomy of the artwork appearing as thing object *versus* the artwork as intellectually structured sign system.

Yet another problem is the role of intentionality and unintentionality in the emergence of signification, which led Mukařovský to introduce the term “semantic gesture.”

Besides literature and language, Mukařovský turned with increasing interest towards non-verbal art during the 1930s. In elaborating the semiology of painting, architecture, the new media (photo, film), he formulated a wide range of new problems, contradictions, and dichotomies (*Dialectic Oppositions in Modern Art*). Such are the contrast between the historicity of art and its currency; the relationship between art and society (where the avant-garde inevitably breaks norms and forms); matter and its use in non-figurative art (László Moholy-Nagy’s material experiments); the opposition between fiction and reality, between art and non-art (Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and the *objets trouvés* of the Surrealists).

In terms of functionalist Structuralism and semiology, oppositions occur even *within* the aesthetic function, whose enumeration unexpectedly returns us to the problem-setting of content and form.

Yet another aspect of Mukařovský’s oeuvre is represented by the interaction of arts and genres, investigated as a case study of Surrealism. The most notable authors that can sometimes almost be considered as Mukařovský’s co-authors are Vítězslav Nezval, Jindřich Štyrský, Josef Šíma, Jan Zrzavý, and Emil Filla. Within Surrealism, of course, the interweaving of literature and painting is the most interesting, but Mukařovský does not forget film and photographic art either. In assessing his writings in this relation, we have come full circle to our initial “hypothesis”: the potentials creative cooperation of science and avant-garde art.

As a result of this research, this dissertation succeeds in presenting those remarkable points of connection which, between the two world wars, emerged between the Czech avant-garde and the Structuralism of the Prague School. It casts new light on the flexible and ultimately avant-garde nature of the formalist and Structuralist method, in spite of its seeming rigidity. We can witness the dialectic unity of Structuralism and the avant-garde: the former thus becomes far more complex than a mere theory, while the latter transcends the boundaries of art and becomes not only the object of aesthetic observation but also its active agent participant.



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