The Prague School concept of the stage figure

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Of the many original concepts contributed by the Prague school to theatre theory, the stage figure is probably the most important. My goal here is to explain the changed perception of stage acting that this concept allows, to provide a survey of its history, and to give an example of its analytic usefulness.

Traditional theories of the representation of character on stage are rather muddy. Aristotle, for example, seems fairly confident that theatre is mimetic, and that actors are involved in the presentation of action, but he is not at all clear about how these people on the stage are to be perceived:

> The poet should work out his play, to the best of his power, with appropriate gestures; for those who feel emotion are most convincing through natural sympathy with the characters they represent; and one who is agitated storms, one who is angry rages, with the most lifelike reality. Hence poetry implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness. In the one case a man can take the mold of any character; in the other, he is lifted out of his proper self (Aristotle, 1971:58).

Aristotle's choices are logical but extreme, and are not very encouraging as analytic tools for the theory of theatrical acting. In the realm of language and ideas, where he was doubtless more comfortable, Aristotle comes closer to a distinction resembling the idea of semiotics when he proposes a distinction between diction, the medium of language, and thought, its object.

The classic statement of the cognitive confusion between actor and character in the technique of acting is probably Diderot's. Though he offers no solution, Diderot's discussion of the French actress Clairon frames the problem of the paradox of acting in terms that are drawn from Aristotle, yet continue to dominate our understanding of acting technique today:

> Doubtless she has imagined a type, and to conform to this type has been her first thought; doubtless she has chosen for her purpose the highest, the greatest, the most perfect type her imagination could compass. This type, however, which she has borrowed from history, or created as who should create some vast spectre in her mind, is not herself . . . once she

has reached the height she has given to her spectre, she has herself well in hand, she repeats her efforts without emotion. As it will happen in dreams, her head touches the clouds, her hands stretch to grasp the horizon on both sides. She is the informing soul of a huge figure, which is her outward casing, and in which her efforts have enclosed her. As she lies careless and still on a sofa with folded arms and closed eyes she can, following her memory's dream, hear herself, see herself, judge herself, and judge also the effects she will produce. In such a vision she has a double personality; that of the little Clairon and of the great Agrippina (Diderot 1957:16).

Diderot is aware of the difference between real events and the actions that signify events on stage, to which he ascribes verisimilitude. However, he is unable to resolve his own question of the extent to which the actor becomes the character, actually assumes another identity. Diderot comes to the unfortunate conclusion that a good actor tends to have no character of his own, no real identity, and is merely clay for the presentation of other characters. The actor is described as an irresolvable paradox of Art and Nature, with Art wholly dominant (Diderot 1957:48).

Another school that faced this apparent paradox, most important to contemporary American acting practice, was the Moscow Art Theatre led by Stanislavsky. In the early stages of their work, Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov tried to force an absolute identification of actor with character. Later on, after the optimism engendered by affective memory technique had cooled, Moscow Art Theatre writers like Michael Chekhov again began to consider the actor's imagination of the character as the key to his technical choices. (Chekhov 1953:63-84). Two different objects must be conceived by the actor: The image of the character that exists in his reading of the play, and the material body that will correspond to and fulfill that image on stage. In Chekhov's theory of the psychological gesture — the 'archetypal' mental image of the character's body that underlies all acting choices — we are very close to the Prague school concept of the stage figure.

Otakar Zich's landmark study, *The Esthetics of Dramatic Art*, maintains the two objects I have described in the Russian school but offers an important adjustment in perspective. The image of the character from the drama, previously only imagined as a guide to the actor, is transferred by Zich into the auditorium. Here it becomes the esthetic object, the dramatic character, which does not exist as the actor's body, but as a dynamic image in the minds of the perceiving spectators. The material signs of the actor are called by Zich 'herecká postavá', the acting figure or, more practically,

the stage figure, and are only the objects through which the concept of the dramatic character is communicated to the audience. A distinction similar to Aristotle's division between diction and thought has here been reached in the art of acting. Zich compares the actor to a sculptor, who carves his own figure for aesthetic perception.[1] The resulting creation is both a technical object, with a relation to the art of theatrical production, and a medium for the imagination of the audience (Zich 1931:54).

In relating Zich's theory to the Russians I have distorted its history, for Zich's background is in Herbartian formalism, a strong school in Czechslovakia that stressed the formalist elements of Neo-Kantian esthetics. Consequently Zich's presentation is probably more rigorous and philosophically thorough than anything by earlier theorists of the stage, yet it also runs the risk of seeming mechanistic and impractical by comparison. Zich divides the stage into two kinds of phenomena according to their means of perception, visual and aural. He does not speak of his theory semiotically, but through a kind of psychology of effect that adapts easily to the semantic theories developed by the Prague Linguistic Circle. The quotation of one key passage should suffice to introduce Zich's unusual approach, with its inherent adaptability to the language of semiotics:

> A distinction between stage figure and dramatic character consequently makes possible the expression: the figure is what the actor makes, the character what the audience sees and hears. This special fact allows the one to be observed from the wings, the other from the auditorium. Psychologically speaking: the figure is the product of the actor, the character the product of the observers. To recall the psychological analysis of the 'dramatic', we see that the stage figure is an immediately motorized product while the dramatic character is immediately optico-acoustic, and only motorized through an agency. In short, we have already done justice to the main principle, but beyond that distinction we must convey the dual difference thus: the stage figure is a formation of the physiological kind, the dramatic character a formation of the psychological kind (Zich 1931:56).

The difference between Zich's vocabulary and that of semiotics can be adjusted by the substitution of material sign for physiological formation, and of mental concept for psychological formation. This transition into the more linguistically-oriented Prague School terms was in fact implied by Zich's student, Jan Mukařovský in a review of the book (1933:318-19).

Mukařovský was also one of the first to apply Zich's model. Rather

than merely utilize the stage figure concept in an analysis of theatre per-
formance, Mukařovský attempts to extend it to the analysis of film. In
his essay, 'Chaplin in *City Lights*: An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of
an Acting Phenomenon',[2] Mukařovský applies the systemic aesthetics of
Roman Jakobson and Juri Tynjanov to acting in a silent picture (Jakobson
and Tynjanov 1978). The case of Chaplin is also more complicated than
ordinary theatrical acting because the actor was a celebrity who used con-
ventional costume and make-up for all his performances.

Mukařovský adopts Zich's distinction between aural and visual phenomena
and develops an interpretation of the silent film that explains why speech
was ruinous for its gestural acting style. The visual aspect of the stage figure
was subdivided into two groups: 1. expressive gestures, poses, and facial
expressions; and 2. movements that change the figure's relationship to
scenic space. In concentrating on the first group, and especially upon ex-
pressive gestures, Mukařovský describes the conflict between conventional,
socially coded gestures and personal gestures that express the mental state
of the character. Chaplin's structurally parallel plot relations with the blind
girl and the dipsomaniac millionaire exploit both sides of the tension between
these two kinds of gestures, since the perceptual handicaps of these characters
permit them to see only one side — either social or personal — of gestures
that are both. In order for this gestural tension to dominate the film, the
spoken word must be suppressed. Similarly, the end of the film avoids the
traditional betrothal scene because that kind of ritualized social gesture
would outweigh the expressive aspect of pantomimic acting. Chaplin's acting
style, his means in constructing the figure for his character, affects the film
so strongly that *City Lights* almost becomes a silent movie about silent
movie acting:

> What causes the spectator's awe of Chaplin's figure is the immense span
> between the intensity of the effect which he achieves and the simplicity
> of his devices. He takes as the dominant of his structure a component
> that usually (in film) occupies a secondary position: gestures in the broad
> sense of the term (facial expressions, gestures proper, poses). And to
> this fragile dominant of limited capacity he manages to subordinate not
> only the structure of his own dramatic figure but even that of the entire
> film. This presupposes an almost unbelievable economy in all the other
> components. If any of them become only a little more emphatic, call
> only a little more attention to themselves, the entire structure would
> collapse. The structure of Chaplin's acting resembles a three-dimensional
> figure which rests on the sharpest of its edges but nevertheless is in perfect

equilibrium. Hence the illusion of immateriality: the pure lyrics of gestures
freed from dependence upon a corporal substratum (Mukařovský 1931:3).

This essay by Mukařovský lies on the borderline between Formalism and
Structuralism, because while it shows an awareness of the social codes
involved in gesture, its primary thrust is to 'lay bare the device', to show
how a formal innovation conditions the content of the art work. The semiotic
potential of Zich's model would not be fully realized until much later in
the Prague School's development, several years after Zich's death in 1934.[3]

Other essays also skirt the borders of Zich's study. The idea of the con-
ventional figure, for example, is treated by Jindřich Honzl in a study that
surveys the stage representation of character from commedia dell'arte to
Anton Chekhov (Honzl 1939). The analogy of character with sculpture
surfaces again as part of an extended study by Roman Jakobson, 'The Sculp-
ture in Puškin's Poetic Mythology' (1937), and as a corollary idea in Peter
Bogatyrev's essay on Walt Disney's 'Snow White' (Bogatyrev 1938). The
most important elaboration of the stage figure concept comes in the work
of Jiří Veltruský, who began his expansion of Zich with a Prague School
lecture on 'Man and Object in the Theater' and continues to pursue the theme
of stage figure in a series of more recent articles on acting.

In his Prague School lecture Veltruský examines the relation of stage
figure to character from a functionalist point of view. The results are some-
what surprising, for Veltruský finds that some stage figures have virtually
no function whatever in the action, while important, active roles are
sometimes played by inanimate objects. Veltruský also points out that many
of the stage figure's actions are not designed principally to communicate
character, but to convey information about the scene. These points, taken
together, help to separate and clarify the relation of Zich's stage figure
concept to the subjectivity of the actor. Veltruský develops a relativist model
of subjectivity, a hierarchy of importance:

> The more complex the actions of the figure of the actor, the greater not
> only the number of its purposeful signs, but also, and this is important
> here, of those without purpose, so that the reality of the figure is placed
> into the foreground. A figure whose actions are less complex is of course
> more schematic. This is what leads to the hierarchy of parts. The figure
> at the peak of this hierarchy, the so-called lead, attracts to itself the
> major attention of the audience and only at times allows room for
> attention to be given to the supporting cast. At the same time, by giving
> impulses for action, the lead affects the performance of the rest of the

cast, and at times may even act as their outright regulator. The spectator may still perceive the other figures as acting subjects, but their subordination is evident. Usually, however, situations may arise in the course of the play when someone other than the lead becomes the main pillar of the action. In some structures even in these situations the hierarchy of parts remains unaffected, in others the hierarchy may regroup itself from situation to situation. All of the dramatis personae, however, from the lead to the smallest bit part, definitely form an absolutely coherent line according to their varying activeness, the cohesion of which is maintained precisely by the jointness of the action (Veltruský 1940:155).

As the hierarchy diminishes, the difference in importance between a supernumerary on a crowded stage and a ticking clock on an empty one gets considerably harder to judge in terms of human subjectivity. Actor and object begin to function similarly. Veltruský's point here was later expanded in a pair of articles on the puppet theatre (Veltruský 1977; 1983).

After a hiatus of nearly three decades, Veltruský has published several more articles developing the idea of the stage figure. Among these the key study is his 'Contribution to the Semiotics of Acting' from 1976. Here for the first time the tripartite structure of the acting sign: actor, stage figure, and character — is related to the three functional terms of Karl Bühler's semantic 'organonmodel' (Bühler 1934). Bühler's idea of the expressive function relates to the actor himself, and the numerous unintentional signs that an actor emits — signs without a clear relation to character — fall under this category. The meanings that are contributed primarily by the audience, drawing from its own background in the constitution of the mental 'esthetic object', come under Bühler's conative heading. The signs constituting the stage figure are related to Bühler's referential function. In most theatrical acting this function dominates, though in situations where improvisation or comedy are involved, one of the others may take on greater importance. In any case, the referential aspect of the stage figure is the one where fictional representation takes place — it is the technical level that involves most of the decisions made by theater producers. Veltruský's analysis in this study constitutes a comprehensive summary of the Prague School acting theory and is much more detailed and closely argued than my overview here can indicate. He presents the most complete model so far attempted for the cognition of acting signs.

In another essay on the production of acting signs, Veltruský has more closely addressed the kind of practical concerns that most writings on acting attempt to describe. This essay, 'Acting and Behavior', describes the main steps in the process of constructing a stage figure (Veltruský 1984). Based on a few categories — for example, 'distinctness' — describing the way acting simplifies and highlights aspects of normal behavior, Veltruský explains how conventional acting practices help behavior function semiotically. He concludes with a note on the 'beholder's share' in the perception of stage figures, which relates E. H. Gombrich's terms to the Prague School concept of the mental esthetic object.

A few other Czech writers also worked on the problem of the stage figure in the so-called 'second generation' of Prague School writers. Milan Obst, a historian of the avant-garde theatre in Czechoslovakia, contributed an essay in 1971 that explores the relation of stage figure to the intentionality of the author. This problem surfaces primarily when the dialog is marked by a distinct literary style which must find some correlation in the vocal delivery of the actor. Obst also surveys the way the stage figure must be adjusted to respond to the intentions of choreographers and composers, and especially to the director's concept of the production.

In an essay printed with that of Obst, Zdeněk Srna (1971), a specialist in the history of 'Theaterwissenschaft', expands the investigation into the relation of text and figure. Srna proposes an approach to acting stylistics that would parallel and complement the study of literary stylistics, while remaining relatively independent. Srna then surveys the traces of this idea in the writings of German theorists like Max Herrman, Hugo Dinger, and Arthur Kutscher. In taking this approach Srna fills in some of the historical gaps in Zich's original formulation of the stage figure, but he takes no steps to attempt the kind of 'figural stylistics' that his study suggests. For this kind of analysis we will turn in the last section of the paper to recent commentaries on Brecht.

In another essay Srna (1979) attempts to put the stage figure in perspective with the other components of the whole theatrical sign. Here he follows the pattern designed by Zich, in which the stage figure, as it exists in time and space with other stage figures, inevitably constructs the stage action, the series of temporal signs that has its mental, esthetic correlative in the dramatic action or plot. Srna also suggests for the first time that the original Czech phrase 'herecká postava' be replaced by the term 'jevistni postavá', the direct retranslation into Czech of the English phrase 'stage figure'.

Ivo Osolsobě, an important contemporary Czech theorist of stage communication, has also suggested this revision in his recent article, 'The Stage Figure, Pro and Con'. Here Osolsobě reviews Zich's concept, taking care to emphasize the place of the term in Zich's original conceptual system. He

particularly addresses subsequent confusion between the stage figure and dramatic character that Zich's interpreters have caused (e.g. Honzl 1939). Osolsobě also describes the way he has integrated Zich's work into his own theatrical elaboration of Bühler's organon-model, 'Dramatic Work as Communication about Communication through Communication' (Osolsobě 1970). Osolsobě continues to develop this relation in his introduction to the forthcoming edition of Zich's book. The concept of stage figure has acquired a long history in Czech acting theory and pedagogy, which Osolsobě has reviewed most succinctly.

The last phase of work on Zich's concept demonstrates a little of its utility in the analysis of specific theatrical performances and productions. My own work has dealt specifically with this Prague School concept in the discussion of Brechtian problems, while two other American scholars have come very close to the Prague School model in independent investigations of acting. Taken together the works constitute a new direction in the theory of theatrical character representation.

In 'The Semiosis of Brechtian Acting' (Quinn 1986), I describe how many of Brecht's favorite devices, such as interruption, the splitting of character into two roles or two figures, and the use of antithetical situations are all attempts to separate out the various parts of Zich's tripartite structure. Through these and other formal innovations, such as the variation of music with dialog and the alternation between fictive acting and direct address, Brecht highlights different aspects of the paradoxical acting sign at different times, and is able to exploit to the maximum the communicative strength of each aspect.

In a second study called 'Švejk's Stage Figure' (Quinn 1988), I am working out a kind of history of a stage figure, attempting to sort out the constant features of a stage image and the potential for variation of those features in different historical realizations. A dynamic tension results from the interaction of the audience's popular conception of a conventional figure with the particular use of that figure in a specific theatrical production. Problems of literary, pictorial, and stage representation are all considered together as they contribute to the thematic power of the figure.

Paul Hernadi has developed a system for the description of character on stage that is roughly equivalent to Zich's, though admittedly less flexible (Hernadi 1985:157). Hernadi substitutes the triad actor/ACTOR/represented character for Zich's actor/figure/character model. Hernadi developed his triad, like my own work, in a re-evaluation of Brecht's writings on acting (Hernadi 1976). However, Hernadi does not seem to accept Zich's view that the character is a mental construct rather than a material object.

This makes Hernadi's triadic actor very similar to the acting phenomenon described by William Gruber (1986). Gruber calls the 'actor-character alloy' visible to onlookers a 'Figur', and he goes on to apply this notion of paradoxical being in a survey of comic stage communication.

The issues that Zich's concept brings to the forefront involve the rudiments of a theory of theatrical representation, a development that is much needed if our growing awareness of theatricality and the 'performative' in art and life are to result in a substantial contribution to humanities and semiotics. Zich's model holds great promise for the initiation of semiotic inquiry in many areas that have resisted semiotic analysis, such as the aesthetics of dance and opera, or arts involving iconographic representation (Quinn 1987). Possibly the investigation of his model will develop into a general revison of semiotic theory, with the introduction of a third term in the sign models of such apparently stable semiotic discourses as literary theory. But these issues exceed the aims of my present study, which has only been an attempt to introduce the stage figure concept, give a brief history of its development, and point toward its analytical potential.

Notes

1. Zich takes his cue here not from Diderot but from Lessing's 'Laokoon.' A new Czech edition of Zich's book is currently in press.
2. The title here is translated literally, as compared to Mukařovský, Jan. 1977. *An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of a Dramatic Figure. Structure, Sign and Function*, tr. and ed. John Burbank and Peter Steiner. New Haven: Yale UP.
3. No comprehensive work on theater was written to consolidate Prague School theory. Papers submitted to a war-time 'Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Theater', which was edited variously by Mukařovský, Honzl, Veltruský, and Miroslav Kouřil, are apparently lost.

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