Inside the inner dynamism of the theatrical sign: An archaeology of Jiří Veltruský's theatre theory

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Abstract: The text provides an overview of the theatre theory of Jiří Veltruský, focusing specifically on the development of his notion of the theatrical sign from his early texts published in the 1940s to his mature writings which appeared in the 1980s. The text demonstrates how Veltruský synthesises theoretical concepts from the works of Jan Mukařovský, Roman Jakobson, Karl Bühler, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce to create his own dynamic concept of sign. This concept captures the specific qualities of theatre semiotics and avoids the shortcomings of the mechanical application of the linguistic notion of sign to art. Veltruský's theoretical work is then contextualised within the semiotic theories of theatre by Roland Barthes, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Marco De Marinis, Keir Elam and Patrice Pavis, and is also discussed in relation to the paradigmatic change after the 'performative turn' in theatre and social studies.

Key words: theatre semiotics; Jiří Veltruský; Prague School; dynamism of theatrical sign; structuralism

Vnitřní dynamika divadelního znaku: Archeologie divadelní teorie Jiřího Veltruského

Abstrakt: Studie podává přehled divadelní teorie Jiřího Veltruského se zaměřením na vývoj jeho koncepce divadelního znaku od raných textů publikovaných ve 40. letech až po jeho zralé studie z 80. let 20. století. Text ukazuje, jak Veltruský na základě syntézy teoretických konceptů z prací Jana Mukařovského, Romana Jakobsona, Karla Bühlera, Ferdinanda de Saussura a Charlese S. Peirce vytváří vlastní dynamické pojetí divadelního znaku. Toto pojetí jednak postihuje specifické kvality divadelní sémiotiky, jednak se vyhýbá nástrahám mechanické aplikace lingvistického pojetí znaku na umění. Veltruského teoretické dílo je následně zasazeno do kontextu sémiotických teorií divadla Rolanda Barthese, Eriky Fischer-Lichte, Marca De Marinise, Keira Elama a Patrice Pavise a také zhodnoceno ve vztahu k paradigmatické změně po tzv. performativním obratu v divadelní vědě a sociologii.

Klíčová slova: divadelní sémiotika; Jiří Veltruský; Pražská škola; pohyb divadelního znaku; strukturalismus

> The whole of stage reality – the dramatist's words, the actor's performances, the stage lighting – all these represent other realities. The theatre performance is a set of signs.
> (Jindřich Honzl: The mobility of the theatrical sign, 2016 [1940]: 129)

At first glance, one may question the necessity of revisiting the concept of the theatrical sign nowadays. A chapter on semiotics, which inevitably opens with a definition of the theatrical sign, is a standard component of contemporary introductions to theatre studies

(see Balme 2008; Fischer-Lichte 2014). These summaries mainly refer to the peak period of theatre semiotics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This era is represented by canonical works such as *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* by Keir Elam (1980), *Dictionnaire du théâtre* by Patrice Pavis (1980), *Semiotica del teatro* by Marco De Marinis (1982) or *Semiotik des Theaters* by Erika Fischer-Lichte (1983). Given this relatively extensive body of work, why revisit a topic that has already been discussed at great length decades ago?

The motivation for this revisiting is fairly simple: texts on theatre theory by Jindřich Honzl, Jiří Veltruský, Petr Bogatyrev, or Jan Mukařovský from the Prague School only entered contemporary discussions in a limited extent in the 1980s. Even though these texts were just published in English translations at the time (see Garvin 1964; Matejka & Titunik 1976) and exceptionally in French (see Honzl 1971; orig. in Czech, Honzl 1940), their reception was sporadic. The dominant paradigm of theatre semiotics in the 1980s was always derived from Ferdinand de Saussure's or Charles S. Peirce's conception of the sign. Within this framework, theoretical essays from the 1930s and 1940s could not be truly appreciated because they were based on a different tradition of semiotics. As Ivo Osolsobě claims, there are at least four different, relatively incompatible, semiotic schools (see his synoptic table of semiotic schools in Osolsobě 1992: 206–208). He recognises the Prague School as part of the "Slavic" tradition, strictly independent of French or American semiotic traditions. As Osolsobě claims, the "Slavic" semiotic school is formed mainly by Russian formalism and Prague structuralism. It is framed as aesthetics or poetics of art (or art theory in general), featuring protagonists such as Karl Bühler, Jan Mukařovský, or Roman Jakobson. The reception of texts from another paradigmatic context often experiences a certain delay, and sometimes it may not occur at all.

This is the case of texts by Jiří Veltruský written in the 1980s that have not been widely received, possibly due to their strong methodological connection to his academic beginnings, specifically to his studies with Jan Mukařovský and the context of the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1940s. Even though they were published in English or German, their divergence from the prevailing paradigm of semiotics might partly obscure reception of these texts. As Emil Volek put it, discussing the case of Mukařovský: "To enter the wave of fashionable world interest in 'structuralism', translations of Mukařovský came mostly too late" (Volek 2006: 32, translation mine). I guess a similar statement is quite true about Jiří Veltruský's texts published – in German and English – at the same time as the English translations of Mukařovský's texts. This is partly confirmed also by Tadeusz Kowzan's testimony, which accompanies the first (and posthumous!) edition of Veltruský's attempt at his own systematic semiotics of theatre *Esquisse d'une sémiologie du théâtre* (Veltruský 1996). Kowzan acknowledges that his knowledge of interwar Czech structuralism was very scarce and fragmentary, only after the publication of Irena Sławińska's (1977) text on Prague school theatre theory did he start to approach it more systematically. Therefore, he took it into account more substantially only in his late book *Sémiologie du théâtre* (Kowzan 1992).

Veltruský's texts on theatre theory from the 1980s were the initial impulse for this study. Despite being available in both the original versions (mostly English) and later Czech translations from the 1990s, their reception has been limited. Even a brief overview

of actual literature is telling: Veltruský's most cited work is his early publication *Man and object in the theatre* (Veltruský 1964), a paper originally published in Czech (Veltruský 1940) and recently republished in English as *People and things in the theatre* (Veltruský 2016a [1940]).

This study cannot cover all of Veltruský's texts from his later period of academic work. Instead, it focuses solely on the gradual development of the concept of the theatrical sign in Veltruský's studies from this period. Only by grasping the development of Veltruský's concept can we show the specificity and originality of his approach to theatre semiotics, and thus – in the context of the already known and canonical texts of theatre semiotics from the 1980s written by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Patrice Pavis or Marco De Marinis – justify why Veltruský's concepts are still worthy of attention today, when semiotic and structural approaches are far from being trendy and mainstream. Here I am attempting to trace back subtle differences between varied phases of Veltruský's thinking to provide an archaeology of his terminology, which is also why I intentionally quote his writing quite extensively to demonstrate the concepts with contexts of the texts.

Early years

Jiří Veltruský established himself early in the contemporary academic context (for detailed biographical information, see Osolsobě 2003; Hoskovec 2012). In 1941, at the age of twenty-two, he was accepted as a regular member of the Prague Linguistic Circle on the basis of a public lecture (Veltruský 1941), which is now well-known as the study *Dramatic text as a component of theatre* (Veltruský 2016b [1941]). At the end of the study, Veltruský responds to Honzl's concept of the *dynamism of the theatrical sign* (Honzl 2016 [1940]) in a subtle but clearly critical manner.

> "These characteristics of the sign systems that combine in theatre determine what may be called the basic, and in a sense constant, structure of the components. This basic hierarchy may never materialize in its pure form. But it is perceived by the audience as the background of a specific structure into which the components may be grouped in a given performance or in a given period or style. **Therefore the variability of the theatrical sign, which Honzl regards as its distinctive feature** (Honzl 2016 [1940]), **must be seen in its dialectical unity with its opposite, the stability of that sign.** Though extremely variable, the theatrical sign is at the same time extraordinarily stable in that its basic, 'unmarked', structure is strongly pronounced." (Veltruský 2016b [1941]: 266, emphasis mine)

Veltruský applies here a very distinct dialectical perspective, based on the simple concept that the variable is only evident against a stable background. It thus complements Honzl's innovative, but perhaps too one-sidedly formulated idea of the dynamism of the theatrical sign. Significantly, Honzl's text concludes with a long passage proclaiming stage action as the unifying principle of theatre. At this point, the text turns more into his personal, avant-garde oriented manifesto. Honzl's now renowned text (certainly the most cited text on the theatre from the Prague School in all languages) was in 1941 a year-old lecture and a freshly published article. This small and hitherto generally unappreciated reference reveals Veltruský's precision – his desire to deepen the concepts proposed by his colleagues (at this point by Honzl) and to refine them, to grasp more precisely the inner, dialectical tension of the concept.

Today, we also have the introduction to the lecture, titled *Structuralism and theatre* (first published in 2016 from manuscript, Veltruský 2016c), which was previously censored during the Protectorate era in 1941. In this introduction, Veltruský provides a detailed assessment of the current state of structural thinking about theatre and formulates a starting point for conceptualising theatre art from a structuralist perspective. It is evident that Veltruský had a clearly defined methodological position at that moment. He was already fully aware of the specificity of yet-to-come theatre semiotics. He agrees with Honzl's opinion that the primary carrier of signs in theatre is a living actor:

> "The figure that he [actor] creates represents the character, the *dramatis persona*, but he is also a real, living person with all his physical qualities – both those that denote the character and those that have nothing to do with the character (Honzl 2016 [1940]). This is one of the main features that distinguish the semantics of theatre." (Veltruský 2016c: 78)

But then Veltruský continues to critique Honzl's study on the dynamism of the theatre sign. He argues that Honzl's conclusion, which posits the primacy of stage action as the unifying principle of all mobility of the theatrical sign, is too metaphorical:

> "Words cannot be fully translated into gestures, pictures, music; the meaning of a picture cannot be fully conveyed by language, music, the play of facial muscles, and so forth. **Each of these types of sign is entirely different, each has its own unique ability to refer to certain kinds and certain aspects of reality and each is deficient in some other respects.** […] If not all, at least several semantic systems combine, complement and conflict with each other in dramatic art. The same reality is referred to, either simultaneously or successively, by signs as different as, for instance, speech, image and music. None of them can denote that reality in its entirety; each has a different meaning even though they all refer to the same thing. **In this sense theatre offers an opportunity to study in optimal conditions – almost as in a laboratory – both the common and the distinctive features of different sign systems or, to put it differently, to study comparative semantics.**" (Veltruský 2016c: 80, emphasis mine)

While Honzl considers everything to be an action and therefore believes the issue is solved, Veltruský sees the statement that the theatrical sign is characterised by the heterogeneity of its internal components as a hypothesis and a starting point. Veltruský is more accurate than Honzl in grasping the internal differentiation of theatre and, above all, in recognizing the distinctiveness of the individual components of theatre expression. At the same time, Veltruský tentatively outlines the comparative method as a starting point for any semiotics of theatre. He even expresses sympathy towards Zich, whose *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* (2024 [1931]) was often criticised in the 1940s for being too closely tied to realist theatre[1]. However, Veltruský maintains an impartial stance towards Honzl's attitude towards Zich in the above-mentioned study:

> "Honzl rightly rejects Zich's classification, but he rejects it on wrong grounds: he claims the unity of action precludes any fundamental differences between the components. He does not seem to notice

[1] The relationship of the Prague School to Otakar Zich is a very complex issue, a summary of the discussion is provided in afterword of *Theatre Theory Reader: Prague School Writings* (Drozd, Kačer & Sparling 2016: 616–621). The English edition of *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* by Otakar Zich was published in 2024 by Karolinum Press. This version also includes extensive contextual afterword (see especially chapter *Reading Zich in Czech and Beyond: Interpreting the Book*, in Zich 2024: 417–434).

that it was precisely on the basis of his classification that Zich tried to prove that dramatic art relies on the unity of action." (Veltruský 2016c: 81)

The classification of individual types of signs, distinguishing between different types of semiosis, is crucial for Veltruský in Zich's thought. Veltruský's approach is based on the comparative approach of his teacher Mukařovský and defines his own lifelong scientific programme. The reference to his mentor's dialectical conception of the sign further strengthens this link:

"In fact, however, there is a dialectical opposition between the components of theatre and theatrical action. And this opposition is only a particular case of a general antinomy between semantic statics and semantic dynamics, between the unit of meaning and the context, that can be found in every application of any type of sign (see Mukařovský 1977[a] [1940]: 46ff)." (Veltruský 2016c: 80)

Both of Veltruský's key texts from the 1940s, *Dramatic text as a component of theatre* (Veltruský 2016b [1941]) and *Drama jako básnické dílo* [Drama as a literary work] (Veltruský 1942; revised English version Veltruský 1977) (the latter, however, focuses purely on the dramatic text), are studies of internal dialectical tension. This exploration of internal dialectical tension is one of the enduring methodological starting points of Veltruský's thought in general.

At the end of his "introduction" to a lecture as such, Veltruský outlines the key problems that theatre poses to semiotic research:

"**[T]heatre uses heterogenous materials.** Its structure is therefore much more complicated than the structure of any other art.
[…]
The ephemeral character of the work of art.
[…]
Theatre is a distinctive semantic system. Although it draws on other semantic systems or types of sign – language, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, gesture, and so on – it differs from them all. Within the theatrical structure, each of these contributory systems keeps its own, characteristic way of relating the *signifiant* to the *signifié*. As a result, **each type of sign to some extent conflicts with all the others. At the same time, in combination with the others each acquires certain new features and semantic potentialities that it does not have in itself, outside theatre**.
[…]
Metaphorically speaking, what is needed first is a phonology, a morphology and a grammar of theatre; then the time will come to work out its semantics. Simultaneously, single works of dramatic art must be analysed in order to develop our knowledge of the global sign, or uniform structure, that each work constitutes in spite of all the diversity and heterogeneity of its components." (Veltruský 2016c: 83–84, emphasis mine)

From a contemporary perspective, the individual theses may appear self-evident. However, in the 1940s, the precise explanation of why semiosis operates differently in theatre than in language (as highlighted in the passages: the heterogeneity of material, the ephemerality of the artefact, and the conflict between types of signs) was a critical moment. Veltruský still uses the dyadic model of the sign and Saussure's terminology of *signifiant*/*signifié*, but he does not apply it as a ready-made distinction. The concept of the "theatrical sign" remains a working hypothesis. Veltruský's proposal is to proceed from phonology to morphology and the grammar of theatre, which is obviously

influenced by Saussure and the linguistic background of the Prague Linguistic Circle in general. It could be argued that Veltruský anticipates the methodological formulations of French semiotics, from Roland Barthes to Anne Ubersfeld and Patrice Pavis, and the attempts to describe the language of theatre, or to identify a minimal theatrical sign that is adequate to the minimal phoneme. However, it is important to note that Veltruský is fully aware that he only uses linguistic terms *metaphorically*, leaving room for developing a specific conception of the semiosis of theatre.

The introduction to the lecture acknowledges that it is impossible to mechanically and uncritically apply Saussure's concept of the sign, derived from language, to theatre. However, Veltruský has not yet developed his own conception, or may not be willing to do so at this stage of his research. It is good to keep in mind that Veltruský was only twenty-two years old in 1941 when he formulated these initial theses in an introduction to the lecture for the Prague Linguistic Circle. Therefore, Veltruský has limited himself to precisely formulating the problems and providing partial probes, such as the study of *Dramatic text as a component of theatre* (Veltruský 2016b [1941]).

Veltruský's other studies from this period are also partial explorations, possibly just "university course" essays. The texts *People and things in the theatre* (Veltruský 2016a [1940]) and *Theatre in the corridor* (Veltruský 2016d [1939]) examine the relationship between the living actor and the puppet, as well as the creation of the impression of liveliness or puppet-like stylisation of the actor's performance. Everything is based on very detailed analysis of carefully chosen material. The term *liveness* is not considered to be an essential quality of acting, but rather a meaning or an impression created by specific use of theatre signs. These texts explore the sign-character of theatre implicitly, but intentionally based only on limited material and without making large, unsubstantiated generalisations.

Revisions and development in the 1980s

Veltruský refrained from academic semiotic work until the 1970s, after almost thirty years of exile, during which he worked mainly for the Independent Trade Unions or as an independent journalist. His writing in the 1950s and 1960s mainly consisted of political commentaries on the Eastern Bloc's political situation. Only at the insistence of his long-time friend Ladislav Matějka did he return to scholarly work and structuralism. During this period, he published some of his previous works in English and wrote new studies (see the bibliography in Veltruský 2012 for more information). The new studies are thematically divided into two categories. On the one hand, Veltruský examines the Prague School as a historical phenomenon, as seen in his works such as *The Prague School theory of theater* (Veltruský 1981a), *Semiotics and avant-garde theatre* (Veltruský 1995), and *La Sémiologie du spectacle à la recherche de son passé* (Veltruský 1986). On the other hand, he further develops some of his research topics, such as the issue of principles of puppet theatre or the role of sound expression in acting.

The extensive text entitled *A contribution to the semiotics of acting* (Veltruský 2016e [1976]), published originally in English, is the most relevant for our inquiry. However,

we are not primarily interested in Veltruský's understanding of acting, but rather his understanding of the concept of the sign when discussing acting from a semiotic perspective. The study does not focus primarily on the conceptualization of the notion of "sign". However, in accordance with Mukařovský's established methodology, each concept in Veltruský's work always functions as an operative definition. Therefore, it is tentative and refined in confrontation with particular material, which is acting in this actual case. The conclusions of this process of conceptual refinement are of interest here.

As a starting point, the study formulates in six statements the problems that theatre as art sui generis poses to semiotics. I will present them here in an abbreviated form – but of course in Veltruský's exact formulations:

> "1. Like theatre as a whole, as well as dance and film, acting is an art of both space and time (Zich 2024 [1931]: 218–19) or, to put it differently, its signantia are organised at once in space and in time.
> […]
> 2. Human or anthropomorphic beings and their actions and behaviour, which are the *signatum* of acting, are represented by a *signans* of the same nature, namely by human beings and their actions and behaviour (exceptionally animals are represented by animals). Even the concept of similarity in its simplest semiotic sense of resemblance tends, therefore, to give way to the idea of sameness.
> 3. The material the actor uses is the actor himself – his own body, its properties and abilities, and even, to some extent, his ability to experience and express feelings that are not his own – so that the artist is personally present in his work or product […].
> […]
> 4. Acting is generally a collective performance.
> […]
> 5. Whenever the audience perceives the actor's work, he creates it in some measure afresh before their eyes.
> […]
> 6. Not only do the spectators witness the act of creation, they also participate in it because it is either stimulated or hampered, but never unaffected, by their response."
> (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 376–378)

These theses are basically a development of the formulations that Veltruský proposed as a general starting point in 1941 in introduction to his lecture (see Veltruský 2016c: 83–84). Whereas then they were placed at the end of his text as a programme of research, now they are the starting point. Above all, there is a clear awareness of the difference between the semiotics of the theatre and the semiotic investigation of other arts, expressed in a succinct formulation: "Seen from the angle of other semiotic systems, all these are confusing factors. Yet they are central to the semiotics of acting" (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 378).

At a general level, Veltruský first employs Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, with a special focus on the *relations* between individual elements. In the subsection *Stage Figure*, he primarily examines various versions of the relationship between the actor and stage figure (or actor figure)[2], emphasising the tensions between these

[2] This term comes from Otakar Zich and describes work of art created by actors themselves. In Czech it is *herecká postava*, which is relatively difficult to translate to English. In the actual edition of the translation of Zich's *Aesthetic of Dramatic Art* we opted for the term *actor figure* (see Zich 2024 [1931]: 444 for detailed discussion for this option). In this paper I keep to Veltruský's translation he employs in his study.

levels. He also explores the relationship between the stage figure and the dramatic persona. He consistently challenges persisting preconceptions about theatre, particularly in regards to acting:

> "Even the simple concepts worked out in the study of other sign systems tend to become confused here, so that semiotic analysis of details and partial aspects are still mostly anchored in the pre-semiotic, naive view of acting as the impersonation of a character." (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 376)

Veltruský, on the other hand, emphasises the cases when the stage figure does not include only signs evoking the dramatic persona, or the cases when stage action of the actor (which as a signifier is part of the stage figure) does not represent the action of the dramatic persona. Thus, in a first step, he reaches a partial conclusion:

> "To sum up, stage figure and stage action are both opposite and complementary. They are two poles of the *signans*." (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 383)

Veltruský's semiotic analysis goes beyond other schools that focus mainly on different types of semiosis and the sign-meaning opposition. He delves deeper into the analysis of *signans*, uncovering an internal dialectical tension at the level of the sign itself. This refines the idea of the complexity of the theatrical sign as such.

In order to make his analysis of internal structure of theatre sign clearer, Veltruský brings Peirce's division of types of semiosis into the Saussurean framework. However, he works with it in a slightly different way than the standard tradition. He avoids the established terminology of icon-index-symbol and designates each type of semiosis using terms that are more accurate (and self-explanatory!) in the context of theatrical practice: similarity, factual contiguity, and codified contiguity. Again, this terminology allows for a more dynamic understanding of the semantic processes, above all, it naturally foregrounds the crucial fact that the relationship between *signans* and *signatum* is always actively re-established in theatrical performance. This relation is never completely predetermined; the role of convention in theatre performance is much smaller than in linguistic communication, for example.[3] Analysis of the individual components of theatrical signans is then organised using Jakobson's model of communicative functions of language,[4] which already opens the way to an analysis of theatrical semiosis as such. Even though Veltruský follows Jakobson fairly closely, he redefines each function conceptually in relation to the communicative situation of a live theatrical performance.

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[3] Veltruský therefore never uses Saussure's distinction between *la langue* and *la parole* because it cannot be meaningfully applied to the system of theatrical semiosis. However, in Bogatyrev's essay *Theatrical signs* (2016 [1938]) preliminary attempts were made. Veltruský himself explicitly comments on this in his study *Comparative aesthetic of art* (Veltruský 1981b: 123–124): "In particular, it should be borne in mind how exceptional the phenomenon which de Saussure called *la langue* is outside language. This has been somewhat obscured by the rather indiscriminate application of so metaphorical and ambiguous term as 'code' to phenomena ranging from the semiotic system through the styles of particular schools and historical periods to the personal style or idiom of an artist. […] But a semiotic system is not necessarily a *langue*, namely a vast and highly integrated structure universally valid for a given society in the form of constraining rules."

[4] Jakobson's concept follows and develops the concept of functions introduced by Jan Mukařovský, inspired by ideas of Karl Bühler. Veltruský was aware of this connection, he himself addressed the topic in extensive study *Bühlers Organon-Modell und die Semiotik der Kunst* (Veltruský 1984).

Partial conclusions about the specific semiotics of acting are summarised in the subsection *Modes of semiosis*. Here Veltruský examines how "the different types of signs affect each other's way of conveying meaning" (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 391) and provides a series of examples from different historical periods and performance styles in which he demonstrates how the different modes of semiosis influence each other, often in tension or one completely superseding the other. Not content with stating that, in the case of the semiotics of acting and of theatre in general, "similarity, factual contiguity and codified contiguity coincide in semiosis" (ibid.: 393), his analysis continues further to examine the interrelationship between the different modes of semiosis according to Peirce. Analysing examples of theatre performances, Veltruský finally argues:

> "What really distinguishes acting as a semiotic system is that by combining the signs borrowed from all the other systems it 'cross-fertilizes' their respective modes of *semiosis*, so to speak. Here, **unlike in the other types of sign, the relations between the three modes are not a matter of one prevailing and being supported by the other two but of all three operating on the same level** and even, sometimes, **conflicting and competing with each other**." (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 393, emphasis mine)

Veltruský thus demonstrates that the theatrical sign has a different internal structure than the sign in other arts. This dynamic and often conflicting internal structure does not weaken the referential capacity of the sign, but quite the opposite:

> "[T]he concurrence of different modes of *semiosis* not only somewhat curtails the uniqueness of the referential capacity of every type of sign but also considerably extends this capacity. This is where the 'cross-fertilization' of all the modes shows its effects." (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 395)

This conclusion is de facto polemical or at least counter-intuitive to the notion of semiosis in other arts. The common view is that each art has a predominant (or dominant) mode of semiosis that determines its specific logic. Acting, or theatre, then appears as an art in which other arts disappear, but at the same time, in their interrelations, the referential power of the sign is reinforced. These formulations, of course, correspond to the notion of theatrical structure as outlined by Honzl (2016 [1940]) or Mukařovský (2016 [1941]), but they are not elaborated and formulated in terms of the overall structure of a theatrical production, but show that the specificity of theatre can be identified in the internal structure of the theatrical sign itself.

Veltruský, of course, follows Saussure and Peirce in these considerations, but he develops their concepts further. In fact, he redefines Peirce's original idea. By demonstrating that the different modes of semiosis can cross-fertilise each other, he also shows that, at least in the case of theatre, the different types of semiosis cannot be understood as separate and independent. Such an observation is of a more general significance. Referring to his study *Some aspects of the pictorial sign* (1976), Veltruský states:

> "In the *semiosis* of the pictorial sign, which is often thought to be based on similarity alone, similarity could not in fact work without a basis of contiguity (which allows those elements of similarity that are semiotically relevant to be separated from those that are not)." (Veltruský 2016e [1976]: 393)

At certain moments, therefore, Veltruský subtly reverses the logic of his analysis and retrospectively re-evaluates the more general concept of the sign through insights related

to the theatrical material. In his approach, he is still a comparative semiotician who examines the relationships between the arts. In fact, the theatre serves as a laboratory of comparative semiotics for Veltruský.

The concluding part of the study, modestly titled *Notes to the signans*, is surprisingly humble – apart from a summary of the major findings (particularly on the relationship between actor and spectator), it ends with a list of questions that need to be addressed further. Unlike the new generation of theatre semioticians (the aforementioned Patrice Pavis, Keir Elam, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Anne Ubersfeld or Marco De Marinis), who tend to construct closed explanatory systems, Veltruský's conceptualisation retains the character of an open system.

Veltruský's method and its consequences: beyond semiotics?

From a methodological point of view, the extensive study I have just briefly summarised is remarkable. The two "classical" or elementary conceptions of the sign (dyadic and triadic), which are often considered incompatible, are interrelated by Veltruský, and his interpretation is further strengthened by the inclusion of Jakobson's concept of communicative functions. This methodological complexity can also be read in the references to literature: both Saussure and Peirce make an appearance, but only sparingly, practically as a starting point to be – finally! – adapted for a specific theatrical semiotics. The theoretical core of the argument is largely based on Jakobson's studies, including his more recent texts at the time of writing.

If we compare the theoretical and historical references of this study with Veltruský's juvenile works, we find the following: Veltruský remains very strict in his methodological assumptions, and in the case of Mukařovský, for example, he works exclusively with his texts from the 1930s and 1940s. Only in the case of Jakobson does he make an "exception" and draw on his work from the 1950s and 1960s – which he apparently still considers methodologically compatible with his inter-war Prague School beginnings (including Karl Bühler). As far as the historical literature is concerned, it is clear that Veltruský tries to cover theatre history over as wide a temporal and geographical range as possible, not in a positivist manner of course, but in such a way as to extract enough typologically contrasting examples from individual theatre cultures. It is apparent from Veltruský's approach that he prefers the material to the theoretical. There is a development between the "early" and the "mature" Veltruský in the sense that the material basis of the conception expands extensively, while the theory deepens and becomes more complex (eventually leading to a synthesis of methods that are considered irreconcilable).

If I keep emphasising the openness of Veltruský's thinking, I must also add that the intention to be systematic is of course there, but it manifests itself in a specific way: Veltruský links his own individual studies with references, thus creating an internally coherent body of theory. For example, in two subsequent studies he returns to the question of the theatrical sign, in fact synthesising and further generalising his semiotic work on acting. The first major conceptual reference can be found in the at first glance more historical study *The Prague School theory of theater* (Veltruský 1981a). In a subsection

simply entitled *The signans and the signatum*, Veltruský refers to a certain reluctance on the side of the Prague Linguistic Circle with regard to Saussure's conception of the sign (logically, he does not quote any sources at this point, but rather supplements the existing corpus of texts with personal testimony). The problematic nature of Saussure's concept is particularly evident when considering the theatre:

> "**The idea that the sign has simply two facets, the *signans* and the *signatum*, does not quite apply to acting. In a specific work of acting, it is often hard and sometimes utterly impossible to determine what belongs to the stage figure and what to the character.** The borderline between the two is blurred, a great many features are part of the *signans* in some respect and of the *signatum* in some other. […]
> It does not follow that the distinction between *signans* and *signatum* is any less important in the theater than in the other semiotic systems. **What does follow is that the two terms are not simply two facets of the sign, like the two sides of a coin, but two poles of a dialectical antinomy, the internal antinomy of the sign.**
> But then, if this is true of the sign created by acting, it must be true of any sign whatever. Or else the very term of sign would be metaphorical, and semiotics a fiction." (Veltruský 1981a: 233, emphasis mine)

It is clear that, in this 1981 study, Veltruský both explains the historical context of the origins of theatre semiotics in the context of the Prague Linguistic Circle and revisits his own theses on the specificity of acting as a semiotic system, which he formulated already in 1941 and which served as the starting point for the study of acting presented above. Only a few lines later, Veltruský accurately states that:

> "To investigate this extremely complicated problem would clearly have been premature some thirty to fifty years ago, at the time when the Prague Linguistic Circle was trying both to develop general linguistics into a scientific discipline and to explore in the same spirit several other areas of social activity, of which the theater was only one. Special problems arose in all of them." (Veltruský 1981a: 233)

In this historical interpretation, however, he himself proposes a solution – some thirty to fifty years later. When he states, and I will repeat the key phrase: "It follows, however, that these two concepts are not simply two sides of a sign, like two sides of a coin, but two poles of a dialectical antinomy, an internal antinomy of the sign" (Veltruský 1981a: 233), it is necessary to recognise that this formulation actually sums up the entire discussion of the limits of the semiotics of acting that we find at the end of the study *A contribution to the semiotics of acting* as explained above. At the same time, it is essential that we read this formulation against the background of Saussure's famous analogy that the two parts of the sign, *signifiant* and *signifié*, are like two sides of the same sheet of paper. Veltruský is not only discussing here the concept of the theatrical sign, but asking whether the concept of the sign itself, or its internal structure, should be understood not statically (two sides of a sheet of paper, a coin) but dynamically as "two poles of a dialectical antinomy".

Three years later, in his study *Drama as literature and performance*, Veltruský returns to the topic again:

> "I have argued elsewhere that in any semiotic system the two are not simply two facets of the sign but the poles of its internal dialectical antinomy (Veltruský 1981). But **it is probable that the oscillation between these poles does not display the same degree of intensity in different sign systems.**

> **There can be hardly any doubt that in acting it is very intense. It would be tempting to say that in acting it is more intense than in any other sign system. But such a statement could not be justified at the present stage of our knowledge**, especially because the semiotic analysis of music is still in an embryonic state although it is a fairly old exercise. The oscillation between the *signans* and the *signatum* and their interpenetration seems to be very intense in music as well." (Veltruský 1985: 18, emphasis mine)

It is clear from this passage that Veltruský is convinced that the problem of the "internal dialectical antinomy" of the sign must be applied to all the arts. It is certainly no coincidence that he mentions the absence of a semiotics of music, another temporal and live performed art (i.e., an art which, although different from theatre, is created in front of an audience and to some extent establishes its communicative code with the way it is created and perceived), as one of the limits of this comparative semiotic research. It is clear, then, that Veltruský was led to rethink the concept of the sign as such by the need to rethink the theatrical sign, i.e., the sign in live performed art, whose sign structure is established dynamically during the performance under the strong influence of the feedback loop. If we were to use today's terminology, we would say that theatre (and possibly music) is considered here as a performative art.

Veltruský does not go so far as to abandon semiotics as such. But he is enough of a sensitive and rigorous analyst to reach the very limits of semiotics in his attempt to comprehend how the dynamic structure of theatrical experience is already realised at the level of the internal dialectical antinomy of the sign. The next step would then be – though Veltruský does not and cannot take it – to begin to speak of a dialectical tension between the semiotic and the phenomenal (as e.g., Erika Fischer-Lichte does in her *Transformative Power of Performance* 2008) and thus to capture the process of the dynamic emergence (and disappearance) of meaning in theatrical performance. However, the kind of theatre, or rather performance art, in which the tension of the internal dialectical antinomy is so strong that it divides the sign itself, Veltruský clearly does not want to include in his investigation; one can suspect that it is beyond his generations' horizon and taste. From Veltruský's point of view, the phenomena we now call performative or post-dramatic may also have seemed relatively marginal at that time.

In this context, it makes sense that Erika Fischer-Lichte, after developing her semiotics of theatre (Fischer-Lichte 1983), continues in her interest in the performance analysis and gradually complements the narrowly semiotic view, until finally, in *Transformative Power of Performance* (Fischer-Lichte 2008), she proposes a new aesthetic conception that is actually complementary to semiotics, and which, of course, is and would be unthinkable without its first, semiotic counterpart. Another such example of transgressing the limits of a narrowly conceived semiotics is Patrice Pavis's attempt to include the non-representable in the methods of performance analysis and, above all, the concept of the vectorisation of meaning (see Pavis 2003: 24–25, 29–30 or Pavis 2012).

If the idea that Veltruský reaches the very limits of semiotics seems too far-fetched, I will allow myself a few small examples from other texts of his. In his study *Semiotics and avant-garde theatre* (1995), Veltruský demonstrates how the thinking of the Prague Linguistic Circle was intertwined with avant-garde art, including theatre. His reflections

convincingly show that early theatre structuralism in the Prague School was already quite non-linguistic in its understanding of the concept of the sign, because it was constantly confronted with theatrical (and generally artistic) practices that broke with the established conventions of art and thus often found itself in circumstances where it was difficult, if not impossible, to express the meaning of a work of art in words. Mukařovský therefore introduced the notion of "non-thematic meaning", precisely for those instances when, in the terminology of Patrice Pavis, something in a performance cannot be translated into signs (see Questionnaire in Pavis 2003: 37–40). Veltruský highly appreciates this methodological element of Prague School theory:

> "By far the most important among the many impulses which the avant-garde gave to the Prague School semiotics of theatre was its constant emphasis on what could be broadly called non-thematic meanings. In the course of its explorations of the semiotic capacity of single components, it brought into the foreground the mass of subtle, more or less indeterminate and often fleeting meaning that these various components call forth. […] It is interesting in this respect that, outside the Prague School, Paul Valéry's most penetrating insights into some semiotics aspects of the theatre derived from his reflections concerning a non-thematic art, namely dance." (Veltruský 1995: 92)

In the short text *Notes regarding some productions by Otomar Krejča*, which is actually a series of analytical (semiotic) remarks on several of Krejča's productions from the 1980s in France that Veltruský saw, we can see how the term "non-thematic meaning" can be applied precisely to those moments when a theatrical production defies banal semiotisation by its atmosphere, intensity or other so-to-say performative qualities:

> "I have already said that in the production of *The Three Sisters* undefinable associations arise between the characters as a result of different actors successively playing with the same prop such as a particular chair or candle. Another example: in the third act of *The Seagull* the actor representing Treplev after a confrontation with Arkadina collapses onto a heap of luggage on which a short time before the actor who represents Sorin dropped while playing an attack of physical weakness. It would be crass to attempt to translate into words the meanings that this parallelism between the two actors's [sic] moves, as mediated by space and objects, conjures up in the spectator's mind: such meanings are so subtle that they cannot be put into words. What matters is that they contribute to the sense of dramatic characters although they only partly rely on acting, and derive for the most part from its integration in the stage space." (Veltruský 1991: 50)

It is no coincidence that Veltruský touches on dance and music when talking about non-thematic meanings, as does Pavis, when he tries to apply the concept of vectorisation to dance theatre (Pavis 2003: 88–96), or Fischer-Lichte, who devotes lengthy passages to rhythm and singing in *Transformative Power of Performance* (2008).

Of course, it is not possible to say explicitly that Veltruský anticipates the aesthetics of performativity or theory after the performative turn. This would not even make sense chronologically, since his texts were partly written in parallel with this paradigmatic change. But I felt it necessary to show that his way of thinking, which superficial view may sometimes appear too methodologically anchored in the interwar period of the Prague Linguistic Circle, actually pushes semiotic thinking to its limits through a rigorous rethinking of the concept of the theatrical sign. That is, he reaches the limit at which the semiotic view would need to begin to complement the theory of performativity. But Veltruský never crosses it.

He himself seems to have been aware of the borderline character of his standpoint and its possibly controversial nature. In fact, the reflections that began with an exploration of the internal structure of the theatre sign, and which I have uncovered in my archaeological reconstruction, eventually led him – at least in the form of a study – to a level of a true general comparative aesthetics (to which he was introduced by Mukařovský). Let me just quote the conclusion of his *Comparative semiotics of art*:

> "In my view, **the simple two-facet model of the linguistic sign collapsed** when Jakobson described the role of isomorphism, or diagrammatic similarity, in the relationship between its *signans* and *signatum* and the implied interplay between the two (Jakobson 1965).
> Perhaps it is not too daring to suggest in conclusion that rather than two facets, the *signans* and the *signatum* are two terms of an internal antinomy of the sign. **This is an area where the semiotics of art may start repaying at least some of the heavy debt it owes to linguistics.**" (Veltruský 1981b: 132, emphasis mine)

I don't think there could be a more radical critique of the foundations of one of the semiotic lineages than to declare that "the simple two-facet model of the linguistic sign [has] collapsed". But, unlike the post-structuralist or deconstructivist critique of structuralism, Veltruský did not reject the structural approach as such, but in fact only fully implements the idea that semiotics of art should repay its debt to linguistics.

Dynamics systems of Jiří Veltruský

Although this study has focused on only one selected conceptual issue within Veltruský's writing about theatre, even this limited sample has shown that Veltruský's thinking has a high degree of internal coherence. The studies from the second academic phase of Veltruský can obviously be read as a whole. A detailed argumentation is beyond the scope of this study, but one proof of this may be the fact that Veltruský's attempt to create a coherent semiotics of theatre, published posthumously first in French as *Esquisse d'une sémiologie du théâtre* (Veltruský 1996) and then in an expanded version and English translation by Jarmila F. Veltrusky as *An Approach to the Semiotics of Theatre* (Veltruský 2012), often coincides substantially at the level of subchapters with the particular studies Veltruský published in the 1980s.

The general characteristics of Veltruský's approach to theory of theatre at this point are already evident from the analysis of his study above. Veltruský's perspective is always focused on the relationships between the elements of the structure, and this relationship is understood as dynamic and dialectical. It is revealing how often Veltruský emphasises above all the contradictions or tensions in the structure. However, this dynamism is always understood in contrast to the static background. This method, as I have shown above, leads to considerable complexity in Veltruský's approach. We have observed this in the transformation of the concept of the sign from the early, de facto simple dyadic conception (in Honzl, Mukařovský or Veltruský at the turn of the 1930s) to the various phases of Veltruský's thought that revised the very concept of the sign in the 1980s.

In contrast to many semioticians of theatre whose starting points were linguistic (beginning with Roland Barthes and his disciple Tadeusz Kowzan), Veltruský does relate

to linguistics (note that Jakobson is – for him – the key theorist of his entire life, along with Mukařovský), but he consistently reflects on semiosis in the individual arts, to which he successfully applies comparative methods.

While Veltruský's dynamic conception of the (theatrical) sign is a revision of the relatively simple and static conception of the theatrical sign from the 1940s, this revision should not be confused with a post-structuralist or deconstructivist critique of structuralist theory. For Veltruský is, unsurprisingly, only methodologically rigorous. In fact, he consistently applies dialectical thinking, setting in motion the concept of the (theatrical) sign in a similar way to Jan Mukařovský's texts from the late 1940s such as *The individual and literary development* (Mukařovský 1977b) or *Intentionality and unintentionality in art* (Mukařovský 1978), which, however, focuses on literature. The relatively well-known thesis that post-structuralist criticism is directed exclusively against the French branch of structuralism is confirmed here, because – as Emil Volek, among others, notes – the Czech structuralist tradition is fundamentally different from the French one and "our models are, on the contrary, even deconstructive *avant la lettre*" (Volek 2006: 37, translation mine)

In 1997, Herta Schmid published a comprehensive study named *Jiří Veltruský's Vermächtnis an die Theaterwissenschaft* (*Jiří Veltruský's Legacy to Theatre Studies*). In it, she responds to the first French edition of Veltruský's attempt at his systematic semiotics of the theatre. Schmid concludes that with his last book, Veltruský "turns to his colleagues in his country of exile and advises them to free the semiology of theatre from restrictive bonds" (Schmid 1997: 87), a phrase that accurately captures one of the features of Veltruský's thought that I have attempted to substantiate with this analysis – to simply put: to dynamise structural thinking about theatre. The call to "free the semiology of theatre from restrictive bonds" is all the more important today, when semiotics can seem either forgotten and overtaken (see e.g., Pavis 2012) or just one of many standardised theoretical concepts. However, it should and could be a complementary method to the performative conception of theatre, which actually owes it quite a bit.

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