References


Some Remarks on the Notion of Sign in Jakobson’s Semiotics and in Czech Structuralism*

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The mid-war Prague School has justly been celebrated for its "shift towards semiotics" (Matejka 1978: xxv). In fact, the "creation of semiotic aesthetics", or rather the "semiotic reformulation of aesthetics", has been called its "crowning achievement" (Galán 1985: 82).

Indeed, whereas semiotic terminology is still absent in the Jakobson/Tynjanov "Theses", published in 1928, which can be regarded as a summarizing culmination of Russian formalism, we observe the term 'sign' several times in the "Theses" of the Prague Linguistic Circle, presented to the first International Congress of Slavists one year later, and published in the first volume of the "Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague".

There we find the statement, for example, that language has either a communicative function directed towards the signified, or a poetic function, directed towards the sign itself [Il a soit une fonction de communication, c.-à-d. qu'il est dirigé vers le signifié, soit une fonction poétique, c.-à-d. qu'il est dirigé vers le signe lui-même. (p. 14)]

Somewhat more specifically, it is then claimed (p. 21) that it is a recipient's orientation [German: Einstellung; French: intention; Czech: zaměření] which is directed toward the sign itself [le signe lui-même], and not toward the signified [non pas sur le signifié].

It is important to keep in mind that right from the beginning of Czech structuralism, language was considered just one semiotic struc-

ture among others [des autres structures sémiologiques]. With regard to verbal art, however, we obtain some deeper insight into the understanding of 'sign' implied. With respect to poetry, we read, the recipient's orientation is thus on the verbal expression [l'expression verbale].

As far as the notion of 'sign' implied in these comments is concerned, only one logical consequence may be drawn based on the preceding formulation: if the aesthetic orientation in art in general is toward the sign, and if in verbal art it is directed toward the expression, then the notion of sign implied here has to be understood as monolateral. The notion of sign in the form as it is presented here would thus be confined to the expression plane.

Since the expression plane, in turn, is related to some signified, one might object that, ultimately, we are dealing with a scholarly distinction, for in the process of signification it makes no great difference whether a signified is represented by something called either 'sign' or 'signifying'. We would be dealing with a phenomenon, which Husserl (1913: 23) in his Logische Untersuchungen had already termed the "double meaning of the term 'sign'". It will be argued below, however, that we are concerned not only with terminological issues, but with conceptual differences, too. We are led to such basic questions as: when are we talking about a semiotic reformulation of aesthetics, what is the notion of sign underlying it, where are its roots to be found, and, finally, in what terms is it useful to deal with these phenomena today?

In reconstructing the semiotic roots of Czech structuralism, many scholars have pointed out various sources of both endogeneous and exogeneous origin. Thus our attention has been drawn to the fact that "both Peirce's semiotic and Saussure's semiology (...) came to Prague, Czechoslovakia, during the early 1930s and found fertile ground (...)" (Matečka/Titaník 1976: ix). Actually, however, Peirce did not play any role in the formation of Czech structuralism; this has been pointed out by Thomas Winner (1978: 443), who maintains that "Peirce's fundamental semiotics studies were (...) not known to the members of the Prague Circle during the 1930s at the time of their early formulations of their semiotic ideas"; according to him, Roman Jakobson himself, who perhaps should know best, explicitly confirmed this.

The matter with Saussure is different. Saussure's Cours de linguistique générale was well known, at least it was claimed to be well known.

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Mukařovský in his essay "L'art comme fait sémiologique" (1934) which actually can be regarded as the milestone of the "semiotic reformulation of aesthetics", makes an explicit reference to the Geneva linguist:

The work-thing functions, then, only as an exterior symbol (the signifiant, according to Saussure's terminology) to which corresponds in the collective consciousness a meaning (sometimes called the aesthetic object) given by what the subjective states of consciousness evoked in the members of a certain collectivity have in common.

It has been stated, therefore, that although "Mukařovský utilizes de Saussure's term signifiant for the material vehicle of the sign, he does not retain its counterpart, the signifié, but instead splits it into two categories — meaning and reference" (Steiner 1978: 371). In the same context, it has been argued that Mukařovský's inspiration for this step arose out of contemporary German philosophy, namely out of the work of Husserl, Bühler, and others.

Thus, at least one conclusion seems to be in place: one definitely cannot trace the Prague semiotic re-formulation of aesthetics back to one or two concrete sources; rather, different sources seem to have played an indefinite inspirational role. The notion of sign appears to have been used in some disparate and eclectic way, rather than in accordance with a strict terminological definition. Although the Prague scholars' broad interpretations of the notion of sign do not necessarily invalidate their work, they should be kept in mind.

In attempting to reconstruct the notion of sign in early Czech structuralism, it would be naive, then, to assume that one could ever arrive at a homogeneously used definition underlying the work of earlier Czechoslovakian structuralists.¹ In his seminal study Costume as a Sign [Kroj jako znak], written in 1936, Bogatyrev, for example, still explicitly mentions that he interprets the term 'sign' in its broadest sense. Almost a year after the publication of the introduction ['Uvod'] to the newly-founded periodical Slovo a slovesnost, written in 1935 by Havránek, Jakobson, Mathesius, Mukařovský and Trnka, Bogatyrev used the term 'sign' in an undifferentiated manner. This is cu-

¹ Relevant remarks can be found in Peter Burg's investigation of Czech structural aesthetics (Burg: 1985: 48ff., 270ff.).
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followed his 1906 arrest, Karcevskij emigrated to Geneva. There he studied linguistics with both Saussure and Saussure’s disciples Bally and Sechehaye, returning to Moscow in March 1917. Later, Roman Jakobson (1962: 621) described the importance of Karcevskij’s role in acquainting Russian linguists with Saussure’s ideas: “(…) in 1917, S.J. Karcevskij returned to Moscow after years of study in Geneva and acquainted us with the essentials of the Saussurian doctrine”. Fifteen years earlier, in the volume of the Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure dedicated to Karcevskij one year after his death, Jakobson (1956: 10) had already acknowledged Karcevskij’s importance: “He was the first who in 1917–1919, during his shortlived return to Russia, fired the young generation of Moscow linguists with the Cours de linguistique générale.”

It is important to bear in mind the significance of Karcevskij, who, after having lectured at Straubourg University from 1920 on, came to Prague in 1922, because it was Karcevskij who defined the signifiant as being “phonique”, whereas Saussure defined it as a psychological phenomenon, just as he saw the sign as a whole as a two-sided psychological entity [une entité psychique à deux faces]. This interpretation, or rather modification, of Saussure’s concept is still characteristic of many current semiotic conceptions, particularly in Slavic countries. It can also be found in the above-mentioned survey of ancient concepts of sign by the Brno philosopher Karel Svoboda, who explicitly stated about the Stoics: “Il y avait le signifiant au signifié (…), comme l’a fait, à notre époque, Saussure (…). Le signifiant, c’est le son du mot, et le signifié, c’est le sens du mot (…)”

Even earlier, Svoboda had argued that structuralist views were not actually novel, but were based on what he assumed to be the ancient notion of the sign. Roman Jakobson adopted this view of Svoboda’s, and he repeatedly pointed out the fact that “Saussure’s approach to the sign both in concepts and terms originates, in fact, from a tradition lasting over two thousand years” (Jakobson 1959: 267). Thus, Jakobson was convinced that he had traced Saussure’s doctrine back

\[\text{Still, already in 1929, Beneviste directed attention to Saussure’s “veiled recourse to a third element”, i.e. the thing itself, or reality; and in 1947, Raudfis argued in favor of a four-partite notion of sign, taking into account the material quality of the sign as well.}\]
two thousand years, in particular to the tradition of the Stoics and St. Augustine. Thus, on the one hand polemically arguing against the novelty of Saussure's approach, and on the other hand referring to a long tradition of which he regarded himself a part, Jakobson equated all the above-mentioned approaches by way of the following formula: «signum = signans + signatum», and he represented Kacovskij's terms by way of this formula, too.

Many scholars have repeatedly pointed out Jakobson's overwhelming importance and influence in the development of semiotics (cf. Eco 1977), and I can only modestly add my personal debt to his intriguing ruminations. Still, a few critical remarks on the above-mentioned equation are allowable.3

1. In one of his very first explicit semiotic statements, made in his 1933 article on the “Decline of Film?” [Upaděk filmu], Jakobson referred to St. Augustine's distinction between 'sign' [signum] and 'thing' [res], according to which every sign is also a thing, although not every thing needs to be (though it can be) a sign. Referring to the terms signans and signatum Jakobson speaks of "the good old terms of St. Augustine". That these two terms do not actually in St. Augustine's work notwithstanding, Jakobson's interpretation gives birth to more essential doubts. For Augustine, a sign [signum] is a thing [res] which, in addition to what it conveys to the senses [sensus], conveys something else [aliquid aliquid] to the mind [cognition].4 This means that Augustine is not concerned with two components of a sign, as Jakobson defines them (and as other scholars have long claimed), but with a double relation which the signum creates (cf. Ruef 1981).

2. Although practically all documents of the Stoic doctrine that have been lost, one can judge quite reliably from other sources that for the Stoics neither the signifying (τὸ σηματικόν, in their terminology) nor the signified (τὸ σηματικὸς) may be regarded as being of a psychological nature, and thus they cannot be equated with Saussure's definition. The Stoics explicitly qualified the signifying as 'corporeal'

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(σοματικόν, which may be re-termed as 'material'), and the signified, on the other hand, as σονωματικόν (incorporeal, or immaterial). According to the Stoic doctrine, this means that the signified must not be regarded as psychological. Thus, the Stoics’ semiotic foundations are significantly closer to Jakobson’s than to Saussure’s notion of sign. There remains only one minor problem: In the Stoic doctrine, the term σημεῖον [i.e. 'sign'] does not occur in the context of the other two terms mentioned: its use was obviously confined exclusively to Stoic logic.

Thus, there seems to be no solid ground on which to equate either Augustine's or the Stoics' doctrine with Saussure's. Still, Jakobson consistently uses precisely these two terms, thereby binding himself to the authority of a long tradition and presenting his work as a continuation of it. According to Jakobson (1968: 699), “this more than bimillennial model remains the soundest and safest base for the newly developing and expanding semiotic research”. Both in his doctrine and in his terminology, which, despite his own claims, must be labelled idiosyncratic, a sign, on the basis of its assumed ‘material qualities’, is defined as ‘perceptible’, and the signatum, on the other hand, is defined as ‘intelligible’ or ‘translatable’.

Now, why am I so neurotic about terminology?

First, terminology is important if we are to reliably re-evaluate Jakobson’s influential notion of sign by checking it against the assumed historical background. It turns out that Jakobson adopts Kacovskij’s modification of Saussure and interprets it in the historical perspective outlined by Svoboda (whom he never mentions, by the way). Second, I turn to terminology because both Jakobson’s doctrine and his terminology actually represent basic roots of modern aesthetic theory. Finally I stress terminology, because as is the case in this doctrine, terminological murkiness often masks deeper conceptual disagreements.

Some arbitrarily chosen examples might show how Jakobson’s terminology serves as the basis for modern criticism, before we finally turn to the conceptual implications of Jakobson’s terminological murkiness for modern aesthetics and semiotics.

Thus, in contemporary studies on Czech structuralism and its roots (the overall quality and value of which I do not want to call into question with my remarks), “St. Augustine’s binary concept of signum as signans and signatum” is mentioned as one of the semiotic tradit-

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3 For a more detailed analysis of this problem cf. Grzybek (1989: 104f.).
4 Cf. St. Augustine’s definitions in his “De doctrina Christiana (II,11)” and in his “Principia dialectica (V),”

(1) Signum est enim res praeest speciem, quam ingerit sensibus, aliquid ex se faciens in cognitionem venire.

(2) Signum est quod et se ipsum sensui et praeter se aliquid animo ostendit.
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Now there can be no doubt about the fact that one can refer to the terms *signans* and *signatum* in such reconstructions. But actually, this is exactly the point at which we leave merely terminological ground and enter the realm of conceptual matters. To give but one example: in Veltrusky's further analysis of the above-mentioned study of Zich, the problem of double semiosis in acting is dealt with first. We are then referred to Peirce's semiotics, and, on the basis of the bilateral notion of sign sketched out, terms such as "diagrammatic similarity" and "factual contiguity" are quoted (Veltrusky 1978: 567). In fact, however, we are then confronted not with Peirce's semiotic model, but with Jakobson's interpretation of it.

Let us briefly recall Peirce's notion of sign in its essentials.\(^6\)

According to Peirce, a sign has to be understood as a triadic phenomenon, which consists of three correlata: 1. the *representamen*, i.e. the 'sign vehicle' in its representative function (but not in its material qualities, as Morris later defined it), 2. the *interpretant* (the 'significance', or 'meaning', roughly speaking), and 3. the *immediate object*, i.e. the object as it is represented in the sign itself. The latter has to be distinguished from the *dynamical object*, which is the object of reference, but which is not an integral part of the sign relation in its strict sense.

Now Jakobson named Peirce not only as "the most inventive and versatile among American thinkers", but also as his "most powerful source of inspiration". One can say that Jakobson re-discovered Peirce and revealed his importance not only for semiotics, but for linguistic studies as well to a broad scholarly audience, beyond the United States. But Jakobson read Peirce very selectively, and he did not do justice to his doctrine.\(^7\)

Jakobson's interpretation can be roughly summarized as follows: He equals Peirce's *representamen* with his *signans*, Peirce's *interpretant* with his *signatum*; but Jakobson never mentions the third obligatory correlate of a Peircean sign triad, the *immediate object*, which

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\(^7\) For a similarly critical evaluation of Bruss (1978), who maintains that Jakobson "turns Peirce on his head".

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\(^5\) However, the terms 'signum' and 'signatum' can be found earlier, as, e.g., in Jakobson's (1936) "Remarks on the Poetry of the Hussite Era".

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can be understood as an iconic representation in the mind of a sign user. This seems somewhat strange, since Jakobson himself stressed the importance of iconic phenomena in language. However, in Jakobson’s terminology, these iconic phenomena would have been tied to the signans, not to the signatum. To accept Peirce’s ‘immediate object’ would have made it necessary to speak of three rather than of two components of the linguistic sign. Thus, just as Jakobson integrated and subordinated Saussure’s notion of sign into his own doctrine, he gives the impression of a conceptual coincidence with Peirce by, so to speak, “dyadizing” the latter’s triadic notion of sign.

The same process can be observed with regard to sign typology. Jakobson refers only to that sign typology, which, according to Peirce, is based on the relation between the sign, or rather the representamen, and the dynamical object, and which allows a distinction between icons, indices, and symbols. According to Jakobson, however, the three types of signs are differentiated not on the basis of their reference to a ‘denotatum’; but according to kinds of relations between signans and signatum. Such a view has not much in common with Peirce’s doctrine, and soon leads to various problems; these problems become most evident in the case of indices, when Jakobson eventually speaks of the relation of the signans to some object (and not to the signatum), thus approaching Peirce’s concept, but contradicting his own theoretical claims.

Of course, to re-interpret and even to modify others’ doctrines are useful projects; but it would be helpful if Jakobson would state clearly that this is what he is doing. Jakobson, in any case, never made the mentioned terminological inconsistencies, much less the inaccuracies in his interpretation of Peirce’s work, a separate topic.

The whole matter seems to be particularly relevant, since Jakobson transferred not only the terms signans and signatum, but also Peirce’s sign typology, to the phenomenon of the functional asymmetry of the brain. Because of his neglect of Peirce’s immediate object, which can be understood as a mental icon, Jakobson underestimates, or even neglects, important iconic components of symbolic processes, which seem to be important right-hemisphere contributions to semantic pro-

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8 This term is used by Jakobson, though rather inconsistently, to distinguish the ‘signatum’ from the object of reference.

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cesses. True, Jakobson takes into account important contributions of the right hemisphere to communication, such as, e.g., intonation and other non-verbal elements. We are concerned here with more, however — namely, with a constant interplay of iconic and symbolic constituents in any kind of semiosis. Jakobson claims that the signatum is “translatable”. In fact, however, these constituents cannot be translated into (and therefore cannot be substituted by) each other; rather, they represent the complex result of heterogeneous processes. (It might be extraordinarily interesting to re-evaluate Karcevskij’s considerations on a ‘tertium comparationis’, from this perspective.)

Of course, the present conclusions go far beyond the initial question of the notion of sign underlying early Czech structuralism. But even if we confine our interest to this reconstruction — why should we operate with a notion of sign which does not seem to be sufficiently adequate for the understanding of relevant psychological or neuropsychological findings?

Taking a psychosemiotic or neurosemiotic perspective we might, on the one hand, be able to get a much deeper insight into the psychological and neuropsychological bases underlying sign processes; on the other hand, we might perhaps arrive at a more suitable definition of what a sign is if we do not pre-determine the interpretation of (neuro)psychological data by any one notion of sign. Without a doubt, the consideration of the notion of sign from a neurosemiotic or psychosemiotic perspective might result in more than just a (re)definition of what a sign is; some additional light might be shed on any kind of semiotic and, consequently, cultural phenomenon.

It seems to be quite in keeping with this view that some experts in cultural semiotics, such as Tartu scholar Jurij M. Lotman, have recently abandoned the interpretation of ‘meaning’ based on Shannon’s definition of ‘information’ as being the invariant of equivalent transformations.10

Though speaking of different sign systems or subsystems, rather than of single signs in referring to cultural phenomena in general, Lotman (1977) speaks of the «translation of the untranslatable». It seems

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10 Earlier, this definition of ‘meaning’ was unequivocally accepted both by the members of the Moscow/Tartu School and by Roman Jakobson.
reasonable, therefore, that close parallels might be found between the
structure and typology of sign and of culture in general, and to confirm
this on an empirical basis. 11

It would lead us too far afield, however, to outline and to pursue
these perspectives here.

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11 This can be understood as a support of the ideas expressed by V.V. Ivanov
(1978) in his monograph on "Čet i nečet. Asimetrija mozga i znakovskih si-
stem", which, however, suffers from precisely the same problems in sign definition
as Jakobson’s semiotics.

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Die Dialog-Teilnehmer und der sprachliche Kommunikationsprozeß

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Die Untersuchungen der sog. "lebendigen Rede", die sich auf das Redereignis an sich konzentrieren, zeigen die Unzulänglichkeit und den Schematismus der Systemanalyse. Sie beschränken die Mitteilung