

**Jiří Veltruský**

**An Approach  
to the Semiotics  
of Theatre**

Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague, nouvelle série, vol. 6



**Masaryk University**

**Jiří Veltruský**

# **An Approach to the Semiotics of Theatre**

**Reconstructed, translated into English and prefaced  
by Jarmila F. Veltrusky**

**with an afterword by Tomáš Hoskovec, and with a complete scholarly  
bibliography of the author**

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Reviewed by Prof. Veronika Ambros (Toronto University)

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*Jiří Veltruský (on the right) and Michael Kirby, editor of The Drama Review, in 1981.*



## The Background Story of the Book

In Summer 1981, Jiří Veltruský received a letter (dated June 6) from André Helbo, president of the Association Internationale pour la Sémiologie du Spectacle /International Association for the Semiotics of the Performing Arts and editor of the semiotic quarterly *Degrés*, announcing that the Association was starting a new collection, in which it hoped to include a volume, in French, on the theory of theatre of the Prague Circle, and asking if he would agree to take on the task of editor. The volume was to contain a complete collection of the Prague Circle's texts hitherto unpublished in French, dealing with the performing arts (theatre, puppets, ballet, opera), whether from a practical or a methodological point of view, together with a personal commentary (by Jiří) and perhaps some interviews. The length of the manuscript was to be approximately 200 typed pages.

Jiří welcomed the idea of making the Prague School theory of theatre known to the French-speaking world and immediately began to collect the texts to be included. However, this initial form of the project soon had to be abandoned. Not only had the most important studies by Bogatyrev and Honzl already appeared in French but the plan to get the other Prague texts translated proved impracticable. André Helbo therefore proposed instead that Jiří should write a more general introduction to the Prague Circle's theories of theatre, with the option of extending it to some 100 pages.

Jiří saw three major difficulties in this form of the project. First was the length, in that a 100 pages is neither an article nor a book. Second, the uncomfortably ambiguous position he would find himself in as one of the theoreticians he was to discuss from the point of view of a historian. And third, the linguistic difficulties he foresaw having to face since he had not written in French on any form of art for more than 20 years. Consequently, he could not tell how long writing the hundred pages in question might take him and in any event, he would be obliged to find somebody able to correct his French without changing the sense. In spite of these reservations, he accepted the proposal, just adding a reminder of the suggestion he had made earlier that two "excellent studies" of the Prague Circle's theory of theatre, one by František Deák, in English, and one by Irena Ślawińska, in French, be reproduced in an annex.

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Jiří started working on the text right away, gave it every moment his full-time job left him free and expected to finish it in a few months. In May 1982 he wrote to Peter Steiner that he had promised to produce “a little book (about 100 pages) in French” on the Prague School semiotics of theatre and he hoped to finish the manuscript by the end of the summer vacation and to see it published about two months later. This hope proved far too optimistic and he was still working on the manuscript in April 1986, when he wrote to Michael Quinn “The Prague School studies in theatre are still poorly known. I am now trying to write a small book on the subject in French but that cannot fill the gap because it is to be in the nature of an *a posteriori* interpretation; one cannot be a participant in and a historian of something at the same time.”

But as his work advanced, its character changed, so resolving the first two major difficulties he had foreseen. It grew well beyond the problematic 100 pages and its focus shifted away from the history of the Prague School to a fuller presentation of Jiří's own conception of the semiology of theatre, naturally backed by constant reference to the work of other members of the School. As it grew in length, the term of its completion receded. In June 1988, Jiří wrote, again to Michael Quinn, “My French book will still take some time and in the process has become something different from what it was at the outset. Its title sounds now something like ‘*Esquisse d’une sémiologie du théâtre*’; the reference to the Prague School will have to be accommodated in the sub-title”. And in October 1989, “My book is far from being finished; it just keeps growing.”

He was happy to devote to the project all the time and attention his professional occupation allowed, since he realized that it offered him an unexpected but timely opportunity to construct a unified theory, integrating his own and other Prague scholars' work on all the various aspects and components of the theatrical art.

In planning how to shape the book, he soon settled on the six chapters that it has to this day :

1. The Prague School
2. Theatre and Literature
3. The Contribution of the Other Arts
4. Opera
5. Acting
6. Theatre as a Semiotic System

He made a file for each chapter and worked on one or another as the focus of his thinking moved from topic to topic. Every subject he took up made him want to investigate it more thoroughly, with the result that the scope of his reading kept growing and so did the anticipated size of the book.

However, this promising progress came to an almost total stop in 1989. In the Spring of that year he developed a number of health problems which rapidly grew worse. In May 1990 he was hospitalized for the first time and then repeatedly until his death four years later. In spite of his declining health he kept up his full-time work, indeed more intensely than ever. The events of the Summer of 1989 and the following months, when the Communist world began to crumble, absorbed him professionally as well as personally. When he was not attending meetings, he was writing reports and articles on the swiftly evolving political and economic situation in Eastern and Central Europe.

Even during this hectic time he did not totally abandon his interest in the theatre. But in this field, too, a situation developed which prevented him from getting on with his book. In 1991, when he returned to Prague for the first time since 1948, he was invited to a meeting at the Theatre Institute and had the joy of making the personal acquaintance of several scholars whose interests were similar to his own. After hesitating because he feared it would mean another call on his already hard-pressed time, he agreed to let the Institute publish a collection of his articles in Czech, on the understanding that it would find a translator competent enough to accomplish the task without requiring his cooperation, except in questions of terminology, with which he offered to help.

He signed the contract in January 1992, in August he received the translation of the first two articles and he was very pleased with them. However, when he saw the rest of the translations he found them so unsatisfactory he felt he had no option but to revise and correct them very radically. Thus he found himself obliged to spend the little time and energy he had on this "mammoth task" as he called it ("práce pro vraha"). He finished it only a short time before his death.

In the last few months of his life, when he was already very ill, he took out the files of his French book again, one after the other, re-read what he had written and made a number of changes. He removed, transposed and added paragraphs or longer passages, placing the deleted passages at the back of the relevant file, together with other materials he meant to find a place for in the

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chapter at a later stage. To finish the book would have required far more time than he had but it appeared that he failed, or perhaps refused, to recognize how quickly his end was approaching.

At his death, the manuscript consisted of seven files, corresponding to the six chapters already mentioned and the bibliography. Each file contained the (provisionally) final form of the first part of the chapter, sometimes just a few pages, sometimes several dozen, mostly typed but partly handwritten and often with the sort of corrections computers have done away with: additions written between the lines, in the margins or on slips of paper pasted onto the page, circled words, phrases or paragraphs with arrows showing where they were to be transposed and so on. Besides these nearly final but still rather messy beginnings, each file contained a collection of materials of various sorts: cancelled passages evidently to be used later in the chapter, notes of points to bear in mind and so on.

About two weeks after Jiří's death, knowing how much importance he had attached to this work, I wrote to André Helbo explaining the situation and asking if he would be ready to publish the pages Jiří evidently regarded as publishable. He agreed and I retyped the passages concerned, to produce a cleaner text; it amounted some 80,000 words, not counting the notes and bibliography. I was able to assure him that no part of the manuscript had been published previously, except for the segment he himself had printed in his review *Degrés* (No. 74, Summer 1994), as an article entitled "La place et le caractère de la communication intersubjective dans la musique et la danse".

Jiří himself had pointed out years earlier that his French was not up to standard and would need to be corrected. Since Helbo was unable to help, I appealed to Danièle Monmarte who, as a French-speaking expert on Czech drama seemed well qualified for the task, and she kindly undertook it, for which I owe her a debt of gratitude. I sent Helbo the corrected manuscript in August and he replied in January 1995 that he proposed to publish it in a special issue of *Degrés* dedicated to Jiří's unpublished works, perhaps with an article by a respected semiologist setting it in perspective. A copy of the issue in question, *Degrés* No. 85-86, finally reached me in October 1996. It freed me at last from the fear that Jiří's unfinished study would find no publisher and all the work and hope he had put into it would be wasted. At the same time I realized all too clearly that as it stood, the published text presented a very incomplete version of Jiří's work.

Before the publication of the French version was decided, soon after Jiří's death, I informed those of his friends I thought would be interested about the existence of the manuscript and tried to keep them abreast of its fortunes. Several strongly urged me to try to get it published both in Czech and in English so as to make it more widely accessible. I was happy to agree, on condition that they helped me find a translator for the Czech version and publishers for both. Two Czech publishers expressed an interest in a Czech translation but then dropped it, perhaps because my Czech was not up to translating it and they would have had to find and pay somebody to do it.

The English translation appeared to have a better chance of seeing the light of day. In response to my appeal for help in finding a publisher, Miroslav Procházka approached Jindřich Toman, who had succeeded Jiří's old friend Ladislav Matejka as Professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Michigan, and obtained his promise to publish the text if I supplied the translation. I had been translating Jiří's texts, both Czech and French, into English since our very first meeting and naturally undertook to do so in this case too. I welcomed the opportunity to produce a more adequate version of his work, to correct some errors I had overlooked in the French text but more importantly to re-examine the whole manuscript, including the loose pages and fragments at the back of each file and see how far I could integrate them into the finished work. In many cases it proved possible to find what seemed an acceptable place, although clearly not the one Jiří had in mind. One of the most obvious results was an extreme disproportion in the size of the chapters, which Jiří would certainly have rearranged to make them more even. But I thought preserving as much as possible of his thought was more important than trying to give the book a better shape.

Toman distrusted my translation and decided to have it revised by a native-born English speaker. Unfortunately, the colleague who undertook to correct it evidently knew little about the subject and while emending the style often distorted the sense. Toman questioned all my objections and efforts to restore the original sense, so it took us many hours to come up with a text we could both accept. We finally achieved it in May 1999, in Paris. Before he took leave, Toman declared that the text as he now had it on his computer was ready for publication and he had only to press a button to start printing. Imagining he meant to do so in a matter of weeks, I remarked that it would be a nice coincidence

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for the book to come out in 1999, the year Jiří would have been 80. His reply that he wasn't sure he could publish it before the end of the year rather took me aback but I was far from suspecting that he was about to abandon the project, on which he had, after all, spent quite a lot of time and which was so near completion. He stopped communicating with me and apparently avoided contact with the academic colleagues who sought to inquire about his intentions.

In 2003, when Toman had given no sign of life for four years, Tomáš Hoskovec, who had been giving me unstinting help in sorting out various matters connected with Jiří's death, offered to publish the English version in the *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague, nouvelle série*.

We both saw this as an opportunity to revise the text, remove those of Toman's formulations I had unwillingly agreed to, incorporate a few passages I had meanwhile discovered in Jiří's papers, eliminate a few repetitions I had overlooked and generally make the sort of corrections that spring to mind when one re-reads a text after some time. It also meant changing the form of the many bibliographical references. As I worked on it again I liked to think that this chance to improve the text would make up for the delay. Once again I was too optimistic. The publication of this volume of the TCLP was put off from year to year, with no deadline in sight.

Just as I was giving up all hope of ever seeing it in print, I learned that two friends, Eva Stehlíková and Veronika Ambros, had decided to take the matter in hand. They initiated a research project to study the Prague Linguistic Circle's work on theatre and after many discussions, the project was launched in 2011, under the title "Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: Context and Potency". Friends involved in the research gave me to understand that the means to publish the book were now available and, most importantly, that there was a real interest and will to see it through the press. The book is finally being published in collaboration between the Prague Linguistic Circle, represented by co-editor Tomáš Hoskovec, and the research team of the Theatre Studies Department, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.

My warmest thanks go to all the friends who made this possible at long last.

*Jarmila F. Veltrusky*

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## 1. The Prague School

The term Prague School is generally used to mean the Prague Linguistic Circle, founded in 1926. However, in the field of theatre studies, the Prague School also includes Otakar Zich, the author of the monumental *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (1931), whose intellectual relationship to the Circle is rather complicated.

Zich became a member of the Circle only in 1933, when he gave a paper there; as he died in 1934, it is impossible to tell whether or not he had joined with the intention of taking an active and systematic part in its work from then on. He adopted the key notion of structure around 1930 and laid particular emphasis on it in the introduction to his book on drama (1931: 11). But he interpreted the concept in his own way, as he explained later in an interview with Bohumil Novák. He regarded structural aesthetics as something like a revival of the formalist aesthetics founded by Johann Friedrich Herbart, which had degenerated into a cult of form, forgetting that in art, form always shapes some matter; for Zich, the term “structure” was synonymous with “concrete form” (Novák 1933). The Circle would not have subscribed to this interpretation. Moreover, Zich failed to recognize that structure has a dynamic character, in that its unity rests as much on oppositions, contradictions and tensions between the components as on their harmony and complementarity. Yet the notion of dynamic structure was one of the essential ideas on which the Circle was based. On the other hand, Zich had explored several of the questions that were later to figure among the Circle’s major preoccupations long before the Circle itself was founded (Mukařovský 1935). As far as I know, it was Vilém Mathesius, the Circle’s founder and president, who persuaded him to write his treatise on dramatic art, the publication of which he had announced as early as 1923 but which had failed to appear. If it had not been for this crucial book, the semiotics of theatre would no doubt have developed within the Circle nonetheless, but very differently. Zich was at once its immediate precursor and its founding father; and in addition, as I hope to show in what follows, he dealt with certain semiotic problems that the Circle was not ready to tackle.

Moreover, the studies concerning theatre that were published by various members of the Circle are rather heterogeneous. They were never conceived as integral parts of a single theory which was to be built up step by step. The different members held widely differing views, and progress was made by discussing

and confronting these views rather than through coordinated and complementary research. The use of the term “School” is justified on the grounds that all these studies, including Zich’s, had two characteristics in common: a semiotic approach, and an endeavour to analyze the work of dramatic art in its complex unity; in other words, to analyze it as a structure of meanings generated by its different components and contributing, each in a different fashion, to its overall meaning (Mukařovský 1941b). This was the opposite of the earlier atomizing tendency to examine the material components one by one, in isolation from each other; it is true that this atomization took a long time to die and that some of the Prague School’s writings show sporadic traces of it, but the main thrust of its efforts was in the opposite direction.

Contrasted assessments of the Prague School’s work on theatre were recently offered by two scholars, both of whom are well acquainted with the subject. František Deák (1976b) holds that it is not possible to speak about a structuralist theory of theatre, because the Prague School never fully applied its conceptual system in this area and because its writings on theatre cannot compare with its contribution to literary theory in either quantity or variety. According to Ladislav Matejka (1976a), on the other hand, it was in the domain of dramatic art that the Prague semiotics of art was worked out most thoroughly. Contradictory though they may be, the two opinions are not mutually exclusive. Theatre studies add up to only a small fraction of the Prague School’s work on art and literature. Moreover, some vital problems of the theory of theatre are dealt with only sketchily and some are barely touched upon. In fact, the Prague Circle focused primarily on general linguistics, and literature overlaps with language so much that literary theory can rely quite systematically on the linguists’ findings. That is not the case with theatre. From this point of view, it is significant that the Prague School’s work on theatre was far superior in quantity and variety to its contribution to the study of the visual arts, music and dance, areas which are still further removed from language.

Precisely because they dealt with phenomena that had little in common with the object of linguistics, these theatre studies brought to light certain problems of the semiotics of art that might otherwise have escaped notice; but of course that does not mean that they always managed to solve them. As the Polish scholar Irena Sławińska (1977) put it, these studies constitute the semiotics of theatre *in statu nascendi*, a fact systematically ignored, until recently,



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by scholars wishing to claim a pioneering role for their own current work in this field.

While that is true of the relatively recent development of this discipline, its more distant past remains mostly unexplored. Elam (1980: 5) exaggerates when he says that until 1931, the year Zich's treatise and an article by Mukařovský on *City Lights* were published, "dramatic poetics – the descriptive science of the drama and theatrical performance – had made little substantial progress since its Aristotelian origins". Semiotics is a very ancient science and the semiotic interpretation of the theatre was not invented in Czechoslovakia between the two World Wars. Besides, Zich's treatise is not purely descriptive, that is to say free from value judgement – a point, incidentally, which Zich himself undertook to explain in his introduction (1931: 11–12). Honzl's writings, too, are strongly marked by implicit value judgements, in his case reflecting a bias in favour of avant-garde theatre, although a clear-cut separation between theory and criticism was one of the principles of the Circle's aesthetic studies.

On the other hand, it is a fact that the Prague conception of the semiotics of theatre owed very little to earlier thinkers. Zich is best left aside in this connection, because he rarely gave any bibliographical references. As for the rest of the Prague School, the corpus of its writings includes a reference to St. Augustine (Jakobson 1933), an article on Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (Honzl 1940a), and a few references to Hegel (Mukařovský 1941, Veltruský 1941b, 1942); as far as I can tell, Johann Jacob Engel's *Ideas for a Theory of Acting* were known only through the critical and analytical summary by the Viennese psychologist Karl Bühler (1933: 36–52), who was himself a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle. The Prague semiotics of theatre was much more strongly influenced by modern currents in philosophy (Edmund Husserl, Heinrich Gomperz, Ernst Cassirer), aesthetics (the school of Johann Friedrich Herbart, Johannes Volkelt, Max Dessoir, Paul Valéry), the theory of theatre (Max Herrmann, Hugo Dinger, Julius Bab), the history of art (the Vienna School) and, above all, the theory of literature and linguistics.

The semiotics of theatre differs in three respects from the other domains explored by the Prague School:

(1) It had scarcely any ties to Russian Formalism, while this strongly influenced the Prague School's theory of literature, aesthetics and ethnography.

Even an early Formalist study by Petr Bogatyrev (1923) on Czech puppet theatre and Russian folk theatre left little mark on the thinking that subsequently developed within the Circle, although Bogatyrev was one of the Circle's leading figures and major contributors to its theory of theatre. Its writings on film are the only area on which the Russian Formalists (especially Jurij Tynjanov, Boris Ejxenbaum and Viktor Šklovskij) left their mark. In its work on dramatic literature, the Prague school practically ignored the writings of Jakubinskij (1923) and Vološinov (1930).

(2) The theoreticians of theatre came from very different backgrounds. Zich, who laid the foundations of the semiotics of theatre, did not regard himself as a semiotician. His starting point was the psychology of aesthetic perception and the key concept of his semiotics, *významová představa* ("semiotic perception", using "perception" in the sense of "mental image"), derived from Johannes Volkelt's concept of *Bedeutungsvorstellung* (Volkelt 1927<sup>2</sup>). No doubt his understanding of theatre owed something to his own artistic activities; his first opera was performed at the Prague National Theatre in 1910, when he was 31 years old (Burjanek 1981). Bogatyrev was an ethnologist who was drawn to the theory of theatre not only through his research into the most diverse forms of folklore and folk art but also through his personal inclination to lace his behaviour with many different elements of acting; throughout his life, he felt drawn to the acting profession (Jakobson 1976b). Jindřich Honzl was a stage director and one of the founding fathers of the Czechoslovak surrealist group. Before embarking on a strictly theoretical study of the theatre, he wrote a great deal about this art in the spirit of the stage directors of his day, mingling theoretical analysis with the propagation of avant-garde artistic views. Jan Mukařovský focused mainly on literary theory and aesthetics; his writings about theatre and film are an integral part of his study of art in all its forms. Roman Jakobson was the only linguist among the scholars in question. He contributed to the semiotics of theatre, film and the dramatic genre at once directly and indirectly, not only through his own articles but also through the influence he exercised over his fellow-members of the Circle thanks to the numerous initiatives he took.

(3) The structural and semiotic conception entered the field of theatre studies in the form of an already complete and coherent theory, that formulated by Zich in his *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art*, published in 1931. In linguistics, literary scholarship, ethnography or aesthetics, on the other hand, the overall

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theory was gradually worked out through separate analyses and interpretations of empirical facts. It seems to me that the reason for this contrast lies in the ephemerality characteristic of the theatrical work of art. This phenomenon is not to be confused with the particularities of the performing arts as such: for example, while a musical work is also ephemeral in its concrete performance, the composition itself nonetheless endures. A theatrical creation has no existence beyond the time of its performance. It can be analyzed only on the basis of the spectator's memory, the literary text, costumes, sets, photographs or sketches of particular situations, recordings, and so on. As for works of the past, especially of the distant past, our knowledge of them depends on indirect clues and pieces of information which have to be interpreted. That is why the historiography of theatre is full of factual errors, and of guesses and interpretations based chiefly on historians' more or less subjective notions of the nature of theatre. The reason why a new conception tends to be presented in the form of a systematic theory seems to be that, in the absence of sufficiently reliable empirical evidence, the only way the validity of any part of the system can be verified is through its logical links with all the other parts. Indeed Zich was by no means alone in taking this course. Other theories of theatre were constructed in the same spirit; that is certainly the case of those put forward by Johann Jacob Engel ([1785–1786]  $\equiv$  1795), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel ([1836–1838]  $\equiv$  1944), Heinrich Theodor Röttscher (1919<sup>3</sup>) and Henri Gouhier (1968), among others. Zich managed to build up his system only at the cost of some simplification or schematization. Among the almost countless functions that the various components of the theatre can have, he took into account only those they assume in what may broadly be called realistic or (in Honzl's terms) conventional theatre. To give just one example: "White theatrical light represents sunlight. ... With various shades of colour, it represents moonlight, a red sky, fire, etc." (Zich 1931: 268).

In a kind of natural reaction against this narrow viewpoint, the younger scholars were inclined to concentrate on describing and analyzing radically different sorts of material (Honzl 1940b). This tendency found its most extreme expression in Karel Brušák's articles on the classical Chinese theatre, which described a dramatic structure made up of highly lexicalized signs with meanings rigorously determined by convention (Brušák 1939a and 1939b). Less radically, the same tendency underlay the attention the Prague Circle paid to

folk theatre, Greek, medieval and Japanese theatre, to the *commedia dell'arte*, and so forth, but above all to avant-garde theatre. These studies demolished certain sections of the system Zich had constructed; but that does not mean that the semioticians of the Prague Circle called his achievement into question. In fact the only one to reject Zich's theory was Bogatyrev, who did so with a curious ferocity, though at the same time he did not always manage to escape his influence. Everything in Zich's work that the study of a broader and more varied range of theatrical forms had not shaken or modified was either tacitly or explicitly recognized as valid. However, the relative importance of the different problems did not remain unchanged.

The studies that appeared after Zich's *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* did not always exhibit the same methodological rigour. Moreover, while they broadened the field covered by the theory of theatre, they disregarded certain crucial problems to which Zich had found solutions that opened up new perspectives for semiotics. Thus the Circle failed to pursue his semiotic exploration of music in the theatre, and of opera as theatre. The reason for this failure was simply that none of these theoreticians of theatre possessed the necessary musicological training. In other cases the break in continuity resulted more seriously from the fact that Zich had raised certain fundamental problems which the semiotics of art would remain unable to solve for many years to come. A typical example was his idea of dividing the components of theatre into the visual and the auditory, and tying this in with the distinction between the arts of space and the arts of time. He pointed out that in theatre the auditory signs are organized in space as well as in time, and that time contributes as much as space to the organization of the visual signs (Zich 1931: 213–224). These are highly topical issues for the semiotics of today, more than fifty years later (Jakobson 1964: 343–344; Gombrich 1979: 285–305; Veltruský 1981a). He also examined the ways the two types of signs and the two principles of their organization mingle and interpenetrate, and found there the basic feature that distinguishes theatre from other forms of art (Zich 1931: 213–214). Although the relationship between visual and auditory signs was studied in connection with film (Jakobson 1933), questions of this kind were never discussed in the Circle with regard to theatre; at best, the distinction between the visual and the acoustic components served as a principle of classification (Brušák 1939b). And on one occasion at least, this idea of Zich's

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was rejected without discussion as avoiding the real problems of the semiotics of theatre (Honzl 1940c).

From a historical point of view, what characterizes the semiotics of theatre sketched out by the Prague School is in the first place its contribution – in certain respects a decisive one – to the effort to understand the theatre as an autonomous art, distinct from all others and governed by its own principles. Before it could do this, it had to get beyond the literary conception of theatre, carry out a critique of the thesis that it is a composite art in which all the other arts are combined, and explore the specific characteristics of the theatrical signs while recognizing their complexity.