The Prague School Theory of Drama: Structuralism, semiotics ... and SFL?
OVERVIEW

PRAGUE SCHOOL
SEMIOTICS
COMMUNICATION
STRUCTURALISM
SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS
“... it is very difficult... to conceive of an adequate semiotics of theatre which takes no account of dramatic canons, action structure, discourse functions and the rhetoric of the dialogue, just as a poetics of the drama which makes no reference to the conditions and principles of the performance has little chance of being more than an eccentric annexe of literary semiotics. ” Elam 2002
PRAGUE SCHOOL

- 1926-1948
- Linguists and theoreticians of literature, theatre and music
- “The Prague School had an enormous influence on the later development of the study of drama and theatre, especially in the field of semiotic, because it analysed dramatic works with respect to the structure and meaning productive processes initiated by dramatic and theatrical signs.” Quinn, 38

- the Prague School provides one of the first sociological models for critical understanding in which the interdisciplinary arts and scholarship of the post-modern era can be seen as more of a gain than a loss, more like a return to common sense than the sometimes strange separation of the arts and other human activities into disciplines – the forced, “organic” closures that more dogmatic theories had achieved. (Quinn 6)

- They treated every element as a sign
Beginnings of Semiotic exploration

Fences
by August Wilson

Act 1, Scene 3

"How come you aint never liked me?"
Prague School and Semiotics

- Signs that can be studied- actor’s words, actors performance, costumes, stage design, sounds, spatial relations between objects and characters, etc. these together create the sign system of the play.

- Th Early Prague school focused on identifying signs rather than classifying them.
In dramatic art the aesthetic function dominates the other elements, but does not eliminate the others. The Prague school approaches literary communication as part of linguistic communication in general; it is not independent of situation. Jakobson and Mukarovsky’s functional attitude deems the aesthetic function as relational; that the very definition of aesthetic is based on the understanding of the communication model where a message is necessarily coded and decoded. (Kacer 2013)
This functional understanding is a wider model of understanding literary art, as it focuses on communication as a whole rather than selectively based on a tradition of literature or the accepted canon.

Therefore the aesthetic then lies in the relationship between the code and the receiver where the subjective component is dominant in communication. Kacer 2013
Referential Function

- Jakobson highlighted that at times the referential supports the aesthetic to a high degree. In the case the content is important. This can be seen in the dramatic speeches that serve to inform the audience, the external communication paradigm, rather than support the internal communication – unfolding of play.

- “The aesthetic centre of drama is not centrally linguistic but contextual/communicational.” Cureton 2000

- 1:39:55 Into the Woods
STRUCTURE:

- identification and description of components.
- The next step is the relationships among the components - hierarchy, dependence, and dominance and the specific pattern of organization. What are the interrelationships and interaction with aesthetic or communicative function?
- The relationship of this structure to other larger higher structures such as the social structure can be studied.
PRAGUE STRUCTURALISM

DEFAMILIARIZATION

FOREGROUNDING/AUTOMATIZATION

Jindrich Honzl – Dynamics of the Sign in Theatre 1940, foregrounding happens when traditional roles of components are changed. For example an actor can be replaced by sound or lighting or words expressed in a painting. Every time a traditional function of a component is replaced by a different new function, the component is being foregrounded.

Viktor Shklovsky 1917 The technique of Art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an esthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.
PRAGUE STRUCTURALISM

concept
sound image

saussure
(in language)

signified
signifier

esthetic object
artifact

mukařovský
(in art)
Ingarden and the Prague School, David Herman

“Despite the groundbreaking researches of theorists like Ingarden and Mukarovsky and Jakobson, we have yet to develop analytical tools precise enough to understand the forms as well as the functions of literary discourse. Modern day linguistic and literary theory can help us craft such tools...{Roman Ingarden’s work} teaches us that only a dual allegiance to text and context, structure and function, can give us real insight into literary work.” 486

Nina Norgaard Systemic functional language...

Stylistics has often been looked down upon because of the myth that it “entails a fundamental separation of text from context, linguistic description from linguistic interpretation, or language form situation.” Toolan 1992 xiv

In contrast ...Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics appears to be a useful model for bridging the gap between linguistics and literary criticism because it combines text with context, linguistic description with linguistic interpretation, and language with situation...” p11
“Both Halliday and Hasan... see the stylistic tradition through Russian Formalist and Prague structuralist schools as part of the theoretical antecedents for the orientation to the study of verbal art which has developed in systemic functional work.”

Hasan 1985 credits Mukarovsky as having produced “the most coherent view of the nature of verbal art and its relation to language.” Lukin and Webster 413-414


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