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## A meta-structuralist trap: Periodisation and Jan Mukařovský's structuralism

Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975), literary and aesthetic theorist, co-founder and leading member of the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC), occupies a very prominent position in Czech humanities and remains one of the most recognizable Czech scholars both at home and abroad. Although his early works were published a hundred years ago, scholarly interest in his efforts continues unabated.<sup>1</sup> The breadth of available literature and reference material – on both his theories and Mukařovský himself – is mostly the offshoot of Mukařovský often being seen as embodying the structuralism of the Prague School and simultaneously its foremost Czech proponent. This structuralism has since gone on to become one of the most distinguished and internationally acclaimed achievements of Czech humanities. This particular position often serves as not only the destination but also the starting point of many a Czech research project aimed at investigating the “structuralism of Jan Mukařovský”.

In this article, I will focus primarily on the narratives generated by scholarly (and often cultural) inquiries on the topic of structuralism and the figure of Jan Mukařovský himself, in his incarnation as “the foremost representative of the Prague School”, and the resulting additional meanings imbued therein. The body of secondary literature on structuralism

<sup>1</sup> Mukařovský began writing short pieces, mostly theatre commentaries, already in 1917–1920 for the Pilsen-based newsletter *Umění všem* (Sládek, 2015, p. 63).

is a very peculiar collection. Aside from discussing individual problems and issues rooted directly in Mukařovský's theories, they often interpret or develop them further (and, taken together, make up a very interesting and valuable subsection of Czech aesthetic and literary theory). In many aspects, they also come together into specific "stories" – about Mukařovský, the history of structuralism, or both at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

The periodization that provides the framework underlying these "stories" usually has two distinct forms: the first is historical periodization – unquestioned, "textbook", imposed by immutable past events. In this case, the timeframes overlap – with regard to structuralism as a whole as well as to the figure of Jan Mukařovský. The second is "thematic" periodization, employed in the "narrative about the structuralism of Jan Mukařovský" – its frames defined directly by elements of scholarly inquiry, with the choice of respective turning points driven by the distribution of emphases in a given interpretation. The objective of the analysis below is not to question the viability of using an instrument like periodization to scrutinize phenomena that change over time, but rather to identify those elements of the practice that may be misleading and these of its results that suppress insight rather than promote it.

## "The fateful eights"

Historical periodization is sweeping in scope and applies not just to Mukařovský himself, but to the whole of structuralism seen as legacy or a cultural phenomenon. It is generally assumed that the so-called Prague School period began in 1926, following the founding of the Prague Linguistic Circle, a scholarly association dominated by linguistic and literary theorists with a bent toward structuralism and functionalism. Because the early years of Mukařovský's academic career are institutionally linked with the PLC, the year 1926 often marks the beginning of narratives exploring his scholarly work (although it is used interchangeably with 1923, the date of his first academic publication).<sup>3</sup> Subsequent turning points, in both the history of the Prague School and the life of Mukařovský himself, often fall on years comprising the traditional Czech category of "the fateful eights" (*osudové osmičky* in Czech) – years ending in the number eight that Czechs consider watershed

<sup>2</sup> The existence of an extensive web of "stories" about something so veritably un-literary as a theory-direction-methodology (in literary theory, no less) was first pointed out by Danuta Ulicka in *Literaturoznawcze dyskursy możliwe. Studia z dziejów nowoczesnej teorii literatury w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej* [The Possible Discourses of Literary Theory: Studies of the History of Contemporary Literary Theory in Central and Eastern Europe] (Ulicka, 2007, pp. 79–126).

<sup>3</sup> The year marks the publication of *Příspěvek k estetice českého verše* (Mukařovský, 1923).

points whose events shaped the future trajectory of the country. These “fateful eights” usually include 1918, 1938, 1948, and 1968; in a slightly perverse twist, some scholars tend to append the year 1989 to the list (Čornej, Pokorný, Bartlová, et al., 1999; Emmert, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Two of these, 1948 and 1968, carry particular significance to the history of Czech structuralism (although the year 1989 ultimately altered its course, too; more on that below). The year 1938, marking the conclusion of the Munich Agreement (the first of the fateful eights since the inception of the PLC), played a considerably smaller role, and most authors agree that it ultimately had little influence on Mukařovský's academic work. Obversely, the 1938–1939 period affected the PLC profoundly, primarily due to the loss of a number of distinguished members: the deaths of Nikolai Trubetzkoy (phonologist) and Otokar Fischer (Germanic philology expert), the emigration of Roman Jakobson (linguist), René Wellek (literary theorist), and Petr Bogatyrev (folklorist), and the departure of many others for a variety of reasons. Despite these losses, the Circle did not stop either its academic or publishing efforts, although many scholars point out that the 1938–1939 period marked the irrevocable end of an important, some even say pivotal, era in the group's history (Sládek, 2015, p. 238; Toman, 2011, p. 261). The years 1948 and 1968, on the other hand, had a decisive impact on both the history of Czech structuralism as well as the academic career of Mukařovský himself. In either case, the events of those years ultimately contributed to the creation of a sweeping, mythologizing narrative that still holds true today.

The year 1948, with its “Victorious February” (*vítězný únor* in Czech), the name that the Communists used to denote their Soviet-backed takeover of the Czechoslovak government, marked the end of conventional, unhindered academic work. The efforts of the entire PLC were either hampered by strict political control or channeled elsewhere. Mukařovský began involving himself with extracurricular and political activities already in the mid-1940s. Appointed deputy rector of Charles University in the spring of 1948, he was soon promoted to the post of rector (Sládek, 2015, pp. 308–327). Also around that time, efforts were undertaken to revise structuralism as a whole after the authorities denounced the methodology as idealist, and as such detrimental to the progress of socialist society. Until the early 1950s, scholars strove to focus the discussions on the merits of the subject and problematized simple negations however they could, but soon enough all academic publications were brought to heel and began speaking with one voice.

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<sup>4</sup> Czech TV has also been broadcasting a series on the subject called *Osudové osmičky: Kalendárium událostí našich dějin* since 2008.

In the period immediately following the “Victorious February”, Mukařovský found himself among those criticizing the theories that he himself has been developing merely years before. And his conduct in 1948 is still fairly difficult to interpret unambiguously: in November, he delivered a lecture entitled *Kam směřuje dnešní teorie umění* [The Direction of Contemporary Theory of Art],<sup>5</sup> during which he demonstrated a decidedly Marxist methodological orientation; later that year, he published a three-volume collection of his earlier texts, *Kapitoly z české poetiky* [Chapters in Czech Poetics], which offered a summary of his prior scholarly efforts.<sup>6</sup> In 1949 (at the gala celebrating his second term as rector of Charles University), he delivered another lecture, *Socialistická stranickost ve vědě o umění* [The Socialist Tendency in Science and Art], which made no effort to obfuscate Mukařovský's ideological affiliation. Later that year, the lecture was published in a small volume under the same name. His 1951 essay, however, *Ke kritice strukturalismu v naší literární vědě* [On the Critique of Structuralism in Our Literary Studies], was the source of much controversy among his fellow scholars. Although the majority of the essay comprises a sober comparative analysis of structuralism and Marxism, many of the passages had Mukařovský highlight the “faults” of the theoretical positions he championed barely a couple of years prior:

I tried to participate in this revisionist drive by engaging in a critique of this bourgeois current in literary theory whose growth I have been actively fostering since its earliest days. Therefore, bearing in mind the effort to remake our academia and my own future scholarly efforts, I have decided that it was my duty to help overcome its anachronism. (Mukařovský, 1951, p. 155)<sup>7</sup>

Following a trajectory used by most thinkers,<sup>8</sup> the main thrust of his critique was aimed against the idealist aspect of structuralism, impossible to defend within the context of the new reality:

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<sup>5</sup> Later published in the magazine *Slovo a slovesnost* (Mukařovský, 1948, p. 49).

<sup>6</sup> The first two volumes were published in 1941, with a second edition printed in 1948, expanded by the addition of a third volume featuring the so-called “Mácha studies”. The latter was collection encapsulating all his prior structuralist-centred academic efforts, but already exhibiting a pronounced Marxist turn – the introduction featured a different interpretation of some of the author's older studies, while the Czech language version of *K pojmosloví československé teorie umění*, initially published in Polish a year prior (*Myśl Współczesna*, 1947, 1) was given additional text that slightly shifted its meaning.

<sup>7</sup> “Pokusil jsem se přispět k této revizi kritickým rozbořením onoho z boržoazních literárněvědných směrů, jehož vývoje jsem se činně účastnil od samých začátků. Právě proto jsem pokládal za svou povinnost k přestavbě naší vědy i k vlastní další práci pomoci při překonávání jeho přežitku”.

<sup>8</sup> Not just Marxist ones – he was also attacked by other independent critics; first by Mikhail Bakhtin and later, since the 1960s onwards, by Western critics who took the abstract nature of the system and its sequestered ideology and made it into one of the main charges against him.

Particularly in its later stages, structuralism, because of its pursuit of absolute orderliness and the resultant illusion of scholarliness, helped conceal the true, reactionary face of bourgeoisie literary scholarship. (Mukařovský, 1951, p. 164)<sup>9</sup>

As a result of these events and the shifts in Mukařovský's attitudes, it is generally assumed that the "structuralism of the Prague School" came to an end in 1948.<sup>10</sup> This moment in history ultimately reshaped, and for whole decades to come, scholarship on structuralism and particularly its most representative subsection, that is the academic output of Jan Mukařovský. This ostensibly "natural" periodization has left a permanent mark on the inquiries of Czech literary scholars. On the one hand, it has reshaped the thinking on structuralism as a section of literary theory, and rechanneled the narrative about Jan Mukařovský himself.

## The structuralism narrative

In his analyses of its imagery and its symbolic significance to the Czechs, Piotr Gierowski, the pre-eminent Polish scholar on the legacy of the Prague School, often writes of the "Czech dream of structuralism" (Gierowski, 2010, p. 175). The term is a reference to the "dream" metaphor, coined by Vladimír Macura, widely considered the top expert on the Czech National Revival (Macura, 1998). But while Macura used it to dispel the illusions and myths that have accrued around Czech nineteenth century, Gierowski employs it to interrogate Czech structuralism, precisely describing the mythologizing undertones of its attendant narratives, emerging around it almost since its very inception.<sup>11</sup> Writing about certain elements of the parastructuralist narrative, focused on "Czechness" as opposed to "Europeanness", "Germanness", or "Slavicness", he eventually adds that structuralism was a "dream" fulfilled and in this particular context it is rather hard to disagree with the assessment. However, "metastructuralist" interpretations of the events of 1948 necessarily shift our earlier optics. Taken together, a deep belief in being misjudged, violently held back when performing at peak

<sup>9</sup> "Dokonce pak pomáhal strukturalismus, zejména v svém pozdějším vývoji, právě svým úsilím o naprostou systematicčnost, a tím i zdánlivou vědeckostí zastírat pravou reakční tvář buržoazní literární vědy".

<sup>10</sup> Most dictionaries, lexicons, and studies generally assume that the PLC functioned from 1926 to 1948, even though the Prague Linguistic Circle *de facto* shut down only in 1952 (to later reopen its doors in 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Here, Gierowski focuses on the semiotic narratives accrued around "Czechness", "Europeanness", "Germanness", and "Slavicness", categories which Czech scholars have been employing in interpretations and self-analyses for many years, starting way back when the PLC and its members enjoyed much greater degree of academic and personal freedom.

capacity, and having one's history brutally interrupted, produce within the cultural memory an impression of being prematurely awakened from the "dream", rather than seeing it to the end. That, in turn, has left a distinct mark on the dominant elements of the structuralism narrative at a time when the said "unfulfillment" could have been verbalized.

The renaissance of structuralism that took place in the 1960s when the "thaw" in Czechoslovakian culture and politics (not without reason called the Golden Sixties, or *zlatá šedesátá*) allowed scholars to relaunch their structuralist inquiries and, to some extent, rehabilitated the methodology and the figure of Mukařovský himself, serves as a peculiar coda to the history of Czech structuralism, usually bookended by the dates 1926 and 1948. The year 1966 marked the publication of the anthology *Struktura a smysl literárního díla* [The Structure and Meaning of the Literary Work], which discussed the key elements and problems of Mukařovský's theories. The volume was followed later that same year by *Studie z estetiky* [Studies in Aesthetics], a comprehensive selection of Mukařovský's texts, including previously unpublished works.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the younger generation of structuralists, including figures such as Lubomír Doležel, Milan Jankovič, and Miroslav Červenka, developed their individual interpretations of their teacher's theories, creatively adapting his concepts and theses. In 1968, an interdisciplinary conference was held in Brno on structuralism in the context of historical research, but the year, another one of the "fateful eights", marks the definitive end of the story.<sup>13</sup> Soon afterwards, Warsaw Pact military forces under Soviet command rolled into Czechoslovakia to render "fraternal help" to the beleaguered regime by suppressing the so-called "Prague Spring". The ensuing crackdown soon put an end to any notions of academic freedom.<sup>14</sup>

This "new wave" of structuralism was particularly mythogenic: publishing and promotional efforts (particularly the publication of Mukařovský's earlier and previously unpublished works) were a deliberate attempt to unearth the legacy of the 1930s and 1940s, to show structuralism as a methodology that was still very much alive and capable of keeping up with

<sup>12</sup> Two previously unreleased texts from the mid-1940s (*K metodologii literární vědy* and *Básník a dílo*) have also been published in 1968 in the *Orientace* magazine.

<sup>13</sup> We should also note that another two volumes of Mukařovský's studies and inquiries were published in 1971: *Cestami poetiky a estetiky*, edited by Květoslav Chvatík and Bohumila Svozila, and *Výbor z literárněteoretických statí Jana Mukařovského*, edited by Miroslav Procházka. The year 1981 marked the publication of the first editions of Mukařovský's collected 1933–1934 lectures, *Filozofie jazyka básnického* and *Filozofie básnické struktury*; curiously, the volumes were not released in Czechoslovakia, but were published by the Munich-based Slavic studies magazine *Wiener slawistischer Almanach* (cf. Mukařovský, 1981a, 1981b). Aside from the above-mentioned texts, the 1981 issues of the magazine featured a number of texts written by Czech scholars, including Milan Jankovič, Miroslav Červenka, and Josef Vachek.

<sup>14</sup> The events of 1968 led to the emigration of many highly acclaimed scholars, including František Svejkský, Lubomír Doležel, Mojmír Grygar, Květoslav Chvatík.

the latest trends in the humanities: after all, the period marked the heyday of the “other”, Western structuralism. In *Studie z estetiky*, Felix Vodička offers a candid description:

We publish them [the Studies – author's note] not to resurrect structuralism as a system, but to harness the potential it conceals, the potential to improve the perception of the methodical, tireless work that went into advancing our knowledge of art and our thinking thereof. (Vodička, 1966, p. 13)<sup>15</sup>

The period “after 1968”, however, had at least as big an impact. Discussing it in another essay, Milan Jankovič wrote that despite their forced separation from the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (*Ústav pro českou literaturu České akademie věd in Czech*)<sup>16</sup> in the early 1970s, he and other Mukařovský's students continued to meet and work “underground” in order to preserve at least a semblance of freedom to discuss and exchange ideas. This, in turn, allowed them to process and resist the professional and ideological limitations and the political situation imposed upon them:

We found our way to each other. Divisions into methodological and ideological camps simply ceased to exist, and were replaced by a need to seek each other out, need for tolerance, and faith that we were meeting for a reason, even if our politics may not have been exactly the same. That there was common space, if only for a few hours, where we all knew we would be listened to. Where we knew there would be people who wanted to listen, if not exactly agree with us. We had the same goals, but different ways of achieving them. Perceiving our shared situation and a fervent desire to salvage it were key and necessary elements of the *medvědáři* meetings. (Jankovič, 2000, pp. 77–78)<sup>17</sup>

The mythmaking undertones of that trip down memory lane can be interrogated from two separate perspectives: on the one hand, structuralism became a weapon against

<sup>15</sup> “Otiskujeme je dnes ne proto, aby byl obnoven strukturalismus jako systém, ale proto, aby byla využita iniciativa v nich skrytá, aby byla zhodnocena systematická práce, jež posunula naše vědění o umění a naše myšlení o umění podstatně dopředu”.

<sup>16</sup> Which was their place of employment throughout the 1950s – when Mukařovský, as a result of his political machinations, was director there (technically from its inception in 1952).

<sup>17</sup> “Nalézali jsme cestu k sobě. Rozdělení na metodologické a ideové tábory jistě nepřestalo platit. Ale zrodila se potřeba vyhledávat se, tolerovat se a věřit, že máme proč se i přes rozlišné názory stýkat. Že existuje společný prostor, byť vždy jen na několik hodin, prostor, v němž jeden má zájem o to, co říká ten druhý. Že ho chce slyšet, i když s ním nemusí souhlasit. Ale ví, že ten druhý usiluje o něco obdobného, třebaže jinak. Pohled na společnou situaci a chuť to nevzdat, to bylo to rozhodující a potřebné na schůzkách *medvědářů*”. The *Medvědáři* were an unofficial group of literary theorists that continued to nurture the structuralist tradition after being expelled from academic institutions during the normalization period, their meetings were usually held in private apartments (the gatherings, organized by Jaroslav Kolár, were usually attended by Miroslav Červenka, Milan Jankovič, Robert Kalivoda, and others).

totalitarianism because it allowed people to seek and find refuge for their spirit and their identity in the intellectual realm; on the other: preserved and maintained at such high a cost, the legacy of the humanities seemed in the long run to be a treasure of great value. Hampering previously unfettered academic efforts at the institutional and ideological level, produced in the long run a specific vision of “what had failed to come to pass”.

The years after the upheaval of 1989 offered ample opportunity to engage in a revision of Czech structuralism. The Czech liberal arts circles, primarily the literary theorists and historians, were fully aware not only of the immense value of their national heritage, but also the challenges that they would face after their lengthy absence from international academia. Although the pre-1948 accomplishments of the Prague School and its adherents garnered widespread scholarly acclaim at home and abroad, the revival and rehabilitation of the methodology after 1968 and, to a much greater degree, after 1989 never really took root outside Czechoslovakia. The circumstances of this belated renaissance in the 1990s were highly peculiar: (1) Western liberal arts were dominated by so-called poststructuralism, (2) at its core, “poststructuralism” negated the basic tenets of “structuralism”. This rather schizophrenic situation led to multiple attempts to situate the Czech movement or the works of particular scholars (primarily Mukařovský) within the new realities or to demonstrate somehow that poststructuralism and the Czech strain of structuralism share a theoretical foundation (Kubínová, 1999; Petříček, 1991; Sládek, 2006). Behind the scenes, however, another problem loomed: the inconsistencies and ambiguities plaguing the typology of past trends in literary studies, a product of these typologies’ sustained disregard for the efforts of the Prague School. Czech scholars quickly noticed that their local strain of structuralism had no separate status as a theory or methodology.<sup>18</sup> At most, mainstream literary theory either considered it a more mature phase of Russian formalism<sup>19</sup> or equated it with French structuralism (Chvatík, 1991, p. 157; Volek, 2006 p. 35), which, as I already mentioned above, the newly ascendant post-structuralism essentially negated. This confusion was indubitably a consequence of the Prague School’s tumultuous history, but it was definitely aggravated by the fact that original Czech primary source texts were more or less unknown in the West. The fact that some scholars, like Jakobson, for example, were considered key figures in more than one “school” further added to the confusion. Awareness of these difficult circumstances

<sup>18</sup> As noted by Emil Volek, when the existence of the Prague School was acknowledged, it was usually as a result of an illusory teleological sequence of centres of structuralist thought: Petersburg, Prague, Paris (Volek, 2006, p. 34).

<sup>19</sup> That particular problem was already a challenge for Czech scholars back in the heyday of the PLC.

more or less shaped both the style and the rhetoric of much of the post-1989 scholarship. In their tireless efforts to restore their local strain of structuralism to mainstream international humanities, the Czechs had to emphasize its distinctness from both Russian formalism and French structuralism.

Although drawing chiefly on its widespread appreciation and the inspiring strength of its accomplishments, interest in the Prague School, still very much alive today, particularly in local Czech contexts, is rooted in this highly specific historical legacy. Structuralism itself accrued a number of ancillary, almost mythological meanings. Embedding them within a periodization framework, particularly those defined by two of the “fateful eights” – 1948 and 1968 – shifts the centre of gravity of academic inquiry from theory and its contexts toward the history of the said theory and its own contexts. Moreover, it strengthens what seems a dependence of these issues on what we might call “fate” in this particular instance. In the case of structuralism – and in contrast to the case of Mukařovský himself, but more on that later – its (predetermined) surrender to Marxism and to new political realities has been recorded in its own historical narrative as a peculiar act of martyrdom which ultimately elevated Czech structuralism to a sort of sanctity, turning it into a phenomenon in and of itself, one whose semantic scope encompassed the entire multi-level field of reference. The most apt commentary on the matter can be found in the words of Emil Volek: “Our structuralism, a part of our history, our cultural existence, and our hearts – we are, after all, these emotional, Slavic souls (...)” (Volek, 2006, p. 41).<sup>20</sup>

## **The Jan Mukařovský narrative**

As I already mentioned above, the 1926–1948 period is generally considered the window wherein structuralism functioned as a practical theory, or when the structuralist ideas were viable, along with a brief “Prague School revival” that took place in the late 1960s. In the case of Mukařovský himself, as I already discussed before, the historical narrative is based on the same periodization, with the “starting point” sometimes shifted to 1923, the date of Mukařovský's first publication. There is one subtle difference, however: although the year 1948 closes the classic period in his work, its semantic (and symbolic) load is different and so is its impact – on both the “historic” and the “substantive” narrative.

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<sup>20</sup> “Náš strukturalismus, část naší historie, našeho kulturního bytí i našeho srdce – jsme přece ty emotivní slovanské duše (...)”.

The above-described decisions the scholar made in the Stalinist period have left a deep mark on his life, both private and academic. In the symbolic sphere, by renouncing structuralism Mukařovský also renounced not only his own work, but the very intellectual legacy of his homeland. This ambiguity only aggravated the proportions of the whole act. The viability of that problem is well illustrated by how it manifested itself in the recently published monograph (which I already brought up a number of times above) on the life and work of the pre-eminent Czech structuralist, written by Ondřej Sládek (Sládek, 2015), as well as how it was dealt with by the reviewers. We should also note here that although there were hundreds of columns and essays written on Mukařovský, Sládek's was the first attempt at compiling a substantive monograph or a biography. Sládek, a specialist on the legacy of the Prague School, had to know how tensely his work would be anticipated and how it would portray Mukařovský's post-1948 actions. The monograph features a chapter called "Čas úkolů a povinností" [A Time of Tasks and Duties], which gradually introduces the most controversial events from Mukařovský's biography in as neutral a manner as possible. Sládek later points out that there are three possible interpretations of Mukařovský's actions. The first rejects Mukařovský's self-critique and refuses to consider him a weak man who surrendered to Communist authorities and betrayed academic ideals (this approach often entails adopting a negative view of Mukařovský's decisions that presumes that his attitude shift was driven by self-interest). The second ignores and rejects everything that happened after 1948, labelling it political rather than academic activity, and instead emphasizes and reappreciates Mukařovský's pre-1948 efforts (rather than promote a particular appraisal of Mukařovský's work and actions, this approach embraces an understanding of the then political situation in Czechoslovakia and Mukařovský's personal circumstances). The third and final interpretation presumes a comprehensive analysis of the evolution and trajectory of Mukařovský's work against the historical, social, and cultural realities of 1950s Czechoslovakia (this approach also avoids making moral judgments, instead striving toward an understanding of the reasons behind the analyzed situation) (Sládek, 2015, p. 334). As a scholar, Sládek identifies with the third option and strives to seek continuity in Mukařovský's life and his theories. This approach of his manifests itself first and foremost in his tendency to treat all of Mukařovský's work in a uniform manner and his taking into consideration Mukařovský's post-1948 efforts. Sládek argued that the embrace of Marxism, or "dialectical materialism" to be precise, marked a juncture in Mukařovský's

theoretical efforts and was something of a breakthrough as far as the substance of his work is concerned – mirroring the “triumph” of structuralism over formalism that took place earlier in his academic career (Sládek, 2015, p. 314).

What was the reaction of the local liberal arts circles? Already in 2016, two reviews of Sládek's work, authored by Milana Jankovič and Petr Šámal, were published in the same issue of the prestigious Czech magazines *Česká literatura*.<sup>21</sup> Both discussed the monograph extensively, including Sládek's handling of Mukařovský's post-1948 exploits, their place in Sládek's general argument, and their influence on the overall impact of the book. Both are also quick to identify the weak points of the portion of the book dedicated to the “time of tasks and duties”, which not only speaks volumes about the book itself and its author, but also testifies to the pressure that the author of this “long awaited monograph” (a phrase which made it into the title of Milan Jankovič's review) was subject to. It was also Jankovič, in his capacity as very close student and friend of Mukařovský, who decided to include some personal comments in the review. In these asides, he discussed the situation that his mentor found himself in, the shift in his theoretical inquiries, and the specifics of the context, while accentuating the real impact that Marxism, or “dialectical thought”, had on the scholar and arguing – against Sládek – that the meaning and style of those of Mukařovský's works that were unambiguously political should be judged with the same analytical detachment that was applied to his other efforts, but simultaneously should not be equated with his pre-1948 work. Sládek's ambitious intention to paint Mukařovský's life and work as a consistent whole was ultimately critiqued by the other reviewer, Petr Šámal, who pointed out the numerous traps that awaited those who adopted either overly critical or overly apologetic attitudes toward the life and work of the structuralist thinker. Šámal summarized the argument thus: “In whole, the author is rather kind toward Jan Mukařovský; perhaps, at times, even too kind” (Šámal, 2016).<sup>22</sup>

In their remarks on Sládek's handling of that critical period in Mukařovský's biography, both reviewers referred to what is widely considered a classic in the study of Czech structuralism – *Jana Mukařovského rozchod se strukturalismem* [Jan Mukařovský's Break With Structuralism] Miroslav Červenka's (another of Mukařovský's highly acclaimed students) blistering censure or his former mentor (Červenka, 1991). First published in 1991

<sup>21</sup> The *Dvakrát o knize “Jan Mukařovský. Život a dílo”* block included two reviews: M. Jankovič, *Dlouho očekávaná monografie* (Jankovič, 2016) and P. Šámal, *Jak psát o životě a díle* (Šámal, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> “Celkově je autor k Janu Mukařovskému laskavý; obávám se, že místy až příliš”.

in the *Tvar* magazine,<sup>23</sup> the text is a sweeping reckoning with the author's mentor's "self-critique" and, to an extent, a reckoning with the impact of Stalinism on Czech science and culture. In the essay, Červenka identified three aspects of the events of the 1940s that he (and his generation) found especially problematic. The first involved a paradoxical causal relationship: for his renunciation of his own prior accomplishments, Mukařovský was allowed to retain certain high-level positions which were first granted him precisely in recognition of the said accomplishments. On the other hand, however, these positions allowed Mukařovský to carve out an academic enclave where a new generation of scholars could thrive and flourish (Červenka, 1991, p. 1).

The second vexation was with Mukařovský's genuine "infatuation" with Marxism.<sup>24</sup> Červenka argues that the shift in his mentor's worldview was a gradual process and that his 1951 essay came as no surprise to those who were aware of his trajectory. What hurt the most, however, was having to contend with the metamorphosis of a man heretofore considered the top authority in the field,

(...) seeing this creative personality, the admired mentor, gradually renounce his own and sacrifice his identity in the pursuit of what he mistakenly believed to be of interest to people and to culture. I say *gradually* because 1951 anti-structuralist essay was not exactly an unexpected watershed moment, his path toward it had started already in 1945, reaching a climax after the February coup d'état in had 1948. And when I say *mistakenly believed to be of interest*, I mean that the process unfolded primarily within the realm of the scholar's own beliefs. (Červenka, 1991, p. 1)<sup>25</sup>

Then, Červenka explores the specifics of the then historical situation and its attendant illusions, formerly believed to be genuine promises of a better life in post-WW2 realities. The author also emphasized the fact that there were no points of convergence between structuralism and Marxism, regardless of how strongly we would like to conflate the two positions. Červenka later wrote that the third and final vexation (*trapeň* in Czech) lay with structuralism itself. The author asked himself a crucial question: Which of structuralism's weak points so debilitated its foremost proponent? He ponders the ideas or the way of

<sup>23</sup> Later, the text was also included in Miroslav Červenka's *Obléhání zevnitř* (1996).

<sup>24</sup> Hana Šmahelová also noted that the term did not imply a "growing affinity between structuralism and Marxism" but an affinity toward a political ideology (Šmahelová, 2015, p. 112).

<sup>25</sup> "(...) pohled na tvořivou osobnost, na obdivovaného učitele, který se postupně zříká obsahu svého tvoření a vlastní identitu obětuje tomu, co mylně pokládá za zájem lidu a kultury. Říkám postupně, neboť protistrukturalistické vystoupení z roku 1951 nebylo zlomem cesta k němu byla nastoupena už r. 1945 a dovršena po únorovém převratu. A říkám-li, mylně pokládá za zájem atd., myslím tím, že tento vývoj probíhal v rovině učenčova přesvědčení".

thinking that have been present in Mukařovský's theories since the very beginning and later, under the influence of certain impulses, facilitated the scholar's turn toward Marxism in its Stalinist incarnation. Červenka writes:

The answers will be different. I keep going back to the theme of analogy between work and reality, one based on a shared order. Structuralism is, after all, a structuring activity, at its base a pre-reflective obsession with imposing order on anything, from vowel systems, through Baudelaire's sonnets, up to culture as a whole. (Červenka, 1991, p. 5)<sup>26</sup>

While pointing at the idea of order and structure sitting at the base of the word "*řád*", he simultaneously questioned its premise, because Mukařovský was nevertheless far from applying the structuralist reading of art to reality.<sup>27</sup>

Červenka's text, as the author himself keeps pointing out, is an attempt at drafting a rational and impartial interpretation of that perplexing situation, along with its contexts and consequences. The text paints a somewhat bitter, but nevertheless kind portrait of Mukařovský. Červenka goes on to reveal that both he and other Mukařovský's disciples not only remained his students but stayed by their mentor's side throughout his twilight years. The resilience of their relationship – and Mukařovský's continued influence – seems to be further corroborated by the fact that soon after the fall of Communism these same disciples undertook efforts to "rehabilitate" their mentor's somewhat tarnished public image. Červenka's essay in *Tvar* was followed with a brief announcement of an academic conference that would celebrate the centenary of Mukařovský's birth in 1991. The announcement, entitled *Paměť jako východisko* [Memory as a Starting Point] and written by another one of his students, acclaimed literary theorist and historian Zdeněk Pešat, highlighted the need for a genuine discussion of the merits of structuralism in its classic interpretation and the cognitive potential of its legacy. Pešat wrote:

We can only hope that focusing the conference on the key problems of structuralist art studies which, coincidentally, recur in contemporary literary studies, will ultimately contribute to the rehabilitation of their memory and self-awareness. Both in the realm of previous structuralist inquiries as well as the interrogation of the necessity of internal differentiation, of diversification of world views and methodologies, and the determi-

<sup>26</sup> "Odpovědi budou různé. Mně se opětovně vrací motiv analogie mezi dílem a skutečností vybudované na tom, že sdílají jakýsi řád. Strukturalismus je strukturující činnost, u dna má předreflexivní posedlost vnášet řád do čehokoli, od samoháskového systému přes Baudelairův sonet až po úhrn kultury".

<sup>27</sup> The relationship has also been the subject of a very interesting inquiry by Hana Šmahelová (Šmahelová, 2015).

nation of different perspective on the subjects, all of which are basic prerequisites of free and unconstrained academic research. (Pešat, 1991, p. 6)<sup>28</sup>

In addition, the issue also featured a fragment of a previously unpublished 1934 Mukařovský's lecture, *Z filozofie básnické struktury* [On the Philosophy of Poetic Structure],<sup>29</sup> with a brief introduction by Milan Jankovič. The passage implies that a work of art should be viewed primarily through the lens of its aesthetic function rather than comprise unmediated signs of the real world; regardless of their proximity to it, all extra-aesthetic value of a work of art simply resides within its structure. In his brief introduction, Jankovič summons that part of Jan Mukařovský's legacy – the theory that recognized art's place and function within the real world, but simultaneously acknowledged its autonomy and the peculiar nature of its expression (Jankovič, 1991, p. 5).

Coming back to Červenka's essay, this important reckoning with Mukařovský's "self-critique" is referenced in Sládek's monograph and has been alluded to by the majority of scholars studying Czech structuralism at least once in their analyses. The lively debate it has given rise to continues even today. Although a more comprehensive reconstruction thereof exceeds the scope of this article, we should still take a closer look at a couple of the more prominent voices that have taken part in it. A specific counterpoint to Červenka's assertions can be found in the writings of Václav Černý, published in a multi-volume edition of his journals (Černý, 1992). Černý not only unambiguously lambasts Mukařovský for his "problematic" decisions, but goes on to offer a blistering critique of structuralism itself, pointing out a slew of flaws across all levels: from content, through style, up to its proclivity for self-aggrandizement (prominent, for example, in the narrative about continuing local Czech aesthetic traditions).<sup>30</sup>

One other prominent voice, active in recent years, is that of Hana Šmahelová, the author of *O vědě, ideologii a strukturalismu* [On Science, Ideology, and Structuralism] (Šmahelová, 2015) and *Tvorba jako problém odpovědnosti. Nad dílem J. Mukařovského v letech 1945–1948*

<sup>28</sup> "Lze jen doufat, že koncentrace konference ke klíčovým problémům strukturalistické uměnovědy, jež zároveň jsou i stále se vracějícími otázkami současné literární vědy, přispěje k obnově její paměti a k jejímu sebeuvědomění. A to jak ve směru, kterým se nesla strukturalistická tazání, tak také jako poznání nezbytnosti vnitřní diferenciac, názorového a metodologického rozrůznění a jako vyhraňování různých úhlů pohledu na vlastní předmět, což vše tvoří základní podmínku, bez níž nelze mluvit o svobodném vědeckém bádání".

<sup>29</sup> The text was published in its entirety in a 1993 collection of Mukařovský's 1930s lectures, *Básnická sémantika*. The introduction penned by Jankovič for that particular issue of *Tvar*, as well as the passage from the Mukařovský study, were intended to attract sponsors who would be interested in financing the publication.

<sup>30</sup> A more detailed write-up of Černý's attitude toward Mukařovský and structuralism itself can be found in Jiří Pelán's *Václav Černý a strukturalismus*, published in *Svět literatury* in 2017 (Pelán, 2017).

[Creative Output as Problem of Responsibility. On the 1945–1948 Works of J. Mukařovský] (Šmahelová, 2002). Although Šmahelová finds herself among those scholars with a rather harsh view of the events of the 1940s and 1950s, she was quick to acknowledge that the problem was not limited to Mukařovský – rather, it sat at the intersection of structuralism, deeply ideologized authority, and a perversion of the scientific paradigm, and *de facto* applied to the situation of the individual, with respect to history, art, and society. A weakened position of the individual stemming from the continued supremacy of the inhumane “higher order” inevitably results in the atrophy of ethics and degradation of “individual responsibility” (Šmahelová, 2015, p. 113). The scholar also pondered Mukařovský's embrace of the “noetic position” (*noetické stanovisko* in Czech) and its impact on his perception of the individual in sociopolitical contexts and his view of his own self (Šmahelová, 2002). Her interpretation of the issue is an attempt to explore the deeper motivations driving specific changes in the theoretical interpretations apparent in the scholar's texts, particularly his 1951 “self-critique” published in *Tvorba*. In the introduction to *O vědě, ideologii a strukturalismu*, Šmahelová asserts:

in the text, under a superficial layer of obvious rhetoric, there unfolds a clash between science and ideology, between the yearning for knowledge and the desire for power. The goal of these ruminations is to identify these aspects as a problem of a more general nature, one that transcends specific historical circumstances of Communist totalitarianism. (Šmahelová, 2015, p. 105)<sup>31</sup>

Such a position, adopted by both Šmahelová and Červenka, may raise some methodological doubts, a fact pointed out by distinguished literary scholar and theorist Peter Steiner. Steiner later used the observation as a starting point for his 2018 text, “From Structuralism to Marxism (and Back?) Jan Mukařovský 1945–1963”, which is a transcript of the lecture he delivered at the conference *Jan Mukařovský dnes, tradice a perspektiva českého strukturalismu* [Jan Mukařovský Today, the Traditions and the Perspective of Czech Structuralism].<sup>32</sup> In the text, Steiner brings up a peculiar mechanism that tends to drive the arguments of scholars who set out to examine this most controversial period in the life

<sup>31</sup> “(...) právě v této stati se pod povrchem příznačné rétoriky odehrává střet mezi vědou a ideologií, mezi touhou poznávat a touhou po moci. Následující úvaha si klade za cíl poukázat na tyto aspekty jako na problém obecnější povahy, který přesahuje konkrétní historické souvislosti komunistické totality”.

<sup>32</sup> The Czech title of the essay: *Od strukturalismu k marxismu (a zpět?). Jan Mukařovský 1945–1963*. The English version has been published in the magazine *Litikon* (2018, 3(1)). The Czech language version has been published by the author online as a conference paper from 2011 (Steiner, 2011).

of the leading figure of Czech structuralism. He frankly asserts that as they confront the subject, most scholars derive the majority of their facts and information from a limited pool of primary sources, and the shape of their final interpretations often hinges on their usage thereof. Then, he (somewhat ironically) argues:

The only possibility, mentioned earlier, is to reduce these texts to the rank of mere instruments allowing the scholars to pass through the tangled knot of theoretical and practical considerations and eventually ascertain what *truly* persuaded Mukařovský to act how he did. Needless to say, the end result of such practices (...) will be something between total anathema and some sort of apologetics. (Steiner, 2011)<sup>33</sup>

Next, abandoning the ironic tone, he suggests a different solution: instead of mining them for hidden meanings, focus on facts, compile them into a single block of “semantic capital, charging interest”, the flesh of the narrative along with its specific composition, genre characteristics, and means of representation. All of it in pursuit of another truth about Mukařovský that remained elusive – his “road to Damascus” (Steiner, 2011). Eventually, the highly promising observations that open Steiner’s study end up producing only another narrative.

In my opinion, the ironic, self-referential Mukařovský anecdote that constitutes the core of Steiner’s conference talk is not nearly as noteworthy as his above-mentioned observations about the very narratives crafted by Šmahelová and Červenka – narratives not only about Mukařovský himself, but also about Mukařovský’s structuralism. In both their approaches, Steiner identifies a peculiar tendency to devise substantive arguments that would justify Mukařovský’s controversial decision and identify certain shared ideas that would underpin both his academic theories and his (projected) motivations, driving each subsequent phase of his politicized efforts – with the scholars fully invested in the presumption that such ideas actually exist.

The interpretive, or “narrative”, suggestions outlined above blur the line between Mukařovský’s personal motivations and actions and elements of his theories. The narrative unfolds across both these levels at the same time, resulting in an account that does not actually offer any practical explanation for either Mukařovský’s decisions or nuances of structuralism itself. It seems, however, that the said line should be preserved or at least

<sup>33</sup> “Jednou eventualitou, zmiňovanou již výše, je zjednodušit tyto texty na nástroje umožňující mu dobrat se, nepřehlednou spleť teoretických a praktických zřetelů, až k oněm, jež Mukařovského k jeho jednání „skutečně“ ponoukly. Netřeba vypichovat, že konečný výsledek tohoto cvičení (...) pohybuje se kdesi mezi úplnou anathemou a jakous takous apologetikou”.

taken into account by scholars exploring the subject. The “narrative about Jan Mukařovský's structuralism” will be a part of a completely different order than the “narrative about structuralism” and “narrative about Jan Mukařovský” described above. Only isolating all three reveals the multitude of meanings behind the many scholarly motivations as well as the separation of symbolic loads driving their respective analyses. A critical analysis of references to Czech structuralism as a whole and to Jan Mukařovský as historical figure is a pre-requisite without which there can be no critical analysis of the “narrative about the structuralism of Jan Mukařovský”, and, ultimately, no “structuralism of Jan Mukařovský”. That, however, is a subject for a whole different article.

*Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz*

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## **A meta-structuralist trap: Periodisation and Jan Mukařovský's structuralism**

The aim of this article is to show some methodological traps connected with the common tendency for periodisation of phenomena or processes in research, basing on the example of secondary literature about Czech structuralism, especially Jan Mukařovský's theory. The author describes the narratives shaped in these works and shows how their symbolic charge directs the way of thinking about the heritage of the Prague school and Jan Mukařovský, which may influence the interpretation of his literary and aesthetic theory.

### **Keywords:**

Jan Mukařovský; structuralism; Prague school; Czech literary theory; periodisation

## **Meta-strukturalistyczna pułapka. Periodyzacja a strukturalizm Jana Mukařovskiego**

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie na przykładzie opracowań czeskiego strukturalizmu, zwłaszcza dorobku Jana Mukařovskiego, pułapek metodologicznych związanych z powszechną tendencją badawczą do periodyzacji zjawisk i procesów. Zrekonstruowane zostają kształtowane w tych opracowaniach narracje, których ładunek symboliczny ukierunkowuje – często nadmiernie – sposób myślenia o dziedzictwie szkoły praskiej oraz o Janie Mukařovskim, co może wpływać na interpretacje jego refleksji literaturoznawczej i estetycznej.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

Jan Mukařovský; strukturalizm; szkoła praska; teoria literatury; periodyzacja

### **Note:**

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