RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

RACAR
Revue d'art canadienne | Canadian Art Review

Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, eds., *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1976. 298 + xxi pp., $17.95

David Lidov

Volume 4, numéro 2, 1977

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077373ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1077373ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)
1918-4778 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Lidov, D. (1977). Compte rendu de [Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, eds., *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1976. 298 + xxi pp., $17.95]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *4*(2), 117–118. https://doi.org/10.7202/1077373ar

guidance'' to persons and community groups who may want to become directly involved in preservation activities (p. ix). Those well meaning and potentially powerful lay groups have had little published material which they might study, aside from the many booklets issued by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States, many of which are not fully relevant to the Canadian situation.

Our government evidently acknowledges the need for this handbook, for the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs commissioned Falkner to write it, and associated with the University of Toronto Press to publish it. The production of a cheap paperback edition in addition to the hardcover version makes it fall within the reach of every budget.

Falkner responded to the challenge by providing much heretofore unavailable information. Her previous work with the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building and her present post with the Association for Preservation Technology have provided her with good background. She tells about existing heritage legislation and government programmes, instructs her readers how to survey and evaluate buildings, offers hints on how to acquire properties, suggests how to develop a preservation philosphy in deciding what to do with those acquisitions, gives guidelines on costing rehabilitation work, and tries to explain how to cope with the jargon of city planners. She describes numerous preservation projects across the country and cites many good books on preservation. An appendix provides the names and addresses of historical societies and government departments. All of this is valuable material.

Indeed, the book is nearly the useful handbook that it set out to be, and would have become that book had it received help from a collaborator or a strong editor. Unfortunately, it falls short on three critical counts. Firstly, it is badly organized. Material is scattered about, with a chapter's title providing few clues as to its contents. Lamentably there is no index. Secondly, the book is not well written, and the constant use of the first and second persons (''I hope to alert you to your history . . .,'' p. 18) lacks authority and sounds patronizing. And finally the text lacks a sense of experience or critical analysis. Although we remain fully confident that the author has done her research thoroughly, we are not so convinced that she herself has ever faced a hostile city council or fully comprehends the intricacies of acquiring a threatened property, nor that she is really concerned whether the legislation and programmes that she cites are actually effective. The text is further weakened by a number of bothersome errors in the citing of proper names, such as those of the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Programme (p. 31) and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (p. 135).

Falkner frequently reiterates two tired premises of which the preservation movement would do well to rid itself. The first contends that ''preservation'' and ''high-rise development'' are diametrically and irreconcilably opposed (*e.g.* p. 147). The real enemy of preservation is, of course, demolition and *re*-development (or parking lots), not development itself. Related to this is the alleged opposition between ''preservationists'' and ''anti-preservationists'' (*e.g.* p. 211). These do not comprise two races, nor even two language groups. A preservationist is any person who makes an effort to conserve some object at any point in time or space. Some of Canada's most active high-rise developers have turned to rehabilitating groups of old houses and individual landmarks (projects in Toronto and Vancouver come to mind), and they are being very real preservationists while engaging in those particular schemes.

Conservation has become a respectable activity. Developers do it, the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs does it, and the readers of *Without Our Past?* may do it somewhat better as well.

H.K.

LADISLAV MATEJKA and IRWIN R. TITUNIK, eds. *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1976. 298 + xxi pp., $17.95.

Semiotics remains a puzzling concept. A definition — the science of signs and symbolic relations — is not difficult, but it is, as some definitions surely are, pernicious in its simplicity. If a sign is anything that stands for something else, then ''sign'' is such a broad category that we are entitled to be suspect of its usefulness. Perhaps when the great Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, formulated the need for *semiologie* in the first decade of our century, the idea that language was just one of many sign systems which constitute an all-pervasive texture in our social environment was something of a revelation. Today, the same idea has become a facile commonplace. A course on ''communications'' may refer with equal likelihood to the aesthetics of design, first-year English, media analysis, group therapy, or electronic engineering. We say ''language'' in speaking of Picasso's style, computer codes, or facial gestures. Are we not entitled by now to suspect that concepts like ''sign'' and ''language'' are too general to have more than a superficial unity and to doubt whether so coarse a question as ''what is a sign?'' could contribute to so delicate a research as aesthetics?

The Prague Structuralists, as the authors represented by this volume are sometimes called, did succeed, nevertheless, in building new and important critical vantage points for the analysis of art by taking the problem of sign and signification as an indispensable philosophical lever. With the sign as their methodological focus, they established attitudes towards art and questions about art which still remain challenging and germinal. It is not as easy to say how or why this is so as it would be if the Prague Circle had left us with a clear, consistent theory of art. This they certainly did not do. Their work in phonology and much of their other linguistics may stand on its own, but to appreciate their aesthetics, obviously so incomplete in its development, I think we must ponder its context.

The greater part of these essays stems from the 1930s, a period of fervent intellectual division. In addition to the challenges posed by radical upheaval and experiment within art itself in that and the immediately preceding decades, aesthetic theory felt the impact of philosophic responses to cataclysmic changes in European society. The Prague Structuralists were in a sense the direct descendants of Russian Formalism. In the 1920s, the Formalists had rejected the Romantic psychological theory that art was determined by the spiritual states of its creators and its public in favour of a formal analysis of the material artwork

itself. Yet in the same years which saw the Formalists' assertion of autonomous aesthetic values in the art object, the autonomy of art was challenged from a new direction by the aesthetics of dialectical materialism with its insistence upon the social context and economic function of art. Perhaps a young North American readership should be reminded how immediate these issues were in years which witnessed ominous threats to the intellectual democracy on which all theoretical work depends and to a generation personally displaced by war and revolution.

Caught between opposed and irreconcilable theories, attractive for their novelty, consistency, and explanatory depth, Prague structural aesthetics is remarkable in its refusal to simplify its view of art for the advantages of a clearer intellectual dogma. Although the concept of the sign provoked some rich research, it did not provide as comfortable a "system" as either Marxist aesthetics or more purely psychological and formal approaches might have. The strength of these essays is not the sign theory in itself but the use of this embryonic theory to insist on the fullness of art in a world that obviously made an increasingly bitter home for humanism. The theory is used to reaffirm the traditional in art while at the same time defending the *avant-garde*. Folk art is examined with the same intensity of interest as official art, and Eastern art along with Western. The subjective values of art and its material embodiment, social aspects and artistic individualism, all are insisted upon without compromise as aspects of an indissoluble dialectical web.

Matejka and Titunik have divided their book into five sections. The first is introductory and the remaining ones are devoted in turn to folk art (costume, song, and drama), theatre (including cinema), literature, and visual art. Three essays are by Jan Mukorovsky. These provide good access to the collection as a whole, for Mukorovsky came closer than any other of the Prague aesthetic theorists to formulating an overall perspective of their approach.

For Mukorovsky, a sign is three-fold in its aspects. It is a perceivable "signifier." In this dimension art may be identified with the material artwork, the artifact that the artist produces. The sign is then further defined by that which it signifies. Whereas the artwork may have objectively determined material existence, what it signifies depends upon the collective consciousness of its audience. For Mukorovsky, the collective consciousness is what is common in every individual consciousness, and this consciousness of the art-sign as an aesthetic object constitutes the "signified." Finally, in addition to the "signifier" and "signified" as determinants of a sign, the total meaning of a sign is further determined by the relation of the sign to its reference. In this third demension of its manifestation, the art-sign enters into a range of valuative and functional connection with its total cultural context. For Mukorovsky and for the Prague Structuralists generally, one of these functions is the aesthetic function. This aesthetic function (as opposed to informational or utilitarian functions) is identified with the dependence of each element in a sign (as in the words in a poem) on the whole and with the consequent self-referential character of the sign. It is solely the aesthetic function of a given sign in a given context — not the subject, values, materials, or forms — which make it an art-sign for a given audience, but it is never this aesthetic function alone which establishes the full meaning or significance of art.

Bogatyrev deals more specifically with the relation of utilitarian to aesthetic functions in his treatment of folk art. Brušák concentrates more on modes of representation (the relation of signifier to signified) in his discussion of Chinese theatre. The interrelation of different "materials" (acting, costume, words) becomes the focus in articles by Honzl and Veltruský and also in Jacobson's paper on the cinema. In Jacobson's other essays, the third dimension of the art-sign, its dialetical relation to value, society, and reality provides the basis of his examination of literary works.

The book includes a few essays of more recent date which attest to the continuing liveliness of its intellectual tradition. These are Doležel's article on narrative time, Jiri Levý's on translation, and finally an article by Veltruský on the pictorial sign. He has, I believe, succeeded in stating the problems of communication through non-representative painting in an unusually constructive, critical form.

Regrettably the editors of this anthology did not do just a bit more to help the reader who is new to the Prague School and its legacy. Several translators have contributed to this book. While their prose is generally clear, unnecessary obscurities may mar the presentation here and there. The reader who does not read Czech or Russian will be left in the dark by many literary and dramatic references where a few careful footnotes might have done much to enhance his grasp of the argument.

Although each article has its own sources clearly annotated, there is no summary bibliography for the book as a whole. A bibliography — especially one with sources in English — might have been a useful addition. The reader who wants to follow up the pathways opened by this book should at least be aware of another collection, *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style* edited and translated by Paul Garvin (Washington, 1964), which does contain a critical bibliography. In addition readers may be referred to the bibliographic project undertaken by *Versus*, the Italian journal of semiotics (published by Bompani, Milan) which includes bibliographies, *inter alia*, of both Czech- and English-language sources. There is also an extensive collection in French published as *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague* (Prague, 1929), and reprinted in part, with many later additions, in Jean Pierre Faye and Léon Robel, eds., *Le cercle de Prague*, Change 3 (2nd ed., Paris, 1969).

DAVID LIDOV
York University
Toronto