

“Czech Theory”, Czech semiotics

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Review of *Česká teorie: Tendence moderní české sémiotiky*, by Vít Gvoždiak. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2016. 370 pp.

The reviewed book², written by Czech researcher Vít Gvoždiak³ and entitled *Czech Theory* [*Česká teorie*], bears the subtitle *Tendencies of Modern Czech Semiotics* [*Tendence moderní české sémiotiky*], which, at first sight, immediately narrows the circle of possibilities to interpret its contents, and makes this publication potentially interesting for all semioticians and historians of semiotics (or, more widely, for all specialists in humanities and their history) – though accessible to those reading in Czech. The book consists of an introduction [*Uvod*] (pp. 5–7), three main parts titled “Czech theory” [*Česká teorie*] (pp. 9–147), “Conversations” [*Rozhovory*] (pp. 149–267) and “Outline of bibliography of Czech semiotics” [*Nástin bibliografie české sémiotiky*] (pp. 269–359), an index of proper names [*Jmenný rejstřík*] (pp. 360–365) and a short summary in Czech and in English [*Resumé*] (pp. 366–368).

In the introduction, the author briefly presents the general purpose of the book: “to outline a map of modern Czech semiotics” (p. 5), at the same time explaining the particular character of his research: “This book is neither a detailed review (it is not critical enough for this), nor an overview (it is neither very descriptive nor exhaustive). In many parts, it reminds of a textbook. Sometimes it simplifies and generalizes, sometimes it pays attention to (maybe too little) details” (pp. 5–6). Besides, in the introduction, Gvoždiak outlines the whole structure of the book, at the same time expressing his gratitude to those who have contributed to the study: to the seventeen interviewed Czech scholars (cf. their names below), to his Czech colleagues Barbora Kursová, Michaela Špačková, Ivana Varjassyová, Pavla Vytlačilová and Alena

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² Rather than being critical or analytical, the review provides a general overview of the book with the purpose to present this research, written in Czech, to those scholars who do not read in this language.

³ This book is not Gvoždiak’s first contribution to the study of Czech semiotics and its history: among his other works see, in particular, Gvoždiak 2014a, 2014b, 2014c.

Zaoralová who helped him with the work on the book, and to his Estonian colleague Kalevi Kull to whom the book owes its title.

In this part, the nature of semiotics in general (among other things, Gvoždiak mentions some possible interpretations of the word "semiotics") is discussed, together with the particular character of Czech semiotics, which has been formed "at the borderline between Prague School semiology, (cybernetic) semiotics, and, to a certain degree, philosophy (of language). This trinity is referred to by the term Czech theory" (p. 367). As to the expression "Czech theory", it goes back directly to the "Tartu semiotic tradition": indeed, the term "Czech theory" is said to be in many ways analogous to the notion of "Estonian theory" (Tamm, Kull 2015, 2016), which turned out to be a source of inspiration for the author (Gvoždiak 2016: 7, 26). In this respect, Gvoždiak quotes (providing a parallel Czech translation) the lines from the manuscript (in English) of an article written by Marek Tamm and Kalevi Kull about "Estonian theory": "a comparatively coherent aggregate of outstanding notions that originate with scholars linked to Estonia, which may have significant intellectual value and interest for the whole intellectual world" (p. 26). This particular attention to the "Czech tradition" distinguishes the author from the researchers whose approach consisted, on the contrary, in uniting the Czech scholars with other "research cultures" and speaking, for instance, of "Slavic semiotics". In particular, this was the case with Ivo Osolsobě (Osolsobě 1992), to whom Gvoždiak refers several times and for whom the "Slavic School" (of semiotics) united scholars (R. Jakobson, K. Bühler, V. Mathesius, J. Mukařovský, J. Lotman, M. Bakhtin, V. Voloshinov, *etc.*) from "Moscow, Vienna, Prague, Bratislava, Cambridge, Mass., Tartu, Nitra" (Osolsobě 1992; quoted in Gvoždiak 2016: 21) who represented such different academic trends as Russian formalism, Prague structuralism, etc.

The central point of the Czech semiotics in the first half of the past century was, according to the author, the intellectual activity of the Prague linguistic circle (Gvoždiak 2016: 31) and, in this connection, the author dedicates a small chapter to the "Short notes on semiology and semiotics" (pp. 31–45). After that, Gvoždiak raises the question of the "Appearance of modern Czech semiotics" (pp. 46–86) in the 1960s (p. 46), when the evident interest in semiotics manifested itself in many countries all over the world. Precisely at the same time, the attention of many Czech scholars was drawn to semiotics, which was considered a very promising direction of research. Another particular period in the development of Czech semiotics, the one from the late 1970s till the late 1980s (pp. 87–104), begins after the formation of the so-called "Semiotic Group" [*Sémiotická skupina*] within the framework of the Cybernetic Society [*Kybernetická společnost*] at the Czech Academy of Sciences (p. 85). The period of the last decade of the 20th century (pp. 105–133), referred to as one of "general intellectual restauration" (p. 105), preceded the period during which the

author identifies “Main trends of the *contemporary* [emphasis added, E. V.] Czech semiotics” (pp. 134–147). For every period, Gvoždiak identifies some key researchers and basic academic tendencies.

If the first main part of the book is organized, to a large extent, in a chronological way, showing how the ideas about semiotics evolved with time, it seems logical that the next part continues with the presentation of the “most current forms of Czech semiotics” (p. 367), expressed in seventeen interviews with modern Czech scholars, in one way or another dealing with semiotics. The author presents them to his readers as representatives of various generations (p. 6), but their academic fields are also worthy of interest, as those include various backgrounds from which they came to semiotics (for every interviewed researcher, brief bio-bibliographical information has been provided that precedes the interviews). Taking into account the sometimes very conventional nature of borders between different fields of academic knowledge, it seems nevertheless possible to refer to the interviewees as those dealing – among other things – with various trends in philosophy (Michaela Fišerová, born in 1980; Pavel Materna, b. 1930; Martin Švantner, b. 1982) and philology (František Čermák, b. 1940; Jakub Češka, b. 1971; Lubomír Doležel, b. 1922; Tomáš Glanc, b. 1969; Tomáš Hoskovec, b. 1960; Jan Kořenský, b. 1937; Otakar Šoltys, b. 1950), musicology (Jarmila Doubravová, b. 1940), biology (Anton Markoš, b. 1949), cinema studies and media communication (Jan Bernard, b. 1948, and Josef Šlerka, b. 1974, respectively), marketing studies (Jaroslav Cír, b. 1966) together with culturology (Martina Olbertová, b. 1985), logics and theory of science in general (Ladislav Tondl, 1924–2015). Each of these scholars has been asked from seven (Doležel) to seventeen (Tondl) questions. On the one hand, there are particular and individual questions, which vary from one researcher to the other, depending on his or her background(s) and current field(s) of work and research (that is why the real content of the book is certainly larger than “semiotic studies” in the narrow sense of the term). On the other hand, some questions have been repeated, in one form or another, from one interview to another: there were questions about the definition of semiotics itself, about the future of semiotics (including a question about the most urgent and important problems that semiotics could solve) and about the peculiarities of Czech (sometimes Czechoslovak) semiotics. The answers to the last question were different: some scholars insisted on the impossibility of providing a short answer, others expressed a doubt in the necessity of distinguishing strictly between “Czech semiotics” and “worldwide semiotics”. Nevertheless, some names of scholars, important for this particular “Czech semiotic tradition”, are also mentioned: most often, the interviewees referred in this respect to Ivo Osolsobě (1928–2012) – semiotician, theatre dramaturge, theatre and literary theoretician.

The “bibliographical” part of the book not only contains sources mentioned earlier in this study, but also presents the Czech (and, partly, Slovak) works on semiotics,

together with translated research by some foreign authors (for example, among the works of scholars directly connected with the "Tartu semiotic tradition", in particular, Lotman 1975, 1990a, 1990b, 2013a, 2013b and Kull 2009 are mentioned – all these works are available in Czech or Slovak; the bibliography also includes some sources analysing the "Tartu tradition", for instance Macura 1977, Svoboda 1977).

As the reviewed book shows, even if we can still continue to discuss the necessity and relevance of the use of expressions such as "Czech Theory" or "Estonian Theory", etc., in modern academic discourse, the introduction of these notions has already made it possible to (re)discuss some important fragments of the past and the present of the corresponding research "traditions", making these investigations absorbing and stimulating not only for semioticians and culturologists, but also for historians of ideas.

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