criticism in translation

The Theatrical Illusion

OTAKAR ZICH

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY EMIL VOLEK AND ANDRÉS PÉREZ-SIMÓN

Introduction

OTAKAR ZICH (1879–1934) IS A STRIKING FIGURE IN MODERN CZECH AESTHETICS AND ART THEORY. A GIFTED LIBRETTIST AND OPERA COMposer and a professor at Charles University in Prague, his place in the history of aesthetics is still controversial. His *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (*Estetika dramatického umění* [1931]) came out at a time of paradigmatic change in the humanities (the emergence in the 1930s of functional structuralism through the Prague linguistic circle).[1] Also, it was only in the 1930s that the Czech theatrical avant-garde got into full swing. Zich's work apparently "fell short" both of the new scientific paradigm, imposed by the tandem of Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) and Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975), and of the expectations of the students of theater coming from Mukařovský's seminars, some of them already distinguished avant-garde directors (Veltruský 67). Zich's untimely death precluded the development of his project, as well as fruitful debate about it. Mukařovský, as Zich's protégé, felt obliged to address the work of his mentor, but his early semiotic reading was avowedly partial and tentative and barely concealed his puzzlement. This marginal inclusion in the new paradigm without real assimilation left Zich's complex and comprehensive undertaking out in the cold.

Further, Zich's antipositivistic (or romantic?) gesture of not referring to his methodological framework, a gesture in vogue in some circles at that time, led to his theoretical framework's being misunderstood as a result, in particular, of the still apparently psychological Husserlian terminology he used (from the original edition of *Logical Investigations* [1900]). Based on these equivocal "keys," the early readings, ingrained in time, miscast his project as "late" psychologism, missed the underlying phenomenological imprint, and reveled in apparent contradictions that did not fit the expected traditional argument. Zich's treatise became a gold mine (frequently plundered) of fine distinctions in and observations on theatrical art but was not recognized as a model of innovative methodology.

Once the link to early phenomenology was established (through Zich's work on music and through our new reading of *Aesthetics*, which resulted from the translation process), "contradictions" turned into phenomenological

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"circling" and layered analysis of his topic (Volek, "Theatrology").[2] Instead of remaining a work that "fell short" or that perpetuated an exhausted tradition, Zich's project emerged as a stand-alone and unsurpassed phase of Czech aesthetics and as a hitherto missing link in the early development of the phenomenological movement.

"The Theatrical Illusion" ("Divadelní iluse") is a section of *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (361–68, 372) that condenses the analytic work done in Zich's pioneer study. It is a surprising phenomenological analysis of the theatrical event as artistic representation and of the polysemy of the concept of "reality." Zich withdraws "theatrical illusion" from the dichotomy of traditional logic (A/nonA) and argues that artistic representation in theater (which may be expanded to all arts and fiction) should be seen not as some "*un*reality" (i.e., nonA) but rather as *another* reality (another "possible world" if "our" reality is considered one of those possible worlds), a "theatrical reality" endowed with dual logic. This "other" reality (R2) emerges as parallel and comparable to yet different from the "reality" out there, in "real" life (R1). The difference between these realities is not ontological but phenomenological, depending on and called for by our "orientation" key, Husserl's *Einstellung* (Husserl, *Ideas* 118–34).

In "The Theatrical Illusion," Zich affirms that one of the "greatest charms of the art of acting" is "the opportunity to be somebody else without the need to lie." This section of Zich's *Aesthetics* contains an original approach to acting, as well as to fictional worlds on the stage. It is possible to read Zich's statement on acting and lying as part of a discussion on acting that has historically revolved around such terms as *authenticity* and *truthfulness*. A central text in this tradition of thought is Denis Diderot's "The Paradox of Acting" (1778). To resolve the tension between acting skills and feeling, Diderot concludes that the best actors are those who have no character of their own, so that they can "become" multiple fictional characters while remaining emotionally detached from them. This "unfortunate conclusion" (Quinn 76) limits acting to physical memory and skillfulness and bars from the discussion any presence of emotional transcendence in the actors' work.

In the early twentieth century, Konstantin Stanislavsky theorized that authentic acting converted emotional states into physical changes. In chapter 3 of *Aesthetics* and, in more detail, in chapter 5,[3] Zich questions Stanislavsky's idea of the body as a mechanism of natural signs that turns emotion into physical changes. The Czech scholar, recalling William James's and Konrad Lange's research in the field of psychology, argues that it is external action, not internal feeling, that allows actors to alter their psychological states. Zich's description of acting "from outside in," which can explain multiple acting styles beyond the realist one that was the basis for Stanislavsky's system, anticipates concepts only known to theater practitioners half a century later. It was not until 1988, for example, that Richard Schechner challenged assumed notions about the effectiveness of the Stanislavskian concept of emotional memory, defending "mechanical acting" in the light of contemporary neurological research, while also claiming that the method "from outside in" existed in a long tradition of Eastern methods of acting, particularly from India (301–15).

In addition to discourses on acting, "The Theatrical Illusion" belongs to a second intellectual tradition—the philosophy of language. Zich theorized the issue of "truthfulness" in acting from a phenomenological perspective that places him in the company of some of the most distinguished philosophers of language in the modern era. The originality of a text like "The Theatrical Illusion" resides in its ability to create a space for philosophical inquiry that sees theater not as a practice that lacks reference, as Gottlob Frege argued as early as 1892 (63–64), or that needs to be defined as a nonperformative event, following the principles of the speech-act theorists. The value of Zich's contribution to the history of theatrical theory can be better understood vis-à-vis current theorists who have worked to bring together philosophy and theater studies. David Z. Saltz has recently used Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language to resolve one of the greatest quandaries of continen-

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tal semiotics of theater. He invokes Wittgenstein's "nondualistic understanding of representation" to criticize the view that "a theatrical performance is a kind of text whose primary goal is to represent an absent fictional world" and that "the audience looks past, or through, the real events to the fiction" (203).

In a surprising twist, Zich's analysis of the theatrical event and of its "dual" logic contests both the semioticians and the philosophers. In contrast to our "factual approach" to everyday life, in which one perception can only correspond to one representation (a shadow in the woods can be a bush or a real man, but not both, notes Zich), the "theatrical approach" is one in which the viewer's perception is dual: what we perceive is simultaneously an actor and a character. In Zich, duality is not reduced and does not run out of theatrical fiction.

Notes

1. The Prague linguistic circle was an international group of scholars in linguistic, literary, and cultural studies that was active from 1926 to 1948, developing a multifaceted project of dynamic and functional structuralism (focused on the semiotics and aesthetics of artifacts in changing social contexts, in contradistinction to the later French structuralism, which explored the static "deep" semantic structures underlying artifacts in the code).

2. For more on Zich's early transition toward phenomenology, see Volek, Introduction.

3. Chapter 3 runs from pages 43 to 70, chapter 5 from pages 112 to 167.

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The Theatrical Illusion

Much has been written about our particular mental state when we witness a theatrical event. According to the most popular view, it is a constant oscillation between the belief that what we see and hear is reality and the negation of this belief when we realize what the "real" reality is—that we are in a playhouse.[1] It has also been argued that there are moments that reinforce the illusion and others that suppress it; and there is also a third approach, the idea of a *conscious*

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self-illusion.[2] The illusion is supposedly reinforced by everything that increases the similarity between our perceptions of stage and of reality, and it is disrupted by things that remind us that we are in the theater—such as the stage itself, the proscenium, the auditorium, our fellow spectators, and so on.

The psychological impropriety of these theories about the oscillation between consciousness of reality and of unreality is evident when we analyze without bias our behavior during the spectacle, and even when we recall how we feel during the theatrical event.[3]

No matter how carried away we may feel, we have no awareness, belief, or faith *at all* that what the actors are representing is "reality." Consequently, we cannot—indeed, we do not—entertain the idea that *it is not* reality. One thing is certain: the perceptions produced by the stage evoke in us, by means of similarity, mental representations that we derive from previous experiences (and, therefore, from "reality"), and we compare the two of them. But we do so regarding their *similarity* and not their *reality*—and that is the difference. In the same way, the stage presence of a magical figure from a fairy tale, for example, may evoke the remembrance of a similar figure painted by an artist. If we happen to think, in a case of striking resemblance, that what we are seeing "is like real," this is only a theoretical reflection of a completely *extra-artistic* nature, one that temporarily distracts our attention from the stage. Even those spectators who tend to make these types of judgments prefer to leave them for the intermissions. When carried away by the spectacle, we do not engage in these reflections—they only emerge once the emotion has diminished. The most perfect dramatic experience is free of any thought on the reality of the stage, be it in positive or negative terms.

To us, what happens on the stage is not reality or unreality, but *another* reality, different from the one we live in; it is an artistic reality—in this specific case, a *theatrical* one. Aesthetics often conceptualizes this different reality in terms of an "*apparent* reality." This concept, much discussed from a metaphysical point of view, has not been explained to our full satisfaction psychologically. Let's ask to what extent the "apparent" and the "real" realities are different for *the perceiver*. What differentiates my impressions when I witness somewhere, as a casual observer, a quarrel between two persons from those when I watch the same thing happening onstage? Moreover, let's assume that I have observed these two persons only without being aware of the situational frame of their interaction, or at least without capturing the whole frame of "theatrical" action. This hypothetical example helps us to truly understand the distinction in the impression, because the *perception is identical* in both cases, but the impression is different.[4]

We could argue that the perception of the theater, one that we certainly had before the performance began, connects—through memory—with all the following perceptions coming from the stage, in spite of the fact that, at this point, we do not pay attention to the frame of "theatrical" action anymore. While this hypothesis would seem to explain the difference between the two aforementioned impressions, the truth is that we are not aware of such dichotomy, not at least when the play truly captivates our attention. Every now and then, during the performance, certain details may remind us that we are in the "theater"; yet precisely this *reminder* confirms that we are not aware of it all the time. Moreover, the mere association of "theater" with the stage is insufficient to explain the essence of the "apparent" reality. When, after the representation is finished, the playwright and the actors enter the stage to receive the applause, this is not an apparent reality to us; the same thing happens when we attend a pure ballet (and not a dramatized pantomime) or a theatrical concert with an orchestra on the stage—even if we are aware that all this is taking place on the theatrical stage.

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If the perceptions and the associations are no different, then the difference has to be found in a *different take* on the same perception. In the first case, we understand the aforementioned quarrel as another fact of life—that is, as something real: this is the *factual approach*; in the second case, we see it as something represented, enacted: this is the *theatrical approach*.[5] The latter is a special case of the *iconic* conception, one that is present in the iconic arts and is only *different* from the factual or life attitude mentioned above, not *contrary* to it—that is, not "unreal." The theatrical approach is a mental state in which we neither think about reality nor experience a special "sensation of reality" (meaning *external* reality here), a state that accompanies us in the normal circumstances of life and that only vanishes in some abnormal situations, such as when we have certain illnesses or feel extremely tired. In these moments everything we perceive, and especially what we see, seems to be passing before us estranged and as if far away, "as in a dream." Dreams themselves are not, however, a good example; on the contrary, they frequently produce a strong sense of reality, to the point that many times we are relieved when we wake up and realize that what we were dreaming "was fortunately not true."

On the other hand, there are mental states in which the sensation of (an exterior) reality is weakened but not totally suppressed. The previous example of the state of fatigue will surely remind everybody of many times we experienced a similar sensation even when fatigue was not a factor. These are certain states of *daydreaming* or *contemplation* that are triggered by objects we perceive and in which we immerse ourselves, so to speak; examples of this are a landscape, the interior of a temple, and so on. Evidently, this is an *aesthetic state* induced by beautiful objects. The sensation of reality is extremely feeble, but not completely absent; it somehow remains in the background and then comes back as soon as our aesthetic perception ends and we "return to our everyday reality."

What is this sensation of external reality? Without doubt it exists in close connection with the sensation of our *own* reality, more exactly with the reality of our *corporal self*—that is, the totality of all our corporal perceptions, because our corporal self belongs half to the "external world" and half to the internal one, and, therefore, being half object and half subject, it mediates between them.[6]

We have argued that the aesthetic state is induced by beautiful objects. Yet this act is not as passive as this sentence might suggest. It resembles what happens with our involuntary and voluntary attention: if we so desire, we can induce the aesthetic state in ourselves, although the beautiful object is normally the stimulus. This is how the *aesthetic state* originates in general terms. Depending on the objects that induce it, this aesthetic orientation[7] can be further specialized into *artistic* orientation; then into a more specific, *iconic* orientation; and then, in the context of our ever more restricted field, into *theatrical* orientation. We will discuss the last two of these orientations.

The *iconic orientation*, as well as its special subset, the *theatrical* orientation, differs from the general aesthetic orientation in two aspects. First, when this orientation prevails, our sensation of reality is *completely suppressed*. Second, our interpretation of what we perceive is *dual*, because it contains not only a *technical* representation but also an *iconic* one. These two aspects are interrelated, because in the aforementioned "factual approach" the *dual* interpretation maintained at the same time would be factually contradictory (one eliminates the other).

The fact that a certain perception *X of mine* (i.e., a subjective perception) is "really" *A* means that I am convinced of the real objective existence of *A*. The same thing applies if that same perception *X* is supposed to be "really" *B*. Given that *a particular evidence* can only be made of *singular* concepts, and that

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they are subordinated to the common idea of something that *really* exists, something that automatically makes them exclude each other, the relation between them can only be disjunctive. I can see, for example, a dark shadow when I am in the forest after sunset. My interpretation is dual: "it is a (real) bush" *or else* "it is a (real) homeless man." Both things cannot be at the same time. If I accept the first one, I reject the second; if I happen to find out later that the first one was true, then the second cannot be true and, consequently, it was my delusion. The deception always maintains, in consequence, a relation to reality.

On the contrary, if I see a statue, I believe that it is "a statue" and "some person," because these notions do not pertain to the same class of actually existing things (only the statue is in this class), which means that they *do not exclude each other*. That "some person" pertains to the category of existing things only in an ideal form, in my mind. This is the *only* thing I express when declaring that "it is a statue that represents some person." If mine is an *aesthetic attitude*, I do not think in terms of reality or unreality at all. It would be different if I considered the statue exclusively in *technical* terms; but in this case I would contemplate it, for example, as an artificially formed column made of marble that, of course, does not represent anything.

Consequently, I can also declare in regard to dramatic art: he is actor *A* and, *at the same time*, King Lear, because this is *simply an interpretation* of the perception, while the actual existence (one that only the "actor" can have) is not the object of attention during the performance. One cannot talk about "deception," because the interpretation is dual in the first place and never intends to be taken as empirical truth—that is, an agreement with reality. Moreover, this is the same reason we cannot say that actor *A* is a *false* king. This would only be the case of an impostor trying to pass as a real king; and, in this case, we would believe he would be one or the other, but not both things at the same time. One of the greatest charms of the art of acting is precisely the opportunity to be somebody else without the need to lie.

It would be perhaps more appropriate to say that the actor is a king "in appearance"—not in the negative sense of seeming to be what he *is not in reality* but rather in the sense of a *pure phenomenon* without relation to reality—because he really *looks like a king* to our senses, in view of his (optical and acoustic) appearance. In this way, everything on the stage is "apparent," but not "apparently real" or "false." We can talk of false diamonds if they are worn by a lady at a social event but not if they are worn by a dramatic character; for, like the dramatic character, the diamonds are only apparent. Their authenticity, like the *authenticity or falsehood of all objects on the stage*, is an issue of no importance, a simple practical question.[8] The restriction of the meaning of "appearance" also applies to such words as "illusoriness" and "illusion," into which we frequently introduce a relation to reality.

We can therefore infer from our reasoning the following statement: *the essence of the theatrical illusion resides in its theatrical orientation, one that, as a special manifestation of the iconic orientation, suppresses the sensation of reality while linking the perceptions to a dual semantic representation: technical and iconic*.

Illusion does not mean here a deceptive reality. This is nicely demonstrated by the fact that the same theatrical world that unfolds before our eyes recognizes similar cases of illusion and deception. I am referring to the well-known motifs of pretense and especially *disguise*. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, for example, an *actress* represents Viola, who puts on a man's costume and pretends to pass as a *gentleman*. Our perception of all this involves three forms of representation: one technical and two iconic. It is evident that the relations actress/Viola and Viola/gentleman *are not homogenous*. Only the gentleman is "false" and only Viola's action in disguise is a

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"deception," but this notion of falseness does not apply to Viola as fictional character nor to the actress. The other dramatis personae take Viola for a gentleman, at least temporarily, but we as spectators perceive her as Viola all the time. The dramatis personae have no idea that Viola is really an actress (though the actors portraying them do), but we do know about her all the time.

Analysis of Theatrical Orientation

We might explain the phenomenon of the theatrical orientation by analogy with the function of the musical key: the same notes on the staff will represent different tones depending on the clef symbol that precedes them. The "key" for the theatrical orientation is everything we perceive before the play starts and, very often, even after it has begun: the entrance to the theater, the playhouse full of people, the stage frame with the curtain down—one that *goes up after a certain signal*. According to this logic, the musician who has been reading the notes in the key of G will interpret the next notes differently if they are preceded by the F clef, despite the similarities between the sequences of the tones in both cases.[9] This also applies to the theatrical perceptions, which are very similar to our many perceptions of life. In the same way that the musician's musical interpretations are sustained by certain occasional signs (repetition of the clef symbol at the beginning of each new staff and other specialized signals), the theatrical spectator's orientation is sustained by intermittent observations (for example, awareness of the stage or the proscenium). These signals only *sustain*, however, the orientations of both musician and spectator, and the existence of these signals *is not even necessary*.

Our explanation has shown why the observations mentioned above (and many others that originate on the stage), which remind us that we are in the theater, *are not* moments that "cancel the theatrical illusion" (as the theories discussed earlier affirm), because, on the contrary, they sustain it by keeping us within the theatrical orientation. Finally, in the same way that a change in clef from F to G leads the musician to abandon the interpretation in the key of F to return to G, certain perceptions (*curtain down*, the noise of the spectators leaving the playhouse, and so on) tell the audience that it is time to abandon the theatrical orientation and return to the normal, "factual" orientation.

Formulated in this way, the distinction between reality and theatrical illusion is a matter of differentiating between groups of representations linked to one of the two conceptions. As noted before, the factual approach does not require any particular psychological predisposition or, in consequence, any *special* group of semantic representations. This attitude simply ties in with *all* the groups of representations we have acquired in our life (outside the theater). Therefore, our single focus is the cluster of semantic representations that define our theatrical approach. The matter is quite simple: we acquire this group of representations by means of our contact with the *theatrical art* or *dramatic art*. . . . We could say that this is a world of yet another *reality*—an artistic, specifically *"theatrical"* one. Although parallel and responding to the life reality, the "theatrical" reality is *noetically different from and heterologous* to it.

Translators' Notes

1. Here Zich cites Hippolyte Taine's discussion of "incessant rectification" in *De l'intelligence* (1870; *On Intelligence* [441–43; 241–42]).

2. Here Zich cites Konrad Lange (1855–1921), who considers conscious self-deceit (*Selbsttäuschung*) to be the essence of artistic enjoyment.

3. Readers should keep in mind that in Zich "psychological" in fact means "noetic" in the original Husserlian sense. Zich states in the preface to *Aesthetics*, "I have worked out the problem of the theatrical illusion on the psychological, actually noetic, basis, and from there I have

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tackled other questions, especially the endless alternation between realism and idealism" (*Estetika* 10; our trans.).

4. The "impression" is the meaning for us as observers.

5. The Czech term we have translated as "approach" is *pojetí* (conception, approach, attitude), which Zich repeats throughout this passage. *Pojetí* is a synonym of *zaměření* (orientation), a phenomenological concept that Zich refers to later in the text.

6. We omit a brief discussion of internal corporal perceptions.

7. Note that Zich switches here from the psychological term "state" to the phenomenological "orientation." See note 5.

8. Zich as a practitioner points to the fact that in the theater almost "anything" can represent "something" and "what is at hand" may be used in need; however, different theatrical styles may be built on certain types of representations.

9. Here we summarize a long passage of purely metaphoric value.

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