

The Prague Linguistic Circle and Dialectics

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Abstract

The study deals with dialectics in the context of the Prague Linguistic Circle, particularly in the context of Jan Mukařovský's thinking. The essay presents 1) main sources of Mukařovský's dialectics, and outlines 2) Mukařovský's dialectical method. The notion of dialectics appears in Mukařovský's scholarly work in a set of connections. He applied dialectics as a method, manner or form of rationality. It served as a means of gaining knowledge about the world, specific phenomena and objects, their essence, interconnectedness as well as development. Mukařovský also used it as a procedure for resolving contradictions (antinomies) that he encountered in his scientific explorations and in ordinary practical activities. He understood dialectical thinking as dynamic, open, and pluralist thinking striving to reflect reality as a constant process. Gradual coming together of dialectics and materialism, evident in Mukařovský's scholarly works from the mid-1930s, resulted, ten years later, in a public adoption of dialectical materialism.

Keywords

The Prague Linguistic Circle, Jan Mukařovský, Structuralism, Structural Poetics, Dialectics

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1. Introduction

The notion of dialectics appears in the scholarly works of Prague structuralists in various connections. It was instrumental for them for instance in explaining specific linguistic issues, the origination and development of modern art, in interpreting the operation of literary structure, in outlining the relationship between art and society, etc. However, it is also present in works in which they accounted for their own theoretical and methodological points of departure – points of departure of structuralism. By means of dialectics, Prague scholars started to present the notion of structure itself as a dynamic whole, as a unity joined together by mutual contradictions of its individual parts. In his essay from 1945 “O strukturalismu” (On Structuralism) Mukařovský writes:

According to our conception we can consider as a structure only such a set of elements, the internal equilibrium of which is constantly disturbed and restored anew and the unity of which thus appears to us as a set of dialectics contradictions. That which endures is only the identity of a structure in the course of time, whereas its internal composition – the correlation of its components – changes continuously. (4)

Dialectics was understood and interpreted as a discipline about the unity of contradictions. In their conception, it became the most fitting instrument for capturing movement and processual nature. “Structuralism is, of course,” Mukařovský writes in another essay, “akin to what is called ‘holistic thought’ – they are, after all,

contemporaries – but it does not coincide with it. The basic notion of holistic thought is the closed whole, whereas the basic notion of structuralist thought is that of the interplay of forces, agreeing with the opposition of one to another, and thus restoring a disturbed equilibrium by a constantly repeated synthesis. Hence the generic kinship of structuralist thought with dialectic logic” (Mukařovský, “The Concept of the Whole” 79).

From a dialectical perspective, the world is not seen as a set of things, but as a set of processes.

In my essay, I will focus primarily on the views of Jan Mukařovský (1891-1975), a Czech literary theoretician and aesthetician, who applied dialectics in his work. He acquainted himself with dialectics in early 1920s when he started to deal with Russian Formalism in a more systematic way and when he discovered for himself the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel and Vladimir I. Lenin. In hindsight, it is evident that this was the time when he started to employ the dialectical approach to art and reality in his studies. In the following years, Mukařovský not only maintained this approach, but further modified and elaborated it. This is evident whether we look at his work from 1930s or 1940s or from the period when he openly adopted Marxism-Leninism and dialectical materialism. Dialectics became permanently integrated into his thinking.

2. The roots of dialectics

The notion of dialectics (from Greek *dialegein*, to converse, to discuss) has a long and relatively complicated history in Western thought. In philosophical tradition, dialectics is usually presented as the art of discussion, debate and argumentation. Hegel’s philosophy in particular is often described as an example of a fundamentally dialectical philosophy, as a philosophy in which dialectical procedure represents a specific way of thinking (*Phenomenology of Spirit*; *Science of Logic*). Hegel approached dialectics as a method that is most suitable to capture the movement of terms, it is therefore a specific ‘logic’, but at the same time it expresses the dynamics of reality, its movement and fluidity. Hegel’s dialectics served as a basis for philosophical conceptions of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir I. Lenin.

Basic information about dialectics was brought into the milieu of Prague Linguistic Circle by Russian and Ukrainian exiles (esp. Dmytry Chyzhevsky and Roman Jakobson). This was not only Hegelian dialectics, but in particular the dialectics applied by Marx, Engels and Lenin within the framework of dialectical materialism (Engels; Lenin, *Conspectus*; Lenin, *Plan*).

The first studies in which Mukařovský invoked the principles of dialectical thinking were published in 1934 (“Vznešenost přírody”; “A Note on the Czech Translation of Šklovskij’s *Theory of Prose*”). In these works, Mukařovský was negotiating his position in relation to the legacy of Russian Formalists, in particular their notion of immanent development. He admitted that the development of language and art cannot be examined merely from the perspective of immanence, but that it is necessary to take into account also their social aspect. The fact that language and art started to be perceived by the Prague Linguistic Circle as signs, or more specifically as sign systems, prepared ground for this shift of perspective. A semiotic view of the reality at hand (language and art) required that attention had to be paid also to the society that uses these signs and entire sign systems (Mukařovský, “Art as a Semiotic Fact”; Steiner, “Jan Mukařovský’s Structural Aesthetics”; Steiner, *Russian Formalism*; Veltruský).

3. Jan Mukařovský's dialectics

Mukařovský based his conception of dialectics on Hegel's developmental conception, which did not deal with the development of the world, but with the development of forms of thinking, with logic. In addition, he was also inspired by Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*.

Even though the first impulse to pay attention to dialectics for its ability to interpret developmental changes concerned Hegel's philosophy, Mukařovský did not accept Hegelian idealistic dialectics as such. His understanding was that it is based on negation which results in inertness. This can be exemplified by a triad (even though this is not directly Hegel's example): thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In Mukařovský's opinion, synthesis is a dead unity without any movement. Reality, the world, is in his interpretation in constant motion. Life is change and development. The world, but for instance also thinking, is based on contradictions, and as such it cannot be static. It is constantly developing, moving. What is then the role of dialectical thinking?

The purpose of dialectical thinking is to be able to identify the contradictions contained in reality and show the direction in which it is moving and its dynamic complexity. Dialectical thinking also demonstrates that contradictions inherent in reality constantly unify and at the same time erode reality through connections existing between them and that reality (e.g., culture) that becomes void of internal contradictions disintegrates. (Mukařovský, "O dialektickém přístupu k umění a ke skutečnosti" 788)

Hence, Mukařovský sees dialectical thinking as one of the ways of realizing the laws that govern the world. Applied to the relationship between whole and part, dialectical thinking allows us to identify the mechanism of development of individual parts, as well as of the whole as such. If contradictory tendencies cease to operate between individual parts of the whole, then the whole starts to take the form of a harmonious concord, "starts to disintegrate". The whole, i.e. the structure, is (and must be) in constant motion. This is one of the basic axioms for Mukařovský ("The Concept of the Whole in the Theory of Art."; "Dialectic Contradictions in Modern Art").

In 1935, he published a series of studies that show that dialectics moved to the forefront of his methodological apparatus. The study "Dialektické rozpory v moderním umění" (Dialectic Contradictions in Modern Art) is a model example of Mukařovský's understanding of dialectics in mid-1930s and the way he applied it in his work. He believed that it represented a specific method of cognition which, as one of a few, allows us to perceive reality and penetrate to its essence. Together with dialectical materialists he shared the view that reality is movement and change, that things and phenomena exist as sets of contradictions, antinomies. A work of art may serve as an illustration of this thesis. He conceives it as a set of contradictions in which each component is itself and its very opposite. Mukařovský explicitly writes:

The work of art appears as a set of contradictions. Each of its components is simultaneously itself and its contrary; similarly the whole work is the antithesis of what is outside it. Heightened dialectic tension in modern art often manifest itself in the one-sided emphasis of a single member of a given antinomy. ("Dialectic Contradictions in Modern Art" 134)

Initially, Mukařovský did not clearly distinguish between different types of dialectics; he approached it as a sort of universal method of cognition, as a form of rationality (i.e.

dialectical rationality). During 1940s, he made his dialectical concept more specific when he explicitly linked it with the concept of dialectical materialism (*Kapitoly z české poetiky I–III*; “Kam směřuje dnešní teorie umění?”; “K pojmosloví československé teorie umění”).

He basically never abandoned this position. He considered the materialistic basis of dialectics (i.e., the basis concerned with reality) crucial.

The reason why Mukařovský gradually gave more and more weight to the dialectical method in his work is that it allowed him to reflect upon change, movement of the phenomenon under consideration. In addition, it allowed him to name certain phenomena in the first place. It follows from the principle of contradiction, forming the very basis of dialectics, that phenomena exist only when their contradictions exist. Hence, order exists only when chance exists, i.e., something that contravenes it. This dialectical method of determining the contradictions or antinomies can be used to describe and analyse different aspects of reality.

In his work the specific way of reflecting these antinomies takes the form of linking phenomenology with dialectics (Sládek, *Jan Mukařovský. Život a dílo*). Mukařovský's method consisted in focusing on the matter (or object) examined and using a phenomenological analysis to determine the basic dialectical contradictions characterizing it. With their support, he subsequently described and analysed the matter (or object) considered.

Through this method, Mukařovský introduces a large number of antinomies that enable him to reflect the multifaceted nature of the phenomena under examination, their ambiguity and variability. What structuralism clearly shares with dialectics is its anti-metaphysical and anti-subjectivist orientation. Let us have a look at a few examples of dialectical contradictions whose individual components are controlled by dialectical tension and dialectical mutuality that Mukařovský mentions in his work:

art / reality
stability / instability
language / literature
subject / object
individual / general
new / traditional
permanent form / changing form
practical function / aesthetic function.

The question is why Mukařovský started to concern himself with such a great set of antinomies. The answer suggests itself: By admitting that phenomena and objects can be examined through inherent dialectical antinomies, he at the same time realized that if he strives to describe and explain them with maximum complexity, he cannot rely only on one or two antinomies, but needs to apply an entire set of them. Only such a set, a specific network of antinomies is capable of reflecting the phenomena and things in their variety, permanent changeability and unstableness. Furthermore, this new approach allowed him to view the phenomena and objects from many different perspectives.

Mukařovský applied the principles of dialectical thinking in combination with phenomenological analysis in several of his texts. In particular the monograph *Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty* (Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts), published in 1936, should be mentioned. In this work, Mukařovský focused on three key aspects of aesthetic (aesthetic function, norm and value) that are involved in an individual's relation to the world. They play a relatively unique role in expressing the

dynamic and variable aesthetic approach to reality.

4. Conclusion

When we apply the fundamental principle of dialectics, i.e. that development unfolds only through the interplay of contradictions, it becomes clear that Mukařovský, whose thinking was in no way devoid of contradictions (see Steiner, “Jan Mukařovský’s Structural Aesthetics”; Toman; Sládek, “Mukařovský’s Structuralism and Semiotics”), was fundamentally a dialectician. In a way he can be seen as a practising philosopher for whom structuralism and dialectics merged, even though there was a historical period in which he had to declare them incommensurable.

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