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RUSSIAN FORMALISM:
A RETROSPECTIVE GLANCE
A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOR OF
VICTOR ERLICH

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Sergei Davydov • From "Dominant" to
 "Semantic Gesture": A Link
 Between Russian Formalism
 and Czech Structuralism

This paper examines several theoretical premises of the Russian Formalists in the context of European literary thought. For this purpose I have chosen a single concept, that of the "dominant," which I will first trace to its immediate West European origin. Next I will try to describe the subsequent applications and metamorphoses of this versatile concept of the dominant at various stages of the Formalist doctrine, as it—on the way from an immanent to a transcendent theory—gradually incorporated into its system ever wider strata of literary and extra-literary phenomena. And, finally, I will attempt to establish several links between Russian Formalism—whose endeavors were interrupted in the late 1920s under the ideological pressures of Marxist-oriented theories—and Czech Structuralism (the Prague Linguistic Circle), which redefined, developed, and brought to a preliminary conclusion the main Formalist tenets, before this school too succumbed in the late 1940s to similar pressures.

The aesthetic theories of the neo-Kantian philosopher Broder Christiansen, outlined in his *Die Philosophie der Kunst* (*The Philosophy of Art*),¹ stimulated the endeavors of the Russian Formalists in a number of crucial areas. Christiansen's well-known notion of the "Differenzqualitäten" (quality of divergence) (118) was introduced to the Russian scene at an early stage by Viktor Shklovsky,² and it soon became the core of Formalist thinking. For Christiansen an adequate aesthetic reception of a work of art depended largely on the realization of the various "qualities of divergence" through which the work of art deviates from and violates the customary aesthetic norms, as they are established by other works of art. According to Victor Erlich, this concept meant to the Formalists "three different things":

... on the level of representation of reality, *Differenzqualität* stood for the "divergence" from the actual, i.e., for creative deformation. On the level of language it meant a departure from current linguistic usage. Finally, on the plane of literary dynamics, this catch-all term would imply a deviation from, or modification of, the prevailing artistic norm.³

Unlike the "quality of divergence," Christiansen's second major concept, that of the "Dominante" (the dominant), made its way into Formalist theories only gradually. Undergoing a number of metamorphoses, the concept of the dominant, according to R. Jakobson, became during the later stages of the Formalist movement "one of the most crucial, elaborated and productive concepts in Russian Formalist theory."⁴ It also left its permanent imprint on the thinking of the Prague School of Structuralism, most notably represented in the works of Jan Mukařovský.

As defined by Christiansen, the "dominant" is the main aesthetic principle according to which the various "qualities of divergence" of a work of art are integrated, perceived, interpreted and judged. Christiansen's concept of the dominant is based on the recognition of the double ontological status of the work of art. A work of art is a phenomenon anchored in both objective and subjective realities. Through its external manifestations a work of art, existing objectively in time and space, constitutes the "outer work" (*das äussere Kunstwerk*), i.e., the material vehicle. The same work, when perceived, also exists internally in the recipient's mind, where it is integrated into the so-called "aesthetic object" (*das ästhetische Objekt*), i.e., the proper target of an aesthetic inquiry (41). Unlike the material artifact which presents itself to a sensory perception (*Sinnesempfindungen*), the "aesthetic object" also accommodates non-sensory impressions (*Stimmungsimpressionen*, 82), which enter our consciousness mainly through associations of similarities with, and differences from, the governing aesthetic norms. The most prominent among such associations are the "qualities of divergence" (118). This entire cumulative process in which they are integrated into a phenomenological "aesthetic object" Christiansen calls the "synthesis of the object" (*Objektsynthese*, 241). The material vehicle alone cannot guarantee the identity of the immaterial "aesthetic object," which Christiansen defines as a "teleologic structure" (133)—a structure that is the result of the dynamic interaction of various "qualities of divergence" in the perceivers' minds. The actual structure of the "aesthetic object" is

determined, according to Christiansen, by the function of the so-called "dominant":

It happens only rarely that the emotive factors of an aesthetic object participate equally in the effect of the whole. On the contrary, normally a single factor or a configuration of factors comes to the fore and assumes a leading role. All the others accompany the dominant, intensify it through their harmony, heighten it through contrast, and surround it with a play of variations. The dominant is the same as the structure of bones in an organic body: it contains the theme of the whole, supports this whole, enters into relation with it (241).

In an analogous manner B. Eichenbaum introduces the concept of the dominant in his 1921 study "The Melodics of Russian Lyric Verse" ("Melodika russkogo liricheskogo stikha"):

The work of art is always the result of a complex struggle among various form-creating elements; it is always a kind of compromise. These elements do not simply co-exist and "correlate." Depending on the general character of the style, this or that element acquires the role of the organizing dominant governing all the others and subordinating them.⁵

The principle of the perpetual domination and subordination of elements within a hierarchy of a given work was soon understood by the Russian Formalists as the essential *modus vivendi* of any work of art. In 1924 Yu. Tynyanov came up with a similar formulation of the dominant:

Without the sensation of subordination, the deformation of all the factors by the factor fulfilling the constructive role [the dominant], there would be no fact of art. . . . If the sensation of the interplay of factors (necessarily presupposing the presence of two elements—the dominating and the subordinated) vanishes, the fact of art is obliterated; it becomes automatized.⁶

Eager to replace the impressionistic and metaphoric apparatus of previous theoretical schools with more exact methods and more adequate terminology, the Russian Formalists found a variety of applications for the versatile concept of the dominant. In their early works the Russian Formalists applied the dominant in describing the "literary construction" (*konstruktsiia*)—a term used when referring to the inner organization of the text. Later the Russian Formalists used the dominant to describe the "literary system" (*sistema*)—a term used

when a text was analyzed in correlation with other literary and extra-literary series. The dominant was applied to the individual style of a single poet or of a whole poetic school. Later, with the notion of the dominant shifting in time, the Russian Formalists attempted to outline a model for literary evolution (Tynyanov) or to characterize the succession of entire cultural epochs (Jakobson).

The concept of the dominant was first explored in monographical studies. Through a thorough analysis of a given text and its literary background which establishes the governing literary norms, the Formalist critic usually arrives at some essential formula which captures the poetic style of a given poet and distinguishes him from the background of the given poetic tradition. Thus V. Zhirmunsky, in his "The Poetics of Alexander Blok" ("Poëtika Aleksandra Bloka," 1921), states that "Blok's particular place in the history of Russian Romantic lyric poetry is determined by the decisive role which the metaphor—as the dominating device, as the stylistic 'dominant' (Christiansen's term), played in his poetry."⁷ Eichenbaum, in his "Anna Akhmatova: An Experiment in Analysis" ("Anna Akhmatova: Opyt analiza," 1923), sees the "essential dominant" of her style in Akhmatova's "striving for laconism and energy of expression."⁸ Condensed into a miniature plot, Akhmatova's poetic emotion tends toward small forms. In contrast to the "extensive energy of the word" (87)—as Vyacheslav Ivanov defined Symbolism—the energy of Akhmatova's word is, according to Eichenbaum, intensive. Hence the smallest lexical units, for example conjunctions, attain in Eichenbaum's view a new significance within the compositional and intonational frame of her poem.

The notion of the shifting dominant reflects the changes within the "aesthetic object" which arise whenever new "qualities of divergence" surface in the recipients' minds. In his 1922 study, "Valery Bryusov and the Heritage of Pushkin" ("Valery Briusov i nasledie Pushkina"), Zhirmunsky points out the "logical imprecisions" and the "lack of syntactic clarity" of Bryusov's magniloquent verse:

However, only a few years ago, when Symbolism was the ruling poetic trend, these shortcomings of Bryusov's style remained unnoticed. Here we have a rather striking example of what B. Christiansen described as the shift of the 'dominant' in the artistic style and the artistic consciousness of the epoch. For Bryusov and the Symbolists it is the emotive and melodic action of the verse which constitutes the dominant, whereas for

Pushkin, Akhmatova and Kuzmin it is the sensory, object- and logic-oriented element [*shtkhijal*] of speech.⁹

B. Tomashevsky applies the concept of the dominant on a different level of theoretical abstraction in his 1923 study, "Problems of Poetic Rhythm" ("Problemy stikhotvornogo rimma"). Isolating three main devices of Russian verse—accentuation, intonation, and euphony—Tomashevsky demonstrates the different ways in which these devices take part in the creation of the so-called "rhythmical impulse," i.e., the rhythmical dominant. "The rhythmical devices participate in different degrees in the creation of the artistic-rhythmical impression. This or that device can prevail in a particular work, this or that sound element can become the dominant. The set [*zastanovka*] on a particular rhythmical device determines the character of the concrete rhythm of the work."¹⁰ Tomashevsky classifies Russian verse into three categories, each one depending upon which of the three devices is dominant in a given type of poetry: (1) the accentual-rhythmical type (for example, the description of the battle at Poltava), (2) the intonational-melodic type (Zhukovsky's verse), and (3) the harmonic type (late Symbolist poetry). "Of course," Tomashevsky concedes, "such a classification will always remain schematic, approximate, and rough, because all elements are present in the concrete work. All of them are, however, subordinated to a general rhythmical impulse which they support and stimulate while dominating over other elements at various places in the work."¹¹

Notwithstanding the Formalists' efforts "to substitute precision and logical rigor for impressionistic metaphors,"¹² several of their theories, including that of the dominant, came under fire for doing precisely what they strove to avoid. It is true that the more capacious and versatile a concept is—and the dominant certainly belongs to this category—the more it lends itself to elusiveness if not vagueness. The first criticism of the concept came from V. Vinogradov, and it is symptomatic that his reproofs were aimed at Eichenbaum, who had introduced the concept of the dominant in 1921. Vinogradov's 1925 study, *The Poetry of Anna Akhmatova (Poëzija Anny Akhmatovoj)*, in which he revives the old feud between linguistics and poetics, vigorously rebuffs Eichenbaum's method. He accuses Eichenbaum of "fabricating all the phenomena according to gross Formalist categories without defining their functional differences," and of "summoning them under

an invented 'dominant' (of a purely nomenclatorial and signboard nature)."¹³

More delicate and constructive is the criticism voiced by Zhirmunsky in a 1927 note added to his earlier review article on OPOYAZ after his split with this group. Zhirmunsky focuses on Eichenbaum's 1918 study "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Was Made" ("Kak sdelana 'Shinel' Gogolja"). After paying due credit to Eichenbaum's pioneering concept of "skaz," Zhirmunsky points out the one-sidedness of Eichenbaum's approach and claims that Eichenbaum presented "skaz" as the dominating device rather than viewing it as a stylistic element on an equal footing with other components in the tale.¹⁴ Although Eichenbaum did not explicitly use this term (he referred to "skaz" as the "organizing principle"), it is evident from the prominence which "skaz" is given in his study that we are dealing here with an early, albeit implicit, notion of the dominant. From Zhirmunsky's point of view "the danger of the theory of the dominant lies in the fact that a critic usually identifies as the dominant those phenomena which happen to dominate his mind. Further investigations in this direction point toward a theory according to which different elements in one work, and at different times can acquire the role of the dominant . . ."¹⁵

With this concluding remark, which denies the literary work any permanent hierarchy of dominating and subordinated elements and renders the actual structure a relative or relational entity, Zhirmunsky inaugurates a distinctly new phase in the development of Russian Formalism—one for which he coined the name "Neo-Formalism." Neo-Formalism abandoned the static and mechanistic notions of early Formalism which stem from the synchronic view of the structure. Stressing the need for a diachronic approach, the Neo-Formalists eventually transcended a number of shortcomings connected with the question of the autonomy and immanence of the literary work.

Yu. Tynyanov is undoubtedly the most prominent representative of the Neo-Formalist trend. His points of departure are: the insistence upon the relativity of the "literary fact" and the notion of permanent "change." Tynyanov abandons the ontological definition of the work of literature as a "sum of literary devices" (Shklovskiy) in favor of a functional definition. Tynyanov rejects Shklovsky's approach of studying literary devices for themselves alone, and apart from the functions which make them "literary." For Shklovsky "literariness" is the au-

tonomous and unchangeable essence of a work of literature, separate from the paraphernalia of "byt" (literary life, environment).¹⁶ Therefore he locates the "qualities of divergence" in the work itself. Tynyanov, for whom a literary work is no longer an autonomous but a relational phenomenon, finds the "qualities of divergence" in the ongoing interaction of the centripetal and centrifugal forces which mediate between the "literary fact" and the phenomena of literary and extra-literary "byt." Tynyanov understands the "divergent qualities" as functions which correlate and integrate various levels of an overall system of literature. Depending on whether the differential function operates on the infra-literary, intra-literary or extra-literary level, Tynyanov differentiates among three sets of functions. Thus, the function through which various components of a single work are correlated and integrated into their own system Tynyanov calls the "constructive function"; the function which relates this system to the next higher system of the "literary series" that includes other literary works is the "literary function"; and the function through which the "literary series" is correlated with the overall cultural system of "byt" Tynyanov terms the "speech function." Literature, defined by Tynyanov as a "dynamic speech construction," is correlated with the phenomena of "byt" primarily through its speech aspect. No speech construction per se enjoys the privilege of being literary prior to its incorporation into the appropriate functional system. Therefore, only the literary and speech functions, which relate the text to the literary and extra-literary series, determine at any given point whether a text will be perceived as a "literary fact." In order to establish the three functions, a methodologically sound analysis should avoid reductions and proceed from the constructive function to the literary, and from the literary to the speech function.

According to Tynyanov, the system of literature, as a system of systems, inevitably presupposes a hierarchical organization.

It is quite clear that every literary system is formed not in the harmonious interaction of all factors, but by the promotion and supremacy of one (or several) factors which functionally subordinate and mark the remaining factors. Russian literary criticism customarily designates such a factor as the "dominant" (Christiansen, Eichenbaum). This, however, does not mean that the subordinated factors are unimportant and can be disregarded. On the contrary, in the subordination and transforma-

tion of all factors by the leading one, the activity of the leading factor, i.e., the dominant, becomes revealed.¹⁷

It is precisely by virtue of this dominant that a text acquires its literary function and enters into literature as a literary fact.

Tynyanov also answers the legitimate question concerning the author's role in influencing the choice of the dominant or "ustanovka" (orientation toward), as he occasionally calls the dominant. Since the notion of function is incompatible with the notion of intentionality, the laws of literary evolution are independent of the individual will of the author. Consequently, Tynyanov rids the dominant of all its intentional connotations.¹⁸ In this depersonalized form the dominant becomes a self-regulating function equally independent of authors' or critics' intentions, and accountable only to the immanent laws of literary evolution which ultimately determine the shifts within the hierarchy of a literary system. In a joint nine-point manifesto of 1928, "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language" ("Problemy izuchenija literatury i jazyka"), Tynyanov and Jakobson state:

A disclosure of the immanent laws of the history of literature (language) allows us to determine the character of each specific change in literary (linguistic) system. However, these laws do not allow us to explain the tempo of evolution when several, theoretically possible, evolutionary paths are given. This is owing to the fact that the immanent laws of literary (linguistic) evolution form an indeterminate equation; although they admit only a limited number of possible solutions, they do not necessarily specify a unique solution. The question of a specific choice of path, or at least of the dominant, can be solved only by means of an analysis of the correlation between literary series and other historical series. This correlation (a system of systems) has its own structural laws, which must be submitted to investigation.¹⁹

In his two studies, "The Literary Fact" ("Literaturnyj fakt," 1924), and "On Literary Evolution" ("O literaturnoj evoljutsii," 1929), Tynyanov actually attempts to outline a preliminary model of such a "literary system," and to demonstrate on the basis of concrete material some of the general conditions under which such immanent laws of literary evolution operate. No matter how sketchy Tynyanov's arguments might seem, the synchronic and diachronic system of literary evolution outlined, together with the notion of the shifting dominant, are among the most productive speculations of Russian Formalism.

It is significant that this late Formalist statement of Tynyanov was formulated jointly with Jakobson, a leading figure of both Moscow and Prague "Linguistic Circles." Under the ideological pressure of the late 1920s, time had run out for the Formalists in Russia and it became the task of the Structuralists abroad to verify and continue the Formalists' theories.

Reassessing Formalism from a Structuralist viewpoint, Jakobson gave a flattering appraisal of the movement. In a lecture entitled "The Dominant" (1935) Jakobson observed:

The shifting, the transformation, of the relationship between individual artistic components became the central issue in Formalist investigations. This aspect of Formalist analysis in the field of poetic language had a pioneering significance for linguistic research in general, since it provided important impulses toward overcoming and bridging the gap between the diachronic historical method and the synchronic method of chronological cross section. It was the Formalist research which clearly demonstrated that shifting and change are not only historical statements but that shift is also a directly experienced synchronic phenomenon, a relevant artistic value.²⁰

In this lecture Jakobson defines the dominant as the "focusing component of a work of art [which] rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure" (82). In his axiological approach Jakobson presents the dominant as the "leading value" among other values. Its exclusive position vis-à-vis other values determines whether a work of art will be perceived as aesthetic at a given point in time. Jakobson illustrates the role of the shifting dominant with examples from the history of Czech poetry. In the fourteenth century, for example, such a dominant was rhyme. Unrhymed verses were not perceived as poetry. With the rise of the Realist School rhyme became dispensable, and it was the syllabic scheme which ascended to the dominant position in the hierarchy and became the "inalienable component without which verse was not verse." For twentieth-century Czech poetry, when rhyme or syllabic pattern are no longer mandatory, the "intonation becomes the dominant of verse" (82).

However, the function of the dominant is not limited to the literary series alone. Since the dominant operates within other cultural series as well, it modifies and shapes the character of entire cultural epochs.

The dominant, according to Jakobson, mediates between the extra-literary cultural series and the literary series proper:

For example, it is evident that in Renaissance art such a dominant, such as an acme of the aesthetic criteria of the time, was represented by the visual arts. Other arts oriented themselves toward the visual arts and were valued according to the degree of their closeness to the latter. On the other hand, in Romantic art the supreme value was assigned to music. Thus, for example, Romantic poetry oriented itself toward music: its verse is musically focused; its verse intonation imitates musical melody. This focusing on a dominant which is in fact external to the poetic work substantially changes the poem's structure with regard to sound texture, syntactic structure, and imagery; it alters the poem's metrical and strophical criteria and its composition. In Realist aesthetics the dominant was verbal art, and the hierarchy of poetic values was modified accordingly.²¹

Jakobson played a crucial part in the shaping of Russian Formalism as well as in the development of Czech Structuralism; his role as a mediator between the two schools is difficult to overestimate. However, it was the Czech aesthetician Jan Mukářovský who developed and redefined in terms of Structuralist epistemology the main tenets of the Formalist School, including the notions of function and the dominant. While Mukářovský's earlier studies, in which the concept of the poetic system is based largely on a linguistic model, exhibit an affinity with the Formalist period, Mukářovský in his later works departs rather significantly from the Formalist premises. The differences become evident in the very choice of their respective topics of interests. Unlike the Formalists, whose interests remained within the boundaries of verbal art, Mukářovský's theoretical quest gradually reached out toward the extra-literary series, such as dramatic art, film, painting, and architecture, including phenomena which do not belong to art at all. All this led him to a formulation of an overall aesthetic theory.

The most substantial difference between Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralist aesthetics lies in the introduction of the relatively new discipline of semiology into Mukářovský's theoretical speculations. This trend was inaugurated in 1934 in Mukářovský's programmatic article "Art as Semiotic Fact" ("Umění jako semiologický fakt"). The work of art is for Mukářovský simultaneously "a sign, a structure, and a value." Using the Saussurian dichotomy of *signifié*—

significant as his point of departure, Mukarovsky proposes a threefold semiotic model of the aesthetic sign. The work of art thus consists of: (1) an external "sensory symbol" ("work-thing") created by the artist, (2) a "meaning" (immaterial "aesthetic object" constituted in the collective consciousness as an intersubjective phenomenological object) shared by the members of a given collectivity, and (3) the relation of the signifier to the "thing signified" (the reference in the broadest sense).²² Unlike the communicative sign, the aesthetic sign is autonomous—it does not primarily serve any external purpose. The perceiver's attention is focused on the internal organization of the sign itself, while the existential value of its referent is only of secondary importance.

Christiansen, who was one of the first to differentiate between the "outer work" and the "aesthetic object," perceived the latter as the proper object of an aesthetic study. In a similar way, Mukarovsky identifies the second constituent of the aesthetic sign with the "structure proper." Mukarovsky sees the structure as an ongoing process of interaction between the parts and the whole, and between the whole and other wholes, from which results its unstable "internal equilibrium." "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."²³ At any point in time the structure echoes its past states and anticipates its future states. What guarantees the "dialectic identity" of the structure, which at any moment "is and is not itself," can be established only in the combination of synchronic and diachronic viewpoints.

Judged against the background of Russian Formalist thought, Mukarovsky's notion of structure bears a close affinity with the concept of "system" (*sistema*) as defined by Tynyanov, who also implements in his later studies the synchronic and diachronic axes along which the hierarchy is formed. Mukarovsky characterizes the unstable equilibrium of the structure as follows:

In their interrelations individual components constantly strive to dominate one another; each of them makes an effort to assert itself to the detriment of the others. In other words, the hierarchy—the mutual subordination and superordination of components (which is only the expression of the internal unity of a work)—is in a state of constant regrouping. In this process those components which temporarily come to the fore

have a decisive significance for the total meaning of the artistic structure, which constantly changes as a result of their regrouping.²⁴

Which element or group of elements will eventually occupy this dominant position at the top of the hierarchy depends largely on the specific role of the "aesthetic function" vis-à-vis other functions. Tynyanov had already defined the literary system as a system of functions continuously mediating between the text and other literary and extra-literary series. In his 1936 article "Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts" ("Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty"), Mukarovsky emphasizes the absence of firm boundaries between aesthetic and extra-aesthetic phenomena. Any object, including a work of art, is a polyfunctional bundle of aesthetically neutral functions—communicative, referential, cognitive, didactic, religious, ideological, etc. What distinguishes these functions from the aesthetic function proper is their "practical" orientation. The *telos* of these functions lies outside the object which serves as their vehicle, whereas the *telos* of an object dominated by the aesthetic function lies in the object itself. The aesthetic function, therefore, cannot be reduced to any of the practical functions. According to Mukarovsky, the aesthetic function is a "transparent" function, dissolved in the other extra-aesthetic functions which serve as conductors of the "energy" generated by it.²⁵ For Mukarovsky there are no *a priori* aesthetic values and at the same time there is virtually no sphere in which the aesthetic function would be completely absent. The fluidity of the boundary of art and non-art may raise some questions. If art is reduced to a mere "arrangement or combination of non-art," contends R. Wellek, "aesthetics is asked to commit suicide."²⁶ However, for Mukarovsky the difference between art and non-art lies not in the presence or absence of the aesthetic function or value in a given work, but in the dominant position of the aesthetic function and value among other non-aesthetic functions and values contained in that work. According to Mukarovsky, a work of art, as a sign, addresses man as an individual as well as a social being. Through him the extra-aesthetic functions and values operating in a work of art enter into a relation with the established hierarchy of aesthetic norms of a given society. The attribution of a positive aesthetic value to a work of art stands in direct proportion to the ability of such a work to alter and regroup the existing hierarchy of aesthetic values and to set a new aesthetic norm.

Undoubtedly, any of the Russian Formalists would subscribe to this idea. However, the relativity of aesthetic value was for Mukarovsky only one pole of the problem. The other pole lies in Mukarovsky's quest for universal aesthetic values. How does one explain the endurance of values contained in the works of Homer or Shakespeare? Mukarovsky was far from ascribing to them an absolute status. Like all the lesser values, the universal values too are subject to change. Such changes occur, however, at a much slower pace and are less significant. In his 1939 article "Can There Be a Universal Aesthetic Value in Art?" ("Může mít estetická hodnota v umění platnost všeobecnou?"), Mukarovsky sets some criteria which contribute to the stabilization of universal aesthetic values: "(1) value is universal when it attains a maximal extension in space, including a maximal extension across different social milieux; (2) when it successfully resists time; (3) when it is evident."²⁷ The criterion of evidence holds a privileged position. It mediates between the "artist's subjective intention and the objective developmental tendency of art." An even more important criterion for the universality of aesthetic value lies in the homonymy of the aesthetic sign:

As a sign the work can simultaneously have several meanings, and even very many "meanings" can be ascribed to the same work, simultaneously or successively. Every such meaning corresponds to a specific aesthetic object connected with the given material work. The greater semantic capacity the work demonstrates, the more capable it is of resisting changes in place, social milieu, and time, and the more universal its value is.²⁸

In their discussion of the dominant, the Russian Formalists dealt only with one aspect of the aesthetic sign, i.e., the *signifiant*. For Mukarovsky a genuinely structural analysis was first of all a semantic analysis. It was consistent with Mukarovsky's semantic orientation to seek an analogous dominant principle which would reflect the semantic integrity of both components of the aesthetic sign, i.e., its *signifiant* and *signifié*. Such a dominant, operating on various semantic levels, Mukarovsky termed the "semantic gesture."²⁹ The "semantic gesture," however, is the most elusive concept in Mukarovsky's thinking. It was formulated gradually, underwent a number of modifications, and found its full expression only in his late works. In his 1940 article "On Poetic Language" ("O jazyce básnickém"), Mukarovsky sum-

marizes some of his findings, abstracted from numerous practical analyses:

The congruity of the semantic structure of the sentence with the structure of higher semantic units, indeed, even with that of the entire text, is a very important working hypothesis for the theory of literature. That is, it creates a bridge over which we can pass from the linguistic analysis to the study of the entire semantic structure of the text. . . . In this way compositional analysis acquires the possibility of leading to the determination of the "formal" but nevertheless concrete "semantic gesture" by which the work is organized as a dynamic unity from the simplest elements to the most general outline.³⁰

W. Schmid suggests a legitimate comparison between Mukarovsky's "semantic gesture" and the "constructive principle" of the Russian Formalists, presenting the former as a "semantically oriented version" of the latter.³¹ Such an interpretation is correct as long as one keeps in mind that in his reconstruction of the semantic gesture Mukarovsky proceeds from an analysis of both form and content. It is important for Mukarovsky to dissociate the semantic synthesis embodied in the semantic gesture from what is commonly called the "idea of the work." The definite semantic quality contained in the "idea of the work" pertains exclusively to content. For the semantic gesture the "difference between content and form is irrelevant," since both are vehicles of semantic meaning equally suitable for a translation into the "'formal' but nevertheless concrete 'semantic gesture.'" In order to understand what the actual semantic quality of such a gesture entails, a recent investigator of the semantic gesture, M. Jankovič, presumes the existence of two distinct types of meaning which Mukarovsky apparently had in mind when formulating his concept. Jankovič differentiates between "resultative" (*výsledný*) and "displayed (enacted) meaning" (*rozehraný význam*). On the level of "resultative meaning," the work of art is united by "idea," on the level of "displayed meaning," it is the semantic gesture that unites the work and reflects the semantic intention of the Gestalt (*tvar*).³²

Mukarovsky's studies of K. Mácha are particularly instrumental for the formulation of the concept of semantic gesture.³³ We find here the first preliminary definition as well as several successive attempts at a practical reconstruction of the semantic gesture. In these studies Mukarovsky proceeds from the simplest sub-semantic units toward the more complex semantic strata of Mácha's poetic work. Mukarov-

sky subsequently examines the sound, word, syntagm, and motif in their relation to the phonetic, lexical, syntactic, and thematic contexts. On all these levels Mukarovsky observes a common tendency of the text toward loosening the contextual bonds between the dominating and the subordinated elements. As a result of this loosening the individual components gain a marked autonomy vis-à-vis their context, and enter into a parallel interplay of loosely defined and independent semantic meanings. In the last essay of the volume, entitled "The Genesis of Meaning in Máchá's Poetry" ("Genetika smyslu v Máchově poesii, 1938), Mukarovsky identifies this recurrent tendency as the "formal gesture through which the poet was choosing and integrating the components of his work into a semantic unity."³⁴ Unlike the standard interpretations of Máchá's epic poem "May" ("Máj"), Mukarovsky, for example, does not link this tendency toward semantic indeterminateness with the hero's fear of death on the eve of the execution, for doing so would render the "formal gesture" subservient to the theme, to the idea of the work—an implication Mukarovsky would like to avoid.

The content of this formal gesture is often difficult to paraphrase. Rather than designating, the semantic gesture hints, indeed "gestures" toward the dominant intention which, according to Mukarovsky, can be recognized at any point, even in the smallest fragment of the structure. Thus besides "hinting," also a congenial recognition of what is hinted at seems to belong to the essence of the semantic gesture. Therefore the author's intention alone cannot account for the actual Gestalt of the semantic gesture. "A considerable share," Mukarovsky maintains, "falls to the perceiver, and it would not be difficult to demonstrate . . . that often the perceiver appreciably modifies the semantic gesture of a work contrary to the author's intention."³⁵ The semantic gesture can thus be seen as a prism through which the meaning-creating intention of the artist, "displayed" in the structure, is refracted into the congenial aesthetic experience and understanding of the perceiver, or more likely, of the sophisticated literary critic.

Thus we may conclude that Mukarovsky's concept of the "semantic gesture" is the last reflection of the "dominant," introduced by Christiansen at the beginning of the century. The "dominant" developed, according to Jakobson, into "one of the most crucial, elaborate and productive concepts in Russian Formalist theory." In their early works

the Formalists sought to explain through the "dominant" the hierarchy and unity within the "construction" (*konstruktsija*)—the inner organization of the literary text. In their later writings the Formalists attempted to describe through the "dominant" the hierarchy and unity of the "literary system" (*sistema*)—a term used when a text was analyzed in correlation with other literary and extra-literary series. Both "konstruktsija" and "sistema" are direct precursors of the "structure," as defined by Mukarovsky. Mukarovsky's semantic reinterpretation of the "dominant" into the "semantic gesture" not only concludes this genealogical line but also "distinguishes Structuralism from all Formalist movements since it involves a reformulation of the quintessential question of any Formalist study of art, 'how is the work of art organized?' on a higher semiotic plane as 'what does this particular organization signify?'"³⁶

Notes

1. (Hana, 1909); Russ. trans., St. Petersburg, 1911.
2. "Sv'jaz' priemov sjuzhetostozhenija s obščimi priemami stilja" ("The Connection between the Plot-construction Devices and the General Devices of Style," 1916), in his *O teorii prozy* (*On the Theory of Prose*, Moscow, 1929), p. 31.
3. V. Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, 3rd ed. (The Hague, 1969), p. 252.
4. "The Dominant," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. K. Pomorska and L. Matejka (Cambridge, 1971), p. 82.
5. *O poëzii* (*On Poetry*, Leningrad, 1969), p. 332.
6. *Problema stikhovornogo jazyka* (*The Problem of Verse Language*, Leningrad, 1924), p. 10.
7. *Teorija literatury, poetika, stilistika* (*Theory of Literature, Poetics, Stylistics*, Leningrad, 1977), p. 208.
8. Op. cit., p. 106.
9. Op. cit., p. 386n.
10. *O stich'e* (*On Verse*, Leningrad, 1929), p. 27.
11. Ibid.
12. Erlich, op. cit. p. 284.
13. Leningrad, 1925), p. 6.
14. "Vokrug 'Poëtiki' Opojaz'a" ("Around the 'Poetics' of Opojaz'"), in *Voprosy teorii literatury* (*Questions of the Theory of Literature*, 1928; rpt. s-Gravenhage, 1962), p. 355n.
15. Ibid., p. 356n.

16. The "literary byt" includes all phenomena of the literary life of a given society, such as the professional situation of a writer, the relations between author and public, literary salons and journals, literary criticism, editorial and cultural policies, etc. Even less directly related to the literary text is the "extra-literary byt," consisting of the rudiments of all intellectual activities of a given society, such as culture, philosophy, science, technology, economy, ideology, etc. Cf. Tynjanov, "Literaturnyj fakt" ("The Literary Fact," 1924) or Ejikhtenbaum, "Literaturnyj byt" ("The Literary Life," 1929).
17. "Oda kak oratorskij zhanr" ("The Ode as an Oratorical Genre," 1927), in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten*, vol. 2, ed. M. Imdahl et al. (München, 1969), p. 272.
18. "Literaturnaja evoljucija" ("Literary Evolution," 1927), in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten*, vol. 1, p. 452.
19. *Readings in Russian Poetics*, pp. 80-81.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
22. See *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukaiřovskij*, trans. and ed. J. Burbank and P. Steiner (New Haven, 1977), p. 88.
23. "On Structuralism" (1946), *ibid.*, p. 4.
24. *Ibid.*
25. See J. Mukaiřovskij, "Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakt" (1936), in *Studie z estetiky (Aesthetic Studies)*, Prague, 1966), pp. 27, 42, 51.
26. *The Literary Theory and Aesthetics of the Prague School* (Ann Arbor, 1969), p. 21.
27. *Structure, Sign, and Function*, p. 61.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
29. The relationship between the dominant and the semantic gesture was discussed by M. Červenka in his "Literární dílo jako znak" ("The Literary Work as Sign"), *Oriente* 4, 1969, p. 64.
30. *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukaiřovskij*, trans. and ed. J. Burbank and P. Steiner (New Haven, 1977), p. 54.
31. "Formästhetische Inhaltsauffassungen im slavischen Funktionalismus," in *Sound, Sign and Meaning*, ed. L. Matejka (Ann Arbor, 1976), p. 336.
32. "Perspektivy semantického gesta" ("The Perspectives of the Semantic Gesture"), in *K interpretaci uměleckého literárního díla (Toward an Interpretation of the Literary Work)*, ed. M. Jankovič (Prague, 1970), p. 7.
33. Written between 1928 and 1938, the studies entered into the third volume of Mukaiřovskij's *Kapitoly z české poetiky (Chapters from Czech Poetics)*, Prague, 1948).
34. Mukaiřovskij undertook an analogous reconstruction of the semantic

- gesture in his three studies of K. Čapek (1934-39), *Kapitoly*, vol. 2 (Prague, 1941).
35. *Structure, Sign, and Function*, p. 111.
 36. P. Steiner, "The Conceptual Basis of Prague Structuralism," in *Sound, Sign and Meaning*, p. 375.