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THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF AN ARTWORK

Abstract: (*The Ontological Status of an Artwork*) This contribution deals with traditional problem of Aesthetics – relation between material and ideal components of an artwork. Jan Mukařovský's view on this question is put into wider theoretical context by its comparison with the view of Roman Ingarden and John Dewey.

The aim of the paper is to outline the typology of those different approaches and to interfere their theoretical consequences – limits and possibilities – for analyses of the art.

Theoretical projects of thinking about the two main existential forms of an artwork teem with terminological configurations, which are indicative of differing philosophical assumptions and implicative of the diverging space for the theoretical-practical consequences. At stake within this problematic field is essentially the relationship, obtaining between the material and ideal component of an artwork, or the relationship between its material and intellectual (intentional) form.

In this paper, I will address the solution of the quoted relationship within Jan Mukařovský's aesthetic conception and then, by paralleling his approach with Roman Ingarden's and John Dewey's, I will try to locate Mukařovský's aesthetics into a broader theoretical context.

A brief summary of the authors' key ideas as to the given topic seems an indispensable point of departure for the declared comparative intentions of the ensuing considerations.

R. Ingarden discriminates between a material (substantive or physical) „substructure” of an artwork and a work of art *qua* intentional object. Within his conception, it implies that the artwork's „existential foundation lies, above all, within conscious acts, and the qualities, determining the artwork, are not, strictly speaking, immanent in it but are ascribed, or attributed, to it; or, if you prefer, they are granted to it through the conscious acts”¹. Thereby, Ingarden has „bracketed” from the notion of an artwork its substantive form as such that, albeit needful for the artwork's fixation, does not properly belong in its notion. In terms of intentionality, Ingarden in principle distinguishes two forms of the intentional object. The one, mostly schematic and multilayered, for which he will reserve the notion of an artwork, is an intersubjective intentional object, the other, in turn, is a monosubjective intentional object, which we obtain by the concretization of entirely indefinite or not entirely definite (schematic) spots in the artwork and which Ingarden has named as an aesthetic object. The latter is constituted in the process of aesthetic perception (outliving), hence for an aesthetic mode of consciousness it is a given, depending on the subject's aesthetic attitude, while the artwork is constituted in the process of knowledge, hence it presents a given for a knowing mode of consciousness, depending on the subject's theoretical attitude. For Ingarden, as theoretical subjects we all of us are equipped with the equal „outfit” of consciousness, which would render the result of the process of knowledge intersubjective, i.e., identical throughout all the knowing subjects. In the case of the aesthetic outliving, the process of concretization is impregnated by the subject's individual emotional life experience, which differs from subject to subject, rendering the aesthetic object monosubjective and unique for any outliving (perceiving subject).

J. Mukařovský does make use of the modified „Ingardenian” terminology of an artwork and an aesthetic object, but he will differentiate it, proceeding from other scheme. The point at issue is his differentiation is moved onto the level of the relationship, obtaining between the material and the ideational: the „matter” of the artwork pre-

sents the foundation for the whole array of aesthetic objects within our consciousness. Similarly to Ingarden, Mukařovský also sees the consciousness as innately structured, though, again, along different lines. Within the abstract of consciousness, he would not differentiate between the knowing and the aesthetic modes, but he would draw a distinction between the collective and the individual consciousness, while it is just the collective consciousness (as a vehicle of a certain set of valid artistic norms of the day) that is the carrier of the „aesthetic object” (the latter, under Mukarovsky’s interpretation, constitutes the meaning of the artwork-thing). On the level of consciousness, Mukařovský, too, discriminates between „what is common among the subjective states of consciousness, generated by the artwork-thing in the members of a certain collectivity”², and what is individual. At that, however, he will not dichotomize this relationship in terms of dual attitudes (the universal = knowledge, the individual = aesthetic out-living) but construe it as the interface of collective and individual consciousness. Mukařovský seems to proceed from the assumption of, as it were, the ontological priority of collective consciousness as a certain core meaning, providing for the associational or connotational mechanisms operational within individual consciousness. He assumes an aesthetic object to emerge within the individual consciousness just by means of projecting the »material« artwork onto the backdrop of the current state of art’s structure”³.

For all the incompleteness and schematism, which plague this reconstruction of R. Ingarden’s and J. Mukařovský’s treatment of the ontological status of an artwork, I do feel justified to suggest that while resorting to very much the same terminology, the two have come to their conclusions, propelled by divergent assumptions. While Ingarden will unequivocally place the work of art within the area of intentionality and discriminate between its two „dissimilar” forms (constituted by different attitudes), Mukařovský’s solution, in my opinion, will offer a more viable theoretical framework for the treatment of art concerns, by virtue of incorporating into the notion of an artwork the latter’s material ingredient. Ingarden’s project would reduce the material layer to a mere means of an artwork’s fixation, which implies the pre-existence of the ready-made intentional object in the creator’s consciousness. From the beholder’s perspective, the

material layer is then reduced to no more than a stimulus, whose function amounts to the „triggering” of the process of an aesthetic outliving, which – after the stage of the „introductory emotion” (taking an aesthetic attitude) – may become detached from the „thing” to proceed on its own: the matter is Ingarden does not think it necessary for the constructed aesthetic object to correspond with the work of art. Even more to it. The incorporation of the collective „aesthetic” consciousness into the ontological structure of the artwork will open up much more theoretical opportunities for the application of the historically dynamic „life” of the artwork than Ingarden’s project could do. Besides, the semiotic sign-meaning-signified model Mukařovský used for the definition of the artwork will help us reveal further differentials in the conceptions of the two authors.

Mukařovský writes we have (as long as we are anxious to study objectively such phenomenon as art is) to „view an artwork as a sign composed of a sensual symbol, created by the artist; of a „meaning”(= aesthetic object), lodged within collective consciousness; and of the relation to the signified thing, or the relationship towards the total context of the social phenomena”⁴. Ingarden, on the other hand, does essentially construe the aesthetic object as a visual representation in the individual recipient’s consciousness (all of a sudden, the objects’ image in the „as if” modality), which, in the ideal-type case, would coincide with that of the creator (the idea of congeniality). So, as has been shown, Mukařovský grasps the aesthetic object as a meaning structure within collective consciousness, subject to modification and development. Moreover, the ontological independence of the real object, intentional one, and the idea in Ingarden’s philosophical thought permitted him to rule out from his investigations the relationship obtaining between the artwork and the reality, or otherwise, the relationship has been reduced to the one sustaining between the real object and its „as if” existence within the intentional object. Mukařovský’s definition, in contrast, perceives the relationship between the artwork and „the whole of reality” as constitutive agency of the work of art.

Without further broader explications, which might transgress the bounds of this paper, I would like to voice the view that Mukařovský’s theoretical concept enables the construal of the key ingre-

dients constitutive of an artwork and a viable discussion about their dynamic interface.

Now J. Dewey in his aesthetic conception will attack the question of the relationship between the material and the ideational component of an artwork by means of the notion of an artwork-creation he maintains to be the result of the artist's concrete practical activities and that of an artwork he construes as the consequence of the beholder's perception (rooted in a given artistic creation). That differentiation, however, bears no character of an outer relation in Dewey's conception, since the latter postulates any activity as the wedding of the practical and perceptive facets. Activity in Dewey's conception is subsumed under the notion of experience, and the latter (the key notion in Dewey's philosophy) would emerge, Dewey maintains, as the consequence of the interface between an organism and its environment (both natural and social). Under certain circumstances, according to Dewey, experience can assume a character of an aesthetic experience, or artistic-aesthetic experience. Such experience, yielding art in the narrow sense of the word (the broader sense, for Dewey, will embrace, e.g., also science, politics and the like), would occur, he believes, in two guises: that of activities (rational, concrete-practical), where the above quoted human capacities are present in the mode of mutual correction of „the hand and the eye”, and that of perception as the embodiment of that unity, that is to say, while perceiving an object, we as if again restore that unity in our „mind's eye”. For the pinning down of these two guises of the artistic-aesthetic experience and its results, viz., artworks-creations and aesthetic works of art, Dewey employs other than the sign-meaning couple of notions (Mukařovský), namely that of expression and meaning. At first sight, the content of the notion of an expression in Dewey displays similarities with Mukařovský's notion of a sign – for Dewey, an expression is the conjunction of a sensual-perceptual side (an outer one) and the meaning contained in it (an inner side). Yet, again, it should be kept in mind that the background against which the discussed couple of Dewey's notions is seen differs from Mukařovský's. The point at issue is, by an expression Dewey does mean, above all, the phenomenon of expressing and expressiveness „as such”, and the objective of his theoretical endeavour departs from that of Mukařovský's. Dewey does not seek to investi-

gate the already constituted world of artistic signs-expressions, but he does want to find out what makes any human activity into an expressive act. He will arrive at the conclusion that a human would acquire a capacity of performing an act of expression to the extent he or she can understand its meaning. Understanding a meaning, for Dewey, implies the awareness of the consequences of one's behaviour. The expression in art, then, would occur, according to him, where a certain material has been used as means of expression, while meeting these requirements: the material should express an objective feeling, it has been used as such by the artist deliberately, that it constitutes a component of the structure of expressions (context) and of the artwork's chronotype. The understanding of the meaning of a given work of art is, for Dewey, conditioned by the antecedent human experience, or the understanding does occur on the crossroads of the past human experience, the underway present, and the future prospects. „The major portion of the past is made up by the tradition”⁵, writes Dewey, but, at the same time, he is quick to remind that the „knowledge” of the tradition is by no means sufficient for understanding an artwork: the knowing should „grow out of a particular, intimate commerce with the objects composing that tradition”⁶. In one voiced with Mukařovský, Dewey insists that, from the beholder's perspective, the work of art would stand out as a total unity of the sensual properties and meaning (their severance being an auxiliary and methodological act). But dissimilar to Mukařovský, who will assign to theory the function to analyze supra-individual structures (in this, Mukařovský proceeds from the belief that „it is not an individual artwork that constitutes the essence of art; it is a set of artistic skills and norms that is, or the artistic structure considered suprapersonal and social”⁷, Dewey would insist that art is primarily a quality of activity and characterizes human experience, which is always individual, integrative, practically lived, and immediately outlived. That all makes experience essential. As to theory, it does constitute but one ingredient of that integrative human experience, being no more than an assistant, whose task lies in „helping the ultimate effect of the perceptual experience, where the differences (between the sensual and rational) have been overcome and the initial conception has been transformed into an indispensable meaning of the material mediated through senses”⁸.

After that brief survey, I would like to advance a few inferences concerning the relationship between art and human beingness, as they have flown from the above comparative examination of the three individual approaches.

Ingarden relegates an artwork to the intentional space, that has very little to do with the human life, that moves on the level of real objects. As he would write himself, „these activities (processes of an aesthetic enjoyment, my addition – Z.K.) cause no wrinkle in the real world, surrounding us, that is why, in this respect, they are not taken into account”⁹. In order to get into the intentional aesthetic space, we have to perform an act, similar to the phenomenological epoché. Then the aesthetic relation will turn out to be „but something secondary and derivated or something that is no more than an adornment, a kind of luxury amidst the practical life”¹⁰ – and something tacitly closed within the bounds of individual consciousness.

Mukařovský will outcome Ingarden’s „isolationist” position by having postulated an artwork as a specific autonomous sign, that continues to be related to the extra-aesthetic reality: the point at issue is just the nature of the relation to the reality as a whole. Contrary to Ingarden, for whom just the freedom from representing reality in a work of art allows for a full autonomization of its aesthetic component, or aesthetically valuable qualities, Mukařovský will see the aesthetic function of an artwork and the latter’s value to „have been built” with extra-aesthetic functions and values. Art’s meaning in the human life is derived by Mukařovský precisely from the fact that art, „driven by the aesthetic function, tends to an ever richer multifunctionality”¹¹, i.e., art „feeds” the plenitude of the human attitude toward the world and „reveals, ever anew, the principal multifunctionality of the relationship between the man and the reality, thereby also displaying an inexhaustible well of possibilities the reality offers for human action, perception, and cognition”¹². For all that, for Mukařovský, an artwork’s relation to the reality is till that of a sort of opposition, if I may call it so: after all, it is the reality’s image-sign, whose main objective should be to communicate a certain view of the reality (i.e., ideational content) in the direction from the author to the recipient.

It is Dewey that has „abolished” his kind of relationship, obtaining between an artwork and the reality, and that is not unfolding his aes-

thetic arguments against the backdrop of this opposition. For him, a work of art is no sign to convey the author's construal of the reality, it is an expression of experience itself. So therefore, in this conception, art, above all, appears not as a product-artwork, but as a process, as a quality of a processual character of human experience, or as aesthetic experience. The salience of aesthetic experience that renders the latter ever so essential for people consists in that it is an integral, indivisible experience (as distinct from other, more specialized, kinds of human experience) and just in virtue of that, Dewey insists, aesthetic experience is the realization, or articulation, of genuine experience. Dewey would contend that experience has more than one goal, none of which being pre-given. The fact, according to him, will secure that art be in the service of life as such, in the service of „the very process of a joyful acquisition of experience”¹³. That definition of the art's meaning is reminiscent of Mukařovský's construal of the art's aesthetic functionality, with the difference though that Dewey would not be singling out art into a separate semiotic realm, above all, designed to communicate mental contents – for him, art is an integral component of human experience, a component of „pragmatic” relationship, to which serves also communication, viz., the relationship between the man and the surroundings.

By way of upshot, a few typological suggestions might be in place. In Ingarden, the status of an artwork is essentially substantiated by individual consciousness; in Mukařovský, it is the interface of the artwork's material component and consciousness (any element of the artwork's semiotic structure performs as a vehicle of meaning), the central place being occupied by the meaningful structure, i.e., by the fact of collective consciousness. Dewey, in turn, will substantiate the ontological status of an artwork, proceeding from the human action (experience), of which consciousness (undivided vertically and investigated by Dewey horizontally) is but an inner component. The modifications Dewey have accomplished in the starting points of his reasoning suggest that art, or an artwork, is no longer primarily conceived of as fact of consciousness and the latter's relation to the reality, it is a fact of human beingness, a certain way of human beingness. Art is a „direct” invigoration of human experience, it is a „pushing” of the potentialities hidden in any experience to their full manifestation,

amplification, and enrichment. Dewey would object to „promote” art from being just a constituent of immediate human life to the realm of „fine arts”; similarly, he would condemn the practice of a picture-gallery mediated art as such that is based on the mistaken strategy of extracting art from the context of human experience. As it is widely known, Dewey has moved reasoning on art’s forms of beingness from the level of consciousness (Ingarden), or from the level of consciousness/beingness relation (Mukařovský), to that of human beingness, consciousness constituting its component.

Under the foregoing interpretation, thus, Roman Ingarden, Jan Mukařovský and John Dewey appear as proponents of the three plausible solutions of the ontological status of an artwork, which I sought to show, this time drawing on extracts from the coherent body of the respective theories.

NOTES

1. Ingarden, R.: O poznávání literárního díla, Praha 1967. 44.
2. Mukařovský, J.: Studie z estetiky, Praha 1966. 111.
3. *ibid.*, 187.
4. *ibid.*, 113.
5. Dewey, J.: Sztuka jako doswiadczenie, Warszawa 1975. 325.
6. *ibid.*, 381.
7. Mukařovský, J.: *ibid.*, 160.
8. *ibid.*, 377.
9. Ingarden, R.: O poznávání literárního díla, *ibid.*, 148–149.
10. Ingarden, R.: O dziele literackim, Warszawa 1960. 363.
11. Mukařovský, J.: *ibid.*, 154.
12. *ibid.*, 170.
13. Dewey, J.: *ibid.*, 225.