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Unsettled Subject: From Emancipation to Separation

What follows is loosely prompted by the texts and expositions in this issue. The common identifier of these contributions seems to be the changing nature of authorship and the position of the authorial subject, which, however, reflects the broader topic of the position of the subject in the contemporary world. Some of the authors who responded to *ArteActa*'s previous call "AI (and) Art: The Poetics of Prompting" explore the changing conditions of artistic work with AI (Brett Ascarelli, Bruce Gilchrist, Ilja Mirsky), which raise urgent questions related to the concept of the creative subject, while others, influenced by phenomenological approaches and cognitive sciences, focus on the embodied and embedded interaction between sound–materiality and human perception (Jorge Boehringer, John Franek and Slavomír Hořínka). For them, too, however, the theme of the prompt, which emerges from the interconnection between the perceiving mind and the surrounding world, expresses the uncertainty of the relationship between subject and object, or rather reveals their mutual and dynamic fusion. Patrice Pavis' experimental project addresses the poetics of prompting, their variability and reciprocity, in connection with the question of adaptation as an intermedial transfer between literature, theatre, and translation. However, the following essay, as one of the authors, Jorge Boehringer, put it in the context of the collaboration between the human mind and machines, is not a reflection, but rather a diffraction, or, to put it more humanly, an inspired encounter that has its acknowledged source, its impulse, but is not and does not want to be its explicit reflection.

If we wanted to read the phrase "poetics of prompting" somewhat literally, we would probably conclude that the first part can contain the second: simply put, poetics could be understood as an arsenal of tools and procedures whose use is intended to elicit certain responses from the audience. This is at least how Aristotle understood poetics (among other things), even though he did not want to authoritatively prescribe how works – tragedies – should be made to evoke fear and compassion for the purpose of catharsis. His reading of Greek tragedy, which can be understood as the result of a prompt of its kind, functioned more as a recommendation based on his experience with selected examples. Poetics was essentially a well–mastered craft or skill that achieved adequate "infection" or its cure at the level of the perceiver. Infection is undoubtedly an adequate image of the power of theatre and art in general. After all, it was precisely for this reason that theatre, with its performative or transformative power, provoked fiery anti–theatrical reactions from early Christians at the turn of antiquity and the Middle Ages. For them, infection was not a metaphor but a literal danger threatening the human soul and mind. Let us recall Tertullian or John Chrysostom, who in his homily "Against those who have abandoned the church and deserted it for hippodromes and theatres" evoked the image of a spectator literally infected by theatre:

> [W]hen the theater has closed, and the woman has gone away, her image remains in your soul, along with her words, her figure, her looks, her movement, her rhythm, and her distinctive and meretricious tunes; and having suffered countless wounds you go home. Is it not

this that leads to the disruption of households? Is it not this that leads to the destruction of temperance, and the breakup of marriages? Is it not this that leads to wars and battles, and odious behavior lacking any reason? For when, saturated with that woman, you return home as her captive, your wife appears more disagreeable, your children more burdensome, and your servants troublesome, and your house superfluous. Your customary concerns seem to annoy you when they relate to managing your necessary business, and everyone who visits is an irritating nuisance. (Chrysostom 2012)

What a prompt, what a performativity, what a success of artistic creation! one might say. The impact is indeed fatal, not only penetrating the soul and body of the individual but decomposing the entire community, its foundations. John's lament, however obscured by his ideological position, is of course the best possible appreciation of the transformative power of theatre. It goes hand in hand with Artaud's vision of theatre from the 1930s, which – in a similar spirit, albeit completely opposite – acknowledges its extremely cathartic effect, which can be measured only by a deadly plague pandemic.

The Indian sage Bharata, in *Natya Shastra*, and the Japanese actor Zeami, in his writings on Noh theatre, took much more subtle, though fundamentally similar, approaches to poetics in their cultures. Bharata spoke of rasas, juices or essences, with which a work of art – a performative work – should operate and allow the audience to experience. For Zeami, a theatrical performance was an opportunity for what he poetically called "passing a flower from heart to heart" (Kokoro yori kokoro ni tsutauru hana), a transaction through which the aesthetic ideal of *yugen* is to be realised.

Their Western successors, from Denis Diderot to Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, and others, thought along similar lines: poetics as the art of prompting. In this respect, the paradox of poetics – reminiscent of Diderot's paradox of the actor – is that its main role is played not only by the creator, the organiser of the deliberately composed structure of the work, but above all by its partner – the perceiver – who appears in it as a potentiality, an implicit/complicit entity embedded in it. Although poetics deals mainly with creation from the position of the author – the challenger, the sender of the prompt – it inherently presupposes the prompted event of the meeting of subjects on or in the network of the work of art, their cooperation. Jan Roubal, a Czech theatre theorist, speaks of a theatre performance as an "arte-act" (2008). By deleting the "f" in the word "artefact", he unlocks the work as unfinished, open to multiple and dynamic interplay between the work and its recipient – co-creation.

However, it would be a mistake to consider the phrase "poetics of prompting" a pleonasm in today's context, for the simple reason that "prompting" here announces its specific existence as a stimulus addressed to artificial intelligence (AI), a performative, participatory act incorporated into its tissue. At the same time, it clearly asserts that AI must be reckoned with at least as

a co-creator in the sphere of art. In this light, the question of the subject takes on an important nuance, not only in connection with art and creation. The average perceptive observer does not need to be a great expert on artificial intelligence to sense that the accelerated emergence and refinement of AI is bringing about a radical transformation at the level of subjects. As many have mentioned – both optimists and pessimists – AI is causing such an extreme paradigm shift that fundamental questions about the nature of the (creative) subject and its agency have descended from intellectual and philosophical debates into the public discourse, where heavy ontological and existential questions such as "Who is a human being?" are being asked. There is no need to repeat either the enthusiastic expectations or the dystopian, post-neo-Luddite warnings here. Rather, I would point out the extent to which AI, in relation to creation, re-prompts the theme of the subject in art, or authorship, if you will, which several intellectuals attempted to explore during the 20th century. This is just a brief outline of a space of possibilities, which does not aim to (a) present a profound interpretation of the problem or (b) suggest a linear continuity, evocatively depicting a process leading to the current situation.

One of the most influential texts in the field of authorship discussion is undoubtedly Roland Barthes's notorious, oft-quoted short essay "The Death of the Author" (1967). Barthes, using colourful language, buried the subject of the author as an intertextual *scriptor*, a palimpsestic weaver, whose "desacralization" (Barthes 1977, 144) of his "tyrannically centered" (Barthes 1977, 149) position emphasised and emancipated the successor rights of the reader as the guarantor of artistic creation. His view may sound familiar in today's context:

> [A] text [...], a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture [...] the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner "thing" he thinks to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely [...]. (Barthes 1977, 146)

Michel Foucault followed suit, presenting the author as an instance of discursive formation, a regulative or control mechanism of discursivity, under the influence of Samuel Beckett's minimalist, de-subjectivised texts (*Stories and Texts for Nothing*).

I would venture to say that a more radical and nuanced view was proposed some two to three decades earlier by the Czech aesthetician Jan Mukařovský, for whom the subject had become one of the most important, if not the most important, theme since the mid-1930s. Unlike Barthes, he did not seek certainty in either pole of subject – subject interaction, and, unlike Foucault, he left both/multiple subjects their agency. His adventurous exploration of the

terrain can be traced back to his 1934 conference paper "Art as a Semiotic Fact", in which he boldly isolated the object of interest – the work of art as an autonomous sign. The imaginary victims of his reduction were the psycho-physical units of the creator of the work, but also its perceivers. A year later, however, he published a study entitled "Dialectical Contradictions in Modern Art", in which he attempted to reflect on the perception of contemporary, post-Impressionist art and to defend its existence. His focus, surprisingly, was not on an autonomous artwork but the troubled position of the author's individuality, its "suppression" and "dissolution" (Mukařovský 1978, 129), which entails the decay of noetic certainty and responsibility, which is "totally destroyed" (Mukařovský 1978, 131–132). To illustrate this destruction, he quoted the critic F. X. Šalda, who could have been writing yesterday:

> The old conception of personality is threatened. What kind of per-sonality can there be, after all, when everything is in flow, in flux, when discontinuity and disaggregation rule so that man loses himself, dissolves himself [...] (qtd. in Mukařovský 1978, 133).

However, Mukařovský realised that the removal of the authorial subject stimulated, and even emancipated, the subject of the perceiver. In a series of essays published over the next ten years, he attempted to unravel this complex web of relationships between the creator and the perceiver. The result was, on the one hand, a questioning of a work of art as an autonomous sign wrapped up in itself and, on the other, an acknowledgement of the decisive role of the viewer, who significantly contributes to the very event or emergence of the work as a creative act.

To decipher this network of relationships, Mukařovský introduced the concept of the subject, which he did not confuse with a specific person, author, or perceiver; it belonged to none of them. For him, the subject was an abstraction, a possibility absent in the work, because it is only realised through the work and, at the same time, is only realised by it (an event of performance). For Mukařovský, the subject was an imaginary point, a platform, or a plateau, which may vaguely resemble Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome formed by pla-teaus that are "always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end", a plateau as "any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21–22). This posits the subject as a platform on which a perceptual event takes place as hallucinatory, ghostly materiality, emerging and disappearing. The subject becomes a point of refraction, intersection, interaction, dialogue between the author and the perceiver, the possibility of co-creation, a space of possibilities.

Mukařovský's peak in this field is the essay "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art", in which he presented an image of a work that still retains its auton-omy but is so porous that it surrenders. It is full of cracks, deep ruptures, and radical clefts, which bring the work into a state of permanent instability and oscillation and the perceiver into a state of vertigo that overwhelms them. The

cracks let in light ("There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in", as Leonard Cohen put it; Cohen 1992), and under its immaterial force, it is difficult to maintain the autonomy of the work. This does not change the fact that Mukařovský still inclined to tame unintentionality as something happening in the background, the avalanche slowly breaking away. And the larger the cracks in the work, the greater the emancipation and participation it offers the recipient. This suggests the subject as an ongoing impermanence, ambivalent game of shifts, as a place between (*metaxy* or *ma* in Japanese), which makes the work "a matter of vital import" (Mukařovský 1978, 122).

In many ways, Mukařovský's structuralist decolonisation of thinking about the work, art, and its subjects foreshadowed emancipatory tendencies not only in art. These culminated in the post-war period, which Kazimierz Braun reflected on from the perspective of theatre as the realisation of Nietzsche's vision of the Dionysian element, in which everyone becomes a work of art and everything is art. Mukařovský's cracks and gaps opened up to such an extent that the field of the subject often found it difficult to recognise the author–perceiver dichotomy. A carnival of multiplicity. Or its utopia.

It may sound inappropriate to talk about decolonisation in connection with Jan Mukařovský. Moreover, the fact that structuralism stemmed from emancipatory, anti-western, and anti- or postcolonial tendencies is under-appreciated today. As Robert C. J. Young notes in his book on postcolonialism: "structuralism was developed by the Prague school as an anti-western strategy directed against the hierarchical cultural and racial assumptions of imperialist European thought" (Young 2001, 67–68). Poststructuralism grew out of a similar vein: Derrida's subversion of European metaphysics (of presence), read from a postcolonial perspective, thus takes on remarkable significance. The decolonialism of structuralism should not be overlooked. What Mukařovský accomplished before and during World War II was triggered by such an emancipatory process.

It seems to be a paradox of today that all important and necessary emancipation efforts seem to have been distorted or to have given rise to tendencies that sometimes brutally oppose them. The question is therefore how this emancipation can manifest itself at the level of the subject discussed here, the subject of the creator and the perceiver. The de-hierarchisation and decolonisation of the author's empire, which drives the democratisation of authorship (i.e. ultimately hedonism? Or a new solipsism?) that art, or part of it, has imposed on itself, will undoubtedly be tested, not on a metaphorical, abstract level but precisely through poetics or the art of prompting and generative or predictive AI.

AI, which has long absorbed Barthes's diagnosis of the death of the author as an imitator of an already existing structure of citation data, can successfully realise its prophecy. Will it still be possible, as Seán Burke (2011) attempted in connection with the era of internet hypertext, to talk about the sustainability

of the author, their return? Who will they be? And what will remain of the emancipated subject who has gained the power of authorship? Will they emancipate themselves to a higher level, or will they dissolve into a sea of training data? Or will they neutralise themselves and become *ochlos-author-ship* (from *ochlos* as a crowd, not a mob) empowered by a plethora of limitless and ultra-fast possibilities of remixing, re-prompting, and re-writing? Or will they not dissolve but only adapt the boundaries of perception, because perception is the subject of the highest struggle (flat subjects)?

In one of his recent commentaries, Giorgio Agamben asks what AI brings as a separate intellect, as an independent thinking global brain (Agamben 2025). What does it bring as a separate subject, increasingly emancipating itself? In this light, it is difficult to believe in the vision of Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer, who predict the advent of a time of hyposubjects, less-than-human individuals who will live in far greater coexistence with their environment (Morton and Boyer 2021). Should they replace hypersubjects, as they claim? But aren't hypersubjects the ones preaching disconnection from technology? Without reviving the lament of John Chrysostom, who warned against the penetrating prompts of theatre, the fragile subject remains uncertain and unresolved.

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