

# Rethinking theoretical schools and circles in the 20th-century humanities

Remo Gramigna<sup>1</sup>

Review of *Theoretical Schools and Circles in the Twentieth-Century Humanities: Literary Theory, History, Philosophy*, ed. by Marina Grishakova and Silvi Salupere. New York, London: Routledge, 2015. 287 pp.

History of ideas is not only a history of theories, concepts and models, but especially a history of individuals and groups of people who discuss and pursue common interests. They – schools, circles, communities and associations of various kinds – were the protagonists, promoters and catalysts of new ideas and unprecedented scenarios in the intellectual history of the 20th century. *Theoretical Schools and Circles in the Twentieth-Century Humanities: Literary Theory, History, Philosophy* illuminates in an exemplary manner several aspects of this history, emphasizing the historical, political and social centrality of these communities.

Marina Grishakova and Silvi Salupere, editors of the work, offer an organic, exhaustive and accurate framework of the fascinating history of the intellectual movements in the humanities of the past century, focusing not only on the role played by schools and circles as generators of new knowledge, but also highlighting their cultural significance.

The work develops an original “humanistic” vision of culture and a lively sensibility for the “human capital” of any collective enterprise that often remains invisible in the study of the formation of groups and schools of thought and is sometimes not adequately valued in the official culture. In other words, the authors’ contribution gives rise to a *history within history*, making explicit the unofficial, informal and often hitherto unexplored narratives that nevertheless have played an equally important part in the genesis and formation of all the groups and schools examined. In order to mention a few examples of this tendency, let us remind Lubomir Doležel’s “personal memories” (pp. 44–46) on the Prague Linguistic Circle or the domestic meetings and informal activities that accompanied the establishment of the Russian Formalism (pp. 8–10).

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s address: Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, 51014 Tartu, Estonia; e-mail: gramigna@ut.ee.

This approach, that seems to be innovative and original in its own genre, makes the work a unique contribution to the contemporary intellectual panorama. The combination of a rigorous conceptual side and a human touch makes Grishakova and Salupere's work a study that brings together and balances the two aspects that complement each other.

Although the volume – the “eighth labour” in the series of Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature – does not follow a strictly chronological principle, its structure still takes into account the schools' temporal stages of development. The work's guiding criteria and its organizing principles that are masterfully orchestrated by the editors can be found in the conceptual and geographical proximity of the schools as well as in their common intellectual roots. These principles are skilfully interwoven and well-integrated, providing a complex and structured whole.

The volume is divided into fourteen nuclei of content orbiting around distinct schools of thought or circles: Russian Formalism as a community (T. Glanc), Bakhtin's circle (D. Erdinast-Vulcan and S. Sandler), the Prague Linguistic Circle (L. Doležel), Polish structuralism (A. F. Kola and D. Ulicka), the semiotic circle of Greimas (E. Landowski), the *Tel Quel* group (P. Ffrench), the Yale School (J. H. Miller), the Chicago School (J. Phelan), the Geneva School (O. Pot), the Tartu–Moscow School (M. Grishakova and S. Salupere), the Tel Aviv School (B. McHale and E. Segal), the group of Poetics and Hermeneutics (R. Lachmann), the projects of the *Annales* (J. Revel) and *Lignes* (A. May). Thus, in addition to compiling and editing the volume and providing it with a preface, Marina Grishakova – an internationally renowned specialist in the field of literary and narrative studies, and Silvi Salupere – a scholar in the humanities and semiotics, both from the University of Tartu, Estonia, have also co-authored the tenth chapter of the book.

Although this cannot be directly inferred from the title, the book could also be read as a fascinating and original chapter of the history of semiotics. This is apparent, for instance, in the very essay that the editors devoted to the Tartu–Moscow School, their own intellectual *alma mater* that they suggestively call “a school in the woods” (p. 173). This title underlines the historical bond between the Tartu–Moscow School and the now famous Summer Schools of Semiotics held among the greenery of Estonian forests and organized by the founder of the group, Juri Lotman. The informal atmosphere and the intellectual freedom that prevailed at the Summer Schools despite the restrictions imposed by the Soviet regime as well as the spontaneous gatherings held in the smoky kitchens of the Muscovites' flats, were a fertile ground for the blossoming of the group.

The limits of the concept of ‘school’ – the diversity of the views of its members, the lack of a unified method, the double geographical location (Moscow and Tartu)

and the resulting proliferation of different designations to indicate the same group of researchers ('the Tartu–Moscow School', 'the Moscow–Tartu School' or simply 'the School of Tartu') have been aptly identified and justified by contextualizing the study in the historical genesis of the School of Tartu and Moscow (Marzaduri 1979: 344–346; Shukman 1977; Uspenskij 1996; Torop 2007; Waldstein 2008).

Being conscious of these limitations, Grishakova and Salupere have not omitted to problematize concepts and definitions that equalize the Tartu–Moscow School with 'Soviet Structuralism'<sup>2</sup> – an equation that has at times led to premature conclusions.

The concept of 'school' or 'circle', *per se*, evades objective criteria of definition, thus endorsing entirely founded criticisms; yet in reality these criticisms illuminate the very essence at the core of this notion: synthesis of heterogeneous visions and resolution of conflicts.

In addition to the Tartu–Moscow School, explicit references to semiotics are also found in the essays on the Prague Linguistic Circle (pp. 52–56), the Greimasian circle of semiotics (pp. 91–97) and the School of Poetics and Semiotics of Tel Aviv (p. 196–198), and there are several implicit parallels and connections between different groups. The conceptual links that refer from a chapter to another in most episodes of this history are numerous; while enjoying their autonomy, they participate in an interesting game of references which highlights the close connections between schools, disciplines and their mutual influences.

Finally, one cannot but point out the presence of scholars in these essays, such as Roman Jakobson, the *spiritus movens* of linguistics and semiotics in the 20th century, whose contribution transversely crosses various fields and whose name is present in many chapters of the book.

The breadth and depth of the topics discussed by the authors combined with the originality of their approach, makes the work a cornerstone in contemporary humanities that will amply justify its presence in the libraries of both specialists and laymen.

## References

- Faccani, Remo; Eco, Umberto (eds.) 1969. *I Sistemi di Segni e lo Strutturalismo Sovietico*. Milano: Bompiani.
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<sup>2</sup> This trend is particularly evident in the context of the reception of the work from Tartu and Moscow in Italy, as evidenced by the title of one of the first and most authoritative collections of essays on the subject, Faccani, Eco 1969.

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