FRAMING VÁCLAV HAVEL

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Introduction: Reframing Havel

What might Cognitive Linguistics (CL) tell us about reading Havel? In the great majority of applications of CL to literature, the literature has been used merely as data for cognitive or linguistic analysis (see Danaher 2007 and Gross 1997). My goal here is the reverse: I will use CL — specifically a sub-discipline of Cognitive Science known as frame analysis — as background to a foregrounded reading, or rather rereading, of Václav Havel. My main contention is that Havel has been seriously misframed, even by readers sympathetic to him who implicitly accept Havel as the hero of a classic rags-to-riches (dissident-to-president) fairy tale.¹

¹ The argument presented here derives in large part from a monograph course on Havel that I have taught to undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for the past five years. For more information on this course, see Danaher 2008 (forthcoming) and http://web.msc.com/pes/havel/.

² My publications are available for download as pdfs at http://kokdymbyme.net/publications.html.

³ Havel himself is aware of the power that this fairy-tale version of his life carries with it, and it could even be argued, although I will not do so here, that his most recent book, To the castle and back (Prosím stručně), represents...
Perhaps connected with the way in which we accept, often unintentionally, the framing of Václav Havel as hero of his own unique fairy tale is the fact that some basic questions about Havel, his writings, and his political activism have never been adequately answered nor, in some cases, even clearly asked. In this article, I also suggest a framework in which we might answer four such questions:

(1) How are we to reconcile Václav Havel’s various faces or incarnations? The most-well known of these are: philosophical “dissident” essayist, absurdist playwright, political activist and prolific political speechwriter and speechgiver. Other faces of Havel that are less discussed but no less real include: literary and film critic and author of graphic poetry that he called Anticodes. Readers of Havel have assumed that there is a continuity or coherence among these various incarnations of Havel, but in practice they tend to either not discuss this coherence explicitly or hypothesize a radical disjunction between Havel pre-1989 (successful “dissident” and playwright) and Havel post-1989 (more or less failed politician). How are we to make sense of this?

(2) As a writer Havel is, somewhat unusually, a productive and successful cross-genre author: what is the significance of this fact? To the extent that we think about this as significant at all, it might be observed that there is a strong Czech tradition of cross-genre writing as well as of integrating literature with political activism. Havel, however, is not only a cross-genre writer active in politics, but he also seems to find it necessary to redefine or reframe every genre that he “writes” in – the actual literary genres as well as the non-literary ones (his “dissident” face, his presidential face).

Václav Havel’s consistent reframing of the genres in which he writes is hardly a controversial point, and a few brief examples of this will suffice: His Anticodes redefine traditional notions of poetry, even graphic poetry; indeed, it has been suggested that, when looked at from afar, they tend to resemble bureaucratic memos, a perspective which cannot be considered accidental. His plays take French absurdism as an inspirational starting point and recast it in terms of Czech divadlo apelu (“theater of the appeal”). Finally, Havel’s most recent book, To the castle and back (Prostín stručně), is essentially a political memoir, but Václav Havel uses an explicit collage technique to reframe how we view this genre and, by extension, how we view politics and politicians.

To repeat, then, the question: how can we make sense of Václav Havel as a (necessarily?) cross-genre writer who also purposefully redefines each and every genre in which he engages?

(3) Paul Wilson, Havel’s English translator, wrote in regard to Havel’s legacy: “In the ledger of history, Václav Havel may well be remembered more for what he said than what he managed to accomplish, at least in visible political terms” (Wilson 1999, p. 29). But what does it mean for someone to be remembered more for what he said than accomplished? How do we unpack this statement, which we may feel is truthful in some important way, to understand how V. Havel’s words can be considered active and essential components of his legacy, that is, in order to make sense of it in pragmatic terms? Another way to consider this question is in terms of Havel’s extraordinary ability to resonate even with readers who know little or nothing about his socio-historical context, a phenomenon that I have been witness to countless times in the monograph course that I teach on Havel. Why is such resonance not only possible but apparently natural in Václav Havel’s case? What, in other words, does Havel teach us that we can respond to without having a sense of his intellectual grounding or even his own life story?

(4) Havel has always explicitly rejected, from his earliest writings to his present-day public statements, a conventional understanding of the Cold War in which post-totalitarian East represented the anti-thesis of democratic West. We might see this as a key component in V. Havel’s grandest act of reframing in which East and West become two sides of the same coin of a modern human existential crisis. In this reframing, post-totalitarian societies represent a grotesque and special extreme of this crisis of identity (Havel 1999, 4, p. 321), and they should be served as a warning to the West of its own “latent tendencies” (1999, 4, p. 246). For my purposes here, I maintain that this is an overarching hypothesis in Havel’s oeuvre

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1 These citations come from Power of the Powerless, perhaps Havel’s most widely read (misread?) essay. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
that links together, and renders coherent, the development of his thought from his early literary-critical essays through the Antiodes and plays and “dissident” essays to his presidential speeches. And yet, despite the significance of this hypothesis in Václav Havel’s intellectual development, it is generally ignored by readers of V. Havel who have instead concentrated on historicizing, intellectualizing, and/or biographizing his writings. Those critical readers, such as Tucker (2000), who do address the East/West hypothesis almost always dismiss or minimize its seriousness. Can we, however, accept Václav Havel as a coherent thinker worthy of the praise that we conventionally heap upon him without giving this hypothesis a central place in his thought and serious consideration on our part? How do we make sense of this grand intellectual gesture that Havel posited early in his life and has never wavered from?

I suggest that these questions (and others) about Havel can be productively examined by looking at Havel’s writings through a different framework than the one traditionally supplied by historicizing and intellectualizing and biographizing, namely, one in which we focus on the conceptual strategies that Havel both employs in his own thought process and also asks us to employ in how we think about who we are in the modern world. My central point is the following: Václav Havel is obsessed with questions of framing. He is a keen and relentless analyst of conceptual frames and of the relationship between framing and identity despite the fact that he has no formal training in a cognitive approach to language and the mind.  

An Excursus on Frame Analysis

The seminal treatise Frame Analysis was written in 1974 by Erving Goffman, and Goffman gave it what is, for our purposes here, a rather significant subtitle: An Essay on the Organization of Experience. E. Goffman was primarily concerned with the structuring of face-to-face interactions between people (known as “microframing”) and with “the unstated rules or principles more or less implicitly set by the character of some larger, though perhaps invisible, entity within which the interaction occurs” (Berger 1974, p. xiii) — that is, with frames. While Goffman examines the framing of social interactions exhaustively and in technical terms, I will be applying the notion of conceptual framing to V. Havel in a mostly non-technical sense and a broad definition of framing will suffice.

This is not to imply that the technical details of frame analysis ought not be applied to making sense of individual Havelian texts or elements of those texts. For example, Goffman claims that frames have what he terms a “directional track” that regulates the interactions in the given frame, for example, punctuation in written language (210). Material from the directional track is itself typically not profiled in the main frame (reading), but the directional track can sometimes contaminate the main text. This is exactly the case with the telegrams in Havel’s play The Garden Party where each telegram conveys both the contents of the telegram itself (the main text) as well as the material from the directional track when the telegram was being dictated (extraneous and somewhat salacious conversational asides made by the boss to his secretary). Indeed, it could be argued that the central message of the play involves an appeal to the audience to focus attention on — in Goffman’s terms, to stop “disattending” — the directional track behind everyday forms of communication.

According to Goffman, frame analysis is “the examination via frames of the organization of experience” (11), and frames are structures which “set the terms for experience” (182). Frames are pervasive: “we tend to perceive events in terms of primary frameworks” (24) and “it seems that we can hardly glance at anything without applying a primary framework” (38). For example, E. Goffman divides primary frameworks into two classes, “natural” ones (the weather, science) and “social” ones or frameworks that “provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency” (22); he illustrates this point with murder (25), a phenomenon that can be investigated within a natural framework (the coroner searches for the physical cause of death) and also within a social one (the police try to determine the manner of the crime and the motive). Even, however, as “acts of daily
living are understandable because of some primary framework (or frameworks) that inform them" (26), we apply these frames mostly unconsciously: we are not aware that we are framing experience in a certain way because our primary frameworks are natural to the culture in which we live. Moreover, since framing is key to making sense of experience, misframing a situation can lead to "systematically sustained, generative error, the breeding of wrongly oriented behavior" (308), and in a seriously misframed situation, the actors can find themselves "using not the wrong word, but the wrong language" (309).

In his most recent book on framing in American politics, George Lakoff (2006) stresses the power of frames to influence reasoning and belief: "frames govern how we reason" (251). G. Lakoff claims that "all words are defined with respect to frames" (11) and that deep frames, those that shape our moral system and basic worldview, are equivalent to the "conceptual infrastructure of the mind" (12). Along with Drew Westen, who has examined the role of emotion in political decision-making, Lakoff also emphasizes that most thought is not logical or rational but is grounded in metaphors and frames that have emotional as well as intellectual content. Because we rely on frames to organize our experience of the world, real-world facts do not fit deeply-ingrained frames tend to not make sense: "Suppose a fact is inconsistent with the frames and metaphors in your brain that define common sense. Then the frame or metaphor will stay, and the fact will be ignored. For facts to make sense they must fit existing frames and metaphors in the brain" (Lakoff 2006, p. 13).

**Havel as Frame Analyst**

While we do not absolutely need a knowledge of frame analysis in order to read and understand Havel's writings and to attempt to make sense of his coherence in his thought, doing so with conceptual framing in mind can facilitate and enhance the reading, understanding, and sense-making.

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Here (311) Goffman offers the example of a dramatic real-life misframing that he took from a newspaper account: a woman on a trolley in San Francisco who was actually having a brain hemorrhage was believed by the trolley driver and other passengers to be merely drunk, and the police took her to a drunk tank in the local jail where she received no medical care and died.

Ideally, cognitive science provides the critical reader with a psychologically plausible account of how the mind works and the concepts, like frame analysis, that are made available have been developed independently of any relation to a specific genre or literary movement or author or text. Indeed, they have been developed outside of a literary-critical context altogether, but this does not mean that they cannot prove useful in making connections in literary-critical analysis that we might otherwise miss or have difficulty formulating for ourselves given the limitations of the specific analysis that we are undertaking. It is in this regard that reading Václav Havel through the lens of frame analysis can teach us something essential about him.

It is hardly surprising that Václav Havel, a phenomenologically-oriented thinker, would prove to be obsessed with how we organize our experience of the world. Havel's obsession with conceptual framing could be illustrated by a close analysis of almost any of his writings, including (and perhaps especially) his speeches as president. I will instead look more broadly at Havel's oeuvre and consider several kinds of evidence for Havel as frame analyst, starting with a selection of suggestive details, continuing with an examination of Havel-the-semanticist and a discussion of framing in The Beggar's Opera, and then ending with some comments that reconsider Havel's overarching East/West hypothesis against the background of an even broader frame.

**Suggestive Details**

Václav Havel (1988, p. 242) has written that the "meaning of any phenomenon lies in its being anchored in something outside itself, and thus in its belonging to some higher or wider context" - hung, like a picture, in a larger context that constitutes its frame or horizon. Illustrations of this principle are easy to come by, although an example that jumps immediately to mind is Václav Havel's notion of the circles of home (Czech domov, a word which "suggests something more fundamental than home in English" [Wilson 1999, p. 28]); the circles form a nested hierarchy ranging
from the innermost, personal homes (family & friends) to the outer, interpersonal or even international ones (political party, national and regional identification). The circles of home figure as central images in many of Havel's presidential speeches, for example, in his discussion of Czech integration into the European Union, about which he asks rhetorically whether the Czechs will “shut themselves up in their own homeland” (uzavřít se sámí do sebe)4 or rather accept that the Czech Republic is irrevocably part of the larger European circle of home.5 The circles frame various aspects of our identity in the modern world, and we play different frames in the circles that we inhabit, although the hope is that these roles are coherent with one another.

In fact, much of Havel reads like a textbook application of conceptual framing without the metatheoretical scaffolding and commentary, and readers of Václav Havel, like Pontus above, implicitly recognize this without being able to capture the systematicity of it in a neat formulation. Like Goffman, Havel can be classified as a “metaphysician of the banal”; he himself has written that mundane life experiences “contain within themselves the possibility of a parable and a wealth of potential poetic meanings”, only much of his meticulous dissection of his own life experiences takes the form of frame analysis. That he claims in To the castle and back (Havel 2006, p. 144; 2007, p. 207) to have written his individual speeches as coherent parts of a larger thematic whole (and they are indeed best read as such) should come as no surprise when we realize that questions of framing are fundamental to Havel’s thought process.

Václav Havel has also written that he is “drawn to everything mysterious, magic, irrational, inexplicable, grotesque, and absurd, everything that escapes order and problematizes it”6 (Havel 2006, p. 239; 2007, p. 335), which again points to his sensitivity to framing but in the sense of someone who is taken with the need to go beyond or transcend conventionally-ordered systems (conventional rédy). In a 1999 address (Havel 2003, p. 19–21), Havel illustrates this point, using the figure of Saint Václav as a starting point to consider the conventional way in which human history is framed. He argues that official versions of history often fail to tell the whole story and that alongside the official historical flow of events “there exist also underground historical currents (existují i jakési podzemní déjinné potůčky)” (20) that influence the former indirectly but may well be, in the long run, themselves the more decisive historical forms. Official or conventional frames, be they historical or of another kind, seem to serve as guideposts for Havel that direct his attention beyond their boundaries, just as prison impelled him to philosophize about human identity and responsibility in the world outside of it. Concrete, immediate horizons point beyond themselves to broader horizons, to larger circles of home, sometimes even to the absolute horizon, and the more concretely immediate these horizons are (for example, prison or the post-totalitarian order), they more energetically they seem to point.

In the same address, Václav Havel refers to Saint Václav as a “vekly zneklihovač”7 whose historical meaning lies partly in the fact that he embodied “a living, open-ended, unrealized and never fully realizable kind of human transcendence” (20). The mention of transcendence, especially in conjunction with his unusual characterization of the saint, raises another suggestive motif in Havel’s writing that also evokes frame analysis. When one begins to read Havel in frame terms, details from his texts take on new life, and one particular detail from his Letter to Dr. Husáč that I have returned to again and again is the phrase neklid transcendsence (“disquiet

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4 This is frequent phrase in Havel’s writings and interviews, which no doubt points to the fact that it occupies a central place in his thinking. See, for example, Havel 2005 in which he argues that if democracy is merely institutional and power remains continually in the hands of the same people, then the political system “se uzavřít sámí do sebe”. Havel seems to equate this concept with ideologization and dogma: “...the struggle for [an open society] is the struggle against enclosure of people inside [proti uzavření člověka do] doctrine, ideologies, and prejudice, etc” (Havel 2006, p. 98; 2007, p. 135).

5 See, for example, his 1999 and 2000 New Year’s Address. Václav Havel’s major speeches are readily available online at http://www.vaclavhavel.cz or http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html. They are arranged by year given and title.

6 Václav Havel is reproducing here a statement made in Havel 1989 (English translation, Havel 1991b). I have somewhat altered Wilson’s translation of the phrase “Vše, co se vymyká řádu a co ho problematizuje”, which reads “everything that escapes order and makes it problematic”. In his latest book, he rather interestingly describes dissidentism using the same “vymykat se” phrase (Havel 2006, p. 122); dissidents are those who consciously “escape” conventional societal frames.

7 The phrase could be translated by “big trouble-maker”, although I will be interested in the root of the second word (klíšť) in the Czech original.
of transcendence”) used in the following passage: “Life rebels against all uniformity and leveling: its aim is not sameness, but variety; the disquiet of transcendence, the adventure of novelty and rebellion against the status quo” (Havel 1991a, p. 71; 1999, 4, p. 93). This occurs toward the end of the letter when Václav Havel is envisioning the dissolution of Husáč’s “normalized” regime by means of life itself; his language in the letter becomes more and more metaphorical as the essay progresses and life begins to win out over the regime’s attempts to stifle and regulate (order) it.

What then does Havel mean by the phrase neklid transcription? What are we (or what is life) supposed to (or inevitably going to) transcend? And how can neklid (restlessness or disquiet) be a state that leads to transcendence? It is certainly true that klid, like domov, is a word that suggests something much more fundamental in Czech than any of its various English translations do in English, and, given its frequency of use and range of meanings (from the philosophical to the banal), it could even be called a key word (in Wierzbicka 1997’s sense) in Czech culture. And it is equally true that there is a klid-motif that runs throughout the letter, no doubt as a response to the regime’s call for a post-1968 “return” to klid; thus, in Havel’s description of the Husáč era, the generally positive term klid serves to designate a hypnotic state of non-action and apathy—a sense of klid pervades the “normalized” nation, but it is the klid of the morgue or the klid of the grave (Havel 1991a, p. 72; 1999, 4, p. 95). Václav Havel, however, equates life itself with the disquiet of transcendence: it is not a state exclusively associated with one particular regime or sociohistorical context, but rather a suggestive reframing with broader implications.

Both klid and neklid along with their derivative words are high-frequency terms in Václav Havel’s writings, as are references to transcendence: witness his above-cited description of Saint Václav that also links neklid with a kind of positive and necessary transcendence. The “disquiet of transcendence” that Václav Havel suggests in Letter to Dr. Husáč is akin to “escaping order and problematizing it”: life itself cannot be ordered or rigidly contained in a rigid (“normalized”) frame, nor can the richness of human experience be captured in simple formulations or definitively framed even in the most poetic of words. Our minds organize experience through conceptual framing, but life itself— as well as our natural, human experience of life—“escapes” ordering.

I am tempted to apply the principle of neklid transcendence to Václav Havel’s plays, particularly the Vaněk plays. The character of Vaněk is all klid, even under circumstances in which any normal person would certainly not be, and the neklid transcendence is experienced by the audience on Vaněk’s behalf, or at least that has been my experience when I read the plays and especially when I have seen them performed well. At the recent Václav Havel festival in New York (http://www.untitledtheater.com/havel/plays.html) the production of Audience was disappointing precisely because the actor playing Vaněk was constantly agitated, always shifting positions uncomfortably in his chair in the presence of the foreman and visibly relieved when the foreman would leave for the bathroom. He appeared scared and upset when the foreman told him that “they” had been asking about him. The character completely lacked the quiet dignity, expressed through klid, that Vaněk needs to make the play effective in evoking a feeling of empathetic neklid in the audience.

Another detail that has similarly haunted me for years is Václav Havel’s statement, in Power of the Powerless, that manifestations of ideology in a post-totalitarian society make up something like a “panorama of everyday life” (“panoráma každodennosti”) (Havel 1991a, p. 141; 1999, 4, p. 242). Václav Havel often suggests that we de-intellectualize abstract concepts like ideology and that we interpret them by analogy to more readily understandable, and more concrete, life experiences. When I ask my students what the concrete, physical panorama of their everyday lives in contemporary America consists of, they answer: highways and roads, parking lots,
telephone and electrical poles, sprawling malls and gigantic cineplexes, ubiquitous advertising. However, it was only while reading Goffman that I fully understood what Havel is suggesting here by “panorama”: he is asking us to pay careful attention to those phenomena in our everyday life that, under normal conditions, we merely disattend. These disattended phenomena, like the underground historical currents in Havel’s meditation on Saint Václav, are decisive. In other words, Havel asks us to actively see the greengrocer and his sign (all the greengrocers of the world with all of their various signs), the smokestacks (the central image in Politics and conscience), the highways and parking lots and malls and electrical poles and advertisements. These are the things left out of our primary cultural frameworks because they have pervasively become “natural” background to our everyday lives: in Goffman’s words, they form part of our normal disattend track, which is “one special channel or track in the organization of experience” in which locally-occurring events are not considered relevant to the main frame (Goffman 1974, p. 222). And with that we are back to the telegrams in The Garden Party.

Havel as Semanticist

Lakoff claims that “all words are defined with respect to frames” (2006, p. 11), and from his earliest literary-critical works to the present day, Havel is a constant analyst of conceptual frames suggested by individual words or cultural phenomena. In his literary-critical work, we might consider his essay Anatomy of the gag (Havel 1999, 3, pp. 589–609) as an example of Václav Havel’s general method: in Havel’s analysis, the cinematic device known as the gag (as exemplified by Chaplin and Keaton) becomes a spe-

cial form of defamiliarization that acts as catharsis for all who live in the modern age. Havel expands our frame of reference outward and situates the meaning of the gag against the larger background of society and the dilemma of human identity in the modern world. Expansion of frame of reference, in one way or another, is a typical feature of most of V. Havel’s literary-critical analyses.

In his pre-1989 essays, Václav Havel is well-known for defamiliarizing, fundamentally redefining, or semantically reframing the following terms (among others): totalitarianism (he coined the neologism “post-totalitarianism” for his reframed definition), dissident and disidentist, ideology, politics, fear, and law. In his post-1989 speeches and interviews, Havel continues to apply this method as he subjects a whole series of conventional terms to analysis and reframing: free market, civic society, the Czech presidency, culture, Europe, education, hate, ideal, democracy, political party, socialism/capitalism, and many others. His semantic analyses have occasioned controversy, but mostly when his attempts to transcend conventional frames have been misunderstood.

Václav Havel’s semantic reframings generally follow the same path: he prompts us to remove our understanding of the term from its special or technical sphere (for example, politics as a specialized profession or a technocratic understanding of politics) in order to emphasize a more basic or existential-level interpretation (politics as active caring for and nurturing of a community or a kind of morality in practice). In all cases, Havel suggests that our conventional definitions misframe the terms and thereby skew our understanding of the real-life situations evoked by them. In his essay A Word about Words (Havel 1999, 4, pp. 1128–1142; 1991a, pp. 377–389),

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I have also asked my students who could tell me with absolute certainty that there is an electrical or telephone pole outside of their bedroom window. In five years of asking this question, only one student has ever raised her hand; she was absolutely certain that there is an electrical pole outside of her window, but only because it had been hit by lightning one night in a thunderstorm.

In regard to advertising in the modern West, John Berger has written: “We are now so accustomed to being addressed by [publicity] images that we scarcely notice their total impact. A person may notice a particular image or piece of information because it corresponds to some particular interest he has. But we accept the total system of publicity images as we accept an element of the climate” (Berger 1972, p. 130).

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16 The gag derives its cathartic meaning from defamiliarizing conventional frames.

17 A recent controversial attempt at reframing involved Václav Havel’s appeal to young businessmen not to confuse economics (ekonomika) with mere accounting (účetnictví) (Nádoba 2006, Klímová 2006 & Kohout 2006). Also note Havel’s polemic with Klaus over the latter’s veto of a law creating a domestic-partnership registry and Havel’s reaction to Klaus’ implied definition of “family” in his justification of the veto (see “Klaus pokládá...” 2006 for the initial story; Steigerwald 2006 and Choděra 2006 for less-than-reasonable reactions, and Havel 2006 (April 12) for his somewhat surprised response to the controversy).
A Case Study in Conceptual Framing: “The Beggar’s Opera”

As both a playwright and a theater critic, Václav Havel has also attempted to reframe our understanding of theater itself, arguing that drama is “an attempt to deal with the fundamental amorphousness of life, to uncover something like the structure of Being, to display in vivid terms its internal weave, its hidden structure, and its real articulation” (2006, p. 193; 2007, p. 277). Erving Goffman has written (1974, p. 399) that (French) theater of the absurd plays so much with framing that “one might better call it the theater of frames,” and Havel’s plays are a case in point. Many of his plays have titles that frame the play’s message ambiguously: Audience (in what sense of the word?), Protest (against whom and for what?), and Vernissage, which refers to the opening night of an exhibition (what is really being unveiled, revealed, or exhibited?) – the titles send an explicit appeal to the audience to resolve for themselves, or at least puzzle over, their very ambiguity. It is useful to recall here Jan Grossman’s thoughts on theater of the absurd and the theater of small forms: the performance intentionally creates an “empty space” – something left unsaid or undecided – that must be filled by the audience (Grossman 1999, p. 71), and therefore this kind of theater focuses on the “activation of the audience” not just in a theatrical but also in a social sense (1999, p. 71). In our terms here, the staged play is a frame, or what Erving Goffman refers to as a “keying” of a primary frame (1974, p. 40ff), that is intentionally left open, and elements of the performance-frame leak out into the audience’s reality.

Of all Havel’s plays, the most explicitly frame-oriented is The Beggar’s Opera (1972). Václav Havel’s play is itself a rewrite, or intentional reframing, of both Gay’s original 1718 play of the same name and Bertold Brecht’s 1928 rewrite of John Gay’s play that he entitled The Threepenny Opera.

Pontusso (2004, p. 105ff) traces the differences between Václav Havel’s version and the other two, arguing that Havel is, in the meta-literary frame, polemizing with B. Brecht’s ideological notions of morality. At another interpretive level, in the Czechoslovak post-totalitarian frame, Pontusso notes that the play is a satire of “normalization” and specifically a depiction of those who accommodated themselves to the regime or those who chose to inform on others with the excuse that they could thereby protect those on whom they were informing. Pontusso considers yet a third potential way of framing Havel’s intention in rewriting the play, namely to depict an “upside-down world” (111) that is hyperbolically amoral: in this philosophical framing, the play becomes a Heideggerian thought experiment “intended to show the unreality of an amoral world” (114).

P. Steiner 2001 suggests still another way to frame the play, that is, as a game of “meta-pretending” that Czechslovaks at the time understood only too well: “By communicating a communicative disorder Václav Havel reframes the double bind of those locked in the primary frame [Czechoslovak “normalized” society] and offers this reframing for their inspection” (xxi). In reframing and dramatizing the essential communicative disorder of the time, the play also enters the frame of politics and becomes, indirectly but emphatically, a political gesture.

The play itself portrays a dance of intrigues or, as Steiner characterizes it, a “self-perpetuating spiral of mutual deception” (2001, p. xxi). In other words, the play is about framing or rather the keying of frames or the fabrication of frames. According to Erving Goffman (1974, p. 83ff), keying occurs when all participants in a given frame have the same view of what is taking place (no one is being actively deceived); in a fabrication, however, all the fabricators know that the frame is deceptive while others are “contained” or “ensnared” within the fabrication that they accept as real. Other elements of the play also involve a focus on framing or rather reframing conventional expectations: for example, the characters belong to the criminal underworld, but speak almost exclusively in high-style, literary Czech and the tension involved in this unexpected blending of frames, Václav Havel himself insisted, is the crux of the play (Steiner 2001, p. xiii).

In addition to this, the characters refer to the operations of the criminal underworld using language appropriate for conventional business or enterprising undertakings, thus blurring the distinction between the frames of legal and illegal commercial activity. Finally, it might be added that although the world of the play is completely topsy-turvy (underground
criminals speak perfect Czech and behave like bourgeois couples, wives are eager to provide their husbands with lovers, the only thoroughly honest character is a petty thief who is executed for his integrity), actors nonetheless perform as if everything that happens is perfectly normal.22

The last scene of the play reveals an unexpected plot twist that produces yet another frame within a frame (the chief of police and his wife are actually at the head of a criminal organization that is now in presumed control of the organizations of the two principal criminal bosses), and the very last line aphoristically serves up the play's wisdom: "They serve best who know not that they serve. Bon appétit!" (Havel 2001, p. 84). P. Steiner writes: "The text's terminus, I would like to emphasize, does not settle the strategic game that animates the play, but it merely demarcates one of the loops comprising the self-perpetuating spiral of mutual deception" (2001, p. xxxi). Within the play, then, the end of the framing spiral has likely not been reached, but the last line is also an appeal to the audience ("Bon appétit!") that warns them of their own loss of authentic identity given the roles they are obliged to play in the primary framework of their lives.23

Like most of Václav Havel's plays, The Beggars' Opera has been interpreted primarily as a critique of post-totalitarian society. While I do not dispute this interpretation, I have doubts as to whether it is the only or even the primary way to read the play (or any of Havel's plays). It is a rewrite of a famous non-Czech play from another era that has already been reframed once by another non-Czech. It is set in London in the communist underworld. While these facts can be understood as clever devices to distract the censor, it is unlikely that Havel had any hope of being able to pass anything he wrote, no matter how cleverly disguised, by the censor. The play is essentially about framing human relationships in the modern age, about keyed frames and fabricated frames and being aware of the difference between the two, about playing out our roles in our various circles of home as if nothing is wrong and everything is perfectly normal. Even if post-totalitarian society represented a grotesquely concentrated form of the dilemma of identity that Havel dramatizes, it would be a misframing of the play, and a misframing of ourselves, to believe that we live outside of the scope of its message.

The East/West Equation Reframed

Havel pushes frames-oriented thinking to a level well beyond what Erving Goffman set out to do in his examination of the microframing of face-to-face interactions. It is not merely that Havel, from his earliest writings to the present, restructures the traditional East/West dichotomy into an an East and a West that are both actively undergoing more or less the same modern existential crisis. This reframing itself takes place within even a broader frame: it is hung, like a picture, against the background of the passing of one great age of humanity, the Modern Technological Age (represented in its grotesque extreme by post-totalitarianism), into another age that has yet to be named and yet to be defined. Havel has apparently held this belief from a young age and has never wavered from it.24

Václav Havel maintains that we are searching for a new self-comprehension, a new way of framing who we are.25 Our world is upside-down and topsy-turvy, and we ought not continue pretending that everything is fine. Humanity's current cultural-historical technological domov is unstable, and the Modern Age as frame for our collective identity needs to be

22 On this very point, note Andrej Kreob, who directed both the original staging of The Beggars' Opera in 1975 as well as an anniversary performance at the Žižkovské divadlo in November 2005: "I am glad to serve a good script, and I don't want to dress it up or make it somehow cheaply accessible. With their perfect composition and construction, Havel's plays stand on their own. When you add in comic effects, you ruin Havel's own delicate and wise humor" ("Jsem rád, že dodávám dobrý scénář, a nemám rád, abych ho tak úplně neodhalil. Je to úplně dostatečně dobrý, jak je vytvořen, a není to moje úkol jednoduše vytvořit dobrý humor" 2005).

23 Many of Havel's plays have open-ended conclusions that either return the play to the beginning of its cycle (Audience, Vernisazh, The Memorandum) or send a direct appeal to the audience ("Go home!" is the last line of The Garden Party). The last line of The Beggars' Opera essentially does both at the same time.

24 Kosatík reports the 16-year-old V. Havel engaging in an intellectual battle with his friend Radim Kopecky. Havel agrees with Kopecky that the world is "In a crisis" because "ages are in transition (doby se střídají)," but he doesn't agree that because of this morality should be abolished. Kosatík then goes on to praise Havel's ability to foresee, at such a young age and in his particular circumstances, the future of European integration "as if he was able to see, instead of 'real', rather some hidden tendency" (Kosatík 2006, p. 30).

transcended. We cannot afford to remain "contained" within it: by closing ourselves up in it, we will ultimately not survive it. This, to invoke Lakoff, is the "conceptual infrastructure" of Havel's mind or the "absolute horizon" of his intellectual oeuvre, the mother-frame of the many strategic and localized refractions that Havel undertakes.

While the task of detailing Havel's grand reframing gesture belongs to another paper, I will merely suggest here that arguably one of Havel's most significant essays, *Thriller* (Havel 1991a; 1999, 4), has been mostly ignored in the critical literature because, in almost entirely avoiding discussion of post-totalitarianism and addressing instead Havel's grand reframing gesture, it lies outside of the way in which we have conventionally framed the "dissident" Václav Havel of the mid-1980's. Inspired by Michael Jackson's song and video of the same name, Václav Havel takes a "collage" of modern news reports and uses it to discuss what humanity in the Age of Science - the age of the hyperrealist framing of identity - has lost and the consequences of that loss. While Havel's plays and other essays of the same period can be forced into the "dissident" frame, *Thriller* cannot, and, as a result, its importance in Havel's oeuvre and for the development of Havel's thought, seems to have been dramatically reduced.

**By Way of Concluding:**

**Answering the Questions within a Frame Approach**

Questions of framing are fundamental to Václav Havel's thought process, to Havel's need to "escape" order by transcending conventionally ordered systems or *lidáy*. A frame approach to Havel offers us a mediating conceptual structure with which we can make sense of Havel as a thinker across various levels (the reframing of individual words or cultural phenomena and the reframing of our understanding of the East/West dichotomy as well as the Modern Age), across various time periods (the pre- and post-1989 Václav Havel), and across various genres. It thereby sets up a return

to the four basic questions about Václav Havel - questions that, in the existing criticism on Havel, have either not been adequately answered or have yet to be clearly asked - that I posed in the introduction.

(1) What is the continuity or coherence among Havel's various faces and is there a radical disjunction between pre- and post-1989 Havel? There is certainly a continuity of theme: human identity understood through Havel's overarching hypothesis of the passing of the Modern Age. However, more importantly perhaps than a continuity of theme - and a frame approach to Havel makes this clear - is a continuity in the way in which Havel thinks about identity, that is, in the conceptual strategies that he employs to reach an understanding of the relationship between how we are and who we are in the modern world. These ways of thinking that V. Havel employs in his analysis are intended at the same time to model how we should think about our own lives and our own sense of self. We might then conclude that the essence of Havel as a thinker lies not in his unique personal story nor in his role in the intellectual and political history of his particular context, but rather in how he suggests that we apply his ideas to our own lives.

This also suggests that the traditional framing of Havel as a successful "dissident" but a failed politician represents a serious misframing. There is no disjunction between pre- and post-1989 incarnations of Havel nor does it make sense, given his actual intellectual project, that there should be. The reality of what he tried to accomplish as politician and continues to engage in post-presidency - fundamentally reframing our understanding of politics as well as the relationship between politicians and citizens in order to better reflect the dilemma we face at the end of the Modern Age - is not valued within a traditional political framework that focuses on symptomatic rather than underlying causes, on short-term political concerns and self-interested immediate horizons rather than a long-term understanding of our current situation. In short, traditional politics is the problem given the way in which it resists the idea that the "meaning of any phenomenon lies in its being anchored in something outside itself", and it is unlikely that we will survive the end of the modern era without fundamentally reframing what politics (the specialized domain of professional political parties or the ethical caring for and nurturing of a community?) should be. The mistake made by those who view Václav Havel as a successful "dissident" but political failure is that they measure his success or failure within the
framework of the conventional political order and they thereby miss—or dismiss without an argument—the essence of Havel’s contribution.

(2) What is the significance of Václav Havel as a productive, cross-genre writer who simultaneously feels the need to reframe every genre that he engages in? This is a matter of Havel’s obsession with conceptual framing: each genre allows Havel to reframe, in a meaningful way, his discussion of the question of human identity in the modern world, and his need to redefine each genre is a strategy to transcend the conventional limitations of a way of writing, or way of being, that does not adequately express what he believes needs to be expressed.

We could include here a brief discussion, or unpacking, of a characterization of Havel that has become a cliché in Havel criticism and that is also directly related to our first question: namely, the assertion that V. Havel is primarily a playwright. Goffman writes that dramatic scripting allows for the manipulation of framing conventions and that since these conventions cut very deeply into the organization of experience, almost anything can be managed in a way that is compatible with sustaining the involvement of the audience” (1974, p. 241). Theater is the ideal artistic genre for representing and realizing Havel’s intellectual project. Although this statement merits a longer treatment, I will merely mention here that theater is a keying of reality in which all details are meant to be seen and be important, and we are supposed to pay close attention to, and not “disattend”, them (Goffman 1974, p. 138); plays themselves resist rigid framing since each performance is unique; the theater of the appeal is open-ended by its very nature and we cannot make sense of it without transcending the theatrical frame or going beyond the dramatic frame’s “evidential boundary” (Goffman 1974, p. 216). Václav Havel’s plays are therefore concentrated lessons at several different levels in the conceptual strategies that train us to become aware of the frames within which we ourselves are “contained” and appeal to us to transcend that containment.

(3) What is the reason for Havel’s ability to resonate even with naive readers who know little to nothing about his socio-historical context and how can we pragmatically unpack Wilson’s assertion regarding Havel’s legacy? Havel’s strategies of constantly challenging and transcending conventional framings as well as of cross-genre argumentation and genre-redefinition all enact the very process of reframing that Václav Havel argues is essential for humanity to survive our transition to a new age and a new self-comprehension. Research on Havel has yet to confront this phenomenon directly.

We have superb readings of specific texts, especially the plays, and critical works that situate V. Havel in an intellectual, cultural-historical, and/or biographical context, but little critical research that examines Havel’s system of thought as a whole and asks: “How do we apply Václav Havel to our own lives? What lessons do we take from reading him? How are his experiences and writings personally relevant to us?”

To a certain extent, then, it might be true to say that naive readers of Havel have understood something essential about his legacy more readily than the scholarly experts. Havel’s words model a way of thinking about human identity that is accessible and inspirational to intellectually uninhibited readers because Havel deals with questions of framing, and conceptual framing mediates how all of us, regardless of our cultural or class or educational profile, organize our experience of the world. A student in my course on Havel wrote that Havel “offers a kind of manifesto of truth and responsibility to his readers: I now own a new set of tools for understanding my own world”. Havel provides us with conceptual tools for making sense of our place in the modern world, and this is the essence of Havel’s resonance and legacy—of Havel’s “words”.

(4) How do we make sense of Havel’s reframing of the East/West dichotomy and what is the value of it for an understanding of Havel as a thinker? Havel’s East/West reframing is itself a strategic application of his broader hypothesis regarding the passing of the Modern Age, and the latter is an overarching framework within which we are obliged to situate V. Havel as an intellectual. I do not believe that we can accept Václav Havel as a coherent thinker worthy of the praise that has been heaped upon him without giving this overarching framework its due. It is the nexus of his intellectual project, a central thread that runs throughout his writings: remove it, and the fabric of this thought begins to unwind. At the very least, critical readers of Havel need to decide whether they agree or disagree with Havel on this key point, and they need to be prepared to argue their disagreement: anything less than this must be understood as a purposeful misreading of Havel as a thinker.

My main contention here has been to argue that Václav Havel has been seriously misframed. By enclosing and containing Václav Havel within a fairy-tale frame, we do him, and ourselves, a gross injustice. By casting him in the role of improbable hero in his own remarkable life story, we have essentially reduced him to a modern-day political “celebrity”, the main
participant in his own unique reality show. Those aspects of Havel's thinking and political engagement that fall outside of the scope of this way of framing him—arguably the most fundamental aspects of Havel's resonance and legacy—have been systematically disattended, even by critical readers of Václav Havel who often have the best of intentions. My hope is that I have contributed here to a re-reading of Havel that will allow him to "escape" the ordering implicit in this conventional misframing and ultimately to transcend it—that we return to reading Havel as he asks to be read and as he hopes that we read ourselves.

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