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Compte-rendu/Review

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The concept of *ostranenie*, as is well known, emerges out of Victor Shklovsky's seminal essay on the nature and purpose of art, "Art as Technique" (sometimes alternatively translated as "Art as Device").¹ In his formulation, *ostranenie* is the aim of all artistic endeavour : to make strange the object being depicted, using the tropes offered up by a given medium, in order to extend and complicate the experience of perception. Navigating the world has so numbed our perceptual apparatus, Shklovsky writes, that

in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant* (Shklovsky : 6²).

Not only is the artifact itself unimportant, but the medium itself is somewhat irrelevant to Shklovsky's commentary, which applies to art *in toto*, regardless of medium. Though the texts discussed in "Art as Technique" are predominantly prose-based, there is nothing in the essay that precludes applying its precepts to film.³

Annie van den Oever's recent collection of essays, *Ostrannenie*, is addressed primarily to film scholars for whom the Formalist concept of *ostranenie* has had only mitigated success. Indeed, there is perhaps some irony in the fact that what van den Oever calls the "key concept" (9)⁴ of Russian Formalism, one whose meaning is "making strange," has itself become *estranged* from much film studies today. There is little doubt that similar and related concepts — Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, Freud's *unheimlich*, and Eisenstein's dialectical montage, to name only three — have overshadowed *ostranenie*,⁵ at least within film studies. So if nothing else, van den Oever's timely collection at least increases the term's visibility, rendering its (relative)

exclusion in film scholarship conspicuous. The anthology, moreover, also functions as a coherent and cogent survey of the concept's historical trajectory and its variegated role in film theory, arguing as a whole for the concept's value in film studies at this particular moment of medium specificity and technological upheaval.

One of the key elements of *ostranenie* is that it is historically situated; “the device of art” has to vary in order to remain effective because, over time, we will become accustomed to the tropes that are intended to produce the defamiliarizing effect. *Ostranenie* mandates, then, that art constantly reinvent itself, that it never rest on its laurels. When one way of making the stone feel stony becomes ingrained and entrenched, it ceases to perform as intended; another must take its place, defamiliarizing us anew and thereby making the stone stony to our perception once more. *Ostranenie*, thus, suggests that we not only engage art historically — in its original context, to see how it was experienced at the time⁶ — but also transhistorically. For instance, the stylistic flourishes of a contemporary film like Michel Hazanavicius' *The Artist* (2011) are estranging to contemporary audiences, but they would have been *de rigueur* in the era that the film evokes (the transition from silent-to-sound film production in late 1920s Hollywood). In this example, the canonized or “invisible” style of the past becomes the self-conscious and defamiliarizing stylization of the present. This is the cycle of *ostranenie*: a defamiliarizing trope emerges to combat our numbed perception of the world; gradually, we become accustomed to this new mode of seeing and it too becomes familiarized to our perceptual apparatus; at this point another defamiliarizing trope must emerge. (After a period of disuse, however, techniques may regain their defamiliarizing effects, like a lizard regenerating a lost tail.)

The collection editor's own contribution to *Ostranenie*, “*Ostranenie*, ‘The Montage of Attractions’ and Early Cinema’s ‘Properly Irreducible Alien Quality’” is the anthology's strongest primer on the historical formation and context of the concept's emergence. van den Oever re-reads Shklovsky's project as a manifesto advancing a “revolutionary” shift in the way art should be studied: *from the perspective of techniques and their perceptual impact, and not as a form to be interpreted*” (33). Her reading aligns Shklovsky most closely with the Futurists, whose experience of cinema “responded to the new optical *technique* itself and to the radically new and disturbing perceptual experience it created, and mostly with great appreciation for the shock effects” (40-1). One immediately thinks of Sergei Eisenstein, who was influenced by the Futurists in his conception of cinema's capacity to shock viewers and induce dialectical thinking through the collision of concepts via specific montage strategies. But unlike Eisenstein, Shklovsky and the Futurists did not chiefly seek to achieve or conceptualize political change through art (at least, not in the 1910s). In fact, their work became pejoratively branded as “formalist” precisely because it marked a preference for technique over content or meaning (48).⁸ The author's re-reading of “Art as Technique” effectively places it in the avant-garde tradition rather than that of Formalism — when read in this way, the emphasis changes from interpreting works of art based on their formal properties to the perceptual experience of the artwork's form, of the artistic devices that comprise it. In other words, form trumps content, but experience trumps form; or rather, experience is *produced by form*, but it is the *experience* that is fundamental rather than form for its own sake. Form, rather than existing for its own sake, is simply a means to an end.

Nevertheless, Shklovsky's privileging of form over content (remember that "the artifact itself is quite unimportant" in comparison to the experience of it through form) is ground zero for a number of influential theoretical traditions, from Russian Futurism and Formalism to French Structuralism, to David Bordwell's historical poetics and Kristin Thompson's neoformalism. While van den Oever's essay is particularly useful for situating "Art as Technique" within its contemporaneous Russian context, other essays in the collection fill in the gaps of how *ostranenie* has spread beyond Russia's borders.

Several contributors to the anthology describe the trajectory of *ostranenie* as like the "knight's move" — two ahead and one over, or in other words, indirect — because of the selective and inconsistent way in which it is taken up and disseminated across the world and over time. Ian Christie traces the influence of *ostranenie* in 1970s Britain, while Dominique Chateau and Emile Poppe both explore variations on the concept's failure in French theory — the former exploring problems of translation and the latter delving into the incompatibility of *ostranenie* and Metz's semiotics. Chateau and Poppe's essays are both rather short and, given the scope of some of the other essays in this collection, comparatively slight: Chateau's contribution spends several pages debating the best way to translate *ostranenie* into French without losing its complexity and ambiguity before arriving at the fairly obvious recommendation to simply use the untranslated *ostran(n)enie* (as all of the English-language papers do throughout the collection). Of course, there is more going on in the essay than this: most interestingly, Chateau expertly explains why French Structuralism's key thinkers ignored *ostranenie* even while appropriating many of Russian Formalism's other concepts, while Poppe provides a short but succinct explanation of why Metz similarly bypassed the term despite having many of the same concerns as the Formalists ("cinema as language and the notion of the minimal unit" [112]). I will return to these issues in a moment.

It is with Christie's essay, however, that we get into many of the most interesting links between Shklovsky's work and other, more familiar theories of defamiliarization. He begins with an epigraph by Bernard Reich which postulates that Brecht's theory of *verfremdungseffekt* was inspired by Tretyakov, who was himself refashioning Shklovsky's *ostranenie* (81). Though Christie's primary focus is on Britain in the 1970s, following *ostranenie*'s knight-esque movements up to this point also takes him on detours through Germany and France, where he encounters Brecht and Godard, respectively. This is the kind of "indirect transmission" of ideas that Christie is talking about:

What Shklovsky and his colleagues had developed as both a critical and a compositional method in the 1910s and 1920s was taken up by Brecht in 1935 to theorise his concept of "epic theatre"... It was then invoked by filmmakers and critics in the 1960s to explain the reflexivity that characterised much "new wave" film. A decade later, in the mid-1970s, with Brecht more fully assimilated in his own right, attention turned towards the Russian avant-garde culture to which the Formalists had belonged... (84)

Ultimately, however, much of Christie's essay is at one remove from *ostranenie*, as it explores the influence of *verfremdungseffekt* on Godard and the French New Wave and British thought as evidenced by 1970s-era Screen. It becomes obvious that much

of *ostranenie's* potential influence in the area of cinema has been usurped by or at least filtered through Brecht.

But how can we explain the inconsistency of *ostranenie's* application, even in situations where it seems applicable and relevant? Chateau offers that, for the French Structuralists, it was largely a matter of following the path laid out by linguist Roman Jakobson, who was hostile towards Shklovsky's interest in the process of signification at the expense of the signified (101). For Metz, it boiled down to fundamental differences between the approaches of semiotics and of Formalism: "where Eichenbaum suggested '[...] that shot-by-shot analyses would enable investigations to identify various kinds of film phrases,' Metz approached these problems in terms of 'codes' embedded in a structural network, which determined the categorization and division of the so-called 'minimal units'" (112). For many others, including radical filmmakers like Eisenstein and Godard, it was likely the apolitical nature of *ostranenie* that veered them away from it and towards elaborating upon their own theories in both writing and film. As Christie notes, "Godard did more than anyone to make Brecht a pervasive presence in the 'new wave' cinema culture of the 1960s" (87) because his films were largely made in the same ideologically-charged spirit as the German playwright. Where Shklovsky was totally concerned with perceptual experience, to the complete exclusion of theme or subject, Eisenstein and Godard both sought revolution through political action, which they hoped their films would catalyze. The content of their films, then, would obviously be of great importance, regardless of how revolutionary the presentation.

Despite its marginalization in these cases, *ostranenie* has had some impact on film theory, and particularly in the work of Bordwell and Thompson, whose undergraduate text *Film Art* is ubiquitous in undergraduate film classrooms across North America.⁹ Frank Kessler's essay, "*Ostranenie*, Innovation, and Media History", explores the role of the key term in film and media history, including its influence on Bordwell and Thompson. While Bordwell's historical poetics places a strong emphasis on film form, and in particular how the stylistic system of a given film may deviate from (or defamiliarize) the norms to which it is responding, it is Thompson's neoformalist approach that makes more explicit use of Shklovsky and his contemporaries. Indeed, the title of her second book of neoformalist analysis, *Breaking the Glass Armor*, is a reference to Shklovsky:

Classical works have for us become covered with the glassy armor of familiarity—we remember them too well, we have heard them from childhood, we have read them in books, thrown out quotations from them in the course of conversation, and now we have callouses on our souls—we no longer sense them (Shklovsky, qtd. in Thompson xi).

This, of course, is the very purpose of art, and more specifically, of *ostranenie*: to shatter the glass that stands between us and perceptual experience. As it did in Russian Formalism, defamiliarization serves a central role in Thompson's neoformalist approach because it can be found in all art. Shklovsky claimed that "enstrangement can be found almost anywhere (i.e., wherever there is an image)" (Shklovsky 9); Thompson refines this somewhat when she posits that "all art at least defamiliarizes ordinary reality. Even in a conventional work, the events are ordered and purposeful in a way that differs from reality" (Thompson 11). I think that Thompson should be

challenged here on her understanding of defamiliarization, however. It is not, as she writes, “ordinary reality” that needs defamiliarizing; it is our *perception*, which is employed in similar ways in both “the real world” and in the cinema.¹⁰ The ways in which “conventional art” defamiliarizes reality is not properly defamiliarizing, because we are accustomed to these techniques : this is precisely what makes them conventional! Being distinct from reality does not necessarily entail defamiliarization. To this argument, van den Oever would claim that Thompson is underestimating Shklovsky’s affinities with the *avant-garde*.

We have now arrived at one of the key questions that runs throughout *Ostrannenie*, which is whether film as a medium for art is *inherently* defamiliarizing. Thompson would likely say so, because of the way in which devices like framing and editing necessarily give shape to pro-filmic reality. However, differing viewpoints on this very issue have been implicit in the theories of many of the key film theorists dating back to the early days of the discipline : Rudolf Arnheim’s *Gestalt*-based theory of film as art is premised on the medium’s ability to estrange reality through cinematographic intervention, while André Bazin’s and Siegfried Kracauer’s are based on the opposite claim, that film can and should present us with reality itself (although this “reality” is such that it can renew our perception of the world). Such perspectives are fundamentally irreconcilable, and are based on opposite preferences about the kind of relationship that cinema ought to have with reality. To better answer the question, then, we should turn to the cognitivist essays in this anthology. The first of these, by Laurent Jullier, asserts that “before being able to know what may be defamiliarizing in a film, one has to wonder whether the whole cinematographic process itself is not defamiliarizing” (119). In van den Oever’s essay, she places a great deal of importance on early cinema’s “alien quality,” which she attributes to its silence (though we are certainly used to silence outside of the cinema), black and white photography (though monochromatic images would have been commonly seen in newspapers and photographs at this time), and two-dimensionality (35).¹¹ From Jullier’s cognitive-psychological perspective, none of these three qualities of early film is foreign to the way we perceive in the real world. With regard to cinema’s two-dimensionality, he writes that “we are used to flat images as we do not have the ability to see in relief (we see 2D images in a 3D world, namely we see in 2.5D as cognition specialists say)” (123). Such statements go against common wisdom, but challenging assumptions based on new (or old, but ignored) evidence is always valuable. Jullier’s cognitive approach also debunks the idea that editing makes film different from reality *a priori* : rather,

we are not bothered by the presence of cuts as we resort to them in real life as well : each time our eyes move to focus on something else, we are practically blind — the nervous message drops to 10% of its value — for two-hundredths of a second... and we proceed this way as fast as in a MTV music video (123).

So if film is inherently defamiliarizing, it cannot be because it is edited or two-dimensional.

Indeed, the case that film is inherently defamiliarizing seems to fall apart as soon as we consider that defamiliarization is not a permanent condition; defamiliarizing tropes, given enough exposure, are always eventually incorporated into convention

and lose their capacity to shock and estrange. According to Jullier, film has two ways of reliably defamiliarizing the world : “(1) by showing us the world as it is and as we cannot see it because we are enslaved to the limits of our senses (by showing us the world ‘before we look at it,’ to quote M. Merleau-Ponty’s famous formula on Cézanne’s painting); or (2) by showing it in a way that is different from the way we see it daily” (124). Advancements in technology, like the Steadicam or computer-generated effects like *The Matrix*’s bullet-time, have continually raised the bar on defamiliarization, but, as with all such devices, audiences have grown accustomed to these over time (130).

Jullier’s contribution is probably the densest in the volume, and it is also the most suggestive for performing actual film analysis. As Thompson does in *Breaking the Glass Mirror*, Jullier provides four ways of justifying moments of defamiliarization, of explaining their motivation. Rather than repeat Jullier’s case study (the seminal *Man with a Movie Camera* [Vertov 1929]), I will provide my own : the slow-motion shot of the van falling off of the bridge in Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010). Firstly, we can read the slow-motion as a self-reflexive and self-conscious play with the medium itself; the shot acknowledges that cinema as a medium is not bound to re-present reality as reality was originally presented to it. Secondly, we can interpret the slow-motion figuratively, as a way of expressing the elasticity of temporality in the dreamscape of the film. Thirdly, we can read it as a purely aesthetic gesture, as an explicit indicator of the film’s artfulness. Finally, Jullier suggests that the power of defamiliarizing moments may carry over into the world outside of the film; the next time we see a van crashing into a body of water (!), we are likely to contrast it against *Inception*’s depiction of the same (or rather, our experience of the same in the film may shape how we experience it in reality). We can compare these four ways of interpreting defamiliarizing moments with Thompson’s schema. According to her, any element of a film may be motivated *compositionally* (relating to narrative causality, diegetic space or time), *realistically* (related either to our direct experiences in the world or else our knowledge of the “prevailing aesthetic canons of realism” [Thompson 17]), *transtextually* (in relation to or dialogue with other texts), or *artistically* (a purely aesthetic gesture “when the other three types of motivation are withheld” or absent [Thompson 19]). Jullier’s categories are obviously more specifically designed to apply to *ostranenie* (defamiliarization is rarely justified realistically); in fact, defamiliarization is more likely to involve going *against* Thompson’s categories. We are more likely to become defamiliarized when a film is constructed in such a way as to deny our sense of narrative causality, space and time, or realism, because it is more likely to be going against convention in doing so. Both schemas notably include a category for pure aestheticism, devoid of ostensible “meaning.” This is not unexpected, as Formalists are often accused of advancing an “art-for-art’s-sake” position. But as noted above, this is something of a misnomer : art-for-perception’s-sake would be more accurate. For Shklovsky, art that does not produce this perceptual invigoration is not good art, or perhaps not art at all.

Despite the comprehensive way in which *Ostranenie* addresses the issues discussed so far, there are a few areas in which it leaves the reader wanting more. While Brecht and the French Structuralists are given due attention, other key thinkers are tantalizingly evoked only in passing. In particular, a full essay describing Eisenstein’s relationship to the Futurists and the influence of Shklovsky’s theory of

art on his film practice would have been welcome. Likewise, it seems peculiar that the *lack of* intersection between Metz and Shklovsky is given its own essay while the productive links between Derrida's *différance*, Deleuze's *répétition*, or Freud's *unheimlich* and *ostranenie* are relegated to the status of interesting epiphenomena and not developed in any argumentative or sustained way in the "conversations" with András Bálint Kovács and Laura Mulvey that close the volume. Each of these subjects might have merited its own contribution (though what we do have here is better than nothing). Finally, of the twelve contributions to *Ostrannenie* (not including the introduction), only a handful include actual film analysis. It seems like a shortcoming, especially given that the concrete examples (with accompanying images) provided in both Jullier's and Yuri Tsivian's essays represent some of the most cogent commentary in the book.

With these reservations in mind, *Ostrannenie* nonetheless provides a rich and varied overview of what has too often been an overlooked concept from Russian Formalism. Indeed, the usefulness and applicability of Russian Formalist concepts dating back as early as 1913 to contemporary film study continues to impress and inspire. The brief review provided here is hardly exhaustive with regards to van den Oever's book as a whole — in particular, there are several more worthwhile essays on the subject of *ostranenie* and the cognitive-psychological approach, and I have not had room to address Tsivian's provocative reading of Shklovsky's misquoting of sources as a deliberate device! However, it is hoped that the ideas examined here will be sufficient to provoke readers to further investigate what is clearly a rich and fascinating topic.

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Notes

1. The original essay is short enough (and, having been originally published in the 1917, is presumably in the public domain) that its absence here as a reference point is somewhat puzzling.
2. The translation to which I had access for this review is different from that which is generally quoted in *Ostrannenie*. Most notably, it uses the word "enstranging" rather than the more common choices "estranging" or "defamiliarizing."
3. Nor, however, is there anything to suggest it specifically. Shklovsky does not invoke the cinema at all in "Art as Technique," but he does declare elsewhere that "cinematography... probably modernized me" and therefore contributed to his thinking on the issues in play in the essay (qtd. on 57).
4. Unless an author is specifically noted, all parenthetical references refer to *Ostrannenie*.
5. The reader will surely have noted the difference in spelling between the title of the book, *Ostrannenie*, and the term itself, *ostranenie*. The single-'n' in the latter was Shklovsky's original presentation of the term, which he later admitted was a spelling error rather than a deliberate "making strange" of the word itself (as in Derrida's *différance*). Authors within the book typically adhere to the original erroneous spelling, and in this review the single-'n' spelling will refer to the concept while the double-'n' will refer to the title of the book.
6. A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to putting early cinema in its context, including, most notably, Tom Gunning's work on the cinema of attractions, which van den Oever invokes

- in the title of her contribution.
7. van den Oever's use of the term "revolutionary" should not be misinterpreted : *ostranenie*, as several contributors point out, is apolitical. As Barend van Heusden writes, Shklovsky is more ideologically "neutral" than someone like Brecht, whose distanciation effects served rhetorical and political functions as well as an artistic one. While "for Shklovsky it is a truth of experience, of life" that is sought, for Brecht "it is a discursive, ideological truth" (235).
 8. Though the term is still sometimes used pejoratively today, it was particularly venomous in Stalin-era Russia, wherein complex art was thought to be accessible only by intellectual elites and was therefore anti-socialist.
 9. *Film Art's* approach is largely informed by the principles of Russian Formalism, as are the methodologies that they suggest are most productive for film analysis (e.g. shot-by-shot analyses, plot segmentation, etc.). Russian narrative terminology also permeates Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*.
 10. This is a key claim of the cognitivists, whose contributions to *Ostranenie* will be discussed in this review shortly.
 11. Arnheim (1957), for one, believed in the existence of a "partial illusion" based on the principles of *gestalt*. Indeed, if early viewers were not disturbed by the absence of sound or that of colour, it was because enough of the world was seen on film to achieve a good *gestalt* and therefore a partial illusion.

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