

NOTE: This is the transcript of my speech at the conference. It corresponds in most parts to the published article in German (excluding a few additions to the latter)

**From Šklovskij's Modernist Aesthetics to
Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology**

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Abstract: This paper will consider Šklovskij's famous concept of "estrangement" and the modernist conception of aesthetics related to it in a philosophical perspective. Taking cue from the historical circumstances that hampered Šklovskij's and the other Russian formalists' work, I wish to briefly discuss its potential in connection with a structural and phenomenological theory of perception. In essence, my argument is that the Russian formalists' apparently ad hoc and unsatisfactory intuitions as to the formal and aesthetic nature of perception can receive a much more coherent foundation with the help of the phenomenological thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The unfulfilled potential of the Russian formalists' aesthetics

In April of 1930, Vladimir Majakovskij shot and killed himself. Beyond its tragic personal significance, this striking event stands out amongst the most emblematic symptoms of the tremendous changes that the onset of Stalinism brought to the Soviet cultural and intellectual landscape. Above all, as Roman Jakobson shrewdly diagnosed in "The Generation That

Squandered its Poets" (a landmark essay he penned in 1931, in response to his friend's suicide), Majakovskij's death coincided with the ultimate demise of the aesthetic, cultural and social aspirations of the revolutionary Russian avant-gardes, and consequently, with the untimely ebb of the high tide of Modernism in the Soviet Union. Less conspicuously, Majakovskij's suicide also signalled a major rupture in the development of Russian Formalism. In his emotionally-laden essay, Jakobson made it clear that he saw only a bleak future for the formalists' project in the absence both of the fertile soil of the now vanished Russian modernist poetry and of the exceptional intellectual context – fostered amongst other by institutions such as the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN – Gosudarstvennaja Akademia Khudožestvennyh Nauk) or the Institute of the Living Word (Institut Živogo Slova) – that had witnessed intense and productive exchanges between scientists and artists. Jakobson thereby imparted in half-veiled terms to his friends Šklovskij and Tynjanov that he would not be returning to the USSR from his already ten-year long exile in Czechoslovakia. Coupled with Šklovskij's infamous and ambiguous repudiation of formalist ideas in "A Monument to a Scientific Error" (1930), Jakobson's decision unmistakably announced the demise of Russian Formalism as a pioneering, innovative force.

The repercussions both of the premature demise of Russian Formalism and of the enforced break between the Soviet intellectuals and their Prague colleagues have consistently tended to be downplayed. On the one hand, critics tend to agree that Russian Formalism primarily succumbed not to exterior and contingent socio-political factors, but as a result of its conceptual implosion under the weight of its own inherent polemical excesses and contradictions. On the other hand, it has been noted that Formalism's essential insights were directly and effectively salvaged by some of its own members (such as Jakobson) in the context of the Prague School, and were then well received and further developed both by the Tartu School of semiotics and the French structuralists. In other words, the consensus is that Russian Formalism was both a spent force at the time of its demise, and that the valuable part of its work in linguistics and literary theory was successfully and adequately recycled within the structuralist tradition. As such, it is generally assumed that neither formalism's legacy nor the wider course of structuralism's evolution were much affected by the unfavourable historical circumstances that confronted pre-war Soviet intellectuals.

In opposition to this established view, I wish to contend here that the historical disruptions encountered by Russian Formalism in its transition to the structural paradigm of the Prague School did have a significant, negative impact. To be more precise, I wish to argue that – for a

number of reasons I will not be able to go into here – the aforementioned ruptures contributed in particular to unduly restrict the development and assessment of the *philosophical* implications of the formalists' core aesthetic assumptions. Critics, of course, have agreed almost unanimously that the formalists' aesthetic theories as such too obviously lack the conceptual foundations to be credible as a coherent philosophical model, and are too closely bound with the idiosyncratic experimentations of Russian Modernism to be universally applicable.¹ Without doubting the *actual* conceptual frailty and limitations of the formalists' radical pronouncements on aesthetics, however, I believe that the *potential* of formalism's powerful aesthetic vision to be expressed in much more systematic and generalised terms has in fact been profoundly misunderstood and underestimated. As I will try to intimate in the following pages, the intuitions at the root of the Russian formalists' aesthetic theories were actually in the process of being given more solid and general foundations in the original Soviet context of the 1920s. The disruptions to that process suggest that they still might be made to function as the source (or at least the direct inspiration) of a consistent philosophical model and, as such, that they do reveal genuinely universal properties of aesthetic experience, and beyond that, of experience in general.

Šklovskij's estrangement, form and perception

As is well-known, the Russian modernists advocated and put into practice a radical non-objective or non-representational aesthetic which – put briefly and far from exhaustively – involved an uncompromising indictment of tradition and a correlated fascination for the new, the surprising and the shocking; a strong concern both for form and for the specific material medium of art or literature (the phonic or graphic “substance” of words, the pigment and texture of paint, etc.); and the aspiration, one might want to say the *hubris*, to reshape and re-craft the everyday world through art, thus transfiguring it into a sublimated, pervasively aesthetic reality. These wild aesthetic ambitions were captured and expressed theoretically

¹ One might also want to question the very idea of interpreting Russian formalism in such a clearly philosophical light, and that on two grounds: firstly, the Russian formalists themselves rejected the idea that their theories should be seen as a coherent philosophical system; secondly, the concepts and terminology of literary theory are not directly transposable into the framework of philosophy. My answer to the first objection is that despite the Russian formalists' own misgivings, one is perfectly free to « extract » philosophical insights from their work, as long as one does not present them as a historical assessment of Russian formalism itself (which I do not do or wish to do here). As to the second, more methodological objection, I find it to be irrelevant in connection with the Soviet context of the 1920s and 30s and the work of such figures as Jakobson, Špet or Jarcho, who explicitly sought to translate literary (and literary theoretical) ideas into the framework of more scientific or rigorous disciplines such as philosophy or linguistics, and thus provide ample justification to attempts such as this one

by the Russian formalists and Šklovskij who proceeded to successfully formulate what has been called “the central aesthetic and philosophical principle of Modern Art and its theory” (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.19). This principle, which was famously labelled by Šklovskij as the process or device of estrangement (*ostranenie* in the original Russian), postulates that the essential function of art and literature is to refresh our perception of ordinary objects, everyday life and reality, through the artistic mean of surprising or unusual formal innovation. In Šklovskij’s often quoted words: “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are *perceived* and not as they are *known*. The device of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Šklovskij, 1988, p.21)

In many ways, Šklovskij’s conception of art as estrangement simply espouses the major modernist themes enumerated above and is therefore essentially descriptive. For instance, it obviously references modernist aesthetics when trying to congregate notions of artistic form and sensuous perception, or to characterise the everyday world and everyday perception as the most legitimate source of aesthetic experience. By rationalising the aesthetic principles and artistic productions of Russian Modernism as it does, though, Šklovskij's definition also accomplishes something much more striking and ambitious: it eschews references to beauty, judgement, taste and transcendental criteria as the markers of the aesthetic, defining instead the act of consciously and sensually experiencing the physical world in its inherent, vivid perceptual complexity and plasticity, as the defining, constitutive feature of aesthetic experience. His theory thus reveals that the aesthetic assumptions powering modern art and literature involve and rely on a remarkable, philosophical perspective as to the nature of perception and experience.

To begin with, Šklovskij’s theory appears to considerably broaden the field of the aesthetic and accrue its epistemological and existential function. The idea of estrangement, indeed, intimates that our truly concrete, conscious sense of life and reality is not conveyed by indirect acts of cognition simply mediated by empirical sensation, but crystallises in the intransitive *aesthetic* process of perception itself. In all logic, Šklovskij's theory thus seems to imply that reality and its objects can be fully experienced only in an aesthetic mode, or rather, that adequate empirical acts of feeling and perceiving are in fact *per se* aesthetic. Following Šklovskij’s further declarations on the workings of estrangement as a device and on the nature

of aesthetic perception, what this apparently means is that we experience the world not as a series of well-defined, individual physical objects and their empirical qualities, but as the aesthetic concretion and articulation of perceptual forms. In effect, Šklovskij assumes that perceiving an object aesthetically does not imply simply identifying it as a definite whole, but experiencing the detail and intricacies of its specific structural features or “make” (faktura). As he puts it, “art is a way of experiencing how an object is made: the object itself is not important” (ibid., p.21)² Just as in non-objective modernist art, it is the structure or the formal qualities of an object that are decisive in aesthetic perception, rather than the object itself. Much more, Šklovskij suggests along with the futurist poet Alexej Kručnych that in art “form = content”, or in other words, that the aesthetic object is itself perceived as a form – a term understood here not as an abstract Platonician criteria of intelligibility, but the concrete manifestation of an intricately articulated or structured phenomenon. Again, because of the alleged extension given to aesthetic experience by Šklovskij’s theory, the ultimate, if still rather vague implication of his modernist vision of art is that reality and its objects are always only perceived as meaningfully structured, but also concrete, perceptual forms.

My further suggestion is that, in order to justify and make sense of the sweeping philosophical implications of Šklovskij’s above-mentioned aesthetic pronouncement, one must explain it as meaning that perception is itself an articulated, differential system, in which objects are given or appear as expressive, concrete signs, similar in their hierarchically organised and differentiated structure to those of language (albeit not coextensive with them). In other words, it seems to me that Šklovskij’s conception of art as estrangement calls for an extension of structuralism’s scope beyond the bounds of language or signification, to encompass the realm of the perceptual and of experience in general.³

From Šklovskij’s estrangement to Jakobson’s poetic function

There is admittedly still some way to go from the vague and confusing conceptions of form and aesthetic experience found in Šklovskij’s work to a coherent theory of perception as a structural system of concrete expressive signs. My short exposition of Šklovskij’s theory has

² My modified translation

³ Such extensions, it has to be said, have indeed been undertaken, for example by Lotman, or by constructivists such as Piaget and Siegfried J. Schmidt. As far as I can tell, however, all these thinkers fail to take into account the “embodied”, “lived” dimension of experience such as it is conceived of by Šklovskij, and therefore fail to do justice to the implicit originality of his “structuralist” vision of aesthetic perception.

certainly contrived to simplify his views on the relation between artistic form and perception, to over-interpret their philosophical scope, and to paper over the many obvious gaps of his piece-meal argumentation. Amongst other problems, it is quite obvious that Šklovskij's own concept of form does *not* entail structuralist ideas of system-like hierarchy or differential opposition. It also remains very unclear whether Šklovskij really ever uses the notion of form in reference to the phenomenal qualities of empirical objects, rather than to the structural properties of works of art or literature. In truth, he seems to be vaguely implying something intermediary, namely that what is relevant to aesthetic perception is the formal structure of objects *as they are presented in works of art and literature*. Since, moreover, Šklovskij refuses to characterise all experience as aesthetic (despite his theory pointing to the contrary, he maintains a clear distinction between aesthetic and everyday experience), it is thus an obvious stretch to attribute to him the idea that the content of empirical perception is itself “formal” or “structured”. That being said, I do not hope here to defend Šklovskij's theory itself, but the potential philosophical coherence and implications of his insights. To defend the idea of a structural theory of perception, it suffices – in this very cursory exposition of the problem – if I can convincingly argue that Šklovskij's aesthetic vision could potentially develop, and in fact did partially evolve in the direction suggested above.

By all means, the first steps towards consolidating Šklovskij's freewheeling speculations on aesthetic experience were taken by the formalists themselves. Recognising the intrinsic value of Šklovskij's insights, the more scientifically inclined formalists (Tynjanov and Jakobson) proceeded to systemise them in the framework of structural linguistics. In Jakobson's theories, for example, the very broad and vague notion of estrangement is thus replaced by the more precise one of “poetic function”, which reiterates Šklovskij's double concern for perception and form, but specifies their relation within language. Instead of generically inducing perceptions of any kind of object as is the case of estrangement, the poetic function operates, as Jakobson puts it, “by promoting the palpability of signs” (Jakobson, 1971, p.355). Jakobson's underlying assumption is that, just as perception for Šklovskij is not a transitive, cognitive process but an aesthetic end in itself, so language is not a purely transitive medium of communication or thought, but a concrete, poetic phenomenon in its own right. Linguistic signs are concrete objects, whose pure expressivity and existence as sign derive primarily not from their transitive functions (deictic, communicative, conative, etc.), but from the poetic fact of being perceived as a systematically organised and differentiated material (phonic, graphic) structure. Put differently, the “palpable”, articulated structure of a sign must be perceived as such for it to express or mean anything at all, and even exist as a distinct,

signifying instance. Interestingly, the idea that a sign derives its meaning and existence from its expressive, "intelligible" structuration in sensual perception is also to be found in Jakobson's scientific concept of the phoneme, which he analyses as a hierarchy of distinctive phonetic features. In short, despite restricting Šklovskij's ideas on aesthetic form and perception to the phenomenon of language (a reduction already implicit in Šklovskij's own work), Jakobson's work highlights their relevance and their pliability to the structuralist notions of system, distinctive features or differential articulation: it presents us with a type of object, the linguistic sign, that displays the property of existing only as a concrete perceptual form, or rather, an expressive, systematically articulated structure given aesthetically in perception.

The phenomenological trail: Špet, Merleau-Ponty

The next natural step towards achieving a full-blown structural theory of perception in the sense suggested by Šklovskij's work would then involve generalising Jakobson's idea of the phoneme as a concrete expressive structure to apply to any kind of object. Without a doubt, defending the plausibility of this further development is more tricky, as it implies nothing less than redefining the notions of object and perception themselves. In effect, if perceptual objects are to be meaningfully characterised as systematically articulated, expressive signs, one must do away with the traditional, "atomic" concept of the object as a constituted, individual whole or entity. That is so because if objects are given only as sign-structures in a perceptual system, then they cannot also appear as entities defined outside of that system (exactly as words cannot have a meaning outside the system of a language). Similarly, this also means that perception itself cannot be defined anymore as the *objective* relation of a perceiving subject to individual, external entities, but as the *expressive* concretion of differentiated, meaningful structures in given acts of perception. In other words, what one seems to be required here is a non-objective theory of perception, which describes experience as the awareness of reality in its structurally organised, concrete and expressive phenomenality.

Such philosophical speculations, obviously, are not to be found in Russian Formalism or even Prague structuralism. But although the Prague structuralists stopped short of generalising their conception of the phoneme and the linguistic sign, the context of formalism's and Slavic structuralism's evolution does offer both direct and indirect indications that this could be

done. On the one hand, Jakobson himself suggested that his work would receive a more solid foundation when interpreted in the light of phenomenology. He repeatedly quoted Husserl as an important influence, and was personally and ideologically close to Špet and his work. Arguably, some of Jakobson's ideas effectively had a phenomenological origin or underpinning (cf. Holenstein, 1975). On the other hand, Špet's phenomenological work itself provides important arguments for considering empirical objects as structured signs. It would thus appear that a theory of perception developed on the basis of Šklovskij's original ideas on art would most probably take the form of a *structural phenomenology*.

The relevance of Špet's work here comes from his concern for the sense of lived experience, or in other words, for the question of the world given as a lived horizon of meaning. In his important work *Appearance and Sense*, indeed, Špet tries to describe in a unifying way the structure, both intelligible and sensible, of our relation to the world. Špet's reflexion on the meaningful articulation of concrete experience starts with a critique of the very important Husserlian notion of sense-bestowing (*Sinngebung*) by an intentional consciousness. According to Špet, Husserl does not provide in *Ideen..I* any justification for this vital faculty of consciousness (cf. Haardt, 1993, p.100). Since, to his eyes, it is impossible to consider this faculty as the pure power of a transcendental subjective consciousness without falling into the error of Kantian idealism, he looks for the source of meaning somewhere else, in experience itself. Špet sees this source in the existence of an "intelligible intuition", which grasps what Špet calls the "entelechy" or "internal sense" of the object, thanks to which the object constitutes itself concretely for consciousness, in the meaningful unity of its multiple appearances. Along with this idea of an intelligible intuition and its correlate of "internal sense" or entelechy, Špet postulates that objects, in order to be perceived adequately, thus require to be intended and grasped as "signs". To say the truth, Špet remains very ambivalent as to the type of objects that are perceived as signs. He seems to limit his theory to the cultural, historical world, rather than the physical empirical one: in that sense, his definition of the object as a sign does not refer so much to the object's pure perceptive structure, as to its concrete meaning in a functional horizon. In other words, Špet does not quite take the step of affirming that sensual perception as such is a structured, intelligible system.

To my mind, the ultimate evidence of the possibility of systemising Šklovskij's insights on form and aesthetic experience – or rather Jakobson's resulting ideas on the concrete expressive structure of the linguistic sign – into a full blown structural phenomenology is thus provided not by Špet's work, but by that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In Merleau-Ponty's case,

evidently, there is no question of a direct affiliation with the formalist aesthetics, since the only interaction of note that one can indicate was his quoting of Jakobson's work on aphasia. But there are more than enough convergences between the two to make a comparison worth the while. One can start by mentioning the importance of modernist art, most notably Cézanne, to Merleau-Ponty's thinking. He also figures as one of the foremost post-war thinkers who sought to bring together the principles of phenomenology with those of structuralism: the discovery of Saussure and the problem of language was allegedly a milestone in the development of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological thought (cf. Fontaine-DeVisscher, 1974, p.89). More to the point, he put forward in his latter work (*Le Visible et l'invisible, L'Oeil et l'esprit*) a non-objective theory of perception that seems to espouse and corroborate Šklovskij's and the Russian formalists' vision.

Going a step further than Špet, Merleau-Ponty suggests that our sensible perceptions are informed by the intelligible, or in other words, that they are structured at the level of the sensible itself. Yves Thierry, an important commentator of Merleau-Ponty's work resumes as follows: "The sensible [...] is not of another order than the intelligible, but the element in which an intelligibility can take place: [...] the phenomena which are its most direct concretions hold an intelligibility; and this latter is nothing else than the manifested reality of the production and internal organisation of these phenomena." (Thierry, 1984, p.136). This, I believe, corresponds exactly to the conception of experience as the awareness of reality in its structurally organised, concrete and expressive phenomenality suggested by the formalists' modernist aesthetics.

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