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The Expressiveness of Experience

a structural and phenomenological account
of the Russian formalists' "aesthetic of estrangement"

**Strukturálně fenomenologické úvahy
o estetice ozvláštnění ruských formalistů**

Disertační práce

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Prohlašuji, že jsem disertační práci vypracoval samostatně s využitím uvedených pramenů a literatury

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Abstract

In their seminal studies in literary theory and poetics, the Russian formalists (Šklovskij, Tynjanov, Jakobson, *etc.*) famously claim that aesthetic experience amounts to a self-valuable, concrete act of perception functionally induced and conditioned by the formal structure of a work of art or literature. This aesthetic principle, christened by Šklovskij as “estrangement” (*ostranenie*), played an instrumental role in the formalists’ contribution to the establishment and development of literary theory as an autonomous scientific discipline. It has also regularly inspired other thinkers and provided the impetus for productive new insights on art or literature, a fact that seems to underline its acuity and relevance. At the same time however, the formalists’ “strange” account of art and literature has been routinely disparaged for being altogether inadequate, philosophically flimsy and descriptively too narrow. Critics have pointed out that the formalists’ assertions on the topic of perception rest but on a set of *ad hoc* psychological hypotheses and are overly determined by their specific scientific aims and modernist prejudices. Worse, the principle of estrangement has been credibly attacked for being semiotically naïve and for stripping art and literature of any “content” or meaning, to say nothing of any wider social, cultural, political or ideological signification.

Taking cue from the apparent contradiction between the proven fruitfulness of the Russian formalists’ principle of estrangement and its palpable theoretical brittleness, the objective of the forthcoming study will be to reassess its conceptual scope and the whole vision of aesthetics it implies. To be more specific, I wish to argue that the formalists’ claims as to the “estranging” perceptual powers and function of art and literature involves a truly original philosophical perspective, which can be expressed in rigorous terms and cast a serious and interesting light on the nature and meaning of aesthetic experience.

Since its focus will be to re-evaluate the theoretical vitality of the Russian formalists’ key aesthetic intuitions, this study can correctly be construed as an attempt to defend or at least to reassess the general validity of their vision of aesthetics. I wish to stress here, though, that my ambition will definitely not be to rehabilitate the formalists’ aesthetic ideas as such, nor to suggest that they are directly defensible as a coherent

theory. Despite the historical significance of the formalists' work, there can be no doubt that their ideas – including estrangement itself – are resolutely obsolete and display too many significant and obvious flaws. Further, the formalists themselves never provided nor sought to provide a coherent, systematic theory of art, let alone a philosophically consistent aesthetic model. More than the formalists' concepts themselves, it is thus the original perspectives they suggest and the potential thereof to be formulated in strict theoretical terms that will interest me here. As such, the methodological orientation of this study will be to investigate whether the formalists' brilliant but still crude insights into the nature of art, literature and aesthetic experience might be refined and given a sturdier formulation.

This attempt to reframe and reassess the Russian formalists' aesthetic tenets, I wish to add, constitutes by no means a purely speculative exercise. Quite to the contrary, it finds a justification in the fact that the formalists' initially raw intuitions actually underwent a positive if complex evolution towards greater conceptual maturity and were successfully transposed in a much more solid theoretical framework. In particular, the core tenets of Russian formalism were recycled by the Prague structuralists and subsequently played a notable role in the development of structuralism in France. Because of this historical role, structuralism effectively provides both a specific example of the conceptual potential of formalist ideas and a concrete template for reassessing the extent of their relevance as a rigorous theory. For this reason, the focus of this study will be to explore the full significance and potentialities of the formalists' aesthetics in a structuralist perspective. Since the formalists' ideas also share close if often misleading affinities with those of Husserl (or the Russian philosopher Špet) and find an interesting echo in the work of Merleau-Ponty, I will extend my analysis to phenomenology and its own relations with structuralism.

Evidently, a central premise of my project is that a conclusive assessment of the philosophical implications of the Russian formalists' conception of art and literature is still missing and that, as such, it possesses untapped or unexplored potential in connection with both structuralism and phenomenology. Such a presumption might seem surprising at first, since both the formalists and their structuralist legacy have received more than abundant critical attention over the years and that, notwithstanding the putative convergences with Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology has been seen as a competing model, incompatible on many crucial

points with both the formalists' ideas and those of structuralism. The contingent historical circumstances that presided over the evolution and the reception of early Soviet thought, I will argue, do however provide me with a solid case. In effect, it has been shown ever more clearly since the 1990s that averse conditions such as the rise of Stalinism, the outbreak of WWII and the advent of the Cold War contributed to obscure much of the specific dynamics and originality of the work of as influential figures as Bachtin, Jakobson, Vygotskij and the formalists themselves. As a result, it can fairly be said that their role and signification in the evolution of both structuralism and phenomenology have indeed been misunderstood or neglected.

To carry out my project, I will proceed in two distinct stages. Firstly, I will outline the philosophical originality of the Russian formalists' aesthetic principles and argue that it has been partially squandered (Part I). Secondly, I will seek to diffuse the most important criticisms usually directed against these principles by reconsidering the modalities of their adaptation in frameworks such as those of structural linguistics and phonology, as well as their further affinities with phenomenology (Part II). The outcome of these investigations should be to show that the formalists' apparently problematic and restrictive intuitions as to the "strange", formal nature of art, literature and aesthetic experience can be given philosophical foundations and be expressed in coherent fashion, through a structural and phenomenological theory of perception. In short, the defining feature of such a theory is to postulate that we experience reality and its objects as the differentiated, hierarchised concretion of intransitive, phenomenological contents or meanings. To put it differently, this means that the empirical world itself crystallises in perception in the shape of expressive, meaningful but yet concrete and material structures. This phenomenological, structural and expressive vision of experience involves an ontology of Heideggerian inspiration and, in turn, suggests a consistent and compelling vision of art as a prime mean of actualising and "lending form" to reality.

This study will touch upon a number of themes (the structure of perception, language, meaning, the nature of the sign, embodiment, etc.) which have been at the centre of the considerations of many disciplines (linguistics, literary theory, psychology, semiotics, philosophy, etc.) and some of the most influential intellectual traditions of the last century (Gestalt psychology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, structuralism, etc.). The limited scope of my project, however, means that I have mostly refrained from contextualising its findings or sought to apply them critically in

this larger horizon. All I have attempted to achieve here is to bring further clarifications to the philosophical dimension of the Russian formalists' foundational aesthetic ideas and to highlight in clearer, more systematic terms the actual and potential lines of their conceptual maturation in the complementary frameworks of structuralism and phenomenology.

On a technical note, I will be using a "Czech" transliteration for words written in Cyrillic (Šklovskij – Шкловский, vyraženie – выражение), including very common names (Tolstoj, Bachtin) but excluding foreign ones originally spelled with Latin characters (Eichenbaum, Jakobson). If not otherwise specified (or quoted from a translated version), translations are my own.

I also wish here to extend my sincerest thanks to the people who helped me bring my endeavour to fruition: my supervisor Josef Vojvodik, of course, for his faultless support and friendly guidance at every stage and all levels of my doctoral studies; Jean-Philippe Jaccard for his encouragements during the very early phase of this project and his assistance towards obtaining various grants; Petr Bílek for the positive reaction to my initial dissertation project that decided me to take the plunge at Charles University; Georg Witte for welcoming me at the Peter Szondi-Institut of the Free University in Berlin on a year-long exchange; Maryse Dennes, Libuše Heczková, Stefan Kristensen, Patrick Sériot and Sergeï Tchougounnikov; and last but not least, my family and friends, for ensuring I had a life outside the infamous ivory tower.

Abstrakt

Ve svých základních literárně-vědeckých a básnických studiích, ruští formalisté (Šklovskij, Tynjanov, Jakobson, atd....) slavně prohlašují, že se estetická zkušenost rovná konkrétní aktu vnímání, funkčně spuštěnému formální strukturou uměleckého nebo literárního díla. Tento estetický princip, který Šklovskij nazval „ozvláštnění“, hrál pomocnou roli v přispění ruských formalistů při založení a rozvoji literární teorie jako autonomní vědecké disciplíny. Také pravidelně inspiroval jiné myslitele a přinášel impulzy k produktivnímu novému pohledu na umění nebo literaturu, což je fakt, který podtrhuje svou důležitost a závažnost. Současně ovšem, „zvláštní“ úvahy formalistů o vnímatelné-formální podstatě umění a literatury podléhaly kritice za to, že jsou příliš úzké a nepostačující. Kritici často poukazovali na to, že navzdory své povrchní působivosti se klíčová tvrzení ruských formalistů opírají jen o řádku pro tento účel vytvořených psychologických hypotéz a jsou přespříliš podmiňovány svými specifickými vědeckými cíli a modernistickými předsudky. A což je ještě horší, jejich přístup byl důvěryhodně napadán za to, že je epistemologicky a sémioticky naivní a z toho, že zbavuje umění a literaturu „obsahu“ nebo významu, nemluvě o širším sociálním, kulturním, politickém nebo ideologickém významu.

V souvislosti se zřejmým protikladem mezi vytrvalou plodností umělecké-literární intuice ruských formalistů a její patrnou teoretickou křehkostí, účelem této studie bude přehodnocení skutečného konceptualního rozsahu jejich „estetika ozvláštnění“. Abych byl přesnější, rád bych dokázal, že postulát ruských formalistů, že umění nebo literatura mají jak moc, tak i funkci ovlivnit proces vnímání sebe samotné zahrnuje skutečně originální filozofické perspektivy, což je možno vyjádřit přesnými termíny a vrhat užitečné světlo na podstatu a význam estetické zkušenosti.

Poněvadž se tato studie zaměřuje na přehodnocení teoretické vitality klíčových estetických pojmů ruských formalistů, může být vykládána jako pokus bránit nebo alespoň přehodnotit obecnou platnost jejich vize estetiky. Avšak rád bych zde zdůraznil, že mou ambicí určitě není rehabilitovat estetické myšlenky ruských formalistů jako takové, ani nechci naznačit, že je možno je přímo bránit jako koherentní teorii. Navzdory historickému významu práce ruských formalistů není pochyb o tom, že jejich myšlenky, včetně „ozvláštnění“ samotného, jsou v každém

případě zastaralé a zobrazují příliš mnoho významných a zřejmých trhlin. A navíc, ruští formalisté sami nikdy neposkytli – ani se nesnažili poskytnout – koherentní, systematickou teorii umění, dokonce ani filozoficky konzistentní estetický model. Více než koncepty ruských formalistů samy, se proto budu zabývat originální perspektivou, kterou přinášejí a z ní plynoucím potenciálem, který budu systemizovat v přísnějších teoretických pojmech. Metodologickým zaměřením této studie bude hledat způsob, jak by bylo možno vytrýbit a přizpůsobit oslnivý, ale stále robustní pohled ruských formalistů na podstatu umění a poskytnout mu ještě robustnější formulaci.

Je třeba dodat, že tento pokus rekoncipovat estetické teze ruských formalistů do ještě preciznější teorie není v žádném případě čistě spekulativní úkol. Naopak, je ospravedlněno faktem, že původně hrubé intuice ruských formalistů ve skutečnosti prošly pozitivním, pokud ne přímo komplexním vývojem směrem k větší koncepční vyzrálosti a byly úspěšně přeneseny do mnohem pevnějšího teoretického rámce. Především základní principy ruského formalizmu byly opětovně použity pražskými strukturalisty a následně hrály významnou roli v rozvoji strukturalismu ve Francii. Kvůli této historické úloze poskytuje strukturalismus jak specifický příklad systematického potenciálu myšlenek formalizmu, tak i konkrétní šablonu pro nové vyhodnocení rozsahu relevance jako systematické a přesné teorie. Z tohoto důvodu se tato studie zaměří na hledání plného významu a potenciálu estetiky ruských formalistů ve strukturalistické perspektivě. Protože myšlenky ruských formalistů mají těsný, ale často zavádějící blízký vztah s myšlenkami Husserla (nebo ruského filozofa Špeta) a nacházejí zajímavou odezvu v práci Merleau-Pontyho, rozšířím svůj rozbor také na fenomenologii a její vztah k strukturalismu.

Samozřejmě že centrální premisou mého projektu je, že přesvědčivé hodnocení filozofických implikací koncepce umění a literatury ruských formalistů stále chybí a že jako takové nabízí neodhalený a neprozkoumaný potenciál ve spojení jak se strukturalismem, tak i s fenomenologií. Takový předpoklad se může zprvu zdát překvapivý, neboť jak ruským formalistům, tak i jejich strukturalistickému dědictví se za ta léta dostalo více než hojnosti kritické pozornosti. Navíc, nehledě na předpokládané sblížení s Husserlem a Merleau-Pontym, fenomenologie je obvykle považována za soupeřící model, v mnoha důležitých bodech neslučitelný s myšlenkami ruských formalistů i s myšlenkami strukturalismu. Jisté historické okolnosti, které předcházely vývoji a přijetí raných sovětských myšlenek mohou ale

jasně zdůvodňovat můj záměr. V celkovém výsledku, jak se již ukazuje od 90. let 20. století, nepříznivé podmínky, jako nástup stalinismu, vypuknutí 2. světové války a nástup studené války přispěly k zamlžení specifické dynamiky a originality práce tak vlivných postav jako byli Bachtin, Jakobson, Vygotskij a ruští formalisté sami. Jako výsledek můžeme říci, že jejich role a význam ve vývoji jak strukturalismu, tak fenomenologie byly špatně pochopeny nebo opomenuty a že tradiční vysvětlení genealogie strukturalismu byly také významně pokřiveny.

Ve svém projektu budu postupovat ve dvou odlišných etapách. Nejprve načrtnu filozofickou originalitu estetických principů ruských formalistů a předložím argumenty, že byla poničena (část I). Potom se budu snažit rozptýlit nejdůležitější kritiku, obvykle zaměřenou proti těmto principům a znovu uvážím modality jejich adaptace v rámci jako je strukturální lingvistika a fonologie, ale i další těsný vztah s fenomenologií (část II). Takové pátrání by mělo ukázat, že zjevně problematické a restriktivní intuice k „zvláštní“ formální podstatě umění, literatury a estetické zkušenosti může dostat filozofický základ a může být vyjádřena logicky promyšleným způsobem, pomocí strukturální a fenomenologické teorie vnímání. Ve stručnosti, definujícím prvkem takové teorie je předpoklad, že zažíváme skutečnost a její předměty jako diferenciované, hierarchicky seřazené splývání nepřechodných, fenomenologických obsahů nebo významů. Jinými slovy, to znamená, že empirický svět sám sebe vytříbí ve vnímání tvarově expresivních, smysluplných, ale přesto konkrétních, materiálních struktur. Tato fenomenologická, strukturální a expresivní vize zkušenosti zahrnuje ontologii Heideggerianovy inspirace a postupně navrhuje soustavnou a přesvědčivou vizi umění jako prvotního prostředku aktualizace a „propůjčení formy“ realitě.

Tato studie se bude týkat různých témat (struktura vnímání, jazyk, smysl, podstata znaku, tělesnost, atd.), které stály v centru úvah mnohých disciplín (lingvistiky, literární vědy, psychologie, sémiotiky, filozofie atd.) a některých z nejvýznamnějších intelektuálních tradic minulého století (psychologie Gestaltu, hermeneutika, fenomenologie, strukturalismus, atd.). Omezený rozsah mého projektu však znamená, že jsem se většinou zřekl možnosti zařadit její závěry do širšího kontextu popřípadě hledat možnosti, jak je kriticky aplikovat v širším horizontu. Vše, čeho se zde pokouším dosáhnout, je dále objasnit filozofickou dimenzi základních estetických myšlenek ruských formalistů a zdůraznit jasnější, systematictější náležitosti aktuálních a potenciálních spojení koncepčního zrání v doplňkovém rámci strukturalismu a fenomenologie.

Introduction

The Fate and Promises of the Russian Formalists' Aesthetics

In April of 1930, in the year consecutive to Stalin's decisive rise to power in the Soviet Union, the great Russian poet and playwright Vladimir Majakovskij shot and killed himself. In the unfinished poem he left as his suicide note, one comes across these famous lines:

As they say, the incident is closed

The love boat has crashed against the everyday.¹

Majakovskij's sombre words obviously concern first and foremost his suicide and the turmoil of his own life. Beyond their eminently personal signification, though, these stanzas also resonate as a clairvoyant commentary on the "crashes" and "closures" that affected Soviet culture and intellectual life more generally, as a direct result of the tremendous social and political changes wrought by the fierce onset of Stalinism. As a matter of fact, Majakovskij's suicide itself conveniently stands out as an emblematic symptom of two closely related episodes in this chapter of the history of the USSR often referred to as the "Great Turn" (Velikij perelom).²

Above all, as none other than Roman Jakobson promptly and shrewdly diagnosed in "The Generation That Squandered its Poets",³ Majakovskij's disappearance coincided with the ultimate decline 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. To recall, the three or so decades contiguous with the collapse of tsarist Russia and the birth of the Soviet Union witnessed an intense blossoming in literature and the arts in general. During that period, luminaries such as Chagall, Kandinskij, Malevič, Eisenstein, Achmatova, Mandelstam and Pasternak came to the fore – to name here but the most famous

¹ Kak govorjat, incident isperčen/Ljubovnaja lodka razbilas' o byt' (Majakovskij, [1930] 1973)

² Stalin's « year of the Great Turn » was of course 1929, but the events of 1930 mentioned here were fully part of the upheavals it involved.

³ This landmark essay was only published in 1931 but penned by Jakobson in direct reaction to his friend's suicide

amongst the many creative geniuses who formed together the rich, diverse cultural phenomenon known loosely as “Russian Modernism”. Majakovskij himself figured prominently in this setting, amongst other as the leader and, at the time of his death, the last remaining exponent of the so-called Cubo-futurist movement. His role, in fact, was crucial: Majakovskij's Cubo-futurists were the most fervent stalwarts of Russian Modernism and effectively powered the surge of the whole avant-garde, first by sweeping away the waning influence of Russian Symbolism in favour of a more radical vision of art and literature, and then by spawning many of the movements or trends (the LEF,⁴ Suprematism, Constructivism) that defined Modernism from the Russian revolution onwards.

With Majakovskij's sudden death, Russian Modernism could undeniably be said to have lost one of its primary engines and catalysts. Worse still according to Jakobson, it was left to face the absence of “any replacements, [or] even any partial reinforcements” (Jakobson, 1979 [1931], p.380). To be sure, the disappearance of Majakovskij was met by the triumphant on-march of the state-imposed dogma of Socialist Realism and the entailing repression of dissident creative voices, which combined to bring a premature end not only to Cubo-futurism, or rather to its latter offshoots,⁵ but also to the flock of other noteworthy avant-garde movements (Acmeism, Imaginism, the Oberiu, Productivism, etc.) that existed alongside them.⁶ Without constituting its primary cause, Majakovskij's suicide portended the passing into the shadows – well over a decade and a half before the fading of their European and American alter egos – of an entire “generation” of modernist poets, novelists, artists, architects, composers, choreographers, filmmakers and theatre directors, whose accomplishments define a formidably innovative period in Russian arts and letters, and a precious contribution to World culture.

Next to this cultural upheaval, Majakovskij's death also relates to a break in the evolution of the Russian and Soviet human sciences. In effect, the creative explosion and swift demise of Russian Modernism was mirrored by an impressive but relatively short-lived bout of scientific and intellectual activity, which was not only largely inspired by the practices and principles of Modern art and literature, but was intent on

⁴ Acronym for the Left Front of Art (*Levyj Front Isskustva*)

⁵ The « wave » of Cubo-futurism as such lasted from 1910 to 1914 (cf. Markov, 1968). With regard to the dating of the Russian avant-gardes, cf. Hansen-Löve (1993)

⁶ On the topic of the end of the avant-garde, cf. also Jaccard (1991)

justifying and systemising them from a theoretical standpoint. First and foremost, this scientific and intellectual activity involved the motley group of literary scholars and linguists known as the Russian Formalists (Viktor Šklovskij, Jurij Tynjanov, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Osip Brik, Lev Jakubinskij, Evgenij Polivanov, Boris Tomaševskij, etc.), who formulated pioneering ideas in linguistics and poetics, and cast the foundations of modern literary theory. They were seconded in their endeavours by the closely related yet methodologically distinct and sometime rival “formal-philosophical school” (Gustav Špet, Viktor Vinogradov, Viktor Vinokur, Nikolaj Žinkin, Viktor Žirmunskij, Boris Jarcho, etc.).⁷ Further, exiled Russian scholars with close ties to the formalists (Jakobson himself, Nikolaj Trubeckoj, Petr Bogatyrev, Sergej Karcevskij, etc.) also played a decisive role in the creation of the *Cercle Linguistique de Prague*, effectively founding structural phonology and inspiring the influential Prague School of linguistics and literary theory. Finally, alongside the lively and diverse “formalist” faction, outstanding figures such as Lev Vygotskij, Michail Bachtin, Valentin Vološinov and Pavel Medvedev put forward path-breaking theories in fields as varied as aesthetics, literary criticism, cultural history, linguistics, sociology, psychology or the philosophy of language.

Sadly, all this original, modernist-inspired intellectual activity (with the exception, for obvious reasons, of the Prague School) was soon caught up in the process of the stalinisation of Soviet society and culture and ruthlessly curtailed. In the late 1920s, the institutions that had most helped to foster innovation and to encourage the novel links between modernist artists and intellectuals, such as the Institute of the Living Word (Institut Živogo Slova) and the State Institute for the History of the Arts (GIII – Gosudarstvennyj Institut Istorii Iskusstv) in St-Petersburg, as well as the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN – Gosudarstvennaja Akademia Khudožestvennych Nauk) in Moscow, were shut down. As to the aforementioned thinkers, most of whom had benefited from their affiliation to either one of these institutions to promote and give greater credibility to their innovative work, they were either corseted into a rigid Marxist mould, silenced or later even arrested and executed, as was the tragic fate of Špet and Polivanov.⁸

⁷ Despite its name, the formal-philosophical “school” was not a well organised body but a loose group of like-minded scholars, some of whom (Žirmunskij, Vinogradov) are sometimes categorised as “pure” formalists.

⁸ Špet was shot in Tomsk in 1937 ; Polivanov was executed at an unknown location in 1938. A number of other, lesser-known figures suffered a similar fate.

In this generally dismal context, Majakovskij's suicide and the demise of Russian Modernism specifically contributed to bring a premature closure to the productive and original phase of the work of the Russian formalists – the group of scholars which arguably functioned as the principal, if polemical and vehemently contested vector of the young Soviet human sciences' development.⁹ As the story goes (cf. Depretto, 2005; Tchougounnikov, 2005), the Russian formalists' scientific endeavours had by 1928 reached something of a breaking point anyway. Starting with Lenin's death and the publication under the auspices of Trotsky of a fascicule (*Literature and Revolution*, 1924) directly aimed against their "formal method", they had had to face increasingly vehement attacks from their Marxist critics (cf. Günther, 1976). Under pressure, the formalist movement started to dislocate progressively. Eichenbaum, for example, drifted towards a more traditional approach to literary studies during the mid 1920s (cf. Any, 1994). At the same time Jakubinskij and Polivanov spontaneously diverged towards heterodox Marxist positions. One of Russian formalism's leading lights, Jakobson, left for Czechoslovakia as early as 1921.

The Russian formalists were of course well aware of this centrifugal dynamic, which was especially problematical to them because the conceptual vigour of their common project originally derived from an intense process of constant debate, exchanges and cross-fertilisation of ideas. Victor Erlich, a prominent scholar of Russian formalism, maintains for instance that "[The Formalist methodology] was a product of intellectual teamwork rarely paralleled in the history of literary scholarship" (Erlich, 1955, p.51). In defiance of the increasingly unfavourable odds accumulating against them, a committed core of formalists including Šklovskij, Tynjanov and Jakobson thus sought to fend off the mounting political pressures and breathe a new lease of life into their common enterprise. As they understood it, the success of their venture hinged on the reinstatement of a closer collaboration between themselves, and ultimately, on the prospect of repatriating Jakobson from his exile in Czechoslovakia. Majakovskij's death, however, put a definitive end to that hopeful outlook.

⁹ The controversies with formalism were one of the most important debates conducted by Marxist thinkers during the 1920s (Conio, 1975); typically, the work of the « Bachtin Circle » (Bachtin, Vološinov, Medvedev) was fuelled by the productive controversies entertained by its members with the formalists ; Lev Vygotskij sought direct inspiration from the latter's theses; as to the proponents of the formal-philosophical school, Eichenbaum complained of them that «they do not quote our works, although they take their terms as well as everything else from us" (quoted after Tynjanov, 1977, p.515)

As Jakobson's emotionally-laden reaction in "The Generation That Squandered its Poets" plainly shows, he henceforth considered it all but impossible to revive the fortunes of the Russian formalists' scientific enterprise in the new, unpropitious conditions subsequent to Majakovskij's disappearance. In his essay, Jakobson made it clear that he saw only a bleak future for the formalists' endeavours in the absence of the fertile soil of the now vanishing or already vanished Russian modernist environment. He thereby imparted in half-veiled terms to his friends Šklovskij and Tynjanov that he would certainly not be returning to the Soviet Union (Depretto, op. cit., p.112).¹⁰ Coupled with an infamous and ambiguous repudiation of formalist ideas made by Šklovskij in "A Monument to a Scientific Error" (1930),¹¹ Jakobson's final decision and the ensuing break between the Soviet formalists and their Prague colleagues unmistakably signalled the demise of Russian Formalism as a pioneering, innovative force – and with it, the premature end of the free development of the "modernist" human sciences in the USSR.¹²

Just as any similarly contrived break in the "natural" evolution of a cultural or intellectual movement of note, the precipitated downfall of Soviet modernist culture and human sciences entailed by the Great Turn obviously gives rise to a number of serious exegetical problems. At a speculative level, for example, it inclines one to ponder the many paintings, sculptures, buildings, plays, poems or novels that might have seen the light of day, had the Russian modernist artists been allowed to pursue their work either completely unfettered or in a less aggressively hostile environment. Much more substantially, one is confronted with the question of the concrete repercussions of the double rupture epitomised by Majakovskij's suicide on the intellectual and cultural history of the XXth century. Considering in particular that the work of thinkers such as the Russian formalists, Jakobson, Bachtin or Vygotskij

¹⁰ As Depretto also points out, it is in fact rather doubtful whether Jakobson ever seriously considered going back to the USSR (Depretto, 2005, p.112).

¹¹ On the debatable matter of the extent of Šklovskij's "repudiation" of his formalist past and its impact on his subsequent work, see the Sheldon-Erich controversy (Sheldon 1975 & 1976; Erlich 1976).

¹² To be perfectly exact, quite a few Soviet thinkers – including the Russian formalists themselves – continued to produce interesting work well into the 1930s and beyond. From that date onwards, however, they were deprived of institutional support and constrained to the margins of cultural and intellectual life. The vital and lively debate between competing point of views (including Marxist and non-Marxist ones), which had been so productive during the early 1920s was definitively cut short.

subsequently enjoyed significant success and influence both in the West and in the Soviet Union, one cannot but surmise that the Great Turn left some sort of mark on the processes of the development, diffusion and interpretation of the important and complex legacy of the Soviet modernist context.

Surprisingly enough in view of the undoubted and influential achievements of early Soviet culture and human sciences, it so happens that definitive assessments of the full extent of the repercussions of the Great Turn on the evolution and, especially, on the subsequent reception of the Soviet modernist context of the 1910s and 20s have proven rather elusive. Naturally, the Great Turn and the early years of the Soviet Union have received sustained attention and been both discussed and commented upon at great length. The fact is, however, that the interest for this period has been the almost exclusive preserve of Slavists, which it has to be said, remain a marginal scholarly group. This interest has also long remained both lopsided and biased: Soviet artists and thinkers were either put to instrumental use as handy props in mainstream Western theories or traditions (the specificity and vicissitudes of the evolution of their own work being thereby mostly disregarded),¹³ or considered in the light of their relations with Marxist ideology and Marxist science, rather than their specific originality.¹⁴

A superficial reason for this lasting indifference or lack of critical concern for the impact of the Great Turn on the development of the Soviet modernist context is that the latter's originality and relevance have tended to be downplayed, especially outside Russia. Typically, the Russian modernists' achievements have been interpreted as an interesting but unessential facet of modernist culture, which neither held much sway over the main thrust of Modernism's evolution, nor brought fundamentally different or original orientations to it. In the words of the distinguished art critic John Berger, Russian Modernism was "remarkable but not unique" (quoted in Gibian, 1976, p.14). In the same vein, the extent to which the Soviet modernist culture and the human sciences it directly inspired did actually undergo a clear-cut

¹³ One thinks for example of the reception of the Russian formalists or Bachtin in France, which were respectively subsumed to the discourse of structuralism and the critiques against it. (cf. Matonti 2009, Cavanagh 1993)

¹⁴ This is strikingly true again in relation to the exegesis of Russian Formalism, which has more often than not been considered through the prism of the "Formalism vs. Marxism" problem. Cf. Bennett (2003), Conio (1975), Frow (1986), Günther (1976), Morson (1979), Tihanov (2001), etc.

and unwarranted collapse around 1930 has been called into question. The events referred to as the "Great Turn", after all, amount to a long-drawn, complex socio-cultural and political process stretching over many years, not to the abrupt and unqualified end of all valuable science or culture in the Soviet Union. In that spirit, it has even been argued that the triumph of a totalitarian culture and hegemonious Marxist science in the USSR was in many ways the logical result of the aesthetic practices, cultural aims and theoretical outlook of the Soviet avant-gardes and the related human sciences (cf. Groys, 1992), which suggests that it did not involve or constitute a noteworthy break at all.

One ought here to point out that, more than a decisive, well-argued proof of either the limited originality of the Soviet modernist context itself or the limited scope of the repercussions of its troubled history, views such as the above constitute the reflection of a persistent vagueness and confusion surrounding both the precise situation of the Russian or Soviet modernist artists and thinkers in the intellectual and cultural landscape of the XXth century, and the consequences that their unhappy fates actually did entail. For instance, Russian Modernism's rather modest impact in the West has never been justified by a lucid and detailed assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. The reality is much rather that this process resulted automatically from the blur of undue neglect, unfortunate misunderstandings and cultural prejudice that accompanied the reception of the Russian modernists' work in the West.

To wit, most of the Russian modernists were patchily received in Europe or America for predominantly ideological reasons¹⁵ and were unjustifiably but thoroughly ignored as a consequence until well into the 1970s (Gibian, 1976, p. 3). To say the truth, they remain relatively unknown and peripheral to this day, presumably because of their linguistic remoteness¹⁶ or the self-absorbed, autarkic streak that has often come to

¹⁵ As a revealing example of such ideological impediments, one can mention that the "white" Russian intelligencia (Aldanov, Bunin, Gippius, Chodasevič, G. Ivanov, Merežkovskij, Nabokov, etc.), which emigrated to Berlin or Paris after the revolution and could have served as an efficient relay or for the art and theories of Russian modernism failed to help in that cultural transfer in great part because of their distrust and antipathy towards the "red" Soviet avant-gardes. Contacts with the Russian emigration was also of course discouraged by the Soviet regime itself (cf. Dmitriev, 2002, p.433)

¹⁶ This statement is particularly true of the Modernist poets (Majakovskij, Chlebnikov, Achmatova or Mandelstam), whose work is barely translatable, and therefore mostly hermetic to non-Russian speakers.

characterise Russian culture.¹⁷ Were it not for this mix of past or continuing issues of deliberate or fortuitous isolationism, differing ideology and cultural inaccessibility, though, one presumes that the Russo-Soviet artistic and literary output would long have gained a much more prominent place in our accounts of Modernism's greatest achievements, possibly on a par with the works of Picasso, Duchamp, Kafka or Joyce. Revealingly enough, considerably more attention has been afforded to the work of those Russian modernists (Kandinskij, Chagall, Diaghilev, Stravinskij) who were least close to the political ideals of the Russian revolution or the ideology of the Soviet regime, whose artistic medium was not language-related and who assimilated most keenly in the West.¹⁸

Similarly, although the effects of the Great Turn were in some ways ambivalent and indecisive, it remains controversial in the extreme to argue that it did not involve a momentous break or have significantly adverse consequences on the evolution of modernist Soviet human sciences and culture. If anything, such obviously provocative interpretations contribute to highlight the extent of the interpretative problems connected with these events, or rather, with the complicated process of accounting for their cultural and intellectual repercussions. It is certainly worth mentioning in this respect that the complex historical circumstances that followed the Great Turn also significantly contributed to preclude or delay objective and exhaustive assessments of that period (cf. Sériot-Friedrich, 2008, pp.1-4).

In the Soviet Union, the nature of the historical obstacles to such objective assessments is obvious: until the 1960s it was simply forbidden to deal openly with the legacy of the post-revolutionary times.¹⁹ In the West, the reception and interpretative processing of early Soviet thought was deferred, distorted and frustrated by the breakdown in Russo-Western exchanges that the Great Turn and the Second

¹⁷ The Russian futurists, for example – as evidenced by their less than cordial welcome of Marinetti during his visit to the Soviet Union (see Alfonsov 1999, p.16) – clearly sought to distance themselves from their Western counterparts and to promote a typically “Russian” form of futurism

¹⁸ Kandinskij was closely involved with the blaue Reiter expressionist group in Germany. Chagall mingled with the Montparnasse art community. Diaghilev made his name in Paris with the Russian ballet, whilst Stravinskij emigrated at a young age and often appears more as a cosmopolitan than a specifically Russian figure.

¹⁹ Sebastian Shaumyan (1965) in linguistics and Jurij Lotman (1964) in literary semiotics were the first to attempt a rehabilitation of the early Soviet legacy, by re-actualising the ideas of the Russian formalists.

World War unquestionably brought about,²⁰ by the ideological tensions spun by the Cold War,²¹ as well as, once again, by the linguistic and intellectual barriers that still contribute to set Russian thought and culture clearly apart from the mainstream Western artistic and scientific traditions. Because of all these disruptions, it is only in more recent years – approximately since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – that Russian scholars and international specialists in Slavic studies have been able to turn in earnest to reassessing the precise circumstances of the evolutions and revolutions of early Soviet thought and culture.²² Interestingly, the scientific interest for what had been heretofore neglected, distorted or overlooked aspects of the Soviet context of the 1910-30s and its original, modernist legacy has since then steadily increased, both in Russia and internationally, to the point that its popularity has possibly never been greater than today. This post-Cold War wave of reassessment, however, is an ongoing, incomplete process.²³

In short, what all the – highly unusual for scientific life in the XXth century (cf. Dmitriev, 2002, p.423) – delays and difficulties involved in the protracted process of assessing the scope of the Soviet modernist context seem to suggest is that its wider role and impact in the intellectual and cultural history of the XXth century remains liable, to this day, to possibly sweeping reinterpretations. The aspects of the Soviet modernist context which are most likely to disclose new and relevant perspectives, moreover, pertain in particular to its *theoretical* dimension and the problem of its original links with the Russian modernists. Notwithstanding the unjustly small amount of attention imparted to the Russian modernists' artistic and literary productions, it is

²⁰ Dmitriev, 2002, p.433 underlines in particular the effect of World War I on the crucial Russo-German cultural and academic ties, which went from being very intense (scholars such as Žirmunskij or Špet were educated partly in Germany, the work of contemporary thinkers such as Husserl, Bühler, Wundt, etc. was almost immediately received and commented) to quasi non-existent.

²¹ These ideological tensions, it should be noted, contributed to perturb the assessment of Soviet thought in two complementary ways: on the one hand, they put Soviet theories squarely off limits for most Western scholars; on the other, they substantially biased the interpretations that were indeed carried out by disproportionately increasing the relevance of Marxist issues (cf. Sériot-Friedrich, 2008, p.2).

²² One reason for this being of course that a lot of archived material suddenly became much more readily available, especially to foreign researchers.

²³ To convince oneself of the extent and actuality of this renewed interest, one needs but consider the mass of insightful critical reassessments of early Soviet thought to have appeared in very recent years: Avtonomova (2009), Dennes (2008), Depretto (2009), Kelih (2008) Romand-Tchougounnikov (2009), Sériot-Friedrich (2008), Tihanov (2009), Trautmann-Waller (2006), Vauthier (2008), Zbinden (2006).

on the whole doubtless correct that their work is neither of absolutely unique importance, nor outstandingly different, at its very heart, from that of other Western modernist movements. As such, their untimely eclipse was a deeply regrettable incident, but one whose impact affected the narrower Russian cultural sphere and its history rather than the course of Modern art and literature as a whole.

By contrast, the efforts of elucidation and generalisation of modernist ideas carried out by the likes of the Russian Formalists, Jakobson or Vygotskij had no real or significant equivalent outside of the Soviet Union. It is therefore almost inevitable that the perturbations to the exclusively Soviet process of theorising and systemising modernist artistic and literary insights had significant consequences, such as unwarrantedly obscuring the specificity and potential of some of the theoretical avenues suggested by Soviet thinkers. To cut frankly to the point, I wish to suggest here that amongst the “modernist” avenues to have been occulted in such a way, one finds the Russian formalists’ theories on art and literature. To be quite precise, I believe that one has underestimated the implicit philosophical potency of their fundamental intuitions, which *de facto* involve a tantalising but neglected prospect as to the nature of aesthetic experience, and indeed, experience in general.

The allegedly neglected philosophical scope of the Russian formalists’ theories takes its source at the very core of the originality of Modernism, namely its account of art and literature themselves. To recall, be it in perilously over-generalising fashion, a significant aspect of the modernists’ “project” was to radically redefine the possibilities of art itself, most notably by exploring and pushing the limits of its semantic, epistemological and ontological functions. For instance, the modernists defied the age-old aristotelician idea that art must strive to depict reality mimetically or symbolically, suggesting instead that it focus more – sometimes exclusively – on the non-objective, non-figurative formal possibilities inherent to the specific medium of various art-forms (the phonic or graphic substrate of words in poetry, the pigment and texture of paint in painting, etc.). Instead of producing works of pleasing or harmonious beauty in a classical sense, the modernists also sought to use art to surprise and shock us into paying more attention to and confronting the often senseless reality offered by the ever more technical, rushed and confusing modern world. Most ambitiously, the modernists defended the idea that art could creatively or

performatively produce its own reality and, in that process, not only contribute to redefine our relations with the everyday world, but transfigure it into a sublimated, pervasively aesthetic kind of reality.²⁴

In keeping with the specific intellectual ambitions of the pre-war Russo-Soviet human sciences, the Russian formalists sought to capture and express these wild modernist aesthetic assumptions in more systematic and rigorous theoretical terms. To be more precise, one might want to say that the Russian formalists effectively made use of the concrete examples provided by Russian Modern art and literature as templates to formulate their own aesthetic theories. Be that as it may, the Russian formalists certainly succeeded in enunciating a seminal aesthetic idea – famously labelled by Šklovskij as the process or device of *estrangement* or *defamiliarisation* (“ostranenie” in the original Russian)²⁵ – which has credibly been characterised as “the central aesthetic and philosophical principle of Modern Art and its theory” (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.22). In short, the principle of estrangement postulates that the essential function of art and literature is to redynamise and refresh our concrete perceptions or sensations of ordinary objects and everyday life by presenting them in formally unusual, unconventional or surprising ways. In Šklovskij’s often repeated 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 [1917], pp.20-21).

This definition of both art and literature and of their perceptive power and function is of course not bereft of problems and questions marks. For instance, Šklovskij’s principle of estrangement – as well as the whole formalist conception of art and aesthetics that it effectively underpins – simply generalises the major modernist themes enumerated above. Šklovskij obviously gives echo to the tenets of

²⁴ On the tenets of Russian Modernism in particular, cf. Hutchings (1997). On the core tenets of Modernist aesthetics, one can refer to a classic such as Hughes (1991) or the general introductions and anthologies by Armstrong (2005), Kolocotroni (1998), Lewis (2008) or Weston (2001).

²⁵ Ostranenie is a Russian neologism (allegedly resulting from a misspelling) formed on the root “strannyj” – which means “strange”.

(Russian)²⁶ modernist aesthetics with his double concern for the importance of literary or artistic form as such, as well as the raw, sensual concreteness of empirical reality. The same goes for his attempt to characterise the everyday world as a legitimate source of aesthetic experience – whilst simultaneously emphasising the need to distort and transform it through the specific devices of art or literature in order to heighten and redynamise our perceptive awareness of it. Šklovskij's enthusiasm for the new, the surprising or the "unfamiliar" is also absolutely typical of modernism.

Naturally, the pronounced slant of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement towards the particular "dogma" and features of Modern art appears to give it a primarily descriptive value and to very strongly limit its conceptual scope, whether as a theory of aesthetics or as the bearer of general philosophical insights. One might even want to doubt its value as an adequate generalisation of the tenets of modernism itself: considering the incredible diversity and radicalism of Modern Art, such a feat seems methodologically very suspicious. In any case, its intimate links with Modern Art certainly mean that Šklovskij's definition of art was subjected to wide-ranging and stinging criticisms on the grounds that it lacks generality and only constitutes the somewhat out-dated theoretical formulation of a specific aesthetic – which has itself been ferociously attacked.²⁷

In synthesising the artistic principles of Russian Modernism as it does, however, Šklovskij's definition of art as estrangement also accomplishes something theoretically much more ambitious than simply providing a description of the particular aesthetic of Russian Cubo-futurism. For one, it offers an original twist to the venerable tradition of aesthetic formalism. Šklovskij's definition, indeed, obviously involves a *bona fide* formalist attempt to define art immanently, in terms of its own specific function and inherent formal properties. In addition, Šklovskij also eschews the classical criteria of beauty, taste or the "sublime", canonised philosophically since the XVIIIth century by the works of Kant and the German Idealists as the typical markers of art's specific aesthetic value and functions. Instead, he elects to define the act of consciously experiencing the everyday world in its vivid, nuanced and concrete perceptual complexity and plasticity as the constitutive, immanent feature of

²⁶ Technically speaking, Šklovskij's principle of estrangement was inspired most directly by the artistic practices of Russian Modernism (or Cubo-futurists). That inspiration, however, was not exclusive.

²⁷ cf. Gablik 1984, or indeed the whole wave of post-modernist critiques of modernism

aesthetic experience. This unusual decision to closely associate the intrinsic aesthetic value of art with the process of sensual perception – rather than pegging it to a vague, transcendental concept of beauty –, leads in turn to a genuinely general prospect, "on behalf" of Modern art and literature. This prospect is that the process of perception is itself intrinsically aesthetic or aesthetically valuable.²⁸

On its own, I willingly concede, Šklovskij's modernist "discovery" of the intrinsic aesthetic value of the perceptive process is neither particularly enlightening, interesting nor contentious in any significant way. That being said, Šklovskij's and his fellow formalists' conception of art and literature actually goes much further than a mere statement of perception's inherent aestheticity and aesthetic value: it provides a definite meaning and explanation to that assumption, through the idea that our perceptive acts possess a formal, intransitively "expressive" character. According to Šklovskij's programmatic declarations, perception derives its aesthetic value from the fact that it is not a purely mediatory cognitive act geared towards conveying information or knowledge about the empirical world but, on the contrary, that it amounts to an intransitive, conscious awareness of reality in its intricate phenomenal complexity and structure. Put somewhat differently, Šklovskij assumes that perceiving a given object or fact fully and properly does not imply simply identifying it and its properties cognitively or categorically as a definite whole or definite "something" (to *know* what it is), but to experience and be wholly aware of (to *feel*, to *sense*, to *see*) the details and intricacies of its specific structural, formal features or "make" (*faktura*).²⁹ As is the case in non-objective, non-figurative modern art, the act of aesthetic perception involves experiencing the detailed structure or formal attributes of an object, rather than the object itself. As Šklovskij puts it, "art is a way of experiencing *how an object is made*: the object itself is not important"(Šklovskij, 1988 [1917], p.21 – *my italics, adapted translation*).³⁰

²⁸ To be clear, the generality of Šklovskij's claim concerns only the nature of perception itself, not the modernist assumption that art must involve sensual impressions of reality. It is indeed certainly not true that all art forms or aesthetic traditions are focused on sensual perception as their aesthetic end. Still, it is possible to admit that perception can sometimes constitute such an aesthetic end, and that it therefore does carry intrinsic aesthetic potential – whether it is actualized in a given work or not.

²⁹ Jakobson repeats the same argument at the level of language itself: he defines poetry as an "expression with a set on expression", i.e. as a use of language where the pure linguistic substrate is valued as such, rather than for its deictic, communicative or conative functions.

³⁰ The exact meaning of this key statement is unclear, so that translations differ considerably. Lemon's unmodified version reads: "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object:

Again, one might want to question whether Šklovskij's way of correlating aesthetic value with the perception or perceptibility of form as such is all that original. One can trace similar definitions of aesthetic perception as an essentially formal and intransitive act as far back as Kant's critical philosophy and aesthetics – a model from which I just suggested Šklovskij was distancing himself. In that sense, one could argue that Šklovskij's "formalist" interpretation and systematisation of the modernists' original artistic practices does not result in or imply any significant new aesthetic insights after all. An only slightly closer look at Šklovskij's and the Russian formalists' aesthetic conjectures, however, reveals that they do bring significant nuances to the role of form in aesthetic perception, which demarcate them very strongly from Kantian schematism and aesthetics. To be more precise, Šklovskij's "strange" version of formalism diverges in two absolutely decisive ways both from Kant's aesthetics itself and from the other classical statements of formalism in art, music or literature propounded by the likes of Clive Bell, Clement Greenberg, Eduard Hanslick, Oskar Walzel or Heinrich Wölfflin.³¹

Firstly, one recalls that the formal dimension of perception in Kant's philosophical system is linked to the synthetic, critical faculties of Pure Reason, and is therefore of a purely intellectual, abstract order. This abstractness is even more evident in regard to Kant's conception of aesthetic form. In Kant's aesthetics, "the concern is not with the inherent nature of [the] object, not even considered as phenomenon, but rather with the object *qua* represented, that is, apprehended in mere reflection and its aesthetic, and therefore non-cognitive and non-practical, relation to the subject" (Allison, 2001, p.119). Clive Bell offers a similarly detached vision of the work of art and the aesthetic experience it involves: "To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions" (Bell, 1913, p.27). In short, this type of formalism is essentially disengaged and contemplative.

the object is not important." Scholes (1975) suggests "In art, it is our experience of the process of construction that counts, not the finished product". See also Šer (1991): "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant" The original Russian is: "iskusstvo est' sposob perežit' delan'e veščī, a sdellanoe v iskusstve ne važno". There is of course more at issue here than a simple problem of translation: the different meanings given to this statement reflect possible interpretations of Šklovskij's (problematic) view of the relation between the work of art and the object of perception. (see also Chapter 3)

³¹ For the classical accounts of their respective positions, see Bell (1914), Greenberg (1961), Hanslick (1854), Walzel (1923), Wölfflin (1915)

For Šklovskij, in flagrant contrast to these traditional positions, aesthetic form is anything but the property of an abstract, reflected or represented object. We just saw that he explicitly rejects the view that aesthetic perception is an abstract, cognitive act of knowledge – or a disinterested act of reflexive contemplation in the Kantian sense –, asserting rather that it corresponds to our concrete, “lived” sensual impressions of the material structure of a given “thing” (vešč), “fact” (fakt) or a “word as such” (slovo kak takovoe). Despite its formal nature, aesthetic experience involves the perception of something concrete, of the material “fabric” (faktura) or “texture” of an empirical reality. In other words, because of this combination of artistic form and concrete perception in aesthetic experience, it would seem that Šklovskij’s particular conception of formalism involves a rejection of the traditional dualistic distinction instituted by most Western (Platonician, Cartesian, Kantian) metaphysics – and by aesthetics itself as a philosophical discipline³² – between form and content, or between the ideal and sensual layers of perception. Instead, he seems to suggest that aesthetic perception effectively “bridges the gap” (Holquist-Kliger, 2005) between the two and congregates them into a “homogeneous, monistic and autotelic act” (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p. 225).

Secondly, Šklovskij’s idiosyncratic brand of formalism distinguishes itself by postulating that the forms we perceive in aesthetic perception are not defined by their particular “significance” (Bell), “beauty”, “harmony”, “purposiveness” (Kant) or any particular quality. On the contrary, aesthetic experience corresponds to the pure perceptibility or perceptiveness of *any* given form. As we saw, Šklovskij deems that the simple act of perceiving be it as common and ordinary an object as a stone in its complex, sensual phenomenality constitutes in itself a properly aesthetic experience. In that sense, according to Šklovskij, the play of striking arrangements of lines, colours, shapes, volumes, vectors and space that characterises painting, or the subtle uses of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and metaphor in poetry are not intended to produce immanently beautiful, outstanding or special forms as such – nor are they to be evaluated and judged in such terms. Rather, the formal elements of painting or poetry are geared towards being purely “expressive”, which means that they are

³² If one believes Eagleton, that separation was essential to the birth of aesthetics: “The vital distinction that the term signifies for its inventor, Alexander Baumgarten, is not between art and life but between the material and immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, what is bound up with our creaturely life of perception as opposed to what belongs to the mind. (Eagleton, 1988, p.327).

either to be palpable or perceptible themselves, or capable of shaping our ordinary acts of perception in such a way as to reinforce and sharpen our awareness of their intentional content and structure.

When considered in the light of these two specific features then, Šklovskij's brand of aesthetic formalism thus does appear to make a highly original suggestion, namely that art and literature have the power to summon, produce or "perform" aesthetic experiences of the world as a series of structurally articulated, expressive but nonetheless concrete and decidedly empirical forms. Much more, it seems to imply that not only *can* we perceive reality as a series of concretely articulated and expressive forms in the particular modality of aesthetic perception, but that the empirical world is in fact *always* given or experienced in that way. In effect, since Šklovskij posits that the aesthetic value or "aestheticity" of a given object corresponds to nothing more than its pure, concrete perceptibility as a distinct, expressive something and, moreover, that this perceptibility itself implies nothing more than a conscious, alert perception of the object's form or detailed structure, one must conclude that the normal process of perception itself involves perceiving reality and its objects as expressive, concrete forms. In other words, from the typically modernist and not uncommon assumption that perception can be an intrinsically aesthetic and "valuable" act in itself, Šklovskij's and the Russian formalists' theory of estrangement leads up to the ambitious and general thesis that perception functions as a kind of *aisthesis*, "an opening onto the world, a primal contact with it" (Barbaras, 1998, p.16), which happens as the intransitive, onto-morphogenetic crystallisation of reality in a series of concrete, "materially" expressive forms or structures

Regrettably, Šklovskij's unusual aesthetic formalism and the as yet unclear philosophical perspectives it seems to imply with regard to the conjointly concrete and formal, material and expressive nature of our empirical experience of reality have never been thoroughly explored and assessed. That is so because along with many other Soviet modernist ideas of the time, Šklovskij's theory of art as estrangement was dismissed out of hand and deemed unacceptable as a plausible, philosophical and systematic model. On top of the above-mentioned reservations formulated against estrangement, critics (Erlich, Hansen-Löve, Steiner, Striedter, etc.) have agreed almost unanimously that Šklovskij's loose theorising on perception too

obviously lacks the conceptual foundations and ambition to be credible as a coherent philosophical model. The aesthetic principle of estrangement itself has in time been rejected as a relevant and useful concept of literary theory, which was originally its central purpose. Šklovskij's notion of form, similarly, was attacked early on for being too simplistic, reductive and, crucially, for lacking a truly semantic dimension (Medvedev, 1973 [1934], Engelhardt, 1927). As mentioned, the final nail in the coffin of Šklovskij's aesthetics is that, despite its pretension to generality, it seems to be too closely bound with the idiosyncratic artistic experimentations and philosophical background of Russian Modernism to be universally applicable and to adequately characterise all forms and types of artistic practices and traditions.

To say the truth, such circumspection is not wholly unjustified. In many ways, Šklovskij's modernistic ambition to present aesthetic perception as a concretely expressive, formal act constitutes but another attempt in a long, serially unsuccessful tradition – again dating back to Kant – to establish the importance of art as a synthetic and therefore more complete and adequate way of understanding and experiencing the world (Berman, 1994, pp. VIII-IX). In the same vein, the Russian Formalists are not alone in their implicit ambition to transcend the age-old problems of metaphysical dualism, nor do they seem best qualified to offer new solutions to the classical oppositions between intelligible and sensible, form and matter, idea and impression, *etc.* The inherent vagueness of terms such as that of “expression” or even “form” itself, as well as the patchiness of the philosophical concepts and the indefinite terminology used so far to describe Šklovskij's principle of estrangement or the Russian formalists' aesthetic assumptions constitute rather evident hints as to their conceptual limitations and imprecisions. In any case, my short exposition of Šklovskij's aesthetics has without question contrived to simplify his views on the idea of the concrete perceptibility of form and its connection with aesthetic experience, to over-interpret the philosophical scope and intention of his theory, and to paper over the many obvious gaps of his piece-meal argumentation, as well as the more general faults and omissions of his definition of art and literature.

Despite all their limitations and the undeniable pertinence of the above-mentioned objections, however, it must be said that the philosophical perspectives hastily outlined above are but potentially, rather than actually present in Šklovskij's work. They constitute imperfect but promising sketches that other formalists such as Tynjanov or Jakobson, constantly sought – and to a large extent succeeded – to

ameliorate and systemise. Jakobson's work in particular, provides a much more precise and legitimate meaning to the idea of concrete and expressive perceptual form suggested by earlier formalists. As I have been at pains to emphasise in this introduction, both Šklovskij's and the other formalists' efforts were interrupted before Russian Formalism had time to fully run its course and were prevented from receiving an adequate and objective assessments – including in the Western intellectual traditions they contributed to strongly influence – by subsequent historical circumstances. As I will try to show in the following pages, despite their initial conceptual frailties and origins in a particular, historically defined and therefore contingent aesthetic or artistic practice, the correlated ideas of the concrete perceptibility of form and the intrinsically aesthetic, structural and expressive nature of perception suggested both by Modern art or literature and the Russian formalists' literary and linguistic theories can be articulated and systemised in a consistent and relevant philosophical model.

PART I

Chapter 1

Russian Formalism's Structuralist Legacy

To be perfectly honest, my introductory remarks on the difficulties incurred by the wider Soviet modernist context in its development and reception are not nearly sufficient to justify my subsequent assertion that contingent historical circumstances have perturbed and obscured the Russian formalists' work to the point that it has remained insufficiently acknowledged and explored as the source and vector of philosophically profound and consistent insights into the nature of art, literature or aesthetic experience, let alone experience in general. The first, preliminary but nonetheless pressing task that needs to be undertaken at the outset of this study is therefore to face up to, and then answer a number of general objections against the plausibility of my assertion and the prospects it opens.

Amongst the most obvious problems facing my suggestion that the aesthetic assumptions of Russian Formalism are ripe for a comprehensive and fruitful reinterpretation, one finds the inconvenient fact that, unlike the work of some of the other pre-war Soviet thinkers, the Russian Formalists actually enjoyed a wide and often enthusiastic reception. Their ideas were introduced first in the Anglo-Saxon sphere in the 1950s (amongst other by René Wellek's and Austin Warren's influential *Theory of Literature*), at a time when they opportunely came into resonance with New Criticism (cf. Thompson, 1971). Their work was also met with strong interest in Germany, most notably by Hans-Robert Jauss's and Wolfgang Iser's "Poetics und Hermeneutics" group in Constance.³³ Most significantly of all, the theories of the Russian Formalists had a decisive impact on French Structuralism, first through the proxy of Jakobson's personal influence on Claude Lévi-Strauss,³⁴ and then again

³³ Jurij Striedter, one of the core members of the "Poetics und Hermeneutics" group in Konstanz, translated the first anthology of Formalist texts into German. (Striedter, 1969).

³⁴ Lévi-Strauss meeting with Jakobson at the French Institute for Advanced Studies at Columbia in New York in the 1940s is considered as the seminal moment of the former's career, and of French Structuralism as a whole.

when they were rediscovered and reactualised by the French structuralists at the height of their popularity, thanks in particular to Tzvetan Todorov's translation of the fundamental texts of Šklovskij, Tynjanov and Eichenbaum (Todorov, 1966).³⁵ In other words, all the most significant schools of literary theory of the post-war era were acutely aware of the existence of Russian Formalism.

Much more, the Russian Formalists are unconditionally credited with having laid the foundations of modern literary theory (or poetics) and their work is a recognised and valued part of the canon of that discipline (cf. anthologies and introductions such as Culler 1997; Ducrot 1999; Pechlivanos 1995; Ruwet 1996, W. Schmid 2010; Selden 1995; Weber 1998; Wellek-Warren 1949). Over the years, many insightful monographies, one by as prominent a thinker as Frederic Jameson (*The Prison-House of Language*, 1972), have contributed to a thorough scholarly assessment of their ideas and influence. In short, the Russian formalists' work has been widely acknowledged, ably reviewed, productively plundered for its wealth and extensively criticised. Despite the reservations I voiced as to the standard interpretations of early Soviet thought in general, Russian Formalism does not appear to constitute a particularly obscure or contentious part of that legacy, and thus to possess obvious potential for rehabilitation. After all, even their apparently so original attempt to bind form and content together has received widespread and sustained critical attention (cf. Engelhardt, 1927; Hansen-Löve, 1978; Holquist-Kliger 2005). In such conditions, if one is to cast a new light on Russian formalism's allegedly misunderstood philosophical value, one needs here to volunteer much more specific arguments as to the precise scope and origin of that misunderstanding and its consequences – and to discuss in some more detail the historical context and evolution of Russian Formalism, as well as the circumstances of its reception.

Before proceeding to such a discussion, I also need to defend the very legitimacy of my ambition to interpret Russian Formalism as the source of philosophical, systematic aesthetic principles – as this seems in many ways to flout the very spirit of the formalists' project. By all accounts, notwithstanding the general, aesthetic overtones of crucial ideas such as estrangement, the focus of the formalists was solely to formulate a theory of *literature*. They were intent on "specifying" the

³⁵ Cf. also Matonti (2009) on the reception of Russian formalism in France

problems of literary analysis and criticism, not on producing a full-blown aesthetic theory, let alone a methodologically grounded philosophical system (Erlich, 1955, p.145). Boris Eichenbaum, for instance, made this perfectly clear: "What characterises us is neither "Formalism" as an aesthetic theory, nor "methodology" as a closed scientific system, but only the striving to establish, on the basis of specific properties of the literary material, an independent literary science" (Eichenbaum, 1927, p.117). Tellingly, the non-literary, philosophical dimension of the aesthetic principles expounded by Šklovskij was quickly restricted by the formalists to playing a secondary, discreet role in the background of their investigations. Despite its seminal influence, Šklovskij's vision of art as estrangement only functioned in Russian Formalism's earliest days as a broad template or conceptual stepping-stone, warranting but an ever diminishing portion of the formalists' attention in comparison to specific issues of narratology, verse analysis, literary evolution, *etc.* As a matter of fact, the Russian formalists carefully and purposefully avoided confronting the wider, non-literary implications of their initial aesthetic premises: in their eyes, to use the notion of estrangement as a foundation to justify a systematic, unified theory of aesthetics would threaten to reduce the manifold manifestations of art and literature to a single, reductive explanatory principle.

To my mind, neither the formalists' indifference to the broader aesthetic aspects of their ideas nor their outright hostility to closed systems and axiomatic principles must automatically disqualify all attempts to make philosophical sense of their work. This is especially true if such attempts are directed (as mine is) more towards exploiting Russian Formalism's inherent potential than providing a descriptively faithful and exact account of its basic tenets. In any case, the Russian Formalists were never totally successful in distancing themselves from the philosophical field of aesthetics, with which they "worked, not infrequently, in tactical collaboration" (Tihanov, 2004, p.62). What is more, there is definitely evidence of "alien" philosophical or psychological influences in the formalists' literary theories. To drive home this point, one can mention that no less an authority than Vygotskij suggested that "actually, the Formalists are compelled to be psychologists and to speak in sometimes confused, but absolutely psychological prose" (Vygotskij, 1986 [1922], p.74).

As such, the philosophical and psychological innuendos to be found in the formalists' nominally literary theories constitute enough justification for shining some light on these more ambiguous parts of their work, as was done critically in the 1920s already

(cf. Engelhard, 1927; Žinkin, 1927), or later on by Holenstein (1976), Hansen-Löve, (1978), Paramonov (1996), Gretchko (2003), Svetlikova (2005), or Romand & Tchougounnikov (2009). It is also quite clear though that if it is to go further than simply identifying their main theoretical sources (in psychology, philosophy, linguistics, etc.) and descriptively highlighting the non-literary aspects of some of their essential ideas, the interpretative act of systemising the formalists' aesthetic of estrangement into a consistent philosophical framework cannot be carried out as a straightforward hermeneutical reassessment of their work itself. Rather, a philosophical, systematic approach to Russian Formalism must proceed by ascertaining its worth through the prism of another, related model that is both more consistent and philosophically more ambitious.

The necessity of reinterpreting the conceptual potential of the Russian formalists' legacy *indirectly* is made all the more evident when one considers that, despite its undeniable and foundational role in the development of literary theory (and despite the recurring bursts of interest generated by some of its specific concepts, in particular estrangement), Russian Formalism in itself certainly does appear to be both outdated and deeply flawed. The bulk of the formalists' ideas were consciously provocative, even excessive in their intent (cf. Erlich, 1973, p.638) and, as such, they display conspicuous weaknesses. As we saw, the Russian formalists have been abundantly and rightly criticised for these weaknesses and, for that same reason, have also long been assessed as a spent force. That Russian Formalism nonetheless exerted a durable influence and still commands historical interest comes down, arguably, to the fact that it was able to quickly mature into and was eventually supplanted by a stronger theoretical paradigm, that of structuralism.

In effect, Russian Formalism's most valuable insights were reinterpreted and recycled in clear structuralist terms by some of the formalists themselves (Jakobson, Trubeckoj), in the context of the Prague School. Erlich, for instance, has thus volunteered the opinion that Prague structuralism was ultimately a restatement of the "basic tenets of Russian Formalism in more judicious and rigorous terms" (Erlich, 1974, p.727). Additionally, one can point out that it is through the mediation of the Prague school and Jakobson that the formalist ideas first enjoyed significant international recognition; it is in the context of French Structuralism that they made the greatest impact; and it is as the "John the Baptists" of structuralism (Steiner, 1984, p.20) that they are best known and most respected.

At worse, the obvious and long-acknowledged conceptual limitations and polemical weaknesses of Russian Formalism's key ideas – along with their resulting adjustment or adaptation into a structuralist framework – would seem to imply that it has in fact been correctly assessed as a transitional, now refuted theory with no further significant coherent insights to yield as a systematic model. As Peter Steiner has suggested, it is probably most appropriate to see Russian Formalism “not as a school in the ordinary sense of the word, but [...] a peculiar developmental stage in the history of Slavic literary theory” (Steiner, 1984, p.9), which means also that it never actually achieved the coherence of a systematic model in its own right. At best, Russian Formalism's shortcomings mean that prising a coherent theory from its yet embryonic and contradictory ideas must involve questioning its ties with structuralism and, ultimately, lead to a reassessment of structuralism itself.

That the only reasonable prospect of rehabilitating or defending the relevance of the formalists' aesthetic ideas in a philosophical perspective is to do so indirectly, by shining a new light on their significance and potential vis-à-vis structuralism, gives rise to a couple more methodological objections against such an endeavour. To start with, the one really substantial reason to suspect Russian Formalism of hiding unexploited conceptual possibilities with regard to structuralism is the above-mentioned probability that the repression of cultural life and scientific activity that intervened in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s seriously perturbed or diminished the legacy it was able to bequeath structuralism. But, as far as the structuralist aspects of the formalists' work are concerned, the reverse seems to be true.

Although Russian Formalism's precipitated demise did happen in the difficult, hostile context of the Great Turn, it is often argued that it succumbed not as a result of the enforced interruption of its development by exterior and contingent socio-political factors, but primarily because of its own conceptual implosion under the weight of its polemical excesses, contradictions and vagueness (cf. Erlich, 1955; Aucouturier, 1994). By all accounts, the formalists' ideas and theories would have had to be adapted and consolidated in a sturdier paradigm anyway, irrespective of the historical circumstances. Since the formalists' essential insights were effectively salvaged by formalists themselves in the friendly context of the Prague School, and were eventually received and further developed in a structuralist framework both in the

Soviet Union by the Tartu School of semiotics and in the West by the French structuralists, this has quite logically been taken to mean that Russian Formalism's downfall had little negative impact on its contribution to structuralism, and that its transition was highly successful.³⁶

One must also consider against the likelihood of a productive reassessment of the ideas of the Russian formalists through the prism of structuralism that the latter was one of the defining intellectual movements of the XXth century. In that quality, its scope and limitations have been even more thoroughly discussed and debated than Russian Formalism's ever were. Moreover, structuralism is itself generally seen nowadays as a rather tired and, in many ways, discredited paradigm, so that even if Russian Formalism did still have anything relevant to reveal in connection with it, these perspectives themselves would more likely than not be obsolete and subject to the criticisms generally directed at structuralist ideas (cf. Culler 2000). If that were not enough, the pre-war Slavic contributions to structuralism – which include the work of the Russian formalists, the Prague school, as well as that of Špet – have been assigned a distinctly peripheral position both in the genealogy and in the wider conceptual horizon of structural thought.

To recall, in its classical accounts, structuralism is often presented as having emerged almost exclusively from the pioneering work of Ferdinand de Saussure in general linguistics (cf. Dosse, 1991; Eco, 1988). From that single seminal source, it spread to the whole field of linguistics, burgeoning into a number of structural models such as Hjelmslev's glossematics or Benvéniste's theory of enunciation. Structuralism's period of greatest relevance came in France after the war, where the template of Saussurean linguistics was applied to disciplines such as anthropology, literary theory, psychoanalysis, sociology and philosophy. This diversification gave rise to the French intellectual movement of the 1960s, which in due course has become synonymous with structuralism itself. In this conventional picture of the genealogy of structuralism, the Prague School fits in as an important pre-war model, but only as one of several representative examples of the Saussurean tradition of linguistics. Špet's work does not register at all as a significant contribution, whereas the Russian Formalists, as we just saw, are noted only as "inter-paradigmatic" (Steiner, 1984, p.10) forbearers to structuralism proper. Slavic contributions to

³⁶ Jameson (1976), for example, speaks of "Czech formalists", underlining the continuity he sees between the Russian formalism and Prague structuralism

structuralism, including both those of its most prominent figure, Roman Jakobson, thus appear to be both conceptually beholden to Saussure and historically subordinated to the more mature accomplishments of the French thinkers of the 60s (Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Althusser, etc.). In comparison to these towering figures of XXth century thought, it is hard to envisage how a reassessment of Russian Formalism might seriously challenge structuralism's fundamental orientation or offer the prospect of ground-breaking new insights.

Unquestionably, it would be unrealistic to seek to face down all these very substantial and solid objections by simply arguing that Šklovskij's theory of estrangement and the Russian formalists' other core aesthetic assumptions were consciously intended as fully fledged philosophical statements, that they have not been widely received and discussed, and that they do not display fundamental inconsistencies and limitations. It is equally undisputable that most of the Russian formalists' ideas and theories were recycled and adapted in the context of structuralism, a much more potent paradigm which has been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate and whose halcyon days are now also long gone. As such, there seems very little room left to defend the hypothesis that Šklovskij's and the formalists' modernist vision of art and literature as estrangement still has the potential to be shaped into (or at least to inspire) a consistent and appealing vision of aesthetics, be it in a structuralist or any other kind of framework.

Despite these strong arguments against my hypothesis, however, I believe one can nonetheless find compelling reasons to defend its plausibility. To start with, the uncertainties surrounding the Great Turn and its consequences imply that, notwithstanding the widespread and enthusiastic reception of Russian Formalism, the modalities of its transition to Prague structuralism in the turbulent Soviet context of the 1920s are still not as clear as they could be. At the very least, they have prevented a definitive judgement on the successful, adequate nature of that transition. True, Russian Formalism itself was conceptually drained and wearing itself out by 1930. Just as true, structuralism was the obvious solution to redynamise it, and in many ways effectively did so. But the constrained circumstances and manner of the mutation from the one to the other do raise strong suspicions that this process did not proceed as unimpeded and seamlessly as it could have. In fact, one can even

find a few, usually Russian voices to argue that structuralism did not constitute such an improvement or successful adaptation of Russian Formalism at all, and perverted the essential originality of the latter's ideas (Novikov, 1994).³⁷ Whilst such views are both rare and constitute something of an exaggeration, they do underscore that the details of formalism's transition to structuralism remain an unsettled matter.

The second and perhaps even more significant argument in favour of a reappraisal of the philosophical potential and relevance of Russian Formalism's aesthetics in a structuralist perspective concerns the reception and impact of Prague structuralism itself. In effect, even if one accepts that Russian Formalism's legacy was faithfully and adequately recycled in the context of Prague structuralism (which I happen to believe was patently not the case, cf. also Steiner, 1984, p.5), this does not mean either that the full extent of its conceptual links with Russian Formalism were correctly assessed, or indeed, that Prague structuralism itself was received in adequate fashion in the West. True, the key roles played by Jakobson both as a transmitter of ideas and as the "midwife" of French Structuralism, along with the generally high regard in which his and Trubeckoj's work in phonology are held might seem to indicate that the Prague School and its formalist heritage were well received and integrated in the genealogy of structuralism. But there are just as many reasons – for example the almost complete neglect of such interesting figures as Jan Mukařovský or Felix Vodička (Winner, 2002; H. Schmid, 2004, p.18) or the absence of an overarching assessment of the specific importance and place of Jakobson's in the structuralist constellation³⁸ – to believe that Prague structuralism has not been afforded the attention it deserves (cf. also Sériot 1999).

In short, despite the otherwise bleak prospects for a productive reassessment of the Russian formalists' aesthetics, a serious opportunity to do just that does seem to exist. In effect, it seems perfectly reasonable to argue that the mutation of Russian Formalism into Prague structuralism was impeded and rendered problematic by historical circumstances. That consideration in itself gives us grounds to assume that genuine opportunities for the development of the formalists' fundamental aesthetic insights went begging in this unsatisfactory process. Since it is quite possible,

³⁷ Šklovskij himself, the quintessential figure of Russian Formalism, never really warmed to structuralism (cf. Šklovskij, *Theory of Prose* (1985)).

³⁸ There are of course a reasonable number of critical accounts of his work (Bradford 1995, Delas 1993, Holenstein 1975, Sangster 1982) None of these, however, offer to situate his role and position in the ark of mainstream structuralism.

moreover, that neither the true extent of Prague structuralism's debt to the formalists' aesthetic insights nor its own originality and potential have been adequately evaluated, this would then imply that Russian formalism's philosophical scope and signification – in a specifically structuralist framework – could indeed have been at least partially overlooked. With this in mind, the two obvious steps to follow in order to defend the idea that the formalists' modernist vision of aesthetics still carries unexplored and unexploited potential is, firstly, to take a closer look at the modalities of Russian Formalism's transformation and reception in Prague structuralism and, secondly, at the potentially overlooked specificity and residual potential of the Prague School in the wider constellation of structuralist theories and the standard, Western accounts of structuralism's genealogy.

Regarding the matter of Russian Formalism's transition into Prague structuralism, it is beyond doubt that the former was recycled neither in its entirety nor in its complexity in the latter. Russian Formalism was at heart a very diverse phenomenon, involving a number of very different trends and epistemological perspectives (Steiner, 1984, p.16). Although the formalists shared a common and apparently clearly defined objective, their methods towards achieving that goal varied enormously. Šklovskij, for instance, gave a wilfully intuitive, impressionistic and increasingly existential turn to his investigations in poetics. By contrast, Jakobson and Tynjanov defended a more rigorous, systematic and linguistic angle, whilst Eichenbaum chose to emphasise the role of literature's social dimension. Similarly, despite their professed aspiration to concentrate on the purely literary aspects of literature – or as Jakobson put it, on “literariness” (*literaturnost'*, Jakobson, 1979 [1921], p.299) – their arguments included a wide interdisciplinary variety of linguistic, critical, psychological and philosophical elements. All these various trends and disciplinary approaches were quite distinct from one another, but most represented justifiable and interesting contributions to the core aim of Russian Formalism to establish an autonomous “science” of literature. They also continually influenced each other, consolidating or correcting Russian Formalism's general theoretical course and expanding its horizon further than the pure and totally independent literary theory it was aiming for.³⁹

³⁹ Defining the limits of literary theory, of course, has been a constant problem of the discipline since its inception (Tihanov, 2004, p.62-63), and many would argue that such a delimitation has ultimately failed (*ibid.*, 61; Culler, 2010)

After Jakobson's definitive break with his colleagues and friends in the Soviet Union, however, this vital and fruitful collaborative mechanism was terminally disrupted and only the structurally-oriented model which he (and a few others) defended could be developed further.⁴⁰ Even more importantly, the diverse disciplinary breadth and implications of the formalists' ideas and theories were dramatically reduced. For some time after 1930, they were further developed only in the framework of *structural linguistics* provided to them by the Prague school (Fontaine, 1974, p.15). Significantly, the philosophical, psychological or general aesthetic perspectives that had played an important, if ambiguous role in the early stages of the formalists' work were decisively sidelined, and the contact with the more philosophically inclined figures at the periphery of the formalist movement, such as Špet, Žinkin or even Engelhardt, was either lost for good or reduced to insignificance.

This drastic reduction, within the Prague School, of the theoretical or methodological range of formalist theories and ideas, along with the abandonment of whole avenues of inquiry, was certainly not without its own logic and justification. As we saw, Russian Formalism was faced with fundamental methodological issues long before its downfall: the vagueness of some of its claims and the uneven quality of its various theoretical trends made a pruning necessary in order for it to achieve a sufficient level of clarity and coherence. What's more, this trimming process had begun and was largely carried out in the context of Russian Formalism itself, as a consequence of growing disagreements amongst the formalists over the excessive eclecticism of their science of literature and its dependence on the concepts of non-literary disciplines. Their initially constructive and mutually enriching disputes deteriorated over time into something resembling more a sterile confrontation of increasingly irreconcilable ideas.⁴¹ Instead of the undifferentiated intermingling and cross-fertilisation between contrasting methodological approaches, some positions, such as the ones explored by Eichenbaum (or the "quasi-formalists" Žirmunskij, Vinogradov, etc.) were steadily marginalised and rejected as unsatisfying by a smaller group made up of Šklovskij, Tynjanov and Jakobson (and possibly Polivanov and Tomaševskij, cf. Depretto, 2009).

⁴⁰ The formalists who stayed in the USSR had to reorientate their research : Tynjanov turned to writing novels, Šklovskij, after a prolonged silence, produced more classical criticism

⁴¹ This deterioration also applies to the Formalists exchanges with their Marxists opponents, with whom they had originally led a constructive dialogue. (cf. Conio, 1975, Depretto, 2009)

The most promising and conceptually solid work of that reduced group, moreover, was produced by Tynjanov and Jakobson in an ever more distinctly structuralist and (in Jakobson's case) linguistically-oriented perspective. The linguistic, structuralist option, as Steiner and many others have convincingly argued (Erlich, 1955; Hansen-Löve, 1978; Ehlers, 1992), thus profiled itself as the expression of Russian Formalism's maturation and as the exclusively viable template for its further development long before the former's eventual downfall. In that sense, the leaner framework of the Prague school can quite reasonably be seen, as is usually the case, as having simply sanctioned and further optimised the necessary rationalisation and on-going transformation of formalist ideas into their structuralist, language-oriented mould.

Having said that, even the ascendancy of Jakobson's and Tynjanov's model as the "natural" and most potent development for Russian Formalism does not warrant either that the latter's transposition in the context of the Prague school was straightforward and inconsequential, nor that the reduction of its conceptual breadth to the lone discipline of linguistics was wholly justified or even intentional. Tellingly, many of the non-linguistic aspects of the formalists' work and ideas were reactualised at a later stage either by the Czech structuralists (Mukařovský, Vodička, etc.) or by the formalists' other structuralist "heirs" (Soviet and French). Also, the growing involvement of Russian Formalism with structuralism confers paradoxically more, not less significance to the enforced separation between the Soviet Formalists and their Prague colleagues after 1930. That situation, indeed, clearly entailed the risk that not all the formalist insights that possessed value and potential in a narrower structuralist framework would in fact be adequately recycled by the Prague school. That risk was all the greater since, as I said, exchanges between some of the Soviet formalists (Šklovskij and Tynjanov especially) and their Prague colleagues were still going strong in the late 1920s.

The formalists themselves certainly felt that their work was being seriously hampered by the course of events and the resulting impediments to their efforts to collaborate and exchange ideas with one another. In a letter to Šklovskij, Tynjanov mused that: "Had it not been for History and geography, you, me and him [Jakobson], we could have achieved much more together" (Tynjanov, 1984 [1929]). Be that as it may, it is quite clear that the abrupt and constrained nature of the separation between the Soviet Formalists and their Prague colleagues led to a certain arbitrariness in the

selection of the aspects of the formalists' work which were effectively recycled and further developed in Prague. One certainly finds no trace that this selection process was accompanied by a thoughtful analysis and comprehensive refutation of the formalist concepts and theoretical perspectives that were to be rejected and abandoned. Much rather, it resulted directly from the contingent historical fact that only some of the "formalist" proponents of the structural model, namely the linguists Jakobson and Trubeckoj and the folklorist Bogatyrev, emigrated and were able to pursue their work free of any political fetters.

The problematic impact of the enforced separation between the Prague School's Russian members and their colleagues in the USSR on the transition of the formalist ideas and theories to a structuralist framework can be further corroborated by highlighting the circumstances that attended to (and sped up) that transformation process, namely the fading away of Russian Modernism and the special scientific and intellectual context that accompanied it. As mentioned, the Russian modernist poets and artists initially exerted a decisive influence on the formalists and were without doubt the single most important source of the latter's radical and ambitious aesthetical assumptions. Naturally, the immediate relevance of the Russian modernists and their idiosyncratic aesthetic concerns was strongly reduced in Prague after their premature downfall and the discontinuation of exchanges with the Soviet Union. In line with Russian Formalism's perceived progress towards a structuralist paradigm and the limited conceptual credit generally afforded to modernist ideas, though, the dwindling of the Russian modernists' role in Prague has traditionally been interpreted either as a marginally significant event, or even as a helpful step in the evolution of formalist ideas towards maturity.⁴² It is seen as fully coherent with the formalists' suspicions of the more philosophical, non-literary aspect of their work, with their efforts to harness the excesses of their early ideas in a leaner methodological framework, and with the need to emancipate themselves from the specific aesthetic principles and preoccupations of the Russian modernist poets and artists, which as Erlich puts it, "proved a mixed blessing" (Erlich, 1973, p.638).

⁴² Interestingly, it is Šklovskij's « Monument to a Scientific Error » that is considered as the watermark of Russian Formalism, rather than Jakobson's « Generation that Squandered its Poet », underlining the limited importance of the demise of Modernism in connection with Formalism's downfall.

Jakobson's reaction in "The Generation That Squandered its Poets" to the downfall of Russian Modernism, however, casts a quite different light on the significance of this decisive chapter in the evolution of Russian formalism. In his pessimistic essay, written specifically in reaction to his friend Majakovskij's death, Jakobson all but identifies with the fortune of the modernist poets, and laments the dire loss that the ebbing of their singular voice will entail for his generation and for himself: "As to the future, it doesn't belong to us either. [...] When singers have been killed and their song has been dragged into a museum and pinned to the wall of the past, the generation they represent is even more desolate, orphaned, and lost - impoverished in the most real sense of the word" (Jakobson, 1987, p.300). Clearly, the key actor of Russian Formalism's transition to structuralism and linguistics identified the receding of the Russian modernists' influence not as a liberation or as a move towards conceptual maturity, but as an irretrievable loss.

That Jakobson would believe this is of course above all a reflection of the intensity of his own involvement with the Russian modernist poets, both on a personal and a theoretical level. He famously penned avant-garde verses in his youth under the pseudonym Aljagrov, and befriended the futurist poets (Majakovskij, Chlebnikov, Kručnych). He fervently championed their aesthetic cause, providing the avant-garde with one of its most powerful theoretical voice.⁴³ As happened to his poet-friends, his fate was darkened by the upheavals of the time: Jakobson escaped likely persecutions and humiliations only by going into exile. All in all, it could therefore seem credible to interpret Jakobson's anxiety at the avant-garde's eclipse as a moment of personal empathy or a private sense of uncertainty triggered by the need to readjust his methodological approach. Such views, however, do not hold up very well to scrutiny. At the time of writing his essay, Jakobson had already found a new home in the independent, welcoming scientific and cultural context of the young Czechoslovak Republic (cf. Toman, 1995) and was enjoying ever greater international success thanks to his achievements in phonology.⁴⁴ He had also already resolutely switched to the structuralist paradigm that defined his mature and most significant work in phonology, so that no immediate adjustments were called for by his loss of contact with the Russian modernists. In fact, no such adjustments ever

⁴³ Many of Jakobson's early texts are dedicated to the Cubo-futurists poets (Novejšaja russkaja poezija, K pozdnej lirike Majakovskogo, Futurizm, O chudožesvtennom realizme...)

⁴⁴ One can mention here the Congress of Linguistics in The Hague (1928), where Jakobson and Trubeckoj presented their theses to great acclaim.

occurred: there was no fundamental incompatibility between Jakobson structural linguistics and the original modernist inspiration of his work, to which he actually stayed true all his life (cf. Jakobson, 1980). It is thus hard to see why he would want to associate himself and his own work so closely with the fall of the modernist poets ("the future, it doesn't belong to *us*" – my italics).

In fact, it seems much more accurate to interpret the sense of gloom exuding from "The Generation That Squandered its Poets" as reflecting the apprehension of its author in connection to the negative effect of the premature demise of Russian Modernism on the *whole* Soviet scientific context of the 1910-20s and its broader legacy. The fear spelled out by Jakobson in his essay is that, although he might himself be able to keep alive and develop the modernist intuitions of his own, specifically linguistic research, he would have to do so in isolation, in an intellectual environment that would not reproduce the unusually close interaction with modernist artists and writers that had initially helped to foster his ideas.⁴⁵ Worse, he realised that the disappearance of the Russian modernist poets and artists would actually prevent his "generation" from fulfilling all the promises of its early endeavours, and that a large part of its original ideas would probably remain in an embryonic state and be misunderstood or forgotten. This pessimism applies in particular to the work of the Russian formalists, which Jakobson saw as only just beginning.⁴⁶ By despondently turning his back onto Russian Formalism at the vital juncture of Russian Modernism's collapse, Jakobson acknowledged his inability to sustain and develop the whole of the formalists' modernist-inspired legacy on his own. Much more, he also passionately deplored that nobody else would take on that necessary task, whether in the alien and indifferent Western context in which the troubled historical circumstances at hand were forcing Russo-Soviet modernist ideas to develop, or in the clearly hostile intellectual and cultural environment that was quickly taking shape in the Soviet Union.

⁴⁵ Jakobson was very close to the Czech modernists (f.e. Karel Teige), and there also existed a close collaboration between the CLP and the « devetsil ». Czech modernism, however, was of a very different ilk than its Russian equivalent, and looked more to France and the French Symbolist and Surrealist traditions. See also Linhartova (1977)

⁴⁶ As he wrote to Tynjanov in another dispirited letter: "En vérité, le travail des formalistes ne fait que commencer, pas dans le sens d'une étude de détail, avec une centaine d'exemples, pas dans le sens où il serait temps pour nous de faire des manuels synthétiques mais dans le sens du travail tout simplement - avant, nous travaillions à l'aveuglette, pour nous tous, ce furent des années d'apprentissage et maintenant alors que les problèmes sont terriblement clairs, c'est la débandade." (quoted by Depretto, 2005, p.xx)

In my opinion, Jakobson's dejection at the sad prospect of the opportunities lost as a result of the Russian modernists' premature eclipse shows clearly enough that, when adapting the formalists' aesthetic theories to the paradigm of structuralism, neither he nor his Prague school colleagues sought to reduce or limit them to the field of linguistics on deliberate and reasoned methodological grounds. In fact, Jakobson and the Prague School knowingly circumvented many of the issues brought up by early formalism and its modernist aesthetic insights – whilst providing clues and entertaining hopes as to their potential for further developments in a structuralist perspective.⁴⁷ That such developments did not happen is due primarily to the absence – in a rapidly and radically changing scientific context and an increasingly uncomfortable political situation –, of thinkers ready to recognise and tackle the wider implications and possibilities of the formalists' aesthetic ideas. Admittedly, it is eminently doubtful whether either the Russian formalists or the Russians of the Prague School would have had the resources and interest to fully account for all the psychological and philosophical implications and problems of their modernist-inspired assumptions on art and literature, even if they had not been restricted to a narrower linguistic approach in less troubled historical circumstances. As noted, they did not consider it their task to account for the philosophical aspects of their ideas. But the crucial point here remains that possible avenues for the development and systematisation of the formalists' aesthetic insights in a structuralist perspective were almost certainly foregone on what were predominantly contingent grounds by the Russians of the Prague School.

Turning now to the question of the subsequent reception and interpretations of Russian formalism's structuralist legacy, I wish to add to the foregoing observations that, crucially, the formalist aesthetic and philosophical avenues that were not developed by Jakobson or the other Russians in Prague were never adequately investigated, let alone fully exploited in the subsequent evolution of structuralism, whether in the Soviet Union or in the West. True, I did mention that Czech structuralists such as Jan Mukařovský and Felix Vodička actually endeavoured to explore the specifically aesthetic dimension of the formalists' work and produced very

⁴⁷ This dismissal of philosophical concerns is repeated by Jakobson in his considerations on the ontological nature of the phoneme in his essay "Zur Struktur des Phonems" (Jakobson, 1971, pp.282-283)

interesting and thought-provoking theories in that respect (cf. Mukařovský 1936, 1941, 1947 and 1966, and Vodička 1942, 1948 and 1969).⁴⁸ As I also mentioned, however, these pre-eminent scholars have been sadly overlooked outside of the Czech Republic, and are mostly an irrelevance in traditional accounts of structuralism. In that sense, it is not credible to argue that they served as an effective relay for the formalists' ideas, or that they succeeded in anchoring them in the mainstream of structuralist thought. If anything, their work serves as further proof of the widespread neglect incurred by the structuralist perspectives suggested by the Russian formalists' aesthetic theories.

Alternatively, one might want to point out that the Russian formalists' ideas were also considered in a broader disciplinary framework by the likes of Jurij Lotman, Roland Barthes or Tzvetan Todorov – i.e. thinkers who cannot be considered as being outside of the structuralist mainstream. The problem here is that Lotman, Barthes and Todorov all conducted their interpretations of Russian formalism after a thirty-year long hiatus, in the radically different post-war context and with both a very different mind-set and different priorities. As a result, their accounts subjected the Russian formalists' work to important distortions. A clear example of such distortions is the case of Propp's "Morphology of the Folktale", which was of peripheral importance to Russian formalism itself but quickly became one of the most, if not *the* most important formalist text for the French structuralists.⁴⁹ Tellingly, it has also been noted, for example by Jaccard, that the rediscovery of formalist texts in the 1960s occurred independently of interest for the Russian avant-gardes and the context of Modernism in the Soviet union (cf. Jaccard, 2005, p.11). This fact serves as yet another reminder that the modernist logic and pathos which informed the Russian formalists' aesthetic ideas was at the very least partially overlooked and underestimated – and further compounds Jakobson's fears as to the dire consequences of the downfall of Russian Modernism and the vulnerability of the particular intellectual climate it had fostered.

⁴⁸ With regard to its importance in the perspective explored in this study, the work of Mukarovsky should have figured more prominently than it does – and has only been neglected because of a lack of research on my part. Sadly enough, I thus unfortunately repeat a now habitual exclusion

⁴⁹ Propp's "Morphology" is the only work of the Formalists to have received a full and widely circulated edition (point), and was translated before (in 1958) the seminal texts of Šklovskij, Tynjanov or Eichenbaum (1966, by Todorov).

On top of the specific problems of the reception of Russian formalism and its interrupted legacy, it is also crucial to note that even some of the modernistic aesthetic ideas and perspectives that were indeed explored and further developed and systemised by Jakobson and his colleagues in Prague and are clearly in evidence in their linguistic theories have been brushed aside and given less attention than they deserve. As I suggested earlier on, the impact and interpretations of the Prague School itself in the genealogy of structuralism also constitutes an exegetical issue that can further accredit the thesis of the existence of a residual structuralist potential connected with the aesthetic of the Russian formalists.

Lest one forget, problems and delays of reception concerned the whole of the Slavic pre-war output. Propp, for example, was discovered and translated only in the 1950s, Vygotskij in the 1960s, Bachtin in the 1970s and Špet even later, in the 1980s. Even Jakobson, with the exception of his work on phonology, only started to receive sustained attention after his emigration to the United States (i.e. after a *second* break in his scientific trajectory). Just as the theories of the Russian formalists, the groundbreaking theories sketched out by the likes of Bachtin, Vygotskij or Jakobson did not integrate mainstream Western discourse on their own terms, as full-blown and independent paradigms conveying with them their own conceptual horizons. Quite to the contrary, they were received retrospectively, against distinctly alien epistemological backgrounds, to which they were subsumed uncritically for the most part. This critical naivety, it can be added, was further facilitated by the apparently obvious, but in effect treacherous similarities between the Russian context and the Western one (cf. Sériot 1995).

Recent research has highlighted the serious repercussions of these delays and the uncritical subsumption of typically Russian traditions to Western models. In effect, over the last couple of decades or so, specialists in Russian culture have made convincing attempts towards providing a finer comparative assessment of early Soviet thought, and have come up with a very different account of its evolution and historical impact. The extent of the reinterpretations thus achieved is evidenced by the case of as prominent a figure as Bachtin, whose work has been liberated from numerous inconsistencies generated by its French, American and even Soviet receptions in the 1970s.⁵⁰ One-sided interpretations have been nuanced and

⁵⁰ Cf. Beasley-Murray (2007), Vauthier (2008), Zbinden (2006)

contrasted to produce a diversified picture of the many aspects of Bachtin's versatile work and, paradoxically perhaps, a much more sober estimation of the originality of this otherwise enormously popular thinker. For instance, whereas the authorship of important works written by Vološinov and Medvedev (both members of the so-called "Bachtin Circle") were for some time attributed to Bachtin himself, these scholars and their ideas have now again found a distinctive and independent identity. Similarly, Bachtin's influential theory of dialogue and dialogism has been critically reconsidered and made to reveal the extent of its roots in the work of the likes of Jakubinskij, Polivanov, Lev Ščerba (all linguists closely linked with Russian Formalism), as well as its connections with that of Nikolaj Marr or Vygotskij. Next to the plentiful attention lavished on Bachtin, one has thus also rediscovered the richness and the relevance of the original theories of all the scholars cited here on the relations between language, thought and society, as well as their pioneering role in fields such as the philosophy of language, pragmatics, socio-linguistics, psycho-linguistics or the psychology of consciousness.

Of greater interest to us, the heightened attention afforded to pre-war Soviet thought has also brought in sharper focus the complexity and importance of its role in the evolution of structuralism. The widespread view, we saw, was and still mostly is that the Soviet and Czech structuralists operated squarely within the Saussurean tradition (cf. Sériot, 1999, p.3). Upon closer inspection, however, many Soviet structuralist or proto-structuralist models have revealed themselves not to be indebted in such a clear way to Saussure's work, if at all in some cases. Key ideas, such as Tynjanov's conception of verse as a hierarchical system of constructive factors (cf. Ehlers, 1992), Špet's phenomenological and hermeneutical theory of language and expression (cf. Dennes, 1998), as well as the organically structural notion of geo-linguistic areas formulated by Jakobson and Trubeckoj in the context of their research on Eurasianism (cf. Sériot, 1999) have all been shown to hail from a conceptual background that does not coincide with the central claims of Saussurean structuralism. These different models also exerted a reciprocal influence on each other – including on Trubeckoj's and Jakobson's successful and influential structural phonology.⁵¹ To a large extent, structuralism thus unfolded as an idiosyncratic

⁵¹ For instance, Tynjanov and Jakobson penned an important article together ("Problems of language etc.", 1928), Špet is widely acknowledged as an important influence on Jakobson (Dennes 1999; Holenstein, 1975), and the relevance of Eurasianism to Jakobson and

"Slavic" tradition in the Soviet Union and later in Czechoslovakia (Bojtar 1985), the specific typology of which, it is almost needless to say, was mostly passed over in the mainstream interpretations of structuralism.

Having now defined a plausible historical basis for a fruitful reassessment of the Russian formalists' aesthetic theories in a structuralist perspective, the last remaining task facing me in this chapter is of course to make explicit in more detail what their residual structuralist originality might be, and to justify the idea that the specificity of the Slavic tradition they represent can lead to a new understanding, or at least to new perspectives on structuralism and its theoretical potential.

The originality or specificity of the Slavic structuralist tradition as a whole is not difficult to pinpoint as it has already been identified by a number of different researchers as its inclusive, "ontological" or "substantive" nature (see Sériot, 1999; Tchougounnikov 2003; also Bojtar 1985). Sériot, for example, has convincingly highlighted this integrative dimension in Slavic structuralism's most important model, namely Jakobson's and Trubeckoj's phonology. According to him, they did not derive their idea of phonological structure from the abstract Saussurean conception of language as a system of differences without positive terms, but from a reworking and refining of organicist metaphors of totality (inherited from the German Romantics and Wilhelm von Humboldt)⁵² and from considerations on the "real" structure of concrete, geographical entities fuelled by their endeavours to define and justify their "Eurasian" theories (Sériot, 1999). As a result, although the international success of their work elicited its progressive adjustment towards the prevalent Saussurean model, Jakobson and Trubeckoj tended to not separate the problems of ideal meaning and linguistic signification from the question of the concrete "substance" and material articulation of language and linguistic signs. Even from a very different angle, Fontaine comes to a similar conclusion, suggesting that Jakobson proceed to "delogicise" the idea of system and return to empiricism (Fontaine, 1974, p.63)

Trubeckoj goes without saying, since both must be counted amongst the main exponents of that theory (cf. Sériot, 1999). Also, it is important to note here that these scholars were also specifically aware and proud of the fact that they were developing a "national" science, a specifically "Russian science" (ibid., p.1)

⁵² The importance of the German Romantics as a source for early Soviet thought (and the neglect of that source in its assessments) is also noted by Tchougounnikov (2003), or in Trautmann-Waller (2006) and Romand-Tchougounnikov (2008).

An even clearer tendency to apprehend semiotic and linguistic problems in an integral, monistic and substantialist perspective is obvious in the work of Špet, where they are set in the broader context of a phenomenological and hermeneutical investigation on language, signification and knowledge. On the whole, the relevance of Špet's work to structuralism might of course be questioned, as his work seems closer to phenomenology and hermeneutics and shows very little affinities or connections with the Saussurean ideas of system, sign, structure, etc.⁵³ More specifically though, it has convincingly been shown by Maryse Dennes, Špet's definitions of the word (*slovo*) and the structure of expression do represent an important and forgotten source of structuralism in Russia – most notably because of their importance to Jakobson. Both these definitions strongly emphasise the unity of the formal (or intelligible) and empirical (or sensible) layers of language and signification (Dennes, 1999 & 2006).

In my own opinion, the specific, integral orientation of Slavic structuralism also concerns the fundamental aesthetic assumptions of the Russian formalists. In effect, one way (and probably the only way) to justify and make sense of the simultaneously formal and concrete dimension of perception suggested by Šklovskij's theory of estrangement is to explain it as implying that the content of our (aesthetic) perceptual acts are in fact hierarchically articulated as a differential, signifying system: objects and their qualities are perceived not as pre-defined, discrete, individual entities, but as expressive, concrete signs, similar in their hierarchically organised and differential structure or form to those of language (albeit not coextensive with them). To be quite clear, when assimilating perceived objects to signs, I do not mean that the perceived object functions or stands in as a sign « for » or a symbol « of » itself, as an Augustinian *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, but only that the object and its properties are values in a differentially structured, hierarchical *perceptual system* (rather than atomic or discrete units), just as, according to Saussure, linguistic signs are values determined by the total system of a given language. In other words, it seems to me that Šklovskij's conception of art as estrangement implies a vision of structuralism that goes beyond the bounds of language or pure linguistic signification, to encompass the concrete realms of the perceptual and the empirical: it both suggests and calls for an expressive, structural theory of perception.

⁵³ The “structuralist” ancestry in his case is more Humboldt than Saussure. See for example Špet's *The Internal Form of the Word*, which is subtitled “variation on a Humboldtian theme”

Of course, there is a significant step from merely mentioning the “ontological”, “substantive” or “perceptual” dimension of Jakobson’s, Špet’s or even Šklovskij’s ideas to suggesting that their work still bears unearthed potential and the prospect of a radical renewal of our understanding of structuralism’s possibilities. Superficially, the ontological, empirical or monistic originality of Slavic structuralism might seem obvious, as traditional Saussurean structuralism has often been characterised as an idealist, abstract model. Starting with Saussure’s famous dichotomies (langue-parole, synchrony-diachrony, signifier-signified, paradigmatic-syntagmatic), structuralism is seen to evacuate pragmatic and empirical questions from structuralism’s horizon, and to lock language away from reality (cf. Bertocchi, 2001, p.121). Roland Barthes, for one, explicitly rejected the above-mentioned idea of a non-linguistic, meaningful structure of perception: “percevoir ce qu’une substance signifie, c’est fatalement recourir au découpage de la langue: il n’y a de sens que nommé, et le monde des signifiés n’est autre que celui du langage.” (Barthes, 1964, p.2). More generally, structuralism has tended to be criticised and rejected for its allegedly rigid “idealism” and, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, for being a “Kantism without a transcendental subject” (Ricoeur, 1963, p.33).

The fact of the matter, however, is that the accusations of “insubstantiality”, rigid dualism and ontological/empirical shallowness directed at Saussurean structuralism are not especially convincing. In his important study on Jakobson, Elmar Holenstein, for example, makes the convincing point that the pre-war structuralist tradition as a whole did not display dichotomic anti-substantialist, idealist features (Holenstein, 1976, p.15). Sériot comes to a similar conclusion when underlining the crucial fact that structuralism’s epistemological framework and central concepts – including that of structure itself – were not instated suddenly and definitively in the shape of a formal semiotics by Saussure’s *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, but were the result of a slow paradigm shift, which happened in a very particular context, namely the crisis of positivism, and took its roots in much older traditions (Humboldt, the German Romantics) and concepts (those of organism and totality).⁵⁴ Generally speaking, structuralism emerged in a context which saw the birth of Einstein’s theory of relativity, Freud’s psychoanalysis and Husserl’s phenomenology, all theories which fundamentally challenged and engaged with our sense of reality itself and the ways

⁵⁴ That observation itself, as Sériot points out, has older roots and was made already by Koerner and Cassirer (cf. Sériot, 1999, p. 3)

of imposing meaning onto our experience of the world. Far from having been cast and conceived at the outset as an ontologically neutral or even sceptical theory, structuralism emerged as one of many revolutionary ways of theorising not only possible conditions of knowledge, but as an answer to the increasingly acute problem of our concrete relation with the world.

Even amongst the mainstream Saussurean versions of structuralism, one finds much evidence of an important ontological-empirical streak or interrogation. According to Jean-Claude Milner (2003, p.37), for example, Saussure himself was conscious of the ontological dimension of his theory. If one believes Jean Piaget, the problem of the ontological status of the « structure » was one of the initial problems raised by that « great doctrine ».⁵⁵ Many Saussurean linguists (for example Benveniste, Buysens) certainly sought to bypass the strict interpretation of the binary oppositions propounded by Saussure's students and interpret the dichotomies in a non-exclusive, non-binary way. The ambition of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology was to "reconcile the sensuous and the intelligible, [...] and allow a glimpse of the natural order as a vast semantic field" (Lévi-Strauss, 1971, p.614). Similarly, Gestalt psychology, the constructivist models of Piaget, or more recently, the radical constructivism of a J.W. Schmid, to which one can add Algirdas Greimas's ideas on the question of presence all offer examples of the application of structuralist principles to problems of perception.

On the one hand, it would seem that Western structuralism is just as obsessed or concerned with the ontological, empirical status of structures than its Slavic cousin, which contradicts the idea that the latter might bring fresh perspectives to the former. Indeed, structuralist theories of perception already exist. On top of this, an even worse problem if one wishes to argue in favour of the potential of Slavic structuralism to renew the ontological aspect of structuralism is that these more inclusive and ambitious structuralist positions have in fact been criticised and rejected in the West. In effect, the "idealist" sceptical phase of structuralism was ushered in at the end of the 1960s, through the anti-realist, anti-substantialist stance of Michel Foucault's sceptical epistemology (in *Les mots et les choses*, 1966), and with the criticism of the "metaphysics of presence" formulated by Jacques Derrida (2002, 2003 and 2009)

⁵⁵ « Le problème initial que soulève cette grande doctrine est, une fois admise l'existence des structures, de comprendre en quoi consiste cette existence » (Piaget, quoted in Berttochi, 1998, p.122)

and the post-structuralist movement. In other words, it would seem that the ontological ambitions of structuralism belong rather to its early, failed phase, and that the Slavic sources, far from providing new potential, were probably only discarded on the same grounds as other ontologically ambitious models.

To be honest, this study will bring no definite answer to the question of the actuality and continued relevance of Slavic structuralism in general or the structuralist perspectives opened by the Russian formalists' aesthetic of estrangement, for the simple reason that this would require too broad a comparative review of Western structuralist models, both past and present. Before attempting a comparative assessment of Slavic structuralism's allegedly extra ontological potential – in comparison especially to such actual models as the radical constructivism of S.J. Schmid –, one requires a coherent, internal exposition of its own development and potentialities. Only then, I believe, when the internal originality and specificity of the less-known Slavic structural models has been made empirically apparent, can one statute and speculate on their superiority or subordination to other structuralist models. Only then can one decide, whether they fall under the usual criticisms directed at structuralist models and theoretical discourses (see Culler 2000), or if they can offer something genuinely new.

Despite the uncertainties as to the real extent of the remaining relevance and potentialities of Slavic structuralism and therefore of the Russian formalist aesthetic theories, three important points can be mention here at the outset, which all bode well for the idea of an original contribution of Russian formalism and are certainly in the favour of a reappraisal of Slavic structuralism and its position in the structuralist constellation. Firstly, considering the partial neglect and *zones d'ombre* which surround it, one can squarely affirm that it is certainly promising and historically impotent to seek to reconstruct and retrace the development of the Russian formalists' aesthetic ideas in a structuralist perspective. Even if one might find them to fall under the usual objections directed at structuralism, my investigation will have cast some more light on the variations of structuralism's ontological scope and imperialism. If nothing else, one can thus obtain a much more detailed and precise picture of the genealogy of structuralism, of its failures and successes. In a similarly minimalist perspective, one will at least obtain a much fairer, more precise and detailed account of the inherent limitations of their account of aesthetic.

Secondly, the historical usefulness of this account is reinforced by the fact that Slavic structuralism arises from sources very different to those of its Western counterparts, and as such, brings a very different conceptual baggage with it. As I have argued, one of its most direct inspirations was Russian Modernism and its radical theurgic and transfigurational aspirations to transcend and sublimate the everyday world or “byt”. Other important sources include the monistic, neo-platonic tradition of Orthodox theology and philosophy – as expressed in Vladimir Solovev's theory of all-unity or “vseedintsvo” (see Hutchings, 1997), or in the work of Pavel Florenskij, and anti-positivist currents such as German Romanticism or the intuitive philosophy of Henri Bergson (see Fink, 1999; Curtis 1976). These outlandish sources, moreover, do not indicate that it is wholly incompatible with the Western, saussurean tradition: in time, they moved towards Western models, and developed in an original constellation of thinkers. Holenstein, for one, has clearly shown that the Prague structuralists interacted closely with such important theories as the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap, the philosophies of language of Karl Bühler and Anton Marty, and the budding Gestalt psychology of Christian von Ehrenfels.

Thirdly, and most promising of all, one should note that structuralism has in fact indeed undergone re-assessments in recent years, with the criticisms of the post-structuralists having been called partially into question. Such tendencies are to be observed both in Russia (cf. Avtonomova 2009, Dennes 2008,) and internationally (Bronkhard 2010, Chabot, 1998; Costantini, 2003). In such a context, renewed attention to Russian formalism and the obscure aspects of the Slavic genealogy of structuralism might indeed bring useful insights to a more positive and ambitious assessment of structuralism's ontological possibilities. Without saying more on the topic for now, it can already be mentioned that my analysis will indeed contest some of the most powerful and mainstream objections made by the likes of Foucault and Derrida in the 1960s and 70s, by suggesting in particular a thoroughly different relation between structuralism and phenomenology.

Chapter 2

The Strange Aesthetics of Viktor Šklovskij

My prospective suggestion in the preceding chapter was that the original philosophical potential of Šklovskij's aesthetics of estrangement can be fruitfully harnessed and systematically expressed in the terms of a structural theory of perception. This suggestion obviously constituted but a programmatic declaration, which, at this stage, is rather premature and over-ambitious. By all accounts, my argument up to now has contributed only to point towards the general plausibility and relevance – from a historical point of view – of my proposed attempt to reassess the Russian formalists' aesthetic ideas' potential in a structuralist conceptual framework. It has offered precious little indications, however, as to the specifics of such an interpretation. Much worse, my remarks on the Russian formalists' aesthetic of estrangement are in fact still marked by imprecisions and simplifications, which threaten the very validity of my overall assumptions as to its true originality. In order to dispel these lingering approximations and before trying to demonstrate precisely how the Russian formalists' aesthetic intuitions might be explained and justified in the terms of a structural theory of perception, it is therefore essential to corroborate and refine my preliminary arguments by further specifying the scope and implications of the Russian formalists' aesthetic theory itself. Logically enough, I will turn to this task in the present chapter by describing the formalists' core aesthetic tenets in somewhat more detail.

To be quite exact, I will confine myself in the first place to outlining and interpreting the aesthetically and philosophically significant aspects of the earliest version of the formalists' theories, such as they are presented specifically by Šklovskij in his two earliest, seminal essays, "The Resurrection of the Word" (*Voskrešenie slova*, 1914) and, most significantly, "Art as Device"⁵⁶ (*Iskusstvo kak priem*, 1917). One reason for restricting my description and commentary of the formalists' key tenets in this way is that, as we saw, Russian Formalism is on the whole perfectly well documented. Amongst the best, authoritative accounts of its achievements (which I have already

⁵⁶ This title is also rendered as "Art as Technique" in older translations

repeatedly mentioned and quoted), one finds Victor Erlich's *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine* (1955), the first full-length monograph written about Russian Formalism in any language, which also played a decisive role in popularising their ideas in the Anglo-Saxon sphere; Peter Steiner's *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (1982), which provides an astute and clear outline of Russian Formalism's complex diachronic evolution; and in German, Aage Hansen-Löve's massive *Der russische Formalismus: methodologische Rekonstruktion seiner Entwicklung aus dem Prinzip der Verfremdung* (1975), a hand-book of sorts that contains probably the most ambitious assessment of Russian Formalism's significance to aesthetics.⁵⁷ Surprisingly perhaps, since even the most recent of these three monographs dates back a good thirty years, they remain very much up-to-date and provide together an accurate and nuanced picture of the formalists' core literary and linguistic tenets.⁵⁸ In this context, I do not deem it necessary either to repeat or dispute all their conclusions by means of an extensive discussion of the formalists' theories: it amply suffices to outline those aspects of the formalists' work that are relevant in the methodologically limited perspective of this study and to which I wish to give new interpretations.

It should also be noted as a further justification of my choice to concentrate on Šklovskij's early texts that much of the formalists' output is in fact not directly relevant to the argument I wish to explore in the following pages. In effect, Šklovskij's two aforementioned essays are the only ones either to deal directly with the aesthetic, philosophical principles that underlie the formalists' literary theories, or to provide a really explicit formulation of them. For a number of reasons – which I already briefly went over and which have to do with the nature of the formalists' scientific aims and interests, as well as their specialisation as linguists and literary critics –, Šklovskij and his colleagues dedicated their theoretical endeavours to problems of literature or poetic language leaving aside more general questions of aesthetics.

Naturally, most of the original discussions and insights to be found in the formalists' works are thus of a linguistic or literary theoretical nature, rather than an aesthetic or philosophical one. That is not to say, of course, that Šklovskij's aesthetic

⁵⁷ For further topical monographies see Depretto (2009), Ehlers (1992), Jameson (1976), Kujundžić (1997), Speck (1997), Striedter (1968), Svetlikova (2005), Toman (1995).

⁵⁸ Typically, a much shorter, introductory text written somewhat more recently by Michel Aucouturier for a French audience, *Le Formalisme Russe* (1994), brings no significant corrections to the preceding accounts.

pronouncements in "The Resurrection of the Word" and "Art as Device" with regard to the functional relation between art (or literature), perception and reality played no role outside these early texts, or that they were later repudiated and fundamentally called into question, whether by him or his fellow formalists (cf. Lanne, 2005, p.55).⁵⁹ Quite the reverse, his aesthetic ideas continued to exert a decisive influence at the very heart of the formalist theoretical edifice, which they informed and effectively underpinned (Hansen-Löve, 1978; Meyer 1998). As such, other formalist theories than Šklovskij's also contain interesting insights pertaining to questions of aesthetics. Except in Šklovskij's earliest writings, however, the predominance of technical literary and linguistic matters at the centre of the Russian formalists' attention has tended to mask the significance and, inevitably, to modify the philosophical inflections and meaning of their work. In other words, if one is to uncover the full, unadulterated originality of the aesthetic positions at the root of Russian Formalism, there can be no doubt that one ought to turn to Šklovskij's early texts.

To recall, my suggestion in the introduction was that the core of Russian Formalism's philosophical originality is expressed in condensed form in Šklovskij's assertion that the essential function of art and literature consists to refresh or revive our perceptions of ordinary objects and everyday situations by representing (or presenting) them in formally unusual ways – the process he designates in short as that of estrangement. For clarity's sake, I quote Šklovskij's crucial pronouncement again here: "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 that of "estrangement", it is 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 [1917], pp.20-21). I went on to claim that this definition of art and literature implies that, in essence, perception itself is structured as a concretely expressive form. In order now to gain a more detailed perspective both as to the accuracy of this claim and as to the exact philosophical sense and implications of Šklovskij's obviously innovative but rather sketchy and imprecise definition of the aesthetic

⁵⁹ Šklovskij himself states in the introduction to the complete edition of his work: "This book [The Resurrection of the Word] is 70 years old. But it seems it has not aged. Even now, it is younger than I am." (Šklovskij, 1990, p.63).

function of art and literature, it is useful to begin by pointing out that it relies upon a number of more specific arguments put forward by Šklovskij to justify it. To be quite precise, it seems to me that his definition of art as estrangement results from the conflation of *two* vital and in many ways conflicting assumptions.

The first of these assumptions concerns what Šklovskij refers to as “the general laws of perception” (ibid., p.20). According to him, perceiving a given fact or object is not a stable act whose properties recur constantly and without variations, even in analogous circumstances. On the contrary, perceptual acts are subjected through repetition and habit to a process of progressive automatisisation, as a result of which the perceptual qualities of objects undergo significant changes: “as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (ibid., p.20). Šklovskij does not back up this claim with much detail reasoning, but simply argues for the self-evidence of these transformations in our impressions of facts and objects over time: “If one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, one will agree with us.” (ibid., p.20) He does specify, though, that the automatisisation of perception implies that objects lose their clarity, distinctness and consistence, and fail to emerge in their full detail to consciousness. Šklovskij likens automatisisation to a kind of perceptual algebra, where an abbreviated, cognitive symbol is substituted to the intricate and variable content of the empirical object. Thus, in automatised, everyday perception, “either objects are assigned only one proper feature - a number, for example - or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition” (ibid., p.20)

Šklovskij further comments that the propensity of common, everyday perceptions to become automatised or “algebraised” through repetition and habit has the considerable upshot of allowing a great economy of perceptual effort and energy.⁶⁰ The protracted and potentially infinitely complex sensory processes of feeling (oščuščenie) and seeing (videnie) are progressively replaced by the seamless efficiency and constancy of symbolic representation and categorial cognition, thanks to which objects are schematically sorted out and immediately recognized (uznavanie). Such a substitution, Šklovskij admits, provides “a relief for thought, and may appear as an indispensable condition for the existence of science” (Šklovskij,

⁶⁰ He quotes Spencer’s famous principle on that matter (Šklovskij, 1988 [1917], p.29)

1914, in Bann, 1973, p.43). The “automatic”, formulaic nature of habitual everyday perception, its tendency to rigidify and sublimate into something much simpler, schematic and abstract enables it to function as an effective and stable form of conceptual (or symbolic) knowledge of reality. This in turn also allows the perceiving subject to achieve a more effective and generalised knowledge of the world.

On the downside, the automatisisation and "algebraisation" process of perception also leads to the unfortunate consequence that our vivid, immediate contact with our experiences of empirical reality are gradually compromised. Objects often escape our attention altogether because of our familiarity with them and of the sheer efficiency with which we process them cognitively: “We do not see the walls of our bedrooms. If we have such trouble spotting a mistake in our proofs, especially when the text is printed in a language we know well, it is because we cannot force ourselves to see, to read a familiar word and not to “recognise” it” (ibid., p.42). Much worse, the ultimate implication of automatisisation is that reality completely fades into an unconscious, abstract, indistinct, unreal haze, and our everyday lives lose their individual, vital substance. In *Art as Device*, Šklovskij illustrates this process of alienation from the everyday world by quoting Tolstoj’s *Diary*: “I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn’t remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember - so that if I had dusted it and forgot - that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. [Leo Tolstoy’s *Diary*, 1897]”. Šklovskij adds emphatically: “And so life is reduced to nothing. Habitualisation devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (Šklovskij, 1988, p.20).

To offset the negative effects of everyday perceptions’ tendency to dissolve into automatised, almost unconscious and unreal acts of abstract cognition or recognition, Šklovskij postulates the existence of a counter-mechanism, triggered by art. As he sees it, art is able – and functionally intended – to affect the modalities of perception itself and give rise to a distinct type of experience, which Šklovskij defines as being *aesthetic*. In this aesthetic type of experience, he claims, our attention is shifted back to our sensual impressions of the empirical world, and these are restored to their

originary clarity and freshness (“art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life”). In other words, the existential deficiencies of standard cognition and the abstractness of everyday experience bring Šklovskij to reassert the value of the concrete, vital and sensual process of perception as such. He underlines the fact that, counter to the insubstantial, ethereal and almost ghostly quality of automatised, abstract or idealised cognition, the vitality and vividness of sensual perception provides existential substance to our lives.⁶¹

As one can see, Šklovskij thus turns on its head the traditional hierarchy of Platonian metaphysics (which postulates both the epistemological superiority and ontological primacy of the ideal and intelligible over the “shadowy”, fleeting world of the senses) and insists that it is in fact the alert, sensual process of perception that constitute the primary source of our existential experience of reality in its full vibrant phenomenality. For Šklovskij, our most fundamental and fulfilling mode of interaction or contact with reality is not what we can figuratively, abstractly or conceptually *know* about it, but first and foremost what we *see*, *feel* and *experience*. Instead of being downgraded to a functional and derivative source of information or idealised knowledge, the process of perception is defined as “an aesthetic end in itself” (Šklovskij, *ibid.*, p.20).

Šklovskij, of course, does not make his point in philosophical terms, nor does he address it against Platonian metaphysics directly: as I have pointed out, he is not particularly concerned with the philosophical dimension of his argument. His anti-Platonian bent is nonetheless clearly visible in “Art as Device” because of his explicit critique of the (neo-Platonian) theory of art of the Russian Symbolists (Erlich, 1955, pp.33 etc.).⁶² One of Šklovskij’s main concerns or argumentative strategies, in effect, is to attack the Symbolist idea that “art is a way of thinking in images”, of “revealing the unknown through the known” or in other words, that it functions as an intuitive, almost mystic symbol that leads to a deeper, hidden (and it platonic and symbolist terms, “more real”) intellectual world (cf. Šklovskij, 1988.,

⁶¹ In that sense, it has often been convincingly argued, that he was much influenced by the vitalist philosophy of Henry Bergson (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.222). Šklovskij conception of everyday experience as an abstracted, denaturated sub-form of experience is reflected very accurately in (and was doubtless influenced by) the works of the Russian modernists (Hutchings, 1997), themselves very much influenced by Bergson (Fink, 1999).

⁶² Šklovskij attacks as much the artistic practice of Russian Symbolism (Belyj, Brjusov, Balmont’, etc.) as its theory (Potebnja, Ovsianiko-Kulikovskij, Vjačeslav Ivanov).

p.16). By contrast, Šklovskij's own "Futurist" argument is to highlight that art actually functions as an impediment to such intuitively symbolic, abstract or intellectual knowledge, that it seeks paradoxically to make the known unknown (or at least strikingly unusual and difficult to recognise) and thus shift all our attention onto the concrete, material process of sensual perception. In fact, it is to explain and justify this anti-Platonic property of art that Šklovskij introduces his comments on the "general laws of perception".

In short, the first pillar of Šklovskij's original conception of art and literature as estrangement is the importance given to sensual perception as an aesthetic end in itself. That aesthetic role rests upon the crucial distinction (as well as the cyclical alternation) Šklovskij postulates between two contrasted modes of perceiving and experiencing the world. The first mode corresponds to our common, everyday experience, and is marked by habit and repetition. It involves an essentially cognitive, categorial and schematic relation with reality. In everyday experience, objects are perceived only through a reduced, or rather abstract and generalised prism of conventions, concepts and automatisms.

As such, Šklovskij reckons that the everyday should be seen, to some extent, as a depleted, degraded and almost dehumanised type of experience – known in Russian culture as "byt" –, in which reality appears only in a "dead", "petrified" and "sedimented" guise.⁶³ To this automatised and impoverished everyday perception, Šklovskij then opposes what he calls "artistic" or aesthetic perception. In this aesthetic type of experience, the sensual, perceptual process is redynamised and refreshed: the world is given again in its full, lively and dynamic presence. Through the redeeming effect of art and literature, the veils of everyday automatised, generalisation and abstraction can be torn apart and a sense of the world's vital, individual concreteness and phenomenality revived and enjoyed anew. As such, aesthetic experience is *de facto* assigned a clear existential superiority over everyday experience, not so much for possessing value in itself as a special or higher kind of experience, but because only it actually affords us a full, conscious and vibrant impression of reality.

⁶³ This « geological » terminology (petrification, sedimentation, ossification, etc.) is used recurrently in a somewhat indefinite but generally consistent manner by Šklovskij, as well as other formalists such as Eichenbaum or Tynjanov, to describe everyday experience and its negative aspects. This vocabulary stands in very explicit contrast to the living « organic », bergsonian lexic that applies to aesthetic experience.

In conjunction with the autotelic, intransitive value assigned to the process of sensual perception in the alternating cycle of everyday and aesthetic experiences (or automatised and de-automatised perceptions), the second crucial element at the heart of Šklovskij's definition of art and literature as estrangement is the absolutely pivotal role and function he imparts to the notion of *form*. Indeed, we saw in the above quote from "Art as Device" that, according to Šklovskij, "the device of art is [...] to make forms difficult". The following pronouncement, taken from "The Resurrection of the Word", is even more explicit as to the central importance of form in an aesthetic context – even though it only refers to the particular case of literature and what Šklovskij rather vaguely describes as "literary perception": "literary perception is that perception in which we experience form (and maybe something more than form, but certainly form)" (Šklovskij, 1914, in Bann 1973, p.45)

Before commenting further on the question of form, one must quickly acknowledge at this point that it does not simply embody a philosophically interesting and innovative aspect of Šklovskij's aesthetic speculations: the question of form also constitutes one of the defining features of Russian formalism as a whole, and is therefore also one of its most complex, multifaceted aspects. In addition, the paramount role which the formalists sought to attribute to form in art and literature was met with immediate controversy and had to be vehemently defended in the face of vociferous opposition. Because the formalists themselves were fully convinced of the novelty and provocative force of their position, the shrill reception given to their conception of artistic (or literary) form led them to be even more forceful and uncompromising in its defence (Erich, 1955, pp.57 etc.).

Taken in combination, the pivotal importance of the notion of form and the often overtly polemical manner in which the formalists defended its role thus make this an issue fraught with ambiguities and paradoxes. Revealingly, Šklovskij alone is prone to use the term in a number of very distinct ways, referring in turn to "the experience of form", the "external and internal form of words", as well as to "artistic forms". True, these confused references to form – whose diversity and meanings are multiplied when one takes the work of other formalists such as Tynjanov and Jakobson into consideration – are not mutually exclusive or contradictory as such. But they certainly reveal a degree of vagueness as to the extension and definition of the concept, which

contrasts starkly with the generally uncritical enthusiasm with which the formalists used it – not to mention the fierceness with which formalism's detractors attacked it. Šklovskij's aforementioned assertion that "'literary' perception is that perception in which we experience form" is a perfect illustration of this ambiguity. Although its "formalist" orientation might seem to be clear-cut and unequivocal on the surface, even such a straightforward statement of his programme must be understood as possessing at least two quite different, if related meanings.⁶⁴

First of all, Šklovskij often employs the term "form" to designate explicitly the structural and relational qualities, as well as the constituent parts of artistic and literary works. In one of his more radical descriptions of the nature of art and literature, for example, Šklovskij states that "a literary work is pure form. It is neither thing nor material, but a relationship of materials. And, like every relationship, this one too has little to do with length or width or any other dimension. It's the arithmetic significance of its numerator and denominator (.i.e. their relationship) that is important." (Šklovskij, 1990, [1925], p.189). Here, obviously, form takes on a very abstract meaning, relating only to the work of art or literature itself.

This first "abstract" meaning given to the notion of form by Šklovskij derives directly from – and is best understood with regard to – his and the formalists' key theoretical ambition, which was to ground literary studies as an autonomous discipline capable of producing analyses of literature *qua* literature. The central motivation of the Russian formalists, indeed, was "to bring to an end the methodological confusion prevailing in traditional literary studies" (Erlich, *op.cit.*, p.145). Literary studies, they argued, had up to that point tended to concentrate not on the literary work itself, but on a multitude of external factors, including the circumstances of its psychological or social production, its wider impact on society and culture, or its philosophical, ideological, religious and spiritual significance. By implicitly locating the source of aesthetic value outside of the literary work itself, "traditional literary studies" – by which the formalists meant primarily the XIXth century Russian "Civic" tradition of Belinskij and Černyševskij, as well as Potebnja's more recent Symbolist school of thought – thus made it *a priori* impossible "to delimit the area [of literary studies] and define unequivocally its subject of inquiry" (*ibid.*, p.171).

⁶⁴ These two meanings, interestingly, correspond to a long running ambivalence of the notion of form dating back to Aristoteles, for whom form designates both the material limits or contours of an object, and its ideal meaning (cf. Grübel, 2010).

In practice, the formalists' scientific aim therefore required them to oppose these traditions and to characterise the literary work in reference not to external or extrinsic criteria such as its capacity to represent or imitate reality, its moral meaning, emotional power, social and political significance or even symbolic richness (its "imagery" – obraznost'), but purely through its immanent properties or its "literariness". As is well-known, Šklovskij and all the other formalists after him achieved this objective by defining the literary work through its inherent formal structure and the particular relations instituted between its internal constituent parts. Famously, Šklovskij thus stated that a literary work is in fact nothing else than "the sum of its devices." (Šklovskij, op.cit., p.190). The devices themselves, in Šklovskij's definition, correspond to the formal, "technical" aspect of a literary text: depending on the genre (poetry, short story, novel, etc.) and the textual or verbal levels on which they operate (stylistic, discursive, narrative, etc.), they include rhythm, alliteration, repetition, metaphor, metonymy, parallelism, syntax, narrative voice, plot, etc. By defining the literary work in this fashion, the formalists could proceed to analyse only its constitutive formal elements, the devices, and assess its aesthetic value on that exclusive basis. In that sense, it is unsurprising to hear Jakobson declare: "If literary history wants to become a science, it must recognise the artistic device as its only concern" (Jakobson, 1921, p.11).

Šklovskij's definition of the literary work as a pure form or a "sum of devices" – along with the variations on this seminal theme put forward by other formalists – happens to be the aspect of Russian Formalism which has received the widest echo and for which it is best known. It is certainly on that basis that a better defined and less eclectic "science" of literature could be successfully developed. More than anything else, it was the formalists' assumption that a literary work can be analytically reduced to the specific arrangement, patterning or composition of its structural devices, segments and elements that interested French Structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss or Barthes.⁶⁵ This rigorously formal definition of art and literature is also what drew the starkest criticisms from the formalists' opponents. It was attacked in particular by Marxist critics, who decried the formalists for wilfully and categorically excluding the

⁶⁵ As mentioned, Vladimír Propp's « Structure of folktale », which arguably took this definition the furthest by analysing the folktale into a number of invariant structures, was also one of the most influence texts of the formalist in French structuralism

diverse representational, emotional, social or ideological – in short the meaningful, semantic – dimensions of art, in favour of a pure, abstractly formal definition, a criticism that ultimately gave rise to the use of the disparagingly-intended term “Formalism” to describe their theories. For the same reason, as Erlich judiciously remarks, the aesthetics of Russian Formalism “has often been represented as merely a refurbished version of the late nineteenth-century “art for art’s sake” doctrine.” (Erlich, 1955, p.145).

Both the positive reception of Russian Formalism as a theory capable of isolating the intrinsic aesthetic properties of literary works, and its dismissal by critics as an idealist, abstract, *art pour l’art* doctrine are in great part justified and perfectly understandable. There is no doubt that the tendency to isolate literature and art as special, self-contained, blindly “technical” kind of phenomena was a strong feature of the formalists’ theory, especially in its early, polemical days. Typically, Šklovskij states that art has a “sense of being shut up within itself” and a “freedom from external coercion” (Šklovskij, 1991, p.189), which is a stance very close indeed to the principles of *l’art pour l’art*. That being said, such a perception of Russian Formalism as a radically theory of meaningless and abstract form is also both profoundly misleading and incomplete.

For one, as Erlich further points out, when dissociating literature from its external contexts or objective meanings and reducing it to its formal features, the formalists were above all making a point of analytical *method*, rather than formulating a strong aesthetic principle. The formalists did not see their alleged “formalism” as a statement about the essential nature of art and literature, but only as a way to “specify” the problems of literary studies and the methodological perspective required to investigate literature properly (cf. Erlich, 1955, p.145). Eichenbaum thus wrote: “Our method is usually referred to as “Formalist”. I would prefer to call it morphological to differentiate it from other approaches such as psychological, sociological and the like, where the object of inquiry is not the work itself, but that which, in the scholar’s opinion, is reflected in the work.” (Eichenbaum, 1922, quoted from Erlich, 1955, p. 171).

More to the point, this clear-cut conception of art and literature as pure form – as well as the notion of pure, abstract and meaningless literary form itself – is hard to reconcile with some of Šklovskij’s other aesthetics pronouncements and

assumptions. By all accounts, his emphasis on the exclusive aesthetic importance of a text's stylistic devices seems to sit very uncomfortably with the presumptive power to summon vivid, concrete and meaningful experiences of the empirical world that we saw Šklovskij assign to art and literature as their essential function. In spite of its clear and repeated emphasis on the autonomous status of art and the supreme importance of its immanent, formal properties, Šklovskij's aesthetics involves a clearly empirical, worldly component.

Trevor Pateman cleverly highlights this concrete, empirical dimension of Šklovskij's nominally formalist aesthetic by contrasting it to a really uncompromising, almost mathematical formalism such as that of the Bloomsbury art critic Clive Bell.⁶⁶ After quoting Šklovskij's definition of art as estrangement ("And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life etc.), Pateman comments: "If this is formalism, it doesn't sound at all like Clive Bell's. If the job of art is to resist the automatism of perception, its encapsulated imperceptiveness, in order to restore the world and ourselves to life, then it is *humane* in a way which Bell's aestheticism cannot accommodate. Whereas Clive Bell's aesthetic emotion is disconnected from the world represented in an art work and does not lead us back to it, for Shklovsky art is working well when it enables us to experience epiphanies about the real world - illuminations which may be major (about the human condition) or small (in which we feel the stoniness of the stone)." (Pateman, 1991, p.43).

In other words, as paradoxical as it may sound in view of their absolute formal autonomy and immanence, art and literature – or to be more precise, the aesthetic experience they give rise to – are nonetheless tightly bound and involved with the empirical world and our concrete, sensual impressions of it.⁶⁷ As such, the notion of form, or rather the "formal" nature of art and literature take not a narrowly idealistic, abstract meaning, but a specific and unusual one in the texts of the Russian formalists, as is well reflected in comments such as the following by Tomaševskij: "The word "form" has many meanings which, as always, cause a lot of confusion. It should be clear that we use this word in a particular sense – not as some correlative to the notion of "content" (such a correlation is, by the way, false, for the notion of

⁶⁶ Bell's *Art*, is itself considered as one of the most explicit polemical statements of the formalist position (Carroll, 2001 (Routledge Companion to Aesthetic), p.84)

⁶⁷ Hansen-Löve indicates the same closeness between purely abstract art and concrete perception in relation to Kandinskij (cf HansenLöve no 9 (p.31))

“content” is, in fact, the correlative of the notion “volume” and not at all of “form”) as something essential for the artistic phenomenon, as its organising principle” (Tomaševskij, 1928. p.34).

These considerations on the "peculiar sense" of Šklovskij's notion of form and the formal dimension of art and literature bring me logically to the second, more unusual meaning which they take on in Šklovskij's (and the other formalists') texts. That meaning must be understood in closer relation to the conceptual horizon mapped out in “The Resurrection of the Word” and “Art as Device” with regard to perception – rather than to the formalists' goal of establishing an independent science of literature. In effect, it is obvious from my own and Pateman's remarks that Šklovskij's concept of form is no less closely connected with the idea of de-automatisation of perception than with the imperative of isolating the specific features of art and literature. Šklovskij himself introduces the notion of form (and its centrality to art and literature) in immediate and explicit connection with the process of automatisation.

The process of automatisation, we saw, involves a progressive blunting and dulling of the grain, texture or fabric of perceived objects. To take one of Šklovskij's example, when we perceive a stone in the mode of everyday experience, we “know” it is a stone and recognise it as such. However, we do not register and have no impression of the smoothness or roughness of its surface, its particular shape and size, its shades of colour, its asperities and protuberances: we are blind to all the concrete sensual qualities which make up the phenomenal appearance of a given stone. Crucially, Šklovskij likens this dullness or blindness of automatised, everyday perception to a “loss of form” (Šklovskij, 1913). As he puts it, because of automatisation, “we apprehend [objects] only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette.”(Šklovskij, 1917). In other words, it is not so much our impressions of the object as such that becomes automatised and transparent in everyday experience, but that of its intricate, complex sensual features and contours. Conversely, it is our impressions of the object's same intricate, complex sensual features and contours that must be restored, reactualised and redynamised in aesthetic perception.

When considered in this perspective, it now seems that Šklovskij equates form with the phenomenal, perceptual structure of reality itself, or rather, that he uses the term to refer to the empirical, *perceptual form* of concrete objects, as they are given in aesthetic experience. In such a reading (which is the one I implicitly emphasised in my introduction), the form that is revealed, dynamised and “made difficult” by art or literature and thus experienced aesthetically is that of the empirical object itself, or to be absolutely precise, of the object as it is concretely perceived. This also seems to mean that our sensual impressions of the object are in fact not distinct from its formal or intelligible structure, in an aesthetic mode at least. Rather, the empirical object can be said to be “expressed” or given monistically in the act of perception simultaneously and indistinctly as a sensual, concrete and meaningful form. As Hansen-Löve puts it: “Der spezifisch ästhetische Erkenntnisprozess vollzieht sich aus formalistischer Sicht nicht auf zwei voneinander unabhängigen Kommunikationsebenen (einer intellektuell abstrahierbaren "Botschaft" und den sensuell wahrnehmbaren "Reizen"), sondern in einem homogenen methodischen Schaffens- und Rezeptionsakt der "Bedeutungsproduktion" [...]"(Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.225).⁶⁸

In summary, Šklovskij’s theory of estrangement reveals itself as being informed by an obvious tension between two contrasting, almost incompatible elements. The first of these two elements is the value afforded to the concrete act of perception as the intransitive, autotelic purveyor of our conscious, full experience of life and the empirical world. The second element is the immanent, formal nature of art and literature as an independent (and independently analysable) phenomenon. Crucially, we also discovered that Šklovskij does not deem these apparently conflicting formal and perceptual elements to be fundamentally contradictory, nor indeed does he seem to consider that they constitute two distinct, separate facets of his theory. On the contrary, he presents them as being tightly interconnected: even the immanent “pure forms” of art necessarily involve sensual perception, whilst even mere sensual impressions are linked in aesthetic experience with the perception of form. In effect,

⁶⁸ “From a formalist perspective, the specifically aesthetic process of cognition does not happen on two distinct, independent communication levels (that of an abstract, intellectual "message" and of a sensually perceptible "stimulus"), but through a homogeneous, methodical, both creative and receptive act of "meaning production"” (my translation)

his whole idea of art as estrangement only makes sense *thanks to* the functional combination or confusion of immanent artistic or literary form and empirical, sensual perception in aesthetic experience.

On the one hand, the unusual interaction between artistic or literary form and sensual perception posited by Šklovskij seems to lead directly to (indeed, to rely upon) an original and innovative position with respect to the nature of perception. Indeed, we caught a brief glimpse of the possible implications of his theory of estrangement in that regard, for example through the hypothetical idea repeated by Hansen-Löve, that the acts of aesthetic perception induced by art and literature correspond to an experience of the empirical world in its concretely expressive, simultaneously intelligible and sensible phenomenality. For my part, I firmly believe that interpretations such as Hansen-Löve's as to the homogeneous, conjointly meaningful and sensual nature of aesthetic experience are absolutely correct. At the very least, something very similar to that idea is confusedly but persistently hovering at the back of Šklovskij's mind and in the background of his texts, and in my opinion, is necessary to make sense of his theory. The thought that reality and its objects are perceived as concrete, complex and meaningful forms in aesthetic experience certainly flickers through many of Šklovskij's statements. One can recall, for example, his affirmations that objects have "shapes with imprecise extensions" (Šklovskij, 1988, p.20) or that "art is a way of experiencing how an object is made: the object is not important." (ibid., p.21).⁶⁹

On the other hand, one must admit at this point that it would constitute a gross oversimplification (which Hansen-Löve does not commit) of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement to state that it straightforwardly and explicitly implies that artistic or literary form and concrete, objective perception simply and purely congregate in aesthetic experience.⁷⁰ It is a similarly unwarranted short-cut to state that Šklovskij really conceives aesthetic experience as an act in which the world is not only encountered in vivid, conscious sensual fashion, but is also meaningfully articulated, structured and expressed thanks to the direct effect of works of art and literature. For one, although it is definitely present in his theory, Šklovskij never explicitly describes

⁶⁹ Hansen-Löve has brought attention to problem of the definition of the « object » or « thing » in the context of Russian formalism (cf. Hansen-Löve, pp.280-285)

⁷⁰ Except in the very specific case of the Cubo-Futurists' *transrational language* (zaumnyj jazyk) to which I will be turning my attention in the next chapter

or defends what the concrete expressive form of perceived objects really might be or what such a notion implies: beyond his programmatic declarations on the automatisisation and de-automatisisation of given perceptions or his comments on the “disappearing shapes” of objects and the “stoniness of the stone”, one finds little indications as to how Šklovskij envisions perception, or what kind of systematic theory he has in mind to justify that vision. As it is, the question of perception never takes on a clear role in Šklovskij’s aesthetics, but is integrated to it in an ambiguous, derivative way, as if it were either an obvious presupposition or an after-thought, the inevitable consequence of other more important arguments.

Even more importantly, just as it was misleading to reduce Šklovskij’s concept of form to its abstract, artificial dimension, it would be wrong-headed to completely forget that particular emphasis of Šklovskij’s conception of art as estrangement. Next to the undoubted importance afforded to the act of consciously feeling and experiencing life and the concrete, empirical world, indeed, Šklovskij never repeals his fundamental observation that art and literature are essentially immanent, formal phenomena, which as such remain distinct from the empirical world itself – and therefore from the aesthetic perceptions one can have of it. True, because he states that “aesthetic perception is the perception of form” and because the ideas of artistic form and aesthetic perception are so closely linked to one another, the distinct formal nature of art and literature as Šklovskij sees them might not appear to interfere with the radical idea that aesthetic experience corresponds in fact to a donation of reality itself as a concrete perceptual form. One can presume a sort of overlap or correlation between artistic or literary form, and the perceptual forms to which they give rise to. A closer look at Šklovskij’s theory of estrangement, however, reveals that, although it is beyond doubt that he posits a strong link between empirical perception and form in the aesthetic process, Šklovskij does not suggest that artistic form and perceptive, empirical content really congregate in such a way in aesthetic experience. In fact, Šklovskij’s conception of their interrelation is much more complicated and subtle. As mentioned, it has a rich and complex background in the Russian aesthetic traditions, in particular that of Symbolism.⁷¹

⁷¹ Despite his confrontational attitude towards the theories of the Symbolists, indeed, Šklovskij was deeply influenced by their work, just as the Cubo-futurists owed much more than they cared to admit to the Symbolists.

It should be emphasised here that the complexity or subtlety of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement with regard to the questions of artistic form, perception (or perceptual form) and their interrelated aesthetic roles should not necessarily be seen as a weakness. If anything, they reflect positively upon the capacity of his theory to integrate problems such as the mediatory role of art or literature in the aesthetic process. After all, it would seem rather far-fetched and naïve to imagine – as my exposition of Šklovskij's conception of aesthetic experience so far might be said to have suggested – that a work of art or, especially, of literature can induce *direct* and *immediate* perceptions of empirical reality (as concrete forms or in any other guise) through its formal properties.⁷² No one in his right mind, I believe, would want to suggest that the act of reading, for example, leads one to literally "see" or "feel" the objects or situations described as if in a concrete act of perception (cf. Iser, 1976). This is particularly obvious in the case of the non-objective modernist art and literature that effectively inspired Šklovskij's theory, as they do not even pretend to imitate or reproduce real objects and situations as they are perceived, but either wilfully exaggerate and distort their most basic features, or renounce altogether to represent anything objectively defined.

Since it is obviously absurd to postulate that art and literature can induce pure and immediate "formal" perceptions of the empirical world thanks to their own formal properties, and since, despite some of his pronouncements tending towards such an affirmation, Šklovskij is certainly not so naïve as to suggest such a thing, this begs the question of how artistic or literary form actually do affect and interact with perception in his theory of estrangement. As it happens, Šklovskij does offer a specific, detailed solution to the problematic question of the relation between form and perception, the mention whereof will conveniently allow me to complete my outline of his theory of estrangement.

In effect, Šklovskij reconciles and explains the interaction of the distinctly formal and empirical aspects of his conception of aesthetic experience indirectly, with the help of a further, key concept, that of the artistic or literary "devices" (*priemy*). On the one

⁷² At best, this could be true of painting or sculpture. At this point, it is of course worth mentioning that the whole aesthetics of Šklovskij is strongly influenced by these art forms: Šklovskij himself, as well as many of the Cubo-futurists (Burljuk, Kamenskij, etc.) were visual artists at some point. See also Hansen-Löve, 1978, p. 97

hand, we already saw that Šklovskij defines the devices as the basic units or components of the literary or artistic work. As such, they are very clearly connected with its purely formal structure, or rather, they effectively represent and constitute that formal structure itself ("the literary work is the sum of its stylistic devices."). But, on the other hand, Šklovskij also links the artistic devices unambiguously to sensual perception: according to him, devices are meant to provoke estrangement, to "defamiliarise" and induce thereby the fresh awareness of the empirical world and the feeling for life that characterise aesthetic experience according to Šklovskij. In other words, the devices serve as crucial functional intermediaries between the levels of pure artistic or literary form and sensual, empirical perception.

To be more precise, the defining function of the artistic or literary devices is in fact to artificially distort the standard modes of description or representation of everyday objects, facts or situations. Devices are used to describe or represent the world in an unusual or surprising way and thus to "make it strange" and "unfamiliar". Beyond this generic characterisation, Šklovskij does not provide a single definition of the "estranging" function of the artistic or literary devices, choosing instead to illustrate it through a number of significant examples, many of which he draws from the novels and short stories of Lev Tolstoj: "Tolstoj makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects. For example, in "Shame" Tolstoy 'defamiliarises' the idea of flogging in this way: "to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches," and, after a few lines, "to lash about on the naked buttocks." (Šklovskij, 1988, p.21). In a similar spirit, Šklovskij also mentions Tolstoj's recourse to unusual narrative perspectives: after quoting a short extract of Tolstoj's novella "Kholstomer," he points out that "The narrator of "Kholstomer," for example, is a horse, and it is the horse's point of view (rather than a person's) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar." (ibid., p.21)

Obviously, one could do here with some more details on the exact workings of the artistic devices and the varied ways through which they actually produce estrangement and aesthetic perceptions of reality. In fact, it is to such an explanation and differentiation of the distinct types of devices that Šklovskij devoted most of his work subsequently to "Art as Device" (where his idea of the device is only very

broadly sketched out). Having said that, the fundamental mechanism of Šklovskij's aesthetics and, in particular, of the relation it establishes between artistic or literary form and empirical perception can be correctly inferred from the few above examples, without having to go any further into the technical subtleties of the device as a concept of literary theory. Indeed, Šklovskij decides to confer absolute generality to the "estranging" function of literary devices such as the ones highlighted in Tolstoj's works. After simply quoting a couple more relevant tolstojan examples, Šklovskij declares in a typically unworried, sweeping statement: "having explained the nature of this device [i.e. estrangement], let us try to determine the approximate limits of its application. I personally feel that estrangement is found almost everywhere form is found." (ibid., p.25) In short, notwithstanding the particular variations of specific types of devices, they all involve the same fundamental "estranging" interaction between artistic or literary form and perception.

On the basis of these considerations, one can sum up the basic tenets of Šklovskij's "strange" aesthetic as follows: Artistic or literary works are constituted by the specific organisation (složenie) or construction (postroenie) of a sum of individual devices. As such, they are "pure forms". This artistic or literary form is structured and organised in such a way as to distort or displace (sdvig) the habitual and conventional modes of descriptions or representations of facts and objects. In other words, objects, facts or situations are represented not against their usual background (fon), but are detached or separated (vydelennyj) from it and thus made to look strange, unusual, unfamiliar. Through this wilfully artificial and formally unusual depiction, representation or presentation of common objects and facts, the work of art or literature and its devices are thus able to functionally trigger an aesthetic effect, which is defined by Šklovskij as an impression of strangeness, or to be more precise, a sense or impression of difference (differencial'noe oščuščenie, differencial'noe vpečatlenie).⁷³ In turn, the "differential impression" that arises from the discrepancy between the incongruous, formally modified literary object and its normal, "real-life" equivalent is sufficient to interrupt the habitual automatised cognitive process of perceiving the given objects and facts. According to Šklovskij, it leads to a "slowing-doing" (tarmoženie, literally "breaking") or "making difficult" (zatrudyvanie) of the perceptive process, which in

⁷³ A crucial concept adopted uncritically by the formalists from one of their major influence, the little-known German idealist philosopher of art Broder Christiansen (Hansen-Löve, 1978, pp. 223-5)

turn brings with it a renewed, heightened or redynamised – and therefore aesthetic – awareness of the specific properties of given objects, facts, situations, events, etc. In short, the strangeness of the pure artistic or literary form functionally brings us to cast a de-automised, fresh look at the world, and therefore to experience and perceive it more consciously and fully in its sensual complexity.

Chapter 3

Devices, Material and the Concrete Form of “Poetic Language”

From the viewpoint of the Russian formalists' own theoretical aims and modernist convictions, the general meaning taken on by Šklovskij's theory of estrangement in light of his characterisation of the literary work as a sum of de-automatising devices is doubly satisfactory. As it is, this differential, mechanical model allows him and the other formalists to cement their so-called “morphological” analytical approach to literature by successfully reducing the literary text to its strictly immanent, formal features and defining its aesthetic value independently of any external factor. In effect, the literary function and properties of the devices – which, as we saw, constitute the sole aesthetically relevant components of the literary text – are related neither to their plastic appeal, their emotional force, descriptive vividness, ideological, political, moral, religious and spiritual significance, nor to the richness of their figurative imagery. Only the “strange” contrasts and salient distortions imposed by the devices on our habitual representations of reality are deemed by Šklovskij to be aesthetically relevant. The literary text and its aesthetic value can thus be defined and analysed on the whole as a set of exclusively formal, work-immanent problems such as the particular technical uses made of given devices in view of generating distortions and differential effects, or the setting and arrangement of these same devices into plots and narrative structures – which are themselves also designed to produce contrastive, estranging effects.⁷⁴

On top of this, Šklovskij's definition of the literary device and its “estranging” function opportunely accommodates his modernist inclinations for the concrete, vital dimension of art or literature – and saves him and his fellow formalists from being truthfully portrayed as austere or idealist “art for art's sake” dogmatists. Indeed, the idea of estrangement not only preserves a strong connection between the immanent, formal dimension of literature and the wider, everyday world, but relies on it necessarily: if the differential, contrastive or distortive properties of a device do not

⁷⁴ As Šklovskij makes clear in “The Relationship between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style” (Šklovskij, 1991, pp.15-51), the composition and arrangement of devices can themselves be considered as “devices”.

end up inducing fresh, concrete impressions, it cannot be said to fulfil an estranging function at all and, consequently, to possess aesthetic value or even really be a device in Šklovskij's sense. Despite their nominal status as purely formal constituents of literary texts, the devices thus clearly contribute to anchor literature and its aesthetic qualities into real life and the empirical world. In line with Eichenbaum's above-mentioned pronouncements (cf. Chapter 1, p.21), the formalists can reasonably claim that whilst their theory *methodologically* reduces literature to its formal, immanent properties, it does not preclude literature from *practically* entailing an aesthetic experience that is resolutely concrete and worldly.⁷⁵

As far as my own claims pertaining to the philosophical originality and potential of Šklovskij's aesthetics are concerned, by contrast, one can only be disappointed by the functional theory outlined in the preceding chapter – and that without even considering any of the other weaknesses or faults to be found with Šklovskij's theory of estrangement. In effect, the intermediary role attributed to the literary devices obviously brings serious caveats to Šklovskij's apparently so unusual, pioneering conception of the interaction of form and perception in aesthetic experience. It certainly calls into question the notion that aesthetic experience corresponds to the act of perceiving the empirical world itself in its simultaneously formal and concrete phenomenality. In truth, the outlook now is that it might not be possible at all to justifiably or adequately make use of the idea evoked earlier on that objects appear as concrete expressive forms in perception. As a result, one might also have to abandon altogether any claim as to the compelling philosophical innovations it seemed both to promise and to rely upon with regard to the structural, expressive nature of aesthetic experience and perception in general.

In effect, Šklovskij's conception of the literary devices and their crucial mediating role between artistic form and sensual perception certainly leaves no doubt that although aesthetic experience does involve concrete impressions of reality at some point, these are induced secondarily or derivatively by the literary text and occur only as a functional after-effect of its formal properties. Worse, it would seem that only our perceptual "intentions" or "set" (*ustanovka*), rather than our concrete acts of perception are affected by the literary text: when considered carefully, Šklovskij's model intimates that literature does not so much produce immediate sensual

⁷⁵ Cf. Hansen-Löve (1978, pp.175), who strongly insists on the « reductionist » nature of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement

impressions, as recondition our perceptive disposition towards the empirical world through a mediatory, differential play on our formal representations thereof.⁷⁶ As such, the renewal or freshening of our concrete perceptions that is supposed to happen in aesthetic experience results but indirectly from the literary text and its formal, estranging features.

This does not mean that perception plays a lesser role than expected in Šklovskij's aesthetics: by all means, the production of fresh impression remains the ultimate function of art and literature. It does mean, however, that the formal, structural dimension of aesthetic experience concerns only the devices and the artistic, "artificial"⁷⁷ level of literature, rather than the one of empirical perception. All literature actually does is to renew its own significations and artificial structures, not those of the world itself. Contrary to what I suggested in the preceding chapters with regard to its monistic, integrative dimension, Šklovskij's aesthetics thus seems to preserve a traditional dualistic structure and to keep the categories of artistic, literary form and the objective, perceptual world well separated from one another after all. Far from having the general property of revealing reality in a meaningful, expressive form, aesthetic perception appears only as a limited kind of experience, possessing no other end than itself, and no other consequences than a momentarily heightened, acute sense of reality. In that sense also, aesthetic experience constitutes only a special, artificially produced and transient way of experiencing the world and is therefore essentially distinct from and irrelevant to the normal process of perception. To be sure, Šklovskij insists on clearly distinguishing the aesthetic from the everyday as two essentially different modes of experience, despite their interrelation in the cycle of automatisisation and de-automatisisation.⁷⁸

Šklovskij's conception of the literary devices also proves disappointing because of the specific, technical way in which they function – namely by occasioning a very basic "sense of difference" between common, everyday reality and its formally unusual representation in literature. This, indeed, means that literature produces its aesthetic formal effects simply by impeding or interrupting the normal process of perception, rather than transforming or rearticulating perceptual contents. This has

⁷⁶ As mentioned in chapter.2, the act of reading must be seen at least as involving a mediation of perception through language

⁷⁷ One can note the existence of a word play in Russian with the word "iskusstvennyj", which means both "artistic" and "artificial"

⁷⁸ In that sense again, accusation of « abstract formalism » might again seem warranted.

led Hansen-Löve, for example, to characterise Šklovskij's method as being essentially "apophatic": it proceeds only through the negation of positive concepts (Hansen-Löve, 1978, pp.71 etc).⁷⁹

Be that as it may it is certainly true that according to Šklovskij, the aesthetic experience that results from the impediment or interruption of perception occasioned by literature is not intrinsically meaningful; it does not entail essential modifications to the structure or "form" of our impressions of reality. According to Šklovskij's description of the process of estrangement, all that happens as a result of the sense of difference functionally induced by the literary devices is that our impressions of the empirical world alternate between two psychological states of awareness, or two modes of attention: automatised, schematic and diffuse in everyday perception, conscious, vivid and focussed in aesthetic perception. On top of this, there is a second and very serious drawback to this conception of the literary device as the catalyst of a blind impression of difference. In effect, such a characterisation of the process of estrangement makes it impossible to conceive the notion of form as being in any way meaningful or possessing a positive, constructive semantic dimension. In other words, it would seem that Šklovskij's theory of estrangement does not imply that aesthetic perception displays formal, structural features (these are the exclusive property of art and literature) and that even if it did, this formal dimension cannot be said to express or carry any objective meaning. In the face of these two inconvenient facts, it is thus very hard to argue that Šklovskij's aesthetics suggests, – let alone can contribute relevant insights to – a theory that presents perception as a concrete but intelligibly articulated form or structure.

In fairness, I pointed out even whilst outlining these theoretical prospects that they constituted both a simplification and an over-interpretation of Šklovskij's aesthetics. What is more, I do believe that neither Šklovskij's differential, mechanistic notion of the literary device, nor his insistence on clearly separating the aesthetic from the everyday finally put pay to the original perspective of a monistic, structural theory of perception raised by his theory of art as estrangement. The main reason for this unchastened optimism is, simply put, that the concept of the literary device as I have

⁷⁹ In that sense, and despite repeated assertions to the contrary, Šklovskij's idea of difference cannot be linked to that of Saussure. Instead of instating a system of meaningful oppositions and contrasts as in Saussure, difference operates in Šklovskij's theory only as a blind, one-off contrastive effect. As pointed out by Hansen-Löve, Šklovskij's idea of difference derives from Christiansen's Theory of Art

described it so far on the basis of *Art as Device* – along with the blind, negative and non-semantic conception of form, as well as the apparently neat dualistic separation between artistic form and objective perception that it helps to preserve – does not represent Šklovskij's last word on the questions of form and perception, or their interaction in literature and aesthetic experience. In fact, what we have seen so far is but a very general template of Šklovskij's aesthetics, to which he soon brought precisions and refinements.

As I will now try to demonstrate, these precisions and refinements provide renewed reason to believe in the potential originality of his theory as regards both the perceptual dimension of literary form and the formal, expressive structure of concrete perception itself. Discussing these issues, it should be mentioned, will draw me somewhat deeper into the literary theoretical aspect of Šklovskij's work. Unsurprisingly, indeed, it is on the level of literary analysis that he chose to refine his insights on the nature of literature and literary form. Much of this chapter will thus be dedicated to some of Šklovskij's most important literary theoretical concepts. I must again stress, however, that it does not purport to offer an extensive account or criticisms of these concepts, but simply highlights the developments they bring to Šklovskij's conception of literary form and its interaction with sensual perception, as well as the perspective they open with regard to the systematic, philosophical potential of his original insights.⁸⁰

One issue that Šklovskij had to address in particular with regard to his idea of the literary device was the question of the relation between the form and the objective content (or meaning) of the literary text. We saw, of course, that his conception of the device tended to obliterate the semantic dimension of the literary text. Because of Šklovskij's blunt and repeated assertions that literary works of art are "pure forms" and bare "sums of devices", one could be excused for thinking that he does assume that they never possess objective content, are bereft of any social, emotional, or descriptive meaning and, in the most radical of modernist fashion, are completely and essentially non-representational and abstract. Such a view, however, is largely inexact and would be plainly absurd in any case since there is plenty of great

⁸⁰ For a full account of the evolution of Russian formalism, one can consult Hansen-Löve's very rich description (Hansen-Löve, 1978, pp.227-456), or Steiner's convincing "metapoetic" account (Steiner, 1984).

realistic, representational or objective literature, even in Modernism. In fact, despite the undeniably radical formulation he chooses to use, Šklovskij's intention is not to naïvely exclude the idea that literary works of art may possess any objective, meaningful content or that they may sometimes (or even usually) imitate, represent or be connected to the world in some descriptive, referential or "ideological" way. Rather, his concern is to redefine the relation between a literary text's form and its meaningful, objective content in such a way as to underline the exclusive aesthetic prerogative and relevance of the former.

As such, Šklovskij does not present or conceive the literary text as a pure aggregation of literary devices and techniques totally free of meaning or descriptive references to the extra-literary, physical world. Rather, he describes it as the specific organisation or structuration of an underlying, raw content, by means of formal literary devices functionally intended to "defamiliarise" that content and its significations. Instead of accepting the usual opposition between the artistic form of a literary work and its objective content, meaning or "message", Šklovskij postulates a distinction between the literary devices on the one hand, and what he calls the extra-literary "material" (material) on the other. This extra-literary "material" corresponds according to Šklovskij to the real life or imaginary situations, events, facts, objects or ideas that can be taken as themes or "motives" and represented or described in a work of literature. It constitutes so to say the pre-aesthetic stage of the creative process, the unformed, objective substrate of the literary text. Although it is an important component of the literary work, though, the material as such has no aesthetic function: it serves only as a fundament or template which supports the devices' aesthetic, estranging function.

Incidentally, this crucial distinction between device and material is reflected and further illustrated in another famous opposition postulated by Šklovskij between what he calls the "plot" (confusingly called "sjužet" in the original Russian) and the "subject-matter" (fabula) of the literary text, that is, respectively, between "how" a story or novel is constructed, and "what" it is about.⁸¹ These two concepts apply more specifically to the level of narrative structure but involve precisely the same

⁸¹ Šklovskij's provides the following example: "In this way, the plot of Eugene Onegin is not the love between Eugene and Tatiana but the appropriation of that story line in the form of digressions that interrupt the text." (Šklovskij, 1991, p.170)

The sjužet-fabula distinction, by the way, figures among the conceptual innovations of the Russian formalists that achieved greatest success.

distinction as the device/material couple between the functional, form-giving and structuring principle of a work of literature, and the secondary objective, meaningful substrate used as “pretext” for the literary play and formal invention that ultimately give rise to the aesthetically relevant estranging effects.

As one can see, Šklovskij's distinction between device and material (as well as between plot and subject-matter) constitutes his answer of sorts to the question of form and content in the literary work of art. Unsurprisingly, that answer strongly emphasises the importance of form over meaning and confirms the predominant aesthetic role of the devices. Although Šklovskij tolerates the idea that extra-literary material (or objective content) is without doubt a component of the literary work, he very clearly subordinates its role to the latter's formal, differential and estrangement-inducing properties. In fact, the structuring, aesthetic power of the devices is so strong and dominant that the material is all but completely neutralised as an independent element. Typically, Šklovskij thus maintains that the material or objective content that is used in a literary work is disrupted and transformed to such a point by the literary devices that it acquires a wholly different value and quality, which severs it from its original meaning and properties. As he evocatively puts it in of his autobiographical works: “artistic form carries out its own unique rape of the Sabine women. The material ceases to recognize its former lord and master. Once processed by the law of art, it can be perceived apart from its place of origin” (Šklovskij, 1983, p.243)

In another savoury quote, Šklovskij suggests in similar fashion that “in order to transform an object into a fact of art, it is necessary first to withdraw it from the domain of life. To do this, we must first and foremost “shake up the object”, as Ivan the Terrible sorted out his henchmen. We must extricate a thing from the cluster of associations in which it is bound. It is necessary to turn over the object as one would turn a log over the fire” (Šklovskij, 1990 [1925], p.61). In other words, although a literary work of art can possess objective content and can in fact meaningfully represent or describe objects and situations from the extra-literary, empirical world, a clear rift is instated between the formally and artificially structured content described by a literary text and the reality which served as model or motive for its formal and aesthetically potent literary description. Once they are artistically integrated to a literary work as “material”, objects and facts (or the description thereof) lose their

original properties or significations, and find themselves completely subsumed to the formal principles and aesthetic function that govern literature.⁸²

At first glance, the device-material economy of the literary work of art seems to confirm the dualism of Šklovskij's aesthetics and the clear separation it implements between the formal, structured and artificial aspects of literature on the one hand, concrete reality and objective meaning on the other. By reducing the semantic dimension and the objective content of a literary work to the status of a secondary, dispensable substrate - which furthermore undergoes a complete, essential change of value and function when transposed in a literary context, and often functions as a device itself -, Šklovskij further validates the idea that literature and its artificial, formal qualities constitute a phenomenon essentially distinct and independent not only from "real life" itself but also from the objective descriptions of the world and its objects in literature. In effect, Šklovskij seems to suggest that form is not an attribute of the empirical world, or even of its artistically-neutral objective representations and descriptions. As he understands it, when formal, literary elements are applied to objective descriptions of the world, they transform or transfigure it into something distinct, into a series of artificially motivated facts or "artefacts", which are then essentially determined by their literary context and function, not their concrete, real life features and meanings.

Beyond its apparent confirmation of the dualistic structure of Šklovskij's theory, however, the device/material opposition also reveals his profound ambivalence as to the scope of the notion of form. In effect, simply by putting forward such ideas as the device and the material Šklovskij demonstrates an obvious willingness to rethink both the concept of form itself and the precise modalities of its opposition to objective

⁸² In that sense, the content of a literary text is indeed essentially "formal": the text's objective meaning fulfils no mimetic, descriptive functions, but contributes only to the effectiveness of the devices. Even when a given work does apparently follow the structure of a given material, and is organised in a very similar, descriptive fashion, this is only a device of its own, called the "motivation", which serves to reinforce the aesthetic, defamiliarising effectivity of a given literary text. What this means, essentially, is that when a text actually describes or refers to something extra-literary (for example a political event), the relevance of that objective description is not so much what is being described, but how that description is used to create an aesthetic, defamiliarising effect. Šklovskij's favorite example is the description of war in Tolstoj's "War and Peace". According to Šklovskij, the description of war in Tolstoj's novel should not be interpreted as a moral or political commentary, but as a way of forcing us to "see" war in a new light (Šklovskij, 1963): all the objective, moral and political descriptions of war are subsumed to that aesthetic goal and must be first understood in the narrative, aesthetic logic of the novel.

content or meaning. It is certainly clear from the way he elects to define the relation of the literary devices to the extra-literary material that Šklovskij was unhappy with the traditional, dichotomic opposition of form and content, in which form is usually presented as a neutral, passive concept, an “empty receptacle” to be filled with meaningful content. In comparison to this traditional definition, Šklovskij’s notion of the device appears to be much more active and dynamic: as the formal element of the literary work it has the potency to intervene directly on the material and to dynamically shape and organise it. In that sense, of course, the device/material opposition clearly presupposes a measure of interaction between the formal elements and the objective content or meaning of the literary text that goes much further than their mediated, functional connection through the differential effects of estrangement. In effect, the power of the devices to transform the material within the literary work (as well as the property of the material itself to be adapted into a formal device) involves a genuine encroachment of the one on the other.⁸³

This encroachment, it has to be said, is conceived by Šklovskij first and foremost as an expansion of the concept of form, not as a negation of the opposition between literary form and non-literary content. As such, he deems that the encroachment between the two functions only in one direction, namely through the structuring, shape-giving action of form on a docile material, which is then transformed in its essence, and “sublimated” into something essentially artificial and formal. In his early texts at least, Šklovskij does not seriously envisage the reverse prospect, namely that artistic form might be conditioned by the properties of the material. To him, literary devices and form can transfigure and sublimate a neutral material into something aesthetically potent; in some cases, a given material can be used as a specific device (that of motivation). The non-aesthetic material itself, however, can not incorporate or be influenced by formal elements without being immediately subsumed to the artificial logic of these elements. In Šklovskij’s scheme, literature and literary form figure as a dynamic, potent element which remains clearly distinct from the static, passive and amorphous nature of the objective content or meanings on which it operates. Despite the significant encroachment of the devices and artistic form on the material and objective content of the literary text, the intrinsic irreversibility between the two

⁸³ Hansen-Löve’s analysis also underlines this encroachment, by revealing that Šklovskij’s conception implies several interacting levels of devices and materials : material I and II, device I and II, etc, which involve an evolution from a static opposition between the two concepts, to a dynamic interaction (cf. Hansen-Löve, 1978, pp.188 and following)

guarantees that the former can still be distinguished from the latter and maintains a distinct status.

The strictly one way relation between form and content – or between devices and material, literature and non-literary world – is of course extremely useful to Šklovskij. Crucially, it enables him to achieve the double aim of expanding the potency and scope of the notion of literary form as an aesthetically relevant organising principle, whilst maintaining its autonomy as a distinctly phenomenon that can be analysed independently. The (rather obvious) problem with his argument, however, is that it is conceptually unsustainable. As Šklovskij himself soon experienced, once the idea of a mingling of form and content is admitted, defining the two notions separately from one another – let alone establishing the exclusive influence of the one over the other – quickly becomes an endless source of problems and paradoxes. As it happens, Šklovskij distinction between device and material thus masks a much more integrated conception of form and objective content than suggested by the dichotomy of his distinction between devices and material and the generally dualistic structure given to his aesthetics of estrangement by the mediatory function of the literary devices themselves.

There is no shortage of examples to illustrate the complex and evolving nature of the roles assumed by the devices and material, or more generally, of literary form and objective content in Šklovskij's work. One of these is provided by the case of the evolution and eventual crisis undergone by his theory of prose. By Šklovskij's theory of prose, I mean more specifically the collection of articles or essays written during the period 1917-1922 and gathered in his anthology *On the Theory of Prose* (*O teorii prozy*), published for the first time in 1925. These texts, it should be noted, were not explicitly or purposefully composed by Šklovskij as the complementary parts of a single, unified theoretical edifice: in reality, they represent nothing more than successive stages and diverse aspects of his thematic reflexions on the problem of literary prose. Nonetheless, they do display a clear conceptual unity and, thanks to the diachronic rather than systematic relation between them, they provide a revealing trace of the logical progression and crisis of Šklovskij's thought on prose. Without going into the details of his reflections on the subject, I thus wish to briefly outline that progression and eventual crisis.

Šklovskij's theory of prose takes root in the general, seminal concepts we have encountered, namely the ideas of estrangement and of the literary device, as well as the distinctions between device/material and plot/subject-matter. As it happens, Šklovskij first exposes these ideas in the opening three texts of *On the Theory of Prose* ("Art as Device", "The Relationship between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style" and "The Structure of Fiction"), which thus constitutes its general framework.⁸⁴ In the remaining articles of his volume, Šklovskij then seeks to explore these core concepts and detail their precise mechanisms and concrete applications in literary prose. Put summarily, the fundamental insight to emerge from Šklovskij's deliberations and demonstrations is the following: because the material or subject-matter of a literary text is completely secondary and always remains aesthetically neutral, the only way for literary prose to develop and conquer new territories is not by producing new meanings, or changing its content, but to evolve towards an ever increasing degree of formal complexification, artifice, innovation and reflexivity.⁸⁵

This inner logic of the development of literary prose and its devices towards ever greater formal abstraction and complexity is itself best demonstrated by Šklovskij's conception of the evolution and complexification of plot – a theme which effectively serves as the main thread of *On the Theory of Prose*. According to Šklovskij, the earliest examples of prose literature, such as Cervantes' *Don Quixotte*, display a very basic, summary type of plot, consisting only of the consecutive "stringing" together (nanizyvanie) of unrelated episodes and motives (cf. Šklovskij, 1990 [1925], pp.72-100). By contrast, later forms of prose literature, such as the detective mystery story (the paradigmatic type of which Šklovskij sees in the work of Conan Doyle (ibid., pp.101-116)) and the detective novel (ditto Dickens (ibid., pp.117-146)) already possess more complex narrative structures. Their themes and motives are arranged in so-called "framed structures" (obramlenie) and "gradations" (stupenčatost'), which imply a specific, hierarchical ordering of the text's narrative structure. The difference

⁸⁴ In contrast to most of his formalist fellows, who concentrated mainly on verse and poetry, Šklovskij turned most of his interest to prose and "narratology" (what Hansen-Löve calls his "subjekt-theory"). His own "theory of literature" is thus a "theory of prose", which explains why his seminal concepts figure at the head of a work on prose.

⁸⁵ This need for formal innovation is also a result of the process of automatisaton: devices themselves, indeed, are subjected to automatisaton, and must be revitalise, a process only possible through formal innovation. This by the way, shows that Šklovskij's theory is only possible as a theory of literary evolution.

between the mystery story, the detective novel and later, more mature genres is the increasing scale and degree of their structural complexity and formal abstraction, which develops into an ever more baroque nexus of parallelisms, repetitions, flashbacks, anticipations, progressions, gradations, delays, etc.

In its early stage at least, the evolution and renewal of literary plot appears as a straightforward process of complexification of the arrangement and composition of its various elements. At some point, however, even the increased complexification of intricate, interwoven narrative structures attains its limits and exhausts its potential for renewal and "estranging", norm-breaking innovation. Well aware, of that problem, Šklovskij thus gradually turned towards another line of plot development, which relays that of the simple complexification of narrative structure. This new type of plot involves not only an ever cleverer but unreflexive arranging of devices and motives, but the self-conscious "laying bare" (obnaženie) of the plot and its devices through the use of parody. In a parodic novel or story, according to Šklovskij, not only may the plot be complexified to the extreme but, more importantly, the very tricks used to construct and complicate its structure are taken as theme. Instead of relying on an underlying "story" (fabula), the parodic novel relies on a kind of ironical, ultra-formal meta-narrative plot: it "comments" reflexively on its own devices instead of simply structuring and organising them. Šklovskij beloved example of such a parodic novel is Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which he famously deemed to be "the most typical novel in world literature" (ibid., p.170)

Leaving aside the broad range of criticisms to which one could submit Šklovskij's sketch of plot (as a unsatisfactory account of plot and its functions, as a cursory, inadequate assessment of the individual novels it analyses, as an unsystematic theory of literary evolution, etc.), I wish to emphasise the point here that Šklovskij's hereunto perfectly logical scheme of ever more complex and self-reflexive formal innovation seems to reach its limits with the ideas of the parodic novel and the laying bare of the devices. Even if one takes Šklovskij's proclamation that *Tristram Shandy* constitutes the pinnacle of novelistic plot *cum grane salis*, it the parodic novel still appears to mark the outer-bounds of the novel's formal possibilities: it is simply not feasible to add to its formal complexity and self-consciousness.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ In a literary historical perspective, and from a strictly formal point of view, one could argue that the ironical, « post-modern» novel (be it Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon, etc.) exhibits precisely the features of extreme narrative complexity, and playful use of form

This does not mean that no other types of novels are conceivable, that the parodic novel exhausted all the possibilities of the novel as a genre or that it excluded any further developments and innovations. Even Šklovskij did not consider *Tristram Shandy* to constitute the end of the road for the novel, and *On the Theory of Prose* clearly indicates that novel as parody does not figure as the ultimate possible development of plot (whether in a historical, or a conceptual perspective). Indeed, after his analysis of the parodic novel, Šklovskij pushes his exposition a step further in the two final articles ("Ornamental Prose" and "Literature without Plot"), outlining yet another type of plot. The fact of the matter, however, is that the new type of plot he suggest does not rely on a pure play with formal elements and therefore marks a clear break with the foregoing developments of Šklovskij's thought on plot. Revealing, the way Šklovskij presents it also differs markedly from his argumentation in the rest of *On the Theory of Prose*. Instead of highlighting the positive formal progress and innovations achieved by plot in the work of the authors he is commenting (i.e. Andrej Bely and Vasily Rozanov), Šklovskij proceeds rather by showing their failure to do away with form in their attempts to create new literary works that rejuvenate and go beyond the limits even of the "purest", most typical of plot structure, namely the parodic novel.

The work of Rozanov is especially interesting for Šklovskij as, on the one hand, it represents "an extraordinary act of betrayal" (Šklovskij, 1991, p.191). The "betrayal" involved by Rozanov's work is that it is constructed without obvious recourse to form or plot, whether as organising or parodic principles. As Šklovskij points out, Rozanov novels includes "ready-made", non-literary material directly, without transforming or structuring it through the artificial devices of plot, nor even using them as a "motivation". Rozanov novels thus appear as an amorphous collection of "fragments: "Social and topical essays, presented as autonomous fragments, contradict each other at every point. A biography of Rozanov and scenes from his life as well as photographs, etc. have also been included." (Šklovskij, 1991, p.193) In other words, we have here what seems to be the absolute paradox in Šklovskij's theory of prose, a "literature without plot", without form or devices, but only pure, non-literary material.

Šklovskij counters this apparently paradoxical genre by saying that even such a literature as Rozanov's, which seeks to go beyond plot and formal structure, is not free of literary form. Indeed, Šklovskij argues that the introduction and use of pure non-literary material constitutes an extra-proof of the need of literary form to renew

itself by all possible means. Although Rozanov's works are apparently amorphous, anti-literary, the result of the "collage" of non-literary elements (documents, photos, diaries), Šklovskij concurs that this actually constitutes a new form, beyond plot (*vne sjužeta*). He even likens it to a new genre that resembles the parodic novel thereby obviously presenting it as the logical continuation of the evolution of plot. Every attempt to evoke a non-literary justification, within a literary work, inevitably produces a new device; for example, bibliographical facts become stylistic facts. In an apparently paradoxical pirouette, Šklovskij thus states that Rozanov's work represents "a heroic attempt to go beyond the confines of literature, "to speak without words, without form," and the work has turned out splendidly, because it has given birth to a new literature, a new form" (*ibid.*, p.193)

On the face of it, Šklovskij's interpretation of Rozanov's work and his paradoxical use of non-literary material as a new literary form is perfectly acceptable: the use of "ready-mades" and non-narrative collage techniques of conspicuously non-literary is after all by now a well established literary device. Similarly, in Šklovskij's own logic of estrangement and norm-breaking, the recourse to non-artificiality, non-formal elements as a reaction, and estranging gesture against an overtly artificial, complex and self-reflexive type of plot, makes perfect sense. Once the limits of pure formal innovation have been reached, one must have recourse to other elements if one is to renew a genre.

In light of his dichotomic characterisation of the device and the material, however, Šklovskij's explanation raises a number of significant questions. As we saw, Šklovskij's argument rested on the assumption that the material was something raw, unformed, which necessarily required structuration through the devices to acquire an aesthetic, formal character. Even more importantly, he insisted on the irreversibility of the interaction between form and material, refusing any aesthetic quality to the material as such. In that perspective, how is one to understand that material, as in Rozanov's work, can indeed be directly and successfully integrated to a work of art, without further recourse to plot and other formal structures (not even as a straightforward "motivation" device), without being submitted to the distortive effects of devices, and then be considered as aesthetically potent or even as the vector of a new literary form? Does it not necessarily mean that the raw material, – which can thus indeed be integrated as such to the work of art – have formal qualities itself? In the last texts of *On the Theory of Prose* Šklovskij certainly seems to have nuanced

his claims as to the aesthetic neutrality of the material. He thus starts to talk of a "cross-over" (skrešenie), between device and material (Tchougounnikov, 2005, p.131) and suggests that the material can become literary, whilst the device can lose its literary edge.

In other words, against Šklovskij's obvious wish to maintain a clear analytical separation between them, the ideas of the device and the material are interlinked in such a tight interplay that it becomes impossible to distinguish clearly between what constitutes artificial, literary form, and what is objective, descriptive content. Revealingly, as Hansen-Löve points out, this interplay between objective content and literary form is not only confined to Šklovskij's theory, but extends to his literary productions. As one can see in *A Sentimental Journey* and the short epistolary novel *Zoo, or letters not about love*, which Šklovskij wrote during his exile in Berlin in the early 1920s, his literary work took on an existential turn even as he embraced ever more formally complicated and abstract literary forms (cf. Hansen-Löve, 1978, pp.571-575).

One can take *Zoo* as the clearest example of this process. On the surface, it is a baroque succession of literary devices and narrative convolutions with no real subject-matter, a pure, ironic and self-conscious exercise in style and technique. The author of the letters has been forbidden to write about love by the woman he is sending them to. But as this spurned love is his only purpose for writing, he employs all the tricks in his repertoire to write about it without seeming to do so. This literary game culminates in one of the letters being crossed out, as a sign of its purely formal, meaningless nature. At the same time, however, the author of the letters fully realises that, despite his attempts to circumvent his feelings and emotions through literary stratagems, he cannot mask them at all and his only achievement is to give them another more convoluted and literary form. He thus exclaims: "I have been entirely mistaken, Alja!... Love also has its methods... I have forgotten where is love, and where is the book. The game goes on [...]" (quoted in Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.579). Despite his best efforts to take refuge in pure form, the author finds that his letters still express his concrete, real feelings. As he discovers, they cannot be clearly distinguished from their literary form – even from an extreme, almost empty form – because form and reality essentially encroach on each other. If anything, the formal innovations of *Zoo* serve precisely to give expression to the sentimental, over-intellectualised kind of love the narrator seems to be experiencing: his crossed-out

letter, far from being only a purely formal, stylistic act, appears as the most vivid and truest expression to his frustration, and the very concrete interdiction to speak under which he finds himself.

This permeability of plot and the literary devices with the structures of objective representations and descriptions of reality itself, or rather, the ability of plot and devices to express concrete, real situations and feelings despite their clearly formal and artificial nature constitutes a first convincing hint back towards the inherently epistemic, existential potential of Šklovskij's conception of literature and the idea of the concrete form of perception. Despite its nominally dualistic, functional framework, indeed, his theory does seem to involve the idea, firstly, that our objective representations of reality – and possibly, our sensual perceptions thereof – are pervaded by articulated, structured form, or rather, are concretely informed with meaning and sense. Secondly, it also implies that their concrete structure can be transformed and expressed through the action of literature and its artificial devices. Even the extra-literary material, as we saw, possesses potentially formal features that can be actualised in given literary works.

On top of the very general and indecisive perspectives involved by his theory of prose and his concepts of device, plot and material, Šklovskij's work also offers another, thematically more limited and therefore much more precise and convincing set of insights into the simultaneously concrete and formal dimension of literary form (or conversely, the formal dimension of concrete perception). Indeed, his theory of estrangement deals in an original way not only with the question of the relation between literary form and objective content, but also with the question of the perception of literary form itself. In Šklovskij's aesthetics, not only are the literary text and its devices geared towards differentially producing fresh sensual impressions and redynamising our objective representations of the world through their devices, but they take on a concrete, perceptual role and importance of their own. Typically, although Šklovskij does define the scope of estrangement very widely (as we saw, it can be made to "redeem" and refresh the "form" of almost anything, from the simple stone to the fear of war, etc.), most of the time estrangement is applied not to empirical reality and its objects, but to the language, the "verbal material" and words of the literary text itself.

Šklovskij's argument regarding the properties and literary functions of language is that, just as perception in general, it does not always function as a mediatory, transitive conveyor of meaning and knowledge. In essence, Šklovskij sees language as an autonomous phenomenon that possesses its own structure, as well as its own aesthetic value. In fact, one of his central assumptions is that language and words themselves are concrete, objects or things ("veščī") in their own right, whose properties call to be properly perceived.⁸⁷ Just as is the case with general objects, however, the complex forms and immanent features of words are eventually blended out of consciousness through repetitive, ordinary usage. All that remains when a word is thus automatised are its transitive properties (typically, its indexical, semantic and communicative functions). Instead of being perceived and considered as a singular object worthy of interest, with all the depth of its metaphorical and etymological meanings, the word begins to function only as a secondary, unimportant and schematic medium for thought or communication.⁸⁸ When used in such a way, as a means of communication or a vector of thought, language can be said to be purely "prosaic".

In contrast to this purely "prosaic language", Šklovskij highlights the existence of a distinct "poetic language", whose function is to impede transitive, utilitarian uses of language and trigger a renewed sense of words as specific, concrete objects with their own pure aesthetic qualities. The defining trait of poetic language, according to Šklovskij, is its "difficulty" and strangeness: "According to Aristotle, poetic language must appear strange and wonderful; and, in fact, it is often called foreign: the Sumerian used by the Assyrians, the Latin of Europe during the Middle Ages, the Arabisms of the Persians, the Old Bulgarian of Russian literature, or the elevated, almost literary language of folk songs. The common archaisms of poetic language, the intricacy of the sweet new style, the obscure style of the language of Arnaut Daniel with the "roughened" forms which make pronunciation difficult – these are

⁸⁷ In keeping with the tradition of the Russian Cubo-Futurists, whose poetry emphasised the importance and unique status of language as such, Šklovskij thus speaks of the "samovitoe", "samocel'noe" and "samocennoe" slovo, the "self-wrought", "autotelic" and "self-sufficient" word.

⁸⁸ For example, the original meaning and internal form of the French word "enfant" (child) is "who does not speak". But no modern French speaker will take notice of this (or of any other of the specific features of the word "enfant"), and will use the word to refer directly to a child. Similarly, the external, phonetic form of most words is neither spoken nor heard fully in normal conversation, but is reduced to the minimum needed for effective communication (Šklovskij, 1914, in Bann, 1973, pp.63-64).

used in much the same way. [...] The language of poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded language." (Šklovskij, 1988, p.28). As was the case with estrangement in general, language obtains its aesthetic qualities by being unusual, surprising, and by challenging the habitual, often simplified and utilitarian meanings and significations to which it is usually subsumed.⁸⁹

On the one hand, Šklovskij's conception of poetic language involves nothing more than a creative play with the normal structures of language: linguistic form, so to say, is made slightly more complicated, its contours are exaggerated and embellished. For instance, what Šklovskij calls the external form of words, i.e. their phonetic or graphic substrate, can be underlined and redynamised by the use of straightforward techniques such as alliteration or rhyme. As to the "internal form" of words, their etymological roots and core significations, it can be reactivated through the creative use of redundant epithets.⁹⁰ In turn, the use of such epithets will also become automatised and lose its aesthetic or poetic force. New, striking and more complicated epithets must therefore be successively created so as to constantly renew our awareness of a word's internal form and endow language with poetic value. The following lyrical example from Keats comes to mind: "I want a brighter word than bright, a fairer word than fair" (Letter to Fanny Brawne, August 16). This process of formal, linguistic renewal, according to Šklovskij, is essential to poetry. In that spirit, he approvingly quotes Aleksandr Veselovskij – the founder of historical poetics in Russia and one of Šklovskij's main influence: "The history of the epithet is the history of poetic style in an abridged edition." (Veselovskij, quoted by Šklovskij, 1991, p.66).

On the other hand, Šklovskij conception of poetic language and its possibilities to be redynamised also includes a much more radical dimension, in which the play with language is carried so far that, rather than being simply redynamised and reactivated, the contextual meanings and linguistic functions of words are fundamentally undercut and put out of play. In these extreme cases of poetry, words are made to appear as pure expressive objects, free of traditional meaning, but still aesthetically or poetically significant. Poetic language then appears, very explicitly,

⁸⁹ Here again, he is in opposition to Potebnja: poetic language does not facilitate thought but impedes it.

⁹⁰ For instance, although the word "sun" intrinsically implies the notion of brightness, one can use the formula "bright sun" to focus attention back on that particular dimension of the word "sun" (Šklovskij, 1914, in Bann, 1973, p.65)

as an example of a "concrete form", which is essentially both materially perceptual and expressively structured.

To illustrate the meaning of this more radical idea of poetic language as a pure but concrete expressive form – and indeed, to underline its source – one can turn to the Russian Futurists. One of the central aesthetic aims of the Russian Futurists was to produce a pure poetry centred on what Kručenych calls the "word itself" (slovo kak takovoe, cf. Kručenych, 1913). In essence, this means that they focussed on the raw expressive possibilities of language as a concrete, "material" phenomenon. In that spirit, they meant their poetry to explore the diversity and richness of linguistic form itself. This is very obviously reflected in their poetical practice, which goes beyond conventional uses of language and involves many neologisms or "word creation" (slovotvorčestvo), free innovative uses of syntax and morphology, and a general disregard for conventional meaning. A classic (and often cited) example of such Futurist poetry is Chlebnikov's poem "Incantation by Laughter" (1914):

O laugh it out, you laughsters!
O laugh it up, you laughsters!
So they laugh with laughsters, so they laughelize delaughly.
O laugh it up belaughably!
O the laughingstock of the laughed upon—the laugh of
Belaughed laughsters!
O laugh it out roundlaughingly, the laugh of laughed-at
Laughians!

Laughertino, laughertino,
Laughify, laughicate, laugholets, laugholets,
Laughikins, laughikins,
O laugh it out, you laughsters!
O laugh it up, you laughsters!

(Chlebnikov 1908-09, in Perloff, 2009, p.101)⁹¹

⁹¹ In the transliterated original:

O, rassmejtes', smečači!
O, zasmějtes', smečači!
Čto smejuťsja smečami, čto smejanstvujut smejal'no,
O, zasmějtes' usmejal'no!
O rassmešišč nadsmejal'nych – smeč usmejnych smečačej!
O issmejsja rassmejal'no smeč nadsmejnych smejačej!
Smejevo, Smejevo,
Usmej, osmej, mešiki, mešiki,
Smejunčiki, smejunčiki.
O, rassmejtes', smečači
O, zasmějtes', smečači! in Alfonsov, 1999, p.71

As one can see, Chlebnikov's whole poem is constructed exclusively around an ingenious play on the morphological possibilities of the word "laughter" ("smech" in Russian). This English version only partially replicates the subtlety of the original, as English is a morphologically less rich language than Russian. The variants on the stem "laugh" are here all clear and somewhat arbitrary neologisms. By contrast, in the Russian original, Chlebnikov also has recourse to grammatically relevant and common elements, such as prefixes and suffixes which are used to alter the meaning of verbs, or to acceptable forms of nominalisation. As such, his poem takes on an extra layer, as it not only arbitrarily plays on the word "laugh" , but brings into contention and reveals the morphological rules and grammatical structures of the Russian language.

Going even further than this play on the possibilities offered by conventional linguistic forms, the Russian Futurists also sought in many of their poems to completely divest language both of its conventional grammatical structure and of its usual functions of communication and signification. In the following poem by Kručenykh, one can observe the process of language's progressive "liberation" from meaning and grammar:

If you are racking your brain and the malicious rhyme just won't come -
Go and spit on your friend's pink vest!
Brilliantine chains will start dancing in your throat
(diamond wells)
And teeth-smashing harmonies will scatter all around
as from Olympus
a bicycle
draz
raz
mizug
z-z-z

(Kručenykh, 1919 in Barooshian, 1974, p.89)⁹²

⁹²Esli b'eš'sja i zlaja rifma nikak ne vychodit
Pojdi i pljun' drugu na rozovyj žilet
Zatancujut v gorle tvoem brilljantinovye kolody
(brilliantovye dolodey)
I posypjatsja zubotyčiny sozvučij
kak s Olimpa
velosiped
draz
raz
mizug
z-z-z
original also in Barooshian, 1974, p.89

The poem starts with a rather long, perfectly well-formed and meaningful verse, which even has a dramatic plot-like intention to it. The meaning of the next verses gets progressively more obscure, and they are also shorter, but they are still grammatically well-formed and can be interpreted fairly straightforwardly. From the 5th line onwards, verses are reduced to bribes (“as from Olympus”, “a bicycle”) which seem disconnected from the preceding verses. Meaning is then completely abandoned with the appearance of meaningless words from verse 7, and the final line being reduced to an onomatopoeic, or phonetic sound. This structural decomposition from a well-formed, narrative sentence to a pure sound is underlined both by the shortening of the verse lines, and the meaning of the verses which actually have one, in which Kručenyč explicitly emphasises that the shackles of meaning should be disrespected (“spit on your friend’s pink vest”) in favour of producing “teeth-smashing harmonies” and allow “diamonds” to come out of the “throat - well”.

A similar destructive process is found at a morphological level in “The Poem about the Nightingale” (Poemija o solov’ě) by another futurist, Vasilij Kamenskij:

Izlučistaja
Lučistaja
Čistaja
Istaja
Staja
Taja
Aja
Ja.

(Kamenskij, in Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.145.)

One begins with a well-formed adjective, “izlučistaja”, from which one first subtracts a morphologically relevant and meaningful component (“iz”, which is a common Russian prefix and preposition) to make a still well-formed adjective. Then a morphologically, meaningless irrelevant part (“lu”) is taken away, resulting in a further, still meaningful, but quite different adjective (“cistaja” – clean). The process is repeated, leading to morphemes that are only remotely meaningful (“istaja”, “aja”), reminiscent of another word (staja – stoja – standing), or actually have another meaning (taja – melting, ja – I). There is thus a constant interplay of meaning and loss of meaning, underscoring of grammatical, morphological links, and etymological

aberrations. Whole mechanisms, possibilities and lexical richness of association not commonly associated with common uses of language are demonstrated and explored.

The Futurist's aim of achieving a pure form of poetry based and focussed on language itself, culminated with their most interesting and radical innovation, i.e. a totally meaningless, syntactically incoherent language called "zaum" (or "transmental") language. The purest example of "zaum" is provided by the following poem by Kručenyč:

dyr bul ščyl
ubešščur
skum
vy so bu
r l êz

(Kručenyč, in Alfonsov, 1999, p.206)

The shortest of peeks in a dictionary should suffice even for someone totally ignorant of the Russian language to ascertain that this poem doesn't include a single meaningful word, with the exception of "vy" ("you"). It's only recognisable features are elements typical of Russian phonology, again with one small exception, "êz", which does not appear in Russian. At the most basic level, such "zaum" poetry thus focuses exclusively on the phonetic building blocks of language and produces pure, abstract linguistic forms. The pure phonetic expressive force of language is underscored and conveys a striking sense of its aesthetical value as an autonomous phenomenon. Words are given and perceived "as such", as autonomous, concrete object totally freed from their conventional shackles and secondary semantic or syntactic functions. In that sense, Kručenyč likens "zaum" to the abstraction of Malevič's Suprematism. According to him, zaum poetry achieves the purest form of language by reducing it to its primary components just as Malevic's abstract art reduces painting to shapes and colours.

To a certain extent, one can interpret the Futurists' focus on the concrete features of language and linguistic form as the radicalisation of something which is in some way or other typical of any kind of poetry. Attention to formal properties such a meter or rhyme, as well as a certain freedom with syntax and a propensity for neologisms and obscure meaning is a common feature of poetry. But in addition to its radical reduction to linguistic form, zaum poetry also possesses an epistemological, almost

gnostic dimension. According to Futurists such as Kručenyč, because zaum poetry presents language in its "original purity", it in turn allows for a "superior intuition" of the word (Kručenyč, 1914, p.8). It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what Kručenyč means by this, as his statements on the matter remain vague, if not downright obscure. Still, it is pretty clear that his main point is that, in zaum, words do not function at all as a medium or a relay for rational thought or communication. Instead of being conveyed derivatively by syntax, grammar and semantic convention, meaning is obtained through an unmediated, untainted act of intuition of the word in its pure, concrete form. Meaning, in zaum, is not a secondary function of a given word, nor is it in anyway separated from the linguistic occurrence. Rather, it crystallises and is made present, even tangible, "by" or "in" the zaum words themselves: it adheres to the pure, expressive form of the word. By way of consequence, this implies that there is no distinction in zaum between the linguistic form of a word and its expressive content or concrete meaning.

To my mind, the Futurists' poetic experiments, and in zaum in particular, thus provide a concrete example both of Šklovskij's idea about the power of literature to produce and present concrete reality immediately, and of the intrinsically formal nature of the concrete reality thus expressed. On the one hand, indeed, zaum is capable of presenting words or verbal material directly, as concrete, material objects. The words or word-parts of zaum do not represent, symbolise or denote anything else than themselves: they are given as pure phenomenal manifestations. At the same time, this pure expression is possible for one reason only, namely, that the form of the word corresponds or is reduced to its contents, or rather, that the word's content is made present through its very form. Because it has no meaning, the form of zaum expresses nothing but itself, its pure, concrete form is its only meaning. As Eichenbaum states in "Introduction to the Formal Method" "verse form ... is not in opposition to any "content" extrinsic to it; it is not forced to fit inside this "form" but is conceived of as the genuine content of verse speech. Thus the very concept of form ...emerges with a new sense of sufficiency" (Eichenbaum, 1999, p.15)

Obviously, a perfect congregation of form and content as it appears in zaum represents an extreme case. Most language occurrences, whether in verse form, and especially in prose, which obey the rules of grammar and rely on semantic or deictic functions, do not express their meaning immediately, but indeed transitively and referentially. Linguistic and literary form, in such cases, is thus indeed different from

its meaning. It would thus seem that zaum and the Futurist poetry do not prove anything beyond themselves. In that sense, the new idea of pure, expressive form put forward by the Futurists and taken up by Šklovskij might seem resistant to generalisation – both to art (not all art is zaum and capable of inducing pure content renewal through pure form), and to reality, outside language (the form of objects is not equal to their content).⁹³ Thus, for example, it certainly remains something of a stretch to understand how the formal-content properties of zaum actually relate to the case of *Zoo* and the strange relation between literary form and emotional reality which we found there.

Having said that, by deconstructing the genesis of expression in language as the pure organisation of a verbal material, and giving us a tangible example of a "concrete form", zaum can in fact teach us – and did teach the formalists and the Prague phonologists – universal lessons as to the nature of perception, of language, of meaning and of aesthetic experience. What is more, Šklovskij's theory of plot seems to indicate that the same logic is at work on a grander scale. In contrast to what I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the outlook now is that, despite some of Šklovskij's more conservative viewpoints and hesitations, it might very much be possible to justifiably or adequately make use of the ideas of concrete perceptual form to describe his aesthetics in a systematic theoretical perspective, and to describe aesthetic experience and perception in general as possessing a monistic, structural nature.

⁹³ Cf. Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.124: Nach Engel'gardt erfüllt die reduktionistische "Einstellung" ("ustanovka") auf die "zaumnost" eine durchaus konstruktive kritische Funktion, durch die jene dem Ästhetischen eigene "ustanovka na vyraženie" (also die "Einstellung auf den Ausdruck") bloßgelegt wird (Engel'gardt, *ibid.* 67). Als "zaum"-sprachliche Struktur ist aber das Kunstwerk nicht als reale Erscheinung gegeben, sondern als das Objekt einer ästhetischen Untersuchung. Eine ähnliche Tendenz, das reale (wissenschaftliche, künstlerische) Objekt auf die "zaumnost", also die "dinglich-definite Struktur" ("veščno-dannaja struktura") einzuengen, beobachtet Engel'gardt auch in der modernen Linguistik, deren gleichfalls totalisiertes hypothetisches Objekt um eine noch zu schaffene "funktional-teleologische Interpretation" (*sic*) zu ergänzen wäre (*ibid.* 69).

PART II

Chapter 4

Šklovskij's Estrangement and Husserl's Phenomenology

The examples provided by the conceptual hesitations and developmental twists of Šklovskij's theory of literary prose and, especially, by the radical poetic experimentations of the Russian Cubo-Futurists constitute, I believe, sufficient illustration of the latent originality of the Russian formalists' aesthetic of estrangement in connection with the idea of the concrete expressive structure of perception itself. Briefly put, Šklovskij's theory of prose illustrates the permeability of the structure of artistic or literary forms with those of the empirical world itself, whilst the Cubo-futurists "zaum" poems provide a maybe less general, but much more precise and compelling example of how form and objective content might sometimes be assimilated purely and simply – in this case in the concretely structured and intransitively expressive experience of a poetic, linguistic fact.

These literary and poetic examples are of course still far removed from providing a full-blown philosophical explanation to Šklovskij's vague suggestions and intuitions. In effect, the literary concepts discussed in the preceding chapters – the devices, the material, poetic language or the Cubo-futurists' zaum language –, are all much too imprecise and indecisive to offer anything more than clues or cursory indications as to the full scope and implications of Šklovskij's aesthetic of estrangement. What is more, they represent but the symptoms, the specific concretisations of what effectively constitutes Šklovskij's more fundamental, underlying idea or "principle" – namely, that aesthetic experience involves perceiving reality in intransitive, expressive forms. In order now to take a step further and to evaluate the philosophical relevance and applicability of Šklovskij's aesthetic insights with regard to the formal, structural or expressive dimension of perception, one needs therefore to inspect the implicit and explicit implications of Šklovskij's conception of estrangement in a more thoroughly and clearly philosophical perspective (rather than the literary theoretical one favoured by Šklovskij himself).

On the face of it, the philosophical, explanatory potential of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement with respect to the nature of aesthetic experience appears to be both very promising and rather strong. This is so because notwithstanding Šklovskij's sometimes mangled descriptions and interpretations of the specific functioning of the literary devices themselves, the idea of estrangement as such involves an implicit but crucial methodological decision in the treatment it makes of aesthetic experience, which in itself raises a number of useful and innovative perspectives. This decision involved by the idea of estrangement, of course, is to correlate aesthetic or literary value with the standard act or process of perception itself.

The methodological advantages of correlating aesthetic value directly to perception are numerous. For one, it becomes possible to theoretically isolate and define the specificity of aesthetic or literary phenomena whilst doing away with philosophically dubious transcendental criteria, or vaguely intuitive and purely subjective ones (cf. Erlich, 1955, p.250). Instead of confuse or imprecise categories such as the sublime, taste or beauty, Šklovskij's theory promises to define the aesthetic characteristics of a text or painting objectively, through an analysis of its concrete features. In addition, the perceptual dimension of estrangement promises to contribute to precisely situate and define the functions of literature (and other art forms) in relation to reality at large. This means, in short, that they offer a possibility to rigorously define both the broader, epistemic and cognitive function of the aesthetic process (cf. Gretchko, 2003; Kelih, 2008, Miall-Kuiken, 1994, also Ingarden, 1962; Iser, 1976). Broadly speaking, it would appear that Šklovskij's aesthetics of estrangement constitutes a sort of embryonic theory of perception in itself, capable of thematising such important issues as the intentional role of the subject in the constitution of his own aesthetic experience, the structural properties of perception that make it susceptible to aesthetic actualisations and uses, as well as the epistemic, cognitive or even the ontological relations that exist between these aesthetic and the common (or everyday) modes of experience.

Having said all this, one has to admit that the prospects of successfully and directly taking advantage of the methodological promises of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement as a coherent, philosophical account of aesthetic experience are in fact pretty meagre. When it comes to setting estrangement in a rigorous framework

and dissecting its various implications in a cold and precise conceptual light, one is immediately confronted with a grave problem, namely the patent flimsiness and absolute lack of theoretical foundations of Šklovskij's ideas and arguments. In effect, Šklovskij does not volunteer any kind of detailed account of the multitude of implications and aspects that his conception of aesthetics as estrangement both displays and depends upon with regard to perception. Far from that, Šklovskij's only argument in defence of the perceptual nature and attributes of estrangement consists of an unsubstantiated claim to the effect that perception undergoes a cyclical process of automatisisation and de-automatisisation. That claim itself, however, is hardly convincing or rigorous in any way and can fairly be said to raise more problems than it actually answers.

To begin with, Šklovskij's assumption as to the tendency of perception to become automatised certainly does not rest upon the principles of an established tradition, whether in aesthetics, philosophy or psychology. As Erlich and others have pointed out, Šklovskij's argument is in fact essentially *ad hoc*. Worse, Šklovskij fails to compensate for the absence of an established and detailed conceptual framework in that he provides no constructive argumentation of his own to justify and explain the process of automatisisation of perception. As we saw, he is content to introduce that idea cursorily, through a simple appeal to common sense: "If one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, one will agree with us." (Šklovskij, 1988, p.20) Next to this statement of the allegedly obvious, no systematic explanations are forthcoming, either in "Art as Device", or in any latter text.

By all accounts, Šklovskij displays no interest in the details of a problem that he considers to fall well outside his remit: the processes of automatisisation and de-automatisisation of perception are only relevant to him as the backdrop and justification to his key aesthetic intuition, which is that art serves to freshen and actualise our perceptions. That intuition itself, what is more, is useful to him not so much as a definition of art and literature, but as a methodological basis for his autonomous theory of literature.⁹⁴ The very unfortunate consequence of the carefree evasiveness of Šklovskij's statements on the questions of perception that underlie his

⁹⁴ Unsurprisingly, his only attempts to corroborate it involve an analysis of poetic language itself, rather than general problems of perception.

literary or aesthetic theories is that it is impossible to determine with any kind of accuracy what the process of automatisation and the mirroring effect of estrangement actually involve and signify.

For instance, it might at first appear plausible to link automatisation and estrangement with the question of attention and explain both processes as purely contingent psychological mechanisms.⁹⁵ Indeed, it is not unreasonable to assume that Šklovskij understands automatisation as implying simply that objects or events drift out of the field of consciousness and lose their vivid contours and meanings because of the fact that we stop paying attention to them (through habit or other similar reasons). Such a convenient and straightforwardly psychological interpretation, however, remains both superficial and unsatisfactory. Simply saying that automatisation occurs through or because of lack of attention explains neither why nor how our impressions of given objects or events undergo qualitative transformations over time – as Šklovskij evidently thinks is the case. At best, the argument of attention simply provides a causal explanation as to why automatisation takes place at all. But it says nothing whatsoever as to how the process of automatisation actually affects the content of individual acts of perception. More to the point, if automatisation occurs only as the consequence of a lack of attention, there seems to be no reason to justify the recourse to the complex, elaborate forms of art and literature to trigger estrangement or de-automatisation and refocus our attention on given facts and objects. There are quite obviously much simpler, more effective ways of refocusing attention. What's more, it would remain rather unclear what would be "aesthetic" about this all too common process of focusing one's attention on something.

In any case, one finds other indications in "Art as Device" that automatisation and estrangement effectively involve much more than a purely contingent, psychological mechanism. Typically, I mentioned earlier on that Šklovskij seems to attribute a positive, cognitive function to automatisation. In that sense, automatisation appears to essentially influence the modality of our experience of the world. As such, it requires to be understood and described as a truly epistemic or cognitive process (of abstraction, symbolisation, eidation, etc.), which derives not from the contingent, psychological mechanisms of perception, but involves fundamental problems as to

⁹⁵ On the psychological origin of Šklovskij's idea cf. for example Romand-Tchougounnikov (2009).

the possible conditions of our (sensual, perceptual, cognitive, etc.) awareness of, and interactions with, reality. To put it in different terms, Šklovskij's remarks on automatisisation seem to require an explanation as to how the content of sensual perception is synthesised, generalised and organised intelligibly, whether in consciousness or in the mind.⁹⁶ Obviously, the consequences of the reverse effect of estrangement on the formal contents of perception require similar explanation and justification as to their epistemic function and significance.

Furthermore, one must also note that the processes of automatisisation and estrangement take on not only an epistemic dimension, but a clearly existential, ontological one. Šklovskij, indeed, not only defines perception as being an intransitive end in itself, but, in the pure tradition of Russian Modernism and its transcendental, missionary dimension, he often assimilates it to a Bergsonian, intuitive and "lived" experience of the world. In that sense, the automatisisation of perception must be seen as affecting our very sense of existence, the very "stuff" of our lives and the objects that constitute our world.⁹⁷

As we saw, Šklovskij alludes to this loss of concrete feeling and existence entailed by automatisisation both through explicit statement of his own ("And so life is reduced to nothing. Habitualisation devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (Šklovskij, 1988, p.20)) or by quoting Tolstoj ("If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never *been*" [my emphasis] (ibid., p 20)). Conversely, estrangement clearly receives the function of redynamising and actualising our very sense of existence, "our sensation of life". In that spirit, we saw in the last chapter that the power of art and literature to affect the very structures of our existence, of our emotions and of empirical reality itself becomes ever more explicit in Šklovskij's literary prose.

The utter confusion surrounding the psychological, epistemological or even existential and ontological dimension of automatisisation and estrangement is also reflected in Šklovskij's hesitance as to the precise field of application of the latter. We saw at length, for instance, that Šklovskij's texts remain mostly undecided as to

⁹⁶ Neither the "idealistic" nor the "empirical" term is really adequate here, as Šklovskij obviously makes no comments as to the metaphysics that underly his theory of perception

⁹⁷ This sense of loss of existence is a trope typical of Russian modernism as a whole (cf. Hutchings, 1997)

whether literary estrangement indirectly induces objective perceptions of the world in general (as is implied in “Art as Device”) or only of language and words as concrete and valuable objects in themselves (as is the case in “The Resurrection of the Word”). Even more problematically, it also remains unclear whether estrangement is reduced to operating on pure syntax and grammar or even on language’s material – phonetic, graphic – substrate, or if it also affects language's semantic dimension, or indeed, whole complex discourses, narratives and cultural tropes. A similar ambivalence exists with regard to estrangement's impact on our general perceptions of reality: Šklovskij often seems to intend it to operate on pure empirical sensation and impressions (it makes the stone *stony*). More often than not, though, he gives it the more "Brechtian" meaning of a V-Effekt and makes it apply to our cultural, social or moral representations of the world, rather than the empirical world itself (cf. Helmers, 1984, p.69).

To top everything, Šklovskij doesn't seem to want to distinguish the purely linguistic or the more generally objective aspects of estrangement from one another, much less to separate the different layers of sensual, cultural, social perceptions it involves. In fact, the indefinite scope of automatisisation and the very broad palette of estrangement's functions and powers do not seem to have worried Šklovskij in the least. By all accounts, he deems all the above-mentioned facets to represent possible and justified uses and applications of estrangement. They apply in different cases, different art forms or different literary genres, but all fall under the same general concept and imply the same basic process of reactivating and making (all possible types of) experiences of the world fresh, conscious and vividly perceptive with the help of the differential effected provided by the artistic or literary devices.

In other words, it would seem that the process of automatisisation and the counter-process of estrangement involve all at once the critical, sense-bestowing faculties of the conscious, perceiving subject, as well as his capacities for moral judgement and his social and cultural awareness; the expressive, meaningful and concrete structure of language itself; and the ontological dimension of our perceptive acts as an existential relation with the world. Critics have certainly highlighted each of these dimensions of estrangement in Šklovskij's work, and devoted interesting and insightful studies to their significance and implications (cf. Helmers, 1984; Boym, 2005; Holquist-Kliger, 2005; Emerson, 2005, Sternberg 2006). On the up side, of course, one could seek to portray the very varied uses and applications of

estrangement as a sign of its conceptual richness, its versatility and its capacity to thematise or take into account the many facets of literature and aesthetic experience – and to provide a unifying principle characteristic of all aesthetic endeavours. On the down side, however, the methodological confusion and the sheer ambition of the scope of automatised and estrangement mean that no single philosophical framework has been found to systemise them in a rigorous and coherent way, whether as a convincing theory of perception or, for that matter, as a convincing theory of literature.

To put it in another terms, on the one hand defamiliarisation seems to request – as I suggested in my introduction – a hugely ambitious theory of perception as an ontomorphogenetic constitution of meaning, or the progressive articulation and differentiation of concrete sensual data, positing a unity of structure and continuous development between raw sensual perception, emotional response, cultural interpretation, linguistic expression, etc. Because there is no indication as to how this should be achieved, and no sense on Šklovskij's side that such a theory is in fact requested, all one is left with is an array of thought-provoking insights and intuitions, which however remain very vague, and possess no value as a systematic theory (cf Erlich, 1955, p.249).

Given the general confusion and the over-ambitiousness that accompanies the theoretical basis and scope of estrangement itself, it would seem that one is as far removed than ever from providing a solid and useful interpretation to the formalist idea that perception is essentially structural and expressive in nature. Surprisingly enough, however, one philosophical template has indeed been sometimes considered, at least indirectly, as being capable of providing a unified base to the motley and vague perceptual implications of Šklovskij's aesthetics of estrangement: Husserlian phenomenology (cf. Holenstein, 1976).⁹⁸ To be sure, the hermeneutic advantages of Husserlian phenomenology with regard to Šklovskij's aesthetics are certainly appealing at first glance. Without having to go into the detail of Husserl's nuanced and complex philosophy, one can identify quite a few points of convergence between phenomenology and Šklovskij's aesthetics.

⁹⁸ Holenstein, of course, bases his hypothesis on the later work of Jakobson, which, as we shall see, renders his argument altogether more convincing, albeit raising further issues.

To begin with, rather than a mere psychology of attention, phenomenology offers a profound theory of the intentionality of consciousness. Husserl postulates that all acts of consciousness are intentionally directed at an object, and display what he calls a "noetico-noematic" structure. This means, in essence, that the object of an act of consciousness is essentially affected and constituted by the latter's "intentional aim", i.e. the specific way in which it is "intended". Because his phenomenology thus accounts for the fact that the content of an act of consciousness, for example of perception, is directly defined and animated by its intentional aim, Husserl is well placed to explain and justify in detailed philosophical terms a process such as automatisisation – and the correlation it implies between our varying dispositions towards the world (which are affected by habit and repetition) and our way of perceiving it.

Husserl's analysis of the noetico-noematic structure of consciousness also seems to promise a philosophically valid explanation to the epistemic functions that Šklovskij wants to attribute to automatisisation and estrangement. In Husserl's phenomenology, perception is not conceived as a purely sensual act, but as one informed with meaning or sense (Sinn). As we just saw, the intentional acts of consciousness actually structure and confer meaning upon their object.⁹⁹ This means, generally, that objects can be intended with a varying degree of generality and abstraction, and therefore take on more or less abstract and general meanings. This property, obviously, can be made to account for the abstraction and symbolisation features of the automatisisation process. In the specific case of acts of perception, what is more, Husserl suggests that their objective content, the "noem" is stratified and can be analysed both in terms of its "hyletic" material, sensual strata, and its meaningful "morphic" one (Husserl, Ideen). At a pull, this analysis of the meaningful and concrete dimensions of perception can justify the lack of distinction made by Šklovskij between the purely perceptual and the social, critical dimensions of estrangement: if perception itself is seen as being animated with meaning, as being a first step in the constitution of a horizon of sense as Husserl would put it, then one can presume that there is only a difference of degree, rather than nature, between our perceptions of concrete objects, and our representations of cultural events.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Husserl speaks in this sense of the "Sinnverleihender Akt"

¹⁰⁰ Such an idea is certainly presented by Špet's "Hegelian" phenomenology, which he sees as the historical process of the realisation of consciousness

Additionally, Husserl's phenomenology offers interesting perspective as to the existential aspects of Šklovskij's conception of automatisisation and estrangement. Husserl is famous for enunciating that philosophy should return "to the things themselves" (zu den Sachen selbst). To him, perception offers an "originary" access to the world, it allows us to experience it immediately in its full presence, "in the flesh" (leibhaft). The task of phenomenology, as he understands it, is but to describe (rather than explain) the structure of that perceptual, phenomenal experience, or what he would later call the "Lebenswelt". In this sense then, Husserl's phenomenological and descriptive account of perception offers philosophical credence to the existential implications of the process of automatisisation and estrangement, which imply that modifications to our perceptions imply concrete changes to our lives, or at least, to our lived experience. To be more precise, it would seem possible to explain the existential dimension of automatisisation and estrangement through phenomenological analysis – and to do so in a single framework, in coordination with its other, epistemic and intentional dimensions. Most importantly of all, this aspect of phenomenology concurs fully with Šklovskij's intuition that perception constitutes an end in itself, a primary, originary way of being aware of the world: in phenomenology as in Šklovskij's aesthetics, perception is not attributed a transitive, intermediary role, but constitutes all at once an existential, epistemic and aesthetic end in itself.

When one scratches the surface of these apparently appealing arguments, however, one discovers that there are a number of serious problems involved with trying to corset Šklovskij's aesthetics of estrangement into the framework of Husserlian phenomenology. The first argument against such an interpretation is that the general mindset behind Šklovskij's idea of estrangement and perception is in fact far-removed from that of Husserl, especially so in its early "logistic" version. To be sure, one finds not the glimpse of a reference or an allusion to Husserl in Šklovskij's writings. As Hansen-Löve has pointed out, Šklovskij's orientation and arguments are both vitalist and empiricist (Hansen-Löve, 1978, pp.180-184). His philosophical models, as far as one can attribute any to him, seem to be Bergson and a crude version of Humean empiricism. Thus, for instance, whereas Husserl is very nuanced in his description of how reality is given to us in perception (what with the complex noetico-noematic structure and the carefully differentiated hyletic and morphic strata of perceptual acts), Šklovskij seems to assume much more bluntly that our vivid

sensual impressions actually present the empirical world itself to us in its immediate concreteness and vitality. Revealingly, instead of using a subtle phenomenological vocabulary (experience - pereživanie, sense - smysl, intuition - intuicija, etc.), Šklovskij is content with an unreflected empiricist one (impressions - vpečatlenie, feelings - oščuščenie).¹⁰¹

These differences between Šklovskij and Husserl, moreover, do not simply boil down to the lack of philosophical sophistication of the former: they also involve substantial divergences between the two – with regard in particular to the "formal", meaningful aspect of perception. In effect, I have just highlighted that phenomenology works with concepts of meaning and sense: for Husserl, perception is an intentional act of consciousness, which therefore displays an ideal or eidetic structure. In phenomenology, objects are made present as perceptual noems, they are informed and suffused with sense in the act of perception itself. By contrast, Šklovskij insists on the raw, vibrant and immediate character of perception: his conception of estrangement clearly intimates that perception is *not* to be understood as being structured intellectually. The concrete-formal structure of perception, involves a mechanistic, non-semantic aesthetics, founded on the notions of rupture and pure difference: objects are made present not through their inherent, structured form, but through blind deformations that function by contrasting them to a given norm. Even the meanings of objects or situations are reactualised in such a way, without being involved or transformed as such.

On the one hand, Šklovskij's rather primitive conception of perception as a series of raw impressions and of form as pure difference means one could be doing Šklovskij a favour and interpreting him in a richer way when giving a meaningful, phenomenological interpretation to his conceptions of perception and form. The specific, idealist nuances that Husserl's phenomenology brings with it, however, such as the fact that – despite correspond to an originary donation in the flesh – the "noem" does not constitute the real, sensual object, and that its meaningful aspect depends on synthesising, sense-bestowing properties of consciousness, distances it sharply from Šklovskij's insistence on the immediacy and concrete properties of aesthetic experience, and the crucial fact that it is the material structure of the object that imposes its perceptive form – not the sense-bestowing act of a conscious

¹⁰¹ This brings us back to Hansen-Löve's discussion of the phenomenism-phenomenological problems between Gakhn and the Formalists (Hansen-Löve, 1978, pp.280-285).

subject. As such, although Husserl's phenomenology would certainly enrich and consolidate Šklovskij's conception of perception in some respects, it would do so by eliminating or strongly modifying the meaning of the correlation between form and perception (and especially, its vital objective sources) which constitutes the specificity of the latter's aesthetics.

The particular perils involved in trying to interpret and adapt Šklovskij's aesthetic of estrangement through the prism of Husserlian phenomenology is best illustrated by the very different status of language and the crucial problem of linguistic expression in their respective theories. This, indeed, is where the originality and meaning of Šklovskij's conception of concrete form appears most clearly. As far as Husserl is concerned, it is well known that the question of language as such is almost completely absent from his writings (Bundgaard, 2010). What is more, when Husserl does deal with language, such as in the *Logical Investigations*, he does so without considering its specific expressive properties, but by binding it up with mental acts (Smith, 1987), or considering it in terms of a pure grammar. As Bundgaard puts it: „Language as dealt with in the First *Logical Investigation* is assessed by virtue of its being *essentially* a vehicle, serving the purpose of expressing and re-articulating already formed “ideas”, “*Vorstellungen*” or “expressible thoughts,” whereas in the second part of the Fourth *Logical Investigation* it is assessed as an autonomous, self-contained symbolic system, whose formal consistency is based on laws that apply on categorical forms, not on expressed meanings“ (Bundgaard, 2010, p.21). In other words, language and expression appear only as a strange, neutral layer, with no influence either on the production of meaning or on the content of our perceptions (or mental acts) (on this, cf. Kristensen, 2010, p.15).

In Šklovskij's theories by contrast, language occupies centre stage and is identified as a phenomenon of first importance. More to the point, Šklovskij's conception of language – and especially poetic language – directly contravenes both the ideas that it is a vehicle for already formed thoughts or that it is based on laws dependant of categorical forms. Instead, we saw that the great discovery of Russian Formalism and the Futurist poets is that language has its own inherent, “poetic” structure, its expressive *Gehalt*, which constrains and produces its own form and meanings (cf. Friedrich, 1993). As Jakobson puts it: “Das Wort [wird] als Wort, und nicht als blosser Repräsentant des benannten Objekts oder als Gefühlsausbruch empfunden. Die Wörter und ihre Zusammensetzung, ihre Bedeutung, ihre äussere und innere Form

[sind] nicht nur indifferenter Hinweis auf die Wirklichkeit, sondern [erlangen] ein eigenes Gewicht und selbständigen Wert. (Jakobson, 1989, p.79)“

This pure expressive power of language as a poetic phenomena is best revealed by the crassest experiments of zaum poetry: by reducing language to its concrete phonetic form, and freeing it of any transitive functions or logical fetters (whilst still letting it appear as language), it demonstrates that language owes its essence not primarily its derivative functions, but in fact originates from, and is therefore bound with the articulation of a concrete material. In Šklovskij's eyes, language must not only be understood as an autonomous, self-contained, but formally consistent symbolic system: its expressive power, its capacity to express meaning and communicate thought derives from its specific material structure and poeticity. In other words, instead of a pure vehicle of thought and pre-formed logical meaning, language appears as a concrete form, which, as such is the objective bearer of its own expressivity. It is in this sense in particular, that one must understand that form is understood as a concrete, material feature by Šklovskij, rather than an abstract, intellectual one.¹⁰²

Although a more detailed analysis would certainly reveal further isolated points of convergence and prove useful in some ways, I believe that the general incompatibilities between Šklovskij's empiricist aesthetic of rupture and pure difference and Husserl's idealistic phenomenology suffice to lay to rest the idea that the former might be adequately and faithfully interpreted as a whole in the terms of the latter. Since, furthermore, there seems to be no serious alternatives to phenomenology to explain the perceptual implications of Šklovskij's aesthetics and poetics, it would thus seem that it is not possible to account for his theory and assumptions, whether in respect to the concrete form of language or that of perception in philosophical terms.

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn – and the one that has consistently been drawn by interpreters of Russian formalism – from the clear impossibility of systemising Šklovskij's insights into a philosophical mould is that they are generally of little, if not of no worth at all philosophically, and condemned to oblivion and

¹⁰² This distinction, one ought to add here, is hugely important and was made to be one of the main themes of the opposition between phenomenology and structuralism – a fact which tends to show the extent of the gap between Šklovskij and Husserl.

irrelevance. If his idea of estrangement and its implications regarding perception cannot be given solid foundations, one assumes, then even its positive, promising aspects, such as the idea that aesthetic experience corresponds to the act of sensually perceiving reality (whether directly, as in poetic language, or mediately, through artistic devices) in its concrete, expressive form, are directly threatened in their validity and relevance, and probably unworthy of a closer philosophical inspection as a systematic theory.

The suspicions against the relevance of Šklovskij's theory with regard to questions of perception is reinforced by the fact that despite their evident promises and originality, the insights he provides remain very sketchy and ambiguous. His theory represents the heroic attempt to give expression to a vague intuition stemming from Modern art, and is achieved by synthesising a number of insights and theories, most of which do not particularly distinguish themselves by their rigorous and coherent nature (Bergson, Potebnja, Steinthal, etc.). In short, Šklovskij's ideas are much too raw and unreflected and it is not surprising that they remain resistant to such a thoughtful and aspirationally "rigorous" model as Husserl's phenomenology.

As we also saw, Šklovskij himself appears to have remained hesitant, unconvinced and, in some cases, even surprised both by the philosophical implications of some of his ideas, in particular the extent of the encroachment of form and objective content to which his theoretical assumptions seem to lead, and by the existential scope taken on by the formal features of literature in his own prose. His inclination certainly seems to be to restrict the validity of the most ground-breaking aspects of his concept of literary form to the more limited domain of poetic language.¹⁰³ What is more, Šklovskij never fundamentally revised his ideas on the key matters of literary form and its relation to the outside world: one finds a surprisingly, almost unrelentingly consistent approach to literature and form in his latest work and in his ground-breaking, iconoclastic essays of the mid 1910s.

Despite the impossibility of directly systemising Šklovskij's ideas in a philosophical perspective and despite his own personal reluctance to modify their obviously insufficient philosophical premises, however, I do not believe that this spells the end for the philosophical prospects of his definition of aesthetic experience as a concrete,

¹⁰³ Not least because the existentialist extension of his concept of form endangered his aim of isolating literature as a distinct object of inquiry

expressive act of perception. In effect, the overly ambitious, vague and unredeemably unsystematic nature of Šklovskij's perceptual arguments, including the concept of the cyclical process of automatisisation – de-automatisisation is not such a terrible problem after all. Contrary to appearances, it does not lead to the inevitable bankruptcy of Šklovskij's fundamental ideas on the perceptual functions of art and literature and the mechanisms of the reactivation of our detailed, formal perception of the world, nor does it necessarily preclude the possibility that they one might find a way to systemise them philosophically.

The first reason for this is that, simply put, despite its importance in the conceptual tectonics of Šklovskij theory of estrangement, the idea of automatisisation and de-automatisisation actually fulfils but one function. That function, in essence, is to defend the idea that the concrete acts of perception themselves do not only possess transitive, cognitive functions, but have an aesthetic worth in themselves. The worth of perception itself is underlined by the fact of automatisisation, more than explained or justified by it. In that sense, the only really essential feature of Šklovskij's concept of automatisisation is the reversal of the role of perception not as a secondary, transitive process, but as our primary way of accessing and experiencing reality. This “primate“ of perception, is of course a metaphysically ambitious gesture. But as I just pointed out in connection with Husserl's phenomenology, it is one that has foundations in rigorous philosophical thought and is not as conceptually suspect as Šklovskij's unfounded assumptions on the process of automatisisation.

What this means then, is that the weaknesses of Šklovskij's aesthetics of estrangement come down not to its broad philosophical assumption on perception, which is in fact defensible, but its specific details. Indeed, far from being pure theoretical speculation, the fact that the pure process of perception can be aesthetised and taken as an end in itself is practically demonstrated many times over by the concrete examples of Modern art and literature. What is not demonstrated and remains essentially problematic is the precise modalities in which perception is made into an aesthetic end, and especially, how its intrinsic structure can be put to aesthetic uses. Interestingly, Šklovskij's arguments with regard to the functional application of estrangement have nothing to do with the process of automatisisation or questions of perception, but with the way he details estrangement functioning within literature, through the individual devices. In other words, far from resulting from its obvious and irredeemable *philosophical* weaknesses, the problems of Šklovskij's

theory are in fact connected with his *literary theoretical* prejudices. Put differently, one can say that the weaknesses of his definition stem from his detailed but unsatisfactory account of the nature and function of *literature* itself, rather than his hasty and vague conception of perception.

That there are significant problems with Šklovskij's literary theory and his definition of the link between form and perception is certainly undeniable. In short, critics have flagged up two major problems. Firstly, critics have argued that Šklovskij's conception of the aesthetic value of literary works through the idea of the perception of form depends too much on their contrastive novelty, shock or surprising effect and the way they deviate from an existing norm. This overly strong correlation posited by Šklovskij's model of estrangement between aesthetic value, perception of form and norm-breaking novelty or shock effect, obviously, is descriptively only true of a limited types of artistic and literary practices (including, unsurprisingly, those of Russian Modernism), Much more importantly, it leads to the absurd conclusion that form (whether artistic, literary, linguistic, etc.) is only perceived and perceptible when it is new, strange or norm-breaking.¹⁰⁴

Secondly, and most famously, Šklovskij's idea of estrangement has also been attacked for weakening the concept of form itself and reducing it to a pure differential contrast, thereby divesting it of any semantic, meaningful function.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, this of course means that art itself has been divested of its cultural, social or political function. On the other hand, because it excludes the semantic, meaningful dimension of literature, Šklovskij's idea of estrangement entails both an increasingly ornamental, baroque complexification of literary form (as is best witnessed by Šklovskij's account of the evolution of plot), and an ever greater distance between standard, "normal" meanings and the ever stranger literary form as such (as witnessed by the Futurists' zaum poetry). To a large extent, as I mentioned, it is this semantic naivety that separates Šklovskij from a phenomenological interpretation, and prevents a richer account of the interrelation of form and content, both in the work of art, and in our acts of perception generally.

¹⁰⁴ This conclusion is indeed a corollary of Šklovskij's definition of automatisations as a « loss of form » : everyday, non-aesthetic experience, which is characterised by normality, involves no perception of form, indeed, no perception at all.

¹⁰⁵ True, as I said, estrangement can operate on meaning. All it does, however, is to reactivate existent meanings through novelty and shock, rather than transforming and modifying them.

The crucial point here is that contrary to Šklovskij's ideas on perception (automatisation, etc.) which we have shown to be unredeemable, the literary aspects of his theory are very much open to improvement. In fact, because of the value they otherwise attributed to Šklovskij's insights, Šklovskij's formalist colleagues sought to refine and modify them. To say the truth, somebody like Jakobson, despite sharing some of Šklovskij insight, sought very early to explore another way a giving them coherent theoretical expression (quote, on NPP). Šklovskij's problems were thus taken head on by the other formalists, who offered very convincing, effective and influential solutions. Since, to a large extent, the conceptual limitations and philosophical problems of his idea of estrangement appear as the flip side of one problematic, literary theoretical coin, the improvement to his literary ideas also offer a renewed hope and prospect of giving a solid philosophical framework and a more precise meaning to Šklovskij's intuitions. As Hansen-Löve correctly points out: "Jedenfall war im FII eine Begegnung zwischen Strukturalismus und Phänomenologie wesentlich vielsprechender, als dies im FI möglich gewesen wäre" (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.15).

Paradoxically, this means that the philosophical answer both to the conundrums and enticing perspectives presented by Šklovskij's theory of estrangement must come first and foremost in the formalists' literary theoretical assumptions.¹⁰⁶ The obvious conclusion of all these observations on Šklovskij's theory of estrangement – which should come as no surprise after my observations on that matter in Chapter 1 – is then that instead of a direct philosophical interpretation, one needs first to turn to the literary theoretical part of his work, and the specific perspectives they bring on the question of language and literature, rather than on perception in general. Because he did not provided this improvement, but his colleagues did so, I propose, in the second part of this study, to turn to the developments undergone by his seminal ideas in the work of his formalist colleagues, especially Eichenbaum, Tynjanov, Jakobson, and to a lesser extent but with even more importance, Jakubinskij, Polivanov and Trubeckoj. Indeed, it is only through the work of Šklovskij's colleagues that one can show how Šklovskij's theories and ideas could be adapted into a more rigorous model and be given a coherent and more interesting interpretation

¹⁰⁶ In fact, the paradox is not that great, since we saw that the formalists tried to keep the philosophical aspects of their theories to a minimum, and if anything are more confused than openly contradictory.

Chapter 5

Tynjanov, Jakobson and the Concrete Expressiveness of Linguistic Structure

As mentioned in the last chapter, all the main commentators of Russian Formalism (Erlich, Hansen-Löve, Steiner, Striedter, etc.) have noticed and agreed upon the fact that the unmistakable weakness of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement – even when one is otherwise prepared to accept his definition of perception and of literature's perceptive role and function – is its complete lack of a systemic understanding of the literary work as a compound, meaningful whole, and the resulting lack of a meaningful, Gestaltist conception of form. One recalls that Šklovskij considers the literary text as a mere sum of discrete devices, which each function on their own, independently of each others, mechanically producing their specific, differential or defamiliarising effect. Even his analysis of the relationship of the devices (through his theory of plot) remains crudely atomistic and specifies only their arrangement as linear, regressive or progressive sets, rather than a complex system of meaningful interrelations and cross-influences (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.17). The obvious problem with such an "atomistic" account is that literary texts, even when considered in purely formal terms, definitely live from the nuanced relations between their various elements, and achieve their full force and significance only as cohesive, "organic" wholes. As we also saw, Šklovskij's lack of a systematic perspective also prevents him from giving a semantic account of the literary text. Because devices are defined but as isolated, independent switches, the literary text which they constitute can be understood only as a pure succession of synchronic effects, not as a potentially meaningful construct.

In order to build upon Šklovskij's insights whilst being more truthful both to the holistic and semantic dimensions of the literary text, the obvious way forward for the formalists was thus to provide a more systematic account of the devices and their aesthetic function.

The first significant move in that direction is to be found in Eichenbaum's seminal essay "How the Over-Coat is Made" (1919). Instead of analysing Gogol's famous short story as a sum of individual and independent devices, Eichenbaum points to an

overarching organising narrative principle in *The Over-Coat*, which he identifies as the traditional Russian narrative tradition of "skaz".¹⁰⁷ Eichenbaum's argument is that by shaping the whole of his text with the devices of skaz, Gogol achieves a general effect, which transforms the meaning of his short story, and gives it its characteristic tone and style. Without going into more details, the key difference of Eichenbaum's analysis with Šklovskij's idea of a "sum of device" is that it postulates a systematic, consistent use of the devices, which combine not only to produce a series of successive, "new" and "strange" effects, but to convey a particular colour and tone to the text as a whole. Instead of being simply new and unusual, the formal devices of *The Over-Coat* also contribute to its definite texture and meaning.¹⁰⁸

In parallel to Eichenbaum's contributions in the field of narrative prose, the decisive break away from Šklovskij's atomistic conception of the device was accomplished by Tynjanov in the field of verse analysis.¹⁰⁹ Put very briefly, Tynjanov's innovation – which he outlines in his two famous texts *Problem of poetic language* ("Problema stihotvornogo jazyka", 1924) and *The Ode as an Oratory Genre* ("Oda kak oratorskij žanr", 1927) – was to replace Šklovskij's concepts of the device and its effect of pure difference with those of the "constructive factor" (konstruktivni faktor) and of the "dominant" (dominanta). In explicit contrast to Šklovskij's discrete idea of the isolated device, the constructive factors (such as rhythm, metre, rime, etc..) are presented by Tynjanov as structural elements in the dynamic hierarchy of a given verse, or what he calls a "literary system" or "literary serie" (rjad). What is more, the constructive factors carry out their aesthetic function not through effects of pure shock, contrast or difference, but through deformations or inflexions imposed upon the total hierarchy of a literary serie.

According to Tynjanov, indeed, some constructive factors occupy a more important place in the hierarchical structure of a given verse and thus influence and transform the elements that are subordinated to them: they form the « dominant » of that text. In Tynjanov's own words: « It is absolutely clear that each literary system is not

¹⁰⁷ The skaz is an oral form of narration, in which phonetic elements are exaggerated. Eichenbaum's interest for such a form is perfectly understandable, since it involves "concrete" elements, which clearly distort and transform the traditional narrative thread.

¹⁰⁸ On Eichenbaum's role in the development of formalist literary theory, see Any 1994,

¹⁰⁹ The fact that these contributions came from the field of versology is not surprising, as verse offers the most compact form of language, where the different aspects of language (phonetic, syntactic, semantic) are bundled together more tightly.

constituted of a peaceful interrelation of all its factors, but that the domination, the pre-eminence of one of them (or a group of them), functionally dominates and colours the others. Such a factor bears the name, already introduced in Russian literary science (Christiansen, Eichenbaum) of « dominant »." (Tynjanov, 1977, p.48). In other words, Tynjanov considers the poetic work as a system of factors organised hierarchically and dynamically through a dominant.¹¹⁰

Despite the clear divergences with Šklovskij's idea of estrangement, the latter's influence is still clearly observable in Tynjanov's conception. The function of the dominant, indeed, is to « deform » and « distort » the verbal material on which it exercises. The perception of this deformation of the elements subsumed to the dominant constructive factors, moreover, represents the artistic fact: « Without the sensation of the submission, the deformation of all the factors by the factor that plays the constructive role, there is not artistic fact. [...] If the feeling for the interrelation of the factors disappears [...], the artistic fact is also lost : it is automatised" (Tynjanov, 2007, pp.9-10, my translation)" The concordance of the vocabulary used here by Tynjanov with that of the šklovskian estrangement and the perceptibility of form characteristic of aesthetic experience is absolutely obvious. The basic difference is that instead of estranging effects and the pure "sense of difference" derived from Broder Christiansen, he puts forward the idea of the "dynamic form" of the literary system. Hansen-Löve thus comments: "Tynjanov establishes right at the start of "Problem of verse language" a clear methodological link between the estranging principle of de-automatisation and the new principle of the dynamic-form, whose perceptibility guarantees the aestheticity of perception" (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.318).

To my mind, one needs go no further in the detail of Tynjanov's account of verse as a dynamic-form to uncover in what way it offers a more mature version of Šklovskij's aesthetics. One has seen enough to ascertain, firstly, that Tynjanov moves from an aesthetic of estrangement based on the idea of constant rupture and strangeness, to an aesthetic of dynamic, hierarchical or organised form. True, Tynjanov maintains the idea of the concrete perceptibility of form, whose actualisation he also still links with

¹¹⁰ Incidentally, Jakobson took exactly the same perspective in "The Dominant": " In the earlier works of Šklovskij, a poetic work was defined as a mere sum of its artistic devices, while poetic evolution appeared nothing more than a substitution of certain devices. With the further development of Formalism, there arose the accurate conception of a poetic work as a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices" (Jakobson, 1981 [1935], p.754).

the necessity for strong deformations and distortions. But the perceptibility of form characteristic of the aesthetic process is not as reliant on the effects of pure shock, innovation or surprise: an acute sense of the formal interrelations between elements is now what matters. Secondly, Tynjanov's systemic approach to verse allows him to move from Šklovskij's blind "sensations of difference" and the excessively narcissist formal play of laying bear the devices "obnaženie priema", to a more meaningful, semantic conception of form. Because poetic effects result in a heightening of the sense of the interrelation of linguistic factors, they can involve the dimension of articulated meaning and sense. Tynjanov thus speaks for example of the process of "semiologisation", through which the meanings of a word are dynamically activated.

Panning back to the philosophical discussion of the preceding chapter, Tynjanov's theory of verse seems to offer a much more powerful and precise perspective on the idea of "concrete perceptual form". Indeed, despite reducing it to the confines of language, it seems capable of really taking into account the structural and meaningful dimension of literary form, whilst preserving its concrete sensual aspect. Instead of Šklovskij's model, in which sensual impressions were derived secondarily from the differential effects of isolated devices, Tynjanov's theory seems to offer a much more Husserlian conception in which it is form itself, conceived what is more as a meaningful hierarchical system of linguistic factors that is experienced through poetry and literature. Thereby, in keeping with Šklovskij and in opposition to Husserl, the emphasis remains on the concrete, sensual "objective" dimension of language and expression as such: the "dynamic form" that is perceived is not an intellectual one, but more like in zaum, the concrete, "material" one of the word itself.

Having said that and despite its obvious improvements on the theory of Šklovskij, Tynjanov's idea of the dynamic form also remains broadly unsatisfying with regard to the question of the perceptibility of form and its philosophical significance. To be more precise, its major issue, which is reminiscent of the problems of Šklovskij's or Eichenbaum's models, is that it remains a rather vague and "literary" theory. Indeed, despite their relevance and insightfulness, one has to say that Tynjanov's concepts of the literary system, of the interrelation of the constructive factors, of dynamic form itself are based on a series of metaphors (cf. Ehlers, 1992) rather than on a stringent, theoretically grounded argumentation. For that reason, although they are perfectly sufficient to grasp the general trend of Tynjanov's idea, and characterise the basic features of poetic language, Tynjanov's concept lose a lot of their efficiency and

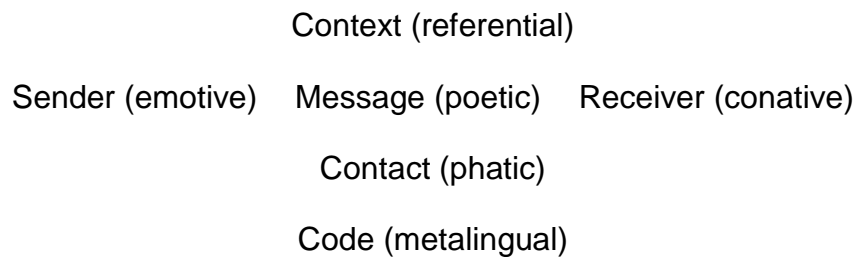
force, when one tries to apply in a strict framework. In particular, it is very difficult to explain how the constructive factors and the dominant actually affect expression and meaning, or – which is the same – how the poetic forms of language relate to the normal syntactic, semantic features of language. In fact, it would seem that Tynjanov retains the idea of difference as a contrastive, rather than a systemic effect. As Hansen-Löve suggests: "Weder die Montage des FI noch das Konstruktionsmodell des FII vermag aber aus phänomenologischer Sicht "Gestalt" zu bilden, da eine Sinnggebung ausbleibt und damit die den Gegenstand konstituierende Wertung. (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.17)¹¹¹

The limitations of Tynjanov's literary model of the dynamic form mean that it can be useful to us only as a first step in the analysis of the formalists' ideas relevance. If one is to gain a really precise example or definition of the ideas of concrete form and the implications of the aesthetic perceptibility of form, it would seem that an even tighter framework is called for in order to capture the whole potential of the formalists' insights. Because Tynjanov constitutes but an intermediary stage in the maturation of the formalists' insights on the ideas of form and perception, I believe that the formalists themselves provides such a framework, namely the variant of *structural linguistics*, suggested by the work of Roman Jakobson. Indeed, as I have suggested many times already, Jakobson appears as the most natural heir to the Russian formalists' ideas. What is more, the convergence and influence of Tynjanov's idea of dominant (and literary evolution) on Jakobson seems to confirm the existence of an ark in Formalism's development from Šklovskij through Tynjanov to Jakobson (cf. Steiner, op.cit.; Hansen-Löve, 1978).

Jakobson's big improvement on Tynjanov's models is to integrate the ideas of estrangement or the dominant into the definition of language itself, in other words, to consider them as a part of linguistics. Jakobson, indeed, famously put forward a functional model of language and communication, which integrates the idea of the poeticity of language in its midst. In short, Jakobson's model of the functions of

¹¹¹ In Hansen-Löve's reconstruction of Russian Formalism, FI, or first phase of formalism corresponds more or less to the early work of Šklovskij and the rawest form of the theory of estrangement. The FII, or second phase, involves the earlier work of Tynjanov or Eichenbaum. Hansen-Löve adds a third phase (FIII), which corresponds to the later work of Tynjanov, and that of Jakobson.

language distinguishes six elements, or factors of communication, that are necessary for communication to occur: (1) context, (2) addresser (sender), (3) addressee (receiver), (4) contact, (5) common code and (6) message. To each of these factors corresponds a communicative function: (1) referential, (2) emotive, (3) conative, (4) phatic, (5) metalingual, (6) poetic. Jakobson's model is often presented in the form of the following diagram:



In Jakobson's theories, the very broad and vague notion of estrangement, or even the Tynjanov's literary one of "dominant" are 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 applying to perception in general as is the case of estrangement, the poetic function operates, as Jakobson puts it, "by promoting the palpability of signs" (Jakobson, 1981 [1968], 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.¹¹² Linguistic signs are concrete objects, whose pure expressivity and existence as sign derive primarily not from their transitive functions (cognitive, deictic, communicative, 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.

Crucially, it is my belief that this idea that a sign derives its meaning and existence from its expressive perceptual structuration is also to be found in Jakobson's scientific concept of the phoneme. For Jakobson, indeed, the phoneme is constituted

¹¹² One finds this idea of the specific materiality of language also in Tynjanov, Jakubinskij, Volosinov, Bachtin, even Vygotskij (cf. Friedrich, 1993)

of a hierarchy of distinctive phonetic features. In other words, one finds in this definition the hierarchical, concrete structure already implied by Tynjanov. On top of this though, that structure is now analysed in purely structural terms: the concrete form of the phoneme is an oppositive and meaningful structure. In short, despite restricting Šklovskij's ideas on aesthetic form and perception to the specific phenomenon of language and giving them a strictly linguistic interpretation, Jakobson's work highlights their relevance and their pliability to the structuralist notions of system, distinctive features and differential articulation: it presents us with a type of object, the linguistic sign, that displays the property of being essentially a concrete perceptual form, or rather, an expressive, systematically articulated structure. Much more importantly, it provides us with a model and a undoubtedly scientific example of "concrete form" that can be systemised in philosophical terms, or gives sufficient indications as to how to do so in an original fashion.

I will come back to the question of the phoneme and detail its historical evolution as a concept, especially in the Soviet context, in order to catch a more clear glimpse of the idea of concrete perceptual structure it seems to demonstrate, and further discuss the implications of the structural theory of perception it seems to imply. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to clarify the assumption that Jakobson's structural linguistics stands out as a mature, elaborate expression of early formalist aesthetic theory, and to add a few more observations as to why it provides a more mature idea of "concrete form", such as anticipated in incoherent terms in Šklovskij's earlier aesthetic speculations.

Such an assertion, indeed, is neither unproblematic, nor self-evident. True, as I mentioned, one can definitely attest of a transition from Šklovskij's to Jakobson's literary theory, through Eichenbaum, Tynjanov, and concepts such as the "dominant", which appear explicitly and with the same definition in all their theories. Despite these obvious influences, however, there are problems with my assertion which, on top of the continuity of formalist literary theory, also presumes a conceptual passage from formalism to structuralism, and from literary theory to linguistics. Both of these passages, however, are somewhat delicate and controversial. In order to defend and specify the idea that Jakobson's linguistics does indeed result, or is coextensive with the aesthetic intuitions of Formalism on the poetic, concrete and formal nature of

language, I wish therefore to spare here a few thoughts on the role of linguistics within Russian Formalism, and its relation to the evolution and development of structural linguistics.

One obvious problem with stating that Jakobson's structural linguistics, whether it be his function model of language or his phonology, appears as the crowning achievement of Russian Formalism, indeed, is that linguistics occupied a competing, separate role in the evolution of Russian Formalism. As is well known, Russian Formalism was made up essentially of two groups, the OPOJAZ in St-Petersburg, and the Moscow Linguistic Circle (in Moscow obviously). Traditionally, the OPOJAZ group is associated with the figures of Šklovskij, Tynjanov and Eichenbaum, and is profiled both as the real centre of Russian Formalism,¹¹³ and as clearly *literary theoretical* society. On the other hand, the MLK and Jakobson in particular are presented as the bearer of the linguistic tradition of Russian Formalism (Erich, 1995, Aucouturier, 1994). Because of its isolation from the literary Petersburg group and its much lesser role, the role of the MLK, and with it of linguistics, seems therefore to have been secondary and somewhat exoteric to Russian Formalism. As such, it seems problematic to argue for an organic development of literary theory and linguistics within formalism, or to present linguistics as the summit of the Formalists achievements.

Now, it should be said that the OPOJAZ- literary theory vs. MLK linguistics distinction is not entirely correct. It is important to note that the formalist linguists formed not one, but two quite distinctive groups: the institutional Moscow Linguistic Circle on the one hand, of which Roman Jakobson, Grigorij Vinokur and Nikolaj Trubeckoj were members, and the more loosely defined "St-Petersburg School of Linguistics" on the other, which mostly regrouped former students of Baudouin de Courtenay such as Lev Ščerba, Lev Jakubinskij, and Evgenij Polivanov. In that sense, linguistics and linguists must be said to have played a significant role in the Petersburgian context itself. The presence of linguists in both the centres of Russian Formalism also seem to point to interactions between the literary tendencies of the OPOJAZ, and the linguistic one of the MLK that went further than the simple mediation through Jakobson. Indeed, I certainly believe that the St-Petersburg linguists such as Jakubinskij

¹¹³ If this thesis is seldom made explicitly, the amount of interest given to the triumvirate Šklovskij-Eichenbaum-Tynjanov in relation to the other formalists certainly makes that point implicitly (cf. Robel, 2005, p.3).

and Polivanov provide a number of extra valuable arguments attesting of the links and evolution between the OPOJAZ- Šklovskij theories and the structural linguistics of Jakobson. Unfortunately, that argument is also suspicious and contested.

For one, the members of the two groups entertained friendly contacts, but their conception and practice of linguistics differed from the start and never converged. The St-Petersburg linguists stood at first under the influence of Baudouin de Courtenay's functionalist and psychological stance. They were also extremely interested in the social nature of language and the concrete, live contexts of its uses. As a result, they came in close contact with the *Institute of the Living Word (Institut Živogo Slova)* – of which Ščerba and Jakubinskij were collaborators – and developed a conception of language as living speech. Similarly, they profited themselves (Polivanov in particular) as the forefathers of pragmatics. In the 1930s, most of the Petersburg scholars evolved towards a Marxist – in the case of Jakubinskij, even Marrist – conception of linguistics, edged on not strictly by political motives, but by their scientific interest in socio-linguistics. By contrast, the Moscow linguists were swayed by the prominent scholars Filip Fortunatov and Alexej Šahmatov, who worked in the tradition of Indo-European linguistics. They thus leant towards traditional topics, such as dialectology and the history of Russian and Slavic languages, and came to explicitly reject the psychological views of Baudouin de Courtenay and his followers. Far from turning towards the idea of language as living speech, their conception of language remained oriented towards formal questions, such as syntax and morphology. Crucially, it was solely linguists from the MLK, such as Jakobson and Trubeckoj, who eventually embraced structuralism and thus tied formalism directly to structural linguistics.

Complicating the picture even more, neither the St-Petersburg School nor the MLK functioned as well-disciplined, monolithic groups: there were wide divergences amongst their own members. Each formalist linguist had his idiosyncratic conception of language and linguistics, with his own special fields of interest, not all relevant to formalism. Jakubinskij's most substantive work concerns the unformalistic theme of dialogical speech. Polivanov's main area of expertise was in Oriental languages, and one of his major contributions was to criticise a concept of general linguistics too exclusively orientated towards Indo-European languages. Even Jakobson's work stretched to fields extraneous to formalism, such as Eurasian theory, an interest he shared with Trubeckoj. In the context of Russian formalism, such lack of consensus

is not in the least surprising. It confronts us in the field of linguistics with a situation similar to that of formalist literary theory, i.e. a loose conceptual framework encompassing an impressive number of diverging positions and interests, the diversity of which the formalists readily acknowledged. Nonetheless, the formalist linguistic output is too diverse and incoherent to provide evidence of the gradual and integrated evolution of a specifically formalist conception of linguistics towards Jakobson's structural model. Worse, some experts go as far as to doubt any significant influence from other formalist linguists (in particular from the St-Petersburg School) on the mature work of Jakobson and the structural trend he represents, laying that influence directly at Saussure's feet instead (cf. for example Koerner, 1997, p.167). Reflecting such a view, the usual accounts of formalism's contribution to structural linguistics have often brushed aside the achievements of the St-Petersburg School and focussed exclusively on the contribution of the "structuralist" MLK or, even more so, on Jakobson's and Trubeckoj's role within the CLP (cf. Fontaine, 1975, Toman, 1995, etc.).

As it is, the disjunctive nature of the formalists' linguistic output and the apparent disconnection from the literary theoretical centre and the linguistic work of the St-Petersburg OPOJAZ from the structurally-oriented Muscovites seem to spell serious trouble for the idea of a direct transition and significant influence of early formalism on Jakobson's structural linguistics. The want of a sufficiently persistent and well-defined formalist framework makes it almost inevitable to attribute the source of Jakobson's structural ideas to Saussure's apparently much better defined and stable model. Instead of the formalist idea of concrete form and impressive difference, it would thus seem that the special status of the sign must be understood in Saussurean terms, as a distinction between signifier and signified. The established view in the canonical accounts of the history of linguistics is certainly that, except for the later work of Jakobson and Trubeckoj in Prague (who are mostly seen as echoing or subordinated to Saussure), Russian formalism plays a marginal role in the development of structural linguistics or the history of general linguistics (cf. Robbins, 2001; Ducrot-Schaeffer, 1991, etc.).

In contrast to these standard views of the separate role of linguistics in the evolution of Formalism's literary theory and its relative significance towards the Saussurean

paradigm in structural linguistics, I wish now to suggest that Jakobson's structural linguistics does appear as the crystallisation of its literary theoretical, or generally poetic and aesthetic assumptions and, consequently, as the product of a typically formalist conception of linguistics, which differs significantly from the Saussurean model. The obligatory starting point, when discussing the adjustment or development of formalist poetics into structural linguistics, has to be the opposition between formalist literary theorists and linguists. Obviously, one cannot simply state that formalist poetics naturally evolved towards linguistics when such prominent formalists as Šklovskij and Eichenbaum unreservedly rejected the idea that their theories should be systemised in a linguistic perspective. To them, poetics must remain a literary theory, i.e. an autonomous discipline, focussed on its specific object of inquiry and governed by its own, appropriate methods. As a result, the "linguistification" of formalist poetics appears, at first glance, as a methodological decision, which as such can be rejected, and firmly was in Šklovskij's or Eichenbaum's cases. Accordingly, one has to face the eventuality that linguistics does not play a necessary, consolidating role in the development of early formalist ideas in literary theory, but rather functions as a distinct alternative, providing an altogether different perspective on poetics.

A closer look reveals that, quite to the contrary, formalist linguistic poetics was never really sundered from the insights of formalist literary theory, but directly builds upon the conceptual basis it outlines. For one, even Šklovskij, Eichenbaum or Tynjanov did not manage to trace a clear boundary between linguistics and literary theory. One can mention, for example, the matter of Šklovskij's natural resort to linguistic arguments in "Art as Device".¹¹⁴ This in itself, of course, does not compromise his rejection of linguistics as a conceptual model for literary theory: he makes only perfunctory use of linguistic facts or observations, and effectively grounds his theory not on linguistic premises, but literary and aesthetical ones (Potebnja, Veselovskij, Christiansen, Bergson, etc.). Generally speaking, Šklovskij suffered no qualms in using punctual linguistic observations as buttress for his theories, but objected to the notion that linguistics had a general, methodological significance for literary theory.

As it happens, however, Šklovskij's seminal argument in "Art as Device", even though it does not rely on linguistics as such, does display strong general linguistic

¹¹⁴ In effect, he often references the linguistic achievements of his formalist colleagues Jakubinskij and Polivanov

implications. One recalls that his essential thesis is that poetic language, contrary to the interpretation defended by Potebnja, is not defined by its ties with extra-linguistic "images" (obrazy), but with the devices of language itself. Šklovskij's theory interprets literature or "literariness" as an artefact of the immanent properties of language, but not of symbolic meaning, or any other external factor. This radically new approach thereby clearly engages the definition of language itself, and its linguistic features. Šklovskij, by the by, was sufficiently aware of this linguistic significance of his idiosyncratic view of poetics to seek out the opinion of Baudouin de Courtenay.

The fact of the matter is that, in the wake of Russian futurism, Šklovskij's formulates in his poetics a new and unconventional interpretation of the nature of language, which conceptualises properties unaccounted for by traditional linguistic theories. Moreover, as his primary sources come from literature or speculative aesthetics, his theory accordingly lacks a scientific, linguistic underpinning. The very definition of language and its properties being at stake, however, such linguistic foundations should be forthcoming. In other words, because of its obvious linguistic implications and even if one follows Šklovskij in refusing to make literary theory a methodological subfield of linguistics, one still must allow a degree of compatibility between the axioms of his poetics and those of a coherent theory of general linguistics. The relevant question here has shifted from the putative methodological autonomy of poetics from linguistics, to whether Šklovskij's poetics is conceptually solid enough to withstand a thorough linguistic analysis.

When one does subject the conception of language present in Šklovskij's poetics even to a cursory linguistic analysis, it is found wanting in some fundamental aspects. For example, Šklovskij posits a substantial, hypostatic distinction between poetic and prosaic language, which he sees, in effect, as two separate languages. This opposition he adopts critically from Potebnja, justifying it in his own perspective through the objective differences in the uses and properties of poetic and prosaic language. But, patently, there is no linguistically founded argument for such an unambiguous and strong binary distinction. To be sure, there are linguistically significant divergences between poetic and prosaic uses of language, as Šklovskij is prompt to point out. But there is no obvious specifically linguistic reason for stopping at the prosaic-poetic distinction, and not defending the existence of a whole string of other languages (verse, scientific, rhetorical, etc.) on the simple basis of straightforward divergences in their uses.

The problem gets even worse when one considers the criterion used by Šklovskij to operate his binary distinction. That criterion is, of course, estrangement. For Šklovskij, simply put, poetic language defamiliarises, whereas prosaic language does not. In the first place, it is debatable whether estrangement is *per se* a valid linguistic criterion. But even if it were, it cannot be applied effectively and consistently to discriminate poetic from prosaic language. Indeed, *any* given language occurrence might defamiliarise in one case, and be processed automatically in the other, implying that the exact same language occurrence might be alternatively poetic or prosaic. As Jakobson points out later in "What is Poetry?", this holds true from language's smallest elements to the larger narrative structures of entire texts (cf. Jakobson, 1979, p.546). It is thus in fact untenable - whether on a linguistic or a literary theoretical basis - to define poetic language through estrangement and at the same time posit a substantial opposition between poetic and prosaic instances of language.

It is not uninteresting to mention here that the separation of poetic from prosaic language is in fact one of the enabling theoretical moves made by the early formalists of the OPOJAZ. Indeed, they first tried to define their specific object of study by firmly isolating poetic language from other linguistic uses and occurrences. Part of the rationale behind the distinction of poetic from prosaic language, moreover, was to evacuate from the field of poetics the questions and problems of traditional linguistics - which the formalists thought were ineffective for poetical analysis - and confine their relevance to prosaic language. The paradoxical nature of Šklovskij's binary conception of language is a logical collateral consequence of such a move, since evacuating the general problems of linguistics obviously precludes providing a proper account of the status and role of poetic instances in terms of their relation with language (and for example meaning and semantics) as a whole. Interestingly, I also mentioned that Tynjanov's idea of the dynamic form suffers from the same problem, namely, it cannot account for the "dynamic hierarchy of linguistic elements" implied by verse in terms of the properly syntactic, semantic and morphological properties of language.

In summary, the main failure of Šklovskij's or Tynjanov's theory, from a linguistic perspective, is that it does not properly account for the relation between language's poetic dimension and its more general properties. To put it another way, despite making poetry and literature a function of language, Šklovskij and Tynjanov refuse or

are incapable of grounding that function coherently on the properties of language, and hypostasise it into a different kind of language altogether. Most problematically, this crystallises in the obvious paradox of his conception of language, which in fact seeks to avoid the question of that relation altogether by postulating a clear divergence between poetic and non-poetic uses of language. It also leads to a general weakness of his literary theoretical assumptions, which lack the requested power and precision to suitably analyse the intricate effects of poetic uses of language. Obviously, therefore, and contrary to Šklovskij's instincts, a more complex linguistic approach of the general properties of language is definitely required, in order to achieve a satisfactory explanation of the role of the poetic dimension within the general economy of language, and consequently, to provide firmer grounds for the formalist poetics.

In that respect, it is not possible to consider the linguistic trend of formalism as a mere methodological alternative to literary theory. On the contrary, it is a necessary component in the conceptual maturation of formalism as a whole towards a more elaborate understanding of poetic language. Again, this does not mean that poetics as a whole must or can be subsumed to linguistics and its methods. One has to agree with Šklovskij that many problems of poetics can find no answers on the terrain of linguistics alone and require the specific framework of literary theory. The point, however, is that some problems of poetics do require a linguistic investigation, and more generally, that there can be no consistent theory of poetics without a sound linguistic basis.

Before turning to the question of how the linguists among the formalists proceeded to provide the linguistic basis missing in Šklovskij's or Eichenbaum's work, we must add a short comment on the latter two's reluctance towards linguistics. Indeed, one should understand that the linguistics on offer to the early formalists in the mid 1910s was, with the notable exception of Baudouin de Courtenay, a traditional brand of neo-grammarians linguistics, which displayed all the features of positivism they were trying to fight off with their theory. Linguistics, in fact, offered formalists precisely what they did not want, i.e. a wide-ranging and disjointed array of facts and observations, but no unifying vision of what might be the universal feature of all poetic texts. In that respect, it is not all that surprising that they sought to keep it at arms length, and did not see in it a useful conceptual resource, quite to the contrary.

To nuance therefore the impression which might arise from our considerations so far, the fact that the Russian formalists did have to turn to linguistics should not be seen as a clear refutation of their suspicions towards it. In fact, the later formalist linguists did not make use of the established linguistics rejected by Šklovskij *et alia*, or adapted their poetics to its models. Rather, they sought to give shape to poetic insights such as Šklovskij's in a new linguistic framework, which they therefore directly contributed to create, and which sprung in great part from their specific concerns in poetics. This is especially true with regard to the two biggest problems we highlighted in Šklovskij's model, namely the need to conceptualise the relation of poetic language with language as a whole, and the need to explain the functioning of poetic devices at the level of their linguistic effectiveness. In both these areas, the formalists came up with their own original linguistic notions.

Our brief discussion of the weak points in Šklovskij's poetics has outlined for us the main specifically linguistic problem pertaining to poetics which faced the formalists, namely the question of the wider role or function of the poetic dimension within language, and therefore, of the relation between the pure, concrete expressive forms of "poetic language" and their relation with the semantic, symbolic or denotative functions of prosaic language. In the perspective of formalist theory, that question takes on, as we have also hinted at, two main aspects. On the one hand, the formalists had to explain and justify at a general level the relation of poetic instances of language to non-poetic ones. On the other hand, they had to detail more precisely the features which define or enable poetic and literary uses of language, in terms of the inner structure of language, i.e. the relation between sound and meaning, or between syntactical form and semantics.

Starting with the first of these issues, we saw that the main difficulty or paradox flowing from the theory of estrangement in that regard was that it couldn't account for the simple fact that a single linguistic occurrence might be respectively poetic or prosaic. Because of this possible alternation, poetic instances of language cannot be explained as inherently different from non-poetic ones, but require to be justified in relation to a unified definition of language and its properties. In other words, providing a coherent linguistic definition of the poetic dimension of language does not only imply uncovering it as a special facet of language (as Šklovskij had done). One has

to rethink altogether and profoundly modify the general definition of language, in order to account for and explain its poetic features in accordance and in relation (and not only in opposition) with its normal, prosaic characteristics.

The formalist linguists successfully achieved the objective of integrating the poetic dimension of language to a theory of general linguistics only through a number of intermediary stages. A good example of an early, insufficient attempt is the work of Evgenij Polivanov. In his conception of linguistics, poetics is considered as relevant, but appears only as a peripheral field. The poetical forms of language are a sort of add-on property, an extra dimension, which does not have any wider bearing on the nature of language itself. Poetical questions are analysed by Polivanov with the tools of linguistics, but as such, they don't have any particular significance, nor do they provide conceptual feedback on the basic features of language. When considering questions of poetics, Polivanov is mainly interested in analysing the dependence of poetry and literature on the core linguistic features (syntax, morphology, phonetics) of a given language.¹¹⁵ Thereby, he very much neglects to consider the mirroring problem, i.e. the implications that the mere existence of poetic and literary forms might have for the understanding of these core linguistic features.

In a perspective such as Polivanov's, poetics is thus completely subsumed to the conceptual framework of linguistics. This means it does not contribute anything conceptually to linguistics and, even more disappointingly, that the fundamental linguistic questions raised by poetics (e.g. the definition of poetic language, its relation to other language forms, etc.) are left begging. To a certain extent, it is also a conception of this type that prevails in the early work of Jakobson, who sought to define poetic language as a detached, autonomous dialect governed by its specific rules. There again, poetics and poetic language appear as a peripheral and well delimited field, fitting in without much conceptual ado into the framework of classical linguistics and having only very limited effect on the general definition of language.

In the work of Polivanov's OPOJAZ colleague, Lev Jakubinskij, the picture presented by the place of poetic language within linguistics is already very different. Indeed, Jakubinskij is not content with devolving a certain amount of attention to problems of poetics. On the contrary, he recognizes that the existence of a poetic dimension actually influences the very essence of language itself and requires to be theorised at

¹¹⁵ This project is described by Robel (2005) and Leontev (1983)

the level of general linguistics. To be more precise, Jakubinskij's basic assumption, in fact, is that by its very nature, language occurs in a wide array of different instances and uses. A proper definition must therefore take into account this multi-faceted dimension of language. For Jakubinskij, poetic language is one amongst many language uses (scientific, rhetorical, etc.) and it is as such that it must be integrated to the definition of language.

The key concepts which allow Jakubinskij to conceptualise the unity of language despite the multiplicity of its instances are those of function, which he takes from Baudouin de Courtenay, and, later on, of "speech form" (rečevaja forma).¹¹⁶ Indeed, according to Jakubinskij, language is always used in a certain function, which determines the specific pragmatic conditions of its use, as well as its formal structure and properties. Language occurs therefore in specific and extremely varied types of "speech form", the properties of which must become the object of specialised linguistic analysis. Jakubinskij himself went on to focus on the particular properties of "dialogical speech", but it is obvious from his model that poetic language can also be analysed as a particular speech form, resulting from a particular, literary functional use.

The quantum leap between the šklovskian theory of a binary, substantial opposition between two hypostasis of language, and Jakubinskij's multi-functional perspective is that Jakubinskij view, there is basically just one, unified language. The manifold (and not only twofold) of its instances is explained through the variety of its functions and the resulting forms they induce. Thus, poetic language is not a separate hypostasis but rather the particular form that normal language takes when used in its poetic function. Similarly, prosaic language is not diametrically opposed to poetic language, but is itself the particular instance of language used in its daily, prosaic function. Jakubinskij's functionalist model is a very important step towards integrating the problems of poetics to the general definition of language. Poetic language is, probably for the first time in the history of linguistics, given a strong conceptual foundation within general linguistics and taken into account in the very definition of language. There is a drawback to this model, however, as it does not specify any possible modalities of the synchronic interactions between the different functions of language. Indeed, they seem to coexist next to each other, without interlocking.

¹¹⁶ This concept first emerges in "On Dialogical Speech", 1921.

Language is used exclusively either in one function or the other, and the speech forms in which it is instantiated are thus also clearly distinguishable from one another. Correspondingly, it is also clearly inadequate to solve the problems linked to the versatility of language, i.e. its ability to be poetic on one occasion and prosaic on the other. This is due to the way in which Jakubinskij construes the concept of function. In his interpretation, the function defines the extra-linguistic *telos* or objective which is aimed at in a particular use of language. Thus, the specific features of a speech occurrence are not defined so much in terms of its internal structure, as in terms of the extra-linguistic, teleological context in which it occurs. Because the function of a speech occurrence receives its unity from the objective towards which the latter is oriented, it is not clear how several functions could interact, unless of course, a speech occurrence was made to pursue several objectives at the same time, and therefore fulfil several functions. But even then, it would seem that we are dealing more with a superposition, than a synchronic interrelation.

Jakubinskij was not unaware of this problem and therefore introduced the concept of "speech form", where he tried, in a typically formalist gesture, to re-centre the linguistic analysis on the intrinsic properties of the concrete language utterance, rather than its external, teleological co-factors. This conceptual move, however, is not wholly successful, because, whatever its other merits, it still considers the properties of a given speech form as a unity, as one particular aspect of language use, distinct as a *whole* of the others. The idea of a synchronic composition or interrelation of several forms or functions is still missing. Poetic functions or poetic forms thus still constitute one particular use of language, clearly distinct and different from all the others. In that sense, Jakubinskij's model is not that much dissimilar to Polivanov's, as poetics again appear as a regional field of study, which can (and in Jakubinskij's conception, should) be investigated separately.

The model which does provide this integration and impact of the poetic dimension of language is Jakobson's. It is interesting to note that it builds on the Jakubinskij's functionalist perspective, via the communication model suggested by Karl Bühler, itself inspired by Jakubinskij. As we mentioned earlier, this linearity is a strong argument to indeed see a continuity within formalist linguistics, all the more because the adoption of the functionalist model is very much conditioned by the requirement of poetics. Indeed, in his earliest work, Jakobson seem to adopt a more typically

šklovskian position of separating poetic speech from prosaic one. This he did not do through defamiliarisation, but in an attempt to consider poetic speech as a kind of dialect, with its own rules and grammar. The failure of these attempts led him to seek another solution, which he found in the St-Petersburg functionalism.

The difference between Jakubinskij's and Jakobson's functionalism is that Jakobson does not consider language as a bundle of different functions and forms, but sees rather all its functions implied together, but to varying extents and degrees in a given speech act. The functions defined by Jakobson are thus very different from those of Jakubinskij: they are much less orientated on the general contextual telos of a speech utterance, but on the specific conditions of communication.. Thus Jakobson does not arrive with "cultural" categories such as "scientific" or "rhetorical" speech, but much more precise functions detailing the process of communication itself (enunciation, reception, etc.). Now, because of this synchronicity and verticality of language functions, the poetic function is always implied in any given speech act or language occurrence. This means that poetics is now integrated at the core of general linguistics, since it analyses an essential, inevitable dimension of language. It is not only relevant in the analysis of clearly literary or poetical texts, in which the poetic function is dominant, but it also has an impact on "prosaic" texts, where its influence is minimum, but still conditions the very modalities in which language actually functions. From the point of view of the question of poetic - prosaic language, the problem is solved: there are indeed different uses of language, which depend on the relative dominance of a function on the others. They are not substantially and categorically distinct; there is an infinite shade of gray between the relative importance of functions. But on the other hand, the poetic function is still sufficiently distinctive to be studied on its own terms, and its existence within language has thus certainly been confirmed and justified.

Chapter 6

Jakobson's Phoneme as a Concrete Expressive Sign

In essence, Jakobson's functional poetics offers us two crucial insights with regard to the aesthetic assumptions of the early formalists on the perceptibility of form. Firstly, by singling out the "material" or "palpable" layer of language and integrating that dimension into a linguistic model as one of the essential features of its expressivity, Jakobson gives both a solid basis and further credence to the vague intuitions of the first formalists. Secondly, it provides us with a first glimpse of the adaptability of the early formalists' aesthetic or poetic insights into a structuralist mould. Much more, as a result of this integration to his linguistic model of the poetic perceptibility of language through the idea of the dominant, Jakobson confirms the potential originality of the structural model produced by the early formalists' insights. Indeed, the immanent poetic nature of language and the fact that its expressivity, according to Jakobson, is to be understood in terms of its concrete perceptibility as an articulated, hierarchical system both clearly marks it out as a structural model that is fundamentally distinct from that of Saussure. Instead of the classical idea that the value of the linguistic sign derives from pure differential oppositions, Jakobson's model seems to suggest that linguistic value derives from the concrete articulation of the sign as a perceptual, phenomenological given.

Admittedly, Jakobson's considerations on the poetic or concrete expressivity of language remain somewhat vague. On the one hand, there is absolutely no doubt that he does consider language as being essentially poetic, or rather, that he sees the poetic function of language as an essential dimension of language, which influences its whole definition. His many attempts to provide a "grammar of poetry or a poetry of grammar" – a project already anticipated by Polivanov (Polivanov, 1963) – confirm this essential insight, that language and its traditional functions (descriptive, communicative, conative, etc.) cannot be considered independently of its poetic dimension. His functional model certainly says as much. On the other hand, however, despite the clear, central role given to poetics, and Jakobson's successful attempt to integrate it to the definition of language itself, this general importance accorded to poetics and the concrete expressivity of language remains too vague and imprecise,

especially with regard to its structural dimension, and the pure semantic of language. For that reason, I wish now in this chapter to turn my focus to a more limited case, in which the implications and meaning of Jakobson's conception of the concrete, structural expressivity of language can be highlighted precisely and in a more convincing way. That more limited case is that of phonology and the phoneme.

One should not be surprised by the fact that it is phonology that can best demonstrate the "formalist" originality of Jakobson's conception of language and of the expressivity of the linguistic sign. The question of the phoneme, indeed, brings up with particular acuity the problem of the relation of sound and sense, or in other words, the relation between the "material", phonetic aspect of language, and its formal, semantic dimension – and therefore the idea of concrete form. In fact, it offers a kind of paradigmatic case and an opportunity to assess that problem in a very limited and condensed context (Holenstein, 1976), instead of the infinitely complex and multi-layered one of poetic language and literature. What is more, the question of the phonetic nature of language is none the less tightly connected in Jakobson's work with that of its poeticity. Typically, as Kiparsky underlines, "the idea of a system of relevant phonological oppositions appears there [O češskom stixu] and is shown to account for otherwise puzzling differences between Russian and Czech versification, years before its application to historical phonology and in the *Remarques* (1929) (Kiparsky, 1983, p.20)

Now, in order to outline Jakobson's conception of phonology and comment on its link with the idea of concrete form and the "palpable" expressivity of the sign, one must again turn to his connection with Russian Formalism. On the one hand, indeed, there is no question that phonology was a privileged field of inquiry of the linguistically-oriented formalists. Next to poetics, it is the single topic to which they devoted the most attention: the near entirety of Trubeckoj's and well over half of Polivanov's work touch upon questions of phonology and phonetics. Šcerba, Jakubinskij, Bernstein, Kušner and, of course, Jakobson, all wrote extensively on the subject. Moreover, it is a field in which they realised some of their most long-lasting and widely recognised accomplishments. Trubeckoj's "Grundzüge der Phonologie" in effect laid down the very foundations of the discipline. Quite simply put, when considering matters in this way, it seems there would be no phonology as we know it without the formalists.

However important the role played by phonology – or phonological considerations – in the work of the Russian Formalists, though, one must again confront the problem of the links of Jakobson's phonology in particular, with the tradition of Russian Formalism. Just as was the case with his functional model of linguistics, indeed, the links of his phonological ideas to the Formalists core tenets, or indeed, to the work of his formalist colleagues are contested. To a certain extent, one even has to admit that the relations between Jakobson's phonology and Russian Formalism is even more contested than his links to the formalists poetics. In effect, whereas, from a linguistic point of view (the literary theoretical links are perfectly well accepted), Jakobson's debt to Russian Formalism is more often than not neglected in connection to the poetic aspects of his linguistic model (along with that poetic aspect itself, one should add), the connections of Jakobson's phonology with the other Russian Formalists, or anybody else than Saussure, has in fact directly been attacked and called into question (cf. Koerner, 1997; Harris, 2003).

The obvious problem, of course, is that much of the central contributions made by "formalists" to phonology were not made before the late 1920s – a time when formalism was already at its agony – and most of them actually came much later. Trubeckoj's *Grundzüge*, to take the most flagrant example, dates as far back as 1939. Jakobson's first decisive contributions to the topic, "On Czech Verse" also date from the mid to late 1920s. In fact, even the work of the Prague Circle itself did not start until 1928: "phonology was not really the most popular theme in the earliest days of the Circle. Lectures on arguably phonological topics began to appear only in 1928, in connection with preparations for the congress in the Hague" (Toman, 1995, p.145). In other words, it would seem as if phonology is in fact a purely structuralist phenomenon, with barely any input from the Formalists. True, one might want to name Polivanov's, Jakubinskij's and Ščerba's work as being more closely identifiable with formalism. But, the theoretical ties of these thinkers with formalism are far from straightforward. Moreover, their linguistic ideas betray the influence of Baudouin de Courtenay more than that of formalism, and neither of them formulated or discussed any of the significant tenets of the OPOJAZ (by contrast, for example, with Jakubinskij, who made the famous distinction between poetical and practical language). Because they do not explicitly state formalist hypothesis, or are presented as specifically formalist, it is therefore a bit of a long shot to categorise their work on phonology as specifically formalist.

These arguments against assigning a significant and specific role to formalist ideas in respect to the evolution of phonology do not mean one should discard their importance right out of hand. Indeed, formalism spans a decisive period in the development of phonology – from the early 1910s, the publication of Saussure's *Cours* and Baudouin de Courtenay's latest work to the 30s and Trubeckoj's *Grundzüge* – which corresponds to the birth process so to speak of the new discipline. On top of this chronological relevance, formalism also provides the personal links between the very first phases of phonology (Baudouin de Courtenay and the Kazan School) and the mature structural phonology of Trubeckoj and Jakobson: Polivanov and Ščerba were the foremost propagators and continuators of Baudouin de Courtenay's psychophonetics, and it was from a gradually more critical position towards these views that Trubeckoj and Jakobson developed their own theory. As a delivered "end product", phonology might therefore be essentially structuralist, but during its embryonic phase, one might want to speculate that it went through more typically formalist stages, or profited from formalist influences. There are two elements in particular we want to consider in respect to this hypothesis.

The first is the context in which phonology arose, namely the epistemological crisis of the early XXth century, during which the tenets of positivism were sharply criticised and new paradigms put forward, next to the empiricism of the natural sciences (Husserl's phenomenology, Dilthey's hermeneutics, etc.). Phonology itself emerged as a direct product of this crisis of empiricism, more specifically, as a result of the inability of experimental phonetics to discriminate linguistically relevant data (cf. Sériot, 2003). Its rise was moreover supported and made possible by the shift in linguistics – which was in tune with the general epistemological upheaval – from the "organistic" view defended by Schleicher and the naturalist, positivist model of the Neo-grammarians to the "systemic" and what might want to term "geisteswissenschaftlich" approaches put forward by Baudouin de Courtenay and Saussure. Now, as has long been shown by Peter Steiner and others (Ehlers, Tchougounnikov), Russian formalism – itself yet another manifestation of a general reaction against positivism – also went through this paradigmatic shift from an "organic" to a "systemic" metaphor; in a way, formalism itself evolved (or dissolved) into structuralism. In that sense, one can see it as accompanying the development of phonology towards a structural perspective, and providing a favourable maturation environment or laboratory.

Secondly, one has to take into account the fact that there is one aspect of the formalists' work which is absolutely germane with phonology (or phonetics), and that is their interest for the sound aspects of poetical language and the relation between sound and meaning in poetry. Indeed, there are even examples of a specifically phonological or phonetic concern for poetic matters in articles by Jakubinskij and Polivanov (one can cite Jakubinskij's "Sound-Gestures in the Japanese Language" or "The *Sounds* of Poetic Language"). These articles, moreover, correspond to the earliest phase of formalism and take up typically formalist theses on the nature of poetic language (impeding of articulation, intrinsic value of spoken sounds, etc.): the link between formalism and phonology is here absolutely straightforward. Jakobson displays the same fascination for such topics, witness his articles on the futurist zaum, and later, in an already more mature and important text, on Czech and Russian verse.

In summary, the case of Russian formalism and phonology seems contrasted. On the one hand, there seems to be plenty of reasons to assume that phonology is indeed tightly connected with formalism and that Jakobson's theory might very well express its aesthetic idea of the perceptibility of form in an original and coherent way. However, the lack of integration of phonology within formalism, plus the lack of coherence of formalist linguistics means that, if one is to draw useful and convincing parallels between the formalists' aesthetics or poetics and Jakobson's phonology, one will have to proceed with an indirect argument, by retracing the evolution of phonology itself and proceeding then to a comparative exercise between its evolution and the principles of formalism. Indeed, as I have just mentioned, it is not possible to present phonology as a direct emanation of formalist thinking. The best one can do, and which, in my opinion is enough, since my point is not to defend the idea of a causal evolution, but rather highlight the plausibility of a conceptual development, is to underline how it relates to formalist aesthetic ideas, and differs from other standard conceptions of structuralism, especially Saussure.

In effect, one of the biggest problems in defending the originality of Jakobson's phonology is with regard to his position vis-à-vis those of Saussure. As was the case with Jakobson's functional model, the lack of coherence of the "formalist linguistics" means that the biggest influence on his conceptions of phonological structure,

opposition, etc. have been traced back to Saussure. The fundamental assumption of my hypothesis on the particular concrete expressivity of Jakobson's conception of language and the phoneme, though is precisely that it is not abstractly Saussurean, but formalist. Now, for obvious methodological and thematic reasons, I will not venture here to offer a full-blown history of phonology. My ambition here is only to quickly re-contextualise the circumstances that presided to phonology's rise in order to distance it from traditional interpretations that rely to heavily on a saussurean perspective, and then to highlight a number of conceptions of the phoneme, which point both to the originality of Jakobson's conception, and its ties with the logic of Russian Formalism' aesthetics.

In order to make my point in the most convincing possible way, it is useful to start here by recalling a number of conventional wisdoms about the history of structural phonology.¹¹⁷ The first of these is that the Prague Circle is universally recognised as having given birth to structural phonology. The Russians contributions at the conference in The Hague in 1928 and Trubeckoj's *Grundzüge der Phonologie* are acknowledged as the "manifestos" of the discipline. Secondly, the structural phonology of Prague – as Prague structuralism in its entirety and all the other influential structuralist schools (Copenhagen, Paris, etc.) – is generally presented as being fundamentally influenced by Saussure and the Geneva School of linguistics. Some suggestions are that the Prague linguists were the first to apply Saussure's general and abstract principles to a concrete field of linguistics (Fontaine, 1974). Others, such as Steiner's is that "the work of F. de Saussure was one of the fundamental sources of inspiration of the Prague Linguistic Circle, and the saussurean idea which influenced it most was the concept of "langue" (Steiner, 1978, p.357). Thirdly, it is assumed that the fundamental methodological decisions taken by Trubeckoj in the *Grundzüge*, is to ground the distinction between phonetics and phonology and the Saussurean opposition between *langue* and *parole* (Trubeckoj, 1986, p.4).

This third conventional wisdom, which is obviously confirmed by Trubeckoj's own statement, and serves so to speak as a confirmation for the two other assumptions about Prague phonology, is of course particularly embarrassing in view of defending the idea that the Prague conception of the phoneme owes in fact much to the

¹¹⁷ On all these point, see also Sériot (1999)

formalist idea of the perceptibility of form. In effect, especially if it is based on the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*, and then situated on the side of *langue*, the phoneme and phonology appear as abstract objects and discipline. As such, it is an "object of knowledge", which results of an ideal "system of relations" and is opposed to the "real" object of *parole*, far removed from the material conditions of its production and reception, from its "palpable" and concretely expressive dimension. In other words, if one is to accept this saussurean characterisation of the phoneme and phonology as disciplines of *langue*, one must also renounce to investigate the phoneme as a phenomenological object, as the "palpable" concrete sign realising the union of sound and sense. One has to understand it as an abstract, analytical object, useful only to the linguistic analysis.

Now, as Patrick Sériot has pointedly highlighted, Trubeckoj's reference to Saussure, although it is very explicit and comes in the "bible" of phonology, namely the *Grundzüge*, is in fact the *only* time Trubeckoj's refers to Saussure in such positive terms (Sériot, 1999, p.235). Sériot thus points to the "palimpsest" nature of Trubeckoj's texts and the presence of many more influences on Trubeckoj's ideas, which are in turn very different from those of Saussure. These sources connected with the German Romantic "organicist" thought, and the Russian "Eurasist" theory point to a totally different conceptual universe, which is, as I pointed out in the introduction, ontologically oriented, and considers therefore the phoneme as a "real" object, and not only as a linguistic abstraction. What is more, Sériot insists on the fact that the idea of "structure" itself, which is apparently so important for the Prague structuralists and has an allegedly Saussurean origin, emerges in their theories in a totally difference way, through the interplay of the idea of "totality" and that of "organism".

I will not repeat Sériot's argument here, although it is obviously extremely helpful with respect to my attempt to present Jakobson's concept of the phoneme as a concrete object (rather than a linguistic abstraction). More modestly, I will simply further underline the "ontological" problem raised by the phoneme by recalling that the beginnings of phonology are linked with a crisis in another, closely linked discipline, phonetics. The origin of this crisis was the advent of experimental phonetics and its endeavour to measure and describe the sounds of language with mechanical, instrumental precision. As a matter of fact, it fulfilled its objective with great success and effectiveness, but this very success produced a paradoxical result: most of the

precise acoustic and physiological information thus obtained did not have any linguistic relevance. Indeed, by focusing on the detail acoustic and physiological properties of sound, the experimental phoneticians all but lost sight of their object of inquiry, human speech, in an overflow of data they were incapable of interpreting linguistically. In reaction to this, "the basic idea of phonology [was] to oppose a limited number of sound-values (Lautwerten) to the quite unfathomable amount of produced and hearable sounds" (Häusler, 1976, p.19). In other words, the founding task of phonology was to find a way to isolate and define the linguistically relevant elements of sound. It had to redefine an object that had been lost in the opaque mass of data collected by experimental phonetics. That object, of course, would be the phoneme, a concept which appears with Baudouin de Courtenay.

Now, from the very manner in which phonology comes into being, one can see that this new object, the phoneme, promised to be quite problematic. Jakobson himself thus volunteers: "Kaum finden wir in der Lautlehre, ja sogar in der ganzen Sprachtheorie des vergangenen Jahrzehntes, einen Begriff über welchen mehr gestritten wurde als über das PHONEM." (Jakobson, 1971, p.281). On the one hand, it couldn't be a purely empirical, acoustic phenomenon, as had just been shown by the failure of experimental phonetics to isolate the linguistically relevant features of sound at the acoustic or physiological level. On the other hand, it should not be a pure abstraction, since it was supposed to designate sound-units someone can actually hear (and recognize) or articulate (and reproduce). From an epistemological or even ontological point of view, the phoneme is thus a very delicate notion as it apparently oscillates between an abstract or ideal linguistic form and a concrete, phonetic substance.

To illustrate the acuity of this problem and the varying solutions that different linguists sought to bring to it, I now will quickly mention a few concrete examples and their evolution in the Russian context – without, I again insist – postulating too much of a "genetic" or "causal" link between these different ideas, since although such links probably do exist, they are still contested by linguists and historian of linguistics, and that such considerations would bring me too far onto the terrain of linguistics itself. My only goal, I also repeat again, is to underline the non-saussurean, clearly distinct from the dual "langue" and "parole" or phonological and phonetic solution aspect of the phoneme, in order to point to the originality, or rather, the original consequences

of Jakobson's solution and its correlation with the aesthetic idea of the expressive perceptibility of form suggested by the formalists.

The first definition of the phoneme is due to Baudouin de Courtenay and more generally the Kazan School (cf Kramsky, 1974, p.23). To be precise, one should say they gave the phoneme several definitions, moving from a morpho-etymological perspective to the later and better known psycho-phonetic interpretation. For Baudouin de Courtenay, in this last conception, a phoneme is "the psychical equivalent [or image] of a speech sound (Sprachlaut)" (Baudouin de Courtenay, 1895, p.9). A telling aspect of this definition is that it wrenches the phoneme away from the empirical conception that made it an object of the natural sciences. This was an important objective for Baudouin de Courtenay, and as we have seen, was significant in the rise of phonology. As a result of this need to detach the phoneme from its empirical, positivist framework, Baudouin de Courtenay's definition also tries to answer the question of the mode of existence or nature of the phoneme, and does not treat it only through its linguistic function. One sees that it answers the form/substance conundrum through a dualistic solution, by opposing the psychic to the physical, despite the fact that for Baudouin de Courtenay, the physical and the psychical connect in the sound aspect of language (Häusler, 1976, p.95): indeed, the modality of this connection is equivalence or image, not an inherent imbrication.

Baudouin de Courtenay's psycho-phonetic conception of the phoneme was taken up by his students, Ščerba and Polivanov, as well as by Trubeckoj. The two first-named scholars worked within the mould of Baudouin de Courtenay's conception, and continued to defend his interpretation of the phoneme as being a psychic representation or image. Polivanov in particular, however, tended to limit the impact of psychology in his considerations, and provide a methodologically reduced account of the phoneme as a linguistic phenomenon. Polivanov was thus the first to suggest a systematic theory of phonetic evolution (Leontev, 1983), yielding such important concepts as phonetic divergence and convergence (taken up later by Jakobson); he also described the two basic rules or constraints influencing that evolution, namely the articulatory "laziness" of speakers and the minimum requirements for communication.

Trubeckoj, whilst also starting from Baudouin de Courtenay's conception distanced himself from Baudouin de Courtenay even more, and, along with Jakobson, criticised

his psychological argumentation as a way of shipping over to another discipline problems that should be treated linguistically (Kramsky, 1974, p.40-41). In fact, both Jakobson and Trubeckoj were suspicious of definitions more concerned with the nature of the phoneme than with its linguistic functions. Trubeckoj solution, in a reduction move quite typical of the Russian Formalists, was therefore to proceed to provide a definition which considered and defined the phoneme only in terms of its functions within a linguistic system. Thus, Trubeckoj's mature definition of the phoneme is wholly functional: "The smallest phonetic unit in a language that is capable of conveying a distinction in meaning" (Trubeckoj, 1939, p.12). As mentioned, it would thus seem that the phoneme, in Trubeckoj's conception, is a linguistic abstraction; it is not identical with an actual sound, but only with its phonologically relevant properties. A phoneme cannot be "spoken", but has to be "realised" through a speech sounds, the properties of which are determined by phonetics, not phonology. Phonology and phonetics, as has already been pointed out, are furthermore two totally different disciplines in the eye of Trubeckoj. In consequence, there is here a clear gap between phonological "form" and phonetic "substance".

Whatever the true state of the opposition between phonology and phonetic in Trubeckoj's theory – if one believes Sériot, the answer to that question much more complex than the limpid saussurean opposition between *langue* and *parole* seems to allow – his model was given another important twist by Jakobson. Jakobson's conception of the phoneme, indeed, attempts to bring phonetic elements back into the phonological theory. He sets off from Trubeckoj's conception, defining the phoneme as the smallest oppositive unit in a language system. But he then goes on to break the phoneme down into smaller constituents, its "distinctive features", that is, specific acoustic or articulatory properties of sounds, structured in binary oppositions (voiced/voiceless, grave/acute, sharp/non-sharp, compact/diffuse, etc.). A phoneme, in Jakobson's definition, is thus a hierarchy of phonetically distinctive features – every phoneme distinguishing itself from the others through at least one distinctive feature.

Now, there is obviously much to say about Jakobson's conception of the phoneme as a hierarchy of distinctive traits, which remains, one should add, a highly influential and accepted idea to this day. From the perspective of the status of the phoneme, one could argue that the phoneme as Jakobson defines it is an even more

linguistically abstract object, as it is itself composed of units, the nature of which is unclear. Indeed, the distinctive features themselves are not objective empirical elements; they also imply an abstraction, an "ideal" linguistic carving out of the phonetic properties of sound. In effect, Jakobson firmly situates his analysis at an abstract structural level, as evidenced by the neat conceptual formality of the idea of "binarism". Jakobson, however, does not claim that we actually hear the distinctive features themselves. To be honest, he leaves the question of how the distinctive features combine to form the phoneme one actually hears and articulates in real speech is left undecided.

To summarise, the basic problem which we see both phonetics and phonology struggling with is the question of the meaningful *segmentation* of the sound continuum: discrete entities need to be isolated in order to proceed with a linguistic analysis. As our brief overview of the most important early conceptions of the phoneme has made clear, there is no obvious solution to how this cutting up of the linguistic reality should be done, or what makes it actually possible. Phonetics could not accomplish this task at a purely empirical, objective level, which underlined the need for a phonological approach. But similarly, phonology proves incapable of finding a clear object, and has to rely on a phonetic analysis (the distinctive features of Jakobson are the product of a phonetic analysis): we see therefore a close interaction between the disciplines, apparently to produce a bipolar object, both form and substance. Up to now, however, far from giving birth to such a concept, both phonetics and phonology in effect have produced a series of abstract concepts, all of which, one should add, present significant drawbacks – significant enough to question the ultimate validity of the objects they describe, even today.

Turning from the pure questions of phonology as a linguistic discipline to considering the problems it raises in a broader epistemological, philosophical perspective, one can observe a general trend from this short overview: linguistics and phonology progressively vindicate their status vis-à-vis the natural sciences but with that methodological security comes a weakening of the concern for the epistemological foundations of the phoneme. Whereas Baudouin de Courtenay felt the need to clearly state on the non-natural-empirical status of the phoneme, Trubeckoj and Jakobson mostly dispense with such considerations, considering them as non-

specifically linguistic. One notices here a Saussurean-Husserlian move, towards bracketing out the empirical. Attention is concentrated on the functional properties: any statement on the phoneme (such as its constitution from distinctive features) is made from a structural analysis of its "behaviour" within language, not from a priori considerations of the function of the mind or perception.

In short, one works from within the strong linguistic framework that structuralism has helped to establish and now provides. This trend is confirmed if one takes a look at generative phonology, which adopts the idea of distinctive features and goes on to develop a very formal theory of how syntactical deep structures are "transformed" into phonetic surface series. The interest of generative phonology has shifted completely away from the nature of the phoneme as an indefinite object oscillating between form and substance, to consider only its formal properties (based on an abstract phonetic interpretation) and their linguistic functions.

It is undeniable, though, that the phoneme as an object raises an epistemological problem, it highlights a "special" mode of reality – which linguistics, by retreating into its own bounds, leaves unanswered. It is one thing to analyse structurally "distinctive features" and phonemes, or in other words, to state that sound has a certain number of phonetic features which can function so as to form a linguistic system and then to modelise more or less successfully, precisely and exactly how this functions: it is another to explain the general epistemological framework in which such a relation to reality (which is undeniable, since language exists) is actually possible. Now, from a linguistic perspective, this neglect of epistemological questions cannot be considered as a considerable tar: after all, it is not the subject of linguistics to study such things. As we can see however with the generative grammarians' forays into the field, and their tries at answer in mentalist, psychological, epistemological terms the dualism their linguistic analysis has thrown up, such questions cannot be completely allayed. The trend against the abstract formalism of classical generative theory, and the need to understand the "natural" processes does show however, that such questions should not be kept too far away from the field of linguistics. In all this, one has to see a weakness of the structuralist paradigm, which too comfortably evacuates such concerns.

Now, if one compares this perspective to the outlook of formalist aesthetics, one seems to be promised to a disappointment: one finds no obvious trace of the ideas

of the perceptibility of form or the concrete expressivity of language in the developments of phonology. A closer look at Jakobson's idea of the phoneme as hierarchy of distinctive traits, however, reveals that a functional, structural analysis of the phoneme might not be fated to "abstractness" after all. True, the distinctive traits might be considered as abstract elements, isolated intellectually through analysis. The important point of Jakobson's conception, however, is that it is indeed the phoneme one hears, and not the distinctive traits. In that sense, Jakobson seems to imply that the phoneme is a *Gestalt*, a whole constituted over its part, a concrete acoustic form, whose meaning derives from its pure articulation as a perceptual whole. In that sense, he does seem to suggest that phonological form devices or is produced by a phonetic substance, thus presenting the phoneme as a concrete, expressive form. What is more, this also seems to imply that the perceived object does not have to correspond perfectly to its "intellectual" form, it does not have to be perceived as such as a hierarchy, as a pure "signal". Durand puts it as follows: « L'analyse est la suivante: le signal "brut" n'est pas un objet linguistique. Dès lors que nous nous intéressons au langage, tout signal est un signal *interprété*. Nous n'entendons pas un signal, mais du langage. » (in Nguyen, 2005, p.191).

To confirm this analysis, one can mention the importance in phonology of the ideas of external and communicative constraints. These ideas are based on the following observation : « Clearly, languages somehow monitor the development of their phonologies, and check segments and inventories off against two very general guidelines : « Don't make things difficult for the speaker » and « Don't make things difficult for the listener ». That is, the best systems are those in which contrasts are maximally distinct with the least amount of articulatory effort. The reasons for specific statistical tendencies may therefore be either articulatory or perceptual" (Gussenhoven, xxxx, p.30). In other words, the principle of phonology is not to produce pure objects or signal, but to instate as clear a difference as possible (with the least effort) between acoustic signals in order for it to produce meaning, and be expressive

Now, if one thus accepts that the « distinctive trait » is, as such, an abstract notion resulting from analysis, but the phoneme which it constitutes is a « phenomenological » one, or in other words, that the phoneme is indeed perceived as « language », i.e. as something meaningful, then one does seem to have an interest object on our hands. Indeed, the analysis reveals that on the hand, the

phoneme owes its existence or meaningful mode to the fact that it corresponds to a specific structuration of an acoustic given. Although the notion of distinctive trait might itself be an ideal abstraction, it certainly highlights the fact, however, that the phoneme relies on such a structuration of its acoustic substance. What is more, on the other hand, this structuration cannot be said to be purely empirical: it results from the capacity of a listener to isolate and differentiate the acoustic substrate of the phoneme. As is well known, indeed, different listeners from different linguistic backgrounds will interpret a phoneme differently.

As I am well aware, my considerations here have only touched the surface of the intriguing and unresolved problems of phonology and phonetics. I have not even provided a convincing or satisfying account of Jakobson's concept of the phoneme and all its implications. The fact of the matter, however, is that Jakobson himself does not provide these details, and that one would now have to tread down a speculative road when trying to assess his philosophical conception of the phoneme. In any case, my point here has been to show but two things: firstly, to highlight the proximity and continuity of Jakobson's phonology with his work in poetics. Secondly, to hint at the fact, that a good explanation to his concept might be the phenomenological road, a road which has not been explored by specialised linguists and phonologists. Indeed, the new development in phonology, since more or less Chomsky and Halle's *The Phonological System of English*, have been oriented towards the cognitive sciences and neglected the "naturalistic" or phenomenological aspect of the phoneme. In that sense, it is better to move back to the context of the 1920-30s, and question Jakobson's phonological work more in the context of its production, and in relation to the question of the palpability of form, etc. and to check what kind of philosophical model were available at the time, and might therefore provide further fodder for an analysis of the phoneme as the emblem of the idea of "concrete form".

Chapter 7

Meaning and Presence: Husserl, Derrida, Špet, Merleau-Ponty

Inasmuch as Jakobson's notion of the phoneme can be said to provide a rigorous conceptualisation of the idea of intransitively expressive perceptual structure initially suggested in Šklovskij's theory of estrangement, it remains to be shown whether the phoneme's concrete-formal features possess any generality beyond the particular case of language and its phonological system, and thus can truthfully characterise perception as a whole. Starting from Tynjanov's theory of verse through Jakobson's concept of "poetic function" to the ideas of distinctive features and the phoneme itself, we have certainly observed a progressive reduction of the scope of the Russian formalists' theories to the field of language, then linguistics, then phonology. As such, we have definitely moved away from the ambitious structural theory of perception which remains necessary to justify the aesthetic vision formulated by Šklovskij in his earliest texts. The last step to take now in order to demonstrate the conceptual value and applicability of the Russian formalists' aesthetic intuitions, is therefore to show that one can generalise the perceptual attributes of the phoneme back into a genuinely philosophical framework.

An obvious difficulty with this last step is that – in contrast to what has been the case up to now – one cannot take support on the Russian formalists' work to justify it. For instance, one finds no word in Jakobson's work to the effect that the qualities of the phoneme have larger implications beyond phonology, or that the idea of the expressive palpability of the linguistic sign might extend beyond language. Neither he nor any of his colleagues offered further philosophical ideas in relation to it, or to its philosophical significance and indeed, explicitly refused to explore that path. By all accounts, Jakobson's phonology and the idea of the distinctive features constitute the most mature and systematic conceptual point of development reached by the Russian formalists' considerations on the notions of form and perception.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ This does not mean, obviously, that the phoneme represents the acme of Russian formalism thinking as a whole, much a less a synthesis of all its ideas. There are many aspects of Russian formalism that are totally alien to the problems of phonology.

Jakobson's lack of interest for the implications of his concept of the phoneme does not mean, of course, that a philosophical analysis of his notion is not possible. In some ways, the notion even requires such an analysis, as one needs to justify philosophically the possibility of the existence of such a strange object or phenomenon. We also saw earlier on that a definite philosophical background is implicit in Jakobson's consideration on the phoneme, and that it is that background which, to a certain extent, underpins his conception of language and phonology. Because the jump to a full blown interpretation of the philosophical element of the phoneme, of poetics or linguistics was never attempted by Jakobson or any other formalist or Prague structuralist, however, one needs now to leave the historical terrain of the Russian formalist theories and their evolution and set them, as Russian formalism itself never did, in the context of philosophy and the general problems of meaning and perception, raised either specifically by the phoneme or by questions of language more generally.

The methodological decision to set the Russian formalists theories and their phonological heritage squarely in a philosophical perspective, although not uncontroversial, is facilitated, even justified, by two states of affairs. Firstly, and more circumstantially, one can mention that Jakobson in particular entertained rather close ties with Gustav Špet. As mentioned already, Špet's phenomenology of language is often cited as one of Jakobson's most important sources of inspiration (Dennes, 1999; Haardt, 1993; Hansen-Löve, 1978, p.183). Without even having to explore the historical ties between Jakobson and Špet particularly attentively, this means then that one can turn to Špet's work as a first point of reference in order to situate the philosophical scope and assess the viability of Jakobson's conception of the phoneme and of language more generally.

The second reason facilitating the philosophical contextualisation of the Russian formalists' ideas on language is that they fit interestingly, or rather, raise issues that are highly relevant to some of the key problems of phenomenology. To recall, I made the point in Chapter 1, Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 that there exists a number of convergences and personal proximities between the formalists and phenomenology. In particular, the affinities of Jakobson with Husserl have been mentioned. In connection to Husserl, of course, one encountered a number of problems, which spoke against a too strong assimilation of formalist ideas to his brand of phenomenology. This was particularly the case of the early, radical formalist ideas of

Šklovskij, whose empiricist, vitalist and atomism could not be squared with Husserl's systematic, idealistic phenomenology. We also discovered though that even Jakobson's more mature and systematic idea of language and expression did not concord with those of Husserl (especially the Husserl of the *Logische Untersuchungen*) on several important point (sense-bestowing through language rather than consciousness, meaning through concrete expression rather than intuition, etc.) – which we saw explained the resulting antagonism between structuralism and phenomenology after the war and the questions of the subject, the structure of meaning, etc.

The discrepancies with Husserlian phenomenology, however, should be considered more as an opportunity than a problem. Indeed, because it obviously contributes original concepts with regard to language, expression and their relation to perception, Jakobson's structuralism offers the prospect of casting a interesting light on what can be considered as blank spots in Husserl's phenomenology. This is especially true for two reasons. Firstly, because the problem of sense-bestowing capacity of consciousness and its relation with the originarity of perception as a source of knowledge, as Derrida's pointed critique of Husserl in "La Voix et le phénomène" has long revealed, is one of the crucial issues or rather problems of Husserlian phenomenology. Secondly, because the work of Gustav Špet, to whom Jakobson was so close, offers insights precisely in that respect, and precisely in the sense of Jakobson's conception of the phoneme as a concrete, expressive sign.

In philosophical terms, one could say that problem involved by Jakobson's notion of the phoneme, in essence, is that of meaningful *presence*. In other words, it is to explain how an object can be adequately given phenomenally not, as the tradition of Western metaphysics and Husserlian phenomenology understand, not as a fullness, as fully present, but as a partial, signifying structure. According to Jakobson's definition of the phoneme, indeed, on the one hand, we have an adequate perception of it, and it is therefore "present" to consciousness as an objective, intentional and meaningful content. On the other hand, though, because it is necessarily given as an expressive structure – which moreover, relies on a wider horizon or system that is *not* given in the perceptive act – it also remains incomplete, it is never experienced "totally" so to speak, or rather, it does not exist on the mode that one associates with

objects, as “lawful fullness”:¹¹⁹ the phoneme owes its presence to an act of synthetic sense-bestowing and differentiation in a systematic horizon. If one is to justify the existence of such a meaningfully present object, one must thus give an account of its mode of presence as a sign.

As these brief remarks already make quite clear, a philosophical grounding of the phoneme as an object understood as a concrete sign – and the generalisation of this semiotic, expressive status to objective reality or perception as whole – must involve a thorough epistemological and ontological investigation. In effect, what one requires here is a model that can explain how a meaning can be expressed and experienced concretely, as the pure articulation and differentiation of a “physical”, “material” or “sensible” given. By all means, it involves crucial issues of meaning and perception, which are at the heart of philosophy. To convince oneself of this, and to outline in slightly more detail the problems involved here, it is useful to turn back to Husserl and the problem of presence and meaning in his phenomenology, such as it is uncovered by Derrida. Indeed, the perspective that an account of the phoneme as a concrete, expressive sign is possible, indeed reasonable, is corroborated by the fact that, as I have just mentioned, it is the point where Derrida attacks Husserl’s account of phenomenology.

According to Derrida, indeed, one of the seminal acts of Husserl’s phenomenology, which Husserl makes in the first of his *Logical Researches*, is to distinguish between two types of signs (Zeichen): the indication (Anzeichen) and the expression (Ausdruck). The notion of expression (Ausdruck) is at the centre of the First Logical Research. It is defined there by Husserl as a sign (Zeichen) possessing a signification (Bedeutung), or expressing a meaning (Sinn). The expression is distinct from the indication (Anzeichen), which is a sign that refers in an unmotivated or unfounded way to something. Kristensen comments as follows: "L'expression désigne la dimension signifiante du langage, à savoir le fait que l'acte de signification possède un rapport interne avec l'objet qu'il vise, par contraste avec la notion d'indication dans laquelle le rapport à l'objet est accidentel" (Kristensen, 2010, p.13). This apparently benign distinction, according to Derrida, "commande rigoureusement toutes les analyses ultérieures" and therefore constitutes an essential element of the

¹¹⁹ This is my ungainly translation for the common French expression « plénitude de droit », which signifies the concept that the object is ideally conceived as being a full entity in its own right, or rather, of *necessity*.

philosophical edifice of the *Logical Researches* (Derrida, 1967, p.2). Much more, Derrida also argues that the whole fate of husserlian phenomenology is at play on this question. The distinction between expression and indication has the consequence, indeed, of neutralising the role of language as layer of signification, and to legitimise Husserl's fundamental idea, namely, that the full and originary intuitions of consciousness give and presentify us the world in its meaning, thereby building an adequate intuitive and perceptive ground (Boden), which functions as the source of right for understanding.

Husserl makes the point that expression and indication are mixed in our acts of communication. For example, in language as an inter-subjective event, any expressive sign is also indicative, and all expression is mediated by an indication. In other words, the linguistic sign does not express its meaning directly, but through an indicative reference to a signification. By contrast, in what Husserl terms "the solitary life of the soul" (das einsame Seelenleben), expression can appear in isolation, independently of any mediating indication. In other words, Husserl assumes the possibility of a "language of consciousness", in which meaning and signification are present immediately, i.e. without the mediation of an indication, in a subjective act of pure expression, so to say of consciousness to itself. This means that language as a concrete act of communication, which is different from pure expression only through the layer of indication (which is itself neutral in relation to meaning), is an unproductive layer and does not modify signification whatsoever. Much more, it would appear that expression itself is neutral with regard to signification. Indeed, Husserl presumes that there are ideal significations (Bedeutungen), which are "expressed" and can be descriptively isolated in what he calls sense-bestowing acts (sinngebender Akt) of subjective consciousness – but which are not affected by their concrete expression in these acts.

Without going here into the complex details of Husserl's analysis of this problem in the *Logical Researches*, one can summarise – as I mentioned earlier on – that for Husserl language and expression are but the vehicle of a logical meaning that is already formed and given.¹²⁰ This meaning, somewhat paradoxical, is actualised in intentional acts of the subject, it results from a meaning-intention (meinen) and a

¹²⁰ Cf, Kristensen, 2010, p.20: "les mots expriment fidèlement le sens noématique pur, ils ne font que refléter ce sens ou en portent l'empreinte selon une « conceptualité préexistante » (Derrida 1971, p. 196)."

donation for and by the subjective consciousness. In other words, the crucial moment of the *experience* of meaning happens through the sense-bestowing act of the subject, which realises the ideal significations, or rather, experiences them intentionally. In order to make sense, this theory must presuppose a homological relation or a strict correlation between expression, signification and the intentional object: the meaning instituted by the intentional act of the subject is also that of the object, as it is perceived noematically. Similarly, this meaning can be expressed descriptively, without modification, originary: "Indem die Beschreibung die ursprüngliche Gegenbenheit des Beschriebenen vermittelt, ist sie selbst ursprünglich. Beschreibung und Gegenstand fallen zusammen." (Husserl, 1980, p.106)

The Derridian critique of this Husserlian conception of the presence of the meaningful object immediately to consciousness is to question the neutrality of the layer of language, and the hypotheses that in the solitary life of the soul, language is indeed heard as pure expression. Without going into the detail of Derrida's analysis, one can mention that he puts forward the idea of the "voice", namely of a "inner language of consciousness", which he finds, does institute a difference between the meaning given to an object, and its perception (Derrida, [1967] 2003). According to Derrida, the experience of consciousness is not a pure, adequate intuition, capable of grasping the meaning of the object, but is mediated through the voice, which needs to reflect and re-articulate the meaning of that object. In that sense, the object is never given originally and intuitively as a fullness to consciousness, but is always "differed" (difference) by the meanings it is given through the "voice", or in other words, through its mediation through language. The ultimate and famous consequence of this linguistic critique of the phenomenology of consciousness is thus that objects are in fact never perceived, never given or "present", but always mediatised through meanings that are not theirs entirely: as in Kant, a "noumenal", hard object remains unreachable to consciousness, hidden behind its meaningful, phenomenal appearance and linguistic or meaningful articulation to consciousness as a given something. In short, there is no meaningful presence to Derrida.

The Derridian critique of Husserl's notion of expression, I believe is fundamentally correct and justified, and throws much light on the very problematic relation between meaning and presence (or in more classical terms, between intelligible and sensible,

form and matter, etc.). Its sceptic conclusions, however, are not warranted. There are indeed very different possibilities to answer the problem of the deficit of presence implied in the fact that we perceive objects as expressive signs, rather than as fully given entities. One very different answer to the quandary faced by Husserl (next to the development of Husserl himself in his more mature works, which brought him to bring much more subtle and nuanced answers, but still always remaining indebted to his "principle of principles") is brought by Gustav Špet.

As Špet is a much less well-known figure than the Russian formalists (although interest in his work has been growing in recent years, much as with the rest of the Soviet thought of the 1920-30s), a few words of biographical introduction are required here. Gustav Špet was a Russian philosopher, student of Husserl, who is credited with having introduced the work of his master to Russia, and having laid foundations for Soviet semiotics. His early work is a clearly phenomenological inspiration, but he soon veered to a more hermeneutical orientation, distancing himself from Husserl whilst keeping the basic discoveries as to the structure of expression he made in his earlier works (cf. Dennes). His work was also strongly influenced by the thought of Humboldt (which much more than Saussure, account for the "structuralist" orientation of his thought, for instance through key concepts such as the "internal form") and unsurprisingly given the context he worked in: Hegel. One of his key interests, next to the problems of language which constituted his central interest, were matters of aesthetics. Rather than to the Cubo-futurists, though, he was closer to the Symbolist and Acmeist traditions. During the 1930s, he was targeted in Stalin's purges, was arrested and executed in Tomsk in 1938. His work was almost completely forgotten until the 1960s, when it enjoyed a first, limited revival (through the Soviet semiotists), and has picked up speed and importance in more recent years.

Špet's work fits in mainly for two reasons within the movement towards the philosophical understanding of perceptual sense sketched out here. On the one hand, one of his central themes is the sense of concretely lived experience, a problem which appears to be similar to that of the perceptual sense. In *Appearance and Sense*, Špet tries to describe in a unifying way the structure, both intelligible and sensible, of our relation to the world. He does not, however, concern himself directly with the problem of perceptual sense, but rather of "the logic of the constitution of the historical and cultural world" (Dennes, 2006b, 177). What interests him is the world given as a lived horizon of sense. The problem of perceptual sense is thus implicated

in his thought, but only secondarily. On the other hand, Špet was a key interlocutor of Jakobson; he influenced, for example, the latter's reception of Husserl's work. Špet thus fulfils a historical role as provider of philosophical foundations to the Prague Structuralists. In this regard, one could expect to find in Špet further clues on the philosophical implications of Jakobson's theory, and in particular, on the source of its weakness pertaining to perceptual sense.

Špet's reflexion on the sense of the concrete given 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 faculty of consciousness (Haardt, 1993, 100ss). 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 has to look for the source of that sense somewhere else, in experience itself. Špet sees this source in the existence of an "intelligible intuition", in other words, a third type of intuition, which grasps what Špet calls the "entelechy" of the object, its "internal sense", 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 also postulates that some objects, in order to be perceived adequately, require to be intended and grasped as "signs". In certain passages of *Appearance and Sense*, Špet goes as far as to say that all objects are given also and foremost as signs. The intentional consciousness is thus always placed in a horizon of concrete sense, originally given by the intelligible intuition. In other terms, Špet postulates here a true logic of experience itself. We seem here very near to Merleau-Ponty's idea of a systematic intelligible articulation of the sensible world. But this analogy should be handled carefully.

The "internal sense" is construed by Špet in *Appearance and Sense* teleologically and functionally, as is clear from his choice of the term "entelechy". Consequently, it is difficult for him to justify extending the intelligible intuition to objects that are not determined by any functional horizon, as for example, the objects of physics. What is the internal sense of these objects, what is their logical content? To answer these questions, one should have to postulate a teleology of the physical world, which is indeed a speculative and radical solution. Therefore, Špet hesitates with regard to

the extension of the intelligible intuition, and the hierarchy of the three intuitions – eidetic, empirical and intelligible – becomes problematic.

Indeed, on the one hand, Špet considers the intelligible intuition to be the only originary intuition; the eidetic and empiric intuitions are derived, and in a certain sense, abstract. But this vision is endangered, as we have just seen, by his teleological conception of sense, which does not allow him to explain the sense of non-functional objects, in other words, of those objects that have a purely perceptual sense. On the other hand, Špet seems to suggest that all three intuitions are originary and provide a "layer" of the concrete experience, which is therefore adequately given when it is synthesised in an act which grasps them together. If one chooses this much less original interpretation, one is immediately taken back to the Husserlian problem of perceptual sense, since in this case, the physical object is given by the empirical intuition in the fullness of its determinations, non-mediated by any sign. We know that a Derridian sword of Damocles hangs over this conception.

Špet, I think, favoured the idea that the intelligible intuition was the sole originary act. This idea underlies his later hermeneutical research and explains, in particular, his endeavour, in the narrower framework of his philosophy of language, to redefine his problematic teleological conception of "entelechy" through the Humboldtian concept of "internal form". With regard to this last concept, one should ask if its introduction allows Špet to dispel the dilemma, linked to perceptual sense, which his functional approach of sense brought about. Indeed, the "internal form" implies a structural conception of sense, as a relation between sensible exteriority and intelligible interiority, which can apply even to physical objects. In this interpretation, every object would possess "originarily a basic structure", (Špet, 1999, p.41) meaningful and concrete, given in the intelligible intuition or hermeneutical act.

This perspective is promising but only hypothetical, as Špet applies his concept of internal form only to words, not to physical objects. It would, moreover, have a significant fault. Indeed, Špet conceives of the hermeneutical act as an *adequate* intuitive act, which grasps the object in the fullness of its determinations. However, this is contradictory, since the very recourse to an interpretation, the necessity of a hermeneutical act, implies by definition an incompleteness of sense, an lack of determinations. If the object is given originarily only through the prism of a meaningful structure, can it be given in its full presence? Is it not always also the sign

of something else, which, precisely, is not there, is given only derivatively, incompletely, inadequately? If, following Špet, who is fully confident in the "positivity" of his philosophy, we wish to construe the object as a fullness of determination, and the intelligible intuition of it as an adequateness, then it must seem that the hermeneutical act loses its ground, because it never can fully grasp the object, which is always, would say Derrida, deferred in its presence. In other terms, Špet seems very vulnerable to a sceptical and relativist critique.

To summarize, Špet's position on the question of perceptual sense is ambivalent, it goes only half the way. On the one hand, he problematises the question of the lived sense, and opens up philosophical possibilities on the structural and concrete constitution of that sense – which were immediately applied by Jakobson to language, and taken up indirectly by Merleau-Ponty. On the other hand, he does not criticise the metaphysical idea of the object as a fullness of determinations and therefore doesn't achieve a satisfying conception of perceptual sense, which, it should be reminded, interested him only indirectly. This last point is made particularly evident by the limitations of his hermeneutical thought. Indeed, he has a pre-heideggerian take on hermeneutics and does not engage towards a hermeneutics of facticity (Faktizität). This lack of interest for the materiality of things is also evident in his aesthetics. Far from adopting the modernist ideas defended by the formalists, he goes back to a symbolist, "neo-classical" aesthetics. For him, the field of aesthetics is the domain of the sign, the symbol, the interplay between logical sense and expression, but not of the sensuous "matter". In this respect, he distances himself from the existential dimension of estrangement.

In conclusion, insofar as Špet's thought is pre-heideggerian and pre-structuralist, his contribution to the philosophical understanding of perceptual sense should none the less be underlined here. The mere existence of his work stands as a confirmation and illustration of the historical development of that undertaking, in the shadow of structuralism. It suggests very clearly, that in order to shed more light on the question of perceptual sense, a double perspective, phenomenological and structural, is required. Moreover, Špet's role, because his work is situated at the intersection of both phenomenology and structuralism, is very important. This would appear even more clearly, if on top of the question of presence, to which we have devoted our attention here, one also put forward the importance of two other themes: the first, is the development of a structural and systemic understanding of sense and signs

within formalism (a conception very different from that of Saussure, since it produced a notion of "system" in which the terms do not simply possess an oppositive value, are not per se negative). The second is the development by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty of an "aesthetical" conception of perception in the sense of the Greek *aisthesis*. The first point would reinforce the historical importance of Špet. The second would nuance it, but would help in understanding the complicated evolution towards a coherent conception of perceptual sense.

These considerations on the complicated and endlessly discussed problem of meaning and presence clearly show that if one to give a successful, sceptical-proof foundation to the Russian formalists' conception of concrete, expressive form, one must engage into the territory of non-objective metaphysics. As we saw, Heidegger is the first to offer such a thing. He would seem obvious point of focus, and has been considered so by people interested in presence (Gumbrecht, Mersch). Rather than Heidegger, however, who in many aspects is too different from the Husserlian question of expressions and the possibilities offered by Jakobson and structuralism, I will now turn to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, whose critique of the Husserlian concept of perceptual noem, and Heideggerian turn towards a phenomenology of embodiment and existentialism, as well as his strong interest for language and the work of Saussure make him an evident choice here.

As Kristensen puts it, for Merleau-Ponty, "*l'expression* est un rapport entre les choses et non pas entre le mot et la chose. Les choses sont dans des rapports de renvois entre elles et me suggèrent ainsi leur sens en tant qu'elles s'offrent à moi, sujet agissant, comme objets d'un usage possible. En bref, *l'expression* est la propriété des choses en tant qu'elles me suggèrent leur sens. Cet usage du terme est proche du concept leibnizien d'expression et du concept heideggérien du "*a/s*" herméneutique". The decisive element of this definition of expression is the notion of the body. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, the expressivity of things depend upon the motricial capacity of the body. He rejects the idea of pure intentional acts of consciousness, which can catch signification that exists "for themselves", and replaces it with the idea of an operating intentionality of the body. Kristensen further remarks: "*l'analyse de la perception* devient herméneutique sans que cela n'entraîne la réduction du contenu perceptif à un contenu linguistique. Le signe perceptif est

purement sensible, livré aux organes du corps et son expressivité est liée intrinsèquement aux mouvements et modulations du champ phénoménal." (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p.131).

In other words, what Merleau-Ponty suggests is a theory of expression which, on the one hand, takes into account its "material" dimension. As we have just seen, meaning is a function of the "modulation of the phenomenal field". As such, his definition is clearly compatible with the phenomenon of language as it is presented by Jakobson. Language "expresses" not by founding relations between things and words, but by the relations and articulations it creates between words themselves (considered here, as by Jakobson and the Russian formalists, as quasi-objects). On the other hand, the subject and the ground of experience are found again, since the "modulation of the phenomenal field" does not "induce its reduction to a linguistic content" which maintains a distance to the world, but corresponds to the lived-experience itself. As such, subjectivity is understood as a "world inherence" (inhérence au monde); there is no pure affection of the matter of the world, which would then be doubled by a sovereign position by the affected subject. In that sense, one finds again the husserlian ambition of a presence of meaning (a phenomenology), whilst respecting Jakobson's discovery of the structure of signification (and Derrida's criticisms). The step that needs to be taken in order to achieve this result, as I mentioned, is to criticise the hypostasis of the subject, conceived as transcendental to a constituted reality and to replace it by the idea of an "expressive" subject, engaged in the articulation of the concrete meaning of his own experience.

Conclusion

On the evidence of the considerable difficulties that marred the development of early Soviet thought and prevented a fully adequate elucidation of many of its idiosyncratic and unusual aspects, I set out in this study to demonstrate that the philosophical implications and scope of the seminal aesthetic idea of the Russian formalists – namely, the principle of estrangement – have been either overlooked or underestimated. Contrary to the standard view, I volunteered, the principle of estrangement does not involve only a weak, vaguely psychological account of perception, tailored towards providing an *ad hoc* theoretical justification to the particular artistic and literary practices of the Russian modernists. Rather, it implies a compelling but insufficiently explored and unexploited philosophical vision of the nature of aesthetic experience (and indeed, of experience in general), which can provide theoretically solid foundations to the Russian formalists' insightful but tenuous and speculative assertions on the essence of art and literature. To recall, I suggested that “from the typically modernist and not uncommon assumption that perception can be an intrinsically aesthetic and “valuable” act in itself, Šklovskij's and the Russian formalists' theory of estrangement leads up to the ambitious and general thesis that perception functions as a kind of *aisthesis*, “an opening onto the world, a primal contact with it”, which happens as the intransitive onto-morphogenetic crystallisation of reality in a series of concrete, “materially” expressive forms or structures”.

The first hurdle that needed to be cleared in order to ascertain the validity of my suggestion as to the unearthed philosophical scope and systematic potential of estrangement was of a methodological and historical nature. Notwithstanding the turmoil experienced by early Soviet thought in the late 1920s and beyond, I promptly had to admit that the work of the Russian formalists itself has in fact been both widely acknowledged and extensively criticised. Similarly, neither could I deny that its theoretical legacy has quite justifiably been deemed to contain very important weaknesses and limitations, which unquestionably renders it outdated in most respects. Since, to top it all, the Russian formalists themselves never managed, nor even attempted to produce a full-blown and consistent aesthetics (their only ambition

being to provide a theory of literature), it appeared that my proposed endeavour to present the Russian formalism's central tenet as the bearer of a potentially general and systematic but neglected philosophical vision of aesthetic experience might prove essentially futile and wrong-headed.

My answer to these strong and valid objections was to point out that although a direct reassessment of Russian formalism might be neither warranted, useful nor possible, one could nevertheless fruitfully and legitimately extract a consistent interpretation of the principle of estrangement by reconsidering its conceptual links with structuralism. Since much of the Russian formalists' legacy was successfully recycled and developed by the Prague structuralists in a much more mature theoretical framework, I argued, structuralism promised to provide a more credible template for a rigorous "aesthetic of estrangement". I found, moreover, that the problematic circumstances of Russian formalism's transition to structuralism and the widespread neglect or ignorance in the West of the originality of the Prague Schools' brand of structuralism strongly indicated that the specific structuralist potential of the Russian formalists' aesthetics ideas (especially beyond their strictly linguistic expression) has remained unsatisfyingly exploited and acknowledged to this day, and was therefore more than susceptible to productive reassessments. With an eye to the clearly ontological and empirical perspectives offered by the neglected "Slavic" structuralist tradition, I suggested that one could hope to achieve a systematic account of estrangement by interpreting it as an original structuralist theory of perception, which would differ on significant points from similar, more mainstream models such as Gestalt psychology or Piagetian constructivism and might (or might not) contribute fresh insights into the scope of structuralism as a whole (Chapter 1).

Having both established the plausibility of my hypothesis from a general, historical point of view and defined the required methodological orientation of my study, I proceeded to outline the details of the Russian formalists' aesthetic of estrangement and specify exactly how it gives rise to the above-mentioned vision of perception as a concrete and expressive crystallisation of reality. This I did by concentrating exclusively on the early work of Šklovskij (*The Resurrection of the Word*, 1914, *Art as Device*, 1917) which, to my mind, presents both the most clear and the only unmitigated exposition of the aesthetic principle that in one form or another underlies *all* the Russian formalists' thinking on literature and art.

In essence, my exposition of Šklovskij's arguments did not diverge in any significant manner from the canonical accounts (Aucouturier, Erlich, Hansen-Löve, Steiner, Striedter, etc.). In accordance with these scholars, for instance, I highlighted the existence of two, apparently contradictory theoretical streaks in Šklovskij's theory of art as estrangement: on the one hand, his Bergsonian, modernist concern for the sensual, pragmatic, "lived" even "living" dimension of our experience either of the world and its objects or of language and words as such; on the other hand, the defining and seminal effort of Russian formalism to isolate the specific, inherent properties of art or literature in order to submit them to an autonomous, purely artistic or literary analysis. In further agreement with standard interpretations, I mentioned that Šklovskij sought to merge these two contrasting aspects of his theory, or rather, that estrangement conceptually *depended* upon the concatenation of the formal and the sensual layers of aesthetic experience. Needless to say, I pinpointed this unusual concatenation of form and perception in aesthetic experience as the source of estrangement's original philosophical implications, in particular its suggestion that perception happens as a concrete, sensual act immediately and intransitively infused with form, structure and meaning (Chapter 2).

At this point, I turned my attention to the fact that despite its (vague but) apparently radical suggestions as to the immanently formal, expressive nature of concrete, sensual perception, Šklovskij's definition of estrangement actually remains much more conservative than at first suspected with regard to the extent of the interaction between expressive form on the one hand and concrete perception on the other. In effect, although Šklovskij's theory definitely implies that our concrete, sensual acts of perception are affected and transformed by the formal, expressive structure of given works of art or literature, it does not go as far as to state that our concrete, sensual acts of perception themselves possess a formally expressive structure. Rather, what Šklovskij states is that the artificial, expressive structure of the work of art influences the process of perception indirectly, through a functional, differential and therefore derivative and secondary effect. In other words, Šklovskij appeared to instate a clear distinction between the formal, expressive level of the artistic, literary work of art, and the blunt, amorphous one of empirical perception. More generally, I noted that in accordance with the general thrust and ambition of his theory towards isolating the properties of literary and artistic facts, Šklovskij emphasises the difference between the realms of the aesthetic and the everyday.

That Šklovskij would choose to characterise estrangement through a functional relation between the formally-defined work of art and the concrete, sensual perceptions it induces, I concluded, is as such perfectly reasonable. If anything, such a decision seems necessary in order for his theory to be able to account for the semiotic nature of the work of art or literature: because a work of art is obviously different from what it represents (inasmuch as it represents anything at all), it would be absurd to suggest that the concrete perceptions it induces through its formal, “estranging” structure are coextensive with that of an objective, external reality (represented or not by that given work). Unfortunately for my own hypothesis as to the original philosophical promises of estrangement, however, the clear separation and isolation of the formal aspects and nature of the work of art from the amorphous act of concrete perception decided by Šklovskij also appeared to reduce the originality of his pronouncements on form and perception. As it is, that separation seemed to preclude the idea that the process of perception might itself be formally, expressively structured: in this account, the only thing that displays formal, expressive features is the work of art itself and its devices.

To confront this new problem and prove that estrangement does imply original perspectives on perception, I turned to Šklovskij’s theory of prose and his own literary production. These, indeed, show that his apparently so clear-cut distinction between artistic form and everyday world is in fact conceptually fragile and unsustainable. For one, since the idea that all art is purely and absolutely formal is absurd, Šklovskij had to find a way to explain the relation between artistic form and objective content in the work of art itself. This he did through the categories of the “literary device” and “extra-literary material”. I showed, however, that these categories are porous: Šklovskij is progressively led to admit that non-artistic, crude “material” can function as a formal device and, more significantly, that even the most radically formal devices can express an objective, extra-literary “content”. Despite its insistence on maintaining a strict difference between the two, it thus appeared that Šklovskij’s theory implies a surprising inter-changeability and analogy of structure between the artistic, formal aspects of the work of art, and its non-artistic, non-formal elements. Much more, some of Šklovskij’s pronouncements seemed to indicate that the inter-changeability of form and content, of device and material does not apply only to our (artistic or non-artistic) representations of the world, but indeed to our concrete emotional and perceptual experience of the world itself.

Next to the hesitations of Šklovskij's theory of prose regarding the exact relation of artistic form and objective content (whether perceptual or representational), I also highlighted another "perceptual" issue with the principle of estrangement, namely the question of the nature of the act of concretely perceiving the work of art itself. In effect, although estrangement does not imply that a work of art makes one perceive the world itself, it does imply that the work of art itself appears as a concrete, intentional object of perception, whose formal mode of existence both reveals or requires an explanation. This problem, moreover, is not a secondary one to the Russian formalists, who specifically confronted it in relation to the concrete nature of poetic language. In their account of the perception of a poem, attention is focussed more on the material aspect of language itself, rather than on any of its denotative or communicative functions. In the extreme case of the Cubo-futurists "zaum" poetry – which strongly influenced Šklovskij and the Russian formalists – one even finds an example in which the semiotic status of the work of art is so completely reduced that the whole expressive, intelligible form of the poem corresponds rigorously to its concrete, material perceptibility (Chapter 3).

The series of examples provided by Šklovskij's theory of prose and the Cubo-futurists' "zaum" poetry, I concluded at the end of the first part of this study, constitute enough evidence of the original implications of the principle of estrangement with regard to the relations of form and perception in aesthetic experience. On their own, of course, they did not allow me to draw any general conclusions as to the conceptual solidity and relevance of these perspectives. But they did undoubtedly outline how the idea of a formal, expressive dimension of perception itself is dormant and implicit in Šklovskij's theory, and that a systematic interpretation of estrangement would certainly bring it to light in much more striking terms. In any case, I decided that these examples warranted a closer look at the presuppositions and implications of estrangement with regard to the question of the interrelation of form and perception, this time in a purely philosophical light.

Beginning in earnest with the conceptual assessment of estrangement's implications, I first noted that, superficially at least, Šklovskij's principle appeared to be philosophically promising, because it defines the question of aesthetic experience squarely in relation to the precise (and precisely analysable) problems of perception

– instead of the traditional vague and subjective concepts such as the sublime, beauty, taste, etc... On closer inspection, however, I found that such as it is presented by Šklovskij, estrangement is resistant to a serious philosophical interpretation, not least because of its crass lack of conceptual foundations, and Šklovskij's evasive, almost nonchalant approach to the crucial problem of the process of perception itself. To be more precise, the essential problem is that Šklovskij attributes a vast array of "perceptual" functions to estrangement, which he fails to justify or explain. On the one hand, he implies that estrangement can affect, all at once and in no particular order, our cultural and social representations, the cognitive processes of abstraction, generalisation or recognition, our responses to pure sensual data or emotions, the expressive structure of language and even our existential feeling of living and being in the world at all. On the other hand, the only explanation he volunteers to explain these extraordinary powers is a few remarks on the automatisisation of habitual perception.

Following suggestions that have been touted by a number of scholars, I briefly considered whether one could have recourse to Husserl's phenomenology as an interesting option for systemising the apparently incoherent theory of estrangement and its various claims as to the structure and nature of perception. After highlighting a number of reasons why one could indeed conclude to similarities and convergences between phenomenology and Šklovskij's aesthetic, however, I underlined that Husserl's subtle philosophical considerations diverged from Šklovskij's ideas on one critical point: whereas Husserl presented perception as an intelligible process, informed with sense and meaning, Šklovskij saw it only as succession of impressions, structured by blind differential and contrastive effects (Chapter 4). I also debated whether Husserl could be considered as an improvement on Šklovskij, but concluded that the advantages brought by his phenomenology would come at the cost of adequately reflecting the essence of Šklovskij's aesthetic. It would fail in particular to reflect the radically empirical, sensualist and vitalist dimension of Šklovskij's theory.

In the face of the unsurprising impossibility of giving a direct philosophical interpretation to Šklovskij's theory of estrangement, I moved on, as my introductory considerations had indicated I would have to, to considering indirect ways of giving more solid foundations to estrangement. Specifically, I raised the question whether the problem might not lie so much with the fundamental assumption of estrangement

itself, namely that perception is an intransitive process which can be formally affected through artistic practices, than with the manner in which Šklovskij characterises the functioning of estrangement. In effect, critics have long pointed out that Šklovskij's notion of the device and with it, of the functioning of estrangement – without even speaking of the “existential” hesitations mentioned earlier –, present a number of fatal limitations. In particular, it fails to take into account the systematic nature of the work of art, thus reducing it to a sum of isolated features. This lack of systematic thinking results in an impoverishment both of the idea of estrangement itself, which can only be understood as the production of a differential but blind and necessarily surprising effect, and that of form, which loses all semantic or “Gestaltist” qualities. To a large extent, I found, it is this mechanistic, blind nature of Šklovskij's theory that distanciates it from a phenomenological interpretation, and therefore, a coherent philosophical interpretation in general.

Since the weaknesses of Šklovskij's theory of estrangement seemed to pertain more to its specific description of the devices than its broad principle, I then proceeded to examine whether it could not be bettered. To be more precise, I mentioned that Šklovskij's crude insights had in fact indeed received ameliorations, brought by the Russian formalist themselves. I thus highlighted the progressive “semanticisation” of the concept of form and the process of estrangement in the work of Eichenbaum, Tynjanov and finally Jakobson (Chapter 5). In particular, I volunteered that Jakobson structural linguistics provided an example of a systemised and powerful version of estrangement, in which we found a concrete example of a structurally expressive, but concrete object: the phoneme. Although the links between Jakobson's ideas of poetic function and estrangement are well-known, I corroborated this interpretation by showing the development of the linguistic paradigm within Russian formalism, thus demonstrating how the original aesthetic ideas of Šklovskij came to be integrated and perfected in the narrower field of language and linguistics. I then went on to demonstrate this in even more detail through the example of phonology and the phoneme itself (Chapter 6).

Having thus demonstrated that Šklovskij's theory of estrangement could be systemised and his notion of form enriched to include a properly semantic, Gestaltist dimension, I proceeded to the last step of my analysis, namely providing a properly philosophical grounding to the notion of phoneme. Indeed, although Tynjanov's and Jakobson's work had refined and bettered Šklovskij's raw ideas, they had reduced

their scope to that of language, linguistics and finally only phonology. It thus remained to be seen whether the particular, rigorous example provided by Jakobson's phonology could be generalised to characterise the structure of perception as a whole. In order to accomplish this re-generalisation, I had to leave the terrain of Russian formalism and its evolution, and place its ideas in a wider philosophical context. Because of the proximity of the issues discussed by the formalists with the core debates of structuralism and phenomenology and the problems of language, meaning and perception, I suggested, this step could be legitimately be done by mentioning the particularity of the formalists positions and its usefulness in that context.

My method was to turn to weaknesses in Husserl's phenomenology. These weaknesses – also pointed out by Derrida's critique of the *Logical Investigations* –, corresponded to the question of expression and the nature of the sign – problems to which the Russian formalists and Jakobson in particular brought totally different solutions. Turning attention to the work of Špet, I even suggested that these solutions appeared as complementary solutions to Husserl's phenomenology. Indeed, by taking into account the particular "materiality" of language and the sign, Špet offered an interpretation of the concept or act of expression which could avoid the Derridian critique of phenomenology. The vital suggestion posited by Špet in this context was that our ordinary intuitions of the world, including our acts of sensual perception, are in fact structured intelligibly, through words and language. At this point, I also remarked that Špet's interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology is also limited by the fact it fails to be sufficiently critical of the traditional metaphysical concept of the object. But I found that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, thanks to its more Heideggerian conception of ontology, did provide such a critique, a thereby suggested a philosophical base for the idea that sensual perception itself is structured intelligibly. Having arrived at this conclusion, I did not go much further into the details of the analysis provided by Merleau-Ponty, which have in effect nothing to do with Russian formalism and open a number of problems (the nature of the perceiving subject, the role of the body, etc.) which go far beyond the scope of this study. I believe, however, that these considerations were sufficient to demonstrate the philosophical depth and viability of the vision of aesthetic experience suggested by the Russian formalists' estrangement, and to bring further elements as to the exact nature and possibilities of that vision.

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