

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.

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