

# Ostranenie Does Not Equal Ozvláštňení: An Issue of a Term Transferred and Misunderstood<sup>1</sup>

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To Světla and house chores

О, рассмейтесь, смехачи!  
О, засмейтесь, смехачи!  
Что смеются смехами, что смеянтвуют смеяльно,  
О, засмейтесь усмеяльно!  
(Velimir Khlebnikov: *Incantation by Laughter*, 1910)<sup>2</sup>

*Don't trust the author and be wary of the formalist theoretician Shklovsky three times more!*  
(Zdeněk Mathauser: *Nepopulární studie* [Unpopular Studies], 1969)

The concepts of Russian formalism came to the Czech lands in the 1930s and were quickly assimilated, and translations of formalists' works by well-known Prague structuralists were made quickly and comfortably assimilated and now the term is more or less empty or 'automatic'. As we have seen in the recent translation of Boris Uspensky's *Poetics of Composition*, this assimilation proves almost excessively unproblematic, as if they have lost the energy and revolutionary character of the original ideas. Among these key ideas is the notion of *ostranenie* (translated in to Czech as *ozvláštňení*), which was coined by Viktor Shklovsky in 1913 and later refined in his principal work *Theory of Prose* in 1925.

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2 The poem *Incantation by Laughter* was first published in the collection *The Studio of Impressionists* (Petersburg, 1910, p. 47). The first four lines from Khlebnikov's *Incantation by Laughter* translated by Jiří Taufer: 'O rozesmějte se, smáči! / O zasmějte se, smáči! / Co se smějí smíchy, co smávají se smějavě. / O zasmějte se usměvavě!' (Chlebnikov 1964, p. 46); 'O laugh it out, you laughsters! / O laugh it up, you laughsters! / So they laugh with laughers, so they laugherize delaughly. / O laugh it up belaughably!' (Haughton /ed./ 1988, p. 371, trans. Gary Kern).

The full extent of the problem emerged with the translation of two terms used by Uspensky — *tochka zrenia* and *ostranenie*.<sup>3</sup> Although Uspensky's terms emphasize the spatial aspects of these ideas, it was not appropriate to use the common and familiar Czech spatial equivalents — *hledisko* and *ozvláštnění*. This is, of course, a common issue when it comes to translation. However, closer examination reveals that this is not merely an instance of problematic translation of a particular text or specific terms, but rather a conceptual, historical, and interpretive problem of term 'transfer'. In order to understand the issue, one must begin with Uspensky's obviously spatial term *tochka zrenia*. An examination of this term will help us to elucidate our point of departure, the point from which we first observed the term *ostranenie*, which does not have spatial connotations in the Czech context.<sup>4</sup>

### TOCHKA ZRENIA

Uspensky first defined *tochka zrenia* (most often translated into English as *point of view*) in 1966 as a functional feature of a text, using Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as an example. Initially, he focused on the phraseological level of the text. The results of his study were included in the second chapter of *A Poetics of Composition* (Uspenskij 1973, or 2008, pp. 7–207). The notion of point of view led him to write a meticulous analysis of the text's movement as its internal dynamic played out between individual layers of the text. As a result, point of view is not only one of the functional features of narration, but also a constitutive element of the text's composition. Point of view does not have a formal nature, but resembles an entirely different literary or philosophical term that connected the Tartu-Moscow School and the tradition of Russian literary theory. Uspensky's closest collaborator Yuri Lotman returned to the problem of point of view several times, but he primarily associated it with the issue of boundaries, center and periphery, mutual exchange of information, and the formative dynamic of culture (see, for example, Lotman 1975).

Lotman's studies should alert us to the essential aspect of the term point of view as found in *A Poetics of Composition*. The term draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogue. Bakhtin's polyphony and Valentin Voloshinov's concept of word-utterance (influenced by Bakhtin) became the basis for the concept of point of view. Bakhtin's 'dialogic perspective', which appears in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art*, points out that the speaking subject embodies the positions of both the creator (author) and the speaking voice. Every utterance has its own 'author' and also contains reactions to other utterances. As such, Uspensky does not strictly separate the position of the author and the narrator. According to Tomáš Kubíček, the author treats the narrator as a subject, ruling out any clear-cut distinction between author as a textual category and author as the actual originator of a text (Kubíček 2007). This ambiguity is precisely the result of dialogic perspective. Bakhtin's concept also underlies the awareness that it is

3 Throughout the text we use these terms in the Russian original as we are directly discussing the problematics of transfer and translation. *Tochka zrenia* is translated into English most often as *point of view*, and *ostranenie* as *defamiliarization*, *estrangement*, or *making strange*.

4 This text draws on the study Heczková — Svatoňová 2011.

impossible to separate any single text from other texts; a text is linked to the entire society and its culture. This disrupts the boundaries of a text, denies the possibility of delimiting a text as an autonomous unit and separately following its structure (composition forms). However, this approach also implies certain problems that lie beyond its scope. It is clear from close reading that this particular path appealed to Uspensky, even though he thus opened himself — like Bakhtin — to metaphorical language.

The interaction of the layers and perspectives of a narrative text brings about new information — a detailed analysis of, for instance, the category of verbal aspect — which some critics found exaggerated and overly interpretative — may well be a challenge to explore an entirely different mode of perception that is revealed in such dialogue.

In *A Poetics of Composition*, Uspensky created a web of perspectives that keep generating new possible ways of encoding the reality of a narrative. According to Lotman, Bakhtin tried to explain the existence of such peculiar phenomena as artistic and poetic language, and the reasons why there are so many parallel systems that encode reality. Yet many of these types of encoded messages have a somewhat inferior, marginal, or even negligible role. One of the basic notions of the Tartu-Moscow School was that this seeming marginality of literary language was actually reversed. Because of its multiple layers of encoding and the shifting point of view which constantly brings strange and living features into play, literary language is not part of spoken language; it is the other way around. If we are to understand language and the phenomenon of language, we need to be able to understand art. In a way, word and utterance are indefinite and open. The course of dialogic interaction of the 'word' (i.e., words and utterances) within the text, beyond the borders of the text, and between texts, generates information that did not previously exist. 'In this sense, the study of art ceases to be a marginal issue and becomes a central problem, first in literary theory, then in culture, and finally in cybernetics as the problem of artificial intelligence' (Lotman 1994, p. 52). This idea, which may seem utopian and indefensibly vague, permeates *A Poetics of Composition* and other works by Uspensky, and it is one of the reasons he started focusing more broadly on culture as such.

If we look at point of view as a phenomenon instead of a device, we can understand why Uspensky finds it easy to cross over between various forms of art or, to be more precise, to cross the borders between individual languages of sign systems. The device and analytical functions of the term cannot be denied. In order to get closer to the term itself — to its origin and to the problem that arises with its transfer into a different context — we shall focus primarily on its phenomenological and ontological nature.

This aspect of *tochka zrenia* will be illustrated using an example from an entirely different medium, environment, and period, namely the work of contemporary German photographer Barbara Probst, who works with the multiplication of images capturing a single scene at a single instant by employing several cameras placed within the set space.<sup>5</sup> The series of portrait photographs made by cameras placed side by side have only minor deviations in the image as a result of different perspective axis

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5 Barbara Probst's exhibition that took place Apr 24, 2014 — Jul 6, 2014 at Galerie Rudolfinum, was curated by David Korecký (see also Lunn — Rasmussen — Tillman — Paul 2013).

(e.g., *Exposure #31: N.Y.C., 249 W. 34<sup>th</sup> Street, 01-02-05, 4:41 p.m., 2005*) and move away from realistic representation and expand into the gallery space. They demand a constant reflection on the constantly shifting perception, especially from the initial point of view and the perspective that would allow the viewer to establish a connection with the subject of her portrait photograph. The photographs contain double perspective without one erasing the other; on the contrary, individual views and parallel versions of the image of the world enter into constant dialogue, just like the position of the image creator (the author or the cameras) and the one who is looking.

In this case, perspective is a term that describes an undeniably spatial situation, and yet it carries other meanings of non-spatial nature (aspect, view, attitude, stand-point) that, in the Czech context, prevail over the original meaning. In the case of photographs, however, they are explicitly subordinate to the spatial meaning.

If we are to define perspective in this way, we highlight not only its dialogic and polyphonic aspect, but also its particular ontological or noetic ‘carnavalesqueness’ that resembles a dance figure — a dance gesture is spatial, physical, abstract, constantly changing and only as such can it be complex, constitute comprehensive meaning, or upturn the status quo and existing structures. And it is only in this way that the term turns out to be not only a mere tool for analysis, but one that constitutes a different line of thought about art at the time of Russian formalism. Art is no longer tied to beautifying; instead it allows for a different existence of the world and a different mode of existence within the world.

The association with a dance gesture is not accidental, but rather points to the Nietzschean turn to thought in language in flux, which is at the same time a gestic and physical language, ever-changing in its meaning.<sup>6</sup> Apart from inspiring Bakhtin, Nietzsche’s philosophy paved the way for many other strands of modern and modernist thought and Avant-garde art.

## OSTRANENIE

In *A Poetics of Composition*, Uspensky describes the construction and dynamic of a text with another term — *ostranenie*. Since the term is used in the proximity of *tochka zrenia*, the problematics of both terms are similar. Another issue haunts the Czech translation

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6 ‘One evening went Zarathustra and his disciples through the forest; and when he sought for a well, lo, he lighted upon a green meadow peacefully surrounded with trees and bushes, where maidens were dancing together. As soon as the maidens recognized Zarathustra, they ceased dancing; Zarathustra, however, approached them with friendly mein and spake these words: Cease not your dancing, ye lovely maidens! No game-spoiler hath come to you with evil eye, no enemy of maidens. God’s advocate am I with the devil: he, however, is the spirit of gravity. How could I, ye light-footed ones, be hostile to divine dances? Or to maidens’ feet with fine ankles? [...] And with tears in his eyes shall he ask you for a dance; and I myself will sing a song to his dance: A dance-song and satire on the spirit of gravity my supremest, powerfulest devil, who is said to be “lord of the world”’ (Nietzsche 1914, p. 104; *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>>).

of *A Poetics of Composition*: the term *ostranenie* cannot not be simply turned into the common Czech word *ozvláštňení*. The spatiality of the term comes from Uspensky's interest in space as the key feature in the relationship between the viewer and the work of art, which is apparent, for instance, in his reflections on the role of frame in painting with regard to linear or inverse perspective. While the frame in painting compositions with linear perspective constitutes the *borderline* between the viewer and the fiction world, the frame in paintings with inverse perspective serves as a *transitional space* between the internal and external point of view, allowing for the possibility of reciprocal dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, in Czech translations, the term did not acquire its spatial or dualist character. In the Czech context, the favored understanding of *ostranenie* has come to include the Avant-garde infinite renewal of a work of art. This term — or phenomenon — is still being translated as *ozvláštňení*, *odcizení* or *aktualizace*, similar to the way *odpowszednienie* is used in the Polish context. Under the term *ozvláštňit*, the *Dictionary of the Czech Language* gives the definition 'to make somebody or something special, especially to emphasize, point out sb. or sthg.: to o. [zvláštňit] a scene; to o. [zvláštňit] a term; to o. [zvláštňit] oneself from others'. In the Czech National Corpus we find examples of the literary/technical use of the term next to examples completely devoid of its meaning and a shift towards 'decorativeness' that goes against the original spirit of the Avant-garde term: 'In politics, women represent an interesting *ozvláštňení*'.<sup>8</sup>

Other languages have also had to deal with various shifts, reductions or accents on individual parts of the term's meaning. In the English (*making strange*, *estrangement*, *defamiliarization*), German (*Verfremdung*, *Entfremdung* or *unheimlich*) and Hungarian (*elidegenítés*) translations, external perspective, strangeness, otherness, and the idea of a second voice are retained, yet they are missing the spatiality evoked by *ostranenie*. According to Frank Kessler, who focuses on the possibility of the transfer and translation of *ostranenie* into various media domains and different theoretical frameworks, the French translation (*l'étrangement*) favors mainly singularity of the phenomenon (Kessler 1996, p. 52).

Spatiality of the term *ostranenie* appears in the texts by film theorists but it is largely unacknowledged, as they mainly adhere to the unilateral influence of the film medium on the theoretical concepts put forward by Shklovsky, (who inspired Uspensky) and on Avant-garde art, while emphasizing the key role of film equipment (van den Oever 2010, p. 61). Research on film reception in prewar Russia conducted by the Tartu semiotician Yuri Tsivian (1994) demonstrates the immense influence of film on Russian culture, especially around 1913, 'when the young and eccentric Shklovsky first presented his now famous revolutionary statements on perception in art to his Futurist friends in a lecture in Petersburg' (van den Oever 2010, p. 11).

Among the contributors to the film studies debate is Frank Kessler, who set out to map out the ways the term *ostranenie* actually works (Kessler 1996, p. 61–65). Kessler

7 This interpretation is also supported by Chapter 7 in *A Poetics of Composition* dedicated to the inverse perspective of traditional Russian icons that go beyond the space of the image toward the viewer, similarly to — albeit with a different meaning — the example of Barbara Probst's photographs. This approach of inversely constituted space is also discussed by, for instance, the phenomenologist Stoichita (2008).

8 Not to mention the political incorrectness of such usage.

shows that *ostranenie* traverses a number of functions by explaining the mechanisms of perception and attention between art and everyday reality, illustrating how specific stylistic devices are reflected in works of art, and following the ways in which this term can become the basis for a stylistic and theoretical change (Kessler 2010, p. 61).<sup>9</sup> The term *ostranenie* can be traced on three levels: differentiation (art vs. non-art), perception (accustomed perception vs. new perspective) and meta-level (reflecting historical theoretical context) (Kessler 1996, p. 61–65). Kessler’s approach also emphasizes technical and technological perspective, hence the term turns out to be a device ‘laid bare’ (*obnazenie priëma*, according to Shklovsky), revealing the mechanisms behind the construction of the work of art and the ways these mechanisms function.

Let us now return to the photographer Barbara Probst. Her photograph *Exposure #104: N.Y.C., Vanderbilt & Lafayette Avenues, 1-13-13, 9:50 a.m., 2013* captures four parallel versions of a single moment at a city intersection. The photograph discussed above forced us to consider multiple different perspectives as well as the space between the viewer and the space of the photograph. This image shows a pedestrian in the middle of an intersection observed by four still cameras in four different corners. The viewer gets to watch the same moment in the same city, yet it seems we can see the situation in four different environments. Upon closer examination, the viewer can also glimpse the mutually revealed cameras — that is the above-mentioned mechanism — yet a much more significant is the feeling of disorientation. This is a good example that shows the multilayered reflexivity mirrored on several levels by the terms *tochka zrenia / ostranenie*: the level of medium (photograph), differentiation (individual narrative versions), and perception (revealing, to a great extent, both a different perspective and the illusiveness of percepts). Again, spatiality is shown to be the basis for a new perspective that has existential consequences.

## OSTRANENIE AS A ‘SAMOVITOE’ WORD<sup>10</sup>

Like many other texts, the anthology *Ostrannenie: On ‘strangeness’ and the Moving Image: The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept* points out the mistake in the spelling of the term *ostranenie*, i.e., the problem of the missing ‘n’. During the late

9 In his text, Kessler focuses, among other things, on the way the term was used and treated by neo-formalists.

10 ‘САМОВИТОЕ’ word in the original (the book *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste / Poshchecina obshchestvennomu vkusu*, was published in 1912 in Moscow). The term is often translated into English as ‘self-centered’ or ‘self-sufficient word’. The English and German versions of the term do not convey the essence of the original. According to Světlá Mathauserová: ‘The new term was translated into Czech literally by using the word *samovitý*, yet people understood this calque differently. Some viewed it as a compound from *vít*, while others believed it was a Futurist kind of degree comparison applied to the pronoun *sám*. In German, the uncommon combination *samovitoe (samotsennoe) slovo* was translated by doubling the first part of the compound; the second one was left out entirely: ‘*selbstmächtiges (selbstwertiges) Wort*’. The term ‘*selbstmächtiges Wort*’ works well to capture the atmosphere of Futurist masculine manifestos, yet it does not pick up on the internal imagery of *samovitý* involving the word *vít* that is suitable for Futurist works like Khlebnikov’s *Incantation by Laughter* (Mathauserová 1988, p. 105).

period of his writing, Shklovsky himself agreed and, instead of the original term *ostranenie*, eventually opted for a spelling variant identical with the Russian grammar — *ostrannenie* (1983). However, we consider the first version of the word the important one. We do not consider it wrong; on the contrary, it is in line with the Avant-garde thought of the period, which can be traced to before 1913, even in 1910 in early Futurist poetry. According to Zdeněk Mathauser, Futurist modernity did not start in 1912 (the publication year of the manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* that included the demand for a new modern technique of the *samovitoe* word), but it was rather an uncovering of the hidden nature of the world. Considering the technicism in Futurism, ‘the heart of the matter is to bring to the surface that which has become a crucial feature of modern life; Futurists reject old culture not because it does not contain technicism or because there are no planes in Pushkin, but precisely with regard to the very substance [...]’ (Mathauser 1969, p. 47).

We propose to explore this term as a neologism, as experiment and wordplay, ‘magic of sounds’ as practiced in the European Avant-garde since Stéphane Mallarmé or even Rimbaud. Vital to our interpretation is the idea that the Russian Futurist language experiment is ‘metalogical’, as Dmytro Chyzhevsky translated the Russian term ‘з́а́умь’. *Zaum* language or the ‘*samovitoe*’ word completes this experiment at the level of the word. Světlá Mathauserová writes: ‘Word-weaving and the *samovitoe* word [...] are not merely static sound spots that would embellish a text from the outside; rather they are dynamic extracts affecting the entire structure of the sign as well as its content’ (Mathauserová 1988, p. 110). The mechanism of the experiment was uncovered in 1968 by Aleksei Kruchenykh when he revealed that the lines in his poem *Heights* (*Vysoty*): ‘e y ю / e и o / o a [...]’ were made up of vowels from the Old Church Slavic version of the *Nicene Creed* (Mathauser 1969, p. 53). Yet these experiments are not just a carnival, ironic acrobatics, or free play; they, too, have their own sacred purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Keeping these contexts in mind, we also follow the term *ostranenie* as a ‘metalogical’ neologism, as a *zaum* or *samovitoe* word. Let us turn to the etymology of the term or the words that have been crossed within. The key is the root of the word, ‘strana’, which can also refer to land, area, territory and cardinal direction; the derived verb ‘stranstvovat’, i.e. to travel, to wander, and ‘strannik’ — wanderer. The word ‘strannik’ brings us to ‘strannyi’, which means strange, odd, and to the word ‘strannost’ — eccentricity. We must also mention another crossover with the word ‘storona’ meaning side or direction, but also standpoint, attitude, and perspective. Surely this association between words did not escape Shklovsky, who was so closely involved with the language experiments of Futurism (his 1913 lecture mentioned above was addressed to his Futurist friends) and with the Russian Avant-garde. This is why one cannot simply ‘correct’ the number of n’s in the original term.

We therefore view *ostranenie* as a neologistic, spatial, polysemic, ironic term imbued with revolutionary potential. It is not simply an expression of change because it shows the movement of the whole — both the movement backward that serves to find the orig-

11 Note in this context Mathauserová’s logical reflection on the relationship between the old rhetorical tradition of spiritual lyricism, so-called ‘*viti slova*’, word-weaving, and the Futurist ‘*samoviti*’, as well the interpretation of icons in Boris Uspensky. On this point Zdeněk Mathauser begins his phenomenological discussion of Futurism.

inal substance, the pre-medium, ‘ur-’ state or ground zero which can become a starting point for a revolution, and the movement forward. The term is defined by a multilayered dynamic that involves both constant shifts in time and space, and also changes in perspective. The radicalness of the term is also grounded in its ambivalent nature and its ability to blend opposites, i.e., in enantiosemey, as suggested by Yuri Girin in his analysis of the Avant-garde movement (Girin 2010). Enantiosemey, which also shares much with Mathauser’s concept of imitative antithesis, points out the possible coexistence of contrasts and contradictions within a single dynamic field, not their mutual erasure or negation (Mathauser 1989, pp. 43–45).<sup>12</sup> A consideration of the phenomenological and ontological levels attests to the internal revolutionary aspect of *ostranenie*. It is precisely owing to these qualities that *ostranenie* can invade both the artistic and lived reality.

It is apparent that the Czech terms *ozvláštňení/aktualizace* trivialize the original, radical, and internally multifaceted term. In contrast to the original focus on the place of observation, the term becomes rather complacent and loses the radical edge of formalism which sought to break notions of complacency and comfort zones. The Czech equivalent *ozvláštňení* does a disservice to the translation of texts by Boris Uspensky and other Russian formalists.

Now then, isn’t it time for a new translation of Shklovsky?

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12 Mathauser mentions Chadraha’s term of imitative antithesis in *Methodological Meditations* and defines it as the ability to stand against a phenomenon, to be its negation but at the same time retain some of it within oneself, writes Eliška Mikeschová in her excellent BA thesis *Teoretická koncepce symbolu a čtverce umělecké specifčnosti u Zdeňka Mathausera* [Theoretical Concept of the Symbol and Square of Artistic Specificity in Zdeněk Mathauser] (Charles University, Prague, 2015).



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## RESUMÉ / RÉSUMÉ

### **Ostranenie není ozvláštňení: Problém pojmového transferu a nedorozumění**

Text se věnuje problematice transferu a překladu několika pojmů (ostranění, točka zření a dalších) ruské formální školy. Interpretace pojmů vychází z knihy Borise Uspenského *Poetika kompozice*, vrací se zpět k původnímu konceptu Viktora Šklovského a ilustruje je pomocí tvorby německé fotografky Barbary Probst.

### **Ostranenie Does Not Equal Ozvláštňení: An Issue of a Term Transferred and Misunderstood**

The text focuses on the question of the transfer and translation of several Formalist concepts, such as *ostranenie* and *točka zrenia*. The interpretation is based on Boris Uspensky's *A Poetics of Composition*, it revisits the original definition provided Viktor Shklovsky and illustrates it by the work of the German photographer Barbara Probst.

## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

ozvláštňení; ostranění; hledisko; točka zření; transfer; překlad; ruský formalismus; Boris Uspenskij; Viktor Šklovskij; Barbara Probst / defamiliarization; ostranenie; point of view; točka zrenia; transfer; translation; Russian formalism; Boris Uspenskij; Viktor Shklovskij; Barbara Probst