**Formalist Theories of Film**

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Over the course of the relatively brief history of Film Studies, a striking number of diverse permutations of formalism have been advanced (Christie 1998; Buckland 2009). These include, for example, approaches developed by Rudolf Arnheim (1957), Christian Metz (1974), Noël Burch (1981), Raymond Bellour (2000), Kristin Thompson (1981; 1988), David Bordwell (1981; 1985; 1988), and Bordwell and Thompson collaboratively (2012). The present entry explores one of the origins of this tradition as well as the work of one of its most prominent exponents in contemporary Film Studies.

The first part of the entry focuses on a seminal essay in Russian Formalist literary criticism—Viktor Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique” (1917/1965). In this essay, Shklovsky introduces the concept of *ostranenie* or “defamiliarization,” which has proved important to a number of film theorists—perhaps none more so than Kristin Thompson (1981; 1988). The second part of the entry examines the ways in which Thompson's neoformalism makes use of defamiliarization and related Russian Formalist ideas.

*Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique”*

Although Shklovsky’s essay sets out several general claims regarding the nature of perception, the nature of literature, and the nature of art more broadly, it begins with what may initially appear to be a rather insular debate. Shklovsky takes issue with a view, advanced by the largely forgotten Russian philologist Alexander Potebnya, which identifies the essence of art (and poetry, in particular) as the engendering of mental imagery. However, as Shklovsky points out, it seems that something’s occasioning “imagistic thought” (1917/1965, 7) is neither necessary nor sufficient for it to be art. On his view, it cannot be necessary because various art forms, notably music, seem not to essentially involve imagery, and it cannot be sufficient for two reasons.

One reason imagery is not sufficient for something to be art is that there can be non-artistic uses of imagery—what Shklovsky calls “prose imagery,” (1917/1965, 9) or “imagery as a practical means of thinking” (1917/1965, 8). This is not an isolated point regarding the nature of imagery. Rather, it owes to Shklovsky’s broader conception of the nature of poetry and language in general. For him, language can be used for practical, non-aesthetic purposes or non-practical, aesthetic purposes. In the former case, language is prose and in the latter case it is poetry. In both cases, words constitute material that is shaped into either prosaic or poetic language through the use of particular devices like imagery. But neither the materials nor the devices have an essential aesthetic valence or value. Whether or not language is prose or poetry, whether it is non-aesthetic or aesthetic, depends on how it functions in a particular context.

A second and related reason imagery cannot be sufficient for something to be art is that, in the case of poetry, imagery “is but one of the devices of poetic language” (Shklovsky 1917/1965, 9). This is a somewhat confusing claim because Shklovsky has just pointed out that imagery can be prosaic as well as poetic. However, what he seems to be suggesting is that imagery is just one of several devices that can be used in poetry. Interpreted this way, Shklovsky is claiming that imagery can be put to prosaic or poetic purposes, but so too can many other devices. Other such devices that can be used poetically include “parallelism, comparison, repetition, balanced structure, hyperbole, the commonly accepted rhetorical figures, and all those methods which emphasize the emotional effect of an expression […]” (Shklovsky 1917/1965, 8-9). As we will soon see, the idea that there is an array of poetic devices, all of which may serve the same purpose equally well, is important to Shklovsky’s overall conception of art.

Before explaining what that is, however, Shklovsky first tries to establish a general principle about the nature of perception. “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (1917/1965, 11). Here, Shklovsky refers not only to visual perception, but all our perceptual modalities—to perception in general. On his view, such “habitualization” or “automatization” has deleterious, anaesthetizing consequences. “Habitualization,” he writes, “devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (Shklovsky 1917/1965, 12). That is, habitualized perception is dulled perception—potentially so dulled that experiences may fail to register with us, as if we were sleep walking. But to live life so desensitized to experience is not to really live it at all, as Shklovsky signals by citing an apt passage from Leo Tolstoy’s *Diary*: “If the whole complex of lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been” (qtd. in Shklovsky 1917/1965, 12).

For Shklovsky, the remedy for habitualized perception is art. As he puts it in a well-known remark, “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*” (Shklovsky 1917/1965, 12). In many texts that cite Shklovsky, the quotation is cut off here, leaving students to ponder the somewhat obscure notion of making a stone stony. But actual passage from which the quotation is often excised continues with a further explanation: “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique 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” (Shklovsky 1917/1965, 12). In sum, Shklovsky’s view is that the purpose of art is the renewal of perception both because perceptual experience is “an aesthetic end in itself” and because habitualized perception dulls one’s experience of life. And this renewal of perception is achieved by making things unfamiliar—by defamiliarizing them. Thus, more simply put, the purpose of art is defamiliarization

Now we are in a position to understand both Shklovsky’s objection to the view that the essence of art is imagery and his emphasis that imagery is just one of many devices that can serve a single function equally well. For Shklovsky, such devices are not ends in themselves, but rather means to realize art’s point—means by which to achieve defamiliarization. This brings us to a crucial and often overlooked point about the conception of art held by Shklovsky and the other Russian Formalists who adopted his views. Despite being known as a “Formalist,” Shklovsky actually propounds a functional theory of art. That is, he identifies the essence of art with a particular function—namely, defamiliarization. This is not to deny that form is important for Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists, but rather is to say that form is significant just because it is what makes defamiliarization possible. And the analysis of form is thus an essential critical activity because it allows us to see how specific devices function in various works to achieve defamiliarization.

It is important to stress, however, that Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists have in mind here a somewhat unusual conception of form. Typically, formalism is associated with the views that there is a sharp distinction between form and content and that only form is aesthetically relevant (Thomson-Jones 2009, 132). However, if, as Shklovsky puts it, a given artistic device’s “purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object […]” (1917/1965, 18), then the aesthetic relevance of the form/content distinction seems to dissolve (Thomson-Jones 2009, 132-133; Thompson 1981, 11). Because the purpose of art is the renewal of perception rather than the communication of meaning, form is not a kind of container in which the content or meaning is presented. Rather, form can be thought of as a set of devices used to shape material so that it is perceived a certain way. As Thompson writes, form “refers in this approach to the sum total of internal relationships in the work” (1981, 12). That is, form is the work’s overall system of devices that renders any given material (e.g. words, objects, cinematic or poetic conventions) defamiliarized.

Much of the subsequent discussion in “Art as Technique” explores defamiliarization in literary contexts, and cinema is not mentioned at all. And although Shklovsky did write both for the cinema and about the cinema throughout the 1920s, he never applied the ideas developed in “Art as Technique” in the context of cinema in a systematic and sustained fashion. So, too, other Russian Formalists turned their attention to film—most notably in the 1927 volume *The Poetics of Cinema* edited by Boris Eikhenbaum—but a comprehensive Formalist study of the cinema was never written.

*Neoformalist Film Analysis*

It was not until the 1981 publication of Kristin Thompson’s *Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*, followed by her *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (1988), that the Russian Formalists’ core assumptions and general approach were systematically brought to bear upon the study of film. Thompson’s neoformalism borrows from the foundational principles of the Russian Formalists rather than their writings on film for two reasons. First, as we saw above, the Formalists never systematized their thinking about cinema. Second, and perhaps for that reason, their writing on cinema tended to apply ideas from their work on literature, assuming that cinema was a kind of language. However, Thompson regards this as an unconvincing line of thought, so in general she adopts the Formalists’ approach while leaving aside their specific work on cinema.

Nevertheless, there is one sense in which Thompson sees a relevant parallel between film and language. On her view, “we may take the material elements of cinema to be those components that are equivalent to words in literature; that is, they may be combined to serve practical or non-practical functions” (Thompson 1981, 25). In other words, Thompson suggests, just as language can be used aesthetically or non-aesthetically depending on how it is used in a given context, so too are there aesthetic and non-aesthetic instances of film. Thompson identifies the materials of cinema as mise-en-scene, sound, camera/frame, editing, and optical effects (1981, 26). Yet, she stresses, “since these techniques are used in some combination in all films, they are not sufficient to define [aesthetic] cinematicness” (Thompson 1981, 26). (It is not clear whether Thompson conflates materials and devices here, or if she simply does not want to draw the distinction as sharply as I have.)

Here we see some of the most important ways in which neoformalism adopts the core assumptions of Russian Formalism. Neoformalism follows Russian Formalism in drawing a sharp divide between the realm of the aesthetic and the realm of the everyday. A medium like language or film has no inherent aesthetic valence. It can be used aesthetically or practically, prosaically or poetically. What matters is *how* a particular work’s devices organize its materials to perform various functions. What, then, constitutes an aesthetic use of the film medium (“cinematicness”) for the neoformalist? When does film function aesthetically?

Again, Thompson follows Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists in supposing that an aesthetic use of the medium essentially involves a special kind of perception. “For neoformalists,” she writes, “art is a realm separate from all other types of cultural artifacts because it presents a unique set of perceptual requirements. Art is set apart from the everyday world, in which we use our perception for practical ends” (Thompson 1988, 8). In contrast to the practical perception required by our engagement with the everyday world, perception in art contexts is, as Shklovsky said, “an aesthetic end in itself” (1917/1965, 12). According to Thompson, this is because “films and other artworks, on the contrary, plunge us into a non-practical, playful type of interaction. They renew our perceptions and other mental processes because they hold no immediate practical implications for us” (1988, 8).

For Thompson, as for Shklovsky, this renewal of perception occurs through defamiliarization, and the neoformalist conception of defamiliarization closely resembles that of the Formalists. According to Thompson, “the nature of practical perception means that our faculties become dulled by the repetitive and habitual activities inherent in much of daily life” (1988, 9). “Art,” she explains, “defamiliarizes our habitual perceptions of the everyday world, of ideology, of other artworks, and so on by taking material from these sources and transforming them. The transformation takes place through their placement in a new context and their participation in unaccustomed formal patterns” (Thompson 1988, 11). Thus, like Shklovsky, Thompson adopts a functional conception of art, according to which art’s purpose is defamiliarization.

However, it is important to recognize that Thompson adds a number of qualifications here and that, ultimately, neoformalism is less a general theory of art or film than an approach to film analysis. One qualification regards the kind of theory of art that neoformalism adopts. Inasmuch as neoformalism supposes that the purpose of art is defamiliarization because this affords a kind of aesthetic perception, it falls under the broader category of aesthetic theories of art. But neoformalism’s aestheticism differs from traditional theories in terms of how it understands the nature of aesthetic experience. In contrast to notions of a detached or disinterested aesthetic attitude, neoformalism invokes a conception of aesthetic experience in which “the viewer actively seeks cues in the work and responds to them with viewing skills acquired through experience of other artworks and of everyday life. [She] is involved on the levels of perception, emotion, and cognition, all of which are inextricably bound up together” (Thompson 1988, 10). Thus, the neoformalist conception of aesthetic experience is a deflationary one, according to which there seems to be some penetrability between the aesthetic and the everyday.

A second qualification is that at the same time Thompson accepts the purpose of art as defamiliarization, she suggests that this is a contingent rather than logically necessary or essential function. In her words, “This is not to say that neoformalism takes art to be a permanent, fixed realm. It is culturally determined and relative, but it is distinctive” (Thompson 1988, 9). Further moderating neoformalism’s commitment to an aesthetic conception of art, Thompson maintains that regarding defamiliarization as the purpose of film art actually constitutes a deep commitment to studying and understanding the historical contexts in which films are made. For, on her view, “Defamiliarization depends on historical context; devices that may be new and defamiliarizing will decline in effectiveness with repetition” (Thompson 1988, 25). Practically speaking, this means that a significant part of the film analyst’s job is to locate the film to be in analyzed in its historical context and to identify the various norms and deviations—the “backgrounds”—in operation when it was made.

Here we see that defending a general theory of art as defamiliarization turns out to be significantly less important for the neoformalist than the analytic approach that it makes available. First, for reasons we saw above, it is Thompson’s view that conceiving the purpose of art to be defamiliarization dissolves the form/content distinction. On this view, “Meaning is not the end result of an artwork, but one of its formal components” (Thompson 1988, 12). This has the practical consequence of subordinating film interpretation to the analysis of a film’s overall formal system: “for the neoformalist, interpretation is only one part of analysis” (Thompson 1988, 34 n25). This view closely echoes Shklovsky’s assertion, which Thompson quotes, “The aim of the formalist method, or at least one of its aims, is not to explain the work, but to call attention to it, to restore that ‘orientation towards form’ which is characteristic of a work of art” (qtd. in Thompson 1988, 32). Second, given neoformalism’s conception of defamiliarization as essentially dependent upon historical context, analysis of the film’s overall formal system must be supplemented by historical research.

Finally, it should be clear that the neoformalist conception of films as historically embedded formal systems of devices that perform different functions in different contexts demands a kind of methodological flexibility—a “constant need for modification” (Thompson 1988, 6). More specifically, Thompson claims, understanding works of film art this way means that such methodological flexibility is “built into” the approach. Elaborating, she writes, “By assuming an overall approach that dictates modification or complete change of the method for each new analysis, neoformalist film criticism avoids the problem inherent in the typical self-confirming method. It does not assume that the text harbors a fixed pattern which the analyst goes in and finds” (Thompson 1988, 7). Arguably, this was neoformalism’s most important intervention in Film Studies in the 1980s and is still its greatest value as an analytic approach.

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