adaptive (and maladaptive) processes since then. *A Reader* is part of a process that will lead to consilience.

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Ostrannenie. On "Strangeness" and the Moving Image: The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 278 pp., 29.95 (paperback).
by **Simon Spiegel**
Zurich

Most people who see this book for the first time will probably experience a moment of confusion. The term "ostranenie," the idea of "making things strange," is certainly well known in literary and film studies. The concept originally developed by Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky is widely used and by no means exotic—but normally it is spelled with only one n. So what happened here? An embarrassing typo? It is, of course, not a mistake but a conscious decision by editor Annie van den Oever to spell "ostrannenie" in this

unfamiliar way. As she explains in her introduction the unusual spelling with two n's is actually the correct one as *ostranenie* is a deviation from the Russian adjective *strannyi* (strange). Shklovsky himself confessed in 1983, that he had erroneously spelt ostranenie with only one n when he had coined the term in his famous article "Art as Technique" (first published in 1917, although Shklovsky had probably developed some of its basic ideas already by 1913). The typo stuck until today. Using the correct but unknown spelling as the title of this collection is a clever trick: Suddenly a term to which most of us are accustomed appears strange; we already experience the concept of ostranenie in action before we have even started with the book.

With this little pun van den Oever hints at one of her objectives: to see ostranie anew again, to "restore the revolutionary impact of the concept of ostranenie" (11). *Ostrannenie* is the first book in a new series from Amsterdam University Press called the "The Key Debates" focusing on film and media theory. Although Shklovsky did write about film and considers ostranenie to be a general principle of art, "Art as Technique" only deals with examples from literature. However, Van den Oever places Shklovsky's essay explicitly in the context of the early theoretical engagement with film. She and several other contributors argue that Shklovky's thoughts on the role of ostranenie in art "were first and foremost an urgently required and utterly relevant theoretical answer to the tremendous impact early cinema had on the early avant-garde movements in pre-revolutionary Russia" (11). In other words, van den Oever sees ostranenie as a consequence of the media change early cinema brought about; therefore the aim of the collected texts is as much historical as it is theoretical: to reevaluate the role ostranenie played during the "birth" of cinema and, at the same time, assess its relevance for research "on media specificity and media change" (11). Today, as we experience a shift toward digital media, the latter perspective is of course of greatest interest.

Accordingly, the first two chapters, which form the first part of the book, locate Shklovsky's work historically. Yuri Tsivian focuses on connections between Shklovsky's theoretical enterprise and the works of abstract painter Vasily Kandinsky, avant-garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov and constructivist photographer Aleksandr Rodchenko. Tsivian investigates one specific example of ostranenie, the notion of making things strange by turning their images upside down, which was employed by all four. Shklovsky was not alone with his concept; quite to the contrary, the idea of literally revolutionizing—from the Latin *revolvere,* to turn—the world was very much in vogue in the visual arts.

Russian formalism is often understood as a kind of proto-structuralism. As Dominique Chateau argues in a later chapter, this perspective was much influenced by Roman Jakobson (who had little regard for the concept of ostranenie) and is not really adequate when it comes to Shklovsky. According to

van den Oever, "Art as Technique" is not so much a systematic theoretical text, but rather "a true 'manifesto,' in the best avant-garde's traditions, and its main objective is to re-think art from the perspective of technique" (33). As a consequence, in her article, van den Oever embeds Shklovsky's essay and the theories put forward by the formalist OPOYAZ circle he belonged to in the wider context of Russian avant-garde, especially the Russian symbolists and futurists.

In his seminal essay "The Cinema of Attractions," first published in 1986, Tom Gunning described the "astonishing" and even "stupefying" effect early cinema had on its audience. This "disruptive and evocative impact of the early cinema" (38) was a major trigger for the Russian avant-garde, and, according to van den Oever, it is in this context that "Art as Technique" has to be understood: "Central to the early avant-garde's reconsiderations and experiments was a fascination with the perceptual potential of optical techniques to 'estrange,' distort, disrupt and disorient, and in general work strongly on the imagination and transform experience" (50). For the audience of early cinema the moving images of film already possessed a strange quality, and it is the experience of this new technology's revolutionary—estranging—quality that made Shklovsky emphasize the role of technique and technology for art. It may seem paradoxical, but the supposed formalist Shklovsky actually replaces "the muddled notion of 'form' by the notion of 'technique'" (55).

Reading "Art as Technique" as a manifesto might indeed prove productive, because, as van den Oever rightly notes, Shklovsky's essay is "hard to interpret" and "its examples are baffling" (54). Shklovsky does proceed quite eclectically and the central term ostranenie is rather hard to pin down. As the different articles in this volume show, Shklovsky uses ostranenie in at least four distinct ways: at one point it is a quality of art in general, at other times it designates specific formal features of a text. In addition, it describes a process of perception, and, finally, it is an important factor in the historical development of an art form. This lack of precision might be considered a weakness, but the lasting success of Shklovsky's concept probably has its roots in its very vagueness—at least to some degree. Today, ostranenie appears almost as a kind of passe-partout term that can be used for nearly anything. What makes the situation even worse is that there is no consensus on how ostranenie should be translated. For example, in English alone three different translations are commonly used: estrangement, defamiliarization, and alienation. It is, of course, much too late for some kind of semantic purge, but at least for the scope of a single book a unified nomenclature might have proven useful. Unfortunately, the various contributors use all kinds of different translations—sometimes even with differently spelled versions of the same term—and it is by no means always evident whether they all mean the same when they talk about estrangement or defamiliarization. It gets even more confus-

ing when other languages come into play: for example, in one of the two in-
terviews, which build the last part of the book, Laura Mulvey mentions that
Sigmund Freud also talks about "estrangement" in one of his letters. The prob-
lem is, he does not: in German, estrangement and ostranenie are normally
translated as "Verfremdung," but Freud actually uses the word "Entfrem-
dung," which has quite a different connotation.

The idea that it is art's primary function to make things strange (again) is
not something invented by Shklovsky or one of his contemporaries. In "The
Resurrection of the Word" he himself traces the concept back to Aristotle. The
pervasiveness of this basic idea in combination with the vagueness of the
term ostranenie and its various translations can easily lead to the kind of the-
oretical short-circuit Mulvey displays. In this regard the case of Bertolt Brecht
is almost notorious; his concept of "Verfremdung" or "V-Effekt" is often con-
flated with Shklovsky's ostranenie. A typical example is Ian Christie's chapter,
which follows the influence Shklovsky and Brecht had on British theatre and
cinema. Christie tries to track down the origins of the Brechtian "Verfrem-
dung," but not only does he confuse the German terms "Entzauberung" and
"Entäusserung" but also purports that Brecht was directly influenced by
Shklovsky when he visited Moscow in 1935. Though it is true that Brecht only
started to use the term "Verfremdung" after his Moscow trip, there is, to my
knowledge, simply no hard evidence for an immediate impact of Shklovsky on
Brecht. Quite the contrary, the V-Effekt was already very much developed as a
staging technique in Brecht's theatrical productions, for example in *The Three-
penny Opera* (1928) and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1929), by the time he trav-
eled to Moscow.

For all their similarities there are also fundamental differences between
Shklovsky's ostranenie and Brecht's V-Effekt. For Brecht, Verfremdung is not so
much a general principle as a specific effect. This effect also serves a different
and political purpose: the V-Effekt must lead to the realization that things do
not have to be the way they are, that any current state of things is—like the
events on stage—not naturally given but a product of historical processes,
which can change and will be changed. Shklovsky's project, by contrast, is
ultimately a conservative one. For him, the task of art is to reveal, to use
his much quoted phrase, "the stoniness of stone." In other words, things are
not the result of a historical process but have an inherent eternal quality. It is
a bit surprising that none of the contributors mentions this deeply conserva-
tive strain that, to a certain degree, contradicts the historical dimension of
ostranenie.

The second part of *Ostrannenie,* which Christie's article is a part of, explic-
itly deals with the postwar reception of Shklovsky's concept. Altogether, this
section is the least satisfying. It is a declared objective of the "The Key De-
bates" series "to uncover the processes of appropriation and diffusion of key

concepts that have shaped Film Studies," but the various ideological battles among the contributors to the journal *Screen* that Christie describes really are of little relevance today. The two chapters by Dominique Chateau and Emile Poppe on the role ostranenie played in French film studies and in Christian Metz's theories, respectively, also seem a bit too specialized to be of general interest.

The pleasant exception in the second part is Frank Kessler's contribution. He argues that ostranenie is essentially a historical concept: because "defamiliarization necessarily presupposes familiarization" (62), it "firmly roots artistic creation in History" (62). Ultimately, "[t]here is no form outside History" (62). Kessler first describes the role ostranenie plays in neoformalist theory. Although the two most important members of this school, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, only selectively refer to Russian formalism, ostranenie—especially as a historical category in Kessler's sense—is central to their work, even if they do not always call the concept by its name. Bordwell's project of a historical poetics with its emphasis on norm, deviation, and disturbance clearly reflects Shklovsky's approach: "the terms 'deviation' and 'disturbance' in fact illustrate the two-sidedness of defamiliarization as a constructional strategy and an effect produced at the level of reception" (64).

Bordwell and Thompson's analyses not only use ostranenie to describe individual works on the background of an established norm (the classical Hollywood cinema), but Thompson also speaks about the re-defamiliarization of an ordinary, largely automatized Hollywood film in order to analyze its stylistic features. Here, ostranenie "becomes an analytical strategy" (66). Although he is aware that his understanding of ostranenie is quite different from Shklovsky's original intent, Kessler sees much benefit in this approach and argues for the use of the concept as a heuristic tool for the analysis of the historical development of stylistic features. Following a similar line of thought as van den Oever, Kessler sees ostranenie as a possible mode of historiography of media: once early film lost its new, astonishing quality, it became—like all media do—automatized, transparent. As Kessler shows, media historians like Gunning or Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin "do see transparency, or invisibility, as the result of a diachronic process of familiarization" (77). This approach has big potential, but Kessler also warns of the danger "that it may turn into a mechanistic and axiomatic explanatory instrument" (78).

The chapters in the third part all deal with ostranenie in the context of cognitive (film) theory. Considering the importance of ostranenie in the works of Bordwell and Thompson, it is not surprising that Shklovsky's theory fits well into this theoretical framework. Laurent Jullier's chapter is partly an introduction into cognitive approaches to film, partly a reformulation of Shklovsky's concept in the context of a general theory of perception. As Jullier notes, "[t]o know when defamiliarization operates, one first has to know what is familiar"

(139); in other words, one has to know how we normally perceive the world. Cognitivism conceptualizes perception as a combination of a "perceptive, bottom-up" and a "cognitive, top-down reading of the world" (121). Defamiliarization can occur on both levels; it "can mislead our perceptive routines" (125), for example, when the rule of bodily continuity is challenged, or on a higher interpretative level when cultural, social, or generic norms are involved. Because defamiliarization "includes bodily, mental, cultural and social dimensions" (139), Jullier pleads for an interdisciplinary study of the phenomenon (although he is aware that interdisciplinarity has its pitfalls).

For Shklovsky art has to convey "the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known." Miklós Kiss takes Jullier's argument even further when he maps Shklovsky's distinction between "perceiving" and "knowing" to the interplay between bottom-up and top-down processes. Kiss argues that our brain is actually constantly editing because the human eye, our "biological camera," is simply not capable of continuously processing visual data. Therefore "[t]he reception of reality appears in our mind as edited" (165) and the characteristic nonclassical editing in films like Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierre le fou,* which is often thought of as defamiliarizing, in fact "exactly mirrors the real, non-linear process of perceiving and understanding" (172). Though this parallel is intriguing, it is a bit too neat. The "editing" our brain performs is a preconscious activity and, unlike when we view a film, we are simply unable to see "the cuts."

Barend van Heusden and László Tarnay also see parallels between Shklovsky's concept and the cognitivist model. According to van Heusden, "[e]strangement is basic to art because it is basic to human life" (163); what Shklovsky calls ostranenie is inherent to human perception. Tarnay also puts emphasis on the perceptive progress; the automatization Shklovsky describes is actually the result of a kind of economic compression our brain performs: what we see is reduced to what we already know. "What art as 'defamiliarization' and experimental films do . . . is that they constitute a challenge for higher-order cognition by presenting a manifold of experience that cannot be subsumed under any known a priori categories" (155).

The fourth and last section consists of two conversations that also represent two different theoretical approaches to film. András Bálint Kovács clearly champions cognitivist theory, which, as we have already seen, fits well with ostranenie and which he regards as "the most unified and virulent theoretical paradigm that presently exists in film theory" (177). Like Kessler, Kovács emphasizes the historical dimension of ostranenie, the importance of "social-cultural training" (179). The study of ostranenie therefore calls for interdisciplinary research that combines cognitive and cultural approaches. Like Jullier (who conducts the interview) Kovács sees fundamental problems when it comes to interdisciplinary research, but believes "that both approaches can

very well survive next to each other if they are willing to accept the specificity of one other's field of interest" (184).

In the other, already mentioned interview, Laura Mulvey presents a typical "culturalist" approach when she connects Shklovsky's ostranenie and the astonishing effect of early cinema with Freud's uncanny, which "describes . . . a psychic mechanism that the device of estrangement exploits (or taps into)" (188). In some ways, this last chapter demonstrates a shortcoming of the whole volume: it touches on too many subjects in too superficial a way; besides Shklovsky, Gunning and Freud, Kant and the sublime are mentioned, but not dealt with in detail. This kind of loose brainstorming is certainly appropriate for the format of a conversation, but, unfortunately, the majority of the other chapters more or less remain on this kind of essayistic "intermediate level." Only a few authors really analyze Shklovsky in detail or make use of his concept for in-depth analyses of concrete filmic example. That way, ostranenie's typical theoretical vagueness is further intensified. This is not so much a problem of the individual articles but of the general editing policy: the whole volume could have gained from a more rigorous editorial approach that would have encouraged greater contrast (both thematically and regarding the level of analysis) and, at the same time, reduced redundancies. Time and again we return to the same passages from "Art as Technique" (and the story of the correct spelling of ostranenie is told at least three times) while other important concepts like the Brechtian V-Effekt, the sublime, or Derrida's différance are only mentioned in passing. Even the question of how ostranenie can help us to reflect on the current media change is just barely touched. Finally, some kind of introductory chapter is missing, which would offer readers with limited previous knowledge a thorough introduction to "Art as Technique." *Ostrannenie* certainly succeeds in defamiliarizing its subject and in opening up new perspectives, but what it actually lacks is a more thorough familiarization.

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