

Take That, Potebnya

Victor Shklovsky - Art as Technique

This is a statement of Russian Formalist method. The general tone of it appeals immediately. It's so brooding and serious. You can smell the vodka and the pungent cigarettes.

Learning is largely a matter of learning to ignore. Art forces us to notice. Can't argue with that. This ties in directly with current thinking in cognitive psychology, neuroscience and artificial intelligence streams, all of which are agreed on some basic points regarding the working of the brain. Another way to put it is that experience is largely a matter of inhibition, and in order to re-experience, we have to disinhibit.

1917 is early to be thinking along these lines. The psychologists didn't reach it until decades later, the neuroscientists only started to scratch at it in the 1940s, and the AI people didn't get there until 1960 or later. Whatever is in those cigarettes, it's good.

As with many academic pieces, you have to know who and what the author is refuting before you can appreciate what he is saying and how he is saying it. Shklovsky is refuting Potebnya. One has to assume they are interested in the same girl. Potebnya gets right up Shklovsky's nose, and Shklovsky will not rest until the world, and the girl, see Potebnya for what he is. Potebnya, it seems, is all about imagery and metaphor - clarifying the unknown with the known. Art is thinking in images. He is going to take some refuting, but Shklovsky is pumped.

First Shklovsky finds a few metaphors in which the metaphier is less familiar than the metaphrand¹, which makes Potebnya look pretty silly. He then appeals to the findings of Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky, apparently not a made-up name, who, although a deluded disciple of Potebnya's, had to give up the task of forcing reality into his master's meager vision.

In a reasoned tone that masks his throbbing passion, Shklovsky quickly establishes that Potebnya has been talking through his ass, without thinking about it nearly enough. The world is a little more complex than can be encompassed by an intellect such as Potebnya's. Read a book or two, then talk to me, says Shklovsky, mentioning rapidly eleven scholars in the course of a single page, including William James, which should clinch any argument. Get over yourself, Potebnya. What, haven't you been following what's happening in Japanese poetry, you moron?

Leaving Potebnya bleeding on the floor, Shklovsky then switches tack. He pauses to light a cigarette, making rather a business of waving out the flaming match.

Real men don't get excited about the tip of the iceberg. They look below the surface. Why do we use imagery? Why other artistic techniques? Because we seek to defamiliarize our perception.

Shklovsky has a habit of using words like law and algebra, as if he is appealing to physics, to the immutable and universal, for support of his argument. He is being scientific. That's what intelligent people do, they don't just shout and wave their arms around like some cossack (casually giving Potebnya a vicious boot in the ribs).

Shklovsky comes nowhere near making explicit the algebraic formulations to which he is referring, which is just as well. It could only weaken his argument, and he might run the risk of inventing linguistics. However he is far from scientific and dispassionate.

¹ Terms from Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*

"Habitualization devours works, clothes, one's wife, and the fear of war." It's all becoming obvious now. Shklovsky was disappearing for long periods into the study, stopping off at the tavern on the way home from rehearsals, taking the little lady for granted and the wily Potebnya saw an opening. He moved into the gap. He filled the vacancy. Shklovsky is so angry because at heart he knows he is to blame. The attack on Potebnya is in fact an attack on himself.

Potebnya is stirring, moaning. The least self-contradictory part of Potebnya's theory is his treatment of fable, damns Shklovsky with near-transparent phrase. Potebnya subsides. It turns out Potebnya died in 1893 or thereabouts, when Shklovsky was born, so the affair must be in Shklovsky's mind. Unless it was with Shklovsky's mother.

Thinking about Potebnya again brings to mind flogging, which Shklovsky takes the opportunity to describe in vivid detail as an example of Tolstoy's technique. He then reproduces another Tolstoy passage, from the point of view of a horse, containing the significant line:

There are people who call women their own, or their "wives", but their women live with other men."

Hmmm. It is a pupil of Potebnya who has stolen Shklovsky's wife, making Shklovsky feel like a horse's ass. Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky, a man forty years Shklovsky's senior? The next images are of death and decay. And another line:

"Why, if people have an affinity of souls, must they sleep together?"

I could go on, says Shklovsky. No need. We are so with you at this point.

Defamiliarization. Things are not what they seem. Not even one's relationship with one's wife. He then demonstrates defamiliarization in Russian literary soft-porn.

"It is not known to what the secretary would stretch his long fingers now" indeed.

"Two white prodigies appeared from beneath her blouse." Look, I follow you. I follow you, as William F. Buckley so memorably said.

Then we have the legend of Stavyor, in which a married man does not recognize his wife. Vasilyushka raised her skirts to the very navel and Stavyor recognized her gilded ring.

Defamiliarization, the basis and point of all riddles. Shklovsky is reminded of an old Russian joke in which a peasant performs violent and degrading acts against a horse, bear, a magpie, a fly and finally his wife. Sex is a brawl.

It's a little embarrassing. You almost wish he would go back to William James. Or algebra. This literary cherry-picking is an academic Rorschach test, revealing nothing about the works discussed and everything about Shklovsky.

Shklovsky manages to calm down and starts to spout references again. Maybe the cigarette is kicking in. He is thinking about rhythm, and perhaps at last he has his breathing under control.

For her sake, I hope she doesn't come back, but the whole incident seems to have inspired Shklovsky to come up with a powerful idea. The Rorschach illustrations are powerful on a visceral level, which pushes the point home. So to speak.

The paramedics have arrived. They shift Potebnya's remains to a stretcher. A taciturn detective questions Shklovsky, who shrugs and blows smoke. The judges are holding up their cards. Potebnya 0, Shklovsky 1.