Ostranenie, Innovation, and Media History[1]

Frank Kessler

There are, undoubtedly, many ways in which Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* can be used in a variety of fields. Even though the concept was conceived with regard to literature, right from the very beginning its scope was that of a general aesthetic principle, and thus, *ostranenie* has also been adopted by the neoformalist approach elaborated by Kristin Thompson (1981 and 1988). In this essay, I would like to concentrate on the way in which the concept (or principle) can be made or has been made productive for work in the domain of film history and, by extension, for media history in a larger sense, independently of whether or not the scholars referred to here do indeed acknowledge any debt to Shklovsky's ideas.

Ostranenie – An Inherently Historical Concept

As I have tried to show elsewhere,[2] Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, which he introduced in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique,"[3] works on various levels. It is used to explain mechanisms of perception and attention as well as the functioning of art with regard to everyday experience, the way in which specific devices operate within a given work of art, and finally, it even opens up towards a theorization of stylistic change. In his famous statement: "And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*," Shklovsky condenses, as it were, his aesthetic *credo* and, by the same token, somehow camouflages its complexity.[4] Building his argument, Shklovsky first defines the purpose of art, which is "to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known,"[5] and then he explains how this goal can be achieved: "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."[6]

These basic statements need to be explored further in order to fully understand their implications. When Shklovsky describes the purpose of art in terms of an opposition between "things as they are perceived" and "things as they are known." he actually introduces a temporality, or diachronicity, which it is important to recognize as being the very foundation of the concept of *ostranenie*, or defa-

miliarization. While "things as they are perceived" refers in the first instance to an experience that takes place *hic et nunc*, the "being known" of things depends upon a process that precedes that act of perception, and in the course of which the "knowledge" about the object in question has been accumulated. This is the process that Shklovsky calls "habitualization" or "automatization." Or, in other words, defamiliarization necessarily presupposes familiarization. This means that in the course of time, the things that surround us have grown so familiar to us that our perception of them is automatized as it were, and thus, in a certain sense, they have become "invisible." When art's technique has as a result "to make objects 'unfamiliar'," this implies that the artist must have gained some kind of understanding of the automatized way in which the object is usually perceived, so that the chosen devices can actually work against this. One step further yet, it becomes possible also for the critic to recognize in what way, at what level, in what respect, and in what sense such a familiarization or a habitualization has occurred and how it has been defamiliarized.

Shklovsky's statements with regard to the purpose of art and the techniques it employs in order to achieve its goals thus implies a complex diachronic process in the course of which perception has become habitual or automatized. Consequently, an artist has reached a level of understanding of this process that makes it possible to work against its grain and to achieve a defamiliarization that undoes the habitualization. It is important to underscore the fact that this theoretical construction firmly roots artistic creation in History, which makes it by definition impossible to have a purely immanent conception of a work of art and, more specifically, its form. This latter concept is introduced as a specification of the technique of art, which consists in making "forms difficult, and to increase the difficulty and length of perception." In fact, by orchestrating this shift that makes the perceptual dimension of the process dependent on the formal qualities of the work of art, Shklovsky's theory moves from a psychological realm – the fact that we do not really "see" what we have become used to and thus have taken for granted – to an aesthetic one. To be even more precise, one needs to take the discussion of this process one step further: Shklovsky's starting point is the automatized perception of objects in our everyday surroundings that art has the task to undo by means of strategies that "make forms difficult" and thus intensify, deautomatize, our perception of them. The dynamics of this process, however, do not come to an end here. Within the aesthetic realm, the formal means by which defamiliarization was achieved can themselves fall victim to habitualization, because otherwise there would be no need for change in the domain of the arts, and thus there would be no art history. So artistic techniques – devices – can also become automatized and will then no longer be able to fulfill their aesthetic function. This, however, would unavoidably lead to a standstill, which in its last consequence would mean the end of Art – and so techniques that have become automatized need to be defamiliarized, or else others have to take their place.

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Form, thus, ultimately is an inherently historical category, and Shklovsky's explanation of the way in which *ostranenie* functions already implies, albeit in a more or less embryonic way, a conception of formal change. Not only is there a necessarily diachronic development taking place that leads to a habitualization of certain formal strategies, but there is also a specific historical context with regard to which formal defamiliarization has to be achieved. There is no form outside History.

Ostranenie and Historical Poetics

This historical dimension, which as we have seen is fundamental to Russian Formalist theory, made this tradition particularly interesting to the project of a Historical Poetics sketched out by David Bordwell in the early 1980s. In a programmatic article, published in 1983 in the first issue of the journal *Iris* that aimed to map the "current state of theory," Bordwell highlights the following aspect:

> It is evident that from the start Russian Formalist theory is grounded in history: the conception of background and foreground, the emphasis on the literary environment, the openness to the vagaries of the work all refute the common notion that these critics were ahistorical.[7]

Along with Kristin Thompson's neoformalist approach, presented in her analysis of Sergei Eisentein's Ivan the Terrible, as well as in her subsequent collection of analyses,[8] David Bordwell's project, already inaugurated in his 1979 study on *The Films of Carl Theodor Dreyer*, constitutes an important and influential strand of thinking in the field of Film Studies. The work by these two writers can also be considered the most consequent – and the most consequential – attempts to make Russian Formalism productive in Film Studies, precisely because of its fundamentally historical orientation.

Given the status the work of Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell has acquired in the field of Cinema Studies over the last quarter of a century, considering also the sometimes fierce discussions and controversies their writings have provoked, it may seem superfluous to look back into their roots. However, it is important to emphasize the significance of the scholarly gesture here, aiming at bridging the gap between "theory" and "history" that continues to exist, even today, in spite of this and many other efforts. The way in which Historical Poetics and Neoformalism refer to Russian Formalism is admittedly selective, privileging in particular a number of key concepts, including *ostranenie*, but also *syuzhet* and *fabula*, background and foreground, the dominant, system, or function,[9] are significant.[10] These concepts are linked to a series of basic assumptions about the nature of the work of art, constructional principles, and the activities of both the

spectator and the artist that lead to the "one approach, many methods" governing the analyses elaborated within this framework.

In Kristin Thompson's methodological reflections, the concept of *ostranenie* plays a rather central role. On a first and, in a certain sense, strategic level, it allows her to eschew what she calls a "communications model of art," proposing instead an approach that places the artwork in a realm that is different from other cultural phenomena because it must be perceived in a specific way.[11] This is an important methodological choice, as it blocks both an interpretation of the work in terms of its "message" (and thus also the form/content split) and the use of linguistic methods and metaphors in the analysis. Quoting the well-known passage from Shklovsky's essay "Art as Device," Thompson concludes: "Art defamiliarizes our habitual perception of the everyday world [...]."[12] She also follows Shklovsky in his reasoning that the perceptual requirements of art are the result of making form difficult through defamiliarization.[13] So, on a second level *ostranenie* becomes a central concept for the analysis of artistic form. However, form is an inherently historical concept, as we have seen, and thus defamiliarization is, thirdly, important for the neoformalist approach in that it makes it necessary to look at the individual artwork in its historical context in order to be able to appreciate the way in which it defamiliarizes habitualized formal patterns and devices.[14] Hence the importance of understanding the norm against which the artist works in creating forms.

While in David Bordwell's Historical Poetics the concept of *ostranenie* plays a considerably less prominent role, the importance of looking at individual works against the broader background of historical norms is already highlighted in his study on the films of Dreyer. In this respect he appears indeed to follow Tynyanov's precept that "one cannot be certain of the structure of a work when it is studied in isolation."[15] In order to identify what is unique in Dreyer's work, he argues here, it is necessary to set it against a background allowing the characteristic difference of Dreyer to be defined and appreciated.[16]

> This book examines Dreyer's work as a set of deviations from some historically defined norm within the same medium. If films frequently jostle our aesthetic perception, the disturbance often arises from a clash between the film and dominant practice. That is, our background set can be some other film style. Although several choices are possible here, I shall pick a background set which I shall call "the classical Hollywood cinema."[17]

The implicit reference to Shklovsky's concept is clearly discernible here: 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. Furthermore, this passage demonstrates that the choice of the classical Hol-

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lywood cinema as a background is a heuristic one, in the first instance. Bordwell motivates this as follows:

> Why this construct? Historically, it is at once proximate and pertinent, central to a knowledge of the development of cinematic forms. If there is an "ordinary cinematic usage" for the fifty years of Dreyer's career, it is the narrative and stylistic principles of the American cinema. This book attempts to show the value of situating a filmmaker in relation to a model of typical traits of narrative feature films between 1920 and 1960.[18]

The heuristics are thus grounded in a historical reflection on the relative dominance of the stylistic and narrative devices developed within the Hollywood film industry and the fact that this dominance was a given throughout Dreyer's career. Bordwell continues by explaining that the "classical Hollywood cinema" he refers to is indeed an abstraction, and in this respect one might say that the monumental project he undertook with Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, resulting in their seminal book on this subject,[19] is also an attempt to give an empirical foundation to this abstraction (in addition, of course, to the many other merits of this study).[20] There is a risk, however, that a background/foreground constructed in that way might become itself "automatized." Taking Hollywood as a norm seems an obvious and convincing choice, but one that might also block an understanding of other logics at work in the construction of a given film, or group of films. Explaining the guiding principles of Historical Poetics in his 2008 book, Bordwell explicitly addresses this point, stating:

> By positing alternative norms, our work becomes comparative in a rewarding way. Instead of the couplet *norm-deviation*, we can posit competing systems of principles, operating at roughly the same level of generality. We find varying norms of narration and style in Hollywood cinema, "art cinema," Soviet montage cinema and other modes. [...] Although it may be momentarily helpful to characterize art cinema narration as a "deviation" from Hollywood principles, it's more enlightening to characterize it positively, as possessing its own fairly coherent set of storytelling principles [...]. Recognizing that we are engaged in a comparative exercise allows us to give equal weight to one norm and another.[21]

Here the sometimes mechanistic tendencies, at least in appearance, of the background/foreground construction are countered by a more generalized comparative approach. Apart from being a good illustration of the openness towards corrections and revisions claimed by Bordwell for his as well as the neoformalist approach, these reflections raise the question of to what degree this critique of

the norm-deviation perspective concerns the concept of defamiliarization as a whole.

To begin with, one could argue that Neoformalism and Historical Poetics share with the structuralist semiology of Christian Metz the idea that the system of every film is constructed on the basis of codes that a filmmaker either adopts, transforms, or works against,[22] even though Bordwell and Thompson would hardly express this in such terms. The main difference here is, however, that the (neo) formalist analysis proceeds by historicizing the various manifestations of what Metz describes as codes, and also the way in which the code (the norm) is being defamiliarized. However, at its most elementary level, Metz in his observation underlines the fact that every filmic system is by definition singular, and this in a way also explains the problem that Kristin Thompson had to face when she was looking for an "ordinary" or "average film" she could use to demonstrate the complexity of even a standardized movie.[23] And indeed, even though the film she studies here, TERROR BY NIGHT (Roy William Neill, USA 1946), a Sherlock Holmes adventure, can hardly be considered to be noteworthy in any way, her analysis teases out the efficiency it deploys in telling the story, building up at least some kind of suspense, etc. Similarly, although in a completely different perspective, Thierry Kuntzel's meticulous analysis of THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME (Irving Pichel, Ernest B. Schoedsack, USA 1932) reveals an unsuspected density in the opening sequence of an otherwise little known adventure movie.[24] Independently of the relative artistic value one may or may not ascribe to these films, what both Kuntzel's and Thompson's studies show is that a well-conducted analysis can, literally, make a film appear "out of the ordinary." As Kristin Thompson puts it:

> Ordinarily, the average Hollywood film is largely automatized, remaining part of that undifferentiated mass that we have come to think of as the classical cinema. In such a case, the critic's job could be to re-defamiliarize the film – indeed, to defamiliarize it more than it would have been at its first appearance.[25]

In this case, the concept of *ostranenie* takes on yet another meaning, i.e. defamiliarization now becomes an analytical strategy. This move, however, raises the question of whether its function to distinguish art from non-art can still be upheld. If the analysis can defamiliarize an object, and that would actually mean: any kind of object, then one might say that an acknowledgement of its specific aesthetic qualities lies, as is often said with regard to beauty, "in the eye of the beholder." As a critique of the neoformalist approach, this is in fact only a minor point, as its purpose can be reached by other means: there are many ways in which one can avoid a communications model of art. And with regard to this point, it seems to me the approach via the concept of *ostranenie* is actually not

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necessarily the strongest one. However, and more importantly, Thompson's productive analysis defamiliarizing an average, or ordinary, film does point out the usefulness of the concept as a heuristic methodological principle.

There is indeed one dimension of the concept of *ostranenie* that tends to function in a more or less schematic way, especially when it is conceived of in terms of the norm-deviation couplet critiqued by Bordwell in the context of his Historical Poetics. Considered in such a fashion, *ostranenie* appears in fact to be too much of a "mechanical" concept; according to an insightful study by Steiner,[26] the central metaphor in this historical phase of Russian Formalism is the machine, the artwork being considered in this period by Shklovsky as the sum of the devices that constitute it. The process of defamiliarization would then function in an equally mechanical way: the automatized parts of the machine are being replaced by fresh ones for which, once they themselves have become habitualized, other substitutes have to be found. However, as we will see in the next section, Shklovsky's own conception of this process turns out to be much more complex than that, in spite of his seemingly mechanistic views on the formal construction of an artwork.

So rather than using *ostranenie* as a concept functioning in absolute terms, it appears not only more prudent, but also much more productive to use it as a heuristic principle, with regard to both historical and textual analyses (though the Neoformalists definitely would not use the latter term). Constructing a background against which a film is situated and analyzing it in a basically comparative perspective can indeed yield interesting results, provided that the choices made can be convincingly supported. As a heuristic principle, this is not only valid for cases such as the ones discussed above, where an apparently "average" or "automatized" production is shown to be constructed in an actually rather sophisticated way, but can also serve as a starting point for an investigation into films that at first sight appear odd, unskillful or even failed.

In my own work, I have tried to make use of such a strategy in order to gain a better understanding of the rather peculiar way in which text elements are used in the Dutch film EEN TELEGRAM UIT MEXICO (Louis H. Chrispijn, NL 1914). Here the sheer quantity of written material is indeed amazing: there are 27 shots, 13 intertitles and 7 inserts presenting letters, telegrams and newspaper articles. The overabundance of these largely expository elements could be seen as some sort of incapacity of the filmmaker to tell his story without the help of linguistic crutches. However, a closer look and a more detailed formal analysis show otherwise, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere.[27]

The film tells the adventure of a young Dutch colonist in Mexico, who becomes involved in the troubles of the Mexican revolution (indeed, a contemporary topical event). His mother and blind father back in Holland anxiously await news from him, following the reports published in their local newspaper. One day the young man decides to leave his farm and head home. He wants to inform his parents, but the messenger simply throws the telegram away. On his way, the hero is

attacked and pursued by the rebels. At this point, the narration returns to the parents. A telegram arrives and upon reading it, the mother faints. The father, unable to read the message, presumes that it is bad news and almost goes mad with grief. Right at that moment, the door opens and the son enters, safe and sound. The telegram announced his arrival at the port of Rotterdam.

When compared to the use of written messages in other contemporary films,[28] it is not only their quantity that is surprising in EEN TELEGRAM UIT MEXICO but also the fact that in several cases the various letters or newspaper articles shown as textual inserts are more or less redundant because of intertitles that precede or follow them. They do have an obvious expository function, but hardly contribute to the film's narrative economy. They slow down the flow of the action, interrupting it time and again by textual elements, which only partly provide the viewer with new information. Compared to another thriving story pattern of that period, which presents a similar narrative situation, namely films where a last-minute rescue occurs thanks to helpers being called by telephone,[29] it is quite clear that both the distance separating the son from his parents and the frailty of the latter indicate that EEN TELEGRAM UIT MEXICO tells a different tale.

This Dutch film therefore appears to depart from existing norms, but in such a way that the deviation is taken as a shortcoming at first sight. However, once the seeming incompetence of the filmmaker is identified as a strategy, it becomes obvious that the focus of the story is not the young colonist, but rather his parents. The film is not about the adventure, but about the wait, about the hope and the despair of those who are longing for news from the loved one overseas. The insistence on the efforts to communicate rather than on the communication itself is functional *for* the narrative precisely because it appears dysfunctional *within* the narrative.

Here *ostranenie* could serve as a guiding principle for the analysis, insofar as it allows us to conceive the "strangeness" of EEN TELEGRAM UIT MEXICO not as a flaw, that is as a failed attempt to comply with a historically existing norm of efficient narration, but as an effort to tell a different kind of story. The reversal of the traditional perspective assessing films in terms of their appearing "advanced" or "retarded" with regard to an assumed general development of cinematic means of expression thus helps us to adopt a more nuanced view on film style.[30] Using *ostranenie* as a heuristic principle, in other words, is by no means linked to a conception of film history as governed by a process of progression. Quite the contrary, the concept, when used accordingly, can also lead to an assessment of stylistic features in terms of their historically embedded functions within a given film.

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Ostranenie and the Historiography of Cinema

When approaching *ostranenie* as an inherently historical concept, it should have become clear by now that this by no means entails reasoning in terms of a simple norm-deviation mechanism. Shklovsky, it seems, was very well aware of the dangers that a view on the history of the arts driven by an ongoing process of defamiliarization might bring about. When talking about historical evolution in "Literature without a Plot: Rozanov," he proclaims that literary evolution does not follow the lineage "from father to son" but "rather from uncle to nephew" (and of course a number of other lineages are conceivable when one lets go of the inherent gender bias: "from uncle to niece," "from aunt to nephew" or "from aunt to niece"). The important point here is, according to Shklovsky, that in the history of literature, often formerly marginal or sometimes also archaic forms are taken up and can then become central aspects in a later period. So Aleksandr Blok "canonizes the themes and rhythms of the 'gypsy song'," or Dostoyevsky "raises the devices of the cheap novel to the level of a literary norm."[31] In terms of a historical development, in other words, there seems to be a shift, or rather a qualification, with regard to the process of defamiliarization. While in his general definition the focus lies on the simple fact that habitualized forms are made strange in one way or another, the introduction of a diachronic perspective demands a more precise characterization of the means by which historical change is brought about. The answer Shklovsky proposes in this – very brief – allusion to literary history is remarkable in so far as he actually roots innovation in tradition. The innovative act then consists mainly in turning to a *different* tradition, in appropriating forms or devices that may be automatized in their original context, but become both defamiliarized and defamiliarizing when transplanted into another realm.

In a certain sense one might argue that in the realm of film history, the French *Nouvelle Vague* could be seen as a prime example for a historical development of the kind Shklovsky evokes. Rejecting the lineage that the dominant French film industry could offer, namely the so-called *tradition de la qualité*, the *Cahiers du cinéma*'s Young Turks not only severely criticized the aesthetic principles of Claude Autant-Lara and his scenarists, Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, but also created their own family tree based on the *politique des auteurs*. François Truffaut's famous polemical article, "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français," and the subsequent interventions by himself and his fellow critics at the *Cahiers* represented a twofold provocation in fact. On the one hand, these young writers attacked those who were perceived as being the most prestigious and successful French filmmakers, denying them all artistic and moral merits; on the other hand, they praised a number of Hollywood directors for their creativity, for the coherence and originality of their world view and for the way they translated their ethics into film images. The future filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague, in other words,

chose for themselves the filmic forms "from the lower stratum of society" (but not exclusively, as Jean Renoir or Robert Bresson also figured prominently among the references evoked by Truffaut in his manifesto, even though one could argue that at that point at least, both filmmakers were marginalized within the French film industry) they wanted to bring to the fore as their main artistic reference "to replace the old ones."[32] So here we have a case where, to use Meir Sternberg's formulation, it is not "the uncle [who] bequeaths his art to the nephew, [but] more exactly the nephew looks back to the uncle for his patrimony."[33] The line of tradition is in fact one that is quite consciously – and strategically! – constructed rather than being a given, thus permitting us to polemically reject the then dominant forms of cinematic style.

Quite obviously, this is but one version of the story, it is but one way to frame the rather complex historical developments that led to the emergence of the Nouvelle Vague. In fact, it also leaves out quite a number of aspects pertaining to the broader socio-cultural environment in France in the late 1950s, the organization of the French film industry, the internal tensions in the field of French film criticism, etc. So in this respect the caveat formulated by David Bordwell needs to be taken into account, and could even be broadened towards these other factors I just mentioned:

> Moreover, we don't have to postulate every historical change as a deviation from a norm. I have already suggested that we can often think of changes as driven by problems, some inherited from tradition, others devised by the filmmaker. There are as well many ways to realize norms, some obvious, some subtle. The most striking stylistic changes in film history often don't stem from absolute innovation, but rather from a recasting of received devices. Welles' deep-focus staging in CITIZEN KANE is a famous instance, but we could say much the same of Godard's cutting in BREATHLESS [À BOUT DU SOUFFLE] (1960), which recasts orthodox continuity principles (matching on movement and eyelines) into new patterns, to new effect. An innovation is not necessarily a deviation.[34]

Historical change is indeed a multi-causal phenomenon, and so its complexities clearly should not be simply boiled down to a mechanics of norm and deviation. In fact, one of the strengths of Shklovsky's notion of historical development in terms of a complex interaction between dominant and minor traditions is the avoidance of a linear model of historic progression. On the other hand, however, it is clear that the knight's move – to quote Shklovsky's famous metaphor – cannot provide a universal principle of literary or art history either. Yet, the theory of innovation that emerges out of the concept of *ostranenie* is worth taking a look at.

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The conception of innovation inherent in the process of defamiliarization is indeed a complex one. It rests upon an interplay between the perceptual realm and certain conscious formal choices the artist makes. Perceiving a device, a type of narrative construction, a configuration of elements as having become habitual presupposes a familiarity with them that necessarily reaches back into the past. This is the fundamental diachronic dimension governing the process. But the choices made by the artist do not imply something like a *creatio ab nihilo* but rather, as Shklovsky's remark on the historical evolution of literary style shows, a taking up or appropriation of features that are part of a tradition, albeit a minor, or "lower," and non-canonized one. Or even, as Bordwell's comment on Godard's À BOUT DU SOUFFLE [BREATHLESS] suggests, canonized devices can be recast by a filmmaker in ways that defamiliarize them (even though one might add here that Godard's take on continuity editing is in any event also shaped by his own film historical erudition acquired in ciné-clubs and at the Cinémathèque française, he looks at it, as it were, through an experience of half a century of editing practices).

It may indeed be the case that the Shklovskyan model is interesting in particular with regard to such moments of historical change that are in a way overdetermined by political or generational ruptures, since artists joining ranks in order to precipitate change generally look at such times for a lineage that suits their purpose. The young directors of the Oberhausen Manifesto, and more generally the rather diverse group of filmmakers labeled New German Cinema, not only declared the death of papa's cinema, but actively searched for points of reference elsewhere: in German film and literature of the 1920s from Murnau to Brecht, in the work of Hollywood directors understood as *auteurs* such as Douglas Sirk or Nicholas Ray, and clearly also in the stylistic and narrative experiments of their Nouvelle Vague contemporaries. Similarly, the young Soviet filmmakers made a clean break with the mise en scène practices and the slow editing pace of the directors from the Tsarist period such as Jevgenij Bauer or Jakov Protozanov, turning instead to the fast editing rate of the American cinema, emblematized in the father figure of David Wark Griffith (a father figure from whom they also distanced themselves in terms of politics and ideology).[35]

While offering at least a number of insights into the way a historical current or movement constructs itself discursively against a previously dominant one (obviously, such denominations are anything but innocent and also require a thorough historical critique), this is evidently a limited perspective. There are important other factors that stay outside the scope of such an approach, as the economic, political, social, legal or institutional environments that frame and shape, promote and support, enable and channel such developments, and of course also the technological conditions that provide opportunities and open new possibilities or, as in the case of the young Soviet cinema, force us to look

for alternatives and stimulate experimentation in a situation where there is a general shortage of equipment and material.

So, looking at the history of style in terms of lineages, following Shklovsky's suggestions, can offer an interesting but necessarily very limited perspective that, in addition, does not provide an equally productive approach in all cases of historical change. Even so, this again reveals the potential productivity of the concept of *ostranenie* as a heuristic tool. With regard to a diachronic perspective, it thus not only focuses on stylistic innovation as such, but also takes into account the origins of the new forms coming out of a different tradition, and specifically out of the undercurrents of popular culture, which often escape the attention of conventional historical inquiry. In that respect, one might add, such an approach is almost inherently a non-teleological one.

From such a point of view, one could even claim that in the historiography of film (or, for that matter, of any art or medium), scholars will often have to defamiliarize the dominating and canonized versions in order to open up new fields of inquiry, to look at phenomena in the light of new questions, or to shift focus. This may take many forms, as the so-called New Film History of the 1980s has amply demonstrated. Moving from the groundbreaking highlights and masterpieces to the anonymous mass production – as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson[36] did with regard to Hollywood, or Michèle Lagny, Marie-Claire Ropars and Pierre Sorlin[37] did in their large-scale study on French cinema of the 1930s – is part of such an enterprise, as are the various initiatives to write film history from the viewpoint of marginalized or neglected groups, or the manifold investigations into early cinema that were launched at an international level after the Brighton FIAF conference in 1978.

This latter body of work is particularly interesting when looked at in the light of Shklovsky's concepts. Traditional historiography saw early films as "primitive" and was interested only in those features that could be seen as forerunners announcing the artistic potential of the medium that would be realized many years later in both classical narrative cinema and the European art cinema of the 1920s. This way of looking at the beginnings of cinema only changed in the 1980s and 1990s, when scholars such as Noël Burch,[38] Tom Gunning[39] or André Gaudreault[40] took a different approach and tried to understand the formal features of early films in light of the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde practices or the dys-narrative experiments of modernist films. Schooled by such viewing experiences, they did not look for the first manifestations of the narrative conventions of classical film (they abolished altogether, in fact, the quest for "firsts" that drove traditional historiography to a large extent), but rather tried to understand the logic proper of these films, a logic that was then described in terms of a specific "Primitive Mode of Representation" by Burch, or a "cinema of attractions" by Gaudreault and Gunning. The relationship between early cinema and the later avant-garde worked both ways, in fact, as demonstrated by the rework-

ing of early films by experimental filmmakers (TOM, TOM, THE PIPER'S SON by Ken Jacobs, EUREKA by Ernie Gehr) as well as by the lectures given by Stan Brakhage on Georges Méliès or David Wark Griffith.[41] So looking at early cinema from the viewpoint of the avant-garde, in spite of the anachronistic perspective that this might engender, proved to be rather productive for an understanding of the specific difference, or otherness, of this mode of representation even though, obviously, there is always a whole bundle of factors that come into play in such a process.[42]

With this kind of consideration, Shklovsky's original concept seems rather distant. This does point, however, to the fact that the fundamental principle (or "bedrock idea," as Meir Sternberg calls it)[43] of defamiliarization can take a variety of shapes, and that it can be used as a strategic or heuristic tool with regard to a whole range of issues. Here it appears, to be more precise, as a specific – and in a way voluntaristic – kind of foregrounding, a term coined by the Czech structuralists that Sternberg sees as one of the "resurgences" of *ostranenie*.[44]

So it may be less surprising that one can indeed observe a reappearance of this principle in more recent attempts to theorize processes in media history in light of the developments brought about by the new digital media and their various manifestations.

Ostranenie and the Historiography of Media

So, how can the idea of defamiliarization be made productive when looking at the history of media? Several authors such as Tom Gunning, Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, and Isabelle Raynauld approach the question of the historical development of a medium by distinguishing two different logics that appear either alongside each other or in a diachronic sequence, namely one that foregrounds the technology and one that foregrounds the "content." This latter type of functioning is in fact often addressed as "transparency," that is, as a form of experiencing a medium where the process of mediation itself is not perceived as such and thus has become "invisible." Obviously, this so-called transparency of a medium is actually always a constructed one (or to use the terminology of a period when this issue was a centerpiece of film theoretical debates: a coded one). And here the concept of *ostranenie* as defined by Shklovsky does reappear, in particular its inherent historicity. The transparency, which cannot manifest itself in ways other than a "having-become-transparent," indeed implies that the use of the medium as such has become "evident," thus presupposing a diachronic dimension in the very core of such a logic.

Proposing a historical approach to old technologies by "re-newing" them, that is, by looking at them from the viewpoint of their once having been newly emerging technologies, Tom Gunning chooses not only a somewhat defamiliarizing perspective on media history as such, but also considers the deconstruction of

the processes of habitualization in the functioning of a medium as a crucial starting point for its historical appreciation.[45] In terms astonishingly similar to Shklovsky's formulations, Tom Gunning remarks: "When a tool works, we pay no attention to it; it seems to disappear."[46] This leads Gunning to an analytical perspective that somehow resembles Kristin Thompson's strategy with regard to the so-called "ordinary film" discussed earlier. He calls here, in other words, for a defamiliarization of a technology that has become familiar:

> To imagine an old technology as something that was once new means, therefore, to try and recapture a quality it has lost. It means examining a technology or device at the point of introduction, before it has become part of a nearly invisible everyday life of habit and routine. But it also must mean examining this move from dazzling appearance to nearly transparent utility, from the spectacular and astonishing to the convenient and unremarkable.[47]

Looking at old technologies as devices or media from the viewpoint of their once having been experienced as novelties is indeed an important methodological choice. It means looking at their potentialities not in retrospect, from a position where their future has already been realized, but as a set of promises, or potentialities, which the contemporaries projected into them. But even their normal functioning in itself is not something that is taken for granted. Quite the contrary, it provokes what Gunning calls "a discourse of wonder [that] draws our attention to a new technology not, simply as a tool, but precisely as a spectacle, less as something that performs a useful task than as something that astounds us by performing in a way that seemed unlikely or magical before."[48] For those who witness the manifestations of a new media technology in the period of its emergence – it being put to use in what Charles Musser with regard to cinema has called its "novelty period" – the simple fact that it does or shows what it is supposed and announced to do or show is a marvel.[49]

   It is in this respect that Gunning remarks that, as far as the cinema of attractions is concerned, one can state that the technology itself constitutes the main attraction for the first viewers of the various devices presenting animated photographies.[50] Similar things can be said about most other media as well: one may think of the voices almost "magically" travelling along telephone lines or through a space interestingly referred to as ether, or of television with its possibility to transmit live images from events elsewhere. And even the rather recent introduction of the mobile phone showed signs of this phenomenon, even though this technology became a habitualized tool in a very short time. How else can we explain the story (perhaps fabricated) of people in Italy walking around with wooden dummies pretending to partake in the wonderful universe of mobile communication.

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Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss the two ways of experiencing a technology presented by Gunning in terms of a historical configuration that occurs diachronically, moving from wonder to invisibility, as two synchronic "logics of remediation," one of which they call "immediacy," the other "hypermediacy."[51] The first one aims to make the medium "disappear," while the other one stresses mediality, that is, it foregrounds the processes of mediation in one way or another. For Bolter and Grusin, however, this is not a matter of a medium's functioning being perceived differently over time. These logics of remediation are conceived of as modes which are inherent to a medium or, to be precise, as certain specific uses that media are put to. According to them, all sorts of "immersive" media inherently strive for immediacy. The viewer or user is supposed to no longer perceive the fact that there is a technology that makes communication or various forms of experience and interaction possible. Hence the statement: "Virtual reality is immersive, which means that it is a medium whose purpose is to disappear."[52] Bolter and Grusin also use the term "transparency" to describe this phenomenon. Obviously, a medium never simply disappears. Its technological design, its affordances, but also its limitations clearly shape the ways in which the viewers, or users, can experience or interact with it. So there is always a level at which the mediality manifests itself. Hypermediacy, on the contrary, refers to a visual style refusing a unified representational space. Bolter and Grusin's example here is the "windowed" computer interface or the multi-layered information streams that run across the television screen in news programs such as those offered by CNN. The viewer or user is continuously confronted with different forms of mediations, often appearing simultaneously, so that there is no way these can all become merged into the experience of a closed and homogeneous representational universe.

Bolter and Grusin thus conceive immediacy and hypermediacy as two different strategies in media history, both of which are based on remediation. Contrary to the conception presented by Gunning, the transparency effect of immediacy is not due to a process of habituation, automatization or canonization, but rather one of two possible ways in which media do function. Both are in fact equally valid, their relationship is neither one of familiarization and defamiliarization, nor one of norm and deviation. They are not even to be taken as characteristic manifestations of a medium. While television may sometimes strive to achieve a maximum effect of immersion by presenting itself as a direct-access medium to an event happening simultaneously or by inviting forms of para-social interaction between the viewers and people on the screen, other formats display hypermediacy, such as the CNN newscasts in combination with stock market and other information running across the bottom of the screen and maybe even additional windows showing an anchorperson addressing a journalist.[53]

Nevertheless, the concepts used by Bolter and Grusin are useful in our context in so far as they show that what is at stake here is not so much a general develop-

ment of media from hypermediacy to immediacy, or from wonder to invisibility, but rather the issue of specific forms or uses to which media can be put. These, too, are subject to historical change, often because of an older medium's confrontation with an emerging new one, which may change the entire mediascape and bring about new forms of intermedial relationships. Television in the age of the internet does look different from television in the 1950s, and this also affects the medium's use of forms of immediacy and hypermediacy. However, in the definition of a medium that Bolter and Grusin give, there seems to be a certain privilege accorded to the reality effect associated with immediacy:

> What is a medium?

> We offer this simple definition: a medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real.[54]

It is not quite clear in how far such an appropriation of a medium by another one "in the name of the real" entails that representational strategies which foreground hypermediacy are in fact to be considered less central to such a process. In any event, introducing the "real" as a teleological category here does suggest exactly this to some extent.

In an article drawing upon both Gunning and Bolter/Grusin, Isabelle Raynauld discusses what Gunning calls a "move from dazzling appearance to nearly transparent utility"[55] in terms of "opacity" and "transparency":[56]

> We thus state that, following the ideas of Grusin, Bolter, and Gunning, an emerging medium has to go through a period of opacity during which its materiality is so visible that, literally, it makes the content disappear. However, as the viewers or users become more competent, this opacity is reduced and ultimately turns into a transparency that allows the content to become fully visible.[57]

Again, the way in which Raynauld describes the phenomenon she undertakes to deal with appears quite similar to Shklovsky's formulations on *ostranenie*. Again, it is habituation, here associated in an interesting way also with the users being increasingly competent in the manipulation of a device or the interaction with a medium, that leads to its becoming, or at least appearing, more and more transparent. In Raynauld's analysis, however, this does not concern artistic devices or styles, but – in accordance with Gunning's ideas – the process an emerging medium undergoes, from flaunting mediality to striving for transparency. According to Raynauld, this process is reflected also in the different textual forms media

adopt, as she illustrates with examples from early films and from multi-media CD-ROMs.

So bringing these ideas together, one could argue that the media historians referred to here do see transparency, or invisibility, as the result of a diachronic process of familiarization with the workings of a technology on the one hand, and also a strategy that is particularly important with regard to all forms of viewer or user involvement from simple interactions to immersion on the other. While such transparency is always relative and only functions on the basis of certain codes and conventions, its effects can indeed be observed on many levels. Hyper-mediacy or opacity, then, is either a strategy foregrounding mediality by means of certain formal or technological devices, or it is linked to a specific phase in the development of a medium, namely the period of its emergence. Formulated by Gunning in terms of both a perspective for media historical research adopted deliberately – "to imagine an old technology as something that once was new" – and a characteristic feature of a medium in its "early" period, it seems indeed that technological innovation in the realm of media (but clearly not only there) does produce an effect of "strangeness" that needs to be analyzed.

This, however, is different from the conceptions proposed by Shklovsky, in spite of certain quite obvious correspondences. While the "stoniness of the stone" is revealed afresh through art after having become invisible in a process of habitualization, the foregrounding of the "mediality of a medium" is linked to its emergence and then disappears as viewers or users become increasingly familiar with its workings. While *ostranenie* refers to a diachronic and in essence also historical process in the course of which the familiarized becomes defamiliarized through the work of the artist, the media historical perspective seems to work the other way round. The non-familiar, the novelty that characterizes the emerging medium, provokes wonder and dazzles those who encounter it for the first time. Once this effect has worn off, the utilitarian aspect of the media technology comes to the fore, and then it is experienced as some kind of a "transparent" carrier for the semiotic material that it mediates.

So the question arises of whether these two processes are somehow related, or whether they belong to two incommensurable logics. The common denominator here is of course the phenomenon of innovation. In both cases the new is indeed characterized in terms of a specific kind of visibility that is due to its differential quality. But then they seem to part ways. While the differential quality in the case of artistic innovation is the result of a defamiliarization of habitualized forms – however complex this process may be in terms of its relation to tradition, the recasting of existing devices, etc. – it is less obvious in relation to what other phenomenon a media novelty is perceived as. Here the concept of remediation might be a productive one. As Bolter and Grusin state, a medium "appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real."[58] Leaving aside this last point,

which may be too apodictic a formula, this remark opens up the field towards intermedial relationships and the possible diversity of what André Gaudreault has called "cultural series."[59] So here technological innovation should be analyzed with regard to the broader mediascape in which it occurs. And in this respect one could indeed reframe or rephrase Tom Gunning's argument and say that not only the "move from dazzling appearance to nearly transparent utility, from the spectacular and astonishing to the convenient and unremarkable" needs to be examined, but also what one might call – to coin a new phrase for the occasion – "the newness of the new," which means that one also has to defamiliarize novelty itself.[60]

Ostranenie – To Be Continued

Following the adventures of Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, from literary theory and history into issues of film and media history, reveals both its problems and its potentials, its limitations as well as its merits. When taken as a general principle governing all processes of artistic innovation, there clearly is the danger that it may turn into a mechanistic and axiomatic explanatory instrument. Its strengths, on the contrary, seem to lie in its heuristic qualities. These, as we have seen, can work on a number of levels. To begin with, one may indeed consider defamiliarization a fundamental analytical strategy allowing us to interrogate and to problematize seemingly self-evident or well-understood phenomena. Whether Kristin Thompson studies so-called "ordinary" films or Tom Gunning looks at old technologies from the viewpoint of their once having been novelties, such cases show that defamiliarization results from a choice made by a scholar when deciding how to approach an object. It functions as a research strategy in a slightly different, yet similar way when David Bordwell looks at Carl Theodor Dreyer's films against the background of classical Hollywood cinema. Conceiving of defamiliarization in such a way, however, is quite different from Shklovsky's original definition, which refers to aspects that are immanent to a given work of art and which in fact are an essential feature of its aesthetic quality.

It could actually be argued that Shklovsky's conceptualization of art is indebted to a modernist aesthetics that stresses aspects such as formal complexity, prolonged perception, and the foregrounding of materiality. In that sense, *ostranenie* is fundamentally two-sided, as it resides in the form of the artwork itself, while also needing to produce a corresponding effect during the act of reception. Defamiliarization, in other words, is always "in the eye of the beholder," and by this very token it reveals itself as an inherently historical phenomenon. Any defamiliarizing device is bound to turn into a habitualized one as time goes by, so to the readers or viewers of later generations, it may indeed appear as an utterly conventional feature. And this also means that at its very foundation, it is a relative one. So if there is, as Meir Sternberg affirms, a "bedrock idea" at the core of

Shklovsky's concept that has turned out to be so very successful, one must also accept that it is one that cannot escape historicity and thus relativity.

In any event, for Shklovsky the work of art is anything but a transparent rendering of the outside world, let alone a representation according to the norms of a classic ideal of beauty, as he also points out in his novel *Zoo, or letters not about love*. Here he distinguishes two ways of approaching art: the first one takes the traditional stance of considering art as a window upon the world; the other one, in contrast, sees art as the relation between its formal elements. (One recognizes here his notion that the artwork is a sum or, as he would say later on, a system of devices.) And so he concludes that if art is to be considered as some kind of a window at all, then the only way to do so is to conceive of it as a painted window.

Apart from being a very insightful and elegant description of what is at stake in formalist theory, this remark also points to the very important issue of the ever-present mediality. The critical stance that Shklovsky makes here can serve as something like a constant *memento* with regard to the reflections by Gunning and Raynauld on media history and the concepts of immediacy and hypermediacy proposed by Bolter and Grusin. Obviously – and no one among the authors quoted here says otherwise – conceptions of the workings of a medium in terms of "invisibility," "immediacy" or "transparency" are not meant to deny the fact that mediality never *actually* disappears. However, it is indeed worth remembering that one should never lose sight of the crucial role played by media technology. The window opening on our computer screen may no longer be a painted one, but it is no less artificial.

Rather than a conclusion, I can offer an observation, a question, and a suggestion. First my observation: however critical one can be of Shklovsky's concept – the phenomenon of automatization and *ostranenie* – the problem of transparency and mediality made visible, as well as the processes of normalisation and deviation from an existing norm, obviously still haunts our debates in media history on different levels. The question now is whether a conceptualisation in these terms does indeed help us to understand these phenomena better. My suggestion is then to never cease to defamiliarize defamiliarization.