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Estranging Objects and Complicating Form: Viktor Shklovsky and the Labour of Perception

Abstract

In Viktor Shklovsky's essay "Art as Device" habitual perception is described as a dangerous practice, which renders one insensitive to the experiences of modernity. Importantly, the subjects' automatized relationship with the surrounding world disrupts their ability to engage with objects. Rather than being experienced through the senses, the object is recognized through an epistemological (preconceived) framework. As a result, Shklovsky argues, "we do not see things, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged." By making the usual strange Shklovsky's technique of estrangement promises a relief from an alienating, consumerist experience of modernity, which "automatizes the object" instead of enabling perception: "in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art." In this article I trace the development of Shklovsky's views on literature and the arts as an alternative way of experiencing objects in his writings during and after the Russian Revolution. I will pay particular attention to the relationship between things and words in Shklovsky's writings produced during his exile in Berlin in 1923. The publication of the Berlin-based magazine *Veshch/ Objet /Gegenstand* in 1922, shortly before Shklovsky's arrival, signals a rejection of both recognition and observation as passive consumerist practices. Instead, the manifesto published in the first issue of the magazine invites its readers to create new objects, which here is inseparable from the creation of new social formations. I will argue that Shklovsky's 1923 writings provide a rethinking of the word "object" in society, literature and the arts. The function of art is not to "express what lies beyond words and images," in other words, not to point to a referent that exists as a 'real' object, but rather to create a world "of independently existing things."

Keywords: *Veshch/ Objet/ Gegenstand,* perception theories, things in literature, mimesis and representation, Hausmann's optophonetics, synaesthesia, transsomatic experience.

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* This article is part of a larger project financed within the POLONEZ 3 programme by the National Science Centre, Poland. Agreement No UMO-2016/23/P/HS2/04129. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 665778.

> From the stifling atmosphere, from a Russia that has been bled dry and a Europe grown fat and drowsy a single battle cry rings out: STOP MAKING DECLARATIONS AND COUNTERDECLARATIONS, MAKE
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> **OBJECTS!**[1]

The editorial manifesto printed in the first issue of El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg's 1922 magazine *Veshch/ Objet /Gegenstand* ends with an avant-garde battle cry, "Make objects!" The military rhetoric of the closing passage, however, serves the magazine's overall pacifist agenda: the war cry paradoxically urges contemporary artists and writers to move away from conceptualising the modern art scene in terms of groups and circles fighting each other for survival and prominence. Published under the title "The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End" the manifesto makes it clear that modern artists can break through the "tedious post-war Monday" only if they end the strife between different art groups and movements, "We are not founding any sects, we are not contenting ourselves with surrogates for the collective that are different movements and schools. We aim to unite and coordinate the work of all those who genuinely strive to work and not to live comfortably on the proceeds of previous generations."[2] Since, by the early 1920s, a publication of a new magazine was likely to announce the birth of yet another art movement, publishing an explicit critique of modernism's group structure calls for a rethinking of a contemporary art scene. The manifesto offers to think about the international community of artists not as divided into numerous nucleus groups with clearly defined centres, but in terms of collectivity which is seen as "an inherent quality of the mature humanity."[3]

Ehrenburg's 1922 book *And Yet It Moves!*, which first laid out ideas later repeated – often verbatim – in the opening manifesto of *Veshch*, describes various modernist groups and their members. The list abruptly ends with Constructivism, which makes the division into groups irrelevant. Drawing on Lissitzky's 1922 text "PROUNS" published in *De Stijl*, Ehrenburg concludes that there is no place for art groups and movements in a society envisioned by Constructivists, a society of new individuals who learnt to dissolve art in the collective life, like a lump of sugar is dissolved in a hot cup of tea.[4] The agenda of creating radically new individual and collective consciousnesses for contemporary humans is clearly outlined in Lissitzky's 1920 text titled "suprematism in world reconstruction" (sic). Suprematism, an art movement founded by Lissitzky's famous mentor Kazimir Malevich in 1913, in this text is presented not as a group of

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[1] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsa," in *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 1-2, 4. My translation. Here and throughout the article I preserve original typography.
[2] Ibid., 3. My translation.
[3] On the concept of nucleus group see Milton A. Cohen, *Movement, Manifesto, Melee: The Modernist Group, 1910-1914* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).
[4] Ilya Ehrenburg, *I vsio-taki ona vertitsa!* (Berlin: Gelikon, 1922), 85-87.

artists adhering to similar aesthetic principles, but rather as a doctrine that supersedes Hebrew and Christian worldviews and, surprisingly, communist ideology, "AFTER THE OLD TESTAMENT THERE CAME THE NEW – AFTER THE NEW COMMUNIST – AND AFTER THE COMMUNIST THERE FOLLOWS FINALLY THE TESTAMENT OF SUPREMATISM."[5] Although both the editorial manifesto in *Veshch* and Lissitzky's article present the Russian Revolution as an essential step in creating the new world and new art, as it promised to eliminate outdated concepts – "the rebuilding of life cast aside the old concept of nations classes patriotisms and imperialism which had been completely discredited" – communism is not the final, but only the first stage in world reconstruction. Katerina Clarke pointed to the Constructivist belief that "a new man and a new consciousness could be created less by individual acts of perception than by establishing a totally new aesthetic-cum-material environment."[6] Although communism promised to prepare the ground for the restructuring of daily life, in Lissitzky's prognosis, it is a rather transitory stage, and "in the further stages of development […] communism […] will have to remain behind." Suprematism, which will replace it, claims to share with its predecessors the impulse for remodelling society as a whole, as well as renewing individual consciousness and cognition.

In presenting the founding of suprematism as an important milestone in twentieth-century history, at least as important as the communist revolution, Lissitzky attempts to write it into the narrative of ongoing human evolution. The role of suprematism in the titular "world reconstruction" is that it "revealed for the first time in all its purity the clear sign and plan for a definite new world never before experienced."[7] In this description it is unclear whether Lissitzky is talking about a material reconstruction of society or an alteration of human consciousness and perception with the help of modern art. What is clear, however, is that the suprematist reconstructive potential can be actualised only through the rejection of any attempts at the "recognition of an absolute form which was part of an already-completed universal system."[8] Relying on "recognition" as an ultimately dangerous practice that impairs one's ability to see and therefore to experience the world is a cornerstone of Viktor Shklovsky's early theories which see the renewal of perception as the main function of arts and literature.

Shklovsky's attack on a habitual aspect of perception and its negative influence on creative practices started in one of his earliest texts "Resurrection of the Word" (1914) which is based on his 1913 talk given at The Stray Dog Cellar, a meeting place for modernist artists, writers and theorists

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[5] El Lissitzky, "suprematism in world reconstruction," in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 327.
[6] Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 51.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

in St Petersburg. Ironically, it was here, in a speech, that Shklovsky first voiced the idea that "practical" spoken language has a negative effect on human perception of words, "when they are used in everyday speech, when they are neither fully spoken nor fully heard – then they become familiar, and neither their internal forms (images), nor the external one (sounds) are experienced anymore. […] We do not experience the familiar; we do not see but only recognize it."[9] In his famous essay "Art as Device," published only three years later, in 1917, Shklovsky argues that relying on recognition affects one's cognitive functions, and, as a result, automatised or habitual perception, in Shklovsky's famous phrase, "eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war." The subject's automatised relationship with the surrounding world not only impairs one's perception of daily speech, but also renders people insensitive to the experiences of modernity, be it the changing attitudes towards marriage and family or the atrocity of war.

Shklovsky's discussion of habitual actions takes as its starting point an excerpt from Leo Tolstoy's diaries, in which the former, while dusting the room, catches himself not being able to remember if he had already dusted the sofa. If, for Tolstoy, routinised actions affect the quality of lives which are "lived unconsciously," in Shklovsky's writings the effects of automatisation are far graver. Although automatisation is governed by the supposedly useful "law of economy of mental effort," which helps human minds and bodies preserve valuable resources, for contemporary humans it became a life-threatening mechanism. The very title of "Resurrection of the Word" points to a link between habitual perception and death – if the word is in need of resurrection, it is already dead. Writing shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, during which he volunteered for the Russian Army, Shklovsky expresses a concern about humanity's drive for self-preservation and ultimate survival, "we do not love our houses and our clothes, and we easily part with life, for we do not feel life."[10]

Although Shklovsky does not yet use the term *ostranenie* (commonly translated as "estrangement"), the earlier text anticipates the argument of "Art as Device," as it declares that only art, and specifically the creation of new art forms, "can restore to man the experience of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism."[11] The editorial manifesto of *Veshch* puts together Lissitzky's emphasis on the creation of the radically new world, as opposed to searching for the elements of this world in either the past or the present, and Shklovsky's belief if the art's ability to renew perception and ultimately "resurrect things." The ideologues of *Veshch* clearly state that the two processes are inseparable, and the creation of new art goes hand in hand with "the process of

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[9] Viktor Shklovsky, "Resurrection of the Word," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 64.
[10] Shklovsky, "Resurrection of the Word," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 70. Similarly, in "Art as Device," eaten by automatisation, "life becomes nothing and disappears." Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 80.
[11] Shklovsky, "Resurrection of the Word," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 70.

constructing new forms of existence."[12] The magazine's war cry "make OBJECTS" becomes a delirious refrain resonating through the Constructivist "building fever," which prompts artists to "build on ground that has been cleared." The programmatic word "object" lies at the intersection of civil construction and creativity, "Every organised creative work – A HOUSE, A POEM, OR A PAINTING – IS A FUNCTIONAL OBJECT, which does not lead people away from life, but helps them organise it."[13] Ben Dhooge has pointed out that the phrase that art should not "lead people away from life" can be understood as both to "destruct from life" and "'to destroy,' 'to kill,' literally 'to take away from life.'"[14] For Dhooge, in lending itself to double interpretation, the phrase hints at the dangerous and destructive potential of old art forms; indeed, the editorial dubs such art movements as symbolism and impressionism "the remnants of yesterday." I would like to suggest, however, that what brings together all the functional objects that aid in the organization of life, namely a house, a poem, or a painting, is their ability to change one's relationship with production, understood broadly as both manufacturing buildings and creative practices.

Shklovsky ends his gruesome list of life-threatening effects of habitual perception, which annihilates one's surroundings, relations and experiences, with prescribing a certain antidote: art has the means to sharpen the sensation of things; in fact, it "exists in order to give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony."[15] Not unlike the editors of *Veshch*, who point out that a house, a poem and a painting can equally stimulate people to take part in the organisation of life, Shklovsky suggests that art's ability to renew one's perception affects both everyday life and artistic production, because "words and even sounds of the text itself are things, too." "Resurrection of the Word" therefore, as Ilya Kalinin puts it, "called for a resurrection of the thing."[16] By making the usual strange Shklovsky's technique of estrangement refreshes one's perception of both art and daily life. It offers a relief from an alienating, unconscious experience of modernity, which "automatizes the object" instead of enabling perception.

Automatisation undoes one's ability to engage with objects, which are no longer experienced through the senses, but instead are recognised through an epistemological – preconceived – framework, "we do not see things, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged."[17] The purpose of art is to

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[12] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsa," in *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 1-2, 1. My translation.
[13] Ibid. 2. My translation.
[14] Ben Dhooge, "Constructive Art 'à la Ehrenburg': Vešč' – Gegenstand – Objet," in *Neohelicon* 42.2 (2015): 503.
[15] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 80.
[16] Ilya Kalinin, "Vernut': veshchi, plat'ia, mebel', zhenu i strakh voiny," in *Nähe Schaffen, Abstand halten: zur Geschichte der Intimität in der russischen Kultur*, ed. Nadežda Grigor′eva, Schamma Schahadat and Igor′ P. Smirnov (Wien: Gesellschaft zur Förderung slawistischer Studien 2005), 354.
[17] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 5.

counteract this effect. The importance of estrangement is that it not only "makes things strange," but also "increases the duration and complexity of perception."[18] In an earlier translation of "Art as Device" by Benjamin Sher the process of perception in this sentence is described as being made "long and laborious."[19] Sher's translation attempts to preserve Shklovsky's emphases on the importance of "work" and "labour" particularly evident in his discussion of estrangement in poetic language, which Shklovsky describes as "laboured, laborious and controlled."[20]

For Shklovsky, art provides an opportunity to participate in the process of production, to "live through the making of a thing."[21] Douglas Robinson reads the Russian word *perezhit'* ("to live through" or "relive") as a clue that points to the inherent emphatic potential of Shklovsky's understanding of art, which Robinson sees as a channel "through which readers and other audience members come to feel like artists themselves, come to feel […] the deautomatizing or 'fulgurating' effects of the artist's own body movements."[22] In "Art as Device," however, Shklovsky makes it clear that one does not need to rely on recreating imaginary experiences of the artist or, in Robinson's words, on emphatically projecting themselves into "the doing of the *work* by which the artwork was made" (original emphasis). Because art functions through making "things" strange and "complicating form," the work itself renders perception a rather laborious process. Moreover, by sustaining focus on the process of perception, which – when it comes to art – is "autotelic and must be prolonged," Shklovsky's text suggests a move away from representational practices (such as Robinson's emphatic projection to the moment of the making of an art object) and towards engaging with objects as they are perceived by the sense of sight.

Shklovsky's *ostranenie* points to an uneasy dynamic between these three cognitive processes. If, in "Art as Device," the purpose of art is to disrupt recognition, "to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things," representation is also a hindrance to perception.[23] As both recognition and representation rely on remembering, that is, operating with words, images and concepts that are already stored in one's memory and, ultimately, disregard new sensory data, they are irrelevant for Shklovsky's understanding of art as "the means to live through the making of a thing." By complicating the process of perception, art disrupts the process of cognitive economy, which has ceased being a helpful evolutional mechanism and became a hindrance to the further evolution of humanity: things are no longer stored in a database of preconceived ideas, they have to be made anew. Ilya Kalinin argues that this radical relationship with material reality lies at the core

[18] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 80.
[19] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, 6.
[20] Viktor Shklovsky, "Iskusstvo kak priiom," in *Formal'nyi metod: Antologiia russkogo modernizma*, vol. 1, ed. Sergei Ushakin (Moscow: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2016), 145. My translation.
[21] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 80.
[22] Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 117.
[23] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 80.

of Formalist poetics:

> Despite its anti-mimetic implications, early Formalist theory is focused not on overcoming material reality, but rather on the transformation of material objects through a renewal of the mechanism of perception. […] The result of this de-automatizing process, which brings things back into reality, are the new forms of art and the new world they construct.[24]

Shklovsky's emphasis on "the making of a thing," therefore, refers not only to the making of an art object, but, more broadly, to the reconstructive potential of art capable of restoring the reality which was consumed by automatasation.

This understanding of the role of art in world reconstruction, is echoed in Lissitzky's claim that in moving away from the recognition of "an already completed universal system" the new art unleashes the creative potential of human beings. Cleansed from habitual ways of relating to reality, human subjects are capable of seeing the plan for "a world which issues forth from our inner being."[25] Katerina Clark argues that the difference between Shklovsky's theories and the Constructivists "is one of the paradoxes of the avant-garde": while early Formalists "deplored routinized action" and their theories looked for the ways to minimise it, Constructivists "sought to perfect just such routinized action."[26] What Shklovsky deplores, however, is not the routine as such, but one's relationship with the perception of everyday life. He does not suggest that everything is life should be made strange; rather, by engaging with arts one acquires access to seeing the everyday differently. Carefully calculated repetitive action was to ensure the optimisation of the production process for both Constructivists and Alexei Gastev's Taylor-inspired Central Institute of Labour. For Shklovsky, it is not the routinised repetitive motion of daily actions, industrial labour or creative production that hinders the quality of the final product but an individual's daily existence spent at the level of habitual recognition. The result of this mode of being "is that the thing dries up, first as it is perceived, and then the very making of it also suffers."[27]

In presenting itself as a vehicle of change in the production of objects – "a PRICE-LIST for new OBJECTS, and a sketch for objects that have not yet been made" – *Veshch* gives artists practical advice on refreshing their perceptions.[28] In a separate framed announcement printed after the editorial statement to *Veshch* Lissitzky and Ehrenburg warns against consumerist attitudes towards reality, which reduce objects of daily life to a set of preconceived ideas or "themes," conveniently "prepackaged" and ready for use:

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[24] Ilya Kalinin, "Vernut': veshchi, plat'ia, mebel', zhenu i strakh voiny," 358-361.
[25] Lissitzky, "suprematism in world reconstruction," in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 327.
[26] Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 51.
[27] Viktor Shklovsky, "Iskusstvo kak priiom," in *Formal'nyi metod: Antologiia russkogo modernizma*, 136. My translation.
[28] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsa," in *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 1-2, 3.

NEITHER A ROSE
NOR A MACHINE
is a theme of
POETRY
or
PAINTING
they teach the artist
STRUCTURE
and
CREATION

Here the refusal to see reality as the subject of mimesis indicates that, for the editors of *Veshch*, new art does not appropriate objects, such as a rose or a machine, instead seeing them as agents of production. The announcement encourages the artist to turn to reality in order to learn valuable lessons in structure and creation. In line with Shklovsky's idea that art allows one to experience "the making of the thing," the lessons artists receive from material objects are ultimately lessons about the dangers of mimesis. Like Shklovsky's things (both works of art and material objects), both a rose and a machine are objects that are made, which here refers to both creation and perception. The announcement warns artists against relying of common preconceptions of these objects – with a rose being a typical trope in romanticism and a machine playing a prominent part in modernist poetics – offering instead to pay attention to their singular materiality. The process by which in turning a fresh eye to an object an artist gains something in return presents artistic activity as a reciprocal dialogue between art and reality. In this light, the famous phrase from the editorial manifesto of *Veshch* which announces that the magazine "stands for constructivist art which does not adorn life but ORGANISES it," speaks precisely about art's potential to make changes in human perception and, as a result, "a reorganization of social forms."[29]

A similar message is printed on the cover of the following issue of the magazine:

TO DEPICT A MACHINE IS THE SAME
AS PAINTING A NUDE
MAN IS NOT A CONSCIOUS
CREATOR OF HIS BODY
A MACHINE IS A LESSON IS CLARITY AND ECONOMY.[30]

In comparing a depiction of a machine to nude painting the editors, once again, challenge the idea that certain objects of art render themselves more easily to art forms that decorate life, as opposed to "organising it" and contributing towards social change. The opening manifesto of the magazine disrupts the distinction between "functional objects manufactured in factories," such as "airplanes and motorcars" and works of art. Although they consider the former "authentic

[29] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsa," in *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 1-2, 2-3.
[30] *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 3, 1.

art," they refuse to restrict artistic production to these "utilitarian" objects. Instead, the editors of *Veshch* promise to follow "the reciprocal relations" between the new art and modernity "in all its varied manifestations (science, politics, technology, daily life, etc)."[31] They observe that in recent years the development of artistic mastery was largely affected by phenomena that lie outside the so called "pure art." *Veshch* pledges to engage with such examples in industry, new inventions, as well as new developments in spoken and written languages, all of which they see as "immediate material for any conscious artist of our times."[32]

Shklovsky, who also conceptualised the content of art in terms of material, is careful to draw a line between artistic expression and personal experiences. At a time when expressing personal views could have dire political consequences, an attack on mimesis created a much needed space between an author and his or her writings. In an open letter to Roman Jakobson published in the first issue of *Veshch* Shklovsky draws conclusions about the role of the Revolution in changing people's attitudes towards their lives. He describes a sense of the renewed value of life that washed over Russia after the Revolution, "We've experienced a great deal. […] We know now how life is made, and how *Don Quixote* is made, and how a car is made, and what hard times are."[33] A rather negative review of *Veshch* published in *Literaturnye zapiski* shortly after the magazine's publication, is especially critical of Shklovsky's claims to possessing a new kind of knowledge about literature, the world and his historical situation:

> "New times have come," – Shklovsky writes urging his friend to return to Russia, – "and everyone must cultivate his garden well." Alas, life was too quick to show Viktor Shklovsky that in this Candidean gardening, just as in literature, he has little idea about how life is made and the true meaning of hardship.[34]

The publication of Shklovsky's book on *Don Quixote*, the reviewer bitterly observes, did not shed light on the making of the book and we still "know how *Don Quixote* was made far less than a fly sitting on Cervantes's head as he was writing *Don Quixote*." Shklovsky's understanding of the making of life is also called into question. The reviewer's sardonic remark that Shklovsky was quick to learnt how little he knew about the meaning of hardship comments on recent changes in Shklovsky's life situation. Shortly before the letter to Jakobson appeared in the March-April issue of *Veshch*, Shklovsky had to leave Russia, where he was facing arrest and execution for his earlier anti-Bolshevik activities. After hiding from the Cheka, the political police, for over two weeks, in mid-March of 1922 Shklovsky walked on the thawing ice of the Gulf of Finland, illegally crossing

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[31] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsa," in *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 1-2, 3. My translation.
[32] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsa," in *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 1-2, 3. My translation.
[33] Shklovsky, "A Letter to Roman Jakobson," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 119-120.
[34] A. Gornfeld, "Novoe izkusstvo i ego idealogiia," *Literaturnye zapiski* 2 (1922): 6.

the border. Having settled in Berlin, Shklovsky published three of his arguably best-known books about his experiences of World War I, the Civil War, the Russian Revolution, turbulent post-revolutionary years and his reluctant exile.

It is therefore not surprising that in these books a theoretical rethinking of the relationship between art and historical reality acquires a new significance. In *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love* Shklovsky explains that his use of what comes across as auto-biographical genres is a literary device, "We have introduced into out work the intimate, identified by first and last name, because of this same necessity for new material in art."[35] Later in the text he deplores those who see art as a means to achieving mimetic reflection of life:

> There are two attitudes towards art. One is to view the work of art as a window on the world. Through words and images, these artists want to express what lies beyond words and images. Artists of this type deserve to be called translators. The other type of attitude is to view art as a world of independently existing things. Words, and the relationships between words, thoughts and the irony of thoughts, their divergence, these are the content of art. Art, if it can be compared to a window at all, is only a sketched window.[36]

Like in "Art as Device," words are here described as "things." They have no referent in everyday reality, they exist as a separate world, independent but unmistakably material. In Alastair Renfrew argues that Shklovsky's denial of "any possibility of referentialism" indicates an "uncompromising commitment to materialism." As Renfrew puts it, "not only is 'the word' […] a material part of that [pre-existing] reality, it is definitively *transformative*, even *constitutive* of it" (original emphasis).[37] Although in *Knight's Move*, a collection of articles published in Berlin in 1923, Shklovsky states that the "outside world is outside of art," art is most certainly not outside the world – it has a physical manifestation. To emphasise this, Shklovsky uses the language of engineering in describing the role of the word in the construction of the world of art, "A poet having as the material of his creation formal structures – not only the word-sound but also the word-concept – also creates from it new things."[38] The emphasis on texture as "the main feature of that special world of especially constructed things, the aggregate of which we usually call art" is the key to understanding Shklovsky's insistent differentiation between the function of the word in real-life language and in art. If in life the word functions as "a bead on an abacus" in art "it's a texture."[39] Word as a texture does not operate within the reality governed by the laws of arithmetic or any other branch of practical knowledge about the world. Moral categories, such as good and evil, in

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[35] Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo, or, Letters Not about Love*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Normal: Dalkey Archive, 2001), 30.
[36] Shklovsky, *Zoo, or, Letters Not about Love*, 80.
[37] Alastair Renfrew, "The Resurrection of a Poetics," in *Critical Theory in Russia and the West*, ed. Alastair Renfrew and Galin Tihanov (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 7.
[38] Shklovsky, "Regarding Texture and Counter-Reliefs," in *Knight's Move*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Normal; London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 66.
[39] Ibid.

Shklovsky's description, are also "textures."

The articles collected in *Knight's Move* provide a rethinking of the role of literature and the arts in a newly formed society and the book uses Shklovsky's theories about literature and mimesis to provide a subtle political commentary. The preface to the collection draws parallels between, "the strangeness of the knight's move" and Shklovsky's own precarious relationship with Soviet authorities: Shklovsky writes that the knight moves in such a whimsical way because its freedom of movement has been restricted. The metaphor of a chessboard piece creates a distance between the author and his political activities. Shklovsky's preface completely evades mimetic readings, "There are many reasons for the strangeness of the knight's move, the most important one being the conditional nature of art. I'm writing about the conditionality of art."[40] The Russian word *uslovnost'* is notoriously difficult to translate.[41] It suggests that a work of art is governed by its own internal logic, rather than reflecting the logic of everyday reality. Shklovsky's idea that if art could be compared to a window, it would have to be a painted window is an example of conditionality. The viewer, therefore, should not seek a reflection of the real world in a work of art. Art indeed creates its own world, a world based on its own set of conventions. Unlike the universal application of an abacus, the law of art is conditional, it operates within a certain tradition, school or genre and is culturally and historically contingent.

To transmute the object of everyday reality into the "sketched" reality of art, Shklovsky maintains, one has to turn to the device of estrangement, "In order to make an object a fact of art, it is necessary to extricate it from the facts of life […], to shake things up, as Ivan the Terrible 'sorted out' folks. It is essential to tear the thing from the set of customary associations in which it is lodges. You must turn the thing like a log on the fire."[42] The conditionality of art severs the possibility of mimetic links between life and art; the transformative potential of art radically opposes the uncomplicated naturalness of mimetic representation. The process of estranging real-life objects necessary for their transformation affects not only the perceiving subject, but the object itself. In Shklovsky's description, estrangement employs the methods of autocratic violence and ritualistic cleansing, which "tears" the thing from its surroundings and throws it in the fire.

Although *Knight's Move* was published in Berlin, most of the book was written and first published as individual essays in Russia between 1919 and 1920, a period of great famine which killed millions of people. In this book Shklovsky describes how the horror of extreme conditions, which rapidly changed the ontological status of people from living to surviving, altered their mental faculties such as emotions, will and, importantly, perception. In "Pounding Nails with a Samovar,"

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[40] Shklovsky, "Knight's Move: Preface one," in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 153.
[41] See, for example, Alexandra Berlina's footnote on the word in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, 269.
[42] Viktor Shklovsky, "The Law of Inequality," *Knight's Move*, 73.

one of the essays in the book, Shklovsky writes that hardship, like the ritualistic fire, had a profound effect on objects, "[p]rivation reorganizes things in its own way, which is terrible but honest."[43] Here hardship unexpectedly provides a framework to overcome the epistemological limits of understanding, the limits brought forth by the inability to process the reality that was rendered unrecognisable by the atrocities of famine and war.

The traumatic experiences of post-revolutionary years create a break between perceiving subjects and their surroundings which signals the mimesis is not only undesirable but also impossible. Although the conditions of the present are practically unendurable, the past does not allow for an easy way out and the mimetic relief cannot be achieved. In *A Sentimental Journey* Shklovsky writes that during the period of New Economic Policy, which marked a partial return to a market economy, in Petersburg, "a lot of signs were hung in the store windows. Some apples would be lying there and over them would be a sign 'apples'; over the sugar, it said 'sugar.' A lot, a whole lot of signs (it was 1921). But one sign was the biggest of all: Rolls of the 1914 Variety."[44] The labelling of food in this description does not refer to the real objects readily available for consumption and the language of Shklovsky's posters severs mimetic links between linguistic signs and their referents. Ilya Kalinin argues that, because the NEP year signalled an attempt to restore normal daily life, Shklovsky's "Rolls of the 1914 Variety" indicate a return of the economics of automatised perception and "what is eaten is not a roll, but rather an aroma of a lost epoch or, more precisely, a simulation of the aroma, automatically recreated through a system of habits and expectations (which is firmly lodged in the unconscious), a system that is connected to the context of a seemingly lost everyday reality."[45] If commercial signs do not attempt to point to an object, but rather to its mnemonic representation, for Shklovsky, the purpose of art is to re-launch a revolutionary renewal of reality. As he writes in *Knight's Move*, "A poet takes all the signs down from their places. An artist always foresees the revolt of things. In the hands of poets, things revolt, throwing off their old names and taking with the new name a new face.[46] Art, therefore, stirs a revolution which leads to an anthropomorphic transformation of things as they change their identities.

If art exists, in Shklovsky's famous phrase, to "make the stone stony," the new property of the stone, its stoniness, can be measured only through the system of human senses. Shklovsky's choice of an object is baffling because it does not fit in the project of restoring the sensation of modernity, after all it is not a human-made object. Moreover, what kind of a stone does Shklovsky

[43] Shklovsky, "Pounding Nails with a Samovar," in *Knight's Move*, 25.
[44] Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 194.
[45] Ilya Kalinin, "Vernut': veshchi, plat'ia, mebel', zhenu i strakh voiny," 366.
[46] Shklovsky, "The Law of Inequality," in *Knight's Move*, 73-74.

have in mind? Is it a grinding stone, on which starving city dwellers in post-revolutionary Russia were making flat breads out of potato peels? Or is it the cobblestone of Petersburg's squares? Among other things, stone is the material of the earliest tools used by hominids. Making "a stone stony" suggests a return to sensorial experiences of objects in prelinguistic humans. In early-Soviet imagery, turbulent post-revolutionary years often take shape of a return to prehistoric times. Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1920 dystopian short story "The Cave" presents a grim reality, where the city is changed into an ice-age wasteland and the inhabitants of freezing Petrograd apartments, wrapped in animal hides, revert to a condition of savagery. In Shklovsky's accounts of the famine years, people had to rediscover what foods are safe to eat, since both a knowledge once used in traditional societies and modern advances in nutrition sciences were completely lost to them. In both cases the pre-civilized conditions have an estranging function which disrupts the unhelpful process of habitual recognition, returning the lost ability to perceive immediate reality and restoring intellectual agility necessary for both survival and creativity.

For the Berlin-based Dadaist, Raoul Hausmann, whose article "Optophonetics" appeared in the third issue of *Veshch*, a return to a primeval condition is a crucial step in the process of renewing human perception, "We are facing a task of achieving a new primary condition, a new prehistory. The elements of language and sight stand before us in their new form."[47] Hausmann's research into physiological optics lead him to design a synesthetic machine that would facilitate the translation process performed by the senses. The optophone, which Hausmann describes in his *Veshch* article, is capable of supplementing the deficiencies of human perception by transforming sound into visual forms and vice versa.[48] Drawing on research on guinea pigs and bees, Hausmann concludes that humanity is only now slowly approaching sensorial "synthesis." In his theories, it is not further scientific research into human senses, but "achieving technological perfection in the development of optophonectics, that is the precise method of expanding our consciousness."[49] Hausmann builds on a Constructivist trope that juxtaposes the perfect form of a machine with an imperfect human shape (after all "MAN IS NOT A CONSCIOUS CREATOR OF HIS BODY") as he offers to technologically enhance deficient human senses. The article ends with an application of such a plan for enhancement to the magazine's overall agenda, "We don't want to have anything to do with old sentimental expressions in the arts of painting and music."[50]

Lissitzky and Ehrenburg describe the publication of *Veshch* as a future oriented beacon of "a creation of new forms in art" and "a herald of technology," promising to engage with cutting-edge

[47] Raoul Hausmann, "Optofonetika," *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 3, 13. My translation.
[48] On the development of Hausmann's ideas about optophonetics see Jacques Donguy, "Machine Head: Raoul Hausmann and the Optophone," in *Leonardo* 34. 3 (2001): 217-220.
[49] Hausmann, "Optofonetika," 14.
[50] Ibid.

advancements in technological and scientific knowledge.[51] Although Hausmann's article proposes to construct a machine that will launch humanity into a new creative paradigm, his idea about the six's sense as "space-time" or the "movement of the spirit" is based on a theory of perception that relies on the existence of ether, a premodern concept which in Hausmann's work lies at the intersection of, as Arndt Niebisch puts it, "occult understandings of mediality" and an understanding "that is supported by the radio engineers of his time."[52] Niebisch argues that Hausmann's idea of optophonetics "shows that the artistic avant-garde of the Weimar period was not always in tandem with the scientific avant-garde of the time."[53]

Hausmann, who was heavily influenced by the writings of the German philosopher Ernst Marcus, believed that perception was a transsomatic experience. Rather than being a product of the brain's cognitive activity, both aural and visual perception happens outside the body, in the cosmic ether, as a projection of the brain, which, in turns, picks up undulations transmitted by an object, "Perception constructs its environment by sending out rays, which let the objects emerge in perception outside of the body."[54] Since the emanations of the brain and those of the object meet in the ether at the moment of perception, the sense of touch is an extension of all the other senses. R. Bruce Elder points out that, for Hausmann, technological advancements allowed for a return to the rudimentary way to relate with the world, "touch was the primeval sensory modality, and new technology had made it possible to use those primeval sensations to generate both sounds and images."[55]

Hausmann's plea for a return to prehistory, as a way of renewing human perception and overcoming outdated stagnant art forms sheds light on Shklovsky's stone, a rather unlikely candidate for perceptual revamping. The phrase that art makes a stone feel stony creates a strong link between perception, as a laborious yet fruitful method of constructing both reality and art, and an object, as a turning away from theory in favour of creation. While Hausmann is looking for a "new organ" that would transform the world, Shklovsky writes that what humanity is looking for has been in its hands since the beginning. In line with Lissitzky and Ehrenburg's emphasis on the value of physical work, Shklovsky's stone is an ultimate instrument of labour, which evokes the time when making things was an intrinsically estranging activity. In making the stone feel stonier, art, not unlike the collective technological synaesthetic experience envisioned by Hausmann, promises to enhance human perceptual capacities transgressing the limits of individual senses. As

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[51] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsa," in *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand* 1-2, 3.
[52] Arndt Niebisch, "Ether Machines: Raoul Hausmann's Optophonetic Media," in Vibratory Modernism, ed. Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 162.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 164.
[55] R. Bruce Elder, *Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 141.

Shklovsky writes in *Knight's Move*, "The entire work of the artist-poet and the artist-painter consists first and foremost in creating a continuous thing, every inch of which can be felt, a textured thing."[56] Art not only invites viewers or readers to live through the making of the thing, it also is a lesson in tool making, with creative practice embodying a transformative experience of labour.

[56] Viktor Shklovsky, *Knight's Move* (Berlin: Gelikon, 1923), 102. My translation.