

Asiya Bulatova

The University of Warsaw (Uniwersytet Warszawski)

asia.bulatova@gmail.com

Food for Thought and Scientific Food Rationing: Viktor Shklovsky's Case Against Censorship

In his 1917 essay "Art as Device," Viktor Shklovsky famously coins the term *ostranenie* ("defamiliarization" or "estrangement"), which, for over a century, has been a staple of modernist literary theory. Shklovsky argues that habitual perception "accounts for much discord in mankind" because it is governed by the "economy of mental effort," helping humans preserve valuable resources by turning real-time objects into easily apprehendable symbols. As Shklovsky puts it, "We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged."¹ This "generalizing perception" reduces the sense of sight to a passive consumerist practice; it also has negative effects upon the quality of life in general, with many people living "entirely on the level of the unconscious." Such automatization is ultimately a violent act, as it "eats away at things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war."² It threatens not only to ingest one's daily encounters but also to numb perceptions of atrocity and violence. By making the familiar unfamiliar, Shklovsky's strategy of estrangement recuperates the lost agency of the perceiving subject promising to eliminate consumerist attitudes towards life and art. Estrangement aligns Shklovsky's theory of literature with a revolutionary agenda that seeks to create a new type of socialist man and woman who were to break away from bourgeois values, behaviors and practices.

The estranging function of the arts acquires a different meaning in Shklovsky's post-revolutionary writings, as the new regime ventured to restructure various areas of society, from attempts to create a radically new wardrobe for proletarian state workers, to far less benign programs such as the redistribution of housing and food requisitioning. Peter Holquist uses Shklovsky's vocabulary to describe the centrality of violence and control to Soviet social policy: "Soviet state violence was not simply repressive. It was employed as a tool for fashioning an idealized image of a better, purer society. After Victor Shklovsky's seminal 1915-1916 essay on formalist art, Soviet policies might best be described as 'state violence as technique.'³ Holquist's appropriation of the Formalist understanding of a work of literature as a collection of devices brings attention to, as he puts it, the "underlying aesthetic project" of the early Soviet era's increased social discipline and repression.

¹ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 5.

² Ibid.

³ Peter Holquist, "State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism," in *Landscaping the Human Garden: Population Management in a Comparative Framework*, ed. Amir Weiner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 20.

* 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.



Shklovsky's own aesthetic project to replace passive perception with the renewed sensory experiences offered by estrangement engages directly with the practices of corrective social discipline implemented at the institutional level. In particular, his writings expose the connection between scientific food rationing, which became prominent areas of research as the new government confronted a countrywide famine, and the institutionalization of punitive censorship mechanisms which targeted the arts. Food rationing – a practice that aimed, despite severe food shortages, to equalize nutrient distribution – was simultaneously a utopian project to implement scientific knowledge about food to meet the needs of the new state, and, paradoxically, the subject of rigorous statistical data analysis that revealed the project's utter failure, as millions continued to die from starvation. In his 1923 collection *Knight's Move*, Shklovsky engages with early-Soviet attempts to provide the scientific rationale for controlling the diets of citizens through the redistribution of food and food rationing. Shklovsky's descriptions of the disastrous effects of these interventions are tied to the anxiety regarding the consequences of the control over arts and literature.

This collection was published during Shklovsky's exile in Berlin after he fled 1922 accusations of earlier anti-Bolshevik activity. Its essays, however, were first published in Russia between 1919 and 1920, a period of great famine which killed millions of people including Shklovsky's aunt and beloved sister Evgenia.⁴ In it he also provides an account of living on the government's food rations, which, according to many statistical reports, were drastically lower than scientifically recommended norms. By engaging with the cultural, ideological and scientific food policies of the period, I argue that famine, like artistic form in Shklovsky's earlier writings, acquires an estranging function, capable of altering the starving subject's cognitive functions.

The preface to the collection creates a link between control over food and artistic censorship by comparing censorship to the effects of malnutrition on the mental capacities of individuals. Censorship is here yet another mechanism of control that does not take into consideration scientific advances in the field, and, more precisely, "the science of literature" developed by the Formalists. While nutrition sciences promised to calculate the optimal calorie intake for workers, Shklovsky asserts that the literary arts are crucial to intellectual health and that, by attempting to control them, Soviet censors risk depriving post-revolutionary society of much necessary food for thought.

Fables of Famine and Scientific Food Rationing

The Berlin edition of *Knight's Move* was published with two prefaces and an afterword. These framing texts attempt to make sense of the author's precarious position both within the émigré culture and back in his increasingly hostile homeland. In a 1922 letter to his London-based uncle Shklovsky complains that he could not find a publisher for *Knight's Move* in Russia because of the book's "anti-governmental tendency."⁵ In contrast to the letter, written shortly after Shklovsky fled the Soviet Union by walking on foot across the thawing ice of the Gulf of Finland, where he paints a bitter picture of the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath, *Knight's Move* offers a far subtler critique. After all, Shklovsky did attempt to publish the book in Russia, albeit unsuccessfully. Individual essays, which first came out in a small theatre newspaper *The Life of Art*, describe the dire living conditions in post-revolutionary Russia, where scientists, writers and artists continued to work in freezing houses, universities, laboratories, studios and theatres amid a severe food crisis. In describing

⁴ Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 185.

⁵ Shklovsky, "Pisma V. Shklovskogo k Dioneo, 1922" in Tynianovskii sbornik, ed. Alexander Galushkin (Riga, Moscow: 1994), 283-284; my translation.

collective suffering, however, Shklovsky positions himself and his fellow intellectuals within the early-Soviet ideological agenda which glorified individual hardship for the greater good of society. The first preface makes clear that Shklovsky entered exile unwillingly and not in search of better living conditions abroad. The preface draws parallels between, “the strangeness of the knight’s move” and the author’s own situation: “the knight is not free – it moves in an L-shaped manner because it is forbidden to take the straight road.”⁶ This metaphor helps Shklovsky to read his own biography through his theory that “the complication of the form” is a crucial for achieving the effect of the estrangement: “Our broken way is the way of the brave, but what can we do if we have two eyes each and if we can see more than the honest pawns and the kings, who are duty-bound to have but one belief.”⁷ Shklovsky’s uneasy role in revolutionary life and the trajectory of his exile are attributed to his binocular vision, with increased depth perception and wider view of field, enabling him to see a historical situation in its incomprehensible complexity. Although Shklovsky appears to admit that his way, the way that eventually lead him to Berlin, is not a straightforward road towards the Bolshevik utopia, he offers his renewed, de-automatized perception as an effective tool for predicting what sort of a future current repressive policies may create.

While the preface laments his curbed freedom, the afterword presents Russia not as a repressive regime which threatens the author with arrest and execution, but as the final position for the knight. These final lines of the book read: “In 1917, I wanted happiness for Russia. In 1918, I wanted happiness for the whole world – wouldn’t settle for less. Now I want just one thing: to return to Russia. This is the end of the knight’s move. The knight turns its head and laughs.”⁸ Here the static symbol of a chess piece – in Russian it is called a stallion (*kon’*) – morphs into an image of a horse’s head brought to life by the absurdity of its situation. Elsewhere in the collection, Shklovsky provides a detailed account of horses dying from malnourishment on the streets of Petersburg, with their carcasses first being carved up by starving people and later eaten by dogs. It is therefore unclear if, by presenting Russia as the final destination for the knight, Shklovsky hopes to win the game or whether the piece will be obliterated by the move, as the other horses have been.

This absurdist uncertainty marks all of Shklovsky’s attempts to explain what happened in Russia: “Some say – in Russia people are eating, or are capable of eating, human flesh... Others say – in Russia the universities are functioning; in Russia the theatres are full. You choose for yourself what to believe. But why choose? It’s all true.”⁹ His refusal to separate hearsay from the truth renders all these “stories” about revolutionary Russia equally plausible. The new horror of extreme conditions, which plunged everyday life into a battle for survival, disrupts the previous mode of automatized perception; neither food nor historical reality comes “prepackaged” anymore. Moreover, in suggesting that the rumours of cannibalism are as likely to be true as the country’s intellectual prosperity, Shklovsky introduces the quality of multiplicity, of interlocked, layered stories, which persists throughout *Knight’s Move*. In its second preface, Shklovsky presents three intertwined fables that are difficult to tease out into separate tales. In a reflection of drastic changes in the

⁶ Shklovsky, “First Preface,” in *Knight’s Move*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 3.

⁷ This quotation is taken from a new translation of the preface by Alexandra Berlina. Shklovsky, “Preface One,” in Viktor Shklovsky: *A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 154.

⁸ Shklovsky, “Afterword: The Tsar’s Kitchen,” in *Knight’s Move*, 130-131.

⁹ Shklovsky, “First Preface,” in *Knight’s Move*, 4.

organization of post-revolutionary society, their collective power resists individuation, yet their combined message offers an effective critique of the new regime's institutional controls.

In this preface, Shklovsky presents himself as a teacher and a scientist in Russia's thriving educational system. He begins by describing a commonplace encounter at the Russian Institute of Art History in which he is visited by members of his workshop, who ask him to "tell [them] something about art." He responds with a lesson in literary history: "I will tell you something like an excerpt from the *Hitopadesha*, a story within a story. It will be interesting as an example of Indian poetics."¹⁰ What follows is an indirect but unmistakable critique of the early-Soviet mechanisms of control over the arts, partially concealed under the guise of literary theory and made more oblique by the international frame of reference. The three stories together establish an extended metaphor wherein agricultural modernization, which depletes the resilience of traditional agrarian communities, introduces the corrosive forces of uncertainty that accompany new social programs. Read together, they cannily reveal the continuous logic between state food controls and state censorship, both of which have profoundly negative implications for the future. Although this preface claims to be an exercise in literary history, the form of nesting stories becomes a cutting-edge technique to convey the modernist aesthetics of uncertainty. Writing to his uncle, Shklovsky describes *Knight's Move* as "a rather odd thing," which is "composed 'a la a Hindu novel' or, rather, is an attempt to create a sort of a new form out of an essay collection."¹¹ This phrase attributes a special role to the nesting structure of the preface, which forestalls an inseparable interconnectedness between the essays that follow it. Where the multiple stories link up and overlap is the site of literary and political transgression, in which censorship, the extra-literary agency that must stay invisible, becomes the ultimate target for critique.

The first story depicts a peasant who, having just finished grinding the grain from the year's harvest, stands outside his home and swears. Appalled by the behaviour, a passer-by asks what happened. "Who wouldn't swear?" the peasant replies, "The harvest was bad. Once again Nicholas the Wonderworker made a mess of things. When fair weather was needed, he sent rain; when sun was needed, he sent frost."¹² The stranger, none other than Nicholas the Wonderworker himself, does not take such criticism lightly, and, like a Soviet bureaucrat, hands the peasant a mandate authorising the latter to regulate the weather. After a year, the peasant's curses grow even louder. He indeed eliminated the wind and thunderstorms, but he did not know that they were essential for pollination of his grain. After hearing the new complaints, Nicholas tells the peasant that he has "acted the way people in Italy act when they subsequently become idiots." He then initiates a story within a story which recounts an episode about people "in Italy or Japan" who noticed that "they were growing more stupid by the day."¹³ After consulting a suspiciously modern team of doctors (at least for a text that claims to be a fable), these Japanese or Italian people finally get an answer to their problem – they have been eating husk-free rice, and the husk contains the nutritious elements that are necessary for the brain. The geographic uncertainty of the inner tale's setting, which provides multiple and equally arbitrary locations for the episode, undermines the omniscient authority of both Nicholas the Wonderworker and Shklovsky, who, once again, makes no claims to either mimetic accuracy or narrative coherence.

The effects of the industrial grain processing (i.e. milling and polishing), which replaced traditional ways of de-husking in the mid-nineteenth century, has been the subject of scientific enquiry and the public interest since the early 1900s. Because grains like wheat and

¹⁰ Shklovsky, "Bundle: Second Preface," in *Knight's Move*, 5.

¹¹ Shklovsky, "Pisma V. Shklovskogo k Dioneo, 1922," 183.

¹² Shklovsky, "Bundle: Second Preface," in *Knight's Move*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

rice are the foundation of staple diets around the world, from Italy to Japan (as Shklovsky's geographical range indicates), finding the best ways to process them have long been a concern of policy debates.¹⁴ In Russia, both before and after the revolution, those in power provided institutional support for biologists, geneticists, and nutrition specialists who were tasked with developing ways to preserve and enhance the nutritional value of the country's grain harvests. Statistical reports, research findings, and advice literature on growing, harvesting, and preparing crops were published throughout the revolution and the Civil War.

Although the new government promised to alleviate urban hunger and peasant unrest, the revolution only exacerbated an already threatening food crisis. The period known as "War Communism," which lasted for three years, was marked by unsuccessful attempts at equal distribution of foodstuffs across the country. After seizing power, Lenin's party confiscated food from rural areas to distribute in cities.¹⁵ Although the intent was to collect only surplus grains and produce, nearly everything was confiscated.¹⁶ Together with an intense drought, this mismanagement virtually destroyed Russia's agriculture, which had already been weakened by years of war and revolution. In Shklovsky's 1923 memoir *A Sentimental Journey*, the party's redistribution of food is accompanied by tragic episodes of catastrophic miscommunication between the authorities and the armed forces collecting the produce:

You heard such incredible stories! Milk being collected. The order says to take all the milk to such-and-such a place by such-and-such a day. But there aren't any containers, so it's poured on the ground. [...] Finally they found some containers – herring barrels. They poured in the milk, hauled it off, got it there and then had to pour it out. Even the smell made them sick.¹⁷

Such tales of mismanagement are almost comic in their absurdity, but the anecdote should not distract from the human cost. During the famine of 1921-1922, which killed between five and nine million people, regional branches of the Central Statistical Administration, established in 1918, collected data on nutritional intake from both rural and urban areas, while the Central Commission for Aid to the Starving carried out investigations in the hardest hit famine regions.¹⁸ Simultaneously, the newly formed Institute of the Physiology of Nutrition promoted economically efficient and scientifically "rational" diets, which, however, could not be successfully implemented under the conditions of severe shortage.

Shklovsky's writings reveals the inherent violence of grafting this new nutritional approach onto an already precarious condition of food insecurity. In *A Sentimental Journey*, he writes that drastic official measures were always failing in the face of real-life conditions of scarcity: "All of life had to be reduced to a formula and regulated. A ready-made formula was imported. The result – we ate rotten potatoes."¹⁹ Stanislav Strumilin, a Soviet economist and statistician who published reports throughout the years of famine, supports Shklovsky's account in his detailed calculations of minimum calorie intake for workers, their actual

¹⁴ See Mark Weatherall, "Bread and Newspapers: The Making of 'A Revolution in the Science of Food,'" in *The Science and Culture of Nutrition, 1840-1940*, ed. Harmke Kamminga and Andrew Cunningham (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 179-212.

¹⁵ William A. Dando, "Russian and Soviet Famines: 1918-1947," in *Food and Famine in the 21st Century*, ed. William A. Dando (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 2. See also David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry 1600-1930: The World the Peasants Made* (London: Routledge, 2014), 356-69.

¹⁶ Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 270.

¹⁷ Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 181-182.

¹⁸ See Boris Mironov, *The Standard of Living and Revolutions in Imperial Russia, 1700-1917*, ed. Gregory Freeze (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁹ Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 182.

calorie consumption from state food rations, and what they could buy at black markets with their daily income. In a 1919 article, Strumilin writes he does not need to calculate percentages of wasted foodstuffs because “nothing is wasted in contemporary kitchens.” He adds that even such “delicacies” as potato peels and coffee grounds are being processed into flatbreads.²⁰

As food supplies became inconsistent, numerous cookbooks and brochures encouraged people to prepare food surrogates, such as flourless bread, and find substitutes for sugar and coffee.²¹ *A Sentimental Journey* provides recipes for such extreme cooking, from the best way of boiling rotten potatoes to preparing spoiled herrings and other putrid meats. Shklovsky writes that during his last meeting with his sister, only a few days before her sudden death by starvation at the age of twenty-seven, she gave him “some bread made out of rye flour with flax seed.” Although now such bread would be considered a healthy alternative, in 1919 it was a prime example of a homemade food surrogate. Shklovsky describes Evgenia, an aspiring singer, as the person closest to him, both because of their physical resemblance and a profound mental connection, which allowed Shklovsky to “guess her thoughts.” He adds that the only difference between them was “her indulgent, hopeless pessimism.”²² To display his own optimistic worldview Shklovsky adds: “There is no need to cry. The need is to love the living!”²³

The refrain “There’s no need to cry” persists throughout Shklovsky’s account of his sister’s death culminating in his acknowledgement of its permanently tragic impact: “The winter of 1919 changed me greatly.” The alienating experience of survival is indicative of a break between the natural flow of everyday life and the cold organizational logic of Bolshevik’s policies: “The Bolsheviks [...] were a special kind of organizing bacillus, but of another world and dimension. It was like organizing a state of fish and fowl based on a double bookkeeping system. However, I am unjust toward them. Just as unjust as the deaf man who looks at people dancing and thinks they’re insane.”²⁴ Although Shklovsky stops short of calling the regime mad by adding that “The Bolsheviks had their own music,” the question of mental health persists. His writings suggest that the traumas of the hostile, life-threatening conditions during the post-revolutionary years will have irreversible effects on the citizens’ collective mental health.

Unlike the institutionalization of individual-centered psychotherapy and psychoanalysis elsewhere, the new state was more concerned with the psychological health of the social body. Both public and medical discourses emphasized the dominance of social factors over heredity in managing health and behavioral problems. This ideological background is reflected in Shklovsky’s description of the peasants affected by idiocy after eating modernized rice. Their problem is not explained by individual psychiatric problems but by their malfunctioning as a collective. Irina Sirotkina writes that the general accepted line on mental health was that, “in a well-designed or ‘healthy’ society,” “mental health would come from improved social conditions.”²⁵ This understanding of collective functioning as critical to the individual psyche is aligned with Shklovsky’s critique of governmental attempts to forcibly modernize society through food rationing and other practices.

²⁰ Stanislav Strumilin, *Problemy ekonomiki truda* (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), p. 309; my translation.

²¹ Halina Rothstein and Robert A. Rothstein, “The Beginnings of Soviet Culinary Arts,” in *Food in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Musya Glants and Joyce Toomre (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 187.

²² Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 185.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 183.

²⁵ Irina Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 149-150.

Shklovsky's descriptions of collective mismanagement in the rural fable suggest the disastrous effects of Bolsheviks' mismanagement, especially in its cities. In Shklovsky's imagination, the collective experience of hunger and deprivation affected not only people, but also the architectural landscape of Petrograd, which is animated to enact the negative effects of revolutionary upheaval upon the social body. In search of wood to feed their pot-bellied stoves people dismantle wooden buildings, with big buildings "devouring" smaller ones. The grotesque image of buildings eating each other captures the state of the city as it starved under a wartime economic blockade, supported by the Allied intervention, while the Bolsheviks purposefully neglected the former capital to punish the unreliable bourgeoisie.²⁶ The carnivorous landscape of the famished city enacts the rumors of cannibalism, mentioned in the preface. The miscarriage of the young is another reminder of a doomed future which must inevitably follow the starved, desperate present. As Shklovsky puts it, "the buildings being constructed were denied the right to be born,"²⁷ suggesting through the animation of the city's architecture that famine disrupts the automatic functions of individual human bodies.

Shklovsky is careful to emphasize that the post-revolutionary obsession with food was not caused by a psychological difficulty to come to terms with the abolishment of free markets, but rather by the physical effect of starvation. As he writes in *A Sentimental Journey*: "If you weren't in Russian from 1917 to 1921, you can't imagine how the body and the brain – the brain not as intellect, but as part of the body – can crave sugar. The body craved sugar the way a man craves a woman; it kept insisting."²⁸ The body's ultimate goal of sustaining life overrides all other instincts and a craving for a sexual partner becomes but a useful metaphor to describe food cravings. Similarly, in *Knight's Move*, Shklovsky relates that sexual desire seems to become irrelevant in the face of starvation: "Then, too, I forgot to say that men were almost completely impotent and women ceased to have their periods. That didn't happen right away. Wave after wave of hunger first weakened, then lashes everyone as it dragged them under."²⁹ By establishing that deprivation resulted in the loss of sexual drives and fertility, Shklovsky further emphasizes that all bodily energies had to be preserved to serve the new socialist state. Diminished reproductive function, however, presents a grave threat to society's future, especially one in which the bodies of women and men were conceptualized as the labor force's foundation.

In Shklovsky's multi-layered fable, the doctors who assess the debilitating diet of the Italian or Japanese peasants speak against governmental controls over traditional dietary habits of the citizens. They provide the readers with the following nutritional advice, "Don't go around inventing food without taking into account every eventuality, but if the people who became idiots because they failed to eat husks are like the peasant who forgot about the wind, then the man who would have liked to take everything into account would be like the Indian folk tale about the millipede."³⁰ This, the third and final fable, introduces a millipede that institutes a bureaucratic system of control over the movement of its legs and is, consequently, unable to move any of them. After assessing its own paralysis, the millipede says:

Viktor Shklovsky was right when he said that the greatest misfortune of our time is that the government is regulating art without knowing what it is. The greatest

²⁶ Martha Weitzel Hickey, *The Writer in Petrograd and the House of Arts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), xii.

²⁷ Shklovsky, "Petersburg During the Blockade," in *Knight's Move*, 13.

²⁸ Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 232.

²⁹ Shklovsky, "Petersburg During the Blockade," 13.

³⁰ Shklovsky, "Bundle: Second Preface," 7.

misfortune of Russian art is that we discard it like a husk of rice. And by the way, art [...] is like vitamins, which should be contained in food in addition to proteins and fat. Vitamins are neither protein nor fat, but the life of the organism is impossible without them.³¹

Thus the fables, read collectively, have woven together the seemingly separate critiques of new scientific approaches to nutrition and newly centralized regulation of the arts.

‘Art is Like Vitamins’: Censorship and Intellectual Malnutrition

The ventriloquism of the ancient folk-tale millipede summons an uncanny knowledge of early twentieth-century research on vitamins in order to express Shklovsky’s views on the unfavorable position of arts and literature in early Soviet cultural policies. By 1923, the term “vitamin” was at the core of the debates about how to provide adequate nutritional supplements for poor diets consisting primarily of bread or rice.³² The industrial methods of rice-milling, which stripped its nutrient-rich bran and germ to provide the white appearance associated with modern hygiene standards, are often presented as a consequence of either capitalism or colonialism or both.³³ In Shklovsky’s fabled society, where eating husk-free rice disrupted healthy brain functioning, the peasants suffer immediate loss of mental capacity because of excessive controls that have clear Soviet era parallels. The enforced program of agricultural modernization via de-husking decreases the capacity, not just of individual peasants but the entire community. The millipede advises that any attempt “to take everything into account” – in other words, to adhere too strictly to scientific principles of social organization – endangers the types of traditional and intergenerational knowledge that undergird communal health and well-being. This modern disregard of tradition also threatens to undo more intuitive approaches to the arts. In comparing artistic censorship to its own disastrous attempts to introduce “centralization” to regulate the movement of its legs, the millipede points to the grim future that such intellectual starvation might bring.

Anna Kushkova writes that food controls have long been an ideological tool in a repressive society: “The system of food distribution [...] organized ‘from above’ embodied the traditional model of ‘feeding’ (*kormlenie*), within which ‘masters’ would ‘feed’ ‘their people’ in exchange for their work and personal loyalty.”³⁴ Such dependency perpetuated stunted social progress for the laboring classes. Shklovsky’s writings extend this logic by implying that deprivation is also a useful tool for repressive social engineering. In other words, he makes apparent what remains latent in Kushkova’s claim – that “masters” exercise control over food and food for thought alike. In his descriptions, the gruesome living conditions in post-revolutionary Russia ultimately rewire the brains of the producers of art.

Such a stance is clear in “Petersburg During the Blockade,” where deprivation becomes an agent of censorship in the sense that it reduces critical faculties of individuals to the ultimate goal of survival. The daily hardship of the revolution is attributable to the colossal input of energy that “each step of the revolution took.”³⁵ Day to day survival becomes a smaller scale re-enactment of the larger social upheaval, as fighting is no longer

³¹ Ibid., 8.

³² See Harmke Kamminga, “‘Axes to Grind’: Popularising the Science of Vitamins, 1920s-1930s,” in *Food, Science, Policy and Regulation in the Twentieth Century: International and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. David F. Smith and Jim Phillips (London: Routledge, 2000), 83-100.

³³ J. B. S. Haldane, *Science and Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1939), 142.

³⁴ Anna Kushkova, “Surviving the Time of Deficit,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, ed. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 279.

³⁵ Shklovsky, “Petersburg During the Blockade,” 10.

confined to the battlefields: “In order to stay alive, you had to fight, to fight every single day.” During winters the fight to preserve energy, a resource needed for the betterment of the newly formed society, involved not only finding new ways of receiving calories, but also staying warm: “What did we burn? A few of the surviving bourgeoisie [...] heated with firewood. We heated with everything. I burned my furniture, my sculptor’s stand, bookcases and books, books beyond calculation and measure.”³⁶ This is a profoundly conflicted moment in *Knight’s Move*. Although Shklovsky bitterly admits that “it’s wrong [...] to write books so that they make hotter fire,” he also reminds his reader that these extremes of revolutionary asceticism were essential to create a new society, one free from the bourgeois mindset and values.³⁷ The reference to burning books is a powerful image of destroying politically undesirable materials, an iconic mechanism of state violence. There is an irreconcilable duality in Shklovsky’s work: the authoritarian methods of the regime undo the revolutionary potential for social engineering that the revolution is seeking to unleash, while the conditions of famine and extreme deprivation render barren the environment that is crucial for immanent social and artistic rebirth.

Shklovsky’s controversial reading of individual sacrifice appears in “Pounding Nails with a Samovar,” where he insists that hardship has both glorifying and cleansing effects: “[p]rivation reorganizes things in its own way, which is terrible but honest.”³⁸ Such radical reorganization, in his writings, concerns not only living and working conditions of people, but also their mental faculties such as emotions, will, and, importantly, perception. In writing that privation “reorganizes *things*” (my emphasis), an ambiguous word favoured by modernist writers, Shklovsky shows that hardship alters mental capacities of individuals in a way that helps them to overcome the epistemological limits of understanding. Rather than being the regime’s stupefying tool of repression, in acquiring estranging function, famine and deprivation inadvertently disrupt the unhelpful process of habitual recognition that reduces cognition to familiar “packages” of thought, returning the lost ability to perceive immediate reality and restoring intellectual agility necessary for both survival and creativity.

The millipede’s caution against losing fundamental human knowledge rings true for Shklovsky’s community of Petrograd dwellers, who, amid the failing system of rationing, rediscover what food is, a knowledge once used in traditional societies that has been lost to urban populations: “We didn’t know yet that you have to eat fats to live. We ate only potatoes and bread [...]. Wounds won’t heal without fats.”³⁹ While citizens were figuring out the relationship between major food groups for themselves, statistical reports about famine describe worrisome medical prognoses of the effects of famine. After acknowledging that “the system of rationing has not been successful,” Strumilin expresses concerns about the irreversible effects of “fat starvation”: “It is said that after reaching a certain degree of starvation the body’s ability to replenish the layer of subcutaneous skin fat, which serves as a stack of labour energy, is lost forever.”⁴⁰ While food rationing provided people with inadequate provisions, the centralization of knowledge about food reinforces modernization without taking into consideration more traditional, intuitive knowledge. The fable’s dictum “Don’t go around inventing food” presents an alternative voice of authority that resists nutritional censorship and provides a critique of the government’s reliance upon science to remedy scarcity conditions.

Knight’s Move, however, pronounces the government’s attempts at “regulating art” – and not its disastrous food policies, which resulted in millions of deaths – to be “the greatest

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

³⁷ Shklovsky, “Pounding Nails with a Samovar,” in *Knight’s Move*, 25.

³⁸ Shklovsky, “Pounding Nails with a Samovar,” 25.

³⁹ Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 175.

⁴⁰ Strumilin, *Problemy ekonomiki truda*, 315, 317; my translation.

misfortune of our time.” The lost automatism of Petrograd’s malnourished bodies anticipates the doomed future of this “new” society if it continues being starved by censorship. Drawing on the experience of the peasants who did not eat whole grain rice, the millipede concludes that art is like vitamins. It is not food, but it is just as essential for the healthy functioning of individuals. If food is building material for the bodies and brains of Soviet citizens, then art is a microelement crucial for the normal development of their mental capacities. The governmental censorship of creative activities limits food for thought without fully understanding the effects of such deprivation – without, as the millipede puts it, “taking into account every eventuality.”⁴¹

Like the fabled team of doctors who urged the malnourished peasants to loosen the controls on their diets, Shklovsky proposes to solve the issue of intellectual malnutrition by lifting ever-tightening censorship laws: “The greatest misfortune of Russian art is that it is not allowed to move organically, as the heart moves in a man’s chest: it is being regulated like the movement of trains.”⁴² The alignment of art with the organic movement of a healthy heart, an involuntary function of the body that should not be consciously regulated, presents Shklovsky as a disinterested expert who fully understands the object of his scrutiny, thus placing him in a position from which it becomes possible to criticize the methods of censorship that curbed the freedoms – of movement and of thought – of Soviet scientists, writers and artists. Unlike trains that need a strict schedule to be on time, art is an agency in itself to the extent that it defies any attempts to subject it to governmental regulation. As the millipede says: “Citizens and comrades, look at me and you will see what excessive regulation leads to! Comrades of the revolution, comrades of the war, leave art alone, not in its own name but in the name of the fact that it’s impossible to regulate the unknown!”⁴³

The millipede’s wisdom operates within the modernist framework of epistemological multiplicity, captured by Shklovsky’s concept of estrangement as a technique that reproduces art’s impulse to renew and transform perception. Governmental control over the supply of provisions for a whole society (through food rationing) and of the culinary habits of its citizens (through popular science publications) reveals a continuous logic in which conditions of deprivation mimics the function of estrangement. However, while both estrangement and famine disrupt unhelpful habitual perception, which fractures reality into “prepackaged” segments, censorship extracts all the elements essential for cognition, rendering subjects incapacitated. By using the militant language of revolutionary propaganda, the millipede commands both the government and the fellow citizens to acknowledge that art resists control. Shklovsky asks to preserve an aesthetics of uncertainty, symptomatic of modernist art, because its resistance to being fully known, reduced to definitions, and controlled, is what enriches it with an estranging potential, promising, like the invisible yet life-sustaining vitamins, to provide food for thought in an intellectually starved society.

Bibliography

- Dando, William A. “Russian and Soviet Famines: 971 – 1947.” *Food and Famine in the 21st Century*, v. 2, ed. William A. Dando, 1-37. Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2012.
- Haldane, J. B. S. *Science and Everyday Life*. London: Penguin, 1939.
- Holquist, Peter. “State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism.” In *Landscaping the Human Garden: Population Management in a Comparative Framework*, ed. Amir Weiner, 19-45. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

⁴¹ Shklovsky, “Bundle: Second Preface,” 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

- Shklovsky, Viktor. *A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- "Art as Device." In *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher, 1-14. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.
- . *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922*, trans. Richard Sheldon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970.
- . *Knight's Move*, trans. Richard Sheldon. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.
- . "Pisma V. Shklovskogo k Dioneo, 1922." In *Tynianovskii sbornik*, ed. Alexander Galushkin, 282-286. Riga, Moscow: 1994.
- . *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*, ed. and trans. Richard Sheldon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Kamminga, Harmke. "'Axes to Grind': Popularising the Science of Vitamins in the 1920s-1930s." In *Food, Science, Policy and Regulation in the Twentieth Century: International and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. David F. Smith and Jim Phillips, 83-100. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Kurennoi, Vitaly. "Sovetskii eksperiment stroitel'stva institutov." In *Vremya vrepod! Kul'turnaia politika SSSR*, ed. Irina Gluschenko and Vitaly Kurennoi, 12-34 Moscow: Izdatelskii dom vysshei shkoly ekonomiki, 2013.
- Kushkova, Anna. "Surviving the Time of Deficit." In *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, ed. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly, 278-296. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Mironov, Boris. *The Standard of Living and Revolutions in Imperial Russia, 1700-1917*, ed. Gregory Freeze. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Moon, David. *The Russian Peasantry 1600-1930: The World the Peasants Made*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Rabinowitch, Alexander. *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.
- Rothstein, Halina and Robert A. Rothstein. "The Beginnings of Soviet Culinary Arts." In *Food in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Musya Glants and Joyce Toomre, 177-194 Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Sirotkina, Irina. *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Strumilin, Stanislav. *Problemy ekonomiki truda*. Moscow: Nauka, 1982.
- Weatherall, Mark. "Bread and Newspapers: The Making of 'A Revolution in the Science of Food.'" In *The Science and Culture of Nutrition, 1840-1940*, ed. Harmke Kamminga and Andrew Cunningham, 179-212 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995).
- Weitzel Hickey, Martha. *The Writer in Petrograd and the House of Arts*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009.