RUSSIAN FORMALISM

Russian Formalism (1915/16- 30) was an intellectual current that marked a departure from the previously dominant mimetic theory of art. It made significant contributions to modern literary theory and was influential in the development of structuralism and Bakhtinian studies of literature. Representatives of this movement opposed the idea that art should mirror the real world and that language is a simple, transparent vehicle for communication. They maintained that art could not mirror the world and focused on defining the function of language in literary works as different from its day-to-day usage. Drawing attention to the importance of artistic device and to “literariness,” a set of linguistic characteristics that distinguish literary work from other forms of verbal expression, they suggested that literary work is a self-sufficient system designed to free language from the effects of repetition and habit.

Beginning in 1915-1916, Russian formalists rejected the idea that literature is a manifestation of the author’s biography, a socio-historical document, or an example of a philosophical system. Instead, they believed that the text is derived from its “literariness,” a concept coined by Roman Jakobson that aims to define in linguistic terms what makes a verbal message a work of literature.

Russian Formalism emerged in response to the aesthetic sensibility of modernist art. Futurism, in particular, with its focus on the shocking effect of art and its understanding of poetry as the medium that brings new life to the word, represented by such poets as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov, was an inspiration for Russian formalists and one of the objects of their pioneering studies.

Two centers of philological inquiry shaped the formalist movement: the Moscow Linguistic Circle (beginning in 1915), chaired by Jakobson, and the St. Petersburg *OPOJAZ* (starting in 1916) (The Society for the Study of Poetic Language), one of the founders of which was Viktor Shklovsky. Though these two prominent scholars stand out in the movement, it was a product of intellectual teamwork. The *Opojaz* members were primarily literary historians who found in linguistics a set of conceptual tools needed for addressing problems of literary theory. The Muscovites, on the contrary, were predominately students of language, who used modern poetry to test their methodological assumptions.

Formalists were among the first in Russia to address in a systematic way problems of rhythm, meter, style and composition. Considering its communicative function as only one of the possible uses of language, Shklovsky asserted the primacy of sound over meaning in certain types of speech, and suggested that poetry exemplifies language in its aesthetic function. *OPOJAZ’s* *Poetica. Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo jazyka* (*Studies in the* *Theory of Poetic Language*) (1919) and Jakobson’s *Noveishaya russkaja poezija* (*Modern Russian Poetry)* (1921) made clear that Russian Formalism focused on showing how the artistic use of language was different from than of ordinary usage.

In 1916, Shklovsky published his essay “Iskusstvo kak priëm” (“Art as Device”), which is regarded as a manifesto of Russian Formalism. Here Shklovksy defines *ostraneniye* (usually translated as “defamiliarization”)—that is, the creative distortion of nature by means of a set of linguistic devices—as an artistic goal. In his *O teorii prozy* (*Theory of Prose*) (1925), he differentiated between *fabula* (story), a summary of the sequence of events, and *sjužet* (plot), the fashioning of the story or the way the events are presented in the text. He asserted that in order to become part of the aesthetic structure the raw materials of the “story” have to be rearranged into the “plot.”

One of the most important formalist contributions to the theory of fiction is Vladimir Propp’s theory of fairy-tale. In his *Morphologija skazki* (*Morphology of Folktale*) (1928), Propp suggested that all fairy-tales are transformations of a deep-seated invariant that distinguishes them from examples of other genres.

Literary history was another object of interest to Russian Formalists. In *Dostoevskij i Gogol (K teorii parodii)* (*Dostoevskii and Gogol: Remarks on Theory of Parody*) (1921), Yuri Tynjanov distinguished parody and stylization as catalysts of literary change. Shklovsky suggested in his *Literatura i kinematograf* (*Literature and Film)* (1923) that in order to renew itself, literature draws on motifs and devices of sub-literary genres.

A connection between Russian Formalism and the visual arts was made by Vladimir Tatlin, whose work in sculpture explores many of the themes of material toughness, defamiliarization, and laying bare the devices explored by Shklovsky. Tatlin insisted that sculpture occupies the same space as the viewer, in the real, quotidian world. A different notion of form emerges: it is not pressed *onto* material, but it *is* material. The artist brings out the essential characteristics of the material by exposure and defamiliarization.

Formalism for painters means confronting the viewer with the fact that pictorial signs have their own existence and are not transparent vehicles that lead to their referents. Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematism, which refers to “the supremacy of feeling in creative art,” exemplifies this approach. Malevich struggled against the notion of the transparency of pictorial language. He considered the visual as the empirical, with vision understood as an interpretive device.

A preoccupation with the detail and an emphasis on the part at the expense of the whole characterizes the paintings of Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova and Pavel Filonov, whose formal techniques involve substantial distortions, dismembering of objects, and rearranging of components in unusual ways. Their art employs spatial displacement, abrupt transitions, montage, hyperbole, antithesis and paradox.

Formalists were condemned as bourgeois and elitist during the Stalinist regime. The movement was suppressed in the 1930s. Beyond its impact on literary theory, literature, painting and sculpture, Russian Formalism influenced the theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold and the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein.

Further readings

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Steiner, P. (1995) "Russian Formalism." *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Ed. R. Selden. Vol. 8. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 11-29. 8 vols.

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