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Defamiliarization: Shklovsky, Brecht, Debord

Disruption, discontinuity, juxtaposition—these notions of artistic and literary deformation underlie much of the avant-garde project. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* Peter Bürger writes that for the avant-garde, "shocking the recipient becomes the dominant principle of artistic intent. . . . [D]efamiliarization thereby does in fact become the dominant artistic technique" (Bürger 18). This paper will explore one of the best-known theories of defamiliarization, Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky's *ostranenie,* and compare it with two other avant-garde defamiliarizations: Bertolt Brecht's "*Verfremdungseffekt*" and Guy Debord's "*détournement.*" All three techniques seek to make the familiar unfamiliar—to subvert ordinary perception and disrupt the banality of everyday life. Yet their formulations and their functions are quite different. While Shklovsky's *ostranenie* is an aesthetic transformation, for example, the defamiliarizations proposed by Brecht and Debord are expressly political. While not attempting to establish a direct genealogical relationship among the three, this paper will trace the changing aims of defamiliarization and analyze its ability to disorder artistic and social conventions.

Ostranenie

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was predated by radical changes in Russian culture, particularly in the field of poetry and poetics. One of these was the emergence of Russian Futurism, a movement of young writers that included the poets Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky. In 1912, they issued "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," a manifesto that demonstrated

the Futurists' refusal of tradition and rejection of the past. "The past is too tight," it read. "The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphs. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity" (Burliuk et al.). Much of Futurism was a reaction to nineteenth century realism and a rejection of Symbolism, designed to shock the bourgeoisie with poetic innovation. Shortly after the emergence of Futurism, and in many ways indebted to the movement's writings, a group of young linguists and literary scholars came together, also in reaction to the perceived customs of their fields. The scholars, including Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Yury Tynianov, and Boris Eikhenbaum, applied the new linguistic science to literary theory and came to be known as the Formalists.

The Formalists sought to establish poetics as "a science, not an interpretation of literature" (Pike 9). They argued it should be an autonomous field of inquiry, separate from psychology, biography, history, or philosophy. Formalist theory emphasized the study of forms or devices—rather than content, images, or social relevance—as the key to understanding literature. The Formalists were concerned with "literariness," elements that distinguish literature and art from everyday life. This distinction between the poetic and the everyday, particularly in language, was fundamental to the Formalist project.

The Formalists' prioritization of the "literary" quickly found them at odds with the Russian Revolution, for Marxist thought emphasized sociological and historical conditions. According to Tony Bennett, Marxist literary criticism of the 1920s focused on "reflection theory." "This demanded that the relative merits of literary forms should be judged according to the extent to which they succeeded in accurately depicting or 'reflecting' the underlying logic and direction of historical development" (Bennett 26). To the contrary, the Formalists sought to establish the autonomy of literature,

arguing it can be read and theorized without reference to material context or political utility. Although many of the Russian Futurists did side with the Revolution—Mayakovsky being the most notable—the Formalists remained adamant about their position and found themselves demonized and silenced by the new regime. In "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism," Trotsky offers a rather misconstrued summation of Formalist thought, one typical of Marxism's response to it. He writes,

> Having declared form to be the essence of poetry, this school reduces its task to an analysis (essentially descriptive and semi-statistical) of the etymology of syntax of poems, to the counting of repetitive vowels and consonants, of syllables and epithets. This analysis which the Formalists regard as the essence of poetry, or poetics, is undoubtedly necessary and useful, but one must understand its partial, scrappy, subsidiary, and preparatory character (Trotsky 163).

This reduction of Formalism to a mindlessly empiricist or a decadently "art for art's sake" approach persists to this day.

Viktor Shklovsky, arguably the main theorist of the Formalist School, was on the receiving end of much of the Marxists' animosity. "Art has always been free of life," Shklovsky maintained, rebuking his Futurist comrades who sought civil service positions with the new government. "Its flag has never reflected the color of the flag flying over the city fortress" (cited in Erlich 77). Exiled to the Ukraine and later to Berlin and barred from participation in Soviet literary circles, Shklovsky by some accounts eventually "surrendered" to the Party and rejected Formalism. Yet despite its "defeat" by Marxists, Formalist thought has remained influential, evident most clearly in the work of the Czech Structuralists who were joined in Prague by Formalist Roman Jakobson in 1926. Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization also has been particularly important, evident for example in Jan Mukařovský's notion of "foregrounding" (Mukařovský 19).

In 1917, Shklovsky published "Art as Technique," one of the most significant statements of Formalism. In the essay, Shklovsky establishes the Formalists' break with earlier conceptualizations of aesthetics, arguing that art is not "thinking in images" (Shklovsky 5). He insists, "images change little" (Shklovsky 7); artistic innovation occurs in form, not in imagery. Instead of creating images, artists are actually concerned with manipulating and arranging them. By contrast, in everyday life and language, the arrangement of images and words is not a conscious act; it is merely habit. Shklovsky argues that in this way our day-to-day perceptions become "algebrized" and "automatized," whereby "things are replaced by symbols" (Shklovsky 11). Art combats this tedium. Its purpose, according to Shklovsky is "to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar'. . ." (Shklovsky 12). Contrary to those who believe art should "clarify the unknown by means of the known," Shklovsky proposes that art should so the reverse——make the familiar unfamiliar (Shklovsky 6). Shklovsky's concept of ***ostranenie***, or "making strange" disrupts the mundane and everyday, allowing that which has become familiar or automatic to be seen anew.

Although the Formalists were influenced by the poetry of the avant-garde, Shklovsky does not use examples of new work in his explanation of ***ostranenie***. In "Art as Technique," Shklovsky draws heavily on the writings of Tolstoy, whom he argues exemplifies the device. For example, in ***War and Peace***, Tolstoy defamiliarizes the opera:

> The middle of the stage consisted of flat boards; by the sides stood painted pictures representing trees, and at the back a linen cloth was stretched down to the floor boards. Maidens in red bodices and white skirts sat on the middle of the stage. One, very fat, in a white silk dress, sat apart on a narrow bench to which a green pasteboard box was glued from behind. They were all singing something (cited in Shklovsky 16).

According to Shklovsky, Tolstoy defamiliarizes the opera by manipulating the conventional or stereotypical portrayal. He explains the opera, but does not name it, describing it "as if he were seeing it for the first time" (Shklovsky 13). Despite his reliance on Tolstoy, Shklovsky is clear that he is far from the first or only author to utilize this technique. The essay examines other forms of literature and folklore, suggesting that defamiliarization often takes the form of riddle, euphemism, or figurative language. In fact, Shklovsky argues that "defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found" (Shklovsky 18).

It should be no surprise that Shklovsky's emphasis here is on form. "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object," he writes. "The object is not important" (Shklovsky 12). This is the infamous Formalist privileging of form over content that brought them into conflict with the Marxists. Unlike Mayakovsky's insistence that the poet respond to "social demand" (Mayakovsky 185), the author or artist's responsibility, according to Shklovsky, is to maneuver formal elements in order to transform everyday language into poetic language. These defamiliarizations thereby re-stimulate perception. As Victor Erlich explains in ***Russian Formalism,***

> By tearing the object out of its habitual context, by bringing together disparate notions, the poet gives a ***coup de grâce*** to the verbal cliché and to the stock responses attendant upon it and forces us into heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture. The act of creative deformation restores sharpness to our perception, giving "density" to the world around us (Erlich 177).

According to Shklovsky, "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone ***stony***" (Shklovsky 12). Although it may appear to be a paradox—to make the stone unfamiliar renders it stony—Shklovsky argues that ***ostranenie*** will reconnect one with reality. Indeed, that is the function of art.

And yet, for Shklovsky, the emphasis on transformation of perception is fundamentally an aesthetic impulse; Shklovsky the Formalist is uninterested in the political implications of defamiliarization. That the passages he cites from Tolstoy contain elements of social criticism appears irrelevant to his argument. Tony Bennett notes in his book ***Formalism and Marxism*** that

> Shklovsky thus viewed the literary device as being "un-motivated." The defamiliarization to which it gives rise, that is, was not thought to be motivated by any consideration beyond that of promoting a renewed and sharpened attentiveness to reality. The category of defamiliarization was thus invested with a purely aesthetic, and not with an ideological significance (Bennett 31).

The Formalist stance runs contrary to their contemporaries the Futurists, for example, who did view the technique "as a means for promoting political awareness by undermining ideologically habituated modes of perception" (Bennett 31-32). For the Formalists, defamiliarization and its accompanying shift in perspective were contained wholly in the aesthetic realm.

In ***The Prison House of Language,*** his study of Formalism and structuralism, Fredric Jameson is somewhat ambivalent about the implications of Shklovsky's defamiliarization. He writes, "The new concept of ***ostranenie*** is not intended to imply anything about the nature of the perceptions which have grown habitual, the perceptions to be renewed" (Jameson 51). Although Jameson appreciates the concept as a tool to isolate formal elements or genres, he criticizes what he sees as its ahistoricism. For this reason, Jameson finds more promise in Bertolt Brecht's notion of defamiliarization, the ***Verfremdungseffekt***.

Verfremdungseffekt

It is doubtful whether Brecht had heard of Shklovsky's defamiliarization before developing his own technique; he did not compare the two until after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1935. Certainly by the time he was writing, however, Czech Structuralists were applying the concept of

defamiliarization to art forms beyond literature, such as folk theater. Regardless, Brecht's ***Verfremdungseffekt***, usually translated as alienation or estrangement effect, is reminiscent of Shklovsky's ***ostranenie***; it too is a technique of "making strange" though the manipulation of form.

Arguably the most influential German dramatist and theoretician of the theatre in the twentieth century, Brecht's epic theatre is a reaction against traditional forms of drama. Like the Formalist and Futurist repudiation of Symbolism, Brecht seeks to purge the theatre of its "magical" aura. According to Brecht, "efforts were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play" (Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" 91). To accomplish this, epic theatre defamiliarizes both traditional staging and acting. For example, the plays are set in unfamiliar surroundings; gestures are exaggerated; action is interrupted with song; placards announce the content of each scene. Furthermore, the actor does not pretend there is a "fourth wall" separating the play from the audience. The actor does not "become" the role through some inner transformation or emotional identification; rather the actor merely "exhibit[s] the outer signs" of the character (Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" 94). "The artist's object," Brecht writes, "is to appear strange . . . to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work" (Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" 92). Through this type of "laying bare the device," Brecht's epic theatre destabilizes conventional observation. Brecht continues, "As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic" (Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" 92).

Like Shklovsky's ***ostranenie***, this defamiliarization marks a disturbance of routine——in this instance, the routine and "realism" of bourgeois theatre.

For Brecht, however, *Verfremdungseffekt* has a political impetus. As he writes in "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," "the only people who can profitably study a . . . technique like Chinese acting's A-effect are those who need such a technique for quite definitive social purposes" (Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" 96). Indeed, these are Brecht's exact intentions. Brecht wanted to prevent the spectators of his plays from being swept away by emotion; rather they were to watch dispassionately and then come to their own conclusions about what was presented. Recognizing, of course, that there can be any number of conclusions, Brecht believed the audience should arrive at a Marxist interpretation.

As Christine Kiebuzinska points out, Brecht's theatrical techniques "aimed to assault his audience's passive and fatalistic inertia, its adjustment to the course of things in order to encourage an active intervention in the historical process" (Kiebuzinska 78). In other words, the disruption of formal theatrical elements was meant to alter the audience's perceptions of society rather than realize "theatricality for theatricality's sake." Jameson insists

> The purpose of the Brechtian estrangement-effect is therefore a political one in the most thoroughgoing sense of the word; it is, as Brecht insisted over and over, to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable (Jameson 58).

What was once viewed as static and eternal becomes a dynamic force for change.

In Brecht's own words, *Verfremdungseffekt* is

> a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this "effect" is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view (Brecht, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre" 125).

Brecht's technique aims to denaturalize perception; expectations of the familiar and the unfamiliar are violated. In this way, Brecht believed that the *Verfremdungseffekt* would invoke both an aesthetic and an ideological response from the audience, one rooted in Marxist historic materialism.

Détournement

By the late 1950s, the aims of Brecht and the avant-garde remained unfulfilled; despite their intentions, these would-be radicals were viewed by some as "pretty much old hat" (Debord and Wolman 9). One group particularly critical of the avant-garde's failure was the Situationist International. Despite their rather grand and cosmopolitan name, the Situationist International were a small and short-lived group of mostly male, mostly European artists and theorists—less than seventy individuals claimed to be situationists during the group's brief existence from 1957 to 1972. Although they may have since drifted into obscurity, the situationists played a crucial role in the French student uprisings of the late Sixties, particularly during the events of May 1968. Like Shklovsky and Brecht, the situationists too formulated a technique of defamiliarization: *détournement*, or diversion. And like Shklovsky and Brecht, the situationists positioned themselves in opposition to the past; however in this case, it was the avant-garde of the early twentieth century that was viewed as "tradition" and against which the situationists established themselves. The situationists, witness to the shortcomings of their predecessors, aimed to supercede the avant-garde. "We must note," they wrote in 1956, that Brecht's defamiliarizations

> are held within narrow limits by his unfortunate respect for culture as defined by the ruling class—that same respect, taught in the primary schools of the bourgeoisie and in the newspapers of the workers parties, which leads the reddest worker districts of Paris always to prefer *El Cid* over *Mother Courage* (Debord and Wolman 9).

The situationists therefore sought to redefine art, removing it from its elite, specialized legacy. Although initially formed as an aesthetic movement, the Situationist International had expelled all its artists by 1962. So unlike either Shklovsky or Brecht, the situationists eventually rejected aesthetics; their defamiliarization, they claimed, was purely political. Negating the Formalists' separation of art and the everyday, the situationists sought to reinvest life with beauty—in their words, to "realize" poetry and art. This, they proposed, would become the "revolution of everyday life."

Similar to Formalist thought, situationism is premised on a repudiation of "thinking in images." To the situationists, the image is the most dangerous of cultural dominants. Situationist theory posits that individuals in society have moved from "being" to "having" to "appearing." In other words, modern conditions have exceeded Marx's analysis of production and labor; moreover, alienation has grown beyond Marcuse and Lefebvre's emphasis on consumption and leisure. We now live in a world of "spectacles," where all life is reduced to images and representations. We are alienated from all aspects of our surroundings—work and leisure, knowledge and relationships, culture and consciousness.

According to Guy Debord, main theorist and self-styled leader of the Situationist International and author of ***Society of the Spectacle***,

> where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency ***to make one see*** the world by means of various specialized mediations [it can no longer be grasped directly], naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalize abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing, even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It

> is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent ***representation***, the spectacle reconstitutes itself (Debord 18).

In the spectacle, objects become images; expression is diluted into information. People are mere spectators, passive observers of the spectacle surrounding them. Lives are reduced to lifestyles, commodified and circumscribed roles. Participation and self-fulfillment are only mediated through consumption. "Choice" means Coke® or Pepsi®.

The spectacle, Debord argued, was everywhere. "The basically tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are simultaneously its ends. It is the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory" (Debord 13). Faced with the paradoxical task of resisting and subverting the totalizing and universal spectacle, the situationists merged theory with practice; they proposed the creation of "situations," performances that disrupted or defamiliarized the spectacle thereby transcending oppression and alienation.

One method for creating these subversive "situations" was the ***dérive***, or drift. Modeled after the wanderings of surrealist "automatism," the situationists advocated rambling expeditions through the city, not guided by the designated routes of the spectacle, but instead led by the desires and direction of the unconscious. Debord and others created "maps" that depicted a re-envisioned urbanism based on "psychogeography," a mode that privileged happiness over efficiency, chaos over conformity.

The other important method was the ***détournement***, translated from French as diversion or subversion. Debord argued that ***détournement*** could disrupt the power and oppression of the dominant culture, creating a "situation" that liberated people from capitalism and from constraint. ***Détournement*** is the "theft" of pre-existing artistic productions and their integration into a new construction, one meant to serve the Situationist International's radical

political agenda. Images and texts are decontextualized, détourned, and then recontextualized; the displacement of cultural artifacts reverberates into both the old and the new contexts, destabilizing the primacy and stasis of images. ***Détournement***, says Greil Marcus in ***Lipstick Traces***, his book that traces punk rock's roots to situationism, "was a politics of subversive quotation, of cutting the vocal cords of every empowered speaker, social symbols yanked through the looking glass, misappropriated words and pictures diverted into familiar scripts and blowing them up" (Marcus 179). Situationists——often quoting Lautréamont's maxim that "plagiarism is necessary; progress demands it"——took up texts, images, and theories and twisted them to suit their own program. By utilizing texts and images stolen from the spectacle, they hoped to foster an insurrection at the level of representation.

In "Methods of ***Détournement***," Debord and fellow filmmaker Gil Wolman describe the "laws" of diversion and theorize its implementation and effect. In doing so, they distinguish "minor" and "deceptive" ***détournements***. The former consists of the ***détournement*** of an insignificant item, one that draws all its meaning in its new context. The latter utilizes a culturally significant element that develops a new meaning in its détourned context but that still reflects its former inhabitancy. Debord and Wolman argue that these defamiliarizations should remain simplified, so connections to and recollections of old contexts can remain. They also suggest that the greater the distance between the contexts of détourned elements, the greater the impact of their reconfiguration; the least expected object becomes the most effective. This ***discrépance*** between contexts provides a clash of images and meanings——a shock that the situationists believed disrupts the seamlessness of the spectacle.

The situationists are perhaps best known for their détourned cartoons—popular romance comics whose speech balloons were altered to espouse situationist theses. Guy Debord was also famous for his détourned films. *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952), for example, contains no images; it is comprised of a black screen and silence with intermittent fragments of banal conversation, white lights, and lettrist poetry. The influence of situationist praxis was particularly evident during the occupations of May 1968, for détourned performances and artifacts were prevalent in the streets of Paris. Graffiti and posters decorated the walls, proclaiming situationist-inspired slogans like "Run! The Old World is behind you" and "Workers of all countries, enjoy!" The Odéon Theatre was raided and became the locus for the whole revolt: the insurrectionaries wore costumes; they were pirates, knights, and queens; they bore swords and shields and chainmail to defend the barricades. These dramatic but playful violations of expectation threatened the more conventional modes of resistance, those tolerated or accepted by the spectacle.

The jarring effects of these defamiliarizations were revolutionary, according to the situationists. In addition to subverting images, the situationists saw *détournement* as radical for it required collective, rather than individual creation. Echoing Lautréamont, it was "*poésie faite par tous*." *Détournement* was a participatory technique, one that involved people in construction, not just consumption or spectatorship. In this way, *détournement,* like *Verfremdungseffekt*, is meant to spark direct action and political critique.

Against *Byt*—The Revolution of Everyday Life

Despite the theoretical differences between the defamiliarizations of Shklovsky, Brecht, and Debord, all three techniques are devised to re-stimulate deadened senses and to combat the automatization of perception. It

is this routinization of everyday life and language, these three theorists argue, which the artist—and in Debord's case, everyone—must counteract. In their formulations, to "make strange" is to act upon the passive and pacifying forces of the mundane in some transformative gesture.

The Formalists wrote with particular disgust for the everyday. For example, in his essay "On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets," Roman Jakobson provides a rather sad, elegiac look at the deaths of major Russian poets—Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, Esenin. Against the innovative and rejuvenative aspirations of their poetry, Jakobson posits the deadening effects of everyday life. "Opposed to this creative urge toward a transformed future is the stabilizing force of an immutable present, covered over, as this present is, by a stagnating slime which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is ***byt***" (Jakobson 11). Jakobson is utterly disdainful of ***byt*** and its stabilizing force of conventionality, its resistance to change. So rooted in the past, ***byt*** is the deadly enemy of the future and of Futurism. According to Jakobson, ***byt*** destroys poetry—and even kills poets.

For the Formalists, this opposition between ***byt*** and poetry often had gendered connotations. The categories of everyday life, domesticity, and femininity were fused, then viciously attacked. In "Art as Technique" Shklovsky portrays the art's struggle to defamiliarize as a masculine principle for liberation resisting a feminized force of habit. Furthermore, many of the examples in "Art as Technique" couch the concept in terms of sexual innuendo. In his article "Shklovsky's Dog and Mulvey's Pleasure," Eric Naiman points to this as part of the "misogynist thread" running through the essay (Naiman 343). Naiman contends ***ostranenie*** is supported by evidence that "contributes to a denial of the reality of female consciousness and of female desire" (Naiman 342). When Shklovsky suggests that "habitualization

devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (Shklovsky 12), Naiman wonders wryly if ***ostranenie*** is then intended to somehow make the wife ***wifey*** (Naiman 343). Citing Judith Mayne's analysis in ***Kino and the Woman Question,*** Naiman implies defamiliarization can actually be "profoundly conservative," "a subterfuge for the perpetuation of traditional values" (Naiman 345). Indeed, if Shklovsky's defamiliarization has no allegiance to the politics of its transformation or if these politics are drenched in chauvinism, then one may well doubt its possibilities for social emancipation.

Of course, the Formalists are far from the only movement to describe themselves this way. Although the situationists did not overtly characterize everyday life as a feminine entity, they did see their revolution in masculine terms and spoke of its culmination in sexual conquest and fulfillment. For example, in ***Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage de jeunes générations,*** known in English as ***The Revolution of Everyday Life,*** Raoul Vaneigem views contemporary society in terms of sexual anxiety and frustration.

> . . . [T]he present social crisis is . . . a crisis of an orgasmic nature. . . . Total enjoyment is still possible in the moment of love, but as soon as one tries to prolong this moment, to extend it into social life itself, one cannot avoid what Reich called "stasis." The world of the dissatisfactory and the unconsummated is a world of permanent crisis. What would a society without neurosis be like? An endless banquet. Pleasure is the only guide" (Vaneigem 253).

The hyper-masculine revolutionary is surely not a new trope, and perhaps its appearance should come as no surprise in a group dominated by men; only seven of the group's seventy members were women.

For the situationists, this liberation also clashed with day-to-day existence. In Vaneigem's words, "We have a world of pleasures to win and nothing to lose but boredom" (Vaneigem 279). Slogans in the streets of Paris in 1968 echoed this, proclaiming "Boredom is counterrevolutionary!" Like ***byt***

to the Formalists, boredom or *ennui* represented to the situationists the stifling of expression, creativity, and freedom. The situationists argued this malaise was fostered by capitalism and the spectacle. As in Brecht's formulation, the situationists contended hegemonic forces and institutions sought to naturalize themselves. Regardless of its manifestation as aesthetic or ideological banality, these theorists claimed that boredom—*byt*—*ennui* operates to suppress "real" understanding and experience.

Recuperation

Shklovsky, Brecht, and Debord all saw the struggle against boredom as ongoing. The forces of habit always lay in wait to dull poetic language and artistic expression. Shklovsky recognized this in "Art as Technique." In the closing paragraph, he observes that "should the disordering of rhythm become a convention, it would be ineffective as a device for the roughening of the language" (Shklovsky 24). In other words, if the formal elements Shklovsky identifies with defamiliarization become accepted into everyday usage, they will lose their ability to "make strange."

Although the Formalists are often charged with ahistoricism, they did recognize that literary systems change over time. Hence, Shklovsky maintained that the deterioration from poetry to everyday language was inevitable. Defamiliarization is not a give for all time, disrupting expectations in perpetuity. Rather, forms atrophy, requiring constant renewal. "The fate of the works of bygone artists of the world," Shklovsky contended, "is the same as the fate of the word itself: both shed light on the path from poetry to prose; both become coated with the glass armour of the familiar" (cited in Bennett 55).

Debordo and his fellow situationists were similarly concerned with the degeneration of once radical tactics. Despite their proclamations and theories about the subversive potential of *détournement*, the Situationist

International struggled to resolve whether or not any revolutionary praxis technique could evade the recuperative powers of the spectacle. The situationists believed that all criticism had heretofore been absorbed, twisted, and eventually used to promote the existing structures of power. But unlike Shklovsky, the situationists did not see recuperation as a mark of weakness in the ***détournement***, but rather as a sign of the power of hegemony. In Sadie Plant's words,

> the situationists argued that collapses of the marvelous into the mundane or the critical into the counter-revolution are never signs of natural destiny or apolitical degeneration. On the contrary, such shifts are effected in order to remove the explosive content from gestures and meanings which contest the capitalist order (Plant 79).

Forces of opposition are "spectacularized"—manipulated and exaggerated by the media. Therefore, revolutionary images get used to sell tacos; radical slogans advertise beer. What cannot be incorporated or commodified by the spectacle, the situationists argued, is ignored.

The situationists had witnessed the radical elements of surrealism and dada be integrated into the dominant culture, drained of their critical spark and transformed into commodities—*The Persistence of Time* on a Swatch™ watch. So although their origins lay in the artistic avant-garde, the situationists eventually proclaimed that art could not be revolutionary. Already manifest in images, they contended that art is the easiest cultural production for the spectacle to absorb. As an article in ***Arts Magazine*** notes in almost disbelief, the Situationist International "took a step no literary or artistic avant-garde has taken before: it denied revolutionary value to cultural innovation" (Maayan 52).

While ***Arts Magazine***, might be disconcerted by the situationists' rejection of "cultural innovation," any "new-ness" provided by ***détournement*** has always been less invention than plagiarism, less novelty than parody. In

fact, the situationists argued that *détournement* offered a critique that went beyond mimicry or parody of the spectacle. They believed

> an accumulation of détourned elements, far from aiming at arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity (Debord and Wolman 9).

Much like Judith Butler's analysis of gender, *détournement* is performative, a cultural reiteration that problematizes what the spectacle casts as "original" and "authentic" (Butler 306). Like drag, the goal of the situationists is the achievement of a revolutionary "realness"; but until then, unlike drag, *détournement* never wants to "pass." *Détournement* demands to be read, to be noticed.

Despite the recuperative powers of the spectacle, the situationists did not surrender to *ennui*. They recognized that discourse—whether used in support of or in resistance to the spectacle—is inextricably linked to power. As Debord noted, "in spite of what the humorists think, words do not play, nor do they make love, as Breton thought, except in dreams. Words *work*, on behalf of the dominant organization of life. And yet. . . they embody forces that can upset the most careful calculations" (Plant 87). Although the forces of the spectacle reduce expression to information and bureaucratize meaning into banality, the situationists believed defamiliarization could provide a means to reinvigorate human communication with desire and subjectivity. By détourning words and by re-igniting passion, the situationists argued that one could *realize* poetry and rediscover revolution.

While they found artistic imagery inherently suspect, the situationists never treated poetry or performance with the same derision. According to Sadie Plant, "poetic discourse presages a world in which language plays with meanings the spectacle cannot understand; although it can be bought and sold like any other commodity, the desires and freedoms of poetry can never be

completely flattened" (Plant 87). As Vaneigem asserted in ***The Revolution of Everyday Life***,

> people still try to use words and signs to perfect their aborted gestures. It is because they do that a poetic language exists: a language of lived experience which, for me, merges with radical theory, the theory which penetrates the masses and becomes a material force. Even which it is co-opted and turned against its original purpose, poetry always gets what it wants in the end. The "Proletarians of all lands, unite" which produced the Stalinist State will one day realise the classless society. No poetic sign is ever completely turned by ideology (Vaneigem 101-102).

Poetic language, because of its disruptive expressions and manipulated forms, can somehow resist the spectacle.

According to the situationists, poetry and détourned language articulated the rhythms of the revolution they sought. Julia Kristeva also posits that the disruption offered by poetic language can be analogous to political insurrection. In "Revolution in Poetic Language," she examines the writings of the nineteenth century post-Symbolist avant-garde—particularly Lautréamont and Mallarmé—and argues that their poetry highlights this upheaval. In this essay, Kristeva distinguishes the symbolic and semiotic elements of language, both of which comprise all signifying processes. For Kristeva, symbolic elements are those that relate to meaning and grammar, while semiotic elements pertain to materiality and drives. Poetry is "revolutionary" to Kristeva not because it subverts or challenges meaning but because it disrupts the "semiotic chora." "In so doing, [it] no longer act[s] as instinctual floodgates within the enclosure of the sacred and become[s] instead protester against its posturing. And thus, its complexity unfolded by its practices, the signifying process joins social revolution" (Kristeva 49). In situationist terms, poetic language exceeds the limitations and restrictions of the spectacle in order to touch the "real."

It is debatable whether Kristeva's revolution is possible, for any transgression of language must rely on some symbolic system in order to maintain meaning. Indeed, as Kristeva's own formulation indicates, the rejection of the symbolic for the semiotic equals psychosis. Elizabeth Grosz writes that

> Avant-garde practices can lead to a transgression of the symbolic, that is, to the limits of signification, but they do not obliterate them. They are displaced and repositioned elsewhere. Representational ruptures cannot destroy socio-symbolic unities, for, on [Kristeva's] understanding, this amounts to a dissolution of sociality itself. Radical subversion is essentially reformist: as the order of language, the symbolic, can only accommodate so much change at any given time (Grosz 60).

While obviously failing to produce a total revolution, we need not throw Shklovsky, Brecht, and Debord from the rocketship of postmodernity. Defamiliarization can create a temporary fracture in the system. Defamiliarization disrupts, and in that moment of rupture, it recognizes its greatest power. The creation of a transitory though temporary poetic language can be the site of linguistic, artistic, and even societal breach and insubordination. Although the spectacle quickly "spins" the outburst back into the fold and although everyday life awaits to render it habitual, defamiliarization provides a momentary escape. If defamiliarization is seen as a process rather than a final artistic product, as an emergent project rather than a determinate or fixed revolution, it can continue to offer a promising, if merely "reformist," tactic.

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