

Review: Annie van den Oever, ed. (2010)  
*Ostrannenie*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University  
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**Lara Cox**

University of Exeter

This volume situates and analyses the somewhat neglected concept of *Ostrannenie* in film studies. Originally a literary concept, *Ostrannenie* was coined by the writer and critic Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984) in his essay ‘Art as Technique’ (1917). Although translations of the Russian neologism are only approximate, the book accepts a broad definition of *Ostrannenie* as “making strange” (12). Shklovsky’s concept, developed in pre-revolutionary Russia, has been obfuscated in the discipline of film studies. Critics have instead privileged Bertolt Brecht’s latter-day idea of *verfremdungseffekt* or estrangement/alienation effects to inform a theory of filmic defamiliarisation. Film critics have favoured the Brechtian term for its affinity with visual culture – Brecht was a theatre practitioner – and the clear political designs implicit in the notion of ‘alienation’. Shklovsky’s *Ostrannenie*, on the other hand, denoted a perceptual category that could be held discursively separate from, but potentially feed into, a political agenda (Aitken 2002, 23). As such, much of the film theory developed in the 1970s (by Mulvey, Wollen, Lovell, MacCabe, *et al.*) deployed Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* for the elaboration of a politics of film and filmic spectatorship while sidelining Shklovsky’s seminal – and potentially more fluid – precursor. This book, *Ostrannenie*, figures as part of a new series published by Amsterdam University Press that aims to revisit established aesthetic and philosophical concepts in the discipline of film studies. The series promises to throw light upon both an epistemology of film and the future pathways for the discipline as it finds itself at the juncture between celluloid film and the digital age. As such, the volume investigates the influence of Shklovsky’s *Ostrannenie* on film praxis and theory in four key sections: in the first part, critics consider the historical context – pre-revolutionary Russia – that shaped Shklovsky’s invention of the aesthetic device; in the second, the book maps the trajectory, mutations and permutations of *Ostrannenie* in the history of film studies; in the third, the

book turns to cognitive film theory approaches to *Ostranenie*; and in the fourth and final part, critics stake out the future potential pathways of *Ostranenie* in film studies, drawing upon post-structuralist and psychoanalytic thought. The deliberate insertion of the extra 'n' in the title – an orthographic defamiliarisation of the word 'defamiliarisation' itself (12) – lays bare the intentions of this volume to destabilise pre-conceived notions of *Ostranenie*, in order to consider its import anew in the discipline of film studies.

This volume lives up to its promise of a rigorous conceptual destabilisation, owing to the disciplinary breadth of the project, with insights from cognitive film theory (Kiss, Tarnay, van Heusden), Russian cinema specialists (Tsivian, Christie), aesthetics (Chateau), media history (Kessler) and much more. The first of the volume's four parts, dealing with the historical origins of Shklovsky's theoretical ruminations, is notable for Annie van den Oever's expansive historical investigation into the revolutionary nature of *Ostranenie* in early twentieth-century Russia. Shklovsky, according to van den Oever, put into theoretical terminology what contemporaneous Futurists' works documented in a less refined manner (such as in the 1912 manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*). Futurists examined the defamiliarising effects that accompanied the development of visual technology and the birth of the moving image. Van den Oever argues that Shklovsky, in 'Art as Technique', articulated the same cinematic disquiet expressed by the Futurists. However, Shklovsky referenced the prevailing literary examples of his day, such as Tolstoy and Gogol. As such, Shklovsky's essay, although literary in its concerns, paved the way for an epistemological break with the prevailing critical methodologies, focusing on the perceptual experiences of art rather than an authentic grain of 'meaning'. Van den Oever re-captures how Shklovsky's term revolutionised the study of aesthetics, a fact often forgotten in film studies due to the assimilation of *Ostranenie* into the favoured Brechtian system of defamiliarisation in the psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory of the 1970s.

If the first part of *Ostranenie* looks at the revolutionary aspects of Shklovsky's concept in its original historical setting, the second part of the book turns to its lamentable fate in post-war film theory in order to re-grasp its importance. Emile Poppe argues that prominent film theorist Christian Metz 'misplaced' *Ostranenie* in his writings such as *Langage et Cinéma* (1971). Metz missed, by a hair's breadth, the literary-formalist insights of Shklovsky by focusing instead on the formalist theory of Roman Jakobson and Vladimir Propp, whose linguistic research lent credence to Metz's own structuralist strategy of decoding and laying bare the cinematic apparatus. Poppe focuses on the information relegated to the footnotes in Metz's work in order to demonstrate that the critic took inspiration from Russian Formalism as a whole. Shklovsky's *Ostranenie* permits Poppe to destabilise

Metz's seminal semiotic film theory and to expose its blindspots. The aesthetic locus of Shklovsky's *Ostranenie* simply could not have been made 'operational' in Metz's 'cinematographic' research (115).

Poppe's emphasis on the aesthetic nature of a strategy of *Ostranenie* speaks to and cements the findings of earlier chapters of the book's second section. Shklovsky's aesthetic investigation opens up defamiliarisation to heuristic principles of film theory and praxis. *Ostranenie* invites filmic experimentation. Ian Christie demonstrates the flexibility of both Brechtian and Shklovskian defamiliarisation by noting its varying guises: from Godard's 'theatrical tableaux' (87) of *Vivre sa vie* (1962) to the "literalist" (94) approaches of Mulvey and Wollen in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1978). Christie's project chimes with Frank Kessler's chapter in this volume, 'Ostranenie, Innovation and Media History' (61-79). Kessler deploys the heuristic nature of defamiliarisation in order to consider its potential in the twenty first-century age of digitalisation. He concludes that the future of the concept hinges upon an understanding of it as deviation from historically contingent filmic norms. Defamiliarisation demands continual aesthetic innovation. Theorists and practitioners must 'never cease to defamiliarize defamiliarization' (79).

The third part of *Ostranenie* concentrates on the perceptual specificity of defamiliarisation in film by engaging cognitive methodologies. Laurent Jullier's excellent chapter 'Should I see what I believe?' undertakes to explore the possible forms of defamiliarisation in films as wide-ranging as *The Mask* (Chuck Russell, 1994) and *L'Homme à la tête de caoutchouc* (Georges Méliès, 1901). His chapter is methodologically clear and intellectually lucid, encompassing both of the approaches offered by a cognitive study of the film spectator's perceptual experience of defamiliarisation: a universalist-evolutionary 'perceptive, bottom-up reading of the world' and a constructivist 'cognitive top-down' counterpart (121). Jullier's chapter successfully combines an interrogation of the cognitive discourses of defamiliarisation with an outline of the concrete forms that this concept may assume in film (such as the destabilisation of the spectator's 'genetic' knowledge of film-making [133]). Furthermore, Jullier interrogates the validity of equating Brechtian defamiliarisation with alienation from dominant ideologies, an equivalence that is often left unquestioned particularly in the realm of theatre theory. Pointing out the limitations of Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* helps Jullier to fill the gap with Shklovsky's *Ostranenie*. Extending the scope of this chapter beyond the bounds of this book, Jullier's findings may be put into dialogue with critical theorist Jacques Rancière's recent critique of a Brechtian politics of spectatorship in a wider study of the spectacle in his *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009).

The final part of the book consists of two conversations that draw together the ideas and understandings of *Ostranenie* and defamiliarisation

discussed throughout. Laurent Jullier engages film philosopher András Bálint Kovács in a conversation about the discourses that frame our understandings of defamiliarisation. What emerges from this dialogue is a new and insightful interdisciplinary pathway for *Ostranenie* that takes from both the insights of cognitive film theory and the radical elements of constructivist cultural theory. Kovács suggests a link between defamiliarisation and Deleuzian deterritorialisation (181).

The final conversation, between Annie van den Oever and Laura Mulvey is the highlight of the volume. Van den Oever quizzes Mulvey on a psychoanalytic understanding of *Ostranenie* and its affinity to the Freudian uncanny (Mulvey investigates this latter in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* [2006]). One strength of this chapter is its discussion of a topic that is gestured towards throughout the book: the relationship of *Ostranenie* to the concept of the avant-garde. Both concern deviation from aesthetic norms. Van den Oever points out that ‘Shklovsky understood the disruptive perceptual experience to be fundamental to art, and not specifically to art associated with the avant-garde’ (197). This is a vital clarification that extends the possibilities of implementing *Ostranenie* into the realm of mainstream film productions. The most inspiring comments on the topic of *Ostranenie* come, however, in the last few lines of the book in which Mulvey reflects on the influence of Shklovsky’s concept in her seminal research on spectatorship in the 1970s. She demonstrates an appreciation of the research of this volume in informing her reflections and admits that she ‘must have been influenced by the idea [of *Ostranenie*]’ (203). This final – rather touching – sentiment encapsulates the unique skill of this volume to consider the past, present and future of film studies. Not only does it carve out a space for future discourses of *Ostranenie* in the digital film age but it also thinks again received knowledge of this concept stemming from past film theory. As such, this is a cohesive and cogent book that lives up to its deconstructive promise to defamiliarise defamiliarisation.