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Influential school of literary criticism in Russia This article has an unclear citation style. The references used may be made clearer with a different or consistent style of citation and footnoting, (March 2012) (Learn how and when to remove this message) Russian formalism was a school of literary theory in Russia from the 1910s to the 1930s. It includes the work of a number of highly influential Russian and Soviet scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynyanov, Vladimir Propp, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky, Grigory Gukovsky who revolutionised literary criticism between 1914 and the 1930s by establishing the specificity and autonomy of poetic language and literature. Russian formalism exerted a major influence on thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman, and on structuralism as a whole. The movement's members had a relevant influence on modern literary criticism, as it developed in the structuralist and post-structuralist periods. Under Stalin it became a pejorative term for elitist art.[1] Russian formalism was a diverse movement, producing no unified doctrine, and no consensus amongst its proponents on a central aim to their endeavours. In fact, "Russian Formalism" describes two distinct movements: the OPOJAZ (Obshchestno Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka, Society for the Study of Poetic Language) in St. Petersburg and the Moscow Linguistic Circle.[2] Therefore, it is more precise to refer to the "Russian Formalists", rather than to use the more encompassing and abstract term of "Formalism". The term "formalism" was first used by the adversaries of the movement, and as such it conveys a meaning explicitly rejected by the Formalists themselves. In the words of one of the foremost Formalists, Boris Eikhenbaum: "It is difficult to recall who coined this name, but it was not a very felicitous coinage. It might have been convenient as a simplified battle cry but it fails, as an objective term, to delimit the activities of the 'Society for the Study of Poetic Language'." [3] Russian Formalism is the name now given to a mode of criticism which emerged from two different groups, the Moscow Linguistic Circle (1915) and the Opojazz group (1916). Although Russian Formalism is often linked to American New Criticism because of their similar emphasis on close reading, the Russian Formalists regarded themselves as developers of a science of criticism and are more interested in a discovery of systematic method for the analysis of poetic text. Russian formalism is distinctive for its emphasis on the functional role of literary devices and its original conception of literary history. Russian Formalists advocated a "scientific" method for studying poetic language, to the exclusion of traditional psychological and cultural-historical approaches. As Erlich points out, "It was intent upon delimiting literary scholarship from contiguous disciplines such as psychology, sociology, intellectual history, and the list theoreticians focused on the 'distinguishing features' of literature, on the artistic devices peculiar to imaginative writing" (The New Princeton Encyclopedia 1101). Two general principles underlie the Formalist study of literature: first, literature itself, or rather, those of its features that distinguish it from other human activities, must constitute the object of inquiry of literary theory; second, "literary facts" have to be prioritized over the metaphysical commitments of literary criticism, whether philosophical, aesthetic or psychological (Steiner, "Russian Formalism" 16). To achieve these objectives several models were developed. The formalists agreed on the autonomous nature of poetic language and its specificity as an object of study for literary criticism. Their main endeavor consisted in defining a set of properties specific to poetic language, be it poetry or prose, recognizable by their "artfulness" and consequently analyzing them as such. The OPOJAZ, the Society for the Study of Poetic Language group, headed by Viktor Shklovsky was primarily concerned with the Formal method and focused on technique and device. "Literary works, according to this model, resemble machines: they are the result of an intentional human activity in which a specific skill transforms raw material into a complex mechanism suitable for a particular purpose" (Steiner, "Russian Formalism" 18). This approach strips the literary artifact from its author, reader, and historical background. A clear illustration of this may be provided by the main argument of one of Viktor Shklovsky's early texts, "Art as Device" (iskusstvo kak priyom, 1916):[4] art is a sum of literary and artistic devices that the artist manipulates to craft his work. Shklovsky's main objective in "Art as Device" is to dispute the conception of literature and literary criticism common in Russia at that time. Broadly speaking, literature was considered, on the one hand, to be a social or political product, whereby it was then interpreted in the tradition of the great critic Belinsky as an integral part of social and political history. On the other hand, literature was considered to be the personal expression of an author's world vision, expressed by means of images and symbols. In both cases, literature is not considered as such, but evaluated on a broad socio-political or a vague psychologic-impressionistic background. The aim of Shklovsky is therefore to isolate and define something specific to literature or "poetic language": these, as we saw, are the "devices" which make up the "artfulness" of literature. Formalists do not agree with one another on exactly what a device or "priyom" is, nor how these devices are used or how they are to be analyzed in a given text. The central idea is that more general: poetic language possesses specific properties, which can be analyzed as such. Some OPOJAZ members argued that poetic language was the major artistic device. Shklovsky insisted that not all artistic texts defamiliarize language, and that some of them achieve defamiliarization (ostranenie) by manipulating composition and narrative. The Formalist movement attempted to discriminate systematically between art and non-art. Therefore, its notions are organized in terms of polar oppositions. One of the most famous dichotomies introduced by the mechanists: Formalists as a distinction between story and plot or fabula and "syuzhet". Story, fabula, is a chronicle of events, whereas plot, syuzhet, can be seen as artificially arranged by means of such devices as repetitions, parallelisms, gradation and retardation. The mechanistic methodology reduced literature to a variation and combination of techniques and devices devoid of a temporal, psychological, or philosophical element. Shklovsky very soon realized that this model had to be expanded to embrace, for example, contemporaneous and diachronic literary traditions (Garson 403). Disappointed by the constraints of the mechanistic method some Russian Formalists adopted the organic model. "They utilized the similarity between organic bodies and literary phenomena in two different ways: as it applied to individual works and to literary genres" (Steiner, "Russian Formalism" 19). An artefact, like a biological organism, is not an unstructured whole; its parts are hierarchically integrated. Hence the definition of the device has been extended to its function in text. "Since the binary opposition - material vs. device - cannot account for the organic unity of the work, Zhirmunsky augmented it in 1919 with a third term, the teleological concept of style as the unity of devices" (Steiner, "Russian Formalism" 19). The analogy between biology and literary theory provided the frame of reference for genre studies and genre criticism. "Just as each individual organism shares certain features with other organisms of its type, and species that resemble each other belong to the same genus, the individual work is similar to other works of its form and homologous literary forms belong to the same genre" (Steiner, "Russian Formalism" 19). The most widely known work carried out in this tradition is Vladimir Propp's "Morphology of the Folktale" (1928). Having shifted the focus of study from an isolated technique to a hierarchically structured whole, the organic Formalists overcame the main shortcoming of the mechanists. Still, both groups failed to account for the literary changes which affect not only devices and their functions but genres as well. The diachronic dimension was incorporated into the work of the systemic Formalists. The main proponent of the "systemo-functional" model was Yury Tynyanov. "In light of his concept of literary evolution, the study of the history of literature is not a study of the history of literary texts, but a study of the history of literary communication. The communicative domain includes literature with new constructive principles. In response to these extra-literary factors the self-regulating literary system is compelled to rejuvenate itself constantly. Even though the systemic Formalists incorporated the diachronic dimension into literary theory and acknowledged the analogy between language and literature the figures of author and reader were pushed to the margins of this paradigm. The figures of author and reader were likewise downplayed by the linguistic Formalists Lev Jakobinsky and Roman Jakobson. The adherents of this model placed poetic language at the center of their inquiry. As Warner remarks, "Jakobson makes it clear that he rejects completely any notion of emotion as the touchstone of literature. For Jakobson, the emotional qualities of a literary work are secondary to and dependent on purely verbal, linguistic facts" (71). As Ashima Shrawan explains, "The theoreticians of OPOJAZ distinguished between practical and poetic language . . . Practical language was used in day-to-day communication to convey information. . . . In poetic language, according to Lev Jakobinsky, 'the practical goal retreats into background and linguistic combinations acquire a value in themselves. When this happens, language becomes de-familiarized and utterances become poetic'" (The Language of Literature and Its Meaning, 68). Eichenbaum criticised Shklovsky and Jakobinsky for not disengaging poetry from the outside world completely, since they used the emotional connotations of sound as a criterion for word choice. This recourse to psychology threatened the ultimate goal of formalism to investigate literature in isolation. A definitive example of focus on poetic language is the study of Russian versification by Osip Brik. Apart from the most obvious devices such as rhyme, onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance, Brik explores various types of sound repetitions, e.g. the ring (kol'co), the juncture (styk), the fastening (skrep), and the tail-piece (koncovka) ("Zvukovye priemy" [Sound Repetitions], 1917). He raises phonetic factors as the "sound background" (zvukovoi fon) attaching the greatest importance to stressed vowels and the least to reduced vowels. As Mandelker indicates, "his metalinguistic restraint and his conception of an artistic 'unity' wherein no element is superfluous or uncaring. The reader is not meant to be able to skim through literature. When addressed in a language of estrangement, speech cannot be skimmed through. 'In the routines of everyday speech, our perceptions of and responses to reality become stale, blunted, and as the Formalists would say 'automatized.' By forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, literature refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more perceptible" (Eagleton 3). One of the sharpest critiques of the Formalist project was Leon Trotsky's Literature and Revolution (1924).[5] Trotsky does not wholly dismiss the Formalist approach, but insists that "the methods of formal analysis are necessary, but insufficient" because they neglect the social world with which the human beings who write and read literature are bound up: "The form of art is, to a certain and very large degree, independent, but the artist who creates this form, and the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it. They are living people, with a crystallized psychology representing a certain unity, even if not entirely harmonious. This psychology is the result of social conditions" (180, 171). The leaders of the movement began to be politically persecuted in the 1920s, when Stalin came to power, which largely put an end to their inquiries. In the Soviet period under Joseph Stalin, the authorities further developed the term's pejorative associations to cover any art which used complex techniques and forms accessible only to the elite, rather than being simplified for "the people" (as in socialist realism). See also: Anti-formalism campaign Russian formalism was not a uniform movement; it comprised diverse theoreticians whose views were shaped through methodological debate that proceeded from the distinction between poetic and practical language to the overarching problem of the historical-literary study. It is mainly with this theoretical focus that the Formalist School is credited even by its adversaries such as Yefimov: The contribution of our literary scholarship lies in the fact that it has focused sharply on the basic problems of literary criticism and literary study, first of all on the specificity of its object, that it modified our conception of the literary work and broke it down into its component parts, that it opened up new areas of inquiry, vastly enriched our knowledge of literary technology, raised the standards of our literary research and of our theorizing about literature effected, in a sense, a Europeanization of our literary scholarship... Poetics, once a sphere of unbridled impressionism, became an object of scientific analysis, a concrete problem of literary scholarship ("Formalism V Russkom Literaturovedenii", quoted in Erlich, "Russian Formalism: In Perspective" 225). The diverging and converging forces of Russian formalism gave rise to the Prague school of structuralism in the mid-1920s and provided a model for the literary wing of French structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s. "And, insofar as the literary-theoretical paradigms which Russian Formalism inaugurated are still with us, it stands not as a historical curiosity but a vital presence in the theoretical discourse of our day" (Steiner, "Russian Formalism" 29). There is no direct historical relationship between New Criticism and Russian Formalism, each having developed at around the same time (RF: 1910-20s and NC: 1940s-50s) but independently of the other. Despite this, there are several similarities: for example, both movements showed an interest in considering literature on its own terms, instead of focusing on its relationship to political, cultural or historical externalities, a focus on the literary devices and the craft of the author, and a critical focus on poetry. 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"Introduction to Russian Formalism." 21 Dec 2005 Retrieved from " Skip to main contentBrowseInstitutionsLearnersLoginWhat is Russian Formalism?Study GuidesDr. Sophie RainePhD, English Literature (Lancaster University)Date Published: 14.09.2023, Last Updated: 01.02.2024Russian formalism (often referred to as simply "formalism") describes a branch of literary criticism that emerged in Russia around 1915. This form of criticism, partially influenced by futurism's experimentation with poetry (see Barooshian, Russian Cubo-Futurism, 1910-1930, 2012), emphasized the autonomous nature of literature and refuted the idea that literature was a product of a specific historical and cultural context. Russian formalism studies how certain devices (such as symbolism, metaphors, and so on) separate literature from ordinary, everyday language. Members of this school attempted to devise a scientific method by which to describe and analyze the features of poetry and prose. As Victor Erlich puts it, Russian Formalism keeps the work of art itself in the center of attention: it sharply emphasizes the difference between literature and life, it rejects the usual biographical, psychological, and sociological explanations of literature. It develops highly ingenious methods for analyzing works of literature and for tracing the history of literature in its own terms. (2012)Russian FormalismVictor ErlichRussian Formalism keeps the work of art itself in the center of attention: it sharply emphasizes the difference between literature and life, it rejects the usual biographical, psychological, and sociological explanations of literature. It develops highly ingenious methods for analyzing works of literature and for tracing the history of literature in its own terms. (2012)In this sense, Russian formalism shares much with its counterpart in literary criticism, structuralism. New criticism, which was emerging at the same time as Russian formalism and also advocated analyzing the work independently of the author and contextual factors. However, while new criticism focused primarily on the content of a work, Russian formalism is mostly interested in form and structure. Russian formalism encompassed two different scholarly groups: the OPOJAZ (Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka, Society for the Study of Poetic Language) in St. Petersburg and the Moscow Linguistic Circle. In "Slavic Philology in Russia between 1914-1921" (1922) Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev highlighted the main differences between these two groups. As Ladislav Matejka summarizes, the Moscow Linguistic Circle viewed the history of art forms as unavoidably based on a sociological foundation, while the Petersburg OPOJAZ insisted on the immanent, autonomous development of art forms. 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"Attempts to analyze literature generically, or, as we would now say, diachronically (biographically, through a study of sources, etc.) [...] The "tendency to resolve the literary work into a single technique or a single psychological impulse—here the Formalists have in mind a formula like that of Belinsky, for whom poetry is 'thinking in images.'" (1972, [2020])Many have pointed out the difficulty in locating a single formalist method. As Peter Steiner writes, This sampling of contradictory and incompatible classifications applied to the Formalists illustrates the futility of any attempt to pin down the identity of this movement by sorting out its central and marginal protagonists. Ultimately, it seems, one must come to the same conclusion as Medvedev, that "there are as many Formalisms as there are Formalists." 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