

Estrangement

A Retro-Vision for 2016

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Estrangement, also known as defamiliarization, is a well-known concept first used in Russian Formalism¹. After the revolution, Russian formalist theory flourished in close dialogue with Russian avant-garde art. There is a lot that could be said about the historical circumstances in which the term 'estrangement' was coined. I rely on the research of others who have described the contemporary social and political situation in great detail. Focusing here on a more abstract aspect, I would like to explore the temporality of estrangement and the temporality of theories in general; especially, what does temporality mean to art theory today, taking Russian Formalism as an example? In the 1920s, Russian Formalism was an innovative factor in art theory. Now imagine that we wish to say something today about Russian Formalist theory. How would we start? Would we say "Russian Formalism was a literary theory"? There is good reason to do so, since the avant-garde and revolutionary 1920s are long gone. However, I think we would rather be tempted to say, "Russian Formalism *is* a literary theory". If we decide on this expression, it also obliges us to think about the timeliness of theoretical work. Unless we intend to claim that theory has a metaphysical substance, we are forced to think about working on concepts today and also further developing the historical concept of estrangement that we inherited from the 1920s.

To make a temporal difference between the 1920s and today also implies that Russian Formalism was not always what it is now. This means that we cannot look back in a historical way and hope to find the meaning of estrangement in documents that were being circulated in the 1920s, or that it would help us to visit the archives to find repressed or censored positions. Furthermore, it implies that development took place after the actual work of the Formalists—via Czech and French structuralism, via neo-formalist readings in the U.S. in the 1950s. Finally, this temporal difference implies that 'estrangement' has changed due to the history and development of the concept itself. I have to mention that a changing concept gives shape to an irregular idea because a concept is supposed to provide a certain basis for naming objects that fall there under. A concept basically *is* this relation to objects that fall under it. As we will see by going through readings of estrangement during the last century, estrangement appears as a concept but does not behave exactly as a concept is expected to. In other words, although the readings tried to fix its content, it turned out to be difficult to pin down procedures and devices that fall under the concept of estrangement. Estrangement behaves more like temporal statements do. They are expressed in the form: A was/is S. What estrangement was differs from what it *is*. It is debatable if this difference can be brought back to metaphysical certainty by declaring that such statements, instead of stating a relation of concept and its objects, express a relation of a substance and its states. Estrangement, from this perspective, has more in common with Derrida's *différance* in that it infects metaphysics at its origins². It seems difficult to bring it back to a stable difference; instead, it involves the reader in a process of differing.

But let us first have a look at estrangement in its historical context before returning to its temporal misbehaviour. The founding document of Russian Formalism most often cited is a text by Viktor Shklovsky from 1913, *The Resurrection of the Word*. It claims words had lost their impact on our experience. A certain perception of the world has ceased. Our perception of the world needs to be resurrected by a new form of art. As of about 1913, Russian Formalism was very close to avant-garde art, namely to Russian Futurism, and the art form favoured by Russian Formalism is the so-called *Zaum*, a trans-rational or supra-conscious language. What this means is mysterious, and Russian studies have been concerned with revealing the meaning to this very day. *Zaum* is a neologism. One can divide the word in the middle. ZA means 'beyond or behind' and UM means 'mind'. 'Trans-rational language' sometimes hints at Futurist poetry having no meaning or having a meaning beyond the rational. Another translation by the Formalist and later Structuralist Roman Jakobson—who translated *Zaum* as supra-conscious language—hints at something more. He points out the capacity of *Zaum* to change our world-view. *Zaum* is meant to change our state of mind, to make us think differently. When it puts into action language's influence on how we think and how we perceive the world, *Zaum* is in line with the Formalist idea that words have an impact on our experience.

I would like to name but two Futurists: Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh, who were the authors of the script for *Victory over the Sun*, a drama that you may know or have heard of. Kasimir Malevich did the set design for *Victory over the Sun*, released in late 1913. It marks the first appearance of so-called "suprematist" art, the preform of his famous black square. And Aleksei Kruchenykh was the author of the so-called *Sdvigologiya russkogo sticha*, that is, the *Shifting Logics of Russian Poetry*. The Futurist poet was taking part in the theoretical work of Russian Formalism.

The next—I would say main—contribution or development in Russian Formalism took place from 1917, when the revolution began, until the early 1920s, when an actual discussion about Marxism occurred. In 1917 we find an anthology titled *Poetica* and a second one in 1919. In this context Viktor Shklovsky's most famous text, *Art as Device*, was published. This article describes what is most common and best known about Russian Formalism: that it is a theory that concentrates on the devices of art, seeing art as a device. I have a motto from this volume on my retro-formalist t-shirt: "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact in itself is quite unimportant." Formalism focuses on the process of making art, and Formalism analyses the devices of making art. In this early period, Formalism was not so much interested in the product or in the artifact that results, but in the process of creation. In post-revolutionary times we find perhaps a context for this—where creating a new world and creating a new society was more important than producing objects.

When the revolution settles, Russian Formalism engages more and more with post-revolutionary politics, especially with left-wing politics, and joins up with so-called Productivism, a movement of the Russian avant-garde that denied any difference between art objects and other objects. Like Formalism, Productivism is more concerned with the ways of production; these were meant to be creative ways of production. The products and objects of the new socialist society were not meant to be different from art objects. Concerning Productivism, the socialist object is in its essence an art object, the result of a creative form of production. In sharing the Productivist platform, Formalism cares about the devices of creative production. One could illustrate this with a text by Osip Brik, which shares Produc-

tivist Formalist views and was written during the debates between Marxism and Formalism. Leon Trotsky took part in this debate with his book *Literature and Revolution*; Nikolai Bukharin also took part in this debate; and somehow Lenin is also involved in this debate *in absentia*. In 1924, the Formalists wrote a book about Lenin titled *The Rhetoric and Style of Lenin's Speech*. Here one also can see that Formalism deliberately denies a difference between objects and art objects. Lenin's speech is revolutionary speech and therefore both a process of creation and a product of creation.

What had already become important at that time, and more so in later Formalism, was a strict neglect of any content of art, especially of literature. This gesture came from Formalism's focus on literature, later also on film, in relation to Constructivist and Productivist art, for instance Rodchenko's art. Most of these texts were published in the context of *LEF*, the *Left Front of the Arts*, where a shift took place from the idea that art is to be thought of in terms of representation—and therefore has content or meaning—to the idea that what is important in art is the material formed. A piece of Constructivist art explores materials, whereas a Productivist object is located within material culture itself. The debate between Marxists and Formalists revolves mainly around this point. Marxism criticises Formalism for denying content in art. What is most often forgotten by the Marxists, or by the discussion in the 1920s, is that instead of concentrating on the content, Formalism concentrates on the material of art. So it becomes a theory not of understanding, but rather a theory of perception and consequently a theory of experience. Estrangement is meant to bring perception back to our experience. As you will remember, from Viktor Shklovsky's first text, the resurrection of the word is meant to reconnect us to the world.

The idea of 'estrangement' is present in Formalist texts from the early statements onwards, although it must be admitted that it is widely ignored in the 1920s—few quotes are to be found by authors other than Shklovsky himself. Even in the texts of the other Formalists will you rarely find 'estrangement' mentioned. Think of Yury Tynyanov, who wrote on prose and poetry and is the author of two major Formalist texts, *The Literary Fact* and *The Literary Evolution*. You will find no mention of estrangement in them. The same is true for Roman Jakobson, the linguist and later Structuralist, who does not really take up the concept of estrangement. Also Boris Eichenbaum, most famous for his 1927 text on the *Literary Everyday*, does not speak of estrangement. So although the concept is present in the 1920s, it is not explicitly developed but only implied.

Estrangement becomes much more important when it goes global. We find the first taking-up of this notion by Brecht in the late 1920s, in 1928 to be exact. And historically we can reconstruct that it came to Berlin via Sergei Tretyakov. With Tretyakov we touch upon the third connection between Formalism and the avant-garde that I would like to mention. After Futurism and Constructivism/Productivism within the Left Front of the Arts, Sergei Tretyakov's concept of 'factography' became a major touchstone. Tretyakov is the author of *The Biography of the Object* from 1927, founder of *Factography*, and co-editor of a book that was published in 1927, titled *Literature of Fact*. He was propagating a documentary, 'factographic' practice of literature that took the form of sketches, of industrial literature like film scripts, or of the press, as in writing for newspapers. Tretyakov travelled to Berlin in 1928, and a dialogue with Brecht is documented in a 'factographic' book he made, titled *Liudi Odnogo Kostra*, which means 'the people at one fire', which takes up all authors whose books were destroyed by the Nazis in the 1933 book burning in Berlin.

So, we know that the concept of estrangement is first taken up by Brecht and, remarkably, in this first translation of estrangement, in English it would sound like 'alienation', '*Entfremdung*'. The German term is peculiar because not only does it mean 'alienation,' it also means 'to get rid of alienation.' Simultaneously, it is translated in a second way as '*Verfremdung*', which then becomes the well-known Brechtian device in his theatrical practice. People familiar with Brecht's dramas may have heard of the directions he gave his actors. They were advised not to embody the dramatic role nor to stage fiction, but to break it, to take in the social material and the actual historical context, which for Brecht was class struggle. We should be careful not to misunderstand the aim of estrangement as being yet another form of representation. To take in the actual social and historical context was not to represent it. But why take in the contemporary if not for its content? The aim is to shift the relation of the audience towards their engagement in the contemporary world. The procedures of shifting are concrete, historically laden; they can be major or minor, singular or complex.

However the actual device appears, what seems to be clear is that it is a sort of negational device, negating something or removing something. It either takes something away (as in Brecht's fiction) or it negates something (embodiment of the role). It also associates negatively to norms or to canons. It functions as a de-canonisation, that is, a de-automatisation of perception. In the context of the post-revolutionary industrialisation of Russia, the dialectics of alienation through machinery seems most important. We can remember Marx's fragment on machines, where he states that, "The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker's consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself"³. And further, "In machinery, knowledge appears as alien"⁴. The coalition of Formalism and Productivism most likely rested on this sudden appearance of the machine as alienating consciousness and as being alien itself. In the German context of the accelerating financial crisis accompanied by the massive spectacle of the 'roaring twenties', the relation of the negative attachment to a background makes it difficult to state of what the device actually consists.

Another reason for the difficulty in finding out what estrangement actually means is the fact that the Russian word initially was a typo, and then there was also a second typo.

O _ stran _ enie

This is how you find the word in Russian today. By the time the Formalists used it, it did not exist in that form. There was a Russian word that had a 'T' in between the 'O' and the 'S'...

O t stran _ enie

The etymology of *otstranenie* then arises in the French reception of it: it means 'making something strange', which hints at the translation that we know as 'de-familiarization'. It comes from *strannyj*, 'strange,' however this word would require another 'N'...

O t stran n enie

The material body of the word does not allow for an unambiguous reading. The omission of two letters necessarily gives rise to interpretations. If we take a closer look at these interpretations, they reveal the strange temporal behaviour of 'estrangement' that I mentioned before. Our contemporary understanding of estrangement, or *ostranenie*, originates of course from the 1910s to the mid-1920s. But it also turns out to be a 1960s interpretation in connection with the French student movement, inspired by the Russian Revolution via Left theory in France. In

this context—often titled Freud-Marxism—the idea of estrangement as de-familiarisation is rooted.

It is worth mentioning that only in the 1960s does a difference become perceptible between what is called German Formalism (late 19th-century university philosophy) and what is sometimes called American Formalism, in particular associated with Clement Greenberg. My answer to the question of why estrangement becomes so important in the 1960s is rooted here. Estrangement distinguishes Russian Formalism from the type of formalism that Clement Greenberg propagated. Where they share a concentration on artistic materials, Greenbergian Formalism thinks of an autopoiesis of art's material and a sort of teleological history of the arts toward a logic of their material. Meanwhile, Russian Formalism claims there is an estrangement involved on any level of the production of art, on the level of art's meaning, on the level of its form, and in the material production of art.

However, beside the appealing historical complexity, we have to ask ourselves, what are we doing with estrangement today? Is it still possible to use it as this critical device of negation, or is it maybe more interesting to follow up with the particular line of thought that connects estrangement to alienation? The fascination with this line of thought is its inherent ambiguity. Estrangement is both an attempt to get rid of alienation and a strategy to profit from alienation. It expresses this very tension.

I would suggest that maybe it is a good time to find a new translation for *ostranenie*, which would not be estrangement, then, but would sound like '*surplus alienation*'. It could also take up the discussions of Formalism and Marxism in the 1920s in an imaginary post-capitalist situation that is not present today, now that the socialist experiments have failed. We live in the present moment; the socialist idea of a 'post-capitalist' future is past.

It seems we are returning to our initial question of whether it is proper to say 'Russian Formalism is a literary theory' instead of being obliged to say 'Russian Formalism was a literary theory'. In the same way, one could ask whether the utopian future of the avant-garde revolutionaries was abandoned, as Frankfurt School critical theory has it, or was realised, as their postmodern and contemporary adversaries have it. The question as to the past and the future having presence in the present is both epistemological and ontological. It is based on our understanding of time.

This is the point I have reached with the Working Group on Retro-Formalism: to express these movements, it is impossible to claim that the present-ness of Russian Formalism is only connected with Russian revolutionary art. Somehow it seems also to be past. And how we relate to this past—not only in terms of historical theory but more so in relation to the revolutionary avant-garde and to all following vanguardisms in the art of the 20th century—today in the 21st century, where we seem to repeat these gestures. What are we actually doing with this repetition, since we know from Deleuze⁵ that repetition produces difference? *Ostranenie* today could be understood as a device to approach alienation, to work on an alienated experience and to find out its possibilities and opportunities concerning a possible transformation of the contemporary world.

Since this is very much an ongoing project, I would like to conclude with a 'false end' in the manner of Viktor Shklovsky and his analyses of the estrangement

of a text's end in order to avoid illusionary closures. Last summer, in London, the group staged a re-enactment of the Marxism and Formalism debates of the 1920s at the Marxism in Culture seminar at UCL, in collaboration with the Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture at the University of Westminster. Originally, the M&F confrontation had a political focus, whereas we focused on the historical and contemporary economics thereof. Furthermore, in lending symbolic capital to the Formalist theory by developing a Retro-Formalist position we simultaneously wanted to elaborate on how the use of time shaped the symbolic capital of Formalist theory. To include here a close reading of Leon Trotsky's chapter "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism" from his book *Literature and Revolution* brings us back to the context of a historical moment that I mentioned before. To elaborate on an alternative reading of that moment is to employ estrangement.

First I had the traditional picture in mind. Leon Trotsky had equated Formalism mostly to an idealist Formalism of Kantian type and had reduced it to two theses which said: 1) Formalism claims literature is pure form (without content); and 2) Formalism claims literature is independent as relates to the process of production and social historical development. Trotsky argues against both of these, saying firstly that form is not pure but expresses a social content and therefore it is, secondly, dependent. As I have briefly mentioned before, the Formalist defence went along the lines of saying that Trotsky had overlooked the fact that Formalism replaced the concept of form related to content by a concept of form related to material and therefore really was materialistic (whilst Trotsky's defence of "content" fell short by being not materialist but idealist). The second Formalist argument points towards Trotsky's ignorance concerning the concept of estrangement, which is why I include it here. It is central to the Formalist understanding of form, the environment in which art is perceived, and the involvement of art in the social process, which happens precisely via estrangement. Poetic language estranges social codes. It is not autonomous but self-conscious in the use of poetic devices and their power in shifting perceptual, experiential, and behavioural automatisms. It creates a poetonomous existence.

When re-reading Trotsky's chapter for the first time in fifteen years, I surprisingly ended up with a defence of Trotsky's view instead of preaching the historical victory of Formalism. As I have said, this late victory is obvious to me. And maybe this is the reason why I am more interested in the hidden agreement between Formalism and Marxism that has become visible only today, now that the socialist experiments have historically failed and the capitalist economy has become global. I want to base my interpretation on a thesis by Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski from their book *The Spirit of Capitalism*. They argue that since the second half of the last century, capital has followed an economy based on desire, which is first and foremost modelled by the arts. Trotsky's intuition as to the bourgeois character of the futurist avant-garde becomes relevant. Putting it in the terms of Chiapello and Boltanski one would say, "The modernist avant-garde had discovered an economy of desire that was translated into a post-modern aesthetics of capital".

The starting point in reading Trotsky, then, is his rendering of the "poetic" to a sublimation of an essentially capitalist desire:

A new artistic form, taken in a large historic way, is born in reply to new needs. To take an example from intimate lyric poetry, one may say that between the physiology of sex and a poem about love there lies a complex system of psychological transmitting mechanisms in which there are individual, racial and social elements. The racial foundation, that is, the sexual basis of man, changes slowly. The social forms of love change more rapidly.

They affect the psychological superstructure of love, they produce new shadings and intonations, new spiritual demands, a need of a new vocabulary, and so they present new demands on poetry. The poet can find material for his art only in his social environment and transmits the new impulses of life through his own artistic consciousness. Language, changed and complicated by urban conditions, gives the poet a new verbal material, and suggests or facilitates new word combinations for the poetic formulation of new thoughts or of new feelings, which strive to break through the dark shell of the subconscious.⁶

Although Trotsky repeatedly addresses literature as constantly writing down subconscious desire by sublimating sex, I would now like to jump right to his conclusion. The “economy of forces” that Trotsky ascribes to the arts is not the economy of production or labour but the Freudian economy of the libido that gravitates to an equilibrium of libidinal forces, steadying the contradiction of sexual desire and repression, balancing pleasurable and destructive tendencies, and finally mediating between consciousness and subconsciousness.

Furthermore, the reference to Freud suggests itself because, as concerns Trotsky, there is a tendency towards the imaginary in modern fiction. He writes:

Artistic creation, of course, is not a raving, though it is also a deflection, a changing and a transformation of reality, in accordance with the peculiar laws of art. However fantastic art may be, it cannot have at its disposal any other material except that which is given to it by the world of three dimensions and by the narrower world of class society. Even when the artist creates heaven and hell, in his phantasmagorias he merely transforms the experience of his own life, almost to the point of his landlady’s unpaid bill.⁷

This is a reference to August Strindberg’s *Inferno*. Trotsky here hides and reveals an experience of literature that is troubled by one of the first present tense novels in literary history. What is at stake here is the fact that the present-tense novel is a literary phenomenon that has revealed more innovative potential for 21st-century literature than the futuristic avant-garde, which in comparison to Strindberg’s prose look archaic today. So we are confronted with a situation where the constellation of “Innovators and Archaists” described by Yury Tynyanov has been turned upon its head.

I would like to use some observations on the history of the present-tense novel I made together with Armen Avanesian in our book⁸ on the subject.

With Strindberg’s *Inferno*, written in 1894-1897, we see the first case of a fictional pathography almost entirely written in the present tense. Only intermittently can a thin classical narrative framework be surmised. Strindberg knits a paranoid narrative that hints at an intrigue or a threat beyond the present of the instant.

It is no mere accident, for on certain days the cushion takes the shape of terrible monsters, such as Gothic dragons and serpents...⁹

So here we have the raving that Trotsky talks about. Strindberg produces a delirium in the style of an autobiography. I hope that you will follow me through a close reading before I return to Trotsky’s idea that artistic creation, even when it seems to be raving, shifts our relation to reality and transforms it. Being exposed to

unsettling events implies a narrative double bind. Strindberg, the narrator, cannot narrate the conspiracy as (hi)story. He does not narrate the *story*; he is incessantly haunted by it.

I am condemned to death! That is my firm conviction. By whom? By the Russians, the Pietists, Catholics, Jesuits, Theosophists? [...] At the moment that I write this, I do not know what was the real nature of the events of that July night when death threatened me, but I will not forget that lesson as long as I live. If the initiated believe that I was then exposed to a plot woven by human hands, let me tell them that I feel anger against no one, for I know now that another stronger hand, unknown to them, guided those hands against their will. On the other hand, if there was no plot, I must suppose that my own imagination conjured up these chastising spirits for my own punishment. We shall see in the sequel how far this supposition is probable.¹⁰

Strindberg is an adept autobiographer, highly skilled in meta-fictional deceptive manoeuvres. The alternative interpretations offered up to the reader in the short term cannot really be considered but are only introduced so that in the finale of the *Inferno* they can turn out to be undecidable. "I part from my friend—my executioner—without bitterness. He has only been the scourge in the hand of Providence"¹¹, as the last paragraph has it. Is it an intrigue or is it not an intrigue?

Such a literary device, operating with all permissible and impermissible deceptive manoeuvres, shows us how one can pay homage to the power of delusion without being committed to the clinic. In a counter attack, Strindberg's alter ego manages to denounce his doctor—who judges his fiction to be delusion—as a murderer.

When my friend enters after a minute, it is I who am seized with compassion. He, the surgeon, who is accustomed to witness suffering without emotion, he, the advocate of deliberate murder, is an object of pity indeed. He is pale as death, trembles, stammers, and at the sight of the doctor standing behind me seems on the point of collapse, so that I feel more panic-struck than ever.¹²

All of a sudden, "Strindberg" has a second doctor, whose diagnosis counters that of the cold-blooded murderer. Although the way that the doctor looks at him over the shoulder might lead us to suspect that he originates in the imagination of someone writing, it is only the mention of the doctor's library and of "Strindberg's" scientific discovery that make it clear that he is "Strindberg's" invention. The fact that "Strindberg" again and again swaps the address between his friend the "physician" and his friend the "doctor" shows the two medical professionals to be doubles. Shortly before the entry of August 12, which marks the beginning of "Strindberg's" recovery, we read:

If I take a book at haphazard out of the doctor's library, it always gives the explanation I was looking for. Thus I find in an old chemical treatise the secret of my process for making gold [...] An essay on matter which I have written and sent to a French review is immediately published. I show the article to the doctor, who betrays his annoyance, since he cannot deny the fact. Then I say to myself, "How can that man be my friend, who is vexed at my success?"¹³

In terms of spitefulness, “Strindberg’s” attack leaves nothing to be desired. He leaves the disavowed, broken-down physician, condemned to remain powerless against the literary fame of his patient, as a healthy man. As this competition between the (literary and medical) readings continues, he even manages to ensnare phenomenological psychoanalysis, namely in the person of Karl Jaspers. Strindberg’s delusional manoeuvring deceives Jaspers by distracting him from the fictionality of the *Inferno*. In his manifesto of phenomenological psychoanalysis, entitled *Strindberg and Van Gogh*, Jaspers unfolds the (narrative) procedurality of madness/raving by showing how disturbances that successively settle in the world of perception fulfil an essential function in making it possible to recognise the processes of madness as such¹⁴. He pays special attention to a scene in Strindberg’s *Inferno* in which the first-person narrator complains to the landlady of his hotel about three pianos that can be heard in the surrounding rooms.

To suspect a disturbance in perception here, as Karl Jaspers did, is certainly not entirely wrong. The overhasty assumption of an autobiographical reference, however, overlooks Strindberg’s, or rather “Strindberg’s” fictional calculus. It may be that Jaspers, against the background of classical narrated fiction, took it to be a symptom of a madman and as a factographic document. We, however, understand the fictional calculus in which the protagonist invents a story of three pianos for his landlady in order to prevent her from delivering a letter that he suspects contains a bill. Destitute, the hero seeks to dodge the economic realities of his existence. Delusion at this point lies less in the disturbance of perception than in the hubris of the calculation of reality¹⁵ with which the first-person narrator computes the probability of the fiction: How many pianos do I have to set up so that no one will read the bill?

At this point I want to remind you of Trotsky’s reading, who clearly refers to this point: “Even when the artist creates heaven and hell, in his phantasmagorias he merely transforms the experience of his own life, almost to the point of his landlady’s unpaid bill”¹⁶.

I would argue that in this point there is no disagreement between Formalism and Marxism. Poetic creation is not delirious but transforms the experience of one’s own life. While there is no ontological difference between the materiality on which sensual experience is based and the materiality of language, the symbolic economies of poetic language and aesthetic experience are different. Poetic language shifts the reality of aesthetic experience. Although Trotsky is obviously wrong in assuming that poetic language expresses experience, he clearly has a grasp of the symbolic capital in Strindberg’s work. The text is not only a flight into fantastic imagination, a phantasmagoria as Trotsky suggests; Strindberg’s *Inferno* is meant not to be a document of insanity and hallucination, as the philosopher and psychoanalyst Karl Jaspers claimed, but a literary discovery of symbolic value and an economic speculation.

What we have here is a meta-fictional play, as Wolfgang Iser put it¹⁷, that is, a forming of the imaginary in a literary fiction. Within literary history, Strindberg’s text comes only slightly before the first interior monologues, Virginia Woolf, and the *stream of consciousness* prose of James Joyce, which absolve their authors—and the present tense of their texts—from the testimonial function of a medical report. Furthermore, in *Inferno* it is difficult to decide whether the *text* is less fictional than are the incredible perceptions that it (allegedly only) records. The manoeuvres with which Strindberg tasks his reader integrate him and expose him to the (hidden) hallucinations of the text. Hallucinations are originary images of the power of

imagination, and they become literary fictions as soon as it is possible to share them with others in linguistic communication. Viktor Shklovsky stated something similar when he was rating the prose of Andrej Bely over the Constructivist factography of Sergei Tretyakov. Bely was the most elaborate Russian writer of Russian modernist novels, which form—as in “Kotik Letaev”—an entire level of imaginary sensibility. And again, Formalist and Marxist arguments are based in the same intuition: that literature is not reportage—as Trotsky says—but transforms the reality of experience.

To come back to the present...

The type of novel to which Strindberg, Bely, Woolf, Joyce, Weiß, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon, Fichte, Brinkmann, and many others have contributed, is nothing other than the common form of the Contemporary Novel. Their devices are employed by China Mieville, David Peace, and David Cronenberg alike. Armen Avanessian and I have called it the Alter-modern Novel. However, what was called estrangement in modernism and the revolutionary avant-garde is no longer defamiliarisation. *Ostranenie* today reveals an economy based on imagination and desire that is replete with symbolic value and the forms of value that capital assumes. Estrangement results not in less alienation but in ever more alienation, in surplus alienation. Estrangement in 2016 describes the strangeness of this form of economics.

In a different context, I analysed the opportunities that criticism could offer and the traps it risks falling into. By taking a historical detour through the critiques of alienation that accompany the modern experience, something specific appeared: modern experience is alienated inasmuch as it has fully incorporated criticism. To be critical implies to be alienated to such an extent that alienation becomes acknowledged as a precondition for criticism. Perhaps one difference between the modern and the alter-modern experience consists in recognising that the modern nostalgia for the restoration of authentic experience as a result of critique, as for example György Lukács constantly argued, has lost its persuasiveness. This is not to say that the alter-modern experience celebrates a status quo of inauthenticity. It poses its own radical questions of inauthenticity by analysing alienation as an artificial experience to which critique is immanent. Estrangement makes use of alienation as an inherently critical experience. As an artistic strategy it suggests a politics of alienation.

Notes

1 Many thanks to Warren Neidich, who organised the Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art in June 2015 around the concept of estrangement, which gave me the opportunity to develop this approach in a talk and a workshop together with students of the summer school.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998.

3 Karl Marx, “The Fragment on Machines from *The Grundrisse* (pp. 690-712),” p. 693. Accessed 13.12.2015. <http://thenewobjectivity.com/pdf/marx.pdf>.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 695.

5 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 70-91.

6 Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, pp. 314-15. Translated by Rose Strunsky in 1925. Transcribed for the Leon Trotsky Internet Archive by N. Vaklovsky in June 2000 from an uncopyrighted 1957 Russell & Russell, New York

edition of "Literature and Revolution". HTML markup by David Walters in August 2000. Proofread and completed by Eide O'Callaghan in January 2007 using the 1991 RedWords (London) edition of "Literature and Revolution."

<https://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/view-Book?id=8214053C3FCE8A0E82EEA8778DCEC024>

7 Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 243.

8 Armen Avanessian and Anke Hennig, *Present Tense. A Poetics*, Bloomsbury, New York and London, 2015, p. 180ff.

9 August Strindberg, *Inferno*, trans. Claud Field, Putnam, New York, 1913, p. 62. The composition and publication history of the *Inferno* is a complicated one. Originally written in French, it was first published in a Swedish translation (not checked by Strindberg), followed by a heavily edited French version. The second, corrected Swedish version is generally used as the basis for the translation cited here.

10 Ibid., 105.

11 Ibid., 134.

12 Ibid., 130.

13 Ibid., 132.

14 Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg and Van Gogh*, trans. Oskar Grunow and David Woloshin, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1982.

15 Simon Stuhler, *Phänomenologie des Lesens*, Edition Kirchoff & Francke, Berlin, 2010, p. 35.

16 Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 243.

17 Strindberg is playing here with all the elements of agon/battle, aleia/chance, mimicry/deception and reversal, as well asilinx/intoxication. Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993.

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