Shaking the habitual:
A synthesis between Bakhtinian dialogism and Shklovsky's defamiliarisation through relational aesthetics

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Abstract. This essay constitutes an attempt to synthesise Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky's definition of art as proposed in "Art as Technique" and Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogicity. It will incorporate themes from French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*, which heavily rely on the relations between viewer and art. Central to this attempt is Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation – a roughening of the perception. Taken together with Bakhtin's ideas on multivoicedness, and Bourriaud's inter-subjective aestheticism, defamiliarisation can be seen as a powerful tool through which to establish a dialogue between subject and object—a dialogue that engenders, authors, and creates art. Shklovsky also states that the object is not important for art to happen. This view, when taken to its logical extreme, contends that everything and anything can be art, which many critics consider to be a damaging notion. Detractors of this perspective will often gripe about how art becomes meaningless with such assumptions, and that this leads to a nihilistic interpretation of—not just art—but of the grander project of life, but this paper rejects this fearful attitude and instead strives to surpass petty existentialism for a more constructive mindset. This stance already reeks of a postmodern interpretation of art and therefore, as David Shepherd has said, runs the risk that any Bakhtinian interpretation does. Namely, that of "seeming to rehearse the tired gesture by which the Soviet theorist is burdened with the credit for having [...] always already anticipated and surpassed the most significant theoretical trends of recent decades" [Shepherd, 1989, p. 91]. However, the crux of this synthesis lies precisely in the interplay between the three perspectives; it is neither Bakhtin, nor Shklovsky, nor Bourriaud who has the singular concept which leads to a more positivistic infusion to add to this meaning-denying philosophical stance. Instead, the radical implications contained within all three authors' works come together in dialogue, and only then are able to form a more constructive aesthetics of art and artfulness.

Keywords: Shklovsky's defamiliarisation; Bourriaud's relational aesthetics; Bakhtinian dialogism; a renewal of a sense of wonder through a rejection of nihilism; synthesising disparate views.

This essay will attempt a synthesis between Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky's definition of art as outlined in "Art as Technique" and Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogicity, incorporating themes from French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*. Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation, a roughening of the perception, will be the outset from which the synthesis departs. With Bakhtin's ideas on multivoicedness, and Bourriaud's inter-subjective aestheticism this essay will establish an analysis in which art can be seen as being born from the dialogue between subject and object. Returning to Shklovsky, his statement that the object is not important for art will be addressed. Taken to its logical extreme this view contends that everything and anything can be art, as long as one takes the time to truly perceive the object. An overview of criticism, which considers this to be a damaging notion, will be given. In conclusion, this essay will advocate a more constructive perspective on the consequences of Shklovsky's radical statement. The prevailing sentiment at the time of Shklovsky's writing was that art worked by combining signs (images, words, notes, etc.) into "poetic images or tropes" that evoke mental conceptions in the observer "that are always more complicated and more informative than the sum of the signs used in constructing the image" [Denner, 2014, p. 374]. From this it was concluded that the only difference between communication in art and communication in ordinary language was the degree of meaning

imparted by it. Art was simply more intense and more efficient and "the aesthetic reaction to a work of art—he perception of a thing's being beautiful or pleasurable—s nothing more than "a reflex to this economy of expression" [Denner, 2014, p. 375]. Shklovsky admits that practical language does indeed seem to function this way, in what he terms the algebraic method. Simple and accessible signs are used to allow for an easy way to know and recognise more complex ideas. The reduction of signification to its bare fundamental characteristics is, for Shklovsky, exemplified by algebra, as it uses only letters to stand for certain quantities or objects. However he sees the drive for efficiency in practical language as something completely separate from art. He uses metaphors that compare "summer lightning to deaf and dumb demons" and "the sky to the garment of God" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 6] to question the contention that art is simply a hyper-efficient version of communication. The comparison of non-existent things to these fairly simple phenomena is a far cry from the efficiency that motivates practical language. Far more practical would have been the use of meteorological language to describe these things and as such there is little economy to be found in these expressions. Shklovsky therefore rejects the idea of art as "ordinary language, only more so" [Denner, 2014, p. 374].

As Michael Denner states: "What defines art in Shklovsky's analysis is not some contentious or vague characteristic like beauty: Art is rather defined by its observable effect on its consumer" [Denner, 2014, p. 374] and herein we can find a connection with practical language. For Shklovsky practical language, while desirable in certain conditions, also held an inherent danger, namely that of automatisation. He states that as "perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic" as "all our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 11]. To illustrate this point Shklovsky quotes an excerpt from a diary entry by Tolstoy in which, while cleaning a room, he could not remember whether he had dusted his couch yet as this action had become so habitual that it had in fact become impossible to remember [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 12]. Perceived in such an automatised way the object "fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 11]. Shklovsky contends that this tendency to abstract in practical communication leads to a similar abstraction in our perception and thus reduces "reality to convenient categorical prejudices" [Denner, 2014, p. 376]. In doing so we effectively breed an "epistemological illness" that is highly contagious, as our perception alters, not just the world perceived, but the way others perceive the world as well: "the mind responds to the thing and the thing to the mind" [Denner, 2014, p. 376]. So while at first only our perception is affected by this economy driven strategy, eventually it eats away at the world as we stop perceiving and merely lazily recognise. Functioning as perception's equivalent of the algebraic method, recognition is "perceptual shorthand that assumes knowledge of an object based on prior experience" [Denner, 2014, p. 377]. Art, according to Shklovsky, exists to combat this disease, it is the revitalisation of perception, and it undoes the devouring process of habitualisation. In his own words: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 12]. It achieves this by making objects unfamiliar, roughening the form, and in doing so reducing the ease of perception (or recognition as might be the case). The technique of art lengthens the process of perception because this "is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 12]. Thus deprived of "easy and economic recognition" art presents to us an object "removed from all prior associations and assumptions" [Denner, 2014, p. 377] making it possible for us to examine this object anew; "*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 12, emphasis in the original].

Momentarily setting aside the radical implications that Shklovsky's statements have, I would like to establish a connection between his theories and the Bakhtinian concept of dialogicity. Bakhtin used this term in his theories on the novel, which as a genre is engendered by its heteroglossia, or multivoicedness. His theory assumes that within the structure of a novel, more than one voice is present at any given time and that these voices enter into a dialectic relation with each other, their meanings informed by and formed through their dialogue. Opposed to this is monoglossia, the authoritative voice, which in Bakhtin's analysis is exemplified by the genre of the epic. Because of its monolithic nature, authoritative discourse "enters our consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass," prompting one to "either totally affirm it, or totally reject it" [Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343]. Bakhtin

focussed his theories on discourse in the novel but he is deliberate in reminding us "that dialogic relationships in the broad sense are also possible among different intelligent phenomena" [Bakhtin, 2003, p. 184]. What happens then when we take works of art to be 'utterances' in a Bakhtinian sense? An arguably classic method of looking at art is to treat a work as authoritative, a single voice, a single utterance. However Shklovsky's claim that perception, an activity that originates from the subject but is empty without an object, is an end in itself suggests that he acknowledged the importance of the relation between art and its observer. Thus, in including the subject into the process of art, I would argue that Shklovsky introduces a heteroglossic element and makes it "more multi-voiced" so that it "no longer [gravitates] toward itself or its referential object" [Bakhtin, 2003, p. 226]. Therefore the voices of the object and the subject "instead of following one after the other and being uttered by two different mouths, are superimposed one on the other and merge into a *single* utterance issuing from a *single* mouth" [Bakhtin, 2003, p. 209]. The dialogic relation creates art.

A view on aesthetics that seems almost tailor-made in relation to this is proposed by Bourriaud. In his book *Relational Aesthetics* he develops an aestheticism that focuses on the relational aspect of art. This view stresses the importance of inter-subjectivity and human relations. However insofar as humans can be regarded as social constructs it can be contended that so too Bakhtinian utterances, in this case works of art, are merely social constructs. With this interpretation, Bourriaud's framework becomes almost a rephrasing of the Bakhtin-Shklovsky synthesis outlined above. Art for Bourriaud functions as "an opening to unlimited discussion" where the "encounter between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning" [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 15] is the crux. His claim that "art is a state of encounter" [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 18] and can only exist within "the dynamic relationship [...] with other formations" [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 21] clearly mirrors a Bakhtinian dialogic relation. Further strengthening the parallels (besides Bourriaud's frequent use of the term 'dialogue') is the juxtaposing of this relational aestheticism at the "opposite end" of what Bourriaud derisively terms a "pettifogging historical" and "authoritarian version of art" [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 22]. Just like in Bakhtin's monoglossia, this 'art as an indivisible mass' functions through the "negation of dialogue" [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 22], thereby preventing the very process that should give birth to it. Bourriaud also repeatedly refers to installations in galleries, wherein the visitors are integral parts of the exhibition. Examples include an artist's announcement that he would release half a cubic metre of helium into the air, creating an artwork that "only exists as an artwork by virtue of [its] observation" [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 29], or settings in which people were allowed to adjust, move or even take pieces from the exhibition [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 39], among many others. All of these works relied on the presence, interaction, and contribution of the subject. Their prerequisite to function, to even exist, is a dialogistic relation which therefore inherently calls into question the 'author' of the work. Again Bakhtin offers relevant insights. He states that in becoming discourse, the becoming of a heteroglossic utterance, a dialogistic relation must: receive an author, that is, a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses. Every utterance in this sense has its author, whom we hear in the very utterance as its creator. Of the real author, as he exists outside the utterance, we can know absolutely nothing at all. [Bakhtin, 2003, p. 184]

In this way the dialogic relation does not just 'create' the artwork in an abstract manner, but is actually reified as the author of the artwork. A final parallel conveniently reaches back to Shklovsky's device of defamiliarisation. Bourriaud proposes modern exhibition spaces as specialised spaces that facilitate "the possibility of an immediate discussion" and which create "free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life" [Bourriaud, 2009, p. 16]. The generation of this relational discourse thus constitutes an attempt to combat the habitual, automatised perception, and in doing so reframes the familiar allowing us to perceive it, not as it is known, but as it truly is. Returning to Shklovsky, by way of Bakhtin and Bourriaud, his contention that the object is not important, needs to be addressed. This radical claim would seem to completely reject significance of the object, but I believe it needs to be taken with a grain of salt. In a way, what Shklovsky asserts is true, however Bakhtin offers a more nuanced view: "Dialogic relationships are absolutely impossible without logical relationships or relationships oriented toward a referential object, but they are not reducible to them" [Bakhtin, 2003, p. 184]. This distinction turns around Shklovsky's rejection

of the object, as it has now become integral to the dialogic process of perception, but adds the caveat that there can be no isolation for the experiencing of the artfulness of an object. In spite of this gradation, Shklovsky's arguments still effect "a dilation of the potential field of art, opening up the definition of art to include a potentially unlimited set of objects" [Denner, 2014, p. 380], much to the chagrin of art-purists around the globe.

Generally the use of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument is pitted against this inclusive view of art. Let us look at a few concrete (if sometimes fictional) examples of defamiliarisation, in order to see what is meant. Shklovsky's own examples are mostly taken from works by Tolstoy, the "harsh example" that he gives is the defamiliarisation of "the act of flogging [...] by the description and by the proposal to change its form without changing its nature" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 13]. In the same vein, one can look at *Ulysses* by James Joyce as its form is radically 'other.' Not only does this infamous novel use defamiliarisation in its sentence-level language use (describing objects as if they were first seen, avoiding accepted names, etc.), but its paragraphs, and even its suprastructure, are so convoluted that the process of perception is prolonged considerably. Here I would like to add that the process of perception is, in this analysis, not limited to observation, that is, does not pertain exclusively to affecting animate nerve organs.

A work needs not be actually, perceptually present for one to engage with it. I would argue that consuming a work of art does, indeed, start with physical perception, but as long as you engage with it (e.g. through the retroactive realisation of something or delayed contemplation on a work's meaning and such) you are still in the dialogic process of perception. T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, for example, achieves this with its footnotes that continuously take the reader out of the text, or the need, for all but the most polyglot readers, to constantly translate the various snippets of diverse languages. Such convolution can be said to lead to absurd situations (and indeed some find *Ulysses* to be just that) where complexity of form takes precedence over complexity of content, but as Shklovsky states: "in our analysis of the work of art [...] there is no need for the concept of 'content'" [qtd. in Denner, 2014, p. 383]. He considers these essentially expressions of the same thing.

On the opposite end of using complexity to defamiliarise are works like Mondrian's grid-based paintings or Malevich's *Black Square*. These kinds of works are simple in their outward characteristics and their defamiliarisation therefore relies on other aspects. In this case the works arguably rely on the upset of established norms within the world of art. Another way is to rely on the viewer of the painting to assume the painter had an intention, which they subsequently will try to assess with minimal assistance from the work itself. Furthermore, even the realisation of the subject that there might not be an inherent meaning in the object could in itself be such a defamiliarising experience that the process of perception is lengthened considerably. These again already hint at the possible absurdity contained within this definition of art. Indeed this has been a persistent critique of much modern art. *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, a urinal exhibited at an art gallery, is an excellent example of the contentious nature of such artworks. After all, critics say, if a toilet can be art, where is the limit? A gallery filled to the brim with garbage? Would that count as art? According to Iris Clert, who did exactly that in her gallery in 1960, it would. For the skeptics, Shklovsky's assertion that "defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found" [Shklovsky, 2012, p. 18] is a damaging claim, and according to them a false conclusion follows from his allegation. Their *reductio ad absurdum* is as follows: (1) If it can be defamiliarised, it is art. (2) Everything can be defamiliarised. (3) Therefore, everything is art. It is *not* true that everything is art, not (3). Therefore, *reductio*: (1) entails not (2). (2) entails not (1). So either exclusively (1), or exclusively (2). In their eyes the third premise is false, but on what do they base this? A Bakhtinian interpretation might point out the similarities of this rejection to the hallmarks of authoritative discourse. The earlier analysis of art was that it was a system that was "analogous with the system of a language" [Bakhtin, 1981, p. 273], and that it was incapable of standing in a dialogic relation. Thus, from this point of view "the artistic work as a whole [...] is a self-sufficient and closed, authorial monologue, one that presumes only passive listeners beyond its boundaries" [Bakhtin, 1981, p. 274]. According to Bakhtin, there was a tendency in Europe to concentrate the scrutiny of philosophical thought on the "firmest, most stable, least changeable and

most mono-semic aspects of discourse [...] that are furthest removed from the changing socio-semantic spheres of discourse" [Bakhtin, 1981, p. 274]. This single-voicedness "demands our unconditional allegiance" and, as outlined above, this "renders the artistic representation of authoritative discourse impossible" [Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 343-344]. The skeptic's rejection of this proposed definition of art therefore relies on a reaffirmation of exactly that which is impossible to maintain in its requisite dialogic relation.

If, as I hope to have shown, the skeptic's *reductio ad absurdum* is a fallacious (or at least an irrelevant) argument, and indeed everything can be art, what does this entail? Critics of this view might argue that it is a destructive notion, that if everything is art, nothing is art, thereby destroying the significance of the field. However I would argue that this is an extremely negativistic outlook. Rather than subscribing to a pessimistic interpretation, I propose a positivistic, life-affirming and creative mode d'emploi for this definition of art. While writing this, I have become thoroughly familiarised with the white, stuccoed wall behind the monitor. As an object it has faded for the subject of my consciousness.

However through actively imposing defamiliarisation on the plaster, by entering into a dialogic relation and letting the utterances of the object and subject resonate, I become once again able to experience the artfulness of the thing as it is perceived, not as it is known. I might marvel at the physics that make it possible, how the gypsum and water molecules arrange themselves in stable patterns after being heated to a certain degree; or at the economics involved, how the collaborative effort of various businesses that create, trade, transport, and apply plaster interact; or at the underlying cultural factors, how it came to be a thing in society that millions of people smear coagulated sulfate minerals on their walls; or at how a myriad of humans have, over the course of countless lives, gradually contributed to something as simple as a few square feet of plastered wall. It is a cumulative miracle of epic proportions. It is neither the object nor the subject responsible for the artfulness of this, the author of this 'artwork' is the dialogic relation created in that very moment. In this way, in this moment, by the transformative process of shaking the habitual, the ordinary becomes art.

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Изменяя привычное:
синтез бахтинского диалогизма и остранения Шкловского через реляционную эстетику

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Аннотация. Эссе представляет собой попытку синтезировать определение искусства, данное российским теоретиком литературы Виктором Шкловским в статье «Искусство как техника», и концепцию диалогичности русского философа Михаила Бахтина. Оно включает темы из книги французского арт-критика Николя Буррио «Эстетика отношений», в которой, в частности, рассматриваются отношения между зрителем и искусством. Центральным элементом этой попытки является концепция Шкловского о дефамилитации – огрублении восприятия. В совокупности с идеями Бахтина о многоголосии и с интерсубъективным эстетизмом Буррио дефамилизация может рассматриваться как мощный инструмент, с помощью которого устанавливается диалог между субъектом и объектом – диалог, который порождает авторов и создает искусство. Шкловский также утверждает, что объект не важен для возникновения искусства. Этот взгляд, доведенный до логической крайности, утверждает, что все и все может быть искусство, которое многие критики считают вредным понятием. Противники этой точки зрения будут часто жаловаться на то, что искусство становится бессмысленным с такими предположениями, и что это ведет к нигилистической интерпретации – не только искусства, но более грандиозного проекта жизни, но эта статья отвергает это пугающее отношение и вместо этого стремится превзойти мелкий экзистенциализм ради большего конструктивное мышление. Эта позиция уже пахнет постмодернистской интерпретацией искусства и, следовательно, как сказал Дэвид Шеперд, подвергается риску, как и любая бахтинская интерпретация. А именно, «как бы репетировать усталый жест, которым советский теоретик обременен признанием того, [...] всегда уже предвосхищал и превосходил наиболее значимые теоретические тенденции последних десятилетий» [Shepherd, 1989, p. 91]. Однако суть этого синтеза лежит как раз во взаимодействии между тремя перспективами; ни Бахтин, ни Шкловский, ни Буррио не обладают единым понятием, которое ведет к более позитивистскому вливанию, чтобы добавить к этому отрицающему смысл философскому пониманию. Вместо этого радикальные импликации, содержащиеся в работах всех трех авторов, объединяются в диалог, и только тогда они могут сформировать более конструктивную эстетику искусства и художественности.

Ключевые слова: «остранение» В.Б. Шкловского; эстетика отношений Н. Буррио; диалогизм М.М. Бахтина; возрождение чувства удивления через отказ от нигилизма; синтез разрозненных взглядов.