

# 5 = 100: Long Live the “Filologicheskaiia Revoliutsiia”

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The hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution arrives together with a few remarkable centennials in the field of literary studies: Viktor Shklovskii’s “Resurrection of the Word” appeared in 1914; his talk on “Art as Device” at a Petrograd café dates to 1916; the Moscow Linguistic Circle was founded in 1915 by a group of students led by Roman Jakobson, Petr Bogatyrev, and Grigorii Vinokur; and OPOIAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) formed in Petrograd a year later on the initiative of Viktor Shklovskii and Osip Brik (Boris Eikhenbaum and Iurii Tynianov would join shortly after). In this connection, it is worth noting how Formalists themselves were keen on joint anniversaries.

In his pamphlet “5 = 100,” published in *Book Corner* in 1922, Boris Eikhenbaum looked back at the first few years of Formalist activity in parallel with the recent social and political upheavals, and he compared the deep renovation that the OPOIAZ circle was bringing about in the field of literary studies to the revolutions that had shaken and transformed the country in 1917. He defined the emergence of the Formal method as a revolution in its own right: “I decided to write in a tone that is not commemorative, but celebratory. What are we celebrating? . . . the revolution; and philology. Russia certainly comes out of the revolution with a new science of the artistic word.”<sup>1</sup> In “On the ‘Formalist’ Question,” he would restate that “[w]ithin literary studies Formalism is a revolutionary movement, since it clears the field of old ossified traditions and prompts it to reassess and reformulate all its schemes and fundamental principles.”<sup>2</sup>

The “filologicheskaiia revoliutsiia” (philological revolution) saluted by Eikhenbaum would have long-term repercussions on the way literary studies would be conducted and understood for the next hundred years in western institutions. To spell out the foundational role of the Russian Formalists in formulating literary theory as we know it and in setting the direction of western cultural studies over the past century would equate to stating the obvious. The Formal method, its protagonists, and their formulations were steeped in a specific historical moment and cultural milieu, of which the Russian Formalists were a product and which they in turn shaped consistently. At the same time, the longevity of their methodologies transcended all major historical contingencies—the increasing questioning of an exclusively text-centered poetics, the turn of the screw in the arts, and the waning of the avant-gardes, to which the earlier phase of Formalist formulations and statements were indissolubly tied—and carried their legacy remarkably far in time and space. Both these dimensions—the circumscribed sphere of their cultural production, and the universality of their theoretical claims—ought

1. Boris Eikhenbaum, “5 = 100,” *Knizhnyi ugol* 8 (1922): 38–39 (translation mine).

2. Eikhenbaum, “Vokrug voprosa o ‘formalistakh’” *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* 5 (1924): 50–51 (translation mine).

to be considered when observing the heritage of the critical school a hundred years after the October Revolution. Eikhenbaum's celebratory image was not just a seductive metaphor; it also gestured at crucial nodes that tied together the new poetics and revolutionary times, and it may therefore be examined on three different levels.

Since the early days of OPOIAZ (the group on which this piece focuses primarily), its members found themselves fighting staunchly against all sorts of detractors. We are not dealing with detached academic symposia here—belligerent tones and a polemical stance became a necessity for a young and revolutionary methodological school, one that dispensed with old approaches to literary analysis, and one that did not always align with Marxist orthodoxy to break through. Suffice it to say that even the label “Formalists” was applied to the group by their opponents; the definition they had initially chosen for themselves was “morphologic school” or “Spetsifikatory.” Eikhenbaum himself, in his 1927 appraisal of the Formal method, would acknowledge that

In discussing the Formal method and its evolution, it is essential always to keep in mind that a great many of the principles advanced by the Formalists during those years of intense struggle with their opponents had value not only as scientific principles but also as slogans—slogans spiked with paradoxes in the interest of propaganda and opposition. To fail to take that fact into account and to treat the Opojazz works of 1916–1921 as works of an academic character is to ignore history.<sup>3</sup>

Boris Tomashevskii would note: “Yes, OPOIAZ was speaking in the tone of screamed *publitsistika*, and it was speaking like that precisely because that is the tone of Modernity.”<sup>4</sup>

If we wish to explore the philology=revolution equation in its most political overtones, then we should mention the application of literary and linguistic analysis to Lenin's speeches. Language and storytelling form the basis of social interactions and consensus building, the Formalists would argue, and they inform the historical trajectory of a nation. It is not by chance that the three titans of the OPOIAZ school—Viktor Shklovskii, Jurii Tynianov, and Eikhenbaum himself—devoted special attention to the analysis of the leader's rhetoric and vocabulary choices, and their essays on the topic appeared in the 1924 issue of *Lef*, an avant-garde and activist journal.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Eikhenbaum's statement also seemed to suggest that a rigorous study of language and storytelling techniques provides invaluable tools to explain and comprehend a social and political event of such magnitude as the 1917 revolutions. This felicitous concept was recuperated and enriched by Foucauldian

3. Boris Eikhenbaum, “Theory of the Formal Method,” in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor, 1978), 19.

4. Boris Tomashevskii, “Formal'nyi metod (Vmesto nekrologa),” in *Sovremennaiia literatura. Sbornik statei* (Leningrad, 1925), 151. (Translation mine).

5. Eikhenbaum's Lenin, in particular, highlights the empty rhetoric and useless clichés employed by his adversaries. Eikhenbaum compares Lenin's efforts against ossified and formulaic definitions of the revolution to the laying bare of the device and the de-automatization that the Formalists bring about in their approach to literary texts. See Boris Eikhenbaum, “Osnovnye tendentsii v rechi Lenina,” *LEF* 1 (1924): 55–70.

epistemology, and is taken for granted today, when politicians hire experts in rhetoric and communication (therefore likely familiar with Jakobson, too) in order to fashion a compelling narrative, one that in turn gets analyzed and deconstructed by journalists and other experts.

Finally, the concept of “revolutionary philology” points to the figure of the public intellectual, one that Russian Formalists fully embodied by virtue of their active participation in and transformation of the cultural scene of their city and country. The OPOIAZ triumvirate, Shklovskii, Tynianov, and Eikhenbaum, found themselves operating in a period of sparkling artistic experimentation and exciting collaboration across the arts (among the multiple successful outcomes I will only mention the emblematic and most fecund partnership between Velimir Khlebnikov and Kazimir Malevich). They took part themselves in the process by working closely with filmmakers, composers and visual artists, and at the same time shaped that process and provided a theoretical frame for it in their writings. The Formalists were true protagonists of their times and their cities, as is evident in such novels as Veniamin Kaverin’s *Scandalist* (1929) and Ol’ga Forsh’s *Lunatic Ship* (1931), which feature Shklovskii and his fellows as characters; the opoiazovtsy become constitutive components of the Petersburg text of the 1920s. This overt, upfront, and partisan nature of their intellectual engagement, a phenomenon that is firmly situated in space and required by the times (the concept of *zakaz vremeni*, a cardinal component of revolutionary aesthetics), interestingly resurfaces in Russia today after several decades.<sup>6</sup> Mark Lipovetsky noted this in his keynote address at AATSEEL (American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages) in January 2016, “The Formal is Political,” when he claimed that

Today, not only theorists, but writers as well are fully aware of the political meaning of their poetics. Indeed, the correlation between the author’s rejection of rhymed syllabo-tonic verse and his/her participation in anti-Putin protests, or his/her striving toward the “new realism” and a pro-government position after the annexation of Crimea, is too marked to be ignored. This situation is quite novel since back in the 1980s, as well as during Perestroika and in the 1990s, writers who were close to non-conformist circles or influenced by them preached the superiority of literature that was independent of any kind of political or ideological position.<sup>7</sup>

It will be relevant to add that this correspondence between life and scholarship was even deeper in the 1920s. By the end of that decade the apparatus of categories for textual analysis that the Formalists created and honed offered them privileged tools to assess and comprehend their own individual existence in the face of political uncertainty. The Formal method was internalized

6. Among others, Marina Tsvetaeva, who grappled with time and the times as chief aesthetic concerns throughout her career, addressed *zakaz vremeni* in her essay *Poet i vremia* (The Poet and Time, 1932): “Tema revoliutsii – zakaz vremeni. Tema proslavlennia revoliutsii – zakaz partii” (The theme of the Revolution is the demand of the times. The theme of the celebration of the Revolution is the demand of the party). M. Tsvetaeva, *Poet i vremia*, in her *Ob iskusstve*, Moscow, 1991, 65. Translation mine.

7. Lipovetsky’s address was subsequently published in *SEEJ*: Mark Lipovetsky, “The Formal is Political,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 60, no. 2 (2016): 185.

and OPOIAZ scholars often described their lives in strictly theoretical terms: “in reality there is no *siuzhet*, but only *fabula*” (Shklovskii, *Third Factory*), “life became an artistic device” (Eikhenbaum, “On Reciting Verse”), “our current life has no *siuzhet*” (Shklovskii, “On Pil’niak”).<sup>8</sup>

Among the numerous outputs of the Petrograd/Leningrad Formalists’ engagement with the arts, their city, and its culture rank the creative writing seminars that Shklovskii and Tynianov offered at the Petrograd State Institute for the History of the Arts (GIII) in the early 1920s and that had among their students Lev Lunts and Il’ia Gruzdev, two founders of the Serapion Brothers, a group of writers who profoundly transformed Russian prose. Of course, the Formalists were themselves writers. The idea of teaching the skills of the profession was innovative, and it is quite extraordinary that today Formalist concepts and theories, along with structuralist and post-structuralist tenets, are taught in the most successful screenwriting programs in the United States, including but not limited to the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, Cinematic Arts at USC, Radio-Television Film at U Texas–Austin, and NYU Tisch School of the Arts. Enhanced competence in plot-building is required in order to plan out sophisticated TV series, in which the time horizon for thread development and character building exceeds the classical two-hour running time of a circumscribed and self-contained film whose viewership and focus-groups influence the story directly. The space in-between episodes implies radically new modes of reception, and fan fiction provides an additional if ancillary narrative. Shklovskii, Tynianov, and Eikhenbaum, who were already working actively with directors and theorizing on the new medium and its storytelling potentials a hundred years ago, would certainly have found this an exciting challenge.

While the *opoiaztsy* were formulating the “science of literature,” they were also experimenting with styles and genres in their literary-theoretical hybrids, ranging from Shklovskii’s metafiction to Tynianov’s historical-literary novels to Eikhenbaum’s “in-between (*promezhutochnyi*) genre” of experimental (auto)biography. The works they created in this direction served as distant precursors of that “critifiction” or “fiction critique” that would flourish decades later with Roland Barthes’s and Julia Kristeva’s post-structuralist *pastiches*. Moreover, recent Russian scholarship tracks the lineage of today’s *filologicheskii roman* (philological novel, a genre that stages literature and language on a thematic, stylistic, and structural level) back to the theoretical-literary works of the Formalists.<sup>9</sup>

8. Aage Hansen-Löve, “Le formalisme russe,” in *Histoire de la littérature russe, III: Le XXe siècle. La Révolution et les années vingt*, ed. Efim Grigor’evich Etkind. (Paris, 1988), 737. (Translation mine).

9. See, among others, Vladimir Novikov, “Filologicheskii roman. Staryi zhanr na iskhode stoletii,” *Novyi mir* 10 (1999): 193–205. In particular, within the group, Shklovskii is credited as the most successful in exploring the boundaries between literature and criticism through his writing, and his *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* (1921) is considered the “filologicheskii roman” *avant la lettre*. More rarely one finds references to Boris Eikhenbaum’s *Moi vremennik*, in which theory, criticism, and literature inform different sections of one “journal,” while Tynianov’s fictional prose is generally seen as the predecessor to learned historical-literary novels such as Iurii Lotman’s *Sotvorenii Karamzina*. A sign of the interest that the genre has attracted in Russia is the recent series by Giperion

In 1926–27 the OPOIAZ circle experienced a methodological impasse that resulted from acknowledging the limits of a poetics that was centered solely on the text. Both Tynianov and Eikhenbaum suggested provisional solutions at a symposium for the anniversary of their department at GIII (March 1927).<sup>10</sup> The papers they delivered, “Literature and Literary Environment” (Eikhenbaum) and “On Literary Evolution” (Tynianov), which appeared in print a few months later, at once proposed a substantial reform of the Formal method and marked a methodological divergence between the two scholars. Tynianov’s concepts of “parallel series” accounted for non-literary series that run parallel and contiguous to the literary one, with porous boundaries; while his model of center-periphery dynamics of forms and genres attempted to explain the mechanisms of literary evolution. In his essays “Literature and Literary Environment,” “Literature and the Writer” (1927), and “Literary Domesticity” (1929), Eikhenbaum took as his privileged avenue of inquiry what today we would call sociology of literature and the study of literary institutions. He became interested in mapping with formal categories not just the text but also the literary *byt*, a concept that includes the conditions under which literature is produced and received, the space and modes of distribution, publishing companies, salons, public performances, and the building of a literary persona. Both Tynianov and Eikhenbaum formulated their new questions and models in order to carry their method forward and out of the difficult situation created by a peculiar conjunction of methodological implosion and external pressure. Once again, however, their theories transcended their time and place and prove fruitful in mapping our literary scene a century later. Genres and forms such as blogs, patient memoirs, and fan fiction, once in the periphery of our literary system, are gaining attention. Russian-speaking bloggers such as Linor Goralik, Stanislav Lvovskii, Evgenyi Grishkovets, Boris Akunin, and Elena Fanailova are modern-day representatives of those in-between genres (letters, memoirs, autobiographies) that Tynianov described as peripheral and ready to be canonized—exactly the genres that Lidiia Ginzburg, a representative of the “young formalists,” mastered.<sup>11</sup> Modern writers-bloggers artfully employ new and old platforms and media to fashion their literary persona, build their social network, and influence their reception. This obviously holds true for writers outside of the Russian-speaking world, too. As Eikhenbaum’s main question shifted from “how to write” to “how to be a writer,” his interest was drawn towards authors (most notably Lev Tolstoi), whose literary longevity derived from their ability to perceive the direction of history and set themselves in tune with the times.<sup>12</sup>

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Publishing House called “Proza filologov,” which features novels and short stories whose authors are literature theorists and philologists. The inaugural book of the series was published in 2004 and it included two novels by V.V. Sipovskii originally published in journals in the years 1929–30.

10. Gosudarstvennyi Institut Istorii Iskusstv (State Institute for the History of the Arts).

11. On Ginzburg’s search for a new style that would be adequate to her times, see Emily Van Buskirk, *Lydia Ginzburg’s Prose: Reality in Search of Literature* (Princeton, 2016).

12. This is a shift in Eikhenbaum’s poetics that Carol Joyce Any explores in depth in her *Boris Eikhenbaum: Voices of a Russian Formalist* (Stanford, 1994).

That very ability became crucial in the early 1930s, in a political landscape that made writers' lives increasingly precarious. An analogous process was observed by Lipovetsky in his AATSEEL address, when he highlighted Viktor Pelevin's "unique sensitivity to changes in the tenor of the time" while being "unable to reform himself in sync with these changes."<sup>13</sup>

Another proposed solution to reform the method became instrumental in carrying it outside Soviet borders. Jakobson and Tynianov's "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language" (1928) provided an earlier formulation of that "system of systems" that lies at the basis of structuralism. Through the mediation of the Prague Linguistic Circle (founded in 1926), Formalist theories were adopted by the French structuralists, who did away with their historical context and modified some of the original terminology.<sup>14</sup> Léon Robel reports an anecdote that highlights this "imperfect continuity": in 1967 Shklovskii met the *Tel Quel* group in Paris, in the main office of Éditions du Seuil, and when confronted by pressing questions and manifold objections about his *Tetiva*, he "became red with anger and yelled: 'Before discussing it, one should at least have read it!'"<sup>15</sup>

At any rate, intellectuals such as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss were deeply indebted to the Russian Formalists, and the *Tel Quel* group played a major role in canonizing Russian formalism (Tsvetan Todorov's famous anthology came out in 1965) and exporting its theories across the Atlantic.<sup>16</sup> The linguistic and communication components of Formalism were not altered as much along the way, because of their more pronouncedly formal features and because one of their major proponents, Roman Jakobson, traveled to America together with them! Two more lines compose the genealogical tree of the Formalist legacy in the twentieth century—Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii's Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics (with their journal *Sign System Studies*) and the Tel Aviv School of Narrative Poetics, the hub of *Poetics Today*.<sup>17</sup> In general, Formalist theories offered such an unparalleled potential to reveal the underlying structure of texts—from the smallest motif in a folk tale to the most layered and complex novels, from the elaborate rhetoric of political speech to film montage, from the evolution of genres to the places

13. Lipovetsky, "The Formal is Political," 186.

14. For instance, within the anglophone literary studies, the concept of "obnazhenie priema" was initially translated as "laying bare the device," but the expression was soon substituted by "foregrounding," which had lost the original Formalist connotation. The distinction between *fabula* and *siuzhet*, too, spread throughout western academia in its structuralist re-elaboration (*histoire/discours*). Some of the problems related to the translation of the Formalist vocabulary on text analysis are discussed in Reinhard Lauer, "Probleme der Übertragung literaturwissenschaftlicher Begriffe des russischen Formalismus," in *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, nos. 30–31 (1978): 175–89.

15. Léon Robel, "Un trio prodigieux," in *Europe* (2005): 7.

16. Henry James's writings on the novel and New Criticism had constituted the most notable North American developments of literary theory parallel to Formalism in Russia. See Dorothy J. Hale, *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford, 1998).

17. Hosted in the Department of Poetics and Comparative Literature of Tel Aviv University, the circle was founded in the early 1960s by Benjamin Hrushovski/Harshav, Joseph Haephrati, Itamar Even-Zohar, and Harai Golomb, who were joined shortly after by Meir Sternberg and others.

and the institutions for the production, circulation, and reception of literature and art—that not only did they survive despite the profound historical changes that interested Russia at the end of the 1920s, but they also enjoyed lasting significance abroad. Art continues to defamiliarize now as it did in 1916.

Fifteen years ago, Galin Tikhanov declared that literary theory had faded out more or less with Lotman’s death in 1993.<sup>18</sup> I would argue, instead, that Formalist theories are alive and well, and lie at the foundation of the thriving International Society for the Study of Narrative. A “narrative turn” in the past ten-fifteen years has affected a variety of fields, even beyond the humanities—from IT to evolutionary biology, from architecture to law, from geology to medicine to new media. Scholars in those disciplines have turned to narrative theory to reform their methodological tools, while narratologists have started mapping those apparently foreign fields with their toolbox. Quite symptomatically, in 2013 the annual conference of the Society took place at MIT.<sup>19</sup> Post-classical narratology stems directly from the Formalist-Structuralist-Semiotics lineage, with the addition of cognitive, affect, and other more recent theories, and examines the structure, production, and reception of “texts” as broadly understood. The *Living Handbook of Narratology* tracks the history of each methodological category (including focalization, time, character, and plot) from the Formalists to our days, accounting for all the meanings and declensions that the concept has taken on over time.<sup>20</sup>

A field that is currently burgeoning and claims a Formalist lineage is the Digital Humanities. The analysis of literary networks and the circulation of texts that Eikhenbaum introduced is now conducted with sophisticated diagrams and data-mining tools. Topic modeling allows researchers approach large text corpora and formulate statements about genres and the literary evolution. Although the lineage looks merely evocative, it is noteworthy that a hundred years after the birth of the Formal method scholars are still fascinated by the quest for general underlying structures that large groups of texts share.<sup>21</sup>

Among all Formalist texts, Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) has always been one of the least controversial. This may explain why it is popular among those disciplines that are interested in form. However, it still makes the idea of employing Propp to fight terrorism puzzling, if not amusing. This was precisely the goal of a project that was run from 2010 to

18. Galin Tikhanov, “Zametki o dispute formalistov i marksistov 1927 goda,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 50, no. 4 (2001): 279.

19. Among the enthusiastic messages that were sent to the Narrative Society email list after the 2015 meeting, one specifically caught my attention since it maintained that “the Narrative conference makes the stone *story*.” ISSN listserv at <https://groups.google.com/a/georgetown.edu/forum/#forum/narrative-1> (last accessed July 10, 2017, only accessible to members). Shklovskii’s *ostranenie* has probably had the same transformative effect on today’s cognitive narratology and the phenomenology of reception as it did on Bertold Brecht’s theater a century ago. Linguistic anthropology is another discipline that still draws consistently on original formulations of the Formalists and Structuralists.

20. The website is <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de> (last accessed July 10, 2017).

21. Moreover, it is undoubtedly surprising, at least to literary scholars, that the most generous grants on “text analysis” today are offered within computer science departments.

2015 by an MIT-based group of computer scientists and that was funded by, among others, the US Government. The MIT group had recreated Vladimir Propp's model of character functions as a sophisticated software and would run it on Middle Eastern legends and track the system and hierarchy of characters—the protagonist, the antagonist, the helper, and so on.<sup>22</sup> The goal of the endeavor was to gain a better understanding of the culture from which terrorism had sprung and plan foreign policy accordingly. This episode may confirm, in a radically estranging light, that the Formal is political.

Although the Formal method is inseparable from the historical circumstances that produced it and to which it responded, from its original proponents and their engagement with their cultural milieu and the *zakaz vremeni*. The concepts, categories, and intuitions it brought about outlived the Formalist school, became universal over the decades, and has shaped literary studies and methodological approaches in the humanities to this day—well beyond the “linguistic turn” of the 1980s.

From our perspective, a hundred years later, we clearly see the profound connections and the strong analogies between the political turmoil of the late 1910s and the powerful recasting of methods and approaches that the Formalists brought about in the field of cultural studies, on the basis of their magnitude and bearings. To us, readers distant in time, Eikhenbaum's concept of a *filologicheskaia revoliutsiia* serves as a window on the historical-cultural situatedness of the Formalists and their theories, and at the same time sounds like a prophecy.

22. Mark A. Finlayson, Jeffrey R. Halverson, Steven R. Corman, “The N2 Corpus: A Semantically Annotated Collection of Islamist Extremist Stories,” MIT CSAIL Work Product, hdl: 1721.1/57507, 2014, online at [http://www.lrec-conf.org/proceedings/lrec2014/pdf/48\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.lrec-conf.org/proceedings/lrec2014/pdf/48_Paper.pdf) (last accessed July 23, 2017).