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## DISLOCATING THE THEORY OF THE CONTEXTUALIST APPROACH

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**Abstract:** In Eastern Europe it is unusual to write a new theory – the exceptions are indeed exceptional. Considering the alternative versions of modernities, Romanticisms or Reformations, it seems that we can at last set aside the compulsory model of the West-East transfer of knowledge, in order to reveal particular aspects of the Central-East European cultures or different ways the local contexts transform adapted key concepts and theorems. Instead of their simple assimilation into the Western canonic patterns, there are two more directions which complement this tendency: on the one hand, we can investigate the local import of historical criticism dismantling the hegemony of theory, and on the other hand we can study the local embeddedness of circulating theoretical trends from before the new historical turn. However, this is again, as usually, the application of a recent – albeit elsewhere more advanced – Western methodology, this time that of comparative literary and cultural studies. Facing this situation, I will try to dislocate the theory of the contextualist approach through questioning its conception of time as canonized in fundamental terms like histor(icity).

**Keywords:** intellectual history, Formalist theory, *ostranenie*, time projection, rhythm

### Duel

The location and dislocation (or placement and displacement) of literary theory is largely determined today by the unmovable Archimedean point – or at least the

strengthened positions – of the contextualist approach. It seems to me that the approach which regards historicity as an absolute value of literature and theory conceives itself as unshakable, definitive, and, in this sense, even timeless, just as the long-lasting project of the discourse founded on the autonomy of literature. In my analysis I will try to question this (self-confident) time conception of literary and intellectual history.

When Galin Tihanov states that “literary theory is the product of one specific phase in the evolution of one particular regime of relevance” (Tihanov 2) he also adds: “For the historian of intellectual formations, radical historicity is the only credible approach” (Tihanov 5). I wonder whether this exclusiveness is itself the result of a historical process, or the result of the inclination of a researcher investigating historical constructions. Similarly, any other research project is inclined towards certain ways or rhythms (Berszán, “Can Humans survive the Anthropocene?”) of happening (such as the working of transmission media, machinations of the market or Anthropocene acceleration etc.). In my case – gestures of attention in literary writing and reading exercises.

A “timeless procedure” is illusory, not only because it cannot be detached from the cultural and social processes, but simply because all happenings are temporal. By this I mean that any distinguishable rhythm has its specific time. I propose a practice-oriented physics (Berszán, “Empirical Research”) which defines temporality as the rhythmic space of a movement/ happening/ practice or, in short: *kinetic space*. There is no way to find the rhythm of a practice in the kinetic space of another: in order to get in the rhythm of a practice, one has to get out from the temporality/ kinetic space of all other practices. Beyond the only extended time dimension (projected usually on the axis of numbers) I propose to take into account the complementary rhythmic dimensions of happenings as well. Introducing more than one time dimension entails the supposition of independent time directions. Practice-oriented physics defines occurrences with different rhythms as time directions. If rhythm is time direction, changing the direction in time means changing the rhythm. We can follow a happening/practice in the rhythmic dimension according to its own time direction or we can follow it as a time projection to another rhythmic dimension.

If we introduce a theoretical research practice (for instance, the literary theory of Russian formalism) into a shared kinetic space with other cultural or social procedures, yet ignore the temporality of its rhythm, then this equals to making it

*timeless* by means of such a contextualization. Because such placement or location provokes considerable loss and distortion due to the projection of that practice upon the time dimension of certain historical processes we study (and follow) in the chosen context.

Following Foucault, Tihanov adopts a certain positivism through which he studies the history of theory: “By ‘regime of relevance’, a term that I coin here in full awareness of its Foucauldian provenance (recall Foucault’s *regime de savoir* and *regime de verite*), I mean the prevalent mode of appropriating (both interpreting and using) literature in society at a particular time” (Tihanov 20). If Russian formalism, structuralism, and post-structuralism appropriate literature by interpreting and using it as an autonomous discourse or a prototype for other types of discourse, intellectual history, in his reading, questions the way they interpret and use literature (making it timeless in a historical sense). Practice-oriented physics in turn would suggest that interpretation cannot be taken as a paradigm for literary reading, or used as a paradigm for practice. These kinds of appropriation ignore the multiplicity of practical rhythms. Tihanov intends to reveal the historical reality of Russian formalism, but in practice he projects its (theoretical) orientation to the kinetic space of a historical research enterprise. And he regards contemporary regimes of relevance the same way: “The demise of literary theory has by now confirmed the transition to a third regime of relevance, where literature is increasingly recognized not for its social and political weight, nor indeed for some presumed discursive uniqueness, but, in a rather low-key way, for the (largely individual) entertainment and therapy it can provide” (Tihanov 23).

Tihanov’s “imitative self-abnegation” (Tihanov 15), a term he uses when discussing Russian theorists, by which I mean his way of not exposing his own regime of relevance as the current mode of interpreting literature, in fact just camouflages a new kind of appropriation: in the regime of relevance of intellectual history it is only the historicity of theory that matters. Similarly, the contextualist approach replaced unique literariness with the cultural and social contexts of literature: instead of the individual therapy and entertainment it provides (said to be the new way of appropriating it), its quality of being a historical construction became the only relevant issue here. Intellectual history suggests that the regimes of relevance may change, but (changing) historical conditions must be accepted as an eternal system of reference. I wonder whether by emphasizing their historicity one really wants to have a view on

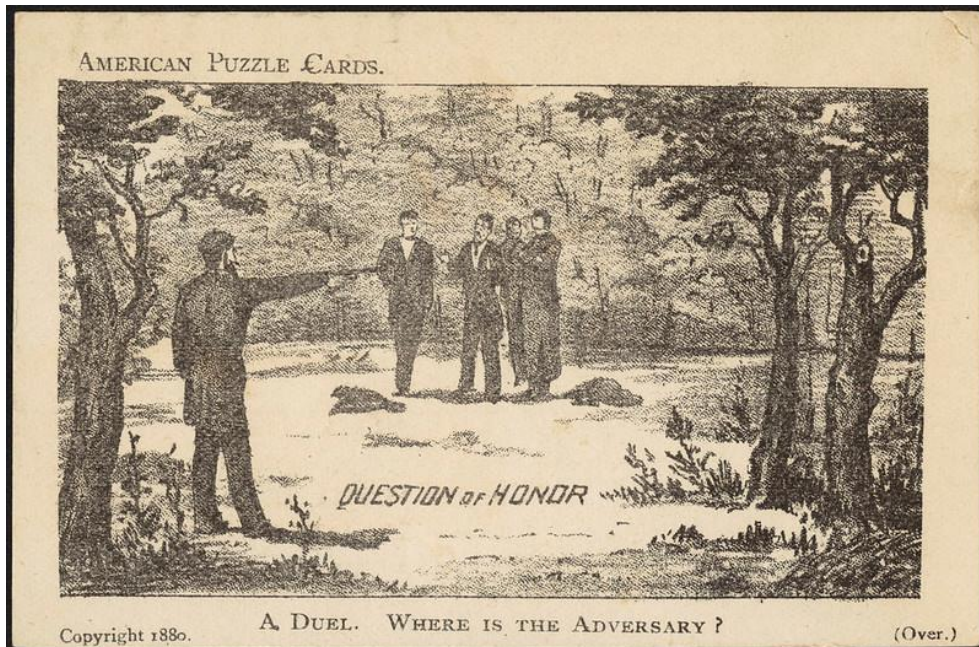
every given regime of relevance concerning literature, or only tries to arrange all of them within a (practically) chosen “regime” or rather, a kinetic space of orientation.

Tihanov’s theory claims to do the former, but seems to work according to the latter: „In any one period, different regimes of relevance are of course simultaneously available. Instead of working in isolation, they are engaged in forms of exchange and competition” (Tihanov 23). Simultaneity is historically unproblematic because we suppose an all-encompassing time-space (that of a period) in which different regimes of relevance interact. But this time-conception of historical relevance obscures the more complex spaciousness of parallel kinetic spaces that exceeds the mere exchange and competition of simultaneously entangled processes. In order to investigate the complexity of different temporalities, it’s not enough to find our way through the complexity of relations and interactions; we have to learn to orient ourselves among multiple rhythms by different practical ways of contact making.

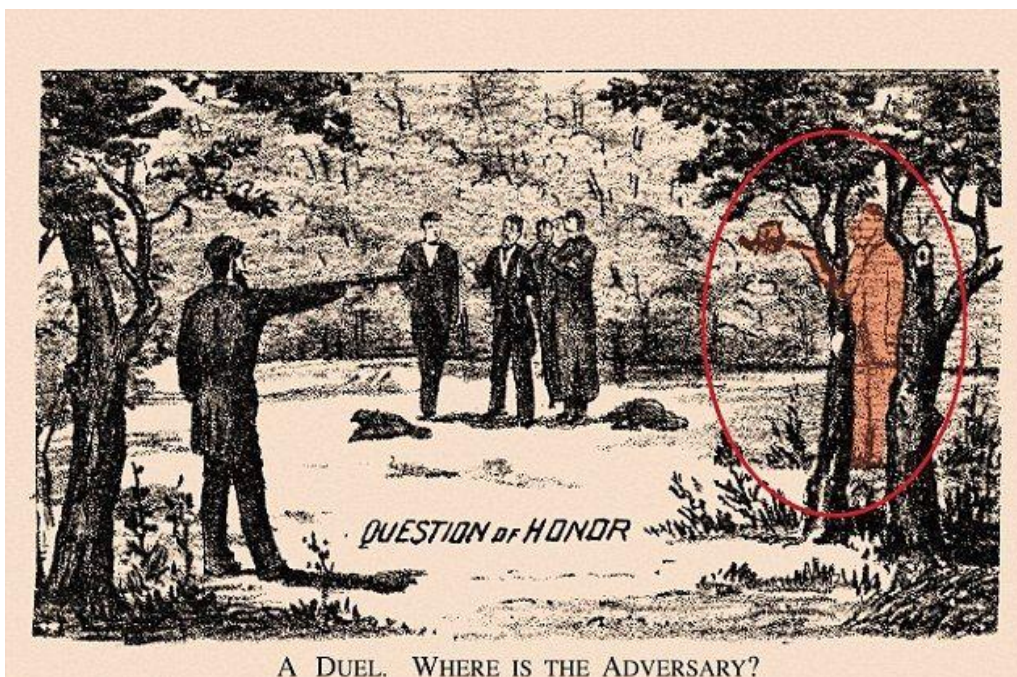
The theory of *refraction* proposed by David Damrosch (Damrosch 281) and adapted by Tihanov uses the physical law of light propagation as a model for the transfer of a national literature into the mediums of other languages and cultures, or for its relocation in another historical period, respectively. There is another phenomenon connected to light propagation (and the geometry of space dimensions) which transforms things in a similarly surprising way – we call it projection. I am interested in how it works between complementary rhythmic dimensions having in view the study of time projections. How, for instance, contextual approach creates the time projections of theoretical endeavors to the kinetic space of historical construction? Refraction involves a different medium, projection, a different dimension. It is hard to adapt these models to the transformation of literature so that the radical historicity of theory would be retained. If the regimes of relevance exist simultaneously and compete with each other, the refraction and projection can happen in both directions. If I claim that Russian formalism is a historical construction that unfolds within the regime of relevance of the autonomy of literature, then it is also possible to regard the contextualist approach as a Formalist procedure or device (*priyom*) that transforms the “fabula” of history into a narrative *syuzhet*. After all, it is a story about theory shaped and molded by (or through) contextual changes.

Or we can put it another way: if several regimes of relevance are in action at the same time, influencing and fighting each other, which of these actions determines that “same time”? The paradigm of historicity traces constructions created by mutual

impacts of occurrences on each other in a presumed common kinetic space called history, but it cannot help in orienting ourselves in and between different rhythms and time projections. To explain this, let's perform the following experiment: look at the duel below (**Fig. 1**), and try to find out where the adversary is.



**Fig. 1** *A Question of Honor. A Duel. Where is the adversary?*, American puzzle card [front], lithograph, 1880, Collection: 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Trade Cards, Boston Public Library, [https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston\\_public\\_library/9786828363/in/photostream/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/9786828363/in/photostream/).



**Fig. 2**

Usually very few people can find him without some help. Look at the version below, revealing the “missing” adversary (**Fig. 2**) and then again back to the first one. The trickery is that we see the hidden other as an opening between the trunks of the trees – and hence, we do not notice anything but what can be seen through *this* hole: foliage and the grass of the grove. The core issue of the effect of this representation is that the deceitful spot is not what we see, but the gap through which we think we are looking. Let us recall watching a film projection: it seems as if a hole would open up in the wall and we could see everything through this hole. However, there is no hole on the wall: the aperture of the refractor is projected on it. In consequence, we are expected to look through the projection of a hole or window through which we can see pictures and happenings.

By a similar trick (though it may be overtly assumed and previously announced as in the cinema), the contextualist approach makes us see everything that has to do with happening, including theoretical or artistic practices, as a hole through which we are looking at the workings of social and cultural contexts called “historical construction”. In his “duel” with literary theory, Galin Tihanov conquers his adversary thus: “We should keep in mind this insistence on the radical historicity of literary theory” (Tihanov 25). Notice that there is a threefold, very strong validation of the projected hole: “we **should** keep in mind,” “**insistence**,” “**radical** historicity”. The success of the show is conditioned by our watching through the hole that reveals only contextual relations.

It is also part of the trickery that the hole and what we can see through it do not simply cover up theoretical or literary practices, but there is a precise connection between the presented historical processes and the projected practices. The hole is, in fact, a “shadow”, more precisely a time projection. In other words, we see a limited and distorted image of certain happenings that take place in more and/or different rhythmic dimensions than “their historical construction.”

According to Galin Tihanov, “the current discourse of «world literature» is an iteration of the principal question of modern literary theory at the time of its birth: should one think literature within or beyond the horizon of language?” (Tihanov 182). I agree to take this question as a starting point, but beyond the horizon of language we can find more than just contexts of social, cultural and institutional conditions – there are the multiple rhythmic dimensions of practice as well. Edward W. Said says: “Like

people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another” (Said 115). I would like to highlight the reference point here: “like people”. Do not forget that not only ideas and theories travel, but we too, including our passages between different theoretical and literary practices. The contextual approach is focused only on historical changes and it totally ignores rhythmic changes involving practical transitions between kinetic spaces. If we extend our research towards this kind of happenings (which are of crucial interest in literary writing and reading), it will raise fundamental questions concerning the time conception and time experience of historicity. It cannot be the sole paradigm of temporality any longer, because along its extended dimension we also have to take into account the complementary rhythmic dimensions of happenings, especially when researching artistic practices.

By distant reading we can reveal historical patterns and constellations in literature, but we avoid or fail to learn refined and intensive gestures of attention and to connect them in practically followed rhythms during the time of reading. If along the geographical and historical dislocations of ideas and theories we want to investigate location and dislocation of people (for instance the ones of theorists, writers, or readers) in and between different kinetic spaces, we need a new theory of time. My main point is that the time of literary reading, writing, and theorizing is more complex than contextualist historicity.

### **The aperture of projection**

In time projections, we consider factual events to be those happenings and gestures which are going on in the very kinetic space of each projection. The captives of Plato’s cave, for instance, accept the movement of shadows as the only real process (Plato 747–52). In our case, the kinetic space of projection is fostered by the practice of the contextualist approach, so we shall examine how Viktor Shklovsky’s theoretical experiments are distorted and what they lose, when projected upon the rhythmic dimension of intellectual history. By placing Shklovsky in a wider historical context, Tihanov reveals two important reference points in the theory of device: the philosophical and ideological conservatism of the “radical formalist scholar” and the basic context of the First World War. Henceforward the experiment of formalist orientation is revealed, on the one hand as the manifestation of a premodern, conservative ideology, and on the other as a consequence of the wartime context,

finally configuring an epitome of the crisis of late modernity. As a time projection to the intellectual history, *ostranenie* is attended like this and in this way.

From the beginning, it is very important for Tihanov to have a look at the formalist theoretical attempt through the special aperture of certain historical considerations, for instance, in-between conservatism and a contemporary thinking affected by the war or on the cusp of different regimes of relevance. Intellectual history never tests the examined theoretical attempt – say, through a reading experiment based on the principles proposed by that theory – but places it in an already familiar historical perspective (for instance, the world view crisis of late modernity) and singles out those characteristic phenomena of the context through which we can see everything, including the target of our investigation as an item of the whole set. In this way, we will exclusively discover connections that are indispensable parts of that period or process.

The surprise of Tihanov's interpretation is not the particular contents through which we grasp the theory of estrangement (such as conservatism, the influence of the war or the regimes of relevance of the period), but this: we never expected that even a theoretical attempt based on the autonomy of literature will exhibit the effects of the same historical circumstances we already find behind many other phenomena. Every historical context we carefully outline, or we refer to by evoking previous historical research creates apertures, on which what we can see through them depends. Since we project these apertures on the canvas of an alerted attention (or on a certain canvas of the attention), we perceive everything sensed as historical construction. The key issue of the trickery is that, by a careful contextualization, we transform the very object of research into a projected aperture through which we can perceive exclusively the occurrences of the opened up kinetic space or the gestures of contact-making performed there, and thus these alone count as real.

Of course, what we transform into its own projected aperture has to become graspable, at least in one concrete way as a part of that kinetic space on which the aperture is opened. In the representation of the duel it is the texture of the suit the adversary wears that coincides with the texture of grass and foliage. The ambiguity is doubled, since the same pattern appears on the face of the hidden person as a clear camouflage using the foliage (not by covering, but transparency), while on the suit – depending on the way we look at it – this pattern can be shifted between the texture of the foliage and the texture of the clothes. The “calligraphy” of citations has a similar



double role in the time projection offered by Tihanov, since these sentences definitely belong to Shklovsky's theory, but *this time* they are speaking about context. The proximity of things given by continuous watching (*videnie*) becomes another ambiguous pattern here, because in the context of previous historical standpoints it is presented by Tihanov as a conservative proximity between words and objects.

Albeit based on change, historical construction strictly excludes any change of the rhythm of happening, which is legitimated by intellectual history since in the contextual space, alternative rhythmic processes cannot be caught in the act. To make such apprehension possible we need to move not simply into other contexts, but into kinetic spaces that displace the rhythm of the intellectual historical research with alternative practical rhythms – such as *videnie*, for instance.

Let us follow the working of all these contextualist *devices* in Tihanov's critical reflection on Victor Shklovsky's theory of estrangement. "One of my main points is that Shklovsky is an essayist and literary theorist whose work can only be properly grasped if taken to be part of the larger wave of European literature and thought called into existence by the war" (Tihanov 41). This "only proper grasp" of Shklovsky's theoretical endeavour has already decided not to exit the rhythmic dimension of contextual approach and thus, whatever is going on in Shklovsky's work, we grasp them as phenomena occurring in the kinetic space of selected contexts. The "correct way of grasping" has to match with precision very diverging proceedings until their total coincidence. Although in "Art as Device" "the task of art is to provide a sensation of the thing that is like seeing [*videnie*], and not like recognition [*uznavanie*]" (Tihanov 43), in its intellectual historical projection Shklovsky's engagement with the radical innovation of the artistic form is subjected to a conservative purpose, that of recovering the indubitable and enduring truth of things. "For a writer who earned himself the reputation of a radical, the young Shklovsky's platform was indeed strikingly conservative" (Tihanov 43). And again: "His faith in the reality of resurrection – first of the words, then also of the objects – rests ultimately on his nostalgic belief in the temporarily lost, but no doubt still retrievable, intimate proximity of word and object, which is posited as an ideal and set as a pressing task for the artist" (Tihanov 44).

Reading Shklovsky, however, we find that he denies the validity of the conventional connection between words/forms and objects, drawing attention not to word-object relation, but to the way of perception and of paying attention. In his

examples (taken, among others, from Tolstoy), not words are in a secret correspondence with the described phenomenon: things and happenings become intensive experiments by decelerated, non-automatized gaze as, for instance, a horse looks at people. For Shklovsky, it is a special kind of gaze which matters indeed, i.e. occurs “as if seen for the first time, as if happening for the first time” (Shklovsky 81–2). Words and forms are occasional or accompanying tools of such a gaze, and when they cease to help us seeing in this way, they are uninteresting from the artistic point of view.

How can this be read as conservatism? Only by eliminating the rhythmic dimension of the literary way of looking at and perceiving things in the space of word–object relation that was displaced by *ostranenie*. This is not a simple carelessness or inattention: making contact by giving up recognizable patterns and relying on the impulses of things is simply not followable, nor graspable in intellectual history. Context is the only complementary dimension for interpretation; we can perhaps speak about some designates without real, i.e. historical reference (see “which [are] posited as an ideal”, Tihanov 44), but we never exit the rhythm of changing contextual relations, even though the impulses of the investigated occurrence invite us for such experiment.

The aperture of projection through which we are expected to see what we see is created in “the empty place” of an eliminated or skipped rhythmic dimension. Following Shklovsky and the early formalists it is remarkable that in their view (*videnie*) the specificity of art or literature is not the innovation in itself (like for revolutionary marxism) or the language in itself (like for structuralist scholars), but an approach (*ustanovka*) or practice by which we keep in touch with things in “a way that perception lingers and reaches its greatest strength and length, so that the thing is experienced not spatially but, as it were, continually” (Shklovsky 93). Most interesting is not the form in itself, but “the way” of artistic contact-making as a certain temporality or rhythm of perception and comprehension.

The artist is not searching for a secret proximity between word and object, but should make us follow his or her decelerated, lingering perception of things. After all, this is the artistic action for Shklovsky. No form and no word have any extraordinary power and as soon as they fail to draw us into artistic contact-making, they cease to be art at all. Literature and other arts provoke an intensive alertness in one way or another, this is why they are much more demanding compared to various media of

entertainment. But this is not only a disadvantageous feature on the market of leisure time activities, as Tihanov mentions (Tihanov 29–30), but the condition of artistic intensity. Obviously, we must deal with something beyond the conservative world view or obsolete conception of art – becoming this way only in the kinetic space of a research oriented by ideological patterns and thus projecting artistic (re)turn towards things to the retrograde epistemological or political attitude.

After Shklovsky we find out that an approach like *videnie* can turn into different kinds of encounters: it can be a special way of *letting-be* for Heidegger (Heidegger, “The Nature”, *passim*), responsiveness to the Other’s face in a Lévinasian sense (Lévinas 9–11) or the active proximity of fellow creatures in a common ecosystem (Claviez 447–453). Shklovsky has already recognized that what is at stake here is a demanding contact-making instead of an identified, nameable essence. Later on, the Formalists prioritized the innovative form, but in Shklovsky’s essay art itself is considered a device or concrete experiment of “estrangement”.

We can link *videnie* with conservatism only by projecting it in another kinetic space where we orient ourselves according to totally different processes and we accept as “historical fact” that being interested in things was replaced irrevocably by their social, cultural and medial construction. Yet according to contemporaneous examples<sup>1</sup> literary writing and reading continue experimenting in proximity-based contact-making. It is not history that takes us away from any proximity, but rather those orientation practices which make no distinction between the rhythm of an occurrence and its time projection. The device of *ostranenie* dislocating us from the kinetic space of previous *proceedings* (see this meaning of Russian *priyom*) becomes in Tihanov’s reading a hesitating theory between innovation and conservatism. It seems to me that this is not a consequence of the strict and unmasking arguments of a critical inquiry in Shklovsky, but it stems rather from the fact that in the kinetic space of intellectual history we can grasp the rhythm of the artistic *ostranenie* only by projecting it onto the contextual relations.

For the same reason, the social effect of the innovative form appears as a cloven hoof in Shklovsky’s conception of art: “Despite his and his fellow Formalists’ many claims (recurrent in their early writings) to art being a process of exclusively formal innovation, the stoppage or failure of this process is implied to generate potentially

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Philip Gross’s poetry (Gross, *The Water*) or an approach to trees by Mátyás Sirokai (Sirokai, *Lomboldal [Foliage-side]*).

dangerous sociopsychological consequences, going far beyond the realm of artistic form” (Tihanov 46). Of course! If Formalist scholars conceive of poetic language as a way or mode of being, it comes as no surprise that it influences our life. The distinctive feature of their conception is that *ostranenie* does not depend on impersonal historical processes, but on *videnie*, i.e. on a kind of know-how of contact-making. The autonomy of literature does not mean that it has nothing to do with anything else except itself, but it is a different kind of orientation in contact-making than the relational connections of social theory. Of course, literature definitely has to do with life and thus with war as well. But not necessarily and not only in a contextualist sense, but also by practical orientation in time(s), for instance. When Shklovsky writes that “the thing is experienced not spatially but, as it were, continually”, he seems to be more curious about this practical orientation in an experiment called literary or artistic *ostranenie*. Tihanov however follows even the inquiry for the proximity of things in a conservative epistemology of truth: “The drive toward rediscovering the substance of things, the desire to regain their true nature in art went hand in hand with a conservative epistemology of permanence and inalterability” (Tihanov 53). As we already noticed, it could not be the case, because according to Shklovsky art does not tell us how things really are, but make us turn towards them. More likely, the problem for Tihanov is that according to the theory of estrangement there are things beyond us, we aren’t surrounded by social, cultural or intellectual historical facts alone, as the contextualist approach presumes. The reason why the event of *ostranenie* itself – despite its power of dislocating our conventional world and confronting us with things – had to be transformed into plain dogmatism was its inclusion in the set of a social historical context of change: “Things are as they are, and art seems to be called upon to reveal or enhance their genuine character through estrangement (to make the stone stonier, in Shklovsky’s parlance) – not to change them or the social settings in which they occur” (Tihanov 53).

Tihanov is no longer concerned at all about how stone becomes stonier in *ostranenie*. Certainly not as a final definition of the *stonehood* as he suggests, but by our turn away – forced by the art – from *petrified* definitions, conventions and routine perception and by our turn towards the stone. After all, Shklovsky is conservative inasmuch as he thinks that we are surrounded indubitably by things, so reality is not social historical alone, but much more spacious; and relating to its openness every petrified convention or routinized form is limited to its recognizable patterns.

Formalism confronted Marxism, an all-inclusive and prescriptive social theory as well, because it sustained the rhythm of literary writing and reading practices irreducible to the temporality of ideological or political endeavors.

In this respect, the foundation of modern poetics also anticipated ecocriticism. Today, like Shklovsky, we also consider unacceptable to regard social historical constructions as our all-encompassing environment, where social, economic and media historical constructions are the “Real” of anything outside us. We have to recognize that orientation by such time projections has contributed significantly to the global environmental crisis. When Tihanov resents that *ostranenie* wants to discover the things and not to change them together with the social settings in which they occur, he presumes political conservatism as the only choice apart from the revolutionary act. Yet there is the Heideggerian *letting-be* as one more alternative of progressive (and violent) change. Shklovsky would accept indeed that art does not change but make accessible things by dislocating us from our familiar conventions. It never estranges us from things, never from the stone, but from petrified, and in this way crucially simplified, routine notions.

According to Shklovsky’s theory, art is not a *device* of the social revolution, but rather a device of responsiveness: it changes a practice, a routinized way of contact-making which once upon a time could help us to get close to things, but it is no more capable of this. The same happens to a genuine rhythm which became the time projection of everything else. Contextual approach is able to discover social processes, but since we try to totalize them – regarding art, the entire culture or even the stone as being their constructions, or when the *raison d’être* of any occurrence depends on its projection to social historical processes – the latter ones turn to be less and less genuine. Formalism recognized that we are inclined to canonize or use as a paradigm even what was revealed once by a new, estranging form. Shklovsky is not conservative, but consequent and radical at the same time, when he also regards canonized estranging devices as misleading and anti-artistic. Historicity as a paradigm assimilates everything, in the same way as the processes of selected kinetic spaces named contexts, by simplifying the included phenomena as time projections to these processes. Literature, art and theorizing are more spacious than intellectual history. If we dumb down Shklovsky’s exciting theoretical and reading experiments as an unavoidable consequence of war, we lose just as much as, in Shklovsky’s view, we lose of the richness of things through routine perception.

Our turn (back) towards things is projected by intellectual history not on conservative gestures alone, but also on a materialism triggered by the war in contemporary thinking. Even though the war appears only once in the “Art and Device” as an example of the effects of automatism - “Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war” (Shklovsky, “Art and Device” 80) – intellectual history explains the whole theory of estrangement in the wartime context, without quoting the only occurrence of the term:

The war was the propitious ground on which a materialist, substance-orientated view of the world grew strong and flourished, amid and out of – ultimately as a protest against – the cacophony and chaos of annihilation. Facilitating a return to the pristine nature of things seemed to be for Shklovsky, Jünger, and so many other writers of the World War I generation the greatest gift that the progress of technology, industry, and warfare, so evident on the eve of the war and during it, could give back to a frustrated Europe. Estrangement was a technique designed to assist this process by equipping the reading public with the required acuteness of perception (Tihanov 52).

Theory needs to be lowered to the level and standard of mere assistance because Tihanov is disposed to comprehend even the intensive perception of things as a function of the wartime ideology in the historical context. As if any other rhythm, including theoretical and artistic practices or the lively impulses of things could be relevant only in the context of the war. This is or, more properly, has to be the case because in intellectual history relevance cannot but be confined to the contextual attribution of value. In the case of intellectual history, the need for fundamental and lasting truths appears as historical materialism and it happens in a much more vehement way, in my opinion, than in Shklovsky’s case, with the aim to decide that the factuality of historicity is more relevant than the proximity of things.

Getting back to the “substance” (or rather the proximity) of things cannot be attributed unequivocally and entirely to the war. If these two happenings encounter indeed, for Shklovsky even the conception of war stems from the aesthetic proximity of things, rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, Tihanov wants at all hazards to reduce theoretical and artistic experiment to the historical context of the war. Because historical context for him is as *substantial* as the proximity of things for Shklovsky. Claiming the death of theory, Tihanov evokes history as the ultimate instance (in as a determined way as Shklovsky refers to the “substance of things” or his Formalist

colleagues to *literaturnost*). In fact, he tries to make the contextualist experiment of practical orientation the ultimate level of all happenings. This time, historicity is important as historical advantage: we think that we see what happened in the time of the Formalists and later on, and we can use this “advantage” as infallible base for the critique of Shklovsky’s theoretical investigations. In the meantime, we attribute values to everything in a regime of relevance orienting us in the (time)direction of historical construction. The problem is that the ultimate level itself is, in fact, one of the practical orientations in time(s), as Shklovsky’s theoretical attempt was as well. The difference between them is not the advantage of historical knowledge, but rather a difference between the time-directions or rhythms they practically follow in their research. Shklovsky takes as his guideline the artistic way of looking (*videnie*) to reveal things as if for the first time (an attempt distorted later as formal innovation); Tihanov regards the pace of intellectual history as a trustful guide in occurrences. As for me, the main question is whether we follow a concrete happening according to its time direction or as a time projection to another rhythmic dimension. If we say that war was the material, substance-oriented base on which the conception of *ostranenie* had been founded – as Tihanov does by referring to Jürgen – we elaborate a time projection of the theoretical attempt we are talking about. But if we consider the rhythm of happening as well, the hypothesis that everything is going on in the same kinetic space becomes unsustainable.

### **“The current task of the theory of rhythm”**

The theory of regimes of relevance suggests that the relevance of literature and of things can only be decided historically, while in order for the significance of anything at all to be able to change, there is a need of distinct practices. It is true that we can give a historical account of the actually formed practices or of their struggle for domination, but the constraint of practical orientation remains unavoidable. The mere fact of which among them became dominant does not necessarily decide which we should follow, or which we should look at as self-explanatory. The global environmental crisis can show that the dominant practices of modernity are not and should not necessarily be sustainable.

If historicity is relevant alone, then there is the risk that everything can be justified by following the direction of historical processes. Tihanov summarizes the history of modernity by saying that man is no longer in the centre and the events of

the world are guided by the external and internal processes revealed by scientific thinking. It is on this that he founds his condemning thesis that Shklovsky “conservatively” returns to the *seeing* of things. As if, in our practical orientation in time, we could rely on the revealed historical processes, irrevocable in all respects. However, it seems we cannot be relaxed about the directions that modernity follows: neither the market, nor science and history have proved wise or reasonable enough in the decisions it has taken. It seems like a bad idea to merely rely on the constructed systems of our civilization, or to follow its historical guidelines. History is not the course of a reality that it “embodies”, but a series of occurrences happening in the kinetic spaces of certain individual or community practices, decisions, orientation strategies, which make us responsible of how we orient ourselves and which rhythmic dimensions we choose to follow when researching and/or narrating.

The contextualist *approach* is not a spatial perspective, but rather an attempt to integrate the analyzed phenomenon into particular kinetic spaces. Tihanov “approaches” Russian formalism as part of the worldview crisis of late modernity, since “we have so far failed to see Russian Formalism as part of this wider crisis” (Tihanov 32). The theory of the regimes of relevance is, first of all, the legitimation of this historicist order of relevance, for no matter what kind of regime of relevance we talk about, it can only attribute a meaning to “things” that is created through the historical context. Theory and art cannot be relevant therefore as independent practices, not even when the discussion is precisely about their theory and practice. Their time projections only make visible or real the occurrences of the context, just like the cave makes visible the movement of the shadows for Plato’s captives. The projection space however can only be all-inclusive while it is exclusive. As a captive gets free, at least to the degree that he can turn his head, he discovers alternative kinetic spaces right away. Historicity too, although it posits itself as an all-encompassing “context”, is practically limited to the temporality of the kinetic space of one single regime of relevance, and only seems all-encompassing as long as its dominant paradigm is able to keep us within – as its captives.

As we succeed in turning our attention elsewhere, Russian formalism becomes important not as a re-telling of the “story told many times over and over” (Tihanov 32) of late modernity, but rather because it warns about the scarcity of our ruling, self-explanatory, routine practices. It is true that later, by constructing its own paradigm, Formalism limits all this to one single story, the evolution of the form that defines



everything. However, I think that we should not transcend it by a new, historical regime of relevance but rather in the direction of alternative temporalities that cannot be limited to any kind of story or history, but accessed by tuning our gestures to their rhythms. Shklovsky's contribution to this is that he does not look for tendencies in arts, nor for the functions derived from previous or simultaneous circumstances, but inquires how arts change our daily routines through their distinct practices. Tihanov's quest happens in the kinetic space of a completely different occurrence: it is the war that forces the turning towards substance, and any kind of theoretical or artistic tendency to this end is self-deception: "Making a virtue of necessity, Shklovsky and Jünger, alongside many other writers at the time, were out to refresh their readers' sensitivity to matter and substance, and to aid them back onto the path to a protected realm of basic and enduring truths" (Tihanov 52). If this is indeed the case, this means that the theory of estrangement and the avant-garde only "assist" the historical formation of *things*, according to a story that is completely different to their own. Is it indeed the incontestable level of positivity of concrete ambitions, or the result of a research ambition to see Russian Formalism at all cost in the context of the crisis of late modernity?

Formalism as a practice with its own rhythm loses just as much, while we simplify it into the result of the struggle of two historical regimes of relevance: "Shklovsky's early paradox of estrangement appears to be an epiphenomenon of Russian Formalism working on the cusp of two different notions of the relevance of literature: one that valorises it for its autonomy and specificity as a discourse and another that seeks to bestow significance on literature with reference to its socially and individually ameliorative capacity" (Tihanov 53). For me, Shklovsky is so exciting because he goes around both regimes of relevance and at the analysis of literary writing and reading he does not limit himself to discourse as the only substance and context of literature (as structuralism and its post-structuralist criticisms do later on), and does not overlook the art of contact-making even for the sake of the ideology of social usefulness, partisanship or revolutionary change. Juxtaposing Shklovsky's *ostranenie* theory and its reading by intellectual history, it seems to me that the "critical relevance" of the explanation based on war, conservatism and the context of the two kinds of regime of relevance is in fact a different kind of *estrangement* of Shklovsky's estrangement theory, one by which we dislocate it from following the artistic rhythm of contact-making in order to create a particular time projection of this practice onto the

paradigm of intellectual history. It does not seem convincing to accept, instead of Shklovsky's literary research, its corrections by the history of theory because the explanation within broader contexts is at the same time narrower than what it explains: it restricts the multitude of contact-making practices to the kinetic space of intellectual historical connections and by this, to a reflective relating. What we read in Tihanov's book about Shklovsky and Russian Formalism comes in front just like the trick in the representation of the duel, where one of the parties turns into grass and foliage in the projection aperture between the tree trunks. In the same way, Shklovsky's theory of artistic contact-making is re-designed as conservatism, war and the regimes of relevance.

In our post-Shklovsky research of contact-making it is also our task to differentiate the rhythm of occurrences and practices from their time projections. Since we cannot see the grass or foliage, and the dueling opponent at once, because we either sense the one or the other, the research of Shklovsky's *seeing* (*videnie*) is one of our current challenges. There are many ways to see, and no practice of seeing can be traced back to another. On the contrary, I can only get from one to the other if I move away from the previous one as vice versa. I can see like Shklovsky and I can see like Tihanov, if I get familiar with both ways. But I see completely different things one way or another. Shklovsky teaches me to see the artistic practices of the contacts made with things, Tihanov teaches me to see the contexts of intellectual historical contact-making. The latter does not illuminate the former, but obscures it. And the other way round. If I see the one, I don't see the other. There definitely are distinct practices of seeing, so we should relearn to orient ourselves within and between them. While the contextual approach tries to trace all of them back to common contexts or historically deduce one from the other, the practice-oriented physics reveals their independent temporal directions as complementary rhythmic dimensions – that what happens only in one, and only in the other. It doesn't try to relate them to each other in the kinetic spaces of common contexts or some other neutral paradigmatic space, but it follows their gestures with varied rhythms – by practice.

In Shklovsky's theory, art alienates us from what we are accustomed to – it moves us away from the usual rhythm. In contrast, the time projections that fall on the rhythm of intellectual history do not move away from the projection space, not even if we follow the occurrences of other kinetic spaces in them: everything projects onto the same rhythm or rhythms. However, it is not all the same, for instance, whether

Shklovsky in his *ostranenie* theory projects the war and its intellectual context or its theory in the description of the war. Tihanov does not see this difference because he interprets “correspondence” *automatically* from the perspective of historical determinism, while he projects every occurrence to the same rhythm, the operation of selected contexts. The theory of moving away from automatisms has at least the same validity for intellectual history as intellectual history for the *ostranenie* theory. Moving away from automatisms also means that we change our orientation practice. Although Tihanov argues that Shklovsky’s possibilities of influence may become limited (Tihanov 54), it seems to me that it is still progressive with respect to the interrupted research of rhythm: what he started is worth continuing.

It is just as important today not to forget what happens in the particular practices of literature as it was in the time of Formalism. For this reason, I would like to make an addition to Tihanov’s theory. This is what he says regarding the Formalist analyses based on the primacy of language, and therefore avoiding drama and theatre:

It is, in the end, this single-minded focus that allows Russian Formalism to produce theory in the only sense in which theory is possible: by generating relational value, in other words an argument or statement that works in relation to one set of phenomena but is tested by, and demonstrated not to work in, other such sets (Tihanov 55).

The practice-oriented physics reveals the cause of this: the individual theories always try to follow one or another selected occurrence according to its own time direction, and because of a theoretical need or for the sake of a consistent system they reduce other occurrences as well to a time projection on this kinetic space. The theory of the regime of relevance for instance is about how, through interpretation and usage, literature is expropriated by society. Intellectual history turns this expropriating practice into a paradigm, as if literature could only be valuable this way, and therefore only offers the time projection of literary writing and reading which falls onto this. However, the literary or artistic practice itself can also change the valid regimes of relevance. In the case of Russian Formalism, we cannot claim that the regime of relevance of literary theory could have brought about the turn that took place in avant-garde artistic movements. We usually say that the two are intertwined. But this relationship lies not only in the common historical context, but also in the fact that Formalist theory attempted to follow the artistic revolution of the 1920s through the

rhythmic dimension that corresponded to its time direction, and which turned paradigmatic for example in the concept of war distorted in a Formalist way. When we attribute the value of literature fully to the regimes of relevance, we must take into account that it might be a just as divergent time direction, not to mention that meanwhile we project all theoretical experiments onto the historical kinetic spaces of the regimes of relevance we choose.

Tihanov attempts “to capture the underlying significance of Shklovsky’s theory of estrangement as part and parcel of the larger dilemma of his early period, that of radical innovation and conservatism: a dilemma that reflects his work on the cusp of different regimes of relevance that endow literature with significance for different reasons and from different perspectives” (Tihanov 40). According to the intellectual history *perspective* the relevance of literature is not given by the practices of writing and reading, but it is their historical use that shapes it one way or another. Russian Formalism does not share indeed this contextualist *approach*, since there it is literature that disrupts the regimes of relevance. Formalists analysed what happens during literary writing and reading, the contextualists analyse how literature becomes a part and a product of that what happens outside it. In Tihanov’s view, Shklovsky is balancing on the edge between social regimes of relevance, but he himself is concerned with the fact that estrangement as a change of rhythm dislocates the practices of literary *seeing* from some kind of routine. Later on, Tynyanov thinks about the literary fact as the same rhythm of the renewal of forms or the “dislocation of the system” (Tynyanov 31), but Shklovsky’s initiative seems more interesting to me:

[P]oetic rhythm consists in the distortion of prosaic rhythm. Attempts to systematize such distortions have been made; they are the current task of the theory of rhythm. It seems probable that such systematization will not succeed, for we are talking not of complicating but of disrupting the rhythm, of disrupting it unpredictably; if such a disruption is canonized, it will lose its power as a device of deceleration (Shklovsky 96).

Shklovsky never wrote the book about rhythm that he had promised. For me, it seems as a more interesting *current* endeavour to continue the research of “rhythm distortion” that he abandoned, rather than to *distort* the rhythm of his research practice in contextualist time projections. It would be useless to argue that such “time projections” are just as creative as the *ostranenie* in Shklovsky’s view, because there is

a fundamental difference: literature always distorts the rhythm of prose differently, in all respects unforeseeably, for the many kinds of seeing of many kinds of things, but the contextual approach also wants to see literature in the same contextual historical projection in which it sees everything it observes.

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