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THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS OF THE FAMILIAR: REFRAMING SOVIET AVANT-GARDE CINEMA BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This study reinterprets Soviet avant-garde cinema of the 1920s through the analytical lens of Russian Formalism, challenging the prevailing scholarly dichotomy that frames these films either as ideological propaganda or as purely aesthetic experimentation. Employing a formalist conceptual analysis, the study investigates key cinematic devices in selected films by Eisenstein, treating rhythmic, intellectual, metric and tonal montage types as the primary units of analysis. The method integrates formalist principles with sequence analysis to determine how familiar sociopolitical motifs function within the perceptual logic of poetic cinema. The findings reveal that revolutionary and socialist imagery in avant-garde films operates not as direct ideological messaging but as perceptually automatized material necessary for generating defamiliarization effects. Devices such as rhythmic, intellectual, metric and tonal montage reconfigure these familiar motifs into sites of renewed perception, confirming their role as formal prerequisites rather than propagandistic ends. The analysis further shows that the historical displacement of Formalism by Marxist and post-structuralist frameworks shaped later misreadings of Soviet cinema, obscuring its original system-bound aesthetic rationale. It concludes that Soviet avant-garde cinema's political motifs should be understood as integral components of a wider formal system grounded in perceptual estrangement. This approach provides a historically informed analytical model for reassessing early Soviet film beyond ideological binaries and offers a foundation for further research on how aesthetic systems emerge from and respond to their cultural zeitgeist.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

In the realm of human activity, art has always occupied the special provision, as it incidentally conveys irrational through rational, playfully exteriorizing mysterious and problematic phenomenon of human mind. Throughout history, art has taken various shapes and form, but with the invention of kinetograph by Thomas Edison the art has materialized into something that has never been seen before - cinema. The screening of The Arrival of the Train by Lumiere brothers heralded a new era of artform, tailored for novelty and uniqueness in its form of expression. Unsurprisingly, this groundbreaking invention quickly became a global obsession, spreading rapidly around the world. Remarkably, the emergence of cinema has led to hasty declaration the death of theatre. However, this claim was dispelled later on, as the influence of theatre on early cinema was acknowledged and recognized. In this context, the early development of cinema in Soviet Union holds particular significance, especially considering the prominent legacy of Russian theatre (Kirn 2017). Pioneering figures like Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold played a vital role in shaping both theatre and early cinematic expression.

Despite inner state struggles and upheaval, Soviet School of Cinematography was one of the pioneers of early movies, introducing the movement of avant-garde with its peculiar features. Soviet directors such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov left an indelible stamp on the history of cinema, with their distinctive visionary approach to film structure. By innovatively employing montage and unconventional techniques, early Soviet filmmakers left enduring legacy of attitude towards the language of cinema. The phenomenon of soviet avant-garde cinema emerged from sophisticated and complex zeitgeist anchored by Russian Formalism, Marx's dialectical materialism and revolutionary ideals. Characteristically, contemporary studies on soviet avant-garde movement in 1920's are prone to simplifying films produced during the period and neglecting intellectual and academic climate.

In a manner analogous to cinema's evolution from theatre, the tradition of film studies was established on foundation of literary theory and criticism, favouring post-structuralist

perspective. Hence, traditionally Soviet cinema was associated with highly conspicuous changes and events, that were unfolding in the times of early Soviet Russia. Even though, the role of formalism in avant-garde movement formation was recognized and appreciated, the post-structuralist left-leaning framework has always been dominating the discourse of film studies. The academic field conventionally tied soviet avant-garde cinema to historical events, political ideologies, societal issues and personal life of directors. Historically, innovative, cutting-edge formal elements of soviet cinema solitary were viewed as a tool of power for achieving goals including propaganda of soviet revolutionary ideas, ideological messaging, reflecting historical era. Moreover, subsequent intellectuals took a step further and applied such post-structuralist theories as deconstruction theory, intertextuality and discourse analysis to soviet avant-garde cinema. The negligence of unique time spirit as well as post-structuralist anachronic interpretations reflects the vivid crisis in the field of film studies, devaluating artistic values of soviet avant-garde movement and downplaying the role of formalism in intellectual climate of early 20th century.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to bring into the argument academic anachronism in film studies regarding Soviet avant-garde cinema. This article explores a striking reconsideration of early Soviet cinema, shifting the focus from thematic interpretations to the intrinsic value of its formal elements. That is to say, present study establishes a goal to analyze pivotal phenomenon of early soviet tradition of filmmaking under the scope of Russian formalism theory, critically evaluating cinema as a self-contained system of forms or signs with meaning within its correlation. By reexamining Soviet cinema of 1920's, this study challenges contemporary tradition of viewing the movement from post-structuralist readings perspective. Moreover, it critically examines the objectivity and balance of contemporary intellectual traditions in the humanities and cultural studies, considering the noticeable influence of a predominantly left-leaning perspective. As a result, alternative argument will be proposed signifying the importance of zeitgeist in cinema studies. The inextricable link between Soviet avant-garde movement in cinema and simultaneous rise of formalism theory in revolutionary climate might serve

as a conceptual model for subsequent analyses of cinema from different eras and epochs. The revelation about early soviet films through formalism lens and proposed model for cinema analyses may present substantial perspective inciting another layer of understanding film studies tradition and cultural studies in general, offering alternative intellectual framework diverging from contemporary mainstream course.

Analytical Method and Unit of Analysis: A Formalist Framework

This study defines the primary units of analysis as the four montage types identified by Sergei Eisenstein: metric, rhythmic, tonal, and intellectual montage. These montage types are treated as discrete formal devices that reveal how perceptual and aesthetic effects are produced in Soviet avant-garde cinema. Rather than approaching montage as a narrative technique, the analysis considers it a structuring principle that reorganizes temporality, spatial continuity, affective tone, and conceptual meaning. The examination focuses on short sequences in which these devices become most perceptually active, since it is at the level of device interaction that the process of defamiliarization becomes visible. By grounding the analysis in montage types, the study centres the formal operations that generate aesthetic meaning instead of treating sociopolitical motifs as narrative content (Eisenstein 1977, 54).

Although Russian Formalism originated within literary studies, it provides a methodological approach that is directly applicable to the analysis of early Soviet cinema. The Formalists did not offer a purely abstract theory; they developed a mode of inquiry based on isolating artistic devices, examining their functions, and determining how they produce renewed perception. Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Yury Tynyanov outlined procedures for identifying rhythm, repetition, syntactic arrangements, and other formal elements and studying their interaction within a system. These procedures correspond to the way Eisenstein, Vertov, Kuleshov, and other filmmakers conceptualized cinema as an assemblage of devices whose meaning arises from their interplay rather than from their narrative content. Formalism therefore serves as a suitable methodological foundation for studying how films construct philosophical and cultural meaning through form. Its emphasis on defamiliarization, system dynamics, and the renewal of perception

makes it possible to analyse cinema as a mode of cultural thinking in which aesthetic organisation itself becomes an intellectual act (Shklovsky 1990a, 32).

Analysis: Perceptual Structuring in Eisenstein's Cinema

The analysis examines four central montage types developed by Sergei Eisenstein, metric, rhythmic, tonal, and intellectual montage, using selected sequences from October (1928) and Battleship Potemkin (1925). These montage forms constitute the primary formal units through which Eisenstein constructs perceptual effects and guides the viewer's engagement with familiar sociopolitical motifs. Each montage type foregrounds form by reorganizing habitual visual material into new aesthetic configurations, thereby generating the conditions for differential perception that define poetic cinema.

Metric Montage: October (1928)

Metric montage is used most prominently in the Nevsky Square protest in October. The sequence abruptly shifts from a peaceful demonstration to violent rupture through Eisenstein's insertion of single-frame juxtapositions that disrupt temporal continuity. Instead of conventional frame-by-frame flow, Eisenstein arranges paired frames, two identical frames of one image followed by two identical frames of another, creating a sudden rhythmic shock. Early in the sequence, long shots of the crowd and the newspaper office are interrupted by paired frames showing the cannon's mouth from two angles. Later, a more complex series alternates between several gun angles and a close-up of a gunman's face. The final examples distil into binary alternations: a gunman's face paired with a gun, followed by two alternating machine-gun shots. In each case, the visual rhythm accelerates independently of narrative time, producing a visceral perceptual jolt that marks the transition from civic assembly to armed repression.

Rhythmic Montage: Battleship Potemkin (1925)

Rhythmic montage is exemplified in the engine-room sequence of Battleship Potemkin, where pacing and tempo organize the viewer's perception. The movement of the pistons is synchronized with the sailors' actions, creating a unified dynamic rhythm between human and mechanical forces. As the tempo increases, the montage shifts to progressively tighter shots of faces, ammunition, and mechanical details, accelerating the narrative tension. The associative linking of these fragments relies on the viewer's

interpretive synthesis, leading toward the climactic moment in which the crew collectively resists orders. Here rhythmic montage structures emotional progression: pacing becomes the tool that guides the viewer from steady coordination to heightened urgency, culminating in the symbolic alignment of human solidarity and mechanical force.

Tonal Montage: October (1928)

Tonal montage appears in October through the detailed, sequential depiction of the Tsar's monument. Eisenstein isolates individual sculptural components, such as the orb, scepter, and emblematic features, and arranges them in a rising tonal sequence. The focus on textural and symbolic weight rather than action produces an affective atmosphere of rigidity, authority, and impending collapse. By fragmenting the monument into its constituent parts, the montage shifts the emotional register from reverence to estrangement, preparing the viewer for the symbolic overthrow of imperial power. Tonal montage here functions by modulating mood through visual emphasis rather than through narrative progression.

Intellectual Montage: October (1928)

Intellectual montage operates through conceptual conflict, producing abstract meaning through the collision of shots. In October, Eisenstein intercuts the Mensheviks' speech with images of harps. The juxtaposition transforms the speech into a commentary on repetitive, empty rhetoric, creating meaning not inherent in either shot alone. Later in the film, the aftermath of the Winter Palace's storming is juxtaposed with clocks from different world cities. This pairing produces a conceptual synthesis: the emergence of a new historical time shaped by revolutionary change. These examples show how October uses intellectual montage to articulate ideological or symbolic arguments through formal contrasts rather than direct narrative exposition.

"Our Duty is to Experiment!": The Rise of Avant-Garde and Formalist Thought in the 1920s

Methodological Framing: Avant-Garde Context and Futurism

Apparently, the political vector and academic tendencies majorly influence the creator's thought process drastically, reflecting in major principles and concepts of hegemonic

collective knowledge. Thereas, the contextual peculiarities of the soviet avant-garde movement must be acknowledged and interpolated into the contemporary analyses of Soviet cinema in the 1920's. In that regard, it should be noted that in the beginning of twenties century prevailing romantism and symbolism had rendered its obsolete, obdurately centering conventional historical or philosophical absolutes and neglecting theoretical side. Thus, dominant symbolism and romantism paradigm with an emphasis on elitism and personalism were challenged by aesthetically innovative avant-garde countermovement represented by Abstractionism, Constructivism, Suprematism and Futurism. It must be noted that specifically Futurism had the most significant bearing on Formalism. Futurism, in its rebellious and extreme form, regarded art as self-sufficient independent system and downplayed the role of artist to mere worker. Even though key formalism figures did not admire the devaluation of artist, the audacious idea on art as independent system laid the foundation for upcoming formalism's principles. Distinctively, early formalist primarily focused on literary forms, even though admitting the possible extrapolation of their ideas on the artwork in general (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 2017, 30).

Analytical Approach: Foundations of Formalism

Originally, early formalism raised a problem of subjective artistic principles in literary study, losing the essence of literariness in the labyrinth of countless historical, philosophical and psychological concepts. Instead, they proposed alternative perspective of literariness resting on dry scientific facts isolated from any philosophical, historical or artistic interpretations. To put it another way, formalist studied literary forms rather than literature itself. Thereafter, two group of Russian literary scholars under the name of Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ) and Moscow Linguistic Circle built upon futurism, proposing original scientific approach to literature and later on to art in general under the name of Formalism. Namely, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, and Yury Tynyanov among the others laid down the foundations of early formalism, leaving a personal stamp on literary studies and intellectual heritage on the whole (Eikhenbaum 1965, 102).

Roman Jakobson, as one of the leading figures in formalism, has put forward the differentiation of communication functions. Precisely, Jakobson brought into discourse the notion of: (1) prosaic language, which linguistic means has no any values, apart from practical function of delivering message, and (2) poetic language, where literary means move to the forefront and play as intrinsically valuable units. The poetic language is individually highlighted for its sequential organization rather than traditional paradigmatic. Jakobson emphasized that poetic language has a distinctive meaning-making process, driven by the sequential placement of its elements. For example, in poetry rhythm, meter and parallelism are created through the distinctive systematic sequential organization, inherent in internal rules of poetic language (Jakobson 1960, 356).

The initial revelation of poetic language by Jakobson was consequently built upon by other formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky, and Yury Tynyanov. As an aside it shout be mentioned that early formalists declared their fundamental principles in stern opposition to historic intellectual framework (Eikhenbaum 1965, 103). However, certain conceptual patterns might be traced back to philosophers of 18th and 19th century. Specifically, the influence of early philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Henri Bergson on formalism key concepts is evident (Mitchell 1974, 75-76). Both intellectuals devoted considerable effort inquiring into perception. Hereby, Kant's "aesthetics theory" debated for independent nature of aesthetic experience, requiring deeper and reflective engagement on personal non-contextual level (Mitchell 1974, 74). Similarly, Bergson's "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" highlighted the peculiar nature of human mind to automize perception, minimizing the least possible effort for engagement with the object. Bergson's particularly studied the automatization of perception in the question of humor formation, but the core principles of the phenomenon might be applied to broader perspective of art nature. Precisely, the underlying mechanism of automatization and habituation of perception, or rather breakage of the automatization can be linked to the very nature of art.

Conceptual Tools: Defamiliarization and Laying Bare the Device

The aforementioned ideas paved the way for Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization (ostranenie), one of the central principles of formalism. Defamiliarization, centered on Kant's and Bergson's ideas on perception, evaluate the art as an autotelic aesthetic experience through estranging familiar reality and making the process of perception longer and anew (Shklovsky 1990a, 3). Considering the fact that formalism shifted the focus from meaning itself to perception, praising art for characteristic quality of inducing the alternative image of reality, defamiliarization appears to be closely tied to prolonged and sophisticated perception of information. Perception is precisely what formalism define as aesthetics and the prolongation and increased complexity enhance aesthetic value of the text. The subsequent study of defamiliarization concept by later scholars brought into the discourse more detailed operating principle of the technique. Precisely, two main types of defamiliarization were distinguished: (1) Through sophisticated riddle-like structure of form, forcing to decode meaning. In literature such effect is achieved through literary devices such as metaphor, metonymy or euphemism. (2) Through extraordinary focus on objects or themes that habitually and automatically perceived. As a rule, the effect is achieved by extensive and detailed description on ordinary object (Zubarev 2012). Ultimately speaking, Shklovsky built upon the idea of defamiliarization on the notion of recognition and seeing, where recognition refers to automized unconscious perception and seeing occurs at the moments of encountering the object as if at the first time. Accordingly, seeing object rather than recognizing it precisely stimulates appreciation of artwork's aesthetic values (Shklovsky 1990a, 6-7).

Subsequently, Shklovsky extrapolated his conception of defamiliarization into narratology, identifying the mechanism of synthesizing the raw story into piece of art. Generally, Shklovsky recognized fabula, natural sequence of events of the story" and plot (syuzhet), structured and organized story through clear set of techniques and devices (Shklovsky 1990b, 20-25). It is precisely the plot through which the habitual perception is broken by means of defamiliarization. In that context, it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge the Shklovsky's perspective on defamiliarization role in work of art, as it epitomizes critical conception for the evaluation of further ideas in the article. For that purpose, the reference must be made to the fundamental concept of Roman Jakobson, debating

for perceived meaning not from individual form in isolation, but from the relation and interaction with other forms in the system (Jakobson 1960, 357-358). Similarly, Shklovsky debated for perception of artworks in comparison and contrast with other pre-existing artforms. In other words, every single artwork is produced either in parallel or antithesis to the system of background works of art. Moreover, Shklovsky believed that artistic images have always been stable and consistent with little change thorough the art history. These fixed images correspond to a great number of different forms used by various artists over decades and centuries. With this background Shklovsky describes creative effort as an ability to manipulate images through constructed forms by accumulated set of techniques and devises (Shklovsky 1990b, 16-21). In light of this, the very nature of art constantly requires innovative and original devices to stimulate emotions of special nature, what Shklovsky called differential perception. As a result, the role of the new forms in the artwork can be defined as aesthetic arousal through replacement of old forms of artistic images that have turned habitual and perceptually automized.

One additional point merits mention regarding the distinctive narration device such as "laying bare technique" (obnazhenie priema) as the principle is discussed in the further discourse of contemporary interpretations of avant-garde works. The device refers to the type of narration where the very process of narration itself exposed to the recipient. The laying bare technique defamiliarize perception by forcing the recipient to acknowledge the devices within narration instead of passively perceiving the story. The technique can be achieved through different means and all of them have one common peculiarity – encouraging a recipient into direct engagement with the artificial nature of the artwork either through direct appeal to recipient or through breakage of conventional forms of narration. In other terms, the purpose of laying bare technique is to break the illusion of stories realism, exposing the structural formation (Shklovsky 1990d, 179-181).

Macro Perspective: Tynyanov and Literary Evolution

On the other hand, Yury Tynyanov has leveraged the ideas of formalism ideas on a macro level, contributing to understanding of the literature history in general as an independent system with its own internal rules. Vividly inspired by Bergson's conception

of time as nonlinear, fluid and subjective flow, Tynyanov in his work on literary evolution, debated for recognizing literature as the system evolving through complex interaction of past and present forms. Tynyanov starts by critiquing the conventional tradition of viewing literary work either from psychological background of the author or from external political, cultural and social history. Both approaches shift the focus from the subject of literariness to secondary diachronic elements. Instead, Tynyanov insist on autonomy of literature as the set of interconnected, independent and mobile systems. Therefore, historical changes in literature must be associated with prevailing of one system over other with new forms (Tynianov 2019, 270-273). The proposed framework contrasts with traditional axiom linking literature changes to external shifts in society, history or personal life of the author. In other words, conventional literary studies neglected the self-intrinsic nature of the literature, downplaying its role to the mirror of extrinsic events. Besides, Tynyanov explain literature evolution through systematic restructure of constant reenvisioning of forms, which stem from automized perception of old forms. Notably, Tynyanov principles ideas on literary evolution strongly correlate with Shklovky's concepts, but in broader context. Suchwise, the role of forms was further attributed to constructive function, lying in relation of the form to other forms within system. Moreover, Tynyanov additionally classified form's function into: (1) autofunction – form's relation to other such forms in different systems, and (2) synfunction – form's relation to other dissimilar forms within one separate system (Tynianov 2019, 275-276). Thus, the literariness of a work is defined less by its individual qualities in contrast to other works, and more by the system within which it is situated. In this vein, the framework may provide a strong argumentative foundation for identifying the anachronistic imposition of contemporary Soviet avant-garde cinema studies into an extrinsic system.

Historical Reorientation: Formalism under Marxism

On the whole, academic and intellectual discourse of early 20th century revolved around central idea of form and perception supremacy. In other words, the scholars brought to the front the question of how things are perceived, instead of what is perceived. Avant-garde ideas were flourishing until the clash with state's Marxist ideology interests. The conventional intellectual discourse has seen a radical shift to political and ideological

stance, disregarding the alternative perspectives as apolitical, elitist and inaccessible to masses. Avant-garde was clearly not in line with new univocal world. Under the circumstances, formalism ideas were arguably appropriated and instrumentalized for political and ideological goals. Precisely, remarkable concept of defamiliarization, generated by Shklovsky, was co-opted by Marxist theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht (Mitchell 1974, 75-76). Originally, the defamiliarization technique advocated for making familiar strange, stimulating the perception of a new and different reality. It must be noted that, Shklovsky's concept was purely aesthetical aimed at encouraging more complex perception. Meanwhile, Brecht's "alienation effect" viewed the process of making familiar strange as a mean, rather than ends in itself. In other words, defamiliarization was politized by redirecting the effort from sophisticating perception to altering consciousness, as Brecht himself said "If the world could be shown differently, i.e., as having different possibilities, could it not be differently made?". Ironically, later analyses of Soviet cinema were framed through Brechtian perspectives, even though the films were originally produced within the dominant paradigm of formal method (Sebuktekin and Kılınçarslan 2025). The preceding example is only the small precedent among many others, but it perfectly demonstrates the whole tendency of prevarication and devolution in formalism core principles. The apogee of this process was marked by Leon Trotsky's critique of formalism in "Literature and Revolution". Even though the importance of form and structure were acknowledged, the emphasis was put on broader social and historical context. The formal method was dismissed for its excessive reliance on technical construction of art. Instead, Trotsky manifested that all art is a social product, shaped by the dialectical interplay between changing historical realities and inherited cultural forms (Trotsky 1924). Primarily, it was proposed to view art as a socially embedded process, accessible and participatory to all, including working class. Ultimately, Leon Trotsky and broader dialectic discourse redefined art as dynamic mediation – a tool for social change and broad human emancipation. In other words, the demand for art to be aligned with revolutionary conscious and historical materialism has become clear and vivid. In that regard, formal method was clearly at odds with the new paradigm and key

formalism figures had to adopt and adjust to new realities. Eventually, by the end of the 1920's formalism and its ideas were entirely eradicated from Soviet Union.

From Aesthetic Device to Political Tool: The Afterlife of Formalism in Post-Structuralist Thought

Intellectual Migration: From Russia to Prague

Being forced out from Soviet Union by constant ideological and political attacks, formalism ideas and its key thought leader Roman Jakobson have migrated to Czechoslovakia. The core principles were further developed and elaborated under the name of the Prague Linguistic Circle. In general, the inquiry and interest into latest innovative formalism theory have fallen outside the scope of literary studies, becoming all-encompassing. In that regard, evident firm position of formalism in intellectual circles and reenvisioning of Saussure's structural linguistics model have culminated in formation of structuralism school of thought. Distinctively, the tradition of viewing the language as independent system of fixed meanings was successfully inherited from formalists and applied on wider context of culture and meaning (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 2017, 63-65).

Presumably, "Course in General Linguistics" by Ferdinand de Saussure has served as the prevailing foundation for structuralism, the distinctive parallels of structuralism ideals with formalism principles are evident. Precisely, such central formalism concepts as defamiliarization and dynamic literature system were built upon further and transformed into the theories of foregrounding and aesthetic function respectively by Jan Mukařovský (Mukařovský 1970, 19-21). Additionally, the central concept of binary oppositions, arguing for meaning in language and culture is produced through oppositional pairs parallels with Tynyanov's function of form with Autofunction and Synfunction.

The contribution of Roman Jakobson into structuralism formation must be separately highlighted, as he served as a bridge between formalism and Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas. Specifically, Jakobson formulated axial model of metaphoric and metonymic language. Other scholars similarly extrapolated structural approach to various humanities field. In particular, French scholar Claude Lévi-Strauss applied structuralism theory to anthropology, revealing unconscious structures of human thought (Lévi-Strauss 1955,

431). Equally, A. J. Greimas, who is believed to be one of the founders of narratology, has made great contribution to narration mechanism building upon formalism principles (Greimas 1987, 65-72). Generally speaking, structuralism continued the intellectual tradition of formalism theory, advocating for the same principle of domination of internal structure over external meaning. Commonly, structuralists analyzed the rules within a system and the relation of the system itself with other systems.

Theoretical Evolution: From Structuralism to Post-Structuralism

Since its introduction into intellectual discourse the audacious ideas of form-centered, scientific and decontextualized approach have always been critiqued for neglecting historical, political and ideological contexts. In particular, formalism has been met with strong opposition by Marxism driven Bolshevik movement. Similarly, the members of The Prague Linguistic Circle faced serious political pressure during the rise of fascism in Europe. Critical turning point was marked by the sprout of post-structuralism, which put under the question the self-sufficiency and stability of the systems. Instead, the emphasis was put on the indeterminacy of meaning and ideological or political predication of the structure (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 2017, 145-148). In that regard, post-structuralism school of thought explicitly critiqued critical positions of formalism which were evidenced in new criticism movement in 1940's in the US as the final iteration of formalism ideas. Thus, the evolvement of structuralism to post-structuralism, which arguably occupies the dominant position in humanities studies, is defined as critical intellectual reorientation, rather than natural progression in flow of thoughts. These two movements, which seemingly evolved one from another, formed a dichotomous system of relations, where each concept from one framework is opposed to a corresponding, opposing concept from the other: where Structuralism sought stability, post-structuralism embraced instability; where Structuralism favoured form, post-structuralism interrogated content, context, and power.

Conspicuously, the substantial part of the present study is devoted to literary theory and criticism. Such elaborative discussion of literary criticism serves as a mean to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary tradition of film study discipline. Historically, the house of film studies is closely linked to literary criticism tradition, appealing to

such concepts as deconstruction, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and narrative structure. Curiously, omitting the peculiar political and ideological orientation, the terms have deep roots in literary theory and criticism, bearing a strong resemblance to initial ideas of formalists. Thus, the present chapter argumentatively evaluates the post-structuralist political reinterpretation of formalism conceptual ideas in the discipline of film studies. It is noteworthy that introduced discussion is crucial for further explication of contemporary studies on soviet avant-garde cinema.

Comparative Perspective: Defamiliarization and Deconstruction

One of the most vivid examples of reinterpretation of formalism ideas by post-structuralism framework is illustrated in the deconstruction technique developed by the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida. Essentially, Derrida critiqued the structuralist evaluation of structure as systems with stable and fixed meaning. Instead, the opposing viewpoint has been proposed, debating for never fixed and constantly deferred meaning. Furthermore, Derrida critiqued the hierarchical structure and interdependence of binary opposition developed by structuralists. Instead, he insisted on fluid and codependent nature of structure by revealing the privileged and marginalized sides in the binary system. Thus, Derrida dispels form's neutrality and stability, highlighting instead the ideological and political predication of forms (Derrida 1976, 125-132). Practically speaking, deconstruction reading exposes the gaps, contradictions, and aporias in textual systems, which disrupt ideological closure. Remarkably, the mechanism of deconstruction appears to be strikingly similar to Shklovky's defamiliarization. Both techniques appeal to disruption of habitual perception and stimulation of conscious awareness of forms and structure. However, the end goal of each approach completely different. While, defamiliarization is primarily the tool for aesthetic cognition through differential anew perception. On the contrary, Derrida's deconstruction exposes how meaning is unstable, political, and constructed (Derrida 1982, 9-12). Essentially both concepts spotlight the form as the aesthetical element in defamiliarization or site of contradiction in deconstruction respectively. Additionally, the central post-structuralism idea of "The death of the Author" by Roland Barthes can be traced back to the formalism grounded principles to scientific approach to literature in isolation from any external context,

including the author intent (Barthes 1977, 142-143). Even though at first glance both beliefs seem to advocate for the same idea, its evaluation of the author appears to be slightly different. While, formalists focused on encoded worldview of the author, denying the authorial intention. Barthes opposingly severs the author from the text completely, debating that only through the reader's interaction with the text the meaning arises. The laid-out insight demonstrates the evolution of original literary hypotheses into contemporary academic framework, characterized by peculiar inclination to politicization. The primary involvement with formal construction value was further elaborated into subsequent concepts, continuing the inclination to form as a source of meaning. Within given context, the succeeding experiments with forms has led to formation of self-reflexivity of the artwork, which found its place in post-modern art. Self-reflexive approach refers to deconstruction of narrative craft, deliberately exposing devices, forms and structure. In postmodernist culture self-reference is widely employed in various plays with form through peculiar devices. In cinema and literature direct conversation to audience represent the technique of self-reflexivity. In visual art self-reflexivity is expressed in self-portraits and depiction of art creating process (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 2017, 197-200). In general, the technique has taken various forms, with common trait of directing attention to artificiality of the story. Notably, the first appearance of self-reflexive tone was identified and reported by Viktor Shklovsky in the novel "The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman" by the Irish novelist, Laurence Sterne (Shklovsky 1990d, 147-170). Analyzing the novel Shklovsky formulated the peculiar technique of "laying bare", which was oft-mentioned in the article. Speculatively, the later formulated self-reflexivity closely resembles Shklovsky's revelation of laying bare device, which speculates for self-reflexivity as next iteration of revised formalism ideas. However, similarly to deconstruction, self-reflexivity was subsumed under political purpose. Particularly, self-reflexive elements are conventionally interpreted as questioning the status of reality, history, and narrative authority, turning more into philosophical or ideological act rather than perception device. Said interpretation is in complete contradiction to original conception, which treated discussed technique as another device of aesthetic arousal.

Authorial Intent and Reception: Barthes and the Death of the Author

Finally, under the influence of Barthes's "The death of the Author" and belief in fluid meaning by Jacques Derrida, Bulgarian French philosopher Julia Kristeva coined conceptual idea and literary device named intertextuality. Essentially, Kristeva approach the text as the quintessence formed from multiple other texts that underlie it. In other words, all the literary texts can be understood only through relation to prior literary background (Kristeva 1980, 66-68). Traditionally, in literature and cinema intertextuality appears in the form of parody, pastiche and allusion. In fact, abovementioned techniques had been widely used long before its formulation by Kristeva. One of the pioneers in defining the concept were formalists Yury Tynyanov and Roman Jakobson, viewing literature as a relational system. Their foundational logic of relational meaning of forms within literature system laid the basis for intertextuality model. However, as in previous examples Kristeva theory has seen a drastic shift from the device itself to instrumentalization of it. Particularly, the intertextuality, as well as other post-structuralism concepts, has served as a tool for critique of capitalist saturation of culture and the commercialization of art. This idea is illustrated by intertextual anxiety: the collapse of originality — no author, no origin, no pure meaning — only endless references between texts. Interestingly enough, the idea paradoxically echoes Tynyanov's idea that forms continually shift, while themes are primordially stable, reoccurring from one text to another (Tynyanov 2019, 275–276). Therefore, intertextuality was framed as not only creative method, but as an unavoidable condition of contemporary artistic production. Meanwhile, the discussion on interrelated system of art in formalist discourse was premised within boundaries of aesthetics and the very process of art-making.

On the whole, the set forth argumentation provides a clear picture of contemporary nuances of dominant post-modernist approach in contemporary film studies, stretching back to literary criticism theory of formalism. Additionally, the discussion lifts the veil of peculiar sociopolitical externally oriented lens of status quo in contemporary film studies. Developed idiosyncratic epistemological system serves as a pillar for re-evaluation of soviet avant-garde cinema through self-devised conceptual lens.

Familiar Icons, Unfamiliar Purpose: Revolutionary Themes as Cinematic Devices

Analytical Approach: Formalism Applied to Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema

The early twentieth century has been marked by tremendous political and social upheavals with the desperate need for new audacious ideas. Correspondingly, dominating themes of romantism and symbolism has cloyed the contemporary cinema and the demand for the new resonating with the times approach was vividly noticeable. Before the 1917 Revolution, Russian cinema was dominated by salon melodramas, relying on Art Nouveau aesthetics and offering an escape from drab reality. In 1919, Lenin's government nationalized cinema, marking August 27 as the birth of Soviet cinema. The new regime viewed film as a vital propaganda tool, ideal for educating a largely illiterate population (Kovalova 2017, 97-101). However, the film industry suffered due to civil war and societal upheaval. As a result, many studios moved south along with former filmmakers either emigrating or fading away. Filmmaking was nearly halted in the early 1920s due to material shortages and a lack of trained professionals. This void was soon filled by a wave of young, revolutionary directors. Post-revolutionary Soviet cinema attracted a vibrant generation, fascinated by futurism and circus. Rejecting the past's monumentalism, young artists from diverse backgrounds, shared a drive to forge a new cinematic language, finding inspiration in experimental theatre. Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Lev Kuleshov among others revolutionized cinematic language, shifting the focus from bottom line of the film to the process of perception (Kim 2022, 106-110). Emerging generation of soviet avant-garde filmmakers generously experimented with the form and structure, bringing forth numerous formal techniques such as "The Kuleshov Effect" by Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein's "The montage of attraction" and countless more terms. In fact, their unique approach to cinema and its forms has culminated in formation of Soviet montage theory. However, the clear favouring of peculiar sociopolitical themes and revolutionary imagery in soviet avant-garde cinema has always been puzzling and incongruous for modern scholars. As a consequence, the persistent dissonance has led to split of soviet cinema studies into two opposing sides, interpreting it either through ideological propaganda lens or from aesthetic perception stance. In continuation, this chapter aims to shed light on existing contradiction and

idiosyncratically explicate the thematic choice through internal laws of aesthetic perception.

The key figures in Russian avant-garde movement directly or indirectly reflected the same guiding principles laid out in various theoretical formations including futurism, constructivism and formalism. Unifying interest in form experimentations circulated among different fields from visual arts and architecture to literature and music. One way or another, avant-gardists intersected and shared intellectual influences, including key soviet filmmakers of early 20th century. For instance, Sergei Eisenstein learned was significantly enriched by theatre practitioner Vsevolod Meyerhold while working in experimental theatre studio. Similarly, Lev Kuleshov, the founding figure of Soviet montage theory, has drawn profound inspiration from futurism and formalism (Kuleshov 1974, 45–50). Notably, Kuleshov occupied one of the central roles in theoretical foundation of soviet filmmaking tradition, mentoring the great deal of soviet filmmakers like Vsevolod Pudovkin. Dziga Vertov (born David Kaufman) was deeply influenced by futurism and constructivism, formulating revolutionary idea of camera lens as a greater representation of reality "cine-eye" (Kino-Glaz) (Vertov 1984, 5-11). Altogether, all those mentioned were involved in primarily premised on formalism Moscow filmed school, either as lecturers or students. Particular attention should be paid to the fact that the whole group have fallen under the sway of Marx's dialectics to varying extents. Namely, Sergei Eisenstein operated strictly under the influence of dialectic approach, defining conflict as a core element in artistic expression (Eisenstein 1977, 45–63). However, interpretations soviet avant-garde cinema and specifically Eisenstein's movies framed solely through their engagement with Marx's dialectics constitute an overly reductive model that fails to account for the subsequent historical developments such as state censorship and mounting political pressure.

Thematic Paradox: Political Imagery vs. Formal Experimentation

Meanwhile, key formalism figures like Roman Jakobson and Yury Tynyanov showed an interest in cinema, effectively making significant contribution into its development (Puyal 2024, 15-18). Evidently, multiple theoretical writings of pivotal filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov clearly demonstrate undeniable impact of formalism ideas

on avant-garde cinema (Vertov 1984, 5–11; Eisenstein 1977, 45–63). On the contrary, the relationships of unfolding filmmaking tradition and Bolshevism were complicated and strained. As previously mentioned, the avant-garde movement gained the major inspiration from Karl Marx's dialectics, establishing new revolutionary approach to art and soviet early filmmakers were not an exception. However, the simultaneous incidental inclination towards formalism concepts were always opposed by Bolshevik authorities. Paradoxically, despite strong thematical and sociopolitical alignment with prevailing state ideology, avant-garde cinema was steadily pressured through censorship and banning by the very same ideologists. Ultimately, soviet avant-garde cinematography had to adapt to changing conditions, renouncing experimentations with the forms and revolutionary approach. As a result, in the 1930th the mainstream soviet cinema has taken the principally new form, completely abandoning the fundamental principles of avant-garde movement (Skakov 2021, 25-29). All the attempts to revive experimentational approach to cinema was marginalized by cultural authorities. Thus, the heterogeneous mix of both formalism and Marx's dialectics in soviet avant-garde cinema, along with loyalty to formalism, suggests that the articulation of dogmatic messages was not a priority for avant-garde filmmakers. Nevertheless, prevailing interpretation subverts the role of formal experimentation to strategic tool serving agitational purpose.

Distinctively, soviet avant-garde cinema has always adhered to experimentation to forms and structure, which is already a vivid sign of specific orientation of the movement. However, current intellectual discourse often bothered with characteristic inclination of soviet avant-garde movement to peculiar themes like revolution, labor revolt and industrialization. For instance, in the Dziga Vertov's early directorial works (Izvolov 2019, 2-17). Frivolously, the choice of these specific themes has been linked to the agitative propaganda of bolshevism movement, celebrating new rules of order. Even though the belief seems to fit into a bigger historical picture, some essential details tend to be overlooked. In that regard, above mentioned particular emphasis on complex and speculative forms specifies the perception-centered nature of the films, rather than ideological bent. However, the established framework oddly contrasts with habitual choice of themes with political and ideological tone. The puzzling contradiction between

experimental nature of soviet avant-garde cinema and political motifs is notoriously left out from the discussion and the question of its true calling remains open. In that regard, avant-garde explicit focus on experimental forms and complex structure can be referenced to the central formalism notion of defamiliarization by Viktor Shklovsky. Essentially, the aesthetical values are produced in the process of differential perception. In other words, the complexity of the form perplexes the perception turning it into seeing the object rather than recognizing it. Moreover, according to Shklovsky the more familiar the image is, the more effective the artistic technique of making it strange (Shklovsky 1990a, 1-14). The following mechanism was exemplified on the peculiar comprehension of poetry in a foreign language, when the emotionality of the text feels distant despite the presence of defamiliarization devices. As Viktor Shklovsky notes, "The slightest aberrations from the norm in the choice of expressions, in the combinations of words, in the subtle shifts of syntax—all of this can be mastered only by someone who lives among the natural elements of his language, by someone who, thanks to his conscious awareness of the norm, is immediately struck, or rather, irritated by any deviation from it." (Shklovsky 1990b, 36). That is to say, the differential perception can only arise against the immersive well-known norm.

Defamiliarization of the Familiar: Revolutionary Motifs as Aesthetic Tools

The uncovered insight plays crucial role in present discussion as it endorses the argument that political motives in soviet avant-garde cinema were chosen as prerequisite means rather than the goal object. To expand on this, in the context of 1920's recipients, revolutionary themes and socialist imagery had become perceptually automatized, entering the realm of unconscious mental landscape. Thus, the avant-garde filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Vertov generously utilized political themes as the most familiar and recognizable images for recipients of that time to awaken perception by aesthetic defamiliarization of the known. In other terms, the conventional wisdom that views avant-garde artists as ideological architects of the socialist political regime can be reversed and redefined as an argument in favour of the political and social context shaping the thematic canvas of familiarity upon which the form could reassert aesthetic autonomy (Waite 2021, 113 - 128). Therefore, contemporary analyses of soviet avant-garde cinema

represent anachronic perspectives due to the natural lack of capacity to perceive these films as they were seen by contemporary audiences at the time of their production. The logical non-atomized modern perception perspective of aforementioned events and images interfere in the process of "seeing" object disrupting the aesthetical perception (Castello Branco 2022, 97-101). As the result, the role of the such motifs is downplayed to mere agitation and proselytization.

By a reversal of logic, the later development of soviet filmmaking tradition, labeled as socialist realism, instead used simpler accessible form and structure, shifting the focus to passive perception of dogmatic narrative. The principal difference between avant-garde cinema and later social realism lies in the premise that the former allows to see hackneyed images in a new fresh way and the later instils the idea conveyed by these images. Ultimately speaking, the essence of soviet avant-garde film enthusiasts laid principally in the process of recognizing familiar in estranged to stimulate aesthetic response. Moreover, the images and themes in this process, which are believed to be stable and immobile, serves as a sheer prerequisite means to achieve the desired effect (Hughes and Riley 2007, 197-205).

Situated within a more expansive framework, the choice of themes and imagery in soviet avant-garde cinema can be understood through the Tynyanov model of literary evolution. Already established in earlier sections the model ties formal changes within a system to the loss of form's primary function due to its obsolescence and assimilation into the realm of the ordinary and familiar. As a result, new perceptually novel forms replace older forms, creating binary opposition within the system, where meaning emerges not in isolation but through contrast (Tynyanov 2019, 275–276). However, what is often overlooked is that the binary opposition arises not from external systemic relations, but from the internal dynamics of forms within the system itself. In other words, the stimulation of genuinely novel and purely aesthetic perception requires the presence of habitual dogmatic forms, as it ensures the contrast that makes such perceptions possible. Thus, sociopolitical themes and revolutionary imagery in soviet avant-garde cinema might be construed as fertile ground for deliberate integration of experimental forms, contrasting with overall formal composition of film system.

To further substantiate this argument the perspective of Shklovky on cinema can be referenced to theoretically support the argument. Fundamentally, the type of films discussed in the present chapter was defined as poetic cinema. The discussion opens with an examination of Shklovsky's fundamental unity of cinema laws. As a general principle, the narrative in film operates through familiar, everyday scenarios or thematic elements — what was named "semantic constants". Moreover, semantic constants imply two or more contrasting situations the juxtaposing of which results in a resolution or semantic significance (Shklovsky 2001, 89-92). On this basis, Shklovky opposes this model with a contrary one, in which the resolution is achieved not through semantic construction of element within fabula, but through juxtaposing of formal elements on the plot (suzhet) level. For example, by reordering narrative components — such as revealing the ending first or interweaving events non-linearly — the same underlying plot can give rise to an entirely different interpretation (Prokhorova 2023, 82-85). Ultimately speaking, poetic cinema resolves the narrative by compositional constant, while prosaic one is mediated by semantic means. Yet the sematic constants are uniform in both poetic and prosaic languages, functioning as a baseline for resolution. From this premise, one could assert that poetic formal resolution constitutes a fundamental distinction between avant-garde cinema, engaging with sociopolitical, revolutionary images and ideological cinema opting to semantic resolution of the very same images. In this regard, the film Mother (Mat, 1926) by Vsevolod Pudovkin merits particular interest, as it manages to combine both prosaic and poetic languages, by starting with semantic narration of everyday situations and gradually shifting the focus on compositional structure, culminating in purely poetic formal resolution (Shklovsky 2001, 89-92). Notably, contemporaries favored specifically the first half of the movie, critiquing weak second half of the film. The unfolded paradox substantiates the claim that contemporary readings of soviet avant-garde cinema's role are largely misaligned with the reality of its original historical context. Thorough observation of key avant-garde movies through the proposed lens in the article will demonstrate a range of examples aligning with the primary claim. The juxtaposing of slaughtered cattle scenes with the massacre of striking workers in Strike (Stachka, 1925), the red flag hand-tinted frame, contrasting the black-and-white film in The

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin, 1925), reverse shots, superimpositions, and split screens in Man with a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kinoapparatom, 1929) by Dziga Vertov and countless others examples corroborates the idea that all these elements were used to prompt the viewer to see them from a distanced perspective, revealing these images in a way they had never previously conceived.

Ultimately speaking, it may be concluded that the internal logic of soviet avant-garde cinema is constituted in the "recognition" of deeply familiar elements, achieved through the application of the formal method. Moreover, the act of recognition is self-contained, positioning the formal devices not as tools in service of meaning, but as meaning in and of themselves. As a base line, the essence of poetic and therefore avant-garde cinema can be understood through direct quote from Shklovky's work - "Poetic and Prosaic films distinguished by the prevalence in poetic cinema of technical and formal over semantic features, where formal features displace semantic and resolve the composition." (Shklovsky 2001, 92).

CONCLUSION

Across October and Battleship Potemkin, the analysis shows that Eisenstein's montage forms, metric, rhythmic, tonal, and intellectual, transform familiar sociopolitical motifs into structured perceptual experiences rather than ideological messages. Metric montage produces shock through temporal rupture, rhythmic montage intensifies tension through accelerating pacing, tonal montage shapes the scene's emotional atmosphere, and intellectual montage generates abstract meaning through conceptual collision. Together, these techniques demonstrate that revolutionary imagery functions as perceptually familiar material enabling montage to achieve its aesthetic effect.

The phenomenon of soviet avant-garde cinema has always offered substantial ground for intellectual debate. The experiments with structure and forms, peculiar themes and images, authentic nature and novelty – all of that have been of particular interest to current scholars in film studies field. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize the series of critical events, intellectual trajectory and strive for new ideas that were unfolding in the beginning of 20th century. The aforementioned details have defined the unique

zeitgeist which framed the avant-garde as an active participant in the shaping of a new reality.

The energy of the time was embodied in audacious movements of formalism, futurism and constructivism. Inspired by these doctrines, early Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, and Kuleshov sought to reconfigure cinematic expression from the ground up. The film has become a space for experimentation, challenging the dominant narrative of cinema as channel for cultural or symbolic mediation. Yet, thematically and visually the avant-garde centred on the peculiarly familiar sociopolitical motifs. This seemingly incompatible combination could not coexist for long in ideologically rigor climate and avant-garde movement collided under the state's pressure. Despite the objective and systematic suppression from ruling regime the value and role of the soviet avant-garde movement remains open for discussion. The contradiction between radical form and ideological clarity set the trajectory of interpreting the avant-garde cinema either from ideological or aesthetical point of view. This predisposition laid out the methodological approach that shaped film studies tradition.

As a counterargument the present article put forward the argues that peculiar imagery in soviet avant-garde cinema is not a tool of indoctrination but as an essential element of aesthetics. With the help of theoretical foundation, the thematic choice of the movies has been defined as a deeply familiar elements which are crucial for laying the groundwork for aesthetic resonance. In the hands of Eisenstein, Vertov, and others, symbols like the red flag, the sailor's uprising, or the marching masses were not direct messages but a part of broader formal system of meaning. By highlighting the images solely and decontextualized, this complex dynamic within film's system is dismissed, resulting in binary opposition between aesthetic innovation and political context. Instead, the present discussion treats these two factors as mutually dependent, with neither being conceivable in the absence of the other. Future research may extend this formalist framework to other avant-garde filmmakers, compare montage structures across different national cinemas, or examine how defamiliarization operates in later sound films to further clarify the relationship between form, perception, and political context.

On a broader scale, the developing argument might contribute to conceive aesthetic values not in the decontextualized vacuum, but rather as complex systematic mechanism resonating with social, politic and intellectual climate. The established approach might be further applied to other art movements from earlier (or various) periods. For instance, the notorious motifs in films by Leni Riefenstahl, widely regarded as fascist propaganda, can be reinterpreted through the aesthetic lens as prerequisite means utilized to attain superior aesthetic objectives. Such a perspective does not justify or neutralize political function; it reveals how function and form were historically co-constitutive.

Ultimately, the bottom line of the article lies in revealing corrosive effect of anachronistic reading. Omission of unique unrepeatable zeitgeist of certain artistic movement along with retroactive application of later theoretical models foreign to the movement itself, not only tailor the art object to the demands of the present-day discourse, but also erodes its artistic significance. To analyse a system of forms without its zeitgeist is to miss the very grounds on which those forms became meaningful. And if there is one lesson to be drawn from the lasting legacy of the Soviet avant-garde, it is that true innovation arises when form and history collide.

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