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Art as Technique

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> *"If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been."* — Leo Tolstoy *"If art teaches anything (to the artist, in the first place), it is the privateness of the human condition. Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, it fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness – thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous "I"."* — Joseph Brodsky.

"I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive." —— Joseph Campbell In 1917, Viktor Shklovsky published an essay "Art as Technique", or "Art as Device", or "Art as Method" in other translations. In that essay, he analysed the role art plays in our perception of the world and how it can affect it. For me, the main idea was this: when objects, events, ideas become familiar to us, we stop paying proper attention to them, stop seeing their true essence, stop appreciating them, start taking them as granted. The general law of perception is if something becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Compare riding a bicycle, typing on a keyboard, or speaking a new language for the first time versus doing it after a few years of practice. I took Tolstoy's quote at the beginning

from a fragment of his diary written in 1897 (it's in Shklovsky's essay, too), and it perfectly sums up this idea:

> I was cleaning and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember — so that if I had dusted it and forgot — that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. To which Shklovsky adds:
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> And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualisation devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. To approach that, Shklovsky coins the term *ostranenie*, or "defamiliarisation", a technique that's used by many in all kinds of art that aims to make objects unfamiliar, strange, and therefore evoke strong and new sensations[1]. Further in the essay, he writes:
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> And so, in order to restore the sensation of life, to feel things, to make a stone stony, there exists what is called art. The goal of art is to give a sensation of the object as a vision, not as recognition; the technique of art is the technique of "defamiliarisation" of

things and the technique of complicating the form, increasing the difficulty and length of perception, as the perceptual process in art is an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the making of a thing; what is made in art is not important. The same happens in language and art, too. We use metaphors, analogies and other image devices to simplify the understanding of concepts and make their perception automatic and seamless. It works well because we substitute seemingly complex and unfamiliar things using familiar images. Recalling and reusing them for our brain is much easier than processing new, unusual, strange images. Thus, when you read a text and object descriptions seem familiar to you, the perception is effortless and the sensation is weak, far from what you would have felt if you encountered the same thing for the first time.



Shklovsky defines two types of images: *prosaic tropes* — practical means of thinking aimed to simplify perception; and *poetic tropes* — metaphorically highlighting an object's traits to intensify the impression. He writes:

> An image is not a constant subject with changing predicates. The goal of the image is not to bring its meaning closer to our understanding, but to create a special perception of the object, to create its 'vision,' not its 'recognition.' For example, you walk down the street and see a man wearing an old hat drop his bag. You call the man: "Hey, old hat, you've dropped your bag".

> This is an example of a prosaic trope that uses the word "hat" metonymically. But compare it to "This joke is old hat. I heard it ages ago". It is an example of a poetic trope, that uses the word metaphorically. A poetic trope is a tool of poetic language, while a prosaic trope is a superficial resemblance, such as calling a sphere or a head "a little watermelon".

That kind of "thinking in images" is not only important in literature but cognition and language as a whole. We think and communicate in images[2]. Images are fundamental for us to comprehend abstract concepts, such as love, joy, society and economy, but when images become familiar and well-known, they start being less vivid, require less mental effort and do not strike the same, eventually becoming a cliche. Here's what Orwell said about it in his essay "Politics and English Language" (1946):

> "A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image... Huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves." Together with other formalists of his time, Shklovsky considered the way art describes an object more important than the object itself. They believed that any piece of art should provide us a new perspective on quotidian things and therefore redefine them for us. "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant," Shklovsky wrote in

> "Theory of Prose". That's why he pays so much attention to the idea of "defamiliarisation" and suggest to complicate the way objects and events are described and portrayed deliberately. He believed that approach is beneficial because the process of perception is a process of experiencing the artfulness of an object and you cannot truly "experience" something without sufficient intellectual efforts. "Defamiliarisation", on the other hand, provides us with a fresh view hence helping to "experience" rather than just recognise something, making the perception laborious instead of automatic. That's the essence of the technique.

To illustrate how it works, Shklovsky analyses how Leo Tolstoy's used "defamiliarization" in his writing. He often described objects and actions as if we experience them for the first time. For example, he sometimes avoided known names of the object's parts in describing the object and instead named them like they are parts of other objects. One of the examples Shklovsky provides is Tolstoy's short story "Kholstomer", a short story about a horse. It features the technique of "defamiliarisation" achieved by using the horse's point of view. Here are the horse's thoughts on the human's concept of private property[3]:

> I understood well what they said about whipping and Christianity. But then I was absolutely in the dark. What's the meaning of "his own," "his colt"? From these phrases I saw that people thought there was some sort of connection between me

> and the stable. At the time I simply could not understand the connection. Only much later, when they separated me from the other horses, did I begin to understand. But even then I simply could not see what it meant when they called me “man’s property.” The words “my horse” referred to me, a living horse, and seemed as strange to me as the words “my land,” “my air,” “my water.” In this case, the story demands “defamiliarization”. In it, the technique acts as its main component on the premise level — the horse’s POV would be quite strange anyway.

You can find many examples of Tolstoy applying the technique in his work. Such as, this is how he described a theatre performance:

> The middle of the stage consisted of flat boards; by the sides stood painted pictures representing trees, and at the back, a linen cloth was stretched down to the floorboards. Maidens in red bodices and white skirts sat in the middle of the stage. One, very fat, in a white silk dress, sat apart on a narrow bench to which a green pasteboard box was glued from behind. They were all singing something. When they had finished, the maiden in white approached the prompter’s box. A man in silk with tight-fitting pants on his fat legs approached her with a plume and began to sing and spread his arms in dismay. The man in the tight pants finished his song alone; then the girl sang. After that both remained silent as the music resounded; and the man, obviously waiting to begin singing his part with her again,

> began to run his fingers over the hand of the girl in the white dress. They finished their song together, and everyone in the theatre began to clap and shout. But the men and women on stage, who represented lovers, started to bow, smiling and raising their hands. The technique wasn't invented by Tolstoy, however. It can be found in any place where an image is applied, but the image shouldn't aim to help us recognise the object. Instead, it should aim to create a special vision of it, a special way of experiencing the object, a unique feeling of it[4]. It might be similar to how you would try to retell your dreams to someone right after waking up. You often don't have an explanation and quick terms for what you have just seen and things in the story of your dream appear to be fresh in your perception[5].

The effect can be both achieved in using "strange" and rare words, interesting turns of syntax, or unusual style, however, an author can use simple language and evoke powerful and strange images, which would be enough to take the reader from the automatism of perception. Shklovsky writes:

> "In exploring poetic speech both in its phonetic and lexical composition, as well as in the arrangement of words and in the nature of semantic structures composed of its words, we encounter everywhere the same artistic feature: that it is deliberately created for perception drawn out of automatism,

and that in it, the vision of it serves the purpose of the creator. It is “artificially” created so that perception lingers on it and reaches its highest possible strength and duration. Here, the object is perceived not in its spatiality but, so to speak, in its continuity. These conditions are met by “poetic language.” According to Aristotle, poetic language should have the character of the foreign, the astonishing; in practice, it often is foreign: Sumerian among the Assyrians, Latin in medieval Europe, Arabic elements among the Persians, Old Bulgarian as the basis for Russian literary language, or an elevated language like the language of folk songs, close to the literary one.” Although Shklovsky writes about the application of this technique mainly in literature, in different ways, we can see the similar effect achieved in other media, and life in general. As a quick example, let’s see how it can work in the visual medium.



Above you can see Giorgio De Chirico's painting *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*. It is his first painting in the style of quiet and enigmatic old towns. The painting depicts a part of Florence's Piazza Santa Croce with oversimplified details. The main things we see are the almost empty square, the plain facade of the Basilica of Santa Croce and the headless statue right to it.

De Chirico painted it during his recovery from a serious illness. He had been to the Piazza Santa Croce before, but this time he saw it differently, it appeared to be ill as he was. So he painted the Piazza with that in mind, not focusing on the Basilica or any other objects per se, but focusing on his perception and vision of it instead. He provided us with the opportunity to experience it today in the same way he felt it

one hundred years ago – lonely, empty, ill. There are probably many photos or realistic paintings of the Pizza but none of them would strike us as Chiro's image of it. Just as Shklovsky believed that art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony, De Chirico's painting exists to make us feel things, to make Piazza Santa Croce Piazza Santa Croce as he felt it, as it truly was for him.

So you might want to ask Shklovsky, how the hell am I suppose to do that and why?

Whether for Shklovsky, Tolstoy, De Chirico, for you, or for me, "defamiliarisation" is always a stylistic choice, most of the time unconscious, intuitive, and there's no algorithm to how to do that. I stumbled upon this essay 3 years ago, just when I started writing, and when it quickly took an important place in the way I perceive art and create it myself. You might not share the same belief, for you art might be something that portrays things as they are and that's where the truth lies[6], which I reckon is called "realism". But for me, "realism" has never been appealing, and in many areas of my life, including all kinds of art, I seek things weird, strange and unique, absurd and surreal, consequentially creating more of that kind myself.

I believe you can't learn how to apply "defamiliarisation" from books, from the internet guides, or from any teachers. No one can tell you how to do that except your innermost self. To make something truly unique and new to others, you must be you, you must use your own words,

phrases, colours, brushstrokes, camera angles and so on and embed into them your own personal feelings and perception of the world so others could see it through your unique lens the way they never saw before. But I believe you can become better at it. You can pay attention to how others do it, whether those are famous masters of the craft or your talented contemporaries, whether the work resonates with your or not. You can study what you like, why you like it, or maybe why you hate it as well. You can identify what makes things unique for you. There's an infinite way of portraying the same thing and the best one is always personally yours. I believe that every piece of art is created to shake us and wake us up from the conventional way of seeing things and show us the mundane distorted through the eyes of an artist for whom every created piece of art is a projection of their unique view of reality, a beautiful and grotesque in its pristine strangeness piece of their infinite universe given to the world so maybe at least one person can see it, or read it, or listen to it and feel less lonely.

Notes

1. Basically, language psychedelics.
2. Some scientist, whom I'm lazy to lookup, say that we use around one metaphor every ten seconds of speech.
3. A total trip, if you ask me.
4. That's what's called "vibe", I believe.
5. Another mental exercise to understand the technique is imagining a time traveller from the past who starts describing unfamiliar objects in the present.
6. I'm sorry but "where the truth lies" is probably my new favourite English phrase!

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