

Russian Formalism 100 Years On: Interpretation, reception, perspectives

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Conference conveners: Catherine Depretto, John Pier, Philippe Roussin

Russian formalism has been established as a fundamental heritage of the human and social sciences for several decades. The major discoveries by the formalists are numerous, as are the essential advances coming out of their works that have exerted influence over research, both directly and indirectly, well beyond Russia and the Slavic countries.

But are these works truly known? What, exactly, has their reception been in the West since the 1960s? Have the advances enabled by this work become so many truisms and handed-down ideas?

The aim of this conference is to look at the issues anew, a hundred years after formalism first appeared and fifty years after it gained currency in the West.

The time has now come, on the one hand, to take stock of the issues by highlighting the main steps forward pioneered by the Russian movement as well as of how these developments were integrated into the western intellectual landscape during the 1960s under the influence of Roman Jakobson's structural linguistics and, for France, thanks to the role of mediator played by Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette. These questions involve looking at the principal figures acknowledged as representative of the movement (Shklovsky, Eichenbaum, Tynjanov) as well as at how their texts were translated, presented, circulated.

On the other hand, this stocktaking also involves defining the principal readings – a consequence of the progress of research, access to new materials and changes in the scientific climate – that formalism has experienced in Russia and abroad since the 1980s. The inclusion of Russian formalism within a European perspective has raised new questions, revealing its links with science at the time of its emergence that extend beyond formalism's well-known anchoring in the poetics of the futurist avant-garde. Other names have appeared such as those of Grigori Vinokour and Boris Jarkho, embodying a more discrete and less iconoclastic Moscow formalism. Even so, these advances bear little weight alongside a pervasive lack of interest in a movement associated with linguistic technicalities regarded as indicative of a rigid disciplinary orientation whereas today it would seem that it is those soft orientations of literary criticism, branded as “chitchat” by Jakobson, that hold sway.

Bringing together theoreticians and historians of literature as well as specialists in the human sciences, this international conference ultimately seeks, through the main lines of reflection proposed above, to address the question of the ongoing uses and current relevance of the Russian movement, including its extension to Czech and Polish scholarship and its developments and modulations starting in the 1960s with the Tartu school.

