

# Experience as Device: Encountering Russian Formalism in the Ljubljana School

Kaitlyn Tucker Sorenson

In the introduction to *Slavic Review*'s Winter 2013 Special Issue on Slavoj Žižek, Dušan Bjelić limns the provocation inherent in the publication's topic: on the one hand, he cites "Žižek's total disinterest in the 'discursive particularism' of specialized area studies" and, on the other, he points to "Slavic studies' equal disinterest in high theory."<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, it may seem controversial to consider Russian Formalism, a longstanding fixture of Slavic studies, alongside the Ljubljana School, the intellectual movement to which Žižek belongs. As proverbial bookends of the short twentieth century's interdisciplinary groundswell of critical theory, the two movements seem to stand at both an historical and a theoretical remove from one another. Yet, in its early stages, the nascent Ljubljana School did encounter Russian Formalism as it began to develop its own theoretical platform. This article examines the history of that encounter and considers how these two theoretical movements can best be brought into fruitful dialogue with one another.

To that end, in what follows I explore several different methodological approaches from the discipline of intellectual history and consider what each of them can contribute to the attempt to find meaningful connections between Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School. Section I observes certain biographical parallels in the respective histories of Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School. Section II traces the reception of Russian Formalism in Slovenia, beginning with the theorists who first introduced Russian Formalism into Slovene literary criticism, in order to account for Russian Formalism's presence in Slovene discourse when the Ljubljana School was first emerging. Building upon this, Section III then examines how the intellectual community that would become the Ljubljana School encountered Russian Formalism in the process of developing its own theoretical edifice. In order to do so, I will not be discussing the very first essays published by members of the school, which appeared in 1968, nor the texts that accompanied the

I would like to thank the following for sharing their thoughts and suggestions on earlier versions of this article: William Nickell, Michael Geyer, Robert Bird, Božena Shallcross, Eric Santner, Martin Jay, Jernej Habjan, Marko Juvan, Mladen Dolar, Tamás Scheibner, Daniel Pratt, Cheryl Stephenson and Alexander Sorenson, as well as Harriet Murav and the anonymous reviewers at *Slavic Review*. I am also grateful to the Society for Slovene Studies, the Futures of Intellectual History Conference at the University of California, Berkeley, as the well as the Transnational Approaches to Modern Europe Workshop and the Intellectual Revolution Conference at the University of Chicago; earlier versions of this essay were presented to their audiences, and I am thankful for their feedback and intellectual community.

1. Dušan Bjelić, "An Introduction," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 701.

*Slavic Review* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2020)

© 2020 Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

doi: 10.1017/slr.2020.11

official establishment of the *Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis* in 1982.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I will be looking at several texts by the central figures of the early Ljubljana School—Rastko Močnik, Slavoj Žižek, and Mladen Dolar—which were written between 1971 and 1979. These texts serve as some of the first indications of the emergence of a shared theoretical agenda and also frame the Ljubljana School’s engagement with Formalism, both of which are closely tied to the early Ljubljana School’s relation to Structuralism.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Section IV concludes by assessing the significance of the Ljubljana School’s historical encounters with Formalism, and stages a new encounter between Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School as it considers how these two strains of Slavic critical theory might most productively intertwine.

## I

At the outset, one might notice certain similarities in the individual biographies of Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School. To begin with, both groups bear names of somewhat infelicitous coinage; just as Boris Eikhenbaum noted that the term Formalist “might have been convenient as a simplified battle cry but it fails, as an objective term, to delimit the activities of the ‘Society for the Study of Poetic Language,’”<sup>4</sup> so might one claim that the often-touted moniker of the “Ljubljana Lacanians” is an alliterative but incomprehensive description of the activities of the *Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo* (Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis), as the group is known in Slovenia.<sup>5</sup> A result (or perhaps a cause) of these maladroit names is the fact that parameters for a thinker’s inclusion in either group are difficult to determine; the question of who “counts” as a Formalist is as slippery and vulnerable to programmatic agenda as it is in the case of the Ljubljana

2. By the “official” start date of the Ljubljana School, I am referring to the symposium that marked the founding of the “Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis,” which took place on October 11–12, 1982. This event is chronicled in: *Problemi—Razprave* 21, no. 230–31, (4–5, 1983). I should also note that my usage of the term “discourse community” is not intended as an allusion to Foucauldian discourse analysis, but rather is a term I use to describe the fluid theoretical exchange that occurs before the formal platform of a “School” is established.

3. This early chapter in the Ljubljana School’s intellectual history has generally received little scholarly attention. One exception is Marko Juvan’s study on the concept of Intertextuality, which discusses the relationship between French semiotics and the burgeoning Ljubljana School in order to provide a history of the Slovene reception of Julia Kristeva’s term: Marko Juvan, *Intertekstualnost* (Ljubljana, 2000), 209–25.

4. Boris Eikhenbaum, “Vokrug voprosa o formalistakh,” cited in Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (Ithaca, 1984), 16–17.

5. Without undermining the importance of Jacques Lacan for this movement, one can safely say that this moniker gives the false impression that members of this school all prioritize Lacan at the expense of other thinkers; for just one example to the contrary, see the recent special issue titled “The Slovene Re-actualization of Hegel’s Philosophy,” which was edited by Jure Simoniti and which appeared in *Filozofija i društvo* 26, no. 4 (2015): 783–84, in which multiple members of the School set out to define the “Ljubljana Hegel,” evidencing the plurality of the Ljubljana School’s interests and influences. It is for this reason that I use the more neutral term “Ljubljana School” in this article.

School.<sup>6</sup> In both instances, a history of recantations and revisions makes membership in the schools still more provisional.

Beyond the challenges of denotation and delimitation, Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School also have certain analogous historical conditions. At their earliest moments, both intellectual circles developed in tandem with radical avant-garde movements that informed and performed many of their theoretical insights. Just as the foment of Futurism provided an artistic corollary for the early Formalists, so too the radical OHO Group (1966–1971) ran parallel to—and even intersected with—the path of certain members of the Ljubljana School.<sup>7</sup> Not unlike several Formalists, members of the Ljubljana School also dabbled in extra-theoretical pursuits: Slavoj Žižek contributed two experimental pieces, “Octopussy, ali o (t)istem” (Octopussy, or about the very/same) and “cartesianische meditationes” (cartesian meditations) to the OHO group’s collection, *Pericarežeracirep*, published in 1969.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these engagements with provocative contemporaneous art, both groups also critically reinterpreted their respective nineteenth-century national poets, Aleksandr Pushkin and France Prešeren. The Formalist efforts of Iurii

6. For a detailed account of the “infinite chain of homonymic-synonymic slippage” in delimiting Formalism(s), see Peter Steiner, “Formalism’ and ‘Structuralism’: An Exercise in Metahistory,” *Russian Literature* 12, no. 3 (October 1982): 299–330. Regarding the Ljubljana School, followers of the School will be familiar with the “troika” that consists of Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, and Alenka Zupančič Žerdin, and is described in texts such as Jones Irwin and Helena Motos’s *Žižek and his Contemporaries*, (London, 2014). While this “troika” is an accurate description of the current state of alliances, this term only emerged in the early 2000s and thus falls outside the historical purview of this paper. There are many thinkers from Ljubljana (Rastko Močnik, Zoja Skušek-Močnik, Drago Braco Rotar, Rado Riha, etc.) who performed essential roles in the development of this discourse and certainly deserve scholarly attention for their contributions to this intellectual movement, even though they are—for a variety of reasons—no longer associated with the “troika.”

7. The OHO group itself echoes certain tenets of Futurism and Formalism. As Dubravka Djurić has noted, the OHO group “gathered around a doctrine described by Taras Kermauner as Reist. Reism describes the penchant of Slovenian poets for placing the word at the center of focus. . . . Reist ideology implied that poets had become aware of their devices.” Dubravka Djurić, “Radial Poetic Practices: Concrete and Visual Poetry in the Avant-Garde and Neo-avant-garde,” in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, ed. Dubravka Djurić and Misko Šuvaković (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 82. Later, in the 1980s, a more developed Ljubljana School would have another overlap with the *Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art)* movement. For more on NSK, as well as the nature of this overlap, see: Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach in NSK* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

8. The collection *Pericarežeracirep* (Maribor, 1969) is named after a famous Slovene palindrome that translates literally as: “The washerwoman cuts the duck’s tail.” The collection, which was finished in 1967, featured visual poetry, and included contributions from Tomaž Šalamun, Vojin Kovač, Chubby, Iztok Geister, Plamen, and Marko Pogačnik, among others. Žižek’s contributions are hard to characterize; they have a theoretical tone, but are far more experimental with language than the essays he published in *Problemi* at the time. For example, the “cartesianische meditationes” piece begins with the (untranslatable) word play: “Pred kaj se meče pred-met? Pred sub-jekt (pod-met).” The piece ends with the fragment (in English in the original): “Will you be staying long, Mr. Bomb?/ It’s Bond, B-O-N-D.” Incidentally, this is not the only time Žižek referenced James Bond in his early work; see also: Slavoj Žižek, “The Spy Who Loved Me,” *Problemi: Časopis za mišljenje in pesništvo* 6, no. 67–68 (July–August 1968): 122–24.

Tynianov and Boris Tomashevskii (among others) in this regard find a corollary in Rastko Močnik's 1971 essay, "Mesčevo zlato" (Moon's Gold), which deals with the semiotic process in Prešeren's poem, "Na jasnim nebi mila luna sveti" (In the clear sky the gentle moon shines), and could arguably be called the very first text of the Ljubljana School, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

In addition to this dual orientation toward contemporary and traditional art, Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School also shared a similar reception in English-language critical theory (in the broadest sense of the term), where their contributions constituted major events. Although central figures (such as Roman Jakobson and Žižek) brought exposure to their respective schools of thought, piecemeal and partial translations resulted in receptions of these Schools in critical theory discourse that, while enthusiastic, produced accounts that largely evacuated these movements of their diverse intellectual histories. Despite certain merits, Fredric Jameson's popularizing take on Formalism flattened, as Lubomír Doležel pointed out, the breadth of the Formalist movement: "Tomashevskii is mentioned just once, as a historian of Formalism. Brik, Iakubinskii, Zhirmunskii, Vinogradov do not exist in this account. B. Engel'gardt, who gave the most systematic logical and aesthetic justification of Formalism, is unknown."<sup>9</sup> Accusations of a similar absence of contextual familiarity could be leveled at any number of readings of the Ljubljana School. For example, in an essay published in *Critical Inquiry*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham wrote: "[I]n what was apparently his first work, Žižek displayed no trace of apprenticeship and gave little sign that he had ever been a petitioner at the gate of academia, earnestly demonstrating competence to his betters by making modest interventions in limited fields."<sup>10</sup> In actuality, the work in question (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1989) appeared more than twenty years after Žižek began publishing theoretical articles in 1968, and was his eleventh monograph (simply his first in English).<sup>11</sup> This oversight, coupled with the fact that Harpham only mentions other members of the Ljubljana School once and in passing, reveals that the English-language reception of the Ljubljana School, like that of Russian Formalism, was marked by certain historical lacunae, even from the most credible corners of critical theory. While many scholars in Slavic Studies have addressed this issue with regard to Formalism, the Ljubljana School has not yet received attention of this sort.<sup>12</sup>

The reception of both groups was further mediated by the comportment of certain proponents of either movement. In this regard, some might apply to either group Victor Erlich's remark that "at times one cannot help but be

9. Lubomír Doležel, review of *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, by Fredric Jameson, *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 16, no. 3 (Autumn/Automne 1974): 509–11.

10. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Doing the Impossible: Slavoj Žižek and the End of Knowledge," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 454.

11. This count is conservative, and excludes several co-authored volumes, as well as "research reports" that, while often book-length, are not quite monographs.

12. This article provides all quoted material in the original Slovene, alongside English translations, in order to uphold the field's philological commitments.

annoyed by the constant ‘tactical’ overstatements and wish that [they] had said just what they meant and no more. . . one may long for a little less exuberance and more ‘academic’ decorum.”<sup>13</sup> In response to this charge, members of both groups might defend themselves, as did Viktor Shklovskii, with the words of Vladimir Maiakovskii: “life arises in a completely different context, and you begin to understand the most important things through nonsense.”<sup>14</sup>

These types of historical parallels between the biographies of Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School are productive insofar as they offer touchstones for introduction; they provide an impressionistic overview of the two movements at hand in an economical and topical way. However, like all impressionisms, their points lose focus upon closer inspection. Thus, they are most productive if they serve as merely a cursory introduction to a comparative study; a more durable justification will be sought in the historical encounter of the two movements’ theoretical paradigms.

## II

“O, o njih so pri nas že pisali” (Oh, people here have already written about them). So begins one 1973 article about Russian Formalism, and with good reason.<sup>15</sup> The Slovene-language reception of Russian Formalism has a long if somewhat inconsistent history, and one needs to take stock of this tradition to understand how certain elements were taken up by the Ljubljana School in the mid-1970s. This overview will not be a comprehensive catalogue of every reference to Russian Formalism in Slovene, but rather a brief discussion of several decisive moments in this history that allow us to situate the Ljubljana School’s early reception of Formalism. As such, my analysis will focus on figures who not only made important contributions to the reception of Russian Formalism in Slovenia, but whose legacies also provide significant context for the intellectual history and development of the Ljubljana School more broadly.<sup>16</sup>

13. Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Haven, 1981), 279.

14. Viktor Shklovskii, *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*, trans. Shushan Avagyan, (Champaign, Ill., 2011), 7. Of course, one would have to translate this paradigm into the theoretical idiom of the Ljubljana School to find traction here. Namely, one would have to translate “nonsense” fairly literally as that which is beyond sense, beyond logic or meaning; the Lacanian Real.

15. Daniel Vukadinovič Levski, “Nemurnost ruskega formalizma” (The *Nemurnost* of Russian Formalism), *Problemi—Razprave* 11, no. 128–32 (August–December, 1973): 37. The key word in this title, *nemurnost*, is invented by Levski; it does not exist in Slovene. While it does evoke and echo certain Slovene words (such as its similarity to *nemirnost* [restlessness], or the combination of *nem* [mute] and *urnost* [swiftness]), it is nevertheless impossible to determine which of these references would best facilitate an honest translation.

16. Due to this focus, as well as length limitations, this paper must overlook some of the other figures who deserve mention with regard to the history of Russian Formalism in Slovenia, but who do not contribute materially to the story of the Ljubljana School, such as A.V. Isachenko, N. S. Trubetskoi’s student and son-in-law, who worked as a *Privatdozent* in Ljubljana from 1938–1941 and wrote a Formalist-inspired analysis of Prešeren; or Lucien Tesnière, a French linguist who came to teach French in Ljubljana and had been quoted by Algirdas Greimas (although his own work had no true Structuralist element); and Boris



By all accounts, this story begins with Anton Ocvirk, who taught at the University of Ljubljana from 1937 to 1974 and was one of the founders of Slovene comparative literature.<sup>17</sup> In 1938, early in his career, Ocvirk published two articles that prominently featured Russian Formalism: “Historicism in Literary History and its Opponents” and “The Formalist School in Literary History.”<sup>18</sup> As these titles imply, Ocvirk saw Russian Formalism as a predominantly anti-historical movement, which later critics attributed to the fact that Ocvirk did not seem to be familiar with Tynianov’s “Literary Fact” or, for that matter, with any Formalist publications after 1925.<sup>19</sup> In any case, this first encounter with Formalism was interrupted by the Second World War. Ocvirk became the secretary for the University Committee of Slovene Resistance (*Osvobodilna fronta slovenskega naroda*) and was arrested and sent to Dachau in 1944.<sup>20</sup> After the war, he returned to Ljubljana, where he would go on to hold a variety of academic positions at the University of Ljubljana and at the Research Center of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as a broad array of editorial posts.

Throughout his long career, Ocvirk essentially maintained his original (1938) allegation of the anti-historical character of Formalism. His 1978 article, “Poetic Art and Literary Theory,” includes an account of Formalism which exclusively references Shklovskii, Tomashevskii, and Viktor Zhirmunskii, and retains a degree of the general impulse of Formalist thought, even if the specificity of particular arguments as well as the breadth of the Formalist movement are somewhat lost.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, one misquotation is particularly telling. When discussing “the fundamental outlook of the Russian Formalist School,” Ocvirk attributes the following citation to Shklovskii’s “Art as Device”: “To create is to think in forms” (*Ustvarjati se pravi misliti v oblikah*).<sup>22</sup> Of course,

---

Patenu, a Slovene literary theorist who wrote about Czech Structuralism, and employed some Formalist and Structuralist principles in his own literary analysis. Likewise, as my timeframe concludes in 1979, later Slovene critiques of Formalism, such as the work of Aleksander Skaza, Drago Bajt, and Jola Škulj remain peripheral to this inquiry. For a broader historical account of Formalist and Structuralist thought in Slovenia, see: Alenka Koron, “The Impact of European Structuralism on Slovene Literary Criticism, 1960–2000: Local Reception and Main Achievements,” *Slovene Studies* 36, no. 1 (2014): 3–17.

17. After World War II, Ocvirk oversaw the development of an independent department of comparative literature at the University of Ljubljana, which had previously been subsumed under the bracket of Slavic Studies. For a more thorough history of this development, as well as Ocvirk’s biography, see: Darko Dolinar, “Anton Ocvirk and Slovene Comparative Literature Today,” *Slovene Studies* 30, no. 2 (2008): 283–90.

18. Anton Ocvirk, “Historizem v literarni zgodovini in njegovi nasprotniki,” *Ljubljanski zvon* 58 (1938); “Formalistična šola v literarni zgodovini,” *Slovenski jezik* 1 (1938): 154–61. He also mentioned Russian Formalism in the text *Teorija primerjalne literarne zgodovine* (Theory of Comparative Literary History) (Ljubljana, 1936), but his engagement with Formalism in that text is less sustained than in the articles mentioned above.

19. See: Daniel Vukadinovič Levski, “Nemurnost ruskega formalizma,” *Problemi—Razprave* 11, no. 128–32 (August–December, 1973): 51.

20. Janko Kos, “Anton Ocvirk, 1907–1980,” *Slavistična revija* 28, no. 2 (1980): 238.

21. Anton Ocvirk, “Pesniška umetnina in literarna teorija,” *Primerjalna Književnost* 1–2 (1978): 4–21. It is worth emphasizing the symbolic stature of this article, which was published as the first article in the first issue of *Primerjalna književnost*, the main Slovene-language journal for comparative literature.

22. *Ibid.*, 17.

this rendering echoes the structure, but strikingly inverts the substance of the famous first line of that essay, “Art is thinking in images” (*Искусство—это мышление образами*), which Shklovskii had invoked as the antithesis of the Formalist project.<sup>23</sup> And so, although the spirit of Ocvirk’s misquotation is in fact in line with the Formalist position, this instance reveals the distance that separated certain Formalist sensibilities from the original Formalist texts. Ultimately, this limited conception Formalism would be one of the many diverse movements in literary studies from which Ocvirk borrowed individual components in order to develop his own synthetic method of comparative literary history, which blended diachronic and synchronic modes of literary analysis.<sup>24</sup>

Although a more robust discussion of Ocvirk’s thought would lead us beyond the matter at hand, one final detail of his bibliography merits attention here. In 1967, Ocvirk published a selection of Srečko Kosovel’s poetry under the title *Integrali ’26*, which caused a major stir in the Slovene intellectual scene.<sup>25</sup> Up until that point, Srečko Kosovel had, for the most part, been lauded as an impressionistic regional poet; the rolling hills of his native Karst region (the south-east corner of contemporary Slovenia) featured prominently in his imagery. However, Ocvirk’s publication of *Integrali ’26* revealed for the first time that Kosovel, before his untimely death in 1926 at the age of twenty-two, had also composed radical constructivist poetry.<sup>26</sup> This publication caused such a sensation because—despite the intervening period of forty-one years—Kosovel’s constructivist efforts shared a certain impulse with the visual poetry of the emerging neo-avant-garde OHO Group (mentioned above). Thus, Ocvirk’s publication of *Integrali ’26* contributed to the momentum propelling neo-avant-garde discourse in the late 1960s that, in turn, stoked interest in Russian Formalism amongst Slovene theorists.

In 1970, Katarina Šalamun-Biedrzycka, a Slavist (and sister of the poet Tomaž Šalamun, who was a member of the aforementioned OHO Group), published an article in the theoretical journal *Problemi* that asserted the urgency of the Formalist legacy for the development of Slovene literary historiography. “It seems to me,” she argued, “that [in Slovene literature] in recent years a reversal has occurred which is almost identical with the situation in Russian literature [at the dawn of Formalism].”<sup>27</sup> Šalamun-Biedrzycka claimed that just as Formalist criticism was assisted by the literary production of Velimir

23. Viktor Shklovskii, *O Teorii Prozi* (Moscow, 1929), 7.

24. Darko Dolinar, “Anton Ocvirk and Slovene Comparative Literature Today,” *Slovene Studies* 30, no. 2 (2008): 286.

25. Observations about the collective response to the publication of this text were gleaned from an author interview in Ljubljana, Slovenia, with Mladen Dolar, January 7, 2016.

26. For a detailed analysis of Ocvirk’s commentary on Kosovel’s constructivism, see: Janez Vrečko, “Ocvirkova teza o konstruktivizmu pri Kosovelu,” in *Primerjalna književnost v 20. Stoletju in Anton Ocvirk*, ed. Darko Dolinar and Marko Juvan (Ljubljana, 2008), 155–68.

27. Katarina Šalamun-Biedrzycka, “O literarnozgodovinski znanosti” (On Literary Historiography), *Problemi* 8, no. 86 (1970): 23: “Zato, ker se mi zdi, da je na Slovenskem prav v zadnjih letih nastal preobrat, ki je skorajda identičen s situacijo v ruski literaturi tistih let.”

Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, and Maiakovskii, so too could Slovene neo-avant-garde literature enable “Slovene literary historiography [to] finally discard all ideological, educational, cognitive, psychological, etc. ballast and. . . assert its program and establish working tasks, of which there are not few; it is necessary to research, as it were, all Slovene literature anew.”<sup>28</sup> After noting the lack of Slovene translations of key Formalist texts and providing some historical comparisons from the disciplinary development of Slovak and Polish literary historiography vis-à-vis Formalism, Šalamun-Biedrzycka primes the audience for the following article in the volume, her Slovene translation of Janusz Sławinski’s “Wokół teorii języka poetyckiego” (On the Theory of Poetic Language). By following the historical and theoretical examples of Formalism, she argued, the discipline of Slovene literary history could take advantage of the opportunity afforded it by the emerging neo-avant-garde movement.

In the event that this call to arms proved too bold, however, Šalamun-Biedrzycka subtly posits a more modest reason as to why a reader in Ljubljana in 1970 should pay attention to Formalism: “Wherever there is an awareness of the autonomy of artistic texts (and this is practically all over the world, except for where such an awareness is suppressed and smothered for political reasons), the Russian Formalists are the most valuable predecessors.”<sup>29</sup> She goes on to list a variety of countries where Formalist texts had influenced contemporary discourse (USA, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, and Poland) but only mentions one specific publication: the French journal *Tel Quel*. Indeed, this article appeared after the introduction of “*telquel*ski” semiotics and Structuralism to Slovene theoretical discourse, which had engendered an intellectual fervor bordering on idolatry—this particular issue of *Problemi* featured a pixelated image of Julia Kristeva’s face on the cover. In this climate, it was a sensible strategy for Šalamun-Biedrzycka to attempt to mobilize interest in Formalism by emphasizing its connection to French Structuralism. The extent to which *Tel Quel* enthusiasts in Slovenia (the burgeoning Ljubljana School among them) heeded her advice will be explored later.

Although translations of (and commentaries on) key French Structuralist texts had been creating a buzz in *Problemi* since the late 1960s, the first Slovene-language book devoted to a comprehensive account of the Structuralist movement appeared only in 1971. *Structuralism: An Attempt at Philosophical Criticism* was written by Boris Majer, who had recently become a professor in the Philosophy Department at the University of Ljubljana and would go on to become president of the Marxist Center in Ljubljana as well as an influential member of the League of Communists of Slovenia.<sup>30</sup> For Majer, Structuralism

28. Ibid.: “Tako lahko tudi slovenska literamozgodovinska znanost končno odvrže ves ideološki, vzgojni, spoznavni, psihološki itd. balast in skupaj z zaledjem—s slovensko avantgardno literaturo—uveljavlja svoj program in si postavlja delovne naloge, ki jih ni malo; raziskati je treba tako rekoč vso slovensko literaturo na novo.”

29. Ibid., 25: “Povsod, kjer se danes zavedajo avtonomnosti umetniških tekstov (in to je praktično po vsem svetu, razen tam, kjer je taka zavest zavrta in dušena iz političnih razlogov), imajo ruske formaliste za najdragocenejše predhodnike. . .”

30. Boris Majer, *Strukturalizem: poskus filozofske kritike*, (Ljubljana, 1971). More specifically, according to Majer’s entry on the SAZU website, he “was a member of the



was a monolith without unity. In the Introduction he complained that it was swallowing up indiscriminate corners of the academy and yet could not be “treated as an independent philosophical movement and even less as a unified philosophical direction, as it lacked the very theoretical and philosophical foundation which alone enables a new direction of thought to receive the status of a philosophical theory.”<sup>31</sup> He was also suspicious of what he regarded as Structuralism’s bourgeois sensibilities. Still, Majer admitted that “certain Structuralist theses” would open up some new possibilities for development in contemporary philosophy, and the text that followed was to provide an introduction to the basic tenets of Structuralism for Slovene-speaking audiences. The text itself was organized in brief (usually 1–3 page) entries on the various dimensions of structuralism. Certain philosophical problems received their own entry (“Language as a system of signs”; “The problem of communication”; “Semantic structure”), while some entries were organized by intellectual movements (Russian Formalists, Czech Structuralists, *Tel Quel*) and others were devoted to the individual leading figures in Structuralist thought (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida).

Given the encyclopedia-style format, and compared with the book’s other entries, the entry on Russian Formalism is fairly inclusive. Majer documents a broader and more diverse conception of the Formalist movement than Ocvirk had, and emphasizes certain developments of Formalist thought (namely, the evolution of the concept of evolution).<sup>32</sup> Certainly, this account still reduces the complexity of Formalist propositions, but this is most likely attributable to the format, as well as to the fact that throughout the entry, Formalist thought is cited exclusively in French translation, mainly from *Théorie de la littérature: Textes des formalistes russes* (Theory of Literature: Texts of the Russian Formalists), which was collected, translated, and edited by Tzvetan Todorov and first appeared in 1965. In any case, despite the abbreviation and mediation of its account, this entry does better by the Formalists than others in the book. By comparison, the entry on “contemporary Soviet Structuralism” is devoted to disparaging Iurii Lotman’s “concept of structural aesthetics” for the “decisive philosophical and theoretical shortcoming” that stems from “losing from view the ‘model [of] practical-revolutionary changing of the world’ (in Marx’s sense).”<sup>33</sup> The entry on Lacan is less than a page and a half long, and the main

---

Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia responsible for the department of science and culture,” at [www.sazu.si/o-sazu/clani/boris-majer.html](http://www.sazu.si/o-sazu/clani/boris-majer.html) (accessed September 15, 2019).

31. Majer, *Strukturalizem*, 5: “Iz vsega tega izhaja, da strukturalizma—vsaj doslej—ni mogoče obravnavati kot somostojno filozofsko gibanje in še manj kot enotno filozofsko smer, ki ji manjka prav tista teoretična filozofska utemeljitev, ki šele omogoča, da dobi kaka nova miselna smer status filozofske teorije.”

32. *Ibid.*, 68.

33. *Ibid.*, 97: “Odločilna filozofska in teoretična pomanjkljivost Lotmanovega koncepta strukturalne estetike je po mojem mnenju v tem, da je pri opredeljevanju ‘specifičnosti’ umetniškega modeliranja docela izpustil izpred oči ‘model praktično-revolucionarnega spreminjanja sveta’ (v Marxovem smislu).”

take-away contorts his axiom that there is no subject *without language* into: “the human, the subject, is no more.”<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps it was this problematic distillation (or perhaps another) that irked the young Slavoj Žižek. In any case, in 1975, while still a graduate student, Žižek wrote a Master’s Thesis that was largely an implicit critique of Majer’s reading of Structuralism. At the defense, Majer (who was on Žižek’s committee) blocked the thesis from passing due to its “problematic relationship to Marxism,”<sup>35</sup> and requested an elaboration upon this point.<sup>36</sup> Žižek provided an additional chapter in which he linked the Structuralist signifying process to Engel’s concept of the “production of people,” and with this addition, Majer allowed the thesis to pass.<sup>37</sup> He even solicited Žižek’s explicit comments on his book on Structuralism, and incorporated his critiques into the (heavily redacted) second edition, which came out in 1978.<sup>38</sup> So, despite this initial apparatchik-styled roadblock, Majer went on to tacitly endorse the theoretical activities of the Ljubljana School, and in any event, his 1971 text served as a catalyst against which young members of the Ljubljana School defined their conception of Structuralism.<sup>39</sup> Before transitioning to the history of the Ljubljana School itself, however, there is one final thinker in the early Slovene-language reception of Russian Formalism who deserves mention.

Dušan Pirjevec is a storied figure. A partisan war hero, he subsequently served as a communist political commissar and member of “agitprop” before he was arrested for committing war crimes in 1948 (the veracity of which is hotly debated), spent six months in prison, and then began an academic career that would culminate in immensely popular lectures on world literature in the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> In the legends that surround Pirjevec, these two facets of his public persona—war hero and professor—are conspicuously intertwined. Throughout his entire academic career he was referred to by his partisan nom-

34. Ibid., 106: “Človeka, subjekta ni več.”

35. Jones Irwin and Helena Motoh, interview with Mladen Dolar in *Žižek and his Contemporaries: On the Emergence of the Slovene Lacan* (London, 2014), 98.

36. Slavoj Žižek, interview, Ljubljana, Slovenia, August 24, 2014. Žižek stated that Majer didn’t really object to his thesis but was concerned that if Žižek became a dissident in the future, it would reflect poorly upon him (Majer) that he granted Žižek an MA. According to Žižek, the entire drama of refusing the degree and requiring the additional chapter on Marxism was purely a proverbial insurance policy for Majer, such that he would be politically absolved if things got heated later. Although it is virtually impossible to verify this version of events, it does seem plausible. Regardless of his motivations, Majer’s actions did create obstacles for Žižek’s academic career, in this incident and others.

37. The added chapter in question was entitled, “Teorija pisanja: materijalistička teorija ‘produkcije ljudi’” (Theory of Writing: The Materialist Theory of the ‘Production of People’). The entire thesis was published in Serbo-Croatian the next year under the title *Znak, oznacitelj, pismo* (Sign, Signifier, Letter) (Belgrade, 1976).

38. Slavoj Žižek, interview, Ljubljana, Slovenia, August 24, 2014.

39. That is to say, he let them get away with things that he could have prohibited due to his position in the party.

40. Regarding Pirjevec’s arrest, some accounts describe this event as a patently manufactured communist show trial, while others assert that Pirjevec was in fact guilty of gruesome war crimes. For greater detail on many aspects of Pirjevec’s (political and intellectual) biography, see the collected volume: Seta Knop, ed., *Dušan Pirjevec: slovenska kultura in literarna veda* (Ljubljana, 2011).

de-guerre, *Ahac*, a relic which perhaps stuck due to the tenor of his lectures; as Nadežda Čačinovič recalled: “Pirjevec turned lectures from comparative literature into a battlefield; even [in literature], it was a matter of life and death.”<sup>41</sup> It is also likely that his role as a hero of the Second World War (despite his ever-fluctuating status within the Yugoslav communist party) granted him a certain immunity to some of his politically radical positions. In any case, Pirjevec was by all accounts a charismatic and imposing speaker. His lectures assembled a generation of comparative literature students in Ljubljana, and, as will be shown, reached some members of the Ljubljana School as well.

Pirjevec engaged with Russian Formalism on several occasions. Most pertinent to this inquiry is an article that was published in *Problemi* in 1972, on “The Question of Structural Poetics,” where he discussed the relationship of science to art in the era of formalization.<sup>42</sup> A substantial portion of the paper is devoted to sparring with Majer’s political condemnation of Lotman, and, by extension, the Russian Formalists. In the book discussed above, Majer had claimed that although Soviet Structuralism (like all structuralisms, in his view) had opened up new paths of study, it also “strengthens the positivist tendency in the humanities, robs them of their philosophical dimension, and pushes them into the role of ‘the silent tool of capital’ or at least the silent tool of existing social positivity.”<sup>43</sup> Against this point, Pirjevec argued that only a strictly mimetic definition of art could act as the “silent tool of existing positivity,” whereas Lotman’s structural poetics, like Hegelian aesthetics, affirm ambiguity: “The work of art is of course the sensible realization of the spirit, and at the same time, it also isn’t. This is the essential ‘message’ of Hegel’s aesthetics and it means precisely the same [thing] as Lotman’s claim that the ‘formula of art’ reads as follows: ‘the known unknown; x and simultaneously not-x.’”<sup>44</sup> It is, Pirjevec continued, “the very difference, the dichotomy, the contradiction, which always and in advance enables the ‘exit’ from every positivity, present and future.”<sup>45</sup> Pirjevec takes this argument so far as to claim (via an analysis of Alain Robbe-Grillet) that the purest form of the Formalist principle of *ostranenie* can be found in Martin Heidegger’s notion of ontological difference, in the difference between beings and Being, the gap between

41. Nadežda Čačinovič, “Efekt Pirjevec,” in *Dušan Pirjevec: Slovenska Kultura in Literarna Veda*, 264: “Efekt, o katerem pišem, je bil v tem, da je Pirjevec predavanja iz primerjalne književnosti spremenil v bojišče, da je šlo tako rekoč za življenje in smrt tudi tam.”

42. Dušan Pirjevec, “Vprašanje strukturalne poetike (teze in gradivo),” *Problemi—Razprave* 10, no. 116–17 (August–September, 1972): 1–19.

43. Majer, *Strukturalizem*, 98: “[Strukturalizem] krepi pozitivistične tendence v humanističnih znanostih, odvzema jim njihovo filozofsko razsežnost in jih tako potiska v vlogo ‘molčečega orodja kapitala’ ali vsaj molčečega orodja obstoječe družbene pozitivitete.”

44. Pirjevec, “Vprašanje strukturalne poetike,” 9: “Umetnina je vsekakor čutna realizacija duha, a hkrati to tudi ni. To je bistveno ‘sporočilo’ Heglove estetike in pomeni natanko isto kot Lotmanova ugotovitev, da se ‘formula umetnosti glasi’: ‘znani neznanec; to, vendar ne to.’”

45. *Ibid.*, 15: “[Vendar strukturalizem proti obstoječi družbeni pozitiviteti ne postavlja neko novo, drugačno in še neobstoječo pozitiviteto,] marveč samo razliko, dihotomijo, protislovje, ki že vnaprej in vselej omogočajo ‘izstop’ iz sleherne pozitivitete, sedanje in prihodnje.”

the ontic and the ontological.<sup>46</sup> To round out this rangy theoretical critique, Pirjevec also throws an historical punch that, aimed at the apparatchik Majer, lands with an implicitly *ad hominem* thud: “And finally: is there not some kind of relationship between Russian Formalism and the October Revolution? Has not real history shown that its only alternative in socialism is Zhdanovism?”<sup>47</sup>

Today, Pirjevec is not frequently associated with the Ljubljana School. His banner is carried by comparative literature scholars as well as Heideggerian philosophers, the latter of which broke rancorously with the Ljubljana School in the early 1980s. Throughout the 1970s, both groups had contributed to the main theoretical journal in Ljubljana at the time, *Problemi*, but towards the end of that decade the Heideggerian contingent split with the increasingly Lacanian-oriented Ljubljana School and created their own journal, *Nova revija*, which first appeared in 1982. This theoretical schism of the early 1980s was reinforced with the political clash of the late 1980s, with rather acrimonious results. It is for this reason that, from today’s perspective, it would seem odd to link Pirjevec, a forefather of Heideggerian discourse in Ljubljana, to the Ljubljana School. Texts from before the parting of the two groups suggest otherwise, however: Pirjevec’s lectures make conspicuous appearances in the footnotes of several members of the early Ljubljana School. In the first article he published in *Problemi*, Rastko Močnik cited Pirjevec’s lectures from the 1964–65 academic year.<sup>48</sup> More than a decade later, Zoja Skušek-Močnik wrote in a footnote that “in his lectures on Structuralism Dušan Pirjevec developed the thesis that phenomenology is the *hidden source* of Structuralism,” a point she buttressed by drawing attention to Derrida’s simultaneous reading of Edmund Husserl and Ferdinand de Saussure in *Of Grammatology*.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps most tellingly, shortly after Pirjevec passed away in 1977, Slavoj Žižek eulogized (again, in a footnote):

As is known, an enigmatic void defined Pirjevec’s lectures in the final years. Almost every year the announced lectures on “structural poetics” usually ended with Taine; they never reached a fundamental reckoning with the basic theoretical complexes: Derrida, Lacan, etc. However, this void served

46. *Ibid.*, 18: “Da je ontološka diferenca pravzaprav tudi izvor deavtomatizacije . . .” When Močnik says that “[Heidegger’s] ontological difference is the source of [Shklovskii’s] defamiliarization,” I read “source” as a claim about the theoretical *essence* of defamiliarization, not a genealogical claim about historical influence (which, in this case, would have required time-travel).

47. *Ibid.*, 15: “In navsezadnje: ali ni ruski formalizem vendarle v neki zvezi z oktobrsko revolucijo; in realno zgodovinsko se je tudi že pokazalo, da je njegova alternativa v socializmu samo še ždanovizem.”

48. Rastko Močnik, “Pesmi 1854: Levstikovo utemeljevanje literature,” *Problemi: Časopis za mišljenje in pesništvo* 6, no. 69–70 (1968): 243.

49. Zoja Skušek-Močnik “Konstitucija estetskega objekta,” *Problemi—Razprave* 17, no. 192–193 (9–10, 1979): 105. “V svojih predavanjih o strukturalizmu je Dušan Pirjevec razvil tezo, da je fenomenologija *prikriti vir* strukturalizma. Tu lahko opustimo morebitno pravdo o genealogijah, saj je pač očitno, da sta oba projekta ‘komplementarna’; sodita v isti horizont, pač v horizont nekega določenega momenta zahodne metafizike; zato lahko rečemo celo, da si temeljno ‘pripadata’ prav, kolikor sta zavezana istim metafizičnim postavkam: naj samo opozorimo na Derridajevo Gramatologijo, ki se začenja ravno s ‘hkratnim’ branjem Husserlovega in Saussurovega teksta.”

him well—in this way at least the place remained open, in contrast to the crowd of hasty critiques that tried to fill the gap that “Structuralism” had brought.<sup>50</sup>

Although a comprehensive discussion of all the influences on the early Ljubljana School is clearly beyond the scope of this article, the impression left by Dušan Pirjevec upon the Ljubljana School, as testified by these remarks, is notable for two reasons. First, by revealing the connection between members of the Ljubljana School and an individual who would later be ascribed to an opposing camp, this example challenges the veracity of the historical narrative that superimposes the current configuration of the Ljubljana School upon the contours of its past—a common feature of the few extant studies on the history of the School.<sup>51</sup> Second, one could ask if Pirjevec’s take on Formalism introduces a certain impulse that gained traction in the Ljubljana School; if the pure negativity that he saw in *ostranenie*—“the difference, the dichotomy, the contradiction”—is a prototype (articulated in a different theoretical register) of a notion that has since become a pillar of the Ljubljana School’s theoretical platform: *razcep*, *razkol*, *razdor* (the split, the rift, the break).<sup>52</sup>

### III

The texts that arguably heralded the discourse community of the Ljubljana School were Rastko Močnik’s 1971 essay *Mesčevo Zlato* (Moon’s Gold) and Slavoj Žižek’s response, *Temna stran meseca* (The Dark Side of the Moon), which was published in three installments in 1972. Both texts, which might be collectively dubbed the “Lunar Debate,” invoke the moon as a metaphor in the course of arguments about the function of semiotic signifying processes, and initially appeared in *Problemi*, although versions of both arguments later made their way into books.<sup>53</sup> These texts manifest the original exchange of the original founders of the Ljubljana School, and as such their many theoretical dimensions all deserve attention; however, here I will focus on their engagements with Russian Formalism, or, more precisely, the Formalist insights that migrated to Prague and later Paris under the banner of Structuralism.<sup>54</sup>

50. Slavoj Žižek, “Dva aspekta,” *Problemi—Razprave* 16, no. 177–80 (1–4, 1978): 208: “Kot je znano, je tudi Pirjevčeva predavanja zadnjih let v temelju opredelila ta enigmatska praznina: skoraj vsako leto najavljena predavanja iz ‘strukturalne poetike’ so se običajno končala pri Tainu, nikoli ni prišlo do temeljnega spoprijema z osnovnimi teoretskimi sklopi: Derrida, Lacan itd. To praznino mu je kajpada šteti v dobro—tako je vsaj prostor ostal odprt, za razliko od kopice prehitrih kritik, ki so skušale zapolniti razpoko, ki jo je prinesel ‘strukturalizem.’”

51. For a recent example of this trend, see footnote 4 above.

52. The quotation is taken from an interview with Mladen Dolar, published in *Mladina* on December 31, 2014, where he cites “the split, the rift, the break” as the red thread that defines his work on multiple levels.

53. Slavoj Žižek’s three essays were compiled into a *separat* (that is to say, cut from extra copies of the journal and stapled together) in 1972, while Močnik published a substantially reorganized version of his essay a decade later in *Mesčevo zlato: Prešeren v označevalcu* (Ljubljana, 1981).

54. Many arguments have been made for strictly demarcating—or blurring—the lines between Formalism and Structuralism, all of which, given a specific frame, can be



Rastko Močnik's essay "Moon's Gold" begins with a discussion of the implications of linguistic Structuralism's epistemological rupture for the practice of literary interpretation. Acutely technical and buoyantly lyrical by turns, this essay explores the role of the subject/reader in linguistic Structuralism through an investigation of Prešeren's sonnet, *Na jasnim nébi mila luna sveti* (In the clear sky the gentle moon shines). Močnik opens his critique by following Jakobson's criticism of Saussure in "The Quest for the Essence of Language," citing Jakobson's complaint that "the 'system of diagrammatization'... invalidates Saussure's dogma of arbitrariness, while the other of his two 'general principles'—the linearity of the signifier—has been shaken by the dissociation of phonemes into distinctive features."<sup>55</sup> He then goes on to discuss the relationship between the individual subject and metalanguage, arguing that "metalinguistic deferral is the function of the subject—it is exactly this operation with which the subject, excluding itself from the signifying chain as the always missing signifier, is constituted as a linguistic speaking subject, to whom language (always already as meta-language)... gives power over the signifier."<sup>56</sup> Močnik extends this analysis of the place of the subject in the signifying chain with a rather radical reading of Nikolai Trubetskoï's statement that "Language is neither produced nor perceived. It must be there in advance (it must pre-exist), which is why the speaker and the listener rely on it."<sup>57</sup> Drawing on the non-sensory character of this exchange, Močnik extrapolates that "the subject is the subject by virtue of the voice, but that voice is mute: only the mute subject is composed."<sup>58</sup> He adds that, according to this reading, language is "simultaneously a product and a condition for production," thereby sketching a formula of causality that members of the Ljubljana School would later develop and tailor to a variety of theoretical contexts, one of which will be examined in closing.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to drawing on Jakobson and Trubetskoï, Močnik's essay also engages several figures in French Structuralist thought. The essay is framed

---

convincing. For a meta-commentary on this problem, see Peter Steiner, "'Formalism' and 'Structuralism': An Exercise in Metahistory," *Russian Literature* 12, no. 3 (October 1982): 299–330. In their Slovene reception, however, these projects were linked and interpreted along a certain theoretical continuum; whether or not that continuum is objectively correct is a separate question and not particularly pertinent here.

55. Močnik obviously provides this citation in Slovene, but I have chosen to quote the English edition of Roman Jakobson's *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 426, with the following exception: "signans" is rendered here as "signifier," in order to be consistent with the terminology of the Ljubljana School.

56. Močnik, "Mesčevo Zlato," *Problemi—Razprave* 9, no. 106–107 (December, 1971): 53: "Iz tega lahko sklepamo, da je metalingvistično prelaganje funkcija subjekta—ravno tista operacija, s katero se subjekt, izključevan-izključujoč se iz označevalne verige kot vselej manjkajoči označevalec, konstituira kot lingvistični govoreči subjekt, kateremu jezik kot zmerom že metajezik (vendar ne kot tisto, kar je 'prek' nekega drugega jezika, temveč kot prehajanje, preseganje označevalca) daje moč nad označevalcem."

57. As quoted in Močnik, *ibid.*, 57: "Jezik ni ne proizveden ne dojet: biti mora že poprej (mora preeksisitirati), zakaj tako tisti, ki govori, kakor oni, ki poslušá, se opirata nanj."

58. *Ibid.*: "Subjekt je subjekt po glasu, a ta glas je nem: le nemi subjekt je prisoben."

59. *Ibid.*: "[Čeprav je jezik, kakor razberemo iz Trubeckoja,] hkrati produkt in pogoj za produkcijo."

by Althusser's concept of the epistemological rupture and references Roland Barthes, Kristeva, and Algirdas Julien Greimas.<sup>60</sup> Although never mentioned by name, Derrida's *trace* is present throughout, as well as his concept of *différance*. From a biographical standpoint, this influence is not surprising: Močnik had studied in Paris in 1969–70 (immediately preceding the publication of "Moon's Gold") and would return to Paris to complete a PhD under the direction of Greimas in 1975. Furthermore, Močnik brought certain French Structuralist and semiotic texts to Slovenia and certain Slovene thinkers to Paris.<sup>61</sup> Most notably, Močnik introduced Žižek to Derrida, an event which in itself comprised another critical moment in the history of the Ljubljana School. Given this context, it is fitting that the final point of Močnik's essay, and the element which Žižek picks up on in his counterpoint, pursues a line of thought marked by French Structuralism:

In the sign, the signified is the representative of the tracing of signifiers in its reductions; it is the representative of the pushed-out differentiation of other signifiers. That is to say that the very signifier, which the signified always already is, belongs to another signifying chain, neither parallel nor homogeneous to this one, but which—by virtue of being signifying—slides through it and into which this signifier (to which we ascribe a signified) is nevertheless inscribed, because, as we claim, *it carries its trace in the signified*. . .<sup>62</sup>

A footnote to this passage elaborates that the matter at hand is "about the way in which that other signifying chain in its fundamental otherness is however nothing other than the conscious chain, and about the difficulty for us to think that otherness is exemplified by all the metaphors which Freud makes use of to describe the 'other scene' . . ."<sup>63</sup> In the first installment of "The Dark Side of the Moon," Žižek extends many of the lines of thought presented in Močnik's essay, but this footnote is the only point that he explicitly cites. While engaging the "difficulty for us to think that otherness," Žižek writes: "The structural matrix is simultaneously 'ideal' (in the sense of a 'formal-rational' construct without empirical additions) and *unconscious*."<sup>64</sup> He presents the Lacanian concept of double inscription as the only solution to this difficulty, a solution

60. *Ibid.*, 51: Močnik includes a quotation from Roland Barthes's *Elements of Semiology* in the discussion of metalanguage mentioned above.

61. Močnik was not the only factor here; there were other individuals who were also involved in this exchange.

62. Močnik, 87: "Označenec je v znaku predstavnik sledenja označevalcev v njegovi redukciji; predstavnik izrinjenega razločevanja drugih označevalcev. S tem povemo, da tisti označevalec, kateri označenec zmerom že je, spada v drugo označevalno verigo, ne paralelno ne homogeno tej, ki prek nje kot označevalna drsi, v katero pa se ta označevalec, ki mu pripisujemo označenec, vendarle vključuje, saj, kakor pravimo, v označencu nosi njeno sled."

63. *Ibid.*: "O tem, kako ta druga označevalna veriga v svoji temeljiti drugačnosti ni vendarle nič drugega od zavestne verige, in o težavnosti, da to drugost mislimo, gl. npr. vse metafore, is katerimi Freud opisuje 'drugo prizorišče.'"

64. Slavoj Žižek, "Temna stran meseca I," *Problemi—Razprave* 10, no. 113–114 (May–June, 1972): 93: "Strukturalna matrica je hkrati 'idealna' v pomenu 'formalno-racionalnega' konstrukta brez empiričnih primesi **in ne-zavedna**."

which, he claims, “surpasses the field of Structuralism.”<sup>65</sup> It is important to note that in the third installment of this article, however, it becomes clear that Lacan’s “surpassing of Structuralism” is not meant as an unconditional achievement; the text concludes by questioning whether “we have too quickly patched Heidegger’s gap with Lacanian thought,” and turning instead to Kristeva and Derrida.

Like Močnik’s “Moon’s Gold,” Žižek’s “Dark Side of the Moon” is a dense and demanding text that encompasses many theoretical dimensions, several of which I will have to leave aside here. However, this piece does feature a critique of Propp that reveals Žižek’s perception of Formalism, and in so doing, throws his early conception of Structuralism into stark relief.

Žižek’s analysis of Propp is largely inspired by Lévi-Strauss, whose influence on Žižek’s early work is fairly pervasive in general. As such, Žižek begins by citing Lévi-Strauss’s comparison of Formalism and Structuralism: “Contrary to Formalism, Structuralism refuses to set the concrete against the abstract and to ascribe greater significance to the latter. *Form* is defined by opposition to content, an entity in its own right, but *structure* has no distinct content: it is content itself, and the logical organization in which it is arrested is conceived as property of the real.”<sup>66</sup> Although Žižek would later substantially revise many of the arguments and affiliations present in this early text (none more drastically than the assessment of Lacan previously mentioned), this analysis of form-versus-structure endures. The entire section is repeated verbatim in a “research assignment” (*raziskovalna naloga*) entitled *Znanstvenost in filozofičnost strukturalizma* (The Scientific and Philosophical [Character] of Structuralism), which was completed in 1973, and appears in a more developed form in the monograph, *Hegel in označevalec* (Hegel and the Signifier), published in 1980.<sup>67</sup> In the latter case, the coincidence of form and content

65. Ibid., 109: “Gre za vprašanje ‘o tem, kako ta druga označevalna veriga (na našem nivoju berimo namesto druge verige le še ‘nezavedno’—op. S. Z.) v svoji temeljiti drugačnosti ni vendarle nič drugega od zavestne verige, o težavnosti, da to drugost mislimo’ (R. Močnik, Mesčevo zlato), in katerega rešitev se nakaže šele v Lacanovi misli o ‘dvojnem vpisu,’ ki seveda že presega polje ‘strukturalizma.’” Of course, Žižek would later claim that Lacan is in fact one of the only Structuralists not to give in to the post-Structuralist impulse.

66. Žižek provides a Slovene translation of Lévi-Strauss’s original quotation; given here is the English translation by Monique Layton, cited in Vladimir Propp’s *Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. Anatoly Liberman, trans. Ariadna Martin and Richard P. Martin (Minneapolis, 1984), 167, which includes Lévi-Strauss’s essay as a supplement.

67. *Hegelin označevalec* contains a critique of Lotman on similar grounds. Interestingly, this critique of Lotman had been published anonymously in *Problemi—Razprave* 13, no. 147–149 (March–May, 1975), five years before Žižek included it in *Hegel in označevalec* (Ljubljana, 1980). While in some academic traditions the “recycling” of materials is generally perceived as dubious, it was in fact a very common practice in Ljubljana in the 1970s. Both Močnik and Žižek’s pieces were culled from “research assignments,” which were a component of funding schemes for researchers in the Yugoslavian academic system. Močnik’s essay was based on his research assignment “Bistvo, sociološke razsežnosti in organizacija znanosti” (The Essence, Sociological Dimensions and Organization of Science), while Žižek’s, as mentioned above, was used for his research assignment *Znanstvenost in Filozofičnost Strukturalizma* (The Scientific and Philosophical [Character] of Structuralism). Although these “research assignments” are preserved in the form of (single) mimeographed copies that are housed in the National and University

in structure is extended: “The signifying praxis ‘reflects’ social content, but simultaneously that content is only constituted by its repression. . . . The signifying praxis, when it ‘reflects’ social ‘content,’ is its very Truth; social ‘content’ only literally comes to its Truth in its ‘reflection.’”<sup>68</sup> In Žižek’s take on the relationship between the signifying praxis and social content, one can see the contours of both Lévi-Strauss’s notion of structure-as-content and Pirjevec’s formula of a condition for production coinciding with the product itself. These two concepts, both originally generated in response to Formalism, thus went on to shape the particular brand of Structuralism that was gaining traction in Ljubljana.

Over the course of the 1970s, the nascent Ljubljana School began to develop what one might call Slovene Structuralism through a variety of formats, including the above-mentioned “research assignments.” This format provided a venue for technical theoretical explorations (unlikely to be marketable as monographs) as well as a space for collaboration. For instance, in the mid-1970s, an “assignment” by Močnik, Žižek, and Drago Braco Rotar appeared, entitled *Kritična analiza mesta in pomena semiotike v polju družbenih ved s posebnim poudarkom na možnosti uporabe semiotičnega modeliranja v socioloških raziskavah* (A Critical Analysis of the Place and Meaning of Semiotics in the Field of Social Sciences with a Special Emphasis on the Possibilities of Using Semiotic Modeling in Sociological Research). The three volumes of this endeavor appeared in 1975, 1976, and 1977, respectively, and acted in some part as a revision of Rotar’s text, *Likovna govorica* (Artistic Language), which had been the first treatment of semiotic theory in Slovene.<sup>69</sup> The *Kritična analiza* “research assignment” sought to revisit the topics in *Artistic Language* with more nuance and precision, and is mainly comprised of textbook-style entries on various topics in semiotics (mostly by Rotar), with a few appended critical essays on semiotics and Structuralism (by Močnik and Žižek). This “research assignment” thus marks the introduction of semiotic theory into Slovene Structuralist discourse, but also models one of the ways in which preliminary collaborations between members of the Ljubljana School were organized.

Another collaborative practice that mobilized the early Ljubljana School was the introduction of focused debates in the theoretical journal *Problemi*. In

---

Library in Ljubljana, they were otherwise unpublished, so it was common for academics to repurpose the content of these assignments in later articles or books. This historical habitus is significant, given the scandals that arose—decades later and in an American context—wherein Žižek was accused on various counts of “self-plagiarism.” For one example, see the Editor’s Note appended to “ISIS Is a Disgrace to True Fundamentalism,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2014, at [opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/isis-is-a-disgrace-to-true-fundamentalism](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/opinion/isis-is-a-disgrace-to-true-fundamentalism) (accessed September 15, 2019).

68. Žižek, *Hegel in označevalca* (Ljubljana, 1980), 177: “Označevalna praksa ‘odraža’ družbeno vsebino, toda hkrati se z njeno potlačitvijo ta vsebina šele konstituira. . . . Označevalna praksa, vtem ko ‘odraža’ družbeno ‘vsebino,’ ‘je’ sama njena Resnica; družbena ‘vsebina’ šele v svojem ‘odrazu’ dobesedno pride do svoje Resnice.”

69. Rotar, who had a background in art history, had written the textbook in the late 1960s, but it only appeared in print in 1972, along with the author’s acknowledgment that—as the first Slovene-language book on semiotics—the text had certain limitations and deficiencies.

addition to full-length articles, *Problemi* began including a round-table-styled section of the journal that consisted of four to five diverse theoretical perspectives on a fairly limited topic. For example, one debate published in *Problemi* in 1978 focuses on Martin Krpan, a Slovene folk hero created by the nineteenth-century author Fran Levstik, and features short pieces by Rastko Močnik, Zoja Skušek-Močnik, Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, and Jože Vogrinc—all of whom, at one time or another, could be counted amongst the Ljubljana School's broader discourse community. Despite the fact that *Problemi* would later become the *de facto* publication arm of the Ljubljana School (as it is today), it is important to note that at this time, neither publication in *Problemi* nor participation in these mini-debates were limited to individuals who (when the battle lines were officially drawn in the early 1980s) would identify, or be identified, as members of the Ljubljana School. At this point, Structuralists published side-by-side with their theoretical adversaries (mainly Phenomenologists and Existentialists), and even with some people who did not exist: pseudonyms were fairly common. (Two of Slavoj Žižek's pseudonyms—Zdenka Veselič and Stanislav Žerjav—were in charge of the tongue-in-cheek “agitprop” section of *Problemi* in the late 1970s. Judging by subsequent hyphenations of their last names—into “Veselič-Žerjav,” which, in a socialist-realist send-up, translates as “Happy-Crane”—these pseudonyms were “married” in 1981.<sup>70</sup>) As was previously mentioned, it was not until 1982 when the Heideggerian philosophers split off and founded the competing journal *Nova Revija* that *Problemi* became the theoretical turf of the Ljubljana School. In the late 1970s, *Problemi* hosted the burgeoning Structuralist discourse of the Ljubljana School while also accommodating other theoretical perspectives.

Thus, in one 1979 issue, *Problemi* published several articles by Tine Hribar—a champion of Heideggerian theory who would go on to found *Nova Revija*—alongside a debate amongst the proto-Ljubljana School members on the topic of “‘Art’ and the Margin” (‘Umetnost’ in rob).<sup>71</sup> This fluid discourse community, however, calcified at precisely the moment in which the Structuralist contingent (the early Ljubljana School) forsook Kristeva and Derrida in favor of Lacan. From this point on, the Heideggerians, who had been fairly compatible with Derridean influence but were markedly less tolerant of Lacan, definitively split from what I can now without reservation call the Ljubljana School, which was formally established as the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis in 1982.

One of the essays that marks that shift away from Kristeva's semiotics was a text by Mladen Dolar entitled *O nekaterih stranpoteh semiotične analize* (On Certain Deviations of Semiotic Analysis). That same year, Dolar had won a fellowship to study in Paris, and the argument presented in this article was part of his BA thesis in French Literature. The essay analyzes the poetry of Comte de Lautréamont (the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse) in order to motivate a

70. This episode evinces the complicated and inconsistent nature of Titoist cultural politics at this time.

71. The authors who contributed to this debate (Slavoj Žižek, Rastko Močnik, Mladen Dolar, Miran Božovič, and Ervin Hladnik) would all go on to be involved in the early iterations of the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis.



critique of Kristeva's foundational theoretical division between the realms of the semiotic and the symbolic. Dolar writes:

*The fundamental difference between the semiotic and the symbolic is itself only symbolic, such that Ducasse's path is not subversive in so far as it points to the transgression of the law, to what is beyond it and what is repressed, but rather exactly in so far as it identifies the scandalous and unexpected nature of the law itself. . . . As soon as he experienced the paradoxical and crazy nature of the law, Ducasse himself set about writing [his own definitive formula of poetry].<sup>72</sup>*

This passage represents two critical moments in the development of the Ljubljana School. First, it marked a rejection of Kristeva's category of the semiotic and inaugurated a series of critiques in which the Ljubljana School distinguished their position from *Tel Quel*-styled Structuralism and carved out their own theoretical identity. Second, it articulates for the first time the formative concept of a subject's *experience of the inconsistent character of the law*. This formulation—in which the subject encounters a law that is “scandalous and unexpected,” “paradoxical and mad”—is the first rendition of a principle that would become something of an axiom for the Ljubljana School. It is a point which, in the book that would catapult him to international fame a decade later, Žižek would employ in a slightly modified form in his reading of the “‘traumatic,’ ‘irrational’ character” of the Law in Kafka.<sup>73</sup> Over time, this take on the inconsistent character of the law would be extended to other structures, and then to Structure itself, such that this concept would come to undergird the Ljubljana School's brand of Structuralism. It is also a point that occasions a new approach to the comparison of Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School.

#### IV

Up until this point, I have traced the reception of Russian Formalism in Slovene criticism in general, as well as in the Slovene Structuralism that was the purview of the Ljubljana School. I have shown how several Formalist impulses did indirectly influence the development of the Ljubljana School's theoretical platform. It has also become clear, however, that the historical confrontation between the two groups was heavily mediated; for the most part, the Ljubljana School encountered a Formalism that had already become blurred

72. Mladen Dolar, “O nekaterih stranpoteh semiotične analize” (“On certain deviations of semiotic analysis”), *Problemi—Razprave* 17, no. 184–186 (1–3, 1979): 100. “[. . .] da je temeljna razlika med semiotičnim in simbolnim le sama simbolna, da Ducassova pot torej ni subverzivna v tisti meri, kolikor je naperjena na prekoračitev zakona, na njegov onstran in njegovo potlačeno, temveč prav v meri, kolikor pripoznava škandalozni in nepričakovani značaj zakona samega. . . . Ko je izkusil paradoksalno in noro naravo zakona, se je Ducasse zdaj sam lotil pisanja zakonov.” It should be noted in the context of this article that this final “zakonov” is a figural reference to this citation from Ducasse: “Mislim, da sem po nekaj tavanjih končno našel svojo dokončno formulo,” a formula which Dolar describes as having crystallized in poetry. Given this context, I have translated it thus and not as “laws,” which—out of context—would be misleading.

73. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989), 38.

with the Structuralisms emanating from Prague and Paris and was, for the most part, translated from French rather than Russian; attempts to map their relationship in an intellectual genealogy would produce a cousin at best. Yet, chronicling the influence of Russian Formalism on the Ljubljana School has provided a valuable window on the Ljubljana School's intellectual history, and has also equipped us to pose the question of its relationship to Formalism a bit differently. Rather than considering theoretical kinship between the two movements on the basis of their historical contact, one might instead sketch out the connections that they missed. What theoretical insights are possible if we stage an encounter between Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School, that is, if we engage in an act of speculative genealogy? In closing, I would like to propose one example of what that inquiry could look like.

In the seminal essay "Art as Device" (1917), Shklovskii wrote: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."<sup>74</sup> Fifty-three years later, in *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar* (1970), Shklovskii addressed the incongruity of this concept of *ostranenie* with the rest of the Formalist project. From this sage and subdued position, he reflects upon his youthful contradictions:

On the one hand, I asserted that art is devoid of emotion, that it is only a collision of elements, that it is geometrical. And on the other hand, I spoke of *ostranenie* (estrangement), that is to say—the renewal of sensation. In that case I should have asked myself: what exactly are you going to estrange if art doesn't express the conditions of reality? [Laurence] Sterne, Tolstoi were trying to return to the sensation of *what?*<sup>75</sup>

Rendered thus, the impasse between the world of bloodless geometry and the world of sensory reawakening seems unbreachable. Arguably the two most influential legacies of the Formalist movement seem to be at direct odds with one another; how can the *stony stone* fit in any kind of formal, structural system?

However, if we return to Dolar's formulation about the experience of the inconsistent character of the law, one can see that in this paradigm, a type of estrangement occurs too, but on a different level. In the Ljubljana School's theoretical apparatus, it is not an aesthetic *object* that is revealed to have an "unexpected nature," but rather a *structure*, the law. Shklovskii had claimed that "habitualization devours objects, clothes, furniture, one's wife and fear of war," but it would seem that in the Ljubljana School's theoretical platform, habitualization devours structure itself.<sup>76</sup> Estrangement, then, occurs not

74. Viktor Shklovskii, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and with an introduction by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, NE, 1965), 12.

75. Shklovskii, *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*, 442–43.

76. Viktor Shklovskii, "Iskusstvo kak priem," at [opozaz.ru/manifests/kakpriem.html](http://opozaz.ru/manifests/kakpriem.html) (accessed September 15, 2019). "Автоматизация съедает вещи, платье, мебель, жену и страх войны." Perhaps even in 1917 Shklovskii was aware of this problem of regarding objects as the bearers of *ostranenie*. One could interpret his enigmatic and emphatic proclamation that "Искусство есть способ пережить деланье вещи, а сделанное в

when we encounter unexpected content but rather when we encounter unexpected form. It is the *experience of the irrational nature of the law*, of structure itself—the experience of bloody geometry—that, in the Ljubljana School’s idiom, constitutes the subject, or in that of Shklovskii, helps us recover the sensation of life. To Shklovskii’s anguished question—“Sterne, Tolstoi were trying to return to the sensation of *what?*”—the Ljubljana School would answer: the sensation of structure. With this small but radical shift in perspective, the impasse Shklovskii had described between the Formalist project’s literary “geometry” and the concept of *ostranenie* finds a new resolution.<sup>77</sup>

To be clear, this is an intervention that must be articulated in the subjunctive; Dolar’s 1979 critique is aimed at Kristeva, not Shklovskii, and the estrangement he describes is never identified as Shklovskii’s *ostranenie*. It is only by actively applying the Ljubljana School’s theoretical apparatus to this particular problem—in other words, by practicing a different kind of intellectual history—that we can open the possibility of redressing the missed connection between Russian Formalism and the Ljubljana School.

Still, a careful study of the historical chronicle is an essential precondition of such an endeavor, as Dolar reminds us—via his only reference to Shklovskii—in the text cited above. In the introduction to that essay, while engaging with Marcelin Pleynet’s view of Lautréamont, Dolar quotes Marcelin Pleynet’s citation of one line from “Art as Device”: “The more you understand an age, the more convinced you become that the images a given poet used and that you thought his own were taken almost unchanged from another poet.”<sup>78</sup> Dolar’s citation of Shklovskii here is historically trivial—the quotation is referenced from Pleynet’s French text and nothing in the essay indicates that Dolar had a more substantive encounter with Shklovskii’s work—but, in its contingency, it provides an opportunity to bring the Ljubljana School into closer dialogue with Russian Formalism.

For it would seem that the lineages of poetic images are not all that different from those of theoretical concepts; in both cases, one can trace their histories and find unlikely branches of the family tree: images and theories “almost unchanged.” Yet while Shklovskii’s phrase emphasizes similarity—and most intellectual histories pursue this kind of continuity, sequencing conceptual genomes to find the ancestors of ideas—I would like to suggest that perhaps more is revealed in the departures, the genetic mutations, the difference of that which is *almost*, but not quite, unchanged. In the case of Russian Formalism’s and the Ljubljana School’s respective notions of

---

искусстве не важно” (Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important) as a way of distancing himself from the conspicuously psychological and metaphysical objects (“one’s wife and fear of war”) which he listed as fodder for habitualization.

77. Through several generations, scholarship on Formalism has developed other answers to this question, and I don’t contend that this resolution is more valid than those ones. I merely claim that this resolution provides an additional perspective that broadens the Formalist legacy and suggests a new avenue for further research.

78. Rather than translating Dolar’s Slovene translation of the French translation of Shklovskii’s original, I have provided the quote here in a canonical English translation. Shklovskii, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 7.

estrangement, this change can be measured in two letters: the difference between the Russian word *iskusstvo* (art) and the Slovene word *izkustvo* (experience). For it is the *experience* of the inconsistency of structure that allows the Ljubljana School to reconcile Shklovskii's impasse between *ostranenie* and Formalist literary facts. But it is only by staging an encounter—rather than tracing one—that this difference becomes productive, that we can think of that *experience as device*.