

## Abstract

*The impact of Russian avant-garde, especially the cubo-futurist artists' books of Kruchenykh, Klebnikov and David Burluk (with illustrations by Goncharova, Kulbin, Malevich and others) played a significant role in determining the shape of early structural linguistics. This happened primarily through Roman Jakobson's association with these artists at a time in his life when he was formulating a series of revisions to the linguistic concepts of Ferdinand de Saussure and the neogrammarians before him. Jakobson's artist colleagues began working in interdisciplinary art forms (the artist's book), as he was attempting to articulate a theory that would encompass the irrational in discourse focused on the relationship between sounds, and between sound and meaning, thus trying to retain a role for reason.*

SHa +  
 CHa P  
 but Bo + Lo Aetius,  
 KHo of Rome,  
 So Mo Ve + Ka So,  
 Lo SHa of the  
 steppes + Cha.

**Bastard in the Family**  
**The Impact of Cubo-Futurist Book Art**  
**on Structural Linguistics**

*Harry Polkinhorn*

**Art and Theory**

Roman Jakobson's work, although rigorous and empirical when considered on a molecular level, in some ways is antisystematic and fragmentary. To compensate for this, he continually returns to the theme of the "science of language," and even late in his career he feels it necessary to defend his project against anti-science charges.<sup>3</sup> I will demonstrate in the following discussion that at the heart of this polemic lies a knot of forces pertinent to the establishment of modernism. Jakobson excelled at the short, allusive essay whose closures always lead one into other relations. There is a hieratic visuality implicit in the forms of his expression, a figuration much akin to the silent film's imposition of stylized gesture upon its bearers. The dim flickering of lighting, the alternatively accelerated or frozen moments, the broken quality caused by interruptions for the intertitles all contribute to a filmic structure by means of which innovative ratios of perception/cognition are communicated. Jakobson himself comments on this: looking back from 1932 he says, "the first decades of the cinema have already become an 'age of fragments.'"<sup>4</sup> However, he chooses not to focus on this quality but characteristically on interrelationship; he notes in "the montage, the semiotic interrelation of things [in film]."<sup>5</sup> However, one could as well focus on the emptiness by means of which interrelationship is configured. That is, in order to save the illusion of narrative for the new medium of film, to reinstall some form of presence, the illusion must be attenuated; the narrative erodes within the matrix of its technical generation. Imperfections emerge from a form of idealism against which features are measured (or marked) and found to be wanting. Such a gapping lies at the heart of high and low modernism and finds its earliest and purest expression in the figure of the artist in denial (of society, of the past, of the present, of art, of the family or of himself through suicide).

*Ceux ont exercé  
sur moi le plus  
d'influence, ce sont  
des artistes, non  
les savants . . .*<sup>1</sup>

Roman Jakobson

*When singers have  
been killed and  
their song has been  
dragged into a  
museum and pinned  
to the wall of the past,  
the generation they  
represent is even more  
desolate, orphaned,  
and lost . . .*<sup>2</sup>

Roman Jakobson

San Diego State University  
San Diego, CA 92182-0800

*Visible Language*, 25:1  
Harry Polkinhorn, pp. 88-109  
© *Visible Language*, 1990  
Rhode Island School of Design  
Providence, RI 02903

Jakobson, I suggest, understood all this perfectly. From Saussure he accepted complex revisioning of neogrammarian positions worked out in an ultimately unsatisfactory binarism he himself applied to analyses of language (to which I will return),<sup>6</sup> yet his focus throughout was not on replacing an allegedly outmoded hierarchy with a more streamlined one; rather, what seems to have fascinated him was the binary functioning of reasonable discourse (i.e., his own) which extends its hegemony only at the expense of having to acknowledge its own innermost teleology: truth statements generated from within the model of the socratic dialectic make sense only within the self-defined domain of that process. This awareness emerges throughout, but I will concentrate on one scene in the linguist's early career, his futurist moment. Succumbing perhaps to an old man's nostalgia for the fire of an earlier, more committed posture, Jakobson looks back on his beginnings as heroic: "Young unorthodox linguists heeded the rallying slogans of the avant-garde poets, and we were at one with the brave and moving call jointly launched by Xlebnikov, Kruceňyk, Burljuk and Majakofskij: 'To stand on the boulder of the word WE amid a high sea of catcalls and hatred.'"<sup>7</sup>

Yet what were these so-called rallying slogans; why did Jakobson make repeated if provocatively undeveloped references precisely to this period, to these artists? In "My Favorite Topics," he says, "Yet what must have primarily influenced my approach to poetics and linguistics was my proximity to the poets and painters of the avant-garde."<sup>8</sup> This will be the most significant approach to the necessary concealment which enabled structural linguistics. *Primarily*, he says, showing the important locus of the fascination, the exact point where the difficult new verbal/visual and abstract art objects came into contact with his nascent efforts to rethink Saussure. Winter goes so far as to say that this fascination never left Jakobson.<sup>9</sup> Yet he also says *must have*, as if there were the possibility of misjudgment. Even at the end of his career he reaffirms the importance of his affiliations with the artists of the Russian avant-garde, as if rounding out the story by echoing its beginning. When asked about the relation between Klebnikov's poetry and the painting of Malevich, he responded, "Of course, of course. Artists such as Malevich discussed the relation between *zaum* . . . [nonsense or abstract poems]

and abstract painting. Oh, we discussed this a great deal!”<sup>10</sup> In perhaps a franker moment, however, he admits, “Although I have belonged to the ardent and active adherents of abstract painting from the time of the first Russian steps in this direction (Kandinskij, Larinov, Malevich, Rodchenko, etc.), I feel completely exhausted after five or ten minutes of watching such [avant-garde] films.”<sup>11</sup> In his impassioned reaction to Mayakovsky’s suicide in 1930, Jakobson gave us a glimpse of the horror which his work evades:

The simplistic formalist literary credo professed by the Russian futurists inevitably propelled their poetry toward the antithesis of formalism—toward the cultivation of the heart’s “raw cry” and uninhibited frankness. Formalist literary theory placed the lyrical monologue in quotes and disguised the “ego” of the lyric poet under a pseudonym. But what unbounded horror results when suddenly you see through a pseudonym, and the phantoms invade reality . . .<sup>12</sup>

Thus Jakobson’s contradictory understanding of Russian cubo-futurism gives us a grasp on how structuralism was generated out of the major intellectual, aesthetic and political conflicts of the early twentieth century.

Jakobson acknowledges his debts, a doubly ironic move that pulls both ways, since the “tradition” to which he binds himself explodes a connection to tradition.<sup>13</sup> Jakobson’s debts fall into two distinct categories: intellectual in a conventional sense (Saussure, Peirce, Sapir, among others), and aesthetic/artistic. Whereas his uses of philosophers, linguistics and literary theoreticians take more familiar forms, one senses in his references to the Russian avant-garde the dissatisfaction of a mind aware that its products can never settle what he feels are the greater complexities and challenges of art. An analysis of Russian cubo-futurism, specifically as it may have shaped Jakobson’s early modifications of Saussurean concepts, will provide an understanding of structuralism’s origins in the linguistic innovations which set it up as the key intellectual current of the modernist moment in western European thinking.

#### **Early Structural Linguistics**

Jakobson seems to have been primarily impressed by the enabling assumptions of a Saussurean binarism. In Saussure’s *Cours*, assembled from lecture notes by stu-

dents, we are told that “*Le signe linguistique unit non une chose et un nom, mais un concept et une image acoustique*” (The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustical image.) and that this latter is “*l’empreinte psychique de ce son, la représentation que nous en donne le témoignage de nos sens.*”<sup>14</sup> (the psychic imprint of this sound, the representation which has been given us by the evidence of our sense.) In this first attempt to break language free from an unproblematized nominalization, Saussure invokes the metaphor of the “acoustical image,” revealing a secondary splitting within the initial splitting upon which his theory will be erected. The evidence of the senses, in any event, cannot be trusted but must be completed by a conceptual overlay; what we *know* must be brought to bear on what we *perceive*. At stake is the notion of identity, specifically in Saussure’s advances over the neogrammarian position achieved by Osthoff and Brugmann.

. . . the real fault of Saussure’s contemporaries was that they failed to ask themselves fundamental questions about what they were studying: questions about the nature of language itself and its individual forms, and important methodological questions about identity in linguistics, both synchronic and diachronic. . . for Saussure . . . only by thinking about signs and their nature could one begin to discriminate between the functional and nonfunctional aspects of language and attain an appropriately relational concept of linguistic units.<sup>15</sup>

Saussure therefore develops his notion of the sign: “*Nous appelons signe la combinaison du concept et de l’image acoustique . . .*” (We call sign the combination of the concept and the acoustical image.) and “*Nous proposons de conserver le mot signe pour désigner le total, et de remplacer concept et image acoustique respectivement par signifié et signifiant . . .*”<sup>16</sup> (We propose to retain the word *sign* to designate the whole, and to replace *concept* and *acoustical image* respectively with *signified* and *signifier*. . .) This famous complexification of language function is then extended through Saussure’s notion of the arbitrariness of the sign: “*le signe linguistique est arbitraire.*”<sup>17</sup> Thus the sign subsumes the split upon which signifier/signified is based, and in this gap lies the arbitrary (eventually extended by Jakobson), dialectically called forth by the linguist’s strictly rational approach to the analysis of language. The importance of these formulations cannot be overestimated in setting up the major schools of linguistics

in the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Saussure's subsequent detailing of synchronic and diachronic dimensions, closely related to the interlocking *parole* and *langue* (and very reminiscent of Jakobson's metaphoric and metonymic poles), show him moving further away from an applied or descriptive linguistics through acknowledging the idealizing gestures of theory, or the faculty of knowing, and inserting them directly into a materialist dynamic. Although Jakobson did not accept these reformulations wholesale, but tested them out against the empirical data of his own field work and research, thereby enabling him to rethink Saussure's understanding of the temporal and spatial dimensions in language,<sup>19</sup> the Saussurean prying apart of word and meaning and their rearticulation through an analysis of the sound/meaning component of language had a lasting and formative impact on the development of Jakobson's approach.

That Saussure himself must have been aware of a fundamental contradiction in this project is borne out by a consideration of his fascination with anagrams, constituting as they do an *irrational* matrix for language function.<sup>20</sup> This interest can be found as well explicitly detailed in Jakobson, who says:

It is difficult to find in history a cultural epoch of as numerous and patent contradictions, not only within a society but also within any single thinker typical of that time, as the decades bordering the last and present centuries. The question of antinomies was a favorite topic of authoritative representatives of the epoch such as Ferdinand de Saussure, but even this great linguist's treatment of these internal contradictions remained inherently discordant. One of the general principles of his *Cours*—"caractère linéaire du signifiant"—is at variance with the only work of the same period, which he planned and prepared for publication, namely his voluminous inquiry into the paratexts of Latin, Greek and Vedic poetry.<sup>21</sup>

Jakobson finds this unique but displaces its unacceptable implications by moving immediately into a discussion of what he called "poetic language," that which acknowledges the irrational but subsumes it through repatterning. Yet the unsettling qualities continue to attract his attention, as seen in his comments on glossalalia (and the linguistic forms of taboo as well as of magic in oral tradition). The necessity for interdisciplinary approaches simply reinforces a conclusion that the analytics upon which the discourses of reason are established will not do the job.

“No matter what the results of the joint work of linguists and psychologists were in this case [the glossalalia of Mlle Muller-Smith], it should be seen as a stimulus for further interdisciplinary steps, and in particular for a bilateral structural analysis of glossalalia also in its individual, delirious manifestations.”<sup>22</sup> Jakobson’s avant-garde artist colleagues entered into the delirium.

### **Cubo-Futurist Theory and Practice**

In a radical move, its theorization embedded in the objects’ structures, the Russian cubo-futurists situated their energies at the divide between word and image, between the aural-sensible-cognitive of figured language and the visual-cognitive of painting. This divide was shared with other avant-gardes (dadaism, Italian futurism, ultraismo). The Russians contributed a unique, coherent political dimension the implications of which will be detailed in due course. The decentering of aesthetic activity, however, was the first step, which paralleled and in part furthered the move to demystify art so as to permit its access by the masses. It would no longer serve for the writer to achieve new forms with language, for the painter to evolve different styles from within; hybridization among media became necessary. There was a “physical inter-development of literature and painting which is one of the most outstanding characteristics of the cubo-futurist and subsequent schools of abstract painting which developed in Russia during the years 1910-1921.”<sup>23</sup> Although the futurists may have traced certain lines of descent from a purported symbolist fascination with the autonomous development of art, it is clear that the purifying which the new art sought could only be brought about by a reversal of the directions of concentration which symbolism espoused. Pike recognizes these concerns and dwells on the peculiar conjunction between painting and poetry:

In the case of the Russian futurists, both the beginning of their movement in impressionist/post-impressionist (‘primitivist’) painting and the symbiosis of painting and literature within the movement is shown by a number of factors. First, several leading futurists (e.g., David Burliuk, Kruchenyk and Mayakofsky) began their public existence as professional painters and all of the most significant futurists at one time or another worked in both paint and ink. Second, there was very close collaboration, particularly at the height of ‘pure’ futurism (1913-1914) between the leading avant-garde artists (especially Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, the chief proponents of primitivism-futurism) and the

Burliuk brothers (David, Nikolai and Vladimir). Third, futurist poetry itself constantly emphasized the visual aspects of its existence in its experimentation with handwriting and typography, in its use of primitivism-futurist paintings as illustrations and in the very materials of its books, e.g., the repeated printing of poetry on wallpaper.<sup>24</sup>

Gray also sees the interconnections between poetry and painting as somehow significant to futurism,<sup>25</sup> as does Jakobson himself, although at the same time he curiously disavows any broader importance they may have had: “. . . there was only the question of their close interconnections; there was the possibility of making publications of poems with montage, with collage, of including different non-representational attempts at graphics or painting. Yet I would not say that this produced some questions of high sociological import.”<sup>26</sup> This disingenuous statement seeks to cover up the scandalous revelations which the new art manifests, namely, that one could not defend a special-status claim for art objects, and that instead of being a mysteriously motivated genius the artist was a social agent whose task it was to better society through the means appropriate to his or her particular medium.

What is the nature and functioning of this hybridization? Is it enough for the poet to “illustrate” his or her texts? After all, what about the *éditions de luxe* which only wealthy dealers and collectors could afford? What is insufficiently emphasized is that writers/artists who had previously been satisfied to work in terms of individual pieces now felt compelled to turn to *the book* (a limited series and specifically that kind which combined both verbal and visual features) as an aesthetic form and to subvert it through conscious deployment of primitive-seeming materials and techniques. The argument here is that the book as a cultural form was identified as the most secure bridge (affordable, mass produced, repository of cultural experience) between an elite which had monopolized literacy and knowledge, and the illiterate and oppressed masses whom the Revolution was empowering. However, a new language of the book was felt to be necessary; how this worked itself out as the noisy cubo-futurist period gave way to constructivism’s greater sobriety and geometricism (El Lissitzky Rodchenko) can leave no doubt about the essentially *political* thrust of the entire project, as set within the context of the October Revolution and a phi-

losophy of historical materialism. That is, art was to enlighten the masses not as to the nature of beauty but on the subject of power relations among social classes.

Thus the books produced by the Russian artists came into existence in the highly charged social ambience which preceded and accompanied the Revolution. The symbolism which futurism simultaneously extended and challenged had recently been favored by increased publishing, professional reviewing and more little magazines, in other words, by quick growth in the support systems for literary culture. For this reason, as well as for those mentioned above and because books were public objects (multiples), small and capable of being produced with a minimum of technology, artists chose this cultural form. However, at the same time these artists were engaged in a variety of other art activities, which form a social context for the book. The post-symbolists occasionally resorted to shock tactics in order to motivate interest in their projects:

Malevich and his friends once posed for a group photograph beneath a grand piano suspended from the ceiling upside down; Kamensky showed a mousetrap at an art exhibition in Moscow in 1915; Goncharova, Larionov and others walked about Moscow with their faces decorated with Rayonist designs; Mayakovsky donned his famous yellow vest and paraded through downtown Moscow; Kruchenykh threw hot tea into the laps of his audience.<sup>27</sup>

Such antics were shared with Italian futurism and dadaism, among others. In a negative configuration, they point to an acute dissatisfaction with the channels of culture, manifesting a desire to forge a more direct link with the audiences of the new art. The cult of personality at least in the case of some was pursued in the service of a highly sophisticated form of political art (one in which the artist's life itself became the material; the public dimension of one's life was thus frankly acknowledged and worked with, as the class division between public and private was attacked through performance).

Along with these public demonstrations and acts of cultural provocation, the artists were proceeding with their other intermedia experiments.

Even a cursory glance at key publications of the Russian cubo-futurists (e.g., *Vzorval/Explodity* by Kruchenykh with illustrations by Goncharova, Nikolai Kulbin, Malevich and Rozanova/St. P., 1913, *Slovo kak takovoe/The Word as Such* by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov with illustrations by Malevich and Rozanova/M., 1913, and *Porosiata/Piglets*, by Zina V. and Kruchenykh with cover by Malevich. St. P., 1913) demonstrates immediately sharp contrasts with preceding artistic and typographical methods.<sup>28</sup>

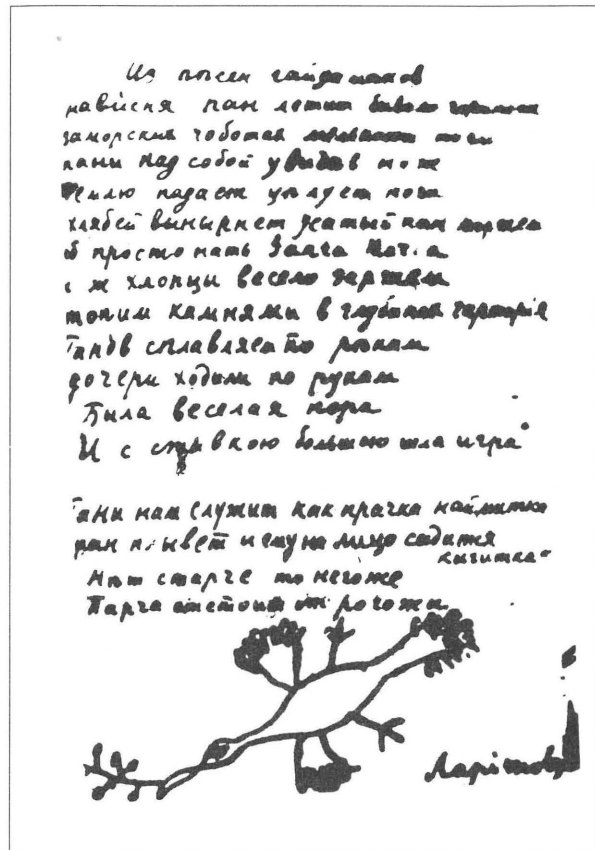
Bowlt goes on to list other examples: “*Pomada (Pomade* by Kruchenykh with illustrations by Larionov, M., 1913), *Dokhlata luna* (Crooked Moon by D. Burliuik et al with illustrations by David Burliuik et al, M., 1913) and Vladimir Mayakovsky’s *Vladimir Mayakovski: Tragediia* (Vladimir Mayakofsky: A Tragedy with illustrations by D. and V. Burliuik, M., 1914.”<sup>29</sup> Janacek sees Kruchenykh as the most important innovator in book art.<sup>30</sup> Primitivism, abstraction, typographic experimentation, collaboration, the importance of emphasizing the materials of art, accident or chance methods of generation, a mix of graphic qualities summed up by Bowlt as “impropriety, disorderliness and vulgarity”<sup>31</sup>—all these elements combined to form the unique contribution made by a class of aesthetic objects perhaps best termed “anti-books.”

As a visual and tactile object, then, the book’s appeal to the intimacy of touch makes Pike’s theory that formalism and futurism are chiefly related through a focus on sound all the more insightful. He says, “It was in sound, the meeting place between the academic linguists and the Bohemian futurists, that the formalists gained entry to literature.”<sup>32</sup> Language was approached as raw sound; articulatory phonetics was invented to describe language in terms of the smallest units or phonemes (allophones as variations thereof) which were defined through contrast with related sounds. Thus a *sound* was constituted of a series of phonemic contrasts, thereby achieving a kind of negative identity. Jakobson confirms his entry into the systematizations of structural linguistics through the door of poetic art: “It was the analysis of verse which enabled me to descry the foundations of phonology.”<sup>33</sup> However, he goes on to offer a more revealing formulation of what he means by a focus upon sound as such: “It is not bare sounds but ‘linguistic values which prove to be the building blocks of verse, and precisely the role which prosodic



European formalism. The work does not exist for thought, or for feelings or emotions, but for the sight. The concept of seeing itself underwent extensive differentiation. The perception of form, the perception of the quality of form (Gestaltsqualität), became one of the most important problems of not only art scholarship, but of theoretical aesthetics and psychology. Here too, the basic tendency was to assert the inseparability of significance and meaning from the sensually perceptible quality.”<sup>36</sup> If such a motive fragmented verbal language, its deployment in a graphic environment necessarily entailed a fuller aesthetics based *as well* in seeing. Bakhtin goes on to expand his context: “The major aim of art, according to European formalists, is to comprehend visual, audial and tactile qualities.”<sup>37</sup> Yet we get no comprehensive theory which relates verbal and visual dimensions as they were being explored in the artists’ books produced by the cubo-futurists. The formalists’

*Worldbackwards*,  
page by M. Larionov,  
text by V. Khlebnikov,  
1912-13.



efforts remain in the realm of phonology, prosody and language-based processes.

The formalists were ultimately concerned with the way in which the individual work of art (or *parole*) was perceived differentially against the background of the literary system as a whole (or *langue*). The structuralists, however, dissolving the individual unit back into the *langue* of which it is a partial articulation, set themselves the task of describing the organization of the total sign-system itself.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the *failure* of formalism as a whole to account for the pressures of the visual dimension of this new art jammed the development of the intellectual enterprise. Art's perceived difficulty was addressed in the case of literature by Shklovsky,<sup>39</sup> but "making strange" receives too much attention as a separate, allegedly new approach; he was simply a man of his age in that he received a tradition, a convention of discourse, and then he proceeded to recast certain features in a techno-mechanical terminology. To speak of "devices" in literature forces a closer dealing with texts but ultimately merely replaces one opacity with another, in this case through turning to a machine metaphor. Although I wouldn't go so far as to apparently completely reject *ostranenie* ("making strange") as Wellek does, he has a point when he says,

"Making strange" serves as an obvious apology for any and all experimentation with language: for the fanciful etymologies of Khlebnikov, for the graphic arrangement of poems on the printed page, for anything that strikes the fancy of the poet and may shock the reader. It serves also as a criterion of value which is central to any avant-garde group, "novelty," the break with tradition, revolt.<sup>40</sup>

However, one must acknowledge that the criterion of value which is implicit to the critical posture here is that art must be serious business; we aren't helped in the process of distinguishing useful shock from mere shock; and so on. One needs as well of course to remember that the "apology" belongs in the realm of arts discourse: artists make art, which is its own defense. Therefore to level the above criticism appropriately, the enunciators of *ostranenie* must themselves be interrogated. Whereas it is Wellek's main intention to assess the contributions of formalism, he slides into a conjunction with the *art* which serves as the object whereby criticism as a valorizing subject gets posited.

Beaujour sees the urgency of this distinction between art-making and its theorization, extracting it from artists themselves (who, it must be admitted, like critics often “step out of character”). “It was the poetic practice of the archaist Khlebnikov, aiming at the creation of a new international language which he called *zaum*, that briefly transformed Russian poetry at the beginning of the century. It was not the theory or poetry of the anarchist-theorist Kruchenykh or his followers.”<sup>41</sup> In their manifestos the artists sought to recapture the process of valorization which the academy and centralized publishing had preempted. These efforts parodied the exclusionary, hierarchizing, canon-building gestures of criticism. However, the manifestos and statements would remain curiosities, bizarre forms of rather unsophisticated criticism were it not for the informing context of the book-objects themselves. This “transformation” mentioned by Beaujour, that is, the hybrid art objects produced by the cubo-futurists, should therefore retain center stage. This of course is not a call for another formalist reading but for the opportunity for art of a relatively new and highly unusual kind to change the shape of attempts to theorize it.

#### **Art and Politics**

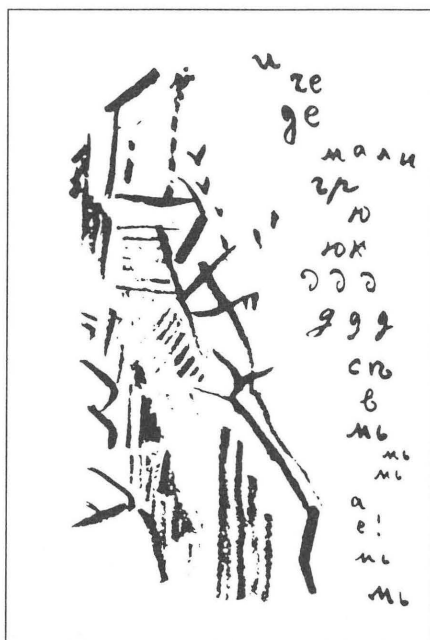
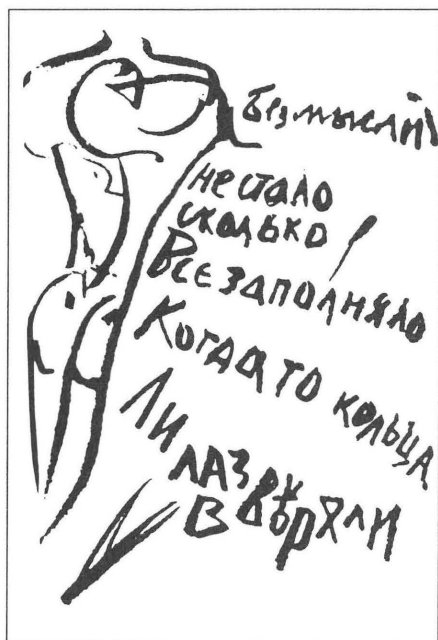
The interconnections between art and criticism, practice and theory, entered a phase of complexification precisely with early modernism, reaching a crisis state in Barthes, the Derrida of *Glas*, and the post-structuralists. As the early modernist poets drove deep into non-sense, the formalist critics strove to keep pace in their theorization. If so-called experimentation with raw sound, with the building blocks of grammar, with color and form distorted and ripped from their traditional aesthetic matrices seemed from the viewpoint of a positivist epistemology to break away from a usable (i.e., socially consumable) relation to revolutionary social developments, and for which the artists were all too soon to be choked off by the state, then analogously in criticism, “Formalist a-sociologism was a matter of methodological expediency rather than of aesthetic principle, a proposition about the critic’s main sphere of interest rather than about the nature of literary art.”<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the finer points of their position and in spite of any truth contained in Ehrlich’s analysis, the critics of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and of Opoyaz were themselves squelched, the most notorious case being

that of Shklovsky. In light of this shameful historical development, who can question the politically revolutionary implications of the early Russian avant-garde? As well, who can deny that their activities changed the category of politically revolutionary art?

### Birth Pangs of Structural Linguistics

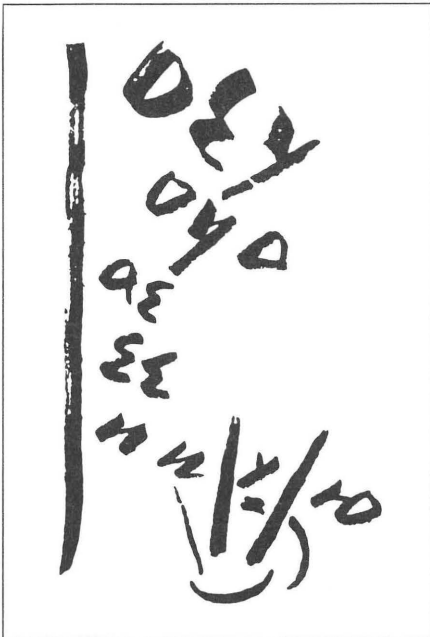
No wonder Jakobson was unsettled and excited with the implications which the multi-media works of Klebnykov, Kruchenyk, Mayakovsky and others motivated. By applying the above model or method of aesthetic processing to language, Jakobson was able to reach a conclusion remarkably similar to that embedded in the art itself, but one which begs the most important questions raised by the art. Thus, cognitive and perceptible dimensions are disaggregated, later to be reunified in a theory of interrelationship.

Three pages from  
*Expodity*, A. Kruchonykh,  
1913-14.



The basic difference between the two [*signans* and *signatum*], from a linguistic point of view, is that the *signans* must necessarily be perceptible whereas the *signatum* is translatable. In both cases the principle of equivalence obtains. In the domain of the *signans* the relative equivalence must be externally perceivable; it can be ascertained, however, only in respect to the function of these sound relations in a given language. We recognize such distinctive features and, by means of a spectrograph, we are able to translate them from the acoustic field into the visual level. And like the *signans*, the *signatum* too must be studied in a purely linguistic and objective manner.<sup>43</sup>

This is an extraordinary effort to maintain the subject/object dichotomy which cubo-futurism had overturned. That is, in order to save the tradition in which Jakobson had been trained, under the pressures of verbal-visual innovation he was forced to move the enterprise to a higher level, to create a meta-theory in which *signans* and



Janecek, Gerald. *The Look of Russian Literature*. © 1984 by PUP. Reproduced by permission of Princeton University Press.

*signatum* are dialectically conjoined and *interpreted* from the vantage point of the *signatum*, which thereby retained its hegemony over discourse. Ergo structuralism, which could only have been worked out in the “science of language,” linguistics, whose coming into being in the form we know it in the twentieth century ironically undoes the positivist foundations of science. In this it is the key “science” of our time. Waugh sketches the main outlines of Jakobson’s linguistics:

... the relative autonomy of language itself as well as of all of its parts; the teleological foundation of language and of all of its parts and the means-ends relationship between code and message; indissoluble ties between the static and dynamic aspects of language; the opposition between selection and combination as two relatively autonomous axes upon which given items operate; the linguistic sign, implying the intimate connection between the signans and the signatum and the strictly linguistic, discrete nature of both sound and meaning; the logical structure of binary oppositions in a hierarchized and mutually implicating relationship; the relational invariance of any facet of language from the largest to the smallest, each one built on the strictly relational nature of language; and markedness, and in particular the unequal hierarchical relation between the marked and unmarked members of any opposition. All these are interrelated. . . .<sup>44</sup>

This excellent summary makes clear how Jakobson reinstalls hierarchy through focusing on the structure of inter-relationship within language.

The best example of how Jakobson recuperates the mystification of critical discourse through concealing the contradictions upon which it is based can be found in his discussion of similarity and contiguity disorders. Importing categories of classical rhetoric, Jakobson begins thus:

Every form of aphasic disturbance consists in some impairment more or less severe, either of the faculty for selection and substitution or for combination and contexture. The former affliction involves a deterioration of metalinguistic operations, while the latter damages the capacity for maintaining the hierarchy of linguistic units. The relation of similarity is suppressed in the former, the relation of contiguity in the latter type of aphasia. Metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to the contiguity disorder.<sup>45</sup>

Thus we are to believe that the entire field of language behavior is divided into two connected dimensions, each of which necessitates the other in an analog/digital modeling process. Jakobson calls this the “bipolar structure of

language (or other semiotic systems)<sup>46</sup> and tries to extend his model to account for nonverbal data as well, but much less successfully, since in order to perform the operation he must first construe the material semiotically (i.e., from within a language convention):

The same oscillation occurs in sign systems other than language. A salient example from the history of painting is the manifestly metonymical orientation of cubism, where the object is transformed into a set of synecdoches; the surrealist painters responded with a patently metaphorical attitude.<sup>47</sup>

Yet Jakobson senses something wrong with this, as he acknowledges in a note to the above: “. . . the crucial problem of the two polar processes awaits a detailed investigation.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the difficulty lies on the very structuring capabilities of language itself, which Jakobson alludes to elsewhere: “One of the important contributions of symbolic logic to the science of language is its emphasis on the distinction between OBJECT LANGUAGE and METALANGUAGE.”<sup>49</sup> Or perhaps it lies with the essentially reductive qualities of his intellectual move, alluded to by Cook:

*Image*, too in addition to symbol for all its complexity, is less slippery than a term like *metonymy*, that current jack-of-all-work which is also a jack-in-the-box of tautology, since references named in a sequent language must perforce be contiguous to each other, and almost any kind of contiguity can be called metonymy.<sup>50</sup>

Thus we are able to see how even though perceptible and cognitive can first be disaggregated and then reunified in a theory of the sign, this operation may work more successfully when the object language is *verbal language* but not at all successfully when it is a combination of verbal and visual data in a single artwork. Jakobson was unable to evolve a semiotic or any other theory of the image sufficiently flexible to account not only for the new artists’ books as presumed aesthetic objects with formal laws and structures of their own but also for their embeddedness in a social context. In this connection, Benjamin’s analysis seems especially telling: “. . . nowhere do these two—metaphor and image—collide so drastically and so irreconcilably as in politics. For to organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images.”<sup>51</sup> This expulsion of moral metaphor from politics was not achieved by Jakobson;

consequently the organization of his pessimism foundered precisely through going to the extreme of hyper-organization.

Jakobson's early exposure to cubo-futurist books posed a genuine challenge to the cognitive tools he was evolving to think about art with. Stankiewicz has rightly said that "one cannot fail to notice that Jakobson's most original contributions to Slavic studies aimed at a reassessment of Slavic literature . . . and at a theoretical vindication of the boldest experiments of the Russian avant-garde."<sup>52</sup> However, the above discussion has demonstrated that "theoretical vindication" was slipperier than either Stankiewicz or Jakobson may have realized. The struggle which Jakobson was involved in stemmed from the unacceptable contradiction I have detailed. According to Ivanov, ". . . an inner avant-gardism was a part of him, which is never a part of any established science. This is an interesting aspect that makes the majority of Jakobson's works on the history of science autobiographical."<sup>53</sup> Structural linguistics' aversion from the object itself (individual word, sound or meaning) and subsequent move towards its constellation within a field or context of relations to other objects in effect was a compromise which saved discourse as a mystifying procedure by removing it from the politically radical subversions being worked by the art of the Russian avant-garde.