

Eccentric Modernities: Shklovsky, Benjamin, Blanchot

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Abstract

Despite striking similarities and documented intellectual affinities, the common grounds of Shklovsky's, Benjamin's, and Blanchot's critical reflection on modernity have never made the object of theoretical attention. At the same time, recent relational readings of Shklovsky and Benjamin, and Benjamin and Blanchot, respectively, are indicative of the growing impact of such a treatment on the current developments in literary and cultural studies (Boym 2005, Tihanov 2005, Liska 2014, Allen 2015). Against this background, the aim of my paper is to provide a comparative discussion of the understanding of space in Shklovsky, Benjamin, and Blanchot by tackling the common theme of *displacement* understood as 'dual trope of the moving body and of the movement of thought' (Baque 2006). The purpose of such a discussion is to show how displacement, a fluid concept describing both physical motion and the intricate paths of reflection, can be used to explore the lateral ways, invisible gaps and in-between spaces in the fabric of the intellectual project of late modernity.

Keywords: *space, displacement, trope, modernity*

‘Écrire ce mouvement incessant de l’écriture à la vie, de la vie à l’écriture [...] Lire ce qu’il en est de l’inscription des corps (ouverts, illimités, souverains) dans les espaces de la mémoire, ce qu’il en est de la lisibilité commune de ces espaces, de la production communautaire de cette mémoire, fin critique de notre seul réel capital.’

(Christophe Bident, *Maurice Blanchot, partenaire invisible*)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a monument was erected in front of Nikolaevsky Railway Station in Saint Petersburg (formerly Leningrad, formerly Petrograd). It pictured Tsar Alexander III on horseback, with the hooves of his mount firmly planted on a patch of Caucasian soil. In 1918, the statue was clad in wooden planks to hide it from view while its fate was being decided. Soon covered up in slogans celebrating liberty and revolution, this makeshift, transient city landmark used to be known as the ‘Monument to Freedom’ in more ways than one. Here is Viktor Shklovsky's version of the story:

No, not the truth. Not the whole truth. Not even a quarter of the truth. [...]

There is a gravestone by the Nicholas Station. A clay horse stands there, with its legs apart, supporting the clay bottom of a clay policeman. They look like they are made of bronze. They are covered by the wooden stall of the ‘Monument to Freedom’, with four tall masts jutting from the corners.

Some urchins peddle ‘Zephir 300’ for those in need of a cigarette, but when the police come with their rifles to catch them and haul them off to a juvenile detention home, where their souls would be saved, the boys shout ‘Scram!’ and, whistling professionally, they scatter around, ending up at the ‘Monument to Freedom’.

Then they take shelter and wait in that strange place – in the emptiness beneath the boards between the tsar and the revolution.¹

For the purpose of the present essay, the ‘strange place’ described in this parable about the transience of historical monuments will be used both as a stage set and as a departure point for a reflection on the construction of space in Shklovsky, Benjamin, and Blanchot that operates by (looking into) successive displacements. A fluid concept, *displacement* will be employed to designate both physical motion and the intricate paths of reflection or, more accurately, to convey the complex articulation in a dual trope ‘of the moving body and of the movement of thought’². In keeping with the nature of its subject, the argument will unfold *sous le mode de la spatialisation*, paradigmatically rather than chronologically, by taking into account the main features displayed by Shklovsky’s verbal image (ambivalence and tension, emptiness, porosity, and peripherality) which make it apt to serve as an introduction both to his own and to Blanchot’s and Benjamin’s notions of space as the critical articulation of the literary, the political, and the historical.

Ambivalence and Tension

Much like the baroque emblems which so interested Benjamin, Shklovsky’s particular form of *ekphrasis* is a ‘mode of representing and interpreting a world out of joint’³ by turning a synoptic image into the site of tension between creation and destruction, construction and ruin, interiority and exteriority – a tension upon which Blanchot will later on build his understanding of the neutral. From the very beginning of this short piece, by insisting on the problematic truthfulness of his account, Shklovsky points to the tense relationship between the cognitive and the creative, for what truth is that which he cannot – or would not – fully express? The most ready answer is one in which the world and the word are inextricably linked: it is the truth about living and writing in post-revolutionary Saint Petersburg. The reasons for which he is unable to speak about that in a way that would reveal even ‘a quarter of the truth’ are the very ones accounting for ‘the strangeness of the knight’s move’ as described in the ‘first preface’ to the book: the specific conventions of literary art, censorship, and distance.⁴ This constellation of reasons is at the same time an assemblage of references; in order to accurately understand the nature of distortions caused by the knight’s lateral move, one needs first to bring together the different threads that make up Shklovsky’s rough fabric.

Written between 1919 and 1921 and published first as separate pieces in the theatre journal *The Life of Art*, then collected in volume in 1923, after Shklovsky’s

¹ Viktor Shklovsky, *Khod Konia: Sbornik Statei* (Moscow: Helikon, 1923), 196-7; trans. Richard Sheldon as *The Knight’s Move* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 126-7, translation slightly amended. Hereafter cited as *KM*; page numbers in the text refer to the English edition.

² Dominique Baqué, *Histoires d’ailleurs. Artistes et penseurs de l’itinérance* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2006), 11.

³ Andreas Huyssen, *Miniature Metropolis. Literature in an Age of Photography and Film* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 140.

⁴ ‘There are many reasons for the strangeness of the knight’s move, the main one being the conventionality of art, about which I am writing. The second reason lies in the fact that the knight is not free – it moves in an L-shaped manner because it is forbidden to take the straight road. [...] One more word – don’t think that the knight’s move is the coward’s move. I’m no coward. Our tortuous road is the road of the brave...’ (*KM*, 3-4).

timely (and temporary) escape from Soviet Russia,⁵ the sketches and short critical essays gathered in *The Knight's Move* are set against a background of privations and despondency⁶ following an uninterrupted seven-year stretch of social violence and political unrest (World War I, revolution, and civil war), accompanied by increasing limitations on public space and civic freedoms. From the publication of 'Art as Device'⁷ ('Isskusstvo kak priem') in 1917, life and art in Soviet Russia had undergone a profound transformation which, in turn, left its indelible mark on Shklovsky's theory and practice of estrangement (*ostranenie*).⁸ As defined by Benjamin Sher,⁹ '*ostranenie* is a process or act that endows an object or image with "strangeness" by "removing" it from the network of conventional, formulaic, and stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions'.¹⁰ But, since in the wake of the October revolution 'there was no regular life of any kind',¹¹ estrangement as the writer's weapon of choice in fighting everyday routine found itself in need of reevaluation. Confronted with the literalization of his witty play with conflicting cultural heritages, the theorist is reduced to confessing: 'I can't put together all the strange things I have seen in Russia' (*SJ*, 184). Strangeness and contradiction punctuate his critical and autobiographical texts from the early 1920s. 'It is strange' is a recurrent exclamation in *A Sentimental Journey*, and it is on the same note that Shklovsky concludes the sketch at the beginning of which the description of the 'Monument to Freedom' is inserted: 'What a strange country (*strannaya strana*). [...] A country of electrification and Robinson Crusoes' (*KM*, 129).

The 'exploded' narrative in Shklovsky's works from the early 1920s through 1930s and the wealth of material information they are providing, sometimes in almost unbearable graphic details but always on a tone of uncanny detachment, is the writer's

⁵ Shklovsky fled Russia first in 1918, when his involvement with an underground organization plotting to restore the Constituent Assembly was exposed and he found himself under the imminent threat of arrest. Being exonerated of complicity in the Socialist Revolutionary 'terrorist' activities, he returned to Petrograd in January 1919. He then escaped a second time in 1922, in very similar circumstances, and headed to Berlin. With the help of Gorky and Mayakovsky, he was again granted an amnesty in the fall of 1923, and he returned to the USSR to settle in Moscow, which was to be his home until the end of his life.

⁶ 'Some say – in Russia people are dying in the street; in Russia people are eating, or are capable of eating, human flesh...' (*KM*, 4).

⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Device', in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher, intro. Gerald L. Bruns (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990 [1925]), 1-14. *Theory of Prose* will be hereafter cited as *TP*.

⁸ Normally, *ostranenie* should be spelt *ostrannenie*, as it is derived from the Latin root for 'strange' (*strannyi*). The removal of the second 'n' allows for a witty etymological play, pointing as it does to the Slavic root for 'country' (*strana*). For different readings of this etymology, see, for instance, Benjamin Sher, 'Translator's Introduction: Shklovsky and the Revolution', *TP* xviii-xix; Svetlana Boym, 'Poetics and Politics of Estrangement: Viktor Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt', *Poetics Today* 26.4 (Winter 2005): 586; Anne Dwyer, 'Revivifying Russia: Literature, Theory, and Empire in Viktor Shklovskii's Civil War Writings', *Slavonica* 15.1 (April 2009), 12. The meaning of this play will be further commented on in the last section of this essay.

⁹ Benjamin Sher, 'Translator's Introduction: Shklovsky and the Revolution', *TP* xix. Sher's favoured translation of *ostranenie* into English is 'enstrangement'.

¹⁰ As such, estrangement should be read not only as a critique of the common place but also in connection to the rhetoric of *loci* from the Classical age to the late Renaissance, a reading equally relevant for Benjamin's and Blanchot's work, respectively. For a discussion of this point with regard to Blanchot's understanding of the neutral, see Laura Marin, *Le Neutre. Lire Blanchot dans les traces de Levinas et Derrida* (Bucharest: Bucharest University Press, 2013), 31 and foll.

¹¹ Viktor Shklovsky, *Sentimentalnoe putestestvie. Vospominaniia, 1917-1922* (Moscow and Berlin: Helikon, 1923); trans. Richard Sheldon as *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917-1922*, historical intro. Sidney Monas (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 134. Hereafter cited as *SJ*; page numbers in the text refer to the English edition.

way of *staging* rather than explicitly *stating* the paradoxical fact that revolutionary estrangement managed to achieve by its own means the same effect aesthetic estrangement had been hitherto supposed to attain, namely to ‘return sensation to life’ (*TP*, 13) – or, in a more literal translation, to ‘restore sensation to our limbs’. ‘The main difference between revolutionary life and ordinary life is that now everything is felt’, Shklovsky approvingly quotes from his fellow Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum (*SJ*, 271), and immediately adds to Eikhenbaum’s observation his own concise rendering of the post-revolutionary transformation: ‘Life became art’ (*SJ*, 271). This strange reversal of the order of things previously described in ‘Art as Device’ is perceptively defined by Svetlana Boym as a form of ‘expropriation’, to which the theorist doubled by a creative writer responds not by abandoning his conceptual inventory but by a sort of functional and existential redoubling:

No longer an exclusive property of art, by the late 1920s and early 1930s estrangement had become expropriated by the Soviet state, which assumed ‘totalitarian authorship’ over a new glorious vision of Soviet reality that radically defamiliarized the everyday perceptions and experiences of ordinary citizens. Therefore, many artists had to perform a double estrangement in order to repossess their aesthetic and existential devices or, to use Lenin’s phrase, to ‘expropriate the expropriated’. For the strange ‘state art’ transferred into life differed dramatically from their expectations, threatening not only artists’ professional practices but also their very existence.¹²

In light of such observations, Shklovsky’s description of the ‘Monument to Freedom’ can be read as a *mise en abyme* of this double expropriation and the corresponding double estrangement. This mental snapshot of sorts captures not only a literal crossroad¹³ but also a temporal intersection: the moment where the statue of Tsar Alexander III is yet to be removed¹⁴ and the projected monument to Soviet liberation has not been completed.¹⁵ Profoundly ambivalent, this moment of historical interruption *and* historical transformation is what Walter Benjamin calls ‘dialectic at a standstill’: ‘a present which is not a transition’ but rather a superimposition of different strands of time or, to put it differently, an arrested movement which gives reflection its impetus.¹⁶

¹² Boym, ‘Poetics and Politics of Estrangement’, 583.

¹³ The monument to Tsar Alexander III has been originally placed on Ploshchad Vosstaniya, in front of the Nikolaevsky (today Moscow) Railway Station, at the crossroad of a few major avenues, among which the famous Nevsky Prospekt.

¹⁴ As a matter of fact, the monument’s situation has been a problematic matter from the very beginning. Authored by the sculptor Paolo Trubetskoy, it caused an intense public scandal due to the nature of the depiction, which the more conservative part of Petrograd society deemed too caricatural, while the liberal circles praised its exposing force. The debate eventually reached the city Duma, which seriously reviewed the question of the statue’s right to existence. Starting from February 1917, it became the target of public jokes until it was covered up, and eventually relocated in 1937 in the inner courtyard of the Russian museum. There, according to local folklore, the monumental statue was kept ‘as a prisoner’ until its post-Communist ‘liberation’. The new place provisionally assigned to it is close to the Marble Palace entrance, where Lenin’s famous political armored car used to be displayed.

¹⁵ No actual Monument to Freedom has ever been built on the spot, although such a project did come into existence in Moscow. The centre of Ploshchad Vosstaniya remained empty until 1985, when the Hero City Obelisk was installed there to commemorate the people’s resistance during the Leningrad blockade.

¹⁶ ‘Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past’ (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and Intro. Hannah Arendt, Preface Leon

The same manner of translating temporal superimposition in spatial terms can be found in Blanchot's analysis of the experience of time in Proust:

The experience of imaginary time that Proust had can take place only in an imaginary time, and only by making the one exposed to it an imaginary being, a wandering image, always there, always absent, fixed and convulsive, like the beauty of which André Breton has spoken. Metamorphosis of time, it first transforms the present in which it seems to be produced, drawing it into the undefined profundity where the 'present' starts the 'past' anew, but where the past opens up onto the future that it repeats, so that what comes always comes again, and again, and again. Indeed, the revelation takes place now, here, for the first time, but the image that is present to us here and for the first time is the presence of an 'already other time', and what it reveals to us is that 'now' is 'before', and 'here' is somewhere else, a place always other, where he who believes that he can calmly witness this transformation from outside can only transform it into potency if he lets himself be drawn out of himself by it, and compelled into that movement where a part of himself, beginning with the hand that is writing, becomes imaginary.¹⁷

It ensues, then, that this 'place always other' presents itself as a fracture, a gap between the past and the future which is usually called the 'present' but which, in fact, can only be *presented* in its elusiveness,¹⁸ as a place of sheer possibility where various versions of history coexist or clash. This, in turn, affects the very practice of writing: the pressure of events disrupts the course of both reflection and work, forcing them to move back and forth between different points in space and time or to search for lateral, alternative paths. The text does not so much flow as overflows, while constantly interrogating the very possibility of knowing and letting know. To the errant speech corresponds an errant thought, following the meanders of the spectral presence of that which has become *out of place*.

Emptiness and Porosity

For none of the writers under scrutiny here is this mode of expression totally new. Already in *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot would speak about the writer's 'obsession' which 'obliges him to say again what he has already said – sometimes with the strength of enriched talent, but sometimes with the prolixity of extraordinarily impoverished repetition, with ever less force, with ever more monotony', in pray to the 'necessity in which he is apparently coming back to the same point'.¹⁹ Also, the

Wieseltier (New York: Schocken, 1968, rpt. 2007), 264-5). Benjamin's use of the notion of 'monad' he borrows from Leibniz is somehow misleading, but in fact the 'revolutionary chance' he is talking about is in fact the ability to bring forth the multiple temporality of the present, and thus to *spatialize* it: 'The particular revolutionary opportunity of each historical moment is confirmed for the revolutionary thinker by the political situation. But it is no less confirmed for him by the power this moment has to open a very particular, heretofore closed chamber of the past. Entry into this chamber coincides exactly with political action' (quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 1999), 944). A similar view is expressed by Shklovsky when he places the 'resonance of new beginnings' (*sozvuchie nachal*) in relation to the exploration of the traces of the past or of lateral roads never taken (Viktor Shklovsky, *Izbrannoe v dvuh tomah 2* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1983), 40).

¹⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 17. Hereafter cited as *BC*.

¹⁸ 'The space where [the words] are projected [...] is folded and bent, not existing anywhere' (*BC*, 235).

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 24. Hereafter cited as *SL*.

allegorical mode analyzed by Benjamin in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*²⁰ shapes his own practice of writing in *One-Way Street*, the only other complete book that he managed to publish in his lifetime (written between August 1925 and September 1926, it was issued in 1928, the same year as his work on the *Trauerspiel*). The same can be said about Shklovsky's 'Art and Device'. In this early essay, estrangement is discussed together with the technique of 'impeded form' (*zatrudnennaia forma*) which, in Richard Sheldon's definition, 'revives the reader's perception by presenting the familiar objects of the real world in verbal designs of great intricacy. The author places his verbal units in complex relationships to one another in order to retard the reader's progress and compel his attention' (in *SL*, xvi) – a technique that Shklovsky would subsequently use for his own autobiographical writings. The novelty comes instead from a more thorough articulation of the subjective experience of historical contingencies onto the previously outlined aesthetics of language, which endows later works with an ever more pronounced political edge.

In all three cases, the language used to 'translate' this space 'pregnant with tensions', as Benjamin puts it, is in a certain sense displaced from within: the accurate way of conveying and reflecting upon historical rupture is not a mere rhetoric of crisis. Rather, the awareness of the inability of traditional modes of expression to incorporate and adequately render liminal experiences and epochal shifts develops into a 'theoretical-critical practice of language'²¹ that describes as well as actively engages the world. For Shklovsky, Benjamin, and Blanchot the various aspects of this engagement can be retraced at both the generic and the aesthetic level, the former referring to the *forms* of expression, and the latter to its *modes*. The two categories are provisionally reunited under the guise of the 'fragment' – a comprehensive term that is used here to account, on the one hand, for the short pieces of the kind published in periodicals (all of the three authors under scrutiny have been involved with this type of activity at crucial points in their careers) and, on the other, for the specific practice of fragmentary writing as such. The complex network of reasons behind this choice of practice has been discussed at length elsewhere;²² for the sake of brevity, I will reduce it to Benjamin's

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2003 [1928]).

²¹ Adelaida Lopez and Marithelma Costa, 'Interview with Umberto Eco', *Diacritics* 17.1 (Spring 1987): 49. This reflexive and political practice of language is tackled by Umberto Eco in a 1987 interview in reference to semiotics as a 'socio-political act' that 'can change the objects which it describes and, consequently, [...] cannot be conducted as an abstract discipline which is totally disconnected from life'. However, Eco maintains the distance between the critical and artistic discourses by restricting this force of interpellation to the former, while Shklovsky, Benjamin, and Blanchot are, on the contrary, more inclined to question and dissolve such boundaries.

²² The historical, political and literary context that shaped Blanchot's engagement with *l'écriture fragmentaire* is analyzed by Christophe Bident in *Maurice Blanchot, partenaire invisible: Essai biographique* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1998) and, more recently, by Leslie Hill in *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012). A reading focused on its aesthetic dimension can be found in William S. Allen, 'The Absolute Milieu: Blanchot's Aesthetics of Melancholy' (*Research in Phenomenology* 45.1 (2015): 53-86. For Benjamin, see Susan Sontag's 'Introduction' to *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, tr. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979 [1970, 1974-6], 7-28; first published as 'The Last Intellectual' in *The New York Review of Books* 25.15 (October 1978), rpt in Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 107-34 as well as Hannah Arendt's 'Introduction' to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, Preface by Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schocken, 1968, rpt. 2007), 1-51 and Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), trans. by Patrick Camiller as *Baroque Reason:*

own concise formulation: ‘relevance to the present’.²³ But the kind of relevance that the three writers claim in almost the same terms, although at very different moments, has nothing to do with contemporary tastes and trends; on the contrary, ‘true’ relevance can only be achieved by means of distance – where ‘distance’ is understood as a critical operation whose task is to investigate not only that which is subjected to it but also its very own movements and limitations.

Each in his own time and place, Shklovsky, Benjamin, and Blanchot share the feeling that they are finding themselves on the threshold of epochal changes: ‘[W]e are aware that we are approaching an extreme movement in time (*un mouvement extrême du temps*), what I would call a change of times (*un changement de temps*)’, writes Blanchot in the first preparatory text for the *Revue Internationale*.²⁴ The world upon which Benjamin’s angel of history locks his transfixed gaze is a world of ruins; likewise, it is not by chance that Shklovsky describes the equestrian statue of Alexander III as a ‘gravestone’.²⁵ The present is not only a stratified reality – it is also a disenchanted one, marked as it is by the disillusionment with the Communist utopia. At such a time of dissolving authority and tradition, ‘the attempt to respond to the grave enigma that is the passage from one time to another’ (*PW*, 56) requires a radical displacement of dominant modes of intellectual and political intervention that would radically differ both from the ‘theological myth’ of traditional humanism²⁶ and from ‘Sartrean commitment’ (*PW*, 60). This ‘communism of writing’ (*PW*, 85) – to which Shklovsky would constantly refer to as ‘the third way’ – is in fact *la mise en place* of a speech that is decentred, plural, and intrinsically provisional. Just like ‘the emptiness beneath the boards’ of Shklovsky’s makeshift ‘Monument to Freedom’ turned into provisional shelter for Petrograd’s Gavroches, this kind of discourse only acquires an interior to the extent that it opens up to the otherness within.

Needless to say, the space molded by this speech remains foreign to models such as the *domus*, the *heimat* or the *demeure*. As designed in Shklovsky’s, Benjamin’s, and Blanchot’s fragmentary works, this space (the ‘free port’ and the borderlands, the

The Aesthetics of Modernity, Intro. Bryan S. Turner (London: SAGE Publications, 1994). Particularly useful in illuminating Benjamin’s early influences is Bernd Witte’s *Walter Benjamin: Une biographie*, trans. André Bernold (Paris: Cerf, 1988). For a recent reevaluation of Shklovsky’s notion of estrangement, see Boym’s article quoted above, as well as Michael Holquist and Ilya Klinger, ‘Minding the Gap: Toward a Historical Poetics of Estrangement’, *Poetics Today* 26.4 (Winter 2005): 614-36, Caryl Emerson, ‘Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*, Bakhtin’s *vnenakhodimost* (How Distance Serves an Aesthetics of Arousal Differently from an Aesthetics Based on Pain)’, *Poetics Today* 26.4 (Winter 2005): 637-64, and Galin Tihanov, ‘The Politics of Estrangement: The Case of the Early Shklovsky’, *Poetics Today* 26.4 (Winter 2005): 665-95.

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings I: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2002 [1996]), 292.

²⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *Écrits politiques: 1953-1993*, ed. Éric Hoppénot (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 101; trans. Paul Zakir as *Political Writings: 1953-1993*, Foreword Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 56. Hereafter cited as *PW*; page numbers in the text refer to the English edition.

²⁵ This ‘dead’ figure of authority bears a striking resemblance with De Gaulle’s, as described by Blanchot in his *Political Writings*: ‘[T]his dead man, unaware that he is dead, is impressive with the great stature of death, with the dead obstinacy that passes for authority’ (*PW*, 90). And in both cases this authoritarian figure, whose solidity has been reduced to a friable ‘trace’ (clay instead of bronze, as Shklovsky metaphorically puts it), projects his shadow over new forms of authority whose emergence has been concealed by the rhetoric of ‘liberation’: the real policemen (or, in the case of the Algerian war, the real soldiers) with real rifles.

²⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 369. Hereafter cited as *IC*.

Parisian *passages*, the strangely porous rooms in Blanchot's *récits*) can be temporarily inhabited but it is also a space where one cannot dwell, only pass or wander through. A new model for reasoning and writing is henceforth gradually imposing itself – one which equals the search for truth with the right to err:

Searching and error, then, would be akin. To err is to turn and to return, to give oneself up to the magic of detour. One who goes astray, who has left the protection of the center, turns about, himself adrift and subject to the center, and no longer guarded by it. More accurately, he turns about – a verb without complement; he does not turn around something or even around nothing; the center is no longer the immobile spur, the point of opening that secretly clears the space of advance (*IC*, 26).

Peripherality

Errancy, then, points to a rational as well as an aesthetic mode of thought that is meant to respond to the ambiguities and displacements of historical experiences and the corresponding experience of writing. As such, it is closely intertwined with the figure of the melancholic as one who, in his inexhaustible search, gets lost (and loses himself) in a space of fluid, uncertain dimensions. '[F]rustration (*toska*) has driven me to the brink (*na okrainy*), as the moon draws a somnambulist to the roof' (*SW*, 74), these are the words used by Shklovsky to explain his departure towards Russian-occupied Persia in *A Sentimental Journey*. In Russian, the sense of space and movement conveyed by this sentence is much stronger than it has been rendered in English translation. The 'whispering sibilants' of *toska*, writes Svetlana Boym, convey 'a stifling, almost asthmatic sense of incredible deprivation' and 'evoke a claustrophobic intimacy of the cramped space from where one pines for the infinite'.²⁷ In other words, the very essence of *toska* can be reduced to the spatial aspect: the yearning to be elsewhere combined with the acute awareness that no point of arrival will ever reduce this feeling of aspiration and anguish.

Just like for Walter Benjamin, travelling, for Shklovsky, is a cure against 'the illusion of exoticism'²⁸ and at the same time an apt way – perhaps even the only one – of transforming 'dead facts' into 'living objects' or, in Benjamin's words, into 'thought-images'. And this amplified perception, the capacity of seeing things anew, reflects back on the source, the point of origin of the voyage. It is not by accident that both *ostranenie* and *okrainy* (literally, 'the peripheries', a word that Sheldon metaphorically renders as 'the brink') are closely linked to the idea of homeland and territorial belonging. If Shklovsky, a real aficionado of puns and extended metaphors, makes *ostranenie* refer not only to the Russian word for strange (*strannyi*) but also to the one for country (*strana*), thus turning mere 'defamiliarization' into 'out-of-placeness', *okrainy* – the plural form of *okraina* – describes that which lies outside or at the very margins of the *krai*, the native land:²⁹ that is, the borderlands. According to Anne

²⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 12.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979). All the texts in this volume are included in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I-IV (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974-1976), with the exception of *Berliner Chronik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970).

²⁹ *Krai* designates a territorial division but also a material 'border' such as a rim or a hem.

Dwyer,³⁰ alternative translations of the above quotation would return ‘the spatial expanse of Russia to Shklovsky’s simile’, while at the same remaining unable to convey the sense that the object of the quest is, in fact, located within the subject himself (the Russian word *lunatik* is derived from *luna*). Estrangement, understood here as an exploration of the margins of literature, is a return to the self or, more accurately, to the otherness of the self, which is also the otherness of language.

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Modernități ex-centriche: Șklovski, Benjamin, Blanchot

În ciuda asemănărilor izbitoare în ceea ce privește traiectoriile urmate și a unor afinități intelectuale dovedite, punctele comune ale reflecției lui Șklovski, Benjamin și Blanchot asupra modernității nu au intrat până acum în atenția teoreticienilor literaturii. În același timp, studii recente dedicate unei lecturi relaționale a lui Șklovski și a lui Benjamin sau a lui Benjamin și a lui Blanchot demonstrează potențialul impact al unei astfel de analize asupra dezvoltărilor recente din câmpul studiilor literare și culturale (Boym 2005, Tihanov 2005, Liska 2014, Allen 2015). În acest context, scopul articolului de față este de a propune o discuție comparativă a modului în care este înțeles spațiul la Șklovski, Benjamin și Blanchot prin abordarea temei comune a *dislocării*, înțelesă ca „figură dublă a corpului și a gândirii în mișcare” (Baqué 2006). Scopul acestei discuții este de a demonstra că dislocarea, un concept fluid care descrie atât mișcarea în sens fizic, cât și căile urmate de o reflecție care (se) caută, poate fi utilizată ca mijloc de investigație a alternativelor, a fracturilor și a interstițiilor care alcătuiesc textura intelectuală a modernității.