

Viktor Shklovsky

A Reader

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transcript

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Part Six

**In 60 Years:
Works on
Cinema (1985)**

Part Six: Introduction

Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader encompasses seventy years of scholarship. So far, this was presented chronologically. This last chapter, however, is a history of Shklovsky's writing in miniature, from 1919 to 1984. Apart from biography and history, the present anthology so far was dedicated to literary studies, with occasional forays into visual art and theater. But film criticism and scholarship took up most of Shklovsky's time, particularly in later years. This wasn't an entirely deliberate decision; Shklovsky began to work in cinema mostly because he needed the money. *Zoo* includes this work in a rather unflattering list: "The deaths of friends bent my soul. The war. Arguments./Mistakes. Injuries. Cinema."

Still, he did grow fascinated with film. He was, for instance, "one of the first to get excited about animated films, convinced 'that they have possibilities that are, as yet, untapped ... Maybe cartoons can be combined with regular films?' Indeed, when Shklovsky died in 1984, aged 91, having avoided every purge endured by the ranks of Soviet artists, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* was already in development at Disney" (Norton). The best of Shklovsky's writing on cinema is guided by genuine interest and closely interconnects with the rest of his work.

The present selection follows the collection *In 60 Years: Works on Cinema* (*Za 60 let: Raboty o kino*), which was published posthumously but selected under Shklovsky's guidance. The collection takes

up 516 pages, including eight pages of very small print listing more of Shklovsky's publications on cinema. Only a small part can be reproduced here, with a few texts that have already appeared in English included due to their importance. A recent translation of Shklovsky's early book on film (*Literature and Cinematography*) features "On Cinema" and "The Plot in Cinema"; there is a considerable amount of Shklovsky's writing in *The Film Factory* (Christy and Taylor), including "Poetry and Prose in Cinema." Still, the majority of the texts presented here have never been translated into English before.

Throughout the collection, there is Shklovsky's trademark aphoristic style: "art—as I haven't proved in the previous lines—is advanced by irony." There are his favorite examples, for instance, sexualized folktales, such as the one about "the hare that abused a fox in a most strange way." There is the strong interest in empirical research on the human body and mind, with Shklovsky explaining how our visual perception ensures that "onscreen, blowing your nose works much better than dancing." The collection's foreword is a manifesto on the value of both repeating and contradicting oneself—an idea that, self-serving or not, became crucial to the late Shklovsky. "On Cinema" explains the concept of indirect inheritance in art both earlier and clearer than the better-known "Literature beyond 'Plot.'"

"Talking to Friends" illustrates that, in 1939, Shklovsky could only talk to friends obliquely, if he wanted to do so in print. He seemingly sarcastically compares formalist conversations with those led by the inhabitants of Swift's flying island—but also speaks of "returning the sensation of reality to the artist," without directly mentioning *ostranenie*. He appears to denounce stream of consciousness writing, claiming that "a writer of genius [Tolstoy] had considered and discarded what another writer [Joyce] did later." However, those familiar with Shklovsky's earlier work know that he loved Tolstoy's

story referenced here. In 1970, he would again compare it to *Ulysses*—this time without criticizing either (Shklovsky, *Tetiva* 60).

"Chaplin as Policeman" begins with a comparison which is at the heart of automatization and hence *ostranenie*: "As unfamiliar to me as the back of my hand. That's what we should be saying about what is alien." "On Cinema Language" puts forth the theory that film can be poetic or prosaic. "On Film Reassembling" describes the fascinating practice of editing foreign films to change their plots. "Happy Fable-land" ridicules Hollywood happy endings, but also appeals to the Russian love for American literature as an argument against the Cold War. Apropos of wars, Shklovsky writes: "I fought in World War I and the civil war, I saw World War II. But I never guessed that cities and countries—the whole world—could be conquered so quickly." He is talking about television.

In one of the last texts Shklovsky ever wrote, a letter which serves as an afterword to *In 60 Years: Works on Cinema*, he says: "The life I lived was, of course, wrong. But in another life I wouldn't have done what I have done."

*Introduction (1985)*¹

[...]

There are many repetitions in my articles.

The way of thought is a winding way. Repetitions are stops alongside it. They are moments when you check your course against the stars, which are not always visible to those walking beside you.

Repetitions mean that the conversation topic isn't a matter of incident.

They are the traces of attempts to get closer to the object.

The traces are loopy, but the object becomes clearer and clearer, seen many times and from different points.

Eyesight can deceive.

But it gets better along the way. It grows wise with work.

My dear compiler, please don't throw out the repetitions—without them, the topographical map doesn't show the terrain relief.

My dear editor, without the repetitions the readers will only receive a contour map.

Contour maps are good for geography lessons, to test the pupils' memory.

What I want to give to the readers is a relief map of my journeys. A map showing the development of Soviet cinematography.

¹Source (for each chapter in this section): *Za 60 let. Raboty o kino*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985.

This is not about geography. This is about history.

The pencil that tries to correct it slips and breaks, leaving not a scratch.

Let us leave everything as it was, so as not to repeat old mistakes.

Those who venture farther than us see things anew.

They make new mistakes.

Without mistakes, there would be no discoveries.

One shouldn't be afraid of one's previous self. Or ashamed of one's past.

No apologies are accepted anyway.

Others will explain you.

Others will want to understand your journey, will follow into your footsteps. Still, they'll find their own way.

[...]

On Cinema (1919)

Art history has a very important feature: in it, it's not the eldest son who inherits seniority from his father, but the nephew who receives it from his uncle.

I'll open the brackets of my prosaic metaphor.

Medieval lyric poetry descends not directly from the classical tradition but from a younger line—the folk song, which existed during the heyday of classicism as a parallel, “junior” art form. This is proven by the canonization of a new form unknown to old art in its upper layers, namely the rhyme. The development of the novel is the canonization of the novella and the anecdote, which lived below “literature.”

This happens as follows.

Outliving the old forms, “high” art reaches an impasse. The tension of the artistic atmosphere weakens and begins to let in elements of non-canonical art, which usually has worked out new artistic devices by this stage.

As an analogy—not a parallel—we can point to the similarity between this phenomenon and the change of the culturally hegemonic tribe or class. Today's cultured mankind is not a direct descendant of the Sumer-Akkadians.

This is why it is so dangerous when the older layer of art begins to mentor the younger one. Great opportunities can be lost this way. A turbine prototype represented a higher technology than any state-of-the-art steam engine, and it would have been a deeply harmful, regressive business to try and furnish it out with a crank.

This is why it pains me so to see what people are doing to cinema, attempting to make it rhyme with theater and literature.

Old theater, which has gone dry, and old literature, which is drying out, are taking it upon themselves to "improve" cinema. With due respect to the comrades in cinema studies I must point out that this closely resembles the epoch of Nicolas I when all soldiers were made to wear boots of the same size.

Apparently, our cinema scholars proceed from the assumption that an artwork consists of form and content, and that any content can be given any form. Thus, any literary plot can be made into a film. In yesterday's great art, narrative literature was represented mainly by the psychological novel and the novel of manners: therefore, these are supposed to become the prototypical genres of literary cinema. Scripts based on old novels are written, followed by new novels in the same vein.

Meanwhile, if cinema was left alone or handed over to people eager to comprehend the forms offered by its own technical (and therefore also artistic) opportunities, then it could not only develop on its own terms but also replace the kind of theater that is now drying out and refresh art with newly created forms.

[...]

The Plot in Cinema (1923)

To do real work in cinema theory, one should begin by collecting all the existing films, or at least a couple of thousands.

Classified, these films would produce the kind of mass material that would make it possible to establish several absolutely exact laws.

It's a great pity that institutes for art history and academies are more interested in the Atlantis and the Pamir excavations.

Cinema was created before our very eyes, its life is the life of our own generation, we can follow it step by step.

Soon, the material will become immeasurable. It's sad and boring to think that we all know how important it is to study contemporary phenomena of art history, and yet that we never do so.

This kind of work cannot be done by one person; it needs qualified assistance, financing, perhaps experiments.

The groundwork for solving some questions of aesthetics could be laid in experimenting upon the audience with films made for this purpose.

What makes people cry?

What makes people laugh?

Under which circumstances does the comic become tragic?

[...]

The detective novel triumphed as "the novel about a detective" and not "the novel about a criminal" because the novel concentrating on the criminal, a descendant of the adventure novel, decelerates action merely by accumulating challenges in the protagonist's path. "The novel about a detective," on the other hand, enables entirely new constructions. We first see the crime as a mystery, then we are given several possible solutions, and finally the true picture is established. Thus, the detective novel is a mystery novel with a professional mystery solver.

Cinema is a triumph of the plot shift. What we usually see first is a sequence of incomprehensible scenes, which are subsequently explained by a protagonist; this motivation is not an account of past events, as in novels, but a pure plot shift: it is as if a part of the film was cut off from the beginning and placed at the end.

In this, cinema is certainly stronger than literature. It is much weaker in the domain of hints, which literature traditionally uses to support the interest toward the mystery's solution. Cinema does not allow for ambiguity.

The novel also often uses parallelisms to decelerate action. In such cases, the hero or heroine of one plot line is left alone at the most critical junction, and we turn to the other, parallel line. Thus, the books six and seven in *The Brothers Karamazov* are rammed shut at the moment of greatest suspense (the preparation of Fyodor Pavlovich's murder). In *Crime and Punishment*, too, two themes—Raskolnikov's and Svidrigailov's fate—keep interrupting each other.

Arguably, *King Lear* uses the same technique of two parallel intrigues.

In cinema, the interruption of one action by another is canonical. But it differs in its structure from the interruption in the novel. In the novel, one narrative situation interrupts another. Plot lines take turns. In cinema, the interrupting segments are much shorter, they

are exactly this—segments of film reel; we usually return to the same episode. A very typical kind of interruption in cinema is the motif of “help being late.” The hero or the heroine is about to be killed, “meanwhile ...”—and we learn that the victim’s friends don’t know about the terrible situation, or are unable to help. Now, we see the murder scene again, etc.

[...]

Chaplin as *Policeman* (1923)

As unfamiliar to me as the back of my hand.

That's what we should be saying about what is alien.

If women know themselves, this is only because they often change their dresses.

We've marked time with the notches of days in order to feel its movement.

Love exists as long as there is a difference, as long as there is wonder or separation.

Art is, at its root, ironic and destructive.

If it does build its little houses, this is because houses that haven't been built cannot fall.

Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus* is ironic because Oedipus creates his own ruin while trying to solve the mystery of the curse upon the city. [Gogol's] *The Government Inspector* is ironic; the only reason the play exists is that Khlestakov is not really an inspector.

A human being in the wrong place—this is the oldest theme in art. Slandered virtue, kings robbed of their kingdoms, weak-willed avengers, soft-hearted murderers, frail old men imagining themselves to be knights of la Mancha—these are the usual characters.

Another frequent feature in art is the description of events from the perspective of a person to whom they are alien, who doesn't understand them.

This is how Voltaire describes the life in contemporary France in *L'Ingénu*, this is how Chateaubriand describes French life in *Les Natchez*, this is how Tolstoy always wrote.

Being in the wrong place, not recognizing things—this is the eternal topic of art.

In Mark Twain's story *The Prince and the Pauper*, a boy finds himself in the king's palace by chance and cracks nuts with the Great Seal.

Robinson [Crusoe] isn't an exception. Admittedly, he behaves very reasonably on the desert island; he creates a life for himself—but he does so on a desert island and not in London, where he could be living if there wasn't his passion for travelling.

Thus, art—as I haven't proved in the previous lines—is advanced by irony.

One of the ways to create an ironic construction is to create a type.

Very often, an artist who has created a certain type finds it hard to lose, so that the type is transferred from scene to scene, from novel to novel.

This is done partly to save artistic material and to avoid beginning every text with the exposition of the type, but also for another reason.

It is important for the artist to carry one unchangeable yardstick through the changeable worlds of his works.

[...]

Not only Chaplin but also his main partners—the blonde (the love object) and the giant (the adversary)—wander from film to film without changing their make-up. What changes are the motivation of their relationships and the methods of collision. Apparently, the prettiness of the blonde, which makes her a love interest, and the immense height of the adversary are the optimal combination for creating a conflict around Chaplin's distinctive figure.

The giant defeated by cleverness is another literary topos, as old as the animal epos. What comes to mind are the frogs that lure an elephant into their swamp, the fox that abused a wolf and the hare that abused a fox in a most strange way (in *Russian Censored Tales*). In the domain of human relationships, the weak who defeats the strong is a beloved figure. David and Goliath are, of course, a classic variation of this theme.

However, we find much closer parallels to Chaplin's feat in German fairy tales about the brave tailor. Here, we see a weak man defeating a giant with cleverness, and not with the national weapon.

[...]

The Semantics of Cinema (1925)

[...]

According to recent research, we experience moving objects rather than single stationary objects replacing each other not because of eyesight physiology but because of our psychology. We tend to see change rather than exchange; thus, if the same letter appears on the screen in different fonts, we will see it as modulation, a gradual change. If, on the other hand, we project onto the screen letters that are very similar in their form but correspond to different sounds, then the moments of transformation will be much more apparent to us.

Expanding the distance between frames, moving them further apart, we don't destroy the experience of continuity but merely make this perception difficult. One can go as far as making the audience faint by forcing it to spend too much mental energy on connecting the fragments flashing before it. Movement in cinema is very interesting in regard to the perception of movement in general. It relates to reality the way a broken line relates to a curve. Our knowledge about what the character is doing onscreen helps our perception. Meaningful movements, particular actions appear to fill up the space between frames, simplifying perception, which is why pure movement, such as ballet, suffers most in cinema. Onscreen, blowing your nose works much better than dancing.

Cine-eye and the whole "kinoki" movement do not want to understand the essence of cinema.¹ Their eyes are placed unnaturally far from their brains. They don't understand that cinema is the most abstract of all arts, close in its essence to certain mathematical devices. Cinema needs action and meaningful movement the way literature needs words, the way a painting needs semantic meaning. Without it, the spectator becomes disoriented; his view loses direction.

In painting, shadows are a convention, but they can only be replaced by another convention. Cinema needs to accumulate conventions, they'll work the way case endings work in language.

The primary material of cinema is not the object, but a particular way of filming it. Only the cameraman's individual approach can make a film scene tangible.

This said, it is quite possible for a writer to work not with single words but with more complex pieces of literary material. Introducing an epigraph, the writer contrasts his whole work with another. Inserting documents, letter fragments, newspaper excerpts into his text, the writer doesn't stop being an artist but merely applies the artistic principle to another sphere. Lev Tolstoy's "What For?" consists of quotations by Maximov, but they are selected and juxtaposed by Tolstoy. He considers this text his own.

[...]

¹Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Glaz* (Cine-Eye) ideas included an attempt to abstain from creating meaning, e.g. by working with ready film fragments; they gave rise to *cinéma vérité* and the Dziga Vertov Group, formed in 1968 by French filmmakers such as Godard and Gorin. Vertov claimed to be "a mechanical eye" decades before Isherwood (followed by Van Druten) called himself a camera.

Poetry and Prose in Cinema (1927)

[...]

In film making, we are still children. We're only just beginning to consider the object of our work, but we can already say that there are two cinematographic poles, each with its own laws.

Charlie Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* is certainly prose; it's based on semantic meanings, on things made clear.

[Dziga Vertov's] *A Sixth Part of the World*, even though it was made by order of the [state export agency] Gostorg, is a poem, an ode.

[Vsevolod Pudovkin's] *Mother* is a centaur of sorts, and centaurs are weird animals. The film begins as prose with convincing captions (which fit the frame rather badly), and ends as purely formal poetry. Repeated frames and images that become symbolic support my conviction that the essence of this film is poetic.

Let me repeat: there is prosaic cinema and poetic cinema, and this is the main distinction. Prose and poetry differ from each other not in rhythm, or not only in rhythm, but in the prevalence of formal technical aspects (in poetic cinema) over semantic ones, with formal elements replacing semantics and providing compositional solutions. Plotless cinema is "poetic" cinema.

On Re-editing Films (1927)

[...]

One very bad Italian film, I recut seven times. In it, a countess was defamed before her lover, a fisher. The defamation was a cinematographic kind of tale. I made the slander true, and turned the truth into the woman's attempt at self-justification. In the Italian film, the woman became a writer and kept dangling her manuscripts in front of everyone she talked to. I had to transform the manuscripts into mortgage notes. The woman's character was entirely inhuman and impossible to motivate. I had to make her hysteric.

In another film, I turned two twins—a good and an evil one—into a single person with a double life, an insidious villain. At the end of my film, he died for his brother, and all his relatives turned away from him.

[...]

There is an invention by Vasiliev that I consider a masterpiece of film work. He wanted a man to die, and the man wasn't dying. He chose a moment when his intended victim was yawning, took that frame and multiplied it, so that the action stopped. The man was frozen with his mouth open, all that remained was to add a caption: death by heart failure.

This device was so unexpected that nobody protested.

Almost all filmmakers worked in re-editing before they went on to direct; it is a great filmmaking school. I had to re-edit and remake the plots of Russian films, adding continuity shots, and I know now how weakly particular actions are connected to particular meanings in cinema.

Lev Kuleshov once said that a man before a plate of soup and a man in sorrow have almost the same facial expression. In order to give the external expression of an emotion a certain meaning, one needs to know the person's experiences and feelings.

In *The Song of Roland*, Roland blows his horn so strongly that blood begins to seep from his ears; Charlemagne hears him from afar, but people reassure him that Roland is merely hunting.

There is also a novella, a much more cinematographic one.

At a ball, a duke brings into the hall a bottle in which some kind of jester is wriggling wildly. He's being very funny, making all kinds of unusual movements. Only later does everyone find out that the bottle had been corked up tightly, that the man in the bottle had been suffocating and pleading for help.

[...]

Five Feuilletons on Eisenstein (1926)

What is Eisenstein good and bad at?

Eisenstein is good at working with things.

Things work wonderfully in his films: the battleship really becomes the work's protagonist. The cannons, their movement, the masts, the stairs—they all perform, but the doctor's pince-nez works better than the doctor himself.

The actors, the "models"—or whatever you call them—don't work in Eisenstein's films.¹ He doesn't want to work with them, and this weakens the film's first part. Sometimes, Eisenstein is good at showing human beings: it is when he interprets them as quotes, when he shows them in standard ways. Barsky (*Potemkin's* captain) is good, as good as a cannon. The people on the stairs are good, but the stairs themselves are best of all.

The stairs are the plot. Its landings play the role of decelerating points, and the stairs—the stairs, down which the carriage with the baby is rolling, gaining and losing speed by turns—are organized according to laws cognate to Aristotelian poetics: a new form gave birth to dramatic peripeteia.

¹Eisenstein advertised for "naturally expressive actors," whose main work was supposed to consist in being themselves.

[...]

Was the color red—the color on the flag, rising over *Potemkin's* mast—necessary? I believe it was. You can't reproach the artist if the people watching his film applaud the revolution rather than his work.²

A well-illuminated red flag is always flying over the Kremlin. But the people walking down the street don't stop to applaud it.

Eisenstein colored in the flag audaciously, but he had the right to this color.

To be afraid of audacity, to be afraid of simple effective devices in art—this is vulgar. To color in a flag on the film reel, once—this was brave.

²Many critics accused Eisenstein of vulgarity for coloring in—by hand—the red flag at the end of a black-and-white film.

Talking to Friends (1939)

[...]

I believed that there were no more plots, that plots were merely motivations for tricks.

We [the formalists] were claiming that there was nothing behind the text, nothing beyond it.

But we didn't see the text, we didn't see color. We saw only the junctions of paint, and in literature, we loved rough drafts best of all.

This is how the Proletkult performed Ostrovsky's *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man*. Every aspect of the play was developed and parodied, but the play didn't exist.

Neither did the world.

The world didn't exist as a whole; it was experienced as a collection of objects for parody. Young "eccentrics" performed the civil war in their conceptual costumes.¹ They couldn't get hold of the epoch without a conceptual subtext.

This resembles the Chinese who have to find a phonetically similar hieroglyph for each syllable if they want to reproduce a European word.

¹The "Eccentric Actor Factory" (FEKS) existed in Petrograd from 1921 to 1926; Eisenstein's "models" vs. "eccentrics" were two conflicting acting schools of the 1920s.

[...]

Art finds itself thematically locked in.

Art has lost its humanity. Cinema actors are being filmed from different angles like samovars. The actor has become an isolated human being among things.

On Swift's flying island, people decided to replace words with showing things. They carried things around with them and led long formalist conversations in the street, arranging their props.

Not all things, not all people were cinema-compatible.

Look how in Abram Room's rather banal *Death Bay*, the director's handwriting grows livelier when he peoples the ship with freaks.

This new sharp tone returns the sensation of reality to the artist, who had lost it in its usual form.

Riffraff bursts into Eisenstein's *Split*.

The riffraff live in barrels. The barrels are dug into the ground, though even a kitten knows that you can only hide from rain in a barrel or box if it lies on its side.

But the effect of the freaks' sudden appearance (a hundred people instantaneously appear right out of the earth) is so great that verisimilitude goes flying into the editorial waste-basket.

[...]

Not everything that is easily possible is worth doing.

Our country has fallen in love with Joyce. Now, Tolstoy, before *Childhood*, wrote a text entitled "Yesterday's Story." It hadn't been published before; now, it appears in the first volume's addendum.

Tolstoy based this text on internal dialogue.

He described only a few hours, but they took up a lot of space.

He based his text on the intersection of different planes, such as

the contradictions between the semantics of different languages. Let me quote an excerpt:

How I love to have her speak of me in the third person. In German this is rude, but I would love it even in German. Why can't she find a decent way to call me? I see how awkward it must be for her to call me by my name and title. Is this really because I ... "Stay for dinner," said her husband. Busy with my reflections on third person formulas, I didn't notice that my body, having already politely made its excuses, put down its hat again and made itself comfortable in an easy chair. It was clear that my consciousness was taking no part in this foolishness.²

A writer of genius had considered and discarded what another writer did later.

Joyce's text moves, the way a blind man moves along a wall, along an altered plot of Ulysses' travels.

The things of the external world are destroyed.

The fragmented consciousness does not serve to test the world; it becomes the content of the artwork.

But it can only live and move if it leans on existing art, on its destruction.

[...]

²Translation by Alexandra Berlina; a version of the full text by George Kline is available at en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_History_of_Yesterday.

Happy Fable-land (1948)¹

As children, we were reading Mark Twain and rafting with Huckleberry Finn on an American river, the Mississippi.

We were rafting with Jim, a Negro who had placed his faith in a white boy.

Huckleberry Finn believed what he was told, but he found the strength and courage not to write a letter about a runaway Negro on his way to the free states. He had found in himself enough faith, and power, and simple human ethics to fight against the ethics of slaveholders.

I'll be talking to Huckleberry Finn's compatriots, to Americans who, as children, read the same books as I did, and who probably comprehended them the way I did.

Miss Watson freed her Negro before dying, but before that, she was going to sell him; Tom Sawyer helped the flight of a slave who was already free. He took on risks, but he did not take on new ethics. This is why Huckleberry Finn is braver than Tom Sawyer. He is closer to the future.

How well does Mark Twain describe the Mississippi! The river is

¹This article's title, "*V nekotom gosudarstve*," is a fairy-tale formula that could also be rendered as "in a kingdom far away." However, Shklovsky is referring to Thackeray's "happy, harmless Fable-land" here.

wide. Someone says something about the night, laughing, far away. On the raft, you can hear every word.

This is how we hear the words of art that are oceans and centuries away: they are spoken quietly, but still they reach us.

Crossing centuries, the words of Sancho Panza, who judged according to the laws of common sense, reached Mark Twain, and he, an American, described the Englishman Tom Canty, who finds himself on the throne and makes laws of sense and justice.

Twenty years ago, my friend Mayakovsky was crossing the ocean toward America. Over the ocean, it was raining. The thread of rain had sewed the sky to the water, and then the sun rose, and a rainbow emerged, shining, over the ocean, mirrored in water—the steamer was entering a festive many-colored circle.

Once upon a time, people believed that a rainbow meant hope.

There was a war. The rainbow of peace didn't remain for long over the burnt-out earth, over the ocean that saw battles.

The sky is stormy, and familiar clouds are forming.

But the ocean is not too wide for words.

Mayakovsky loved the Brooklyn Bridge the way a painter loves Madonna; he loved New York, he admired the masts of ships passing by, he listened to the houses in the city responding to faraway trains, the way crockery in its cupboard responds to your footsteps by tinkling.

The best poet of our time loved New York the way one loves a forest, he loved this city in its busy autumn weekdays, he loved thunderstorms in New York.

We understand America.

[...]

Dickens and Thackeray both complained about the necessity to create happy endings.

Thackeray called the land of false happy denouements in feel-good bourgeois novels a "happy, harmless Fable-land."

American films, as we all know, always end well, with very few exceptions. These few are very good.

Chaplin's screenplays do not end in fun. The happy ending in *The Gold Rush* is a straight-out parody. It's constructed as a pauper's dream. Only we don't see the pauper wake up.

But I'll be talking about American popular cinema here. This kind of cinema deals with the happy Fable-land, now geographically pin-pointed.

It's in America.

Even if the film doesn't play in America, the protagonist is at least on his way there; in *Casablanca*, whose screenplay is very cleverly written, the whole pathos, the whole goal consists in an American visa.

American popular films resemble each other the way detective novels do.

A successful film immediately spawns sequels and turns into a series.

A film that has attracted an audience immediately gives birth to a parody.

A popular parody, in its turn, gives rise to endless sequels.

This is half-folklore, but it has its authors. It's fixed, organized, directed. The author is the owner of the film company.

Dickens knew America. He wrote: "The most terrible blow ever struck at liberty would be struck by this country. This blow will result from its inability to be worthy of its role as 'the world teacher of life.'²

²This quotation, for which Shklovsky gives no source, sounds very much like Chesterton's summary of *American Notes* in his book *Charles Dickens* (which Shklovsky read; he cites in *Tales about Prose*): "In one of his gloomier moments he wrote down his fear that the

Quoting these words by Dickens, I'm ready to restrict their application. We all understand the importance of progressive American literature and technology; we are aware of the diversity of American characters. But the lessons the world learns from American cinema have been for the worse, for a long time now.

Of American cinema technique and, in particular, screenwriting technique, I can say this: it very skillfully brings the most diverse phenomena of world literature to the level of harmful vulgarity.

[...]

greatest blow ever struck at liberty would be struck by America in the failure of her mission upon the earth" (Chesterton). The text of *American Notes* doesn't contain the exact phrase Shklovsky claims to be citing, though it does feature many passages such as "with sharp points and edges such as these, Liberty in America hews and hacks her slaves; or, failing that pursuit, her sons devote them to a better use, and turn them on each other" (Dickens).

What the Character Knows and What the Audience Knows (1959)

Even in our best films, the characters often seem to know everything about themselves.

A negative character might not know himself fully, but the positive one certainly does know the final truth about himself and about everyone around him. This truth is offered to the audience as the film's conclusion.

Meanwhile, this perspective is unscientific. It equates objective existence in the world with a person's, albeit a very intelligent person's, self-understanding. But what we call human psychology must be differentiated from deep relations with reality, which are often beyond control.

The audience sees the character in a series of connections and circumstances; it knows him better than he knows himself.

We empathize with the character—we often feel pity for him—because he doesn't know what we know.

Chapaev doesn't know how much work, how much self-restriction and strain he is to go through as a Red Army commander. The audience knows. The audience knows the future. In *Chapaev*, the audience sees and comprehends its past. This is why Chapaev's

utterances reveal his character but do not constitute the film's moral. They are more than a moral: they lead us into the process of a new moral's creation.

In Ekaterina Vinogradskaya's film *Member of the Government*, the heroine's story consists in her constant elevation. Her horizon grows, but it grows without her full awareness. This is why the audience finds itself seemingly ahead of the heroine but also capable of following her—precisely because it knows her future.

The transition from a witty situation or a conflict to the intelligently developed plot must be imperceptible though predetermined.

Too often, we rob the audience of the joy of discovery.

[...]

*The Emergence of the Word (1963)*¹

We, the cinematographers of the older generation, have lived through a rare phenomenon: we have seen an art form being born and dying. In our lifetime, imaginative cinema emerged as new art that claimed a place beside old art, sometimes even contesting this place. And in our lifetime, it was all over. I'm talking about silent cinema.

By and by, silent cinema developed its own language. First, the missing words were replaced by exaggerated gestures. By and by—this happened very characteristically in Russian cinema—acts, not gestures, began to replace words. Situations were created in which the spectators seemed to construct the text. The captions didn't replace speech; they were short, aphoristic, and constituted what could be described as lines shared by the filmmaker and the characters.

Rendering actors speechless, silent cinema raised the importance of subtle facial and body expressions—not gestures, but the figure as a whole, the actor's behavior as a unity expressing the meaning of the action.

The word doesn't replace action; it has its own, more complex task: it deepens and changes the action's meaning. The speeches of

¹In the original, the reference to Shklovsky's first published article is even clearer: "Poyavleniye slova" (The Emergence of the Word) sounds similar to "Voskresheniye slova" (Resurrecting/resurrection of the Word).

messengers in antique tragedies conveyed actions which remained unseen; they commented without showing.

By 1925-1930, silent cinema had reached international success and united the world in what might be called graphic language. The whole world was learning how people lived, behaved, loved, cheated, suffered from jealousy in different countries.

Silent cinema had to express complex ideas without a voice, without words. Film editing emerged as a technical tool: initially it had to do with combining close-ups with long shots, it was a concession to the specifics of the camera lens. But later, editing was reinterpreted as a means of expression. Showing a part instead of the whole, emphasizing crucial details, cinema developed a language of its own, which included editing. In language, we point to one feature of an object in order to define the object as a whole. In filming, the director produced an impression of the whole by showing a hand, a pair of eyes, or a thing used by a character. Thus, the filmmaker taught the spectator to see, compare, and comprehend.

Technology knows no mercy; it is as if accomplishments were irreversible. I'll explain my use of "as if" later.²

The silence of the film reel was masked by sound illustrations. They hovered near the screen, half-improvising, half-repeating. The sounds of the piano didn't quite reach the spectators' consciousness, but they were necessary.

The great composer Shostakovich worked as a pianist in the cinema "The Light Reel" on the Nevsky in Leningrad when he was a boy. This brought in good money. Besides, the work allowed the

²The article never directly refers to this "kak by" (as if) again; the explanation is apparently to be found at the very end of the article: "New inventions never destroy old achievements, they merely narrow down their use."

boy genius to improvise freely. Later, he greatly enjoyed writing film music.

Nobody else remembers this, probably, but I know for sure that a fire once started in that cinema while Shostakovich was working. A flame appeared under the screen, and the musician saw it. If he had stopped playing, the spectators would have panicked. Back then, fires were frequent in cinemas. Shostakovich went on playing, and the fire was extinguished quietly. The smoke rising from the pit joined the fluttering shadows that always live in the blue cone extending from the projector to the screen. But this is not what I meant to talk about—I merely wanted to mention the quiet heroism of the cinema mechanic and the cinema musician. That tribe was dedicated to its work.

And then, sound came. This happened sometime about 1927. It came from America. It turned out that sound could be recorded on the film reel. The new electronic world, the world approaching cybernetics and mastering the atom, mastered speech and sound on the way; it mastered the art of creating likenesses.

The emergence of the word in cinema looked rather pathetic. First, it seemed that sound must have a special motivation to appear onscreen. What followed were films about singers. I remember one about a Jewish boy who first sang in the synagogue and then became an opera singer; his father was devastated, he died, and the young man came to sing the kaddish in his father's house. The film was very sentimental, very uncinematographic, and enjoyed much success.³

[...]

Don't be surprised at the deafness of my questions, my blindness, my

³ Shklovsky appears to be referring to Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927).

inability to see: I was finding it hard to leave behind me the skills of a silent cinema screenwriter.

Everything turned out differently at the end. Many achievements of silent cinema returned to the talking pictures. New inventions never destroy old achievements, they merely narrow down their use.

We are all living through yet another turning point now. Television, despite its restricted camera field, is already forcing out the cinema, the newspaper, and the book. Theater fought against cinema, and theater survived. Cinema is now fighting against television: it probably will survive, as well. These means of human self-expression will coexist, just like painting, graphic art, and sculpture do.

Return the Ball into the Game (1970)

I saw two films by the brilliant director Antonioni. One of them is called *Eclipse*. A man and a woman can't sort out their relationship. We see their things, their successful and unsuccessful financial operations. We see their decisions, made but unrealized. At the end we're shown water flowing out of a big barrel.

But this is not the saddest film. Antonioni has made another very famous one, *Blowup*. Here it is, as a simple content summary, (but keep in mind that the path of events along which I'm leading you ends in a cul-de-sac):

A young, very talented photographer is looking for sensations. He makes many pictures; his clients demand the story of a murder: a corpse whose picture can be printed in the paper.

The photographer takes a snapshot. He blows it up. Suddenly, it emerges that there is a corpse in the garden, under the trees. Another blowup. The corpse is found. Then, a woman appears, wishing to buy this picture. We see how the theft of the picture is organized. All this is rather disconnected and very difficult. The picture is stolen. The reporter goes to see the place where the corpse had been: there is no corpse. He goes to see his friends who like him well. They are busy with what, in cinema today, carries the short name "sex."

They aren't interested in him or the blowup: the sensation didn't come off.

On his way, the reporter sees a group of young people. They travel in fancy dress, in parody costumes, singing something.

Then, this crowd is playing tennis: we clearly hear the rackets sharply, skillfully hitting the balls.

Then we comprehend that they are playing without a ball.

There is no goal, no ball, only the ghost of a sound.

Nobody is interested in the end of the detective story, the solution of the crime. There might be a newspaper, there might be a picture, but that's it. The denouement disappears. There is no ending ...

A film by Pasolini ends differently. Its title could be translated as *Birds and Birdies*.¹ The story is about Francis of Assisi sending monks to preach Christianity to birds. The monks arrive in the modern world.

They find some hawks and turn them Christian; then they find sparrows, and the sparrows, too, receive the revelation.

But the Christian hawks eat the Christian sparrows: this is their nature.

The monks pray. Around them, a monastery emerges and does a brisk business in faith. The monks leave.

They see terrible things, needless births, needless deaths. They see a Chinese man for whom a beggar woman is getting a swallow nest from the top of an old house. The monks' guide through the world of lawless sadness and strange entangled paths is a raven who is given them by fate. The raven keeps sidling, looking for something. In the end, the hungry travelers eat the bird.

This is, schematically, the film's ending.

We have lived for millennia, and we haven't been living in vain. We

¹ *Uccellacci e uccellini* could also be rendered as *Big/Bad Birds and Little/Good Birds*; in English, the film is known as *The Hawks and the Sparrows*.

don't believe that raven soup is a tasty dish; we don't believe in the sublimity of ironic denouements.

But private denouements, the denouements of particular cases seem to be replaced by comparative denouements.

Our scope of thinking is growing ever larger.

Conflicts take place not only between individuals but between generations, between social systems.

Irony won't help. It will save neither Antonioni, nor Pasolini, nor Fellini—an immensely gifted man who made a whole film about being unable to make a film about a man making a model of a rocket which is supposed to carry him off into another world.

The way of Gilgamesh, who crossed an ocean with a pole, seems difficult to his descendants.

Poems are written about poems being written.

Novels about novels, screenplays about screenplays.

Tennis is being played without a ball. But the journeys of Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Pantagruel, even of Chichikov [from *Dead Souls*]*—*they all need a goal.

Return the ball into the game.

Return the deed into life.

Return meaning not to the reaching for records but to movement itself.

Unread Dream (1984)

[...]

In Plato's dialogue "Phaedrus," there is that conversation. Socrates tells a legend about the invention of numbers, games, and writing.

Writing is defined as a means of conserving knowledge, a means of remembering and reminding.

Socrates comments that writing cannot be really considered an invention because it does not create anything new. We write down what we said or thought. Letters, these signs that assume formation on paper in dense rows, cannot talk and cannot contradict you.

I will add that they kill the living, sounding word; they flatten it, making it fit under the cover.

But Socrates failed to notice a crucial feature of writing. It does not only preserve our knowledge (losing some aspects). It also gives a greater number of people the opportunity to share in this knowledge. Socrates views knowledge as a privilege of the aristocracy.

Writing, on the other hand, knows no class distinctions.

The system of depiction created by silent cinema (which, I'll add, has been so thoroughly forgotten by television) was panhuman and universally comprehensible.

But I seem to be getting ahead of myself.

Printing prompted the democratization of knowledge. Printing assured the victory of revolution.

Television went even further.

The following story once happened to Dickens. The great writer often performed readings of his work. Once, the Queen of England, desiring to witness one, invited him to the palace. Dickens' reply was simple: he sent her a ticket to his reading.

Admittedly, this story has nothing to do with television.

[...]

If we compare the art of cinema to the invention of writing, the frame to the letter, the sign, the hieroglyph (this comparison was widespread in the 1920s), then television is comparable to the invention of book printing.

Writing put the living sound of the word into a little box. Printing left the word even further behind. It also separated itself from the figurative quality of letters, which once had been drawings depicting particular things. The letter, the piece of type, is far removed from a drawing on stone.

Television has disseminated the achievements of cinema, churning out copies. It uses what has already been done, often without noticing, without thinking. The culture of framing and cutting is lost.

Gogol's Petrushka reads syllable by syllable and is astonished to see words emerge from single letters.

We aren't astonished at this anymore. We read automatically, without noticing the words, without finishing them, the way we say "h'lo" instead of "hello."

This is how we watch television.

This probably also happens because television is a specific art form, one we don't yet understand. What we must use in TV work is not what unites it with other art forms but what sets it apart.

[...]

Today, television is more widespread and influential than books, cinema, and theater. Young and audacious, it's forcing out related and unrelated art forms.

I'm afraid that soon it might force out itself.

Its invasion, the invasion of TV, was uncoordinated and highly active. This is how the Huns conquered Rome, avalanche-like, leaving the Romans no time to come to their senses.

Cinema was at the avant-garde of this invasion. It galloped by like the herald of a fire brigade. In old Russia, fire brigades had heralds. Their job was to ride in front, blowing their horns, warning everyone to step aside.

Television has crept into our homes without asking our consent, without as much as talking to us beforehand. Even a thief doesn't come quite without notice—we can hear him force the door.

We let television sit at our table. We wear it on our head. We've been converted to a new faith, replacing the toppled crosses with TV antennas on the roofs of our houses.

I've seen a lot in my lifetime. I fought in World War I and the civil war, I saw World War II. But I never guessed that cities and countries—the whole world—could be conquered so quickly.

We were not prepared for this. We were dumbfounded; for a long time, we were disputing if television would destroy everything we had created.

A genie who took no orders from us had broken free from his bottle.

Today, we're all used to the TV screen. Television is part of our life. It all seems very simple to us now: you come in, you turn it on, you turn it off. Or (worse): you arrive, you place your camera in the street and just start filming.

It's not as simple as that. We haven't yet conquered television. Its fate reminds us of Plato's warnings.

[...]

A Letter to Evgeny Gabrilovich (1984)¹

[...]

Einstein wrote: "Forgive me, Newton."

Einstein looks into Newton's mirror and knows: there is another one beyond it.

Only the greatest trees can nod at each other with such joy.

The world isn't flat.

Space is curved, but this is beyond my understanding.

The life I lived was, of course, wrong. But in another life I wouldn't have done what I have done.

I had that term, *ostrannenie*.

They printed it with one "n." This is how it started. Actually, there should have been two terms.

I only corrected this recently, in my book *Energy of Delusion*. These two words coexist now—*ostranenie* and *ostrannenie*, with one "n" and with two, with different meanings but with the same plot, a plot about the strangeness of life.

You think you're finishing a thing.

But you're just beginning.

[...]

¹Gabrilovich (1899–1993) was a Soviet screenwriter, one of the very few acquaintances of Shklovsky whose life experience was comparable to his own in regard to both length and variety: Gabrilovich went from being a member of "The First Soviet Eccentric Jazz Band" to a socialist realist specializing in films on Lenin. In the 1970s, Gabrilovich intended to make a film about Shklovsky, but this never happened.