

Engaging Estrangement

Defamiliarization Across Genres

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Defamiliarization

ostranenie: making strange, and pushing aside.

- Coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay “Art as Technique.”
- “Art removes objects from the automatism of perception...”
- Against habitualization.
 - Habitualization = algebraic (**Algebrization**)
 - “...we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics.”
 - “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war”

Defamiliarization certainly operates not only upon language, but also impregnates certain works where events appear deformed to the reader, reminding him or her of something familiar that has been distorted, and then, creating a distance between the reader and the narrator that usually conveys some touches of irony and humorous comments on the part of the latter.

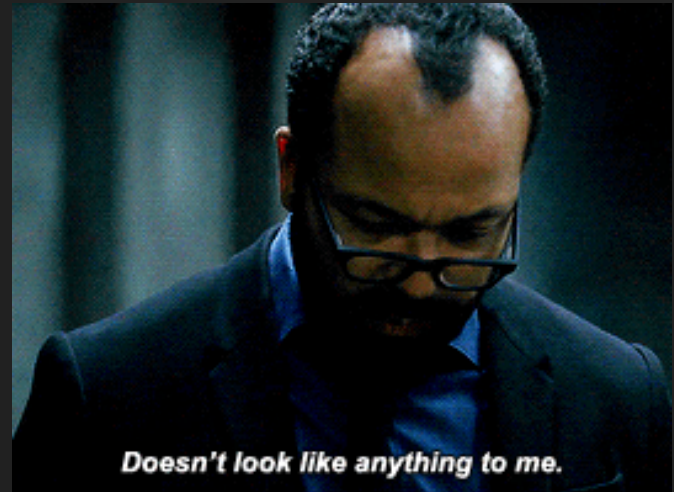
- Ana León Távora, “Deriding the Exotic: Techniques of Defamiliarization in Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, and James Joyce”

Algebrization

The process of "algebrization," the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature - a number, for example - or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition...

“When you become too accustomed to the things around you, they stop seeming extraordinary,”

- Gabrielle Bellot



Poetic Imagery

We know that frequently an expression is thought to be poetic, to be created for aesthetic pleasure, although actually it was created without such intent... Thus a work may be (1) intended as prosaic and accepted as poetic, or (2) intended as poetic and accepted as prosaic.

Poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression... Prose imagery is a means of abstraction.

There are two aspects of imagery:

imagery as a practical [prosaic] means of thinking, as a means of placing objects within categories; and imagery as poetic, as a means of reinforcing an impression...



Prosaic



Poetic

...the artistry attributed to a given work results from the way we perceive it...

*Consider a
Still-Life*



Consider Duchamp's "The Fountain"



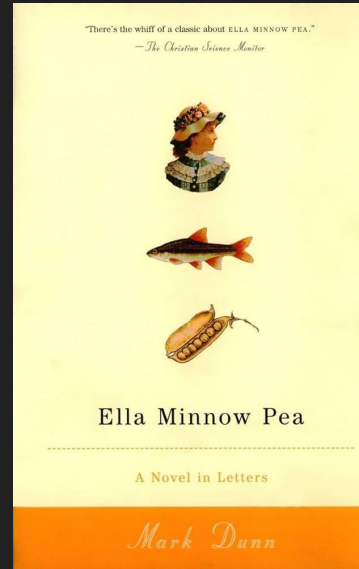
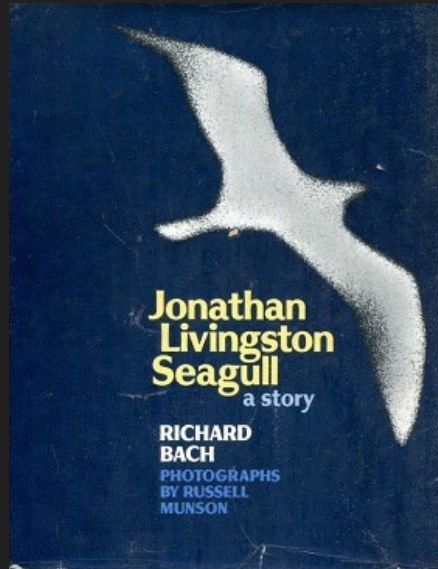
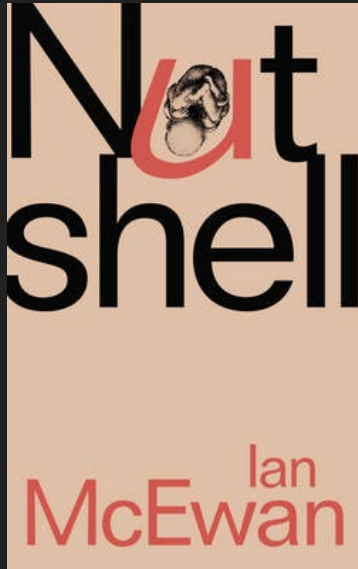
Parallelism

The perception of disharmony in a harmonious context is important in parallelism. The purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception - that is, to make a unique semantic modification.

Example: "the pestle and the mortar," "Carpal Tunnel of Love."

Point of View

Tolstoy uses this technique of "defamiliarization", constantly. The narrator of "Kholstomer," for example, is a horse, and it is the horse's point of view (rather than a person's) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar.



“A point of view that is off-center, a deflective point of view, may liberate the meanings of a story. As one gets older, the story of Hansel and Gretel becomes more interesting only when told from the point of view of the witch.”

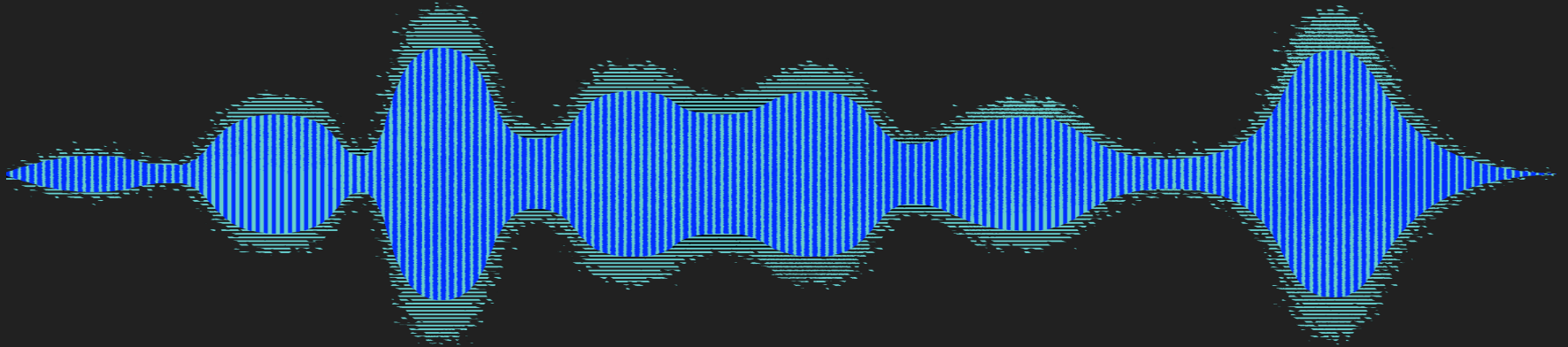
- Charles Baxter

Disordering Rhythm

There is "order" in art, yet not a single column of a Greek temple stands exactly in its proper order; poetic rhythm is similarly disordered rhythm. Attempts to systematize the irregularities have been made, and such attempts are part of the current problem in the theory of rhythm...the problem is not one of complicating the rhythm but of disordering the rhythm - a disordering which cannot be predicted. Should the disordering of rhythm become a convention, it would be ineffective as a procedure for the roughening of language. But I will not discuss rhythm in more detail since I intend to write a book about it.

Focus on Sensation

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.



Defamiliarization and the Uncanny

"...the "unheimliche" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."

- Sigmund Freud, "'The Uncanny' (Das Unheimliche)"

Examples:

- Whether one is a human or automaton.
 - E. T. A. Hoffman's "The Sandman"
- The double
- The childhood fear of losing one's eyes
- The fear of the evil eye



Consider Coyster's Vanitas Still Life Memento mori - "remember you must die"



Since negative effects of movement are apparent even with a prosthetic hand, a whole robot would magnify the creepiness. And that is just one robot. Imagine a craftsman being awakened suddenly in the dead of night. He searches downstairs for something among a crowd of mannequins in his workshop. If the mannequins started to move, it would be like a horror story.

- Masahiro Mori, "Bukimi No Tani" or "The Uncanny Valley" (1970)

Sigmund Freud on Das Unheimlich

“What interests us most in this long extract is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich. What is heimlich thus comes to be unheimlich.”

Charles Baxter on Defamiliarization

“There is always something anarchic about the imagination. It likes to find details that don't belong, that don't fit...Street gangs sometimes act like families, and families sometimes act like street gangs. The familiar gives way, not to the weird, but to the experience of a truth caught in midair. It produces the near laughter of recognition, as if every truth contains within it another truth that nearly contradicts it.”

Examples

From Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

For having lived in Westminster—how many years now? over twenty,—one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

“XXV” by Mark Strand

Is what exists a souvenir of the time
Of the great nought and deep night without stars.
The time before the universe began?

When we look at each other and see nothing
Is that a confirmation that we are less
Than meets the eye and embody some of

The night of our origins and isn't everything
A little less than meets the eye, reminding us
That our ignorance is verified by nothing

Which it honors? And isn't it true that
A loss of memory is the most powerful force
In the formation of culture, that the past

Is always simplified to make room for
The present? And aren't we more interested
In what may happen or will happen

Than in what has already happened, and so look ahead
Into the dark and imagine a fullness in which
We are the stars, matching the emptiness

Of the beginning, giving birth to ourselves
Again and again, rising out of the ruins or ashes
Of the past? Our images blaze a path

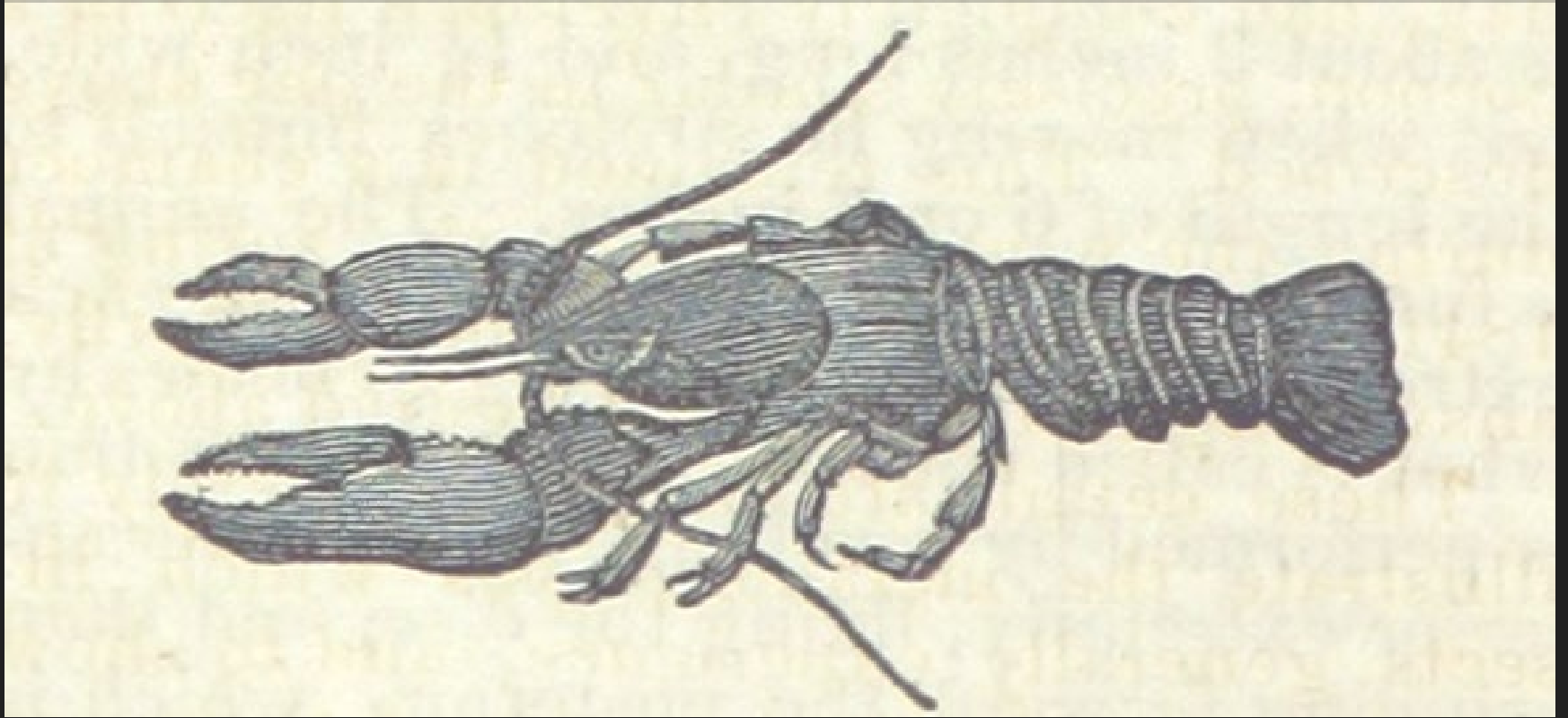
That our poor bodies must follow. And the wind
That pursues is the perfumed wind of spring
That promises much, but settles for summer.

From Ripe by Sarah Rose Etter

Everything here is always in bloom, even in winter. The heads of dark pink flowers slowly explode in the sun like bursting hearts. I walk past graffiti flowers and foxes, boutique art stores, homeopathic centers, food stands, and a Buddhist temple housed in an old Gothic church. The doors to the temple are open. A glimpse inside: a black floor, intricate gilded columns rising to the ceiling, bald men in red robes praying at a gigantic alter. Seeing their faith is like peering into another way of living, their prayer a portal to a peace I have never found.

Technique in Practice

Consider the Lobster



Consider the Liminal Space



Consider the Objects in the Picture

