

Russian Theory in Art

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What is Russian Theory

The **Russian Theory of Art** is a multifaceted intellectual tradition that combines **aesthetics, philosophy, politics, and spirituality** to explore the purpose, form, and social role of art. Unlike Western art theory, which often prioritizes individual expression or formal beauty, Russian approaches frequently tie art to **metaphysical, revolutionary, or collective ideals**.

Core Themes in Russian Art Theory

1. Art as Spiritual Revelation

- From Orthodox icons to Malevich's *Black Square*, art is a bridge to the divine or cosmic.
- "The icon is not a depiction but a manifestation of the heavenly prototype." — Pavel Florensky

2. Art as Social Transformation

- Constructivists and Marxists saw art as a tool for revolution.
- "I want the pen to be equal to the bayonet!" — Vladimir Mayakovsky

3. Form Over Content

- Russian Formalists (e.g., Shklovsky) analyzed *how* art works, not *what* it represents.
- "Art exists to make the stone stony." — Viktor Shklovsky

4. Anti-Bourgeois Radicalism

- Avant-garde movements (Suprematism, Futurism) rejected traditional aesthetics.
- "Museums are the graveyards of art." — Kazimir Malevich

Key movements and thinkers

2. Key Movements & Thinkers

A. Russian Formalism (1910s–1930s)

- **Focus:** Literary/artistic *techniques* (e.g., defamiliarization).
- **Thinkers:** Shklovsky, Eichenbaum, Tynianov.
- **Legacy:** Foundation of semiotics and structuralism.

B. Constructivism (1920s)

- **Focus:** Art as industrial design for the proletariat.
- **Thinkers:** Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stepanova.
- **Legacy:** Influenced Bauhaus and contemporary graphic design.

C. Avant-gard and Suprematism (1910s–1930s)

- **Focus:** Pure geometric abstraction as spiritual expression.
- **Thinker:** Kandinsky, Malevich, Filonov.
- **Legacy:** Precursor to Minimalism and conceptual art.

D. Socialist Realism (1934–1980s)

- **Focus:** State-mandated "heroic" depictions of Soviet life.
- **Thinkers:** Stalin, Gorky, Zhdanov
- **Legacy:** Propaganda art under Stalin.

E. Religious Symbolism (1910s-1920s) (Florensky, Trubetskoy, Berdyaev)

- **Focus:** Icons as windows to divine reality.
- **Concept:** Reverse perspective in icons.
- **Legacy:** Religious mysticism and New Age spirituality

F. Moscow-Tartu Semiotics (1960s–1980s)

- **Focus:** Art as a system of signs (Lotman, Uspensky).
- **Concept:** The "semiosphere" of culture.
- **Legacy:** Postmodern cultural studies

Independent thinkers

Mikhail Bakhtin. *Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), *Rabelais and his world* (1940).

Lev Vygotsky. *Psychology of art* (1924), *Thinking and speech* (1934)

Comparative scheme

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Aspect	Western Theory	Russian Theory
Purpose of Art	Beauty, individual genius	Social change, spiritual truth
Form vs. Content	Balance (Kant, Hegel)	Form as revolutionary (Formalism)
Politics	Often apolitical	Deeply ideological (Marxism/Orthodoxy)
Key Example	Renaissance perspective	Reverse perspective in icons

Dialectic

Russian art theory is not a single doctrine but a dialectic between:

- **Spirituality vs. Materialism** (Florensky vs. Constructivists)
- **Form vs. Function** (Formalists vs. Socialist Realists)
- **Individual vs. Collective** (Avant-garde vs. State dogma).

Its legacy lives on in abstract art, design theory, and critiques of visual culture.

Russian Formalism

Focus: *How art is made (form, technique) rather than what it represents.*

Key Concepts

- **Defamiliarization (*Ostranenie*)** – Art makes the familiar strange to renew perception.
 - *"Art exists to make the stone stony."* – **Viktor Shklovsky** (*Art as Technique*, 1917)
- **Literary Evolution** – Genres change mechanically, not organically.
- **Device vs. Material** – The "how" (technique) matters more than the "what" (content).

Scheme

Scheme: How Formalism Analyzes Literature

Text

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├ Fabula (Story Events)

└ Syuzhet (Narrative Structure)

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└ Literary Devices (e.g., defamiliarization, parallelism)

Key Thinkers & Works

- **Viktor Shklovsky** – *Art as Technique* (1917)
- **Boris Eikhenbaum** – *The Theory of the "Formal Method"* (1926)
- **Yuri Tynianov** – *The Literary Fact* (1924)

Constructivism

Focus: *Art as social utility* – merging art, industry, and revolution.

Key Concepts

- "Art into Life" – No more "bourgeois" easel painting; art must serve society.
- **Material Culture** – Use of industrial materials (steel, glass, concrete).
- **Photomontage & Typography** – For mass propaganda.



Scheme: Constructivist Art Principles

Art

- |
- |— Production (not representation)
- |— Functionality (useful objects)
- |— Collective (not individual genius)



Key Figures

- **Vladimir Tatlin** – *Monument to the Third International (1919)*
- **Aleksandr Rodchenko** – *Books! (1924, photomontage)*
- **Lyubov Popova** – *Spatial Force Constructions (1921)*



Suprematism

Focus: *Pure abstraction – beyond material reality.*

Key Concepts

- **"Zero of Form"** – Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) as the endpoint of art.
- **Geometric Abstraction** – Squares, circles, lines as spiritual symbols.

Scheme: Suprematist Evolution

Representational Art

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Cubo-Futurism (Fragmented Forms)

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Suprematism (Pure Geometry: Square, Circle, Cross)

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The "Zero of Form" (Black Square as Ultimate Abstraction)



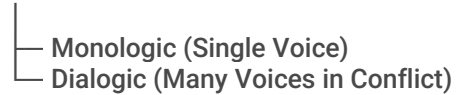
Bakhtin's Dialogism & Carnavalesque

Key Concepts

- **Polyphony** – Multiple voices (e.g., Dostoevsky's novels).
- **Carnavalesque** – Subversion of authority through chaos (e.g., Rabelais).

Scheme: Bakhtin's Theory

Text



Lev Vygotsky

Scheme 1: Vygotsky's Model of Aesthetic Experience

Raw Emotion (Subjective)



Artistic Form (Cultural Mediation: Symbols, Structure)



Catharsis (Transformed Emotion)



Social Meaning (Shared Experience)

Scheme 2: The "Law of Aesthetic Reaction"

Vygotsky argues that art organizes emotions through:

1. **Opposition** (conflict between form/content)
 - E.g., Tragic plot (sad content) + Harmonious verse (pleasurable form).
2. **Overcoming** (resolution via artistic structure)
3. **Catharsis** (purification of emotion)

Comparing Freud and Vygotsky

Aspect	Freud (Psychoanalysis)	Vygotsky (Sociocultural)
Focus	Unconscious desires	Socially mediated meaning
Art's Role	Sublimation of repressed urges	Tool for emotional transformation
Key Mechanism	Dream-work, symbolism	Catharsis through form-content clash

Paul Florensky

A. Art as a Symbol of Divine Reality

For Florensky, art is not mere representation but a **window into higher spiritual truth.**

- *"The icon is not a depiction but a manifestation of the heavenly prototype." (Iconostasis, 1922)*
- *"Art is a symbolic language that reveals the invisible through the visible."*

B. Reverse Perspective in Icons

Florensky argued that **Byzantine and Russian icons use *reverse perspective* (diverging lines) instead of Renaissance linear perspective** because:

- **Linear perspective** = human-centered, earthly vision.
- **Reverse perspective** = God-centered, spiritual vision (the viewer is "looked at" by the divine).

Scheme: Linear vs. Reverse Perspective

Linear Perspective (Renaissance)

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- └ Single vanishing point
- └ Illusion of depth
- └ Earthly, rational space

Reverse Perspective (Icons)

- |
- └ Multiple vanishing points
- └ Expands outward (toward viewer)
- └ Heavenly, symbolic space



A. The Symbolism of Color & Form

Florensky analyzed how colors and shapes in icons convey theology:

- **Gold** = Divine light (*"Gold is the color of the uncreated Light of Tabor."*)
- **Red** = Martyrdom, divine love
- **Circle** = Eternity, God's perfection

B. The Role of Geometry

A mathematician, Florensky linked sacred geometry to art:

- *"The circle, triangle, and square are not just shapes but cosmic symbols."*
- *"The icon's composition follows divine proportions, not earthly aesthetics."*

C. Art vs. Technology

He critiqued modern art's loss of spirituality:

- *"Photography captures the surface; the icon reveals the soul."*
- *"The machine age has turned art into a commodity, stripping it of its sacred function."*

Socialist Realism

Focus: *State-approved art glorifying Soviet life.*

Key Concepts

- "Partiinost" (Party-mindedness) – Art must align with Communist ideology.
- "Narodnost" (National spirit) – Art must be accessible to the masses.
- Optimistic Heroism – Workers, soldiers, and leaders depicted as flawless.

Scheme: Socialist Realist Doctrine

Art → Must →

└ Educate the masses

└ Promote Soviet values

└ Reject "formalism" (avant-garde)

Quotation

- *"The artist must be an engineer of the human soul."* — **Joseph Stalin**



Moscow-Tartu School (Semiotics of Art)

Focus: *Art as a system of signs.*

Key Concepts

- **Culture as a "Semiosphere"** (Lotman) – Art operates within sign systems.
- **Text vs. Non-Text** – How meaning is encoded in visual/literary forms.

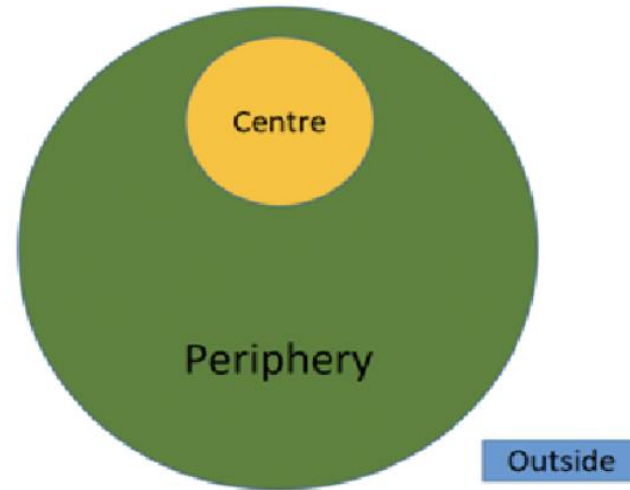
Scheme: Lotman's Semiosphere

Culture

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├ Core (Dominant Codes)

└ Periphery (Innovation & Rebellion)



Why Russian Theory Matters Today?

- **Influence on Modernism:** Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) predated Western abstraction by decades.
- **Art as Activism:** Constructivism's fusion of art and engineering inspires social design today.
- **Semiotics:** Lotman's "semiosphere" shapes digital media theory.

Thank You!

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