City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Pace, I. (2025). The Persecution of the Soviet "Formalists" - Part 2. Café Américain,

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/37004/

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to City Research Online policy.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@citystgeorges.ac.uk

The Persecution of the Soviet "Formalists"
What the Cancelling of Certain Artforms in Stalin's USSR Tells Us About Censorship Today

Ian Pace

Café Américain, September 2025

Part 2 – published 26 September 2025 at https://cafeamericainmag.com/the-persecution-of-the-soviet-formalists-pt-2/

The first part of this article considered anti-formalist campaigns in the Soviet Union led by Andrei Zhdanov and others, and the origins of such debates in the work of Russian Formalist critics. In a broader sense, "formalist" approaches—those prioritizing form and style over content—were not new. They flourished in the nineteenth century in the work of Eduard Hanslick (music), Heinrich Wölfflin (art), and writers such as Théophile Gautier, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walter Pater, their critical work mirroring wider developments in aesthetics and techniques, including motivic intricacy, retreats from realism and naturalism, and self-conscious stylization.

Early twentieth-century art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry, despite their focus on form, belong more to this tradition than to the Russian one. Notwithstanding their significant interest in Futurist "sound poetry" (*zaum*), which rejects logic and meaning, the Russian Formalists did not simply ignore content, Rather, they invoked it to show how art differs from mere mimesis. Whereas Bell, in 1914, declared art independent of history and ethics, Tynianov's 1920s essays proposed a more nuanced view: literary history develops according to its own logic yet intersects with broader history.

The Russian Formalists did not simply ignore content; they invoked it to show how art differs from mere mimesis.

Western figures whose work lies closer to the Russians include Rudolf Arnheim, who emphasized the constructed nature of artworks (including film) and the inseparability of form and content, while opposing realism; his psychological focus on perception, however, diverged from Formalist priorities. Erwin Panofsky—foundational for later "visual culture" studies—likewise stressed tangible and culturally shaped forms, but analysed how perception and meaning are historically constituted, insisting techniques be situated accordingly.

Formalist ideas clearly informed Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) (also informed by the work of Meyerhold and Mayakovsky), though Brecht's aims were overtly political. Formalist criticism also developed in Poland (a 1930s school led by Franciszek Siedlecki) and Czechoslovakia, both influenced by the Russians. Jakobson was central to the Prague School, which included René Wellek. Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1948) treated Russian Formalism in detail; wider Western interest grew with Victor Ehrlich's 1955 study and Tzvetan Todorov's 1965 French anthology, then expanded with 1960s structuralism and post-structuralism, to which Jakobson was a key link.

The pivotal year of 1929 also saw the publication of I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*. In experiments Richards presented Cambridge students with poems without authorship, date, title, etc., and asked them to provide comments, then analyzed their errors and on this basis devised a pedagogy later called "close reading", cultivating attention to diction, syntax, rhythm, tone, irony, imagery. Using formal features, he divided meaning into sense, feeling, tone, and intention.

In experiments, Richards presented Cambridge students with poems without authorship, date, title, etc., asked them to provide comments, analyzed their errors, and on this basis devised a pedagogy later called "close reading".

Richards influenced the loosely connected American "New Criticism". Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938) warned against biographical, historical, or purely logical readings detached from textual evidence. In *The New Criticism* (1941), John Crowe Ransom foregrounded Richards and William Empson but eschewed Richard's focus on psychology, intentions and emotions in favour of a more "objective" stance: poems as self-contained, organically unified works (Brooks's "well-wrought urn"), analysable through close reading with emphasis on irony, paradox, and tension. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's 1949 essays declared intention and affect irrelevant to interpretation.

Like the Russians, the New Critics imagined criticism as quasi-scientific, and their methods scaled well pedagogically, shaping U.S. literary study for several decades. Parallels exist (e.g. between Brooks's "unification of attitudes" and Tynianov's "dominant"), but the movements were quite distinct: the Formalists explored art's synthetic transformation of reality, while the New Critics largely bracketed that reality.

U.S. music theory underwent a parallel shift in the post-war era. Emigré students of Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935) adapted his theory (largely stripped of Schenker's broader nationalistic and ideological arguments) to demonstrate how to produce multi-level voice-leading graphs revealing deep structure within works from a core Austro-German canon; despite its major demands, this approach gained wide pedagogical traction. A little later, pitch-class and set-theoretic analysis traced permutations of groups of pitches and their transformations within musical works.

From the late 1960s, this scientific spirit progressively waned in the English-speaking world. Despite a brief engagement with structuralism, the trend moved toward Marxist ideology critique and related approaches centred on gender, race, power, post-colonialism, as well psychoanalysis, biography and reception—the latter as precisely proscribed by Wimsatt and Beardsley. Some close reading persisted, but many critics favoured contextual explanations or speculative hermeneutics aligned with ideological agendas, often in a censorious key reminiscent of Zhdanov, the true father of cancel culture. The analytical rigour of Shklovsky, Richards, Jakobson, Schenker and early Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida gave way, in many quarters, to the moralizing of Edward Said, Laura Mulvey, Susan McClary (a key figure in the deeply anti-formalist "New Musicology"), the speculations of the Birmingham School, and relativisms filtered through secondary primers on Foucault; formalism was denounced as a distraction.

From the late 1960s, close reading persisted, but many critics favoured contextual explanations or speculative hermeneutics aligned with ideological agendas, often in a censorious key reminiscent of Zhdanov, the true father of cancel culture.

Not everyone accepted this turn, and new formalisms re-emerged. A 2000 *Modern Language Quarterly* special issue helped launch "New Formalist" literary criticism. With only loose ties to the Russians, it sought to move beyond "New Historicism" (inspired by Marx and Foucault, focused on material conditions and ideology critique and suspicious of autonomy) by combining historicist concerns with renewed attention to texts' formal and linguistic features, while distancing itself from the New Critics' ahistorical and apolitical stance.

In musicology from the 1990s, the *Neue Formenlehre* grounded analysis in historically observable practice: James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy's Sonata Theory, William E. Caplin's form-functional theory, and Janet Schmalfeldt's account of form as a process of "becoming". Other models also grew: transformational theories (after the work of Hugo Riemann [1849-1919]), schema theory (historical stock phrases), and topic theory (historical forms of musical signification and representation).

Perhaps the most striking development, however, was neo-formalist film theory, exemplified by Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. From Thompson's landmark 1981 study of Eisenstein's *Ivan Grozny* (the film denounced in 1946 by Zhdanov) and Bordwell's highly detailed 1985 analysis of cinematic narration, to widely-used textbooks on film art and history, they revived Russian-Formalist ideas, rejected one-size-fits-all methods in favour of expansion and modification in lines with the specifics of individual films, emphasized the spectator's active cognition, and re-employed concepts such as *ostranenie*, *fabula*, *syuzhet*, *priyom* or *dominanta* as well as a range of new terms of their own. The school was sceptical of communication models (and as such were very distant from Birmingham media studies) and of what Bordwell dubbed "SLAB theory" (theory heavily indebted to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Barthes).

Alongside associated revivals of Panofsky and Marxist critic T. J. Clark in visual-culture studies, and renewed interest in Theodor W. Adorno and the Frankfurt School, who rarely reneged on a focus on the specific properties of artistic work, multiple formalisms are again a presence in cultural criticism. Yet opposition remains strong: the past decade has seen intensified orthodoxy policing in some departments, favouring readings that excavate suspect ideologies of race and gender, or links to reaction, orientalism, and colonialism. In a post-Cold War era, fewer recognize the Zhdanovian precedent; today's "colonial" or "white supremacist" are often used as liberally and vaguely as yesterday's "bourgeois" or "formalist". Dismissals of the possibility of 'apolitical' art or even demands that educators must declare their politics directly echo Zhdanov's evocations of Lenin to such an end, and are oblivious to other more sophisticated perspectives on the perils of 'committed' and didactic art.

In the post-Cold War era, fewer recognize the Zhdanovian precedent; today's "colonial" or "white supremacist" are often used as liberally and vaguely as yesterday's "bourgeois" or "formalist".

Why devote years to a field mainly to dismiss much of it? The dominance of such approaches has, I believe, played a part in depressing student enrolment. Formalism studies art *as art*, not merely as a window onto something else. Without embracing its most dogmatic forms, renewed formalism can return literature, art, music, film, dance, and media to those who care about and are fascinated by them. The most rigorous formalist methods are demanding, but that is the point of specialist criticism: to yield insights beyond those available to the lay reader, viewer, or listener. To lose this would be a tragedy.

Ian Pace is a pianist, musicologist, composer and writer, and is Professor of Music, Culture and Society at City St George's, University of London. He is writing here in a personal capacity.