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## The Presence of Art as Technique in Absurdism

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### The Presence of Art as Technique in Absurdism

Poetry is often a means of articulating ideas in a way that reflects the intentions and emotions of its author. Throughout history, different paradigms and principles have been developed to assist artists in both how they communicate and the effect that their communications have on their audiences. For this reason, Viktor Shklovsky defined and characterized a specific tool in his work “Art as Technique,” written in the 1910’s, that he called “defamiliarization,” the act of making the familiar, unfamiliar, for the purpose of bringing the subject into a new light. Shklovsky thought of this technique as a means of prolonging perception, and thus leaving “the strongest possible impression” (8). This, although having been used prior to Shklovsky by many other artists, was adopted by the philosophical perspective of absurdism in the 1940’s, a philosophy that believes humanity exists without purpose or reason. Absurdist use Shklovsky’s ideas of defamiliarization to bring attention to how many of our beliefs are founded on assumptions, and, without those assumptions, much of life is rendered meaningless.

Absurdity relates to defamiliarization in the fact that it needs a tool by which to reveal the underlying absurdity of living; however, in order to further discuss this matter, it is important to understand what it means for something to be “absurd.” In Sartre’s book *Being and Nothingness*, he writes, “[Choices] made without base of support and dictating its own causes to itself, can very well appear absurd, and, in fact, [they are] absurd” (616). From this, in part, we can derive a simple definition for “absurdity,” which is that it is any idea or thing that is circular in its

reasoning or has no foundation outside of its own existence. In this idea of absurdity, there are a number of claims that Sartre holds to be true, one of which includes the idea that sensation itself is absurd, for he explains, “We are to use the term objectivity not for an immediate connection with being but for certain combinations of sensations which will present... regularity or which will accord better with the ensemble of our representations” (415). In other words, objectivity is conflated with reality when, in actuality, it is only the sensational perception of reality.

Shklovsky, in his earlier text, links these issues of perception and reality when he realizes that “as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic,” leading to us “not [seeing] it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it” (11). Defamiliarization seeks to fix this by removing the familiarity that contains the habitual perception, and thus allowing us to make novel observations. As the absurdist would hope, this can be used to help understand that our models of life and reality are “made without base of support” (Sartre 616). Both absurdists and Shklovsky use this technique as a way to enable perception, but absurdists focus on the removal of preconceptions as an end to itself.

Defamiliarization was a tool used as an example by Shklovsky to show how imagistic art is more a technique than a definition for poetry; it was then, decades later, leveraged naturally by absurdists. Shklovsky wrote “Art as Technique” in 1917 with an intention to illustrate how imagistic poetry is a method to be used as a means of making an artistic point. This was due to the fact that many during his time believed that “without imagery, there is no art,” and that “art is thinking in images” (Shklovsky 5). However, Shklovsky saw poetic imagery as a “means of creating the strongest possible impression,” thinking of it far more as one of many other linguistic devices (8). It is through this same tool of impression that absurdism explores and communicates its ideas. Although conceived by Sartre, absurdism took on a life of its own in the

works of artists. It is used just as much to unsettle as it is to conjure philosophical beliefs. What ties these thoughts and ideas together is the common thread of rendering things absurd. In a paper studying theatre in its various forms, Tim Miles writes, “[Absurdism] may be characterized in many ways, including a lack of resolution, circularity and... ‘that which is devoid of purpose’” (23). Absurdism focuses on these subjects because they involve ideas and objects that are not indicative of our preexisting assumptions. The “lack of resolution” involves a lack of termination, and thus unrealized rationale; “circularity” reflects self-definition and the lack of foundation; those that are “devoid of purpose” are often imposed with purpose by their observers. Consequently, absurdism represents the ideas of Sartre while also being reminiscent of Shklovsky’s method of defamiliarization by seeking to reshape our perception of the world such that we “make a unique semantic modification” to our understanding (Shklovsky 21).

Absurdist material does not only use defamiliarization to modify understanding but also can be used to bring attention to cultural or societal norms that are, in fact, either unnecessary or harmful. This is because we often become desensitized to the repeated stimulus of our environment, and, when that environment is destructive in behavior, it leaves us without realizing our immorality. Shklovsky often discusses this phenomenon in terms of visuals, stating, “[After] we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it” (13). This can be applied to the physical, metaphorical, and ideological objects of life. In order to achieve this new perception, absurdists have used communication, or the lack thereof, to undermine the audience’s preconceptions. This is outlined in a paper on the Theatre of the absurd, where Gina MacKenzie writes, “Absurdist [theatrical plays tend to] show the absolute failure of the normal communication which structures society. Such a development is an utter

subversion of the audience's expectations and [conceptualizations]" (175). It is within the subversion of conceptualizations that absurdism implements defamiliarization in an attempt to properly realize ideas that have been automated. As Shklovsky articulated it, "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" (12). We can also start to see how the act of disconnecting expectations and habits from the issue or object being observed causes us to begin to alienate the audience from the subject. This parallels with Robert Cardullo's ideas in "Experimental Theatre in the Twentieth Century" on the Theater of the absurd, in which he states that "absurdist plays emphasize the metaphorical aspect through their scenery. Their poetry tends to emerge... from the concrete and [objectified] images of the stage itself; what happens on stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters" (352). The dissonance between what is seen and heard can be thought of as a way to force the audience into reconsidering what is happening, thus prolonging the act of perception and furthering their attention on the scrutinized subject.

Although absurdism is a philosophical perspective on life, it leverages defamiliarization as a means of conveying its values. Shklovsky's work can be thought of as a building block of absurdism due to how closely related the Sartrean philosophy is to his technique; this is due to them both seeking to bring out the unintuitive through the removal of habit. In conclusion, absurdists often rely on Shklovsky's method of defamiliarization, consciously or otherwise, in order to reorient peoples' perspective on life. They do this through alienating their audience from the object and motivating the adoption of a new way to perceive it through showing that, in this new perspective, the object ceases to be logical. absurdists apply this tool in various contexts, particularly ones that involve circuitous logic, with the intention to show how life itself is often without reason, and thus absurd.

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