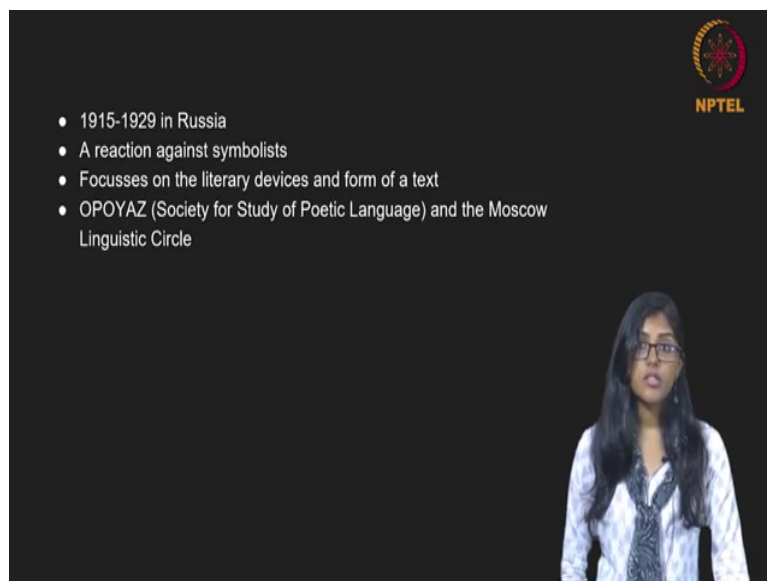
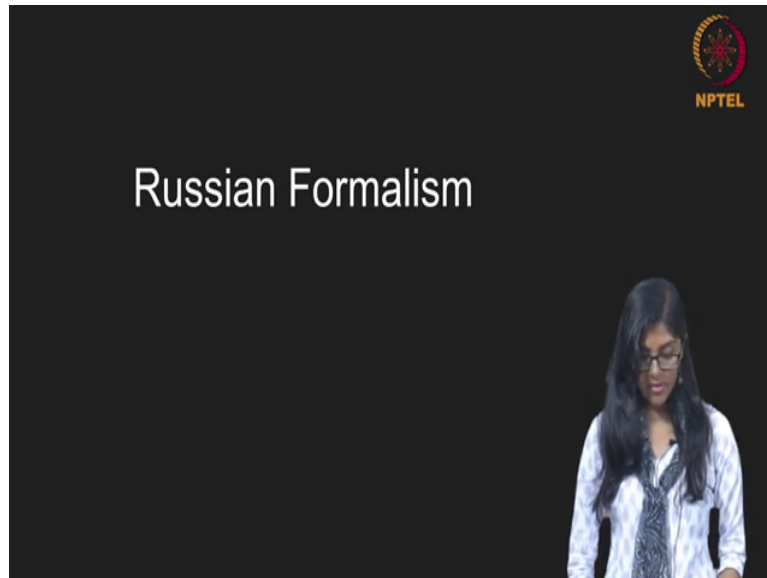


Russian Formalism
Professor Dr. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 34

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Hello everyone, today I will be taking a very short, very introductory lecture on Russian formalism. Russian formalism is a movement that came up in Russia and it lasted from 1915 until 1929. It had a rather abrupt end, which we will look at, and these were due to political circumstances rather than the popularity of the movement itself. It came up in 1915, and it

was primarily a reaction against a lot of metaphysical abstractions and other forms of what they thought was vagueness that pervaded the symbolist movement in Russia at the time.

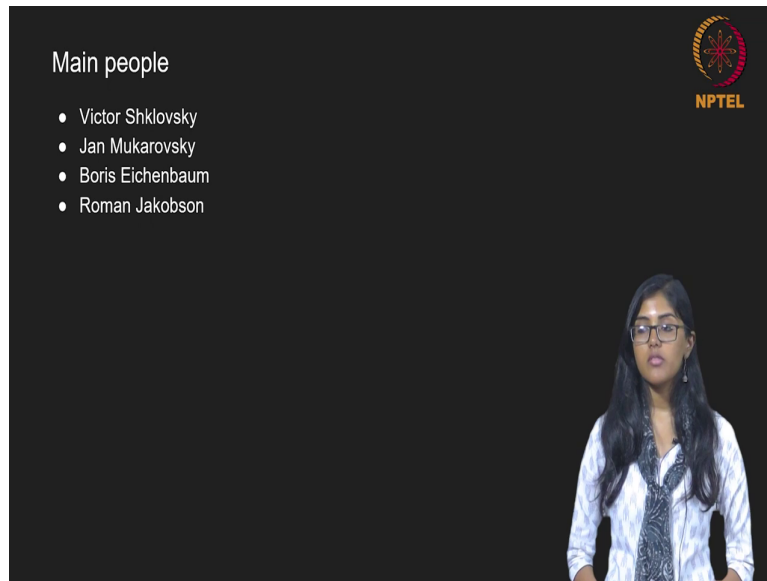
It was also felt that literary history or the study of literary history in Russia was rather too heavy with psychological, historical and biographical features which sort of took away from the literature that they were studying itself.

So, in order to move away from it and look at the text itself, the Russian formalists came up with a movement called Russian formalism-- which was rather a term given to them by the opulence of the movement. They advocated for a movement that would focus only on the literary text, and not just on the text but on the literary devices and the form in which a text was written.

When I say that the name Russian formalism was primarily given by the opulence of the movement, what I mean is, it was given to the two groups called the OPOYAZ and the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The OPOYAZ is a society for the study of poetic language and the Moscow Linguistic Circle was a group that focused primarily on linguistics in literature, not just in language, but primarily in literature. And both of these groups advocated for this movement where you focus primarily on literary texts and on literary devices. And together their activities came to be called the Russian formalist movement.

Moving on, this is how the movement came up. And it was one of the first movements that trended towards a very structural analysis of literary devices in the text, of the text itself.

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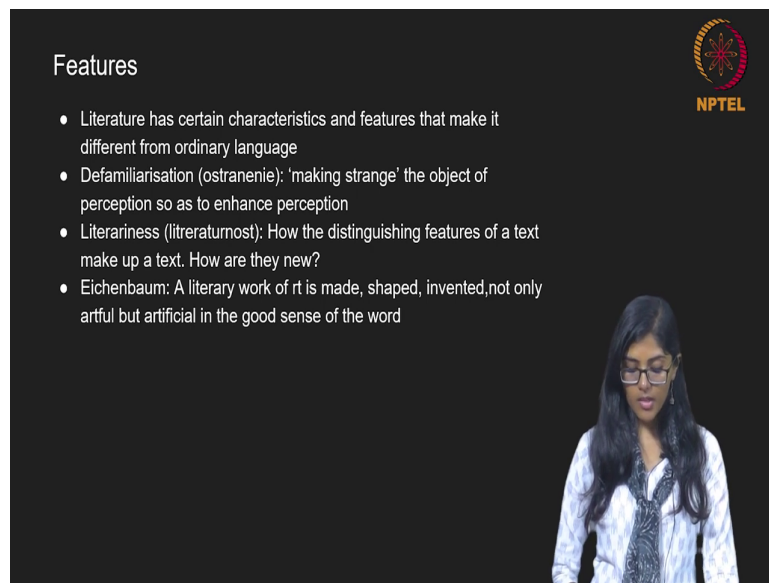


And not just of the literary devices, but also the cultural phenomena that were a part of the text. So in this sense, the Russian formalists and their focus on literary devices and how they function in the text is a point of difference between them and the New Critics who came up around the same time in England and in Cambridge specifically. We have seen this about F.R. Leavis, I.A. Richards, William Empson and all the rest of them.

The New Critics were primarily focused on the text and on keeping out any external context whatsoever. So the New Critics advocated looking at the text not just in the absence of a context, but deliberately doing away with the context to see what meaning the text itself held. The Russian formalists were not so very focused on the context and to be certain did not want undue emphasis on it.

But they did focus on literary devices used and how the usage of certain literary devices produced a certain effect and why those literary devices were ever used in the first place. So this is a basic point of difference between the Russian formalist and the New Critics. Now the main people in Russian formalism or the ones that we read most popularly, are Victor Schklovsky, his essay "Art as technique" we have already seen; Jan Mukarovsky; Boris Eichenbaum who has very perceptive and insightful comments; and Roman Jakobson, who is by far the most popular and the most widely read of the four. Jakobson has an essay called "Linguistics in poetics" which sort of set forth pretty clearly what the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the OPAZ were doing.

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Features

- Literature has certain characteristics and features that make it different from ordinary language
- Defamiliarisation (ostranenie): 'making strange' the object of perception so as to enhance perception
- Literariness (literaturnost): How the distinguishing features of a text make up a text. How are they new?
- Eichenbaum: A literary work of it is made, shaped, invented, not only artful but artificial in the good sense of the word

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Let us move on to look at some features of Russian formalism. Russian formalism states that literature has certain characteristics and certain features that make it different from ordinary language. So you see how they deviate from, we could say Wordsworth, because Wordsworth says that poetic language is most definitely ordinary language except it passes through reflection and thought, before it becomes poetry. But essentially it is the language of the common man, it is everyday ordinary language.

But Russian formalism does not say that; Russian formalism says that literature or language used in literature, specifically in poetry, is a language all by itself and which is far removed from ordinary language. And this is because poetic or literary language has certain features or certain characteristics, which make it extremely different and which hold different meanings in the poetic context.

It focuses on the literary devices or tools that make up the text. It sees a text as being made up of not just the plot, or the story or the character, but of devices and tools of alliterations, meters and rhymes, let us say for example. And this is what gives a literary text its status of being a literary text. This is what they argue.

Therefore, a focus on form and how the literary devices do what it is they do, or their function, rather than a focus on the content, is key to this movement because the content would mean focusing on the plot, on the character, on how the narrative progresses, why is

the plot weak and things like that. But the formalists are not concerned with those, they are concerned with the language used to describe them, or the manner or the structure which encompasses all of these events.

The events are not exactly immaterial, but the events are subordinate to the form, which means that the content is subordinate to the form. This is how they began. Keeping this in mind, keeping in mind that the formalists focused on form rather than on content when they started out, later on, towards the end of the movement, they attempted a synthesis of the two.

But in the beginning, their focus was exclusively on form and they believe that content was encapsulated in the form. And keeping this in mind they had about two to three features that is seen as the greatest legacy today.

One of them is defamiliarisation or *ostranenie* in Russian-- that is the term they use, I am not sure of its pronunciation but it is roughly translated as Defamiliarisation or as “making strange”. Now this technique is, to put it in simple terms, to make strange the object of perception, so as to enhance perception. What does this mean? This means that using poetic language or using literary language, because remember literary language is different from ordinary language. Not just the mere usage of literary language, but using literary language to describe something that we are all familiar with. So, describing the familiar in unfamiliar terms is what defamiliarisation is because it enhances readers’ perception or it makes you think about the reality that you see every single day in different terms, in very new terms-- I think it was Eichenbaum or Jacobs, I am not very sure.--which a lot of the formalists equated to pulling the greyness away from one's eyes, this is what defamiliarisation does-- it makes unfamiliar what is very familiar.

The second one is called literariness or *literaturnost* or the “literariness of a text”. And to put it simply, it is basically how the distinguishing features of a text make up the text in the way they do. How were they new? So what is it, apart from this technique of defamiliarization that gives a text its literary quality, that makes up the literariness of text as they say. And this was put forth by Roman Jakobson who says that this is the object of study of the Russian formalists and of Russian formalism in general-- to look at the literariness of a text and how it is constituted.

So while defamiliarisation focuses on literary devices and how you make familiar things unfamiliar, literariness of text goes one step further back, and looks at how those devices work. It says that its main focus is how these devices that participate in defamiliarisation call themselves to readers' attention. Perhaps when you see an unusual description or an unusual simile, you might say, "Well, that is beautiful because that is defamiliarisation at work". Because you can see how a poet is using a simile or metaphor that is usually not used. But if you were to take a step back and say, "Well, now what is it about this simile that makes it what it is? How has he used this simile? Or why has he picked this particular description to describe this thing instead of another one?", and that would constitute literariness.

Jakobson says that literariness is the way in which the devices of a text call themselves to our attention. And the focus is on how they call themselves to our attention as being new or as being unique. You also focus on how these literary devices make up a text and how they make up a text differently. So if a certain simile is used and is a cliché one, and is perhaps used 10 times across 10 different texts, and the 11th time, it is different. That is what we need to focus on. That is what you need to focus on to see why it is different and how it gives the text its literary character. The sole focus of Russian formalism then is just on the text and on the devices itself, not simply on the text, but on the devices itself. And it works to keep out psychological, historical and biographical factors as we have already gone over, but not in too great detail. They are not completely dead set against including historical detail or psychological legacies into their reading because they realize that these have a role to play. However, when they started out, this is what they were seen as-- as keeping to the end as we can say. But we will come to that in a while.

Here are a couple of other points about the Russian formalists. Here is one on imagery: so for the Russian formalists imagery does not characterize literature. The mere use of imagery does not make a work a poem or a piece of literature as we might commonly assume that it does. For the Russian formalists, it is what use the work makes of imagery that gives a work its literary character. So simply describing the sunlight and how it glints off leaves of a tree, say, and likening it to fire or dying embers, or anything that we might commonly associate with sunlight glinting off leaves, is imagery. And if written thus, we would say that yes, it is. It is beautiful, and it is probably extremely literary. But for the Russian formalists it is not simply

that, it is what use is made of the imagery. Why is the text using the imagery the way it does? Why is the text talking about sunlight glinting off leaves and in terms of fire or dying embers, let us say, why is it doing it and to what end is it doing it?

So, if those questions have answers, then the text can be said to be literary on account of its imagery, but not if imagery is simply used for flourish. Another example of looking at literary devices and focusing on how we make up a text would be in poetry or in verse where you look at the meter, the rhythm, the rhyme, the alliteration, and so many other devices. And you see how they work together to produce an effect that it does. So verse is different from prose here, because all of these features, all of these characteristics that I just mentioned, work together to produce one effect.

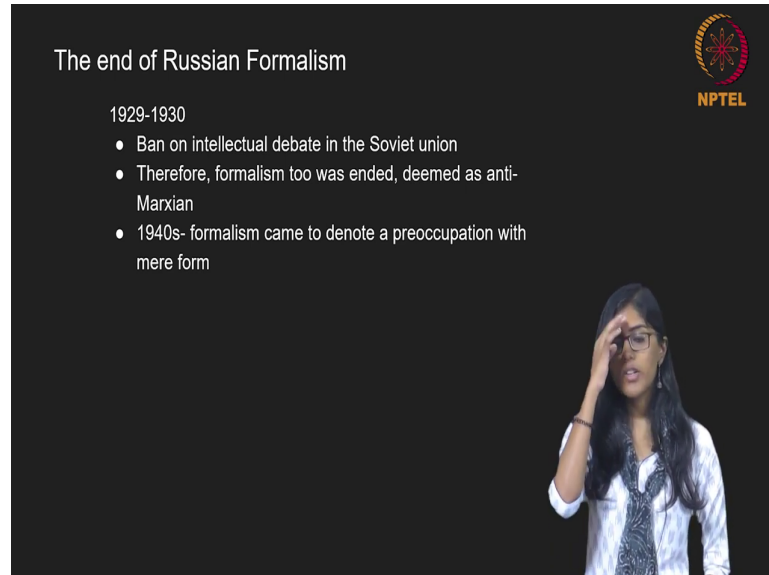
Paul Fry who is a lecturer at Yale University gives a very nice example of, I think, a children's story called Tony the Tow Truck. He starts off with the alliteration in the title itself. And then he looks at the rest of the story. As he moves throughout the story, he sees that everything is in groups of threes. So there is Tony the Tow Truck, which is three Ts. And then there are three of his friends and there are three events that the book talks about, and other things like that, really. But he shows how the significance of the alliteration in the title Tony the Tow Truck, and every time that is repeated in the story, it serves to reinforce or re-emphasize the tripartite division in the story.

It is a nice example that he gives and he has done the analysis himself. Now, Boris Eichenbaum who is also a Russian formalist said that a literary work of art is made, shaped, invented, not only artful but artificial, in a good sense of the word. So he is aware and all of them are aware that literary language and poetic language is extremely different from ordinary language. And they realize that it is not simply using imagery and the language for the sake of it, which would be artificial in the bad sense of the word.

But it is using these devices to a certain end, to produce a certain effect on the reader, or to emphasize a certain point, or to strengthen perhaps the form of the text if it is an allegory, or verse. Then you would use these devices to strengthen it in order to re-emphasize certain points. Therefore, a good literary work of art is not only artful, but artificial in the good sense

of the word-- that these devices are being used to some end and that there not simply there for the sake of being there.

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The end of Russian Formalism

1929-1930

- Ban on intellectual debate in the Soviet union
- Therefore, formalism too was ended, deemed as anti-Marxian
- 1940s- formalism came to denote a preoccupation with mere form

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The slide features a black background with white text. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a red and yellow design and the text 'NPTEL' below it. In the bottom right corner, there is a small inset video of a woman with long dark hair and glasses, wearing a white patterned shirt, with her hand near her face as if speaking.

Now before we move on to how Russian Formalism ended, I'll give a couple of general points on how the movement progressed as well. So the Russian formalists were very aware that a new art form, or a new genre, or a new movement like this one where you emphasize form over content, cannot be divorced from old forms-- of reading literature, of looking at them, of analyzing them. They are not divorced, and it would do nobody any good to say that they are divorced and to pretend like they are divorced. So, they recognized that new art forms derive a lot from old ones. And instead of looking at them as a derivation, they say that new art forms are reorganizations of old art forms. So, when an old art form loses its aesthetic value, that is what they say, when an old art form loses its aesthetic value, a new art form comes along or springs up, in order to revitalize it or to rework it and tweak it a little bit. In order to give it either its old aesthetic value, or to give it a new aesthetic value, in which case it would become popular with readers once more.

And what they mean by reworking or reorganizing an old art form is that they recognize that certain elements in literature are privileged above others at different points in time. And a reorganization of an art form would simply mean moving these elements up and down in scales of hierarchy. For instance, because Russian formalism was a reaction to symbolism and against the metaphysicalness of things, literary language, imagery for the sake of

imagery, deep meaning, psychological and historical contexts, were all privileged above the written word, the character and the plot in itself. So, these were the elements that were privileged in the previous movement or in the previous art form. But now in Russian formalism, they privilege the form itself above the content of the text, which means that the character is subordinate to the form, the plot. Perhaps the author's biographical context is also subordinate to the form.

Literature in order to renew itself should periodically draw upon motives and devices of sub-literary genres, like journalism, vaudeville, folk song, detective story, etc. This is a statement made by one of the Russian formalist members. And it is a lovely statement because it reinforces what I was talking about earlier that they recognize that new art forms are not divorced from old art forms. And that they draw from one another, they reorganize one another and new art forms need to draw, or in this case, literature needs to draw from sub-literary genres, genres that are not considered quite literature but that are still there-- like folk song, like old traditions, maybe fairy tales, mythologies, things like that.

Literature needs to draw on elements from these genres in order to revitalize itself and in order to give itself a new impetus. This also is a testament to the school's distrust of rigid definitions and hierarchies because they were trying very hard to break away from it, especially the hierarchies because that is what prevailed before 1915. And this was a radically new idea that they had come up with at that point of time in their geographical location, which was extremely exciting for them-- to look simply at the form and at literary devices and literary tools in the text without being worried about the nuances of plot.

Just to repeat a few points, the Russian formalists, then were interested in the literariness of a text in the devices of literature used that delay readers arrival at meaning. They are interested in the structure, in the way a text is put together. Now, this lens of interpretation that is used on the Russian formalists is that the techniques of defamiliarisation that is used, which is making the familiar unfamiliar, to understand what is going on, to understand and appreciate what is going on.

If the useful similes are to like in a moon to perfection, beauty, radiance, and so on and these are similes for the moon or simply adjectives used to describe the moon, if suddenly someone

comes up with a simile that the half moon is like the crescent shaped part of our nails that everybody has that is closest to the skin. Or if they rendered it in more literary language than I just did, then it would take the reader a moment to go, “Hang on a moment, you are talking about the moon but the simile being used is about the nail that is closest to our skin at the bottom part of our nails”. And that is not something you would expect to see in conjunction with a description of the moon. And it certainly does not hold with ideas of that.

So it would take the reader just that one extra moment to understand it. And it also enhances your perception of everyday life because when you read that, you probably think “Oh, I never thought about that”. So, this is what is meant when it is said that these devices delay a readers arrival at meaning because it takes you a while to understand that it is moon that is being spoken of. But it also allows you to appreciate everyday perception. It also restructures your everyday perception. And it also makes you attentive to the different features of a text or how sentences are structured, therefore, how a text is put together.

Now, going back a couple of points to the New Critics, the New Critics were also interested in the same features. They are also interested solely in the text, which means that they are definitely interested in the devices and literary tools used to create meaning in the text. But they see it as enriching the meaning of a text. How? Because it slows you down to get the meaning.

So ambiguity is looked upon very kindly by the New Critics. And it is inevitable because you are cutting out all forms of external context whatsoever. And if you are cutting out authorial intent, authorial biography, historical circumstances, social and cultural circumstances and contexts then it means that there is definitely going to be ambiguity when you look at the text solely in itself.

But while the New Critics look at this delay as a means of enriching the text, the Russian formalists look at it as enriching a reader's perception. That is one point of difference. The later formalists, saw no difference between form and content. And to them, this was the basic mistake that the opponents of formalism made, but this was towards the later stages of the movement, perhaps a couple of years before it ended. This is to their testament because they started out on the premise that form is different from content and this element of form is

privileged above the element of content. However, this is rather in keeping with the new art form as not divorced from the old ones, about how they see literature as needing to revive itself by drawing from other genres that are not strictly literature, and so on. So you see that they are not set on binaries and perhaps that they never were. See form and content not as very different, certainly not as binary opposites. But they do privilege form over content nonetheless.


Let us move on to the end of Russian formalism or how it drastically came about. This happened in the span of 1 year or less from 1929 to 30. There was a ban on intellectual debate in the Soviet Union, and therefore formalism too was ended. It was deemed as anti-Marxian. Now why was it deemed anti-Marxian? Simply because it allowed, or it was believed that it allowed for no space for historical or cultural contexts. And that goes completely against Marxian tenets which says that all cultural production is the result of historical materialism and of cultural contexts that are present right now and have been present for a while.

But because it was seen that Russian formalism did not allow these into play while reading a text, it was banned entirely. In the 1940s formalism, not just Russian formalism, but in general the term formalism, was used in a rather mocking way and it was not used in a very positive way. It came to acquire a negative connotation, and it came to denote a preoccupation with mere form.


Now, this was also seen as a preoccupation with art for the sake of art, or with aesthetics for the sake of aesthetics, which should not go down too well in the Soviet Union at that point of time. Because the track that they were taking was definitely Marxian, and definitely communist, which also perhaps meant that if you had time to sit, to look at the aesthetics of a text, or to look at the features of a text, simply because you want to see what gives the text, the status that it has, then it must mean that you have a lot of time. And it is a very bourgeois activity to do, let us put it that way.

So this is an overview of how Russian formalism came up, its trajectory and how it ended. But it is also important to note that it is a form of literary criticism.

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- 1915-1929 in Russia
- A reaction against symbolists
- Focusses on the literary devices and form of a text
- OPOYAZ (Society for Study of Poetic Language) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle




It started out from here, from the OPOYAZ and the Moscow Linguistic Circle. And these were societies for the study of the poetic language and of linguistics and poetry, and these were critical endeavors in themselves. And ideas of defamiliarisation and literariness are not just revolutionary breakthroughs, so to speak, but there is solidification, and perhaps a refining of ideas that had been going on in these circles for quite some time.

And it gave a new impetus to how criticism is done, especially defamiliarisation which is even today synonymous with Russian formalists, and it is quite difficult to do as well, and it takes practice.


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The end of Russian Formalism



1929-1930

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So, as a critical endeavor it truly did open up new avenues. And it has been likened to New Criticism a lot, but there are subtle differences between the two which we have seen. New Criticism focuses on pushing out all kinds of contexts whatsoever, while Russian formalism allows for context but focuses on the devices that are there in a text, it focuses on the language, on the semiotics. And Russian formalism eventually gave rise to ideas of structuralism as well which is dealt with by Saussure who is also a linguist. So, you can see the continuation of their work through the ages. Thank you.