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Through a Glass, Enviously: Yuri Olesha's Photographic Distortion of Reality

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Abstract

Yuri Olesha's 1927 novel *Envy*—the author's magnum opus and an often-overlooked tour de force of modern Russian Literature—depicts the world through the eyes of an isolated loner named Nikolai Kavalero. Kavalero's vision of the world is distorted, surreal; he asserts that he is afflicted by "thinking in images," a phrase which this paper traces back to the Russian Formalists' debate as to whether or not "art is thinking in images." This paper goes on to argue that Kavalero's mode of seeing is not only avant-garde in its defamiliarization, it is inherently photographic: Through the distorted lenses of mirrors and backwards binoculars, we encounter a visual space that is flattened, foreshortened, and cropped, as the forms of objects take precedence over their real-world function. Kavalero's photographic vision is then situated in an art historical context; while it draws from the same inspirations as Olesha's Constructivist avant-garde contemporaries, it is ultimately Romantic in nature. Although many scholars have focused on how this visual treatment stems from Kavalero's need to control and dominate the world, this paper argues that more than anything it is a symptom of the narrator's desire to retreat from reality: Kavalero's mind comes to resemble a personal camera obscura, a self-made version of Plato's cave that he shrinks into in order to hide from the bite of objective reality.

Keywords: Yuri Olesha, photography, Constructivism, defamiliarization

In Part One of *Envy* by Yuri Olesha, we see the world through Nikolai Kavalero's eyes—the eyes of a drunken loner, a man who has just been hauled up from the gutter and into the light of day. As one might expect, Kavalero's vision is hazy, distorted; it is also obsessively trained on his “rescuer,” a sausage mogul named Andrei Babichev. The story revolves around Kavalero's jealous fixation with Babichev, who represents everything that Kavalero is not: a well-adjusted, successful, corpulent entrepreneur who lives in his body rather than in his mind. As the narrative of the story retreats further into Kavalero's head, the depiction of reality becomes more and more warped.

Kavalero tells us that his affliction is “thinking in images,” a defamiliarization that occurs when the meaning of objects melts away and their forms come to take precedence over their function (Olesha 68). Shapes become stand-ins for concepts and ideas. We peer up at the world through a distorted lens: space is flattened and foreshortened, while our perspective is cropped by the narrator's fragmented cognition. Kavalero returns over and over to the image of him viewing the world through a glass surface, be it through a mirror or a pair of binoculars worn backwards. This mode of seeing is not only avant-garde, it is inherently photographic: we imagine that the narrator's eye is a lens which mediates and distances us from reality, that his mind is a reel of film which records the shapes of objects yet is unable to discern their meaning.

All camera lenses have a slight warp to them: the world might look as if it were curving in on itself, or an object might seem farther away than it truly is. The discrepancies between this camera vision and typical human vision create a dissociative effect when one regularly begins to imagine the world through the distance of a lens. As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, “the habit of photographic seeing... creates estrangement from, rather than union with, nature. Photographic seeing, when one examines its claims, turns out to be mainly the practice of a kind

of dissociative seeing,” (Sontag 97). In Olesha, estrangement from nature—or the defamiliarization of it—is the basis of vision. Kavalеров is in a constant negotiation with objective reality; rather than inhabiting it comfortably, he is at war with the external. “Things don’t like me,” he repeats (Olesha 8, 32).

Instead of looking directly at the world around him, Kavalеров searches for moments of escape, as if he can only enjoy seeing when he is not face to face with what is being seen: “I find that a landscape observed through the wrong end of binoculars is more lustrous and brilliant, more stereoscopic,” he writes (69). These warped lenses not only mediate reality, their dissociative effect renders the world more beautiful to Kavalеров. Later, Kavalеров continues, “a boy in a window caught the sun in a shard of mirror... I’m very fond of street mirrors,” (72). Here, reflective surfaces act as portals leading from the literal world into a lush, saturated dreamscape; the sun can be trapped in a mirror like one might catch a firefly in a glass. Nature can be digested and appreciated because it is no longer acting on you—you cannot get a sunburn from a sun that you hold, in miniature, in the palm of your hand. The polished corner cannot bite Kavalеров, the sideboard cannot laugh at him, when his body does not exist on the same plane as they do: from the distance of a mirror, he is able to experience the pleasure of perception without any of its pain.

When one photographs something, space is flattened; the lenses that create Kavalеров’s dreamy, reflected worlds also render them two-dimensional. As his description of street mirrors continues, Kavalеров observes,

You’re walking along, not assuming anything, you raise your eyes, and suddenly, for a moment, it’s all clear to you: the world and its rules have undergone unprecedented changes. Optics and geometry—the essence of what had been your motion, your

movement, your desire to go exactly where you were going—have been laid waste.

(Olesha 72)

Just as backward binoculars make objects appear more distant, and thus more beautiful, the collapse of physical space that occurs when viewing the world as a reflection can create a pleasurable dissociative effect. One's "desire to go exactly where you were going," to participate in the mundane comings and goings of everyday life, is suddenly obliterated. The self, for a moment, exists outside of any routine; you are physically disoriented and thus unable to continue on your path (or you may try to continue forward into the mirror, without any luck). In a mirror, the world is nothing but a surreal aesthetic vision, something that can be played with like a toy or admired like a picture.

When Kavalero states that he is afflicted by "thinking in images," he is describing a tendency to replace his words and ideas with images; just as a camera takes in light and shapes without intuiting their meaning, his mind associates forms purely based off their visual similarity. As he lies on Babichev's couch, drifting off to sleep, he writes:

I picture air bubbles streaming to the water's surface... before I plunge into sleep, still exercising control over my waking consciousness, I can see my thoughts take the flesh of dreams, transformed like bubbles rising from deep underwater to turn into fast rolling grapes, a hefty bunch of grapes, a whole fence full of thickly tangled bunches: a path alongside the grapes, a sunny road, heat... (Olesha 28)

Here, the basic underlying idea, "my thoughts," is replaced by an image: "bubbles rising from deep underwater." Once we accept that his thoughts are bubbles, we learn that they are acquiring flesh. What does a fleshy bubble look like? A grape. Based on their formal similarities alone—for thoughts are no more related to grapes than they are to bubbles—bubbles and grapes become

steps in a chain of metaphors that lead further and further from the original idea and into abstraction. The final image of a hot, sunny road lined with grapes has no conceptual connection to Kavalero's dozing thoughts, and yet by substituting the idea with the shape, we are able to arrive at a completely unexpected destination. Interesting conceptual possibilities arise: do thoughts have a sweet, tart taste, and isn't popping the skin of a grape a bit like popping a bubble?

This Surrealist logic becomes increasingly prevalent later on in Part One, when Kavalero begins to replace multiple concepts with unrelated images. In Chapter 9, Kavalero remarks that "flying machines stopped looking like birds" after the aviator Otto Lilienthal killed himself. Lilienthal's death implies a loss of innocence and hope; the form of the bird (and the related concept of air) come to symbolize what was lost. Industry has advanced in the years since, and Kavalero writes that the airplane "now looks like a heavy fish," (Olesha 43). Industrialization is thus connected with the aquatic, a loss of air. In the following chapter, the associations remain the same, but are no longer overtly stated: the images completely replace the words that they stand for.

When Kavalero follows Babichev onto the airfield, leaves for a moment, and struggles to get back, he quite literally loses his senses; instead of relaying what is in front of him, his perceptions are communicated through metaphorical images. Kavalero writes,

I was getting close. Clatter and dust. I'd gone deaf and had a cataract... The paths were confusing, I felt like I was walking through fish soup... I was walking across a gully over an abyss. I was balancing. It looked like a ship's hold yawning below. Immense, black, and cool. It reminded me of a wharf. I was in everyone's way. (47)

Here, we see the connection between fish and industry develop further. Kavalеров is in an environment where industry has dominated; the air, symbolic of the pre-industrial world, has been sullied and is now thick with dust. It is suffocating. Kavalеров, normally an intensely visual person, is so overwhelmed by his surroundings that he feels deaf and blind, disabled by the chaos of the airfield. (This deafness and blindness are likely dissociative coping mechanisms that allow him to filter out some of the discomfort of not belonging). He is surrounded by machines and industry workers, and the air is so thick that it becomes like liquid—i.e. he is surrounded by fish and trying to walk through soup. The airfield is like a wharf because it is a point of departure; Babichev and the Two Bits are taking off from the past and heading into the industrial future (out to sea). Linear events are replaced by increasingly abstract, metaphorical images.

Kavalеров's retreat from the physical world results in an utter loss of cognition; he is unable to make sense of or organize the audiovisual input of his surroundings into a coherent, grounded narrative. This is what Olesha scholar Leon Stilman refers to as "perception without apperception"—perceiving the shapes of things without being able to infer their meaning (Beaujour 22). In this passage, narration does not function in the traditional "I saw A and then B and then C" pattern. Instead, Kavalеров describes events as: "I saw A and B and thought they looked like Y and Z. Y and Z are now happening." Images replace words, colliding with one another until nothing is communicated directly. Olesha describes his own sensory experience of the world in a similar manner: "Instead of the essence of a thing I see only its painted form ... The true world where form and content are joined does not accept me. I see only form. [...] Not long ago I wanted to compare a steamshovel to a giraffe. It looks something like a giraffe. But this is only a visual impression, an impression of form," (35).

This deeply Surrealist method of thinking evokes photomontage, a form of photography in which images are stitched together according to their formal similarities rather than conceptual logic. In one example, the Constructivist artist and photographer Alexander Rodchenko (Olesha's contemporary) uses the technique of photomontage to illustrate a 1919 portrait of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Similar to how thoughts were associated with the circular forms of bubbles and grapes in *Envy*, Mayakovsky's head is overlaid with the sphere of the globe. These two circles create a formal connection which links the objects conceptually. This connection allows us to imagine that the Mayakovsky's thoughts expand past the confines of his skull and are embodied by the Earth; by the transitive property, then, we also imagine that his thoughts are being circled by fighter planes. He is at war with something, under siege. The intensity of his gaze amplifies this perception. Susan Sontag argues, "Photography is the only art that is natively surreal ... Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural visions," (Sontag 52). While photography and photomontage are inherently surreal media—meaning that the type of visual free association that turns thoughts into bubbles and bubbles into grapes is relatively easy to grasp in a photograph—communicating exclusively in images is far less common in literature.

Kavalero's gaze is that of a photographer: He experiments with lenses, flattens reality, uses images to describe ideas, cuts those images apart and pieces them back together again in unusual combinations. He crops out the aspects of reality he doesn't wish to see, increases the saturation and contrast of the world when necessary, and inhabits an aesthetic, dissociative mental space. While the visions that he builds may warp and flatten as if they were liquid, Kavalero's own self remains rigid; he exists at the solipsistic center of his own visual universe.

In short, Kavalеров thinks in images. But what kind of images? Is he thoroughly avant-garde, a colleague of Rodchenko and Mayakovsky, or something else?

During the period in which Olesha wrote *Envy*, a fierce debate was taking place among the Russian Formalists as to whether or not “art is thinking in images,” (Erlich 24-26). In response to this notion, Victor Shklovsky argued that art was in fact defamiliarization,¹ or presenting everyday scenes from an unexpected angle so as to force one to “recover the sensation of life.” Shklovsky wrote, “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. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important,” (Schklovsky 5) This argument became the guiding principle of the Russian avant-garde in the early post-revolution years, and Olesha himself certainly agreed with Shklovsky’s statement.² Not only are objects unimportant to Kavalеров, they are something to be despised and avoided at all costs. Kavalеров loves to watch himself seeing; experiencing perception and defamiliarizing reality is the goal of his photographic vision.

When it comes to defamiliarization, Olesha was clearly in agreement with his Constructivist avant-garde contemporaries; both Olesha and the Constructivists “deliberately fragmented the world in their art” to make it match the hectic new pace of life (Olesha 157). As Mayakovsky wrote, “Everything has become lightning-fast, swift as it is on motion picture films ... The tempo of our day is feverish,” (158). But while Mayakovsky and his peers clearly relished the new frenetic pace of life in an urban, industrial environment—“Nobody knows what gigantic suns will light up the life that is to come,” he asserted—Kavalеров is terrified by it (Andel 27). As the narrator’s extended metaphor regarding industrialization and underwater

¹ “Defamiliarization” is also frequently translated as “estrangement” or “making strange.”

² Olesha borrowed heavily from and was in a close dialogue with Shklovsky. Beaujour, *Invisible Land*, 142.

suffocation might suggest, Kavalеров is alienated and oppressed by the modern world. At the beginning of the novel, as Babichev is rescuing him from the gutter, Kavalеров narrates:

“Coming to, I saw the sky, the pale, too bright sky, racing from my heels and past my head. The vision thundered, it was dizzying, and each time it ended in a wave of nausea,” (Olesha 20).

Instead of inspiring waves of euphoria and pronouncements about gigantic suns, the new tempo of life literally makes Kavalеров sick. (One can imagine Kavalеров as El Lissitzky’s *Runner in the City* if the runner had tripped over the hurdle and was lying in the gutter in a puddle of his own vomit.)

Given the role that the camera played in Soviet society in 1927, the year that *Envy* was written, Olesha might have even resisted the comparison to photography. In the eyes of both the avant-garde and the Soviet government, the camera blended “the worlds of the machine (technology and industry) with the world of art” (Lodder 186) so successfully that in 1926 one prominent official announced that “Every progressive comrade must not only have a watch”—to stay in step with the industrial tempo of life—“but also a camera,” (Goodman & Hoffman 17). The Leica in particular was viewed as a machine to serve as the eye of the modern revolutionary, who would in turn create an “infinitely reproducible” mass art (Lodder 186). This stands in direct opposition to Kavalеров’s stark individualism. Olesha even spoofs this Soviet synthesis of the man and the machine when he has Volodya assert, “I’m a man-machine. I’ve turned into a machine... What I envy is the machine,” (Olesha 63).

In his writings, Olesha never spoke of his Constructivist art world contemporaries. The only artists he references are “Gustave Doré, Tiepolo, Delacroix, etc.—the painters of a bygone romanticism,” (Beaujour 157). Looking closely at the images Kavalеров creates, this alliance with the past rather than the present makes a great deal of sense. While photographers like

Rodchenko concentrated on sharpening the world in their images, creating strong diagonals and razorlike zigzags, Kavalero's images blur the world and prefer to leave it out of focus in places. The collective oppresses Kavalero, at least in his own imagination. He dreams of travelling to other countries, places where he imagines that he would be able to blossom as an individual. If he were to belong to any photographic movement, Kavalero would certainly have been a Pictorialist; where the Constructivists sought to engage the world, Kavalero would rather dream it.

While Elizabeth Beaujour argues that Kavalero's visual treatment of the world is ultimately due to his need to control and dominate it, the reality is perhaps more pathetic. Beaujour writes that Olesha and his characters "try to compensate for [their] actual powerlessness by seeing the world in a distorted and imaginary fashion, projecting an imaginary control over it, and thus making it theirs" in a "process of inadequacy and imaginary dominance, humiliation and revenge," (38). To an extent, this is certainly true: All of Kavalero's visual mediations—making objects seem small through backwards binoculars, flattening space in a mirror—are an attempt to control the world around him and render it less threatening to his vulnerable ego. (The world cannot harm Kavalero if he has reduced it to an image of his own making.) Beaujour goes on to use a scene from later in the novel as an example of Kavalero's quest for domination. In it, Kavalero attempts to escape the widow Prokopovich's affections by trying "to return to a world of presexual innocence," (49). Kavalero imagines that if he were a child, Anichka's son, he would have all sorts of imaginary adventures using the bed as a prop. "I would have set imaginary catapults on its barriers and fired at my enemies," he daydreams. "I would have arranged receptions for ambassadors," climbed the ornate arches of the bed, and "hurled myself into the terrible abyss, down into the icy abyss of the pillows," (Olesha 112).

While this could be seen as a childish attempt at domination, it appears more likely that this is a mere regression, a way of escaping reality rather than mastering it. Kavaleroov hides from the world in a pillow fort that he has constructed in his own head. This is not domination; it is retreat.

Kavaleroov's vision takes place in a sort of personal camera obscura. He sits alone in the dark, hollow chamber of his mind; instead of peering out from his pupils, as most people do, he has turned his back to the outside world and is watching something else. From the pinhole of light behind him, the world splashes out onto the back of his skull, but this image of the world is inverted, upside-down. Dark objects whiz past him—he takes in their shapes but is unable to decipher their meaning; those bits of recognition that filter through are distorted, colored by his own emotions before they dissolve and abstract. He bangs on the door of Plato's cave and cries, "Let me in!"

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