

# The Formalist Cinematographic Theory: a Refined Thinking of the Expressionist Film Conception?

Original study

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**Abstract:** According to many researchers, Russian formalists do not want to recognize the influence of German expressionism on their work. This statement leads to a distinction between both theories in many fields, such as the field of cinema. In this sense, it is common to read nuanced definitions of expressionism and formalism. The present article tends to verify the truthfulness of these definitions and to show that formalism could be an extension of expressionism through an analysis of two reference works: *Expressionism and Film (Expressionismus und Film)* (1926) by Rudolf Kurtz et *The Poetics of Cinema (Поэтика кино)* (1927).

**Keywords:** Expressionism, formalism, form, film.

Many researchers emphasize that Russian formalists refuse to recognize the strong influence of German expressionism on their thought. That is the way the specialist in culturology Jan Levchenko, in his paper, which he presented in 2013 at the international conference about the centennial of Russian formalism in humanities, shows the “so-called distance between formalists and German expressionism, above all in the field of cinema”<sup>1</sup> (Серёгин 2013). This comment meets with a response in the article “Oskar Walzel et le formalisme russe: les éclairages croisés sur les formalismes européens” of Serguei Tchougounnikov who notices that “in spite of an indisputable interest from the formalists in this phenomenon, their comments about German expressionism leave one feeling uneasy, not to say deep suspicion” (2020)<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, even though Russian formalists, such as Boris Eikhenbaum and Yuri Tynyanov, deny the influence

of expressionism on their thought, they nonetheless know the works of Robert Wiene and Fritz Lang (Levchenko 2013), for example.

The exclusion of any direct reference to expressionism often leads to the will to distinguish both theories, particularly in the field of cinema. In reality, even if those theories present similarities, because they are not considered to be schools strictly speaking and because the National Socialist Germany and the Soviet Union described them as « degenerate », they diverge when we have to characterize them precisely, which is obvious in both below definitions:

Expressionism represents the global and theoretical idea of film as a unique form of artistic expression and communication – unique in the sense that film is capable of interpreting reality or an aspect thereof

1 Original version: “псевдоотстраненность формалистов от немецкого экспрессионизма, прежде всего в кино”. Our translation.

2 Original version: “en dépit d’un incontestable intérêt des auteurs formalistes vis-à-vis de ce phénomène, leurs propos sur l’expressionnisme allemand laissent l’impression d’un malaise, voire d’une profonde méfiance”. Our translation.

in specific ways. Formalism is more exact and pronounced in its description(s) of how film is capable of doing this. It gives a more concrete and “scientific” description of film’s codes (techniques) enabling film to be a unique form of expression (Fourie 2001, 197).

Those definitions show that expressionism is a more general theory than formalism which would focus on form and would offer a detailed version of expressionism.

In view of those ambiguities, we intend to verify the truthfulness of the aforementioned definitions and to seek to know if, unlike Russian theoreticians put forward, formalism could not be considered to be an extension of expressionism and so confirm the marked influence of expressionism on formalism. In order to do this, in a comparative perspective, we will analyse both reference works which are *Expressionism and Film (Expressionismus und Film)* of Rudolf Kurtz et *The Poetics of Cinema (Поэтика кино)*, respectively published in 1926 and 1927 and seen as the foundation of film theories of the 1920s.

When we examine the only structure of both books, it seems that the work of Kurtz, at the time senior editor of the German journal *Lichtbildbühne*, less concerned with the form of the Russian anthology. Indeed, *Expressionism and Film*, whose pages are numbered from 9 to 131 and which mentions the word « film » in his title, begins to deal with the cinema only as from the page 51. Therefore, more than one-third of the book is devoted to generalities about the “meaning of expressionism” (Kurtz 2016, 7), which allows coming back to the definition and the conception of expressionism and involves above all the creation. It makes also possible to return to the other arts, component parts of the beginning of expressionism, that is to say, literature, visual arts, comparisons, architecture, music, stage and applied arts<sup>3</sup>. That way we could think that the theory of expressionist film is more general, on contrary to *The Poetics of Cinema* (1982) which consists of seven articles, whose titles and authors are the following ones: “Preface” of Kirill Shutko, “Problems of Cine-stylistics” of Boris Eikhenbaum, “The Fundamentals of Cinema” of Yuri Tynyanov, “The Nature of Cinema” of Boris Kazansky, “Poetry and Prose in Cinema” of Viktor Shklovsky, “Towards a Theory of Film Genres of Adrian

Piotrovsky and “The Cameraman’s Part in Making a Film” of Evgeny Mikhailov et Andrei Moskvina. These articles tackle very precise topics, even if both first articles are nearly alike because of their similar ideas.

However, in these pages that we could exhibit as introductory pages, Kurtz studies key elements, more particularly the major element of the form<sup>4</sup> which is developed throughout the anthology *The Poetics of Cinema*. Thus, the German essayist and critic writes about the form: “Each shape stands where it does of necessity, if artistic unity is to be retained. Every expression, every movement strives toward a coherent concept. Any alteration would endanger the equilibrium of the picture”<sup>5</sup> (Kurtz 2016, 31). Although these views concern art, he surely underscores the key role of form which has to be nevertheless associated with an expression (or emotion) and a dynamic. This idea is confirmed in a second passage: “Thus, Expressionism is a problem of form. But not of form for form’s sake; form as a pattern that is modified with consistently new subjects. Much more, form is expression; this form grows organically out of that which is expressed [...]”<sup>6</sup> (Kurtz 2016, 42).

So, a first difference between expressionism and formalism would be due to the fact that the expressionist form is inseparable from the expression and “the play of energies and intensities”<sup>7</sup> (Kurtz 2016, 21). However this energy must not be overacted, as Kurtz warns his reader, when he mentions the too „harsh“ (48) borrowings from the cabaret „Blue Bird“, opened in Berlin in December 1921: “it was expressionist enough to retain a whiff of vanguard modernity, sure enough of its audience to restrict itself to what was effective for everyone, and possessive of a healthy sense of earthy, colourful Russian folk, which entered into a somewhat barbaric marriage with Expressionism”<sup>8</sup> (49). Moreover, the force of expressionism appears in the style itself of the author who uses a more affective tone than the formalists, more calm, though both German and Russian writers get together again, when they express very clear-cut opinions.

Despite this undeniable difference in the form, expressionism and formalism are similar on many points. First of all, they attach big importance to photography, which is considered to be the starting point of the cinematograph<sup>9</sup>,

3 It is worth noticing here that in their anthology Russian formalists cite also many examples of art, theater and literature.

4 We remind that the form only can play a key role at one time when the films are still silent.

5 Original version: “Jede Form im Bildraum steht mit Notwendigkeit da, wo sie ist, wenn anders die künstlerische Einheit aufrecht erhalten bleiben soll. Jeder Ausdruck, jede Bewegung strebt einer einheitlichen Konzeption zu. Jede Änderung würde das Gleichgewicht des Bildes gefährden” (Kurtz 1926, 31).

6 Original version: “Der Expressionismus ist also das Formproblem. Aber nicht der Form als Selbstzweck, der Form als Schema, das in immer neuen Inhalten abgewandelt wird. Vielmehr der Form als Ausdruck, der Form, die aus dem Ausgedrückten [...] organisch herauswächst” (Kurtz 1926, 42).

7 Original version: “das Spiel der Energien und Intensitäten” (Kurtz 1926, 22).

8 Original version: “[...] expressionistisch genug, um den Hauch letzter Modernität zu wahren, publikumssicher genug, um sich auf das für Jedermann Wirksame zu beschränken und mit gesundem Sinn für die bunte, russische, bodenständige Volkskunst, die mit dem Expressionismus eine etwas barbarische Ehe einging” (Kurtz 1926, 49).

9 The development of the cinematograph is linked to the fast evolution of photography, invented in 1824 by

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but which should become living. Kurtz notices this fact in the following words: "We must admit that what has been photographed is not merely God-given daily life – rather, it has been created anew from the ground up, according to principles that are not inherent to the object, but to the cinematographic art form"<sup>10</sup> (2016, 51–52). A analogous, but more refined consideration, can be read in the article of Eikhenbaum who lays stress on the major role of "photogeny" (1982, 7), defined as a "language' of mimicry, gestures, objects, camera angles, close-ups, long shots and other elements which are the basis of cine-stylistics"<sup>11</sup> (Tynyanov 1982, 7) and which, according to Tynyanov, has to clear the way for the "cinogeneity" (1982, 38), apparently called cine-stylistic by Eikhenbaum. Therefore, the main point is not the recourse to a series of shots, but the creation of movement and mobility (Kazansky 1982, 58).

In the same way expressionism and formalism associate art and cinema with a living organism, as we can note in Eikhenbaum's remark: "The primary nature of art is a need for the discharging of those energies of the human organism which are excluded from or find only partial application in everyday use. This is also the biological basis of art, which imparts to it the force of a vital need seeking fulfillment"<sup>12</sup> (1982, 7). This assessment, even if it is less specific than Kurtz's comment, reminds nonetheless of the idea of the German critic who declares:

The expressionist film is a highly artistic organism that represents a specific shaping of reality. This form cannot be created by building expressionist sets, or theatrical modes of expression, in just any kind of film.

Rather, the expressionist film is the result of a unique composition that consistently takes hold of, and expediently reshapes, all of the film's components<sup>13</sup> (2016, 115).

Insofar as the film has to form a harmonious whole, it is not surprising that Kurtz and the formalists list a series of essential characteristics to the good production of a film at the centre of which the form plays the lead. Among those characteristics is the set that Kurtz describes as follows: "The work with large spaces, the simplification of details, the emphasis on making the objects' leading lines as striking as possible, is in keeping with the character of expressionist sets"<sup>14</sup> (2016, 55). The formalists appropriate this idea, when they claim that "film is a particular sort of 'graphic drama'"<sup>15</sup> (Kazansky 1982, 59) which has "its own laws of geometry, mechanics and physics"<sup>16</sup> (66). Another necessary element to the film construction is linked to the architecture: the light which "lays its malleable power over surfaces; it underscores the jaggedness and energy of the lines; it emphasizes or weakens the shapes, it gives them strong inner mobility"<sup>17</sup> (Kurtz 2016, 62). In order that this light becomes the best, it is vital, according to Kurtz and the formalists, to use artificial light since "only in the studio can the light be wholly controlled at the will of the cameraman"<sup>18</sup> (Mikhailov, Moskvina 1982, 169). In addition to its practical side –artificial light ensures an independence from the vicissitudes of the weather –, "it is only with artificial lighting that one can achieve maximum plasticity, that is a relief, convexity, and airiness, in other words, create

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the Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and improved in 1835 by Louis Daguerre who creates the daguerreotype in 1839. To that may be added the thaumatrope, phenakistiscope, zootrope et kinescope, designed in 1853 by the Austrian Franz von Uchatius and which allows to project of the first moving pictures on a screen.

10 Original version: "Es ist ohne weiteres einzusehen, daß nicht das gottgewollte Alltagsleben photographiert ist – daß es vielmehr grundsätzlich neu gestaltet ist, nach Prinzipien, die nicht im Objekt liegen, sonder in der Kunstform der Kinematografie" (Kurtz 1926, 51).

11 Original version: "«язык» мимики, жестов, вещей, ракурсов, планов и пр., являющихся основой кино-стилистики" (Tynyanov 1984 [1927], 17).

12 Original version: "Первичная природа искусства - это потребность в разряде тех энергий человеческого организма, которые исключаются из оихода или действуют в нем частично. Это и есть его биологическая основа, сообщающая ему силу жизненной потребности, идущей удовлетворения" (Eikhenbaum 1984 [1927], 16).

13 Original version: "Der expressionistische Film ist ein höchst kunstvoller Organismus, der eine eigentümliche Formung der Wirklichkeit darstellt. Diese Form ist nicht zu erzeugen, indem expressionistische Architekturen oder schauspielerische Ausdrucksformen einem beliebig geartetem Film eingebaut werden. Vielmehr ist der expressionistische Film das Resultat einer einheitlichen Gestaltung, die gleichmäßig alle Komponenten des Films ergreift und zweckmäßig umbildet" (Kurtz 1926, 109).

14 Original version: "Es liegt im Charakter der expressionistischen Dekoration, mit großen Flächen zu arbeiten, die Details zu vereinfachen, die Führungslinien der Objekte möglichst eindrucksvoll zu betonen" (Kurtz 1926, 54).

15 Original version: "графическая драма" (Kazansky 1984 [1927], 96).

16 Original version: "Кино обладает собственными законами геометрии, механики, физики" (Kazansky 1984 [1927], 106).

17 Original version: "legt seine plastische Kraft auf Flächen, es unterstreicht das Zackige und Energische der Linien, es betont oder schwächt die Formen, verleiht ihnen innere Beweglichkeit" (Kurtz 1926, 60).

18 Original version: "Только в павильоне свет может быть всецело подчинен воле оператора" (Mikhailov, Moskvina 1984 [1927], 183).

on the flatness of the screen the illusion of perspectival distance between levels"<sup>19</sup> (Mikhailov, Moskvina 1982, 171).

Both first component parts, which are the architecture and the light, contribute to creating not only some movement in the film, but also provoking the emotions of the moviegoer, caught by the expressive nature of the film.

A last element, which completes the harmonious form of the film, is the actor who, although he is a human being, can be seen as an integral part of the decor insofar as he has to learn how he can merge with his decor in developing "art of posing"<sup>20</sup> (1982, 72) which Boris Kazansky explains in these words:

But, at the same time, it is quite obvious that, in accordance with these categories, the 'role' of the cinema performer in no way demands the all-round ability and skills which constitute the actor's mastery in stage art. Here, enormous significance is laid not on acting, but on 'posing', that is, the skill of adopting this or that position, of making this or that movement, not in general, but as applied to the task and demands of the production, with the aim of depicting this or that detail from the required angle<sup>21</sup> (72).

In order that those three component parts – architecture, light and actor – can represent real harmony, the film unit has to fall in step. To do that, the director, the author of the screenplay, the cameraman and the set designer need not only to make a good job of being careful with the different techniques they use (for example, the movement of the camera, which involves slowdowns, accelerations and

special shots. On the contrary, all the parties of the film unit have to collaborate so that "an action, which either happens in life or has been specially organised for the shooting, and which in reality exists in three-dimensional space, is imprinted, and after montage acquires its own purely cinematographic, two-dimensional lifelikeness"<sup>22</sup> (Mikhailov, Moskvina 1982, 107).

Nevertheless – and we think that the main difference between expressionism and formalism lies in this fact –, the harmony, which the film unit created around the decor and the play of the actors, thus around the form, is not the success<sup>23</sup> condition of a film. Kurtz shows indeed that *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*) (1920) of Robert Wiene is a success in the field of expressionist film because

thus two worlds meet that are constructed according to different ground rules. The organic touches on the geometrically-shaped; unification seems impossible. Wiene's direction tones down the rigidity of the discord; he discovers painterly intergradations, balanced with the emotional content of the scenes<sup>24</sup> (2016, 68).

Conversely, *Genuine* is a failure for the following reason: "Genuine is an expressionist film because Expressionism was a success. But rather than a method of composition, it became the content of the film, so to speak. With this paradoxical discrepancy, the expressionist film faded"<sup>25</sup> (2016, 75). This criticism is all the more interesting that *Genuine* is based on a real plot<sup>26</sup> and does not belong to the films without an actual subject.

19 Original version: "Кроме того, только при нем можно добиться максимума пластичности, т.-е. Рельефности и выуклости и воздушности, т.-е. Создания кажущейся на плоскости экрана перспективной отдаленности одних планов от других всего снимаемого материала" (Mikhailov, Moskvina 1984 [1927], 185–186).

20 Original version: "мастерством позировки" (Kazansky 1984 [1927], 115).

21 Original version: "Его, вместе с тем, совершенно очевидно, сто соответственно этим категориям и «роль» исполнителя в кино вовсе не требует тех целостных способностей и умений, которые составляют мастерство актёра в сценическом искусстве. Громадное значение здесь имеет не актерство, а «позировка», т.-е. Умение принять то или иное положение, сделать то или иное движение не вообще, а применительно к заданию и требованиям операторы с целью изображения той или иной детали в нужном ракурсе" (Kazansky 1984 [1927], 114–115).

22 Original version: "К тому, чтобы некоторое, существующее в жизни или специально для съемки организованное действие, происходящее в действительности в трехмерном пространстве, пройдя через съемочно-лабораторную работу, запечатлелось бы и после монтажа приобрело бы свою уже чисто-кинематографическую жизненность плоскостного порядка" (Mikhailov, Moskvina 1984 [1927], 173).

23 By success we do not understand success among the audience, but the creation of a consistent cinematographic unit.

24 Original version: "So treffen zwei Welten aufeinander, die nach anderen Grundgesetzen konstruiert sind, Organisches berührt sich mit mathematisch Gestaltetem, eine Vereinheitlichung scheint unmöglich. Wienes Führung tönt die Härten des Zwiespalts ab, er findet malerische Übergänge, balanciert mit dem Stimmungsgehalt" (Kurtz 1926, 66).

25 Original version: "Genuine ist ein expressionistischer Film, weil Expressionismus ein Erfolg war. Aber statt einer Methode der Komposition, wurde er sozusagen Inhalt des Films. An diesem paradoxen Zwiespalt verblich der expressionistische Film" (Kurtz 1926, 73).

26 A painter falls asleep and dreams of his favourite book. In this one Lord Lelo buys the deposed priestess Genuine on the slave market. He shuts her, but she manages to run away. Once she arrives in Lelo's room, she

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In this way we can think that expressionism less follows the tradition of absolute art, developed at that time, for example, by the Swede Viking Eggelin, the German Hans Richter et Walter Ruttmann et the Frenchmen Français Fernand Léger et Francis Picabia. The absolute art, understood by Kurtz as a lack of search for sense and a world feeling, expressed by the forms (86), relates to the “expressionist formalism” (2016, 40) that the German critic describes “as a throwback to the academic formalism”<sup>27</sup> (40–41). However, when we pay attention to the articles of the anthology *The Poetics of Cinema*, we can note that the formalists enhance the film theory with considerations about the insert titles, which must be well chosen and play a real role, in the film genres, which are not only dark expressionist films, about editing techniques (1982, 50) or else the spatiotemporal representation, influenced by Balazs and his “Zeitraum” (1982, 57). At the same time, it is also possible to believe that those technical considerations tend to refine the film form which “had appeared”<sup>28</sup> (Eikhenbaum 1982, 6) “with the development of cine-technics and with the realization of the various possibilities of montage”<sup>29</sup> (6). This idea seems to be all the more relevant that the formalists devote the most part of their collective work to the questions of film technique while Kurtz tackles this topic for only nine pages (51–60) and prefers dedicating other pages (61–85) to the analysis of expressionist films, in particular to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari*) (1920), *Genuine* (1920) and *Raskolnikow* (1923) of Robert Wiene, *From Morning to Midnight* (*Von morgens bis mitternachts*) (1920) and *The House on the Moon* (*Das Haus zum Mond*) (1921) of Karl Heinz Martin, *Waxworks* (*Das Wachsfingurenkabinett*) (1924) of Paul Leni. Kurtz also mentions some expressionist elements which appear in the films *The Wild Cat* (*Die Bergkatze*) (1921) of Ernst Lubitsch, *The Last Laugh* (*Der Letzte Mann*) (1924) and *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*) (1922) of Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, *Die Nibelungen* (1924) of Fritz Lang, *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (*Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*) (1920) of Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, *Die Hintertreppe* (1921)

meets Florian, the barber’s nephew. She looks at him and convinces him of killing Lelo. They are happy in love until *Genuine* asks Florian to commit suicide for her love. Florian is horrified and decides to run away from her. *Genuine* reiterates her request with Percy, Lelo’s nephew. Percy pretends to commit suicide. When *Genuine* thinks that Percy is dead, she collapses. Percy confesses the fake and the couple decides to leave Lelo’s house, but at that moment Florian stabs *Genuine* to death.

27 Original version: “Rückschlag in den akademischen Formalismus” (Kurtz 1926, 40).

28 Original version: “Явилась” (Eikhenbaum 1984 [1927], 15).

29 Original version: “Вместе с развитием кино-техники и осознанием разнообразных возможностей монтажа” (Eikhenbaum 1984 [1927], 15).

30 Our emphasis.

31 Original version: “Вооружить себя правильным теоретическим оружием, чтобы легче, продуктивнее идти по пути создания нужной нам кино-фильмы” (Shutko 1984 [1927], 4).

32 Original version: “Каким должно быть кино-зрелище нашего времени” (Shutko 1984 [1927], 3).

33 Our emphasis.

34 Our emphasis.

35 Original version: “Призыв к теоретической работе в области кино” (Shutko 1984 [1927], 9).

of Leopold Jessner et *The Street* (*Die Straße*) (1923) of Karl Grune.

In this connection, it is interesting to notice that the formalists not only allude to Russian and Soviet films, but also German, French and American films. It seems to show that they offer a more universal cinematographic theory than Kurtz who, however, did not entitle his book *German Expressionismus und Film*<sup>30</sup>. It also appears that Kurtz considers expressionist cinema to be a constituent of German art while the formalists would like to “arm [them]selves with the correct theoretical arsenal so that [they] can more easily and more productively embark upon producing the film that [Soviet cinema] need[s]”<sup>31</sup> (Shutko 1982, 1).

With regard to all these considerations, we cannot raise objections against the undeniable influence of German expressionism on Russian formalism insofar as they present many view convergences about the film conception and the form of the latter. Nevertheless, Russian formalism goes further in its theoretical considerations in suggesting a refined thinking of the expressionist theory. As the author of the quoted definition stresses, the more detailed description of the cinema theory, which gave the formalists, is due to the fact that they take an interest in the way that the film can interpret reality, which reminds of the objective of the anthology, set by Shutko: “what kind of films should be shown nowadays”<sup>32</sup> (1982, 1)<sup>33</sup>. This goal differs from Kurtz’s one which throughout his work shows how is the cinema of his time<sup>34</sup>. That is maybe this divergence that makes *The Poetics of Cinema* “a call to theoretical work in the field of cinema”<sup>35</sup> (Shutko 1982, 4) while *Expressionism and Film* is an achieved book which does not incite any discussion. So, we will draw the conclusion that the Russian formalists refuse to recognize the influence of expressionism on their work because this one would not ensure a universal opening to (cinematographic) art.

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