Explain Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization clearly and succinctly. Apply this concept to Craig Raine’s poem ‘A Martian Sends a Postcard Home.’ [Text available on Seminar Sheet.] You should refer to two secondary texts on defamiliarization.

In this essay, I will explain what defamiliarization according to the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky is and apply it to the poem ‘A Martian sends a postcard home’ by Craig Raine from 1979. The movement of Russian Formalists started in the beginning of the 20th century even though they became influential only after the 1960s. In the book Modern Literary Theory by by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, Terry Eagleton claims that the beginning of modern literature occurred in 1917, at the same time when Viktor Shklovsky published the essay ‘Art as Device’.

According to Viktor Shklovsky in the essay ‘Art as Technique’, defamiliarization or estrangement is defined as a technique which aims to make us perceive everyday objects and words from a strange perspective. Our perception becomes automatized while repeatedly perceiving objects or doing actions. Our view of objects becomes generalized, so artists want to prompt us to observe an object for a prolonged period of time to see it clearly for what it is. Automatization of objects in reality means that we recognize them, but don’t see them. Therefore, the point of the technique of defamiliarization is not to return the meaning to an object, but to see an object from a different, unfamiliar perspective.

A natural progression of this work is to analyse defamiliarization in relation to poetry. It is because poetry can make our perception of words different. It enforces the prolonged observation of words and hence defamiliarizes them. Formalists see poetry as something that emerges from deadened society where everything is repetitive and routine. Our automatized life and the use of language are renewed with the act of estrangement. Poetry contrasts the alienated society with the act of estrangement.

Furthermore, poetry uses figurative language that differs to literary, everyday language. Figurative language ‘has the capacity to “defamiliarize” our world – to refigure, reform, revolutionize.’ (Bennett and Royle, ‘Figures and tropes,’ 83.) It is used mostly in poetry, but we also refer to the world around us in figurative speech. The important part of it is imagery that can’t be interpreted literally and makes poetry strange. Modern poets intensify our focus on language and achieve defamiliarization with the use of tropes.

In Chambers Dictionary, trope is defined as ‘a figure of speech, properly one in which a word or expression is used in other than its literal sense.’ (Bennett and Royle, ‘Figures and tropes,’ 80.) Tropes in poetry expand the literal and automatized meanings of language. They force us to look at words in a prolonged way to decipher their meaning. Because of this, we begin to see words in an unfamiliar way. However, they lose their distinctiveness and become worn out as they repeat throughout other works of literature and in everyday speech. Therefore, writers have to constantly create new devices to achieve the effect of defamiliarization.

‘Formalist critics like Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum and Roman Jakobson argued that the function of estrangement was common to all literary devices.’ (Eagleton, ‘Estrangement,’ 50.) Some of the tropes or literary devices include metaphors, metonymies, and personification. It is common to all tropes that they create imagery that makes us see objects around us in a different light. By thinking in images, we finally see an object.
In this paragraph, I will give examples of tropes that make the signifiers in the poem ‘A Martian sends a postcard home’ strange. The signifiers that I will focus on are mist, time and rain. The perception of these words is altered with tropes. In the verse ‘Mist is when the sky is tired of flight’ he uses the personification for the sky and the whole verse as a metaphor for clouds. Furthermore, he changes the familiar signified or the meaning by putting the signifiers in the atypical context. For example, the signifier Time is described as an alive entity with personification ‘But time is tied to the wrists/ or kept in a box, ticking with impatience.’ In the verse ‘Rain is when the earth is television’ defamiliarization is accomplished with the metaphor for staying inside and looking through the windows because the association of television with earth changes our perception of rain. This raises questions about the use of metaphor which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

As exemplified above, the author doesn’t use typical metaphors. Instead, he creates different imagery by using the metaphors that make us find connections between two unrelated images and defamiliarizes both words. For example, the effect of estrangement happens with a simile ‘then the world is dim and bookish/ like engravings under tissue paper.’ which is the metaphor for an old design of books. The epithet ‘bookish’ is not usually used in relation with the world or compared with tissue paper, so this makes us look at the words longer.

In the following paragraph, I will analyse the last part of the poem. The metaphor for dreaming ‘At night, when all the colours die, / they hide in pairs/ and read about themselves - / in colour, with their eyelids shut.’ makes humans seem automatized and strange, almost like robots. I believe that this fits into the formalists’ theory about alienation that says that ‘Formalism is the poetics of an alienated society.’ (Eagleton, ‘Estrangement,’ 50.) While dreaming, we see our reality in a dissociated and unfamiliar way. Also, our ordinary and automatized, gray reality can be seen in colours. This might insinuate that we are alienated from our own lives.

This essay has explained the meaning of the term defamiliarization or estrangement in the context of Russian formalism and its’ application on the poem ‘A Martian Sends a Postcard Home’ from Craig Raine. In essence, defamiliarization is the technique that makes us see objects around us or words differently and in contrast with our habitualized reality. The poem succeeds in creating the special perception of objects with unusual descriptions of ordinary things such as mist, rain and time. The tropes of metaphor and personification create special imagery that reinforces the effect of estrangement. In my opinion, the poem fits to the formalists’ idea about alienated society as the basis for the poetry, which function is to estrange us from the alienation. The title of the poem invites us to see our reality from a Martian’s perspective that is weird and alien, in that way announcing the estrangement. In my interpretation, with the use of tropes that create strange imagery, the writer manages to reinforce the effect of defamiliarization in which we see our own alienation from our reality for what it is.
Bibliography:
