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Theorizing the Social Through Literary Fiction: For a New Sociology of Literature

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Abstract

When analyzing literary fiction, most cultural sociologists still accept the well-established boundaries between the literary and the sociological, thus leaving literature stripped of its aesthetic qualities. Instead, I propose a new approach that focuses on the process of meaning-making as it occurs within the interaction between the reader and the novel in a given socio-historical setting. This allows analysts to capture those aspects of understanding social experience which are usually 'lost in translation' between fictional and sociological genres. My major claims are that, first, when referring to social experience, both sociological and literary texts employ *aesthetic devices* to mediate understanding for the reader. Second, within the literary genre, the understanding of social experience relies much more on the *emotional engagement* of the reader through a reading process facilitated by these aesthetic devices. Third, to benefit methodologically and epistemologically from the *lyrical understanding* of social experience mediated by literature, cultural sociologists must be particularly sensitive to the subtlety and ambiguity of meanings mediated by the aesthetic. The methodological advantage gained is the analysis of deeper cultural meanings grounded in, yet also going beyond, an emotionally and existentially experienced social reality, which is intersubjectively shared and filtered by various groups of readers and cultural intermediaries. The epistemological advantage gained by overcoming the assumed inferiority of literature is that cultural sociological research unlocks a whole new area for understanding the meanings of social life, especially its non-discursive dimensions. The research model I propose for a *new sociology of literature* adopts the *landscape of meaning* concept developed by Isaac Reed in combination with the *aesthetic structuralism* of Czech linguist Jan Mukařovský. This model will be demonstrated through an interpretive analysis of the Czech novel *Sestra* (published in English as *City Sister Silver*) by Jáchym Topol.

Keywords

Czech literature, landscape of meaning, literary, literature, lyrical sociology, post-communism, sociology of literature, structural aesthetics

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The Question of Literature as Sociology

> And there I stood in the street, it was freedom, half past six, weather roughly March. Clouds above, asphalt below, people with shopping bags walking the street, children and dogs in tow, it was freedom and time out of joint was going mad. I let it drag me in, it was a different dance than . . . the dance of the rose, different than with the truncheons, there was no end to it, it seemed endless. Human time had accelerated, I was disguised as a young man with a tiger-stripe tie, files under my arm, walking to an appointment with my associates . . . We knew that Slovaks were fast Moravians, Moravians were a few bricks shy of a load, Czechs thought around the corner, Praguers were stuck-up pigs, and all of us were on the same map. Micka and I had been born with asphalt between our fingers . . . . (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 37–38)

> The Chicago River, its waters stained by industry, flows back upon itself, branching to divide the city into the South Side, the North Side, and 'the great West Side.' In the river's southward bend lies the Loop, its skyline looming towards Lake Michigan. The Loop is the heart of Chicago, the knot in the steel arteries of elevated structure which pump in a ceaseless stream the three millions of population of the city into and out of its central business district. The canyon-like streets of the Loop rumble with the traffic of commerce. On its sidewalks throng people of every nation, pushing unseeingly past one another, into and out of office buildings, shops, theaters, hotels, and ultimately back to the north, south, and west 'sides' from which they came. For miles over what once was prairie now sprawls in endless blocks the city. (Zorbaugh, 1929: 1)

These two excerpts provide insight into the aesthetic and emotional aspects of the social landscape of two cities, post-communist Prague in 1989 and early 20th-century Chicago, by means of emotional engagement with the text. The first comes from a novel, the second from a sociological book. In his influential article, 'Against Narrative: A Preface to Lyrical Sociology', Andrew Abbott (2007) uses Zorbaugh's text to show that sociology can, and does, embrace literary rhetorical devices for mediating the experience of a social world to readers. Abbott stresses the lyrical aspects of Zorbaugh's passage in contrast to another sociological text, which he considers non-lyrical. I also wish to use Zorbaugh's lyrical and sociological piece to make a comparison, only in my case it is with a piece by Czech writer Jáchym Topol, which is lyrical but not explicitly sociological.

Abbott (2007: 68) starts with the suggestion that Zorbaugh's passage aims 'to evoke in the reader a certain frame of mind . . . a sense of excitement and intensity'. By means of his language 'Zorbaugh invokes not only simple metaphors like the "stained" river and the "looming" and "canyon-like" Loop, but also the Homeric simile of the el tracks as the blood system through which circulates the diurnal pulse of city life' (Abbott, 2007: 68). Also in the passage by Topol, we can see how 'excitement and intensity' are generated by metaphorical language and *aesthetic devices*. 'It is because [they find] the city fascinating and overwhelming that Zorbaugh [and Topol] can wax poetic' (Abbott, 2007: 68). It is because they are emotionally engaged and emotionally engaging. Far from being abstract sociological theories, both passages are 'about a thing' (Abbott, 2007: 68), that is, about real, tangible objects.

Zorbaugh, providing a macro-sociological bird's-eye view, 'writes of the city itself—its geography, its people, its places' (Abbott, 2007: 68), while Topol, who depicts situations and characters in a more microsociological way, talks about the concrete experience of the fuss and fervor of new freedom by sketching ‘people with shopping bags’ and a ‘man with a tiger-stripe tie’ (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 37). The effect of concreteness is further facilitated by the pictorial, snapshot-like character of both passages. Zorbaugh’s portrayal develops like brush strokes, step by step painting a more cogent image of social landscape with every new line adding detail, context, and color to what has already been painted. Similarly, Topol piles up layers of meaning, drawing us deeper into the presented situation, into a ‘state of being, a moment’ (Abbott, 2007: 69). While one is a sociologist by profession and writer by heart, and the other is a sociologist by heart and writer by profession, both Zorbaugh and Topol look ‘at a social situation, [feel] its overpowering excitement and its deeply affecting human complexity, and then [write] a book trying to awaken those feelings in the minds—and even more the hearts—of [their] readers’ (Abbott, 2007: 70).

A lyrical account of social experience is anchored in the ‘emotional engagement’ (Abbott, 2007: 92), which presents the text to the reader as something familiar, endowed with a deeply subjective quality. This emotion, Abbott (2007: 94) writes, ‘is rooted completely in the here and now about which the author is writing’. Instead of determinate social facts, the attention of the reader is shifted to the ‘recreation of an experience of social discovery’ (Abbott, 2007: 70) of these facts—experiencing social life in its becoming. Yet, the lyrical can also express more general and stable aspects of social life. Fictional writing embraces aesthetic devices like metaphors and allegories, which can refer beyond concrete experience and are thus able to mediate a deeper understanding of the social landscape where this experience occurs.

My argument in this article is based on three claims. First, when referring to social experience, both sociological and literary texts employ *aesthetic devices* to mediate understanding for the reader. Second, within the literary genre, the understanding of social experience relies much more on the *emotional engagement* of the reader through a reading process facilitated by these aesthetic devices. Third, to benefit from the *lyrical understanding* of social experience mediated by literature, cultural sociologists must be particularly sensitive to the subtlety and ambiguity of meanings mediated by the aesthetic. The benefit is twofold. Methodologically, it allows for an analysis of the deeper cultural meanings grounded in, yet also going beyond, an emotionally and existentially experienced social reality, which is intersubjectively shared and filtered by various groups of readers and cultural intermediaries. In terms of epistemology, sociologists sometimes look at literature with jealousy, acknowledging that it can testify to social phenomena beyond the grasp of social sciences. For example, Harrington (2002: 55) claims that a literary work can ‘communicate thoughts [about social life] that scientific discourse could not’. Rita Felski (2008: 88) speaks about the ‘social phenomenology’ mediated by novels, which cannot be provided by sociology. According to Ron Eyerman (2006: 27), even the most cited sociologist of literature, Pierre Bourdieu (1996), admits ‘that some aspects of social structures are better grasped through novels than the more direct methods of scientific research’. I argue that only by overcoming the often-assumed inferiority of literature in sociological research, can cultural sociologists realize its full potential in understanding the meanings of social life.

My proposal for a *new sociology of literature*[1] adopts the *landscape of meaning* concept developed by Isaac Reed (2011) in combination with the *aesthetic structuralism* of

Czech linguist Jan Mukařovský (1971, 1978). I demonstrate this approach through an analysis of the Czech novel *City Sister Silver* (hereafter *Sister* in italics),[2] by Jáchym Topol (2000 [1994]). I chose *Sister* for two main reasons: (1) *Sister* mediates a *deeper understanding* of social experience in a newly emerging Czechoslovak republic from 1989 onwards, and (2) this deeper understanding is possible through the reader's (and the author's) emotional engagement with the text which is facilitated by the aesthetic devices of the text. I pinpoint key aspects of the deeper understanding of social experience mediated by *Sister*, which include time perception, use of language, and the alternation between the immersion and alienation of the reader. These aspects capture the transformation of the meaningful landscape characterized by both continuity and discontinuity between the Czechoslovak regimes before and after 1989.

Between Sociology and Literature

The idea that the study of novels is beneficial for sociology is as old as the discipline itself. In fact, when Auguste Comte coined the term 'sociology', the object and methods of the emerging social sciences largely overlapped with the ways of literary fiction. It was due to institutional separation that they split into incompatible fields of intellectual inquiry, typically portrayed as the 'confrontation of cold rationality and the culture of the feelings' (Lepenies, 1988: 1). Yet, along with the ongoing de-positivization of sociology in the last third of the 20th century, marked by such movements as the linguistic turn, poststructuralism, and the cultural turn, cultural sociologists have been treating this division rather suspiciously (Alexander, 2015).

Some scholars tried to bridge the historically established boundaries retrospectively, focusing on literary texts which resemble sociological ones (e.g. Berger, 1977; Brinkmann, 2009; Erasga, 2010; Harrington, 2004; Hoggart, 1966; Smith, 2004). In 1963, Lewis Coser wrote in the introduction to his collection of classical fiction stories for sociologists that fiction 'provides the social scientist with a wealth of sociologically relevant material, with manifold clues and points of departure for sociological theory and research' (Coser, 1963: 3). Despite, or perhaps because of, their non-scientific language, literary texts often provide insightful analyses of society. Some writers, for example Michel Houellebecq, might even be called 'literary sociologist[s]' (Petersen and Jacobsen, 2012: 100) or 'lyrical sociologist[s]' (Brinkmann, 2009: 1379) for their ability to communicate social experience to the reader. However, labeling a writer a 'sociologist' was never entirely serious. Most scholars still cling to the long-established idea that without an adequate sociological interpretation, literary fiction lacks the conceptual and systematic clarity to be used scientifically (Longo, 2016: 145).

Another set of studies (Atkinson, 1990; Becker, 2007; Beer, 2016; Brown, 1977; Lepenies, 1988; Nisbet, 1962, 1977; Smith, 2008) crosses the historical boundaries between sociology and fiction by emphasizing the literary qualities of sociological works. Demonstrating that sociologists often employ similar rhetorical devices to those of writers and poets, these studies suggest that the plausibility of scientific texts is to a considerable degree co-created by their emotional and aesthetic aspects. Perhaps the most cogent example is an ethnography by Clifford Geertz (1973). According to Philip Smith (2008: 177; cf. Alexander et al., 2011), the power of Geertz's iconic study on the

Balinese cockfight stems from its position between the sphere of social science and literature. Abandoning the false chimera of 'conventional positivist ethnography', Geertz 'takes advantage of this more literary forum to sail close to the winds of aestheticism, relativism, and subjectivism' (Smith, 2008: 178; see also 'blurred genres' in Geertz, 1980). However, it is not a case whereby the author could simply 'persuade the reader' by means of aesthetic devices and rhetorical figures (Atkinson, 1990: 62). Rather, the lyricalness is closely related to experiencing the investigated social phenomena. Lyrical language helps Geertz to make sense of the disorderly flow of impressions and sensations in order to capture the 'messy' social experience as genuinely as he can. Consequently, the researcher's ability to mediate their own experience to the reader by means of the lyrical can facilitate a 'reality-effect' (Greenblatt, 1997: 20).

However, according to Abbott (2007), lyrical sociology is not the exclusive domain of ethnographers and anthropologists. Besides mentioning Bronisław Malinowski and Michael Bell, Abbott alludes to Chicago School scholars like Robert Park or even Nicholas Christakis, whose work is considered lyrical despite its predominantly quantitative character. Lyricism, then, is not bound to a specific subfield, genre, or method. It is rather a particular approach characterized by Abbott (2007: 92) as having an 'emotional engagement' or 'emotional stance' towards the topics of inquiry.

In this regard, John P. Ward (1986: 328–331) describes a poetic 'realignment' that sociology has taken in the 1970s and 1980s by adopting a 'new phenomenological reflexivity'. Following authors like Goffman, Giddens, Garfinkel, and Schütz, sociologists 'have become less inhibited in their use of language, no longer concerned only to be purely objective or scientific' (Ward, 1986: 332–333). Often, a lyrical or 'metaphor-employing' (Watson, 2016: 432) style of writing is connected to sociological imagination. Richard Swedberg (2014: 20–25) conceives of metaphors and analogies as crucial components of sociological 'theorizing'. Such a 'poetic sociological imagination . . . shifts from science to poetry, and from empirical evidence to artistic impressions and creative expressions' (Jacobsen and Marshman, 2008: 800). The aesthetic aspects, then, do not only make a sociological text more persuasive, compelling, or memorable; they also constitute the meaning of what is communicated between the author, the text, and the reader.

On Epistemology: How Literature Theorizes Society

Both sociology and literature can be emotionally engaging in their accounts and both employ aesthetic devices in their texts. However, they embrace different 'criteria and modes of communication' (Nisbet, 1962: 73) through which they mediate understanding of phenomena.[3] To fulfill these criteria of communication, sociologists often strive to *translate* or *convert* 'literary data into sociological discourse' (Longo, 2016: 142; see also Alworth, 2014: 257; Harrington, 2002: 52). This conversion is typically accomplished in two ways. In the first approach, literature is treated as a black box and the analytic focus is narrowed to its social dimensions—either the social context of its production (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1996; further see Serrão, 2017: 2–3) or reception (e.g. Griswold, 1987; Radway, 1984; most recently Olave Thumala, 2018). This is the case with a recent special issue of *Cultural Sociology* (Franssen and Kuipers, 2015), where the sociology of literature is reduced to (Bourdieusian[4]) studies of literary production (see also Váňa, 2020). In the second approach, investigators look inside the novels, yet treat them as resources inferior to sociological frameworks. Here, literature is valued as a source of sociological imagination (Beer, 2016; Edling and Rydgren, 2010; Misztal, 2016), a tool for teaching sociology (Carlin, 2010; Coser, 1963; Hegtvedt, 1991), or as a support for sociological concepts and explanations (Boltanski, 2014; Singer, 2011; Smith, 2004). In these cases, sociological interest in novels does not go beyond their utility.

There are, however, some sociologists who found that full-fledged sociological understanding can be mediated by the novels themselves. Authors such as Balzac (Pasco, 2016), Robert Musil (Harrington, 2002), August Strindberg (Swedberg, 2016), or Italo Calvino (Becker, 2007) are recognized as literary sociologists. In this regard, Harrington (2002: 51) claims that 'literary and scientific-sociological accounts of social reality differ only in the mode of linguistically communicating knowledge, not in the claim to knowledge itself'.

To understand the similarities between sociology and literature, we can utilize the landscape of meaning concept developed by Isaac Reed (2011: 89–121). Grounded within a meaning-centered interpretive epistemology, the main purpose of a landscape of meaning is to understand how social action is navigated through cultural meanings and how social actors experience and make sense of these meanings. The cultural sociologist, who becomes a metaphorical painter, utilizes a distinct 'paint' and 'painting style' to reconstruct a certain constellation of meanings as a metaphorical landscape. The advantage of Reed's metaphor is that it allows the researcher to observe the landscape from a distance, which opens up space to infer more general patterns of how meaning is shaped while at the same time taking account of 'the variety of ways in which meaning and processes of communication provide the basis for, and give form to . . . [the] subjectivities and strategies' (Reed, 2011: 110) of those who inhabit the landscape.

A similar idea was put forward by Robert Nisbet (1962, 1977). Yet, his conception is broader than Reed's as it includes both social scientists and artists, 'driven by the desire to understand, to interpret, and to communicate their understanding to the rest of the world' (Nisbet, 1962: 69). Nisbet's 'social landscape' (1977: 43) is a way of communicating social phenomena filtered through the specific 'perceptions, consciousness, and style' of the author by means of creative imagination. In accordance with Reed, Nisbet defines *landscape* as a result of theory and evidence, but he describes the process of theorizing as something not exclusively scientific. The word *theory*, in its original sense, stands for *contemplation* and is closely allied with *imagination*, that is, 'internalizing the outer world to an image' through the 'detachment' of the author (Nisbet, 1962: 69). Theorizing is an ability to delineate '[b]ackground, detail, and characterization' of a particular social phenomenon and transform it 'into something that is iconic in its grasp of an entire social order' (Nisbet, 1962: 72).

For Reed (2011: 20), theories are abstract meaning-systems imaginatively mobilized together with a single goal of achieving a 'deeper and more general' (Reed, 2011: 20) understanding of social meaning. Reed (2011: 167–168) discusses theory in a broader sense, as primarily drawing on '[c]uriosity and the will to understand', fueled by an investigator's 'sensitivities to idiosyncratic meanings, and not just . . . her logical brilliance'. The 'hermeneut', the human 'agent of understanding', applies theory to bring 'comprehension of other signification systems, other social formations' (Reed, 2011: 168). Writing a novel, then, is a theoretical work in a broader sense, which conjoins bits of social experience documented by the author into a complex web of meanings transcending these individual bits and creating a sense of a complete whole of social life. We can find theories as understood by Nisbet and Reed in the novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Goethe as much as in the writings of Marx, Weber, or Geertz.[5]

For example, Howard Becker (2007: 241) observes how Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* accumulated countless detailed descriptions to construct a compelling social analysis of the 'marriage customs of a particular group of early-nineteenth-century English country gentry'. Austen's theoretical skill allows her to 'spiral out through the layers of meaning that construe human experience' (Reed, 2011: 89) of marriage customs vis-à-vis a particular socio-historical background. Constantly moving between abstract and concrete, fictitious and real, evidence and imagination, Austen can *reconstruct* the respective landscape of meaning. The word *re-construction* is important, as it suggests that the landscape of meaning is not a mere epistemological tool (a *construction*). There is a 'fundamental connection' (Reed, 2011: 162) between the textual reconstruction in a novel, or a sociological text, with concrete socio-historical reality, which the author strives to understand. The major task for a novelist, as well as a sociologist or an anthropologist, is to employ theory to reconstruct the landscape of meaning in order for the reader to recognize 'that it conforms to reality' (Atkinson, 1990: 63).

On Methodology: Understanding the Social through the Aesthetic

Literary fiction employs theorizing in a broader sense to tackle real-world evidence and transform it into a new meaningful whole—a landscape of meaning. Yet, not all novels succeed in mediating a meaningful landscape. Sociologists, who recognize sociological quality in novels, often select novels based on 'their authors' particular ability to observe and interpret social phenomena sharply, and using a refined vocabulary' (Kuzmics, 2015: 29–30). For example, Becker (2007: 271–283) chooses a novel by Italo Calvino as it connects 'evocative, even erotic' language, metaphors, and images evoking 'complex thoughts and feelings' with elaborate study in urban sociology. Similarly, Alworth (2014: 236) picks Herman Melville's *White-Jacket* because 'the ebullient voice of the narrator', 'the striking imagery' and 'the embellished descriptions of character' deploy the novel 'toward the production of sociological knowledge'. Harrington (2002: 57) values *The Man Without Qualities* for Robert Musil's ability to 'reflect his experience' of the 'Zeitgeist in a unique prose of probing and equivocal complexity'. I argue that these criteria can be encompassed by Reed's (2011: 113) concept of *maximal interpretation*. The novelist produces deeper understanding[6] by connecting historically located experience with theory in a broader sense, and this is mediated to the reader through the landscape of meaning (cf. 'deep intersubjectivity' in Felski, 2008: 91).

Readers can access implicit sources of deeper meaning by engaging emotionally with the novel (see 'Landscape of meaning, implicit' in Figure 1). The landscape of meaning, which has been codified through the author's imaginative practice, is activated in the reading process and perpetually reconstructed as long as the novel and the

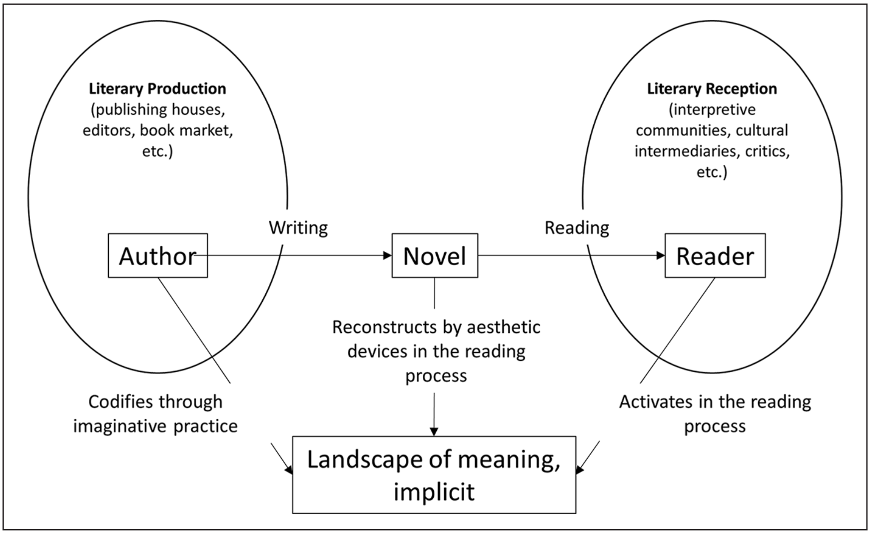

Figure 1. The landscape of meaning, implicit.

reader maintain the interaction. The spaces of literary production and reception shape the landscape of meaning in the background, as they influence the writing as well as the reading of the novel.

A cultural sociologist who wants to access the deeper understanding mediated by the novel in a more extensive way must 'explicitate'[7] (as to *make explicit*; see Serrão, 2017: 4) what happens within the author-novel-reader communication vis-à-vis socio-historical background—particularly with respect to the novel's production and reception.

An effective way to accomplish such an explicitation was developed in the mid-20th century by linguist and literary theorist Jan Mukařovský (1971, 1978), a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle.[8] The aesthetic structuralism employed by Mukařovský can be understood as a method of deep interpretation based on the aesthetic aspects of a literary text. The aesthetic aspects considered by the interpreter include: style, metaphorical language, melody and rhythm, the order of and relation between textual elements on various levels such as words, sentences, and paragraphs. These textual elements are subsequently investigated in relation to the social space of production and reception as it develops in time. Finally, the interpreter examines how factors internal and external to the text participate in forming the overall meaning.

For example, in the classic Czech novel *The Grandma* (*Babička*) by Božena Němcová (1924 [1855]), Mukařovský (1982 [1925]) notices something similar to what Becker (2007: 238–251) finds in *Pride and Prejudice*: an accumulation of details forming a new meaningful whole which is more than the sum of its parts. Yet, Mukařovský goes further as he investigates how this meaningful whole is composed through specific aesthetic devices. Mukařovský (1982 [1925]: 683–685) claims that Němcová presents countless details of everyday village life as a steadily flowing and harmonious narrative stream to evoke an impression of a peaceful cosmological order and integrity. To test this claim, Mukařovský changes the order of some words and traces how the disrupted fluency changes the meaning of the sentences. He points out that Němcová's writing process involved selecting words that conjure feelings of tranquility (Mukařovský, 1982 [1925]: 686–689). This is also the case with the sound aspect of the novel. Němcová diminished the effects of sharp- and distinct-sounding words to minimize disruptive 'jumps' and maintain a 'soft melodic waviness' (Mukařovský, 1982 [1925]: 690) in the text.

These stylistic selections, based on Němcová's imaginative work, correspond to the broader conception of theory as defined in the previous section. The overall meaning of *The Grandma*—the landscape of meaning the novel mediates—is reconstructed as a conjunction of numerous evidential descriptions and Němcová's ability to theorize them. That is, Němcová 'moves beyond data toward deeper meaning' with the utmost goal 'to make the meaningful landscape intelligible to the reader, to render its contours clearly', so the social actions she writes about 'must come to make sense' (Reed, 2011: 115–116). Thus, if we are to 'make sense' of the novel and not just summarize and categorize its content, we must look at how it comes to life through every single paragraph, sentence, and word shaped by the author's imaginative theorizing.

The aesthetic structure can be simply defined as an outcome of structural-aesthetic analysis, as performed by Mukařovský in the case of *The Grandma*. Ultimately, structural-aesthetic analysis delineates (1) how the landscape of meaning has been theorized by the author's imaginative practice; (2) how it is reconstructed by the text's aesthetic devices; and (3) how it is activated by the reader in the reading process. For the analysis to be complete, the author-text-reader interaction must be analyzed with respect to their socio-historical backgrounds, which include the conditions of literary production and reception of the text among various discourses and publics. Mukařovský (1935) points out, on the one hand, how the social conditions of production relate to specific aesthetic features like sentence structure, length, and complexity of phrasing; and, on the other hand, how various reading publics endow literary texts with meaning at a given time and place. Here, it is important to emphasize that 'interpretive communities' (Fish, 1982) play a vital role in the meaning-making, yet, it should not lead to the dismissal of the author's (Childress and Friedkin, 2012: 50–51) and novel's[9] (Alworth, 2016; Felski, 2015) participation in the overall landscape of meaning. In accordance with Mukařovský (1935), the mutual relation between a literary work and socio-historical conditions of its production/reception can be accessed through various discourses about this work (cf. Griswold, 1987). The aesthetic structure is like a *map*, which gives us hints about all kinds of relations between the elements that constitute the landscape of meaning channeled by the novel (see 'The landscape of meaning, explicit' in Figure 2). With such a map, cultural sociologists have access to a deeper understanding mediated by the novel without necessarily filtering it through sociological theories.

I demonstrate the proposed model in a brief structural-aesthetic analysis of *Sister* by Jáchym Topol (2000 [1994]) in three successive steps focusing on (1) segments of the literary space relevant to the chosen novel and accessible through discourses about the novel, (2) the aesthetic devices in the novel, and (3) their relation to each other and to the overall landscape of meaning mediated in the reading process.

In the first step, I investigated the position of Topol and *Sister* in Czech literary space through the analysis of literary reviews, critiques, online blogs, television interviews,

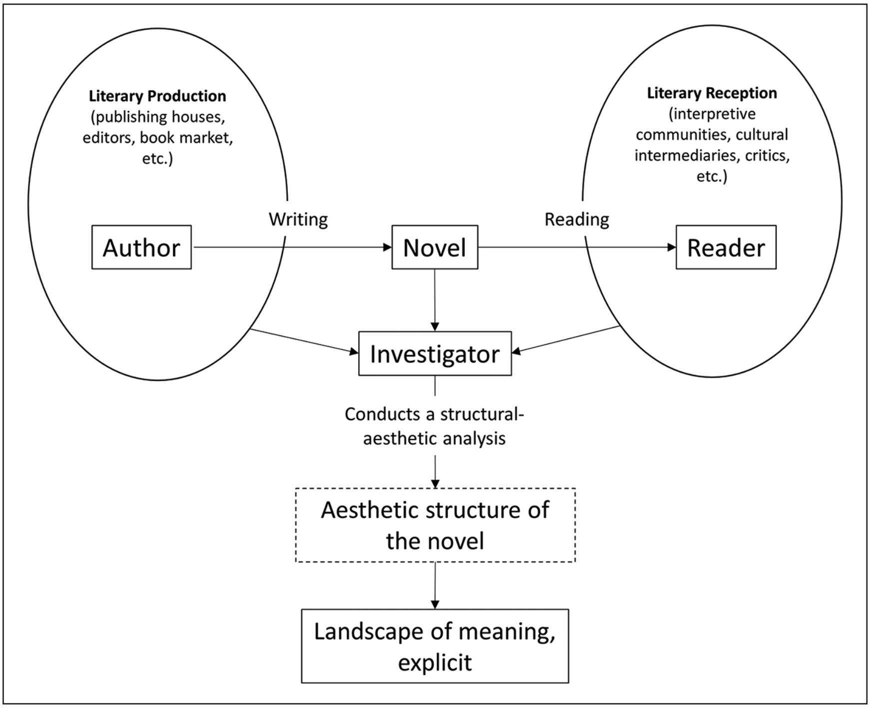

Figure 2. The landscape of meaning, explicit.

and radio debates from the date of the novel's publication until the end of 2017.[10] An inquiry into the novel's reception and various interpretations circulating in the public discourse provided a preliminary idea of cultural meanings related to the reading experience of *Sister*. In the second step, I read the book repeatedly to outline its aesthetic structure (Mukařovský, 1971, 1978). I focused on how the author channels social experience through the formal qualities of the text. In the third step, I followed the method of Harrington (2002: 56), who suggests that the 'relation between . . . the discursive and the lyrical' is that of a 'hermeneutic circle'. I repeated the first vis-à-vis the second step, so the analysis of public discourse and the aesthetic structure informed each other, until I found the interpretive potential exhausted. Here, it is important to note that different readers attribute different meanings to *Sister*, depending on socio-cultural space where the interpretive community is situated. For example, allusions to Native American cosmology in *Sister* only make sense to an interpretive community familiar with youth culture based on the western genre in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s. For the analysis to be comprehensive, I strove to include a variety of discourses, whose preliminary understanding would potentially unlock new ways of meaningful reading (cf. Fish, 1982: 3). This allowed me to understand how the landscape of meaning is reconstructed via the aesthetic devices of the text and, subsequently, to access the deeper meanings mediated by *Sister*. In the next section, I demarcate these meanings according to three main organizing principles: dis/continuity of time perception, dis/continuity of language, and the alternation between the immersion and alienation of the reader.

Analysis of *Sister*

Introducing the Novel

Published in 1994, *Sister* (Topol, 2000 [1994]) immediately became the center of Czech literary debates. It was designated 'one of the best literary depictions of the wretchedness of 1980s Czechoslovakia and the transition to freedom' (Czech Literature, n.d.), capturing the 'social chaos before and after 1989, generating streams of ambiguous images and language expressions . . . that evoke the life-feelings of a generation imbued with deep skepticism towards the false ideals [of the communist era]' (Machala, 2008: 292)[11]—a 'depiction of the life-feeling of a whole generation' (Chvatík, 1994). Most reviews praised the novel as a breakthrough in post-communist Czech culture. Soon after, it was canonized as a symbol representing the cultural values of the newly achieved democratic regime.[12] For decades, *Sister* has been included in the Czech educational curriculum, and its importance has been further consecrated by a series of literary awards and symbolic honors.[13] With translations into German (1998), Hungarian (1998), English (2000), Polish (2002), and Slovenian (2007), *Sister* has also become an important national-cultural export and Jáchym Topol has become a living legend.

However, *Sister* has not exactly been a bestseller.[14] Reviewers often highlighted its rather chaotic construction (e.g. Chvatík, 1994; Foldyna, 2008; Gabriel, 1994; Hybler, 1995). Over 500 pages of 'unrestrained volcanic force' (Šlajchrt, 1994) are brimming with complex metaphors, intertextual fictional allusions, and sophisticated real-world references, as well as misleading hints, blind paths, and mysterious fantastic entities. *Sister* provides a maximal interpretation of social experience during (post-)1989 Czechoslovakia. The landscape of meaning reconstructed by the novel, which is emblematic of the life-feeling of a generation, has been consolidated as a 'representative type' in the Lukácsian sense (Laurenson and Swingenwood, 1972: 55). Unlike Lukács' (1964) favorite genre of literary realism, the style embraced by Topol can be described as 'modern epic' (Moretti, 1996). While the traditional epic communicated deep cultural meanings through 'cosmic' and 'mythical' forms, *Sister* mediates them through 'the minutiae of everyday life and the finite fleeting experiences of an insignificant individual' (Harrington, 2002: 57).

Dis/Continuity of Time Perception

Although it is not easy to follow a consistent linear time frame in *Sister*, it is possible to identify a few stable historical reference points. In the summer of 1989, the main character and narrator, Potok,[15] and his female lover mysteriously called 'Little White She-Dog',[16] observe a scene with crowds of East Germans climbing over the fence of the German embassy in Prague trying to reach West Germany. Until the Velvet Revolution,[17] the couple spend most of their time locked away from the lifeless world of real socialism,[18] enjoying the private pleasures of their passionate, even animal-like, love. The discontinuity in the perception of time flow is expressed through sensual metaphors. The 'prehistoric times' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 42) of the era before 1989 are described as 'being sealed in a can' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 416). Living in such 'sour times' grayness' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 33–34) feels like being pressed in a narrow space, where everything seems still, monolithic, and dull. We can measure such time conventionally. Yet, from a phenomenological perspective, stressed by the expression 'human time' (Topol 2000 [1994]: 37), it is rather static. Private passion, into which Potok and She-Dog escape from the gray and banal reality, manifests itself with heightened, almost primordial intensity.

When the revolutionary events take off, this way of life is no longer possible. Topol employs aesthetic devices to evoke the feeling of a drastic, irreversible change in the perception of time; he conveys a shock similar to one caused by a huge physical force, 'the explosion of time' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 50). The loss of a sense of continuity—however gray and dull it was—threatens ontological security. Time, which in the old regime was only latently present in the background, is suddenly 'flyin [sic] like a mad horse' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 183), exploding and bursting with colors. If concentrated in the form of 'time grenades', this uncontrollable force can easily 'blow [one's] head off' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 441). Time acquires a new ontological quality. It 'has its own color, taste, and smell' (Kouba, 2013 [2003]: 103) and can be 'glimpsed' or 'touched' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 51). Potok is forced to deal not only with the changing political regime, but with the very new ontological condition—with a fundamental *discontinuity on an existential level*.

Along with the explosion of time, the new historical era starts with its own calendar, counting the 'years 1, 2, and 3 . . .' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 50). Let us return to the paragraph quoted at the beginning of this article. The situation described seems to be the same as usual—people 'walking the street', the 'weather', 'clouds above and asphalt below' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 37)—everything seems orderly. Even time can be measured by a clock, which shows half past six. However, the same concreteness used to depict the children, dogs, and asphalt is applied to the abstract concepts of 'freedom' and 'accelerating time'. The almost incidental position of 'freedom' in the text assures the reader it is just as common as clouds and people walking. The poetic expression 'time out of joint' acquires the same concreteness as children and dogs. According to Mukařovský (1971: 151–152), the overall meaning of the aesthetic structure changes throughout the process of reading with every new sign perceived by the reader. Thus, the abstract concepts of freedom and time placed in the list of mundane objects disrupt the ordinary picture of the street, endowing them with a new quality. There are no more 'people as always', but 'people experiencing freedom'. At the same time, all that has been read influences the meaning of every new sign (Mukařovský, 1971: 151–152). The new sensations of time and freedom are intrinsically present within the context of the everyday hustle, as though they have always been part of it. The aesthetic qualities of the text express here a *discontinuity in continuity*. The city of Prague paces its usual daily routine, but at the same time, *it does not*.

Dis/Continuity of Language

Post-1989 language 'had exploded along with time' (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 41). Its ambiguous character is not only latently driving the frantic pace of *Sister*, but is thoroughly reflected by the narrator himself. Referring to the biblical story of the confusion of tongues, Potok distinguishes between a ‘pre-Babylonian’ (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 234) and a ‘post-Babylonian’ language era. The pre-Babylonian language of communism was clear, straightforward, but lacking its own agency since it was restrained by official ideology. The post-Babylonian language of post-communism is totally unbounded from any restrictive force—it becomes an autonomous agent. While the pre-Babylonian language was repressed, the post-Babylonian language is itself repressive. Since control over the post-Babylonian language is no longer centralized, various actors ‘steal words from each other’ (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 234) and try to capture and manipulate them for their own interest. The temptations of new opportunities make post-communist Czechoslovakia a new ‘Klondike’ of the ‘Wild East’ where ‘pubs buzz with fast talk full of loopholes and taxes on declared and undeclared income, licenses and contracts’ (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 81). This new language is ‘broken’ (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 474) and ‘bewitching’ (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 48) at the same time.

The ultimate metaphor for post-1989 language in *Sister* is a sequence of three words: ‘blather, babel and Babylon’ (Topol 2000 [1994]: 175). ‘Blather’, as an expression for nonsensical or incoherent speech, predetermines the meaning of the whole triad. The opening of Czechoslovak borders confronted the Czech language with languages, which were hitherto inaccessible. For most Czechs, freedom after 1989 overlapped with the Babylonian confusion of language, rendering any non-Czech (and non-Russian) language meaningless blathering. Although ‘babel’ and ‘Babylon’ have the same biblical reference, ‘babel’ additionally refers to Jewish mysticism[19] and to the literature of the Russian-Jewish writer Isaac Babel, who was admired for his colorful depictions of lower-class colloquial speech and criminal slang. The meaning of these intertextual and real-world references is delivered through the rhetorical device of *assonance*: the repetition of vowel sounds.[20] The onomatopoetic quality of the triad manifests itself as an incantation: a rhythmical and melodic conjuring which can be understood without knowing the actual language. The audible aspects are an indivisible part of the wording, yet they cannot be simply expressed in words. The only way to capture their full meaning is through the experience and emotional engagement of the reader. The incantation is then recognized as a part of the entire aesthetic structure of the novel, allowing the reader to *feel* the emergence of this vibrant, buoyant, and intricate post-revolutionary language set within the complex socio-historical background.

Since the prior formal language of communism is dead, the new era demands a new means of communication—something more universal, closer to life, almost primordial. Potok experiments with language, seeking a language that is ‘tender and cruel’, ‘swift and agile’ (Topol 2000 [1994]: 34), and stretches the possibilities of human communication to its limits. Yet, he hopes the confused language will settle and ‘give rise to a new tongue . . . of peace’ (Topol, 2000 [1994]: 234), which will be like the pre-Babylonian, but in the era of freedom. What seemed at first an inescapable discontinuity is now perceived as a *continuity in discontinuity*: The possibility to build a new, better language upon the ruins of the old one.

The Dialogue Between Sister *and its Reader*

In the previous two sections, I demonstrated how *Sister* mediates the experience of the new ontological quality of time and language through aesthetic devices. However, another important way of triggering the emotional engagement of the reader occurs on a higher level of abstraction: the organization of the text itself. Words, sentences, and entire blocks of texts in *Sister* are often connected by triple-dots (*ellipses*), thus creating unresolved situations and blank spaces calling for completion by the reader. *Sister* consists of many lengthy passages in which the excessive use of the ellipsis gradually builds up the impression of a never-ending stream of consciousness,[21] as if Potok's thought process was occurring in real time. The reader, lured by the author's artful writing, is not given any straightforward account of social experience. Rather, with only a handful of clues provided, the reader is left in a dialogue with the text, trying to solve its puzzles and resolve its ambiguities. The textual entities are not fully closed, thus trapping the reader in an endless process of meaning-making. Within the stream of consciousness, the convergence of the text and the reader is more likely to foster the reader's immersion.

At the same time, these moments of heightened immersion alternate with moments of *alienation*,[22] which are maintained by linguistic devices such as inventing new words, confusing colloquial and formal word forms, and mixing up phonetic word forms with written ones. The alienation effect is achieved through 'tricks' performed on the reader: 'It is a world driven by [the author] where he can play and fool around, making crazy fun of us' (Bílek, 1994: 17). By alternating between immersion and alienation, Topol evokes an impression of an extensive tension between, on the one hand, excitement, euphoria, and the flow of the new fast-paced era brimming with opportunities and, on the other hand, nostalgia, anxiety, and uncertainty which inevitably comes with the outbreak of freedom. *Sister*, then, becomes an intriguing landscape of meaning, skillfully depicting the author's experience and feelings processed by his imaginative theorizing, bringing about a new, lyrical understanding of social experience, not only when his readers interpret it but when they *re-feel* it.

Conclusion

This article aimed to establish methodological and epistemological foundations for a new sociology of literature. In terms of methodology, I suggest a way for cultural sociology to unlock the depths of cultural meanings mediated by a literary piece without translating it into sociological discourse. The understanding in *Sister* is not mediated by an exhaustive enumeration of facts or evidence, but by the author's 'awareness of . . . relations in flux' transformed into a text through specific stylistic and formal selections (Laurenson and Swingenwood, 1972: 55). The literary awareness and style correspond to the author's theorizing in a broader sense. The author's ability to transform real-world experience into a meaningful whole—a landscape of meaning—which is built upon this experience and, at the same time, transcends it. That is, by means of aesthetic devices, *Sister* mediates deeper understanding of social experience *and of more general patterns* in which this experience is embedded.

The main epistemological proposition for cultural sociology is what Richard Hoggart (1966: 277–278) already suggested more than 50 years ago: that 'literature provides . . . [a] new and distinctive' understanding of social experience, 'which no other source can give' (also see Harrington, 2002; Noble, 1976; Pincott, 1970). In the model I propose, 'new and distinctive' refers to the emotional, existential, and non-discursive dimensions of social experience, which are mediated by the aesthetic aspects of a literary text. 'Poetic discourse' is not bound by 'the facts, empirical objects, and logical constraints of our established ways of thinking', but rather by 'the need to bring to language modes of being that ordinary vision obscures or even represses' (Ricoeur, 1976: 59–60). For example, the time, language, and emotions in *Sister* are 'indexical' (Abbott, 2007: 94), as they do not refer to an ordered structure, but to a subjective experience mediated anew each time they are instantiated by reading. Such experience always partially evades verbal signification due to its fleeting and polyvalent nature. It is a feature of poetic discourse to refer beyond the words. Literature, then, can address the general question of interpretive sociology 'What was it like to . . .?' (Reed, 2011: 89–90) through reconstruction of human subjectivities with all their ambiguity and peculiarity.

At the same time, literary fiction has a capacity to unravel deeper meanings from the textures of human subjectivity. Deeper meanings are not addressed simply through a direct reference, but they emerge, for example, from impressions of a character living through a single day, as famously demonstrated by James Joyce (1992 [1922]) in *Ulysses*. We can find an analogy to Lukács' and Goldmann's conception of 'totality' (Boelhower, 1980) as the ability of a text to grasp infinite social wholeness by the means of finite textual tools. Through the skillful use of aesthetic devices in descriptions of subjective social experience, a literary author can indirectly create a maximal interpretation of more general social milieu. When we read about a character whose life is turned upside down in 1989 Czechoslovakia, we also learn something about all the people who experienced the Velvet Revolution. Hence the feeling of truthfulness—a 'reality-effect' (Greenblatt, 1997: 20), 'verisimilitude' (Becker, 2007: 248), or 'vraisemblance' (Atkinson, 1990: 62)—an experience of getting to know the 'real' world outside the text by means of reading the text.

It is no accident that sociologists often choose for their analysis 'high-brow' texts like those written by Robert Musil (Harrington, 2002), Jane Austen (Becker, 2007; Thompson, 2015), Jorge L. Borges (Kurakin, 2010), August Strindberg (Swedberg, 2016), or Herman Melville (Alworth, 2014). Recognition by literary critics and cultural intermediaries is an indication that a novel has a potential to represent a social phenomenon—that it successfully mediates deeper understanding of social experience. However, even 'low-brow' and genre literature have great potential to facilitate access to deeper cultural meanings. Putting into relation aesthetic aspects of a 'low-brow' novel with relevant public discourses can show us emotionally resonant cultural meanings that circulated in a society in a given time and place. Iconic dystopias like *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley or George Orwell's *1984* earned a great deal of attention as parables epitomizing the negative aspects of the late modernity and technological progress. The popularity of detective stories and spy novels, as Boltanski (2014) shows, stemmed from the unpronounced tension between state-driven order and deviations which undermine its universality.

Eva Illouz (2014: 7) suggests that best-sellers like *Fifty Shades of Grey* 'are defined by their capacity to capture values' that are 'dominant and widely institutionalized'. Investigating how *Fifty Shades of Grey* maintains emotional engagement with its readers could bring us closer to an understanding of cultural meanings related to sexuality in contemporary western societies. We can witness the emotional engagement in fan communities, blogs, film adaptations, all kinds of unofficial social media follow-ups including popular memes or parodies, and so on. Yet still, we would have to resist the temptation to reduce the analysis of a novel to an analysis of the novel's social surroundings. Discourses of interpretive communities should navigate the structural-aesthetic analysis, but they should not replace it. Therefore, we would follow how the specific sound and rhythm of the wording builds up an erotic tension, which cannot be easily described by words. This non-discursive tension, perhaps, is a maximal interpretation of 'love, intimacy, and sex' in western culture (Illouz, 2014: 5), which has been sought by and resonated among the millions of readers all over the world.

It is the task for a new sociology of literature to probe the variety of possibilities in which the aesthetic aspects of literary texts relate to the social. Cultural sociologists can find in literature a powerful ally for understanding the social world, but only if they respect that in this complex organism 'the meaning emerges of its own volition' (Hoggart, 1966: 281) and cannot simply be dissected without being damaged. What is essential is that the literature must speak for itself. If cultural sociologists understand how the literature mediates the understanding of social experience through its own means—the means of metaphors, sounds, and rhythms—then they can embrace this understanding for their own cultural sociological research.

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Notes

1. For an overview of the history and 'the state of the art' in sociological studies of literature see Váňa (2020).
2. In the Czech original, the novel's title is *Sestra* (Sister) and it is divided into three subsections titled 'Město' (City), 'Sestra' (Sister), and 'Stříbro' (Silver).
3. In the case of science, Nisbet (1962: 72–73) speaks about a possibility 'to verify . . . by repeating the process', or a possibility to support new ideas through the experience of someone other than their author.
4. Seven out of eight articles are based on the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu. The one exception (Sato et al., 2015) employs organizational analysis, which, just like field theory, investigates the social institutions surrounding literature, not the literature itself.
5. Reed (2011: 30) names these three examples to show that they all employ social theory together with evidence 'to produce new social knowledge'. In this sense, Reed does not differentiate between theorizing in ethnographic and non-ethnographic ways of sociological inquiry.
6. Reed (2011: 25) claims that maximal interpretation serves 'to produce the social knowledge that we tend to value highly'. Nevertheless, because novels do not usually mediate knowledge in the sense of (social) sciences, I prefer the word 'understanding'.
7. Serrão puts explicitation in contrast to explication. The former is based in *Verstehen* tradition of Weberian sociology, whereas the latter is close to explanation in a more positivistic

tradition of Durkheim. I use explicitation to stress understanding literary fiction without translating it into sociological discourse.

8. Founded in 1926, the Prague Linguistic Circle was an association of linguists who engaged critically with Saussurean structuralism and Russian formalism (cf. Toman, 1995).
9. For an illuminating debate on the agency of literary works see the recent developments influenced by science and technology studies (Alworth, 2016; Felski, 2015; Latour, 2016).
10. The total number of inspected sources is 52. Due to space limitations, it is not feasible to cite them all. However, most of the textual sources can be found in Říha (2013) and Machala (2008).
11. All the Czech sources were translated by me.
12. In 2017, Topol received an award from the Czech Ministry of Defense for his ‘anti-communist resistance’.
13. After the publication of *Sister*, Topol was honored with the Egon Hostovský Prize (1995), the Book of the Year Prize (2005), the Jaroslav Seifert Prize (2010), and the State Award for Literature (2017).
14. Topol (2012) says that in the 20 years the book has been in print, only about 20,000 copies have been sold. For comparison, popular Czech novels in the 1990s typically sold tens of thousands of copies per year. The most extreme case is a satirical novel *Black Barons* by Miloslav Švandrlík; more than 750,000 copies were sold during a single year (Šimeček and Trávníček, 2014: 384–392).
15. The name refers to the name of the author, which has a similar phonetic structure: Topol–Potok. In Czech, Topol means poplar and Potok means creek, which is a reference to Native American names based on natural motifs.
16. Also a Native American connotation, in this case to animality.
17. A series of non-violent popular demonstrations against the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia that took place from 17 November to 29 December 1989.
18. The era between 1968 and 1989 in Czechoslovakia. The term refers to the discrepancy between the theoretical socialism of Marxist theorists and the existing socialism of the Soviet bloc.
19. ‘Babel’ is the Hebrew name for Babylon.
20. In Czech, the sequence goes ‘blábol, bábel, Babylon’, which makes the phonetic resemblance between the words even stronger.
21. This technique was famously used by James Joyce (1992 [1922]), especially in the closing part of *Ulysses* in the inner monologue of Molly Bloom.
22. Originally translated as defamiliarization, a term coined in 1917 by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who claimed that literary language is fundamentally different from non-literary language.

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