

A Cosmopolitan View of the Relevance of Literary Theory in the Twentieth Century: A Review of Galin Tihanov's *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*

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Abstract: By focusing on the formation of literary theory in the interwar decades in Russia, Galin Tihanov's new and insightful book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* charts a comprehensive map of the trajectory of modern literary theory. The book explores the continuity of theories in Russia and Eastern and Central Europe to their wider impact on the subsequent theories in the West during the 20th and 21st centuries. Tihanov's investigation of the rise and fall of theory ranges from Romanticism to Formalism to Bakhtin to structuralism and to post-structuralism, offering a continuous and cosmopolitan view of not only the origin and demise of theories but also their successive regimes of relevance. In the book, Tihanov particularly highlights the contribution of the exiles of both interwar and postwar decades to the making of modern literary theories.

Key words: literary theory; birth and death; Russia; regime of relevance; Tihanov

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标题: 世界主义视域下二十世纪西方文学理论的内外关联：评加林·季哈诺夫的《文学理论的产生与消亡：俄罗斯及其域外的关联机制》

内容摘要: 加林·季哈诺夫的新著《文学理论的产生与消亡：俄罗斯及其域外的关联机制》聚焦两次世界大战期间俄罗斯文学理论的形成过程，全方位描绘了现代文学理论发展的轨迹。全书探讨了俄罗斯和中东欧文学理论的内在勾连及其对之后 20 世纪和 21 世纪西方文学理论的广泛影响。季哈诺夫一路探寻了理论的兴衰历程：从浪漫主义与形式主义的关联到巴赫金的对话理论到结构主义再到后结构主义，全书脉络清晰，视野开阔，就各种理论之间

的关联机制给予了细察。季哈诺夫还特别阐述了二次世界大战前后流亡艺术家和文学批评家对现代文学理论的贡献。

关键词：文学理论；产生与消亡；俄罗斯；关联机制；季哈诺夫

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Galin Tihanov is the George Steiner Professor of Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London and winner of the Efim Etkind Prize for Best Book on Russian Culture (2012). Previously Professor of Comparative Literature and Intellectual History and founding co-director of the Research Institute for Cosmopolitan Cultures at the University of Manchester, Galin Tihanov enjoys a reputation for his research on literature, culture and cosmopolitanism. Galin Tihanov's diverse academic interests are conducive to his insight into the interrelation between literature and other domains. His book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (2019) demonstrates "the foundational paradoxes of literary theory and the regime of relevance in which it is embedded" (1). Tihanov's exploration of the birth and death of literary theory revolves around Russian literary theory during the interwar decades of the twentieth century. He places his discussion of theories in the context of the cultural and intellectual history of France, Germany as well as Russia and East-European countries, as he believes the rise and decline of literary theories could be closely relevant to their contemporary cultural, intellectual and artistic history.

The book consists of a prologue (What This Book Is and Is Not About), an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. In the Introduction, Tihanov gives an account of the birth of literary theory and the meaning of "regime of relevance." In Tihanov's eyes, literary theory came into being in Eastern and Central Europe in the decades between the World Wars as a result of "a set of intersecting cultural determinations and institutional factors" (9), which is based on the process of disintegrating and modifying philosophical approaches that made their appearance at the time of the First World War. This sort of transformation is an indispensable part of the emergence of literary theory, such as the reworking of Marxism and the modifications of Husserlian philosophy. Besides, Tihanov asserts that there is another scenario accountable for the birth of literary theory, which emerges "as a response to radical changes in literature and its social relevance" (18). Tihanov is very discerning in his understanding of the continuity of literary and critical tradition. For example, he rightly points out that the Russian Formalists are in

essence concerned with “preoccupations emblematic of the Romantic literary and critical tradition” (19) and thus have a close affinity with Romanticism in that both of them “assert the idea of the autonomy of literature” (20), although the Russian Formalists would be more radical in insisting on the autonomy and uniqueness of literature and put greater emphasis on the value of language. Obviously, by placing the emergence of Russian Formalism in the context of post-Romanticism, Tihanov aims to envisage the inseparability of the subsequent schools of literary theory from the standpoint of a dialectic historicism as well as a cosmopolitan view towards the mobility and connectivity of literary theories.

In this book Tihanov coins the term “regime of relevance” (with its Foucauldian provenance) to elaborate on the relevance of literature to society. According to Tihanov, “regime of relevance” refers to “the prevalent mode of appropriating (both interpreting and using) literature in society at a particular time” (20). Tihanov perceives that there are mainly three regimes of relevance: 1) literature as an instrument to promote the well-being of society; 2) literature as an original and unique discourse; 3) literature as an entertainment and therapy. The three regimes of relevance, however, are not totally isolated from each other, as it is possible for them to be either interwoven or incompatible: “Any such regime or mode is in competition with others, and at any one point a constellation of different regimes is available, shaped by a plethora of factors (social and institutional, factors to do with the accumulation and distribution of disciplinary knowledge, etc.)” (20). Moreover, Tihanov points out that the practice of modern literary theory is entangled with “a specific (and new) regime of relevance that is shaping the way literature matters” (22). As a matter of fact, the recurrent term “regime of relevance” is accorded critical importance throughout the book because by making repeated references to the term, Tihanov is empowered to probe into the intrinsic motivations behind schools of theory. After all, intellectual and artistic developments are not purely driven by academic purposes. Instead, they are inextricably engendered by or linked with different political, social, cultural and historical factors.

By delving into the intricate relationship between Formalism and Marxism, and their respective regimes of relevance to the aesthetic value of literature, Chapter 1 dwells heavily upon the subject of Formalism’s impact and reverberations. The chapter begins with a review of the birth and demise of literary theory:

In retrospect, one could locate literary theory within a period of nearly eighty years, from its inception in the second half of the 1910s as a modern

intellectual project grounded in assumptions of autonomy and specificity, until the early 1990s. The beginnings of the discipline were marked by the activities of the Russian Formalists, its end by Iser's turn in the late 1980s and the early 1990s from reception theory and phenomenology of reading to what he called "literary anthropology" and by Yuri Lotman's death in 1993 at the end of a career in which he gradually came to embrace semiotics as a global theory of culture rather than a specifically conceived literary theory. (28)

Quite clearly, this very short passage delineates a nearly eighty — years' history of conceived literary theory by identifying Russian Formalism as the beginning and marking Wolfgang Iser and Yuri Lotman as the end of theory. Literary theory, as Tihanov asserts, came into being as a result of the critics' awareness of the artistic autonomy and aesthetic peculiarity of literature as early as the second half of the 1910s, when the Russian Formalists were active and became popular. Tihanov suggests that during this period it is the Russian Formalists' dedication to the discussion of literature in terms of "literariness" that has substantially contributed to the elucidation of the distinction of literature. Thereafter, the 20th century would experience both the glory of theory during the postwar decades and the decline of literary theory at the end of 1990s, as is respectively found in reception theory, phenomenological theory, deconstruction theory, literary anthropology and so on. To illustrate the death of literary theory, Tihanov cites Yuri Lotman, who is regarded as the founder of former Soviet structural semiotics in culturology as well as a prominent Russian formalist critic, and whose theory of semiotics brings a turn of the global theory to a new recognition of the relationship between culture and semiotics. After comparing the social and cultural relevance of theory in the Age of Information with that of 1910s and 1920s, Tihanov notes that in the Information Age, as people are inundated with "an incessant flow of information and image-based communication" (29), literature has been deprived of its specificity and is increasingly regarded as "another tool of personal therapy or entertainment" (30). He further associates Formalism's relationship with late modernity, positivism, psychoanalysis and Marxism. Quite interestingly, Tihanov holds that the cultural genesis of Formalism can be traced back to its relationship with Marxism. He asserts that although Russian Formalism is grounded in a different relevance of literature, it "shares a larger epistemic framework with Marxism" (32) in that both attach great importance to the ideals and values of scientism:

Formalism and Marxism, then, should be seen not simply as foes, as has been the case so far, but rather as competitors in the field of rational enquiry into the objective laws that govern human agency. After the October Revolution, both Marxism and Formalism hoped and strove to embody the ideals and values of scientism (*nauchnost*) in a society that had succumbed to the breathtaking lures (and risks) of rapid modernization. (33)

Besides, both Formalism and Marxism are embroiled in polemics with a view to vying for power and public attention. Tihanov properly points out that in fact Russian Formalism and even the Prague Linguistic Circle are inherently desirous of “constructing a new state with a new political identity” (35). Consequently, Russian Formalism undergoes its inner revolution as it shifts from one regime of relevance—advocacy of autonomy and specificity of literature to the other regime of relevance—endorsement of the utilitarian side of literature. To further elaborate his opinions, Tihanov introduces Shklovsky’s concept of estrangement, its earlier failure to “be properly adopted by the fellow Formalists” (39) and its afterlives in Brecht and Marcuse. Tihanov might have noticed some critics’ possible misunderstanding of Shklovsky’s theory of estrangement and its relationship with Formalism, so he pinpoints the failure of the integration of the early theory of estrangement into the Russian Formalists, stressing that:

the early Shklovsky’s theory of estrangement—despite its emphasis on the beneficial nature of the reader’s encounter with the new, the unfamiliar, and the strange, despite its forceful rhetoric and flamboyant claims to completely overhauling the then prevalent notions of the significance of art, finally despite the popularity in the 1920s of Shklovsky’s own narrative prose that rendered this theory into practice (...) appears to have failed to become an integral part of what the Russian Formalists, and later the Soviet Structuralists, embraced and promoted as their principal tenets. (40)

There exists the paradox of estrangement: through all sorts of artistic devices, the innovative product attained at the end of the process aims to revitalize and underscore “the old and constant substance of things” (53). Likewise, Russian Formalism works “on the cusp of two different notions of the relevance of literature: one that valorizes it for its autonomy and specificity as a discourse, and another that seeks to bestow significance on literature with reference to its socially and individually ameliorative capacity” (53). Therefore, Russian Formalism is of

great significance as it pioneers modern literary theory and presents a transition from the belief in literature's utility to the recognition of literature's own value—its autonomy and uniqueness as a discourse different from other discourses.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 make a comparative study on the intellectual trajectory of two Russian literary theorists Gustav Shpet (1879-1937) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1885-1975), both of whom seem reluctant to regard literature as autonomous and self-sufficient. While Shpet champions a return to aesthetics, Bakhtin turns to the “realm of cultural theory and the philosophy of cultural forms” (95). In Chapter 2, Tihanov uncovers the status of literature and its regimes of relevance in the Soviet 1920s by exploring Gustav Shpet's life and work, especially his engagement with literature, theater and translation. According to Tihanov, Gustav Shpet is a staunch supporter of applying philosophical and aesthetic approaches to literature. Besides, Shpet holds a firm conviction in language's capability to offer “a universal semiotic code that enables the processes of translation and expression between different sign systems” (86). In order to form a contrast to Gustav Shpet's preoccupation with aesthetics and semiotics, Tihanov focuses on Bakhtin's transition from ethics and aesthetics to philosophy of culture by underlining Bakhtin's study of genre theory, a theory appropriately employed as “a vehicle for his philosophy of culture” (96). He sharply observes that Bakhtin does not appreciate the generic specifics of the novel and that he “seeks to accommodate the novelistic within the epic” (99) at the early stage, but in the 1930s, as the philosophy and history of cultural forms drew much of Bakhtin's attention and interest, the study of the novel as an artistic genre became increasingly important to him. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Tihanov also dwells on Bakhtin's move from polyphony to heteroglossia, which has much to do with his change in the notion of language and the novel. Tihanov's elaboration on polyphony and heteroglossia enables the reader to clarify their differences: the former uses language in a holistic way that conveys aesthetic and moral meanings while the latter uses language as “a range of partial sociolect” (102) that adopts a neutral position in terms of language and the novel. To augment his arguments, Tihanov turns to a scrutiny on Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World* in which Bakhtin conceptualizes literature and culture as a result of grounding in a new regime of relevance that “draws on the dispersion of the written word within a broader cultural mass” (104). Thereafter, Tihanov expounds on Bakhtin's high opinion of language as the “descriptor of entire domains of culture” and “a marker of entities larger than literature” (105). Although it would be difficult to simply categorize Gustav Shpet and Mikhail Bakhtin into a particular school of literary

criticism or theory, their theoretical writings and proposals have merged into the repertoire of major literary theories and have ever since been retained in critical vitality. After all, postmodernism and post-Structuralism have made an attempt to appropriate Bakhtin's work to address their "concerns with meaning, subjectivity, and the canon" (126). In a word, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 keep us well informed of the process of the rise and development of literary theory in its early period, when various viewpoints and concepts were assimilated to enrich the theory itself.

In Chapter 4, Tihanov examines the boundaries of modernity from the perspective of semantic paleontology and its subterranean impact. According to Tihanov, built upon Nikolai Marr's "'new doctrine of language' and his methodology of cultural analysis" (134), semantic paleontology is one of methodological formations in the 1930s strongly influenced by Bakhtin's research methodology and theoretical writings. The term "new doctrine of language" refers to a priority given to the origins of language and its evolution conditioned by social and economic situations. Tihanov makes it clear that semantic paleontologists not only emphasize the status of language but also the connection of the conduct of language study with the study of material culture. As a consequence, archaeology, ethnography and linguistics become inseparable in their devotion to "the semantic universe of humanity" (136). On the other hand, semantic paleontology's attention to the origins of language and the influence of socioeconomic character and modes of production on literature differentiates itself from Russian Formalism and Vulgar Sociologism, the former being seen as a static approach to literature while the latter being deemed as not only lacking in complexity in terms of the continuity of the three key stages of culture's growth reflected in myth, folklore and literature but also failing to ground its hypotheses in the origins and the evolution of language (139-141). The elucidation of the foundations and the methodological distinctions of semantic paleontology is followed by its status in drawing the boundaries of modernity. Tihanov argues that the theory of Stadialism espoused by semantic paleontology leads to its assertion that rationality is an integral feature of modernity, which sets an inflexible distinction between modernity and premodernity, the former characterized by rationality and conceptual thinking while the latter characterized by irrationality and image-based thinking (144). This practice arouses oppositions among other schools of thought. For example, the Soviet art theorist Ieremeia Ioffe proclaims that "irrationality and pre-logical thinking do not disappear with the arrival of advanced capitalism; they survive the industrial revolution, because irrationality is the very nature of any thinking grounded in exploitation" (145). He believes that irrationalism is in fact also

internalized in modernity as it is engraved in the mind of human being. Although semantic paleontology is not well received by other theorists, it has exerted considerable influence on literary studies. First, it reasserts the connection between literary studies and linguistics. Second, its interest in the realm of myth and folklore helps widen the scope of Soviet literary studies.

Chapter 5 delineates the impact of the exiles on literature and the interactions between literary theory and literary criticism by exhibiting several momentous debates. Tihanov thinks that the debates over the role of criticism are essentially a manifestation of “wider debates about the fate of émigré writing” (161); the polemics on “young literature” implies the émigré writers’ changing notion of literary value and the disputes over the canon is “a salient feature of this rethinking of literary reputations that accompanied the rise of the new generation on the Paris literary scene” (166-167). For Galin Tihanov, the exiles play an important role in the formation of literary theory as they enable people to shake off the constraint of the traditional mindset of literature:

Exile, rather than acting as an impeding factor, was right at the heart of developments in literary theory during the interwar period; it was part and parcel of renewed cultural cosmopolitanism that transcended local encapsulation and monoglossia. (156)

Tihanov suggests that the exiles might have easier access to the experience of the ethnic and cultural diversity, which greatly contributes to the understanding of “what constitutes literature beyond the singularity of the language in which it happens to be written” (3). This argument paves the way for the subsequent discussion on “world literature”, which is the de facto academic issue Tihanov has been engaged with these several years.

The Epilogue begins with a brief summary of some important viewpoints mentioned above, and then shifts its focus to one of the afterlives of Russian literary theory in “world literature” today. The debate on world literature triggers our thinking on debate over whether literature should be discussed within the singularity of the language or beyond the horizon of language (182). This dispute is critical to earlier debates on language and literariness as the Russian Formalists would differ when it comes to the dispute. These debates on whether literariness can only be found in the original text or even in the translated version, and debates on whether literariness is embedded in one language remain to be further explored. Therefore, it is appropriate that “world literature” is accorded paramount attention

in the last section of the book as Tihanov puts it, “the current discourse of ‘world literature’ is an iteration of the principal question of modern literary theory at the time of its birth: should one think literature within or beyond the horizon of language?” (182).

Tihanov’s book offers a cosmopolitan view of the birth and death literary theory in interwar Russia together with a myriad of relevant polemics. In the meantime, it covers a wide theoretical domain and relevance ranging from literary theory, literary criticism, culture, politics, sociology, linguistics, and even archaeology. Therefore it would be no exaggeration to say that *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* is a veritable encyclopedia of Russian literary theory during the interwar decades of the twentieth century, and undoubtedly an innovative exploration on theories and their regimes of relevance in Russia and beyond, as the title of the book indicates.

Work Cited

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