

Title: “Every ‘why’ can be reduced to ‘for what purpose’”: Vol'fila Debates with the Formalists
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A major turning point in Russian Formalist theory occurred when the critics of Opoyaz stopped thinking of an artwork as a set of devices and began to consider it a system of devices. The totality of the artwork became central to their analysis and “function” became the operative term. Jurij Striedter claims this late version of Formalism serves as a point of contact with Czech Structuralism, and argues that “the concentration on the individual device” that characterized early Formalism “may well have stood in the way of an early definition and theoretical elaboration of the work of art as a sign.” A more ‘semiotic’ orientation can in fact be recognized among the peripheral members of the Formalist circle earlier than among its core group, he argues. Not mentioned in Striedter’s account—or any account of this transformation in Formalist theory—is the role played by the Petrograd Free Philosophical Association (Vol'fila). Founded in 1919 by Ivanov-Razumnik and Andrey Bely, among others, Vol'fila participated in the post-revolutionary cultural debates until its demise in 1924.

This paper will argue that discussions between Vol'fila and the Formalists contributed to the reorientation of Formalist theory toward “function,” and helped motivate a serious consideration of the relationship between what Tynyanov would later call “literary” and “extra-literary” orders. I will use transcripts of their debates (in 1920, 1921) to show that members of Vol'fila were among the first to press the Formalists to examine the artistic device not in isolation but as part of the aesthetic whole. They also challenged the Formalists to account for aesthetic value by analyzing the artwork in relation to its producers and consumers. The most urgent points of contention had to do with the very issues on which the Formalists’ views later evolved.