

Presenter: Bradley Goerne, Concordia University
Title: Roman Jakobson's Intellectual Promiscuity

Abstract:

This paper revisits Russian Formalism's claim to disciplinary autonomy. Scholarly consensus suggests that Formalist theory developed as a systematic response to the radical *poetic* experiments of the historical Russian avant-garde. To date, historiographers of Russian Formalism emphasize structural linguistics and folkloristics as the primary conceptual influences on the fledgling movement. At the same time, however, it is widely accepted (although under-investigated) that modern art in particular influenced Roman Jakobson's intellectual formation. Capitalizing on the internal tension between medium specificity and medium promiscuity in the historical avant-garde, this paper provides an alternate visual (painterly) genealogy for the conceptual development of literary theory.

I proceed by scrutinizing Roman Jakobson's extensive contacts with the painterly and poetic avant-gardes, making use of textual documents regarding his intellectual formation (autobiographical dialogues, formal retrospects, letters) to extrapolate networks of exchange and patterns of influence. Jakobson's formative social relations consisted primarily of painters and it was through these connections that he first made contact with the poetic avant-garde. Furthermore, Jakobson engaged with developments in modern art at a conceptual and analytic level at precisely the same time that he was developing his own linguistic ideas. Attention is paid to the unique perceptual environment that Jakobson experienced in Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov's private collections of postimpressionist and cubist French art as well as Jakobson's extensive intellectual collaboration with Malevich. I also offer a close reading of Jakobson's often-neglected early writings (pre-1920) in which he reported on recent developments in the visual arts. In doing so I emphasize the transfer of conceptual terminology across media. By tracing the conceptual trajectory of avant-garde culture across media and its legacy in Russian Formalism, I aim to recover an ostensibly outmoded theoretical project for a time when concerns with digital media render its preoccupations with older forms of media obsolete.