

***Stranger Things:  
Rethinking Defamiliarization in Literature and Visual Culture***

**DAY I: Thursday 12 December  
(Roeterseiland REC A 1.02, Amsterdam)**

**13:30-14:00: Welcome and opening remarks**

Jan Willem Duyvendak, NIAS Director

**14:00-15:30: Keynote I**

*Chair:* Alberto Godioli

**Defamiliarization for a Sustainable Planet**

Caroline Levine, Cornell University

Artists and critics have long committed ourselves to disruption—to the dismantling of dominant structures and systems. But as neoliberal economics undoes hopes of secure work, and as fossil fuels radically disrupt longstanding ecosystems, our greatest threats to a just world come not from static institutions but from the onrush of rapid and destructive change. The steady provision of food, clean air, shelter, and water, is by definition unexciting. But it is one of the core goals of a leftist politics, and one that is increasingly out of reach for most of the world's population. So: what art forms might help us to appreciate social forms like food security? This paper will argue for the importance of realist defamiliarization to global climate justice. Many critics have argued that realism seeks to naturalize the status quo. I will argue, instead, that realist fictions defamiliarize the ordinary work of keeping life going. They are interested in exposing and exploring the mundane forms necessary for sustaining collectives over time—that is, the project of sustainability.

**15:30-16:00 Coffee Break**

**16:00-17:30: Panel I**

*Chair:* Christian Kirchmeier

## **The Good, the Bad and the Familiar: Deconstructing “Cultural Normality” with Zygmunt Bauman and François Jullien**

Florian Lippert, University of Groningen

Research has shown that one of the key causes of the rise of xenophobia and populism in Europe is the fear of “cultural change.” This inevitably poses the question how the respective “cultural *normality*” is thought, perceived, and/or constructed. While concepts of “culture” and “normality” have been extensively discussed in cultural studies, philosophy, sociology and anthropology, the implicit interconnections between an alleged “cultural normality” and “*familiarity*” still await further inspection. My contribution will follow this trace by drawing on two main sources: Zygmunt Bauman’s conception of culture *as* change; and François Jullien’s differentiation between “the Universal, the Uniform, and the Common.”

## **Defamiliarizing the Rural Idyll in Jon McGregor’s *Reservoir 13* and Cynan Jones’ *The Long Dry***

Esther Peeren, University of Amsterdam

The rural idyll is an old and highly familiar – not to say over-familiar – genre that many (from literary scholars to geographers and sociologists) have argued has a damaging stranglehold on the imagination of the rural in literature, other arts, and society at large, not least in the UK. This is the case even though the genre’s conventions – especially its association with isolated, self-sufficient locales and a cyclical time hostile to change – are an increasingly bad fit with the realities of rural life. In Lauren Berlant’s terms, it is high time for a waning of this genre, but such waning is prevented by the affective attachments many people have in idyllic imaginations of the rural. Defamiliarization – in this case not of reality but of a particular lens through which rural reality has been sensed, understood and shaped – is one technique that may produce different imaginations of the rural capable of engaging with pressing rural issues such as sustainability, immigration, tourism, racism and poverty. In this paper, I look at two examples of literary texts that, on the level of both the story they tell and how they tell it (form, style, narration/focalization), set out to defamiliarize the rural idyll. The first is Jon McGregor’s 2017 *Reservoir 13*, which tells the story of a rural community caught up in the disappearance of a young girl and which defamiliarizes the idyll by pushing its cyclical temporality to the extreme. The second is Cynan Jones’ *The Long Dry*, which tells the apparently uneventful story of a day in the life of a Welsh farmer, focalizing part of it through the eyes of a cow, in an updated version of Shklovsky’s famous example of defamiliarization in Tolstoy (who uses a horse). I will explore how, in each case, defamiliarization takes shape and what it does to the rural idyll and its affective associations.

## **If You Only Knew How Strange It Was... Viktor Shklovsky's Theory of *Ostran(n)enie* and Its Relevance for 21st-century Research on Techniques and Technologies**

Annie van den Oever, University of Groningen

In this paper, I return to the research work done with a team of (early) film scholars, Yuri Tsivian, Ian Christie, and Frank Kessler among them, for the edited volume on *Ostrannenie*, published by Amsterdam University Press in 2010. I will argue that Viktor Shklovsky's key text "Art as Technique", which revolves around the famous Russian neologism *ostran(n)enie* ("making strange"), draws from two historically related phenomena: (1) the early film shows which cleverly exploited the expressive potential of the Lumière's 1895 "new cinema machine" to make humans and objects look "strange" if not "grotesque," as Maxim Gorky had aptly argued in 1896 in his seminal essay, "Last Night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows"; and (2) the 1910s avant-garde performances in which Shklovsky's Futurist friends (the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky among them) mimicked and celebrated the "strangeness" of the film shows. These two phenomena form the context for the inception of "Art as Technique." To make this point, I will reread "Art as Technique" within the historical context of the early film shows; and I will address the question how the new cinema machine functioned to make Maxim Gorky label it a "grotesque" creation. The aim of my paper is to create a new understanding of the theory of *ostran(n)enie* and its relevance for 21<sup>st</sup>-century research on techniques and technologies. To this end, it will present specific fragments of a cultural archaeology of the then new cinema machine and an excavation of its novelty and strangeness effects. This method is chosen in an attempt to avoid the misunderstandings created by the retrospective perspective. From this perspective, one tends to overlook the novelty experiences triggered by that turn of the century's "new medium." As is so aptly explained by Shklovsky in "Art as Technique," novelty/strangeness experiences vanish overtime. Thus, excavations such as in this paper are needed to remind us of them and to reinvigorate the context from which "Art as Technique" and the notion of *ostrannenie* emerged.

**DAY II: Friday 12 December**  
**(NIAS Conference Room, Korte Spinhuissteeg 3)**

**10:00-11:30: Keynote II**

*Chair:* Pablo Valdivia

**Strangers in Paradise: Migrant Figurations in Media Culture**

Sandra Ponzanesi, Utrecht University

The notion of defamiliarization is very much linked to processes of othering and alienation but also of fear and fascination. From Homi Bhabha's notion of the uncanny as "un-homely" to Sara Ahmed's concept of "stranger fetishism" (2000), defamiliarization has played a central role in postcolonial theory in articulating constructions of difference and intimacy. This talk analyses how this *Verfremdung* takes place in media culture in general, and in cinema more specifically, with respect to migration, the migrant body and migrant figurations. The aim is to explore how alternative modalities of representation and subjectification are possible through different visual registers in contestations and deconstructions of "symbolic bordering" (Chouliaraki, 2018).

**11:30-11:45: Coffee Break**

**11:45-13:30: Panel II**

*Chair:* Camilla Sutherland

**Making the Strange Familiar: Getting Intimate with Toxicity**

Ruby de Vos, University of Groningen

How does defamiliarization relate to that which it assumes to be familiar? In this paper, I explore this question in the context of toxicity, an often invisible and imperceptible power. For artists, defamiliarization has therefore been a useful aesthetic strategy to make toxicity's presence in the everyday tangible. But if toxicity always has to be discovered or remembered anew, as Lawrence Buell (1998) already pointed out, how can we learn to *live* with toxicity and to understand its on-going, pervasive presence? Tracing the work done by defamiliarization in several examples drawn from contemporary art and scholarship on toxicity, this paper goes on to complicate the ability of this strategy to stay with the toxic trouble at hand (Haraway 2016, Tsing 2015). I conclude with some artistic examples that suggest we need to get intimate with toxicity instead: it is time to make the strange familiar again.

## **Defamiliarization in New Languages of Protest: The Literary Uncanny as a Challenge to Post-Truth Rhetoric**

Maria Boletsi, University of Amsterdam / Leiden University

This talk will trace the political force of forms of defamiliarization emerging through new languages of protest. It focuses on recent events of public protest in Madrid, Seoul, Toronto, Paris, and Moscow, marked by the absence of actual bodies of protesters, which were replaced by holograms, empty shoes or toys. These uncanny figures were mobilized to oppose the criminalization of protest, state control of public space, or the environmental crisis and violation of native people's land. In these events, bodies asserted presence in public space through their absence. Unsettling the boundaries between the virtual and the real, materiality and immateriality, power and impotence, these protests fostered spectral, uncanny spaces, in which the opposition between fiction and reality was contested and redrawn differently. The spectral subjectivity the protests put forward, both underscored and challenged conditions of precarity and crisis today, showing how new forms of agency could spring through defamiliarization. Functioning in a manner analogous to Freud's "literary uncanny," these protests reintroduced the conflict between fiction and reality as a condition for critique to neoliberal governmentality in a post-truth era.

## **Thinking the Unfamiliar: On Weird Ontologies and Eerie Agencies**

Christian Kirchmeier, University of Groningen

In his 2016 essay *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher argued that contemporary aesthetic media established new modes of the strange that could no longer be described in terms of Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*: While the *unheimlich* remains within the opposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the weird and the eerie represent experiences of radical strangeness that are beyond the familiar. The paper will focus on these new types of radical strangeness. It will examine the systematic differences between the unfamiliar and the defamiliarized, and it will reflect on the social functions of the different historic aesthetics of the strange.

## **Thresholds and Metaphors: The Physics of Cultural Narratives**

Pablo Valdivia, University of Groningen

In this presentation, I will discuss the applicability of Threshold Concepts theory for the study of the regimes of metaphors that articulate cultural narratives in combination with a quali-quantitative approach for modelling the study of pre-cognitive cultural and literary knowledge. I will mainly focus on cross-domain and multi-modal metaphors which operate in the learning mechanisms anchored in specific pre-existing neuronal circuits. The final goal of my talk is to critically assemble a theoretical model for the study of fundamental cultural and literary attributes.

**13:30-14:30: Lunch (offered by NIAS)**

**14:30-16:00: Panel III**

*Chair:* Olga Krasa-Ryabets

**Stranger Futures: Critical Dystopia and Dark Humor in Contemporary Video Art**  
Nilgun Bayraktar, California College of the Arts, NIAS

How can art conjure up radically different futures for those who have been left outside the dominant trajectory of Western progress? How can art envision alternative temporalities for contemporary crisis-scapes beyond discriminatory histories of colonization and neoimperial practices in the present? This paper will explore recent video art works that employ dystopian sci-fi aesthetics and dark humor to tackle questions of dispossession, displacement, and futurity. With a specific focus on European borderlands and the Palestinian/Israeli context, it will examine the ways in which artistic practice can defamiliarize the seemingly static temporality of such crisis-scapes (defined by a protracted sense of crisis/conflict) as well as the dominant vision of the future as a frontier of exploration, technological progress or apocalypse. By offering a close analysis of the works of artists such as Larissa Sansour, Halil Altindere, and Kordae Jatafa Henry, this paper will investigate various artistic techniques of estrangement that offer new audiovisual forms and narratives in order to imagine decolonial futures.

**Familiarly Strange / Strangely Familiar: Humor and Contemporary Artists from Turkey**

Lora Sariaslan, University of Amsterdam

Focusing on a selection of contemporary visual artists who are of Turkish origin, this paper will query how their humorous, and at times ironic artistic gaze can provide critical insight into identity negotiations through defamiliarization. By creating art that incorporates humor, these artists reject dominant preconceptions and presuppositions of what their identity is supposed to be determined by, transforming it into forms of artistic and hence political transgression. By looking at how mobility and transnational encounters shape humorous artistic production, this paper will present how, in turn, such transnational and intercultural works can shed new light on the making of contemporary European identities 'beyond borders' enriching the global artistic discourse.

## **Playing with Fire: Dark Humor, Defamiliarization and Empathy**

Alberto Godioli, University of Groningen

Being based on incongruity and on various kinds of diversion from conventional logic, humor maintains a privileged link with defamiliarization. This is especially the case with dark humor, where the role assigned to the “dark” component often results in a second-degree defamiliarization of humorous discourse itself. This paper will propose a systematic definition of dark humor, establishing a distinction between three different types (or reception modes) and discussing how each of these types relates to defamiliarization. Particular attention will be paid to what can be defined as ‘engaged dark humor’, i.e. occurrences of dark humor where the (perceived) main goal is that conveying a deeper social or political message. The discussion of selected examples of engaged dark humor (from Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* to *Charlie Hebdo*) will set the basis for a broader reflection on defamiliarization and political engagement, particularly in relation to empathy. Building on Paul Bloom’s controversial book *Against Empathy* (2016), I will argue that dark humorists often use defamiliarization as a tool to promote an idea of political activation that does not rely on superficial empathic engagement, but rather on a more diffuse form of rational compassion.

### **16:00-16:30: Coffee Break**

### **16:30-18:00: Conversation with Artist alaa minawi and Curator Jo-Lene Ong**

*Chair:* Nilgun Bayraktar

#### **(inside - out) talk by alaa minawi**

when I was asked by arthur kneepkens, a dutch dramaturge and performer, if my performative installation “2048 bodies – borders – belonging” would have the power to make an actual /physical /political change, then what would I want it to be, my answer was that I would like it to demolish the current state system and simultaneously start a new social contract. from then onwards I started perceiving my work as a catalyst of change stripped from its powers. “2048” was conceived from an urgency to not only present statelessness as a witness on the failure of the system, but rather a chance to escape it. it is one of a series of installations which can be described as a representation or a presentation of certain aspects of my ongoing artistic research revolving around the notion of belonging. this research started in 2016 and still in progress.

**Talk by Jo-Lene Ong** (title to be confirmed)

### **18:00-19:00: Closing Reception at NIAS**