

Text: concluding passage from Bjorn Blikstad's Magazine (2022): *Peacock Cabinet. Mary Magdalene from feathers to fur to flesh. Painting a woodparent cabinet red.* PhD work.

In an essay on literariness and poeticity in Roman Jakobson's journey through language and sign —in the heydays of Russian formalism— [Marius Wulfsberg \(2007\)](#) follows the trail of an intellectual query pursued by Jakobson in his lifetime: from the literariness of poetry with *language* as his vantage point, to the poeticity of sign in performance (in the expanded/emergent field of the *sign*). We start with language and the firecrackers of arbitrariness in the linguistic sign, to the mobilising poetics of signs motivated by sound: *I like Ike* from Eisenhower's [presidential campaign](#) (1952).

Roman Jakobson's linguistic/semiotic exhibits are packed in *sound* (cf, the title of his lessons in French [Six leçons sur le son et le sens](#)). From aesthetic absurdity of Daniil Kharms' poem *The Red Haired Man* (below) to the jailhouse scene in Jim Jarmush *Down by law*—featuring Tom Waits, John Lurie and Roberto Benigni—where the 3 inmates, who regroup their mutual antagonisms in a sudden and unexpected circular procession, repeating rhythmically in unison: "[I scream, you scream, will all scream for ice cream!](#)" As with 'I like Ike': *the Circus is in town...So, we follow suit!*

The interest for the place of *sound* in signification—grafted on Saussure's basic mode of the sign (the unit *signifier* | *signified*)—apparently takes him in very different directions, if seen on the timeline of his intellectual career: that is, in linear sequence. But given Jakobson's work with the theory of [shifters](#), we could ask whether the two vantage points on signification in language and semiotics could moved *from* being considered in sequence, to being seen in *parallel* (or, if you will, in a relation of *sequence* | *consequence*). That is, while the referent becomes emptied from language (Kharms, left), the semiotics grows fat/engrossed with motivation (Beuys, *verso*).



There was a red-haired man who had no eyes or ears. Neither did he have any hair, so he was called red-haired theoretically.
He couldn't speak, since he didn't have a mouth. Neither did he have a nose.
He didn't even have any arms or legs. He had no stomach and he had no back and he had no spine and he had no innards whatsoever. He had nothing at all!
Therefore there's no knowing whom we are even talking about.
In fact it's better that we don't say any more about him.

As Wulfsberg intelligently points out, we may see Jakobson's inflections of absurd | motivated, in terms of the political and cultural context: of Daniil Kharms and the Oberiu circle in USSR —flanked by e.g. Russian Constructivism—retreating from reference, and of Eisenhower's presidential campaign in 1952, who mustered the electorate to vote for him ("Ike") by including a comics movie into his electoral campaign at Rosser Revere's instigation. On the other hand, if we see them in parallel, we are invited to consider an investigation of a different type: e.g., Marion Grau's parallel between Christianity and petro-eschatology in her article (2023) "[State of happiness"? Petroreligion and petromelancholia in Norway.](#)

It promises to provide a framework to consider a 'difficult co-existence' between language emptied from reference and the engrossing of semiosis with motivation: in other words, *allegory* as the trope of difficult/laborious truth. In Grau's the spanning of the parallels between the oil venture and the theological adventure, is never deterministic. But nevertheless always congenial: like a tortured yet gregarious *ménage à deux*. There will be no synthesis. But there are multiple mediations. A case in point—perhaps—of [negative dialectics](#) (Adorno & Benjamin). An other

example of such a venture can be found in Bjørn Blikstad's [doctoral PhD work](#) in artistic research: featuring the tortured co-existence of art and design in the labours of *craft* (carving).

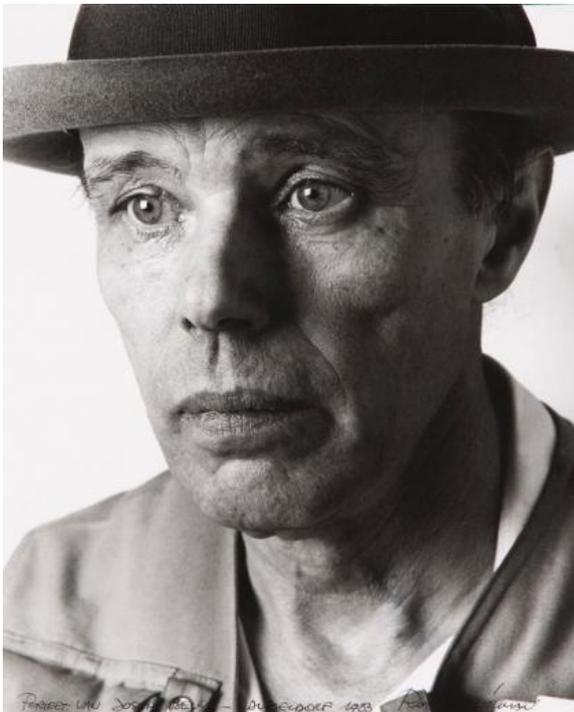
Grau's main focus is a Norwegian TV-series—the [State of Happiness](#) (NRK)—featuring the Norwegian oil adventure, starting up with the Ekofisk oil-findings, by Phillips Petroleum in 1969: the largest sub sea oil basin in history. On the one hand, the series features an unprecedented high-cost production of a Norwegian series. On the other hand, the basic set of assumptions are not typically Norwegian: that is, on the backdrop of the postwar rationality driven *ethos* of the Norwegian social democratic polity. Rather, its antecedents are cogently from the USA.

Featuring a connection between oil-exploitation, Christianity and the American way of life. However, the plot and narrative of the series does not unfold by a simple transposition of this antecedent. It is not a series on the Americanisation of Norwegian culture in Stavanger city (European Cultural Capital in 2008): substantial connections to local *pietism* are historically real, and provides the occasion to discuss the adventures of the soul—state of Norwegian happiness—on that backdrop: that is, the vantage points of oil exploitation and Christianity conjointly.

Which is the basis for its relevance to the present discussion. That is, the withdrawal of the reference to fossil fuels in the Norwegian state of happiness: the Norwegian broad-ranging errands with humanism and climate-change, and its self-image as social life-form living in close exchange with a pristine nature. On the other hand, the testimonial value of the oil-worker—as the [whaler](#) of yore—as the epitome of toughness, and the sacrifice for the greater good embodied by petro-masculinity ([Daggett 2018](#)). The errands of toughness in the twilight zone of good and evil.

There is a *lopsided* synchronicity throughout the series between Christian references and calendar, and the events and findings of the oil-industry. So, in one aspect it provides an occasion to delve into contemporary petro-nostalgia, but also for a critical castigation of the current state of the Norwegian happiness (with the underlying query on the state of the soul, which the investigative framework affords). Evidently, there is no allegory without labour: and the prospects of 5 seasons of the series, makes that clear. The parallels discovered by Grau, also appear to be *intended*.

Returning to the first discussion: Jacobson's query of *floating signifiers* (Lévi-Strauss) clearly applies to the oil-venture, along with the contesting views of it. The cultural historic *greenwashing* taking place with endless procession of “pilot- projects” for a future with alternative energy sources in Norway. According to Bruno Latour, a priority response to floating signifiers (or, [zero signifiers](#)) is to *land* them: articulate support, feature criticism of the support, determining adequate courses of action. The path to the [terrestrial](#) is straightforward work.



If we posit Daniil Kharms as *same*, and Joseph Beuys as *similar* what will we acquire of emergent insights as we inquiry into what separates them (what is *different*) as pertaining to the *other*. That is, if we for the sake of the experiment take Kharms and Beuys in parallel—rather than opposites on the spectrum of *poetry* and *performance*—which can be taken to conjointly point to the earth as a place of trauma (and our errands with it). A frontier at which philosophy has been grazing on the banks of theology. But beyond that, the expanded field.

Shifters can thereby be seen as “tendrils” forming by a protocol of work-shifts (within or between people): subtly disengaging from floating signifiers, in the between-space opening as we establish a *parallel* between **a**) *emptying* of the linguistic reference and **b**) *engrossing* motivation in the expanded field of the sign. Between them: the generative process of the shifter, in forming what we could call the tendrils of orientation (i.e., *deixis*). If allegory is taking **a**) and **b**) as *one*, then what is the nature of our errand with the *other* (to which the allegory laboriously tethers us to)? This question brings up two broader issues: **1**) the question of *signatures* as the signs of signs [[Agamben/Melandri 2008](#)]; **2**) the question of [meta-lepsis](#) as the chasing up of floating signifiers, by the course of *events* [[Genette, 2004](#)] as aspects of the problem of orienting traumatic experiences in the site-local “tooth” of *shifters* in human performance.