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The article investigates some textual coincidences between Denis Diderot's major works on art and theater and the Formalist manifesto "Art as Device" by Victor Shklovsky. Acknowledging the accidental nature of these coincidences, I try to determine the common philosophical origins of the metaphors that aesthetics "lived by" in mid-eighteenth-century France and in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. What kind of cultural crisis engenders the cult of difficulty and retardation? How is this aesthetics connected to the idea of freedom? In order to answer these questions, we trace the key notion of Shklovsky's theory, the *automatization of perception*, back to its "personified version" – *l'homme-automate* of Diderot. The modernity of both these authors consists in their special concern with the deliberate distancing of artistic representation from the reality represented. Studying the phenomenon of the *delinearization* of human perception from the semiotic viewpoint, the article discusses visual counterparts of literary estrangement, such as anamorphic structures in painting and the art of pantomime in the theater.

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