

Gluttonous Cyborgs, Industrial-Strength Jugglers and Meyerhold's "Constructivist" Theater

Mike Sell

And then to find, suddenly, after this initial moment of insatiable energy with which every great creative enterprise ought to begin, but which in most cases either ends in catastrophe or degenerates into a futile pointlessness, suddenly and delightfully to find that you are also an inexhaustible master of plastic composition, a dramaturge no less than a director, an astonishing historian who cannot fail to love his homeland and its past because he performs an act of love for its future in his daily work. And this is the only kind of futurism I can accept: futurism with a geneology.

—Boris Pasternak, letter to Meyerhold, March 26, 1928¹

Proletarian revolutions will be *festivals* or nothing, for festivity is the very keynote of the life they announce. *Play* is the ultimate principle of festival, and the only rules it can recognize are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints.

—Situationist International, "On the Poverty of Student Life"²

Faced with the exigencies of the historiographic project, which, as Pasternak recognized, casts glances towards both past and future, it is critically decorous to use the words of historians a bit closer to the event. And while it is certainly *not* decorous to trot out the glacial mass of critique accumulated since the first attempts of Feminists, Marxists, and the Freudians to diagram the syntax of power (an activity always prone to bureaucratic recuperation), in the present case the philosophical difficulties of theater historiography may enable us to understand our object all the better. It is the performative aspects of historiography that so disturb us these days, the awful (if immensely liberating) recognition that power is, finally, ventriloquism,³ and historiography—to use a term whose ramifications have been greatly limited and generally bracketed from

Mike Sell is a Graduate Student and member of the Graduate Employees Organization at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His current project, *Performing Crisis: Countercultural Theater in the American 60s*, investigates the relationship between art and politics among the self-styled "revolutionary performers" of the American counterculture.

the concerns of theater history—*play*. As the old Russian proverb says, "the most difficult thing to predict is not the future, but the past."

The reconstruction of the contexts in which the "avant-garde" (of whatever political stripe) has functioned demands even closer attention to the rigors of performative criticism. The writing of such histories poses specific difficulties to the scholar, as avant-garde performances traffic with architecture, archives, and memory is at best tenuous, at worst disavowed. (Consider the purpled haze of post-WW I Paris, Berlin in 1925, the velvet underground of late 60's Manhattan, or its sunnier sibling in Northern California.) The Situationists wrote that "to be avant-garde is to be in step with reality."⁴ Our difficulties with the one will orbit our difficulties with the other. In the specific case of Soviet director Vsevolod Meyerhold, however, the all-too-human faith in memoirs, photos, and ghost-infested theaters is precisely where the historian begins to comprehend the Master's method. The director's passions and politics is to be found most often among ruins, and history and force between the lines. And it is in this regard that the historiographic (re)construction of performances is an allegorical project—the reconstruction of an absent energy.

The relative dearth of contemporary documents (largely the bundle of personal papers secreted away by Sergei Eisenstein at the time of his mentor's liquidation) has compelled a kind of self-referentiality upon the Meyerhold industry. Perhaps of greater concern is the reliance by Meyerhold's critics upon essentially modernist assumptions of formal unity and liberal politics—ideologies historically associated with bureaucratic industrialism and classed cultural production. Again, we double our object, and recognize that piercing encrusted interpretation and tendentious critical fashion is the pith of Meyerhold's—and the term is a significant one for its indication of limits and possibilities—"theatrical-critical" activity.

In this respect, Konstantin Rudnitsky's description of the 1926 production of *The Inspector General* affords a performative instance, a "shared field of exteriority,"⁵ for the doubling of dramaturgy and criticism in the Meyerhold Theater:

A platform would roll slowly toward the proscenium in the dim light. Like a time machine, it brought to modernity an immobile picture of a past age—its objects, mahogany furniture, porcelain, bronze, silk, brocade—and the people of a bygone time. The strong beams of light from projectors lit up this picture immediately, flashing in the angles of crystal goblets, softly illuminating the delicate damask upholstery of the armchairs and ottomans, the dead waxen faces. There was a

lengthy pause over the picture, then everything suddenly went into motion.⁶

The bordered yet mobile tableau, the exaggerated sensuality and forgotten emptiness of the stage prop, the delicious morbidity of the body, the emphasis on rhythmic disjuncture and temporal rupture—these are the essence of Meyerhold.

The quality of this essence is dual. I would mention first the psychoanalytic notion of the "fetish," that exquisitely threatening, mutative object that embodies desire, the production of satisfaction, and the selective forgetfulness that obscures the practical economies between the two. (I will not speak specifically to that fetishism, though its economies circulate throughout this essay, its reading, and its object.) Second, I would indicate a broader theme: the historical and conventional significance of Meyerhold's work within Russian and European theatrical tradition. As Christine Kiebuszinska reminds us in *Revolutionaries of the Theater*, the categorical distinction between text and performance is crucial to any writing of theater history. Unlike the text, whose signs unfold and modulate as it disseminates among a temporally and spatially dispersed community of readers, performance remains essentially discrete, a relatively specifiable, if never wholly describable, product of culture, genre, and moment. Furthermore, "In the theater, the action is an end in itself and lacks an external practical purpose outside of being understood by its audience as a coherent meaningful event."⁷ Thus, a productive contradiction lies near the heart of any performance: its simultaneous constraint (the "social" in the broadest sense⁸) and autonomy (the momentary, semi-private communication). This paradox complicates, thankfully, any attempt to theoretically stabilize the notion of "political theater." More apposite to my present purposes, these kinds of distinctions put at stake Meyerhold's position within modernization, modernism, and modernity, as well as their late cousins, the "posts."

Contemporary critical methodology cannot wholly clarify that position. The postmodernist installation of the "sublime" within communication theory⁹ bankrupts any search for "coherent meaningfulness" in historical texts, compelled as that search is, ironically, to rely upon an essentially positivist, formalist methodology (i.e. the elision of the social and the close reading that characterizes American-style deconstruction). In addition, the parameters of that search is muddled by the on-going dismantling of humanism that characterizes post-Zola modernity. Without naively invoking what preceded these critical fashions, I would argue that both formalist methodology and anti-humanist ideology do an immense disservice to Meyerhold.

Consider, for example, W.B. Worthen's *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*.¹⁰ Worthen characterizes modern drama as specifically interested in

issues of representation and interpretation; an interest that motivates an on-going negotiation of the stage-viewer relationship, particularly the ways in which a group of spectators is disciplined into a relatively homogenous interpretive community. Despite my general agreement with Worthen's theory, I am uncomfortable with his method, founded as it is upon a stabilized, essentialized text and the formal maneuvers *it* performs to construct interpretation and interpreter. Both meaning and meaning-production are pocketed by the text, resulting in the marginalization of performance and performance history and the homogenization of the audience, two consequences I doubt Worthen intends.

In contrast, Kiebuszinska posits, as we have seen, a fundamental disjuncture between text and performance: "Since a theatrical presentation differs from the dramatic work in its fundamental concretization, we cannot define that which occurs between a dramatic work and a theatrical performance as simply a translation but rather as a distinctly separate methodological activity in which verbal signs are communicated by means of signs from nonverbal systems."¹¹ Thus, "theatrical perception involves an activity that does not necessarily take into account a familiarity with the dramatic work but rather projects a sensitivity to the density of signs and relationships among them."¹² The stress is placed upon the semiotics of performance, and the range of liberatory practices enabled by the (eroticized) gap between text and enactment; that is to say, enabled by the "making strange"¹³ of the wrong-headed pleasures of the text. As a result, Kiebuszinska disables a truly dialectical theory of performance.

Between Worthen's "textualist" and Kiebuszinska's structuralist approach to theatrical politics, Meyerhold's work, dependent as it is upon the cultivation of momentary pleasures, ends looking rather like an expensive and repetitive exercise in literary criticism rather than a genuinely social gesture. For both Worthen and Kiebuszinska, aesthetic pleasure (a term I leave overly broad for now) is viewed as contributing in essential ways to disempowerment. I feel that such a position should be occupied with caution. In my mind, Worthen and Kiebuszinska's critical politics (if not the desire that motivates that politics) are a creature of liberalism and critical asceticism—and at least partly inadequate to consideration of Meyerhold specifically.

A comparable network of assumptions underlies theater historical approaches to Meyerhold. Take, for example, the body of commentary surrounding the 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Due largely to the fact that the visual aspects of the production were so genuinely astonishing, such commentary has settled, by and large, on two elements: stage design and acting. As regards the former, we might consider Nick Worrall's insightful 1973 essay, which discusses at length the links between the production and the techniques of Russian Constructivism. Worrall deems Lyubov Popova's stage apparatus "the first

example of a pure Constructivist setting in the history of the theatre."¹⁴ By this, Worrall means that the stage environment is purely functional, its meaning, and the semiology of the performance as a whole, generated by the actor's motion through space. Significantly, Worrall qualifies this purity by noting the resemblance between the set and the mill in which the narrative takes place, an exception he justifies as the "deformations" of the play's "local world" and its "historical context"; which is to say that either it is *not* a Constructivist set or that Popova and Meyerhold were decidedly non-canonical—even parochial—Constructivists.¹⁵

This ambivalency is underlined when Worrall, exploiting photographic records of the performance, demonstrates that the gestures of the actors were choreographed in such a way that limbs and bodies doubled the exposed framework of the set. To Worrall, this doubling indicates both the "humanization" of the machine and the transformation of human desire into a universal, functional mechanism. He tells us that "[t]he body, in movement, is shown to be made up of working parts in much the same sense as the working parts of the stage construction. Indeed during the course of the action, these are made into the signs of what had previously passed for the projection of human suffering, now transformed into kinetic signs through stylized gesture and the operation of the stage mechanism."¹⁶ Thus, the stage mechanism transformed "melodramatic excess" and tragic suffering into a "stable, external registration of human feeling by an inanimate world, which was the essence of stability and symmetry; the inanimate equivalent of reason in the human world."¹⁷

Without wholly abandoning that interpretation, I wonder whether we might reverse its terms and discover that the shock and thrill of the play was a product of the human being mechanized and the machine localized? Such a reversal is justified by (1) distinguishing Russian and International Constructivisms, and (2) by focusing on the content and contemporary reception of the play. As regards the former, I would agree with Stephen Bann's characterization of Russian Constructivism as a parcel of unique conditions that "for a few years after the Revolution permitted a conjunction of practical and creative aims that was unprecedented."¹⁸ Such a conjunction, Bann argues, compels any consideration of the Russian Constructivists to take into account the peculiarities of "historical materialism," particularly the attention paid by that very practical philosophy to questions of context and class. Worrall, not having access to Bann's essay, seems to conflate the Russian and International branches of Constructivism, and therefore fails to take account of a number of significant differences between them. First and foremost among these, in my mind, is that "Russian [C]onstructivism was obeying a political and social imperative," while International Constructivism "was obeying an aesthetic imperative," an imperative

bound up with the cosmopolitan, formalist, and functionalist character of high modernism.¹⁹

I would have us remember that Meyerhold's production of *Cuckold* was, to put it rather lightly, a violent, excessive play: its plot centered around the systematically planned—if never executed—gang rape of Stella by a mechanized chorus line of "suits." Other frills included repetitious, vicious beatings, the firing-squad execution of the suits, and various bits of slapstick terror. Therefore, when a contemporary critic wrote that the production marked the advent "of the new man, free of the power of objects, of the power of stagnant, immobile society, who stands in a big, spacious world filled with that life energy which permits an exceptionally exact calculation of each gesture or movement, newly rebuilding the house of the world,"²⁰ I wonder whether he paid any attention to the story. In any case, such comments are revelatory in their peculiar linking of feelings of liberation, theories of scientific management (a.k.a. Taylorism), the celebration of the "Constructivist" set, and the concomitant forgetting of misogyny and sociopathy. Such comments are characteristic of bureaucrats and industrialists.

Anatoly Lunacharsky, "People's Commissar of Enlightenment" and sole dissenting voice, apparently concerned himself with everything his colleague forgot:

I consider this play an affront to man, woman, love, and jealousy, a mockery, please excuse, miserably underscored by the theater. I left after the second act with a heavy feeling, as though someone had spit out my soul. It is not that the plot is indecent: it is possible to be more or less tolerant of pornography, but it is a matter of the coarseness of form and monstrous tastelessness with which it was presented [. . .] One is ashamed for the audience which howls with animal laughter at the slaps, falls, and obscenities. One is ashamed that the audience laughs so . . . at a show staged by a communist director.²¹

Apparently, the enlightened transformation of "melodramatic excess" into "the essence of stability and symmetry" didn't work too well for the Commissar. It seemed to have escaped his colleague, too.

The rhetoric of the production proves dual-edged, precisely around the issues of pleasure, violence, and their troubled synthesis in misogyny. Beyond its "official" (such a loaded word in the Soviet context) intent to "expose the evils of bourgeois jealousy and the historical denigration of women," the play's *radical obscenity* seemed to elicit an intense, even threatening, variety of pleasure in its

audience. Rudnitsky notes the contradiction: "The director wished to ridicule the newly defeated and rejected old world with a raucous, farcical laughter. The play, however, was a scream of despair, a tragic farce."²² In a critical maneuver not unlike Kiebuszinska's structuralist tactic of exposing the beams and rafters of dramatic exegesis, Rudnitsky contends that the radical potential of the play—the whetstone of its dual edge—was its generic hybridization, its fractured transformation of tragedy into farce.

A more convincing, if less formalist, explanation might be offered; namely, that Meyerhold had little faith in—and even less desire for—the Revolution's ability to produce the "New Man," a man whose utopian wishes, as it would turn out, could shoulder little more than the tritest varieties of realism. While on the surface, man and machine seemed perfectly melded—the means of production properly "humanized"—beneath that surface seethed antique violence, the audience's affection for which seems indicated by the "howls" of "animal laughter" that so offended the Commissar of Enlightenment. Of course, Lunacharsky comes off a bit puritanically in his uncritical conflation of image and reality, even more so in his refusal to consider laughter a pleasurable, proliferative, and socially effective reaction to the subversion of socialist revolution.

Therefore, I must insist that the October Revolution did not mark a significant break in thematic concern for Meyerhold despite its obvious impact upon his formal tactics. In fact, I believe that Meyerhold's broader intention in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* to be virtually identical with the formally distinct, pre-Revolution productions of *Masquerade* and *Don Juan*. If this fundamental identity can be established, then both formalist criticism and liberal/modernist ideology will prove inadequate to the specific reconstruction of Meyerhold's theater and politics. Simultaneously, the target of much of Meyerhold's own critical invective will be made clear: the ascetic formalism and technicist ideology of the cultural arbiters of bureaucracy.²³

Masquerade marked the director's last work at the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theater, and was the culmination of some half-dozen years of preparation with designer Alexander Golovin. As usual when approaching older works such as Lermontov's, Meyerhold concentrated more on evoking the essence²⁴ of the play's period—the romantic and tragic passion of nineteenth-century St. Petersburg—than accurately presenting a strong sense of place. Golovin manufactured some four thousand sketches for the production, sketches translated into custom-made multitudes of costumes, furniture, china, glassware, candelabra, swords, walking-canes, fans, playing cards, as well as seven main curtains and ten backdrops. All told, the production cost some three hundred thousand rubles. Significantly, the house lights remained lit throughout the performance, and many

of the scenes took place on a specially constructed thrust stage. Mirrors framed the proscenium. Despite the opulence and logistical chaos of the production, Meyerhold stressed speed of performance; a stress Marjorie Hoover believes—and I concur—dramatized the "precipitate haste" of the anarchist-protagonist's "jealous rage and . . . blind vengeance."²⁵

Appropriately, this tale of doomed *Pierrot*, of cloying, luxurious death, premiered on February 25, 1917, the day the tsarist regime finally and fatally confronted the Petrograd working classes. The first shots of the Revolution were fired literally as the curtain was raised. Alexander Kugel, Meyerhold's contemporary and most prolific and inaccurate critic, was well aware of the irony:

I knew—everyone knew—that two or three [districts] away crowds of people were shouting for bread and that some Protopovian policemen receiving seventy rubles per diem were pouring machine-gun lead on these hungry people. . . . And here, practically next door . . . was this artistically debauched, arrogantly wasteful and senselessly decadent luxury for amusement. What is this? Imperial Rome? . . . I was outraged violently: the whole decay of the regime in the senseless wastefulness of this so-called artistic staging!²⁶

Assembled in seats that were going for as much as twenty-four rubles, were, in Kugel's words, "[a]ll the wealth, all the nobility, all of Petrograd's enormous pluto-, bureau-, and behind-the-lines-ocracy."²⁷ He goes on to describe the reaction of this audience:

[T]he first curtain rose, artistically painted by Mr. Golovin, then came a second painted by him with equal artistry, then, for some reason a third and then a fourth of transparent gauze, while in the wings stood portals of undetermined significance with gilded sculptural decorations by Mr. Evseev, and the costumes flickered past, one more magnificent, more incredible, more intricate, and, I dare say, more stupid than the next, and everyone was exclaiming, "ah, ah, ah, how luxurious, how rich!"²⁸

And from behind those gilded portals and flickering curtains, timed to the most inappropriate moments, "someone fat and self-satisfied despite all his quasi-artistry" would poke his head out and cry, "My master has a lot of money! This is not all I can show you!"²⁹

Rudnitsky takes issue with Kugel—though the latter's view was echoed increasingly by Soviet critics during the next two decades—and refuses to see

Masquerade as an instance of "extreme alienation from reality," refuses to see "that between the storm of Revolution already roaring through the capital and the production on the stage there were no points in common."³⁰ "Meyerhold's spectacle," Rudnitsky elaborates, "sounded a dark requiem for the Empire, a majestic and threatening, tragic and fatal requiem for the world that was perishing during those days."³¹ I think Rudnitsky has it half right—as does Kugel. For as Rudnitsky himself points out, the production stayed in repertoire for some twenty years and generated "dozens of articles and many pages of reminiscences."³² What is lacking in both Rudnitsky and Kugel's analyses is a sympathy for, and critical description of, the genuine pleasure the production engendered, even as it indicated specific targets for disdain and semi-certain avenues for the exploitation of that pleasure. After all, despite their mutual disgust, neither critic walked out after the second act.

In regards to the equally gratuitous production of *Don Juan* a few years prior, the director wrote: "The richer *we expect* the luxury and beauty of costumes and properties to be . . . the more freely Moliere's comic author-actor temperament might *let loose* against the prim pretence of Versailles."³³ Unlike Rudnitsky and Kugel, Meyerhold recognized that beauty—the sacrificial beauty of the framed, semi-autonomous *potlatch*—draws the attention and desire of the viewer; in effect releasing or "deterritorializing" (to use a term favored by Deleuze and Guattari) that desire, while simultaneously enabling the revelation and possible recognition of contradictory, even subversive content. Unlike his critics, Meyerhold considered and exploited the productive economies of the proscenium, the "gap," so to speak, between form and reception. *Masquerade* fascinated him for its "conjunction of gloss with *demonism*."³⁴

Prior to examining the fractured trajectories of that conjunction, it would be apposite to consider a question or two concerning genre. In *Feeling and Form*, Susanne Langer characterizes the comic as a "realization in direct feeling of what sets organic nature apart from inorganic; self-preservation, self-restoration, functional tendency, purpose. Life is teleological," she continues, "the rest of nature is, apparently, mechanical."³⁵ Alvin Kernan represents this distinction as the foundational dynamic of satire, arguing that "[t]his reduction of life to its grossest constituents has taken many forms, but the two most persistent directions it has followed are the diminishing of the vital to the mechanical and the spiritual to the vulgarly mechanical."³⁶ With the advent (so to speak) of bourgeois greed, its apologists, and its sustained (if never truly effective) attack under the aegis of figures such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, the saturated farrago of the vital has been associated by and large with venality and wasteful, damning greed. We will defer discussion of the ways in which that association would be transformed under pressure of a properly socialist revolution. It should be noted,

however, that the distinction between organic and inorganic, telos and mechanism, of the mechanical as a "diminishing" rather than as an augmentation, and the elision of "vulgar" with "material" is tacitly romantic and founded upon technophobia, an ambivalence towards the body, and a naturalist essentialism. Satire, as Langer and Kernan have it, is the response of puritannical ascetes, alienated intellectuals, and romantic moralists.

The satire is—to use a troubling name—a humanist genre. Concerning François Rabelais, Anatole France wrote that the satirist "plays with words as children do with pebbles; he piles them up into heaps."³⁷ Thus, the satirist's cosmos is a shattered totality, a disorder of words and things prone to the various appetites of its occupants. The satirist's first duty, therefore, is critical: to convince the reader that chaos and potentiality, rather than the ossified daily round that gets all the press, is the true state of things. In this respect, social critique melds with a quasi-scientific, "truth-telling" operation. The second duty of the satirist is the revelation of new orders, of new methods and structures to harness and discipline the energies of chaos and usher in a golden age. Often, this second moment is little more than tacit: the assumed morality underwriting critical representation. In any case, the satirist should not be considered a nihilist. Though his methods are often cruel, we should not mistake tactic for intent. To do so would erase social context, and, for the artist, to fall into the double trap of catastrophic fantasy and futile pointlessness that Pasternak rightly abjures. Quite the contrary, the satirist is a builder—a "constructivist"—and, oddly enough, something of a conservative.

Consider, in this regard, Meyerhold's angry denunciation of Alexander Benois following the publication of the latter's negative and tendentious review of a 1911 production of *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Benois attaches a derogatory meaning to the word "cabotinage." He seems to be reproaching somebody with the prevalence of some harmful element in the theater. In Benois' opinion, those concerned in the reform of the contemporary stage are deceiving the public by creating some fictitious renovated theater. The Moscow Art Theater alone, in his opinion, "cannot lie." He regards the introduction of "cabotinage" into the world of the theater as a deception; "it is all deception and 'cabotinage'," and is beyond their (i.e. the directors of the Moscow Art Theater) "reach" because "they cannot lie." But is a theater without cabotinage possible? And what is this cabotinage that is so detested by Benois? The cabotin is a strolling player; the cabotin is a kinsman to the mime, the histrion, and the juggler; the cabotin can work miracles with his technical master; the cabotin keeps alive the

tradition of the true art of acting. It was with his help that the Western theater came to full flower in the theaters of Spain and Italy in the seventeenth century. . . . The cabotin was to be found wherever there was any sort of dramatic representation, and the organizers of mystery-plays relied on them to perform all the most difficult tasks. . . . The solution of the complex problems posed by the mystery-plays fell on the shoulders of the cabotins.³⁸

The builders and maintainers of revelation, these jugglers—a kind of "metaphysical proletariat" central to much of Meyerhold's labor, particularly in his experimental pre-Revolution studio work. The director's interest in the *commedia* is well-documented and need not be discussed at length here, but I would note that in the *commedia*, as in certain strains of Constructivist drama, the characters shoulder the burden of the story. The settings in which *Harlequin*, *Columbine*, and *Pierrot* dance their intrigues is an abstract and non-expressive space, a fluid environment rendered meaningful by the (often obscene) actions of the troupe.

The links between satire, traditionalism, anti-naturalism, and the metaphysics of juggling that characterized Meyerhold's work are explicitly reflected in Boris Alper's account of the 1924 production of *The Forest*, a bitter story of an "evil, arrogant, and resourceful clown":

The stage was transformed into a moving system of things and objects the center of which was the actor himself. He ran around the stage performing short pantomime scenes, lively farces and sketches, and objects moved behind him in an unbroken flow, moving across the stage, endlessly taking each other's places. . . . From behind the stage before the eyes of the spectators, fruit, pumpkins, cans, trellises, a giant stride, and swings appeared and were taken away. All this moved, passed through the actor's hands, became light, turned into original objects for the juggler. Not only large objects played such a role. Small objects like a fishing rod, teapot, handkerchief, and a pistol were also included in this system of objects moving about the actor. It unfurled around him from the beginning to the end of the show like a magic ribbon in the hands of a Chinese conjurer.³⁹

There is a critical metaphysics implicit in this juggling, a metaphysics that places Meyerhold at clear distance from Stalin-era Constructivism and its functionalist, techno-bureaucratic rear guard.

On the other hand, such juggling fits rather neatly into the tension mapped out by Constructivist Alexei Filippov in his "Production Art." In that essay, published in 1921, Filippov writes that "[t]he very disintegration of Russian reality caused by the unprecedented social revolution only helps artists in their search for new forms for a new way of life."⁴⁰ Such a search is compelled by "the essential, vital demands of life and by the constructive imagination of the artist-creator, and . . . as the comprehension, mastery, and transformation of the material."³⁸ A. Toporkov seconds Filippov, writing that "[t]he machine . . . is not only clever, but also fantastic."⁴² Toporkov argues that "the very progress of knowledge merely opens up the depths of that which is still unidentified. . . . Technological design leads into eternity as does scientific knowledge. . . . Calculation is possible only on the grounds of wide-awake intuition, and one can construct only when one possesses great creative imagination."⁴³ Finally, in a statement I feel lies close to the pith of Meyerhold's theater, Toporkov writes, "At the basis of the machine lies the creative motive, the living idea that cannot be completely analyzed. . . . the general motive [of the machine] exists prior to the parts, and they are all conditioned by it. . . . Every machine has its prototype; it is the improvement or modification of a previously existing machine."⁴⁴

Close, but not quite on the mark, for Meyerhold's theater—much like the Futurist manifestos and performances of Marinetti and his cohorts—exploited the vulgar shock of conjoining desire and mechanism, exploited the fetish-economies of the "grotesque." Meyerhold, in fact, explicitly praised the grotesque as "based on the conflict between form and content. The grotesque," he elaborates, "aims to subordinate psychologism to a decorative task."⁴⁵ The Naturalist trope of a fully determined subject—the subject as negative space of her environment—is turned inside-out by the artist of the grotesque: Bruno the cuckold's irrational excesses define the motion of the mechanism.⁴⁶

The subordination of subjectivity to surface-effect implies a partial rationalization or reification of desire, as Worrall demonstrates, just as it also implies a proneness of that rationale to the kinky terrors of the cyborg. Meyerhold's theater tells us that, in the grotesque world of utopian industry, desire is determined *by* as much as it is determinant *of* the social space. The Constructivist subject as envisioned by Meyerhold is cyborg and pervert, historian and avant-gardist, a fractalized creature occupying and exploding the representational interstices of industrialization and mass culture. In such a world, moral evaluation is secondary to the cruel joys of production. In Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner's words, "Not to lie about the future is impossible and one can lie about it at will."⁴⁷

The social levelling enabled by the revelation of beauty's pretense (as in *Don Juan* or *Masquerade*) or (as in *Cuckold*, *The Bedbug*, and some twenty-odd more of Meyerhold's post-Revolution productions) the turning inside-out of utopian hygienics, is enabled by a cruel cycle of laughter and horror, buffoonery and tragedy, pleasure and pain. This destabilizing, fluid, essentially performative dynamic can be compared to the dialogue of flexibility and rigidity constructed by Henri Bergson in his anti-bureaucratic, anti-commodity, anti-naturalism tract *Laughter*. In this regard, and as a way of characterizing the theatrical traditions mined by Meyerholdian satire, we should consider the roots of the actor-training techniques the director called "biomechanics" as two-fold: on the one hand, the avant-garde movements of early 20th century Western Europe, with their misogynist, anti-*passeist* fury; on the other, circus performance, acrobatics, juggling, and the poised obscenity of the *commedia*.

Significantly, Meyerhold's struggles with his actors' bodies started long before his interest in Constructivism and Biomechanics. As early as 1905, his thoroughly stylized work in Symbolist drama was running up against the history and nature of the actor. In *The Death of Tintagiles*, Meyerhold attempted to mount a production "whose every element was strictly bound by a musical scheme. But while it was easy enough to synchronize gestures and movements with the musical score, the actors found it impossible to rid their diction entirely of lifelike intonation and to think in purely rhythmical terms."⁴⁸ The heart of the problem, Edward Braun writes, was the actor's previous training in the romantic-realist tradition, her inclination to "live" even the most circumscribed of roles. The director's struggle to render the body wholly symbolic repeatedly (and often pathetically) failed, with the sole and significant exception of *Sister Beatrice* (1906). This particular production succeeded largely because the tension between human passion and the rigidities of Christian Orthodox law was central to Maeterlinck's play; thus, content supported form. Despite this single success, Meyerhold's employer, Vera Kommissarzhevskaya, her star's ego repeatedly bruised by the rigors of Symbolism, fired him.

Kommissarzhevskaya's dissent to the contrary, it is vital that we recuperate and contextualize the often disparaged attempts on Meyerhold's part to stylize every aspect of his productions, a habit we find even at the end of his long, abruptly terminated career. Igor Ilyinsky, one of the more brilliant biomechanicists, writes: "When I would try to stop, to argue or to ask him to explain some scene that wasn't clear to me, he would say: 'You're not getting it because you're near-sighted. Watch me carefully and repeat what I do. Then you'll get it right'."⁴⁹ Predictably, Ilyinsky didn't take well this affront to his actor's dignity. He goes on to say that he "would take all the lavish material he gave me as a director, pick it over and work it through my own internal

filter. . . . But even that wasn't enough. I had then to work that part rhythmically and *organically* into the entire fabric of the part, to make it come alive for *my character* in the given instance."⁵⁰ Ilyinsky's success, along with the equally impressive labor of Garin and Babanova, is testament to the necessity of organic justification as condition of a successfully comedic, properly "Meyerholdian" performance.

Biomechanics was never an end in itself. As Garin explains, the "goal of biomechanics was the comprehensive training of the actor; its techniques were opposed to the photographic naturalism of 'slice of life' theater on the one hand, and to balletic aestheticism on the other."⁵¹ Ilyinsky argues that the exercises were not a method, but rather a task-oriented, resolutely contextual mode of exploratory preparation.⁵² Biomechanics demanded, Garin continues, "clarity, moving with an awareness of center."⁵³ Meyerhold, without contradicting Garin, often urged his players to study the decentered performances of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton in order to master the "laconicism of style" necessary for his Constructivist farces,⁵⁴ and in order to master the careful balance of flexibility and rigidity, particularity of performance and universality of method, so crucial to his grotesquely erotic vision. Ilyinsky paraphrases Meyerhold as saying, "My concern as director-biomechanician is with the actor's health; I see that his nerves are in good order, that he is in a happy mood. Despite his acting in a sad play, he must be happy, inwardly at peace."⁵⁵

Mikhail Sadovsky, another of Meyerhold's actors, tells us that the director used to say, "The actor must not rivet his role tightly, like a bridge builder with his metal construction. He must leave some slots open for improvising."⁵⁶ Meyerhold's Constructivist subject reflects, then, the fluid inscription of a simultaneously democratized and Taylorized subjectivity across the performing body, reflects an embodied dream of "mechanized man" that attempts to surpass and displace the social/aesthetic movement from feudalism to its romantic resuscitation to a state-integrated industrialism.⁵⁷ Meyerhold, however, would read "industrialism" as "festival."

How does the biomechanic afford us a vision of a "way of being" or a "cultivation of the self" (as Michel Foucault might have put it) that would enable the striding that Gabo and Pevsner call for, the striding across the "tempests of our weekdays," across the "ashes and cindered homes of the past," towards the "gates of the vacant future"?⁵⁸ The answer to such a question can be approached by recognizing that Meyerhold's Constructivism has very old precedents—as old as the fuzzy-tongued dawn of the Enlightenment, as old as the epic vulgarity of Rabelasian humanism, as old as the "wandering womb" (*hysterksis*) that threatened to wreck the economy of the Greek home-space. Meyerhold's contribution to modernity and modernity's supersession/modulation/recuperation

within postmodernism lies in the binding of the two, in binding ("coupling" is perhaps the better word, with its dual connotation of sexuality and industrial process) the fetishization of privacy, "compulsory heterosexuality," and "common feeling" central to the bourgeois liberalism of the industrial state to the insistent, anti-structural biologism of Rabelais. All this in the name of massified *eros*.

The director grants us a carnivalesque celebration of the essential obscenity of reason, a celebration spawned by his great distaste for the increasingly strident Soviet call for an "untarnished and triumphant" socialist bureaucracy. Satire, as a discourse (if you'll excuse the *non sequiter*) of quality, always appears when quantity threatens victory. In the case of Meyerhold, this threat was embodied by the ascent to power of a deeply corrupt, nationalist bourgeoisie within an increasingly dispersed, increasingly rigid bureaucracy. So Lenin is essentially on target when he labels the director's work "hooligan communism."⁵⁹ "We require," Meyerhold always maintained, though the ramifications and parameters of such a statement have been consistently misplaced, "Red carnival."⁶⁰

If Kernan is correct when he writes that "Art and morality, dunce and the reality he opposes are locked together in an intricate and continuing conflict which generates the plot of satire,"⁶¹ then there is one more question that should be asked, (1) specifically of Meyerhold, (2) more generally of the avant-garde as on-going critique of mainstream realism and as continual struggle with the actor and her body, and (3) more theoretically concerning the debate over subjectivity, agency, and acculturation in contemporary thought. If, as I have hinted, the ways in which we have traditionally discussed satire are founded upon essentially romantic/liberal paradigms of subjectivity (notions that distort the work of the state-supported, state-supporting satirist), and upon a puritannical aversion to the excesses of the body, then how is it possible for us to comprehend the orgiastic dynamics of "deterritorialization" and "overcoding" at work within, as Bann put it, the unprecedented conjunction of practical and creative aims that immediately followed the October Revolution?

Not coincidentally, such a question approaches certain hidden histories of the reception and diversion of postmodernism within the academies, boardrooms, and bedrooms of our own era of transnational corporations and the inertial state. Satire and the disciplining of the body for the needs of an ascendant production mode are inseparable at such moments, moments when, as Manfredo Tafuri argues in *Architecture and Utopia*, the critique of ideology and the collective release from older representational modes is founded upon "an accurately controlled image of the future."⁶² And what is precisely at stake in this inseparability is the tacit acceptance of the body as a productive, participatory element in the social machine. The lessons of the bureaucratic backlash against the October avant-garde can be read then, as the institutionalization of

behaviorism on the basis of a reified, essentially misogynist vision of "nature." That backlash can be read, finally, as the repression of perversity, gluttony, and the metaphysics of juggling. Perhaps more accurately, it can be read as their mortification within the eschatologies of a state-mediated commodity culture.

Notes

1. In Paul Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981) 145.
2. In *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 337.
3. Brian Massumi, in what I consider to be one of the more prescient texts on performance in recent years, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), likens the act of speaking to "demonic possession": "Ripe young bodies animated by secondhand words . . . Ghoulish indirect discourse" (29). As will become clear, the "resuscitation of meaning" (20) that characterizes criticism as an act of power takes on peculiar qualities in pre- and post-Revolution Russia.
4. Situationist International 331.
5. Massumi 31.
6. Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold: The Director* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981) 391.
7. Christine Kiebuszinska, *Revolutionaries in the Theater: Meyerhold, Brecht, and Witkiewicz* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988) 2.
8. A term to be opposed to "mass." See Jean Baudrillard's *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or, The End of the Social, and Other Essays* (New York: Semiotext(e): 1983).
9. One normally thinks of Jean-Francois Lyotard or Gilles Deleuze in this respect, though certainly Gayatri Spivak's struggles with the representation of "subaltern" voices spring from this sort of coupling. See also the struggles of playwrights and performers to represent raced, gendered, and sexual specificity in Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan's *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993).
10. W.B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* (Berkeley: U of California P).
11. Kiebuszinska 3-4.
12. 9.
13. Kiebuszinska explicitly links her work to Prague-school structuralism and Russian formalism.
14. Nick Worrall, "Meyerhold's Production of *The Magnificent Cuckold*," *The Drama Review* (17:1, March 1973).
15. Worrall, by the bye, fails to mention the letters "CR," "ML," and "LK" inscribed upon the large wheels at the rear of the stage-apparatus. The celebration—one might say "monumentalization"—of the play's original author, Fernand Crommelynck, exerts an uncomfortable strain on Worrall's attempt to situate the play in the functionalist, cosmopolitan branch of Constructivism. See my appropriation of, and comments on, Stephen Bann's introduction to *The Tradition of Constructivism* below.
16. Worrall 22.
17. 24.
18. Stephen Bann, "Introduction" to *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) xxix.
19. xxxvi.

20. Quoted in Rudnitsky 307.

21. Quoted in Rudnitsky 309.

22. 310.

23. And with an eye to a more contemporary future and past, I would hope to make clear the related methodologies of those who are attempting (by and large successfully) to limit the proliferation of postmodernist discourse within a kind of bland formalism, or, perhaps more frighteningly, to reduce the more radical varieties of postmodernist critique (I think here of Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, and Holly Hughes, specifically, though the recent outcry over Time/Warner Records and television violence is relevant in this regard) to questions of "morality." The ideology of functionalism is also known as the "technological veil"; that is to say, as the dispersal of aesthetic and social issues under the weight of the tropes of "profit," "efficiency," and "crisis-management." See Herbert Marcuse's "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt's *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1992).

24. I use the word "essence" in the loaded manner favored by Deleuze, Guattari, and their ventriloquist Massumi. In *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Massumi defines "essence" as "neither stable nor transcendental nor eternal; it is immanent to the dynamic process it expresses and has only an abyssal present infinitely fractured into past and future" (18). It is a creature of "context," which Massumi will define as "the juncture at which force is translated into power, in a shared field of exteriority." Meaning, he goes on to say, "is what the circumstances say" (31). The pragmatic nature of Meyerhold's "reading" process has yet to receive adequate description. As a result, the nature of his theater's "politics" are incomprehensible.

25. Marjorie L. Hoover, *Meyerhold and His Set Designers* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988) 108, 109.

26. Quoted in Rudnitsky 231.

27. 231.

28. 231.

29. 231.

30. 232.

31. 232.

32. 232.

33. Hoover 71 (my emphases).

34. Rudnitsky 234.

35. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 328.

36. Alvin B. Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New York: Yale UP, 1965).

37. J.M. Cohen, "Introduction" to Francois Rabelais' *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 17.

38. In Schmidt 121-22.

39. Quoted in Rudnitsky 347.

40. Alexei Filippov, "Production Art," in Bann 25.

41. 25.

42. A. Toporkov, "Technological and Artistic Form," in Bann 27.

43. 27.

44. 30.

45. Quoted in Edward Braun, *The Theater of Meyerhold: Revolution on the Modern Stage* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979) 141.

46. Were there space, we might examine the closely related issue of the fetishization of women—sign of chaotic, unboundable nature for Meyerhold—on the director's stage: Stella rendered desirable and "feminine" by her spike boots and sheer hose, the Phosphorescent Woman in *The Bath House* as symbol of progress exquisitely and tightly bound in the fragrant leather of utopian kink,

as one luxurious edible among others in *The Inspector General*, or, nameless, as carefully framed and hastily concealed nudity in the dance scenes of 1934's *Camille*.

47. Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, "The Realistic Manifesto," in Bann 11.

48. Braun 48.

49. In Schmidt 27.

50. 27.

51. 27.

52. Igor Ilyinsky, "Biomechanics," in Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, *Actors on Acting* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970) 504.

53. Schmidt 27.

54. Braun 211.

55. Ilyinsky, "Biomechanics" 506. David Cole describes improvisation as a combination of active ("I rise to enact my supplanting of the text") and passive ("I rise to enact my immersion in the text") urges towards their synthesis in a "setting equal" ("The action I take to deepen my immersion in the text supplants the text with action I take"). See his *Acting as Reading: The Place of the Reading Process in the Actor's Work* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 91-92.

56. In Schmidt 207.

57. Comparable representations can be discovered in virtually all of the nations moving towards state-mediated industrialism at the start of this century. Futurism's insistent call for an athleticized, hyper-sensitive subject; the coupling of athletics, misogyny, and eugenics in Nazi Germany; the sudden explosion of "Supermen" and comicbooks (not to mention the mass dance-spectacles of the twenties and thirties) in the U.S.; the general acquiescence to the universalized/quantified body as promoted by the Olympic festivals—each in its way attempts to represent (and simultaneously discipline) the body unleashed by the universalizing flows of finance capital. The distinction I would mark here concerns the ambivalent qualities of Meyerhold's biomechanism. That amalgam refuses by its very nature the demands of reproduction and bureaucratic management of the future. By the bye, fruitful results are promised to research into the nature of the rehearsal process in Meyerhold's theater, particularly its evocation of the pleasure of bodily control and mutual comprehension. Such research might gesture towards answering the difficult question of whether a truly popular culture can exist.

58. In Bann 5.

59. Quoted in Braun 149.

60. Quoted in Rudnitsky 349.

61. 18.

62. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976) 57.