

After Symbolism: Theoretical Aspects of Meyerhold's Early Theatrical Reform

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Abstract:

This essay examines Vsevolod Meyerhold's theory of the stage in the first decade of the twentieth century. This article analyzes Meyerhold's symbolist staging of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice*, in 1906, and compares it to his production of Alexander Blok's *The Fairground Booth* later that year, which constituted a break with symbolist aesthetics. Meyerhold's essay «The Fairground Booth», published in 1912, is considered the main theoretical text to understand his project of theatrical reform, one that revolved around the ideas of exposing the conventionality of theatrical art and bridging the gap between stage and audience.

Después del simbolismo: aspectos teóricos de la temprana reforma teatral de Meyerhold

Palabras clave:

Vsevolod Meyerhold. Maurice Maeterlinck. Alexander Blok. Teatro simbolista. Teatro ruso.

Resumen:

El presente ensayo estudia la teoría teatral desarrollada por Vsevolod Meyerhold en la primera década del siglo XX. Este artículo analiza la puesta en escena que Meyerhold hizo de *La hermana Beatriz*, de Maurice Maeterlinck, en 1906, y la compara con la producción de *El teatro de feria*, de Alexander Blok, que tuvo lugar a finales de ese mismo año y que representó la ruptura de Meyerhold con la estética simbolista. Se considera el ensayo «El teatro de feria», publicado en 1912, como el texto de referencia para comprender la reforma teatral propuesta en estos años por Meyerhold, reforma que gira en torno a dos ideas: exponer el carácter convencional del arte teatral y anular la distancia entre escena y espectadores.

This essay examines Vsevolod Meyerhold's theory of the stage in the first decade of the twentieth century, right after his departure from Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre in 1902. Biomechanics, a system of actor training that Meyerhold developed in the 1920s in dialogue with constructivism, has been traditionally considered his response to Stanislavsky's acting system, but in focusing on Meyerhold's early years I intend to broaden the discussion by situating Meyerhold in contact with (and in reaction to) the tradition of French symbolist theater.

Around 1890, French symbolists turned to the marionette and the puppet as the perfect instruments to achieve what Elinor Fuchs defines as the «de-individualization in favor of the Idea», a radical reform against the notion of «character as represented by the living actor» [1996: 29]. Because the actor's body ceased to be seen as a positive (or, at least, neutral) signifier, the symbolist aversion to bodied spaces led to the massive presence of puppets in dramas that revisited the allegorical patterns of medieval mysteries. Two main principles operate at the core of the symbolist praxis. In the first place, the actor is seen as an obstacle against the spiritualized art that characterizes symbolist poetics. Maurice Maeterlinck's programmatic text «Menus Propos: Le Théâtre» (1890) is one of the earliest formulations of this principle. The Belgian playwright argues that the essence of the great dramatic characters is lost when they are impersonated on the stage, the individual act of reading being the only way towards understanding these characters' inner truth. For Stéphane Mallarmé, who also privileges evocation over showing, the dramatic work is insufficient, a mere «succession of exterior aspects of things, without any moment becoming real, and all things considered, without anything happening» [qtd. in Deak, 1993: 23]. Mallarmé's ideal Hamlet is a presence devoid of corporality, very much in the same fashion as that in which Maeterlinck conceives the dramatic character of Shakespeare's play. As Fuchs explains in *The Death of Character*, «Hamlet, one of Hegel's chief examples of a tragedy of character, has here moved into a realm of



abstraction that borders on allegory, with all characters functioning as symbols, aspects, or projections of an “imaginary and somewhat abstract” hero» [1996: 31]. A second characteristic of symbolist drama is the dominance of narration over dramatic enactment. The narrator (a reciter, a chorus) enjoys a dominant position among all the performers on the stage, a strategy aimed at guaranteeing the integrity of the author’s artistic plan.

As early as 1890, authors Maurice Bouchor and Anatole France endorsed the hieratic expression of the puppets as the best remedy against the personalities of the actors. Their view was influenced by the contemporary *Le Petit Théâtre du Marionnettes*, which presented puppets of about thirty inches that were manipulated by a group of artists while another group of performers recited the text. In 1891, director Paul Fort staged Pierre Quillard’s *The Girl with Cut-off Hands*, defined by Frantisek Deak as the «first distinctive symbolist *mise-en-scène*» [1993: 144]. In the play’s programme, Marcel Collière explained how the original literary text was given priority over the spectacle: «The *mise-en-scène* of the poem is done in such a way as to give all the power to the lyric speech. Taking only the precious instrument of the human voice which resonates simultaneously in the soul of spectators, and neglecting the imperfect enticement of sets and other material devices of theater» [qtd. in Deak, 1993: 144]. A narrator in a blue tunic read the prose stage directions, and the actors monotonously declaimed their parts in verse—instead of theatrical parts, it would be more correct to describe their speeches as recitation of poetry.¹ An explicit critique of the actors’ physicality can also be found in Alfred Vallette’s review of Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas and Mélisande*, performed in 1893 under the direction of Lugné-Poe. Vallette lamented that acting was not completely subordinated to the symbolist principles of abstraction and stylization, for he still felt that the actors were «too human, too concrete, too material» [qtd. in Deak, 1993: 167].

¹ As Deak observes, «The individual characters’ texts (the Girl, the Father, the Poet King, and the Servant) were in verse. These texts were like short poems/monologues that acquired the character of dialogue exclusively from the context created by the narrator» [1996: 143].



The symbolist idea of the actor as a puppet/marionette became an integral part of the theoretical discourse of the directors who questioned mimetic aesthetics during the early years of the twentieth century. Edward Gordon Craig, one of the first directors to propose an explicit comparison between actors and marionettes, affirmed in 1907 that acting is not an art because actors cannot exercise a total control of their body. In accordance with the symbolist tradition, but also echoing the words of Heinrich von Kleist,² Craig declares that the actor's work «is of an accidental nature. The actions of the actor's body, the expression of his face, the sounds of his voice, all are at the mercy of the winds of his emotions» [1968: 55-56]. Craig's formulation of the actor as *über-marionette* aimed to replace naturalistic acting and settings by an abstract presentation of shapes and colors in which the human body would appear as one of the constitutive elements of theatrical art, but not necessarily the dominant one. But Craig was not the only director who saw the living actor as an obstacle to his artistic practice. As Martin Puchner argues, the modernist resistance to the actor's presence, from Mallarmé to Oskar Schlemmer and the early Walter Benjamin, is not simply a matter of an anti-theatrical stance, a prejudice that can be ultimately traced back to Plato. What characterizes the debate in the

² In his dialogued essay «On the Puppet Theatre» (1810), von Kleist narrates his fictional encounter with Mr. C, an opera dancer who declares himself an admirer of the marionette theater of a local marketplace. When von Kleist inquires about the reason for the superiority of marionettes over human performers, his interlocutor explains that their great virtue consists in their lack of affectation—their members being «dead, pure pendulums, which follow the basic law of gravity – a marvelous quality, which we look for in vain in most of our dancers» [1982: 213]. At the bottom of von Kleist's argumentation is the idea of an automaton (the marionette) that has not fallen from Grace. His praise of the marionette is an aesthetic tractate with a notable theological orientation, which inscribes itself in the tradition of Platonic and Hermetic dialogues. Von Kleist's essay would later inspire the writings on automatons by E. T. A. Hoffmann and Giacomo Leopardi in the nineteenth century, and Rainer Maria Rilke and Bruno Schulz in the early twentieth century [Nelson, 2001: 60-73]. Nonetheless, despite the importance of a philosophical tradition that is fascinated by the human simulacrum, von Kleist's essay did not have major influence on nineteenth-century dramatists and theater directors. This was due to the fact that, for most of the century, marionettes and puppets remained confined to the realm of popular or 'low' art, a space alien to the bourgeois stage. It was only with the emergence of symbolist theater in France, in the closing years of the century, and the publication of Gordon Craig's essay on the *über-marionette* in 1907, that von Kleist's original contribution finally found its adherents.



early years of the twentieth century is, according to Puchner, the awareness of

theater's uneasy position between the performing and the mimetic arts. As a performing art like music or ballet, the theater depends on the artistry of live human performers on stage. As a mimetic art like painting or cinema, however, it must utilize these human performers as signifying material in the service of a mimetic project. [2002: 5]

An explanation to the phenomenon described by Puchner can be found in Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art*, originally published in 1931. As Zich observes, theater cannot be defined as a reproductive art, and this is not only due to its collective nature. Musical art, for instance, is collective and at the same time operates as reproductive art. This is because the role of the musical performer is limited to introducing nuances to an artwork that is clearly defined from its inception: the composer hears the music in his mind, first, and then registers it in a score. This score secures the future reproducibility of the work without room for the performer's modification, as the musical score establishes parameters such as timbre, intonation, and duration. In contrast to the reproducible musical score, a dramatic text will vary in performance by the mere presence of different actors, not to mention the role of stage directors and the overall importance of historic styles. The actors fulfill a creative task when they incorporate multiple elements, such as voice delivery and facial features, which are both (at least partially) foreign to the authorial text. Because the human body cannot be automatically converted to a sign that is equal to the rest of the stage signs, there is no way to completely control the production and reception of the actor's work. Gordon Craig epitomizes the obsession for directorial control that characterized the first decades of the twentieth century, the era of the great directors who aimed to transform theater into a reproductive art (collaboration without modification, in Zich's terminology).



Meyerhold and the reception of symbolist drama in Russia

In Russia, the symbolist theories of acting that came from France merged with a local movement that was already willing to question Stanislavsky's realist school. The second section of this essay is concerned precisely with the role of puppetry in rejecting the basic assumptions of realistic dramaturgy in the Russian context. I will discuss the central importance of Meyerhold as catalyst of the transition from a realistic to a 'stylized' drama after his departure from the Moscow Art Theater in 1902. In the wake of Maeterlinck's static drama and Gordon Craig's theory of the *über-marionette*, the metaphor of the actor as puppet/marionette acquired a central position in the discourse of the Russian innovators during the years immediately preceding the Great War. One of the most important documents in this respect is the anthology of critical texts *Theater: A Book on the New Theater*, published in Russia in 1908. This anthology contained contributions by a number of dramatists and directors who did not share the realist aesthetics of the Art Theater. This volume included texts by poet and playwright Valery Bryusov, who in 1902 had published «An Unnecessary Truth» in response to Stanislavsky's system, Meyerhold, and recognized symbolist artists such as Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely, and Fyodor Sologub. The idea of the actor as marionette is particularly prominent in Sologub's contribution, titled «The Theater of One Will», a piece clearly influenced by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. A reputed novelist and poet, Sologub had begun writing for the stage in 1906, after meeting Meyerhold at Vera Komissarzhevskaya's Theater in Saint Petersburg. In «The Theatre of One Will», Sologub proposes the transformation of theater into liturgy following the example of the ecstatic drama of the French symbolists. In order to achieve this transformation, Sologub argues, it is necessary to go beyond the realistic idea of theatrical spectacle, which he defines as the product of enrolling «professional actors, the footlights and curtain, cunningly painted scenery seeking to give the illusion of reality, the clever contrivances of realistic theatre and the wise fabrications of conventionalized theatre»



[1977: 89]. Of all these mentioned elements, the actor represents the main obstacle for his ideal of theater of ecstasy, for the actor «draws the attention of the spectator too much upon himself and in so doing overshadows both the drama and the author. The more talented the actor, the more his tyranny is intolerable for the author and harmful for the tragedy» [1977: 89].

It is important to note that Sologub is not prescribing here the substitution of the puppet for the actor (Maeterlinck), nor the adoption of closet drama (Mallarmé). However, he insists on the necessity that the performing subject, precisely because of his corporality, be reduced to the status of «speaking marionette» because it is the only way to guarantee the rule of a single will, what he denominates «the will of the poet» [1977: 91]. Sologub privileges the dramatic text to the extent that he denies any artistic capacity to both the actors and the stage director, seen by him as intruders who disrupt the poet's supreme power. Despite numerous mentions of Christian liturgy and the de-individualized Greek tragedy, Sologub's «The Theatre of One Will» is, in the end, a simple continuation of the static theater envisioned by the French symbolists.³

In contrast to Sologub, Meyerhold initially recruited French symbolist drama to combat Stanislavsky's realism only to arrive later at his own version of puppet theater. In his symbolist years, from 1903 to approximately 1907, Meyerhold regarded Maeterlinck's symbolist drama as one of his main sources of inspiration. As Deak notes, in these years «Meyerhold came to the realization that the new theatre he was seeking would not come about by reforming the existing theatre, as Stanislavsky believed, but by a radical break with it» [1982: 42], and French symbolism offered him a coherent set of dramaturgical principles that made possible a break with realistic aesthetics. This early symbolist influence, however, was

³ Christopher Innes criticizes symbolist drama for embracing «traditional legend and artificial medievalism, while the religious aspect of their work remained within the socially accepted limits of catholicism» [1992: 22]. The same argument can be applied to Sologub's proposal.



only one of the various strains that would characterize Meyerhold's own technique of acting in the years to come.

For the staging of Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice*, in 1906, Meyerhold blurred the distinctive physical traits of the female cast, with the exception of the main protagonist, Sister Beatrice, played by Vera Komissarzhevskaya. Some of the elements that integrated the Nuns into a single, undifferentiated stage figure were the following: the hieratic gestures and movements that followed a unifying rhythmic pattern, modeled on the paintings of the primitive Pre-Raphaelite style; a cold delivery free from all tremolo, with extended pauses, resulting in the antithesis of naturalistic speech; and, finally, the similarity of the costumes and the set (grey-blue colors in both cases) that reinforced the depersonalization of the bodies on the stage. A long blue robe covered the body of the actresses, with the exceptions of their palms, and a blue bonnet also completely covered their heads, with no hair visible. In the third and final act, the agony of Sister Beatrice was presented in imitation of medieval paintings of Christ's descent from the cross. According to Deak's historical reconstruction of the performance, «all the nuns gesticulate in unison and the main gesture is the open palm (facing forward), imitating religious painting and used throughout the production by the chorus of Nuns» [1982: 45]. The influence of medieval aesthetic patterns was central to the creation of the stage figures in Meyerhold's adaptation, since a typical feature of European liturgical theater is the attenuation of the distinctive traits of the performing subjects.⁴

Alongside *Sister Beatrice*, Meyerhold staged Maeterlinck's *The Death of Tintagiles*, *Pelléas and Mélisande* and *The Miracle of Saint Anthony*, as well as a symbolist adaptation of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* in the 1906-07 season of Vera Komissarzhevskaya's theater. In view of these

⁴ As Jiří Veltruský points out, in the liturgical theater of medieval Europe «the internal polarity of the figure is weak because they (as distinct from the characters) are little differentiated, often near interchangeable. The distinctness and the unity of each figure is sacrificed to its smooth insertion in the whole set of figures. Characteristically, the performers often act in unison, as a sort of chorus, and the figures can even merge, intermittently, with the church choir» [1976: 555-556].



titles, there is little doubt about the influence of symbolist aesthetics on Meyerhold's non-naturalistic theater. However, concurrently with these symbolist productions, Meyerhold was able to forge his own dramaturgical model, one significantly different to the solemnity of French and Russian drama. The production of Blok's *The Fairground Booth* [Balaganchik], which premiered on December 30, 1906, constituted a turning point of Meyerhold's theatrical career, for Blok's text offered him the possibility of merging the symbolist tradition with the popular strains of puppetry and *commedia dell'arte*. In *The Fairground Booth*, the movements of the actors imitated the restricted repertoire of movements of puppet theater, thus foregrounding the artificial connection between actor and character instead of presenting it as a natural fact. Meyerhold placed a little booth on center stage with hybrid figures (halfway between actors and puppets) attached to wires that were visible to the audience. Outside the booth, on the main stage, an actor impersonated the Author who controls, or better attempts to control, his fictional creations. The Author, however, does not enjoy the absolute power he believes he has, as someone hidden in the wings pushes and pulls him on and off stage by his coat tails.

Columbine, for whom the cuckold Pierrot suffers, appears to the spectators as a shallow and elusive character. At the end of the play, she is converted into a cardboard figure, meaning that the metaphor of her shallowness has been subject to a literal interpretation, what Bogatyrev refers to the «realization of the metaphor» [1999: 106]. The realization of the metaphor, a typical folkloric device, is therefore recruited for anti-illusionist purposes. While the presence of theater within theater is not a novelty at all, the accumulation of apparently incompatible styles (realism, symbolism, puppetry, *commedia*) ends up producing a disharmonic modernist version⁵ of the ancient metaphor of *theatrum mundi*.

⁵ J. Douglas Clayton argues that the title of Meyerhold's production can be related to the idea of *épater le bourgeois*, for the term *balaganchik* «is used figuratively in Russian, rather as the English "farce," but more pejoratively, to mean vulgar theatre or even a scandal of any kind in which conventional decorum is flouted» [1993: 54]. In view of



The distance between symbolist drama and Meyerhold's new idea of puppet theater is evident in his humorous treatment of classic symbolist motifs. At the end of *The Fairground Booth*, Harlequin pronounces a grave speech before escaping through a window (a typically symbolist sign of the secluded life of the artist) only to find himself clumsily falling through a paper hole. Moreover, the constant confusion between the earthly Columbine and the solemn figure of Lady Beautiful/Death constitutes another example of parodic distance from symbolist drama. This parody of symbolist motifs, present in Blok's play and highlighted in Meyerhold's production, were also present in Schnitzler's pantomime *The Veil of Pierrete* when it was translated and adapted by Meyerhold, with the title of *Columbine's Scarf*, in 1910.

Meyerhold's new theatrical praxis had its theoretical counterpart in his theorizations of a new theater that would be different from both Stanislavsky's school and the symbolist orthodoxy. Meyerhold's most extensive reflection on this matter appears in the essay «The Fairground Booth» (1912). In sharp contrast to Sologub's proposal, Meyerhold explains that the reading-room of a library, and not a playhouse, «is the only proper place for such gravity and immobility» [1998: 124]. In disagreement with the omnipresence of the authorial text, Meyerhold calls for a return to an actor-creator, almost a pantomime, as «a good antidote against excessive misuse of words» [1998: 124]. This essay also contains a long reflection on the incorporation of puppetry to the modernist stage, for Meyerhold distinguishes between two possible applications of puppet theater: The first type is imitative, and the objective of the puppets is to reproduce as closely as possible the gestures and appearance of human beings; the second type, on the contrary, presents the movements of the puppets as something overtly artificial. Only this second version, according to Meyerhold, represents the

Clayton's contribution, it is possible to define Meyerhold's production as one of the earliest examples of anti-bourgeois puppetry in the twentieth century. But, rather than conveying an explicitly political message, Meyerhold defies the expectations of the audience by disrupting the mimetic illusion and questioning the stability of the theatrical frame.



theatricalist path to be explored once the mimetic imperative has been put into question.

Meyerhold's description of the puppet is in consonance with the general idea of *uslovnyi* theater (which can be translated as stylized, non-realistic, non-representational) that Meyerhold had been endorsing since late 1906. The artificial nature of the puppets is precisely what reinforces the imaginary implication of an audience that is now required to see something that is not a passive copy of reality⁶. For, as Meyerhold argues, «the puppet did not want to become an exact replica of man, because the world of the puppet is a wonderland of make-believe, and the man which it impersonates is a make-believe man» [1998: 129].

Epilogue: Laying bare the theatrical stage

Meyerhold's idea of how to activate the audience changed significantly in the years immediately following the 1917 Soviet Revolution. In attempting to literally suppress the separation between stage and audience Meyerhold tried to get rid of the element that contemporary literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky defined as the 'psychological footlights.' In 1920, Shklovsky opened a review comically titled «Papa—That's an Alarm Clock» with a description of his first impression of Meyerhold's recent production of Émile Verhaeren's *Dawn*. «The footlights», Shklovsky writes, «had been removed. The stage was stripped bare... The theater was like a coat with the collar the ripped off. It was not cheerful and not bright» [2005a: 39]. In this short text, Shklovsky reflected on the multiple efforts to suppress the fourth wall in the theater of the Soviet regime. Meyerhold, in

⁶ In 1906, Meyerhold compared the naturalist school of acting, from the Meiningen Players to the Moscow Art Theatre, to photography, an activity that he did not consider an art at that time: «The naturalistic theatre has created actors most adept in the art of 'reincarnation', which requires a knowledge of make-up and the ability to adapt the tongue to various accents and dialects, the voice being employed as a means of sound-reproduction; but in this plasticity plays no part. The actor is expected to lose his self-consciousness rather than develop a sense of aestheticism which might balk at the representation of externally ugly, misshapen phenomena. The actor develops the photographer's ability to *observe the trifles of everyday life*» [1998: 24-25, his emphasis].



accordance with the artistic doctrine of the Communist Party, had organized a mass spectacle conceived to transform the spectators into active agents—a transformation that parallels the new role of the proletariat in the utopian socialist state.⁷ Meyerhold removed the footlights in order to unite actors, orchestra pit (populated by Proletkult members) and audience but, Shklovsky noted with irony, in this particular production the spectators seemed to go «on strike» [2005a: 40] in view of their passive behavior. The rapid automatization of what was supposed to be a communal and liberating exercise was evident as soon as Soviet theater filled in, literally speaking, the orchestra pit (actors embedded in the auditorium, architectural reforms) only to end up reproducing the dogmas of the socialist state.

In «Regarding Psychological Footlights», another short piece of the early Soviet period, Shklovsky states that the core of theatrical art is not simply illusionism or anti-illusionism, but a constant tension between these two poles. An admirer of the futurist dramas of Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Shklovsky argues that what foregrounds the materiality of the stage, its artificial condition, is the constant interplay between actuality and fiction. The main feature of non-mimetic aesthetics consists, therefore, in producing «a flickering illusion, that is, one that comes and goes» [2005b: 49]. He maintains that theater, understood as the representation of dramatic literature, cannot dispense with this requirement.

Shklovsky's thoughts on theatricality and anti-illusionism, which he published in the Russian press before temporarily leaving the country in 1922, can be read as the theoretical testament of the Russian theatrical avant-garde. At the same time, his description can be retrospectively applied to the European theater that departs from naturalism at the turn of the nineteenth century, embracing first symbolism and later the rest of the –isms in the short span of two decades. On the one hand, Shklovsky makes the

⁷ In «On the Staging of Verhaeren's *The Dawn*», a short text published in 1920, Meyerhold declared that «each spectator represents, as it were, Soviet Russia in microcosm... Now we have to protect the interests not of the author but of the spectator» [1998: 170-171].



laying bare of the devices one of the main principles of his general artistic theory, and there is little doubt that the exposure of the theatrical machinery became in these years a frequent tool against the illusionist fourth wall. On the other hand, Shklovsky is perfectly aware of the futility of simply suppressing the physical boundaries between stage and auditorium. Interestingly enough, Meyerhold himself had formulated a very similar proposition to Shklovsky's as early as 1911, in an article devoted to his experience at directing Blok's play. After consolidating a theatrical style different to Stanislavsky and the symbolists, Meyerhold proposed a return to a theater of improvisation that should adopt the «laws of the fairground booth» that were present in the Spanish and Italian Baroque:

The prologue and the ensuing parade, together with the direct address to the audience at the final curtain, so loved both by the Italians and Spaniards in the seventeenth century and by the French vaudevillistes, all force the spectator to recognize the actors' performance as pure play-acting. And every time the actor leads the spectators too far into the land of make-believe he immediately resorts to some unexpected sally or lengthy address *a parte* to remind them that what is being performed is only a *play*. [1998: 127, his emphasis]

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