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Research Article

Body as a Machine: Meyerhold Between Politics and Theory

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ABSTRACT

There might be many explanations for why Meyerhold's theatre did not survive Stalinist Russia and why Stanislavsky's did. Meyerhold's theatre of biomechanics differed significantly from Stanislavsky's method. If Stanislavsky's psychological theatre of the truth presented no ambiguities and surprises, Meyerhold's theatre of the hidden, of the invisible manipulations, put forth a number of problems. On one hand, Meyerhold's idea that man is in control of himself was very much in tune with Soviet propaganda; on the other hand, Meyerhold's actor was fundamentally split, a condition that presented no problems within the space of theatre, but which involuntarily put into question basic premises of Soviet ideology. Although in theatre the theoretical discrepancies and paradoxes did not present a major problem, in Soviet Russia caught in the grip of history and ideology, any discrepancy signaled a danger for a newly evolving fragile system based on nothing but blind power and illusory promises.

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1. Meyerhold vs. Stanislavsky

When thinking about Russian theatre in global context, the name Stanislavsky immediately comes to mind. Stanislavsky is Russian theatre, and Russian theatre is Stanislavsky. But Stanislavsky himself, when asked whom he considered to be the most influential Russian theatre director of his time, said without a doubt that it was Meyerhold. Whether this was false modesty or professional honesty on the part of Stanislavsky, we may never find out, but whatever global narrative we would like to build around the Stanislavsky–Meyerhold relationship—either that of a prodigal son or student who had outgrown his master—without Meyerhold's name, if only in a small circle of theatre passionates, the Stanislavsky–Russian theatre pair is incomplete.

An industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century foreshadowed gradual mechanization of the everyday life. The demographic explosion of the post-war period along with rapidly developing technology cultivated the conditions in which the anonymity and alienation of individual life has become increasingly problematic. Simultaneously a tool of support for the technological efficiency of mass production and a supplier of needs which mass production claimed to satisfy, an individual could not escape viewing himself as a mere element in the self-running factory of thoughtfully mechanized society. The tenacious harshness and cold precision with which the industrial machine executed its control over people's lives created an environment in which man had every reason to feel less and less like the master of his own destiny. Overwhelmingly self-ordaining, an industrial city functioned as a perfect machine in which everything, including man, was steered with the same mechanical cynicism. Existing within the world of machines and himself treated like one, man was becoming more and more aware of the reduction of his role to that of yet another machine, but a machine that was more vulnerable and less perfect than those surrounding him. The experiments with the human body conducted at the beginning of the twentieth century in the European avant-garde theater (mainly in Germany and Russia) reflect the progressive mechanization of all the aspects of human existence, testifying to the emerging need to redefine the relationship between man and the machines surrounding him.

From the very beginning of Meyerhold's career, Russian critics' opinions were divided between those who saw his theatre and mechanical method of acting in complete opposition to Stanislavsky's naturalistic theatre, and those who saw them as pursuing the same goals but via different pathways. Why such a firm and contradictory discrepancy, and what was at stake in the argument about the similarities and dissimilarities between the two directors? To answer this question, we need to look not only at the development of theatre in turn-of-the-century Russia but also at the whole of the sociopolitical and scientific changes that were taking place in Russia, in Europe, and globally at the time. These global shifts not only provide context for the position of Russia on world stages, but also allow us to understand how they influenced Russian and international theatre theory during the twentieth century.

In his attempt to distinguish between the two directors, Paul Schmidt goes so far as to perceive them as epitomizing two separate historical époques, two different centuries: "*[T]he triumph of the Moscow Art Theatre and the Stanislavsky system was a triumph of culmination, not of innovation. It marked the end of the nineteenth century, not the beginning of the twentieth. It was Meyerhold who brought theatre into the twentieth century*."[1] In what sense did Meyerhold bring "theatre into the twentieth century"? The first answer lies in the area of the drama itself affected by the fin-de-siècle malaise.

The Naturalist theatre is guided by the principle of "*truth to the external appearances*."[2] It stages the visible of real life in its theatrical form; "*it teaches the actor to express himself in a finished, clearly defined manner; [but] there is no room [in it] for the play of allusion or for conscious understatement; it knows nothing of the power of suggestion*."[3] Thus, Stanislavsky's 1904 production of Maeterlinck's trilogy of one-act plays, *The Blind, The Uninvited Guest*, and *Inside* was a failure, and Stanislavsky was forced to admit that this production was, in the words of one critic, "*the inadequacy of conventional representational methods when faced with the mystical abstractions of the 'new drama*."[4]

Freud's works *The Interpretations of Dreams* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, published in 1900 and 1904 respectively, opened up a new space of the unknown and invisible and closed for good "the truth of the external appearance." In 1905, Einstein published his *Theory of Relativity*, an event that pushed even further the breakdown of traditional perceptions. As one critic pointed out, it is Einstein and, we could add, Freud, who should be considered the fathers of many major arts movements, including Russian Symbolism and Futurism.[5] In the face of the fractured

[1] Paul Schmidt, ed., *Meyerhold at Work*. trans. Ilya Levin, Vern McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), xii
[2] Nick Worrall, "Meyerhold's Production of 'The Magnificent Cuckold,'" *Theatre Drama Review 57*, no. 1 (1973): 14–34.
[3] Edward Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995, 25.
[4] Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 19.
[5] Worrall, "Meyerhold's Production of 'The Magnificent Cuckold,'" 15.

reality which could no longer be grasped as a whole in unequivocal terms and a psyche that escaped surface reading, the Naturalist theatre exhausted its forms of expression.

For Stanislavsky, the truth of the drama shone through the truth of emotional experience. His method of acting "*stressed primarily [. . .] the capability of an actor actually to begin to live the life of the character, to saturate his stage behavior with the absolute truth of emotional movements, intonations and true-to-life details and shadings of the action taken from real life. 'The truth of the life of the human spirit' was seen as the fundamental basis for the actor's art*."[6] But how was one to represent the "truth of external appearances" (guided by the truth of emotions) when the truth, both of the psyche and the reality that produced it, was becoming more and more ungraspable and relative, when the "external appearances" ceased to have their truth?

Meyerhold welcomed the new circumstances and replied to their demands by elevating "*the unreal in a 'theatre of mood' (aided by lighting effects and progressions), which, unlike Stanislavsky's, embraced the irrational and transcended in the psychological and material*."[7] Second, "*Meyerhold declared war on psychology, and in his search for purity of form 'demanded increased attention to plasticity, rhythm, to the expression of the pose and finally to special reading, the technique [. . .] Also essential was a new, distinct form of projecting the character, which broke simultaneously with both [. . .] as Stanislavsky expressed it, 'ordinariness of feelings*."[8] There was something impalpable in human nature, human interactions, human emotions, and Meyerhold put all his faith in the impalpable and in theatre as a vehicle for its transference.

Thus, for Meyerhold, the ultimate meaning of the spectacle was accomplished not via the psychology of specific characters but via the emotional impact produced by an entire spectacle. In Meyerhold's words: "*The underlying idea of a play can be brought out not only through the dialogue between characters created by the actors' skill, but equally through the rhythm of the whole picture created on the stage by the colours of the designer and by the deployment of practicable scenery, the pattern of movement and the interrelationship of groupings, which are all determined by the director*."[9] It was only by treating the entire play as a single audiovisual entity that the inexpressible and hidden could be brought forward, in gestures and movements projecting specific meanings visible to the spectator, but impossible to replicate if the actor were to "live his role." "*The truth of human relationships is established by gestures, poses, glances and silences. Words alone cannot say everything. [. . .] The difference between the old theatre and the new is that in the new theatre speech and plasticity are each subordinated to their own particular rhythms and the two do not necessarily coincide*."[10]

The discrepancy between Meyerhold and "old theatre" thus lay in the understanding of the spectacle as a spectacle of the actor's emotions and as a spectacle of emotions projected as much by an actor's body as by the lights, set, rhythm, and movement. In order, however, to create the spectacle of emotions, the actor had to reclaim a control over his own: "*[T]he actor has always been so overwhelmed by his emotions that he has been unable to answer either for his movements or for his voice. He has had no control over himself and hence been in no state to ensure success or failure*."[11]

In order not to submit himself to his emotions and to retain a total control over the impression he makes on the viewer, the actor had to master his body, its physiological impulses, its rhythm and movement. Thus, Meyerhold devised a series of physical exercises, biomechanics, demonstrated for the first time in public in June 1922, that put the actor in charge of his body. Because the biomechanics were based not on the actor's emotions but on his physical skills, which would allow him to execute the director's instructions with maximum accuracy and agility, "*many [. . .] accused Meyerhold of trying to turn actors into automatons or marionettes*."[12] Already long before the biomechanics came to light, in a letter written three days after the opening of *The Victory of Death*, Komissarzhevskaya wrote: "*The route on which you persistently travel is a route which leads to a puppet theatre*."[13]

The argument that Meyerhold was trying to treat his actors like puppets surfaced repeatedly. Adding to it was the accusation that biomechanics was a machine-like acting style. As one critic points out, it was the British writer Huntley Carter who was most likely responsible for this "*most common and frequently repeated notion of Biomechanics. It started with [Carter's] thousand-word description of Biomechanics in The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia,*

[6] Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1981, 296.
[7] Spencer Golub, "The Silver Age, 1905–1917," in *A History of Russian Theatre*, ed. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 293.
[8] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 73.
[9] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 82.
[10] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 38.
[11] Edward Braun, ed., *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. Edward Braun. New York: Hill and Wang, 1969, 199
[12] James M. Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque: The Post-Revolutionary Productions, 1920–1932*. Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971, 74.
[13] Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque*, 30.

written in 1924."[14] In Russia, however, the mechanical quality of Meyerhold's acting method was not the biggest problem. On the contrary, with the spirit of the futurist movement propagating the image of a New Soviet Man, the machine-like quality of an actor was seen as an advantage. It was the relationship between the actor and the viewer, mediated by the biomechanics, that troubled Russian critics and, finally, Russian officials.

The attacks, yet undefined, began with the argument, one which most offended Meyerhold, that biomechanics eliminated emotional responses on the part of the actor. "*In 1935, Meyerhold, objecting to an article whose author stated that biomechanics 'supposes the absence of feeling in the performing actor,' wrote in the margin: 'Does not suppose.' Regarding the comment that biomechanics led to an undervaluation of the 'psychic apparatus of the actor,' Meyerhold expressed himself even more categorically: 'Nonsense! We did not underestimate. In The Magnanimous Cuckold the psychic apparatus was in motion just like biomechanics*.'"[15]

It was the accusation that biomechanics renders the actor devoid of emotions that prompted some critics to defend it as an acting method similar in purpose to Stanislavsky's "method of physical action." Biomechanics and Stanislavsky's method were seen as having a common goal: to liberate the actor from "*uncontrolled muscular tension to give him the freedom of stage presence, to teach him to control the 'physical life of the role*.'"[16] In the same spirit, Illinsky, one of Meyerhold's most frequent actors, wrote directly that "*there is a junction between Meyerhold's biomechanics and Stanislavsky's physical action*."[17] Also, A. Fevralsky stated that "*the researcher who undertakes a comparative analysis of biomechanics and Stanislavsky's method 'undoubtedly will find in them much that is in common*.'"[18] The desire to see biomechanics as a mere exercise that preserves the "psychic apparatus" was symptomatic of a larger ontological question emerging, yet never stated, in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russian theatre: the paradox of control. It was this unsolvable paradox in Meyerhold's theory, applicable to theatre yet undermining Russia's whole ideological system, that brought about Meyerhold's ultimate demise.

2. Between Machine Puppet and God

For those familiar with Meyerhold, it is no secret and no surprise that he was fascinated with Craig, and that the feeling was mutual. "*In an article on the Russian Theatre written in 1935, after spending five weeks in Moscow, Craig observed, 'Stanislavsky and Danchenko are adored: Tairov is loved: and Meyerhold amazes everyone, they both adore and love him.' Calling Meyerhold the 'great experimenter,' Craig added that he wanted to visit Moscow again just to see Meyerhold's work in its entirety*."[19] Meyerhold's admiration for Craig is one argument that prompted critics to see his biomechanics as a step towards the puppet theatre. In his 1908 essay, "The Actor and the Über-marionette," Craig formulated a thesis, according to which the possibilities of an actor's body did not suffice to express precisely the exact idea of the director. The human body, claimed Craig, was subject to internal and external laws that prevented it from carrying an artistic message. "*[T]he 'accidental' influence of man's unpredictable emotional behavior, human inconsistency was the 'enemy of design, and hence of art*.'"[20] To attain the desired perfection, the actor "must go" and be replaced by what Craig calls the *Über-marionette*.

Arguing for the supremacy of the precision of the *Über-marionette* over the living being, Craig ascribes to it the same enigmatic and godlike beauty. Because of its mysticism, the *Uber-marionette* embodies a superior model of being, one that "*will not compete with life—rather will it go beyond it. Its ideal will be not flesh and blood but rather the body in trance—it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit*."[21] The exaggerated morbidity of the puppet would not negate life but, on the contrary, Craig claims, will glorify it. Through its artificiality, the marionette will reach beyond the essence of life, becoming its improved version.

The same argument in favor of the marionette was presented by another of Meyerhold's strong influences, Kleist. In his pivotal 1810 essay, "About the Marionette Theatre," Kleist introduced the idea of the intrinsic supremacy of the puppet over the human actor. On an ontological scale, Kleist located man somewhere between God, the supreme being, and the marionette, the absence of being, both representing a similar degree of perfection as complete opposites of each other. The lack of consciousness of the marionette and the centralization of all of its movements in only one point of gravity make it an absolute and finished form, one in which nothing can be improved. Because all movements of

[14] Alma Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*. London: McFarland, 1996, 3.
[15] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 295.
[16] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 305.
[17] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 296.
[18] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 296.
[19] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 14.
[20] David F. Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 66.
[21] Michael J. Walton, *Craig on Theatre*. London: Methuen, 1983, 10.

the puppet are controlled from one point, they can be fully coordinated, creating the sort of ultimate and divine grace that can be attained only by the other perfection, God.[22] Eisenstein, Meyerhold's most prized and devoted pupil, wrote about Kleist's discovery:

> *Kleist was sitting on the boulevard with a dancer from the opera and watching the marionette theatre. In talking about dances, Kleist's companion observed that a dancer could learn a good deal from marionettes. Precisely what, Kleist understood from the following examination of the mechanism of movement of marionettes. He was interested in the means by which it was possible to control the movements of the limbs and the joints without the aid of countless strings attached to them, and at the same time to achieve the necessary rhythms of movement or dance. The dancer replied that Kleist mistakenly imagined that during the movement or dance each limb was put into motion separately by the marionette operator. Each movement depends on the center of gravity. It is sufficient to find this center in the doll and to find means to control it. The limbs, dangling like pendulums, mechanically follow the center of gravity without any additional intervention.*
> *The dancer added that basically the movement was very simple—each time when the center of gravity shifts on a direct line, the limbs make a curve, and with the least chance shaking, the whole marionette assumes a certain rhythmical movement resembling a dance. In those cases when the movement is not a direct line, the character of its curvatures does not rise above the second degree, and most often it is elliptical, a form which is characteristic of the human body, and which, because it is determined by the construction of the joints, is especially easy for the nervopast. The same ability is observed in constructing artificial limbs, where the ability to perform the most varied movements is achieved by proportionality, mobility, and the light weight of the prosthesis, but mainly by the distribution of the centers of gravity, which must be analogous to the natural distribution. [. . .]*
> *Further, Kleist goes on to the question of how the intrusion of consciousness disorganizes man's natural gracefulness. [. . .] In this way identical views were established by Kleist and his companion about the nonorganized naturalness of reflexive movements. And from this, Kleist's final conclusion became clear: that perfect movement is characteristic only of completely unselfconscious beings (animals, puppets), or of a being who has absolute consciousness—according to Kleist—'a divinity.*[23]

Although Meyerhold strongly admired both Craig and Kleist, it was not the lack of consciousness in the marionette that they praised that attracted him to their theories. It was rather the enigmatic, enchanting quality of the puppet, neither man nor a God, yet with the qualities of both. In his essay, "Two Puppet Theatres," Meyerhold writes:

> *The director of the first [puppet theatre] wants his puppets to look and behave like real men. Like an idolater who expects the idol to nod its head, this puppet-master wants his dolls to emit sounds resembling the human voice. In his attempts to reproduce reality "as it really is," he improves the puppets further and further until finally he arrives at a far simpler solution to the problem: replace the puppets with real men.*
> *The other director realizes that his audience enjoys not only the humorous plays which the puppets perform but also—and perhaps more important—their actual movements and poses which, despite all attempts to reproduce life on the stage, fail to resemble exactly what the spectator sees in real life.*
> *Whenever I watch contemporary actors performing, I am reminded of the sophisticated puppet theatre of the first director, that is, the theatre in which man has replaced the puppet. Here man strives just as hard as the puppet to imitate real life. The reason he is summoned to replace the puppet is that in copying reality he can do something which is beyond the puppet: he can achieve an exact representation of life.*
> *The other director wanted to make his puppets imitate real people, too, but he quickly realized that as soon as he tried to improve the puppet's mechanism it lost part of its charm. It was as though the puppet were resisting such barbarous improvements with all its being. The director came to his senses when he realized that there is a limit beyond which there is no alternative but to replace the puppet with a man. But how could he part with the puppet which had created a world of enchantment with its incomparable movements, its expressive gestures achieved by some magic known to it alone, its angularity which reaches the heights of true plasticity?*
> *I have described these two puppet theatres in order to make the actor consider whether he should assume the servile role of the puppet, which affords no scope for personal creativity, or whether he should create a theatre like the one where the puppet stood up for itself and did not yield to the director's efforts to transform it [emphasis mine]. 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. The stage of the puppet theatre is a sounding board for the strings of the puppet's art. On this stage things are not as they are because nature is like that but because that is how the puppet wishes it—and it wishes not to copy but to create.*
> *[. . .] When man appeared on the stage, why did he submit blindly to the director who wanted to transform the actor into a puppet of the naturalistic school? Man has yet to feel the urge to create the art of man on the stage.*[24]

For Meyerhold, in fact, there is no affinity between man and puppet. On the contrary, each has his own qualities, and any attempts at making one look like the other is ultimately doomed to failure. There comes a point when the simple solution is to replace one with the other, but then the process can start all over again: trying to make man into puppet and puppet into man, ad infinitum. The puppet cannot become man, as man cannot become puppet. The marionette theatre has a world of its own, the vocabulary of a few gestures, gentleness, and restraint, which can project the same emotions as in the actors' theatre, but only when it is allowed to remain within its own laws. Although inanimate, the puppet enchants us with its enigma; it evokes emotions often with more affect than the actor of "the old school":

> *When the puppet weeps, the hand holds the handkerchief away from the eyes; when the puppet kills, it stabs its opponent so delicately that*

[22] Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über Marionette," *Mask* Volume 1 (1908): 12.
[23] Eisenstein in Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 183.
[24] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 128–29.

the tip of the sword stops short of the breast; when one puppet slaps another, no colour comes off the face; when puppet lovers embrace, it is with such care that the spectator observing their caresses from a respectful distance does not think to question his neighbor about the consequences.[25]

Sometimes, the movement of the finger, the raising of a brow or a twitch at the corner of one's lips can reveal more about a character's inner feelings and have a more powerful effect on the viewer than the most ebullient and grandiloquent elocution:

If an actor of the old school wished to move the audience deeply, he would cry out, weep, groan and beat his breast with his fists. Let the new actor express the highest point of tragedy [. . .] almost coldly, without shouting or lamenting. He can achieve profundity without recourse to exaggerated tremolo. [. . .] We need some new means of expressing the ineffable, of revealing that which is concealed.[26]

In order to express "that which is concealed," one's entire body has to be included in the acting vocabulary and controlled in the same manner in which other theatrical elements are controlled. Although the puppet's face remains always unchangeable, we still recognize the emotions it communicates to us via the movements of its entire figure:

One of the most important elements in the mastery of one's material is the ability to place and shift one's body in the stage space, that is to play raccourcis.[27] *If we take a toy, a "Bibabo" [a hand puppet], we will see that the toy is perceived by us laughing, crying, and so forth, in spite of the fact that the Bibabo mask is immobile, the changes depending solely on the change of raccourcis: the secret isn't in the mimicry, but in the bodily movement; with skillful use, the mask can express everything that is expressed by mimicry.* [28]

By his bodily movements, thoughtfully controlled and calculated, the actor could evoke the desired effect in the spectators. The mask assumed by an actor is both a part of him and that which he has to master:

How does one reveal this extreme diversity of character to the spectator? With the aid of the mask. The actor who has mastered the art of gesture and movement (herein lies his power!) manipulates his mask in such a way that the spectator is never in any doubt about the character he is watching: whether he is the foolish buffoon from Bergamo or the Devil [. . .] [t]he mask enables the spectator to see not only the actual Arlecchino before him but all the Arlecchinos who live in his memory. Through the mask the spectator sees every person who bears the merest resemblance to the character. But is it the mask alone which serves as the mainspring for all the enchanting plots of the theatre?[29]

The mask was that which allowed the actor to control himself and the audience, to reveal that which is concealed. But in Soviet Russia, nothing was to be concealed, nothing had to be revealed. If Stanislavsky's psychological theatre of the truth presented no ambiguities and surprises, Meyerhold's theatre of the hidden, of the invisible manipulations, put forth a number of problems. On one hand, its premise, man being in control of himself, was very much in tune with Russian propaganda; on the other hand, Meyerhold's actor was fundamentally split, a condition that presented no problems within the space of theatre but which involuntarily put into question basic premises of Soviet ideology.

3. Body as a Machine

Biomechanics was part of a new Soviet Russia. As one critic pointed out, "*If the theatre was to survive and play a dynamic part in the future Soviet culture, then it would have to be transformed by the same factors that were guiding the rest of Soviet life*."[30] Thus, in elaborating his exercises, Meyerhold drew on "the scientific methodologies that were then current in Soviet industry and culture" (Taylor's system of time management) and the psychological research popular at the time in Russia (James's behavioral theory, according to which one experienced emotions after performing certain actions, not vice versa).

Taylor's method of time management became popular in Europe in the early 1900s. In Russia, Taylorist experiments were first conducted following the 1905 Revolution:

Investigating each work unit on the production line, Taylor came to the conclusion that the worker's physical movements were among the least efficient in the entire work process. [. . .] Analyzing the execution of each work task according to precise motions, which he timed and regulated within fractions of a second, Taylor sought to find the most efficient movements and gestures for each kind of activity. Calling his study "motion economy," Taylor had soon to take into account such nonlinear and unmechanical factors as work rhythms, balance, muscular groupings, fatigue, and "rest minutes." Through trial and error, Taylor developed a system of "work cycles," each involving a whole network of movements and pauses, allowing the laborer to produce the greatest output with the least amount of strain.[31]

[25] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 129.
[26] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 55.
[27] *Raccourci*—the foreshortening, the visual change of the form of an object placed in an unaccustomed position for the observer (primarily on the horizontal place of vision).
[28] Meyerhold in Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 154.
[29] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 130–31.
[30] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 34.
[31] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 35.

If in America and Europe the Taylorist system of work management was used to improve productivity, in Russia the aspect of efficiency gained an ideological dimension. Soviet Russia was building a new world in which each worker's capacities would be used in a superior manner. Influenced by the time-and-motion study and by Taylor's theory of labor, Meyerhold's biomechanics treated an actor like a worker whose movements had to be maximally utilized. *"It is essential,"* says Meyerhold, *"to discover those movements in which work facilitate the maximum use of work time."*[32] Efficient use of time required from the worker eliminates superfluous movements, as well as rhythm, stability and the correct positioning of the body's center of gravity. In this sense, the worker represented a crossover of the machine and marionette. Coordinating his movements as to maximize their productivity, he looked like a mechanized puppet; no gesture performed by him was accidental or off-balance. On the labor market, to win in the competition with machines, the worker had to become as efficient and infallible as they were, or he was at risk of being replaced. If an actor were not to be replaced by the marionette, his movements, according to Meyerhold should be designed in the similar manner to those of a worker. Their precision should make them as economical as possible in order to "*facilitate the quickest possible realization of the objective*."[33] For Meyerhold, as for Craig, art was a conscious process which left no space for the random and spontaneous actions. Hence, the idea (objective) attempted to be conveyed by the performance should be treated as a final goal of the production, in which workers'/ dancers' movements should be maximally efficient as to accelerate its realization. This instrumental treatment of actors demanded them to approach their bodies as though they were machines whose mechanics had to be discovered, studied and utilized for the objective purpose.

The actor's movements had to be designed in such a manner as to achieve the "*maximum expressiveness on the stage*" with the most economic and efficient movement.[34] In Meyerhold's words: "*In so far as the task of the actor is the realization of a specific objective, his means of expression must be economical in order to ensure that precision of movement which will facilitate the quickest possible realization of the objective. The methods of Taylorism may be applied to the work of the actor in the same way as they are to any form of work with the aim of maximum productivity*."[35] The objective (that is, what emotions spectators were to be feeling) was dictated by the director. His job was to seek the most efficient and economic movements that would lead him to accomplish one goal: to project a very specific effect on the audience. In order to execute the movements as precisely as necessary, the actor had to learn to control his body; only then would he be able to control the audience. Robert Leach points out that:

> *Meyerhold arrived at this system by way of Diderot, who suggested that "At the very moment when [the actor] touches your heart, he is listening to his own voice . . . He has rehearsed to himself every note of his passion . . . He knows exactly when he must produce his handkerchief and shed tears." Mediated by Coquelin, this enabled Meyerhold to produce a formula which suggested that unlike other artists, the actor was both the controller and the instrument of his art. He must therefore learn absolute control of his instrument—his body—so that it would obey precisely the requirements of the brain, intellect and imagination. "The first principle of biomechanics," he wrote, "is: the body is a machine, and the person working it is a machine-operator."*[36]

The actor's body was his tool, with which he was to accomplish the goal of stimulating the spectator. Meyerhold often begun his lessons with Coquelin's formula of the actor's double nature: "*A^1 is the idea, the intelligence, and A^2 is the material: the body, the voice, etc. Biomechanics was a system for training the actor's material*."[37]

The perception of the body as a machine was not specific to Meyerhold. In Soviet Russia, the work of two other directors, Ukrainian Nikolai Foregger (*Machine Dance*), and Russian, Boris Ferdinandov (Experimental-Heroic Theatre) was devoted primarily to investigations of methods which would allow man to metamorphose into a total machine, one in which everything, body, movements and emotions, could be mechanically controlled. The Constructivist treatment of a body itself as a machine directed some artistic endeavors toward the exploration of the kinetic possibilities of the human organism. The machine was deified and romanticized by Constructivists:

> *I.B. Arbatov, one of the theoreticians of Constructivism, supposed with a sort of logic that theater must become "the factory of the qualified man," that the stage "inevitably will arrive at plotless theatrical art, thanks to which theater will have before itself the opportunity to experiment with the material elements of theater (dynamics of light, color line, volume in general and in particular that of the human body). This will allow the results obtained in the stage laboratory to be transferred into life, creating a new our real everyday social life*."[38]

In his *Machine Dance*, Nikolai Foregger employed very specific techniques of combining the perfect rhythm and precision in order to transform the movements of his actors into those of robots. To further enhance the mechanical-like

[32] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 197.
[33] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 197.
[34] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 36.
[35] Meyerhold in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 198.
[36] Robert Leach, "Revolutionary Theatre, 1917–1930," in Leach and Borovsky, *A History of Russian Theatre*, 310.
[37] Ernst Garin in Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work*, 38.
[38] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 292.

effect of his dance, Foregger adhered to Craig's suggestion of eliminating individual expression from the performance. Describing the spectacle designed by Foregger, Robert Leach says: "*Everything was performed in strict tempo, with maximum precision, and with no expression on the performers' faces. The aim was clearly Constructivist, in the sense that it inherently commented on human efficiency and on taking possession of man's mechanical heritage*."[39] Leach further describes Foregger's work:

> Theatre of Four Masks *had operated in the sitting-room of his own home in the immediate post-revolutionary years. In 1921 he opened a new workshop, MastFor (Masterskaya Foreggera), where he developed his own system of theatrical and physical training, known as TePhyTrenage. Like Meyerhold, he divided the actor's functioning into two—that of the body, which must be like a machine, and that of the controlling brain—and developed a large number of exercises that enabled his actors to present programmes that mixed acrobatics, dance and stylized acting. [. . .] In all his shows, Foregger's company danced—often the most modern, Western, "decadent" dances, like the tango, the foxtrot, or the shimmy. Their most original dance, however, which gained the director-choreographer notoriety and international notice, was the "machine dance," first shown on 13 February 1923. Using performers in tight black-and-white leotards, he created a kaleidoscope of mechanical patterns the like of which had never been seen before. The dancers ran onto stage, rapidly formed a pyramid or similar "construction" and to the accompaniment of a "noise orchestra" [. . .], the clanging of metal objects, whispers and shrieks from the players themselves—they gradually stirred into mechanical motion. Their arms, or legs, sometimes their whole bodies, made pistons, gear-levers, crank handles.*[40]

Similar method was used by Ferdinandov, whose "*programme attempted to train actors in the 'mechanical' calling forth of emotion, frequently with the use of the metronome, and laid stress on breaking down text and movement into rhythmic compartments, which sometimes made Ferdinandov's actors seem like marionettes*."[41]

At the time, in Germany, the Bauhaus director Oscar Schlemmer also experimented with the idea using geometric costumes, mechanized movements, and spatial arrangements in which man remained one more object. For Schlemmer, however, the purpose was not to celebrate the "machine age", but on the contrary, to demonstrate its limitations. Schlemmer employed a method very similar to Shreyer's, with the exception that his actor never fully became the marionettes. In Schlemmer, the antagonism between man and the industrial labyrinth surrounding him is paralleled with the antagonism between man and surrounding him theatrical / space. That confrontation between actor and space led to "an intensification of their peculiar natures." As Schlemmer put it: "*Man, the human organism, stands in the cubical, abstract space . . . Each has different laws of order. Whose shall prevail? . . . Either abstract space is adapted . . . to the natural man and transformed back to nature . . . or natural man . . . is recast to fit its mold*."[42] The intrinsic antagonism between man and space creates a milieu in which the actor could not escape the objectification forced on him by the designed stage space. The only way to salvage his subjectivity was to merge with the surrounding objects, and to "*use [his] body as [a means] of visually exploring the abstract laws of the theatre [space]*."[43] One way of transforming an actor into an object was to design a costume that would fragment his body into geometric shapes, emphasizing its material qualities (e.g., Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*). Confining an actor to a particular set of gestures, the mechanical costume was able to alter the relationship between the human body and space. The interaction of body and space generated tense contradictory movements enforced by the physical geometry of the space. Structuring the action of the performance, these contradictory drives would find their outcome in the conquest of the abstract space by its "primary object"—man. Becoming an object, the actor could compete on equal terms with the objectifying of his space, and only then could he assert his individuality in relation to it. Although the robot-like costume deprived the individual of all signs of his subjective existence, it merged him into the surrounding structure, transforming his body into a sign, a symbol, an idea—which, in connection with others, became a conceptual part of a structure which in itself was a form of subjective expression. "*The 'object' is nothing if it is to be merely an isolated thing; only in the universal system of reference does it gain significance*."[44] In his understanding of performance as a total project, Schlemmer agreed with Meyerhold's notion of total effect.

For Schlemmer, however, a human being could never be replaced by the machine. He says in his diaries: "*Not machine, not abstract – always man!*"[45] Realizing that the human being was increasingly turning into machine, an object, Schlemmer also knew that man's creative impulses would allow him to retain his human emotions. "*Modern Life has become so mechanized, thanks to machines and technology we cannot possibly ignore, that we are intensely*

[39] Leach, Robert. *Revolutionary Theatre*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2005, 119.
[40] Leach, 314.
[41] Leach, 127.
[42] Oscar Schlemmer, "Man and Art: Figure," in *Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*, ed. Teresa Brayshaw and Noel Witts. Routledge: NY, 2014, 418.
[43] Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre*, 161.
[44] Oscar Schlemmer, *Man: Teaching Notes from the Bauhaus*, ed. Heimo Kuchling. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971, 23.
[45] Schlemmer, Oscar. *Letters and Diaries*, selected and edited by Tut Schlemmer. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972, 116.

aware of man as a machine and the body as a mechanism. ... Everything which can be mechanized is mechanized. The result: our recognition of that which can not be mechanized."[46]

4. The Body Politics. The Politics of the Body

Meyerhold's biomechanics epitomized "*the dream of man 'organized' according to the principles of mechanics, of man ideally adapted to 'mechanized life.' It was supposed that the theater of the near future would be a sort of school giving the audience lessons in rational, laconic, expedient motion. Man was viewed as a machine that needed to learn how to control itself. The stage, accordingly, took upon itself the modest function of demonstrating the already well-adjusted human 'mechanisms' as an example to all*."[47] As a system, biomechanics was "*designed to foster in the actor a sense of complete self-awareness and self-control in performance*."[48]

Using his physical agility, the actor could penetrate deeper into the complexity of his character than he could by trying to become his character. Meyerhold often repeated that it is not important how the actor feels: "*Biomechanics makes no pretense of expressing the internal content of human experience and so forth*."[49] For the viewer, the actor's personal state means nothing. There can be an unbridgeable discrepancy between what the actor feels and what the spectator thinks he feels and, ultimately, what the spectator feels himself. In the words of one critic: "*The function of acting is not merely to fill the performer with hidden thoughts and feelings, but to communicate expressively with the audience. Whether an actor feels 'correctly' or not becomes immaterial if the spectator cannot see and feel the result. Theatre is much more than an exercise in 'truthful' emotion; it involves an entire spectrum of scenic elements, acting being one of them*."[50] The theatre was meaningless without the audience, and it is the spectator and his emotional response that should be the focus of the entire theatrical endeavor, not the actor and his emotions.

Thus, "*nothing was to be spontaneous or apparently haphazard, nothing was to give the impression of 'real life.' For Meyerhold, a production was more like a carefully constructed symphony, in which each element—theatrical equivalents of violins, oboes, percussion or French horns—was synthesized and given expressive force by a director-conductor*."[51] As Konstantin Rudnitsky noted: "*Very often the pause serves as the means for uncovering the most complex stage interrelationships. Occasionally, only after a pause, does the meaning of the entire preceding scene becomes clear*."[52] Knowing that there is nothing random and unplanned and that every subtle movement and every, even the barely visible, gesture has a significance for the meaning of the entire show; the spectator must necessarily be transformed into "*a vigilant observer*."[53]

The actor working with his body as a machine to influence the viewer brought to light a number of theoretical and ideological problems. Following Taylorist principles, "*biomechanics proudly billed itself as a system whose aim was to create 'a man wielding his body . . . sturdy, strong and agile, useful not only for art, but at any moment ready to take a hammer and stand at the anvil.' In other words, biomechanics promised to transform not only the actor, but man in general (fully in tune with the LEF concepts of 'life-construction' (zhiznestroenie)—which the new art was necessarily to pursue)*."[54] If the actor was seen as a machine operator in charge of himself, how were viewers to be seen as whom the actor was to influence? If the same ideology were to be applied to the spectator, it would be impossible for him to be affected. If the actor was a model New Soviet Man, fully in control of his body and emotions, his goal—to manipulate the audience's emotions—put the spectator in a position completely opposite that of the model New Soviet Man. In this scenario, the viewer was a weak, spineless looker, whose emotions could be easily manipulated by the others. The relationship between an actor and the viewer was, as Paul Schmidt put it, "a social act."[55] But what social schema did this act replicate? The one answer that inevitably came to mind was the bourgeoisie ideology (along with religion) and its exploitative ramifications. The other answer, equally apparent, was the Soviet party elite and the Soviet people. For how was the New Soviet Man to create himself as strong and unyielding? Strong and unyielding in relationship to what? If the application of Taylorism to theatre created sufficient ideological conflict, Meyerhold's other influence, James's behaviorist theory, added to the already problematic theoretical context.

For James, emotions were produced by behavior, not vice versa; thus, they could be changed if proper behavior

[46] In "Man and Art", 416.
[47] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 294.
[48] Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 176.
[49] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 57.
[50] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 2.
[51] Leach, "Russian Theatre in World Theatre," in Leach and Borovsky, *A History of Russian Theatre*, 2.
[52] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 305.
[53] Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 38.
[54] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 296.
[55] Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work*, 6.

was enforced. "*Using the dictum, 'I saw the bear, I ran, I became frightened,' James attempted to demonstrate the physiological basis of his theory. The act of running, not the bear, caused the fright. Or as Meyerhold put it: to trigger the sensation of fear, a person would only have to run—with his eyebrows raised and pupils dilated. Regardless of what the person was stimulated by or thinking, an automatic reflex signifying fear would be felt throughout his body*."[56] Furthermore, "*In keeping with the principles of reflexology, the Meyerhold actor approached the psychology of a character not internally through 'experiencing' his feelings and thoughts, but externally by means of physical actions*."[57] Performing certain movements which were to represent specific feelings, the actor would ultimately become excited and experience them as well. It is at this point that biomechanics differed significantly from Stanislavsky's method. For Stanislavsky, the actor had to feel first, and then perform actions dictated to him by his feelings. For Meyerhold, the feeling came after the action. "*The route to image and feeling must begin not with experience, not with seeking to plumb the meaning of the role, not with the attempt to assimilate the psychological essence of the phenomenon, in sum, not 'from within' but from without; it must begin with motion*."[58] Thus, inevitably, the actor did not remain cold. As Meyerhold pointed out many times, the actor too experienced the emotions: "*It is this arousal (emotion) that distinguishes the actor from the marionette, giving the former the possibility to infect the spectator and arouse a reciprocal emotion which is already a nourishment (fuel) for the succeeding play (an ecstatic state)*."[59] In 1934, I. Ilinsky, one of Meyerhold's most prominent actors, defended biomechanics as a method that "brings an actor to emotionally saturated performance and experience":

> *Few know that the biomechanical system of performance [. . .] also extends to the most complex problems of [. . .] the ability to direct one's emotions and one's acting excitability. The emotional saturation of an actor, temperament, excitability, the emotional sympathy of the artist-actor with the creative emotional experiences of his hero—this, too, is a fundamental element in the complex biomechanical system.*[60]

James's theory applied to theatre created three ideological problems. The first was very much in tune with the issue brought forth by Taylorism. How was the actor to remain in control of himself if his movements produced an emotional effect not only in the viewer but in the actor himself? How was the actor to remain a cold manipulator of the audience's emotional apparatus while also allowing himself to experience the emotions he was portraying? Was it even possible, and if so, in what sense did he remain in control of his emotions and of his body? Who was in control of whom, and thus, who was in power in the actor–audience relationship? This question led to another, more problematic issue. Reflexology was important insofar as it closely followed the Marxist doctrine of "*circumstances making men just as much as men make circumstances*,"[61] that is, of material conditions dictating one's behavior: "*The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first most directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. [. . .] Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life*."[62]

The consciousness of the proletariat was thus created by the exploitative ideology of the upper classes. There was no "human" nature specific to men; there were only conditions that made them what they were. In this sense, man could be changed according to his circumstances. The all-too-well-known error in Marx's thesis lies in the question of who is to determine in which direction the proletariat must go to liberate itself from the reign of bourgeoisie ideology. Marx's answer is the "awakened class consciousness," but who is then to say which consciousness is "awakened" and which are (if not all of them) products of external conditions? Who is 'woke' and how do you know? If ideology can be used by the bourgeoisie class to manipulate the proletariat, it can just as easily be used by those claiming to have an "awakened class consciousness." If men were to be changed by their circumstances, who decided what circumstances they were put into? In the theatre, it was the director who decided what emotions the audience and the viewers would feel; the director determined what the ultimate message of the entire spectacle would be. If an actor were to feel a specific emotion, he was asked to perform a particular set of actions; his actions provoked reactions in the viewer and in himself. Who was the director of Soviet Russia, and in what position were the Soviet people? These and other questions perpetually loomed over Meyerhold's head, and in Soviet Russia, their meaning grew more and more ominous.

Although in theatre the theoretical discrepancies and paradoxes did not present a major problem, in Soviet Russia, caught in the grip of history and ideology, any discrepancy signaled a danger for a newly evolving fragile system based on nothing but blind power and illusory promises. Trying to find a way out of the theoretical trap, Eisenstein wrote:

> *And so, then, according to James' theory, movement comes first: a person is sad because tears are falling from his eyes; but another theory*

[56] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 37.
[57] Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 49.
[58] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 295.
[59] Meyerhold in Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 157.
[60] Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold the Director*, 296.
[61] Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 165.
[62] Marx, "The German Ideology," in *Selected Writings*, 155.

> *says that the tears flow because the person is sad. Actually, both of these are seemingly correct. The very thing is, the very posing of the question bears in it the traditions, the remnants of a dualistic worldview, that is, the ripping apart of the unity of these manifestations, the psychic and the motor, as a single process.*[63]

In Eisenstein's attempt to redirect the issue away from ambiguity to the problem of the dichotomy between dualism and universalism, these words sound today like an apologia for Meyerhold. By appealing to totality, Eisenstein appealed to that in Russian propaganda which could save Meyerhold and his theatre. But Meyerhold was not interested in the ideological unity of the party stanza. In theatre, he found his own unity in the grotesque. The grotesque was unifying insofar as it had not rejected any part of life; it combined the pompous and the noble, the ugly and the beautiful:

> *The grotesque, advancing beyond stylization, is a method of synthesizing rather than analyzing. In turning away details, the grotesque recreates the fullness of life (in a perspective of "improbable suitability," according to Pushkin's expression). / In reducing the richness of the empirical world to a typical unity, stylization impoverishes life whereas the grotesque refuses to recognize only one aspect—only the vulgar or only the elevated. It mixes the opposites and by design accents the contradictions.* The only effect which counts is the improvised, the original.[64]

> *[The grotesque] is a deliberate exaggeration and reconstruction (distortion) of nature and the unification of objects that are not united by either nature or the customs of our daily life. The theatre, being a combination of natural, temporal, spatial, and numerical phenomena, is itself outside of nature. It finds that these phenomena invariably contradict our everyday experience and that the theatre itself is essentially an example of the grotesque. Arising from the grotesque of a ritual masquerade, the theatre inevitably is destroyed by any given attempt to remove the grotesque—the basis of its existence—from it.*[65]

But life in Soviet Russia wasn't finding its unity in the grotesque, and the Party ideology did not wish to combine "the vulgar with the elevated." "*On 17 December 1937, Pravda published the article 'An Alien Theatre.' On 7 January, 1938, the government committee with responsibility for the arts decreed the closure of Gostim as a theatre that had adopted a 'totally bourgeois formalist position, not in keeping with Soviet art*.'"[66] There are other reasons for why Meyerhold and his theatre did not survive Stalinist Russia and why Stanislavsky's did (Meyerhold's abstract art invited ambiguity which Stanislavsky's realist theatre did not), but the politics of the human body and consciousness, as well as the question, to whom do they belong (the party or the individual), were fundamental for the Soviet ideology. Meyerhold's theatre dared what others did not: it dared to ask them.

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63 Eisenstein in Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 207.
64 Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque*, 66.
65 Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque*, 68.
66 Inna Solovyova, "The Theatre and Socialist Realism, 1926–1953," in Leach and Borovsky, *A History of Russian Theatre*, 332.

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