THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Fragments of Times and Spaces:
Collage in the Theatre of Vsevolod E. Meyerhold, 1906 – 1926

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Fragments of Times and Spaces: Collage in the Theatre of Vs. E. Meyerhold, 1906 – 1926

Abstract

The (re)discovery of collage by the Cubists and futurists was one of the most significant artistic developments of the last century. Collage practice was embraced by artists and intellectuals as more than a formal process involving the combination of image fragments using glue. From Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, through the Dadaists, the surrealists, and on into the era of post-modernity, collage has become a metaphysical expression of a world in flux, characterised by relativity and uncertainty.

Often working in close personal contact with the avant-garde artists, theatre director Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold was intimately involved with the political, social and cultural upheavals of the early twentieth century. This thesis argues that Meyerhold’s work with the artists of the avant-garde has been under-investigated in English language scholarship, and that the influence of artistic developments on his aesthetic extends beyond the well-documented instances of causal cross-over (for example, in stage design). Seeing the lack of scholarship relating Meyerhold’s work directly to the collage device as an oversight, this thesis constructs a collage-based model through which the director’s theatre can be read.

Collage in Meyerhold’s theatre is initially identified in the construction of the mise-en-scène. By 1926, the device emerges as the organizational principle underlying the performance as a whole, shedding light on the form and function of the director’s aesthetic. Particularly significantly, through collage, Meyerhold’s theatre is seen to engage with the questions of subjectivity and objectivity in the audience experience, and, in line with anti-positivist developments in philosophy, radically deconstructs the objective as a category. In addition, through collage, Meyerhold’s theatre finds vital points of contact with today’s performance practice which often engages with the multiplication of spatial and temporal frameworks through the use of multi-media techniques.
# Fragments of Times and Spaces:
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Introduction

[Through collage, the] displaced object entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring.¹

- Pablo Picasso

Abstract

In spring 1912, Pablo Picasso executed his first collage: *Still Life with Chair Caning* [see plate 1]. The work combines oil painting with the inclusion of two fragments: a piece of oilcloth printed with imitation chair caning, and a section of rope. The fragments are selected with a wit which was to become characteristic of Picasso’s use of collage. The chair caning is imitation, rather than real, calling into question the value of *trompe l’oeil* representation in fine art. The rope encircles the canvas, taking the place of a frame, and challenging the value of the conventions of art exhibition. The artist’s ironic approach to the selection and combination of fragments in the artwork revitalized the age-old collage technique.² The device was imbued with new potency and new appeal to the early twentieth century avant-garde artists who were seeking to explore on the canvas the limitations of fine art in light of the social, cultural and philosophical revolutions taking place at the turn of the twentieth century.

² It is important to note that collage techniques have been used throughout the history of art (in Japanese culture, for example, or in the ‘paste-ups’ of Victorian England). The significance of the avant-gardists’ use of the technique is found in their adaptation of the device to the High Modernist period (see, for example, Perloff, 1986, p. 47).
Plate 1  
Still Life with Chair Caning  
Pablo Picasso. 1912.
The career of Russian theatre maker Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold coincided with the establishment of collage practice amongst the avant-garde. Meyerhold’s personal and professional contact with the avant-garde artists (including Picasso himself) is well documented, as is the cross-over between the European and Russian avant-gardes, and the wide availability of seminal European artworks in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In English language scholarship, however, Meyerhold’s work is more frequently investigated in terms of the political upheavals in early twentieth century Russia than in terms of the modernist cultural upheaval which redefined the weltanschauung of intellectuals and artists across the Western world, and of which the collage device is a crucial element.

Using this oversight in Meyerhold scholarship as a starting point, this study contends that between 1906 and 1926 elements of Meyerhold’s stage aesthetic constitute the use of the collage device as an organizational principle for performance. Through his adaptation of this device to the stage, Meyerhold’s productions demonstrate a concern with the anti-positivist philosophies of space and time which underlie the spatial structure of Cubist and futurist artworks. This in turn suggests a significant and lasting influence of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde artists on Meyerhold’s post-revolutionary oeuvre. In addition, in terms of cultural history, collage finds in Meyerhold a theatrical exponent as early as the 1920s. This predates earlier analyses which see the application of collage to theatre as a

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4 Weltanschauung is taken to signify the world-view of a specific era, culture or group.
post-modern development, the use of collage in Meyerhold’s theatre indicating a modernist exponent of an artistic device which was essentially modernist in origin.\(^5\)

II

Identifying Differences: Meyerhold Scholarship in Russian and English

A comparison of recent Meyerhold scholarship in English and Russian suggests differing trends in academic approaches to the director’s work. Trends in Russian scholarship indicate a greater tendency towards in depth analysis of individual elements of the Meyerhold aesthetic, as well as towards the social and cultural contextualization of the director’s work, and a less divisive attitude concerning the question of politics versus form at the Meyerhold Theatre.\(^6\) Through the comparison of these Russian trends to the body of work available in English on Meyerhold, this study will suggest that there is a gap in English language scholarship, and that an alternative contextualization of Meyerhold’s work should be considered, in terms of international cultural developments at the beginning of the twentieth century.

By the late 1930s, Meyerhold had become *persona non grata* in the USSR. The State Meyerhold Theatre was officially closed in January 1938, Meyerhold was arrested in June of the following year, and executed a little over seven months later. After his death, Stalin managed to secure the complete suppression of Meyerhold’s work within Russia extending as far as the publication of commemorative books for his productions which do not mention

\(^5\) See, for example, Roger Copeland’s work on Merce Cunningham, which will be explored in greater detail below, pp. 31 – 33, 143 – 144.

\(^6\) Since Meyerhold’s dismissal as a formalist by the Socialist Realist movement in Russia, there has been a tendency to see his work as either concerned primarily with politics or concerned primarily with aesthetics (with a purely opportunistic approach to the political situation). As a result, 1917 has been emphasized as a turning point in Meyerhold’s work, and a divisive attitude has arisen towards the pre- and post-revolutionary periods of his career. Although the 1917 Revolutions clearly mark a new emphasis in Meyerhold’s work, the value of imposing this sort of schism in the director’s oeuvre must be questioned.
his name (as if, as Laurence Senelick observes, “the *mise-en-scène* had been generated spontaneously”). The atmosphere of secrecy engendered by the Cult of Personality surrounding Stalin and his activities was equally problematic for researchers of Meyerhold outside of Russia. Inaccurate scholarship on Meyerhold (Yury Yelagin’s discredited account of Meyerhold’s ‘last speech,’ for example) is clearly a direct consequence of the suppression of information in the USSR under Stalin, and created a difficult situation for those scholars writing in English on Meyerhold during and after the Khrushchev Thaw. When Edward Braun began his investigation of Meyerhold in the 1960s, for example, the material available on the director both in Russia and abroad was sparse, and the Soviet Government proved hostile to the idea of allowing an English scholar into the country to study this subject.

By February 1956, when Stalin’s successor Nikita Khrushchev denounced the Personality Cult and initiated a new period of openness regarding the government’s activities during the Stalinist Purges, Meyerhold’s rehabilitation had already begun. In the summer of 1955, the date of his death was confirmed as 2nd February 1940. Shortly afterwards, on 26th November 1955, his death sentence was posthumously repealed. Meyerhold’s first mention in a book published in Russia is in Victor Komissarjevsky’s 1959 text, *Moscow*

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8 Yelagin’s book *Dark Genius* (New York: Imeni Chekhova, 1956) gives a distorted account of Meyerhold’s speech at the All-Soviet Directors’ Conference in 1939, in which he is portrayed as a hero, courageously defending his work in the face of government persecution. As Senelick (2003) highlights, more reliable accounts of the conference portray Meyerhold as broken, uninspiring and backtracking (see, for example, pp. 164 – 165).

9 In 1965, Braun’s application to study Meyerhold in the USSR was rejected because there was “no suitable supervisor for [the] project.” In interview with the author, 23rd February 2005.

10 On 25th February 1956, at the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev gave his ‘Secret Speech’ to the Soviet Government, in which he reported the findings of a committee he had established in 1955 to investigate deaths during the purges. The content of this speech became widely known across Russia, and is recognized as the initiation of the Khrushchev ‘Thaw’. A full account of Meyerhold’s arrest, execution and rehabilitation can be found in Edward Braun, ‘Meyerhold: The Final Act’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 9 (1993), 3 – 15.
Theatres. Although Komissarjevsky's assessment of him is far from thorough or complimentary, this brief mention signified Meyerhold's reappearance in theatrical scholarship in the USSR.\textsuperscript{12}

The mainstay of Meyerhold scholarship in English dates from the 1970s (c. 1969 to c. 1981) coinciding with the centenary of the director's birth in 1974. The texts produced during this period constitute Meyerhold's posthumous rehabilitation in English speaking countries, and include translations of his theoretical texts and of Russian tracts on the director, as well as a series of studies by English and American academics. The key Russian text in translation is also the most comprehensive record of Meyerhold's theatre, Konstantin Rudnitsky's \textit{Meyerhold the Director}, which provides an in depth commentary on Meyerhold's life and work, combining biographical and historical information with production analysis.\textsuperscript{13}

On his own admission, Edward Braun's 1969 translation of Meyerhold's writings \textit{Meyerhold on Theatre} came as "something of a revelation" to Western theatre practitioners and academics.\textsuperscript{14} Prior to Braun's publication, Western knowledge of the director had been sparse, drawn only from the recollections of visitors to Russia during the early Soviet period (the work of André Van Gyssegham or Norris Houghton, for example).\textsuperscript{15} Braun provided scholars with the first, and to date the most comprehensive, translation of

\textsuperscript{12} V. Komissarjevsky, \textit{Moscow Theatres} trans. by V. Schneier and W. Perelman (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959). The reference to Meyerhold can be found on pp. 39 - 40.

\textsuperscript{13} Konstantin Rudnitsky, \textit{Meyerhold the Director} trans. by George Petrov (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981).

\textsuperscript{14} In interview with the author, 23\textsuperscript{rd} February 2005. Braun suggests that the impact of \textit{Meyerhold on Theatre} can be judged from the review of the book in \textit{The Times Literary Supplement}, 8\textsuperscript{th} January 1970, p. 33 (no author). Braun's \textit{Meyerhold on Theatre} is published by Methuen (London, 1969, 1998).

Meyerhold's writings into English, and few supplements to this work can be found. Paul Schmidt's *Meyerhold at Work* (1996) combines extracts from Meyerhold's writings with recollections of those who met and worked alongside him, including translations from Russian key-text *Vstrechi s Meierkhol'dom [Meetings with Meyerhold]*.\(^{16}\) In addition, Alma Law has edited and translated material supplied by Aleksandr Gladkov in *Meyerhold Speaks, Meyerhold Rehearses* (1997).\(^{17}\) Gladkov, who worked alongside Meyerhold in the 1930s, records his recollections of ideas expressed by the director in rehearsal and conversation. As a result, this collection is more a series of Meyerhold's isolated reflections than a developed argument, giving the reader an insight into the director working practically in the rehearsal room rather than as theatre theorist.

What is striking about the publications on Meyerhold by English academics since 1969 is their generalized and predominantly historical nature. Aside from translations, work on Meyerhold in English is primarily descriptive of his life and oeuvre, with reference in places to his key theoretical principles. Braun (1969, 1979) and Robert Leach (1989), although still addressing Meyerhold's entire career, provide a more in depth, thematic, commentary.\(^{18}\)

There are few book-length English studies on Meyerhold which focus on one specific aspect of his oeuvre, or even take a primarily analytical rather than descriptive or historical

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Studies which take a less generalized outlook seem to focus on one of two areas: either Meyerhold’s actor training system and its practical application, or his work with set designers. Alma Law and Mel Gordon’s collaborative work *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics* (1996) focuses on Meyerhold’s work with the actor and his development of actor training systems, a subject that is popular no doubt because of its practical application for the modern actor (as Jonathan Pitches argues, Meyerhold’s work is preserved primarily through the bodies of those who worked alongside him). Marjorie Hoover’s 1988 study *Meyerhold and his Set Designers* is more applicable to the current research, providing a combination of historical overview and analysis of the contribution of design to his aesthetic. Moscow’s Galart publication by Alla Mikhailova, *Meyerhold and Set Designers* (1995), in both Russian and English, is an extensive collection of drawings and photographs of Meyerhold’s theatre, and also includes some analytical commentary on Meyerhold’s work with the designers themselves. Although these studies do not specifically contextualize Meyerhold in terms of international artistic developments, they lay the groundwork for the current research through their visual approach to the director’s aesthetic.

In terms of comparative studies researchers of Meyerhold tend to focus on the relationship of his aesthetic to that of other theatre practitioners, for example Katherine Bliss Eaton’s *The Theater of Meyerhold and Brecht* (1985), or, most recently, Robert Leach’s

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19 For example, the majority of texts attempt to address the director’s entire oeuvre, and take a broadly chronological approach. One notable exception is Leach (1989), whose work is ordered according to elements of Meyerhold’s aesthetic (actor, audience, mise-en-scène) making it a valuable analysis of the elements and principles of Meyerhold’s theatre.

Stanislavsky and Meyerhold (2003). Comparative work relating Meyerhold’s theatre to practices in the visual arts is rare in the English language, although it has been a focus of Russian studies since the 1920s, for example, in Nikolai Tarabukin’s work on The Government Inspector or The Queen of Spades, or in more recent research by Galina Titova (‘Meyerhold and the Artist’). An English language article published in Drama Review in 1973 by Nick Worrall suggests a Cubist and futurist influence on Meyerhold’s 1922 production of The Magnanimous Cuckold, and it is this suggestion that the current study takes as a starting point, and aims to expand to demonstrate the value and relevance of comparative studies of Meyerhold’s theatre which have an interdisciplinary focus. Meyerhold scholarship saw a surge of activity in the mid-to-late 1990s, including a Meyerhold conference as part of the Past Masters series at the Centre for Performance Research (Aberystwyth) and David Chambers’ Yale University/St. Petersburg Dramatic Academy production of The Government Inspector, both in 1996. In 1998, an edition of

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22 See Galina Titova, ‘Meierkhol’d i Khudozhnik’ in Meierkhol’d k Istorii Tvorcheskogo Metoda, ed. by N. V. Pesochinskii and E. A. Kukhta (St. Petersburg: Kul’t Inform Press, 1998), pp. 77 – 114; Nikolai Tarabukin, N. M. Tarabukin o V. E. Meierkholde (Moscow: O. G. I., 1998). Tarabukin’s work on the construction of spatial and temporal models in Meyerhold’s theatre is particularly significant. In his discussion of The Queen of Spades, premiering in 1935, falls outside of the current research, which identifies similar processes in Meyerhold’s earlier productions, using the collage device as a specific parallel to Meyerholdian theatre. Tarabukin’s work is as yet unavailable in translation.
24 Mention should also be made to the conference held in Paris, 6 - 12 November 2000, Meierkhol’d, rezhissura v perspective veka/ Meyerhold, la mise en scène dans le siècle (Meyerhold: Mise-en-scène in the Century), at which papers were given in French, Russian and English. The papers given at this conference are published in French, Russian and English by O.G.I (Moscow, 2001), edited by Béatrice Picon-Vallin and
Theater magazine (published by Yale University) was dedicated to Meyerhold, and included contributions in English and translations of work by Russian scholars. Since the millennium, however, new research on Meyerhold has been much more sparse. Two book-length studies were published in 2003: one the comparative study of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold (Leach), the other a general introduction to his work aimed at students, with an emphasis on practical exploration of his ideas (Pitches, as part of the Routledge ‘Performance Practitioners’ series). A minimal number of articles dedicated to Meyerholdian Theatre have been published in major journals since 2000. Of these, two relate his work to the debate on the nature of theatricality (Jestrovic in SubStance, 2002; Féral in SubStance 2002), and two are on actor training methods (American Theatre’s Approaches to Actor Training special section, 2004). The actor training articles, alongside practical explorations of Meyerhold’s theories through workshops and occasional performances, further highlight the belief that Meyerhold’s main relevance to the modern theatrical world is through the physical applications of his training system, biomechanics.

The articles by Jestrovic and Féral seem to suggest that Meyerhold’s main contribution to modern scholarship is as an aid to the definition of the buzz term ‘theatricality’.  

Vadim Shcherbakov. The International Federation for Theatrical Research conference in St. Petersburg, May 2004, also featured a Meyerhold panel. 


26 Two Russian practitioners, Gennadi Bogdanov and Alexei Levinsky, currently teach biomechanics, travelling around the world to run workshops in the system. Bogdanov has formed close links with English theatre company, Talia Theatrurn. He runs regular workshops with Talia (who are based in Manchester) and advises the company on production work, occasionally acting as a guest director. Talia consider themselves to be a theatre company whose work is rooted in the principles of biomechanical training and its application to performance. More information on Talia can be found at <www.taliatheatre.com> [accessed 15 June 2005].

27 The debate surrounding the term ‘theatricality’ is characterized by divergences in definition. One such definition is provided by Josette Féral, whose work clearly demonstrates why Meyerholdian theatre is of such interest to these scholars. Féral’s ideas are summarized by Janelle Reinelt in her article ‘The Politics of Discourse: Performativity meets Theatricality’ (SubStance, 31.2&3 2002, 201 – 215). She states: “For Féral, theatricality is a condition in which a certain cleavage in space opens up where the spectator looks to engage and to create the theatrical. Outside of the everyday, or rather a breach in it (brisure, clivage), this space of theatricality requires both the gaze of the spectator and the act of the other, but the initiative lies with the
In comparison, theatre scholarship in Russia has recently seen a significant increase in research on Meyerhold, and the Russian oeuvre combines general studies with those which are far more specific in outlook. A Meyerhold research group, headed by Oleg Feldman, has been established at the Moscow Institute of Arts Studies, and is currently contributing to the body of historical analyses a detailed complete history of Meyerhold’s creative work, the first (496 page) volume of which covers the years up to 1903, with a second volume (1903 – 1907) awaiting publication. In addition, this group has contributed a two-volume publication of newspaper and journal reviews of Meyerhold’s productions, and the publication of the letters and memoirs of Meyerhold’s step-daughter, Tatyana Yesenina. The scope of recent analytical studies in the Russian language on Meyerhold is vast, ranging from analyses of individual productions (notably the republication of a 1927 text containing a series of articles on The Government Inspector); to analyses of periods in his career, such as Galina Titova’s Meyerhold and Komissarzhevskaya: From Art Nouveau to Poetic Theatre; and analyses of technique, for example Alexander Ryaposov’s The Structure of Meyerhold’s Production. In Russia’s current post-glasnost climate, publication of texts banned under the Soviets has finally become possible. Nikolai Tarabukin’s study of Meyerhold’s use of stage space, for example, which was written in the 1930s, was published by O.G.I. (Moscow) in 1998.28

Discussing the nature of Meyerhold scholarship in Russia today, Professor Nikolai Pesochinsky, a leading Meyerhold researcher at the St. Petersburg Academy of Dramatic Art, remarks on the importance of spectatorship as creating a perceptual condition of theatricality (“theatricality is a dynamic of perception”, p. 206) resonates with Meyerholdian theatre. This survey of Russian scholarship on Meyerhold was kindly provided by Prof. Nikolai Pesochinsky at the St. Petersburg Academy of Dramatic Art through private correspondence. This study is deeply indebted to Prof. Pesochinsky, who in addition to this survey has also provided an outline of different trends in Russian scholarship which have been central to understanding current Russian attitudes towards Meyerhold.

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28 This survey of Russian scholarship on Meyerhold was kindly provided by Prof. Nikolai Pesochinsky at the St. Petersburg Academy of Dramatic Art through private correspondence. This study is deeply indebted to Prof. Pesochinsky, who in addition to this survey has also provided an outline of different trends in Russian scholarship which have been central to understanding current Russian attitudes towards Meyerhold.
Arts, concludes that Russian scholars do not “lack materials for studying Meyerhold as a unique personality in the arts who can not be classified in any political standard”, and that the focus of such scholarship in Russia is wide. He claims that:

Most [...] researchers concentrate their work on the methodology of the directing arts of Meyerhold. But it never works without considering many circumstances of social history and of arts history [...].

Pesochinsky suggests that Russian researchers of Meyerhold are keen above all to see his work in the context of not just the social and political, but also the cultural and artistic events that surrounded its production.

Pesochinsky’s assessment paints a different picture of trends in Meyerhold scholarship than that suggested by American researcher Mel Gordon in interview with Christopher de Haan in 1998. Describing revisionist tendencies in Russian scholarship, Gordon suggests that a product of these tendencies is a division amongst scholars between those who see Meyerhold as motivated entirely by his communist beliefs and those who see his work as purely aesthetically motivated and his relationship to politics as predominantly opportunistic. Judging from Pesochinsky’s refusal to classify Meyerhold “in any political standard”, this divisive, or revisionist, tendency is arguably more a feature of English language than Russian scholarship.

This thesis will address the lack of scholarship in English relating Meyerhold to the cultural life of the early twentieth century, and re-emphasize his status as modernist, contextualizing his work against that of those working alongside him in other media. In addition, it will challenge the divisive revisionism outlined by Gordon by seeking continuity between the

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29 Nikolai Pesochinsky, private correspondence, 11th January 2005.
30 Mel Gordon, in interview with Christopher de Haan, ‘Remembering Between the Lines’ Theater, 28.2 (1998), 10 – 18.
pre- and post-revolutionary periods of Meyerhold’s career. To this end, the study aims to identify parallels between Meyerhold’s theatre and the work of the avant-garde artists, particularly the Cubists, whose relationship to the cultural shift at the turn of the twentieth century has long been acknowledged.

III

General Outline

The initial aim of this thesis is to suggest a parallel between the conception of the canvas by the avant-garde artists, and Meyerhold’s conception of the stage space. Although Meyerhold’s conception of space in performance was uniquely theatrical, this study rests on the premise that fruitful analysis of Meyerhold’s organization of space can emerge from the director’s adaptation of fine arts processes to the unique conditions of stage performance. In order to provide a contextualization for the research, this study will consider the historical evidence of Meyerhold’s connections with the avant-garde artists, as well as his theoretical approach to the question of space in the theatre and the construction of the image on stage. Although simple, causal links are not central to the study in terms of the redefinition of Meyerhold’s use of stage space, the investigation of historical connections between the director and the artists provides justification for the choice of avant-garde art as a comparison point, indicating that this research has some precedent in Meyerhold’s life and work.

Meyerhold’s directorial career stretched from 1902 to 1938. During this period he contributed to some three hundred productions, over one hundred of which took place
between the years of 1902 and 1903. This output is far too large to investigate in any meaningful depth within the scope of this study, and some limitation of the productions addressed is imperative. Consequently, the thesis will focus only on Meyerhold’s work between the years of 1906 and 1926, and specifically on five productions of this period: *Sister Beatrice* (1906); *The Fairground Booth* (1914); *Masquerade* (1917); *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922); and *The Government Inspector* (1926). These productions have been selected as representative of Meyerhold’s work during four distinct periods of his development as a director between 1906 and 1926, namely his early symbolist-influenced period at the Moscow Art Theatre Studio on Porvorskaya Street and the Theatre of V. F. Komissarzhevskaya; his simultaneous projects between 1908 and 1917 at the Imperial Theatres and as Doctor Dapertutto; and his early and later communist periods post-1917.

As the collage technique is primarily a device for the organization and construction of the artist’s canvas, the search for parallels in Meyerhold’s theatre will operate initially at the level of image construction and the *mise-en-scène*. The identification of collage in Meyerhold’s work from 1906 to 1922 takes the form of the gradual emergence of a layered stage aesthetic operating on the same parallel principles of combination and juxtaposition as those of the avant-garde collage.

In 1906 Meyerhold began his first period of independent work as a director, having broken finally, and decisively, with the Moscow Art Theatre in late 1905. Despite his initial departure from the Art Theatre in 1902, Meyerhold’s directorial work with his provincial touring company, the Fellowship of the New Drama, where he worked sporadically from

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31 Robert Leach provides a full list of Meyerhold’s productions (1989, appendix 2, pp. 194 - 205).
1902 to 1906, was still significantly influenced by the production style of his Alma Mater. Indeed, Meyerhold himself referred to his creative work during these years as “slavishly imitating Stanislavsky”. He rejoined the Art Theatre in 1905, as head of an experimental project, the ill-fated Theatre Studio on Porvarskaya Street. The Studio project constituted an attempt by Stanislavsky to align the Art Theatre with emerging symbolist trends in the Russian arts. Seeing Meyerhold as epitomical of this New Theatre, Stanislavsky approached him to undertake the role of director at the Studio. However, the project collapsed before public performance, ostensibly due to the increasing social unrest in Russia leading to the 1905 attempt at revolution, but also because of artistic differences between the directors, Meyerhold’s ideas of experimentation not aligning with Stanislavsky’s expectations. The resulting split between the two masters was decisive.

In the context of this study, the relationship between Meyerhold and the Art Theatre forms a fundamental facet of the investigation into the director’s aesthetic. Meyerhold’s rejection of naturalism is a defining aspect of his theatre, and little can be contributed to Meyerhold scholarship by re-emphasizing the importance of the abstraction of art from life in his work. However, the significance of the identification of the collage device in Meyerhold’s aesthetic is that it suggests a framework through which the director aimed to translate reality into theatre.

Following the collapse of the Theatre Studio in 1905, Meyerhold was invited to join the company of Vera Fyodorovna Komissarzhevskaya, then considered the first lady of Russian theatre. At the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre, Meyerhold’s artistic control was complete and he found a forum for the symbolist experimentation that Stanislavsky had

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vetoed a year earlier. 1906 can consequently be seen as the first year of Meyerhold’s independent directorial work, no longer under the artistic or financial auspices of the Moscow Art Theatre.

In the context of this study, 1906 is also stylistically significant in the Meyerhold oeuvre, as it saw the initiation of his experiments in relief staging based on the theories of Georg Fuchs. Meyerhold’s 1906 production of Maeterlinck’s *Sister Beatrice* at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre is typical of his symbolist period in its static tableaux and melodically intoned dialogue, and in its use of a narrow strip stage reminiscent of Fuchs’ relief staging. The roots of Meyerhold’s adaptation of the collage device are seen in the bas-relief perception of stage space underlying this theory, enacted in practice in his symbolist-influenced productions.

Post-1907 and his dismissal by Komissarzhevskaya, Meyerhold’s work demonstrated a return to the depth stage in order to facilitate a greater degree of space for a more physicalized, acrobatic performance style. The process of the reintroduction of the depth stage is seen as pivotal in the identification of the collage device, and two contrasting productions have been chosen through which to explore it. Firstly, the 1914 production of Alexander Blok’s *The Fairground Booth* (at the Tenishevskoe High School) which Meyerhold produced under his pseudonym Doctor Dapertutto, a move designed to protect his official employers, the Imperial Theatres, from embarrassment when his experimental work was considered unsuitable. In contrast, his 1917 production of Lermontov’s *Masquerade* was created in his role as director at the Imperial Theatres. The opulent splendour and clear expense of the 1917 production formed a sharp contrast to the limited

33 Fuchs’ theories will be fully discussed in chapter one, see pp. 41 – 88, below.
resources of Doctor Dapertutto, yet both productions addressed the issue of reconciling the depth stage with the notions of juxtaposition afforded by Fuchs' relief staging.

The première of Meyerhold's *Masquerade* coincided with the final moments of the Tsarist regime: its opening night, 25th February, saw the start of the first of Russia's 1917 revolutions. Despite his obvious enthusiasm for the utopia promised by revolution, Meyerhold's theatrical interpretation of, and contribution to, the new communist world which emerged in October 1917 was stalled by the political and social upheavals of the Civil War (1918 - 1920) and the Bolshevik consolidation of power.34

By 1922, stability was returning to the country. Politically, the Bolshevik power base was becoming increasingly secure, due in part to the element of capitalism introduced into the Russian economy by Lenin's New Economic Policy (N.E.P.) in 1921. In the arts, Meyerhold had similarly consolidated his position as the 'first director' of post-revolutionary Russia. Between 1920 and 1921 he had worked for the government, as head of T.E.O., the theatrical department at Narkompros (the People's Commissariat for Education). His policy of Theatrical October set out his aims for the re-structuring of the theatre in terms of its new function under the new political system.35 Despite resigning

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34 Whether the motivation behind his revolutionary enthusiasm was a result of genuine Bolshevik sympathies or simply an opportunistic use of the political situation to further his career, Meyerhold still professed a degree of excitement in the face of the new regime. He was, for example, the only member of the theatrical community to attend Lunacharsky's meeting to discuss the place of the art under communism in November 1917. In August 1918, he joined the Bolshevik party. As Braun observes, in openly supporting the new government, and by implication the new political system, neither of which were particularly stable, Meyerhold was taking a risk (see Braun, 1979, 1998, pp. 152 – 152). His commitment to the Bolshevik cause was tested during the Civil War, when he fought for the Red (communist) forces, and even spent a short period (September 1919 - February 1920) as a political prisoner in Novorossiisk.

35 Meyerhold's programme for Theatrical October can be found in Braun (1969, 1998), pp. 159 – 180. Theatrical October was intended to bring about the politicization of theatre practice, recreating the communist October Revolution in the theatre. Braun summarizes Meyerhold's Theatrical October programme: "he conducted a violent polemic on behalf of the proletarian, provincial, non-professional and Red Army theatres,
from T.E.O. in February 1921, Meyerhold’s commitment to the reorganization of theatrical forms in the service of the Revolution remained integral to his rhetoric, and is often associated with his development of new performance styles and forms after 1917.

It is at this point that the current study departs from a trend apparent in previous work, and argues that, rather than seeing Meyerhold’s work post-1917 as a rupture with his pre-1917 aesthetic, it can instead be seen as a logical development in terms of stage shape and the spatial organization of the stage image: in other words, as another facet of his continuing experimentation with stage collage. The production chosen to highlight this stage in Meyerhold’s development is his 1922 version of Fernand Crommelynck’s farce *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. This production, at the Actors’ Theatre in Moscow, has frequently been the site of connection between Meyerhold’s productions and the post-revolutionary developments in avant-garde art, particularly the work of the constructivist artists. However, in this instance it is the art of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde which is seen as underlying Meyerhold’s work on the production, through the identification of a layered, or collaged, stage aesthetic.

After 1922, a new aspect of the collage aesthetic becomes apparent in Meyerhold’s theatre. During this period, an extension of the collage device beyond the construction of the stage image emerges in the director’s work. Roger Copeland suggests that collage technique can be extended beyond the visual aspect of a production, and function as the organizational principle behind the performance as a whole. Copeland implies a performance where collage principles underlie not just the spatial construction of the stage image, but also the

and demanded a ruthless redeployment of the manpower and material resources concentrated in the small group of ‘Academic Theatres’ in Moscow” (Braun, 1969, 1998, p. 162).
construction of the entire performance experience, establishing a juxtapositional relationship between each element of the performance event (the movement of the actors, the soundscape, the contrasts between episodes, and so forth). In light of the redefinitions of space and time that are central to the anti-positivist philosophical approaches emerging at the turn of the twentieth century, this study takes the organizational principle of collage to imply an engagement with the collage technique in performance which addresses the temporal nature of theatre. Through the identification of collage as an organizational principle of Meyerhold’s theatre, the director’s application of the device can be judged to be more than superficial, and indicating his engagement with the philosophical as well as the aesthetic implications of collage practice.

Post-1922, the layered stage space can no longer be seen in Meyerhold’s productions: the director begins to extend the stage into the auditorium, curving the front edge of the stage space and disrupting the planes of the layered stage. Alongside the development of montage principles in cinema (notably by Sergei Eisenstein), collage is seen emerging as a device for the rhythmic and temporal organization of Meyerhold’s productions. Through the changes in stage shape and temporal organization of the performance, Meyerhold’s theatre moved towards the final adaptation of the collage device addressed by this investigation. This final stage, where collage functions as the organizational principle underlying the performance as a whole, can be seen in Meyerhold’s 1926 production of *The Government Inspector* by Nikolai Gogol at the State Meyerhold Theatre (GosTIM) in Moscow.

The development of montage techniques in cinema, and Meyerhold’s close contact with filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov, highlights one problem with studying the adaptation of collage to the stage. When compared to theatrical performance, the artist’s
canvas has two features which are vital to the operation of the collage device: twodimensionality and simultaneity in reception. The transference of collage to the threedimensional and highly time-based art of theatre will clearly have implications for thefunctioning of the device. In addition to the identification of collage in Meyerhold’s theatre,therefore, this research also aims to question whether the unique tensions which enablecollage to function on the canvas will be maintained in performance, or whether collagewill simply be transmuted into its cognate techniques, assemblage (collage in threedimensions) and montage (collage in temporal continuum).

The potential effect of the collage device on the audience at Meyerhold’s theatres isconsidered as being largely outside the scope of this thesis, which focuses primarily on theidentification of the device in the director’s work, tracing its development into anorganizational principle for performance. The study will suggest possible models for thereception of the device drawing on scientific Field Theory and the role of the arts in Russia post-1917, but appreciates that discovering the views of audiences in the early twentiethcentury is to a large extent impossible. Instead, the thesis focuses on the philosophicalsignificance of the identification of collage processes in Meyerhold’s theatre, highlightingthe potential re-evaluation of Meyerhold’s practice which emerges through collage.

1926 marks the end of this study. This year saw the beginning of Meyerhold’s governmentimposed decline as an artist: after this date, his work was increasingly subject to censorshipand complicated by governmental hostility. In 1927, Stalin was to emerge victorious fromhis three year power struggle with Trotsky, and would begin the process of bringing allaspects of Russian social, political and cultural life under his control. As Russia moved intothe 1930s, Stalin’s grip tightened and resistance in any form was increasingly associated
with arrest, torture, and execution, bringing the “Golden Age” of the Russian theatre to an abrupt close.36

IV

Methodological Concerns: Photographic Evidence

Due to the nature of records of Meyerhold’s theatre and the emphasis that this thesis places on the visual elements of his work, this study is heavily reliant on photographic evidence of his productions. This is through necessity rather than choice: if film footage was available of Meyerhold’s work, it would naturally be preferable to combine the study of still and moving images, however the only extant film available of Meyerhold’s theatre is a brief clip of his Government Inspector, and is insufficient for any extended analysis.37 The deceptive nature of photographic evidence is well-documented. Philosophical discussions of issues relating to the truth problem of photography are readily available, and theorists such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag highlight the problems inherent in the seemingly transparent nature of the photograph, which is in reality carefully constructed and ideologically loaded.38

In theatre photography, these issues are multiplied. The optical viewpoint of the camera is constructed, and does not see in the same way as the human eye, thus a photograph of a theatrical performance can never fully capture the visual experience of the viewer present at that event. Theatrical productions are rarely photographed during a performance, and

37 An extract from the film footage of Meyerhold’s Government Inspector is available on line at <www.meyerhold.org>, the website of the Meyerhold Museum [accessed 15 June 2005].
photo-calls are likely to be staged in order to give the photographer ample time to create pleasing images, possibly by anti-documentary means such as rearranging the actors. In addition, theatre photographs are not produced solely for documentary purposes, and there is no way of understanding the motivation behind the photographs taken of Meyerhold's work. If the images were produced for advertising purposes under the supervision of a theatre manager, for example, they are less likely to be accurate representations of the director's vision of the production than if they were produced under the supervision of Meyerhold himself. The director is, of course, not assumed to be an unbiased recorder of his own work; the significance of photographic evidence to this study is that, if posed by Meyerhold, the images would, presumably, have been posed to reveal what the director wished the viewer to see. Consequently, the photographs may have a lesser value as documentary evidence of the production, but as images constructed by Meyerhold to reflect his own aesthetic, their value is far greater. The combination of these issues complicates the value of photographic evidence to the researcher of Meyerhold's theatre.

A more significant issue than the question of photographic truth, however, is the static nature of the photograph. Photographs, as Barthes and Metz argue, are synonymous with death.\textsuperscript{39} The photographic moment is abstracted from the constant flow of images in time from which the human experience of the world is constructed. The photograph, by way of preserving the moment as an image, lifts it out of the flow of time from which it derived its relevance, even its significance. The frozen photograph, to use Barthes' imagery, is as much a death mask as it is a guarantee of immortality.\textsuperscript{40} This complication of photography


\textsuperscript{40} In Camera Lucida, Barthes describes the photograph as "a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (Barthes, 2000, p. 32).
is problematic in day-to-day applications of the art. In photographs of performative events, and in Meyerhold’s theatre specifically, these problems are multiplied. In theatre, the temporal structure of the production is complex. It encompasses not just the temporal flow of real life, but also the constructed temporality of the performance. Theatrical images are constructed in terms of moment to moment temporal continuities and juxtapositions. In Meyerhold’s theatre the construction of the image was of paramount importance. The only other feature of the mise-en-scène to which the director afforded equal importance was rhythm, the temporal construction of the performance as a whole: in other words, the temporal flow of images. Photographs of Meyerhold’s theatre imply that the image can be considered outside of this temporal and rhythmic flow, separating the two fundamental elements of the Meyerhold aesthetic.

Researching Meyerhold’s theatre in terms of his construction of images is therefore problematic. The only documentary evidence available is photographic, aside from occasional descriptions by the director and his contemporaries which can supplement the images. In order to limit potential misinterpretation in the analysis of the images, it is vital for the researcher to understand the problems inherent in photographic evidence, and to work with a constant awareness of the temporal nature of theatre set against the static nature of the photograph. To enhance that element of this thesis, photographs are only used when they can be placed in context within a production. Photographs where the act and scene of the play cannot be identified are not used. An appendix has been added to this study outlining where in the given Meyerhold production each image used can be found. 41

The purpose of this contextualization is to allow the viewer to place the image within its

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41 See Appendix A, pp. 321 – 322, below.
performative context, and, where applicable, to locate it against other images of the same production.

Beyond this level of awareness very little can be done to combat the problems presented by photographs as evidence of Meyerhold’s theatre. It should be noted that photography is a vital tool in preserving the visual element of the theatre of the early twentieth century, and that these images have been imperative in the preparation of this thesis. The value of being able to engage visually with Meyerhold’s *mise-en-scène* cannot be overestimated, even if the nature of photographic media can cause the representation of the production to be somewhat distorted.

The question of the transliteration from the Cyrillic to the Latinate alphabet is problematic: a number of systems exist, and there is little consensus between sources. In order to avoid confusion, the common anglicized forms of Russian names have been used throughout this study, and diacritics have been avoided, hence Мейерхольд is rendered ‘Meyerhold’ rather than ‘Мелеркхол’д’. Edward Braun’s work has been used as a spelling model in any instance when there is some confusion. The one exception to this rule is Aleksandr Gladkov, whose name appears in this form throughout, drawing on the form used in Alma Law’s English translation of his book *Meyerhold Speaks, Meyerhold Rehearses.* All quotations have retained the spelling used in the original text, although incorrect grammar (for example, the misuse of apostrophes) in some source material has been silently amended. Capitalisation of movements (for example, Cubism or futurism) is according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

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42 Names are rendered in their common anglicized form to simplify the reading of this thesis. All bibliographic references use the Library of Congress system of transliteration (1997).
43 Gladkov (1997).
Background to the Research

Part One: The Modernist Weltanschauung and the Place of Collage

In order to understand the cultural context of Meyerhold's directorial work (which began in 1902), it is necessary to address the political, philosophical and scientific concerns underlying the modernist epoch, and the way in which the collage device expressed these concerns. According to Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, the dawn of modernism in art and literature was a formal response to a moment of cultural crisis:

[... ] Modernism would seem to be the point at which the idea of the radical and innovating arts, the experimental, technical, aesthetic ideal that had been growing forward from Romanticism, reaches formal crisis - in which myth, structure and organisation in a traditional sense collapse, and not only for formal reasons. The crisis is a crisis of culture; it often involves an unhappy view of history - so the Modernist writer is not simply the artist set free, but the artist under specific, historical strain.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the "specific historical strain" under which the artist was placed resulted from a combination of political and cultural factors. Politically, the international community was engaged in preparations for conflict. When the First World War began in 1914, it was to redefine the nature of warfare, literally shattering lives and countries in a way that nineteenth century conflict never suggested was possible. In intellectual circles, however, the world had been blown to pieces before the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand triggered war, as philosophical and scientific developments since the

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44 Although modernism, in some senses, can be seen to span the entire first half of the twentieth century, the era of High Modernism coincides with Meyerhold's most productive period as a director (1910 - 1930).
turn of the century had steadily overthrown the reassuring absolutes associated with positivist thought.

The world of the positivists was one in which science had the potential to provide every answer. Scientific explanations were sought for phenomena which had previously been classified as acts of God; be they in the natural world, or the subconscious of the human mind. The purpose of art was deemed to be overwhelmingly moral, articulating the new theocracy of science for the masses, as explained by positivist philosopher Auguste Comte:

Art may be defined as an ideal representation of Fact; and its object is to cultivate our sense of perfection. Its sphere therefore is co-extensive with that of science. Both deal in their own way with the world of Fact; the one explains it, the other beautifies it.46

The "world of Fact" had been steadily instilled in scientific thought since the seventeenth century. The principles of Newtonian Mechanics had been the basis of scientific study since 1686 when Newton first presented his Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica (Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy), positing that space and time, and the relationship between them, were absolute values. In mathematics, the Athenian principles of Euclid dominated geometry, particularly his parallel postulate which argues that two straight lines running parallel to one another can never meet. Space was therefore seen as a flat surface, without curves, bends or folds, where rules could be applied uniformly.

In 1905, Albert Einstein published his Special Theory of Relativity. In it, he undercut the fundamental tenet of positivism by removing any possibility of an absolute answer. Space and time were no longer straightforward entities: the measurement of space, for example,

was wholly dependent on the position of the measurer and the speed at which the measurer, or the object to be measured, was travelling. Einstein supplemented his theory with a second paper, the *General Theory of Relativity*, in 1919. The latter paper expanded and generalized Relativity Theory, introducing the now world-famous equation \( E = MC^2 \) (energy = mass x speed of light\(^2\)), and also argued that time could be considered the fourth dimension.\(^{47}\) Hermann Minkowski provided Einstein with a visualization of his theories in the form of the Minkowskian space-time diagrams. These diagrams function as graphs on which the progress of an object in both space and time can be represented. Through these diagrams, in which spatial and temporal co-ordinates are plotted on one line, the two separate entities are collapsed into one: spacetime. Space and time are not only no longer absolute values; they are also no longer separable. In the field of mathematics, the absolute notion of space was also being deconstructed. The emergence of non-Euclidean geometries, for example in the work of Henri Poincaré, had applied the principles of Euclid to curved space and found them inaccurate: on a curved surface, parallel lines can meet and the parallel postulate, one of the foundation stones of all geometrical principles, is rendered impotent.

The spatial-temporal relationship was an equally popular subject in philosophy. Prior to Einstein’s classification of the fourth dimension as purely temporal, the Russian philosopher P. D. Ouspensky had posited the existence of a purely spatial fourth dimension.\(^{48}\) In France, Henri Bergson had questioned the nature of time, arguing for a

\(^{47}\) This element of Einstein’s theory became widely known and popular, and is reflected in literature, for example in H. G. Wells’ novel *The Time Machine* (London: Everyman, 1935, 1952, 1993).
\(^{48}\) Ouspensky’s theory of the spatial fourth dimensional can be found in two volumes: his *Fourth Dimension* (1905) and *Tertium Organum* (1911).
differentiation between objective and subjective temporal experience - 'homogeneous time'
versus 'heterogeneous duration'.

These anti-positivist world-views were popular amongst the avant-garde artists who
believed in the value of engaging with trends in contemporary thought, echoing Rimbaud's
sentiment "il faut être absolument moderne" ["One must be absolutely modern"]. Cubist
and futurist art in particular engaged with spatial and temporal issues, and the artists are
known to have read and discussed the scientific and philosophical developments associated
with anti-positivism. To this end, the artists of the avant-garde used collage to shatter the
spatial and temporal unity of the canvas: each element of the image was lifted from an
outside source and brought with it the traces of its original spatial and temporal identity: the
collage transmutes the canvas into a temporary meeting place for other spaces and times.
Consequently, as Picasso observes, collage is not a reassuring art form. The surrealist use
of the collage device, for example, sought to highlight the incongruity of the resulting
image as a disturbing experience for the viewer. In its fragmentation and temporariness the
collage reflects a world where the certainties of nineteenth century positivism were
increasingly being displaced by developments in science and philosophy. Added to the
increasing international unrest leading up to World War One, and the first attempt at a
popular political revolution in Russia in 1905, it is hardly surprising that the avant-garde

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49 Bergson's theories of time can be found in his Duration and Simultaneity (Indianapolis, New York and
51 The Parisian Cubists, including Braque, Picasso and Gris, met regularly at a restaurant run by a Monsieur
Vemin on Rue Cavalotti to discuss these ideas, as is recorded in an article in the journal Fantasio in October
1912, cited by Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton in Cubism and Culture (New York: Thames and Hudson,
artists felt the need to engage with a world which was, in Picasso’s words, “becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring.”

The collage device is now considered the pivotal (re)discovery of the Cubist artists. As late as 1959, eminent modernist art critic Clement Greenberg regarded the emergence of collage as the “major turning point” of the last century. The incorporation of everyday objects (the collage fragments) into the canvas constituted a fundamental redefinition of the identity of the artwork. The avant-garde adaptation of collage was born out of the belief that the image is constructed not just of space, but also of time. The notion of temporality within the artwork is, of course, not limited to the early twentieth century avant-garde: the use of narrative, for example, is a well-established device in painting that calls on the viewer to make a temporal implication by projecting the image either forwards or backwards in time. However, the belief that an abstract work of art can embody an essentially abstract concept of time, such as those advocated by the anti-positivists, is characteristic of the avant-garde aesthetic.

The development of Einstein’s theories of relativity, their visualization in the form of the Minkowskian four-dimensional diagrams, and the belief that space and time could be collapsed into one entity (spacetime) is reflected in the extension of the artists’ perception of the image. Images became more than simply spatial constructs, seen instead as representations in two-dimensions of the four-dimensional space-time continuum. This development had consequences for canvas art which were as unsettling as Einstenian

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52 See footnote 1, introduction, p. 3 above.
53 See footnote 2, introduction, p. 3 above.
physics was to advocates of Newtonian mechanics. Characteristic of the revisionist (and provocative) attitude of the avant-garde artists, if the quotidian view of the world was going to be turned on its head, perceptions of art would not be far behind.

The emphasis on the connections between spatial and temporal constructs led to a redefinition of the image as a representation of both space and time. The combination of images was, therefore, for the Cubists, the combination of traces of spaces and times. Similarly, the collage process, in its juxtaposition of image fragments, was conceived of as a temporal activity. The collaged canvas is not simply a multi-locational plane but also a multi-temporal one. In the words of Donald Kuspit:

> The elements [of the collage] are already “relative” by reason of their displacement from the life-world into the “art world,” and by reason of their fragmentary state. [...] They are an experiment in time and space - which shows that the old idea of Modern art as an experiment concerned with articulating the fourth dimension has, for all its charming naiveté, a certain truth to it.\(^{55}\)

If collage is an articulation of the fourth, temporal, dimension, it seems logical to apply collage practice to performance, an art form which relies on temporal progression for its realization. Until recently, however, analysis of the collage aesthetic has been predominantly restricted to the visual arts. Even within the theatrical world, collage has been primarily identified with scenography, where, its emergence has been associated, for example, with the work of Czech designer Josef Svoboda in the second half of the twentieth century. Even through Svoboda’s innovations collage was not usually seen as underlying the structure of the performance as a whole. However, the wide-spread grip of post-modernism on contemporary culture has resulted in new readings of collage as potentially

performative and new applications of the collage device to performance. Theatre-makers grouped as collagists, or users of collage as “a principle organizing strategy”, to employ Roger Copeland’s terminology, include Robert Wilson, The Wooster Group, Heiner Müller and Pina Bausch, all acknowledged examples of a post-modern aesthetic. The exclusion of modernist theatre from the renewed interest in analysis of the collage device in performance is a peculiar oversight: collage is, after all, a modernist device adapted to the post-modern project. Roger Copeland’s work goes some way towards redressing this anomaly, by associating the creation of performance collage with the work of Merce Cunningham. Copeland claims that:

[T]he earliest - and arguably, still most influential - practitioner of collage in performance is the choreographer Merce Cunningham. Collage in fact has been central to Cunningham’s work from the very beginning.

Copeland’s work serves two important purposes in the context of this study: firstly, in asserting Cunningham as the originator of the stage collage he predates the post-modern performance collagists by twenty to thirty years, Cunningham’s work beginning in the 1940s, partially returning collage to its modernist origins. Secondly, he re-emphasizes the natural relationship between collage and performance, which he sees as being rooted in the temporal nature of the performative or theatrical event:

[I]t’s my belief that the collage principle has been carried to its furthest extreme in the more fully temporal realm of performance. There are two reasons for this: In performance, all of the elements are potentially dynamic (i.e., set in motion); and the gaps of space and time that separate these disparate elements can be more highly accentuated.

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57 Copeland (2002), p. 11. Although Copeland considers Cunningham’s work to be the first manifestation of collage practice on stage, collage-like principles can be seen in theatre as early as the Renaissance. In Renaissance drama, the construction of the play text from dramaturgical subunits creates a performance in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The contribution to the audience’s understanding of the meaning of *King Lear*, for example, is enhanced by the juxtaposition in location and atmosphere between act one, scene one (Lear’s palace) and act three, scene one (the heath).
The temporality of the image associated with the avant-garde use of collage is the feature of the device which makes it applicable to performance. Meyerhold's theatre, central to the development of the modernist theatrical aesthetic, and significant in its influence on post-modern performance (for example, that of Robert Wilson), provides a logical predecessor for performance collage, pre-dating Copeland's pre-dating, and a truly modernist performance adaptation of an artistic device with modernist roots.59

Part Two: Meyerhold's connections with the avant-garde artists

The nature of artistic life in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century encouraged philosophical and formal cross-fertilization between groups of artists. During the avant-garde era, the Russian intelligentsia was comprised of small groups of artists, intellectuals and literati who shared common formal or political aims voiced through a manifesto. These groups had short life spans, and were interdisciplinary in nature. The Russian futurists, for example, like their Italian counterparts, comprised poets, painters, and sculptors. As a result, the turn of the century Russian cultural climate was one where small groups formed, produced a number of works and then rapidly disbanded and regrouped. Artists and intellectuals frequently shifted between movements, and could become exponents of a number of diverse aesthetic theories within a very short period of time:

Between 1902 and 1911 artist Mikhail Larionov, for example, regarded his work as expressionist, primitivist, and rayonnist, as well as having connections to the Cubo-Futurist

59 Meyerhold's influence on Robert Wilson, and other contemporary theatre practitioners, is explored in the conclusion to this thesis, pp. 289 - 293 below.
The interdisciplinary nature of the groups enabled the movement of ideas and theories between different media. This is particularly prevalent in both Russian and Italian futurism, where the futurist fetishization of speed and the machine emerges simultaneously in art and in literature, with some projects deliberately intended to deconstruct the boundaries between the different disciplines, for example the futurist collaged books. In these books, the visual element of poetry is emphasized over the verbal through the arrangement of the words on the page for maximum visual impact [see plate 2].

As a member of the intelligentsia in early twentieth century Russia, Meyerhold was working in the same cultural climate as the avant-garde painters and collagists. Working in a creative capacity in this cultural climate, Meyerhold had easy access to avant-garde art and his personal and professional connections with the artists are well documented. Following the example of Sergei Diaghilev, who had employed leading artists to decorate the stage for performances at the Ballets Russes, Meyerhold invited artists involved in the emerging avant-garde scene to design for his productions. This is particularly evident in his links with the members of the Russian constructivist movement, a number of whom worked at his theatre, including Lyubov Popova (The Magnanimous Cuckold, 1922), Varvara Stepanova (The Death of Tarelkin, 1923) and, slightly later, Alexander Rodchenko (The Bedbug, 1929). However, this trend was well-established in Meyerhold’s work prior

60 The Knave of Diamonds group worked with Cubist techniques (amongst others), and included the futurist artist David Burliuk. Larionov in fact left the Knave of Diamonds group in 1912 to create his own group (the Donkey’s Tail), further emphasizing the unstable structure of Russian cultural life.

61 A similar process can be seen operating in Victor Khlebnikov’s zaum poetry. Rather than constructing the poem for conventional meaning, Khlebnikov creates an anti-rational language which preferences the sound of words over grammatical logic, and in which the visual organization of the words on the page contributes to the reader’s engagement with the text. This system has a precedent in Italian futurism in the parole in libertà (free-word poetry) works of the movement’s founder F. T. Marinetti.

62 Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova were amongst the Russian artists to design for the Ballets Russes. Picasso was amongst the Europeans.
Plate 2  *Piedigrotta* Francesco Canguillo, 1913 – 1916
to 1922. In his pre-revolutionary productions at the Imperial Theatres, Meyerhold had worked repeatedly with the artist Alexander Golovin, who had been involved with Savva Mamontov's Abramtsevo Colony and the Peredvizhniki (Wanderers) group, whose work arguably laid the foundations of the avant-garde movement in Russia. In 1920, he had invited the artist Vladimir Dmitriev to design his production of The Dawns, resulting in a set which was ostensibly Cubist in influence [see plate 3].

The confrontational nature of the manifesto-making engaged in by the early twentieth century Russian avant-garde groups resulted in a thriving discursive community for the arts, allowing members of the intelligentsia easy access to others' ideas and works. According to Jane A. Sharp, the Russian avant-garde community saw the art exhibition as a forum for public debate and discussion. In her essay 'The Russian Avant-Garde and its Audience, 1913', Sharp outlines the role of the exhibition as one of performative reiteration of the beliefs of the artist or the movement, where the public declaration and rebuttal of ideas was as important as the display of the artworks themselves.

Within this context, Meyerhold's attendance at art galleries and exhibitions becomes a significant issue. The avant-garde exhibition culture in the first decades of the twentieth century was focused around the artistic centres of Moscow and St. Petersburg (then the

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63. The Abramtsevo Colony was created by Savva Mamontov as a place where artists and intellectuals could live together and practice their art. Mamontov's aims were substantial: he wished to redefine the notion of art in Russia, emphasizing Slavic elements and drawing on peasant culture for inspiration. His artists were known as the Wanderers because of their frequent journeys to the Russian countryside. Working in the mid to late nineteenth century, the Wanderers combined artistic and social concerns. Of the artists, Camilla Gray writes: “The ‘wanderers’ interpreted the current idea that art should be an active force in the cause of social reform by laying an emphasis on the subject matter of their work” (Gray, 1962, 1971 p. 10). Like the artistic colony at Abramtsevo, the wanderers turned towards folk and traditional art forms to connect their work to the people of Russia. In their desire to change art, and their belief in its social role, the Wanderers can be seen as forerunners to the Russian avant-garde movements.

Plate 3  *The Dawns* (1920) - design by Vladimir Dmitriev.
Russian capital), cities in which Meyerhold worked regularly throughout his life.65 There are few records which enable concrete assumptions to be made as to which exhibitions Meyerhold attended, or the artworks to which he would have had access. There is, however, evidence which suggests that Meyerhold attended art exhibitions, and that his perception of his work on stage was affected by these encounters. His attendance at the ‘5 x 5 = 25’ exhibition of constructivist art serves as an example: it was after this event in 1921 that Meyerhold invited Popova to join the staff at his Theatre Workshop.66 The “machine for theatre” which Popova created for Meyerhold’s production of The Magnanimous Cuckold in 1922 was heavily constructivist in influence; ostensibly anti-representational, comprising a series of platforms at different heights connected by slides and stairways intended to provide a “spring-board” for the actors which would enable them to demonstrate their new, biomechanical, acting skills.67 Meyerhold’s attendance at the art exhibition not only demonstrates his interest in cultural life outside of the theatre, but also highlights the influence of artistic developments on his construction of the stage image and his design decisions.

In addition to his connections with the Russian avant-garde movement, Meyerhold is also known to have had connections with European artists. He had met Picasso in 1928 and again in 1936, and their friendship was supplemented by Meyerhold’s professional interest in Picasso as an artist and as a potential designer. In autumn 1936 he had succeeded in

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65 After 1906, Meyerhold worked predominantly in St. Petersburg (c. 1906 – 1917) and then in Moscow (1918 until his death). There are brief periods during which the director worked elsewhere, but the majority of his work is carried out in these two cities. Before 1906, it should be noted, Meyerhold periodically worked in the provinces (Poltava, Rostov-on-Don, and so forth) with the Fellowship of the New Drama.


securing Picasso’s agreement to design his, subsequently unrealized, production of *Hamlet* - “Picasso promised me he would be the designer for our *Hamlet* when we have time to do it”.

Works by the European avant-garde were accessible in Russia from the beginning of the century. Russia had seen a surge of interest in art collection during this period, resulting in private galleries whose collections of up-to-the-minute European works were impressive. The contribution of Muscovite collector Sergei Shchukin to Russian awareness of European movements was particularly significant, his collection encompassing a wide-range of the modern art movements, including Cubism, as Russian art historian Camilla Gray observes:

By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 [Shchukin’s collection] numbered 221 works of the French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist schools, over fifty of them by Matisse and Picasso, including many vital Fauve and Post-Fauve works by Matisse and examples of Picasso’s latest period of analytical Cubism.

Again, it is impossible to know whether Meyerhold visited Shchukin’s gallery. There is, however, evidence that artists he worked with had seen the collection (Popova, for example, visited in 1912). In addition, the Russian avant-garde developed close links with their European counterparts pre-1917, and a number of the artists Meyerhold was to work with after the Revolution had studied in Paris and considered themselves exponents of Cubism during this period. Significant amongst those working under the Parisian Cubists were Popova, Nadezhda Udaltsova and Vladimir Tatlin, whose work formed the basis of Cubist influence in Russia. It should be noted that the Russian adaptation of Cubist and futurist techniques is different from the original, European use of these techniques.

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68 Meyerhold’s connections with Picasso are documented by Gladkov (1997), pp. 97, 190. A link between the aesthetics of Meyerhold and Picasso is indicated by Mel Gordon and Alma Law, who refer to Meyerhold as “the Picasso of the modern theatre” (1996, p. 13).
Although Russia had an independent futurist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian Cubism is usually referred to as ‘Cubo-Futurism’, and draws on devices used by both groups of European artists.

Although it is possible to identify periods of operational cross-over between Meyerhold’s theatrical experiments and the various manifestations of Russian and European avant-garde art, attempting to identify artworks which Meyerhold may have seen is, by its nature, a process of pure conjecture. Although examples of direct contact between Meyerhold and the avant-garde artists are valuable in that they demonstrate a degree of interest and knowledge on Meyerhold’s part of the work of the avant-garde, they provide only a surface connection. The simultaneous occurrence of the world-wide and discipline-wide move away from the influence of Renaissance approaches indicates that there is some fundamental characteristic of the High Modernist period which brings to birth artistic works with a similar philosophy. Renaissance artistic practice is most closely associated with the advent of a fully realized system of linear perspective, giving birth to a potentially higher degree of verisimilitude in representation. Renaissance perspective conventions have therefore retained a significant influence on realist art. The Cubist artists saw their work as a rebellion against this Renaissance legacy. This rebellion was not restricted to the arts, however, but also to literature and even to scientific progress, as is suggested by Thomas Vargish and Delo E. Mook in their interdisciplinary study of modernism. For Vargish and Mook, there are significant similarities between Cubist art, modernist literature, and Einstein’s Theories of Relativity. It is the methodology adopted by the Vargish and Mook study that is significant in this context, taking the form of an adaptation of the social matrix

theory proposed by N. Katherine Hayles. Drawing on New Historicist cultural theory, Hayles proposes an underlying cultural matrix which influences the form taken by intellectual processes in a certain culture. Thus, the question of direct influence is subsumed by a more general (and more significant) question of simultaneous manifestations of the same thought processes in different disciplines at a particular moment:

Different disciplines are drawn to similar problems because the concerns underlying them are highly charged within a prevailing cultural context. Moreover, different disciplines base the theories they construct on similar presuppositions because these are the assumptions that guide the constitution of knowledge in a given episteme.

The connections between Meyerhold’s theatre and the art of the Cubists and futurists may, therefore, manifest themselves not as instances of direct or causal influence, but as a simultaneous occurrence of similar concerns resulting from a shared cultural context. As Galina Titova, analysing Meyerhold’s use of space and his relationship with the artists working at his theatre, comments:

The space in Meyerhold’s theatre was one of the most well-balanced, theoretically regulated and fortified in the theatre tradition, and was able to respond to the spirit and form of twentieth century art.

Arguably, the investigation of the work of any theatre director should have at its foundation an awareness of the organic nature of the rehearsal process. Mel Gordon’s description of

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71 The notion of intertextuality is closely related to the principles underlying New Historicist and Cultural Materialist criticism, which advocates the reading of a text in relation to the other cultural artefacts by which it is or was surrounded. As Michel Foucault notes, “no book can exist by itself; it is always in a relationship of support and dependence in regard to others; it is a spot in a network; it contains a system of landmarks which refer ... explicitly or not... to other books, other texts, other sentences” (quoted in Elaine D. Concalon and Antione Spacagna, ‘Introduction’, in Intertextuality in Literature and Film: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Florida State University Conference of Literature and Film, ed. by Elaine D. Concalon and Antione Spacagna, Gransville: University Press of Florida, 1994, pp. 1 – 7, p. 2).


Meyerhold as “simply a devious and intriguing animal” reflects the notion of the director working practically in the rehearsal room, reacting to situations as they arise and devising creative solutions to theatrical problems.\(^7^4\) This image of the director makes the theorization of Meyerholdian theatre immensely difficult, suggesting that any one of the epitomic features of his aesthetic could be an inspired response to a rehearsal situation rather than a fully theorized technique founded in his philosophical approach to performance. The image of Meyerhold as practical director is of course fundamental to understanding his practice, as reports and recollections of his work in rehearsal reflect. However, this does not diminish the value of investigating possible theoretical frameworks for his aesthetic. Meyerhold’s essays and lectures suggest that he was constantly involved in the intellectual appraisal of this own practice. Hayles’s notion of the cultural matrix allows the two approaches to the director (inspired genius versus conscious intellectual) to be reconciled, suggesting that even the director’s instinctive reactions to the performance would have been shaped by the cultural climate in which he lived.

\(^7^4\) Gordon, interviewed by de Haan (1998), p. 11.
Chapter One

The Emergence of a Painterly Perception:

Meyerhold, Symbolism and the Theories of Georg Fuchs

I

Drawing an Analogy: Meyerhold’s Painterly Stage

An attempt to draw an analogy between the laws of the theatre and the laws of the plastic arts: to reveal the laws governing the art of the theatre one needs not merely to unravel the tangle, but to unravel it according to a most intricate system (the geometrical deployment of figures, etc.).

Vsevolod Meyerhold

1906 was a significant year in the development of the early twentieth century Russian avant-garde. The art collector Sergei Shchukin began to add French Fauve works to his collection, and met Matisse, who would later introduce him to Picasso. The ‘World of Art’ revue, previously the “champion of the avant-garde” movement, held its final exhibition and was superseded by the younger generation of artists who formed the ‘Golden Fleece’ and ‘Blue Rose’ groups. The ‘Blue Rose’ in particular provided the first forum for a number of artists who would later become significant members of the primitivist, Cubo-

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2 The eminent collector of Russian avant-garde art, George Costakis, dates the start of the Russian avant-garde art movement from 1910 (see Angelica Zander Rudenstine, ‘The George Costakis Collection’, in Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the George Costakis Collection, ed. by Angelica Zander Rudenstine and Margit Rowell, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1981, p. 11). However, the work of some artists before this date, for example, the primitivists, shows avant-garde tendencies, and can be considered ‘proto-avant-garde’.
3 The word ‘Fauve’ means ‘Wild Beast’ and was applied to this group by a critic responding to their bold use of colour and unconventional brushwork. Matisse was the leading figure amongst this group of artists.
4 Gray (1962, 1971), p. 66. Of the ‘Golden Fleece’, Gray writes: “It was the ‘Golden Fleece’ which continued the tradition of the ‘World of Art’ most completely. This not only championed the avant-garde in its magazine, but was also an active organization in sponsoring exhibitions. During its short life, 1906 to 1909, the ‘Golden Fleece’ was of fundamental importance [...]” (p. 66). The ‘Blue Rose’ movement was formed out of the ‘World of Art’ 1906 exhibition, and constituted a “second generation of Symbolist artists” (Gray, 1962, 1971, p. 71).
Futurist and constructivist movements, including Georgy Yakulov, Natalya Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov.

1906 also marked a new phase in Meyerhold’s career. Stanislavsky’s closure of the Art Theatre Studio on Povarskaya Street in October 1905 denied Meyerhold’s initial experiments with symbolism a public viewing. However, by May of the following year, Meyerhold had found a new venue which seemed more suited to his ambitions: the Theatre of V. F. Komissarzhevskaya in St. Petersburg. It was also during 1906 that Meyerhold first came into contact with the work of German theatre director and theorist Georg Fuchs.5

Meyerhold’s discovery of Fuchs’ theories was a significant milestone in the development of his aesthetic. The director’s adoption of Fuchs’ relief stage demonstrates a direct connection between his theatre and the visual arts: the narrow strip of stage advocated by Fuchs emulated the construction of bas-relief sculpture, juxtaposing a three-dimensional figure with a two-dimensional environment. Meyerhold’s use of the relief stage at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre was closely associated with his experiments in symbolist staging, experiments which emphasized stillness over movement, and subsequently the construction of the stage image over the linear development of action. The combination of the bas-relief staging structure and the director’s emphasis on static tableaux suggests that similar concerns were represented by Meyerhold’s construction of the stage image and the artist’s construction of the canvas. Meyerhold had begun to develop a perception of the stage space which incorporated painterly overtones.

In the context of this study, Meyerhold’s 1906 production of Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Sister Beatrice* is taken as the starting point for an investigation of the director’s engagement with the visual arts. During his period with Komissarzhevskaya, Meyerhold was seeking to establish himself as an independent artist, free from the stylistic auspices of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. During his time at the Art Theatre, Meyerhold had become disillusioned with naturalism and it was arguably his impulse to divorce performance from the hyper-naturalistic tendencies practised at his *Alma Mater* that initiated Meyerhold’s engagement with the abstract theories of space and time which defined the art of the avant-garde. The director objected to the naturalistic presumption that the conventions dictating the construction of the performance should be hidden from the audience, and the subsequent belief that the spectator’s intellectual participation was superfluous to the successful performance event. Above all, Meyerhold objected to naturalism’s “narcotic” quality, lulling the spectator into what he regarded as physical and mental inactivity.6

This dissatisfaction was fundamental to Meyerhold’s theatre practice throughout his career, and is thrown into sharp focus during his early symbolist period. It is for this reason that this study begins with an investigation of Meyerhold’s relationship to the naturalism championed by the Art Theatre. From the comparison of Meyerhold’s and Stanislavsky’s aesthetics, and the investigation of the role of the stage image in his symbolist-influenced productions at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre, a perception of stage space strongly influenced by painterly concerns emerges in Meyerhold’s work.

In addition to the director’s symbolist sympathies, traces of other trends popular in early twentieth century artistic circles were apparent in Meyerhold’s work at the

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Komissarzhevksaya Theatre. Significant amongst these is the use of techniques reminiscent of Russian folk art and iconography, styles which had been rehabilitated in mainstream painting by the primitivist group of artists, including Goncharova and Larionov. The transference of these techniques to the theatre and the influence of well-known religious imagery in Meyerhold's *Sister Beatrice* created a system of visual cross-referencing for the audience, asserting the power of the image in performance.

Establishing a parallel between Meyerhold's conception of the stage space and the artist's approach to the canvas is the first step in identifying the use of collage processes in the director's work. Meyerhold's painterly perception of the stage space can be seen as a precursor to the collage practice which developed in his theatre subsequent to his symbolist period. In this sense, the principles and implications of Fuchs' relief stage are far more important to Meyerhold's developing aesthetic than the device itself. In its disruption of depth space and its implicit collision of a three-dimensional actor with a two-dimensional stage world, relief staging is predicated on the same principles of fragmentation and juxtaposition which underlie collage practice. The influence of Fuchs' principles of staging therefore extends beyond Meyerhold's brief engagement with the relief stage itself. Meyerhold's use of Fuchs' theories is the first indication not only that a general painterly perception emerges in his aesthetic, but also that this perception is underpinned by collage-like processes.

The primitivist style combined Russian folk influences, for example, the style of the *lubok*, or folk woodcut, with images drawn from iconography and a use of bold colours and lines. According to Gray, the primitivist movement emerged in Russia as "a conscious style" between 1907 and 1910 (Gray, 1962, 1971, p. 93). However, the influence of iconography on Goncharova in particular can be seen much earlier in works dated between 1903 and 1905 (see Gray, 1962, 1971, chapter four, pp. 93 - 130).
When considering the similarities between Meyerhold’s construction of the stage image and the structure of the artist’s canvas, it is important to emphasize that Meyerhold’s concept of stage space was determined by his understanding of the unique traits of theatrical production, and as such cannot be read as directly contingent with trends in the visual arts. The relationship between his aesthetic and the developments in avant-garde art was one of adaptation, his work representing a specifically theatrical re-working of the artists’ approach to the canvas. Meyerhold’s production of *Sister Beatrice* provides a starting point for the investigation of the audience’s visual experience in his theatre because of the director’s repeated recourse to constructions which directly recall both the visual arts in general and specific works of art in particular. The collision of devices drawn from the visual arts with the unique conditions offered by theatrical performance is strikingly evident in the tableaux-based *mise-en-scène* of *Sister Beatrice*. As such, the production lays the groundwork for Meyerhold’s later experiments with the static stage image and its potential to convey meaning within the temporal framework of theatre.

II

The Role of the Art Theatre

In order to identify stylistic parallels between Meyerhold’s theatre and the art of the avant-garde, it is first necessary to establish the overlap in their respective aims and intentions. The avant-garde project was primarily concerned with the re-definition of the arts, and the

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8 According to Pesochinsky, Meyerhold’s construction of the stage image is an extension of painterly principles into three-dimensional space, “it was “painting” with actors in space. Specifically theatrical, not like painting on the canvas.” (private correspondence, 22nd July 2005).

9 Meyerhold’s theatre is closely associated with the Russian avant-garde movement, and his work is widely considered to be a theatrical exponent of avant-garde principles. Meyerhold’s status as a member of the avant-garde is reflected in his use of leading avant-garde artists as stage designers at his theatre. This connection can be seen in articles such as John Bowlt, ‘The Construction of Caprice: The Russian Avant-Garde Onstage’, in *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design 1913 – 1935*, ed. by Nancy Van Norman Baer (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp. 61 - 83.
rejection of that which the artist considered to be outdated and irrelevant to modern life.
The term ‘avant-garde’ has military origins, meaning the ‘forward party’, a smaller group of soldiers sent on ahead of the main army. Its adaptation to cultural practice consequently implies both a group of groundbreakers and a sense of sacrifice (the forward party would, presumably, be the first to meet the enemy). Art historian Linda Nochlin claims that the term also has connotations of being ‘ahead of its time’, indicating “a union of the socially and the artistically progressive.”¹⁰ The affiliation of Meyerhold’s aesthetic with the early twentieth century avant-garde movement is an indication that his work was rebelling against naturalistic production methods in the same way that Picasso’s Cubism, for example, rebelled against Renaissance-influenced realism in canvas art. Meyerhold’s desire to create a theatre which would “burn with the spirit of the times” evidently aligns with this aspect of avant-garde practice, implying his aspiration to destroy the outdated in Russian theatre and to look to the future.¹¹

When Meyerhold joined the Moscow Art Theatre Company in 1898, the vision of its founders Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko represented the cutting edge of Russian theatre. Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s collaboration was motivated by a desire to reform theatre practice, combining social conscience with high production values.¹² Dedicated advocates of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen’s company,

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¹² Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s application for funding from the Moscow City Council outlines the aims of the Art Theatre project. According to Worrall “The report began by complaining about the lack of cheap theatre seats, going on to dispel prejudices about what constituted a ‘popular’ theatre. This was not to be a home for lubok, not for versions of féerie à la Lentovskiy, nor for narrowly tendentious plays, nor for boulevard melodrama, but a home for the work of classic Russian and foreign plays, as well as for contemporary drama. Theatre was, first and foremost, entertainment but the spectator needed to take away ‘a particle of goodness and truth’.” (Nick Worrall, The Moscow Art Theatre, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 39).
whom Stanislavsky had seen on their 1890 Russian tour, the founders of the Art Theatre intended to bring the naturalistic trends in European theatre to Russia. As Jean Benedetti observes, the opening of the Art Theatre marked the emergence of a new path in theatre practice in the West, both in Russia and abroad:

The Moscow Art Theatre is a legend. Many of its practices [...] have passed into normal practice. In the West it was an inspiration to those who dreamed of creating an ensemble theatre, even for those who had never seen it in performance.  

However, Meyerhold’s dedication to naturalism was short-lived. He split from the Art Theatre in 1902, and by 1903, he had become disillusioned with naturalistic principles and, rejecting his Art Theatre heritage, was turning towards symbolism, the new trend in Russian art, theatre and literature.  

Meyerhold’s dissatisfaction with the Art Theatre’s production methods led to his belief that naturalism was in fundamental contradiction to the constructed nature of the theatrical performance. In 1906, quoting Schopenhauer, he wrote:

Wax figures have no aesthetic impact even though they represent the closest imitation of nature. It is impossible to regard them as artistic creations, because they leave nothing to the imagination of the spectator. 

Meyerhold goes onto apply Schopenhauer’s observation to the naturalistic theatre, specifically to the Moscow Art Theatre:

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13 Jean Benedetti, introduction to The Moscow Art Theatre Letters, ed. and trans. by Benedetti (London: Methuen Drama, 1991), p. xiii. It should be noted that Benedetti goes on to dispel this image of a seamless ensemble theatre as an “illusion” (ibid., p. xiii).
14 Robert Leach notes that “[b]y 1902 Meyerhold was clearly looking to enter a larger theatrical world than he felt Stanislavsky’s company could offer.” (Leach, 1989, p. 4). However, his work with the provincial company which he formed with Kosheverov after leaving the Art Theatre generally followed the lines of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s productions. Meyerhold’s interest in symbolism did not emerge in his production methods until 1903, when his company was re-named The Fellowship of the New Drama, and he began experimenting with texts by symbolist writers: Gladkov, for example, draws attention to his 1903 production of Przybyszewski’s Snow (Gladkov, 1997, p. 6).
The naturalistic theatre teaches the actor to express himself in a finished, clearly defined manner; there is no room for the play of allusion or for conscious understatement. That is why one so often sees overacting in the naturalistic theatre; it knows nothing of the power of suggestion.\textsuperscript{16}

The naturalistic theatre is too close to life, implying that the conventions of theatrical representation are transparent. The pervasive influence of realism on Western culture deceives the spectator at the naturalistic performance into believing that the construction of the stage space, for example, has occurred naturally and without intervention from an outside force such as the director. As it is not necessary to decode the spatial structure in reality, naturalism deceives the audience into believing that their intellectual participation is not central to the realization of the performance event. Meyerhold claims that theatre must abandon the pretence that life and art are interchangeable in order to create a performance which engages the audience member as a thinking being.

The reduction of Meyerhold and Stanislavsky’s respective aesthetics to a relationship of simple binary opposition is evidently an oversimplification. In his recent comparative study of the two directors (2003), Robert Leach claims that their work is "essentially complementary", and Meyerhold both began and ended his career alongside Stanislavsky.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1898 he played the role of Prince Ivan Shuisky in the Moscow Art Theatre’s inaugural production of Alexei Tolstoy’s Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich (14\textsuperscript{th} October 1898, old style).\textsuperscript{18} Forty years later, in 1938, he briefly worked as the director’s assistant at the Stanislavsky

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{17} Leach (2003), p. 8. Meyerhold himself dispels the myth that he is Stanislavsky’s opposite ("I can let my imagination roam freely and admit that my theatre is also one of the Moscow Art Theatre Studios"), and claims that the ‘opposite’ to his theatre can be found instead at Tairov’s Kamerny Theatre ("[t]here is no theatre more opposed and alien to me than the Kamerny"). Meyerhold, in Gladkov (1997), p. 97.
\textsuperscript{18} Before the twentieth century, Russia used the Julian (Old Style) calendar. These dates are twelve days behind the Gregorian Calendar, which was introduced in 1918 by Lenin.
Opera Theatre, his final position with a theatre company prior to his arrest in June 1939.\(^\text{19}\)

In addition, by the late 1930s, the work of the two directors showed evidence of stylistic overlap. Stanislavsky had significantly modified his System including a shift towards physically, rather than psychologically, motivated methods, for example, through the Method of Physical Actions.\(^\text{20}\) For Meyerhold’s part, his later, and arguably most sophisticated, work demonstrated a degree of recourse to Stanislavsky’s System in terms of character development. Discussing characterisation with the cast of *The Government Inspector* in 1926, Meyerhold stated that:

> [W]hen you are dealing with a text containing such concrete details, you must be scrupulous in your regard for them. [...] If an actor wants to find out what sort of a man Khlestakov is, he must study the details of his biography. \(^\text{21}\)

The combination of periods of direct contact, modification of original ideas and a lifelong mutual respect all contributed to the complexity of Meyerhold’s relationship with Stanislavsky and his System. Any suggestion of a simple dichotomy between the directors’ aesthetics fails to recognize this complexity and leads to a misrepresentation of their work: Meyerhold’s theatre was no more purely physical than Stanislavsky’s was purely psychological.

It is also easy, however, to understate the significance of Meyerhold’s self-acknowledged rebellion against the Art Theatre. Braun warns against over-estimating the reconciliation

\(^{19}\) Stanislavsky’s offer of a job at his Opera Theatre in March 1938 was Meyerhold’s lifeline. His increasing unpopularity with Stalin and the government had resulted in the loss of his theatre (midway through the Barkhin and Vakhtangov rebuilding project which had commenced at the beginning of the 1930s) and had placed his life in severe danger. Meyerhold saw the position with Stanislavsky as a chance to save his career, his family and his life, and referred to Stanislavsky’s offer as “a miracle” (in Gladkov, 1997, p. 94). Stanislavsky’s death in August 1938, however, left Meyerhold unprotected, and in less than a year he had been arrested.


between the two directors in the 1930s as “there is little evidence of any significant artistic rapprochement between the two”, maintaining that their aesthetics were based on a fundamental difference in attitude. Unlike Stanislavsky's work, Meyerhold’s theatre was concerned with the “production’s overall significance” and subordinated characterization to this wider goal.22 Meyerhold’s dissatisfaction with Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko’s interpretation of the form and function of theatre had become evident as early as 1903 in his work with the Fellowship of the New Drama.23 Analysis of his earliest independent directorial projects must maintain an awareness of Meyerhold’s deliberate construction of his theatre against the naturalistic principles of the Art Theatre, in the same way as the avant-garde artists offered their canvases as alternatives to the accepted conventions of verisimilitude and Renaissance linear perspective.

In order to function as a rebellion against verisimilitude and Renaissance linear perspective, Cubist collage relies on the viewer being consciously aware that the artwork is constructed according to anti-realist principles. Meyerhold’s theatre similarly relied on the audience being consciously aware of the differences between his aesthetic and a naturalistic approach. This is a fundamental quality of the avant-garde; the artist defining their identity in opposition to the identity of other artists and constantly presenting the viewer with an alternative to previous practice in a continual quest to be modern.24 This quality is also

23 It should be noted that Meyerhold’s departure from the Art Theatre was prompted primarily by economic factors and not artistic differences. Through the influence of Savva Morozov, who saved the company from financial ruin in 1902, the Art Theatre became a joint stock company in which some prominent members were not offered shares. Meyerhold was amongst them. The split destroyed what little respect Meyerhold had left for Nemirovich-Danchenko, who had introduced him to the Company after his graduation from the Moscow Philharmonic Society Drama School in March 1898. His respect for Stanislavsky, however, proved lifelong. Art Theatre members Alexander Kosheverov and Alexander Sanin were also not offered shares in the company. It was alongside Kosheverov that Meyerhold would form the ‘troupe of Russian dramatic artists under the direction of A. S. Kosheverov and V. E. Meyerhold’ (see Braun, 1979, 1998, p. 17) in 1902.
24 This process of creating oppositions between different artistic practices is also closely related to the emerging anti-positivist philosophies of the turn of the twentieth century. In a world without absolute truths,
fundamental to Meyerhold’s aesthetic. His theatre functions through the collision of the actuality of the real world and the fantasy of the stage environment. In order for this balance between reality and fantasy to operate, the audience must be aware of how the director has translated reality into performance.

To this end, Meyerhold’s pre-revolutionary theatre practice was consistently engaged with the practice of the Art Theatre. A comparison of the productions and playwrights chosen to form the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theatre and Meyerhold’s oeuvre before 1917 highlights the complexity of Meyerhold’s relationship with his former teacher and mentor. Although in his confession of “slavishly imitating Stanislavsky” during the first years of his career, Meyerhold was referring to directorial method and stylistic choices, the assertion seems equally true of his choice of repertoire. Of the playwrights who formed the mainstay of the Moscow Art Theatre canon, over two-thirds also had a significant place in Meyerhold’s repertoire: Andreev, Chekhov, Gogol, Gorky, Hauptmann, Ibsen, Ostrovsky and Tolstoy all form a large part of the repertoire of both, with only one playwright, Dostoevsky, holding a significant place in one, the Art Theatre, but not the other.

the only way to establish identity is not through some absolute quality within the self, but in comparison with the other.

25 This repertoire analysis has been restricted to the pre-revolutionary oeuvres of the directors. Further research into repertoire choices immediately after 1917 may yield interesting results, but the imposition of Socialist Realism in the mid-1930s to an extent levelled out the repertoires of all theatres making later comparisons less significant.

26 See footnote 32, introduction, p. 16 above. Laurence Senelick refers to Meyerhold “putting on his Cherry Orchard in Kherson almost immediately after the Art Theatre opening, so that he could not have seen Stanislavsky’s production or the script licensed for it.” (Laurence Senelick, The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of Plays in Performance, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 1999, p. 92). It is unclear whether Meyerhold’s eagerness to stage the play was related to his repertoire links with the Art Theatre or his devotion to Chekhov.
In addition, after Meyerhold’s departure from the Art Theatre Studio in 1905, he and Stanislavsky premiered a number of productions almost simultaneously. An example of this sort of overlap can be seen between 1905 and 1906 in their respective productions of work by Maxim Gorky. On 24th October 1905, the Moscow Art Theatre production of *Children of the Sun* opened; Meyerhold produced the same play in his next season, opening on March 1st 1906. In Andreev’s *The Life of Man*, a pattern of productions emerges which almost suggests a dialogue between the two directors: Meyerhold’s initial production opened on 22nd February 1907 at the Theatre of V. F. Komissarzhevskaya. The Moscow company opened their production on December 7th 1907, with Meyerhold returning to the production after his split from Komissarzhevskaya, on 23rd February 1908.27 This pre-revolutionary repertoire overlap is interesting in that it establishes a connection between Meyerhold’s work and that of the Art Theatre, and suggests that Meyerhold’s choice of repertoire was in part determined by the choices made by other companies, particularly by his *Alma Mater*. This is not to suggest that Meyerhold was constructing his productions as diametric opposites to the work of the Art Theatre, but rather that his theatre was engaged in a dialogue with the choices made by other companies. As Meyerhold himself claimed:

> The notion that Stanislavsky and Meyerhold are antipodes is wrong. This notion is meaningless in such a static, ossified form. Neither Stanislavsky nor Meyerhold represents something completed. Both are in a state of constant change. As a wise artist, Stanislavsky listens intently to everything, carefully following what takes place at the art front.28

Meyerhold explicitly states that the binary classification of his work with that of Stanislavsky is inappropriate, implying that as artists both directors were engaged in a constantly shifting process. The notion of a dialogue between the two directors which

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27 Meyerhold’s 1908 production of *The Life of Man* took place in the provincial town of Vitebsk with the unnamed company Meyerhold worked with in February and March of that year.
allowed Meyerhold to establish his artistic identity against that of other artists seems, in the light of his statement above, to be a productive thesis.29

The difference in opinion between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky is particularly evident in the attitude Meyerhold demonstrated towards the work of Chekhov, which had become the stronghold of the Art Theatre repertoire. As his dissatisfaction with the naturalism of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko grew, Meyerhold began to suggest his own, alternative, readings of Chekhov’s plays. Unlike Stanislavsky’s work, which focused on verisimilitude, Meyerhold’s readings emphasized the symbolist aspect of Chekhov’s writing. In terms of exploring alternative analyses of Chekhov’s work, the most marked disparity in Meyerhold’s and Stanislavsky’s views can be seen in their respective readings of *The Cherry Orchard*.

As Worrall observes, by the time of the Moscow Art Theatre’s première of Chekhov’s final play *The Cherry Orchard* in January 1904, both the work of the theatre and the production methods of Stanislavsky had become “almost synonymous” with Chekhov’s writing.30 The Art Theatre’s production of *The Seagull* had been its saving grace after a generally unsuccessful first season from 1898 to 1899. The company had then secured the rights to produce the author’s next two plays, *Uncle Vanya* in 1899 and *Three Sisters* in 1901. The arrival of *The Cherry Orchard* had been long anticipated by the Art Theatre and the

29 These similarities require further investigation to determine whether they are merely circumstantial. A number of the playwrights who form the mainstay of both repertoires (Gogol, Ostrovsky, Tolstoy) are established members of the Russian classical canon. However, there is evidence that Meyerhold and Stanislavsky maintained a lifelong interest in each others’ careers, and that there was an element of stylistic influence and overlap: Stanislavsky’s move into producing symbolist drama, for example, was arguably in part due to Meyerhold’s work. The question of repertoire overlap is clearly a potential area of expansion for this research which could provide productive insights into Meyerhold’s relationship not only with the Art Theatre, but with other directors working alongside him (for example, with Tairov).

company were keen to perform in it. Elena Pavlovna Muratova, one of the Art Theatre actresses, even claimed that should she not be cast in a lead role, she would play the part of Yasha’s mother (who never appears on stage).\(^{31}\)

According to Anatoly Smeliansky, the close association of Chekhov’s work with the Art Theatre has proved to be to the writer’s detriment. Stanislavsky’s productions amount to a legacy which has since set a precedent for interpretations of Chekhov’s work:

>[E]ven in the dramatist’s lifetime the Chekhov canon evolved into a theatrical straitjacket from which it became necessary to break free.\(^{32}\)

Just as Stanislavsky’s name has become inseparable from stage naturalism, so, through Stanislavsky’s productions, have Chekhov’s plays. Against this background, the Art Theatre’s première of *The Cherry Orchard* is an interesting case. *The Cherry Orchard* was preceded in the Art Theatre repertoire by the company’s hyper-naturalistic production of *Julius Caesar*, directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko, which Worrall describes as making recourse to “archeologically realistic, Meiningen-style methods.”\(^{33}\) *Julius Caesar* opened at the Art Theatre on 2nd October 1903. Rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard* began on 9th November 1903, although the play had already been in discussion at the theatre for over a month. Chekhov’s final play therefore joined the Art Theatre repertoire during the production of arguably its most fanatically naturalistic project of the early twentieth century.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 159.


\(^{33}\) Worrall (1996), p. 22. Nemirovich-Danchenko’s *Julius Caesar* included a number of devices intended to make the production seem realistic and accurate, including a cast of over 200 extras. According to Worrall, drawing on the research of Joyce Morgan, “some details seemed unconsciously satirical of Stanislavskyan naturalism, such as the scene with scattered toys supposedly left behind by his children, in Brutus’ orchard, with a background of night birds, croaking frogs, howling dogs, and the roar of wild beasts from circus cages.” (Worrall, 1996, p. 152).
Trends amongst the Russian intelligentsia as a whole, however, were taking a different route. Symbolism was becoming increasingly popular, and Meyerhold had already become involved in symbolist circles. In 1905 Stanislavsky would attempt to align the Art Theatre with these trends through the creation of the Art Theatre Studio on Povarskaya Street, whose projected repertoire was one of predominantly symbolist writers, including Maeterlinck, Bryusov and Ivanov. Stanislavsky’s choice of Meyerhold as head of the Theatre Studio project reflects the degree to which the young director was associated with the Russian symbolist movement.

The creation of the Studio in itself highlights Stanislavsky’s knowledge of the emerging cultural trend. This awareness is also reflected in his notes for the production of *The Cherry Orchard*, which indicate some understanding of the complexity of Chekhov’s work, resting as it does between symbolist and realist concerns. Worrall refers to Stanislavsky’s reading of the play as it was recorded in his production score:

> What would seem to emerge from [Stanislavsky’s] score [...] is an intuitive sense of the play’s problematic nature, hovering between realism and symbolism. An intensely felt opposition between the natural and human worlds would appear to have exercised itself so powerfully on Stanislavsky’s imagination that the fully human, three-dimensional, flesh and blood solidity of human character seems held in a state of suspended animation.\(^{35}\)

As Worrall acknowledges, however, it was not these concerns that were communicated by *The Cherry Orchard* in performance. Meyerhold in particular felt that the Art Theatre had misinterpreted the play and placed too great an emphasis on naturalistic detail at the expense of the (symbolist) impression of the production as a whole:

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\(^{34}\) According to Braun, the full list of writers considered for production at the Theatre Studio ran: Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Ibsen, Przybyszewski, Verhaeren, Hamsun, von Hofmannsthal, Strindberg, Ivanov and Bryusov (see Braun, 1979, 1998, p. 30).

\(^{35}\) Worrall (1996), p. 156.
The director at the Art Theatre has shown how the harmony of the act can be destroyed. In Chekhov the director loses sight of the whole by concentrating on its parts, because Chekhov’s impressionistically treated images happen to lend themselves to portrayal as clearly defined figures (or types).\textsuperscript{36}

Even if Worrall is correct in suggesting that Stanislavsky’s intentions were far more sophisticated than Meyerhold acknowledges and that “had Meyerhold had an opportunity to study Stanislavsky’s production score, he might have felt obliged to modify his viewpoint”, the production did show evidence of the highly naturalistic approach apparent in \textit{The Seagull, Three Sisters, Uncle Vanya, and Julius Caesar}.

In his correspondence with Chekhov, Stanislavsky engages with the text on an extremely literal level, seeking advice from the playwright as to whether the house is made of stone or wood, to which Chekhov’s characteristically laconic response is “wood… or stone, it doesn’t matter”, and even suggesting the inclusion of his trademark ciphers of naturalism, the croaking frogs and corncrake:

\begin{quote}
Allow us, during one of the pauses, to bring a train with little puffs of smoke across. That could work splendidly. [...] The concert of frogs and the corncrake at the end of the act likewise [...] This is for the actors to help them live their roles.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Chekhov’s own interpretation of his play is in striking contrast to that of Stanislavsky. In the face of the Art Theatre’s insistence to play the piece as a tragedy, the author maintained he had written a farce.\textsuperscript{39} He resisted the cluttering of his plays with devices intended to increase realism, rejecting Stanislavsky’s suggestions of the train and the frogs.\textsuperscript{40} To

\textsuperscript{38} Stanislavsky to Chekhov (letter 239) in Benedetti (1991), p. 185. Chekhov’s comments on the material from which the house is constructed can be found in Chekhov to Stanislavsky (letter 226), ibid., p. 178.
\textsuperscript{39} It is hard to take Chekhov’s suggestion that the play should be read as a farce at face value, particularly as his evidence to support the claim is that only one character, Varya, ever weeps. This is in direct conflict with the script itself which suggests that, in addition to Varya, both Ranevskaya and Gayev appear weeping. The text does, however, contain moments of light comedy (Charlotta’s conjuring scene, for example, or Trofimov’s fall down the stairs), and Worrall suggests that Chekhov’s character construction is more in style of vaudeville types than fully developed naturalistic characterization (see Worrall, 1996, p. 155).
\textsuperscript{40} See Chekhov’s letter to Olga Knipper (letter 241) in Benedetti (1991), p. 185.
Chekhov’s mind, rather than enhancing the play’s naturalism these additions undermined the conventionalized nature of theatre as an art form. Meyerhold records Chekhov’s objection to such devices as early as 1898 during rehearsals for *The Seagull*:

> On the second occasion (11 September 1898) that Chekhov attended rehearsals of *The Seagull* at the Moscow Art Theatre, one of the actors told him that offstage there would be frogs croaking, dragon-flies humming and dogs barking.
> ‘Why’ – asked Anton Pavlovich in a dissatisfied tone.
> ‘Because it’s realistic’ – replied the actor.
> ‘Realistic!’ – repeated Chekhov with a laugh. Then after a short pause he said: ‘The stage is art. There’s a genre painting by Kramskoy in which the faces are portrayed superbly. What would happen if you cut the nose out of one of the paintings and substituted a real one? The nose would be “realistic” but the picture would be ruined. 41

Meyerhold took these notes on the first occasion that he met Chekhov in person. 42 The conversation with the playwright is recorded in his diary, and he returned to Chekhov’s comments eight years later, writing his 1906 essay ‘The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood’. Chekhov’s acknowledgement of the conventions that dictate theatrical representation appears to have impressed Meyerhold, and to have had a lasting influence on his belief that stage naturalism was fundamentally problematic.

‘The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood’ was written in response to the Art Theatre’s production of *The Cherry Orchard*. 43 In his essay, Meyerhold’s approach to the text is overtly symbolist, forming a sharp contrast to the naturalism he saw in Stanislavsky’s production. 44 He cuts through the small talk of Chekhov’s plays to their

42 See Braun (1979, 1998), p. 11.
43 Although written in 1906, Meyerhold's essay was not published until 1908 in a collection of essays entitled *Teatr, kniga o novom teatre* (Theatre, a Book on the New Theatre). It was reprinted in Meyerhold's own book *O Teatre* (On the Theatre), published in 1913.
44 The title of Meyerhold’s essay refers to two opposing styles of performance he identified operating at the Art Theatre: the naturalistic theatre and the symbolist theatre (the ‘theatre of mood’). The essay divides the repertoire of the Art Theatre into plays Meyerhold considered naturalistic and plays he considered the ‘theatre
essence, engaging with the implications of the playwright’s use of imagery, sound and rhythm. Instead of Stanislavsky’s focus on the creation of believable human characters and situations, Meyerhold suggests that meaning on stage can be created at a different level, where text, subtext and image are synthesized. In a letter to Chekhov dated May 1904, Meyerhold refers to the third act of *The Cherry Orchard* as containing “jollity with overtones of death,” making the connection to symbolism explicit by concluding that “in this act there is something terrifying, something Maeterlinckian.”

In ‘The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood’ he goes onto discuss what he considered to be the Art Theatre’s fundamental misinterpretation of Chekhov’s essentially symbolist play:

*One recalls how the overall harmony was disturbed in the Moscow Art interpretation of Act Three of *The Cherry Orchard*. The author intended the act’s leitmotiv to be Ranevskaya’s premonition of an approaching storm (the sale of the cherry orchard). Everyone else is behaving as though stupefied: they are dancing happily to the monotonous tinkling of the Jewish band, whirling around as if in the vortex of a nightmare, in a tedious modern dance devoid of enthusiasm, passion, grace, even lasciviousness. They do not realise that the ground on which they are dancing is subsiding under their feet. Ranevskaya alone foresees the disaster; she rushes back and forth, then briefly halts the revolving wheel, the nightmare dance of the puppet show. In her anguish, she urges the people to sin, only not to be ‘namby-pambies’; through sin man can attain grace, but through mediocrity he attains nothing.*

Meyerhold’s reading of the act emphasizes the rhythmic and visual properties of Chekhov’s work. Using a musical analogy as a starting point, Meyerhold selects a *leitmotiv* in the suffering of Ranevskaya, and extends this individual’s suffering to a universal theme, the condemnation of ignorance and passivity which is arguably thematic to all Chekhovian drama. In Meyerhold’s essay, the third act of Chekhov’s play is conceived of as an overall of mood.’ Chekhov’s plays are the only works listed in the latter category. Meyerhold’s complaint against the Art Theatre’s production is that it does not engage with the symbolist potential of Chekhov’s work, trying instead to produce it as part of the theatre’s naturalistic repertoire.

45 Meyerhold, quoted in Braun (1969, 1998), p. 34. According to Braun, this letter formed the basis of Meyerhold’s 1906 article.


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impression rather than a series of linear objectives. His construction of the act revolves around the audience’s sensory, more than their intellectual, experience: the tinkling of the band and whirling people set against the heightened rhythm of panic and foreboding represented by Ranevskaya.

Through his emphasis on the sensory and rhythmic elements of the act, Meyerhold visualized a production in which the events of the party on Ranevskaya and Gayev’s estate became a manifestation of Ranevskaya’s state of mind as she awaits the report of the sale of the orchard. Meyerhold reinterprets the notion of Chekhovian subtext, by creating a second layer of meaning aside from the narrative development of the act, a layer of meaning which is entirely sensory, visual and rhythmic. Meyerhold envisages the audience being presented with a visual impression which can inform their reading of the text, allowing the viewer an insight into Ranevskaya’s state of mind and attempting to draw the audience into the performance on an anti-intellectual level.

As such, Meyerhold’s reading of act three of The Cherry Orchard engages with the fundamental issues addressed by the Russian symbolist movement. In his article ‘The Unnecessary Truth’ symbolist theorist and writer Valery Bryusov outlines the stylistic tenets of Russian symbolist art:

The subject of art is the soul of the artist, his feelings and his ideas; it is this which is the content of a work of art; the plot, the theme are the form; the images, colours, sounds are the materials.  

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47 Bryusov, quoted in Braun (1979, 1998), p. 30. Braun provides a comprehensive summary of Bryusov’s ideas and their influence on Meyerhold’s theatre, noting that Meyerhold is known to have read Bryusov’s article, and to have used these ideas as the basis of his work between 1905 and 1907 (Braun, 1979, 1998, pp. 30 – 31).
Bryusov’s reading is particularly interesting in that it highlights the cross-over between the content of the art work and the formal expression of that content. In his reading of *The Cherry Orchard*, Meyerhold suggests that the visual, material expression of the text is as significant to the audience’s experience of the production as the text itself. The director challenges the belief that the visual aspects of the production should merely provide a believable location for the events of the play text, and implies instead that the audience responds simultaneously to the communication of narrative and non-narrative meaning in performance.

Meyerhold’s reading of *The Cherry Orchard*, alongside his engagement with Chekhov’s and Bryusov’s opinions on the conventionalized nature of theatre, suggest that by 1906 his main concern was to define his work in terms of theatrical artifice. Meyerhold sought to reject the naturalism of Stanislavsky in favour of a new form of theatre which acknowledged its own convention-based nature and used the material elements of its production to enable the audience to engage with the performance on a sensory, almost ethereal, level. In the same way that the avant-garde artists had rejected verisimilitude in painting, Meyerhold rejects Stanislavsky’s naturalistic production of *The Cherry Orchard*, suggesting an abstract re-interpretation which he believed was more closely related to Chekhov’s intentions.
III
Symbolism and Meyerhold’s Theatre of Images

The emphasis Meyerhold’s reading of *The Cherry Orchard* places on the material elements of the production suggests a developing interest in the construction of the image on stage. Rather than the linear exposition of the characters or plot, Meyerhold’s essay emphasizes the interaction between the different production elements in terms of shapes, colours and rhythms. Although rhythm in its musical sense was fundamental to Meyerhold’s aesthetic, in this context, the notion of rhythm is based on the use of the term in the visual arts, where the rhythm of the canvas is determined by the artist’s organization of the elements which construct the image.\(^4^8\) Meyerhold demonstrates a belief that the audience’s perception of the production is formed through the rhythmic organization of its visual elements, highlighting the importance of the moment-to-moment construction of the stage image.

As a result, Meyerhold’s work during his symbolist period is noted for its use of carefully structured colour schemes, non-representational scenery and static tableaux staging. This emphasis on the image in performance, and on the potential of the image to communicate with the audience, is seen as the earliest emergence of a painterly perception of the stage space in his theatre, and is intimately related to the symbolist aspirations manifested in his work between 1905 and 1907.

Meyerhold’s experimentation with symbolism is associated primarily with his work at the Art Theatre Studio (1905) and at the Theatre of V. F. Komissarzhevskaya between 1906 and 1907. The static images associated with these early productions seem a far cry from the

\(^4^8\) Meyerhold’s use of rhythm in both the musical and the artistic sense is further explored in chapter two, pp. 96 – 97, below.
acrobatic physicality of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* or the grotesque comedy of *The Government Inspector*. However, the challenge of translating the ethereality of the symbolist world-view to the theatre resulted in staging choices that foreshadow approaches Meyerhold would later adapt to radically different performance styles. In line with the symbolist belief that truth can only be found by transcending the everyday, Meyerhold’s preoccupation during this period was the creation of a stage world not bound by everyday constraints, specifically those of linear space and time. The conventions he explored to this end he was to revisit in his productions of the 1920s.

The symbolist experiments Stanislavsky had vetoed at the Theatre Studio in 1905 formed the basis of Meyerhold’s year with Komissarzhevskaya. The thirteen productions Meyerhold staged between November 1906 and November 1907 were primarily by acknowledged symbolist writers including Maeterlinck (*Sister Beatrice*), Ibsen (*Hedda Gabler*), Sologub (*Death’s Victory*), Andreev (*The Life of Man*), and Przybyszewski (*The Eternal Fable*).49 The choice of repertoire was almost identical in playwrights, if not in play texts, to that of the Theatre Studio, where three of the four rehearsed but unperformed productions were Ibsen’s *Love Comedy*, Przybyszewski’s *Snow*, and Maeterlinck’s *The Death of Tintagiles*.50 In addition, during this period, Meyerhold was based in St. Petersburg and cemented his affiliation to the symbolist movement through regular attendance at Vyacheslav Ivanov’s Wednesday night meetings at his Tower apartment.

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49 Although Ibsen’s later work can be considered symbolist (*The Wild Duck*, 1884, or *When we Dead Awaken*, 1899) the critics and public apparently disliked Meyerhold’s production of *Hedda Gabler*, considering the director’s symbolist innovations contradictory to Ibsen’s purposes. Braun observes that “the criticism seems incontestable: *Hedda Gabler* was a classic example of a production subordinated to the director’s ruling obsession” (Braun, 1979, 1998, p. 56).

50 The fourth production was Hauptmann’s *Schluck and Jau*. 

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Through Ivanov, a leading figure of the Russian symbolist movement, Meyerhold made contact with Bryusov, Alexander Blok, and Andrei Bely, amongst others.51

Maeterlinck’s symbolist drama Sister Beatrice was Meyerhold’s third production at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre, opening on November 22nd 1906, a mere twelve days after the première of his inaugural production with the company, Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler.52 Meyerhold was acquainted with Maeterlinck’s work prior to his production of Sister Beatrice: aside from the aborted production of The Death of Tintagiles at the Theatre Studio, he had read Le Trésor des Humbles in 1901, and had planned to stage Maeterlinck’s work during his 1903 season with The Fellowship of the New Drama.53

Maeterlinck’s 1901 play Sister Beatrice is quintessentially symbolist in its plot and subject matter: a statue of the Virgin Mary comes to life to take the place of the nun Beatrice who has run away from her convent with her prince-lover. When Beatrice returns, unaware of the miracle and dying from the effects of her sin, she cannot seek redemption, finding herself exalted for her life of selfless saintliness by the Mother Superior and other nuns. Although the plot of Sister Beatrice is linear, and Maeterlinck shows a specific awareness of the imagined timescale of the action by indicating a twenty-year time-lapse between the second and third acts, Meyerhold’s staging undercut the continuity of Maeterlinck’s text by constructing a series of static moments that punctuated the performance. In plates 4 and 5, the sculptured images of the chorus of nuns gathered around Komissarzhevskaya’s Beatrice serve as examples of Meyerhold’s carefully constructed stage tableaux. The performance

52 Hedda Gabler was Meyerhold’s first production with Komissarzhevskaya, Sister Beatrice was his third. The second production was Yushkevich’s In The City, which opened on November 13th 1906.
Plate 4  
*Sister Beatrice* (1906), design by Sergei Sudeikin
A theatre constructed of images rather than action, characteristic of Meyerhold’s work before *Sister Beatrice*, and appears to be characteristic of his early symbolist period.

Valentina Verigina, a member of the Art Theatre Society, wrote of the planned production of *The Death of TIMOTHEUS* in a correspondence to Meyerhold in 1906: ‘We were interested in the mystery of *The Death of Timothée*, where the image developed by Meyerhold in order to the the image of character, and the image of the character, is that the audience would remain with the audience after the performance.

The large armchair covered with white fur is a kind of throne for Hilda: she plays the majority of the characters on her armchair. The spectator is intended to associate Hilda with her throne and carry away this impression in his memory. Brack is associated with the judicial bench of the large table [...] The table serves as a pedestal for the motionless figure, which the spectator wishes to imprint on the spectator’s memory.

Plate 5 *Sister Beatrice* (1906), design by Sergei Sudeikin
comprised a series of such tableaux, connected by smooth, slow, unobtrusive movements, and accompanied by melodic, intoned dialogue punctuated by extended pauses.

A theatre constructed of images rather than actions was characteristic of Meyerhold’s work before *Sister Beatrice*, and appears to be representative of his early symbolist period.

Valentina Verigina, a member of the Art Theatre Studio, wrote of the planned production of *The Death of Tintagiles*:

> When I recall the production I see everything in one place, even though the characters sometimes moved around and made exits and entrances. They did it inconspicuously, simply appearing and then disappearing.\(^{54}\)

The tableaux-based *mise-en-scène* of *The Death of Tintagiles* provides a direct link between Meyerhold’s work at the Theatre Studio and his *Sister Beatrice* with Komissarzhevskaya.

According to Braun:

>In *Sister Beatrice* dialogue and movement were treated in the style first developed by Meyerhold in order to render Maeterlinck’s ‘static tragedy’, *The Death of Tintagiles*.\(^{55}\)

Static images had also been the focus of Meyerhold’s work on *Hedda Gabler*. In his analysis of the production, Meyerhold refers to the process of association developed between each character and an item of stage furniture, with the intention of creating images that would remain with the audience after the performance:

> The huge armchair covered with white fur is meant as a kind of throne for Hedda; she plays the majority of her scenes either on it or near it. The spectator is intended to associate Hedda with her throne and carry away this impression in his memory. Brack is associated with the pedestal bearing the large vase [...] The table serves as a pedestal for the motionless figures which the theatre wishes to imprint on the spectator’s memory.\(^{56}\)

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Meyerhold’s intention is to create discrete images to punctuate both the audience’s experience of the performance itself and their later recollection of that performance. He shows an awareness of the power of the image, employing the static moment as a device to influence the impression the audience retains of the production. In line with Bryusov’s belief that the artwork reflects the soul of the artist expressed through colour, image and sound, Meyerhold’s stage pictures of Hedda and her throne, or Beatrice surrounded by the nuns, allowed the audience to retain a sense of the production’s atmosphere rather than exactly recalling the plot or dialogue. In contrast to the naturalism of the Art Theatre, Meyerhold’s symbolist productions were self-consciously visual: the impressions which he wished the audience to carry away with them were momentary visual experiences which were complete in themselves; diminishing the importance of such complexities as plot or character motivation: “The spectator may forget the actual words exchanged by Hedda and Loevborg, but he cannot possibly forget the overall impression which the scene creates,” Meyerhold says of a particularly static sequence from *Hedda Gabler*.57

In his symbolist-influenced productions, Meyerhold attempted to bring the spectator’s perception of the image to the forefront of the viewing experience. Consequently, the construction of the static images became the overriding concern of the performance. To this end, Meyerhold rejected the Art Theatre’s realistic construction of the stage space, instead choosing to reduce the performance space in depth. The emerging spatial structure took the form of a narrow strip of stage placed close to the footlights, reminiscent of the overtly non-naturalistic relief staging device outlined in the writings of Georg Fuchs.

Both Braun and Vera Beate Beeson estimate that Meyerhold first read Fuchs’ *Die Schaubühne der Zukunft* (The Stage of the Future) in 1906, a matter of months before starting work at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre.\(^{58}\) Fuchs’ staging ideas were radically anti-realist, believing that the convention-based nature of the stage environment made accurate realistic representation impossible, and that theatre should therefore reject all imitative methods:

Fuchs felt that the entire stage space was to be treated not so much as three-dimensional space (an idea that carried such falsehoods as trick perspective) but as a shallow, visual picture on which the actors protruded as in relief, much as a sculptural relief. The actor, in turn, should be trained in graceful movements, gymnastics, sports, even acrobatics so that his play on the stage, in combination with beautiful costumes, miming and colorful decorations, would help to create for the audience an experience greater than life, an experience only to be accomplished by the arts.\(^{59}\)

Fuchs’ emphasis on the necessity of recognizing the conventionalized aspects of the stage recalls Chekhov’s comments at Stanislavsky’s rehearsal of *The Seagull*.\(^{60}\) In Meyerhold’s adoption of Fuchs’ staging principles, his desire to differentiate his theatrical practice from that of Stanislavsky again comes to the forefront of his work. The manipulation of the audience’s perception of depth on stage was paramount in the Moscow Art Theatre’s construction of the stage space. Plate 6 shows the Art Theatre’s production of *The Seagull*, in which the use of trick perspective techniques to construct a sense of depth can be discerned clearly, for example, in the form of a vanishing point. Stanislavsky hints at the use of similar techniques in his notes on the staging for *The Cherry Orchard*:

> The left part of the stage and the centre without masking flats – just the distant horizon. This will be done with a continuous semi-circular backdrop with supports to take it into the distance.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{58}\) See footnote 5, p. 42, above.

\(^{59}\) Beeson (1960), pp. 41 – 42. Beeson provides a very good summary of Fuchs’ ideas and their influence on Meyerhold’s early productions.

\(^{60}\) See p. 57, above.

In contrast, and in line with Puckey’s statement, Meyerhold’s scenery for The Seagull has a more open feel than the lighting, with the main stage elements in the background of the set. The lighting, as in Meyerhold’s staging of The Seagull, demonstrates his desire to exploit the audience as the main focus of the stage space. This is in stark contrast with the more traditional staging of the Art Theatre’s production of The Seagull, where the lighting and set design are more static and less dynamic.

Plate 6  *The Seagull* (1898) Moscow Art Theatre, design by Alexander Kanski.
In contrast, and in line with Fuchs' theories, Meyerhold hung the *Sister Beatrice* backdrop a mere seven feet from the footlights, reflecting the narrow stage space at Fuchs' own theatre, the Münchner Künstlertheater. The foreshortening of perspective in Meyerhold's staging demonstrates his desire to alert his audience to the fact that depth on stage is in fact constructed, in contrast to the work of Stanislavsky, whose production designs at the Art Theatre attempted to make the false depth of the stage seem natural and inevitable.

Meyerhold's use of Fuchs' theory of relief staging indicates the development of a perception of the stage space in his work closely related to the fine arts. Relief staging results in the division of the performance space into two planes: a foreground (the actors) and a background (the non-representative backdrop). This spatial structure has a direct artistic precedent in bas-relief sculpture. In his review of Meyerhold's *Sister Beatrice* for the Russian newspaper *Russ*, Maximillian Voloshin compares Meyerhold's stage tableaux with the frescoes of Giotto:

> A Gothic wall in which the green and lilac-tinted stone blends with the grey tones of the tapestries and glimmers faintly with pale silver and old gold ... The Sisters in grayish-blue, close fitting garments with simple bonnets framing their rounded cheeks. I was constantly reminded of Giotto's frescoes in the Duomo in Florence, the glorious *Assumption of Saint Frances* portrayed with unsparing realism and idealized beauty.

Meyerhold, who quotes the Voloshin review in his own reflections on *Sister Beatrice*, acknowledges an artistic influence on his production, in the form of the "old masters" and the primitives:

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The critics tried to compare the production with most disparate artists: they spoke of Memling, Giotto, Botticelli and many others. In *Beatrice* we borrowed only the means of expression employed by the old masters, the movements, groupings, properties and costumes were simply a synthesis of the lines and colours found in the Primitives.63

Voloshin’s review suggests that Meyerhold’s use of images drawn from painterly and sculptural sources was apparent to the spectator during the performance, provided they had the correct frame of reference to access it. In his article ‘Meyerhold’s Staging of *Sister Beatrice*,’ František Deák considers the specific visual reference points created by the director. He claims that:

Several symbolist productions in France and in Russia were based on the idiom of symbolist paintings, but the staging of *Sister Beatrice* seems to go farther than any other production in modeling all of its visual aspects – blocking, grouping, tableux [sic], postures, gestures, eye movement – on concrete visual sources.64

Deák explores one of these concrete sources in greater depth, shedding light on the function of visual cross-referencing in Meyerhold’s aesthetic. Claiming that Meyerhold’s mise-en-scène for the first act was “inspired” by Domenico Veneziano’s *Martyrdom of Saint Lucy*, Deák identifies an “inverse parallelism” between Veneziano’s painting and Maeterlinck’s text:

St. Lucy, a young virgin, offered her virginity to God and refused to get married. Her suitor, to change her mind, accused her of being a Christian. When she again refused to marry, the judge condemned her to prostitution in a brothel, but God saved her by making her immobile. After tortures, she finally was killed by a sword thrust in her throat.65

Deák goes on to identify the moment at which Meyerhold’s mise-en-scène exactly mimicked Veneziano’s image:

65 Ibid., p. 43.
In Domenico’s painting, St. Lucy is kneeling and praying, while her executioner, standing behind her, is stabbing her with a sword through her neck. Both figures are in profile against the almost blank, neutral space of a courtyard. The first scene of the play actually opens with Beatrice on her knees praying to the Virgin Mary and asking her for advice. She is still praying when Bellidor enters, so it is at this moment that the arrangement of the painting is evoked for the first time in the mise-en-scène. If the spectator is in possession of the correct visual reference point, Meyerhold’s mise-en-scène expands their understanding of Maeterlinck’s text. Beatrice, in her comparison to St. Lucy, is implicitly condemned for her weakness in the face of temptation. This form of visual cross-referencing is, however, very specific in its functioning and implications, relying on appropriate knowledge on the part of the spectator. Meyerhold’s construction of the mise-en-scène also evoked a more general notion of religious imagery, manifesting the theme of the text in the visual arrangement of the actors, a visual metaphor similar to the visual manifestation of Ranevskaya’s state of mind seen in the director’s analysis of The Cherry Orchard.

IV
Fuchs and Iconography

As well as constructing an appropriate visual metaphor through the mise-en-scène, Meyerhold’s use of bas-relief sculpture and religious imagery had implications for the spatial and temporal structure of the performance. Like the figures in bas-relief sculpture, the actors in Meyerhold’s Sister Beatrice were forced out in relief against the designer Sudeikin’s abstract backdrop, and the shapes of their bodies became the focal point for the audience’s experience of the production. Fuchs’ relief stage was intended to provide the actors with an environment in which to work physically: a stage space that would emphasize their bodies, making them the focus of the performance. The reduction of the

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66 Ibid., p. 43.
space in depth draws the spectator’s attention to the body of the actor and the image it creates. In this sense, Fuchs’ staging fulfils the same function as the associations between the characters and elements of the stage environment that Meyerhold had employed in *Hedda Gabler*: the performance is constructed as a series of images which are intended to be retained by the audience.

By providing an environment that highlighted the actor’s physical reality Meyerhold was addressing a fundamental crisis in the symbolist theatre. Theatre was not the preferred medium of the symbolist writers. Unlike a novel or a poem, the theatre cannot be elevated to the realm of the purely symbolic: however ethereal a talented artist can make the stage environment appear, the actor remains resolutely corporeal, destroying any attempt to transcend the everyday. The relationship developed by Meyerhold between Fuchs’ staging principles and the Russian cultural shift towards symbolism was therefore problematic. In his analysis of symbolist staging at the *Théâtre D’Art* in Paris, Deák addresses the notion of symbolist synaesthesia, the combination of different sensory experiences on stage to create a seamless whole which elevates the audience member to a higher perceptual plane. Deák describes synaesthesia as being “the transference from one sense to another”, and quotes Baudelaire’s observation that:

> What would be really surprising would be that sound would not suggest color, that colors would not convey a melody, and that sound and color were unsuited to translating ideas, things always having been expressed by a reciprocal analogy since the day God created the world as a complex and indivisible whole.  

Although Meyerhold’s theoretical engagement with *The Cherry Orchard* seems to operate on this level, his practical experiments in *Sister Beatrice* fundamentally contradicted the

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67 Baudelaire, quoted in František Deák ‘Symbolist Staging at the Théâtre D’Art’, *The Drama Review*, 20.3 (1976), 117 – 122 (p. 121). Deák’s discussion of synaesthesia can also be found on p. 121.
unification of the stage elements required by synaesthesia. Fuchs’ relief stage, in its combination of a two-dimensional environment and three-dimensional performer, functions more through a process of juxtaposition than unification. This aspect of Meyerhold’s staging is most evident when Fuchs’ device is compared the techniques employed in religious iconography, the appropriation of which was emerging as a trend amongst the artists of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde.

The similarities between Meyerhold’s staging for *Sister Beatrice* and the work of Giotto indicates a direct link between Meyerhold’s appreciation of art and his construction of the stage space. The lines and groupings of *Sister Beatrice* are certainly reminiscent of the frescoes Voloshin cites and Meyerhold acknowledges [see plate 7]. However, the structural division of the space into two planes is reminiscent less of Giotto (whose work shows evidence of pre-Renaissance perspective painting techniques), than of the Byzantine-influenced Russian orthodox icons [see plate 8].

The techniques of icon painting were introduced to Russia with Byzantine Christianity in 988 AD. Both the religion and its cultural conventions were taken almost intact from the Byzantine Empire and transferred to Kiev by Prince Vladimir who began the process of converting the, mostly pagan, Russian people. As Russian iconographers began to adapt the foreign style to create uniquely Russian icons, their works became a focal point for

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68 Deák’s analysis of *Sister Beatrice* does highlight an element of unification through the dissolution of boundaries between the actor and the décor, using correspondence of colour in set and costume, resulting in the human body becoming “depersonalized” (Deák, 1982, p. 49).
70 Most icons that have been preserved until today date from the 13th century at the earliest.
Plate 7

Madonna Enthroned, Giotto
Plate 8

*Virgın of Vladimir, twelfth century Russian icon*
Christian worship in Russia. 71 At the turn of the twentieth century, iconography became a popular reference point for the emerging avant-garde art scene. Gray argues that the radical new perception of art that emerged in early twentieth century Russia had its roots in late nineteenth century Russian art movements, especially those concerned with the revival of traditional and popular imagery. 72

Following a period of unpopularity at the beginning of the eighteenth century, including the removal of icons from many churches, iconography experienced a revival starting in the 1850s and culminating in the systematic restoration of icons after the 1917 Revolution. 73 In the mid- to late-nineteenth century the Wanderers group of artists employed traditional Byzantine iconography and themes in their work thereby increasing the circulation of these ancient religious styles. 74 Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, iconography influenced the work of the Russian primitivists, as can be seen, for example, in Goncharova’s 1905-7 painting *Madonna and Child* [see plate 9]. The revived interest in iconography and the repeated used of icon-like images amongst the early twentieth century avant-garde artists indicates that the comparison of Meyerhold’s work in 1906 to techniques evident in icons painted as early as the thirteenth century is not unfounded speculation. Iconography was becoming a popular reference point in early twentieth century Russian culture.

72 See Gray (1962, 1971), particularly chapter one (pp. 9 – 36).
74 See footnote 63, introduction, p. 35, above.
Plate 9  


The Russian orthodox icons represent a similar visual structure to that which Mayerhold was familiar with and employed in his designs. The subject of the icon (the figures to be worshipped) is painted in detail in the foreground; the backgrounds are predominantly non-representational, often two-dimensional and consisting of an abstract pattern or image. In both the icons and Mayerhold’s stage settings, the screen setting does not reflect the location of the figures, placing more emphasis on the expressive power of painting in terms of colour and shape. In addition, the setting is static (Sister Benedict, a setting for *Sister Benedict*). 

The emergence of linear perspective in Russian art is the mark of the twentieth century and represents a shift between the viewer and the art object. Art historian Osmo Penttilä claims that the concept of linear perspective in painting in the early twentieth century is the logical progression of the perspective of the Renaissance concept of the autonomous subject. The domination of linear perspective in art since the Renaissance has shaped the perception of reality in Western culture as Penrose-Keil-Kanterman demonstrate: Westerners have been familiarised with the organisation of our field of vision according to the regularity of linear perspective. In stage scenery, what we perceive is arranged within a clearly delineated frame, with the eye focused on a single, central disappearing point against the horizon.

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*See p. 67, above.*

The Russian orthodox icons represent a similar spatial structure to that which Meyerhold, prompted by Fuchs, employed in *Sister Beatrice*: the subject of the icon (the figure to be worshipped) is painted in detail in the foreground; the backgrounds are predominantly non-representational, often two-dimensional and comprising an abstract pattern or image. In both the icons and Meyerhold’s stage structure, the abstract setting does not reflect the location of the figures, placing more emphasis on the expressive power of painting in terms of colour and shape (such as is indicated by Voloshin’s description of Sudeikin’s setting for *Sister Beatrice*). The construction of the orthodox icon is intended to create a specific relationship of identification and intimacy between the viewer and the image. On stage, the incongruity of the three-dimensional actor and two-dimensional environment serves to highlight the actor in the same way that the simple backgrounds of the early Russian icons drew attention to the focus of the believer’s worship. The focal point constructed by the use of the device in Meyerhold’s theatre is not an abstraction of a deity however, but the corporeality of the actor’s body.

The re-emergence of iconographic techniques in Russian art at the turn of the twentieth century posits a redefinition of the relationship between the viewer and the art object. Art historian Erwin Panofsky claims that the advent of linear perspective in painting in the early fifteenth century is the logical predecessor of the Cartesian concept of the autonomous subject. The dominance of linear perspective in art since the Renaissance has shaped the perception of reality in Western culture, as Petran Kockelkoren demonstrates:

Westerners have been familiarised with the organisation of our field of vision according to the regularity of linear perspective since infancy. What we perceive is arranged within a clearly delineated frame, with the eye focused on a single, central disappearing point situated on the horizon.

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75 See p. 67, above.
According to Kockelkoren and Panofsky it is this perception of the world which leads to emergence of the autonomous subject in art, and is subsequently closely related to the philosophy of Descartes. Kockelkoren goes on to address the implications of this worldview on the relationship between the viewer and the image:

Through the application of linear perspective, the world is transformed into an external scene, while in the same movement the viewer who was initially a part of it is dragged backwards out of the picture and turned into a remote spectator.

This theory is equally applicable to the spectator in a theatre reliant on verisimilitude. Meyerhold’s foreshortening of the stage space to the narrow strip stage reverts to a pre-Renaissance concept of perspective, as seen in the Russian icons for example, where the figure is juxtaposed against a two-dimensional, non-realistic background. In viewing the icon, the worshipper is engaged in an active process of identification with the image. There is no correct, external point from which the image must be viewed in order to function correctly (the innovation of Renaissance perspective being the re-ordering of the canvas to promote the belief that only one viewpoint, that of the external spectator, is correct). Meyerhold reverses the process that Kockelkoren and Panofsky observe: pulling the audience back into their original place within the image, the place they occupied before they were “dragged backwards” by linear Renaissance perspective and arguably by the trick perspective scenery employed, for example, at the Moscow Art Theatre.

77 The connection between Renaissance art and the philosophy of Descartes proposed by Panofsky and Kockelkoren is problematic. Neither author acknowledges the substantial time lapse between the emergence of linear perspective in Renaissance art (early fifteenth century) and the Cartesian concept of the autonomous subject (early to mid-seventeenth century). However Panofsky and Kockelkoren base their argument on the pervasive influence of linear perspective on Western humanity’s daily visual interaction with the world: the way that art is organized influences the daily perceptions of those exposed to it, even to the extent of shaping a philosopher’s world-view two centuries later.

The significance of Meyerhold’s use of foreshortened perspective is that it questions the notion of objectivity in viewing, undercutting the belief that the spectator needs to occupy a position external to the performance in order to appreciate it fully. Instead, the intimacy of the stage-auditorium relationship suggests that the spectator should engage with the performance on a more personal, subjective level. The removal of an objective external viewing point connects Meyerhold’s theatre to the trends emerging in avant-garde art, for example, the multiple perspectives of Cubist painting which suggest an increased number of acceptable points from which the spectator may observe the image, and consequently, the number of intellectual viewpoints they may construct [see plate 10].

In addition, Meyerhold’s emphasis on subjectivity over objectivity has significant implications for the role of the spectator. The stage is no longer constructed as a space for the audience to see but not to touch. In Meyerhold’s later projects, this dissolution of boundaries was to become a literal process: in the highly politicized atmosphere post 1917, connections between the stage and the auditorium took on a new dimension. In his symbolist-influenced work, the foreshortening of the stage space lays the groundwork for this dissolution of boundaries which created an atmosphere of intimacy between the audience and the performer. Panofsky’s reading of perspective in art provides a fuller explanation for the intimacy of Meyerhold’s Sister Beatrice staging than the simple proximity of the playing space to the audience, whilst re-emphasizing the connection between Meyerhold’s theatre and the radical changes in canvas art that were beginning to take place in the early twentieth century.

The division of the image into two contrasting elements, the figure and the backdrop, is characteristic of the spatial structure of both the Byzantine icons and sculptural bas-relief.
Plate 10  *Landscape at Céret*, Juan Gris, 1913
This spatial construction operates on a similar premise to that which would emerge in the avant-garde use of the collage device. According to art critic Clement Greenberg, collage functions through the assertion of the flatness of the canvas. In his influential essay on collage and modernism, ‘Collage’ or ‘The Pasted Paper Revolution’, Greenberg argues that Cubist art before the introduction of the collage device had begun to address the question of the flatness of the canvas, and the problem of distinguishing between the depicted flatness of the forms represented on the canvas, and the literal flatness of the canvas itself.  

Greenberg observes this process operating in Braque’s use of letters and trompe l’oeil effects in his Cubist paintings, which serve to emphasize the canvas as a surface:

If the actuality of the surface - its real, physical flatness - could be indicated explicitly enough in certain places, it would be distinguished and separated from everything else the surface contained.  

The effect of this process, according to Greenberg, is the construction of two opposing planes of flatness in the image. The interaction of these planes is seen as emphasizing the constructed, anti-realist nature of the painting:

Sealed between two parallel flatnesses - the depicted cubist flatness and the literal flatness of the paint surface - the illusion is made a little more present but, at the same time, even more ambiguous. [...] The abiding effect is of a constant shuttling between surface and depth, in which the depicted flatness is “infected” by the undepicted. Rather than being deceived, the eye is puzzled; instead of seeing objects in space, it see nothing more than - a picture.  

The introduction of the fragments of images which comprise the collage is seen by Greenberg as part of the same modernist Cubist project to assert the flatness of the canvas

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79 Greenberg’s essay is seminal in its influence on the development of art criticism. There are, however, more recent analyses of the collage device which suggest that Greenberg’s reading is inaccurate. Christine Poggi, for example, suggests that collage cannot be connected to the modernist project, and that Greenberg’s reading is outdated (see Christine Poggi, In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, particularly chapter 9, pp. 252 - 257).

81 Ibid., p. 73.
and disrupt the linear depiction of depth. Through this project, Greenberg highlights the connection between collage principles and sculptural bas-relief. The paradox of the collage fragment is that it simultaneously functions as foreground and background of the canvas:

The actual surface becomes both ground and background, and it turns out - suddenly and paradoxically - that the only place left for a three-dimensional illusion is in front of, upon, the surface. In their very first collages, Braque and Picasso draw or paint over and on the affixed paper or cloth, so that certain principal features of their subjects as depicted seem to thrust out into real, bas-relief space - or to be about to do so - while the rest of the subject remains embedded in, or flat upon, the surface.  

In this context, Meyerhold’s use of the relief stage can be seen as a precursor to his use of the collage device. In his production of *Sister Beatrice*, the flatness of the stage space was essential in constructing juxtapositions between the performers and their environment. Whereas in the Art Theatre the actors were hidden behind the imaginary surface of the fourth wall, in Meyerhold’s production they were forced out in relief against the abstract backdrop. The removal of trick perspective and the proximity of the performance space to the audience also questioned the validity of conceiving of the proscenium arch as a frame for a depth space, in the same way that collage highlighted the canvas as present surface rather than transparent window. Meyerhold’s use of Fuchs’ principles therefore suggests that relief staging operates through processes similar to Cubist collage. Greenberg’s analysis of the flatness of the collage surface also highlights Meyerhold’s meta-theatrical construction of the stage space. By foreshortening the stage in depth, the spectator, like the viewer of the Cubist collaged canvas, is forced to attempt to reconcile the three-dimensional figure with the two-dimensional environment, “shuttling between surface and depth”. The eye, as Greenberg says, unable to be deceived by verisimilitude, is puzzled and, in this instance, sees nothing more than a stage.

82 Ibid., p. 75.
The Static and the Dynamic: Temporal Implications

Through his use of Fuchs’ principles of relief staging Meyerhold constructed a series of stage images which had their origins in fine art, for example, in the work of Giotto. In addition, his construction of the stage space engaged with issues which indicate the beginnings of a painterly, even collage-based, perception of the image in performance: through the juxtapositional process underlying Fuchs’ theories, Meyerhold’s staging began to engage with the notion of juxtaposition within the mise-en-scène, for example between the actors and the setting. Meyerhold’s division of the stage into different planes engaged with the belief that space is as consciously constructed on the stage as it is on the canvas.

By 1907, Meyerhold’s theatre demonstrated a conscious engagement with the visual arts, indicating that the foundations for the birth of collaged space were as much in place in his theatrical work as they were amongst the artists of the avant-garde.

Meyerhold’s engagement with proto-collage practice in Sister Beatrice is reflected in the temporal, as well as the spatial, organization of the production. Like the Russian orthodox icons it resembled, Fuchs’ staging had implications for the reception of the performance in terms of both space and time. The iconographer’s task was to provide a point of contact for the viewer with another reality, with their saints and with God, who, according to biblical doctrine, exists outside of the constraints of human time. As II Peter 3.8 states:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 83

83 New International Version.
The collision of human time with the time of God is expressed in the concept of universal time embodied in the English medieval mystery plays. Of universal time, Christine Richardson and Jackie Johnston claim that:

The mystery cycle plays focus on the present, showing the past of biblical events to be integrally connected to both the present of the audience and actors, and also to their future in terms of salvation or damnation. The cycle plays work within ‘God’s time’ which is universal and contemporaneous, fixing the individual within the flow of Christian history.⁸⁴

The Russian Orthodox icons also function through this concept of universal time, providing the viewer, in the present, with access to the “universal and contemporaneous” time of God and acting as a point of contact between the viewer and eternity. The similarities between Meyerhold’s construction of the stage space and the principles of iconography suggest that his productions can also be associated with a temporal realm operating outside of the confines of linear space and time.

Through emphasizing the actor’s body as a formal construct, rather than as a vehicle for the realization of a fully developed character, Meyerhold shifts the focus of the performance away from the continuous linear development of a plot towards the construction of a series of images. This shift has a number of temporal implications, indicating that, as early as 1906, spatial and temporal structures functioned in parallel in Meyerhold’s theatre. Fuchs’ thesis of the relief stage consequently implied in Meyerhold’s work a specific relationship between space and time in performance: the reduction of the stage space to a narrow strip backed by non-representational backdrop forced the actors out into relief, highlighting the

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stage image; these highlighted images then become the driving force of the production, the sequence of *tableaux vivants*.  

Through the division of the production into *tableaux vivants*, Meyerhold constructed a theatrical experience which undercut the notion of simple linear temporal progression within the performance. The relationship between theatrical performance and temporal progression is clearly complex. The theatrical performance embodies several distinct temporal processes, amongst them the collision of the real time of the performance event itself, and the constructed time of the events taking place on the stage.  

In order to facilitate the realistic development of characters and action in the naturalistic theatre, the events on stage take place in simple linear temporal progression, often compressed or elongated, but rarely re-ordered or substantially deconstructed. In contrast, the emphasis Meyerhold placed on the image in *Sister Beatrice* freed the production from linear temporality, and introduced new temporal concerns. If Meyerhold’s individual tableaux operated on painterly principles, then each image can be seen to have embodied a notion of temporality similar to that found on the artist’s canvas.

Reflecting on his production of Alexei Faiko’s *Bubus the Teacher* (1925), Meyerhold states that:

> Directing is not a matter of static groupings, it is a process - the influence of time upon space. Beyond the spatial idea it includes the temporal idea, which is rhythmical and musical. Look at a bridge and you see what might be a leap frozen in metal. Movement, that is, not something static.

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85 The term *tableaux vivants* to describe Meyerhold’s work on *Sister Beatrice* is taken from Braun (1979, 1998), p. 59.

86 Other temporal processes operating in the theatrical performance include the process time (the rehearsal time, for example), and the meta-cognitive time which the audience need to engage with the performance intellectually after it has ended.

Here, Meyerhold is addressing an issue at the crux of both theatrical presentation and artistic representation: the relationship between space and time within the performance or the work of art. In his description of the bridge as a "leap frozen in metal" Meyerhold proposes a very specific reading of the stage space, and the subsequent effect that this reading should have on the director's construction of the stage image. Meyerhold’s implication is that the stationary is not necessarily static. In reading the bridge as leaping through space, he explores the temporal aspect of a spatial structure by implying a dynamic process located within the form of the bridge, an "active stillness".88

The choice of a bridge for this analogy is significant in that it implies a sense of movement operating within the image outside of the confines of narrative. By projecting movement outside of a narrative structure, what Meyerhold sees is pure movement: the space itself contains time. It is through this non-narrative example of the impact of time on space that Meyerhold’s theatre can be linked to the new temporal ideas in painting characteristic of the Russian avant-garde.

The representation of movement in Vasily Surikov’s 1887 painting, The Boyarina Morosova [see plate 11] provides a particularly good example of non-narrative dynamism in canvas art. Although the painting does have a narrative element, Surikov’s construction of the image also implies an abstract sense of movement across the picture surface. The

88 The term "active stillness" is taken from Teleory Williamson’s review of the Otrabanda Company’s production of Blok’s The Fairground Booth (La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, New York, 10th May 1996). Williamson uses the term in relation to a section of the production in which the characters “pose in unison to begin a ghoulish dance”. Williamson claims that “[t]his pose, reminiscent of Egyptian hieroglyphic figures, exemplified the active stillness found in Meyerhold’s posturing.” Teleory Williamson ‘Performance Review: The Fairground Booth’, Theatre Journal, 48 (1996), 511 – 512 (p. 512). The notion of active stillness is exemplified in Meyerhold’s use of the raccourci, a static position which Sergei Eisenstein describes as “dynamics frozen for a moment.” Sergei Eisenstein, ‘What is a Raccourci and What is a Pose?’, in Law and Gordon (1996), pp. 168 – 9 (p. 169).
representation of the crowd in Surikov's painting again to recall Meyerhold's construction of tableaux using the mass and the banya, the various groups, in Silent Service.

Ginzburg's analysis of the sense of movement in Surikov's painting can also be applied to Meyerhold's staging procedures:

[The Boyarina Morosova] is full of movement (. . .) present carries onto present, and finally one's eye is arrested by the central figure of the Boyarina with her dramatic uplifted hand and pointing finger. This dynamic quality had always been a fundamental characteristic of Russian painting, and in Surikov's work is re-emergent from the predicted research for the first time.

Plate 11  The Boyarina Morosova  Vassily Surikov, 1887

In addition to Meyerhold's dynamic construction of the tableau in Silent Service, the emphasis on discrete images rather than continuous action fractures the temporal dimension of the performance. Time is not merely one preceded or elongated but fragmented. The
representation of the crowd in Surikov’s painting seems to reflect Meyerhold’s construction of tableaux using the nuns and the beggars, the two choral groups, in Sister Beatrice. Gray’s analysis of the sense of movement in Surikov’s painting can also be applied to Meyerhold’s static groupings:

[The Boyarina Morosova] is full of movement [...] gesture carries onto gesture, until finally one’s eye is arrested by the central figure of the Boyarina with her dramatic uplifted hand and pointing finger. This dynamic quality had always been a fundamental characteristic of Russian painting, and in Surikov’s work it re-emerges from the medieval traditions for the first time.89

The dynamic effect of the gestures in Surikov’s painting can also be seen in plate 4, a photograph of a tableau from Meyerhold’s production of Sister Beatrice.90 The standing nuns, with their eyes cast heavenward, are arranged in height order, the shortest nearest Beatrice, and the line formed directs the viewer’s eye towards the central figure. The heads of the seated nuns describe a curve around Beatrice’s head, and Beatrice herself forms the focal point of the image, with her arms raised in the same way as Surikov’s Boyarina. The dynamic quality that Gray sees as characteristic of Russian medieval painting is also present in Meyerhold’s stage tableaux: the viewer’s eye is guided through the stage picture, and a sense of movement becomes apparent in the static image. By filling the moments of arrested time with movement, Meyerhold uses the tableaux to disrupt linear temporality, demonstrating that temporal stillness does not necessarily equate to spatial stillness.

In addition to Meyerhold’s dynamic construction of the tableaux in Sister Beatrice, the emphasis on discrete images rather than continuous action fractures the temporal through-line of the performance. Time is not merely compressed or elongated but fragmented. The

90 Plate 4 can be found after p. 63, above.
nature of theatrical performance, where an actor and audience share an experience in space and time, is such that it is inconceivable that theatre could operate outside of temporal progression, and the experience of watching *Sister Beatrice*, as in any theatrical performance, would, of course, have been embedded with a sense of linear time.

Meyerhold's *tableaux vivants* were presented in a pre-determined and unchanging order to the audience, and consequently contained by their nature more temporal coherence than, for example, the images of a comic strip presented to the reader simultaneously on the page, only convention dictating the order in which they are read. In Meyerhold's *Sister Beatrice* linear temporal progression was not ignored, but time was systematically disrupted for effect, to "imprint" an image onto the audience's memory or to give atmosphere precedence over action. The production cannot operate outside of time, but linear temporal progression does not control the way in which the play is realized on stage. The division of the play into tableaux shifts a degree of responsibility for the construction of any temporal through-line onto the audience, who can decide to create a linear plot from the images either during the production or in retrospect.

Meyerhold's symbolist-motivated innovation to reduce the plot to discrete images and partly transfer the burden of temporal construction onto the audience initiates the beginning of his life-long process of the redefinition of temporality in performance. Meyerhold forces apart two parallel processes of temporal progression in theatre: the constructed time of the performance on stage and the actual time of the theatrical event itself, exploring the collision between fantasy and reality. For Meyerhold, the relationship between theatre and

91 Here, again, the meta-cognitive time associated with theatrical performance becomes significant. Theatre allows those involved to engage mentally with the production both before and after its performance. For the reference for the quotation from Meyerhold, see footnote 56, p. 64 above.
92 The division of the performance into tableaux clearly resonates with the division of the film into frames. Meyerhold's relationship with cinema, in particular, with cinematic montage, will be discussed in chapter five, pp. 254 – 260 below.
life was functional, not representational, and he believed, as Mayakovsky observed, that “the theatre is not a mirror but a magnifying glass”. On stage, all things are not equal: certain images must be emphasized and others glossed over, some moments are more important than others and deserve more attention and time to be dedicated to them.

Meyerhold saw the director’s role as the manipulation of this process. In his theatre, performances needed not to mimic real time, or even a paraphrase of real time, in order to relate directly to reality. Meyerhold’s later productions, particularly The Government Inspector, pushed this re-working of real time to an extreme, using devices drawn from the cinema, dream-time sequences, and the slowing down, speeding up and freezing of linear time.

Meyerhold’s work on Sister Beatrice questioned the need for temporal progression on stage to be linear and continuous, suggesting that the performance can be read just as well by the audience when it adopts the constraints of conveying temporal progression encountered in the visual arts, where images are equated with moments and the moments must be ordered by the viewer as part of the viewing experience. In Sister Beatrice, Meyerhold was arguably questioning the absolute, positivist interpretations of space and time which dominated naturalism in theatre, and his work had started to show evidence of an alternative way of constructing space and time in performance. In the context of this study, particularly significant is the way in which this aspect of Meyerhold’s work mimicked the trends in proto-avant-garde art in Russia, for example in the primitivist revival of iconographic images in painting.

93 Although commonly attributed to Mayakovsky, in the prologue to his play Mystery Bouffe, most English translations of the play do not appear to include this line, which in Russian reads: Театр, не отображающее зеркало, а – увеличительное стекло.
VI

The Reintroduction of the Depth Stage

Before Meyerhold’s dismissal from the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre in November 1907, his work had begun to show traces of dissatisfaction both with symbolism and with the relief stage. In December 1906, he staged his first production of *The Fairground Booth*, a short verse drama by the acknowledged symbolist poet Alexander Blok.\(^{94}\) Blok’s play explores the familiar love triangle of Pierrot, Columbine and Harlequin, and its symbolist features are outweighed by the author’s satirical take on symbolist mysticism. Meyerhold’s affection for Blok’s text, which he would go on to stage twice more before the 1917 Revolutions, indicates both his fading interest in symbolism, and his increasing interest in the actor’s corporeality, as exemplified by his emerging emphasis on the *Commedia dell’ Arte*.\(^{95}\) Unlike symbolism, where the actor seems a necessary distraction from the ethereal construction of the stage world, the physical presence of the actor and the tension between the actor and the character are central to the *Commedia* aesthetic, as typified, for example, in the Duality *Lazzi*.\(^{96}\) Meyerhold employed *Commedia* techniques mainly to increase the physical virtuosity of his performers, suggesting the cabotin (strolling player) “in terms of

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\(^{94}\) *Balaganchik* is either translated as *The Fairground Booth*, or *Farce*. The Russian word carries implications of both.

\(^{95}\) It should be noted that although Meyerhold’s productions move away from the traditional ideal of symbolist theatre, he continues to employ a sense of mysticism, often manifested as the grotesque, in a number of productions. These include his opulent version of Lermontov’s *Masquerade* (1917), where a figure representing fate controlled the action, and his 1926 production of *The Government Inspector*, where a sense of grotesque unreality engulfed much of the performance, and can be seen especially in Erast Garin’s portrayal of the con-man Khlestakov. See chapter three, p. 169, below.

\(^{96}\) As Mel Gordon notes in his study of the *Commedia dell’Arte ‘lazzi’*, the so-called ‘duality *lazzi*’ focus on the relationship between the performer and the character. In these *lazzi*, the actor is often made as apparent to the audience as the character, and a comic situation arises from the clash between actor and character (see Mel Gordon, *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell’Arte*, New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983).
an actor-training alternative to that of Stanislavsky”. It was the physicality of the cabotin
that appealed to Meyerhold, as his essay ‘The Fairground Booth’ makes clear:

It is to the heyday of cabotinage that one must look for the origins of the theatre
[...] Nowadays the majority of stage-directors are turning to pantomime and prefer
this form to verbal drama. This strikes me as more than a coincidence. It is not just a
question of taste. In their attempts to propagate pantomime, directors are not merely
attracted by the peculiar fascination which the genre possesses. In order to revive
the theatre of the past contemporary directors are finding it necessary to begin with
pantomime, because when these silent plays are staged they reveal to directors and
actors the power of the primordial elements of the theatre: the power of the mask,
gesture, movement and plot.

The power, in other words, of the actor of the Commedia dell'Arte. It was the actor as
acrobat, tumbler and mime which Meyerhold emphasized in the Commedia classes offered
at his pre-revolutionary teaching studio on Borodinskaya Street. The Borodinskaya Street
Studio (1914 - 1916) housed Meyerhold’s first serious attempt at an acting class, and it was
there that the director devised the Sixteen Études, the exercises that would develop into his
post-revolutionary actor training system, biomechanics.

Since the early twentieth century, understanding of the techniques of the Commedia
dell'Arte has significantly increased. Consequently, it becomes apparent today that
Meyerhold’s interpretation of Commedia techniques was not necessarily an accurate
reflection of the Italian comedy. The director saw Commedia as a predominantly physical
performance style, and as such emphasized the physical virtuosity and acrobatic skills of
the Commedia actor at the expense of verbal improvisation. Reflecting on Meyerhold’s
adaptation of Commedia both at the Borodinskaya Street Studio and in his productions in
the early to mid-1910s, John Rudlin observes that:

Meyerhold’s desire for an increasingly physically-adept performer, rooted in corporeality rather than ethereality, is reflected not only in his adaptation of Commedia techniques, but also in his movement away from relief staging, particularly after leaving the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre. Meyerhold appears to have encountered the fundamental paradox of Fuchs’ theory: Fuchs advocates an extremely physical training regime for the actor, Beeson mentions “gymnastics, sports, even acrobatics”, but the manifestation of these skills in performance is restricted by the imposition of the narrow strip of stage space. Meyerhold’s Commedia-influenced, highly acrobatic performers required a stage shape more appropriate to the expression of their abilities.

Consequently, Meyerhold’s reintroduction of the depth stage seems to be a rejection of the principles of relief staging in favour of a space more suited to a physical performance style. The extension of the stage space does not, however, necessarily indicate a complete abandonment by Meyerhold of Fuchs’ ideology. The almost paradoxical contrasts in staging styles employed by Meyerhold after 1906 can be seen to constitute the development of an aesthetic closely associated with his early experiments in relief staging, and productions from Sister Beatrice to The Magnanimous Cuckold bear traces of the continued influence of the principles of the relief stage on Meyerhold’s work. From analysis based on

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100 Beeson (1960), pp. 41 - 42.
images taken from Meyerhold’s productions, evidence can be identified which indicates the emergence of a process of layering in the stage space: the depth of the stage divided into a series of narrow strip stages, retaining the traces of the relief staging advocated by Fuchs.101

The development of a stage space divided into narrow strips reminiscent of the relief staging structure constitutes the next phase of Meyerhold’s engagement with the collage aesthetic. In addition, through the identification of the layered stage space, the connections between Meyerhold’s theatrical work and the anti-positivist redefinitions of space and time become more explicit. The adaptation of Fuchs’ relief staging principles to the depth stage indicates Meyerhold’s first extended investigation of the stage space through the formal and philosophical tenets of the collage device.

101 The images chosen for these analyses are predominantly photographic, although in some cases, where no appropriate photograph could be found, an artist’s impression, or designer’s sketch has been used.
Chapter Two

From Relief Stage to Layered Stage: The Creation of a Collaged Stage Space

I

Reconciling the Relief Stage and the Depth Stage

As Meyerhold’s emphasis shifted from static symbolist mysticism to an increasingly physical performance style influenced by the Commedia dell’Arte, a parallel shift in his use of stage space was to be expected: the actor required more space to perform Commedia scenarios than to perform Maeterlinck’s “static tragedies”. Meyerhold’s increased interest in Commedia and physicalized performance highlighted the fundamental contradiction implied by Fuchs’ thesis: that the actor must master extremely physical skills in training, for example gymnastics and acrobatics, yet was placed in a stage space too restricted to explore those skills in performance.

However, Meyerhold’s return to the depth stage should not be read as a prime-face rejection of Fuchs’ theory of relief staging. The principles of the relief stage had been advantageous to Meyerhold in his construction of the stage image. The foreshortening of perspective associated with relief staging emphasized the theatrical performance as a constructed, rather than a natural, process. In addition, the relief stage drew attention to the physical reality of the performers in the space, emphasizing them as three-dimensional through their juxtaposition with the two-dimensional, non-representational backdrop.

The emphasis on the convention-based nature of performance and the juxtapositional construction of the stage image, the underlying principles of relief staging, became

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1 See footnote 55, chapter one, p. 64, above.
fundamental to Meyerhold's aesthetic throughout his career. In images of his productions between 1907 and 1922, these principles repeatedly emerge in Meyerhold's construction of the stage space. In his aesthetic during this period the relief stage was transmuted into a fractured or fragmented space, which was ultimately formalized into a series of narrow strips of stage space superimposed one on top of another. This spatial structure represents a layered stage aesthetic, similar in both its aims and its outcomes to the collage device employed by the avant-garde artists.

The shift in Meyerhold's aesthetic from relief stage to layered stage can be seen as a development in three parts, the culmination of which is the construction of a stage image which embodies a sense of dynamism through the combination of multiple layering processes. The first stage of this development is the re-conceptualization of the depth stage, reading the space not as an unstructured void, but instead as a series of relief stages superimposed one on top of another. The earliest sign of this process operating in Meyerhold's work is the fracturing or fragmentation of the depth of the stage space into separate areas or planes.

In addition to the fragmentation of the stage in depth, Meyerhold's productions between 1907 and 1922 show evidence of a similar fracturing in the space between the stage floor and the flies: a fragmentation of the stage in height. During this period, the work of Meyerhold and his designers demonstrated an increasing awareness of the space above the actors' head as a significant aspect of the stage image. By 1920, in his production of The Dawns designed by Dmitriev, a seemingly deliberate process of layering through the height of the stage space can be discerned.
The particular sophistication of Meyerhold’s use of layering in his production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) lies in his combination of the two layering processes (in depth and in height). The combination of the two systems of layers introduced a further axis into the stage image, a line which extended diagonally through the cuboid of the stage space, and implicitly out towards the audience.\(^2\) It is through this diagonal axis that Meyerhold’s staging acquired its dynamic dimension. The division of the stage space into fragments and the subsequent combination of these fragments into an image constitutes a parallel process to the collagist’s selection and combination of fragments to create the artwork. The temporal processes which emerge from this construction of the stage image correlate to the anti-positivist sense of temporality embodied in Cubist, futurist and Cubo-Futurist art.

II

Layering Part One: Fragmentation of the Stage in Depth

The earliest evidence of the development of a layered staging aesthetic in Meyerhold’s theatre takes the form of the simple division of the stage space into two (or more) separate sections. An example of this sort of division can be found in the director’s 1914 production of Blok’s *The Fairground Booth*.

As observed in chapter one, Meyerhold’s interest in Blok’s play can be seen as indicative of his waning commitment to the symbolist movement. Meyerhold himself acknowledged his 1906 production of *The Fairground Booth* as a watershed in his oeuvre, claiming that

\(^2\) It should be noted that a large proportion of Meyerhold’s work between 1908 and 1922 took place in theatres with an end-on staging structure, at the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatres and the former Sohn Theatre in Moscow, for example. As a result, the description of the stage space for his productions as a ‘cuboid’ is legitimate, despite his strong dislike for the barrier between actor and audience that the proscenium arch and end-on stage represented.

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through his work on the production he came to redefine his aesthetic and shift decisively away from symbolist concerns towards an exploration of the self-consciously theatrical elements of performance. In the introduction to his book *O Teatre (On the Theatre)*, published in 1913, Meyerhold described *The Fairground Booth* as one of the “decisive productions in his first ten years as a stage-director.”³ The director’s 1906 variant of Blok’s text was ostensibly meta-theatrical. With his designer Nikolai Sapunov, Meyerhold constructed a miniature theatre on Komissarzhevskaya’s stage, a setting which he describes in his notes on the production:

This booth [the miniature theatre] has its own stage, curtain, prompter’s box, and proscenium opening. Instead of being masked by the conventional border, the flies, together with all the ropes and wires, are visible to the audience; when the entire set is hauled aloft in the booth, the audience in the actual theatre sees the whole process.⁴

The action of the play took place on this stage-within-a-stage. Meyerhold’s meta-theatrical approach to the production was further reflected in the striking *coup-de-théâtre* which he executed after Pierrot’s monologue in scene two: the scenery surrounding the character suddenly flew up into the flies and was replaced by that required for the next scene, in full view of both Pierrot and the audience.⁵ The inspiration for Meyerhold’s meta-theatrical conception of the play is clearly rooted in Blok’s text, which openly seeks to question the value of illusionism in performance. To this end, the text includes frequent interjections from the author (who questions why his work is being produced in this manner) and references to theatrical tricks (a wounded clown, for example, cries out that he is bleeding cranberry juice).

⁵ Meyerhold played the part of Pierrot in the production.
Konstantin Rudnitsky observes a direct connection between Meyerhold’s 1906 variant of *The Fairground Booth* and the emergence of Cubism in modern art:

Chronologically, the production of Blok’s *The Puppet Show* [*The Fairground Booth*] coincided exactly with a most significant turn in the graphic arts. Cubism — specifically Picasso’s “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” — first appeared in 1907. There is an unquestionable internal connection between these two events.⁶

The “internal connection” Rudnitsky identifies is the rejection of artifice that is demonstrated both in Picasso’s influential proto-Cubist work, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and Meyerhold’s 1906 production of *The Fairground Booth*. Braun refers to this process as:

[T]he complete subordination of each work’s form to the artist’s perception of reality, asserting his primacy as observer and interpreter of a world totally unamenable to the traditional solutions of faith or logic.⁷

This emphasis on the artist as the conscious constructor of events can be seen in the sudden disappearance of Pierrot’s surroundings at the end of scene two of *The Fairground Booth* as much as it can be seen in the distorted figures of the women in Picasso’s painting [see plate 12]. Both Picasso’s Cubist artwork and Meyerhold’s production assert themselves as subjective, rather than objective, constructions, demonstrative not of a positivist world of facts, but of the personal viewpoint of their creator. The emphasis on subjectivity which had defined Meyerhold’s symbolist aesthetic in *Sister Beatrice* explicitly re-emerged in his meta-theatrical interpretation of *The Fairground Booth*.

Meyerhold’s second production of *The Fairground Booth* took place in 1908, with an “unnamed company” in Vitebsk.⁸ In this variant the director placed a similar emphasis on the play’s meta-theatrical elements: the Playwright was pulled off the stage by his coat tails

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⁸ The Vitebsk company are referred to as ‘unnamed’ in Robert Leach’s summary of all of Meyerhold’s productions (appendix two, in Leach, 1989), p. 198.
Plate 12  *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* Pablo Picasso, 1907.
(as he had been in 1906), the scenery disappeared around Pierrot but this time left him alone on the empty stage, and the clown spilt his cranberry juice-blood over the edge of the stage towards the audience. 9

It is, however, in the director’s 1914 production of the play that his construction of the stage space becomes particularly significant within the context of this study. Meyerhold’s 1914 variant of The Fairground Booth took place at the Tenishevskoe Institute in St. Petersburg, and was presented as part of a double bill with another of Blok’s plays, The Unknown Woman. The performers were Meyerhold’s students, recruited from the teaching studio he had opened in September 1913 on Troitskaya Street, although the role of the Playwright was undertaken by Meyerhold’s teaching colleague Vladimir Solovyov, and Meyerhold himself performed as one of the proscenium servants. 10 The third production of The Fairground Booth differed in staging from the 1906 variant, and the construction of a stage-within-a-stage was abandoned. Instead, Meyerhold divided the playing space into two separate areas, a process of fragmentation which represents a proto-type of the layered stage aesthetic. Plates 13 and 14, both artists’ impressions of the production, highlight this spatial division, which is reminiscent of Classical Greek theatre: there is a stage and an orchestra, surrounded by an audience seated in a sloping auditorium.

In his 1907 article ‘The Stylized Theatre’, Meyerhold posits the architecture of the ancient Athenian theatre as the ideal performance space:

Architecturally, the Greek classical theatre is the very theatre which modern drama needs: it has three-dimensional space, no scenery and it demands statuesque plasticity. [...] [W]ith its simplicity, its horseshoe-shaped auditorium, and its

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9 See extract from Meyerhold’s letter to Ekaterina Munt concerning the 1908 variant of The Fairground Booth reproduced in Rudnitsky (1981), p. 133.
Plate 13  *The Fairground Booth* (1914), design by Yury Bondi. Drawing by G. Markov.
Plate 14  *The Fairground Booth* (1914), design by Yury Bondi. Drawing by Alexei Gripich [reconstruction, 1974]
orchestra, it is the only theatre capable of accommodating such a varied repertoire
as Blok's *Fairground Booth*, Andreev's *Life of a Man*, Maeterlinck's tragedies, 
Kuzmin's dramas, Remizov's mysteries, Sologub's *Gift of the Wise Bees*, and all
the other fine new plays which have yet to find their theatre.\(^\text{11}\)

Judging from Meyerhold's examples, aside from Blok's play, the "modern drama" the
Greek theatre model was to accommodate was primarily symbolist in style. However, his
stagings of Maeterlinck's tragedy at Komissarzhevskaya's theatre, for example, did not
draw on this Greek model, turning instead to Fuchs' relief stage. In contrast, as can be seen
in plates 13 and 14, the 1914 variant of *The Fairground Booth* represented a small-scale
replica of the theatres of ancient Athens.\(^\text{12}\)

It is this adaptation of the Greek staging model which enabled Meyerhold to divide the
stage into two sections. The division of the spaces was made more pronounced by the
raising of a platform at one end of the playing space (equivalent to the *skene* of Athenian
drama). The semi-round area in front of the audience (the *orchestra*) provides a space better
suited to physical performance than the narrow relief stage. There are, however, still traces
of the relief stage in Meyerhold's construction of the space. In addition to the division of
the stage space into *skene* and *orchestra*, the raised platform area is further divided by a
long table. In plate 13, Columbine and Pierrot appear to be performing in front of this table,
in a narrow, downstage space, reminiscent of the relief stage. Behind the table sit the


\(^{12}\) As with the *Commedia dell'Arte*, it should be emphasized that Meyerhold's conception of Greek theatre
practice is not necessarily accurate according to today's ideas or standards. At the start of the twentieth
century, theatre history was not an exact science, and Meyerhold's ability to read German may have exposed
him to some of the misconceptions in German scholarship at the time (particularly in the work of Wilhelm
Dörpfeld and Ernst Fiechter). As in the discussion of the *Commedia dell'Arte* above (see p. 86 above), the
interest of this dissertation lies not in what are now considered to be the actual practices of the ancient
Athenian theatre, but instead with what Meyerhold believed those practices to be. Examples of Meyerhold's
approach to Classical Greek theatre can be found in his essays 'The Stylized Theatre' (1907) and 'The
Reconstruction of the Theatre' (1930), both in Braun (1969, 1998), pp. 58 - 64; 253 - 274 (with particular
references to the amphitheatres on pp. 257 - 258).

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mystics, presumably significantly restricted in their movement, and acting as a parody of Meyerhold’s earlier static symbolist productions.13

Meyerhold’s construction of the stage in his 1914 variant of The Fairground Booth introduces the notion that space is divided according to function, making explicit the association of movement with the depth stage and stillness with the narrow strip stage. Placing the mystics in the restricted space upstage acts as a visual metaphor for the audience, implying that the characters and the ideas they represented were outdated, trapped in the past as the performers were trapped behind the table. The association of the mystics with the restricted stage space and the more physically active performers with the depth stage also indicates a degree of progression in Meyerhold’s perception of performance: the mockery of the mystics and parody of his own symbolist work is extended by implication to the narrow strip stage. In contrast, the depth stage is the home of his new style, the physicality he associated with the Commedia dell’Arte.

This process again highlights Meyerhold’s construction of a performance space which engenders a specific temporal correlate. Separating stillness and movement in this way adds a rhythmic function to the stage space. Fast-paced action and movement take place on the depth stage, whereas static or slower sequences are restricted to the relief stage. This rhythmic division of space can be seen as an extension of the director’s rhythmic construction of the individual tableaux in Sister Beatrice, instilling a sense of movement in the static moment. The importance Meyerhold afforded to the rhythmic construction of the

13 The representation of the mystics in the text is in the mode of self-conscious parody of symbolist theorists. In Meyerhold’s 1906 and 1908 productions of The Fairground Booth, the Mystics sat behind cardboard cutouts of their clothes, with only the actors’ real hands and heads visible. This further reinforces Meyerhold’s interpretation of these characters as immobile.
production is well documented: in Robert Leach’s study of Meyerhold’s aesthetic, for example, an entire chapter is dedicated to the director’s use of rhythm, which Leach regards as “the chief guiding principle” of his career. Meyerhold’s rhythmic construction of the performance incorporated the whole *mise-en-scène* in terms of setting, performers and image. In his work on the tableaux of *Sister Beatrice*, as addressed above, Meyerhold constructed a sense of rhythm through the lines and shapes of the actors’ bodies. In his 1914 variant of *The Fairground Booth*, the division of the stage space contributed to a similar rhythmic structure.

The use of the stage shape to construct a sense of rhythm in the production as a whole was exploited more fully in Meyerhold’s most elaborate pre-revolutionary production, Mikhail Lermontov’s *Masquerade* at the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre. Although the production did not open until 25th February 1917, Meyerhold spent six years preparing his *Masquerade*, which was designed by his regular collaborator at the Imperial Theatres, artist Alexander Golovin. The project was of almost unprecedented size and cost, involving over 200 performers, with all scenery, props and costumes being made to Golovin’s detailed specifications. The spectacular scale of the production resulted in its being titled the “swansong of the tsarist regime” by critics, who were quick to note the irony of its first performance falling on the day that Russia’s February Revolution broke out.15

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15 Beeson (1960), p. 175. Braun quotes Alexander Kugel: “At the entrance to the theatre stood tight black lines of automobiles. All the rich, all the aristocratic, all the prosperous Petrograd pluto-, bureau- and ‘homefrontocrats’ (*tylokratia*) were present in force... and when that Babylon of absurd extravagance was unveiled before us with all the artistic obscenity of a Semiramis, I was horrified. I knew – everybody knew – that two or three miles away crowds of people were crying ‘bread’ and Protopopov’s policemen were getting seventy roubles a day for spraying those bread-starved people with bullets from their machine-guns. What is this – Rome after the Caesars? Should we go on afterwards to Lucullus and feast on swallows’ tongues, leaving those staring wretches to go on shouting for bread and freedom?” (Braun, 1979, 1998, p. 148).
Golovin’s set design for Meyerhold’s production of *Masquerade* extended the principles seen in the 1914 variant of *The Fairground Booth* by juxtaposing a narrow and a deep stage space. Lermontov’s text frequently requires elaborate set changes between scenes, for example, from the Baroness’ Palace in scene four to Arbenin’s study in scene five. In order not to disrupt the rhythmic flow of the production to change the scene, Meyerhold and Golovin conceived of an intricate series of decorated curtains, which were lowered from the theatre flies before each scene ended [see plate 15]. The relevant characters were isolated in front of the curtain and could continue the scene, allowing for large scale sets to be changed without disrupting the strict rhythms of the performance. The result, in effect, was one of repeated rapid transitions between the relief and the depth stage.

Golovin’s elaborate designs for settings on the depth stage made some use of trick perspective devices. Plates 16 and 17, for example, show Golovin’s set for scene four, the Baroness’ Palace. The design attempts to construct a sense of depth in the stage space through the use of a visual focal point upstage, the windows. The viewer’s eye is guided towards this focal point by Golovin’s use of several sets of curtains and borders at different heights, the lowest framing the windows themselves. The windows are further emphasized as a focal point through the large sets of doors stage right and stage left which are angled diagonally upstage. Despite the elaborate decoration of the stage space, the design incorporates both a realistic sense of depth and naturalistic elements in furniture and design (particularly in the area furthest upstage). In contrast, the curtains Golovin designed were decorative and non-representational, as can be seen in plate 15. These curtains constitute a clear meta-theatrical reference to the proscenium curtain, and the framing of the stage space

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16 Meyerhold’s approach to the text was to divide the four acts of Lermontov’s original play into ten episodes. The re-organization of the play text into shorter sequences, each constituting a separate moment or event in the production, became a device Meyerhold was to revisit regularly throughout his career.
Plate 15  *Masquerade* (1917), design by Alexander Golovin, curtain for the masquerade.
Plate 16  
Plate 17  *Masquerade* (1917), design by Alexander Golovin, photograph of episode five: The Baroness’ Palace
with non-representational drapes emphasized the theatricality, and implicitly the artifice, of the performance, echoing the stage-within-a-stage Meyerhold had constructed for the 1906 and 1908 variants of *The Fairground Booth*. In addition, the insertion of a curtain, which in practice functioned as the reduction of the depth stage to a relief stage, emphasized the constructed nature of theatrical space, highlighting the trick perspectives of Golovin’s designs as mere tricks.

The rhythmic shifts between the relief and the depth stage had implications for the audience’s experience of Meyerhold’s production. The depth stage implied a sense of distance between the audience and the performers. In plate 17, for example, the scene has been set far upstage, leaving a large empty space between the actors and the spectators. 17

The curtains, signalling intimacy, appeared to push scenes closer to the audience, as if the actors had “crossed the proscenium line and entered the auditorium”, taking the audience into their confidence. 18 Through the use of the curtains, Meyerhold could rapidly reconstruct the sense of perspective experienced by the audience. Golovin’s use of trick perspective devices on the depth stage placed the spectator in the position of the externalized viewer Panofsky associates with Renaissance linear perspective techniques. 19

In contrast, when the curtain was lowered, it acted as a relief stage, suddenly foreshortening the audience’s perspective and, as was discussed above in relation to *Sister Beatrice*, replacing the objective position of the external observer with a subjective, personalized viewpoint. In contrast to his work on *Sister Beatrice*, however, Meyerhold’s *Masquerade* contained a series of differing perspectives on the stage space within the one production:

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17 The full depth of the Alexandrinsky stage was only used twice in the production, for the two ball scenes [see plate 66]. In order to enhance clarity in plate placement and numbering for the reader, plates referred to only in footnotes have been placed at the end of the thesis, after p. 293.


19 See chapter one, pp. 73 – 74, above.
the sense of difference was established between different sequences in the same
performance, not between Meyerhold’s work and that of other theatres with a primarily
naturalistic aesthetic, notably the Moscow Art Theatre.

In terms of the development of his aesthetic, Meyerhold’s approach to the construction of
the stage space in *Masquerade* is particularly significant. An ongoing investigation into
devices which alter the relationship of the audience to the performance was a fundamental
aspect of Meyerhold’s theatre. His rejection of the naturalism he had learnt from
Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko was partly born out of his desire to make the
spectator an active part of the performance event, an idea which he had encountered in the
work of the symbolist theorists Bryusov and Ivanov.\(^20\) The Meyerholdian aesthetic
attempted to engender a greater intimacy and equality between the actor and the audience
than that which was implied by the rigid imposition of the fourth wall at the Moscow Art
Theatre. Rudnitsky draws on Meyerhold’s discussion of his opera *Tristan and Isolde* (1909)
to address the director’s desire to restructure theatrical space and engender a closer actor-
audience relationship:

The problem of devising the new stage he sees primarily as the problem of bringing
the actor and the audience closer together, the problem of transcending the “frame”
as the boundary between stage and auditorium. He is excited by the idea of nearness
between player and audience; by the idea of bringing the stage into the auditorium.
The director’s attention is arrested by the “front edge” of the stage, the proscenium.
His theater lunges at the audience, tries to leap across the orchestra pit and prepares
to step into the auditorium.\(^21\)

Bryusov argued that the role of the theatre was to act as a stimulus to the audience’s imagination, rather than
to present the performance as a full realization of the play text. Ivanov’s Dionysian approach to theatre called
for the unification of the actor and spectator to create a quasi-religious experience.

To this end, Meyerhold repeatedly reorganized the stage space, redefining the spatial relationship between the stage and the auditorium. This process of redefinition can be seen in the director’s use of the forestage as the principle performance space and in his abolition of the proscenium curtain, both devices associated with his interest in Fuchs’ thesis of the relief stage:

Meyerhold experimented with a number of [Fuchs’] innovations during a season by the Fellowship at Poltava in June and July [1906]. In several productions (including Ibsen’s Ghosts) he removed the front curtain, built a deep forestage and employed a single, constructed (not painted) setting. In addition, Meyerhold reconfigured the actor-audience relationship through the removal of the footlights, a physical barrier between the performer and the spectator, and in his 1910 production of Molière’s Don Juan at the Alexandrinsky Theatre the connections between the stage and the auditorium were further emphasized by leaving the houselights up throughout the performance. These devices re-emerged in Meyerhold’s work on Masquerade: the scenes played downstage in front of the curtains highlighted the forestage as a significant playing space; the houselights remained on throughout the performance; and Golovin’s designs minimized differences between the stage and the auditorium by echoing on stage the elaborate style of the Alexandrinsky’s classicist interior.

The reconfiguration of the actor-audience relationship is also apparent in Meyerhold’s use of curtains to manipulate the stage space in depth. In his 1914 variant of The Fairground Booth, Meyerhold divided the stage space according to the actor’s function: depth space was more appropriate for acrobatics and physicality; relief space was more appropriate for

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23 Meyerhold’s production of Don Juan also used the forestage as a playing area. Meyerhold’s reflections on the production can be found in Meyerhold ‘Dom Juan’ in Braun (1969, 1998), pp. 98 – 106.
24 The Alexandrinsky Theatre was designed by architect Carlo Rossi, and built between 1828 and 1832.
static mysticism. The audience could infer the director’s attitude towards the character by their placement in the space, for example, in the placement of the mystics in restricted space. In *Masquerade*, the space was divided according to the required relationship between the stage and the auditorium: large-scale scenes were played on the depth stage; more intimate sequences on the relief stage. The audience were alternately externalized as observers and internalized as confidantes.

Again, Meyerhold’s project appears to have been to emphasize the constructed nature of the theatrical experience. Primarily, Meyerhold had conceived of the curtains to maintain the rhythmic flow of the production: to avoid the action becoming fragmented by frequent scene changes. However, in terms of the audience’s experience of the performance, the imposition of the curtains was arguably as disruptive as the interruption caused by a large-scale set change. Yury Yuriev, who played Arbenin in the original production, observes a generally negative audience reaction to the device:

[W]ith one voice they all protested at the division (or if you like, the segmentation) of the episodes… by the device of lowering the curtain in the middle of the dialogue. [...] ‘It breaks the illusion...’ ‘It distracts your attention, it stops you concentrating’.

Through the imposition of a curtain in the middle of a scene, the spectator’s sense of continuity was subordinated to the rhythmic flow of the production and the resulting experience was intentionally “distracting” or fragmented: the curtains were clearly intended to produce the effect against which the audience “protested with one voice”. The imposition of the curtain which “breaks the illusion” fulfilled the formalist principle of *ostranenie* (estrangement), indicating Meyerhold’s connections with the Russian Formalist

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movement. Leading Formalist critic Victor Shkhovsky claims that the role of art is to “[remove] objects from the automatism of perception”, and this is arguably the function fulfilled by the curtains used in *Masquerade*, making the process of viewing the performance apparent to the audience. Through associating the relief stage with intimacy and the depth stage with distance, the production appears to suggest that *where* the audience look from (their perspective on the space) affects *how* they see (their philosophical or emotional reaction to the production’s content). This connection between formal decisions and philosophical engagement is fundamental to Cubist art. As Bruce Altshuler claims:

> For these artists, painting was to depict intellectual conception and not visual appearance, encapsulating what is known rather than what is merely seen.\textsuperscript{28}

Rudnitsky suggests that the rapidly shifting configuration of the stage space in *Masquerade* functioned as a visual representation of the instability of the Tsarist regime:

> The world appeared dubious, threateningly mutable and mobile. The monumental stateliness of the era of Nicholas, presented with the maximum opulence of Golovin’s decorations and costumes, with its excessive, striking splendor and the intoxicating refrains of Meyerhold’s circular stagings, shifted to the edge of catastrophe, collapse, disaster.\textsuperscript{29}

This visual metaphor can be extended. The shifts in the configuration of the stage space resulted in the repeated reconfiguration of the spectator’s visual relationship with that


\textsuperscript{27} Victor Shkhovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 13. Connections between Meyerhold’s aesthetic and the Russian Formalist movement are discussed in Worrall (1973), p. 19. According to Katherine Bliss Eaton, there is some debate amongst Brecht scholars as to whether the Russian Formalist notion of *ostranenie* is the root of Brecht’s theories of alienation (the *Verfremdungseffekt*). On his visit to Russian in 1935, it is possible that Brecht came into contact with the ideas of the formalists, particularly, as John Willets argues, the ideas of Viktor Shkhovsky. See Eaton (1985), pp. 21 – 22.


\textsuperscript{29} Rudnitsky (1981), p. 239.
space. More than simply presenting a world in crisis which would soon collapse, Meyerhold created an audience experience which mimicked that crisis, continually moving between the objective and the subjective, the externalized and the internalized spectator. The resulting viewing experience was unsettling, destabilizing the spectator’s position, and through this, placing the audience in an analogous position to Arbenin, the protagonist, a figure who cannot define his relationship to the world with which he is presented. Both alienated from society by his own actions, and embraced by it through his marriage to Nina, Arbenin can neither reconcile himself to his world, nor control its effect on him. Convinced by those around him that Nina is unfaithful, he murders her and is driven insane by his own guilt. Like Arbenin, the audience of Meyerhold’s *Masquerade* were alternately embraced by the stage world, invited in as confidantes, and excluded by it, pushed back by depth space to the position of outside observer.

In *Masquerade*, the tableaux that had fractured linear temporality in *Sister Beatrice* gave way to a more extreme form of fragmentation: the fragmentation of the audience’s viewing experience. Through repeatedly reconstructing the spectator’s relationship with the stage space, Meyerhold created a viewing experience which was, above all, unsettling. The director’s construction of the space again emphasized subjectivity over an objective truth. The disappearance of the scenery around Pierrot at the end of act two of *The Fairground Booth* (1906 and 1908 variants) paralleled Cubist art by reminded the audience that actions on stage are controlled by an outside force, the director. In *Masquerade*, the rapid transitions between relief and depth stage space demonstrated that both the action and the spectator’s experience of that action were subject to the director’s influence. Meyerhold openly manipulated spectator’s perspective on the stage, signalling now distance, now
intimacy, undercutting any opportunity for the viewer to sit outside of the experience as objective judge.

The coexistence of the relief and the depth stage in Meyerhold’s work on *The Fairground Booth* (1914 variant) and *Masquerade* indicates that the director was exploring the implications of the spatial structure of the stage, and investigating the ways in which the relief and the depth stage could be reconciled. The resulting stage spaces were either fragmented throughout the performance, as in the division of the playing space according to the Classical Greek model in *The Fairground Booth*, or subject to fragmentation during the performance as in the fluctuation of the stage space in *Masquerade*. By Meyerhold’s 1922 production of Fernand Crommelynck’s farce *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, this fragmentation of the stage space had developed into the systematic organization of the stage floor into narrow strips. In *Masquerade*, the relief stage was constructed out of the division of the depth stage: in this sense, the spaces were co-existent. However, in order to emphasize the relief stage, the depth stage had to be obscured by the lowering of the curtain. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the relief and depth stages are reconciled through the superimposition of the strips of stage (the relief stages) one in front of another.

It is for this reason that the fullest and most sophisticated realization of layered stage space in Meyerhold’s theatre occurs in his production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. The harsh conditions of the Civil War, including his own brief period as a political prisoner of the White Army in Novorossiisk, had reduced Meyerhold’s theatrical output immediately after 1917, and *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was his first significant post-revolutionary success. Meyerhold’s production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* epitomized the collaboration between visual artists and theatre makers, transferring aspects of the constructivist
movement to the stage. The constructivist influence on the production was clearly evident: the designer, Popova, was widely recognized as affiliated to the constructivist group working under Vladimir Tatlin, and had participated in the first constructivist exhibition, the ‘5 x 5 = 25’ exhibition, in 1921. Popova’s construction for The Magnanimous Cuckold, described by Gvozdev as “a spring board for the actor”, reflected the constructivist concern for non-representative, utilitarian anti-art.

The concept of ‘Constructivist Theatre’ is problematic: the constructivists’ cry of “death to art!” makes their collaboration with theatre, which they acknowledged as an innately artificial mode, seem extremely paradoxical. However, the combination of Popova’s design and Meyerhold’s direction, which drew heavily on his recently formalized system of biomechanics, resulted in a production that was certainly constructivist-influenced. In addition, in their combined work on The Magnanimous Cuckold, Meyerhold and Popova created a series of stage images which also have distinctly Cubo-Futurist overtones, incorporating a particularly sophisticated adaptation of the layered stage aesthetic.

In plate 18, taken from The Magnanimous Cuckold, layers can be identified which divided the depth of the stage space: the back wall, animated by shadows, forms the layer furthest upstage; the main construction occupies the central layer; and the area of clear stage floor, including the curved bench stage right, forms the final layer, furthest downstage. The

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30 The title ‘5 x 5 = 25’ referred to the five constructivist artists (Popova, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Vesnin and Exter) who each contributed five works to the exhibition.

31 A. Gvozdev, quoted in Braun (1979, 1998), p. 180. It should be noted that although Popova is credited with the final design for The Magnanimous Cuckold, she was not the only designer to work on the project. The project was initially undertaken by the Stenberg Brothers and Kasimir Medunetsky. The project was then handed over to the Meyerhold Workshop, where student Vladimir Vladimirovich Liutse was assigned to make the set model. Popova took over the project from Liutse. See Alma H. Law, ‘Meyerhold’s The Magnanimous Cuckold’, in The Drama Review, 26.1 (1982), 61 – 86 (pp. 63 – 64).

Plate 18  *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), design by Lyubov Popova
actors are distributed across these layers, using their biomechanically-trained bodies to create shapes which form parallels with the lines of the construction and the bodies of other performers. Meyerhold repeatedly constructed the *Magnanimous Cuckold* stage images to contain a series of echoes across layers highlighting the division of the stage space.

Plate 19 serves as an example. In this image, the actors occupying the downstage layer, the curved bench, use their bodies to continue the lines formed by the construction, the mid-stage layer. Bruno, played by Igor Illinsky, has his right arm raised as an extension of the diagonal strut of the construction seen in the top right hand side of the photograph. The diagonal line formed by Alexei Temerin, playing the Bourgmestre, the central figure in the image, is parallel to the stage right staircase. Vasily Zaichikov (as Estrugo) uses his body to create another parallel diagonal line, which is then extended by the line of the slide, stage left. In addition, the quill pen Zaichikov holds is perpendicular to the stage floor, extending the line of the bench leg into the vertical struts of the construction. By setting the human body against its inanimate surroundings, Meyerhold has constructed a sense of contrast between the two parts of the image, and this highlights the fragmentation of the stage space into layers. However, the extension of the lines of the environment through the human body, or vice versa, simultaneously unifies the two layers, creating a stage image which seems organic. Like the avant-garde collage, the stage image relies on the combination of separate fragments to create a coherent whole.

33 The middle figure can be identified as Temerin by the Bourgmestre’s raincoat which he is wearing, designed by Popova.
Plate 19 The Magnanimous Cuckold (1922), design by Lyubov Popova
III

Layering Part Two: Fragmentation of the Stage in Height

Meyerhold’s use of the layered stage aesthetic in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* extended further than the fragmentation of the space in depth. Images of this production also show evidence of a stage space divided into layers in height, horizontal layers, in other words, which extend from the stage floor to the flies. Before the development of the division of the depth stage into a more sophisticated aesthetic of layering can be addressed, it is first necessary to consider the development of this second process of fragmentation operating in Meyerhold’s theatre.\(^{34}\)

Meyerhold’s concern with the space which lies above the actors’ heads emerged during his work at the Imperial Theatres. Unlike his studio productions, where limited performance spaces were conducive to focusing the audience’s attention onto the performers, on the vast stages of the Imperial Theatres the actors appear almost lost. The size of the actor in comparison with the scale of the stage shifts the audience’s attention away from the performers towards the space which surrounds them.\(^{35}\) Golovin’s design sketches and photographs of Meyerhold’s productions at the Imperial Theatres between 1908 and 1917 demonstrate a concern with this question of relative scale. In plate 17, for example, depicting the fourth episode of *Masquerade*, the amount of the stage which is portrayed realistically (as a representation of the Baroness’ Palace which is believable in both

\(^{34}\) During the early twentieth century, an interest had arisen amongst directors and designers in the quality of the stage floor. Prompted by the work of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, the stage floor had become an important element of the production’s aesthetic. It should be noted that Meyerhold was aware of the work of both Gordon Craig and Appia, and that this interest may be reflected in his fragmentation of the stage space in height. Meyerhold makes reference to both directors in the writings translated by Braun in part two (‘At the Imperial Theatres’) of *Meyerhold on Theatre* (1969, 1998), pp. 75 – 107.

\(^{35}\) The relative scale of actors and stage environment at the Alexandrinsky Theatre is demonstrated in plate 17 (a still from *Masquerade*).
perspective and detail) is relatively small. The majority of the stage space is taken up by patterned tabs and borders, framing the central area of depth space and significantly reducing the amount of empty space with which the actor has to contend.

The use of patterned material to frame the playing space is significant. Rather than simply reducing the audience’s focus to a smaller performance area, Meyerhold and Golovin activate the space using colour and shape. Compare Meyerhold’s 1906 production of Semyon Yushkevich’s *In the City*, where the small off-centre playing space is framed with black drapes [plate 20], with the elaborate framing of *Masquerade* [plates 16 and 17]. The effect created by the respective designs is significantly different. In Victor Kolenda’s design for *In the City*, the space surrounding the actors is denied and hidden; in Golovin’s work on *Masquerade*, it is acknowledged, even emphasized. Meyerhold and Golovin have abstracted the space, creating a layer above the stage floor which forms a deliberate contrast to the space below it: the lower space is realistic in depth and in detail, whereas the curtain is two-dimensional and abstract in decoration.

Meyerhold’s production of Emile Verhaeren’s *The Dawns*, 1920, demonstrated an extended application of the principle of abstract activation of the space above the actors’ heads. Verhaeren’s verse play, adapted by Meyerhold and Valery Bebutov, provides an interesting link between the director’s symbolist work and Cubism. *The Dawns*, written by Belgian symbolist writer and theorist Verhaeren, was translated into Russian by Georgy Chulkov, whom Meyerhold had met at the Wednesday Meetings at Vyacheslav Ivanov’s Tower.

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36 Plate 17 can be found after p. 98, above
37 Plate 16 can be found after p. 98, above.
Plate 20  *In the City* (1906), design by Victor Kolenda
apartment. The Dawns is a symbolist work with a political edge: the oppressed people of Oppidomagne rise up against their rulers under the leadership of a group of revolutionaries. In Meyerhold’s production, the symbolist concerns incorporated in the play text were realized within a Cubist framework.

The initial production concept was the work of Dmitriev, then a student at Meyerhold’s Borodinskaya Street studio, who had submitted designs and a production plan for The Dawns as part of his coursework. According to Marjorie Hoover, Meyerhold was so impressed with Dmitriev’s work that he adopted the project, and planned to produce it as his first post-revolutionary performance in 1918. However, the reaction of the Imperial Theatres, where Meyerhold was still employed, was less than enthusiastic, and Meyerhold postponed the project until 1920, when it became the inaugural production at his new theatre, the RSFSR Theatre Number One in Moscow.

Dmitriev’s work provides a direct link between Meyerhold’s theatre and the Cubist movement. Dmitriev was as much an artist as he was a theatre designer, and when he entered Meyerhold’s Borodinskaya Street Studio, he simultaneously joined the studio of the artist Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin. By 1920, Dmitriev’s work showed connections with the Cubist movement and it was arguably Dmitriev’s links to Cubism and the Cubist influence on his aesthetic which attracted Meyerhold. When Dmitriev’s design met with a negative

38 See Braun (1979, 1998), p. 45 for Meyerhold’s connections with the Tower and with the Russian symbolist movement.
40 Analysis of Meyerhold’s relationship with Dmitriev and of the production of The Dawns can be found in Hoover (1988), pp. 122 - 125.
41 Ibid., pp. 117 - 118.
critical response during the performances of *The Dawns*, Meyerhold himself came to the artist’s defence, highlighting the importance of the collaboration between the theatre and the new artistic movements sweeping Russia in the early twentieth century, particularly Cubism:

> We are right to invite the Cubists to work with us, because we need settings that resemble those which we shall be performing against tomorrow. The modern theatre wants to move out into the open air. We want our setting to be an iron pipe or the open sea or something constructed by the new man. I don’t intend to engage in an appraisal of such settings; suffice it to say that for us they have the advantage of getting us out of the old theatre. ⁴²

As was identified in Meyerhold’s work on *The Fairground Booth* (1914 variant) and on *Masquerade*, Dmitriev’s design again divides the stage into an upstage and downstage plane, the downstage plane, in this instance, being the theatre’s orchestra pit, adapted as a performance space for the chorus [see plate 21]. The strong line of the downstage edge of the stage space emphasizes this division, as does the curved staircase, which starts abruptly in the centre of the stage image. The orchestra pit also drops below the level of the stage, introducing the first element of layering in height. The most striking aspect of the design, however, is the series of abstract shapes hung above the stage [see plate 3]. ⁴³ Dmitriev had created a space where the air was fractured and, in plate 21, also divided into progressive layers: the first formed by the two cubes placed on the stage floor, the second by the large curved structure, and the third by the three abstract shapes hung above it. ⁴⁴

Dmitriev’s design draws the viewer’s eye immediately upwards through these shapes which dominate the stage image, a similar effect to that created by Golovin’s system of decorated

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⁴³ Plate 3 can be found after p. 35, above.
⁴⁴ It should be noted that different sequences in *The Dawns* required slight changes in setting which either clarify or obscure these layers. In plate 21, a large portion of the central part of the set has been obscured by the curved structure, simplifying the overall image and making the division of space clearer.
Plate 21  *The Dawns* (1920), design by Vladimir Dmitriev
borders and tabs employed in *Masquerade*. However, whereas Golovin’s abstract drapes were emphatic in their flatness, Dmitriev’s shapes construct the space above the actors’ heads in depth. The shapes form a series of intersecting planes and volumes, creating a visual aesthetic akin to that seen on the Cubo-Futurist canvas. Dmitriev’s emphasis on the three-dimensionality of the space above the stage is significant in that it opens up a potential new performance space: a three-dimensional space above the stage floor into which the actors themselves could venture.45

The flaw of Dmitriev’s design, a fault which Popova was to overcome in her work on *The Magnanimous Cuckold* two years later, is that this fractured space above the stage seems unrelated to the performance below it. Plate 3 does show evidence of an attempt to create a parallel fracturing of the stage in the lower half of the image: note, for example, how a group of performers in the centre of the stage space are raised above floor level on a platform, almost directly beneath the highest point of the design (the large circle).

However, the overall impression of the stage image is that it is divided into two separate parts: the lower level, occupied by performers, and the upper level, occupied by abstract shapes. In Dmitriev’s design, the space does not complement the performers: the layer of shapes and the layer of actors cannot blend, and the image remains constructed of two unconnected elements.

Dmitriev’s design is also problematic in that it introduces two parallel processes of movement or dynamism which cannot be reconciled. The first of these processes is created through the inclusion of the abstract shapes above the playing space, which draw the

45 In certain images from *The Dawns*, Meyerhold’s actors do enter this space and are seen standing on various shapes raised above floor level (for example, on the central platform).
viewer's eye upwards, away from the stage. The second process was deliberately initiated by Meyerhold, who wished again to address the relationship between stage and auditorium. This redefinition in part occurred because of the demands of the play text: Verhaeren's text calls for a large crowd on the stage. Wary of Meiningen-style naturalism, and concerned about the practicalities of creating such crowd scenes, Meyerhold instead chose to reduce the number of performers on stage, signifying a large group through a smaller chorus, then implying that the audience themselves were to become the crowd Verhaeren requests. This implication is contained in Dmitriev's design in the curved staircase which connects the main playing area (the stage) to the chorus area (the orchestra pit). Through the curved staircase, Meyerhold and Dmitriev create a second dynamic process, moving away from the stage towards the auditorium, intending to draw the audience into the performance in their implicit role as the revolutionary citizens of Oppidomange. The result of the combination of these processes is fragmentary: the viewer's eye is consistently drawn away from the action, either towards the auditorium or towards the flies. Although The Dawns does not exploit this dynamism to its full potential, the design does demonstrate that the introduction of layers on the stage results in a spatial structure with a dynamic or temporal counterpart. This sense of dynamism is also a feature of the collage device in the visual arts. In Carlo Carrà's collage Free-Word Painting – Patriotic Festival, for example, the artist uses the layering of fragments to create a dynamic circular motion, guiding the viewer's eye in a spiral across the surface of the canvas [see plate 22]. The superimposition of layer-upon-layer on stage similarly guides the audience member's eye through the image, and is as dynamic in its combination of fragments (or layers) as Carrà's futurist collage.
Plate 22  Free-Word Painting – Patriotic Festival Carlo Carrà (1914)
IV

Dynamism in the Stage Image: Combining Layers in Depth and Height

In his design for *The Dawns*, Dmitriev’s innovation was the introduction of a potential new playing space by engaging with the space above the actors’ heads in three-dimensions. Popova’s “playground” for actors, a multi-levelled climbing frame designed for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, fractured the stage floor into a series of platforms, effectively opening up the space introduced by Dmitriev to the actor himself, allowing the performer to move vertically through space using the different levels of the set.⁴⁶ Popova’s construction draws the eye steadily up through the stage image: from the stage floor, a ramp leads to the platforms, where the multiple crossing lines of the walls point towards the summit of the structure, the wheels and sails. In plate 18, this spatial structure is augmented by a higher layer as the shadow on the back wall acts as a synthesis of all the lower levels.⁴⁷

The shadow on the back wall directly addresses the construction of depth in Meyerhold’s theatre. Through the shadow, the back wall of the theatre becomes an animated space, a space of which the audience should be conscious. Through the use of light to create a shadow, the back wall acts as a literal embodiment of collage, functioning as a canvas onto which the downstage fragments are superimposed to create a new whole. The two-dimensionality of the shadow acts as a direct contrast to the constructed or sculptural

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⁴⁶ Leach (1989), p. 97. Meyerhold engaged with the division of the stage space into different levels significantly earlier than 1922, in his 1907 production of Frank Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*. According to Titova, Vasily Denisov’s design for the production “was built up vertically and divided into ‘storeys’.” (Titova, 1998, p. 88). She goes on to quote the reflections of one reviewer on the organization of the stage space, highlighting the different levels involved: “The activity [...] in turn took place now on the boards themselves... now under the boards so that the actors’ heads ended up on the same level as the floor... now... on the first floor of the stage, on a kind of indefinable geometric figure with stairs on the right and left... now, finally, on the very top of the stage.” (quoted in Titova, 1998, p. 88).

⁴⁷ Plate 18 can be found after p. 106, above.
(three-dimensional) nature of the downstage space. As a result, the shadow influences the spectator's reading of the stage image. The abrupt transition from sculptural space to two-dimensional space reminds the audience that the stage world is discontinuous. The stage image can extend no further into depth space because there is no more space for it to fill. The naturalistic stage does not acknowledge any such limitations; instead the back wall is constructed to give the impression of receding into the distance. In Meyerhold's theatre, the shadow emphasizes the back wall as resolutely flat. This juxtaposition between two- and three-dimensional space is, in itself, a collage process, allowing the audience member to construct a meaning through the collision of fragments. In this instance, the spectator acknowledges the different constructions of depth, and infers that the theatrical space is discontinuous and unreal.

The particular sophistication of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* stage image is contained in the creation of a dynamic movement towards the audience through the combination of the two layering processes (the layers dividing the space in depth and the layers dividing the space in height). The distinction between the horizontal and vertical layers within the stage space can be clarified by the division of the stage into axes (as commonly used in the visualization of three-dimensional spaces in mathematics): the layers dividing the stage floor are seen as layers in the z-axis (the z-layers), the layers dividing the height of the stage are seen as being in the x-axis (the x-layers). In plate 18, the x-layers are easily identifiable: the shadow of the construction on the back wall is the highest point, and thus forms the highest x-layer; the construction itself fills the centre of the space and forms the second x-layer; and the lowest x-layer is the stage floor. The way in which these x-layers are combined with the z-layers (the downstage, mid-stage and upstage layers) results in a

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48 See chapter one, p. 66, above.
diagonal movement towards the audience: the highest layer in the x-axis is also the furthest layer in the z-axis, the construction forms the centre of the stage image in both depth and height, and the clear area of stage floor is both lowest and nearest the audience [see plate 23].

This diagonal line combines the two processes of layering to create a dynamic movement towards the audience. It is this combination of the layers which distinguishes The Magnanimous Cuckold from The Dawns: whereas in The Dawns the two dynamic processes identified worked in opposition, in The Magnanimous Cuckold, the processes work together in order to create a unified sense of dynamism moving downstage towards the auditorium. This diagonal progression of layers extended the stage space towards the audience, whilst simultaneously drawing the eye of the observer into the image. The dynamic structure of the stage reaches out towards the auditorium, and, as Rudnitsky observes in relation to Meyerhold’s 1909 production of Tristan and Isolde, the director creates a spatial structure which implicitly “lunges at the audience” leaping over the edge of the stage space.49 Through the layering of the stage space, this dynamism, rather than being restricted to an isolated design device, is embedded in the entire stage image. The layered stage aesthetic can therefore be seen as creating a similar sense of dynamism on the depth stage as Meyerhold’s painterly construction of the Sister Beatrice tableaux had on the relief stage.

49 See footnote 21, p. 100 above.
Plate 23  Diagonal line visualisation *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922)
The exploration of an abstract (non-narrative) sense of movement contained within a still image is central to the futurist and Cubo-Futurist aesthetic. The futurist obsession with the machine, especially the motor car, resulted in artworks that were primarily concerned with the representation of speed and movement, rather than the sense of static ethereality associated with symbolism:

In reflecting a revolt against the passive, contemplative world of the Symbolists, the Futurists aimed at a dynamic reconstitution of reality. In terms of versification this meant the re-substitution within the poetic structure of that which had been absent from Symbolist verse - namely the verb. The verb is nothing less than a motor. The restoration of the verb meant the introduction of the engine into what had become an etiolated form.

In canvas art, Cubo-Futurist dynamism is reflected in the fracturing of the image and the representation of a figure in a number of positions simultaneously (implying a sense of movement), as can be seen in Kasimir Malevich's 1912 painting, *The Knife Grinder*. Here, the Knife Grinder has been reinterpreted as a series geometric shapes which are repeated and rotated across the canvas, implying a sense of movement operating outside the confines of narrative: there is no interest in the story of the Knife Grinder himself, but rather in the movement of his form across the canvas [see plate 24].

The term Cubo-Futurism was not adopted by members of the Russian avant-garde until 1913, although futurism had been influential in Russia since the formation of the Triangle Society in 1909. 1913 was a significant year for the Cubo-Futurist aesthetic in Russia,

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50 Although Russian futurism had some common ground with the Italian movement, the two groups of artists considered themselves separate, and the Russian futurists denied any close connection with their Italian counterparts. There is some controversy regarding the extent of Italian influence on the Russian futurist movement, and this is discussed in Gray (1962, 1971), pp. 93 – 94.


52 The Triangle Society was formed by Dr. Nikolai Kulbin, musician Mikhail Matyushin, and his poet wife Elena Guro, all of whom were to become closely associated with the Russian futurist movement. By 1911, the membership included poets Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh, and the artists David and Vladimir Burliuk, and the group changed their name to Hylaea. It was the Hylaea group of artists who, by 1913, began to call themselves Cubo-Futurists.
Plate 24  *The Knife Grinder* Kasimir Malevich, 1912
seeing Larionov's launch of his rayonnist painting techniques, the publication of the futurist poetry anthology *Troe* (The Three) and the premiere of the futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun* by Alexei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matyushin (with early Suprematist set designs by Malevich), presented in a double bill with Vladimir Mayakovsky’s first play *Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy*, at the Luna Park Theatre in St. Petersburg.53

Although never formally affiliated with Russian futurism, Meyerhold had connections to the movement through his frequent collaborations with Mayakovsky in *Mystery Bouffe*, 1918 and 1921, *The Bedbug*, 1929 and *The Bathhouse*, 1930. The earliest comprehensive study in English of Meyerhold’s production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in relation to early twentieth century Russian futurism is Nick Worrall’s 1973 *Drama Review* article, ‘Meyerhold’s Production of *The Magnificent Cuckold*’. In his analysis, Worrall identifies aspects of Meyerhold’s staging which highlight links between his concept of stage space and performance and the doctrines of the Russian futurist and Cubo-Futurist movements, including aspects of futurist verse structures, such as reverse homonymy and metonymy, themes such as the “rebellion of objects”, and the techniques employed by the Cubo-Futurist artists, including Kasimir Malevich and Natalya Goncharova.54 For example, Worrall reads Meyerhold’s use of the repetition of a physical image, a number of actors with a similar stance distributed across the stage area, as a reflection of “the typical Futurist fascination with speed and movement”.55 He claims that:

> What [Meyerhold] can be seen to have done was to separate out the layers of the schematic image in the Cubo-Futurist work so that these became several distinct units. He retained a sense of simultaneity of action which related to the depiction of

53 Rayonnism was launched by Larionov at the ‘Target’ exhibition in Moscow, March 1913. This painting technique involved the representation of rays of light emanating from an object, and exploration of the points of intersection of these rays.

54 Worrall (1973), p. 16.

55 Ibid., p. 17.
the movement of single persons, while distributing aspects of each particular stage of the action among the general, separated units of the actors.\textsuperscript{56}

The futurist devices identified in \textit{The Magnanimous Cuckold} are not at odds with the overall constructivist-influenced style of the production. In her study of futurism and related avant-garde movements (the \textit{avant guerre}), Marjorie Perloff explores the breadth of futurist influence on modern and contemporary artists and thinkers. In this sphere of influence, she includes those as removed from the \textit{avant guerre} era as John Cage and Jacques Derrida, whose works constitute, for Perloff “disillusioned or “cool” versions of the Futurist poetic”.\textsuperscript{57}

It is the central theme of Perloff’s study which provides the specific link between the futurist and constructivist aesthetics. Subtitled “The Language of Rupture”, Perloff’s work takes the defining feature of the futurist and \textit{avant guerre} movements as the use of collage. Collage is defined on two levels. Firstly, it is:

from the French verb \textit{coller} and means literally “painting, sticking, or gluing,” as in the application of wall-paper. In this literal sense, collage has been practiced for centuries around the world.\textsuperscript{58}

In the specific sense of the avant-garde, however, it also implies a continual process of juxtaposition, the unification of disparate elements which retain traces of their original context. Perloff cites the 1978 Group \textit{Mu} manifesto:

The trick of collage consists […] of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 18.
\textsuperscript{57} Perloff (1986), p. xviii. Perloff states that the two world wars between the futurist and post-modern or post-structuralist cultural movements resulted in more recent adaptations of the collage device being approached ironically. The collage elements in the work of Derrida and Cage, for example, are “less repetition” of the futurist aesthetic “than ironic allusion.” (Perloff, 1986, p. xviii).
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 46 - 47.
\textsuperscript{59} Group Mu, quoted by Perloff (1986), p. 47.
It is collage, the process of building up an image through the combination and juxtaposition of surfaces, which unites Cubo-Futurism and constructivism, a movement whose roots lie in Tatlin's Counter-Relief sculptures. Perloff refers to "montage", meaning collage with a temporal element, mainly associated with film editing, "assemblage", collage in three-dimensions or sculptural collage, and "construction", and implicitly also the constructivist movement, as the "cognates" of collage.

A precedent for the constructivist ideal to see art become a vital facet of life is surely found in collagist’s incorporation of fragments taken from daily life into the artwork, as can be seen, for example, in Juan Gris’ collage Le Lavabo, in which a label from a bottle and a piece of mirror are incorporated into the image in order to represent the objects themselves [see plate 25]. The constructivist destruction of the art-life boundary also questions the relationship of the artist and audience, and the stability not only of genres, but also the concept of art itself: the constructivists equated art with artifice, and saw themselves not as artists (as detached from popular life), but as workers intimately involved with realities of the new Soviet state.

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60 Artist Vladimir Tatlin was affiliated with both the Cubo-Futurist and later the constructivist movements in Russia. After a visit to Paris in late 1913, when he first came into contact with Picasso’s Cubist-influenced paper sculptures, Tatlin began to create his own counter-relief sculptures. The Counter-reliefs (or painted-reliefs) are artworks which take the canvas as a starting point and build out from its surface in sculptural relief. Gray assesses their importance as being "the first step in [Tatlin’s] three-dimensional development of the conception of form from that of an enclosed sculptural mass, to that of an open dynamic construction sculpturing space. For the first time in Tatlin’s constructions we find real space introduced as a pictorial factor; for the first time interrelationships of a number of different materials were examined and co-ordinated.” (Gray, 1962, 1971, p. 176). Out of these principles, Tatlin’s concept of constructivism developed.


62 The inclusion of these objects in Gris’ work demonstrates his beliefs regarding the function of the collage device. The fragment of the bottle label was included because the artist considered it pointless to paint a label when one could be so easily acquired. The piece of mirror is included because this is the only way in which the artist can represent a mirror on canvas: the image reflected by the mirror must change from moment to moment to reflect that which it is presented with. Only through the inclusion of an actual mirror is this instability in representation possible.
Plate 25  
*Le Lavabo* Juan Gris, (1912)
There are aspects of Meyerhold’s production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* which suggest a closer affiliation to Cubo-Futurist collage than to constructivism. Unlike the constructivists, the futurists and Cubo-Futurists embedded a sense of speed and dynamism within the conventional structure of the artist’s canvas: their concept of innovation was contained within the frameworks of traditional artistic modes (painting, poetry, and sculpture). Meyerhold’s use of a constructivist-influenced stage design, which was conceived to resemble the machinery common in the new factories more than the mill in which Crommelynck’s play takes place, constitutes the transference of an object from one context to another, the factory to the stage, without destroying the structure of the latter.63 Similarly, the identical blue coveralls worn by all the performers, Popova’s prozodezhda, or work clothes, transferred another aspect of daily working life to the stage, and the acting style, heavily influenced by popular entertainments, such as the circus, the fairground and the balagan, added another referent to the collage so that working life was seen to meet leisure time. The incorporation of fragments of everyday life into the theatre framework is evidently closely associated with Meyerhold’s drive to make the post-revolutionary theatre accessible to the new, proletarian audience.

The tension between the familiar, the factory references and popular entertainments, and the alien, represented by the traditional theatre framework, introduced an element of collage into the production. It is, however, the application of a layered stage aesthetic which represents the most overt use of collage in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Here, working in a theatre which arranged its audience in an end-on relationship with the stage, the layered

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63 One of the features of Popova’s design was that it was to be simple to move from location to location, and performances could therefore take place outside of the theatre. This further highlights the collaged nature of the set, which as a fragment of a theatrical performance could be literally released from the stage and re-contextualized if necessary.
space is by its nature collaged: each slice of the image is placed on top of the one preceding it. However, this only fulfils the criteria of collage in the most superficial sense. In order to claim a futurist or *avant guerre* influence in the collage of the stage space, the layers must constitute both collage in the literal sense of the French verb *coller*, and also in the expanded sense of the avant-garde, in the sense of a unity formed from disunity, an image structured around continual juxtaposition.

It was a sense of juxtaposition which prompted Fuchs' thesis of the relief stage: the backdrop and narrow strip stage highlighted the actor as a three-dimensional being in a two-dimensional environment. The process of layering on a depth stage retains this sense of juxtaposition explored by Meyerhold at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre. The introduction of three-dimensional acting space through the re-introduction of the depth stage created an environment in which Meyerhold could achieve the stage synthesis he had sought since his work with Komissarzhevskaya. In 1907, after a performance of *Hedda Gabler*, a note made in Meyerhold's journal posited that the unification of actor and performance environment should be the central question of theatre. 64 However, this perfect synthesis would deny the actor the focus afforded by relief staging. By dividing the stage into layers, and juxtaposing the figure of the actor against both the lines of the design, animate against inanimate, and against other actors, Meyerhold maintains the potential of Fuchs' staging to throw the actor out in relief. The actors exist both individually, as shapes on the stage, and collectively, as a continual process of juxtaposition which constitutes the stage image.

The slight variations in the actors' postures across the stage image are consequently very significant to the collage process. Juxtaposition within the stage image represented in plate

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18 can be seen most clearly by examining the distribution of the actors across the stage space. If the two actors at the stage left end of the downstage bench are excluded, each actor in the downstage layer of the stage image [Plate 18 (a)] has an equivalent in the mid-stage layer [Plate 18 (b)]. The actors' bodies are positioned in such a way as to form pairings which are similar but not identical: the image is structured around the juxtaposition of each performer against another performer. In the avant-garde sense, the space is collaged. The positioning of the actors creates a feeling of dissonance in the image, highlighting the juxtapositions which are inherent in Cubo-Futurist collage. As a result, the stage image, like the collaged canvas, is both fragmented and unified.

If the spatial structure employed by Meyerhold in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* draws on the avant-garde collage device, it then follows that the production's staging would also reflect the temporal concerns embedded in collage processes. Summarizing the ideas of James Billington in his study *The Icon and the Axe*, Linda Dalrymple Henderson introduces an aspect of the relationship between space and time in Cubist and futurist thought:

James Billington [...] has described the cultural climate of early twentieth-century Russia [...] in terms of three prominent concerns of the period: “Prometheanism,” sensualism, and apocalypticism. Citing the writings of P. D. Ouspensky, the art of Malevich and Kandinsky, and the music of Alexander Scriabin as representative of Prometheanism, Billington defines this view as “the belief that man – when fully aware of his true powers – is capable of totally transforming the world in which he lives.” The fourth dimension was an integral part of the Promethean philosophy of Ouspensky and of Malevich and certain of his Russian Futurist friends who drew upon Ouspensky’s writings. 66

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65 This exclusion seems reasonable, as the positioning and attitudes of these actors clearly isolates them from the action surrounding them. The actor further stage right is Igor Illinsky, playing Bruno (identifiable by the pom-poms hanging around his neck). His partner is Vassily Zaichikov, playing the mute character Estrugo, who accompanied Bruno through-out the performance. In this case, there is further cause for isolating these performers, as they are, in all probability, the protagonists at this point in the action.

Plate 18 (b) *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), design by Lyubov Popova. Figures in mid-stage layer highlighted in red. Digital manipulation by David Simpson.
Henderson’s work provides an in-depth study into the influence of the philosophy of the fourth dimension, and the parallel mathematical concepts provided by non-Euclidean geometry in the theory of curved space, on the artists of the Russian avant-garde, particularly the futurists and Cubo-Futurists, Larionov’s Rayonnism and Malevich’s Suprematism. 67 Philosopher P. D. Ouspensky outlined his theory of the fourth dimension in two theses, *The Fourth Dimension* (1905) and *Tertium Organum* (1911). 68 Through his philosophy of the fourth dimension, Ouspensky turns time into space. The popular notion of the fourth dimension as purely temporal developed from the dissemination of Einstein’s *General Theory of Relativity*, published in 1919. Einstein’s earlier work, including his *Special Theory of Relativity* (1905), did not address the concept of the fourth dimension as an entirely temporal construct. 69 Before Einstein’s theory gained popular currency, many artists of the Russian avant-garde, as well as Russian philosophers, scientists and mathematicians, subscribed to the concept of a spatial fourth dimension. 70 The philosophy of the spatial fourth dimension states that our experience of time in the third dimension, in what is commonly perceived as reality, is in actuality a distorted experience of a fourth spatial dimension. Drawing on spiritual ideas of a higher power, Ouspensky’s philosophy

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67 See chapter five of Henderson (1983), pp. 238 – 299. Henderson’s work is concerned with highlighting how modern art embraced the ideas of anti-positivism, particularly the concept of the fourth dimension (in both its spatial and temporal manifestations) and the curvature of space implicit in non-Euclidean geometry. In this chapter, she discusses the potential routes of dissemination of European anti-positivist philosophy in Russia, and the Russian contribution to such philosophical approaches (for example, the work of Ouspensky). Henderson goes on to address the application of these ideas by the Russian avant-garde, including Kandinsky, Malevich, Khlebnikov, Matyushin and Lissitzky.

68 *Tertium Organum* was the name given to the new logic that Ouspensky suggested would be the key to understanding and accessing the fourth dimension: a new way of thinking to parallel a new perception of the world.


70 Henderson (1983), p. 239.
of the fourth dimension relies on the belief in a higher perception, the ability to see beyond this world, or at least to understand the potential of some to see beyond this world, reflected in the philosopher's own example:

If we touch the surface of a table with our five fingertips of one hand, there will then be on the surface of the table only five circles, and on this surface it is impossible to have any idea either of the hand or of the man to whom the hand belongs. There will be five separate circles. ... Our relation to the four-dimensional world may be exactly the same as the relationship between that consciousness which sees five circles on the table and the man.\(^1\)

The relationship between the three- and four-dimensional worlds is therefore parallel to the relationship between the three-dimensional world and a hypothetical two-dimensional world, as described by Edwin Abbott in his novel Flatland:

Your country of Two Dimensions [says the Sphere to the Square] is not spacious enough to represent me, a being of Three, but can only exhibit a slice or a section of me, which is what you call a circle. [...] You cannot indeed see more than one of my sections, or circles, at a time; for you have no power to raise your eye out of the plane of Flatland; but you can at least see that, as I rise in Space, so my section becomes smaller.\(^2\)

The two-dimensional square thus experiences an intersection with the three-dimensional world only in terms of movement, or, in other words, only temporally. Consequently, it is only the experience of the fourth dimension that is temporal, the dimension itself is entirely spatial, and time becomes a spatial construct.

Perloff and Henderson address the influence of the spatial fourth dimension on the Cubist and futurist artists, and Perloff specifically highlights the connections between the theory of

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\(^1\) Ouspensky, quoted in Perloff (1986), p. 128, emphasis in Perloff.

\(^2\) Edwin Abbott, Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions (London: Seeley, 1884), p. 72. Flatland (whose authorship is credited to 'a square') is an investigation of perception as it would be from an entirely two-dimensional perspective. Although dealing with predominantly with geometry, the book is written in the style of a novel, rather than a textbook.
collage and the fourth dimension, stating that through Ouspensky’s philosophy “time becomes space, and space is perceived as a surface”.\textsuperscript{73} She adds that in the Tertium Organum Ouspensky quotes Charles Hinton on this matter:

A surface is nothing more nor less than the relation between two things. Two bodies touch each other. The surface is the relationship of one to the other.\textsuperscript{74}

Through Ouspensky’s philosophy, time becomes a surface that can be incorporated in a collage, and theatre, with its implicit temporal element, is, as Roger Copeland claims, the ideal place for such a collage of space and time.\textsuperscript{75} The representation of a fourth spatial dimension on stage could imply embedding a sense of the dynamic into the static, making time a part of the space, for example through the use of moving scenery. In her design for The Magnanimous Cuckold, Popova incorporated moving elements, including the three different sized wheels that rotated to provide a commentary on the action below: as Bruno became angrier and more frustrated, the wheels rotated faster. The significance of the wheels, as opposed to other moving features in the design, including a set of revolving doors, is that they have a temporal existence separate from the actors, yet connected to the action. The actors do not make the wheels move, and the movement of the wheels passes through the action as a commentary from a higher being. Nor can the speed of the wheels be consciously controlled by the characters: the set reacts to the action, and has a temporal existence which is not dependent on the performers.

The two-fold layered structure of the space itself also constitutes a representation of the fourth spatial dimension. In order to conceptualize n-dimensional geometry,

\textsuperscript{73} Perloff (1986), p. 129.
\textsuperscript{74} Ouspensky, quoted in Perloff (1986), p. 129
\textsuperscript{75} See footnote 58, introduction, p. 32, above.
mathematicians employ a similar process to that used to represent the third dimension on a
two-dimensional plane. In the same way that a three-dimensional cube is represented in two
dimensions by the extension of a two-dimensional square along an axis representative of
the third dimension, a four-dimensional figure, called a hypercube, is drawn by extending
the three-dimensional cube along another axis, representative of the fourth dimension [see
plates 26 and 27].

Representations of the hypercube are particularly common in Cubist art. Henderson sees
the literal use of the hypercube form in Malevich’s design for act two of Victory Over the
Sun [see plate 28].\(^76\) Both she and Perloff note that Cubist and Cubo-Futurist art reflects the
influence of the hypercube in its representation of simultaneous, multiple perspectives on
the subject. According to Perloff:

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\text{[The Hypercube theory was] interpreted freely by the painters as a license to renounce perspective and create a “motor space” in which objects are depicted in fragmented or partial form, as they would appear from multiple points of view - the Russian avant-garde regarded the ability to visualize the object from all sides at once as only the first step towards the desired “higher consciousness” that Ouspensky associated with the fourth dimension.}\(^77\)
\]

Consequently, Worrall’s Cubo-Futurist analysis of the use of repeated postures in The
Magnanimous Cuckold clearly reflects the influence of the theories of four-dimensional
visualization and the hypercube on stage. The progression demonstrated in Meyerhold’s
work from Sister Beatrice to The Magnanimous Cuckold can also be read in terms of the
hypercube and the spatial fourth dimension. Sister Beatrice and the relief stage indicated a
two-dimensional attitude towards stage space and a foreshortening of the audience’s
perspective: the equivalent of a square drawn on a sheet of paper. The development of

\(^77\) Ibid., p. 127.
Plate 26  Square extended along axis to form a cube. Original figure marked in black, axis in red, new figure in blue.
Plate 27  Cube extended along axis to form a hypercube. Original figure marked in black, axis in red, new figure in blue.
Plate 28 Design for *Victory Over the Sun* (1913), Kasimir Malevich
multiple layers across the depth of the stage, in *The Fairground Booth* and *Masquerade*, extends the relief stage along an axis; it is the equivalent of a cube. When processes of layering in depth and in height are combined and the stage image is extended along a diagonal axis towards the audience, the layering is representative of the fourth dimension: the hypercube. The resulting stage image is dynamic. Within the static spatial structure, a sense of movement can be discerned and the design embodies movement within stillness, consequently turning time into space.

The dynamic effect of the two-fold layering process seen in Meyerhold’s production is best understood through comparison with the work of his contemporary, Alexander Tairov. Plate 29 is an image taken from Tairov’s 1923 stage adaptation of G. K. Chesterton’s novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*, designed by artist Alexander Vesnin. The production seems, superficially, to be based on similar principles to those evident in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Vesnin was closely affiliated to constructivism, and his design evidently attempts to transfer aspects of constructivism in the visual arts to the stage. The design comprises a series of levels that divide the stage into a grid, with the actors positioned both within this grid and on the stage floor in front, indicating an element of depth layering. Compared to *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, however, the stage image seems static and Tairov’s production was considerably less effective: “in this competition with Meyerhold,” Rudnitsky claims “Tairov was the loser.”\(^78\) Vesnin’s construction is restricted by the proscenium arch of the Kamerny stage, and does not extend towards the audience. Therefore, despite the various moving features incorporated within the design, the moving ramps, elevators and so forth, the image lacks the simple dynamism of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

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Plate 29  The Man Who Was Thursday (1923), Kamerny Theatre. Directed by Aleksandr Tairov, design by Alexander Vesnin.
The development of the layered stage aesthetic in Meyerhold’s theatre is a significant extension of the principles which emerged through his use of relief staging. The director’s construction of the *Magnanimous Cuckold* stage image made recourse to the parallel processes of fragmentation and juxtaposition, and the dynamism of the stage image re-emphasized Meyerhold’s commitment to constructing a stage space which communicated with the audience outside of the play text. The director’s engagement with subjectivity and objectivity in viewing also re-emerged in his early experimentation with the depth stage and layering. The subjectivity created by the intimate construction of the relief stage, mimicking the intimacy of the relationship between worshipper and icon, gave way to the manifestation of the subjective process of the theatre-maker in *The Fairground Booth*. The most significant development in this area, however, was seen in *Masquerade*, where the objective potential of the viewer’s role is fundamentally unsettled by the fluctuation between objective and subjective viewing positions.

The artworks produced by the symbolist and Cubo-Futurist movements in Russia constitute two diverse styles: the dynamism of futurism was above all conceived as a rebellion against the static, ethereal style of the symbolists. In Meyerhold’s theatre, however, the application of a device drawn from Cubo-Futurist art in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* has very similar implications as the use of symbolist and iconographic techniques had in *Sister Beatrice*. Both staging devices construct an image through a process of juxtaposition which operates according to the same tenets as avant-garde collage practice, indicating collage principles underlying Meyerhold’s work between 1906 and 1922. Meyerhold’s spatial aesthetic up until the early 1920s was concerned primarily with the same issues occupying the Cubist, futurist and Cubo-Futurist artists.
The new techniques of these artists arose in part as a response to the rise of photography as a more efficient and effective method for the representation of reality. As a result, art was no longer concerned with reducing a three-dimensional world-view to a two-dimensional representation based on verisimilitude, but with the manifestation of something beyond the world as experienced by the naked human eye. For the symbolists, this is the pseudo-spiritual, ethereal world, accessed through motionless contemplation, leading to a release from the constraints of mundane, daily life. For the Russian Cubists and futurists, this other world is contained in the more scientific doctrines of the fourth dimension, the philosophy of Ouspensky and, later, Einstein’s *General Theory of Relativity*.

The dynamism seen in the *mise-en-scène* for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* reflects this shift from static symbolism to dynamic Cubo-Futurism. The *tableaux-vivants* of *Sister Beatrice* were dynamic in the sense of canvas art, however, this dynamism was restricted by the relief stage. As in a painting, the sense of movement was contained within the surface of the image, and within the performance space. Despite their proximity to the stage, in *Sister Beatrice* the spectators’ role was implicitly contemplative. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the dynamism is projected out from the stage towards the audience. The diagonal axis reaches out towards the viewer and pulls them into the image, initiating a sense of active involvement. Meyerhold’s post-revolutionary audiences were evidently not the intellectuals who attended Komissarzhevskaya’s theatre, but those he hoped to draw into active participation with the performance, paralleling their active role in the day-to-day reality of the Soviet revolution. The collage device enabled Meyerhold not only to reconcile the relief and the depth stage, but also to adapt the principles of his aesthetic to the climate of post-revolutionary Russia.
In terms of Einstein’s definition of the fourth dimension as purely temporal, however, theatre is already four-dimensional: theatrical performances predominantly presume the existence of a third, spatial, and a fourth, temporal, dimension. Theatre does not share the constraints of canvas art, and arguably, the use of painterly techniques on stage to realize already existing dimensions is a pointless exercise. However, the re-interpretation of the notion of time and dynamism implied by attempting to transfer the practices of canvas art to the stage constitutes a questioning of the most fundamental preconceptions of the theatrical event. The desire to be released from the rigours of daily life is reflected in the rebellion of the early twentieth century avant-garde artistic movements against linear time, the invisible force that controls human existence, expressed through the disruption of linear space on the canvas. In this sense, the closest link between Meyerhold and the avant-garde artists is in his disruption of linearity, both spatial and temporal, in performance. Through the emergence of a painterly perception in his construction of the stage image, and the subsequent development of a layered stage aesthetic, Meyerhold’s theatre questioned the underlying assumptions of the medium, paving the way for his more radical time-space experiments in his later productions, particularly his 1926 production of *The Government Inspector*.

The mid-1920s, however, demonstrate a new development in Meyerhold’s spatial aesthetic. Between 1922 and 1926, the director repeatedly moved towards a curvature in the stage space, impeding the application of the layered stage aesthetic as a framework for reading his theatre. This development suggests that the definition of stage collage should be extended beyond a device for ordering the *mise-en-scène*, and collage subsequently
emerges as a far more encompassing model which functions as an underlying organizational principle of Meyerholdian theatre.
Chapter Three

Towards a Model of Collage as Organizational Principle of Performance:

Meyerhold's Theatre of Uncertainties

I

Expanding the Principles of Stage Collage

In analysing Meyerhold’s work between 1906 and 1922, this thesis has been concerned with identifying parallels between the director’s construction of the stage space and the structure of the avant-garde artist’s canvas. Evidence of a general painterly perception of the stage space in Meyerhold’s earliest independent directorial projects at the Theatre of V. F. Komissarzhevskaya was identified in chapter one, and in chapter two, this spatial structure was seen to develop into a staged adaptation of a specific artistic device, collage practice.

Using key productions in the Meyerhold oeuvre between 1906 and 1922, the director’s use of collage principles was developed into a framework through which it is possible to read his construction of the stage space. The initial manifestation of collage in Meyerhold’s theatre emerged through the use of a layered stage aesthetic, in which the director’s construction of a juxtapositional relationship between the layers of the stage image operated in parallel to the juxtaposition of fragments on the avant-garde collaged canvas. In his adaptation of painterly and collage principles to the stage, Meyerhold’s work between 1906 and 1922 also reflected a concern with the temporal implications of spatial structures, developing fragmented and non-linear temporal processes on the stage which reflected the trend towards anti-positivist constructions of space and time at the beginning of the twentieth century.
Meyerhold’s adaptation of painterly processes also contributed specifically to key trends in his aesthetic. Stage collage practice highlighted Meyerhold’s desire to differentiate his aesthetic from the verisimilitude practised at the Moscow Art Theatre. To this end, painterly and collage processes were seen to make the experience of watching theatre conscious to the audience, undercutting any suggestion that the construction of the stage space was either natural or inevitable. In addition, the painterly construction of the stage space unsettled the objectivity of the theatrical experience for the viewer, emphasizing theatrical spectatorship as a subjective experience.

The spatial and temporal implications of the collage device provide a starting point for the consideration of the wider influence of collage on Meyerhold’s theatrical aesthetic, focusing on his work between 1922 and 1926 and drawing examples particularly from his 1926 production of Nikolai Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*.

The spatial structure employed by Meyerhold in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* constituted the most sophisticated example of layered stage space in the director’s oeuvre. After 1922, literal layering of the stage space is less prevalent in Meyerhold’s work, indicating either that the collage aesthetic can no longer be discerned in the director’s aesthetic, or that a shift in emphasis had occurred in his application of collage processes to the stage. Through analysis of Meyerhold’s theatre of the mid-1920s, it becomes apparent that the collage principles of fragmentation and juxtaposition remained fundamental to Meyerhold’s aesthetic, pervading not only the construction of the stage image, but also the construction of the performance as a whole. From this premise, collage emerges in Meyerhold’s theatre not simply as a device for ordering the spatial structure of the stage image, but also as a
fundamental organizational principle for performance, and consequently a crucial aspect of the director’s theatrical aesthetic.

Before investigating the application of collage to Meyerhold’s theatre of the mid-1920s, it is necessary to establish a working definition of the notion of collage as organizational principle for performance. As the significance of the collage device to the High Modernist era was dependent as much on its metaphysical as its structural implications, the definition of collage as organizational principle of performance rests on the realization on stage of the both the formal and the philosophical tenets of collage practice. In line with the rising interest in the theories of relativity in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Meyerhold’s production of The Government Inspector showed evidence of the rejection of the notion of absolutes in terms of space and time, and an extended and explicit investigation of the deconstruction of an external, objective viewpoint for the observer. The resulting theatrical experience was one in which absolute truth and objectivity were deconstructed and replaced by uncertainty and subjectivity.

Rudnitsky highlights Meyerhold’s emphasis on the subjective over the objective in his early symbolist productions:

The primacy of the subject over the object and the triumph of the subjective over the objective always ruled in the esthetics of Symbolist Theater. Meyerhold set himself the goal of realizing in the material correctness of figures on stage the logic of the imaginary and not the observed world.¹

The primacy of the imaginary world created by the director over the observed world of naturalistic verisimilitude remained fundamental to Meyerhold’s aesthetic throughout the 1920s, and was particularly evident in The Government Inspector. The subjectivity of

Meyerhold’s theatre outlawed the possibility of it representing an externally verifiable objective truth. Through his engagement with the principles of collage and consequently the anti-positivist notion of relativity, Meyerhold’s aesthetic became a theatre of uncertainties, not of absolutes: a theatrical reflection of the metaphysical concerns of the High Modernist era.

II

From Two, to Three, to Four Dimensions: 
Adapting Collage to the Stage

The avant-garde development of collage techniques in the early twentieth century extended beyond the confines of the artist’s canvas. Collage became a strategy for the expression of modern life, in which industry had taken over from rural modes of production, and cities, with all their associated paraphernalia of billboards, traffic lights, and street signs, were the backdrop to the work of artists and intellectuals across the Western world. The avant-garde appropriation of the collage device was an articulation of the world which surrounded the artists, and functioned so adequately in this role that it was incorporated as an expressive strategy outside of canvas art. As Herta Wescher states:

> It has been customary to apply the term ‘collage’ to all works in which components belonging to separate intellectual or perceptual categories have been combined, even when, as in many instances, nothing has been pasted or glued.²

Collage became not just the “organizing principle of art,” to use Kuspit’s phrase, but also the organizing principle of a wide variety of artistic and cultural practices, including music as in Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring, literature with the futurist parole in libertà, sculpture

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as exemplified by Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzblau* assemblages, and cinema through Kuleshov and Eisenstein’s experimentation with montage. More than a formal technique, collage became a philosophical principle. In the words of Katherine Hoffman:

Once considered a folk art, collage in the twentieth century has emerged as both a medium and an idea.

Against this backdrop of the rising influence of collage principles at the start of the twentieth century, it is interesting to note that there are very few specifically theatrical examples of the collage device. The adaptation of the collage technique to the stage can take one of two forms: collage can either function as the scenographic principle behind a performance, or it can function as the metaphysical notion on which the performance is based. The scenographic adaptation of collage to the stage follows Diaghilev’s model of adapting artistic innovation to theatrical production. Through the ‘World of Art’ revue, and the performances of the *Ballets Russes*, Diaghilev employed the leading artists of the turn of the century to act as stage designers for his productions. Although Diaghilev’s innovations were significant in redefining the nature of stage design, this sort of connection between artistic innovation and theatrical performance is limited in scope. The influence of the artistic device on the production is restricted to the creation of the performance.

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3 See Donald B. Kuspit, ‘Collage as the Organizing Principle of Art in the Age of the Relativity of Art’, in Hoffman (1989), pp. 39 – 57. Regarding collage practice in music, Glenn Watkins states: “in music’s reshuffling of bits and scraps of memory, in the unsuspected confrontation and unusual alliance of materials, and in the manipulation of both time and space through a new set of coordinates, a sense of discovery was [...] being heralded from the first dozen years of the century in the music of such notables as Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky. The temptation to relate such developments to the emergence of Cubism in Paris between 1906 and 1914 is encouraged by the fact that its most famous practitioners were well known to the musicians.” Watkins goes on to discuss Stravinsky’s use of a collage-like aesthetic: “For Stravinsky, the invocation of a known and one’s expectations regarding it became the starting point of the creative process. [...] A personal style was thus coined not so much through the appropriation of ingredients from a particular historical or cultural model as through their fracture and purposeful reassembly.” Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 2 – 3.

environment and does not necessarily penetrate either the content or the style of the performance itself.

Scenographic adaptations of the collage device to the stage became particularly popular after the High Modernist era, in the 1950s and 1960s. Examples of this practice can be seen in the work of Czech designer Josef Svoboda, particularly in his design for Václav Kašlik’s production of Zimmerman’s The Soldiers (1969) [see plate 30]. In this instance, the collage effect is created through the use of multiple projections onto screens suspended above the stage. A similar use of collage can be seen in Ming Cho Lee’s design for the musical Hair (1967) [see plate 31].

In contrast with the purely scenographic applications of collage principles, Kurt Schwitters proposed a more encompassing, metaphysical adaptation of collage to the stage. Schwitters’s Merzbühne (Merz-Stage) is the only extended and explicit theoretical application of collage to performance during the High Modernist era, and arguably the only instance of a theatre specifically theorized in line with collage principles. According to Helga Vormus, the Merzbühne concept is unique in its adaptation of collage to the spatial and temporal realms of theatrical performance:

Le théâtre pourrait être le lieu privilégié où on peut jouer sur les deux dimensions de l’art: le temps et l’espace, medium du langage et des arts plastiques. Il semble se prêter le mieux à un gommage des frontières entre les différents arts par la juxtaposition ou l’opposition des éléments les plus divers: image – son – éclairage – texte – mouvement. Schwitters est le seul qui ait osé élaborer une théorie du théâtre-collage qu’il appelle théâtre-merz.5

Plate 30  *The Soldiers* (1969), Staatsoper, Munich, design by Joseph Svoboda
Plate 31

Hair (1967), Public Theatre, design by Ming Cho Lee
Theatre has the potential to be the privileged space in which one can play in the two dimensions of art: time and space, the medium of language and of the plastic arts. It seems best to lend itself to the erasing of boundaries between the different arts through the juxtaposition or opposition of the most diverse elements: image - sound - lighting - text - movement. Schwitters is the only one who dared to elaborate a theory of collage-theatre, which he called the Merz-Stage.

The connection between Schwitters's *Merzbühne* and the collage aesthetic is immediately made apparent in the use of the word 'Merz'. A truncated fragment of the word 'Kommerz', from an advertisement for the *Kommerz und Privatbank* which Schwitters included in one of his early collages, Merz became definitive of Schwitters's art. The word denoted not only a technique and a rebellion - not affiliated to any other avant-garde movement, Merz constituted Schwitters's private avant-garde project – but also came to signify the artist himself. Schwitters's diverse Merz projects were all characterized by the principles of collage and assemblage. The original Merz work, his *Merzbild* (Merz Picture), exhibited in July 1919, was a collaged canvas including fragments of wire, images and, of course, the word Merz itself. In 1920, the artist began to construct Merz columns, freestanding assembled sculptures. These projects, located in his Hanover home, were expanded to become the *Merzbau* (Merz Building), an immense environmental sculpture. The *Merzbau* comprised a series of grotto-like spaces, constructed by Schwitters from wood and plaster, amongst which objects could be placed. The *Merzbau* was clearly driven by a theatrical impulse, a constructed environment with an interactive element. Guests could explore the structure, and Schwitters's friends were even invited to contribute objects to a space in the grotto reserved for them. Annabelle Melzer claims that Schwitters's *Merbühne* concept was a natural development from his earlier Merz projects, particularly the environmental *Merzbau*.
[Schwitters's] aesthetic discipline became a way of life: the objects he lived with he worked into his art, his “merzbau” became a backdrop and set for his real life. By 1919, the walls and floors had become so crowded with collages and free-standing objects that there was no distinction between the room and the interior architecture. The rooms in their different settings were given names: Cathedral of Erotic Misery, Great Grotto of Love, Lavatory Attendant of Life, Sex-Murder cave. From here it was but a small step to a concept of theatre [...].

The Merzbau certainly reflected an element of theatricality, both in its environmental nature, as the “set for [Schwitters’s] real life”, and in the thematic organization of the rooms titled to reflect their content. Through the Merzbau, Schwitters began to turn his life into a conscious performance.

Schwitters’s adaptation of Merz to theatre took the form of a proposed staged event in which all elements were related (or unrelated) according to the juxtapositional principles of collage. In his manifesto of the Merzbühne, Schwitters states that:

The Merz stage knows only the fusing of all factors into a composite work. [...] As in poetry word is played off against word, here factor is played off against factor, material against material.

The factors which Schwitters imagines resonating off one another to create the performance include the stage set - “materials for the stage set are all solid, liquid and gaseous bodies, such as white wall, man, barbed wire entanglements, blue distances [...]”; the score - “materials for the score are all the tones and noises capable of being produced by violin, drum, trombone, grandfather clock, stream of water, etc.”; the text - “all experiences that provoke the intelligence and emotions”; and even the actor:

Even people can be used,
People can even be tied to backdrops,
People can even appear actively, even in their everyday positions, they can speak on two legs, even in sensible sentences.

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Having identified the potential materials for the *Merzbühne* stage collage, Schwitters then describes the process of their combination:

Now begin to wed your materials to one another. For example, you marry the oil cloth table cover to the homeowner's loan association, you bring the lamp cleaner into a relationship with the marriage between Anna Blume and A-natural concert pitch.\(^9\)

Evidently, Schwitters theory of the *Merzbühne* is based on the same principles of collage which defined his other Merz projects in the plastic arts. In the *Merzbühne*, Schwitters develops an adaptation of collage to the stage which extends beyond the organization of the scenography or even the construction of the stage image. In Schwitters's *Merzbühne*, collage became the underlying organizational principle for the performance as a whole.

It is not possible to apply Schwitters's model of stage collage directly to Meyerhold's theatre. Schwitters's *Merzbühne* was a purely hypothetical project, never extended beyond a manifesto, and according to Melzer even the artist himself regarded the project as unrealizable.\(^10\) Although Schwitters's demands are unrealistic, the juxtapositional impulse which underlies the *Merzbühne* is clearly open to adaptation to a less impractical theatrical form. Similarly, although Schwitters's work seems to reject all notion of meaning, probably as a result of his loose links with the Dada movement, it is evident that Schwitters's project could be adapted to a more politicized rationale as was demanded by early Soviet Russia. The modernist use of collage in the visual arts was, of course, noted for its political

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8 Ibid., p. 83.
9 Ibid., p. 83.
dimensions, and the device was put to the service of as diverse political regimes as the anarchism championed by Picasso and the Fascism of the Italian futurists.\textsuperscript{11}

Meyerhold’s use of the collage device in the mid-1920s can be located in terms of the two poles of stage collage practice, the purely scenographic and the purely metaphysical. Although there are elements of collage in the scenography of Meyerhold’s theatre, for example, in the superimposition of Cubist shapes in Dmitriev’s design for \textit{The Dawns}, Meyerhold’s aesthetic tended towards a metaphysical approach to stage collage. Even in his work on \textit{The Magnanimous Cuckold}, where the layered stage functioned as a predominantly scenographic adaptation of collage practice, the manifestation of the spatial fourth dimension and the fracturing of linear temporal progression demonstrate that the collage device was not restricted to scenographic concerns. In his production of \textit{The Government Inspector}, Meyerhold appears to engage with an adaptation of collage which is primarily metaphysical, based on principles similar to those underlying Schwitters’s \textit{Merzbühne} project.

\section*{III}
Collage as Organizational Principle of Performance

Before it is possible to address the metaphysical application of collage practice specifically to Meyerhold’s theatre, it is first necessary to consider what would constitute the use of collage as the organizational principle of a performance. Drawing on Schwitters’s \textit{Merzbühne} model, the work of Roger Copeland and definitions of collage practice in the visual arts, it is possible to construct a framework for the adaptation of collage to theatre,

\textsuperscript{11} Picasso political views are discussed further below, pp. 150 – 152. For a discussion of futurist politicized collage, see ‘Futurist Collage and \textit{Parole in Libertà} in the Service of War’, in Poggi (1992), pp. 228 – 251 (chapter eight).
and to differentiate this application of collage practice from the scenographic model and the layered stage aesthetic investigated above.

The terminology used here, of collage as organizational principle of performance, is adapted from Roger Copeland’s analysis of the performance practice of choreographer Merce Cunningham.\(^\text{12}\) In his article ‘Merce Cunningham and the Aesthetic of Collage’, Copeland identifies aspects of Cunningham’s work which suggest that collage principles are fundamental to his aesthetic.\(^\text{13}\) Rather than focusing on collage in the construction of the stage image, Copeland addresses the more encompassing notion of collage as a “principle organizing strategy” for a performance.\(^\text{14}\) To this end, Copeland outlines the ways in which he believes that collage principles can be transferred to the stage, including the development of a juxtapositional relationship between the elements which construct the performance, similar to Schwitters’s Merz model, and the incorporation of found or natural movement into the virtuosic vocabulary of dance, paralleling the collagist’s incorporation of everyday objects into the artwork.

However, Copeland’s definition of collage as “organizational strategy” and the assertions he makes based on this definition have only a limited use in the analysis of Meyerhold’s theatre. In his article ‘Space Craft: Collage Discourse’, Harry Polkinhorn addresses the importance of the historical contextualization of the collage device. Analysing the contribution of various art historians to the critical discourse surrounding collage (the work

\(^{12}\) Copeland’s use of the term is possibly also an adaptation. In the footnotes and bibliography for his article, Copland refers to Donald B. Kuspit’s article ‘Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art in the Age of the Relativity of Art’ (in Hoffman, 1989). Copeland’s work addresses the presence of the collage device in Cunningham’s aesthetic specifically, including some general discussion on staged collage principles.


\(^{14}\) See footnote 56, introduction, p. 32 above.
of Rosalind Krauss, for example), Polkinhorn dismisses criticism which de-contextualizes the device from the era of High Modernism.\textsuperscript{15} Retrospective criticism which fails to take account of the origins of collage, or which is motivated by post-modernist ideology, is seen as alienating collage practice from its modernist roots:

\begin{quote}
The point here is that the debate must be as fully contextualised as possible [...] Unless we approach collage as a particular process practiced by artists in a given historical period, claims as to its ultimate significance for modernism lose all force [...] by idealizing the "category" of collage among a variety of others, critics then can use it to advance their own arguments concerning modernism and postmodernism.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The collage device is hugely significant in terms of the development of art and philosophy at the start of the twentieth century, and the continued formal and metaphysical influence of the collage aesthetic on cultural practice should not be underestimated. Copeland's analysis is significant in that it makes a convincing argument for the possibility of the application of collage processes to the stage, and gives a plausible specific example of these processes in operation in Cunningham's performance practice. However, Polkinhorn's arguments regarding art criticism can equally be applied to Copeland's work. In identifying Cunningham as "the earliest - and arguably, still most influential - practitioner of collage in performance", Copeland ignores the modernist origins of the device and consequently de-contextualizes and de-politicizes the collage technique.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{15} In her work, Rosalind Krauss provides a semiotic analysis of collage practice using Saussurian structuralism as a framework. Polkinhorn demonstrates how Krauss ignores specific works of the modernist era in order to make her point, for example in response to her claim that "collage [...] is the first instance within the pictorial arts of anything like a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign", Polkinhorn asks "What about Cézanne's exploration of signs and living spaces in his Mt.-Sainte-Victorie series? What about the serial signs of Monet's cathedral facades or haystacks?" (Polkinhorn, 'Space Craft: Collage Discourse' in Hoffman 1989, p. 217). Krauss' argument can be found in Rosalind E. Krauss, \textit{The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths} (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1985).

\textsuperscript{16} Polkinhorn in Hoffman (1989), pp. 215, 217. Polkinhorn is addressing collage practice as it was developed by the early twentieth century avant-garde (i.e. collage motivated by a specific cultural, social or political project), and not the pre-avant-garde use of collage principles (the Victorian paste-ups, for example).

\textsuperscript{17} See footnote 57, introduction, p. 32 above.
\end{footnotes}
The use of collage as a performative device within the framework of a post-modern aesthetic strips it of its original cultural potency. The now out-dated anti-positivist philosophies which prompted the rediscovery and development of collage at the turn of the century by the Parisian Cubists formed the basis of a new, and for many a scandalous, world-view.

In order to identify collage principles as underlying the organization of a theatrical aesthetic, it is therefore essential that the director’s construction of performances reflects both the formal and the philosophical tenets of collage practice. In investigating the use of the collage device in early twentieth century avant-garde art, it is clear that despite the etymological origins of the word, it is not the use of glue or paste alone which determined a work as collaged. As Max Ernst, whose aesthetic expounded collage as idea rather than as formal process, claims in his much-quoted witticism, “si ce sont les plumes qui font le plumage, ce n’est pas la colle qui fait le collage” (If it is feathers which make plumage, it is not glue which makes collage). Marjorie Perloff notes that the collage impulse is evident in the work of Picasso and Braque before either artist included found objects or papier collé in their canvases. According to Perloff, the juxtaposition of trompe l’œil representation with Cubist abstraction in works painted by both artists constituted an engagement with proto-collage principles as early as 1908, four years before Picasso executed his Still Life with Chair Caning.

In analysing stage images from The Magnanimous Cuckold, a theatrical equivalent was sought to the glue or paste of literal collage practice in the form of the superimposition of a

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series of layers of images one on top of another. In the analysis of Meyerhold’s post-1922 productions, the use of collage as organizational principle of performance is taken to imply the construction of a performance which adapts the metaphysical principles, rather than the formal models, of the collage device to the unique conditions of theatrical production. The metaphysical stage collage may not necessarily use glue to combine diverse fragments into one image, but it must engage with the principles and impulses which promoted the modernist affinity with collage practice.

There are three fundamental facets which define collage practice: the juxtaposition of fragments, the creation of meaning through non-narrative devices, and the deconstruction of absolutes in terms of space and time. These facets demonstrate the formal and philosophical aspects of collage practice as it was engaged with by the turn of the century avant-garde, and which defined the role of the technique within the modernist cultural project. They are also responsible for the unique effect of the collaged artwork on the viewer, deconstructing a single objective viewpoint, and creating a visual experience which is radically unsettling.

The first of these facets is concerned with defining the formal aspect of collage practice. As an aesthetic, collage is characterized by the combination of disparate fragments into a new whole. The creation of a collage is a process of selection and appropriation of image fragments from a variety of sources, and the subsequent combination of these fragments according to the principles of juxtaposition. Aside from creating an image which is fundamentally unsettling for the viewer, it is this process of juxtaposition that enables the collagist to convey meaning or opinion through the artwork: the significance of the collage in terms of meaning-making emerges through reading one image fragment against another.
The collision of images on the collaged canvas allows the viewer to construct meanings which operate outside of narrative, and through the selection and combination of fragments, the collagist can comment on social and political issues. This process is enhanced by the nature of the collage fragments, which are often quotidian and help to blur the boundary between life and art, suggesting a more intimate and vital relationship between the two than that which is evident in simple verisimilitude.

The most notable aspect of the collage device which characterizes the processes of fragmentation and juxtaposition is the inclusion of the found object within the artwork. In his article ‘Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art in the Age of the Relativity of Art’, Kuspit characterizes the objects selected by the collagists as either “purely worldly elements [...] fragments of dailiness” or “mixed or impure elements [...] residual images of an imitated nature.” In the first category, Kuspit includes the quotidian fragments most associated with avant-garde collage practice, particularly the newspaper clippings which frequently appear in the collages of Picasso, Braque and Gris. Kuspit’s description “fragments of dailiness” is particularly apt in that it emphasizes the mundane nature of the objects chosen by the collagists. The artistic appropriation of elements of everyday life in an industrial age redefines the notion of art itself, questioning the necessity for virtuosity in the artist.

The second category of fragments Kuspit outlines are elements which further unsettle the identity of the artwork by belonging both to daily life and to artistic or illusionistic conventions. Amongst these objects, Kuspit counts the infamous printed oil cloth in

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20 Kuspit in Hoffman (1989), p. 55. Kuspit’s observation is also quoted by Copeland, who sees the incorporation of found movement as vital to Cunningham’s aesthetic (see Copeland, 2004, p. 165).
Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning* which functions as both an included fragment of a mass produced object, oil cloth, and as a *trompe l’œil* effect, imitation chair caning. The mass-produced nature of objects such as *faux-bois* wallpaper, printed oilcloth and newspapers undermined the individuality of the artwork. The inclusion of such objects questioned the commercial and philosophical value of art itself: every fragment was elevated to the status of art object by virtue of its inclusion on the canvas, yet simultaneously, every fragment devalued the canvas and made the work of art as mundane as its contents.

The inclusion of the everyday object in the artwork brings to light one aspect of the process of metaphysical and philosophical questioning which forms the foundation of collage practice. The use of the collage technique by the artists of the early twentieth century avant-garde brings to light their engagement with artistic and aesthetic questions regarding the function of art and the nature of representation. Through the inclusion of fragments of actual objects, selected from the everyday world surrounding the artist, collage can be used to blur the boundaries between the artwork and real life. According to Harold Rosenberg, it was this inclusion of fragments of actuality in the artwork which constituted the revolutionary potential of collage for the Dadaist Tristan Tzara:

For Tzara, the revolution of collage consisted in its incorporating “a piece of everyday reality which enters into relationship with every other reality that the spirit has created.” This idea of collage as a mixture of realities belonging to different orders identifies modern assembled art with a metaphysical principle beyond mere technique. Collage opens art to the common stuff of daily life, to Rimbaud’s “poetic junk” of the city streets, in order to fix in time and place the abstractions of form. The collage revolution brings to an end the age-old separation between the realm of art and the realm of things.²¹

As Rosenberg observes, the collage technique questions the boundaries between the art object and the real world. It is through this sort of questioning that collage principles can be seen to underlie such later artistic projects as Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Ready Made’ sculptures, which consist of objects found by the artist and displayed without modification in a gallery context. A similar process takes place in Picasso’s later sculptures, for example in his 1943 work in which the handlebars and saddle of a bicycle are transformed into an art object under the title of Bull’s Head [see plate 32]. Although the question of whether an appropriated everyday object can be considered art is made more clearly apparent in Duchamp’s ‘Ready Mades’ or Picasso’s Bull’s Head, the fragments included in collage works are clear predecessors to the latter projects. Collage practice addresses the separation of art and life, actively considering the fundamental question of representation in artistic practice. Rather than engaging with reality by accurately recreating it on the canvas through verisimilitude, the collagist incorporates fragments of actual reality into their compositions.

A similar process of questioning the life-art relationship can be seen in the way in which the collaged artworks engage with the notion of framing. In his Still Life with Chair Caning, Picasso’s construction of the canvas deliberately draws the viewer’s attention to the issue of framing by substituting the conventional wooden frame with a piece of rope. Christine Poggi suggests that through this mockery of the frame, Picasso’s work engages with the culture of art exhibition, and questions the validity of displaying the artwork in a gallery or museum setting. Expanding her argument, Poggi posits that a series of collaged works created by Picasso in spring 1914 further engage with the questions of framing and exhibition. In these works, Picasso represents both the artwork itself and its mode of exhibition by framing a central collaged image with a wallpaper border. The border becomes both collage fragment and frame, and the reference to the exhibition of the
Plate 32  *Bull's Head* Pablo Picasso (1943)
artwork is made explicit through Picasso’s inclusion of a mock plate bearing his name, as would be found next to an exhibit in a gallery or museum [see plates 33 and 34]. The roughly cut wallpaper in these works mocks the conventions of art exhibition in the same way as the rough section of rope which acts as the frame for Still Life with Chair Caning. In addition, Poggi’s analysis suggests a more fundamental questioning of the notion of display or exhibition through Picasso’s choice of wallpaper as a collage fragment:

As pictures of framed pictures depicting still life paintings hanging on wallpapered walls, the collages in this series also present the viewer with some uncertainty about where these works depict themselves as hanging. The mock gilt frame and label may refer to a museum context, but the wallpaper suggests the wall of a bourgeois home. The two settings seem to be conflated; in either case the work is depicted as being on exhibition by virtue of having been framed, labelled, and hung on a wall. 22

Through inclusion of wallpaper, a recognized symbol of a bourgeois lifestyle in the early twentieth century, Picasso collapses the two possible arenas of exhibition for his work: the formal exhibition context of the art gallery is set against the bourgeois home of the private collector.

The blurring of the boundaries between art and life on the collaged canvas has implications which extend beyond the philosophical questioning of the role of the artwork. Through questioning, deconstructing and subverting the notion of a boundary between life and art, and suggesting that the inclusion of real fragments of an everyday object provide a more significant link between art and reality than the illusionistic representation of such an object on the canvas, collage principles increase the socio-political potency of the artwork. This is particularly evident in Picasso’s inclusion of newspaper clippings as fragments in a large number of his collages. If these clippings of news articles are actually read (rather than simply regarded as a formal element in the construction of the artwork), the political

Plate 33  
*Pipe and Musical Score* Pablo Picasso (1914)
Plate 34  *Bottle of Bass, Ace of Clubs, Pipe* Pablo Picasso (1914)
potency of the collages comes to light. 23 Picasso professed a highly politicized world-view influenced particularly by anarchism and, as Patricia Leighton argues, expressed his political reactions to the First and Second Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 through his inclusion of relevant clippings of newsprint in his collages:

During 1912 and 1913 Picasso made approximately eighty collages of which fifty-two contain newspaper text; of these, at least half deal with the Balkan Wars and the economic and political state of Europe, most produced in the autumn and winter of 1912. 24

Leighton’s analysis suggests that Picasso’s work has a highly politicized content, resulting from the inclusion of the fragments of daily life in the form of newspaper articles. The inclusion of these fragments allowed the artist to convey further political messages through the collision of the newspaper text with other fragments in the artwork. Leighton provides an example of such political commentary operating in Picasso’s 1912 collage Bar Table with Bottle and Wineglass, in which a newspaper cutting is overlapped with a sketch of a wine bottle [see plate 35]. The newsprint, on close inspection, is taken from an article concerning the criticism of the French anti-militarist movement by Millerand, then Minister of War. Leighton reads Picasso’s combination of the newsprint and bottle as a deliberate, anti-militarist political statement:

[T]he newsprint is circumscribed by the outline of the bottle suggesting its role as the bottle’s liquid and, by extension, the stuff on which French culture is temporarily drunk. 25

23 The importance of reading these fragments rather than simply considering them to be part of the formal construction of the artwork is highlighted by Robert Rosenblum in his essay ‘Picasso and the Typography of Cubism’ (in Hoffman, 1989, pp. 91 – 120). Rosenblum argues that the analysis of Cubist art has been predominantly focused on the formal innovations of the movement at the expense of any consideration of the subject-matter of the artworks. Rosenblum concludes that: “The question, simply, is this: could it really have been that Picasso and his fellow Cubists chose the words, the newspaper clippings, the calling cards, the cigarette-paper packets, the advertisements, the bottle labels, even the kind of typeface (roman, italic, gothic) with total indifference to their potential verbal meaning or associative value?” (p. 92).


Plate 35  *Bar Table with Bottle and Wineglass*, Pablo Picasso, 1912

The meaning of the artwork is done so less in its subject matter than in the collision of the formal elements which comprise it. In this sense, Picasso's collages function through the juxtaposition of fragmented and drawn elements to create non-narrative meaning.

The third facet of collage practice involves the construction of absolute notions of space and time within the artwork. As the collage artist moves from an initial attempt to construct the collage underscores the experience of space and time within the artwork, contributing to a sense of fragmentation which permeates the artwork. Through the combination of the processes of fragmentation and recombination, the artwork becomes the site of multiple spatial and temporal events. In many ways, art becomes the process of reconceptualizing places into spaces which appear simultaneously.

In addition to the ideas of spatial and temporal conflation with the belief that an external time and space exist for the appreciation of the artwork:

The critic then goes on to use the concept of space and time to engage the reader with the spatial and temporal issues inherent in collage practice.

If the purpose of a spacecraft is to travel through space, the faster we move the shorter the amount of time elapsed. Pushing the model to its extreme, we see that...
The meaning of the artwork is contained less in its subject matter than in the collision of the formal elements which comprise it. In this sense, Picasso’s collages function through the juxtaposition of fragments and drawn elements to create non-narrative meaning.

The third facet of collage practice is the deconstruction of absolute notions of space and time within the artwork. The use of fragments of images to construct the collage undermines the sense of spatial and temporal unity within the canvas, contributing to a sense of fragmentation which pervades the artwork. Through the combination of the processes of fragmentation and juxtaposition in collage practice, the artwork becomes the site of multiple spatial and temporal identities: the collage is many things at once because it is constructed of many things at once, many fragments of places and times which appear simultaneously.

In addition to the aesthetic and political implications addressed above, this facet of collage practice implies an engagement with anti-positivist philosophical issues. Through the inclusion of fragments of everyday life, Polkinhorn argues that the collagist engages with the idea of simultaneity. Polkinhorn claims that the use of the collage technique challenges the belief that an extended period of time is a necessary pre-requisite for the creation of the artwork:

"Time is not necessary for the collage artist to achieve mastery […]. Rather, he or she plugs into the instantaneous present of cultural artefacts." 26

The critic then goes on to use the example of space travel to engage the reader with the spatial and temporal issues inherent in collage practice:

If the purpose of a spacecraft is to travel through space, the faster we move the shorter the amount of time elapsed. Pushing the model to its extreme, we see that

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instantaneous transport, the hypothetical ideal state of the system, in which speed is
totalized, eliminates time as a category separable from any other, which logically
eliminates space, its complement. Thus one can speak either of spatial or of
temporal simultaneity. "Ubiquity, instantaneity, the peopling of time supplants the
peopling of space." Collage, then, gestures towards this instantaneity, which
perhaps suggests why the process has been so appealing to contemporary
sensibility.27

Through the use of fragments, each of which represents part of a whole image that has a
spatial and a temporal identity of its own, the collagist creates an artwork in which the
notions of unified space and time are radically unsettled, resulting in an unsettling,
fragmented viewing experience. The rising influence of theories of the fourth dimension on
High Modernist cultural and literary life led to a common perception of the image as a
four-, rather than three-, dimensional construct. In his science fiction novel *The Time
Machine*, H. G. Wells expresses the popular suggestion that time is a necessary dimension
for any object to exist in space:

‘Can a cube that does not last for any time at all, have a real existence?’ Filby
became pensive. ‘Clearly,’ the Time Traveller proceeded, ‘any real body must have
extension in *four* directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness and –
Duration. But through a natural infirmity of the flesh, which I will explain to you in
a moment, we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three
which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time.’28

The avant-garde artists, particularly the Cubists, similarly acknowledged the image in both
spatial and temporal terms. As a result, collage became the combination not just of
fragments of discontinuous spaces, but also of fragments of discontinuous times. In this
sense, collage practice engages directly with the notion of relativity. Through the
emergence of relativity theory, both the scientific community and the intellectual world at
large were forced to acknowledge that complete objectivity and absolute truth were in fact

unobtainable. The canvas was no longer the site of a developed fictional location as, for example, could be seen in art which engages with illusionistic principles of verisimilitude. Instead, through the multiple fragments which constructed the collaged image, the canvas became a multi-locational and a multi-temporal construct in which no space or time was seen as extended, continuous or absolute.

Through the fragmentation of the spatial and temporal identity of the artwork, collage disrupts the linearity of the canvas in terms of both space and time. The engagement with non-linear space and time is an important aspect of the anti-positive philosophies which influenced the avant-garde artists, and can be seen reflected in the work of the mathematician Henri Poincaré, or the philosopher Henri Bergson. Collage practice, therefore, juxtaposes fragments of spaces and times in order to question their relationship to one another and their potential to construct meaning. Through the processes of fragmentation and juxtaposition, the early twentieth century avant-garde artists used collage to engage with social, political, cultural and metaphysical issues.

It is through the application of this three-part model of collage practice that a definition of collage as organizational principle of performance can be obtained. In order to constitute a performative version of the collage aesthetic, the performance would have to engage with the principles of juxtaposition and fragmentation which underlie collage practice on the canvas. In the same way that the collaged canvas constructs meanings through the collision of independent fragments, the collaged stage production would use collision to create

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29 Poincaré, as was outlined in the introduction to this thesis, deconstructed Euclidean geometry through the suggestion that Euclid's parallel postulate (that two parallel lines will never meet) is not applicable in curved space (that the curvature of space allows parallel lines to meet). Bergson's philosophy of time addresses the division between mathematical time (objective time) and durational time (subjective time). Bergson's work is discussed more fully in chapter five, pp. 248 – 254.
meanings both within the individual stage images and across the production as a whole. Through the juxtaposition of fragments, the collaged performance would engage with issues particularly associated with the era of High Modernism, for example, the modernist project of questioning the identity of the artwork, and the role of the artwork in defining the identity of art itself. In the same way that the collaged canvases of the early twentieth century avant-garde artists disrupted the frame of the artwork, the performance would need to question the boundaries between life and art, particularly with socio-political motivations in mind. Finally, the processes of juxtaposition and fragmentation would have a disruptive effect on the unity of the performance event, in terms of both space and time. The use of collage should contribute to a deconstruction of absolutes in the performance, resulting in a theatre which undercuts the audience’s belief in objective truths. It is an engagement with these issues, apparent in Meyerhold’s theatre of the mid-1920s, which makes it possible to claim that the director created a performance aesthetic which used collage as an underlying organizational principle.

IV

A Changing Aesthetic in Meyerhold’s Theatre, 1922 – 1926:

The Curved Stage Space

In the context of this investigation, Meyerhold’s 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* emerges as a watershed in his aesthetic. Pre-1922, the collage aesthetic became apparent in Meyerhold’s theatre through the construction of a layered stage aesthetic. Post-1922, a shift occurred towards a less literal, but more encompassing, use of collage as the organizational principle which underlies the performance. In order to provide a background to this shift, it is necessary to consider a significant development emerging in the director’s use of the stage space between 1922 and 1926. The application of the layered stage
aesthetic to Meyerhold's construction of the stage space is dependent on the spectator's visual relationship to the playing space. In order for the space to be read as layered, it is necessary that the audience member has a fixed perspective on the performance space, and that no aspect of the space distorts or undercuts the planar arrangement of the layers. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, for example, Meyerhold's staging meets both of these conditions: the stage and auditorium are arranged in an end-on relationship, and the stage shape is a simple rectangle.

Between 1922 and 1926, however, Meyerhold engaged in a significant reconfiguration of the stage space. Although the end-on relationship between the stage and the auditorium remained in place, a restriction implied by the fixed stage-auditorium configuration at the former Sohn Theatre, the simple rectangle of the stage space was increasingly distorted: in line with Poincaré's anti-positivist mathematics, Meyerhold introduced a degree of curvature into his construction of the stage space. As the director begins to define the spatial structure of the stage through curves, rather than planar layers, it becomes evident that the collage technique represented by the layered stage aesthetic is no longer applicable to Meyerhold's theatre.

The initial identification of the layered stage aesthetic in Meyerhold's theatre was prompted by a shift in spatial structure. After 1906, Meyerhold discarded the narrow strip of stage space associated with Fuchs' relief staging and returned to the depth stage. The physically restricted relief stage could not accommodate the degree of physicality in performance with which Meyerhold was experimenting from 1906. The reinstatement of the depth stage in Meyerhold's theatre indicated that the principles of relief staging had either been abandoned by the director or had been adapted to his developing aesthetic.
The shift in Meyerhold's work from the narrow strip stage to the depth stage functioned as an adaptation, rather than an abandonment, of Fuchs’ ideas. The question of how the director conceives of (and consequently, constructs) the stage space is fundamental to the consideration of this spatial shift. Meyerhold’s placement of the stage set and the performers on the depth stage suggests that the director organized the stage space through the construction of a series of narrow relief stages extending across its floor. Relief staging was governed by principles of juxtaposition, using the narrow strip of stage as an overtly non-representational, two-dimensional performance space to highlight the threedimensionality of the actor. These principles are fundamentally similar to those which underlie the layered stage aesthetic, which uses the superimposition of narrow strips of stage space one on top of another in order to create a continual sense of juxtaposition within the stage image.

In the mid-1920s, another shift in spatial construction can be identified in Meyerhold’s work. Between 1924 and 1926, productions at the Meyerhold Theatre repeatedly demonstrated a movement away from a rectangular stage space to a stage which was dominated by circular or oval forms. Evidence of this shift can be found, for example, in Meyerhold’s 1924 production of Ostrovsky’s *The Forest*. The design for this production, executed by Vasily Fyodorov, comprised a large curved ramp which dominated the stage space [see plate 36].

Reminiscent of the much smaller curved staircase that had connected

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30 The word 'executed' is used here advisedly. Meyerhold frequently designed the staging concept for a production, leaving the execution of that concept to his designer. The degree to which Meyerhold dictated the designer’s work varied from production to production, but the importance of his overall vision often led him to specify precisely what he wanted from the visual aspect of the performance. According to Alla Mikhailova: "Meyerhold’s idol was Gordon Craig, who was proficient both as director and designer. Meyerhold, who lacked this double competence, had to solve the painful problem of how to make up for the absence of professional drawing and painting skill [...] ‘None of my plans will be realized on the stage in their true
the stage to the orchestra pit in Meyerhold's 1920 production of *The Storm* (see plate 3). The ramp extended from upstage right to downstage left, enclosing the performance space. 10

Significantly, it also extended beyond the front edge of the stage, encroaching on the raised stage area and encompassing it within the flow of the curve (as can be seen in Fyodorov's model of the set illustrated in plate 37). The ramp was complemented by the curved additions to the stage made up of downstage right and left, and by the downstage left (representing the edges of Chekhov's stage). The resulting design was drawn at the eye's level to give the impression of a more shallow, curved stage.

Plate 36    *The Forest* (1924). Design by Vasily Fyodorov
the stage to the orchestra pit in Meyerhold’s 1920 production of *The Dawn* [see plate 3], the ramp extended from upstage right to downstage left, enclosing the performance space.\(^{31}\)

Significantly, it also extended beyond the front edge of the stage, reshaping the boundary of the raised stage area and encompassing it within the flow of the curve (as can be seen in Fyodorov’s model of the set pictured in plate 37). The ramp was complemented by the two curved additions to the stage placed downstage right and left, and by the archway downstage left (representing the entrance to Gurmyzhskaya’s estate). The resulting design was dominated by curved lines, giving the space an organic feel as the spectator’s eye is drawn along the dynamic lines of the curves.

The curvature of the stage space is even more pronounced in the two productions premiered at the Meyerhold Theatre in 1925, Alexei Faiko’s *Bubus the Teacher* (29th January) and Nikolai Erdman’s *The Warrant* (20th April). For Meyerhold’s production of *Bubus the Teacher*, designer Ilya Shlepyanov emphasized the curve of the stage space through the introduction of a semi-circular back wall, created from hanging bamboo canes, and highlighted the curved edge of the stage space through the use of a circular floor cloth.\(^{32}\) In plate 38, the curved edge of the raised stage platform is clearly evident near the lower edge of the photograph. However, the use of a dark circle of carpet to define the playing area gives the impression of a more sharply rounded stage space.\(^{33}\)

dimensions until I become my own decorator.”” Mikhailova, with quotation from Meyerhold, (1995), p. 64. Due to the small number of productions achieved during his career, it should be noted that Craig’s proficiency as a director is questionable.

\(^{31}\) Plate 3 can be found after p. 35 above.


\(^{33}\) A colour sketch of the design for act one of *Bubus the Teacher* indicates that the carpet was at least intended to be bright blue in colour (see Mikhailova, 1995, p. 186).
Plate 37  Model of the set for *The Forest* (1924), design by Vasily Fyodorov
Plate 38  *Bubus the Teacher* (1925). Design by Ilya Shlepyanov.
The semi-circular back wall which defined the stage space for *Bubus* did not reappear three months later in Meyerhold’s production of *The Warrant*. Working again with Shlepyanov, the director instead employed a new device: a performance space constructed from three concentric circles, two of which revolved [see plate 39]. This innovation was partially practical in intention, allowing the director to make rapid transitions between different locations; however, its curved edge clearly emphasized the rounded stage space, as can be seen in plate 40. The introduction of the revolving stage combined Meyerhold's practical concern for the rhythm of the performance with his construction of a stage space which acted as a visual metaphor for the thematic concerns of the play text. The revolve not only allowed the director to shift scenery with ease, it also had an impact on the style of the production, as well as on its political and social message:

Telling effects were achieved with this simple mechanical means: a petrified group would silently retreat, a gap would materialise in the seemingly impassable wall, and they would be ‘hurled from the stream of life onto the rubbish dump of history’.

Although Erdman’s play is predominantly satirical in tone, Meyerhold’s production of *The Warrant* bordered more on the tragic than the comic. Russian theatre critic Boris Alpers saw the production as sacrificing Meyerhold’s “satirical theatre, merry and irreverent” for a new theatrical “voice” in which “there began to predominate the note of tragedy.”

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34 Braun (1979, 1998), p. 217, with quotation from M. Zharov. Erdman’s play centres on the attempts of the Gulyachkin family to cope with the changes in their lifestyle required by the new regime after the Revolution.

35 Boris Alpers, quoted in Braun (1979, 1998), p. 219. Braun also notes the significance of the replacement of Igor Illinsky with Erast Garin as lead actor at the Meyerhold Theatre. Braun quotes Rudnitsky’s comparison of the two performers: “The buoyant, mischievous, charming Illinsky, full of youthful energy, was replaced by the nervous, fragile, disturbingly grotesque Garin, with his sudden freezes into immobility. Energy was replaced by trance, the dynamic by the static, high-spirited playful humour by sombre and bitter satire.” (Rudnitsky quoted in Braun, 1979, 1998, p. 219). As Braun and Rudnitsky state, the change of actors seems almost symptomatic of the shift in style at the Meyerhold Theatre in the mid-1920s.
Plate 39  
Sketch of the revolving stage for *The Warrant* (1925), design by Ilya Shlepyanov.
Plate 40  *The Warrant* (1925). Design by Ilya Shlepyanov
sees the production as a significant moment in Meyerhold’s theatrical development, claiming that:

The Warrant marked Meyerhold’s virtual rejection of placard drama and his return to a theatre of disturbing complexity.36

Meyerhold’s 1925 production of The Warrant is a clear predecessor to his work on The Government Inspector the following year: Braun’s description of Meyerhold’s work as a “theatre of disturbing complexity” is equally applicable to both productions. In terms of staging, The Government Inspector epitomized Meyerhold’s shift towards a curved stage space. Unlike his productions of Bubus the Teacher and The Warrant, The Government Inspector did not feature any rounding of the downstage edge of the stage space. However, Meyerhold’s re-introduction of a curved back wall to enclose the playing space, similar to that seen in Bubus, ensured that the performance space comprised a semi-circle [see plate 41].

This curvature of the stage space was repeatedly reflected in Meyerhold’s construction of the stage images. In the production, the director rarely used the full depth of the stage space, instead restricting the majority of the fifteen episodes to small truck stages placed downstage centre.37 It is interesting to note, however, that on two significant occasions when Meyerhold did choose to open up the full stage, the mise-en-scène he constructed emphasized the curvature of the stage space. The first of these occasions took place in episode nine (entitled ‘Bribes’). In this sequence, in Gogol’s original text, the conman Khlestakov (posing as the Government Inspector) is offered a series of bribes by the town

37 These trucks created the most striking visual element of Meyerhold’s production of The Government Inspector. The best-known images of the production are of the large ensemble cast of the State Meyerhold Theatre crowded onto the small platform stages. This staging device, and its implications for the staged collage aesthetic, will be discussed below in chapters four and five.
Plate 41 Sketch of set for *The Government Inspector* (1926), design by Victor Kiselyov.
officials, resulting in a scene which is lengthy and repetitive, with each encounter between Khlestakov and official following a similar pattern. In Meyerhold’s production all the exchanges were condensed into one episode, in which the drunken Khlestakov was offered bribes by all the officials simultaneously. Plate 42 shows Meyerhold’s mise-en-scène for the episode, demonstrating the emphasis which the construction of the image places on the semi-circular form of the stage space. The director used the eleven doors in the curved back wall as the main feature of the image: as Erast Garin’s Khlestakov lay passed out on the downstage chaise longue, an official appeared in each doorway, reaching out towards him, offering him bribe money. As can be seen in plate 42, the ghostly outlines of the officials in the doorways form a curved upstage boundary for the image. The lines of the boards on the stage floor extend from the doorways (and in this instance, the officials) downstage towards Khlestakov, providing the image with a focal point in the reclining figure of Garin. The lines of the floor boards further emphasize the curved construction of the space, highlighting the stage as semi-circular.

In the production’s final Dumb Scene, Meyerhold constructed a stage image similarly based around a curve. Gogol’s text culminates with a tableau of shock at the announcement of the imminent arrival of the real government inspector, and the town officials’ discovery that they have been duped by Khlestakov. In Meyerhold’s production, the tableau suggested by Gogol was replaced by the famous Dumb Scene: a gong sounded and a curtain was lowered announcing the arrival of the inspector. As the curtain rose, it revealed the company replaced by wax dummies in frozen attitudes of horror. In this sequence, Meyerhold again employed the full stage space. Plate 43 shows how the dummies were placed.

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38 A fuller analysis of the form and function of the Dumb Scene is provided in chapter four, pp. 201 – 208 below.
Plate 42

*The Government Inspector* (1926) episode nine: Bribes, design by Victor Kiselyov
Plate 43  *The Government Inspector* (1926), the Dumb Scene, design by Victor Kiselyov.
placed in a semicircle across the width of the stage, running parallel to the curved back wall. The construction of the space reinforces the significance of curved forms in Meyerhold’s construction of stage image in this production: the final frozen image presented to the audience was one spatially dominated by a curve.\textsuperscript{39}

Meyerhold’s increasing use of curved forms to define the stage space in the mid-1920s reflects a shift in his choice of repertoire during this period. In \textit{The Magnanimous Cuckold}, the constructivist-influenced, rectilinear forms indicated an element of solidity and certainty, the certainty of the young, healthy, acrobatic performers in the new communist world they were building. The curvature of the stage space in Meyerhold’s productions of the mid-1920s carries a different set of implications, functioning as a distortion of the simple, rectilinear world, similar to the distortion of linear space achieved through non-Euclidean geometry. The “disturbing complexity” of \textit{The Warrant} and \textit{The Government Inspector} is reflected in this curvature of the stage space, with its associations with fluidity and distortion.\textsuperscript{40}

However, Meyerhold’s move towards a curved stage space impedes the application of the layered stage aesthetic as a framework for reading his construction of the stage image. A stage space created from a series of relief stages superimposed one on top of another cannot function in a curved performance space. The layered stage aesthetic relies on the division of

\textsuperscript{39} The image of the Dumb Scene is even more significant when historically contextualized in Meyerhold’s oeuvre. When the closure of his theatre was announced in 1938, Meyerhold chose \textit{The Government Inspector} for the final performance. It was therefore the frozen images of the dummies which formed the final image presented by the State Meyerhold Theatre. Mikhail Sadovsky recalls that final performance: “\textit{The Inspector General} began, and each scene as it was played disappeared forever [...] The dummies were put in place in the darkness. The sound of a gong. The lights went up. And those dead dolls, which Meyerhold had conceived of as a final image of deadness and petrifaction, were especially terrifying that night, in the last performance of \textit{The Inspector General}. The sound of the gong again. Darkness. End of scene. End of theater.” (Sadovsky in Schmidt, 1981, pp. 214 – 215).

\textsuperscript{40} See footnote 36, p. 160 above.
the space into narrow strips which reflect the foreshortening of perspective (the two-dimensionality) of Fuchs’ staging. This foreshortening cannot be realized within a curve. The circular stage space, by its nature, exists in depth, with the central section of the stage space being placed either further from or nearer to the audience.41

Meyerhold’s developing preference for a stage space dominated by curved forms indicates a new period in his staging aesthetic (as is reflected in the semi-circular playing space employed in *The Government Inspector*). Consequently, if the collage aesthetic is to remain relevant to the analysis of his theatre, a new adaptation of the device in performance must be sought. Rather than dividing the stage into layers which can be juxtaposed, Meyerhold’s construction of the image in *The Government Inspector* demonstrated a juxtapositional relationship between the key elements of the mise-en-scène (the stage space, the décor and the actor). In the director’s construction of the image, each element functioned as a collage fragment, bringing its own identity to the performance event and creating meaning through its combination with the other elements of the production.

It is particularly significant that Meyerhold did not attempt to resolve the contradictions between the elements and create a stage image which was entirely unified. Photographs of *The Government Inspector* demonstrate that the visual aspects of the production retained a sense of dissonance, particularly evident in the collision of the realistic and abstract elements of the production. Through this feeling of dissonance and dislocation between the performance elements, Meyerhold’s construction of the stage image can be read as an application of collage principles.

41 Although a curved stage space could be divided into a series of narrow curved relief stages, the foreshortening of the stage space would be disrupted, and, in an end-on performance space, only the spectators in the centre of the auditorium could fully appreciate the layering of the space.
Similarly, Meyerhold’s construction of the relationship between the series of individual stage images developed across the production demonstrated a juxtapositional impulse. Through the use of platform stages which could be wheeled into and out of the stage space, Meyerhold constructed images which could be read as independent entities, rather than a continuous flow. The juxtaposition of individual images or staged moments, as well as being related to the collage aesthetic, ensured that Meyerhold’s work during this period closely reflected the montage experiments of film makers such as Kuleshov and Eisenstein.  

V

Parallel Principles: Avant-garde Collage and the Grotesque

The construction of a performance through the juxtaposition of its different formal elements was not new to Meyerhold’s aesthetic in the mid-1920s. As early as 1907, Meyerhold expressed his belief that the creation of a theatrical work which was totally unified, a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, was an impossibility. In his article ‘First Attempts at a Stylized Theatre’, Meyerhold dismissed the possibility of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as purely idealistic and unachievable:

One never sees an ideal blend of author, director, actor, designer, composer and property-master. For this reason, Wagner’s notion of a synthesis of the arts seems to me impossible.  

42 Meyerhold’s connections with Eisenstein and Kuleshov will be discussed in chapter five, pp. 254 – 260 below.
43 Meyerhold, ‘First Attempts at a Stylized Theatre’, in Braun (1969, 1998), p. 49. It should be highlighted that in Braun’s translation of Meyerhold’s writings, a second reference to Wagner can be found. This is a much later reference (in his 1930 article ‘The Reconstruction of the Theatre’), in which he suggests that the new conditions of the Soviet theatre have made the achievement of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* possible: “There was a time when Wagner’s idea of a new theatre which would be dramatic synthesis of words, music, lighting, rhythmic movement and all the magic of the plastic parts was regarded as purely utopian. Now we can see that this is exactly what a production should be: we should employ all the elements which the other arts have to offer and fuse them to produce a concerted effect on the audience.” (Meyerhold, in Braun, 1969, 1998, p. 254). This statement does not undercut any analysis of Meyerhold’s theatre as collage-based in the
Four years later, Meyerhold began work on his influential essay, 'The Fairground Booth' (1911 – 1912). It is in this essay that Meyerhold fully outlines the principle of the grotesque which was to form a significant part of his theatrical theory and practice throughout his career. Meyerhold’s writings prior to the publication of ‘The Fairground Booth’ had made some reference to the grotesque. In his analysis of his 1906 production of Arthur Schnitzler’s *The Cry of Life* at Poltava, just a year before he denounced the impossibility of a total work of art according to Wagner’s model, Meyerhold refers to the use of the grotesque as a device to emphasize the emotional intensity of particular scenes:

> Wherever it was necessary to convey the extremes of passion, resort was made to a device of the grotesque: in order to reinforce the impact of dramatically intense scenes, the passages of intervening narrative were delivered in an unusually cool style, almost devoid of feeling and emphasis.⁴⁴

The term grotesque appears here to refer to the use of contrast in mood and delivery in order to emphasize particular sequences in the production. Even in this brief mention, the elements of juxtaposition and collision evident in Meyerhold’s use of the term ‘grotesque’ call to mind the principles of collage. In ‘The Fairground Booth’, Meyerhold expands on the brief mention of the grotesque made in 1906. In its principles and its usage, the grotesque, as Meyerhold understood it, is clearly related to the processes of fragmentation and juxtaposition seen in the collage device. The grotesque is, in fact, strikingly similar to collage in both its style and its intention.

mid-1920s. Firstly, the statement was not made until 1929 at the earliest (the article is a composite of lectures given by Meyerhold in 1929), and this date falls outside the scope of his practical work as analysed here. Secondly, in Meyerhold’s practical work as surveyed across his career (particularly from 1906 to 1926, the years addressed here), the principle of fusion expressed here in connection with the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is much less prevalent than the principle of dislocation and the notion of the grotesque.

In terms of style, Meyerhold’s description of the grotesque as applied to his production of *The Cry of Life* suggests that the device is simply a matter of contrast: one aspect of the production is emphasized by being made as different from other aspects as possible. His description of the device as cited by Gladkov seems to reinforce this idea:

The grotesque isn’t something mysterious. It’s simply a theatrical style that plays with sharp contradictions.\(^{45}\)

However, the description given by Meyerhold in ‘The Fairground Booth’ instead implies that the device operates according to more complex, collage-like principles. Meyerhold’s analysis of the device begins by quoting a dictionary definition of the grotesque, taken from the 1902 *Bolshaya Entsiklopedia*, which describes the grotesque as being from the Italian *grottesca*, and implying:

Something hideous and strange, a humorous work which with no apparent logic combines the most dissimilar elements by ignoring their details and relying on its own originality, borrowing from every source anything which satisfies its joie de vivre and its capricious, mocking attitude to life.\(^{46}\)

The definition chosen by Meyerhold is strikingly similar to Schwitters’s description of his *Merzbühne*, which also advocated the seemingly illogical and light-hearted combination of elements in line with the Dada world-view.\(^{47}\) In addition, the combination of elements according to the logic and originality of the organizer, rather than an inherent aspect of the elements themselves, seems immediately to equate the grotesque with collage principles. Meyerhold goes on to explore the element of relativity intrinsic to the notion of the grotesque, the belief not in absolutes but in the definition of entities through their relationship to other entities, including their opposites:


\(^{47}\) See p. 141 above.
The grotesque does not recognize the purely debased or the purely exalted. The grotesque mixes opposites, consciously creating harsh incongruity and relying solely on its own originality.48

The theatrical grotesque creates meaning through the collision of the different elements which comprise the performance. Despite implying elsewhere that the device is simply a matter of constructing binary oppositions, in ‘The Fairground Booth’ Meyerhold provides a more sophisticated analysis of the function of the device. Dismissing the notion that the grotesque is simply the collision of disparate styles or forms - “Surely the grotesque is not intended simply as a means of creating or heightening contrasts!” - Meyerhold clarifies the function of the device using the example of a gothic cathedral.49 Describing the way in which the cathedral architecture functions, combining tall towers (which represent the believer’s urge towards heaven) with decorations resembling hellish creatures (the believer’s urge toward sin), Meyerhold goes on to parallel this combined reminder of heaven and hell with the principles of the grotesque:

Just as in Gothic architecture a miraculous balance is preserved between affirmation and denial, the celestial and the terrestrial, the beautiful and the ugly, so the grotesque parades ugliness in order to prevent beauty from lapsing into sentimentality (in Schiller’s sense).50

The grotesque is not content with constructing simple contrasts; it functions through a more complex process of estrangement. In a relationship of contrast, each term of the equation remains essentially unaffected by the other terms surrounding it. If anything, the process of contrast is intended to make each term more like itself, to use the differentiation of the term to highlight its individuality, making its unique aspects more evident. This is not what Meyerhold observes in the cathedral. Heaven is not made more like heaven by the presence

49 Ibid., p. 138.
50 Ibid., pp. 138 – 139.
of a reminder of hell. Instead, the cathedral functions as a physicalization of humanity’s struggle on earth as seen from a Christian viewpoint: as human beings strive towards heaven, they are continually pulled back towards earth and sin. The categories of humanity’s goodness and sinfulness intermingle, resonating off one another. This notion of collision is also contained in the collage, in which every element affects every other, simultaneously asserting and altering its own identity. Like humanity’s struggle between heaven and hell suspended in the Cathedral form, this struggle for identity is never-ending. In this sense, collage, and by implication the grotesque, embody the principle of relativity, as Kuspit observes:

Collage is a demonstration of this process of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it. Every entity is potentially relevant to every other entity’s existence, is potentially a fragment in every other entity’s existence. This is the relativistic message of collage: the keeping in play of the possibility of the entry of the many into the one, the fusion of the many into the one. Concrescence is, in effect, never finished, however much there may be the illusion of completeness.51

Although the collage may give the impression of being a unified artwork, Kuspit notes that it can never fully achieve that status because of the impossibility of the absolute resolution of the differences between the fragments of which it is comprised: by its nature, collage is suspended in a state of becoming. Through equating the grotesque with the process of juxtaposition operating in the gothic cathedral, Meyerhold suggests that the function of that device is essentially similar to the function of collage.

Meyerhold’s use of the grotesque is also similar to the collage process in its intention. Like collage, Meyerhold’s application of the grotesque to theatre was intended to shift the audience from one plane of perception to another, unsettling their experience of the artwork.

and undercutting the notion of objective truth. In this way, the device functions as an
estrangement process focused specifically on the question of perception:

Is it not the task of the grotesque in the theatre to preserve this ambivalent attitude
in the spectator by switching the course of the action with strokes of contrast? The
basis of the grotesque is the artist’s constant desire to switch the spectator from the
plane he has just reached to another which is totally unforeseen.\textsuperscript{52}

This constant shifting of perception for the audience contributes to the construction of
Meyerhold’s aesthetic as a theatre of uncertainties. Like collage, Meyerhold guided his
spectator through a series of perspectives and viewpoints, not allowing them to identify too
closely or too long with any one in particular.

Meyerhold’s use of the grotesque is originally associated with his work as Doctor
Dapertutto during the 1910s. However, in the mid-1920s, he returned to the device with a
new force. Braun observes the influence of the grotesque on Meyerhold’s production of \textit{The Warrant}:

\textit{[T]here was little laughter at the closing line ‘What’s the point in living, mama, if
they don’t bother to arrest us?’ It was a glimpse of the tragic aspect of the
grotesque, which recalled the Mayor rounding on the audience at the close of \textit{The Government Inspector} and Blok’s clown bleeding cranberry juice in \textit{The Fairground Booth}.}\textsuperscript{53}

The reference to the clown who bled cranberry juice is made by Meyerhold in his initial
analysis of the grotesque in ‘The Fairground Booth’.\textsuperscript{54} In his production of \textit{The Government Inspector} Meyerhold included a number of devices which had become
epitomic of his theatre. Amongst these were a return to the principles of the \textit{Commedia
dell’Arte}, particularly in Erast Garin’s interpretation of Khlestakov, and an overt reliance
on the juxtapositions and the uncertainties in perception posited by the grotesque:

The Government Inspector was perhaps the clearest and most coherent realization of the style which in his crucial essay, The Fairground Booth (1912), Meyerhold defined as the 'tragic grotesque'. 55

It is the 1926 production of The Government Inspector which forms the primary focus of the following two-part case study addressing the role of collage in Meyerhold’s theatre of the mid-1920s. In addition to his use of the grotesque, the three-part model of collage practice outlined above serves as a framework for the consideration of other aspects of Meyerhold’s theatre which reflect the collage practices of the avant-garde artists, in terms of both the formal construction of the performance and the implications for the viewing experience. The overlap between Meyerhold’s construction of the performance event and the collagist’s construction of the canvas is significant enough for his theatre to represent an extended application of the collage aesthetic to the stage, and be classified as a theatrical aesthetic which employed collage as an underlying organizational principle of performance.

Chapter Four

Spatial Forms and Collage in *The Government Inspector*

I

Collage within Images

The definition of the relationship between art and reality formulated by symbolist writer and theorist Andrei Bely has both a spatial and a temporal facet:

Art is incapable of conveying the sum of reality, that is, all concepts as they succeed one another in time. Art dismantles reality, depicting it now spatially, now temporally. For this reason, art consists either in images or in the alternation of images: the first yields the spatial forms of art, the second – temporal forms. ¹

In his essay ‘The Fairground Booth’, Meyerhold cites Bely’s comments as support for his own argument that art must be distanced from verisimilitude in order to become a true reflection of reality.² However, the distinction which Bely makes between the spatial and temporal aspects of art, and his claim that artistic representation fluctuates between the two, “depicting [reality] now spatially, now temporally”, is particularly interesting in the context of Meyerhold’s painterly perception of the stage space. In his alternation of static and moving stage images, Meyerhold’s work constituted a theatre which consciously operated “now spatially, now temporally.”

Meyerhold’s theatre consistently reflected a concern with the role of the isolated stage image in the rhythmic construction of the performance. In his 1906 production of *Sister Beatrice*, the director employed *tableaux vivants* in order to forefront the visual aspects of the production and the construction of stage images after the model of “pre-Raphaelite and

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early Renaissance painting” and sculpture.³ Twenty years later, the isolation of individual
stage images still played a significant role in the director’s aesthetic. In his 1926 production
of The Government Inspector, the balance of movement and stillness was as fundamental to
Meyerhold’s rhythmic construction of the performance as it had been in Sister Beatrice, the
production contrasting fast-paced physical clowning with the suspension of action in the
form of tableaux vivants.

Meyerhold’s insertion of static tableaux into his production of The Government Inspector
indicated that his concern with the role of the individual stage image was not restricted to
his early symbolist projects. Bearing this rhythmic balance of stillness and movement in
mind, it is Meyerhold’s construction of the isolated stage image which is taken as the
starting point for this investigation of the collage device in his theatre of the mid-1920s.

The shifts in style and in spatial structure which can be identified in Meyerhold’s work
between 1922 and 1926, and specifically between The Magnanimous Cuckold and The
Government Inspector, indicate a new emphasis in the director’s construction of the visual
aspects of the performance. As was explored in chapter three, Meyerhold’s work in the
mid-1920s placed an increasing emphasis on curved spaces, indicating that the layered
stage aesthetic is not a suitable framework for reading his productions post-1922. However,
as analysis of photographs of The Government Inspector demonstrates, it is still possible to
discern the parallel processes of fragmentation and juxtaposition underpinning Meyerhold’s
construction of the stage image.

Through the juxtaposition of the different elements which comprise the stage image, Meyerhold created a *mise-en-scène* with an underlying sense of dissonance or discord, similar to that which can be found in the collaged artwork. As was emphasized in chapter three above, it is Meyerhold’s refusal to resolve the separate visual aspects of his productions into a unified stage image that is central to the definition of his work as collaged. Through the identification of independent fragments juxtaposed within the stage image, Meyerhold’s theatre fulfilled a fundamental facet of collage practice: the combination of diverse fragments of images within the framework of the canvas.

In Meyerhold’s theatre of the early to mid-1920s, and particularly in *The Government Inspector*, the juxtaposition of fragments is evident in the collision between the realistic and abstract elements of the *mise-en-scène*. This collision is manifested in the director’s contrasting approaches to costume and scenography, and in the division of the stage into restricted and open spatial structures.

Against this backdrop of visual juxtapositions, Meyerhold emphasized the importance of the visual aspects of his production through inserting moments of suspended movement in the form of freeze frames. The insertion of these tableaux highlighted the principle of the “tragic grotesque” upon which the production was structured, further reinforcing Meyerhold’s painterly perception of the stage space.\(^4\) As an analysis of the final two episodes of the production demonstrates, through the combination of static and moving images Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector* emphasized the subjective process of observing theatre, rather than the objective ideal of an externalized observer who resides outside the creative process. This shift from objectivity to subjectivity echoes the

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4 See footnote 55, chapter three, p. 170 above.
director’s earlier work on Sister Beatrice, The Fairground Booth and Masquerade, as addressed in chapters one and two. In The Government Inspector, however, rather than attempting to replace the objective viewing experience with one that emphasizes subjectivity, and thus leaving the possibility of objectivity intact, Meyerhold begins to deconstruct the objective. Through this process, Meyerhold’s production engaged with the Cubist conviction that the artwork should construct not a privileged external viewpoint for the observer but a representation of the process of observation itself.

II

Juxtaposition in the Stage Image (1): Use of Costume

In Meyerhold’s work between 1922 and 1926, a sense of dissonance becomes apparent in the stage image, the presence of which is fundamental to the definition of the director’s aesthetic as collaged. The collaged canvas brings together independent fragments of images or objects in order to construct meanings through their collision. It is therefore fundamental to the functioning of collage practice that the fragments which meet on the collaged canvas retain their original identity and are not subject to a process of levelling which collapses one into another. As Jean-Jacques Thomas observes:

[C]ollage is characterized by the explicit and deliberate presentation of the heterogeneous nature of diverse components.

The juxtapositions which define Meyerhold’s aesthetic as collaged arise out of the collision of the elements which construct the stage image, namely the stage space itself, the area of

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5 It should be noted that, although certain applications of collage politicize the device (as is particularly evident in Picasso’s Balkan Wars collages discussed in chapter three, pp. 150 – 152), the collage aesthetic can also indicate a desire on the part of the artist to divorce their work from meaning. This is true of certain Dada collage practices which emphasize the role of chance meetings in collage. This is reflected in the Comte de Lautréamont’s description of Dada practice as the “chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table” (quoted in Melzer, 1994, p. 68).

the theatre building designated for performance; the stage set as placed into that space, the scenographic element; and the actors, particularly their costumed appearance. The visual construction of Meyerhold’s performance is grounded in the collision of these elements, which exist as independent and often contradictory entities. Through this process of juxtaposition, Meyerhold creates irresolvable differences between the elements which comprise the stage image, undercutting the visual unity of the mise-en-scène. This process of fragmentation highlights the theatrical function of the stage environment over its representational function, acting as an estrangement or alienation device. The use of collage principles therefore re-emphasizes Meyerhold’s ongoing project of accentuating the conventionalized aspects of the theatrical experience, evident in his work prior to his commission at the Moscow Art Theatre Studio in 1905.

The development of the different visual aspects of the production as independent elements (or collage fragments) is particularly apparent in Meyerhold’s contrasting use of set and costume. There was only a brief period in Meyerhold’s career in which he advocated a form of costuming which was wholly functional rather than representational. This innovation took the form of the cover-all work clothes designed by Popova for The Magnanimous Cuckold, known as the prozodezhda [see plate 44]. These uniform overalls made no allowance for the character, or even for the gender of the performer, reducing the essential representational function of the costume, the distinction of one character from another, to simple signifying elements: red pompoms for Bruno, black boots for Stella, and so forth.7

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7 The use of this sort of rudimentary signification in costuming prompts a connection between Meyerhold’s production and the Blue Blouse or Living Newspaper theatrical movements. In these movements, the propagandist potential of theatre was exploited in order to present a simple message to an uneducated or illiterate audience. Meyerhold’s desire to tour the production of The Magnanimous Cuckold is also indicative of the connections between the simplistic forms of propaganda theatre in Russia after 1917 and the more complex dogma of Meyerhold’s Theatrical October campaign. It is interesting to note that one of the most explicit connections between collage and performance in Russia can be seen in the Bolshevik use of
Plate 44  The Magnanimous Cuckold (1922). The prozodezhda designed by Lyubov Popova.
This period of complete abstraction in costuming was short lived, and Meyerhold’s use of costume, as traced across his entire career, is strikingly realistic.  

Meyerhold’s approach to costume reflected an interest in the practical function of the actor’s garments. The clothing worn by students undergoing biomechanical actor training reflected the director’s concern with the practical implications of costuming. During biomechanical training, the fall of the actor’s clothing fulfils an important role in developing the student’s external eye: the student actors are taught to consider the creases falling in their loose-fitting training clothes in order to judge the shapes that their bodies are making. This function of the garment is carried across into Meyerhold’s use of costume in his productions. Meyerhold considered the costume to be vital in constructing the style and quality of the actor’s movement in performance. Actors at the Meyerhold Theatre were taught to play with their costumes, using them as an extension of their own bodies, as can be seen in Meyerhold’s work on the role of Yelena Goncharova in Yury Olesha’s *A List of Benefits* (1931), originally played by Zinaida Raikh. Maria Sukhanova describes Meyerhold’s rehearsal demonstration of the actor’s play with costume, in this instance, a cloak:

Vsevolod Emilevich went up onto the stage. [...] He put on the hat and took the cloak out of my hand. He smoothed it and threw it over his right arm. With an elegant gesture of his left hand, he took the top part of the cloak and drew his left hand aside, but not very far, so that all the lower part of the cloak fell

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propaganda trains. These trains toured to countryside in an attempt to spread the doctrines of communism to the rural Russian peasantry, their most significant feature being the tiny cinemas they housed in order to show propaganda films to rural communities. The trains were decorated with posters and painted slogans, reflecting collage principles (see Hoffman in Hoffman, 1989, p. 11). The propaganda trains campaign also employed theatre troupes who performed Blue Blouse style sketches in front of this collaged background.

8 Even by Meyerhold’s second constructivist-influenced production, *Tareltin’s Death* (1922), his use of the *prozodezhda* has been significantly modified, with each pair of overalls featuring an individual design developed by the production’s designer, Popova’s colleague Varvara Stepanova. *Earth Rampant* (1923), the following production at the Meyerhold Theatre, shows further movement away from wholly functional costuming, the *prozodezhda* having been replaced by soldiers’ uniforms, in line with the World War One and 1917 Revolution setting. By *A Profitable Post* (1923), the *prozodezhda* had been abandoned completely.

9 Meyerhold’s pre-revolutionary training studios also used costume as a training tool (see Leach, 1989, p. 70).
beside his left leg. He put his right hand on the cloak and with his other hand spread it out like a fan in front of his leg. The cloak lay beautiful and free.10

Through Meyerhold’s movements, the cloak is given an expressive force in the actor’s communication with the audience, sometimes directly conveying the character’s attitude, for example, pride, sometimes creating an impression to inform the audience’s assessment of the character. One movement, Sukhanova notes, gave the “impression of a bird with dark wings flying past”.11 In addition, the actor’s play with costume was designed to make a vital contribution to the visual impression of the production, and reinforces Meyerhold’s painterly approach to the stage image. Leach quotes Rudnitsky’s example:

‘Play with costume’ provided a striking silhouette in The Storm in 1916: ‘when Katerina Roshchina ... fell on her knees in ecstatic rapture before the images, she spread the folds of her heavy silk dress artistically and with a graceful motion raised her thin arms, pausing for a moment, as though on the canvas of an exquisite artist’.12

Costumes in Meyerhold’s theatre also contributed to the collage-like disjuncture within the stage image, in particular creating a collision between realism and abstraction in his productions. Unlike the décor Meyerhold favoured, which was overwhelming non-naturalistic, his costumes frequently demonstrated an element of illusionism. In his pre-revolutionary work, for example, Vera Komissarzhevskaya and the chorus of nuns in Sister Beatrice wore what could easily be construed as nuns’ habits [see plate 45] and Yury Yuriev and the cast of Don Juan performed in full period costume [see plate 46]. Aside from the brief use of the prozodezhda, Meyerhold’s post-revolutionary attitude towards costuming appears to have been extremely similar: A Profitable Post and The Forest, The Government Inspector, and The Lady of the Camellias, for example, were performed in as

10 Sukhanova, quoted in Leach (1989), p. 71. The extensive full description of Meyerhold’s demonstration can be found in Russian in Valentei, et. al. (1967), pp. 432 – 440.
12 Leach (1989), pp. 70 – 71, with quotations from Rudnitsky and Alpers.
Plate 45  *Sister Beatrice* (1906), design by Sergei Sudeikin
Plate 46  Don Juan (1910), design by Alexander Golovin
detailed period dress as his pre-revolutionary productions of *Don Juan* or *Masquerade* [see plates 47 and 48 for examples]. Illusionism in costuming was also not restricted to Meyerhold’s performances of classics, as photographs of his productions of Faiko’s *Lake Lyul* or Ehrenberg’s *D.E. (The D.E. Trust - The History of the Fall of Europe, also called Give us Europe)* demonstrate [see plate 49].

The difference between Meyerhold’s use of set and his use of costume provides one of the most striking instances of an estrangement or alienation device in his theatre. Plate 50 (from *A Profitable Post*) highlights the collision of the director’s realistic use of costume and his non-representational construction of the stage environment: the actors, in costumes with a level of detail worthy of the Moscow Art Theatre, have been placed in an environment which is entirely non-naturalistic, even completely sparse. Meyerhold’s departure from a naturalistic theatrical aesthetic is clearly embodied in his rejection of a naturalistic setting in performance. His production is instead located (or possibly dislocated) in a stage environment without specific place or space markers. Meyerhold’s stage space becomes consciously theatrical because it is consciously a theatre, a stage or platform onto which realistically-costumed performers are placed. The *mise-en-scène* resists unification: the actors and the environment do not seem to belong to the same stage image.

III

**Juxtaposition in the Stage Image (2): Dissonance in Décor**

Between 1922 and 1925, the collision of realism and abstraction in the stage image at the Meyerhold Theatre had been restricted to the director’s contrasting use of costume and
Plate 47  

*Profitable Post* (1923), design by Viktor Shestakov
Plate 48  
*The Forest* (1924), design by Viktor Shestakov
Plate 49  Costume design for *D.E.* (1924), design by Ilya Shelpyanov
Plate 50  *A Profitable Post* (1923), design by Viktor Shestakov
scenography. In photographs of *The Government Inspector*, however, this conflict appears to have been extended to encompass the construction of the performance space as a whole. In the 1926 production, Meyerhold created two co-existent areas within the stage space, one realistic and one abstract, again emphasizing the conscious theatricality which underlay his aesthetic.

When comparing images taken from two productions staged by Meyerhold in 1922, *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (premiered 25th April) and *Tarelkin’s Death* (premiered 24th November), the most striking difference is the relative simplicity of the staging for the latter production [see plates 51 and 52]. For *Tarelkin’s Death*, Popova’s large construction, occupying the majority of the stage space, was replaced with a series of relatively small pieces of apparatus designed by her colleague and fellow constructivist Varvara Stepanova. As can be seen in plate 52, Stepanova’s design for *Tarelkin’s Death* simplified the stage space and left the stage floor predominantly clear. This simplification of décor emerged repeatedly at the Meyerhold Theatre post-1922, as can be seen in such productions as *The Forest, D.E., Bubus the Teacher*, and *The Warrant*, and was characterized by the rejection of large-scale fixed set pieces for smaller, mobile pieces of equipment which left significant areas of the stage floor clear.

It should be noted that the simplification of Meyerhold’s staging after *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was more a trend than a rule: the director did stage productions post-1922 which still relied on large-scale, complex sets, as can be seen in Viktor Shestakov’s design for the 1923 production of Faiko’s *Lake Lyul*. Shestakov’s design was heavily constructivist-

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13 In total, Meyerhold created three productions in 1922. Less than a week before *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the newly formed Actor’s Theatre performed Meyerhold’s adaptation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, entitled *Nora, or how a wife from a bourgeois family opted for independence and work* (20th April 1922).
Plate 51  *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), design by Lyubov Popova
Plate 52  
*Tarelkin's Death* (1922), design by Varvara Stepanova.
influenced, comprising a large multi-levelled structure [see plate 53]. However, small mobile set pieces became a predominant feature of a large percentage of Meyerhold’s productions after Tarelkin’s Death. In his 1924 production of Ilya Ehrenburg’s D.E. Meyerhold used a series of mobile screens on an otherwise empty stage [see plate 54]. Later in the same year, Meyerhold returned to Ostrovsky, and produced The Forest in a space that, although defined by the large curved ramp discussed in chapter three, was for the most part clear [see plate 36]. In 1925, his production of The Warrant followed the trend of simplification, returning to a system of screens akin to those used in D.E., now mounted on the revolving stage [see plate 40]. Meyerhold himself claimed that the wheeled platform stages used in The Government Inspector were directly descended from the revolve system employed in The Warrant.

The simplification in design and the exposure of large areas of the stage floor in Meyerhold’s productions post-1922 further contribute to the director’s overriding project of emphasizing the performance event as theatrical and constructed. Meyerhold’s simplification of the stage décor can consequently be seen as fulfilling the same function as his subversion of other widely-used illusionistic devices in his earlier productions: in his 1906 production of Sister Beatrice, for example, Meyerhold had utilized a recognized theatrical device (the backdrop) and subverted it to highlight its falseness and theatricality. As opposed to the staging conventions at the Moscow Art Theatre, where the use of trick perspective relegated the backdrop to the furthest point upstage creating an artificial

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14 Plate 36 can be found after p. 157 above. Meyerhold’s staging of The Forest did require large set pieces to be brought onto the stage into this clear space, most notably the ‘giant strides’ (a Russian fairground attraction), described by Marjorie Hoover as a “revolving maypole-type swing” used by Meyerhold as a metaphorical realization of the young lovers’ relationship: “so the young lovers with ever higher exhilarating leaps declared their love” (Hoover, 1988, p. 139). These set pieces were, however, temporary, reinforcing the director’s rejection of a large-scale uni-set.

15 Plate 40 can be found after p. 159 above.

Plate 53 Viktor Shestakov’s construction for Lake Lyul (1923), on tour in Odessa (1925).
Plate 54  D.E. (1924), design by Ilya Shlepyanov.
vanishing point for the audience's visual attention, Meyerhold relocated the backdrop in the
downtown space. The false perspective of the stage space was instantly foreshortened, and
the backdrop highlighted as a theatrical device. This falseness was further emphasized by
the abstract nature of the painting on the drop, creating a non-representational background
to the stage action.

Meyerhold’s use of the narrow stage space advocated by Fuchs has already been explored
in terms of his rejection of the verisimilitude practised by the Art Theatre. The rules which
governed Fuchs’ thesis of the relief stage are clearly not the rules of stage naturalism. The
deliberate narrowness of the space results in an intentionally unreal stage environment. It is
particularly relevant in this instance to consider how the identity of the stage space is
determined. In Meyerhold’s adaptation of Fuchs’ principles of staging, the environment
was characterized not by the geographical location of a specific play for which it was
designed, but instead by the style of the performance (in this instance, the theatre associated
with the symbolist movement). In Meyerhold’s adaptation of Fuchs’ device, the stage space
had been universalized: on this relief stage one could stage any production, provided it was
stylistically in tune with the staging structure. The key shift from naturalism to
Meyerholdian production methods can be seen as being a shift from the representation of
the fictional location of a play text to the creation of a space which is nothing more or less
than the stage of a theatre. This process constitutes a generalization of the performance
space, and a refusal to equate the stage environment with the theatrical tricks associated
with naturalism and verisimilitude. The empty stage space emerges as an independent
entity which refuses to be classified as the fictional location of the performance.
The rejection of specific locations for generalized spaces was particularly characteristic of Meyerhold’s productions during his post-Revolutionary period. Popova, for example, professed that her design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was intentionally devoid of a geographical location. She claimed that in approaching the design for the production she and Meyerhold had together stripped Crommelynck’s text of unnecessary set and prop elements, and had been left only with the universalized staging elements common to many play texts: doors, platforms, and so forth. It was these elements which she proceeded to combine into a set which emphasized utility over representational (and, in a typically constructivist manner, aesthetic) concerns. This sort of bold, rejectionalist, statement is, of course, characteristic of constructivist manifesto-making in the early twentieth century, and should accordingly be regarded with a little scepticism. Popova’s construction for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is not as entirely anti-representational as she claimed, and resulted in her being briefly ostracized from the constructivist movement. Indeed, the sails at the stage right end of the construction, as well as the three large wheels backing the machine, can easily be read as the water mill in which Crommelynck specifies the action occurs: the complaints of Popova’s constructivist colleagues were not entirely unfounded.

The set remains, however, a clear rejection of the principles of naturalistic set design. The platforms, revolving doors, and struts of the machine are not immediately recognizable as representing a mill, let alone the specific mill belonging to Bruno and Stella, even if traces

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18 Ibid., p. 92.
19 In 1931, for example, Nikolai Tarabukin claimed that Popova’s design “shows a predominance of flat surfaces and Suprematism. Its lightness and elegance are entirely in keeping with Crommelynck’s farce, but as a utilitarian construction it does not stand close scrutiny of all its components. One needs only to mention the door on the second level and the difficulty the actors have in making exits onto the landing behind it.” (Tarabukin, in Braun, 1979, 1998, p. 179). According to Erast Garin (at that time a student at Meyerhold’s State Higher Theatre Workshop, or GVYTM) the set “alluded to the carcass of a water-driven mill. The left side of it stood for the farm […]” (Garin, quoted in Hoover, 1988, p. 126).
of the original textual setting remain. The primary function of the space, as acknowledged by Popova and Meyerhold, was to provide an environment that facilitated the highly physicalized performance style Meyerhold had been developing at GVYTM (the State Higher Theatrical Workshop) and was formalizing into his actor training system, biomechanics. The set plainly fulfilled this function, as Erast Garin (who would later become one of Meyerhold’s most well-known and celebrated actors) observed:

You heard an exultant voice ring out offstage, full of joyful strength, love and happiness; and then up the side ladder to the very top of the construction flew - and ‘flew’ is the word - Illinsky as Bruno. His wife Stella (played by Babanova) ran to meet him and stood, indescribably youthful, lithe and athletic, with her straight legs planted wide apart like a pair of compasses. Without pausing, Bruno hoisted her onto his shoulder, then slid down the highly polished chute and gently lowered his weightless load to the ground. Continuing this childishly innocent love-play, Stella ran from him and he caught her by the bench, where they remained face to face, excited and happy at the thought of being together again and full of the whole joy of living.

Meyerhold’s direction used the physical opportunities offered by Popova’s construction (in this instance the slide) to display the skill of the performers, as well as to express the meaning of the text in a purely physical form. Here, again, Meyerhold’s exploitation of the power of visual image comes to the forefront of his work. In the same way that the rhythmic construction of images, colours and sounds in Meyerhold’s description of act three of The Cherry Orchard had functioned as a visual manifestation of the character’s state of mind, the action of sliding down the chute in the opening sequence of The Magnanimous Cuckold functioned as a physical metaphor for the joy and desire felt by Bruno and Stella.

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20 The State Higher Theatre Workshop (GVYTM) was the second name of Meyerhold’s post-1917 theatre school. The school was previously called the State Higher Directing Workshops (GВYRM), and would later (1923) become the Meyerhold State Experimental Theatre Workshops (GEKTEMAS). After this date, according to Edward Braun, “[the workshops] continued to function as such under various names until 1938. It remained an integral part of Meyerhold’s theatre.” (Braun, 1979, 1998 p. 170 footnote).

The *Magnanimous Cuckold* design fulfilled a further function, akin to that of the relief staging Meyerhold had rejected circa 1906, by emphasizing the performance space as theatrical. The set was intended to support the actors as performers by providing an environment which provided plenty of opportunities to explore their skills base. This stands in direct opposition to the naturalistic theatre in which the décor is intended to provide a realistic environment which facilitates the actor’s creation of a believable character (as can be seen in Stanislavsky’s descriptions of his stagings for Chekhov’s productions).\(^{22}\) In its support of the actor as performer, rather than the actor as character, the set fulfilled a function akin to the equipment of the circus acrobat: however much it is decorated and made to appear attractive to the spectator, it is primarily a tool to aid the physical feats of the performer. The set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was not part of an imagined universe, but instead of a theatrical event, staunchly resisting illusionism. The stage did not become a mill; it remained a stage, upon which the equipment required for a performance was placed. Whether or not this equipment appeared to represent a mill was to a large extent irrelevant, because the process of representation was not disguised from the audience at any point. More important than the residual element of representation in Popova’s design was that through its abstraction it required the audience member to make a conscious reading of the stage space: no natural and transparent relationship was assumed between the appearance of the stage set and the fictional location of the play text. Consequently, the theatrical world and the acknowledgment that ‘this is a performance’ were the only complete and extended truths with which the audience were presented, in the same way that the canvas is the only complete and extended reality within Cubist collage: every other world or image is represented only as a fragment amongst many.

\(^{22}\) See chapter one, pp. 56 – 57 above.
The separation of the theatrical world from the representational world suggested by the play text was further reinforced by Meyerhold’s attitude towards the placement of the construction within the frame of the stage. Popova’s construction seems set apart from the theatre building which surrounded it. In the extant photographs, the set appears to be perched in the stage space, disconnected from the wooden boards under it and the plain drape behind it [see plate 55]. Meyerhold’s original decision not to provide a comfortable frame for the construction in the form of drapes (which would have also hidden the work of the theatre’s backstage staff) was due in part to his intention to tour the production to various (non-theatrical) venues, including village halls, farms, and so forth. The result was that, within the walls of Meyerhold’s theatre, the set remained slightly disconnected from the stage space by which it was surrounded.23

In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the disconnection between the theatre building and the stage set highlights Meyerhold’s fragmentation of the stage image. The stage environment is not entirely unified, and Popova’s set is discontinuous with the space in which it is placed. A similar sense of fragmentation is evident in photographs of *The Government Inspector*. The scenography Meyerhold devised for the production had two aspects. The only feature of the design which remained in place throughout the entire performance was a curved back wall, made of polished dark wood and inset with a series of eleven doors [see plate 56]. Meyerhold’s own description of the space highlights its potential versatility, conceived of as a dark, quiet background to the action:

23 In her analysis of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Marjorie Hoover quotes the reaction of Igor Illinsky (Bruno) to the announcement that the construction would be placed against the bare walls of the theatre rather than being framed by drapes: “I was in despair. ‘That’s impossible,’ I exploded ... I don’t want anyone keeping me as an actor from realizing your direction. Hang Popova’s old petticoats behind the construction. I don’t care, as long as I’m screened in so that no one interferes with my work.” (Illinsky, quoted in Hoover, 1988, pp. 127-8). Hoover observes that Meyerhold did eventually concede, and hung a drape over the back wall “if only to cover the properties and equipment stored there for other productions in the repertory.” (Hoover, 1988, p. 128).
Plate 55  *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), design by Lyubov Popova
Plate 56  Design for *The Government Inspector* by Vladimir Dmitriev. Although Dmitriev was not finally employed as the designer for Meyerhold's production, his design sketch illustrates the curved back wall which was used by Meyerhold.
The stage will be of almost oval form, its space delimited and moved forward close
to the audience. A polished surface must be selected, such as will be associated with
the era of the 1830s to 1840s. Let us take mahogany, that is, polished panels of
mahogany facing the audience. They must be dark so as not to distract the viewer;
they’ll make a quiet background. Eleven doors open out of these polished
surfaces.²⁴

The simplicity, almost blandness, of the playing area provided an unobtrusive and
predominantly non-representational background for the action on stage, Meyerhold's only
reference to representation being that the dark wood evokes a certain era. Against this quiet
background, the majority of the playing space remained empty until the two central doors
opened and trucks, like “trolley cars,” were wheeled to a downstage centre resting place.²⁵
These wheeled trucks constituted the second aspect of the design, and the main playing
space for the production, with the majority of the action taking place on them. According to
Marjorie Hoover, only five of the fifteen episodes of the production were not played on
these moving platform stages.²⁶

In *The Government Inspector*, the use of a large empty space surrounding the main playing
spaces highlighted the constructed nature of the stage environment by presenting the
audience which a large area of stage space which did not contribute to the representation of
the fictional world of the play text. This space can be seen as epitomical of the simplified,
generalized spaces described above, a space which has no identity beyond that of the stage
of a theatre. The small platform stages were placed within this overtly theatrical space.
Measuring just 3.5 metres by 4.25 metres, these trucks were an obvious expression of the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 151.
²⁶ One of these - Khlestakov’s first meeting with the Mayor at the inn - “was played in a unique set. Though
also pre-set and rolled on, it was two stories high with a staircase leading down to Khlestakov’s alcove under
the stairs”, maintaining the principle of a fully-created scene being revealed to the audience (Hoover, 1988,
pp. 151-2).
restricted stage spaces which characterized Meyerhold’s work with the relief stage.\(^{27}\)

Meyerhold emphasized the restriction of the space by creating highly populated tableaux within the small spaces, as can be seen in plate 57. The use of a large crowd gathered into a restricted space fulfilled a metaphorical function, expressing in the stage image the sense of oppression that Meyerhold believed should be associated with Gogol’s Russia. Rudnitsky describes the opening sequence, the Mayor’s announcement to the local officials of the immanent visit of the inspector in an episode entitled ‘Chmykhov’s Letter’:

> More and more officials appeared during the episode. One after another, they pushed their way through to the table and sofa, shoving and “reinforcing” each other. The impression of closeness was continually increased.\(^{28}\)

Spatially, therefore, the densely populated and highly restricted tableaux were directly juxtaposed with the large, empty stage space which surrounded them. A further collision between the two spaces can be seen in the stylistic decisions made regarding the decoration of the platforms. Aside from being highly populated, the miniature wheeled stages were also highly detailed, indicating a level of realism which was in direct conflict with the heightened theatricality of the surrounding stage environment. As Gvozdev describes the settings on the trucks:

> It looks like a staging by the Moscow Art Theater […] A piece of the real life of the 1830s.\(^{29}\)

The trucks were consequently not merely rudimentarily representative of the fictional locations in Gogol’s text in the sense that Popova’s construction for The Magnanimous Cuckold was representative of Bruno’s mill. The realistic construction of scenes on the

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27 Nick Worrall gives approximate measurements for the trucks as three by four metres in his article ‘Meyerhold directs Gogol’s Government Inspector’, in New Theatre Quarterly, 2.7 (1972), 75 - 95 (p. 78).

28 Rudnitsky (1981), p. 395. In addition to the social-metaphorical role of the trucks, they also had a clear comic function in the large number of bodies crowded into such a restricted space.

Plate 57  *The Government Inspector* (1926), episode seven: Behind a Bottle of *Tolstobriucha*, design by Victor Kiselyov
trucks enhanced the juxtaposition between the theatrical space and the fictional spaces which combined to create the scenographic element of the stage image.  

The placement of highly realistic fragments into a larger non-representational context consequently provides a clear link between Meyerhold’s theatre and the collage practices of the Cubist artists. As Kuspit observes, the fragments which Picasso and Braque inserted into their collages were either fragments of reality (newspapers, bottle labels) or trompe l’oeil representations of reality (imitation chair caning). These fragments were combined to create an ostensibly unreal work of art, colliding with the painterly abstractions of Cubism. The collage canvas cannot be equated with a specific geographical location, as Max Ernst highlights in his description of the collage as “the meeting of two distant realities on a plane foreign to them both.” The surface of the canvas does not become synonymous with any of the fragments that inhabit it, but remains independent of them all, existing as a space which is purely artistic, the tool with which the artist works.

To posit that the stage space exists independently of the productions which take place on it is clearly a redundant observation. The dissonance between the actual location of the performance space and the fictional location associated with the production played out in it is a fundamental concern of non-naturalistic theatre. What is unique in Meyerhold’s work is not that he addressed this issue, but the way in which he constructed the collision

30 In this sense, Meyerhold’s use of the trucks certainly had meta-theatrical implications. According to Worrall, Meyerhold chose the trucks because of their closeness to the medieval trestle stage (see Worrall, 1972, p. 78). Alternatively, it is possible to read the platform stages as reminiscent of the ancient Greek ekkuklemata (see chapter five, pp. 233 – 235 below).
31 See chapter three, pp. 147 – 148 above.
33 The collision of the reality of the theatrical space with the constructed fictional location of the play text can be seen in much of the theatre of the avant-garde, for example in the meta-theatricality of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. This concern is not unique to avant-garde practice, however, and emerges, for example, in English medieval drama, which conflates the location of the biblical action with local concerns to achieve its religious-didactic purpose.
between actual and fictional space in the performance. Through the introduction of a large
portion of stage space which is not associated with any fictional location, the spectators
were continually confronted by a space which was theatrical: Meyerhold's construction of
the stage space attempted to bring the theatricality of the performance event to the forefront
of the spectator's experience.

Like the imitation chair caning in Picasso's collage, the overtly constructed nature of
Meyerhold’s production is emphasized through the collision of art, reality and
representation. In Picasso's work, the piece of printed oil cloth has a trompe l'oeil effect; it
appears at first glance to be a real piece of chair caning. It consequently draws the viewer's
attention to the constructed nature of the canvas on which it is placed (the canvas is an
artistic construction, the chair caning, apparently, is not). In the same way, Meyerhold's
realistically constructed platform stages instigate a similar process of recognition,
highlighting the theatricality of the surrounding stage space through their realism.
However, like the oil cloth, these stages are on closer inspection as constructed as the
environment which surrounds them. Consequently, the collage of the realistic and the
abstract calls into the question the construction of the canvas or the stage as a whole: the
theatrical space is constructed, but the fictional spaces are deceptive. The collision of
realism and abstraction is a collage process, allowing the audience member to disassociate
the actual and fictional spaces in which the performance takes place. This disassociation is
initiated through the co-existence of both spaces on stage simultaneously, in the same way
that the collage simultaneously presents the viewer with every image fragment comprising

34 If the chair caning is read as oil cloth, this process still takes place: the oil cloth is real, the canvas which
surrounds it is constructed.
the canvas. Meyerhold appears to approach the question of actual and fictional space in performance through a collage-like process.

Meyerhold's collaged approach to actual and fictional space through the collision of abstract and realistic elements in design highlights a further connection between his theatre and avant-garde art. Like the work of the Cubist artists, Meyerhold's theatre did not move into pure abstraction. The director preferred to retain an element of representation in his performances, creating a theatrical experience which used characterization and narrative to engage the audience. This remnant of representation forms the same connection to the real world as did the remnants of representation that can be identified in Cubist art, for example, in the artists' use of the paraphernalia of the still life.35 Meyerhold's theatre functioned not in the abandonment of verisimilitude, but in its collision with abstraction. This is particularly evident in his production of The Government Inspector. Rather than abandoning the fictional location of the play text which, in the naturalistic theatre, dominates the stage, Meyerhold instead makes evident to the audience the dual identity of the stage space.

In addition, the juxtaposition of realism and abstraction re-emphasizes the theatricality of the stage image: in the instance of the realistically costumed actor set against the abstract setting, both space and actor, in their mutual juxtaposition, become theatrical constructs. The audience is not merely expected to look and to identify with the stage image, but to understand that the image is meta-theatrical and to engage consciously with the process of watching theatre. This collage technique is arguably a more effective way of emphasizing

35 Cubist works, particularly those of Picasso and Braque, feature objects frequently associated with the tradition of still life painting, for example bottles, glasses, fruit, and guitars. In addition, both artists used the techniques of analytical Cubism to paint portraits.
the theatricality of the stage environment than complete abstraction in both set and costume, as each element of the stage image serves to distance the other in a cycle of estrangement. Rather than dissolving one element (stage space, set, and performers) into another, Meyerhold’s stage image retains the individuality of each aspect, or collaged fragment, of the production. The resulting space is clearly theatrical (the edges of the theatre building are never lost, never blended into the stage set) but is equally clearly connected to the real world through its references to reality (in the naturalistic costumes of the actors, for example).

In sum, the resulting stage image reflects the collage device on multiple levels. Firstly, the specific geographical location of the play text (or of the naturalistic theatre, if considering Meyerhold’s conscious rebellion against realism) is dissolved, and replaced with a non-specific stage space, a space akin to the canvas on which the artist creates the collage. In addition, the stage image is created from three separate elements which are never fully resolved: the space retains a sense of dislocation and functions primarily as an image through the juxtaposition of these separate elements. Finally, the elements of the image represent a philosophical collage, uniting within the stage space theatricality, reality, and cultural life. In many instances, Meyerhold’s stage images were intimately linked to the artistic and cultural interests of the era, for example, in the constructivist influenced sets of his early post-revolutionary period. The unification of these elements allows the production to function as art (within the context of other artistic enterprises), to explore the uniqueness of theatre as an art form (to engage with the theatricality of performance) and consequently to exist as a fantasy world filled with possibilities and capable of igniting the audience’s imagination. Simultaneously, through the link with reality seen in the costuming, the director allows the audience an entry point into his theatrical world. Meyerhold’s stage
universe functions best in its ability to sit between fantasy and reality: to open up possibilities, but not to deem them unobtainable, arguably the key to successful political theatre.

IV

Returning to Painterly Perceptions: The Image in Performance

Spatially, Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector* functioned through the division of the stage into two juxtaposed fragments, one realistic, and the other abstract. This spatial juxtaposition was fundamental to the director’s construction of the production’s *mise-en-scène*, the canvas on which individual momentary stage images were created. Although, within a theatrical production, the stage image frequently exists only in continuum, Meyerhold’s rhythmic suspension of this flow of images through the insertion of static tableaux highlighted his concern for the individual or momentary stage image in performance. The alternation between static and moving images in Meyerhold’s theatre is significant in that it re-emphasized the connections between Meyerhold’s construction of the stage space and the painter’s approach to the canvas. Through the insertion of tableaux, Meyerhold’s work implied that the spectator engages differently with the static and the moving image in performance, and that this difference in perception could be exploited in order to structure the audience response to a particular sequence or episode. In addition, the alternation of static and moving images disrupted the temporal unity of the performance,

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36 The belief that the image exists within a flow of images, and that the identity of each momentary image is defined by the image which precedes it and the image which follows it, is fundamental to the theory of montage proposed by Kuleshov and Eisenstein. It should be noted that although montage theory is best known as a cinematic device, Eisenstein began his research into collision and montage principles in theatre. The inspiration for the device was arguably sparked by his period as assistant director for Meyerhold on the production of *Tarelkin’s Death* in 1922. The circus theme of the production re-emerged in Eisenstein’s first independent production, Ostrovsky’s *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man* (abbreviated to *The Wise Man*) at the First Workers’ Theatre, Proletkult in 1923. In his article about this production (‘Montage of Attractions in *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man*’), Eisenstein discusses his development of the montage of attractions theory in relation to theatre. This article is reproduced in translation (by Daniel Gerould) in *The Drama Review*, 18.1 (1974), 77 – 84.
laying the groundwork for an investigation into anti-positivist approaches to temporality in Meyerhold's work.

As was noted in chapter one, Meyerhold's approach to theatrical performance placed a definite emphasis on the role of the static tableau. This device is most clearly evident in the director's work on productions such as *Sister Beatrice*, in which the temporal through-line of the performance was deconstructed through the use of *tableaux vivants* as a primary structural device. However, the use of static tableaux in Meyerhold's theatre was not restricted to his symbolist period, and in *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold demonstrated that tableaux were still fundamental to his theatrical aesthetic. Through the continual use of these static images in his theatre, it is possible to trace Meyerhold's ongoing engagement with the fluctuation between the individual image and the image in continuum to create meaning.

Meyerhold's use of *tableaux vivants* as the primary structuring device for performance (to the extent that they were employed in *Sister Beatrice*) was short lived, and is commonly associated with the brief period of his oeuvre which reflected the direct influence of Fuchs' relief stage. However, in the same way that relief staging can be seen as the structural basis for Meyerhold's later work (in the layered stage aesthetic seen in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, for example), the use of static tableaux and the rhythmic alternation of movement and stillness continued to pervade the director's aesthetic. In *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold maintained his careful construction of the stage image, fragmenting the action with periods of stillness inserted across the performance. The director took paramount care over the construction of the image as it exists both within and outside of the temporal continuum of the performance, and the production was of a compellingly visual nature,
reflecting Meyerhold’s concern for the momentary impressions created by the *mise-en-scène*.

The alternation of movement and stillness and the use of varying speeds in performance formed part of the careful, musical-rhythmic construction of the production which Meyerhold considered vital in his creation of the performance as a temporal whole. This rhythmic structure cannot be conveyed by a photograph. However, the isolation of the individual image provides the scholar with an opportunity to appreciate the care taken to construct the stage image as image, as Worrall’s in-depth analysis of a photograph of episode three of *The Government Inspector* (‘After Penza’) demonstrates [see plate 58]. Worrall’s work is worth quoting at length to highlight the degree of complexity identifiable in Meyerhold’s construction of the stage image. Firstly, Worrall analyses the shapes formed by Khlestakov’s alter ego, the silent officer, also making reference to a particularly Cubist device in the continuation of lines between the figures and the environment surrounding them:

> The cards, laid in an arc towards the outer edge of the table, became a continuation of the curve of the shoulder [of the officer] and the curve of the table. This arc was then repeated in the splayed pattern of cards held in the officer’s other hand, poised over his left leg, which now curved in at the knee and out at the foot, against the natural lines of the leg and the natural muscular direction. The image became circular and self-reinforcing, involving both the environment and the figure in a visual metaphor both powerful and suggestive of further connections beyond these.37

Worrall then transfers his attention to the second half of the image, which features Khlestakov himself:

> In juxtaposition to this pattern was the rectilinear one of Khlestakov and the area he occupied. His figure seemed composed of seemingly disconnected straight

37 Worrall (1972), p. 82.
Plate 58  *The Government Inspector* (1926), design by Victor Kiselyov, episode three ‘After Penza’.
lines and acute angles. He sat with his back against the raised part of the stove. The square recesses in the outer wall of the stove were repeated in the square pattern of his spectacle frames and in the square shape of his hat […]\textsuperscript{38}

Worrall continues to address the checked pattern on the rug over Khlestakov’s shoulder, and the use of the line of the cane to bisect the actor’s image. The careful construction of the shapes formed by the actors’ bodies, justifying the aim of complete physical control central to Meyerhold’s biomechanical actor training, and the spatial juxtaposition of the two halves of the stage demonstrate the importance of the momentary image in Meyerhold’s theatre in setting up an atmosphere on stage which reflects the director’s interpretation of the characters. The image contrasts the rigidity of Khlestakov through the rectilinear construction of the stage left half of the mise-en-scène against the fluidity of his alter-ego, adding weight to the suggestion that Meyerhold conceived of the officer as a fragment of Khlestakov’s own personality.\textsuperscript{39} Worrall notes that it “was as if [the characters] represented two separate worlds in the Gogol universe, composed of the curved and the rectilinear.”\textsuperscript{40}

The production of The Government Inspector went further in its reinforcement of the importance of the image in Meyerhold’s isolation of images through the use of static tableaux to precede the commencement of each episode, a device also described in Worrall’s reconstruction:

[T]here would be a tableau lasting a number of seconds then, almost magically, the figures would slowly come to life.\textsuperscript{41}

These momentary pauses, aside from being used as a device to structure the production rhythmically, also functioned as Meyerholdian ‘pauses for aim’, a staged equivalent of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[38] Ibid., p. 82.
\item[39] See, for example, Braun (1979, 1998), p. 229.
\item[40] Worrall (1972), p. 82.
\item[41] Ibid., p. 78.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
biomechanical *otkas* (refusal) through which the actor emphasizes a movement forwards by first withdrawing backwards. 42 Meyerhold's static tableaux work in counterpoint to the periods of physical action in his productions: the isolated stage image is defined against the stage image in temporal continuum, and stillness is defined against action. 43

The use of both stillness and movement to define and emphasize one another through opposition constitutes an engagement with the shared principles of collage and the grotesque, both of which posit that meaning is obtained through collision and juxtaposition. The oppositional relationship of stillness and movement also has interesting implications for the audience's engagement with the production. The juxtaposition of the still and moving images does more than simply forefront the image; instead, it represents a development of the notion of the stage as canvas which was explored in relation to Meyerhold's earlier productions. The juxtaposition of still against moving images implies an understanding on the part of the director that the spectator engages differently with the image in continuum on stage and the isolated image in the plastic arts. This difference in perception was a popular issue amongst the early twentieth century avant-garde. The

42 In certain contexts, 'withdrawal' is an alternative translation for the Russian *otkas*. The clearest example of the notion of refusal or withdrawal still widely experienced in today's culture is seen in cartoons, where a physical gesture is often emphasized through the use of a movement in the opposite direction. Leonid Varpakhovsky describes the use of the refusal (here called the 'reject') in Meyerhold's construction of episode six (The Procession) of *The Government Inspector*: "The famous scene in *The Inspector General*, in which Khlestakov and the city officials make their drunken way to the house of the mayor after lavish libations, was staged entirely with movement along the balustrade as its basis. This movement went back and forth in two directions: now towards the house, now away from it. It was his masterly skill at using the "reject" technique that enabled Meyerhold to stage this classic parade with an unforgettable expressiveness." (Varpakovsky, in Schmidt, 1981, p. 179).

43 Meyerhold's careful construction of static tableaux, and the use of such tableaux to introduce each episode of the production, indicates a further link between spatial and temporal constructions in his work. The atmosphere generated by the spatial construction of the tableau indicated to the audience the form that the episode would take, as well as introducing the setting and the characters. The assumptions of the audience regarding Gogol's famous text, and the implications of the tableau are heightened in the static moment so that the episode becomes more a replaying than a revelation. This process recalls the manipulation of well-known mythologies in the plays of Euripides for example, as well as emphasizing the impossibility of fully separating the spatial and temporal construction of a performance. For clarity, however, temporal concerns are discussed in more detail in chapter five below.
American writer Gertrude Stein, a close associate of Picasso, sought to write a play which would engage with the audience using the unique perceptual tenets of canvas art. Of painting, Stein claims:

The business of Art as I tried to explain in Composition and Explanation is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present.44

Stein goes on to apply this principle of the perpetual present of the artwork to the construction of the play text. In her description of her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Stein notes that:

All these things [the events in the lives of the saints] might have been a story but as a landscape they were just there and a play is just there.5

Stein distinguishes the narrative function of theatre from its potential to engage the audience with a single staged moment akin to a landscape painting.

The Cubist and futurist artists were aware of the simultaneity of perception associated with the artwork, as can be seen in the simultaneous representations of an object from multiple angles which was a frequent feature of their works, for example in Malevich’s *The Knife Grinder* [plate 24].46 In addition, the artists engaged with the potential of the canvas to represent both stillness and movement. Futurist art, in particular, functions through the notion of the artwork as both static and dynamic. Poggi describes the collage work of Severini, for example, as “depicting his subjects in all their dynamic simultaneity, without regard for unity of time and space.”47 The futurist obsession with speed and mechanization, whose representation *par excellence* was considered to be the motor car, is evident in their attempts to construct a sense of dynamism in their artworks. The aim of the futurists was

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46 Plate 24 can be found after p. 117 above.
the creation of a canvas, or a sculpture, in which the artist fully expressed the notions of
dynamism and speed associated with the modern world. Futurist images, therefore,
represent the collision of the movement of the subject with the inherent stillness of the
medium itself. This is most clearly evident when the construction of Cubist and futurist
collages are compared. Cubist representations, which favoured the analytical
deconstruction of the object above its dynamic potential, often take as their subject static
objects such as guitars, wine bottles, and so forth, unlike the futurist interest in objects in
motion, including cars and horses with riders. Dynamism is also evident in the structure of
the futurist canvases; the Cubist works favoured a grid formation, whereas the futurists
preferred the more dynamic spiral form [compare plate 59 to plate 22].48

Meyerhold’s theatrical tableaux vivants also functioned through this collision of the static
and the dynamic in order to disrupt linear temporal progression in the performance, an
element of his aesthetic identified above in his 1925 description of a bridge as a “leap
frozen in metal.”49 The key difference between the use of tableaux in Sister Beatrice, where
they formed the main structural facet of the production, and in The Government Inspector,
where they existed in a juxtapositional relationship with periods of rapid movement and
physical clowning, is that the Sister Beatrice tableaux were condensed representations of
movement, whilst the tableaux of The Government Inspector functioned as suspensions of
movement. In the same way that the futurist artwork engages with movement and
dynamism, the tableaux of The Government Inspector functioned as suspended moments in
the production’s perpetual motion.

48 Plate 22 can be found after p. 113 above. An analysis of Cubist and futurist collage practice which
compares the Cubist use of a lattice or grid structure with the futurist dynamism emanating from a centre
point can be found in chapter six, ‘Destroying the Cult of the Museum: The Futurist Collage Aesthetic’, in
49 See footnote 87, chapter one, p. 80 above.
Plate 59  
*Glass of Beer and Playing Cards* Juan Gris, 1913
Meyerhold's selection of specific moments of the production to be frozen into tableaux functioned as a magnifying glass for the audience. Through the suspension of action the director forced the audience to engage with the staged moment as they would with a painting, highlighting the moment as significant in the audience's understanding of the performance as a whole. In Meyerhold's theatre, significant moments were made still, silent and predominantly visual. These visual interludes were used to introduce an episode, as in the emergence of tableaux on the trucks in The Government Inspector, or to emphasize a moment as key to the production, as in the Dumb Scene which concluded the performance. The implication is that the audience will read these visual moments as significant, and that they will remember them. Meyerhold is consequently engaging with the same sort of process of meaning making in The Government Inspector as had determined his work on Hedda Gabler in 1906, claiming that the visual impact of the production, rather than the words exchanged by the actors, would remain with the audience after the performance had ended.50

V

Episodes 14 and 15: 'A Fine Old Celebration' and 'Unprecedented Confusion'

The final two episodes of The Government Inspector demonstrate the first facet of collage practice (the juxtaposition of fragments) in operation in Meyerhold's theatre. These two episodes (fourteen and fifteen) were a reworking of the second part of the final act of Gogol's text, act five, from the celebrations which precede the arrival of the postmaster

50 See chapter one, p. 65 above.
with the letter which unmasks Khlestakov to the final tableaux. The transition from episode fourteen - ‘A Fine Old Celebration’ - to episode fifteen - ‘Unprecedented Confusion’ - took place just before the Mayor’s final monologue. 51

The spatial construction of the two episodes epitomized the fragmentation of the stage space and the collision between fictional and actual space described above. Episode fourteen took place on one of the platform stages, decorated with “an ornately wrought metal trellis, painted gold which ran straight along the back of the platform with two wings at either end set off at a slight inwards angle.” 52 Onto this platform, almost obscuring the twelve foot high trellis, Meyerhold crowded thirty actors positioned in a pyramid formation [see plate 60]. This concentration of activity stood in stark contrast to the empty stage space which surrounded the platform. At the pinnacle of the action, after the letter had been read out and the gathering descended into chaos - “the letter caught fire and was tossed, burning, from hand to hand, accompanied by shrieks and shouts [...] Anna Andreevna gave a melodramatic shriek [...] She fainted and was carried off the stage” - the truck was wheeled offstage and the empty stage became the playing space for the final episode of the production. 53

The spatial structure of the two episodes were consequently diametrically opposed to one another, the first crowded onto the small truck, the second encompassing the entire playing space. The use of two different spatial structures so close together emphasized the

51 The action of the two episodes is as follows: Khlestakov, having proposed to the Mayor’s daughter, leaves the town. After his departure, a letter is intercepted by the postmaster in which Khlestakov boasts of his conmanship to a friend. The postmaster brings the letter to the celebration of the engagement at the Mayor’s house, where it is read aloud. After the realization that they have been tricked, the officials’ horror is magnified by the arrival of a second letter, announcing the imminent arrival of the real inspector.

52 Worrall (1972), p. 93. Worrall notes that Meyerhold conceived of this design metaphorically, as standing for “the fantastic convulsions of Khlestakov’s lies” (ibid., p. 93).

53 Worrall (1972), p. 94.
The final episode juxtaposed the image of the production, stilledness and de-theatre in which the deconstruction refused to resolve. The words uttered strike them all like a thunderbolt, a sound expressive of astonishment breaks, with one accord, from the mouths of the ladies; the whole group makes a sudden shift of positions, and then stops petrified.14

director's construction of two co-existent spaces throughout the performance. The removal of the truck also constituted the removal of the fictional location from the stage space. As the production became increasingly nightmarish, the characters were abandoned to a space without locational markers, the empty theatre stage. The sudden dislocation of the characters from the cramped truck to the empty stage seemed also to parallel the despair and isolation of the Mayor, whose final monologue Meyerhold portrayed as a descent into madness, even providing police officers and a doctor with a straitjacket to restrain him.

The final episode of the production contained the most striking use of the static image juxtaposed with the moving image to create meaning. In the final moments of the production, referred to as the Dumb or Mute Scene, Meyerhold explored the interaction of stillness and movement and the notion of the static as the suspension of the dynamic. Through the suspension of action into stillness, the director also created a coup-de-théâtre in which the objective external viewpoint of the audience member was fundamentally deconstructed, contributing to a theatrical moment in which the audience were both implicated in the action on stage, and caught in a net of uncertainties that the director refused to resolve.

In the final moments of Gogol's text, in response to the news that the town officials have been tricked, and that the real inspector from St. Petersburg has arrived, the playwright calls for a tableau:

The words uttered strike them all like a thunderbolt. A sound expressive of astonishment breaks, with one accord, from the mouths of the ladies; the whole group makes a sudden shift of positions, and then stops petrified.54

Gogol goes on to describe, in detail, the positions that should be taken up by the actors, concluding that:

This position is held by the petrified group for almost a minute and a half. The curtain is lowered.\(^{55}\)

In Meyerhold’s production, however, the announcement of the real inspector’s arrival was accompanied by the sounding of a gong, and the lowering of a curtain to obscure the stage. On the curtain were printed the words:

A Government Inspector, appointed by Imperial Degree, has arrived from St. Petersburg. He is waiting at the inn and requires your presence there immediately.\(^{56}\)

The curtain was then raised, revealing not the actors frozen in positions of horror, but instead a crowd of waxwork dummies. The replacement of the actors with dummies ensured that the production ended in total stillness, demonstrating that Meyerhold had not abandoned the principle of using the static tableau to embed a visual image onto the memories of the spectators. The effect of the Dumb Scene, as described by Harold Clurman in the context of his impressions of the whole production, was strikingly similar to the effect Meyerhold sought in his production of *Hedda Gabler*:\(^{57}\)

A strange feeling comes from this production: it is very funny and it is very tomb-like. It has a definite macabre quality - cold, beautiful, grimacing, distorted and graceful [...] It makes one feel as if one entered a cryptlike room where the lights were low: and suddenly one came upon a beautifully dressed, extravagantly expressive people who on closer examination are found to be inert and dead… The production ends with the actors running offstage laughing while we see their prototypes who are puppets. Meyerhold’s *Revisor [The Government Inspector]* is a masterpiece, but somehow not a warming one: it leaves one slightly uncomfortable.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 316.

\(^{56}\) Worrall (1972), p. 94.

\(^{57}\) See chapter one, p. 65 above.

This final moment of the play is clearly significant in terms of understanding the meaning of the production. Meyerhold therefore takes the implication of Gogol’s text, that the town officials are metaphorically petrified by the immanent arrival of the inspector, and realizes a representation of the metaphor on stage: the characters are not turned to stone by their fear, but instead become wax effigies.

Through the use of dummies rather than actors for this image, Meyerhold created a stage moment which seemed nearer to the conventions of sculpture than those of theatrical performance. The advantage of the dummies in the construction of the image was that they provided absolute stillness and precision, allowing the audience time to observe the complex arrangement of figures.\(^{59}\) In its complexity and detail, Meyerhold’s Dumb Scene is also reminiscent of nineteenth century Russian genre painting. Plate 61 shows Vasily Perov’s 1865-75 painting *A Monastic Refectory*. In terms of construction and style, there are similarities between Perov’s work and Meyerhold’s construction of the Dumb Scene [plate 43].\(^{60}\) In both images, the space is crowded with characters, each of which has an individual personality reflected in their stance and expression. In the painting and the arrangement of the dummies, repetition of lines and shapes give the image a spatial unity, for example in the robes of the monks or the shapes of the women’s dresses.

The painting is also stylistically similar to Meyerhold’s production, both combining realism with caricature and social satire. The satirical content of Perov’s painting is as evident as that in Meyerhold’s production: in the artwork, Perov portrays the abuse of power through

\(^{59}\) Worrall notes that despite the length of the production, the audience were captivated by Meyerhold’s coup-de-théâtre: “It was already five minutes after midnight but the audience, instead of hurrying away, sat motionlessly in the lighted auditorium, as they contemplated the spectacle of grotesque effigies. They watched for at least the full minute and a half, which Gogol asks they should, and even longer. In achieving this alone, Meyerhold had stage-managed a minor miracle” (Worrall, 1972, p. 94).

\(^{60}\) Plate 43 can be found after p. 161 above.
Plate 61  
*A Monastic Refectory* Vasily Perov, 1865 – 75
the drunken monks who feast whilst a peasant begs for food in front of them. In
Meyerhold’s production, there was an implication that the non-specific provincial town of
Gogol’s text had been replaced with the Tsarist capital St. Petersburg, portraying a similar
abuse of power by an authority. The role of art in shaping social conscience underlies both
Meyerhold’s theatrical image and the work of the Russian genre painters, typified by
Perov. As the final image of his production of The Government Inspector, Meyerhold’s
Dumb Scene held a special significance in the performance. The last impression of The
Government Inspector that Meyerhold attempted to imprint on his audience’s memory was
one which recalled the visual arts: the frozen dummies bringing to mind the conventions of
sculpture, and their arrangement evoking the style and socio-political commitment of the
Russian genre painters.

Beyond this general painterly approach to the construction of the stage image, Meyerhold’s
interpretation of the Dumb Scene also addressed specifically Cubist concerns. In order to
identify what makes the process of viewing the Cubist artwork unique, it is necessary to
consider the way in which these artworks construct a notion of looking (of the process of
observation) within the frame of the canvas. Cubism functions as an exploration of how the
artist engages visually with the world. Consequently, Cubist art is not an art of objective
representation, but of representing representation itself and, by virtue of its self-reflexive
impulse, Cubism becomes not just art about looking at the world, but also art about looking
at art. Thomas Vargish and Delo E. Mook explore the notion of looking as it is represented
by the Cubists:

Commentary on the Russian genre painters, the rise of social conscience in Russia art, and in particular the
work of Perov, can be found in Tamara Talbot Rice, A Concise History of Russian Art (London: Thames and
Cubist paintings say, "This is what I observe and have observed about this visual reality. I offer it to you as an observation." Cubist paintings are improvisations on the representation of visual reality, on what we take to be space and the relations of objects to space. The mediation, the observation and the representation of the visual reality, has become the primary subject of the painting.\textsuperscript{62}

In Cubism, the process of translating the world as observed by the artist into the artwork is paramount. The object of representation is constructed as being less interesting for the viewer than the style of representation itself. According to Vargish and Mook, it is this philosophical tenet of Cubist art which distinguishes it from the classicist and realist movements:

We can point out, for example, that in the vast tradition of religious painting, no act of representation, however masterly, not even Raphael’s, could have the status, the prestige, the claim to our interest, of the Madonna herself. [...] But Picasso’s act of mediation might supersede his subject, might interest us more than a wine bottle, a scrap of newspaper, or Ambroise Vollard.\textsuperscript{63}

In sum, Vargish and Mook’s argument is threefold: Firstly, the object is no longer the prime-face essential aspect of the artwork; secondly, it is the representation of the object that replaces it as the focal point of the artwork; and finally, this representation is a reflection of the way in which the artist engages visually with the world. It is this visual engagement which reshapes the formal elements of the work of art. This process of re-evaluation of the function and form of the artwork is the unique level on which Cubism (and its cognates, Italian futurism, Russian Cubo-Futurism, and collage) engage directly with the concept of observation.

\textsuperscript{62} Vargish and Mook (1999), p. 83, Vargish and Mook’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 83.
In his construction of the Dumb Scene, Meyerhold’s work suggest that his theatre explores an aesthetic that places the process of looking, and what that implies about the world-view of the audience, above realistic representation on stage. On one level, Meyerhold’s rejection of the naturalistic illusionism represented by Stanislavsky’s work at the Moscow Art Theatre is an obvious formal parallel to the rejection of realist art by the Cubists. The motivation behind this rejection, however, is more revealing: the naturalistic theatre, for Meyerhold, excludes all elements of allusion or suggestion. The performance is complete in itself; the audience can bring nothing more to the production, there is nothing “left unsaid”, and consequently the naturalistic theatre excludes any active notion of observation.64 The observer in the naturalistic theatre must remain passive, seated behind the fourth wall. In contrast, Meyerhold’s aesthetic of observation was highlighted in The Government Inspector, a text the Moscow Art Theatre had tackled on more than one occasion, including the 1921 production starring Mikhail Chekhov. The climax of Meyerhold’s production appears to be constructed to question the notion of one-way, audience to stage, observation in theatre. Meyerhold’s composition of the sequence functions as a three-part comment on the nature of looking.

In the first section, Meyerhold establishes a parallel between the stage and the auditorium. In the Mayor’s final speech at the end of act five, a tirade against himself, Khlestakov, and the town officials, Meyerhold chose one line to be delivered directly to the audience: “What are you laughing at?” the Mayor asks the spectators in the full flow of his fury, “You’re laughing at yourselves!”65 The audience are consequently informed of a similarity between the situation on stage and their own lives. By laughing at the Mayor, they laugh at

themselves. They are also informed that rather than simply watching the action hidden behind a metaphorical fourth wall, they too are being watched. On stage, the Mayor has seen and noted their enjoyment of his fruitless rage.

This parallel is then emphasized by the second part of Meyerhold’s three-part structure in the final moments of the sequence, the Dumb Scene. Through the repeated use of frozen tableaux throughout the production, Meyerhold had prepared his audience for the shock of this moment: the actors are suddenly substituted by the absolutely still dummies, with all the metaphorical associations of being petrified. The shock of the audience at this Meyerholdian coup-de-théâtre would have mirrored the shocked expressions engraved on the dummies’ faces. Just as the Mayor predicted, the audience were now looking, and laughing, at themselves.

Finally, then, the frozen dummies stared out at the audience, a concrete reminder that the actors at the Meyerhold Theatre could, and would, turn and look out at those who should be watching them. The whole sequence embodies the process of being observed, it is a reversal of spectatorship: the audience, looking to the stage, are only met by stares straight back. They are looking at looking, caught in a cycle of observation. Through the fixed gaze of the dummies, ironically, an object, the audience find themselves objectified, engaged in a process of multiple observations.

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66 The idea that the audience were being watched from the stage was further reinforced by the houselights, which came up at the beginning of the Mayor’s monologue, and stayed up until the end of the performance. In the final moments of the play, the Jewish band which had been playing since episode fourteen exited through the auditorium (see Worrall, 1972, p. 94). Meyerhold’s choice of the Jewish Orchestra is interesting in itself, and was possibly a reference to the Jewish band which Meyerhold saw as vital to constructing a nightmarish atmosphere in the third act of The Cherry Orchard (see Meyerhold in Braun, 1969, 1998, p. 28).
Through constructing a stage moment which engages the audience in a cycle of observation, Meyerhold's theatre parallels the emphasis on observation embodied in the Cubist artwork. In viewing the Cubist canvas, the spectator is aware of both the process of the construction of the artwork by the artist and their own process of interpretation in observation. According to Polkinhorn, this awareness of the processes of creation and reception of the artwork is also fundamental to the functioning of the collage aesthetic:

For collage to be perceived as such, the phases in the composition process must be discernible: that is, one must know that collaging has occurred in the course of art-making. The artist must construct signs whereby the viewer is told that collaging has occurred.  

Meyerhold's construction of a stage image in which the audience member cannot resolve all the elements into a seamless whole indicates that the director sought to make the process of fragmentation evident to the audience in the same way that Polkinhorn suggests the collage aesthetic makes the construction of the canvas evident to the viewer. This is further emphasized by his construction of the final moments of The Government Inspector, in which the process of observation inherent in theatre is made manifest in the waxwork dummies. Like the collaged artwork, Meyerhold's theatre engaged the audience member consciously with the process of creating and viewing theatre, reinforcing the director's overriding project to divorce theatrical representation from naturalistic verisimilitude.

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Chapter Five

Temporal Forms and Collage in The Government Inspector

I

Collage in the Alternation of Images

In the previous chapter, analysis of the role of static tableaux in The Government Inspector highlighted the significance of the isolated stage image in Meyerhold’s construction of the performance. In addition, the construction of these images was seen to embody an aspect of collage practice through the juxtaposition of the different visual elements of the production, resulting in a mise-en-scène defined by a sense of dissonance. Through the combination of a painterly approach towards the role of the isolated stage image, and the application of collage-related processes in its construction, Meyerhold’s theatre was seen to unsettle the audience, to engage the spectator in an active process of meaning making in performance, and to emphasize observation as part of the theatrical experience, deconstructing any sense of objectivity in the spectator’s role.

The investigation of the isolated stage image in Meyerhold’s theatre was in part prompted by the director’s reference to the work of Andrei Bely. Bely’s assertion that art functions through both the individual image and the image in continuum (“art consists either in images or in the alternation of images”) is reflected in Meyerhold’s construction of the performance.¹ The first category of artistic experience outlined by Bely was investigated in chapter four in the spatial construction of the isolated image. Bely classifies the second artistic process as temporal, the alternation or combination of images across the work of art. Through the isolation of individual images in Meyerhold’s theatre, evidence of a

¹ See footnote 1, chapter four, p. 171 above.
fundamental formal facet of collage practice was explored: the construction of the *mise-en-scène* through the juxtaposition of fragments. Analysis of Meyerhold's combination of isolated images into the temporal continuum which constructs the performance as a whole reveals the director's engagement with the two remaining facets of collage practice identified in chapter three: the combination of fragments to create non-narrative meanings, and the anti-positivist deconstruction of absolutes.

In his production of *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold's use of small platform stages not only facilitated juxtaposition within the stage image, but also controlled the temporal flow of images across the production. The trucks allowed the director to present the production's episodes as a series of discrete moments, constructing the play's different fictional locations as independent entities. The platform stages functioned as a collage device, facilitating the collision of different spaces and times. The multiplication of spaces through the agency of the platforms deconstructed the notion of an extended fictional location for the performance, turning the stage into a collaged canvas on which different fragments of space and time met. In addition, by returning to the origins of the director's choice of staging device in Athenian drama (the *ekkuklema*) the implications of Meyerhold's platform stages on the temporal unity of the production also become apparent.

Meyerhold's use of platform stages undercut the temporal linearity of Gogol's text. This fragmentation of linear temporal progression resonated throughout Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector*, the director repeatedly multiplying the temporal processes that were presented on stage to the audience. Rather than using the stage to recreate the linear temporal progression as suggested by Gogol in the play text, Meyerhold restructured the temporality of the production, separating the text into episodes, diverging into fantasy.
time sequences, and expanding the performance to focus not just on *The Government Inspector* but on the entirety of Gogol's oeuvre.

The multiplication of temporal processes in *The Government Inspector* reflected the multiplication of spaces enabled through the use of platform stages. Functioning in parallel to the multiplication of spaces and times seen in Cubist and collaged artworks, and in parallel to the emphasis on observation in his construction of the final Dumb Scene of the production, Meyerhold's fragmentation of spatial and temporal linearity radically unsettled the viewer's sense of an objective, external viewpoint from which the production could be analysed and understood. Again, Meyerhold's construction of *The Government Inspector* can be seen as creating a stage space which rejected the absolutes of theatrical naturalism in favour of a theatre of shifting perspectives and deep set uncertainties.

II

The Wheeled Trucks: Fragmenting Space and Time

The majority of the episodes in Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector* were played on platform stages placed downstage centre in the main performance space.² The platforms functioned as self-contained locations for the action, wheeled into the stage space with the setting for the episode already constructed and the actors already in place. The transition from one episode to the next was aided by the mobility of the platforms, allowing locations to be removed and replaced with a minimum of effort. The resultant potential of the platforms to simultaneously represent independent, self-contained spaces and to construct a flow of such spaces across the performance makes them an appropriate starting point.

² See chapter four, pp. 185 – 188 above.
point for an analysis of Meyerhold's combination of individual stage images into the
temporal continuum of the production.

In the same way that the director had used the system of curtains designed by Golovin to
maintain the rhythmic structure of *Masquerade*, the trucks provided a solution to the play’s
multiple scenic locations without resorting to large scale set changes. The truck system
involved the alternation of two separate wheeled platforms: whilst one platform was being
used on stage, the second was free backstage to be set up for the next episode. As a result,
when an episode had been played, the truck on stage could be wheeled off and the second
wheeled on without any delay or disruption in the rhythm of the production. The system is
described by Worrall:

\[T\]wo platforms were used, operating on a points system, interchanged in the
blackout between the episodes. [...] as the play ran for four hours and five minutes,
the system meant that the scene changes could be effected in a matter of seconds.
This avoided the unnatural pauses of normal scene changes, which would have
disturbed the carefully calculated pace of the performance.\(^3\)

Gogol only specifies two geographical locations in the text of *The Government Inspector*:
acts one, three and four take place in the same room in the Mayor’s house, act two in the
town inn.\(^4\) In the production at the State Meyerhold Theatre, however, the director chose to
multiply substantially the number of locations required. In Worrall’s 1972 reconstruction of
Meyerhold’s production, ten independent locations are identified, including seven different
rooms in the Mayor’s house and three locations in the town.\(^5\) In addition, three sequences
took place in indiscriminate or composite spaces which did not have specific place or space

\(^3\) Worrall (1972), p. 78.
\(^4\) These locations are taken from Cooper’s translation of the text (1972, 1990), see chapter four, footnote 54,
p. 201 above.
\(^5\) The settings for the episodes which took place in the Mayor’s house are considered to represent different
rooms because each contained different, distinctive pieces of furniture (sofas, divans, piano, wardrobe, and so
forth).
markers to aid their identification. These spaces were associated with episodes which had a predominant fantasy or dream motif, namely episodes eight and nine (‘An Elephant Brought to its Knees’ and ‘Bribes’) and the final sequence, episode fifteen (‘Unprecedented Confusion’). The use of indiscriminate spaces in these episodes intensified the sense of unreality associated with them, suggesting that the action took place in a void, a non-specific dream-space.

The fact that Meyerhold chose to increase the number of fictional locations required for his production of The Government Inspector suggests that his use of platform stages had a different motivation to that underlying his use of curtains nine years earlier in Masquerade.

In the text of Masquerade, Lermontov specifies a series of different locations required for the performance: the system of curtains designed by Meyerhold and Golovin was intended primarily to overcome a problem presented by the text and created by the playwright. In The Government Inspector, however, Gogol does not present the director with this problem: the number of spaces required is relatively small. The multiplication of these spaces is motivated almost entirely by Meyerhold.

Meyerhold’s multiplication of the number of rooms in the Mayor’s house which were shown during the production was partly the result of a stylistic impulse. Worrall notes that

6 The identifiable locations in Meyerhold’s production were as follows: room in the Mayor’s house with small divans (episodes one and two); town inn (episode three); the Mayor’s wife’s boudoir (episodes four and five); in the town, with balustrade (episode six); room in the Mayor’s house with sofa (episode seven); room with long table (episode ten); music room in the Mayor’s house (episode eleven); prayer room in the Mayor’s house (episode twelve); room in the Mayor’s house with large divan (episode thirteen); room in the Mayor’s house with trellis (episode fourteen). This analysis of episodes and locations has been constructed using Nick Worrall’s reconstruction (1972, pp. 79 - 94).

7 Amongst the locations specified by Lermontov are a drawing room, a study, a ballroom, and the masquerade itself. Masquerade requires specific locations to function, particularly as it is the masquerade sequence which drives the plot forward, and creates the play’s nightmarish atmosphere. The locations specified in Lermontov’s text have been identified using M. Iu. Lermontov, Maskarad’, in Sobranie Sochinenii, vol. 3: Dramy (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Khudozhestvennaia Literatura. 1965), pp. 5 - 119.
the director used the spatial forms of the furniture in order to structure the shapes of the actors’ bodies according to the mood of the episode, for example, in his use of the furniture for episode seven:

Characteristically, the shape and patterning of the sofa dictated the psychological atmosphere of the scene and provided the line for physical movement on the platform.  

Consequently, the multiplication of locations in the production could be associated with the number of moods that the director wished to create. In addition, through the introduction of locations not specified in the original text and the use of trucks to accommodate these spaces, Meyerhold multiplies the number of locations which must be manifest in the performance space, and consequently increases the potential to disrupt the spatial unity of the stage. Again, Meyerhold’s handling of the stage space is reminiscent of the collaged artwork, where the combination of a series of fragments (each with its own spatial identity) disrupts the spatial unity of the canvas. As Kuspit notes, through the agency of fragments, “[c]ollage composition does not cohere and there is nothing inherent to it.” The multiplication of spaces also contributes to the number of possible meanings which the audience can infer from the mise-en-scène, suggesting that meaning is not only contained in the individual settings, but also in the relationship of one setting to the next; that is, not just in the fragments, but also in their combination.

The use of platform stages released Meyerhold’s production from the confines of linear space and time. The trucks were a very specific choice for dealing with the problem of the multiple geographical locations introduced by the director. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*,

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8 Worrall (1972), p. 87.
Meyerhold had sought an alternative solution to this problem through rejecting the representation of geographical location almost completely: the set was rudimentarily representative at most, and could not be easily affiliated with any one specific location.\(^{10}\) This rejection of location could have been applied to *The Government Inspector*, creating a single uni-set which would have accommodated all locations through rejecting the notion of location altogether.

A re-working of this concept of the uni-set had emerged in Meyerhold’s 1925 production of Erdman’s *The Warrant*. In this instance, Meyerhold simplified the stage décor to the extent that any location could be created through combinations of moving screens and the use of the revolving stage. All properties and set elements were kept to a minimum and were used to enhance the play’s message:

\[
\text{[P]rops were used sparingly but effectively ‘both as an instrument for acting and as a symbolic generalization of a way of life’. A domestic altar complete with votive candles and horn-gramophone, a wrought-iron treadle sewing-machine, a piano decorated with paper flowers, a banquet table with epergne and a candelabra: these were the objects the doomed ‘nepmen’ relied on to preserve their delusion of permanency.}^{11}\]

Meyerhold’s use of representative properties and set pieces in *The Warrant* provides a clear link between the uni-set employed in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and the system of trucks devised for *The Government Inspector*. Meyerhold’s production of *The Warrant*

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\(^{10}\) Braun highlights a similar aesthetic in Meyerhold’s 1924 production of *The Forest*: “The neutral permanent setting with its dynamic function was a refinement of Meyerhold’s earlier, more overtly constructivist manner. His use of properties in *The Forest* was based on a similar principle. An assortment of real objects with no obvious relationship was assembled onstage to be utilised as required.” (Braun, 1979, 1998, pp. 210 - 211).

\(^{11}\) Braun (1969, 1998), p. 196, with quotation from Zharov. The nepmen Braun refers to were those amongst the Russian people who took full advantage of the brief period of N.E.P. (the New Economic Policy) between 1921 and 1928. N.E.P. introduced an element of capitalism into the Russian economy to try and rescue the country from imminent economic collapse after the 1918 – 1920 Civil War and the economic policy of War Communism which had accompanied it.
demonstrated a closer relationship to the geographical locations suggested by the play text than had been seen in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*: the use of realistic properties and design elements contrasted directly with the purer form of abstraction seen in Meyerhold’s work in the early 1920s.\(^\text{12}\) This use of realism was extended in *The Government Inspector*. In *The Warrant*, set and properties were used partially in a symbolic sense: the objects represented the environment in which the action took place. More sophisticated than the minimal signification employed in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, *The Warrant* nonetheless still presented the audience with indications of locations rather than extended representations of these locations on stage.

In *The Government Inspector*, the locations created on the platform stages relied on a far greater degree of representation. The director chose to create on the miniature platform stages an accurate representation of life: the trucks look like they have been lifted, intact, from the world of the 1830s.\(^\text{13}\) Arguably, this degree of representation was possible because the trucks were restrictive by their nature and the illusionistic space was clearly delineated by the edges of the platform. The audience could never entirely be tricked by the verisimilitude into believing that the representation on stage was real: the space had a strict edge at which the illusion was cut off. The platforms corresponded to fragments of other worlds, fragments of times and spaces temporarily displaced into the stage environment.

Each time a truck was wheeled onto the stage, the spectators were presented with a fragment of a geographical location which was required for the performance of Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector*. Like the fragments in a collage,

\(^{12}\) The properties used in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* were abstracted along the same lines as the set design and the *prozodezhda*, as can be seen in plate 67, Popova’s design for a prop potted geranium.

\(^{13}\) See Gvozdev’s description of the platform stages, quoted in chapter four, p. 187 above.
these spatial fragments can be read as representative of an extended geographical location which exists elsewhere and a small section of which is being temporarily transposed to the stage. Unlike the sets of the Moscow Art Theatre, which were intended to suggest to the audience that the rooms on stage continued beyond the visible playing area, there is no need for the audience to identify the stage space at the Meyerhold Theatre as continuous. Each truck represented an independent and discontinuous piece of another world, briefly placed into the world of the stage. In this sense, the trucks function in parallel to the fragments of a collage, which are conceived of by the artist as discontinuous pieces of images selected and placed onto the canvas in an arrangement which frequently seeks to highlight the temporary nature of the composition.

Through the use of moving platform stages, Meyerhold resisted the identification of the stage space with a specific geographical location, reflecting the rejection of linear space associated with Cubist collage. The Cubist disruption of spatial linearity is most evident when the collaged canvas is considered in opposition to the Renaissance construction of linear perspective. The use of vanishing point perspective in structuring the canvas provides the viewer with a single focal point for their attention. The frame of the canvas thus becomes the equivalent of a window frame, suggesting to the viewer that observing the artwork is akin to observing the view from a window.\footnote{See chapter one, pp. 76 - 77 above.} Cubism, and in particular Cubist collage, pre-suppose the end of a unified fantasy location for the artwork by providing a variety of locations each represented by an image fragment. In the same way, in Meyerhold's theatre, the stage is released from the representation of geographical location. The stage becomes a neutralized space, a space that exists outside of the notion of fictional identity. Meyerhold's use of the trucks represents a device functioning in the same way as
the fragments of the collaged canvas: both trucks and image fragments aimed to free the
work of art from the notion of linear space.

Like the revolving stage Meyerhold employed in *The Warrant*, the trucks used for *The
Government Inspector* were ostensibly mobile, underlining the instability of the character’s
world. Unlike *The Warrant*, however, the world of Gogol’s play was no longer extant. In
*The Warrant*, the revolving stage gave Meyerhold the opportunity to remove symbols of
bourgeois life at a moment’s notice, emphasizing that the lifestyle they represented was, as
Braun states, delusional.15 Meyerhold’s revolving stage functioned as a literal
representation of the metaphorical instability of the nepmen, from under whose feet ground
was steadily sliding away. In this sense, the revolving stage can be seen as a precursor to
the wax figures which brought *The Government Inspector* to a close, a staging device
which physically manifested the director’s response to the world of the play text.

In *The Warrant*, the metaphor made manifest is concerned with motion, and the world,
suddenly revolving, moves too much for the characters. In *The Government Inspector* the
opposite effect is created when the characters are petrified into waxworks, representing
both their fear of the impending inspection, and their archaic attitudes. In *The Warrant*,
time slips away from the characters, in *The Government Inspector*, it is frozen alongside
them. Meyerhold’s staging reflects the difference between the two texts, *The Warrant* set in
contemporary Russia and *The Government Inspector* in Tsarist Russia. In the first, the
world must be seen to move faster than the outdated characters because it is the character’s
lifestyle, and not their world, which is the primary subject of critique. In *The Government
Inspector*, however, the world is as much at fault as the characters it has produced, and both

15 See p. 215 above.
are outdated and frozen in the past. In both productions, Meyerhold used a temporal staging device to make the relationship between the characters, the world in which they live, and the real world outside of the theatre apparent to the spectator. Through the staging devices, the inability to master time becomes a symbol of the inability to survive in the new Soviet world, and consequently a warning to the audience member.

_The Government Inspector_ was a historical project for Meyerhold. The images of Gogol’s Russia which the director presented to the audience were historical fragments which appeared and disappeared, dreamlike. The use of the restricted space of the platforms distorted the historical aspect of the image, informing the spectator that these fragments of another world were not merely being presented to them, but also being commented on. Meyerhold is engaging with the problems of presenting history on the stage. As Barthes claims:

> [T]he life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of history, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.\(^ {16} \)

With an audience already distanced from Tsarist Russia in the new Soviet world, Meyerhold’s challenge was to make the image of Russia’s past vibrant and relevant to the spectator. To that end, life in Gogol’s provincial town was presented as a series of fragmented images, museum pieces, disconnected from the reality of the theatrical experience. However, there was nothing nostalgic in Meyerhold’s presentation of Nikolayan Russia. The director sought, as Barthes suggests, to cross the division between past and present by critiquing the history he presented. His conclusions are not sympathetic,

\(^ {16} \) Barthes (1981, 2000), p. 65
and the crowded platforms mock the mayor and his officials, making them grotesque figures of comedy.

Through the platforms, however, the characters are not merely mocked, but also rendered ineffectual. They are confined within an extremely restricted fictional world. For the majority of the play, they have no contact with, or influence on, the wider non-representational stage space. It is this wider stage space which is free from fictional location and is consequently presented to the audience as a real space, a self-acknowledged stage: the stage at GosTIM is part of the real world and the real Revolution that has seized it. Like the Gulyachkins in *The Warrant*, desperately trying to control a world which is slipping away from them, the characters in *The Government Inspector* have little access to this world, and cannot control it. They are presented to the audience as outdated figures with outdated views.¹⁷

The character’s disenfranchisement is further emphasized through the mobility of the platform stages, which allow the director to remove one location and replace it with another, a communist puppet-master over the Tsarist world. In this sense, Meyerhold’s platform stages are an extremely didactic staging device, dictating where the audience should look at every stage of the performance. There is something unsettling in this manipulation of the performance. Like the collaged canvas, the stage production

¹⁷ The ambiguity of Meyerhold’s theatre was an essential part of his aesthetic. The readings of the stage space utilized in *The Government Inspector* presented here have distinctly pro-communist overtones. However, it would be misleading to represent Meyerhold’s theatre as entirely uncritical of the Soviet regime, and the choice of *The Government Inspector* was clearly a deliberate one on the part of the director. Gogol’s criticism of government figures could easily have been read as a criticism of the Party, and the inferences of Meyerhold’s choice of play text sit alongside the inferences of his construction of the stage space. To suggest false resolutions to the ambiguities of Meyerhold’s theatre would be a deceptive and purely conjectural process, and is not the intention of this thesis. Readings of the stage space which seem to advocate a pro-Party line are suggested with an awareness that conflicting, anti-Party messages can also be uncovered.
constructed from fragments should allow the spectators the freedom to create their own meanings in the combination of these fragments. However, collage is not so transparent a device. Although the viewer may believe that their eyes roam freely across the surface of the canvas, many collaged artworks have a distinctive focal point. In Carlo Carrà’s *Patriotic Festival*, for example, the eye cannot help but be drawn to the centre of the spiral [see plate 22].\(^\text{18}\) In addition, as was demonstrated by Picasso’s collages with a pro-anarchist viewpoint, the meanings created by the collision of fragments are not random, but often carefully dictated by the artist. Meyerhold’s stage fragments oscillate between allowing the viewer the freedom to construct meaning, and dictating the nature of the meanings which are constructed, manipulating the audience’s response to the play text by manipulating their visual response to stage image.

III

**Wheeled Trucks and the Episodic Structure: Creating Non-Narrative Meanings**

In addition to releasing the stage space from linearity, Meyerhold’s use of the trucks also contributed to the production’s potential to communicate meanings beyond those suggested by the play text. The collagist’s use of fragments allows the viewer to create meanings outside of the realms of narrative, a process identified in chapter three as the second facet of collage practice. Meaning in collage is created not simply through the connotations of the original identities of the fragments, or through their formal arrangement in terms of shape, colour and so forth, but through the collision of one fragment with another. When the stage space is conceived of as a collaged canvas in which the moving platform stages function as image fragments, it is possible to construct implicit meanings in Meyerhold’s

\(^{18}\) Plate 22 can be found after p. 113 above.
production of *The Government Inspector* which function outside of the narrative of Gogol’s text.

In order to engage with the implications of the stage collage in terms of meaning making, it is first necessary to address the use of episodes as the structural device underlying Meyerhold’s work on *The Government Inspector*. Meyerhold’s rejection of the symbolist movement was accompanied by the end of productions constructed solely from *tableaux vivants*. The director’s attitude towards the linear structure of the majority of dramatic texts available to him, however, continued to reflect Mounet-Sully’s aphorism that “chaque texte ce n’est qu’une prête-texte” (“each text is only a pretext”). Meyerhold’s work at the Imperial Theatres, and his simultaneous projects under the pseudonym Dr. Dapertutto, showed more evidence of physical clowning in the style of the *Commedia dell’Arte* than of the static mysticism of the symbolists. However, just as symbolism had prompted Meyerhold to divide the text into *tableaux vivants*, his new *Commedia* influence prompted new divisions, into episodes or periods of action contrasted rhythmically across the production, reflecting the use of *lazzi* to structure *Commedia scenarii*.

Meyerhold is well-known for his restructuring of the play text, dividing the playwright’s acts and scenes into short episodes. *The Government Inspector*, which in Gogol’s text has five acts, had in Meyerhold’s production fifteen such episodes, each individually titled. Dividing the text into episodes reflects a similar temporal impulse as dividing it into *tableaux vivants*, both processes demonstrating an underlying impulse towards the

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19 See Braun (1979, 1998), p. 221.
fragmentation of temporal progression. However, the shift from tableaux to episodes resulted in a significant shift in the organizational principles underlying the combination of these fragments into the performance as a temporal whole.

Although innovations such as the system of curtains used in *Masquerade* indicate traces of a developing episodic structure in Meyerhold's pre-revolutionary work, it was in his post-revolutionary productions that the principle was most fully realized. The episodes in his 1924 version of Ostrovsky's *The Forest*, for example, were largely self-contained, signalling a new development in Meyerhold's fragmentation of time in performance. As addressed in chapter one, the fragmentation seen in *Sister Beatrice* affected the continuity of the production, but not its linearity: the performance is divided into individual images, or moments, but these are enacted according to the rules of linear time, or the progression of time within the context of the production, a time defined as linear by the playwright. The more radical fragmentation of the text seen in Meyerhold's post-revolutionary period indicates a new non-linearity in performance. As Braun describes the textual divisions in *The Forest*:

Meyerhold largely ignored the play's original time sequence and rearranged Ostrovsky's text according to the principles of montage. Altering little of the actual dialogue, he divided the original five acts into thirty-three episodes, shuffling them into a new order, and inserting pantomime interludes for the sake of effective contrasts of mood and tempo.  

The important structural innovation in Meyerhold's production of *The Forest*, therefore, was not the division of the text into episodes, the fragmentation, but the re-combination of

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these episodes according to the "principles of montage".\textsuperscript{22} There was no need for the images, or episodes, to progress linearly and are instead arranged thematically or rhythmically to serve the higher purpose of the rhythmic structure of the production and the spectator's response to the play text through this rhythmic manipulation.

In his comparison of Meyerhold's theatre practice with that of Stanislavsky, Leach identifies a key schism in the directors' aesthetics by distinguishing between tasks and motifs. The division of the text into segments was an important element of the construction of the performance in each director's aesthetic. Leach's analysis, however, differentiates between the "bits" of the Stanislavskian performance, and the "bricks" of a Meyerholdian approach.\textsuperscript{23} Arguing that the "bits" employed by Stanislavsky were defined by tasks, whereas Meyerhold's "bricks" took their identity from motifs, Leach claims:

\begin{quote}
Each 'brick' therefore was more self-contained than a Stanislavskian bit, and moved \textit{towards} a 'number', as in a cabaret, or a 'turn', as in the circus.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

The use of motifs rather than tasks clarifies Meyerhold's approach to the construction of the performance and to how the actor was to engage with his part. Stanislavsky's emphasis on tasks demonstrates the linearity of the Art Theatre's approach, both in terms of the construction of the performance and in the portrayal of the characters. By its nature, a task is goal-based, implying a linear, teleological progression towards a final point. In their combination, tasks, particularly constructed theatrical tasks such as those employed in Stanislavsky's System, must progress linearly, one after another, until the ultimate goal is

\textsuperscript{22} Braun's reference to montage principles indicates a clear connection between Meyerhold's theatre and the film theory of Eisenstein. This connection, and the problematic relationship between collage and montage theory will be discussed below, pp. 254 - 260.

\textsuperscript{23} Stanislavsky's division of the performance into bits is explored in chapter seven (Units and Objectives) of Stanislavski, Constantin, \textit{An Actor Prepares}, (London: Methuen, 1988), pp. 111 - 126

\textsuperscript{24} Leach (2003), p. 125.
achieved. This emphasis on progression towards an end point permeates Stanislavsky’s approach to theatre, and is particularly apparent in the division of the play into objectives which are combined to create the overarching super-objective.\textsuperscript{25} In contrast, Meyerholdian motifs need not be goal-based. A motif is an identifiable pattern of sound or movement; like the Commedia lazzo, it is a goal in itself. Motifs need not progress linearly and more than one can be engaged with at any given moment. The motifs of a production, therefore, can be collaged to create non-narrative meanings through their juxtaposition. The tasks, by their nature, cannot. This is evident in Leach’s comparison of Meyerhold’s theatre to the circus or to cabaret, where the acts ordinarily do not contribute to an overriding narrative, but instead are arranged to create a mood or atmosphere. Meyerhold’s reconciliation of narrative-based texts with cabaret or circus-influenced structures highlights the director’s concern with theatre’s potential to communicate meaning on both a narrative and a non-narrative level.

Episodes five, six and seven of The Government Inspector demonstrate Meyerhold’s collaged construction of the performance through juxtapositions across episodes. An analysis of the spatial construction of the episodes demonstrates the connection between spatial structure and theme in Meyerhold’s theatre, and indicates how the director constructed meaning through the juxtaposition of the fragments. In these three sequences, meaning is implied through the collision of spatial structures, suggesting echoes between characters which go on to inform the spectator’s reading of the play’s narrative.

The transitions between episodes five, ‘Filled with the Tend’rest Love’, six, ‘The Procession’, and seven, ‘Behind a Bottle of ‘Tolstobriucha”, characterize Meyerhold’s

emphasis on juxtaposition in his construction of the performance. 'Filled with the Tend’rest Love' and 'Behind a Bottle of ‘Tolstobriucha', episodes five and seven, were staged on the platform stages. In episode five, the location was the Mayor's wife's bedroom; in episode seven, another room in the Mayor’s home, presumably, judging from the sofa and the presence of all the town officials and the Mayor’s family, a reception room. Episode six, dividing the two, employed a contrasting spatial structure, as described in Worrall’s reconstruction:

The lights went up on a stage which was now bare, except for a light coloured metal balustrade running across its entire width and positioned across the rear.26

The balustrade divided Khlestakov, who appeared downstage of it, from the town officials following him, who were crowded into the space upstage [see plate 62]. This staging maintained the principle of restriction established by the platform stages by focusing the spectator’s attention on a fragment of the stage space which was long and narrow, rather than square, expanding the audience’s field of vision across the width of the stage to the wings.27 The spectator's focus therefore shifted from a small space downstage centre, to a long strip of stage extending into the wings, and then back to the small downstage square. The restriction of space in both of the contrasting playing areas was emphasized through the juxtaposition in their shape.

Episodes five and six were more influenced by Meyerhold’s conception of the play than that of Gogol. Episode five, ‘Filled with the Tend’rest Love’, featured a fantasy sequence devised by Meyerhold, and episode six, ‘The Procession’, was conceived entirely by the director, and does not appear in Gogol’s text. Through his construction of the two episodes,

26 Worrall (1972), p. 86.
27 A sudden shift to a long, narrow stage space expanding the audience's field of vision across the width of the stage is characteristic of Meyerhold’s work during this period, the device being used twice in The Government Inspector (episodes six and ten), and reappearing in the 1928 production of Woe to Wit (by Griboedov) in his staging of the famous ‘rumours’ sequence.
Plate 62  
*The Government Inspector* (1926) episode six: The Procession, design by Victor Kiselyov
Meyerhold created two parallel sequences of revelry, each revolving around one key character. Consequently, the director set up two contrasting carnivalesque events which suggested similarities between the behaviour of their central characters: the Mayor’s wife in episode five and Khlestakov in episode six.

Episode five constituted an exploration of the vanity and sexuality of the Mayor’s wife, Anna Andreevna. The carnivalesque element was suggested by a rapid series of costume changes, described by Worrall as “a firework display of dresses”, watched by the “voyeur” Dobchinsky who “stood transfixed by a wave of lust”. In episode six, Meyerhold’s staging of Khlestakov’s procession was equally, although contrastingly, carnivalesque. The drunken conman, having convinced the Mayor that he is the Government Inspector, leads the town officials through the streets of the city to a musical accompaniment. These contrasting, possibly stereotypically female and male, explorations of carnival behaviour suggest to the audience a connection between the characters made through the collage principle of juxtaposition, reflecting Meyerhold’s belief that Anna was a “Khlestakov in skirts”, a female parallel to the sinister conman.

This suggestion was emphasized by the transition into episode seven, ‘Behind a Bottle of ‘Tolstobriucha’, in which the two characters became the central figures. Episode seven was an adaptation of Gogol’s third act, showing Khlestakov’s seduction of Anna through a, fictional, description of his life as a government official. In addition to the shared narrative

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28 Worrall (1972), p. 85 and 86.
29 Ibid., p. 85.
30 The word ‘Tolstobriucha’ was a punning reference on Meyerhold’s part to a Russian beer (called Tolstooriucha) and a combination of tolsty (rendered tostyi, Library of Congress system) and briucha (brykha, Library of Congress system) meaning ‘fat belly’. According to Worrall: “For a Russian audience the title of the episode would have had immediate comic associations with the characters in the scene.” (Worrall, 1972, p. 87).
focus on Anna and Khlestakov in episode seven, Meyerhold further reflected the implications of similarity between the characters in his construction of the stage space. The connection between the previous episodes was highlighted by the co-existence of their staging in episode seven: according to Worrall, the balustrade used in episode six remained on stage, but was split in the middle to allow a platform to be wheeled on. The spatial collision of episodes five and six prepares the audience for the meeting in episode seven of the two characters Meyerhold perceived as alter-egos.

Meyerhold’s belief that Anna and Khlestakov were parallel characters, and his construction of the staging for these episodes to highlight this parallel, clearly has implications for the reading of the sequence (for example, in terms of gender politics) emphasizing that the collage process allows the spectator to construct non-narrative meanings through the collision of episodes. Particular implications emerge regarding the construction of the two characters and the spectator’s understanding of their motivations. In Meyerhold’s production, Khlestakov’s relationship with Anna is explicitly constructed as sexually motivated, as is evidenced, for example, in a piece of business in the episode entitled ‘After Penza’. The Mayor mentions to Khlestakov that he wishes to send a note to his wife, and Khlestakov is obliged to produce a sheet of paper. During his search, Meyerhold had Garin’s Khlestakov “pawing through the bedclothes”, noting that “Khlestakov […] is all fantasies about the wife.”\footnote{Nikolai Gogol and Vsevolod Meyerhold, ‘Revisor: Episode Four – “After Penza”’, translated by David Chambers and Daria Krizhanskaya, \textit{Theater}, 28.2 (1998), 61 – 78, (p. 77). In Worrall’s analysis (1972), ‘After Penza’ is identified as episode three, whereas Chambers and Braun (1979, 1998) refer to this episode as episode four.} Through establishing the two characters as parallels, Meyerhold confused the sexual identity of each, implying Anna’s status as a sexual predator and Khlestakov’s femininity, an aspect of the character which he further emphasized through...
the construction of a more masculine counterpart in the form of the Silent Officer. This confusion of traditional gender roles not only contributed to the comedy of the production, but also to its general sense of unease, undercutting the absolute implications of the male-female binary and adding to the impression of an unstable world in which everything is not quite as it seems.

IV

The Wheeled Trucks: Deconstruction of Spatial and Temporal Absolutes

Drawing on the anti-positivist redefinition of the notions of space and time, a particularly significant aspect of the collage aesthetic in Meyerhold’s work was his construction of a stage space in which spatial and temporal implications worked in parallel, collapsing the distinction between the third and fourth dimensions. At its most practical level, Meyerhold’s use of trucks as a staging device had a temporal motivation: wheeling the action into the stage space allowed the director to control the performance rhythmically and maintain the strict rhythmic patterns which he had created for the production. Like the curtains in *Masquerade* or the revolve in *The Warrant*, the stage space had been structured in order to facilitate the temporal progression of the performance in real time.

However, Meyerhold’s use of wheeled platform stages as the defining design feature of his production also indicated a new sense of dynamism operating in the stage space. The spatial dynamics of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* staging, as explored in chapter two, functioned on two levels: the set contained both literal moving elements, the rotating wheels and sails for example, and a sense of dynamism through the application of the
layered stage across two axes, shifting the notion of movement on stage into the
Ouspenskian spatial fourth dimension.32

In contrast, in *The Government Inspector*, the sense of dynamism is primarily actual: the
trucks are wheeled through the upstage doors, across the stage space, to their downstage
resting point. The movement of the trucks from an upstage to a downstage position
parallels the sense of movement seen in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* stage images, in which
the spatial structure created a projected diagonal line towards the spectator. In *The
Government Inspector*, this projected line is actualized in the path of the trucks.

The implications for the spectator's engagement with the stage space are significantly
altered when the abstract dynamism implied in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is actualized in
*The Government Inspector*. The sense of movement created by the trucks is unambiguous,
and the implications of this development are two-fold. Firstly, the stability of the stage
space is openly undercut in a process similar to that seen in *The Warrant*. The introduction
of a diagonal axis into the mise-en-scène of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* undercut the
stability of Popova's large construction, implying that the space itself could embody
movement. This was further highlighted by the moving elements of the design which the
characters could not control, for example, the revolving wheels, indicating an underlying
schism between humanity and its environment. Despite the apparent mastery of the world
by the actor-acrobat, the world could still rebel against its character-inhabitants. In *The
Government Inspector*, the moving trucks make this instability in humanity's relationship
to the world more explicitly apparent to the spectator.

32 See chapter two, pp. 123 – 128 above.
Through the manifestation of this instability as actual rather than implicit movement, a new
sense of temporality also emerges in Meyerhold’s work on *The Government Inspector*. In
*The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the dynamic diagonal line is a two-way axis: the movement it
embodies can equally run upstage to downstage or downstage to upstage. In *The
Government Inspector*, however, the upstage to downstage axis is emphasized and the
downstage to upstage axis minimized. By the time to truck begins its journey upstage, the
attention of the audience is focused on the next episode and the impending upstage-
downstage axis of the next truck.

This removal of ambiguity indicates that Meyerhold’s approach to temporality had
progressed in line with anti-positivist philosophy. The Ouspenskian fourth dimension,
which in chapter two was associated with *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, is an abstract sense
of time, apparent only to those who have the ability to envisage a world beyond the
everyday. Meyerhold’s use of trucks in *The Government Inspector* seems to reflect a
contrast view of the fourth dimension, more in line with that proposed by Einstein in his
1919 *General Theory of Relativity*, that is, a fourth dimension that is purely temporal and a
pre-requisite for the existence of any object in space.

Through the redefinition of space and time prompted by anti-positivism, the image became
both a spatial and a temporal construct, a fragment of a place and a time. In the light of this
redefinition, the fragments of geographical locations represented by the trucks used in *The
Government Inspector* clearly have temporal as well as spatial implications. The
implications of the trucks on the spatial unity of the stage have been discussed above:

33 The redefinition of the image as both a spatial and temporal construct is addressed in the introduction to this
dissertation, p. 31 above.
through the temporary imposition of a number of different spatial locations, the stage itself is neutralized and becomes a space which has no imagined, unified geographical identity. If each location presented on the trucks is also considered to have a temporal identity, the trucks would subsequently similarly fragment any sense of temporal unity in the production.

The key to understanding the function of the fragmentation of spatial and temporal processes in Meyerhold’s later work can be found in a series of lectures he gave in 1929, published in 1930 under the title ‘The Reconstruction of the Theatre’.34 In these lectures, Meyerhold expressed his belief in the practicality and potential universality of trucks similar to those used in The Government Inspector, and argued for them as the basis for the construction of a new theatrical space:

[W]e must destroy the box-stage once and for all, for only then can we hope to achieve a truly dynamic spectacle. By making the stage machinery sufficiently flexible to present a series of rapidly changing scenes, we shall be able to abolish the tedious unity of place and the compression of the action into four or five unwieldy acts. The new stage will have no proscenium arch and will be equipped with a series of platforms which can be moved horizontally and vertically to facilitate transformation scenes and the manipulation of kinetic constructions.35

In a direct parallel to the loss of geographical location found in Cubist collage, Meyerhold equates the use of trucks with the dissolution of the Aristotelian Unity of Place. The introduction of trucks allowed a new flexibility in the facilitation of multiple episodes: the

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34 According to Braun: “The published text was based on three lectures given by Meyerhold in Leningrad, Kiev and Kharkov in 1929.” (Braun, 1969, 1998, p. 274). The date of these lectures is interesting in that it corresponds to Eisenstein’s essay ‘The Filmic Fourth Dimension’, dated August 1929, which explores the filmmaker’s reactions to the notion of the fourth dimension in the work of Einstein. Eisenstein’s essay can be found in Sergei Eisenstein, S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works, volume one. Writings, 1922 – 1934, ed. and trans. by Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) pp. 181 – 194. In this collection, the title of the essay is translated as ‘The Fourth Dimension in Film’.  
trucks enabled Meyerhold to shift action quickly from one location to another, and implicitly, from one time to another. Fragmentation furnishes the director with the potential to transcend linearity in his construction of space and time.

The implications of the trucks used in *The Government Inspector* as devices for transcending spatial and temporal unity can be seen most clearly when they are traced back to their ancestry in the ancient Athenian theatre. The Greek *ekkuklemata* were trucks of a similar nature to those used by Meyerhold, whose primary function was the revelation of an already constructed tableau to the audience, bringing outside, into the open air, the secret acts that had taken place inside. J. Michael Walton describes the form and function of the *ekkuklemata* in the Athenian theatre:

Functioning in all probability as a simple platform wheeled out from inside the *skene*, the *ekkulema* was a practical demonstration of the tableau. Stage furnishings, dead bodies, or, in an extreme Aristophanic example, the playwright Euripides at work in his study, could be presented with the maximum of convenience and withdrawn with the minimum of fuss. Here [...] we do not have simply a solution to a problem, that of how to present what would logically stay indoors. Instead we find the basic stage principle of the ‘reveal’, the sudden display of a prepared visual sequence to give enhanced significance.37

Through this staging device, traditional notions of the unity of space, not in the Aristotelian, but in the positivist, sense, were subverted. Spaces, and by implication times, could be superimposed one upon another: the stage does not recognize the spatial and

36 In the introduction to his translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Kenneth McLeish states: “Aristotle does talk of the Unity of Action: the events of a tragedy should have internal coherence and inevitability, following one logical sequence from beginning to conclusion [...]”. To this Renaissance critics added the Unity of Place (everything which happens should take place in a single location [...] ) and the Unity of Time (the events of the play should take place in a single time-span, preferably no more than twenty-four hours [...] ) As it happens, these Unities are observed in the majority of the ancient tragedies which survive to us.” Kenneth McLeish, ‘Introduction’, in Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by McLeish (London: Nick Hern Books, 2000), p. xiv. It is important to note that very little Renaissance drama actually conforms to the Unities suggested by the adaptation of Aristotle’s work.

temporal boundaries of reality. Consequently, the introduction of a tableau on the 
\textit{ekkuklema} indicated to the audience that a process of connections outside the realms of 
linear time needed to be made.

Consider the function of the \textit{ekkuklema} within Aeschylus' \textit{Oresteia} trilogy in connecting 
the climactic moments of the first two plays, \textit{Agamemnon} and \textit{The Libation Bearers}. Each 
play climaxes with a revelation on the \textit{ekkuklema}: in \textit{Agamemnon}, the murdered king is 
revealed; in \textit{The Libation Bearers}, murderer becomes victim as the body of Clytemnestra 
emerges. Each moment of revelation indicates the intrusion on the fictional setting of the 
play of a stage space which has a purely theatrical function, bearing a scene from another 
fictional location. The two represented locations, outside and inside, are collapsed into a 
composite theatrical space. Simultaneously, each moment of revelation also lifts the 
performance out of the fictional time of the play text into a universalized time, encouraging 
the audience to make connections between the two separate performances. This is a didactic 
device which functions within the realms of mythology. The audience are encouraged, 
through the appearance of the \textit{ekkuklema}, to see Clytemnestra's murder as a consequence of 
Agamemnon's murder. The repetition of the staging device served to highlight the 
playwright's opinion of the dangers of revenge culture, as well as to locate the murders in 
relation to one another, within the context of the three plays as one entity, and within the 
myth-cycle of the Curse of the House of Atreus.

The Athenian \textit{ekkuklema} was used only at a climactic point in the performance.

Meyerhold's adaptation of the device extends its temporal function, suggesting its potential 
as a structural model for the performance as a whole. Each truck represents a different 
spatial and temporal fragment, connected to the other fragments outside the boundaries of
linear space and time, suggesting that events or moments on stage are connected not just through narrative progression but also thematically, rhythmically, through characters (as in Khlestakov and Anna), and even through formal constructions such as shape or colour. Like the fragmentary images of the collage, the connection that each episode appears to have to the previous and next episode is by virtue of its presence on the same canvas, in the same stage space. The placement of each truck in the same downstage position encourages the audience member to construct these connections.\textsuperscript{38}

Meyerhold’s production of \textit{The Government Inspector} raises questions regarding the connections between the spatial and temporal organization of the performance. The collage process that, in \textit{The Magnanimous Cuckold}, was used to realize the Ouspenskian fourth dimension, a sense of time that is ultimately spatial, was redefined in \textit{The Government Inspector}, becoming an articulation of space that facilitated a multiplication of temporal processes. Meyerhold’s production of \textit{The Government Inspector} became the site of numerous temporalities operating simultaneously within a stage space that was conceived to enhance this sense of fragmentation and multiplication. Within \textit{The Government Inspector}, Meyerhold appears to have developed a theatrical world which functioned according to its own spatial and temporal rules.

\textsuperscript{38} Meyerhold’s play with time cannot only be located against ancient Athenian drama, but also has resonances in more recent instances of temporal manipulation, for example, in the work of Harold Pinter (\textit{Betrayal}, 1978) or Tom Stoppard (\textit{After Magritte}, 1970, \textit{Arcadia}, 1993) or in cinema in Christopher Nolan’s \textit{Memento} (Independent Artists, 2001) or François Ozon’s \textit{Cinq Fois Deux} (Thinkfilm, 2004).
V

Multiple Temporal Processes in *The Government Inspector*

Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector* engaged directly with non-linearity in the temporal progression of the performance. As was suggested in chapter one, theatrical performance is, by its nature, rooted in temporal progression. Unlike the Cubist canvas, theatre exists in a defined and pre-determined period of temporal continuity, as both a performance which unfolds across time and as a representation of fictional time. The fictional time of the play text is, in addition, widely recognized as combining more than one temporal process, a notion popularized in early twentieth century by the Russian formalist distinction of the text’s *fabula* (story) from its *siuzhet* (plot).

Meyerhold’s deconstruction of linear temporal progression in *The Government Inspector* draws on the potential of the formalist *fabula-siuzhet* distinction: the organization of the story into the plot highlights the constructed nature of storytelling, be it within the text, or, in Meyerhold’s case, on the stage. The disruption of linearity within the performance emphasizes the fact that the stage embodies more than one temporal process at any one time: the play text as constructed by Gogol is seen as distinct from the performance as constructed by Meyerhold. It is this emphasis on time, and multiplication of temporal processes within Meyerhold’s production, that parallels the Cubist artwork: the production has become a collage of different temporal fragments. Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector* was not timeless, the performance had a specific temporal location

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39 Theatre is, of course, embedded in many more temporal processes, for example the period of rehearsal time, and the meta-cognitive time during which the audience re-consider the production after they have left the theatre. This analysis is limited to considering the temporal processes which Meyerhold constructs on the stage, during the performance, regarding the progression of the production in front of the audience (the relationship between the time of the play text, the temporal processes represented on stage, and the time span in real time of the performance itself). See also footnote 86, chapter one, p. 80 and footnote 91, chapter one, p. 83 above.

40 See chapter two, pp. 102 – 103 above, particularly footnote 27.
(1830s Nikolayan Russia) which was reflected in elements of the design, particularly in the
detailed properties and costumes. However, this visual nod to the era of Gogol’s text does
not indicate unified and linear temporal progression in Meyerhold’s production.

Meyerhold’s manipulation of time in The Government Inspector combined the
fragmentation of the text into episodes and the use of trucks to stage those episodes with a
radical shift from textual time to authorial time. Rather than focussing on the play text,
Meyerhold’s production focused on Gogol the playwright, reflecting the typically Cubist
attitude that art is defined by the artist as much as by the artwork. It is in this shift from
representing the play text to representing the playwright that Meyerhold’s play with time is
particularly evident.

The shift in emphasis from textual time to authorial time had two significant implications
for the production. Firstly, Meyerhold could redefine the era in which the production was
set, giving an indication of his attitude towards historical time in performance. Secondly,
and more significantly in this context, the introduction of authorial time resulted in a shift
towards a more subjective notion of temporality in performance (a parallel to Henri
Bergson’s philosophy of durational time or durée), allowing the director divergence into
fantasy or dream time sequences, based on the characters as he and the playwright
visualized them.41

As Katerina Clark highlights, Meyerhold’s intention was never to abolish the word in
theatre. However, reverence for the text and a text-based performance style had not been
part of his aesthetic since his first independent work as a director. In his eyes, although the

41 Bergson’s philosophy of durational time will be discussed in more depth below, pp. 248 – 254.
word was vital in performance, language took second place to movement and physicality. In his essay ‘The Fairground Booth’, Meyerhold explores the form and function of theatre in terms of the emphasis on movement he observes in certain periods of theatrical history, particularly those in which theatre attempted to speak directly to the populace in public spaces, for example, the medieval theatre or the Commedia dell’Arte. Meyerhold’s essay increasingly relegates text to a secondary place in performance, shifting the emphasis from words to movement in the new, or modern, role of both the director and the author:

The pantomime is a good antidote against excessive misuse of words. Only let the new author not fear that we want to deprive him altogether of the right to speak on the stage. He will be permitted to put words into the actor’s mouths, but first he must produce a scenario of movement. How long will it be before they inscribe in the theatrical tables the following law: words in theatre are only embellishments on the design of movement? 42

These principles underlie not just Meyerhold’s pre-revolutionary period, for example his Commedia dell’Arte influenced work as Doctor Dapertutto, but also his post-revolutionary productions. Meyerhold’s re-evaluation of the role of the text, to call it a disregard for the text would be misleading, is particularly striking in his adaptations of the classics, exemplified by his work on The Government Inspector.

Here, again, Meyerhold’s construction of the performance parallels the philosophy of the Cubist artists. The Cubist notion of abstraction functions through the representation of the object as manipulated by the world-view of the artist, emphasizing the artist’s task as a creative rather than a documentary role. This attitude towards the artist’s role resulted in the emphasis on subjectivity seen in the Cubist artwork, and led to the Cubist emphasis on the

process of observation, rather than on the observed object itself, as was discussed in chapter four. In the words of Russian artist Olga Rozanova:

Only now does the artist create a Picture quite consciously not only by not copying nature, but also by subordinating the primitive conception of it to conceptions complicated by all the psychology of modern thought: what the artist sees + what he knows + what he remembers, etc.

In the case of the Cubist artwork, the “psychology of modern thought” to which Rozanova refers included the anti-positivist spatial and temporal concerns in philosophy. The link between the creative processes of the Cubist artists and Meyerhold’s aesthetic is found in the loss of the authority of the object of representation in the artwork and the text in the theatrical production. Neither art object nor play text were any longer regarded as an absolute, for the anti-positivist world was not a world of absolutes, but as the starting point from which the artist or theatre-maker explored the world in general and their cultural world-view in particular. In the same way in which the Cubist artists construct a fourth dimension, a temporality, for the artwork which is more concerned with their own process as observer than with the object of representation itself, Meyerhold imposes a new temporal structure onto the text that relocates the driving force of the production.

The redefinition of the era of the production in terms of the era of the author can be seen in Meyerhold’s work as early as his 1910 production of Molière’s Don Juan. Meyerhold’s aim in this production, alongside Golovin as designer, was to re-create in the Rococo red and gold interior of the Alexandrinsky Imperial Theatre the essence of “the era of Louis

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43 See pp. 204 – 205 above.
XIV [...] the age of Molière and Racine”. Unlike the previous, infamously accurate, recreation of Imperial Rome in the Moscow Art Theatre’s 1903 production of *Julius Caesar*, the era Meyerhold sought to re-create was not a literal representation, but more an evocation of the spirit of the Court theatre of the Sun King. This aim is reflected in Meyerhold’s own description of the production:

An authentic play of the old theatre may be staged as a *free composition* in the spirit of the theatre in which it was originally staged [...] In staging, say, Molière’s *Don Juan*, it would be a mistake to move heaven and earth to achieve an exact copy of a theatre of Molière’s time, such as the Palais-Royal or the Petit-Bourbon.

Braun reflects Meyerhold’s generalized, rather than specific, attitude towards historical recreation, noting that he “seems [...] to have read into accounts of Molière’s theatre what he himself wished to find”. This did not, however, appear to impair the “stylization” of *Don Juan*, which Rudnitsky judges as being “most appropriate”.

The relative inaccuracy of Meyerhold’s adaptation is, of course, enlightening in its own right, as an indication of the director’s attitude towards period drama which adds further weight to the suggestion that Meyerholdian theatre was not bound by strict notions of either linear or historical time. However, more significant in this context were Meyerhold’s choice of era and his contextualization of the performance in terms of the period of its creation, the period of Louis XIV. To Meyerhold’s mind, as both Braun and Rudnitsky emphasize, Molière’s play can only make sense within the framework of Molière’s era:

[T]here are works which cannot be understood properly by the modern spectator unless he is able both to grasp all the subtleties of the plot and to penetrate the intangible atmosphere which enveloped both the actors and the audience of the author’s day. There are plays which cannot be appreciated unless they are presented

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46 Meyerhold, ‘*Don Juan*’, in Braun (1969, 1998), p. 99. Worrall’s description of the Moscow Art Theatre *Julius Caesar* can be found in chapter one, p. 54 above.
in a form which attempts to create for the modern spectator conditions identical to those which the spectator of the past enjoyed. Such a play is Molière’s *Don Juan.*

In *Don Juan*, Meyerhold used the era of the author to define the temporal location of the performance. By 1926, and *The Government Inspector*, he had developed the influence of the author beyond a device intended to merely contextualize the production. On a simple, textual level, Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector* differed significantly from Gogol’s original. The director restructured the text, for example, relocating the action from nondescript provincial Russia to a larger town reminiscent of the Tsarist capital St. Petersburg and recasting Gogol’s petty bureaucrats as leading government officials. In its style and atmosphere, Meyerhold’s production arguably placed more emphasis on Gogol the man than the play text *The Government Inspector.* In staging *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold aimed not simply to stage one of Gogol’s plays, but instead to create a production which was inherently Gogolian; a production defined by the personality and the world of Gogol. Mikhail Chekhov, then an actor at the Moscow Art Theatre who had himself played Khlestakov in 1921, comments that:

> [Meyerhold] realised that to stage *The Government Inspector* and only *The Government Inspector* would be to torment himself with an unbearable vow of silence. *The Government Inspector* started to grow until it split wide open; through the cracks there gushed a raging torrent: *Dead Souls, The Nevsky Prospect,* Podkolyosin, Poprishchev, the dreams of the Mayoress, horrors, guffaws, raptures, the screams of the ladies, the fears of petty bureaucrats...”

The extension of the text of *The Government Inspector* to include the totality of Gogol’s oeuvre was both a literal and a metaphorical process. Meyerhold firstly constructed a new...

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50 This relocation was implicit rather than explicit, and references to ‘an Inspector from Petersburg’ in the text were retained.

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version of the text by combining scenes from the six versions Gogol had produced. In addition, he introduced new characters, a chambermaid to accompany Osip, a soldier dressed in light blue and, most significantly, the omnipresent Officer-in-transit, a military man who appeared to be accompanying Khlestakov on his travels.\textsuperscript{52} The Officer was a silent role, possibly a gambler, a character lifted from Gogol’s novel \textit{The Gamblers}, Meyerhold including a suggestion of Khlestakov’s and the Officer’s gambling past through the pack of playing cards the Officer held.\textsuperscript{53} The Officer acted as a counterpoint to Khlestakov, melancholic and foreboding, a presence the conman could not shake off and possibly even a fragment of his own personality, a sinister alter-ego.\textsuperscript{54} Meyerhold also incorporated lines lifted from Gogol’s prose work: Braun mentions the inclusion of lines from \textit{The Gamblers, Marriage, Vladimir of the Third Degree} and the \textit{Petersburg Stories}, as well as a reference to Gogol’s most famous novel, \textit{Dead Souls}:

Moreover, on the departure of Khlestakov and Osip at the close of Act Four the theatre was made to echo with the ghostly jingling of harness bells, reminding the audience of the flight of Chichikov’s celestial troika at the end of the first part of \textit{Dead Souls}.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Unlike the other characters introduced by Meyerhold, the Soldier in blue did not interact with those around him and was treated as invisible by the other characters. Nick Worrall notes that “according to Michael Chekhov, he was like a hole, an empty space in the play, symbolizing an emptiness in its inner world. There was a drunken pathos in his presence, which photographs of the play substantiate where he is seen usually sitting with his head slightly bowed and his figure downcast.” Worrall (1972), p. 77.

\textsuperscript{53} The pack of marked playing cards which Khlestakov and the Officer used also constituted a reference to \textit{The Gamblers}: as in Gogol’s novel, the cards were given a name, Adelaida Ivanova.

\textsuperscript{54} The literal division of Khlestakov’s personality into two figures reflects the influence of modern psychology on Meyerhold, particularly Freud’s division of the human psyche into id, ego and superego. The division of a personality into two characters also has a precedent in Meyerhold’s earlier productions and can be seen in his use of co-dependent pairs of characters, for example the combination of Bruno and Estrugo in \textit{The Magnanimous Cuckold}. It is interesting to note that this sort of character pairing is thematic in Russian folk or popular theatre, and in the tradition of Russian literature (for example in Dostoevsky’s \textit{The Double}). For details of co-dependent character pairings in Russian folk theatre see Alexander Kozintsev, ‘Forma and Yerema, Max and Moritz, Beavis and Butthead: Images of Twin Clowns in Three Cultures’, \textit{International Journal of Humor Research}, 15 (2002), 419 – 439. <http://www.degruyter.de/journals.humor2002/pdf/15_419.pdf+forma+and+yerema&hl=en&ie=UTF-8>[accessed 14 April 2003].

For Meyerhold, these references were not just literary word-play, but instead defined the style of the production as a whole, and were even used in rehearsal as practical advice for the actors shaping their performances:

We invented the Charwoman [Osip’s chambermaid companion] and then found a Charwoman in Gogol himself, and she gave us a definite prescription for playing her. By re-reading Gogol’s works, the actor discovers gestures and movements which he can incorporate in the lines of, say, Khlestakov. They give him a firm foundation which will determine his stance, his gait, his mode of dress, and so on…

Meyerhold’s reconstruction of Gogol’s text recalls the use of classical mythology by the Athenian playwrights, as these literary references presupposed knowledge on the audience’s part of the original text of *The Government Inspector* which could be juxtaposed with the Meyerholdian text. This mythological construction draws the spectator into the performance, suggesting that the true experience of the play is in the collision between the original text and the director’s interpretation.

In addition, Meyerhold attempted to stage the production so as to evoke resonances of what he considered to be a Gogolian spirit. Gogol’s world, as reflected in his literary work, was a nightmarish place, often devoid of logic and out of control. His phantasmagorical worldview is particularly evident in his short stories, and can be seen, for example, in his story *The Nose*, in which the central character awakes one morning to find a nose in his bread roll, which subsequently takes on a life of its own as he tries to return it to its owner. Meyerhold was fascinated by Gogol’s belief in the grotesqueness of Russia and the tragedy

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57 See *The Nose*, in *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans. by Ronald Wilks (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1971), pp. 42 – 70. The (relatively obscure) opera version of this story, with music by Dmitri Shostakovich (1928), was recently produced in Berlin in co-operation with the biomechanics workshops run by the MCB (The Berlin Mime Centre) under the title *Meyerhold Trifft Shostakovich* (Meyerhold meets Shostakovich), November 2001.
of life, which in his work is manifested in an almost horrific atmosphere of foreboding, rather than in the passive symbolist sense. It was this perception of Gogol’s mentality which prompted Meyerhold’s production, a nightmare where static tableaux come to life and people are turned into mannequins. The deliberately unsettling contrasts which reflected both the collage device and Meyerhold’s concept of the grotesque were largely motivated by the director’s desire to create a stage world which visually manifested the spirit of the playwright before the audience.

By choosing to locate the production temporally not in Gogol’s text but in Gogol himself, Meyerhold opened up the possibility of a more complex, and less literal, interpretation of the notion of time in performance. In his production of Don Juan, Meyerhold demonstrated his belief that the play can only make sense within the context of the era of its production, a belief reflected in Golovin’s elaborate design work. In The Government Inspector, the spatial structure of the stage was also indicative of the director’s approach to the temporal construction of the performance. Rather than using the stage space to evoke the spirit of Gogol’s era, Meyerhold constructed a series of parallel time frames on the stage. The trucks, with their detailed realism, represented Gogol’s Russia, the time of the play text. However, the restriction of this realism to the restricted space of the trucks allowed the audience to read this time frame as separate from the wider, theatrical, space surrounding them.

58 The Russian symbolist movement had produced symbolist readings of Gogol’s work and Meyerhold himself considered a production of The Government Inspector during his symbolist period. Braun cites Rozanov’s Legend of the Great Inquisitor, Bely’s Gogol, and Merezhkovsky’s Gogol and the Devil as “attempts [...] to reinterpret The Government Inspector in the light of the writing’s of Gogol’s later ‘mystical’ period” (Braun, 1979, 1998, p. 222). Braun also gives 1907 as the year of Meyerhold’s earlier plan to produce The Government Inspector (at Komissarzhevskaya’s theatre), and claims that this production “would almost certainly have followed the symbolist reading” (ibid., p. 222).
The time frame associated with this theatrical space is problematic. Meyerhold claimed that the dark wood, semi-circular back wall represented the era of the play’s production (1830s or 1840s), but this vague nod towards a specific era is clearly constructed differently to the realistic construction of the era on the trucks. However, the space cannot simply be equated with real time, Soviet Russia in 1926, because it is also differentiated from the auditorium and the world of the spectator. As such, it exists as a composite space, both theatrical and representational, both 1830 and 1926. It is this feature of the space which makes it appropriate for the (dis)location of the most nightmarish or dream-like sequences of the production.

As a result, within the theatre building, Meyerhold embodies the time of the play text, the time of the creation of the performance and the time of its replaying (the theatrical time), and the time of those watching. Through this construction, the theatrical space distances the audience from the realistic space, asking them to question the relationship of their world to this historical world.

The structure of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* is straightforward, divided into five acts, and then subdivided into scenes, following a linear route from exposition to

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59 See Gvozdev’s description of the trucks, chapter four, p. 187 above.
60 This analysis of Meyerhold’s use of multiple time frames was prompted by and is indebted to Stephen Daldry’s work on his 1992 production of J. B. Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls*. Daldry’s analysis of his production reflects a thematic overlap with Meyerhold’s work, drawing on Priestley’s interest in Jung and Ouspensky, for example. Daldry discusses Priestley’s play in terms of the era of its creation (1945), and the era of its setting (the Edwardian period). In addition, he adds a further time frame, the era of its reception, and uses a typically Meyerholdian device to emphasize this, allowing the audience to be lit at a key moment in the performance. As an explanation, Daldry states: “[for this reason] the audience is lit up, so that it isn’t just the people of 1945 – another leap is made – it’s the people in the audience saying “Is this what we want? Do we want to go back to this? We’ve been told for the last ten years that we should go back to Edwardian values. Do we want these values?” And then a resounding “No” from Priestley.” (Stephen Daldry interviewed by Giles Croft, transcript of National Theatre Platform Paper, 16 September 1992, p. 8). Further analysis of Daldry’s work can be found in Wendy Lesser, *A Director Calls: Stephen Daldry and the Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).
conclusion. Meyerhold’s production, however, focused not on the text, but on the man who wrote it. Linearity and logic took second place. Meyerhold undercut any aspect of the production which required linear logical development.

This rejection of linear logical development is reflected in the methods of characterization Meyerhold employed in the production, which drew on *Commedia dell'Arte* stock figures and the concept of the mask. Braun, in his discussion of the Meyerhold Theatre’s production of *The Forest* (1924), identifies the director’s use of social masks in characterization:

Meyerhold interpreted Ostrovsky’s genre portrait of bigoted country gentry in the terms of the class war, rejecting character development in favour of ‘social masks’ whose interplay was the production’s true end.  

These social masks, based on Meyerhold’s list of *Ampula Aktera* (Actor’s *Emploi*), reappeared in *The Government Inspector*, although Meyerhold’s conception of character in this production was far more complex than the playing out of stereotypes or stock roles.  

In his observations on *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold complicates the notion of social masks by seemingly rejecting generalization in principle:

> When I warn an actor of the danger of lapsing into abstractions, I forbid the very mention of masks because they are too risky.

The mask, therefore, functions as a basis for characterization, but not as a series of concrete rules. Reflecting on *The Government Inspector*, Meyerhold undercuts any illusions

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62 Meyerhold’s list of roles for the actor, the Actor’s *Emploi*, developed in 1921, was clearly related to his understanding of the stock characters of the *Commedia dell’Arte*. For a full list of the *Ampula Aktera*, see appendix two in Marjorie Hoover’s *Meyerhold: The Art of Conscious Theater* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974) pp. 297 - 310. Robert Leach also provides a discussion of Meyerhold’s list of set roles (1989, pp. 74 – 77), and re-emphasizes their connection to the socio-political role of Meyerhold’s theatre in his discussion of Georgy Plekhanov’s dialectical materialism (see p. 133 in particular).

that his conception of characterization is a simple, abstract process set in direct opposition to Stanislavsky’s System. Meyerhold’s development of the use of masks indicates an increasing complexity in characterization following his principle of freedom through restriction, a notion adapted from the Japanese Noh Theatre and repeatedly reflected in his theatrical theorization. In line with the Cubist theme of multiplication akin to the multiplication of locations and temporalities identified above, Erast Garin’s interpretation of Khlestakov rejected linear character development, and became a kaleidoscope of personalities, shifting from episode to episode. Boris Alpers, a Russian theatre critic and the author of a study on Meyerhold’s theatre entitled The Theatre of the Social Mask, highlights how, in his portrayal of Khlestakov, Erast Garin used a sophisticated variation of the mask from scene to scene:

[Garin’s] first appearance was in only one of the ‘social masks’, which the critic Boris Alpers saw as being adopted, chameleon-like by Khlestakov, to meet every new situation. The critic saw in Garin’s interpretation of the part a different person in every scene, someone who donned a mask with the same kind of facility with which he changed aspects of his external appearance - from square spectacle frames to round, from shabby suit to gleaming uniform, from uniform to the silk waistcoat and elegance of a St. Petersburg dandy.

Meyerhold’s approach to characterization was clearly influenced by his interest in the Commedia dell’Arte, and reflected his disruption of linear temporality in performance:

Since the point of the mask is to identify the character completely at his first appearance, gradual development of character can be discarded.

It is through the mask, therefore, that Meyerhold can abandon linearity in character development, and subsequently move towards non-linearity in the temporal development of

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65 Leach (1989), p. 74. The principle of freedom through restriction is central to Meyerhold’s conception of actor training and is reflected in biomechanics: the actor is taught a series of set patterns of movement, which develop the skills required to move freely on stage.
66 Worrall (1972), p. 82.
the production as a whole without entirely abandoning the development of the play’s narrative. Meyerhold’s use of social masks and characters easily identifiable to the audience demonstrate his desire to retain a theatrical experience with which the viewer can identify. Again, like the Cubist artist, the director resists moving into pure abstraction. The process of estrangement developed through Meyerhold’s aesthetic functions in the gaps between the stage world and reality: it is simultaneously a process of identification and alienation.

VI

Dream Time: Meyerhold and Bergson

Meyerhold’s shift from the text as an objective construction to man, in this instance Gogol, as a subjective construction, opens up the stage to a subjective rather than objective perception of time. The notion of time as a subjective experience is central to the philosophy of turn of the century French anti-positivist thinker Henri Bergson, whose work argues for two separate concepts of time. Bergson’s notion of mathematical time is time as categorized for its daily, universal use. The division of time into seconds, minutes, days and so forth, results from the mathematical construction imposed onto temporal progression, and consequently, Bergson concludes, is a series of false distinctions.

Bergson’s overriding philosophical project is concerned with the division of quantities into those which are measurable, referred to as extensive, and those which are not, referred to as intensive. In order for a quantity to become extensive, Bergson argues, it must be possible to conceive of it as existing in units, and of these units as being added to, containing in the higher values all of the values beforehand: in order to identify three metres, one must be able to see two metres as being contained within three. Intensive measurements do not have
this, vital, quality. To Bergson’s mind, the division of time into units, and the subsequent attempts to turn time into an extensive quantity, are distortions of the true nature of temporal progression. Bergson’s argument is that in order to measure time (to make it extensive) it must be distorted: spatialized, turned into units and universalized. Bergson sets up this mathematical time in opposition to a subjective notion of time, his duration, or durée, immeasurable time as experienced by the individual. In life, Bergson argues, we substitute this true, subjective time with constructed, mathematical time.

Bergson’s ideas form part of the basis of Cubism’s anti-positivist aesthetic. Antliff and Leighton identify Bergson’s philosophy as central to the anti-positivist thinking which redefined artistic processes during the Cubist movement. Bergson’s belief in a subjective notion of time was significant for the Cubist artists in that it freed the spatial structure of their art from linearity and logic, and that it posited a rhythmical organization of space that could act directly on the viewer’s consciousness. According to Antliff and Leighton, this concept of rhythmic space can be found in both Bergson’s philosophy and in Gleizes and Metzinger’s influential manifesto Du Cubisme.68

However, Meyerhold’s production of The Government Inspector reflects the influence of both of Bergson’s temporal models. The linear temporal progression of the plot as specified by Gogol is identifiable in the performance, forming a parallel to Bergson’s mathematical time: despite the division of the text into episodes, Meyerhold maintained the overall order of the plot as specified by Gogol (unlike his earlier work on The Forest).69 However, the

68 See Antliff and Leighton (2001), p. 85. There are records of the discussion of Bergson’s philosophy amongst the Cubist artists, for example in the October 1912 article in Fantasio cited by Antliff and Leighton (see footnote 51, introduction, p. 29 above).
69 See Braun (1979, 1998), p. 224. Although Meyerhold generally maintained the order of action as prescribed by Gogol in The Government Inspector, he did make some changes including moving the first
linear progression of the play’s plot was interrupted in Meyerhold’s production by the introduction of tangential sequences, following the thought processes or fantasies of an individual character. These divergences into fantasy or dream time reflect the subjective temporality of Bergson’s *durée*, and the subjectivity in perception advocated by the anti-positivist and Cubist movements as a whole.

Of the tangential sequences devised by Meyerhold, arguably the best-known is episode five, ‘Filled with the Tend’rest Love,’ an exploration of the fantasy life of the Mayor’s wife Anna Andreevna. Prompted by a line in the text suggesting her vanity, Meyerhold created an episode exploring the character’s self-image as seductress, where a large number of soldiers appeared out of her wardrobe whilst she dressed and presenting her with gifts, one even shooting himself after her rejection [see plate 63]. Through this sequence, Meyerhold makes the character’s motivation manifest to the audience, creating a subjective viewing experience in which the spectator engages with the world of the play through the eyes of one character.70

Other sequences sat between the reality of the plot and the fantasy of the characters. Significant amongst these was Meyerhold’s work on the text’s bribe scene (act four/episode nine), in which the town officials offer Khlestakov bribes to secure favours or protect their own interests. Meyerhold’s interpretation was dream-like in its construction: Khlestakov, passed out drunk downstage, was offered bribes by all the officials simultaneously.71

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70 This construction is interesting within the context of early Soviet Russia, particularly when set against the increasing popularity of cinema. Through creating the fantasy sequence, Meyerhold mimics on stage one of the apparently unique aspects of cinema, the ability to allow the viewer to look through another’s eyes.

71 A description of Meyerhold’s interpretation of the bribe scene can be found in chapter three, pp. 160 – 161 above.
Plate 63  *The Government Inspector* (1926) episode five: Filled with the Tend’rest Love, design by Victor Kiselyov.
Unlike 'Filled with the Tend'rest Love,' which introduced fantasy time through the expansion of an idea in the text, Meyerhold's bribery sequence functioned as a contraction of Gogol's scene and the dream-like construction re-cast an element of the plot as potentially fictional. Whereas the former sequence shifted the audience's perspective, presenting them with the opportunity to view the world of the play through the eyes of an individual character whilst leaving the plot intact, in other words, functioning as a tangent, the latter undercuts the validity of the plot itself, which could now be nothing more than Khlestakov's dream.

It is the unsettling realization that the performance could be equally interpreted either as a series of events common to all characters or as the fantasy of one character which highlights the function of collage in Meyerhold's theatre, particularly as the director refuses to resolve this apparent paradox. The introduction of fantasy time removes any sense of a reliable, objective viewpoint which the theatrical performance can offer, bringing to a head the steady redefinition of the relationship between the audience and the performance event occurring in Meyerhold's theatre since 1906.

In his early rebellion against the Art Theatre, Meyerhold attempted to engender intimacy between the stage and the auditorium by replacing the objective distance of verisimilitude with a subjective intimacy akin to the relationship between worshipper and icon. In his productions of The Fairground Booth, the director's construction of the performance was seen as parallel to the construction of the Cubist artwork in that it emphasized the subjective world-view of the director over the objective constructions of verisimilitude. Meyerhold's work on The Government Inspector, in contrast, did not merely reject
objectivity in favour of subjectivity, but instead deconstructed the possibility of objectivity itself.

Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector* is an experience constructed through the eyes of its participants; from the writer Gogol to the characters he created, each shapes an element of the production and there remains no external, objective place from which the viewer can construct absolute truth. In this sense, the production parallels exactly the notions of anti-positivism found in Cubist art. The comparison of plates 64 and 65, images of the Eiffel Tower by artists George Seurat (1889) and Robert Delaunay (1911) demonstrates this parallel. Seurat's work, although moving towards subjectivity in representation through the post-impressionist use of pointillism for which the artist is best known, maintains a sense of objectivity through the external viewpoint provided for the spectator. In contrast, Delaunay's Cubist painting deconstructs the objective viewpoint, presenting the observer with the different sides of the monument simultaneously. There is no longer one objective viewpoint with which to equate the painting, and it is impossible to go to Paris, stand in one place, and view the form of the Eiffel Tower as Delaunay has chosen to depict it. Meyerhold's use of different temporal processes has a similar effect on the audience, removing external, objective truth and shifting the role of the audience from viewer to interpreter.

The notions of subjectivity and objectivity in audience response are a fundamental concern in the theatre of the twentieth century, particularly in the socio-political theatre of figures such as Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. Brecht argues for an audience of objective observers, who, presented with the facts, may make an informed decision. At this juncture, a terminological issue should be resolved: naturalistic verisimilitude has been referred to as
Plate 64  Eiffel Tower Georges Seurat, 1889
Plate 65  
*Eiffel Tower* Robert Delaunay, 1911
an objective form of theatre throughout this thesis. This draws on the notion of objectivity as it is defined in art criticism, a representation which establishes reality as an objective absolute. Early photographic practice, for example, regarded the camera as the epitomic tool for the objective representation of the world. Brecht regards the audience experience at the naturalistic theatre as primarily subjective, defined by emotional intimacy to the extent that it impairs the spectator’s ability to think rationally. It is by distancing the production from verisimilitude (by making it less objective) that Brecht obtains a greater objectivity in the viewing experience.

The similarities between Meyerhold’s theatre and the work of Brecht are well-documented. A number of the techniques considered epitomic of Brecht’s aesthetic first occurred in Meyerhold’s work, and Meyerhold’s theatre certainly employed a form of estrangement closely related to the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt. However, the application of collage as a framework for reading Meyerhold’s aesthetic suggests a fundamental difference between the approaches of Meyerhold and Brecht. Brecht’s theatre, through its emphasis on objectivity, maintains the integrity of the categories of the objective and the subjective. Brecht’s implication is that, beyond the deceptions of over-reliance on emotional intimacy, an objective truth still exists. This is equally true of Meyerhold’s early productions: The Fairground Booth is subjective in that it maintains the possibility of objectivity, emphasizing the world-view of the director as the driving force behind the production.

72 See footnote 27, chapter two, p. 103 above.
73 Leach refers to Meyerhold’s 1906 production of The Fairground Booth as “an almost perfect example of ‘defamiliarization’ – or even ‘alienation’ – before the terms were invented.” (1989, p. 128).
The multiple world-views contained within Meyerhold's production of *The Government Inspector* entirely discard the categories of subjective and objective. The constantly shifting viewpoint, manifested spatially in the constantly shifting stage configuration, undercuts objectivity itself. As Einstein posits through relativity theory, in a world without absolutes, the definition of truth rests with the observer: in Einstein's world, the measurer is king, defining the ever-shifting boundaries from which the measurements must be taken. In Meyerhold's theatre, the impetus rests with the audience member, who must define the boundaries of the production. The spectator's role, in other words, is the construction of truth. There is no pre-determined objectivity to resort to, and the spectator is empowered as creative partner alongside the director, writer and actor.

This empowerment of the spectator is demonstrated in Meyerhold's construction of the final moments of *The Government Inspector*. Through the cycle of observation emerging from his interpretation of the Dumb Scene, Meyerhold creates a moment of suspension in the theatrical process: the play is over, but real life has not yet recommenced. In order to break the cycle of observation, the audience must be active, they must signal the end of the suspended moment through a physical action (leaving the theatre, starting to applaud). Meyerhold makes the spectator's role tangible and physical. In the same way that the audience must intellectually define the boundaries of the production, they must also define the production's end, its ultimate physical boundary.

**VII**

**Meyerhold and Eisenstein: The Collage/Montage Question**

Returning finally to Bely's observations on the spatial and temporal facets of artistic creation, it is through the theories of cinematic montage that a clear link between the
isolated image, the fragment, and the image within a continuum of images, the combination of fragments, can be found. The clearest and best-known exponent of these ideas was initially a pupil at Meyerhold’s workshop, film maker Sergei Eisenstein.74

The relationship between collage and montage theory is problematic. The montage device arguably fulfils the criteria of an adaptation of collage which functions in both the third, spatial, and fourth, temporal, dimensions. Marjorie Perloff classes montage as a “cognate” of collage, a temporal expression of a spatial device:

It is customary to distinguish between collage and montage: the former refers, of course, to spatial relationships, the latter to temporal; the former to static objects, the latter, originally a film term, to things in motion. Accordingly, *collage* is generally used when referring to the visual arts; *montage*, to the verbal.75

Despite the differences between the terms, Perloff’s ultimate conclusion is that “*collage* is the master term, montage techniques being an offshoot of early collage practice”, quoting Denis Bablet’s claim that “a collage can be a montage and a montage a collage.”76

This definition, however, allows for far too much slippage between the terms. If indeed they are so similar, the need to differentiate linguistically between the two is surely

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74 Eisenstein was one of the first students to join Meyerhold’s workshop in 1921. He remained with Meyerhold’s company until 1923, when he left to work with Proletkult. Eisenstein regarded his split from Meyerhold as one of the most traumatic periods in his life, writing in his memoirs of the “purgatory” he endured when he was “expelled from the Gates of Heaven, from the ranks of his Theatre, when I ‘dared’ to acquire a collective of my own elsewhere - in the Proletkult.” Sergei Eisenstein, *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein, selected works volume IV*, ed. by Richard Taylor, trans. by William Powell (British Film Institute, London, 1995), p. 106.


76 Ibid., p. 246 footnote 5. The issue is further complicated by Jean-Jacques Thomas’ argument (acknowledged by Perloff) that montage promotes unity across the fragments, whereas collage ultimately aims for disunity. Thomas’ argument highlights a fundamental difference between collage and montage theory which, despite their similarities, establishes them as separate arts. It is the belief in a difference between collage and montage which prompts a collage reading of Meyerhold’s theatre, rather than simply reiterating the argument that his work constitutes a stage form of the cinematic montage such as is seen in Eisenstein’s films.
redundant. As Perloff observes, montage was originally a film term. In the first instance, the term simply denotes the process of film editing, the Russian *montazh*, or the French *montage*. This usage is akin to the pre-avant-garde use of the term collage, an adaptation of the French verb *coller*. Both terms underwent a redefinition during the High Modernist period, eventually coming to imply a more complex process than the mechanics of combining fragments.

Avant-garde cinematic montage predates Eisenstein and is initially attributed to the film maker Lev Kuleshov. Kuleshovian montage, however, is less sophisticated than Eisenstein’s theory, positing that images can be combined for specific effect, and that the meaning of an image can be altered when it is placed in combination with other images, resulting in the well-known representation of montage theory as \( A + B = C \). Kuleshov experimentally verified the latter principle by showing an audience a shot of an expressionless face followed by an image of either a bowl of soup, a body in a coffin, or a child playing, and evaluating the spectators’ responses. The results are described by Kuleshov’s pupil, Vsevolod Pudovkin, later a contemporary of Eisenstein:

> When we showed the three combinations to an audience which had not been let into the secret, the result was terrific. The public raved about the acting of the artist. They pointed out the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup, were touched and moved by the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman,

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77 “There is nothing mystical about montage. Montage is the ordinary word for film editing in French and Russia (*montazh*), Italian (*montaggio*) and Spanish (*montaje*). It is a word with strong practical and even industrial overtones.” Geoffrey Nowell Smith, ‘Eisenstein on Montage’, in Eisenstein, *volume 2: Towards a Theory of Montage* ed. by Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1991), pp. xiii – xvi (p. xiii).

78 Kuleshov and Meyerhold are known to have worked in close proximity in the early 1920s (the period during which Meyerhold developed biomechanics and Kuleshov worked on cinematic montage), sharing the same building in Moscow in the early 1920s. Leach suggests the cross-over of students between the two masters, indicating that each was at least aware of the other’s work during this period. This is supported by Eisenstein, who is known to have worked at the Meyerhold workshop from 1921 and the Kuleshov workshop from 1923 (see Leach, 1989, p. 121).
and admired the light, happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play. But we knew that in all three cases the face was exactly the same.\textsuperscript{79}

In contrast, Eisensteinian montage focuses on "collision", a process similar to the juxtaposition defining avant-garde collage practice.\textsuperscript{80} In his article 'Beyond the Shot', Eisenstein advocates a multi-levelled montage technique, incorporating collision both within the individual image and in the assembly of the images into a sequence, providing a direct link between the shot, or image, isolated and the shot in sequence:

So, montage is conflict.
Conflict lies at the basis of every art. (A unique ‘figurative’ transformation of the dialectic.)
The shot is then a montage cell. Consequently we must also examine it from the point of view of conflict.
Conflict within the shot is:
potential montage that, in its growing intensity, breaks through its four-sided cage and pushes its conflict out into montage impulses between the montage fragments [...].\textsuperscript{81}

Eisenstein’s personal and professional links with Meyerhold are well-documented, not least by the film maker himself.\textsuperscript{82} It is also interesting to note that the two films which are fundamental to the development of montage theory early in Eisenstein’s career coincided in their release with the productions central to the development of staged montage and staged collage at the Meyerhold Theatre: Strike, Eisenstein’s first film, was completed at the end of 1924 and premiered in 1925, coinciding with Meyerhold’s production of The Forest

\textsuperscript{82} Particularly in his memoirs (see footnote 74, p. 255 above).
(1924); Battleship Potemkin was completed in December 1925 and screened in 1926, the year that Meyerhold produced The Government Inspector.  

Marjorie Hoover’s use of the phrase “‘cinematification’ of the theater’ to describe Meyerhold’s work on The Government Inspector reflects the cross-over between Meyerholdian and Eisensteinian techniques during this period. The fifteen episodes of The Government Inspector were presented to the audience independently, as linear fragments parallel to the cinematic shots. Although the transitions between episodes were smooth, designed to maintain the rhythmic flow of the production, the movement from one episode to the next was still emphasized. No attempt was made to hide the boundaries between the episodes, and often these transitions were highlighted by the dimming of the stage lights. The spatial and rhythmic contrasts in the combination of the episodes demonstrated Meyerhold’s concern for what Eisenstein terms collision, the collagists, juxtaposition.

There is, however, a fundamental aspect of Meyerhold’s aesthetic which makes it necessary to consider his work as engaging specifically with collage processes. The slippage in usage between the terms collage and montage may account for the lack of research associating Meyerhold’s theatre with collage practice. If collage and montage are seen as interchangeable, then the well-documented connections between his theatre and montage practice would be seen as a sufficient investigation into Meyerhold’s engagement with the collapsed collage-montage aesthetic. However, there is one key difference between collage

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and cinematic montage. Montage theory relies on linearity in presentation. This is particularly true of Eisenstein's concept of montage before the introduction of sound in cinema forced him to develop a more encompassing application of his ideas beyond the combination of shots.\(^{85}\) The final impression of the sequence of shots relies on the viewer engaging with each image linearly, committing the first shot to memory, A, and then combining the memory of the first shot with the second shot, B, (or the memory of B, as film footage is constantly moving) in order to form the impression, C. C is therefore not simply A plus B, but the memory of A plus (the memory of) B. In contrast, the fragments of a collage are not presented to the audience in such a linear sequence, even though the viewer may chose to impose linearity by focusing on one aspect of the image at a time.\(^{86}\) The simultaneous reception of all the elements of the collage is what makes its use of fragmentation and juxtaposition different to that of montage.

Collage does not rely on the viewer's memory of an earlier image with which the current image is juxtaposed. Instead, both images are concurrently manifested on the canvas. The simultaneous presence of image fragments on the collage canvas allows the viewer to engage simultaneously with more than one reality. Through the displacement of the

\(^{85}\) It should be noted that Eisenstein significantly modified his theory of montage in light of the advent of sound in cinema. Geoffrey Nowell Smith equates the advent of sound cinema with the rise of Socialist Realism in Soviet Russia, claiming that "both represent a similar turn away from modernism and a turn towards (or a rejoining with) a humanist notion of realism that modernism had repudiated [...] The sound film, developed throughout the world as dialogue film, becomes in the Soviet context the favoured vehicle for the populism and pseudo-humanism of Stalinist ideology." As a result, Eisenstein was forced to expand his theory of montage between 1937 and 1940 to engage with the new style championed in Soviet Russia. Smith continues: "Rather than see the concept of montage limited to that of a special case of film editing, [Eisenstein] argues that montage as he himself conceived it in his earliest writings on the subject is in fact a special case of montage in general, which is a principle to be found underlying artistic construction of all kinds." Geoffrey Nowell Smith, 'Eisenstein on Montage', in Glenny and Taylor (1991, 1994), p. xiv.

\(^{86}\) Gestalt Theory, for example, would argue that it is impossible for the viewer to not impose linearity on their reception of the fragments of a collage, as the brain cannot engage simultaneously with more than one impression.
fragments from their role in reality onto the collaged canvas, Harold Rosenberg claims that "collage invites the viewer to respond with a multiple consciousness". 87

It is this aspect of the collage process which becomes evident in Meyerhold's work on The Government Inspector. The main process of juxtaposition operating in Meyerhold's collaged theatre is the juxtaposition between life (the reality outside of the theatre) and art (the reality of the theatrical experience). All other juxtapositions which can be identified in Meyerhold's work arguably contribute to this fundamental process, the construction of a performance event in which the art on stage exists in a collaged relationship to the life of the audience outside of the theatre walls. This juxtaposition can be seen clearly in the director's simultaneous creation of fictional and theatrical space on stage, manifest through the spatial juxtaposition between the stage as fictional environment and the stage as stage. Here, Meyerhold's theatre draws on the function of the found object in the canvas collage: a piece of the real world enters the artwork and redefines its boundaries. In the collaged artwork, this process frequently questions the literal frame of the image, the point at which the canvas collides with the world that surrounds it (as can be seen in Picasso's ironic framing of his Still Life with Chair Caning with a piece of rope). In theatre, the process questions the philosophical notion of framing the performance in terms of its socio-political context.

Conclusions

One has to choose: something cannot be simultaneously true [vrai] and verisimilar [vraisemblable].

- Georges Braque

Part One

Meyerhold, Collage and Audience:
Extending the Implications of Collage in Performance

I
Collage and Audience

The re-emergence of collage practice amongst the avant-garde artists was a significant development in modernist cultural practice. Cultural contextualization is fundamental in understanding the work of artists in any medium. Meyerhold's work has been contextualized in political, social and cultural terms since the re-establishment of scholarship related to the director in the mid-1950s. The lack of research connecting Meyerhold's work with collage, modernism's "major turning point", is a clear oversight.

The application of collage principles as a framework for reading Meyerhold's construction of the stage image suggests a new perspective on the director's aesthetic. The identification of collage as an underlying organizational principle of Meyerhold's productions brings to light thematic aspects of his work which have not been fully investigated to date (for example, his repeated recourse to the principles of fragmentation and juxtaposition). Furthermore, beyond the formal significance of the device in his work, the staged

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2 See footnote 54, introduction, p. 30.
adaptation of collage processes has a metaphysical significance which suggests that Meyerhold’s theatre reflected the chief philosophical issues of the High Modernist period.

In addition to the formal and metaphysical implications of the device for Meyerhold’s construction of the performance itself, collage practice also has the potential to inform analysis of other aspects of the director’s theoretical and practical approach to performance. As a preface to the concluding section of this study, one such aspect of Meyerhold’s work will be addressed: the director’s construction of the actor-audience relationship in performance.

Meyerhold’s construction of the actor-audience relationship appears to balance his desire for unification between performer and spectator with his persistent use of an end-on staging structure. The former Sohn Theatre building on Mayakovsky Square, in which Meyerhold worked from 1922 to 1931, may not have had a literal proscenium arch, but it retained what André Van Gyssegham describes as an “action-space”, an area of the building where the performance is primarily situated. 3

The use of an action-space in Meyerhold’s theatre can be elucidated by comparing his work to that of Nikolai Okhlopkov. In his desire to prompt the actor and the spectator to “clasp hands in fraternity”, Okhlopkov reconfigured the relationship between the stage and the auditorium in its entirety, creating a versatile performance space which could accommodate a variety of staging configurations. 4 Norris Houghton describes the potential of Okhlopkov’s space, the Realistic or Presnaya Krasnaya Theatre:

3 Van Gyssegham (1943), p. 25.
In *The Iron Flood* [premiered in 1934] they [the seats] were grouped along one side and end of the hillside which was the stage. Sometimes the form may be circus-like, with the audience sitting in a circle around the stage; sometimes the stage may be at one end of the room like a dais in front of which the spectators sit facing it as in a lecture hall; at other times, the stage may be lozenge-shaped, the audience sitting in the four empty corners of the room; again they may sit on three sides of the stage as it extends out from the fourth wall. In one production Okhlopkov placed much of the action on bridges set up over the heads of the audience. 

The comparison of Meyerhold's action-space with the work of Okhlopov is in some ways deceptive. As a former student of Meyerhold, Okhlopov's innovations were inspired by projects at the Meyerhold Theatre, notably El Lissitzky's designs for the unrealised production of Erdman's *I Want a Child*. In his productions, Okhlopov realised concepts which state suppression prevented Meyerhold from bringing to life, but are evident in his unrealised projects, particularly in Barkhin and Vakhtangov's designs for the new GosTIM building on Mayakovskv Square.

However, in Meyerhold's realised productions, the action-space results in a degree of sustained separation between the actors and the audience. This separation can be construed as paradoxical: the division of the space seems to work in opposition to Meyerhold's desired actor-audience intimacy indicating an underlying disparity between the director's theatrical theory and his performance practice. 

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6 A partial explanation for this paradox can be found in the economic constraints placed on Meyerhold's theatre post-1917. In 'The Reconstruction of the Theatre' (in Braun, 1969, 1998), Meyerhold outlines the complete physical restructuring of the theatre building as central to achieving his revolutionary goals. In the difficult economic climate of 1930, Meyerhold attributed the failure of his theatre, and of theatre in general, to achieve this revolutionary vision to predominantly economic factors, claiming that revolution in the "modern theatre" was "being delayed only by the lack of funds to re-equip our stage and auditorium" (ibid., p. 256). Meyerhold evidently found the proscenium stage restrictive, and initiated a major rebuilding project as soon as funds became available. However, the majority of the theatres in which he worked had an end-on stage structure, including the former Sohn Theatre in Moscow where his company was based between 1920 and 1931. Although Meyerhold's unfinished projects (which included the rebuilding of his theatre) can shed light on the ideal form his work could have taken, it is through his actual productions that it is possible to understand how his aesthetic functioned in practice. The tension between Meyerhold's ideals and the practical
as an integrated and yet autonomous element within the performance event, parallel to the
collage fragment, Meyerhold’s careful balance of the maintenance and disruption of the
end-on stage can be read as a deliberate manipulation of actor-audience intimacy. Through
this balance, Meyerhold’s theatre directly addresses the problem of forging a connection
between art and life which was central to the work of the Russian avant-garde.

The introduction to this study drew attention to the potential problems of adapting the
collage device to the stage. Collage is arguably defined by the collision of three- and four-
dimensional processes with the two-dimensional framework of the canvas. Theatre, by its
nature, functions in the third, spatial, and fourth, temporal, dimensions. Consequently,
adapting collage to theatre could result in the device being transmuted into other, cognate,
techniques. The plastic and cinematic arts already recognize three and four dimensional
adaptations of collage practice: collage in three-dimensions is widely referred to as
assemblage; collage in four-dimensions, as montage. Although the differentiation of collage
from these collage-cognate practices is often vague, collage practice in its purest sense
functions through the specific conditions of canvas art.

Simultaneity of reception has already been addressed as a facet of collage practice which
responds to the unique conditions of the canvas. Although the viewer engages with the
collaged canvas over a period of time, and during that time may decide to focus on different
aspects of the artwork, the initial impression of the canvas is formed by the simultaneous
reception of all its fragments. In contrast, as in cinematographic montage, the reception of
theatrical performance is closely tied to temporal progression. The viewing experience

constraints of his day-to-day work is particularly evident in the disparity between his ideal theatre and the
performance space at the former Sohn to which his company had been assigned.

See chapter five, pp. 259 - 260 above.
relies on the performance unfolding across a period of time; it is a process of revelation. In chapter five, collage principles were used to construct an element of simultaneity in the reception of theatrical performance. Through the application of collage, the audience member could perceive the constructed, fictional world of the performance and the realities of theatre practice simultaneously: the stage became a collage of fictional and actual spaces and times. Through this simultaneity of reception, collage practice on the stage retained a vital aspect of its identity in the visual arts.

Simultaneity in reception is also fundamental to addressing the potential effect of the collage device on Meyerhold’s construction of the actor-audience relationship. It is, of course, impossible to determine the exact nature of the audience experience in a theatre which ceased to exist more than sixty years ago. However, it is possible to use collage principles to read Meyerhold’s manipulation of the actor-audience relationship.

II

Meyerhold’s Models of Spectatorship

For Meyerhold, theatre could only exist in front of an audience, and no performance was complete until it was being watched. Describing the function of the audience in Meyerholdian theatre theory and practice, Robert Leach refers to the spectator as the theatrical “fourth dimension.” In the context of this study, Leach’s choice of words is

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8 The only evidence of the experience of the audience member in theatre history can be taken from eye witness accounts, and these, by their nature, are often biased or unreliable. In the study of Meyerhold’s theatre, a particularly helpful resource had been provided by the Meyerhold Research Group at the Moscow Institute of Arts Studies, a two-volume collection of reviews of his theatre: Meierkhol’d v russkoj teatral’noj kritike 1882 - 1918 ed. by N. Pesochinski, et. al. (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo ‘Artist, Rezhisser, Teatr’, 1997) and Meierkhol’d v russkoj teatral’noj kritike 1920 – 1938 ed. by T. V. Laninol (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo ‘Artist, Rezhisser, Teatr’, 2000).
particularly appropriate, incorporating connotations of the developments in physics and philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century:

For Meyerhold, the audience was the vital fourth dimension without which there was no theatre. The other three 'dimensions' – the playwright, the director, and the actor, worked to no avail if they had no audience, for it was somewhere between them and their audience that theatre 'happened'.

This idea is borne out by Meyerhold's own essays. In his 1907 article 'First Attempts at a Stylized Theatre' he describes "two distinct methods" of constructing a performance both of which explore the relationship between "the four basic theatrical elements (author, director, actor and spectator)" termed "dimensions" by Leach. The first method, the Theatre-Triangle, is dismissed by Meyerhold as ineffectual. The director represents this method diagrammatically:

![Diagram of Theatre-Triangle]

In addition, he describes the method as:

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9 Leach (1989), p. 30. The use of 'fourth dimension' to describe the audience appears to be Leach's rather than Meyerhold's term. The term is interesting in that it reflects the growing interest in the concept of the fourth dimension (be it temporally or spatially expressed) amongst the Russian intelligentsia (particularly the different interpretations suggested by the philosophy of Ouspensky and Einstein's relativity theory). However, because there is no evidence of Meyerhold himself using the term, its relevance to this analysis remains questionable.

10 Meyerhold, 'First Attempts at a Stylized Theatre', in Braun (1969, 1998), p. 50. Both diagrams can also be found here.
A triangle, in which the apex is the director and the two remaining corners, the author and the actor, the spectator comprehends the creations of the latter two through the creation of the director.¹¹

Meyerhold equates this system with a symphony orchestra in which the conductor’s interpretation is paramount and the musicians are dependent on the conductor for guidance throughout the performance. As a result, he concludes that this method is inappropriate in theatre, an art he sees as fundamentally collaborative.¹²

As an alternative, Meyerhold posits the Theatre of the Straight Line:

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Author  Director  Actor  Spectator
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This method is described as:

A straight, horizontal line with the four theatrical elements (author, director, actor, spectator) marked from left to right [...] The actor reveals his soul freely to the spectator, having assimilated the creation of the director, who, in his turn, has assimilated the creation of the author.¹³

Alongside a greater degree of input for the performer who is no longer under the constant supervision of the director, Meyerhold’s Theatre of the Straight Line also facilitates a degree of freedom for the spectator. In the Theatre of the Straight Line, the actor can, in

¹¹ Ibid., p. 50.
¹² Meyerhold states that: “So I contend this: true, a symphony orchestra without a conductor is possible, but nevertheless it is impossible to draw a parallel between it and the theatre, where the actors invariably perform on the stage without a director. A symphony orchestra without a conductor is possible, but no matter how well rehearsed, it could never stir the public, only acquaint the listener with the interpretation of this or that conductor, and could blend into an ensemble only to the extent that an artist can re-create a conception which is not his own.” Ibid., p. 51.
¹³ Ibid., p. 50.
Meyerhold’s words, stand “face to face with the spectator (with director and author behind him) and freely [reveal] his soul to him, thus intensifying the fundamental theatrical relationship of performer and spectator.”\textsuperscript{14} The conscious realization of this “fundamental” relationship is an enduring principle of Meyerholdian theatre:

\begin{quote}
[The Theatre of the Straight Line] forces the spectator to create instead of merely looking on (for a start, by stimulating his imagination).\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Meyerhold’s models of theatrical construction are evidently simplifications of the process of the creation and reception of performance.\textsuperscript{16} However, they are enlightening in that they reflect the director’s approach to the role of the audience and the relationship he wished to construct between the auditorium and the stage. Through his inclusion of the spectator as one of the “four basic theatrical elements,” Meyerhold implies that the audience have a specific role to play in the performance, and without them the theatrical experience is not complete. However, their role is not identical to that of the performer: the only way in which the audience can fulfil their role is, in fact, to maintain their unique identity as external to the theatrical process. They complete the performance event by coming in from the outside.

Throughout this thesis, Meyerhold’s deconstruction of an externally verifiable, objective viewpoint for the spectator has been emphasized as a facet of his work which aligns with

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 50.
\textsuperscript{16} The simple model of the linear assimilation of ideas is clearly not an accurate representation of the practicalities of theatrical production. In the introduction to her book \textit{Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception}, Susan Bennett surveys the developments in theatre and performance which have led to today’s more complex approach to the audience. She highlights the role of interdisciplinary study in opening up this field, for example, the influence on performance theory of models drawn from sociology (and vice versa). Bennett also acknowledges the importance of Meyerhold’s work on the audience in establishing a precedent for this sort of study, noting his status as “a practitioner who tried seriously to analyse the effects of his works on audiences” (Susan Bennett, in reference to the work of Stourac and McCreery, \textit{Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Reception and Production}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn., London: Routledge, 2001, p. 6).
the Cubist world-view. Meyerhold’s construction of the spectator as both internal and external to the performance event reiterates this aspect of his practice. For the Cubist artist, although the viewer is by definition outside of the artwork, there is no longer one objective external position from which to view the object. This principle is reflected in the multiple perspectives represented simultaneously within the Cubist artwork, an object seen from more than one angle at once. In Meyerhold’s theatre, the spectator is similarly seen as an observer without an objective vantage point: internal to the process, yet placed at a distance from it.\(^\text{17}\)

Unlike in the visual arts, the definition of the object of representation in theatre is problematic. The object of theatre could be the play-text: Meyerhold’s theatre certainly approaches each text as an object to be deconstructed, in the same way as Picasso approaches his analytical Cubist still-lifes. However, if the object of theatre is instead taken to be reality, the world outside the theatre building, Meyerhold’s deconstruction of the object acquires a greater degree of political potency. This is especially true in the face of the reality in flux which was characteristic of Soviet utopia-building.

The notion of reality in early Soviet life operated on more than one level. The government constructed an image of reality through the media and, after 1934, in Socialist Realism in the arts. This government-endorsed image of real life both informed and conflicted with the notion of reality envisioned by the artists and transposed onto the streets through their monuments and street art projects. In addition, of course, both the governmental and the artistic ideals of reality clashed with the day-to-day life (the byt) of the Russian

\(^{17}\) These ideas are an extension of the analysis of the final Dumb Scene of *The Government Inspector*, in chapter four, pp. 201 – 208 above.
proletariat. As a result, the atrocious living conditions of the Russian people contrasted with a belief that somewhere, just around a corner, utopia was being built. The Soviet Revolution, forced to work out its practicalities on a daily basis, had a similar deconstructive effect on the common perception of reality as anti-positivism had previously had amongst the intelligentsia. Reality was no longer transparent. Somewhere another dimension existed: life was no longer defined by what you saw, but by how you had the potential to look. It is this potential reality with which Meyerhold’s theatre engaged.

III

Equality and Discourse: Field Theory and Theatre

The Cubist aesthetic shifts the focus of the artwork from the representation of the object to the process of observation itself. This shift in focus has significant implications for the notion of observation, as addressed by Vargish and Mook:

As we offered our description of this change in value [the shift in emphasis from representation to observation associated with Cubism], we found ourselves constantly in danger of raising a question that threatens the logical consistency of our analysis: if one replaces the realist observer and object with the middle ground of observation, then what becomes of that realist distinction? Doesn’t the very concept of observation require an observer and an object?

18 The term byt is used by the Russian people to refer to their day-to-day existence. It implies an element of drudgery and monotony. This concept of byt can be offset against the great achievements of the Russian people in the name of constructing the Soviet utopia, particularly during Stalin’s Five Year Plans starting in 1928 (intended to increase Russian rates of production to Western levels). During this period, entire industrial towns were constructed from scratch (Magnitogorsk in Siberia was built in this way between 1929 and 1931), as well as individual workers achieving superhuman levels of production. Stalin’s Stakhanovite movement, for example, rewarded workers for particularly high levels of production, and was named after Aleksei Gregorovich Stakhanov, a coal miner who achieved a seven-fold increase in productivity.

19 The belief that utopia already exists elsewhere in Russia (in Magnitogorsk, for example) is interesting in that it is a spatial notion of progress, rather than a temporal notion. The utopia building characteristic of Soviet Russia balances the belief that the ideal is in progress (that it exists in another time, the future) with the belief that it is in existence (that it exists in another place, another part of the country). Another model of the construction of political systems using spatial and temporal frameworks is explored by Susan Buck-Morss in Dreamworld and Catastrophe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). Buck-Morss suggests that the difference between communist and capitalist models is that communism is focused on temporal progress (utopia building) whereas capitalism is focussed on spatial progress (empire building).

Indeed, this problem is reflected in the analysis of the final moments of *The Government Inspector* carried out in chapter four. Through his interpretation of the Dumb Scene, Meyerhold created a cycle of observation in the performance space, the audience looking at the stage, the dummies staring out at the audience. However, Meyerhold’s sequence does not genuinely reflect the end of the “realist distinction” of observer and observed, but rather a multiplication of their roles, or, in the case of the dummies, their perceived roles: it is temporarily impossible to divide those involved in the performance event into the categories of observer and observed.

As a solution to the problem of observation in Cubist art, Vargish and Mook posit the application of Field Theory:

What was it that enabled modernism to leave open the question of how one can focus on the act of observation without sustaining the dichotomy between observer and object? The answer, an answer that applies to Cubism and modernist narrative as well as physics, lies in the development of the concept, metaphor, and method of the field.\(^2\)

Originating in the sphere of physics, Field Theory is in common usage in the sciences. Although Vargish and Mook date the first use of the term to Michael Faraday’s description of the magnetic field in 1845, in order to apply it to their own interdisciplinary purpose, they offer a more general definition than that adopted by physicists:

A field is a spatial and/or temporal model or representation in which all constituents are interdependent and in which all constituents participate and interrelate without privilege.\(^2\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 104.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 105 (the reference to Faraday can be found on pp. 105 - 6).
Vargish and Mook's application of Field Theory to Cubist art is as intriguing in what it does not say as in what it does. Their analysis focuses primarily on the spatial-formal implications of Field Theory in art, addressing the spatial interpenetration of object and background on the canvas. By using Field Theory as a framework, Vargish and Mook argue that they can provide an explanation for the formal vocabulary of the Cubist artists (for example, their use of geometric shapes):

These developments eroded the demarcation between objects and the space surrounding them because the objects and the space were presented by the means of the same visual constituents. Object-space and background-space leaked into each other, participated in the reciprocal representation, and became a field according to our definition. The spatial flow between background and object creates the "interdependence" of the painting's constituents while the facet-language permits their common participation without privilege. 23

On the level of image construction, these ideas are as applicable to Meyerhold's theatre as they are to Cubist art. This is most markedly apparent in his early Soviet productions: in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, for example, the repetition of the geometric forms of Popova's constructivist-influenced set in the lines of actors' bodies facilitates a degree of spatial interpenetration on the stage. 24

What is missing from Vargish and Mook's analysis, however, is any discussion of the notion of observation outside the confines of canvas construction: in terms of the artwork and the viewer, rather than in terms of the object and the artist. Arguably, this sort of analysis is problematic in canvas art. The viewing of the artwork, although dependent on some element of shared spatial and temporal context between artwork and spectator, does not afford the same prescribed and prolonged period of contact as the theatre does between the performer and the audience. In the theatre, particularly in Meyerhold's theatre, it is the

23 Ibid., p. 112.
24 See Worrall (1972), pp. 75 - 95, and chapter two, p. 107 above.
presentation of the work to the audience (the fourth “basic theatrical element”) that is most important. The Cubist artwork, especially in Vargish and Mook’s analysis, appears to place preference on the observation process as represented within the artwork itself rather than on the artwork’s moment of reception by the viewer.

This oversight on the part of Vargish and Mook brings to light an underlying assumption in this study: that the artwork or canvas is seen as parallel to the stage, and the performance event in front of the audience as parallel to the viewing of the artwork, the moment of reception by the viewer, even the art exhibition. Meyerhold’s theatre posits the moment of reception as a vital element of the theatrical experience: theatre cannot be complete until it is seen by an audience. In this instance, therefore, the performance event can be considered as akin not to the art exhibition but to the canvas itself. Indeed, Vargish and Mook’s description of Field Theory seems to constitute an adequate description of the performance event at the Meyerhold Theatre, in the sense that it suggests the interpenetration of all constituent elements “without privilege”. Meyerhold’s internalization of the spectator, his attempts to transgress the actor-audience boundaries, could represent a fully realized application of Vargish and Mook’s modernist Field Theory to theatre.

The defining feature of Field Theory is the equality of all elements within the field and the interpenetration of every element with every other: Field Theory is based on the principle of reciprocal relationship. In his approach to the audience as the theatrical “fourth dimension”, Meyerhold clearly sees the spectator as central to his aesthetic. Meyerhold’s Theatre of the Straight Line model implies the reciprocity of the actor-audience relationship.

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25 There is evidence amongst the Russian avant-garde artists of a growing awareness of the importance of the moment of reception of the artwork by the viewer. This is reflected in Jane A. Sharp’s work, outlined in the introductory chapter to this thesis, p. 35 above.
within the performance as indicated by the direction of the arrow connecting the spectator
to the rest of the diagram. This reciprocity is demonstrated by two observations of actor-
audience interaction in Meyerhold’s theatre. The first is Meyerhold’s reflection on the
potential influence of the performer on the spectator, as outlined in his essay ‘The
Reconstruction of the Theatre’:

> We can induce the spectator to join us in examining a wide range of topics
> presented as a debate, but employing dramatic situations and characters. We can
> persuade him to reason and to argue. This ability to start the spectator’s brain
> working is just one of theatre’s properties. But it has another, quite different
> property: it can stimulate the spectator’s feelings and steer him through a complex
> labyrinth of emotions.²⁶

Conversely, Oliver M. Sayler highlights the effect of the audience on the performance, in
his observations of Meyerhold’s 1910 production of Molière’s *Don Juan*:

> *Don Juan* in rehearsal was antic and jolly. In performance it was sheer joy, - the joy
> of the theatre as theatre … the give and take between audience and actor [was]
> dynamic and almost incessant.²⁷

As much as the actor can hope to stimulate the audience in performance, the audience can
redefine the performance experience for the actor. However, Meyerhold did not regard the
audience’s role as identical to, or interchangeable with, that of the actor. The audience
member came from outside the theatre building, and consequently represented different
spatial and temporal frameworks to those constructed on stage. The roles of the performer
and spectator were unique, yet still had an equal weighting in the function of the Meyerhold
aesthetic, and neither could fully exist without the other.

The Cubo-Futurist collage similarly comprises a field in Vargish and Mook’s definition of
the term. Within the temporary shared spatial location of the canvas, the fragments of the
collage interpenetrate with equal weighting. Like the collage fragments, the elements

gathered for the theatrical performance are connected primarily by the virtue of their shared environment. The spectators become one element in this environment, a part of the performance event. Their occupation of the space is, however, temporary, and, like the collage fragment, they maintain the traces of their original context. In order to function as a collage fragment in the production, the audience must interact with, but remain independent of, the other fragments in the space. They are internalized as part of the theatrical canvas but still detached, carrying traces of their identity outside the theatre building. It is through this double status as both internal and external to the performance event that Meyerhold’s manipulation of the role of the audience achieves its political potency. In attempting to determine the role of the arts in post-Tsarist Russia, artists were particularly preoccupied with the question of the utility of art, constructing the arts as relevant and vital to daily life. This motivation is reflected in the artistic activities of groups such as the Proletkult, the constructivists, and the street artists. Under the Soviet system, cultural movements sought to become useful agents of the Revolution, and to discover a way in which art can function when being revolutionary no longer meant subverting the extant power structure.

Theatre is arguably the artistic site with the greatest potential to connect with reality, thanks to the real human bodies that are essential to its operation. As a result, in Soviet Russia, theatrical performance found itself striving to move outside the walls of the theatre building and find a place of relevance in the real world, as can be seen in the mass spectacles and Blue Blouse performances, and in the activities of Proletkult prior to its official denunciation by Lenin in December 1920. 

Despite the fact that performance today seeks to transcend the limits of the human body (see the work of performance artist Stelarc, for example), for Meyerhold, the body of the actor was the fundamental building block of theatre. Information on Stelarc’s work is available online at <www.stelarc.va.au> [accessed 31 May 2005]. Meyerhold’s desire to move his productions outside the walls of the theatre building is reflected in the free standing, portable construction designed by Lyubov Popova for The Magnanimous Cuckold.
collage of the performance event because they provided this vital link to the day-to-day reality of the Soviet revolution, as can be seen from his 1920 article ‘On the Staging of Verhaeren’s The Dawn’:

The audience has changed so completely [from the audience pre-1917], that we, too, need to revise our opinions. We have a new public which will stand no nonsense - 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. The interests of the audience have assumed a vital significance.  

The audience are a fragment of another space and time, bringing into the theatre building an identity which Meyerhold did not want to suppress. Through the new Soviet audience, each member of which is a “microcosm” of the new society, Meyerhold formed a connection between life and theatre: the daily realities of building the communist utopia were connected to the utopian potential of the stage. Meyerhold’s work did not present unmediated utopian visions of the future Soviet society and his stage was not simply a site of simple wish fulfilment or escapism from the drudgery of byt, but a place where life and art could collide and potentially affect one another. To fulfil this function, it was necessary that Meyerhold’s approach to the audience implied the interpenetration of theatrical space and time with the space and time outside the theatre walls. Through this interpenetration, stage and auditorium can create a field: a place of equality and discourse between art and life.

30 The ambiguous satire of Mayakovsky’s The Bedbug, produced at the Meyerhold Theatre in 1929, indicates that Meyerhold was an intelligent political critic as well as a supporter of Bolshevik ideals. Mayakovsky’s play follows Prisypkin, a member of the proletariat, as he attempts to marry into the middle class. On his wedding night, drunkenness and raucous behaviour results in a fire. The fire brigade are called, but the water from their hoses freezes, and Prisypkin is caught in the stream. Fifty years later, Prisypkin is discovered and unfrozen, into a sanitized Soviet future (where passion and alcohol, amongst others, are things of the past). Mayakovsky’s representation of the Soviet future is hardly utopian and the attitude the play presents towards Russian society at the time, and its future, is intentionally ambiguous.
Part Two

Conclusions, Implications and Significance of the Research

I

Meyerhold and the Visual Arts

Nick Worrall's 1973 analysis of Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* suggests that there is a connection between the work of the early twentieth century avant-garde artists and Meyerhold's construction of the stage space. In addition to the widely-accepted constructivist influence on the production, Worrall's analysis also identifies a futurist and Cubo-Futurist influence, particularly in the adaptation of futurist poetic and painterly devices to the stage. Through the identification of this connection, Worrall asserts the importance of cross-disciplinary influences on Meyerhold's work:

The importance of these events [Meyerhold's productions of *Nora* and *The Magnanimous Cuckold* at the Actors' Theatre in 1922] may not seem clear unless the course of Meyerhold's development as a director can be seen in relation to other movements in the arts which serve to explain, at least partially, what he was trying to do and how the dominant influences of the period found expression in his work.

To understand Meyerhold's work fully, Worrall argues, one must understand it within the context of the other artistic media by which he was surrounded, and which he clearly valued. It is the need to contextualize Meyerhold's work culturally, as asserted by both Russian and European scholars, which has been the catalyst for this investigation of Meyerhold's aesthetic through the framework of collage practice.

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31 See Worrall (1973).
32 See chapter two, pp. 118 - 119 above.
In support of Meyerhold’s painterly perception of the stage space, consider his critique of Max Reinhardt, recorded in his journal of 1907, complaining that the German director “doesn’t possess the art of drawing” and that he consequently:

groups the characters in the manner of a photograph rather than a painting, resulting in groupings that often become dull.  

The structure of the complete stage image in terms of both actor and environment was of paramount importance in Meyerhold’s work, and he approached the construction of the stage picture with the care of an artist structuring his canvas. This thesis considers Meyerhold’s construction of the stage image as a whole in terms of the influence of techniques drawn from the visual arts, focusing on the structure of the stage space and the overall structure of the performance as a reflection of the formal and metaphysical tenets of early twentieth century avant-garde art and the modernist movement. Meyerhold’s contact with the artists of the avant-garde arguably resulted in a stage image influenced by both the techniques and the philosophy of the Cubist and futurist artists. In particular, evidence can be found in Meyerhold’s work which suggests the use of collage as the organizational principle of performance, echoing the desire of the Cubists and futurists to embody a sense of non-linear temporality within their work, and consequently suggesting the need for a re-evaluation of spatial-temporal performance relationships in Meyerhold’s theatre.

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II
Stage Collage, High Modernism and Trans-Media Practice

During the period 1906 to 1926, examples of stage collage occur consistently in Meyerhold’s theatre practice. Despite the diversity of the styles in which the director worked between 1906 and 1926, recurrent themes can be identified in the concerns represented by collage, including fragmentation and juxtaposition, and the disruption of linearity in space and time. These concerns underlie Meyerhold’s use of vastly different formal constructions, ranging from Fuchs’ principles of the relief stage adapted in *Sister Beatrice* to the sophisticated version of the theatrical grotesque seen in *The Government Inspector*. The diversity of styles apparent in Meyerhold’s theatre during this period does not necessarily indicate a diversity of aims and intentions, and the application of collage to his theatre highlights the elements of continuity in his aesthetic which stylistic shifts can conceal.

Consequently, devices drawn from the visual arts can provide a framework for reading Meyerhold’s construction of the performance, and can uncover themes in the director’s work which have to date remained under investigated. Meyerhold himself makes repeated reference to the importance of the image in his construction of the performance, and to a wide range of visual reference points which emerge in his productions (for example, references to the bas-relief sculptures of Giotto which influenced the construction of the stage image in *Sister Beatrice*). Emerging from a general painterly perception of the stage space seen in his work with Komissarzhevskaya, this study has identified one specific device drawn from the visual arts which repeatedly influenced Meyerhold’s construction of

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the stage space. Collage practice has been seen to emerge in Meyerhold’s theatre in two separate, but interconnected, forms.

From 1906 to 1922, his work developed from a general painterly perception of stage space towards the specific use of collage techniques, manifested in the application of a layered stage aesthetic. Meyerhold’s 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is seen as the most sophisticated and significant instance of this form of collage practice in the director’s oeuvre. After this production, collage practice in Meyerhold’s theatre is extended beyond the structure of the stage image to encompass the organization of the production as a whole. Taking the 1926 GosTlM production of *The Government Inspector* as a case study, this thesis has outlined evidence of the collage principles of fragmentation and juxtaposition underlying the construction of the performance as a whole, suggesting that, by the mid-1920s, collage had become an organizational framework through which the performance was structured.

Instances of direct contact between Meyerhold and the artists of the avant-garde, both within Russia and internationally, establish a historical basis for the analysis of Meyerhold’s theatre in the light of devices drawn from the visual arts, a connection which is frequently emphasized in Russian studies of his aesthetic, for example in the work of Galina Titova or Alla Mikhailova. However, the assumption that the similarities between Meyerhold’s stage aesthetic and the visuals arts are more than instances of simple causal crossover has been fundamental to this research. More significant than the instances in

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which Meyerhold employed avant-garde artists to design for his productions are the
instances in which the director adopted specific aspects of visual arts practice and adapted
them to the unique conditions of theatrical performance.

The formal aspects of collage evident in Meyerhold’s work suggest a formative connection
between the director’s theatre practice and the techniques of the early twentieth century
avant-garde artists. However, the significance of collage practice in Meyerhold’s theatre
extends beyond establishing links between different media. Through the identification of
formal aspects of collage in his theatre, it is possible to consider Meyerhold’s engagement
with the philosophical and metaphysical tenets of collage practice.

The avant-garde re-discovery of collage processes was closely related to the perceived
potential of collage to connect with the philosophical upheaval experienced at the turn of
the twentieth century. In their non-collaged works, the Cubist artists had repeatedly
engaged with the questions surrounding the absolute values of space and time and the
emerging problem of relativity. This philosophical engagement is apparent in the artists’
use of a formal vocabulary of geometric shapes repeated and rotated in different forms
across the canvas to represent one object from many different vantage points
simultaneously, thus contracting an extended spatial and temporal experience of the object
in reality into one image on the canvas. Collage, with its own formal vocabulary of
fragmented images drawn together from a variety of sources, facilitated further
investigation into these issues, continuing to question the validity of the positivist belief in
absolute values.
The adaptation of collage practice to the stage has similar implications for the unity and linearity of space and time in performance. Through his use of the formal aspect of collage practice on stage, Meyerhold created theatrical performances which engaged in a similar process of deconstructing the absolute. This metaphysical implication of stage collage is significant in that it reconnects Meyerhold's work with the cultural climate in which he was working. The concerns of the anti-positivist philosophers, and the implications of Einstein's theories of relativity, emerge as equally potent concerns in Meyerhold's theatre and in Cubist art.

The identification of collage techniques in Meyerhold's theatre establishes the premise that devices used in the visual arts can be adapted to the stage, and that they potentially have similar metaphysical implications for theatrical practice as they do for artistic practice. Bearing this assumption in mind, it is clear that the collage device is an appropriate starting point for this sort of research. Collage practice, although initiated in the visual arts, has become a universal metaphor for both the conditions of modernity and of post-modernity. The influence of collage practice has spread far beyond the visual arts, and anthologies investigating the collage technique routinely contain reference to cinematic, literary and poetic works. Performative examples of collage practice, particularly within the era of High Modernism, are harder to uncover. Examples of staged equivalents to canvas collage that have been identified are associated predominantly with the performative experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s: Allan Kaprow's Happenings, for example, are often equated with collage practice by virtue of their sense of transitory and incidental

37 See, for example, Hoffman (1989) or Plottel (1983).
occurrence. As was outlined in chapter three, only one extended example of staged collage practice can be found in the High Modernist era, that of Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzbühne* project. Although the *Merzbühne* constitutes a potential model for staging the sort of collage practice that can be found in the visual arts, as Schwitters himself worked in the plastic arts routinely using collage and assemblage techniques, the realization of a Merz stage was considered impractical even by its creator and remained a purely theoretical construct.

In Meyerhold’s theatre, it is possible to posit that an operational example of modernist stage collage practice can be found. Through the identification of collage techniques in Meyerhold’s work, a model of stage collage can be constructed which sits between the unrealizable Dada-influenced *Merzbühne* and the purely scenographic applications of collage practice which emerged in the mid-twentieth century, as seen, for example, in the work of Josef Svoboda. Through the assertion that Meyerhold’s work is collaged, it is possible to identify a working exponent of stage collage in the era of High Modernism, returning the device to its modernist roots.

In addition, through Meyerhold’s work, a model of theatrical collage can be constructed which reflects accurately the formal and metaphysical intentions of the avant-garde artists. Meyerhold’s theatre incorporates elements of collage practice into the framework of

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38 William C. Seitz states that: “Although the connection is far too dispersive to make precise, the productions known as “happenings,” presented by Kaprow, James Dine, and other New York artists at the Reuben Gallery and elsewhere, had their origin in painting and collage. Kaprow explains their expansion for “agglomerates” to three-dimensional assemblages large enough for a spectator to enter, to become an element of, and even to alter if he chooses. Finally, surrounding and including not only their authors but their audience as well, “happenings” involve movements, costumes, sounds, lights, and scents as well as forms and colors.” William C. Seitz, ‘The Realism and Poetry of Assemblage’, in Hoffman (1989), pp. 79 – 90 (p. 88). In ‘Collage in the Twentieth Century, an Overview’, Hoffman claims that Kaprow referred to his Happenings as a “collage of action” (in Hoffman, 1989, p. 22).
recognized theatrical conventions. Cubism, in particular, strives to balance abstraction in form with representation in subject matter. In the Cubist artwork, the subject of the painting remains recognizable. This is true also of Cubist collage, where not only the object of representation remains recognizable to the viewer, but each individual collage fragment also retains traces of its original identity (for example, as part of a newspaper, or a bottle label). This element of Cubist collage practice is reflected in Meyerhold’s adaptation of the device. The collage practice identified in Meyerhold’s theatre comprised a balance between abstraction in some aspects of the production’s formal construction and the maintenance of theatrical conventions such as characterization and narrative. In this sense, Meyerhold’s work is unlike Schwitters’ Merzbühne project, which moved towards pure abstraction, emphasizing the random collision of different discrete elements (“white wall, man, barbed wire entanglements, blue distances”).

III

Soviet Visual Culture: Areas of Expansion

The association of Meyerhold’s aesthetic with the popular philosophical issues of the turn of the century implies that the director was intimately engaged with the intellectual concerns of his era. The use of the collage device as a framework for reading Meyerhold’s theatre therefore suggests that his aesthetic was not only intimately connected to the cultural climate in which he lived and worked, for example to the practices of other artistic media, but also to philosophical and intellectual trends developing in the early twentieth century.

39 See chapter four, page 190 – 191 above.
40 See chapter three, p. 140 above.
The connection between Meyerhold’s theatre and the anti-positivist trends in philosophy has far reaching implications for the analysis of his aesthetic. More than simply suggesting an alternative reading of the spatial structure represented by Meyerhold’s stagings, the philosophical concerns of collage practice can shed light on the most wide-ranging aspects of the director’s work. An example of the potential analytical power of the collage device beyond the investigation of the stage image was included in the preface to this conclusion: it is possible to read Meyerhold’s construction of the actor-audience relationship through the application of Field Theory, a scientific development which is reflected in Cubist artistic practice.

The brief consideration of the question of audience undertaken here indicates some potentially fruitful areas of further research emerging from this study. Attempting to determine the response of spectators to a theatre closed in 1938 is, of course, immensely problematic. This thesis has deliberately been restricted to studying the ideal actor-audience relationship as envisioned by Meyerhold, and how the director’s aesthetic may have contributed to the construction of this ideal, rather than questioning the potential disparity between the response envisioned by the director and the actual reaction of the spectators. Whether or not the evidence of collage practice in Meyerhold’s work would have been apparent to the viewer is, in many ways, an unanswerable question. The careful construction of the stage image in performance is arguably only apparent when the image is isolated from the temporal flow of the production, for example, as a photograph. How much resonance these stage images would have had to the average viewer is questionable, and these issues have been judged as falling largely outside of the scope of this research.
However, an investigation into the question of Soviet visual culture, and the possible visual experiences and reference points which audience members would have brought to his productions could elucidate the potential audience response to Meyerhold’s work. The work of the early twentieth century avant-garde artists contains frequent references to folk culture and religious iconography, playing on the visual experience of their audience: for example, Tatlin’s counter-relief sculptures were hung in corners, mimicking the placement of orthodox religious icons in the home.41 Meyerhold’s work on Sister Beatrice indicated a similar process, using recognizable religious imagery in the construction of the tableaux vivants. The rise of communism, and the increasing emphasis on street art and art in public spaces would have significantly redefined Russian visual culture. There is valuable work to be done on the potential effect of this shift on the reception of the stage image, and on the visual references which Meyerhold constructed on stage.

IV

Cultural Contextualization

Arguably, the most significant consequence emerging from the identification of collage practice in Meyerhold’s theatre is the contextualization of his work in terms of cultural factors.

This contextualization is most evident in the schism in the director’s aesthetic which emerges naturally in this research. The majority of English language studies of Meyerhold’s work mark 1917 as a watershed in the director’s oeuvre. His work before

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41 See Christine Lodder, Russian Painting of the Avant Garde (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 1993), p. 19. Lodder also refers to a similar practice in Malevich’s art, citing his comment that his Black Square was “the icon of my time” (ibid., p. 18).
October 1917 is widely considered to have lacked the political motivation which characterizes his post-revolutionary work. Although some studies of Meyerhold’s theatre have emphasized the continuity between his pre- and post-revolutionary work, the huge upheaval instigated by the events of 1917 has undoubtedly overshadowed the cultural and philosophical upheaval of fin de siècle Russia.\footnote{Braun, in his analysis of The Government Inspector for example, emphasizes the continuity in Meyerhold’s aesthetic through his continued use of the grotesque (see Braun, 1969, 1998, p. 211). Braun claims that the emphasis on continuity between the director’s pre- and post-revolutionary work is characteristic of English Meyerhold scholarship, which can embrace political ambiguity more openly than Russian scholarship could under the Soviet system (in interview with the author, 23\textsuperscript{rd} February 2005). Despite this element of ambiguity, however, Meyerhold scholarship continues to emphasize the dichotomy of the formal versus the political influence on his theatre, as described in the introduction to this thesis, pp. 5 - 14 above.}

The pivotal moment which emerges in this analysis, however, falls not in 1917, but in 1922. The importance of Meyerhold’s production of The Magnanimous Cuckold is undeniable. The production is considered to be Meyerhold’s first significant project of the post-revolutionary era, the first production using his own student actors in his own theatre building, and is arguably the one production which can legitimately be considered constructivist theatre.\footnote{The problematic nature of the notion of Constructivist Theatre (as opposed to theatre which has a constructivist influence) is addressed in chapter two, p. 106, and chapter four, p. 182 above.} However, the importance of the production in the context of the current study is that it marks the end of an earlier aesthetic development, rather than the start of a new one. In The Magnanimous Cuckold, the most sophisticated example of layered stage space that can be found in any of Meyerhold’s work emerges. This marks the end of the literal application of collage in his theatre, and in productions between 1922 and 1926, a new form of collage practice becomes apparent: collage as an organizational framework for the performance as a whole.
The cultural contextualization of Meyerhold as modernist theatre maker is, of course, intended as an additional framework to contribute to the overall understanding of his aesthetic. It is not the intention of this study to claim that political factors are not significant in Meyerhold’s theatre, or to follow the revisionist line that the political and the formalist models of Meyerhold as practitioner are mutually exclusive. The highly politicized climate of 1920s Russia made a-political artistic practice increasingly difficult. At the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky began producing Soviet plays in 1926, and was forced to stage works approved by the State as the grip of Socialist Realism tightened. Claims like that made by Mel Gordon that Meyerhold was not a political figure because he was never involved in fighting for the communist cause, for example declaring that “I step outside this political assessment of him because as far as I know Meyerhold never held a gun and shot anyone”, are not only inaccurate, but also betray a misunderstanding of the nature of political activism. Through the deconstruction of absolutes in space and time, Meyerhold’s work arguably challenged and unsettled his audience, making them look again at the world which surrounded them. In this sense, Meyerhold’s estrangement of life through art, the formal-aesthetic construction of his theatre, can in itself function as a political stance, albeit one which is more ambiguous than didactic. In the words of Picasso, “it is not necessary to paint a man with a gun. An apple can be just as revolutionary.”

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45 Gordon, in interview with de Haan (1998), p. 18. Gordon’s statement is, of course, inaccurate: Meyerhold was directly affiliated to the communist movement through his appointment at T.E.O. in 1918, and was captured and held prisoner by the White Army in Novorossiisk during the Civil War.
46 Picasso, quoted in Leighton, in Hoffman (1989), p. 141. The ambiguity engendered by the loss of absolutes is evidently closely related to Meyerhold’s artistic demise: Stalin’s Russia did not embrace ambiguity, and the sort of political stance associated with formal innovation was not appropriately didactic for Soviet Russia in the late 1920s and 1930s.
One Hundred Years On: Anti-Positivism, Meyerhold, and Contemporary Theatre

Meyerhold’s work has an acknowledged influence on today’s theatre practice, as is reflected in the work of practitioners such as Peter Brook and Robert Wilson, in companies dedicated to developing theatre through biomechanical training including Manchester-based Talia Theatrum, and in specific productions such as Théâtre de l’Ange Fou’s 2003 production of The Government Inspector. In addition to these acknowledged areas of influence, the cultural contextualization of Meyerhold’s work and the identification of collage practice operating in his aesthetic open his work up to a new sphere of relevance for today’s practitioners.

The use of collage as a framework for reading Meyerhold’s theatre influences the potential impact of his work on today’s theatre practice. Katie Normington claims that:

The current fascination with Meyerhold’s work is mainly due to two factors. First, the rise of physical theatre and dance theatre within contemporary theatre practice finds much of interest in Meyerhold’s principles. Second, the increased freedom following the demise of communism has allowed Gennady Bogdanov and Aleksei Levinsky, two former students of Meyerholdian actor Nikolai Kustov, to make his training accessible to western practitioners and academics. Although the freedom brought about by the fall of communism in Russia has made access to Meyerhold’s work increasingly easy in the West, it is Normington’s first factor that is of

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47 Wilson’s notorious manipulation of performance time in his productions makes the link between his theatre and the work of Meyerhold particularly interesting in the context of this study. Nikolai Pesochinsky considers the work of Robert Wilson to be similar in spirit to Meyerhold’s theatre, seeing part of Meyerhold’s legacy in contemporary theatre in work which “convert[s] movement in a performance into a phantasmagoria, no characters, no life resemblance, just THEATRICAL abstract reality.” (private correspondence, 3rd September 2001). Théâtre de l’Ange Fou are a London-based company whose work is closely tied to the ideas of Etienne Decroux. Their 2003 production of The Government Inspector included a statement in the programme acknowledging the influence of Meyerhold’s production on their work. Information about the company can be found online at [http://www.angefou.co.uk/angefou2.html] (accessed 9 May 2005). Katie Normington’s article ‘Meyerhold and the New Millennium’ (New Theatre Quarterly, 21 2005, 118 - 126) outlines an example of the use of Meyerhold’s biomechanics within a performance project.

greater interest. As Normington notes, contemporary theatre and performance practice is increasingly influenced by physicalized performance and dance, and is becoming notoriously diverse in influence and structure. Writing in The Guardian newspaper in September 2001, theatre critic Michael Billington predicted the path that twenty-first century theatre would take, envisioning the continued rise of multi-media and site-specific productions. His description of the work of high profile directors including Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage and Simon McBurney recalls both the aims and the aesthetic of Meyerhold’s theatre of the 1920s:

[T]here are many artists extending the vocabulary of theatre. At the tip of a very large iceberg stand Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage and Simon McBurney. They think imagistically. They work on a grand scale. They have also moved from the outer reaches of the avant-garde into the theatrical mainstream [...]. But what these shows [Wilson’s A Dream Play, Lepage’s Far Side of the Moon and McBurney’s The Noise of Time] also prove is that audiences are hungry for outsize experiences - something in which language, music, movement, images coalesce to produce an event that works simultaneously on ears, eyes and emotions.

The work of Wilson, Lepage and McBurney appears to extend that of Meyerhold. The directors all engage with the notion of spectacle, creating a performance centred on the stage image, and attempting to incorporate the aesthetic experimentation characteristic of the avant-garde into the theatrical mainstream.

In the context of this study, Meyerhold has been highlighted as a modernist theatre practitioner. However, the contextualization of Meyerhold as a modernist does not disqualify his work from having vital points of contact with today’s theatre. In addition to the similarities in style between Meyerhold’s work and that of Wilson, Lepage or McBurney, the features of Meyerhold’s work outlined in this study and the current trends in

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49 English translations of Russian scholarly studies of Meyerhold’s theatre are still rare, and very little of the extensive Russian oeuvre on Meyerhold is available in English. For example, the work of the Meyerhold research group at the Moscow Institute of Arts Studies is not yet available in translation.

multi-media performance have striking areas of overlap. In its combination of devices
drawn from different media and its engagement with nonlinear temporal processes,
Meyerhold’s work can be seen as anticipating the current surge in multi-media performance
and the questions of liveness and temporality addressed by theorists such as Philip
Auslander.\textsuperscript{51}

In her analysis of trends in contemporary performance, playwright Caridad Svich identifies
the concerns of artists at the turn of the twenty-first century. The issues she lists are
strikingly similar to the concerns of their counterparts a century earlier. Svich claims that:

\begin{quote}
The preoccupations of artists remain rooted in how to represent nature, humanity,
time, memory and space, how to live in the world, and keep up with its pace, and
how to simply be.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

The conscious engagement with space and time which Svich identifies is, of course,
characteristic of Meyerhold’s practice, as highlighted through the application of the collage
device to his theatre. Svich goes on to investigate the cross over between different media to
contribute to the construction of parallel time frames in performance:

\begin{quote}
When an artist crosses media in performance, multiple time-frames exist in space.
The body is not only the live body but also the mediated one on film or video, or it
is disembodied as only a voice pre-recorded and therefore severed from its origin,
yet somehow still signalling its liveness in theatrical space […] Confluences of time
converge during a performance as present, pre-recorded, and the many layers of
suspended time inhabited by memory, sentiment and spirit play themselves out.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Svich’s analysis makes explicit the way in which the use of many different forms of media
within a performance facilitates a consciousness of multiple time-frames. The collage

\textsuperscript{51} See Philip Auslander, \textit{Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture} (London: Routledge, 1999).
\textsuperscript{52} Caridad Svich, ‘The Dynamics of Fractals: Legacies for a New Tomorrow’, in \textit{Trans-global Readings:
\textsuperscript{53} Svich (2003), p. 3.
process arguably enables a similar multiplication of time frames in Meyerhold’s theatre, which can be seen as trans-media by virtue of its connections to painterly processes. Meyerhold’s fundamental re-conceptualization of the relationship between space and time in performance, and in particular his development of a notion of non-linear temporality, appear to be under-investigated. In an age when theatrical experimentation increasingly takes the form of multi-media productions which juxtapose live and recorded spaces and times, this aspect of Meyerhold’s staging has the potential to become increasingly relevant to modern theatre makers.

A century after the philosophical upheaval instigated by Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity (1905), the loss of the notion of the absolute has taken a firm hold on cultural practice. Post-modernity revels in a world without recourse to an absolute truth, and relativism has as widespread a grip on contemporary culture as positivism had a hundred years ago. In the wake of the death of Pope John Paul II in April 2005, the Catholic Church identified the most pressing and significant cultural issue which his successor needed to address as the notion of relativism. The overriding concerns of cultural life with which Meyerhold’s aesthetic engaged are no less relevant today. In the light of today’s cultural climate, the time is ripe to re-examine Meyerhold’s practice, bringing about a cultural re-contextualization of the director in his own era, and a re-evaluation of his significance for contemporary theatre practice, not only as source material for physicalized performance projects or as a schema for actor training, but as an artist intimately engaged with the philosophical concerns of his age. Analysis of his theatre in terms of the visual arts highlights how Meyerhold questioned the underlying assumptions of the medium of

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54 On April 20th 2005, BBC news online ran an article on relativism and the comments of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). The article can be viewed at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4460673.stm [accessed 09/05/2005].
theatre, paving the way for the more radical space and time experiments of contemporary performance. Even today, Meyerhold’s work can provide a model for trans-media practice, and for the representation on stage of a world which is becoming increasingly “strange and not exactly reassuring.”

55 See footnote 1, introduction, p. 3 above.
Plate 66  
Plate 67  Potted geranium property for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), design by Lyubov Popova.
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Appendix A

Stills from Meyerhold’s Productions

In order to allow the reader to locate still photographs of Meyerhold’s productions within the temporal progression of the production as a whole, each still image used for this research is listed below, with a description of the point in the production which it represents.

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Act Three

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Construction assembled for a performance in Odessa

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Plate 55  *The Magnanimous Cuckold*
Stage set for performance

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Episode seven, ‘Behind a Bottle of Tolstoibruchia’, Khlestakov (Erast Garin) lies about his life as an inspector.

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Plate 60  *The Government Inspector*
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Scene eight, the Ball (photograph taken in 1926)
Appendix B

Cross Reference Time-line: Russian Art and Meyerhold's Theatre

I devised this time-line during my research to allow me to cross-reference events in Russian and international avant-garde art against major developments and productions in Meyerhold's career.

The time-line is included here to give the reader a year-by-year account of these developments and potential overlaps. Where possible, the specific date of an event is given to allow more in-depth, month-by-month analysis. For art exhibitions and Meyerhold's productions, the city in which they took place is also given. This is to allow the reader to cross-reference Meyerhold's geographical position with events taking place in the visual arts.

Due to the restrictions placed on this research in terms of era (1906 – 1926), only the years 1870 to 1926 have been included in the time-line reproduced in this appendix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Russian Art</th>
<th>Significant Works</th>
<th>Meyerhold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Foundation of the &quot;Society for Circulating Art Exhibitions&quot; (Wanderers). Pavel Tretyakov starts building up his art collection.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Born (January 28th old style).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881 - 1887</td>
<td>Surikov: The Boyarina Morosova.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890s</td>
<td>Imperial Theatres start using professional painters for décor.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Starts acting in amateur dramatics in Penza.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Tretyakov donates his collection to the City of Moscow.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>Dmitri Merezhkovsky publishes essay On Reasons for the Decline of Contemporary Russian Literature and On New Literary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Trends.**

1895
Reads law at Moscow University.

1896
Chekhov: *The Seagull.*

1897
Lev Tolstoy publishes *What is Art?*

1898
Graduates from Philharmonia and is awarded gold medal for best actor (March). Joins newly formed MAT.

World of Art formed 1st edition of World of Art journal.

1899
First World of Art Exhibition (Stieglitz Art Institute, St. Petersburg). Symbolists form Scorpion Publishing House in Moscow. Start publishing almanac *Northern Flowers.*

Division of World of Art into two schools: Moscow School (emphasis in line) vs. Petersburg School (emphasis on colour).

1902
Larionov’s expressionist period begins.

1904

1905
Leaves MAT. Travels to Italy. Forms Fellowship of the New Drama (provinces).

Kuznetsov: *The Blue Fountain.*

Death of Tintagiles, *Schluck and Jau, Snow, Comedy of Love.*
1905 -
1906

1906  Formation of Proletkult.

Kustodlev: *Death Stalks the Streets.*

End of Larionov’s expressionist period.

Blok: *The Fairground Booth.*

Last World of Art Exhibition, St. Petersburg. Golden Fleece Group unveiled.

1st issue of *Golden Fleece* almanac.

1907  Kliun meets Malevich.


Sees productions by Reinhardt in Berlin (April).

*Spring Awakening,* Theatre of V.F.

Komissarzhevskaya (September 15th).

*Death’s Victory,* Theatre of V.F.

Komissarzhevskaya (November 6th).

1908

Leaves Komissarzhevskaya theatre (January).

Provinces: Ungern, Vitebsk, Minsk, Kherson, Poltava, Kiev, Kharkov (productions include *Sister Beatrice and The Fairground Booth*).

Appointed director of opera and drama at Imperial Theatres St.

Salon of the Golden Fleece (organized by Ryabushinsky),
Moscow (April, May).

1909

Foundation of the Knave of Diamonds group.
Larionov begins his primitivist work.
Golden Fleece exhibition, Moscow: Goncharova and Larionov emerge as key figures, also shows French artists from the Shchukin’s collection.
Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto published in Russian (shortly after publication in Figaro in Italy).

1910

Costakis dates start of the avant-garde from this year.
First Union of Youth Exhibition (March), St. Petersburg.
Vladimir Izdebsky introduces Munich School in Odessa: nucleus of the Blaue Reiter.
Knave of Diamonds Exhibition, Moscow, establishes Russian art as a school in its own right. Malevich is introduced. Some Blaue Reiter and minor French works are shown too (December).

1911

Beginning of Larionov’s rayonnist period.

Petersburg (April).
Begins ‘double life’ as Dr. Dapertutto.
Contributes to Theatre: A Book about the New Theatre.
Tristan and Isolde Mariinsky Theatre (October 30th).

Adoration of the Cross, Tower Theatre (April 19th).
Columbine’s Scarf, House of Interludes (October 12th).
Don Juan, Alexandrinsky Theatre (November 9th).

Travels to Greece.

Harlequin, the Marriage Broker, Nobles’ Assembly (November 8th).
1912 Larionov and Goncharova separate from Knave of Diamonds (February). Picasso: Still Life with Chair Caning (Spring). Works with the Cooperative of Artists in Terioki (Lovers, Harlequin, the Marriage Broker, Adoration of the Cross, Crimes and Crimes, You Wouldn't Have Said Anything for That).

1912 First Donkey’s Tail Exhibition, Moscow, by Goncharova, Larionov, Malevich, Tatlin (March 11th). Popova sees Shchukin’s collection.

1912-1913 Popova and Udaltsova study in Paris with Metzinger and Le Fauconnier, and probably see the 1913 Futurist Paris exhibition.


Moscow.
Kandinsky returns to
Russia after outbreak
of WW1 (November).

1914
Goncharova and
1915
or Larionov leave
Russia for Paris to
design for
Diaghilev’s Ballets
Russes.

1914 -
1915
Popova’s “mature
Cubo-Futurist
period” (Rowell).¹

1915
Tramway V
Exhibition: first
futurist exhibition
February, Petrograd.
Malevich meets
Tatlin.

0.10 Exhibition: The
Last Futurist
Exhibition, Petrograd. Malevich
announces
Suprematism
(December).
Malevich’s earliest
interest in
architectural projects.

1915-
1916
Tatlin working on
corner constructions.

1916
3rd (1st published)
edition of Malevich’s
From Cubism and
Futurism to
Suprematism: The
New Realism in
Painting (January)
The Store Exhibition,
Moscow, organized
by Tatlin, introduces
Rodchenko.

Directs film The
Picture of Dorian Gray
(December).

Cangiullo: Piedigrotta.

Directs film The
Strongman
(December).

Masquerade,

1918

Rozanova dies of diphtheria (November 8th).

1919

Tenth State

Exhibition: Nonobjective Creation and Suprematism, Moscow (January).

Nineteenth State Exhibition, Moscow (December).

First Free Exhibition at the Winter Palace, Petrograd.

Malevich starts teaching in Vitebsk.

Lissitzky paints first Proun.

1919

or

1920

1919 - 1920

Malevich organizes UNOVIS.

Tatlin: Monument to the Third International (design and model).

Released on parole (January).

1920

Kandinsky founds Inkhuk. Obmokhu Exhibition, including Stenberg Brothers and Kasimir Medunetsky, Moscow (May).

Lenin presents resolution/ultimatum to Proletkult (October 8th).

Alexei Babichev takes over leadership of Inkhuk, starts forming

Alexandrinsky Theatre (February 25th).


Mystery-Bouffe, Theatre of Musical Drama, Petrograd (November 7th).

Arrested by White Army whilst in the South (September).

Publishes fairytale play Alinur, edits journals, periodicals, bulletins, etc.

Directs Municipal Theatre at Novorossiisk.

The Dawns, RSFSR Theatre No. 1, Moscow (November 7th).
Constructivist programme (November).
Pevsner and Gabo write the \textit{Realistic Manifesto}.

\textit{Exhibition of Four}, Moscow (Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Sinezubov).

Lissitzky moves to Moscow to lecture at Vkhutemas.

1921

9 sessions of the Working Group of Objective Analysis at Inkhuk on ‘construction vs. composition’ (January – April).

First Working Group of Constructivists emerges as a unit (March).

3rd Obmokhu Exhibition, Moscow - first display of Rodchenko’s hanging constructions. Popova designs Tairov’s \textit{Romeo and Juliet} (May).

Constructivism developed as an ideology at Inkhuk (Summer – Autumn).

Constructivists plan to publish \textit{From Figurativeness to Construction}.

Rodchenko gives a paper on ‘line’ at Inkhuk (Autumn).

5 x 5 = 25 Exhibition, Moscow, by Rodchenko, Stepanova, Vesnin, Popova, and Exter

\textit{Tairov: Notes of a Director}.

\textit{Mystery Bouffe}, RSFSR Theatre No. 1 (May 1st).

Becomes director of the new State Higher Theatre Workshops, Moscow. Zinaida Raikh joins GVYTM (Autumn).
El Lissitzky lectures at Inkhuk (September 23rd).

2nd reorganization of Inkhuk under Osip Brik, Boris Arvatov, N. Tarabukin. 25 Inkhuk artists announce their withdrawal from laboratory art (i.e. theory) to concentrate on production art (November). Inkhuk commission Popova’s article on production art. Kandinsky leaves Inkhuk for the Bauhaus (December). Split in Inkhuk: First Working Group of Objective Analysis splits.

1922 AkhRR started (May), first AkhRR exhibition in Moscow (May). Electroorganism manifesto.

Electroorganism Group Exhibition, Moscow.

Malevich moves to Petrograd with UNOVIS.

Doll’s House, Actors’ Theatre, Moscow (April 20th).

Magnanimous Cuckold, Actors’ Theatre (April 25th).

State Higher Theatre Workshops becomes part of GITIS (State Institute of Theatrical Art). Soon breaks away, becomes Meyerhold Workshop. Starts lecturing and publishing articles on biomechanics (in his review of Tairov’s Notes of a Director, and in pamphlet The Set Roles of the Actor’s Art).

Death of Tarelkin

GITIS Theatre,
1923

Mayakovsky starts *Lef*.

*Moscow's Theatrical Art Exhibition* (June).

1923 - 1924

Popova and Stepanova start working in the textile industry.

1924

First *AkhRR* exhibition in Leningrad (February).

First Discusional Exhibition of Association of Active Revolutionary Art, Moscow (May).

Popova dies (May), posthumous exhibition held (December).

Trotzky publishes *Literature and Revolution* (Moscow).

1925

*Lef* folds.

1926

*Bubus the Teacher*, Meyerhold Theatre (January 29th).

*Mandate*, Meyerhold Theatre (April 20th).

*The Government Inspector*, State Meyerhold Theatre
(December 9th).