

## Looking at Meyerhold's Unseen Theatre

Amy Skinner

This essay addresses the importance of visual spectatorship in Meyerhold's theatre. By identifying and exploring the 'modes of looking' suggested by production examples from the late 1920s and 1930s, it considers the relationship between how scenographic structures invite audiences to look and how looking can become a profoundly ideological act, particularly within the context of a totalitarian state. Perhaps unexpectedly, the examples analysed in this chapter come from a specific subset of Meyerhold's productions; those that were cancelled prior to their first performance. These 'unseen' works provide an illuminating starting point to consider the nature of looking: despite being often neglected in Meyerhold scholarship, they are well-documented in the director's archives, featuring the same 'embarrassment of riches' in resources associated with his better-known productions (Syssoyeva 2010: 170). The quality of their documentation, however, is nuanced towards the process of theatre making, rather than its product, and these productions occupy a liminal position between conceptualisation and realisation. As this essay concludes, I mobilise this liminality as a hybrid form of engagement for the theatre historian, to uncover aspects of the director's practice that cannot be understood from his publicly-performed works alone.

The study of spectatorship in Meyerhold's theatre has made much of the director's belief in an active and engaged audience. Meyerhold writes that:

We produce every play on the assumption that it will still be unfinished when it appears on the stage. We do this consciously, because we realize that the crucial revision of the production is that which is made by the spectator. (Meyerhold 1929-30, in Braun 2016: 320)

This belief in the audience's active contribution to the production is frequently associated with Meyerhold's innovative approaches to spectator participation: in a theatre where audience members were invited to play ball games during the interval or stand for the Internationale, much less attention is paid to the, far more frequent, occasions on which one of the spectator's primary modes of engagement was to sit and look at the director's carefully constructed *mise-en-scène*. Looking, however,

was essential to spectator engagement at the Meyerhold Theatre, and the embodied and positional act of viewing was deeply embedded in the director's construction of the stage space. To deny the experience of the viewer as viewer is to undermine the significance of visual experience at Meyerhold's theatre, and contradicts the director's own emphasis on stage image and scenography as key creative tools.<sup>1</sup>

Maaïke Bleeker, in her study of visuality in the theatre, observes that:

The theatre organizes the relation between those seeing and what they see, mediating in a specific relationship between the two. The theatre, therefore (or so it would seem) presents the object *par excellence* for an analysis of visuality as a phenomenon that takes place within the relationship between the one seeing and what is seen and against the backdrop of culturally and historically specific visual practices. (2008: 2)

Meyerhold's theatre is a particularly pertinent example of this connection between performance and visuality, where the relationship between the spectator and that which they see is mediated by the staged event. The specific historical and cultural context of the Soviet Union provides a determining frame for the way that looking functions in Meyerhold's practice: this aspect of Meyerholdian visuality will be emphasised here through an emphasis on the director's productions that were interrupted by the process of political censorship and a focus on the ideological aspects of looking, that is, the ways in which acts of looking are shaped towards specific political or social ends. If, as Bleeker argues, looking is both relational (connecting the viewer and that which they see) and contextual (dependent on a broader cultural and historical practices), opportunities to look are inherently connected to dominant ideologies and political messaging. This is particularly the case in ideologically-loaded frames such as the early Soviet Union, where the possibility of the artwork as a cultural expression of ideology was well-established, and artists, including theatre makers, had been actively pursued by the government for propaganda purposes from 1917.<sup>2</sup> By recognising the role of looking in Meyerhold's work, it becomes apparent that the ideological function of Soviet creative practice is not solely contained within the artwork, but in ways in which the viewer visually encounters that artwork, and how the act of looking itself can shape their political and social engagement with the dominant ideologies of the culture.

This essay considers the different models of looking found in two of Meyerhold's unseen productions: *I Want a Baby* (1927-1930) and *One Life* (1936-7). It begins with a survey of Meyerhold's

unseen works, establishing their status in his oeuvre, and the opportunities that they offer in the study of the director's practice. The two productions are then explored in detail, using a focus on Meyerhold's scenographic approaches as a way to identify the modes of looking suggested in each project.<sup>3</sup> In *I Want a Baby*, the constructivist-influenced set, designed by Meyerhold and El Lissitzky, draws the spectator's eye through the performance space, constructing an opportunity to 'look through' the production. In *One Life*, an emphasis on flat surfaces and the use of distorted forms of linear perspective ask the viewer to 'look at' the stage, creating a contrasting mode of visual engagement. The essay concludes by returning to the question of unseen productions, considering their role and value in the study of historical theatre practice.

### **Meyerhold's 'unseen' productions**

At the end of Robert Leach's chronology of Meyerhold's repertoire is a short section headed 'Uncompleted productions' (1989: 202-3). In it, Leach identifies twenty-two Meyerhold productions that were never performed before a public audience; works that were prepared and rehearsed, but cancelled prior to their première. These projects cover the full span of Meyerhold's career: the earliest is an unfinished production of Mey's *The Woman from Pskov* with his Russian Company of Dramatic Artists in Kherson in 1902; the last, his version of Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko* that was in rehearsal at the Stanislavsky Opera Theatre at the time of the director's arrest in June 1939.<sup>4</sup> Some of the productions, like the four works prepared for the first Moscow Art Theatre Studio in 1905, are relatively well-known; other projects, for example, his work on Prosper Mérimée's *La Jacquerie* (1923) or Paul Hindemith's *News of the Day* (1931-2), are rarely addressed, particularly in English-language studies of the director.<sup>5</sup> That these productions were never seen in performance gives them a sense of incompleteness that has limited their perceived significance as examples of Meyerhold's practice, particularly when compared to works like *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, *The Forest*, or *The Government Inspector*, mainstays of the Meyerhold canon.

Despite their unseen status, however, these productions are unique in their historiographic value as objects of study in Meyerhold's theatre. There is no typical unseen production: from symbolist mysticism to Soviet mass spectacles, they are as diverse as the director's repertoire as a whole, reflecting

the changes in his working practices and the shifts in theatrical aesthetics that took place across his career. Similarly diverse are the circumstances that surround each instance of cancellation, and interruptions could take place at any point in the rehearsal process. Some productions were taken nearly as far as opening night before they were cancelled: a version of Lidiya Seifullina's play *Natasha*, for example, was cancelled in 1937 after an unsuccessful dress rehearsal (Rudnitsky 1981: 538). Other works were only partially prepared and then cancelled or, in the case of Sergei Tretyakov's play *I Want a Baby* (1927-30), deferred, with the intention of returning to the project at a later date. Some productions were not rehearsed at all, but remained at the point of conceptualisation and discussion. These works included mooted Shakespeare projects during the late 1920s and early 1930s, particularly the director's evocative, but ultimately unrealised, plans to stage a version of *Hamlet* with designs by Pablo Picasso.<sup>6</sup> The motivation for project cancellations is similarly nuanced. Some productions were cancelled at the director's behest, as a result of restricted resources (*I Want a Baby*) or loss of faith in the project (*Natasha*). There were also instances of unwanted cancellations, enforced on the director by an external authority: Stanislavsky's withdrawal of support for the Art Theatre Studio is one example, leading to the cancellation of Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles*, Hauptmann's *Schluck and Jau*, Przybyszewski's *Snow*, and Ibsen's *Love's Comedy* in 1905.

The unseen productions, therefore, are defined not only by their style and content, but also by their processes and cancellation. This results in their complex status as objects of study: the historiographic function of a production that was conceptualised but not rehearsed, for example, is different to that of one rehearsed but not performed. Similarly, a work cancelled at the director's request offers a different perspective on Meyerhold's practice to a production whose cancellation was forced by social or political circumstances. Despite the nuance demanded by these different variables, the defining factor that unites all of Meyerhold's cancelled productions is their status as works that remained unseen by a public audience.

Productions that were cancelled as a result of government censorship are a specific subset of Meyerhold's unseen works, where the nature and notion of looking become particularly significant. The censoring of theatre productions is a form of cancellation where the opportunity to be seen is constructed as politically potent and potentially dangerous. The disruption of a production process with

the intention of deliberately preventing or obstructing an act of viewing illustrates the ideological power of models of looking in Meyerhold's theatre. Although theatre was subject to censorship throughout Meyerhold's working life – his 1908 production of *Salomé*, featuring Ida Rubenstein, for example, was cancelled after the play was deemed unsuitable by the Tsarist censor – the connection between the opportunity to look and the ideological implications of that act of looking is perhaps most apparent in Meyerhold's work during the late 1920s and 1930s.

During this era, the director found himself increasingly ostracised from Soviet orthodoxy, overseeing a theatre whose practice was considered 'alien' by the government elite.<sup>7</sup> This is reflected in the increasing number of interventions by the committees that oversaw censorship for the Soviet Union, including Glavlit (The Main Administration for Literature and Publishing), Glavrepertkom (The Main Administration for Theatre Repertoire) and, from 1928, Glaviskusstvo (The Main Administration for Affairs of Literature and Art).<sup>8</sup> In the years between 1927 and 1939, The State Meyerhold Theatre (GosTIM) saw both a relatively small production output and a high proportion of cancelled productions.<sup>9</sup> Leach's chronology lists just 18 completed productions during these nine years, with a further eight unseen works, a cancellation rate of 44% - higher than in any other period in Meyerhold's professional practice. The reduction in total number of productions and the increase in acts of censorship culminated in the cancellation of five productions in the final four years of Meyerhold's career: a version of Mayakovsky's *Bedbug* (styled as *A Fairy Comedy*) and a production of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* in 1936, *Natasha* and *One Life* in 1937, and *Semyon Kotko* in 1939.

Meyerhold's censored productions offer a unique perspective on the relationship between visibility, ideology and censorship, articulating the tensions between the director's practice and the totalitarian regime in which he worked. The act of theatrical censorship is intended to interrupt the process of looking, that is, to prevent a public audience from engaging with the ways of looking suggested by a theatrical production. That productions prepared by Meyerhold were considered politically unsuitable to the point of suppression indicates that the director's construction of these works, out of all of those in his oeuvre, posed particular problems for Party ideologues. This essay suggests that the ideological 'problems' seen in Meyerhold's censored productions went beyond the content of the play text or the director's formal choices, instead encompassing the entirety of the

production's scenographic system and the ways of looking that this implied. That Meyerhold's productions were subject to censorship, the prevention of viewing, indicates that the Party was very aware of the power of the act of looking, and that the visual opportunities created by Meyerhold in these productions were seen as potent and potentially damaging to ideological messaging.

### **Comparing models of looking: Two examples of Meyerhold's unseen practice**

To explore Meyerhold's scenographic and ideological construction of looking in his censored work, two examples have been chosen from his unseen productions:

1. *I want a Baby* [*Khochu rebenka*], by Sergei Tretyakov, first submitted to GosTIM in December 1926, but rejected by Glavlit and sent for rewriting. Permission to produce the work exclusively at GosTIM was not granted until December 1928, although work on the project continued during the two intervening years. In 1930, Meyerhold deferred the production to the New Meyerhold Theatre, a venue planned but at that time un-started, finding the auditorium at the former Sohn Theatre, where his company had been based since 1922, too restrictive for his ambitions for the project.

2. *One Life* [*Odna zhizn'*], based on the novel *How the Steel was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky and adapted for the stage by Yevgeny Gabilovich, prepared between 1936 and 1937. This production was banned by Glaviskusstvo, after committee viewings at the Passage Theatre on 5 and 19 November 1937.<sup>10</sup>

Both productions are instances of the direct suppression of Meyerhold's practice: works, in other words, that censorship committees from Glavlit, Glavrepertkom, or Glaviskusstvo considered unsuitable for viewing by the Soviet public. In each of the productions, Meyerhold uses the scenographic structure of the performance space to construct a different mode of looking for the audience, operating through the construction of the stage image, the configuration of the stage-auditorium relationship, and the location of the spectator within the theatre building. The combination of these features invites the spectator to look, and understand, the production in a specific way, re-conceptualising the relationship between the performance event and the reality of life in the Soviet Union. Close analysis of the scenography of these unseen examples can therefore uncover the

mechanics of the relationship between looking and ideology in Meyerhold's theatre, articulating the potential anxiety that these productions caused the Soviet censorship machine.

It is important to note that the play texts for both of these productions were by living playwrights, and as such, they were subject to both censorship of the new text and censorship of the production as staged by Meyerhold. Meyerhold faced significant challenges in his staging of new writing during this era, and was actively searching for a Soviet playwright who could be affiliated with his theatre. His collaboration with Tretyakov illustrates an ongoing relationship between the director and a writer whose work fitted well with the GosTIM aesthetic: Tretyakov had had work produced by Meyerhold prior to *I Want a Baby*, including *Earth Rampant* (1923) and *Roar China* (1925). In addition, alongside Nikolai Aseyev and Sergei Gorodetsky (as the trio AsGoTret), he had written *Spinball*, another of Meyerhold's unseen productions, planned for Moscow's Theatre of the Revolution in 1922. In *I Want a Baby*, Tretyakov formulated a sharp social satire on the role of the traditional family in the USSR, a play that, in Rudnitsky's words, 'propagandized eugenics with a single change: the racial criterion was replaced by the social criterion' (1981: 438). The play was controversial in its subject matter, dividing the Glavrepertkom committee and leading to much debate around its propriety: although the science of Soviet eugenics was well-established in 1920s Russia (see Smith 2012: 110-3), the committee questioned both the play's content and its language. Rudnitsky cites an unnamed committee speaker:

It is impossible to stage the play as it is written. The expressions of the play are such that (a worker likes to go to the theater [*sic*] with his family) perhaps a sixteen-year-old girl should not hear them. (1981: 439)

In addition, there was consternation around the play's collage-like structure, what Leach describes as a text constructed from a 'series of climactic gestures, rather like *The Battleship Potemkin*, gestures that were larger than life, expressive and even symbolic' (1993: 6). The combination of complex social commentary and formal nods towards the avant-garde made it extremely difficult for Tretyakov's play to pass the censorship committee, and the original version was sent for significant rewriting prior to clearance for production.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, *One Life* was, on paper at least, an eminently suitable choice of play text. Although Meyerhold did not, as a rule, produce socialist realist plays, and rejected the turn towards socialist realism in the 1930s, *One Life* was based on a novel that was rapidly becoming a classic of the genre.<sup>12</sup> Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was Tempered* was an autobiographical story of strength in the face of adversity: injured soldier Pavel Korchagin overcomes his illness and misfortune in order to become a Soviet leader, his personal growth acting as a metaphorical 'tempering of the steel' that produces an ideal example of Soviet heroics and resilience.<sup>13</sup> In this instance, it was not the play text *per se* that caused problems, but Meyerhold's staging and interpretation of the material. Although the production was well received at its initial performance for the Glaviskusstvo committee, a second viewing took place a week later and the production was subsequently rejected as an inappropriate interpretation of the text (Fedyanina and Konaev 2019a).

A decade passed between the beginning of Meyerhold's work on *I Want a Baby*, and the cancellation of *One Life*. In those years, the Soviet creative landscape was significantly changed, and the official endorsement of socialist realism brought about not only a stagnation in Soviet playwriting and theatre production, but also a new way of approaching the visual relationship between the viewer and the art work. The mode of looking that Meyerhold develops in *I Want a Baby* is reflective of the production's avant-garde influences, following the trajectory of an increasingly embodied and immersive approach to theatre making developing in his theatre since the 1910s. The production asks the spectator to 'look through' the performance and examine what lies in the world beyond the stage. In contrast, in *One Life*, confined by the strictures of the socialist realist diktat, Meyerhold invites the spectator to sit at distance from the performance and 'look at' his staging, seeing themselves and the stage space as separate entities. Read together, these two productions offer a compelling argument for Meyerhold's use of visual structures to invite spectators into a nuanced ideological engagement with the performance text, and with wider Soviet reality.

### **Looking Through: *I Want a Baby***

Central to Meyerhold's plans for his production of *I Want a Baby* was the reconfiguration of the performance space at the former Sohn Theatre. Working with his designer, visual artist El Lissitzky,



the director conceived a reworking of the interior of the former Sohn that blurred the boundaries between the stage and auditorium.<sup>14</sup> Lissitzky describes the space:

The stage is completely merged with the auditorium by the construction of an amphitheatre. A new acting area is created by building a 'ring' that rises from the orchestra pit. The actors enter from below out of the depths of the orchestra pit, from above out of the balcony, and from the sides across bridges: they no longer have anything to do with the stage itself. (in Braun 1998: 241)

The relocation of the playing space over the orchestra pit shifts the structure of the auditorium as a whole, pulling the focal point forward and transgressing the proscenium arch, a permanent architectural feature at the former Sohn. The inclusion of a banner that runs around the top of the theatre, inscribed with the motto 'A healthy child is the future builder of socialism', draws the eye around the perimeter of the theatre space, again past the proscenium, rendering irrelevant this former barrier between the audience and the stage.

Within this restructured performance space, Meyerhold identifies two potential locations for the audience: there is seating in the auditorium of the former Sohn, but also in a raked seating block added on the stage. As can be seen in figure 1, an image of the set under construction and taken from the auditorium of the former Sohn, the two seating blocks face one another, with the playing space between them. This separation of the audience was key to Meyerhold's realisation of his production concept. In his notes on the play's staging, written in December 1928, he emphasises the need for the production to function as a '*spektakl' diskussionnyi*', or a piece of 'polemical theatre' (in Mikhailova 1995: 278). For Meyerhold, the construction of a polemical performance was a way to moderate the potential censorship of his project by suggesting that the play text – controversial as it was – was only intended as a starting point for critical discourse amongst the audience. To achieve this end, he outlines a plan to 'combine the auditorium and stage', giving away tickets for the onstage seating to guests with a particular interest in the issues discussed in the production. His intention was that the onstage audience would model good debate for other audience members:

The acts will be interrupted for discussion and debate [by members of the audience]. The actions of individuals will function diagrammatically, as a demonstration of how to orate. It will be similar to an anatomy theatre, where students cut up a body. (Meyerhold in Mikhailova 1995: 278)<sup>15</sup>

This notion of interrogation and discussion is wholly embodied within the scenographic structure of the performance space. The polemical nature of the production is reflected in the polemical division of the auditorium, an act that Lars Kleberg, supported by Braun, considers to be deeply divisive:

The point of departure [for the audience experience in *I Want a Baby*] was no longer the postulated *unity* of the auditorium that was to be manifested and confirmed by the performance, but instead the socially based and by now undeniable *division* in the audience. (in Braun 1998: 242, Braun's emphasis)

The association of the physical separation of the audience with their social division, however, fails to take into account the nature of the looking as it would have operated within this performance space.

In *I Want a Baby*, Meyerhold asks the spectator to look through the playing space to encounter the rest of the audience. This establishes the theatrical space as the foreground for the spectator's experience of the Soviet collective: Meyerhold's production visually mediates between the two audience groups. Figure 1 illustrates how the placement of both groups of spectators makes it impossible to look at the other audience members without also seeing the playing space, and vice versa. This is partly achieved through the use of height in Lissitzky's design: the onstage seating block is the highest point and the auditorium is the lowest, with the playing space between the two. The result is a diagonal trajectory between the two audience groups that requires them to look through the playing space to see one another (as demonstrated by the angle of the photograph in figure 1).

#### **INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE.**

Figure 1: *I Want a Baby*, GosTIM 1927-30. Set under construction. Photograph taken from the auditorium of the former Sohn Theatre, looking upwards towards the playing space and the onstage seating. Photographer: A. A. Temerin. © "A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum", Moscow.

The implications of this invitation to look through the playing space in *I Want a Baby* are perhaps best understood through comparison with another of Meyerhold's Tretyakov productions, *Earth Rampant*. In *Earth Rampant*, Meyerhold collaborated with designer Lyubov Popova to develop a constructivist-influenced, frame-like structure comprised of intersecting bars and lines. The gaps in

the structure invite the spectator to look through the frame and see what lies beyond. In *Earth Rampant*, a production that was performed outside as well as on the stage at the former Sohn, this process of looking through takes on a new dimension: the spectator can look through the production and see the Soviet world beyond. When the set was placed outside of the theatre, as seen in figure 2, the collision of the theatrical space and the realities of daily Soviet life make the ideological implications of this spatial metaphor clear: the production is the mediator through which the spectator can see the wider Soviet world.

**INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE.**

Figure 2: Set for *Earth Rampant*, Meyerhold Theatre 1923. On tour in Kharkov. © “A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum”, Moscow.

In *I Want a Baby*, however, it is not an outdoor space that is seen through the set, but a group of other spectators, sat on the other side of the Meyerhold Theatre. By placing the two audience groups opposite one another, Meyerhold establishes a relationship between them. In her analysis of visuality, Bleeker considers the act of looking to be fundamentally relational:

[...T]he object of visual analysis is the way things become visible as a result of the practices of looking invested in them. Visuality as an object of study, therefore, requires that we focus on the relationship between the one seeing and what is seen. (2008: 2)

For Bleeker, this relationality challenges disembodied notions of looking that emphasise the difference between the viewer (self) and the seen object (other). In *I Want a Baby*, the construction of the stage space suggests that part of the spectator's role is to see other spectators, creating a relationship that can only be achieved through looking. Rather than being divisive, the separation of spectators facilitates a visual connection between them: each groups makes the other 'become visible' by their act of looking through the production and at their counterparts. This act of looking is both relational and ideological: by looking through the production, spectators are connected to one another via the mediation of the play.

### 1927-1937: A decade of scopic change

As Bleeker observes, the act of looking occurs within the context of a specific historical and cultural situation:

[What] we think we see is the product of vision ‘taking place’ according to the tacit rules of a specific scopic regime and within a relationship between the one seeing and what is seen. (2008: 1-2)

In the decade between Meyerhold’s work on his productions of *I Want a Baby* and *One Life*, the scopic regime at his theatre underwent two significant changes. The introduction of socialist realism at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress altered the arts landscape, formalising the requirements of Soviet visual art, writing, and performance around clear ideological premises. The expectation of socialist realism, as summed up by Secretary of the CPSU, Andrei Zhdanov, at the 1934 Congress, was one of ‘revolutionary romanticism’ (1977: 21). The ‘realism’ of the Socialist realist project was a specific, Sovietised reality, inflected by a romantic, almost mythological, attitude towards the experience of post-revolution life.<sup>16</sup>

Socialist realism was a significant, and enforced, change to the Russian scopic regime: a government attempt at creating a specific way of looking. Socialist realist visual art highlights this process in practice: the idealised representation of healthy farm workers happily undergoing a forced requisition of grain seen in figure 3, a poster advertising collectivised farming, sits in clear tension with the realities of famine in the Russian countryside during the 1930s. The poster constructs a dual notion of looking, where the image as seen is in tension with reality as known. Rather than being dismissed as a lie, however, these images function as an invitation to the viewer to redefine their understanding of the real, alleviating any cognitive dissonance by aligning their perception of daily life with the mythic socialist reality constructed in the poster.

#### **INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE.**

Figure 3: M. A. Voron ‘Shock harvesting – to the Bolshevik harvest’, Moscow, IZOGIZ, 1934. Socialist Realist poster advertising forced requisition of grain during collectivised farming. By permission of the Don State Public Library.

The result of socialist realism, as Inna Solovyova notes, was a restriction not only in experimental form, but also in the scope of the writer or theatre director's role:

Any attempt by an artist to create a separate, aesthetically self-sufficient inner world, any claim to the intrinsic value of the creative act, or the imagination, was outside the limits prescribed to Soviet artists. (1999: 328)

For Meyerhold, whose aesthetic was founded on 'the creation of an aesthetically self-sufficient inner world', this was deeply problematic, and required the director to feign a performance style that suppressed its own theatricality. Reflecting on Meyerhold's work on *Natasha*, Rudnitsky notes that Seifullina's play, one of the director's few socialist realist experiments, was 'a drama of every day life which was unsuccessful and completely foreign to [Meyerhold's] style' (1981: 538). The implications of this mismatch are captured in Aleksandr Gladkov's reflections on the production's final dress rehearsal:

We were too uncomfortable to look each other in the eye, so tragically helpless was the uninspired Meyerhold [...] the poison of artistic falsehood spread through the entire spectacle from the weak, inert, it is terrible to say, 'stamped out' episodes... (in Rudnitsky 1981: 538)

The falsehood of Meyerhold's production exposed the tension between his practice and socialist realist scopical principles. Although the tension between the reality of the socialist realist image and the lived experience of the Soviet citizen was central to its ideological function, the government endorsement of socialist realism presented its formal choices as a neutral and objective way to capture 'reality' onstage. This disguises the complexity of the viewer's experience, instead suggesting that socialist realist representations are somehow neutral or objective in their content. In fact, the belief in artistic practice as foundationally representational is, as Bleeker articulates, incompatible with the active and situationally-specific nature of visibility.<sup>17</sup> Where, in *I Want a Baby*, Meyerhold's theatre had explored ways of looking that entangled the spectator, drawing her eyes through the playing space to her counterparts across the room, the ideological function of socialist realism required the audience to be disengaged from their own process when looking.

Meyerhold faced an additional, practical, change to the visual culture at GosTIM in October 1931, when the former Sohn Theatre was closed for refurbishment. The director had long been vocal about the venue's shortcomings, attributing the difficulties he had experienced in reforming the Soviet theatre to the limitations placed on him by his run-down venue (see, for example, Meyerhold, 1929-30). The closure of the former Sohn offered the director the opportunity of a new venue, built entirely to his specifications, but also presented the challenge of his company leaving its permanent home. In 1932, after a brief touring season, GosTIM moved into the Passage Theatre, a venue that was far from ideal for Meyerhold's purposes. Edward Braun observes:

The Passage was a miserable little box which was as much responsible for the gradual stagnation of the [GosTIM] repertoire as the tenets of socialist realism or mediocrity of contemporary dramatic literature. (Braun 2016: 304)

The transition to the Passage was intended to be temporary, but, in reality, work on Meyerhold's ideal venue was perpetually deferred until the liquidation of his company in 1938. As a result, GosTIM would never have the advantages of the new building Meyerhold had imagined, and the director saw out the majority of his career in the confines of the Passage, a sad restriction to the end of his working life.

Spectators at GosTIM in 1937, therefore, found themselves in a significantly different position to their counterparts in 1927. The relational model of looking that Meyerhold proposed in *I Want a Baby* in the, admittedly less-than-ideal, conditions of the former Sohn was no longer possible a decade later: instead, the director was under increasing pressure to produce a successful socialist realist play at the Passage. After the failure of *Natasha*, Meyerhold returned to *One Life*, a project he had begun in 1936 and temporarily suspended to work on Seifullina's play. In this production, the pressures of the socialist realist diktat and the restrictions of the Passage as a venue created in his work a new way of looking. A return to the end-on stage-auditorium arrangement brought the 'looking through' that Meyerhold proposed in *I Want a Baby* to an abrupt end, replacing it, instead, by an act of 'looking at', a mode of engagement that locates the spectator as external to the performance and challenges the viewer to engage consciously with the problematic scopic regime demanded by socialist realism.

**'Looking at': *One Life***

If Lissitzky's design for *I Want a Baby* invited the audience to look through the playing space, Vladimir Stenberg's work on *One Life* turned instead to a series of flat surfaces that foreshortened the spectator's line of vision, asking them to 'look at' the stage itself. Unlike looking through, which in *I Want a Baby* invited a relational mode of engagement between audience members, 'looking at' invites the spectator to focus their attention on the carefully-framed stage image.

Conceived for performance in the Passage Theatre, Meyerhold's production of *One Life* was intended for a small venue with a clear divide between spectator and stage. Like the Sohn, the Passage had a permanent proscenium arch; unlike the Sohn, however, the smaller venue did not offer Meyerhold scope for the large-scale reconfigurations of the space that he had explored in *I Want a Baby*. Stenberg's designs for *One Life* focus on the stage as playing space, with the majority of the design contained within the area upstage of the proscenium arch. The arch acts a frame for the playing space, drawing attention and focus towards the performance, presenting it as an object to be observed and emphasising its pictorial qualities.

The pictorial aspect of the stage image is enhanced through the tension in Stenberg's images between surface and depth. In Stenberg's paintings of designs for different episodes, the arch is rendered as deliberately flat, a solid, brown surface. This serves to emphasise further its function as a frame: none of the devices of texture or shade used in the drawing of the stage space itself are applied to the frame, differentiating it from its contents and highlighting its visual similarity to the frame of a painting. The stage is surrounded by a surface that, to use Clement Greenberg's analysis, draws attention to 'its real physical flatness' (1969: 72). This emphasis on the surface of the proscenium arch highlights the constructed nature of the images that it contains. Like a painting hung on a gallery wall, the presence of the frame forms a boundary between a deliberate creative act and its wider context. The insertion of an intentionally and emphatically flat surface around the depth of the stage space calls into question the authenticity of that depth. The presence of a back wall to the playing space further highlights this constructed depth, reminding the spectator that they can look at the stage, but not through it.

This use of framed and constructed depth in the stage image is essential in establishing the audience's mode of looking, and relates closely to the director's engagement with the ideology of socialist realism. The most striking aspect of the designs for *One Life*, at first glance, is their

superficially socialist realist aesthetic: their realist, yet slightly stylised forms and saturated colours echo the aesthetics of socialist realist painting. The inclusion of realist aspects in stage design was not unusual in Meyerhold's theatre. A. A. Gvozdev's description of the setting for *The Government Inspector* highlights the director's incorporation of realism as a theatrical device:

It looks like a staging by the Moscow Art Theatre [...] a piece of the real life of the 1830s. (in Rudnitsky 1981: 394)

In most of their applications, however, these realistic stages are bounded and do not take over the whole of the performance space: in the example of *The Government Inspector*, the realist settings are confined to the small trucks that Meyerhold used as playing spaces for some of the production's episodes.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, Stenberg's designs for *One Life* utilise as a foundation principles associated with early twentieth century stage realism. Figure 4 shows the design for episode nine of the production, entitled 'The Dug-Out'. In the drawing, vanishing point perspective is used to draw the spectator's eye into the image, creating a *trompe l'oeil* effect that gives the impression of the space receding to a distant horizon. The inclusion of this specific device is particularly jarring in the context of Meyerhold's outright rejection of false perspective in his 1908 article 'The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood'. Reflecting on the naturalistic aesthetic at the Art Theatre, he writes:

The hills on the battlefield in *Julius Caesar* may be constructed so that they decrease in size towards the horizon, but why don't the characters become smaller, too, as they move away from us towards the hills? (Meyerhold 1908, in Braun 2016: 35)

Meyerhold's objection to the staging of *Julius Caesar* articulates the impossibility of theatrical naturalism. The artificiality of the device is brought into sharp relief by the presence of the actor, whose body cannot be made to conform to the visual trick of linear perspective. Considering Meyerhold's analysis of the device, it seems unlikely that the use of perspective in *One Life* is intended to be read as wholly realistic, or to be a concession to realism in staging. Instead, the director's articulation of the problems of linear perspective suggests that the device is used with an awareness of the anti-realist elements of the visual trick highlighted in the tension between the performer and the scenography. As a result, the incorporation of linear perspective, rather than creating a realist environment for the action, reveals the falseness of the device to the viewer, inviting the spectator to engage with the constructed nature of the performance.



Other aspects of Stenberg's drawings support this idea. The designer manipulates perspective in the images, in some instances exaggerating the forms of the space to the point of almost absurdity. In Figure 5, the design for episode 16, a line of trees in the background is rendered far smaller than a strict use of vanishing point perspective would demand. In addition, there is a tension in the drawing between the perspective suggested by the trees, and the lines of the red fence and gate that dominate the image. The fence in particular is difficult to read: it seems to exist in two visual planes. If the top half of the image is covered, the fence seems to be receding upstage; cover the bottom half, and it appears to be aligned parallel to the footlights. The construction of depth in the drawing is inconsistent, giving the image an uncanny feel: a realism that is, somehow, not real at all.

**INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE.**

Figure 4: Vladimir Stenberg's set design for *One Life*, "Trench shelter" (episode 9), GosTIM 1936-7. © Nikolay Ostrovsky Museum, Moscow

**INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE.**

Figure 4: Vladimir Stenberg's set design for *One Life*, "Young people celebrate" (episode 16), GosTIM 1936-7. © Nikolay Ostrovsky Museum, Moscow. Note the manipulation of perspective in the rendering of the red fence.

As a result, what appears, at first glance, to be a relatively realist space for a socialist realist production in fact exposes the mechanisms of the socialist realist aesthetic. Rather than adhering to the required tenets of the form, the director and designer have generated a performance space that functions through a similar mediation of the 'real'. The resulting sense of discomfort engendered by the drawings is an illustration of the general discomfort of the socialist realist form: not reality, but Soviet reality. It is Meyerhold's (mis)-construction of Soviet reality that formed the basis of Kerzhentsev's criticism of his practice in his article 'An Alien Theatre', written after viewing *One Life* in 1937. He writes:

The systematic deviation from Soviet reality, the political distortion of that reality, and hostile slanders against our way of life have brought [his] theatre to total ideological and artistic ruin, to shameful bankruptcy. (in Braun 2016: 312)

Kerzhentsev's criticism is founded on the collapse of socialist realism with the reality of Soviet life – another instance of the desired invisibility of the socialist realist scopic process, presenting government-endorsed formal choices as neutral representations. The result is an accusation of distortion in Meyerhold's practice that has significant ideological implications: bringing the theatre to ideological 'bankruptcy' and 'ruin'. It is possible, however, to understand Stenberg's uncanny spaces not as distortions, but as exposures: scenographic constructions that uncover the function of socialist realist looking to the viewer via their unsettling play with realism as a constructed device. What appears on the surface as realist is, in fact, an exposure of the mechanisms of the socialist realist project and as such, Meyerhold's exploration of socialist realist principles in *One Life* becomes an experiment in uncovering the ideological function of government arts policy.

## **Conclusion**

Meyerhold's unseen productions reflect Bleeker's belief that 'things become visible as a result of the practices of looking invested in them' (2008: 2). In *I Want a Baby* and *One Life*, Meyerhold uses the act of looking to as a way to make things become visible, to bring the nature of the Soviet collective or the experience of socialist realism into sharp, critical focus for the spectator. The contrasting modes of looking in Meyerhold's *I Want a Baby* and *One Life* were never tested before a public audience; through the exploration of the designs, models, and partially constructed sets created for these projects, however, it is possible to engage imaginatively with the spectator's experience, comparing these possible modes of looking with wider visual culture to understand how Meyerhold created a theatre in which, to use Bleeker's words, 'visuality happen[ed]' (2008: 2).

Meyerhold's unseen productions are examples of suspended or truncated theatrical projects that occupy a liminal position between conceptualisation and realisation. This liminality is key in articulating the value of these productions in the study of Meyerhold's theatre: they draw attention to the theatrical process rather than the performance event, highlighting the director's conceptual decisions and the iterative nature of theatre making. The cancellation or suspension of a production brings with it a sense of loss: Meyerhold's emphasis on the role of the spectator in both his practice and theory indicates that the moment of public reception was critical to his process.<sup>19</sup> Productions that were never

viewed by a public audience did not undergo what Meyerhold called the ‘crucial revision of the production [...] by the spectator’ (Meyerhold 1929-30, in Braun 2016: 320), their practices remaining, at least in part, hypothetical, and their archives restricted, for example, by a lack of images from performances or critical responses in the press.

For the historian, however, the value of the unseen productions far outweighs the limitations of their perceived incompleteness. They reveal elements of Meyerhold’s work that are perhaps obscured by the power of the moment of reception and the spectator’s ‘crucial revision’ to the director’s concept. The relationship between conceptualisation and realisation is ultimately one of pragmatism, as the director encounters the logistical and, particularly in Meyerhold’s case social and political, constraints of the production process. In some instances, the unseen productions offer the opportunity to encounter the tension between production concepts and their pragmatic realisation, drawing attention to elements of conceptualisation that could be lost in public performance. This is apparent in both *I Want a Child* and *One Life*. In *I Want a Child*, Meyerhold clearly identifies the pragmatic constraints of the theatre’s architecture as a key factor in the project’s cancellation. Should the production have been performed at the former Sohn, the complexity of the visual concept developed by Meyerhold and Lissitzky would have been lost to the compromises demanded by the unsuitable space. In *One Life*, Stenberg exploits the potential of drawn renderings of the design to manipulate the representation of perspective in a way that is not possible on stage: in order for the space to function in performance, the tension between the two conflicting renderings of perspective in figure 5, for example, would have to be resolved, and an element of the uncanny construction of the space would necessarily be removed. Cat Fergusson Baugh (2016) discusses the pragmatic nature of performance design, and the potential of the stage drawing to expose creative and ideological intentions that are not necessarily apparent in a final, performed, product. In short, what can be drawn on paper cannot always be constructed in a theatre workshop, and the drawn image can reveal underlying conceptual premises for the production project.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of Meyerhold’s theatre, the close association between cancelled productions and government censorship means that the director’s unseen works also reveal elements of his relationship with the Soviet state. The complexity and unpredictability of the censorship system makes generalisations about its processes difficult, however, the close study of individual, censored

productions offers practical examples of censorship in action: the representations of dominant political ideologies contained in Meyerhold's unseen works illustrate not only the tension between GosTIM and the Party, but also throw light on the operation of the Soviet censorship machine. In the late 1920s and 1930s, with Meyerhold's increasingly precarious personal and professional position, the notion of visual experience allows another avenue to understand the often unpredictable and brutal mechanisms of Soviet censorship and restores the status of these overlooked, but essential, examples of Meyerhold's productions. Paradoxically, it seems, it is only by looking at Meyerhold's unseen productions that we can fully see the function and impact of the director's practice.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Nikolai Tarabukin's work on Meyerhold's construction of the *mise-en-scène*, published in an edited volume by Feldman (1998). Tarabukin was an art historian who worked with Meyerhold, and whose analysis of the director's practice focused on the director's 'compositional schema' and use of line, shape and trajectory in the stage image.

<sup>2</sup> Following the nationalisation of Russian theatres in 1917, Anatoly Lunacharsky invited 120 leading figures in the art scene to attend a meeting with the Bolsheviks. Just five guests attended, amongst them Meyerhold, who was the only representative from the theatre.

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed the emphasis on scenography in Meyerhold's work elsewhere, arguing for his status as a director-scenographer. This hyphenated role captures the significance of visual practice in the director's theatre (see, for example, Skinner 2015, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Leach does not include all of Meyerhold's unrealised projects: Alla Mikhailova, in her survey of Meyerhold's work with set designers, includes concept sketches for two additional unrealised

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productions: Andrei Globa's *Petr, Petr* in 1925 and Andrei Bely's *Moscow* between 1927-1930 (Mikhailova 1995: 276-277). Rudnitsky lists a number of planned season repertoires that never came to fruition, particularly related to the plans made for the New Meyerhold Theatre in the early 1930s. He writes: 'Many of Meyerhold's fondest dreams were tied to [the New Theatre] project. In the new building, he intended to stage Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Hamlet*, Mérimée's musical drama *Carmen*, in a new stage version by Isaac Babel and Nikolai Erdman, a new version of Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*, that was being worked on by Osip Brik, N. Aseev, and S. Kirsanov, and more' (Rudnitsky 1981: 495).

<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the productions Meyerhold prepared for the Moscow Art Theatre Studio on Povarskaia Street can be found in Braun (1998: 27-44) and Rudnitsky (1981: 49-76).

<sup>6</sup> Productions that were discussed but not rehearsed are not included in Leach's list of uncompleted productions. Meyerhold's meeting with Picasso in Paris in July 1928 is documented in a letter sent by his wife Zinaida Raikh, who describes a day spent at the artist's atelier, discussing the relationship between the two masters' work, and exploring the possibility of Picasso providing designs for *Hamlet* (Raikh 1974: 34).

<sup>7</sup> The term alien is taken from Platon Kerzhentsev's article on Meyerhold 'An Alien Theatre', published in *Pravda* in 1937, which is seen as instrumental in engineering the final stage of the director's downfall. Braun uses the same phrase to encompass all of Meyerhold's practice between 1927 and 1939 (see Braun 2016: 291-373).

<sup>8</sup> The Soviet censorship machine was vast and complex: *Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv*, or Glavlit, was responsible for the censorship of all written and published materials and employed around 6,000 people by the late 1930s (Sherry 2015: 55). From 1923, *Glavnyi repertuarnyi komitet*, Glavrepertkom, oversaw theatre censorship. In 1928, Glavrepertkom was incorporated into the newly-formed *Glavnoe upravlenie po delam khudozhestvennoi literatury i iskusstva*, Glaviskusstvo. For an overview of Soviet censorship during the Stalin era, see chapter two in Sherry (2015). Information on the development of Glaviskusstvo can be found in Fitzpatrick (1971).

<sup>9</sup> *Gosudarstvennyi teatr imeni Vs. Meïerkhol'da*

<sup>10</sup> The development and cancellation of *One Life* is documented by Fedyanina and Konaev in their series *Teatr kotorogo ne bylo [Theatre that never was]* (2019a, 2019b), published online in *Kommersant*. This project explores uncompleted productions in the history of the Russian theatre between 1898 and 1972. Two productions by Meyerhold were included: *The Suicide* (1929-31) and *One Life*.

<sup>11</sup> Leach documents the differences between the two versions of Tretyakov's play: the second version, set on the Russian Steppe, was more idealised in its representations of the Soviet Union. In contrast, the former, set in a Moscow tower block, used the chaotic backdrop of the city to develop social commentary on human behaviour that prompted Milda, the central character, to turn to selective breeding to produce the next generation of communists. Leach notes that '[in the first text] *I Want a Baby* referred [...] not simply to Milda's frustrations, but to the frustrations of social idealists like Tretyakov himself, who saw the good and the bad in the new Soviet society and were less certain than the zealous apparatchiks – idealists too, of course – that the direction in which the party was taking the country was wholly correct, *I Want a Baby* now meant something more akin to *I Want a Future*' (1993: 8).

<sup>12</sup> The journey of Ostrovsky's text from a relatively unknown work serialised in the journal *Molodaya Gvardia* to a best-selling socialist realist novel is detailed by Vera Alexandrova (1964). She notes that the original serialisation (published in the early 1930s) was reworked for publication in 1934 at the request of the Party to bring it into 'full conformity with all the rules of "socialist realism"' (1964: 51).

<sup>13</sup> This use of an industrialised metaphor for the reformation of human lives into the Soviet mould is a common socialist realist device, and can also be seen, for example, in Nikolai Pogodin's successful play *Aristocrats* (produced by Meyerhold's student Nikolai Okhlopov at the Realistic Theatre in 1934); see, for example, Ruder (1998).

<sup>14</sup> This chapter takes as its premise the belief that Meyerhold was very involved in the development of performance scenography and stage designs for his productions. I have argued elsewhere for the framing of Meyerhold as a 'director-scenographer', a dual role in which the spatial aspects of performance are considered an essential part of directorial practice. This is often reflected in the roles that Meyerhold attributes to himself on productions, for example, in the case of *I Want a Baby*, both he and Lissitzky are credited as *khudozhniki*, or artists – the same term used to designate a visual artist (see Mikhailova 1995: 278).

<sup>15</sup> My translation from the Russian.

<sup>16</sup> The association of socialist realism and either mythology or the mystic, can be found in Friedberg (1977) or Roberts (1965). It should be noted that although the ideological basis of socialist realism was clear, its formal expectations were not, and the fear of reprisal for non-compliance led to a significant stagnation in Soviet playwriting (see, for example, Solovyova 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Bleeker draws on Barbara Freedman and Hans-Thies Lehmann to suggest an alternative model of the 'theatre-reality' relationship that 'understands theatre and reality as parallel constructions rather than as an original and a

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copy, or originary presence versus representation' (2008: 11). Despite his totalitarian context, this model is arguably much closer to the work made by Meyerhold during the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>18</sup> I discuss the use of realist fragments in more detail elsewhere (see Skinner 2015).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Meyerhold's essays 'First attempts at a stylized theatre' (1907) or 'The reconstruction of the theatre' (1929-30).

<sup>20</sup> This is particularly the case when the wider visual culture of the 1920s and 1930s is considered: avant-garde experiments in multiple or shifting perspectives were common (for example, amongst the cubists), and the influence of these practices can be seen in stage design. Fergusson Baugh, for example, explores the manipulation of space on paper, and its pragmatism in performance, in cubist artist Vlastislav Hofman's designs for Karel Hilar's 1926 production of *Hamlet* (2016).