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Performance and Revolution: Tues/Thurs 11-12:30

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The Blood of the Artist Burns Bright Red

Forward: This essay's main points speak towards how the Russian Revolution had its voice amplified and solidified in the hearts and minds of the Russian people through various forms of performance and literary art. This analysis of artistry directly crossing over into the livelihoods and personal agendas of the Russian working class (and eventually, the world) shows how revolutionary thought and practice can be spurred on by viewing performances that depict or critique modern socio-political events. Performance is an integral component of revolt, as all revolutions are an act of defiance and conviction, and sometimes artistic action must be taken to inspire the hearts of the disadvantaged to spur action in the real world. Revolution and performance are both simultaneously acts of aggression and love, and because they so often closely deal with the lives of the disadvantaged, they are inextricably linked.

Socialism and communism are major economic and social philosophies that have conflicted with major, western forces of capitalism, often drawing attention to perceived shortcomings in capitalist society. One world-reaching demonstration of these philosophies seeding their ways into western populaces is the Russian Revolution. The revolution's impact on the world and Russia's socio-political structure cannot be understated, but in many ways, the rejection of the Czar was even more of a catalyst for an artistic liberation of the people. This freedom came in many shapes and sizes, as the revolution was an extremely far-reaching and multi-faceted event, but was significant in the world of theater thanks to Russian director/actor Vladimir Meyerhold.

Meyerhold was an originator of a system of actor preparation called "Biomechanics", an attempt to liberate the more complex feelings and intentions of an actor via physicalization and physical theater. This style of training was influential on the new ways theater was performed and communicated to the people of the revolution. Another artistic wave of Agitprop theater also was significant in the synthesis of revolutionary sentiments. In addition to the world of drama, journalism extended the stories of the revolution to other parts of Europe and around the world, creating change in the philosophical ideals of many world powers. Critics have pointed out the abrasive and combative nature that socialist and communist ideas took during the Russian Revolution through groups like the Agitprop brigades. Nevertheless, the arts (specifically theater and journalism) became forums in which political protest and change could take place, as well as serving as a catalyst of collective agreements, upholding the anti-war peace movement, and inspiring personal enlightenment for many of those involved.

From various sources including this class' lecture notes and *Meyerhold on Theater* by Edward Braun, Meyerhold's approach to reinventing actor training shows a clear resemblance to the volatile, changing Russia at the time. In an attempt to reflect the ideas of Constructivism, an artful philosophy focusing on the growing industrialism of the world, Meyerhold emphasized the body as a mechanical device, showing how physical work in a performance was as, if not more important than psychological preparation. Meyerhold's philosophy was conceptually defined as such: "By correctly resolving the nature of his state physically, the actor reaches the point where he experiences *excitation* which communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor's performance... It is this excitation which is the essence of the actor's art" (Braun, 199). This external source of excitation that called out to viewers and strangers is a striking analogy to how the indignancy of the working Russians spread like wildfire when communicated across newly formed sectors of the Russian public, planting seeds for the philosophical uprisings of communism and socialism.

With the shift to biomechanics, Meyerhold's teachings of constructivism spread an appreciation for the humble body of all human beings, as well as the importance of the mechanical/industrial work many Russians found themselves engaging as proletariat soviets, two things that were quite ignored by Russian bureaucracy prior to the revolution. This form of theater became a celebration of the working class, which helped raise their awareness of the power they possessed as a collective, suggesting that banding together could make real change in their government. This newfound collectivism shared by the working class took on many of the ideals of communism, most importantly the rejection of the capitalist mindset imposed on their livelihoods, which acted as an impetus for more revolutionary action in theater in the future. It is remarkable to consider how Meyerhold and his teachings, not initially intended to be a tool in the revolution, became integral components to the revolution's expression of itself throughout time.

In addition to the lasting impact of Meyerhold's techniques, a new phenomenon known as Agitprop was making its way into the public consciousness, first proposed by Vladimir Lenin in his political pamphlet, *What Is To Be Done* (1902). Agitprop was a form of raising awareness of Soviet issues and eliciting emotional responses from audiences and, "...had an immense impact on modernist cultural practice, particularly in graphic design, visual art, and theater" (Filewod). The theater practice of Agitprop soon developed into a quick, mobile, often outdoor form of protest performance, adaptable to whatever location or needs the audience had. Performances often consisted of quick, to-the-point sketches dealing with the poor conditions of factory workers, or parody of the current Russian leader(s), with the performers attempting to communicate their revolutionary sentiments to the masses. This artistic connection to the struggles of modernity resonated with many audiences, with Agitprop quickly becoming associated with the revolutionary movement, combining political radicalism with affecting artistic practice. Not only was Agitprop a new vessel for the art of theater to be revised in, but it was also an integral component of uniting the masses in their shared experience of being slighted by the Czar and other oppressive forces. Agitprop was able to project communist-like ideas, such as absence of social classes and common ownership of production, in a digestible artistic format so that spectators could identify and act on their opinions.

The art of journalism also played an important role in shaping the outside world's view of the Russian Revolution. A prime example of this was our class' viewing of the film *Reds*, directed by Warren Beatty, which depicts the tribulations of the relationship between journalists Jack Reed and Louise Bryant as they become more involved in the revolution. Bryant and Reed went on to write *Six Red Months in Russia* and *Ten Days That Shook The World* respectively, huge and influential writings that exposed the western (specifically American) populace to what was happening in revolutionary Russia. The couple's writings and work in establishing communist labor parties in America opened the door for many Americans to join forces with like-minded people who wanted to implement more forms of socialism and communism into their government. Bryant and Reed's professional work is complemented by the personal development they went through, depicted in *Reds*, as marital and romantic issues plague the couple throughout the film. But when they are closest to the revolution and conducting frontline journalism, they draw closest to one another. I think that this could be an interpretation of Beatty's part of how the revolution was not only supported by and inspired great works of writing/art, but acted similarly in the personal lives of many revolutionaries. Much of the couple's relationship was predicated upon their involvement in supporting the communist parties, showing how revolution not only gave a national purpose and responsibility to artists, but a personal one as well, with the characters focusing on important issues in their political and romantic worlds.

Whether through the lens of performance or literary art, revolution tends to manifest itself in a combative and socio-politically challenging manner. Specifically with the Russian Revolution, a landmark event in which capitalist and aristocratic ideals were met with opposition from the still-discussed ideologies of socialism and communism, art was essential in uniting the sentiments and ideas of revolution within the working-class public. Within any unification of a large group of people, problems in camaraderie are bound to occur, but this artful call-and-response from theater and journalism helped the people better focus on self-actualization and what they deemed to be their rights as workers and citizens. While not all art necessarily has this effect on its audience, when put in a revolutionary context, performance can communicate politically challenging ideologies and much more with great purpose and impact.

Sources

Meïerkhol'd V. È, and Edward Braun. *Meyerhold on Theatre*. Hill and Wang, 1969.

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Beatty, Warren, director. *Reds*. Paramount Pictures, 1981.