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Sylvia Sasse

The Confession of the Theater

Nikolai Evreinov's "Restaging" of the Moscow Show Trials

The political show trials of the 1930s in the Soviet Union were highly elaborate theatrical productions. High-ranking political leaders confessed to incredible crimes against the Soviet Union: treason, sabotage, espionage, and murder. But in Evreinov's play *The Steps of Nemesis*, it is the organizers of the Moscow show trials themselves who confess. They confess to a different kind of crime: the political theater which they create. "I have been wearing a *mask* all my life, pretending to be a Bolshevik, and I never was! [...] And I'm not the only one who *played a role*, but almost everyone, starting with Stalin ..." as Genrikh Yagoda reveals at the very end of the play.¹

In the reality of Soviet life at the time, Yagoda, who was the head of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (NKVD) from 1934 to 1936, would never have said such a thing. He was replaced in 1937 by Nikolai Ezhov, who had been gathering "evidence" against him for some time, and was himself on trial in the third and final public show trial. While Evreinov has Yagoda confess to his play-acting as a Bolshevik in *Nemesis*, the real Yagoda confessed during the historical Moscow show trial to having poisoned his predecessor Viacheslav Menzhinsky as well as the writer Maxim Gorky. He was sentenced to "death by firing squad" on the basis of this confession.

1 Nikolai Evreinov, *The Steps of Nemesis*, 138. Emphasis in the original.

Evreinov's play, as can be observed from the scene mentioned above, is not a piece of historically verified documentary theater, nor a factographic reconstruction of events, nor a chronicle of the show trials in the conventional sense, even though Evreinov chooses the subtitle "A Dramatic Chronicle in Six Scenes from Party Life in the USSR (1936–1938)." It is rather a document of contemporary speculation. Evreinov was not alone at the time in asking the questions which his play attempts to answer. What was the purpose of all this memorized, and media-orchestrated staging of political betrayal? Why the staging of guilt, remorse and confession and avowal in the form of the show trials?

Evreinov had not been in Russia for more than ten years, since 1924, when he began working on the play; he was in exile in Paris, writing "for the drawer."² In Paris, as his wife Anna Kashina-Evreinova describes in her note, he read everything he could get his hands on about the Moscow show trials: the transcripts in the daily newspapers, the reading of which became "an almost deranged obsession"³ for him, and the volume *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites* (*Sudebnyi otchet po delu anti-sovetskogo 'pravo-trockistskogo' bloka*) of the 3rd Trial, published in Moscow. Kashina-Evreinova also reports that he asked the Russian Social Democratic publicist-in-exile Pavel Berlin for advice in assessing the protocols. Evreinov also carefully filed newspaper clippings in folders and labelled them "Theater and Scaffold"; in another folder, dated December 6, 1930, to March 21, 1938, he collects

2 Anna Kashina-Evreinova, "In Place of a Preface," in: Evreinov, *Steps of Nemesis*, 7.

3 Ibid.

specific materials on the show trials, including individuals such as Bukharin.⁴

What Evreinov collected and read at that time, however, were transcripts of the show trials that had already undergone a round of censorship. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union were researchers able to access the unpublished original transcripts and see how passages had been deleted and statements had been completely deleted or rewritten.⁵ The basic fact of censorship, however, could already be guessed from the translations of the protocols. The German translation of the third trial, for example, is somewhat more detailed than the Russian original, and some passages are even missing in the Russian, from Nikolai Bukharin's cross-examination in particular. The historian Wladislaw Hedeler, who published a chronicle of the show trials in 2003, emphasizes that to this day it is essentially impossible to ascertain what happened behind the scenes of the show trials. There are "no archive-based source editions that provide information about the preparation, execution and follow-up of the three show trials [...]. The archives where the related documents are kept [...] are inaccessible or largely closed to foreign and Russian researchers."⁶

When Evreinov was writing his play in the 1930s and 1940s almost nothing known today could be proven. In this

4 The articles and sketches collected by Evreinov between 1928 and 1944, the folders, "Teatr i Eshafot," are held in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 982 (Evreinov), op. 1, ed. khr. 302.

5 See Wladislaw Hedeler, "Ezhov's Scenario for the Great Terror and the Falsified Record of the Third Show Trial," in *Stalin's Terror. High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, ed. by Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 34–55.

6 Wladislaw Hedeler, *Chronik der Moskauer Schauprozesse 1936, 1937 und 1938. Planung, Inszenierung und Wirkung* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2003), XXVII.

respect, Evreinov's play also documents the rumors and speculations of his time. Some, after all, believed the accused were really guilty, sometimes due to personal conviction, sometimes out of partisan prejudice, while others were certain that the confessions were a result of torture—either the torture of the accused or the threatened torture of their closest relatives.⁷ Still others argued that the defendants were under hypnosis,⁸ or ruled this out based on their courtroom behavior and instead pointed to the use of mescaline.⁹ In Evreinov's play it is the character Nikolai Bukharin who asks: "No, really! What do they do in your dungeons to get people to confess to things they haven't even done?"¹⁰

Evreinov adds to the speculation in his play with a truth drug invented by the Secret police, "Veritophor," an "elixir of honesty" whose development is overseen by Yagoda. However, the drug is not used in the play for the defendants of the show trials, because the question is not how to extort the truth, but how to extort fiction. Yagoda uses the elixir for a private purpose, forcing a dose of it on Varvara, his mistress's sister, who is visiting Moscow from Paris, her home in exile. He does not want to find out what she really thinks about the Soviet Union—after all, he knows perfectly well the terrible

7 Examples of this appeared early on in Karlo Shteiner's autobiography and in Roy Medvedev's *Let History Judge*. Medvedev writes that the confessions were also extorted from Bukharin and Krestinsky, for example with the threat of murdering Bukharin's wife and newborn child. Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 382.

8 See Erich Andermann, "Hexenprozess in Moskau?," *Das neue Tage-Buch* 6, February 1937, 162; S. Aberdam, "Hypnose in Moskau?," *Das neue Tage-Buch* 7, May 1937, 162–163.

9 See David Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 174.

10 Evreinov, *The Steps of Nemesis*, 32.

reality that he himself is helping to bring about—but he wants to hear whether Zinaida is “faithful” to him, whether she is not playing a trick on him. Evreinov has his characters reveal the political theater around them and develop methods for deciphering the acting of others, as Yagoda’s confessions about his acting and the use of “Veritophor” suggest. In the time of the show trials, reality produced only theater and theatrical confessions. In Evreinov’s play, on the other hand, it is the theater that produces the truth.

The Political Theatricalization of Life

It is no coincidence that Nikolai Evreinov, of all people, became interested in the Moscow show trials of the 1930s. Even though he studied the surviving accounts of the show trials, the protocols, and interviewed experts, one thing seemed to interest him above all: the inconceivable degree of theatricality that permeated politics in the Soviet Union. This meant not only the public staging, but above all the hidden theatricality, the theater that denied being theater. The show trials were the best example of the latter. They claimed to reveal the hidden truth of the opposition, and it was precisely this “hidden truth,” which was to be proven with confessions and testimony, that was staged. The defendants were to confess as credibly as possible to crimes they had not committed.

Evreinov obviously recognized the theatricality of the show trials; his play brings them back onto the stage of the theater. At the same time, he saw that the call he had propagated in the 1910s for the “theatricalization of life” had been politically implemented in a completely different way, in a way that he probably had not anticipated. Was his play also

an attempt to revise his own demand for the theatricalization of life?

In the 1910s, Evreinov's call for the theatricalization of life was directed primarily against the alleged 'naturalness' in theater and in life. "Theater without theatricality is rabbit stew without rabbits,"¹¹ Evreinov wrote in *Theater for Itself*, a three-volume book on the theater of the everyday that he wrote between 1915 and 1917. Behind this culinary comparison lay, above all, a polemic against Konstantin Stanislavsky's naturalistic school of acting. When Evreinov called for more theatricality then, he did not mean affected posturing. For Evreinov, theatricality was not limited to theater as an institution, but was an everyday practice and anthropological category.

With this broad concept of theater and theatricality, Evreinov's concept also differed from those of Stanislavsky's other contemporary opponents. Unlike, for example, Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Stanisław Witkiewicz, who also rejected Stanislavsky's naturalism, Evreinov saw no contradiction between the authentic or natural and the theatrical. Craig, Witkiewicz and Meyerhold, on the other hand, sought to overcome Stanislavsky's demand for naturalness and rejection of the mask primarily through a commitment to the total artificialization of the theater. Craig pursued this through the Übermarionette as a sublimated, depersonalized actor. Meyerhold's approach was 'biomechanics,' an anti-psychological, purely physiological training for actors, and Witkiewicz pushed for a 'pure,' metaphysical and artificial theater that should not be oriented towards life. Evreinov, on the other hand, claimed that theatricality was always

11 Nikolai N. Evreinov, *Demon teatral'nosti*, ed. by A. Ju. Zubkov and Vadim I. Maksimov (St. Petersburg: Letnij sad, 2002), 285.

already natural. In a way, he put an equal sign between naturalness and theater and added that precisely this so-called naturalness was the most demanding element: “Oh, this naturalness we know too well! This laughable naturalness, outrageous in its naiveté! We have long since cracked it, and Oscar Wilde even told us that this was the most difficult role of all.”¹²

In this respect, it is no wonder that Evreinov regarded the Stalinist confession practice as a form of theater first and foremost. It had degenerated into a mere ritual in the campaigns for “criticism and self-criticism” (*kritika i samokritika*) as early as 1927. Just as Socialist Realism was not realism, the ritualized confessions were not about truth. However, if someone articulated any real criticism, Stalin placed it in quotation marks. He thus interpreted any criticism of his policies from the outset as a false “criticism,” which was only masquerading as criticism and was in reality sabotage and counterrevolutionary activity.¹³ This inversion into opposites was Stalin’s political strategy: Facts were declared secret sabotage and lies (disinformation) were staged as truth. For example, in 1936, during the 1st Show Trial, *Pravda* published an article entitled “On Enemies in Soviet Masks,”¹⁴ while in March 1938, the *Deutsche Zentral-Zeitung* (DZZ), the German-language organ of the Communist Party published in Moscow, wrote of “Fascist murderers behind the masks of doctors,”¹⁵ and then also in March 1938, during the 3rd Trial, it was announced in the newspaper *Bol’shevik* that Bukharin had worn the mask of

12 Ibid., 154.

13 Iosif V. Stalin, “Protiv oposhleniia lozunga samokritiki,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 11, 1928-mart 1929 (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo politicheskoi literatury, 1949), 127–136, here 133.

14 Hedeler, *Chronik der Moskauer Schauprozesse*, 58.

15 Ibid., 382.

a spy all his life.¹⁶ In *Pravda*, Ezhov is praised for his ability to “recognize the enemy, no matter how he masks himself, and hold him accountable.”¹⁷ The metaphor of the mask was omnipresent, and the alleged unmasking served primarily to discredit critics in the ranks as fascists or fascist spies, not only in their own country but also internationally.

Evreinov, however, reverses the polarities once again and thus puts everything back in its place. In *Steps of Nemesis*, Evreinov uses theater not to unmask or expose the enemy, but to reveal theater through theater. It is crucial to note here that when he wrote of the “theatricalization of life,” Evreinov did not mean to deceive and lie and to hide the theater, but to live out the natural instinct towards play, i.e. to show the theater as theater.

Therefore, in *Steps of Nemesis* Evreinov exposes the exposure itself as political theater. This is also made clear in one scene directly as a tip or stage direction from the designated head of the NKVD, Ezhov, to the prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky, who directed the prosecution for the state during the show trials: “In your opening statement you need to emphasize as strongly as possible,” Ezhov advises, “that all these Trotskyites, Zinovievites and Bukharinites are nothing but *capitulators*. That, concealing themselves with revolutionary phrases, they were seeking to re-establish capitalism in Russia.”¹⁸ Thus Evreinov verbally demonstrates how the mask that is to be torn off is created and put on in the first place by speech acts such as this.

16 Ibid., 395.

17 Ibid., 387.

18 Evreinov, *The Steps of Nemesis*, 132. Emphasis in the original.

The Theater Denied

So while the Soviet Union's judicial theater is based on hiding the staging at all costs and passing the truth off as a mask, Evreinov's theater is based on revealing the political theatricalization of life. It is perhaps surprising then that the Moscow show trials, which form such an important context for everything that happens in the play, are only shown in one scene. The remaining five scenes take place behind the scenes of power: in the apartment of Zinaida Popova, Yagoda's mistress and an invented distant relative of Bukharin; in Stalin's study in the Moscow suburb of Gorki; in a chemical laboratory of the Secret police at an unknown location, where the aforementioned "Veritophor" is produced and tested; in the office of the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, Nikolai Ezhov, which is also a kind of dress rehearsal for the 3rd Trial, at least in the cross-examination of Bukharin; and finally in "hell," which is located in the room next to Ezhov's office during the dress rehearsal. In hell, the defendant Bukharin also confirms: "The trial between the authorities and the defendants doesn't take place in court, but behind the scenes; in Party committees, and not in the organs of the judicial investigation; in the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, and not in the Judiciary!"¹⁹

Bukharin, and thus Evreinov as well, does not assume that there is no theater behind the scenes. Rather, there is simply another theater off stage, and perhaps it is even the real one. Evreinov depicts this backstage theater as a kind of smear theater, a cabal of intrigues. Although many people tell the truth there, behind the scenes, they are just as likely to perform something for one another.

19 Ibid., 131.

The question is not so much whether they are acting, but how well and, above all, how credibly. In Evreinov's play, it is Stalin who is worried about the show trials' credibility: How could people "not be critical," he says, "when the accused exposed themselves in committing fairytale crimes and then even demanded the death penalty for them! It is completely absurd: no paper trail, no material evidence, not even a trace of any documents of any kind!" Stalin is not bothered by the theater itself, but by the "fairytale crimes," by the fantastic, amateurish presentation of evidence. When Yagoda asks Stalin how the production could be improved, whether he should have fabricated documents as well, Stalin has an idea: "Why *yourself*? What was needed was for the *criminals* to do it... Once a criminal admits to what we need, let him prepare a corresponding document to confirm it."²⁰

Evreinov has Stalin formulate a solution to the problem that will enable him to dispose of his own staging. Or, in other words, a good staging is the one that one forces the others, one's political enemies, to produce on their own, in this case the defendants of the show trials.

Interestingly, in the historical show trials it was precisely the other way around. Prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky had used the lack of evidence on the part of the prosecution as proof of guilt to justify the confession as the sole evidence. This was because Vyshinsky assumed that the offenses of which the defendants were accused would be primarily conspiratorial activity—if it had been executed in an appropriately professional manner, it would not have produced evidence of its existence at all. The more successful the conspiracy, the less evidence there would be, as Vyshinsky put it in his remarks to

20 Ibid., 41. Emphasis in the original.

the court: “How can one raise the question of evidence under these circumstances?”²¹ The trick was more than ingenious, because in this way the prosecutor could always interpret the completely insufficient evidence as an indication of the crime. Vyshinsky concludes by reaffirming this claim: “I dare to assert, in accordance with the basic requirements of criminal procedural science, that in criminal cases for conspiracy one cannot make such claims.”²²

The Truth-Tellers

Evreinov’s play not only presents the confession of the theater. It also tells us a great deal about Soviet reality. In doing so, Evreinov uses very different rhetorical tricks. He essentially turns the Stalinist principle of reversal into its opposite here as well. Those statements that are disqualified as brazen lies, paradoxically, are themselves particularly true. The truth thus emerges as a lie. Radek, for example, tells Stalin all kinds of unpleasant truths, but packages them as alleged statements of sabotage made by Tukhachevsky. Or Yagoda, who works himself into a fit: “The bastards! They accuse me of embezzlement, when I’ve saved the state *millions* with the free labor of prisoners! Enriched the Soviet Union with gigantic works that the Pharaohs of Egypt couldn’t even dream of! Who made slave labor in the concentration camps so disciplined that we could supply it to state enterprises like a flawless product!”²³ And Ezhov is afraid that eventually people

21 Andrei J. Wyschinski, *Gerichtsreden* (Berlin: Dietz, 1951), 615.

22 *Ibid.*, 615–616.

23 Evreinov, *The Steps of Nemesis*, 45. Emphasis in the original.

will say “he [Stalin] is settling personal scores with his former comrades.”²⁴

Evreinov allows himself a particularly interesting reversal in his portrayal of Bukharin. While the truth is passed off as a “lie” in the back rooms, the defendant Bukharin consistently tells the truth at the rehearsal for the trial, which also takes place in a back room: “Although I already have a poor opinion of our Soviet court, I confess that I would never in my life have believed that it would go so far as to accuse a man using *deliberately* falsified facts. I am completely disgusted and nauseous!”²⁵

In the historical trial, this was not at all the case. It was precisely Bukharin’s cross-examination that caused confusion. Bukharin, the party’s chief ideologue and theoretician, had admitted almost everything he was accused of and even confessed to more than was necessary in his closing statement. Later it was learned that even during his imprisonment, before the beginning of the trials, he had written books, poems and philosophical arabesques and, on December 10, 1937, two months before the beginning of the 3rd Trial on March 2, 1938, he had written a letter of petition to Stalin. It is clear from the letter that at this point he still seemed to hope that Stalin would believe him and recognize his innocence. He even offers himself to Stalin as a Trotskyist detective and proposes he be given a 25-year sentence in Kolyma, which he could use to build a Siberian cultural center.²⁶ Why he wrote this and what it implied led to an international discussion that continues to this day. His appearance during the show

24 Ibid., 42.

25 Ibid., 124. Emphasis in the original.

26 Pis'mo N.I. Bukharina na imia I.V. Stalina, December 10, 1937, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f.17, op. 171, d. 427, l. 12–22ob: <http://istmat.info/node/62004>.

trials was also repeatedly interpreted against the background of this letter. Why, people wondered, did he not disclose, as Nikolai Krestinsky had done, that he had been forced to confess to fabricated crimes?²⁷ Why did he humiliate himself in this way before Stalin and the entire nation?

Since then, there have been many interesting attempts to answer these questions, and Evreinov also participates in the speculation. Arthur Koestler, in *Darkness at Noon* (1940), was one of the first to deal with the intolerable situation of the accused who were required to slander themselves in order to justify the party line. Slavoj Žižek also reads the confessions of the accused in relation to this double role. In doing so, he draws attention to the Lacanian distinction between the subject of the statement (*sujet d'énoncé*) and the subject of the enunciation (*sujet d'énonciation*). In show trials, according to Žižek, the defendant, i.e. the victim, is required to admit to counterrevolution until he finally agrees with the judges' view that the death penalty is his just dessert, and thus paradoxically also "begins to like" his conviction:²⁸ "The accused finds himself in an absolute void insofar as he is compelled to authenticate his devotion to the communist cause by confessing his betrayal."²⁹ According to Žižek, the accused appear credible to the people only when

27 On Bukharin's strategy see also Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, 373; Klaus-Georg Riegel, *Konfessionsrituale im Marxismus-Leninismus* (Graz, Vienna and Cologne: Styria, 1985), 110–112; Sylvia Sasse, *Wortsünden. Beichten und Gestehen in der russischen Literatur* (Munich: Fink, 2009), 305–307; Karl Schlögel, *Terror und Traum. Moskau 1937* (Munich: Hanser, 2008), 665–667; Renate Lachmann, *Lager und Literatur. Zeugnisse des Gulag* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2019), 116–118.

28 Slavoj Žižek, *Grimassen des Realen. Jacques Lacan oder die Monstrosität des Aktes* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1991), 70–71.

29 Slavoj Žižek, *Liebe Dein Symptom wie Dich selbst* (Berlin: Merve, 1991), 53.

they accept the procedure of the show trials and assume their role in the staged drama, in order to return from this speech act to reality and to their role as a Communist who does not resist the Communist accusation. Bukharin, in his letter written before the trial, speaks of the “disarming” which was required of him: “I had no ‘way out’ but to confirm the accusations and testimonies of others and elaborate on them. Otherwise it would have seemed that I was ‘not laying down my weapons’.”³⁰

But did Bukharin actually accept the role of traitor during the show trial, in the cross-examination with Vyshinsky and in his closing argument, did he actually “disarm” himself? Reading the published transcripts also makes another interpretation possible, because Bukharin’s contradictory statements do not necessarily have to be read as a psychological dilemma. The censored protocols reveal that Bukharin actually split himself into two often contradictory subjects of speech, one subject of statement and one of testimony. Karl Schlögel writes that he confesses and recants at the same time.³¹ But he does this on two different levels. Bukharin, for example, inquires of Vyshinsky before responding to the latter’s questions, “You ask whether I, as a member of the centre of Rights and Trotskyites, was in favour ... [...] I was.”³² In other words, he inquires whether he was guilty in the role attributed to him or guilty as himself. Or elsewhere, “VYSHINSKY: Did you talk to Radek as the editor of “Izvestia” or as a member of the plotting organization? BUKHARIN: You understand perfectly well that I spoke to

30 Pis'mo N.I. Bukharina na imia I.V. Stalina.

31 Schlögel, *Terror und Traum*, 669.

32 *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites* (Moscow, 1938), 377.

him as a member of the plotting organization..."³³ Bukharin distinguishes between speaking as Bukharin and speaking as the persona they invented for him during the cross-examination, as an alleged traitor, as if he were acting out a theatrical role. And it is only as this traitor that he confirms the accusations.

In his closing argument, moreover, Bukharin articulates the required split in terms of content; he speaks of a schizophrenia that accompanied his revolutionary actions. This schizophrenia, which is linked simultaneously to the crimes he is accused of and to the context of his testimony during the cross-examination, becomes clearest when he admits that he is guilty on all counts but denies the preconditions that enabled him to do this in the first place. Bukharin says that while he accepts responsibility for everything, that it was not his personal position. He pleads guilty even though he cannot remember specific acts, he admits to founding a gang without knowing the members of it, etc.³⁴ The closing argument ends with Bukharin admitting that he is guilty in his capacity as an accused counterrevolutionary criminal, but not as Bukharin. He splits himself into two speech subjects, not in order to "accept" his conviction, but to make the schizophrenic situation linguistically conceivable.

In Evreinov's case, however, Bukharin not only tells the truth, but also asks himself the question that became

33 Ibid., 405. This passage is missing in the Russian version. The English and German translations are much more comprehensive than the Russian 'original' published in 1938, in which sections are combined and where entire lines of argument are sometimes left out. Heinz Neumann and Margarete Buber-Neumann were commissioned to translate the text into German. Two months later Heinz Neumann was arrested. See Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Von Potsdam nach Moskau. Stationen eines Irrwegs* (Stuttgart: Ullstein Tachenbuchverlag, 1957), 439, 443.

34 See *Report of Court Proceedings*, 769.

a subject of so much discussion later, namely “To admit to vile, debased, disgusting acts! And even more, to do it almost ecstatically! I swear on my honor, I would rather be hanged, quartered and put to death under a dull saw!”³⁵ This is a Bukharin who is not yet in prison, who has not yet had to endure a public trial, this is the Bukharin who still has the opportunity to speak the truth even in public, a Bukharin as Evreinov might have wished him to be.

In his play, he does not have Bukharin shot three days after the verdict under Ezhov’s supervision, but first sends him to the hell previously mentioned. There, Zinoviev advises him to confess: “My best advice: agree to any self-denunciation! Sign off on any crime! Agree to play the most humiliating role in the trial! As long as they *actually* shoot you, and not just on paper! Because [hell] is worse than death! A thousand times worse!”³⁶ Evreinov’s contribution to the speculation over confessions is thus a fantastically dystopian one; surviving in Stalin’s regime is worse than death, so it is better to confess to everything possible and more.

Theater as Punishment

Evreinov was no stranger to court trials or legal theory. He initially studied law between 1892 and 1901, but joined a theater group at law school, for which he wrote plays and performed. His thesis was in legal history and focused on the history of corporal punishment in Russia (*Istoriia telesnykh nakazaniakh v Rossii*). In it, he assembles material documenting public punishment in Russia since the Middle

35 Evreinov, *The Steps of Nemesis*, 29.

36 *Ibid.*, 130.

Ages, referencing legal texts and listing types of punishment. It is not until 1912, in his collection of essays *Theater as Such* (*Teatr kak takovoi*), that he also explicitly reads the court of the 17th century Spanish Inquisition as theater, with its masked judges, torture props, and auto-da-fé. He is primarily concerned with commonalities between theater and court, theater and punishment, or, later, with common origins. Thus, in 1922, in “Theater and Scaffold” (*Teatr i Èshafot*), he explores the coincidence of theater and court in the origins of tragedy, which, translated from Greek, is famously derived from the “goat song,” and can be traced back to sacrificial rituals, public purifications, and self-abasement.³⁷ “Wherever we turn in search of the origin of the theater—whether to history, folklore, child psychology, or ethnography—everywhere we encounter visible or hidden signs of the scaffold, where the executioner and the victim (human or animal) in the early days of drama are the first to define the appeal of this new institution to the crowd, an institution that will only become theater later.”³⁸

After the October Revolution, when meetings were first held in the form of court trials, and finally agit courts began to play an increasingly important role in the public life of Soviet citizens as a moral-ideological compass, Evreinov had already emigrated to Paris. He does not seem to have come into contact with these parajudicial, amateur theatrical

37 Evreinov also reaches back to the roots of the theater in other studies and examines public purification (self-abasement) and the origins of tragedy, the “goat song” which was sung when a goat was sacrificed at the festival of Dionysus. Nikolai Evreinov, *Proiskhozhdenie dramy: folkloricheskii ocherk. Pervobytnaia tragediia i rol' kozla v istorii ee vozniknoveniia* (St. Petersburg: Petropolis, 1921).

38 Nikolai Evreinov, “Teatr i Èshafot,” in: *Segodnia*, June 6, 1996, 10 (First published in *Segodnia* 1922).

events. Yet he is responsible for one of the greatest political productions of the early Soviet Union as the director of *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (*Vziatie Zimnego dvortsa*), commissioned in 1920 for the 3rd anniversary of the October Revolution. Evreinov was hired as the principal director and bore enormous political responsibility. The importance of this event is reflected, among other things, in an order issued by the special commissioner of the fleet and army for the conduct of the October celebrations, the last paragraph of which, the 17th, announces that those who intend to disrupt the preparation and execution of the theatrical event will be accused of counterrevolutionary intent and brought before a revolutionary tribunal.³⁹

It is likely that Evreinov saw in this commission, more than anything else, the potential for a gigantic production, something capable of eclipsing everything that had been done in the theater before it: the latest technology, 10,000 actors, 100,000 spectators. To what extent Evreinov understood that he had to realize a state commission to theatricalize history is not clear from his notes. The fact that one of the photos taken during the dress rehearsal for the theatrical storming was later used as a historical document would probably have amused him, since he believed theater has the potential to create reality and even to heal it. Evreinov, however, did not intend to falsify history. He always marked the spectacle as a spectacle.⁴⁰ His set consisted of two huge stages built on the

39 Nikolai Evreinov, "The Storming of the Winter Palace," in Nikolai Evreinov et al., *Storming of the Winter Palace*, ed. by Inke Arns, Igor Chubarov, and Sylvia Sasse (Berlin, Zurich: diaphanes, 2017), 30–49, here 45.

40 Igor' Chubarov, "Teatralizatsiia zhizni' kak strategiia politizatsii iskusstva: Povtornoie vziatie Zimnego dvortsa pod rukovodstvom N.N. Evreinova (1920)," in Hans Günther and Sabine Hänsen (eds.), *Sovetskaia vlast' i media* (St. Petersburg: Monoskop, 2005), 281–295.

square behind the Winter Palace, each 40 meters long. One of them showed the time before the October Revolution in the style of a comedy, almost as a parody of the past, while the other stage was supposed to show the revolution and the mobilization of the masses. In the history of the theater, the idea of the political mobilization of the masses matched the discovery of the spectator as an actor. Or, reversed and reformulated for the young Soviet Union: Discovering the spectator as an actor in the theater was an actualization of the political demand to mobilize the masses in the future dictatorship of the proletariat. Evreinov also used this historical moment to politicize his own concept of the theater. Before the dress rehearsal, he gave a speech in which he transferred aspects of his theory to the political situation: "The time of the extras is over. Remember, comrades, that you are not extras at all. You are artists. You are artists, possibly even more important artists than those of the old theater."⁴¹

By the 1930s, there was nothing left of this political enthusiasm. Political participation and the spontaneous activity of the masses were only representations that no longer had a place in political reality; the political premises had themselves degenerated into ideological scenery. When Evreinov was working on his article on "Theater and the Scaffold" in the early 1920s, his main concern was not to banish crime, vice, and punishment from the theater and not to turn the theater into a moral institution. Rather, he argued, Nemesis, the goddess of righteous retribution, should not be chased out of the theater, and should itself become the theater.⁴² It is precisely in the theater, he argues, that there must be room for vice, crime, and punishment.

41 Evreinov, "Storming of the Winter Palace," 39–40.

42 Evreinov, "Teatr i Èshafot," 10.

Evreinov continued to write about the ideological objectives of early post-revolutionary theater in the 1930s. In an undated manuscript he delivered at a Parisian Masonic lodge after 1934, he writes that the performing arts in particular (theater, film, circus, festivals) had already been used to educate the masses immediately after the revolution.⁴³ Theater was particularly well suited to this purpose because it targeted consciousness as well as the emotions and the unconscious, and achieved its immediate effect through suggestion and direct involvement.

Evreinov does not recognize, however, that theater had become a punishment in the Soviet version of the theatricalization of life. This punitive function had already emerged in the agit courts, which were organized until about 1930. While the theater was still quite clearly marked in the agit courts until the mid-1920s, there, too, the dividing line became increasingly unclear. So it can happen that the village alcoholic is put on public display, has to play himself and to repent. This public repentance and confession, which was regularly rehearsed via the agit courts, culminated in the show trials, which completely concealed their theatricality. Michel Foucault stated in *Discipline and Punish* that one could observe how public punishment—a subject which had interested Evreinov since his dissertation for law school—gradually disappears and becomes discrete in modernity. Instead, the fear of punishment is transformed into the fear

43 Nikolai Evreinov, "Ideologija sovetskogo teatra," Columbia University Libraries, Archival Collections, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Nikolai Nikolaevich Evreinov Papers, ca. 1905–1965, Box 12, 34. Lectures that he delivered through his membership to the Free Masons were published in Nikolai N. Evreinov, *Tainye pruzhiny iskusstva. Stat'i po filosofii iskusstva, étike i kul'turologii (1920–1950)*, ed. by Igor' Chubarov (Moscow: Logos-Al'tera, 2004).

of confession. This is also partly true for the political show trials. In the show trials, we can also observe a discrepancy in punishment that occurs on the level of staging; while the executions do not take place in public, the confession is put on display.⁴⁴ It is true that the show trials are—on the surface—staged as cathartic theater, as the epitome of a moral institution that reveals how conspiracy, murder, crime and espionage have been successfully uncovered and thwarted. On the other hand, the show trial is itself the crime. The purification is *enacted*, and is first produced by a “theatrical pact” with the accused. When this happens, the theater itself becomes the punishment. The “theatrical pact,” however, occurs not only on the level of political staging; it also reenacts itself in everyday life. Everywhere people “play along.” Fellow travelers should actually be called fellow players. Nor is it only the fellow travelers who play along: To do so becomes a daily struggle for existence. The “theatrical pact” demanded by the dictatorship is perhaps the most common everyday political theater.

Evreinov, however, seems much more concerned with another question, the role of the spectators. The fact that he makes Nemesis the title figure of his play also reflects the role of the spectators or fellow players: Varvara sees the Russian people as potential enactors of the role of Nemesis: “The Russian people suffer patiently, but when their hour of revenge comes the whole world will shake from their wrath. You just wait—they will repay you a hundredfold for the millions of people you’ve martyred, killed, tortured, humiliated, and who took their own lives in despair!”⁴⁵ Seeing the people once

44 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books 1977), 93ff.

45 Evreinov, *The Steps of Nemesis*, 75.

more in the role of actors, and not as mere extras and or spectators, is perhaps the utopic vision hidden in the play. When Yagoda, however, deposed as head of the secret service, turns to the audience at the end and justifies himself: "Well, you might as well ham it up if the people will put up with a travesty!",⁴⁶ then the statement becomes all the more agonizing and remains relevant today. Why do we allow political theater to play itself out for us?

46 Ibid, 139.