CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Contesting, confusing, corrupting: Huizinga's foundational anthropology of play and its limits
Authors	Szakolczai, A#rpa#d
Publication date	2012-02-01
Original Citation	Szakolczai, Arpad (2012) Contesting, confusing, corrupting: Huizinga's foundational anthropology of play and its limits. In: The Fifth Workshop of International Political Anthropology, on Play: The creation of culture and the modern world. Waterford, Ireland, 24th – 25th February 2012.
Type of publication	Conference item
Link to publisher's version	http://www.politicalanthropology.org/
Rights	©2012, A#rpa#d Szakolczai. Draft version; please do not quote without permission
Download date	2026-11-06 19:53:46
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/971



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Contesting, confusing, corrupting: Huizinga's foundational anthropology of play and its limits

by

Arpad Szakolczai
Department of Sociology
University College, Cork

Paper prepared for the Fifth *International Political Anthropology* Workshop, 'Play: The origin of human culture and the modern world', 24-5 February 2012, Waterford Institute of Technology

Draft version; please, do not quote without permission.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL THEORY 3

2. HUIZINGA: PLAY AS FOUNDATIONAL OF CULTURE 3

PLAY AS CON-TESTING 6

REPRESENTATION, CEREMONY 7

HUIZINGA AND THE ROMANTICS 9

3. DEBUREAU: THE RE-BIRTH OF PIERROT AS SUFFERING VICTIM 10

NODIER DISCOVERS DEBUREAU: ROMANTICS AND MIMES 10

DEBUREAU AS A MIME AND AS A HUMAN BEING 12

THE MIME FROM THEATRE TO LITERATURE: STAGES IN THE COMMEDIFICATION OF THE WORLD 13

4. MEYERHOLD: BIOMECHANICS AS THE AVANT-GARDE TAYLORISATION OF THEATRE 14

FROM ACTOR BACK TO THE MIME 14

FAIRGROUND BOOTH 15

MASQUERADE 17

ACTING AS 'BIOMECHANICS': UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL OF THE DEMONIC CLOWN 17

I chose upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn
Drop their cast at the side
Of dripping stone; I declare
They shall inherit my pride,
The pride of people that were
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
Neither to slaves that were spat on,
Nor to the tyrants that spat
WB Yeats, *The Tower* (1926)

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.
WB Yeats, *Ego Dominus Tuus* (1919)

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned
WB Yeats, *The Second Coming* (January 1919)

the true natural art of statecraft […] will first test them in play, and after the test will entrust them in turn to those who are able to teach and help them to attain the end in view
Plato, *Statesman* (308C-D)

1. Introduction: The Anthropological Foundations of Social Theory

This paper argues that Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* is not simply a classic work of cultural history, but lays the anthropological foundations of the understanding of social life, comparable to, and complementing, similar works by Marcel Mauss on gift-relations, Simmel on sociability, and Tarde and Girard on imitation. However, play can also become problematic, even demonic, and modern art and politics is much based on the use and abuse of this demonic aspect of playfulness.

The paper will consist of three parts. The first will introduce Huizinga's foundational work, focusing on the importance of contest for the promotion of socially relevant excellence, interpreting 'contesting' as 'con-testing' or 'joint proving', sparked by Agnes Horvath's ideas on the significance attributed by Plato to wrestling. The second will present the archetype of the modern demonic clown, the Pierrot figure as renewed by Jean-Gaspard Debureau after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, and 'discovered' in 1828 by French radical Romantics as capturing the truth of the human condition, reading into a rancorous and bitter circus clown Isaiah's figure of the 'Suffering Servant'. The third part will present an ultimate stage of this development in Meyerhold's Russian avant-garde theatre, pioneered before and perfected after the Bolshevik revolution, with its glorification of mechanisation and industrialism, the 'taylorization of theatre' through his innovative 'biomechanics', and his landmark corrupting of acting through the techniques of 'puppetisation' and 'out-casting'.

2. Huizinga: play as foundational of culture

The writings of Johan Huizinga constitute one of those classic works in social theory that everybody refers to and yet nobody knows or uses in any depth. His ideas on the 'waning of the Middle Ages', on the Netherlands of the 17th century, on Erasmus of Rotterdam, or on the 'play element of culture' are mentioned in any related work in its first pages, so that the real substance of Huizinga's ideas could then be safely ignored in the rest, substituted by more 'up-to-date' literature. This section will offer a detailed analysis of this crucial classic work *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1970[1950]) by contrasting and comparing it to the similarly fundamental-anthropological approaches of René Girard (1977[1972]) and Marcel Mauss (2002[1924-5]).

Just as Girard, Huizinga was trained as a historian, but in contrast to Girard's obsession with violence and sacrifice, mistakenly considered as foundational and not situational, and showing affinities with the work of Mauss, Huizinga shifts the focus to an area that has all but ignored by anthropologists, and social scientists in general: play.[1] With his emphasis on the playful elements of human life, and the related aspects of beauty, joyfulness and harmony, Huizinga offers an antidote to Girard's tendency to apocalyptic gloom.

The issues at stake in *Homo Ludens* are captured in its sub-title, and its fate. It was intended as 'The Play Element *of* Culture', but repeatedly changed by editors and proof-readers to 'The Play Element *in* Culture', and published finally in this manner, in spite of protests from the author. They all agreed that one just cannot possibly suggest that the origin of culture is simply play; even more, that it is joyful, self-erasing, innocent playfulness.

Yet, this is exactly what Huizinga is suggesting; and the first steps taken to substantiate his claims are immediately striking. Playfulness, as a feature, far from being restricted to humans, is also shared by animals; while among humans, it is particularly characteristic of children. One could explain this by the need for education, and connect

it to mimesis, but this for Huizinga does not exhaust the significance of playfulness for animals or children, as they, especially when playing, are also particularly *graceful*.[2]

The joint gracefulness and playfulness of animals and children can be further illuminated through another much-neglected area in social analysis: laughter. Animals do not laugh; children, on the contrary, laugh particularly frequently – and also cry particularly frequently. The laughing of children is also particularly graceful, while the laughter of adults can often be quite opposite. The central question concerning the joyous playfulness and graceful laughter of animals and children is the following: is this something purely preliminary, primitive, a necessary preparation for 'serious' adult life; or is this a central feature of not just human but also of a good part of animal life, which can be lost in adulthood, yet remains fundamental?

Huizinga takes the latter position, and furthermore connects playfulness to the sacred: play *is* the source of the sacred as sacred play, or archaic religious ritual. Play is therefore an extremely 'serious' – worthy, noble – matter, being the foundation of order: play *creates* order. Finally, and closing the circle, the order generated by sacred play is not simply functional, but it is also *beautiful* and *graceful*: '[i]n history, art and literature everything that we perceive as beautiful noble play was once sacred play' (p.104).

Huizinga substantiates his 'revaluation of values' through a series of contrasts and dualisms that he partly mobilises, partly reverses, and partly tries to transcend. The 'animal vs. human' and 'child vs. adult' oppositions were already examples for this. But the book illuminates a number of further such basic dualities, starting with the contrast between the 'playful' and the 'serious'. This issue is particularly important for Huizinga, as his central proposition is that playfulness should be taken seriously, though he is well aware of the inherently paradoxical nature of such a position. The solution is provided through one of the central methodological tools offered in the book, returning to aspects of Huizinga's own academic formation as a Sanskrit linguist: etymology and semantics. Play is a basic word in all languages, with a rich and intriguing semantic variety. In Japanese, the core meaning contrasts playfulness and seriousness, going in hand with a central feature of Japanese culture, which on the one hand attributes gravity or seriousness to every single aspect of social life, while on the other explicitly considers human behaviour as playful in the specific sense of performativity (pp.34-5). Among Indo-European languages, the Latin word for play is *ludus* (of Etruscan origins, just as the connected word for mask, *persona*). It has links to deception and imagination; and while, interestingly enough, and probably for this very reason, in all Romance languages the word has disappeared as denoting 'play' or 'game', the root survived in expressions such as 'illusion', 'allusion', 'collusion', or 'delusion', combining deception, trick and fantasy (pp.35-6). Finally, in Semitic languages, the root word for play, *la'ab*, also stands for laughter, but in the special sense of mocking, or laughing *at* somebody (p.35).

One aspect must be emphasised here, in order to prevent confusion later: in some languages there are a series of term describing game, play, and toy, while in others one term captures all. Thus, in languages so different as Italian or Hungarian 'game', 'play' and even 'toy' are expressed by the same term (*gioco* or *giocattolo* in Italian; *játék* in Hungarian). Seriousness, however, especially as a term offered in contrast to playfulness, as exemplified by German *Ernst*, is much less fundamental as a linguistic term; it rather looks like a late afterthought (pp.44-5). Huizinga draws the consequences in a particularly striking way: 'the two terms are not of equal value: play is positive, earnest negative. The significance of earnest is defined by and exhausted in the negation of "play" […] Play is a thing by itself. The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness' (p.45).

Huizinga's conclusive assessment of the priorities between play and seriousness is particularly striking. Playfulness not simply merits as much attention as 'serious' human

activities; it is not an earlier step necessary for the evolution of culture, whether in the sense of ontogenesis or phylogenesis; rather, 'in a sense it is also superior to it or at least detached from it. In play we move below the level of the serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it – in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred' (p.19).

In order to understand how this genuine 'transformative magic' is performed through play, we now need to analyse what exactly happens when humans play, transcending modern dualisms. Anybody who ever played a game knows it very well that playing is serious. Whoever plays genuinely, whether child or adult, always plays with full intensity. Not everybody can play, though; and this is one of the gravest defects a human being can have, comparable in character to the inability of giving gifts. Any child knows that somebody who cannot play cannot become a friend; or, as sociologists would say it 'seriously', that person is not well socialised, is incapable of belonging to any human community. But children also very well know the difference between playing a game and doing something else. Doing something as a game is different from doing the same thing but *not* as a game; and this difference takes us to the heart of what a game is. Playing is not simply 'free', just as there is no 'free gift' (Douglas 2002); it is rather a peculiar combination of freedom and constraint. One is free to enter a game; but playing also means to accept a set of rules. Cheating in a game is again comparable to not returning a gift: it does not evoke the law, but something much worse, revealing a character fault, close to hubris; in the language of the Gospels, it is comparable to a sin committed not against the Father or the Son, but against the Holy Spirit, and which cannot be forgiven (Mt 12: 31-2).

A final characteristic of play, placed at the centre of analysis and given special linguistic attention, is that a play (or a game) always has a *stake* (pp.48-50). It is by this 'stake' that the game returns from its 'set aside' place, from its dreamland, to everyday reality. This of course is related to 'winning' the game, but cannot be reduced to whatever the winner is actually gaining; not even to the broader issue of prestige and honour. It is revealed by the meaning of 'stake' as an object: a piece of wood that physically marked, by having being thrust into the ground, the limits within which the game was played; and so in this sense the stake is quite close to Greek *herma* (p.50); or, one could add, the Etruscan *tular*. The main stake of a game is not simply to find a winner, in the trivial and mechanical way it has been institutionalised in our times in our own societies, where every single game has a winner; rather, the real stake is the setting up of limits; the establishing of measure.

How exactly play is capable of fulfilling such a vital social role? This question leads into the heart of Huizinga's work. In the analysis that follows much attention will be paid to his exact words, but even more to their spirit.

The core of Huizinga's position is contained in his ideas about the two basic 'higher forms' of play, which are defined as 'a contest *for* something' and 'a representation *of* something' (p.13). The manner in which this idea is introduced in the crucial first chapter of the book is particularly significant. The first overview of the central elements of play ends with referring to the role played by disguise, dressing up, or mask for play, claiming that with it 'the "extra-ordinary" nature of play reaches perfection' (p.13), as it refers to the transformative aspects of play: somebody disguised or masked does not simply 'play' another part, but '[h]e *is* another being' (p.13). The unity of these functions, thus in a way the quintessence of playing, is given in 'a game that "represents" a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something' (p.13). Thus, by analysing the formal characteristics of play, Huizinga gained access to the heart of the two central institutions of the modern world: economic competition and representational politics.

These are rooted in the 'two ever-recurrent forms in which civilization grows in and as play', which are 'the sacred performance and the festal contest' (p.48).

Play as con-testing

The links between play and contest are introduced through linguistic analysis. Starting with Greek, Huizinga argues that one of the three words used in Greek for play, *agon*, also means contest (p.30), while the same holds true for Chinese (*cheng*; see p.32), or Blackfoot Indian (*kachtsi*; see p.33).[3] In all these cases, apart from being playful, contests also included a strong festive component. Adding here Agnes Horvath's ideas on the crucial importance wrestling as mutual testing plays in Plato's works (Horvath 2010: 207), one can restore the meaning of 'contest' as 'con-testing', or a joint testing, where the emphasis is neither on struggle and conflict, nor the selection of a winner, rather the maintaining of human relationships in a mutual state of respectful testing and tension.

The types of contests that have playful elements are extremely varied; in fact, originally and for a long time, *all* contests included an element of play. This applies first of all to warfare, as '[e]ver since words existed for fighting and playing, men have been wont to call war a game' (p.89). Both playful contest and actual fighting also particularly strongly characterise aspects of erotic life (p.43). Contests also played a major role in the development of knowledge. Gaining knowledge was traditionally closely connected to the solving of riddles, of which the myth of the sphinx represents one of the best-known examples.[4] Finding the solution to a riddle always represented something more than following straightforward logical procedures; it had the element of a sudden intuition, which had vision-like qualities (p.110). Philosophical contests were central aspects of philosophical life, from the time of the Sophists up to medieval scholastic disputes and beyond (p.116-8).

But perhaps the most evident, and also most puzzling, area of social life where contests always and everywhere played a central role was the law. The legal system is outside ordinary life, which may explain why archaic justice was less concerned with ethical considerations and more with the restoration of order (p.78). Greek etymology again offers particularly helpful insights. Concerning the etymology of the Greek term for justice, given the evident links with the word for dice (both *dike)*, Jaeger came up with the unlikely suggestion that the abstract meaning was the original one. Given his broad comparative perspective and the series of examples mentioned in his chapter, Huizinga has no problems in accepting that the Greek term for justice was derived from the casting of a dice (pp.79-80). After all, even Heraclitus defined 'Zeus' as a child playing dice. In a broader context, the Hebrew word Torah has the same etymology in casting lots; while in the *Mahabharata*, the classic Sanskrit epic poem, 'the world itself is conceived as a game of dice', while its main action evolves around such game, played in a particularly striking setting: in a simple circle, drawn on the ground (p.57).

The most significant example, however, which both helps to round up the argument and move it close to the next section, is given by the etymological analysis of the common Dutch term for marriage ceremony (*huwelijk*, meaning literally 'wedding play'; pp.41-2). The term 'lijk' can be traced back to one of the Indo-European roots for play, *leik*, which stands for all kinds of play referring to bodily exercise and rhythmic movement, including dancing, and especially the sense of 'leaping', confirming another insight by Plato concerning play: it is based on the need of all young creatures, humans as well as animals, to *leap* (p.37, referring to Laws 653D-E).[5] The Anglo-Saxon versions of the word also mean sacrifice, offering and gift (p.41); while the starting point of this

semantic development has already been identified by the Grimm brothers in a highly peculiar practice: sword dancing (p.42).

Far from being restricted to trivial areas of human life, playful contests extended to and even dominated its central aspects. They performed a civilizing role, where Huizinga's ideas can be compared to those of Norbert Elias (2000[1939]). However, Huizinga captured better than Elias the single most important civilisatory function of playful contests: the manner in which they promote human excellence in the sense of perfection and virtue (*aréte*; see p.63): '[t]he primary thing is the desire to excel others' (p.50). Games or playful contests are functional and 'serious' as they promote excellence by elevating those individuals who manage to assert under fair and equal conditions their own qualities; and such a system of individual selection is *socially* functional in the sense that it contributes to the creation of genuine *nobleness*, fundamental for finding a way to promote the common good.

Representation, ceremony

Huizinga again starts by innovatively applying linguistics. The English term 'play' is derived from *plega, plegan* which means 'play' as well as 'rapid movement', 'gesture', and 'clapping of hands' (pp.38-9). The German word *pflegen* 'care, nurse' is also derived from an Old Saxon term *plegan*, but academic etymologists refuse to consider a connection between these two terms, arguing about a purely formal correspondence, or homology. This is because Old Saxon *plegan* had a series of meanings that they were not able to connect to play. These include 'to take a risk' or 'to expose oneself to danger, the oldest sense; 'to bind or engage oneself', or to 'take care of'; finally, and in various meanings, 'the performance of a sacred act' (p.39). Connecting such 'playful' and 'serious' meanings poses no problems for Huizinga, and so he argues that it was the *same* original term that developed in England into a concrete, while in continental Germanic languages into a more abstract direction, revealing the same unity between playfulness and sacred performance. We should add here that risk and danger are also aspect associated with the etymological root of experience (**per*) as a dangerous passage, evoking liminality and also rituals as 'rites of passage' (Szakolczai 2008a), thus connecting playfulness to the core meaning of lived experience.

Taking this connection further, play for Huizinga is a ritual, which first of all means actual involvement and participation. Huizinga quotes here Jane Harrison: ritual ' "is more *methectic* than mimetic." ' (p.15). This participatory experience at its most basic level emerges in the context of a very special kind of ritual: the 'sacred performance', so characteristic of archaic cultures, which is not simply 'an actualization in appearance only, a sham reality; it is also more than a symbolical actualization – it is a mystical one' (p.14) Here follows one of the most important sentences of the book, Huizinga's capturing of the nature of ritual as sacred play: 'In it, something invisible and inactual takes beautiful, actual, holy form' (p.14). The passage requires careful analysis.

Participation is real: it involves our passing through our own life; the concrete events, the lived experiences by which we become what we are. A ritual, however, is staged: it follows a pre-arranged scenario in which the actors and the audience, whether they are separate or identical, go through a series of pre-established motions; where everybody knows at the beginning what is going to happen at the end. How can this participation be more than the result of imitation and tricks?

This happens, first of all, through a key word in the sentence quoted above: *beauty*. A proper sacred performance must evoke the experience of beauty, and even if what we see is a performance, not a real event, our *experience* of beauty immediately

makes it real, by spiritually transfiguring the staged scene into a piece of reality; even into a reality of higher order than 'mere' everyday life. The encounter with beauty is always moving; *in extremis*, it moves us to tears, making tears of joy, beyond laughter, into the most characteristic human gesture expressing playfulness.

Second, however, a sacred performance also has another, different and just as important connection to reality: in its original form it is not artificially invented, but is rooted in an original event; and an event of particular, cosmogonic importance (pp.14-5). Huizinga's comments on the exact nature of this representation are so important that they must be quoted in full: 'The word "represents", however, does not cover the exact meaning of the act, at least not in its looser, modern connotation; for here "representation" is really *identification*, the mystic repetition or *re-presentation* of the event' (p.15; emphasis in original).

The starting point is another crucial recognition by Huizinga: a central component of the archaic experience of life is *seizure*: or the feeling of 'being seized on, thrilled, enraptured' (p.16). The participatory aspect of rituals can only work if participants are literally 'captured' or possessed during performance, meaning that they manage to feel as if they were present at the original event itself. This also implies that this event must have involved the same kind of experience. Furthermore, and again in contrast to Girard, Huizinga emphasises *beauty*. The origins of religious experiences and their sacred performance – thus, the origins of culture – cannot be reduced to the victimage mechanism and rituals of sacrifice, no matter how important this particular case was in history. There was a much more basic, truly original, and very different kind of religious experience – positive, not negative; uplifting, not lethargy-generating – by which 'something invisible and inactual' took beautiful, graceful, ennobling form: this was the original experience of a divine epiphany by those who actually witnessed it, and who then continued to reproduce it in their festive rituals; a particularly clear and important example being Minoan Crete.

The proper evocation of an original event involves something more; another basic characteristic of human beings, another anthropological fundament: imagination (pp.129-30). Imagination is required both at the level of the singular intellect, putting the event into form; and at the level of participants who manage to re-live imaginatively the experience. The link between play and imagination is one of the basic tenets of the type of 'fundamental anthropology' promoted by Huizinga, further illuminating the central, joint meaning of beauty and participation.

The imaginary re-enacting of original events, foundational for culture before and beyond the sacrificial mechanism, is rendered possible by poetry; and the experience of participation is helped in particular by music. The Greeks captured the divine aspect of poetic inspiration through the Muses, which was upheld by Plato in the *Ion*. Huizinga's work helps to shed further lights on two crucial aspects of archaic poetry. First, the composition of poetry often involved playful contests (p.124). Poetic imagination was always playful; it was 'born in and as play', and as 'sacred play', always 'verging on gay abandon, mirth and jollity' exactly due to and not in spite of its sacred character (p.122). Second, and for the same reason, it performed a social function far more important than routine everyday drudgery, as it contributed to making and keeping alive culture itself.

Huizinga was not deluding us: he managed to substantiate, and in great detail, that human culture was born out of play, even of sacred play, and of the most joyful, self-abandoned, spirited kind of play which only is capable of creating beautiful, graceful, harmonious order; not some rigid, formal, structural 'order without meaning' (Voegelin), prescribed by written laws and maintained by a specific force like the police.

Huizinga and the Romantics

But is not all this romantic daydreaming? Huizinga spent considerable efforts in distinguishing his own approach from that of the Romantics, without condemning them in a wholesale manner. Many elements of his approach – aesthetics, imagination, the importance attributed to poetry and music – are indeed shared (p.135, 164). However, the Romantics can't be followed, as they were part of the schismogenesis of modern culture, based on accepting a 'choice' between playfulness and seriousness; Puritan rigour or Romantic irresponsibility. Huizinga even here offers us some hints, as the last two chapters of the book offer a fascinating historical account on 'Western Civilization *Sub Specie Ludi*', or under the sign of playfulness, showing how European culture lost its own playful origins.

The harmony between playfulness and seriousness persisted from Antiquity through the medieval and Renaissance times; Huizinga perceives the first major sign of disturbance with the Baroque of the 17th century. There were few instances in world history that were as much dominated by a concern with ceremony, ritual etiquette, but also formal beauty and grace, elegance, and playful entertainment, as in the theatre, ballet, opera, dance and music of the absolutist courts of the 17th century (pp.182-5). But at the same time the formal aspects of ritualistic ceremonies went beyond the edge, and became as if ossified into a world of exaggerated artificiality, where everybody in the court became his or her own mask (see also Elias 1983[1969]); though hypocrisy only became a total social fact in modern media-driven mass democracy. It is this suffocating feeling of artificiality that gave rise to an opposite excess, its schismogenic pair, the romantic search for authenticity and autonomy, the exaltation of personal experience and true sentiments, first formulated in the philosophy of Rousseau, the father of both Kantian philosophy, with its obsessive search for the 'autonomy', and German Romanticism, but whose most important, epochal antecedent belongs to the heart of the court of Louis XIV. This can be found in the paintings of Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), which emerged 'as a protest against stiffness and artificiality and a vindication of all that was natural and innocent', and where 'the germ of Rousseauism and Romanticism' can be located (p.185).

The last chapter argues that while the play element did not disappear from our world, the balance between playfulness and seriousness was further damaged. A central aspect of modern life is the growing importance of sport; but what started as 'pure fun' was increasingly turned into a permanent and 'serious' kind of activity, the central aspect being 'the transition from occasional amusement to the system of organized clubs and matches' (p.196). Far from restoring the play element at the heart of social life, this development is part of a more generalised movement towards increased confusion: '[b]usiness becomes play', while at the same time 'play becomes business' (p.200). The same confusion characterises modern art, torn apart between the excesses of a hunt for pleasurable sensation on the one hand, and the idolisation of art as a substitute religion on the other (p.202).

The single most important factor promoting such excesses and imbalance is the rise of the propaganda machinery, where the forces of science and technology are deployed in the service of mechanisation, advertising, and sensation-mongering in general (p.202). The sad effects of propaganda are nowhere visible so clearly than in the 'Puerilism' characteristic of contemporary politics, a name he chose for 'that blend of adolescence and barbarity which has been rampant all over the world for the last two or three decades' (p.205), meaning the period starting after WWI.

3. Debureau: the re-birth of Pierrot as suffering victim

The first case study will demonstrate how one of the main masks *Commedia dell'Arte*, Pierrot was re-born in Paris, in the 1820s, as a deeply problematic Romantic response to the disillusionment with revolutionary dreams.[6] Jean-Gaspard Debureau was born in 1796 in Bohemia. He came to call himself Baptist, which is not without significance given that the Zanni figure he resurrected in post-Revolutionary France was traced to medieval carnival representations of St John the Baptist, while the image of a decapitated Pierrot would obsess *fin-de-siècle* decadents. His father, native of Amiens, was a vagabond, having served in the Austrian army and then leading a theatrical troupe mostly consisting of his own sons, born of different relationships. Debureau duly performed his first shows as 'a clown of the public square' (Storey 1985: 5-6). It was this 'troupe of nomadic tumblers and rope-dancers' that appeared in Paris in 1814, and would join in 1819 the just-formed *Funambule* (tightrope-walker) Theatre (Storey 1978: 94).

For a considerable time the two threads were not connected. German Romanticism was transplanted into France by the problematic figure of Mme de Stael, remaining a phenomenon of the Salons, light years away from the suburban popular circus-like Funambule. Their joining was helped by the increasing affinity between the general mood by the late 1820s and the spirit of German Romanticism, which became suddenly championed by poets of the emerging literary avant-garde like Nerval and Nodier. Following the lead of de Stael, they were particularly interested in theatre, especially Goethe's *Faust* and the new approach to Shakespeare pioneered by Lessing and Tieck, as alternative to the French classicism preferred by Voltaire; and in the related obsession with dreams characteristic again of Tieck and especially Jean-Paul. Central to this Romanticism was an escapism from the crisis of their times, marked by disillusionment about the promises of the Revolution and a cult of the precocious Romantic genius, which in the cases of both Tieck and Nerval resulted in the immature assumption of major projects that literally crippled their career and life: Tieck started to write a book on Shakespeare when 19, translating *first* Shakespeare's *last* work, *The Tempest*, and propagating a misreading of Shakespeare as its deep truth; while Nerval similarly published his translation of the first part of Goethe's *Faust* when he was 20, ignoring the fact that Goethe spent decades finalising this first part, and left the publication of the second after his death. Driven by Romantic hubris, Tieck and Nerval thought themselves superior to Shakespeare and Goethe; thus, instead of sparking a new Renaissance, which was indeed promised by the work of Schleiermacher and Schlegel (Gadamer 1998), they rather became forerunners of decadence and the politics of miming which would culminate in the 'revolutions' of the 20th century.

Nodier discovers Debureau: Romantics and mimes

This Romantic spirit encountered the new, mime Pierrot by accident in July 1828 when, pressed by his daughter, Nodier entered the *Funambule* to see a show entitled *Le Boeuf enragé*. The review he published about his experience represents the apotheosis of Debureau's Pierrot among the literary avant-garde, culminating in the mime-play 'The Golden Dream' he wrote and had performed in the same year. Significantly, he failed to own both the first review and the play, published anonymously, though it was generally agreed then, as now, that he was author of both.

Nodier's review contains two points of exceptional interest. First, he captured the figure with striking precision, using a highly peculiar and revealing language, without realising the significance of what he actually was saying. According to this, Debureau's Pierrot was " 'a character whose infinite nuances are difficult to render. Ingenuous like a

child, cowardly, crafty, lazy, mischievous by instinct, obliging, jeering, gluttonous, thieving, blustering, greedy, clumsy, ingenious in the arts that tend to the satisfaction of his tastes: he is a naïve and clownish Satan.' " (Storey 1978: 97); while what he enjoyed most in Deburau's Pierrot was its ' "broad Pulcinella-like streak of perversity" ' (Storey 1985: 75-8). It was the embodiment of the 'demonic clown' archetype – but Nodier evidently just loved it. Second, in his concluding sentences Nodier formulated the blackmail hook that would become trademark of the radical avant-garde: this theatre is not yet fashionable, and 'intellectuals' would need to resist their own reservations to go and see it; however, he promises that those who gathered the courage to enter, will return. Here again Nodier captures well the obsessive nature of the show, without realizing that a desire to return does not justify the original entry.

A central aspect of Nodier's infatuation with mime theatre was his personal obsession with Columbine (Storey 1985: 74). Nodier was certainly an extremely peculiar person, who evidently had morbid longings for his daughter, considering her wedding as his own death, and wishing to be buried in her wedding veil (Storey 1985: 80), while being also attracted to the 'mystery' of Pulcinella, devoting his most obsessive stories like 'Idiot' and 'Polichinelle' to him, which were fully serious, not meant as parodies (Ibid.: 80-8). Similarly to Tieck, his entire life was lived in a fantasmagoria of dreams, especially erotic dreams, while his most famous novel was devoted to the theme of the 'forbidden fruit', claiming that morality and chastity are only hypocritical masks, and the novel finished in a full-scale confusion of dream and reality (Béguin 1939: 456-66). Still, the obsession for Columbine was by no means limited to him, but encompassed such giants of European art as Dickens and Baudelaire (Cuppone 1999: 48-9), arguably *the* most important artists in the 19th century in their respective countries; artists whose life cannot be fully understood without such obsession. Shakespeare and Tiepolo again proved right: comedy remodelled European society from the top to the bottom; and the central question any artist and academic must pose concerning to this fact, touching the heart of one's own being, is responsibility. The Debureau cult possibly reached its height in a 1842 review of Gautier, 'Shakespeare at the Funambules', which compared the pantomime *The Old Cloths Peddler* to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (Borowitz 1984: 24). While the perception of an affinity between Shakespeare and *Commedia dell'Arte* was correct, revealing the sensitivity of Romantics, the interpretation was radically faulty: Shakespeare tried to spiritualise and transcend the mime origins of theatre, while the French Romantics regressed from Shakespeare into the glorification of mere buffoonery.

The Romantic exaltation of Debureau's Pierrot would not have been effective had it not have its twin in its glorification as representative of the 'people' (Lehmann 1967: 212-3; Storey 1985: 4-5). This was accomplished contemporaneously in a 1832 book by Jules Janine, 'that most fashionable of critics', which became the ancestor of the cult of popular genre by high-brow critics, though its 'self-conscious "camp" attitude to its subject, revealing the critic's self-satisfied daring in shocking conventional opinion [… which] caused a furore of indignation and turned Debureau into the idol of the fashionable avantgarde' (Haskell 1972: 7). Thus the figure, lifted from its original, rustic setting, became representative of the revolutionary dream, on its way towards the symbol of the proletarian. The point of intersection between these two poles, the diabolical trickster and the suffering victim, capture the heart of Debureau's Pierrot: the glorification of the outsider *as* outsider; the absurd apotheosis of the 'pathetic moon-struck outcast' (Lehmann 1967: 210). This is again captured in a piece Gautier, who in 1847 argued that 'Debureau's Pierrot had a timeless and universal meaning, embodying "the ancient slave, the modern proletarian, the pariah, the passive and disinherited being" ' (as in Borowitz 1984: 24).

Performing such a feat, keeping together so different exigencies, requires an actor of capacity; and Debureau was indeed described by Théophile Gautier, with the understatement so characteristic of Romantics, as ' "the most perfect actor who ever lived" ' (as in Storey 1978: 94). Still, Gautier was no small figure in the history of art, inventor of the term *l'art pour l'art* and best friend of Baudelaire who dedicated to him his *Flowers of Evil*, inaugural book of modern poetry.

So what kind of actor, and person, was 'Baptiste'?

Debureau as a mime and as a human being

Given that he was evidently an able performed, and that actors anyway only enact roles, questions related to his personality would seem inappropriate. Yet, already contemporaries became deeply aware that 'the violent and sometimes sinister cruelty that Deburau brought to his role had at least part of its source in the brooding rancor of his own temperament' (Storey 1978: 115). This became particularly evident in a famous spring 1836 incident, when he killed a young street-boy who mocked him. He was acquitted in what was probably the first case of intellectual mobilization for an avant-garde 'hero' who was presumed to be beyond the law. The significance of the case merits a long quote from his biographer, Tristan Rémy: while "on stage, Deburau was 'neither gay, nor sinister,' he concedes that 'the face and gestures of Jean-Gaspard [Deburau] showed, each time a scene gave him the occasion, that he was reckoning with a world that he made laugh at will, he whom the world had never made laugh. His liberated rancor burst out on stage especially when, under his floured mask, he expressed his whole personality. Only in this way could he reveal those parts of himself that he kept contained. The bottle whose label «Laudanum» he smilingly revealed after Cassandre had drained it, the back of the razor he passed over the old man's neck, were toys which he could not be allowed to take seriously and thus put to the test his patience, his reserve, his sang-froid. […] When he powdered his face, his nature, in fact, took the upper hand. He stood then at the measure of his life – bitter, vindictive, unhappy' " (as in Storey 1978: 104-5).

Concerning the nature of the character, both on and off stage, two famous episodes gain new light through the argument presented so far. First, in a probably apocryphal though personally diffused story he claimed that the first happy event of his life, awakening him to his own identity was when playing in Constantinople before the curtained Harem he climbed on the Perilous Ladder and managed to spy at the semi-nude odalisques (Storey 1985: 6). Both the place, Constantinople and the act of voyeuristic watching as a key to happiness is emblematic. The second concerns the inventing of the figure. Here again it is necessary to insert a longer quote, this time from the classic book of Séverin: ' "Without letting fall a word, one evening, for himself alone, [Debureau] powdered the shine of his white greasepaint to a perfect whiteness and dullness. Something was lacking in this mask. What? The eyebrows and eyes accentuated with black. That was better already. What more? Some rouge on the lips to offset the white. Better and better, already captivating, and yet it was not complete. What had to be added? Ah! the black skullcap of Yacomo's Harlequin. And oh! miracle! Pierrot was born. The spirit of the *mimus albus* of Rome had passed into Deburau" ' (as in Storey 1978: 95). Here the central point concerns the possessive aspects of wearing a mask, or even of a painted face: the account is a century earlier than Pizzorno's classic essay on the mask (Pizzorno 2010), and yet presents the exact same argument.

Thus, Debureau the actor and Debureau the human being can't be separated, as Pierrot on stage *was* Debureau, more true to his self than the mask he wore in ordinary life to

cover the ugly deficiencies of his personality, while the real Debureau *was* the stage Pierrot. Such washing together of real person and stage personality, combined with the implied glorifying of victimhood and suffering, of the outcast outsider, of the perpetrator who is also a victim, had tremendous consequences. The most direct was the fascination with the possible staging of the 'real' Deburau. Deburau could not completely make his own character appear on stage, playing ' "a character who embodied an all too personal truth" ' (Rémy, as in Storey 1978: 105-6); but this was done in the 1840 play *Marrrchand d'habits*, by the next great Pierrot actor Dominique Legrand, who staged Debureau, capturing 'the undispelled shadows of Baptiste's cruelty and daring, the mélange of macabre and melodramatic knockabout', thus miming of a mime (Ibid.: 106). Such vertiginous self-referentiality and multiple imitation, probably the first ever theatre play about an actor, was spun further in a comedy of errors around a review by Gautier, who actually missed the first act but read into it his own Romantic dream-world, and with his 'fine, ironic intelligence' made it into a 'coherent and arresting synthesis' (Ibid.). This review so 'skillfully […] transmute[d the] worn puerilities' of the play, trivialising for e.g. the murder committed in it, that when in 1896 Séverin revived it, the programme identified Gautier as its author (Ibid.: 108).

Yet, a truly great actor also had to be a personality. As he lacked it, Debureau used simple yet ingenuous trick: he stylised his performance to the extreme, reducing the character to a formula (Clayton 1993: 34), performing on stage marionette figure. This would have vital consequences for avant-garde theatre; just as his playing with his radical shifts of mood.

After the decline of Baptiste Pierrot's figure of was taken up by his son Charles who did not simply continue it rather created its schismatic double. Lacking the brutal vitality of Baptiste, Charles was – on stage just as in real life – nervous, slender and sickly, a typical neurotic with suicidal tendencies, for whom life is a nightmare, lived as an 'endless protest and threats of revenge against the careless malice of the world' (Lehmann 1967: 214). He moved the figure a bit away from the 'people' and close to a Hamlet captured as image of the 'precarious outcast' (Ibid.). The figure, however, already with Charles, and especially the other imitators and epigones of Baptiste, became excessively sentimental, moving towards decadence and triviality.

In a crucial remark Storey argues that the key role played by Deburau 'in the transmission of the type from the popular to the literary world', and 'in the transformation from *naïf* to neurasthenic pariah' is still not understood (Storey 1978: 94). The history of miming presented so far already demonstrated the validity of the comedy version of Einstein's law that demonic energy never disappears only alters shape, finding always new vehicles.

The mime from theatre to literature: stages in the commedification of the world

After 1860 the mime figure moved from the theatre to literature. The two central documents and operators of this new Pierrot were a curious novel by Henri Rivière, *Pierrot: Caïn*, influenced by Gautier's account of *Marrrchand d'habits*, published in 1860; and *Gaspard of the Night: Fantasies in the manner of Rembrandt and Callot* by Aloysius Bertrand, first published posthumously in 1842, but becoming influential after 1860.

Rivière's book marks a new primacy of the written word over not simply theatre but mime play. It is the story of a young mime who 'conceives of Pierrot as the "fallen angel" ', as he became 'struck by the audacity and sinister gaiety of Baptiste's performance' (Storey 1978: 111-2). Thus, 'as he later explains to his friend, "there began to take shape slowly in my brain a genius of evil, grandiose and melancholic, or an

irresistible seductiveness, cynical one instant and clownish the next – in order to raise himself up still higher after having fallen" ' (Ibid.: 112). This is followed by a love affair with Columbine and the decapitating of a rival during a performance, culminating in a self-confession before the public that what he brought to the role was ' "the genius of madness" ' (Ibid.).

Bertrand is credited as the inventor of prose poem, and his life (including authoring a posthumous masterpiece) contained everything needed for a Romantic myth. He was a typical representative of the mid-19th century state of spirit: an 'errant mind, fantasising, melancholic, theatrical and ironic' (Rizzo 2003: 128). His bizarre, labyrinthine imagination mixed together contemporary themes with medieval architecture, where even flâneurs are lost. For him Rembrandt was a Romantic genius, ' "an alchemist of the colour, and a magician of the light" ', while Callot's incisions are remarkable for depicting 'a clown-like, grotesque, fantastic and completely/ prettamente theatrical world' (Ibid.: 128-9). In the book *Commedia dell'Arte* gestures are pushed to their extreme, including a play with a book within a book, written by the devil under the threat of Pulcinella (Ibid.: 131), and the crowning of a mad king during a grotesque masked ball (Ibid.: 136). It is this same process that is capture by a central figure of the 'golden age of caricature' in France, Paul Gavarni, who devoted an entire series to Pierrot as being emblematic of Paris, new capital of carnival bypassing Venice, with its ' "infernal gallop – a regular round of the Sabbath of Pleasure" ' (Borowitz 1984: 27, quoting Gautier), centring on masked balls that became especially sensual with the introduction of the cancan from Algeria in 1831 (Ibid.: 25-6).

4. Meyerhold: Biomechanics as the avant-garde taylorisation of theatre

Meyerhold clearly and uncompromisingly formulated his *ars poetica*, revealing artist and his work at the same time and in harrowingly disturbing ways. According to Meyerhold, as '[t]he public expects invention, play-acting and skill' of the theatre, and not a 'slavish imitation life', artists must move away from reality by 'carefully choosing a mask, donning a decorative costume, and showing off one's brilliant tricks to the public – now as a dancer, now as the *intrigant* at some masquerade, now as the fool of old Italian comedy, now as a juggler' (Meyerhold 1969: 130).

Every major word in this short paragraph is profoundly problematic. It starts by characterising the artist as a slave: not of imitation as a task, but to the 'public' that must be 'satisfied' at all costs. It do not yet have the demagogy of 'market value' or the 'taxpayer's money'; and it is clear enough that a work of art is made to be appreciated. But why by 'the public'? How can 'the' public judge a work of art; immediately, at the spot? Any possible educational sense of culture, the heart of European civilization since the Greeks, is thus immediately rendered irrelevant, reduced to the provocation of laughter, characteristic of a circus or the Hippodrome. After such arch-betrayal, it is less surprising that three of the most important values of European culture are subtly abused and appropriated. It is *care* – which is reduced to the selection of a way of disguise, a frozen face; it is *gift-giving*, which here means the taking up of another way, a theatrical costume (the Italian word being *maschera*, identical with mask); and finally *brilliance*, the gift of talent, delivered to the service of tricks. Meyerhold does not even feel a sense of shame for explicitly proliferating illusionism; and this is the perspective from which lists the four archetypal artists of his theatre, sources and effects of *Commedia dell'Arte*.

From actor back to the mime

Given that Meyerhold's philosophy of theatre is acting reduced to pulling tricks, it is reasonable to assume that his purported return to the 'pure' sources of theatre is also nothing but a trick. That this is indeed so is best visible through his glorification of cabotinage, and in his confusing the origins of *Commedia dell'Arte* amongst charlatans and buffoons with medieval mystery plays. A 'cabotin' is a second-rate, strolling actor or charlatan; but when his style of acting was dismissively described by this word he proudly took it up as a praise, claiming that 'a cabotin is a kinsman to the mime, the histrion, and the juggler; the cabotin can work miracles with his technical mastery; the cabotin keeps alive the tradition of the true art of acting'; even evoking the story of Reynard the fox (Meyerhold 1969: 122), now widely identified as the central medieval trickster figure, whose story was taken up by Goethe in 1792-4, capturing his falling out with the French Revolution (Varty 1967, 2000). Far from being a mere aside, it captures the 'revaluation of values' at the heart of Meyerhold's project, oriented against the classical tradition of 'inspirational' acting. This style of acting – which Meyerhold simply fails to grasp, as he identifies it with playing merely according to 'subjective mood' (Meyerhold 1969: 129) – is result of a long 'civilisational process' by which mere mime origins of European theatre were transformed and spiritualised, implying in the spirit of Dilthey's philosophy, personal empathy with the person represented on stage; an affinity with the experience of the original character and the playwright, thus transmitted to the audience, in the Platonic sense of the interpretive rings (see *Ion*), thus transforming theatre mere spectacle into a participatory experience, resurrecting the original sense of classical Greek theatre. Meyerhold's propagation of *Commedia dell'Arte* is regressive, all the more so as, through the recapturing of the spirit of Callot through ETA Hoffman and Tieck, it directly and self-consciously plunges back to the fairground sources of *Commedia dell'Arte*, the charlatan and the mime.

This seems counterbalanced by the purported return to medieval mystery plays, also championed by Evreinov. This, however, only indicates and proliferates further misunderstanding. Mystery plays were not pure spectacles, but genuine rituals, where a condition of access was participation in the religious substance of the performance. Meyerhold missed this participatory component exactly in the same way as he missed the importance of human personality in 'inspirational acting'.

Such failure reflected serious personality defects. Meyerhold had an extremely negative, deprecatory view of human beings and life in general, bemoaning the spiritual poverty of mankind and the general vulgarity of life, considering that whatever is said in jest is more serious than what was meant seriously, confusing the accidental and the regular, dressing up idiosyncratic errors into hidden essences (Moody 1978: 860, 865), similarly to Freud. In a revealing passage he considered Molière's Don Juan as a mere mask and puppet of the author, employed as a way 'to square accounts with his innumerable enemies' (Meyerhold 1969: 133), thus reducing the great artist to the level of a Terence, revealing more about himself than about Molière. Meyerhold's 'view of the human race' is contained, in condensed form, in the concluding scene of the 'Fairground Booth', an 'astonishing *coup de theâtre*', in the image of a 'collection of tragically grotesque puppets' (Moody 1978: 868).

Fairground Booth

This play, written by Blok and pivotal for Meyerhold's oeuvre, was second in the three performances in which he resurrected the spirit of Debureau's Pierrot on the Russian stage, in between his 1903 graduation and the 1910 *Carnival*, staged by Fokine based on Schumann's music, after which he stayed with the figure (Moody 1978: 860-2),

combining it with the mask of Dr Dappertutto, a sinister figure conjured up by ETA Hoffmann. It was a kind of manifesto, asserting the comic freedom of the grotesque. Central for the effect mechanism of the grotesque, taking up hints from Callot, is the persistent mixing of incompatible elements and the accumulation of surprising turns in the plot (Meyerhold 1969: 137), thus shocking the audience until its members give up all attempt of understanding, thus willing to release their integrity.

The play was teamed up as a double bill with the 'Miracle of St Antony' (Green 1986: 87), itself a provocation, especially as following even here the example of Callot; and was used as a main vehicle for Meyerhold programmatic concern with returning to the world of *Commedia dell'Arte* and the 'primordial elements of the theatre: the power of the mask, gesture, movement and plot' (Meyerhold 1969: 125). The staging was rendered possible by a double coincidence, combining historical and personal liminality: the disorientation caused in Russia by the defeat in the war against Japan and the Revolution of 1905; and Blok's disillusionment of with symbolism as an ersatz religion, who fuelled all his sourness into the play, ridiculing what he had held sacred. Blok was a great poet and genuine human being, who would die in 1925, sick from living in the hallucinatory boredom, hypocrisy and madness of Communist Russia, where Meyerhold would strive as fish in water.

Fairground Booth was a return not to *Commedia dell'Arte*, but to its parody, where the actors where enacting a mechanised caricature of themselves (Green 1986: 90-1). Its storyline was inane purposefully, and beyond belief: a group of Mystics, sitting around a table, are expecting the arrival of Death as beautiful women, but instead Columbine arrives, followed eventually by Harlequin and Pierrot. At the same time, and in conformity with Meyerhold attitude to full truthfulness, which combined the shameless use of tricks with cynically revealing the technical machinery of theatre, with 'all the ropes and wires [being] visible to the audience' (Meyerhold 1969: 70).

With this play Blok and Meyerhold demonstrated that they learned the lesson of Debureau and the French Romantic avant-garde: even the most inane plot can be declared as work of genius if the self-proclaimed cultural elite declares so – given that the sole judge after the French Revolution, 'the' Public, proved itself incapable of judging.

The final scene was a genuine climax to the anti-theatre, where, as described by the actress playing Columbine, ' "[t]he curtain fell behind Pierrot-Meyerhold and he was left face to face with the audience. He stood staring at them, and it was as though Pierrot was looking into the eyes of every single person. … There was something irresistible in his gaze. Then Pierrot looked away, took his pipe from his pocket and began to play the tune of a rejected and unappreciated heart. That moment was the most powerful in his performance. Behind his lowered eyelids one sensed a gaze, stern and full of reproach" ' (as in Green 1986: 92). At that time confusion in judgment and the arts was not yet total, and many found the outrageous provocation unacceptable, not knowing yet that within less than two decades this would be made into official public policy by the Bolsheviks: it resulted in 'nearly violent scandal in the audience, derision from the critics, outrage from the playwright's betrayed fellow symbolists – and, from many young radicals, deep enthusiasm' (ibid.).

The article Meyerhold would write a few years later, apart from giving the rationale for his regression to *Commedia dell'Arte* and beyond, contained a visionary insight concerning cinema – or the script of what was enacted soon. In contrast to those who considered the cinema as a vehicle for realism, he argued that it rather was comparable to the fairground booth which was 'eternal' – a claim he immediately repeated, using standard rhetorical trick, to hammer the effect – and projected the coming return of the clowns with the help of the screen (Meyerhold 1969: 135). This would indeed happen soon, in the emerging Hollywood, with Chaplin as its main

protagonist. Meyerhold had a considerable impact on Eisenstein, considered as his disciple (Moody 1978: 868-9), helped by their shared fascination for Wagner.

Masquerade

Meyerhold's next major show was again perfectly timed – after 5 years of preparation, and with a cast of 200, he staged Lermontov's *Masquerade* on 25 February 1917, when the first shots of the Revolution were fired; a student was even killed in the vestibule (Green 1986: 103; Moody 1978: 865). The piece was again masterfully chosen: Meyerhold caught a particularly sour work by a great poet, who was despairing over the tragic corruption of Russia in the 1830s, presenting it through two masked balls and the 'ominous Stranger, the figure of vengeance (Green 1986: 102). Meyerhold transfused it with his usual 'commedic alchemy' (Ibid.: 107), fixating it into a vicious and cynical vision of the world, presenting an 'extravagantly decadent image of society' (Ibid.: 102), distilling the 'dark forces', even ' "demonism" ' out of the play, including the motifs ' "murder through tears" ' and ' "laughter after murder" ' (as in Moody 1978: 865), worthy of a Byzantine mime of the Hippodrome. Critics immediately identified it as 'typical of Meyerhold's own decadence and megalomanic extravagance' (Meyerhold 1969: 80), but to no avail; with the Revolution Meyerhold's time finally has come.

Acting as 'biomechanics': unleashing the potential of the demonic clown

Throughout his career Meyerhold was helped by a series of extraordinary historical coincidences, working in his favour, whether in 1905/6 or in February 1917. By 1921 the devastation of the Civil War created just the right 'tabula rasa' to put his ideas into practice. This culminated in his truly extraordinary idea of 'biomechanics'.

Meyerhold joined the Communist Party early, in 1918 (Green 1986: 104), and this was no sheer opportunism, but based on a shared fascination with industrialisation, mechanisation, science, technology, and progress. In particular, his vision of the 'new actor' rhymed perfectly with the Soviet vision of the 'new man': he needed actors who, far from searching for ' "authentic emotions" ', rather performed like puppets, abstracting from actual life-conduct the 'mechanism of human behaviour'; actors who not simply wore masks, but whose own body would become a mask (Moody 1978: 866). The Civil War produced the proper 'prime material' for Meyerhold, just as for Makarenko, the 'great educator' of Soviet Russia, who considered that the best pupils of the new socialist education are orphans, as they are not bogged down by old-fashioned concerns with family life. So Meyerhold chose his new from 17-18 years old war veterans, having fought in the war as teenagers, with low social background, so 'understandably, their devotion to the "Master", as Meyerhold was now known to his students, bordered on the fanatical' (Braun 1995: 170).

Meyerhold's short texts on biomechanics are an extraordinary read today, as one cannot possibly image that this could have been considered in its time, and for decades after, as manifesto for the theatrical avant-garde. The central idea is that actors should mirror the way assembly-linework has become a joyful necessity in the new socialist society, thus eliminating the separation between work-time and rest, learning to regulate rest and fatigue as efficiently as possible. This must incorporate recent research in America, especially the 'methods of Taylorism', which should 'be applied to the work of the actor in the same way as they are to any form of work with the aim of maximum productivity', thus promoting '[t]he Taylorization of the theatre' (Meyerhold 1969: 197-9). He called this method 'biomechanics', where actors, instead of building the role from

their own emotions, rather study their own '*innate capacity for reflex excitability*' (Ibid.; italics in original), memorizing technical tricks and controlling one's own physical movement, as a result of which an actor can gain a conscious control over the excitation of the audience as well: 'By correctly resolving the nature of his state physically, the actor reaches the point where he experiences the *excitation* which communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor's performance: what we used to call "gripping" the spectator. It is this excitation which is the very essence of the actor's art' (Ibid.: 199). Meyerhold duly illustrated his lectures by performances of his students, dancing the mechanical pantomime, happily puppetising themselves.

The corollary of this was a technique taught by Meyerhold in the 1930s that can be literally called 'out-casting'. According to this, and moving beyond Debureau, in order learn 'correct' acting, which meant Meyerhold's constructivist de-naturalisation of normal human emotions, actors had to be induced to take up roles against their temperament: 'In order to spur and actor into action you sometimes need to set him a paradoxical task which he can manage only by discarding his normal criteria' (Ibid.: 204). Meyerhold, just as Nodier, or as any professional pimp, well realised that the technique of transgressing boundaries always work: once the integrity of a human being is successfully broken, he or she would be entrapped in the act and look at his or her perpetrator, who became master by rendering him slave, for future guidance.

Notes

[1] As a particular game of coincidence, it is worth noting here that Huizinga and Mauss were born in the same year, in 1872; and their work on play and gift relations could help to re-found anthropology, correcting the serious imbalances introduced by Durkheim and Boas, born in 1858, thus only fourteen years their senior.
[2] About this, see Bjorn Thomassen; see also Bateson.
[3] Incidentally, this idea would be the basis of 'Koyaanisqatsi: Life out of Balance', the 1982 film by Godfrey Reggio.
[4] Other, particularly intriguing examples, combining the winning of a hand with the solving of a riddle, include Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Puccini's *Turandot*, where some of the most important European artists, in one of their central works, thus captured an arche-typal technique.
[5] In many languages (including Greek, Latin and Hungarian) the term for 'dancing' originally was identical to leaping. All these were pushed out through the term 'dance', of uncertain origins, during the 'Dark Ages'; a development that strangely parallels what happened with the word 'mask'.
[6] About this Girard's analysis is fundamental (Girard 1961).

References

Béguin, Albert (1939) *L'âme romantique et le rêve: essai sur le romantisme allemand et la poésie française*, Paris: Corti.

Borowitz, Helen O. (1984) 'Sad Clowns in French Art and Literature', in *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 71, 1: 23-35.

Braun, Edward (1995) *The Theatre of Meyerhold: Revolution and the Modern Stage*, London: Methuen.

Clayton, J. Douglas (1993) *Pierrot in Petrograd: The Commedia dell'arte/Balagan in twentieth-century Russian theatre and drama*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Cuppone, Roberto (1999) *CDA: il mito della Commedia dell'arte nell'Ottocento francese*, Rome: Bulzoni.
Douglas, Mary (2002) 'Preface', in Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, London: Routledge.
Elias, Norbert (1983[1969]) *The Court Society*, Oxford: Blackwell.
___ (2000[1939]) *The Civilising Process*, Oxford: Blackwell.
Girard, René (1961) *Mensonges romantiques et vérités romanesques*, Paris: Grasset.
___ (1977[1972]) *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: John Hopkins U.P.
Green, Martin (1986) *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination*, New York: Macmillan.
Haskell, Francis (1972) 'The sad clown: some notes on a 19th century myth', in Ulrich Finke (ed.) *French 19th century painting and literature: with special reference to the relevance of literary subject-matter to French painting*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Huizinga, Johann (1970[1950]) *Homo Ludens*, Boston: Beacon Press.
Horvath, Agnes (2010) 'Regression into Technology, or the First Mask', in *International Political Anthropology* 3 (2010), 2: 203-16.
Lehmann, A.G. (1967) 'Pierrot and *fin de siècle*', in Ian Fletcher (ed.) *Romantic Mythologies*, London: Routledge.
Mauss, Marcel (2002[1924-5]) *The Gift*, London: Routledge.
Meyerhold, Vsevolod (1969) *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. by Edward Braun, with a critical commentary, London: Methuen.
Moody, C. (1978) 'Vsevolod Meyerhold and the "Commedia dell'arte" ', *The Modern Language Review* 73, 4: 859-869.
Pizzorno, Alessandro (2010) 'The Mask: An Essay', *International Political Anthropology* 3, 1: 5-28.
Rizzo, Concettina (2003) *Masques et visages del Pierrot: le metamorfosi di un mito*, Catania: C.U.E.C.M.
Storey, Robert F. (1978) *Pierrot: a critical history of a mask*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
___ (1985) *Pierrots on the stage of desire: nineteenth-century French literary artists and the comic pantomime*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Varty, Kenneth (1967) *Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art*, Leicester: Leicester University Press.
___ (ed.) (2000) *Reynard the Fox: social engagement and cultural metamorphoses in the beast epic from the Middle Ages to the present*, New York: Berghahn Books.