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**Surfaces, Depths and Hypercubes:  
Meyerholdian Scenography and the Fourth Dimension**

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## **Abstract**

An appreciation of Meyerhold's engagement with theatrical space is fundamental to understanding his directorial and pedagogic practice. This article begins by establishing Meyerhold's theoretical and practical engagement with theatre as a fundamentally scenographic process, arguing for a reconceptualisation of the director as 'director-scenographer'. Focusing on the construction of depth and surface in Meyerholdian theatre, the article goes on to identify trends in the director's approach to space, with an emphasis on the de-naturalisation of depth on stage. This denaturalisation is seen as taking three forms: the rejection of depth as a prerequisite in theatrical space, the acknowledgement of the two-dimensional surface as surface, and the restructuring of depth space into a series of restricted planes. The combination of these trends indicates a consistent and systematic process of experimentation in Meyerhold's work. In addition, this emphasis on depth and surface, and the interaction between the two, also highlights the contextualisation of Meyerhold's practice within the visual, philosophical and scientific culture of the early twentieth century, echoing the innovations in  $n$ -dimensional geometry and particularly, the model of the fourth spatial dimension seen in the work of Russian philosopher P. D. Ouspensky.

## **Keywords**

Meyerhold; Russian Theatre; Russian Scenography; Cubism; Visual Art; Plastic Arts

## **Biographical note**

Dr. Amy Skinner is Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Practice at the University of Hull. Her research interests include Russian and early Soviet theatre, the relationship between theatre and the visual arts, and theatrical space and scenography. Her monograph, *Meyerhold and the Cubists: Perspectives in Painting and Performance* is forthcoming from Intellect (2015). She is the founder and co-ordinator of the Russian Theatre Research Network UK.

**Surfaces, Depths and Hypercubes:  
Meyerholdian Scenography and the Fourth Dimension**

An appreciation of Meyerhold's engagement with theatrical space is fundamental to understanding his directorial and pedagogic practice. His conceptualisation of spatial structures underwrites the form and function of his aesthetic, and the exploration of his approach to space as an idea is a powerful tool for the contextualisation of his practice within the philosophical and artistic innovations of the early twentieth century. Beginning from the premise that his directorial practice was fundamentally scenographic, this article seeks to reframe Meyerhold as director-scenographer, highlighting the potential utility of close scenographic analysis of his use of stage shape. Focusing on the construction of depth and surface in Meyerholdian theatre, it is possible to identify trends in the director's approach to space (particularly in the de-naturalisation of depth on stage) that imply a consistent and systematic process of experimentation in Meyerhold's work. In addition, this emphasis on depth and surface, and the interaction between the two, also highlights the contextualisation of Meyerhold's practice within the visual, philosophical and scientific culture of the early twentieth century, echoing the innovations in  $n$ -dimensional geometry and particularly, the model of the fourth spatial dimension seen in the work of Russian philosopher P. D. Ouspensky. By bringing principles in Meyerholdian staging together with visual art and philosophy, the significance of de-naturalised depth can be identified in Meyerhold's practice, not only as an aesthetic marker of style, but also as a foundational grammar for his staging which underwrites the mode of spectatorship at these theatres. The presence of four-dimensional forms on stage (represented spatially rather than temporally through the hypercube structure) also suggests a new reading of one of Meyerhold's most critically-explored productions, *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, that moves away from early Soviet optimism towards the uncertainty and grotesque of the director's later practice.<sup>1</sup>

**Meyerhold as Director-Scenographer**

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If the extensive selection of photographs held in the Meyerhold collection at the Russian State Archive of Art and Literature demonstrate anything about the director's work, it is that his theatre was a theatre of the image. From the structured tableaux of his *Sister Beatrice* (1906) to the crowded platforms of *The Government Inspector* (1926), each production embodies a unique visual scheme. The shifts between dominant aesthetics in Meyerhold's theatre (from symbolism to *commedia dell'arte*, or constructivism to the grotesque) are underwritten by the director's on-going search for an effective mode of visual communication with the spectator. Indeed, the division of Meyerhold's oeuvre into 'periods' based on these aesthetic shifts tends to undercut this consistent and systematic search for a new way of writing the stage space.

Critical writing on Meyerhold's practice reflects the centrality of visual and spatial decisions in his theatre-making. Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the director's spatial structure is found in the work of art historian Nikolai Tarabukin, Meyerhold's colleague at GITIS, the State Institute for Theatrical Art. Tarabukin's readings of Meyerhold's production work locate his theatre against themes in a wide range of visual art practices (from Ancient Egypt to twentieth century Russia), as well as identifying visual schema in the director's use of shapes and trajectories in his *mise-en-scène* (Feldman 1998).<sup>2</sup> More recent commentaries draw out the visual and spatial elements of his theatre as significant aspects of his practice: Alla Mikhailova (1995) and Marjorie Hoover (1988), for example, consider the significance of Meyerhold's relationship with his set designers - many of whom were established visual artists - in shaping his understanding of scenographic space. Nick Worrall (1972, 1973) sees the communicative potential of *mise-en-scène* in key Meyerholdian productions (*The Magnanimous Cuckold*, *The Government Inspector*), particularly in relation to concurrent developments in painting. Spencer Golub (2004) suggests ways to read specific visual devices, notably the use of typography in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

Both Tarabukin's analysis and the more recent commentaries are born out in Meyerhold's own reflections on his practice, as typified by this observation on his production of *Sister Beatrice*, which not only acknowledges the influence of visual art on his aesthetic decisions, but also articulates a working method for the adaption of fine art practice to the theatre:

*Sister Beatrice* was produced in the style of Pre-Raphaelite and early Renaissance painting, but it would be wrong to conclude that we were aiming to reproduce the colours and composition of any one artist of either of these periods. The critics tried to compare the

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production with the most disparate artists: they spoke of Memling, Giotto, Botticelli and many others. In *Beatrice* we borrowed only the means of expression employed by old masters; the movements, groupings, properties and costumes were simply a synthesis of the lines and colours found in the Primitives (in Braun [1969] 1998, 68-69).<sup>3</sup>

Meyerhold describes the influence of a broad visual culture and its schematisation into a theatrical frame: not a copying of individual artists, but a theatricalised adaptation drawing on themes in line and colour. The overriding impression is of a theatre that is visually-driven, where a knowledge of the visual arts becomes an application of line, colour and shape that is consciously theorised and intentionally used as a communicative tool.

It is this emphasis on space and the visual that prompts a fundamental reconceptualisation of Meyerhold as a practitioner: his theatre (incorporating not just his productions, but also his training programmes, production preparation, and rehearsal process) is better understood if he is seen not as a 'director', but as a 'director-scenographer'. This does not imply that Meyerhold had the practical skills to work as a designer - he did not - but that he arranged the working practice at his theatre to allow him to engage consistently with his developing understanding of performance space. Mikhailova writes of Meyerhold's 'keen visual perception', claiming that 'he used to say that vision was his greatest natural endowment, that he was able to see a play in his mind's eye before he could hear it' (1995, 51). His ultimate desire, as Mikhailova notes, was to unify the processes of direction and design, reflected in the training programmes he created for his students:

Meyerhold was no draftsman, but he would start his working sessions with his intern directors or designers pen in hand. He tried to give the budding directors at his Workshop a chance to learn the skills which he himself missed so much: draftsmanship and the craft of scale model making. He had a longtime ambition of training future directors and artist-designers together - a logical sequel to his idea of "unison" between director and designer (Mikhailova 1995, 65).

This is not to claim that Meyerhold was not a collaborator: his collaboration with many of the significant artists of the Russian and European avant-garde was a vital aspect of his developing aesthetic, and a way in which he embedded his work within the wider visual culture of his era. These collaborations were in part motivated by his own lack of skill as an artist, and in some instances, the design work at his theatre was a product of his collaboration with a 'design-realiser', whose role was to take Meyerhold's concept and create a functioning space.<sup>4</sup> Some collaborators, however, and

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particularly those whose work combined an interest in theatre design with other media (including canvas art, photography, or sculpture) had a significant and lasting influence on Meyerhold's practice: Mikhailova claims that '[the] decisive influence on Meyerhold's progress as a stage director was undoubtedly exerted by artist-designers' (1995, 51).

Meyerhold's desire to collapse the roles of director and designer (either literally through training students in both roles, or metaphorically in his own close working practice with artists) suggests that the scenographic elements of his work were central to the development of his productions, and that his understanding of space was foundational to his theatrical aesthetic. Meyerhold's working practice with stage designers indicates an on-going search for a working model by which he can control the scenographic elements of his productions. The visual construction of his theatre is a conscious process, and the development of a visual theatrical language across his career embodies an on-going experiment with the communicative potential of various scenographic elements, influenced by contemporary trends in fine art and wider visual culture.

### **The question of depth and surface**

Meyerhold's adaptation of visual arts practice to the stage concerns theatrical space, not just in the form of stage design, but also in stage shape and in the proxemic relationships created between the stage and the auditorium. Between 1906 and 1922, Meyerhold's systematic engagement with stage space found particular expression in a series of projects exploring the relationship between depth and surface on stage. In his theoretical and practical exploration of the constructed nature of on-stage perspective, Meyerhold's work during this period indicates that the treatment of depth can become a significant marker of theatrical aesthetic. A concern with the nature of depth, and its conceptualisation as a facet of surface (and vice-versa) was also key in the emerging anti-positivist philosophies of the early twentieth century, providing contextualisation for Meyerhold's understanding of space within wider scientific and visual culture. The artists of the early twentieth century avant-garde turned towards the relationship between depth and surface to develop modes of representation that moved away from the realist use of linear perspective. Single-point perspective conventions construct a relationship between surface and depth in which the surface becomes transparent, and the depth space is read as receding behind the canvas, rendering depth

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a fictional construct. In contrast, the avant-garde rejection of these conventions led instead to the development of visual art techniques in which the surface itself became the key structural feature of the work. The challenge of representing depth on the canvas is reconceptualised by the avant-garde in a series of experiments in which depth is de-naturalised, surface itself is brought into the viewer's consciousness, and the qualities of depth are incorporated within the surface. The binary model of depth versus surface becomes a new expression in which depth is surface. An example of this sort of depth-surface reconceptualization can be seen in the cubist collage or constructivist painting, where the presence of objects - drawn or stuck - on the canvas actualize the surface, distorting any fictional receding space, and, as Clement Greenberg put it:

The actual surface becomes both ground and background, and it turns out – suddenly and paradoxically – that the only place left for a three-dimensional illusion is in front of, upon, the surface ([1961]1969, 75).

This fascination with surface is a facet, perhaps, of the new dimensional geometries that were emerging in the early twentieth century. The anti-positivist reconceptualisation of reality undercut the absolute and uniform understandings of space and time that had dominated key disciplines: Newtonian Mechanics in physics, and Euclidean geometry in mathematics. This included a significant engagement with questions of dimensionality, that is, the stratification of temporal and spatial understanding into layers that explain perceptual experience. The nature of the fourth dimension, and its relationship to the widely accepted model of three-dimensional space, was picked up in wider cultural contexts (for example, in H. G. Wells' novel *The Time Machine*). For advocates of Einstein, the fourth dimension was a temporal construct, what Wells calls the 'duration' dimension ([1935] 1993, 4); in contrast, the philosophy of P. D. Ouspensky, a popular pre-Einstein reference point for the Russian avant-garde, argues for a spatial understanding of the fourth dimension. For Ouspensky, what appears to be temporal progression (that is, any change in the make-up of one's spatial surroundings) is in fact the interaction of the three-dimensional world with a larger, four-dimensional one. Through this philosophical model, temporality is spatialised, and Ouspensky turns time into a surface that can be manipulated just like any other space. In his 1913 treatise *The Cubist Painters*, Guillaume Apollinaire associates the innovations of cubism with the emergence of this sort of non-Euclidean (four- or  $n$ -dimensional) geometry in science and mathematics:



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Until now, the three dimensions of Euclidean geometry were enough to answer the disquiet that a sense of infinity instills in the soul of great artists. The new [cubist] painters do not claim to be geometers any more than painters of the past did. But it is true that geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of the writer. Nowadays, scientists have gone beyond the three dimensions of Euclidean geometry. Painters have been led, quite naturally and one might say intuitively, to take an interest in the new possibilities for measuring space which in the modern artist's studio were simply and collectively referred to as the *fourth dimension* (trans. Read 2002, 17)

Framing dimensional geometry as a 'grammar' of painting indicates the significance of these new structures for the artists of the avant-garde. The fourth spatial dimension reframed representational conventions: if time is a space, then it can be included on the canvas alongside any other visual element. Just as, in linear perspective, a convention had been constructed to represent three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, so could conventions be devised to represent four dimensions in three, or even four dimensions in two: depth and time – the third and fourth dimensions – become features of the canvas surface, allowing the artist draw or paint time in its purist form. For artists with 'a sense of infinity', this new temporality presented evocative possibilities.

For Meyerhold, the question of surface and depth, and the possibilities of representation that it presented, were equally provocative. In his earliest critiques of the Moscow Art Theatre (written in 1906 and published in 1908), he makes the relationship between depth, surface and aesthetics very clear by identifying false perspective as a flaw in the naturalism practiced by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko:

The hills on the battlefield in *Julius Caesar* may be constructed so that they decrease in size towards the horizon, but why don't the characters become smaller, too, as they move away from us towards the hills? (in Braun [1969] 1998, 31).

The problem with naturalism, the director argues, is that it becomes implausible by attempting to hide its own representational conventions. It is the presence of a two-dimensional surface on stage, the backdrop, which reveals the falsehoods of the representational system as a whole. For Meyerhold, the relationship between this surface and three-dimensional form (of the actor or the stage furniture, for example) becomes a distinctive marker of style.

However, the significance of depth in Meyerhold's theatre extends beyond the director's desire to differentiate his practice from that of the Art Theatre. The fundamental relationship between dimensions, surfaces and depth is one of perception: the construction of depth is also the construction of how the viewer sees, that is, of how they engage visually with the work presented to them. In other words, how Meyerhold constructs depth in performance is the foundation stone for communication in his theatre; it is the context for any communicative potential within the stage space. Like Apollinaire's understanding of the relationship between painting and geometry, how Meyerhold constructs depth and surface on stage establishes the basic grammar of the theatrical performance.

Drawing on three productions as case studies (*Sister Beatrice*, *Masquerade* and *The Magnanimous Cuckold*), it is possible to identify a systematic exploration of depth and surface in Meyerhold's theatre between 1906 and 1922.<sup>5</sup> Read as a whole, these productions indicate a three-part process of the de-naturalisation of stage depth in Meyerhold's practice: firstly, Meyerhold rejects depth as a prerequisite for performance space. Emerging from this premise, he then develops a model of staging that treats the surface as surface, rather than as window to false depth. Finally, he reconceptualises the depth of the stage floor as a series of structured, superimposed layers rather than a continuous void, leading to a new model of depth in performance. Drawing on the new understanding of dimensionality emerging in anti-positivist philosophy, Meyerhold's relationships with the artists of the avant-garde, and extant photographs of his productions, it is possible to see how the director used this de-naturalised stage depth to construct a foundational grammar for his performances, shaping the way in which the stage space can communicate with the spectator.<sup>6</sup>

### **De-naturalising Depth I: Rejection of depth as an on-stage prerequisite**

Meyerhold's objection to the false depth of the *Julius Caesar* backdrop forms part of the broader critique of naturalism in his essay 'The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood' (see Braun [1969] 1998, 23-34). The use of linear perspective in Nemirovich-Danchenko's production is indicative of a specific attitude towards depth on stage, closely associated with the Art Theatre's

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naturalistic aesthetic. According to Worrall (drawing on the research of Joyce Morgan), Nemirovich-Danchenko's direction of *Julius Caesar* was near-on fanatical in its construction of stage naturalism:

Some details seemed unconsciously satirical of Stanislavskyan naturalism, such as the scene with scattered toys supposedly left behind by his children, in Brutus' orchard, with a background of night birds, croaking frogs, howling dogs, and the roar of wild beasts from circus cages (1996, 152).

The back cloth, with trees that 'decrease in size towards the horizon' as Meyerhold noted, indicates that a falsely constructed depth was more in tune with Art Theatre naturalism than abruptly cutting off the sense of receding space at the theatre's back wall. A sense of depth - real or otherwise - was a prerequisite for Nemirovich-Danchenko's production.

Meyerhold's initial response to his dissatisfaction with Art Theatre naturalism was a series of experiments in symbolist theatre. In 1906, employed at the Theatre of V. F. Komissarzhevskaya in St. Petersburg, the connection between his rejection of naturalism, his turn to symbolism, and his construction of on-stage depth becomes particularly apparent in his production of *Sister Beatrice*. Drawing on the model of relief staging advocated by Georg Fuchs, Meyerhold moved the backdrop at the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre downstage, resting just seven feet from the footlights. This anti-realist gesture served the director's purpose of highlighting the falseness of naturalistic or realist spatial aesthetics, challenging the conventions employed at the Art Theatre. The effect of his staging decision, however, was perhaps far more radical: the foreshortening of space reconstructed the visual relationship between the spectator and the stage, recasting the spectator's role in the performance event. The key function of linear perspective is the externalisation of the viewer, and any canvas constructed according to these conventions (whether it is hung in an art gallery or a theatre), implies that there is one optimum viewing position: this is external, centralised and slightly distanced. This is the position occupied by the spectator at the Moscow Art Theatre, seated in a block in its end-on auditorium. Although the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre was also an end-on configuration, Meyerhold's appropriation of the relief stage released the space from the conventions of constructed perspective. The 'correct' external viewing position was deconstructed, suggesting not only a different aesthetic, but also a different, more intimate, relationship between the stage and auditorium.<sup>7</sup>

By bringing the curtain forward, however, Meyerhold also highlights the constructed nature of theatrical space. The foreshortened stage emphasises the fact that stage space is never anything other than restricted: a world delineated by clear boundaries. In effect, Meyerhold shifts the back wall of the stage, the very site of the Art Theatre's depth illusion, to the front of the performance space, abruptly disrupting the spectator's ability to perceive both real and constructed depth. More than simply rejecting the need for a deep stage space in order to realise Maeterlinck's play, Meyerhold's decision also reconstructs the relationship between theatre and reality. The foreshortened space implicitly interrupts the possibility of seeing the onstage action as part of a wider, fictional, offstage world. Theatrical space and real space are framed as discontinuous, and restricted depth becomes a metaphor for conscious theatricality as opposed to naturalistic illusionism: both the stage space and the world it represents are reframed as fragmented, theatrical constructs.

### **De-naturalising Depth II: Treatment of the surface as surface**

If the placement of the *Sister Beatrice* backdrop challenged the necessity for depth space in Meyerhold's production, the design of the cloth itself served to highlight its surface, bringing it into the audience's consciousness as part of the visual structure of stage design. Rejecting the constructed depth of the realist backdrop, Meyerhold and his designer Sergei Sudeikin created a non-representational painting, as described by Maximilian Voloshin:

[The backdrop comprised a] gothic wall in which the green and lilac-tinted stone blends with the grey tones of the tapestries and glimmers faintly with pale silver and old gold (cited by Meyerhold, in Braun [1969] 1998, 69)

Although Voloshin references the 'wall', and Sudeikin's designs for the production indicate a fairly conventional view of a nunnery, photographs of the production show Komissarzhevskaya and the chorus of nuns standing out in relief against flat cloths and curtains [figure 1].<sup>8</sup>

[Figure 1 near here]

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The closeness between stage and auditorium renders a linear construction of depth unnecessary, and in its place, Voloshin implies, Meyerhold and Sudeikin created a symbolist visual artwork. Meyerhold acknowledges this process as constructing a specific relationship between stage and auditorium that emphasises atmosphere and intimacy above all else:

The settings were placed almost on top of the footlights and the entire action took place so close to the spectator that he was reminded irresistibly of the ambo in an ancient church. According to the director's original project, which for practical reasons had to be modified, the entire forestage and the steps down to the auditorium should have been covered with polished wood to look like palisander; in this way the actors would have been completely separated from the background decorative panel [...] (in Braun [1969] 1998, 70).

Bringing the backdrop forward brings it into the audience's consciousness, and this allows Meyerhold to construct a visual tension between the flat surface and the three-dimensional performers, the actors 'separated from the background'. The foreshortened stage space is a clear aesthetic statement on the relationship between surface and depth on stage.

The use of this sort of tension remains apparent in Meyerhold's aesthetic after his abandonment of Fuchs' relief stage. By 1907, Meyerhold had begun to see the limitation of Fuchs' model: the restriction of the stage in depth had suited the ethereality of his symbolist experiments, where actors moved slowly between static tableaux. However, as Meyerhold began to question the theatrical plausibility of symbolism as a form, he simultaneously sought a new, more physically-realised, performance style. His resulting turn towards the *commedia dell'arte* in effect rendered the relief stage redundant: a seven-foot-deep performance space was simply not adequate for the antics of Meyerhold's *balagan*, or acrobat-clown. The return to a deep stage space, however, did not indicate a rejection of the principles of relief staging in Meyerhold's theatre. In his 1917 production of Lermontov's *Masquerade*, Meyerhold used the imposition of curtains mid-scene in order to divide the stage space in depth, as well as cover scene changes. The actors isolated in front of the curtain would continue the scene, whilst the set was changed behind, allowing for Meyerhold to control the rhythmic structure of the production.<sup>9</sup> These curtains, non-realist in their decoration, functioned much as the *Sister Beatrice* backdrop: a non-representational surface brought forcibly into the audience's consciousness, backing a narrow strip of stage, with the imposition of the curtain drawing attention to the restriction of the downstage space against the full depth of the stage at the Alexandrinsky Theatre.

[Figure 2 near here]

The use of a surface to draw attention to depth is also apparent in Meyerhold's later work on Fernand Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Arguably one of the director's most-discussed productions, certainly in western scholarship, photographs of the staging seem resolutely three-dimensional, focusing on the constructivist-influenced 'machine for acting' created by Lyubov Popova [figure 2]. There is no foreshortening of the stage space into a relief stage, nor any imposition of a downstage backdrop or curtain. There is, however, a striking device used to pull the viewer's attention towards the two-dimensional surface at the rear of the space: the shadow on the theatre's back wall.<sup>10</sup> This shadow appears repeatedly in photographs of the State Meyerhold Theatre's 1928 revival of the production, and draws attention to the flat surface which sits behind Popova's three-dimensional construction.<sup>11</sup> Against the resolute three-dimensionality of Popova's structure, the surface is highlighted as a flat boundary to the performance space. The shadow, drawing the viewer's eye towards this boundary, functions as an animation of the two-dimensional surface. Through the use of the shadow, the back wall is drawn into the scenographic idiom which defines the stage design as a whole: that of active space. Like Popova's construction, with its moving sails and wheels, the shadow sets the surface of the back wall in motion. This animation of the back wall introduces a fundamental conflict into the performance space. The shadow draws attention to the flatness of the wall, its status as surface rather than depth, establishing a tension between two- and three-dimensional space on stage. Finally, and paradoxically, the shadow is also a space of synthesis: on this surface, actor and construction are merged into one, sharing the same spatial idioms, a merging of forms and lines through the levelling of the colours and depths of the performance space into the dark, flat outlines of the shadow.

The foreshortening of space associated with the relief stage reconstructs the visual relationship between stage and auditorium. The use of the shadow in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* suggests a different function for the surface in Meyerhold's staging, as a space that can be inscribed and read. This is echoed in the typographical features of the set (the Latin letters printed on the revolving wheels), which turn the surfaces on stage into spaces that communicate information in the most

literal sense. The viewer is turned into a reader and interpreter, emphasising Meyerhold's desire for an active and engaged spectator, a principle he had expressed as early as 1906 in his critiques of the Art Theatre:

In the theatre the spectator's imagination is able to supply that which is left unsaid. It is this mystery and the desire to solve it which draw so many people to the theatre (in Braun [1969] 1998, 25)

What is striking about the shadow and typography of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is that the reading is distanced from the spectator: the use of Latin, rather than Cyrillic, type for the letters, for example, emphasises both the literal reading of an alphabet, and the distanced experience of reading an alphabet that is not your own. The letters read as both letters and as shapes or forms. In the same way, the shadow can be read as a literal representation of the actors and the set, and as a new form, the merger of the two that creates the shape of the shadow as a whole. Through distancing the process of reading, the act of reading becomes a conscious function of the two-dimensional surface on Meyerhold's stage.

### **De-naturalising Depth III: Reconceptualisation of depth as structured planes**

Meyerhold's use of curtains in *Masquerade* to isolate characters downstage indicates how the relationship between narrow and deep stage spaces can be constructed, implying that the relief stage seen in *Sister Beatrice* continued to influence his work more than a decade after it had been abandoned as a literal spatial structure. The designs for *Masquerade*, in fact, imply that the relief stage is contained within the depth stage, and that it can be made to re-emerge, through isolation, at a key moment: the spaces are coexistent on stage.

This principle is also apparent in Meyerhold's work on *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. For this production, the space is not restricted in depth or fluctuating between deep and narrow; instead, the relief stage principle is multiplied across the depth of the stage space, in effect dividing the stage into a series of planes which are superimposed one on another in order to construct the *mise-en-scène*. Popova's construction makes the presence of the planes apparent to the viewer: the size of the structure itself, taking up just under half of the stage in depth, indicates a clear dividing line in the centre of the space, the point at which the bare stage floor gives way to the raised platforms of

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the construction. The choice of uplighting, creating the shadow, draws the viewer's eye-line up further, to the space behind and above the structure - the back wall.

These divisions are further enforced through echoes and variations across the performance space: in other words, the division of the stage can be seen in the use of similarity and difference in the construction of each stage section, or plane. The first plane, furthest downstage, comprises the space between the front edge of the stage and the construction, and is easily identifiable because of the contrast in placement of the spectator's eye-line, which (reading the image from bottom to top) is drawn first along the stage floor and then up into the construction. This shift of visual engagement (from horizontal to vertical) indicates a concurrent shift in the composition of the stage space. This is reinforced by the collision between the simplicity of visual idiom in the clear, flat stage floor and the complexity of lines and surfaces that comprise the construction, making the differentiation of these two spaces immediately apparent. The use of the curved bench, stage right, indicates a connection between the two planes, with its lines echoing the curvature of the construction's wheels, and its surface that of the construction's ramps. The second plane, the construction itself, has a series of clear boundaries, surfaces that separate it from the space behind, in the form of the latticed screen and the wheels. However, it is the shadow, falling on the third layer, the back wall, that indicates both similarity and difference in the two upstage planes. The lines of the shadow echo the lines of the construction, indicating similarity, but their two-dimensionality is a clear indicator of difference. The resonances of shape which Meyerhold creates between the lines of the actors' bodies continue to emphasise this layered structure of similarities and differences: the physical shape of actors in the first plane is echoed again in the second plane, and finally, in the shadow.

What is also apparent, however, is that planes are not only present in the depth of the stage space, but also in its height: the shadow is both highest and furthest away from the audience, the construction forms the centre of the stage image in both depth and height, and the clear area of stage floor is lowest and nearest the audience. The result is a diagonal axis which runs from the shadow (upstage and high) to the clear floor (downstage and low). This axis combines the two



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processes of layering – height and depth – to create a dynamic movement towards the audience, embedded within the spatial structure of the stage.

This combined process of layering along two axes (depth and height) suggests a new connection between Meyerhold's theatre and the anti-positivist aesthetics of the avant-garde visual artists. The two-fold layered structure of the stage space seen in the photograph of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* can be read as a representation of the Ouspenskian spatial fourth dimension. In  $n$ -dimensional geometry, there is an implicit relationship between the *conceptualisation* or an idea (for example, the belief that the fourth dimension is a spatial construct) and its *representation* (the way in which this belief can be notated or communicated). It is this connection between the what and the how of geometry, arguably, that shapes its function as a 'grammar' for the visual artist: the representation of one dimension within the conventions of another suggests formal structures for the construction of the artist's canvas that embed the mathematical or philosophical concept within the artwork. In order to conceptualise  $n$ -dimensional geometry, mathematicians employ a similar process to that used to represent the third dimension on a two-dimensional surface. In the same way that a three-dimensional cube is represented in two dimensions by the extension of a two-dimensional square along an axis representative of the third dimension, a four-dimensional figure, called a hypercube, is drawn by extending the three-dimensional cube along another axis, representative of the fourth dimension [see figure 3].

[Figure 3 near here]

The visualisation of  $n$ -dimensional shapes relies on a process of layering forms along multiple trajectories. The new shape created by the square-to-cube, or cube-to-hypercube transformations can be read as existing either in the original dimension of the surface (that is, as a collection of two-dimensional lines and forms) or in the represented dimension (as three- or four-dimensional). For the hypercube, this requires a perceptual shift for the viewer, who is asked to conceive of as spatial a dimension that, according to Ouspensky's model, would normally be experienced as temporal. At first glance, it can be difficult to understand how the form functions, and the viewer's visual engagement can fluctuate, resulting in a sense of mobility in the shape: it appears alternately as a two-, three-, and even four-dimensional representation. The presence of the hypercube alters the

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nature of the surface on which it is drawn, which becomes a multi-dimensional space, containing within it elements of the third and fourth dimensions. There is a significant transmutation in the nature of these dimensions, particularly time, by virtue of their representation within the hypercube: the shape reveals what Ouspensky saw as the true nature of the fourth dimension, that is, as a spatial rather than a temporal construct. The hypercube is thus a transformation form, revealing to the viewer a new reality that inflects understandings of the everyday, shifting the perception of temporal progression into a spatial frame.

The hypercube form appealed to the artists of the Russian avant-garde: Linda Dalrymple Henderson, for example, identifies the literal use of the hypercube in Malevich's design for act two of the 1913 futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun* (Henderson 1983, 277). This indicates that the formal conventions of the hypercube became part of the grammar of four-dimensional space that Apollinaire saw in the relationship between geometry and painting. Less literal uses of the hypercube suggest a broader influence of this four-dimensional grammar: both Henderson and Marjorie Perloff note that Cubist and Cubo-Futurist art reflects the influence of the hypercube in its representation of simultaneous, multiple perspectives on the subject. According to Perloff:

[The Hypercube theory was] interpreted freely by the painters as a license to renounce perspective and create a "motor space" in which objects are depicted in fragmented or partial form, as they would appear from multiple points of view – the Russian avant-garde regarded the ability to visualize the object from all sides at once as only the first step towards the desired "higher consciousness" that Ouspensky associated with the fourth dimension (1983, 127).

For the artists of the avant-garde, the hypercube as mobile and multi-dimensional form expanded the viewer's engagement not only with the canvas, but also with reality itself: it was a representational convention that could alter perception. The progression in Meyerhold's work from *Sister Beatrice* to *The Magnanimous Cuckold* can also be read in terms of the hypercube. *Sister Beatrice* and the relief stage indicated a concept of space which emphasised the surface, metaphorically two-dimensional: the equivalent of a square drawn on a sheet of paper. The development of multiple planes across the depth of the stage, for example, through the use of curtains in *Masquerade* or the planes in depth in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, extends the relief stage along an axis; it is the equivalent of a cube. When processes of layering in depth and in height are

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combined, the stage image is extended along a new diagonal axis towards the audience, and an additional process of layering occurs. This axis represents a new spatial structure on stage: the hypercube. This is reinforced by the effect of the diagonal trajectory, which leads to an implicit sense of movement embedded in the combination of layers along the multiple axes in the design. The diagonal line is dynamic, and the design embodies movement within stillness, in effect, turning time into space. This sense of movement is an embedded temporality, like that of the hypercube, functioning through the scenographic manipulation of surface and depth.

The de-naturalisation of depth indicates a clear relationship between stage space and spectatorship in Meyerhold's theatre: the construction of depth and surface on stage becomes the foundation for the sort of theatrical communication that will take place, be that the intimacy constructed for *Sister Beatrice* or the fluctuations of *Masquerade*. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the diagonal trajectory created through the combination of planes in depth and height reaches out from the stage towards the auditorium, implying a dynamic interaction between actor and spectator, a facet, perhaps, of the dynamism of post-Revolutionary theatre in early Soviet Russia. Meyerhold framed his early post-Revolutionary practice as a place of connection between performance and life, embodied in the connection between performer and audience. Discussing his theatrical intentions in 1920, he states:

Here is our theatrical programme: plenty of light, plenty of high spirits, plenty of grandeur, plenty of infectious enthusiasm, unlaboured creativity, the participation of the audience in the corporate, creative act of the performance (in Braun [1969] 1998, 170).

Reading the photographs of Meyerhold's revival of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* eight years later, and identifying the presence of the shadow and the hypercube structure, inflects this straightforward, optimistic model of theatrical purpose. For Ouspensky, the hypercube and the spatial fourth dimension are connections to another world, an extension beyond the everyday that opens up an implicit instability in the quotidian idea of temporal progression. They inflect the reading of Meyerhold's positive and energetic biomechanical actors, whose acrobatics in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* were considered by some a representation par excellence of the Soviet ideal of health and youth. Placed in this liminal setting of shadows and hypercubes, and at the later, revival date of 1928, the Soviet ideal becomes less stable, and the staging of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* moves closer, perhaps, to the grotesque of Meyerhold's later productions, the despairing satire of Nikolai

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Erdman's play *The Mandate*, or the haunting wax dummies of *The Government Inspector*, the production Harold Clurman referred to as a 'masterpiece [that] leaves one slightly uncomfortable' (1998, 80). These later productions, with their complex and metaphorical dramaturgies, were enacted under another shadow, that of the threat of Stalin and the slow, and almost inevitable, progression of Meyerhold towards his arrest and execution. The inflection of the high-spirited biomechanical performances with the instability of other-wordliness embedded in the setting seems to indicate a fundamentally metaphorical approach to theatrical space in Meyerhold's practice, as the director invites his audience to engage with the disjuncture between the utopian and the dystopian stage worlds. In a world of absolutes, like the absolutes of socialist realism imposed from 1934 as the official, government-approved style of Soviet art, these shadows and hypercubes are dangerous fault lines. Moving beyond its manifestation as a spatial structure, the hypercube also becomes a metaphor for Meyerholdian theatre practice as a whole: the creation of a transformational space in which every day life is re-written through the language of theatricality. At this, most fundamental level, the director's practice becomes scenographic, as he sought to rewrite visually the realities of Soviet Russia in performance.

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### Figure captions

Figure 1: Meyerhold's production of *Sister Beatrice*, Theatre of V. F. Komissarzhevskaya, 1906.

Figure 2: Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (revival), State Meyerhold Theatre, 1928.

Figure 3: *n*-dimensional visualisation: from square to cube, cube to hypercube.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the material in this article expands on work in my monograph, *Meyerhold and the Cubists* (Intellect, 2015). A more in-depth exploration of Meyerhold as scenographer can be found in that volume.

<sup>2</sup> Tarabukin's work, edited by Feldman, is not yet available in English translation.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Braun's *Meyerhold on Theatre* ([1969] 1998) is the most comprehensive translation of the director's writings into English. To ensure accessibility for the reader, all quotations from Meyerhold included here can be found in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> This is true, for example, of Meyerhold's work with V. Kiselev and K. Soste on *The Government Inspector*, a production whose designs caused particular problems for Meyerhold, including the dismissal his original designer, Vladimir Dmitriev (see Mikhailova 1995: 66-67 or Rudnitsky 1981: 391)

<sup>5</sup> The restricted selection of productions from the Meyerhold oeuvre addressed here is a necessary response to the number of performances undertaken by the director during his career: in excess of 300 premieres are recorded in Robert Leach's record of Meyerhold's productions (see Leach 1989: 194-204). The productions selected here are used as representative of key moments in the development of depth in his aesthetic; other productions represent additional stages in this process, including his 1906 production of Yushkevich's *In The City* and his 1914 variant of Blok's *The Fairground Booth*. The three productions used as case studies in this article have been selected partly because of the clarity with which they represent the issues in question, and partly because of their familiarity in western theatre scholarship. Although I appreciate that returning to productions that have been subject to previous commentary can feel restrictive or limiting in the new discoveries available, I consider the re-reading of Meyerhold's theatre to be key in the development of English-language scholarship on the director. As availability of material on Meyerhold in the West increases, returning to, and re-analysing, significant productions in his oeuvre allows for the emergence of new approaches to the director that are historiographic and dialogic in their emphasis. As a result, I make no claim that this reading of depth and surface in Meyerhold's theatre is definitive, or should stand alone, but that it can contribute to a dialogue with other readings of these key productions to develop an extended and multi-dimensional understanding of his practice. The importance of re-reading Meyerhold's practice, and the place of Meyerhold in western theatre scholarship, is addressed in depth in *Meyerhold and the Cubists* (Skinner 2015).

<sup>6</sup> The study of Meyerhold's theatre through photographic sources is both frustrating and rich: I write with a full awareness of the problematic relationship between theatre photography and historiography. The potential distorting of the theatrical experience into the photographic experience clearly complicates the role of the photodocumentation in theatre practice (see Reason, 2006). At the same time, however, the Meyerhold Archives hold thousands of photographic images of the director's practice, comprehensive documentation of Meyerhold's work in action (see Syssoyeva, 2010). These images not only provide an insight into his aesthetic, but, arguably more provocatively, invite a return to the details of Meyerhold's practice and a chance to look again at the visual construction of his theatre.

<sup>7</sup> These ideas are developed in more depth in *Meyerhold and the Cubists* (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Sudeikin's designs are reproduced in Mikhailova (1995: 80-82).

<sup>9</sup> Meyerhold's isolation of sequences in front of the curtain in *Masquerade* has clear resonances with the front cloth tradition in pantomime, indicating that the analysis of de-naturalised depth has potential outside of Meyerholdian theatre.

<sup>10</sup> The consistent presence of the shadow in photographs of the 1928 revival and the lighting angle required to achieve this sort of shadow indicate that it is an intentional, rather than accidental, feature of the scenography.

<sup>11</sup> Other examples of photographs featuring this (or other similar) shadows in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* can be found on the Global Performing Arts Database ([www.glopad.org](http://www.glopad.org)), see image IDs 911, 912 and 916. The shadow can also be seen in image ID 1005383, a photograph of the original 1922 production, indicating that the use of shadow is not unique to the revival version.