

## **DRAMA RESEARCH PRESENTATION**

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“Iconoclasm of identity: Khrushchev as political performer  
in his *'Secret Midnight Address'* Moscow 25 Feb., 1956

### **Introduction**

The image of Nikita Khrushchev in Russian politics is that of a strong-headed liberator; the first Soviet leader with an honest worker's background, who broke the chains of the oppressive past of Stalinism. Looking more closely at his figure, one can notice that, though this is all true, the imagery surrounding him is far more complex; through it he portrays a rags-to-riches story of a single-parent, and a new composite version of Stalin and of Lenin. Furthermore, as in a lot of Russian leaders, we can see a tradition of exclusion (reaching back to the Great Schism of 1054) constructing a 'character' polarised between the hero and the traitor, to be adapted and performed to a variety of audiences.

In the document and the context of the secret speech, it has been claimed that the psychological makeup of all post-Stalin leaders is visible, literally inscribed in the codes of behaviour for public events devised by Stalin. (Wolfe) This presentation will not concentrate on the actual text itself, but more on the political and historical context, performance environment and performer of the document.

It is interesting to see that when studied in the light of two initially contradictory Russian thinkers - Vladimir Solovyov and Mikhail Bakhtin - and performance theory, the situation which Khrushchev partially created and lived in, unearths more material for the study of leadership. The discoveries, however, ultimately do not settle on any of the premises as a single answer to the times' political crises.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

Mikhail Bakhtin credits the Russian scholar Vyacheslav Ivanov with the first proper “grope towards this basic structural feature of Dostoevsky's artistic world”. By this Bakhtin is referring to Ivanov's idea of ‘affirming someone else's “I”’ as a central characteristic concerning the relative freedom of Dostoevsky's characters that Bakhtin was later to build his work on. In his notion of ‘dialogism’ within a novel and between voices heard and unheard in it, Bakhtin goes further than Ivanov's ‘affirmation’, which can be seen as a type of religious and cathartic sympathy forcing a character (and the reader) to aspire to a single, pre-determined end or identity.

Making fictive voices within a novel more open-ended and thus more democratic - meaning being freed from the objectification of the author - Bakhtin doesn't completely forgo objectification of the character: namely that by the reader. However, this serves another purpose. Bakhtin now makes meaning in the novel more jointly subservient between reader, text and author, but he has changed the setting by making the reader more responsible or has politicised the reader. This means at least two things. First, this allows for multiple interpretations from the novel, something that, as new voices arise, will reflect in the society(es) that read it. In this sense the thoughts of Bakhtin will have a liberating effect forcing a negotiation of positions in a society as represented in (types of) fiction.

Secondly, as in a sense, the creativity of the reader or audience is turned on, they are simultaneously made aware of their process of creation or participation: of their authority of voice. How this relates to Bakhtin and his link between literature, language and democratic negotiation is important as this removes the idea of the static or neutral reader. How this relates to Khrushchev, is that with the carefully regulated audience of the Soviet Congress starting on February the 14th, the new Leader wielded power through a careful balance of domination of the Congress (Stalinist imagery) and acting in the name of it as a liberator against Stalin. In doing so, he neutralised his 'character' and

imposed a yet stronger, more complex power over his 'audience', making the audience the performers *and* his fellow conspirators.

Bakhtin distinctly excludes 'drama' from his treatment of dialogism and polyphony. In her article 'Drama and the Dialogic Imagination', Helene Keyssar critiques Bakhtin's oddly dismissive attitude towards drama. Bringing Bakhtin into the realm of feminist drama and performance, she writes: "The continuous recreation of meaning, what Bakhtin calls the heteroglossia of communication, is the basic condition and phenomenon of theatre". Keyssar then continues on to reveal the polyphonous possibilities of drama, starting from Greek tragedy to contemporary 'avant-garde' theatre like that of Fornes'; dropping a hint as to the growing importance of multiple interpretation of voices, in the dialogue of contemporary society.

The intention of this presentation, likewise, is not to provide any kind of in-depth 'Bakhtinian' interpretations of the subject matter, but only to establish links between this type of thinking around a specific performance, public consciousness, or state of cultural exchange

### **The Audience, and The Text**

Which creates which? The environment of Stalin's Russia required a strongly controlled audience and didn't allow for individual opinions or contesting views in, especially, political gatherings. This was effectively a much older controlling device in metropolitan theatre from the times of absolutism in Czarist Russia. What was allowed on stage would be filtered through a selection panel of a theatre, and a level of self-censorship took place in order to keep peace and secure the business of the theatre. It isn't therefore surprising that throughout the socialist revolution the medium of theatre was used for its propaganda opportunities. The environment after 1953 continued the chaos and suspicion of the Soviet Union, which existed when Stalin was alive, only scattering its main focus, its main characters, its main story. It would then be likely that any ensuing control measures to this, would take place on a stage.

Khrushchev was Stalin's highest 'yes' man. But he realized that in the upcoming Twentieth Congress of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union, someone had to take power in order to control the insecurity in the absence of the Leader, and in order to slide it into a more open form.

On the opening of the Twentieth Congress in 1956, Khrushchev announced he would be dealing with 'the problem of the cult of individuality' (kul't lichnost') - the problem concerning the idea of collective leadership after Stalin - but in a separate closed-door meeting. Specific guidelines were set for the event: no one was to take notes or disclose information about it. This is one of the first elements that distinguish the night speech of the 25th from others: emphasized, regulated pre-publicity. Khrushchev generally never wrote detailed speeches, and what he wrote he improvised on. This speech was carefully researched and it controlled textually the reactions of the audience. Highly 'secret' though this was to, the document would eventually be leaked all the way into the foreign press; to Reuters, the Manchester Guardian and the United States Information agencies. Even before its presentation, hints of future changes described in the text were published in the Voprosy Istorii journal ('Historical Questions').

The event is peculiar in its delivery of message and meaning. It is interesting in the ambiguity of the prescribed roles (and especially roles of power) on audience behavior dating back to Stalin in a sense it was an ominous drama, the conclusion of which all could guess would be dramatic.

It is ambiguous whether or not Khrushchev deliberately set out to publicise a 'secret' event, that eventually lead to the symbolic use of Stalin's dead figure, as a sort of Deus Ex Machina, to bear the weight of all the injustices of the past regime. It was a typical gamble from the New First Secretary, as he knew himself that his participation in past evils was considerable, though not the worst of the bunch.

In this culture of silence, the audience, half-witting and malleable, became silent demonstrators. They became Khrushchev's supporting cast or even subjected to the status of props - the new apparatchiki. They were what Richard Schechner calls an Integral or Integral-ritual audience. They are part of a in-the-know crowd, ready to participate in something they know they know the outcome of, and thus more ready to ignore some of the details. Khrushchev invited a mostly yes-crowd to this secret meeting for him to take the role of 'liberator' in the wake of Stalin's death, though unannounced

to the audience in this newly formed anti-Stalinist characterisation, was his continuation of Stalin's tactics of clearing ranks. In a word: he was *the traitor* to Stalin and Stalinists.

Khrushchev worked in at least as sinister a way as did Stalin. He used contextual and text-bound conventions to control the audiences' approval, and dynamic interaction to the text. This can be seen in the 'codes' of behavior in applause given to different speakers, in the order and quantity of speeches by and individual - Khrushchev dominated the podium in the 14th day and 25th night speeches, far more than Stalin ever did. One difference though marked the two speeches; in the general speech during day, no indignation or objections were voiced. The night speech, on the other hand, was always geared towards being an emotional performance event of Cathartic dimensions. It was here that Khrushchev could embody the tragedy of past sins, and play now a *tragic* hero, while gaining a supportive group to further blame a group of Khrushchev's rivals to 'the throne' and achieve stability in the Soviet Union. It has been commented that by this performance, though not Khrushchev's 'debut' (which was at The Kharkov Congress in 1926, to catch Stalin's right-hand man Kaganovich's eye), he nevertheless gained in a short amount of time the clout that took Stalin 10 years to gather.

But the event of the 25th is not as simple as that. Far from a simple *coup*, the context of the performance shows that Khrushchev was not only re-shuffling the cards, re-organising the Panoptikon of Stalin's Big Brother ideology, in the re-organising of the police and secret services; he was simultaneously setting contradictory projects of democracy ahead. His blundering or calculation of the speech's leaking abroad made waves in all other Communist countries, forcing him to further portray Stalinist images - which he on the surface rejected - in an exercise to limit the damage caused to the international socialist communities.

Victor Turner proposes a four-leveled pattern for what he calls social drama (as opposite to aesthetic drama): *breach* (which can be a long period), *crisis*, *redressive action* and *reintegration*. This is effectively crisis management. Through Stalinist years of oppression and finally confronted with his death, a crisis occurs to which a clear solution is needed. Since Stalin's years in office were founded on strong, clear images that could distract from the realities in life, a new, tightly controlled and performed image campaign was needed. Needed, to reintegrate the Soviet people and the apparatus (and some would say this is a contradiction in terms) to daily life and, again, ignore as much as possible: but the ambiguity of the new text, the new texture of society was something unexpected - possibly even foreign to Khrushchev himself.

To misquote Peggy Phelan: "Performance is loss". Whether he knew it or not, his performance took the form of the tradition of Samizdat' (self-published). It became an unpublished chain letter, like the banned novels, which were manually distributed from one typewriter to another. It became, and has become even in academic literature, a significant legendary event that *took place*. It doesn't matter that there are printed versions about; they are all circumstantial and relics. What he spoke of; Lenin's testament to Leon Trotsky condemning Stalin in late 1922; of Stalin's horrors; of his ignorance in agriculture - this was all known. Yet his audience was captivated. What mattered was that he had in the day speech of the 14th captured their attention and set rules for them to suspend their disbelief for this narrative to be spoken by Khrushchev 11 days later. In a sense of Kleinian group phantasy, it was a great mourning session of a father who beats his wife, Russia. One, where the immediate family don't want to give up the body, because he's caused so much pain, and are simultaneously building an image of the near future in the image of the corpse. Khrushchev, perhaps, was discovering that the whole past was such a phantasy.

In this break down of the family in the nurtured society of the time, some one was needed to take his place. But any approaches to *become* this person would be dangerous, as neither collective leadership nor dictatorial order was instated, and the environment was volatile to changes. The gamble Khrushchev risked was to play on the intuitions of the Communist apparatus, to ingeniously do away with his rivals and play on his array of wholesome identities to the general public, as he thought fit - until the suitable equation came up. After all he was keen on improvising. In a moment, he shifted from Chief Stalinist to Chief anti-Stalinist, declaring as much of the exposition to the story of the past as the people needed to know, to create a future. Was this 'liberalism' to allow free opinions or a theatrical device to secure the foundations of Stalinist control of important economical and political matters? Was it an entertaining distraction on many levels to gain time?

### **The Spiritual History of Russia - '*Ruskaia Idea*'**

The field of secular or non-scholastic philosophy starts in Russia with Chaadaev's letters, which called for a more open trend of western-influenced thinking. Yet even *his* work, 'a shot in the

dark' as it was called, carried with it the tradition of mystical 'otherness', which in Russia was taken as a sign of divine righteousness. Although this is a religious idea, its power, its influence, notions of 'Grand Designs', its spirituality and contradictions can be explored around Khrushchev through the writings of Solovyov.

In Solovyov's cult of 'Sophia Divine Wisdom', the notion *Sophia* takes on more forms than this femininely engendered wisdom usually does. It also occupies a position which, with its companion, the human race, displaces the concept of 'Sophia' as a static, (rational) site that lacks vitality and dynamic progression of the world. A Sophic human race should then, according to Solovyov, play out its cosmic role and actually be elevated as humans to a higher form of being - merging into an 'All-Unity'. This myth of return, though problematic, is for Solovyov the true meaning of Christianity and this - in Solovyov's own political dimension - is something that would unite all people and bridge all differing beliefs and difficulties in the world.

Solovyov wanted to export Messianically his 'Universal' system, and in doing so would cloak his intuitions in "open armed" Christian garb. It was a patronizing and patriarchal act to assume the cultural applicability of a system which, because of its proportions of Christianity to interpreted foreign materials, would "work" or inspire in the Western world. It would rather cause a renewed colonialization and perversion in domestic religious thought in the sites of origin of some of the source materials. Solovyov seemed to assign an awkwardly moralizing rationale of re-building towards a universal (Christian) harmony to Sophia, which resembles the differentiation between 'God as absolute being' and 'Man as The Absolute in process of becoming' (towards 'Godmanhood').

We can see the Sophia cult becoming very dependent on notions of 'Sophia' as female 'Muse' in a very patriarchal pseudo-liberated society. This is because, like for several Marxist regimes the female image and certain particular era-based fe/male images, are iconic of a mind-set that tells us about the sexual politics of these locations, times and construction of male identities. Solovyov's ambivalent yet chauvinist use of the symbolic female is a clue to the yet unattainable power he (and in different ways, many other political writers) envisioned - a road sign to his work's travel from merely theosophical to strongly theocratic while remaining ambivalently czarist *as well as* liberal.

### **The Performance(s)**

*K. as political performer: blunder, improvisation, research, calculation and audience selection*

Khrushchev was versatile and site specific as a performer. He most often improvised on an outline of a speech, emphasising emotion rather than message. He adopted, like we assume of politicians today, a number of masks and gestures to suit a particular event: the kissing of a baby, the handshake, and the public whisper to an opposition politician. Khrushchev, like Stalin dominated the Congress speeches - even more than Stalin in fact, who had changed his name in 1910 from the far Georgian Dzhugashvili to the more impressive Stalin - 'man of steel'. But Khrushchev may turn out to have played with his audience far more than his predecessor, for Stalin's was a simpler control and environment of fear, Khrushchev's was more ambiguous; a mixture of thaw and regression.

There are four central character types that Khrushchev relied on heavily: Khrushchev as 'savior-hero' emphasising his past, be it revolutionary, worker, of poverty or concerning his single-parent status (only between 1919-1923). He is quoted as having proudly showed off his rags-to-riches story at a C20th Fox dinner party - relying on the emotional connection of the American Dream. It is through this characterisation that he disqualifies Stalin as an ignorant of agriculture, he being one from the Country.

*The liberator* - character or dimension of Khrushchev focused more on the future and Grand Designs. In this outfit, he was an exponent of Leninism, liberalism and individualism within the Communist Utopic landscape.

His *traitor* - character is interesting for its link to his constant exhibition of honesty and his heritage from Stalin and Lenin. Here we can see the use of Stalinist tactics to defeat Stalin; in many ways Khrushchev's politics and public figure was closely, paternally, linked to Stalin and the iconography of Russian leaders. His are performances around Stalin: about fathers and sons, and about a battle over a Mother Russia. This is also the site to study the use by the leader of Censorship and Propaganda as performance.

The last main characterisation is that of a lost Pirandellian character: here, deconstructive, but ultimately *without a plot*. His performances can fit into political explanations and psychological motivation. The trouble is that his intentions are constantly in flux and, in his experimentation, collide with unexpected events in world politics. He'll disrupt his jovial, playful use of language by another playful threat to use nuclear bombs (some parts of his profile resemble that of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy). A significant collision would be, by leaking his 'secret' speech, risking a domino effect of desires for liberation in East Europe. This pre-publicity, as discussed earlier, is interesting in that this aspect takes the event onto the borderline of live art and recorded art.

## **Conclusion**

It has been my aim to provide some context to politicians as political performers. Using the example of Khrushchev's public character, I have selected a crucial text from his rise to power in the wake of Stalin's death. Though the his use of dramatic devices in the text and context, Khrushchev applied libertarian and Stalinist techniques to gain power in an unstable country, but crucially, the method of doing so was multiply performative - it could be interpreted in different ways, served many purposes and had unforeseen consequences. By studying the stylistics and situation of the text we have come to join some dots in the two men's characters. The apprenticeship-like nature of the leaders in the early Soviet Union means that the succeeding leader, should he continue policy or not, will continue elements 'ghost written' by predecessors. Being politicians, and not political theorists, these elements will inevitably also be performative in nature. Head politicians are now at times judged by their family history (George Bush Jr.), performance history (Reagan), youth (Putin, Clinton and Blair) or presence in the media (Berlusconi). As stylistics and image-play takes over politics globally, even today, with an ex-KGB head liberating the Slavic world, it may be fate of post-Stalinist leaders in Russia to repeat 'badly' what has been done before (Wolfe).