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Bodies, Things, and Social Machines

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> "The body is a machine, the worker a machinist." (V E Meyerhold)
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> "The machinist is part of the machine, not only in his activity as machinist, but also afterwards." (Deleuze / Guattari, *Kafka. Towards a Minor Literature*)
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> "The work on scenic material, the transformation of the stage into a machine, which helps to develop the work of the actor as broadly and manifoldly as possible, is then socially justified when this machine not only moves its pistons and holds up under a certain work load, but also begins to carry out a certain useful labour." (Sergei Tretyakov, "The Theater of Attractions")
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> "The primary material of the theater will turn out to be the viewer ... Tool for working on all the components of the theater apparatus..., which in all their differentness can be returned to a unit that legitimizes their existence, which is their character of attraction... I define an

> attraction in the formal sense as a self-reliant and primary construction element of a performance – as the molecular (i.e. constitutive) element of the effectiveness of theater and of theater itself." (Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage of Attractions")

The term *machina* has appeared in Latin since Plautus and Ennius in the early second century B.C. and increasingly during the imperial era and late antiquity, initially as a loan word from the Doric vocabulary of the colonists of lower Italy. The Latin *machina* thus assumes all the meanings of the Greek *mechané* (The Doric word, already relatively close to the Latin, was *machaná*). Its more general meaning as "means, contrivance, device" does not further distinguish between material and immaterial means, but instead allows them to overlap and merge. This basic extension of the term between a material device and a contriving approach, and especially the many overlaps of both aspects remain its characteristic in most languages in which it has developed over the course of modernity. In ancient Greek and Latin the term spread primarily into two fields of application – the significance of this for Guattari's and Deleuze's machine concept is not to be underestimated: There was the military use as an apparatus for besieging, conquering or defending cities, in other words as a war machine, and there was the comprehensive term for the machinery of the theater.

This bifurcation into the fields of war and theater, however, does not imply a separation into the material and the immaterial meaning along the boundaries of these two fields. In both cases of application the term both holds the technical meaning of apparatuses, frames, devices as well as the psychosocial meaning of

trick, artifice, deception. This ambiguity is most adequately transported in English by the word “invention” (from Latin *invenio* meaning “to find, to come upon”): the machine is an invention, an invented device, and it is an “invention” as an invented story, as a deception, as a machination. Technical innovation and inventiveness blur together here along the two mutually merging lines of the meaning of machine.

This kind of neighboring zone between the double artifice of technical art and artistic creation developed for the first time in the period of the zenith of Greek drama in the fifth century B.C. In the theater of antiquity, machine meant primarily the deity machine, the *theòs epì mechanés*, the *deus ex machina*. The *mechané*, or later in Roman theater the *machina*, was the general term for all stage machines, such as thunder and lightning machines or devices for making the dead vanish into the underworld. However, *the* machine of the Attic theater was a specific device placed above the left stage door. All the gods and heroes of the air appeared on this left side, so they had to be lowered to the stage from above. The actors playing deities probably hung from a hook fastened to the belt, which was in turn attached with a rope to a system of rolls or pulleys. With the help of this machine a god or goddess thus appeared from above, specifically with a special function within the plot of the play: he or she was to resolve all the aporia that had emerged in the course of the play. Euripides especially used this technique in a double sense (as narrative technique and as apparatus technique): a sudden resolution of all the complications that had arisen in the course of the plot that seemed hopeless and immanently irresolvable, with the help of a crane-like machine that allowed gods, goddesses and other figures to fly onto the stage or even the proscenium or the roof of the stage.

Deus ex machina meant the development of theater technique as a machination and machinery, yet at the same time it was also an artistic effect, a trick, a break, a sudden twist capable of resolving complex entanglements in the plot all at once. Its function in the plot was to resolve the most abstruse confusions, which developed in the dramatic subject matter of the late fifth century. The very cunning invention of complications that could not easily be disentangled and their artificial resolution through the *deus ex machina* were presumably connected with the political disturbances and impositions of the Peloponnesian War, and the fairy-tale-like happy end through the *deus ex machina* in Euripides' later tragedies was understood as a comforting, yet clearly artificial suspension of difficult circumstances. At the end of a plot, in which – unlike in the tragedies of his predecessors Aeschylus and Sophocles – the gods no longer determine the scene from the beginning to the end, in other words a plot that moves almost solely in the human sphere, a god does still appear in Euripides' plays. In *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the flight of Iphigenia and Orestes at first succeeds through human insight and cunning, then finally – following a sudden surge of the sea – through an intervention from the goddess Athena. In *Ion*, following a long period of uncertainty about his origin and the interplay of attraction and intrigues between Ion and his mother Creusa, it is due less to the interventions of his father Apollo than to an epiphany of Athena that Ion is introduced into the Athenian royal family. In *Helen*, Menelaus and Helen are rescued from Egypt through their own cunning, but mostly through the help of Castor and Pollux; in *Orestes*, it is due to the ingenuity of Orestes and Electra and to the *deus ex machina* Apollo that the pair reach a happy end. In each case there is the same pattern of the sympathetic description of the protagonists' misfortunes in the opening scenes, the development of complex intrigues, of *mechánema*, the main figures themselves employing

ideas for escape and cunning inventions, and finally a surprising climax of the saving intervention by the *deus ex machina*. Instead of the turbulent conflicts of various gods in a heterogeneous landscape of deities (whether hierarchically ruled by the father-god Zeus or a quasi anarchic setting of manifold deities), the *deus ex machina* embodies singular and sovereign protection by a single autonomous deity.

It was Aristotle who first criticized this use of gods on suspension and flying machines in his Poetics, affirming that the resolution of the story should result from the story itself and not through a *deus ex machina*. Instead, divine interventions should only be represented in the meta-situations that lie outside the stage plot, which have occurred before or after it, in other words in prologues and epilogues. This general rule in Aristotle's Poetics makes the *deus ex machina* of Euripides's tragedies look like an expedient device for a mediocre playwright, necessary for disentangling the dramatic knots he has created, but which virtually take on a life of their own. What is overlooked in an interpretation like this, however, is the skillfulness with which these knots are often constructed, so that in the end only a goddess can untie them. At least in the case of Euripides' late tragedies, the epiphany of the *deus ex machina* is not so much a makeshift solution, as it is a purposely and carefully constructed crosspoint and climax of technical spectacle and the invention of intrigues.

It was possibly Aristotle's criticism in antiquity that forestalled an unbroken theater genealogy of the machine-god over the centuries, and which still echoes in Nietzsche's assessment of the *deus ex machina* as a sign of the downfall of tragedy. In this long modern development of the theater, the double function of the *deus ex machina* as interrupting apparatus and break of the narrative is increasingly displaced. The rupture, the break, the obvious

artificiality of the machine is interpreted as an unartistic act of force and therefore has to be covered up more and more. To an ever greater degree machines serve a rapid change of scenery and the perfect illusion, the smoothing of breaks. The cloud machines of the Italian baroque theater, for instance, had not only the function of transporting and illuminating deities, but also and especially of masking the technical apparatuses.

In the interests of the bourgeois theater of illusion, technical devices and narrative machinations equally serve to covertly suspend the different in identity, when the specificity of the sudden break, of surprise and confusion gives way to the harmonious resolution at the conclusion of the play. Whereas with Euripides the artificiality, the intended inconsistency, the unreality of the happy end was evident, the organic suspensions of modern theater tend to lead to a distanceless empathy. This theater, as it says in *Anti-Oedipus*, "forces the play and the working of machines into the wings, behind a limit that has become impassible." When Brecht in 1928 explicitly designated the final scene of the *Three-Penny Opera* with the title *deus ex machina*, it was only to call attention again to this problem of the bourgeois theater: undisturbed enjoyment of untenable situations that can only in theater be resolved by a riding messenger. With the naming of the *deus ex machina*, Brecht emphasizes the artificiality of suspending the conflicts and differences that were not to be tamed immanently into transcendentality: "The riding messengers of the king rarely come when those kicked have kicked back."

Post-revolutionary theater in the Soviet Union of the early 1920s substantially influenced (not only) Brecht as the climax of the flight from hiding the machines and machinations to inventing new interrupting apparatuses and narrative breaks, which went far

beyond the singular appearance of the *deus ex machina*. The October Revolution was accompanied by the vehement question of revolutionizing art, including the bourgeois theater. Should the theater of the scientific age emerge from a transformation of the bourgeois theater, or as a radical new beginning, or did the only solution consist in completely rejecting theater as a bourgeois practice? Those who decided, under the name "Theater October", in favor of solutions in between transformation and new beginning, increasingly dispensed with illusionist plots and the psychology of the figures, did away with the peep show stage, the curtain, the backdrops, built new theaters, left the theater. Instead of using the *machina* as a divine suspension of difference, the radical theater-makers associated with Meyerhold and the First Moscow Workers Theater were more interested in multiplying differences, making them dance with the help of a multiple machinization of concepts and practices. Here the machine was given its threefold composition as the biomechanics of the actors, as the constructivism of the technical apparatuses and things, and as the social machine of the Theater of Attractions. The machine material of the post-revolutionary Soviet theater encompassed the bodies of the actors, the construction, the audience: it anticipated the concatenation of human organs, technical apparatuses and social machines that constitute the machine for Deleuze and Guattari.

Following far-ranging experiments on *Commedia dell'arte* and on the traditional Russian circus genre of the Balagan in the 1910s in his Petersburg studio, which was simultaneously an acting school and a laboratory, in Moscow in the early 1920s, V.E. Meyerhold developed more than a new acting method; his method of biomechanics was a new, generalized theater pedagogy. "The body is a machine, the worker the machinist," according to Meyerhold,

and this especially implied experimenting with all flows of movement. Against the background of an idiosyncratic appropriation of Taylorism, Meyerhold primarily began to rationalize the apparatus of movement: the body of the actors as model for a generalized optimization of movements, the biomechanical experiment as a model for the potential utilization in labor processes outside the realm of the theater. Yet under the mantle of the Taylorist vocabulary and a seemingly overzealous utilitarianism, Meyerhold and his colleagues carried out experiments little touched by the problems of the scientific organization of labor and the creation of a New (Soviet) Man: They aimed at denaturalizing the theater.

Contrary to the psychology of the plot and to an empathetic audience, the core components of biomechanics were the rhythm of language and the rhythm of physical movement, postures and gestures arising from these rhythms, coordinating the movement of the body and bodies with one another. The development of the plot was not to come from "within", from the psyche or mind, but rather "from outside", through the movement of the body in space. These components were created through an economy of means of expression, control of bodies and gestures, precision and tempo of movement, speed of reaction and improvisation. Meyerhold's acting school was not merely a school for gymnastics and acrobatics, but rather attempted to bring the actors to calculate and coordinate their movements before that and beyond it, to organize their material, to organize the body.

As a first larger presentation of biomechanics, *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, a contemporary play by the Belgian author Fernand Crommelynck, premiered in April 1922. Sculptural images of bodies and movements, athletics and rhythm permeated the scenes. The stage was open far to the back, all the way to the brick wall, all

the stage machinery was transparent. The performance thus became the first concatenation of biomechanics and constructivism: as much as Meyerhold separated the bodies of his actors in training and treated them individually as material, just as little did he forget the machinic environment of these bodies, the things, the objects, the materials and constructions on the stage. In a rapid succession of treatments and new plays, in collaboration with constructivist artists he also created a theater of things that no longer sought pure representations and images, but instead to present the things themselves. Instead of an illusionist stage set, instead of props and stage decorations, artists like Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova invented and designed constructions, prototypes, handled objects, which were placed for use on an otherwise empty stage. In this movement of inventing, (re-) arranging and reappropriating things, technical apparatuses, and stage construction, the theater machinery also moved from the practice of being most skillfully hidden back into the light of perception.

The scenery for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, constructed by Liubov Popova, was no longer actually scenery, but was instead a single machine made of planks, ramps, ladders and scaffolds. In analogy to this, there were no costumes either, but rather uniform blue suits also designed by Popova. The actors moved around the stage not only horizontally, but also vertically, climbing, exercising, sliding, using Popova's machine as the frame for their movements. In the next
biomechanical-constructivist piece by the Meyerhold Theater, *Tarelkin's Death*, Varvara Stepanova chopped up the machine into many objects, which she called "apparatuses", small and large, mobile furniture mock-ups. The actors were able to apply and

expand their biomechanical skills in handling these apparatuses and constructivist devices.

The transformation of the stage into a machine, the work on scenic material was – as Sergei Tretyakov explained in his fundamental essay on the "Theater of Attractions" – only "then socially justified when this machine not only moves its pistons and holds up under a certain work load, but also begins to carry out a certain useful labor and meets the ongoing daily tasks of the Revolution." In Tretyakov's radical treatment of Marcel Martinet's *La Nuit*, which premiered February 1923 on the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Red Army under the title *Earth Rampant* in the Meyerhold Theater, Liubov Popova placed real machines on the stage instead of constructions. Along with photos and posters, her combination of collage and construction also included rifles, machine guns, cannons, motorcycles and even a military truck. The polit-revue about World War I and the beginning of the Russian Revolution was extremely successful and was performed over a hundred times just in 1923. To a certain extent, *Earth Rampant* still belonged to the tradition of the mass plays of war communism, the re-stagings of the October Revolution and Mayakovsky's *Mysterium buffo*, but at the same time it also created a transition to the Theater of Attractions, which emerged in Tretyakov's collaboration with the young Sergei Eisenstein and marked the climax of machinic theater production of the 1920s.

Before the period of major film productions, it was left up to this young Eisenstein, who had still worked as assistant director on *Tarelskin's Death*, to realize Meyerhold's plans as the exodus of the theater into the factory, as the concatenation of constructivist stage sets with technical machines. In 1924, in the third and final theater cooperation of Eisenstein and Tretyakov, *Gas Masks*, the everyday life of the factory was at the center not only of the plot: the first

performances were organized in gas works at the Minsk train station and performed before an exclusive audience of workers. Wooden scaffolds were built for the actors in between the monumental superstructures of the factory, in the midst of which they acted. Tretyakov had taken the subject matter of *Gas Masks* from a news article in *Pravda*. According to this article, after an accident seventy workers from a gas work in the Ural region had taken action themselves, collectively and at the risk of their lives, to repair a leak in the main gas pipe, each working for three minutes on the main pipe without a gas mask and thereby enduring poisoning. The theatrical treatment of the self-organized and collective action was intended to examine what the future of labor could look like, based on an emergency, an event, an impending disaster in the midst of the difficult political transition phase following the Revolution. At the same time, this model was no longer anchored in the glorious periods of the battles on the barricades, the Revolution, but rather in the everyday life of the factory and the difficulties of production. The immanent criticism of the sloppy NEP director of the gas works in the play, who had repeatedly postponed obtaining gas masks, corresponds to Eisenstein and Tretyakov's actual flight from the theater. The reason for their exodus from the theater was not only the glorious Proletkult idea of "culture for all", but also the simple and sober insight that its audience was increasingly interspersed with the Nouveau Riche of the NEP. In the factory as well, however, the theater activists soon realized that they were no more than tolerated, and they left again after four performances. For Eisenstein, this movement of flight from the theater consequentially ended not in the factory, but instead led him on to film.

It had already become clearly evident a year earlier that biomechanics and constructivism had not yet gone far enough in precisly investigating the material of the machine. They had to expand the machine concept from the body-machines of the actors and the machine constructions on the stage to the *social machine*, which stretched beyond the protagonists on the stage to a diffuse and illimitable assemblage: it was the viewers that should finally be inflamed by the trained elastic actor-machine and the constructivist apparatuses. The experiments of the radical leftist artists in the brief golden age of the Theater of Attractions in 1923/24 did not take the direction of the dissolution of art and life, as in the large-scale mass spectacles of the post-revolutionary period, but rather the direction of developing specific competences of the actors as well as a specific audience. This was accompanied by a precise assessment of the relationship between stage and audience space, actors and audience.

In the course of Meyerhold's experiments in Petersburg and Moscow, a special form of segmenting the scenic action into small units, acrobatic "numbers", and rapid slapstick sequences had been developed. In addition to Meyerhold's experiments in the 1910s, the early futurist theater experiments by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Chlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh, but also the Dadaist excesses in Western Europe were crucial for the Theater of Attractions. However, whereas the Dadaist farces took place in the marginal setting of places like the Cabaret Voltaire, the theater of the leftist Proletkult brought the circus, the fair acrobatics, the attraction into the official theater of the young state of the Soviet Union. Tretyakov and Eisenstein called their Soviet variation the "Theater of Attractions", thus inventing a molecular concatenation of single, independent attractions with their aggressive moments

and risky action processes. In analogy to the fragmentary compositions of Heartfield, Grosz and Rodchenko, they transformed the static theater of depiction and of milieu description into a dynamic and eccentric theater, deconstructed the molar-organic linearity of the theater plot and mounted the attractions into an orgiastic molecularity. The fragmentation of the plot, its segmentation into attractions, raised the question of a new form of the concatenation of attractions, of a montage that should treat the social machine in their sense. Eisenstein stressed that the attraction was intended to be the opposite of the absolute and the complete, especially because it was based exclusively on something relative, on the reaction of the audience.

Whereas Meyerhold still regarded the body of the actor as material and as machine, Eisenstein's material/machine was the audience. Sergei Eisenstein started his position as artistic director at the First Workers' Theater Moscow with the theoretical essay "Montage of Attractions" and a piece designated as such. As with Meyerhold's adaptation of *La Nuit*, Eisenstein commissioned Tretyakov with a radical treatment. In the infight with the right-wing currents of the Proletkult, it was particularly provocative to take up a popular comedy of intrigues by the classically naturalist dramatist Ostrovsky, *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man* – and to distort it until it became completely unrecognizable. The program booklet accordingly stated: "Free text composition: S.M. Tretyakov, Scenario S.M. Eisenstein". The *Wise Man* premiered in May 1923. The audience sat in a semicircle in two amphitheaters divided by a narrow passage. Instead of a stage, the floor in front of the amphitheaters formed a circus ring with various devices, scaffolds and ropes. The attractions were strung together as breathtaking acrobatic feats and tricks, which required the actors' entire biomechanical skills, yet at the same time also parodies of the

canonized performance practices in the theater and in the circus. In addition to acrobatics in the air and on the ground, clowns, rope dancing and eccentric musical numbers, Eisenstein's first short film was also shown.

As in Meyerhold's pseudo-Taylorist procedures, in the Theater of Attractions tension and audience attacks were also coupled with a gesture of the precise scientific investigation of the audience. Not only discussions after the performances were to be part of a meticulous procedure for calculating the effects and the attitude of the audience, but also participating observation, questionnaires and an exact documentation of expressions from the audience during the performances. What started in 1922 as a planned fragmentation of bourgeois theater, however, had developed by 1925 into an increasingly grotesque discussion in art studies circles: in Meyerhold's theater the audience was more and more compulsively observed and degraded to a research object. In a harshly utilitarian and behavioristic perspective, the plays were fragmented into small units of time and the audience reactions were charted according to twenty standard reactions. From silence all the way to throwing things onto the stage, those responsible registered everything down to the smallest detail. This method of real-time evaluation was intended to supply insights for new productions, but it led instead to more of a state apparatization of the theater. Through the notation not only of audience reactions, but also of all aspects of production (from the actors and stage personnel to the bookkeeping), it was possible to immediately find fault with mistakes and omissions. The fetish of "scientific calculation" developed into a comprehensive control system. Internal rationality, joining the parts into the whole, panoptic survey: all the components of the ideal of the purely technical machine formed the ideal state apparatus.

In some of Eisenstein and Tretyakov's texts, it also appears at first as though the linear progression from the political goal of the theater to societal effect dominates to such an extent that one could speak here of an overcoding of the machines by the state apparatus, perhaps even of a glimpse of the Stalinist politics of a totalitarian "purge". This diction, however, is mainly determined by the contemporary jargon in the years following the Revolution and later by the incipient censorship of theater operations and the cultural political discourse following the introduction of the NEP. This was additionally disambiguated and closed in the one-sided historicization by later art and theater studies (both in the Soviet Union and in the "West"), which excluded phenomena deviating from the doctrine of Social Realism from their narratives. In comparison, in Eisenstein and Tretyakov's plays a parody can be recognized of the simple, linear notions of agitation, which are based on the pseudo-sociological screening of class composition and sought to optimize its effects without deviations. Eisenstein and Tretyakov did not construct the audience as an object, but instead specifically attempted to provide an impulse for trying out new modes of subjectivation. When they spoke of the audience as "material", this was in analogy to Meyerhold's relationship to the biomechanical body, and the point was the experimental build-up of tension, the organization of the social arrangement into self-organization. The montage of attractions conjoined singularities as human, technical and social bodies in an unexpected way, thwarting the horizons of expectations and ultimately supplied material for eruption and tumult.

Half a year after the *Wise Man*, Tretyakov and Eisenstein brought a politicized version of their Montage of Attractions into the Proletkult Theater. On the sixth anniversary of the Revolution, on 7 November 1923, Tretyakov's play *Can You Hear, Moscow?!*

opened. Subtitled as “Agit-Guignol”, it was intended to link agitation with the device of horror (following the practice of the Paris theater *Grand Guignol*). As a logical development of politicization from the formal experiment with “abstract” attractions in the *Wise Man* to political agitation, it was animated by a concrete agitational mission: Tretyakov had written the play as a propaganda play and action to mobilize volunteers from Moscow for the anticipated revolution in Germany – which had failed from the start due to the historical developments. The plot: a provincial governor with the significant name Graf Stahl (Count Steel) wants to stage a patriotic fair as a counter-staging to expected proletarian demonstrations on the anniversary of the October Revolution. He plans to present a historical play and the festivities are to culminate in the unveiling of a statue of an ‘Iron Count’, mythical ancestor of Graf Stahl. However, stage workers and actors change the play. Following increasingly clear allusions to phenomena of exploitation, a gigantic portrait of Lenin is unveiled, which incites the armed revolt. Heroic exploited people, martyrs and revolutionaries on one side, caricatured exploiters and their ideologues, provocateurs and conformist social democrats on the other. The climax of the play (not only the play in the play) celebrates the upheaval that leads out of the theater into life. At the end of the plot a protagonist agitates the Moscow audience with the words: “Can you hear, Moscow?!” And according to the script, the audience is to respond unanimously: “Yes, I hear!” What actually happened, was obviously something different. The tumultuous excess on the stage so inflamed especially the youthful audience and the extras that the bourgeois actors were nearly attacked even during the play; following the conclusion of *Can You Hear, Moscow?!*, the emotionalized audience purportedly poured into the streets in tumultuous scenes, singing and “wildly flailing against the shop windows”.

For Tretyakov and Eisenstein, the evaluation of these real effects of their performance on the anniversary of the October Revolution turned out to be quite ambivalent and self-critical. Yet nevertheless, it represented a predictable consequence of the experiments of machinic theater in the early 1920s: it was the program of the Theater of Attractions to develop a form that turns emotions into extreme tension, in order to ultimately achieve a "release of the audience's emotions" (Tretyakov) through the montage of these attractions. Whereas the machinery and machination of the early *deus ex machina* turned the action of the theater play from the organic into the orgiastic, the threefold concatenation of the post-revolutionary machines was to intervene in the world, creating worlds instead of a representation of the world. The montage of physical movements in biomechanics, the montage of things and technical apparatuses in the constructivist stage settings, the montage of the audience as a social machine in the productivist Theater of Attractions sought not only a composition of organic, technical and social machines, but also the becoming-orgiastic of the organs, the flowing of the technical constructions, the insurrection of the social machine.