The Hieroglyphs of Biomechanics: Otkas, Tormos and Rakurs

Otkas

In 1918 Meyerhold was one of the first artists to join the Bolshevik-movement and to support the revolution. At that time, particularly in his public proclamations, he enthusastically followed the stream of concepts of transforming art into life. His students announced: "The creation of Biomechanics will be the creation of a human being who adapts – within the confessions of his movements – to the conditions of a new, mechanical way of living." 11

On April 25, 1922, with the legendary production of Crommelynck's "The Magnanimous Cuckold", Biomechanics made its first public apearance as the training system and performance style that was to found a new culture of theatre. The point of departure for Meyerhold's Biomechanics was – as I already indicated – his vision that the "inner", psychological moment of the acting process could be derived from the "outer", physiological moment. The production of "The Magnanimous Cuckold" evoked lively discussions. People were either outraged or enthused by the rhythmic and physically expressive style of acting. Public demonstrations of the new system soon followed: demonstrations of Biomechanics and of its nucleus, the études. In composing movement Biomechanics borrows a fundamental concept from music: it creates "scores" for movements that are analogous to a musical score. In the études this new beginning towards developing such "scores" that would serve as the basis of an actor's work became apparent.

Particularly those among the classical études which tell a dramatic story like "The Stab with the Dagger", "The Leap on the Chest" seem overly theatrical or even martial. They don't seem to fit Meyerhold's Constructivist and 'Taylorist' proclamations of the early 1920's. The contradiction between the enthusiastic proclamations of the Modern Times and their technologies and the traditional patterns of the études reveals again how influenced by tradition Meyerhold's avantgardism was.

The études were segmented into phases of movements to learn them.

The segmentation of movement is a crucial principle of Biomechanics. Though this method was probably taken from the Taylor-system, it consists of different modes of operation and aims. The economy of gestures in Biomechanics reminds one more of the precise play in the Asian theatre than of the ,Taylorized' work-movements. In Biomechanics each individual movement is broken up into basic elements, into movement phases which come together to form an unbroken cycle. This cycle

¹¹ Srelischa, Moscow, 1922, No. 10, page 14

concists of: the "otkas" – the preparatory movement in an opposite direction, the "posyl" – the execution of the movement, and the "stoika" – that means arresting or fixating.

The fundamental impetus for any movement in Biomechanics is contained in the principle of otkas. The Russian term otkas literally means refusual, rejection. In the first instance, this seems confusing. As I indicated, in a physiological and spatial sense, otkas denotes the preliminary counter-movement necessary to perform the movement intended. One has to swing back to perform a blow. But the otkas has an ambigious and multi-layered meaning. It can be seen not only as a crucial element of the segmented movement scores, but as well as the ,secret and the hieroglyph that containes the whole system.

In his analysis of the otkas-movement Eisenstein pointed out that Meyerhold rediscovered this old element of theatrical techniques, which appears in Commedia dell'arte as well as in Kabuki, and which Eisenstein also found in Lessing's notes on the art of the actor and in the Jesuit father Franziskus Lang's treatise, published in 1727, yet he criticised Meyerhold's restricted application of this principle, confining itself to an only spatial awareness of otkas. Within Eisenstein's concept of the appeal of expressive movements, otkas on the one hand constitutes the basis for a movement that – as perceived by the spectator – does not originate from a dead centre, a vacant space, but shall be perceived exactly at the dynamic point of the change of the movement's direction from the otkas-movement to the actually intended and shall thereby act upon the spectator's mind. So otkas is supposed to facilitate the spectator's reception, as the mind isn't being burdened, but what has been seen unconsciously turns into a sensation, arousing it at the same time. On the other hand the otkas-movement according to Eisenstein is a mode of expression within the dialectical principle of the negation's negation.

So the literal meaning of otkas as refusal in the sense of negation regains weight. Eisenstein explained the phenomenon of the otkas-doubt, a preliminary doubt that freequently precedes decisions, especially in a creative process with the following example: "A person thinks: ,I'll go. No, I won't go.' Then he departs." 12

But Meyerhold too, being the object of both Eisenstein's reference and criticism, perceived otkas as a transgressing instrument of theatrical ,language'. Besides coining the immediate, physiological-practical term that includes the function of organizing the actor's team-work, he also determined a dramaturgical otkas-term.

"When Meyerhold was once asked what otkas was, he replied briefly: , You have to bend the string, before you can shoot with the bow.' Then, after some contemplation, he began to explain in detail and full of enthusiasm, how the last scene of "Othello" should be performed. The actor has to playact a scene of boundless love to Desdemona before strangling her to death."

The love-scene before the strangling would once again be a form of the otkas-technique. This element both of dramaturgical suspense and of contradictory movements Meyerhold also encountered in paintings and in Pushkin's Poetry.

So, Meyerhold once described Delacroix's painting "The Death of Don Juan". In the painting one may see men in an overcrowded boat that is going to sink. They draw for lots, to see who will be sacrificed. In the centre of the painting is the hat with the lots. One of Meyerhold's assistants noticed:

¹³ L.W. Varpachovsky, Sametki proschlych let, in: Vstretschi s Meyerholdom, Moscow, 1967, S. 474

¹² Eisenstein. S.M.: Isbranniye proisvedenniya v schesti toamch, Moskau, 1966, Bd. 4, S. 86

"... in the foreground we may see a naked back of a man, who almost turns over the side of the boat, on the right and on the left side of the painting are female figures, who are turned back in opposite direction. All of these figures, who oppose the main movement, are in Meyerhold's terms in the state of ,otkas' in relation to the centre of the spatial and intellectual composition of the painting. They individualize not only the different psychophysical states they are suffering from, but they also intensify the main theme of the painting: the fear of death." 14

One may find similar compositions in Meyerhold's stagings, for example the dying scene in "The Lady of the Camellias", written by Dumas, where Marguerrites' words: ",I don't suffer! Life is coming back...' served as otkas for bodily played ,dying'." 15

Thus, Meyerhold expended the otkas-term from its spatial and physical meaning to a dramaturgical and phylosophical conception of his theatre.

Tormos and Rakurs

Tormos and Rakurs are similar multi-layered Hieroglyphs of Biomechanics. The term of tormos – literally "the brake" is used in an immediate kinetic sense and means, that the actor who is executing a movement (posyl) has to control it in a way, that he comes safely to the desired stance. Only this technique enables a really continous flow of movement, where the fixation is understood as part of the movement. On the other hand the term tormos is used to describe aspects of the musical and rhythmical structure of the performance and the dramaturgical structure of suspense. Meyerhold refers to the Chinese and Japanese actors' slowing down and fixating of movements.

Tormos ("brake") is to enable the actor's precise self- control. The actor should be able to respond to his own activity and to those of his partners. Self-observation here is not simply to control oneself, but to ,mirror' oneself, to observe ones own expression and to enjoy the beauty of ones own gestures. In this respect Meyerhold came close to the way Seami taught his actors at the Japanese No-theatre. Seami wrote: "I always want to emphazise: One has to acquire a possible perfect view and to understand, that the eye can never see the eye. Therefore, one has to imagine with the ,inner' eye the sight one would have from the front, from the back, from the left and right side." 16

"Rakurs" is another ,mysterious' term. Rakurs, originally a french term for foto and filmtechnique, literally means: a point of view with a certain perspectively shortend sight of objects in the backround. Adopting this technical term, Meyerhold created a new term for his theatre to differentiate it from the traditionally based theatre of ,beauty postures' and the ballet-like ,postures' in his rival Tairov's theatre. Meyerhold's student Eisenstein explained: "Rakurs is a point (stance) within the movement and this way different from the dead motionlessness of posture." The

¹⁴ ebda, p. 475

¹⁵ ebda.

¹⁶ Seami, Die geheime Überlieferung des No, Frankfurt/M, 1961, S. 94

¹⁷ S.M. Eisenstein, YO – ich selbst (memoiren), Berlin, 1984, Bd. 1, S. 323