

MARIA GOUGH

Gogol's grotesque raged around us; what were we to understand as farce, what as prophecy? The incredible orchestral combinations, texts seemingly unthinkable to sing . . . the unhabitual rhythms . . . the incorporating of the apparently anti-poetic, anti-musical, vulgar, but what was in reality the intonation and parody of real life—all this was an assault on conventionality.

—Grigorii Kozintsev (1969),
on the 1930 Leningrad
premiere of *The Nose*

If one holds onto the discoveries, the risks and inventions of the Russian avant-garde . . . one also has to find a place not simply to acknowledge, but to house the faith animating the work of its members—their belief in a transformed society.

—William Kentridge (2008)

In his quest for an all-out renewal of operatic form, Peter Gelb, the General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera in New York since 2006, packed the 2009–2010 season with eight new productions, essentially bringing to a close the reign of Franco Zeffirelli, whose florid, love-it or hate-it Neapolitanesque scenography has more or less dominated the proscenium for decades, at least with respect to the Italian repertoire. With just one exception, all the new additions to the Met's inventory this past

* Sincere thanks to Tom Cummins for generously enabling my graduate seminar to attend the premiere of *The Nose* at the Met, to Jodi Hauptman for arranging entry to the performance of William Kentridge's theatrical monologue *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine* at the Museum of Modern Art, to Leah Dickerman and the *October* editors for inviting the present reflection, and to Eve-Laure Moros Ortega, Ian Forster, Art 21 Inc., Marian Goodman Gallery, Sam Johnson, Hugh Truslow, and Adam Lehner for various forms of invaluable assistance.

year were directed by professionals from the world of the performing arts, such as Luc Bondy, Mary Zimmerman, Bartlett Sher, Patrice Chéreau, Richard Eyre, and Pierre Audi. The single exception to the rule was *The Nose* (1927–28), an operatic transposition of Nikolai Gogol’s absurdist short story “The Nose” (1836) by the very young composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975), which was directed and co-designed by the internationally acclaimed visual artist William Kentridge. A co-production with the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence and the Opéra national de Lyon, *The Nose* premiered at the Met on March 5, 2010, and ran for a total of six performances.¹

Kentridge is not the first visual artist to have been invited into the New York house. Under Rudolf Bing in 1967 Marc Chagall designed Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, while in 1981 Anthony Bliss engaged David Hockney to design various compositions by Satie, Poulenc, Ravel, and Stravinsky.² But to the best of my knowledge Kentridge is the only one to have been charged with direction overall, rather than scenography and/or costume design alone. Gelb’s reaching beyond the professional delimitation of his own field is an enterprising response to the crisis in which opera—like so many other major art forms—perennially finds itself in the modern world, and his choice of Kentridge extremely savvy: although best known for his extraordinarily innovative work in and across a range of still and moving image media, most especially charcoal drawing and stop-motion animation, the artist has long had an interest also in theater and live performance, and recently directed several puppet operas (including Monteverdi’s *The Return of Ulysses*), as well as a full-scale production for the Théâtre royal de la monnaie in Brussels (*The Magic Flute*).

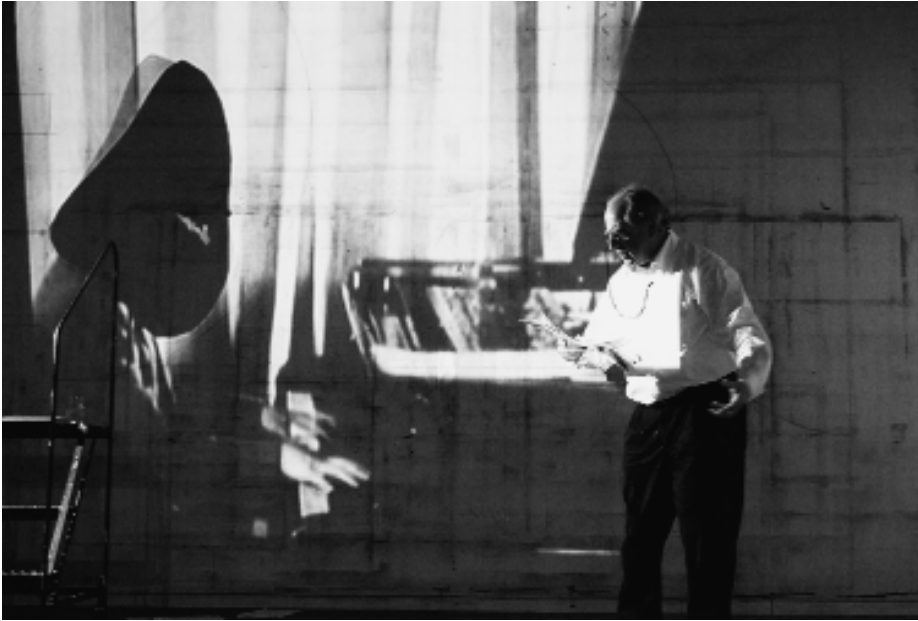
The present essay reflects upon Kentridge’s production of *The Nose* primarily from the point of view of its visual aspect. My argument is that the artist’s extreme visualization of this remarkably experimental work brought to the fore a new reading or inflection of it, one having to do less with its indisputably satirical register and more with its thematization of metamorphosis and, more broadly, social transformation. I begin with a few words about Gogol’s famous story, and of Shostakovich’s transposition of it, before turning to a discussion of the specific characteristics and significance of Kentridge’s production at the Met. I then make an excursus into two of the preparatory projects through which the artist fueled his thinking about the stakes and potentialities of the opera, and conclude with an examination of his staging of its seventh scene, which is perhaps its most crucial.

Satire

In response to Gelb’s initial invitation to stage an opera by Shostakovich, Kentridge proposed *The Nose*, the composer’s first experiment in the medium.

1. William Kentridge, director, Luc De Wit, associate director, and Valery Gergiev, conductor, *The Nose* by Dmitri Shostakovich, Metropolitan Opera, New York, March 5, 2010.

2. Dorothy Spears, “Laughter in the Dark: William Kentridge,” *Art in America* (December 2009), p. 118.



*William Kentridge. I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine. 2008.
Photograph by John Hodgkiss.*

Though best known for his instrumental compositions, Shostakovich also sought to compose at the intersection of music and drama, embarking on more than a dozen operatic projects over the course of his lifetime.³ Of these projects, *The Nose* is one of only two that he managed to complete and bring to the stage (the other being the rather better known *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* [1930–32]). As the story goes, the twenty-year-old Shostakovich, flush from the success of his *First Symphony* (1926), was casting about in summer 1927 for an opera to stage. Faced with an apparent dearth of contemporary Soviet operas and a lack of interest among his literary compatriots in adapting their own work for the stage, he went rifling through the nineteenth century for a story to use as a basis for a libretto, eventually settling on “The Nose.”⁴

An absurdist dressing down of imperial Russian bureaucracy and the police state, Gogol’s story tells the tale of, and pokes serious fun at, a low-ranking, skirt-chasing, buffoonish bureaucrat in St. Petersburg, one Collegiate Assessor Platon Kuzmich Kovalyov, who awakes on the morning of March 25 to discover that his nose is missing. Setting about its recovery, Kovalyov soon chances upon his wayward appendage praying in Kazan Cathedral. But, to his further consternation, it has now attained the physical stature and bearing of a gentleman and a much higher rank to boot—that of State Councilor—and thus refuses to recognize its former owner. Kovalyov’s nose is now the Nose, its own ontological subject. On the lam around town for some two weeks, the Nose is eventually arrested while attempting to board a stagecoach bound for Riga, and returned to Kovalyov in the form once more of a mere appendage. After a few further tribulations, Kovalyov awakes on April 7 to find his nose back in place, as inexplicably as it had gone missing. With policemen of various ranks making their appearance on almost every page of “The Nose,” hounding all and sundry, the setting is not just the grandiloquent imperial city but also the police state that binds and constricts it.⁵

Literary scholars have debated whether Gogol’s little story belongs most properly to the genre of satire, irony, parody, grotesque, farce, burlesque, comedy, or even tragedy, or some hybrid combination thereof. For the purposes of the present essay suffice it to say that the vogue for Gogol in the Soviet Union in the 1920s cast the writer as a social satirist, though one with an absurdist rather than didactic aesthetic temperament. This was the overriding spirit, for example, of the avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold’s production of Gogol’s play *The Inspector-General* (1836–42), which was the highlight of the 1926–27 theater season in Moscow. Shostakovich saw *The Inspector-General* numerous times while he

3. See Rosamund Bartlett, “Shostakovich as opera composer,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich*, ed. Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 179–97.

4. Dmitri Shostakovich, “Pochemu ‘Nos’?” *Rabochii i teatr* 3 (January 15, 1930), p. 11. See “Editor’s Note” to Dmitri Shostakovich, *Nos: Opera v trekh deistviakh, desiati kartinakh, soch. 15* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1981), n.p.

5. Nikolai Gogol, “The Nose,” in *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (1835), trans. with an introduction by Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 42–70.

was living in the Meyerholds' apartment and employed as a pianist in the Meyerhold Theater, a period that coincided with his initial work on *The Nose*. When it came time to launch the latter, the composer's numerous statements to the press invariably characterized Gogol's short story in terms of satire: it is "a devastating satire of the epoch of Nicholas I," he wrote in one article, referring to the story's various protagonists as "all perfect nonentities, shown against the background of a bureaucratic police state [*politseisko-chinovnicheskoi epokhi*]."6

Shostakovich's operatic transposition of the story comprises three acts with ten scenes altogether, which is a substantial number for a production that runs just over 100 minutes. (Even before it was staged, Laurel Fay tells us, "critics noted a 'cinematic' quality in the pacing and alternation of the scenes and entr'actes, which created the effect of a succession of 'frames.'"7) Its nontonal and nonlyrical style was aggressively experimental for the period, and in some quarters is still considered so today. Salient are its parodic treatments of popular music and dances, both old (galop, polka, march, waltz) and new (foxtrot), as well as its musical evocations of the baser sonic phenomena and rituals of everyday life (snoring, shaving). The full score was written for a small orchestra—essentially a chamber but with the crucial addition of an extra fleet of percussionists—but it calls for at least thirty vocal soloists (each of whom must double or triple up in order to cover the seventy-eight singing and nine speaking roles). The vocal score is "declamatory" and "angular," as Fay puts it, demanding a wide range of unusual vocal techniques.⁸

The libretto was written by Shostakovich, in collaboration with the stage writers Georgi Ionin and Aleksandr Preis, along with a little input from the modernist prose writer Yevgeny Zamyatin.⁹ Staying close to Gogol, they transposed all of his original dialogue, but also made some crucial additions of their own. For example, an arioso in Act II, Scene Six—when a crushed Kovalyov realizes the futility of his various attempts to retrieve his nose—affords his character considerably greater emotional depth than Gogol had given it, thereby fostering in the audience at least some empathy for this otherwise mostly unsympathetic principal.

The Nose premiered in January 1930 at the Malyi Opera Theater in Leningrad. Notwithstanding the fact that 1930 was the height of the Cultural Revolution—the attempt to proletarianize all aspects of Soviet life—the Malyi had a policy of fostering experimental productions due in large part to the perspicacity of

6. Dmitri Shostakovich, "K prem'ere 'Nosa,'" *Rabochii i teatr* 24 (June 16, 1929), p. 12; quoted in "Editor's Note," n.p.

7. Laurel E. Fay, "The Punch in Shostakovich's Nose," in *Russian and Soviet Music: Essays for Boris Schwarz*, ed. Malcolm Hamrick Brown (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 234.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

9. Dmitri Shostakovich, *The Nose: An Opera in Three Acts with Ten Scenes* (1928), libretto by Y. Zamyatin, G. Ionin, A. Preis, D. Shostakovich. My citations to the libretto are to the version published in the liner notes (pp. 24–69) accompanying the recording of *The Nose* by Valery Gergiev (conductor) and the Mariinsky Soloists, Orchestra, and Chorus at the Mariinsky Concert Hall, St. Petersburg, July 15–23, 2008.

its artistic director and conductor, Samuil Samosud, who was committed to the renovation and modernization of operatic theater.¹⁰ Critics were quick to note the influence of Meyerhold's *The Inspector-General* on both the dramaturgy (directed by Nikolai Smolich) and staging (designed by Vladimir Dmitriev) of the opera.¹¹ Archival photographs suggest that Dmitriev set *The Nose* in period style—that of early nineteenth-century St. Petersburg—but with a conspicuously low-brow twist and even a certain circus-like physicality.¹² The avant-garde theater and film director Grigori Kozintsev, then a leading member of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), recalled that “Dmitriev’s sets *spun and reeled* to the sounds of rollicking galops and dashing polkas; Gogol’s phantasmagoria was transformed into sound and color. The particular imagery of Russian art that was linked to urban folklore—the signs of taverns, shops, and picture booths, cheap dance orchestras—all burst into the kingdom of *Aida* and *Il Trovatore*.”¹³

The Nose enjoyed a substantial run of sixteen performances at the Mali, and the Bolshoi Theater even hired Meyerhold to direct a production in Moscow, though this last was never realized.¹⁴ Assailed by proletarian critics,¹⁵ the opera nevertheless garnered strong support from *Pravda*’s regular music critic, Yevgeny Braudo, who commended Shostakovich for his “social satire” on the imperial period, pointing in particular to several scenes that were not in Gogol’s original story

10. See Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 54. On the Cultural Revolution, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 8–40.

11. See, for example, M. Iankovskii, “‘Nos’ v Malom opernom teatre,” *Rabochii i teatr* 5 (January 26, 1930), p. 7. In his graduate-student report to the Leningrad conservatory, Shostakovich stated that in *The Nose* he had “symphonized Gogol’s text producing not an ‘absolute’ or ‘pure’ symphony but a ‘theatre symphony’ as represented by . . . Meyerhold’s production of *Inspector General*,” (unpublished manuscript, May 1928), Arkhiv LOLGK; quoted in “Editor’s Note,” n.p. In an undated letter to his friend Ivan Sollertinsky, Shostakovich enthused that “the play that impresses me most is still *The Inspector-General* at Meyerhold’s theater. I have now seen it through about three times. Seven times in all. The more I see it, the more I like it”; see *Pages from the Life of Dmitri Shostakovich* by Dmitri and Ludmilla Sollertinsky, trans. (slightly modified) Graham Hobbs and Charles Midgley (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 50. The Meyerhold-Shostakovich relationship is debated by nearly all scholars of the opera, but see esp. Larisa Bubennikova, “K probleme khudozhestvennogo vzaimodeistviia muzykal’nogo i dramaticheskogo teatrov (postanovka V. Meierkhol’d ‘Revizor’—1926 g., opera D. Shostakovicha ‘Nos’—1928 g.),” in *Problemy muzykal’noi nauki* 3 (1975), pp. 38–63.

12. For rare reproductions, see M. Iankovskii, “‘Nos’ v Malom opernom teatre,” p. 6; S. Gres, “Ruchnaia bomba anarkhista,” *Rabochii i teatr* 10 (February 21, 1930), p. 6; and Ia. V. Olesich, ed., *Dvadtsat’ let gosudarstvennogo akademicheskogo Malogo opernogo teatra, 1918–1938* (Leningrad: Teatr, 1939), n.p.

13. Grigorii Kozintsev, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 4 (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1984), p. 254, quoted in Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 75 (emphasis added). As a member of the FEKS group, Kozintsev produced a film adaption of Gogol’s short story “The Overcoat” in 1926. Shortly after the completion of *The Nose*, Shostakovich composed a score for live performance with the silent film *New Babylon*, which Kozintsev co-directed with Leonid Trauberg in 1928–29.

14. See Fay, “The Punch in Shostakovich’s Nose,” p. 234. In the Soviet Union, *The Nose* was not seen again until 1974, the year before the composer’s death. In the United States, it was first staged in Santa Fe in 1965, and has enjoyed two recent productions in addition to that by the Metropolitan: at Bard’s Summerscape festival in 2004, which was devoted to “Shostakovich and His World,” and in Opera Boston’s 2008–2009 season.

15. See Gres, “Ruchnaia bomba anarkhista,” p. 6.

but rather inserted by the composer for explicitly satirical purposes. In 1933, in a review essay on the contemporary performing arts, Braudo attributed to *The Nose* groundbreaking satirical force: "The greatest shock to our conservative musicians so far has been . . . *The Nose* . . . This work, a model of caustic wit, is the most strongly satirical opera staged so far. Shostakovich has a remarkable sensitivity to social implications."¹⁶

Metamorphosis

Under Kentridge's direction, *The Nose* arrived at its most extreme visualization to date. Its scenography and costuming broached a range of period styles, but the artist staged the opera not so much in the trappings of specific historical moments as in the dynamic formal language of a major body of artistic production, that of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde. By drawing upon the work of Shostakovich's counterparts in the visual and performing arts—Meyerhold, Liubov Popova, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Gustavs Klucis, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and especially El Lissitzky—Kentridge sought to reconnect *The Nose* to the world of advanced aesthetic and political ambition within and out of which its composition had developed.

Co-designed with Sabine Theunissen, the sets comprised various innovations. Ivan Yakovlevich's modest barber shop, and Kovalyov's tiny apartment (with its conspicuously too-short bed, perhaps a humorous aside on the broader metaphorical significance of his noselessness), for example, were constructed as small boxy interiors decorated in period style. Suspended within the vast dimensions of the Met's cavernous proscenium—the distance from the stage floor to the rigging loft is over a hundred feet—they looked something like repurposed shipping containers floating in space. Kentridge had his singers move in and out of these cramped interiors through not only regular doors but also ceiling trapdoors and, in one instance, by a rudimentary rope and pulley system.

Another set construction was multifunctional, revolving on its own axis to serve as the residence of the Chief of Police (Act II, Prologue), and, in its second orientation, as the newspaper office where Kovalyov attempts to place a lost notice concerning his errant nose (Act II, Scene Five). What was especially compelling in the switch between these two scenes was that the singers involved in the first remained on the moving construction during its half-revolution to the second, gymnastically recostuming and thus repurposing themselves—in full view of the audience—from policemen into porters placing newspaper advertisements. At about mid-height, a rudimentary ramp constructed from unpainted wooden slats was slung diagonally across the breadth of the proscenium; traversed by different singers throughout the performance, this ramp helped to establish an important

16. See Evgenii Braudo, "Prem'era 'Nosa' Shostakovicha," *Pravda* (February 12, 1930), p. 6; and Braudo, "Concerts, Opera, Ballet in Russia Today," *Modern Music* 10, no. 4 (May–June 1933), p. 218.

theatrical counterpoint to the main action occurring on the stage floor below.

On the one hand, these sets—and the expectations about the intense physicality of dramatic action that they seemed to bring with them—recalled nothing so much as the Constructivist “acting apparatus,” a new typology of set construction invented by Stepanova and Popova for Meyerhold’s biomechanical productions in the early 1920s. For the main stage of Fernand Crommelynck’s farce, *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), for example, Popova built a skeletal wooden apparatus comprising stepladders, scaffolding, platforms, and revolving doors for the acrobatics of Meyerhold’s ever-moving actors, thereby recreating the proscenium as gymnasium. Relatedly, the bold graphics of Stepanova’s costumes for Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin’s *The Death of Tarelkin* (1922), and Constructivist graphic design more generally, seem to have both found their way into Greta Goiris’s costuming for *The Nose*. Kovalyov, to mention just one protagonist, sported a brilliant white waistcoat on which a giant upper-case letter “K” was printed in reverse—and thus defamiliarized—perhaps a pun on the so-called back-to-front “R” (Я) that is the Russian letter “ia” and word for “I,” or simply a nod to Kentridge’s newfound enthusiasm for Cyrillic letterforms.

On the other hand, the analogy to Constructivist theater or costume design only goes so far. In dressing *The Nose*’s seventy-eight roles, Goiris drew inspiration from a vast repertoire of European and Asian costumes, while Kentridge, for his part, abandoned altogether the revelation to the audience of the back wall of the stage, a revelation that characterized so much Constructivist theater chez



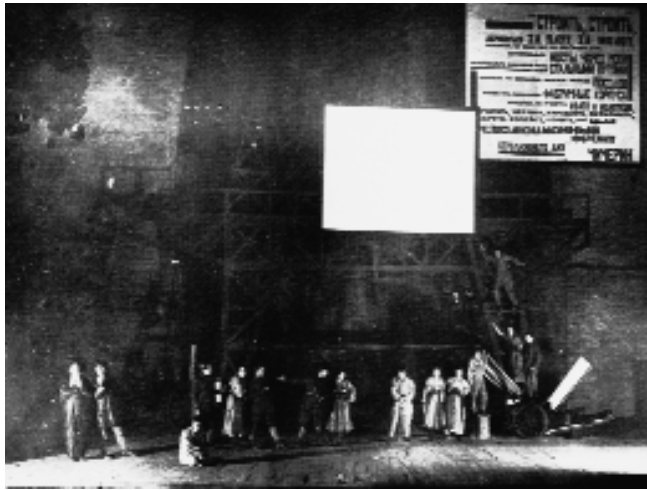
*Dmitri Shostakovich. The Nose.
Production directed and designed by
William Kentridge. 2010.
Photograph by Ken
Howard/Metropolitan Opera.*



Shostakovich. The Nose. Production directed and designed by William Kentridge. 2010. Photograph by Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera.

Meyerhold, valorized as it was as a rudimentary way of laying bare the process of the play's own production. Instead, Kentridge moved *The Nose* in the opposite direction, that of spectacularization. His main backdrop comprised a giant noisy collage of newspaper and encyclopedia articles, a map of St. Petersburg, portrait engravings bedecked with red wedges and circles in lieu of noses, agit-prop slogans shouted in multiple languages, and a miscellany of other printed matter. But most fundamental of all to Kentridge's spectacularization of *The Nose* was his deployment of video projection. Edited by Catherine Meyburgh and delivered by a single, extremely powerful machine stationed at the rear of the auditorium, a vast array of projections saturated almost the entire production, creating a sheer surfeit of images that effectively conjured something like—to borrow Kozintsev's pithy comment on the opera's Leningrad premiere—"Gogol's phantasmagoria." Whether still or moving, slow or fast, miniature or gigantic, singular or complex, these projections helped to transpose much of the drama from the horizontal space of the stage floor onto the vertical plane of the screen, thereby transforming the Met into a hybrid opera-movie house.

Over the last several decades the use of film or video projection in operatic performance has moved from the experimental periphery into the mainstream, but it is worth remembering that among the first major practitioners of moving-image projection in live performance were vanguard directors such as Meyerhold and Erwin Piscator in the 1920s, and Bertolt Brecht in the early 1930s, each of whom grappled with the question of the impact of the new medium of film upon their theatrical or operatic craft, and the possibilities for innovation that it opened up. The apparatus Popova installed for Meyerhold's production of



Sergei Tret'iakov. *The Earth in Turmoil*. Production directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold and designed by Liubov Popova. 1923.

The Earth in Turmoil (1923), a play by Sergei Tret'iakov adapted from Marcel Martinet's *La Nuit* (1921), registered this exploration: comprising a stripped-down gantry crane, it was hung with a large film screen for the projection of Dziga Vertov's *Kino pravda* newsreels during the performance. Such film sequences embedded in opera or theater in the 1920s and 1930s typically had one of two functions: most often their role was documentary in ambition—to expand the audience's understanding of the historical context of the live action unfolding before them—the assumption typically being that film was a veristic medium. Sometimes, however, such projections also had a critical role—to contrast with the live action on stage—and thereby provoke the audience's more sustained reflection upon the latter.¹⁷

Both of these functions were evident in certain moments of Kentridge's projections for *The Nose*, notwithstanding the production's phantasmagorical thrust. The prologue to Act II delivered an example of film's both documentary and critical expansion of the stage: while Kovalyov was en route to beseech the Chief of Police for assistance in the recovery of his nose—Kentridge had him furiously pedaling a much too small bicycle, à la Ubu in the artist's print *Ubu Tells the Truth: Act IV, Scene 7* (1996)—projected overhead were a few seconds of documentary film

17. Brecht discusses his usage of film projection in the opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in notes he prepared for Hanns Eisler in 1942, which are published in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. and trans. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 13, and in "The German Drama: Pre-Hitler," *The New York Times* (November 24, 1935). In the latter he attributes the innovation to Piscator. On Piscator's projections, see Sheila McAlpine, *Visual Aids in the Productions of the First Piscator-Bühne, 1927–28* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990).

footage showing pedestrians milling like ants on Nevsky Prospekt, the main boulevard of St. Petersburg. This footage expanded the audience's grasp of the political geography of the moment, instilling a sense of the vast scale of the imperial city, in contrast to the puniness of its human subjects.

But the critical function of projection in *The Nose* was most especially felt with respect to Kentridge's dramatic foregrounding of the character of the Nose, and thus his reorientation of the main thrust of the opera overall. Shostakovich's libretto gives the Nose—sung at the Met by the Canadian tenor Gordon Gietz—a mere handful of vocal lines, extremely difficult ones but nevertheless only two or three minutes worth at most. (Had the libretto not also directed the Nose to scamper about on stage from time to time the audience would have barely encountered him at all; for this unsung part Goiris and Kentridge outfitted another actor in a giant papier-mâché nose.) The minor role of the Nose is in strong contrast to that which Shostakovich affords Kovalyov, an extremely demanding part sung by the Brazilian baritone Paolo Szot, who was on stage for much of the production, and singing for most if not all that time. By deploying multiple projections of the Nose throughout the performance, Kentridge redressed this imbalance, restoring to the latter character by visual means the dramatic role of a principal. While Kovalyov was bemoaning the loss of his nose (Act I, Scene Three), for example, a giant image of the Nose sneaking past outside his bedroom window appeared on the screen overhead. On occasions, this projected Nose even intervened directly in the action occurring on the stage floor. The net effect of these dramatic appearances and interventions was to shift our attention away from an exclusive preoccupation with the target of Gogol and Shostakovich's satire—the bureaucrat Kovalyov—and toward instead the life and adventures of his now fully emancipated former appendage.

In addition to its dramatic participation in the drama, the Nose also appeared in a number of projections Kentridge created to accompany the score's various instrumental interludes. (There was a nice inversion here: while Shostakovich composed scores for live performance with silent films, Kentridge created filmic accompaniment for the composer.) These projections comprised extremely rapid montages of the artist's signature stop-motion animation combined with live action and archival film footage. In the main, their effect was synthesizing rather than contrapuntal. For example, Kentridge calibrated the wild rhythmic energy of Shostakovich's ground-breaking interlude (Act I, between Scene Two and Scene Three) for nine unpitched percussive instruments—triangle, tambourine, castenets, snare drum, tom-tom, suspended cymbal, ordinary cymbals, bass drum, and tam-tam—with an equally percussive montage of moving images that began with the phrase “Search out reliable anti-futurists’ (Lenin)” spinning around and around as if wound upon an invisible revolving fair-ground barrel. In evident homage to Malevich and Lissitzky, a barrage of red and white squares and circles then hurtled across the screen, coalescing for a brief instant

before pulling apart again. These were followed by scrappy fragments of torn black paper that became a horse (Don Quixote's Rocinante) before our eyes. An old-fashioned Russian typewriter was played by invisible hands, and then, all of a sudden, Shostakovich was at the piano with a giant nose for a head. A more thematic form of synthesis shaped the accompaniment to the exhilarating orchestral "Galop" (Act I, between Scene Three and Scene Four), which included multiple configurations of the Nose striking a pose on the ever-skinny Rocinante.

For some critics, the unrelenting presence and pace of projections ultimately distracted from rather than complemented Shostakovich's music,¹⁸ which raises an old and much contested issue, namely the degree to which image, action, and music compete with one another in opera. In a recent interview with Kentridge, Calvin Tomkins confessed that with respect to the artist's production of *The Magic Flute* (2005) there were times when he felt "that the visual effects were a distraction from the music." To this Kentridge responded: "Some people hated it because there was too much to watch." The having of too-much-to-watch is a problem, in some quarters, because it implies a loss of the ability to grasp the putative totality, a loss of mastery. But for Kentridge, this is simply not a problem because, in his opinion, "opera is an impure medium" that combines many different elements.¹⁹

Shostakovich himself seems not to have weighed in on the image-music side of the operatic triangle (image-action-music)—though he did apparently want to create a new genre, which he called "film-opera"²⁰—but given his opposition to the traditional hypostatization of music in opera, he might well have agreed with Kentridge. The composer did address over and over again, however, the question of the relationship between music and drama in his numerous statements apropos *The Nose*. "In composing my opera," he wrote in 1930, for example, "I was least of all guided by the idea that an opera is primarily a musical work. Action and music are of equal importance in *The Nose* and neither is allowed to dominate over the other."²¹ In another statement, he wrote: "Music in this spectacle does not play a self-sufficient role. The stress is on the presentation of the text."²² In fact, one of the reasons he gives for having chosen Gogol's story in the first place was that its "intricate plot [gave] rise to many effective theatrical situations."²³ It was precisely for this reason that he was so

18. See, for example, the comments of Anthony Tommasini, the chief classical music critic for *The New York Times*, in conversation with Roberta Smith, Dwight Garner, and Daniel J. Wakin in "Regarding 'The Nose' and the Eye and the Ear," *The New York Times* (March 11, 2010).

19. See Calvin Tomkins, "Lines of Resistance: William Kentridge's Rough Magic," *The New Yorker* (January 18, 2010), p. 58. For a remarkable new study of the problem of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is partly at issue here, see Juliet Koss, *Modernism after Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), esp. chapter 8.

20. Bartlett, "Shostakovich as opera composer," p. 195.

21. Dmitri Shostakovich, *Nos: opera v 3-kh aktakh po N. V. Gogoliu* (Leningrad: Gos. Malyi opernyi teatr, 1930), p. 6; quoted in "Editor's Note," n.p.

22. See Shostakovich, "Pochemu 'Nos'?" p. 11; quoted in Fay, "The Punch in Shostakovich's Nose," p. 231.

23. Shostakovich, "K prem'ere 'Nosa,'" p. 12.

opposed to the concert performance of the score in 1929.

The fundamental impurity of operatic form may render irrelevant objections based on assumptions about the primacy of one medium over another. But there still remains the question of whether or not the endless proliferation of citations to, and animations of, the work of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde in Kentridge's staging of *The Nose* amounts to something more than, in the end, a new form of scenographic ornament. Ultimately I believe that it does, because these citations and animations play a major role in shifting our understanding of the opera away from its hitherto dominant and exclusive interpretation in terms of satire. Without disavowing the satirical dimension altogether, Kentridge refocuses the audience's attention—through a new emphasis on the primarily visual figure of the Nose—on a subject of cardinal but underacknowledged importance in the very construction of story and opera alike, namely, the concept of metamorphosis. His staging reminds us of something so basic to their shared narratives that it may be easily forgotten: that, altogether fantastically, a part of the human body is transformed into an autonomous being. In foregrounding the generative role of metamorphosis in *The Nose*, Kentridge thereby opens the door to the myriad potential metaphorical ramifications of this ancient poetic concept, beyond the realm of physical embodiment alone to that of social and political transformation more broadly. In his staging, the Nose becomes a figure of revolution, not just of the October Revolution—though that remains the Ur-example, it is true—but of any and all attempts to bring about fundamental social change. The Nose is thus Rosa Luxemburg and Lev Trotsky, but also Steve Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa who was beaten to death while in police custody in Port Elizabeth in September 1977.²⁴ That the Nose is ultimately beaten and repressed, the production seems to suggest, is no reason not to honor and celebrate those precious instances of intrepid faith in the possibility of transformation, and thus also to lament their passing. "Even as utopia is dead," Kentridge writes, "we hang onto its skeleton, hoping to resurrect it through a wish, a will."²⁵

Revolution and Terror

This interpretive shift—from satire to the celebration of, and lament for, utopia—was not something arrived at overnight; rather, it emerged during the long course of Kentridge's preparation of *The Nose* over the past four years. Much of this preparation took place in his Johannesburg studio, and resulted in the creation of a network of related, ancillary projects. Common to these projects is the near-total

24. In this connection it is worth noting that the artist's father, Sir Sydney Kentridge, a prominent anti-apartheid lawyer at the time, was the barrister who represented the Biko family at the inquest into his death; see Donald Woods, *Biko* (New York: Paddington Press Ltd, 1978), pp. 176–260.

25. William Kentridge, *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, a theatrical monologue (2008), published in this issue, p. 40.

eclipsing of Kovalyov in favor of an exploration of the life of the Nose, rather in the spirit of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.²⁶ No doubt the relative unscriptedness of the Nose's role in the libretto encouraged Kentridge in this direction, affording his imagination free rein, one drawing leading to the next until the hitherto secret life of the Nose finally came into view for the very first time. These projects then became something of a sourcebook for the projections that animate Kentridge's production at the Met.

The life of the Nose is recorded in a portfolio of thirty etchings conceived by Kentridge between December 2006 and May 2009; this was released in an edition of fifty and also published in book form under the title *William Kentridge Nose* (2010).²⁷ The portfolio tracks the numerous encounters of the Nose as he goes about his newly autonomous life in St. Petersburg, though it would be better to say "invents," since so few of these episodes are to be found in Gogol's story. Kentridge portrays, for example, the Nose's private visits with various nude and clothed ladies (*Nose 1, 2, 4, 23*), some famous from the history of art. To one of these women he makes love (*Nose 10*), this last perhaps somewhat substantiating Ivan Yermakov's old reading of "The Nose" in terms of castration anxiety (a reading that Kentridge, however, refutes).²⁸ The

26. See Kentridge's references to Cervantes as a precedent for Gogol—and for himself—in *ibid.*, p. 36.

27. The print media involved are sugar-lift aquatint, drypoint, and engraving, with the occasional addition of background etching. The portfolio was printed by the David Krut Print Workshop in Johannesburg, with Jillian Ross, Niall Bingham, and Mlungusi Kongisa as the editioning printers.

28. See Ivan Yermakov, "The Nose" (1923), in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 156–98. Yermakov was a psychoanalyst with strong literary interests. For Kentridge's rejection of the psychoanalytic reading, see Matthew Gurewitsch, "As Plain as the Nose on his Stage," *The New York Times* (February 28, 2010).



Kentridge.
Nose 29.
2009.

Nose also enjoys mounting a series of Rocinantesque equestrian monuments (*Nose* 6, 7, 8, 9), and heading/hooding—the ambiguity is surely deliberate—all manner of objects and beings, inter alia, a sculptural bust (*Nose* 25), a marble statue of a male nude in contrapposto (*Nose* 27), a female nude (*Nose* 14), Anna Pavlova (*Nose* 15), Angelina Ballerina (*Nose* 16), and Trotsky (*Nose* 17). The Nose even encounters the Ur-icon of the Revolution, Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920) (*Nose* 3). But one print comprises his police mugshot (*Nose* 13), thus foreshadowing his violent end: the Police Inspector holds a gun to his head (*Nose* 29) and fires, blasting the Nose to smithereens (*Nose* 30). The Revolution is over. (An animated projection of these last two prints appeared in Act III, Scene Nine of the opera, in which Kovalyov is celebrating the return of his nose. There, the death of the Nose was memorialized by a screen awash with almost melting black fragments—it was the most painterly and abstract filmic sequence in the entire production, and extremely moving.)

The Nose's trajectory from euphoric engagement to systemic repression is explored in much greater detail in *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine* (2008), a raucous installation of eight film fragments transferred to video, each six minutes in duration.²⁹ These fragments now have a life of their own but the original impetus for their creation was to provide visual accompaniment to the opera's instrumental interludes, as discussed above, and brief excerpts from all of them appeared in one place or another in the Met production. The fragments were constructed using three main techniques: the main one was stop-motion animation, though the charcoal drawing Kentridge typically uses for this process was largely replaced by a collage mode of drawing with scraps of black paper, which coalesce to form shapes before dispersing once again. There was also a considerable amount of live-action footage, the product of workshops Kentridge held in his studio, in which actors or the artist himself performed very loosely choreographed tasks such as dancing, twirling, marching, drawing, dragging, prancing, climbing, or horse-stepping. Selected sequences of this footage were then projected frame by frame and overlaid with collage materials (often depicting the Nose), and then reshot. Last but not least, some of the film fragments incorporated archival film footage. The combination of these techniques meant that the principle of erasure that has driven most of Kentridge's work since the late 1980s ceded, in *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, to that of montage, thereby according nicely with what Shostakovich referred to as the technique of "literary montage" that he had used in the composition of the opera's libretto.

Projected simultaneously in a dedicated, pitch-black gallery, the eight fragments share a single soundtrack, *Ngilahlekehlewe Ikhala Lami*, which was

29. *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine* (2008) premiered at the Sydney Biennale in June 2008, where it was installed in a derelict toolshed on Cockatoo Island in the middle of Sydney Harbor. My discussion is based on its installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where it formed part of the traveling exhibition organized by Mark Rosenthal, *William Kentridge: Five Themes*.



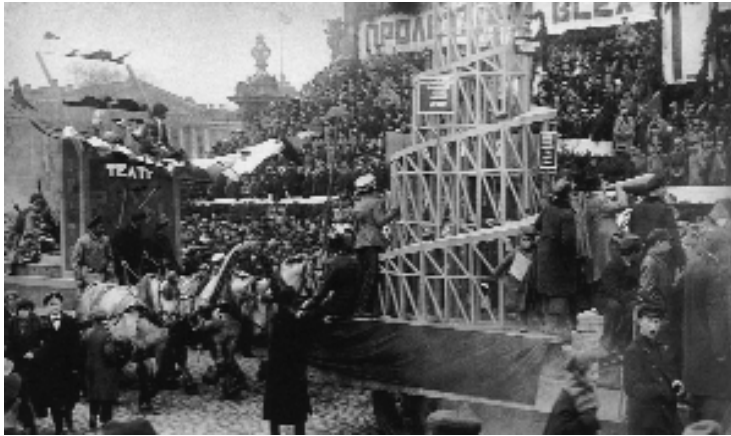
Kentridge. Stills from A Lifetime of Enthusiasm, as seen in I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine. 2008. Photograph by John Hodgkiss.

arranged by Philip Miller (a Johannesburg-based composer with whom Kentridge has often worked), with music and lyrics by Thulani Manaka and his Apostolic Faith Choir in conjunction with Richard Siluma.³⁰ Because the projection uses all four walls of the gallery, it is not physically possible to view the eight fragments simultaneously, nor do they seem to have any given sequence. Evading both totality and linearity, the installation is a cluster of short visual essays that, taken together, constitute a commemorative portrait of the October Revolution and its destruction: “an elegy (perhaps too loud for an elegy) both for the formal artistic language that was crushed in the 1930s,” Kentridge suggests, “and for the possibility of human transformation that so many hoped for and believed in during the revolution.”³¹

One of the fragments, *A Lifetime of Enthusiasm*, presents a procession, a frequent topos in both the artist’s work (*Shadow Procession* [1999], *Procession on*

30. See Philip Miller, “Ngilahlekelwe Ikhala Lami,” in William Kentridge, *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine/William Kentridge* (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2008), pp. 56–58.

31. See William Kentridge, “The Nose: Learning from the Absurd,” in *ibid.*, p. 9.



Vladimir Tatlin. Float for May Day Parade. 1925.

Anatomy of Vertebrates [2000], and *Portage* [2000]) and that of Gogol (the scene in Kazan Cathedral and another in *The Inspector-General*). The film begins on an ecstatic note: a dancer suddenly whirls into the frame, swirling a long satin red banner into arabesques, like a lascivious tongue. His movements are wild, exaggerated, and full of promise. As he leaps forward, his hat is dislodged and falls to the ground, transformed into a tumbling black circle. It is at this point that we notice that this revolutionary is clad in a great coat like the one worn by the Police Inspector in *The Nose*; as soon as we see this, his banner begins to disintegrate and then, in less than an instant, is gone altogether. Already here, then, we have the suggestion that Revolution and Terror are not being plotted at different points on a temporal trajectory—Revolution in 1917, Terror in 1937—but are rather contained within one another, like the two sides of a dyad. (This same figure is seen again in the dance soliloquy *Country Dances I* [Shadow], a studio “improvisation of African imaginings of Russian dances.”³²) But in *A Lifetime of Enthusiasm*, this revolutionary-cum-Police Inspector has a specific job to do: he is the standard bearer announcing the arrival of the procession’s guest of honor—the Nose—who kneels on a rudimentary litter borne aloft by a squad of four marching figures. Following in his wake are those who transport like spolia the now iconic emblems of the avant-garde: a megaphone-shaped wedge; fragments of graphic designs by Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and Popova; and shards of Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*—this last having itself appeared as a float in a May Day parade held in Leningrad in 1925.

32. See William Kentridge, “I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine: Installation of 8 Film Fragments,” in *ibid.*, p. 29.

But as the procession continues in *A Lifetime of Enthusiasm*, its mood gradually changes from ecstatic to downtrodden, the parade of enthusiasts becoming a straggling line of refugees or even a chain gang. Harnessed, a single figure drags a float bearing a host of figures including, once again, the Nose. Metamorphosis begins to give way to its flipside, the grotesque: along limps a megaphone—one of the artist's perennial motifs, which he shares with Klucis—mounted atop a pair of pliers. Again the Nose reappears, his litter dragged now not by one but four harnessed human beasts of burden. A black circle swoops into view, followed by an abject, mechanomorphic agglomeration of graphic insignia. By this point, the procession looks more like Otto Dix's *War Invalids* (1920) than the Revolution triumphant. When the Nose reappears a fourth (and final) time, he is superimposed upon the body of the wildly cavorting revolutionary-cum-Police Inspector with which the film began, while the remaining participants are bent double under the weight of the visual iconography of the Revolution, which they now carry on their breaking backs, like so many pieces of salvaged detritus.

It would be easy to read *A Lifetime of Enthusiasm* as an ironizing swipe at the ubiquitous festivals, anniversaries, and parades of Soviet life as mere pathetic rituals of forced spontaneity. "To live in Stalin's era was to be condemned to a lifetime of enthusiasm," Kentridge writes. "The marches, the May Day parades, the Five-Year plans fulfilled in three or four years. These were the symbols and proofs of the success of the Soviet experience."³³ But to reduce the film to irony would be to trivialize its elegiac tone and ambition, its celebration of, and lament for, all those who persisted in their faith in the possibility of social transformation, notwithstanding the Terror mounting everywhere around them, and perhaps most frighteningly of all, already within themselves. "What I am interested in," Kentridge clarifies, "is that part of the enthusiasm that could not be extinguished even as, from the 1920s on, the cost, the casuistry and terror of that enthusiasm became clearer." This is "a procession determinedly going towards an uncertain destination."³⁴

The Nose, and his entourage of ambulatory mechanical devices concatenated out of the graphic objects of the avant-garde—such as Lissitzky's *Of Two Squares* (1920) and Klucis's *Radio Orator no. 5*—reappear in three other films in Kentridge's installation: *Commissariat for Enlightenment*; *His Majesty, the Nose*; and the eponymously titled *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*. In these, the Nose metamorphoses from one creative figure to the next, heading/hooding any number of bodies, including that of Rocinante, Pavlova twirling en pointe, Shostakovich playing the piano, and even the artist himself. But already in *His Majesty, the Nose* the explicit repression of the Revolution has begun. Over and over again, the Nose, sported by Kentridge in a task-oriented solo performance, climbs the studio stepladder, only to be kicked back down—and shattered—by an invisible force at the very moment he reaches the summit. As frustration mounts,

33. Ibid., p. 23.

34. Ibid.

an array of printed words and phrases appear on the screen, blurting out the violence inflicted upon the Nose, who here stands in for the revolutionary subject forced into “self-repudiation,” “abjection,” and so forth.

His Majesty, the Nose thus sets things up well for the two other films projected on the same wall, *Prayers of Apology* and *That Ridiculous Blank Space Again*, which present piercing commentaries on this repression, though each in a different modality. *Prayers of Apology* comprises the factographic projection of a montage of excerpts from the transcription of the February–March 1937 Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, at which Nikolai Bukharin and Aleksei Rykov were arraigned and denounced as clandestine members of the treasonous Right Opposition.³⁵ Within the context of Kentridge's film installation, Bukharin becomes an historical personification of the Nose: “It was me / it was me, who was beaten with a stone,” he declares at one point in the film fragment. Though not a show trial per se—that would not come for another year—both defendants were arrested at the Plenum's conclusion and imprisoned as part of the Stalinist campaign to destroy the Old Bolsheviks, the remaining witnesses to the October Revolution.

But Bukharin refused to play his assigned role in this pseudo-judicial farce—which was to confess to his guilt—insisting instead on mounting a legalistic defense of his innocence as well as revealing to the committee the intolerable psychological state in which he found himself. (It was during his speech to this Plenum that Lazar Kaganovich, the Secretary of the Central Committee, asserted that instead of confessing to their guilt, Bukharin and Rykov simply kept denying

35. For a transcription of the Plenum and related documents, see J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–39*, trans. Benjamin Sher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 364–419.



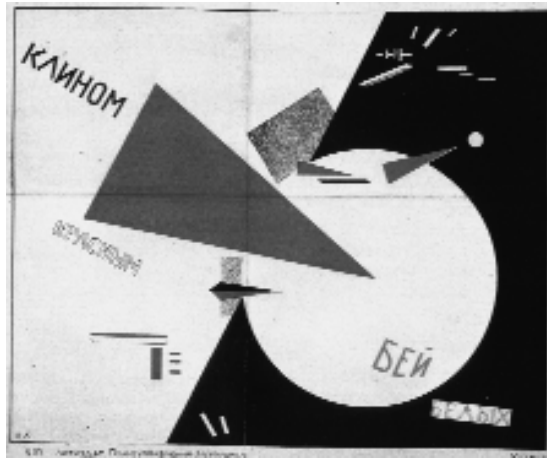
*Kentridge. Stills from
That Ridiculous Blank
Space Again, as seen in
I Am Not Me, The
Horse Is Not Mine.
2008. Photograph by
John Hodgkiss.*

it, constantly “repeating the old proverb, ‘Never laid eyes on them!’ [‘Ia ne ia, i loshad’ ne moia,’ *lit.*, ‘I am not me, the horse is not mine’].”³⁶) With his exceptional ear for the absurd, Kentridge adapts some of the Plenum’s most sadistic exchanges, for example: “*Bukharin*: But you must understand—it’s very difficult for me to die. / *Stalin*: And it’s easy for us to go on living?!” (Noise in the room, prolonged laughter.)” While the factographic economy of *Prayers of Apology* makes it a unicum in the installation—it comprises simply a moving typescript—it is worth noting that Kentridge has often experimented with the use of documentary materials in the past, most especially in the animated film *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997), in which he juxtaposed the testimony of witnesses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with his drawn fictional protagonists.

In contrast to the factographic economy with which the persecution and repression of Bukharin is presented, *That Ridiculous Blank Space* delivers its commentary on the Terror in the form of a duet of paper scraps played out in the graphic language of Lissitzky and Oskar Schlemmer. (Taken from Gogol’s story, this fragment’s title is an utterance repeated several times by Kovalyov in his despair about his noseless face.) The film begins with the animation of the kernel of Lissitzky’s Civil War period lithographic poster, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920), the purpose of which had been to exhort local participation in the Bolshevik and anarchist struggle against the armies of the White Generals and other forces of counter-Revolution. A white circle enters the frame and takes up a position in the center of a black field. A smaller red circle enters from upper left and bounces against the perimeter of the white one before exiting the frame; the red circle then returns with a red rectangular appendage, and taps, taps, taps against the perimeter of the circle, as if trying to enter; it then exits only to return quickly once again, this time as a concatenation of red circle, red rectangle, and red triangle. Its tapping on the white circle becomes now more urgent and insistent, but it still fails to penetrate the latter’s perimeter and disperses off-field. A piece of off-white paper, with the word “Awful” typed upon it, appears atop the white circle. Then, suddenly, a large red wedge bursts in from upper left, hurtling rapidly toward the white circle, its sharp point successfully penetrating the perimeter. In a matter of four or five hefty thrusts, the white circle is broken into shards. Out of these shards steps a strange mechanomorphic being who soon encounters a curvilinear Schlemmerian figure who, rather ominously, has a small white circle for a head and a club-like arm. The two court and eventually embrace—hence the film’s subtitle, “A One-Minute Love Story”—but within seconds the white Schlemmerian figure turns on its red lover, sadistically beating him or her to death with its club-arm, and then dragging offstage the broken body parts. The violence in *That Ridiculous Blank Space* thus comes full circle: beat the whites red and they’ll eventually come back to get you.

That Kentridge rejects the use of violence to further revolutionary objectives

36. See *ibid.*, p. 389.



El Lissitzky. Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge. 1920.

is suggested by a remark he makes apropos a famous verse by Vladimir Mayakovsky from *Left March* (1923): “Silence, you orators! / Comrade Mauser, you have the floor.” (The poet’s reference is to Peter Ermakov, who became known as comrade Mauser after he shot the Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna in the mouth with his Mauser pistol.) Like Frantz Fanon, Kentridge asserts, Mayakovsky had “a deluded belief in the purifying effect of violence,” his suicide in 1930 being but “the clearest demonstration that once it had the floor, the Mauser would keep its place.”³⁷ This is the insight, perhaps almost a truism, that haunts Kentridge’s filmic elegy overall: given the Revolution’s recourse to violence, Terror was necessarily latent within it. Hence the dyadic figure of the trail-blazing revolutionary-cum-Police Inspector in *A Lifetime of Enthusiasm*. Hence “the Party eating itself,”³⁸ one Bolshevik/Bukharin/Nose/artist at a time. But if, due to the Bolsheviks’ Mauser-like hold on power, Terror came as much from within as from above, it must also be acknowledged that a latency is not the same thing as an inevitability. There must be a catalyst—an historical factor or factors—to bring that latency to the surface, to make it manifest. This catalyst remains unspecified in the film installation.

As I write these sentences, I am aware that they are in a sense antagonistic to the very principle of *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, which, as an installation of filmic fragments, has gone out of its way—in its very form and format—to disrupt the efficacy or even possibility of literal-minded paraphrases or deductions. Yet the compulsion to find meaning here is inexorably strong. In his theatrical

37. See Kentridge, “I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine: Installation of 8 Film Fragments,” in Kentridge, *William Kentridge*, p. 23.

38. See William Kentridge, *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, p. 42.



Shostakovich. The Nose. Production directed and designed by William Kentridge. 2010. Photograph by Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera.

monologue, *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, Kentridge refers to this as the “pressure for meaning”:

One sees a series of abstract black shapes, and one will force them into a meaning for oneself. So that even as one tries to say, no, it’s a series of sheets of black paper, that are being torn and manipulated, one cannot stop oneself seeing a figure, a shape, a horse, a form. What is this pressure for meaning? It’s about the pressure for meaning we have inside us, where you finish everybody else’s sentences. You finish them literally, if they stop halfway through. But otherwise even as they are speaking, we are predicting the rest of the sentence. It’s as if we have sent someone ahead, to the road ahead, to look around the corner and see what is coming, and come back and report to us what is there. And with this push for meaning we latch onto any half-word or half-image and make sense of it. And once a meaning is found, we hold onto it even as it disintegrates. We do this with images, but also with ideas, so that even as utopia is dead, we hang onto its skeleton, hoping to resurrect it through a wish, a will.³⁹

39. Ibid., pp. 39–40.

The Death of the Nose

For better or worse, Kentridge's film installation *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*—and the constellation of profound issues and concerns that it raises—inevitably stays with us when we watch his production of Shostakovich's opera at the Met, prompting us to zero in on the ultimate repression of the Nose and the role therein of the latter's chief antagonist, the Police Inspector. If Gogol had distributed the forces of the imperial police state across a hierarchy of officers of the law, the composer concentrated these figures in this single punitive and venal character, the *kvartal'nyi nadziratel'* (district constable). At the Met, this role was sung by the Russian tenor Andrei Popov, who truly inhabited this extremely difficult tenor-altino part, producing an extraordinarily high tessitura that was extreme, hysterical, and deeply fascinating.⁴⁰ As noted at the outset, the Police Inspector—who is identified by no proper name—looms menacingly over citizens and subordinates alike, both live and in projection. But it is only in the long and protracted seventh scene of Act III, in which the emancipated Nose finally meets his end, that the Police Inspector fully emerges for the first time.

Significantly, none of the events that transpire in this scene—including the beating to death of the Nose—are to be found in Gogol's short story. Instead, the entire scene is an interpolation by Shostakovich and his co-librettists based on a single line in the "The Nose" ("We caught it just as it was about to drive off in the Riga stagecoach," the Police Inspector tells Kovalyov).⁴¹ In an attempt to preserve the unity of his style, however, the librettists recycled various other texts by Gogol in writing the scene's dialogue.⁴²

The setting is the outskirts of St. Petersburg—that liminal space between city and the beyond. (The libretto places the action at the hitching post for a stagecoach, but Kentridge sets it in the vicinity of a railway station, with the projection of a Soviet-era train schedule serving as the main backdrop.) It is night. The scene opens with the Police Inspector drilling and tormenting his motley posse of ten slovenly subordinates as they lie in wait to ambush a worker. His voice shrill and piercing, Popov also played the drill for laughs, kicking his poor minion Petrushka in the backside. A searchlight scanning the upper reaches of the proscenium from left to right reveals the Nose in projection, contentedly rocking in his chair, reading his newspaper. Despite the bumbling slapstick of the policemen there is something palpably ominous about the scene—an atmosphere of dread, a sense of foreboding—which intensifies with the arrival of each prospective passenger on stage: a couple plead with their friend not to risk the dangers of traveling at night, such as highway robbery by bandits (a random notice in the collage backdrop reads "but your spine has been smashed"). Parents prepare to send their

40. Popov, a member of the Mariinsky Theater Company, sings the role of the Police Inspector also on the Mariinsky recording of *The Nose* cited in note 9, above.

41. Gogol, "The Nose," p. 60.

42. Shostakovich, "K prem'ere 'Nosa,'" p. 12; quoted in "Editor's Note," n.p.

masked children away on a journey all alone. An elaborately masked woman, wearing an exquisite white coat with ermine trim—the libretto identifies her as the Elderly Lady—sings about her impending death. More and more people enter, and a crowd begins to form.

Suddenly disrupting this lugubrious and disquieting scene, a gay and wholesome seller of *bubliki* (bagel-shaped sweet breads) rushes on stage, hoping to find customers among the soon-to-be departing passengers. But she is quickly surrounded by the posse of policemen, who harass her with salacious taunts, vulgar pelvic gestures, and lascivious gropings at her bosom and behind. As their taunting escalates—in the libretto there is an implicit suggestion of rape—the upper reaches of the proscenium are suddenly illuminated to reveal an astounding projection of the Nose looming overhead. A witness to this act of sexual and class violence, the Nose attempts to come to the *bubliki*-seller's succor. Brandishing two red-square flags up and down like semaphore, he goes berserk, firing off a volley of red squares. These hurtle down to the stage floor in order to liberate the victim from her oppressors, a veritable animation of a page from Lissitzky's *Of Two Squares* (1922). This is the most agitated the Nose has ever been, and it is pure Kentridge.

In the midst of the projected Nose's frantic intervention, the live giant papier-mâché Nose scampers down the upper ramp, hurrying to make the Riga train. The Police Inspector raises his hand to stop him, a shot is fired, and suddenly all the policemen set upon the papier-mâché Nose, beating him to death as the crowd—and most especially the Elderly Lady—eggs them on. "Take that, take that, take that" the chorus cries in unison some forty-three times. (I should note that in the libretto, the Nose is beaten by the entire crowd-turned-mob—the stage direction reads: "Everyone surrounds the Nose and beats him"—and thus not only by the policemen.)⁴³ The projection on the screen above is even more graphic: a rapid montage shows the Nose being crushed from all sides, his legs giving way beneath him. As he collapses to the ground, the chorus cries "Nose" over and over again, and an enormous projection of that word in Cyrillic fills the entire proscenium. At the end of this violent frenzy, a little appendage-sized nose is found on the ground and quickly if disdainfully pocketed by the Police Inspector. A whistle blows and the crowd goes on its merry way, as if nothing at all has happened. The stage darkens and almost a full minute of *Country Dances I* is projected overhead. The Revolution is over, the Police Inspector has triumphed, with more than a little help from the mob. (In the next scene he will "sell" the appendage back to Kovalyov in exchange for a gold pocket watch and a sizeable contribution to the cost of his children's education.)

With the addition of this scene, Shostakovich has clearly pushed Gogol's absurdist satire much further than its author would seem to have intended it to go. Line by line the composer patiently builds a dramatic portrait of the violent repression of the Nose, the opera's beautiful and absurd figure of revolutionary

43. See Shostakovich, *The Nose*, libretto, p. 48.



Shostakovich. The Nose. Production directed and designed by William Kentrige. 2010. Photograph by Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera.

transformation, which Kentrige stages in the form of a brutal pantomime. But Shostakovich also underscores the way in which this repression takes place at the hands of a senseless mob, incited to violence by an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Patching the scene's dialogue together from other Gogol texts, and packaging the whole as satire, the composer found a way to adumbrate the culture of denunciation that was increasingly coming to characterize his own historical moment, even as early as 1928, in both the political and aesthetic realms.⁴⁴ But Shostakovich was a believer and, despite what he saw about him over the course of the next decade and beyond—including, the execution of Meyerhold and countless others from his circle in the Terror of the late 1930s—he kept on at it. “Shostakovich could shift throughout his life between an irreverent, absurd view and pleasure in the world, and at times play the trumpet for the edifice as loudly as anyone, with a conviction that was more than simply self-preserving or strategic,” Kentrige writes. “The need for belief and the power of that belief are not just foolishness or self-service. They are also about hope.”⁴⁵ In his production at the Met, Kentrige found a way to house that hope, that faith. “Even as utopia is dead, we hang onto its skeleton, hoping to resurrect it through a wish, a will.”⁴⁶

44. Most notably, the Trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1922, and the Shakhty Trial of 1928, both of which foreshadowed the Moscow Trials of 1936–38.

45. Kentrige, “I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine: Installation of 8 Film Fragments,” in Kentrige, *William Kentrige*, p. 23.

46. Kentrige, *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, p. 40.