"Aurora Festival" Water Fairy Play (1967): Structure and System of Images

Evgeniy Slesar[1,*]

[1]Department of Arts, St. Petersburg State University of Culture, St. Petersburg, Russia
[*]Corresponding author. Email: evgeniy.slesar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on the analysis of the system of images and structure of the major "Aurora Festival" water performance timed to the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution and shown in the Neva waters in November 1967 in Leningrad. The artistic concept of the festival was prepared and introduced by the artists of "Dvizhenie" ("Movement") group under the leadership of V. Petrov and the director S. Yakobson. Image and plot reminiscences to V. Mayakovsky's "Mystery-Bouffe" play may be revealed in S. Yakobson's aesthetics concerned. The performance presented the synthetic allegoric water performance, in which the concepts of theatrical futurism, avant-guard and ideas of new synthetism having influenced on the monumental language of the mass Soviet performances of the 1970s were reflected. By representing the main ideologemes and inconsistencies of the time through the texture of water, light and fire, the performance has determined the artistic and aesthetic guidelines of future festival of school leavers: "The Scarlet Sails". The author refers to the method of historical reconstruction and description of the theatrical performance of Gvozdev's (Leningrad) theatre school. This paper is aimed at reconstructing "Aurora Festival" water performance and analyzing its artistic structure.

This paper is based on archival documents of laboratory of mass festivals, documentary photographs, and literature of art criticism.

Keywords: *theatrical water performances, Soviet mass performances, the Scarlet Sails, performance culture of the USSR, water performances, Soviet festivals*

"Water is the image of time, and every New Year's Eve,

in somewhat pagan fashion, I try to find myself near water,

preferably near a sea or an ocean,

to watch the emergence of a new helping,

a new cupful of time from it"

J. Brodsky "Watermark".

I. INTRODUCTION

The ontological status of water is inseparably linked with the motive of time origination and movement. The dramatic contradiction between fluidity and spontaneity, variability and order consisting in the water was reflected in many ritual and performance practices dedicated to the reception of time and path. According to Brodsky's fair point, being the agent of time movement, the water is able not only to "unsettle the principle of horizontally" [1], transferring the events of the historical time to the space of the mythological time, but also to visually incarnate these events. Gaston Bachelard related the artistic opportunities of water to its direct nature. Designating water as the "material element" [2], he considers the water as the space allowing imagination to "create symbolic values with ease" [3]. However, "dynamogenic" [4] essence of water is insufficient for visual representation of time. Water in performance practice always establishes dialogic connections between the river and the topos, where it flows, rather than exists per se. Thus, if water acts as an aesthetic matter, the river sets the nature of this matter's flow by the river's direction and borders (determines the geometry of the performance). And adding the historical and cultural context of the place

(or city) to the mythical and poetical image of time, the place (or city) constructs the substantial level of performance, becoming the plot or material for reflection of time and memory.

The scope of research dedicated to the aesthetics of water performances is represented by several groups of sources. Firstly, aesthetic and culturological works dedicated to the cultural and ontological status of water matter and various forms of its existence in culture. A prominent role here belongs to the works of G. Bachelard, Y. Sepanmaa, J. Gibson.[1] Historical and theatrical complex of research works is represented by the works of A. Bloch, A. Gvozdev, K. Clark, G. Maksimova, O. Nemiro,[2] considering the interaction between various performative practices and water. The third group of sources represents the complex of methodological works of directors describing the practical knowledge of creating water performances, among which the works of A. Piotrovsky, S. Radlov, V. Khodasevich, etc. should be distinguished.[3]

The attempt to place the festival of revolution to the space of water has appeared as early as the first anniversary of the October events. In his "Mystery-Bouffe" written in 1918 to the first anniversary of the October Revolution, V. Mayakovsky places not only the revolutionary events and people to the model of mystery water journey, but he also quite definitely presents Petersburg. Later on, the play has markedly influenced the aesthetics of future anniversary revolutionary water fairy plays, and the desire to follow Mayakovsky's aesthetics was expressed by the very organizers of "Aurora Festival". In 1920, "The Blockade of Russia" water performance was staged in Krestovsky Island (directed by S. Radlov), and as early as in 1927 the major "Ten Years" theatrical performance was played in the Neva waters to the anniversary of the Revolution (directed by S. Radlov, A. Piotrovsky, N. Petrov, designed by V. Khodasevich),

[1] See.: G. Bachelard, "The Poetics of Space" / Transl. from Fr., Moscow, Russian Political Encyclopedia (ROSSPEN), 2004, p. 376; G. Bachelard, "Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter", Moscow, Gumanit. met. Publ., 1998, p. 268; Y. Sepanmaa, "The Beauty of Environment. A General Model for Environmental Aesthetics", Helsinki, 1981, p. 31; J. Gibson, "The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception", Moscow, Progress, 1988, p. 464.

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[3] See: A. Piotrovsky ", The Triumph of the Folks" / The Red Newspaper. No. 124 (May 28), 1930, pp. 4; S. Radlov "The October stage versions on the Neva" / Life of Art. No. 42 (October 18), 1927, pp. 5; V. Khodasevich "The portraits in words: Sketches.", Moscow, Boslem, 2009, p. 368.

which had a number of plot and composition, image and character reminiscences to Mayakovsky's play.

II. THE LABORATORY OF MASS FESTIVALS

Preparation for celebrating the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution required the search for the new forms in monumental theatrical performances. In view of significant historic agenda, on March 21, 1967 two-day All-Union laboratory of mass performances was opened, which had to outline the artistic forms of future anniversary performances. One of the main initiators of the Laboratory of mass performances was Evgeniy Gershuni (1899-1970), whose creative development started from "The Free Theatre" arranged by already mentioned figures of Petrograd avant-guard in 1920: N.N. Petrov, N.V. Evreinov, Yu.P. Annenkov, K.A. Mardzhanov. It is quite reasonable that Gershuni suggested the experience of theatrical performances of Petrograd in 1920s as an aesthetic platform for Soviet direction of mass forms. Explaining the turn to avant-guard, Gershuni proceeds from those structural features of people's theatre, from which A. Gvozdev and A. Piotrovsky proceeded, namely from urban space, which determines contents and form of mass performances [5]. Along with the suggested expansion of bounds of the artistic functionality of the festival, the very view of its space arrangement expanded. It was suggested to revolutionarily expand the topography of celebration for the anniversary and transfer the festival from land to water, to the Neva waters. Except the transfer of the festival to the space of waters and its transformation to the stage, the very facilities decorating the city were also suggested to be placed on the water. This adventurous project was suggested by the art director, Vasily Petrov (1916-1992).[4] He has put forward the concept of "complex city decorating as the living organism" [6]. The project was entrusted to the "Dvizhenie" working group of artists (Lev Nussberg, G. Bitt, V. Borodin, F. Infante and V. Buturlin), who have centrally developed and presented 14 sketches and 120 models of streets for celebrating the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution to the Laboratory [7]. While decorating of waters was entrusted to Petrov's group, Sergey Yakobson (1905-1970) was chosen as the director and scriptwriter of water performance on the Neva, who has already had broad experience of staging performances at the sports stadiums and squares behind himself. He has been entrusted to arrange the mass festivals in the Central Park of Culture and Recreation since 1936. And as early as in 1940 his merits of arranging mass celebrations involving more than two hundred thousand people were distinguished at All-Union Conference [8]. His script under the name of

[4] The graduate of Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, professor sculptor, co-creator of the monument to A. Pushkin in Arts Square in Leningrad (sculp. M.K. Anikushin), in 1967 held the position of Leningrad art director.

"Aurora Festival" was chosen from the numerous of works received for the competitive selection. According to the numerous acknowledgements of the experts, Yakobson's director's idea met the requirements of new synthetism and correlated with the suggested decorating of waters, which was the advantage of his artistic concept. According to Gershuni, the indispensable virtue of the script represented for the competition was the fact that therein the director managed to subordinate the literary basis to the space nature of the theatre arts. Without neglecting the "light, pyrotechnic, and radio effects" [9], Yakobson proceeded from the qualities and opportunities of the space. In other words, the virtues of Yakobson's script, on the one hand, consisted in the fact that he referred to the aesthetics of mass avant-guard performances of Petrograd, the importance of connection with which was emphasized by Gershuni, and, on the other hand, that the artistic aim at creating "true synthetic art" [10], where, synchronizing, light and sound could merge with the act on water, was traced in the script. In this case, according to Gershuni, Alfred Radok's "Laterna magika" synthetic performance staged in 1958 and watched by Gershuni served as the model for him [11].

III. SYSTEM OF IMAGES AND COMPOSITION OF THE FESTIVAL

The image of revolution ship decorated with masts and scarlet sails was suggested for the first time in "Aurora Festival". It should be noted that coloristic, plot and composition elements of scarlet ark of revolution presented by Yakobson appeared as far back as before the festival of school leavers: "The Scarlet Sails" (1968). Fastened together by fire and water, Mayakovsky's characters have also departed from Petrograd striving for "crawling up to Mount Ararat" [12] on the revolutionary Ark. Therefore, the influence of Mayakovsky's poster, monumental, and agitation aesthetics, the first mass theatrical performances of Petrograd and "Aurora Festival" on the aesthetics of "The Scarlet Sails" seems to be more obvious rather than Grin's narrative.

According to the artists and director's idea, the main dominant was the floating flower ship constituted of three tower portal cranes appearing from the Neva waters like Mount Ararat. Being situated at different heights, the cranes seemed to be both the bouquet, and the scarlet ship masts decorated with the ropes. The Scarlet Sails tensioned on the masts of the festive ship were set in motion by "the very construction of the cranes and decorative elements thereon" [13]. According to the idea, both the construction, and the décor should have moved. "The reliance on dynamic and poster language of ROSTA windows" [14] and Mayakovsky's aesthetics was emphasized in the solution suggested by the artists. As in "Ten Years"

water performance (1927), the director aimed at making the palette of machine characters performing on the water stage. The resemblance to the stage experiments of the Italian futurists may be traced, who strived not only for extirpating any lifelikeness, but also for substituting the live actor, an action-performing subject, for not lifelike matter, concealing him/her at one moment by the geometrical figures, at another by the pictures or even turning him/her into the mechanisms descending from the gridiron. Having deprived the action-performing subject of lifelikeness, the futurists strived for saving him/her only as a kinetic unit of space. And these industrial characters had to act in the Neva waters on November 7, 1967. The stage with scarlet sails located on the water has become an allegory of the main character of the festival, Lenin. And its three masts became similar to three images of his personality: "the person", "the philosopher", and "the leader" [15]. According to the artists' idea, for the duration of the festival the floating main character should have become an architectural dominant and entered into dramatic relations with the city objects having fitted into its landscape. The striving for the resemblance to the city was emphasized and it was supposed that "wearing the red clothes" [16] allegoric Lenin character would become equal to the height of St. Isaac's Cathedral [17].

The horizontal line of the festival ran between two closing points in the waters: Lenin Ship on one side, and "Aurora" opening the festival with salvos on the other side. According to Yakobson's idea, the movement of figures in the waters with the stream of the river between these two points should have become the allegory of the historical path of the October Revolution. Two main figures: Lenin and Aurora were presented in the exposition of the festival. It is the horizontal axis presetting the limits of artistic space on the water stage, and, at the same time, the visual composition of the festival showing the very movement of the revolutionary concept: from the living idea of revolution expressed in Aurora's shot to the stark, portrayed, decked out in gold myth of revolution, which has become an icon. Considering the waters as a single stage space, the artists strived for embracing the city with the ships and floating constructions located along the river. "Braided with the lace of ropes" [18] four seventy metres long floating cranes, where "living Lenin" in newsreel shots emerged by means of projection screens, were situated between Kirovsky Bridge and Liteyny Bridge. Drawing up the objects in accordance with the stage composition, Petrov determined the function of these floating figures as the balancing one [19]. It was supposed that living and dynamic image of Lenin would not only synchronize with the same living and effective Aurora's shot, but "would" also "combine with the main subject" of Lenin in gold [20]. In this case we can see the striving for

drawing up an ensemble polyphony of figures in the waters. However, at the same time, the dialogic connection between living and dynamic Lenin and iconic and static Lenin combined by the river line was becoming a stage metaphor revealing the deep inconsistencies hiding behind the festive anniversary theatrical reality. The river of History combining these two polar images has visually demonstrated the metamorphosis of the main hero of revolution, which has occurred during the last fifty years. Two Lenins combined by the river were becoming the eloquent illustrative example of dematerialization of the living. From a particular man captured in newsreel to his conversion to the gold image of Lenin the Leader religiously presented in his discrete ternary nature, remote from reality, and abstract as the very idea of revolution of the stagnation time.

Following the "Mystery-Bouffe" and mass festivals of Petrograd of 20s, almost religious appeal in the manner of Urbi et orbi calling the entire World to be the witnesses served as the overture to "Aurora Festival". Following the Aurora's call, like the Magi, the small motor boats flowed together to Aurora to ceremonially present their "gifts" to it: the flags of the Union Republics. In the first scene of the fairy play, the acting figures were combined by the coloristic leitmotif. Everything was in scarlet. Scarlet Lenin, "as scarlet Aurora as dawn" launching "the scarlet missiles", "the scarlet firework of stars" [21]. According to the director's idea, in this case the colour became the means of artistic structuration of water space. The waters turned into the stage space. As it should be in accordance with the laws of allegoric performance, when the waters have been removed from the natural city lighting by the scarlet light and transferred to the mythological space of revolution, all the objects therein started to interact as the subjects of the stage acts. The festival started the historical shot of "Aurora" against the background of "OCTOBER large letters". Having settled themselves at the terminal point of the horizontal axis of the waters stage, "as scarlet" Aurora "as dawn" [22] and "October" started narration. Like a protagonist, the Aurora's shot was becoming the starting point and was linked up with another image of Lenin "dressed in red and gold" [23] by means of light on the other side of horizontal line. The action was set in the direction of the course of the river becoming the allegory of inexorable course of historical time. The first Aurora's cue set other participants on the stage in action. In the "Mystery-Bouffe" the action started with the "cannon roar" [24], and in Yakobson's performance Aurora called the witnesses thereto by the shot. The Peter and Paul fortress responded to the cue launched from water by the return salvo. Thereupon, like the heroes of revolutionary events, the "shot ahead" [25] motor torpedo-boats filled the water surface with the loose of fires vivifying it. According to V. Petrov's idea, "the

scarlet firework of stars, with 20 thousand stars from each motor boat" [26] should have filled the waters, turning it into the sky of stars reflected in the water. In such a way the world turned over in a faerie manner. The upper part (sky) was becoming the stage reality of the fairy play materializing on the water surface. Gradually, the fire of revolution was symbolically wresting Leningrad from the darkness, and the city born by revolution emerged in the gleams of fire. The waterside slopes were revived by the salvo of coloured rockets, the Peter and Paul fortress entered into action after them, along which fifty torches alight "would draw" the silhouette of the fortress "by its flickering tongue" [27] (by means of gas burners). Consecutive kinetic light solution became the independent hero. The fire moved headily like a cue launched by the Aurora's shot. The light pulse was rushing along the lines of historical waters and changed the city heroes' clothes like a theatre light. The optical shadow game, flares on the walls and water surface destroyed the rigorous properties of the fortress's form and material turning it into unsteady, moving, metaphysical Fortress reflected in the water, which, according to the plot, was designed to become a refuge for the martyrs of the revolution [28]. After that the fire introduced the next hero of the Soviet fairy play to the artistic space. The light also revived the Rostral columns behind the Fortress transformed. The artists and director have emphasized the dialogic and effective function of the fire. It was designed to act as the agent hero consecutively involving the city objects surrounding in the common theatrical performance. Each new object enveloped in fire continuously extended and "maintained the previous one" [29]. The narration by light was moving forward to the centre. Following the motor boats dissipating the flame, the light ran along the coastline and the curves of the buildings. And then it rocketed up and "maintained the torches on the Rostral columns" [30]. Thus, the horizontal and the vertical lines were combined by the fire discharged from Aurora. However, both the horizontal and the vertical lines had to be combined by the force of revolutionary fire, and the land and water should have met each other. Not only such binary oppositions as up-down, land-water should have appeared before the audience, but also the following elements: fire, water, earth, and air should have appeared to make the faerie picture complete. As in Mayakovsky's play, the elements met each other and the "light show" turned into the flood [31]. The vertical line revived by the fire (the Rostral columns) set the water surface in motion. The submarine being in the fairway was directing the thirty metres water up towards the fire of the Rostral columns [32]. In this dynamic movement (gesture) the meeting of two elements (fire and water) and two city spaces: the metaphysical city of three revolutions allegorically represented in the water and the modern city with the audience watching what is going on from the coast has

visually taken place. Air was also materialized by the director and came into play as the poured out scarlet sky falling to the water surface by means of red lights hung on the parachutes. The mythological and real time combined and actualized the revolution through the dialogic connection between two allegoric images, two ship heroes: Aurora as the hero from the past and the submarine as the hero from the present. Moreover, the axis of development of revolution concept, its past – present – future, visually appeared on the Neva before the audience. From archaic but effective Aurora through the militarist image of the modern present represented by the submarine to the image of the tranquil future, floating Lenin in gold, the quiet image of future, which they only had to build. Three arks are three stage metaphors of time.

The performance was not only allegoric combination of land and water, it was the union of revolution, which came from the water (together with the shot) and the city, which were symbolically combined by dynamic elements, fire and water, into the united ensemble. The light score of the water fairy play was the reflection of its plot movement. The performance started from the darkness with the searchlights wandering therein. Then colouristics and light zones were expanding through the waters filled in with scarlet light of revolution, and they led the waters to the triumph of light becoming more dynamic. The colour and light world of Mayakovsky's play reflects the plot movement. The Ark departed from the darkness of St. Petersburg and reached the paradisiacal city with the gardens, factories and the Sun illuminated it. The play has ended with the hymn to the Sun. And following the passage of the fleet along the waters, "Aurora Festival" also ended with the flashing pyrotechnic Sun on the floating platform and with A. Ostrovsky's song on L. Oshanin's lyrics, "May There Always Be Sunshine". At this moment, the image of Lenin was presented to the residents of Leningrad on the aerostat as the supreme Sun. Leningrad and Lenin, the city and its myth, were shown to each other at the climax of the performance.

The conversation on symbolic dialogism between the mythological narrative of "The Day of Aurora" in the waters and the space of Leningrad of 1967 deserves special attention. According to the artists' idea, this connection was also fulfilled through the system of light and kinetic methods combining the space of water and land. The ships moored on Krasny Flot Embankment were combined with the city buildings through the consonant elements of decoration. Thus, at nighttime the lamp decoration of the ships, and their twinkling lights have synchronized with the same light compositions on the buildings of the Senate up to "Sudomech" factory. The horizontal line of light elements having run along the ground floor of the buildings on the embankment was visually overlaid to the light elements of the ships. Thus, it managed to organically merge the space of water and land through the light solution. The synchrony of twinkling of the lights on the land and water should have turned the city objects into the boundless mirage city of the ships. The city lights were becoming the continued decoration to the performance in the waters, and Leningrad of 1967 was becoming the symbolic twinkling continuation of the lights born by Aurora. According to Petrov's idea, "the impression" should have been "given that the entire Baltic fleet lies in the Neva" [33]. In the daytime the flags and the scarlet pendants were the means combining two spaces. The masts with the fixed scarlet and blue sails were situated between two pavilions of the Admiralty and in front of the buildings. In this case the dialogism of two topoi, the mythological one and real one, are visually represented. As Petrov believed, the moment of meeting was fixed in this meeting, when "the Peter's fleet was ready to swim out from the Admiralty and greet the modern fleet lying in the Neva" [34].

IV. CONCLUSION

The water performances have a long tradition and have firmly entrenched in theatre arts. The Soviet government gravitating towards the total staging of its imperial nature often appealed to the practice of water performances. As early as the first Mayakovsky's revolutionary mystery and mass performances the strivings for combining two narratives: the revolution and water journey to the best of possible worlds may be revealed. The discussion between the directors of mass performances, artists, and playwrights arisen in 1967 demonstrates the strong connection between the aesthetics of mass water performances of the late 60s and the artistic search of the first quarter of the XX century in Petrograd-Leningrad. "Aurora Festival" water fairy play has become an example of new understanding of synthetism ideas in mass theatrical performance. The performance was based on the combination of visual, acoustic and kinetic lines. It was supposed that two first groups of elements should not only have been in dynamics (the movement of light, fire, water, figures of waters), but they should also have been consonant with the acoustic line. The acoustic narrative (music and voice score) of "Aurora Festival" often had its visual equivalent solved in allegoric and kinetic form. Moreover, plot and composition, character and image connections between the water fairy play and the first Soviet performances and "Mystery-Bouffe" may be traced. The plot of fairy play is a model of initiatory path along the waters consisted of three composition parts: call to journey (appeal to the World, shot), departure and journey along the waters being accompanied by progressive movement of light and fire wresting the city from the darkness, and finding the land (the city) and end of the path represented by unity

of the City and the Revolution. The character level is remarkable for its tendency towards monumental poster forms, allegorism and techno-morphism (floating constructions, hero ships, cranes). The colour and light space arrangement structures the festival. Having united with the anniversary image of the ship, which has determined the idea of revolution reflected in scarlet, this idea has coloured the sails, masts, ropes, and all waters in the colour of Grin's story, with having fixed the power of this colour dominant in the Neva for a long time. The motive of saving scarlet ship of revolution granting the festival to the city and releasing it from the darkness by lights of its shots and lights was set by Sergey Yakobson, who has in many ways become the pioneer of major synthetic water performances in the USSR.

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