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JOURNAL OF CROSS\_CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy  
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.csj.ualberta.ca>

## "High-Rise Zhivago"

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March 28, 2014

### To Cite this Article:

Siemens, Elena. "High-Rise Zhivago" *Imaginations* 5:1 (2014): Web (date accessed) 113-121. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.periph.5-1.8

### To Link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.periph.5-1.8>



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# HIGH- RISE ZHIVAGO

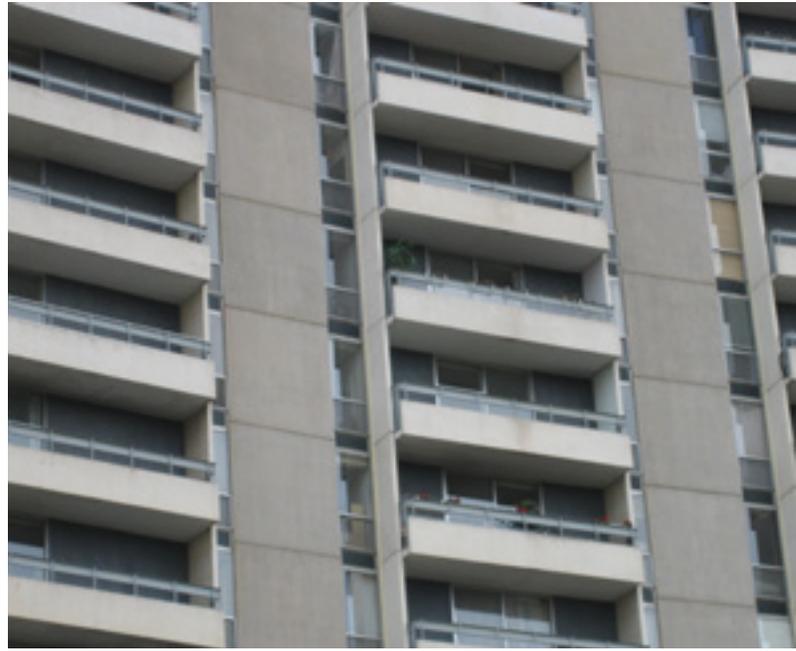
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This paper discusses the Taganka Theatre's production of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, staged in a remote Moscow suburb. Performed in a Soviet-built palace of culture, the show radically reinterprets *Zhivago*, transforming it from an intensely personal to a collective narrative. Drawing on a chapter from my book *Theatre in Passing: A Moscow Photo-Diary* (Intellect 2011), the paper refers to Marvin Carlson, who argues that theatre buildings and their locations greatly impact the overall meaning of a show. Citing evidence provided by cultural theorists, architectural critics, as well as authors and artists, I expand on my earlier discussion of suburbs – a fertile subject attracting a wealth of contradictory opinions. I illustrate my discussion with images of high-rises inspired by the avant-garde photographer Alexander Rodchenko, and pictures of soup cans and cases of Coca-Cola – my tribute to Andy Warhol, who, like Rodchenko, rejected the old in favour of the new. I conclude with a nostalgic shot of a single-family dwelling, reminiscent of the spaces depicted in Pasternak.

Cet article examine la production par le Théâtre Taganka de *Docteur Zhivago* de Boris Pasternak dans une maison de la culture en banlieue de Moscou. Marvin Carlson a proposé que les espaces performatifs jouent un rôle à part entière dans le sens global d'un spectacle. Suite à Carlson, je propose à mon tour qu'en étant montée dans une banlieue de Moscou, la production Taganka réinterprète radicalement *Docteur Zhivago*, le faisant passer d'un récit individualisé à un récit collectif. L'article interroge des représentations fragmentaires du Moscou historique, des banlieues construites sous les Soviétiques, en plus de points de vue sur l'habitabilité suburbaine empruntés à des théoriciens culturels, des architectes, et des auteurs. Le tout est illustré et appuyé par des photos de bâtiment suburbains inspirés de Alexander Rodchenko, ainsi que des photos de conserves Campbell et de caisses de Coca-Cola rendant hommage au travail de Andy Warhol. L'article se conclut avec l'image nostalgique d'une ancienne maison familiale, proche de l'esprit original de Boris Pasternak.

Riding the metro to the Meridian Culture Palace, I tried to keep an open mind. The show was staged by the Taganka's veteran director Yuri Lyubimov, who had produced many of this theatre's legendary Soviet-era productions. The journey was long, even by Moscow standards, and to make things worse I had nothing to read, making the trip even more tedious. The Meridian, which I found right next to the station, was exactly the kind of structure I imagined it to be: a giant concrete shoebox decorated with sculptural depictions of spacecrafts and cosmonauts. Directly in front of it was a large parking lot, where I photographed a girl walking a cat on a leash. A mass of residential high-rises was visible in the distance, and beyond that were more high-rises and a forest.

The show began with dancing and choir singing. The enormous stage was lit by blinding spotlights. This was not a promising start. *Doctor Zhivago* was prohibited in the Soviet Union, and people read it in smuggled copies. Most Russians were familiar only with the novel's selection of poems published during Khrushchev's thaw. "Winter Night," describing the clandestine meeting of Lara and Strelnikov, has a haunting refrain: "The Candle on the table burned, the candle burned" (Pasternak 488). This poem was made into a song which everyone sang at informal gatherings. I had hoped the show would be inspired by it as well. After the intermission, things remained the same – more group dancing, more choir singing. And more spotlights. I gathered my things and left, blaming director Yury Lyubimov, but



also myself for thinking that he could overcome the environment. No one could. When staged at a place like the Meridian, *Zhivago* inevitably acquires a completely different set of characteristics and becomes something other than *Zhivago*. Later on, I learned that Lyubimov's choice of the Meridian was not entirely deliberate; it had resulted at least in part from a fierce internal conflict at the Taganka Theatre and a territorial war that followed it.

Theatre buildings and their locations, Marvin Carlson argues in *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, "generate social and cultural meaning of their own which in turn help to structure the meaning of the entire theatre experience" (2). Most researchers, Carlson laments, address "primarily (and often exclusively)" the written text, while leaving the space of performance virtually ignored (2). To counteract this approach, Carlson refers to Roland Barthes' essay "The Eiffel Tower," among other sources,



which identifies the meaning of various constituent parts, or zones, of Paris. Extending Barthes, Carlson points out that Parisian theatres “reflect these connotative divisions,” and that the Montmartre zone, for instance, which is associated with “pleasure,” contains mostly cabarets and music halls (1989: 12).

Similar “connotative divisions” can also be found in Moscow, as exemplified by the contrast between the Meridian Culture Palace and the historical Taganka Theatre. Taganka’s original building was constructed in 1911 and initially housed the Volcano Cinema, one of Moscow’s first movie houses. This old-fashioned building is representative of the cozy, pastel-coloured low-rises that populated Moscow before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Today the theatre is painted dark-red, and its façade is decorated with various Constructivist-inspired details. The theatre’s striking emblem, also displayed on the façade, is reminiscent of

Kazemir Malevich’s iconic painting *Black Square* (1913), recognized as a turning point in the history of art. Malevich received a less enthusiastic response in his native Russia during the age of Socialist Realism.

In the Soviet period, the Taganka staged prohibited material, such as Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, that gathered large crowds and antagonized the officials in charge of the Soviet arts. Its rebellious repertoire corresponded to the theatre’s location on Taganskaya Square, the former site of the infamous Taganskaya prison, founded in 1804. Following the prison’s demolition in 1958, the Soviet-built Taganskaya metro station became the square’s most prominent landmark. The Taganka Theatre’s imposing new building, adjacent to the theatre’s old stage, opened in 1980. With its arrival, the square has become a prominent theatrical destination – a transformation similar to that of Bastille Square in Paris. Once a site of the legendary Bastille prison, this square is now home to the enormous Opera Bastille.

The Taganka Theatre’s historical building is representative of the old Moscow described in Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*. Riding to a Christmas gathering in the chapter “Christmas Party at the Sventitsky’s,” young Yury Zhivago admires the “ice-bound trees of the squares and streets” and the “lights shining through the frosted windows” (81). On Kamergersky Lane, he notices “that a candle had melted a patch in the icy crust on one of the windows” (81). He whispers to himself the beginning of his

yet unwritten poem “Winter Night” (81). Kamergersky Lane, with its old houses predating the 1917 Revolution, plays a key role in the novel. Both Yury Zhivago and Lara live here at different times, and it is here that both of them will die. In his room on Kamergersky, Zhivago feverishly writes his essays and poetry, addressing his beloved city. He acknowledges how “empty and dilapidated” Moscow has become following the “trials of the first few years of the revolution” (436). “But even in this condition,” he insists, “it is still a large modern city and cities are the only source of inspiration for a truly modern, contemporary art” (436).

In contrast to the Taganka Theatre, the Meridian Culture Palace is located near the remote Kaluzhskaya metro station – a residential suburb far removed from the historical centre of Moscow and populated by a mass of uniform high-rises, representative of the “new rationalist” architecture that originated in the 1960s. Inspired by the 1920s motto “the form is determined by the function,” the “new rationalism,” Andrei Ikonnikov writes in *Russian*

*Architecture of the Soviet Period*, subordinated form to “building technology” (327). He points out that the homogeneous architecture of the 1960s divided buildings into “functional types”; considerations of style came second and “depended on the purpose of the structure” (328). A characteristic example of these functional buildings, Ikonnikov continues, is a large cinema defined by the “austerely natural forms of exposed, undecorated constructions” with an

“emphatically straightforward” interior devoid of any superfluous decorations (285-86).

The “palaces of culture,” also built according to a standard design, exhibited similar characteristics. These multifunctional entertainment structures staged concerts and theatrical productions, as well as offering space for political gatherings. The Soviet architecture of the 1970s, Ikonnikov argues, still “failed to take on a more personal touch,” and the collectivism of the 1960s continued to rule (328). The homogeneity of Soviet-built suburbs received a humorous treatment in Eldar Ryazanov’s hit film *The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath* (1975). The film includes an animated prologue, in which Soviet authorities veto any architectural innovations, and insisting instead on populating Moscow and the rest of the Soviet Union with uniform high-rises. The suburban Cheremushki neighbourhood, located one metro stop away from the Meridian, serves as the film’s Moscow location.

“Just a few minutes from my timeworn house, and I am surrounded by the derricks of a building estate without a past,” Henri Lefebvre writes in his well-known essay “Notes on the New Town” (148). According to Lefebvre, in the “old town” each house “has its own particular face,” and streets are “spontaneous and transitory” (148). The street, he explains, “is not simply there so that people can get from A to B, nor does it lay traps for them with lighting effects and displays of objects” (148-49). Conversely, the “new town,” with its uniform high-rises,

or the “machines for living in,” terrifies Lefebvre (149). He acknowledges that the new “blocks of flats look well planned and properly built,” as well as offering various modern conveniences (149). But can these blocks of flats, Lefebvre asks, “mediate between man and nature, between one man and another”? (150). “Streets and highways,” he warns, “are becoming more necessary, but their incessant, unchanging, ever-repeated traffic is turning them into wastelands” (151).

Sharing some of Lefebvre’s concerns, Douglas Coupland, the author of the seminal *Generations X*, writes in his book *City of Glass* dedicated to his hometown of Vancouver:

*A few years ago, I went to see a Hollywood thriller which was partly filmed in front of my father’s office building in North Vancouver. In the movie, North Vancouver was “Boulder, Colorado,” and throughout the movie Vancouver doubled as Seattle, Denver, New Orleans and a few other cities, none of them Vancouver. (6)*

Vancouver, Coupland continues, “can neatly morph into just about any other North American city save for those in the American Southwest, and possibly Miami” (7). This statement also applies to Edmonton, the capital of neighbouring Alberta, where I took my photographs for this paper. Edmonton’s downtown skyline, representative of a typical midsize western city, can “neatly morph” into a variety of towns in the American Northwest. Moreover, Edmonton’s residential high-rises, located downtown



and around the University of Alberta campus, resemble Moscow’s suburban apartment buildings. I also photographed rows of soup cans and cases of Coca-Cola at Edmonton’s chain grocery stores. With their repetitive geometrical patterns, those grocery displays reveal the same monotony to which Lefebvre objected in his discussion of the new town.

But the new and the uniform can also be celebrated and even revered, as demonstrated in Andy Warhol’s art – an inspiration behind my photographs of Edmonton’s supermarkets. “My ideal city,” Warhol declares, “would be completely new. *No antiques*. All the buildings would be new. Old buildings are unnatural spaces. Buildings should be built to last for a short time” (157).

Warhol urges city planners to construct new buildings “every fourteen years” (157). He explains: “The building and the tearing down would keep people busy, and the water wouldn’t be rusty from old pipes” (157). Warhol has also favoured “the good, plain American lunchroom

or even the good, plain American lunch counter” over fancy restaurants (159). He even hoped to start a chain of diners called *Andymats*. He states: “Everybody’s sense of beauty is different from everybody else’s” (71).

According to Warhol, “the most beautiful thing” in any city from Tokyo to Florence is a McDonald’s (71). Since the 1970s, when *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* first appeared in print, Moscow has acquired numerous McDonald’s restaurants, as well as western-style supermarkets offering Coca-Cola and Campbell’s Soup. Along with Peking, renamed Beijing, contemporary Moscow can now be added to Warhol’s list of “beautiful” cities. Discussing Coca-Cola’s contribution to America’s democracy, Warhol writes:

*What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drink Coke and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. (100-01)*

Like Warhol, the renowned early Russian avant-garde photographer Alexander Rodchenko advocates the advantages of living and creating art in a modern city. He denounces painting as old-fashioned and irrelevant: “Every modern cultured man must wage war against art, as against opium” (1988: 253). Instead, he champions photography, a truly revolutionary medium, and insists



on capturing such manifestations of modernity as “multistory buildings, specially erected factories, plants, etc., two- to-three-story-high windows, trams, automobiles, light and space advertisements, ocean liners, airplanes” (2005: 209). According to Rodchenko, the modern city has shifted “the customary psychology of visual perception,” and he urges his fellow photographers to take pictures from unexpected perspectives, corresponding to the changed environment (2005: 209).

Rodchenko’s photographs of Moscow’s high-rises from his *Balconies* series (1925) employ many of the unusual perspectives he advocates. Captured from a high-floor window, sometimes from the roof, or, alternatively, from the ground looking up, his striking shots reflect the exciting geometry of the modern city. The traditional centered point of view derived from painting, Rodchenko argues, fails to account for this, just as it fails to adequately record “the street with its rushing automobiles and scurrying pedestrians,” as seen from

a high-rise balcony, or a tram window (2005: 209). In “What the Eye Does Not See,” his associate Ossip Brik writes that in Rodchenko’s photographs “the familiar object (the house) suddenly turned into a never-before-seen structure, a fire escape became a monstrous object, balconies were transformed into a tower of exotic architecture” (90). Echoing Rodchenko, Brik insists that film and photography capture things “from unexpected viewpoints and in unusual configurations, and we must exploit this possibility” (90).

While serving as a fascinating subject of photography, Moscow’s uniform high-rises provide an incongruous setting for a production of Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*. In his essay “On the Prose of the Poet Pasternak,” Roman Jakobson writes: “To belong to a compact collective group and to hold firmly to a particular direction are both repugnant to Pasternak, who is a passionate destroyer of customary affinities” (317). Narrating the story of the Bolshevik Revolution, *Zhivago* remains a private document – possibly the book’s greatest fault in the eyes of the Soviet state, and the reason for its prohibition in the Soviet Union. The poem “Explanation,” included at the end of the novel, describes Yury Zhivago’s “passion to break away” as his strongest “pull” (Pasternak 476). Further evidence of this “passion to break away” is found throughout the novel. Some of his associates at the Hospital of the Holy Cross in Moscow regard Zhivago as “dangerous”; other people, “who had gone further in their politics,” consider him “not Red enough”; in short, “he didn’t please anyone” (169). His view of the



revolution is equally nonconformist: “You might say that everyone has been through two revolutions – his own personal revolution as well as the general one” (136).

Performed at the Soviet-built Meridian, the intensely personal *Zhivago* was inevitably transformed into a collective narrative. With its persistent use of choir singing and group dancing, Lyubimov’s show, subtitled “a musical parable,” also contributed to this transformation. The music composed by Alfred Schnittke, Birgit Beumers writes in *Yury*

*Lyubimov at the Taganka Theatre*, “did not provide any solo musical scores, but offered choral music to accompany some of Pasternak’s poems” (268). “Some metaphors from the novel,” Beumers points out, “were transformed into theatrical images for the production”; among these was a candle, which in one scene “was carried in on a spade” (268). She adds that the show “was commissioned by a Western producer for the Vienna Festival,” and originally

premiered in Vienna in 1993 (266). According to Beumers's largely favourable account, the Taganka's production did not "aim at a rendering of the events of the novel"; instead, it raised a more general question: "But who are we, and where do we come from?" (274).

While appealing to the Western spectator, the show demonstrated less sensitivity to the domestic audience. "Mise-en-scene does not have to be faithful to a dramatic text," Patrice Pavis argues in his book *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (26). He asks: "If producing a faithful mise-en-scene means repeating, or believing one can repeat, by theatrical means what the text has already said, what would be the point of mise-en-scene?" (27). In Pavis' opinion, "the undeniable relationship between text and performance" must take the form of a "transfer or a confrontation of the fictional universe structured by the text and the fictional universe produced by the stage" (28). This is a convincing argument, particularly when applied to the adaptations of well-known works of literature, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, both staged victoriously at the Taganka Theatre. With Pasternak's novel, which many Russians were only discovering when the show first premiered in the early 1990s, the theatre's defamiliarized approach produced a less satisfying result. Sometimes, a more "faithful" mise-en-scene is the better route to take: to be able to read, you first must learn the alphabet.

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