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Alexandra Smith

**Reconfiguring the Utopian Vision:  
Tret'iakov's Play *I Want a Baby!* (1926) as a  
Response to the Revolutionary Restructuring of Everyday Life**

Sergei Tret'iakov (1892–1937) was a prolific poet, critic, playwright, an active member of Maiakovskii's Left Front of Art, and a close associate also of Sergei Eizenshtein and Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, yet his works have received relatively little attention. Several of his plays of the 1920s, including *Are You Listening, Moscow?* (1923) and *Gas Masks* (1924), were directed by Sergei Eizenshtein. His famous epic drama *Roar, China!* was presented at the Meierkhol'd Theatre on 23 January 1926 and directed by V. Fedorov and Meierkhol'd. His most controversial play *I Want a Baby!* was accepted for production by Meierkhol'd, and by Igor' Terent'ev in Leningrad, but banned and rewritten with a view to a new production in 1929, and was neither fully published nor staged during Tret'iakov's lifetime. The full version of the play was published for the first time in Russia in 1988.<sup>1</sup> The first production of the play in the original version was undertaken by the Berlin Ensemble in the summer of 1989. As Robert Leach comments, the Berlin Ensemble (founded by Brecht in 1949) 'clearly saw the "social document" dimension of the play' and presented the urban space of post-revolutionary Moscow of the 1920s as claustrophobic and overcrowded. Milda, the chief protagonist, a young Muscovite of Latvian origin, is disgusted by the anti-social trends she witnesses in the capital and seeks to counter some of the corrosive influences of NEP culture on everyday life by breeding a new race of Soviet citizens.<sup>2</sup> In February 1990 Leach himself produced a shortened version of the play for Mark Rozovsky's Nikitsky Gate Theatre (Teatr u Nikitskikh vorot); according to his own account, 'the play was ... quite a shock for some of the more staid apparatchiks of the late Soviet state, who fought even in 1990 for it to be banned'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Tret'iakov, *Khochu rebenka!*, *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia*, 1988, 2, 206–243.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Leach, 'I Want a Baby! – Three Times', *Studies in Theatre Production* 8, December 1993, 8–9.

<sup>3</sup> Leach, 12.

Given that Tret'iakov's play was conceived as an experimental dramatic form intended to initiate public discussion of social problems, including such issues as abortion, rape, sexuality and drunkenness, it was perhaps to be expected that in the late Soviet period some conservative elements would have seen it as yet another manifestation of *chernukha* aesthetics. The play's emotional effect on audiences of the period might be explained by its construction as a montage of attractions which turns the violent and ugly behaviour of Soviet citizens into a spectacle. Furthermore, the presentational technique embedded in Tret'iakov's play largely depends on the method of expressive acting developed by Tret'iakov and Eizenshtein in the early 1920s, inspired by Meierkhol'd's system of Biomechanics and incorporating in addition several techniques borrowed from Rudolph Bode's system of Expressive Gymnastics. Tret'iakov and Eizenshtein insisted that every movement should be underscored and theatricalised in order to be truly expressive.<sup>4</sup> In one of his discussions of the play, Leach suggests that Tret'iakov's *I Want a Baby!* not only demonstrates the limitations of naturalism on stage but also mocks many of the conventions to be found in illusionist theatre. He refers to it as one of the finest examples of a theatre work built according to the principles of Eizenshtein's montage of attractions, and suggests parallels with the theatre of Brecht, who considered Tret'iakov to be his teacher.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Leach compellingly demonstrates in his analysis of the play, Tret'iakov differs from Brecht in focussing on issues rather than character, thereby avoiding the 'desiccated intellectualism' characteristic of Brecht's drama.<sup>6</sup>

In Leach's opinion, *I Want a Baby!* might be seen as 'a seminal text in the "golden age" of Soviet theatre, that period in the 1920s when the theatres in the age of revolutionary satire and the workshops of Communist drama really did seem to be helping to recreate the world, and the theatres of Moscow threw up a firework burst of brilliant productions'.<sup>7</sup> Characterising its genre as that of the 'discussion play', Leach goes on to write: 'Tret'iakov's intention in writing the play was not to undermine the regime, which he wholeheartedly supported; rather

<sup>4</sup> Robert Leach, 'Introduction', in Tret'iakov, Sergey Mikhailovich. *I Want a Baby!* Translated by Stephen Holland, edited by Robert Leach (Birmingham: Department of Drama and Theatre Arts, The University of Birmingham, 1995), xii.

<sup>5</sup> Brecht wrote, for example: 'My teacher Tret'iakov, tall and kindly, / Has been shot, / Condemned by a people's court as a spy'. Quoted in Leach, *I Want a Baby!*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Leach, 'Introduction', xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Leach, 'Introduction', viii.

it was to shed light on what was going on in the heart of the Communist capital, to open unmentionable topics for discussion. He believed that Communism required an unblinking recognition of the truth and an absolutely open and democratic debate about the truth'.<sup>8</sup> In his Introduction to the English version published by the University of Birmingham in 1995, Leach also highlights the importance of the utopian theme in the play. As he puts it, 'Tret'iakov's self-imposed task was to show, not just the historical situation, but the potential of the revolution – that is, a possible future Utopia – within the broad sweep of contemporary life'.<sup>9</sup> According to Leach's analysis of the play, Tret'iakov's use of montage devices corresponded to his belief that the theatre should not serve as a tool of didactic propaganda but rather provoke discussion of societal needs. In one of his essays, for example, Tret'iakov observes that the contemporary plays he finds especially valuable are those which 'stimulate in the spectator something that lasts beyond the theatre'.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising, then, that he should explain the purpose of *I Want a Baby!* as follows: 'The play is constructed deliberately problematically. The task of the author is not so much to give a kind of final prescription as to demonstrate possible variants, which might provoke the healthy discussion which society needs on the serious and important questions which are touched on in this play'.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the play has 'all the energy and intensity which characterise revolutionary theatre,' as Leach puts it.<sup>12</sup> The play tells the story of Milda, a Latvian Party activist and educationalist who lives in an overcrowded block of flats in Moscow and determines to have a child fathered by a good socialist worker whom she plans to abandon as soon as the baby is conceived. Her choice falls on Iakov, a building worker who, in spite of his verbal agreement that their relationship will end after its objective has been achieved, becomes sentimentally attached both to Milda and their offspring-to-be. Following a row, during which she hits him on the head, Milda sends him back to his fiancée Olimpiada (also known as Lympa).

<sup>8</sup> Leach, '*I Want a Baby!*', 9.

<sup>9</sup> Leach, 'Introduction', ix.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in A. Fevral'skii, 'S. M. Tret'iakov v teatre Meierkhol'da', in S. Tret'iakov, *Slyshish', Moskva?! (Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1966)*, 204. The English translation of the quote appears in Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), 175.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Fevral'skii, 198. The English translation appears in: Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 175.

Other scenes in the play depict the gang rape of Ksenichka, whose boyfriend Andriusha is restrained by militiamen from shooting her assailants; and the attempted seduction of Milda by the superintendent of the block of flats making the most of the opportunity afforded by his wife's absence. Milda rejects his advances on the grounds that she is afraid of contracting gonorrhoea, and suggests an alternative outlet for his passion: 'Masturbation, even at your age and in your position, in my opinion, can do nothing but good'.<sup>13</sup> When he nevertheless attempts to rape her, she fights him off with a book, unable to find her revolver. In the end, her male room-mate, identified in the play as the Stoneturner, overhears them and comes to Milda's rescue.

Following this incident, Milda and the Stoneturner discuss the disastrous consequences for the state when 'the kids of drug addicts, syphilitics, alcoholics, turn out to be cretins, epileptics or scrofulous or neurotic' and deplore the spread of syphilis in Soviet Russia.<sup>14</sup> While Milda is a Party activist pursuing her studies in education, her friend the Stoneturner is an inventor, a visionary and an advocate of social engineering based on the principles of selective breeding and the scientific control of population growth. Furthermore, he outlines a new model of society that could bypass the sexual relationship altogether. He explains to Milda his vision of the perfect society thus: 'To hell with husbands! What do you say to the syringe? That the State gives the most productive women workers the best sperm. The State encourages this method of selection. It takes responsibility for the upbringing of these children, and develops a strain of new people'.<sup>15</sup> His advocacy of the scientific regulation of human reproduction, not only at the stage of conception and birth but also during the child's formative years, evokes the theories of eugenics popular in the 1920s both in Russia and the West. The Russian Eugenics Society was founded in 1920 by Nikolai Kol'tsov (1892–1940) and Iurii Fomichenko (1882–1930). In that year Kol'tsov's Institute for Biological Experiments opened a department specialising in eugenics which brought together several experts in genetics. Kol'tsov's vision of eugenics attracted a large number

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<sup>13</sup> Tretiakov, *I Want a Baby!*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Tretiakov, *I Want a Baby!*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Tretiakov, *I Want a Baby!*, 53.

of followers outside the field of biology, including Anatolii Lunacharskii,<sup>16</sup> who in 1928 co-authored with Georgii Gerbner a film script based on the life of the Austrian biologist Paul Kammerer, who had been invited to establish a laboratory of experimental biology in Soviet Russia. Kammerer was a proponent of the Lamarckian model of eugenics which views all genetic material as modifiable by social conditions and transferable to future generations in an enhanced form. Tret'iakov himself was apparently aware of Kammerer's works, and the name by which Milda's friend is known – Stoneturner – evokes Kammerer's statements comparing genetics to sculpting, such as (for example) the proposition that '[o]ur reason and our will must be able to control organic substance, including that of which our own bodies are composed, just like soft clay in the hands of the modeler or hard steel in the hands of the machinist'.<sup>17</sup> Kammerer also promoted the 'Steinach operation' to rejuvenate and energise men by conserving their testicular secretions,<sup>18</sup> testicle implants to 'cure' homosexuality and radiation treatments to enhance lactation – not only in human mothers, but in dairy cows as well – arguing that the positive effects of such treatments would become hereditary after just a few generations: 'So promptly does living substance react to influences imparted according to plan! So precisely does protoplasm comply with our wishes that it is soft wax in our hands!'<sup>19</sup>

Kammerer's theoretical approaches and experiments stemmed from that disillusionment with the state of modern society and evolution that was the legacy of the First World War. Having ceased to believe in natural progress, he called on humanity to take charge of its own future and actively pursue the acquisition of positive characteristics, instead of leaving matters to nature. Despite the problems caused by the accusations of some scientists that the results of his experiments with the midwife toad had been falsified, his ideas received positive coverage in newspapers and magazines. In 1926, the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow

<sup>16</sup> Christina Kiaer, 'Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tret'iakov's *I Want a Child!*' in Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, eds., *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006), 189.

<sup>17</sup> P. Kammerer, *Das biologische Zeitalter: Fortschritte der organischen Technik, Verein Freie Schule*; quoted in Sander Gliboff, '“Protoplasm is soft wax in our hands”: Paul Kammerer and the art of biological transformation', *Endeavour* 29, 4, December 2005, 166.

<sup>18</sup> P. Kammerer, *Rejuvenation and the Prolongation of Human Efficiency. Experiences with the Steinach-Operation on Man and Animals* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923).

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Gliboff, 166.

offered to build him a laboratory, standing by its offer even after news emerged that the last surviving midwife toad had been injected with ink. Reports in the Soviet press went so far as to claim that Kammerer had been framed. Also in 1926, Aleksandr Serebrovskii and Solomon Levit had founded a Department of Human Health and Hereditary Issues. Serebrovskii had written several books and articles in which he popularised his notion of artificial insemination and advocated the idea of the creation of a State sperm bank. Although Serebrovskii's claim that artificial insemination could enable a gifted worker to father up to 1,000 children was published only in 1929, Tret'iakov's play makes implicit references to similar radical and anti-family ideas discussed in eugenicist publications appearing in Soviet Russia in the early 1920s.

The notion of conception by means of artificial insemination appears to be one of the most important points offered for open discussion in *I Want a Baby!* After Stoneturner has rejected Milda's sexual advances and run away from her, she eventually finds a substitute in Iakov, whom she seduces only in order to bear a child. Iakov is far from being an ideal citizen of the Soviet State, a drunkard and a misogynist (he blames Ksenichka for inciting her own rape) who sees himself as a victim of the NEP period, lacking the means to seduce the women to whom he is attracted. He tells his story to his friends in front of Milda: 'But look how these women carry on! They walk round the streets like it was in their bedroom. Pink stockings on their legs, all smoothed round. They stick their arses out. And their lips are bruised red from kissing. [...] They'll only go to bed with you if you've got plenty of money'. Yet he eventually marries his girlfriend and develops fatherly feelings towards his children. At the end of the play he is presented as a highly positive character whose contribution to the well-being of his country is recognized when both of his children are awarded prizes. He refers to all the fathers whose children participate in the contest to find the best child as 'the heroes of our age'.

Both Iakov and Stoneturner appear in Milda's dream, the concluding part of the play entitled 'The Children on Show', as representatives of the State who share an interest in eugenics and children. Thus the Stoneturner, who sees eugenics as a substitute for religion, acts as a spiritual leader congratulating some of the fathers on their success in producing healthy-looking children. Milda's dream depicts a new building completed in 1930 (still four years in the future) and a nursery full of voluntary organizers forming a chain to cordon off the mothers' area. The nursery

is adorned with posters proclaiming ‘Healthy Parents for a Healthy New Shift’, ‘State Nurseries Free the Woman Worker’, ‘A Harvest of Children’, ‘An Easy Birth Requires Healthy Nourishment’, ‘A Healthy Conception [Means] a Healthy Pregnancy’ and similar messages.<sup>20</sup> Also figuring in the dream are the Fact Club Secretary selling a house calendar for 1930, Tolstoy’s novel *Resurrection*, a 30-copeck booklet offering advice on sexual problems, a medical committee charged with awarding prizes for the healthiest infants and toddlers and a group of gamblers laying bets on the likely prizewinners. Here too Milda meets Iakov, the father of her two children who is now married to Lympa with whom he also has two children, and explains she is a working mother who breastfeeds her children and hands them over to the Children’s Home once they are weaned. In a final speech, the Stoneturner explains his wish to donate his latest invention to the Children’s Home. He describes his gadget as a ‘centralised electrical self-comforter’ and explains how it works: ‘Press this button – and in every cradle a rattle is activated. A self-rocking cradle triggered by the infant cry’.<sup>21</sup>

The glorification of Soviet men prepared to father numerous children that ends the play has unmistakable overtones of technological utopianism. Tret’iakov’s emphasis on the functionalist, rationalist notion of technology recalls the manner of the Constructivists, and the fact that the conclusion of the play is presented as Milda’s dream suggests a symbolic manifestation of the functionalist, technology-inspired idealism associated with German New Realism (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). Since it is difficult to judge whether Milda’s vision of technological progress and social engineering is utopian or dystopian, it might be interpreted as an embodiment of her anxieties. In some ways, it might be also seen as Tret’iakov’s attempt to reconcile two diametrically opposed views of technology: the expressionist view that highlights its destructive and irrational potential, and the cult mentality of *Neue Sachlichkeit* that relies on complete confidence in social engineering driven by technology.

While there are allusions in Milda’s dream to similar ‘baby contests’ in England, the character called ‘Man in Blouse’ leaves no doubt as to the superiority of the Soviet event: ‘When I was in England, I never saw anything like this’. The allusions to England in Tret’iakov’s play might be viewed not only

<sup>20</sup> Tret’iakov, *I Want a Baby!*, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Tret’iakov, *I Want a Baby!*, 118.



as a means of political propaganda, but to a greater extent as a reflection of the fact that eugenic thinking was widespread in the modernist period, permeating medicine and social science, affecting popular culture and shaping public policy and aesthetic theories. Thus, for example, Daylanne English in her illuminating study on eugenics in American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance writes: ‘Eugenic thinking was so pervasive in the modern era that it attained the status of common sense in its most unnerving Gramscian sense. From eugenics’ inception in late nineteenth-century England to its peak in the United States during the postwar years of the late 1910s and 1920s, few challenged the view that modern nations, especially those beset by immigration, must improve their stock, in order to remain competitive, indeed viable, in the modern world’.<sup>22</sup> Given this link between eugenic thinking and the utopian vision of modern nations, it comes as no surprise that the original 1926 version of Tret’iakov’s play should be set in Moscow, where the contrast between the old and the new was more obvious than in the rest of Russia.

Leach convincingly argues that the first, ‘Moscow’ version of the play, more linear, sharp and rough than the second version set in the Russian steppe, reflects ‘the frustrations of socialist idealists like Tret’iakov himself, who saw the good and the bad in the new Soviet society’.<sup>23</sup> He pays special attention to the fact that the scene of Milda’s seduction of Iakov is depicted in the context of an assemblage of various ‘snapshots’ of Moscow life: ‘the author creates a dense pattern of images in sound, movement and light, including a drug addict getting “high”, poets declaiming, a hooligan dragging a woman to a ginshop, a group of soldiers marching and singing, and a man crushing the lips of the woman he is kissing – a piercing bird’s-eye view of contemporary Moscow, presented as a collage’.<sup>24</sup> This apt observation on the aesthetic innovations of the play highlights Tret’iakov’s interest in urban life as a material for collage. Tret’iakov’s experimentation with the lyric-epic genre yields a comparison with Moholy-Nagy’s pioneering notion of photomontage. As Margolin points out, ‘While Rodchenko always considered the social world as the reference point for his photographs [...], Moholy-Nagy wanted to demonstrate the possibilities of an expanded vision that

<sup>22</sup> Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Leach, ‘*I Want a Baby!*’, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Leach, ‘*I Want a Baby!*’, 8.

was not represented through the objects of the world but in the process of seeing it anew'.<sup>25</sup> These words seem equally applicable to Tret'iakov, who in *I Want a Baby!* uses the image of a new woman to impose upon his audience a new way of looking at reality with an expanded and enlightened vision focussing on positive examples.

Such analogies between Tret'iakov's 'montage of attractions' style and Moholy-Nagy's photomontage may seem to support Harold Segel's suggestion that the former's experimental plays of the 1920s present striking parallels with the New Realism that replaced German Expressionism around 1924. Thus, in his analysis of Tret'iakov's 1923 play *Are you listening, Moscow?! (Slyshish', Moskva?!)* Segel suggests that the use of pantomime, film techniques, different lighting effects, dance and dramatised dream sequences strongly resembles many of the structural innovations of Expressionist plays. Similarly, he finds that in *Gas Masks (Protivogazy; 1924)* 'the simultaneous shouting at several places in the action heightens the emotional aspect of the situation and creates the sense of urgency often experienced in Expressionist drama'.<sup>26</sup>

However, while *I Want a Baby!* also contains several devices found in Expressionist drama, it appears to have even more in common with Fritz Lang's 1926 film *Metropolis*. Both works attempt to synthesize two dystopian notions of technology, i.e. the rationalist function and the irrational one. The latter unfolds the chaotic, demonic and disruptive notion of technology. If one applies the triadic metaphor 'head, heart, and hands' found in Christian symbolism to the structure of the play, then it might be argued that the image of the Stoneturner, who displays the quality of superhuman efficiency and rationality, represents the head and brain of the Soviet Metropolis, while Milda acts as its heart and Iakov represents the workers who lack the spirit and emotions that define human life, and therefore appear to be mechanical and replaceable. Only Milda, the party official and educationalist, seems to be capable of linking the chief designers of the utopian space and the workers, rejoining thereby the head with the hands.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 161.

<sup>26</sup> Harold Segel, 'German Expressionism and Early Soviet Drama', in Robert Russel and Andrew Barratt, eds., *Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism* (Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press, 1990), 206.

In other words, Tret'iakov presents Moscow of the NEP period as a fragmented social body subordinated to an abstract order that favours a technologically-centred rationality which in turn leads to alienation and the loss of identity. If Milda is in some sense associated with the Mother of God, Lympa is seen as a false Virgin Mary, since she is identified with the sensual and irrational aspects of life. Iakov's oscillation between his love for each of them suggests a reading of the play as a manifestation of the anxiety of Soviet workers of the 1920s, subject equally to the emotional manipulation of the rationalist mechanism of the educationalists on the one hand and the irrational and demonic spirit of nature on the other. In this respect, Tret'iakov's play might be seen as an attempt to reconcile the scientific and the magico-spiritual. The condensed sexuality and technology manifest in the play appear as the product of a fetishisation in which an alienated object substitutes for an organic whole. The Stoneturner's obsession with scientific management and his urge to dominate are exposed in the play as a fetish of the modern age, so that in 1926 Tret'iakov can be seen as gravitating between the expressionist view that technology could be purged of its threatening aspects and the New Realism's conception of technology as a harbinger of social progress. The playwright's vision of gendered technologies presents gender itself as alienated and based on the repression of the organic wholeness of nature; or, in other words, the play represents modernity as lacking, as a split that causes the repression of a feminine nature by a tyrannical, masculine technological will, thus revealing anxiety about modernity in Oedipal terms as the imposition of the technological law of the father – that is, as a castration anxiety that divides the modern subject. It aspires to a merger of the masculine technological will for modernity with the ancient feminine spirit of nature, but the overcoming and spiritualisation of the repressive and paternal rational order is not resolved and lies beyond the boundaries of the play. The Stoneturner in Milda's dream seems to be acting both as the mother and the father who looks after the well-being of the nation. In this dream the notion of love seems to be subsumed in the abstract notion of Soviet Russia.

Curiously enough, Tret'iakov's emphasis on the resolution of a gendered modernity as an androgynous whole (associated with the new image of Moscow represented by Milda) stems from the notion of modernity as split or alienated by a repressive technological rationality to be found in the works of Schiller. Central to this is the metaphoric representation of the progress of modernity as

a wheel whose monotonous noise represses part of human nature, leading to the production of a robot-like copy or an artificial imprint. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller suggests that the creation of a technologised modern nature might lead to a return of the repressed which could reinstate a society uncontrolled, ‘instead of hastening upward into an organic life’.<sup>27</sup> This call to restore wholeness by means of a higher art seems to be well interwoven into Tret’iakov’s vision of the revolutionary drama constructed as a montage of attractions, in accordance with which art itself serves to represent the Eternal Feminine. It testifies to the need to reconcile the modern technological world and abstract spirituality noted by R. L. Rutsky, for whom from its very beginning ‘aesthetic modernism [was] caught up in a desire to mediate between the eternal and the modern, the magico–spiritual and the technological – a desire, one might say, to spiritualise, or rather, to *aestheticise*, the modern and the technological’.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, Tret’iakov’s play illustrates well Lawrence Birken’s argument about the centrality of sexology to the intellectual history of modernity. According to Birken, the sexological revolution beginning with Darwin and Freud triggered the emergence of changing models of sexuality that have parallels with the increased role of consumption within economic thought. The discourse of sexology acknowledged an undifferentiated libidinality as the basis for human relations, bringing the potential for a democratisation of desire and enabling women to establish their status as desiring subjects.<sup>29</sup> In accordance with the structural logic of Tret’iakov’s play, Milda overcomes her powerlessness through the strategic deployment of her desirability. In order to simulate desirability, Milda must learn the magic tricks of seduction, relying therefore on the power of artifice in order to achieve her own ultimate desire. Jean Baudrillard’s suggestion that ‘seduction never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice, signs and rituals’<sup>30</sup> is fully applicable to Tret’iakov’s play.

However, such an idealisation of seduction as feminine explicitly denies its role in gender power relations, presenting it as the privileged space of indeter-

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Schiller (trans. Reginald Snell), *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York: Unger, 1965), 35.

<sup>28</sup> R. L. Rutsky, ‘The Mediation of Technology and Gender: Metropolis, Nazism, Modernism’, *New German Critique* 60, Autumn 1993, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of Culture of Abundance, 1871–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Jean Baudrillard (trans. Brian Siger), *Seduction* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1990), 2.

minacy and masquerade. It could be argued that *I Want a Baby!* is a manifestation of the nostalgic desire to re-construct the image of Turgenev's young woman in modern times. It appears to extend the wide-ranging discussion of women and modernity triggered by the publication of L. Nikulin's article in the newspaper *Moskovskaia gazeta* in January 1914. This puts the question as to whether it was still possible to encounter in Moscow the kind of romantically- and altruistically-minded young girl represented by Turgenev's heroines, or whether this type has been completely replaced by female dandies and passionate advocates of the tango. As Nikulin puts it, in the 1910s 'Rudins and Lavretskys turned into civil servants and Turgenevean girls went to Adashev's Schools of Drama'.<sup>31</sup> In response, Georgii Iakulov had advanced the view that the tango should be seen as a manifestation of the old order, and that more emphasis should be put on purely Russian female types such as the Old Believer *Boiarynia* Morozova and the strong women of Dostoevsky's novels. Iakulov also proposed teaching these women to sublimate their sensual needs by cultivating activities that would develop them intellectually and spiritually. In his response to Nikulin's question, Mikhail Larionov compared contemporary women, dreamers and decadents alike, to artificial dolls who could be returned to life in part by the spread of the tango in Russia. Natal'ia Goncharova's extensive reply to Nikulin's question suggested that in modern times Turgenevean girls had been replaced by decadents who faked emotions and were obsessed with sensuality and eroticism. She gave expression to her own artistic credo which overcame the existing stereotypes of femininity: 'all the charm of Turgenevean young women is in their unconscious simplicity, whereas in modern life simplicity can only be conscious. This being the case, a conscious lack of simplicity is much to be preferred' ('*Вся прелесть тургеневских девушек в их бессознательной простоте, а при современной жизни может быть простота только сознательная. В таком случае уж лучше сознательная непростота*').<sup>32</sup>

In a curious manner, Tret'iakov's play takes Goncharova's view of the New Woman further, providing a vivid example of modern subjectivity embodied in the Latvian girl Milda which relies on a web of hybrid diasporic identities and a complex mixture of different cultural traditions and philosophical systems. Lis-

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in E. V. Basner, 'Natal'ia Goncharova o "soznatel'noi neprostote"', in G. F. Kovalenko, *Amazonki Avangarda* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), 149.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted Basner, 152.

sitzky's illustration for the planned 1929 production highlights the collage-like image of the identity of modern subject, invested with blurred gender characteristics and a swarthy complexion. Given the strong interest in the 1920s in African cultures as well as in eugenics, it may be that Tret'iakov and his fellow artists were attempting to envisage the possibility of a counter-culture of modernity beyond the logic of binary coding. Tret'iakov's statement that 'the Futurist must be least of all the owner of his own production'<sup>33</sup> sheds light on the meaning of the radiant image of her future children in Milda's dream in the concluding part of the play. Their happy faces resemble the photographic images of healthy, happy babies used in Soviet posters. Her dream might be seen therefore as an embodiment of the nostalgic desire to recapture the moment of love-making, presented symbolically as the instant of fixing forever a pure image proof against all change and impermanence.

Given Tret'iakov's interest in the literature of fact, his anxieties as playwright-photographer inscribed in this utopian play might best interpreted in terms suggested by Baudrillard, for whom the image can emerge only after it has been put in suspense: 'It must be captured in the single fantastic moment which is the first encounter, when things are not yet aware that we are here, when they have not been yet arranged by analytical order, when our absence is not yet fading away. But this instant is ephemeral. We should not be present to see it. This is what photographers do, hidden behind their lens, themselves vanishing, themselves having disappeared. For this is the price of making object appear: the disappearance of the subject'.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Milda's dream is inserted into the concluding part of the play as a visualised embodiment of absolute subjectivity achieved in a state of silence. As Roland Barthes puts it, 'Shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence'.<sup>35</sup> Tret'iakov's play celebrates the visionary aspects of modern art, reinforcing thereby the point that the artistic-social avant-garde is not merely interested in innovative forms but desires these forms to become signifiers of a new spirit. As Margolin explains, the avant-garde artists wanted to effect 'a double revolution' by redefining revolutionary art practice so

<sup>33</sup> Sergei Tret'iakov, 'Otkuda i kuda?', *Lef*, 1, 1923, 201.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Violence of the Image and the Violence Done to the Image', in Victoria Grace et al., eds., *Baudrillard: West of the Dateline* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2003), 180.

<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes (trans. Richard Howard), *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), 55.

that it became revolutionary social practice as well,<sup>36</sup> opening up new directions for the artist and producing social models of what social life might look like in the future.

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<sup>36</sup> Margolin, 3.