

## KANTOR'S 'POOR OBJECT' AS ICON OF TRUTH

### Abstract

In a 1980 address Jacques Derrida characterised the problematic of representation as a 'sending' or 'dispatch'—as *envoi* of truth. For Derrida the appearance of the *envoi* is not separate from that which it represents. Such a revision of the relationship between truth and representation derives from Heidegger's reading of Plato, which deconstructs the Allegory of the Cave into a narrative economy. The 'image' of truth enshrined in Plato's cave is seen in terms of a necessarily structured process of disclosure or *alētheia*. Such an 'economy of truth' is also an inherent part of the Orthodox icon's uncanny power to act as the *envoi* of truth from 'the other world'. Recent research has identified a relationship between the metaphysics of icons and the early twentieth-century avant-gardes in contemporaneous Russian writing.

In categorically located his 'poor object' 'between the garbage dump and eternity' Tadeusz Kantor's aesthetic apparently bears an unlikely affinity with the 'hammered gold and gold enamelling'—'the artifice of eternity' of Orthodox icons. However, whilst Kantor can be seen to draw on the metaphysics of Bruno Schulz's 'degraded reality', his apparently peculiar marriage of symbolism and abstraction indicate a previously unexplored proximity, via the Russian avant-garde, with the mystical legacy of the aesthetic logic of icons. This paper makes links between Pavel Florensky's work on space and representation, in particular his 1919 essay 'Reverse Perspective', and Heidegger's and Derrida's critiques of representation, drawing on recent research to shed new light on Kantor's aesthetic of the 'real'.

### Biography

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## KANTOR'S 'POOR OBJECT' AS ICON OF TRUTH

This paper brings together Tadeusz Kantor's conception of the Mannequin as a 'poor object' together with ideas about Russian icon art and reverse perspective that were current among members of the early twentieth century Russian avant-garde. This approach to Kantor's theatre theory, I propose, can shed new light on Kantor's aesthetic of the 'real'. For Kantor a mannequin was a symptom of the 'reality of the lowest rank'; it was an empty object, a carapace, a shell, and as such functioned as an *envoi* or messenger of death. 'In my theatre', he wrote, 'a MANNEQUIN should become a MODEL embodying and transmitting a powerful feeling of DEATH and of the condition of the dead—the MODEL for a Living ACTOR' (Kantor 1975, Section 8: n.p.). Kantor's conception of the actor's performance was purely formal, modelled on empty, dummy-like gestures, rather than on gestures imitative of natural human expressions or based on the idea of portraying inner thoughts and emotions. By articulating their nature as objects, the actors align themselves with the physical-mechanical aspect of their being. In appearing true to this aspect of life, they achieve a degree of realness in their performance that can be otherwise elusive for actors operating in more realistic or naturalistic traditions. Although Kantor, in his *Theatre of Death* manifesto, cites Heinrich von Kleist's and Edward Gordon Craig's championing of the mannequin over the live performer, his own approach to theatrical representation, as I will show, was in effect a deconstruction of theirs. In categorically locating his 'poor object' 'between the garbage dump and eternity' Kantor's aesthetic apparently bears an unlikely affinity with the 'hammered gold and gold enamelling'—'the artifice of eternity' of Orthodox icons (Yeats 1967: 218). Kantor's apparently peculiar marriage of symbolism and abstraction, I shall argue, indicates a previously unexplored proximity, via the Russian avant-garde, with the mystical legacy of the aesthetic logic of icons. This paper makes links between Pavel Florensky's work on space and representation, in particular his 1919 essay 'Reverse Perspective', and ideas drawn from Martin Heidegger's and Jacques Derrida's critiques of representation, to shed new light on Kantor's aesthetic of the 'real'.

Kantor came in touch with Bauhaus and Russian Constructivist ideas as a student of stage design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow during the 1930s (having rejected the post-impressionist focus of the painting course there). His

stage designs in the late 30s and early 40s were overtly Constructivist in character, but he subsequently abandoned this aesthetics of abstraction for an aesthetics of what he called 'Poor Realism' or 'Poor Reality'. He later pointed to his 1944 production, *The Return of Odysseus*, with its real objects such as a muddy cartwheel and stolen German loudspeaker, as the work in which he broke with his previous Constructivist allegiances. There are nevertheless indications that Constructivism haunted Kantor's mature work in his last three major spectacles. In *Let the Artists Die* (1985) the actors are fastened into wooden mechanical contraptions that force them into tortured poses. These poses mirror those of the figures at the base of the triptych of the Assumption of the Virgin, in St. Mary's Basilica in Kraków, by the medieval Nürnberg artist Veit Stoss. These 'torture machines' are, in turn, reminiscent of some of the *merz* sculptures of Kurt Schwitters, an artist who came to practice on the threshold between Dada and Constructivism in the 1920s. Also in the 1985 production, the 'barricade' assembled at that spectacle's finale can be seen as a 'poor' version of typical Soviet Constructivist stage design. In *I Shall Never Return* (1988), the setting is an inn—'a kind of abstraction of a dive' (Kantor in Kraszewski 1994: 302 and Kantor 2005: 111)—presided over by a 'Constructivist-innkeeper' who sets the square tin-topped tables and stools in strict lines and measures them obsessively with a folding ruler. In *Today is My Birthday* (1991), the Constructivist theatre director Meyerhold is invoked as witness to artistic martyrdom alongside Kantor's late Polish colleagues in the Kraków avant-garde, the abstractionists Maria Jarema and Jonasz Stern.

These Constructivist references and elements in Kantor's later work should not be discounted as extraneous but as indications of a deeper vein of continuous influence underlying his work. Kantor's particular understanding of 'Constructivism' and associated tendencies can be seen to build on early twentieth-century Russian ideas about the Orthodox Christian icon. Art historians have described Malevich's *Black Square* and Tatlin's *Corner Counter-Relief*, both exhibited at the seminal *0.10* exhibition in 1915, as icons. Indeed Tatlin himself initially trained as an icon painter. Each work was exhibited across a corner of a room, just as an icon was hung in the icon corner of a domestic Russian house. Within the western tradition, based on Euclidian geometry, perspectival paintings create the illusion of a space which recedes behind the

picture frame towards a vanishing point in the distance. The Russian theologian, mathematician, and philosopher Pavel Florensky developed an account of the space of the Russian icon which he argued is non-Euclidian. This ‘reverse perspective’ extends out towards the viewer just as the forms in Malevich and Tatlin’s works moved out of their corners to directly engage the viewer. Florensky also went on to develop a related idea of ‘reverse time’. In a 1922 work, he discusses ‘the infinite speed of the dream-time, the time that turns inside out, the time that flows backward’ (Florensky 1996: 35) As Clemena Antonova points out in her analysis of Florensky’s discussion: ‘there are two interrelated features of reverse time—one is its direction, the other its duration’ (Antonova 2010: 21). This leads her to interpret Florensky’s ‘reverse time’ as: ‘an in-depth reversal of kind. The very reversal of time suggests actually a lack of duration—this is exactly what “infinite in speed” and “instant” imply. The lack of duration [...] is an aspect of the concept of timelessness’ (Ibid.: 22), that is to say, eternity. It is this notion of reverse perspective and reverse time that, I propose, underlies Kantor’s conception of the mannequin as a ‘poor object’, and also underlies his statements about space, time, dream, and death in connection with mannequins.

Kantor, in his *Theatre of Death* manifesto, cites Heinrich von Kleist’s and Edward Gordon Craig’s championing of the mannequin over the live performer. He argued that he did not believe:

[...] that a mannequin (or a WAX FIGURE) might be substituted for a LIVING ACTOR (like Kleist and Craig demanded). It would be too easy and naive. I am trying to define the motives and destination of the unusual entity which has suddenly come into my thoughts and ideas. Its emergence is compatible with my increasingly strong belief that life can be expressed in art only by the lack of life and a resort to DEATH, by APPEARANCES, by the VOID and the lack of any MESSAGE. In my theatre a MANNEQUIN should become a MODEL embodying and transmitting a powerful feeling of DEATH and of the condition of the dead—the MODEL for a Living ACTOR.

(Kantor 1975, Section 8: n.p.)

Here Kantor reverses Craig’s ur-narrative in ‘an *opposite* image, with *reversed* meaning of events’ (Ibid. Section 9: n.p., my italics). In his ‘reversed’ account, Kantor characterises the ur-actor as a messenger of the eternal:

OPPOSITE those who remained on this side, there stood a HUMAN DECEPTIVELY SIMILAR to them, yet (by some secret and ingenious 'operation') infinitely DISTANT, shockingly FOREIGN, as if DEAD, cut off by an invisible BARRIER—no less horrible and inconceivable, whose real meaning and THREAT appear to us only in DREAMS. As if in the blinding flash of lightening, they suddenly perceived a glaring, tragically circus-like IMAGE OF A HUMAN, as if they had seen him FOR THE FIRST TIME, as if they had seen THEIR VERY SELVES. [...] the craft of the art of this ACTOR (also according to our terminology) revealed that realm of DEATH and its tragic and full-of-DREAD beauty.

(Kantor 2009: 237)

This conception of the actor, and of the actor-spectator relationship, articulated in Kantor's writings around the time of *The Dead Class* and his *Theatrical Space* essays, would seem to be directly related to reflections on the 1944 production of *The Return of Odysseus*. The equation between the categories of 'fiction' and 'eternity' have now been themselves equated by Kantor with the category of 'death'. As an intimation of eternity, 'death'—the negation of human being—is its *emballage* (packaging). In seizing on 'death' as a model for the actor, Kantor effectively transforms the actor into an icon-like performer: one who presents the *image* of human being as an *envoi* from the eternal world. In conceptualising the performance in this way Kantor can be seen to be mapping the reverse perspective, characteristic of icons and the first avant-garde, onto the actors as well as the poor objects that he turns into performers, and onto the stage setting as a whole.

Kantor's comments on the barrier between human and eternal reality appear more logical when read in the light of the icon's metaphysical situation on the same threshold. If the proscenium arch and its stage space (i.e. the picture stage) is seen as a three-dimensional analogy of the picture plane, then Kantor can be seen to have approximated the aesthetic of icons in several ways, which I will now briefly outline.

Firstly, in reflecting on his 1944 production of *The Return of Odysseus*—with its *fond* 'poor place' (the room), and its 'poor objects'—it is significant that Kantor foregrounded the idea of marginality, and especially 'the corner'. It is surely not mere coincidence that, just as Malevich and Tatlin placed their key works in corners at the *0.10* exhibition, Kantor explicitly set his *Dead Class* in

'the last forgotten outpost of our memory [...] in a crowded corner' (Kantor n.d.: 1):

The audience gradually take their seats. On a wooden floor in the C O R N E R there are several rows of school D E S K S . These are old-fashioned, poor-looking desks from a country school.

This poor classroom is divided on both sides, looking from the audience, with a

R O P E .

(Ibid.: 8)

For Kantor, the essence of the piece was based on the idea of the marginality of the corner, and this allowed *The Dead Class* to manifest its 'corner-ness' wherever it was performed. From the cellars of the Krzysztofory mansion to the stages of the grandest theatres, Kantor's school benches confronted each audience as if perched on the edge of a forgotten corner of eternity: 'In this performance where the action takes place on the borderline between life and death [...]' (Ibid: 155). For Kantor these school desks were: 'always in a CLASSROOM. But it was not a / CLASSROOM—REAL PLACE. / It was a black hole, a / void, in front of which / the whole auditorium / s t o p p e d ' (Kantor 2009: 365). In his 1974 texts written in preparation for *The Dead Class*, Kantor wrote of an 'unusually simple idea which had never been used before' (Kantor n.d.: 10–11). Recalling his 1963 production based on Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *The Madman and The Nun*, under the banner of the 'zero theatre', Kantor recalls 'considering staging a secret performance done "on the side", .... Yes, exactly: "on the side!" In the CORNER!! ....' (Ibid.). Kantor goes on to describe the paradoxical power of this idea of marginality:

If in a room full of people you make somebody act 'abnormally' i n t h e m i d d l e of the room, all people gathered will take it for a p e r f o r m a n c e . If the same happens on the side, in the corner of the room, everybody will watch it with embarrassment, or even apprehension. The same activity when carried [out] 'in the middle' of the room, before an audience, was regarded as performing, pretending, safe, but when it happened in the corner, it became true, real. The line of division and strangeness became a fact.

The stage has a l w a y s been placed 'in the middle' 'on the axis' of the spectator, for the p e r f o r m a n c e to be watched, observed. However, it is enough to move the PLACE of the so-called PERFORMANCE to the side, to

the corner, place it not 'on the axis', and a strange thing happens. The spectator loses 'natural' sight of something that used to be 'performed', or, to be exact, pretended and demonstrated. In the corner it will acquire the features of embarrassing exhibitionism, shameful dealing not meant for the spectator, completely independent, STRANGE and self-sufficient! which does not require the presence of the spectator.

(Kantor n.d.: 10–11)

In this passage can be seen the metaphysics of Bruno Schulz's 'degraded reality' articulated in terms of an anti-representational theory of performance. In the same way that the materiality of the icon's physical presence in the spectator's space allows it to escape the negative connotations of being a 'copy', conceptually relocating the performance to the 'side' and the 'corner' allows it to acquire an independent, autonomous quality. As things previously hidden suddenly reveal themselves and impinge on the spectator with a forceful impression, so Kantor's conceptual marginalisation of the performance action acquires a peculiar force.

A second connection with the aesthetic of icons lies in the manner of performance of Kantor's actors. The way in which they are used, and use themselves, as found objects, also allows them to function in the manner of the figures in icon art. The very 'emptiness' of Kantor's actors in their performance endows them with a sense of eternity which confronts the audience in the manner of the 'Poor Object'. In the early sections of *The Dead Class*, the actors confront the spectators from behind their desks, at first by simply staring, then by raising their hands as if trying to attract the attention of a schoolteacher; later by wailing, as if in ecstatic Jewish prayer; and later still with grimaces—'pulling faces at the audience'—as the Polish theatre critic Andrzej Źurowski has noted. However, this is a performance and not a painting, and this confrontational engagement with the spectator acquires a choreographic dimension through movement. In a pattern that recurs throughout the 'theatre of death', the actors periodically recede into and advance from the darkness at the rear of the performance space. Following their re-entrance, they engage in a circling movement around the stage, a movement that has also has the effect of withdrawing and advancing to and from proximity with the spectator. As they pass the front of the performance area, on the threshold with the spectator's space, the actors fix their audience with mask-like expressions and beady eyes.

The effect of this dynamic orientation towards the spectator is, I argue, akin to the way that the icon directly confronts the viewer rather than passively offering itself up to the spectators' gaze. However, the layered incongruities with which Kantor has endowed his actors contributes a further effect. On the one hand there is the incongruity that it is old people who stare back at the spectator from behind the schooldesks. But, upon their return to the stage after their first exit, they are adorned with mannequins of their childhood selves. It is not just that the actors' performance is modelled on death. Their juxtaposition of their old, corpse-like-selves with real objects-in-children's-form doubles the truth-message that human being is being-for-death (as Heidegger characterised it): a being that comes from nothing and returns to nothing. In his *Partytura* writings for *The Dead Class*, Kantor discusses this paradoxical, layered pairing of the actor-mannequin 'bio-objects':

The little corpses of children—their own childhoods—which they [i.e. the actors] bear and which alone could enliven their memories ... are dead. The pupils are themselves almost dead, stricken with a deadly disease. They have a chance of becoming O B J E C T S of art at the cost of STRANGENESS and DEATH. This very S T R A N G E N E S S makes them approach the state of objects, deprives them of their biological, organic and naturalistic l i v e l i n e s s for which there is hardly any room in art.

Through this 'o f f e r i n g', they become elements of a work of art. The living one!

(Kantor n.d.: 176–177, ellipsis in original)

In this, Kantor seems to echo Malevich's characterisation of his *Black Square* as a 'living royal infant'. This playing with the idea of human being around the borderland of life and death serves to affirm the very peculiarity of human being.

A third connection between Kantor's 'theatre of death' and icons is to their aesthetic of timelessness. In certain icons, not only are multiple perspectives of an object presented in the same image, multiple points of one narrative are frequently also synthesised within the same image, apparently occupying the same space. In his 'theatre of death' works, Kantor also frequently represents multiple times in the same stage space at the same time. In *Let the Artists Die*, he shows himself as a six-year-old child, as a dying man, and as the observer of himself dying. In *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole, Wielopole*, he layers events

and characters from different times and places within the same place. If the perspective of time is considered, then Kantor's presentation of memory can be understood using the analogy of 'reverse perspective' that Florensky deploys in his concept of 'reverse time' in the discussion of dreams in his book, *Iconostasis* (1996). In the 'theatre of death' the depth of time functions in reverse in that the past is moved up to press against the present and stand before the spectators, its reality adjacent to theirs behind the invisible barrier separating them from the action.

In its juxtaposition of the theme of death with that of schoolroom pranks and children's games, *The Dead Class* also seems to echo Søren Kierkegaard's discourse surrounding the relationship between human being and eternity, and his reference to a Danish idiomatic folk phrase, that:

[...] the whole of life was a game that came to an end, and in which everyone, the greatest [as] well as the least, made their departures like school children, extinguished like sparks of burning paper, and last of all the soul itself as the schoolmaster. And so there is also a muteness of annihilation found in the fact that the whole was merely a children's game, and now the game is over.

(Kierkegaard 1980: 93 fn.)

However, in *The Dead Class*, Kantor is not the schoolmaster here. Florensky had argued that 'pure painting is, or at least wants to be, above all *true* to life, not a substitute for life but merely the symbolic signifier of its deepest reality' (Florensky 2002: 209–210 ). For Florensky, the painting is not a window in the sense of the picture plane as conceived by Alberti and Dürer. It is rather, a metaphorical window, a symbol of direct communion with a reality *behind* appearances, rather than a view onto those appearances themselves. In this sense Kantor's role on stage in *The Dead Class* can be seen in terms of this Florenskian window through which the spectator engages with the threshold of eternity, which the performance brings into presence.

Kleist had argued in his 1810 essay that 'where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near a puppet' (Kleist 1994: 7), that 'Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the God' (Ibid.: 12). In Kantor's 'theatre of death', both the 'poor object', and the actors themselves, rendered as 'poor objects', achieve something of the grace

that Kleist ascribed only to marionettes. In doing so, they function like icons, as *envois* of a truth: as emissaries between the living and the dead, between the eternal and the temporal.

Kantor, in a sense transformed himself into an icon. This process of transformation can be seen at work in his 1978 acceptance speech for his receipt of *The Rembrandt Prize*: his 'Little Manifesto' (Kantor 2004: 23). In this text Kantor transforms himself into a 'poor object' and reverses the perspective of time to stand before his audience in the form of a small schoolboy, accused he knows not what of, in the corner of a forgotten schoolroom. In his final sequence of works, during the period 1985–1990, Kantor increasingly moved from the periphery to the centre of his work, gradually advancing 'the thing that he was' towards the status of an icon. In *Today is My Birthday* events transpired to bring about a performance work in which occurred the peculiar effect of absence, where it seemed as if the dead presence of the artist 'stared' out at his audience from the very centre of the work. This movement further into the artwork, until the artist is wholly iconised within it, is the subject of another discussion.

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