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Vadim Fishkin's *Lucid Orbit*

Humour is often dark, but always lucid.

– Simon Critchley¹

For many people, and especially for Vadim Fishkin's fellow Russians, the title of the exhibition *No Magic* will very likely bring to mind the central scene in Mikhail Bulgakov's famous novel *The Master and Margarita*. Here, the character Woland, a personification of the forces of hell, summons the public to come to the Variety Theatre for "An Evening of Black Magic and Its Exposé", as the poster describes it. The connection with Woland's magic show is all the more justified because the same paradoxical effect – a miraculous phenomenon followed by the demonstration of its fictitious character – is the basis on which Fishkin constructs his work *Magic Button*, the source of the exhibition's title. If, in the creation of the novelist, "money rains down" on the theatre visitors, who are further encouraged to exchange their clothes for expensive stylish outfits, only to later see the banknotes turn into candy wrappers and the new clothes turn into nothing at all, then in the visual artist's work the visitors to the exhibition are encouraged to press a red button, after which soap bubbles rain down on them with accompanying audio effects while a person in a video projection on the wall explains that "there is nothing miraculous" in what is happening, that it is merely "an electronic relay, a projection, light effects... and soap bubbles".

Bulgakov began writing his novel in the late 1920s, when the utopian promises of the Russian avant-garde, both artistic and political, were being put in question (as it seemed to many at the time) or (as it seemed to many others) were entering a new stage of their evolution. Fishkin's formation as an artist took place in this same country in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the entire project of the avant-garde utopia had come to an end (as it seemed to many at the time) or (as it seemed to many others) was given new impetus for development. What is more, in both of these periods, faith and scepticism, hope and disillusionment could happily coexist in the very same consciousness. So it is logical that, for both Bulgakov and Fishkin, the mediator that reconciles these opposing principles is irony. Nor is it surprising, that in the years when *The Master and Margarita* was being written, Mikhail Bakhtin was composing his great works on the culture of laughter.

Bakhtin connected the birth of laughter and irony to the age of the Renaissance, that is, the same period when the idea of utopia was born. Indeed, the emergence of modernity led to the awareness of our own subjectivity and the discovery of distance vis-à-vis reality, which in turn created the conditions for both laughing at the now-revealed imperfection of the world and developing projects for its betterment. This collision with world's imperfection, however, naturally proved traumatic, so the Renaissance also saw the birth of the tragic, which is structurally aligned with the category of the sublime. In both situations, in the

¹ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, Verso, London and New York 2007, p. 82.

comic and the sublime, we are dealing with the experience of defamiliarization, of looking at the world from the outside. But if, according to Kant, the subject of the sublime contemplates reality under the spell of a grandeur that exceeds all human measure, then for the subject who laughs, relations with reality are incomparably more involved. As Vladimir Propp tells us, laughter derives from the awareness that nothing exists behind reality's outer shell, that it conceals only a void. So it is necessary to expose the illusory nature of the world, to break the world down into its basic elements and rearrange them, turn them inside out, which, as we know from Bakhtin, is what happened at carnivals during the Renaissance.

Something similar takes place in the art of Vadim Fishkin. His work *Magic Button*, which is programmatic for the present exhibition, is constructed on denying the public's expectations: instead of the illusion being shown as reality, the public is offered its "exposé" with a precise description of the technology that creates the illusion. More precisely, the illusion created here by the artist thematizes its own illusory nature. Something analogous happens in *Snow Show*, where viewers are instructed to state their name; this name is then repeated by a scratchy mechanical voice which assures them that the work is dedicated specifically to them, and artificial snow sprinkles down on their heads. Here, in tautological form, the artist thematizes one of the basic *dispositifs* of the art system: works are created for the viewer and only for the viewer. Generalizing more broadly, we can say that in both works, as in many others, Fishkin ironizes the seemingly unconditional, but at the same time extremely fragile and relative, idea of the art institution's lofty significance. In other words, the object of Fishkin's deconstruction turns out to be what Michel Pêcheux called "the Munchausen effect", meaning the social status quo – when the subject and social context remain in discursive identity, that is, when "each person knows in advance what the 'other' will think and say ... and not without reason, since each person's discourse is produced by the discourse of the other".²

In this connection, the Kantian sublime in its most obvious incarnation – the motif of "the starry sky above us" – frequently appears in Fishkin's works. But Fishkin's skies – and here he again denies the public's expectations – hold nothing that is inaccessible. On the contrary, his sky is something familiar, homey; its stars are but an arm's length away. Anyone can give them a name (*M.I. Star*), and they offer just as much sublimity as a household hair drier (*Moving Stars*). In Fishkin's art, natural and social cataclysms are regulated by an ordinary remote control (*Lost and Found/Remote Control*); temporal changes over the course of a day, or changes in the weather, play out before our eyes with the help of theatrical lamps (*A Speedy Day, Choose Your Day*); and the laws of science are overturned, or confirmed, with the help of ordinary objects (*Sun Stop, Don Quixote Pact, Prometheus Electronic*). Everything, no matter how superhuman or grand, becomes ordinary and diminished in scale, reduced to the level of a game or a toy.

Fishkin's turn to the world of play, his reduction of the artwork to the status of a play object, is in essence an assertion of the autonomous nature of art. After all, as Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, the leading play theorists, tell us, play always fences off its own space while distancing itself from the social surroundings. Hence, the culminating scene in Bulgakov's novel, described above, takes place on a theatre stage, while in one of Fishkin's earliest works, *Between Dog and Cow*, performed at Moscow's Regina

² Michel Pêcheux, "Propisnyye istiny: Lingvistika, semantika, filosofiya", in: Patrick Sériot, ed., *Kvadratura smysla: Frantsuzskaya shkola analiza diskursa*, Progress, Moscow 1999, p. 276; originally published as *Les Vérités de la Palice: Linguistique, sémantique, philosophie*, Maspero, Paris 1975.

Gallery, the action was fenced off from the basic space by a tidy border. Stage, podium, or platform – this is also a fundamental condition in most of Fishkin’s works that followed, which, by the way, ensured him success in his second creative role, as a set designer for the theatre.

Theatricality and performativity, too, have deep roots in the nature of laughter. Humour, indeed, always manifests itself through a processual action in which the important thing is a preordained duration of time that ends in an unforeseeable, sudden resolution. It is like an elastic band being stretched out: “We know that the elastic will snap, we just do not know when.”³ The same is true of the poetics of Fishkin’s works: there is always a beginning, a literal or metaphorical button, that sets in motion a process that in its resolution produces the artistic effect. Here laughter and, with it, Fishkin’s poetics mirror the processuality of ritual, with the only difference being that the ironic beginning tends to expose the system of social conventions at the basis of the ritual act.⁴ Hence, Fishkin’s poetics with its marionette-like theatricality, by exposing the “Munchausen effect” – i.e. the discursive discordances – in art and the art system, ironizes the demiurgic sacral pretensions of art.

Incidentally, reducing the artwork to the status of a play object proves to have yet another characteristic consequence for Fishkin’s poetics. Like any toy, his works draw our attention to how they are made – to the principle on which they are constructed. And in so doing, his work returns art to its classical Aristotelian definition as *techne* – skill, mastery, technique. Aristotle, however, saw art as capable of bringing practical benefit – this, for him, is the only thing that distinguishes it from science (*episteme*), which exists solely for itself as knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Fishkin, however, by depriving art of its demiurgic, life-constructing mission, in fact identifies it as science. Art produces knowledge, and specifically, knowledge about itself, about its own fictitiousness, its own non-being.

This self-sufficient character of art, its self-referentiality, is yet another consequence of Fishkin’s involvement in the culture of laughter. Laughter, after all, is always tied to an object of ridicule. For this reason, the artist’s works are not confined to exposing the emptiness behind the world’s outer shell while showing us its fabricated nature and theatricality – that is, its apparent unreality. Rather, by appropriating the object of parody, the artist’s works themselves are presented as something marionettish and mechanical – as something apparently non-human. Fishkin is not just ironizing art and its pretensions to sublimity; he also ironizes himself and his own artistic pretensions to show us the ultimate truth about art. It is hardly surprising, then, that the artist himself so frequently appears in his own works, if only, as in *Magic Button*, as a computer manipulation that speaks in an artificial voice. Freud saw this ability to laugh at oneself as typical of Jewish humour, while Samuel Beckett considered such laughter to be the highest achievement of the human personality; he called it *risus purus* (“pure laughter”).

Hence, a different, opposite, perspective on Fishkin’s poetics emerges. If we accept that laughing at oneself is the highest manifestation of the personality, then “levelling” the human aspect in art may be seen as a form of its affirmation. Incidentally, in Fishkin’s works the presence of the author is by no means always realized through some scenographic fiction. Fishkin’s *Lighthouse*, for example, presupposes the artist’s

³ Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, Routledge, London 2002, p. 7.

⁴ On laughter as anti-ritual, see Mary Douglas, “Jokes”, *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*, Routledge, London and New York 1999, pp. 146–164.

permanent bodily involvement in his work. Here we already see a manifestation of the reverse side of the ironic view of the world. For while laughter may, indeed, expose the world's illusory nature, it is always inseparable from the actual presence of a person. Whether we are talking about the convulsive, flesh-shaking Rabelaisian belly laugh or merely a smile, there is always a person involved in the laughter through their corporeality. Comicality does not exist apart from what is properly human; someone must know how to see the comical aspect, must be able to make some moral assessment of it or perform some cognitive operation upon it. We can laugh at animals, but, as anthropologists tell us, they themselves are incapable of laughter (*Between Dog and Cow*).⁵

Taking this opposite perspective further, we see that irony, while making customary things unfamiliar, also makes ordinary things miraculous. Laughter is sacral to the extent that, by exposing the fictitiousness of the world, it discovers in it another potential hidden behind the illusion. In laughter, the real becomes unreal: that is why André Breton and the surrealists were so fond of humour and why Kierkegaard held that humour was the last stage in the transition from the ethical to the religious. In keeping with the messianic, transformative power of humour, Fishkin creates each of his works as a miraculous phenomenon. After all, is not the stopping of the sun at its zenith a miracle (*Sun Stop*)? And a self-portrait printed on the leaves of a plant – is that not also a miracle (*Self-Portrait*)? Or the possibility of controlling rain and snow, thunder and lightning, spring and autumn, all without leaving your armchair (*Choose Your Day*)? And does not the ironic anti-rituality of *Magic Button* and *Snow Show* draw us into some festive liturgy, even if it is part of a new cult Fishkin has not yet fully elucidated? And to then surrender the world to anathema, to deny it a miracle, in *No Magic* – this is something only a heretic/apostate could do, or a new saint or prophet.

Finally, just as confessional faith presupposes a congregation, so laughter too is a social manifestation. In order to laugh at the imperfection of the world, there must be social agreement with respect to both the normativity of certain expectations and their incongruity to the facts. To put it another way, in order to expose the Munchausen effect, it must be at work in the first place. As Henri Bergson observed, laughter knows no loneliness – it is always a conspiracy, it always recruits accomplices. For this reason, Fishkin, unlike the artist Yuri Leiderman, his friend and comrade-in-arms from the 1990s, cannot conceive of art without communication, without the appeal to the other. Thus, his early Moscow project *Darkness Orbit* took the form of delicate interventions in the exhibitions of other artists. And what is his *Lighthouse*, if not a programmatic and desperate push toward the other? And not toward some concrete individual or collective other, but the other as described by Giorgio Agamben in *The Coming Community*: “the Whatever”.

Consequently, Fishkin's irony is, in Peter Sloterdijk's terms, not the humour of the cynic or *kynic*, but rather “humour that has ceased to struggle”. Or, to use Alexei Yurchak's term, what stands behind Fishkin's works is the humour of “inside/outsideness” (*vnyekhodimost'*), where this refers to a person recognizing that they are included in a system that for them becomes an object of irony with the aim of shifting the accents within it.⁶ In other words, Fishkin is not a political activist, but nor is he a cynical or

⁵ See Mary Douglas, “Do Dogs Laugh?” in *Implicit Meanings*, pp. 165–169.

⁶ See Alexei Yurchak, “Ironiya vnyekhodimosti”, chapter 7 in *Eto bylo navsegda, poka ne konchilos': Posledneye sovetskoye pokoleniye*, translated and revised by the author, *Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye*, Moscow 2014, pp. 461–552; originally published as *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2006.

tragic loner: his irony aims at a reconsideration of certain relationships; it does not seek to overturn or ignore them. It proposes a means of creative and moral existence within the system by creating meanings that the system can neither predict nor miscalculate. Through irony directed at the system Fishkin preserves the ideal of community and, by likening the artwork to a toy or marionette, preserves his faith in art, in *techne*; at the same time, he preserves the sublime by presenting it not as epic spectacle but on a puppet stage. Inherent in Fishkin's poetics is an inner dialectic that reminds us of the epigraph to *The Master and Margarita*: he is "part of that Power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good".

In Bulgakov's novel, as we remember, the uncompromising artist/idealist, the Master, was unable to bear the collision with the world's imperfection: he lost his reason and burned his manuscript. So at the end of the novel, when the Most High rewards each person in accordance with their deserts, he gives the Master only peace, not the thing he had so ardently requested: light. Vadim Fishkin does not need to beseech the Most High for light: the element of light is his basic instrument and is present in the majority of his works. Not afraid to accept the advice of the devil, Fishkin in his idealism turns out to be more radical than the Master, for he knows that "manuscripts do not burn".

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