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978-0-521-10899-7 - *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre*

Catriona Kelly

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Russian *Punch and Judy* show, *The Comedy of Petrushka*, was one of the most popular types of street theatre in Russia during the century between 1830 and 1930. It was known and performed in most Russian-speaking parts of the Russian Empire, from Odessa to Sakhalin, and its audience was composed of children and adults, rich and poor, peasants and proletariat, although its most characteristic spectators were the urban poor. ‘The puppet theatres were more numerous [than any other type of entertainment] at the carnivals,’ writes Yury Dmitriev; and Ivan Shcheglov confirms this:

No sir, Petrushka is not to be trifled with – he is still the fairground’s favourite hero! Take a look, if you please; the thickest and most contented crowd is always the one by his booth; besides those standing, some of the more diminutive spectators are even sitting on other people’s shoulders.¹

The memoirs of painters, writers and other artists active around the turn of the century testify to the charm of *Petrushka*: Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Sergey Yutkevich, Grigory Kozintsev, Andrey Bely and, most famously, Alexandre Benois, all did it homage (see particularly chapters 1 and 4).

Petrushka has considerable appeal also as an academic subject. All theatrical performances are necessarily ephemeral, popular theatrical performances the more so, and we are confronted, as in all popular-cultural traditions, with ‘the massive silences of the archives’, in James Clifford’s phrase.² But in the case of *Petrushka*, some artefacts have survived (a few puppets, for instance), which help to give some idea of what performances were like.³ A series of variants of the show, mostly dating from the late nineteenth century, supplies verbal, as well as visual, material to work with. The *Petrushka* shows are some indication of the diversity of Russian popular culture, whilst conversely making its links with popular culture elsewhere in Europe clear, being a fascinating combination of Western European influences brought by Italian puppeteers, and the native comic tradition going back to the minstrels and buffoons of Old Russia.

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The study of *Petrushka* can also make a contribution to the upsurge in interest in Russian urban popular culture, which has been manifested in particular by two excellent recent books, Anna Nekrylova's *Russkie narodnye gorodskie prazdniki*, on the Russian fairground, and Jeffrey Brooks' *When Russia Learned to Read*, on the cheap popular printed books of the late nineteenth century, and by A. M. Konechny's several articles and the exhibition on the Petersburg fairground which he organised at the Museum of the History of Leningrad in spring 1985.⁴ The importance of the popular dramatic tradition cannot be overestimated, given the illiteracy which notoriously obtained in the Russian Empire.⁵ The audiences for fairground and street theatre ran into millions; they outstripped by far the numbers who had access to printed material. At least until the late nineteenth century they were numerically the most important types of organised, professional entertainment. *Petrushka*, as a type of entertainment which was always nearly, and often entirely, free, reached particularly large numbers; and the place of its performance, directly among its audience, made it especially well suited to express the interests and frustrations of the urban poor. And until the 1860s it, the peepshows and the clowns' monologues were the only important types of spoken drama allowed on the fairground; most other shows were pageants and pantomimes with little dialogue.⁶

The importance of *Petrushka* extends outside its immediate context, for it inspired two traditions of drama outside the street. It was imitated by the high theatre: the Benois–Stravinsky ballet *Petrouchka* is arguably the most famous adaptation ever made of a Russian orally transmitted dramatic text. In the 1920s it, like other street genres, inspired many agitprop theatre spectacles and even whole agitprop theatre groups. And the significance of *Petrushka*, like other popular theatre genres, is explained by more than 'influence' in the sense of positive effect: throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Russian high theatre, with very few exceptions, has striven to dissociate itself from popular entertainment, to be a rarified pastime for intellectuals. It is impossible to understand Russian drama if this struggle for dissociation is not taken into account; yet most commentators on the dramatic tradition have preserved the purview of Russian dramatists. Such insensitivity to the popular theatrical tradition is a flaw, for example, in Simon Karlinsky's recent book on Russian drama, which does an excellent job on reclaiming the minor works of the high theatre.⁷

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My own interest in *Petrushka* came originally from my work on the high theatre, when I was studying neo-classical tragedies written by the Symbolists.⁸ I began by asking myself why the Symbolists, whose enthusiasm for drama was proclaimed to derive from a desire to reach the masses (as in Vyacheslav Ivanov's essays on the theatre, for example), should have with few exceptions ignored the dramatic forms which would have made access to the masses most likely. When they did choose popular theatrical forms, many of them turned to non-Russian traditions, as Vsevolod Meyerhold did in his essay 'The Fairground Booth', which discusses the French and Italian medieval and Renaissance fairgrounds, but not the Russian fairground; or to Russian popular theatre of the distant past, as Aleksey Remizov did in his drama based on the 'School Plays'.⁹ I then discovered that this contempt for or indifference to Russian popular theatre was very deep-rooted and by no means confined to the Symbolists. It led Mikhail Bakhtin, author of *François Rabelais and His World*, perhaps the best and most influential study of carnival in existence, to assert that Russia had never had carnivals in the Western sense:

The clearest, most classical carnival forms were preserved in Italy, especially in Rome. The next most typical carnivals were those of Paris. Next came Nuremburg, which adopted a more or less classical form at a somewhat later period. In Russia this process did not develop at all; the various aspects of folk merriment of a national or local character (shrove days, Christmas, fairs) remained unchanged. They offered none of the traits typical of Western European amusements. Peter the Great, as we know, tried to bring to Russia the later European style of the 'feast of fools' (for example, the election of the All-Clowns' Pope) and the pranks of the April fool, but these customs did not take root, and did not mix with local traditions.¹⁰

Bakhtin is right only in the two examples which he cites; a visit to any Russian fairground in the nineteenth or early twentieth century would have given him plenty of evidence that the rides, amusements and dramatic genres of the European fairground were represented in Russia, where they enjoyed popularity in no way inferior to their popularity in the West, and that, besides, carnival in an abstract sense – drunkenness, popular revelry, hedonism, and subversive celebration – was no less at home in Russia than elsewhere.

Bakhtin's indifference to Russian popular entertainments may have been prompted by prudence, given the date of his book on Rabelais.¹¹ There is no doubt that it is more benign than the crusading and hortatory attitude adopted by many of his compatriots. The difficulty

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of translating the term ‘popular culture’ into Russian is indicative of difference in attitude. And even if the coinage *populyarnaya kul' tura* were made, there would remain a problem, both aesthetic and political: the word *kul' tura* in Russian has not completed the meaning shifts which the word *culture* has accomplished in the West. As James Clifford has pointed out, since 1900 or so the word ‘culture’ has increasingly been used in a relativistic way, ‘suggesting a world of separate, distinctive, and equally meaningful ways of life’; it has to a great extent lost its former sense of ‘the outcome of a process of long development . . . the basic, progressive movement of humanity’.¹² In the Soviet Union, however, belief in ‘the basic, progressive movement of humanity’ remains enshrined. Ethnographers use the word *kul' tura* to refer to intellectual activities only (in opposition to *byt*, or ‘material culture’), and references to *kul' tura* in its relativistic meaning (such as ‘meetings between two cultures’) are found directly alongside references to *kul' tura* in a teleological or evolutionary sense (‘the raising of cultural levels’).¹³ Though commentators now more readily admit the autonomy of popular culture, rather than dismissing it as existing on scraps discarded by the bourgeoisie (as Vsevolodsky-Gerngross did in 1929), commentary by Russian Soviet cultural observers remains all too often ethnocentric and imperialist (where relating to other cultures), elitist and hegemonic, dictated by the values of the cultural hegemony of educated intellectuals (where relating to their own).¹⁴ The following passage, describing variations in living patterns between different groups of workers in the Urals before the Revolution, polarises ‘bad’ (not intellectualised) and ‘good’ (semi-intellectualised) workers:

Everything about the decoration – the crocheted [*garusnye*] napkins hung on the walls and scattered on the chests of drawers, the multitude of crudely glazed ceramic statuettes, shells and other such cheap fripperies, *lubok*-type lithographs on the walls, painted rugs of sacking from the market, primed and decorated with tasteless bouquets or ‘fake parquet’ – bears witness to the penetration of *petit-bourgeois* influences to the worker milieu . . . The whole arrangement of the place in which the young worker lived indicated that he was a man with *fully developed cultural interests and requirements*. Besides the kind of furnishings typical for a highly skilled worker . . . he had a writing desk with books and magazines on it . . . there was a mass of quality literature in his trunk . . . the walls were hung with pictures of writers in elaborate frames . . . the room was lit with two high-powered kerosene lamps.¹⁵

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A view of culture which is value-laden, if not teleological, is found more insidiously in writings which gesture towards ideological neutrality; in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, a collection of essays by Lotman, L. Ginzburg and Uspensky, examples are taken from high culture: the literary canon, fine art and the behaviour of the cultural elite.¹⁶

This is not to suggest that mistrust of popular culture is limited to critics in the Soviet Union. In the West, lip-service to relativism is certainly paid: as Carlo Ginzburg writes 'if only verbally we have now gone beyond . . . the attitude which saw in the ideas, beliefs and world views of the lower classes nothing but an incoherent fragmentary mass of theories that had been originally worked out by the dominant classes perhaps many centuries before'.¹⁷ There is now an exemplary corpus of work on Western popular culture, especially of the early modern period.¹⁸ But as far as studies relating to Russia and the Soviet Union go, some battles won years ago in other subject areas remain as yet unfought. The following hilariously reactionary comments were made by a Western critic writing not, as one might suppose, in 1886, but in 1986:

It is unhappily the case that the masses of the people – even in a political democracy, let alone an autocracy – make very minor contributions to political history. In a real sense it makes very little difference what the people happen to think at a given moment, whereas the values of the high culture as they affect the views of those in political power are very much worth analysing. It is difficult to see that the most intricate analyses of the readership, say, of detective novels and the ramifications of their plots could help scholars a hundred years in the future to understand the course of American History today.¹⁹

Even Rose Glickman, in her excellent study of women factory workers in the nineteenth century, *Russian Factory Women*, seems unaware of the realities of popular entertainment in Russian cities:

The squalor and poverty of the Russian workers' lives, the long hours of arduous labour for which they were so miserably remunerated, left them with little time, energy or money for recreation. Nor were amusements and social amenities readily accessible. The rich cultural offerings of the cities were inaccessible and possibly not much to their taste. Even simpler pleasures were hard to come by.²⁰

Western studies of Russian popular culture have to date also been dogged by an occasionally unreflective adoption of quantitative

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methods of analysis and a tendency to treat the material of popular culture *uncritically*, as if it spoke for itself.²¹ Central theoretical issues remain unresolved. There has, for example, been a reluctance to make any distinction between popular culture and culture for the people, mass entertainment, a lack of sense that ‘it is absurd to equate “the culture produced by the popular classes” with “the culture imposed on the masses”’.²² The distinction between cultural phenomena where the subordinate or popular classes were actively involved in and responsible for production, and those in which they were not, needs to be made, even if it is blurred in practice by the fact that members of the subordinate classes were capable of new interpretations and appropriations of the improving works designed for their consumption by outsiders. One theatre activist described with chagrin how a production of *Anna Karenina* drew vast crowds attracted not by the literary merits of the spectacle but by the prospect of seeing the heroine throw herself under the locomotive.²³

Despite the importance of *Petrushka* as a popular-cultural genre, it too, like other kinds of Russian popular culture, has been the subject of dismissive hauteur on the one hand, non-commitment in theoretical terms on the other. The Soviet theatrical activist Tarasov writes:

Previously, when *Petrushka* was still very popular, few educated people paid him any attention. *Nor did he deserve that they should have done: the contents of his comedy were uninteresting, and the text was characterised by crudity and improper language.* (Tarasov 29; my emphasis)

Elsewhere we hear that *Petrushka* was ‘the favourite spectacle of an *undemanding public*’ (VLB 3; my emphasis). Even Nina Simonovich-Efimova, a puppeteer of great skill and so committed to her occupation that she was still finishing a costume for her own puppet theatre as she lay on her deathbed, wrote that ‘it is impossible to reproach the *Petrushka* plays with anything *except a certain lack of content*’.²⁴

Academic study of *Petrushka* has also been limited. There is no book on the subject in English, though Elizabeth Warner’s *The Russian Folk Theatre* and Russell Zguta’s *Russian Minstrels* have sections on it.²⁵ Even in Russian there has so far been no full-length study of the text, though several informative articles have appeared, amongst the best of which are those in the volume *Teatr Petrushki*, by Orest Tsekhnovitser and Igor’ Eremin. The book was intended as a manual for practising puppeteers, but the articles on *Petrushka* are

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excellent scholarly studies; that by Eremin gives valuable information on textual variants. Recently this work has been supplemented by a series of articles written by the Soviet scholar Anna Nekrylova, who wrote her dissertation on *Petrushka*. Some factual areas, however, require elucidation: amongst these are the connection between *Petrushka* and Western European puppet theatre, and the fate of the text after the Revolution. The only source of information on the latter is Natalia Smirnova's book on the Soviet puppet theatre, which, however, concludes at 1932.²⁶

In this book I hope to fill in some of the gaps left. I shall try to explain how the *Petrushka* street tradition was caught in a pincer movement between economic and cultural reforms in the 1930s; I shall also give a fuller account of its history and its links with the Western street glove-puppet theatre – the resemblance between *Petrushka* and Punch, Pulcinella, Polichinelle, Guignol. I shall give a more detailed description and analysis of the text than has been attempted before, and a fuller account of its audience and the circumstances in which it was performed. As important as these points of detail, however, is the need to clarify the theoretical principles according to which *Petrushka* is studied. Study of *Petrushka* has suffered, like other forms of popular culture, from a certain lack of direction. The studies have tended to be of a descriptive rather than an analytical character. Sometimes an overtly tendentious rhetoric is adopted (as by Smirnova); more often the material is marginalised by emphasising that it is of purely ethnographical interest. It has been accepted by one commentator after another that this text is 'folklore', and that the methods suitable for its study are structural analysis and speculation about distant ritual origins. Individual objections to and reservations about these approaches will be dealt with later; at the moment I shall simply give a broad outline of my own orientations.

I think it is as well to make clear why I prefer to describe *Petrushka* as a popular-cultural text, rather than a folkloric one, as it has been described by previous commentators. I do so not out of disrespect for the academic study of folklore, which has evolved methodologies vital in the recording, classification and interpretation of orally transmitted material; on these I shall myself draw. My objections are not operational, but ideological. Whilst aware of the dangers of the term 'popular culture', which Peter Burke has described as both too inclusive and too exclusive,²⁷ I am determined to use it for several important reasons. First, because I am studying it as part of the entire

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cultural system rather than as an autonomous phenomenon. The folklorist Dan Ben-Amos has argued that it is time folklore was accepted as 'a sphere of interaction in its own right'.²⁸ I respect this statement of scholarly independence; but, for my part, I intend to study *Petrushka* in conjunction with other material, not all of which can be accommodated by the most elastic definitions of folklore. By using the term 'popular culture', and opposing to it the term 'high culture', I also indicate my views of divisions within the cultural system, which are not, I believe, opposed in a clear-cut and mutually exclusive way. I avoid the word 'folklore' because it is easily and conventionally opposed to 'literature', as for example in Roman Jakobson and Pavel Bogatyrev's famous essay 'Die Folklore als eine besondere Form des Schaffens', where 'literature' (individual, original, transcendent of time and social convention and expectation) is in every way the mirror-image of 'folklore' (collective, conventional, ephemeral, or subordinate to time, and obedient to 'preventive censorship', that is, forced to cater to the whims of its audience).²⁹ It seems to me that an important conceptual confusion has arisen here, for an ideologically neutral distinction between oral and written discourse has been mapped onto a far from neutral division between intellectual and popular creation. Despite the difference in medium of transmission, a folk-tale has more in common with a chapbook or broadsheet than it does with an after-dinner speech in an Oxford college, however liberally laced with anecdotes the latter, and the reasons why, say, *War and Peace* is not seen to be ephemeral have to do with more than the manner of textual dissemination. In Russian culture, for a variety of historical reasons, the creations and values of the elite have been as dependent on oral transmission as have those of the people; yet in spite of – or even because of – this similarity, literature and other forms of high culture have, at least since Westernisation, been set apart and specially revered.³⁰

The terms 'popular culture' and 'high culture' are meant also to give equal weight to both sides, since I believe that debate about primacy of one tradition or the other is empty and sterile. It is meaningless to argue about whether high cultural ideas 'sink down' into the popular classes or, conversely, folkloric traditions go 'upwards' into the educated classes.³¹ The relationship is circular, and not just in individual cases or from epoch to epoch. Within a given culture at any moment, the popular tradition may articulate assumptions directly which are buried in high culture; whilst members of the

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cultural elite may draw on popular tradition as a form of escape, refuge or legitimisation strategy.

The preference of 'popular culture' over 'folklore' indicates also a concern with immediate contexts and historical facts rather than with remote origins or with tradition. Dan Ben-Amos has argued that 'the traditional character of folklore is an analytical construct; it is a scholarly and not a cultural fact'.³² I do not disagree; but I think that the use of the word 'tradition' has dangers. When Herbert Halpert, for example, gives a working definition of folklore as 'traditional cultural lore ... transmitted traditionally rather than by official sources; [consisting] of ideas which find various forms of expression, in sounds, actions, or objects',³³ it is possible to assume that he refers only to a process of communication, but often the word 'tradition' implies much more. A recent volume in the Penguin Folklore Library stated that the interests of its compilers were in 'how the inherent values or oral literature should be communicated for the benefit of humanity'; whilst, more recently still, a series of letters in the *Guardian* discussing the custom by which British children are encouraged to leave discarded milk teeth under their pillows for the 'tooth fairy' in exchange for small coins attracted a heated missive from a representative of the Folklore Society. The correspondent insisted that this was not folklore, but 'fakelore', and the writer concluded 'we seem better at preserving our old stones and bones than our traditional beliefs and customs'.³⁴ As this letter suggests, closely allied to respect for tradition is emphasis on the 'purity' of the folkloric text, which has led some folklorists to underestimate the cross-fertilisation from printed genres to oral genres, some others to despise the collection of material which is impure in a more specific sense, that is, obscene. Over the last thirty years attitudes amongst Western folklorists have become more pluralist, partly because of an impelling sense that if principles were too rigidly applied there would be nothing left to collect at all; but in the Soviet Union obscenity is still kept out of sight and outpourings of contempt for 'vulgar' or '*petit-bourgeois*' genres remain more frequent than study of or commentary on them.³⁵

Petrushka is not particularly old and certainly not particularly pure; it offers little comfort to those in search of folk wisdom or traditional moral values, and by the exacting standards defined above can only be described as 'degenerate' unless much of the text is passed over in silence. In order to avoid critical reduction, therefore, we must use notions such as 'morals' or 'purity' with caution. Equally, we must

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take the notion of context beyond the rather cosy family or extended family circle which is posited in some studies of 'folklore'. Take this description of a Scottish traveller–storyteller for example:

With Betsy [his daughter] dozing on his lap and Linda [his wife] lovingly looking after Thomas, both my ten-year-old daughter Heather and I have sat hours on end spellbound as Duncan has taken us into his special world of wonder and magic.³⁶

The introduction to a recently published collection of Irish folk-tales describes a typical tale-telling beside a turf fire, where the warm atmosphere of male bonding over whiskey is increased in effect by its contrast with the 'wild night' raging outside.³⁷ Dan Ben-Amos' statement that folklore is performed in 'small group situations' is apparently more clinical, but depends just as much on a model of social consensus and harmony.³⁸

It is not my business to decide how adequate these idyllic pictures are to the conditions in which rural popular culture operates or operated; but I believe that urban popular entertainments belonged to rather a different world. They were often defiant, constrained not so much by 'preventive censorship' as by the desire to breach censorship. The 'small groups' which watched them lacked the cohesion set down by Dan Ben-Amos as a primary requirement for the transmission of folklore, that 'the participants in the small group situation have to belong to the same reference group, one composed of people of the same age or of the same professional, local, religious or ethnic affiliation'.³⁹ The groups watching fairground dramas were not always united by all of these features (there was usually a variety of ages and professions, if not of ethnos or creed); they were, moreover, invariably divided by a feature ignored by Dan Ben-Amos, that of gender. It was possible, as we shall see, for fairground performances to single out certain members of the group (such as ethnic minorities or women) for abuse, in order to reassure others (dominant ethnic groups and men). The 'small-group' labelling cannot reflect such contradictions and conflicts. Nor can it reflect the conflicts, which were equally important on the fairground, between one 'small group' and others; indeed, such conflicts are explicitly avoided in the statement 'the connotations of marginality and low socio-economic status that were once associated with the term "folk" have been abandoned'.⁴⁰ The final reason for avoiding the term 'folklore', therefore, is because it suggests a classless society; the watchers of *Petrushka*