

Square Between the Eyes: A Study of William Kentridge's *Nose*

In her biography *Shostakovich: A Life*, Laurel E. Fay relates the events of a trip the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich took in June 1953, writing that he "surprised his travel companions with his impulsive insistence on riding a daredevil roller-coaster at the Prater." Shostakovich "returned exhilarated," Fay notes, and exclaimed: "I love the madcap, it gave me great pleasure. You've undoubtedly forgotten that I am the author of the opera *The Nose*!"

It's hard to imagine a more fitting anecdote to introduce *The Nose*, a work both famously daring and widely underperformed. 80 years on from its first staging in Leningrad, the work—an adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's novella about a nose which abandons the face it rests upon—remains a famously daring but widely underperformed opera. In 2010, the South African artist William Kentridge was commissioned to produce an opera for the Metropolitan Opera. What resulted was a boundary-shattering production of an already singular work.

To comment that Kentridge's production of is "busy" is something of an understatement: it is saturated; superabundant with ideas. But the foremost of these themes is *fragmentation*. This is not a motif on loan, so much as a preoccupation that has spilt over from elsewhere: as critics have noted, Kentridge's insistence that "in *The Nose*, the body's in conflict with itself"

rhymes with his earlier commentary on the Soho and Felix film series ("Soho and Felix were both close to me—not so much as a self divided, but as the artist as mediator between several different factions of the self"). In the studies and works anticipating *The Nose*, Kentridge dealt directly with questions of fragmentation and remediation: consider *I Am Not Me*, *The Horse Is Not Mine*, which included performances/presentations Kentridge would give alongside projected recordings of himself. (Jane Taylor exclaims: "*What an apotheosis!*"). This intermedial bricolage extends to *The Nose*, which again deals explicitly with "the divided self"—"the stage belongs to Kovalev, while the screen is the domain of the Nose," as Kentridge puts it.

But crucially, fragmentation is just as much the guiding logic of Shostakovich's libretto—and Gogol's novella before it—as it is of Kentridge's production. This is, after all, a novella concerning literal *disjecta membra*—and at that, one fractured by aporia and elision, as if the dismemberment motif necessitated a disjointed narrative. (That "*the incident becomes completely shrouded in mist, and of what happened after, absolutely nothing is known*" becomes a refrain.)

In her illuminating essay on "Operatic Translation and Shostakovich," Carolyn Roberts Finlay goes further, arguing that Shostakovich's adaptation foregrounds "the incongruity between the conventional and serious tone of the narrative—in Formalist terms, the *sjuzet*, or way the story is told—and the absurd and improbable events it is used to relate—the *fabula*, or basic story material." This is *The Nose* as fundamentally fragmentary: the slippage between the (absurd) plot and the (deadpan) manner of its retelling is the crux of the work.

This relationship between *sjuzet* and *fabula* is also a useful model for the Cartesian tonal-linguistic questions which *The Nose* raises.

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As Fay notes, one of Shostakovich's chief projects in *The Nose* was the "musicalization" of language and of words' pronunciation. Through "unhabitual rhythms" and "the incorporation of the apparently anti-poetic, anti-musical" devices—in the harsh words of Grigorii Kozintsev, writing of the work's 1930 Leningrad premiere —the voices onstage are connoted with the bodies onstage. Alexander Tumanov notes that "The commonplace characters [sing] and talk in a "normal" register [and] are assigned the voice ranges of bass and baritone," while the "police

inspector and the Nose are, respectively, a counter-tenor and a high tenor, who sing in an unnaturally high register” (410). Even the "very word 'police' comes in a high register"—a nasally voice, if you will—throughout the work. Thus, just as the tension between *sjuzet* and *fabula* animates Gogol's original novella, the redefining of boundaries between speech and singing becomes a driving force behind the libretto. Shostakovich pled against a concert production of *The Nose* on related grounds—that it loses all sense "if it is viewed only from the musical standpoint [...] for its musical component is derived exclusively from the action” (54)—and repeatedly made the (controversial) case that the score to *The Nose* was subordinate to the "action." This clarifies the nature of *The Nose's* fragmentation: like Soho and Felix, even the disparate qualities exist in relation to each another.

With all this being said, the words and music of Kentridge's production are firmly rooted in Shostakovich's libretto. That the stage design of Kentridge's production is more complex than the productions of Shostakovich's day goes without saying—and yet, in its fragmentation and bricolage, it is faithful, too. As Wendy Lesser notes in a 2010 review for the Threepenny Opera:

“In the libretto, in one of the few stage directions Shostakovich offers, he suggests that Podtochina's house and Kovalyov's rooms should both be onstage at once, but that at first, when one is spotlighted, the other should be "swallowed up in darkness [...]. In Kentridge's

production, this is accomplished by having two brightly lit boxes of activity, at different heights, set within the flat rectangular screen on which the projections appear throughout the show [...] By the time we get to this method in Scene Eight (the only scene in which Shostakovich specifies the lighting), we are already extremely familiar with it, because Kentridge has been using it since the Prologue, where he first showed us the barber's room as a small, raised, lighted rectangle set within the larger, darker plane of the proscenium-filling "curtain." We are still very aware of the segregation of space into smaller units."

The fact that Kentridge's stage registers as an array of boxes—or, more precisely, windows—evokes nothing so much as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation*, and its account of hypermediacy as "[offering] a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as "windowed" itself."

Bolter and Grusin frame desktop browsers as "implicitly relying on Alberti's metaphor"—the window—in the same manner that Kentridge has repeatedly referenced Alberti and Dürer's perspectival works (i.e. the window, the rhinoceros).

That the themes of *Remediation* bleed over into Kentridge's body of work is interesting in its own right. But what are the consequences for our interpretation of *The Nose*? Bolter and Grusin write that "the desktop interface does not erase itself [...] The multiplicity of windows and the heterogeneity of their contents mean that the user is repeatedly brought back into contact with the interface." This idea of cyclical viewing (and reviewing) parallels Maria Gough's argument that Kentridge's production of *The Nose* marks a departure from his "principle of erasure" into what Shostakovich called "literary montage." On a literal level, the set and stage design evoke such montage and collage: consider the backdrop, projected with encyclopedia entries and scraps of prose, or the Nose itself, a papier-mâché amalgam of boilerplate and headlines. Even Fay's paraphrasing of literary montage in *Shostakovich and His World* evokes the hypermedial desktop: it "calls for juxtaposing and musically animating out of this block of words a series of Gogolian 'pictures,' more or less animated in their frames." The "literary montage," then, is

another aesthetic of fragmentation and of heterogeneity.