VIOLENCE AND ASPHYXIA IN IVAN VYRPAEV’S PLAYS

Colleen Lucey

University of Wisconsin-Madison
The contemporary Russian playwright and filmmaker Ivan Vyrypaev (b. 1974) has gained wide acclaim both in Russia and abroad for his experimentation with language, form, and content. He has been championed as the leader of Russia’s New Drama, a movement that emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century showcasing the new generation of playwrights. The appearance of Vyrypaev’s dramas on western stages has paralleled a focus in recent scholarship on theater-going as an act of defiance in the Russian context; Monica Greenleaf, for example, states that contemporary Russian theater offers “a traditional locus of resistance to the new regime of privatized spaces and bodies.”¹ The works of contemporary Russian playwrights are quite often remembrances of “forgotten” citizens—orphans, the homeless, psychiatric patients—who are overlooked in political discourse—specifically because they resist “privatization.” Likewise many of the works of New Drama deal with sensitive issues such as alcoholism, drug abuse, threats of terrorism, and illegal immigration.

For Vyrypaev the question of how to address such matters is more than just a sociological debate on the country’s need to expose its seedier side; rather, he poses a linguistic question to his contemporaries: how does one speak about such atrocities? What language can encapsulate the totality of existence in all its nastiness and maliciousness? His characters—psychiatric patients, maniacs, and murderers—confess their assaults openly to the audience. As they expose themselves they struggle to find a language appropriate to their experience of reality; they suffer from a linguistic crisis as much as a psychological one. In Vyrypaev’s plays these social outcasts and criminals turn to language as a means to place themselves within the public discourse.

Certainly death and violence is not new to Russian theatre, but addressing it quite frankly in a metatheatrical way, as Vyrypaev does, with language containing expletives and urban slang, is revolutionary. It is important to note that although the plots of Vyrypaev’s plays develop around murder and violence (either in a physical or metaphorical sense) no actual bloodshed is seen onstage during the productions. This is a major breakaway from the inherited forms of “chernukha” and the prolific presentations of violence in film and mass media dating from the 90s. Vyrypaev’s audience learns via direct speech—rather than visual representation—of characters’ crimes.

This paper will examine three of Vyrypaev’s plays: Oxygen (Kislorod), Genesis No. 2 (Bytie No. 2), July (Iul’) and explore how the playwright expresses violence linguistically. These three plays, all directed by Viktor Ryzhakov, share common structural frameworks; they favor contemplative dialogue rather than physical action, are one-acts, and revolve around characters confessions to the audience. Their main commonality though, is on the level of language, for it is through verbal sayings that characters inflict violence or justify their brutality. In examining these three plays I will illustrate that Vyrypaev succeeds in creating a new Russian theatrical language that utilizes violence as a means to express both physical and spiritual disunity. In order to explicate how Vyrypaev’s characters subvert language I will draw on Antonin Artaud’s theories on the Theatre of Cruelty and Jacques Derrida’s subsequent reading on Artaud’s particular notion of violence in connection with language.

Comparing Vyrypaev’s approach to violence and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty sheds light on the particular kind of language assault taking place in the Russian playwright’s works. The only way the theatre, according to Artaud, will find itself is “by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitate of dreams, in which his taste for crime, erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism pour out on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior.”² Vyrypaev’s dramas do just what Artaud calls for; they contemplate the way murder as in Oxygen, savagery in Genesis No. 2, and cannibalism in July effect the psyche of individuals, but the performances also explore the effect such happenings will have when spoken of rather than shown to spectators.

Violence then, is something characters inflict both on each other and on the language itself. On the one hand they speak about violence in an alienating way and on the other they try to justify their violence through linguistic means by emptying the utterances of others and exposing them as meaningless. Language that expresses violence points out the split between mind and body, between a
spiritual disunity in the characters. In Vyrypaev’s play *Oxygen*, the characters banter and debate with one another in order to make sense of the duality of existence, of the difference between sensation and thought.

**I. Oxygen and asphyxia**

*Oxygen* (Kislorod), first staged in 2002 at the experimental Moscow theatre, Teatr.doc, and recently adapted for film version in 2009, is a dialogue between a man (“He”) and woman (“She”) on the difficulty of living according to the Ten Commandments in modern times. Splicing sections with rap music and DJ samples, each of the play’s ten sections, or “compositions” as they are called in the script, begins with a citation from the Sermon on the Mount and deconstructs how implausible it is to live according to the particular religious tenet mentioned. The play is considered by many as a manifesto for the post-perestroika generation because of its portrayal of the widespread disillusionment of Russia’s 20-something youth. But the play’s central conflict is more timeless than a simplified sociological reading would offer. At the heart of the drama is a love story between a man from the provinces, Sanka (performed by Vyrypaev in the original production), and his newfound love from Moscow, Sasha. Sharing the same name (both are short for Alexander) they find their plight remarkably similar: both are driven by a need for air, the play’s allegory for freedom.

Murder is, in *Oxygen*, something so mundane and non-climatic that it could be described as part of Sanka’s habitus. The play begins with the actor recounting the sixth commandment, “Thou shall not kill.” The actor then explains in third person narrative, “Ia znal odnogo / cheloveka, u kotorogo byl ochen’ / plokhoj slukh. On ne slyshal, kogda govorili: ‘ne ubej’, byt’ mozhet, / potomu, shto on byl v vplejere.” (I knew a man with very bad hearing. He didn’t hear when they said thou shalt not kill, perhaps because he had his headphones on.) This “man,” explains the actor, took a shovel, went out to the yard, killed his wife, returned home, and began dancing. There is no moral crisis in committing murder because it was not wrong to begin with; Sanka’s crime is not a climactic event in Vyrypaev’s play. Rather, Vyrypaev emphasizes callousness to violence by the very act of retelling, rather than visually showing, such brutality. In fact, the mechanical repetition of certain lines gives off a feeling of lyrical drama mixed with Greek tragedy. The refrains in each composition repeat and oftentimes they are poeticisms dedicated to violent themes and are quite disjointing.

There is an odd relationship between actor and character that helps underscore this alienation effect in *Oxygen*, for although the “He” (the character’s lines are not designated by their names, only by their sex) of the play is Sanka, the actor tells of the wife’s murder in the third person. The technique of relating information from a narrator is part of what is known as the verbatim style characteristic of New Drama, but what separates Vyrypaev from other playwrights using verbatim is the distancing of actor from character. As one theatre describes it, rather than “…represent real people whose ‘streams of speech’ they voice…the performers simultaneously are themselves and play a sophisticated game with the fictional characters who carry on the naïve discourse.” By relating violent acts through the third person, actors are afforded a critical distance between subject matter and their relation to it.

Vyrypaev’s use of third person narration also underscores the alienation characters feel toward language. For Sanka and Sasha language is something inherently dualistic and deceptive; once a thought is uttered it becomes something totally different from what characters originally intended. In the eighth “composition” for instance, “He” relates that a “Thought looses thought / if spoken aloud that, / which you truly want / to tell.” (Smysl teriaet smysl, / esli proiznosit’ vslukh to, / chto po-nastoiaschchemu khochesh’ / rasskazat’.) Likewise, Sasha never expresses her feelings for previous lovers verbally to them, for to do so would sabotage the relationship. Sasha and Sanka’s avoidance of speech-as-such is a fear of losing the essence of their utterances. Their anxieties are quite similar to what Derrida explains as Artaud’s deconstruction of language in the Theatre of Cruelty, specifically a spiriting away of one’s speech: “I am in relation to myself within the ether of a speech which is always spirited away [soufflé] from me, and which steals from me the very thing it puts me in relation to.” The word that is breathed
can never be the fullness of thought itself and this is the ultimate asphyxiation for Vyrypaev's characters. They are in constant battle to suck in as much oxygen as possible in hopes to breathe life back into their words.

Violence in Oxygen is an expression of spiritual disunity and something Sanka and Sasha diagnose as symptomatic of contemporary life. Their dialogue is a way to make sense of their time. In Vyrypaev's play Genesis No. 2, characters also debate the meaning of existence.

II. Spiritual Violence in Genesis No. 2

First staged in 2005, Genesis No. 2 (Bytie No. 2) is a philosophical debate between a psychiatric patient, Antonina Velikanova, and her attending physician, Arkadii Ilich, on the existence of God. The action centers around Velikanova's retelling of the story of Lot's wife (who she refers to as herself) and God (who is her psychiatrist). Vyrypaev begins the performance by addressing the audience directly, explaining to the spectators how the text came into his possession. According to Vyrypaev, Velikanova sent him the material from inside her psychiatric ward and gave him full license to edit or add scenic elements as he sees fit. The play is, like Oxygen, about the meaning of life and God's existence, but in Genesis No. 2 the violence described is not of humans against each other, but rather God against humanity.

At its essential level the play is about what gives meaning to life and echoes the themes in Oxygen, questioning what language can and cannot express; Antonina Velikanova insists that there is "something else" (chto-to esche) beyond the immediate gratifications of the flesh or decay of the body after death. Her retelling of the Sodom and Gomorrah tale is to prove to God (her psychiatrist) that there is, indeed, meaning in existence; she refuses to believe him when he says there is no purpose to life. But her crisis is a crisis of language as well; unable to quantify that "something else" she repeats over seventeen times in one monologue and over a hundred times in the play, she is left to face God's nihilism empty-handed.

The God/Arkadii Ilich character in Genesis No. 2 negates this "something else" by negating his own existence (and existence in general). Vyrypaev's God is stuck in his own solipsistic universe: he has wiped away his existence and the only way to retain authority is to threaten Lot's wife with the same fate. His power is over memory, which he proves by erasing her past recollections. By wiping away her memories, God robs Lot's wife the belief in "something else," essentially making her ideology the same as his.

God's cleansing is an act of aggression in the sense that it negates her autonomy, turning Lot's wife into a tabula rasa. His robbery is what Derrida describes as the theivity of thought by language that Artaud attempts to conquer in the Theatre of Cruelty: "the force of a void, the cyclonic breath [soufflé] of a prompter [souffleur] who draws his breath in and thereby robs me of that which he first allowed to approach me and which I believed I could say in my own name." When God cleanses her of her memories, Lot's wife can no longer say "something else" in her own name; the prompter [souffleur] as God becomes the sole breath in the play, the only owner of utterance.

God's violence is of a linguistic nature; he essentially "beats" Lot's wife in a philosophical tug-of-war by showing language as the true determinant of existence. This language though, is split between physical (smell) and spiritual (spirit) connotations. Linguistic chasm also takes place on a psychological level in Genesis No. 2 through the theme of madness, for Velikanova loses her hold on reality and suffers from schizophrenia. Insanity is also a central theme in Vyrypaev's most violent drama, July.

III. Violence and desire in July

July (Iul') is the confession of a sixty-three-year-old madman named Peter who, after a series of murders, ends up in a mental institution. Peter relates to the audience his violent rampage sparing no details. His victims are chosen amongst those he encounters on his downward spiral; they are perpetrators of injustice, like his self-obsessed neighbor, but also innocent victims like a homeless man and a village priest, who pose no direct threat to him, and actually, in the case of the latter, offer him
sanctuary and try to rehabilitate him. At the play’s end, just before the arrival of his three sons, Peter literally consumes his object of desire when he eats his attending nurse.

First staged in 2006 at Praktika theatre in Moscow, July is more gruesome than Oxygen and Genesis No. 2; the cannibal-turned-storyteller is something like a Hannibal Lector (Peter does, upon arrival to the psychiatric ward, where an iron mask reminiscent of Lector’s) and a demonic force par excellence. Possibly in order to counteract this highly alienating narrator, Vyrypaev specifies in the script that a woman play the role. In the original production the actress Polina Agureeva played Peter. After the most graphic parts of the text, Agureeva would smile and lick her lips, suggesting a pleasurable experience to the audience. By having an actress, dressed in formal black attire reminiscent of a concert performer, calmly deliver lines peppered with revolting images Vyrypaev succeeds in estranging the spectator. This visual contradiction possibly re-sensitizes an audience that has become accustomed to violent images in news, film, and other sources.

Peter’s murderous acts are a means for him to appropriate the language of others. His murder of the priest, Father Mikhail, is an example of Peter’s appropriation of theological discourse. Peter can justify his gruesome acts as saintly deeds by taking Father Mikhail’s explanation that yes, if a priest is murdered in innocence he will go to heaven, as warrant for chopping the innocent man to pieces. As in Oxygen and Genesis No. 2, the audience is confronted with the absurdity of Biblical thought when taken literally. Peter reflects on his murder as something holy, “I chtoy uze vse bylo sdelano naverniaka, ia eshche chasya chetyre rezal ego na melkie chasti…delaia tak, chtoby otets Mikhail ne poterial soznanie i straal v zdravom ume i trezvoj pamiati.” (And so that everything would be done quite properly, I spent some four hours cutting him into fine parts…doing it in such a way that Father Mikhail would not lose consciousness and suffer with alertness and sobriety.)

Peter’s dismemberment of Father Mikhail is undoubtedly a cruel act, but it also resonates on a symbolical level: actual dismemberment of the priest’s body is a metaphor for splitting the spiritual unity of the Orthodox faith. Peter literally divides the body of the Church as representative in the medium of God, Father Mikhail.

Peter wishes to literally consume Neli-Zhanna, his attending nurse with whom he is infatuated. Peter’s cannibalism is a kind of maddened and disjointed ritual in which violence becomes not only justified, but necessary if one wants to love. His cannibalism can be understood as a mutation of Christian beliefs, particularly that the Eucharist gives believers eternal life, for Peter believes that eating his beloved’s flesh will make him godly: “S’est’ eto moiu Zhannu M. pol’nost’iu i tselikom…ona khotia by budet u menia vnutri, moia Zhanna M…Liubov’—eto ved’ postupki. Vziat’ da i s’est’, chasa dva ujdet na vse pro vse, ne bol’she…” (To eat my Zhanna M. completely and entirely…she will at least be inside me, my Zhanna N, …Love is really an act to take and eat—two hours or so and it will all be gone, no more...) Peter consumes Neli-Zhanna in order to absorb her essence in his own and become god-like.

Peter’s murderous rampage can be seen as limitless; he is capable of murdering innocents (the homeless man), spiritual mentors (father Mikhail), and objects of desire (Neli-Zhanna). Peter’s mania is symptomatic of what Eliot Borenstien defines as “boundless violence” characteristic of Post-Soviet representation, whether it be in mass media, pulp fiction, or film that depicts violence without restraint. The critical difference between Vyrypaev’s drama and the mediums portraying boundless violence is firstly that cruelty is spoken of and not presented on stage. Secondly, Vyrypaev’s drama reflects on Russian culture itself and on the effects of “overkill” aesthetics asking the audience to place Peter’s origin in these aesthetics and wonder to what degree his is the natural outgrowth of them.

In July, murder is a silencing of language, of other discourses in order for Peter to appropriate them. This is seen quite literally in the murder of Peter’s neighbor; the maniac thrusts a knife between his lips, silencing him forever. In the case of the priest, Peter “dismembers” the language of the Church by disfiguring Father Mikhail. In his final killing, Peter consumes the body of Neli-Zhana and silences her spirit. In all three murders Peter justifies his acts as necessities, logically placing them in a wider framework for him to attain a god-like status. In terms of language, Vyrypaev’s text is vivid and concrete;
it is the language of a murderer. If Peter silences the language of his victims it is only to place his own as paramount. Peter’s monologue is certainly an exposure, a reflection to the spectator of the most abhorrent, yet lucid, mental thought process.

**IV. Asphyxia in Oxygen, Genesis No. 2, and July**

When considering the three plays examined in this paper and the kind of carnage they expose, it becomes apparent that not only does the theme of violence unite these works, but also the struggle on behalf of the characters for clean air, for freedom. The allegory of asphyxiation resonates on a literal and figurative level. Vyrypaev’s characters are victims of urbanity; they suffer the effects of modern industrialization and the bad air quality of their towns literally suffocates them. Metaphorically though, his characters endure spiritual suffocation. The ultimate question of each drama is existential in nature: how does one live and breathe, let alone speak, when the air is poisoned? In Oxygen, Sanka and Sasha mourn a lack of air; they suffer from spiritual asphyxiation. Lot’s wife, in Genesis No. 2, is suffocated by God’s nihilistic hegemony. She cannot breathe life into her utterances because he has literally sucked the meaning out of them. In July, Vyrypaev confronts his spectators with a mutated form of religious belief in his maniac-murderer anti-hero. Peter’s carnage is an all-consuming breath that inhales his victims.

In an interview from 2006, Vyrypaev points out the struggle of the modern individual as something crushing: “Segodnia sama epokha pytaevisia nivelirovat’ cheloveka, no on osoznaet eto, to siuda i zhelanie vstupit’ s etim mirom v konflikt” (Today’s epoch tries to nullify the individual, but he/she is aware of this; thus the desire to enter into conflict with the world.) For Vyrypaev, the epoch itself suffocates humanity; his characters are choking for lack of air. Their utterances are ways in which to breathe life back into the world. In order to return the lost breath, these characters must turn the violence of language upon itself; they must retell violent acts to shed light on the suffocation they endure. By retelling events that have already happened, they bring their speech back under their ownership, returning that utterance which, as Derrida describes, has been spirited away. Audiences may wonder at the violence of Vyrypaev’s characters, but when examining their linguistic crisis, certainly they see that their battle is one against form: how to make language express the ills of our time, how to verbalize that conflict of the modern individual with the world, how to sense cruelty and be freed from it.

---

4 All translations from the Russian are mine unless otherwise noted.
5 Vyrypaev, Ivan, 13 tekstov napisannykh osen’iu (Moscow: Vremia, 2005), 1.3-7.
7 Vyrypaev, 13 tekstov napisannykh osen’iu , 8.74-77.
9 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 176.
10 Yakubova, “Ivan Vyrypaev,” 40.
12 Ibid., 35.
13 Borenstein, Overkill, 198.
14 Ibid., 213.

REFERENCES