

Periphery or Center? Ukrainian Modernism in Kyiv

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ABSTRACT: Contesting the use of the geospatial concepts of “periphery” and “center,” this essay argues that a mathematical metaphor, the Möbius strip, better expresses the continuously morphing, interrelated, dynamic mesh that we call modernism. One of the major but still understudied nodes on this strip was Kyiv (Russian: Kiev). Flourishing between 1905 and the early 1930s, modernism in Kyiv was distinctive by virtue of its historical-political circumstances and by its rapid acceptance, vitality, and astonishing efflorescence. After an overview of some of its most salient features, the latter part of this essay is devoted to the work of the self-proclaimed modernist stage and film director Les Kurbas and to two of his most important productions, *Macbeth* and *Jimmie Higgins*.

ARRIVING IN NEW YORK IN 1921, composer-songwriter Vernon Duke (born Vladimir Dukelsky) found the American city not just conservative but a far cry from vibrant Kyiv (Russian: Kiev),¹ where he had studied and where he had seen “futurists, like the Burliuk brothers, Kruchenikh, Khlebnikov, and others of that ilk... [who] donned eccentric garb, wore carrots and radishes in their buttonholes, painted their faces blue or green and created disturbances in theatre and other gathering places to attract publicity.”²

¹ Throughout this text I have employed the spellings of cities as they are commonly used in Ukraine today (e.g., Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv). For ease of reading, I have chosen to simplify the spelling of personal names, including avoiding soft and hard signs (e.g., Grigory vs. Grigorii; Les vs. Les’).

² Vernon Duke [Vladimir Dukelsky], *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 22–23. David Burliuk, like Duke and many others, escaped from the upheaval of revolution and civil war, eventually settling in the United States. For an overview of Ukrainian artists in the European, especially Parisian, avant-garde, see Myroslav Shkandrij, *Avant-garde Art in Ukraine, 1910–1930: Contested Memory* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018). For a more detailed look, see Vita Susak’s massive and beautifully illustrated volume, *Ukrainian Artists in Paris, 1900–1939* (Lviv: Rodovid Press, 2018).

Organized in Kyiv by David Burluk, *Lanka* (Link; 1908), the first avant-garde exhibition in the Russian Empire, had given expression to the joyful and extensive experimentation in the arts in Ukraine. Scenographer Boris Aronson, son of the chief rabbi of Kyiv, along with colleagues Nissim Shifrin and Isaak Rabinovich, were excited young participants in the second such exhibition, also in Kyiv: *Kil'tse* (Ring; 1914). When Aronson finally settled in America in 1923, he, like Duke, was surprised and disappointed to find “that the American arts, especially the theatre, were often as backward as American technological civilization was advanced. Even the psychologically realistic theater of Stanislavsky was still waiting to be transplanted to New York.”³ Dominated by melodrama, music hall, and vaudeville, Broadway’s conventional proscenium stages were decorated with painted backdrops and employed old-fashioned staging and acting practices.

Like many New Yorkers, most Parisians were reluctant to embrace modernism and the avant-garde. Indeed, a nearly two-decade-long debate swirled around the term “modern” and was partly responsible for the delay in launching one of the key artistic events of the twentieth century, the eight-month-long 1925 Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes.⁴ An early witness to that debate was Canadian Edwin Holgate, later an important figure in his country’s arts scene. Disillusioned with his instructors at the Académie de la grande chaumière, where he had been studying, Holgate left Paris for Kyiv shortly before the eruption of the First World War. He was inspired to do so by fellow painters like Alexandra Exter, a frequent European traveler who lived and worked in Kyiv and from whom he avowedly learned more than from his French teachers. Delighted by Ukrainians’ “vigour” and “warmth,” he was particularly struck by the power of their drawings and their strong use of color.⁵

The experiences of Duke, Aronson, and Holgate suggest that modernism was not necessarily rooted in the major cities of the West. Yet “Peripheral Modernisms,” the title of this special issue of *Dibur*, implicitly categorizes the subjects of its contents as marginal or secondary (“peripheral”) in importance to a (somewhere) central modernism. But are these spatial metaphors truly useful in understanding the international phenomenon of modernism? And, if so, where is the *here* to which the “there” is the periphery? The geospatial metaphors of “center” and “periphery” suggest fixed locations, stasis, and solidity; but modernism was the product of movement: artists and writers who crisscrossed the globe, linking, taking from, contributing to, and reworking what they found. Thus, we might more profitably consider looking to a mathematical metaphor, the Möbius strip, to best express the continuously morphing, interrelated, dynamic mesh that we call modernism.

Kyiv was one of the major, yet still understudied, nodes on this modernist strip.⁶ Flourishing between 1905 and the early 1930s, modernism in Kyiv was distinctive by virtue of its

³ Frank Rich with Lisa Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 58.

⁴ On the topic of this important exhibition, see Irena R. Makaryk, *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

⁵ Interview with Edwin Holgate conducted by Charles Hill on September 20, 1973, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* exhibition, Exhibition Gallery, National Gallery of Canada Fonds, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

⁶ Jean-Claude Marcadé even refers to Kyiv as the “capital” of modernism and modernity. See his “Kyiv: The Capital of Modernity in the Twentieth-Century,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 36, nos. 3–4 (2019): 275–305. This special issue of *HUS*, edited by Michael Flier, offers a selection of papers from a 2007 conference held at Harvard titled “Ukrainian Modernism in Context, 1910–1930.”

historical-political circumstances.⁷ After an overview of some of its most salient features, the latter part of this essay will focus on the self-proclaimed modernist stage and film director Les Kurbas and two of his most important productions which exemplified this distinctive brand of modernism.⁸

Born around the time of the 1905 Revolution, Ukrainian modernism was effectively suppressed by 1934, when, under Stalin, socialist realism was declared the only possible approach to artistic creativity.⁹ The traditional descriptors applied to modernism—decadence, decline, melancholy, adversary culture¹⁰—did not pertain in the Ukrainian case. Rather, a euphoric sense of promise and possibility dominated. For a society that had long been controlled by extensive tsarist censorship and prohibitions, the early years of the twentieth century finally seemed to swing wide open—and all at once—the prospective doors of creativity, modernization, and liberation. The result was an astonishing eruption of cultural, intellectual, and scholarly activities.

Although a vital center of modernism, Ukraine was nonetheless mostly absent from scholarly discussions of modernism until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.¹¹ A primary reason was the brutal Soviet erasure of its modernist and avant-garde talents, their achievements, and their history. This occlusion took the form of not only strict censorship and destruction of archival sources, publications, paintings, photographs, and other documents but also the physical destruction of artists, theater practitioners, scholars, and intellectuals. Even the names of particular artists and writers were suppressed, reference to them constituting a forbidden linguistic zone. Adding to the Stalinist suppression of modernism was the limited number of Western scholars who had a good knowledge of the Ukrainian language and culture. Familiarity with Ukraine was frequently reduced to Soviet state-sponsored folk culture, in which the singing-and-dancing peasant stereotype dominated. In the ubiquitous conflation of the terms “Soviet” with “Russian,” the Ukrainian contribution to modernism and the avant-garde was also often erased. Yet modernism flourished with a passion in Ukraine, shaped by the particularity of its history and politics. As art historian John E. Bowlt has pointed out,

most of the stellar players in the so-called Russian avant-garde (the Burliuk brothers and sisters, Exter, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin) were Ukrainian by birthright

⁷ Like all great cities, Kyiv was composed of many different groups, including Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Poles, Georgians, Greeks, and others. For a detailed study of the contribution of these groups to modernism, see Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz, eds., *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). This essay will, however, focus mostly on the Ukrainians’ contribution.

⁸ For a different perspective, focused on constructivism in Ukrainian theater arts, see Georgy Kovalenko, “Constructivism in Ukrainian Theatre,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 36, nos. 3–4 (2019): 389–413.

⁹ Modernism was already under threat in the second half of the 1920s when the “Cultural Revolution” (1928–32) was initiated under Stalin with the aim of “proletarianizing” art and culture. It put in motion a hostile interrogation of modernist experimentation, which effectively ended in 1934, when socialist realism was declared the only possible approach to artistic creativity. On socialist realism, see Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992) (originally published 1986). For a detailed look at the path toward shutting down experimentation in the theater, see Irena R. Makaryk, “Toward Socialist Realism: Hnat Yura’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” in *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn: Les Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 144–76.

¹⁰ As, for example, modernism is characterized in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), vii–viii; or in the now-classic essay on the topic by Clement Greenberg, “Beginnings of Modernism,” in *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones, and Albert Wachtel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 17–24.

¹¹ Exceptions include scholars Myroslav Shkandrij, Myroslava Mudrak, and Oleh Ilnytzkyj.

or adoption. . . . The same can be said of the Russian performing arts, cinema, and literature of the same period. Without the contributions by the Ukrainians Anna Akhmatova (real name: Gorenko), Oleksandr Dovzhenko, Nikolai Foregger, Benedikt Livshits, Vaslav Nijinsky, Oleksandr Tairov, Pavel Tchelitschew, and many other luminaries, Russian dance, dramatic theatre, cinema, and poetry would lack much of their vitality and excitement. Just how important Ukraine was to the development of the avant-garde is indicated by the fact that Isadora Duncan chose Kyiv as one of her first venues during her second Russian tour of 1907–08.¹²

What was the catalyst for such a flowering of the arts? Many scholars agree that the Great War was the uncontested cataclysmic event that shaped the nature of modernisms in western Europe. In the East, the Russian October Revolution (1917) is regarded as the parallel catalyst for modernist and avant-garde movements. In Ukraine, however, modernism was already well underway before the Russian Revolution was imported to its lands. As has been suggested by the examples of the *Link* and *Ring* exhibitions mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Ukraine's turning point occurred much earlier, the result of the relaxation of censorship following the 1905 Revolution. Here was the first opportunity for a major political and cultural "thaw." Some of the most radical nineteenth-century tsarist decrees were no longer being enforced. These had included bans on the staging of serious theater, performing folk songs, and even translating works (including the Bible) into the Ukrainian language. Such severe prohibitions had been imposed because of imperialist fears that cultural development would encourage Ukrainian nationalism and thoughts of separatism.¹³

After the 1905 Revolution and for the first time in the history of the Russian Empire, Ukrainians were finally permitted to create scholarly and cultural institutions, including a theater with a permanent home—an event comparable to some degree in its wide-ranging cultural, political, and psychological impact to the founding of the Abbey Theatre in Ireland. This relaxation of censorship bred an optimism which only grew with the overthrow of the tsarist regime and then rapidly accelerated with the proclamation of the creation of an independent (albeit short-lived) Ukrainian state. When the Central Rada (Council) declared Ukraine's autonomy in 1917, it issued its proclamation (the "Second Universal") in four languages: Ukrainian, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish. Seeking complete independence in 1918, the Ukrainian National Republic also introduced national autonomy for the minorities of Ukraine, including the Jews. Social, political, national, and aesthetic revolutions sparked together, creating an electric surge of creativity in all areas of cultural endeavor.¹⁴

¹² John Bowlt, "National in Form, International in Content: Modernism in Ukraine," in *Ukrains'kyi modernizm, 1910–1930* [Ukrainian modernism, 1910–1930], catalog, Anatoly Melnyk, project director (Kyiv: Natsional'nyi Khudozhnyi Muzei Ukrainy, 2006), 76.

¹³ On the tsarist decrees, see Valerian Revutsky, "The Act of Ems (1876) and Its Effect on Ukrainian Theatre," *Nationalities Papers* 5 (1977): 67–77; and Roman Solchanyk, "Mykhailo Drahomanov and the Ems Ukase: A Note on the Ukrainian Question at the 1878 International Literary Congress in Paris," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 1 (1977): 225–29.

¹⁴ See Myroslav Shkandrij, "Jews in the Artistic and Cultural Life of Ukraine in the 1920s," in *Jewish Life and Times: A Collection of Essays*, vol. 9, ed. Dan Stone and Annalee Greenberg (Winnipeg: Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 2009), 85–99; reprinted in Shkandrij, *Avant-garde Art in Ukraine*, 56–78. Shkandrij makes the important point that the Ukrainian leadership, particularly its first head of state, historian Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, proclaimed loyalty to the territory and the people, not to Ukrainian ancestry or nationality, as the key requirement of its citizens. As a result, many prominent Jewish figures served in the government and were part of press and secretarial sections of government missions to France and the Netherlands. Even though the vice-minister of foreign affairs, Arnold Margolin, personally read out the government's proclamation

The events of the late 1910s and early 1920s were tumultuous: world war, civil war, anarchy, and revolution. Between 1917 and 1922, Kyiv endured nineteen changes of government. These events, combined with the two revolutionary movements of socialism and national liberation, presented the extraordinary possibility of rethinking and reshaping the identity of those who lived in Ukraine. Within this distinct cultural-political alembic, the idea of toppling authority in all its forms, including imperialist, inflexible, and chauvinistic attitudes toward minorities, was propelled into prominence.¹⁵ More than the proponents of other types of modernism, Ukrainian modernists and avant-gardists linked such liberation to a spiritually reformed humanity.¹⁶ Artists and writers now felt free to use any and all sources and tools in order to explore their visions of what theater director, poet, and theater historian Virlana Tkacz has termed “New Worlds”: the quest for a new identity, new art, new society. Dynamism, movement, rhythm—the leit-motifs of modernism in Kyiv—were also linked to everyday life as “a paradigm for a new social organization.”¹⁷ The theater in particular brought together new forms and ideas from science, technology, philosophy, psychology, and the arts.

This efflorescence of creative activity involved an infinitely productive tension between recovery and renewal, tradition and contemporaneity, liberation and rupture. Quite unlike western European postwar culture, the Ukrainian cultural scene, despite grave privations and extreme social duress, spoke a language of exuberance. Modernists and avant-gardists were unique in their relationships to indigenous Ukrainian art forms. Artists were already familiar with symbolic, simplified, abstract forms from pre-Christian, icon, and folk art. They had made the jump into conceptual art in the immediate prerevolutionary years. Rather than confronting the “Other” in “primitive” forms taken from other cultures, Ukrainian artists recovered the “Self” from within their own traditions, a Self which hitherto had been forcibly repressed.¹⁸

A quest for liberation and a break from authority and conformity have often been identified as the most important impulses behind experimentation. In the case of Ukrainian modernism, the quest for liberation came not from a desire to escape entrenched Western-oriented aesthetic theories but, in part, from the desire to pull away from the centripetal political-cultural dominance of imperial Russia in order to create its own distinctive Ukrainian voice. Rather than merely emulating other (e.g., Western) models, Ukrainian modernism was unusually open to myriad influences and traditions—Western, as well as Far Eastern—with a concomitant desire to digest, reformulate, and transform them for its own purposes. Significantly more important than its outward gaze was Ukrainian modernism’s inward study: it was a self-proclaimed renaissance in its turn back to long-suppressed native academic and authentic folk Ukrainian traditions, not in order to restore them but, rather, to reconceive and re-create them through the prism of

strongly condemning pogroms, terrible waves occurred in 1919 in which those allegedly loyal to the UNR participated. Shkandrij, *Avant-garde Art in Ukraine*, 57–58.

¹⁵ The toppling of imperialist, and even chauvinist, paradigms and attitudes is still not complete, as George G. Grabowicz points out. See his “Rethinking Ukrainian Modernism,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 35, nos. 3–4 (2019): 237–73, esp. 247.

¹⁶ So claims Myroslav Shkandrij, who has written extensively on this topic. See, e.g., “Politics and the Ukrainian Avant-garde,” in Makaryk and Tkacz, *Modernism in Kyiv*, 219–41.

¹⁷ *Kurbas: Novi svity* [Kurbas: New worlds], exhibition and catalog by Virlana Tkacz (Kyiv: DP “NKMMK” Mystets’kyi Arsenal, 2019).

¹⁸ I have explored the topic of Ukrainian modernism elsewhere, including in “Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation,” in the book of the same name, 16–24. Much of the material in this article draws from the contributions to that volume.

modernity. To put it in another way, the desire to escape provincialism and colonialism (both political and aesthetic) was paralleled by the overwhelming impulse to innovate.

Ukrainian modernism thus departs from most definitions of modernism. If western European modernism is generally described as elitist in impulse, and its art said to reflect devotion, discontinuity, a sense of dislocation, fragmentation, ruin, and alienation, on the one hand, and a simultaneous desire for social coherence and meaning on the other, Ukrainian modernism is the opposite: an attempt to restore continuity and cultural identity, at the same time as it rejects imposed imperial conventions and traditions.¹⁹ Ukrainian modernism was, in fact, considered by its contemporaries as a new renaissance, with all the connotations usually attributed to that word, including the idea of a new creation, synthesizing, reshaping and reinterpreting many, often opposing and even antithetical, traditions.

More particularly, the spirit of Ukrainian modernism was nurtured both by its previous cultures and by its still-living folk culture that celebrated abstract symbolic forms and employed vibrant colors. The ancient massive and mysterious stone idols—the stone “babas” of the steppes—provided a primitivist inspiration for sculptors and visual artists. The two-dimensional picture plane of conceptual art could easily be found on peasants’ painted houses, while abstract patterns and a riot of color, on *pysanky* (Easter eggs). The icons of Byzantine-inspired Kyivan Rus with their sense of cosmic space and simultaneity of time were also consonant with modernism, particularly cubism. The tradition of the *skomorokhy* (medieval jugglers-acrobats-performers-bards) drew attention to theatricality. The mid-seventeenth- to mid-eighteenth-century Ukrainian baroque served as another wellspring of nonmimetic art, including the puppet theater (*vertep*) with its diptych of sacral events alternating with the secular, comic, and social; the interludes, whose broad contemporary comedy similarly jarred with their serious sacred or historical “frame” plays; and literary works, full of allegory, paradox, and the grotesque—all resistant to linearity of structure and narrative.

This rich cultural past which had been suppressed for so long now functioned as a significant ground of inspiration. Ancient folk art, still part of daily life, also reached back to the roots of ritual, to the undefined and the mysterious past. Where Western modernists looked to cultures outside their own to revivify art (e.g., to “primitive” African masks), Ukrainians looked “inside” their culture.²⁰ Looking to their past, Ukrainian creators mediated these forms and traditions, filtering them through the prism of modernity, new ideologies, new theories, and works by Cézanne, Picasso, Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Georg Fuchs, Henri Bergson, Einstein, Freud, and Jaques-Dalcroze, among many, many others. In turn, the work of Ukrainian modernists would reinvigorate and inspire the West, as we shall see.

As has already been suggested, the rapid assimilation of abstraction and modernism as a whole by Ukrainians may in large part be explained by their vested interest in the complete and total transformation of society. Modernism both harmonized with modernity (understood as political evolution, modernization, urbanization, and so forth) and promised to transcend or overturn the provincialism of imported imperial academic models and stultifying conventions.

¹⁹ Perhaps most famously identifying modernism with rupture was Clement Greenberg, in his “Beginnings of Modernism,” 22. Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 4, categorizes modernism as a movement which rejects or is indifferent to history. This was certainly not true of Ukrainian modernism.

²⁰ Myroslava Mudrak, “The Graphic Arts: From Page Design to Theatre,” in Makaryk and Tkacz, *Modernism in Kyiv*, 408–41.

As a result, it is not surprising that the great stage and film director Les Kurbas referred to himself interchangeably as “modernist” and “avant-garde,” terms that allude to the interpenetration of the aesthetic with the political.

New art forms were created that were not negations of the past but, rather, imaginative reworkings of it. Joyfully embraced, experimentation in all disciplines—literature, theater, sculpture, visual art, music, dance, design—achieved astonishing results. In poetry, Mykhail Semenko threw aside traditional forms and conventions. Spurning the notion of language as a transparent referential tool, he instead turned to exploring a wide range of dislocating techniques: exaggeration, the grotesque, violation or elimination of syntax, pure sound poetry, and “poetry-painting” (*poezo-maliarstvo*).²¹ In painting and design, Alexandra Exter was one of the seminal bridging figures of that time. Exter traveled back and forth from Kyiv to Paris, Vienna, Moscow, and St. Petersburg and thus linked together the Parisian cubists, the Italian futurists, and the “Russians”—among them, Ukrainian-born sculptor Alexander Archipenko and painter and designer Sonia Delaunay. Close to such well-known avant-gardists as Apollinaire, Picasso, Braque, and Chagall, Exter opened a studio-workshop in Kyiv that became a hub of artistic and intellectual life. Frequenters included the previously mentioned Boris Aronson, dancer and non-objective choreographer Bronislava Nijinska (sister of the still better known Vaslav Nijinsky), painter and designer of the Berezil Artistic Association Vadym Meller, painters Benedikt Livshits, Pavel Tchelitchew, Klyment Redko, Ignaty Nivinsky, Nissim Shifrin, Alexander Tyshler, Mark Epstein, Isaachar Ryback, Simon Lissim, and Anatoly Petrytsky. Also part of this astonishingly large cohort of talent were the then-unknown young Sergei Yutkevich and Grigory Kozintsev, whose future successes would lie in the world of film.

Exter’s studio also constituted a major center for artists wishing to develop Jewish art as part of Yiddishist nation-building projects. In Kyiv, home to the largest Jewish community in the tsarist empire, the Jewish modernist experience partly coincided with the Ukrainian. Poets Osher Shvartsman, the founder of Soviet Yiddish poetry, and his cousin, David Hofshstein, began to write in Ukrainian and later switched to Yiddish. The critic Bal-Makhshoves, the linguist Nohum Shtif, and the writer David Bergelson even contended that Ukraine was the center for Yiddish literary talent. One of the most important Kyivan organizations was the Kultur-Lige (Culture league), which aimed to construct and promote a new Jewish culture based on Yiddish and secular democratic values. The league became the go-to place for the development of projects in education, theater, and publishing.²²

At the same time as Westerners like the Canadian Holgate traveled to Kyiv, Ukrainians traveled to the West: to Vienna, Berlin, Munich, or Paris. Among them were Vladimir Tatlin (creator of the famous “Tower,” the Monument to the Third International) and painter-scenographers Vadym Meller and David Shterenberg. The cross-pollination between East and West and the unexpected human encounters which spurred creativity created this artistic and intellectual Möbius strip that enriched all the “centers.”

²¹ On the poetry of the period, see Oleh S. Ilnytzyk, *Ukrainian Futurism, 1914–1930: A Historical and Critical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Ukrainian Research Institute, 1997); and his article “Abstraction and Ukrainian Futurist Literature,” in Makaryk and Tkacz, *Modernism in Kyiv*, 387–406. See also George G. Grabowicz, “Creating and Concealing Modernism: The Poetry of Pavlo Tychyna Reconsidered,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 35, nos. 3–4 (2019): 447–93.

²² See Gennady Estraiikh, “The Yiddish Kultur-Lige,” in Makaryk and Tkacz, *Modernism in Kyiv*, 197–217.

One of the pivotal figures—indeed, the heart of Ukrainian modernism—was its self-styled adherent Les Kurbas. Director, actor, playwright, translator, and filmmaker, Kurbas was, as his contemporaries called him, “The Man Who Was Theater.” Born in western Ukraine, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kurbas studied in Vienna, where he read widely, attended theater productions more avidly and more often than lectures, witnessed the productions of Max Reinhardt, and enthusiastically imbibed the rich musical and political-satirical cabaret scene. After briefly studying at the university in Lviv (Polish: Lwów; German: Lemberg), then acting various romantic roles in a Ukrainian traveling company, Kurbas moved to Kyiv in 1916.²³ It was here that he was to overturn staid theatrical conventions and make an indelible mark on Ukrainian culture.

Kurbas quickly embarked on an ambitious quest to create a conceptual theater that would examine the nature of theater and reality itself. Theater was one of the major laboratories for a reconception of society and, arguably, the most influential genre of the early twentieth century. It was the place where the general state of culture was presented and where new possibilities could be explored. Through constant experimentation, Kurbas achieved his most profound and radical explorations with his third company, the Berezil Artistic Association, which he founded in 1922. Much more than a group of actors putting on plays, the Berezil also carried out research and experimentation in stage design, performance, and audience response; published a journal; and established the first theater museum in Ukraine. Four theater-studio labs were created, each with a particular focus, from village theater to opera. Lectures were organized by Kurbas on a wide range of topics, including world history, aesthetics, art, music, philosophy, biology, and psychology. Actors endured rigorous physical training in gymnastics, fencing, acrobatics, ballet, juggling, and tightrope walking. The ultimate goal was to create an intelligent, cultured, and informed actor capable of a great range of expression.²⁴

Kurbas believed that

the basis of theatre [is] movement, not words. Without movement there can be no theatre, just as without words there can be no literature. Movement should be of primary importance for an actor, because the material of his art is the living human body in motion. Acting involves the play of the entire body, not of just one of its parts. Words and language are only a partial expression of this total movement, this total play of the body is on equal level to gesture, mime or motion. Because of this, the ideal actor is the one who acts with his entire body; and the one who excels only in speech, in the art of verbal expression, without expressive movement,—he is merely a declaimer.²⁵

²³ The constraints of space prevent a more developed argument about the dynamics of influence of Vienna on Ukrainian modernism. It should be remembered that the territory of Ukraine had been divided between the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian Empires until both collapsed. This territorial division also had consequences for society, language, and culture.

²⁴ On Kurbas’s Berezil Artistic Association, see Virlana Tkacz, “Les Kurbas’s Early Work at the Berezil: From Bodies in Motion to Performing the Invisible,” in Makaryk and Tkacz, *Modernism in Kyiv*, 362–85. Also on this topic, see Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn*.

²⁵ Les’ Kurbas, *Visti VUTsVK*, June 3, 1921, in *Filosofiiia teatru* [The philosophy of theater], comp. Mykola Labins’kyi (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo Solomii Pavlychko Osnovy, 2001), 564. Translated and cited by Tkacz in “Les Kurbas’s Early Work at the Berezil,” 362.

A young actor inspired by Kurbas, Oleksander Zaporozhets (later an important Soviet psychologist), observed that

Kurbas frequently returned to the problem of rhythm, to the importance of the rhythmic composition of stage action for the transmission of the inner, moral idea of the depicted events, the inner dynamic of human passions and experiences. He would speak about this, [and about the fact] that there are no voids in the world, that silence and pauses are especially full of rhythm, that there is a rhythm in colour, in light, in a line. . . . Imagine how the magic of these words awoke in us our fantasy.²⁶

Spurning art as surface facsimile and dismissing narrowly conceived ideas of national art, Kurbas created productions that pushed the boundaries of theatrical innovation and audiences' expectations. Among his many exciting productions, two are particularly remarkable: *Jimmie Higgins* (1923) and *Macbeth* (1924). With *Jimmie Higgins*, based on the novel by Upton Sinclair (translated and adapted for the stage by Kurbas), Kurbas was one of the first in the world to incorporate film with onstage actors as an organic part of the theatrical narrative. This fascinating production has been extensively studied by Virlana Tkacz, who has examined the complex reality Kurbas created out of this interplay of two media. Using a spectrum of functions for film in this production, Kurbas created an especially powerful moment in the scene of a gas explosion. The horrified thoughts and fears of the main character, Jimmie, were completed by an onscreen montage of projections which showed images of his wife, family, and neighborhood. The audience understood these as nostalgic moving images of what once was: the explosion had destroyed everything he loved. Tkacz explains:

The montage gathers strength because of the extreme economy of information on stage and on screen. The constant jumble of time and space forces the audience to experience Jimmie's whirlwind of emotion, memory and realizations. The film cuts from a shot of the crater created by the explosion to a close-up of Jimmie's face. This close-up of Jimmie's face in despair overwhelms the theatrical space. The emotion is enlarged by the disruption of proportion. This image burns in the audience's mind when Jimmie runs in on stage. The double image of the close-up and the actual actor on stage reinforces the emotional impact of the final lines. The final moment, however, belongs to the actor playing Jimmie. The director built the sequence so as to allow space for the actor to create the final image—the outburst that resounded with the explosion and the crumbling with the final line, the shattering.²⁷

In his 1924 *Macbeth*, Kurbas set himself another challenge: to examine the nature of theater itself. The production broke down all the "natural" expectations of the traditional theater event—among them concepts of character, time/space (already reconceived in *Jimmie Higgins*), differences between high and low, audience and actor—in a production which also assimilated and rethought contemporary achievements in the related fields of the visual arts, dance, film, poetry, music, graphic design, and technology. I have discussed this production in some detail elsewhere, so here I shall focus on just a few particularly important elements. Foremost was the assault on the notion of character. In addition to doubling and tripling roles (a convention of English Renaissance

²⁶ Oleksander Zaporozhets', "Uroky: spohady pro Lesia Kurbasa" [Lessons: Reminiscences about Les Kurbas], *Kyiv 2* (February 1987): 142. Translated and cited by Tkacz in "Les Kurbas's Early Work at the Berezil," 362–63.

²⁷ Tkacz, "Les Kurbas's Early Work at the Berezil," 377.

theater), actors were required to “engage” in their role only once they were onstage and after a gong had sounded their cue. Having completed their part, a gong sounded again, and the actors then “disengaged” from their role before exiting. The audience would thus see the actor “working.” In effect, the actors presented a series of isolated, discrete “numbers.” Repeated throughout the production, such an “engagement” and “disengagement” with a role drew attention to the broader notion of theatricality. Suspending traditional drama’s fluidity of action, the tactic of discontinuity invited the audience to interrogate its expectations of theatrical conventions both onstage and in life. Focusing on the skill and labor of the actor, the strategy encouraged a cerebral response to the play on both sides of the footlights, since the actors—as in cabaret—were required to be both performers and spectators to each other, as well as to the audience.²⁸

Decorative scenery was rejected and replaced by enormous, movable bright green screens of stretched canvas on which giant modernist red block letters announced the locality of each scene. Going a step beyond Edward Gordon Craig’s idea of self-supporting screens, Kurbas employed “living” screens to form an integral part of the dramatic action. Raised or lowered when needed at the sound of a gong, the screens sometimes indicated the simultaneity of the action in different parts of Scotland; at others they underscored the emotions of the lead actors, emphasized tension, and even interfered in the action. The blurring of time present with time past was also reflected in the costuming. Most of the actors were dressed in contemporary workmen’s clothes with stylized medieval accessories. Props acquired their own life, flying down or up, as need be. The musical score drew from Anatoly Butsky’s (Russian: Butskoy) contemporary atonal creations, Ukrainian folk songs, excerpts from Pietro Masagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana*, and a Schubert military march.

Taking from the East as well as from the West, Kurbas’s production harmonized with elements of Noh theater in its attention to economy of expression, stylized movement, shifts in time frames, and enforced rhythms—the contrast between “blank” or “negative” sound-spaces and speech (especially through the use of the abrasive sound of the gong punctuating and segmenting the play).²⁹ But the Scottish play was also “Ukrainianized” with Kurbas’s significant addition to it: three “interludes” between each of the acts. Drawing from the traditions of seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Ukrainian school drama, particularly the comic *intermediia* (interlude), Kurbas had the Porter, renamed the Fool, claiming the central role of the play and thus usurping the position traditionally assumed by the tragic hero. Mocking political, religious, moral, and aesthetic pretensions, the Fool riffed on the latest events culled from accounts published in the daily newspapers. Montage, the organizing principle of the whole production, depended upon antitheses and analogues that underscored the themes of hypocrisy, cycles of violence and destruction, and their consequences. Looking back in time to a barbarous feudal period as well as peering into a possibly similar future, the scandalous production that turned a classic on its head brought about an extensive polemic which reverberated for many years to come. Shakespeare had been appropriated, rethought, reimagined, and recast within a Ukrainian context of politics and theatrical traditions.

Following his experiment with Shakespeare and conceptual theater, Kurbas turned entirely to film, where, in Odesa, he continued to explore the concept of time/space. *Arsenal*, probably the

²⁸ On Kurbas’s 1924 *Macbeth* and cabaret, see Irena R. Makaryk, “‘Antic Dispositions’: Shakespeare, War, and Cabaret,” in “Shakespeare and War,” special issue, *Shakespeare Survey* 72 (2020): 86–97. For a detailed examination of the early work of Kurbas, his three redactions of Shakespeare’s Scottish play, and an analysis of his radical 1924 version, see Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn*.

²⁹ On the Noh theater, see Kunio Komparu, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives* (New York: John Weatherhill, 1983).

most compelling of his three films, employed a split screen (for the first time in the Soviet Union) to create dynamic movement and tension, as well as to explore the concept of simultaneity of time. In all his stage and film endeavors, Kurbas aimed at creating a new, conceptual art, one that, in his own words, would “astonish the world,” his stated goal being to create great art—not just “Ukrainian” (i.e., obviously nationally inflected) art.³⁰

Writing about a performance of Kurbas’s *Berezil*, Russian poet Osip Mandelstam enthused about the audience’s “electrified” response:

Each staged fragment and solemn announcement of the director’s name were met with applause. I came at the end of the feast, which is why it was difficult for me to rise to the same level of enthusiasm and rapture as that experienced by the usual frequenters of the *Berezil*.

All the fragments strongly communicated one thing: *Berezil* is a deeply democratic theater; a theater for a country in which there can be no snobbism or dandyism, and where every aesthete is doomed to become a laughingstock.

A few words about *Berezil*’s technical means: According to some theater insiders, the most expensive of the *Berezil*’s productions cost 1500 rubles (!). Considering what the theater has achieved, this requires nothing short of a genius.³¹

Experimental productions like the one mentioned by Mandelstam had been constantly fed by the creative energies of and exchanges with groups and individuals who lived and worked in Ukraine. Remarking on this amazing hive of activity, historian Andrew Wilson has referred to Kyiv as a “Mecca” for the Arts.³² Among those many talents were Michael (Mikhail) Mordkin, who taught movement to Kurbas’s actors. Bronislava Nijinska, creator of the first conceptual ballets at her *École de mouvement* (founded in Kyiv), shared studio space, dancer-actors, and theoretical discussions with Kurbas and his troupe. Sergei Eisenstein tested out some of his preliminary ideas about montage in a theatrical endeavor. Composer Anatoly Butsky shocked his own musicians with his atonal music. Anatol Petrytsky and Vadym Meller created wonderful costumes and fantastic “constructions”—set designs—for Kurbas’s productions. Cabarets, flourishing in the basements of hotels, derelict buildings, and restaurants, gave rise to eruptions of spontaneous, often crazy poetry, skits, and theatrical, musical, and dance numbers. Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold brought his productions to Kyiv, where his works alternated with the presentation of Kurbas’s shows, and thereby ignited a polemical debate in the press about who had bested whom.³³

Kurbas, reputedly hailed as the greatest living Soviet theater director by Meyerhold, was awarded the state’s highest honor in 1925: he was named People’s Artist. At the Paris Exposition

³⁰ According to a friend from his student days, Mykhailo Rudnyts’kyi, Kurbas long dreamed of astonishing the world with his stage productions. When Rudnyts’kyi teased Kurbas about the fact that the material conditions of his stage would be very poor given the times (1913), Kurbas retorted by referring his friend to both the Japanese and the Shakespearean theaters, whose simplicity did not prevent great plays or productions. Mykhailo Rudnyts’kyi, *V naimakh u Mel’pomeny* [In the service of Melpomene] (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1963).

³¹ Osip Mandelstam, “*Berezil*” (1926), in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, *Essays, Letters*, ed. G. P. Struve and B. A. Filipoff (New York: Inter-language Literary Associates, 1969), 102.

³² Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 135.

³³ On the critical reaction to the work of both directors, see Panfuryst-ekstruktor [pseud.], “Les’ Kurbas i Vsevolod Meierkhol’d” [Les Kurbas and Vsevolod Meierkhol’d (i.e., Meyerhold)], *Bil’shovyk* 138, no. 1740 (1923): page number illegible. See also F. Ia. [complete name not given], “Kurbas i Meierkhol’d (Lyst z Kyiva)” [Kurbas and Meierkhol’d (a letter from Kyiv)], *Visti VUTsVK* (Kharkiv) 137 (June 24, 1923): 3.

internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, the Berezil Artistic Association's work was represented by photos, drawings, and maquettes.³⁴ Berezil's designer, Vadym Meller, was awarded a gold medal for the production of *The Secretary of the Labor Union* (based on Leroy Scott's novel *The Walking Delegate*), directed by Borys Tiahno under the tutelage of Kurbas. Over fifteen million visitors viewed the exhibitions of the Soviets, of which, by common consent, the stage designs were the most extraordinary. It is hard to overstate the importance of these exhibits on designers, directors, actors, artists. Yet, ironically, at this originary moment of the massive dissemination of the grammar of modernism, the work of Ukrainian modernists was effaced by the refusal of Soviet authorities to issue Ukrainians travel visas to discuss their art. Among the many consequences of this refusal were the mangled spelling of the names of the designer, directors, and actors; the mistranslation of production titles; and the continuing use of old imperial tags (i.e., "Russian") in identifying members of the Berezil.

Stunned by the innovative theater arts on display, Jane Heap, editor of the influential *Little Review*, was inspired to help bring them to New York for the International Theatre Exposition (1926), where they influenced a whole generation of American artists, designers, and playwrights and initiated another lively, though at times acrimonious, debate about modernism in the theater.³⁵ In addition to the show's catalog, the whole Winter issue of the *Little Review* (1926) was dedicated to this exhibition of theater art, which was the largest in the world. Inside the twenty-six-page special issue of the *Little Review* were eight photos (second in number only to those of the Russian theaters) of some of the most remarkable productions of the Berezil; but replicating the errors in Paris were the misspellings, mislabelings, and misattributions of contributors to theatrical modernism.

During the three weeks of its run, the International Theatre Exposition also included a flurry of other activities, including public lectures on the new directions of theater by a twenty-one-member Lecture Committee, among whom were John Anderson, Lawrence Langner, Oliver Saylor, Kenneth Macgowan, Aline Bernstein, Barrett W. Clark, and Irene Lewisohn—familiar, indeed renowned, names from the world of American theater. At the exposition's opening night, speaking through a translator, designer Friedrich Kiesler, who had helped bring the expo to New York, alluded to the reciprocal—Möbius strip—relations of modernism: "We are bringing you a thing that is in a sense new to you, and yet it is yours. Especially it is your spirit that has brought this new art into the theatre."³⁶

Back in the Soviet Union, modernism and its adherents began facing attacks when the Cultural Revolution was launched in earnest in 1928. With Stalin firmly in power, modernist experiments finally ceased. Kurbas became one of the "blank pages" of Soviet history. Executed in the far north in 1937, his papers, set design models, photos, and company destroyed, Kurbas became a prohibited and dangerous name until the late 1950s, when the laboriously slow process of "rehabilitation" began. His theoretical works were not permitted publication in Ukraine until the late 1980s, and even under glasnost were still severely censored. Only after Ukraine achieved

³⁴ On the Paris exposition and its aftermath, including the New York International Theatre Exposition, see Makaryk, *April in Paris*.

³⁵ For a detailed examination of the New York International Theatre Exposition and its reception, see Irena R. Makaryk, "Battling Traditional Space: Bringing Modernism from Paris to New York," in Makaryk, *April in Paris*, 166–92.

³⁶ Friedrich Kiesler cited in J. Brooks Atkinson, "Exposition Reveals New Theatre Ideas: Show Representing Sixteen Countries Has a Wide Range of Subjects," *New York Times*, February 25, 1926, 16.

independence in 1991 was it possible openly to discuss his career and investigate biographical details, including the year and place of his death.

As this essay has been arguing, the Möbius strip of the continuing aesthetic-cultural traffic between East and West, the particular historical and political circumstances, the look “inward” to indigenous forms—all these combined to make modernism in Ukraine distinct from its Western and Northern variants. Thoughtfully glancing back at that time of great social and political upheaval, Grigory Kozintsev recalled his youth. As a young sixteen-year-old born in Kyiv and decades away from becoming an internationally renowned filmmaker and screenwriter (famous in the West for his 1964 *Hamlet* and his 1971 *King Lear*), he noted with amazement that throughout the turbulent period of the late 1910s and early 1920s, “every kind of art began to flourish. . . . Innumerable committees, section and subsections discussed projects for producing all the great classic plays of the world, for organizing popular festivals. . . . Everyone took to art with passion, and with passion people taught it.”³⁷ Sharply differing from its western European variants, the nature of Ukrainian modernism may be summed up in a phrase I have used elsewhere: jubilant experimentation. A

³⁷ Grigori [sic] Mikhailovitch Kozintsev, “A Child of the Revolution,” in *Cinema in Revolution: The Heroic Era of the Soviet Film*, ed. Luda Schnitzer, Jean Schnitzer, and Marcel Martin (London: Secker and Warburg; New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 90.