The first time I read about the 1920 mass Soviet spectacle *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, I thought it was bananas. *The Storming* has everything you ever wanted in a spectacle, and much of what you didn't know you wanted: 8,000 performers, a 360 degree stage on the grounds of St. Petersburg's Palace Square, a light show spanning the façade of the Hermitage, real gunfire, cannon fire from a battleship, thousands of spectators, a dream team of avant-garde directors lead by Nikolai Evreinov, and of course – fireworks.

We know [in part thanks to Daria Khitrova’s wonderful talk yesterday] that *The Storming* was not produced simply to dazzle its spectators. The occasion was the third anniversary of the October revolution, and the goal was to depict that which had not been witnessed by much of the proletariat: the Bolshevik seizure of the winter palace, which in 1917 housed the provisional government headed by Alexander Kerensky.

*The Storming* was not the first mass spectacle of its kind. Several experiments in mass performance had been staged before it, usually to celebrate important achievements surrounding the 1917 revolution. The first of these was *The Overthrow of Autocracy* staged in 1919 at the People’s House in Petrograd. This reenactment of the February revolution was so successful that Narkompros decided future spectacles needed a bigger stage with which to accommodate larger crowds and declared that future celebrations should be given “exclusively in the open air.
On the squares, at the street crossings and in the parks, special grand stands should be erected.”

Overthrow was thus followed by three major outdoor spectacles, two held outside of the former Stock Exchange building and one in the middle of Kammenyi lake. These performances were well-received by audiences and party elites who attended them. When asked by the Petrosoviet to provide a full report of the governing principles that had guided them in their popular production of A World Commune, the organizers responded with the following statement:

Our group followed the following principles: Art should now play an official role; it should become a weapon for agitation and propaganda of the ideas of communism as well as cultural-educational ideals; it must become revolutionary – it must charge the masses with positive political energy...

Mass festivals produced henceforth would of course be expected to internalize these same principles. The Storming of the Winter Palace performed in November of 1920 would have been no exception – or was it?

Much of the scholarship published in the last century on the Soviet mass spectacle, and The Storming of the Winter Palace in particular, has accepted this interpretation of spectacle as strategic propaganda wholesale. In “Street Theatre as Propaganda,” Natalia Murray writes that the Bolsheviks “aimed to use the power of mass propaganda in order to establish a founding mythology...and disseminate their ideas to an overwhelmingly rural and illiterate population.” Similarly, Igor Chubarov claims that The Storming of the Winter Palace can be interpreted “as a

1 Vestnik Teatra, 1919, 29 April – 2 May, No. 22-23
3 Ibid.
prototype of modern political PR-technology and the forerunner of similar artistic performances [produced later].”  

In tandem with these analyses often comes descriptions of the spectacles as well-ordered, with directors employing “machine-like” or “military-precise” organization.  

This interpretation quite frankly, takes all the fun out of The Storming of the Winter Palace. While it’s undeniable that The Storming was propaganda in so far as it glorified the actions of the Bolsheviks and it helped forge a memory of the revolution for many Soviet citizens [thanks in no small part to Sergei Eisenstein], I want to spend the next 7 minutes complicating this interpretation by revisiting the ways The Storming failed as classical propaganda.  

The first thing that undermines the idea of The Storming as “machine-like” propaganda is the sheer logistical nightmare of producing this performance. [I haven’t described it in detail here because I assume most of us remember Daria Khitrova’s talk yesterday.] [So] One 150 spotlights alone were needed to illuminate the action as it moved around the square. The request for this quantity of lights was initially rejected by the Petrograd electric supply center and was later only granted after a pointed violent threat was made to the center’s director. The scenic and costume director, Yuri Annenkov, was unable to assemble and install the platforms in the Palace Square until the day of the performance due to the urban traffic that needed to flow through there during the week. Annenkov admitted later that he was worried his platforms would buckle under the weight of the performers.

4 Игорь Чубаров, Коллективная чувственность. Теории и практики левого авангарда, Исследования культуры (Высшая Школа Экономики (Государственный Университет), 2014).  
The entire event was precariously coordinated by the directors who were holed up in a raised platform attached to the Alexander column in the center of the square. Through the use of field phones, light signals, and motorcycle couriers, the directors controlled the actions of the 8,000 performers, the cues for the 500-member orchestra, the gunfire, the armored vehicles waiting in nearby alleys, and even the cannon fire from the *Aurora* anchored on the Neva.

Miraculously, almost everything went according to plan—with one noticeable exception. Annenkov recalls in his memoir that,

> When it came time for the shots fired from the Aurora, the signal director pressed the corresponding button. There was a volley [or a discharge of the cannon]. Then another and a third. The signal director pressed the button to stop the shots, but the firing continued for a fifth time, an eighth, a tenth ... In despair, we all poked at the button, but soon realized that the electric current that connected us to the ship was interrupted. The cannon fire was uncontrollable. Hugo Varlikh, who was in charge of the orchestra in our spectacle, who was supposed to "break" into music right after the third shot, hopelessly shouted to us in the telephone receiver: - When? When? When? [когда же когда же когда же?!] "Maybe never!" - Yevreinov said and burst out laughing.

The *Aurora* was eventually stopped by one of the handy motorcycle couriers. Nevertheless, this near-catastrophe underscores the precarious and *totally cockamamie* nature of this spectacle. Arrangements for future Red Calendar demonstrations would receive directives from central regional headquarters, and subcommittees would be formed and held responsible for the organization of parades, slogans, decorations, etc. *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, however, had the feel of a larger than life avant-garde fantasy gone wild that was *just barely* "pulled off." The production was as grand as it was fragile and it left the directors biting their nails with the audience, wondering what might happen next.
Which brings me to the second aspect of *The Storming* that undermines its status as official propaganda: the spectator. In contrast with later Red Calendar demonstrations, here there was a genuine sense of suspense among spectators.

We know from accounts and memoirs that Evreinov’s production inspired suspense and anxiety even among impartial foreign spectators. The British journalist Huntly Carter described the spectacle as a tangle of “marching, running, singing, shouting people, all pressing toward the Winter Palace…” all this, he said “was awful, arresting, almost indescribable.” An account from the German writer, Arthur Holitscher, describes how he and his companion, Aleksandra Kollontai, briefly feared that a counter-revolution would break out across the square. He writes:

> Behind our windows we turned a little pale...we realized what a perfect opportunity a storming like this provided for a possible counter-revolution, not the fake counter-revolution impersonated by actors, but a real one that had been waiting for an occasion like this...to stage a political coup under the cover of the theatrical thunder.

Once the fireworks broke out, Holitscher heaved a sigh of relief but wrote the effect of the performance was overall “gripping, amazing; it shook and terrified us to our innermost.” This anecdote serves as a reminder that at the time of the staging of *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, the civil war still raged and victory for the Bolsheviks was not yet secured, adding to the suspense of the production.

Also in direct contrast with later mass demonstrations was the element of improvisation among spectators in *The Storming of the Winter Palace*. Thousands of

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6 Quoted in: Deák, “Russian Mass Spectacles.”
8 Ibid.
spectators spontaneously joined the action in the square. A report from the PSRKD noted:

Viewers…participated in each episode, composing a kind of chorus… They reacted to any action as a real event, and when the last attack began, along with the whole crowd they instinctively lunged at the gates of the Winter Palace.9

Accounts from observers note that spectators even helped Red Army performers chase the actor playing Kerensky out of the square.

Finally, I want to emphasize that *The Storming of the Winter Palace* represents a brief moment in time when mass spectacles enjoyed relative artistic freedom before transforming into state-executed propaganda. Contrast the excitement experienced by Carter and Holitscher with the excitement you experience as I read this description of the preparations for the Thirteenth Anniversary of the October Revolution, which took place a full decade after *The Storming*:

This complex mass action will consist of the following separate elements: (a) an agitational procession, (b) an agitational meeting, (c) the October parade (d) the demonstration itself. These elements...happen simultaneously at different points within the demonstration. It is the combination of these elements and a skillful distribution of material elements and of slogans which gives the demonstration its colorful and at the same time balanced diversity.10

This report marks the shift to festivals made by politicians in the place of artistic directors. By 1930, the spectators knew when to clap, the performers, when to raise

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9 Quoted in: Чубаров, Коллективная чувственность. Теории и практики левого авангарда. Author’s translation.
their banner of a “figure showing the fulfillment of industrial and financial plans.”
Here organizers followed helpful guidelines like, “to large constructions may be added such materials as fluttering ribbons, flags, pennants and banners.” Here, there is no suspense, no improvisation.

Thus if we are to do justice to Evreinov’s “theatricalization of life,” The Storming of the Winter Palace, it must be teased out and placed apart from the spectacles that came after it, which were expected to follow the Narkompros directive that “art should play an official role” as a “weapon for agitation and propaganda of the ideas of communism.” Where later mass festivals were calculated – Evreinov’s production hung together by a thread. Where later productions were staid – Evreinov’s was, simply, bananas.

Thank you.

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.