Performativity and Interpellation in *Elizaveta Bam*

Lenora Murphy

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DRAMATIC elements abound in the work of Daniil Kharms, and his sometimes flamboyant self-presentation was nothing if not theatrical. For a man whose life and work were so infused with performativity, he experienced almost no luck as a playwright, however. The only play of Kharms's that received a complete performance during his lifetime is *Elizaveta Bam*, which he composed in December 1927 and was performed at the OBĖRIU exhibition night *Tri levykh chasa* [Three Left(ist) Hours] in January 1928.

The plot of *Elizaveta Bam* is both simple and impossible: a woman, Elizaveta Bam, is being chased by two men, Piotr Nikolaevich and Ivan Ivanovich. Eventually, it is revealed that they are chasing her because she has murdered one of them. The play concludes by circling back to the first scene of her flight, but this time she is arrested and led away by both men. In between the opening and closing scenes, the story is advanced through a series of vignettes, each with its own generic subheading[1]. These vignettes, many of which have no direct connection to the central flight-and-pursuit plot, are the most foregrounded elements of the play, repeatedly introducing new paradigms for the main characters and their relationships; indeed, Elizaveta and her pursuers change personae as the scenes in which they find themselves change genre. As a result of her ever-shifting self, Elizaveta and her crime alike are elusive — but her guilt is, ultimately, undeniable.

At the heart of *Elizaveta Bam* is a tension between the infinite possibilities of human identity and the certainty that our fates are decided by outside powers. For the majority of the play, Kharms stages ludicrous scenarios and nonsense dialogue, using the potential offered by the theatrical space to create a world defined by instability, with the bodies of the actors serving as the only lines of continuity. This absolute freedom is an illusion, however; Elizaveta cannot escape what has been decided for her. In this paper, I explore this conflict between an individual's desires and the higher authority that ultimately controls them using theories of state power from Foucault and Mbembe as well as Althusser's concept of interpellation to illuminate the political order Kharms builds. Though no explicit reference is made in the play to any state, Soviet or otherwise, the ending and Elizaveta's capture cast her previous transformations in a new light: not only are they expressions of the vast number of selves contained within all humans, they can also be read as attempted escapes from a power that refuses to allow Elizaveta to perform any version of herself other than that which it has chosen. I argue that the tragedy of *Elizaveta Bam* is not Elizaveta's 'crime', arrest, or presumed death, but the fact that she is denied the privilege to live as a truly untethered individual.

THREE LEFT(IST) HOURS

In OBĖRIU scholarship, the evening of January 24, 1928, has taken on almost mythic proportions. After all, one of the defining aspects of the

* I would like to thank Branislav Jakovljević, Gabriella Safran, and Yuliya Ilchuk for their invaluable help in the development of earlier versions of this article.

[1] There are two variants of the *Elizaveta Bam* script: one that contains only the text of the play, the other, based on a typed manuscript housed in N. Khardzhiev's collection in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) in Moscow, that includes penciled-in stage directions and generic subheadings (the latter is frequently referred to as the "scenic variant"). Both were included in Mikhail Meilakh's 1987 publication of the play (M. Meilakh, *O 'Elizavete Bam' Daniila Kharmsa (predystoriia, istoriia postanovki, p'esa, tekst)*, "Stanford Slavic Studies", 1987, 1, pp. 163-246). All citations of *Elizaveta Bam* in this article will be of the scenic variant as it was presented in "Stanford Slavic Studies", except for the very end of the play (what corresponds to the final page of the typed manuscript), which in that publication was only included in the non-scenic variant.

careers of the core members of the group that at that time called itself OBÈRIU (which at that point included, in addition to Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii, Nikolai Zabolotskii, Konstantin Vaginov, Igor' Bakhterev, and Boris [Doivber] Levin) is that they were truly underground, denied the kind of recognition granted to earlier avant-garde groups. *Three Left(ist) Hours*, which was held at the Leningrad Press House, marks the group's most mainstream exposure – and the poor official reaction guaranteed that a second opportunity would not be granted.

Due to the unique nature of this night in the context of the OBÈRIU members' careers, there is no shortage of information detailing just how *Three Left(ist) Hours* unfolded[2]. Here, I address the event not only because it provided the opportunity for *Elizaveta Bam* to be staged in full, but also because the article (frequently referred to as the OBÈRIU declaration or manifesto) composed by the group to accompany this exhibition provides crucial insight into how Kharms understands and uses theater. The section of the article focusing on theater was written by Baktherev and Levin[3], two men who were intimately involved in the production of *Elizaveta Bam* and had been working with Kharms for the previous two years as part of the experimental theater collective Radiks[4]. As the product of two close collaborators of Kharms, the theater section of the OBÈRIU article offers insight into what Kharms and his team were hoping to accomplish with *Elizaveta Bam*, and how they intended to do it. In keeping with the tone of a document establishing a new artistic movement, they are eager to demonstrate what sets their work apart, what makes their theater completely new and different from traditional theater: "This will be a plot which only the theater can give. The plots of theatrical performances are theatrical, just as the plots of musical works are musical. All represent one thing – a world of appearances – but depending on the material, they render it differently, after their own fashion"[5]. The goal of OBÈRIU theater was not to produce plot-focused plays, in which all theatrical elements from writing to performance to costumes and sets are used to convey the details of a story to the audience[6]. Instead, the narrative plot, though not discarded entirely, was seen as secondary, and far less readily apparent:

> The dramatic plot of the play is shattered by many seemingly extraneous subjects which detach the object as a separate whole, existing outside its connection with others. Therefore the dramatic plot does not arise before the spectator as a clear plot image; it glimmers, so to speak, behind the back of the action. The dramatic plot is replaced by a scenic plot which arises spontaneously from all the elements of our spectacle[7].

This is a principle that is evident not only in *Elizaveta Bam*, but in many of Kharms's prose works as well. Most prominent in these pieces are sensorial details: sounds, images, music, and movement. All of these aesthetic elements are just as crucial to Kharms as the plot, which is frequently quite simple and fades easily into the background. *Elizaveta Bam* illustrates this method clearly, as befits a play written expressly for this exhibition night, demonstrating to the audience just what OBÈRIU theater was, and how its 'scenic plot' functioned.

The production itself, attributed in the event

[2] For in-depth descriptions of *Three Left(ist) Hours* and the reactions to it, see M. Meilakh, *O 'Elizavete Bam'*, op. cit., pp. 187-97; V. Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms: Zhizn' cheloveka na vetru*, Sankt Peterburg 2008, pp. 182-211; A. Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie proizvedenii v dvukh tomakh*, II, ed. by M. Meilakh – V. Erl', Moskva 1993, pp. 146-150; I. Bakhterev, *Kogda my byli molodymi*, in *Vospominaniia o N. Zabolotskom*, ed. by E. Pabolotskaia – A. Makedonov – N. Zabolotskii, Moskva 1984, pp. 57-100.

[3] I. Bakhterev, *Kogda*, op. cit., p. 88. This section has also been attributed to Kharms.

[4] Mikhail Meilakh has written at length on the ways that the work of Radiks can be seen in *Elizaveta Bam*, and how the theatrical philosophy of OBÈRIU has its roots in Radiks. For more on this topic, see M. Meilakh, *O 'Elizavete Bam'*, op. cit., pp. 163-173.

[5] D. Kharms – A. Vvedenskii, *The Man With the Black Coat: Russia's Literature of the Absurd*, trans. by G. Gibian, Evanston 1987, p. 253.

[6] The question of how to create theater, and how to best utilize the theatrical form, was not a new one: since the turn of the century, the Russian, and then Soviet, theatrical community was in a state of constant disagreement about how to best practice its craft. These arguments became even more complex after the Revolution, as new theatrical genres and techniques (such as grand spectacle reenactments and the theatrical 'living newspaper') gained prominence. OBÈRIU's article, as well as its conviction that theater should use more varied means than simple plot and dialogue to communicate with the audience, can be seen as a new entry in this long-running debate. For a concise summary of the currents of Russian/Soviet theater from 1900-1930, see *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History*, ed. by L. Senelick – S. Ostrovsky, New Haven-London 2014, pp. 1-10.

[7] D. Kharms – A. Vvedenskii, *The Man*, op. cit., p. 254.

poster to Bakhterev, Levin, and Kharms, with sets and costumes by Bakhterev, was an elaborate affair, considering it was for a one-time event not located in a dedicated theater (the Press House occupied the former Shuvalov Palace on the Fontanka, now home to the Fabergé Museum; at the time, the stage area of the Press House was used for weekly recitations of their works by members of the Leningrad Association of Proletarian Writers)[8]. The set consisted of a central area flanked by two wings, shaped as rows of teeth. The wings were mobile and could be swung out or in to transform the space from wide-open to claustrophobic and back again[9]. Several of the actors were former Radiks collaborators, coming to *Elizaveta Bam* after the ultimately failed attempt to stage Kharms and Vvedenskii's *Moia mama vsia v chasakh* [My Mother is All in Watches]. In addition to actors, the play also features music and a chorus, whose parts are written into the script. All of these elements, considered together, indicate a complex, intricate staging which foregrounded its technical elements.

Ultimately, this evening did not serve as the springboard to broader notoriety for which OBÉRIU perhaps hoped[10]. The day after *Three Left(ist) Hours*, a critic from the "Krasnaia gazeta" ["Red Gazette"] claimed that the play, according to the general opinion of the audience, was "a cynically frank muddle of which nobody could understand a thing"[11]. Initially, the afterlife of *Elizaveta Bam* was as grim as the "Krasnaia gazeta" review was negative. Although OBÉRIU would continue to perform excerpts from the play at subsequent, less high-profile events, for decades the night at the Press House remained its sole complete performance. Since the rediscovery of Kharms and OBÉRIU, however, *Elizaveta Bam* has become one of Kharms's best-known works, and is certainly the most famous of his plays. It is also the play of Kharms's that has received the most scholarly attention[12]. It has been staged multiple times in the last few decades and has been translated into many languages – an appropriate fate for a play that was written not only as an independent work of art, but as an introduction to an aesthetic philosophy. *Elizaveta Bam* is much denser than its brevity implies: in this play, Kharms not only introduces his vision of what theater can be, he combines that vision with a commentary on institutions that govern the lives and behavior of ordinary people.

Elizaveta Bam and the absurd state

The lack of explicit references to the government, police, or any aspect of the justice system does not impede a reading of *Elizaveta Bam* as a commentary, however absurd, on the relationship between the subject and the state – too much in the play gestures towards that very theme. In order to approach this play as a political work, I have found it useful to utilize the frameworks detailed in the writings of Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe. Both of these thinkers explore the ways in which states regulate and benefit from the lives and deaths of their citizens; given Elizaveta's eventual fate and presumed death, their work helps to illuminate why that happens and how such an ending can recontexualize the preceding action depicted in the play.

In his lecture series *Security, Territory, Popu-*

[8] V. Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms*, op. cit., p. 185.

[9] All descriptions of the production itself are taken from M. Meilakh, *O 'Elizavete Bam'*, op. cit., pp. 180-186. Meilakh occasionally quotes Bakhterev's memories of the evening as told to Vladimir Erl'.

[10] See V. Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms*, op. cit., p. 188.

[11] Quoted in A. Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, II, Ann Arbor 1984, p. 246. Translation my own. Thank you to Gabriella Safran for her insights on how to render this phrase in English.

[12] Most of the studies devoted to *Elizaveta Bam* focus on generic, formal, and textual questions, acknowledging the political background without making it a primary focus. As a result, this article, which presents an overtly political reading of the play, does not draw heavily on that body of previous scholarship. For more on how *Elizaveta Bam* fits into broader European theatrical movements and genres of the 20th century, see J. Stelleman, *The Transitional Position of* Elizaveta Bam *between Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde*, in *USSR*, ed. by J. van der Eng – W. G. Weststeijn, Amsterdam-Atlanta 1991, pp. 207-229; J-Ph. Jaccard, *Daniil Kharms: Teatr absurda – real'nyi teatr: Prochtenie p'esy* Elizaveta Bam, "Russian Literature", 1990 (27), 1, pp. 21-40; H. Grünewald, *Generic Ambiguity in Daniil Kharms's "Elizaveta Bam"*, "New Zealand Slavonic Journal", 2001, pp. 87-99. For an analysis of Kharms's use of language in *Elizaveta Bam*, see G. H. J Roberts, *Of Words and Worlds: Language Games in* Elizaveta Bam *by Daniil Kharms*, "Slavonic and East European Review", 1994 (72), 1, pp. 38-59. For an exploration of the relationship between language, sound, and time in the play, see M. Iampol'skii, *Bespamiatstvo kak istok (chitaia Kharmsa)*, Moskva 1998, pp. 149-155.

lation (1977-1978), Foucault charts the historical development of the citizenry of a given state from a collection of individuals who must be controlled by the sovereign to, by the time of the birth of the modern state in the 17th century, a population, a collective to be managed by the government, and most particularly by the police. The police, Foucault claims, are responsible for making sure that the people who compose the population are productive in a way that will positively impact the state:

> [...] police must ensure that men live, and live in large numbers; it must ensure that they have the wherewithal to live and so do not die in excessive numbers. But at the same time it must also ensure that everything in their activity that may go beyond this pure and simple subsistence will in fact be produced, distributed, divided up, and put in circulation in such a way that the state really can draw its strength from it[13].

In this way, people in the modern state, in what Foucault characterizes as the era of the physiocrats, have become resources of the state, to be regulated and utilized for its benefit. Foucault frames this phenomenon within the rise of mercantilism and economic competition between European states: in this context, the outcome of this regulation of the population is thus expected to be some kind of monetary gain. Human life is treated as raw material in the name of an end goal of wealth accumulation, accomplished by the state for its own purposes.

Foucault places this system at the beginning of western European modernity, at the turn of the 17th century. In tracking the evolution and development of the role of the police over the next several centuries, he confirms that by the nineteenth century, the project of population management had been passed from the police to the market and the state, while the police remained to regulate the behavior of the population:

> The regulatory control of the territory and subjects that still characterized seventeenth century police must clearly be called into question, and there will now be a sort of double system. On the one hand will be a whole series of mechanisms that fall within the province of the economy and the management of the population with the function of increasing the forces of the state. Then, on the other hand, there will be an apparatus or instruments for ensuring the prevention or repression of disorder, irregularity, illegality, and delinquency[14].

What is key for this discussion of *Elizaveta Bam* is that, leading up to the 20th century, the modern western European state was intimately engaged in the process of observing, guiding, and controlling the behavior of its citizens. The logistics of this system could change over time, but the end goal remained consistent. The agency of an individual subject within this system was not accounted for or, indeed, permitted; rather, the individual was absorbed into a collective that was then implemented for the benefit of the state.

Although Foucault is discussing the formation and development of the western European state, his observations can also be applied to Russia and the Soviet Union. Indeed, Foucault was of the opinion that many aspects of the Stalinist state and its expression and implementation of power could be traced back to the West. In his 1978 talk *Gendai no Kenryoku wo tou* [Analytical Philosophy of Politics], given in Tokyo, Foucault argues that the genealogies of both Stalinism and fascism, "two great maladies of power", had their roots in western historical and political development:

> [...] it cannot be denied that in many ways, fascism and Stalinism merely prolonged an entire series of mechanisms that already existed in the social and political systems of the West. After all, the organization of large [political] parties, the development of a police apparatus, the existence of techniques of repression such as labor camps – all this is entirely the heritage of western liberal societies which Stalinism and fascism merely received[15].

Stalinism undeniably does share many characteristics with the modern European state as Foucault describes it, and as a result I believe that Foucault's framework can be productively used to analyze art of the Stalinist period.

As Foucault defines and explores it, biopower is above all concerned with the way that the state regulates the 'lives' of its subjects[16]. This problem is

[13] M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans. by G. Burchell, New York 2007, p. 326.

[14] Ivi, p. 353.

[15] Idem, *Dits et écrits. III. 1976-1979*, Paris 1994, pp. 535-536. Translation my own.

[16] In his genealogy of the western state and sovereignty, Foucault traces the evolution of the society of discipline, where focus was given to the regulation of behavior and where failure to adhere to

highly relevant to Kharms's presentation of the individual subject in *Elizaveta Bam* (which will be discussed at length in the next section), but so too is the relationship between the state and death. After all, the overwhelming specter of the play is the death from which Elizaveta tries to flee, and which she ultimately cannot escape. Elizaveta's life is, by the end, not being guided or brought into line; it is being pruned by a power that, if not explicitly the state, is at least analogous to it. Foucault identifies the right to kill as one of the foundational aspects of sovereign power: "Sovereign power's effect on life is exercised only when the sovereign can kill. The very essence of the right of life and death is actually the right to kill: it is at the moment when the sovereign can kill that he exercises his right over life. It is essentially the right of the sword"[17]. For a broader discussion of how the state can inflict death, both directly and indirectly, and the implications of this sort of culture of state murder, it will be helpful to consider Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, the state management of death[18].

Mbembe introduces necropolitics as a counter to, or continuation of, biopower, which he describes as "that domain of life over which power has asserted its control"[19]. In contrast, necropolitics seeks to answer questions concerning death: "[...] under what practical conditions is the power to kill, to let live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the one who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets such a person against his murderer?"[20]. If Foucault describes the systems through which the state directs the lives and activities of its citizens, Mbembe grapples with the state as killer, as an arbiter that determines which lives it would prefer to do away with.

Crucial to Mbembe's depiction of this fatal relationship between state and subject is Carl Schmitt's definition of the "state of exception": that scenario which the law does not account for, and in which the sovereign therefore is authorized to act as they will, outside of the law with the law's own blessing. In a discussion of the security state, Mbembe observes that such a state actually "thrives on a *state of insecurity*, which it participates in fomenting and to which it claims to be the solution"[21]. Security mechanisms, and the people who operate them, know that their authority is dependent on the continuous demonstration of some kind of threat from a potential, or even imagined, enemy. This conflict between the state and its 'enemy' can be transformed into something even broader and more far-reaching, however. Mbembe identifies "trajectories by which the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill. In such instances, power (which is not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to the exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy"[22]. If a society finds itself continually under threat, continually in a state of emergency, then it is no longer ruled by laws but by fear and aggression and the certain knowledge that all threats to its order must be eliminated.

Mbembe's insistence that the power that operates in this kind of drawn-out state of exception is not necessarily state power is notable, particularly in light of *Elizaveta Bam*'s lack of clarity on the question of the state. In his discussion of the French Revolution, Mbembe describes an environment of terror (a "state of insecurity") so encompassing that it helped to erode the barrier between state and subject:

regulations was strictly punished, and the society of control, which he associates more closely with biopower. In the society of control, death is held off (i.e., the usage of the death penalty declines), and the state's attention is devoted to the observation of and the optimization of subjects' lives. Stalin's rule can perhaps be said to occupy a kind of middle ground between these two models, with the balance tilted in favor of the society of discipline, a combination which is well-illustrated in *Elizaveta Bam*.

[17] M. Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. by D. Macey, New York 2003, p. 240.

[18] Mbembe's work is for the most part oriented towards the 21st century, but, like Foucault, many of his observations speak both to Stalinism broadly and *Elizaveta Bam* specifically.

[19] A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. by S. Corcoran, Durham-London 2019, p. 66.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] Ivi, p. 54.

[22] Ivi, p. 70.

> As David Bates has shown, the theorists of terror believed it possible to distinguish between authentic expressions of sovereignty and the actions of the enemy. They also believed it possible to distinguish, in the political sphere, between the citizen's 'error' and the counterrevolutionary's 'crime'. Terror thus became a way of marking aberration in the body politic, and politics came to be read both as the mobile force of reason and as an errant attempt to create a space where 'error' would only be reduced and the truth enhanced and the enemy dispatched[23].

The power over life and death, the authority to act in the state of exception, did not belong solely to the state in its most concentrated form. To decide who had overstepped their rights, who could not continue to live in the space governed by the state, was determined not by actions taken but by identity: citizen or enemy. The implications of such a mindset find some expression in the murky world of *Elizaveta Bam*, where Elizaveta's guilt and punishment are established not through clear, logical evidence, but by the tautological conclusion that since she is the guilty party, she must have committed the crime.

The transforming subject in Elizaveta Bam

The question of the state and its power may be said to hover, barely seen, behind the main action of *Elizaveta Bam*, analogous to the "glimmering" theatrical plot referred to in the OBĖRIU article. In this play, Kharms most directly considers the individual subject, which he depicts as a discrete, independent unit which is nonetheless mutable, unstable, and capable of fantastic variation. The action onstage is driven not by the plot but by this play of subjecthood. From scenario to scenario, from moment to moment, there is no guarantee that who a character was, who they presented themselves as, will have any connection to who they are now. Sometimes, personality traits and interpersonal relationships stay consistent, but there are also times when they are completely broken. The only constant Kharms offers is that his characters will continuously re-evaluate and re-invent themselves and their place in the world: this rule, however, is violated by the final scene, in which it is confirmed that no number of transformations could make Elizaveta into a person innocent of the charges leveled against her.

Given the central position that my analysis grants to Kharms's interpretation of the political, social subject, Louis Althusser's work on interpellation provides a crucial aid to approaching this material. As Althusser defines it, interpellation expresses the relationship between the individual and ideology as one of mutual recognition: ideology, be it state, familial, religious, or other, in essence calls out to the individual, identifies them, and they in turn identify themselves in the same way. Althusser understands ideology as a purely material phenomenon, and its materiality is rooted in its ability to constitute individuals in this way. The example Althusser provides to illustrate how interpellation takes place is (appropriately for a discussion of *Elizaveta Bam*) a scenario in which a policeman calls out to an individual walking by:

> Assuming the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere 180-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else)[24].

To be addressed by an ideology, to be identified by an ideology, and to recognize that you have been addressed and identified, is to be interpellated. In real life, this process is almost automatic from birth, an unavoidable aspect of living in a society: "[...] ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*"[25]. We are born into ideology, and our existence, our individual subjecthood, is governed by it. The questions of naming and labeling, of recognition and self-recognition, and of the interplay of subject and state recur throughout *Elizaveta Bam*, as its characters demonstrate the flexibility of their

[23] Ivi, p. 73.

[24] L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, London-New York 2014, p. 264.

[25] Ivi, p. 265.

identity, as well as their ultimate vulnerability before a power they cannot outrun.

As the play begins, Elizaveta is already being pursued; indeed, the audience first sees her hiding from offstage pursuers, in fear for her life. Her terror seems justified as they attempt to break down the door when she refuses to let them in. As they push against the door, Elizaveta tries to reason with them, to understand why they are chasing her and what sort of fate awaits her:

> *Ел. Б.*: Я Вам дверь не открою, пока Вы не скажете, что Вы хотите со мной сделать…
> *I-й гол.*: Вы сами знаете, что Вам предстоит.
> *Ел. Б.*: Нет, не знаю. Вы меня хотите убить?
> (*вместе*) *I-й*: Вы подлежите крупному наказанию!
> *II-й*: Вы всё равно от нас не уйдёте!
> *Ел. Б.*: Вы, может быть, скажете мне, в чём я провинилась.
> *I-й*: Вы сами знаете.
> *Ел. Б.*: Нет не знаю…
> *I-й*: Разрешите Вам не поверить.
> *II-й*: Вы преступница.
> *Ел. Б.*: Ха-ха-ха-ха! А если Вы убьёте меня, Ваша совесть будет чиста?…
> *I-й*: Мы сделаем это, сообразуясь с нашей совестью.
> *Ел. Б.*: В таком случае, увы, но у Вас нет совести[26].

Several details in this exchange stand out, perhaps most notably the lack of specificity with regards to Elizaveta's crime and punishment. The voices, still behind the door, claim that Elizaveta knows what her crime is, but they refuse to name it, or to elaborate on what they plan to do with Elizaveta after capturing her. All they will say is that she is subject to "крупн[ое] назакани[е]" [dire punishment], a word choice that, along with the label of "преступница" [criminal] that they assign to Elizaveta (an attempt to constitute her into their reality which she rejects), helps to establish an imbalanced power dynamic between the two parties, unavoidably reminiscent of that between the state and a transgressing subject. As was previously discussed, there is no point in the play at which Kharms confirms that Elizaveta's pursuers are in any way associated with the state or law enforcement, but they speak as though that is the case. This tension will grow in prominence over the course of the play—these two men may be no more than free agents pursuing Elizaveta for their own purposes, but they present themselves as though there is more at work here than chance. Immediately after this initial exchange, a new generic heading appears: "Жанр реалистический, комедийный"[27]. This heading does not indicate a new scene, but it does signal a shift in the tone of the action onstage, as Elizaveta switches from pleading with her pursuers to mocking and manipulating them from behind the door. Notably, Elizaveta's taunts, which effectively get under her pursuers' skin, are based around identity, playing with the questions of recognition that Althusser calls attention to in his work:

> *Ел. Б.*: У Вас-то, Иван Иванович, нет никакой совести. Вы просто мошенник.
> *II-й*: Кто мошенник? Это я? Это я? Это я мошенник?!
> *I-й*: Ну подождите, Иван Иванович! Елизавета Бам, приказываю…
> *II-й*: Нет, Пётр Николаевич, это я что ли мошенник? […] Вы мне скажите, это я мошенник?
> *I-й*: Да отстаньте же Вы!
> *II-й*: Это что же, я по-Вашему мошенник?
> *I-й*: Да, мошенник!!!
> *II-й*: Ах так, значит по-Вашему я мошенник! Так Вы сказали?[28]

Here, Elizaveta pushes back against these men who want to capture her, turning their accusations of criminality back at them (although the word

[26] M. Meilakh, *O 'Elizavete Bam'*, op. cit., p. 223. ("*Elizaveta Bam*. I won't open the door for you until you tell me what you are going to do with me…/ *First Voice*. You know yourself what you're facing. / *Elizaveta Bam*. No, I don't know. You want to kill me? / *First Voice*. *[speaking together with Second Voice]* You are subject to dire punishment! / *Second Voice*. No matter what, you won't get away from us! / *Elizaveta Bam*. Maybe you could tell me what I'm guilty of. / *First Voice*. You know yourself. / *Elizaveta Bam*. No, I don't know…/ *First Voice*. Forgive us if we don't believe you. / *Second Voice*. You are a criminal. / *Elizaveta Bam*. Ha, ha, ha, ha. And if you kill me, do you think your conscience will be clear?…/ *First Voice*. We'll do it in consultation with our consciences. / *Elizaveta Bam*. In that case, alas, you have no conscience", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, trans. by T. Langen – J. Weir, Evanston 2000, p. 170).

[27] Ibidem. ("Realistic comedy genre", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 171).

[28] Ivi, pp. 223-224. ("*Elizaveta Bam*. You have no conscience at all, Ivan Ivanovich. You're just a crook…/ *Second Voice*. Who's a crook? Me? Me? I'm a crook? / *First Voice*. Now wait a minute, Ivan Ivanovich. Elizaveta Bam, I order you…/ *Second Voice*. No, Pyotr Nikolayevich – so I'm a crook? […] Tell me, am I a crook? / *First Voice*. Just drop it. / *Second Voice*. So in your opinion, I'm a crook, am I? / *First Voice*. Yes, you're a crook!!! / *Second Voice*. Ah, so, in your opinion I'm a crook! Is that what you said?", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 171).

with which she attacks Ivan Ivanovich, "мошенник" [crook], carries less serious connotations than "преступница", the term that was used to label Elizaveta). At the same time, she addresses one of them by name, adding weight to her verbal attack: before, Ivan Ivanovich's anonymity contributed to the aura of fear surrounding him, making him seem less like a specific individual and linking him more strongly to the shadowy power structure behind him. Now Elizaveta not only names him but accuses him, defines him, just as he previously attempted to do to her. The most significant difference now is that, in contrast with Elizaveta's steady denials that she was a criminal, the root of Ivan Ivanovich's reaction to being called a crook is not fear of punishment or an insistence on his innocence, but anxiety. It is not the consequences of being labeled a crook, but the implications of such a label, what it says about Ivan Ivanovich as a person, that upsets him – and his inability to move on, his need to know if this is truly what Elizaveta and Piotr Nikolaevich think of him, demonstrates how seriously he takes this charge. This vignette reads almost like a companion to Althusser's illustration of the mechanics of interpellation: Elizaveta hails Ivan Ivanovich as a crook, and much as he dislikes it, he cannot help but respond, acknowledging that on some level she has indeed correctly understood him.

The strength of Ivan Ivanovich's response here is amplified by Elizaveta's newfound ability to call him by name. The fact that Elizaveta is able to identify him by name, even though there was no previous indication that she was acquainted with the men chasing her, signals clearly that this play's approach to memory and identity is far from straightforward. This is quickly borne out, as Elizaveta's teasing, and Piotr Nikolaevich and Ivan Ivanovich's clownish ineptness, become more and more pronounced, until suddenly the men are no longer menacing threats but magicians. Their new occupation is announced by Elizaveta, who has exchanged the fear and cunning displayed when she accused Ivan Ivanovich of being a crook for childlike joy and wonder. This is an entirely different setup and tone from what was shown in the opening of the play, a complete reconfiguration of who these characters are and how they relate to each other achieved fairly rapidly. In spite of all that has changed, though, there is a base level at which they remain unaltered: Piotr Nikolaevich and Ivan Ivanovich remain a pair, approaching Elizaveta together. Their names also remain the same: the individual in *Elizaveta Bam*, then, is capable of incredible change, but within limits.

The fact of these characters' transformations is notable in and of itself, but the repetition of Elizaveta naming and labeling her pursuers provides an interesting complication. It cannot be said that she changes the natures of Ivan Ivanovich and Piotr Nikolaevich solely through her speech – though Kharms does see an incantatory power in language, which he explores in this very play, in both of the scenarios under consideration here, the personae and relationships of all three characters have a preexisting instability that limits the control one person can exert on them. Nonetheless, to see Elizaveta twice in a row verbally crystallize a change happening around her, within her interlocutors, forces us once again to consider how this act of naming functions in the universe Kharms has created.

Perhaps the clearest encapsulation of how Kharms approaches the idea of human transformation and how it relates to exterior names and labels can be seen in an appeal that Ivan Ivanovich makes to Elizaveta soon after the introduction of Mamasha and Papasha, Elizaveta's parents. In this address, Ivan Ivanovich creates a new identity for himself, as a supplicant with a wife and children at home, even as he repeatedly reinscribes Elizaveta's identity through the use of new patronymics:

> Если позволите, Елизавета Таракановна, я пойду лучше домой. Меня ждёт жена дома. У ней много ребят, Елизавета Таракановна. Простите, что я так надоел Вам. Не забывайте меня. Такой уж я человек, что все мня гоняют. За что, спрашивается? Украл я, что ли? Ведь нет! Елизавета Эдуардовна, я честный человек. У меня дома жена. У жены ребят много. Ребята хорошие. Каждый в зубах по спичечной коробке держит. Вы уж простите меня. Я, Елизавета Михайловна, домой пойду[29].

[29] Ivi, p. 226. ("If you'll allow me, Elizaveta Cockroachson, I'd better be going home. My wife is waiting for me at home. She has many kids, Elizaveta Cockroachson. Pardon me for boring you so. Don't forget me. I am the kind of person that everyone kicks out. For what,

None of the three patronymics, not the perfectly ordinary Eduardovna or Mikhailovna or the absurd and insulting Tarakanovna[30] is given precedence or treated like the correct version of Elizaveta's name. Instead, they all coexist, each with an equal potential to be true – or perhaps it could be said that each is true in the moment that it is spoken, in the same way that Ivan Ivanovich was a dangerous threat when he was chasing Elizaveta, a harmless magician when she named him as such, and now is a beleaguered family man. All of these contradicting facts can be true, Kharms suggests: a person is not limited strictly to their current circumstance or presentation. In the case of Elizaveta and her three patronymics, which are presented one after the other without interruption, it is possible that a person is not even limited to being only one thing at a given moment. Identity in this play is not only fluid, it is multifaceted, capable of expressing multiple, seemingly conflicting aspects of one person at once. However, it has a constant to which it must always return: Elizaveta may have a variety of patronymics, but she is always Elizaveta. The act of naming can articulate a change, but as this passage demonstrates, it can also confirm that which is immune to change.

Kharms's attention to these two conflicting aspects of identity once again resonates with the concept of interpellation, particularly its interpretation by Judith Butler, who is interested in the ways that individuals can resist the law that seeks to name and incorporate them: "The law might not only be refused, but it might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation"[31]. Butler here is interested mainly in the performance of gender, in the range of ways that individuals can rebel against those rigid categories imposed on them from above:

> Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavior conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who seeks to deliver it[32].

Butler suggests that individuals can use the tools of performance to question and test the limits of the identities that they are forced to inhabit; even if they do not deny outright or publicly fight against the law, there is still the possibility of subverting it.

The scenarios depicted by Kharms in *Elizaveta Bam* do not correspond to the specifics of Butler's discussion of gender, but there is overlap between them in the depiction of performance as such – performance as a means of resistance which can also be a key to survival. What stands out about Kharms's version of this phenomenon is how his characters prompt each other to take up new performances; as a result, their performances have a random quality, as though they have no specific desired goal of expression but rather a total willingness to try anything new, to be anyone new. There is nothing structured or purposeful about these performances, simply the unspoken desire to be liberated from one's established identity, even if that liberation is only partially possible: after all, Elizaveta will always be Elizaveta.

It is certainly possible to read *Elizaveta Bam* and regard these transformations as expression of something fully internal, a fundamental porousness of the self. But if we examine the play through the lens of Althusser's work, a political dimension is revealed. This is also a play about the position of the citizen-subject in society, struggling to establish a self that can exist safely – a goal that Kharms ultimately reveals to be impossible. No matter how much Elizaveta, Piotr Nikolaevich, and Ivan Ivanovich change, they cannot fully outrun the hunter and prey identities that defined them from the very beginning. Their relationships can evolve, can become close and affectionate, can experience complete reversals of power dynamics, but the way that they are linked together, the way that the two men never stop following Elizaveta, is consistent. No matter how much

I wonder. Have I stolen something? But no, Elizaveta Edwardson, I am an honest man. I have a wife at home. My wife's got a lot of kids. Great kids. Each one holds a matchbox between his teeth. So you must excuse me. I, Elizaveta Michaelson, am going home", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 174).

[30] Literally, "daughter of a cockroach". This begins a cockroach motif that will continue throughout the play.

[31] J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York -London 1993, p. 122.

[32] Ibidem.

they change, certain aspects of their fate and identity remain completely out of their control.

This is confirmed by the sequence in which Elizaveta's crime is revealed. Even before the event is described, Kharms muddies the narrative waters, obscuring just who is telling the story. It is Piotr Nikolaevich who begins the tale ("Но однажды я просыпаюсь…"[33]). Ivan Ivanovich, however, quickly takes over, with the stage directions indicating that the two "закрывают друг друга"[34]. This direction suggests an erosion of the boundaries between Ivan Ivanovich and Piotr Nikolaevich, their unique and concrete subjecthood traded in for something more ambiguous and indeterminate. Even as the narration centers the experience of the narrator, Kharms complicates the very idea of individual subjectivity: the story these two men share will determine Elizaveta's fate, but from the start it hints at a blurred perspective. This is reinforced as Ivan Ivanovich picks up from Piotr Nikolaevich, recounting the appearance in his doorway of a woman: "Во всяком случае, я видел хорошо её лицо. Это была вот кто (*показывает на Ел. Б.*). Тогда она была похожа…"[35]. This sentence is completed by "Everyone" announcing, "На меня!"[36]. All performers then leave the stage, save for Ivan Ivanovich and Elizaveta, and he continues: "Я спросил её, чем она это сделала. Она говорит, что подралась с ним на эспадронах. Дрались честно, но она не виновата, что убила его. Слушай, зачем ты убила Петра Николаевича?"[37]. Elizaveta insists that she did not kill anyone, but Ivan Ivanovich presses her: "Взять и зарезать человека! Сколь много в этом коварства! Ура! ты это сделала, а зачем?"[38].

Here, Elizaveta's crime and victim are finally revealed. However, this revelation obscures the truth rather than bringing it to the light. After this scene, the identities of the victim and criminal involved in this apparent murder are, if anything, less evident than before. Each figure has become blurred: Piotr Nikolaevich and Ivan Ivanovich become each other's doubles and Elizaveta's likeness is shared by the entire ensemble. Even if a specific crime can be definitely determined to have taken place, the question of who did it and who it was done to are fundamentally unanswerable. If Elizaveta was the killer, then the killer could in fact have been anyone, because it has been established that she looks like everyone. If Piotr Nikolaevich was the victim, then it could also have been Ivan Ivanovich. If there is guilt or victimhood, they cannot be linked to one individual; the possibility for individual agency has been effectively removed.

Kharms reinforces this paradigm in the final sequence of the play, which loops back to the opening scene. Once more, Elizaveta is hiding from the two men attempting to knock her door down, debating her chances of escape. This time, however, she is reduced to a state of absolute vulnerability, and cannot fight back as she did before. Ivan Ivanovich and Piotr Nikolaevich succeed, and Elizaveta is arrested and dragged off. As they lead her away, she is still insisting on her innocence: "Да я не убивала никого! […] Вяжите меня! Тащите за косу! Продевайте сквозь корыто! Я никого не убивала! Я не могу убивать никого!"[39]. At this point, Kharms has created a world so alogical, and introduced so many opposing pieces of information, that it is impossible to take Elizaveta's protestations entirely at her word: the fact is, she may have killed somebody. However, the only crime of which she has been directly accused is the murder of Piotr Nikolaevich, who in this very scene is alive and well onstage. Logically, Elizaveta cannot be guilty of killing a person still alive. But the

[33] M. Meilakh, *O 'Elizavete Bam'*, op. cit., p. 229. ("But one time I wake up —", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 179).

[34] Ibidem. ("hide one another", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 179).

[35] Ibidem. ("In any case I had a good look at her face. And that's who it was. [*Points at Elizaveta Bam.*] At that time she looked like…", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 179).

[36] Ibidem. ("Like me!", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 179).

[37] Ivi, p. 230. ("I asked her why she did it. She said they fought it out with swords. They fought fair and square, and it was not her fault that she killed him. Listen, why did you kill Pyotr Nikolayevich?", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 179).

[38] Ibidem. ("To up and butcher a man. How underhanded that is; hooray, you did do it, but why?", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 179).

[39] Ivi, p. 221. ("I didn't kill anyone […] You may tie me up! You may pull me by the hair! You may drag me through the gutter. I didn't kill anyone! I couldn't kill anyone!", *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays*, op. cit., p. 193).

instability of Elizaveta and Piotr Nikolaevich alike, the well-established fact within the universe of the play that who a person is at the present moment can change without warning, introduces the possibility that even though every aspect of her crime as it has been presented is impossible, it may also be true. If it is true, then she must be captured and punished; Ivan Ivanovich and Piotr Nikolaevich have been selected to perform the task, and they must carry it out.

This device of a crime forced into existence in spite of logic and physical reality calls to mind Mbembe's discussion of the state of insecurity perpetuated by the security state to prolong its usefulness and necessity. What Kharms ultimately offers is somewhat more complicated, however. His focus is not on the mechanisms manipulating his subjects but the subjects themselves: from the beginning, the heart of the plot is located within Elizaveta. She is labeled a criminal, and responds with defiance — to return to Althusser's scenario of interpellation, she refuses to turn around when hailed. Do Elizaveta and her fate then fall under the category proposed by Althusser of "bad subjects", those who somehow resist interpellation and "provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus"[40]? Not quite: Elizaveta's struggle is focused not on external factors, on the social and ideological structures surrounding her, but on internal questions of personal identity. Even when she is being dragged away, she does not protest against the injustice, the obvious mistake that has led these men to apprehend her as a criminal; instead, she insists that regardless of what is done to her, she is not a murderer.

One of the most fundamental questions of this play thus becomes: if Elizaveta is not a murderer, who is she? There is, of course, no concrete answer. In each new scenario, she tries on a different version of herself: here cunning, here innocent, here younger, here older. Her interlocutors and their relationships change along with her, displaying an extraordinary range of identities, none of which are presented as absolute. Elizaveta's identity, her status as a subject in this world she finds herself in, is predicated on her lack of a stable core: for her, to exist is to change. Ultimately, however, this succession of different possible Elizavetas is forcibly replaced from without by Elizaveta the murderer.

From a play that previously depicted the many natures hidden in each individual and the almost endless human capacity for transformation, what ultimately emerges is a world in which subjects do not possess the kind of freedom they at first seem to. The complex trajectories of Elizaveta and Piotr Nikolaevich illustrate those characters' powerlessness over themselves and their bodies, their vulnerability and lack of agency. Elizaveta can be made into Piotr Nikolaevich's murderer not because it is certain that she killed him but because some other, higher power has decreed it, just as it has decreed that Piotr Nikolaevich must die. Ironically, it is through Kharms's exploration of the infinite sides of humans, the myriad ways they can express themselves and exist in the world, that he also creates a population that, through its very instability, can be framed or forced into guilt or victimhood, for any crime imaginable, and then dealt with accordingly. This play presents a nightmarish version of Althusser's interpellation scenario, with Elizaveta desperately trying to escape after being hailed, but ultimately being forced to turn around and acknowledge that it is indeed she who was hailed, she who is a subject.

The model Kharms generates here thus does have some clear similarities with the biopower model, particularly in how subjects are reduced to biological units for the control and consumption of a greater power. Onstage, none of the characters can get their stories straight, as it were — they cannot come to an agreement about this instigating crime and who committed it. In the end, however, Elizaveta suffers the exact fact that she was threatened with when the play started, her agency trampled by the narrative imposed from above. By the end of *Elizaveta Bam*, it is difficult for the audience to determine what happened: whether Piotr Nikolaevich truly died and whether Elizaveta was guilty of his murder are unknowable. All that can be said for sure is that a murder was committed, and a victim and perpetrator

[40] L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction*, op. cit., p. 269.

were selected to make that crime into a reality. Elizaveta's guilt, then, is irrelevant: what matters is that she is named as a criminal, and then punished as one. Her capture and presumed death can then be claimed by the invisible state as proof of its effectiveness and necessity, for a threat to public order and safety has clearly been eliminated.

Conclusion

In how it deals with characterization, *Elizaveta Bam* occupies a unique place in Kharms's oeuvre, which is not typically focused on psychological questions. As Elizaveta, Piotr Nikolaevich, and Ivan Ivanovich move from scenario to scenario, changing as they do, they become characters of immense complexity and richness. This approach to character is not always seen in Kharms's famous prose works, such as *Sluchai* [Incidences, 1933-39], which tend to place more emphasis on scenario and physical details than the inner workings of a character's mind. *Elizaveta Bam* is not entirely disconnected from Kharms's prose of the 1930s, however: taken on their own, each of its generic subsections reads like a dramatic version of the microfiction for which he is most famous. The plot of Elizaveta's pursuit and capture accounts for a small proportion of the play overall — in keeping with the OBĖRIU article's prioritization of scenic plot over dramatic plot, *Elizaveta Bam* could be described as a series of mostly unconnected vignettes. The transformations in personality and character type that occur between these scenes could, in that light, be viewed as more literal transformations, as the actors actually playing different characters in each new scenario. Their identities and even their biological statuses can change dramatically because there is no expectation of emotional or physical continuity.

What makes *Elizaveta Bam* something other than a staged precursor of *Sluchai* is Kharms's decision to impose a larger narrative structure, to follow the journeys of a few characters as they move from scenario to scenario. Instead of the sharp focus on small, isolated moments of time, seemingly disconnected from past and future alike, that Kharms would craft later in his career, *Elizaveta Bam* depicts a world in which past and future meld together, and both are inescapable. Elizaveta does not have the freedom of a character captured in a sliver of time, then abandoned and never heard from again: although she is one of Kharms's most fully-rounded characters, one of his few figures who possesses real biological and narrative continuity, she pays a price for those qualities. Just as the dramatic plot of *Elizaveta Bam* exerts its force on the structure of the play, the unseen power structure motivating Ivan Ivanovich and Piotr Nikolaevich's pursuit of Elizaveta is, by the end, free to take her away and, presumably, kill her.

What is most at stake in this play, even more than Elizaveta's life, is her status as an individual, and the question of what is permitted to the individual subject. *Elizaveta Bam* presents ordinary individuals as beholden to no one, who act as they will with no inner logic or concern for their community. This is then taken even further with Elizaveta's refusal to acquiesce to an externally imposed narrative that does not fit her understanding of herself. To the extent that she can be defined at all, Elizaveta is characterized by her freedom, her absolute, unpredictable, anarchic selfhood. For large parts of the play, Kharms extends that freedom to her fellow characters, particularly Ivan Ivanovich and Piotr Nikolaevich: all three of them are too untethered to belong to a larger group, or to be concrete subjects of a united polity. The melodrama of the finale not only conveys the specific tragedy of Elizaveta's death, then, but the ultimate fate of the subject who attempts to become truly liberated. The freedom these characters spent most of the play reveling in was, it turns out, always an illusion: the first scene with Elizaveta's successful escape was not a starting-off point but a promise that only Elizaveta could not heed. Whether Elizaveta is in fact a killer is an unsolvable mystery and beside the point: Kharms has constructed the narrative so that she could be, and that possibility is enough. Subjects have been so thoroughly constituted into the state ideology (or rather, the ideology of the undefined power), and the 'state' has such complete control over narratives of crime and pun-

ishment, that Elizaveta cannot escape.

Approaching *Elizaveta Bam* from this angle, it is difficult not to read it as a specific repudiation of the inflexibility and brutality of Soviet society. This impression is only reinforced by the fate that subsequently befell both Kharms and his play: just as Elizaveta is denied the ability to fully act out her broadest, most variegated forms of self, so too was *Elizaveta Bam*, an attempt by its creators to channel the theatrical form in service of a more narratively diverse vision, denied access to the stage by the Soviet authorities. But I would argue that Kharms is also invested in exploring selfhood and subjecthood in a much broader sense. Elizaveta is stalked by an unspecified power not only for purposes of political deniability, but because this is a clash of the individual and society as such: this is the narrative plot that glimmers behind the more showy scenic plot. However, even as Kharms reinforces Elizaveta's powerlessness in this situation, his use of Piotr Nikolaevich as both victim and pursuer points to an instability and vulnerability of the greater system. Elizaveta may be the ultimate victim of this story, but it seems unlikely that a world that uses up and sacrifices its own people like this can perpetuate itself indefinitely.

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♢ *Performativity and Interpellation in* Elizaveta Bam ♢

Lenora Murphy

Abstract

This paper examines how Kharms uses performativity in his 1928 play *Elizaveta Bam* to explore the relationship between the subject and the state. The play follows Elizaveta as she attempts to escape a murder charge by cycling through a series of radically different and strange personae. Her many transformations obfuscate her actual identity and personality; in the context of her flight from men who would kill her, this ability to transform is a survival mechanism. Ultimately, however, she is caught, and Kharms frames this as an inevitability. This approach to the relationship between state and subject corresponds to Althusser's concept of interpellation, which tracks the deep connection between individuals and the ideologies that surround them. This paper argues that Kharms makes the actor's performance into the central device of the play, and in so doing, he uses the tools of theater itself to depict (futile) resistance to overwhelming state power.

Keywords

Daniil Kharms, OBĖRIU, Theater, Louis Althusser, Sovereignty.

Author

Lenora Murphy is an Assistant Professor of Russian Studies at Bucknell University. She completed her PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures at Stanford University. Her dissertation, *Power and the Void: Representations of Sovereignty in Unperformed Plays of the Stalinist Period*, analyzes performances of sovereignty and subjecthood in four plays by Kharms, Bulgakov, and Platonov that were either unperformed or barely performed during their authors' lifetimes. This project engages with both the texts of these plays and the historical and social context in which they were written; it thus comments on the dual nature of theater's relationship with power, depicting it even as it is subject to it.

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