1. From Marxism–Leninism to Perestroika and Glasnost

In the former Soviet Union ideology penetrated all facets of life, functioning both as philosophy and practice. Indeed, to the Western world (and to a certain extent also to the Soviet citizens themselves), ideology and ideological indoctrination manifested themselves so clearly in the former Soviet Union that it was often considered the hallmark of communism, contributing to a historical perspective of ideology that was connected directly with the Soviet Union, communism, and Marxism-Leninism.

Contemporary perspectives of ideology have affected and expanded our views on the workings of ideology in society. These perspectives contest a presupposed definition and manifestation of ideology both from a philosophical and political perspective (Althusser, Baudrillard, Foucault, Habermas, Lefort, etc.). As this book discusses the ideological function in, and resulting cultural position of, theatres for young audiences in Russia, some background of the history of ideology in general, and in the former Soviet Union in particular, is essential for a meaningful discussion on the importance of the historical role of theatre for young audiences in Russia. This is especially true since the political, economic, and cultural changes in Russia resulted directly from ideological changes. Or, as Mikhail Epstein puts it, following Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra: “[T]oo much in this culture [Russia] came from ideas, schemes, and conceptions, to which reality was subjugated” (191).
Since Destutt de Tracy and his friends coined the term ideology in the seventeenth century the meaning ascribed to it has undergone significant changes. The original term is understood to refer literally to the metaphysical world of ideas (cf. Althusser 158). “Nothing exists for us except by the idea we have of it, because our ideas are our whole being, our existence itself” (Destutt de Tracy, qtd. in Bauman 114). Twentieth-century philosophers added to this general definition some interpretative nuances of their own. Bauman, for example, takes Destutt de Tracy’s concept of ideology as “a meta-theory of the moral and political sciences and the ‘great activities which immediately influence the prosperity of society.’ ” The significance of ideology would consist solely in its practical implications, hence “power would be the content and the consequence of all tasks [of] ideology” (112, cf. Foucault). Claude Lefort points out that the current conception of ideology is almost contrary to its original meaning: from “a logic of dominant ideas, concealed from the knowledge of social actors and only revealing itself through interpretation and in the critique of utterances and their manifest sequences, [ideology] has been reduced to a corpus of arguments, to the apparatus of beliefs, which provides the visible framework of a collective practice [liberal, Leninist-Stalinist, fascist]” (“On the Genesis” 47). In these definitions ideology obtains a political dimension through a tendency by which ideas substitute for reality, in a process that Jean Baudrillard calls “simulation.”

Based on this notion of ideology Mikhail Epstein argues that throughout Russian history ideas have been “routinely” substituted for reality, appearing more real than reality itself, beginning with the adoption of Christianity by Prince Vladimir in 988 AD, through the forced Westernization process by Peter the Great in the eighteenth century, to the totalization of society under the Soviets in the twentieth century (190–197). After Glasnost and Perestroïka, post-totalitarian Russia emerged as a no less ideological environment, unleashing a myriad of “invisible” ideological trends which were in constant flux because, as Epstein asserts, “no particular ideological position remained consistent or comprehensive” (159).