

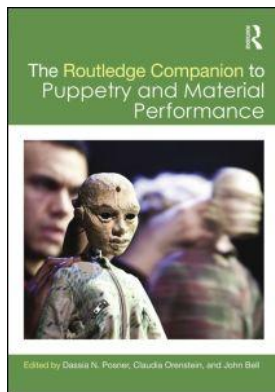
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance

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The Death of “The Puppet”?

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315850115.ch1>

Margaret Williams

Published online on: 15 Jul 2014

How to cite :- Margaret Williams. 15 Jul 2014, *The Death of “The Puppet”?* from: The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance Routledge

Accessed on: 02 Oct 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315850115.ch1>

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Part I

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Edited and Introduced by John Bell

Puppetry, which allows a performer to create the illusion of life by combining objects with motion and sound, is an art form that raises many fundamental questions. What exactly is life? How is it created? Who creates it? What, in fact, do puppets actually do? How should we think about and respond to our experience of puppetry? Such basic questions about the nature of human and material existence constantly wait beneath the surface of puppetry's benign or seemingly inconsequential existence and inspire performers, audience members, and scholars to engage in theoretical thinking, some of which we present in Part I of this book, "Theory and Practice." The first section, "Theoretical Approaches to the Puppet," presents the work of three scholars concerned with the meaning of different kinds of puppet practices; while the second, "Perspectives from Practitioners," offers writings by nine puppeteers who analyze the form from the viewpoint of their own experience. These two perspectives, from both sides of the puppet stage, complement each other by investigating what it means to make puppet theatre and what it means to experience it.

Puppets and performing objects have been part of global culture since its beginnings, but theoretical writings about the form began to constitute their own field only relatively recently. Puppet theory first existed as observations puppeteers shared with each other, and it seems to have been only in the modern era that theories of puppetry have been written down for more general audiences. Perhaps such thinking emerges with an understanding of the form as art, more than ritual or popular performance. In Japan a brief record of playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon's thoughts about meter, nonrealism, and the articulation of paths through words and objects in *jōruri* puppet plays appears in a 1738 memoir, *Naniwa Miyage*, after the playwright had established puppet plays as serious theatre. In Europe, the modern engagement with puppet theory could be said to have begun less than a century later with Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay "On the Marionette Theatre." Kleist's unassuming text (a dialogue, really) analyzes the connections between movement and consciousness in dance, everyday life, and with animals and marionettes. However, like much of puppet theory to follow, it expands itself into a contemplation of

identity and being which embraces metaphysical issues and conundrums in an epiphanic style befitting Kleist's Romantic bent. Although not all the essays in Sections I and II here strive for epiphany, their subject matter forces the authors to engage in stimulating thinking about the nature of humans, life, and inanimate matter in the context of often-humble performances with various combinations of wood, metal, plastic, leather, and papier-mâché.

The three essays in "Theoretical Approaches to the Puppet" reflect the expansive and heterodox range of contemporary puppet and object theory in the early twenty-first century. Margaret Williams's investigation of the "death" of the puppet marks a particular moment of expansion from traditional notions of puppetry into the "theatre of objects" movement that began in Europe during the 1980s, placing both on a continuum of manipulated materiality. In his chapter, Paul Piris asks basic questions about new forms of puppet and object theatre from a phenomenological perspective, attempting to understand how the simultaneous presence of manipulated puppet and manipulating puppeteer creates ontological ambiguity. Finally, my own chapter argues that puppets are always "uncanny" and that our modern sense of that sensation as a problem connects to the metaphysical complexity of puppetry's consistent resistance to modernity's attempts to separate nature and culture.

Puppeteers always have to think about the nature of their medium in a kind of applied theory. In purely practical terms and for wholly practical reasons, they figure out how to move the puppets; what kinds of objects, settings, sounds, and texts to add to them; and what makes for the most effective means of communicating with and through them. Some puppeteers have been further inspired to address issues of puppet theory on the page as well as the stage. Theorist/practitioners Edward Gordon Craig and Alfred Jarry set the tone for such writings about puppetry, establishing an audacious and willfully shocking attitude befitting the avant-garde desire to redefine modern culture. In the century that followed, puppetry has become a complicated mix of practices encompassing old traditions, new aesthetics, and technological innovations that have intertwined it deeply with other strands of contemporary culture. The various "Perspectives from Practitioners" in Section II express differing combinations of theory and practice as experienced in each author's work and show that the artist's need to articulate puppet theory offers vital insights applicable to a broader understanding of the field.

Considering the increased importance of the body in contemporary performance, Sandglass Theater founder Eric Bass argues for a similar awareness of the puppet's function, pointing out that, although when an actor appears onstage she or he *needs* to make a statement, the appearance onstage of a puppet already *is* a statement – a dynamic principle with profound implications for all types of performance. Basil Jones, co-founder of South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company, pursues similar goals on a different path, describing the independent "*Ur*-narrative" of the puppet as a "dignified hunt for life" that exists almost independently of story, in the "micro-movements" that give puppets life. Moscow puppeteers Alexander Gref and Elena Slonimskaya, who work with the archetypal Russian glove puppet Petrushka, examine the function of the noise instrument known as a swazzele in order to interrogate its function for modern audiences and consider the semiotics of such music-making in international contexts. German puppeteer Rike Reiniger explains the development

of a different kind of contemporary puppetry: the invention of object performance for very young audiences by artists inspired by the “live-art” experiments of Bauhaus and other avant-garde traditions and informed by contemporary early-childhood education theories. New York puppeteer Kate Brehm links her own process of creating theatrical structure and dramatic affect to theories of the cinema and the comic book articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Scott McCloud, thus discovering a means by which critical theory can have practical value for object performance. Chinese Theatre Works co-founder Stephen Kaplin looks at the nature of shadow theatre – one of the oldest idioms of puppetry – as a practical technique that, even with the new technological possibilities of image projection and performance that saturate our environment, inexorably leads to mystical phenomenology by means of its essential dependence on the elusive properties of light. In “The Third Thing,” puppeteer and director Jim Lasko follows the development of applied theory by Chicago’s Redmoon Theater as it creates participatory spectacle in public spaces where puppets and objects become essential mediators between people, creating what Victor Turner termed “communitas.” Finally, Bread and Puppet Theater director Peter Schumann – who has long shared the proclivity of avant-garde artists to use the manifesto as a modern literary form that declaims, proclaims, teases, and provokes – provides an enigmatic and evocative analysis of the ordinary life of the capitalist system in which we live, calling for a revolution against “the holy cathedral of our civilization” by means, of course, of puppet theatre.

While the practitioners of Section II have been compelled by personal experience to explain how puppetry manages by its very essence to address larger questions of human existence in the material world, the theorists of Section I have made a conscious decision to examine puppetry as a legitimate field of inquiry that embodies multiple theories of performance and modes of existence. Both perspectives illuminate the work examined in the following sections of this book.

Note

Chapters in Part I by Bell, Gref and Slonimskaya, Jones, and Lasko are edited by Dassia N. Posner.

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Section I

Theoretical Approaches to the Puppet

1

The Death of “The Puppet”?

Margaret Williams

In his message via the Internet to puppeteers for World Puppet Day on March 21, 2011, Henryk Jurkowski celebrates the vitality and diversity of international puppetry today. Yet he suggests that “from now on the object will replace the figurative puppet,” and ends with the hope that “the tradition of the figurative puppet has not disappeared over the horizon” and “will always remain as a valuable point of reference” (Jurkowski 2011). If it seems a rather wistful conclusion, it echoes a concern shared by some devotees of the puppet theatre. Many people at festivals of “puppetry and related arts” still complain that there weren’t any puppets. That might not trouble many of us, but the complainants do have a point – is it puppetry if there are no puppets in it? And just how are the “related arts” related to puppetry?

Three classic short performances in which puppets or objects seem to commit suicide might serve to illustrate the “death” of the figurative puppet, perhaps even of “the puppet” as a concept, in the contemporary Western puppet theatre. The death or suicide of the puppet is a recurring theme in puppetry, since it exposes the problematic nature of the puppet’s “life.” There is a parallel theme of the death of the puppeteer at the hands of the puppet, but it’s the puppet’s potential demise we’re concerned with here.

In Philippe Genty’s famous short untitled piece, a Pierrot marionette becomes aware of the strings connecting it to its manipulator and asserts its independent life by breaking them one by one until it falls “dead” when finally detached from the puppeteer.¹ It’s the classic metaphor of puppetry – the godlike puppeteer both gives life to and withdraws it from a creation made in his/her own image. Genty, a black-clad figure manipulating the controls high above the Pierrot, is an impassive superior presence whom the puppet resists, only to invite its own destruction. When the last string breaks, Genty simply picks up the puppet and walks off with it, now just an object. But its reduction to object status is incomplete; even as it is carried offstage, it still retains that “after-life” that lingers around any figure with which an audience has emotionally identified. It remains a human form, able to be empathized with and to be revived and to “die” all over again at the next show. The piece has reduced many audience members to tears, yet it demonstrates, quite literally, that the puppet’s “life” exists only as an *effect* of the puppeteer’s control.



Figure 1.1 Pierrot (1973). Photo courtesy of Philippe Genty Company

In the French puppeteer Yves Joly’s *Tragédie de Papier* (*Tragedy in Paper*), the puppets are animated drawings rather than lifelike figures, two-dimensional cutouts with stylized facial features and arms painted onto them. The physical properties of paper (in fact, light cardstock) are exploited in the portrayal of the two lovers’ deaths: the female figure is brutally slashed by a large pair of scissors wielded by a jealous villain, and the male figure is set alight and reduced to ashes. It remains ambiguous whether this apparently spontaneous combustion of grief is to be read as suicide, since, unlike Pierrot, the figures can seem to take only limited action by themselves. Both the slashing of the first figure and the setting alight of the second are performed by the puppeteer’s black-gloved hands, visible at times, which must substitute for the puppets’ painted ones. If, as Victor Molina (1998: 177) writes, a puppet cannot be called dead until its body has completely disappeared – “as long as we can see the smallest fragment of its destroyed body, there is a potential puppet” – Joly’s paper figure consumed by fire can truly be said to have “died,” reduced to matter that is impossible to revive or re-create. The audience is denied even the semblance of a human form to empathize with, the figures reduced to a formless materiality that it is impossible to revive and re-personalize. The puppets are shown to be simply matter in a quasi-human form, and a temporary and unstable form at that.

Gyula Molnár’s tabletop show *Piccoli Suicidi* (*Small Suicides*) is an early example of the Theatre of Objects in which everyday objects are substituted for humanoid figures.² In such performances there is no attempt at visual illusion – the objects are moved about by a visible manipulator and imaginatively transformed into notional characters suggested by their shape and movement, although they can also be used in counterpoint to their inherent form and function, in Jurkowski’s words, either in



Figure 1.2 *Tragédie de Papier*, created and first performed by Yves Joly (1956). Photo: © Yves Joly and courtesy of Théâtre de la Marionnette à Paris

accord with or against their “iconicity” (Jurkowski 1992: 103). Some recent performances have bypassed character and narrative altogether and simply explore the various physical properties and imaginative evocations of the objects in what is often described as a form of “adult play.” *Piccoli Suicidi* is of the former narrative kind. Molnár sits behind the table on which he moves his objects, and in contrast to Genty’s remote impassivity, his hands-on manipulation and exaggerated facial responses to the story’s events make him an integral part of the show. In the first little suicide, an Alka-Seltzer tablet and a handful of sweets play out a comical yet touching drama about the rejection of the outsider. The Alka-Seltzer tablet, consistently spurned by the sweets, finally “dives” into a glass of water in which it instantly dissolves. In the second story a despairing match sees the coffee bean it loves tossed with a handful of others into a coffee grinder. The cup containing coffee made from the beans is overturned by the match, who signs his lover’s name with the spilt liquid before striking his head in despair and setting himself alight.

In all three performances the most poignant moment for the audience is when the “puppets” revert to being objects or inanimate matter, though in Molnár’s case it’s tempered with (slightly guilty?) laughter. But their reversions to the status of object are of very different kinds. Genty’s marionette seems to “act” of its own volition, but it must detach itself physically from the manipulator to prove it’s alive, which only demonstrates that it’s not. Yet it remains a complete human figure, able to be reanimated in the same form. Joly’s two-dimensional stylized figures have little capacity for simulating independent movement and can “die” only by being defaced or destroyed by the (at times) visible hands of the puppeteers. No revivable puppet figures remain, and new ones must be made for each performance. Molnár has no constructed figures and simply assembles a new set of objects for each show. Any sense of life or independent action in them is a matter of imaginative suggestion, and

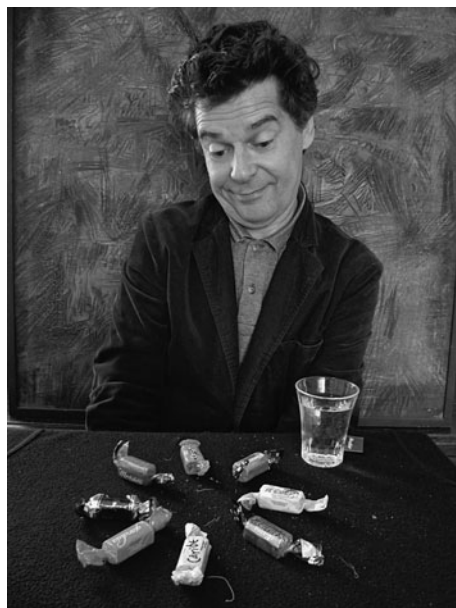


Figure 1.3 *Piccoli Suicidi* (1984): Creator and performer Gyula Molnár with sweets and a glass of water. Photo: © Francesca Bettini

their “death” is expressed as a transition from one form of materiality to another, bypassing the human form altogether. As with Joly’s figure destroyed by fire, Molnár’s objects “die” by disintegrating into a form of matter that allows no possibility of theatrical resurrection. They are chosen for their inherent instability of form, and, as quasi-puppets, are as disposable and replaceable as the ordinary objects we discard every day.

But Molnár’s recycling of puppet “life” into physical matter includes, by implication, the puppeteer – and, by extension, the audience – in the cycle of material disposability. Items of food were often used in place of puppets in the early days of Theatre of Objects.³ It’s an obvious choice for hard-up performers – it’s cheap, the universal “found object,” and if not too damaged, can be eaten after the show. Yet at the interface between the animate and inanimate that is the territory of puppetry, food exists in an ambivalent state: it might be seen as an inanimate object before it’s eaten, but it’s always potentially animate. Like the Alka-Seltzer tablet and the coffee bean, its disposability lies in its becoming part of a human body. Objects of food used as substitute puppets become an implicit comment on the contingent status of the puppet’s theatrical life in relation to the real biological life of the puppeteer, since the “puppet” is potentially subsumable into the living performer.

“Puppeteer swallows puppet” would seem to epitomize – depending on how you look at it – either the *raison d’être* or the *reductio ad absurdum* of contemporary Western puppetry. It encapsulates the collapsed boundaries between the living and the inanimate that are characteristic of today’s puppet stage, where the human performer and inanimate matter are often presented side by side as a composite stage

subject or a form of “thing theatre” (Silk 1992: 89).⁴ Puppeteer and puppet, creator and character, living human and inanimate matter become aspects of a single reality with all these elements in constant flux. “The puppet” is no longer an autonomous “living” figure but an object, as is the body of the human performer, and the only constant reality, it seems, is their shared materiality.

But this relationship of symbiotic equivalence between animate and inanimate matter on stage, no matter how theoretically seductive, is not quite what it seems. The relative absence of the human form from the recent puppet/object stage effectively puts the focus on what “the puppet” is in reality – a manipulated object. Yet that implies a manipulator. No matter how much impersonal matter becomes the sole medium of performance, by itself it can’t do anything that would keep an audience watching the stage. Objects can express a great many things in themselves – they can evoke emotions, convey associations, create states of mind – but not by themselves. Object and human performer might share a physical reality, but while Molnár could drink the coffee, thus making the bean seem an organic part of him, the bean can’t consume Molnár. Even if he were swallowed up in coffee, he wouldn’t *become* coffee – and in any case there wouldn’t be another show!

As part of a studio performance at the University of New South Wales some years ago, a postgraduate student created a complex machine that, once set in motion, operated all by itself. A small ball rolled through a series of different planes and inclinations, bounced off various surfaces, made sudden changes of speed and direction, until it finally dropped and abruptly stopped. In describing it, I’ve had to resist saying that it seemed to make an elaborate journey – it climbed laboriously upwards and then raced downhill, was tumbled about and righted itself, and finally fell and “died.” Certainly there was an audible “ah” of regret when it stopped. Did that mean that the audience had identified something human about it, or were they just sorry that the fun had ended?

It seemed that a certain personal narrative was imposed onto the ball in an otherwise impersonal machine by the audience’s perception, or perhaps expectation, of a theatrical event. That expectation of being able to identify with something human in a performance setting can become a demand. At a major exhibition of early twentieth-century avant-garde art, a number of films were screened that showed only moving objects or machines, with no human context or intervention.⁵ Many in the audience for the screening at which I was present showed obvious restlessness, even anger, as if a joke were being played on them, and some people stormed out of the cinema, slamming the door in protest. Yet kinetic art and impersonal mechanisms operating in open gallery spaces do not seem to create a similar outraged response.

Context sets up certain expectations, and expectation molds perception. It was certainly possible to anthropomorphize the ball in the machine – indeed, hard not to! – but it could equally be seen simply as going through a series of ingenious mechanical interactions. Might the ball in the machine be perceived differently at a puppet festival and in a gallery setting? Might it become puppetry in one context (a theatre) but perhaps not in another (a gallery) and almost certainly not in a factory workshop? A factory context, in which the machine’s purpose would be viewed as simply functional, would seem at the opposite pole from a theatrical event. Yet even

with a machine in a purely functional context, an imaginative viewer might find a suggestion of anthropomorphic performance in its impersonal action.⁶ Is puppetry then a mode of spectatorship rather than a specific form of performance? For the moment I’ll just leave that question hanging!

The four examples I’ve discussed might seem to suggest an evolution in puppetry from the “living” figurative puppet to the non-anthropomorphic moving, but not necessarily performing, object. (There is no chronological progression implied in the relation between these examples, simply a conceptual one.⁷) If they are seen in terms of a linear progression, one might draw a line between any of them and say that up to this point the event is “puppetry” and then it starts to become something else. Genty’s Pierrot is a traditional figurative puppet, and despite their two-dimensionality and limited potential for autonomous action, virtually everyone would class Joly’s paper figures as puppets. Most people today would extend puppetry to include Molnár’s show, although it has no puppet figures, since its objects stand in for fictional characters enacting a narrative. But for many people the tilt from puppetry into “something else” would still be at the point where obvious character and narrative disappear – between Molnár’s objects and the ball in the machine. If the ball can be empathized with as a quasi-character, perhaps it counts as a puppet – just! But that would imply that puppetry is to be defined by its approximation to the human dramatic theatre of character and narrative and that it cannot exist in its own right outside the realm of the dramatic.

Hans-Thies Lehmann’s term “postdramatic theatre” embraces the various forms of contemporary performance that are not based in fictional character or dramatic narrative but which combine the energy of human performers’ bodies and elements of the physical setting into a nonlinear theatrical event, happening in real time and within a space that includes stage and auditorium, performers, and audience. Apart from postulating some of Robert Wilson’s slow-moving performers as analogous to puppets in their apparent lack of volition, as if moved by mysterious forces, Lehmann (1999: 78) does not discuss any specific forms of puppetry. But he does consider the possibility of an impersonal theatre of nothing but interacting physical realities (including the performer’s body), a post-anthropocentric theatre that might include “the theatre of objects entirely without human actors, theatre of technology and machinery ... and theatre that integrates the human form mostly as an element in landscape-like spatial structures.” This fusion of animate and inanimate forms into a single reality he appears to see as still largely potential, “utopically” prefiguring a theatre that would challenge the human dominance of nature (Lehmann 1999 [2006]: 80–81).⁸

Are we now in the age of postdramatic puppetry? Certainly we seem to be in an age of post-puppet puppetry. The progression (or regression, some would say) of puppetry in the four above examples might seem to parallel the change from the dramatic theatre to the postdramatic and even to the post-anthropomorphic – from the puppet as a character within its own narrative to a continuous present of interchangeable physical realities, both animate and inanimate, and even to a theatre of interacting material shapes and images with no human reference at all. If seen only in terms of a dramatic spectrum, the figurative puppet of Pierrot and the ball in the machine might well seem to be at opposite poles or even from two quite different genres.

The Catalan puppeteer and theatre academic Joan Baixas, writing in the puppetry journal *Puck*, makes a distinction between animating a puppet into life and the movement of objects in a theatre of performing materiality. The puppet arises from the world of real living things, of “zoology,” he writes, whereas a theatre of material images develops from virtuality and metaphor. The physical control of objects requires manipulation, whereas the animation of a figure into life demands acting on the puppeteer’s part (Baixas 1994: 40). Baixas is himself a master of both figurative puppetry and the theatre of dynamic images, but he makes a fundamental distinction between them in their mode of performing.⁹ I’m happy to accept that for a performer (I’m not one) they are fundamentally different ways of working, but I’m less sure that from an audience’s perspective the difference between acting through a puppet and manipulating an object is always so clear cut. All of the three “suicides” previously discussed suggest a shifting or collapsing boundary between acting and manipulating. Genty is both acting through the puppet of Pierrot and demonstrating that its own “acting” is nothing more than the effect of his manipulation; the hands of Joly’s puppeteers both act on behalf of and act upon the cutout puppet figures; and Molnár’s objects are openly acted upon to simulate their enactment of their own stories. None of the puppet or object characters in the three examples can even *seem* to end its own life without visible help from human hands. Conversely, the ball in the machine was acted upon only mechanically, yet seemed to acquire a notional “life” of its own.

Rather than seeing the manipulation of objects in contrast to the acting that animates a puppet into life, it is possible to see “the puppet” as existing at their point of intersection. A puppet only seems to act by itself because it is acted both *through* and *upon*. The various forms of manipulation – strings, rods, hands-on control – have always lent themselves to being read metaphorically and have often been the basis of attempts to define “the puppet” itself. Yet the word “manipulation” has ambivalent associations. It is rightly regarded as one of the puppeteer’s most highly valued skills, but it also has overtones of the mere showman, of tricks and cheap effects. Ariel Bufano makes a similar distinction to Baixas in seeing a potential “divorce” between actor and puppeteer, with the latter becoming a simple manipulator of beautiful and astonishing effects or “a kind of ‘prestidigitator’” – a word that suggests not just manual dexterity but the conjuring tricks of the stage magician, and even outright deception (Bufano 1992: 94).¹⁰

Historians of puppetry’s origins are always happy to include ancient magic and sorcerer’s dolls within the provenance of the puppet, and a number of puppeteers such as the English Punch professor John Styles are also magicians, while others, including Genty, have incorporated magic tricks into their shows. Yet today stage magic is rarely if ever found among the “related arts” at puppet festivals, and I wonder why. Maybe it is because to most puppeteers it seems something *even less* than manipulation – mere manual dexterity or even sleight of hand? Yet perhaps the stage magician might give some clue to the nature of the puppet before its relatively late appearance as a dramatic character and its recent disintegration into objects and material images.

One (just one) possible way of seeing “the puppet” is as a point of intersection between dramatic theatre and stage magic, which, like puppetry, is a point of intersection between acting and a manipulation that is not only physical but visual and psychological. Puppeteer and magician manipulate not only objects but also audience

perception – they deal in making objects seem to subvert the outward forms and laws of nature. Both set up an interactive relation between performer and objects, and at times even create the sense of a psychic force between them. Like puppets, the magician’s objects can seem to be transformed in defiance of everyday logic, and at times to have a capriciousness, even a will, all their own. One such object is the “floating globe,” a sphere that seems to glide around the magician and is “called back” when it drifts too far away – an apparent psychic tug-of-war between object and performer that recalls the classic battle of wills known as “separation” between puppet and puppeteer, which echoes Genty’s resisting Pierrot.

Puppeteer and stage magician both manipulate objects in order to create surprising theatrical *effects* so that at times the boundary between puppetry and magic can be hard to define. The late Australian puppeteer Norman Hetherington had a show based on *The Magic Tinder Box* in which the marionette of a king was just one puppet character among others – until, to the audience’s astonishment, suddenly the arms became owls and flew off, the legs became frogs and hopped off, and the body turned upside down and became a large purple pig that ran off. Did it stop being a puppet when it ceased to be a character and instead became just a trick? In fact, it’s one of the oldest tricks in the puppetry book, a variation on the Grand Turk marionette that flips inside out to reveal a cluster of its own small children.

The traditional puppet has a quasi-human body, yet one of puppetry’s obvious advantages over the theatre of living performers has always been its ability to subvert the human form. The physical irreducibility of the human body has been a problematic concern of the twentieth-century stage, as seen in the lengths to which directors have gone to disguise it, ever since the Futurists and the Bauhaus artists encased their performers in machine-like and geometrical shapes.¹¹ No matter how much the stage tries to objectify the human body, it’s not an object *just* like any other, since there’s a limit to how one can really distort or dismantle it. Yet traditional puppets, such as dissecting skeletons (breakaways) and transforming figures, still keep audiences happy with no narrative context, simply by changing their bodily forms in ways impossible to real human beings.

We’ve become so used to seeing “the puppet” as a character and to theorizing about it as a character that we’ve forgotten that it can be something else.

The magician’s secrets are closely guarded, whereas the puppeteer is often happy to have the audience come backstage after the show, but both puppetry and magic invite asking about how it’s done, perhaps most of all when they pretend to conceal it. The concept of “backstage” is intrinsic to the puppet theatre, just as it is to the magician’s stage. Recent puppetry has brought “backstage” onstage with the presence of the formerly invisible puppeteer, but “how it’s done” is an implicit part of the show, even when it’s behind the scenes. In this puppetry would seem to diverge from Lehmann’s concept of postdramatic performance, in which stage and auditorium together create a single shared time-and-space, continuous-present reality for both performers and audience (Lehmann 1999 [2006]: 150–152). I asked my friend Clare Grant, a member of the Sydney Front, one of the pioneering postdramatic groups cited by Lehmann, whether backstage figured greatly in their concept of performance. Apart from briefly slipping behind a small curtain for changes of

costume, she said, there was only one moment in all their shows when it became a significant element – when, in her words, they wanted to create “a moment of magic.”¹²

Henry Jurkowski’s term for the puppet that seems to have a theatrical life of its own is the “magic” puppet (Jurkowski 1988: 42), and for many people it is still the pure form of puppetry, its point of reference. Yet the “magic” puppet that is often taken as the benchmark of puppetry might also be seen as a close relation of the transposed and transformed objects of the stage magician. “How it’s done” is an intrinsic part of both puppet show and magic show, whether through offstage manipulation, hands-on control, or sleight of hand. Far from effacing the question of how it’s done, the magic puppet raises it more explicitly than any other form of puppetry. Puppeteers might like to think that the public believes the puppet lives by itself, but the most common everyday metaphor of the puppet refers to the marionette’s supposedly invisible strings, not to its “magical” life.

To return to the question I raised earlier: is there perhaps a puppetry and a non-puppetry way of seeing the ball in the machine? In one sense, it was only too easy to perceive the ball as a little person (or perhaps a hyperactive mouse). That might seem enough in itself to make it a puppet, but I would hope that puppetry is something more than the easy anthropomorphizing, even sentimentalizing, of a moving object. Simply to see the ball as a quasi-character would be to ignore the action of the machine. If it was possible to anthropomorphize the ball, it was impossible not to be aware simultaneously of the rest of the machine’s operations, to enjoy the maker’s craft and wit, his ingenuity and intention, in its impersonal mechanical interactions. The creator’s volition was intrinsic to the event, even though he was physically absent from it after setting it in motion.¹³ A theatre of nothing but interacting objects might exclude any human element, whether puppet or performer, from the stage, but no matter how far the audience suppresses the awareness of it, there’s always someone backstage. The suspension of that awareness in a theatre of abstract material forms is as much a pretense as the fantasy that the magic puppet lives all by itself.

We’re not in the age of post-puppet puppetry, and the figurative puppet will always remain, as Jurkowski trusts, the point of reference because it holds acting, acting-on, and acted-upon in near equilibrium: the three-dimensional puppet of Pierrot both acts as a character and acts on its strings in freeing itself while being visibly acted upon by Genty, who is acting through the puppet. Yet all puppetry plays with all three in varying degrees: Joly’s two-dimensional cutouts, midway between figurative puppets and objects, seem to take action by themselves though obviously being acted upon by the puppeteers’ hands and external objects; Molnár’s acting on and through his objects evokes their own imagined actions; and the ball in the machine is mechanically acted upon, yet suggests activity rather than passivity on its part.

Despite his fundamental distinction between acting and manipulation, Joan Baixas (1994: 40) sees figurative puppetry and the theatre of material images as closely related and complementary – “*deux genres voisins et complémentaires*.” In a later major article he sets “puppets and their relations” in the context of a wide range of sacred and secular forms of which puppets are “really just one aspect,” including “a huge variety of forms which prioritize plastic, choreographic or technical aspects in turn,” from “the theatrical life of geometric shapes” to “the emotion of the living machine,

independent of human control” (Baixas 1998: 173–175). Acting and manipulation, living performer and puppet-object, onstage and offstage, are in constant flux in all puppetry and material performance, and in ever-changing inverse ratio, depending on how one chooses to prioritize them. Perhaps an awareness of their interaction is the “way of seeing,” a mode of spectatorship rather than any specific theatrical form, that identifies puppetry and links those unspecified related arts to “the puppet.”

The traditional puppet as a “living object” figures the ambivalent nature of the body itself, which as an animate being can act and act on objects but as part of the material world is vulnerable to being acted upon. Yet whether the human form is mirrored on the puppet stage or conspicuously absent from an impersonal theatre of objects, the inextricable relationships between acting, acting on (or manipulating), and being acted upon raise the same questions puppetry has always asked about our relation to the materiality that includes our own bodies. Victor Molina (1998: 176) writes that “the puppet reveals ... that man’s body is not a space that ensures the indisputability of his I, but right where man (and together with him, anthropocentrism) finds himself contested.” The distinction between the “living” puppet, with its basis in biology, and a theatre of purely material forms disappears in the transformation of Molnár’s coffee bean: from everyday object to puppet-character to amorphous granules to liquid coffee consumable by the performer, it encapsulates both the puppet’s “life” that it shares with the puppeteer and the body’s potential disintegration into formless matter. “The puppet” and a theatre of impersonal objects are not the extreme ends of a linear dramatic spectrum, but on a continuum in which, from opposite directions, they come full circle to meet each other.

Notes

- 1 The antithesis of Philippe Genty’s suicidal Pierrot is the Punch-like marionette of the Dutch company Triangel, which defiantly breaks its strings, causing the puppeteer’s hands to drop as if lifeless, while the puppet hobbles offstage using its marionette control as a crutch.
- 2 Objects have had a prominent place in both actors’ and puppet theatre throughout the twentieth century, but a Theatre of Objects developed as a specific form in Europe in the 1980s. Among the early performers, Christian Carrignon and Katy Deville of Le Théâtre de Cuisine, Jacques Templeraud’s company Manarf, and Tania Castaing and Charlot Lemoine’s company Vélo Théâtre used household objects, notably kitchen gadgets. For example, Carrignons’s vignette of a tabletop village was created entirely with objects, such as corks, bottles, and a coffee grinder. Performers with objects use bric-à-brac, children’s toys, and “found objects” from the site of performance, not necessarily as substitute puppets but to explore their uses, shapes, mechanical properties, and emotional and cultural evocations (e.g. the Catalan duo La Cònica/Lacònica created near-unrecognizable shadows with everyday objects, such as bottles and electrical components). Though some of its performers reject their work being seen as a variant of puppetry, object theatre is now widely accepted at puppet festivals.
- 3 In two emails to me, Molnár wrote that he had the idea for the show while making coffee and smoking as he prepared breakfast. The audience sees the unfolding tragedy in the daily actions of an ordinary breakfast, while he remains the creator and observer of the story: “I’m just there to assist the tragedy” (Molnár, pers. comm., December 6 and 8, 2012). Jacques Templeraud’s version of *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* included a potato as the Grandmother (which was boiled and mashed to emit steam), a fish head as the Wolf, and a green apple as Little Red Riding Hood, which Templeraud relayed to me that he

- simulated biting when the wolf attacked her (Templeraud, pers. comm., February 28, 2012).
- 4 Dennis Silk's article "The Thing Theatre and Thing Language" (Silk 1992) is an exploration of the shared physicality of actors and objects and of what actors can learn from objects' theatrical "presence."
 - 5 "Surrealism: Revolution by Night" at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, July–September 1993.
 - 6 Some devotees of the puppet (including Edward Gordon Craig) have idealized the impersonality of the machine; its unconscious perfection of movement has been seen as analogous to the aesthetic "grace" of the dancing marionette described in Heinrich von Kleist's famous essay "On the Marionette Theatre" (1810).
 - 7 Genty's Pierrot marionette was made in 1973, and the untitled number has often been presented on stage and television. Joly's show was created in 1956; his wedding scene performed entirely with umbrellas is an early example of object theatre. *Piccoli Suicidi*, subtitled "tre brevi esorcismi d'uso quotidiano" (three short exorcisms of daily use), was created by Molnár in 1984 and has more recently been performed by Carles Cañellas. The machine was also made in 1984, and its creator, Philip Parr, is now a performer, musician, and director in Britain and other countries.
 - 8 The contemporary example Lehmann gives of a possible post-anthropocentric theatre is the circus.
 - 9 "La marionnette relève de la zoologie, du monde des êtres vivants. L'image en mouvement se développe au contraire dans la virtualité, dans la métaphore. L'une demande à s'inscrire dans le biologique, l'autre se repaît de langage. ... L'art des images en mouvement demande des manipulateurs, l'art des marionnettes exige des acteurs." As solo performer, theatre director, artist, and teacher, Joan Baixas has created an extraordinarily wide range of original and dynamic performances, which embrace puppetry, masks, objects, and abstract images, and include collaborations of his company Teatre de la Claca (1968–1988) with celebrated visual artists, such as Joan Miró. For a survey of his extensive career in puppetry and visual theatre, see the biography on his website: <www.joanbaixas.com/en/past/biografia>.
 - 10 "A commencé ... ce qui pourrait bien être un divorce entre l'acteur et le marionnettiste. Car ce dernier devenait un simple manipulateur d'effets, beaux et étonnants: une sorte de prestidigitateur."
 - 11 Two contemporary examples of objectifying the body onstage are *Vivisector* (2002), a collaboration between Austrian director Klaus Obermaier and choreographer Chris Haring, which projects images onto near-unrecognizable parts of the performers' bodies, and the Babelfish Company from Germany, who encase the performers' bodies in giant inflated balloons. Both pieces were performed at the International Festival of Puppetry Art in Bielsko-Biała, Poland, in 2006, the former winning the prize for the best show.
 - 12 From 1986 to 1993 the Australian group the Sydney Front (Clare Grant, John Baylis, Nigel Kellaway, Chris Ryan, and Andrea Aloise) staged a number of convention-breaking, anarchic, and often transgressive physically based performances involving both performers and audiences. The "magic trick" involved the substitution of a performer for an audience member dressed as a clown.
 - 13 The machine's creator walked onstage to set it in motion and then exited. This raises the question of "real time" (i.e., that the manipulation must take place in the same time frame as the puppet's actions, a view that would exclude stop-motion and Claymation as forms of puppetry).

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