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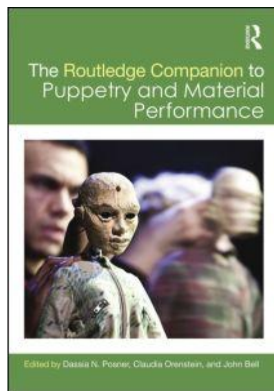

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Puppetry, Authorship, and the Ur-Narrative

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Puppetry, Authorship, and the *Ur*-Narrative

Basil Jones

The "work" of the puppet

Perhaps it would be useful to begin by asking whether we can define what it is that characterizes the "work" a puppet does onstage and how this form of work is distinguished from the "work" of an actor. The work of the actor is surely to perform the text written by the scriptwriter under the guidance of the director and informed by his or her own research into the character being interpreted.

Ostensibly, the same might surely be said for the work the puppet performs onstage. Both the puppet and the actor are interpreters of the playwright and the director's artistic vision. The traditional chain of meaning and interpretation starts with the playwright, passing through the director and finally to the actor or the puppet.

However, there is another level of activity that actors take for granted, which is central to the meaning and function of the puppet's work. The actor is a living person and therefore automatically possesses life. Both the actor and the audience take for granted this fact. His or her livingness is obvious and certainly doesn't need to be "performed." The actor is in no danger at any stage in the performance of giving away the fact that he is not alive. However, by its very nature, a puppet is an object and therefore, by definition, lifeless. The object which we call a puppet lives and breathes only because the puppeteer takes great care, for however long the performance lasts and at every moment during that performance, to make the puppet appear to be alive.

The designer/maker of the puppet is partially responsible for the life the puppet possesses in performance. The jointing (or lack of it) and the structure of the puppet allow for certain forms of expressiveness and not others. The expert design is acutely sensitive to the movement required by the puppet. So, a large part of the liveliness of the puppet is the responsibility not only of the puppeteer but of the puppet's designer/maker as well.

Thus, the primary work of the puppet is the *performance* of life, while for the actor this fundamental battle is already won. The life – the viability – of the puppet is always provisional. So, a puppet is by its very nature dead, whereas an actor is by

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her very nature alive. The puppet's work, then – more fundamental than the interpretation of written text or directorial vision – is to strive towards life. This struggle, this "play," is literally in the hands of the puppeteer and need have no connection to the scriptwriter or the director. Every second onstage is a second in which the puppet could die. The life and credibility of the puppet depend entirely on the vigilance of the puppeteer. The audience will take the puppet seriously only so long as they believe in this life. So the puppeteer is literally engaged in a parallel, low-key drama: a life or death struggle, dependent on the puppeteer's strength, stamina, muscle memory, and, of course, artistry or talent.

The ontology of the puppet

The puppet in performance possesses a significantly different ontological status than a human actor. The fact that the puppet is essentially a performing object (the more mechanical puppets could be called performing machines) definitely suggests a different ontology to the human. Also, the puppet's striving to depict and embody life means that it has a different ontological narrative from a human being. I'm not sure how you would describe the human actor's *Ur*-narrative. Perhaps it is the desire to function as the medium for stories and narratives. However, the puppet's *Ur*-narrative is something quite different to, and more fundamental than, storytelling. It is the quest for life itself. It is perhaps worth noting that this "quest" is not an obvious

Figure 5.1 *Confessions of Zeno* rehearsal, The Dance Factory, Johannesburg (2002): puppets designed by William Kentridge and made by Adrian Kohler and Tau Qwelane. Photo: © Ruphin Coudyzer

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part of the puppet's performance. However, it forms the impulse behind every move and every gesture the puppet makes.

Micro-movement

I would suggest that it is this dignified hunt for life, exhibited by all puppets in performance, that fascinates audiences because we ourselves can identify with similar quests in our everyday lives. Thus, apparently minor quotidian functions, like getting out of bed in the morning, or reaching for a cup just beyond one's grasp, or avoiding the clash of spectacles when kissing a friend, can take on epic proportions for many observers when performed by a puppet. Audiences identify with this and feel a resonance with their own interaction with the world. The puppet, therefore, becomes the manifest incarnation of our own struggle to live, to be human, to act.

Once we as puppeteers begin seriously to play and to master these micro-dramas, we see they can trump the macro-action onstage, the action that would normally fall under the heading of choreography. Thus, when the audience becomes engaged with the micro-movement of a puppet's performance, spoken dialogue tends to fade from consciousness, as if it has been bleached out of the performance. Often we hear the comment: "lovely puppets, pity about the text." Most often this remark is made not because the text is poor, but because it is hard to really hear or apprehend the text when one becomes fully engaged with, even mesmerized by, this more profound level of performance. So the puppeteer is performing on two levels, one is the macro-level, which engages with the script and the choreography. The other is the micro-level and is a performance of the *Ur*-narrative: the performance of life.

War Horse

In 2006, Handspring was commissioned to design and make nine life-sized horses for the National Theatre's production of *War Horse* in London. The idea was to make a theatrical interpretation of Michael Morpurgo's novel of the same name. For many reasons, this would be a challenging adaptation. For one thing, in the novel, the central character and narrator is a horse. This horse, Joey, goes to war alongside the British army and it is through his eyes that we experience the horrors of combat. The horse's voice – producing a kind of "equine reportage" – is a powerful narrative device in the novel, though one that we realized would not work onstage. So, the decision was made to keep the horse silent in its theatrical incarnation. This presented the playwright with a problem. How does one "author" a character who plays the leading role in the drama but doesn't speak and is not even a person? Clearly the horse would have to be "articulate" in languages that were not verbal.

From the start, it was clear that the scriptwriter was almost powerless to author scenes where the horse was central. Without an intimate knowledge of the capabilities of the puppet and without weeks of watching the puppet in action, it was impossible to "write" these scenes in any but the sketchiest of ways. And here's where we began to realize how different our role was as puppeteers – different, that

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is, from the role of the actor. And what I am referring to here is the generative semiotics of our presence onstage.

From a semiotic perspective, the puppet's signing process is made up of two components: the design/making process and the manipulation process. The first is the signing potential that is built into the puppet itself. When designing the horses, for instance, Adrian had to decide which horse-like actions he would be able to include in the puppet's structure and *which not*. A thorough knowledge of the physical skeleton was necessary in order to be able to simplify the jointing and design a *workable* puppet. This was a process that required a deep intuitive understanding of the mechanical capabilities and ergonomics of the human hand and body and how the six hands of three puppeteers could be used to give the horse as much physical articulation as possible.

I would argue that this design process was an act of authorship, because Adrian's design built into the puppet the semiotic grammar of which the horse would be capable. In a sense, then, the puppet design is a meta-script, which the puppeteers must interpret, guided by director, choreographer, and puppet master. Andrew Macklin, of the University of New South Wales, sees this way of generating (authoring) meaning as being *corporeal*, as being *generated by the body* and not reducible to words:

> To create the puppet mechanics is to devise a way of interpreting, hence returning language to its roots in physically actualized discourse from which language is derived. So the puppet-maker who devises ways of articulating concepts of the script (written language) in movement language, is authoring meaning in an embodied language.
>
> (Andrew Macklin, pers. comm., 2008)

The second component of the horse's signing process is the expressive work of the manipulators themselves. Even though Adrian's horses are capable of a wide range of expression, *realizing* that expression through movement requires of the puppeteers the development of a complex set of coordinative skills both personally and as a group. The two main horses each require groups of three operators. A convincing individual horse with a character of its own can be created only by a formidable act of "group mind" – a level of coordination far beyond what a scriptwriter could predict.

Thus, we came to realize that *authoring* a role for the horses functioned at levels that didn't have much to do with the traditional script author. Much of this "authorial" work happened during periods of improvisation. During these periods, the scriptwriter effectively played the role of onlooker. Generally what he did was to observe the various sequences, and those that were approved by the director were sometimes described by the stage managers and incorporated into the working script used to rehearse the play. This was a different script fundamentally from the one published.

So *ex post facto*, the written text incorporates what, in fact, began as a movement text. This is what Juhani Pallasmaa might call the "haptic" text – the text of "active touch" and of the touching body moving through space.[1] The *War Horse* audiences are constantly wanting to know what the horses are thinking and feeling. Only by

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Figure 5.2 The cast of *War Horse* at the New London Theatre (2009): puppets by Handspring Puppet Company. Photo: © Brinkhoff/Mögenburg

watching the smallest movements of tail and hoof can they hope to "read" these thoughts.

The authorial audience

Now let us also look at the phenomenon of the performed puppet play from the point of view of the audience. What happens to actors armed with words when they are sharing the stage with a puppet? We were astonished to see what happened in *War Horse* when the horse puppets shared the stage with actors. The audience quickly develops an affinity and fascination with the horses. They clearly want to understand what the horse is feeling and thinking and, as a result, they become avaricious readers of horse semiotics. Whatever the horse puppeteers do (from ear twitching, flank shivering, and eye-line alteration, to whinnying, nickering, and blowing), the audience hungers to interpret.

The audience thus experiences a strong feeling of empowerment. Spectators feel themselves to be in a new interpretive territory concerning the meaning of animals within the context of a theatrical event. There are no rules for such forms of interpretation, and thus the puppeteers give to the audience an *interpretive authority* that is not often imparted in more conventional forms of theatre. Therefore, it could be argued, the audience takes up an auxiliary authorial role as generators of meaning. The intensity of this interpretive focus has an unexpected result: the audience is so

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intently decoding the visual text that it may experience sections of the performance where the auditory dimension of the play is, as we say, bleached out. In a very real sense, the puppets are stealing the limelight.

The authority of breath

It may be said that there exist levels of authorship that arise neither in word nor in movement, but in stillness. We find that one of the most eloquent ways of communicating onstage is, indeed, not through movement but through such stillness or, more exactly, a *breathed* stillness. Only when the puppet is still and just perceived to be breathing is the audience able to read its thoughts and emotions. So, paradoxically, even in motionlessness there exists a "text" – the text of thought. This is truly an unwritten, an unwriteable text, one that is "authored" by the puppeteers manipulating the puppet and, to some extent, by the puppet designer/maker who engineers such subtleties into the puppet's mechanisms.

But now we are at a curious site of exchange between the performers and the audience as authors. Truly this is the *interplay*: a subtle realm of hermeneutic interchange between viewer and viewed, between actor and those acted upon, where meaning is being created, but we are not sure by whom. Breath and silence on the part of the puppet stimulate, in the minds of the audience, proposals as to the thoughts and emotions in the wooden puppet they are watching. These moments can be some of the most powerful experiences a puppet play produces. The audience, in noticing the tiny in breath and out breath of the puppet, enters into an empathetic relationship with the object that is being brought to life. This breathing is physical, yet it has a profound metaphorical power. This nonexistent substance (air) that is passing through this mechanical being represents the very essence of life: the soul.

Movement as thought[2]

Now we come to a counterintuitive proposal and one that seems to contradict the principle asserted above – namely, that in the puppet's *stillness* the audience can read its thoughts. This is, indeed, true. This is part of what in particle physics might be called "the weak force." However, parallel to this form of thinking (where the audience is really doing the thinking in that spectators "read" the thoughts of the puppet), there exists also a form of thinking which is, one could say, generated more actively by the puppeteer. This may be termed "the strong force" thinking and refers to the totality of movement the puppet makes. This assertion comes out of a phenomenological way of understanding and describing events in the world.

The assertion is that the movement is the thought. Here we are talking about an *embodied* form of thinking, of thinking *incarnate* – well, in the case of the puppet, thinking in and through wood. Here we assert that we refuse to make a separation between mind and body – that is, the mind that thinks and the body that moves. During an improvisation, therefore, we would assert that the puppeteer is using the puppet to *physically evolve ideas that are incommensurate with script and scriptwriting*.

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This is thought given expression through gesture, timing, rhythm. Chaplin was the most eloquent and perhaps the clearest example of a performer whose thoughts were utterly embodied. Macklin quotes the philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, who refers to dance improvisation as an act of thinking: "In such thinking, movement is not a medium by which thoughts emerge but rather, the thoughts themselves" (Harré 1991: 29). Macklin observes:

> What phenomenology is saying is that the body thinks *before* language or concepts, it creates meaning in an immediate act, it is itself a language, both before verbal/written language and in a feedback loop, based on that very language. So when a puppeteer creates meaning with a puppet we have a language beyond language upon which meaning is based.
>
> (Andrew Macklin, pers. comm., 2008)

I have to admit, then, that we do, indeed, feel a fundamental tension in puppet theatre between the scriptwriter and the puppet manipulator. In a sense, we, the puppeteers, sometimes experience language as a form of repression of our work. Traditionally in the theatre, language asserts its supremacy as thought. However, we the puppeteers instinctively know that we possess a powerful alternate form of thought, and that this form is at least the equal of words.

The work of the puppet, therefore, can be seen implicitly as a rebellion against the word and against conventionalized forms of theatrical discourse. Perhaps this is why so many avant-garde artists have utilized this art form.[3] To grasp the origin of the thinking inherent in any puppet play and to understand how this thinking functions, we have to analyze the work that the puppet performs. We need to understand this process by which the performed play comes into being. Our inquiry has to come to grips with this work of the puppet and its manipulator, where meaning is generated more by process than by content, more by movement than by words. It is this process which reveals the workings of the play's thoughts. As Freud said of the *dream-work*, so too is the puppet's movement in and through a performance a "disguised form of thought process" where the puppets use the modest gesture and the unassuming walk to embody the deepest meaning. This is where the puppets are doing their thinking and herein lies their authority.

Notes

This chapter is abridged by permission of the author from Jones, B. (2009) "Puppetry and Authorship," in J. Taylor (ed.) *Handspring Puppet Company*. Parkwood, South Africa: David Krut, 253–268.

1 For a discussion advocating touch and "hapicity" in architecture, see Finnish architect Pallismaa (2005).

2 For this section I am indebted to Andrew Macklin, who read an early version of this manuscript and made many insightful comments and recommendations.

3 There are many, as evidenced by *The Puppet Show*, the touring exhibition focusing on the influence of puppetry on contemporary artists, curated by Ingrid Schaffer and Carin Kuoni of the Philadelphia ICA. Willian Kentridge, the artist with whom we collaborated between 1991 and 2002, is one. The list is long and includes Pierre Huyghe, Laurie Simmons, Gavin

Turk, and Deborah Curtis and Nayland Blake. The cohort from an earlier period includes Paul Klee, Picasso, Miró, and Alexander Calder.

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