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Puppet, Death, and the Devil:
Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

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EMILY LEQUESNE*

From the Grotto to the Grotesque: Puppets, Folklore and the Uncanny

Abstract

Do our collective unconscious memories of folk traditions, ritual, and pre- and early Christian use of puppetry influence responses to puppetry today? What is an uncanny response to puppetry? Historically, many societies have at times deemed puppetry to be foolish or even illegal: it was dismissed by the Christian suppression of Paganism, and later through the banning of idolatry, and since the Enlightenment period through the mockery of indigenous folk traditions. From the “ensouling” (Nielson 2001, 33), of statues in a sacred grotto to the grotesquery of the uncanny brought to life through puppetry, and onto political protest through animation of effigy and statue, this article will explore links between folklore and puppets.

KEYWORDS: puppets; uncanny; folklore; pagan; grotesque; statue

To speak of puppets with most men and women is to cause them to giggle... they tell me it is “a funny little doll”... Let me again repeat that they are the descendants of a great and noble family of Images, images which were indeed made “in the likeness of God”; and that many centuries ago these figures had a rhythmical movement and not a jerky one; had no need for wires to support them, nor did they speak through the nose of the hidden manipulator.
(Craig 1980, 90)

Both John Bell in his essay, “Playing with the Eternal Uncanny. The Persistent Life of Lifeless Objects”, and Victoria Nielson’s exploration of the spiritual and supernatural gnosis of puppets, “The Secret Life of Puppets”, explore the origins of our collective modern experience of the uncanny in relation to puppets. Nielson states,

“for Westerners from ancient times through the Renaissance, moreover, a statue or other human-made image was not regarded as an entity divorced from nature by human artifice, but rather as a natural object on a par with a seashell or a seed” (2001, 38).

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Puppets are liminal; alive yet not alive. There is an intrinsic uncanniness to puppets which comes from the anthropomorphisation of an inanimate object. Puppets have been utilised all over the world and across many indigenous spiritual systems for millennia, with both inert and animatable figures employed in ritual, religion and play. They were used as fertility symbols by European Palaeolithic peoples. They were held aloft during religious processions as personifications and celebrations of Gods and Goddesses in fifth-century BCE Greece. The shadow puppets of Bali and Java (Walang Kulit) are seen as the manifestation of beings that live on a purely spirit plane; they perform for both the audience on Earth and a supernatural audience. In some areas of the South Pacific and some parts of Africa, puppets were and still are used as a host for the spirit of an ancestor or departed loved one. Today, some First Nations in North America utilise puppets in ritual; the Hopi culture uses puppets in a fertility rite.

In Europe, the live animation of figures and objects for performance, whether puppets such as dolllike sculpture, marionettes, shadow or inanimate objects such as a bunch of sticks, a rock or hat, can be traced back to third-century CE Athens. In pre-historic times, Cro-Magnons were creating figures from clay and stone. It seems for as long as humanity has been fashioning figures from raw materials we have been anthropomorphising objects.

I will be focussing on British folklore and puppetry with some references to European examples. There is little written about British or European puppetry during the period between 400-1200 CE but puppets, masks, poppets, idols, and objects of worship imbued with *anima* were as evident then as they continue to be; theurgy involving puppets has been a tradition for millennia. It was, at times, deemed foolish or even illegal by the Christian church, initially by the suppression of Paganism, later through the banning of idolatry, and then the dismissal of indigenous folk traditions since the age of enlightenment. Bell says:

modernity – by which I mean developments in secular, humanist, and rationalist culture beginning in Western Europe during the sixteenth century and continuing to this day – has had a fundamental problem with puppet, mask, and object performance. Puppetry’s primitive roots, animism, irrationality and its basic contradictions with realism make an art form that would not easily adapt into modern culture’s interest in civilisation (versus nature), realism, rationality, text, and bourgeois art. (2014, 44)

Folklore is a recent ideation, the meanings of which change in the place and time of response. As a concept it is somewhat of a misnomer in that the term folk is “unequivocally a 19th Century understanding” (2021, 24). As Peter Harrop says: “I raise Jacques Derrida’s famous difference. This conception,

with its twin inference of endless difference alongside meaning deferred time and again, lends itself to folk performance” (24). Folklore can be a dismissive term, as patriarchal, capitalist thinking seems to relegate the rituals and entertainments of the historically rural poor to a diminished position of just folklore, not unlike the relegation of puppetry to just kids’ stuff. A definition of folklore performance in the *Routledge Companion* says: “It can be conventionally dramatic but neither plot nor character is a prerequisite. It always harnesses performativity” (Harrop and Roud 2021, 1). However, puppetry within spiritual belief systems and as folkloric practice has never fully gone away, even if we feel further from it now than at any other time. It can still be seen in everyday life; in the use of mascots, good luck charms in the shape of pixies, in voodoo dolls and in fictional homunculi. The idea that automata or a talking statue were a conduit to the Gods or specifically, the Judeo-Christian God, was represented more fully in written history, from the twelfth-century. These animated beings were a form of theurgy and many of their characteristics may have been born in the Pagan sensibilities of an earlier era. Max Von Boehm lists Cro-Magnon puppets (for want of a more nuanced noun) as including: *Losskindel* or *Loess* dolls – loam formations that appear to have ahuman form. He suggests that Palaeolithic sculpture often appears to imply that the materials “suggested the object finally represented by the artist” (1956, 25). What Van Boehm terms “figurestones” (ibid.) are an ancient form of pareidolia – the occurrence of seeing patterns and particularly living forms or faces within inanimate objects. Many historians and theoreticians believe that these ancient figures are a form of ancestor worship rather than idolatry; the dead person merely exists in a new way or different place and the doll, sculpture, or puppet forms a substitute for them. All the spiritual qualities of the deceased pass into the sculpture. Puppets from this era are also believed to represent the sacred. As Nelson says of her delight at a Cro-Magnon puppet she observed in the American Natural History Museum, a human figure carved from mammoth bones with holes for twine to articulate it: “I was forgetting, however, that the Upper Pleistocene was a time when art served religion, not entertainment. The puppet was a God, or at least a sacred talisman” (2001, 25).

Are these objects all puppets? Across the world in the twenty-first century, puppetry is utilised in theatrical or art performance, ritual, exhibition, protest, and in various applied contexts: therapy and education. Puppetry can be, mimetic, surreal, symbolic or anthropomorphic. What determines a puppet? Eileen Blumenthal posits that it could be about the mode of manipulation or that it is a performance for an audience or oneself, only coming to ‘life’ through animation, unlike a doll that “continues to keep their imagined life even when they are alone” (2005, 230). Puppets come in all sizes and scales: “puppets are the size of fetishes, saints, relics, voodoo dolls, and talis-

mans” (Gross 2011, 39). I believe that anything with real life substance, that can be seen or felt by another can be manipulated as a puppet.

The puppet straddles the liminal space of alive/not alive, object/being, the material world/the other realm. Steve Tillis observes that debate still continues as to whether puppetry is descended from the religious figures of yore or is merely movable figures that share coincidental similarities. He says: “in either event, the similarity between the two suggests that the religious figure might indeed lend to the puppet something of its sacred aura” (1990, 13).

The animation of figures is what Nielson calls ‘ensouling’ whether through or for “religion (the realm of belief) . . . or art (the realm of make-believe or imagination)” (2001, 30). Peoples of late antiquity pursued ‘the spiritualising of matter’ (20) and animated statues, or ensouled idol performance were evident in ancient religious rituals. Frederik Poulson describes a “first-century CE bust of Epicurus with a hollowed-out centre culminating in a discreet hole in the great philosopher’s mouth . . . made for a tube through which a priest, crouched behind a wall, could speak” (2001, 44).

Nielson explains the origins and reasons for religious statues, ensouled idols and puppets of the theatre of the Gods:

Through all the ancient cults, the spiritualising of matter . . . became the religious goal of these first centuries after Christ. This quest also extended to human-made images that were intended as concrete links to the spiritual. If all things in the material world are simulacra, copies, of the true World of Forms, then statues and people alike (and especially statues if they took the shape of humans) acted not just as passive vessels but as magnets to the energies of the higher world, drawing down the gods’ powers and materially embodying them. (2001, 33)

As Christianity took hold as the dominant religious dogma across the Mediterranean area towards the end of the fifth-century CE, statues and idols were toppled, and Nielson suggests that “the main reason pagan statues were routinely mutilated was that they were commonly perceived as being alive; this seemed to be the only sure way to kill them” (43). Puppets were perceived as idolatry and therefore evil and outlawed by Christianity in England in the Middle Ages because of their direct lineage from the animated Pagan statues of antiquity, believed to be alive and the material embodiment of the gods. That matter ensouled should be seen as demonic. Ester Fernandez recounts examples of seventeenth-century Christian disdain for the notion of “fraudulent performance objects in secular entertainment contexts” (2021, 82). These examples of fundamental Christians breaking musical instruments, tearing off masks and destroying the shows of itinerant puppetry performers are an example of a reformation-era determination that belief in magic is only acceptable in Christian teaching. Anything outside of miracle within scripture

was heathen, pagan, evil and certainly not scientific or rational.

Moving, often string-operated figures are recorded all over the world from Pre-Christian times. Marionettes appear to have originated as mobile sculptures in Egypt and gradually travelled to Europe. Around 450 BCE, Herodotus reported sculptures of a God of fertility with a twenty-inch string operated phallus, carried in procession through Egyptian villages (Speaight 1990, 24). The word 'marionette' originates in the French for 'little Mary'. Within the Catholic church in Mainland Europe around the thirteenth-century CE, religious statues were transformed into marionettes to be utilised in scripture-based plays. Nielson observes

references in medieval English miracle plays to 'Gods on strings' . . . date from 1200 and the occasional continued wonder is noted, such as a crucifix in Boxley, Kent whose eyes and head were made to move by the monks at significant moments and puppets used by pre-reformation English priests to enact the passion (2001, 49).

Right up to the Reformation, the Medieval-Christian church utilised hand-controlled automatons, such as, "crucifixes which moved their heads and showed blood oozing from the wounds in their sides, as well as Madonnas which shed tears" (Van Boehm 1956, 253). This was a popular form of religious education and propaganda until the sixteenth century, when the church again denounced puppetry, this time as devilry. People were burned as witches and heretics for practising puppet theatre and for using dolls and puppets in a ritualistic manner. The early Christian church's dislike and destruction of ritualistic puppets and automatons sprang from a disease with the living/not living liminality, a fear of magic, Paganism and the propensity for puppets to elicit a visceral and (as yet undefined) uncanny response from spectators. "By the sixteenth century a common alternative word for puppet in the theatrical sense would be maumet or mammet which originally meant 'idol'" (Cutler Shershow 1995, 26).

In pre-Roman times, large wicker cages housing criminals would be set alight as punishment and to stop the evil abilities of the incumbent from blighting crops or killing people (Early 1935, 26). These practices were outlawed by Roman colonisers, but might some sub-conscious memory linger as we watch giant puppets in procession through the city or the effigy of Guy Fawkes (or other wrong-doers) go up in flames? In France, during plague years in the mid-fifteenth century, giant figures processed; "figures made of wickerwork, with brightly painted wooden heads, the father twenty-one feet high, the mother eighteen to twenty and the children twelve to fifteen. Ten or twelve persons were required to move the largest" (Ibid.). Giant processional puppetry is recorded as far back in England as 1415, as effigies of Gog and Magog were present in a royal procession to greet King Henry the

Fifth. Gog and Magog, the ancient giants of Albion as the pre-Tudor era version of the legend has it,¹ were captured and chained to the gates of Brutus's palace in London and tasked with protecting the city and the country. The fifteenth-century puppets no longer survive, but there have been many incarnations of the Gog and Magog puppets over the centuries.

In 1605 they were stalking on stilts, in 1672 they were 15 feet tall, seated in chariots and "moving, talking and taking tobacco" . . . In Cromwell's time they were destroyed, but at the accession of Charles II a fresh pair appeared. These made from wicker work, perished in the Great Fire of London; the next pair had their 'entrails' eaten by rats; their fine wooden successors, carved in 1708 were too heavy to move and remained in the Guildhall . . . Portable wicker work figures, fourteen foot high were made . . . for the Lord mayors show in 1827. The wooden giants of 1708 were destroyed in an air raid in 1940, and replaced by a fresh pair, which still stand in the Guildhall. (Simpson, and Roud 2000, n.n.)

There is a long tradition of image magic in the British Isles and the use of puppets, puppets or dolls as the focus of a desired outcome; everything from ridding the world of one's enemy to helping the safe birth of a baby has long been practised and studied. In June 1954, a Dr. Nimmo-Smith reported finding a puppet hanging from a willow tree next to the river in Oxfordshire, "beautifully dressed in clothes made of straw or dried grass. Some sort of bonnet covered the head, there was a skirt and the arms and legs were supplied or suggested by little sticks" (Beecham 1956, 159). M.R. James wrote in "The Hanging Oak": "the custom for those who wished to secure a successful issue to their affairs . . . to suspend from its boughs . . . puppets rudely fashioned of straw, twigs, or the like rustic materials" (1911, 75). Whether James' report is purely fictional or not it has echoes of the hanging puppet of Oxfordshire, for which no origin nor reason was ever discovered as to why it was there, although extensive local research was undertaken at the time. Reports of image magic using effigies in Scottish Highland tribal tradition are mentioned by Max Von Boehm; "*corp creadh* – an image of white clay with black glass-bead eyes and teeth made of splinters of wood, which is supposed to represent the person on question" (1956, 61). If placed in a river the invocation is for the death of the person. Similar figures were carried around local towns and villages around the time of elections and, "the nails with which they were pierced showing contempt for the candidate" (61). This sort of practice is still seen today at political demonstrations in the UK and elsewhere, with puppet effigies of politicians considered untrustworthy or guilty of wrongdoing.

¹ See the entry "Gog and Magog" in Simpson and Roud 2000.

1. The Grotesque

The grotesque has its origins in the sixteenth-century fashion for grottos, particularly within the grounds of the gardens of the nobility. This fashion for wealthy noblemen to enjoy *alla grottesca* translated to the French as *crotesque* and in turn to grotesque in English by around the 1640s (Jacobs 2014, 8). According to Victoria Nielson, the grotto was “the place of birth and death, passing away and re-birth, descent and resurrection” (2001, 2). The grotesque in art and literature is a close sibling of the uncanny. As Danielle Jacobs attests in: “Entering the Grotto of the Biomechanical Puppeteer; Exploring the Grotesque in Stop motion Puppetry”, the grotesque manifests in art and literature at the juncture between the horrific and the comic. What is considered grotesque now may not have been so in another era, the nightmare apocalyptic visions of Hieronymus Bosch may be considered by today’s audience to be horrific and also somewhat funny but to his contemporary audiences, they were terror complete. Philip Thomson summarises Wolfgang Kayser’s definition of the grotesque as:

The grotesque is the expression of the estranged or alienated world, that is the familiar is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange (and, presumably, this strangeness may be either comic or terrifying, or both). The grotesque is a game with the absurd, in the sense that the grotesque artists plays, half laughingly, half horrified, with the deep absurdities of existence. The grotesque is an attempt to control and exorcise the demonic elements in the world. (1972, 18)

The grotesque has its origins in the Pagan worship of and at sacred streams, wells, and Goddess grottos. The word *grotta* in Italian derives from *crypta*, a Latin word for cave or hidden pit. The creature growing and reaching up from the ground, from beneath the earth or living in a dark cave or grotto is a repetitive theme in British folklore. Think of the troll whose permission we must ask to cross the bridge, or being pixie-led to take a wrong turn, these creatures often appear in stories and puppet shows. Perhaps our collective perception of many puppets, as uncanny, magical or grotesque, originates in our shared Pre-Christian belief in these creatures and the soul of the inanimate. Feelings of the uncanny are a response and as Wolfgang Kayser states, the grotesque is also only experienced through reception. Some of the key themes as laid out by Kayser in so-called grotesque works of art are: “monstrosities, grotesque animal incarnations, the fusion of organic and mechanical elements, insanity and quasi-insanity and the mechanical brought to life” (Jacobs 2014, 10).

Grotesque animal incarnations are seen in the hobby horses of folkloric performance across Europe. In “The Hobby Horse and Other Masked Ani-

mals”, Violet Alford states that in Britain, hobby horses are “laughed at but generally welcomed” but in previous centuries, “they were anathema to the Church and considered a danger to Christian people. This was because they were known to continue pagan practices which were diabolic. The old gods . . . quickly became devils to ecclesiasts – but not to their flock” (1978, 155). The Obby Oss of Padstow, Cornwall, perhaps one of the more well-known still performing today, is what Alford refers to as “the horse-skull creature, inspiring both fear and awe, in which the bearer is entirely concealed” (2). Alford visited in the 1960s and reported that the Old Oss chases after young women; finding one, he backs her against a wall and encircles her in his large black cloak, “the married women laugh, the girls shriek, for it is well understood that this piece of luck forecasts the birth of a child” (5). This feels grotesque and somewhat uncanny to me, but perhaps not for the same reasons spectators of this tradition might have felt in past centuries. Now the obviously masculine symbology of a male horse as a symbol of fertility is clear. Nearly sixty years on and there is a slightly less assaulting approach these days, although young women are still chased by the Oss. There are three main types of hobby horse as described and defined by Alford. The tourney horse: a term describing a rider and horse in one, in which the person “carries around his waist a light frame of wood or basketwork, from which a curtain hangs almost to the ground, hiding the human legs . . . on the front of the frame a horse’s head, generally of wood, often with a hair mane, fixed at the back is a tail of hair, twigs, wool or even leaves” (3). This type also often includes a pair of false human legs hanging astride the sheeted frame as if attached to the visible human rider. The skull and pole type is not confined solely to horses, Alford lists, “the stag, the goat, a donkey, a bull and a cock” (4), and that these animal guises were called upon to discharge their duties at the carnivals around ancient feast and festival days across much of Europe, such as summer and winter solstice, May Day and harvest time (or Lammas). These duties are to bring good luck, ensure a good harvest, the return of the sun and for fertility.

In England on Plough Monday in the mid-1800s, plough hands and farm workers were given free rein, akin to the similar law-free days during carnival in then British colonies. The farm hands and ploughmen would go from house to house seeking gratuities or reward with no redress. Various of these men “wore costumes, coloured their faces . . . to enliven the effect” (Harrop and Roud 2021, 109).

These disguises include hobby horses that would pull a plough around the village or tourney horses that would tease and pester the women folk. This guising and puppet play may have been an influence on North American Halloween Trick or Treat games. Many ex-farm labourers emigrated to the USA in the 1870s and 1880s as a result of the agricultural depression

in the UK. The Mari Lwyd is a type of skull and pole horse. In Wales, on a dark night, sometime between the winter solstice and the start of the new year, you may hear a knock at your door or a tapping on the window. Pull back the curtains and peer into the blackness, there's nothing there. Or is there? A flash of white, your eyes adjust; a monstrous skeletal creature with a horse's skull for a head atop a flowing white sheet, adorned with ribbons and bells, the eye sockets filled with pieces of glass stares back at you from the darkness. Chaotic and disconcerting, Mari Lwyd is calling. Mari Lwyd and her attendants will then engage those inside in a poetry battle or song verse off. Each group performing rhyming verses in response to the other until the household group are beaten and must let Mari Lwyd inside. She creates havoc and again chases the girls and women in this wassailing tradition.

The Cambridge straw bear, a bear version of the hobby horses seen plough jaggling was revived in Cambridgeshire in 1980 and travels around many of the local pubs on the first Monday after ploughing, in earlier eras it would have jaggled or begged for gratuities at the larger houses in the locale. The Straw Bear and the Welsh Mari Lywd can both be seen in the twenty-first century, continuing a folkloric practice that usurps the class system through law-free and uncanny performance, then as now.

2. Animism and the Uncanny

Puppets are liminal: alive yet not alive. There is an intrinsic uncanniness to puppets which comes from the anthropomorphisation of the inanimate or the animism of an object. Over many centuries the puppet's journey from spiritual, magical and/or religious object of *anima* to becoming the 'low' cousin of so-called proper theatre, the target of ridicule and unfairly diminished to the realm of kids' stuff, has taken those of us in Western secular society further away than ever from the uncanny experience that is the possibility of a psychic and magical encounter with puppets. Basil Jones describes animism and puppetry as:

A belief in the life of objects and the life of things around us. We suspect that objects may have a life and that dead people might have an afterlife. So when we go into the theater and the lights go down and we once again are shown objects – i.e. puppets that are brought to life, I think it ignites a smoldering coal of ancient belief in us that there is life in stones, in rivers, in objects, in wood. I feel it's almost part of our DNA that we all left Africa believing in the life of things, as animists. (Qtd in Posner, Orenstein and Bell 2014, 290)

Many in the modern and postmodern secular world have relegated a belief in the spirit or life of things not human to a position of ridicule – as primitive

or childish, and as John Bell suggests, “the animism attached to puppets, masks and performing objects thus becomes a problem of modernity” (qtd in Nielson 2001, 46). Bell contextualises modernity, as spreading across the world since the seventeenth century, rationalizing so-called civilised people to separate the human (as rational, superior and authoritative) from the natural (as subordinate, tame-able and exploitable). Yet these ancient and in modernist terms, pre-civilised perceptions, beliefs and responses to the *anima* within objects continues. This deeply ingrained human response to object, doll and puppet clashes against our trained rational imperative to send our sixth sense responses to the realm of childish silliness, and as a result the notion of the uncanny is born. In this respect, only a modern or indeed post-modern spectator could respond to puppetry with a sense of the uncanny. As Bell says, “belief in the animism of objects was a marker of one’s relative cultural sophistication. Uncivilized and savage peoples believed in such things, while civilized modern men and women categorically rejected these ways of thinking” (2014, 49). This is a response that negates the complexities of puppetry spectatorship; the visceral nature of people’s response to performing objects is a concept that goes far deeper than a dismissive relegation to the realm of kids’ stuff. The Victorian obsession with childhood, and later the advent of cinema and TV did much for the infantilising of puppetry. While references to folk art, although true up to a point, perhaps say more about the social mindset of some early twentieth-century historians and anthropologists; those who equated primitive, ancient beliefs and folk traditions with otherness, naivete and ignorance and things only to be acknowledged in the context of anthropological research.

Kenneth Gross suggests that “the puppet serves as an ambassador or pilgrim to human beings from the world of things” (2011, 33). To the so-called rational mind, the concept of animism is absurd, childish, over the top – much like many adults’ response to puppetry. We may ignore it but perhaps out of the corner of an eye, when alone, in the half-light we are not entirely convinced that objects do not indeed have their own life. As Freud said:

We – or our primitive forebears – once regarded such things as real possibilities; we were convinced that they really happened. Today we no longer believe in them, having surmounted such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation. (Qtd in Posner, Orenstein, and Bell 2014, 48)

Explorations of the concept of the uncanny then, are modern or indeed post-modern musings only. The historic journey from animism to rational denial of *anima*, has subsequently led to discussion about why some people can be disturbed, unsettled or spooked by inanimate things. “What looks like a child’s doll may be equally a votive offering, a magical fetish, or an actor in

a sacred puppet play” (Gross 2011, 50). And it is this unsurety, this non-rational questioning that so many try to suppress, that can resurface and manifest in an uncanny response.

Jentsch and subsequently Freud, who, in response to Jentsch, would write his own exploration of the Uncanny, were both writing from a European, white, middle class, male, early twentieth century position of notable privilege.² Their theories about the emotional or psychological effect a known, unknown or unfamiliar familiarity can have on people resonate through puppetry. Ernst Jentsch first discussed the term uncanny, in his essay “The Psychology of the Uncanny” written in 1906, ten years before Freud:

With the word *unheimlich*, the German language seems to have produced a rather fortunate formation. Without a doubt, this word appears to express that someone to whom something ‘uncanny’ happens is not quite ‘at home’ or ‘at ease’ in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a lack of orientation is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident. (1906, 1)

Talking of Freud and Jentsch, Bell suggests “their concept of the uncanny defines the power of objects as a problem, not a window into the nature of the material world and its agency” (2014, 46).

3. Imbuing Objects with *Anima*

When confronted by a puppet that lives the uncanny response is prevalent for many. Animism is the uncanny. Without the life of imbued animism, the puppet is yet another lifeless object. The uncanny manifests in anthropomorphism also, as every spectator of puppetry anthropomorphises. Especially if the puppet is abstract, an object otherwise employed in real life, such as a kitchen utensil or ‘just’ a bunch of twigs. For me, sometimes the uncanny response is a desire to feel empathy with the thing I see or experience. Other times, the uncanny response is the recognition of a situation or behaviour; the feeling that I recognise this but I do not quite recognise it and therefore I cannot empathise with it, I am confused by this familiarity. As Jentsch wrote:

Among all the physical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an

² “The weaker the critical sense that is present and the more prevailing psychical background is affectively tinged. This is why women, children and dreamers are also particularly subject to the stirrings of the uncanny and the danger of seeing spirits and ghosts” (Jentsch 1906, 12).

apparently living being really is animate and, conversely doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate. (1906, 8)

The experience of the uncanny can be pleasurable but is not always so, many people are disturbed by puppets. As John Bell points out, both Jentsch and Freud's approaches problematise the uncanny, "by associating the uncanny with doubt, uncertainty, abnormality, disturbance and other undesirable effects, Jentsch also problematises the uncanny, something Freud would press even further" (2014, 46). Why should it be that a feeling of the uncanny is seen as negative? Some people of course, do respond with genuine fear to puppets but the inherent contradiction of the uncanny is to be attracted and repulsed in equal measure. Many people are drawn to puppets because they are delighted by the uncanny aspect. Otakar Zich, a precursor to the Prague school of linguistics, talks of two options for human response to puppets; one is accepting them as themselves and nothing else and therefore finding them funny, that the other is that

puppets can be taken for live beings in that we put emphasis on their apparent manifestations of life (their movements and speech) and take these shows with sincerity. In such a perceptive mode, the awareness of the factual un-liveness of puppets moves to the background and it is apparent merely as a sensation of something inexplicable, a certain mystery that raises a sense of amazement. In this case puppets have an un-canny effect on us. (2015, 93)

Petr Bogatyrev disagrees with Zich's descriptions stating that an audience might find puppets funny or uncanny if they always perceive them in relation to human theatre and that to take puppetry at face value as an art form with its own system of signs not related to human theatre allows it to be itself and therefore not funny or unsettling by comparison. Yet, how many people do this when watching puppetry? Very small children perhaps are wont to respond in this way but I have to agree with Zich, that some of the things people most enjoy about puppetry is that it creates a sense of comedy and/or the uncanny. A puppet can only be itself; it is not the actor signifying the character, it is the character. This is the paradox of the un-canny at play.

Our modern and postmodern perception of the material and natural world as other, not-alive, and not-sentient can be traced in the Western world to the early Christian church, "once the human likeness was no longer worshipped, it became an idea, not an idol, partaking of the insensible territory 'imaginary' instead of the insensible territory "holy" (Nielson 2001, 60). Our apparently rational and logical perception is challenged when confronted by the unknown known, the unrecognisable friend or the intensely familiar stranger. Perhaps our collective perception of many puppets, particularly human shaped, realistically featured and believably manipulated, as uncanny,

magical or grotesque, originates in our shared pre-Christian belief in the soul of the inanimate. The Uncanny is the phenomenology of puppetry, and that seems to be the essence of experiencing it. The very phenomenology of it, is what creates a sense of the uncanny. Victoria Nielson observes the puppet as threat to human in fiction and drama particularly across the twentieth century and suggests, “these stories play on the contrast of an animate object invested with the aura of childhood innocence that is suddenly infused with (always) demonic energy – the upsurge of the supernatural grotesque from the least anticipated source” (58).

4. Contemporary Puppetry and Folklore

Many of the historical examples given in this article still exist in some form today, the Padstow Obby Oss still performs and Mari Lwyd is growing in popularity again across Wales. Religious statues or indeed ensouled idols are evident the world over; they can be seen in examples that span a millenia and across many land masses. In an example given by Victoria Nielson, “when the first department store in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, opened with dress mannequins on public display in the 1970s. Citizens rioted because they believed the souls of someone’s ancestors were being desecrated” (2001, 26). Were the people, whose belief that these mannequins were ensouled idols rather than mere plastic human shaped clothes hangers, experiencing an uncanny response? To be viscerally and emotionally disturbed by these objects could be seen as an uncanny response, to an outsider, but is it uncanny if it is within someone’s belief system? Having been raised in a secular Christian society but within a family on one side vehemently atheist and on the other whole heartedly Pagan, I have often responded with an uncanny feeling and or a viscerally uncomfortable moment when confronted by the grotesque imagery of a large and detailed crucifix, although I have never responded this way to ancient statues of Gods.

Giant processional puppets such as the Sultan’s Elephant created by Royale de Luxe have visited many countries including the UK and been seen by many thousands of spectators. Remembering one of their performances, puppeteer Sophie Powell says,

“the whole thing felt like a physical experience, uncanny, yes – tied up with the heat and the noise of the festival, overwhelming but for a variety of reasons. I loved it. I credit it with making me realise that puppets could tackle the epic – both narratively and emotionally go anywhere”.³

³ Private email conversation between Emily LeQuesne and Sophie Powell (January 2022).

Giant processional puppets have been utilised for political and educational reasons also, seen at the Cop26 meeting in Glasgow in 2021: “STORM is a ten-meters tall goddess of the sea . . . Made from entirely recycled materials, the giant puppet STORM’s eyes are the colour of oyster shells, her hair thick strands of kelp, her voice the chorus of the waves. Aided by eight puppeteers, STORM will walk the streets of Scotland”⁴

Little Amal is “3.5 meters tall living artwork of a young Syrian refugee child walked across Turkey, Greece, Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and the UK to focus attention on the urgent needs of young refugees”.⁵ Puppeteers UK director Hannah Bainbridge saw Little Amal in London,

I was rendered speechless. I remember looking up at her and just being in total awe, it was visceral. This is unusual because there’s a puppeteer inside Amal, and four around her – I remember thinking her minute movements and decisions were very impressive, I started to disregard the puppeteers, forgetting that she wasn’t real! I think if asked to interact with her up close I would have felt nervous.⁶

Although these examples are obviously puppets, objects purposefully made and manipulated by people for an audience, I would argue that there is a link from ensouled idols, image magic and processional puppetry to the puppeteering of statues in protest actions.

At the time of its toppling, was the statue of notorious Bristol slaver Edward Colston a puppet? As Sarah Plummer observes when discussing the toppling of statues in North America:

When people gather around a statue of Columbus, entwine him with ropes, and pull him down, what is it if not an act of puppetry? It’s a performance between human and non-human, and its meaning is greater than the sum of its parts. This is an act of solidarity, not with the ideology or ideas behind the monuments, but with the objects themselves as they fall, break, sink, or are covered over with paint of possibilities. (2022)

The toppling, dragging and struggle to ultimately tip the Colston statue into the river on June 7, 2020, at a #BlackLivesMatter protest in central Bristol, England, was certainly protest, but it was also puppet theatre. A performative mirroring of the dragging, struggle and enslavement of Africans via Colston’s death ships to the same harbour in past centuries. An object manipulated by people while many others watched and applauded.

⁴ <https://visionmechanics.org/> (Accessed 10 May 2022).

⁵ Home - The Walk (walkwithamal.org) (Accessed 10 May 2022).

⁶ Private email conversation between Emily LeQuesne and Hannah Bainbridge (January 2022).

Artist and writer John Ruskin described grotesque art as composed of “two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful” (qtd in Nielson 2001, 256). The toppling of the Colston statue was grotesque; the object in question, a character of a once real and feared person but also a caricature imbued with different meaning by its contemporary audience; white power, and the enslavement of Africans, at once both ludicrous and repellent. It was also uncanny, as the crowd watched and cheered as the manifestation of this man’s legacy drowned in the docks before them. This theatrical political protest at the commemoration of such evil was not only an act of defiance and protest but image magic in its most public form. The uncanny feeling and visceral reaction many people have to puppetry is the phenomenological response. Phenomenology in theatre has been said to be about the “sensory effects of theatre” (Fortier 1997, 39) or the “lived experience” (38) and it is the very uncanniness of puppets that can make the experience a visceral, multisensory and emotional one. Experiencing the uncanny is a phenomenological response to puppetry.

As Eileen Blumenthal states, “while any statue, can be used as a puppet, some statues have a proclivity for it. Life size three dimensional figures of people and animals have an obvious advantage in seeming alive” (2005, 231). Political protest through the performative puppeteering that is the toppling of statues, is direct action as witness performance or gesture performance. David Graeber says:

The mocking and destruction of effigies is of course one of the oldest and most familiar gestures of political protest. Often such effigies are an explicit assault on monumentality. The fall of regimes are marked by the pulling down of statues . . . similarly, during George Bush’s visit to England in 2004, protesters built innumerable mock statues of Bush, large and small, just in order to pull them down again. (10)

As such, the statue repurposed as puppet in or for protest is a mockery of the permanence of that monument, particularly when that monument symbolises and personifies the subject of the protest. A phenomenological response can be visceral, and a visceral response can be because of a perception of the uncanny. As Prof. Philip Schwyzer says:

Reformation iconoclasts might spit on religious icons, daub them with urine or feces, or invite them, ironically, to save themselves. In some cases, religious images that had attracted particular veneration were sent to Smithfield to be burnt in public, mimicking the execution of traitors. Likewise, at Bristol, protesters took turns kneeling upon Colston’s neck, recalling the horrifying death of George Floyd under the knee of a policeman in Minnesota. In such acts of ritual humiliation, the status of the monument seems to flicker uneas-

ily between dumb matter and a living human body. These moments can be intensely uncomfortable to witness. (2020)

Do our collective unconscious memories of an ancient belief that the spiritual qualities of the deceased pass into sculptures of them, influence our responses to the puppeteering of statues? Is there an uncanny response in the visceral pleasure of seeing the statue of Colston – an artificial person in the literal sense but also a representation of the state, drowning in the river? A postmodern processional statue of a now fallen God, or a type of reclaiming of the effigy or monument. From the articulated statues of pre-Christian times to the fraudulent performance objects of the reformation to the guerrilla puppetry of statue toppling; perhaps the uncanny idea of the animism of objects has come full circle. A now changed perception of statues as capable of disobedience in certain hands; the puppet made me do it becomes the statue made me drown him!

Puppetry can bypass rationality and link us into something more primal or transrational – and therefore deepen our responses to what is being said. That is the crux of why puppetry remains popular and has so much to give, whether as theatre performance, procession or exhibition. Folkloric puppetry practice ranges from Palaeolithic pareidolia, Pagan ensouled idols, processional statues of the gods, animal entities used in seasonal rites, effigy as image magic, early Christian fraudulent oracles, puppet miracle plays, to contemporary giant processional puppetry and statue toppling as object manipulation in political protest. All of these practices, whether collectively culturally remembered or seen by our own eyes, contribute to our sometime uncanny responses to the grotesquery of puppetry as folklore and folklore as puppetry.

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