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

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

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<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù

P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

Contents

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

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – <i>Introduction</i>	5
DIDIER PLASSARD and CAROLE GUIDICELLI – <i>Haunted Figures, Haunting Figures: Puppets and Marionettes as Testimonies of Liminal States</i>	11
FRANCESCA CECCONI – <i>Journey into Hell: a Tour through Puppetry</i>	35
EMILY LEQUESNE – <i>From the Grotto to the Grotesque: Puppets, Folklore and the Uncanny</i>	51
MARA THEODORITSI – <i>Literal and Metaphorical Puppets as Supernatural Figures: Echoes of Classical Greek Theatre in Cervantes’s Fiction</i>	69
MANUELA MOHR – <i>Rethinking the Vampire: the Fantastic on the Puppet Stage</i>	87
JEAN BOUTAN – <i>Death, the Devil and the Wife: Danse Macabre Motifs in Nineteenth-Century Puppetry, from Punch to Kasperl</i>	103
FRANCESCA DI FAZIO – <i>Figurations of Evil in Contemporary Puppet Theatre Dramaturgy</i>	121

Miscellany

ELENI PAPAZOGLOU – <i>The Dramaturgy of Vocatives: Dynamics of Communication in Sophoclean Thebes</i>	143
FRANCESCO DALL’OLIO – <i>Athens, the Moon and You: Diana and the Female Appropriation of Marriage in A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>	167

Special Section

LORETTA INNOCENTI – Stephen Orgel, <i>Wit’s Treasury: Renaissance England and the Classics</i> , Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. ISBN 9780812253276. pp. 216	189
CRISTINA CONSIGLIO – Tana Wojczuk, <i>Lady Romeo. The Radical and Revolutionary Life of Charlotte Cushman, America’s First Celebrity</i> , New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020. ISBN 9781501199523. pp. 226	201
NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – Ashley E. Lucas. <i>Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration</i> . London, New York: Methuen, 2021. ISBN 9781408185896. pp. 272	209
RAFFAELLA DI TIZIO – <i>A Journey to the Border Between Theatre and Literature: Theateradaptationen. Interkulturelle Transformationen moderner Bühnentexte</i> , Edited by Olaf Müller and Elena Polledri, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2021. ISBN 9783825347857. pp. 257	219
MARK BROWN – <i>From Oedipus to a Voyeuristic Photographer: a Showcase of the Breadth of Czech Theatre</i>	231
SORIN DAN BOLDEA – <i>The Actor-Author: its Presence and Absence in the Romanian Theatre</i>	239

FRANCESCA CECCONI*

Journey into Hell: a Tour through Puppetry

Abstract

One of the most frequent topics in puppet theatre is the representation of the close relationship between the earthly and the otherworldly dimensions, often dealing with narratives that refer to crossing the boundaries between human and non-human, between life and death. Many puppetry techniques deal with this theme: from carnal puppets to visceral guarattelle, from shadows to robots. The aim of this essay is to analyse some of the puppet theatre techniques that have dealt with the theme of the journey to hell in order to trace a path that investigates assonances and divergences. The study starts with an analysis of Pirù, demoni e denari by the Walter Broggin Company. The show is inspired by the famous story of Orpheus and Eurydice but becomes humorous through the use of glove puppets. The analysis continues through an example of shadow theatre, El Gran Baile by the company Cosmonautas Teatro de Sombras, where the main theme is the reunion of the living and the dead, then discusses the show Inferno by Louis-Philippe Demers and Bill Vorn, in which the audience is asked to perform, wearing teleguided exoskeletons. Man, the puppeteer par excellence, is finally manoeuvred by the inanimate, in this case, robot machines in a real Inferno where everyone becomes an unwitting victim.

KEYWORDS: Hell; shadow; puppetry; robot; journey

One of the most common topics in puppet theatre is the representation of the strong relationship between the earthly and otherworldly dimensions, confirmed by the kind of technique that involves a manipulator giving life to something inanimate. This relationship is consolidated by an inclination to create stories that relate to crossing the threshold between human and non-human, between life and death. It is in this context that many techniques of puppetry deal with the topic of the journey to the Underworld: from puppets to marionettes, from shadows to robots. Each of them, with its own features, entrusts its characters to plays in which the element linked to the Afterlife is present, not only as the destination of a journey, but as an archetypal symbol of death and rebirth.

In the interesting catalogue of the exhibition *Di qua e di là dal mondo, umani e non umani nei burattini di Bepe Pastrello*, in which some rooms of the Museo Casa Giorgione in Castelfranco Veneto were set up, between December 2019 and June 2020, with important pieces from the most significant

* University of Verona- francesca.cecconi@univr.it

Italian puppet collections, Cristina Grazioli points out the strong connection that underlies any technique of puppetry and the concept of animation:

The threshold between the earthly and the otherworldly, the real and the fairy-tale, is an element intrinsic to the universe of the figures, where the human is confronted with a different, non-human status, inherent in the relationship between the living body of the manipulator and the inanimate object on which he breathes life: an image that speaks of the relationship between life and death. (2020, 32-3, translation mine)

In puppet theatre, characters such as devils or death are depicted like any other character: they are corporeal, have a face (usually representing the skull) and express themselves as earthly beings – they can talk, manipulate objects, strike other characters, etc. They are human beings, only with the feature that they belong to the Underworld. The other characters either interact with death and the devils in a shameless manner, unafraid and trying to fool them, or have a reverential fear that is manifested through the trembling of the puppets.

The lyrical vision of an immaterial death moves away from the techniques of puppet theatre: from glove puppets to the world of *guarattelle*, but also in shadow theatre, and thus vanishing and characterised by the use of a transcendental element such as projection, death is represented as a tangible element. This physical, concrete nature of death is reflected in the popular culture in which these techniques originated. Death is tangible because puppets and shadows can oppose it, can fight it and succeed in defeating it. Puppet heroes such as Pulcinella, Punch and Fagiolino¹ conquer death, they beat it – often with a fast-moving slapstick – and this is a clear apotropaic act that avoids the fear of death itself.

In the puppet show we meet heroes – even if they often hide behind clumsy expressions and rely on luck – who manage to defeat the enemy, even if it presents itself in the form of death, thus succeeding in pursuing the longed-for immortality. The plays in which these characters act, most of which have a happy ending, have as their leitmotiv a meeting between the living and the otherworldly being. This encounter can take place in the world of the living, into which Death or messengers of the devil come to demand the lives of the living; or in the Underworld, with a descent into Hell.

In the literary context, the theme of the descent to the underworld has been much studied and investigated, while its scenic translation in puppetry

¹Fagiolino is a traditional puppet from the Emilia tradition, created by Cavazza, a puppeteer from Bologna, but which became famous through the performances of Filippo Cuccoli (1806-1872) and Angelo Cuccoli (1834-1905). It is a puppet that was created along with other masks following the French Revolution.

is not so well known. The aim of this research is to analyse three traditions of puppet theatre – glove-puppets, shadow theatre and robot – which are strongly connected to the theme of the journey to the underworld, both in terms of the type of animation and the dramaturgy proposed. Through the suggested examples it will be possible to understand how the descent to the underworld is represented from a scenic point of view, the relationship that the characters have with death, and the dramaturgical role of the descent. To best exemplify these features, we will examine three shows: *Pirù, demoni e denari* (1992) by the Walter Broggin Company, *El gran Baile* (2017) by the Cosmonautas Teatro de Sombras Company and *Inferno* (2015) by Bill Vorn and Louis-Philippe Demers.

1. *Pirù, demoni e denari*

Pirù, demoni e denari (1992) by the Broggin Company² is an example of glove puppets show. The setting is that of comedy, played with misunderstandings and incomprehensions that trigger laughter and comic effect.

The artist Walter Broggin had already worked on the theme of death with a wordless show for adults characterised by the use of black humour, in which death – unlike in classic puppet plays – wins over man. The show in question is entitled *Solo* (1986) and is still in the repertoire together with all the other shows of the Broggin Company; it is a work played “on the thin border between macabre and ironic” (CWB website) through the use of table marionettes animated according to the Japanese technique of bunraku. The topic of the show is the desperate attempt of the human being to escape death.

After this first work, Broggin decided to involve himself primarily with the tradition of puppets, creating two works related to the topic of death with *Pirù*, the puppet of his own invention, as the protagonist³. Some puppeteers used historical characters from the Commedia dell’Arte, such as Harlequin or Pantalone, while others invented their own puppet, but always with similar characteristics to those of the Comici dell’Arte. Each puppeteer has their own character puppet, which they use as the main hero of their adventures

²The Broggin Company was officially founded in 1986 by puppeteer and artist Walter Broggin. Over the years, the company has developed its own repertoire and research area, which has led it to work on marionettes and puppets with public performances. I would like to thank Walter Broggin for allowing me to interview him for this essay. The following quotations come from the interview conducted on 8 January 2022. See <http://www.compagniawbroggin.it/> (Accessed 8 January 2022).

³The Broggin Company has created a trilogy on the theme of death with the shows: *Solo* (1986), *Pirù, Pirù* (1987), *Pirù, demoni e denari* (1992).

and often represents the character who, despite the difficulties, manages to achieve a happy ending. These heroes are usually of humble origins; until the eighteenth century, they were simple servants (like the characters Harlequin and Brighella in the *Commedia dell'Arte*). After the French Revolution, these characters served in noble or royal houses and were characterised by wearing a livery. It was at this time that masks such as Gianduia, Gerolamo, Meneghino, and Stenterello were created. From the twentieth century, these characters are no longer simple servants but turn into the working class that characterised most of the people who were employed in the 1900s. These were characters such as Bargnocla, created by puppeteer Italo Ferrari, who played the role of a shoemaker.⁴ Another important aspect of Italian puppets, which is unique on an international level, is that some characters have become regional masks. Some puppets have become so famous that they have been identified as the mask of a particular regional area; this characteristic is reinforced by the use of dialect by the puppets, who express themselves and speak like locals.

Broggini's original idea was to create a character that reflected a distinct regional origin and its own dialect, and it was with these features that Pirù was born as the Varese⁵ puppet in 1987. Pirù is a character who mixes different features coming from several masks: he has some elements typical of the Zanni of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, but also features that are close to the newer masks created after the French Revolution, such as Gioppino from Bergamo or Fagiolino from Bologna. Pirù is also aesthetically reminiscent of the English Punch or the German Kasperl.

Pirù has a large, hooked nose, cheeks as red as the tip of his nose, a wide, cheerful smile, and wears a warmly coloured patchwork dress (a harlequinade of yellows, reds, oranges and indigo). On his head he wears a pointed cap with a rattle on top (in the first Pirù a rattle from a late nineteenth-century Kasperek). And like Punch, he wears a rare feature in Italian glove puppets: two legs dressed in red and white striped trousers, white socks and black shoes. (Rizzi 2019, 102, translation mine)

After *Solo*, Broggini seemed to want to realise a new vision linked to the sphere of death: "ricercavo una speranza, anche se illusoria" ("I was looking for hope, even if it was illusory", translation mine). This vision led to the creation of two other works on the theme of death, both starring Pirù, with

⁴Other successful examples in the more recent history of puppetry are Areste Paganos of the Is Mascareddas Company (Sardinia) and Lomè of the Teatro Medico Ipnotico (Parma).

⁵The Varese area did not have its own mask of reference; in that area the puppeteers used the character of Gianduia.

a totally different change of perspective: in these two representations it is Pirù who wins over death, in the first case by saving his wife Elvira, in the other Eurydice.

Pirù, Pirù (1987), the second chapter of the trilogy, presents the protagonist with Death, who has fallen in love with him and wants to lead him to the Underworld. Pirù tries to escape, but due to a misunderstanding, Death takes his wife Elvira with him. The poor puppet is accused of his wife's disappearance and for this reason imprisoned. In order to escape from the penitentiary, he makes a pact with Death himself. Once released, Pirù will not respect the agreement and starts a gruelling duel with Death, which he wins.

In the third performance, *Pirù, demoni e denari*, the famous myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is taken up and reworked. Pirù finds himself employed by Orpheus, who is married to Eurydice not for love but for money. Orpheus curses his wife and wishes that she could go to Hell. After several imprecations against Eurydice, two messengers from the Underworld come to take her to Hell. Orpheus is happy, but some of the servants disapprove of the situation and the master is forced to send Pirù to ransom his wife. Pirù will have to descend into the Underworld and deal with two devils, Beelzebub and Ezekiel, the first representing the evil demon, the other the foolish one. The story has a happy ending with Pirù's victory over the two devils.

In this last chapter, which is the only one in which there is – despite the various dealings with Death – a real descent into the Underworld, from a scenographic point of view, Brogginì prefers a portable stage in which the characters act in the shadow, without backdrops or showy props. It is a bare black box, from which the different characters appear from below: even during the descent into hell, Pirù does not seem to descend below the proscenium, but the devils appear from below with a spectacular effect in which a lot of smoke is involved.⁶ Only in the final scene does Pirù descend to save Eurydice. Hell is identified, however, not only through the use of smoke, but also through two simple symbolic objects: on one hand a bell, placed on the right, which represents the “bell of the Underworld”, and on the other, on the left, a pit. The gate to the Underworld is here interpreted literally as a door to which one must ring a bell to gain access, while the pit is the symbol par excellence of the descent into the Underworld.⁷

⁶Smoke has always been an element of puppet shows, especially when it is linked to magical illusions or the appearances of demons and devils. In some collections we can see historical examples of embryonic ‘smoke machines’ such as pipes or hand-made constructions made even from old DDT (para-dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) packaging.

⁷Among the wells made famous as a means of connection with the Afterlife is St Patrick's Well in Orvieto, whose origin comes from an Irish legend that identified the well as the preferred means of descent to the Underworld. Anyone who did not believe

Pirù goes to the Underworld on two occasions – the first time at the request of Orpheus who sends him with a false ransom to recover his wife Eurydice. The deceived demons become even more angry at Orpheus, threatening him that he will never see his wife again, which in reality will bring great happiness to the singer who can no longer stand his wife. The second time, Pirù goes with the servant Osvaldo and the two have to struggle against the devils Beelzebub and Ezekiel. They are two characters that fully reflect the classic Zannis of the *Commedia dell'Arte*: one cunning and clever, the other naive and foolish. Once Beelzebub has been killed, Pirù searches for the place where Eurydice has been hidden and for this reason he needs to physically descend below the stage. Brogginì's idea of the Underworld is not linked to the concept of death, but to a vision of the Afterlife similar to the medieval one, in which the souls of the damned are not inactive bodies, but animated and forced to perform actions.

The Spanish critic Toni Rumbau (2017) describes the performance in these terms:

. . . a comedy with Pirù as the main character, with a plot based on the abduction of Euridice and 'Orpheus' journey to hell, which is interspersed with situations that dismantle the characters and lead them to the comedy of the absurd and of misunderstandings, to arouse laughter, intrigue and surprise at the denouement. . . . Brogginì controls his puppets with skill and with splendid, confident voices. The demon appears with a spectacular flare, the result of the good use of a powerful fire-pipe, one of the most powerful we have ever seen, and the scenes are marked by simple objects, which allows the puppets to play with them. The puppeteer controls the timing with expertise and grabs the audience immediately, well provided with the corresponding effects and with a text full of gags and irony. A very well-written text by someone who knows the writing of the ancient "scripts". (Translation mine)

Where Rumbau uses the word "script", he means the entire creative process, not only the text, that Brogginì adopts for his representations. The artist from Varese begins, following a primordial idea, to work on the image by creating a storyboard in which he hypothesises some of the moments he wants to recreate on the stage. From these he will construct the characters and any essential sets. Once the props have been produced, he starts to create his own script, improvising the dialogues and collecting everything that can be derived from the improvised acting. The resulting text will only become stronger once it comes into contact with the audience.

in the afterlife could embark on a journey into the well, until they reached the deepest part where they would find the damned intent on atoning for their sins. The descent was not straightforward, and whoever undertook the journey would have to overcome a number of complex tests in succession.

According to Brogini, the myth of Orpheus is merely a pre-text for recounting the impossible idea of bringing a person back to life. In fact, the famous scene in which Orpheus has to walk back along the road from the Underworld without ever turning around or other key features of the myth, such as the poet's singing skills, are totally absent. The story is totally rewritten and hinges on the ambivalence between life and death, truth and fiction. The puppet is an inanimate being, a piece of wood, and yet, if endowed with life, is even capable of beating Death with a stick.

2. The South American Tradition: Shadow Theatre and *El Gran Baile*

Another of the leitmotifs linked to the world of the Underworld is the image of the ghost of a dead person haunting a living being, which finds its representation through the technique of shadow theatre. A shadow, being abstract and immaterial, represents, from a technical point of view, the double of something tangible.

All true effigies have a double, a shadowed self. And art fails the moment a sculptor believes that as he models he liberates a kind of shadow whose existence will unsettle him. Like all magic cultures displayed in appropriate hieroglyphics, true theatre has its own shadows. Furthermore, of all languages and all arts, it is the only one whose shadows have shattered their limitations . . . For theatre, just as for culture, the problem remains to designate and direct shadows. And theatre, not confined to any fixed language or form, destroys false shadows because of this, and prepares the way for another shadowed birth, uniting the true spectacle of life around it. (Artaud 1970, 6-7)

The souls of the deceased can be represented by the world of shadows, precisely because of their immateriality, and in some cases find in theatre the best artistic expression in which to represent their living memory. In the same way, the shadow is the most faithful representation of the disappearance of the body that can move into the Afterlife. One of the South American traditions known and exported all over the world is that of portable theatres specialising in shadow puppetry. These are small constructions in which the artist acts out a story using two-dimensional silhouettes and/or puppets that can be enjoyed by one or a maximum of two spectators at a time (in technical terms, this is referred to as *lambe lambe* format). The entire set is structured in such a way that the artist is autonomous in the performance. The spectator can watch the performance through a small hole or peephole in the structure, and he is also provided with headphones to listen to the background.

It is a unique show: the spectator is the only one who can watch the

performance that the artist creates on the spot exclusively for them. The simplicity of the story and the use of silhouettes make the show accessible to all kinds of audiences; indeed, it is a performance that we can easily find in street theatre festivals.

An example of *lambe lambe* theatre is *El Gran Baile* (2017) by the company Cosmonautas Teatro de Sombras,⁸ which tells the story of an old woman on the last day of her life. The silhouette of the old lady moves from one side of the room to the other, leaning on a chair with extreme difficulty; the day seems endless until death arrives, stylistically represented by a skull, a black cloak and a scythe, taking her to the Afterlife. It is an unusual Afterlife; the lady seems to have regained her strength and dances with Death (this time in the guise of *Catrina Mexicana*), her final ‘grand dance’ to the sound of Gloria Estefan’s *Conga*.

Unlike the other examples cited so far, the journey into hell proposed in this show has an extremely positive connotation: the Afterlife is a wonderful place to celebrate and be happy about the things achieved in life. This thought reflects the Mexican tradition of *Día de los Muertos*, the celebration in which the dead are remembered through a ceremony in which people dress up in bright and colourful clothes. Candles, flowers and food are prepared and left near the graves in honour of the dead.

This connection with the famous Mexican festival is confirmed by an interview I held with the artist Sonia Alejandra García, creator and performer of the show.⁹

El proceso creativo de El Gran Baile ha sido muy inconsciente y por lo tanto algo terapéutico . . . yo había estado viajando durante más de dos años por Latinoamérica, y en ese viaje me había encontrado con la muerte de diferentes formas. Había acompañado duelos, y había sido acompañada durante el duelo de mi maestro, aprendiendo con la ayuda de personas sabias, que el dolor puede transformarse. Había vivido por primera vez el día de muertos en Oaxaca, México, y había visto con mis propios ojos lo que mi abuela me contaba cuando yo era niña; las personas comían sobre las tumbas, cantaban, los niños jugaban. Pero no era solo eso, había entendido que la muerte es triste y alegre a la vez.

[The creative process of *El Gran Baile* has been very unconscious and there-

⁸Cosmonautas Teatro de Sombras is an independent company created in 2015 by Sonia Alejandra García (Buenos Aires, Argentina) currently based in Oaxaca, Mexico and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her work is based on shadow theatre in relation to the audience through different performances, both group performances and shows for a single spectator. See <https://sombrascosmonautas.webnode.mx/> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

⁹I would like to thank Sonia Alejandra García for the materials and information provided. These quotations are taken from a personal interview with her.

fore therapeutic . . . I had been travelling for more than two years in Latin America, and on that journey I had encountered death in different ways. I had accompanied bereavements, and I had been assisted in the grieving of my teacher, learning with the help of wise people, that pain can be transformed. I had experienced the Day of the Dead for the first time in Oaxaca, México, and I had seen with my own eyes what my grandmother had told me when I was a child; people eating on the graves, singing, children playing. But it was not only that, I had understood that death is both sad and joyful at the same time. (Translation mine)]

From the experience of watching this celebration, Sonia Alejandra García has rethought the concept of death, creating a performance that moves away from the idea of fear to embrace a totally positive attitude: “no puedo decir que había entendido algo, pero me había asomado a un mundo menos lógico y más espiritual, desde donde ver la muerte y tenerle menos miedo” (“I cannot say that I had understood anything, but I had looked out into a less logical and more spiritual world, from where I could see death and be less afraid of it”, translation mine.)

In this show we encounter two types of Death: the first is the classic personification of death with a black cloak and sickle, while the second takes up one of the most representative icons of Día de los Muertos, the *Catrina Mexicana*. This character originates from an illustration by José Guadalupe Posada (1851-1913) of the beginning of the twentieth century that literally depicts “an elegant skull”. Posada strongly criticised his own society, which tended to become more and more like Europeans, denying their own roots. He therefore drew a female skull surmounted by a large hat that reflected the style of the early twentieth century.

The theatre of the *Cosmonautas* company takes place in a small brown suitcase surmounted by the sign “Teatro”, which has an opening in the lower part into which the artist inserts the silhouettes she manoeuvres during the performance. There are four silhouettes: the old lady, the first death, the second death, and a chair. For Alejandra García, this last element, which might at first glance resemble a simple prop, has a unique power in representing “un lugar metafísico, el espíritu de la obra” (“a metaphysical place, the spirit of the work”, translation mine). Indeed, the first element that started the creative process of the show was the chair. Alejandra García imagined a chair that has been occupied by generations and generations.

In shadow theatre performances, light is the key element; in this case black and white dominate, becoming bright and colourful when the old lady finally reaches the Afterlife: red, orange, pink, a set of stroboscopic lights accompany the celebration that consecrates death. The spectators do not feel sadness, they do not feel that the journey to the Afterlife is a narrow one; on the contrary, they identify it as a pleasant place not to be afraid

of: “El Gran Baile habla de un tabú para nuestra sociedad, y encima lo desecraliza. La muerte está aquí entre nosotros y está sonando Gloria Estefan... ¿Bailamos?”. (“El Gran Baile deals with a taboo for our society, and on top of that, it desecrates it. Death is here among us and Gloria Estefan is playing... Shall we dance?”, translation mine).

3. New Infernal Visions: a Robotic Performance

The latest example of this journey into the Underworld is dedicated to a show that has a ‘talking title’: *Inferno* which premiered in Italy in 2015 during the Roma Europa Festival. The show conceived by Bill Vorn and Louis-Philippe Demers – two artists who work mainly with robotic elements – is inspired by different models of *Inferno*: on the one hand, Dante’s famous work, on the other, the Chinese Buddhist worldview behind the Singapore Haw Par theme park¹⁰ where the idea of the Ten Courts of Hell¹¹ has been physically realised.

Inferno is a participatory robotic performance, in which twenty-five spectators are invited to wear exoskeletons that descend from above, which will control the movements of the participants. These prostheses are placed on the performers’ upper limbs and back, effectively blocking the movement of this part of the body, which will be electronically controlled by the programmers Bill Vorn and Louis-Philippe Demers, who are positioned at a console at the centre of the stage.

In some descriptions of the performance, the constraint of the person’s movements is referred to as a punishment, like those imposed in Dante’s circles of Hell. The punishment differs according to the circle of Hell in which the spectators find themselves: at times they are able to move their limbs freely, at others they are blocked or manoeuvred into performing other actions.

Once the exoskeletons have been placed on the selected spectators, they are left free to experiment: the prostheses have lights that turn on and off, movements are allowed despite the fact that the equipment is heavy. But at one point the room is darkened, and electronic music sounds play along with flashes of light framing the protagonists on stage. The journey to the Underworld has begun, the programmers Vorn and Demers slowly accustom the actors’ bodies to the constraints, and metaphorically it seems as if they are descending Dante’s circles, step by step, as the body is asked to move

¹⁰A theme park devoted to Chinese mythology located in Singapore, designed in 1937 by Aw Boon Haw and his business partner Aw Boon Par.

¹¹A part of Haw Par Park where the horrible agonies of sinners in the Afterlife are depicted.

more and more. As long as the body is left free to move, the more daring try to keep in time with the techno music, which can become deafening, but the freedom is short-lived: the lights on the prostheses come back on and the automaton dance starts again.

The actors' gestures are the same, as in a perfect choreography, but these movements are imposed upon them and the feeling of the observer is that of watching damned bodies forced to perform specific sequences. The louder the music becomes, the more the participants' gestures can be amplified, when the lights on the prostheses turn on and they too become a rhythmic and choreographic score in the dark of the room.

The machine imposes a broken gesture, which is never fluid and takes up the sense of automation that is part of the collective imagination linked to the world of robots. The exoskeleton devised by Vorn and Demers has antecedents that can be traced back to the early twentieth century. As early as 1917, the inventor Leslie C. Kelley designed a kind of backpack to carry a steam engine on the back, and this prototype was the model for the first exoskeleton created in 1960 at the US Department of Defence (see Morbin 2015). The project was called Hardiman and was based on a hydraulic system that allowed its wearer to increase their strength. Aesthetically it is very similar to the one proposed by Vorn and Demers, but it had little success because the structure was very bulky and allowed slow and dangerous movements.

This type of exoskeleton can be considered as a wearable robot, precisely because it consists of an external structure that can be easily worn by a person. They are often used in the medical field for rehabilitation, assistance to the disabled or even some neuro-motor control studies. Vorn and Demers' project is directed towards the performance field, presenting exoskeletons, automata and other robotic forms in their performances.

The great power of *Inferno* lies in the creation of a double reality: on the one hand the twenty-five spectators manoeuvred by robotics, on the other an audience unable to move, watching human marionettes manipulated from above via cables by an invisible God.

The meaning of damnation and the concept of Hell are justified and reinforced by the fact that the remaining part of the audience knows the identity of the other participants, and they could also be part of that experiment. If we observe the performance with a neutral gaze, we might assume that those who are performing are professional dancers, but the additional value of the show is given by the fact that those coordinated and precise gestures are the result of the machine acting on them, dominating and manipulating them.

The artists themselves relate their performance to a different vision of the Afterlife than has always been portrayed. There are still the damned and sins to be atoned for, but we have to imagine the Underworld as some-

thing different and reflecting an Afterlife that also takes into account technology and the events of recent years. This is a vision that envisages and considers the Afterlife in the sense of a dimension “after the technological life”.

The unification of man and machine is, in a certain way, an expression of the punishment for the technological sins committed for the sake of progress. The more we blend with technology, the more it drives us through the inner circles of a state of loss. We want to exploit this theme to build the aesthetic concept of the work, not as just another version of Dante’s *Inferno*, but as a hypothetical answer to the afterlife (in the sense of “after the technological life”). (Demers and Vorn 2015)

The audience that does not act on stage turns into Dante and watches the damned being punished.

In this example it is the human being who is manipulated, the roles have reversed and it is the inanimate that manages the human being.

The person is forced to raise their arms in the air as a symbol of surrender, the lights go out and damnation seems to be at an end. This vision proposed by Vorn and Demers seems to take up the cultural trend linked to science fiction in which electronic manipulation subdues the human being. In the 1976 essay *Man, Android and Machine*, the writer Philip K. Dick – who more than anyone else has described the hells presented by technology – wrote the following:

We humans, the warm-faced and tender, with thoughtful eyes – we are perhaps the true machines. And those objective constructs, the natural objects around us, and especially the electronic hardware we build, the transmitters and microwave relay stations, the satellites, they may be cloaks for authentic living reality inasmuch as they may participate more fully and in a way obscured to us in the ultimate Mind. Perhaps we see not only a deforming veil, but backward. Perhaps the closest approximation to truth would be to say: “Everything is equally alive, equally free, equally sentient, because everything is not alive or half alive or dead, but rather lived through”. (quoted in Warrick 1984, 269).

Dick’s vision parallels what Grazioli expressed in the quotation cited at the beginning of this essay. The threshold between the living and the non-living becomes void if we take the assumption that any element can be crossed by life. The moment this happens, we are all living beings with the same characteristics: we are all manipulators or we are all manipulated.

Conclusion

This journey into the Underworld by means of some of the techniques of puppetry has shown how the journey was mainly characterised by two sequences: the crossing of the threshold and the arrival in the Afterlife. The moment of passage emerges as crucial: the crossing of a hypothetical frame that does not change the stage set-up but the psychological situation of the characters.

In the glove-puppet show with Pirù as the protagonist, we have two descents into the Underworld: the first is marked by an ‘apparent descent’ because the protagonist rings the bell, but in the next scene it is the devils who appear from below; the second is performed by Pirù himself who physically goes under the stage. The old lady in *Cosmonautas Teatro de Sombras* is the only one of the examples to evolve completely: her meeting with Death ratifies her rebirth in the Afterlife, and this is translated on stage by the transition from black and white to colour and joyful music. The infernal robotic version crosses the threshold of the Afterlife at the same moment in which the spectators equipped with an exoskeleton no longer have freedom of movement and they are chained to the gesture imposed by the machine. In all these cases, the change occurs in the moment when something that seemed familiar inadvertently becomes foreign, and this is indicated by the overt or metaphorical crossing of the threshold.

If we take up what was outlined by Freud in his famous essay on *Das Unheimliche* first published in *Imago* in 1919, among the factors that trigger the feeling of disorientation typical of the uncanny we find animism, omnipotence of thought and above all involuntary repetition, all elements that we can find in the examples given so far. Monica Cristini, in an essay related to the theme of the uncanny, clarifies that Freud:

highlights . . . the doubt that an inanimate being can be alive, which can arise in the face of wax figures, puppets and automata; the phenomenon of the double; the continuous recurrence of an event or action, a compulsion to repeat that is uncanny because of the perception of a non-domination of self; silence, darkness, solitude. (2018, 31, translation mine)

We find in all three examples the onset of doubt in the face of something unreal: the wooden puppet that becomes first flesh and then spirit during the descent into hell, the shadow of the old lady that is transformed into a soul, or the machine that from a simple creation of man becomes his manipulator. What the viewer perceives is a moment of disorientation that can become uncanny.

A good example is Masahiro Mori’s 1970 theory called *Uncanny Valley*, in which he investigated the feeling of empathy generated by the vision of

certain figures, both moving and stationary, on a sample of people. The characters chosen for the experiment were robots, puppets, anthropomorphic automatons and zombies. From this study he deduces that the feeling of pleasantness of the sample of people grows as the creatures' resemblance to the human figure increases, until the extreme realism creates an opposite reaction that oscillates between being disturbing and uncanny. This happens, for example, when confronted with the maximum realism represented by corpses and zombies, which are not automatons but dead bodies, while the uncanny ends when the sample observes representations of puppetry such as *bunraku*.

When we observe puppets and shadows acting as human beings we feel a sense of pleasantness, but when we see the machine dominating the human being and making them perform automatic gestures it is the theme of anguish that takes over. The journey to the Afterlife is a journey into the depths of human fears, and even from a dramatic and theatrical point of view we attempt to ward off this feeling by contrasting it (*Pirù, demoni e denari*), overcoming it (*El Gran Baile*) or confronting it with the Uncanny (*Inferno*).

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