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

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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Introduction

Outside the specialist area, the idea of puppet theatre is still quite widespread, at least in its most known typology in the western world (glove puppets and string puppets), as a form of theatre intended for an infantile public. To this vision, prospectively distorted, a number of considerations on an ontological and anthropological level may be opposed, which highlight the particular link that this genre of performance has with issues related to death, alongside the historical evidence that would easily demonstrate that this assumption is false.

First of all, on an ontological level, the puppet theatre is an art based on the apparent (but credible) animation of simulacra of humans and of other living beings, and therefore already belongs in itself to that psychological category of the *Unheimlich* (uncanny) of which, at the beginning of the last century, first Ernst Jentsch (1906) and then Sigmund Freud (1919), also made a fundamental category of aesthetic reception. The disturbing sensation of cognitive indeterminacy and consequent psychic discomfort that characterise the *Unheimlich* has, in fact, a fundamental root in what constitutes the soul of puppet theatre:

Among all the psychical 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 apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate. (Jentsch 1997, 12)

Statues, dolls, wax figures and other simulacra of the human are inevitably charged with this ambiguity, especially since popular beliefs of religious

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origin, which remain rooted in the unconscious of the rational mind, do not stop attributing to these anthropomorphic images the faculty of being haunted by supernatural entities, and in particular by the spirits of the dead. The condition of ambiguity between animate and inanimate is therefore also, and above all, a boundary condition between life and death, a boundary that reveals itself to be uncertain and violable.

The puppets' link to death is not simply due to their having no one to move them . . . in many of their earliest manifestations, and still in certain Asian traditions, in Japan or Java, puppets were brought to life precisely to provide homes for the souls of the dead; they served as a means to repair a loss of life or to keep ancestral spirits alive, to give them a way to speak to the living. The puppet might also channel the presence of demonic spirits, or act as vehicle to contain energies at once creative and destructive. Death is at work, in fact, in many origin stories for the puppet theatre. (Gross 2011, 22)

The puppeteer is thus presented as the symbolically re-actualised incarnation of one who gives life back to the dead, and holds the key to the door that connects the earthly world with the afterlife. This door is often crossed, in fact, both in the scripts of traditional puppet theatre as well as in modern authors' reinterpretations. Therefore, many heroes of traditional puppet theatre (from Harlequin to Pulcinella, from Kasperl to Punch) end up having a privileged relationship with the afterlife and its inhabitants, in particular with Death and the Devil. The puppets fight, sometimes with a sword, but more often with their slapstick, against these two incarnations of the underworld, in duels that can take place 'in the sunlight' (when it is the demons that make their appearance in the human world) or in hell (when it is the Pulcinella or the Kasperl on duty who are attracted to the depths of the underworld). It should be emphasised that it is almost always the puppet that prevails, managing to win not only against the Devil, but also against Death, who is at times forestalled, but at other times, paradoxically, killed. However, this does not necessarily mean a victory for good: on the contrary, the puppets, in their duel against evil entities, seem to be contaminated by them, assuming their unbridled propensity for evil and stealing their immortality.

This possibility of assimilation of the puppets to the infernal entities seems to be, however, a trait of affinity present in their own origins, on which folklore scholars have often insisted: noteworthy, for example, is the hypothesis of the connection of Harlequin with the king of hell Hellequin and his diabolical *mesnie* (gang), as well as with the Alichino included by Dante among the devils of Malebolge. Already Paolo Toschi, in his classic study on the folkloric origins of Italian theatre, fixed the origin of most of the masks shared by *commedia dell'arte* and puppet theatre in carnival rites in which the masks

(Arlecchino, Zanni or Pulcinella) had clear demonic and frightening traits:

we can believe without hesitation that the Zane has existed in northern Italy since ancient times as a carnival mask of infernal origin and of a burlesque character at the same time. The first *comici dell'arte* from northern Italy therefore took it from their Carnival. Finally, confirmation of his demonic character comes from the mask and clothes. The oldest Zanni iconography shows us that the leather masks . . . from the beginning were grotesque, even horrid and atrocious. (Toschi 1976, 210, translation mine)

Although sweetened over time, this demonic soul of the puppets is always ready to re-emerge, and in a more disturbing way the more the burlesque nature of the character is maintained. Besides, the grotesque to which the previous quotation refers is a trait that can be expressed much more freely and with more emphasis in the figures of the puppets than the *commedia dell'arte* performed by human actors, and that is why the demonic essence of the masks is expressed much more in the world of artificial actors than in that of real actors. This tendency, at least in Europe, has been expressed in particular in the context of glove puppets, both because they have a more grotesque appearance than string puppets and because they have a truly 'demon-possessed' rhythm and speed. Furthermore, their appearance on stage (and relative disappearance) from below confirms their symbolic link with the underworld, while string puppets, which are manoeuvred from above, have often been attributed a more angelic symbolic character (also, however, with strong disturbing potential).

The aspects mentioned so far also justify the propensity of the new experimental forms of puppet theatre developed in recent decades to address the issues of evil with a radicalism almost always unknown in the theatre of actors. As shows such as *Jerk* by Giselle Vienne highlights (see the article by Francesca Di Fazio in this issue), the 'antirealism' of this type of theatre allows us to cross borders of intolerability that 'normal' theatre cannot cross, at the same time conferring an unusual strength of truth to the themes and events treated. In these cases it is no longer necessary that, to be frightening, evil have supernatural connotations: when the Devil and Death turn out to be human, when hell becomes the earth we inhabit, when the force of evil transforms the victims' own life into an inanimate object, a broken toy, an entity that no longer belongs to life even if it does not yet belong to death (like, as in the performances by Giselle Vienne, in those on the Shoah analysed in the article by Plassard and Guidicelli) the puppet theatre confirms its extraordinary expressive potential in fathoming the darkest parts of the human being, of his inner hell.

The seven articles of this special section deal with this theme, sometimes favouring the historical dimension, and sometimes the theoretical one, or

the analytical one. Didier Plassard and Carole Guidicelli, in “Haunted Figures, Haunting Figures: Puppets and Marionettes as Testimonies of Liminal States”, analyse two different moments in the history of the relationship between puppets and the uncanny. The first is placed at the end of the nineteenth century and is exemplified through two texts for the puppet theatre by the Belgian symbolists Charles van Leberghe and Maurice Maeterlinck, where death is the protagonist, but without presenting itself in the traditional clothes welcomed by the nineteenth-century puppet theatre (a figure with a skull on its face and armed with a scythe): it is rather a widespread presence, the true substance of the drama, an invisible power that gradually invades the entire scene thanks to the atmosphere of threatening suspension that the liminality of puppet theatre makes possible. The second moment, closest to us, concerns the ability, which the contemporary puppet theatre demonstrates, to cross the territories of an apparently unspeakable evil, that of extreme violence and genocide, of the degradation and reification of humanity that no living actor could embody better than a puppet.

If death and hell, in the works examined by Plassard and Guidicelli, invade the territories of the human, the article by Francesca Cecconi instead takes us, literally, to hell, thanks to the journeys to the afterlife made by the protagonists of the three recent performances analysed by her, in the wake of the traditional *descensus ad inferos* of Pulcinella, Punch, Fagiolino etc. Between ritual and mythical reminiscences, references to the *commedia dell'arte* and contributions from new technologies, Cecconi's analysis is also interesting because it examines the theme in three different puppet theatre techniques: glove puppets, shadow theatre and robotic performance. It is particularly interesting, in the latter case, that the puppets are a certain number of spectators contained in a robotic exoskeleton that forces them to perform certain movements, placing them in the role of the damned of hell forced into the obsessive repetition of actions that are imposed on them by an external power.

Emily LeQuésne in her article “From the Grotto to the Grotesque: Puppets, Folklore and the Uncanny” frames her analysis, on the one hand exploring the beliefs linked to the animation of objects and in particular the simulacra of the human figure, whose friction with the rationalist attitude is at the basis of the sensation of the uncanny; on the other hand examining the aesthetic conception of the grotesque, which actually finds in the art of the puppets one of its privileged territories of expression, thanks to its tendency to excess or deformation, and to the propensity to simultaneously accept the dimension of the frightening and the comic, of the tragic and the burlesque. Meanwhile, the image of the ‘grotto’, to which the grotesque is etymologically linked, inevitably recalls the idea of the underground place where the soul descends, to be confined for eternity or to emerge victorious

over death.

Instead, Mara Theodoritsi's article "Literal and Metaphorical Puppets as Supernatural Figures: Echoes of Classical Greek Theatre in Cervantes's Fiction" focuses on a great author and his contribution to the puppet theatre, in a key that intends to highlight his relationship with magic and the marvellous: Miguel de Cervantes, with particular emphasis on the interlude "The Marvellous Puppet Show" and two episodes of *Don Quixote*. Not only the chivalrous theme, but a certain widespread 'interior iconography' leads to a spontaneous connection between *el ingenioso hidalgo* and the world of puppets, in particular the Sicilian *opera dei pupi*: the author hypothesises that Cervantes might have been able to personally see some prodromal form in Sicily (the current *pupi* tradition dates back to the nineteenth century); whether it is true or not, what seems more likely is the existence of a trans-cultural dimension of puppet theatre in the Mediterranean area that connected Italy to Spain and the dramaturgy of the puppets to the stories of the paladins. Moreover, Theodoritsi is interested in highlighting the relationship with magic, and therefore with the supernatural world, of the puppets: in the interlude of Cervantes, for example, the puppeteers Cianfraglia and Cirinola claim the magical power of the puppet show, making their audience believe that the wonderful apparitions of their theatre (actually non-existent) are invisible to Jews and illegitimate children, leading all spectators, fearful of being attributed to one of the two categories, to pretend to see what is not there. The demons, in this case, are not on the scene, but they are represented by the hypocrisy and repressed fears that the deception of Cianfraglia and Cirinola bring out in the soul of the spectators.

Manuela Mohr in her article "Rethinking the Vampire: the Fantastic on the Puppet Stage" examines the way in which the demonic and vampire themes present in Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* are scenically treated in a staging for puppets, analysing in detail the staging created by the Salzburger Puppentheater. Mohr highlights how these themes, and that of vampirism in particular, are not identifiable with individual figures in this show, but permeate the entire representation. Each of the demonic figures that appear in the libretto (Lindorf, Coppélius, Miracle, Dapertutto) also takes on vampire traits; in general, these figures are made more complex by the staging, which draws the boundaries between one and the other less clearly. Their uncanny dimension is also highlighted by the fact that the characters sometimes show themselves to be aware of their puppet nature, for example taking positions that are impossible for a living being or fearing that someone might unscrew their heads.

With the article "Death, the Devil and the Wife: *Danse Macabre* Motifs in Nineteenth-Century Puppetry, from Punch to Kasperl" by Jean Boutan, we enter the tradition of German puppets, which has the character of Kasperl

as its protagonist. The author, thanks to a careful survey of the dramaturgy for puppets of the nineteenth century, focusses on the similarity, as regards his relationship with Death and the Devil, between Kasperl and other comic characters of the puppet theatre, from the various servants of Don Juan (whose story has often been the subject of plays for puppets) to the English character of Punch. He also interprets this type of dramaturgy as a form of *danse macabre*, also on the basis of comparisons of an iconographic nature. Boutan's article makes the reversibility of Kasperl's character (and his analogues) clear with respect to diabolical figures: the puppet can show himself as bad like the Devil and Death (but also his Wife, often presented as a sort of devil) until it can be equated in all respects with a demonic entity.

Finally, the article by Francesca di Fazio "Figurations of Evil in Contemporary Puppet Theatre Dramaturgy" examines, starting from a vision of evil in art derived from Georges Bataille and from the category of *rire noire* (black laugh), four contemporary shows created by prominent personalities in the field of contemporary puppet theatre: Guido Ceronetti, Gigio Brunello, Gérard Lépinos (in this case, to be precise, we are talking about a text not staged) and Gisèle Vienne. These are four extraordinary interpretations of absolute evil, which in some cases assumes metaphysical connotations: whether it is a gruesome episode of cannibalism derived from a real news story or Harlequin's fall from a comic show into the abyss of Shakespearean *Macbeth*, the unstoppable chain of killings and the sequence of deaths into which a modern Polichinelle transforms the scene or the narration-representation of the heinous violence committed by a trio of serial-killers, the common denominator is the very particular expressive power that puppet theatre gives to these stories and these themes.

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