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► **To cite this version:**

Didier Plassard. Scenes of disquiet. Igor Tretinjak. Contemporary Puppetry and Criticism, Osijek : Academy of Arts and Culture, pp.19-27, 2022, 978-953-8181-55-9. hal-04456955

HAL Id: hal-04456955

<https://hal.science/hal-04456955v1>

Submitted on 19 Jun 2024

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Didier PLASSARD, « Scenes of disquiet », in Igor Tretinjak (dir.), *Contemporary Puppetry and Criticism*, Osijek : Academy of Arts and Culture, 2022, p. 19-27.

(English translation of Didier PLASSARD, « Les scènes de l'intranquillité », *Puck*, n° 20 (Humain / Non humain). Montpellier : L'Entretemps / Institut International de la Marionnette, juin 2014, p. 11-16.)

Scenes of Disquiet

Didier Plassard

Enter the effigies

On the path generally believed to be safe, followed by the man of the Age of Enlightenment and of Reason, there appear, suddenly coming out of obscurity and increasing in number, CLONES, MANNEQUINS, ROBOTS, HOMUNCULI – artificial creatures which are, each and every one of them, insults to the creations of NATURE and convey all the lowering, ALL the dreams of the humanity, death, horror and dread¹.

This is how the Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor, in his manifesto *Theatre of Death*, describes a large movement that, during the last third of the 18th century, brought out and made reappear from under the crust of classical culture a fantasy world thought to have been lost forever at the closure of the Middle Ages: lost or at least marginalised, ever since, in a space far from civilised art and literature. Vaucanson's or von Kempelen's automata, spectres and zombies from gothic novels, disturbing shadows and doubles pulling faces Romantic tales swarmed with, vampires haunting theatre stages of Europe², Robertson's phantasmagorias upsetting Parisian audiences ... although they officially celebrated Progress and Reason – did the French Revolution not dare try to impose the cult of the latter? – Voltaire's, Kant's and Hegel's contemporaries were fascinated by this interplay of lookalikes and simulacra, these alternative, « monsters » produced by « the sleep of Reason », offering an endless range of variations between things that are dead and alive, natural and simulated, human and nonhuman.

Similarly, nowadays there is another movement carrying novel « mixed presences³ » that invade broader and broader spaces of imagination and sensibility. These amount not only to insults to the creations of nature, but even much more to those of man, adorned with his ambitions of technical mastery and scientific rationality. Both screens and stages, as well as the virtual space of video games and, then, pages of novels or *fantasy* comics, abound in all the « lowering », all the « dreams », death, horror and dread, combining our explorations of science and technology, our investigations of unprecedented arrangements of real and virtual, and our utopian developments of commerce and communication, with creaking and limping, awkwardness and rictus, screams and defects of the most troubling and unsettling creatures, the living dead, avatars, androids, hybrids, clones, mutants. Thus the accumulation of knowledge and improvement of skills come along, in the layers of imagination, with a proliferation of fantastic beings that blur the dividing lines on which we construct the ordinary representations of what we are.

A double vision

The ancient art of puppetry, in this context of a generalised diffraction of the signs of the human condition as, on a more global level, of the category of living beings, has taken a renewed power, since it is woven right at the meeting place of biological and mechanical, of animate and inanimate, of human and nonhuman: those liminal zones where we are invited to project and recognize ourselves in what is radically other, whereas what we considered ourselves to be suddenly reveals an unexpected alterity. Even if the imaginary worlds that nourish the contemporary marionette stand apart from those virtual ones, overflowing with monstrous creatures, which are on the bill and are shown on large retailers' big displays and the screens beleaguering our everyday environment, yet a common sensibility, differently structured and steering another course, seems to unite them – at the very least, what unites them is the same questioning about the boundaries and prerogatives of man.

This common sensibility stems from the fact that the puppet, today less than ever, cannot be reduced to what people were sometimes ready to see in it: a miniaturised actor. And it is especially not a simple imitation of man any more, nor of an animal, nor of an imaginary being produced by an animated object; has it ever really been one? It rather brings together, in an ambivalent figure, the human and the nonhuman, the still world of things and the noisy one of the living. The opalisation phenomenon Henryk Jurkowski presented as a distinctive feature of the perception of the western puppet emerging with the 18th century⁴, has in fact always existed to a certain extent. By its nature, the theatre makes two images overlap mentally: one of the object perceived in its material reality, and another one representing the living being we project in it. The process mixes up their traits in a blurry, swaying figure, the one that Steve Tillis defines more correctly as a result of a kind of « double vision⁵ ».

Every puppet is in fact double: even in a totally realistic figure, the different size, the reduced limb and face mobility, the odd-sounding materials that make it up, or even the discrete presence of the puppeteer (indeed the only conscience of this presence, while it remains hidden), all this adds up to vivify a kind of materiality underneath its illusory life, a materiality that takes issue with it and deconstructs it. Between the object – the instrument of the theatrical play – and the appearance of a living creature we bestow on it there is always a gap, a fissure, that no lasting illusion can plug completely. Whatever the perimeters, the definitions and the respective roles we confer to the physical world and the imaginary one, the puppet, in a way, remains intrinsically fantastic: in an infinite mirage, it joins suspicion and belief, awareness of the reality of the tools implemented and desire to see another thing in it – a shiver in front of the sacred, joy of playing, taking pleasure in a fiction.

More and more complex and radical artistic strategies have been used to put this gap in the contemporary puppet theatre right. What wasn't but a crack in visualisation becomes a split; a divide and even – a gulf: between what is given to perceive and what is given to fathom or sense there's a founding dissemblance which maintains an incompatibility, a distance the spectator has to cross by way of her or his imagination and sensibility. She or he has to muster fictionalisation powers of a child (a child can invent a world in front of any object). The double vision does not

get absorbed in aesthetics of theatrical illusion; conversely, it is kept at a maximal deviation, using all of the resources offered by the choice and alteration of materials, volumes, weights, forms and dimensions, in order to assert the oddity of the appearance, its non-compliance to plausibility demands. The head is split up to the ears, the limbs are distorted in fantastic twists, the body unfolds or droops in shapeless heaps, in wobbly assemblies, in flimsy geometrical structures on occasion... Whether they display absolutely smooth or contorted faces, animal rumps or grotesque stomachs, an outline consisting of a few strokes or even the hyperrealist reproduction of a real person, the marionettes, with their stiffness resembling death and their sudden jolts, air glides, faltering walk and bizarre crawling, present the whole fluctuation range between recognition and discovery, between memory of common forms and the emergence of the unexpected. In both its material aspect and its movements, every animated image, in its own manner, shifts, redrafts and rewrites the contours of living things.

Signs inversion

Convincingly dominant on stages nowadays, the visible presence of the actor-puppeteer, who manipulates the figure i.e. the puppet or is its partner in play on the set, takes on new meanings in this regard, since it reveals to the spectator similarity alongside dissimilarity, a common man-like-us grappling with creatures smaller or larger than him... It puts on show shapeless or deformed, symbolic, schematic, caricatural, metamorphic apparitions... Whatever the role he takes on – a narrator, witness, accompanying presence, double, interlocutor, operator and so on, the appearance of a living ~~mouthpiece~~ player is an event, it proclaims an actual existence next to an appointed existence, a loan from the real world within the imaginary world constructed by play. Propelled to the marionette space, having brokered a place and a role for himself in a fiction he himself begot, the actor-puppeteer forms the visible benchmark on which we can measure the distance between the images and what they represent : he is a complete body that contrasts with animated logs, live flesh that reveals inert materials used, a familiar shape that underlines the oddness of the caricature or of the abstract form, a free intermediary who denounces enslavement to an exterior will.

And to all appearances, at least, it is true: because what is produced by the puppet and puppeteer, in his role as an active actor, entering together into the same visual field is definitely the opposite of what one would expect. For the animation to take place, that is to say for the puppet to seem to have been given an inner life and a will which belongs to it as its own, it is necessary to conceal and enshroud the manipulation. The artist delegates his capacity to represent a character to the object he manipulates. This transfer is accompanied by a focus shift, at the spectators' end, which induces a redistribution of symbolic tasks belonging, respectively, to the human and the nonhuman.

Whether he is only an instrumentalist, a quiet operator, all absorbed in serving the puppet, or whether he himself represents another character of the theatrical play, or whether he grafts parts of another creature on his body, a creature with which he is going to meld, the actor-puppeteer is there only for someone else, for himself or for a bit less than himself: a character, at most, that is to say an individualised image in any case, a woman or a man among so many others, « and who

is worth all of them and whom any of them is worth », we could add with Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Les Mots*. Permeated by voices and gestures he produces and slips, weighing his acting so that the artificial performer whom he animates or opposite whom he plays can actually attain the maximum effectiveness, the artist at least temporarily occupies the weakened part in the performing act, the periphery of the puppet theatre stage he is busy with.

Inversely, since it comes from another plane of reality, the object-puppet, in light of the fact that it gives us illusion of being alive, does not only take on the character it is supposed to personify. The focus of the attention of the public as well as of the puppeteer, it brims over the limits of the individuated figure to become, since its first movement, an allegory of human fate, a condensed image of our desires, experiences, fears and memories, whatever the nature of what it represents. All our destinies suddenly seem jeopardised through it: they get ejected out of our inner self and lodge themselves in an artefact.

It is about a reversal taking place during the head-to-head between the face of the puppeteer and the cardboard, latex, wood or foam head he is putting fake life into: the site of the human shifts from the living instrumentalist towards the puppet he twists around. A thing that arises from the world of inert objects is all of a sudden charged with humanity: even when not anthropomorphic, even when formed out of unrefined materials or of readily recognisable utensils, even when reduced to several rudely sketched lines, the marionette does not only lend itself to theatrical character play, but it is an emblematic representation of what founds the human being as well (first of all?).

A threshold figure

This is why it is so easy, by means of a marionette, to represent the limits and extremities of the human: either those which separate being from non-being (birth and death scenes, ghosts, dreams or memories), or those which keep society away from other living kingdoms or other components of the physical world. Puppet theatre, as has been long noted, is naturally metamorphic: its stage language is the one of *becoming-an-animal* or *becoming-a-thing*, that is of a surge we carry in ourselves – we could call this a development transforming a man into a non-human – as well as the one of *becoming-human* with regard to animals and objects. In it are tied together then undone the threads of our destiny, but those of our identity, too. If, on one hand, the puppet, like a new Janus with a double face, is a threshold figure, keeping an eye on the world of things it comes from and at the same time on the world of humans it creeps into⁶, on the other it keeps swivelling, forcing us to grasp, in the same mental space, what founds us and what threatens us.

Well, it is not about shapes: *becoming-inhuman* of a human being does not come down to the sheer comical side – be it the darkest of all – of a caricature; more than that, it opens out directly onto the memory of the most traumatising events of the last century (mass killings, world wars, deportations, extermination...) as well as onto the deepest fears of those who are just getting started. The bestiality of behaviour, the objectification of men and women, and similar are not just bad dreams, nor stylistic devices, but very real dangers which surround our lives. We have to

bear them in mind continuously. Inversely, *becoming-human* that concerns what is not human helps us remember the small number of feelings, values and essential gestures (affection, education, solidarity, emancipation...) that make life worth living and constitute the modest baggage we think we more or less universally share. Consequently, any motion done from outside humanity and directed towards this founding nucleus, where our representations of all things human condense, immediately becomes bearer of emotional impacts and potential meanings.

Beyond doubt, the puppet is today but a name given, on the theatre stage, to these motions of entering and exiting humanity, and that in a double sense – biological and moral one – of the term. Accordingly, it is profoundly disquieting.

¹ Tadeusz Kantor, « Le théâtre de la mort », *Le Théâtre de la mort*, texts collected by Denis Bablet, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1977, p. 216.

² See Nicola Pasqualicchio (dir.), *La meraviglia e la paura, Il fantastico nel teatro europeo (1750-1950)*, Rome, Bulzoni editore, 2013.

³ The name which Villiers de l'Isle-Adam uses for Hadaly-Sowana in his novel *L'Ève future* (*Œuvres complètes*, vol.1, Bibl. de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 833).

⁴ See Henryk Jurkowski, *Aspects of the Puppet Theatre*, London, Puppetry Centre Trust, 1988, p. 41.

⁵ See Steve Tillis, *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet*, Westport, Greenwood, 1992, pp. 67-76.

⁶ See Didier Plassard, « La marionnette aux postes-frontières de l'humain », *Registres*, n° 15, Paris, Presses de la Sorbonne nouvelle, November 2011 (pp. 103-108).