

## **A Trinity of Contrasts: Left Eye, Right Eye and The Mind's Eye. Phenomenology and Semiotics in Puppetry.**

The puppet can only ever be itself.

The actor is both the thing (a human) and the representation (the character). By contrast, the puppeteer is acting but not in the same way a human acts a character. The puppeteer is not the actor but the actor can be a puppeteer. Confusing.

Performed across the World and over thousands of years, people respond to puppets in a way that they do not to human performers. This response to puppetry can be an emotional, psychological or visceral experience. An exploration of the semiological and phenomenological responses to it opens up numerous questions for the practitioner of puppetry.

Henryk Jurkowski asserts that puppetry belongs in four different sign systems:

- “The puppet in the service of neighbour sign systems.”<sup>1</sup>

Historically puppetry was used as a metonym for either a human performer or as an illustration for a storyteller's art. Later, in the early puppet theatre, puppet semiology became focussed on the actual puppet itself. Therefore it has been read either as human theatre, as a picture or as a new theatrical style.



*Print depicting Samuel Foote's The Primitive Puppet Show, Haymarket Theatre, 15 February 1773, published in The Macaroni and Theatrical Magazine, February 1773. Museum no. S.1004-2010. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

<sup>1</sup> Jurkowski, H, *Transcodification of the sign systems of puppetry in Semiotica. Puppets, mask and Performing objects from semiotic perspectives.* Vol 47 1 of 4 (1983), 132.

- “The puppet in the sign system of the live theatre.”<sup>2</sup>

Again historically, puppets were literally standing in for human actors. In 17<sup>th</sup> century opera and stylised schematic candlelit performance of that era, it was often hard to tell if it was a human or a puppet performing. Puppet shows have also been interpretations of human plays for reasons of popularity, economy or censorship.

- “The sign system of the puppet theatre.”<sup>3</sup>

This explores the special features of puppets, things that can not be reproduced by humans. The sheer theatricality of puppetry. The puppet can only ever be itself. What Jurkowski terms, “opalescence of the puppet”<sup>4</sup> the double identity of the puppet; it’s inherent uncanny puppet-ness: it can only ever be itself coupled with the need to be manipulated by a human to give it life.

- “The atomization of all elements of the puppet theatre and its semiotic consequences.”<sup>5</sup>

This includes the separation of voice and action in puppetry as a defining characteristic, the establishing of relationships, scale and performance specific norms in each puppetry production.

Puppet theatre often assumes the spectator will be decoding at a deeper level than they perhaps would when watching a human performance. The co-creation of character happens through a reading and interpretation of theatrical semiotic signals by an audience. Within puppetry, the spectator understands the sign of breath to mean life, specific shapes to denote type of being and gestures similar to human or animal gestures to show intent. What the puppet theatre maker, writer or director intends, can often be presented in its clearest terms through a puppet. But, there will always be other interpretations. The audience will bring their own unintended perceptions and meanings to the experience. Alissa Melo suggests,

*“...the audience participant co-creates and completes the inner life of the puppet through their active participation, interpretation of events, and recognition of gesture, tone and atmosphere on stage. This co-creation shifts a puppet from a mere object to a character with possibility of interaction with others.”*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.134

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 139

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.141

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.142

<sup>6</sup> Alrutz, Listengarten and Van Duyn Wood (Ed.) *Playing with Theory in Theatre Practice*. (London: Palgrave. 2012),p.246.

In many puppetry traditions, the aesthetic appearance of the puppet is codified, for example British Punch and Judy.



*The same scene in two different Punch & Judy shows. UK 2000- 2010*

In contrast, contemporary puppet theatre makers perform abstract and unique shows with no preconceived or recognisable semiotic code. How theatrical signs and their meaning are interpreted by a director, a puppeteer or an audience will rely on those individuals. In theatre semiology, reader response theory is a major consideration of meaning. Each perception or experience depends on the theoretical framework and attitude the spectator is reading from, as well as their physical place in relation to the performance.

Pierce's semiotics assumes meaning is about context and relationship rather than a fixed and specific 'signified' meaning. Saussurian semiotics is more of a code and has it that the thing is not the sign and the sign is not the thing. Yet, puppets are the thing, the sign and the thing signified. This is an example of the three part Husserlian model employed as the Prague school model of theatre signs. An object such as a chair in use as a chair, can be identified semiotically in Saussurian terms as the signifier and the signified but the chair as a stage object can also take on referential semiology. The three part model says the chair is signifier, signified and referential when used for example, to represent a horse on stage.

In theatre, the phenomenological response is the feeling, the experience, and the perception of the world presented. Mark Fortier describes it thus,

*“Phenomenology is not concerned with the world as it exists in itself but with how the world appears (as phenomena) to the humans who encounter it... Phenomenology is concerned*

*with what it is like for human beings to be alive in the world around them and how they perceive the world.*”<sup>7</sup>

How does puppetry embody a phenomenological response? The uncanny feeling and visceral reaction many people have to puppetry is a phenomenological response. Phenomenology in theatre is about the ‘sensory effects of theatre’<sup>8</sup> or the “lived experience”<sup>9</sup> and it is the very uncanniness of puppets that can make the experience a visceral and emotional one. Experiencing the uncanny is a phenomenological response to puppetry.

In *Great Reckonings in little rooms. On the phenomenology of theatre*, Bert States discusses the phenomenology of puppetry, the human response to the experience of that which makes it puppetry and no other thing. The very thingness of it, “If an image, by definition, is a likeness or a representation of something, how can it be the thing itself?”<sup>10</sup> How can a puppet be both itself and a representation of itself? Surely, a puppet is inherently itself. States talks about the aesthetics/materials in and of puppetry, suggesting that: “A few sticks can become a character. A fork is an actor. Newspaper creates a scene of beauty.”<sup>11</sup> All these items are not materials that permanently become the puppet (work of art) but rather temporarily.



*Human Zoo Theatre Co, paper puppet 2013.*

The puppet can only ever be itself yet the feature signs of an object or perhaps an item of clothing, allow that object to be the sign and include: synecdoche, (a part that represents the entirety) metonym, (something closely associated with the concept/role/characteristic representing that character) mimicry, abstraction, differing size and scale.

Steve Tillis states that “Three types of signs make up or constitute the puppet: signs of design, of movement, and of speech.”<sup>12</sup> Within the sign system of speech, Tillis states, “The major variables within this sign-system are paralinguistic features, dialect/language, voice modification and the

<sup>7</sup> Fortier, Mark, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*. (London: Routledge, 1997), 38.

<sup>8</sup> Fortier, Mark, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*. (London: Routledge, 1997), 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>10</sup> States, B. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms. On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Tillis, Steve, *Towards an Aesthetic of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 7.

onstage presence or absence of the living speaker(s).” What does it say semiotically, to have ghost puppeteers on stage? Visible but non intrusive, perhaps clad all in black and with no reference to their presence? Green and Pepicello suggest this is the definition of puppetry performance,

*”...when human intervention takes the form of an actor or interlocutor it contributes to the flow of the performance in dramatically proscribed ways. However, if a human intervention takes the form of a visible, silent puppeteer who is not part of the drama, we must see this juxtaposition of illusion and reality as a semiotic relationship that speaks to the very nature of puppetry.”*<sup>13</sup>

This onstage contrast between the puppeteer as always visible or as hidden away throws up questions for the puppet theatre maker that explore semiotics and the notion of whether the puppet manipulator is also an actor. Who will the audience be taking their semiotic clues from? Only the puppet or the puppet and sometimes the operator? Steve Tillis asks, “who is the actor...the puppet or the operator?...we will be identifying the actor as either the site of signification or the producer of signification, but not necessarily as both.”<sup>14</sup> He goes onto state,

*“...if we accept that puppet performance is drama, it follows that the actor is the person who produces the signs of dramatic character, regardless of where those signs are sited.”*<sup>15</sup>

Is a puppeteer an actor? Is the puppeteer acting if there is no dialogue or if the performance is post dramatic in structure? What then are the differences between acting a character and acting for/as/with a puppet? I prefer to refer to the person operating the puppet and performing character through that puppet as a puppeteer. An actor is a human performing a character. The puppeteer is throwing their performance in the sense that a ventriloquist throws their voice to inhabit the doll. That is not to say that the puppeteer isn't acting, it is a deliberate, contrasting and different way of acting and as such I call these roles by different names.

I think it is possible to identify the puppet as the site of signification whilst simultaneously reading the operator as the producer of signification. This simultaneous reading is what States calls binocular vision,

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<sup>13</sup> Green, Thomas A & Pepicello WJ, Semiotic relationships in the puppet play. In *Semiotica. Puppets, mask and Performing objects from semiotic perspectives*. Vol 47 1 of 4 (1983),157.

<sup>14</sup> Tillis, Steve, The actor occluded: Puppet theatre and acting theory. *Theatre topics*. Vol. 6.(Johns Hopkins University press. 1996),3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*4.

*"If we think of semiotics and phenomenology as modes of seeing, we might say they constitute a kind of binocular vision: one eye enables us to see the World phenomenally: the other eye enables us to see it significantly."*<sup>16</sup>

This contrast is one of the defining characteristics of puppetry and why a spectator of puppet theatre can experience it intellectually as well as aesthetically, viscerally and phenomenally.

Puppeteers go out of their way to play with the suspension of disbelief and toying with meta-theatricality for reasons of performivity is an expected element of a puppet show for most spectators. By contrast, with so many influences and different semiological systems, semiology within puppet theatre can't be universal in meaning or interpretation. One can explore and question what an audience might perceive and interpret, and thereby try to use the system of signs that best helps to communicate the desired meaning, but we can't possibly know for sure the numerous different interpretations present in the minds of a group of people. Binocular vision can contrast with reader response, if that reader diminishes the art of puppetry to the realm of "just kids stuff". Phenomenology as a personal response contrasts with semiotic reading of codified puppet character or type. The visible puppeteer as producer of signification contrasts with the invisible puppeteer presenting the puppet as solely the site of signification.

The puppet, the puppeteer and the actor all contribute to images that could be said to metaphorically enter through the left eye for phenomenological response, the right eye for a semiological response and viscerally through the mind's eye. A trinity of contrasts.

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<sup>16</sup>States, O. Bert, *Great Reckonings in little rooms. On the phenomenology of theatre.* (Berkeley: University of California Press.1985), 8.

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