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Puppet theatre

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Otakar Zich

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The Psychology of Puppet Theatre

Of all the arts that represent humans, *acting* is the only one that uses for that process a material identical to its object.[1] Sculpture represents the material human in stone or metal; paintings use canvas and colours that capture the human's visual aspect; finally, poetry describes the human in words, and it is up to the reader to create the corresponding picture in their imagination. Only acting presents humans by means of humans – live humans, that is. An actor is naturally not identically coterminous with the dramatic character they are representing, but their dress and their mask [or mien] attempt to delude us into believing that such is the case; and although we never forget that the character we are seeing on stage is an actor rather than, say, Othello, the visual aspect and the acting seduce us into seeing Othello. If we compare this actor performing Othello witha painting representing Othello, we may clearly see how much greater the theatrical illusion is to that of the painting. The theatre, in using live people, thus achieves the greatest illusion of all the arts, and this quality may explain its tendency towards artistic – and occasionally even *un*-artistic – Naturalism.

There is only one genre of theatre art – a small one, though of great interest – in which the situation is different: puppet theatre. Here, dramatic characters are represented not by live people but by *puppets*, usually made of wood – which is to say of dead matter, just like in sculptures. However, puppets differ from sculptures *substantively* in that they speak and

move (I disregard their use of costumes, which is only an insignificant difference). It is no obstacle that they do not speak themselves but are spoken for by their operators, because the auditory impression is identical to that in live actors' theatre. The optical impression is, however, more precarious: we see not only that the puppets are small (which does not actually need to be the case), but also that they move rather imperfectly. They not only lack all the fine-motor movements of the human body, they also lack in particular that which interests us most in live actors' theatre: facial expressions (which are used by human actors to convey dramatic characters' mental states). The live actors' theatre has, nevertheless, not always been like that: in Classical Greek drama, for instance, actors' faces were concealed by rigid masks, and the impression of the performance – given the large distance of the spectators from the stage – was surely quite similar to that which pertains in puppet theatre nowadays. However, that was long ago and my aim is the art of today.

Let us analyse psychologically the impression of the illusion produced by puppet theatre as opposed to that of the more common theatre of live actors. In live actors' theatre, our *perceptive* [*názorný*], i.e. sensory impression is integral; what we can hear and see tells us directly: yes, this is, for example, a king. Our awareness that it is actually *not* a king but an actor (Mr X) is entirely theoretical. The controversy, a logical controversy over the apparent opposition inherent in a statement such as: 'this is a king, and this is not a king', would therefore be one between what we see (and hear) and what we know [i.e. between sensory perception, and cognition]; but, given that while we are enjoying a performance we give ourselves over predominantly to perceptive impressions and our theoretical knowing is side-lined, crouching in the corner of our consciousness, our *overall* impression [in actors' theatre] is non-controversial. With puppet theatre, however, this is different. Here the controversy is not only between what we see, and what we know, but also between what we see, and that which, again, we see. The controversy [of puppet theatre] is thus in the realm of perception itself: according to the presence of movement and speech we have a live person before us; according to other [equally sensorial] signs, we have un-live matter, a puppet. Naturally, even when enjoying puppet theatre, we leave all of our more theoretical awareness aside. However, that does not remove the controversy; it merely means that in choosing to suppress our more abstract awareness, we remove a theoretical, logical controversy that would otherwise be unsurpassable (just as in the case of live actors' theatre [in which we suppress the ultimate irreconcilability of actor and character]); but there is still a perceptive, aesthetic controversy that luckily can be resolved. The reason [for this possible resolution] lies in the fact that the controversy exists in the *dual conception* of what we perceive: puppets may be either taken for live people, or as un-live puppets. The solution therefore lies in the fact that we take them in *only one way* of the two – which leaves us with a choice between two possibilities:

1. Either we take puppets as puppets (i.e. we stress their un-live qualities and their materiality). In this case, the physical puppet is something real for us, and we take it with sincerity. In such a case, however, we cannot take equally seriously their speech

and movements, in brief their 'manifestations of life'; we thus find them *comical* or *grotesque*. The fact that puppets are tiny and are partially rigid (in their faces, in their bodies) and that their movements are correspondingly clumsy (they are quite literally 'wooden'), in such cases contributes to the comedy of the impression. This is not a crude type of ridiculousness, but merely a mild form of humour that these little figures affect us with, particularly given that they behave seemingly like live people. We take them for puppets but they want us to take them for people, which will surely put us into a good mood! Everyone knows that puppets have such an effect.

The second option is:

2. 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 *uncanny* effect on us. If they had real human size and their facial expressions were as perfect as can be, the sensation created in such a conception could accordingly be one of terror.

In presenting just these two options, I am deliberately leaving aside the case of the panopticon [i.e. seeing both possibilities simultaneously], wishing to remain in the artistic spheres [of theatre practice and live audience perception]. Legends and literature can provide examples of matter similar to puppets brought to life: such as the Commendatore's statue (in *Don Juan*), or the Golem. Everyone will accept that these fantasies have much more terrible effects than, for instance, the notion of the resuscitated dead, since this is a case of something wholly unnatural, namely life brought into non-living, inorganic matter, whereas the latter case is life brought back to matter that once used to be alive. Nevertheless, I believe that if our puppets were the size of people, it would bring a feeling of awkwardness; however, the mere diminution of their size prevents this completely, even in the second mode of perception described here, which gives them only a serious sense of uncanniness.

Two Styles of Puppet Theatre

Our puppet theatre has grown out of a folk tradition. Just as in other disciplines of folk arts, the intelligentsia took over the popular heritage at the point at which the people started to abandon it. Puppet theatre has been recognised as a distinctive artistic discipline, priceless in aesthetic education and particularly orientated towards children.

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However, at the point at which puppet theatre turns from folklore towards an artificial form, it comes within the remit of advanced (developed) art. This process is identical to that which took place with other folk arts, such as the ballad, the fairy tale and others: they *developed* to become artificial forms. Our puppet theatre is currently at the outset of this development.

From this perspective, it is necessary to heed the efforts [currently being made] to make puppet theatre stylised in a visual way. Are these efforts fully justified and is the issue merely how to stylise? Folk puppet theatre is already stylised in a particular way, which leaves two options: either folk stylisation is retained, or the theatre is stylised in a modern way (i.e. in the sense of our contemporary visual arts). We have learnt from the history of Czech poetry and music that the former attitude, proposing to retain a folk style and justifying it either nationally or patriotically means artistically impotent conservatism. Practitioners of our modern visual arts, which constitute a fully developed branch of the arts, have an undeniable right to stylise puppet theatre in their own way – even more: the executing of this right should be seen, at least partially, as the *development* of puppet theatre, as I have suggested above.

However, once it comes to the execution of this right, difficulties appear that seem almost insurmountable. The reason is that puppets and their stage (the stylisation of which is the aim of current practitioners) are not something perpetually self-sufficient, but rather they are there to be *played* with. Notwithstanding this fact, theatre plays for puppets have not yet extricated themselves from the folk circumstances from which they have emerged. There are certain traditional types of 'dramatic characters' that the modern visual stylisation would be unable to tolerate: it suffices to give Kašpárek[2] as an example. A Kašpárek stylised in the spirit of modern visual arts would be an utterly alien character, incompatible with the Kašpárek of our plays. The same is true – though not so apparently – for the other characters of our puppet plays. It would therefore seem that the idea of artistic stylisation of our puppets should be abandoned for the time being – at least until we have another type of puppet play than the current ones. If we consider that new puppet plays – which emerge organically – are composed with a view to the existing puppets, it transpires that we are spinning in a vicious circle.

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2   Kašpárek (probably from the German Kasperle) is a character almost certainly derived from German language puppet tradition, via a comic character brought to the puppet-play scene by Austrian puppeteer Johann Joseph Laroche (1735–1806) at the end of the eighteenth century. Kašpárek has analogues in several European puppet traditions, including Mr. Punch in the English tradition (for which the Czech tradition is a clear antecedent). The Czech version and 'Czech-ness' of this character was consolidated by means of his use by Matěj Kopecký (1775–1847) during the Czech National Revival. Kašpárek aims to maintain contact with the audience; he often enters into the story and responds to immediate audience behaviour, thereby acting as a bridging character between the on-stage puppet action (and the dramaturgically contained world of the puppets) and the world of the human beings in the auditorium. Kašpárek thus plays an important role in the interpretation and clarification for audiences of action that transpires on stage, and he has become a symbol of the cheerful and clever hero who is able to handle any situation.

Abroad, namely in France, where the tradition of not only dramatic plays but of puppet plays is much older, there are dramatic texts for puppets of another kind, however rare: it would be enough to recall the puppet plays of Maeterlinck.[3] In such cases, it instantly becomes clear that these plays cannot be produced with existing puppets without artistic damage. Maeterlinck's mood is wholly different – enigmatic, or even terrifying – whereas our [Czech] puppets are humoristic. This recognition offers us a glimpse of a way of extricating ourselves from the vicious circle, and of resolving the issue of stylisation in puppet theatre.

[The answer lies in the fact that] it is not one single stylisation of puppet theatre that is needed but a *dual* one. The two stylisations are completely different with no possibility of a median compromise, since the duality is psychologically based on the *dual aesthetic perception* of the puppet stage as it has been outlined in the first part of this essay. From this dual perception of puppets, we may define both the modes of their visual stylisation as heterogeneous and mutually incompatible. Consequently, we may delineate two groups of plays that can be performed by puppet theatre.

The first mode of stylisation will in principle bring us nothing new but it will *accurately* determine the visual category into which the stylisation belongs – which is also surely beneficial. We have established that in the former case we perceive puppets as un-live matter; their 'manifestations of life' do not have a serious effect on us, but rather achieve a comical, grotesque one. The stylisation corresponding to this perception accordingly belongs to the discipline of visual comedy; it is, in brief, *a visual caricature*. This says everything to the visual artist; it is obvious that the issue cannot be the mere and gross ridiculousness of the puppets, such as a stupid expression on the face etc., but rather it is a matter of artistic values. Caricature means exaggerating certain characteristic features typical of the caricatured person; the exaggeration is not random but rather it is visually logical. The caricature of puppets as 'theatre types' is therefore based on characteristic features of certain human types, that is, not caricatures of individual persons, but rather of typical (or generic) ones – caricatures of human types. It is also essential to realise the limits of such caricature, which are determined by the fact that a puppet is an actor

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3   The three marionette plays in question are: *Interior*, *The Death of Tintagiles*, and *Alladine and Palomides*, which were all written as part of Maeterlinck's sub-project of the Symbolist movement: 'Static Drama. Static Drama was a form of performance born of the Belgian dramatist's belief that 'the stage is a place where works of art are extinguished. [...] Poems die when living people get into them' ('Drama – Static and Anarchistic', *The New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1903). Maeterlinck explained his ideas on Static Drama in detail in his essay 'The Tragic in Daily Life', which appeared in *The Treasure of the Humble* (*Le Trésor des humbles*, Paris, 1896). For Maeterlinck, puppets made an ideal vehicle for the performance of his plays because, in his opinion actors were to speak and move as if pushed and pulled by external forces, with fate as puppeteer. They were not to allow the stress of their inner emotions to compel their movements and, even without puppet theatre, Maeterlinck often continued to refer to his casts of characters as 'marionettes' – a move also made by the practitioner and theorist Edward Gordon Craig (see, in particular, 'The Actor and the Über-Marionette' (1908), in Edward Gordon Craig. *On Movement and Dance.* Edited by Arnold Rood London. Dance Books, 1978).

whose function is to represent a dramatic character; the visual artist is thus not as free here as s/he might be in a purely visual caricature – and the stylisation must not be exaggerated to the extent that the puppet would cease to function as an onstage 'character'. This fact rules out a geometrical caricature, which, in visual arts such as graphic design, is perfectly possible.

Our folk puppets certainly had natures derived from caricature; but it was a rather fortuitous form of caricature caused by the primitiveness of the techniques that were used to make them [rather than from any deliberate attempt at distortion or travesty]. The issue here is one concerning the manner in which one creates caricatures consciously, in such a way that they have visual artistic value. A successful and very lucky start in our country was made by Aleš's puppets.[4] My preceding argument suggests that this path has been lit well and should not be abandoned, but rather followed; further development is very well possible – either by the individual conceptions of new artists, or by multiplying the number of current puppet types. This multiplication of types necessarily relates to an extension of the current repertoire of plays – and it has to be admitted that in this respect we have thus far made very little progress beyond folk plays. With only a few exceptions, which have successfully redeployed the folk style, the remainder of our new scripted literature for puppets is weak artistically and especially dramatically. Compensation for and supplementation of this deficiency must therefore be sought in translations of foreign puppet plays, some of which are truly valuable. Nevertheless, it would still be possible to extend the range of these plays even further, with the consequence that these would not be plays for just children but for the general public. What I have in mind is a range of plays out of which puppet theatre has actually developed as a specific discipline. It is a continuous performance tradition from Greek comedy, through Roman and medieval drama, right up until deep into the modern era. Of these comedies, which mostly hail from the Romance nations, the majority have not survived [in textual form], since they were generally improvised (in performative forms such as the Italian *commedia dell'arte*), but what is available forms a large enough body. Even Molière has some plays – such as *The Impostures of Scapin* (*Les Fourberies de Scapin*) – that are essentially a French '*farce*'. To give an example of older plays, let me name for instance *La Farce de Maître Pierre Pathelin* [*ca.*1456–1460]. Even Plautus's comedies could be successfully produced on the puppet stage – and I do not hesitate to voice my view

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4   Mikoláš Aleš (1852–1913) was a leading Czech painter. Based on his illustrations and with his consent, the sculptor Josef Šejnost modelled a series of marionettes (36cm in height) for the Czech Union of the Friends of Puppet Theatre (*Český svaz přátel loutkového divadla*); these marionettes became the first serially produced marionettes on the Czech market and gained immense popularity. A new series (25cm in height) was created by Karel Kobrle (see Jaroslav Blecha. Loutky, dramatika a praxe českého rodinného loutkového divadla [The marionettes, plays and practice of the Czech family marionette theatre]. *Loutkář* 53 (2003): 6: 248). See also Joseph Brandesky's essay in this volume and Jaroslav Blecha's essay 'The History and Scenographic Influence of Czech Family Marionette Theatres' in Christian M. Billing and Pavel Drábek (eds.). *Czech Stage Art and Stage Design*, a special issue of *Theatralia* 15 (2011): 1: 114–46, namely 132–4.

that this stage, rather than our live actors' theatre, would bear well the Classical comedies of Aristophanes. That would however be aimed at a narrower, literary-educated audience. Still, the experiment would be surely interesting even if only for the visual artists involved, who could be solving conceptions of new dramatic types in the sense of visual caricature (as in the other instances named above).

The second mode of stylisation is capable of creating a new type of puppet theatre on the basis of serious visual arts. My analysis above has shown that in this case we perceive the live manifestations of puppets with the same seriousness as certain typical shows. We realise simultaneously that puppets are no more than non-living matter, but this circumstance retreats into the background of our consciousness. If that were not the case (i.e. if the awareness of the puppets' inanimate form were too obtrusive) it could bring, as suggested above, a sensation of terror or repulsion. If the awareness of the puppets' lack of life retreats – their small size is a favourable condition [for such a hierarchisation within spectators' perceptions] – then this problem becomes merely the sensation of something mysterious; puppets are for us some kind of uncanny, almost supernatural beings. The visual stylisation of puppets must accordingly follow this tendency towards *dematerialisation* of the puppet, and that process can be achieved by counter-realistic means. This means that puppets become mere symbols of personalities, and yet again these are not conceived of as individuals but rather as types – which is in this case in agreement with an anti-Realist direction of stylisation. If in our first case the puppet was *a visual artistic caricature*, in this second case it is *a visual artistic symbol of a typical dramatic persona*.

It is obvious that remarkable opportunities in this field could be offered to the endeavours of modern visual arts that require the artefact – in opposition to naturalistic impressionism – to be created according to the autonomous order of a purely visually artistic kind. At the same time, it has to be emphasised – and even more than in the preceding case – that the stylisation of puppets as dramatic characters is limited by certain boundaries. The puppet is not only a self-sufficient visual artefact, such as a statue. After all, even in the visual arts proper, the level of stylisation is limited by the choice of the subject: extreme geometrical stylisation – the well-known lines and circles – is overly forceful in a nude, for instance, and wholly impossible in a portrait. With puppets, the level of stylisation has to be limited even more: these are dramatic characters performing on stage and they have to be perceived on stage as dramatic characters. It is obvious that the stage itself (the wings, the proscenium) may be highly stylised in this case; however a sense of unity has to be retained between the creation of the stage and the creation of the puppets.

I am of the opinion that designing such a 'symbolic puppet stage' – as I would like to call it – would be rewarding task for our young visual artists. However, they would need to rely on concrete plays that could be performed on such a stage. Surely we could name

as examples the plays of Maeterlinck, or of dramatists similar to him; still, if there were no others, it would be a very narrow and one-sided group – and the repertoire of this theatre could be much broader and more varied. Let me add a few words on this point to outline a firm direction for the visual artistic work. The symbolic puppet stage could perform all dramas that were conceived for stages other than our *current* theatre stage (i.e. [not for a realistic live actors' stage, but] for stages generally much more stylised); these are dramatic texts that are as a result highly stylised themselves in ways that are alien to our present theatrical sensibilities. Such plays either do not find their use on our stage, or they are, often ruthlessly, modernised. This is true first of all of Classical Greek tragedy. I have previously observed that the spectator's impression of Classical Greek theatre could be compared more profitably to that of puppet theatre than to live actors' theatre – since the faces of Greek actors were hidden under a rigid mask and their physical gesticulation from a distance asserted itself only in its gross features. Naturally, we must not think of the usual puppet theatre – that is the theatre of our first type – but rather the theatre of the second type, with puppets appropriately stylised. Also the Classical stage was supremely simple, in fact merely, architectonic. It is particularly important that the speech of the Classical Greek actors was highly stylised, so it was radically different from the stage speech of modern actors and came close to our poetry *recitation* (unless it was singing, the melodies of which we do not know). In puppet theatre, in which it is operators who speak for their wooden actors, such recitation can be realised very well. The significance of this fact would be that the purely poetic beauties of the work would assert themselves; these dominate over the dramatic moments in Classical Greek tragedy. It is well known that in our theatre, poetic beauties, especially the finest ones, suffer. This circumstance would also be of consequence for other groups of plays that our symbolic stage would enable for performance. These are *oriental dramas*, especially Indian as well as Chinese and Japanese. Such forms become almost un-dramatic when performed on our stages, since they were intended for a totally different stage, a wholly ideal one. And yet oriental dramas abound in great poetic beauties that our symbolic puppet stage would certainly bring to the fore. The third large group of significance in such a repertoire would be *neo-classical French tragedies* of the seventeenth century (Corneille, Racine); these were also composed for a totally different stage than ours and they are poetically strictly stylised, requiring more of a recitative style. The fourth group finally would be *modern Symbolist plays*, such as the above-mentioned plays of Maeterlinck – and not just those that their author explicitly intended for puppet theatre. Into this group could also be added *sacred* plays, especially of the Spanish Golden Age (Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca). There is no doubt that many a modern 'chamber drama' that cannot be produced on the great stage either at all, or at least with difficulties and little effect, would surprisingly find their use on our puppet stage – unless such plays are too dominated by epic elements, which can hardly be tolerated on stage, in which case it is best to read them in the form of a dramatic poem, at home, in a book.

As transpires from this brief overview, the repertoire of plays would be sufficiently large and would have specific sub-groups that could proffer to the imagination of the visual artist rewarding and fruitful motifs.[5] The only drawback is that someone needs to take the initiative of creating such a 'symbolic puppet stage' that would not be exclusively shut to children, but would be predominantly intended for adults. Thanks to such a medium, audiences could gain access to the treasures of precious poetic as well as dramatic beauties that we would otherwise never experience on stage, unless exceptionally, and in forms altered and modernised by the virtue of our modern stage, which is more or less alien to them. Generally experiments of this sort [in the live actors' theatre] are expensive because they frequently end in apparent failure; the puppet stage, with its incomparably smaller expense, would therefore be able to afford such attempts much more easily and, I should think, with a much greater likelihood of success.

Perhaps also one of our poets, a true poet, could be found who would be inspired by this new puppet stage to write a valuable modern play, stylised in such a way as to be bespoke for this 'symbolic stage'. In such a space, the artistic visual aspects of creation could also induce creative acts of poetry that would in turn enrich our dramatic literature with new and original works of art.

Translated by Pavel Drábek

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5   However, it would be wrong if the visual artist thought that they *must* stylise, for instance, the characters of the classical Greek dramas after ancient Greek statues, or Indian after the Indian. The characters of these plays are in the end panhuman and the artist has total freedom in creating them – as long as they are artistic.