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Western European avant-garde theatre and puppetry : a reappraisal

Western European Avant-garde Theatre and Puppetry: A Reappraisal

Didier Plassard

Abstract

The article addresses the question of how much the historical avant-gardes introduced radical breaks in artistic practice and can be considered as forerunners of what would happen after them. If we consider the case study of puppetry, where no homogenous tradition nor specific institutions existed at the beginning of the 20th century, we can observe that the experiments of the Cubist, Futurist, or Dadaist poets and painters in that field did not radically differ from those of the Symbolist and Modernist circles a few decades before. In many cases the avant-garde artists, when working on puppet and marionette theatre projects, were surprisingly open to collaborate with traditional puppeteers, as well as with theatre and art institutions. The dramaturgy often followed time-honoured patterns, with the prevalence of parody and folk or fairy tales as major sources of inspiration, a focus on artistic circles and children as audiences, and a composition of the show that respected the habits of mainstream marionette theatres. Original subjects are mainly to be found in Pierre Albert-Birot's, Fortunato Depero's, and Kurt Schwitters' plays for marionettes and shadows.

Yet, because many of the avant-garde artists experimenting in puppetry were painters and sculptors, they introduced a major change in the composition of puppet plays: visual transformations of the figures marked the steps of the action, alternating biomorphic and non-figurative outlines, images of living beings and of mechanical objects. Thus, they put on stage a drama that was going much further than the conditions of the productions, or the dramaturgy they were using, could do: the drama of entering into a new mechanical age, where the place for mankind had to be re-invented.

Key words

avant-garde, puppetry, innovation, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, popular theatre, children theatre

L{sc A} F{sc EMME} {sc AUX} {sc CHIFFRES}: [...] Allons!

L{sc E} V{sc EILLEUR}: Où donc?

L{sc A} F{sc EMME} {sc AUX} {sc CHIFFRES}: Précéder tout ce qui suit.[1]

(NOVARINA 1989: 10)

The context: a fragmented landscape

Words, as we all can experience, may easily become traps. When speaking of the 'avant-garde', even if – thanks to the passage of time – we are fully aware that we only mean the works, the experiments, and the manifestoes produced by the artists of the historical avant-gardes during the first decades of the 20th century, this simple word, '*avant*' (before), induces us to reflect primarily on what would come *after*. That is to say, we emphasise the breaking with institutional art, we focus on radical innovation, we look for the impact on the following generations. Avant-garde artists, we continue to believe, should always be forerunners. Thus, we remain prisoners of a linear representation of historical time, and we may forget not only the diversity of artistic strategies in a single period, but also the complexity of the creative act.

In this regard, the puppet, marionette, and shadow theatre productions or projects of the Western European historical avant-gardes appear as a significative field for investigation, because puppetry is at the same time a collective work involving various artistic contributions (drama, acting, sculpture, painting, lighting, music, etc.), each with its own logic and its own historical development, and a living performance to be produced in a certain context and addressed to a certain audience. Therefore, these productions and these projects do not belong to only one domain and have to be examined from different viewpoints. In addition, if we look more precisely at its general situation in the first decades of the 20th century, we can notice that puppetry in Western Europe was not only a disregarded branch of the performing arts, deprived of any institutional support: it also underwent a harsh identity crisis, being split into three different factions. When working on puppet and marionette theatre projects, the artists of the avant-gardes had to choose one of these factions, and the choices they made were as such significant (see PLASSARD 1992).

The first faction, and the most important one, gathered the regional and popular traditions of puppet and marionette theatre which had flourished during the 19th century. By the turn of the century, some of these traditional shows, like that of the French Polichinelle, had already disappeared, and a large number of the remaining ones were falling apart, having to compete with new kinds of popular entertainment: café-concert, music-hall, or cinema. Most of these traditions, like those of *Guignol* in France and *Kasperl* in German-speaking countries, had turned into an entertainment for children.

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1   T{sc HE} W{sc OMAN} {sc WITH} N{sc UMBERS}: [...] Let us go!
    T{sc HE} W{sc ATCHMAN}: Where to?
    T{sc HE} W{sc OMAN} {sc WITH} N{sc UMBERS}: To precede all that follows (NOVARINA 1989: 10).
Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of the sources are mine.

They also had lost their original roots in the lower social classes: audiences and puppeteers were now coming from the middle-class. They were more educated, more integrated into the society, more demanding also – with the result that their shows had become more respectable and strongly moralising.

A second faction of puppetry was that of travelling marionette theatres which used to tour across the country with a very diverse set of shows: melodramas, farces, songs and dances, transformation figures, adaptations of successful novels or fairy tales, etc. While most of these fairground theatres, facing more and more financial difficulties, had to give up their activities in the early years of the 20ᵗʰ century, or show movies instead of marionette plays, a few companies would move up a gear with more ambitious shows which toured internationally, performing in large venues and in music-halls. This was the case, for example, for Thomas Holden's Fantoccini, at the end of the 19ᵗʰ century, or for Vittorio Podrecca's Teatro dei Piccoli [Theatre of the Little Ones] in the 1920s and the 1930s; both of them presenting adaptations of fairy tales and miniatures of circus or music-hall acts with clowns, dancers, musicians, acrobats, etc.

The third faction consisted of the multiple performances of puppet, marionette, and shadow theatre given in literary and artistic circles since the second half of the 19ᵗʰ century: sometimes as a private entertainment, in artists' studios and high society salons; sometimes as a public show, in cabarets or in little venues. Despite the fact that many of these productions were performed only a few times, the growing interest of artists for puppetry at the turn of the century had already given birth to lasting ventures: Henri Rivière's shadow theatre at the Cabaret du Chat-Noir in Paris, Paul Brann's Marionettentheater Münchner Künstler [Marionette-Theatre of Munich Artists] in Munich, or Richard Teschner's Goldener Schrein [Golden Shrine] in Vienna, for example.

Thus, the question I would like to raise now can be very easily summarised: in this fragmented artistic landscape – where 'puppetry' could refer to such different activities as moralising children's theatre, relics of popular and regional farces, miniature parodies of concerts, circus and music-hall performances, fascinating experiments with lights, colours, forms and poetry, – how did the artists of Western European historical avant-gardes position themselves when experimenting with puppet and marionette theatre? Between the last surviving branches of century-long traditions and the new shoots that would become the major artistic expression of the following generations, what choice did they make? Or, to formulate it in a more brutal way: how much did the avant-gardes take a step forward, '*en avant*', in the history of puppetry?

The production: artists and practitioners

To begin with, we must make an observation: although a dominant characteristic of Futurism, Dadaism, and all the European 'isms' during that period was to break the links with traditional practitioners and well-established structures (such as publishing houses, art galleries, academies, institutional theatres, and companies), the artists of

the historical avant-gardes, in their relations with the puppet and marionette scene, were far more eclectic and open to close collaborations.

Already Alfred Jarry, the inspiration for many avant-gardes, was fascinated by the popular traditions of puppet and marionette theatres. The title of his first published work, in 1893, was 'Guignol' (JARRY 1972), and it began with the description of a puppet-booth where Ubu was making a disconcerting apparition. There was no breakup, for Jarry, between the traditional and the artistic forms of puppetry, between his experiments with Claude Terrasse at the Théâtre des Pantins, in 1898, and the 'Pouchinels', the popular rod-marionettes of the Théâtre Toone in Brussels: he praised both of them in his writings. In 1901 he wrote a reduction of *Ubu Roi* [King Ubu], *Ubu sur la butte* [Ubu on the Butte] (JARRY 1972: 629–653), with an original prologue between the Director and Guignol that no 'Guignolist' would have disapproved of. The comical effects in this prologue, the dialogue with the audience, and the staff fighting were indeed similar to those we can find in the major part of the traditional repertoire for Guignol (FOURNEL 1975).

Ubu sur la butte was performed at the Théâtre des Gueules de bois [Theatre of the Wooden Gobs] of the Cabaret des 4-z'Arts, in Montmartre, 'with participation of the famous ANATOLE of the Champs-Élysées', as Jarry (1972: 629) underlined it on the book cover. In fact, Émile Labelle, the Guignolist who, after Anatole Cressigny's death in 1893, took over his booth on the Champs-Élysées as well as the name 'Anatole' as a trademark, was one of the puppeteers working at the Théâtre des Gueules de bois. For the performances of *Ubu sur la butte*, he had to manipulate the puppet of the Général Lascy, and Jarry was so pleased by this collaboration with a traditional master-puppeteer that he wrote some extra lines for him.[2]

If we get closer to the time of the historical avant-gardes, we can notice that Guillaume Apollinaire was also interested in traditional puppet theatre: as a young man, during the winter of 1899, he had seen some Guignol shows in Lyon, and ten years later, in one of his chronicles for the newspaper *L'Intransigeant*, he welcomed the town's decision to erect a memorial to Laurent Mourguet, the Guignol's inventor. Yet, at the same time, he lamented the decaying of the tradition:

> Il faut ajouter, d'ailleurs, que le Guignol lyonnais est en décadence: la parodie, la chanson de café-concert l'ont envahi…
> Hélas! tout s'en va! Les marionnettes elles-mêmes[3]… (APOLLINAIRE 1910: 2)

During WWI, at the same time as he was promoting the 'Esprit nouveau', writing the *Calligrammes* and *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* [The Breasts of Tiresias], Apollinaire attended the shows of the Guignol de la Guerre [War Guignol], a puppet-booth in the Parc des

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2   'le Général Lascy fut joué (en un rôle allongé et même spécialement construit) par le célèbre Anatole!' [Général Lascy was performed (in a role made longer and especially elaborate) by the famous Anatole!] (JARRY 1903).

3   We must add that the Guignol of Lyon is declining: parody and café-concert song invaded it… Alas! Everything has gone! Even the puppets… (APOLLINAIRE 1910: 2).

Buttes-Chaumont where the puppeteer Gaston Cony, in front of children and family audiences, performed a chauvinist and warmongering repertoire (PLASSARD 2015). Just as President Raymond Poincaré, Albert I, the King of Belgium, and many senior officials, intellectuals, or writers, Apollinaire entered the patronising committee of Nos marionnettes, Gaston Cony's charity for puppeteers. In October 1917, he was asked by Cony to write a short dialogue or a monologue for puppets (CONY 1917: 37). The poet did not follow through with this proposal, but a few months before, in April, he had written the poem 'Guignol poilu' [Hairy Guignol] that Cony, after Apollinaire's death in November 1918 (APOLLINAIRE 1918), would publish in his monthly journal *Artistique-Revue* in memory of him: these eight quatrains of rhymed octosyllabic verses surely fitted with Gaston Cony's conservative taste, but they sounded so academic that the poem was discarded by the editor of Apollinaire's complete works for the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade... (APOLLINAIRE 1956).

Pierre Albert-Birot, Apollinaire's friend and the editor of *SIC*, the journal where Cubists, Futurists, and Dadaists published their works between 1916 and 1919, was one of the most prolific dramatists of the historical avant-gardes. In 1918, as he was writing his puppet drama *Matoum et Tévibar* (ALBERT-BIROT 1977), he was contacted by Gaston Cony. The puppeteer initially expressed his interest for Pierre Albert-Birot's play but would eventually give up on his plans to stage it: most probably, he was afraid of its Futurist aesthetics, with moving settings, light and sound effects, collage of texts, and transforming puppets. The visual dynamism required by the play largely exceeded the technical possibilities of a traditional puppet booth like Cony's one, and of his artistic skills as well. Nonetheless, in 1921, the puppeteer commissioned Pierre Albert-Birot for a short play to be included in *Bébé-Revue*, a little variety show he was preparing for the Guignol de la Guerre with a repertoire of popular *chansonniers* such as Théodore Botrel, Gaston Couté, or Xavier Privas, all to be performed by puppets (see ALBERT-BIROT and PLASSARD 1988).

In the play he wrote for Cony, *Scène birotechnique* (ALBERT-BIROT 1921), Pierre Albert-Birot took over the two protagonists of *Matoum et Tévibar*: the false poet Tévibar killing everybody, and the true poet Matoum bringing back to life Tévibar's victims. These victims were not the King of Mars and his subjects anymore, as in the comedy *Matoum et Tévibar*, but the traditional characters of the Parisian repertoire: Guignol, Madelon, Gnafron, Nicolas, and the Devil. Only one 'special effect' was used: an inflatable and deflatable head for Tévibar, made out of a toy balloon. The contrast between Gaston Cony's poor construction for the two modern figures and his accurate carving of wooden heads, as we can see in the photographs published by the newspaper *Comoedia* (OUDOT 1921: 1), reveals the difficulty of this collaboration between a traditional Guignolist and an avant-garde poet – a difficulty that the context of the production would only increase: neither the family audiences of the Guignol de la Guerre, nor the spectators drained by the names of some famous *chansonniers* were prepared to see *Scène birotechnique*, a show that a journalist declared to be hardly understandable by children (OUDOT 1921).

Pierre Albert-Birot would fortunately experience much more successful collaborations with professional puppeteers. The most significative of them was for the Théâtre des Marionnettes au Théâtre de l'Étoile, where his rewriting of *Le Petit Poucet* [Little Thumb] premiered in January 1924 (ALBERT-BIROT 1980a). The Théâtre de l'Étoile, a newly built venue on the Champs-Élysées, performed Sacha Guitry's comedy *L'Arrache-coeur* [The Heart-Wrencher] for a couple of months, but, three times a week, it also hosted the afternoon performances of the Théâtre des Marionnettes. Run by the Dadaist poet Philippe Soupault and the Romanian journalist and puppeteer Henri Gad, this marionette theatre was born out of an audacious project:

> The Puppet Theatre Circle, which will give performances, is made up of a group of 'avant-garde' authors, writers and painters whose aim is to renew the genre and give performances of a new artistic formula, while preserving the classic, grotesque, and synthetic character of their miniature actors.[4] (RIGAUD 1923: 2)

Germaine de Surville, Pierre Albert-Birot's second wife, composed the music, the Hungarian painter Ladislas Medgyès designed the sets and the marionettes, and the fashion designer Paul Poiret created their costumes. Another painter, Jean Lurçat, designed the marionettes for the second part of the show: some circus acts inspired by the Fratellini brothers. As for the 'classical nature' of the show, it was guaranteed by the construction of the marionettes, made by the Ateliers d'Art Russe,[5] famous for their Russian dolls – but above all by the puppeteers: these were the famous Pajot-Walton's, descendants of the oldest French dynasty of travelling artists, and masters of string-marionette manipulation.

Beginning in the sky, like *Faust*, and ending with Petit Poucet being killed by his jealous brothers, then rising up to the clouds, Pierre Albert-Birot's rewriting of the story is clearly a very original one that bears the stamp of modernist poetics; but the programme of the afternoon performance – in the first part, the adaptation of a fairy tale, in the second part a series of circus acts – followed exactly the traditional structure of marionette shows, as they had been performed by travelling theatres in the 19th century. In a sense, the Théâtre des Marionnettes du Théâtre de l'Étoile gave the Walton's an opportunity to restore the dynamics of their former performances, whereas they were usually forced, after WWI, to give up long plays and to organise their show with concatenating short parodies of music-hall or circus acts.

Henri Gad and Philippe Soupault, after *Le Petit Poucet*, planned to perform Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi* and Guillaume Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, thus reinforcing the modernist dimension of their Théâtre des Marionnettes, but these projects did

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4   'Le Cercle du Théâtre des Marionnettes qui donnera des représentations est formé d'un groupe d'auteurs, d'écrivains et de peintres "d'avant-garde" qui ont pour dessein de renouveler le genre et de donner des spectacles d'une formule d'art nouvelle, tout en conservant à leurs acteurs en miniature leur caractère classique, à la fois grotesque et synthétique' (RIGAUD 1923).

5   The Ateliers d'Art Russe [Russian Art Workshops] were a charity founded by Alma de Poliakoff to help Russian immigrant artists after the October Revolution; their head offices were also on the Champs-Elysées.

not materialise and the Théâtre de l'Étoile was soon transformed into a dance hall. Being their first and only show, *Le Petit Poucet* may be considered a much-restrained example of avant-garde theatre: not because of Pierre Albert-Birot's dramaturgy, which is truly innovative, but because of the very context of the production – the adaptation of a well-known fairy tale, performed for family audiences by the most famous French puppeteers of their time, in a show that repeated old-fashioned programmes.

Many experiments with puppet and marionette theatre were made in equally contrasting contexts, outside of the proper avant-garde events and networks, with the collaboration of artists who stood much closer to the institutions. In September 1918, the Dadaist production of *König Hirsch* [The Stag King], in Zürich, with Sophie Taeuber's marionettes, was performed as part of an exhibition of the Kunstgewerbeschule [School of Applied Arts] where she was employed as a teacher, and whose director Alfred Altherr was very critical towards Dada.[6] Staged by Werner Wolff, the play, an adaptation of Carlo Gozzi's *fiaba*, had been written by René Morax, a Swiss dramatist famous for his historical and rural dramas, and who was not at all an 'avant-garde' playwright.

One year later, in Berlin, Walter Mehring's Dadaist parody of the *Oresteia*, *Einfach klassisch!* [Simply classical!] (MEHRING 1919), had been commissioned by the stage-director Max Reinhardt for the opening of the Cabaret Schall und Rauch [Sound and Smoke], in the basement of his Grosses Schauspielhaus, and the play was performed as a part of a typical programme for literary cabarets, between songs and monologues. The marionettes had been built by George Grosz and John Heartfield, and Waldemar Hecker, a former member of the Munich cabaret Die elf Scharfrichter [The Eleven Executioners] and a film director, staged it – with the results that on the very next day, the three Dadaists published in the newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt* a letter of protest against what they called a 'falsification of Dadaist principles' (PLASSARD 1992: 174).

To give one more example, in Italy, we can see that Fortunato Depero's *Balli plastici* [Plastic Ballets], was staged and performed in Vittorio Podrecca's Teatro dei Piccoli in 1918, but not during one of the many tumultuous Futurist evenings. The Teatro dei Piccoli in Rome, still in the first years of its existence,[7] was already famous for its beautiful staging and its high literary and musical standards, showcased by productions of Pergolesi's or Donizetti's works (*La Serva padrona*, *L'Elisir d'amore*), to name but a few. Shortly after its opening in 1914, it was invited to give a performance at the Palazzo del Quirinale, in front of King Vittorio Emanuele III. By the end of WWI, the marionettes were animated by Ottorino Gorno Dall'Acqua's company, a famous family of traditional Venetian puppeteers. It was also a theatre for children, where the young spectators were asked, after the performance, to write their impressions of the show and to deposit them in a special box. Depero's *Balli plastici* could profit, therefore, from the technical knowledge of traditional marionette masters, from the sophisticated

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6   Sophie Taeuber wore a mask while dancing in the Dada evenings, because she did not want to be recognised and denounced to the school directory.

7   The first international tours began in 1921.

atmosphere of an art theatre, and from the benevolent attention of music and theatre critics – with the result that one of these critics considered the show as standing 'between the old and the new, in a middle-aged critical status, somewhat hybrid in which, on one side, they open a slit to the future, while on the other side they leave open a slit for the past'[8] (ANTONUCCI 1975: 126).

The dramaturgy: taking over traditional frames

Looking at the dramaturgy of the plays written for puppets or marionettes by the artists of the historical avant-garde gives evidence of the same intricacy between tradition and innovation that we can observe when analysing the conditions of their production. Since the middle of the 19th century, the poets and writers who dedicated some of their works to the puppet and marionette stage had often developed a nostalgic approach to this art. They considered it a testimony of a vanishing (or already vanished) popular theatre and tended to reinforce its older characteristics: the use of characters from the *commedia dell'arte*, the farcical traits, or a naïve religiosity, for example. This attitude was still, during the first half of the 20th century, held by such prominent figures as Federico García Lorca or Michel de Ghelderode, who used puppet theatre to keep alive characters, narratives, and fictional worlds that the actor's theatre had since a long time given up on.

Even if free from any hint of nostalgia, many productions of the avant-gardes were following the same patterns. For instance, when parodying for the Cabaret Schall und Rauch, under the Grosses Schauspielhaus, the *Oresteia* that Max Reinhardt was producing, Walter Mehring established with *Einfach klassisch!* the same use of puppet theatre as the Guignolists in Lyon did, when they presented *Guignol et Juliette*, *Guignol Tell*, or *Madelon Lescaut*; or as the authors of the Parisian Théâtres de la Foire did, two centuries before, when they mocked the tragedies of the Théâtre Français or Jean-Baptiste Lully's operas. Resuming the traditions of parodic puppet theatre, the Dadaist rewriting of Aeschylus' trilogy appealed to the most proven techniques of this genre: concentration, modernisation, and trivialisation. Electra became a member of the Salvation Army, Agamemnon the Emperor Wilhelm II, Cassandra a film-starlet, Orestes an officer of the Freikorps, and Aegisthus was killed by the explosion of a hand-grenade in a water-closet.

König Hirsch performed by the Schweizerisches Marionettentheater, with Sophie Taeuber's marionettes and stage design, was also a parody, but with no reference to a contemporaneous staging of Carlo Gozzi's original play. René Morax and Werner Wolff's rewriting was a charge against the vogue for psychoanalysis in Zurich, due to Carl Gustav Jung's international celebrity. Among the main characters of the parody were Freud Analytikus, his assistant Doctor Oedipus Komplex, and the fairy Urlibido.

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8   'Tra il vecchio e il nuovo, in uno stato critico medioevale, alquanto ibrido, per cui mentre da un lato schiudono uno spiraglio all'avvenire, dall'altro lasciano aperto uno spiraglio del passato' (ANTONUCCI 1975: 126).

The oriental land of Serendip with the forest of Roncislappe, where the action took place in Gozzi's *fiaba*, had given room to the Burghölzli: the wooded hill, in Zurich, where the Psychiatrische Universitätsklinik in which Jung began his career had been built.

If theatre parody had a long tradition on puppet and marionette stages, it was certainly not the dominant literary genre in their traditional performances at the beginning of the 20th century. Since they had become an art form primarily for children, an important part of their repertoire came from folk and fairy tales: above all those of Charles Perrault, of the brother Grimm, or the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Even if he made a kind of tragedy of it, Pierre Albert-Birot's rewriting of the story of Little Thumb, which I have already mentioned, only followed the major trend of his time. Another of Albert-Birot's works for marionettes – he wanted them to be of human size, and even tried to build them in 1925 – was a theatrical adaptation of Charles Perrault's tale of Bluebeard, *Barbe-Bleue*, '*deuxième drame tragique*' (ALBERT-BIROT 1980b). In Italy, during WWI, the Futurist Enrico Prampolini designed puppets for a production of *Cenerentola*, with the music of Massenet, at the Teatro dei Piccoli. In the Netherlands, the Neo-Plasticist painter Vilmos Huszár, a co-founder of De Stijl, designed figurative and stylised shadow figurines for an adaptation of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* performed in Rotterdam in 1926 (EX and HOEK 1985: 107).

At the Bauhaus, when Oskar Schlemmer in 1923 commissioned Kurt Schmidt to prepare a marionette-show, he recommended him to use a manuscript he had found in the National Library in Weimar: it was a 19th century marionette play adapted from a folk-tale of Thuringia, *Der Schmied von Apolda* [The Blacksmith of Apolda]. After a while, as the preparatory work had already been done, and the marionette of the blacksmith been built, Kurt Schmidt considered that the geometrical and mechanical forms he was developing for the marionette design did not fit with the folk tale; thus, he asked Schlemmer, who agreed, to use instead of *Der Schmied von Apolda* an argument from the *One Thousand and One Nights*, and he chose the tale of the Little Hunchback. All the marionettes were built, but the show was not performed, giving room to the choreography of *Der Mann am Schaltbrett* [The Man at the Control Panel], another Kurt Schmidt's production with the *Bühnenwerkstatt* [Stage Workshop] of the Bauhaus, but performed by actors (see SCHMIDT 1972).

We could find many other examples of productions and projects with puppets and marionettes, born in the context of the historical avant-gardes, that drew their inspiration either from the traditions of puppetry, or from its dominant genres in their time. When the Futurist painters Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov designed figurines and sets for Julie Sazonowa's Théâtre des Petits Comédiens de Bois [Theatre of the Little Wooden Comedians], the programme of the show resembled much of those mainstream marionette theatres like the already mentioned Teatro dei Piccoli: after a Scarlatti's *Suite*, played by a marionette orchestra, the audience could see a folkloric scene with Russian dances, *Une fête au village*, then *Livietta e Traccolo*, an intermezzo composed by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi in 1734, a modern scene, *Trois heures du matin* [Three O'clock in the Morning], picturing a night-dancing, and a series of circus and

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music-hall acts. In addition, Natalia Goncharova's marionettes, with their minutely detailed costumes and heads, bore no traces of her Futurist works: they were very delicate miniatures of human performers (see SAZONOWA 1926), as in most of marionette shows of the time.

Following a completely different tradition, not that of a '*théâtre d'art*' with marionettes, but that of the popular entertainment for children, Pierre Albert-Birot, as his actor Roger Roussot decided to become a puppeteer, wrote for him a 'guignolade', *Guignol veut s'enrichir*, which was performed in 1932 at the Akademia Raymond Duncan: a short comedy where we can recognise all the components of the traditional repertoire (see ALBERT-BIROT 1980c).

Recalling these links between the productions of the avant-gardes and the traditions of puppet and marionette theatre should not give the impression that the artists of the historical avant-gardes, when exploring the expressive potential of the animated objects, forgot their claims for absolute novelty. But if we look closer at their dramaturgy, only very few examples of really innovative plays can be found, with original plots and scenic invention: among them should be mentioned Albert-Birot's 'comic dramas' *Matoum et Tévibar* and *Matoum en Matoumoisie* (ALBERT-BIROT 1979), with the fights between the 'True Poet' and the 'Fake Poet', but also his puppet-play *Les Mains* [The Hands] (also called *Quand on est trois* [When They are Three]), where Arlequin, Pierrot, and the Devil, quarrelling like children, in an unexpected way become the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (ALBERT-BIROT 1980d). Written in 1917, before the production of his *Balli Plastici*, Fortunato Depero's four sketches for marionettes *Suicidi e omicidi acrobatici*, *Avventura elettrica*, *Ladro automatico*, and *Sicuro* (DEPERO 1970a, b, c, d), with their accumulation of gags, are also excellent examples of an original dramaturgy for puppets, that recently the American stage director Dan Hurlin adapted under the title *Demolishing Everything with Amazing Speed*. And of course, Kurt Schwitters' *Schattenspiel* [Shadow Play], which was staged in 1927 by Jiří Frejka in the Divadlo Dada in Prague, should be added to this list (see SCHWITTERS 1977). All these plays make use of a modern humour, accumulating nonsensical events, changing identities, and visual transformations of sets and characters.

In Schwitters' play, for example, five characters (Laura, Elena, Friedrich, Lime, Emil) fell in love, chased each other and/or killed or dismembered each other: but Lime was only the shadow of Emil, and Laura was born out of the mind of Friedrich. After a mix-up of absurd transformations, Emil, Lime, and Elena embrace each other, while Friedrich goes out, holding Laura's foot in his hand – the only part he could save from her...

The stage design: where innovation begins

Being a minoritised branch of the performing arts, linked with popular traditions and with childhood, puppetry could certainly not appear to the historical avant-gardes as an institution to be attacked, ridiculed, and dismantled as they would the academies,

the museums, the official exhibitions, the critics, or the fashionable circles. It could not represent any form of power, nor of 'sclerotic' tradition. Rather puppetry was considered, like circus, music-hall, or cinema, as an alternative and also a weapon against rigidified artistic expressions. Therefore, in the fragmented landscape described before, the avant-garde did not introduce any major breaking with the experiments of the previous generations: just as their predecessors had, they produced a miniaturised '*théâtre d'art*' with satirical parodies, adaptations of fairy tales, circus or music-hall acts, and some farcical sketches. Sometime collaborating with traditional puppeteers, more often perpetuating the presence of puppetry in literary and artistic circles that Symbolists and Modernists had initiated a few decades before, the avant-gardes apparently did not take any major step forward in the history of this art as they did in the other arts.

But looking more closely at their projects and their productions, we can identify where the threshold has to be placed: whereas most Symbolist and Modernist artists experimenting with puppets and marionettes (or dreaming to experiment with them, as Maurice Maeterlinck did) were poets and writers, the protagonists of the avant-garde operating in the field mainly came from the visual arts. A major characteristic of the historical avant-gardes was, as we all know, the interdisciplinary composition of the groups, and also the interdisciplinary work of each individual artist. This is doubtless the reason why the most innovative aspects of their shows and projects for the puppet and marionettes theatres have to be found in their stage and character's design, and moreover in the way this design was closely interrelated with the narrative structure.

Some visual effects, taken from the scenic vocabulary of traditional shows, were transformed according to new patterns through exaggeration and systematic iterations. One example of these effects was the deconstruction and reconstruction of segmented bodies, a well-known act performed by transformation figures in fairground theatres, such as silhouettes with changing heads, animals and objects turning into men or women, puppets with telescopic necks, or dancing skeletons losing their skull and their bones. These quick metamorphoses, belonging to a rich tradition that ran from magic lantern shows to Georges Méliès' or Émile Cohl's trick-films, emphasised the mechanical aspect of the puppet or the marionette as an animated object. They were widely taken over for example in Pierre Albert-Birot's 'comic dramas' *Matoum et Tévibar* and *Matoum en Matoumoisie*, in Fortunato Depero's scripts for marionettes, or in Schwitters' *Schattenspiel*. In all these plays, the visual transformations of the characters mark the narrative articulations of the plot. These scenic events became as important as the dialogue, and sometimes they replaced it, changing the drama into something that the critics of that time used to call a 'pantomime' and the artists a 'ballet', but that we can today define as a visual theatre.

Even Kurt Schmidt's *Mechanisches Ballett* at the Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer' *Figurales Kabinett*, Vilmos Huszár's *Mechanisch Beeldend Tooneel* [Mechanical Visual Theatre], or the latter's *Mechano-Dansers* could be considered as avant-gardist variations of transformation figures: just as those of the fairground theatres, they were bi-dimensional articulated forms. With very few movements, their narrative potential was extremely

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limited: if we take the examples of Kurt Schmidt's *Ballett* or Huszár's *Mechano-Dansers*, these figures could only come and go, cross the stage, or move, in parallel to the stage opening, the geometrical shapes they were made of. But when doing these movements, they transformed themselves from abstract forms to human or animal figures, and vice versa. As we can infer from the contemporary reconstructions of these shows,[9] such apparitions and disappearances of living bodies created comical effects, as did also, in Huszár's *Mechanische Dansfiguur* for example, the alternating anatomical and non-anatomical positions of the figure.

Were they living beings who imitated machines and objects? Machines and objects that pretended to become living beings? Squares and rectangles that strived to come to life? Moving on the threshold between figuration and abstraction, mechanical and organic movements, lifeless objects and living bodies, and geometry and anatomy, these animated forms told the same story that many stage productions of the avant-gardes did, from Vassily Kandinsky's *Bühnenkompositionen* [Stage Compositions] to Oskar Schlemmer's dances at the Bauhaus. A story that could be interpreted as an allegory: both of the invention of a non-figurative art, and of the entering into the second industrial revolution.

Even if they sometimes looked like toys, as Sophie Taeuber's and Fortunato Depero's figures did, the puppet and marionettes of the avant-gardes, through their design, revealed the tensions and the contradictions of that historical moment. They put on stage a drama that was going much further than the conditions of the productions, or the dramaturgy they were using, could do: the drama of entering into a new mechanical age, where the place for mankind had to be reinvented.

Because this place is not at all secure, it has more and more to be questioned and re-examined; and because puppet and marionette theatre is the art where human and non-human entities meet, moult, and deal with each other – in this sense we can say that, yes, the experiments of the historical avant-gardes on those little stages were indeed the forerunners of today's puppetry.

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9   For example, by the Theater der Klänge, Dessau, 28. 11. 2009. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmThAic44GI

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