Hélène Beauchamp
(University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès)

The puppet in the theatrical experience of the historic avant-gardes of Europe

The dissolution of identity?

Driven by the early 20th century avant-gardes, the theatre underwent a huge process of puppetisation that influenced dramatic writing, theatrical theory, the concept of the actor's role and scenography. This movement called into question the unity and thus the identity of the character, the actor, and the human being in general, contributing to the ›dehumanisation of art‹ theorised by Ortega y Gasset in *La Deshumanisación del arte* in 1923.

Although the avant-garde movement puppetised the actor to a large extent, my focus in this paper is on actual puppets, which also underwent a profound metamorphosis, oriented mainly towards abstraction and fragmentation. For this reason, I am going to look at how individual and collective identities have been shaken up and redefined by new forms of puppets.

I will start with some preliminaries about the identity of the dramatic character, then move on to show how some avant-garde trends have made the puppet into a ›walking abstraction‹, before looking at the presence of fragmented puppets, duplicate scenic beings that represent an atomisation of interpretation.

Preliminaries: dissolution of the identity of the character in avant-garde dramatic narratives

Although the period in question is marked by the advent of theatre directors and scenographers, we should remember that at the end of the 19th century, theatre performances arose mainly out of pre-existing

dramatic texts. We cannot consider the dissolution of on-stage identity as the 19th century rolled into the 20th without specifying its under-lying cause, namely a radical challenge to the very notion of the ›dramatis persona‹. Avant-garde dramatists, theorists and directors came to reject the idea of a character conceived as a psychological unit, endowed with a ›personality‹, that they associated with the realist and ›bourgeois‹ theatre that dominated the second half of the 19th century. A new genre of character was thus born, open to anyone to fathom: it had different faces, at once ›puppet‹ and ›pawn‹.

This new ›characterless character‹ could take on mysterious powers, like the protagonists of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Three Little Dramas for Marionettes: Interior, The Death of Tintagiles, Alladine and Palomides* (1894). In the worlds of the Belgian dramatist – whose influence in Europe was extraordinary – the identity of the character, as a being with a personality and psychological development, is largely irrelevant. Maeterlinck's figures are totally ›disconnected‹, affected by a series of powers, presentiments, and instincts.

This ›non-character‹ can also take the form of a being in a perpetual state of change like the ›worm‹ Cockatrice, who spearheads Edward Gordon Craig's *Drama for Fools.* We are familiar with Craig's theories on the ›Über-Marionette‹ or ›Super-Puppet‹, but less so with his unfinished puppet dramas, now available in a bilingual publication (cf. Craig 2012). For Craig, the puppet is the template for an empty character: »marionettes always were empty shells« (ibid.: 24), he writes under his pseudonym Tom Fool. Cockatrice travels through time by means of multiple metamorphoses to practice his hypocritical vice: his essence is simply movement.

This new ›pawn‹ can also appear in the form of a parodic puppet manipulated by absurd and coercive forces. A perfect example is found in Spain with the hero of *Los Cuernos de don Friolera* (*The Horns of Don Friolera*) by Ramón del Valle-Inclán, a major dramatist at the start of the 20th century and author of several ›puppet plays‹. Lieutenant Don Friolera is driven by hackneyed literary codes and by the military code of a colonial army. Here, the impossibility of the character achieving his own identity is a reflection of the history of Spain, which is presented by the dramatist as a huge parody.

When the puppet refers to a ›type‹ determined by a traditional character such as Punchinello, Punch or Don Cristóbal, the stereotypical character of that ›standard‹ is the instrument of the destruction of interiority in favour of a being who obeys a series of actions and reactions and typical behaviours. *El Retablillo de don Cristóbal* (*The Puppet Play of Don Cristóbal*), a farce written by García Lorca based on a popular Andalusian character, is an illustration of this.

Lastly, the puppet-character can be presented as an empty figure set to become the receptacle of all man's projections, even the wildest of them. Such was the case with Ubu, a character devised by Alfred Jarry who wrote of his creation: »Of the three souls distinguished by Plato: the head, the heart and the strumpot, only this last is not embryonic in him« (Jarry 1972a: 467, translation quoted according to Breton 1996: 28). Ubu has no reason, no sentiments, but a ›strumpot‹, a belly, an insatiable appetite.

These new ›puppets‹ find a remarkable coherence in the task of hollowing out the ›identity‹ of the character as it was conceived, characterised by a story, moral and physical traits, an interiority, and psychological development. And how does this vast work of dissolution of identity manifest itself on stage? I have to say that some of these incarnations have not been realised. But that does not mean that these modernistic puppets have not been scenically thought out and well considered, as we can see, for example, in Craig's multiple sketches in his *Drama for Fools* or in the magnificent drawings of Georges Lafaye for the production of Paul Claudel's *L'Ours et la lune* (*The Bear and the Moon*) (cf. Fleury 2012). The ›character‹ on stage is then as much a set of colours and geometric shapes as an animal or an anthropomorphic figure. The puppet is the perfect instrument for a character that has become »a walking abstraction«[1] (Jarry 1972b: 413), a remarkable notion that we owe to Alfred Jarry.

»A walking abstraction« on stage: from identity to sign

It is not just any old puppet that can be used to ›hollow out‹ the character, but only those capable of transforming the scenic figure into

signs sufficiently abstract to be universal. So let us look now at some instances that were pioneering, albeit relatively low-key. I am going to start with the puppets of the Théâtre des Pantins (1898), created by Alfred Jarry and his cohorts, Pierre Bonnard, Claude Terrasse and Franc-Nohain. They reflect a desire for simplified theatrics using rudimentary means. Their naïve plasticity was combined with their equally rudimentary operation in order for them to appear ›stylised‹ and ›synthetic‹ and to produce ›conventional‹ and ›universal‹ gestures and movements, according to Franc-Nohain, one of the animators of the Théâtre des Pantins:

> Our technique as puppeteers tended resolutely and systematically towards simplicity, or if you prefer a more technical expression, stylisation. It was easier, absolutely; but that aside, this stylisation was the best match for this search for essential movements in our characters that we alone wanted to emphasise, and in written works, we believed that it was only worth expressing a minimum of sentiments with a minimum of essential words: plus we never forgot—which persists above all in the memory of men—the *essential* word of Ubu. […] of him, we remember his way of walking, the way he shook his head, or held his belly out in front. Do you need to move the arms when only the legs command our attention? Let's put a wire around the neck of a puppet that shakes its head, but not one that holds its belly out in front; let's stylise, simplify our wires. (Franc-Nohain 1933: 1)

These very basic puppets serve as a foil to the falsely ›true‹ images of realistic scenery. Thus the puppet remains anthropomorphic but is stylised so as to tend towards a form of abstraction and a plastic existence above all, where it is difficult for the spectator to project a consciousness or a psychology. This is working towards a disembodiment or ›decorporation‹ of the theatrical figure: puppets become symbols and signs, rather than characters and personalities.

(From the left to the right:) Ubu, Bougrelas and the Tsar, three puppets from Ubu roi. *Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques-Doucet, fonds Tristan Tzara, Paris. © D. R. Photo courtesy of Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques-Doucet – Chancellerie des universités de Paris, and Marie-Thérèse Tzara.*

The ›decorporation‹ of the theatrical figure

These are ›symbols‹ that substitute for characters, switching the drama and the staging from individualised identity to symbolic identity. This is amply demonstrated by the flat, coloured figures used by the scenographer Hemenegildo Lanz to stage a 12th-century mystery in the house of Federico García Lorca in 1923. Such bi-dimensional figures suggest a correlation between the pure, plastic depiction of the characters and their allegoric ›identity‹: the magi are ideas or symbols rather than individuals, and only this type of decorporated puppet can represent this singular identity that lies beyond humanity.

The fascination of the avant-gardes with barely mobile hieratic puppets like the mechanised puppets (›marionnettes à clavier‹) of the Petit Théâtre of the Galerie Vivienne in Paris or the Ombres du Chat-Noir must be placed in this context of ›decorporation‹ of interpretation.

Real, animated statues appeared before the spectators at Henri Signo-
ret's Petit Théâtre. Let us first look at their unique method of operation,
that of ›mechanised puppets‹ as seen in the Aix-en-Provence ›crèche
parlante‹ (a talking nativity scene) or puppet show:

> An iron rod through a hollow base supported the puppet, [which
> was] reduced schematically to a piece of wood on which were fashio-
> ned wooden arms and legs moved by strings. These were attached to
> pedals inside the base, which were pressed to create movement. […]
> The assembly was just over a metre high. The little base, on castors,
> glided along grooves unseen by the spectators. It was manoeuvred
> from underneath by operators who also activated the pedals at the
> same time. (Baty/Chavance 1959: 107)

The advantage of this mechanism was that it produced a movement
that appeared spontaneous, since no wires could be seen. This tied in
with the spirit of this type of theatre, where doll-like figures embo-
dying saintly or divine characters had to appear free and untethered,
giving the audience the impression of an existence on a higher plane.
Among its most enthusiastic spectators was the writer Anatole France,
whose description of these figures as being like »Egyptian hierogly-
phics, something mysterious and pure« (France 19??: 11) shows how he
perceived their identity. He saw these puppets as symbols to decrypt,
but whose meaning remained a mystery. The identity of the figure was
effaced, leaving only the sacred quality of the poet's thought. This mys-
tery of an indecipherable, statuary presence is found today in several
productions that use ›hyper-realistic‹ puppets, as in Bérangère Van-
tusso's direction of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Les Aveugles* (*The Blind*) by
the Trois-six-trente Company, for example. In the Petit Théâtre, the
characters were not shared amongst several entities or several bodies
as in some contemporary productions today, but we can still see that
identity continued to be perceived as an enigma at the end of the 19th
century.

This type of puppet has given rise to the idea of transforming the
actor into a puppet that creates symbolic signs, whose personality will
fade to leave an identity open to mystery. I shall not develop this aspect
further here, but it is noteworthy that there have been many attempts

Plain puppet figures for the play Auto de los Reyes Magos *(Mystery of the Magi), cardboard and paint, 24 x 12cm. Hermenegildo Lanz, Grenada (Spain), 1923. Photo taken by Enrique Lanz. © Archivo Lanz, Grenada (Spain).*

to depersonalise and puppetise the actor, beyond Gordon Craig's theories on the ›super-puppet‹, as I discuss in my book (cf. Beauchamp 2018). These have included using the divine statue as a model, like Craig, the awkward and artificial ›cardboard‹ actor of Pierre Albert-Birot, and the conventional gestures and movements of the hand puppet as favoured by Meyerhold. The puppet is thus transformed in its shape as in its language. This process of fragmentation entails, if not new forms of identity, then at least problematic identities.

Fragmentations of puppet bodies and new forms of identity

It seems that the avant-gardes were entirely *au fait* with the potentialities of puppet theatre as a device in which the body of the puppet is by definition separate from the supposedly corresponding ›voice‹. Some theorists have used this separation to offer a structural definition of puppet theatre. Henryk Jurkowski wrote that »the separability of the speaking object and the physical source of the word […] is the

distinctive feature of the puppet theatre« (Jurkowski 1988: 25). The avant-gardes built upon this by offering multiple variations on the system of puppets and narrators for which the dedicated text can be theatrical, narrative or poetic. Music often constitutes a third factor in this dissociated interpretation.

This is a new type of illusion in which the identity of the character is not given a priori, but is created by the projection of the spectator. This process, based on suggestion, is highlighted magnificently in Manuel de Falla's puppet opera, *El retablo de maese Pedro* (*Master Peter's Puppet Show*). Here, a spectator, Don Quixote, is so consumed by the puppetry that he swings at the theatre with his sword to help the fleeing characters, an action which results in the destruction of the theatre. The plot runs as follows: Don Quixote and other spectators are watching a puppet theatre performance: Melisendra has been taken by the Moors, and is rescued by her husband Don Gayferos. Dissociation of interpretation is essential here: the story is told by a young boy, the Trujamán (Dragoman), who stands before a closed curtain narrating the silent tableau to follow. When the curtain opens on the puppets, the Trujamán disappears from the spectators' field of vision and they see only the puppets, whose movements are accompanied by music. In Cervantes' text (*Don Quixote,* 2, chapter XXVI), the Trujamán narrates at the same time as the puppets move. In the opera, de Falla places the start of Don Quixote's madness at the precise moment when the rigorous mechanism of this dissociation takes hold: everything becomes chaotic, the narrator speaks at the same time as the figures are seen, the music runs away… and the theatre is no more.

De Falla demonstrates the failure of dramatic illusion when faced with the efficacy of puppet dissociation. The puppets created by the scenographer Hermenegildo Lanz for the original performance underline this simplicity. He designed stylised figures with little or no articulation. The original »notes on vocal performance« reflect this, stating that the voice of the Trujamán should be »rough and therefore free of any lyrical inflection« (Falla 1923: n. p.). Everything combines here to create a form of hypnosis. As Federico García Lorca wrote in the draft of one his plays inspired by puppet theatre, »The drama must be played out around the public, not in the characters« (García Lorca

1990: 39). So what becomes of the stage identity of the puppet? It
seems to be transformed into a projection space whose very simplicity
appears to multiply the power of suggestion. This dissociation can also
be seen in works that ›diffract‹ the body of the puppet, integrating it
into a scenography that is itself in motion.

As is apparent in some futuristic productions, a puppet figure can
tend to disappear as an autonomous, independent entity, with a blur-
ring of the boundaries between its body and the rest of the scenery
(cf. Lista 1988; Plassard 1992). I shall choose one here that I think is
symbolic of what the avant-gardes were looking for, because it links up
Italian futurism, the French avant-gardes, traditional puppet theatre,
and the question of identity.

It is a production by the Italian futurist painter Enrico Prampolini of
a puppet play by the Frenchman Pierre-Albert Birot, entitled *Matoum
et Tévibar* (*Matoum and Tévibar*). This performance was staged by
the Teatro dei Piccoli de Vittorio Podrecca in Rome in 1919. At this
time, the Teatro dei Piccoli was enjoying worldwide success with its
puppets on strings and its opera and music-hall repertoire. The full
title of Pierre-Albert-Birot's work, published in the *SIC* review in 1918,
was: *Matoum et Tévibar, ou histoire édifiante et récréative du vrai et
du faux poète. Drame pour marionnettes* (*Matoum and Tévibar, or an
edifying and recreative story of the true and the false poet. A drama for
puppets*). It was a farce in the form of an apology for new poetry in
the manner of Apollinaire, and was characterised by free verse, the
art of surprise, incongruous association and fantasy. Albert-Birot was
himself a poet and an old colleague of Apollinaire, for whom he had
produced *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*) in May
1918, a natalist fable with puppet influences that had caused a scandal
in France. Albert-Birot's play is similarly fantastical. It is in one act,
which is opened by a ridiculous bailiff who treats the public flippantly
and nonchalantly.

The plot is notable because questions of identity determine the struc-
ture. The main character is divided into two, the ›true‹ and the ›false‹
poet. We see Matoum arrive on the planet Mars from Earth, where the
King and Queen are awaiting him like the Messiah. But on his arri-
val, they notice that »Matoum is double« (Albert-Birot 1979: 69), as a

*Sketch depicting Melisendra
from Manuel de Falla's*
Retablo de Maese Pedro*,
for the show presented in 1925.
Hermenegildo Lanz, ca. 1924.
© Archivo Lanz, Grenada (Spain).*

second head and new limbs form at his feet. Then »he splits into two«
(ibid.: 70): from one character, two are born, Matoum and Tévibar, the
true and the false poet. The King is also double as he has a head with
both a »sad and a happy face« (ibid.: 61). Tévibar speaks in alexandrines
and immediately sends his listeners to sleep with rustic, antiquated
poetry. Matoum has a »tête lumineuse ad libitum« (a luminous head ad
libitum) (ibid.), which lights up when he recites his verses composed
of poems by Apollinaire, Pierre Albert-Birot, Max Jacob, Philippe
Soupault and Pierre Reverdy. He bears the »inextinguishable torch of
new fire« that Apollinaire wished for in the Prologue to *Les Mamelles
de Tirésias* (Apollinaire, 2000: 115). Tévibar's head, however, remains
opaque and black. When Matoum speaks, the side walls of the puppet
theatre show their coloured side; when Tévibar speaks, they turn to
their grey side. The competition between Matoum and Tévibar leads
to the victory of the true poet, and the play closes with the ascension
of Matoum, whilst Tévibar remains slumped at the edge of the theatre.
But Matoum tells the public that he will rush to revive Tévibar as soon
as the Queen has left, as though the poet still needed his former double,
and could not create without his damned soul.

The puppets and scenery created by Albert-Birot are highly inventive, particularly the idea of Matoum's luminous head. Enrico Prampolini radicalised these ideas and strengthened the relationship between puppet and scenography. His puppets were anthropomorphic, geometric forms in bright colours that wore »dynamic-architectonic« costumes (*SIC,* 1919: 17). A detailed description of Prampolini's staging can be found in a letter to Albert-Birot published in *SIC* in June 1919 (cf. Prampolini 1919). Here, Prampolini first mentioned the difficulty that Podrecca's puppeteers experienced in making and operating avant-garde puppets. They were used to traditional string puppets, and they were confused by the requirements of Prampolini's geometric puppets. He describes the fact that colour and light are utilised like a material in motion: »the colour sculpted the volumes marvellously«, wrote Prampolini (Prampolini 1919: 20). The scenery is thus treated in the same way as the puppets, in dynamic volumes, with the light and the colour also becoming protagonists. Matoum's luminous head was achieved by placing a bulb inside it, the effect of which was enhanced by using luminous flowers, which was Prampolini's own idea. He speaks of a »fantastic illumination that flooded the scene and lit up the flowers with each word by Matoum« (ibid.). Matoum's character no longer merely emitted light; it radiated it throughout the stage set, breaking down the boundaries between the puppet figure and the scenery. The question of identity thus arises again here. Above and beyond the dual nature of the poet, by necessity old and new, good and bad, it is his dissolution into a larger environment that is materialised here – in this instance characterised by colour, light and movement. Prampolini's »plastico-dynamic puppets« (ibid.) showed in concrete terms that the light of new poetry could spread everywhere, into everything, cancelling out differences between beings, men, Nature and objects.

Duplications: the selfsame and the foreign other

The puppet figure can sometimes be duplicated twice or even three times, resulting in a veritable atomisation of interpretation that is not so far removed from our current scene. This raises several possibilities.

The first is an exploration of hitherto undiscovered psychic territories and the activation of the unconscious. Several projects by Antonin Artaud tend in this direction, particularly his staging of Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata* (1930–31), where he introduces both the puppetisation and the obliteration of characters, with transitions of certain beings from living to inert, the duplication of others by means of lighting, and the use of a loudspeaker for the words of others (cf. Artaud 2004).

I intend to focus on the second possibility, that of duplication referring back to the historical, political condition of man after the First World War, as exemplified interestingly in the works of the Laboratoire Art et Action (Art and Action Laboratory), which is the subject of a book by Michel Corvin (cf. Corvin 1976). This theatre of research, directed by Louise Lara and Edouard Autant in Paris in the 1920s, experimented with the use of masks, shadows, projections, puppets and the separation between scenic figures and narrators. Each production was low-key, sometimes performed only two or three times, but some were significant, such as *Liluli,* a pacifist play written by Romain Rolland in the aftermath of the First World War that featured around a hundred characters. Its first performance in 1922 was the result of collaboration with the painter Franz Masereel, whose etchings were to a certain extent translated into the scenery by the *Laboratoire*. The crowd scenes, which were the main hurdle to staging the work, were represented by shadow puppets in the manner of *Le Chat Noir*. Individual characters appeared on another screen, played by actors of whom one also saw only their shadow outlines. The allegorical characters (Illusion, Master God, Punchinello and Truth) were played by flesh-and-blood actors. Three other actors appearing as shadows behind a screen were supported by eight narrators who also operated the puppets (cf. Corvin 1976: 197–199). These acts of duplication served the critical, pacifist message of the play, which denounced war as a vast illusion (*Liluli*) in which individuals were manipulated and reduced to mere puppets or stooges. In this allegorical theatre, the citizens are shadows, consumed by the enormous travesty of history.

The loss of identity of the individual and collective in history is also depicted in the work of the group Art et Action in *The Wedding*, a

drama by the Polish author Stanisław Wyspiański. This play is clearly
linked to the Polish tradition of the ›szopka‹, with puppets on rods
depicting the Nativity. The particular feature of this theatre is its
double stage: there is an upper gallery for the religious scenes, and
a lower gallery for the secular action. Wyspiański bases his first act
on the ›szopka‹, introducing the characters in pairs like »these Polish
puppets that enter the stage two by two, hieratic in nature, whilst in
the background are the saints, angels and Nativity characters« (ibid.:
275). The second act sees the arrival of the spirits who join in the
peasant wedding, which are phantoms borrowed from Polish history.
These supernatural envoys prevent the wedding guests from waking
up, and symbolise Poland's stagnation in the past. Édouard Autant
subjected this scene to a radical transformation. All local colour was
removed: »For these scenes where the humans become nothing more
than human puppets, the characters are shown life-size using simple
white paper and are animated by synthetic actions« (Autant/Lara
n. d.: 114). The substitution of traditional dolls for more abstract paper
figures offers the public an obviously political interpretation of the
play: »politically, the Poles, stripped of their own character, continue
to believe that they are a nation whereas they are manoeuvred exter-
nally«, writes Michel Corvin (Corvin 1976: 277). Here, the puppetry
questions the relationship between individual and collective identity.
The issue of Poland's political identity appears to be the subject of the
play, but it is portrayed in more universal terms, allowing everyone to
question the political identity of the European nationals affected by
the First World War. This was also the approach taken in 1927 by Erwin
Piscator and Georg Grosz in their famous puppetry production of the
adventures of a wartime soldier in *The Adventures of the Good Soldier
Švejk* (cf. Piscator 1929; Lorang 1979).

Conclusion

When we question the relationship between the puppets of the avant-
garde and contemporary practice, we cannot assume any direct or
ad-hoc legacy. Much of what the avant-garde achieved has remained

unacknowledged and is separate from us by a hundred years. Moreover, we can barely distinguish the perpetual metamorphosis of the puppet figure on stage in the work of the avant-garde. The question of identity in the theatre of the avant-garde is not played out in the interactions between puppet and puppeteer, or in the assumed role of hybridisation of bodies in the form of prostheses, overturning or changing roles, but rather in the puppetry to which the whole play is subjected, from the scenery to the actors. In short, the avant-garde did not cross the line of full-view manipulation, or at least did not explore its dramatic possibilities.

However, the systematic process of fragmentation undertaken a century ago was striking: the identity of the character, of the actor, and of the plastic and physical identity of the character on stage, were radically deconstructed by puppet theatre productions in the early 20th century. What does this signify? Today, we can doubtless say that the work of the puppeteers contributes to challenging the flexibility of identities, drawing us away from anthropocentric representations by proposing a vision of the world in which objects, elements of Nature, men, the inert and the living are no longer radically separated.

So, what was it all about? The question most radically posed by avant-garde puppets was without a doubt that of unity: bodily unity, psychological unity, the unity between body and soul, the unity between the individual and society. The crisis of representation at the close of the 19th century, psychoanalytical discoveries and the First World War all undermined these unities that had been accepted as given until then. The stylised, geometrised, duplicated puppets in the theatre of 1900 to 1930 are sensitive incarnations of a paradox: whilst the avant-garde is better known for its aesthetic experimentation, the mirror that it holds up to human society is in its substance highly political: ›what remains of man in history‹ seems to be the question asked by these walking abstractions.

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Notes

1 Unless otherwise stated, the translations from Spanish or French to English were made by the author of the article.

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