

**Paul Piris: The puppet as a figure of alterity in contemporary puppet theatre.**

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## The puppet as a figure of alterity in contemporary puppet theatre

This article presents the puppet as a figure of alterity in a specific form of performance in which performers enact characters who interact with the puppets that they simultaneously manipulate. I use the term ›manipulating‹ to define this new form of performance, a word first coined by Annie Gilles in her article »Des Acteurs et des ›Manipulateurs« (›Actors and Manipulators«), published in 1994.

A unique co-presence takes place on stage between a human being, who is a subject, in other words a being endowed with consciousness, and a puppet, which is an object. When a puppet and a puppeteer interact together, they establish a unique relation of self to Other. In manipulating, the interaction between the puppet and the performer heightens the ambiguous ontology of the puppet, an object which appears as a subject onstage. Different variations of manipulating can be found in the work of artists such as Neville Tranter, Duda Paiva, Ilka Schönbein, Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté, Blind Summit, Ulrike Quade and Philippe Genty.

I will here present the difficulties faced by manipulators who want to achieve a co-presence onstage. Then I shall discuss the ontological ambiguity of the puppet and the specific nature of its alterity on stage through a Sartrean phenomenological perspective. Finally, I will analyse two different representations of the puppet as a figure of alterity by looking at *Cuniculus* by Stuffed Puppet, performed by Neville Tranter, and *Twin Houses* by the Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté, performed by Nicole Mossoux.

## **Co-presence in manipulacting**

In manipulacting, there is potential conflict between the presence of the puppet and that of the performer. The challenge lies in giving the impression of two characters being present on stage. The fact that the performer is also a character threatens the apparent alterity of the character of the puppet. Presences have to be balanced, because initially there is no balance between the manipulator and the puppet. The fact that the manipulator has to enact a character increases the risk of an imbalanced co-presence.

Manipulacting requires that the performer uses acting and puppeteering skills simultaneously. It is important to remember that the main difference between puppeteering and acting is that they use two different modes of embodiment of the character. Acting is characterised by a fusion of the body of the actor and the character. Whatever acting technique is used, the character exists through the body of the actor. In puppetry there is a split between the body of the puppeteer and the character, as it is the puppet that is identified as the character, not the performer. Gilles argues that »the puppet can be considered as the other of the character, definitely not like the other of the actor. The other of the actor is indubitably the puppeteer because he is the one who performs<sup>1</sup>« (Gilles 1994: 22). The actor's aim is to focus the audience on her body while the puppeteer's aim is to focus the audience on her puppet. In manipulacting, the performer faces a very difficult task because she has to create a double focus on both herself and her puppet.

The balancing of co-presence means that manipulacting is not merely an addition of acting and puppeteering skills. It requires the elaboration of a new method of practice that organises body and gaze through movements on stage.

## **The construction of the puppet as an Other: body and gaze**

The study of manipulacting reveals that in order for the puppet to appear as an Other, it is necessary for its apparent body to seem to be autonomous of that of the manipulator. The manipulator and her

puppet seem to have separate bodies. The Sartrean phenomenology of consciousness is a useful analytical tool for understanding why the separation of bodies is central to the construction of the puppet as an Other.

In *Being and Nothingness*, first published in 1943, Sartre suggests that the separation of bodies represents the separation of consciousnesses because consciousness is always embodied. For Sartre, as Kathleen Wider explains, the body is »the subject of human consciousness« (Wider 1997: 112). The unity of the body shows the unity of the subject with regard to the world. The body is actually consciousness, and not a screen between consciousness and its objects. As the Canadian scholar Monika Langer writes, the existence of flesh is »a vehicle of an interworld in Sartre's philosophy« (Langer 1998: 112). She argues that the existence of consciousness as body »spells an inevitable and eradicable alienation insofar as it engages consciousness in a world which it continually surpasses, and confers on it an eternally elusive ›being-for-others‹« (ibid.: 105).

The distinction of bodies between the manipulator and the puppet confers on the puppet its belonging to the world as an embodied consciousness. The performer and the puppet seem to be present to one another because of their presence on stage as subjects. The distinction between the apparent body of the puppet and the real body of the manipulator contributes to the epiphany of an apparent embodied consciousness in the puppet.

The gaze also functions as a key sign of consciousness of the puppet. In *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre*, Jan Mrázek (2005) suggests that the eyes of the Javanese Wayang Kulit puppet are its »power of vision. [...] The eyes give the sensation of the puppet's subjectivity and visual agency, as opposed to being an object of visual gaze« (Mrázek 2005: 35). The puppet is more than a thing that can be seen; it is also an apparent subject that can see. When the gaze of the puppet is not precise, then the puppet can lose its apparent subjectness.

The gaze of the puppet reinforces its separateness from the manipulator by stressing her dramaturgical presence. If the puppet looks at the manipulator and the latter responds to this gaze, the human performer appears as part of the actuality of the puppet.

To understand the interdependence of body and gaze in the fabrication of the alterity of the puppet, I suggest examining how Sartre describes the relation of self to Other. As Langer explains,

in virtue of its body, consciousness has an ›exterior‹ and can experience the other's gaze. This gaze simultaneously reveals the other as subject and makes me aware of a facet of my own being which, on principle, will always elude me. (Langer 1998: 106)

For this reason, as Langer concludes, »my body is at one and the same time the body which I live and the body which is an object for the other« (ibid.). Sartre has two ideas here. First, the Other can only be apprehended by the self as a subject. Secondly, the Other is the subject who mediates my relation to myself. In other words, the Other allows me to be aware of aspects of myself.

Nevertheless, trying to understand the construction of the puppet as an Other through Sartrean phenomenology opens up a contradiction. Sartre never intended his theory of the Other to be applied to puppets, as they are not subjects, but objects. A relation of self to Other can only take place between two subjects, in other words between two human beings. And yet the puppet appears as the Other of the manipulator onstage. To solve this contradiction, I will look at the theory of imagination as developed by Sartre in *The Imaginary* (2004) in order to offer an understanding of the specific nature of the ontology of the puppet.

### **The puppet as an image**

Sartre draws attention to the fact that images can be psychic, such as the memory of someone, but also non-psychic, such as a photograph, a sculpture, a painting, a caricature, an imitation and, I will add, a puppet.

Sartre argues that the image is not a thing but a relation. He defines the image as

an act that aims in its corporeality at an absent or non-existent object, through a physical or psychic content that is given not as itself but in the capacity of ›analogical representative‹ of the object aimed at. (Sartre 2004: 20)

What is imagined is an object that is not present, but that we bring back to our consciousness. Imagination does not have the same knowledge content that perception contains. »In perception knowledge is formed slowly; in the image, knowledge is immediate« (ibid.: 9). The image does not bring us any additional knowledge of the object that we already know; perception always brings additional knowledge. Unlike the object of perception that appears in an infinite series of profiles, the object of imagination »possesses in itself only a finite number of determinations, precisely those of which we are conscious« (ibid.: 16). Therefore, between perception and imagination there is a difference of nature and not of degree. In the case of perception, the object »is ›encountered‹ by consciousness« (ibid.: 7). In the case of imagination it is not; the object is absent.

This difference of nature is key to understanding the ontological ambiguity of the puppet. Scholars such as Henryk Jurkowski and Steve Tillis have both discussed the role of imagination and perception in their studies of the spectator's engagement with puppetry performances. In *Aspects of Puppet Theatre* (1988), Jurkowski refers to the concept of opalisation to explain the spectator's experience of puppetry, whereas in *Towards an Aesthetics of Puppet Theatre* (1992), Tillis develops the concept of double vision. However, Jurkowski and Tillis do not define beforehand the terms ›imagination‹ and ›perception‹, which leads to some contradictions in their definitions, such as the concept of double vision. According to Tillis, puppets create a »double vision of perception and imagination« (Tillis 1992: 65). Yet vision is a perception and so there is no such thing as an imagined perception. Moreover, he argues that the perception of the puppet by the audience »fulfils the audience's desire to imagine it as having life« (ibid.). The audience imagines the puppet as having life, not because they desire it, but because the puppet's resemblance to a living being, combined with their affective reactions, provokes the immediate impression that they are facing a living being.

Sartre explains the articulation between perception and imagination by establishing a link of intentionality between them in the context of non-psychic images. He calls an analogon a content that gives the absent object as it is given in perception although it does not make real what it represents. Sartre stresses the importance of a resemblance between the material content and the object which it represents in order to provoke an affective response from the viewer.

I propose considering the puppet as an analogon because it allows the audience to imagine its subjectness through its present objectness. Puppets are non-psychic images situated between images that bring absent objects such as portraits or sculptures immediately to consciousness, and images that make use of signs such as those found in impersonator performances.

The ontological contradiction that an object cannot be an Other finds its resolution in the fact that the puppet is not an Other, but the image of an absent Other. We perceive an object and we imagine an absent subject.

## Two constructions of the puppet as an Other

I will now examine two solo performances that offer different modes of representation of the puppet as an Other: *Cuniculus* by Stuffed Puppet from The Netherlands and *Twin Houses* by Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté from Belgium. Using Hans-Thies Lehmann's study of postdramatic theatre, I suggest that *Cuniculus* is a form of dramatic theatre, whereas *Twin Houses* belongs to postdramatic theatre.

### ***Cuniculus* (2008) by Neville Tranter: Talking heads**

I choose Neville Tranter as my first example, because the Method acting training that he undertook in his youth with the American actor Robert Gist has been very influential in his work with puppets. This influence is reflected through the embodiment of the Other in *Cunicu-*



*Stuffed Puppet, Cuniculus, Bochum, 2008, © Michael Kneffel.*

*lus*, whether enacted by him or the puppets. Characters have clear intentions in each scene and have super-objectives for the whole play.

*Cuniculus* (2008) is a piece about survivors living in a world ravaged by violence and chaos. It tells the story of a small group of starving rabbits who live confined to their warren to remain safe from a war happening above them. Despite the fact that they hate human beings, a human character performed by Tranter lives amongst them. He wears a pair of red plastic rabbit ears and thinks he is a rabbit. The rabbits pretend to believe such a thing. His presence as an obedient servant appears to be very convenient for them.

## Design

The five main puppets are about eighty centimetres high. They are Muppet-style puppets that can sit upright on their own without the intervention of Tranter to stabilise them, because the trunk and the legs form one solid element. This feature frees the hand of Tranter

that is not in charge of moving the head of the puppet, allowing him to manipulate one of its arms or another puppet.

All the limbs of the puppet's body seem petrified in dynamic tension. They do not hang freely, even when not animated. The only movable parts of the puppet are the head and, occasionally, the arms.

As a result, these puppets can stand on their own, speak and look at the world around them, but are not designed to move in space. When Tranter needs to bring a puppet to a different point of the stage, he simply lifts it in the air and places it in its new location. Their apparent body is easily identified from that of Tranter, and the fact that they keep a dynamic pause, even when not manipulated, reinforce their subjectness.

## **Manipulation**

Tranter's manipulation is in full view of the audience, including the production of the puppets' voices. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that although Tranter does not hide the manipulation process, he is very careful to direct the attention of the audience away from it.

Tranter's manipulation is focused only on moving the head, the mouth and the left arm of the puppet. The lower part of the body remains still. This contrast between the upper and lower parts of the body is also found in Tranter's body itself. Only his head and arms actively play a role in the act of manipulation. The rest of his body is used as a support. Tranter applies his own acting approach towards building characters to the design and the manipulation of his puppets.

On most occasions, Tranter is situated next to the puppet. This body position gives him an equal presence with the puppet. In this setting, he becomes part of the surroundings of the puppet because not only is he more visible from the audience's point of view, but also the puppet can potentially see him. A direct relation of self to Other is thus possible.

## Gaze

Gaze is essential in Tranter's work for setting up the relation of self to Other between him and his puppets. Tranter's character becomes part of the actuality of the puppet from the moment that the puppet looks at him. This exchange of gaze and the direction of their gaze construct an elaborate relation of self to Other between them.

In one particular scene, the character of Tranter shares an intimate moment with Mutti, an old female rabbit who dares to go outside the warren to bring food to the whole community. Although the scene is very short, it is technically complex. Except for the heads and the right arms of Tranter and the puppet, the rest of their bodies remain still. This scene contains five different usages of the gaze:

- mutual acknowledgement, when Mutti and Tranter look at each other;
- staring at a specific point, when Mutti looks at Tranter's ears;
- looking into space without focus, when Tranter talks about something that worries him;
- looking away to break eye contact when Mutti starts to laugh;
- eye contact with the audience, when Tranter's character laughs at himself.

These usages of the gaze form a dramaturgical thread which constructs the relationship between Tranter's character and Mutti.

## Voice

The strategy used by Tranter to achieve the plausibility of a dialogue between him and a puppet is similar to that discussed above about the gaze.

A short discussion between Tranter's character and a puppet called Sissy displays how Tranter deals with speech. Before talking, Sissy looks at Tranter, and then looks towards the audience to deliver her line in a very patronising tone: »You should also change your name. Good for you« (*Cuniculus* 2008). Her head and mouth movements are very large. Tranter's head is motionless and looking sideways at Sissy,

which makes his face less visible than that of the puppet from the audience's point of view. The movements of his mouth are less important than those of Sissy's mouth. When Sissy has delivered her lines, she freezes. It is now the turn of Tranter to become animated. He laughs and then answers her, »You're crazy! Crazy!« (ibid.), making fun of her while moving his head and exposing more of his face to the public.

As soon as he has finished delivering his line, Sissy turns abruptly towards him and stares him in the eye. Tranter's immediate reaction is to start at Sissy's movement. He stops smiling, and fear can be read on his face as if he realises that he should not have talked to Sissy in such a way. He offers an apology. In this situation, Sissy appears as a threatening character.

In this example, it appears that the one who speaks is the one who moves. The character engaged in a speech displays his mouth and eyes to the audience. The direction of the gaze as well as the movements of the head structure these dialogues in order to indicate to the audience which character is talking.

Tranter shapes the puppet to behave like him. He concentrates his manipulation on the head of the puppet. The construction of the puppet as an Other is mainly established through gaze and speech, with the body playing more of a supportive role.

### ***Twin Houses* (1994) by Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté: Thinking bodies**

Nicole Mossoux trained in contemporary dance at Maurice Béjart's Mudra School, while Patrick Bonté comes from a theatre background with a training in Grotowski and physical theatre. They define their work as ›theatre-dance‹. Theatre-dance is a hybridisation of theatre and dance, not a juxtaposition of them. The order of the words, with ›theatre‹ being placed before ›dance‹, is important. It indicates the theatricality of their work. Dance is used as a tool which articulates their theatrical work.

*Twin Houses* (1994) consists of a series of situations, separated by blackouts and without any utterance, that invoke a woman surrounded

by beings which resemble her. The company describes *Twin Houses* as ›a multiple monologue‹ (Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté 2009: 10). A general feeling of oppression emerges from *Twin Houses*. Most of the time, the puppets seem to control the character performed by Mossoux.

## Design

The puppets are life-sized and can be described as a head prolonged by a piece of cloth. All the puppets are made from a cast of Mossoux's face. Mossoux looks like her puppets, wearing make-up and a synthetic wig to enhance her resemblance to them.

These puppets have a large range of leg and arm movements, as these body parts actually belong to Mossoux, but they collapse on themselves without the support of Mossoux. Because of the realistic features of the face, the eyes are not made especially prominent and so do not reinforce the direction of the gaze.

## Manipulation

Mossoux employs two main techniques of manipulation. In the first, she holds the neck of the puppet with her hand. This technique allows precise movements of the head but limits the other body parts of the puppet that can be manipulated. The second technique consists of controlling the head of the puppet with her shoulder. The puppets are fastened to Mossoux's body. Their heads are prolonged by a neck supported by one shoulder. This shoulder is strapped by elastic to one of Mossoux's shoulders. This technique gives a limited range of movement of the head but allows Mossoux to share her arms between her character and the puppet. Mossoux uses the dance technique called ›body-parts isolation‹ in order to perform a relation of self to Other with the puppet. She identifies the parts of her body that belong to the puppet, and isolates them by giving them particular rhythms and movement qualities that are different from those of the body parts

belonging to her character. Tranter uses the same technique, but only for the hand that manipulates the head of the puppet.

### **The body**

The Other in *Twin Houses* does not have a fixed shape. It is a fluid entity whose form changes according to the nature of its relationship with the character of Mossoux. In one scene, the shape and size of the puppet goes from a head with a floating body, to a large body which shares parts of its body with Mossoux, to a complete body which has fully absorbed Mossoux's body, only to end up as a ball of clothes that represents a baby bump inside Mossoux's body.

### **Gaze and presence**

The head of the puppet is not the primary focus of attention of Mossoux's manipulation. As a result, there is no eye contact between Mossoux and the puppet at many moments during the piece.

When Mossoux uses her shoulders to manipulate a puppet, she cannot turn her shoulder inwards far enough for the eyes of the puppet to meet her own eyes. Moreover, her shoulder does not allow fine movements. The result of this is an inability of the puppet to focus its gaze precisely on the objects that surround it and that can reinforce its objectness.

Mossoux counterbalances this issue by using a particular strategy that consists of reversing the mimetic relationship between puppets and human beings. Instead of creating a figure of the Other that moves like her, she embraces the limitations of the object and makes herself move like a puppet. This way of engaging with the alterity of the puppet becomes even more noticeable when one looks at her approach to gaze and presence. This strategy, developed by Mossoux, is particularly noticeable in one scene where she and an androgynous puppet stand behind a desk that hides the legs of Mossoux. In this scene, Mos-



*Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté, Twin Houses, Brussels, 1994,  
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soux's eyes are half-closed as if she is very tired or half-asleep. A book is open in front of them.

The puppet invites Mossoux's character to read some lines from the book and then to write something on it. At the end of the scene, the puppet closes the book and gently forces Mossoux to rest her head on the book. The puppet exhibits a large knife and uses it to cut off Mossoux's head.

In this scene, neither the puppet nor Mossoux look each other in the eyes. Instead, they both look at the book which is at the centre of the action. Both the puppet and Mossoux display an unfocused gaze. For instance, when Mossoux writes in the book she does not look at what she is doing, but slightly above the book. This is not normal human behaviour when writing. People tend to look at what they are writing.

Mossoux's ability to gaze is similar to that of the puppet. They share the same limitation of movement. This choice allows Mossoux to balance her presence with that of the puppet.

Mossoux loses parts of her human nature in order to balance her presence with the puppet. The alterity of the puppet requires a ›puppetisation‹ of Mossoux herself.

The different training backgrounds and the forms of theatre produced by Stuffed Puppet and Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté shape the relation of self to Other between the manipulators and their puppets onstage. Despite their differences, these two representations of the Other highlight the importance of body and gaze in the construction of the alterity of the puppet. The fabrication of co-presence in these two variations of manipulating highlights the necessity for the performer and the puppet to exist on apparently similar ontological levels.

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## Shows

Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté (1994): *Twin Houses*, The Traverse, Edinburgh.

Stuffed Puppet (2008): *Cuniculus*, Kesselhaus, Berlin.

## Notes

- 1 »La marionnette peut être considérée comme l'autre du personnage, assurément pas comme l'autre du comédien. L'autre du comédien est bel et bien le marionnettiste car il lui revient de jouer.«

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