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Puppetry and Purpose: Exploring how nature shapes form through animal puppets

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STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY/ DECLARATION OF
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Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Freya Meldrum". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Freya Meldrum

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Abstract

The art of puppetry is one that has fascinated humankind for generations, and continues to do so. What is it about this form of theatre that we find so appealing? Looking at seminal texts on puppetry and performing objects, and analysing in particular three puppets, I hope to highlight how the nature of a puppet is deeply entwined with its construction. The puppets I will be focusing on are of all animal puppets, but their similarities end there. Kermit the Frog is a small scale puppet, built for television, and known the world over for his personality as host of “*The Muppet Show*”; Joey is the beautiful, full size horse from the stage production of “*War Horse*”, and the Cheshire Cat exemplifies the wonderful and strange in his role in “*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.” All three are examples of how a puppet designed with its purpose in mind will always be extremely effective.

Introduction

When defining puppetry, there are a number of definitions in common circulation. Perhaps the most popular amongst puppetry academics is that of Frank Proschan, where he defines the performing object as “material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance.” He adds also that “While puppetry is at the centre of this definition, it is not alone.” (Proschan, 4). This gives us a wide scope from which to start our analysis. Though a good foundation for a definition of puppetry, Proschan’s limitation of a performing object having to be in the image of a human, animal, or spirit excludes some recognised forms of puppetry, such as object theatre wherein the ‘puppet’ is often a found object given life as a puppet without alteration of its original form. This definition too does not in fact explicitly refer to puppets. In many cases, the term ‘performing object’ is used interchangeably with that of ‘puppet’ in the literature surrounding puppetry, though not in all cases. The use of ‘performing object’ within a definition allows for a broader definition that can accommodate the changing nature of puppetry, but also can cause problems when trying to distinguish puppets from other moveable figures, such as robots. How then do we build on this definition to further distinguish between similar constructions?

Moving towards a definition that strictly encapsulates puppets alone, we can examine Steve Tillis’s 2001 essay “*The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production.*” Tillis argues for the categorisation of puppets into three main groups: ‘tangible’ puppets, ‘virtual’ puppets, and ‘stop-action’ puppets. The category of tangible puppets would encapsulate all of what we might consider to be ‘traditional’ puppets; marionettes, hand puppets, rod puppets, even object-puppets. These puppets all share the quality of being physical objects, of being ‘tangible’ and able to perform their function without the need for a

technological medium. Stop-action puppets, however, retain this physical presence but need the intervention of a technological medium such as the camera to simulate movement. They exist in the physical world, and can be moved by human intervention, but are not ‘puppeteered’ in the traditional sense and are almost as dolls. They are perhaps only differentiated from dolls by their intended use. This very fine line between puppets and dolls is one that is often straddled when describing or designing a puppet. Most puppets are created with the intent of their use as puppets, but even objects which had a purpose before their use as puppets are distinguishable from being ‘objects’ due to their intent. A.R. Philpott posits that the difference between a doll and a puppet is that: “Dolls are for personal play: puppets are essentially theatrical in function.”.

There exists in the movement of a puppet a deliberateness born of its lack of ability to move unconsciously. For example, a human sitting still will very rarely actually be fully immobile. The constant firing of our neurons and nerves in response to minute stimuli causes people to twitch or shift without being at all aware of it. Humans are also prone to movements we are aware of, but have no control over, such as sneezes. In contrast, any movement from a puppet is premeditated by its puppeteer, resulting in much more purposeful motion. This is particularly the case in puppets requiring multiple puppeteers to work together. Referring for example to “*The Muppet Show*”, Rowlf the Dog is a live hand puppet needing three hands to be operated. Most of the time, Rowlf is performed with one puppeteer working the head and left hand, and another moving the right hand only. This is known as “right-handing”. When scenes require Rowlf to play the piano however, his head is operated by one person, and both hands are controlled by a second person, allowing for more natural movement. This collaboration between puppeteers calls for a high level of teamwork, and an in-depth understanding of the workings of the puppet being

performed. As such, all movements will be deliberate and communicated. This need for teamwork and communication increases when more puppeteers are involved, such as with Joey, the horse puppet from the Nation Theatre's production of "*War Horse*", who is life size and operated by three puppeteers, a creation of the Handspring Puppet Co,. The Cheshire Cat from "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*" is composed of several pieces and performed by 6 puppeteers working together to create a cohesive character, who can dissolve and reform on stage. The transformative nature of this puppet is particularly interesting, as it necessitates a particularly cooperative team to ensure all pieces find themselves exactly where they need to be when the character reforms. All this highlights the precision with which puppeteers must make choices when moving their puppets, leading to the precise nature of a puppet's movement. There are of course puppets whose bodies are composed of elements which have their own capability of movement, like long fur, feathers, springs, tails, or other such details. Whilst these components may have their own motion that is not directed by conscious thought, it will always be derived from the intentional movements of the puppeteer. For these reasons, any movement we observe in puppets has an element of grace inherent to the art form as all movement is designed in a way that regular human motion is not.

Perhaps then what drives us to continue enjoying puppet performances is that they are most often the kind of show that allows us to give in to the instinctive desire to see life and animation in inanimate objects. It may be that the peculiar effect produced by the overlap of knowing that a puppet is being controlled and wanting to believe that it has its own capacity for self-governed movement is what draws us back. The intentional nature of all movement observed in a puppet must also contribute to the overall effect of the performance, and to our willingness to believe in their independence. Whichever of these elements it is

that has the largest impact on our experience of watching a puppet in action doesn't matter as much as might be assumed, as it is the combination and overlap of all these small but significant things that allows the illusion of the puppet to have such a profound and long-lasting effect on the human psyche, and the way that we have told stories throughout our long history. The magic of a puppet performance is so unique precisely because it cannot be simply dissected analytically but must be experienced to be fundamentally understood.

There are of course an extremely vast variety of puppets and puppet types, some of which are outlined in Stephen Kaplin's thought-provoking "A Puppet Tree", where he graphs puppet types by ratio of performer to object on the x-axis, and distance of performer to object on the y-axis. Rather than attempt to reclassify such a vast field of performing objects, this thesis will focus on a very specific category: the animal puppet operated by 'hidden' puppeteers. The three case studies I have chosen are Kermit the Frog from "*The Muppet Show*", Joey from "*War Horse*", and the Cheshire Cat from "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*". I have chosen these three as they are all designed based on animals, but have different purposes within the narratives they are part of, and this is reflected in both the method of their construction and manipulation as well as the method in which their puppeteers are shielded from the focus of the audience.

In the first chapter, I will begin by introducing prevalent theories on why we seek to believe in the 'life' of a puppet, focusing our historic predisposition to see life in inanimate objects. I will do this by referencing both a scientific study on the human tendency to see faces where there aren't any, and also by citing the philosophy of world-renowned French puppeteer Philippe Genty that he

discusses in an episode of “*Jim Henson Presents the World of Puppetry*”. Following this I will discuss the phenomenon of The Muppet Show puppets, but particularly Kermit the Frog, and how his presence in pop culture is made possible by our commitment to belief in his autonomy, an illusion that is created and maintained effectively by his construction and operation, as well as the medium through which we experience The Muppets: the screen.

In the second chapter, I will focus on the remarkable Joey puppet from the National Theatre’s stage production of “*War Horse*”, based on Michael Morpurgo’s novel of the same name. I will start with a look at The Handspring Puppet Co., the company responsible for the design and build of Joey and all the other puppets featured in the stage play. Referencing a TEDtalk given by the founders of the company, I will break down the material elements of the life-size puppet and highlight how these help to evoke the experience of seeing a horse through their natural materiality and the new method of puppet operation developed specifically for this performance. I will also analyse the decision to dress the puppeteers in ‘visible/invisible’ costuming and how this allows for a deeper immersion of the audience into the world of the performance.

In the final chapter, I will take a look at the use of puppets within the context of religious ceremony by focusing on the articulated statues of Jesus Christ used in medieval passion plays, as described in “*From the Cross to the Stage*” by Esther Fernández. Following this I will analyse the oft-cited work of Heinrich Von Kleist: “*On The Marionette Theatre*”, wherein he argues for the superiority of puppet dancers over human ones in some circumstances. Drawing from these I will focus on the puppet’s ability to portray the inhuman – be it divine, infernal, or simply supernatural – more effectively than a human due to its lack of

conscience, and therefore its purity as a vessel. Once this is established I will look closely at the Cheshire Cat puppet from the Royal Opera House production of “*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*” as a prime example of a spirit-animal puppet by analysing how it’s construction and method of operation improve its dramatic effect.

I will conclude by positing that when puppets are custom built for a role, nature shapes form in regard to their materiality and their operation.

Chapter One

Kermit the Frog: person-animal puppets

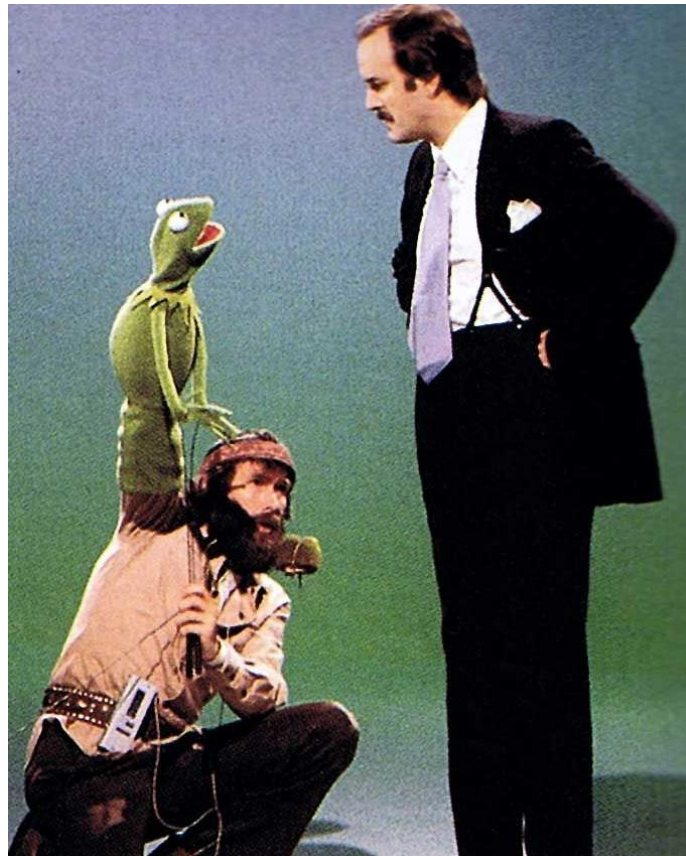


Fig. 1 Jim Henson & Kermit the Frog and John Cleese on the set of The Muppet Show (1977)

1.1. The secret life of puppets

Puppets have the particular property of illusion. Though we know consciously that the character we're seeing is not real, is nothing more than a well manipulated object, we are inclined to believe that they move on their own. When faced with a skilled puppeteer, we often forget that the actions we see are not in fact those of the puppet itself and react to the puppet as though it could respond. There is often an element of acting involved in this, when the person reacting is acting alongside the puppet, where they willingly buy into the belief

that the puppets have lives of their own for the sake of a performance, but there is certainly a large element of genuine expectation that at the end of the day when puppeteer and puppet part ways, the puppet will return home, maybe have dinner, and go to sleep before another day of work tomorrow. Is the driving force behind this assumption naivety? Is it due to our desire to believe in “magic”? Is it a product of our evolutionary predisposition to assign life to anything that could possibly wish to cause us harm, in an effort to protect ourselves?

This latter theory may warrant a deeper exploration. Early humans developed very powerful pattern recognition to be able to spot predators hidden in their surroundings, and this advantage has trickled down to today, when our brains are susceptible to seeing faces in any set of shapes even vaguely following the two-eyes-one-mouth pattern. This also causes people to sometimes assign emotions to inanimate objects, based on the angles of certain shapes, such as the windows on a house. This phenomenon is referred to as “Pareidolia” and affects everyone, but is more frequently experienced by women, as well as by those in emotional or mental distress, and people suffering from exhaustion. (Proverbio, Galli). This study refers to an “anthropomorphising bias” (Proverbio, Galli, 1511) in the human brain. This intrinsic ability we have to perceive character in inanimate objects, may have once evolved from a need to protect ourselves in an unsafe environment possibly full of dangerous creatures, but today contributes to animism, the idea that everything has a soul. Famous French puppeteer Phillipe Genty expresses this sentiment in relation to puppetry in a conversation with Jim Henson, saying that we carry an “archaic memory” of animism, and “we like to believe that somewhere, maybe, after all this [object] is really mov[ing] by itself.” (“Featuring: Phillipe Genty”, 5:31). The appeal of a theory such as this rests between its being rooted in our instincts, and our desire to believe in magic. In this case, the magic of puppetry, of giving life to an inanimate object. Maybe this is the core of the charm of puppetry, the desire to suspend disbelief in order to experience a performance unlike any carried out by human actors. There is indeed an interesting contrast between productions of the same original text performed by actors and those by puppets. Directors, sets, scale, costume, and all the *mise-en-scene* of course also have their part to play, but the fundamental elements of a play, the actors (or in puppets’ case the “actors”) will set the tone more distinctly than any of these.

1.2. Kermit the Frog

The Muppet Show is well known and beloved of many, and was many people's first exposure to the use of puppets outside of children's media or street festivals. The show, first aired in 1976, takes the form of a variety show wherein all the acts are performed by a cast made up entirely of puppets of varying styles, sizes, and abilities. The only human visible in any episode is the celebrity guest star, often actors, dancers, or singers. Perhaps one of the enduring appeals of the Muppets is their personhood. Kermit the Frog for example, is in essence a harried producer, director, and stage manager, in the body of a somewhat anthropomorphic frog. We the audience know he is a frog largely because we are told as much, and not due to any particularly prevalent froglike tendencies or behaviours. In this way, a large percentage of the muppets take the form of people-animals, such as Fozzie Bear, Miss Piggy, or Gonzo the Great. This use of non-human characters that remain 'people' is a very effective choice for the kind of storytelling involved in The Muppet Show. In order for these characters to come to life as compellingly as they have done for so many years, much thought had to go into their design. To make decisions surrounding the material, scale, and construction of these puppets, another important factor had to be considered: the medium of their performance.

The show is filmed for television, and in such a way that the audience cannot see the puppeteers, allowing for the illusion of the puppets' autonomy to be very easily accepted. This is a distinguishing feature of a lot of media featuring The Muppets, as they were designed with the fact of their use on screen in mind. This is one element of their performance that helps to convey the idea of them as fully realised and independent characters. However, when filming, guest stars had to act opposite both puppet and puppeteer working together. You might think that this would cause stilted performances, with guests struggling to focus on the puppet and instead looking at the puppeteer. Whilst the expected awkwardness is sometimes apparent, almost invariably the guests are able to treat the puppets as autonomous co-stars. This is due, most likely, to a number of things. Firstly, the skill of the puppeteers cannot be underscored. These talented individuals lend heart and soul to their charges, alongside their voices (in most cases) and physical movements. Though a similar effect is present in almost all forms of puppetry, and at all skill levels, the puppeteers working

on The Muppet Show are of particular renown, and at the forefront of the industry, particularly Jim Henson and Frank Oz, both household names. In many cases, those who have interacted with The Muppets report briefly forgetting that Kermit (or other characters) are in fact not entities of their own, and simply puppets. They address questions to the puppets, often forgetting that they don't, and can't, function without the actions of a puppeteer. For example, when Jim Henson was a guest on The Arsenio Hall Show. Arsenio Hall addressed some questions to Kermit, asking him if he'd ever kissed Miss Piggy. When Kermit states that he has, but only for the camera, Hall insists, asking: "Nothing ever like, in the car, on the way home maybe, from a shoot?"(Jim Henson, Kermit, and Rowlf on The Arsenio Hall Show (1989), 4:26). This idea that Kermit would have moments of privacy, of downtime, as if he were autonomous, is one that many people entertain. The illusion of these characters as fully fleshed out, living beings with full lives that continue outside of when they are being performed is perhaps the key to why we find them so engaging.

We frequently address puppets directly, like in this photograph taken during the filming of The Muppet Show episode 223. The photograph depicts John Cleese mid-conversation with Kermit the Frog, with Jim Henson visible crouched below, manipulating Kermit's body and hands, and wired up with a microphone to record his voice.

As The Muppet Show was to be broadcast on television, the design choices made were divergent from those that might be made about a stage production with similar characters. Taking Kermit the Frog as an example again, we know he was designed to be seen by audiences through a screen, that is, through a medium in which the point of view of the audience is strictly controlled at all times. He is composed of a body and head that are worn somewhat like a glove, and his arms are controlled by thin, discreet rods attached at one end to his hands. This allows for his arms to hang more naturally, and to be more visually to scale with his body. This design is known as a hand-rod puppet. An essential element of the performance of hand-rod puppets is that they be seen as independent. This is why their puppeteers are hidden from view (to the audience, but often not to any co-performers). In the case of the Muppet Show, the puppeteers would crouch below the level of the camera, just out of shot to the side, or behind specially built set pieces to maintain the illusion. For this reason, seeing a puppet of this kind juxtaposed with its puppeteer is startling to us in a way that other kinds of puppet aren't. The mental image of the puppet as an autonomous creature

is broken. However, the surprising and delightful phenomenon that occurs when watching the puppet and puppeteer simultaneously is that the illusion is often restored.

This can be observed in Jim Henson's interview on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1989, when he brings out a Kermit puppet and performs him whilst sat on the interview couch. (Jim Henson, Kermit, and Rowlf on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1989), 2:40-7:09) Even when watching Jim Henson's mouth as he performs, it seems like he is only mouthing along to what Kermit is saying. Logically, we know this is not the case, but something about the construction and manipulation of the inanimate object that is the Kermit the Frog puppet, by a skilled puppeteer such as Henson, makes it hard not to believe in Kermit's autonomy.

This alternating belief and disbelief in the actuality of the puppet's autonomous existence can create a sort of quick back and forth of the audience members' focus. This shifting focus is characterised as an "oscillation" by T.A. Green and W.J. Pepicello in their 1983 article on the semiotics of puppet theatre. This oscillation becomes reduced when a puppet performance is particularly effective, or when a viewer commits to their belief in the narrative as told through puppetry. Another way that this oscillation can be reduced is through the puppet's design being in harmony with its character and its performance style. For *The Muppets*, this means the choice to have many of the characters as somewhat anthropomorphic animals in an effort convey their non-human personhood, as well as their construction reflecting the practical considerations of the medium through which they are experienced (Kermit's being a hand-rod puppet).

In conclusion, the appeal of a belief in a puppet's autonomy likely stems in part from our desire to believe that they have a soul, a desire born from the overlap of our "archaic memory" of animism with the construction of puppets in a manner that takes advantage of our biological predisposition to pareidolia. *The Muppets*, in particular Kermit the Frog, are a wonderful example of this. Kermit's design is especially effective in conveying his character as a person-animal puppet thanks to the appearance of autonomy portrayed by his being a hand-rod puppet whose puppeteer is never seen, due to the medium of performance being that of television. This clever manipulation of the way we perceive the Muppet characters has been so successful that even when faced with the both the puppet and the puppeteer, we are able to convince ourselves of the puppet's self-sufficiency.

Chapter Two

Joey: animal-animal puppets



Fig. 2 “Joey the life-size horse puppet from the War Horse theatre production”

2.1. Handspring Puppet Co.

Joey, the life size horse puppet from the national Theatre’s production of Michael Morpurgo’s “*War Horse*”, is another fascinating example of an animal puppet. The puppet, developed by the Handspring Puppet Co., is the size of an actual horse, and is manipulated by three puppeteers working together closely. The body of the puppet is built mainly from cane and sheer fabric, supported by a metal skeleton structure. This rigid structure allows for one of the most impressive properties of the puppet: its ability to carry an adult human rider. When tasked with designing a life-sized horse puppet that could actually support the weight of an actor on its back, the Handspring Puppet Co. had to get creative with their solutions.

The South African puppetry company's founders Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones were no strangers to creating lifelike puppets, as they had already made a little hyena for a production of *Faustus in Africa* (1995). The Handspring Puppet Co. was established in 1981, after Jones and Kohler met at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town. Initially working with puppets for children-focused performances, they then moved into adult-focused theatre when Kohler introduced Jones to the African traditions of puppetry, particularly the detail-oriented approach of the Bambara puppetry of Mali. This switch in focus and style proved to be the key to the company's success and they worked with visual artist William Kentridge on several productions such as *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997), *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992), and *Faustus in Africa* (1995), which toured globally and established the company's reputation within the world of contemporary puppetry. This reputation led to their being commissioned to create the horse puppets for *War Horse*.

2.2. Building Joey

The challenge with the puppets in *War Horse* lay in the question of the rider. They had to find the right materials to make the puppet structurally sound without detracting from the horse-like appearance. The puppet also had to be lightweight enough for the two puppeteers within to carry the weight of both puppet and rider around the stage, and retain a full range of expressive movement. To achieve this, Jones and Kohler alongside their team of designers and builders settled on bent cane to form the exterior of the horse's body, giving it rigid structure without too much weight, and retaining an organic element in the material. The rest of the puppet's body is filled in with semi-sheer fabric stretched between the slats of its body. This allows for some variation in the appearance of the puppet that would not otherwise be possible. The two puppeteers, stood one in front of the other, wear harness-backpacks that allow them to share the load of the puppet's internal aluminium framework. The construction of the puppet is such that the hooves of the horse sit on the ground when the puppet is at rest, but they don't support its weight. This allows the puppeteers to manoeuvre the jointed limbs in smooth and lifelike movements, including the horse rearing up on its hind legs. The third puppeteer stands outside the body of the horse, by the head. They hold the "reins" to the horse's head, controlling the movement of neck, head, eyes, and ears through the use of a long stick with various levers connected to wires in the puppet's head. Though this puppeteer

is perhaps more visible at first glance than the other two, they take on the visual role of horse handler and do not therefore seem out of place. This clever visual masking of the puppeteers extends to their costume choices. All three wear costumes as of background characters in the play; worn shirts, slacks, suspenders, old leather boots, and flat caps. This helps them to blend almost seamlessly into the background of the story, and obfuscates them more effectively than wearing all black would have. This choice marks another point at which a design decision had to be made which would either help or hinder the audience's belief in the puppet's liveliness. The production's careful use of stage lights in concert with the fabric of the horses' bodies lends them an almost living quality, where they seem to breathe as the lights and textiles move on the stage. This beautiful effect would be severely marred if the puppeteers were to wear all black, as they would stand out like dark shadows in the warm and neutral tones that comprise the majority of the set and lighting. In this way, the puppeteers are clothed in a kind of "visible/invisible" costuming, a practice in which giving the actors (or puppeteers, as may be) distinct costumes in fact helps them to disappear on stage. This practice, by virtue of 'hiding' the puppeteers more effectively, also helps the audience to perceive the puppet as more independent. For the illusion of Joey's being a living creature to be as effective as possible, the spectators must believe that the puppet is moving of its own accord, and the puppeteers are merely handlers. In this way the War Horse puppeteers' costumes are doubly effective, because they camouflage the puppeteer within the visual language of the performance, but if an audience member decides to focus on them they appear simply as horse handlers, and never feel out of place on the stage.

The design process of Joey, and his counterpart Thornton, was influenced from the beginning by the narrative requirement that the puppet be able to perform alongside human actors, and give the impression of a living, breathing, real horse. 'Narrative requirement' here refers to the elements of performance that are necessitated by the story itself. For *War Horse*, this means anything without which the story would become too far removed from the original narrative. The fact of Joey's being a horse, and one that is ridden to war, is an inalienable facet of the story being told. *War Horse* would not be *War Horse* if Joey were not a horse, surrounded by humans, and plunged into a war with a rider on his back.

It is for this reason that the puppet is large scale, which in turn necessitates the use of multiple puppeteers. The size of a horse would not accommodate three people, and the puppeteers inside the horse could not manipulate the head precisely enough, and therefore an exterior puppeteer was needed to help control the head of the puppet. The fact of this

puppeteer's necessary visibility required that the puppeteers be somehow hidden in plain sight, leading to their being costumed like the background characters of the play.

The visible/invisible costuming plays an important role in the audience's perception of the puppet's independence.

All the design decisions and practical considerations fed into each other, over and over, to create the cohesive puppet presented on stage. This is a prime example of the kind of puppet project in which a puppeteer-designer is an invaluable resource. The puppeteer-designer is a puppeteer who also participates in the construction of their puppets. The advantages of this are manifold, and in the case of War Horse are exemplified by the solutions found by the Handspring Puppet Co. to the problems arising in areas of design that caused the puppet to be impractical to perform. Rather than having to scrap or vastly alter the original design, Kohler and Jones were able to play with the movement of the puppet, observe its materiality and make the necessary changes to structural framework and puppeteer count that allowed the puppet to be as effective as it is now known for.

The phenomenon of the National Theatre's production of War Horse has swept the globe, touring widely and astonishing audiences wherever it goes. Reviews vary in their praise of the human actors and the story itself, but never in their glowing commendation of the efficacy of the horse puppets. Audiences routinely report forgetting that the horses on stage are puppets and feel themselves drawn into the story more deeply than expected. This phenomenon of people feeling such a strong empathy for Joey and his plight throughout the harrowing events of the play probably represents a large part of the reason the play has had such success. Why then does this particular puppet evoke such strong emotions? Part of the reasoning lies in the inherent bond humans feel towards animals in pain, an instinct we have had since prehistoric times, and one that drove our species to form civilised society, when we tended to our wounded instead of leaving them to die as animals would have done. This drive to help animals stems from both an instinct, and perhaps a belief that an animal is always deserving of help, never having done anything "evil" by our human standards. Animals therefore present an excellent tool for storytelling, as we are predisposed to listen to their tales and to empathise with their woes. This is the point at which animals and puppets overlap. As Penny Francis elegantly breaks down;

"We imbue the puppets with our imagination and experience a deceptive empathy, deceptive because empathy assumes feeling in the recipient. The puppet only mimics feeling through

attitude and movement.” (Penny Francis, *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice*, 2012, p.23)

This mimicry of feeling is exactly what Joey accomplished with such skill. Clearly, Joey himself does not accomplish anything as he is merely the character projected onto the puppet. I use ‘Joey’ here to refer to the character that is created onstage when all the elements of physical puppet, three puppeteers, stage lights, and choreographed movement mesh together to form something greater than the sum of individual parts; a living being. The life imbued in Joey is a sum of all the life poured into him by his three skilled puppeteers and the audience combined. The audience’s belief in Joey’s existence fuels their empathy for his struggle. This vicious circle, (though perhaps “virtuous circle” is more apt), is at the core of not only the effect of Joey on War Horse audiences, but also that of many if not all puppets.

Joey is interesting too because despite being crafted specifically for the stage and set of *War Horse*, he is still marvellously effective in real-world settings. The founders of the Handspring Puppet Co. presented a TEDtalk in which they discussed the origins of Joey, his construction and production. They briefly discuss their evolution as puppeteers and how they handled the challenge of creating such a unique type of puppet. To end the presentation, Joey joined them on stage. Even without the trappings of the theatre, his presence is still so clearly evocative of a real horse, largely due to the incredible technical skills of his puppeteers (in this case Craig, Tommy, and Mikey). To watch a puppet “behind the scenes” can often feel like a violation of the unwritten rules of puppet show audience-ship, as if we are trying to catch a glimpse behind the wizard’s curtain. But Joey, even when brought out immediately following a detailed description of his conception and fabrication, feels like nothing so much as a horse. His detailed design and careful manipulation allow us to instil in him the idea of life and therefore to feel compassion for his suffering. This is what all well crafted and controlled puppets do, allow an audience to project life onto them, and then empathise with that being, creating a safe and cathartic way for the audience to share the puppets’ experiences.

Joey’s power as a puppet therefore lies in his resemblance to a real animal, thereby increasing our desire to empathise with him. All aspects of his design, from the three puppeteers to their visible-invisible costuming, as well as Joey’s nature-evoking cane and fabric body help to contribute to the illusion being carefully crafted. The audiences around the world enthralled

by these magnificent horse puppets and moved to tears by their story and struggle show that the right choices in the materiality and construction of a puppet help that puppet to fulfil their role within the narrative they were created for.

Chapter Three

The Cheshire Cat: spirit-animal puppets



Fig. 3 The Cheshire Cat and Alice on stage

3.1. An Unconscious Vessel

One of the most common uses for the puppet in its early years, was that of a vessel for or representation of the divine. Originating most likely from the spiritual practice of idols, physical representations of gods in the form of figures, puppets have a similar ability to take on significance not otherwise assigned to other objects of the same shape. In many – often

polytheistic – religions, carved figures designed to evoke the gods of a culture were used as an essential part of the ritual of ceremony. To these figures a devotee could address their worship or their prayer, helping them to visualise their god, and in consequence feel closer to them. In the elaborate spectacle that is organised religion, anything that could help to immerse a disciple in the world and worship of their god or gods is beneficial to the spiritual and religious leaders. For this reason some religious practices started to transition the practice of idolatry to puppetry, establishing a new form of spiritual performance to draw the faithful into the fold. For example, from the sixth to twelfth centuries, ‘animated sculptures’ representing the crucified Christ were known to have existed across Europe, namely in Spain where they played an important role during Holy Week as the key figure in the staging of episodes from the Passion. (Fernández, 59-74) These ‘animated statues’ of Jesus would have jointed shoulders, as well as being designed and made to look as close to human as possible, in an effort to highlight the humanity of Jesus. Perhaps the most effective episode of the Passion in which these figures featured was the Descent from the Cross, wherein the body of Christ is removed from the cross after his crucifixion by his followers. The scene would be played in the “stage-like space of the church” (Fernández, 61) where two members of the church would perform the roles of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and remove the nails from Christ’s arms before lowering his arms to his sides and placing him lying down. This possibility of lowering the body’s arms was accomplished by the jointed shoulders of the puppet figures. Why then not have a human actor portray Jesus? Why go through the far more complex process of carving a likeness from wood, adding hair, painting features and fashioning moveable shoulder joints? Fernández posits that: “Only the puppet, an entity supposedly deprived of independent consciousness, has the capacity to represent God and His saints without profaning their sacred content”. (59) Fernández highlights the idea that in matters of holy representations, it is essential that the vessel not mar in any way the divinity they are representing through irreverent intentions. By this thought process, only something with the ability to faithfully perform the required movements without altering any aspect of the ‘divine’ – whether conscious or subconscious – could be used for representation, and as such would need to be devoid of consciousness. The idea that a puppet could perform better than a human in some instances, precisely because of its lack of conscience is one that has been popular for many years now. In 1810, Heinrich Von Kleist wrote of a conversation between friends, one of whom was a dancer, as they discussed the performances of the marionette theatre in the local market place. The dancer explains his conviction that a sufficiently well-made marionette puppet “could perform a dance that neither he nor any

other outstanding dancer of his time, not even Vestris himself, could equal.” (Von Kleist, 23). This conviction arises from the dancer’s observation that the movements performed by the marionettes are faithful to the centre of gravity of the puppets’ limbs, and that these limbs are “what they should be - dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity, an outstanding quality that we look for in vain in most dancers.” The purity of the puppets’ movements imbues them with the ability to portray the more-than-human with beautiful fidelity.

The puppet’s ability to perform beings with an element of inhumanity doesn’t stop at the divine. Long have we used puppets to represent all sorts of supernatural creatures and beings. From witches, to demons and devils, to abstract beasts, the properties of puppets allow them to be very effective storytellers no matter their role. There is an innate humanity to all puppets, as they need human influence to ‘exist’, to come to life. There is also however an innate in-humanity to all puppets, and this is driven by the human ability to recognise the other, the parts of our brains that can intrinsically tell whether something is not quite as it should be. This instinct can tell that a puppet is being manipulated, that it doesn’t have the capacity for movement by itself. It is precisely because of this instinct telling us that something is just slightly off that puppets can make such affective supernatural entities. Our will to believe in the performance before us wars with our knowledge that what we are seeing is in fact a performance. This is where suspension of disbelief, and in fact a commitment to belief in a narrative plays an important role in our experience of a puppet show. It is at such moments that a more ‘childlike’ disposition, that is to say, a willingness to believe in the narrative we are being drawn into, allows for a deeper enjoyment of a puppet performance. Nonetheless, even those least inclined to believe in the magic of storytelling may find themselves drawn in by a well-crafted puppet show.

3.2. The Cheshire Cat

The Cheshire Cat from the 2011-2017 production of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by The Royal Ballet is a beautiful example of how thoughtful design can create a stunning visual impact. The puppet of the Cheshire Cat in this performance is in fact composed of nine separate pieces; a head, four legs, three body segments, and a tail. These pieces are operated by eight puppeteers, four responsible for a single body part (head, foreleg, hind leg, central body segment), two responsible for two pieces each (front body segment and foreleg, back

body segment and hind leg), and two working together to manipulate the tail. When assembled, the Cheshire Cat is an imposing figure, almost a head taller than any of the human actors. The particular ability of this puppet to fragment into all its pieces, swirl around the stage, and then reform is what makes it really effective. Within the world of Alice in Wonderland, originally brought to life in the book by Lewis Carroll, the Cheshire Cat plays a fascinating double role. As Alice leaves the world she knows, falling through the enchanted rabbit hole into Wonderland, she goes on a dream-like journey where nothing is quite what it seems, and things are apt to shift and change even before your very eyes. This surreal fantasy world pulls Alice along on her adventure as she learns about herself and the world around her, aided by a host of colourful characters. One such character is the Cheshire Cat, a large striped cat who seems to appear and disappear at will, leaving only the trace of a smile, or the wave of a tail. He seems to want to help Alice but gives her unreliable directions and reminds her that much of what she sees cannot be trusted to resemble or behave in the ways she expects. In this capacity he is her guide to Wonderland, forming a link between what she understands (his appearance as a cat, albeit a strange one), and what she doesn't yet understand (his penchant for dissolving into the air, leaving only random body parts). He is the bridge between Alice's reality, and the fantasy world she is experiencing. The Cheshire Cat also represents the entirety of Wonderland within the context of the story, playing a small but significant role whilst staying largely out of the main narrative of the story, only appearing when Alice needs him to be able to continue in her story. In this manner he is exceedingly similar to many trickster gods throughout mythology and folklore, influencing a narrative for his own gain without putting himself at the centre of the story.



Fig. 4 Miniature of the puppet



Fig. 5 Full scale puppet (unpainted)



Fig. 6 Full scale puppet (painted)

To be able to effectively translate the character of the Cheshire Cat to the stage, his design had to be well considered. How to show his changing nature and his ability to disappear at will? Clearly, a human actor could not rise to the many and varied challenges of this particular character, despite the fact that animals are played by humans not-irregularly in theatre. How then to bring to life such an unusual beast? The choice of a puppet seems obvious, as it allows for the creation of a character, from scratch, that will not only suit the role it plays, but embody it completely. A puppet does not simply play a role, it is the role, in ways no other medium can so beautifully execute. So, once the medium of puppetry is decided, how to craft this unique puppet so that it can be as effective as possible? A larger-than-human size to convey the Cheshire Cat's presence within the narrative, and a design that allows dissolution in real time. This last element is what really sets this puppet apart. Designed by Toby Olié, the Cheshire Cat was first built in miniature, to allow for movement tests, and visual decisions around scale. (fig. 4) The puppeteers were able to play around with the cat's physicality on a small scale, allowing for a much more seamless transition to manipulating the full-scale puppet. Linked through Olié's website is a video chronicling the design process from the perspective of the puppeteers; first as a miniature only a hand high, then in full scale to practice movement but unfinished and unpainted, next the final visual finish of the puppet in dressed rehearsals, and finally the finished puppet on stage, transformed yet again by the lights and sound of the performance. This final stage is particularly effective in helping the audience to accept the puppet as a spirit. The final transformation, into a creature of performance, is also aided by the puppeteers themselves. They are by now familiar with the physicality of the puppet, and able to dance across the stage, unnoticed in their blacks. For the audience to believe in the Cheshire Cat's autonomy, the puppeteers must disappear. In this instance, the effect is achieved by dressing the puppeteers all in black, thereby camouflaging them against the dark background of the stage and hiding them from the coloured lights. The choice to dress the puppeteers in black, rather than as background characters is informed by the character's nature. A mischievous spirit does not need attendants, and to have a group of them surrounding it would draw too much attention. It is likely that this design choice is influenced by the traditional Japanese art of Bunraku puppetry. In this technique, puppets are usually around 150cm in height, with extremely detailed faces that allow for the movement of eyes and mouth. These delicate mechanisms require precision in their operation, and therefore multiple operators, three in fact. These puppeteers, dressed in black, necessarily dwarf the doll-like puppets and the

visual impact of this is a significant one, as so eloquently outlined by Susan Sontag in 'A Note on Bunraku' (1984):

“The puppet is literally outnumbered, beleaguered, surrounded. The presence of three out-sized handlers contributes an unending pathos to the puppet's movements and efforts. The puppets seem helpless, child-like, vulnerable.”

The 2011 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* ballet very effectively reverses this use of black clothed operators combined with a significant size difference between puppet and puppeteers. The puppet in this instance is the one that towers over his operators, reducing them almost to insignificance by his larger-than-life presence. In this way, the inhumanity and spirit-ness of the character is amplified by distancing him from something small and familiar such as a real cat. This use of size, frequently coupled with bright colours, is often seen in narratives where a spirit takes the form of an animal to help the audience and other characters within the story to identify the manifestation of the 'other'.

In this manner, the design of the Cheshire Cat is brilliantly suited to his role within the narrative. The intangibility and un-humanness of his character is highlighted by his size, and the visual contrast with what is expected from puppet/puppeteer size ratio, as well as his 'ability' to shift and change during the process of the story by separating into nine distinct body parts and travelling across the stage to reform into a familiar shape. These visual illusions are made possible by his well-considered construction and the costuming of his puppeteers in clothing that will obscure them to the point of invisibility.

Conclusion

The appeal of puppet shows has endured for millennia, in part thanks to our fascination with the phenomenon of puppetry itself. We are transfixed by our warring desire to believe in the life of the puppet, and our rational knowledge of the puppet's inanimate nature. There are many reasons we might want to give credence to the possibility that we are witnessing a creature with a soul, be it our evolutionary predisposition to imagine faces and emotions onto the inert, or our archaic notion of Animism. The human desire to perceive puppets as living beings, particularly strong in children, is often materially helped by the design of said puppets. When designing a puppet, there is a large range of decisions to be made in regards to the visual aspect of the puppet, such as size, colours, or form, but there are equally decisions to be made about the construction and operation of the puppet. This last portion can greatly influence the effect and affect of a puppet and should not be underestimated. I posit that the key to choosing the correct method of puppet operation lies in the puppet's purpose. The puppet's purpose, its narrative reason for existence, is what should dictate the manner of its handling. The three case studies undertaken in this thesis highlight how a really effective puppet's design choices can be traced back directly to their necessity to the puppet's purpose within the narrative.

Kermit the Frog has such lasting charm due to the juxtaposition of his personhood with his 'animal' exterior. In all senses but physical, he is just a human trying to do his job and make his way in the world. This is part of why The Muppets are so widely loved, they exist almost as a satire of human relationships, and bring us great joy to observe things that are so obviously puppets act like human people. This personhood that the Muppets maintain is made possible in large part by our conviction of their autonomy. This in turn, is made possible by the careful control of audiences' perspective of The Muppets. Kermit's hand-rod puppet construction allows for him to have expressive movement while maintaining an aspect of detachment. The use of camera & screen to always tightly control the audience's point of view of Kermit from anyone who might be 'controlling him' has helped to imbue the general public with the idea of his autonomy. This has only been compounded by the recent development of The Muppets as public figures in their own rights, as they now have their own social media pages, and even attend talk show interviews 'in person'. They 'behave' like

other celebrities and are prevalent in modern day pop culture. This image we have of them as independent creatures blurs the lines of animal/puppet/human in a way no other puppets do.

Joey is a phenomenal example of how lifelike an inanimate object can be, and particularly how affective it can be. His power lies in his incredible ability to evoke the feeling of a real horse, an illusion that is so well carved and maintained by the many well thought out aspects of his design, but particularly, the movement and ‘behaviour’ he is able to exhibit thanks to his puppeteers. Despite the fact that the choice to have three puppeteers was born of necessity, it evolved into perhaps the most effective element of the puppet’s design in helping the audience to see Joey as a real horse. The puppeteers’ costuming as background characters of the play is again a brilliant choice, as it casts them in the role of handlers, and encourages the audience to share in their attention on Joey. This is where the delicate balance of puppet, puppeteer, and audience gets to really shine. This triangle is what gives puppetry its magic: an unspoken agreement between all present to treat the puppet as if it were living, as if it had a soul, in order to be able to experience the narrative as intended. Puppeteers encourage this belief by paying attention to their charges, by behaving themselves as if they are taking care of, helping, or handling the puppet. Thanks to the puppeteer’s commitment to not only operating the puppet, but engaging with it visibly, the belief in an autonomous character is strengthened.

The need to portray something more-than-human is something we’ve always had in our storytelling, be it good or bad, and something we have for hundreds of years used puppets for due to their innate ability to portray roles that human actors would not be able to do justice to. The Cheshire Cat is one of the more recent examples in the long line of puppet characters that manage to walk the line between divine and infernal by being a spirit of mischief, but apparently a benevolent one. His build, huge, and dissolvable, allows him to again toe the line between this and that, which is the purpose he serves within the narrative of “*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*”. He is a bridge from the known to the unknown. The puppeteers being small in comparison to his form and dressed so as to disappear completely when on stage help to create his presence on stage in a way that is larger-than-life. As mentioned previously, this is a reversal of the puppet/puppeteer scale ratio that we see in Bunraku, but as it’s goal is the inverse of that of Bunraku, it is extremely effective. Were we able to see the

puppeteers, the illusion of his autonomy would be shattered, and he would seem like perhaps on oversized child's toy.

In conclusion – puppets, when purpose built for a role, become that role in a way that human actors could never. They can be designed with incredible precision, and the vast range of possibilities means that no matter the narrative requirements of a performance, there will be a perfect choice of puppet for it. The way in which the puppet is operated, particularly the manner in which the puppeteer is visible or invisible to the audience will influence that puppet's ability to perform its role to an extreme degree. In the case of puppets where it is imperative that we believe in their autonomy, it is highly important that the puppeteers be invisible, either through controlling the audience's perspective, disguising the puppeteers as characters within the framework of the narrative, or visually hiding them through the use of all black costumes. In this way, the nature of a puppet, that is to say the purpose that it serves within the narrative of its performance, will necessarily influence the way in which that puppet is designed, built, and operated.

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Fig.1: Jim Henson & Kermit the Frog and John Cleese on the set of The Muppet Show (1977). “Working with the frog [?] and the absolutely brilliant Jim Henson.” *Twitter*, 30 July 2020, <https://twitter.com/JohnCleese/status/1288887828533800960>. Accessed 27 September 2022.

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Fig. 3: The Cheshire Cat and Alice on stage

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