

# THE “AS-IF” REALITY OF PUPPET THEATER<sup>1</sup>

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“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented” Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte<sup>2</sup>

I.

I recently had occasion to rescreen Stanley Kubrick’s rather astonishing epic 2001: A Space Odyssey. About halfway into the film there is a sequence that continues to be profoundly disturbing. In it we witness the shutting down of the memory banks of a highly advanced mainframe computer, HAL. These are among HAL’s shocking last words:

“I know that you and Frank were planning to disconnect me, and I’m afraid that’s something I cannot allow to happen.”

The computer’s interlocutor, addressed here in the second person, is Dave Bowman (whose name situates him with all human agents who are heir to the hunt), the captain of the spacecraft Discovery One, which is on a mission to Jupiter. HAL has made an error in data analysis and is showing signs of putting the voyage at risk, and as a result Bowman terminates the computer. The scene is emotionally distressing to watch, even though HAL’s voice is without affect.<sup>3</sup> In fact it seems disembodied, detached from itself. HAL is pure intelligence, yet nonetheless is captive to the hardware within which that intelligence is constituted. This is the source of the uncanny disquiet for the audience who watch as, through a series of material and technological actions, HAL is rendered a nullity. There is something akin to a metaphysical unease in the meticulously slow-paced

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<sup>1</sup> Catalogue essay for *The Puppet Show*. Curated by Ingrid Schaffner and Carin Kuoni, for the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers. 1981 p 124..

<sup>3</sup> The voice of HAL is played by Canadian actor Douglas Rain. Rain’s unforgettable interpretation of HAL’s comments can be heard online at *2001: A Space Odyssey Internet Resource Archive > Sounds*.

filming of the events as Bowman removes units of memory from HAL. We are made to watch, to take note of HAL's passing.

Released in 1968, the film in many ways looks forward, anticipating the future of robotics. At the same time the flow of meaning that is generated among the audience, the captain, and his computer alludes to the archaic puppetry traditions which HAL obliquely inherits. In what sense do I understand this? It has become a commonplace to refer to the puppet as a forerunner of the avatar, but I would like to consider what this might actually mean.

In puppetry, the thing becomes a being because of an implicit contract shared: the event depends on a triangle linking the audience, the human performer(s), and an inanimate object. Via a transaction of affect between these sites, we are allowed to engage with the object as if it were generating a universe of expressive and intellectual complexity.<sup>4</sup> That as if is crucial, and it is in these terms that puppets reaffirm the profoundly mediated nature of human subjectivity. In psychoanalytic terms, after all, it is through processes of projective identification, of role play, and of separation that we are precipitated into individuation. Our pleasure in engaging with puppets arises from the instability that they generate in relation to that process. No longer do we understand ourselves to be projecting meanings onto the thing, but rather the thing begins to speak to us, and we lose touch with the idea that the object has become sensible simply because of our commitment to transfer affect onto it.

In 2001 Dave Bowman carries out his professional obligation to “neutralize” HAL, but because of his repressed (yet evident) dismay as he does so, we import emotional meaning to the computer's impassive voice as it intones, “Stop. Will you. Stop Dave. Will you stop Dave. I'm afraid. I'm afraid Dave.” These are not questions, nor are they appeals. They are simply chains of signifiers. In the background we hear Bowman's amplified and uneven breathing inside his space-helmet. Visually, we are caught in a chain of gazes, with Bowman constantly glancing at the red light that serves as an emblem for HAL's consciousness, and we see the astronaut's helmet reflected in the surface of that red orb. This reciprocal mirroring destabilizes the normative distance

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<sup>4</sup> Puppetry practices vary enormously in this, because the obligation to serve verisimilitude is often negated. Nonetheless, even setting up a pratfall can be a complex task.

between the subject and the object. Somehow, even with no expressive possibilities at all, HAL manages a deeply affecting performance.

While Kubrick's film is not in the strict sense a puppet show, I would argue that it instructs us on how the procedures of puppetry allow for the projection of an expressive capacity onto a non-person. Thus the limits of personhood are momentarily suspended. Periodic ideological shifts prompt philosophy to redefine which categories of "objects" should participate and share in the community of persons (those agents who are both spectators and speakers). "Person" is, as Locke so clearly understands, "a Forensick Term."<sup>5</sup> The law defines where agency and accountability can be located. Perhaps some of the exhilarating delight of puppetry stems from its challenge to fixed notions of subject and object categories.

The child who smacks a "naughty" doll intuitively explores these potential confusions. Various experiencing her position, that of the authoritative caregiver, and that of the doll, the child may undergo the distress and pain of the toy, may cry its tears, in a process of affective circulation that is in part precipitating the child into consciousness through the experience of sadism and masochism.<sup>6</sup> What interests us while watching a staged puppetry performance is not that we might forget that we are captive to a sleight of hand, and take the artifice for the real; rather, we are beguiled in large measure precisely because we are simultaneously aware of both the performer and the puppet.

The simplest, most banal act, when undertaken by a puppet, becomes a sublime achievement, and the quotidian attains the status of the sacred. It is a marvel to see a wooden hand stir a pot, or tie a scarf. We observe the puppet's compliance with the will of the puppeteer as if we were hierophants at a sacred rite. This surely means that we have surrendered our unquiet selves to governance with difficulty. However, now and again the puppet will avenge itself against the puppeteer. The potential volatility of this relationship is substantially the premise upon which many ventriloquism acts are based.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 346.

<sup>6</sup> It seems not without relevance that so much traditional puppetry relies specifically on beating, falling, tricking, and trapping. The slapstick itself is an instrument from puppetry arts. Further, for an explication of the sadomasochistic production of persons, see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> A fascinating meditation on the meanings of ventriloquism **and its particular potential for postmodern multicultural performance** can be found in C. B. Davis, "Reading the Ventriloquist's Lips: The Performance

Despite the conventional distinction between the puppeteer and the ventriloquist, for the purposes of my discussion I will elide that difference, for the very reason that ventriloquism provides the limit-term for the case I am making.

In the 1945 short film “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy” (part of the compendium Dead of Night), Michael Redgrave’s Maxwell Frere is a performer whose mental collapse is precipitated by his inability to maintain a meaningful boundary between himself and his dummy.<sup>8</sup> The historical context of the film’s making, at the end of World War II, had led cultural critique to engage with problems of collaboration, autonomy, and will. By the time Psycho was released, in 1960, Norman Bates’s acts of ventriloquism took the embalmed body of his mother as dummy. Within the intergenerational crisis that the 1960s would precipitate, Bates’s melancholic attachment to the matriarchal corpse is coded as pathological, signaling to the film-going audience that the character had failed to construct adequate defenses for the self against the omnipotent mother. Norman Bates is regarded as at once contemptible and pathetic, in an ideological maneuver that naturalizes this interpretation. The failure of masculinity within the Hitchcockian paradigm is premised on the transgression of two fundamental embargoes: “Boys do not play with their mothers” and “Boys do not play with dolls.” The *reductio ad absurdum* of the film is “Boys do not play with their mothers as if they are dolls.” Both incest taboos and gender identity are affirmed through Hitchcock’s culturally specific narrative of one frail male subject.

Intergenerational relations have been at the heart of substantial recent research into robotics, simulacra, and performance theory. Our self-deceiving habits of mind are at present being explored as a solution to the crisis in care of the elderly in Japan. Due to the accelerated breakdown in facilities for the elderly, the Japanese government has identified a critical need for simulated interactive companionship and nursing via interactive robotic design.<sup>9</sup> The desideratum driving this research is the impulse to produce a generation of intelligent machines that will adequately express and respond to patients and clients.

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Genre behind the Metaphor,” *TDR* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 133–156). Davis suggests that “as an enactment of both the dispersion of agency in speech and the appropriation of the voice of the Other, actual ventriloquism would seem to be a neglected technique” (151).

<sup>8</sup> *Dead of Night*, 1945, UK. “The Ventriloquist’s Dummy” was directed by Alberto Cavalcanti.

<sup>9</sup> Nariko Dethlefs and Brian Martin, “Japanese technology policy and aged care,” *Science and Public Policy* 33.1 <<or 33 no. 1? I couldn’t find the info>> (Feb 2006): 47–57.

Such experiments frequently awaken unease about the violation of what is taken to be a "natural" horizon between the subject and the object, and the real and the simulacrum. We take this as characteristic of our postmodern condition.<sup>10</sup> Such unease presumes a normative logic according to which our journey toward modernity has been a unidirectional evolution heightening the relationship between humans and their surrogates. Our identification with our things, our animals, is uniquely modern. Perhaps there is a more variable narrative of that history. The legend of the Minotaur may well suggest that Greeks of antiquity were willing to assimilate a major technology (the bull) into their own personhood, and that the dream so forged was a mythological creature that partook of both intelligence and might.

Puppets are figures of metamorphosis. As in Ovid, Daphne turns to laurel wood under the hand of Apollo and Galatea is born from stone; so too Geppetto's little marionette Pinocchio becomes an automaton and ultimately is transmogrified into flesh and blood. Collodi's much-loved children's story is generally interpreted as a fable about education and moral fortitude. It strikes me that it could also be interpreted as a political allegory. Collodi was a passionate nationalist, and as a young journalist he had written for the cause of Italian unification. The emblem of the boy engineered out of wood and string who magically is transformed into an integrated being could well suggest the process whereby Italy would emerge as an organic unity. The puppet is thus a figure of magical potential, standing on the cusp between sensate and insensate being, between the real (what is) and the longed for (what might yet be).

## II.

The human body is in some sense the necessary technology through which the "person" is realized, without which it cannot exist. Performance traditions that animate the mask, the puppet, and the ventriloquist's dummy are foregrounding one of the core questions of philosophy: What is the relationship between the material and the ideal, or in more

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<sup>10</sup> As Jean Baudrillard has indicated, "The system of needs has become less integrated than the system of objects" under late capitalism. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988): 14\_15.

classical terms, between the Body and the Soul? Tertullian asserted, in defiance of the Platonists, that the Soul had corporeality; Descartes's singular solution was that the two only make contact within the pineal gland. In such terms the puppet's form is a metaphor for the physical human subject whose affective universe arises from somewhere that is, uncannily, not coextensive with the body. No puppet speaks for itself.

I became aware of the performative power of this fact when working with Handspring Puppet Company and artist-director William Kentridge on the making of Ubu and the Truth Commission. The theatre piece was one of several "Fault Lines," cultural events that I initiated during the first year of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These projects mobilized inquiries around memory, narrative, voice, sadism, and masochism. One of the most powerful insights that I gained through this process arose from considering the dispersed and distributed field of affective meaning in language.

In 1966 South Africa was testing the limits of its new multilingual constitutional guarantees, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was, through the gathering of testimony, engaging in a work of linguistic reparation. In a massive departure from the former Eurocentric language policy of the South African apartheid state, the Commission sought to broaden and deepen access to political agency for its citizenry through a significantly multiplied spectrum of official languages. The country had opted for eleven of them. The TRC's hearings were conducted, over the next several years, with simultaneous translation in those various tongues. Particularly in the Human Rights Violations hearings (in which individuals testified to violations against themselves or those they knew or loved), a volatile and at times unpredictable circulation of meaning and of feeling resulted. When working with puppet performance, there is automatically a somewhat diffuse field of emotional meaning that can be distributed across the puppeteers and puppets. This varies in degree depending on what kind of puppets are involved, with differing levels of ambiguity being explored through each puppetry tradition. What I am suggesting can be best apprehended through some comments on aspects of staging interpretation using puppets in our production.

For Ubu and the Truth Commission, there were three distinct kinds of puppets. There were two rather burlesque, diabolical characters that were a combination of found objects and carved faces, Niles the crocodile and Brutus the three-headed dog. A second type was a mechanically driven automaton in the form of a pet vulture. The third group of puppets, who made up the bulk of the puppet cast, performed the witnesses: these were naturalistic yet sculptural carved human figures, one-half to two-thirds of human scale. The witnesses were each manipulated by two puppeteers, one of whom would take the lead and whose expressive identification with the puppet encouraged the audience to read the puppeteer's features as indicative of the puppet's emotions. In a somewhat unorthodox interpretation of Japanese Bunraku puppetry, the puppeteers were always clearly visible, and they in fact contributed significantly to the emotional meaning that was ultimately conferred on the performance. It is through their intense gaze into the face of the puppet that the audience is led (via the puppeteer) back into the puppet.

These witness puppets carried the ethical and emotional substance of the play as they took turns giving their account of acts of horror perpetrated under a corrupt and crumbling regime. As they testified, one of the troupe's performers would break away from the group and enter a translation booth in order to provide simultaneous translation of what were generally indigenous African languages. The audience was required then to watch both the small knot of figures constituting the puppet with its two manipulators, and the translator standing inside his booth. These simultaneous events each generated their own language environment. In one group there was a story being told through expressive gestures by a puppet that was being manipulated by an African-language speaker who spoke on the puppet's behalf. Some distance away there was a restating of that narrative in English by a translator whose attention remained absolutely fixed on the witness puppet.

This linguistic circuit is deeply productive of meaning and resonates in many ways with events at the Commission hearings themselves. There, the witnesses testifying would previously have formulated the story of their violation (even if only to themselves). Very often, however, the interpreters could not anticipate the narratives that they would be called upon to tell: while the witnesses had within themselves a representation of what had happened, the interpreters did not. Thus, while it was often

extremely distressing and humiliating for the witness to provide linguistic substance to a remembered horror, it was not generally shocking for them. For the interpreters, by contrast, the moment of speech coincided with the instant of trauma, and they spoke the horror into existence at the instant in which they were hearing it. As a result the affective distress flowed in unforeseeable ways around the arena.

The shape and structure of speech patterns in these hearings was often unfamiliar, because the interpreter's characteristic habit is to end a verbal phrase with an upward inflection, a kind of caesura. The interpreters did not know exactly where a sentence was going, nor could they predict the speaker's intention or the closure of an utterance. They were attending primarily to the content of what they were saying, yet in some part of their minds they were striving to pay attention to the emotional meaning of what they were hearing and speaking. The sound environment became a fabric of various tonal and expressive articulations, with a strong undertone of the provisional, as the interpreters regarded and spoke on behalf of another's distress.

This process drew attention to the dialogic character of language: interpreters were enjoined not to finish sentences "on behalf of" a witness who was so distressed that their thoughts were interrupted or slow in coming. The natural habit of facilitating dialogue through anticipating endings was unhelpful. So too, was substituting a euphemism in place of a blunt formulation. We had to learn to be attentive to the precise formulations of a speaker who was reluctant to describe a violation in frank terms, or whose cultural proprieties were affronted by an impolite truth.

The ideal of radical agency still persists within Western philosophical traditions, exemplifying a kind of ideal autonomy. Because of cultural biases, there are deeply negative constructions attached to the notion of being a puppet. It is instructive to recognize that puppets in some meaningful sense reassert the necessarily social and reciprocal exchange upon which language is founded.