



Call for abstracts

International Symposium

Puppets on screen

Art, audiovisual and theatrical studies

20th to 23rd April 2020 - Amman (Jordan)



Puppets on screen

International Symposium in Amman, Jordan

Assumption

Puppetry traditionally favours gathering the audience, the animated object and the puppeteer on the same location. Limiting this art to its appreciation through a screen brings a paradox that consists in subtracting both physical proximity and real-time perception. Why, then, should we insist on this limitation?

After the end of World War II, on every continent where television experienced a swift boom, puppets largely invaded the small screen to satisfy an increasingly younger audience eager for fantasy and adventure. While in the 1960s, live action dramas were shot in cramped studios (which explains the abundance of medium long-shots trapped in a theatrical convention), programs using puppets¹ allowed to inexpensively obtain the whole range of shots specific to high-budget fictions (i.e. extreme long, long, medium, full, close and extreme close shots) and explored themes such as the conquest of space, the discovery of unknown lands and seas, journeys on isolated islands or deserts...

By leaving the theater stage, puppets therefore reached, in the 1960s in Japan, from the 1970s in USA and in Europe, the full field of fantasy. However, for the Middle East, scholars have not paid sufficient attention to this practice and so the lack of studies – and resources – makes it difficult to document puppet theater in the region and to obtain information about its new life on screen after the 1960s.

Puppets broadcasts around the world

While in Europe the popularity, in the 1990s, of 3D imaging gradually pushed puppets away from TV screens (especially since the success of virtual creatures animated in live via motion capture), tangible puppets (marionettes, paper cut-out, hand puppets...) still hold the TV air today in Japan through plural tones. They do not only focus on children. In fact, Japan's historical attachment to puppets may explain their current television destiny, as well as their ability to deal with sometimes difficult, serious or taboo (including under a "kawaii" appearance). In the popular program *Nehorin Pahorin*, two moles (as reporters

or journalists) interview a guest who appears like a pig, customized with clothing accessories that reflect his personality (hat, sun-glass, scarf, bandana, etc.).

“ The guests that appear on *Nehorin Pahorin*² [...] are all regular people involved in interesting subculture spaces or activities that rarely get mainstream media attention. This season, which started last September, has focused on idol otaku, child actors and women obsessed with “boys love” comics, among others. Normally, people wouldn’t want to talk about these topics because of privacy issues. Yet *Nehorin Pahorin* circumvents this via its use of puppets (alongside voice modulation technology)³ .”

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the United Kingdom popularized the tradition of filmed theatre plays. In *The Muppet show*, Jim Henson proposed an entertainment program that seems to take place in a theatre, as if the viewer would be sitting among the public⁴. Through this device, Henson is constrained by theatrical conventions that require a frontal point of view and a limitation of shot scales. This option however offers many benefits such as the possibility to hold the scene far from cinematographic realism (in a puppet booth, characters do not pretend to be living creatures), bring together creatures made of foam and living actors (guests), and give the occasion to shoot every scene in a studio optimized for set replacements and camera movements (which guarantees a regular performance). But the main advantage is certainly the ability for recurrent puppets to perform in different roles, depending on the sketches they enlist in. This condition may explain the success of the several movies featuring the Muppets.

In Syria, puppet shows filmed secretly by the rebels strongly revive the tradition of the political satyr of 19th century street performances. In a country where gatherings can attract dangerous attention, only the anonymous filmed shows supported by YouTube can reach the expected audience. The Syrian group *Masasit Mati* indeed questions the media potential of puppets: their films pave the way, if the problematic is exported outside the war context, for the adaptation of situations that border the prohibition of representation or, to further expand the field, the non-visible.

[1] In Japan, puppets were largely used when the studio were unable to provide regular animation programs

[2] TV show airs every Wednesday at 11 p.m. on NHK's educational channel (30 minutes broadcast).

[3] The Japan Times, 03/03/2018.

[4] In fact, the technicians can edit the show like in a normal pre-recorded program.

Issue

In this symposium project, puppets are considered through their tangible links with a manipulator who could be visible, hidden by a classical stage device (curtain, base...) or acting off-camera, "between the frames" (stop motion). It excludes, at first glance, the 3D modeled figurines, even if they often are mentioned as "puppets". These creatures, made of foam, wood, paper, and who can be realistic or abstract, are considered through a media existence (television, cinema, web) which **has enriched the subgenres of post-war fiction, deals with subjects that could not be filmed in real capture, or offers the opportunity to experiment a great variety of tones and points of view in video practice**, without geographical or temporal restrictions. Thus, the symposium will provide the opportunity to explore fields on the margins of research as well as to present the current knowledge on the topic, eventually opening new perspectives in the studies.

This symposium could also foster some reflection on the origins of different practices belonging either to cultural mythologies or to more recent currents of thought. When focusing on the origin of Czech filmed puppetry, one is aware that the 18th century tradition nourished subsequent artistic practices. Similarly, one knows the deep interpenetration that took place in the 19thth and 20th centuries between literature ("El retablo de Maese Pedro" from Cervantes's *Don Quixote*), theatrical practices (Brecht) and puppetry: *Über das Marionetten Theater* (Kleist, 1810), *Trois petits drames pour marionnettes* (Maeterlinck, 1894)... attest to the impact of this legacy upon literary, theoretical and practical grounds.

The different types of puppets included in our approach are:

- full-bodied, human-arm, hand, finger puppets;
- rod puppets;
- marionettes (controlled from above by strings);
- tabletop puppets;
- silhouette and shadow puppets;
- marottes;
- black light puppets;
- object puppets;
- animatronics;
- "made-for-stop-motion" puppets (articulated puppets for "frame by frame" animation capture).

The different types of media included in our approach are:

- theatrical film (filmed theatre plays);
- feature and short cinema films;
- stop motion films;
- TV shows (series, TV film, children's programs);
- web series;
- advertisements, web pop-up ad;
- video games.

Angles of study

Can be considered studying puppets for:

- **the variety of explored genres** (sci-fi, fantasy, adventure, musical, etc.);
- **their ability to create recognizable universes** (Jim Henson's, Tim Burton's, Roland Topor's, Alain Duverne's, Tadahito Mochinaga's troops, etc.);
- **the manipulation potential** in a context of filmed scenes (puppeteers wearing black masks, dressed in green in front of a chroma-key, etc.);
- **the co-presence of living actors and creatures;**
- **the link between cinematographic realism and abstraction** (puppets as living beings or inanimate objects);
- **the puppet's ability to relate situations that cannot be filmed through traditional shooting:** what is buried or unclear (memories and life stories...); what is intangible (indices and time markers...); what is falsified (including false memory, misinformation or events that did not occur but are validated by testimonies...); what is poetic (tales, fables, beliefs, legendary stories and products of folklore);
- **the use of the traditional heritage in new technologies;**
- **the forms of theatricality** in puppet theater;
- **puppet theatre's political and social aspects;**
- **the relationship between puppet theatre and forms of political power;**
- **the use of puppetry for social objectives;**
- **puppets and censorship.**

Call for abstracts

Please e-mail abstracts relative to your communication (≈500 words) + author bios (≈100 words) + short bibliography to:

- to: s.kaczorowski@ifporient.org
and n.nakhlecerri@ifporient.org
- before: 30th November 2019

Practical information

The conferences will be held from the 20th to the 23rd April 2020 in the French Institute of Amman (Jordan).

Accommodation in Amman, Jordanian visa and meals are covered.

Depending on the funding obtained, transportation might be covered upon request for speakers coming from abroad.

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