

INTRODUCTION

Animating Matter, Suggesting Uncanny Presences. Light in the Thought and Practices of Puppetry

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The texts gathered in this dossier were collected during the study day devoted to the relations between non-human stage forms (puppets, masks, shadows, robots) and light through the lens of the uncanny¹, held at the University of Lille on 27 November 2024². What possibilities of animation does lighting open up for artists? What dialogue is established between the non-human body and light? How does light participate in transforming the presence of a non-human actor into a disturbing presence? Although the notion of virtuality was not explicitly one of the themes addressed, it clearly resonates with the reflection on the uncanny, linked to the experience of liminality³ and to that of possible worlds.

Lighting an actor endowed with an ontological status different from that of the human actor poses unprecedented challenges for the lighting designer. «How can presences and absences be played for the needs of dramaturgy? What choice and direction should be given to the light in order to play with the focus placed on this or that part of the image⁴?» The questions posed here by Olivier Irthum, lighting designer for the production *Les Aveugles* by Cie Trois Six Trente (2008), in relation to staging with puppets, are equally relevant to those who work with masks or robots. In all three cases, what is distinctive is the metamorphosis produced by light, closely linked to animation. Light animates the non-human actor while transforming it; it suggests a life (the character) while revealing its absence. At the threshold between the inanimate and the animate, the puppet, like the shadow, mask, or robot, is a privileged means of evoking the «uncanny», in which one «doubts that an apparently living being has a soul⁵», or conversely wonders «whether a non-living object might, by chance, have a soul». What Steve

¹This encompasses different aesthetic categories characterized by an international vocabulary: Unheimlich (Ger.), Perturbante (It.), Uncanny (Eng.).

²This study day was organized by Cristina Grazioli, Yanna Kor, Véronique Perruchon, and Antonio Palermo as part of the «Lumière de Spectacle» research programme within the CEAC laboratory directed by Véronique Perruchon.

³Nicolas Royle, *The Uncanny*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 1-2.

⁴Olivier Irthum, «Les techniques de l'éclairage pour la marionnette», in *Manip*, no. 39, July-August-September 2014, p. 9.

⁵Sigmund Freud, *L'inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*, Paris, Gallimard, collection «Folio Essais», 1985, p. 224.

Tillis calls «double vision⁶», and what Kenneth Gross designates as «puppet madness⁷», is impossible without light. The latter does not necessarily have the reassuring effect one might expect: rather than diminishing the feeling of uncertainty experienced in the presence of these entities, it increases it, because it makes it possible to animate and transform the immaterial, to suggest the presence of the living, and to invoke its marginality and duality, even its multiplicity.

When speaking of light and the non-human actor, however, it is shadow theatre that first comes to mind. More than puppet theatre, this form of performance, which relies on the expressive possibilities of the shadow, needs light in order to tell a story⁸. More than that, those who act upon the screen's vertical stage are themselves actors of light⁹, ephemeral, fleeting creatures in constant evolution. Led through the maze of questions—Is it alive? Is it dead? What is it? Who is this before me?—we scarcely have time to answer before the form changes and the interplay of shadow and light makes something else appear. Thus, in shadow theatre and optical spectacles more generally (the magic lantern, phantasmagoria), the uncanny reaches its highest degree (as does virtuality).

Patrice Pavis's definition of light, «a substance from which life is born¹⁰», takes on its full meaning in this context, suggesting a rapprochement between the act of lighting and the act of animation. Light plays a primary role in creating the halo of the non-human actor's virtual life. Through it, the puppet (mask, robot, shadow) «enters the game¹¹», in Alfred Jarry's formulation. It then opens onto a multiplicity of possible lives: «A wooden head opens the door to strange worlds¹³», says Kenneth Gross in the prologue to his book *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*. In contemporary puppetry practices, this virtuality, «a form of separation, a fissure that no illusion can ever completely seal», which persists «[between] the object, an

⁶Steve Tillis, *Towards an Aesthetic of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1992, p. 64.

⁷Kenneth Gross, *Puppet. An Essay on Uncanny Life*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 1. Our translation.

⁸Fabrizio Montecchi, *Au-delà de l'écran. Pour un théâtre d'ombres contemporain*, Françoise Canon-Roger (trans.), Charleville-Mézières, Institut International de la Marionnette, online, [icima_fmontecchi_au-dela-de-l-ecran.pdf](#)

⁹Cristina Grazioli, «Acteurs de lumière», in Puck. *La marionnette et les autres arts*, no. 15, «Les marionnettes au cinéma», 2008, pp. 11-22.

¹⁰Patrice Pavis, «Éclairage», in *Dictionnaire du théâtre*, Paris, Dunod, 1996, p. 111.

¹¹Alfred Jarry, «La Mécanique d'«Ixion»», *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, Paris, Gallimard, coll. «Bibliothèque de la Pléiade», 1987, p. 407.

¹²Kenneth Gross, *Puppet. An Essay on Uncanny Life*, op. cit., p. 4. Our translation.

¹³Didier Plassard, «Les scènes de l'intranquillité», in Puck : *la marionnette et les autres arts*, no. 20, «Humain Non humain», 2014, p. 13.

¹⁴Ibid.

instrument of theatrical play, and the appearance of being alive that is attributed to it», becomes even more palpable. «What was merely a gap in representation becomes a fracture, crevice, abyss: between what is given to be understood or felt [...] a distance that the spectator must cross through imagination and sensitivity». And light participates fully in this process, at times creating the fracture, at times constructing the bridge between the object and its appearance.

The issue is one of encounter, whether with puppets, shadows, masks, or robots: first, the encounter between light and matter, with light exploring the reliefs, structure, surface, cavities, and protuberances of matter in order to reveal them in their naked, unsettling truth; and then the encounter between the human body and the artificial body, which light invests as a field of questioning, but also, at times, of collisions. It is precisely in these encounters that the source of the uncanny lies, and it is there that the virtual takes flight.

Puppeteers have always known how to take advantage of the magical power of light: they designed puppets' eyes so that they would reflect light rays, making their gaze appear more alive, or they lit the stage in such a way that the strings became invisible, giving the puppet the appearance of a living being¹⁵¹⁶. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Alfred Jarry would synthesize the aesthetics of the glove puppet, shadow theatre, and mask in order to propose a new aesthetics of theatrical play under the sign of light¹⁷¹⁸. What was then merely a theoretical approach would, two decades later, take the form of a multitude of stage experiments conducted by avant-garde artists around the interactions between light and performative objects. These investigations had an impact on traditional forms, which diversified in the second half of the twentieth century, with the emergence of new forms of performance such as object theatre and matter theatre, collectively referred to today as «figure theatre».

The growing importance of light in contemporary puppetry, on the one hand, and the introduction of the first robots onto the theatrical stage at the beginning of the twenty-first century, an unprecedented performative practice both close to and independent of figure theatre, on the other, raise a crucial question: does light add an additional dimension to animation and

¹⁵This technique was notably used by the British puppeteers, the brothers Thomas and John Holden.

¹⁶Yanna Kor, *Les théâtres d'Alfred Jarry. L'invention de la scène 'pataphysique*, La Fresnais-Fayel, Otrante, 2022, pp. 93-98.

¹⁷See: Cristina Grazioli, «Le Avanguardie: luce della tecnica e luce dello spirito», in *Luce et ombra. Storia, teorie e pratiche dell'illuminazione teatrale*, Bari, Laterza, 2008.

¹⁸This notion, less commonly used in French, is present in the vocabulary of other European languages: Figurentheater (Ger.), Teatro di Figura (It.). Figurentheater (all.) Teatro di Figura (ital.)

staging, or does it merely serve to make them visible? The contributions gathered in this dossier show that light is much more than simple illumination: it is a fully-fledged stage partner of the non-human actor. It enters into dialogue with it and opens it to dialogue with the human actor (and spectator), thereby introducing the dimensions of the uncanny and virtuality into the dramaturgy of the performance.

Claude Jamain's article, which opens this dossier, reflects on the puppet as «matter emerging from the void», which, through light, creates a universe at the boundary between the real and the imaginary. Echoing Jamain's analysis, Yucheng Peng's contribution explores the relationships between light and the humanoid robot, showing how light becomes a means of questioning the robot's virtual life as well as its artificiality.

The following two contributions, by Samuel Lhuillery and Olivier Vallet, examine the way light participates in the creation of virtual worlds and in the emergence of a feeling of uncanniness in optical spectacles. Samuel Lhuillery considers the different roles played by light in the shadow-theatre production *Préhistoire* by the company Scalopendra. Olivier Vallet discusses his artistic work as a shadow performer and designer of original projection systems.

Marzenna Wiśniewska closes this dossier with a presentation of the artistic experiments of Polish artist Tadeusz Wierzbicki, particularly his invention, the «light masks», a radical reconceptualization of the theatrical mask that shifts it from a physical object to an immaterial entity.

This dossier continues the reflection on light and lighting in stage practices involving non-human actors¹⁹ on poetic, aesthetic, and scenic levels, while proposing a dialogue between puppetry, optical spectacles, robotic performance, and artistic experimentation.

¹⁹It should be noted that, at the time this dossier was prepared, the question of the challenges and issues involved in lighting in puppetry and related practices remained a subject very little addressed in theoretical scholarship. Cristina Grazioli has made a major contribution to this research (see Cristina Grazioli: «Acteurs de lumière», art. cit.; «Insufflare luce, animare figure / Inspirar Luz, Animar Figuras», in *Urdimento - Revista de Estudos em Artes Cênicas*, vol. 1, no. 37, 2020, pp. 85-115, accessed 25 June 2026, <http://www.revistas.udesc.br/index.php/urdimento/article/view/1414573101372020085>, French translation: «Souffles de lumière : animer les choses», in *Poétiques de l'illusion. Dialogues contemporaines entre marionnette et magie*, Liège, édition Alternatives théâtrales, pp. 86-89; «Marionnettes et la Lumière», in *Carnet d'Hiver. Intersections*, no. 4, 2021, pp. 34-35; «À la croisée des figures animées et de la lumière : Mario Ricci au début des années 1960», in *Manip*, no. 70, 2022, pp. 18-19.) We should also add the *Manip* dossier entitled «Y a-t-il une particularité à déclarer les arts de la marionnette ?» by Olivier Irthum and Vincent Vergone (no. 39, July-August-September 2014, pp. 9-11), as well as our own article, which examines, among other things, the technical aspects of lighting the castelet from a historical perspective. (Yanna Kor, «Comment construire un castelet ? De la notice technique au manuel pédagogique (1881-1942)», in *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, «Relire les traités techniques»,

(Translation into English by Alexandru Bumbas)

no. 301, 2025/2.) As for shadow theatre, it is rather its practitioners who engage in this work (see: Montecchi, Fabrizio, *Au-delà de l'écran. Pour un théâtre d'ombres contemporain*, Françoise Canon-Roger (trans.), Charleville-Mézières, Institut International de la Marionnette, 2024, https://lelab.artsdelamarionnette.eu/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=72392; Olivier Vallet, «Ombre et lumière, histoire des techniques évolution conjointe des usages de la lumière et de l'image projetée», in *Poétiques de l'illusion. Dialogues contemporains entre marionnette et magie*, loc. cit., pp. 95-98. We should also mention Rainer Reusch's numerous publications, including three volumes of *Shattentheater* published in 1997, 2001, and 2005 by Einhorn Verlag.)

Olivier Vallet, « Ombre et lumière, histoire des techniques évolution conjointe des usages de la lumière et de l'image projetée », dans *Poétiques de l'illusion. Dialogues contemporains entre marionnette et magie*, loc. cit., pp. 95-98. Citons également les multiples publications de Rainer Reusch dont trois volumes de *Shattentheater* parus en 1997. 2001 et 2005 chez Einhorn Verlag.)