

Manipulation and Animation: Theatrical Construction of the Relationship Between "Self" and "Other" in Puppetry Performance

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Abstract

As an ancient performing art with contemporary vitality, puppetry demonstrates rich aesthetic characteristics and philosophical connotations in contemporary theatrical practice. Taking the puppetry performance in the contemporary drama. When a Tooth Falls in Love with the Dentist's Front Tooth (hereinafter referred to as "The Tooth") as the research object, this paper starts from the basic characteristics of puppetry, and deeply explores the construction of the relationship between "self" and "other", the aesthetic mechanism of anthropomorphic performance, and the reconstruction of performing subject identity in the co-performance of humans and puppets. By combining theoretical analysis and case study, this paper argues that puppetry is not only a display of skills, but also a philosophical exploration of life, subjectivity and the spectator-performer relationship.

Keywords

Puppetry performance; anthropomorphism; puppet; theatrical performance; subjectivity.

1. Introduction

As Marshall McLuhan said in *Media of Understanding*: "A game is a machine. Only when the people in the game agree to be a puppet can the machine run[1]. Amid the vigorous development of digital technology and intermedia art, traditional performing forms are constantly re-examined and revitalized. Puppetry, an art originating from ancient rituals and folk entertainment, is radiating new vitality on the contemporary theatrical stage with its unique body language and philosophical metaphors. Beyond mere children's entertainment or folk custom display, it has become an effective medium for artists to explore profound propositions such as human and object, reality and fiction, manipulation and autonomy. This paper selects the contemporary drama "The Tooth" as a specific case, aiming to systematically elaborate the core characteristics and values of puppetry in the contemporary context through analyzing its puppetry practice.

2. Basic Characteristics and Theoretical Framework of Puppetry Performance

Different from other performances, puppetry is centered on its complex identity structure and relational tension. It is an artistic performance that endows puppets with life, realizing the transformation from "object" to "role", and completing the triplicity of identity and dynamic symbiosis of roles, so as to achieve the dialectical relationship between manipulation and being manipulated.

2.1. Theatrical Anthropomorphism: Transformation from "Object" to "Role"

The essence of puppetry is a process of "theatrical anthropomorphism". Through manipulation, the performer makes the puppet appear as a role and become a potential, unreal "other" relative to the performer. As the core of puppetry, this manipulative and manipulated relationship makes the audience realize that the relationship between the "self" (puppeteer) and the "other" (puppet) sharing the stage is unreal, for the "other" does not exist in reality. This process is not simple imitation, but the generation of "illusion" based on the common agreement of both performers and spectators. As relevant theories point out, when watching puppetry, the audience is both aware of the "objecthood" of the puppet and instantly "identifies" it as a role with life and emotion. The generation of this "illusion" is an important source of the unique charm of puppetry.

2.2. Triplicity of Identity and Dynamic Symbiosis

Zhang Qian pointed out in "Prominence and Redefinition of the Narrator Identity in the Same Platform of Dolls - Taking Doll Performers and Animal Puppets as Examples" that in the performing arts of the same stage of dolls, puppet controllers and puppets together constitute a multi-level narrative identity. The puppeteer is both the behind-the-scenes manipulator and the narrative guide; the puppet is both the object of performance and the main body of the narrative[2].

In puppetry, there are three interwoven identity levels: firstly, the performer as a real existence; secondly, the puppeteer as the manipulator; thirdly, the role identity presented by the puppet. These three identities are not mutually exclusive, but form a dynamic symbiotic relationship during the performance. As the only living being on the stage, the performer determines the dominant position of manipulation. From the perspective of performance, the performer manipulates the puppet and expects it to appear as a subject, which is the relationship between the manipulating subject (puppeteer) and the object (puppet). However, in a successful performance, the object (puppet/role) will acquire a "quasi-subjectivity", thus forming a complex identity dialogue.

2.3. Dialectical Relationship Between Manipulation and Life

The actor makes the puppet appear as a role through manipulation, and becomes a potential and relative actor's non-real "other"[3]. The core tension of puppetry lies in the dialectical relationship between "manipulation" and "being manipulated". The puppeteer injects his own vitality into the inanimate puppet through body movements, gesture skills, rhythm control and other means, while the puppet presents an "anthropomorphic" visual impression to the audience through its morphological movement trajectory, expression changes and so on. As relevant studies point out, the puppet is both a material existence and demonstrates the characteristics of "life" and "spirit" in performance, being a product intertwined with "self" and "inanimate matter". This relationship goes beyond simple tool use and becomes a creative ritual of endowing life.

3. In-depth Case Description: Anthropomorphic Practice of Puppetry in "The Tooth"

As a contemporary theatrical work centered on puppetry, *"The Tooth"* embodies its artistic characteristics in inheriting and breaking through traditional puppetry forms, providing a vivid model for observing the above theoretical features.

3.1. Artistic Orientation and Formal Innovation

"Looking at the head and pretending to be a role" is a must for the actor, and "choose the head and play" has always been emphasised by the actor. The extreme importance of puppet actors

and the audience to the puppet head has directly promoted the continuous improvement of the carving technology of the puppet head[4]. Compared with traditional puppet shows, *"The Tooth"* pays more attention to interactivity and dialogism in handling the relationship between puppets and performers, breaking through the one-way manipulation mode and forming a more complex and diverse performance structure. This co-performance art of humans and puppets, as a product of the symbiosis of "body-role", is fully reflected in *"The Tooth"*. For example, the "tooth" in this play is shaped by weaving wicker branches, pasted with white paper, and finally coated with a waterproof and antifouling film to simulate the luster of a tooth. In terms of proportion, the puppet has made a bold breakthrough: to restore the appearance of a tooth, the puppet adopts a wide-top and narrow-bottom shape, which is close to the shape of a tooth while enlarging the proportion. The final tooth puppet is 1.2 meters high; when the performer wears it on the body, the total height is nearly 2 meters, the widest part is 0.8 meters, and the weight is nearly 10 kg. The performer manipulates and performs while wearing the tooth puppet, and both the performer's performance style and the tooth puppet's movement are quite different from traditional performances. This deliberate blurring or emphasizing of the boundary between the puppet and the manipulator as well as the real performer triggers new spectator-performer reflections.



Figure 1. The process of making dolls

3.2. Specific Construction of Anthropomorphic Aesthetic Mechanism

In *"The Tooth"*, anthropomorphism is reflected not only in the "human-like" design of the puppet's appearance, but also in the "humanized" construction of the puppet's movement logic. When the performer wears the tooth puppet, his face is exposed, so he needs to paint his face white to integrate with the puppet. Therefore, the performer's facial expressions should be exaggerated to match the characteristics of the tooth puppet. In addition to facial expressions, the weight and size of the tooth puppet also affect the performer's body movements on stage. The performer should fully consider the state presented by the tooth puppet in front of the audience during movements, so he makes the movements extreme and adopts exaggerated, large-scale actions for performance. Through the performer's facial expressions, body movements, movement rhythm and other elements, a unique set of "anthropomorphic language" is constructed, enabling the audience to perceive emotions, will and subjectivity in the inanimate form of the puppet. This construction follows specific artistic principles. As the master of puppet animation Kihachiro Kawamoto suggests, each animation (performance) mode corresponds to its own script and performance style. *"The Tooth"* exactly finds the anthropomorphic performance vocabulary matching its absurd and metaphorical plot (a tooth falling in love with the dentist's front tooth).



Figure 2. Stills of the performance

3.3. Realization of Aesthetic Tension Between "Defamiliarization" and "Identification"

Japanese animation master Kihachiro Kawamoto believes that each animation mode has a specific drama style and a corresponding performance style. The puppet work itself represents an animation mode, so it also needs a special performance mode. This performance mode does not confuse people through some strange artistic means, but cleverly balances scene scheduling, narrative, music, etc[5]. The study of the performance form of "puppet ugly" in Gaojia opera shows that actors form a unique performance aesthetics by imitating the action of puppets in the performance. At the same time, the physical exploration of "even" in the performance situation has the value of drama anthropology research[6].

The aesthetic charm of puppetry lies in the tension between "defamiliarization" and "identification". "The Tooth" also applies this "defamiliarization" technique in puppetry, enabling the audience to gain a unique aesthetic experience in the tension between "knowing it is a puppet" and "feeling it is real". On the one hand, as a symbol of "tooth", the inhuman form of the puppet always reminds the audience that this is a fable and a symbol; on the other hand, through delicate anthropomorphic performance, the audience can empathize with its emotion of "love" and develop affection and resonance for the tooth puppet. This "double cognition" enables puppet performances to produce unique dramatic effects. The audience may not only be attracted by the drama of the plot and the performance of the puppet master, but also inevitably enter the situation of communicating with the puppet[7]. The alternation of alienation and empathy is the source of the in-depth aesthetic experience of puppetry.



Figure 3. Stills of the performance

4. Core Issues: Reconstruction of Subjectivity of Performers, Puppets and Audiences

Puppetry breaks the traditional spectator-performer relationship, forcing the audience to rethink the subjective issues in drama such as "who is performing", "who is being watched" and "who is feeling".

4.1. Shifting and Highlighting of Performer's Identity

In the process of a performer creating a role, two selves—the performer's self and the role's self—exist objectively, interacting and influencing each other. The French actor Coquelin put forward in "The Dual Personality of the Actor" that the first self is the performer, namely the actor; the second self is the tool, namely the voice and body. The performer must follow the logic of the role, living both in the situation of the role and in the process of role creation. The two selves endow the performer with dual personality and a dual life. However, the audience not only pays attention to the fate of the role but also appreciates the performer's performance, which is the dialectical relationship in the artistic creation of acting and the unique psychology of creating role images.

In puppetry, the positioning of the performer's identity is a more complex issue. In the performance of "*The Tooth*", the performer's identity often shifts between "manipulator" and "performer", and this uncertainty of identity becomes part of the performance tension. The performer sometimes hides behind the scenes as a narrative background, sometimes intervenes on the stage as the "voice" or "emotional source" of the role, and even forms a competitive or dialogical relationship with the puppet. This fluidity of identity breaks the stable one-to-one correspondence between performers and roles in traditional drama, as revealed by the viewpoint of "highlighting and redefining the narrator's identity" proposed in relevant studies.

4.2. Construction and Controversy of Puppet "Subjectivity"

Whether a puppet has independent "subjectivity" is a core issue in puppetry research. In "*The Tooth*", it is worth exploring whether the subjectivity of the leading "tooth" puppet is endowed or inherent. From a traditional perspective, it is a "manipulated object"; but from the perspective of performance effect and audience acceptance, it seems to be a "subject" capable of making choices and expressing emotions. Contemporary theories extend this discussion to the relationship between humans and technology, pointing out that digital puppet forms extend theatrical themes to the relationship between humans and machines, exploring human subjectivity and initiative in technological integration. Although "*The Tooth*" does not use digital technology, its exploration of puppet subjectivity also echoes this contemporary proposition.

4.3. Audience as Co-constructor of Meaning

One of the charms of theatrical performance is its presence. The audience is not a passive viewer, but a co-constructor of performance meaning. The audience's identification with the "puppet-role" relationship is the key link for puppetry to gain "vitality". During the viewing of "*The Tooth*", the audience needs to take the initiative to make a cognitive leap: accepting an inanimate object as an emotional subject. This acceptance process itself is an active participation. Historically, when watching similar Mulian Puppet Shows, the audience may "forget the fictionality of the performance and enter the situation of communicating with deceased relatives (actually puppets as substitutes)". Although "*The Tooth*" has a different context, it also requires the audience's emotional investment and meaning endowment to find experiences similar to their own in the puppet and resonate, so as to complete the final theatrical ritual.

5. Aesthetic Value and Philosophical Extension: Contemporary Enlightenment of Puppetry

The value of puppetry goes far beyond stage skills; it provides an artistic lens for reflecting on fundamental philosophical issues.

5.1. Inquiry into the Boundary of Life

Through the "anthropomorphic" treatment of "inanimate objects", puppetry triggers our philosophical thinking on the boundary between "life" and "non-life". When a puppet comes to life on stage, how do we define life? Is it movement, emotional expression, or perceived consciousness? In the technological era of prevalent AI, this question becomes increasingly acute, as "the boundaries between life and non-life, human and machine become blurred, triggering rethinking of 'self', 'subjectivity' and 'life'". The loving tooth in *"The Tooth"* is exactly such a philosophical image that triggers thinking. In the daily grinding life, it meets the light that illuminates its life. For love, it risks its life to escape the oral community. Although it finally loses its mission as a tooth, it breaks free from bondage and finds its true self. This desire and persistence for love can never be replaced by technology at any time.

5.2. Philosophical Metaphor of "Other"

In the puppetry of *"The Tooth"*, the tooth puppet, as the image of "other", carries rich philosophical metaphors. It is both an extension and mirror of the performer's (self) body, and a completely heterogeneous, manipulated "other". This kind of "symbolic puppet" breaks the original practical function of the object, giving it new symbolic attributes, and the audience psychologically recognises and accepts the broken and reconstructed relationship of this cognition[8]. This relationship can metaphorize the complex subject-object relationship between people, between humans and objects, and even between humans and their own subconscious. The puppet becomes a projection and substitute of the "self"—carrying "another self" that the performer cannot directly express. Just like most people live day after day, just like teeth grinding food every day, countless times wanting to escape this routine life, but lacking the courage to act in the face of love. In the anthropomorphic performance of *"The Tooth"*, the audience can see their own epitome in the tooth. Through the performance of manipulation and being manipulated, the drama reveals the micro-politics of power, desire and identification.

5.3. Cultural Value Bearing of Contemporary Drama

In contemporary theatrical practice, puppetry, as an ancient performing art with contemporary vitality, has increasingly prominent cultural value. Like traditional puppet shows, it can explore "multiple relationships between humans and ghosts, humans and gods, humans and demons, with profound philosophical discussions". In a modern drama like *"The Tooth"* puppetry carries contemporary cultural propositions about body, desire, alienation and communication. It proves that this ancient form is fully capable of becoming an effective carrier for exploring the fundamental issues of human existence.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, as a unique theatrical performing form, puppetry demonstrates rich aesthetic characteristics and philosophical connotations in contemporary theatrical practice. The puppetry practice of *"The Tooth"*, through inheriting and breaking through traditional forms, vividly shows the dialectical relationship of "manipulation and being manipulated", the identity construction of "self and other", the aesthetic tension of "defamiliarization and identification", and further triggers profound inquiries into the boundary of life and subjectivity.

Looking forward, the exploration space of puppetry is still broad. There will be more in-depth experimental works on the relationship between puppets and performers, the construction of puppet subjectivity, the audience participation mechanism and so on. Meanwhile, the intervention of new media such as digital technology and artificial intelligence will surely bring new opportunities and challenges to puppetry. The integration of these new technologies with puppetry will not only create new visual wonders and manipulation methods, but also fundamentally reshape our understanding of performance, life and even existence, providing new possibilities for the innovative development of puppetry. As an ancient art, puppetry will continuously provide human beings with aesthetic and philosophical mirrors to examine their own situation through constant self-renewal.

Acknowledgements

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