Ritual Objects: Parting on Z

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Over time ritual objects have become increasingly remote from the body. Masks, considered to be an evolutionary ancestor to puppets, were gradually transformed, being held in front of the body, and then animated with rods and strings. This distancing process has advanced through computer technology, introducing virtualization, wireless interaction, and distributed consciousness over networks. Distancing on both mental and physical planes is a crucial aspect of ritual, activating the process of becoming.

The relationship between puppet and puppeteer, avatar and user, is one of intimacy across an unbridgeable distance. Particularly in the digital realm, this tragic dialectic enacts distantiation in depth, a parting along the Z-axis. The digital puppet slips from the puppeteer's gaze, interest, and love in the infinite depth of virtual fields. This farewell beyond physicality intensifies the desire to become the other. Virtual space becomes an infinite place for farewell.

This article investigates the gradual process of distancing between shaman and ritual object, puppet and puppeteer, and will extend this process to the user and avatar in virtual fields.

Avatar, Mixed reality, Virtual reality, Puppet, Ritual, Becoming

RITUAL OBJECTS OF BECOMING

Various ritual objects are used in shamanic practice — bells, fans, mirrors, knives, masks, puppets — all helping the shaman to communicate with alternate worlds. Each object has a specific role in the ritual: the sound of a bell opens a sacred space, inviting spirits to enter; water purifies the space; the mirror allows the shaman to see into the spirit world; his cap, decorated with feathers, is associated with flight, ecstatic transcendence. Ritual objects such as the shaman's costume, mask, and puppet support the shaman's becoming spirit.

Mircea Eliade notes the significance of masks in this context:

> ...[T]he mask manifestly announces the incarnation of a mythical personage.... [T]he costume transubstantiates the shaman, it transforms him, before all eyes, into a superhuman being (1964, p. 167-8).

> When he puts on a mask, he ceases to be himself; at least, he seemingly becomes another.... [A] man knows himself as a man precisely by changing himself into something other than himself (1985, p. 64).

The mask, like the shamanic dress and cap, allows the shaman to incarnate a mythological figure—a god, ancestor, or mystic animal. The costume's accessories — animal hides, feathers, and sometimes the clothes of the ancestor — are selected for the specific spirits with which the shaman wishes to commune, and ultimately to become.

Bil Baird (1965, p. 30) proposes that puppets are an evolutionary step beyond masks, showing the connection between ritual and puppetry:

> Gradually, in the course of centuries, the hinged and jointed mask moved upward, off the head, and was held in the hands in front of the body. Later it moved farther away and was made to live by the manipulation of strings.

Baird's linear progression places the performing object on an outward trajectory, leaving the performer's body. In this evolution of the ritual object, the moment of its physical detachment from the performer's body constitutes a critical shift, yielding a performing object that can truly be called "puppet".

BECOMING PUPPET

If the shamanic dress, mask and puppet support the shaman's process of becoming, what differences can we discern between them? Why did ritual objects part from the performer's body? How does this distance contribute to a distinct experience of becoming? These questions address essential qualities of the puppet-puppeteer relationship and provide a platform on which to develop new forms of puppetry using new technologies.

A story may help to illustrate the point: one day, one of the author's two brothers visited her home and played hand puppets for her kids. Their performances reflected fundamentally different approaches: one brother reflected the puppet's emotions on his face; the other brother performed as an observer from a distance, without any sympathetic facial expression. He and the puppet were completely distinct beings; therefore the puppet seemed to move by itself, resulting in a brilliant performance.

Stephen Kaplin (1999, p. 23) characterizes the latter approach as the essential aspect of puppetry, in his article "A puppet tree: A model for the field of puppet theatre":

> [T]he performing object has become detached from the actor's body, developing its own center of gravity, ... its own presence. It is at this point, where the center of gravity of the performing object and the performer are distinct from each other, that the term "puppet" can be used.

In becoming puppet, the puppeteer's body occupies a liminal zone suspended somewhere between puppet and puppeteer. It is like driving — initially the car is an external tool in which the driver sits and manipulates controls, but eventually it becomes like an extension of the driver's body. Interfaces become transparent, intuitive. In the same way, puppet and puppeteer come to share a single body, a single center of gravity. However, there is also a point at which the object becomes liberated from the puppeteer's body, creating its own life and center of gravity. At this point, the puppeteer's body seems to return to where she started the journey. However, her state of mind and body seem crucially changed by this development; she becomes a distant spectator of the puppet's autonomous performance.

Kaplin (1999, p. 22-3) distinguishes masks from puppets with regard to these same aspects of distance and center of gravity:

> "[The mask] does not alter the actor's center of gravity, but it re-contours her surface, while remaining in intimate contact with the flesh beneath its shell. As long as the mask's features correspond more or less with the actor's own face, the character's center of gravity remains united firmly to the performer's".

Masks and puppets differ in their degrees and modes of anatomical correspondence to the performer's body. Though a mask may cover the face wholly or partially, or can be significantly outsized, it still typically forms a direct analogue to the structures of the human face, and is typically superimposed over the anatomical structures it analogizes. However with a puppet, the anatomy is often animated by entirely other body parts — usually the puppeteer's hands drive every part of the puppet's body — or even more remotely, through the use of rods or strings.

The tension inherent in this distance — physical separation and remoteness of movement modality — contributes to the sense of an autonomous life force. The distinct body systems seem at once connected and disconnected, in continuous conflict. This paradox challenges the puppeteer, and makes the puppet uncannily distinct, an irreducible enigma, mysterious as life itself. Puppet control is mechanically challenging, but these obstacles contribute to the dynamic transformation.

Distance on the Cartesian Z-axis enables the puppeteer to watch her own performance at eye level. At this distance, the puppet and puppeteer can turn to face each other; they are mutually engaged in a relationship of becoming-other. Separation yields detachment, but also a view on one's own becoming. Parting on Z makes space for the puppeteer's gaze, interest and love towards her puppet. Wearing a mask, contrarily, does not allow the performer to watch her own performance, except through imaginary projection.

Hand puppetry involves a Z-distance which allows the puppeteer to watch the performance, or even to face the puppet and interact with it, sometimes creating a dialogue of puppet and puppeteer. String or rod puppetry also operates with distance, though not in the same modality as hand puppetry — its vertical orientation breaks the eye-level engagement. Shadow puppetry allows the puppeteer to face the puppet the whole time, due to the two-sided structure of the projection: one side, material, facing the performer; the other side projected, facing the audience. When a dalang (shadow puppet master) looks at the shadow puppet before him, his gaze communicates a spiritual connection with the puppet. This distinct structure, enabled precisely by distance, supports a powerful 3-way engagement between puppet, puppeteer, and audience.

Distance along the Z-axis, particularly when structured such that the performer and performing object can face each other, allows a sense of engagement between distinct, autonomous individuals. This structure supports a feeling of wonder, as if the power to create life itself were at work. Translation along the X-axis (as with a puppet in approximately the same frontal plane as the performer, both facing forward) or the Y-axis

(as with a mask worn above the head, or a marionette operated from above) do not easily afford the same kind of engagement; the performance tends to be more articulated, controlled, and hierarchical. Providing the puppet with its own life, the performance can be freed of plots, instead employing improvisation and interaction, supported by a deep inner dialogue of the puppeteer as distant observer.

PRIMARY AND EMERGENT DISTANCE BETWEEN PUPPET AND PUPPETEER

We identify two kinds of distance operative in becoming-puppet: primary distance and emergent distance. Edward Bullough (1957, p. 93-4) proposes three kinds of distance:

> actual spatial distance, i.e. the distance of the work of Art from the spectator, … represented spatial distance, i.e. the distance represented within the work, [and] temporal distance, remoteness from us in point of time.

For Bullough, all three are ways of achieving "psychical distance" in art, illustrated in the metaphor of fog at sea:

> Imagine a fog at sea: for most people it is an experience of acute unpleasantness.... [I]t is apt to produce feelings of peculiar anxiety, fears of invisible dangers, strains of watching and listening for distant and unlocalised signals.... Nevertheless, a fog at sea can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment. Abstract from the experience … its danger and practical unpleasantness; direct the attention to the features 'objectively' constituting the phenomenon … and the experience may acquire, in its uncanny mingling of repose and terror, a flavour of ... concentrated poignancy and delight .... It is a difference of outlook, due … to the insertion of Distance.

The notion of psychical distance, for Bullough, encompasses all three types of distance enumerated above; each is a special type of the general condition by which experiential intensities are mediated. Distance is characterized here as a intentional way of regarding phenomena, with the potential to change our experience of those phenomena from uncanny terror to calm, aesthetic delight.

In order to situate primary and emergent distance in this metaphor, we can illustrate "fog at sea" in a narrative time line, progressing from clear conditions, through gradually increasing fog, and finally in the sensory paralysis of zero visibility. With each increase in fog we observe a psychical change, from the ordinary state of perceiving the actual spatial distance between spectator and objects, to a state of unusual perception — feeling the psychical distance between spectator and invisible objects as pure potentiality in uncanny sensation and imagination. The condition before the fog (however, expecting the fog), is where primary distance is situated. In puppetry, primary distance corresponds to Bullough's "actual spatial distance" between puppet and puppeteer, as well as to the puppeteer's consciousness of the ordinary distinction between himself/herself and the non-living performing object.

Actual spatial distance is also operative in Stephen Kaplin's (1999, p. 33) puppet tree, where the distance between performer and the object increases along a continuum encompassing performing object, actor, character role, masks, body puppets, hand puppets, rod puppets, marionettes, remote controlled figures, shadow figures, animated figures, computer generated figures, and virtual performer/object. Kaplin's puppet tree clearly shows the evolution of ritual objects moving away from the performer's body, and the relationship between spatial distance and technological development:

> As the physical distance between the performer and the object widens, the amount of technology needed to bridge the gap increases. Moving the puppet's center of gravity outside the body of the puppeteer requires more and more sophisticated linking systems.

Technology has widened the distance between puppet and puppeteer, paradoxically in order to fill the gap.

Kaplin's puppet tree model is built on the Indonesian kayon, or cosmic tree. Its symmetrical form provides an apt metaphor for his axis mapping the ratio of performers to performing objects, centered as it is around the trunk of unity. As a 2-dimensional model, Kaplin's puppet tree maps all kinds of distance, regardless of direction, onto the Y axis, corresponding to the height of the tree. For our purposes, we seek to elaborate a model of distance in 4-dimensional virtual and psychic space-time, from primary to emergent reality; therefore our model requires a somewhat different geometry. Our Z-axis represents a complex interplay of psychical and spatial dimensions, and is the direction of passage from primary to emergent distance.

EMERGENT DISTANCE AS INTEGRATED EMBODIED CONSCIOUSNESS

Ultimately a new type of distance emerges between puppet and puppeteer which is quite different from the primary state — a psychical distance across which the puppeteer views her own becoming. It renders the puppeteer as a quantum observer, both involved in the event and remote from it. This integrated embodied consciousness emerges in a process of transformation.

Distance and detachment figure prominently in East Asian spiritual and philosophical practice. Steve Odin (2001, p. 15) observes that in Taoism, detachment is a transcendent way of regarding the world, "letting-be", practicing non-desire. Detachment is also expressed as equanimity (*chung*) in the Confucian doctrine of the mean. Korean Zen Buddhism recognizes 3 stages of enlightenment: initially, the mountain is a mountain and the river is a river, reflecting the presumed factuality of pre-philosophical regard on the world. In the second stage, as the essential nature of reality is analyzed, the mountain is no longer a mountain and the river no longer a river. In the ultimate stage of transcendence and unity of all things in disjunctive synthesis, the mountain is again a mountain, and the river is again a river. The first stage reflects primary distance; the third stage reflects emerging distance. The first and third steps look similar, since the puppeteer's body returns to where she started this journey, but the inward difference is crucial.

One form of psychical activity that entails emergent distance is Han (addressed in depth elsewhere; see forthcoming Ryu publications on love impossible), a psychical experience particular to Korean culture, manifesting as an extreme state of grief that coextends with a fierce desire to overcome a distance or barrier induced by an oppressive social context. Han operates along the Z-axis, due to the subject's endless, impassioned gaze toward a seemingly unattainable potentiality. With infinite Z-distance, Han achieves a strong emotional quality in recognizing the primary distance. Although this ultimate reality can be associated with many philosophical and psychical concepts, Han is particularly relevant to our present considerations due to the way it unfolds over time, from primary distance, through emergent distance, and ultimately attaining an integrated embodied experience. Over time, Han stabilizes as a transcendental structure; the emotional aspect of

Han becomes separated from the self, and takes objective form as an autonomous entity. Therefore, the subject can discuss her Han, just as she would discuss an other's experiences (Choi 1993, p. 18).

Han changes over time from a strong emotional state of grief, to a transcendent detachment, and at last returning to a way of regarding the grief as an observer. This models the process of becoming-puppet in a virtual context: initially the intrinsic remoteness of the virtual experience induces a primary distance. With use and practice, the puppet becomes a passive medium for the expression of the puppeteer's will. Ultimately the puppet emerges as an autonomous subject, and the puppeteer becomes a distant observer of the actualized performing object. The puppeteer returns as a distant spectator to her own body, from which she was alienated during the transitional phase, but returns with a completely different state of mind.

CONCLUSION

Virtual space affords an infinite depth along the Z-axis, bearing both physical and psychical dimensions. The potential distance of the virtual puppet far exceeds the range of the physical puppet. Virtual puppets travelling on such a vast Z-axis constitute new ritual objects parting on Z, becoming increasingly remote, intangible, flexible, deconstructed, multiplied, and fragmented, challenging us continuously with new experiences of distance. This distance affords unprecedented experiences of the uncanny, arising from paradoxical tensions between life and death, materiality and immateriality, identity and autonomy. The implications of distance between the virtual puppet and puppeteer are more complex than those found in physical puppetry, both in regards to the primary distance and emergent distance. Virtual puppetry will continue to explore the becoming of ritual objects parting on Z.

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