What is the situation of masks, puppets, and performing objects at the end of the century? Puppets and masks are central to some of the oldest forms of performance, and “performing object” is a term used by Frank Proschan to refer to “material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance” (1983:4). In the Euro-American tradition, puppets, masks, and objects have always had a strong connection to folk theatre, popular theatre, and religion, but (or perhaps consequently) they have rarely been the subjects of sustained systematic academic attention in this century. The purpose of this issue of TDR is to give some attention to performing objects in the hope that more people will be inspired to examine this rich and wide area.

Much writing about puppet, mask, and object theatre is not distinctly defined as such. Instead, it often appears within the various literatures of folklore, anthropology, semiotics, art history, theatre history, drama, and performance studies. For example, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote about North-west Coast Indian masks in 1975 not so much to describe what they did in performance (he didn’t), but to explain tribal kinship patterns. In this issue of TDR, Stephen Kaplin criticizes Scott Cutler Shershow (1995) and Harold B. Segel (1995) for eschewing direct attention to puppets themselves, in favor of a focus on definitions of popular culture or on the puppet as “a literary trope.” These criticisms point to something good writing on performing objects needs, whatever its methodology or critical perspective: attention to the objects themselves in performance. The submersion of performing object writing into other disciplines has meant that to a large extent it has been an invisible field. This invisibility—due to a lack of close, unified attention—may have helped protect the field in some ways, but it has also in many cases prevented us from understanding the intense and revelatory connections between performing objects as they have occurred in vastly different times and places. At present, things are changing. It is possible to consider studies of performing objects as a continuing, connected dialogue about different techniques in different cultures: traditional puppet and mask theatres, machine performance,
projected images (whether shadow theatre, film, video, or computer graphics), and rituals. This issue of TDR seeks to make a contribution to such studies, whose scope I would like to briefly outline.

In Europe, the idea that puppet and mask theatre is a subject worthy of serious theoretical consideration emerged during the period of German romanticism, and is particularly evident in Kleist’s quirky and oblique 1810 essay “On the Marionette Theatre” (1918). Then, at the end of the 19th century, new thinking emerged in the suggestive, symbolist-oriented work of E.T.A. Hoffmann (1946 [1819–1822]), Oscar Wilde (1909), Alfred Jarry (1965), W.B. Yeats (1921), and, above all, Edward Gordon Craig (1908, 1911, 1908–1929, 1918). The meaning of objects in philosophical, social, and psychological theory also covers a wide range, from Marx in Capital writing about the commodity as fetish object ([1867] 1972) to Merleau-Ponty’s consideration of subject-object relations (1994), Heidegger’s sense of “thingness” (1971), and Winnicott’s “transitional object” (1971). Their thinking suggests the ways in which theories of objects can take us far (or not so far) from the modest predicament of the puppet or mask.

In the early decades of the 20th century, avantgarde practitioners such as F.T. Marinetti ([1909] 1986), Wassily Kandinsky ([1912] 1982), Fernand Léger ([1913–1923] 1973), André Breton ([1924] 1969), and Oskar Schlemmer ([1925] 1961) valorized the performing object in three new ways: as an important link between European and non-European ritual performance; as a central aspect of traditional popular theatre with contemporary experimental possibilities; and, in a particularly new theatre, as the central focus of what Léger called “machine aesthetics” (see also Rischbieter 1974; Plassard 1992). These practitioners’ theories frequently took the form of manifestos, a way of proclaiming that the essay in this issue by Peter Schumann continues (see also Schumann 1991).

In Russia, futurist and constructivist interests in redefining art in terms of social and political functions coincided with the semiotic, structuralist analyses of the Moscow Linguistic School, fostering Pyotr Bogatyrev’s 1923 “Czech Puppet Theatre and Russian Folk Theatre,” translated into English for the first time on these pages. Bogatyrev’s essay was the first effort in a sustained body of critical writing about puppets, masks, and objects in the 20th century. Following Bogatyrev came writings by other members of the Prague School, including Jiří Veltruský ([1914] 1964, 1983), Jindřich Honzl ([1945–1947] 1982), collected in Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (1986). In 1983 Frank Proschan edited a special issue of Semiotika, collecting important examples of these writings and connecting them to later theoretical studies. However, poststructuralist theory by and large ignored performing objects in favor of the predicament of the text and the body. There were some exceptions, such as Barthes’s essay on bunraku (1977). Besides Proschan, Henryk Jurkowski (1988, 1996) has served as a bridge from Prague School object theories to more recent analyses of performing objects such as those by Michael Meschke (1992), Scott Cutler Shershow (1995), Ana Maria Amaral (1997), Dina Sherzer and Joel Sherzer (1987), myself (1996b), and Steve Tillis (1992) who in this issue of TDR pays particular attention to the object in cyberspace. Also in this TDR, Stephen Kaplin attempts to unify the field, from masks to computer images, with a paradigm based on the distance between performer(s) and the object(s) they are manipulating.

In the early 19th century, the romantic movement’s attention to popular culture forced it to analyze puppet and mask theatre, and the same imperative forced the newly minted fields of folklore and anthropology to examine performing objects. Thomas Sharp’s 1825 Dissertation on the Pageants Anciently Performed at Coventry (as well as Fairholt 1859) dealt with the giant puppets used...
in medieval theatre. In 1852 Charles Magnin made the first attempt at an inclusive history of European puppet theatre, and in 1902 Richard Pischel made one of the first attempts to find the roots of European puppet performance in Asian forms. The wide scope of Magnin’s initial effort was followed by specific studies of puppet and mask history in different European countries.


The history of puppet and mask performance in the Americas is a complicated mix of Native American, European, African, and Asian performance styles, which all, in one way or another, use masks, puppets, and other objects. In 1883 Daniel Brinton described and analyzed the Guêguène mask and puppet dances of Nicaragua and in 1903 Jesse Walter Fewkes did the same with Hopi mask and puppet performance. Both Brinton and Fewkes were bound to European theatre traditions—the French comédie-ballet and Greek tragedy respectively—as analytical models for these very different performing object forms. This put them in a situation similar to that of Lévi-Strauss a few decades later. More recent studies (Cordry 1980, Geertz and Lomatuway’ma 1987, Vidal 1983, Amaral 1994, Barreiro and Guijosa 1997, Nunley and Bettelheim 1988) have studied such indigenous and popular performance forms without justifying them in terms of European traditions. The interview with Gustavo Boada of Yuyachkani in this issue of TDR underlines the particular debt of one of Peru’s most important theatre groups to indigenous traditions.
In 1969 Paul McPharlin and Marjorie Batchelder laid the foundation for serious studies of puppet theatre in North America with *The Puppet Theatre in America*. Bil Baird popularized their approach, extending it around the world in *The Art of the Puppet* (1973). Bauhaus refugee Xanti Schawinsky (1971) analyzed the particular emergence of avantgarde performing object theatre on this continent (which he instigated) at Black Mountain College. More recent studies—such as George Forman Brown’s history of the Yale Puppeteers (1980), Stefan Brecht’s extensive history of Bread and Puppet Theater (1988), Christopher Finch’s study of Jim Henson (1993), and Eileen Blumenthal’s analysis of Julie Taymor (1995)—have attended to particular examples of high-culture modern American puppet performance. Studies such as I. Sheldon Posen’s 1986 analysis of the Brooklyn *giglio* have examined the continuing importance of urban performing object rituals. In this issue, Edward Portnoy’s analysis of the Modicut theatre—a New York Yiddish political puppet theatre of the 1920s and 1930s—furthers our understanding of the complexity, richness, and popularity of puppet theatre and Yiddish culture. In my essay on the life and death of the Bread and Puppet Theater’s Domestic Resurrection Circus I explain the development of one of that theatre’s important contributions to the spectacle economy of the U.S. Richard Schechner’s interview with Julie Taymor helps elucidate the development and artistic motivations of the American puppeteer—deeply influenced by her experiences in Indonesia—who has successfully used performing objects on Broadway. Theodora Skipitares’s photo essay documents some of her contributions to the extraordinarily rich body of puppet work done by downtown New York theatremakers in the past three decades—a group which includes Taymor, Skipitares, Janie Geiser, Ralph Lee, Roman Paska, Lee Breuer, Basil Twist, Paul Zaloom, Amy Trompetter, Great Small Works, Hanne Tierney, Robert Anton, Stuart Sherman, Michael Romanyshyn, Jonathan Cross, and Charles Ludlam.

Just as anthropologists and folklorists examining European and American performance forms were forced to write about mask and puppet theatre, so were their counterparts who arrived in Asia on the waves of colonialism. The performance traditions of India, Java, Bali, China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and other areas of the continent inspired a huge body of 20th-century literature on Asian mask and puppet forms. This literature is too extensive to attempt to even partially cover here. We must note, however, James R. Brandon’s *On Thrones of Gold* (1970), an anthology of Javanese wayang kulit shadow plays, which placed the epic literature of that dramatic form into the center of world theatre studies. Brandon’s studies of Southeast Asian (1967) and Japanese theatre forms (1982), in which puppets and masks are central, were also seminal. R.L. Mellema (1954), John Emigh (1996), Richard Schechner (1993), and others have also studied mask and puppet forms of the Indonesian archipelago, and Amin Sweeney (1980) has followed related forms of shadow theatre in Malaysia.

The Euro-American appraisal of Japanese forms has been strong throughout the 20th century. French symbolist playwright Paul Claudel is particularly important in this respect. While in Japan in the 1920s, he sought to analyze Japanese performance aesthetics without basing his assumptions on European models ([1938] 1972). After World War II Donald Keene similarly analyzed the great Japanese noh and bunraku traditions ([1965–1966] 1990). Jane Marie Law’s more recent study of Awaji puppet theatre offers an in-depth analysis of a lesser-known Japanese form (1997). At the end of the century such closer analyses are now possible.

In 1961 Russian puppeteer Sergei Obratsov made an anecdotal study of Chinese puppet forms, and Roberta Stalberg (1984) continued this line with a tantalizingly brief history/theory/how-to book. Jacques Pimpaneau’s 1977 study of Chinese shadow theatre demonstrates how such work can be highly rigorous
and analytical. While Pischel gave an important early and extravagantly orientalist view of Indian puppet theatre as the progenitor of European forms, numerous studies have since focused on particular Indian puppet and mask theatres (Blackburn 1996, Kamath 1995, Sarma 1985, Venu 1990). Salil Singh’s essay on these pages examines the challenges traditional Indian puppet forms now face. In the Mediterranean area, the strong Turkish and Greek traditions of Karagoz and Karaghiozis shadow theatre have been documented by Metin And (1979), as well as by Stathis Damianakos (1986), who sets that form into a worldwide context.

Colonialist interests in Africa led to studies of African mask and puppet traditions, again, an area too vast to cover here. European exhibitions of African artifacts had a massive influence on avantgarde performance, for example Fernand Léger’s 1923 Création du Monde with the Ballet Suédois (an intriguing predecessor to Julie Taymor’s Lion King). In the latter half of the 20th century, studies of specific traditions in particular regions (such as Liking 1987 and Arnoldi 1995) have been complemented by more general examinations of the role of African masks, puppets, sculptures, and objects in performance (Sieber and Walker 1974, Thompson 1974, Blier 1995, Liking 1996).

The notion of performing objects can include many performance forms that are neither puppet- nor mask-centered. Léger analyzed the role of manufactured objects in performance, picking up a historical thread which goes back to the early history of automata offered by al-Jazari in the 12th century (1974). In the 1920s Max von Boehn connected the history of automata to that of puppets, and in this issue of TDR Mark Sussman looks at a 19th-century automaton in a way that reflects our increasing awareness of the central ideological importance performing machines have had in this century and will have in the next.

Another form whose importance has only recently emerged is picture performance. Victor H. Mair (1988) links Chinese and Indian performance to picture performance throughout Asia and Europe—returning, in a way, to Pischel’s search for originary ur-forms. Ulrike Eichler (1975) and Tom Cheesman (1994) focused on the European history of this form. In an even more particular study, Sammy McLean (1972) analyzed how picture performance influenced the work of Bertolt Brecht. The panorama is a form of picture performance that, like the automaton, is particularly technical, and often mechanized. Stephan Oettermann (1997), Dolf Sternberger (1977), and Ralph Hyde (1988) have chronicled the development of this important precedent to film and television, and I have analyzed the 19th-century form of American panorama in terms of its function as political theatre (Bell 1996b). Other 19th-century performing object forms have been studied by Gunter Böhmer (1971) and Werner Nekes (1990).

The end of the century has seen an accumulation of resources on puppet, mask, and performing object theatre. Bibliographies by Gladys Langevin and Genevieve Leleu-Rouvray (1982, 1993), and by George Miller, Janet Harris, and William Hannaford (1981) help organize existing research. The Puppetry Home Page performs an ambitious but more limited service on the internet (see Sage 1997). Under the auspices of the Union Internationale de la Marionette, Henryk Jurkowski is editing an international encyclopedia of puppet theatre, which should appear early in the 21st century. In addition, there are now a number of journals devoted to the study of puppet theatre. Puck is published by the Institut International de la Marionette, James Fisher edits The Puppetry Yearbook from Wabash College, UNIMA-USA recently founded the journal Puppetry International. Animation represents the views of English puppet writers, and The Puppetry Journal has served for most of this century as the voice of the Puppeteers of America. Educational opportunities in the field have recently
broadened as well. Puppetry schools in Moscow, Bremen, Prague, and Charleville-Mézières have international reputations. The puppetry program at the University of Connecticut has trained hundreds of active American puppeteers. And most recently, in 1999 New York puppeteer Janie Geiser began to direct a new puppet program at California Institute of the Arts.

Puppet, mask, and performing object theatre has deep roots connecting a vast array of contemporary and ancient performance practices. The usefulness of writing about and analyzing these practices, and the theories behind them, will increase our ability to link worldwide traditions with worldwide innovations.

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