

THE HOLOGRAM PUPPETS OF ALPHA CENTAURI

Of science fiction and puppet theatre:

Science fiction is associated with modern literature, films and comic books. The use of puppet theatre as a medium for expressing the ideas of science fiction has never been significant neither was much popular for makers of puppet theatre. On the surface, it would seem that these two have no correlation or any kind of relationship between them. However, in this essay I would like to suggest such a correlation and to point out the possible potentials of puppet theatre as a performing form of art for science fiction ideas.

In order to tune the readers of this essay with my concept of science fiction, I will try here to define it. Science fiction is a genre of literature that mostly developed in the 20th century, and deals with the impact of science upon the society or the individuals. In the center of the science fiction story we find the same basic elements that drive the plot of any other kind of story, such as fundamental feelings (love, fear etc.) or fate (fortune, misfortune); But while in other - mostly more traditional genre of literature - the forces of nature, the laws of society, the divine interference or different elements of the supernatural are used as tools in manipulating the plot of the story, science fiction uses science and its implications to do the same. It is the product of the fast-changing, progress-seeking secular and modern society of the last century, and as such its themes are different from those of the traditional and older genres.

Science fiction presents the fantasy and the supernatural as true, realistic phenomena that can - even though they are strange and mysterious - be explained logically within the frame of the hard sciences (such as physics or biology). If to compare, for an example, between two stories from the romantic period that resemble each other in their plot - Shely's Frankenstein and the tale of the Golem - so in the Golem, which is not a science fiction story, the creator of the monster evoked the name of god, while in Frankenstein, which is in my opinion an early example of science fiction, the creator invokes electricity, i.e, the laws of nature. Science fiction does not always deny the existence of the metaphysical, for example in many science fiction stories humans are differed from androids by the human quality of possessing a soul, but usually there is a clear separation between the natural and the supernatural.

Riding the (theatrical) time machine:

On a first glance puppet theatre seems to be further from science fiction nowadays than what it used to be in the past, before the birth of the genre. I am referring to the mechanical theatre of automatos that was a milestone in the evolution of puppet theatre. This theatre attracted viewers by presenting an artificial life on stage; The audience knew that the figures are made of wood, springs and so on, but it didn't know what was their life force. It was closer to the magician's show of nowadays. In modern puppet theatre the technique is often visible and the show is technically explainable, while the theatrical magic, which is not explainable, is in the doing, in the live drama onstage. That brings it closer to the ideal of science fiction, where technology, though playing an important role in creating the concrete reality of the story, is still not the story itself; The magic of the story is in the human desire to reveal the unknown, and the unknown is, like in theatre, in the drama, in the characters, in the unpredictable.

Because the science fiction story is built around the unknown, it has to surprise its readers; In order to surprise the readers, the science fiction story teller first sets the rules for the story: he builds a real, concrete and understandable world, just so he can break it later with the

unknown. There is an equivalence here to the theatre world, where in every performance (except maybe for concealed or invisible theatre) the performers have to maintain some kind of unwritten contract between them and their audience. The meaning of this contract is to establish the audience's common belief in the things that happen onstage, and it is the key to the success of the show. In puppet theatre the challenge is bigger: how to convince the audience of the dead objects' not only being alive but also living in the right, normal way for them to live, so that later in the play a surprise will be made possible without changing technique or using technology.

Adapting the all-galactical themes:

I see a good potential in the presentation of science fiction's main themes in the means of puppet theatre, and i would like to analyze them here:

Human and machine

This is the manifestation of the unknown through an imagined technology. We can include here stories about creating a combination of human and machine, the creating of androids, the struggle between human and machines. I think puppet theatre can offer an interesting interpretation about the source of life and the independence or the dependence of living creatures and dead objects in or from an outside factor (for an example the relationship between puppet and puppeteer). The process of defining the genuine and artificial life is for me in a way the essence of puppet theatre.

Human and extra-terrestrials

This is the manifestation of the unknown through an imagined biology and psychology. We can include here stories about human individuals who encounter strange life forms, the human society which encounters a culture very different from their own, the impact of such encounters - conflict or collaboration. Puppet theatre can offer here original ways to define what is the strange and what is the familiar; What are our standards for human beings? If two puppets, made both from the same materials are on the stage, why do we identify ourselves with one piece of wood but not with the other? The tension between the strange and the familiar which exist anyway in puppet theatre can be used to interpret this theme. Puppet theatre has a huge capability and diversity to perform eksotic life forms through different materials and contructions or the style of manipulation.

Human breaking the limits

This is the manifestation of the unknown through imagined physics, chemistry, geography, astronomy and so on. We can include here stories about voyages to far away, discovering of new places so far out of reach for humans, the encounter with a new kind of nature and the physical and psychological reactions to the laws of the new surroundings. From the different forms of performing arts it is puppet theatre that has the biggest ability of changing the rules, from cancelling gravity to bending the space and time. This can be achieved by means of puppet manipulation and the changing of scenery, which is in pupet theatre an organic, living unit, together with puppets and puppeteers. The search after new life forms and landscapes in the universe is actually in the making of puppet theatre; When a space ship is cruising the galaxies in the science fiction book, and when the puppet of a business man is flying up in air above the stage - it is in both cases the artistic manifestation of the human desire to become free from its natural boundaries.

The confrontation of esthetics:

The esthetics of science fiction is a futuristical one - on the visual level of science fiction stories the writers often tend to underline and amplify the technological progress. Even when the plot can be easily transfered many centuries to the past, the esthetics of the story remain as clean as possible from old elements. Puppet theatre esthetics was traditionally taken from the

old and ancient, much because traditionally, and almost until the 20th century, the old esthetics was more appreciated, and puppet theatre was imitating old styles to display a higher artistic status. This however changed in the last century and in particular after the war, when puppet theatre together with other forms of art started to seek for new esthetics; The use of the new synthetic materials also contributed to the change in esthetics. Modern puppet theatre is therefore a suitable medium for science fiction. One common element in both is fantasy; In science fiction fantasy is often mixed with other components and is an important part of presenting an imaginal world, in puppet theatre fantasy is often an integral part of the show. One apparent obstacle in combining science fiction and puppet theatre could be puppet theatre's tendency to refer visually to handcraft and only seldom to modern mechanism. This can contradict the technological esthetics of science fiction. On the other hand, it is from these kind of contradictions that an interesting combination can be created; If to use the same example, I believe that the magic in the unmechanical imitation of the mechanical is theatrically more pleasant than annoying.

Back to planet Earth:

In the social aspect of art, puppet theatre can help us answer the actual dilemmas of life in the shadow of an ever accelerating technological development. A good science fiction story remains socially relevant also after the technology it presents is out of use, and the same is with a good theatre play. Nowadays, when movies and computer animation can offer the illusion of exposing the unknown in a very high technical quality the challenge of the simple, hand craft based puppet theatre is a big one. Nevertheless I believe that just because of its technological inadvantage that puppet theatre is the right form of art to question and analyze these issues of progress, to present a deep and intelligent science fiction. After all, science fiction is a story that is told by humans to other humans, about humans, in the form of allegory; The alien in my book is the neighbour next door whom I have never talked with. And puppet theatre is the most allegoric way of making theatre.

by Ishmael Falke