

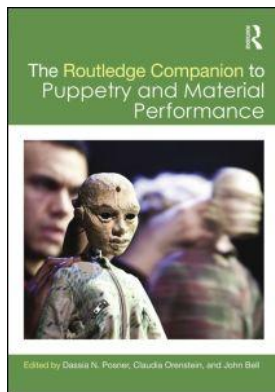
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### **Playing with the Eternal Uncanny**

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### 3

# Playing with the Eternal Uncanny

## The Persistent Life of Lifeless Objects

*John Bell*

The relatively recent development of so many scholarly studies of the uncanny makes it clear that Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay and the 1906 article by Ernst Jentsch that inspired it continue to resonate strong and clear as touchstones for our understanding of modernity. Just as Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* – distancing, “alienation,” or estrangement – has consistently offered itself as a valuable tool for understanding modern theatre and the performative nature of modern culture, the concept of the uncanny – the “dark feeling of uncertainty” (Jentsch 1906 [1995/2008]: 224) as to whether objects are alive or dead – offers itself as a useful marker of the complexities and contradictions of the recent past and our current condition.

For the puppeteer, reading Freud's and Jentsch's essays is a remarkable experience because both are filled with references to the essential nature of puppetry. By this I don't mean that the two writers are focused on puppets *per se* but that the references they make to uncanny experience involve the animation of objects – the essence of puppet theatre. That essence is inextricably linked to long-standing human desires to play with the material world, in performances focused on wood, stone, plastic, metal, glass, paper, bone, and other objects that, as the result of our human intervention, move around, speak, and otherwise seem to possess life. Thinking of the terminology Jentsch and Freud use to explain the uncanny, we could say that the essence of puppet, mask, and object performance is the animation of the dead world by living humans. Before examining their different versions of the uncanny, I would like to consider why the concept itself is a modern problem.

### **Ubiquity and invisibility of object performance**

Performance with objects, puppets, and machines is a ubiquitous global presence today, as it has been since the mid-nineteenth century. Not only do traditional

puppet, mask, and object performances coexist with efforts to reinvent those forms, but also contemporary material culture – in particular, machines and digital media – constitutes a network of intense, daily, human–object performance relationships affecting millions of people. For example, on October 8, 2013 I noticed the following in the Arts section of *The New York Times*: a photo of a vintage flatbed truck adorned with a battering-ram style giant head, installed as sculpture in a park in Queens, New York; a shot of giant puppets emerging from the Pacific Ocean as part of Basil Twist’s *Seafoam Sleepwalk* performance in Santa Monica, California; a photo of a traditional Indian masked dance to be performed by Rajika Puri in New York City; a picture of an ornate graffiti design on a New York City subway car entitled “Stay High 149”; and an image of the star of a new digital animation television series, *Sabrina: Secrets of a Teenage Witch*. All of these events are examples of a material performance culture that spans geography and chronology, as well as form: puppets, masks, machines, digital animation. They are intricately connected aspects of our modern interplay with performing objects, and yet in the pages of the US “paper of record,” there is no critical or analytical sense of how these forms might connect with each other as aspects of material performance. In that sense their presence as a cohesive cultural force can seem invisible.

The disparate modern methods used to analyze puppet performance – anthropology, folklore, semiotics, ontological philosophy, the history of technology, performance studies, and a smidgen of theatre history and theory – do not yet quite allow for a comprehensive understanding of the field. A variety of analytical tools have been forged, in other words, but they have not yet been placed in the same toolbox, and we are not quite sure how to handle them together. However, interesting advances in puppet and object analysis have begun to appear with increasing frequency. The American scholar Jena Osman, for example, recently connected puppetry to Brecht’s sense of *Verfremdungseffekt* by stating that “the puppet theatre is the epic theatre” (Osman 2008: 19): in other words, that every instance of puppet performance is marked by the distanced performance methods that Brecht, Erwin Piscator, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and many others developed in their own experiments to make theatre that, in Dassia Posner’s words, “celebrated (rather than trying to erase or hide) its conventional nature” (Dassia Posner, pers. comm., July 23, 2013). In a similar way I would propose that every puppet performance is also an instance of what Sigmund Freud and Ernst Jentsch called “the uncanny.”

### **Latour: Modernity as separation and translation**

However, modernity – by which I mean developments in secular, humanist, and rationalist culture beginning in Western Europe during the sixteenth century and continuing to this day – has had a fundamental problem with puppet, mask, and object performance. Puppetry’s primitive roots, animism, irrationality, and its basic contradictions with realism mark an art form that would not easily adapt into modern culture’s interests in civilization (versus nature), realism, rationality, text, and bourgeois art. By the later nineteenth century, when Western ideas about the nature of

childhood entered into a kind of crisis mode due to the challenges of the Industrial Revolution, puppetry began to be more clearly defined as the realm of children, fairy tales, and “primitive” cultures from around the world. This situation has led many Western puppeteers over the past 120 years to lament the often successful efforts to limit puppetry’s ambit. Bread and Puppet Theater director Peter Schumann (1990: 3) refers to this as “the habitual lament of modern puppeteers about their low and ridiculous status,” a standing that, despite the success of Schumann, Julie Taymor, Basil Twist, Robert Lepage, Adrian Kohler, and Basil Jones, as well as others, is still more or less in place.

Modernity (and its postmodern appendage) is often considered from an artistic perspective, but French sociologist Bruno Latour in his influential book of the early 1990s, *We Have Never Been Modern*, sees this moment of history first of all in terms of science and social structure. Modernity, for Latour, represents “a break in the passage of time,” when “an archaic and stable past” was superseded by a dynamic and changing new society marked by reason and science. More important, modernity represents “two sets of entirely different practices” for Latour: “translation” and “purification” (Latour 1991: 10). By “purification” he means the “modern critical stance” of separating “Nature” and “Culture” in a strict dichotomy of “two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of non-humans on the other” (Latour 1991: 10–11). However, “translation” in Latour’s schema involves “mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture” – relationships which he also terms “networks.” The essence of modernity, Latour argues, has been the consideration of translation and purification as entirely separate spheres. However, if we “directed our attention *simultaneously* to the work of purification and the work of hybridization,” he writes, we would “immediately stop being wholly modern” (Latour 1991: 11).

These concepts are relevant to the nature of puppet and object performance and the uncanny. First of all, modernity’s “separation between humans and nonhumans” has an immediate relation to the performances of humans and the performances of objects that define the difference between puppetry and actors’ theatre (although Latour, like Freud and Jentsch, was not thinking about theatre). The separation Latour has in mind is necessary for such modern political activities as the creation of the US Constitution, which analytically laid out a plan for a new society, and the development of empirical experimentation – the scientific method – which analytically laid out plans for our knowledge of the natural world. Both activities, emerging simultaneously in the seventeenth century, depended upon strict separations of humans (culture) and nonhumans (nature) and the dominance of the former over the latter. In this new modern environment, logic, rationality, and the experimental method were prized, and the idea of strict separations could come to include the many differences between “ancient” and “modern” cultures. Colonialism and anthropology, for example, depended upon the concept of modern culture subduing and studying a separate and pre-modern culture. One problem of pre-modern cultures would be their failure to maintain strict separations between culture and nature, between humans and objects. Instead, in such “ancient” cultures, objects and humans were connected, versions of the same existence. Objects in pre-modern (or non-modern) culture could have agency, could perform. But in modern contexts,

performing objects inhabited an “entirely distinct ontological zone” (in Latour’s terms) separate from humans.

The animism attached to puppets, masks, and performing objects thus becomes a problem of modernity, one which Jentsch and then Freud represented in the early twentieth century with the concept of the uncanny. And the fact that performing objects fall into the category of the uncanny has made it difficult to understand their communicative powers outside the realms of pathology, which both Jentsch and Freud assigned to the concept. Their concept of the uncanny defines the power of objects as a problem, not a window into the nature of the material world and its agency.

### Jentsch: Doubt and the uncanny

Freud articulated the uncanny (“*Das Unheimliche*”) as a central element of the repressed mysteries of modern life in a 1919 essay that, in particular, examined E. T. A. Hoffmann’s disconcerting 1816 story “The Sandman” as an example of how anxieties about castration, sexuality, and the power of the father can return to haunt our psyches. Freud’s essay has become one of the most well-known aspects of his analytical approach to psychology, one that has inspired much recent thinking about weird and mysterious situations and events and how we respond to them.<sup>1</sup>

Jentsch’s essay a decade earlier, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” pays more direct attention to the performance of objects. Jentsch also focuses on the writing of Hoffmann<sup>2</sup> in terms of a concept of doubt that resonates strongly with the dynamics of puppetry. Jentsch writes that:

Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness. The mood lasts until these doubts are resolved and then usually makes way for another kind of feeling.

(Jentsch 1906 [1995/2008]: 221)

Of course, the play with inanimate objects is exactly what puppetry is, and the fact that Jentsch ascribes the feeling of “doubt” to such play is an important insight for puppetry studies. However, by associating the uncanny with doubt, uncertainty, abnormality, disturbance, and other undesirable effects, Jentsch also problematizes the uncanny, something Freud would press even further. Jentsch’s essay features a rich array of performing objects seen from a turn-of-the-century perspective: automata, puppets, life-size machines, masked balls, tree trunks that turn out to be snakes, the “wild man’s” first sight of a locomotive or steam boat, scarecrows, wax figures, panopticons, panoramas, dolls, and other anthropomorphized objects. Jentsch makes it clear that human concerns about the mysterious movement possibilities of objects are grounded in the nature of what was then considered “primitive” life. He says that an:



Figure 3.1 “Doubt as to whether ... a lifeless object may not in fact be animate”: Trudi Cohen in Great Small Works’ *Terror As Usual: Episode 7: Metro Section* (1993). Photo courtesy of Great Small Works

... important factor in the origin of the uncanny is the natural tendency of man to infer, in a kind of naïve analogy with his own animate state, that things in the external world are also animate or, perhaps more correctly, are animate in the same way. It is all the more impossible to resist this psychical urge, the more primitive the individual’s level of intellectual development is. The child of nature populates his environment with demons; small children speak in all seriousness to a chair, to their spoon, to an old rag and so on, hitting out full of anger at lifeless things in order to punish them. Even in highly cultivated Greece, a dryad still lived in every tree.

(Jentsch 1906 [1995/2008]: 225)

In other words, belief in the uncanny power of performing objects is connected to the infancy of modern children, or the “infancy” of cultures that the West, from its modern perspective, sees as “primitive.” In another reflection of that era, Jentsch finds that “women, children, and dreamers” are more susceptible to the influence of the uncanny because of their “weaker ... critical sense,” while fully formed adult Western males need not be troubled by the uncanny, since it is not, in the end, rational (Jentsch 1906 [1995/2008]: 219).

### Freud: Surmounting primitive modes of thought

Thirteen years after Jentsch, Freud’s sense of the uncanny (“something familiar [‘homely’, ‘homey’] that has been repressed and then reappears” [as “unhomely”])

shifts focus away from objects and back towards the human psyche (Freud 1919 [2003]: 152). Like Jentsch, Freud also sees the uncanny as connected to “primitive” or infantile sensibilities. However, while for Jentsch uncanny objects provoke more benign feelings of “uncertainty” and “doubt,” Freud’s opinion is much more alarmist and dire. The uncanny, he writes, “belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (Freud 1919 [2003]: 123). And while Jentsch sees uncertainty about the independent agency of objects as a central element of their power, Freud is certain that such powers are illusions to be explained by “the old animistic view of the universe” (Freud 1919 [2003]: 147). Although Jentsch focuses on the performative powers of the objects themselves, Freud is (unsurprisingly) more interested in what performing objects mean to the minds of modern men and women. For Freud, “uncanny effects” are “associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish fulfillment, secret harmful forces and the return of the dead”; moments when our minds play tricks on us, and we believe irrationally that we can control elements of the physical world or that physical objects can take on a life of their own (Freud 1919 [2003]: 154). Freud writes:

There is no mistaking the conditions under which the sense of the uncanny arises here. We – or our primitive forebears – once regarded such things as real possibilities; we were convinced that they really happened. Today we no longer believe in them, having *surmounted* such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation. Now, as soon as something *happens* in our lives that seems to confirm these old discarded beliefs, we experience a sense of the uncanny.

(Freud 1919 [2003]: 154)

For Freud, the uncanny is connected to “animistic convictions” that in human culture were “once familiar and then repressed”; a feature of human society that in the modern West is no longer consciously acceptable for “anyone who has wholly and definitively rejected” such convictions (Freud 1919 [2003]: 154). At one point in his essay, Freud confidently says of himself that “[i]t is a long time since he experienced or became acquainted with anything that conveyed the impression of the uncanny” (124), so confident is he in his grasp of the rational world and of his healthy and sophisticated relationship with his unconscious.

Freud sees the experience of the uncanny as an individual pathology; however, it is also part of our collective cultural history. The rejection of animistic convictions, and the particular time when these beliefs were discarded, marks the beginning of the modern world, as Peter Burke (1978) has pointed out in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. For Burke, there are specific moments when this rejection or surmounting took place – for example, when the Curé of Nanterre “tore the mask from the face of the leading actor” of a street theatre company in mid-seventeenth-century France or when the Russian Archpriest Avvakum, “zealous in Christ’s service” and faced with a travelling *skomorokh* (a Russian minstrel) who had come to his village to perform with dancing bears, “broke the buffoon’s mask and the drums” (Burke 1978: 214). In a similar manner, Protestant reformers cleared churches of icons,

paintings, and other Catholic ritual objects that troubled the increasingly logical minds of Europeans. The ascendancy of rationalism and the scientific method during the Age of Enlightenment beginning in the late seventeenth century only strengthened modern confidence in discarding ancient beliefs, and in the world of Western performance, the increasing dominance of realism as both a scenic and dramaturgical principle of the stage further marginalized popular performing object forms. The colonial forays of European powers into Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and the consequent invention of anthropology and folklore as a means of explaining the old beliefs that the “primitive” inhabitants of these places held, brought back the issue of animist performance with objects as a peculiar, irrational belief system that could be examined at a distance, as distinctly “other” than our own sophisticated modern thinking. In other words, as Burke points out, belief in the animism of objects was a marker of one’s relative cultural sophistication. Uncivilized and savage peoples believed in such things, while civilized modern men and women categorically rejected these ways of thinking.

And yet, despite the many centuries of development of modern Western thought, the animate nature of objects persists. We attempt to control it with concepts such as “the uncanny,” which want to tame the effects of object theatre by assigning them to the irrational and pathological, rather than to consider the disconcerting possibility of the agency of things. But the world of puppets and performing objects is always breaking free of such efforts, imposing its questions on us in a variety of ways.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, a new autonomy of objects emerged with the increasing presence of machines as fundamental aspects of modern life. Industrial society and the rise of mechanical entertainments forced Europeans to consider how machines function and gave rise to anxieties about the possible independence of machines from humans, which Hoffmann articulated in 1816 in the form of the beautiful automaton Olympia in “The Sandman.” A century later this crucial theme reappeared in an even more socially disturbing form when Karel Čapek invented the word “robot” for his 1920 play *R.U.R.* Art historian Tom Gunning (2003) has shown how the appearance and experience of new technologies themselves in the nineteenth century was itself always uncanny, not in terms of theatrical performance *per se* but in the performance of everyday life.

Some avant-garde theatre-makers of the early twentieth century, inspired by machines and by “primitive” icons and fetish objects from Asia, Africa, and the Americas, rejected realism and actors’ theatre and jumped right into the uncanny world of puppets and objects. Part of the shock of this avant-garde was its happiness in returning to the culture of “discarded beliefs.” Freud’s 1919 essay proposed that “we no longer believe in” the real power of objects, but the experience of the twentieth century seems to suggest that, in fact, we may not have “surmounted such modes of thought.”

### **Tugging back on Modernism**

The uncanny is a force that tugs back on the civilizing and rationalizing thrust of modern thinking – but perhaps this is a positive development. Modernity presented



itself as an entity slowly but inevitably spreading across the world, enlightening it, changing everything in its path, and leaving behind old beliefs and ways of life as they were replaced by modern technologies, modern societies, modern people; but in fact, the old beliefs and non-modern or anti-modern practices have not all been left behind. Puppets are signs of this, which is why they are uncanny.

Let us consider this in terms of modernist performance, by which I mean the network of old and new performance forms that began to coalesce in the late nineteenth century in the European theatre and continue to this day. The drama of realistic actors' theatre (which since the dissemination of Stanislavsky's early teachings to the United States has been the dominant form of theatre taught in the US and the dominant element of what is considered here to *be* theatre) is a sign of the confidence of modern thought. We see humans onstage making things happen or messing things up, but in either case creating action primarily with their bodies and voices. The moment when the young playwright Konstantin Treplev fails to achieve a cosmic symbolist spectacle in Chekhov's 1895 play *The Seagull* – his play-within-the-play is about the possible union of “Spirit and Matter” and includes “will-o'-the-wisps” and the Devil represented by two red lanterns for eyes; Chekhov 1895 [1988]: 82 – not only reflects Treplev's conflict with his mother Irina but also Chekhov's sense of the substantial cultural obstacles a modern drama of symbols and objects faces in front of an audience quite accustomed to the traditions of actors' theatre. And what was disturbing about the actual nonrealistic theatre of the time – the plays of Maurice Maeterlinck; Alfred Jarry's masked characters, puppets, and proto-surrealist scenery in his 1896 play *Ubu Roi*; or, later, Pablo Picasso's puppets for the 1917 ballet *Parade* (which inspired Guillaume Apollinaire to coin the term “surrealism”) – was that Freud's “discarded beliefs” in the active power of objects came back, not in the form of primitive culture but as avant-garde performance.

Modern puppet performances can be threatening, doubt-inducing, and anxiety-provoking events because they remind us that we are not necessarily in control of as much as we thought we were. Modernity has traditionally asserted its confidence in human potential, in our rational minds, in our ability to impose logic over untamed and illogical features of our world, including societies we consider un-modern, and even over nature itself – the ultimate force in need of taming.<sup>3</sup> But play with puppets, machines, projected images, and other objects is constantly unsettling because it always leads to doubt about our mastery of the material world. If that piece of wood, that lump of clay, that shadow figure, that machine, seems to be moving of its own accord, then where are we as humans? The essence of puppet, mask, and object performance (as countless puppeteers have said from their own experience) is not mastery of the material world but a constant negotiation back and forth with it. Puppet performance reveals to us that the results of those negotiations are not at all preordained and that human superiority over the material world is not something to count on, especially since *we* all eventually end up as lifeless objects.

Freud saw instances of the uncanny as moments of psychological trouble when certain anxieties of childhood returned despite our efforts to repress them; such uncanny moments were a problem that needed to be and could be addressed by a healthy psyche that had gotten beyond them. But puppets and performing objects, despite our best efforts to insist that we are not “primitive,” pull us back towards the



Figure 3.2 Freud’s “discarded beliefs” in the active power of objects came back not in the form of primitive culture but as avant-garde performance: Maryann Colella in Bread and Puppet Theater’s *Things Done in a Seeing Place*, Glover, Vermont (2013). Photo courtesy of the author

old, discarded animist beliefs and in this way throw doubt upon modern conceptions concerning the powers of reason and science. By not taking them seriously, we think we can hold back the doubt. But since puppet and object theatre is ubiquitous in modern culture (just as it has been ubiquitous in pre-modern cultures), it relentlessly brings the issue back to us.

Bruno Latour developed his thinking about having “never been modern” by focusing on the characteristics of hybrids and networks, which seek connections among cultures, systems, humans, and objects rather than “purifying” those relationships with a strict dichotomy between culture and nature. This approach, it seems to me, is useful not simply because it gets well beyond the modernism/post-modernism debates that have fueled scholarly thinking in Western academia in recent decades, but because a sense of and appreciation for networks and hybrids is necessary for an understanding of the way in which our culture actually works today. Scientific thought and technological development coexist and are informed by the startling power of object performance. The “ancient” beliefs in animism – in Western religions as well as in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas – have not been superseded but instead thrive in and benefit from developments in science and technology. Digital puppetry, motion capture, and stop-motion animation coexist with live street performance, ritual-object theatre, and Punch and Judy – a global network of object performance. The “uncanny” power of puppets persists, not necessarily as a problem to be surmounted but as a theatrical sentiment to be felt, appreciated, interpreted, and celebrated.

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### Notes

- 1 See, for example, La Capra (2009), Collins and Jervis (2008), and Thorburn and Jenkins (2003).
- 2 Hoffmann, like Heinrich von Kleist and other Romantics, played an important role in the late-nineteenth-century development of performing-object theory because of his intense interest in objects that come alive in such stories as “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King” and “The Sandman,” which were adapted, with profound and lasting effect, for the stage.
- 3 Dassia Posner notes elsewhere in this volume that literature, art, and performance also showed another kind of fascination with puppets: the idea of humans as puppet controlled by outside, larger-than-life, and often invisible forces.

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