The dramaturg(ies) of puppetry and visual theatre

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As a dramaturg, when I have created visual resources for productions with live actors, puppets, or both, my approach has typically been to find images inspired by a dramatic text or by the story a director, puppeteer, or company hopes to tell. Some are illustrative and give needed answers to practical questions. Others are conceptual, creating open-ended potential signifiers for elusive signified ideas or emotions. These conceptual images are not always captured literally in a production, but might make their way into how an actor holds her body at a particular moment, which materials are used to construct a puppet, or how a scene’s rhythmic structure and mise-en-scène are shaped.

Recently, however, I have moved away from the idea that visual dramaturgy is necessarily connected to story, character, or metaphor, and have begun exploring other ways the dramaturg can, in both puppetry and in other kinds of visual performance, support alternate “systems of meaning.” In this essay I will explore this expanded definition of visual dramaturgy as it relates to puppetry and visual theatre, examining in particular what Sumarsam has described as things that are “peripheral to the story, but essential to the performance” in order to track how the visual elements of theatre create unique trajectories of meaning that interweave with text or story.

Inspired by Sharon Carnicke’s explanation of Stanislavsky’s notion of a production’s through line as akin to a rope woven out of multiple, individual “lines,” I view the theatrical event as consisting not of a single through line, but of many. One is the narrative as it unfolds as a result of the interplay of multiple “strands”: words, characters, sounds, or images. Another is the artist’s conversation with the audience about how and why s/he constructs meaning with a particular theatrical grammar for a specific production. A third is something more ineffable, something related to what Basil Jones has called the “ur-narrative of life” in puppet theatre, which I expand to also characterize the fragile thread of belief that is birthed and nurtured by audience and artist over the course of a production, something that, in the puppet theatre in particular, is woven out of things like breath, gaze, surprise, and expectation.

Visual narrative, in my proposed definition, is comprised of images that support, interpret, contrast with, or otherwise interact directly with text or story. Visual meta-narrative is the visual grammar the artist uses to engage in self-reflexive
theatrical dialogue with the audience about the performance itself and its aesthetic values. Lastly, visual ur-narrative encompasses visual elements of performance that exist independently of plot or spoken text, but that generate a distinctive through line of emotive and visceral audience response. These three unique narrative strands support distinct, interweaving, simultaneous systems of theatrical meaning that together produce a polyphonic rather than simple melodic theatrical experience for an audience.

In order to explore the profound significance of the latter two, visual meta-narrative and visual ur-narrative, I will briefly analyze two well-known productions that use puppetry in innovative ways, The Lion King (1997) and War Horse (2007), investigating how each develops these alternate visual dramaturgies. Both have been instrumental in bringing puppets to the attention of mainstream theatregoers and are therefore often talked about in conjunction with one another. Both juxtapose puppets and live actors, use spoken and sung dialogue, and have a plot-driven dramatic structure. However, the visual grammars of these two productions are conceived very differently: while each tells a linear story, The Lion King actively interweaves this narrative with meta-narrative, while War Horse’s greatest innovation lies in its development of the puppet’s ur-narrative. I hope to illuminate new approaches for analyzing puppetry and visual theatre productions by investigating how.

Meta-narrative and The Lion King

In The Lion King, director-designer Julie Taymor and co-designer Michael Curry condensed the metaphorical and emotional content of the musical into specific, precise images or “ideographs.” Herbert Blau, who pioneered this term, defined the ideograph as “the stage image or tableau that symbolically visualizes the distinctive world of a play.”6 As applied to the performer, this echoes what Soviet actor Solomon Mikhoels called a “gesture leitmotif.”7 It also tallies with many puppeteers’ understanding of the puppet as a repository of visual dramaturgy; the puppet is character and contains story even before it is set in motion. Taymor’s understanding of the ideograph also encompasses condensed, concentrated visual metaphors more broadly defined; she states, “An ideograph is an essence, an abstraction. It’s boiling it right down to the most essential two, three brush strokes.”8 Many of Taymor’s ideographs visually capture The Lion King’s verbal themes, the most obvious being the recurrent use of circles in the design, inspired by the song “The Circle of Life,” from the rising of the sun that begins and ends the play, to the spiraling movement of Pride Rock as it enters the stage, to the circular leaping of gazelles.9

Taymor’s additional aim was to converse theatrically with The Lion King’s audiences about her artistic thought process. She did not want the production to be simply a theatrical illustration of the Disney film, but an overt dialogue with the story; she held that “[t]he meaning comes in the telling, not in the story itself.”10 One way she sought to provoke this dialogue was to significantly rewrite Disney’s original to include material that celebrates African culture. She also placed a great deal of emphasis on non-verbal dialogue with an audience as a form of theatrical structure, creating a visual dialectic between, in Richard Schechner’s words, “the mask character and the mask itself.”11 This meta-narrative is depicted in the persistent
simultaneous presence of and equal emphasis on both puppeteer and puppet. It is implemented through fully exposing the puppets’ mechanics, so that the puppets move seemingly by magic even while the audience sees how the magic works. Thus the swaying safari grass is worn on the heads of fully exposed dancers, and the masks are designed to seemingly magically move away to reveal the actors’ faces behind them.

Taymor calls these intersections between the production’s narrative and meta-narrative the “double event” of The Lion King,” adding, “[I]t’s not just the story that’s being told. It’s how it’s being told.” The design of the Lion King puppets is focused on productively capturing, in Paul Piris’s words, the “co-presence” of puppet and puppeteer — essence of giraffe-with-puppeteer, essence of lion-with-puppeteer — rather than on focusing our attention on how an inert puppet lion is imbued with life. In Taymor and Curry’s visual vocabulary, there is no need for the puppet to create the illusion of reality, but instead for it to make visible the process of creation. Significantly, the audience never forgets that the puppeteers are perpetually present or that there are masks atop the actors’ heads. Although puppet theatre is inherently self-reflexive — it is always a performance of the creation of a performance — Taymor’s production is every bit as much about defining theatre as an interactive visual conversation with an audience as it is about Disney’s story of a young lion who comes of age.

**Ur-narrative and War Horse**

In War Horse, the puppet represents a fragile life that is upheld in the omnipresent face of death. This metaphor is not inspired by the story of War Horse, even if it is...
set during the Great War, but, for Handspring Puppet Company’s Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, it is central to the function of all theatrical puppets: every puppet performance is, to some degree, a performance of the ur-narrative of life. According to Jones, “A puppet is by its very nature dead, whereas an actor is by her very nature alive. The puppet’s work, then … is to strive towards life. This struggle … is literally in the hands of the puppeteer and need have no connection to the script-writer or the director.”¹⁴ As puppeteers and spectators together create and sustain this life from the moment a puppet first begins to move, they also create and sustain something else: a fragile thread of conscious belief. As Jones muses, “when we go into a theater and the lights go down, and we … are shown objects – i.e., puppets – that are brought to life, I think it ignites a smouldering coal of ancient belief in us – that there is life in stones, in rivers, in objects, in wood.”¹⁵ This belief is irresistibly personified in Handspring’s horse puppets, but it is also a fundamental part of the theatrical experience, where the fantasy of the audience is similarly conceived, birthed, and nurtured.

In War Horse, Jones and Kohler develop the “performance of life” (and therefore also the nurturing of belief) as an independent narrative that interacts and contrasts with spoken text. Jones writes: “The puppet’s Ur-narrative is something quite different to, and more fundamental, than storytelling. It is the quest for life itself.”¹⁶ The ur-narrative of the production’s horses allows the audience to participate in something miraculous. The more obviously dead the puppet looks, based on the materials of which it is contructed, the greater the wonder of its life; hence Handspring’s puppets are made of undisguised, obviously inert materials such as cane or wood, but are designed to be absolutely lifelike in their movement.

Figure 57.2 The cast of War Horse at the New London Theatre. Puppets by Handspring Puppet Company. Photo: Brinkhoff Mögenburg
Jones suggests that it is the interweaving of a puppet’s macromovement and micromovement that produces what I call visual narrative and visual ur-narrative. For him, macromovement “engages with the script and the choreography,” while micromovement – moments of stillness or breathing – is “a performance of the Ur-narrative.” It is these micromovements with which he is most concerned, these moments during which the most distant spectator in the theatre perceives the puppet’s almost imperceptible breathing as life. Frequently, while the spectators are able to sense that gentle undulation of breath, they forget entirely about the humans who generate the breath and cease to see the puppeteers.

Significantly, spectators also sometimes become so focused on *War Horse*’s visual ur-narrative that they become literally unable to hear the spoken dialogue. Jones notes, “Often we hear the comment: ‘lovely puppets, pity about the text.’ Most often this remark is made not because the text is poor, but because it is hard to … hear or apprehend the text when one becomes fully engaged with … this more profound level of performance.” Thus, while *The Lion King* uses visual narrative and meta-narrative to condense language, theme, character, and artistic point of view into images, *War Horse* creates a visual ur-narrative of life that is independent of – and sometimes even erases – spoken language. Hence Jones’s claim that “the work of the puppet … can be seen implicitly as a rebellion against the word.”

**Tracking visual narratives**

In the visual meta-narrative of *The Lion King* and the visual ur-narrative of *War Horse*, the audience is embraced as a co-creator of visual meaning and is made a participant in a celebration of belief (rather than a suspension of disbelief). The conscious juxtaposition of contrasting, simultaneous narratives within a single production creates a productive environment for the generation of this belief. These discrete yet interweaving strands of visual narrative create what Bert States has called “binocular vision,” allowing the audience to peer into a performance through multiple lenses simultaneously. The awareness that this parallel vision exists is not new; it is the tension that lies at the heart of Diderot’s *Paradoxe sur le comédien* and is the foundation of Meyerhold’s entire theatrical poetics. But although, as Joe Roach has observed, “[t]heatrical performance is the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive possibilities: truth and illusion, presence and absence, face and mask,” we remain, to date, more adept at analyzing the stories those illusions and faces tell than we are at investigating the productive tensions of theatre’s “mutually exclusive possibilities.”

Robert Scanlan’s plot-bead play-analysis technique, cogently outlined by Shelley Orr, is an invaluable way to chart patterns of recurrent themes, metaphors, and events in a dramatic text. I suggest that it can also be used effectively to trace the interweavings of multiple visual narratives. Among the many things that may be valuable to track in conjunction with one another are rhythm, tempo, and dynamics; moments of self-referentiality and the frequency, density, and nature of their occurrence; different levels of movement (micro, macro, stillness, breathing);
the dramaturgies of material objects in performance; the architecture of suspense and surprise; tensions and juxtapositions between the phenomenological and the symbolic; and, especially in the puppet theatre, the interplay between liveness and objectness. Attending to such things can shift how a dramaturg or director imagines conceptual visual research and understands the visual elements of a production. Visual materials that deal with simultaneity, self-referentiality, rhythm, or the agency of objects can carry different meanings but equal value to those that capture a historical moment or evoke an elusive emotion.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon famously said in a conversation about bunraku that “art is something which lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal.” Every production inevitably grapples on some level with the interplay of these elements; however, many contemporary theatre artists are choosing to make the process of grappling itself central to the structure of performance. Delineating and analyzing the distinct visual narratives that reside in Chikamatsu’s productively liminal space can help us to articulate the ways in which this interplay works.

Notes

1 I presented earlier versions of this essay on a visual dramaturgy panel at ATHE (2012) and at Playwriting, Puppets, and Dramaturgy: A Symposium (2013) at the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry. Sincere thanks to the participants of both for their comments and suggestions.
8 Richard Schechner and Julie Taymor, “Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to The Lion King: An Interview,” TDR 43.3 (Autumn 1999): 38.
9 Schechner and Taymor, 42.
10 Schechner and Taymor, 51.
11 Schechner and Taymor, 36.
12 Schechner and Taymor, 43.
13 For Piris, “Co-presence inherently supposes that the performer creates a character through the puppet but also appears as another character whose presence next to the puppet has a dramaturgical meaning.” Paul Piris, “The Co-presence of the Performer and the Puppet in Solo Performance,” Puppetry International 33 (Spring/Summer 2013): 22. I expand this definition to include puppeteers who appear as deliberately undisguised performers.
14 Jones, 254.
16 Jones, 255.
17 Jones, 257.
18 Jones, 256.
19 Jones, 268.