

If you love me when I'm breathing; you don't love me when I'm dead?

EMMA MINKLEY

DSI/NRF SARChI Chair in Visual History and Theory Postdoctoral fellow,

University of the Western Cape

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5990-2442>

Abstract

This article looks to the form of the puppet, both an oral and aural entity, as a receptacle or instrument which allows for a ventriloquism to take place in partnership with the puppeteer. In the work of South African Handspring Puppet Company, the puppet is a receptacle for sound, but also for the human body itself – a chamber within a chamber – highlighting the instrumentalisation of the body. In this regard, the article looks to Handspring's *I Love You When You're Breathing*, particularly in reference to a comment once made by an audience member at a performance of the show that I watched in relation to the title; 'If you love me when I'm breathing; you don't love me when I'm dead?'

In the practice of puppetry there is a focus on the ways the puppeteer conveys life in the puppet. Here, breath is significant as a sound, but more so as a movement, passed from puppeteer to puppet, a kind of bellows or organ. The 'life' of the puppet is discerned through the rhythmic breathing motions of the puppeteer. Here the aural is conveyed through movement, rather than through sound itself, which is further a reminder that sound is at its core a movement anyway, a vibration. What can be opened up if we are to think the oral/aural through the puppet in its relation to movement and stillness, life and death?

Keywords

puppetry, breath, sound, movement, subject, object, subjectivity, materiality, technology, hapticity.

This paper thinks through the puppet as an instrument or receptacle for sound, and draws out ideas around subjectivity using this notion through a study of materiality and the senses. Aside from speech there is a whole repertoire of sounds which the puppet-maker and puppeteer must consider in bringing the puppet to life; laughing,

crying, sighing, coughing, breathing. They must think very carefully about the functioning of these sounds, position them as an automatic and ongoing practice that the body undertakes, and then analyse what goes into that practice – the movements and methodology behind them – so as to accurately communicate them in the puppet through a combination of voice and gesture. In the puppet the sounds we take for granted must be newly embodied, find a vessel, a material form. To think sound and its materiality through multiple senses beyond the aural/oral allows for the reimagining of subjectivities and ideologies through the form of the human body. Further, to use the puppet as a receptacle or instrument to think through technologies and current technological and capitalist tropes allows for a blurring of subject/object and human/non-human which has the potential to open up fresh readings of the human in the anthropocene. In this exploration I aim to offer soft openings for thought, rather than loud answers.

The puppet in its relation to sound is here explored through the work of the South African Handspring Puppet Company, co-founded in 1981 and run by Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler.¹ It is Jones and Kohler who raise the Handspring puppet up from its very conception, taking on the hybrid tasks of designing, crafting and often performing their puppets, all in collaboration with interchangeable teams of puppet-builders and puppeteers/actors. Handspring has predominantly selected stories based on the creation of the worlds in which the puppets exist for each production, and it is interesting then to note the compilation of plays they have ended up producing, and the common themes which can be tracked across these productions. The company moves from the production of ‘new children’s theatre with puppets that reflected life on the [African] continent’, staking ‘a claim for puppet theatre as a legitimate part of [...] local theatre vocabulary’;² through a transitional period instigated by South Africa’s 1985 state of emergency. They then shift to the production of politically attuned plays in collaboration with William Kentridge, which could perhaps be marked by a focus on the human ‘other’ as puppet; into an intense focus on the animal puppet, which remains the centre of the majority of their work in the present, and has won them much worldwide acclaim as a puppet company; and finally, back to a more ‘meta-theatrical’ focus on the human puppet, particularly in its relation to the self.

The company has always warded against ‘instrumentalist theatre’,³ which conveys a specific and often unyielding message for the audience, and has instead promoted individualised interpretations and understandings of each production. Strikingly their oeuvre has given rise to the evolution of the puppetry forms with which they have worked, as each production generates its own demands both technical and philosophical. Along the way, they have impelled their audiences to engage in a similar evolution, enrolling them as ‘autistic’ or highly sensitised to the material they

-
- 1 Executive Producer and Artistic Director of Handspring Puppet Company respectively. The company was initially established along with two other founding members, Jill Joubert and Jon Weinberg.
 - 2 A. Kohler, ‘Thinking Through Puppets’ in J. Taylor (ed), *Handspring Puppet Company* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2009), 42.
 - 3 D. Samuels and K. Mbongwa, *Die Name Wat Ons Gee*, Documentary Film (Cape Town: The Handspring Trust for Puppetry Arts, 2016).

receive,⁴ so the content of the existent plays is shifted by the artistry of design and puppet conception, and technique weds itself to character in this way. Handspring can be seen to engage with an inquiry into the object status of the human through the symbiotic or amalgamated relationship of puppet and human puppeteer that can be witnessed in their work. The progression of their puppet technologies has allowed a closer, more intimate relation between puppet and puppeteer, and because of the amalgamated design of puppet and puppeteer, what John Mowitz refers to as ‘handspring apparatus’,⁵ we may often look to the puppeteer (or a combination of puppet and puppeteer) in terms of gesture or body language and facial expression to determine the emotion of the former.⁶ Handspring has noted the significance of the puppeteer as an extension of the puppet, that is, as much as the puppeteers are ‘absent’ in performance, they are inevitably present, and maintains that instead of concealing or camouflaging themselves, the puppeteers should dress to complement the puppet’s character.⁷ This is a method characteristic of Japanese Bunraku puppetry, but can also be seen in examples from African puppetry as can be witnessed in *Tall Horse* (2004),⁸ as well as examples in some of their earlier plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1988).⁹

At a 2016 performance of the South African Handspring Puppet Company’s *I Love You When You’re Breathing* (2011/2012),¹⁰ a play presented in the form of a lecture given by a male puppet protagonist that I attended at the Cape Town Science Centre, the speaker who introduced the play, upon reading the title, wondered out loud that ‘If you love me when I’m breathing; you don’t love me when I’m dead?’ – a thought that has always stuck with me, and which feels significant but which I still cannot quite comprehend in the context of Handspring’s work. Evident here is the association of breath with life (and conversely the absence of breath with death), but also a blurring of subject and object, whereby the puppet subject (that is, the subject of the *You* in the play’s title) is conflated with the human subject (the speaker introducing the play), in a move where ‘you’ becomes ‘me’. In other words, the puppet subject becomes relatable as another ‘me’, an object which is also a subject. The comment further brings into awareness the fragility of the breath, a function which often goes unnoticed in our bodies. We breathe automatically, but when we do notice our breath, the physicality of our bodies becomes more apparent in that moment; we feel our lungs expand inside us, see our chest open up, hear the breath travel in

4 Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts (GIPCA), *Great Texts: Handspring Puppet Company*, <http://www.gipca.uct.ac.za/project/great-textsbig-questions-handspring-puppet-company/> (accessed 25 September 2022). In other words, they suggest that an ‘autistic’ demeanour allows for more sensitised receptivity on the part of the audience.

5 J. Mowitz, *No Strings Attached: Technics, Form, Politics*, Conference paper presented at the Centre for Humanities Research Winter School (Hogsback: The Edge, 2015), 1.

6 An uncanny formulation seeing as the puppet has no emotion other than that which is projected onto it by the puppeteer.

7 Kohler, ‘Thinking Through Puppets’, 69.

8 A joint venture between Handspring Puppet Company and Sogolon Puppet Troupe of Mali (Yaya Coulibaly). Written by Khephra Burns, from the book *Zarafa* by Michael Allin, and directed by Marthinus Basson.

9 Adapted by Handspring Puppet Company. Directed by Esther van Ryswyk and Fred Abrahamse.

10 Written and adapted by Basil Jones and Jason Potgieter. Directed by Jason Potgieter. This production has been performed numerous times since its inception, often in the context of academic and art circles, for example at the ‘Love and Revolution’ conference and at the opening of the Community Arts Project (CAP) exhibition, both hosted by the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape.

and out through our nostrils, throat and windpipe. This was a childhood anxiety of mine – that somehow I would forget to breathe, that while I slept my body would not remember to keep breathing. So there is a sense that breath is also linked to memory and forgetting – that our bodies continually ‘remember’ to breathe.

Part of the gestural language of the puppet can be seen in its ‘breath’, seemingly transmitted from puppeteer to puppet through a mode of continual resuscitation, but in actuality conveyed by the micro-movements of the puppeteer. The ‘sound’ of the puppet’s breath, and thus its life, is *seen* rather than heard. To conjure the illusion of the breathing puppet the puppeteer must learn to move the puppet, walk the puppet, in such a way that the audience believes in the rhythmical up-and-down movement of the chest as indicative of a biologically functioning anatomy. In this way the subject of many puppetry productions is also body rhythms and gestures such as breathing and walking, and the biological laws that govern these actions. This ‘walking’ could be seen as what Michel de Certeau refers to as a ‘space of enunciation’, a kind of speech,¹¹ in this guise positioning the puppet as a ‘topographical system [...] a spatial acting-out of [a] place’,¹² perhaps the ‘place’ of the mind, or in Handspring’s case, the ‘place’ of the South African subject. This invokes a certain kind of blind mobility in the puppet, a walking without seeing, walking without a body that *can* walk – a body without organs or muscle – perhaps comparative to what de Certeau calls an ‘opaque and blind mobility characteristic of the bustling city’.¹³ This ‘unseeing’ mode of mobility implicates the body with other bodies, which together make up a larger amorphous ‘organ’ moving as one, similar to the puppet-puppeteer relationship, reliant predominantly on senses other than the visual. The puppet’s voice is produced through a ventriloquism, the puppeteer talking for and through the puppet, a convention which is further complicated in Handspring’s case where the puppeteers are visible and become an extension of the puppet. Thus, the ocular, the haptic, the oral and the aural all work in collaboration to produce the voice and breath and, ultimately, the life of the puppet – a multi-sensory or synaesthetic being.

The amalgamation of all the senses or the mixing of ‘sensory compartmentalisation’ (‘synaesthesia’) within the aesthetic is taken up by Tyson Edward Lewis as a means of ‘opening up new spaces for new forms of cognition (new metaphors) to take place’.¹⁴ Lewis has used ‘the mixing, rerouting, and cross-contamination of divisions found within the aesthetic’ to propose ‘a radical rethinking of synaesthesia as a particularly democratic machine able to produce new metaphors by mixing senses and significations once held apart by strict boundary principles’.¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre’s notion of ‘rhythmanalysis’ more clearly brings the sonic into play and can be held alongside Lewis’s notion of synaesthesia as a means of ‘call[ing] on all [the] senses.

11 M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 98.

12 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97–98.

13 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

14 T. E. Lewis, ‘Education in the Realm of the Senses: Understanding Paulo Freire’s Aesthetic Unconscious through Jacques Ranciere’, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43, 2, 2009, 290.

15 Lewis, ‘Education in the Realm’, 290.

[...] Without privileging any one of these sensations, raised [...] in the perception of rhythms, to the detriment of any other'.¹⁶ The rhythm analyst 'draws on his breathing, the circulation of his blood, the beatings of his heart and the delivery of his speech as landmarks'.¹⁷ Lefebvre's understanding of the senses thus includes more automatic and typically unnoticed biological processes that would not usually be included in defining the subject, but in the context of puppetry practice these 'rhythms' become highly significant in terms of mimicking their 'life-giving' characteristics. Of course, the senses must always work in combination with each other, and it is more the ontological separation of them that is at issue here, that is, how we are conventionally taught and expected to use different senses in different contexts, for example that art is of the eye and music of the ear. In these terms, puppetry presents a synaesthetic means of transgressing boundaries, 'alter[ing] the thing that is seen and transform[ing] the seer'¹⁸ – between audience, artist and object, life and death, sites of production or creation and, as has been mentioned, between subject and object. Further, however, is a mixing in the form of mobility and stillness, gesture and image, where the puppet subject comes into being through a combination of performance (movement) and materiality. Thinking the visual through the other senses, as opposed to solely through the eye, 'seeing' is thus 'metamorphosis, not mechanism'.¹⁹

I Love You When You're Breathing fits in to what I have grouped as a 'meta-theatrical' iteration within Handspring's oeuvre, which also includes *Or You Could Kiss Me* (2010),²⁰ *Save the Pedestals* (2018/2019)²¹ and most recently, *Life and Times of Michael K* (2021/2022);²² an exploration of the self as puppet, or, conversely, the puppet as self. These plays offer meditations on life and death, self and other – contemplations on 'I' and 'you' – as a means of both explaining the puppet and of addressing the human self. There is also something evident here linking breath and the self that is inherent to Handspring's work, which underlies their entire practice in the making and performing of puppets, and can be tracked through their complete body of work. Here many of the puppet characters appear as similar, or at times, quite literal representations of Jones and Kohler themselves (for the latter, see their semi-autobiographical play *Or You Could Kiss Me*), but this is further an exploration of the ways in which the company situates their practice in relation to theory, as is most clearly seen in *I Love You When You're Breathing*.²³ This play is a useful starting

16 H. Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004), 21.

17 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 21.

18 J. Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 11.

19 Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 11.

20 Written by Neil Bartlett and Handspring Puppet Company. Directed by Neil Bartlett.

21 Adaptation of a short story by Ivan Vladislavić. Directed and choreographed by Robyn Orlin with Handspring Puppet Company in collaboration with Puppentheater Halle.

22 Adaptation of the book by J. M. Coetzee, adapted for the stage by Lara Foot, in collaboration with Handspring Puppet Company. Directed by Lara Foot.

23 See also a catalogue of talks and publications on their website which they themselves have presented on the problematic of the puppet/puppeteer relationship and their thinking around it (Handspring Puppet Company. 'Talks and Publications, 2016, <http://www.handspringpuppet.co.za/our-work/talks-and-publications> (accessed 8 December 2020).

point in outlining the company's philosophy of puppetry in terms of 'movement as thought' or movement as 'generative of thought', a process by which audience authors meaning, and a concept akin to Donna Haraway's 'semiotic of materiality', where the material object 'speaks' or is animated in ways that go beyond voice.²⁴ This 'language' of material is here apparent in the crafted form of the puppet, as well as the gesture and movement expressed in its performance.

In *I Love You When You're Breathing* the puppet presenter, dressed formally in a grey suit and white collared shirt with a carved wooden head and hands, guides the audience in the practice of the puppeteer in terms of the way in which the latter projects life into the puppet through the micro-movements of *breath*. The puppet discusses how this is achieved by performing a combination of vocal prompts and gestures, sometimes addressing the puppeteer directly, calling attention to this symbiotic relationship, but simultaneously making explicit how reliant this seemingly living being is on the puppeteer to give it life and form. The title of the play places emphasis on the importance for Handspring of the *living*, moving subject, and the significance puppetry has as a 'life-giving' practice for them. In the play it is expressed that life is a 'struggle' for the puppet, 'a pile of sticks and cloth' which contains a certain 'deadliness' into which the life must be designed.²⁵ The bodies of many of Handspring's puppets are created like skeletons, their inner structures or armatures are revealed, sometimes covered with a sheer fabric which is ripped and laddered to reveal the parts it covers. The audience can thus see that the puppets do not have inner organs. They are skeletons with transparent skins, constantly on the brink of death, further emphasised by the contrast in materials and the 'materiality' of the human body – bone, flesh, wood, metal and plastic; human and puppet skins in close relational proximity.

It is the human hand which is the subject that creates or 'births' the puppet, a kind of mutant love-child; however, for many puppet-makers there also exists the notion that the puppet is alive before the subject's (in the form of the puppet-maker and later, puppeteer) intervention, and calls to be brought to live a more meaningful life, one which can only be made possible through the puppeteer's support as 'parent'.²⁶ Despite the uncanny or 'unhomely' (*unheimlich*) feeling the puppet may provoke in the viewer in its mimetic similarity to the human body, the relationship between puppet and puppeteer could perhaps be described, quite contrastingly, as 'homely' – the latter 'inhabiting' the former, this seen quite clearly in Handspring's puppets which must be controlled from within, and the puppet most 'at home', most

24 Handspring Puppet Company, *I Love You When You're Breathing*, Theatrical performance. Directed by Jason Potgieter. Performance at Cape Town Science Centre, Cape Town, 1 November 2016. See also D. Coole and S Frost (eds) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and R. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

25 Handspring Puppet Company, *I Love You When You're Breathing*, 2016.

26 This is akin to the impulse expressed by sculptors who describe how in the act of carving they 'find' the figure in the material with which they are working.

‘itself’ in this arrangement.²⁷ The Handspring puppet also provides a dwelling for the human self – a *private* space in the public realm, and a protective armour or shell. It is a passive entity, a receptacle or vessel to be ‘filled’ with a subject, which in Handspring’s case is twofold – the puppet is filled with the puppeteer as subject, but simultaneously with the puppet’s designated character as subject, performed predominantly through a combination of voice and gesture. The puppet is thus both active and passive in its subjective identity, and it is in this way helpful to utilise the puppet form to think through notions of subjectivity and ideology. If individuals are, as Louis Althusser frames it, ‘*always already* subjects and, as such, constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, unmistakable and, naturally, irreplaceable subjects’,²⁸ then it is perhaps that the vessel or cup, as representative of the ‘always already’ subject, is filled rather with ‘ideology’, which ‘never stop[s] interpellating subjects as subjects, never stop[s] “recruiting” individuals.’²⁹

These ‘rituals of ideological recognition’ are what Lefebvre refers to as ‘rhythms’, and to think of them in this way means to *listen* and learn rhythms first from the body, ‘in order consequently to appreciate external rhythms.’³⁰ The body thus ‘serves [...] as a metronome.’³¹ Lefebvre writes that this ‘preparatory discipline for the perception of the outside world borders on pathology yet avoids it because it is methodical. All sorts of already known practices, more or less mixed up with ideology, are similar to it and can be of use: the control of breathing and the heart, the uses of muscles and limbs, etc.’³² Handspring’s puppets are illustrative representations of this thought process – figuring the body as a metronome – and *I Love You When You’re Breathing* is a tutorial on this way of interpreting puppets, making visible what Lefebvre terms the ‘*garland*’ or ‘*bouquet*’ of rhythms the ‘body produces [...] that results from all its history.’³³ The audience is shown explicitly how the puppet breathes, how it walks, dances, jumps, balances – using its carved wooden muscles, blood seemingly pumping through its veins to power this dextrous movement – and on witnessing this instructive tutorial, the viewer may come to understand all of Handspring’s puppetry performances in a new light, considering not only the storyline and characters of each play, but the way the puppet body is made to move, talk, breathe – the rhythms of its body. They

27 This is in alignment with Masahiro Mori’s observation in his essay on the ‘uncanny valley’ in relation to the Bunraku puppet, which, ‘on close inspection’, does not, to him, ‘appear [...] very similar to a human being’. For Mori, its ‘realism in terms of size, skin texture, and so on, does not even reach that of a realistic prosthetic hand. But when we enjoy a puppet show in the theatre, we are seated at a certain distance from the stage. The puppet’s absolute size is ignored, and its total appearance, including hand and eye movements, is close to that of a human being. So, given our tendency as an audience to become absorbed in this form of art, we might feel a high level of affinity for the puppet.’ (M. Mori, ‘The Uncanny Valley’, *IEEE Robotics and Automation Magazine*, 19, 20, 2012, 3). Mori uses the puppet to articulate a view about the uncanny within robotics when he claims that ‘when an industrial robot is switched off, it is just a greasy machine. But once the robot is programmed to move its gripper like a human hand, we start to feel a certain level of affinity for it.’ (Ibid.) Here the hand is significant as a body part which signals how we should approach an outside object or being.

28 L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus* (London: Verso, 2014), 189.

29 Althusser, *On the Reproduction*, 193–194.

30 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 19.

31 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 19.

32 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 20.

33 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 20.

may subsequently come to experience heightened awareness of their own body and the ways these bodily rhythms contribute to the ideologies of their own subject formation, one's own life 'plot'.

This helps to show that ideology, which names and forms the subject, 'has a material existence',³⁴ and the ways in which the subject is interpellated through the material language of the object. In other words, it shows how objects can name us, or bring *us* into being as subjects. This follows on from Foucault's insistence that 'we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instances as a constitution of subjects.'³⁵ If we are to think human subjectivity through the constructed and rehearsed form of the puppet it becomes more evident how we 'train ourselves, and are trained, to behave in a number of ways.'³⁶ This is to recognise, as Lefebvre illustrates, 'the coexistence of social and biological rhythms, with the body as the point of contact. Our biological rhythms of sleep, hunger and thirst, excretion and so on are more and more conditioned by the social environment and our working lives.'³⁷ Donald Winnicott's 'transitional objects', also referred to as "'not-me" objects' or "'other-than-me" objects',³⁸ show how from early on our worlds become constituted through 'things', the object often serving as a substitute for the subject for the young child as a means of transitioning into a 'full' individuated being.³⁹ Here the 'individual [is] engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.'⁴⁰ This is descriptive of, in Georg Simmel's thinking, 'the diversity of the ways in which men and things belong to each other, of the fact that they are simultaneously inside and outside one another.'⁴¹ Again, the Handspring puppet forms an illustration of this notion – the human subject is both inside and outside the puppet form, while the latter, being both subject/object, is both inside and outside of human subjectivity, human 'life'. What it further conveys however, via the puppet, is the notion that ideology is rehearsed, enacted and adjusted *along with other bodies*, both human and otherwise.

For Foucault, the 'process of subjectivation takes place centrally through the body',⁴² subjection being 'literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced.'⁴³ The subject is as such materially figured, but for Foucault 'appears at the expense of the body, an

34 Althusser, *On the Reproduction*, 184.

35 M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 97. For more on both Althusser and Foucault in their relation to materiality, see Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 33–36.

36 S. Elden, 'Rhythmanalysis: An Introduction' in H. Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004), xii.

37 Elden, 'Rhythmanalysis: An Introduction', xii.

38 D. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 4.

39 The transitional 'object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate', (Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 19–20)

40 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3.

41 G. Simmel, 'The Handle' in K. H. Wolff (ed), *Georg Simmel 1858–1918: A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), 274.

42 J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1997), 83.

43 Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 84.

appearance conditioned in inverse relation to the disappearance of the body. The subject not only effectively takes the place of the body but acts as the soul which frames and forms the body in captivity.⁴⁴ In this instance Foucault refers specifically to the formulation of the subject within the context of the prison, and in this case ‘the soul is figured as itself a kind of spatial captivity, indeed, as a kind of prison, which provides the exterior form or regulatory principle of the prisoner’s body’,⁴⁵ but, as Judith Butler has pointed out, ‘[i]f discourse produces identity by supplying and enforcing a regulatory principle which thoroughly invades, totalises, and renders coherent the individual, then it seems that every “identity”, insofar as it is totalising, acts as precisely such a “soul that imprisons the body”.’⁴⁶ Figured as ‘an instrument of power through which the body is cultivated and formed’,⁴⁷ the soul ‘forms and frames the body, stamps it, and in stamping it, brings it into being. In this formulation, there is nobody outside of power, for the materiality of the body – indeed, materiality itself – is produced by and in direct relation to the investment of power.’⁴⁸ This reverses the relation of vessel to ideology in that the subject, or ‘soul’, which comes into being via relations of power, acts rather as an ideological receptacle, a holding cell, for the physical body.

The subject is seen to be held by and in the body, the physical body a vessel for the ‘soul’, but if the subject (or soul) itself simultaneously acts as a vessel, then, in turn, and in alignment with Foucault’s thinking, it also holds the body. This analogy could be paralleled with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the ‘Body without Organs’ (BwO)⁴⁹ as a receptacle, and can be further explored through the puppet body, which is not expected to appear anatomically correct, and indeed does not require the same organs, bone structure, muscles and blood vessels as what the living human or animal body does; but it is the lifelike forms of Handspring’s puppets in particular that highlight this uncanny form of BwO, a body made to be held, or perhaps, a body with *handles*. The puppet can be seen to function as a receptacle for the human body in and of itself, particularly in the case of Handspring’s puppets, into which the puppeteer must actually *insert* either some part of their body, or their entire body in order for the puppet to function and move as it should. In this case, the hybrid form of puppet-puppeteer becomes a new kind of BwO, an armature powered by a flesh-and-bone body, a cyborg.

While *I Love You When You’re Breathing* draws attention to the breath as a function, *Life and Times of Michael K*, an adaptation of J. M. Coetzee’s 1983 novel of the same title which details the journey of a man who seeks to return his mother’s ashes to her rural birthplace in a country besieged by civil war, can also be seen as a parallel which draws attention to the *mouth* as an object of study. The protagonist,

44 Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 91–92.

45 Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 85.

46 Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 85–86.

47 Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 90.

48 Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 91.

49 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 158–160.

Michael K or just 'K', a lone character who is faced continually with Kafkaesque trial after trial, is born with a cleft lip, exposing the top row of his teeth and part of the inside of his mouth. His upper body, which is often exposed throughout the play, is cage-like, constructed in ribbed sections from bent cane, and in comparison to his solid carved wooden head, arms, hands and feet, it feels vulnerable and fragile, as if it could be easily cracked like the skeleton of a small animal. The audience is allowed access inside the body of the puppet who cannot shut his mouth, cannot close the receptacle which holds his voice, but what is interesting here is that, although it is often remarked upon in the play (he is teased as a boy, bullied and ostracised throughout his life), the audience does not have frequent visual access to K's mouth, a significant marker of his identity. The K puppet is relatively small in comparison to its human handlers, so the detail of the cleft lip is lost when viewed from further away. There are numerous instances throughout the play however which project the puppet character onto a large screen backdrop, and it is only here that K's mouth is fully visible, in virtual form. The cleft lip can thus be seen as representative of a further tension between the visual and the aural/oral, in that more can be interpreted ekphrastically through what is said about it, how it is described, as opposed to through visual representation or information. K's skeletal body is 'filled' by the virtual images displayed on the screen behind him – his dreams and imaginings, his mindscape – beyond the physical form of his body his subjectivity is accessible through this imagery. The screen is sometimes in fact visible *through* the ribbed forms of his chest; we see the transient 'soul' of the puppet through his bodily form, experiencing the frustration and turmoil of his life as if his body were a screen itself. Here body and soul merge, but K's soul is blocked by the physical limitations of his body and the landscape around him.

The 'life' of a puppet is achieved by a 'signing system' or simultaneously choreographed movement of puppeteer and puppet, the former ensuring that no matter what other movement the puppet may be involved in (walking, sitting, dancing), it also remains 'alive' in a rhythmically repeated micro-movement or micro-motion representative of breathing, the puppet 'gasping' for life. Handspring first made this observation whilst working on the puppet-opera adaptation of *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (1998 and 2008),⁵⁰ in which opera singers enact the dreams and visions of the dying puppet Ulisse. It was here that they realised the importance of breath in uniting the opera singers' vocals with the breathing movements of the puppets and their manipulators, thus also pointing to the significance of breath and the voice to maintain the illusion of life.⁵¹ Through this breath, the puppeteer also technically acts a pair of lungs, and by extension a heart, a brain, blood flowing through veins, and a whole set of human or animal organs that are required to instil life in an organism. For Handspring, breath is further significant in sustaining a 'bond of trust between audience and puppet' in that when the audience witnesses the puppet 'breathing', the latter is seen to be 'bound by the same physical laws as

50 Music by Claudio Monteverdi with musical direction by Philippe Pierlot. Directed by William Kentridge.

51 Kohler, 'Thinking Through Puppets', 99.

the viewer.⁵² If the puppet doesn't breathe, according to Kohler, '[e]ffectively it holds its breath', causing the audience to mimic this action and hold their breath until they no longer can, creating an uncomfortable tension and breaking the 'bond of trust between audience and puppet.'⁵³

If the human puppeteer is essentially acting as a set of organs, why is it necessary to build this set into a complete, and for Handspring, rather elaborately designed, body at all? It is usually clear that this human-like object is not anatomically correct and does not have life or a body which could offer it life, yet we may begin to believe that it is living.⁵⁴ Conversely, the human body can be presented to us in multiple different forms and out of numerous different materials, thus breaking down the living integrity of the body itself, and placing it on par with the object that it is represented by. So it is not actually only the fact that the puppet *looks* human that makes it a potentially horrifying or uncanny entity; it is that we are told it is the subject, that the human subject displaces its status as subject by giving life to this object.⁵⁵ It could be that the anxiety around the puppet, an 'anxiety about the boundary between the self and the object of worship',⁵⁶ lies not in the puppet becoming a living being, but rather in the human 'becoming puppet', and by extension, at least in Handspring's case, becoming animal. There is also something sinister or vampiric about these characters, which come with the risk of infection, the puppet's relation with the puppeteer both symbiotic and parasitic, these dead objects relying on the warm blood flow of another to survive, sucking out life; the love for them somewhat necrophilic. It may amaze us that the puppeteer can give such convincing life to an inanimate object, birth it, breathe energy into it, god-like, but this life is also a trickery, a terror, in its refusal of the human subject, a trickery that the audience must play an active part in, maintaining and enabling the belief in the life of the puppet. As Otakar Zich states, 'an audience can perceive a puppet performance in either of two ways: first as lifeless puppets, in which case their material reality overwhelms their pretensions to seriousness and they are perceived as comical; alternatively, they are perceived as living beings, evoking wonder and

52 Kohler, 'Thinking Through Puppets', 99.

53 Kohler, 'Thinking Through Puppets', 99.

54 Even a plastic shopping bag floating in the wind can become a living, breathing being, as can be witnessed in French Compagnie Non Nova's *Afternoon of a Foehn* (2014).

55 In the excerpt that follows, Freud describes how a child he is observing substitutes a wooden cotton reel for his absent mother, 'staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach [...] The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o" ["gone"]. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" ["there"]'. This, then, was the complete game – disappearance and return'. See S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961), 9. The reel could never be seen as anything other (a carriage; a toy) than a stand-in for his mother – a living object. When the boy uses the cotton reel as a stand-in for his mother, she becomes that object. Here the curtained cot becomes a theatre, and the reel a marionette or puppet on a string. Through this performance the boy gains power over the object he desires and now possesses; he can throw it/her away and then bring it/her back again. This scene reveals that mimesis need not necessarily operate aesthetically; something does not necessarily need to *look* like the thing we are told it is or believe it to be. We see this clearly in toys and make-believe games when children transform objects into scenes from their imaginations. A table becomes a boat, a tree becomes a house. Keir Elam echoes a similar concept when he states that a 'table employed in dramatic representation will not usually differ in any material or structural fashion from the item of furniture that the members of the audience eat at, and yet it is in some sense transformed: it acquires, as it were, a set of quotation marks'. See K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980), 6. These quotation marks transform an object from what it appears to be into what we imagine it to be.

56 J. Taylor, 'Mark's Signs/Twain's Twins', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 8, 1–2, 1992, 2.

affecting spectators mysteriously'.⁵⁷ This may in fact require a certain 'numbing' or 'muting' of the senses, that is, the human subject becoming numb to the fact of the object. This is evident in many audiences' responses to *War Horse*, where it is often remarked that over the course of the performance, viewers began to believe that the horse puppets were *real* horses.⁵⁸

The self as puppet can further be seen as a doubling of the self, a doubling of the human in which the copy or double is bestowed with life and value akin to the 'original', to some extent playing out the 'drama of the self's enchantment with the self'.⁵⁹ In this way the human fulfils a 'narcissistic longing',⁶⁰ creating new life for itself, but simultaneously diminishing it. When the puppeteer takes on an entity which they must devote themselves to they are in a sense denying their own life; when they breathe life into the puppet they take away some of their own breath, an empathy for the object,⁶¹ a contradiction and an enigma. However much life is put into it though, the puppet remains deaf, blind, mute to itself; it cannot regard itself through sight or voice, alive from the inside, but with a 'dead skin' unable to absorb or respond to the touch or voice of another. It is akin to Franz Kafka's strange entity 'Odradek', who expresses 'only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it'.⁶² It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves.⁶³ However, to describe the puppet's laughter is really to describe the puppeteer's laughter as we experience it through the puppet. It is perhaps in these moments that familiar sounds and biological processes such as breathing and coughing become unfamiliar, estranged or alien to the human body when seen via the form of the puppet. The illusion of the puppet is further realised, and the audience becomes aware of the fact that the puppet's lungs are empty, or more accurately, non-existent. The sound is an effect, like fallen leaves that crunch underfoot to describe an autumnal day.

The puppet as a receptacle 'holds' the human body within performance, and as an audience, we understand that a human manipulator is controlling this lifeless form, but we do not always see their forms – at times they are literally 'dark matter'⁶⁴

57 O. Zich in F. Proschan, 'Introduction: Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks and Performing Objects', *Semiotica* 47, 1983, 13.

58 J. Parker-Starbuck, 'Animal Ontologies and Media Representations: Robotics, Puppets and the Real of *War Horse*', *Theatre Journal*, 65, 3, 2013, 373–393.

59 Taylor, *Mark's Signs*, 1.

60 Taylor, *Mark's Signs*, 1.

61 In *War Horse* Handspring made use of trained puppeteers instead of muscular acrobats and Kohler explains that '[t]heir empathy for the figure was what made them most valuable to us'. (Kohler, 'Thinking Through Puppets', 137).

62 F. Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, W. and E. Muir (trans), (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 470. Kafka's Odradek seems to exist between the living and the dead as an immortal being, in that '[a]nything that dies has some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek' (Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 470). The narrator of this tale finds this fact threatening in that '[h]e [Odradek] does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful' (Ibid.). If Odradek is to be imagined as a sort of puppet, which becomes even more likely when his form is described as a spool inter-spliced with a 'small wooden crossbar' with 'another small rod [...] joined to that at a right angle' (Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 469), like a puppet's supportive frame, it may become evident how a puppet (object) threatens the life of the puppeteer (subject). Further, 'the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs', situating Odradek closer to the bipedal human form. If Odradek is indeed a sort of puppet, this would mean that the puppet is immortal, but also aimless in his desires and goals, meaning that the human must convince him or win him over in order to get him to do what the former requires of him. However, the title of the short story, *The Cares of a Family Man*, positions Odradek, and by extension the puppet, as a domestic entity. The narrator seems to possess a worry that he may be devoting more life, more time to this puppet-child called Odradek than to his human family, but also steers the puppet away from an instrumentalist relation to one of close kin, 'rather like a child' (Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 470). Odradek is a menace but vulnerable, aimless, immortal and domestic, a living-dead entity.

63 Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 470.

64 See A. Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theatre, and Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013).

concealed behind a screen or play board, or within the body of a puppet. This is expressive of what Jean-Luc Nancy might call a 'being singular plural', in alignment with the notion that ideology is formed along with other bodies, in that '[b]eing cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence' which is inclusive of 'all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails, gods, and "humans"'.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the 'mark of invisibility', according to Fred Moten, 'is a visible, racial mark: invisibility has visibility at its heart. To be invisible is to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly recognised as the unrecognisable, as the abject, as the absence of individual self-consciousness, as a transparent vessel of meanings wholly independent of any influence of the vessel itself.'⁶⁶ As such, the form or method of this mode of performance renders the living human body absent but present, whole but segmented. In this relation voice is further disembodied, ventriloquised;⁶⁷ it is not easily located, linked to the ways in which objects which hold voice or sound can also be seen as 'puppets' in perhaps surprising ways.⁶⁸

Some of the ways this is evident include the early example of the phonograph, which at its inception was figured as a thoroughly uncanny object, 'speech made "immortal"',⁶⁹ the disembodied voice attached to a supposedly lifeless object.⁷⁰ This voice could be traced subsequently through the gramophone, record player, cassette tape player, compact disc player, and more recently into the digital realm, where the tangible object that 'holds' voice is less obvious, but rather exists virtually, with cell phone applications such as the 'voice note' allowing the user to record and transmit their own voice instantaneously. This is similar to the function of the telephone, an 'artificial ear',⁷¹ but here there is no means of back and forth conversation; one must listen to the disembodied, recorded voice note until its end, and then respond with one's own soliloquy. This kind of 'puppet' points to the role sound plays in giving and sustaining life,⁷² but further how '[f]unctions of the central nervous system [have] been technologically implemented'.⁷³ Thus the fragmentation of the

65 J. L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.

66 F. Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 68.

67 Elsewhere I worked through the idea of the puppet as receptacle in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1996), written by Jane Taylor, with source testimony from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Archives, and directed by William Kentridge. This play reimagines Alfred Jarry's absurdist play *Ubu Roi* (1896) in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), proposing that the protagonist 'Pa Ubu' could perhaps be identified, via the lines derived from the TRC proceedings he is made to speak, as Dirk Coetzee, the first commander of the covert apartheid-era South African Security Police Unit at the Pretoria farm Vlakplaas, 'whose actions' in overseeing the death and torture of multiple anti-apartheid activists 'epitomised the atrocities of the apartheid regime'. See J. Edelstein, *Truth and Lies: Stories from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Granta Publications, 2001), 13. Here there is a ventriloquism at play where Coetzee's voice in the form of his TRC testimony is evident but his physical presence is not explicitly identified, thus casting the human Pa Ubu, played by the actor Dawid Minnaar, as a mannequin or dummy – a vessel for voice – realising the 'ventriloquistic potential of performance to re-member an absent body'. See M. Franko and A. Richards (eds), *Acting on the Past: Historical Performance across the Disciplines* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 4.

68 See A. Erasmus, 'A Sinister Resonance', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 45, 4, 2018, 585–596 on the absence/presence of sound or the sonic in relation to the physical object or body in the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

69 F. Kittler, 'Gramophone' in J. Sterne (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012), 234.

70 There is further work to be done here on the impact of Edison and the phonograph in a South African context, as well on the larger history of technology, particularly in relation to séances and spiritualist events, as a means of thinking through the notion of absence/presence and the puppet.

71 Kittler, 'Gramophone', 238.

72 See Kittler, 'Gramophone', 237.

73 In this regard, Kittler also refers to the telegraph as an 'artificial mouth'. (Kittler, 'Gramophone', 238).

body as a vessel for sound is inherently connected to technology and technological advancements which figure the body in parts, whether metaphorically or otherwise.

This is also apparent in increasingly prevalent instruments of surveillance in the public and private realms. The framing of the body in this way is evident in more obvious recording devices such as security cameras and bureaucratic instruments of measure such as the identity document or passport, but the internet presents a perhaps more sinister mode of surveillance which ‘borrows’ the data we upload to social media platforms and other digital applications. As Ed Krčma puts it, ‘[d]igital media have enabled the details of our interests, preferences, communications, movements, and transactions to be monitored, shaped, stored and trafficked.’⁷⁴ For Rustom Bharucha, ‘we are living in an environment where the technologies of surveillance have intensified particularly in liberal democracies where the myth of free speech has been placed under severe duress. There are now legal mechanisms which place enormous curbs on critical thinking or dissent.’⁷⁵

To rethink human subjectivities and futurities through the puppet allows us to take on potentially different rhythms and rituals, and adjust how we rehearse and enact or perform ideologies in ourselves and amongst others. It may seem a strange suggestion – to take on the rhythm of an object – but I would suggest that by becoming *more* object we can find our way back to different formulations of subjecthood which reanimate, reimagine and re-enchant.

74 E. Krčma, ‘Fortuna: Drawing, Technology, Contingency’, *O que nos faz pensar, Rio de Janeiro*, 26, 40, 2017, 137. The ‘emergence of global mega-corporations such as Apple, Google and Facebook has meant that those domains of human activity that escape such surveillance have radically diminished, while the content to which subjects are exposed on line, for example, becomes ever more precisely tailored and pre-packaged’, while ‘digital technology enables the exercise of new powers of manipulation at various registers and scales [...] Photoshop offers ever-greater means to saturate images with intentions, to shape them to the conscious will of their maker’. (Krčma, ‘Fortuna: Drawing, Technology, Contingency’, 138–139) See also J. Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).

75 R. Bharucha, *Terror and Performance* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 8.