In the Beginning Were Puppets: Towards a Poetics of Puppetry. Edited by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Lisa Nais. Heidelberg: Universität Verlag Winter, 2023. 240 pp., 37 b/w, 56 color illustrations.[1] Hardcover €46,00, Paperback€45,00.

In the Beginning Were Puppets: Towards a Poetics of Puppetry is a bilingual collection of fourteen scholarly essays in English and German developed from the first Salzburg Puppet Theatre conference (2020), which was inspired in turn by the Salzburg Marionette Theatre's 2019 production of Mozart's opera *Bastien and Bastienne*, originally mounted by founder Anton Aicher in 1913. UNESCO listed the marionette theatre as Intangible Cultural Heritage for its unique playing technique, and it is one of the oldest continuously operating string puppet theatres in the world. Salzburg is not often mentioned in the scholarship in puppetry anthologies and the introduction to the volume by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner does the corrective work of doing the city justice as one of the centers of object performance in the modernist era. Similarly, other authors turn their attention to the "origin stories" of various forms of puppetry, concepts that can be useful in the field, and case studies of contemporary puppetry performers. Editors Coelsch-Foisner and Lisa Nais foreground the variety of regional theatres across the world to illuminate some debates in the global puppetry community from a European perspective.

Coelsch-Foisner engages in conversation with such notable scholars of puppetry as Claudia Orenstein, Dassia Posner, Eileen Blumenthal, Alissa Mello, and Cariad Astles in her writing, picking up the baton from John Bell, who outlined the necessity of using a combinatory approach in writing about puppetry. Assembling this diverse toolbox is exactly what *In the Beginning Were Puppets* aims to do. Coelsch-Foisner demonstrates the benefits of the interdisciplinary approach to puppetry studies by including scholarship based in literary analysis, art history, museum studies, and more. Some of the chapters are organized as historical overviews, some dive deeper into a theoretical concept, and others grapple with practical and ethical questions. I will talk about the
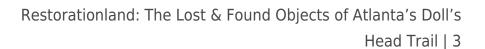
essays in the order that they appear in print because the case studies are roughly chronological.

In her introductory chapter, "Why Puppets Matter: Ten Concepts to Approach Puppets on Stage and Beyond," Coelsch-Foisner organizes her concepts into three groups to serve as analytical tools and applies them to several Austrian performances. Some of them, like *the uncanny*, already have a lot of traction in the field. Others trace new connections, like *transgression*, which views puppetry, similar to magic, as a way of manipulating the audience's attention rather than objects.

Esther Fernández is interested in the manipulation of shapes and illusions in her essay "Rebellious Silhouettes: From Arabic Shadows to Optical Illusions in Iberia," situating her research within literary and social histories from the eleventh century to the early twentieth century. Her historical survey connects the dots between different forms of object-shadow entertainments in the region.

"The Legacy of Commedia dell'arte in Nino Pozzo's Puppetry" by Francesca Cecconi looks at how masks, improvisation, and *canovacci* (scenarios on paper) are folded into the performance of Veronese puppeteer Nino Pozzo (1901–83). Among many noteworthy insights, she engages the ongoing "egg or the chicken" debate about whether the wooden puppets or masks of *commedia dell'arte* appeared first by looking closely at the character of Burattino. In the contemporary world, the work of puppeteers like Pozzo preserve the traditions of *commedia dell'arte*.

The depiction of puppeteers in the drawings and prints of Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder are the focus of Erwin Pokorny's essay "The Magician as a Puppeteer." Pokorny observes how the occupations of court jesters, ventriloquists, and conjurers intersected in the image of a puppet master, who possessed the dangerous skill of bringing inanimate matter to life. The parallels between the magician's and the puppeteer's techniques for manipulating audience's attention is clearly a potent research direction for audience studies.

To answer the question from the title of her essay, "A Hall of Mirrors: Why Use a Puppet?," Emily LeQuesne turns to the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*. Evoking the studies of puppetry theorists such as Juri Veltrusky, Steve Tillis, and Matt Smith, LeQuesne explores the possibilities of meaning created by the dual nature of puppets, both representative of human experience and abstracted material objects.

Wolfgang Büchel focuses on the puppet theatre of Arthur Schnitzler and Maurice Maeterlinck in his essay, "Zum literarischen Kleinphänomen der Apostrophierung von Dramen als Puppenspiel: Pareidolie, Gesichtsmetapher und anthropomorphe Gestalt" (On the Literary Phenomenon of Apostrophizing Dramas as Puppet Shows: Pareidolia, Facial Metaphor, and Anthropomorphic Figure). Büchel turns to the European modernists such as Rainer Maria Rilke to illustrate his point that a puppet or non-human object's anthropomorphic features are critical to perceiving them as invested with life. He concludes that the literary division between "puppet plays" and "human plays" is superficial since both kinds can be acted out by puppets and actors alike.

Caterina Pan's "Kasperl's Genesis: Intercultural Heritage of the Popular Matrix" dives into the history of the string and glove puppet. The term "popular matrix"––a network of shared knowledge beyond the nationalization and textualization of an elite culture––is a valuable contribution to puppetry studies from popular culture and is well illustrated by the emergence of Kasperl due to fluid boundaries and shared resources of the Renaissance.

Alisa Rakul's essay, "Maeterlinck's Plays for Marionettes: Making Voice and Silence Sound Simultaneously," focuses on a trio from 1984: *Alladine and Palomides*, *Interior*, and *The Death of Tintagiles*. The author conceptualizes the puppets' ability to perform "active silence" and the disembodied, "trans subject voice" of the text that becomes a character. In puppetry, silence can be exceptionally potent due to the foregrounding of motion and materiality.

David Krych's contribution entitled "'Die zehnte Muse': Jan

Sztaudynger's *Marionetki* (1938)" takes the name ("The Tenth Muse") from the Polish writer's own reframing of the figure theatre as one of the high arts. The strength of *lalka-aktor* ("actor-figure" or "actor-puppet") lies in its diversion from reality, being a subject and an object simultaneously.

Perhaps the most familiar company, especially to readers on the East Coast of the United States, is celebrated in Sarah Plummer's piece, "The Puppet 'Other': Bread and Puppet Theater's Depiction of Racialized People in Anti-War Circuses," focusing on skits from their 2018 Grasshopper Rebellion Circus about the US backing military violence in Yemen. Plummer argues that since puppets are already "othered" they might be the perfect actors for portraying politically "othered" persons, a logic that seems dangerous to me due to the existing history of objectifying the colonized, the feminine, the disabled, and other categories of subjects.

Sahereh Astaneh's "The Transformation of the Puppet Theatre in Iran after the Revolution of 1979" studies how *kheymeh shab bazi*, a traditional Iranian form of puppetry merged with Western marionette opera, combines Persian literature, mythology, music, and vocal technique with European manipulation techniques. This exciting case study demonstrates the political potential of the puppet theatre in a culture where depictions of humans are highly restricted.

Georgia Chryssouli's essay, "Jan Švankmajer: The Uncanny Life of a Puppet," explores the Czech animator's use of the aesthetic of the uncanny in his short puppet films, *The Last Trick of Mr Schwarzwald and Mr Edgar*, *Punch and Judy*, and *Don Juan*, and how the sensation of touch is conveyed through cinematic means.

Piero Corbella writes about his experience of being a member of the Milan-based theatre troupe in "Carlo Colla & Figli: A Marionette Company Blending Tradition and Innovation." This chapter covers company history spanning over two centuries. It also details the company's plans to expand the Museo del Teatro di Figura (Museum of the Theater of Figure) in Milan, which will house not only the company's vast collection of puppets and

documents but also provide training and develop new productions.

Antonia Napp, Silke Technau, and Annika Schulte grapple with how to exhibit puppet theatre in their essay, "Scenic Spaces in Museum Spaces – A Work-in-Progress-Report from the Museum of Theatre Puppets in Lübeck." By examining collections of European glove puppets and Chinese rod puppets, the authors address the question of extensive stock and cultural assumptions that can hinder the appropriate display of puppets as museum artifacts.

In the Beginning Were Puppets: Towards a Poetics of Puppetry presents a productive variety of topics and approaches within puppetry studies. The chapters can be assigned to students independently because they do not need to be read in order. A short summary in English preceding each chapter is a helpful tool for a reader navigating this varied collection. The color illustrations at the end and the black-and-white illustrations throughout the essays are also invaluable visual aids that provide a glimpse of varied performances and traditions.

Asya Gorovits
City University of New York Graduate Center, New York

Notes

[1] Illustration numbers provided via email by publisher.