

**The Image of the Puppet in Italian Theater, Literature and Film.** By Federico Pacchioni. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. x, 125 pp., 1025 b/w, 9 color illustrations. Hardcover \$49.99, eBook \$39.99.

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The best way to appreciate this study is as a map of where a variety of puppet types—not just the most famous of all, Pinocchio—appeared in Italian artistic production across time and various media, with an emphasis on contemporary filmic remediations. Throughout the volume's twelve short chapters, Pacchioni mentions puppet variants ranging from the wooden-head *burattino* operated through a glove from below, typical of the Po Valley, to the *marionetta* and southern *pupo* controlled from above by rods and wires.

Tracing the genealogy of the puppet figure, the author notes how its flesh and blood forefather, the masked character Burattino, likely a parody of the humble flour sifter (from Medieval vulgar Latin, *buratinus*), first appeared in the seventeenth century. He was a servant type in the Gelosi *commedia* troupe directed by Flaminio Scala, who included Burattino in twenty of his published *scenari* for improvisation. In addition to the lasciviousness and greed typical of the *zanni* role, Burattino displayed stupidity, grumpiness, and a disconnect from reality, leading him often to be deceived. When *commedia* fell out of fashion due to criticism and bans by religious institutions, the character was incorporated into puppet performances and ended up giving its name to the entire genre of *teatro dei burattini*. Countering the nostalgic notion of the progressive disappearance of the puppet in the twentieth century, Pacchioni shows how, despite the fading of its “traditional social space” (p. 20), puppet theatre retained performative and symbolic relevance thanks to other media that incorporated it.

A key transitional moment was the decade from 1895 to 1905, when cinema in its infancy operated mainly as one attraction among other popular entertainments, coexisting with puppet performances and leading to cross-contaminations in the context of respectful but competitive “remediation.” This approach, elucidated by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their 1999

volume that takes the term as its title, is the most relevant theoretical reference employed here to account for the persistence of the puppet figure. Early examples are the case of magic lantern slides, where “[p]uppets and marionettes become projections of light for the first time” (p. 24) and films such as the Dante-inspired *Inferno* (1911), with its use of marionettes for special effects, or Giovanni Pastrone’s *Cabiria* (1914), in which a game played with two puppets allegorically alludes “to the turbulent fate of the young Cabiria and her rescuer, Fulvio Axilla, bound [by] the capricious jolts of a string, coming closer and then moving apart” (p. 31). Although variety performances framed moving images as “the event of greatest novelty and visual spectacle,” for some time “cinema remains a guest in the ‘GRAND PALACE’ of puppets” (p. 26).

Then, influenced by the introduction of Thomas Holden’s English marionette, whose wires allowed more refined control, Vittorio Podrecca’s Teatro dei Piccoli (Theatre of the Little Ones), established in 1914, grew to an internationally renowned company and a crucial influence on pioneers of puppetry like Maria Signorelli. The puppet appeared prominently as precursor of the robot in modernist avant-garde plays like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Fantocci elettrici* (Electric Puppets, 1909-26) and in the theatre and prose works of Massimo Bontempelli, who introduced magic realism in Italy. His *Siepe a nordovest* (Northwestern Hedge) is a virtuoso play in which humans and marionettes coexist in the same space, unaware of the others’ existence, while the glove puppets of Colombina and Napoleone humorously comment on their follies from the outside.

Later “intermedial dynamics” (p. 37) are explored by shifting attention to puppetry that was either incorporated in cinematic works as such or influenced their acting and movement style. The little-known *I quattro moschettieri* (The Four Musketeers, 1936) by Carlo Campogalliani, for instance, was “the only Italian feature film ... cast entirely with marionettes,” also an attempt to bring theatre and cinema further together by casting puppets of Laurel and Hardy as sidekicks in place of the traditional duos, Brighella and Arlecchino or Fagiolino and Sandrone. As for stylistic influences, in a chapter on filmmaker Lina Wertmüller, Pacchioni traces the director’s

highly theatrical, satirical approach back to her apprenticeship as choreographer with Signorelli's *Opera dei Burattini* between 1949 and 1954, a sensibility then absorbed in films like *Mimì metallurgico ferito nell'onore* (The Seduction of Mimi, 1972) or *Pasqualino Settebellezze* (Seven Beauties, 1975). In this way, he argues, it becomes possible to “transcend the accusations of repetitiveness, boorishness, histrionics, and degradation that many Italian film historians have lamented about Wertmüller's films” (p. 100).

In several other chapters that span the history of Italian cinema, the author illustrates how tropes and scenes from the puppet theatre tradition became ways for filmmakers to create a dialogue between the popular form and the broader meaning of their stories. The second episode of Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), set in a Naples recently liberated by the Allies towards World War II's conclusion, sees an intoxicated African American soldier step onto the stage of an *opera dei pupi* to defend the dark-skinned Moorish puppet knight from the paladin Orlando, in a (mis)reading of the chivalric tale colored by the racial tensions he experienced in the United States. Or, in the movie *Capriccio all'italiana* (Caprice Italian Style, 1968), Pier Paolo Pasolini's episode *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* (What Are the Clouds?) adapts Shakespeare's *Othello* for real actors wired as marionettes, a “tactic ... typical of the puppet metaphor, which has the effect of highlighting the limits of human consciousness and the mechanisms of history outside of our control” (p. 76). In yet another example, puppets have an effect on the real world and trigger social unrest. In Bernardo Bertolucci's cult classic *Novecento* (Twentieth Century, 1976), the two glove puppets Fagiolino and Sandrone, animated by the historic Ferrari puppeteer family from Parma, beat up a couple of puppet *carabinieri* (policemen) in a scene that “attracts the attention of two real carabinieri on horseback, who attack the puppet theater with saber strokes, causing the indignant public to begin pelting the policemen with stones” (p. 84). The volume concludes with a look at the southern *pupo*'s role for Italian immigrants to the United States. Examples from theatre and movies range from the Manteo family, who presented episodes from Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando Furioso* in New York City, to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II* (1974)—where young Vito Corleone stalks his victim Don Fanucci from the rooftops of Little Italy while a *pupi* show plays during a feast of San

Gennaro—to John Turturro’s documentary *Rehearsal for a Sicilian Tragedy* (2009), in which the Italian-American actor reconnects with his maternal homeland by receiving instruction in the art of puppetry.

While this study demonstrates the persistence and significance of the puppet trope in the Italian artistic tradition, the breadth of references across centuries in such short space is also a limitation that often leaves the reader wondering. Possibly due to the fact that several chapters were previously published as journal articles, one has the impression that each topic could have been pursued further beyond the surface, especially in regard to theatre history. For instance, the important Podrecca family of puppeteers is mentioned multiple times but without much detail, which would be essential historical background for English readers unable to read other volumes in Italian; or, Fortunato Depero’s avant-garde *Balli Plastici* (Plastic Dances) are defined as “well-known” (p. 34) but that is unlikely unless the reader is an expert of Futurist theatre. Bottom line, this is an agile introductory text that could spark interest in more in-depth readings.

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## References

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.