

*American Puppet Modernism*, by John Bell  
(forthcoming from Palgrave/Macmillan)

*American Puppet Modernism* is a sequential, chronological collection of related essays exploring different aspects and different eras of puppet, mask, and performing object performance in the United States, from the late-nineteenth to the late-twentieth century. Despite its success as Broadway spectacle, experimental theater technique, popular film effect, and effective advertising medium, puppet theater is still sometimes considered—even in academic circles—to be rooted in children’s entertainment and educational theater. This collection of essays treats puppet, mask, and performing object theater as an essential American performance medium spanning multiple cultural influences and many decades. The fourteen chapters of *American Puppet Modernism* focus on particular historical instances where puppets, masks, and performing objects have played a central role in determining Americans’ images of themselves, their communities, and their worlds. By analyzing how puppets and objects function in performance in each of these examples, creating immediate concrete images of identity and communal vision, this study connects instances of puppet and object performance in the United States as moments in the development of modern national identity.

Chapter One: Introductions

The study begins with definitions of terms (puppets, masks, and performing objects), and basic theoretical approaches to the analysis of these forms of performance. While references are made to the central performing object work of Prague School semioticians in the 1920s, the introduction also considers machine aesthetics and such principles as “object determines action,” which are embraced by performers as varied as Shari Lewis, Balinese Topeng dancers, and Peter Schumann.

Chapter Two: The Sioux War Panorama and American Mythic History (1860)

John Stevens’s traveling panorama show played little towns and mid-sized cities in the Midwest of the 1860s. A semi-mechanized picture performance, Steven’s *Panorama of the Indian Massacre of 1862* articulated the passions and ideology of western settlement and the demonization of native Americans, for white Americans who sought a larger sense of context for their frontier existence.

Chapter Three: Katchina Masks and Shalako Puppets: Anthropology meets Indigenous Mask and Puppet Theater

Late nineteenth-century anthropologists and ethnographers in the Southwestern United States ran into rich cultures of mask, puppet, and object performance in Hopi and Zuñi ritual practices. Frank Cushing and Matilda Stevenson were forced to come to terms with Zuñi mask and puppet performance in order to understand that culture, and Jesse Walter Fewkes faced similar challenges in understanding Hopi mask and puppet rituals, which he considered to be parallels of the ancient Greek festival of Dionysus.

Chapter Four: The Little Theater Movement and the Birth of the American Puppeteer

Although the Little Theater Movement is widely known as the impetus for the United States's first great modern playwright, Eugene O'Neill, puppet theater was a central feature of its performance vocabulary, from its 1912 birth in Midwest (where Chicago Little Theatre co-founder Ellen Van Volkenburg invented the term "puppeteer"), to its culmination in the 1920s experiments of Remo Bufano with the Provincetown Playhouse. This articulation of American puppetry as avant-garde art theater inspired innovative puppet performances across the United States, from New York to San Francisco.

#### Chapter Five: Jane Heap and the International Theater Exhibition of 1926

Chicago's Little Theatre Movement had inspired Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson to create *The Little Review*, which sought to document burgeoning strands of American modernism and their connections to similar European currents. In 1926 Heap almost single-handedly brought European avant-garde to the United States when she produced the International Theatre Exhibition at the Steinway Building in mid-town Manhattan. While the exhibition dazzled New York theatermakers with its models of futurist, expressionist, constructivist, Bauhaus, and Paris avant-garde set and costume designs, a major component of the exhibit was the puppets, masks, and performing machines created by Alexandra Exter, Pablo Picasso, Oskar Schlemmer, Friedrich Kiesler, and others. The International Theater Exhibition showed Americans how the European avant-garde had embraced puppets, masks, and objects as central elements of performance.

#### Chapter Six: Puppets and Propaganda

Modern American puppetry played a big role in the street spectacles of New York City in the 1920s and 30s. Tony Sarg invented inflatable puppets for the commercial spectacles of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parades of the 1920s and 30s, but giant puppet figures were also central to the May Day Parades sponsored by the American Communist Party in the same decades. Although spectacular puppets were contributed to these parades by various anonymous artists, the creators of such political spectacle also included Mexican painter David Siquieros and a young Jackson Pollack. Later, in the midst of World War Two, Remo Bufano's giant-puppet version of Hitler as a skeleton Nazi graced a Fifth Avenue War Bonds parade.

#### Chapter Seven: *Identity*: Gertrude Stein's Puppet Show

In the midst of making Shakespeare marionette plays for the Chicago branch of the Federal Theatre Project, Donald Vestal met Gertrude Stein on Michigan Boulevard one day. Their meeting spurred the creation of a marionette version of *Identity, or I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me*. The collaboration, which featured a teen-aged Bil Baird, and the advice and support of Thornton Wilder, was the hit of the first American puppetry conference, in 1936, and laid out the possibilities of United States puppet theater as high avant-garde art.

#### Chapter Eight: *From Sorcery to Science*: Remo Bufano and the 1939 World's Fair

Inspired by the possibilities of art theater which he had learned at the Provincetown Playhouse and through the New York City branch of the Federal Theatre

Project, puppeteer Remo Bufano took on the production of a wholly commercial puppet spectacle entitled *From Sorcery to Science*, to be performed in the Hall of Pharmacy. This giant-puppet history of medicine featured an original score by Aaron Copland (in one of the first uses of a recorded soundtrack for a live puppet show), and was a harbinger of the mainstream American tradition of puppetry for advertising.

#### Chapter Nine: American Puppets and Television

From its inception in the 1930s to the end of the twentieth century, television has turned to puppets and objects as central means of telling stories and selling products. In fact, for many Americans, puppet theater means television puppet shows. Why do puppets make good television? How did the early improvisations of Bil Baird in Chicago, Rufus and Margo Rose in New York, and finally Jim Henson's Muppets, capture the possibilities of cathode-ray performance as mass spectacle? How did television puppetry's self-definition as children's and educational theater fit into American cultural goals of the late twentieth century?

#### Chapter Ten: Kustom Kulture and Detroit Industrials: Cars as Performing Objects

The centrality of the automobile in post-World War Two United States culture played itself out in two different versions of performing machines. Special in-house Detroit spectacles ("industrials"), similar to sixteenth-century masques, performed the power of their corporate benefactors with spectacular theater focused not on humans, but on the beauty of bright, shining machines which sought to embody American dreams. Meanwhile, in working-class communities, especially in California, ingenious mechanics created their own versions of American desire, customizing mass-produced machines into hot-rod and low-rider culture.

#### Chapter Eleven: Landscape and Teeth Masks

Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater emerged from New York's early sixties re-inventions of performance, through the combination of sculpture and dance as political street spectacle. While Schumann created his theater with a particularly European sensibility about the social importance of art, Bread and Puppet has developed a particularly American art form. How does Bread and Puppet's work continue the project of American puppet modernism? How does it position itself as a low-culture, low-tech, "unsuccessful" performance troupe with international status?

#### Chapter Twelve: ACT-UP and the Puppetista Movement: Reinventing Activist Performance as Object Theater

In the 1980s and 90s, first in response to the AIDS epidemic, and then in the context of anti-Globalization activism, new generations of political activists embraced puppet and object theater as a means of creating spectacular street spectacle. Both ACT-UP and the Puppetista movement used traditional street theater techniques, but also created their own particular innovations in political street spectacle at the end of the twentieth century.

#### Chapter Thirteen: Mass Media and Motion Capture

Most of the largest grossing films of all time (*Jurassic Park*, *E.T.*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*) are dependent upon puppetry and other analog special effects for their spectacular impact. But motion capture (for example, Andy Serkis's work in *Lord of the Rings* and *King Kong*, and Bill Irwin's work in *Stuart Little*) represents the extension of puppetry's central principles (humans using their bodies to create the illusion of movement in non-living materials) into the cyber world. How does puppetry help explain these new performance techniques? How do these techniques and their use connect to earlier visions of puppetry as the articulation of modern culture?