

# Theatre of the Animated Form

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**Figure 1** - Performance *Amor Omnia Vincit* by Rafał Domagała, student at the Warsaw Theater Academy, Puppetry Art Department in Białystok. Photo: Daniel Frymark.



**Figure 2** - Performance *Bestiariusz słowiański* by Agata Soboczyńska, Rafał Gorczyca, Mateusz Stasiulewicz, Maciej Zalewski, students at the Warsaw Theater Academy, Puppetry Art Department in Białystok. Photo: Jarosław Stasiulewicz.

**Abstract:** The article includes some reflections on terms “animant” and “animated form”. The “animant” denotes any object, material or immaterial (e.g. a shadow), which is submitted by an artist to the process of animation. It can be useful in our contemporary discussions. The term “animated form” is used very often, but not precise. It has become dangerously capacious. It is coming to denote all the actor’s onstage actions. Essentially, in order for the “animation” to occur, it must refer to something that in itself is not alive, and thus – regardless of the convention of its application – it certainly does not refer to human beings. An actor on the stage is unquestionably a living creature, so he/she is not an “animated form”. If puppet theatre wants to march in the artistic avant-garde instead of dragging behind with the epigones, it must focus on the issue which constitutes its core and its greatest merit: on the art of animation and on the phenomenon of the animant. The most important message that the theatre of the animated form conveys to the spectators concerns the issue of the boundary between the living and the dead, the animate and inanimate – and if animated, then why, how and wherefore. The miracle of animation is a cure to our anthropocentrism and egotism. On condition, of course, that we are able to lend a piece of our own life to a created object, a thing which in itself has no life: to a puppet.

**Keywords:** Animated forms. *Animant*. Puppetry art. Puppet. Puppetry training in Poland.

Does art need theoreticians, critics, researchers and commentators? Does it need definitions, descriptions, evaluations or, in fact, mediators between the creator and the recipient? There are those who doubt it. What is more, art always comes before theoretical reflection. If a work follows the already-formulated principles too closely, it is considered to be epigonic. Why, then, should we concern ourselves with naming things which have already been done onstage, i.e. belong to the past? Maybe all the words, terms, concepts that attempt to describe the ephemeral phenomenon of theatrical art are superfluous, because the simple “I like it/I do not like it” would suffice? These questions call for reflection and for well-documented, serious answers. For this, an essay is not enough; hence, we shall here limit our search for answers to puppet theatre

and to just one term: the much used, perhaps over-used, “theatre of the animated form”.

The concept of “form” is capacious enough to be defined in many ways, according to need. The expression “theatrical forms” is often used as a blanket term when a key to a given performance cannot be easily found. In the definition for the entry “forms of theatre”, Patrice Pavis states:

*“Form indicates immediately the eminently mobile and changeable aspect of the types of performance, based on new circumstances and goals that make it impossible to come up with a canonical, fixed definition of genre. One may speak of theatrical forms in reference to the most heterogeneous things: harlequinade, ballet, interlude, melodrama, parody, tragedy, and so on (PAVIS, 1998).*

But this is not the perception of “form” we are looking for. Pavis, as nearly all teatrologists, is none too clearly aware of the existence of the theatre of form (in his large dictionary, the entire problem of puppet theatre is reduced to just two terms: “mariionettization of the actor” and “theatre of objects”); hence we must look for definitions in the sphere of the theory of puppet theatre.

One more concept – that of an “animated” form – must be added to the already complex meaning of the “theatre of form”, thus causing further complications. On the stage, “animation” occurs only symbolically. Even the most humanoid puppet that perfectly imitates the movement of the human body is not truly alive, even though the illusion of life can be very powerful; it is this illusion that provokes the feelings of awe, aesthetic pleasure or even a metaphysical shudder in the audience. Nevertheless, no-one (perhaps with the exception of young children) truly believes in the puppet’s being alive. On the stage, it is only the actor who is alive, regardless of being concealed or visible.

The term “animated form” is occasionally used instead of the term “puppet”, as the latter has for a long time been a cause of a

terminological problem; it is too strongly associated with a children's toy<sup>1</sup> and with a humanoid shape, whereas performances staged in puppet theatre are not only ones intended for children and, in addition, the figures which are used are not only human-like, but can also be images of animals, objects, abstract forms, shadows etc. In his *History of European Puppetry*, Henryk Jurkowski proposed his own, traditional definition:

A puppet is a three-dimensional figure manufactured from various materials such as wood, wax, *papier-mâché*, cloth, or metal. Intended for theatre performance as a representation of man or other creatures, it is given life by human agency by means of strings and rods when manipulated from the exterior or directly by the human hand, for example if manipulated inside the puppet's body as with hand puppet (the glove puppet) (JURKOWSKI, 1996).

This definitions seems to be too narrow, because if we applied it, we would be obliged to put outside puppet theatre such types of performances as the theatre of objects (umbrellas, for instance, are not representations of man or any "other creature", and yet they were brilliantly animated in theatre, e.g. in Yves Joly's famous shows), shadow theatre (shadows are not "three-dimensional figures"), cyber-theatre (since automata are "given life" not by "human agency", but by being programmed in advance), or visual theatre (as it treats the animated form as an artistic sign, not as a figure, and thus it does not imitate "life").

Contemporary theatre (not only the puppet theatre) has diverged far from old-time models. This is not a place to define such terms as "post-dramatic theatre", "performance", "theatre of diverse means of expression" or "post-modern theatre", but it is obvious

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<sup>1</sup> In Polish, the word *lalka* is used to denote both a puppet and a doll. (N.T)

that our language often lacks terms to precisely name or describe the modern-day performances/events which involve puppets, masks, mannequins, animated forms or multimedia animations. Two threats are generated by this deficiency: that the term “puppet” will either become completely vague or it will come to be used in a too broad or too narrow a sense.

A few years ago, in reference to the term “animation”, I took the liberty to coin a neologism: an *animant*. It denotes any object, material or immaterial (e.g. a shadow), which is submitted by an artist to the process of animation. To quote from my own text:

A humanoid puppet, a hand puppet, a rod puppet, an effigy, a marionette, a shadow puppet, a mask, any object, a piece of fabric, even a beam of light may be an *animant* when it is treated as a stage figure, a partner in a dialogue, a carrier of ideas, an aesthetic object that constructs the metaphor – a thing which the actor brings on the stage and shows to the spectators as the third element of the performance. A meeting of the actor and the spectator is the essence of theatre. The essence of puppet theatre is a meeting of three partners: the actor, the spectator, and the puppet (WASZKIEL, 2013).

If this definition were accepted, it would be easier to distinguish a puppet from a prop in contemporary performances. It often happens, after all, that humanoid simulacra, mannequins or sculptures are seen on the stage; but if they are not animated, if the actor does not imbue them with a part of his own life and does not focus the audience’s attention on their actions instead of his own, then we are not dealing with the art of animation and this is not puppet theatre. It is a theatre without any added adjective, an ordinary theatre with – at the most – an inventive stage design.

Someone might say that it is immaterial how a given type of theatre is called. From the audience’s point of view all that matters is

whether the performance can be considered interesting or not. But there are situations when it does matter. One case in point: festivals, during which awards are given. If they have the word “puppet” in their title or are organised by puppet theatres, it should be possible to unequivocally state which show can or cannot be considered a puppet one; this would be a reasonable criterion for selecting and awarding the performances invited to participate. Otherwise, the contest is unfair.

Another case in point is education. Two Polish theatre academies have departments that educate puppeteers; it would be nice to be able to give the students at least some idea of what puppet theatre is (or is not). As things stand, terminological chaos and the shortcomings of the contemporary theory of puppet theatre make this a problem. As an example: a course taught at the Department of Puppet – Theatre Arts in Białystok is entitled *Theatre of the Animated Form*. It is taught in the third year of study and the students, under the supervision of their professors and with the aid of the department’s art workshop, devise and prepare small-scale shows (solo or in small groups). It is to some extent a breakthrough moment in their course of study, because – after two years of learning – they finally shape their understanding of their future profession through practice, they reveal their ambitions, inclinations and technical skills. The best performances are sometimes honoured with an invitation to a festival or with some other form of public presentation. Such a success cements the students’ conviction that they have chosen a correct artistic path.

What is the problem, then? The problem lies in the differences in understanding the term “animated form”. We are back to the question what “animation” and “form” actually are. Especially the latter term has become dangerously capacious. It is coming to denote all the actor’s onstage actions. For instance, a solo performance presented by a certain girl student involved a sad tale about young lovers terrorised by the village community. She recited the text, she sang (very professionally, with a folk intonation), she wore a cos-

tume of a peasant girl, she lit candles, she gazed into the luminous depths of a well, she used her wet long hair as a prop. From time to time she took up two little straw dolls and (for brief moments only) used them to illustrate her tale. She was not animating them, she did not turn them into protagonists; she only presented them as an additional visual sign (straw). The performance as such was very good and the student displayed honest acting and singing skills – but was that really “theatre of animated form”? Certainly not, since no form had been animated. During an ensuing debate it turned out that some members of the teaching staff defined “form” in a quite different way. They used this term to denote every stylised, devised action of the actor: using hair as a prop, gestures, facial expressions, the chosen costume, bare feet, lighting the candles. This definition is decidedly too broad.

Every art – not only the theatrical one, but also music, visual arts, dance – involves giving sounds, colours, lines, body, words and so on a particular, inimitable, devised form. Every theatre is a theatre of form, then, if form is understood in this way. If this perception is applied to puppet theatre, its special nature evaporates. In its case, the “form” must be defined differently, more narrowly: as a puppet (or the *animant*). The performance must involve some thing which gets animated and which becomes the other active stage presence besides the actor. In the performance described above, neither wet hair, nor luminescence inside the well or the straw props were used to construct a protagonist.



**Figure 3** - Performance *Il Lusions* by Kamila Wróbel, Anna Moś, Michał Szostak, students at the Warsaw Theater Academy, Puppetry Art Department in Białystok. Photo: ATB.

The Cracow festival *Materia Prima* interestingly proposes the issues of “form” and “matter” as problems for consideration. Each time, the festival offers an opportunity for serious reflection on what theatre of form, and from in theatre, actually are. The very term *materia prima* means the basis, the primary matter, the raw material. It was a different thing to alchemists, philosophers or psychologists than to chemists and physicists. So what do people of the theatre consider to be their “primary matter”? It may be assumed that three types of matter are present on a stage: the animate matter (i.e. the people), the inanimate matter (i.e. the props, costumes, pieces of stage decoration) and the animated matter (i.e. the *animants*). An academic session and exhibition which accompanied the third edition of the *Materia Prima* festival (2015) focused on “Form Theatre in the Work of Tadeusz Kantor, Józef Szajna and Jerzy Grotowski”. It is pleasant to think about these great artists as “puppeteers”; but at the same time we are aware of how imprecise

this word is. And yet Goplana made of sheet metal, wood and fabric in Kantor's *Balladyna*, the animation of a corpse in Szajna's *Replika* or the stove pipe in the role of a bride in Grotowski's *Akropolis* constitute excellent examples of how theatre brings together the living and the non-living yet magically animated matter. They are embedded in the reflections on the limitations of life and on its transience in comparison with the durability of objects, and vice versa. Puppeteers have been considering these topics for a long time (for instance, in 1984 "Teatr Lalek" no. 6 published A. J. Syrkin's *Uwagi o niwelacji opozycji "żywe – nieżywe"* (*Comments on the invalidation of the "animate/inanimate" opposition* in Henryk Jurkowski's translation).

The phenomenon of animating the inanimate constitutes the very essence of the art of puppetry. Some will consider this animation to be symbolic; others will see it as magical; still others – as fairy-tale, humorous or even related to the advertising industry (like the adverts featuring animated frankfurters, biscuits or the anthropomorphised appetite, nowadays all too frequently seen on TV). Essentially, in order for the "animation" to occur, it must refer to something that in itself is not alive, and thus – regardless of the convention of its application – it certainly does not refer to human beings. An actor on the stage is unquestionably a living creature, so he/she is not an "animated from".

By means of both his physical body and the facial expression, gesture or costume, an actor creates a new entity: a theatrical protagonist which differs from him as a private person (although performance practices experiment with the question of invalidating this difference). Let us imagine Gustaw Holoubek in the famous role of Konrad in *Dziady* (*Forefather's Eve*) as staged by Dejmek. We see here a living man lending his body, so to speak, so that the illusion of Konrad's actual presence may materialise on the stage, even though ontologically his existence is only virtual: he exists solely in the imagination of the readers of Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (or the spectators of some other staging of the Polish arch-drama).

In puppet theatre, the situation is quite different. There, objects manufactured of wood, pieces of fabric or leather, plastic, straw or any other substance have their own existence and a material, tangible shape, i.e. their own singular form. At the moment of their appearance on the stage, they may remain a dead (if meaningful) prop or they may be subjected to animation, i.e. the actor's intentional and conscious actions that lead to the emergence of an illusion that those objects are truly alive; that they move, speak and take action. Only this interpretation of the term "theatre of the animated form" will prevent us from getting mired in the ambiguity of words.

The onstage play with the animated form may spring from a very broad range of sources and intentions. It may describe the more or less conscious relations between the artist and the matter: from fear to amazement and fascination. Józef Szajna's works clearly revealed the terror of a creator lamenting the fragility of human life in contrast to the durability of objects left behind by those who have died. Jan Wilkowski, in turn, wished to give voice to objects by nature mute, so that they could finally express themselves. Frank Soehnle, who animated Death in the performance of *salto. lamento*, tamed human fears by showing the dreaded being as a lady in a smart hat on her skull and a row of bracelets on her skeletal arm. By combining his own legs with the body of a puppet of an old woman in the show *Bastard!*, Duda Paiva allowed the spectators to experience the delight of movement, of dance, which is inaccessible to so many: to the sick, the elderly, and also the "non-people", such as the puppets, who may to dance only when the animator wishes them to do so.

The most important message that the theatre of the animated form conveys to the spectators concerns the issue of the boundary between the living and the dead, the animate and inanimate – and if animated, then why, how and wherefore. If puppet theatre wants to march in the artistic *avant-garde* instead of dragging behind with the epigones, it must focus on the issue which constitutes its core and its greatest merit: on the art of animation and on the phenomenon of the *animant*.

This is the reason why theoretical reflection and the process of amending old definitions to follow artistic practice are, indeed, necessary. The concept of “form” has become so broad that it no longer explains anything, quite the opposite, it makes the whole issue more vague. The concept of “animated form” continues to be helpful, on condition that its semantic closeness to the concepts of “puppet” or animant is accepted as a given.

In his essay *Teatr animacji. Wprawki do manifestu (The Theatre of Animation: A Sketch for a Manifesto)*, Paweł Passini wrote:

Animation is the act of conveying the “I” outside oneself. It is the act of sharing oneself with a beloved “something” which is thus made into a “someone”. It is the giving of a name. The submitting to a trial. The saving from a danger. The suspending of the rules according to which operates the world one has constructed in order to ultimately save a “someone” above a “something”. It is similar to the act of taming, or adoption, or marriage. It creates a bond and generates a deeper understanding. Animation means awareness – it is impossible to go back. The one-directionality of this process is a measure of our humanity. What has once turned out to be “someone” can never again be a “something”. This knowledge is given to us already in the early childhood, when we generously import souls on the objects that surround us. This may perhaps be an act of gratitude for ourselves having been called into being, animated, shortly earlier (PASSINI, 2015).

The theatre of the animated form teaches us to empathise with beings who are different from us. Someone who has cared about the fates of objects in Malina Prześluga’s *Pręcik (A Filament)* will never again strike a ringing alarm clock on its head too hard. Who listened to the post-mortem ruminations of Marta Guśniowska’s *Fox* will perhaps be willing to look upon their own life more wisely. Shadows in the performance of *Sklepy cynamonowe (The Street of Crocodiles)* in English; *Cinnamon Shops* in Polish) directed by Robert Drobniuch

make it easier to understand the inner universe of Bruno Schulz, while *Pastrana* staged by *Teatr Animacji* lets us understand and come to like misfits, cripples and freaks. The miracle of animation is a cure to our anthropocentrism and egotism. On condition, of course, that we are able to lend a piece of our own life to a created object, a thing which in itself has no life: to a puppet.

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**Figure 4** - Performance *Wendy* based in J. M. Barrie by Agata Soboczyńska, Maciej Cempura, Tomasz Frąszczak, Mateusz Stasiulewicz, Maciej Zalewski, students at the Warsaw Theater Academy, Puppetry Art Department in Białystok. Photo: Jarosław Stasiulewicz.