

‘That’s the way to do it!’:

Establishing the peculiar geographies of puppetry

Abstract

This paper initiates a new area of cultural geography – the geographies of puppets and puppetry – and makes both empirical and conceptual contributions by presenting an initial analysis of puppets in popular culture. The paper begins by highlighting the paucity of disciplinary interest in puppets and the productive potential of puppets and puppetry for a range of sub-disciplines within human geography. A content analysis of 50 films, television programmes and fictional texts is presented, through which a dimensional model of puppets in popular culture is developed to stimulate further work in this area. Utilitarian (role and extent), relational (individual and social) and qualitative (puppetness and ontology) dimensions describe the many and varied ways in which puppets are used in popular culture. The diverse spaces that are created in such works through the interrogation of the human-puppet relationship are explored, with more extreme interpretations of puppetness generating the most peculiar – unique and strange – geographies. Subsequently, the cultural analysis is related to conceptual developments from geographical work on comics and cartoons to advance a conceptual contribution. Integrating and inverting notions of borderscape and topological gulf accommodates the simultaneous maintenance and elimination of human-puppet distinctiveness found to be essential to the peculiar geographies of puppetry.

Key words

puppet, popular culture, content analysis, comic, cartoon

Introduction

This paper proposes a new area of human geographical endeavour with productive potential across multiple sub-disciplines. It responds to recognition of an ongoing need to engage with

cultural forms and genres¹ but rather than attending to another medium (e.g. film, comic, cartoon, literature) or genre (e.g. horror, comedy, fantasy), I focus on a cultural form and practice that can feature across such media and genres: puppets and puppetry. Recognising that different media and genre conventions can produce their own geographies², I suggest that cultural forms and practices not only do likewise but do so differently in different constellations of form, medium and genre, paving the way for interrogation of generalised puppet geographies (characteristic of any one type of puppet) as well as for nuanced investigation of these different constellations (how a type of puppet creates different geographies in different genres and mediums). This paper, then, initiates a diverse and productive new arena of cultural geographic work in the form of the geographies of puppets and puppetry.

The paper is structured in three main sections, the first of which – this introduction – discusses the underrepresentation of puppets and puppetry in geography compared to other cultural forms, with a comparative emphasis on cartoons and comics. The second section presents an initial cultural analysis of puppets, exploring how puppets are used in a range of film, televisual and literary outputs covering a range of genres, and to what effect, generating a dimensional model of these uses to stimulate further methodological and analytical work in this area. The third section extends this analysis by examining puppet spatialities and temporalities (how puppets are generative of their own special and temporal realities), which in turn is employed to advance geographical conceptualisations in existing work on comics and cartoons. Finally, the conclusion draws out the key points emerging from these analyses and highlights their disciplinary significance.

Puppets are animated figures or objects, with common forms including glove or sleeve puppets, ventriloquists' dummies and marionettes. While there are overlaps between puppets and associated cultural forms from performing objects to automata, for the purposes of this paper a puppet is distinct in being intended for performative use (so is not an object that is re-appropriated for such use) and requiring real-time manipulation by a human operator (so is not programmable for independent operation)³. While we might commonly associate puppets with

children's cultural outputs, including television (Sesame Street), seaside holidays (Punch and Judy) or the theatre (War Horse, based on a children's novel), puppets are also used in popular adult cultural outputs, including their incorporation into televisual murder-mysteries (e.g. Midsomer Murders, Endeavour), fantasy fiction (e.g. Rivers of London), and horror films (e.g. Robert, Puppet Master). Puppets, then, are not confined to any one cultural medium or genre and are thus accessible from a range of analytical perspectives, which provides the starting point for the comparative analysis in this paper.

To explore disciplinary interest in puppetry and other cultural forms, I searched the academic database Scopus in August 2019, pairing key cultural search terms with 'geography': 1) within title, abstract and keywords, and 2) as source title. These searches returned only 16 results for 'puppet + geography (title/abstract)' and only three for 'puppet + geography (source)', compared with 36 (title/abstract) and 12 (source) for 'cartoon', 48 (title/abstract) and 22 (source) for 'comic', and 38 (title/abstract) and 7 (source) for 'filmic'. Given the long history of puppets compared to the more recent invention of printed and televisual media, with human use of puppets preceding theatre and organised religion⁴, this relative paucity of work on puppets is notable. This disciplinary neglect of puppets is highlighted further if we consider that even famous or celebrity puppets, such as Mr Punch and Pinocchio, do not rate a single mention but individual comic characters cropped up frequently in these searches, including Captain America, Superman and Tintin.

While film and literature have a long history of geographical engagement⁵, my comparative focus here is on cartoon and comic book geographies as this has recently been described as a newly identifiable area of cultural geography⁶ and both comics/cartoons and puppets blur the distinction between high and low culture⁷, providing a degree of equivalence between the two cultural forms despite their differential treatment within academic circles. Much social science work on comics and cartoons is geopolitically oriented, mostly at the national or international level⁸ but also within a metropolitan context⁹, with analysis revealing both hegemonic¹⁰ and counter-hegemonic¹¹ narratives, and covering cultural outputs for children as well as adults¹².

However, progressive diversification from this focus has been identified, with growing interest in the material form of the comic as explicitly geographical¹³, generating variety in the spatial experiences in reading comics¹⁴. At the same time, interest is growing in such cultural forms as methodologically informative in the context of both research¹⁵ and teaching¹⁶.

By contrast, very little geographical work addresses puppets explicitly and when puppets do feature, this is in a passing or metaphorical fashion, as in labelling post-conflict states 'puppets' if they remain tied to a patron state¹⁷. Specific puppet figures have occasionally featured in such geopolitical work, either to establish a genre lineage from the Punch magazine¹⁸ or comparing the comedic vulgarity of South Park with Spitting Image¹⁹, but puppets as a cultural form or geographical phenomena are not directly interrogated. Finally, although there has been some experimentation with puppets in a teaching context²⁰, these examples are also rare. Consequently, if comics/cartoons are described as being under-researched in geography²¹, puppets are utterly unappreciated.

This is not to assert that there is no geographical work engaging with puppets, as there is no doubt consideration of Punch and Judy in the context of the emergence of the working class and its spatial association with the seaside, within historical geographies and/or coastal geographies. However, as puppets in such work do not feature in titles, abstracts and key words, these more general engagements with puppetry are harder to trace (and are yet to be unearthed), making it difficult to establish a baseline for pre-existing disciplinary work. Even tourism geographies, which have addressed the changing face of live entertainment at the seaside seem not to acknowledge Punch and Judy as an archetypal live seaside entertainment²². By looking beyond geography, it is considerably easier to find work explicitly focusing on puppets with an emphasis on geographical themes, whether in terms of their cultural appropriation²³, their progressive respatialisation from the seaside to the shopping mall²⁴ or their capacity to unpack the politics and performativity of the (disabled) body²⁵.

This lack of disciplinary engagement is both unfortunate and surprising. It is unfortunate given growing public interest in puppetry despite the trend towards digitalisation and virtualisation of social and cultural life, suggesting an interesting tension ripe for geographical exploration.

Specific puppet theatre shows have achieved iconic status (e.g. Warhorse); super-sized characters periodically roam the streets to commemorate historic events (e.g. giant puppets in Liverpool to commemorate the Titanic) or to celebrate local identity (e.g. Man Engine in Cornwall); they continue to feature in new popular cultural outputs, from television (e.g. Hold the Sunset) to rap (e.g. 'Puppet' by Tyler the Creator), and new puppetry festivals are being established (e.g. Nottingham Puppetry Festival in 2018).

It is surprising given the myriad ways in which puppetry intersects with disciplinary concerns and developmental trajectories, suggesting that geography has much both to contribute to and gain from engagement with puppetry. Puppetry is an internationally practised cultural form with a long history that is both culturally specific and globalising. For example, Bunraku (involving three puppeteers per puppet) originated in Japan but three-person ensemble puppetry is now a common feature of puppetry workshops in the UK, while Mr Punch was re-appropriated and renamed upon arrival in the UK from Italy. The sub-national level, too, exhibits a historically-rooted geography of puppetry with certain locations being associated with specific types of puppetry (e.g. puppet opera in Sicily, and puppet film and animation in Prague), often uniting museums to preserve puppetry artefacts and contemporary facilities to sustain the practice into the future. As a socially, culturally, economically and politically situated practice, puppetry is inevitably implicated in socio-political processes, tensions and transformations from the community to the global geopolitical level. Recognising this situatedness, my own research focuses on contemporary Anglo-American cultural uses of puppets to establish a baseline of understanding within my own cultural milieu in advance of any cross-cultural work in the future.

Puppetry is, furthermore, an inherently spatial practice, occurring in performance contexts ranging from theatre, film and television productions to community events within street, carnival and festival settings. These spaces are transformed by puppet performances, prompting

spectators to question and experience them anew as, for example, Warhorse exits the theatre and canters down the street, or a human-scaled cityscape is dwarfed by the presence of a giant marionette, making puppets immediately relevant to non-representational concerns in generating powerful affective responses. Simultaneously, socialities are changed as the puppet rather than the puppeteer becomes the focus of attention, fuelling the agency, subjectivity and sociality of the puppet, while also drawing attention to the conjoined puppet-puppeteer bodyscape as its own space, which exhibits a different geography according to whether the puppet is operated directly (in a glove) or remotely, whether from below (using rods) or above (using strings), and whether the puppeteer is intended to be a powerful visible presence within the bodyscape or eclipsed by the puppet. Moreover, this embodied relation between puppet and puppeteer and the ability to transgress bodily norms with or violate the body of the puppet, lend themselves to contemporary interests in embodiment, materiality and more-than-human relationality. Not only do the varied configurations of puppet-puppeteer bodyscape provide new perspectives on more-than-human entanglements, but the relationship between puppetry and masked performance invites new work on the significance or otherwise of faciality in relating and communicating both within human and more-than-human socialities. Similarly, the diverse material forms that puppets can take and their different affordances and limitations offer alternative ways to explore the potential for non-linguistic communication, including mime and gesture, especially in relation to differently abled bodies, while questions surrounding what it is that makes a puppet performance convincing and how we sustain or fail to sustain the believability of the puppet, are also beguiling for non-representational geography. As such, puppetry nestles in the intersections between the visual, the verbal, the performative, the material, the more-than-human, the emergent and the affective, and is amenable to investigation from cultural, socio-historical, political and non-representational perspectives.

Recognising this diversity and fertility, this paper is the first foray into an extensive research project, with further cultural research underway into theatrical and musical uses of puppets, archival research progressing in the political geographies of puppets, and non-representational

research underway through auto-ethnographic practice-based research with puppets. Given this broader body of work, the current paper is tightly focused around the use of puppets within literary, televisual and filmic cultural outputs due to a desire not to second-guess work that is yet to be completed. This paper seeks to open this historically rich, currently ascendant, inherently spatial and hugely diverse cultural form and practice to geographical enquiry across multiple sub-disciplinary domains through an initial cultural analysis of puppets.

Puppets in popular culture

The analysis presented here focuses upon representations of puppets in films, television programmes and literature covering genres from humour to horror and catering for child and adult audiences. Table 1 (below) presents the 50 works analysed, which were identified through existing knowledge, internet searches and suggestions received during conversations with others. While numerous other puppet works could have been included (e.g. *Spitting Image*, *Muffin the Mule*, *Gordon the Gopher*, and so on), the sample is sufficient to generate a sense of how puppets are treated in each category, and some puppet works have been reserved for analysis in specific contexts (e.g. *Spitting Image* for political analysis). Each work was analysed individually to identify the main representations, associations and uses of puppets, before two stages of comparative analysis were undertaken. Within-group comparative analysis considered similarities and differences between texts that had been grouped according to audience and type (e.g. adult films, child fiction), which, alongside analysis of similarities and differences between groups, generated an analytical landscape of the uses of puppetry in popular culture.

Table 1: List of works analysed

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Across these works, puppets are utilised to different degrees and in diverse ways, ranging from minimal use as a simple object, through moderate use as a proxy for humans and metaphors for human life, to a core topical focus through which the human condition is interrogated for narrative purposes. These can be organised into a series of dimensions (utilitarian, relational and qualitative), as outlined in Figure 1, below.

<Figure 1 here>

Figure 1: Dimensions of puppet use in popular culture

The utilitarian dimension relates to the functional role of puppets and the extent of their use. Some cultural outputs use puppets simply as a material object or as a proxy for a human actor, while others present them as autonomous agents, and yet others employ them as a narrative tool to question what it is to be human rather than puppet (e.g. exploring issues of control in *Being John Malkovich*). Similarly, puppets can be used either minimally or extensively and either focally or incidentally. Both *Riddley Walker* and *Dodger* draw on Punch and Judy, but the former makes much fuller use of the show as a mechanism for maintaining governmental control of a dystopian society than the latter's analogical use of the same show to explore interpersonal violence. Even this first dimension brings myriad combinations of the function and extent of puppet use for academic exploration.

The second dimension is relational, and addresses both individual and social relations between humans and puppets. At the individual level, this relationship is sometimes framed as one of interaction, as in children's fiction posing questions as to who or what is controlling the puppet that seemingly acts on its own. In other examples, it is more a case of interchangeability of human and puppet, although this interchangeability is managed differently in different works. In

Rivers of London magic is employed to enable the ghost of a Punch and Judy Professor to exact revenge by turning the physical form of his victims into Mr Punch, whereas *The Death of Mr Punch*, adopts a psychologised perspective as a former Punch and Judy Professor acts as if he is Mr Punch as he succumbs to dementia. Sometimes these relations are set within a social context, perhaps being used as an object but for a social purpose, as in *Murder She Wrote – Something Foul in Flappieville*, which utilises a puppet for educational purposes to explain the world to young children. Alternatively, the puppet is framed as socially situated, whereby the puppet is viewed differently by different people. In *Friday Night Dinner – Lord Luck* the puppet makes socially excusable utterances that would be unacceptable if said by a human, thereby mediating standards of social acceptability. Then again, *Murder She Wrote – Where have you gone, Billy Boy?* presents the puppet as enabling the puppeteer to say that which would otherwise remain inarticulate not because of social mores but psychological distress. Towards this end of the dimension, puppets become increasingly significant social and psychological actants. At the individual relational level, the location of communicative autonomy shifts from the puppeteer to the puppet as the communicative role played by the puppet changes from informational dissemination through social mediation to psychological facilitation.

At the social level of the relational dimension, puppets are used to comment on human society through comparison or integration of human and puppet communities. Three examples employing Punch and Judy in children's fiction exemplify this. In *The Box of Delights*, one of the main characters is a Punch and Judy Professor but the show itself only receives fleeting mention. Instead, a dual social context of human and magical communities is established, each with its own social norms, which acts as a mirror to the other. In *Dodger* the social appropriateness of Punch and Judy is explored, drawing parallels between the puppet show and social life in the use of violence for the purposes of control. By contrast, *The Magicians of Caprona* involves the puppetisation of people by magical means to inflict violence on them by performing the Punch and Judy show, rather than the show metaphorically standing for the realities of social life. Here, puppet and human communities progress from being discrete to being metaphorically related to

being mutually constitutive in the puppetisation of humans and the humanisation of puppets, again reflecting varying degrees of human-puppet integration but at a societal level.

The third dimension relates to the qualities of puppets and includes consideration of puppetness and ontology (world-making potential). The extent to which 'puppetness' as a quality is an identifiable feature or focus of the work is often related to puppet role. In *Thunderbirds Are Go*, puppets are used as proxies for human actors but their nature as puppets and the opportunities this brings for plot and action are not directly explored, despite footage of human hands being used for close-up scenes interchangeably with puppet performance for whole-body scenes. By contrast, *Pinocchio* explicitly questions the human condition through the material form, more-than-human sociality and subjectivity of Pinocchio. Between these two are the Muppets, especially *The Happytime Murders*, the first Muppet movie for adults. Here, human and puppet communities live together but discrimination is rife due to their varied materialities: fleshy humans and fluffy puppets. The puppets are constructed as suspended between objectivity, with insults denigrating them as fluffy socks, and animality, with laws prohibiting the poaching of puppets for their feet, so some use is made of puppetness. Moreover, the human protagonist has received a puppet liver transplant, which is used to suggest that she has gone soft on puppets due to her new liver being fluffy rather than fleshy, blurring the distinction between humanness and puppetness at the level of the body. The puppets, though, acknowledge that they live in a human world, so the world-making (ontological) possibilities are limited to a human context as humans are precluded from participating in a puppet world (whatever that might look like), and the two communities are held apart by their mutual prejudices and separate moral codes. However, although puppetness is related to role, there is not a direct correspondence between basic/incidental role and negligible puppetness on the one hand and focal role and substantial puppetness at the other. *Team America* makes only basic use of puppets as human proxies but makes moderate use of puppetness for comedic (highlighting what puppets cannot do) or sensationalist (killing puppets in as many gory ways as possible) purposes. By contrast, *The Happytime Murders* are primarily populated by puppets and puppets are used as a substantial

narrative mechanism so are towards the focal end of the role dimension but the interrogative use of puppetness, although in evidence, is only moderately developed.

Finally, and related to puppetness, is the extent to which the use of puppets affords alternative, unusual and incredible world-making possibilities. While the extendable arms of Gonzo (*the Muppet Show*) or a puppet's ability to vomit leeches at will (*Puppet Master*) is suggestive of more than human capabilities, these are still often set within a human context, whether a theatre (*The Muppet Movie*), international terrorism (*Team America*) or a domestic environment (*Dolls*, *Robert*). In some instances, this human context is itself puppetised, as in the modification of classic literature to fit the puppet characters (e.g. two Marley brothers in *The Muppet Christmas Carol* to cater for Statler and Waldorf – the grumpy old men from the balcony), but in its most extreme form, whole new possibilities of existence come into being (e.g. John Malkovich's ability to enter his own head).

Importantly, it is the ability to sustain and integrate an element of humanness and puppetness that brings greatest potential, as each is liberated from the constraints of their conventional material form and existential possibilities. However, this is complicated by the extent to which puppets are used and puppetness is employed. If puppets are used too simplistically, they are conceived either as objects or as proxies for humans, and if too much emphasis is placed on the human, the more-than-human puppet capacities are neglected, meaning that the existential possibilities are confined to human contexts (unless another factor is introduced, such as magic). For example, *Rivers of London* generates fantastical temporalities and subjectivities through magical means as the ghost of a Punch and Judy Professor haunts the present and the contemporary characters travel back through history in pursuit of the ghostly felon, while *The Death of Mr Punch* generates disorienting temporal and existential conditions through the human experience of dementia. However, *Dolls* and *The Magicians of Caprona* both conduct a dualistic transposition of human-being-puppet and puppet-being-human, in a manner that goes beyond that achieved by *The Happytime Murders*. What it is to be either human or puppet is unclear; the potentialities for action, experience and autonomy of each are transformed; and moral and

ethical as well as existential questions arise. Developed to its fullest extent, this dimension generates a whole new world of human-puppet materiality, sociality, practicality and morality. Humanising puppets can be very powerful and – in *The Death of Mr Punch* – very poignant, but simultaneously puppetising humans is where greatest potential lies for the creation of unique worlds that interrogate and optimise puppetness for narrative purposes.

These dimensions characterise how puppets are constructed and used in popular culture and to what effects. Two dimensions are concerned with utility: their role and the extent to which they are used. A further two are concerned with relationality, at both the individual and collective level. The final two dimensions (puppetness and ontology) attend to qualitative aspects of puppets; questioning the nature of the puppet and creating new worlds. It is entirely possible that further dimensions and distinctions can be drawn through subsequent research, as different aspects of puppetness might vary in significance between puppet types (marionettes, glove puppets). The relations among the dimensions are also worth exploring further as it is the role rather than the extent of the use of puppets that is most important in determining the effects generated: a focal role for questioning what a puppet is prompts engagement with puppetness, but this is not inevitable as the question of what a puppet is might be answered by using the puppet solely as an object, precluding any such potential. Consequently, this analytical framework facilitates both understanding and investigating how diversely puppets are used in cultural representations and in the creation of puppet spaces and worlds.

Puppet geographies

In this section, I explore puppet geographies through three lines of discussion: puppet bodily spaces, which take diverse forms and merge with each other to different degrees; spaces of puppet memory, which are found to be more extensive and enduring than human memory; and puppet spaces and worlds, which considers the constellation of factors with greatest potential to generate unique worlds that are peculiar to puppets.

The ways in which puppet and human (puppeteer) bodily spaces are employed vary considerably across the works analysed. Sometimes the puppet has a mind of its own within a yoked dual persona, fluctuating between being an external other and an internalised aspect of their human operator, and *Pinocchio*, of course, is the archetypal example of puppet-human interchangeability in wanting to become, and becoming, a real boy. In horror, a curse is sometimes transferred from puppet to human, while a human spirit can be incorporated into a puppet in a metaphysical merging rather than a transition from one to the other. Intercorporeal merging of puppet and person also features. In *Dolls*, the elderly residents of a remote house administer justice to visitors lacking sufficient reverence for toys by transforming them into dolls, and the man who acts violently towards a Punch puppet is turned into a figure of Punch, complete with hooked nose and jingly hat. Here, the bodily forms become one, but the subjectivities remain distinct: Punch remains a material object despite being enlivened with human vitality, but the human is aware of their own captivity within the material form of Punch. *Rivers of London* takes a simultaneously corporeal and spiritual approach. The ghost of Henry Pyke (aka Punch) uses real people to enact his own show by possessing their body, which visibly transfigures as the chin bulges and the nose stretches. Pyke can both sequester other people's bodies and transition between the physical forms of Pyke and Punch, rendering indistinguishable the subjectivities of puppet and human and unifying their bodily forms and appearances.

Intercorporeal blending of a different sort is evident in *The Death of Mr Punch*, in which a former Punch and Judy Professor increasingly confuses his own identity as the Professor and the identity of the Punch with which he used to work as he succumbs to dementia. Dressing as Mr Punch, waving his slapstick and adopting Punch-like behaviours, the Professor increasingly embodies the puppet with which he used to perform. *Being John Malkovich*, though, provides the most extreme example here in the physical passage of one person into the brain of another. When his head is occupied by someone who uses their control of John Malkovich to engage in sexual intercourse with a third person, the love-making entity involves three personae but only

two bodies. The occupier's body is inside John Malkovich's brain, but John Malkovich's subjectivity is overridden rather than replaced as he expresses awareness of being used as a mouthpiece by someone else. Bodies, then, can be merged just as much as subjectivities and in equally diverse ways, and the space of the conjoined human-puppet entity forms a more explicit focus in works that engage more thoroughly with puppetness. Unlike treating puppets merely as objects or human proxies, which precludes any engagement with intercorporation (the integration of corporeality between human and puppet), the human-puppet bodily border becomes the target for narrative creativity. This allows the transference of human qualities and capacities to the puppet and vice versa, unsettling assumptions as to what constitutes 'puppet' and 'human' by liberating them from the constraints of their respective material forms to create peculiar intercorporeal capacities.

Spaces of puppet memory

One perhaps surprising such capacity is memory. A common trope of puppets, especially ventriloquists' dummies, is that they retain knowledge and could tell of things that humans would not wish others to know, and sometimes that they do not know themselves. It is often in murder mysteries that puppet memory and the risk of or need for its disclosure features, as the puppet holds vital information to solve the crime, sometimes over extensive time periods. In *Midsomer Murders – Destroying Angel*, however, Mr Punch has a tradition of revealing local scandals, positioning the puppet as a barometer of both truth and (ironically) social probity. This is developed further in *Bryant and May and the Memory of Blood*, in which the Punch story is re-enacted through modern-day murders in revenge for familial wrongdoings. Moreover, the ability of puppets to facilitate human articulation of otherwise inarticulable events and experiences – even against the wishes of their human operator – not only evidences the sharing of memory between human and puppet but also the puppet's power to resist any psychological efforts on the part of the human to suppress that memory. In this example of the psychological individual relational dimension, puppets have a clarity and continuity of memory that surpasses human

memory, allied with greater communicative autonomy, enabling truths to be revealed and preventing misdemeanours – both legal and moral – being unjustly neglected.

Social memory, too, can be inscribed in and reconstituted through puppets, as exemplified by the governmental use of Punch and Judy show in *Riddley Walker*. Similarly, in *Bryant and May and the Memory of Blood* Mr Punch is considered to demonstrate, perform or explain life, illustrating the unpalatable promise and profitability of opportunism in the making of the modern world, while in *The Comical Tragedy or the Tragical Comedy of Mr Punch*, puppets conscript children into social practices and norms as carriers and communicators of social memory. In *Rivers of London*, Punch describes his spirit as irrepressible, suggesting the inevitable perpetuation of Punch's take on society; a perpetuity supported and continued by the frequency of his appearance in the works analysed here, at least 15 of which feature the irrepressible Mr Punch.

Puppets are also used to explore the fallibility of human memory, most clearly demonstrated in *The Death of Mr Punch* and *The Comical Tragedy or the Tragical Comedy of Mr Punch*. The first narrates the crumbling and confusing of memory and identity for a former Punch and Judy Professor in the grips of dementia, who lives as a human in the present as if he is the puppet from his past, with jumbled associations and juxtaposed recollections. The second revisits childhood memories of the protagonist's Grandfather's performances, with similarly jumbled and juxtaposed memories, associations and emotions. Both texts highlight the duplicity of memory as the characters shift between past and present, reality and fantasy, dream and memory. In the former, a model of Mr Punch is used to try to help the protagonist reconnect with his past as a material embodiment of the memories that are increasingly muddled, while in the latter the material space of a Punch and Judy proscenium conjures memories of other times and places that involve similar materialities. These two texts work well together in addressing issues of memory, loss and death in a similar way – through the materialities of Punch and Judy – but from different perspectives: the performer in the former and the spectator in the latter. Puppets, then, are diversely and intimately bound with memory, whether as a reservoir of elusive truths, a medium for the perpetuation of social memory, or a material repository of memories. They can both

conceal and reveal truths and secrets, and can both remember more, for longer than humans and empower (or overpower) their human operator in communicating memories. Puppets remind us that memory, like subjectivity, is not confined within the body but is distributed in more-than-human entanglements and that memories, like puppets, shift between reality and fantasy, the normative and the pathological.

Puppet spaces and worlds

The spaces and places that feature in the analysed works are many and varied, and a spatial continuum can be discerned ranging from a focus on familiar spaces (everyday and iconic sites) and repeated engagement with specific spaces (attics, bedrooms), through the reworking of these sites for puppet purposes (perhaps in terms of scale or functionality) to the generation of fantastical places that are even less recognisable within human frames of reference. Among everyday spaces, specific types of space feature more commonly than others. Dark, high and low spaces, such as attics, cellars and abandoned buildings, suggest a strong association with horror. However, puppets in these works are often found rather than purchased so cellars and attics might be as much a trope of puppets as of horror. Moreover, specific domestic spaces become important. While kitchens as a source of lethal weapons again suggests a horror connection, bedrooms evoke privacy and trust, with the puppet granted privileged access to an inner sanctum where the human-puppet relationship is secured prior to the manipulation of the human. Certain everyday spaces, then, become preferentially associated with puppets, while they can also be puppetised in generating spaces specific to that puppet form and story.

There are also distinctions to be drawn between works that generate their own fictional world and those that remain within human parameters, and between fantastical places created as settings and internal fictional worlds created through the integration of puppet and human. For example, *Labyrinth* and *Dark Crystal* involve fantastical places but these are not generated through interrogation of puppetness: the fantastical places are settings and the puppets are simply characters in the story. By contrast, the internal fictional world of *Being John Malkovich*, and to a

lesser degree *Dolls* and *The Magicians of Caprona*, springs from the attention directed towards puppetness. *Being John Malkovich*, for example, involves a hidden passage that serves as a portal between an office environment and John Malkovich's brain, enabling characters to enter his brain and control him like a puppet. Here, the office would be the fantastical place as the ceiling is so low that most people are forced to navigate the space in a stooped posture, but the internal fictional world is the tunnel-brain nexus that enables the puppetised control of John Malkovich. Consequently, the use of spaces and places in these works is distinct from the new worlds that are sometimes created through an interrogation of puppetness, even while they might contribute to the creation of that new world.

Spaces in these works are multiple and diverse, and Figure 2 (below) visualises these complex puppet spaces from iconic sites to fantastical places, highlighting both everyday spaces associated with puppets, and the significance of bodily spaces and spaces of memory across the puppet-human border. Some spaces (attics) encapsulate the ambiguity of the puppet's past, while others are important in nurturing the puppet-human relationship of dependency (bedrooms). Bodily spaces are important in enabling the transference of qualities and capacities across the puppet-puppeteer bodily border, while spaces of memory are important in both rendering fluid past and present, reality and fantasy and unsettling assumptions of relative autonomy and probity. It is through explicit interrogation of puppetness that the most peculiar puppet worlds are generated, and as space, the body and memory are all bound up with puppetness, the prime space for the creation of such worlds lies in the intersection between variously conflated spaces, conjoined bodies, and contrary memories across the border between puppet and puppeteer.

<Figure 2 here>

Figure 2: Puppet spatialities

Intercorporation

In this final section, I develop more thoroughly the notion of intercorporation by engaging with work in performance studies on ‘transembodiment’ between puppet and puppeteer, and – after establishing how intercorporation differs from this – returning to geographical work on comics and cartoons to ground intercorporation in this body of work.

Transembodiment, a term used in performance studies to denote the transfer of embodied techniques among puppeteers and puppets, involves both direct techniques that are visible and knowable (e.g. gesture, rhythm), and indirect techniques that are not visible (e.g. drawing on memory and emotion), which together imbue the puppet with a sense of weight, liveliness and character²⁶. The bidirectional transfer of these techniques between animate and inanimate performers suggests strong synergies with the idea of intercorporation proposed here, but my interest in this paper is not with the practical doing of puppetry but with the uses to which puppets are put and the interrogation of that puppet-puppeteer relationship for narrative creativity rather than its utilisation for convincing performance. Consequently, while I also attend to the puppet-puppeteer relationship, I – for this paper at least – maintain the perspective of the spectator and probe the employment of puppets rather than performance with puppets.

Intercorporation is not about the transfer of professional techniques but the intermeshing of bodily forms, capacities and subjectivities in creating peculiarly puppet worlds, for which conceptual work in existing literature on comics and cartoons is more fertile territory.

Within this literature, different conceptual possibilities emerge, including encounter and topological gulf²⁷, assemblage and borderscape²⁸. Encounters are certainly evident between puppet and human, and between a human and him/herself in the case of social mores, psychological relief or cognitive decline. It is also straightforward to consider the puppet-human entity in terms of assemblage, generating new constellations of capabilities. However, my preference is to bring together ideas of borderscape and topological gulf to reflect on the

overcoming of distance between different and de/reformulated corporeal entities in constituting the ontogenetic capabilities of puppetness.

In the context of puppetness, the focus within the concept of borderscape on state borders is redirected towards bodies while the world-making capacity of puppetness remains reminiscent of the creation of states. The concept also retains its emphasis on the shaping and reshaping of borders in the direct use of puppetness to play with and reconfigure the human-puppet border. In terms of the dimensional framework (see Figure 1), such borderscaping might feature within the focal narrative element of the utilitarian dimension and within the psychological individual relational dimension, and would characterise the ‘upper’ end of the qualitative dimension, finding maximum expression in substantive puppetness and transformational ontological categories. This pinpoints which parts of which dimensions allow peculiarly puppet worlds to emerge, but this is contingent upon the ways in which diverse elements – puppet, human, plot, genre, and so on – come together. Consistent with the borderscape as constituted by different elements working together²⁹ in representing the area around a border³⁰, the area represented in the particularities of the work created needs to be experienced as real in the performative consumption of the work. However, rather than distinguishing between radical dissolution and theatrical strengthening of the border as alternative approaches to reshaping it³¹, the interrogation of puppetness generates the *theatrical dissolution* of the human-puppet border. This bodily border between puppet and puppeteer is dissolved by unsettling distinctions that are usually drawn between them, but it is dissolved in such a way that attention is sustained on the very distinction that has been dissolved. It is in this sense that the dissolution is theatrical, as the peculiar capacities, bodily forms and spaces that are created through it throw light back onto those very distinctions. The peculiarity of the world created sustains our attention on the very border that has been dissolved in creating that world. The border, then, is simultaneously dissolved and reinscribed.

This affords an inverted appreciation of borders explored in work on comic book geographies, in which the gutter is considered a topological gulf or anti-optical void requiring the reader to

forge connections between successive panels in the story³², as the human-puppet relations are forged by the creator rather than the reader/viewer. Here, the challenge for the reader/viewer is not to forge their own connections but to invest in the intercorporation that has been constructed against a background of retained recognition of the distinction between human and puppet. The intercorporation is given in that it is determined by the creator, but it is also uncertain and unstable, requiring constant active maintenance in the performative consumption of the work. Cognitively, the void between human and puppet is maintained by the impossibility of the intercorporation that is presented, yet the intercorporation denies that void on a performative level. In works engaging directly with puppetness, the spectator is challenged not with overcoming an anti-optical void but with investing in the intercorporation presented while the distinction between puppet and human is kept within focus in the very interrogation of human-puppet relations that generates the intercorporation in the first place. This tortuously oxymoronic process simultaneously sustains and eliminates human-puppet distinctiveness across the human-puppet bodily border by overcoming that distinctiveness only through interrogating it. Ultimately, then, we can think about the spaces and worlds generated by an interrogation of puppetness both in their individual peculiarity and in this peculiar practice of borderscaping.

Conclusion

This paper opened by highlighting both the perplexing under-representation of puppets in geographical literature, given that they are inherently spatial and are of blossoming popular interest, and their huge potential across sub-disciplinary domains, including cultural interest in their diverse forms and effects; political issues from international geopolitics to identity politics; and non-representational interests in materiality, practices, performance, and affect. The analysis that followed teased out six dimensions – utilitarian (role, extent), relational (individual, social), qualitative (puppetness, ontology) – found to characterise different approaches to the use of puppets. Collectively, these provide an analytical framework for subsequent research that might

productively look in more detail at either the intersections between cultural forms, practices, media and genres or the different forms and arrangements of puppetry to refine these dimensions further.

A detailed investigation of space in these works identified a preponderance of certain everyday spaces, alongside a graduated reworking of everyday spaces into spaces of puppetness as the nature of a puppet and the human-puppet relationship are increasingly employed as focal factors in the telling of the story. Moreover, the significance of bodily spaces and spaces of memory was highlighted in the generation of these peculiarly puppet worlds, whereby the most interesting puppet worlds emerge from the integration of puppet-human conjoined bodies, conflated spaces and conflicted memories. The notion of intercorporation was proposed to denote this integration, which was compared to and distinguished from performative ideas of transempodiment. These puppetised geographies were resituated in the disciplinary context by developing and integrating concepts from comic book geographies: borderscapes were redirected to the bodily border between puppet and human, and the forging of relations across the topological gulf was compared to the investment in the intercorporation. These were brought together in the specification of intercorporation as a theatrical dissolution of the puppet-puppeteer border through the simultaneous elimination and reinstatement of puppet-puppeteer distinctiveness.

This paper makes at least three contributions to the discipline: 1) initiating a new arena for culturally-oriented work (the geographies of puppetry), with potential for expansion into other sub-disciplinary areas from political to non-representational geographies; 2) providing a dimensional framework that characterises the varied uses of puppets and the effects that they generate, with potential to stimulate and guide further scholarship, and 3) conceptualising the means by which the most peculiar puppet worlds are generated in the notion of intercorporation as a theatrical dissolution of the human-puppet bodily border, with potential to inform our conceptual understanding and analytical use of more familiar ideas of the borderscape and the topological gulf.

To close, then, puppets embody a huge reservoir of potential for geographical engagement and interrogation. Speaking to thematic concerns, enacting processes of social signification, and offering new opportunities for research and teaching methodologies, puppets signpost broad and fertile geographical terrain that has been overwhelmingly neglected to date. Puppetness is a spatial concern anchored on a bodily border, and the spatialities generated by these explorations of puppetness, especially in their more extreme forms, are certainly peculiar, in both senses of being unique and being strange. Given the peculiarity of puppetness proposed here – simultaneously sustaining and eliminating human-puppet distinctiveness in a theatrical dissolution of the bodily border – this first cultural geographical analysis of puppets points to a fascinating future for the peculiar geographies of puppetry.

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