

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO**

I'm the Dummy, You're the Dummy

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in

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

I'm the Dummy, You're the Dummy

by

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Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

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This essay is best experienced in tandem with Evelyn Walker's MFA thesis exhibition *I'm the Dummy, You're the Dummy*. The paper has a split personality: one personality is a caricature from inside the text and is not aware of any other reality. That personality (designated as the Scientist) is the dominant persona hereafter and speaks as though their credibility as an authority of science is beyond question. The second personality (designated as the Author or Artist) operates here in the introduction, as well as the footnotes, and offers insight the in-text personality has no access to. Namely:

- The use of the conventions of a science publication sets up a subconscious social contract between reader and author, whereby the reader expects credible information to be delivered. The Author aims to exploit that expectation and none of the content actually represents the scientific process.

- The Scientist is not aware that anything is amiss and approaches the content in earnest. They are unaware of any quackery in their argument, or else they believe themselves above scrutiny. This behavior is echoed in both the cited content, and the visual installation. This pillar-of-truth phenomenon fascinates the Author.

## **Summary of The Argument in Favor of the Puppet as Life Form**

Thesis: After extensive study and experimentation in the field, the author proposes that a puppet fulfills the criteria that distinguishes living material from inanimate material. Puppets are a semiotic, symbiotic form of life.

### **Summary of the Argument:**

Part A) If a living thing must have the following:

1. Metabolism
2. Growth
3. Stimuli
4. Reproduction

Part B) And if we accept the following as true in the case of the puppet:

1. The puppet is animated via its operator's psychic input, which represents its fuel. The direct result is that the puppet is kinetically animated to fulfill its expressive function, indicating that the puppet performs a unique semiotic metabolism with the aid of human initiative. The puppet meets the criteria of metabolism.
2. The puppet accumulates a progressively strengthened expressive quality via continued articulation, commonly perceived as a "life history" or "character development". This is the puppet's method of growth; the puppet meets the criteria of growth.
3. The puppet reacts to stimuli vicariously via the mimicry it is created to perform. Its own reaction to stimuli is its receptivity to the mimetic input it is designed to process. The puppet meets the criteria of reactive stimulation.
4. The puppet depends upon its human operator for reproduction via mutual psychic habitation, causing the human to preserve existing puppets as well as teach puppetry to others. This is

evidenced by puppetry's long and diverse history, and contemporary continuation. The puppet meets the criteria of reproduction.

Conclusion: A puppet possesses every quality by which life is distinguished. A puppet is therefore a living organism.

## **Expanded Life Support**

### **Defining Puppet**

The "puppet" here is an object recognized to 1) Posses an approximation of personhood, either in form or suggested designation 2) Understood to be activated with regularity by a person (puppeteer) in order to mimic life via physical animation, or some other such game of pretend<sup>1</sup>.

The argument for its identity as a living thing is contingent on the caveat that the psyche operates as a fuel source, which will be supported in the following section. The healthy puppet organism functions like a parasite that is specialized to operate in the nebulous realm of the mind; it is a semiotic symbiote, and ontological organism.

### **Metabolism**

1. The puppet is animated via its operator's psychic input, which represents its fuel. The direct result is that the puppet is kinetically animated to fulfill its expressive function, indicating that the puppet performs a unique semiotic metabolism with the aid of human initiative. The puppet meets the criteria of metabolism.

We can defend the premise that the human psychic residue is a viable fuel source by first identifying the human organism's aptitude for psychic possession of the material world for its own adaptive purposes. The earliest stone cutting tools are effectively prosthetic claws, the camera is a

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<sup>1</sup> Craig, Edward Gordon. 1908. "The Actor and the Uber-Marrionette." Mask, April: 3 - 8.



phantom eye, the airplane is a multi-billion-year short-cut to flight. This appropriation of environmental resources achieves the adaptive process that takes other species a span of millennia to complete. The human organism achieves this adaptation instantly through a form of ventriloquism by imbuing an inanimate object with its own intentions; to *possess*<sup>2</sup> the object. If fuel is defined as a material that is burned to produce energy or power, then it is not a far step to suggest that the influential force of human psychic occupation may represent an environmental substance that works as a fuel to the organism that can tap into it.

The puppet is an object shaped by *homo sapiens* for the express purpose of psychic habitation<sup>3</sup>. It is therefore specialized to be receptive to the human psyche, and efficiently metabolizes the psychic actant into fuel.

## **Growth**

1. The puppet accumulates a progressively strengthened expressive quality via continued articulation, commonly perceived as a “life history” or “character development”. This is the puppet’s method of growth; the puppet meets the criteria of growth.

Once a puppet is activated, it establishes a joint homeostasis with its human occupant. Without an exact model for this unique form of mutualism, we can look to various mind-altering parasitic or mutualistic phenomena in the natural world. *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* is a pathogenic fungus that infects and hijacks the brain of an ant, altering its behavior in order to complete its life cycle by killing and spawning from the dead host ant.<sup>4</sup> Through co-evolution, the puppet gains access to fuel and vicarious life functions via the human host, and the human gains a channel of egress through which the subconscious is exercised (or exorcised<sup>5</sup>) despite taboo without fear of being ostracized. The longer that

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<sup>2</sup> In both senses of the word. See *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* by Steven Connor for more on connection to supernatural and demonic possession.

<sup>3</sup> Gross, Kenneth. 2011. *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>4</sup> Sample, The Guardian, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Again, see Connor, *Dumbstruck*

the human animal remains connected with the puppet, the stronger the connection is between them. This constitutes the puppet's variety of growth.

### **Reaction to Stimuli**

2. The puppet reacts to stimuli vicariously via the mimicry it is created to perform. Its own reaction to stimuli is its receptivity to the mimetic input it is designed to process. The puppet meets the criteria of reactive stimulation.

All functions, whether passive photosynthetic processes, or culturally complex theatre productions, fall under this category. The puppet serves as an expressive prosthetic for the puppeteer who articulates it and reacts vicariously to the stimuli experienced by the operator. To do this, the puppet performs its own specialized receptivity to the mimetic input<sup>6</sup> which it then converts into animated expression.

The puppet exceeds the inert role of a simple conduit by the influence it exerts on its human host over time. The expression projected through the puppet is necessarily altered by the puppet. Through the puppet, the psychic projection returns to the ventriloquist as an identical but altered self. Over time, this reflectivity transforms into reflexivity, an integrated feedback loop that allows the puppet to gain agency.

### **Reproduction**

3. The puppet depends upon its human operator for reproduction via mutual psychic habitation, causing the human to preserve existing puppets as well as teach puppetry to others. This is evidenced by puppetry's long and diverse history, and contemporary continuation. The puppet meets the criteria of reproduction.

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<sup>6</sup> Extant models for passive nutrient acquisition: sea sponges, corals, and carnivorous plants, and many more.

Of the four functions, reproduction for the puppet is strangest of all. Current speculation proposes that the puppet performs a sort of reproduction through duplication. The Double and its mechanics are explored in the following section, *Symptoms and Complications*.<sup>s</sup>

### **Symptoms and Complications**

*“You think we came here to shed me, but actually we came here to shed Nina.” –Monkey<sup>7</sup>*

The caveat of the systems described above is that they are almost always invisible and undetected when everything is going well. An overt and symptomatic occupation would be maladaptive to the puppet. Two anecdotal case studies will be looked at here, along with relevant psycho-analytic theory, in order to speculate further about the exact nature of the osmosis between puppet and person.

Our first case study is of the actor Donn Knotts. Before his role in the Andy Griffith show, Knotts was a ventriloquist in the navy, along with his dummy Danny “Hooch” Matador. In an interview conducted many years after the fact, Knotts confesses that he “became tired of playing straight man to a hunk of wood” and threw the puppet overboard. In the interview, he claims he could hear its cries for help as it bobbed away into the South Pacific.

Our second case looks at an incident in ventriloquist Nina Conti’s documentary *Her Master’s Voice*. While reconsidering her choice to pursue a career as a ventriloquist,<sup>8</sup> Conti absentmindedly drops her puppet “Monkey” while walking in a parking lot. A car pulls out, running over Monkey in the process. It’s not long before we learn that the accident is staged, upgrading it from manslaughter to murder. Nonetheless, the sight of the squashed and lifeless Monkey sends Nina into a panicked state of grief and remorse. Her reaction, despite the staged killing, is genuine. The incident is enough to convince

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<sup>7</sup> 2017 - 2018. *Nina Conti - In Therapy*. Performed by Adam Meggido and Nina Conti. YouTube.

<sup>8</sup> 2012. *Nina Conti: Her Master's Voice and the Legacy of Six Bereaved Puppets*. Directed by Nina Conti. Performed by Nina Conti.

Conti that she's not ready to give up ventriloquism.<sup>9</sup> Although two anecdotes do not constitute data, these attempted murders offer concrete scenarios demonstrating the tension between one's self and one's double.

In his famous study of the uncanny in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimlich*, Freud elaborates on the only previous psychoanalytic work on the subject, *Zur Psychologie des Umheimlichen*, published in 1906 by Ernst Jentsch. Jentsch proposed that the basis of the *uncanny* is intellectual uncertainty, or fear of the unfamiliar. Jentsch takes E.T.A. Hoffman's story "The Sandman" as a literary model, pointing in particular to the automaton woman Olympia in the story as one clear example of the *uncanny*: the protagonist becomes infatuated with the automaton and the automaton triggers a psychological struggle. We want to react to it as though it were a real human, and yet we know it is not a real human. Our reality is challenged, and the existential vertigo that follows is the experience of the *uncanny*. Masahiro Mori's theory of the Uncanny Valley, (which states that the more a robot resembles a real person<sup>10</sup>, the more unsettling it is to us) was later linked back to Jentsch's analysis.<sup>11</sup>

Freud takes issue with Jentsch's analysis. Looking at the semantics of the word *Das Unheimlich* he observes that the German "heimlich" describes that which is homey, familiar, comfortable, private, concealed, secret. "Unheimlich", the *uncanny*, is the opposite of "heimlich". It is the unwitting or unwilling revelation of what is private and concealed; of what is hidden not just from others but also from oneself. It is the eeriness of an encounter with the repressed self<sup>12</sup>. Doctor Richard Gray, of the Department of Germanics at the University of Washington<sup>13</sup>, notes an unmistakable connection here to Freud's concept of *parapraxis*, the "inadvertent slip of the tongue that reveals a hidden truth".

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<sup>9</sup> The author notes that in both cases the puppeteer enacted violence as a means of recourse, suggesting a fight or flight reflex

<sup>10</sup> In literature, Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio transforms into a real boy

<sup>11</sup> The author notes that this link occurred accidentally and retroactively. Concept first proposed by Robotist Masahiro Mori in 1970 in published work *Bukimi no Tani Genshō*. Translated in 1978 as "The Uncanny Valley" by Jasia Reichardt in published work *Robots: Fact, Fiction, and Prediction* (Hsu, *Robotics' Uncanny Valley Gets New Translation*)

<sup>12</sup> "[The uncanny is] something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed. The link with repression now illuminates Schelling's definition of the uncanny as 'something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open.'" (Dahl 2011, page 99)

<sup>13</sup> Gray, Dr. Richard. 2016. "Lecture on the Uncanny." Seattle: Washington, January.

Freud refers to and draws upon his contemporary Otto Rank's work *Das Doppelgänger*, which is an almost ethnographic text surveying the appearance of the double as an omen of death in various folklore traditions. In Germanic folklore the doppelgänger is a phantom double of one's self, which appears alongside or in place of the original individual<sup>14</sup>. Similar traditions, not limited to Europe, look to one's shadow, reflection, or representative likeness in a painting or photograph as a manifestation of one's double. All are either an immediate omen of death, or have the capacity to become a cause of death. Freud relates the encounter with one's double as an encounter with one's primitive state, and an embodiment of the repressed content of one's identity. It is therefore an experience of the uncanny, the inadvertent escape of that which we've hidden even from ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

So the uncanny is not just Jentsch and Mori's encounter with the unfamiliar dressed up like the familiar, it is also encountering what we know should be familiar (one's self) as entirely unknown. Sartre captures the sensation of unsettlement and uncertainty in his novel *Nausea* with a scene in that captures this look into the mirror, and knowing what one sees is oneself, and knowing the self is a stranger:

“There is a white hole in the wall, a mirror. It is a trap. I know I am going to let myself be caught in it. I have. The grey thing appears in the mirror. I go over and look at it, I can no longer get away. It is the reflection of my face...I can understand nothing of this face.

The faces of others have some sense, some direction. Not mine.”

### **The Sorcerer's Apprentice**

Now that the psychoanalytic theory has been established, let's return to the scenario at hand: the puppeteer identifies themselves emanating from the puppet, which is no longer an inert receptacle, but a Double. The puppet has become its own organism by latching to the human's psyche, a shareholder in the

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<sup>14</sup> Contemporary fascination with the subject sets aside the supernatural phantom double. Doppelgänger now more frequently refers to an uncanny look-alike; two unrelated individuals who nevertheless are nearly identical in appearance; a “twin-stranger”. See also [twinstrangers.net](http://twinstrangers.net)

<sup>15</sup> Further reading on this subject: Lucan's Mirror stage, Girard's Mimesis and Desire.

puppeteer's hidden self. To explore the implications of this phenomenon we will follow the examples of Jentsch and Freud, who—as discussed above—analyze E.T.A Hoffman's short literary work "Sandman" as a site for the study of the uncanny. I propose 18<sup>th</sup> century German poem "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" as a model of the effects of the mutinous double.

A summary of the plot: An apprentice to a great sorcerer is tasked with the mundane drudgery of hauling water. While his master the Sorcerer is away the apprentice seizes his opportunity to try his hand at magic and uses a spell to bring a mop to life to carry water for him. When the mop begins to flood the place, being singly focused on hauling water, and not familiar with the concept of "too much" or "stop",<sup>16</sup> the foolish apprentice realizes his mistake but can find no way to shut the mop down. Desperate, he resorts to murder, taking an ax to the mop and hacking it to tiny bits. To his horror, the bits spring to life, multiplying the problem by several orders of magnitude.

This scene may be our closest encounter to date with the reproductive process of the puppet. We have explored the puppet's specialized receptivity to the human's intent, which at first glance indicates total subjugation to the human will. Our study suggests that this may be adept imitation of benignancy, camouflage that conceals a threat. The puppet's psychosomatic adaptation is characterized by a self-reinforcing mechanism. Even after it is identified as a trespasser, a twin-stranger, the very recognition of the fact only serves to affirm and strengthen the bond. The more violently the puppet double is rejected, the more psychic energy is poured into the bond. To reject the puppet is to reject the self, and to kill it is only to activate it further. To throw it overboard, or run it over with a car, or to chop it to bits with an ax is only to fan the flame.

In the story, the Sorcerer arrives just in time, lifts the enchantment, saves the day, and scolds the apprentice for his foolish hubris. The action ends here. It is my belief, however, that this was only a temporary remission. Rather than ending the outbreak, the Sorcerer merely treated the symptom; that having done the spell without deep understanding of his actions, the apprentice opened Pandora's box. In

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<sup>16</sup> See Nick Bostrom's Paperclip Maximizer (Bostrom 2003)

committing violent ax murder, he became a host and a carrier for the possessive spirits he invited.<sup>17</sup> He was himself puppetized.<sup>18</sup> It could be said that the Sorcerer's Apprentice acted in self-defense, but one would first have to accept that his Self was under threat. If so, Donn Knotts and Nina Conti's acts of puppecide were manifestations of psychic self-defense, the rejection of a threat posed in the nebulous realm of the unreal.

*"He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee." –Nietzsche*

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<sup>17</sup> "Die Geister, die ich rief." — "the spirits I have called", Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Der Zauberlehrling*. Become German colloquial cliché. Refers to calling upon powerful allies, who are afterward found to be beyond control. One problem has been replaced with another. Often used in politics.

<sup>18</sup> Much in the same way that Frankenstein was monsterized almost the moment he made the monster

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