

From a comparison of puppetry with masked performance, in

“The puppet and the mask. The power of the mask, the dependency of the puppet.

Schumann’s theatre alienates masked performance by the form of puppetry,”

*The Bread and Puppet Theatre*, Volume One, p. 306.

The mask is quite another. It is, above all, the mystery. Hiding the performer, it bereaves us of the signs by which to beware, and we do not know who it is. It thus gives superiority to the performer, and the effect on the audience is the opposite of that of the puppet.

Note that a simply veiled or shrouded person is mysterious, and that the mystery is produced and persists even if we know who it is and know that person; and that this mystery is totally independent of whether we feel that, shroud or veil apart, they are in any way mysterious.

The way the word is used, mysteriousness may attach to a lack of information merely (or inability to identify the person, or to explain how something happened or came about); or to a seeming paradox or their impossibility. In the case of the hidden or featureless face, oddly, it seems of the latter, stronger sort, something that seems the case and yet, it seems, could not be so. It is not only the feeling “it could be anybody”, it is as though we *saw* anybody.

A puppet, to a greater or lesser extent, takes on its animator’s life. It may even, notably if the operator delivers its speech or has designed it and its performance, or when its construction is such that it rather directly and sensitively reproduces the operator’s way of moving, take on some of his or her personality. A mask, on the contrary, gives its lack of life and its identity to the wearer of it. He or she becomes it, and all the wearer’s vivacity is constrained within the bond of its inanimation. The puppet borrows from its operator; the mask gives to its wearer. Put on, the mask becomes a face; only when played does the puppet become a puppet, an extension of the master, who, if in evidence, if anything, becomes more fully him or herself, active in the use of the puppet, him or herself amplified by its play. In the puppet we see life in death, in the masked performer, death in life.

When we see a puppet come to life we are delighted, but not astounded. We fall into our illusion by sleight-of-mind. But when a person puts on a mask, the transformation is astounding, in fact, unbelievable. The person becomes another;

we are torn into the illusion, but their metamorphosis is frightening rather than delightful; and as the delight in the wearing of a mask relates to a feeling of irresponsibility and power, so the delight in confronting the wearer of a mask relates to the thrill of danger – a masked person is sinister. This intimidation is of course the essence of Halloween, but even a Mardi Gras cortege is scary. Only in theatre, with the stage well separated from the audience, is the fearsomeness of the mask mitigated into strangeness, coldness and awesomeness.

Yet, even so (there is a pleasure in danger), the delightfulness of puppetry and the astoundingness of masks and of the masque, though quite different from one another, both belong to a realm of experience distinctly counterposed to high culture, but mistakenly identified as frivolous: for the realm of delight and astonishment provided by jugglers, magicians, fireworks, bright lights, waterfalls and fountains, the play of children and the self-destructive excesses of the poor extends without break, continuously to caresses and orgasms, to fornication, to the coming of spring, and to the pleasure parents take in their children, seeing them learn to walk or to talk or hearing their displays of wit. The same spring is touched in all these cases, and the leap of our spirit is the same. We are taken by surprise at a sudden eclosion of capacities increasing our and the world's wealth. Subjectively, although, of course, not in fact, these are experiences of miracles.

. . . If Schumann's theatre can properly be called puppetry, this is not particularly because, though he started from masked performance, he arrived at it by way of a return to a traditional form of puppetry, but because he made of the manipulation of his masked figures a major element of it, used to alienate the masked ceremony for the sake of making address to the audience explicit.

Having realized the power of masks, he proceeded to let them work their mystery in a new form of puppet theatre: one that depended on awe, rather than inviting condescension, and essentially tragic (though he would perhaps not admit this) rather than comic (though he tries for humor). The tragic quality of his theatre is conveyed most directly by the appearance of indifference to us of his puppets – no longer, like traditional puppets, playthings – not, like actors, humans posturing before us in the ridiculousness of their pretense – totally unconcerned and yet appearing to us as the lineaments of our fate. This quality is not redeemed by the appearance of visible puppet operators – these appear as the puppets' servants. Only secondarily does his theatre's tragic quality appear as content – the perennial defeat of good by bad.

Schumann's masks make him one of the great plastic artists of our age. They carry a contrapuntal emotion into his stories, the sadness of death. Not infrequently they are

skull masks. Often they are masks taken from face casts, but such masks are as though from the faces of the dead – undesiring, mysteriously superior, having lost the sweet vulnerability of the faces of sleepers. The beautiful people in his plays wear these masks, the moonlike faces, gray, white, silver, of oriental peasant ladies, moving through his world slowly and gracefully, figurations of Chinese serenity, wisdom of style, of alleviating this world's Germanic barbarity, but putting its ponderous agitation in perspective, qualifying it as foolish. Then there are the faces of those who sit in the shadow of death, yellowish, pink or purple, the faces of ordinary men and women, with expressions not so much of suffering as of dumbly inward concentration too weak to ennoble, sometimes only the shields of insensitivity borne by dull self-preoccupation – the grotesquely molded faces of worriers, short on time, irritable and arbitrary, narrow-minded, caught up in rules and routines to the point of petrification, ugly by the meanness of misery. These are the faces of the living dead. There are the faces of strange monstrous creatures and of malevolent devils, ogres, and demons – though also of benign fairies, pale, faint, or of unmasculine dreamers. These are the agents of death, often gigantic authorities – outside of time neither alive nor dead. And there are the tiny, vivacious puppets, ridiculous imps looking on, jumping out of the stomachs or pockets of giant or popping up at the upper edge of a curtain with some crack. They have time but are not using it.

Sitting in the New York subway, I notice how similar the Negro – but not only the Negro – faces of the people opposite me are to Peter Schumann's masks.....A striking feature of Schumann's masks is the irregularity, in fact the approximateness of the faces, especially on the head masks; but inspection of subway faces suggests these masks are in this respect realistic. His face masks are often expressive of serenity, which reminds us that people use their faces more as masks than for expression, a stunning under- and mis-employment of their faces . . . Schumann's theatre is primarily a theatre of faces: his hard stare on men's titanic struggle with Time.