

## After words

(Draft thoughts for a reading; Escala, 2.5.13)

What do masks or puppets want of words?

“A puppet in its very stillness and abandonment may be charged with potential motion, becoming an object of reverie, patiently awaiting some further life. Voice is another matter. Puppet actors are often mute. They can seem most persuasive in wordless dances, where unspeaking figures are moved by music... Or when they assume the forms of voiceless animals, real or invented. Silence and speechlessness indeed seem natural to the puppet...”<sup>1</sup>

“This is partly because puppets are more like words themselves – abstract yet object-like things with an intractable life of their own – and so do not need words. It is also because a puppet’s words can never come from inside it. While a puppet’s movements will seem to belong to the physical thing it is – even if moved by the hand of the puppeteer – the puppet’s voice always comes from the outside. Its voice is always alien, never its own. Or rather, it only becomes the puppet’s own in finding a way to embrace that strangeness, or in becoming puppet-like in its own right (as happens in certain forms of ventriloquism...)”<sup>2</sup>

Is *this* now a form of ventriloquism, a performance “after words”? Do these sentences, written by Kenneth Gross, themselves ventriloquise my voice, making my mouth move in ways that they determine; animating my breath by their meaning?

In the film by Deborah Hunt that we have just watched the voice is clearly given to the puppet from outside, by a masked figure – given to its creation, to its image as a homunculus. But Hunt is not a ventriloquist.

What then is the “need to link the alien voice to the voiceless figure” in these performances? And is there something in these “after words”, addressing masks and puppets, of “a gestural sound that keeps close to the motions and breath of the body...”<sup>3</sup>

There is a paradox about the invitation to address what might be particular in the film presented by Hunt in her absence. In the performance we were shown, there is a relation between what she tells us – the voice speaking – and the image of these silent objects (mask and puppet) performing.

They appear in the spirit of a story – although for us this is not a story of spirits by themselves. In our society, the sacred groves have been built over by theatre spaces – where nonetheless an exchange between the visible and the invisible may yet take place,

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Gross, *Puppet*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, p.66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.66-67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67.

often through (or “after”) words, even in a culture as unwilling as ours to acknowledge that residual form of initiation which we call “make believe”.

Just as speaking is not reducible to the words spoken – neither is the performance of a mask. What does the mask give us to say? How does it make us heard?

What is there to say – afterwards – that does not simply presuppose the images we have just seen? And yet which does not ignore them either? How to make these images present again, in other words, with a different voice?

Is this simply a question of technique or medium? A technique for making the inanimate speak? To “bring it to life”, like these words; to give them a voice, like a performance?

And what would happen if the mask were to fall; if these words were no longer to seem to be “my own”? What might be heard then?

We see that Hunt is very careful when putting on and taking off her masks – going behind a screen, itself a kind of scenic mask, at the back of the stage. She carefully distinguishes the mask that she wears from her own persona when speaking directly to the audience, making a show of the former’s visibility – as if to support an illusion of the latter’s invisibility.

But again, speaking is not reducible to the words spoken.

One of the precepts of Jacques Lecoq – the theatre maker whose techniques Hunt explains in her filmed performance-lecture – is that the performer first learns to speak corporeally – without words – precisely by way of a mask.

The first page of Lecoq’s training is, as he says, blank.

“*A Blank Page*: Students come from all over the world to our school and enroll in the first year for a trial term. Their average age is twenty-five, and they have some acting experience. Many who come from abroad have already completed drama school in their own country, others will have attended short courses and workshops. Because of this, we have to begin by stripping away learned behaviour patterns which do not belong to them, eliminating everything which might hinder them from rediscovering life at its most authentic. We have to divest the students of some of what they have learned, not in order to diminish their store of knowledge, but to create a blank page for them. In this way they can be awakened to that far-reaching curiosity that is essential if they are to discover the quality of play. This is the objective of the first year’s work...”<sup>4</sup>

“In the course of this first year of discovery and understanding we seed the roots of creative acting, by means of improvisation and the analysis of movement in life. A permanent link is established between these two activities. On the one hand, through

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, trans. David Bradby, London: Methuen, 2002, p.27.

improvisation, we externalise what is latent within the students; on the other, through objective study of movement techniques, we allow them to work from the outside in.”<sup>5</sup>

“Beneath every mask, expressive masks or *commedia dell’arte* masks, there is a neutral mask supporting all the others. When a student has experienced this neutral starting point his body will be freed, like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed...”<sup>6</sup>

With a blank page – a mask; this is perhaps how I may address the invitation to speak afterwards – to offer as it were an afterword that speaks to, rather than about, the images that have come before. After all, I cannot speak *for* the mask that precedes me.

A mask dissociates the face from the limbs, from their attitudes or posture – making the habitual visible, through a montage of abstracted expressions. Masks reduce the usual tension between the intelligibility and the affective dynamic of the face that we try to read – by making of the visible, facial expression a gestural form, with which the body’s attitudes may be juxtaposed. The mask suspends the auto-affection that suggests meaning for others – it makes play with the dynamics of a “speaking body”.

Paradoxically then the animate is made expressive through a technique of the inanimate – as perhaps with these chairs, for example. Do we see them in their sculptural, formal aspect; or are they practically invisible to us, in the way that they habitually manifest – or ventriloquise even – our movement, our posture? The chair is evidence of a culturally specific centre of gravity. These are not just inanimate objects to be moved about, but everyday puppeteers of our own bodies. Indeed, there is a whole drama here – a conspiracy of chairs, the secret masters of the western world, embodying a form of cultural habitus, of what we call sitting (“take a seat!”) – which encodes differences between public and private space, work and home. In this unspoken and invisible puppetry, the body is dominated by the society of chairs – subject to a regime of meetings, especially those presided over by quisling “chairpersons”!

But there is still a question as to what kind of mask speaking requires. Masks offer an image – in other words, an allegory – of speech; of our knowledge that what is said is not necessarily what is meant. We are said to hide behind words and we contrast being “two faced” with what is called “bare faced”. “Face”, like “mask”, is a verb as well as a noun; we face up to others’ expectations that we will speak (or perhaps fail to do so). Indeed, to face up to a task is a sign of virtue, while to hide behind a mask is deemed unfriendly, cowardly, or perhaps simply prudent. But is not speech already a mask?

As Descartes is supposed to have thought, privately to himself: *Larvatus prodeo*.

“Just as actors are counseled not to let shame appear on their foreheads, and so put on a mask: so likewise, now that I am to mount the stage of the world, where I have so far been a spectator, I come forward in a mask...”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38.

Besides such allegories of spoken performance, the masked face typically emphasizes the eyes, to be seen seeing; but there is finally a mask in which the gaze is withheld, withdrawn, seeing inwardly; in which the face becomes visible for itself: the death mask, of which the photograph is but an imitation. With the death mask may be heard an echo of silence – the very possibility of thought; knowing that one could have said everything differently.

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<sup>7</sup> René Descartes, “Private Thoughts”, in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and eds. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, London: Nelson 1971, p.3.