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'The return of the puppetress/sorceress: feminism, (auto)biography, ecology'

At Odds conference on puppetry and object theatre, University of Bern, Switzerland.

In much recent female/feminist puppetry work, female identity is seen primarily in relation to an animistic world; puppetry forms emerge from within and amongst nature; consciousness is seen as something which enters, temporarily, into matter and form, rather than belonging to it; and the power of magic, ecology and, frequently, autobiography, enables discussion of identity, politics and purpose.

The *puppetress* does not see herself as a dominant figure, manipulating forms which emerge on stage, nor does she see herself as a sole and lonely figure dominated by terrifying forces beyond her control.

Indeed, perceptions of control in this kind of work seem to be redundant.

Instead, the *puppetress* is experienced as being *at the service* of the forms that appear alongside her.

Her consciousness is that of interbeing; new forms, selves, spirits, characters and energies co-exist alongside her.

She guides the story at times, but does not deter it, or coerce it.

This approach is in direct relationship to theories of both ritual animism and of deep ecology. In deep ecology, we cannot impose ourselves upon the natural world, but need to understand it and care for it.

In ritual animism, the spirits that enter into matter are welcomed and honoured as knowledgeable and wise. This approach to contemporary women's puppetry therefore pays homage to the figure of the archaic female puppeteer within rituals and liminal spaces of where animated figures were used to facilitate the passage between worlds.

Puppetry, moreover, is not seen as being related to control, but in relation to service, dependence and interbeing. This approach could have great resonance for gender, disability and political theory: if co-dependence and relationality are seen as high-status qualities, and separation, independence and individuality given less focus, the ways in which we treat one another and the world could be radically altered.

Those, thus, needing to be enabled to express, move and speak, rather than being poor beings who are in some way inferior to those more powerful, are seen as beings with sacred and meaningful qualities since they offer the opportunity to assist and through this to participate in the sacred.

Whilst numerous puppeteers (some cited above) explore the relationship of self to other bodies, consciousnesses and beings, the key aspect of the creative process through which the puppetress performs is that of connection, rather than disturbance; recognition and welcome rather than fear and horror, of invitation and co-presence rather than dominance and struggle.

The puppetress consciously and deliberately invokes her other selves, and other, equal selves, into the performance space through her interaction with matter, nature, herself and in so doing invokes the intangible, mysterious and sacred aspect of life.

Instead of seeking certainty, she seeks openness and co-presence, leading to a mode of interbeing alongside and amongst other bodies and consciousnesses.

This approach is predicated upon **belief**, **respect** and **play**. The puppetress therefore acknowledges the importance of the unknown and the trust in the unknown through assuming that matter and nature have their own processes and that she, while being part of that process, can not simply determine the course of its existence.

Magic therefore fights back in its insistence that the mystical, ecological, animistic relationship with performed matter is sacred; the human performer approaches the sacred matter with the view to stepping into the shared threshold rather than completing the story.

The Canadian puppetress Magali Chouinard draws directly on this relationality between female identity, nature and interbeing in her works, in particular the evocatively titled *Nomad Soul*. The performance, which has toured widely, emphasises that the self (the microcosm) exists only in relation with nature (the macrocosm) and is a deep exploration of the interior world in relation with the natural environment.

The performance has a dreamlike quality and is based on Chouinard's own exploration of indigenous spirituality and the quest for consciousness.

In *Nomad Soul*, Chouinard goes on a metaphorical and literal journey in which she explores different aspects of herself as expressed in the natural world. The self, therefore, semi-autobiographical, is only seen as something that exists as it is manifested amongst the workings of the natural world.

Here Merleau-Ponty's* concept of core and extended consciousness can be seen to be deeply entwined in Chouinard's performance; the interior world of multiple selves only exists in relation to how it is expressed, multiply and differently, in a series of ongoing and always-changing encounters with material.

Nothing is fixed; nothing ends; there are only emerging and continuous images.

This poetic visual and psychological approach is seen similarly in her earlier works *Full Moon* (a giant puppet installation); *Journey to the Centre of the Moon*, an puppet project exploring the female human form in relation to images of nature; *The Crossing*, an animation project which focuses on the female gaze, her reflection on herself, drawing, texture and nature and *Whispering in the void*, a piece using table-top puppetry, shadow and music to create textures and evocation of the senses.

Similarly, her performance *The White Woman* eschews linear narrative for a series of images linking images of Chouinard herself represented in puppet form, as a human or as an animal (a crow and a wolf as well as an old woman and a young child).

Wild female consciousness is explored; the relationship of the feminine to nature and to the totemic use of animal puppets; the maternal can be seen in the deep care taken to curate and caress the figures emerging from the scene.

Both performances show exploration, embrace and journey rather than a closed, completed narrative, and deeply personal work, which puts the artist, female consciousness and identity and relationality on stage.

Chouinard's work, therefore, can be seen as deeply ecofeminist and animistic in its practice. Puppets are used as fleeting images of consciousness which appear within the journey of the puppetress herself.

They are experienced as part of nature in a world which entwines female identity with nature.

The body of the puppetress is source, home and potential to enable the temporary resting of the spirits that enter it.

Chouinard's shows invoke internal journeying in the audience; they invite reflection, self-recognition and imagination.

- <https://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/>
- **Merleau-Ponty: The Self as Embodied Subjectivity**