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# Leaky Boundaries: Transversing the Abject through Puppetry Performance

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In Wattle and Daub's *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (2015), a reanimated corpse puppet leaks blood, excrement, and saliva on his journey through military torture, medical treatment, and morbid illness. In moments of memory, body parts of Snuff Puppets' giant Everybody puppet detach from its dying body and secrete. These moments and others like them unsettle the boundary between puppet and human body by transposing abjected materiality - decay, secretions - of human bodies on or into the puppet.

Recent scholarship draws on the puppet's ability to transverse multiple sites and states through simultaneously occupying opposing binary positions: human/object, figure/material, alive/dead. This paper asks what possibilities are revealed when the puppet transverses the abject itself as object performing human decay and secretion, abjected materiality that shores up the contours of the embodied human subject? What boundaries are crossed that reframe our relationship to both human and non-human materiality? In this paper I analyze these moments of transversing the abject in puppetry performances, a gesture that allows artists to deepen explorations of porous, "leaky" boundaries of the body through material performance.

I consider these performances as abject through both their enactments of human leakage and decomposition, and through the various affective responses of disgust they produce in spectators. My use of the abject draws on the Kristevan abject in its unsettling of the integrity of the body (1982). However rather than positing the abject as a universalizing psychoanalytic process of subject formation assumed outside of its emergence from imperialist European accounts of subjectivity, I follow Imogen Tyler (2009, 2013), Anne McClintock (1995), Judith Butler (1993) and others in examining the mechanisms through which culturally- and historically-contingent *norms of abjection* are mobilized, reinforced and, in some cases, unsettled.

In her work on social abjection, Tyler explores what she terms “revolting aesthetics” (2013, 25) which mediate exclusions of certain bodies through practices of social hygiene, locating the potential for unsettling processes of social abjection in the aesthetic realm. She draws on Sara Ahmed’s work on the performativity of disgust which constitutes social relations spatially, producing aboveness and belowness through aversive and expelling reactions to that which is socially constituted as disgusting (2004). My attention to the “revolting aesthetics” in abject puppetry performance seeks to consider ways in which puppetry can allow for a reworking of these aesthetics and thereby a re-spatializing of social relations constituted between spectators and performed bodies, by unsettling the perception of what constitutes a body.

In her taxonomy of the cyborg within cyborg theatre, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck locates puppetry at the intersection of abject body and abject technology, considering the abject-ness of the puppet as, for example, a materialization of the disembodied absence of an organic body (2011, 42). In her separate analysis of the *War Horse* puppet as becoming-animal through puppetry's triangulation of human, animal and technology, she argues that this is a triangulation that allows for productive space between its constituent components that avoids their conflation and foreclosure of meaning in film depictions of the horse. For Parker-Starbuck, this allows for a sense of becoming-animal, she writes "these are ontologies that are nonfixed, and the moving, shifting terrains are what produces a sense of animality that stays with the viewers" (2013, 385).

My analysis draws on Parker-Starbuck's cyborg framing of puppetry and on her locating productive ontological ambiguity in puppetry performance, with a focus on the affect that circulates when a puppet mediates in this case neither animality nor the bounded human, but human abjection: the triangulation in this configuration might be described as human, *abject*, and technology. Through attention to the affective disgust response (and its more immediate visceral precursors shock and nausea), I suggest that the intersections of inorganic and organic materiality within abject puppetry performance allows a circulation of affect linked simultaneously to a visceral response to organic leakage and decay, and, seemingly paradoxically, to the fact that it's inorganic material performing this leakage and decay - these excretions clearly *aren't* blood, saliva, fecal matter

and so on, and the bodies that appear to produce them clearly *are not* flesh; yet for a moment, the visceral responses in spectators' bodies suggest that they are. The "shifting terrains" of these ontologies allow artists to play at the boundaries of revolting aesthetics, redirecting the physiological disgust response and thereby respatializing the social relations constituted.

I look at two sites for this: Melbourne-based Snuff Puppets' outdoor interactive piece *Everybody* (2015), in which a giant puppet lactates and urinates on spectators and invites them to cuddle with dancing poos; and my company Wattle and Daub's puppet opera *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak*, in which the central puppet vomits, bleeds and defecates.

*Everybody* is an interactive giant puppetry show, often performed in outdoor spaces, created by Melbourne-based Snuff Puppets, featuring a 26.5-meter puppet with detachable body parts and organs, puppeteered invisibly from the inside. Snuff Puppets describes the puppet as "all genders and multi-racial" (2016). It is intended to celebrate *the body* as unifying human experience; the show's tagline is "Everybody's born / Everybody cries / Everybody shits / Everybody dies" (2016). While the piece's attempt to locate a universalizing experience of embodiment deserves critical attention, in this analysis I focus on the mechanisms deployed to negotiate spectator response to that which is socially constituted as disgusting about the human body, including in this case not only bodily waste but also lactation.

The piece begins with a brick landing on the puppet's head, initiating Everybody's death throes; the remainder of the piece is Everybody's life as it flashes before its eyes, including its own birth from its own vagina, its crying, its shitting, and culminating in the decay and breakdown of the body as body parts and organs detach and float over the spectators.

Here is a short clip from the trailer for the show; it's worth noting that in upcoming iterations of the show the company want to add additional body fluids including placental fluid and blood:

[\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnbxO7P7Xnk\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnbxO7P7Xnk)

In an interview with me, Artistic Director Andy Freer described spectators' responses to being sprayed with liquid from a breast or penis, or invited to cuddle with poo as a mixture of "shocks and hilarity" (2016). This is a startled disgust response that almost immediately converts into a shared experience of heightened laughter. It is this moment of spectators' visceral responses to physical contact with the puppet's bodily excretions that I am interested in here, the moment when spectators react *as if* contamination has occurred. The initial shock, which could convert into disgust, instead quickly shifts into laughter and "hilarity". This can be largely attributed to a reassertion of awareness of the puppet-ness of both the body and its excretions, both in the sense of it being

“fake”, and designed to be tactilely pleasing. Snuff Puppets designed the component puppets of *Everybody* to be pleasing to the touch, particularly the dancing poos who invite spectators to cuddle and sink into their cushiony depths, which by and large spectators are happy to do. When the breast or the penis sprays liquid onto the crowd, spectators display pleasure in getting wet, with several instances of groups of spectators dancing under the spray.

This redirection of the initial disgust response of shock to a physical embracing of the revolting object interrupts the two components of disgust response that Aurél Kolnai identifies in his seminal work on the phenomenology of disgust ([1929] 2004). First, the flight response of disgust in which we attempt to generate boundaries and distances from the revolting object, avoiding “intimate contact and union with it” (Kolnai 2004, 587); by contrast, in *Everybody* spectators literally embrace the revolting objects following an initial aversive jump back. And second, these spectator responses function counter to the “associative transference” between physiological and moral disgust, in which a visceral disgust reaction is converted into moral disgust, producing the above/below spatializing of social relations referenced earlier in relation to Ahmed’s work. For spectators at the live performance of *Everybody*, physiological disgust does not convert into moral disgust but instead into shared enjoyment. I emphasize the *live* performance here because response to the 2-minute video trailer of the show that circulated on social media produced strong moral disgust directed at Snuff Puppets, pointing to a different mode of spectatorship when puppetry is mediated

through video technologies instead of through physical proximity and tactile encounter with the puppet's materiality.

Transposing the abject in these ways in the live show therefore allows Snuff Puppets to play at this boundary of disgust response, provoking multiple affects through which spectators are invited to relate differently to that which is socially constituted as disgusting about the body, to enjoy the experience of perceived contamination through a communal and theatrically framed physical encounter with body taboo.

Wattle and Daub's puppet opera *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* traces the true story of medical anomaly Tarrare, a late 18<sup>th</sup>-century French polyphagist with an enormous appetite including for live snakes, cats, human body parts, and possibly a toddler, who performed in street shows, served as a military spy for the French Revolutionary Army smuggling documents in his stomach, and became a failed case study for military surgeon George Didier, Baron Percy. Our interest in Tarrare revolved around his status as a medical "monster"; the ways in which his body was displayed and mobilized in freak performances, the military, and the medical establishment; and an ethical awareness of the absence of Tarrare's voice in an archive comprised of Percy's medical notes (1805).

The piece is framed by the pathological autopsy that Percy conducted on Tarrare



following his death; all puppets except for Percy are corpses on display in the autopsy room reanimated by medical assistants, who remain visible as they puppeteer the direct-manipulation puppets; the singers stand apart from the puppet-cyborgs. Our aim through these design and puppeteering choices was to resist the gesture, for both artists and spectators, of reinforcing one's own subjectivity against that which is excluded – and we're thinking here of Tarrare's monstrosity in the worlds of the freak show, military, and medical establishment. For us this was an attention to deploying puppetry not as figurative representation, but as a material performance mode of resisting the foreclosure of meaning around a historical figure. This is something we're continuing to work towards as we develop the show, and will probably always be an unfinished project, but some interesting things have happened around audience response that I'll be talking about here.

Here is a short clip from the show's trailer that illustrates the show's framing and puppet design, including some of the scenes of bodily excretions:

[\[https://vimeo.com/53101351\]](https://vimeo.com/53101351)

Similar to Snuff Puppets, we were interested here in strategically deploying our transposition of the abject; the puppets are corpses with skin that appears to be rotting, and Tarrare's body is difficult at times to witness, particularly when he vomits, shits and bleeds. These moments produced nausea in many audience

members, including in particular a vomiting moment that immediately precedes Tarrare's death.

The construction of this moment involved multiple components: a puppeteer/medical assistant depressing plungers on two large syringes to excrete K-Y jelly from behind the puppet's mouth, mimicking the expulsion of saliva and bile from the stomach, and the Tarrare puppeteer using his body to both manipulate the puppet body to mimic human retching, and to force air through his closed throat to produce loud retching sounds.

Here is a short clip of this moment:

[link below requires password "tarrare"; selected clip 1:13:44 – 1:14:50]

[\[https://vimeo.com/138892569\]](https://vimeo.com/138892569)

The assemblage of puppetry performance techniques in this moment produced a visceral response of nausea in many audience members, who reported grimacing, breathing deeply, and clutching their bellies, yet not looking away. This response occurred despite the fact that Tarrare's saliva/bile concoction is visibly *not* produced by a human body - the audience sees the supporting puppeteer pick up and depress the syringes; the Tarrare puppet is visibly not human flesh; Tarrare's puppeteer, not the actual puppet, produces the retching sound. Despite this, the visual and auditory stimuli transverse the performance space to enter

the porous bodies of the spectators (to use Stacy Alaimo's term), producing affects *as if* each audience member is witnessing a human body expelling its own fluid, and *as if* each audience member's body is itself about to vomit.

The nausea is multiple here, evoking both *disgust for* and *sense of deepened connection with* the figure as reported by audience members, a multiplicity that can be attributed to the shifting terrains of revolting ontologies in abject puppetry performance. It was precisely the connection response, common to puppetry spectatorship, that we had sought to complicate, as we wanted to avoid the common sympathy/pity response to puppets. We wanted to tread the line between the audience feeling connected to him as a character, not just reproducing his monstrosity, and maintaining Tarrare's grotesqueness, not "neatening him up" to make it easy to like him and therefore to pity and want to "help" him, a spatializing gesture that, as with aversive responses, produces aboveness and belowness. That the moments of nausea seemed to produce both aversion and connection simultaneously points to a redirecting, as with Snuff Puppets, of aversive responses to leaky bodily boundaries and abjected materiality, a respatializing that allows audience members to remain *with* the nauseated affect that links *them* with the puppet rather than avoiding "intimate contact and union with it" through associative transference into moral disgust.

In both of these sites spectators' affective response to the abject - disgust - is

evoked by clearly marked *representations* of human secretions, not by the actual abjected “thing”. This is an explicitly material mimesis in which the puppetry performance unsettles the boundary between abjected aspects of human bodies and inorganic material objects. This enacts a different relationship between porous, leaking bodies, unsettling both the outside/inside maintenance of bodily boundaries and the above/below spatializing of disgust.

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