

International Puppetry Research

# PUPPETRY AND MULTIMEDIA

Edited by Ida Hledíková and Cariad Astles

Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, Theatre Faculty



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Flavia Dalila D'Amico

## Bit: Giacomo Verde's virtual puppet



Giacomo Verde. Courtesy of Giacomo Verde's Archive, Museo della Scienza di Napoli. 2010.

This essay aims to take into account the influence of multimedia on contemporary puppetry and related forms. There is a correlation of influence between the use of on-stage technologies and contemporary forms of puppetry. Does the use of technology change the core of puppet theatre? I try to answer and articulate this question through analysing the performance *Bit*, a virtual puppet animated through a cyberglove by the Italian artist Giacomo Verde.

Since 1973 Giacomo Verde has been working in the fields of theatre, electronic and digital arts as author, actor, musician, director. His productions combine attention to 'poor' media and theatrical tradition with experimentation that is both eclectic and critical of new electronic technologies. Verde invented the 'TV-tales' (*tele-racconto*), a performance that combines narration, micro-theatre and macro-video live, worked with prison inmates, animated 'Euclid', an interactive artificial puppet at Studio Azzurro, created 'poor' games for using



television intelligently, founded the SeStessiVideo production company, taught us how to destroy television sets, wrote, polemicized, invented formulae and made new definitions. He defines himself as a teknoartist and he is engaged in interactive art.

At the core of his artistic research there is the idea that technology is not a monster, something totally separated from nature and human people. Technology, for Giacomo Verde, is an important medium to achieve our aims, free our creativity and to develop relationships. His approach could be read as an hacker attitude. According to hacker perspective, people should know how all their technological devices work in order to be aware of technology, and not slaves to it. The aim of an hacker is to free people from technological corporations, make people aware of the risks and the potential of technology; and at the same time aware of their potential creativity.

In the same way, Verde overturns common uses of different media in order to obtain the maximum creative result from them. His first experience with media and puppet theatre was *TV-Tale* in 1990. For this, he used a TV monitor as a little stage in which his hands and some small commonplace objects, like fruits, cables or pasta, act as characters. Verde manipulates these objects within the small set while telling the fable of Hansel and Gretel. At the same time, a video camera focuses on close-ups of the objects and sends the images to the monitor in real time.

As in object theatre, the nature of the character is linked to the objects: the walnut becomes the witch, bread becomes home, fingers become Hansel and Gretel, and so on. However, the goal of this performance is to demonstrate that television images have no power to mean anything if they are not included as part of wider narration. If the monitor shows the hand in silence, what the audience sees is just a hand, but if the narrator speaks about a forest, then the audience begin to imagine that the magnified image of a hand actually resembles a forest. *TV-Tale* bares the inner workings of television construction of reality: although the viewer is led to create a direct association between what he/she sees and reality, there is no indexical relationship with the referent shown on the monitor. What appears on the monitor is just an image that acquires meaning when it is inserted in a certain tale.

At the end of the 1990s Giacomo Verde started to work with interactive technology for his performance *Bit*. *Bit* was created in 1999; over the years it has changed different forms and played in different contexts: from theatre to television, from the museum Città della Scienza in Naples to the urban streets. *Bit* is a part of a Euclide project created by artist Stefano Roveda. The aim of this project is to find a way to humanize technology and make it relational. The objective is to create a kind of romantic robot which is not animated by a mouse or a keyboard, rather by an interface without filters and with an immediate impact. Basically, the system is made up of one or more screens where the character lives; and one location for the animator who controls the character's movements through a cyberglove. This tool is a glove that uses sensor technology able to transform hand and finger motions into real-time digital data. Software captures the movements of the hand and translates them into expressions or gestures of the character, while the voice is treated by a filter which changes its timbre. So this system goes through the intermediation of a computer interface and uses bodily gestures, their randomness, imperfection and ability to change continuously, to give life to the puppet. Verde engages the form of the glove puppet, since the life of the character derives from the movement of the animator. We can see this in the following video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMf9PI86cqQ&feature=youtu.be>

The interactive technology represents the dramatic code which shapes the character; the process is transparent. The engineer Antonio Bocola reprogrammes the puppet every six months; during the show, the artist declares this. The continuous programming presents *Bit*'s character as a curious child who asks the spectator everything. Changing the code is a way of relating with the spectator. His mother is the motherboard; his appearance is clearly synthetic. The animator is not hidden, but is visible to the spectator. Verde's intention is to make the spectators aware of the mechanisms of the illusion, in order to engage them in a relationship with *Bit* and not to become absorbed in the play.

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As in many other forms of puppet theatre, the animator is visible to the spectator; the puppet is also aware of their presence. Puppetry action is not shown as the result of the animator's will, but a result of the relationship between the puppet and the spectator. Bit's performances are in fact based on total improvisation. There is no plot, because the core of the show is interaction with the spectator. The ability of the animator is focused on stimulating a dialogue between Bit and the audience. However, all these traits are very common in other forms of puppet theatre. Does the use of interactive technology, then, influence the basis of puppet theatre?

In my opinion, Giacomo Verde does not change the original forms of puppet theatre with new instruments; on the contrary, he finds in puppet theatre a terrain that makes sense of technology. He uses the history of theatre to relocate the value of technology, keeping in mind, however, the specific language and property of the device used. In the case of *TV-Tales* he overturns common use of television and uses the monitor as a way to stimulate the fantasy of the audience and make it aware of the power of TV to construct reality. The main trait of the electronic device, is its liveness, the potential to produce a video signal in real time and to focus closely on the object observed. The artist finds close parallels between these technologies and the tradition of object theatre.

The main trait of interactive technology is the possibility for the user to change something; to create a dialogue with an environment. Verde considers the past, and translates this into a puppet performance based on dialogue between a character and an audience. Interactive technology shapes Bit's character's nature, appearance and story. Like every virtual avatar that we can see in our computer, Bit's life depends on interaction with its user; but Bit needs real dialogue, real questions, real people in front of him and not simply an impersonal user that moves a mouse. So interactivity for Giacomo Verde does not mean interaction between humans and technology or between human people and stage play, but interaction between people through technology.

Today there are different ways of engaging technology in puppet theatre performance. I do not wish to generalize, but I have the suspicion that the changes brought about by new media are not defined by the form of theatre