Swazzles of Subversion: Puppets Under Dictatorship

Cariad Astles

Second World War: Mr Punch appears in battledress and gas mask performing to British troops; Jack Ketch, the hangman, is transformed into Hitler and is duly hanged by the ingenious Mr Punch. Carnival in Viareggio 1991: carnival elsewhere in Italy has been ‘cancelled’. The floats are ready to parade in the streets despite the threat of the first Gulf War. Giant puppet figures of Saddam Hussein alongside world leaders adorn the floats, emphasizing the absurd politics of the international crisis. June 2013: anonymous Syrian puppeteers lampoon the dictator through satirical protest in an effort to drum up peaceful protest. Assad is a gross caricature. The artists hope that, by using puppets, they will be able to remain anonymous.

Puppets occupy a peculiar and distinct place in relationship to dictatorship. The metaphor of puppetry suggests ultimate control and power over a lesser being. The puppeteer has frequently been cast as a control freak; in Paul Gallico’s book from 1954, Love of Seven Dolls, for example, he exercises supreme power over a community of characters, controlling their actions, desires and fates: a dictator in a small world. But puppetry is peculiar and unsettling also because, conversely, puppets represent the struggle for freedom; there are numerous examples throughout literature and film which metaphorize this relationship between control and freedom. The popular puppet, moreover, is one that traditionally represents the absolute refusal to conform: cousin to the Commedia zanni, s/he subverts authority through trickery, ignorance, naivety, or simple blatant insubordination. Puppets emerge at times of political crisis in many guises: appropriated by all sides of the political spectrum, they have been used variously by national governments to bolster their political or moral ideologies; by protesters using the ‘otherness’ of the puppet to represent the ludicrous nature of dictatorship; and by people wishing to escape censorship, blaming their actions on the puppet.
They have been used not only as instruments in the hands of ideologists, but also as vicious and sharp satirical voices. Balfour notes that theatre ‘flourishes’ and has a particular function for society during times of crisis (Balfour 2001: 1). Puppetry occupies a specific place in collective and individual consciousness during political crisis, which we can assume dictatorship to be. Puppeteers, as socially engaged artists, respond to the political conditions of the time; their constructed objects are material representations of a particular moment. Puppets also have a historical role in popular culture as purveyors of news, and as social or political commentators. They have often continued to do this under dictatorship; the distancing effect of the puppet in performance enables artists to view and open up their ‘moment of crisis’ to scrutiny. On a more fundamental level, the making of and performing with puppets seems to respond to a very basic desire to create, play with and critique representations of human life. There are numerous examples of puppets made from the simplest and basest objects by prisoners of war in concentration camps, by political prisoners and those in refugee camps around the world: evidence has been found of puppets made from towels and handkerchiefs in the trenches of World War One; from rags and dry bread in World War Two; from their own clothes by political prisoners in Chile. In some cases, puppets have been made to entertain and to tell stories; in some cases for prisoners to entertain their children. There is something in both the power offered through the act of puppeteering and in the capacity of the puppet to capture the synthesized essence of a popular response to a political moment. This chapter explores the uses of political puppetry in three different contexts of dictatorship: Czech ‘daisy’ shows performed in Prague under Nazi occupation; as a farewell to the dictatorship of General Franco in Spain; and as a means to explore collective guilt and loss experienced by survivors following the dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile. All three examples are direct manifestations of collective responses to dictatorship, and all respond to a clear need to process and engage with the effects of dictatorship. All offer, therefore, different perspectives on the power of puppets to address, recall and evoke trauma. The chapter seeks to explore the suggestion by Wolfgang Kayser, in his study of the grotesque, that art created under obscene, manipulative or oppressive circumstances employs the grotesque to articulate the absurdity of the contextual circumstances, whether they are political, social or cultural (Kayser 1981: 29). The grotesque has greater freedom to challenge and undermine hegemonies of oppression due to its expansive and ludic nature. It does not function merely as a critique of inhumanity, but actively engages with the