

A POSTCOOL EVERYWOMAN¹

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“I would rather see the portrait of a dog that I know,” Samuel Johnson once remarked, “than all the allegorical paintings they can show me in the world.” In this comment the good doctor captured the transformed taste for representations of the real and tangible that would govern his own century’s audience and those of the next two centuries to come. Though allegory remained straight through the nineteenth century a mainstay of public monuments, epic painting, and popular religious instruction (via such perennial texts as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*), this device of personifying the ideal or the abstract was effectively dead in art and literary practice by the beginning of the modern era. Nevertheless, we still recognize, if half ironically, such conventional allegorical figures as Mother Nature, Father Time, Justice as a blindfolded goddess holding a scale, and the Seven Deadly Sins. Considerably less familiar examples include Opportunity, from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, a beautiful maiden in flowing garments coming toward you, a hideous bald naked hag from the back after she’s passed you by. Or the figures of the King and Queen as a form of scientific notation for gold and silver, respectively, in alchemy. Or the Money Critic, robed in a garment patterned with financial symbols and nibbling various denominations of world currency to assess their bouquet, in Will Self’s *My Idea of Fun*.

With the exception of the Money Critic, these allegories all date from well before the Enlightenment. To the mainstream twentieth-century sensibility we still inhabit, allegory seems the hollowest of aesthetic shells because the worldview behind it—based on the gut conviction, as Peter Kingsley puts it, that “what isn’t there, in front of our eyes, is usually more real than what is”²—is not simply one we no longer subscribe to, it’s so remote from

contemporary ways of perceiving that our minds resist even trying to imagine it.³ Examining on its own terms the metaphysical engine that powered this formerly omnipresent device, however, can help us understand the tremendous influence allegory once exerted as a conceptual tool in our culture.

Though personification was already a deeply entrenched feature of the Greco-Roman imagination, the beginnings of allegory in Western art are usually traced to Rome around the first century C.E., when the custom of erecting statuary personifying human qualities such as Fidelity (with a capital *F*), Honour, Virtue, and the like flowered during the Augustan age. The worldview of the Western ancients, refined and modified in Christianity's Neoplatonic matrix, recognized at least two realities: the greater cosmos or macrocosm (for Christians this would become the living body of God) and the smaller cosmos or microcosm (the physical world around us that mimicked the forms of the divine world that ruled it). This belief in a dual reality dominated Western intellectual culture through the Renaissance. Within its framework, an allegory was no fanciful conceit or even an abstraction drawn from the material world but the exact reverse of these humancentric formulations: a way of giving substance and form, for the benefit of our mortal senses, to the world we cannot see or hear or touch or taste – the realm of Ideal Forms inhabited by gods, ideas, intellect, conditions of life, even emotions. For Christian Europeans, contemplating an allegory in art or in literature was considerably more than an edifying aesthetic experience. The allegorical image, visual or verbal, did not “symbolize” forces in the superior world; it embodied them almost in the way a graven image does, as a kind of direct manifestation of the holy realm beyond the senses. As an expression of divine reality, an allegory carried the added theurgic charge of that world and thus was most correctly experienced as a *presence*, not a symbol.

Allegory's ubiquity in philosophical argumentation and science as well as art and literature during the thousand years between Late Antiquity and the Renaissance also greatly influenced the ways in which both human emotions and the boundaries of personhood were viewed in Western culture before the Enlightenment. What we now think of as subjective feelings originating within a person—such as anger and pity with a small *a* and *p*—were more easily seen, viewed in the frame of allegory, as impersonal or transpersonal forces acting from outside upon the individual. In his portion of *The Romance of the Rose*, Jean de Meun presents a familiar allegorical character, Reason, who expounds, after Cicero: “Youth impels all men and maids to deeds / That jeopardize their bodies and their souls.”⁴ Neither Youth nor Reason are qualities that can be ascribed to a specific person; they are absolute conditions invading and animating persons under their dominion. Possession by the goddess Venus—in allegorical terms, being pierced by Cupid's arrows—is likewise a very different experience, ontologically, than our contemporary interpersonal event of “falling in love.”

Personification made theatre allegory's most effective vehicle. Though not an explicit device of the Corpus Christi cycles staged by the English town guilds that flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, allegory and its layerings of simultaneous realities did shape the underlying assumptions of these early biblical pageant plays. When a cart full of amateur guild players paused in the town square to act out scenes from the Passion, the players—in that doubling of identity so characteristic of allegory—fully inhabited their biblical characters as the towns of York or Townerley became, in the moment, Jerusalem. This convergence of past and present also joined the particular and mortal with the holy and universal, a sensation that citizens could savour the rest of the year while they walked these

temporarily transformed streets, rubbing shoulders with those who had briefly been the mortal simulacra of Joseph, Mary, and Abraham.

Allegory found its supreme expression in the secular morality plays of the fifteenth century. Staged, like the miracle plays, in outdoor sites in England and on the continent but performed by travelling professional players, these productions typically presented a spiritual biography of the average person and the war waged by good and evil for his soul. Their narratives exteriorize this lone person's inner spiritual struggles as a series of picaresque encounters with personified qualities or forces in the course of a journey or pilgrimage. In *Everyman*, the most famous of the morality plays, the character Death, on God's instruction, tells Everyman it's time to take his last pilgrimage (another allegorical construct), and Everyman, completely unready, tries to find companions for the journey. In this strange abstract landscape where absolutes masquerade as human characters, the play presents Fellowship and Kindred, conditions of social intercourse, side by side with (to our modern way of thinking) interior qualities such as Discretion and Five-Wits. In a complex winding up that remains completely faithful to the dynamics of human nature, all these qualities desert Everyman—all, that is, but Knowledge, who doesn't depart until Everyman "knows" whether or not he is going to Heaven. After that moment of revelation, this character disappears and only Good Deeds remains to accompany Everyman as he climbs into the grave.

Surprisingly, from our perspective, the unfolding of this rather calculated schematic produces a strong and satisfying emotional effect in its audiences.⁵ We realize that what allegory loses in nuances of characterization—the distinguishing marks that identify individuals—it makes up for in deep identification. Where naturalism emphasizes empirical particularities ("the portrait of the dog that I know") allegory shows people what they have in

common. And these allegorical characters that seem so cartoonishly undeveloped by the standards of naturalism served another important purpose for their original audiences: as magical talismans. The memorized lines the players uttered functioned as a kind of incantation that activated their characters' theurgic powers as animated emblems capable of drawing down the energies of the divine world.⁶

Eventually allegory succumbed to "the same great process of Internalization," as C. S. Lewis once eloquently put it, "which has turned *Genius* from an attendant *Daemon* into a quality of the mind," in which "century after century, item after item is transferred from the object's side of the account to the subject's."⁷ Against the twentieth century's extremes of subjectivity and internalization, however, our new century is witnessing a complex aesthetic move back to objectivity and externalization that includes a revival of traditional allegory in certain areas of the visual arts, literature, and even computer media. A whole generation have grown up enacting *Pilgrim's Progress*-style allegorical life adventures in role-playing and video games. And for cyber theorists – many of whom are unconscious Neoplatonists with little awareness of their perspective's ancient roots – what began as metaphor has transmuted effortlessly into allegory. The reflexive premise that "cyberspace" is a real territory underlies theoretical discussion as well as popular film and literature. Typical products of this mindset are the personified computer programs in Andy and Larry Wachowski's *Matrix* trilogy: the Oracle, an aboriginal wise woman the hero consults, is in reality "an intuitive program who complements" the Architect, a male character embodying the original program that created the Matrix. (There is even the suggestion that the hero, Neo, has been "planned" by the Architect, making us wonder if Neo is human or a program that is "humanizing," in the classic narrative arc of the simulacrum who becomes human.)

In the high arts, another strand of this revival can be traced to Expressionism (the indirect heir of Neoplatonism through the Romantics and Symbolists) and its colourful and interesting trawl through the twentieth century.⁸ Along with computer Neoplatonism and videogaming, what I call New Expressionism in the performing arts and literature began in the decade of the 1990s. More a sensibility than a school or movement, New Expressionism characteristically collapses the boundary between the internal and external (thereby “objectifying” internal forces and feelings as characters and objects in the landscape); mainstreams supernaturalism as a positive, beneficent force; combines melodrama with characters that are often explicitly or implicitly allegorical; and employs Kitsch, camp, and cliché for non-ironic effect. This post-postmodern trend in film, theatre, and (to a more limited extent) literature can be linked in the visual arts to a phenomenon variously identified as “post-ironic” and, in one region of the United States, as “LA PostCool”—a sensibility, in one curator’s words, that “deals openly with such art world taboos as spirituality, commitment, celebratory decoration and psychological confession.”⁹

Independently of each other, these New Expressionists, as I call them, have produced a bevy of what might be called “supernatural melodramas.” This sensibility abounds in international theatre (to name only a very few, works by avant-garde groups such as Mabou Mines and Gardzienice, the American novelist Denis Johnson’s lesser known plays, such as *Hellhound* and *Shoppers Carried by Escalators into the Flames*, and even mainstream productions like Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*). In film, we find supernatural melodrama in the work of such diverse directors as Guy Maddin, Lars von Trier, Guillermo del Toro (most notably, *The Devil’s Backbone*), and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Tropical Malady*). Of melodrama, Maddin has said that it is “not exaggerated feeling but the

uninhibited primal feeling of dreams—the truest feeling.”¹⁰ Allegorical drama must always be melodrama because the feeling mode of allegory is identification, not empathy. In the context of melodrama, allegory exaggerates those qualities of the human condition we all share, not the qualities that set us apart as individuals. In Maddin’s New Expressionistically autobiographical and self-styled “oneiric portraiture” (*The Saddest Music in the World, Cowards Bend the Knee, Heart of the World*), his main characters are anguished fraternal alter egos locked in primal battle with their fathers and each other for the love of the same woman, who is also in some way their exteriorized soul or animating spirit. Lars von Trier’s works (*Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark*) typically center on a woman character who is both an Everywoman and a Christ figure sacrificed for the sins of humans.

The late twentieth century and early twenty-first century have also seen a flowering of international high-art puppetry and the widespread incorporation of puppets in both mainstream and avant-garde theatre, a trend that started in the early twentieth century when the old Expressionism elevated puppet theatre from a distinctly low-end mass entertainment to a distinctive high art form.¹¹ Because they are simulacra animated by a human creator, puppets have a universalizing quality that carries them easily into allegory’s territory of personification and the animation of objects, pulling us automatically back into the old matrix of greater and smaller worlds.¹² Almost a hundred years ago, E. Gordon Craig expounded on the “religiosity” of puppets and the unconscious connection they still possess in our very secular imaginations to the graven idols of olden days.¹³ Since then, the sense of the uncanny that Freud identified with automata fashioned in the likeness of humans has leaked out into a generalized aura of strangeness, with supernatural overtones, that once gathered around holy objects and saint’s statues.

Allegory, puppets, and postcool supernatural melodrama all find a home in the works of Antenna Theatre, a site-based company located in Marin County, California, just north of San Francisco. Founded by its artistic director Chris Hardman in 1980, Antenna produces “experiential art forms” in which audiences walk from site to site (often outdoors) to witness silent performances mimed sometimes by puppets, sometimes by human actors wearing large puppet heads, while listening to Walkman-broadcast interviews with real people. During the months of October and November 1996, Antenna staged a Day of the Dead celebration in the form of a New Expressionist morality play that ingeniously reinvented the genre in its staging and conception while remaining faithful to the aesthetics and deeper precepts of the original form.

Skin & Bones/Flesh & Blood – the reversal of the common expression in this title already tilts us away from the living and toward the macabre—presents the journey from life to death of its main character, a nameless Marin County matron we know only as “the Mrs.” but whom we gradually come to perceive as a multi-voiced Everywoman carrying all our own readily identifiable human flaws. Her ruling sins, though not personified in the production, are clearly Vanity and Greed (with a helping of Lust and Gluttony); her allegorical quest is for Beauty, whom she does find personified, but not in the form she expects. Stereotyped in real life as the ultimate affluent California New Age suburb, Marin County served only too well as the location for this allegorical encounter. The physical site selected for the staging of this piece, the county’s central Recycling Center, offered a similarly charged symbolic space whose double meaning for human life and death was as perfectly accessible to every member of its modern audience as the use of a live lamb for the Christ Child in *The Second Shepherds’ Play* would have been for audiences in Wakefield.

(The pungent odour wafting from the centre's adjacent state-of-the-art pig and goat farm, it should be noted, added considerably to the retro-medieval atmosphere.)

Hardman has acknowledged the original *Everyman*, along with medieval roving pageants and cart shows generally, as an inspiration for *Skin & Bones/Flesh & Blood*.¹⁴ A second source was Hispanic folk culture, in particular the rich collection of Catholic Christian customs clustered around November 1, the Day of the Dead. With his original group, Snake Theatre, Hardman did an Ur-version of *Skin & Bones*, in conjunction with the Galeria de la Raza and other Hispanic organizations, as a Day of the Dead celebration in the Hispanic Mission district of San Francisco; he also began the first Day of the Dead parade in that city by driving an old pickup truck with a fake skeleton in the back. Over the years this parade has become a huge celebration that the Hispanic community itself now organizes. When Hardman moved to Marin, he started another Day of the Dead parade in that county's biggest city, San Rafael. He and his family privately observe the day with a homemade altar containing the names of everyone they know who died the previous year. All these observances, he believes, are a way of revitalizing the meaning of the autumn season, returning the ritual from its juvenilized Halloween version back to a celebration of death that fulfils a deep need in the adult human psyche. Other influences Hardman cites include the Belgian Expressionist painter James Ensor, in particular his painting *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889*, and the Mexican artist José Posada, whose work, particularly his etchings of the *calaveras*, the skeletons who cavort and dance on All Souls' Day, is permeated with Day of the Dead imagery.¹⁵

A typical Antenna Theatre production demands physical participation from its audience, who must walk from one location to another like the actors did in the old mystery plays, but

also, and more familiarly, in much the same way as videogamers traverse a series of simulated landscapes—in both cases with an implicit assumption of enacting, in miniature, the life journey. Antenna’s “Walkmonology” aesthetic calls for each “audient” (“this new ambulatory audient/actor, otherwise known as you”) to function as the silent double of the play’s main character, “experiencing the drama first hand while listening to [your] own soundtrack filled with musings about who [you] are and what [you’re] doing.”¹⁶ Hardman usually serves as master of ceremonies and guide, leading his flock from site to site.

Voices—inside the head, banal, oracular, and hallucinatory—dominate the Antenna theatrical experience. But these voices come only from Walkman headsets, making this a very different playgoing experience than either traditional theatre or the medieval pageants. Listening to a Walkman is a special kind of auditory experience located somewhere “between autism and autonomy,” as one commentator has noted.¹⁷ Surrounded by other audience members, one has only the “portable intimacy” of the audio commentary as a companion; the shared, and often audible, emotional reaction that is part of theatre experience across cultures since time began—fear, laughter, all of it—is gone. The fact that each person makes the lonely pilgrimage in the sole company of disembodied voices recorded at another time and place creates a further distortion in perceptions of space and temporality.

The solipsism of this experience, the uncanny feeling of isolation that it engenders, is enhanced by the fact that the taped voices we hear in the Walkman are not interactive dialogues but snippets of overlapping monologues skilfully edited with cutting, fading, panning, echo, and other sophisticated audio techniques. Never formally identified, the repetitive, incantatory fragments—words, phrases, full sentences—are typically presented out of context, often for comic effect. The speakers are not actors speechifying from a script but

real people in the community talking about their lives and jobs. As we move from room to room within the Recycling Center, we listen to the recorded voices of children, a salon stylist, a model agency owner, a plastic surgeon, an aerobics instructor, a homeless child, an anti-immigration activist, a butcher, a mortician, various partygoers at San Francisco's Black & White Ball, a hospice worker, members of a near-death experience support group, and assorted others. While these voices hold forth about their occupation or experiences, the actors with their Expressionist puppet heads silently pantomime their owners' stories or, more simply, their being, their state in life. Typically, a single actor (usually the Mrs. herself) serves as a mute medium channelling this often comically mundane babble.

"My voice is not something that I merely have, or something that I, if only in part, am," Steven Connor reminds us. "Rather, it is something that I do. A voice is not a condition, nor yet an attribute, but an event."¹⁸ As a series of mimed voice events detached from individual speakers, the continuous oral commentary has the interesting effect of turning the performance even farther away from the interactive conflict of conventional drama toward the picaresque journey of allegory.

Standing outside the recycling center on a dark October night, plugged into our Walkmans, a group of solitary audients waits for the journey to begin. After some anticipatory static, our ears are filled with the sound of crickets and gentle snoring. The corrugated iron door of the recycling centre lifts to reveal a sleeping woman, our nameless heroine, played by a human actor wearing a giant puppet head. As she tosses and turns, we deduce from the speech fragments in our Walkmans that she's in the grip of a nightmare about growing old. A man's voice intones, "Over the hill," "going into the older period,"

“she’s full under the chin ...a double chin,” followed by a child’s voice gleefully pronouncing: “A long nose...a green face...a big wart...a big hat...a *witch!*”

The Mrs. wakes up to the sound of a shrill alarm and the loud ticking of a clock, an important audio motif in the play. To the noise of cars, a radio traffic report and a woman saying “I’m late...I’m late...I really hate it when I’m running late,” she rushes off to a busy day. During this transition we walk upstairs to the next scene, set in a model agency. As tall human-puppets parade before us, an important thematic overlapping of voices begins. The first is that of the owner or manager of a model agency, the same male voice from the opening scene, now fully unspooled in context. After some disjointed phrases—“That model is beautiful,” “That model is very handsome,” “looking for bone structure, looking for height,” “let’s book him”—we get, after the fragment “the model,” a nasal female voice saying: “*citizen.*” The spliced phrase repeats: “model *citizen.*” This second voice belongs to a real-life Marin County anti-immigration activist (though her accent marks this singularly unpleasant person as a native New Yorker). A third voice, that of a male officer of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), chimes in: “In order to apply for naturalization, one must have proof of birth, fingerprints, and three photos.” The immediate visual point of the scene—the fact that everyone’s trying to break into modelling—is juxtaposed, in our Walkmans, with the plight of Mexican nationals trying to get into the U.S. “It’s *il-legal,*” the female voice plaintively repeats as the Mrs.’s triple chin gets her booted ignominiously from the modelling agency.

While we climb the stairs to our next scene, the voices in the Walkman eagerly discuss the upcoming Black & White Ball, a formerly exclusive San Francisco social event now converted to a fundraiser open to anyone with the price of a ticket: “Everybody is talking

about it,” “Nightclubs stay open because they want the beautiful people,” “Have everything you want to eat and drink for \$130.” With the Mrs. we visit an aerobics class (figured as dancing silhouettes behind a curtain), a beauty salon (to cover ugly grey hair, the voices suggest), and finally a plastic surgeon’s, where the central line of this play is delivered for the first time: “Every single person in this world is concerned about their appearance.” This statement is pronounced by the cool, self-satisfied voice of a female plastic surgeon given to deadpan asides about “keeping up with the twenty year olds.” She is mimed by an extraordinarily tall woman-puppet, simpering and curtsying, whose face has movable parts that rotate into various combinations judged to be more or less pleasing. As another voice says, “The eye region of the face is the first thing we look at,” a puppet-headed surgeon sharpens his knives. Our Everywoman disappears offstage for her procedure (voiced, scarily, as a whining buzz saw), then re-emerges chinless and straight nosed, prancing and preening in front of a mirror: “My face...my beautiful face,” a woman’s voice says happily, and the female surgeon declares, “Plastic surgery just makes you feel so good about yourself, it really does.” Excitement builds on the soundtrack about the Black & White ball as we walk downstairs. Many voices, male and female, chatter: “It is wild, it is crazy, it is exciting,” “the event of the year,” “always done really pretty,” “everyone gets all dressed up in their best,” “dance all night and party and have fun.” And here comes the Mrs., crooning to herself on her way to the ball: “My beautiful face...my skin...my hair... my eyes.” Suddenly, to the plaintive refrain of a Mexican folksong and the model agency owner’s comment, “They’re all trying to get in,” two fearsome 12-foot-tall apparitions made of shredded newspaper glide out of the darkness. Our initial terror turns to pity when we hear the poignant voice of a homeless child describing (in an obvious allusion to Joseph and Mary) how he and his family were

turned away from various houses and finally had to sleep under some stairs. Miming the xenophobic activist, our Everywoman foments against these aliens who “illegally cross our borders,” “displace white American citizens out of their jobs,” and “devalue real estate values” in San Rafael. “You would not know you were in America,” she concludes, and calls the police.

Another change of scene and rooms and now at last we’re at the Black & White Ball, where the Mrs. makes her grand entrance. To the butcher’s itemization of cuts (“this part is more tender – this is the rounds, this is a loin”), the Mrs. poses and preens, then proceeds with other guests to devour an Expressionist carcass with bestial gusto and loud smacking of chops. As the ball continues, she gazes out the window at the homeless apparitions. The window breaks, injuring her precious reconstructed face, and the Mrs. is rushed on a stretcher to the hospital, where her bright, superficial life takes an unexpected downward turn: suddenly she’s on the operating table facing not just a lacerated face but somehow, mysteriously, the prospect of death. We hear a clock loudly ticking; its hand is an arrow pointing at our Everywoman’s pulsing, glowing heart. A male voice saying, “I haven’t finished what I came here to do” overlaps with the female activist’s “illegal,” “crossing the border,” and “When they say they will overwhelm, they mean it.”

As the spectral homeless *gigantonas* restlessly circle the operating table, we absorb the layered meanings in the soundtrack. The broken-record, fetishistic repetition and juxtaposition of key phrases and themes, disorienting at first, has taken on an almost symphonic logic that becomes emotionally easy to follow. We get the merging of models and “model citizens,” or (in a good Shakespearean conflation) the body and the body politic; we get crossing the boundary from Mexico to the U.S., invading the boundary of the body with

surgical knives, crossing the border from life to death; we get the conflation of cosmetic surgery, butchery, and embalming; and finally we get the Black & White ball as a social event (a dance of life), an ethnic and class separator, and, in the ultimate conjunction of opposites, a dance of death.

From the Walkman now comes the voice of a woman (probably a grief counsellor) in a rather banal recitation of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's five phases of dying: denial, bargaining, anger, and so on. Another woman's voice (a lawyer, most likely) speaks of the way dying people tend to write their wills at the last minute. People want to take everything with them, she says; one woman, mimed by the Mrs., even asked to be buried in a red chiffon dress and gold sandals. Now Death makes his first entrance. A human actor wearing a huge puppet skull face, a top hat and a black suit, he swoops and hovers around the Mrs., a predator who has caught her scent. There's a blackout and our group of audients descends the stairs into the underworld to a Walkman refrain of "restlessness-terminal-restlessness-agitation-restlessness." This obsessively repeated sound bite unfolds into full sentences in the next scene, when the same voice (a male hospice worker) explains that "restlessness and agitation" is a common condition among dying people. His story of a woman who refuses to die is enacted by the Mrs.: she jumps out of bed, runs into the street, and grabs onto a telephone pole. "I don't want to go, I'm not going," the hospice worker's voice says, imitating the dying woman. But now the music rises and the Mrs. enters a deeper state of acceptance. Death appears again, embraces her, and they dance to slow, solemn music as the hospice worker describes the dying person's state of mind—"It's okay. You're going to be okay." As the dance of life morphs slowly into the dance of death, Death takes the Mrs. in one last tango swoop.

We follow the body to a slab presided over by an embalmer wearing the puppet head of a ghoul. To a most unappetizing noise of dripping fluids, the calm professional voice of a real-life embalmer matter-of-factly explains such details as draining the blood and “clos[ing] the decedent’s eyes with plastic cups with barbs.” The plastic surgeon’s familiar voice chimes in: “The eye region of the face is the first thing we look at,” and “Every single person in the world is concerned about their appearance.” In the way she has of absorbing the identity of the various real women who either speak or are described in the audiotape, the newly embalmed Mrs. climbs off the slab and poses for us in the red chiffon dress and gold sandals.

A bell tolls and the “Lord is my shepherd” prayer is recited. Accompanied by sounds of thunder and lightning, rain, the creaking open of a large gate, and low chanting voices, the audience descends even farther into the bowels of the recycling centre. It’s dank and cold down here in the land of the dead. Surrounded by mountainous bales of newspaper, crushed plastic, and glass, we watch the danse macabre of the *calaveras*—full-body puppet skeletons manipulated by humans standing behind them—to sprightly vibraphone music in our Walkmans. As the audio track voices take up the refrain of “crossing the border” once again, the Mrs. is rolled in, lying in her coffin. Cackling ghouls help her out, only to rob her of everything—her gold necklace, her red chiffon dress—and dance her off to yet another operating table, where they chop off her flesh and behead her. Here voices of the butcher, the plastic surgeon, and the model agency owner intertwine (“We trim the flank,” “saddlebags, droopy chin,” “maybe a double chin or a nose that is hulking,” “we use this for ground meat”), only to be drowned out finally in the ghouls’ maniacal laughter.

Stripped of her flesh as well as her earthly possessions, the Mrs. has no personal identity left. A man says in our ears: “That’s a fear of people—that they’re going to lose what they have when they go to the other side.” The hospice worker says, “Suddenly they’re going to find they’re no different than everyone else.” At this lowest point, another voice (presumably that of a man who survived a near-death experience) breaks in with a soothing, extended (and, significantly, uninterrupted) monologue:

There was a conscious choice made that it was no longer useful to have this body/mind. Spontaneously there was a great relaxation that was felt through the universe and release and a sense of joy, and spontaneously at that moment I found myself with no awareness of any tragedy or any problem in life. I was actually looking up into a night sky . . . like a little kid laying in the grass staring at the stars. There was this grand imagination, this open consciousness that seemed to go out into infinity . . . this perfect relationship where I could feel everything into infinity beyond all human incarnation . . . I was completely unaware of body consciousness. I was this point of consciousness, radiating, and the whole mood was absolute bliss and joy, and I simply laid in that for some time.

A woman’s voice adds, “Most beautiful place . . . don’t bring me back.” The music swells and our heroine’s head, now reattached to her skeleton, elevates high overhead in blue light.

Now the skeletons are back at their danse macabre, the ultimate Black & White Ball, the place, many disjointed voices tell us, where you “don’t have to worry about fashion, taxes,” where “there are people hugging and kissing,” “having fun all day long”—in short, a rather dubious ‘Paradise.’ With Hardman’s music soundtrack providing a good medieval subtext,

we understand that Hell is the cacophonous many, Heaven the harmonious one. As the dance ends, Death reappears in a blue light – but this time as a towering puppet with a female’s head and a long dress. As the Mrs. kneels before Lady Death, the multitude of voices gives way to one, that of a Hispanic man: “Such a beautiful respectful lady,” he tells us, “like the faithful bride” (the plastic surgeon interrupts, “Bone structure is very important”). “The one who doesn’t have any rivals,” the Hispanic man continues. “Death represents this ideal bride, this perfect lover . . . there is nobody as beautiful as she.” As choral singing voices rise, Lady Death lifts up the Mrs. and cradles her like a baby, the formerly male lover now a mother reunited with her child. The Mrs.’s quest for physical beauty has reached its only possible conclusion, and with it comes peace and completion. In the allegory of Beauty, Death is the perfect Form and we are her imitators.

Skin & Bones is over. The lights go on to reveal the performers, who take their bows before a rather disoriented group of onlookers still wearing their headphones. We audiences are still very much in the story, feeling incredibly moved by, and connected to, the formerly triple-chinned Mrs. We don’t remember her insufferable vanity or xenophobic hatred of immigrants. We’ve walked with her through the various chambers of the House of Life into the Underworld, where she is stripped to her essence, which is our essence. Because she has lost the last trace of her individuality and is “no different than everyone else,” we experience her death as if it were our own. And all this despite the fact that few present, believers or secularists, subscribe to the first principles, Christian or Platonic, informing traditional allegory in our culture.

What is the nature of the animating force ensouling the Mrs. that makes her seem an extension of ourselves, some kind of externalized soul carrier? Absent a metaphysics that

allows us, among other things, the consolation of a heavenly city resonant with San Rafael, California, it's our own shared experience of life as evoked by a Babel of voices channelled into this half-human, half papier-mâché entity. Allegory embodies the intrahuman experience, not the subjective life of the individual. Identifying with the performing object allows us, her ambient doubles, the experience of many lives at the same time. Even though critical wisdom decrees that such de-individualizing is psychologically distancing, something curious happens as we listen to the voices of real people in our headsets and watch the grotesque main character before us mime their chatty stream of consciousness. Instead of fragmenting our sense of the Mrs., this acting out of diverse stories solidifies our sense of her, and our own, living wholeness.

The heart of Antenna performances, and a defining characteristic of New Expressionism, is the powerful unitary effect—echoing here the spirit (if not the dogma) of Catholic Christianity—paradoxically produced from multimedia theatre techniques conventionally regarded as destabilizing. Somehow, against the whole postmodern agenda of dissolving the boundaries of self, all the fragments come together into a satisfying, if most unfashionable, whole. Like one of those nameless creative geniuses of Towneley or York, Chris Hardman is Marin County's pageant master offering his community an aesthetic experience deeply rooted in the details of its everyday reality. It is also, thanks to the universalising powers of allegory, an experience capable of moving the rest of us as well.

ENDNOTES

¹ The complete version of this essay, with illustrations, will appear in Aura Satz and Jon Wood, eds., *Articulate Objects: Voice, Sculpture, and Performance* (Bern: Peter Lang, in press). Thanks to the editors for permission to reprint.

² Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999), 33.

³ Modernist and postmodern commentators on allegory – from Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem to Paul de Man and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – reinterpret allegory essentially on their own terms, outside its original metaphysical context. Even the Romantic critique of allegory (Coleridge’s “counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding”) does not take into account its talismanic dependence on a two-worlds cosmogeny.

⁴ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Harry W. Robbins (New York: Dutton, 1962), 22, ll, 4-5.

⁵ In the dour words of A. C. Cawley, “[Everyman’s] lenten austerity can hardly fail to impress any but the most spiritually torpid.” *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (New York: Dutton, 1965), xxvi.

⁶ William Howard Engel, “Theurgic Elements and the Memory Arts in Later Medieval Drama,” (lecture, Modern Language Association, New York, NY, December 28, 2002).

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 214.

⁸ See my extended discussion in chapters 8 and 9 of *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁹ The title of an exhibition held at the San Jose Museum of Art in December 2002, curated by Michael Duncan. Artists included were Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, John McCracken,

Robert Irwin, and James Hayward. Duncan says: “This is art that suggests routes back to direct expression and away from buzzwords and ironic art-about-art.” San Jose Museum of Art , press release,

http://www.sjmusart.org/content/aboutUs/press/press_info.phtml?itemID=39.

¹⁰ Guy Maddin, lecture, October 9, 2004, Berkeley, California, Pacific Film Archive premiere of *Cowards Bend the Knee*. See also his *From the Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2003).

¹¹ For an excellent historical overview, see Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio’s Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automaton, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

¹² In Peter Arnott’s 1955 staging of *Everyman*, the character Worldly Goods was portrayed by an ironbound chest whose lid opened to ventriloquize the character’s lines. When *Everyman* makes his last-ditch appeal in the face of death, the lid snaps definitively shut. Peter Arnott, *Plays without People: Puppetry and Serious Drama* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), 71.

¹³ Edward Gordon Craig, “The Actor and the Uber-marionette,” in *On the Art of the Theatre* (Chicago: Browne’s Bookstore, 1913), 84-85.

¹⁴ An important and immediate influence on Hardman’s ecumenical religiosity and his populist political advocacy was the famous Bread & Puppet theatre company of Vermont. Hardman worked briefly with its founder, the sculptor Peter Schumann, on various productions, including a *Totentanz* inspired by the etchings of Hans Holbein as well as this artist’s depictions of the Seven Deadly Sins.

¹⁵ Chris Hardman, personal communication, March 24, 2003.

¹⁶ Program, “A Body of Water,” Antenna Theater, June 6-25, 2005.

¹⁷ Ian Chambers, quoted in Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, in press), n.p.

¹⁸ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

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