



Puppets' Tales. New Design Perspectives for a Multimedia Archive of a Humanity's Intangible Heritage

Vincenzo Maselli^(✉) 

Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy
vincenzo.maselli@uniroma1.it

Abstract. In 2008 UNESCO has recognized Puppets as expressions of intangible cultural heritage and, since then, thirteen traditions from around the world have been included in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list. In the last decades puppets have been object of study and cultural fascination. This paper aims at suggesting an unprecedented perspective in reading, displaying and narrating this priceless intangible cultural heritage, by both outlining its aesthetic, and symbolic values, and enhancing its processual and material features. These thoughts open a research path that applies the point of view and the tools of multimedia design to tell the narratives, the craft and production traditions of objects that have crossed the history of humanity. The aim is to create a multimedia archive filled with audiovisual artefacts produced by hybridizing documentary media (photographs, videos and interviews) with fictional productions (drawings, scripted dialogues and animated sequences). To test the validity of using hybrid languages and visual codes a didactic experiment will be described. Students of a Multimedia design class were asked to design an archive of audiovisual artefacts that stage under a new perspective the cultural roots, materials and production processes of a tradition worthy of being visually narrated.

Keywords: Puppets · Intangible Heritage · Multimedia Archive · Hybrid Docudrama · Didactic Experiment

1 Puppets in the UNESCO's Intangible Heritages List

From Mali to Czech Republic, from China to Egypt, puppets' tales have crossed several counties and fields of knowledge and have been connected with myths, religion, theater, marketing, entertainment, technology and film studies [1]. Puppets are inanimate and anthropomorphic object that, due to their human-like appearance, over the centuries has been treated as non-organic entities which human beings could 'give life' to, by manipulating them with hand, strings, rods or with complex systems of cogs and gears [2]. The heritage of these objects belongs to different cultures, places and eons of human history and have been explored to enhance sometimes their anthropological roots, some other times their philosophical, spiritual, symbolic and, not rarely, material and technological dimensions [1–8]. Puppets' tangled genealogy, their tales, craft traditions and functions

© The Author(s) 2024

F. Zanella et al. (Eds.): Design! OPEN 2022, SSDI 37, pp. 65–74, 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49811-4_7

have been recognized by UNESCO as an intangible heritage of humanity starting from 2008 – with the Sicilian Pupi – up to 2018 – with the string puppets used as performers in the Rūkada Nātya shows in Sri Lanka.

The actions for enhancing Puppets' traditions undertaken in the last decades follow the new vision that UNESCO has aimed to achieve since the 70s, trying to promote not just peace, economic and political agreements among States, but also to strengthen the mutual knowledge, understanding, solidarity and dialogue between cultures and their traditions. That's why in 2003 UNESCO launched the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, expanding the meaning of the term 'cultural heritage', and making it not ending at monuments and collections of objects. Cultural heritage today also includes 'traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts' [9]. Intangible cultural heritage expressions have a social, cultural, technological and economic value and represent both inherited traditions from the past and contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part. Intangible cultural heritage allows to find a sense of shared identity and continuity between different places and cultural manifestations.

In the following sections it will be illustrated an experimental approach to preserve, communicate and narrate puppets' heritage by highlighting the value of these objects, and by engaging new multimedia methods and instruments.

2 New Approaches for Preserving Puppets' Heritage

2.1 Puppets' Museums: An Overview

The pervasive appeal and uncanny ontology of puppets' manufacture practice [6, 10, 11], has been at the core of cultural events, exhibitions and rituals that have paid homage not only to the spiritual meaning of these objects but also to their material features and to the design experimental approach they testify. These symbolic objects, indeed, in the last decades has been protagonists of exhibitions that tried to enhance and preserve their main meanings, features and artistic values as one of the most ancient forms of theater, arguably the origin of drama itself [11]. Puppets' material features and stories have been the main aspects staged and communicated in dedicated museums and exhibitions [12]. Important examples of museums still today actively involved in the attempt to preserve this humanity's heritage are the Richard Teschner Collection at the *Austrian Theatre Museum* in Vienna; the *International Institutue of Marionette Art* in Prague; the *Musée de l'Automate* in Souillac (France), one of the few examples of museum not dedicated to puppet theater but on Collection of automatons and mechanical toys from the 19th and 20th centuries; the collection of puppets hosted by the *Museum of the City of Munich*, one of the biggest permanent collection of puppets in the world with over 5,000 objects; the permanent exhibition of traditional puppets hosted by the *Scottish Mask and Puppet Theatre* in Glasgow; several small collection of traditional puppets in UK, such as those hosted in the *Bethnal Green Museum* of childhood, in *The Horniman Museum* in the theatre branch of the *Victoria and Albert Museum* in London. As for the worldwide panorama, a few examples are the Strings, Springs and Finger Puppets Collection at the

Canadian Museum of Civilization; the *National Puppet Museum* in Messico, and a wide list of museums in the USA among which *The Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry* at The University of Connecticut and the *Center for Puppetry Arts Museum* in Atlanta, Georgia. In Italy, especially after the important recognition provided by UNESCO in 2008, marionettes and rod puppets traditions have been protagonists of exhibitions aimed at preserving the tales and the knowledge of a multifaced heritage that gets different characteristics and conveys diverse stories from region to region. *The Antonio Pasqualino International Puppet Museum* founded in 1997 in Palermo and the *Museo Opera dei Pupi* in Catania as places for spreading culture and knowledge about Sicilian Pupi; the museum *La casa delle Marionette* in Ravenna and the *Museo del Burattino* in Bergamo, just to mention the most famous. In these places, stories, performances and styles are interwoven and the focus seems to be on three core features:

- The valorization of the puppets' theatrical performance, as most of the museums are dedicated to marionettes and rod puppets;
- The historical and geographical dimension, as exhibitions present puppets from various time periods and countries around the world;
- The educational value of these craftsmen traditions; quite often the exhibitions are accompanied by 'Create-A-Puppet' Workshops for adults and children.

The above-described puppets exhibitions miss a link with a contemporary dimension of museum's experience. In recent years the museums' modality of fruition has evolved embracing the idea of dynamic experience [13–14]. Museums got interactive by using sophisticated digital technologies and many museums today offer the possibility of observing their artworks even remotely, experiencing spaces that are virtually reconstructed. This new model aims at increasing the emotional involvement of visitors, at arousing curiosity, and at facilitating the learning of the narrated history and contents [14]. Dynamism and attractiveness, in this perspective, have become synonymous with *multimediality* and digitalization [15–17].

2.2 Puppets' Multimedia Archive

Since the international recognition of oral and intangible heritage as a fundamental factor for safeguarding cultural identity UNESCO has started collecting, capturing images and sounds and digitally archiving forms of cultural expression in virtual exhibitions with a purely informative objective. On the UNESCO official website also pictures and short documentary video portraying rituals and shows with puppets and mask as protagonists are available and free to be consulted. However, puppets' heritages archive is far from being complete and exhaustive about all aspects, from cultural roots to manufacture process, since these traditions are related to performances and rituals that have never been recorded and today are known only because of ancient orally passed information. Furthermore, taking into consideration the sensitive nature of the oral and intangible heritage, demanded with privacy of even closed to outsider of the community, sometimes the preservation by direct documentation could be complex and even impossible.

Due to the mentioned criticalities a new experience of the puppets' heritage needs to include an alternative approach. To enhance and spread puppets' cultural, anthropological, aesthetic and material features and symbolic values, a different means of

communication can be found by constructing a multimedia archive made accessible over the Internet and filled with audiovisual product that hybridize typical documentary nonfictional media (live footage and photographs) and animated sequences evocatively depicting historically verified information for which there is little archive. The fictional component of these storage provides a new archive model that the scholar Concetta Damiani named as narrating. She formulated the idea of designing an archive capable of telling stories and strengthening a collective identity through narrative mechanisms [18].

2.3 Docudramas on Puppets Traditions

The form of documentary suggested as vehicle for preserving heritages by telling stories belong to the audiovisual genre that Gary Rhodes and John Springer [19] at the beginning of the new millennium named docudrama. They addressed that form of video that hybridizes the traditional model of the ethnographic documentaries – that rely on non-invented situations and actions such as the tradition of materials, manufacturing process and folkloristic rituals –, and fictional narratives.

Docudramas are a form of documentary by nature hybrid, as they make a visual argument by using hybrid visual media such as video, pictures, paintings or drawings and animation, and, at the same time, that builds a narrative based on real historical records by using information that has been passed along, interviews with subjects actually involved, and also dramatic recreations using actors, in live action or animated, to depict actual events [20–21]. A docudrama, therefore, is more than a collection of facts, it conveys a narrative based on true stories to capture the audience's interest and curiosity and to visually experience events, characters and traditions that came to us only in oral form. The use of drawings, illustrations and animated sequences allowed by the hybrid nature of a docudrama, furthermore, has a pedagogic function in reaching a wider target and in making the narrated events visually and culturally closer to the audience. Paraphrasing Andy Glynne, the use of illustration and animation in documentary artefacts has several advantages: it allows to capture a past for which there is no existing or not accessible archive, to represent subjectivity, memories, thoughts and feelings, to add another dimension to a narrative – a metaphoric one –, to protect – when necessary – the identity of the protagonist(s). And to shift the focus onto the experiences rather than the individual, providing a universal message [22].

3 A Didactic Experiment

3.1 Objectives

The opportunity to test the design of a multimedia narrating archive filled with hybrid docudramas about puppets' heritages came from a didactic experience. The new approach based on the hybridization of fiction and non-fiction and the use of different audiovisual techniques in an educational scenario, had the following objectives:

- To provide opportunity to reach knowledge about a specific transcultural and transnational cultural tradition;

- To experiment hybrid audiovisual forms by integrating live footage, photographs, animation and illustration;
- To create a pilot version of a narrating moving images archive about a specific topic and verify if the use of docudrama in Cultural Heritage context makes the fruition experience richer and improves the interest towards the depicted events, places and protagonist;
- To open new perspectives on future possible actions aimed at similar preserving operations. It would be possible, for instance, to expand the puppets' heritage list and trace back other anthropologically valuable traditions that use puppets as form of expression, means of communication, vehicle of technological and craft experimentation. Furthermore, it could be possible to apply the same kinds of narrative approach and multimedia tools to other forms of intangible cultural heritage;
- To tryout different codes of representation and animation techniques among the wide range of possibilities to approach fictional component and to make the theorized valuable hybridization as effective and operative.

In the following sections students' journey will be described and a few case studies analyzed to evaluate the experimental approach to the topic.

3.2 Context and Methodology

The Master of Art in Design, Multimedia and Visual Communication of Sapienza University of Rome in the last years has dedicated a special focus on cultural heritage and students have been encouraged in producing communication campaign, interactive projects, audiovisual and multimedia design artefacts on the topic. During the Multimedia Design class in the a.y. 2021/22 they have been challenged to engage their expertise and skills in designing animated audiovisual artefacts to narrate the kind of intangible cultural heritage under analysis, puppets' traditions recognized by UNESCO. The assignment was expected to be developed by encompassing different phases and tasks:

- Research and exploration: aspects under analysis ranged from manufacturing processes, material qualities, aesthetic features, rituals, and social impact, and the disciplinary approaches to address the topic ranged from technology, art and sociology. The narration and direct involvement – through interviews – of protagonists (e.g., puppet makers, puppeteers, puppetry scholars) added a further opportunity to reach knowledge, narrate and enhance the specific tradition under investigation.
- The second phase consisted in the development of the storytelling, and in the definition of the following parameters: storyline, audio-visual sequences and photographic material to be grasped from digital archives (with mandatory copyright permission request), scripted actors – if needed –, animated sequences and/or still illustrations.
- The third phase consisted in the production of the docudrama, by following the main production phases: pre-production and assets definition, production, montage, editing and post production.

3.3 Final Outputs: Description and Analysis

Students produced thirteen docudramas, each one narrating one of the thirteen puppets' traditions recognized by UNESCO since 2008. In each of them real stories are narrated

in fictional form and photographs and videos taken from official archives are combined with illustrations and animated sequences. Students freely used animation technique they were more comfortable with and that better fitted their narratives and the specific puppets' tradition.

Following three projects will be described. The selection has been made according to the following parameters. The three docudramas:

- stage different animation techniques (traditional hand drawn animation, digital 2D animation and stop motion animation);
- show different thematic approaches to the topic (nostalgia for a glorious but disappearing past, puppets theatre tradition as a means for social engagement, puppets as occasion of technological transformation);
- enhance puppets made of different materials and theatrical approaches (human sized puppets manipulated by sticks, tridimensional material string puppets, shadow puppets made out of flat figures).

'Made To Move'. The docudrama 'made to move' (Fig. 1) narrates the story of an old puppeteer worried about the future of Bunraku, the traditional Japanese puppet theatre characterized by heavy human-size puppets whose manipulation requires the job of three puppeteers. The docudrama narrates the retirement of Tamao Yoshida, a puppeteer who has contributed to Bunraku's current status as the world's most highly developed and refined form of puppet theater. The narrative starts with Yoshida Tamao at home, bringing a box full of personal memories of Bunraku in the attic and feeling pain and nostalgia in abandoning a piece of his life. After reviving some of these memories connected to the manufacturing process and to the shows performed in the past (these two moments are supported with archival materials) he finds the courage to leave his place to the new generations. The narrative about the character carrying the box and reviewing past memories is the trigger that connects past and future, tradition and new generation that are depicted as enthusiast to learn a difficult and charming technique. These sequences are produced in traditional animation using a figurative visual code. Animated characters, objects and background are accurately detailed and the animation is smooth with a framerate of 24 frames per seconds.

'A Puppeteer's Story'. It tells the story of Shadi Al-Hallaq, one of the last shadow puppeteers of the Sirian Shadow Play tradition, a type of theatrical entertainment performed with flat puppets originating from the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali, and manipulated by the puppeteers between a bright light and a translucent screen. This form of cultural expression today has almost completely disappeared, but during the political fighting following the 'Arab Spring', it has been used as part of the protest against the government. The social power of this tradition inspired the story of the docudrama, in which an animated Shadi Al-Hallaq is performing the classic play of Aragoz, but get interrupted by the explosion of the conflict (Fig. 2). War's contradictions and horrors are shown through pictures and video from documentary archives. The last animated sequence show Shadi Al-Hallaq again on the abandoned set saying 'I looked at my puppets, and told them: 'You realize you are going to see the light, the world!'. By denouncing War and occupation as tools to annihilate a nation, students with this



Fig. 1. Still frames from the Docudrama “Made to Move”. Authors: M. Bernava, C. Cassetti, A. Lopizzo © V. Maselli

docudrama stated that humans are not so easily silenced, and one of the ways that people fight this kind of oppression is culture. Animated sequences for this video have been produced in stop motion animation. Students manufactured a plasticine tridimensional puppet depicting Shadi Al-Hallaq and a semi destroyed city made of flat paper resembling theatrical wings.



Fig. 2. Still frames from the Docudrama “A puppeteer’s story”. Authors: R. Claps, F. Elia, A. Tabacco, M. Sun © V. Maselli

‘The Legend of Aragoz’ This docudrama is an imaginary tale about Aragoz, a typical wood puppet of the Egyptian hand puppetry tradition (Fig. 3). In the very beginning of the story, he is inside a box, forgotten as the theatrical tradition he belongs to. After someone opens the box, Aragoz wakes up and meets a child who does not know the Egyptian hand puppetry tradition. By telling his story, Aragoz realizes that his places don’t exist anymore and that puppetry tradition is obsolete. But the child contradicts him as he finds Aragoz’s story interesting and entertaining, but suggests the puppet needs a restyling to fit into the new forms of entertainment led by technology. Hence, at the end, Aragoz ‘jumps’ into a computer and gets virtual. The narrated story kindly deals with the issue of the slow disappearance of this art form in Egypt mostly because of the continuous developing of the technology. But in the end rather than keep defending the tradition as it was, students suggested a way to make this art form reborn by combining tradition and technology. From a technical perspective, the entire tale, apart from a few videos from the archive, is made in 2D digital animation.



Fig. 3. Still frames from the Docudrama “The legend of Aragoz”. Authors: M. Baghestani Koozegar, E. Merrone, S. Perna, S. Sabihuddin, A. Tumenbaev © V. Maselli

4 Measuring Impacts: A Democratized Knowledge

Students managed to engage different cinematic tools to narrate ancient transcultural heritages, and to explore technological, anthropological, aesthetic and pedagogical aspects. But how to evaluate the cultural, social and economic impact that this new approach in communicating and preserving cultural heritage can produce? The described experiment does not provide data for a quantitative measurement of the long-term effects of building a digital storage of hybrid docudramas. The admitted evaluation metrics allow

to capture, even if partially, recurrences in dramaturgical choices that bring out a need for criticism or a search for social cohesion. Indeed, thanks to the awareness of the social potentials of the suggested instruments, it is possible to define the innovative strategies for the enhancement of heritage that can be communicated and shared with the public, stakeholders and citizens [23].

The metric of evaluation worth to be considered concerns the power of the narrating archive to reach a wider audience and democratize the knowledge of puppets' traditions. Although the pilot experimentation lacks of data concerning numbers of visualization and virtual fruition, the multimedia archive combining an online easily accessible storage with multimedia artifacts, democratized the heritage experience as increase the access to heritage contents [24]. This possibility was creatively demonstrated by the narrative choices that students freely decided to take in their artefacts. Harriet Purkis suggests that by basing narratives on 'people's life histories is an important part of the democratization of heritage' [25], 434]. Scripted storylines, indeed, mostly focus on puppeteers and engage members from the communities, who, by narrating their stories or expressing their feelings, achieve to universalize personal emotions, social issues and fears towards an uncertain future. Democratization of heritage, therefore, can also be considered through the ability to engage members of the community and present a version of history which is dictated by and reflective of personal stories of community members themselves [26].

References

1. Nelson, V.: *The secret life of puppets*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (2003)
2. Maselli, V.: *Anatomy of a puppet. design driven categories for animated puppets' skin*, Franco Angeli, Milano (2020)
3. Jurkowski, H., Francis, P.: *A History of European Puppetry: From Its Origins to the End of the 19th Century*. Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston (1996)
4. Blumenthal, E.: *Puppetry and Puppets: An Illustrated World Survey*. Thames Hudson, London (2005)
5. Bicat, T.: *Puppet and Performing Objects: A practical guide*. The Crowood Press Ltd., Marlborough (2007)
6. Gross, K.: *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2012)
7. Gray, J.: *The Soul of Marionette. A short Enquiry into Human Freedom*. Penguin books, London (2015)
8. Maselli, V.: *Performance of puppets' skin material: the metadiegetic narrative level of animated puppets' material surface*. *Int. J Vis. Des.* **13**(2), 17–37 (2019)
9. UNESCO, *What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?*, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>, Accessed 26 Sep 2022
10. Rochat, P., Zahavi, D.: *The uncanny mirror: A re-framing of mirror self-experience. Consciousness and Cognition*. Elsevier, Amsterdam (2011)
11. Posner, D.N., Orenstein, C., Bell, J.: *Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*. Routledge, Florence (2014)
12. Speaight, G.: *Puppetry*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/puppetry>. Accessed 26 Apr 2022
13. Fonti, D., Caruso, R.: *Il museo contemporaneo. Storie, esperienze, competenze*. Gangemi, Roma (2012)

14. Dal Falco, F.: Lo spazio pubblico del Museo. Design e museum experiences. In: Ricci, L., Battisti, A., Cristallo V., Ravagnan, C. (Eds.). *Building the public space between history, culture and nature*, pp. 119–122. INU edizioni, Roma (2018)
15. Jenkins, H.: *Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment: An annotated syllabus*. *J. Media Cul. Stud.* **24**(6), 943–958 (2010)
16. Mandelli, E.: *Esporre la memoria. Le immagini in movimento nel museo contemporaneo*. Forum, Udine (2017)
17. Salvetti, F., Scuderi, A.: *Digitalization and Cultural Heritage in Italy. Innovative and Cutting-Edge Practices*. Francoangeli, Milan (2019)
18. Damiani, C.: *La memoria rappresentata: dalla descrizione inventariale agli archivi narranti*. OS-Officina della Storia (2019). <https://www.officinadellastoria.eu/it/2019/01/09/la-memoria-rappresentata-dalla-descrizione-inventariale-agli-archivi-narranti/>, Accessed 26 July 2022
19. Rhodes, G., Springer, J.: *Docufictions: Essays On The Intersection Of Documentary And Fictional Filmmaking*. McFarland Publishing, New York (2006)
20. Hampe, B.: *Making Documentary Films and Videos*, 2nd edn. Henry Holt and Company, New York (2007)
21. Martin, J.R.: *Documentary Directing & Storytelling*. Real Deal Press, Orlando (2018)
22. Glynne, A.: *Drawn From Life: The Animated Documentary*. In: Wilson, B. (ed.) *The Documentary film book*, pp. 73–75. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London (2013)
23. Dimoulas, C.A.: Cultural heritage storytelling, engagement and management in the era of big data and the semantic web. *Sustainability* **14**, 1–6 (2022)
24. Henninger, M., Scifleet, P.: How are the new documents of social networks shaping our cultural memory. *J. Documentation* **72**(2), 277–298 (2016)
25. Purkis, H.: Making digital heritage about people’s life stories. *Int. J. Herit. Stud.* **23**(5), 434–444 (2017)
26. Duffy, P.R.J., Popple, S.E.: *Pararchive and Island Stories: collaborative codesign and community digital heritage on the Isle of Bute*. *Internet Archaeology* 46 (2017)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

