

Of Shadows and Shadow Theatre

What is a shadow, what is shadow theatre, why are we still moved by such things ?

These are big open questions to which of course there are no definite simple answers. But nevertheless here are some of my thoughts on the matter after some twenty years experience in the field of shadow puppetry.

A **shadow** ? For a shadow to exist there are four key factors.

The first factor is obviously « light ». Although « light » in itself is not easy to define. Is light a rush of particles called photons, moving through space at « the speed of light », i.e. at about 300,000 km/per second ? Just imagine, the flame from one single match can make particles travel at those breathtaking speeds ! Or is it a collection of waves whose different wavelengths make up the colours of the rainbow in the same way as notes form an octave in music ?

Physicists say that light is both the former and the latter!! This is very difficult for us mere mortals to conceive. So «light » which we take for granted in our everyday lives is no small subject. It is indeed extraordinary ! It cannot be touched, has no weight, no smell, makes no noise and cannot be seen ! Yes light cannot be seen, it only makes objects visible, i.e. bodies which block its path. If there is no obstacle to light there is no way of knowing that there is light. So this leads to the second indispensable factor.

The **object** or the **body** is a necessary prerequisite to reveal light and thus make it possible for us to see a shadow. In shadow theatre we would need a puppet, the body of an actor or just one part of an actor's body. But this object or body which is able to block the breakneck trajectory of light is not sufficient for the shadow to be seen by us ! There must be another body or object for the shadow to be revealed. For example we would never see the shadow of the moon lit up by the sun if there were no earth



Eclipse of the moon in July 1999 as seen from a station orbiting around the Earth probably the biggest shadow that man will ever be able to see.

So the third factor is another **object** unconnected to the first and whose distance from the first can vary. This third factor could be the wall of a room, the back of a stage or in shadow theatre : the surface of the screen.



In the picture opposite we can see the first three factors : a light source, a body blocking the light and a wall situated behind the body. These factors are « necessary » but not « sufficient ».

There must also be a fourth player. In science this player is called « the observer », in theatre we call him the **spectator**. This spectator must have the ability to see and also be endowed with a brain which allows him to make sense of what is conveyed to him through his eyes. Without such a spectator there is no shadow. Only this being can tell us that he sees a shadow there where in fact there is **nothing**.

For a shadow could also be defined as the absence of something which does however exist all the way around it. This is a bit like trying to define a hole. Our brain sees the absence of light brought about by the object blocking the light source and in interpreting the outline of this absence it has the ability to recognise something in the same way as a form in the sky can be interpreted as a cloud.

We could say that a shadow is simply a **conjecture of the mind**.

So what is Shadow Theatre ?

Shadow theatre is above all theatre, i.e. the encounter of a certain number of spectators with one or several actors at a certain place and at a certain time. These actors intend to tell a story with or without words, with or without scenery, with or without images but with one single goal, viz that of inciting one or several emotions in the audience and where necessary showing sensitivity to the audience's reactions in the narration of the story.

Shadow theatre is thus a theatrical experience, where in order to achieve the goal stated above shadows are used in every possible way.

It is of course possible to bring shadows into conventional theatre at certain moments in order to produce such and such an effect.

However we can only really say that we are dealing with *shadow theatre* when *the shadow* is the main medium used to convey images to the spectators. Nonetheless voice and music can be used to great effect in helping with the narration of the story.

It is said that shadow theatre has existed for several millennia in Asia. In the fifth century BC in Greece, a certain form of shadow theatre is evoked in Plato's Republic, in the famous « Myth of the Cave ».



This is not the place to make a list of every different form of shadow theatre. But it can be stated that there has, and always will be a limitless amount of possible shadow theatre forms to match the variety of light sources available. This extraordinary variety only increases if you consider the amount of different objects or bodies that can be put in front of these light sources and the infinite variety of ways there are of making a shadow screen.

In traditional shadow theatre a flame or an oil lamp is used, the puppets can be flat and opaque or even translucent. They are made from animal skins and the screen is often a stretched sheet.

Nowadays the light source is often electric and can be an incandescent or halogen light.

With halogen lights it is possible to play more easily on the distance between the object (puppet) and the screen and the shadow can thus be enlarged without becoming blurred. It is also possible to increase the amount of light sources which moreover can be mobile, coloured and of varying degrees of intensity. All these effects can contribute effectively to the telling of the story.



Three examples of images created using various light sources : the shadow of a bird is superimposed on an elephant's shadow (from « The Elephant's Child ») ; at night a schooner glides over the water beside a rotating beacon; a ship and an iceberg in white shadows also at night (from « Le fils de Croguennec »).

New materials such as opaque and translucent plastics can be used to make shadow puppets and shadow objects. What the screen is made out of can also vary and involve new materials. A whole array of screens of different shapes and sizes can be used at the same time during one performance.

To the multiple combinations of these three elements must be added the seating arrangements of the audience, our fourth element. The audience is normally placed in front of the screen and therefore they do not see the people behind who operate the objects, they only see the shadows. But the audience can also be on the other side behind the puppeteers and not only see the shadows but also how they are created. Another possibility is for the puppeteer to go and stand in front of the screen and cast shadows in full view of the spectators. Why not ? If this helps to tell the story.



Before ending let us remember the debate about translucent coloured puppets, such as the ones used in Asia for so long. Can it be said that they produce shadows ?

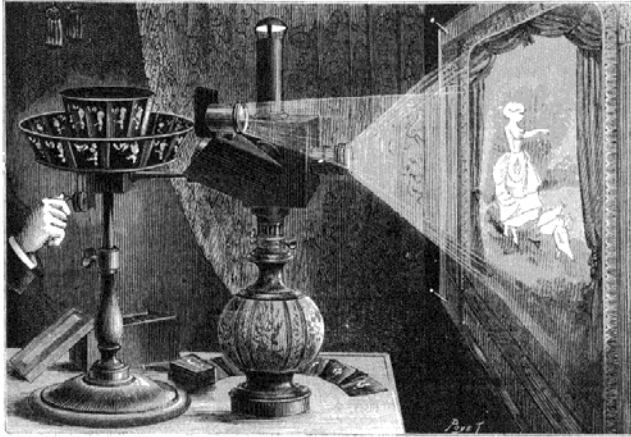
In the strict sense of the term, since the material used is transparent, that is to say it lets light through, the light source is not blocked by an object. The light is simply modified by the puppet. The spectator thus sees colours, and the form made up of different individual sections. The faces of such puppet characters are sometimes exquisitely cut, their features are painted on or chiselled out as can be seen in the head of the tiger in the picture opposite. Here we are no longer looking at a profile, the image is very explicit. Is this a shadow ?

Answering this question would mean trying to assess what percentage of light needs to be blocked in order to obtain a true shadow. Such an assessment would surely be absurd.

Why are we still moved by shadow theatre ?

As has already been stated, the distinctive nature of shadow theatre is that it is visual. The fact that theatre in general is still a living art form which we can relate to will not be discussed here. Many articles have been written on that vast subject.

For a long time shadow theatre's role was to create living pictures which « reproduce » life. This role fulfils an essential human *need*.



Nouveau praxinoscope à projection de M. Reynaud.

For the last two or three centuries inventors have tried hard to make mechanisms in order to assuage this need: inventions have ranged from magic lanterns to cinema with « *special effects* » produced by computer, not to mention cartoons or machines such as the “*phenakistoscope*” or even the “*praxinoscope*”.

Man's creative genius in this domain has been and will remain exceptionally imaginative.

Shadow theatre has been completely overtaken by these constant technical developments.

Cinema, that other form of light projection modified by a *filter* (the image on a film passing in front of a light source at the rate of 24 pictures per second) swept aside shadow theatre at the end of the nineteenth century. This was a popular attraction and existed in such places as the “Cabaret du Chat Noir” in Paris, which had developed a technique for the production of animated shadow pictures which has never been surpassed.

And yet in spite of this competition shadow theatre never ceases to move people who come to see shows. This at least is what we have observed in our tours of France and other countries, where not only adults but very, very young children have shown their appreciation.

Why is this the case ? There are obviously several reasons.

One reason is the *unconventional* nature of such an art which harks back to a simple and old fashioned form of theatre that was once popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. However this does not explain why very young children (with no knowledge of our civilisation's recent past) are so interested in it.

Another reason is surely the powerful nature of puppet theatre in general. Conveying emotions and illustrating life with objects which are operated is a forceful art which shadow theatre shares with the puppet world. Here objects can be operated in every conceivable way using strings, rods, gloves, hands, body, etc....

The cleverness of the puppetry, the resourcefulness of the techniques, the beauty of the images, the point of the story are all factors which contribute to the success of a shadow theatre show.

However what remains is the peculiar nature of a shadow, that mysterious thing, that *conjecture of the mind* which lets us into the realm of fancy, which suggests more than it shows and... which perhaps reminds us subconsciously of the first vague images that we see in our mother's womb.

Indeed, is it too far fetched to say that perhaps our mother's hand caressing her stomach as she sang a lullaby to us in the sun was our first experience of shadow theatre, our first experience of the world?

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Translation by **Rupert Ingrams**