

Institution: Loughborough University
Unit of Assessment: D29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: The Object Theatre Network: Changing Creative Practice for Theatre Practitioners and Industry Professionals, and Influencing Pedagogy
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Through his research with the AHRC-funded Object Theatre Network in 2011-12, Dr Daniel Watt has been able to draw on his Loughborough University research to influence the methods and understanding of a range of theatre practitioners and industry professionals, generating new ways of thinking that have influenced their creative practice. Through the Network, Watt's research has also had an impact upon students at the Central School for Speech and Drama and their teachers: as part of their professionally oriented training, these students have been able to explore the work of international object theatre practitioners and analyse their methods and pedagogy.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Daniel Watt was appointed Lecturer in English and Drama in 2006, and promoted to Senior Lecturer in 2012. His research into objects in performance, literature and philosophy deals particularly with the ways in which human beings use objects both as tool and craft. He argues that (especially when performance is the context for that interaction) the relationship should be understood as an ethical encounter that can then be analysed philosophically. This approach raises new questions both about puppets – objects that have long been understood to in some way be performers – and about objects on stage more generally. The underpinning research falls into three categories:</p> <p>(1) journal articles, book chapters and conference papers that focus on conflict between the performer and the object. This aspect of the research relates particularly to the ideas of the Polish writer Bruno Schulz concerning what he calls the 'flux of materials' [3.1, 3.2], and the concept of the bio-object (as total encounter with stage space). From this theoretical perspective, the puppet becomes a model through which such concerns are articulated: the encounter between actor and object transforms the object into one that performs.</p> <p>(2) conference papers testing ideas of the performing object in specific contexts. This dimension of the research addresses what might be seen as a certain 'amputation' of the object, drawing on the theories of Schumann and Deleuze to understand how using an object for representational purposes is a form of appropriation that does not fully recognise an object's characteristics. Instead, this usage denies them their insurrectionary status as ridiculous and resistant, whether that be in the moment of performance or in an attempt to transform them into petrified museum artefacts.</p> <p>(3) work that addresses the scope of contemporary interdisciplinary research on performance and objects, and which led specifically to the collaboration between Watt and Sean Myatt, Nottingham Trent University, on the Object Theatre Network [3.3].</p> <p>It was because of Watt's growing profile in this area of research that in 2008, the AHRC asked him to review a fellowship grant application on Object Theatre. Subsequent to this, in 2009, Sean Myatt, the PI for a proposal to AHRC to set up an Object Theatre Network that had been recommended for resubmission, asked Watt to join the bid to strengthen its theoretical and philosophical basis. Myatt's own background was largely as a theatre practitioner and educator of students; although he was well-networked in relevant parts of the industry, he could not bring to the network a full depth and range of theoretical understandings. Watt agreed to join the project as a Co-Investigator, and it was the strengths that his published research brought to the Network proposal that led to its funding by AHRC. Watt's key contribution to the Network meetings that followed was to use his philosophical and theatre studies research to define the questions that they focused on at their meetings. Outcomes from those meetings continue to inform his theoretical and philosophical research.</p>

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3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The rigour, originality and significance of the underpinning research is evidenced through leading publications and the award of AHRC research funding:

Publications:

- 3.1. Daniel Watt, "'Us and them!': The Consciousness of Puppets and Other Abject Objects', in *Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts*, ed. by Daniel Meyer Dinkgrafe (Cambridge Scholars, 2006), pp.240-48, ISBN: 1904303633 [this is a ground-breaking collection, and some of its chapters by other contributors were submitted for RAE2008]
- 3.2. Daniel Watt, 'Bruno Schulz's Incomparable Realities: From Literature to Theatricality', in *(Un)masking Bruno Schulz: New Combinations, Further Fragmentations, Ultimate Reintegrations*, ed. by Dieter De Bruyn and Kris Van Heuckelom (Rodopi, 2009), pp. 289-306, ISBN: 978 90 420 2694 0 [review of this book in *The Russian Review*, June 2012, notes its international importance, observing 'We should expect that the collected essays in this volume will set the standard for Schulz studies in English'.]
- 3.3. Daniel Watt, L. B. Clark, and Richard Gough, editors, *Performance Research*, 12.4 Special Number 'On Objects' (2007); ISBN: 978 041544161 [Special Number of an A-rated international journal from Routledge, cited in *The Object Reader* (Routledge, 2009) as an important example of contemporary work on objects]
- 3.4. Daniel Watt, 'Kantor's "Last Room": Thinking the Object, Bio-Object and Death', in *Polish Theatre Perspectives*, 1.3, 2013 (Special Issue: Tadeusz Kantor, Twenty Years On) [article in peer-reviewed journal; will be submitted to REF]

External Funding:

AHRC Research Network Grant (Sean Myatt, Nottingham Trent University, PI; Daniel Watt, Loughborough University, Co-I; March 2011-October 2012. Total value across institutions: £34,339).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The Object Theatre Network meetings in December 2011 and September 2012 have had an impact through influencing the methods and understanding of theatre practitioners and industry professionals, generating new ways of thinking that have changed their creative practice. They also provided opportunities for industry trainees and their teachers to reflect on and develop their performance practices. Supporting evidence is highlighted in section 5, and includes confirmation from professionals of the adjustments made to their practice.

The first Network event, 'Foundations of Object Theatre', resulted in changes to the practices of a number of practitioners and industry professionals. These included Object Theatre practitioners; puppeteers, writers, actors and choreographers; and those involved in design, curation and arts management [5.1]. The Design and Display Projects Manager at Nottingham City Council, for example, has confirmed the influence on opportunities for visitor interaction at his institution, reporting that the workshop 'had considerable impact on [his] work at Nottingham City Museums & Galleries', and has influenced new plans for the museum's use of objects [5.2].

Watt's research, as referred to in sections 2 and 3, underpinned the discussion sessions that were integral to that event, when questions that lie at its heart were used to structure group discussions; groups were guided to explore wider theoretical issues concerning puppets, objects and performance. Questions addressed included: what is an object?; can we distinguish a puppet from an object—is a puppet always figurative?; how do mechanical and digital objects differ?; are natural materials important in object theatre?; what is the relationship between object/person/space?; how does memory affect the meaning of an object on stage?; how might this be different for the audience and practitioner?; how is language used in object theatre?; what cultural differences might there be in object theatre?; what roles do gender and heteronormativity play in object theatre?; do we need a definition of object theatre? [5.3].

In addition, Loughborough University's Arts Centre, RADAR, organised an event in March 2012,

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which examined the object as both puppet and installation material [5.4]. This extended the reach of the Network's impact by opening the debate to other arts professionals and members of the public who had not attended the other events, totalling over 130 participants [5.5].

One of the clear outcomes of the first event was its exploration of a divide between a mode of object manipulation that is focused on a form of storytelling, where the object becomes a character, and that in which the properties of the object drive the performance to develop its aesthetic, either in opposition to this, or to enhance it. This understanding, drawn directly from Watt's work on Kantor and objects, offered much for the actors working in the workshop, but also for those writers involved, who saw different modes by which objects might 'speak' rather than simply be used to 'tell' a tale. As a blogger after the RADAR Arts event summarised, 'Radar helped me realise objects and puppets are more than mere props' [5.6].

The meetings' consideration of the manifold political contexts of object theatre also had an impact on the work of performers. The use of detritus and rubbish is particularly important in object theatre, and the practitioner leading a workshop on this matter has written that he has since drawn on what he explored at the event when working with school-teachers in his village in Indonesia [5.7]. This directly relates to what Watt terms the 'abject object', a degraded material whose use value is refracted negatively back upon the audience during performance (in the case of the performers at the first network event, this is waste material such as carrier bags, plastic bottles etc.; in the case of the second, this is the articulation of the object as death, relating directly to Kantorian theories).

The Winter 2012-13 number of the key journal used by puppeteers, *Puppet Notebook*, refers to the Network events from 2011-12 as having provided 'high hopes' about developments in their profession [5.8, p. 2]. Many of the contributors to this journal number were participants at the network events, and their articles draw on those events directly.

The research has also caused a change in the learning experience of students at the Central School of Drama, because professionals who combine teaching there with their own practice attended the network events, bringing students with them. One such teacher commented of her students' experience of the events that the equitable format used 'built the confidence of the students taking part', and that it was 'really valuable for them to experience' [5.9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

The following sources of corroboration can be made available at request:

- 5.1. A list of participants in the 13-16 December 2011 Foundations for Object Theatre event, indicating their professional affiliations is available (PDF).
- 5.2. Correspondence from Design and Display Projects Manager, Nottingham City Council.
- 5.3. Transcript of discussions amongst participants reflecting on the December 2011 event at its end.
- 5.4. Programme for RADAR-organized event, 12-14 September 2012, indicating workshop leaders.
- 5.5. Attendees at the RADAR-organized event, 12-14 September 2012, as detailed in the HE-BCI Public Event Data.
- 5.6. Blog entry <http://kpunton.com/about/> 11 May 2012.
- 5.7. Copy of correspondence from Artist and performer.
- 5.8. *Puppet Notebook*, 22 (Winter 2012-13), 'On Object Theatre'; ISSN 1745-1086. This magazine is widely read by practitioners, and its choosing to draw attention to the Network's activities provides wide-ranging contact with them.
- 5.9. Letter from Central School of Drama teacher, reflecting on the impact of the Network events on the training now being offered to trainees.