

## **The life and death and life and death of Frank**

**James Edward Frost**

Performance Lecture for the Centre for Practice Research

Sidney Cooper Gallery, 5.30pm 1<sup>st</sup> February 2018

Frank was made for the Winter Tales Festival of Stories in Sandwich in 2007. He starred in a one-off performance *Anatomy of a Story* in collaboration with the storyteller Tony Cooper. Two very dodgy characters, mimed by myself and my wife Sonia, entered the stage dragging Frank by the feet and placing him on a table. Our characters were loosely inspired by the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'resurrection men' who robbed graves to supply corpses for anatomy lessons and Burke and Hare who murdered for the purpose in Edinburgh 1828.

Frank was a throw-together construction from scraps of wood, an old office chair and old clothes. His head and hands were carved from lightweight Indonesian Jelutong wood. His head was hollowed and contained the woodchips and sawdust surplus from the carving.

As Frank was dissected he would spill his sawdust and we would present the audience with objects – his eyes in a dish; a flute made from his shin-bone; his hand with the fingertips lit as candles.

Each object prompted a story from Tony. The final story involved a resurrection and at the climax Frank was stood upright (his head at that point had been removed). He put out his arms and walked towards the audience who screamed and recoiled in their chairs. So why did the audience scream when they knew that Frank was a wooden construction and they could see us operating him?

In understanding the effect of this effigy we can look at theory on dolls and puppets, and also on the notion of the uncanny.

In Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny'. The feeling of the uncanny is one of eeriness, unfamiliarity, 'unhomely' (*das unheimliche*) but also paradoxically familiarity and homeliness (*das heimliche*). For Freud the uncanny was often prompted by a recurrence e.g. as a ghost or haunting provoking a fear of the dead. Such experiences provoked a reaction in the unconscious and a return of deep-rooted, often collective fears which had been repressed. In discussing the automaton

Olympia in Hans Hoffman's story 'The Sandman', Freud referred to the doubt over whether an inanimate object is really alive, or a lifeless object is animated.

*"...an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes..."* (Freud, 2003)

...so it is when the imaginary seemingly becomes real. Frank a puppet tapping into the fear of the inanimate becoming animate, he represented an image of the dead uncannily resurrected. For a moment the dead and the inert seemed to have been given life and the audience reacted with a collective horror. However, Freud's theories don't explain why this should happen when the artifice of the animation or puppetry can be clearly seen. Surely the conscious mind should be able to adjust to the obvious trickery? But we cannot expect the 'return of the repressed' to be rational, and we should perhaps look back to our childhood encounters of the animation of the inert...

In 1853 Charles Baudelaire observed how children will animate any object, but also felt that looking for the 'soul' in the toy "is the first metaphysical stirring" (1994, p.24). Rainer Maria Rilke further developed his suggestions. Children make an emotional investment in dolls and thus breathe life into them, while knowing that behind the mask face of the doll there is nobody there. For Rilke the doll is a silent vessel, which we fill with our own incomprehension of being; "We mixed in the doll, as if in a test-tube, everything we were experiencing and could not recognize" (1994, p.31). So, behind the doll there is a nothingness which we fill with meaning; it becomes a signifier for the meaning of our own existence.

More recently the American puppeteer Roman Paska discussed the puppet as hiding a profound nothingness. This differs from the mask, which hides a living being; "The mask of an actor or dancer conceals a density of humanity; the puppet, nothing but emptiness" (2012, p.136).

For the theorist Alan Cholodenko animation always implies the inanimate, dead, suspended or inert (1991, p. 21). The animation of a doll, a marionette, or an object through stop motion creates what he calls the "illusion of life". The animated object works as a metaphysical signifier by nature of its evident inertness, its seeming presence never ceases to be only seeming. If the illusion was entirely convincing we would not take the object as a signifier, we would accept it as life itself. Rilke refers to this kind of soulless effigy which is invested by human feeling as the "doll-soul". As

he explains; “one could never quite say where you really were; whether you were at that moment in us or in that drowsy creature to whom we were constantly assigning you” (1994, p.36). Thus the doll, puppet, or effigy is a signifier for an “other self”: it is empty of soul until we animate it with movement and therefore character. Puppets and dolls stand as signifiers; their very point is that they are not living, they are objects used to signify otherness or emptiness.

Outside of the moment of performance the inert puppet is, in Paska’s writing, a “dead thing, a potential signifier only” (2012, p.138). As an object the puppet is reborn for each performance, rather than having the illusion of continuous character. However it doesn’t make sense to call the puppet ‘dead thing’ when it was never really alive. It is given the illusion of life and therefore also has the illusion of death when inert.

So Frank is both inert matter and a signifier of death, until he moves. And then the signification changes drastically. But he can only signify death effectively by being a potential signifier of life.

Another way of understanding this inert effigy comes from Jewish legend. The Hebrew word *golem* means ‘unformed’, or simply ‘matter’ rather than death. *Golem* is the silent effigy waiting to be animated. The biblical Adam, made from clay, is *golem* before he has life breathed into him by God (Scholem, 1965, p.161). A puppet, hanging lifeless in the theatre wings, or slumped in a box, is in the state of *golem*.

The legend of The Golem has been told and retold by both Jews and Christians in Prague since the middle ages (Dekel and Gurley, 2013). A figure is modelled from clay and brought to life with a written spell, it rampages through the ghetto until the spell is removed and it returns to being inert clay. This tale prefigures some of the themes in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The Golem, *Frankenstein’s* monster and Collodi’s *Pinocchio* all speak of the chaotic dangers of artificial animation let loose.

The puppeteer does more than simply move objects, but seems to breathe life into them. In conveying a character to an audience, the puppeteer calls into being or summons a seemingly living presence regardless of obvious artifice. Puppetry is a way of conjuring the inert or lifeless into life. It is a kind of occult summoning, an awakening of the ‘doll-soul’ that we knew in childhood – empty of consciousness but full of significant meaning. But at least one is safe in knowing that the puppeteer still controls the puppet and can put it to rest once again.

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*Anatomy of a Story* was a successful performance but the show did not get developed further as we got overtaken by other projects. So, for a decade Frank moved from one corner of my workshop to another. For a short time he was propped in a corner but I was constantly making jumpy second glances at him while trying to work - had his 'doll-soul' not been put to rest or did he bear too close a resemblance to a cadaver? So he ended up stuffed under a table and then into a tea-chest. Often his carved head and hands would sit separately on a shelf, presiding over the new projects. Somehow they didn't have the same unsettling presence as the headless body. Like an abandoned mask, his eyeless head had no presence.

Frank was resurrected once again very recently. In 2017 I was asked to provide one of my traditional hooden horses for the Canterbury Players production of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* at the Gulbenkian Theatre. The hooden horse played the part of the cantankerous horse Gunpowder who revelled in throwing Ichabod Crane. This action was derived from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christmas hoodening custom, where publicans would try to mount the hooden horse and be thrown to the floor.

Asked if I had any ideas for the headless horseman I thought immediately of headless Frank. I covered one of my horse constructions from a former hobby horse joust I had made and mounted Frank on top, without his head. Instead of the construction sitting around my waist it sat on top of my shoulders, inspired by the traditional Padstow Obby Oss. Frank got a new coat and boots, a sword, pistol and an articulated arm to reach toward Ichabod in the final chase scene.

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