

# SPEAKING IN OTHER VOICES: An Ethnography of Walloon Puppet Theaters

by Joan Gross

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In *Speaking in Other Voices*, anthropologist Joan Gross offers a detailed ethnographic study of puppetry in Wallonia (the southern part of Belgium bordering France) with a particular focus on the function of voice.

As local puppeteers manipulate their puppets, Gross argues, they similarly manipulate the deeply historical and social construction of the Walloon language and culture. Delving into the history of rod puppetry in Liège, the easternmost province of the Walloon region, Gross analyzes language usage in terms of social power and cultural capital. Her sociolinguistic analysis of the voices used by urban working class puppeteers finds contextualization within 19<sup>th</sup> century medieval texts, puppetry tradition, and contemporary Belgian speech patterns and customs. Analyzing the linguistic and tonal choices made by the puppeteer voicing an entire cast of characters, Gross untangles a web of meaning steeped in a rich history of identity struggles, class conflict and imperial tension.

Heavy in theoretical discourse, Gross's book is not geared toward the casual reader; instead, it provides rich fodder for scholars of anthropology, linguistics, and sociology. In many ways, Gross uses the puppet theatre of Liège to critically examine issues fundamental to linguistic anthropology. Early in the book she explains,

An investigation of Liège puppet theaters allows us to clearly see heteroglossia [the use of different voices] as the nature of language and mimesis [the imitation of aspects of the sensible world] as the cornerstone of cultural transmission. In daily life outside of performance frames, heteroglossia and mimesis are more subtle and dispersed, but in the puppet theater of Liège, they are condensed and exaggerated and show their devices to the world.

Building upon post-structural discourse, Gross explains her project as the examination of "how metadiscursive contextualization of 'the tradition' establishes the authority of puppeteers."

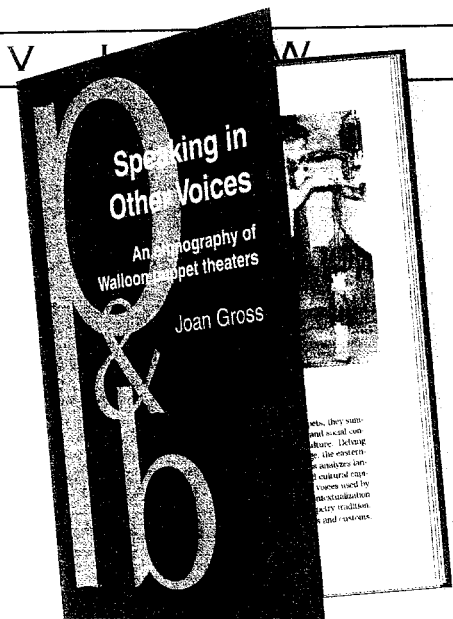
The book is divided into ten chapters, each presented with a thorough foundation in linguistic theory and anthropology. Gross acknowledges the potential pitfalls involved in her study, linking her scholarship with the form at hand: "Whatever model one follows," she writes, "representation confers power and control on representers (puppeteers or an-

thropologists) because they determine the voices of the others. Introducing her project in Chapter One, Gross focuses Chapter Two on the historical relationship between the French and the Walloon as compared to the Flemish and the Dutch.

Gross hits her stride in Chapter Three, entitled "Class and Culture in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Liège and the Rise of the Puppet Theater," in which she examines the political economy of the early rod-puppet tradition. Through lenses of symbolism, nationalism, and regionalism, Gross considers political manipulation and historical conditions of material production and audience generation from 1830 to World War I.

With a hearty nod to Mikhail Bakhtin, Gross links popular culture to dominant culture as she examines the evolution of the puppet theatre following the adoption of the form by the bourgeoisie. She discusses the role of the servant both in daily life and in the puppet plays as mediator both between the bourgeois society and the working class, and between the puppeteer and the audience. Gross describes the enduring popularity of the puppet character Tchantchès, a servant who was seen to "speak the minds" of the Walloon people in the face of Flemish oppression. While Gross situates the adoption of the puppet's name as a pseudonym employed by the satirical press in relation to Punch and Guignol in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, she neglects to reference even earlier servant ancestors who performed similar functions in the *commedia dell'arte* or even Greek and Roman comedies.

In Chapter Four, "Manipulations and Transformations," Gross describes the increasing commodification of the puppet theatre in the hands of the middle class between World Wars. She paints vivid pictures of the experiences and influences of Joseph Maurice Remouchamps, who relentlessly preserved puppetry documentation and practice as head of the Museum of Walloon Life; Rodolphe de Warsage, puppetry ambassador for Liège; and Thomas Talbot, champion of the form's working-class roots. Gross then presents qualitative research concerning the work of contemporary practitioners Gaston Engels and Adrien Dufour as it relates folklore and Walloon history.



# B O O K R E V I E W

Her research is rich in detail and thoroughly presented.

Gross moves to the present in Chapter Five, linking social communication and puppetry practice of the 1980s with elements of a much earlier past. She considers the consciously deep roots of genre, tradition, and style identified within Walloon puppetry, connecting contemporary practice to the past through folkloric stories, written texts, and the puppets themselves. She then discusses both traditional and unconventional paths taken by successful contemporary puppeteers in Wallonia.

Chapter Six emphasizes two concepts at the heart of Gross' study: "entextualization" and "intertextuality." Both conceptual frames place Walloon puppetry as performed at a given time and place in dialogue with deep social meaning resulting from layers of evolving puppetry traditions and political and economic influences. Gross illuminates these ideas by analyzing multiple productions of the Nativity play in 1982. She compares and contrasts the work of three puppeteers belonging to different performer lineages: Jean Pinet, Adrien Dufour, and Henri Libert.

Continuing her work with the Nativity play, Gross focuses Chapter Seven on generations of performance within a single performer lineage: the Verrées-Dufour-(Deville)-Ficarrotta line, chosen for their emphasis on preservation and replication. Gross moves beyond the written script to link decades

of performance through rhythm, noise, and musicality in performance grounded in a craftsman's intuition nurtured and continued through oral tradition.

The final three chapters of *Speaking in Other Voices* are devoted to the representation of complex social issues on both sides of the stage. Chapter Eight addresses how Walloon puppets capture identities concerning economic status, gender, age, as well as personality and folkloric qualities in relation to the qualities embodied within the puppeteers themselves. Chapter Nine contextualizes representations of religion and war throughout the history of Walloon puppetry. In Chapter Ten, Gross addresses the complex embodiment of social politics including the role of women, class issues, immigration and labor, and language.

*Speaking in Other Voices* provides a rich local history of Wallonia in relation to the rest of Belgium and indeed Europe. Pointing to developments in puppetry forms, Gross makes a convincing case for the theatre's microcosmic reflection of a culture in transition. Gradual changes in the puppet theatre in Liège represent evolving societal structures grounded in the local economy, politics, language, and class. Although her book focuses on history and practice specific to Wallonia, the ethnographic framework Gross employs may serve as a model for scholars of puppetry and performance in other regions and cultures. review by Virginia Anderson