

THE METAPHOR OF THE *MATRYOSHKA** DOLLS ANIMATED BY THE LOGOS AS THE CREATIVE PRINCIPLE OF DRAMATURGY

A METÁFORA DA Matrioshka Animada pelo
Logos como Princípio Criador de Dramaturgias*

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* Traditional Russian doll that covers a set of identical wooden dolls of decreasing sizes that are placed one inside the other

Spectacle *Ninguém Falou que Seria Fácil* [Nobody said it would be easy] (2011).
Screenplay by Felipe Rocha, who also directs the spectacle with Alex Cassal. Photo by Dalton Valerio

Abstract

The object of this study is to trace an approximation between the ideas related to Edward Gordon Craig's *über-marionette* and two contemporary works: the first in theatre, *Ninguém falou que seria fácil* (2011), written by Felipe Rocha, and the second in cinema, *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), script written by Charlie Kaufman. The hypothesis is that the idea of the actor in Craig's *über-marionette* finds an echo, in terms of creating roles, in these two dramatic texts, in which the characters, as animated *matrioshkas*, behave as puppets of the other characters in the text, resulting in a logic game of theatricality and in the dissolution of their realistic characteristics.

Keywords: Craig, Dramatic text, Deleuze, *Über-marionette*.

Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é fazer uma aproximação das ideias relacionadas à *über-marionette* de Edward Gordon Craig com duas obras recentes: uma do teatro, *Ninguém falou que seria fácil* (2011), texto de Felipe Rocha, e outra do cinema, *Synecdoque, New York* (2008), roteiro de Charlie Kaufman. A hipótese é a de que a ideia de ator na *über-marionette* de Craig encontra uma possível resposta em termos de criação de papéis nessas duas dramaturgias, nas quais as personagens como *matrioshkas* animadas assumem o lugar de marionetes de outras personagens do texto, resultando em um jogo lógico de teatralidade e na diluição de seus caracteres realistas.

Palavras-chave: Craig, Dramaturgia, Deleuze, *Über-marionette*.

Resumen

El objetivo del presente trabajo es promover un acercamiento de las ideas relacionadas a la *über-marionette* de Edward Gordon Craig a dos obras recientes: la primera en el teatro, *Ninguém falou que seria fácil* (2011), texto de Felipe Rocha, y la segunda en el cine, *Synecdoque, New York* (2008), dirigido por Charlie Kaufman. La hipótesis es de que la idea del actor en la *über-marionette* de Craig encuentra una posible respuesta en términos de creación de roles en esas dos obras dramáticas, en las que los personajes como *matrioshkas* animadas toman el lugar de marionetas de otros personajes del texto, resultando en un juego lógico de teatralidad y en la dilución de sus caracteres realistas.

Palabras clave: Craig, Dramaturgía, Deleuze, *Über-marionette*.

The ample sense of the dance

The dance outside the limits imposed by physical nature is the one questioned by Heinrich von Kleist when using marionettes. Nonetheless, it is dance imagined for individuals to execute it – or, even better, *gods* (KLEIST, 1997). For these individuals, even if constricted by the limitations of a physical body, possess a singularity submerged in a cultural construction of a subject. Therefore, Kleist's question could be summarized in the following interrogation: how do we clear this singularity in one's cultural affectations, aiming at a pulsive depuration of the work of art? What would be impossible for a human being to execute would be substantially real to perform with *conscious marionettes*. This *modus operandi* of the body machine would constitute the trigger to a revolution in the actor's creative field, as theoretically developed by Edward Gordon Craig. "The actor will disappear and on his place we will see an inanimate character that will take the name of, if you wish, the *Über-marionette*, until it conquers a more glorious name" (CRAIG, 2004, p. 52).¹

But what actually draws our attention in Gordon Craig's text is the attempt to put into practice a type of theatrical configuration that points to an abstraction that lies in the human figure, or, even better, that insists in this figure, now focusing on a perfect creation machine – the supermarionette. Following this line of thought, we may ask ourselves: why not simply replace what looks human with lines and shapes, colors and lights, in an extra-human radicalization, in which this dance would definitely take the place of the dramatic "make sense"? For Craig, who grew up in the English theater environment, being the son of an actress of recognized prestige in their home country, Helen Terry, this does not seem to be a simple way out of the creation of his new theater. He believed that lines, shapes, colors, and lights must dance with the human figure. The machinery of the theater should be taken into account, a new kind of theatrical offshoot, in which the subtleties of abstraction flirts with nature's own subtleties. (NEWMAN, 1989)

This need of emancipation of the parts (in the case of Craig and Kleist, culture and body) resonates in the artistic events of our time, when the separa-

1. This quote is a translation from the Portuguese edition to English.

tion of elements is taken to an extreme point in order to explore new territories for artistic construction, for instance, in Rudolf von Laban's dances without music, and in John Cage's music without notes. We cannot say that Craig, while dealing with dramaturgies so deeply human (such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), sought this separation so radically, which resulted in pure abstraction. He rather aimed at breaking limits imposed by the physical nature of this body and culture in order to go beyond the already established "human", but still breaking limits in which the question of man serves as a bed to sense, spiritual substrate of the work of art. "The *über-marionette* will not compete with life – rather it will go beyond it" (BABLET, 1981, p. 109).

Perhaps this separation of the parts is the completion of the unspeakable in Craig, an issue Luiz Fernando Ramos discussed in his article "O indizível e as obras imaginárias de Klein e Craig" [*The unspeakable and the imaginary work of Klein and Craig*]. Maybe this puzzle of the ideal actor for Craig never happened in real life; nonetheless, his ideas later echoed in contemporary times, where a separation may finally be possible. As pointed out by Ramos (2014), this dialogue is also true regarding the existing parallel between the work of Craig and the creative processes of contemporary times in which "many times the non-work, the non-object, and the pure virtuality would offer the viewer their own imaginative power as what is there to be enjoyed" (p. 74-75).

For us, in this article, what is perhaps more important to identify at Craig's time and that, in terms of dramaturgy, we will certainly hear the latest inspiration echoes, is the attempt to tangentially write the question of reason – or rather *emancipated from reason*. In other words, more than the setting of an ideal (which in Craig proves, at least during his lifetime and in terms of achievement, to be a failure) is the motivation of the artists of his generation to escape from the enshrined configuration of the human (RANCIÈRE, 2009).

One of the possible answers offered by the contemporary drama to this ideal Craigian actor in supermarionettes, and especially to the goals he sought to achieve, is set in an unusual way in *Ninguém falou que seria fácil*. In the play written by Felipe Rocha, the disappearance of Marina, daughter of the couple Peter and Anna, gives vent to a baroque unfolding when the characters try to take on the role of the missing child to continue the performance. Here Craig's ideal is materialized in the progressive subtraction of the cultural

filling that lies in the play's significant (father, mother, daughter) by means of dramaturgy. These significant become, therefore, *logic dancers* "dancing" in what Gilles Deleuze (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1995) calls flat territory, of the free association and connection of ideas, within the boundaries of the theatrical form through speech.

The driving element to Craig's *über-marionette* configuration is also present in this drama through a symbolic point of view, namely, the dilution of the realistic character, what Craig would consider the fake theatrical. The main difference between Craig and Rocha lies exactly in the starting point that each one assumes to start the game that better suits them. In Craig, it is portrayed by the puppet for a symbolist *logos*. In Rocha, it is portrayed by a realistic *logos* for the puppets.

***Über-marionette* and marionette-character**

Let us now think about the difference between Craig's *über-marionette* and Rocha's marionette-character. We can trace a parallel between the differences in both approaches, knowing that besides being the ideal model (the limitless "god" imagined by Craig), a marionette is in itself an object of representation played by someone. We should also take into account the question of the actor's conscience, as Denis Bablet explained in his *The Theatre of Edward Gordon Craig*: "But why the *über-marionette*, why not simply the marionette? Because the actor, as *über-marionette*, will retain one advantage over the marionette – he will be conscious of his gestures and movements" (BABLET, 1981, p. 109).

To Craig the puppet is then an object rather than a perfect substitute for the "defective" human body; it is an ideal to be followed. On the other hand, to Rocha it is precisely the failure of human representation – that is, due to the difference that a marionette-character represents within the dramaturgical system – that allows for the game to take place. Thus, in the play *Ninguém falou que seria fácil*, the theatrical flow finds its way in the relocation (from adult to child) misconception, as if the clash between that flaw and the represented object asked for even more evidence of its error, ending up in a logical baroquism in which the end comes not through a narrative line, but rather through welds between moments.

Here we must turn our attention to the driving forces that permeate the play – *id est* approaching *Ninguém falou* and Craig's *über-marionette* (or any other puppet as manipulable object) is only possible, in the symbolic field, if we understand that Rocha's characters take themselves the roles of objects to represent an Other, thus continuing what is being performed. It is the idea of *being* a puppet that is at stake here, more than the embodiment of an ideal of aesthetic construction. In this sense, the marionette-character Felipe Rocha creates has as the operating headgear the interplay between imperfect reproductions, as the assembling and disassembling of a *matryoshka*, the Russian doll constituted by its smaller copies. It is, therefore, a *matryoshka* animated by the logos, *id est*, by the emptied signifiers in the exchange of characters, what is revealed in layers.

The result is the slow dilution of the character's integrity due to its marionette-character replacement. Instead of encountering an individual, we face with multifocal visions of childhood, in which the dramatic line is broken at any moment for this to take certain effect. Finally we have here the approach we have been seeking between the *über-marionette* and marionette-character. In Craig, the *über-marionette* appears as an attack on the realism of his time, an attack on the kind of interpretation that is made in this realism². And it is precisely this route that we witness in Rocha's play, but in relation to the realistic *character*. The marionette-character in *Ninguém falou que seria fácil* is constructed in opposition to vectors of likelihood. It is an unrealistic answer to the question that follows "Where's Marina?", and it differs from its original inspiration so much that it ends up constituting something else out of the simple scope of representing reality (which would be within the doll, a representation of it, a representation that is set up by the differences in size, contours etc.).

Therefore, what is distortedly configured in *Ninguém falou que seria fácil* is the very path of the Craigian ideal, not aiming at the perfect harmony of shapes and movements, but at the very least, aiming at the dilution of likelihood carried out by the difference. "Today [the actors] impersonate and interpret; tomorrow they must represent and interpret; and the third day they must create. By this means style may return" (CRAIG, 2004, p. 42). But what in Craig would

2. We must therefore keep in mind that when Craig talks about the actor's disappearance rather than a supermarionette, he talks about the actor in *realism* (CRAIG, 2004).

lead to the creation of a new subject, in Rocha gives rise to the misconception that is continually wrong. It is the same principle of repeating decimals, numbers that could be infinitely represented with the addition of one more number at a time, but that never satisfactorily conclude an equation. The characters represented by marionette-characters never close their configuration, their character – but they thoroughly envision this closure.

Synecdoche, New York: society as a marionette

If in *Ninguém falou que seria fácil* we witness the beginning of a *matryoshka* animated by the logos – that is, the actions of a marionette-character gradually diluting other characters while constructing a third, distorted character – in *Synecdoche, New York*, a movie written and directed by Charlie Kaufman, we effectively glimpse the mounting and dismounting of this lively *matryoshka*: the emergence of the marionette-society³, a kind of broadening of the concept of marionette-character which gains grandiloquent contours in the movie, with a high level of difficulty to be put into practice in the theater. Here, in an assemblage of marionette-characters, we have the birth of another fictional society, with the same operating logic of a society fixed within the scope of fiction. It is through the representation of the differences between **all** the characters involved in the plot that Kaufman seeks to construct his dramaturgy. And it will be in contact of two or more fictional societies – the original one and its puppets – that the repeating decimals previously mentioned will occur.

But if we assume that the factors that influence the functioning of a society are innumerable, how can we project a puppet to represent it? In *Synecdoche*, after watching the movie more than once, I have the feeling that all the factors that influence this fictional society were “marionettized”. But how? Kaufman slices the various layers that exist within each one of these elements to construct new marionettes in each separation step. For instance, in the beginning the city receives a marionette; however, a home in the original city also generates another marionette, as well as a home in the previously built marionette-city. Here we find a set of lenses – zooming in

3. The image of the marionette has appeared before in Kaufman’s movies, namely in *Being John Malkovich*, in which the main character and the puppeteer is, curiously, named Craig.

and out. Or, as exposed by Deleuze, a game of repetitions and differences: the background reveals us something – the clouds often surprise us with lightning. (DELEUZE, 2000)

What does happen is that by using these various marionettes of different times and spaces in the same storyline, Kaufman extends to infinity the range of interactions, incredibly still within a dramatic structure of what is possible. That is, unlike *Ninguém falou que seria fácil*, where the interaction between marionette and object tends to the absurd, in *Synecdoche, New York* this interaction appears to be dialectical. The actions, even though they develop in this context of marionette-character, still perform a dialogue between what is past and what is present. We are under the impression of a beginning-middle-and-end. And this applies to the constitution of a false epic cover throughout the work, centered on the main character's conduction of the marionettes. Everything leads us to believe that the story presents a huge theatrical event of great proportions (a play that materializes the totality of life in New York) that is distanced from the protagonist's microcosm, in such a way that, in the end, it reveals that it was actually about this individual's singularity.

Through the filter of this character the marionette-characters stick together to finally form a marionette-society. Thus, what seems to be a world apart, an epic leap, is actually a piece of the central character, a synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole of something, or vice versa). Caden Cotard, played in the film by Philip Seymour Hoffman, serves as the magnetic center of the operations of this puppet-society. The elements it contains only act as marionettes from the moment they believe they are existential reflections of Cotard. Even time passes because of him. His daughter's diary is filled with his thoughts (do we have a marionette-object here?), and television broadcasts signals of his hypochondria. Everything is contained in Caden while outside Caden. It is no coincidence that Caden, at one point in the film, is considering to name his play "Simulacrum."

From a Deleuzian point of view, **simulacrum** would be that supposedly wrong time in the representation of consciousness – pure difference –, of which is not part of the Platonic Idea, which is already settled, and therefore do not correspond to the DNA of identity.

Plato attempted to discipline the eternal return by making it an effect of the Ideas – in other words, making it copy a model. However, in the infinite movement of degraded likeness from copy to copy, we reach a point at which everything changes nature, at which copies themselves flip over into simulacra and at which, finally, resemblance or spiritual imitation gives way to repetition. (DELEUZE, 2000, p. 223)

It is the perfect image of the disassembled *matryoshka*, now animated by the affections of the protagonist.

However, the character itself turns into a marionette conducted by someone else throughout the movie. Here, in an epic twist, we understand why Caden gradually loses the ability to cry (he uses artificial tears) and to salivate. It added a layer over the fact that he is obsessed with cleanliness – it is because now he is driven (like a marionette) by a cleaning lady named Ellen. Kaufman plays with the dolls contained in a *matryoshka*. He repositions them, changes their places. The smaller one, the last one, now becomes the conductor of the larger one's affections. However, this movement does not appear to be casual. We are suspicious of it, just as we are suspicious of the signs of life. As in Craig, here this work flirts with the subtleties of human nature. The escaping of what is real ends up contaminated with real. And just as in Craig, Caden fails in his attempt to put together a show which properly displays his artistic vision. It is curious to think that this parallel goes even further: according to Daniel Shaw, the movie's critics believe that this failure is also displayed in the construction of the latter as a process⁴.

The flat terrain of the marionette-society

The dramaturgical triumph in *Synecdoche, New York* lies in the indiscernibility of its bed of sense. A bed that would allow us, for instance, to reinterpret a dream. That is, a *subsequent place to what is dreamed formed through the repositioning of pure happenings*. However, in Kaufman's movie we do not know the limits of what is imposed on us. He does not justify the phenomena in the work. And these phenomena are not seen as such by the characters (as

4. "He spends the next forty years (and the second half of the movie) trying to do so, and fails miserably. According to critical consensus, Kaufman's film also becomes a failure in the process" (LARROCA, 2011, p. 264).

would happen in science fiction, for example) – it is all built into the dramatic narrative logic. This indiscernibility of the bed of sense allows us to have multiple visions of what happened, as much as it grants the author an incredible diversity of interactional options between the elements – it is precisely the affirmation of the difference in his conscience (DELEUZE, 2000).

For example, the house burning throughout the entire movie, where Hazel (the woman who works in the box office) lives, can be interpreted as a reflection of the protagonist's feelings towards his object of desire. Simultaneously, in the last part of the movie the character literally dies due to the asphyxiation caused by the constant inhaling of her house's fumes (something that could also be metaphorically interpreted as the character being asphyxiated by her own desire). These metaphorical layers and the traffic they promote between a poetic interpretation and a literal one make us distrust the situations, while we need them for the movie to have some narrative outline. What does happen, and this is the main dramatic strategy in *Synecdoche, New York*, is that the movie thins its metaphorical prospects little by little through the affirmation of difference. The reflective field, which could be presented to us by the metaphors, is blurred and turned into shaky territory by the assertion of the *simulacrum* that is created moment by moment by the main character. This simulacrum is mixed with another layer of the possible – intertwined, together they form the quicksand of difference at all costs – the metaphor is blinded by the dagger of the lack of limits.

Caden Cotard's repetition and Charlie Kaufman's difference

Cotard seeks to repeat himself. He searches for something that got lost at one time or another in his own life. However, Kaufman, the creator of Caden Cotard, says “yes” to difference. The marionettes accompany Caden and always put him under a new perspective, even though the character also looks for the enclosure of repetition. It is in this insoluble contradiction that the movie takes place. It is like a theater rehearsal of a play that never happens – this is the narrative of the movie itself – where new evidence is presented by the actors every other hour. This is also Cotard's *modus vivendi* while he searches

for meanings concerning the acceptance of the end of his relationship with his first wife. The conflict lies in the lack of ways out that he sets up for himself, generating even more repetitions and situations where the marionettes can interact. It is interesting to observe that this is due to the very enjoyment of the movie. Engendering visual and logical hiding places, the work proves to be very different every time we watch it.⁵

In every part of the movie Caden announces a new title for his play, the one that never opens. The motto, which is repeated obsessively, has the modulations of the time the character lives at any given time. And it always repeats arrears to what is happening, in a contemplative position. His role as marionette seems to be to mark an ending that has already been finalized through other repetitions – and this is contained in Kaufman's creative process, as explained by Kaufman himself in an interview presented in Larroca:

Language always puts us on the scene too late. "To live where we really are" would seem to be a given – the easiest thing in the world – and in a sense it is. Because we are creatures of language, however, nothing is more difficult. "I struggle with that a lot when I'm writing," Kaufman concludes, "because my things tend to be very wordy. I like words." (LARROCA, 2011, p. 252)

On the other hand, when the *logos* is triggered, another doll emerges from the *matryoshka* ready to be animated. This happens *ad infinitum*, although it seems to have a finite battery. When the character feels tired, when the logos does not seem to make any more sense to animate marionettes, another character (once a marionette-character) leads him to his death, which is the very representation of the driver's (Helen, the cleaning lady) death. Here, once again through Deleuze, we witness a contemporary approach to Craig's ideas. An ontological approach. The meaning of marionette-societies that, in reality, stroll in accordance with the magnetic center of the main character, flirts with the constitution of the subject in society, or rather, with its primeval singularity conducted by subjects. If in Craig there is a search for the essence

5. It is at the very least instigating to discover (after watching the movie a number of times) that the marionette which will represent Cotard was hiding in the movie all the time, observing his inspiration. Or that the timeframe comprehends months, even years, in just one dialogue.

of man, in *Synecdoche, New York* this search lies in a wave motion – firstly through the accumulation of fragments of subjects in a singularity; then through the emptying of these same fragments. Caden's death carries, in the DNA of its existence, everyone that was ever a part of his existential synecdoche.

Marionette-society and the relational theatre

Taking into consideration that the object of this text is always connected to the interactions (of works, of characters, marionettes), one step further in terms of another kind of implementation would be the relational theatre (by means of a structure that requires the participation of the audience) attached to the idea of a marionette-society, as Felipe Rocha has already done to the marionette-character (in his text, Rocha explains that the construction of dramaturgy was completed during the process and, in some moments of the play, the characters interact with the audience). In terms of multiplication of possibilities, the interaction between actors and audience, and even throughout the construction of the play (taking the marionette-character, for instance, as a road to be traveled), would raise the level of the dramaturgical strategies to be employed by the participants in the theatrical game. This is a question that, when put into practice, will certainly be a challenge to future theatre artists. The staging of the marionette-society in a relational theater structure is certainly a far-reaching issue, from philosophical to theatrical references, which asks us for extra commitment and study, and that can open many possibilities in a new field of artistic creation.

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