



The Body, the Moving Image and the Puppet: the contemporary scene arising from [in]animated forms

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ABSTRACT – The Body, the Moving Image and the Puppet: the contemporary scene arising from [in]animated forms – This article seeks to find possible forms of scenic creations originating from the crossing of technologies considered antagonistic, as is the case of the body on stage, the puppet and the projection mapping. The investigation intends to question historical scenic hierarchies, in such way as to allow the fusion between the three elements above referred through the perspective in which subtracting any of them from the theatrical doing is considered impossible. Such investigation will be developed through the analysis of *R.O.O.M (Re-organization Of Material)*, a piece by the German company *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl (Cinematographic Theatre)*.

Keywords: The Moving Image. The Body on Stage. Animated Forms. Projection Mapping. Hybridity.

RÉSUMÉ – Le Corps, l'Image en Mouvement et la Marionnette: la scène contemporaine issue de formes [in]animées – Dans cet article, nous cherchons à trouver des formes possibles de la création scénique à partir de l'entrecroisement de technologies considérées comme antagoniques, telles que le corps sur scène, la marionnette et le mapping vidéo. Par le biais de cette réflexion nous souhaitons remettre en question les hiérarchies scéniques historiques, afin de permettre la fusion des trois éléments visés en épigraphe dans la perspective qu'il ne soit pas possible de soustraire aucun d'eux de la pratique du théâtre. Pour mener à bien cette réflexion, nous avons décidé d'analyser le spectacle *R.O.O.M (Re-Organization of Material)*, de la compagnie allemande *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl (Cinematographic Theatre)*.

Mots-clés: Image en Mouvement. Corps sur Scène. Formes Animées. Mapping Vidéo. Hybridisme.

RESUMO – O Corpo, a Imagem em Movimento e a Marionete: a cena contemporânea oriunda de formas [in]animadas – Por meio deste artigo busca-se encontrar possíveis formas de criação cênica a partir do entrecruzamento de tecnologias consideradas antagonicas, como é o caso do corpo em cena, da marionete e da projeção mapeada. Pretende-se, através desta reflexão, problematizar as hierarquias cênicas históricas, de modo a possibilitar a fusão entre os três expedientes em epígrafe, na perspectiva de que não seja possível subtrair nenhum deles do fazer teatral. Para levar a cabo tal reflexão, optou-se por analisar o espetáculo *R.O.O.M. (Re-Organization Of Material)*, da companhia alemã *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl (Cinematographic Theatre)*.

Palavras-chave: Imagem em Movimento. Corpo em Cena. Formas Animadas. Projeção Mapeada. Hibridismo.

This paper returns to an investigation that first emerged while working on my master's degree and has remained pertinent throughout my doctoral work - concerning the various elements that contribute to the creation of a stage performance, specifically the dialogue between the body on stage, the moving image and the marionette. This study aims to identify some forms of creation by examining the interchange between elements traditionally associated with performance art and the moving image. In other words, this investigation attempts to reflect, theoretically and practically, on the ever-changing statutes and hierarchical reorganization of the elements that contribute to the creation of stage performance.

The moving image has played an increasingly important role in contemporary theatrical experiments. However, in most works it's quite common to observe a hierarchical relationship in which the projection is mainly a function of the set. More recently, with the increasing popularity of digital technology in hegemonic countries, most stage performances rely on the latest technologies, with the main objective being to achieve technically groundbreaking results. Therefore, in these cases, the body on stage has often served essentially as an ornament for the technological apparatus presented in the performance. Thus the hierarchy of values stemming from the pre-established relationship between the marionette and the body on stage becomes even more important; in almost all theatrical works, the latter manipulates the former.

With this in consideration, the question arises of if and how it's possible to attribute equal value to the three elements – the body on stage, the moving image and the marionette –, which apparently pertain to distinct aspects of theatrical performance and which thereby problematize the regulated hierarchies of theatrical performance (Giesekam, 2007) in some contemporary experiments. To address this question we look to the German company *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl (Cinematographic Theater)*, created in 2003 by the actress Iris Meinhardt, the stage director and video artist Michael Krauss, and the composer and musician Thorsten Meinhardt – and which now also includes the work of the video artist Oliver Feigl – which provides fertile ground for developing our proposed research.

The aforementioned German company has been circulating international festivals of animated forms and has, in recent years,

received awards in Switzerland and Germany. *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl* has defined its work as cinematographic theater for its intercross of new and traditional technologies of object animation. Due to Iris Meinhardt's educational background in Marionette Theater, marionettes are present in virtually all of the company's performances. Even when there are no objects to be animated, there's a projection of moving images - that is, images animated by specialized softwares (Ferraz, 2014). In 2013, the company performed *R.O.O.M. (Re-Organization Of Material)*¹, the focus of study in this essay, at the International Festival of Puppets and Animated Forms (FIMFA) in Lisbon, Portugal. Following the festival, a dialogue with the artist Iris Meinhardt initiated a process of combining all of her empirical work (performance texts, stage maps, audiovisual recordings) with a theoretical approach that interlaces politics and art. The practice of staging² is considered to be analogous to the creation and maintenance of power structures. In other words, the power dynamics that exist in theatrical performance mirror those of the social world (Rancière, 2010).

Before describing the steps taken by the Company to construct the *R.O.O.M* performance, it's important to clarify some of the terminology used in this paper regarding the concept of character³ in the play. Firstly, a stage-character refers to a character that occupies the same space and time as the spectators. Secondly, and of equal importance, an image-character complies with the temporal-spatial rules of the audiovisual device⁴ and does not appear as the projected image of a human being. On the contrary, the moving images created in *R.O.O.M* are composed of objects and landscapes. In this way, the image-character has a leading role in the performance. Lastly and also of equal importance is the puppet-character, played by a doll which enters in dialogue with the body of actress Iris Meinhardt and with the array of moving images. It's important to highlight that the marionette negotiates the stage space with the moving images in the same way that the performance's magic tricks attempt to find equilibrium with the special effects produced by specialized software (Image 1). By joining together traditional animation techniques and highly advanced technologies, the *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl* company manages to create a performance that is void of the opulence so often observed in plays featuring special effects, which are apparently keenly aware of the demonstrative economic power of such technologies⁵.

Recomposing Stage Props

Initial explanations aside, we return to the performance, *R.O.O.M.*, in which the German collective presents a stage-character in a square-shaped space defined by the lighting and projections of moving images. The set could be a living room or a bedroom, with a few props spread out over the space: a table, a mirror, a chair and a cup.

At the start of the performance, the stage is dark. Slowly, the spectators' eyes adjust to the darkness and are able to make out the silhouette of a stage-character seated on the chair. Then becomes audible the voice of an offstage, first person narrator, supposedly the voice of the stage-character. The narrator ponders the space, recognizing the table and chair as his own, but not the room itself. Two windows and a door are projected onto the wall, in constant spatial reorganization throughout the fifty-five minute performance (Image 2). The stage-character desperately tries to find a logical explanation for being there – whether it be death, craziness or a dream – and also tries to determine why the space appears to be acting and reacting according to its own logic. That is, the stage-character is waiting for the room to fulfill an expected role: a space of welcoming, resting, working, intimacy, always subordinate to the whimsical needs of its users (Ferraz, 2014). Yet in this performance, the room acts as an autonomous being that mostly rejects the stage-character's decisions, thereby acquiring the status of image-character.

While trying to comprehend the new reality in which it finds itself, the stage-character, illuminated by the image-character, encounters the immobile puppet-character lying by the table. The puppet-character is similar to the stage-character in dress, skin color and movement, and, like the stage-character, personifies the absence of a body-on-stage. It is, in a way, the mirror image of the stage-character, serving as an intermediary that simultaneously is and is not what it appears to be (Vernant, 1991). At the moment of their encounter, the initial tension that exists between them dissolves into a sort of consolation for the puppet-character. Initially, the puppet-character seems needy and requiring of special attention, as it depends on the stage-character to maneuver it in order to come to life. However, their relationship becomes more complex as the performance continues, to the point that the stage-character

transforms, through the course of action, into an inanimate character manipulated by the puppet-character and character-image.

A brief interlude in the description of the characters' relationship is needed here in order to highlight an important point for this research paper: just as the manner in which the stage-character addresses the puppet-character is fixed, and the puppet-character relies on the stage-character in a predetermined way. It can be argued that we attribute restrictive functions to the traditional elements or to the technologies that typically make up a theatrical scene. On this subject, Jacques Rancière (2006, p. 28) affirms:

The joyful, postmodern artistic licence, its exaltation of the carnival of simulacra, all sorts of interbreeding and hybridization, transformed very quickly and came to challenge the freedom or autonomy that the modernist principle conferred – or would have conferred – upon art the mission of accomplishing.

Rancière notes that in contemporary times, despite the supposed unlimited freedoms of the arts, there's been no cessation of domination nor the emergence of anything that is really free of power dynamics. For this reason, in the majority of contemporary theatrical experiments, the body and/or technologies are addressed in a fairly typical way. Consequently, a large number of performances present themselves as a collection of different artistic languages rather than as works resulting from the interaction and interdependence of dissimilar elements.

For this reason, what interests us about *R.O.O.M* is the fact that the performance presents itself as a junction of different artistic devices “[...] such as the formation of a work that is both singular and hybrid” (Ferraz, 2014, p. 12), resulting from the confrontation between body and scene, the moving image and the marionette.

To better understand how the German company managed to do this, we closely examined the theatrical means and technological devices that were used. We are used to considering the body of the actress as being responsible for performing actions, with her words and gestures, that derive from a written text; we are equally accustomed to recognizing a projected image upon a tridimensional space as representative of new technologies, lacking in any characteristics that we could prescribe to a character; and we are used to seeing marionettes as lifeless objects, becoming alive only through the

invisible gestures of a performer. Having said that, we can argue that the German company's proposal revolves around an effort to bring a new perspective to each of these attributes, in such a way that all of the characters play a role that is contrary to what we traditionally expect of them.



Image 1 – Special effects by specialized software, and magic tricks. Still frame from R.O.O.M. Source: Meinhardt, Krauss (2013).



Image 2 – Perpetual rearrangement of the theatrical scenery. Still frame from R.O.O.M. Source: Meinhardt, Krauss (2013).

Let us consider some examples. First, the actions performed by the stage-character don't derive from a scripted text. The character remains silent throughout the entirety of the play, her voice presenting itself off-stage as a master narrator. The narrative brought to us by the stage-character presumes its alignment with an epic drama and, at the same time, distances itself from what is expected of a

leading character (Brecht, 1957). What develops the stage-character are her thoughts and inner-dialogue, not the interaction with other characters.

Regarding the projections on tridimensional surfaces – usually contrary to fragmentation and opposing a linear narrative in favor of the visual impact – what *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl* presents in *R.O.O.M.* is technology in favor of narrative, something that is part of the constituent of artistic practice. The stage-character, therefore, is turned into one of the main pillars of the narrative, becoming, along with the other two characters, one of the main characters of the play. The image-character fuels the actions of the other two characters, limiting them and creating conflicts between them, while at the same time being influenced by them.

The puppet-character, as well, has an unusual function: in a number of instances throughout the play, it's this character that enables the actions of the stage-character, and not the other way around. Reversing our expectations, the puppet-character animates the actress' body, which in turn causes the puppet to come to life. The stage-character dances and interacts with the projected images, props and marionette. The puppet-character is not only influenced by the stage-character but also by the image-character, which is constantly interfering with its actions and decisions by means of light and shadow. This is how *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl* manages to bring the marionette to life: by a moving image rather than a performer, as is usually the case. In this way, the objects that we thought we knew begin to drift away from their expected roles.

Presented here is the interaction between the different elements that compose a narrative on stage. In order for the mutual interaction to be effective, we must call into question that which is usually considered to be the essence of a particular artistic practice – often considered responsible for differentiating one form of art from another. The concept of the *language game* by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1990) is fertile ground for our observations on these hybrid contemporary experiments. *Language games* show us that if we think about theatre, cinema or marionette art as such, it is possible to think about them in many other different ways. To relate the concept of the *language game* to our thoughts on the interactions between the body on stage, the moving image and the marionette, as we see them in the work

done by the German company, we'll exam how the company uses words in its work:

Our use of words is unpredictable. We tend to privilege today what we dismissed before. This is the case of the word hybrid. In the beginning of the twentieth century, men and women of the theatre wanted little to do with hybridism, and while today we value mixing, we think even less about what the word hybrid means. Our use of words is as dynamic as much as the works of arts themselves. It can be assumed, therefore, that words are permeable to change, and ultimately depend of the status we give them. (Ferraz, 2014, p.18).

In the 65th aphorism of the book *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein writes: “when *language-games* change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts, the meanings of words change” (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 42). If it is possible to change the common use of any given word, we can assume that it is also possible to alter the way in which we view the different elements that compose a theatrical scene.

For Wittgenstein, language is not based on objects, for language does not reflect the reality of objects, and words are incapable of reflecting the essence of a given object. Objects lack essence and instead are a loosely connected network of distinct, though interrelated, *language games*. Language in general, and therefore the language of theatre and cinema, is founded upon conventions that are created, used and changed throughout time. The idea of an artistic language persists, but we can't ignore that it is not founded on an intrinsic essence, but on a belief system (Ferraz, 2014, p.19).

Following Wittgenstein's logic, it can be said that a body on stage, a projected image or a marionette doesn't have an intrinsic nature of its own but acts according to rules inherent to each one. When we accept a given *language game*, we know it can change any number of times (Wittgenstein, 1995). Although it's not necessary to dismiss our beliefs about staging, we shouldn't consider them as absolute truths.



Image 3 – Encounter between the stage-character, the image-character and the puppet-character. Still frame from R.O.O.M. Source: Meinhardt, Krauss (2013).

Although today it's still common to find dramatic performances in which the written text plays a hegemonic role⁶, the German company is part of a wider sphere of contemporary artists – such as the Finnish group *WHS*⁷ and the Dutch *Hotel Modern*⁸ – that consider it possible to rethink hierarchies, starting with the relationships between different stage elements⁹. *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl* has made an effort to think about staging in new and different ways, introducing a reciprocal and interdependent relationship between scenic elements that has produced results seldom found in contemporary theater.

Strategies for Rearranging Hierarchies of Stage Elements

R.O.O.M presents a number of possibilities for intersecting the roles of stage-character, image-character, and puppet-character. This study aims to highlight the transition from inanimate to animated object or device. The stage-character moves the lifeless puppet-character, and the image-character is responsible for the movement of the stage-character (Image 3). By moving the puppet-character, the stage-character may be mistaken for another at first, while the image-character is also prone to undergoing changes because of these interactions.

Among a number of examples about the changes undergone by the three characters, we will focus on the moment when the image-character divides itself into hundreds of squares, forcing the stage-character to move around the stage, searching for stable ground

(Ferraz, 2014). From that moment on, the stage-character's actions are provoked by the image-character. We can draw a comparison with Shakespeare's *Othello* in which the character, believing Iago's words about Desdemona's betrayal, starts acting according to his feelings of jealousy. From this perspective, it's not only the stage-character that controls the game. Like Othello, the image-character makes its interlocutor disappear, taking charge of its own destiny and consequently, of its own disappearance (Image 4). In addition to its relationship with the other two characters, the puppet-character is responsible for the creation of transitions, of the fades in and fades out¹⁰. It's responsible for determining what's shown on stage, as not one of the three characters ever leaves the set. The puppet-character plays a constant game, on and off stage, with the light and shadows created by the moving image. The puppet-character makes conventional audiovisual contributions to the scene while the moving image is incorporated into the stage narrative (Ferraz, 2014). Of relevance is the concept of *bricolage*, on which Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, p. 19) said:

[...] the decision as to what to put in each place also depends on the possibility of putting a different element there instead, so that each choice which is made will involve a complete reorganization of the structure, which will never be the same as one vaguely imagines nor as some other which might have been preferred to it.

The exchange of devices that build up the narrative presented on stage in the show *R.O.O.M.* makes it possible for the rearrangement of devices, as the title of the play explicitly suggests. In contrary to contemporary trends, the artist searches in every new project for the means and materials that better allow for translating an idea. What seems to interest the German company is the conciliation of a variety of devices collected by the group for more than twelve years of experience working together. Knowing so well the objects with which they work, they don't feel obliged to conform to the rules and instead explore new ways of playing with new technologies. The Company also knows that, regardless of all the complexities that new technologies offer, they can also serve simple poetic purposes, in very much the same way that traditional shadow theater uses light to create its narratives. It's important to note that technology plays a structural role for *R.O.O.M.*, for without it there is no narrative (Ferraz, 2014).

As for the actress' body, it exists within an environment that is capable of modifying it at any moment. Whether animated by the lights and shadows of the image-character, or by the movements of the puppet-character, the stage-character's role is scripted by on-stage interactions (Ferraz, 2014). The actor's conventional role in a play, as the moving force of the narrative, is absent here. The actress, along with the puppet and the image – at times active, other times inactive – constitute a game in which the borders between the moving image, the actress' body and the marionette, although defined, are constantly interchanging.

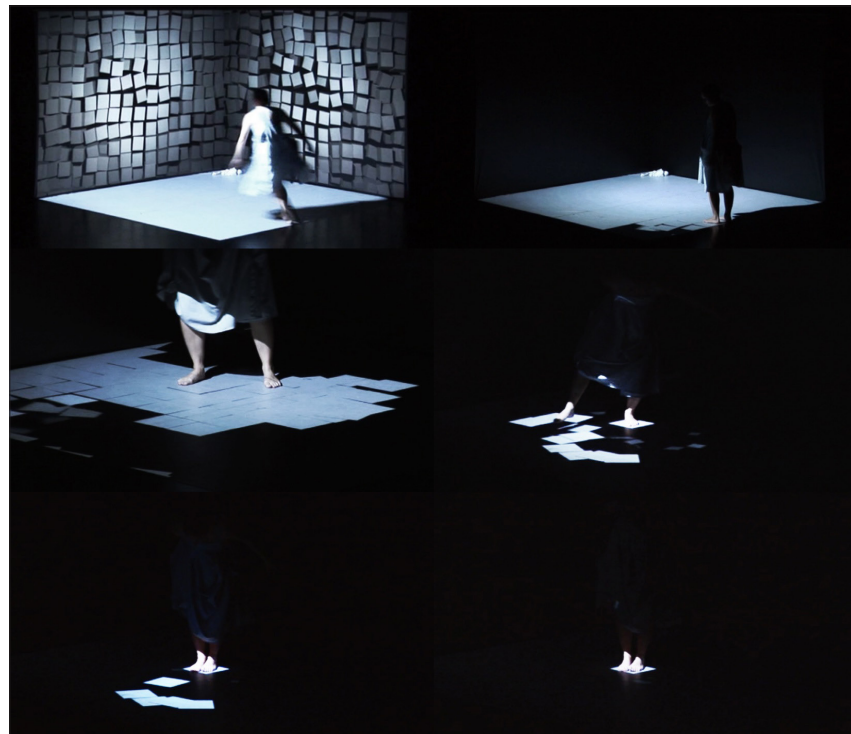


Image 4 – Sequence for the penultimate scene of the play. Still frame from R.O.O.M. Source: Meinhardt, Krauss (2013).

The dialogue between the actress, the puppet and the projected images on the walls is responsible for building up the narrative's conflicts and actions. Establishing a parallel view to the function that is attributed to the characters in a theatrical text by Jean-Pierre Ryngaert in his *Introduction to Theatre Analysis*, it can be said about the three characters in *R.O.O.M.*:

The character is a crossroads of meanings. Necessarily, there is overlap between the character as presented with a certain identity or substance, the character that moves the action forward and the character that produces

speech. That overlap brings complexity into the character (Ryngaert, 1996, p. 31).

The three characters in *R.O.O.M.* constantly swap their functions, at times responsible for moving the action forward, at times the objects of discourse. They go beyond the expected exchanges, overlapping every aspect of their roles and narratives.

Final Remarks

In the creation of *R.O.O.M.* by *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl* it becomes clear that reality is shaped by its possibilities, and not the other way around. In other words, it is not reality that makes things possible, but rather possibilities that recreate reality. This company has been working throughout its history with the same devices: a body-on-stage, marionettes and moving images, experimenting with the multiple possibilities they present. The same way Wittgenstein proposes the idea of *language games*, the company has been experimenting with new scenic devices, building upon the seemingly outdated structures of the past. In addition, the company endeavors to overcome the challenges of theatrical practice by collecting a large variety of materials to work with. By selecting devices that are very similar to each other, members of this company build on layers of experimentation and are bridging different artistic practices. They relate every object of a performance to the possibilities that every member has to contribute.

Certainly, contemporary art has embraced hybrid forms of action. Something has changed in the art world that has been pushing artists to rearrange the rules of the game, and to search for new ways of bridging practices. Nevertheless, ideas regarding the roles of the moving image, body on stage and marionette have remained quite the same. If, in the very beginning of cinema, artists were concerned with representing places, objects and daily actions, the focus gradually shifted to the story being told by actors. To this day, actors continue to follow scripted texts most of the time. *R.O.O.M.*, on the other hand, moves away from typical staging and the idea that artistic practices and languages are autonomous, and allows its narrative to be emerged from the interactions between the marionette, moving images and the body of the actress, all which hold equal importance. The company's artists are concerned with what constitutes drama and



are working to make it operate at a level where the scenic apparatus does not depend on anything but itself.

This article aims to contribute to the discussion on how to create narratives that can be presented on stage in unexpected ways. In this regard, *Meinhardt Krauss Feigl* is a pertinent example, important contributor and reference for developing our thoughts on the creation of new scenic processes. By refusing to privilege one character's leading role to the detriment of another, artists Iris Meinhardt, Michael Krauss, Thorsten Meinhardt and Oliver Feigl make it possible to imagine a world in which the quest for the privilege of a few is not the starting point for narrative building, whether on stage or in our daily lives. Perhaps a reflection on the projects and research that attempt to reorganize hierarchies could lie out a path that leads to new sorting procedures on stage and in other spheres of social life.



Notes

¹ The play's trailer is available at <<https://vimeo.com/63660153>>.

² This is a concept that derives from mostly collaborative practices, in which the text is the starting point and not an end of itself, despite its center role. The aesthetic device has been used by many theatre collectives, a practice based on an ensemble approach to acting, named group theatre.

³ The character is understood here as deriving from the transformations in theatre around the turn of the nineteenth century, into the twentieth century, that is, the character without a well defined identity, changing status continually. Despite the fact that the character is complex, the purpose of this text is not to attain to those complexities, and we can address you to authors as Robert Abirached (1997) about the different dimensions that constitute a character; Jean-Pierre Ryngaert (1996), concerning the interchanging roles between the character that performs an action and the character that is the object of discourse; and Jean-Pierre Sarrazac (2006) on the absence of identity of a character that derives from the multiplicity of voices that constitute it.

⁴ The word device relates to the technical apparatus belonging to a specific artistic practice.

⁵ Because software and projection devices are still very expensive, these resources are a privilege of few countries - in Europe: Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries. Most times, visual impact is preferred over narrative, conducing to light shows and impressive special effects that resemble the largest cinematic productions.

⁶ Text has been the predominant device in western theatre ever since the greek classics. Among a series of works on this matter we highlight Jean Jacques Roubine (1998) and Marvin Carlson's Theories of the Theatre.

⁷ Available at <<http://w-h-s.fi>>.

⁸ Available at <www.hotelmodern.nl>.

⁹ In this sense it is indifferent what element the director has chosen to highlight - the text, actor, moving image or any other - since what is important to note are the works that try the blur the boundaries of the leading forces that exist in tradition. Even if most contemporary production are founded on a dramatic art centered on the stage and not the text, what we care to highlight are the hierarchical correspondences between the dramatic elements.

¹⁰ There are two commonly used terms in film that describe the gradual appearance of an image (fade in) and its opposite, the gradual darkening of an image (fade out). Traditionally these are used to mark the passage from one scene to another.



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