




**INCENDIARY PUPPETS:  
Reflections on the Artistic Trajectory of the Pigmalião Escultura que Mexe**

MARIONETES INCENDIÁRIAS:  
reflexões sobre a trajetória artística do grupo Pigmalião Escultura que Mexe

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### **Incendiary Puppets:**

#### **Reflections on the Artistic Trajectory of Pigmalhão Escultura que Mexe**

**Abstract:** This article discusses the trajectory of the group Pigmalhão Escultura que Mexe, reflecting on their theatrical practice and recognizing ways in which animated forms have become visibility tools, opening spaces for political reflection in their performances. The text focuses on identifying the group's main characteristics and recalling aspects of its history, seeking perpendicular points between the motivations of their social context and the content of the works adapted to the stage. The article incorporates elements of participatory research, using observation and documentary analysis as instruments, along with bibliographic consultation, to outline a reflection on their 18 years of collective work grounded in an active dialogue between art, philosophy, and politics.

**Keywords:** puppet theater; political aspects; theatrical aesthetics; Pigmalhão Escultura que Mexe.

### **Marionetes Incendiárias:**

#### **reflexões sobre a trajetória artística do grupo Pigmalhão Escultura que Mexe**

**Resumo:** O artigo discorre sobre a trajetória do grupo Pigmalhão Escultura que Mexe, refletindo sobre o seu fazer teatral e reconhecendo alguns modos com que as formas animadas se tornaram ferramentas de visibilidade para a abertura de espaços de reflexão política em seus espetáculos. O texto se encarrega de identificar as principais características do grupo e rememorar alguns aspectos de sua história, procurando por pontos perpendiculares entre as motivações do seu contexto social e o conteúdo das obras transpostas para a cena. O trabalho traz elementos de uma pesquisa participante, utilizando como instrumentos a observação e a análise documental, além das consultas bibliográficas, para esboçar uma reflexão sobre os 18 anos de trabalho coletivo alicerçado em um diálogo ativo entre a arte, a filosofia e a política.

**Palavras-Chave:** teatro de animação; aspectos políticos; estética teatral; Pigmalhão Escultura que Mexe.



## 1 Introduction

Pigmalião Escultura que Mexe (PIGMALIÃO, 2025) is a theater group founded in the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Navigating the intersection of Visual Arts and Performing Arts, the group has built a trajectory in Puppet Theater, in which philosophy and politics permeate its productions. Their poetic language explores the expressive potential of animated forms as objects of aesthetic appreciation. Mikel Dufrenne (2002, p. 23-31) conceives the aesthetic object as an idea embodied in a sensible form. By enabling a free interplay between imagination and intellect, while simultaneously invoking both sensible and significant dimensions, the puppet seems to mobilize the viewer's soul more immediately than any other object. By means of this poetic appeal to reason, when the image is charged with structures of meaning, the Pigmalião group seeks to stimulate active audience participation in the construction of dialectical, reflective, and critical interpretations of their own realities.

Image 1 - Collage with productions from Pigmalião



Source: Group archives, 2022

The group's repertoire currently includes eight productions (*Seu Geraldo Voz e Violão*/2008, *A Filosofia na Alcova*/2011, *O Quadro de Todos Juntos*/2014, *Mordaz*/2016, *Macunaíma Gourmet*/2017-2023, *Brasil*/2018-2021, *Elefanteatro*/2023, and *Fábulas Antropofágicas para Dias Fascistas*/2023), two performance interventions (*Mendigo Marrom*/2008 and *Bira e Bedé*/2010), and over ten workshops and creative labs, having toured several cities in Brazil and abroad. Since its founding in 2007, Pigmalião has been committed to developing its own discourse. In this pursuit,



the group strives to ground its work in Puppet Theater made for adults, promoting a perception distanced from the idea that this language is inherently associated to children's theater. The design, construction, and manipulation of the puppets aim to move away from childlike caricature and instead immerse themselves in realistic mimicry. The refinement of its puppets—regarded as sculptures, as the name of the group suggests—aims at the philosophical effects of aesthetic pleasure as proposed by Dufrenne:

The experience of beauty invites philosophy to reflect on the unified meaning of the word form (or also of the word structure), that is, on the relationship between the sensible form given as Gestalt signifier, proper to the aesthetic object, and the rational form elaborated by formalisms that, in order to understand it, replace the real object with an ideal one (Dufrenne, 2002, p. 28).

Dufrenne (2002, p. 56) used the metaphor of mirrors to speak of a transcendence of reality towards an unreality that may represent an ideal. Thus, art does not imitate life, but idealizes a new world. Each singular world constructed on stage becomes a possible world. Puppets act as signifying structures of these imaginable realities—bodies that appear alive, yet are not human, becoming alter egos of those who animate them, behaving as simulacra or substitutes for our individual consciousness to be externalized. The puppet, thus, becomes a mirror of humanity. In dialogue with Bakhtin's thought (1997, p. 32-3), the mirror does not show us as we are, but rather presents an inverted image; in it, we see how we are perceived by society. This makes the puppet transcend the individual and portrays who we are in relation to the collective, thus igniting its political role as a site of "reflection" of ourselves in relation to others.

From within, it is difficult to perceive ourselves as part of a whole. Therefore, we project ourselves "outward" using aesthetic creation. For Mikhail Bakhtin (1997, p. 24), the author projects themselves outward into their work in search of closure and completeness: by becoming other, they can judge themselves through the eyes of the world. We judge ourselves based on the value others assigns to us, because in doing so we step outside ourselves and transcend our own consciousness: we visualize our finitude, that which remains after we are gone. And why might the puppet surpass the actor on stage to promote this outsideness? Perhaps because the puppet is no one until the actor-puppeteer and the audience endow it with existence. The puppet is a universal shell that, even when full of pictorial and sculptural values, can only simulate self-awareness with the participation of the artist "author" and the spectator "author." Thus, the puppet's realization on stage necessarily involves a process of integration, to some degree, between the "Self" and the "Other"—entities that diverge yet complement each other, forming a dynamic that seems to synthesize the dialectic of existence, of life in society, of Politics, and of Art.



## 2 Contemporary Theater

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2009) wondered what it means to be contemporary. Following Friedrich Nietzsche's footsteps, he associated the concept with a kind of temporal disjunction—a misalignment that enables one to visualize their own time from a certain distance, and thus perceive it more clearly. This perception would be rooted more in the darkness than in the lights of the era: "contemporary is precisely the one who knows how to see this darkness, who is able to write by dipping the pen into the obscurity of the present" (Agamben, 2009, p. 63).

Professor and researcher Jean-Pierre Ryngaert views Contemporary Theater as one that does not readily reveal itself by means of reading alone, requiring from the reader a "true cooperation for meaning to emerge" (Ryngaert, 1998, p. 3). He also characterizes this new theater as "obscurantist," in the sense that it does not lay everything out for the spectator. As a result, it is often criticized for being difficult to comprehend, challenging Aristotelian premises and expectations.

Katia Canton (2009, p. 15) uses the concept of "skewed narratives" to describe this new trend that reconnects with life and with social, political, historical, ecological, media-related, and ethical issues of the world. However, it does so using storytelling forms that use collage, fragmentation, repetitions, and layering, often without resolving their own plots. If Modernism focused on creating synthetic and abstract art that displaced the spectator from ordinary and everyday meanings, Contemporary Art reintroduces narratives from a non-linear perspective, enabling multiple interpretations to emerge with the spectator's engagement.

From a more technical perspective, researcher Henryk Jurkowski (2000) says that Contemporary Puppet Theater was driven by modernist movements that led to a reinvention of the scenic space and the presence of the actor-puppeteer's body, now visible to the audience. The language transformed into interdisciplinary, interactive, transcultural, and technological proposals, exploring the puppet both as a fictional scenic subject and as a real object. Hybridism and heterogeneity have become prominent adjectives of Contemporary Puppet Theater.

For all these reasons, I believe that the work from *Pigmalhão* aligns with the main characteristics of Contemporary Theater, as it aims, with its dramaturgies and puppets, to "neutralize" the "lights" of its era to unveil its obscurantisms (Agamben, 2009, p. 63), building "skewed narratives" (Kanton, 2009, p. 15) that approach and distance themselves from reality, entrusting the audience with the constraints of their own understanding (Ryngaert, 1998, p. 3) and exploring different relationships between the puppet, the actor-puppeteer, and the staging space (Jurkowski, 2000).



### 3 Political Theater

For Jacques Rancière (2005), the categorical divisions of historical periods are merely changes in aesthetic regimes, that is, new ways of sharing the sensible. The word “sharing” is crucial in the author’s thought, as it is problematized in its translation process (Rancière, 2005, p. 7), referring to something in common that is distributed among individualities. This definition resonates with the very concept of the political by confronting contradictions between individual and collective interests, as well as the rights and duties of public and private life. Theater, as a language that articulates the statement of an artist or collective in a public space, would thus constitute a political action, manifesting its aesthetic politicization because it involves collective sharing and, concurrently, something aesthetic (Rancière, 2005, p. 20).

Hans-Thies Lehmann, in turn, believes that the debate over whether Art and Theater are political or not is no longer relevant and that, given the speed of the media, theater struggles to denounce societal abuses, now resorting in a much indirectly to political themes. Thus, he argues that one should look for the politics of theater in the way signs are used, changing how the spectator perceives issues, and suggests that “the politics of theater is a politics of perception” (Lehmann, 1999, p. 424). The author highlights theatrical art as the utopia of another life, thus becoming a fruitful laboratory for the perceptual experience of resistance, transgression of taboos, promotion of ruptures, and destitution of political categories. Here, Lehmann’s thinking meets that of Rancière, when the latter speaks of “aesthetic acts as configurations of experience, which enable new ways of feeling and induce new forms of political subjectivity” (Rancière, 2005, p. 11).

According to André Carreira (2010), in the 1990s, Brazilian theater groups moved away from militant projects inherent to the periods of dictatorship and the country’s redemocratization, and instead tended toward seeking new models of collective work, sustainable alternatives for the group, and the creation of new aesthetics. Fernando Mencarelli (2016, p. 6) expands this perspective by analyzing theater in Minas Gerais and emphasizing the importance of having headquarters—fixed locations where groups develop long-term work within the community and the artistic scene, “seeking the sharing of experiences in the fields of training, experimentation, and creation, which consolidated the commitment to a group ethic understood as a cultural agent.”

Leandro Alves da Silva, from the group Fuzuê Teatro de Animação, reflects on the political exercise that begins within the very structures of collectives:

Beyond this more internal sphere of daily coexistence among artists in the process of building collectivities, the groups also function as territories where the experience of another form of democratic sociability is constantly tested and established—even if often ephemeral, either because some experiences are short-lived or because they are in constant transformation. Therefore, we can think of an important political dimension of these artistic modes of existence as resistance territories, where other possibilities of participation, democracy, equality, and citizenship are explored. More than “talking about” this other possible society, the collective itself becomes a laboratory for its micropolitical exercise. And





many Puppet Theater groups are also articulated as collectives that foreground the struggle for a more just and democratic society as the guiding principle and central theme of their artistic work (Silva, 2020, p. 81).

It becomes evident, from the perspectives of Carreira, Mencarelli, and Silva, along with the reflections by Lehmann and Rancière, that the political character of contemporary theater groups lies within the fabric of these new models of collective work and relationship, in the creation and affirmation of new aesthetics and in the enactment of cultural agency between artists and the community. These aspects are manifested in the artistic productions and group theater structure of Pigmalhão Escultura que Mexe since its founding (2007) and the establishment of its headquarters (2012) in the Colégio Batista neighborhood of Belo Horizonte. The group fosters innovative collective work that currently brings together over 30 individuals, including management members, actors, producers, technical staff, and guest artists. Its projects range from the production and touring of performances to the sharing of its physical space and technical knowledge in workshops and artistic residencies with other artists and the wider community.

#### **4 The Pigmalhão Escultura Que Mexe theater**

Throughout the group's trajectory, its dramaturgy and aesthetic approach are conceived simultaneously, leaving in the air the well-known question of what came first: the chicken or the egg, the drawing or the word, the text or the puppet? Eduardo Felix, as the dramaturgical leader and general and artistic director of the performances, orchestrates a creative process in which word, image, politics, and movement merge and are built together into Pigmalhão's theatrical proposals, catalyzed by the technical and expressive capacities of the artists participating in each work.

I realize how each of the group's performances became a foundation for those yet to come, building a cumulative path of reflections that also shaped Pigmalhão's own style and discourse. Its trajectory from 2007 to 2025 stands as a small sample of what happened in Brazil and the world during the same period—seen through the eyes of a theater collective—encompassing a time frame that, coincidentally, begins and ends under the same president's administration. Lula governed from 2003 to 2006 (first term) and from 2007 to 2010 (second term). Pigmalhão began its trajectory at the beginning of his second term (2007) and begins working on *A Filosofia na Alcova* at its end (2010). In 2018, when Judge Sérgio Moro ordered Lula's imprisonment, Pigmalhão was staging the play *Brasil*. In 2023, Lula assumed his third term, Sérgio Moro was under investigation (Luz; Campos, 2023), and Pigmalhão was preparing for the premiere of *Fábulas Antropofágicas para Dias Fascistas* at the *Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes de Charleville-Mézières* (France), also performing internationally at the *Festival Internacional de Marionetas e Formas Animadas* in Lisbon in 2024 amid a global surge of far-right politics. Also in 2023, the group premiered the street show *Elefanteatro*, a project born out the social distancing



demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing issues related to migration processes that continue to fuel political and social discussions worldwide.

It is also evident that the timeline of the group's dramaturgies did not always align with the pace of the headlines: at times, they seemed to predict what was yet to come; at others, they questioned what had already passed. As Walter Benjamin states, "history is a time saturated with the now" (Benjamin, 1987, p. 229). Hence, the reflections and themes of a performance continue to evolve, drifting between past and present in the uncertain sea of events, of vision, and of the blinders worn by its spectators. This is also a result of the extended gestation period of creative processes, especially when it involves the construction of complex puppets. From the moment an idea is conceived, until it becomes a written proposal and project, it is submitted for approval and funding, and finally begins to be built, assembled, and rehearsed; the process can take anywhere from two to four or five years. The play *Quadro de Todos Juntos*, for example, had its first creative impetus in 2011. It premiered in 2014 and had its main major tour in 2017. Over all these years, not only did the "temperatures" of the world shift, but much of what was initially conceived morphed into other meanings, shaped by the succession of new events, headlines, tragedies, scandals, and power struggles. One need only recall that the play's premiere in 2014 took place during the heated re-election of Dilma Rousseff's leftist government, while its penultimate performance, in 2022, occurred amid the conservative clamors with fascist overtones under Jair Bolsonaro's administration. In this sense, we return to the metaphor of art as a mirror, always reflecting what lies before it: as the scenery changes, so does the reflected image.

Returning to previous reflections on Contemporary Theater as one that sees in the dark, we might consider that the group's performances have gained deeper meanings over time, because there was, at the moment of their creation, a kind of opaque intuition of what was to come. Jacques Rancière (2005, p. 44) identifies two distinct types of political subjectivity when he unpacks the dual meaning of the word "avant-garde": one refers to that which confronts current politics, suggesting transformation; the other refers to a certain capacity to anticipate and foresee what is yet to come.

This critical and prospective character of theater, as mentioned by Rancière—at times acting as an anaphora, at others as a cataphora of its era—is debatable within the group's repertoire. Philosophy in the Boudoir was already addressing abortion with its foam fetuses back in 2011. In September 2020, Damares Alves, then Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, allegedly took action to prevent a legally approved abortion for a 10-year-old girl (Jiménez, 2020), who had been raped by her uncle. Likewise, *O Quadro de Todos Juntos*, a play that has addressed family policies since 2014, was "reheated" in 2019 by the Bolsonaro government's rhetoric in defense of family, morality, and traditional values (Lisboa, 2018). The play *Mordaz*, which staged a portrayal of corruption and a "coup" in early 2016, would see, in August of that same year, the President of Brazil impeached and replaced by her vice-president—an accomplice in the machinery behind her ousting. *Macunaíma Gourmet* was born amidst the unfolding of this process, its development closely intertwined with the chapters of Brazil's political narrative, often confronting them head-





on. The scandal that gave rise to its dramaturgy—in which the discovery of expired meats from large slaughterhouses were ground up, processed with cardboard, and sold for consumption (SETE [...], 2017)—is barely remembered today, but corresponds to so many other similar incidents that bring new meanings in the present. In 2023, for example, Indigenous issues became a central topic in the news due to debates surrounding the Time Frame Law (Coelho, 2023), which added new interpretations to the iconic Brazilian modernist work once again being reimagined through *Pigmalião*'s lenses.

## 5 Final considerations

Theater is a tool for reflecting on our surroundings, engaging in processes of representing reality; but like a hall of mirrors, it distorts its forms to promote new ways of seeing and to create space for new perspectives of understanding what happens around us. I conclude that the language of Puppet Theater adds another layer of reflection on stage, contributing to the creation of a showcase that instigates the gaze and disrupts the preformatted images in our minds.

Throughout this analysis, I understand that the search for more realistic features in animated forms has led *Pigmalião*'s performances to achieve quite the opposite: a paradox in which the more realistic the animated world built on stage becomes, the more unreal it appears, resounding in a polysemy within the spectator's mind and contributing to the deconstruction of images forcibly carved into our consciousness. Ryngaert (1998) had already stated that the theatrical text is not as an imitation of reality, but rather a new construction of it. At the same time—and perhaps this is the greatest of all paradoxes—this strange, unreal, and deconstructed world seen through our retinas somehow becomes familiar. For instance, we perceive a strange sense of familiarity when we see the legendary character Macunaíma eating a “McDonald's” (*Macunaíma Gourmet*, 2017), or when we see sharp-toothed rats resembling figures from our news broadcasts (*Mordaz*, 2016), or even when a family of pigs remind us of the family portrait sitting on our shelf (*O Quadro de Todos Juntos*, 2014). From this invention of other worlds, empowered by animated forms, I believe that Theater is still potent in its political activism, even if, at times, it merely offers an escape from an unhealthy and alienating reality for the few willing to engage with it.

In our relationships, we resort to words to explain thoughts and feelings, conjuring through them images that enables us to express what goes on inside as closely as possible. We speak of someone's powerlessness, we recount the violence we've experienced, we compare things to animals. Animated forms manage to recreate before our eyes the feats that only exist in our imagination, using play on proportions, the breaking of physical and natural boundaries, and the possibility of “painting” certain signs on stage with greater intensity. Rancière (2005, p. 18) uses the expression “painted signs” to describe the movement of bodies on stage. Puppets and masks then emerge as these painted signs, appearing sometimes as an index, sometimes as an icon, sometimes as a



symbol, almost giving the words within dramaturgies a three-dimensionality that offers a deeper connection with the spectator. Thus, puppets and masks tend to function as a kind of *trompe l'oeil*<sup>1</sup> for decoding our times: they are high-speed lanes, placing the spectator on a faster track of associations and references that give visibility to political and social issues of our time. Puppets, masks, and objects function as chiasmus, chimeras, quarrels, totems, mummies, metaphors, signs. We have at our disposal all these possibilities of animated forms, and so many others, to lift the veils drawn over the eyes of our times.

At Pigmalião Escultura que Mexe, we are a company. But we are also friends, and we are family, because we share the same dreams, rooms, and daily lives. Sometimes we are a couple. Therapist and patient. Boss and employee. We are several institutions rolled into one. Having a theater group is like conducting a daily political rehearsal. How do we value what each person earns? How do we stay together and well? How do we build a dream with several hands? We place ourselves in a continuous reflection process. We are individuals within the micropolitics of a group and within the macropolitics of a metropolis, of a vast country, of a vast world. We use puppets that “reflect” to reflect upon ourselves. We reverberate our feelings and thoughts in our puppets and performances. The pronouns *I* and *We* blur along this path built by many hands. I do not want to be individual. I want to be collective. And so we walk together on this road of art, struggle, and resistance.

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1 A technical-artistic resource used to create an optical illusion, as indicated by the French meaning of the expression: *tromper*, “to deceive,” *l’oeil*, “the eye.” Either by the use of realistic details or of perspective and/or chiaroscuro, an image represented with the aid of *trompe l’oeil* creates in the spectator the illusion that they are facing a real three-dimensional object, rather than two-dimensional. The goal is, therefore, to change the perception of those who see the work. The term, although initially applied to paintings of periods in which Naturalism prevailed—for example, in Ancient Greece and the Renaissance—was generalized in the critical vocabulary and now refers to any form of accentuated illusionism employed in the arts (TROMPE [...], 2025).



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