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PUPPETS, ACTORS AND DIRECTORS: EDWARD GORDON CRAIG AND THE EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDE

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The work of Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) occupies an ambivalent position within British modernism. The son of Helen Terry and the architect E. W. Godwin, Craig first worked in the theatre as an actor with Henry Irving's company at the Lyceum. By 1909, having directed several operas, he was ready to abandon England and indeed one its great theatrical families, and settle in Italy for the rest of his life.[1] By turning himself into an exile —a quintessential modernist stance— Craig consciously places his work within the context of the European *avant-garde*. He also distances himself from both the Victorian actor-manager tradition in the theatre and the modernist experiments in poetic drama conducted by Eliot, Yeats and later Auden and Isherwood.[2] His approach to the "art of the theatre" not only makes him unique within the Anglo-American tradition but it also places him alongside European figures such as Reinhardt, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Artaud. To see Craig's work within the context of the European *avant-garde* is to highlight some of the visionary qualities that have inspired such contemporary theatrical producers as Peter Brook. It may also point towards some of the contradictions and sometimes utopian impossibilities that Craig's theoretical work presents.

Unlike any other theatrical project in Britain at the time, Craig's work embraced all the concerns of the *avant-garde*, exploring the relations of theatre, religion and politics, connecting with the traditions of oral performance, establishing relationships with the "theatres of the Orient". While such preoccupations can be found in the poetic dramas of Eliot, Yeats or Wyndham Lewis, the whole experiment in Britain remained stubbornly

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literary, initiated by writers and not "men of the theatre" —Craig's term for those great directors of the European *avant-garde* who sought to create a language of performance that would "liberate" theatre from a parasitic relationship to the written text. The "rise of the director" can be seen as a quintessentially modernist phenomenon, in which a new charismatic leader figure resurrected the collective dimension of theatre. Ritualistic, synaesthetic, quasi-democratic, *avant-garde* theatre on the Continent offered an exciting platform to stage experiment in the "total work of art", while at the same time renegotiating the complex relationships between aesthetics and politics. It was with this dimension of the modernist stage that Edward Gordon Craig engaged when he left Britain.

W. B. Yeats's experiments with the forms of Japanese Noh drama, stimulated by Ezra Pound's work on Ernest Fenellosa's papers, were also significantly influenced by Craig, the designer for Yeats's plays for the Abbey Theatre.[3] In his designs for *The Hour Glass* Craig first used his subsequently famous screens, as a means of creating a non-naturalistic space. Unlike Yeats, however, Craig was not a poet but an "artist of the theatre" —another of the many phrases Craig invented in search of a name for the director's role. Craig's aphoristically-expressed theories —his desire to replace the actor by the *Ubermarionette*, his advocacy of the total rule of the director, and his wish to see women banished from the stage— created a reputation of which any serious critical attempt to historicise his project must take account. Known as the man who hated actors, whose screen designs for the famous Moscow *Hamlet* fell over, who was impossible to work with and who treated women badly, Craig appears as a charming but difficult Englishman abroad, a modernist *flâneur* who travelled around Europe recording his experiences in his journal, *The Mask*, usually in letters to himself under various pseudonyms. He was also one of the few English directors to work with Reinhardt, Stanislavsky, Isadora Duncan and Eleonora Duse, to meet the Italian futurists, and to create a body of performance theory that has remained influential until today. He also flirted with fascism while in Italy, and tried unsuccessfully to interest Mussolini in funding his ambitious theatrical schemes. By contrast, he persuaded Count Kessler, the "red" count of the Weimar Republic, to fund several such projects. Craig was never an articulate or "theoretical" fascist, but his search for a totalising theory which would restore a collective dimension to the theatre and construct the quasi-religious figure of the director certainly attracted him to the ideology of fascism. He wrote in his Daybook of 1908-1909: "I want to study the theatre. I do not want to waste time producing plays [...]. I want to

leave behind me the seeds for the Art, for it does not yet exist. Such seeds are not discovered in a moment" (1908: 1).

Like Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and other modernist directors, Craig spotted very early the need for a language of both performance and pedagogy. The "art of the theatre", reconfigured for probably the first time in history as the art of directing and acting as opposed to the art of writing plays, was in search of an epistemology.[4] Modernism effected a crucial shift from the Aristotelian paradigm of theatre. From Aristotle to Nietzsche, whose *The Birth of Tragedy* influenced many experimenters of the period, Craig included, theatre had been read as an essentially written, textual practice, for all Aristotle's interest in *mise-en-scène* and related matters. The notion that theatre is "produced" and not simply written, that it involves "reception", and that it occupies a civic space, are all ideas that spring from viewing theatre as performance rather than literature. Acting, stage design, lighting, the role of the audience, the theatrical space —all become relevant to the way theatre happens. Theatre is no longer seen as a translation or simple embodiment of a play-text. The new view proposes theatre as a distinct discursive practice, independent of the text, and requiring its practitioners to acquire and deploy distinctive new skills.

It is no coincidence that most of the director-theorists of the period founded schools and established their own methods of training. Indeed, it was only as a result of their re-working of the institutions and practices of theatre that their roles as directors could come into existence. Craig followed this pattern, establishing a school in Florence (The School for the Art of the Theatre) and creating and publishing from there one of the period's most important magazines on theatre, *The Mask* (1908-1929). The journal, which combined the "book beautiful" tradition of English 1890s aestheticism with the more futurist notions of continental design, deploying a rhetoric which was radical and aphoristic, couched in the style of a *manifesto*, was a site of Craigian thought and experiment for almost twenty years. It was here that Craig conducted his debates with the Italian futurists, recorded his work with Stanislavsky in Moscow, and mounted his furious attacks on naturalism. The "Futurist Manifesto on the Variety Theatre", by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, appeared in the pages of *The Mask* in 1913, in one of its first English translations. Of this, Craig wrote (*The Mask* 1913: 88-193): "I want you to remember that it is not essential to our understanding in any way to mistake the Futurists as a band of wild madmen or silly fools. They are neither. They are quite serious and strong fellows".

Later in the same article, however, he comments, with typical contradictoriness: "The Futurist Manifesto is the most impertinent piece of ignorance that ever a set of courageous and frisky young men trumped up to deceive themselves with while occupied with other and more profound thoughts".

Craig's quarrel with the Italian futurists was not about their politics or their provocative style. It was rather about their adoration of technology, and their total embracing of modernity. Craig's way to tackle what he saw as the "problem" of modernity was to seek to create a stage that was highly stylised, ritualistic, and reminiscent of the Wagnerian "total work of art". The futurists' celebrations of modernity seemed alien to him; his revivals of the collective and ritualistic dimensions of theatre owed far more to the influence of German idealism. For all his proclamations about banishing the actor from the stage and replacing him with a *marionette*, he himself never actually made what the futurists unashamedly called "robot plays". The two movements with parallels to Craig's work, Italian futurism and Russian constructivism, both celebrate the modern. In both, technology appears as an emancipatory force. Craig, nurtured in the aestheticist arts and crafts tradition of the previous century, was a technophobe. One way of situating these different projects in relation to each other is by contrasting the theories and pedagogies of acting that are a constitutive part of all three.

Central to modernist theories of acting is the "puppet and actor" debate. The argument is as old as Plato,[5] and can sometimes be read as a reconfiguration of his attack on the theatre. The stage is held to create "a double fantasy", a world twice removed from the ideal by the operations of mimesis, and the process of acting is seen as corrupting the actor. Walter Pater wrote in *The Mask* that "Contact with the stage, almost throughout its history, presents itself as a kind of touchstone, to bring out the bizzarrerie, the theatrical tricks and contrasts of the actual world" (1911: 174). The "bizzarrerie" that in another cultural context might be read as exciting, even magical (the actor perceived as *shaman*), here leads to the designation of the actors themselves as unreliable, unstable material for art, since the process of mimesis "contaminates" the actor, body and soul. Craig proclaimed in his famous essay, "The Actor and the *Ubermarionette*", that:

> Acting is not an art. It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist. For accident is an enemy of the artistic. Art is the exact antithesis of Pandimoniun [sic], and Pandimonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents; Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials. (*The Mask* 1908: 3)

This is a legacy Craig inherited not only from the aestheticist 1890s but also from such romanticist writers as Kleist, whose essay, *Uber das Marionettentheater*, saw its first English translation in *The Mask*. Walter Pater, Arthur Symons and Oscar Wilde all appeared in the pages of the journal to support the case for a theatre of puppets. The *Petit Théâtre des Marionettes*, run by Maurice Bouchor at the Galérie Vivienne (1889-1894), had acquired almost cult status among English and European artists at the time. Oscar Wilde wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Daily Telegraph* in 1892:

> I saw lately, in Paris, a performance by certain puppets of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, in M. Maurice Bouchor's translation. Miranda was the image of Miranda, because an artist had so fashioned her; and Ariel was true Ariel, because so had she been made. Their gestures were quite sufficient, and the words that seemed to come from their little lips were spoken by poets who had beautiful voices. It was a delightful performance, and I remember it still with delight, though Miranda took no notice of the flowers I sent her after the curtain fell. (in Hart-Davies 1962: 311)

The artificiality of the puppet, as opposed to the lifelikeness of the actor, was what appealed in such theatre. The puppet is seen as the figure that will ritualise the modern theatre and connect it to the "great" theatres of the past. Rather than celebrate technology, Craig's *Ubermarionette* will help to re-introduce the sacred onto the modern stage. In an issue of *The Mask* devoted solely to the *marionette*, Craig wrote, under a pseudonym:

> This number of *The Mask* being dedicated principally to the Marionette, we have asked Mr. Gordon Craig, who has studied him so closely and knows him so well, to act as Master of Ceremonies and make the Introduction; and so together with Mr. Anatole France, "Yorick," Mr. Arthur Symons and others of those who believe in "the majesty of the marionettes," make better known to many who have long been estranged from these wonderful little things which, with centuries of life behind them and centuries before, have "in them something of the divine" and "live with the life of the immortal gods". (*The Mask* 1912: 1)

These "divine" creatures could also, of course, help to construct the "godly" figure of the all-powerful director. A major function of Craig's writings on the *Ubermarionette* was to make the case for the directorial role.

The Russian constructivists, and particularly Meyerhold, provide a fascinating parallel to Craigian experiment.[6] Meyerhold's theoretical background was Russian formalism, which he combined with Marxism and Taylorism to produce a highly original notion of theatre in general, and acting in particular, which designated both as forms of labour. This view might seem to be in direct conflict with Craig's concept of theatre as ritual and magic, a force that could transcend modernity. However, Meyerhold was heavily influenced by Craig, whose "First Dialogue On the Art of the Theatre" had been pirated and published in Russia in 1906. Meyerhold wrote in 1909 that "It is remarkable that in the very first year of this new century E. G. Craig flung a challenge to the naturalistic theatre [...] this young Englishman is the first to set up the initial guideposts on the new road of the Theatre" (in Senelick 1981: 114). Craig was aware of Meyerhold's work but the two men did not to meet until 1935, just before Meyerhold's disappearance and subsequent murder by the Stalinist regime.

They never worked together, but the similarities between them are striking. Both men had read Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in the early years of the century. Both experimented with theatres that were visionary and totalising, and had both aesthetic and philosophical purposes; both made utopian claims for their work. The shape of their utopias were, however, very different. Meyerhold, a proclaimed Marxist, embarked on his modernisation of the stage in the framework of a utopian romanticism inflected by theories of technology and faith in revolution. Craig, the anti-modern, saw his "new" theatre as a way of becoming more involved with what he called the "great theatres of the past". A telling instance of their different attitudes to the past appears in their responses to the *Commedia dell'Arte,* the Italian popular theatre of the 15th-17th centuries.[7] For Meyerhold, this was a perfect example of "organic" popular form; most importantly, it gave him ideas for his theories on stylised acting and what he called the "carnivalisation" of the theatre. In a classically modernist gesture, followed by Picasso and others, he appropriated the *Commedia* to his new aesthetic. For Craig, the *Commedia* was not a model of theatre to be appropriated, but one to be revered. *The Mask* is full of scholarly articles on the *Commedia*, arguably the most comprehensive accounts available in English at the time.[8] Nowhere, though, do we see Craig invoking the *Commedia* in the context of his own work

— not even for the construction of the *Ubermarionette*, where the potential for adaptation is obvious.

For both men, the idea of the puppet offered a way of resolving the particular difficulties that theatre sets in the way of the dramatist or director committed to the exploration and representation of abstract form. The physicality and "naturalness" of the human form make it resistant to abstraction and stylisation. By contrast, the puppet allows the objective representation of abstract form on stage without tainting it with the subjectivity of psychological expressivism. For Meyerhold, supremely, the puppet provided a model for a mode of training. Mechanical, reproducible, functional, it could help transform the theatre from high art into a mode of production that resembled other forms of labour, ensuring, in Meyerhold's words, that "The work of the actor in an industrial society will be regarded as a means of production vital to the proper organisation of the labour of every citizen of that society" (in Braun 1969: 120).

The various traditions in puppetry, east and west, provided him with a basis from which to create his elaborate system of training, *biomechanics*. This was an attempt to mechanise the human form, to make it trainable, and hence turn it into appropriate material for a constructivist form of theatre —one that, as in constructivist painting, could deal with the materiality of people and things. Rather than ban the human form from the stage, Meyerhold sought to break it down, dissociate it from its conventional psychological and biological contexts, and turn it into raw material. This new kind of acting found its model, not its replacement, in the puppet. Meyerhold's experiments completed a full circle which, in the end, returned to the human form:

> The director came to his senses when he realised that there is a limit beyond which there is no alternative but to replace the puppet with a man. But how could he part with the puppet, which had created a world of enchantment with its incomparable movements, its expressive gestures achieved by some magic known to it alone, its angularity which reaches the heights of true plasticity? (in Braun 1969: 128)

The objective of a theatre pedagogy for Meyerhold was to reproduce in the human form the magic, the angularity and the plasticity of the puppet. He believed that "Above all drama is the art of the actor" (in Braun 1969: 128). Craig on the other hand was more interested in consolidating the role of the director. His views on acting are those of Plato: actors distort reality rather

than enhance or comment on it, and acting itself is a decadent and corrupting activity. As late as 1928, he prefaced an article entitled "Flesh, Blood and Marionettes" with a "Nineteenth Century Note" by Joseph Conrad:

> The actors appear to me like a lot of wrong-headed lunatics pretending to be sane. Their malice is stitched with threads. They are disguised and ugly. To look at them breeds in my melancholy soul thoughts of murder and suicide —such is my anger and my loathing of their transparent pretences. There is a taint of subtle corruption in their blank voices, in their blinking eyes, in their grimacing faces, in their light false passion, in the words that have been learned by heart. But I love a marionette show. Marionettes are beautiful, —especially those of the old kind with wires, thick as my little finger [...] heroic, superhuman, fascinating [...]. I love the marionettes that are without life, and that come so near to being immortal! (*The Mask* 1928: 76)

While the futurists were writing and performing robot plays, Meyerhold experimenting with his *biomechanics*, and the Bauhaus mounting the *Triadic Ballet*, Craig turned his back on the modern and nostalgically revived a late-romantic vision of the function of the puppet. Kleist's essay of 1810, referred to above, was his main source of inspiration. Deploying, in the form of a polemic dialogue with a fictitious antagonist, an argument that Craig would later reiterate, Kleist had written that

> however clear his paradox might be he would never persuade me that there could be more grace in a mechanical doll than in the structure of the human body. He replied that a human being was simply incapable of rivalling the marionette in this respect. Only a God could measure himself against matter [...] and this was the point, he said, where both ends of the world's circle fit into each other.[9]

The limitations of the human form are imposed by its materiality; the need, then, is to de-materialise the body of the actor. For Kleist, this was the task of a God; for Craig, it was the work of the director.

Meyerhold, worlds away from both, rather than de-materialise the body of the actor, sought to re-materialise it with a theory of training that could be reproduced and developed. But for Craig, like Kleist, the *marionette* presented an ideal which was not meant to be realised, let alone reproduced. Though he owned the best collection of puppets in Europe (Wyang, Bunraku, Sicilian

and so on), and filled his journals with designs, reproductions and scholarly articles on puppets and traditions of puppetry, he never tried to make the *Ubermarionette* that would displace the actor. Despite his theoretical preference for "men of the theatre", and his radical influence on men such as Meyerhold, Craig never himself perceived the threads that connected his work to the larger context of European experiment. While he was writing on about the graces of the *Ubermarionette*, the futurists, literally just down the road, were performing *marionette* plays. Craig wrote of just such a performance in Florence:

> Just got back from the Teatro dei Piccoli [...] Diavoli. It is quite as bad as you guessed. The music had just about as much form and structure, the colours true futurism, and as ugly as the music, which as usual contained not one sound not displeasing to the ear [...]. Their announcements in the paper spoke of studies in light and rhythm, etc [...] to me the whole thing is like a young girl proposing to play her scales, not well, in public [...] and talking all the while about the "beauty of diatonic sequences" and "harmonic simplicity." That would be funny if anyone else were fooled [...] but perhaps not, since there is never a lack of gulls. (*The Marionette* 1918: 4)

In a turn of phrase that combined his misogyny and his distaste of futurist experimentation, Craig presented his account without the slightest reference to the *marionettes* themselves. He was articulate when talking about puppets of the past, but became vague and general when criticising *marionette* productions of his time. Oddly enough, he showed no hesitation in identifying Henry Irving as the perfect actor/ *marionette*:

> I consider him to have been the greatest actor I have ever seen, and I have seen the best in Italy, France, Russia, Germany, Holland and America. They were all imitable, and yet he was unique. By Irving the Mask and the Marionette were better understood than by all other actors [...]. If you will be an Actor in such a day as this, and if you are an English man, take but one model [...] the masked marionette. (*The Marionette* 1918: 6)

It is impossible to imagine other modernist theatre experimenters accepting Irving as the prototypical *Ubermarionette*. The distinction could not be more clearly exposed. Craig's adherence to the Kleistian tradition sets his *marionette* theory in a quasi-religious context, where the central preference

was for an idealised, abstracted version of human action rather than naturalistic representation. Craig's counterparts in the European *avant-garde*, Meyerhold, the later Stanislavsky, the Italian futurists, the Bauhaus, Dada, found new ways forward. Craig's "theatre of the future" remained rooted in the past. Yet for all its contradictions, failures and confusions, the radical gesture it represented has continued to make itself felt in the work of such key innovators as Grotowski and Brook. In this, Craig's thinking helped build the bridge between the European *avant-garde* and the Anglophone modernist stage.

NOTES

[1] Before leaving for Germany and later Italy he had directed operas and masques: *Dido and Aeneas* (1900); *The Mask of Love* (1901); *Acis and Galatea* (1902), Laurence Housman's nativity play *Bethlehem* (1902), and Ibsen's *The Vikings* (1903).

[2] There is a considerable body of work in Anglophone modernism which can be distinctively characterised as "poetic drama". See Jones, ed. (1960). On Yeats, see Cave, ed. (1997); for the influence of Noh on Yeats see Taylor (1976). For Auden and Isherwood see Mendelson, ed. (1989).

[3] Yeats was a regular contributor to Craig's journal *The Mask*, and Craig in turn reviews the work of Yeats throughout its pages. Yeats appears in *The Mask* in the following issues: Vol. 2, p. 148; Vol. 4, p. 61, p. 161; Vol. 5, p. 2; Vol. 7, p. 137, p. 174; Vol. 9, p. 50; Vol. 10, p. 66; *The Hour Glass*, Vol. 3, no. 4, frontispiece; Vol. 3, pp. 190-192; Vol. 5, pp. 327-346 (play and preface printed); Vol. 7, p. 174; *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (rev), Vol. 8, p. 39; *Plays and Controversies* (rev), Vol. 10, p. 90; *Plays for an Irish Theatre*, illustrated by Edward Gordon Craig, Vol. 4, pp. 342-343 (rev); Vol. 7, pp. 139-140; "The Tragic Theatre" (article), Vol. 3, p. 77.

[4] See Roach (1985) for a discussion of the history of theories of acting.

[5] "So you are interpreters of interpreters", see Plato. *Ion.* 535a; in Russell, ed. (1985).

[6] Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) was one of the visionary theatre makers of the Russian/ Soviet *avant-garde*. He trained under Eisenstein and started his career working with the naturalist director Stanislavsky. In 1921, he set up his own studio, the Moscow State Higher Theatre Workshop, where he sought to create a revolutionary theatre incorporating the latest technological developments. Meyerhold's view of technology as emancipatory is similar to that of Walter Benjamin, who visited him and watched his rehearsals. He had also a major influence on Brecht. In 1937 he was criticised by *Pravda*, and a year later the Meyerhold Theatre was closed down. In 1939 Meyerhold and his wife, Zinaida Raikh, were arrested and later murdered. For many years information about Meyerhold and his life was suppressed. Now there is a Meyerhold Museum in Moscow. See Braun, ed. (1969), and Kleberg (1993).

[7] See Oreglia (1968) and Rudlin (1993).

[8] The impressive coverage of the *Commedia* in *The Mask* is mainly the work of Dorothy Nevile Lees, an Italian scholar. Many of the articles on the *Commedia* signed by Craig were written by Lees. Lees was also Craig's "secretary" in Florence and they had a child together while he still had a wife and family in England. The contribution of Lees to the whole Craigian project has not yet been fully researched. See Taxidou (1998).

[9] Heinrich von Kleist, *Uber das Marionettentheater, Berliner Abendblatter*, c. 1810. Craig printed the first English translation of Kleist's essay (trans. Amedeo Foresti) in *The Marionette,* 1918. *The Marionette*, also produced and edited by Craig, was a leaflet more than a journal. It appeared in 1918 as a substitute for *The Mask*, at a time when Craig had financial difficulties. It dealt more specifically with the lives and histories of puppets. It was also a comic equivalent of *The Mask*.

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MODERNISM IN BLACK AND WHITE: AMERICAN JAZZ IN INTERWAR EUROPE

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I

Anyone at all familiar with the lives of jazz musicians knows that the tenor saxophonist Lester Young never recovered from the experience of his war years. Geoff Dyer's semi-fictional account of that experience in *But Beautiful* feels at once authentic and sufficiently detailed to suggest why Young latterly withdrew into a near-catatonic, drink-fuddled paranoia:

> Exercises in the daybreak cold, men shitting in front of each other, food that made his stomach heave before he even tasted it. Two guys fighting at the foot of his bed, one of then pounding the other's head on the floor until blood spotted his sheets, the rest of the barracks going wild around them. Cleaning out the rust-coloured latrine, the smell of other men's shit on his hands, retching into the bowl as he cleaned it.
> —It's not clean Young, lick it clean.
> —Yes sir. (1991: 14)

What broke one of the greatest of all jazzmen was not the German but the American army. And those who bullied and beat Young loathed him not merely because he was an uppity nigger, but because they suspected that although a married man and adored by women —most famously by Billie Holiday— Pres was a faggot.

There is no space here to offer detailed reasons for this suspicion. I do however need to remark that the American jazz world itself was for the most part aggressively *macho*. Coleman Hawkins, who in the 1930s preceded Young in the tenor chair with the Count Basie orchestra, and who was renowned for the fullness of his tone, for his determination to "cut" any rival,

Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies 20 (1999): 85-101