

# Acting Archives Essays

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## THE MANUSCRIPTS OF *THE ART OF THE THEATRE* BY EDWARD GORDON CRAIG\*

### *A Door to Modernity*

Edward Gordon Craig published *The Art of the Theatre* in the summer of 1905. The book had been already published in Germany in June with the title *Die Kunst des Theatres* (edited and translated by Maurice Magnus, preface by Harry Kessler, Berlin and Leipzig, Seeman); the English edition (Edinburgh and London, Foulis) was published immediately after with an introduction by Craig himself and a preface by Graham Robertson. A Dutch edition followed in 1906, *De kunst van het theatre* (Amsterdam, S. L. Van Looy) with introductions by De Vos, Van Looy and Bauer, and then a non-authorized Russian edition. In 1911, the book became a section of the more extensive *On the Art of the Theatre* (London, Heinemann, 1911). *First dialogue* was added to the title of the section to distinguish it from another dialog found in the book, whose protagonists are the same, a director and a spectator, but whose subjects are different, resulting in a diptych of extraordinary importance.<sup>1</sup>

The year of publication of *The Art of the Theatre* is significant, as we shall see, both for Craig's personal history and for the history of European theatre on which Craig's theories had an extraordinary impact, significantly shaping its future evolution. To cite only two events, 1905 was the year of Max Reinhardt's version of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and, in the same year, Stanislavski invited Meyerhold to direct the first of the studios that were to accompany the activity of the Moscow Art Theatre. Two very different events, but together they give a sense of the ferment that pervaded the European scene. Reinhardt's *Dream* sanctioned directing as an inventive and creative art and established the director's theatre as a feasible productive and artistic system while Meyerhold's workshop instead, was a sign of the need of the theatre to

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<sup>1</sup> In referring to the various editions of the text we have followed the suggestions in L. M. Newman, 'Gordon Craig in Germany', *German Life and Letters*, no. 40 (October 1986), and in the notes to his edition of *The Correspondence of Edward Gordon Craig and Count Harry Kessler*, London, Maney & Son LTD for The Modern Humanities Research Association and The Institute of German Studies University of London, 1995. Newman's indications serve especially to clarify how the first edition of the text was the German one and not the English one, as is commonly believed and as Craig himself suggested in his *Index to the Story of My Days* probably confusing, after many years, the first German edition with the second one, which came out in August 1905, while a third one, which had to include an introduction by Hugo von Hofmannsthal was never published (cf. E. Gordon Craig, *Index to the Story of My Days*, London, Hulton Press, 1957; here we are citing New York, The Viking Press, 1957, p. 275).

research and experiment, something requiring a more secluded and autonomous space in which to investigate the expressive potential of theatrical language. *The Art of the Theatre* fitted perfectly within this context and rapidly became a necessary reference in the evolution of twentieth-century theatre. It is a text which offers a space of theoretical synthesis in which the new tendencies of early twentieth-century theatre find their identity and articulation, and are thus channeled towards Modernity.

From this perspective, Craig's work can be described as the theatre's door to Modernity. Marotti – whose studies are essential for understanding Craig, also on account of close relation between the two—<sup>2</sup> had already evidenced this aspect many years ago, albeit in the context of a more general reflection on director's theatre (of Appia as well as Craig, considered as its founding fathers). For Marotti, Craig's view of directing represented for theatre what the transition from impressionism to symbolism had been for painting, namely the development of a modern theatrical language aimed at reforming its grammatical foundation from an anti-representational perspective.<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, *The Art of the Theatre* paves the way to Modernity, playing a strategic role in the development of contemporary theatre.

At the time, however, not everyone grasped the theoretical leap represented by Craig's book and, among those who did, many criticized his notion of the rejection of literature as the primary source of theatrical language. Many, on the other hand, found in Craig's fifty page booklet and the illustrations that accompanied it a reflection of their own desire for artistic renovation: from Stanislavski who shortly thereafter called Craig to Moscow to co-direct his legendary *Hamlet*, to Reinhardt who carried out with Craig a long and exhausting negotiation for a production that was never realized, to Eleonora Duse who commissioned Craig the scenes of the 1906 production of *Rosmersholm* and planned a future collaboration that failed to materialize.<sup>4</sup> These people did not necessarily agree with all that Craig wrote but were able to appreciate the fact that Craig had brought to the fore a crucial question of contemporary theatre that up to then had not been theoretically addressed. *The Art of the Theatre* instead addressed this issue in very clear terms, using an almost apodictic form, which forced everyone to deal with questions, definitions, and arguments that together represented an extraordinary synthesis of the more innovative experiences of the past decades (starting with Wagner's fundamental work), experiences which emerged from Craig's treatment as transfigured, as "modern".

The impact of Craig's teaching did not manifest itself fully in 1905. But this year marked the beginning of a process which continued with *On the Art of the Theatre* (1911), which included Craig's other more innovative and "scandalous" texts

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<sup>2</sup> 'Of all the young people around him in these last years, the one who impressed him the most was Ferruccio Marotti from Rome'. E. Craig, *Gordon Craig. The Story of His Life*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1968, p. 360.

<sup>3</sup> F. Marotti, *Amleto o dell'oxymoron. Studi e note sull'estetica della scena moderna*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> After *Rosmersholm*, Duse had asked Craig to work on *The Lady from the Sea*, a play she was particularly fond of. But after what is commonly referred to as the Nice incident, that is Craig's terrible outburst of rage when he found out his scenes had been changed in order to adapt them to a smaller stage, the project was abandoned. It is difficult to say whether at the time of *Rosmersholm* the Duse had read the recent *The Art of the Theatre*. A copy of both the German and English edition were found in the library of her lover, Gabriele D'Annunzio, in Rome, which attests, at least, to the circulation of the book in the culturally more advanced circles.

(starting from ‘The Actor and the Übermarionette’), *Towards a New Theatre* (London, Dent, 1913), *Scene* (London, H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1923): a series of works that together outline an extraordinarily extensive and complex theoretical scenario. Along with these books, which placed Craig squarely in the middle of the European scene, making him the founder of what was called the New Movement, it is important to remember Craig’s intense work with *The Mask*, the review to which Craig entrusted, from 1908 to 1929, his reflections on theatre (and whose articles, starting from the already mentioned ‘The Actor and the Übermarionette’, often were later included in his books), as well as other book-length studies, from *The Theatre advancing* (Boston, Little Brown, 1919) to the memorable *Henry Irving* (London, Dent, 1930), to the “biography” (an autobiography more than anything else) *Ellen Terry and her Secret Self* (London, Sampson Low, Marston, 1931). The list goes on, but these are the main steps in Craig’s theoretical production, which turned an artist who had produced almost nothing in terms of theatre productions into one of the great masters of the twentieth century.

Compared to this extraordinary and complex production, the goal of the present essay is rather specific. I do not intend to examine Craig’s work in general but to focus on the starting point – both material and cultural – of this theoretical evolution: Craig’s *The Art of the Theatre* and the writing process out of which this work developed. In the ‘Fonds Edward Gordon Craig’ of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris there are two preparatory manuscripts for *The Art of the Theatre*, which are extremely important to understand the development of arguments and ideas that converged into the extraordinary dialogue of 1905.

However, before entering what we could term Craig’s mental workshop, it is important to identify more specifically the elements and ideas that justify my definition of *The Art of the Theatre* as theatre’s door to Modernity. ‘With *The Art of the Theatre* – wrote Bablet in 1962 – the era of the director begins’.<sup>5</sup> This apodictic statement summarizes a common opinion. *The Art of the Theatre* is indeed commonly considered as the manifesto of modern director’s theatre. This formula, however, should not be taken literally or at least not without a number of due qualifications. Modern directing was already found in European theatre, both in theatrical practice and theory: Antoine’s ‘Causerie sur la mise en scène’, perhaps the first effort to conceptually formalize directing had appeared in the *Revue de Paris* on 1 April 1903. It is true, however, that the vision presented in *The Art of the Theatre* is quite different. It is also true that while the practice of modern directing was spreading throughout Europe (as attested, for example, by the modernity of Reinhardt’s *Dream*), in many ways its theoretical identity remained problematic and aesthetically confused. This aspect is very evident in Antoine’s article, which meticulously reconstructs a practice of directing, evidencing the creative importance of the more scenic aspects, but never goes as far as affirming the notion of the director as author, which is instead central in Craig. In other words, modern directing is present in European theatre at least in some of its forms; what is lacking however is a theory of directing.

It is not my intention however to engage in the dispute on the birth, or worse on the date of birth, of modern directing, a controversial question which in recent years

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<sup>5</sup> D. Bablet, *Edward Gordon Craig*, Paris, L’Arche, 1962, p. 103.

has sparked a lively and interesting debate.<sup>6</sup> I will limit myself to stating that *The Art of the Theatre* is generally accepted as the founding text of the theory of twentieth-century theatre directing. An autonomous, authorial form of directing that synthesizes the artistic and creative essence of theatre. I will add that this position, while certainly justified, does not exhaust the complexity of Craig's text, as I shall seek to demonstrate. Indeed, more than being a theoretical description of directing, *The Art of the Theatre* seems to go beyond directing. Directing is conceived as a transition towards something more absolute and perfect: the art of theatre, to which directing can lead us but remains distinguished from it, because limited to what can be practically achieved in early twentieth-century theatre. What Craig prefigures is a new artist of the theatre. To create this figure, one must not develop the role of the director but rather perform 'the Renaissance of the stage director'.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective it is interesting that Craig should speak of the 'advent of the artist', a formula rich in biblical overtones.<sup>8</sup>

To follow a more systematic approach, however, let us first list the main theoretical questions addressed by Craig in the *The Art of the Theatre*. The text has the form of a Platonic dialogue, in which the dialectic play of question and answers maieutically proceeds to explore the topic specified by the title. The two interlocutors are the *stage director* and the *playgoer*, a director, in other words, and a spectator, who represent the two poles of the discourse. The *stage director* voices Craig's positions. The spectator on the other hand, though what he does is mostly listens, has the crucial function of representing a necessary interaction with the public, whose understanding is considered essential to the regeneration of the art of the theatre. From this perspective, the choice of the dialogue as communicative form is not, in my view, simply a rhetorical solution – albeit one with a longstanding tradition from Leone de' Sommi's *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* to Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* – but corresponds instead to a necessity that Craig was profoundly aware of, namely, the establishing of a link (a dialogue) between the future of the theatre and its present condition. The public is an essential component of this present condition and necessarily the main interlocutor of the discourse. Naturally, we are dealing with an "ideal spectator", one who is open to change and innovation, who is willing to question his own presuppositions about theatre, avoiding their degeneration into prejudices, which is what usually happens.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, this "ideal spectator" interacts with a similarly "ideal *stage manager*", who,

<sup>6</sup> Allow me to refer the reader to my own 'La nascita della regia. Una questione di storiografia teatrale', *Culture teatrali*, 13 (2005) (actual year of publication, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> E. Gordon Craig, *The Art of the Theatre*, Edinburgh and London, Foulis, 1905, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Marotti describes him, instead, as 'an assiduous playgoer, who stands for the average spectator of those years' (F. Marotti, *Edward Gordon Craig*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1961, p. 76). While his positions reflect a traditional view of the theatre, his dialectically open attitude makes him, in my view, something more than the average spectator, not because he has already grasped Craig's ideas, but because he is willing to participate in this conversation, starting from his own assiduous interest in the stage. This aspect is important for the idea of a new theatre advanced in *The Art of the Theatre*. Almost all English reviewers adopted a very harsh view of Craig's depiction of the playgoer, criticizing the notions that one so obtusely vulnerable to Craig's arguments could exist. Precisely because based on an opposite perspective, this attitude seems to me to confirm my impression of the *playgoer's* exceptional willingness to converse with the *stage director*, rather than insisting on an academic and rigid view of the theatre.

by regenerating his function and overcoming the prejudices of theatre, will transform himself into an artist.

The dialogue revolves around two main questions, which partly overlap but which can be followed distinctly. On the one hand, there is the relation with the playwright; on the other the problem of the peculiarities and artistic specificity of theatrical language. In between, functioning as a dialectic bridge between the two, is the question of the role of the director.

The question of the playwright is already discussed in the *Introduction*, a section that is generally neglected, most likely because Craig's text is read in its re-edition in *On the Art of the Theatre* in which the *Introduction* was cut, but the section is important to fully understand Craig's position. Craig introduces his book starting from the question of the playwright or 'poet' saying he will offer 'one word about the theatre as it was, as it is and as it will be'.<sup>10</sup> He is quick to add that this would entail writing a history of theatre, something which is beyond the limited scope of his text. He intends to limit himself, therefore, to a few general observations, the first of which is that theatre, in the beginning, was much complete because it was self-reliant. This, Craig says, was the original condition of religious rites, within which various arts converged. This was changed by the intervention of the author of the text, the 'poet' who, being the most intellectual among the people involved in religious rites, took control of them and altered the original form of the theatre, detaching it from its most authentic essence.

The dramatic poet is therefore a negative figure, limited by his strict adherence to literature and incapable of grasping the autonomous essence of the theatrical language of the origins. There is an obvious similarity between the argument of the *Introduction* and the first part of the dialog. In the first lines of the dialogue Craig has the *stage director* say: 'The poet's imagination finds voice in words, beautifully chosen; he then either recites or sings these words to us, and all is done. That poetry, sung or recited, is for our ears, and through them for our imagination'.<sup>11</sup> In this case, the emphasis is on the sense that is involved and on the term 'imagination', which, though Craig does not specify it, seems to refer to an abstract state of the mind. Words, that is, are anti-theatrical because they do not act on the here and now of the theatrical perception, but elsewhere, in the mind of the spectator, and the artificial addition of gesture does not improve the situation but is in fact damaging. Having said this, Craig adds that the dramatic poet 'writes for the reader, or listener' and therefore his specific art is literature.<sup>12</sup> In this way, Craig establishes a categorical distinction between dramatic poet and dramatist, the latter being much more intimately related to the reality of the stage. We will return later on to this distinction, for now I wish only to evidence the border that Craig establishes between literature and theatre. In fact, this border is precisely the subject discussed at the beginning of the dialogue. The *stage director* addresses the playgoer with an apodictic question that introduces and permeates the entire text: 'Tell me, do you know what is the Art of the Theatre?', and when the spectator timidly asks whether he does not believe it to reside in the dramatic text, he answers: 'A play is a work of literature, is it not? Tell

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<sup>10</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

me, then, how one art can possibly be another?'.<sup>13</sup> The problem therefore, as it emerge in the dialogue, is the categorical distance between different artistic media. In the *Introduction* things are presented in a somewhat different light. The central question is the intellectual nature of poetic activity, which is the reason that the literary aspect detached itself from the osmotic process that characterized ancient theatrical rituals, becoming something distinct and irreducible to them. 'The theatre was for the people, and always should be for the people. The poets would make the theatre for a select community of dilettanti', offering them difficult thoughts expressed through equally difficult words. For Craig, however, all this has nothing to do with theatre which instead should offer the public sights, life and beauty. Thus it happened that the poet went one way and the people, who 'desire to see the sights, realistically or poetically shown, not turned into literature' went in a different and completely separate direction.<sup>14</sup>

At the center of Craig's argument, therefore, there is once again the distance between literature and theatre, and the argument of the *Introduction* is complementary to the one found in the dialogue. The irreconcilability of literature and theatre is due to the theatre's ultimate destination, which is not thought, reason and analytic understanding, but vision, beauty and 'life', a word that Craig does not clarify but which is of the utmost importance. Life, as Craig presents it, is the living nature in its entirety, a vaguely ontological and mystical concept, certainly different from everyday life and its representation. It is the world in its totality, the combination of the senses and the spirit. Theatre, unlike literature, is the art that comes into contact with spirituality through the sensible sphere (expressed by beauty), therefore through a route that is different from that of the intellect. This concept was particularly dear to Craig; many years later, in 1930, when Craig published his drawing for *The Crown Pretenders* staged in Copenhagen for the Poulsen brothers, he wrote that a play like that had so many interpretative subtleties, conceptual overtones and dramatic details that it could be fully appreciated only by reading it. In other words, when it is communicated and received in an intellectual fashion. In theatre, instead, this type of communication is impossible. One must synthesize what must be communicated in a single moment, the message must be clear and direct, and the intellectual implications limited. The reason being also that theatre goers are not intellectuals and cannot be expected to grasp the subtle overtones of a work.<sup>15</sup>

The categorical distinction between theatre and literature is developed in the course of the dialog through two important and well-known arguments. The first concerns stage directions. According to Craig, stage directions are the greatest offense the poet can give to those who stage the play, because through them he arbitrarily interfere with their dominion. It is the equivalent of an actor wanting to change the text. Stage directions, therefore, when present (and in the great theatre of the past they are not, as Craig notes citing Shakespeare) should be ignored, leaving free reign to the interpretation of the director, who must, on the other hand,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> E. Gordon Craig, *A Production being thirty-two collotype plates of designs projected or realized for "The Pretenders" of Henrik Ibsen and produced at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, 1926*, London, Oxford University Press, 1930.

faithfully interpret the play ‘as indicated in the text’.<sup>16</sup> The problem lies precisely here, in the formula used by Craig. The text, for Craig, is the structured ensemble of the words; the task of translating those words into the language of the stage pertains to the director, whose interpretation consists precisely in the creation of the stage equivalent most suited to conveying the meaning of those words. It is a meaning that should be confused neither with the immediate story (the narrative and discursive meaning), nor with the poetic intention of the author (what he, on a rational and deliberate level, was planning on saying). The director instead must use his capacity to disclose, using visual signs (the first interpretative step is the designing of the scene in all its elements, starting from space), the secret symbolical horizons that lie hidden in the more remote, unspoken, areas of the text. For example, in a play staged right after the publication of *The Art of the Theatre*, the 1906 *Rosmersholm* that Craig designed for Eleonora Duse, the relation between Rebecca and society is presented as an irreducible conflict between the force of Life (Rebecca) and the deadly spirit of the world.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the interpretation Craig speaks of does not consist in a superimposition of the representational aspiration of the text and the practice of the stage (as Stanislavski had done with Chekhov, for example) but on a dialogue between two different languages: the poetic word and the word of the stage, a dialogue in which the latter is the one that must be “visible” in the theatre.<sup>18</sup>

The second moment in which the unsurpassable distance between the poetic word and the theatre is evidenced is when Craig says, in what may seem a provocative hyperbole but is in fact a statement that follows logically from his premises, that *Hamlet*, being a work that is perfect in reading, should not be staged, whereas a *Masque*, precisely because ‘unreadable’, expresses an evident ‘need of theatre’. To understand this famous statement one must understand two things: Craig was convinced, and was later to explicitly state, that Shakespeare’s texts were a literary re-elaboration of the original theatrical works, which must have been much more ‘rough’ (using Peter Brook’s expression) and partly entrusted to the improvisation of the actors.<sup>19</sup> The second is that the mention of the *Masque*, while being a historical reference to a theatrical form that was almost contemporary to *Hamlet*, must be read also as a reference to Craig’s own work, given that Craig has staged a *Masque*, *The Masque of Love*, in 1901, for the Purcell Operatic Society, and was also planning to stage others. Having said this, the statement remains a very forceful one, in which reading and viewing theatre are clearly distinguished and treated as two activities that ‘today’ can meet but will separate ‘tomorrow’.<sup>20</sup> The problem of the relation between the poetic word and theatre, between poet and director is located by Craig “in time”, as is ultimately his entire argument. The rediscovery of the true artistic nature of theatre, the acknowledgement of its

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<sup>16</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> On Craig’s *Rosmersholm* allow me to refer the reader to my own ‘Edward Gordon Craig regista di Ibsen’, *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale. Sezione germanica*, 18, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>18</sup> On this subject, consider what Craig’s told the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre during the staging of *Hamlet*. Words are a thing, they must be ‘spoken’ in their totality, respecting their poetic intonation, but the stage action is something different. Not in the sense that it is arbitrarily different, but in the sense that it expresses its own vision of the text.

<sup>19</sup> E. Gordon Craig, *Shakespeare’s Collaborators*, in *The Theatre Advancing*, Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1919 (I quote from the edition New York, Benjamin Blom, 1963, p. 131).

<sup>20</sup> Craig moderates his statement, adding that *Hamlet* will continue to be staged, in the best possible way, until theatre, having acquired its full artistic status, will be finally able to do without it.

autonomy and specificity, is a process that affects, dialectically, the present condition of theatre, its immediate evolution (tomorrow), and its more distant horizon (the future), when this process will have been accomplished. No shortcuts are possible, every step is necessary, the discovery of the Art of theatre is a journey, a path, and not simply a decision.

The ultimate conclusion of the conceptual distancing of literature and theatre will be achieved when theatre will have acquired its artistic dimension, and when the “ideal *stage manager*” will have become an “artist”, when theatre will do without the poetic text: “Then [...] the Art of the Theatre would have won back its rights, and its work would stand self-reliant as a creative art, and no longer as an interpretative craft”.<sup>21</sup> Craig then goes on to suggest that the materials used by the “ideal *stage manager*” (that is the artist of the theatre that is no longer simply a director) are Action, Scene and Voice, and specifies that the absence of the conventional dramatic text – the form elaborated within Western tradition, which betrayed the ritual origins of theatre and reduced it to an intellectual product – does not mean that a text, in an entirely and exclusively theatrical sense, will be missing, but only that it will be different. Craig does not specify in detail how this new text will be, but lists its main aspects, stating that an entirely scenic work (where by scene one means the combination of all representative materials) will become itself a text, and will have to be read as a text, because a text is an idea that takes on a form, the form most suitable to the specific and self-reliant materials of the language adopted.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that for Craig theatre should do away with words entirely and become a sort of dumbshow. What Craig is arguing for, instead, is not the primacy of stage over words (indeed Craig will regret all his life having engendered this misunderstanding) or a wordless theatre (and what about voice, then?) but something much more complex and stimulating.<sup>22</sup> Craig is introducing a radically new view of the theatrical text, something that anticipates one of the key notions of contemporary theatre, namely, that of the Spectacular Text: not the combination of text and representation, but a form of writing that uses all the signs of the stage (visual, spatial, actorial but also verbal) to produce a structured and meaningful whole that is entirely and exclusively theatrical. In other words, a “text” that does not allow spectators to go back to a literary origin, even when this element is still present.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> According to Enid Rose the problem, for Craig, is not the distinction between the visual and verbal aspect in theatre, but rather that ‘a play is conceived in images, or ideas, to which a language follows; it is executed in visible forms from which language may proceed’ (E. Rose, *Gordon Craig and the Theatre*, London, Sampson Low, Marston, 1931, p. 60). Many years later, Christopher Innes wrote that Craig’s reform did not involve simply the scene or the actor but ‘a radically different concept of drama itself’ (Ch. Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, London; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 127).

<sup>23</sup> I refer the reader to M. De Marinis, *In cerca dell’attore*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2000 and to my own *La scrittura scenica. Un codice e le sue pratiche nel teatro del Novecento*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2003. As for the relation between stage writing and dramatic text as a one-way journey, I have elsewhere used the term “dramaturgy of difference”, to evidence the play of interaction and conflict between dramatic languages that generate a new and different dramaturgy, which can in no way be related to a literary origin. See also L. Mango, *“Il Principe costante” di Calderón de la Barca-Stowacki per Jerzy Grotowski*, Pisa, ETS, 2008.



In *The Art of the Theatre* in other words Craig questions the very foundations of the notions of drama and text. The director is not simply attributed an artistic role, he is transformed into an artist and therefore into the author of a new drama and a new text. Drama and text are both scenic, they are forged with the living substance of the theatre and destined to produce sights, life and beauty, not thoughts expressed with complex sentences. ‘Does anyone think – writes Craig in the *Introduction* – that I hold the scene, costumes, lights, or programme actor, of more importance than the play? The play is the idea, the rest only parts of the idea. The play is what the poet presents to the theatre to-day – the play (the idea) that is what we of the theatre will invent to-morrow’.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of refounding the Western notion of drama leads us to two other statements in *The Art of the Theatre*, which are as difficult as they are stimulating. The first is the distinction between ‘the word written to be spoken and the word written to be read’.<sup>25</sup> It is a statement that comes at the end of the dialogue and serves to illustrate the role of the Voice as a fundamental medium of artistic stage writing. In a manuscript note on the margins of the last page of the copy of *The Art of the Theatre* found in the ‘Fonds Edward Gordon Craig’ of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, Craig writes: ‘Comedies are writ to be spoken, not read; remember the life of these things consists in action’ a phrase that comes from the preface *To the reader* of the second “in quarto” of John Marston’s *The Fawn*.<sup>26</sup> The assonance with Craig’s position is so strong that one suspects Craig had already in mind it when writing *The Art of the Theatre*, and decided to reveal this source of inspiration some year later, by adding it as a manuscript note. On the other hand, there is no solid evidence to support this hypothesis and we can limit ourselves to prudently noting the analogy between the two texts, also because the expression is actually used in somewhat different ways. Marston inserts it in the context of a sort of *excusatio* addressed to the reader, in which he laments the fact that the life of the words conceived for the stage is blurred when entrusted to the page, a transition that occurs because of a sort of cultural obligation, which burdens the playwright with a weight, the weight of poetry, which Marston claims rhetorically to feel very strongly. In short Marston is raising the problem of the quality of the theatrical word which, being conceived for the voice, is ill-suited to the medium of literary creation and reception. The theme echoes Craig’s distinction between theatre and literature. Craig however is not a playwright who declares himself afraid to face the literary page, like Marston, but a director (or, better, an artist of the theatre) who has just affirmed the uselessness of the literary text. So what does Craig mean when he distinguishes between words written to be spoken and words written to be read?

Craig has just finished arguing that, in the future Art of the theatre, there will be no text as we know it from the Western tradition. He adds that there will be a

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<sup>24</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> John Marston, *The Fawn* in *The works of John Marston*, ed. by A. H. Bullen, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1887, II, p. 113. John Marston, one of the most significant poets of the late Elizabethan and Jacobian period, wrote *The Fawn* (also known as *Parasitaster, or The Fawn*) in 1604, and published it two years later. It is a bitterly satirical text, as often with Marston. An image similar to the one quoted above is found in the preface to *The Malcontent* (1603), Marston’s best known work: ‘Only one thing afflicts me to think that scenes, invented merely to be spoken, should be enforcively published to be read’ (*ibid.*, I, p. 198).

different kind of text, a theatrical text, which includes in its “trinity”, the Voice. Voice, Craig specifies, means words and this is where the difficulty lies: what are those words, where do they come from and what is their role? Craig does not explain it and, therefore, his idea is destined to remain in some ways enigmatic. Certainly, Craig was not thinking of a silent theatre, of a dumbshow. Or at least this was not the only possibility he had in mind. For it is true that the masques he had just finished planning – and particularly *The Masque of Hunger* of which he published a preparatory drawing (along with a description of the action associated with it) in the conclusion of the *Introduction* and the famous drawings of *The Steps*, which date back to 1905, even though they were published only a few years after in *Towards a New Theatre* – correspond to a theatre of pure action, a Drama of silence, as Craig was to write later for *The Steps*. However the theatrical art described in *The Art of the Theatre* is to include words. Words, however, that not only have a specific non-literary quality, but are especially oriented towards the spectacular text. For Craig, this is my impression, the word written to be spoken is not only a word with a special quality (what Carmelo Bene was to call *phone*), but also a word that does not correspond to a traditional text but rather is in service of a dramatic and spectacular text that exceeds it. We would be dealing, in short, with a redefinition of drama and of dramaturgy. When we speak of the word, in fact, we must not limit ourselves to the usual meaning of the term, but must take into account the fact that, in Western theatre, the word has become equivalent with the text not only because the poet was in most cases the “author”, but because drama as a whole has been primarily entrusted to words, while other theatrical languages have been given a merely illustrative and supportive function. While theatre was never purely verbal, and was always accompanied by acting and by scenic elements, it is evident that, with few exceptions, the dramatic meaning has been entrusted to the verbal text. Craig is therefore hypothesizing, though he does not clearly state it, a crucial distinction (following the one between theatre and literature): the distinction between words and text. In the theatre of the future there will be words but they will not become a text, they will be part of a whole, signs among other signs in which it is the “scene as a whole” that is entrusted with the dramatic function of communicating the meaning of the drama. In conclusion, it is my impression that ‘the word written to be spoken’ and ‘the word written to be read’ are two statements that differ objectively but especially in their relation to the drama as a “whole”. The second *is* drama, as conceived in the Western tradition, the first is *one of the signs of drama*.

This becomes more evident if we consider the beginning of *The Art of the Theatre*, where Craig advances the distinction between dramatic poem and drama, and between dramatic poet and dramatist (the second more elusive statement already discussed). Craig resorts to the same formula, ‘A dramatic poem is to be read. A drama is not to be read, but to be seen upon the stage’, establishing an important connection between the two parts of his argument.<sup>27</sup> The drama is, therefore, what we see on stage. In the drama, words function as a distinctive but partial linguistic signs, whereas in the dramatic poem they constitute its entire structure. The author of the dramatic poem is the ‘dramatic poet’ (a literary author on loan to the theatre). The author of the drama instead, is the ‘dramatist’, something different, more

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<sup>27</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 19.

specific, a full archetypal author who is a first step towards the future artist of the theatre. The reason for this, as Craig notes shortly thereafter, is that

The first dramatists were children of the theatre. The modern dramatists are not. The first dramatist understood what the modern dramatist does not yet understand. He knew that when he and his fellow appeared in front of them the audience would be more eager to *see* what he would *do* than to *hear* what he might *say*.<sup>28</sup>

Shortly before, the *stage director* had asked his interlocutor whether he knew who the father of the dramatist. When the latter had replied: ‘The dramatic poet’, he had objected: ‘You are wrong. The father of the dramatist was the dancer’.<sup>29</sup> It might be worth recapitulating this dense series of statements: the dramatist and the dramatic poet are two distinct figures, because the dramatic poet uses the word/text while the dramatist uses the spectacular text; the father of the dramatist is the dancer and not the dramatic poet; the early dramatists addressed the eyes of the spectators and not their hearing. These three statements outline the specific quality of theatrical creation. The dramatist does not, evidently, coincide with the “writer” because he does not use words but rather creates a theatre that is meant to be seen. This at least was the case at the beginning (the “first”); then however he entrusted himself to the ‘word to be read’, and turned into the son of the dramatic poet mentioned by the spectator. Craig adopts a rather articulated terminology: there is the *dramatic poet*, the *first dramatist* and finally the *modern dramatist*. The first figure is different in that it has little to do with the theatre, whereas the second and third belong to the theatre. This is the case at least if we stay with Craig’s terminology. However, if we ask ourselves to which actual artists of the history of theatre these figures correspond, it becomes evident that the *dramatic poet* is a result of the degeneration of the *first dramatist* into the *modern dramatist*. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to guess the actual historical figures that Craig had in mind (if indeed he had any), it seems possible to say that the *modern dramatist* and the *dramatic poet* are, ultimately, the same thing, because they both write in order to be read and heard, but not seen. Both, in short, betray the essence of the spirit of the theatre, which, and this is one of the most important statements found in *The Art of the Theatre*, is a visual art. Theatre should offer the public sights, beauty and life, Craig had written in the *Introduction*. The statement becomes here conceptually more defined. Theatre is a visual art because it addresses the spectators’ gaze. It communicates through the eye, the organ which synthesizes the dramatic motifs that the spectators must grasp. The very dramatic meaning of the work is visual, or rather “visible”, not solely because the scenic elements are given more scope, but because it is those elements that convey the deep meaning of the work. When spectators see the court scene of the Moscow production of *Hamlet* (I, 2) they must be able to visually grasp the hypocrisy of what is spoken. When a similar situation is translated from a staging practice (each acted character is a seen character, and each seen character is a character of the drama) into a theoretical principle, a Copernican revolution occurs. Theatre as a visual art becomes the door towards the modern conception of theatre.

The fact that the “paternity” of the dramatist is attributed to the dancer is also significant. The dancer, in Craig’s acceptance, is the artist of the art of movement

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

and, as such, the theatrical artist par excellence, since movement is the language that defines more specifically the identity of the theatre. Craig uses the word dancer rather than ballet dancer because he has a clear vision of the distinction between the two, which he was to formalize years later in describing Isadora Duncan. He called Duncan a dancer rather than a ballet dancer, because the dancer writes the action through movement, while the ballet dancer decorates movement with his virtuosity.<sup>30</sup> The dancer provides his child the dramatist with the genetic reference to his art: movement and not words. Movement obviously can only be perceived through vision. The theatre, as codified by Craig in *The Art of the Theatre*, is therefore image in action, that is, the construction of an event that is perceived through movement and gives the drama its form.<sup>31</sup> This notion, which in I hope has now become less cryptic than at the start of the present article, seems to me to be the key to the underlying conception of *The Art of the Theatre* more than the notion of the primacy of directing. Saying that theatre is a visual art means enacting a true anti-Aristotelian turn, which drastically repositions theatre in the system of the arts, and also clarifies Craig's rejection of the intellectual nature of verbal language voiced in the *Introduction*.<sup>32</sup> It is unlikely for images to produce concepts. Rather they stimulate a

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<sup>30</sup> E. Gordon Craig, 'Memories of Isadora Duncan', *The Listener*, 47, no. 1214 (5 June, 1952), later in *Your Isadora. The Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig Told through Letters and Diaries*, ed. by F. Steegmuller, New York, Random House and The New York Public Library, 1974.

<sup>31</sup> The question of movement is a very complex one, on which Craig continued to return at different times. Since it is beyond the scope of the present essay, I will limit myself to referring the reader to the important studies by Christopher Innes, mentioned above, and Franco Ruffini, *Craig, Grotowski, Artaud. Teatro in stato d'invenzione*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2009, besides a few texts by Craig himself, first and foremost *The Artists of the Theatre of the Future*, in *On The Art of the Theatre*, London, William Heinemann, 1911. One thing, however, needs to be noted. Movement for Craig does not coincide with the action of the body in space. It includes it, obviously, but it is also something different. It is the movement of the scene, in the first place, but it also a guiding principle of the dynamic rhythm that is at the base of the harmony that regulates Life and the world (and not only art). As Craig writes in *The Artists of the Theatre of the Future*: 'I think that movement can be divided into two distinct parts, the movement of two and four which is the square, the movement of one and three which is the circle. There is ever that which is masculine in the square and ever that which is feminine in the circle' (in *On The Art of the Theatre*, quoted in the edition edited by F. Chamberlain, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 24). The movement that Craig is describing corresponds to a dialectic of *coniunctio oppositorum*, which is at the heart of esoteric cultures, first and foremost alchemy. Not so much, or not only, a physical act, but as a symbolical representation of the principles that regulate cosmic harmony, based on the balance of the opposites, which is rhythm, *dynamis*, and therefore movement. A few years later – also under the influence of Craig – Kandinski chose movement as the symbolic form and the foundation of his notion of "stage composition", aimed at providing a theatrical equivalent of the cosmic whole (see W. Kandinski, 'On Stage Composition', in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*, ed. by W. Kandinski and F. Marc, 1912).

<sup>32</sup> I call it anti-Aristotelian, because it is precisely in the *Poetics* and thanks to the *Poetics*, that Western theatre is placed within the system of the arts as the art of the poetic word. Aristotle, as it is known, identifies six principles in tragedy: the story, the characters, the language, the thought, the spectacle and the singing. He discusses in detail, however, only the first four, and when he arrives to music and even more spectacle, he quickly dismisses the subject, saying that all that concerns the visual aspects is not really part of the drama but an external appendix, with a purely decorative function. Aristotle then proceeds to enounce the distinction between theatre and spectacle, which was to become crucial for the Western notion of theatre. It is this distinction that Craig intends to erase, going beyond Aristotle's analysis to the archetype that precedes his categorization. To the tragedy before the *Poetics*, the way it was done and perceived in the V century BCE and not as it was reinterpreted by Aristotle one century later.

level of sensibility that translates into knowledge (production of meaning) in ways that are different from that of words, ways that are non-rational, a sort of intuition that has to do with the speed of reception, the capacity of what we see to be perceived immediately, without the filter of a mental re-elaboration.<sup>33</sup> From here the notion of sights as the authentic quality of theatre, as opposed to concepts. Not a theatre realized thanks to visual artifices, but a theatre whose drama is a “visible drama”. It is on this assumption that the twentieth century was to construct its notion of theatre. Not always and not necessarily a theatre of images, but always a theatre oriented towards communicating through what happens materially on stage and is, as such, visible. Precisely what Craig predicted in 1905.

This categorical repositioning of the artistic essence of theatre is expressed by a famous definition of theatre, which Craig offers at the beginning of his dialogue, but which I felt it would be best to discuss at this point of my argument. Craig says, after having quickly and abruptly dismissed the notion that theatre, as an art, can be identified with literature (which is a different art), with acting (which is only a part of it), and, even less, with scenery and dance, that theatre ‘consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance’, specifying that, although all these elements have an important role, action, and therefore movement, ‘is the most valuable part’.<sup>34</sup> This is a particularly important definition, which is particularly cogent if viewed in the context of the relation of the categorical inclusion of theatre among visual arts. There is, evidently, a clear echo of the Wagnerian notion of total work of art, albeit expressed in a different form. Theatre, for Craig, is as total work of art because it functions on various perceptive and cognitive levels, associated with different areas of human nature, and is synthesized through the production of dynamic scenic images. Up to here, except perhaps for the final consideration, Craig position seems coincide with Wagner’s. Yet, in many ways, the way he articulates the notion remains different. In his book published in 1961, Marotti observed that we are dealing here with ‘a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which the originality lies in the fact that the primary element is action, not music’.<sup>35</sup> This is a significant difference, especially if we consider that Craig no longer cites music among the arts of the theatre. What can we infer from this? Perhaps that Craig is not so much interested in defining theatre in terms of a combination of various art forms, as much as in finding, among the arts that are used in theatre, those elements that will allow it to create a specific, autonomous and self-reliant language, as already declared in the *Introduction*. The

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<sup>33</sup> The first dramatist ‘knew that the eye is more swiftly and powerfully appealed to than any other sense; that it is without question the keenest sense of the body of man’ (*The Art of the Theatre*, p. 20). Evidently speed, preciseness, power allow sight to perceive, through an intuitive synthesis, the essence of the meaning of things, bypassing the filter of verbal reason, which necessarily entails a process of translation of that meaning and therefore of distancing from its origin.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. It can be interesting to note how in the manuscript notebook of *The Art of the Theatre*, found in the ‘Fonds Edward Gordon Craig’ at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (EGC MS 29) the term ‘elements’ corrects the early ‘properties’. It is a small difference, which however suggests a process of terminological but also conceptual refining. ‘Properties’ would suggest, in the language of the theatre, scene props, objects, materials. The term is therefore strictly related to theatrical practice, whereas the term ‘elements’, refers more to the structural matrix of the theatrical language.

<sup>35</sup> F. Marotti, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 77.

disappearance of music – replaced by dance as the bearer of rhythm – suggests that theatre must base itself on a scenic matrix and not, as in the case of Wagner, on a musical one. Wagner does speak of a fusion of art forms, but music remains the underlying unifying principle, the necessary foundation of his artistic system. In the case of Craig, instead, this foundation is provided by movement, the sensible manifestation of dance. On the other hand, in both music and dance there is the presence of rhythm, the internal rhythm that gives a foundation and coherence to the scenic vision which, being dynamic, is necessarily also rhythmical. Thus, while we do not find music in *The Art of the Theatre* we do find its function, its profound and symbolical unifying function through the secret rhythm of forms and, on a metaphysical level, of the cosmos.

Christopher Innes clarifies this aspect well when, in seeking to clearly distinguish Craig's position from Wagner's, he writes 'in his notes Craig specifically denied that combining the different arts of music, painting, and poetry, would in itself produce the kind of drama he wanted'.<sup>36</sup> The problem is, therefore, defining more specifically the proximity and, at the same time, the distance between the ideas of Craig and those of Wagner. A very cogent contribution to this question comes from Denis Bablet's study of 1962, which is worth quoting extensively. The definition of theatre as a synthesis of elements of the languages associated with the arts and not of the arts themselves, Bablet writes,

shows how Craig's thought is at the same time close and distant from that of Wagner. Close because, like Wagner, Craig insists on the necessary unity of the work; distant because it is not a question, according to Craig, of creating a supreme art, the result of the active union of different arts and of their reciprocal exaltation. Far from him, the idea of any fusion of arts. Craig speaks of lines, and of colours, he never uses the term 'painting', he speaks of 'words' and not of poetry. Gestures, words, lines, colours, etc., are so many *materials* that are incapable of an autonomous artistic life.<sup>37</sup>

Bablet's passage clarifies two aspects of Craig's argument: the first is that Craig is thinking of elements and principles of the various artistic languages and not of independent art forms, even if combined into a common system. The second is that his goal is not a total work of art in the sense of a "supreme art" as in the case of Wagner, but a specifically theatrical work, distinguished from other art forms. While, in other words, in Wagner what is hypothesized is a single totalizing art form, in which all other arts must necessarily be integrated (though one must be careful not to confuse Wagner's synthesis with a mechanical sum of the parts), in Craig this late romantic aspiration is no longer present. Theatre, for Craig, is not the ideal art, it is not the art of all arts. Theatre, instead, must seek to become an art in itself and not the shadow, the reflection, the mirror of other arts. After having rejected the dominion of the poet, in 1905, in later years Craig banned also the painter from his ideal theatre: theatre has its own language and must have its own artist.<sup>38</sup>

The astounding novelty of Craig's thought is precisely this. Theatre must not achieve the romantic idealization of the idea of art but rather must find its specific and autonomous origin. This origin, as we gather from Craig's definition, is based on

<sup>36</sup> Ch. Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> D. Bablet, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> See E. Gordon Craig, *Some Evil Tendencies of the Modern Theatre*, in *On The Art of the Theatre*, p. 53.

a series of expressive factors that can be referred to the various arts, but are extrapolated from them in the moment they are appropriated. In the case of words, Craig's vision can be understood only if we distinguish between words and drama: in the new theatre, words remain but they are repositioned into a "dramatic whole" that is different from the verbal text of Western tradition. In the case of other expressive elements, it is more easily understood. Line and colour, for example, are not confined to the scenery, but can be present in other aspects of the performance, starting with the movements of the actors on stage. This is possibly even more the case with rhythm, which pertains to dance but in the new theatre becomes a general compositional principle. Finally action, which refers to the notion of actor as body in movement, is obviously something that concerns the human figure, but also involves the "objects" of the stage. In other words, what Craig does is to define a new vocabulary of the theatrical language, which does not arise from the fusion or collaboration of predefined elements, but is rather based on partial non-predefined signs. These signs are manipulated, organized, catalyzed by a single artist, the director, who shapes them, who writes with them, like all artists do using the materials of their art. What colours, design, perspective are for the painter, action, line, colour and rhythm are for the artists of the theatre. Their materials – which belong to them and no one else – will allow them to provide the body, the form, the life of the visual theatre, the theatre of sights, which is the authentic form of the theatre, the one that best reflects the original ritual archetype, making it possible to adequately reposition theatre in the system of the various arts.

Having clarified the linguistic and categorical aspects that make *The Art of the Theatre* one of the privileged access routes to modern theatre, I would like to examine more carefully the structure of Craig's argument. I have already said something about the dialogic structure of Craig's text and its relation to the theoretical debate on theatre. What I would like to do now is to investigate more specifically the underlying structure of the passages we have analyzed up to here. An evident distinctive feature of the *The Art of the Theatre* is its tendency to synthesis, the direct and precise immediacy of its arguments. It is a brief text, only fifty pages, but it is extraordinarily dense. It is as if Craig had chosen to directly present the nuclei of his arguments to his readers through a quick essential exposition that requires their constant attention. Basically, *The Art of the Theatre* is made up of a series of statements by the *stage director*, which follow one upon the other, questioning the notions of the spectator until he (and the reader along with him) allows himself to be dragged into the game and unconditionally accepts, as convincing statements and not as provocative hyperboles, even the more extreme conclusions. This happens because Craig adopts a fairly tight argumentative logic, establishing cause and effect relations between the various passages, even when, as we have seen, his argument is not outlined in detail. After all, as he will show in the years to come, Craig is not a systematic theorist. In other texts, his arguments proceed often by leaps, metaphorical intuitions (as the extraordinary one of the *Übermarionette*) which remain often ethereal references that cannot be directly associated with specific phenomena of the history of theatre. As an example, his notion of the origins of theatre is not associated with specific historical references – not even the Greece idealized by Wagner, Nietzsche and the Romantics before them. It is rather a place of the mind, an archetype that, in line with a general tendency not only of the theatre but of the entire culture of the twentieth century, has its roots in the Orient, a vague generic term that Craig favored because

metaphorically opposed to the Occident, the West.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, it would be a mistake to insist too much on the unsystematic nature of his approach, at the risk of turning Craig into a incoherent visionary, characterized by suggestive intuitions and weak arguments. Ines Aliverti very correctly stresses the dangers of this approach, insisting instead on his complexity and coherence.<sup>40</sup>

*The Art of the Theatre* is, among Craig's works, the one in which the discourse is most logical, while the metaphorical and symbolical aspects are played down. It could seem, and in many ways is, an essay on the "logic of theatre", which Craig displays to unequivocally assert the true identity of the theatre and the languages that are needed to establish it. One understands the importance of the extraordinarily assertive incipit. It is as if Craig, through the *stage director*, intends to cut right to the chase. 'Do you know what is the Art of the Theatre?' the *stage director* begins.<sup>41</sup> The argument is addressed through the general categories of thought. Craig poses the question of the essence of theatre, what we could call its linguistic ontology. After that, sentence after sentence, comes the list of the synthesis of its expressive elements; the distinction between dramatic poet and dramatist; the visual nature of the theatre. In barely six pages, Craig has laid the theoretical premises, the foundations of his entire argument. He can now address the more practical questions, starting from the function and craft of the *stage manager*. The latter is presented as a crucial figure in the "Renaissance" of the theatre. He is the one whose tasks more closely correspond to the composite nature of theatrical language. Craig's discourse, therefore, is based on the analogy between the artistic essence of theatre and the technique, the craft of the *stage manager*. The transition to the art of the theatre (that is a coming back to it) entails a self-conscious practical experience of the craft and the crafts of theatre, in order to achieve the status of art thanks to the 'Renaissance' of the *stage director*. It is important to note how the artistic dimension to which the *stage manager* aspires (or *stage director* since Craig uses the two terms indifferently) is introduced by numerous references to the centrality of the craftsmanship that characterizes the theatre. The people who work in the theatre are called *craftsmen*; the director himself, so long as his role is that of staging a text, is a *craftsman*, and his work is a *craft*. This lexical datum becomes significant in the context of a English (though not exclusively English) cultural environment, that was particularly familiar to Craig, namely, that of the Arts and Crafts movement, whose chief inspirer was William Morris. Morris insisted on the importance of bridging the gap between craftsmen and artists, freeing crafts from the routine aspects imposed by their practical purposes and conversely providing arts with a practical dimension. *Art* and *craft* were two key terms for an entire generation of architects and theorists, who addressed the problem of the social purpose of art, conceived in relation on the one hand to the idea of a widespread and socially accessible aesthetic, and on the other to the utopian social transfiguration to which

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<sup>39</sup> 'Our Western theatre is very much down. The East still boasts a theatre'. *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> 'Craig is often accused of being an ingenious but non systematic theorist. From the perspective of my research, however, Craig's theoretical and artistic work proves to be as coherent as it is culturally complex'. M. I. Aliverti, 'History and Histories in Edward Gordon Craig's Written and Graphic Work', in *Performing the Matrix. Mediating Cultural Performances*, ed. by M. Wagner e W.-D. Ernst, München, Epodium, 2008, p. 201. Aliverti's essay is an extremely interesting and thorough study of Craig's "paper theatre", of his capacity to entrust to books and drawings his personal vision of the theatre.

<sup>41</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 17.



the new movement – which spread transversally through Europe – was going to give its fundamental contribution. The question is complex and would deserve further attention. What I am interested in at the moment, however, is evidencing how Craig's insistence on the relation between the artistic aspect of the theatre and the craft of the theatre, which is the theoretical substratum of the notion of directing as the medium most capable of responding to the new artistic requirements of the theatre, is something more complex than might have seemed at first glance.

Let us return, however, to the structure of the argument in *The Art of the Theatre*. After having declared that the *stage director* is the professional figure that best corresponds to the language of the art of theatre and having outlined the relation between the craft of the theatre and its artistic transfiguration, Craig presents the more immediately operative part of his dialogue describing, in various passages, the craft of the *stage director*. Having said that stage directions should be ignored if present, Craig writes that the *stage director/craftsman* must instead read the text, 'get the great impression' and in this way 'see the whole colour, rhythm, action of the thing'.<sup>42</sup> It is at this point that the question of being faithful to the text comes up. The faithfulness, as already noted, does not concern so much the "intention of the author" as much the "intention of the text", that is the capacity that the text itself has to communicate to the reader in the name of its own authorship, which uses instrumentally that of the poet to communicate things that go beyond the story, the psychology of the characters, etc.; the only things that art wishes to and should say: the story of the great symbolical conflicts and balances.

The director, in other words, wants to say what the text, in its hidden depths, wishes to say. In order to do this, he uses all the craft he has. The interpretative idea acquires substance and form through a global vision that translates into a stage design (not solely the scenery therefore, but the whole visible aspect of the performance). The spatial and visual construction has therefore a interpretative function, insofar as it is the only one capable of revealing the symbolical meanings that the theatre wishes to communicate. The director creates it by combining the various language elements that are the materials of his craft. Having done this, the "project design" of the entire performance is translated into an act, through the guided creation (the *stage director* personally directs every single phase of the work) of the scenes, the costumes, the lights, and finally, acting, the actors being signs just like the other signs of the stage. Important, necessary signs, but not the protagonists. Their best quality will be their capacity, following the indications of the *stage director*, to harmonically integrate themselves into the entire structure of the performance. Their function, as presented in *The Art of the Theatre*, is eminently visual. Their main interpretative function is to become part of the scenic whole, since the scene is where the interpretation takes place. But, asks the spectator, does not the actor risk becoming a puppet? A loaded question for anyone familiar with Craig's work. The *stage director* replies: 'A puppet is at present only a doll, delightfully enough for a puppet show. But for a theatre we need more than a doll'.<sup>43</sup> This seems to be the end of it, though the subject which will be picked with much greater vivacity two years later in 'The Actor and the Übermarionette'. However there is a "secret" subtext that

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

makes the *stage manager's* statement more problematic.<sup>44</sup> At this stage, however, what I am interested in is Craig's insistence on the interpretative function of the scenic performed by the *stage manager* through his craft and by his collaborators, including actors. What one sees, as already noted, is what generates the dramatic meaning of the theatre.

Craig's survey of the practical craft of the *stage manager/stage director* seems to correspond to Craig's own experience. First with the Purcell Operatic Society, right at the beginning of the twentieth century and later, though with rather unsatisfactory results (especially from Craig's perspective), with *The Vikings* in 1903. It could seem as a sort of collection of "recipes" extracted from his early work as a director.<sup>45</sup> But what makes this discussion of the *stage manager's* craft significant is its position within the overall argument. The discussion serves to focus on the present deteriorated condition of the craft of the theatre and the need to recreate once again the synthesis of elements of different languages which is present even when a verbal text is present. This is the condition, the necessary condition, for theatre to rediscover its craft. But this is not enough. Theatre must also free itself from the literary text which, until it is present, remains an insurmountable obstacle on the way to the transformation of theatre into a true creative art. The *stage manager* must achieve the same condition of other creative artists. He must have his own ideas, as well as the materials and techniques to realize them. Nothing, especially a literary text, must limit his expressivity. Only then, will the *stage manager* become the ideal *stage manager*, the artist of the theatre, and use Action, Scene, and Voice as the materials of his creation.

Considered in its entirety, *The Art of the Theatre* shows a peculiar and interesting circular structure. Craig begins by stating the linguistic conditions necessary for theatre as an art. He then focuses on the *stage director*, on his function and work methods, since among the craftsmen of theatre, he is the one that best corresponds to those artistic requirements. Starting from the way in which the *stage director* applies the tools of his trade to the present staging practice, Craig proceeds to describe the reform that is necessary to give new dignity to theatre as a high-level craft. It is at this point that the question of the artistic nature of theatre (as a creative art) resurfaces. This time, however, not as an aspect of the nature of theatre, but as a something for which the *stage director* must take full creative responsibility. Theatre becomes a creative art insofar as it is entirely and absolutely autonomous and self-reliant. And, as a consequence, free of the burden of the literary text. At this point the discussion comes full circle. At the beginning of the dialogue, Craig had listed the elements of the various artistic languages that make up the art of the theatre. Now, in the conclusion, he lists the materials that the *stage director* will employ once he is transformed into an artist. The two lists coincide: the linguistic tools used by theatre as an art and those that the *stage director* will employ once transformed into an artist

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<sup>44</sup> I am thinking of the 1905 manuscript notebook *Über-Marion* in the 'Fonds Edward Gordon Craig' of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, in which the hypothesis of the marionette is part of an early theoretical effort that, in Craig's intentions, was to have a practical turnout consisting in an actual theatre of marionettes, or Übermarionettes we could anticipate, a theatre he was hoping, or dreaming of opening, in Dresden. On this subject see I. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask. Gordon Craig, Movement, and the Actor*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

<sup>45</sup> Bablet peremptorily states that this portrait is the same of the director of *Dido and Aeneas* and *The Vikings*. See D. Bablet, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 101.

are the same. The circle is closed. But is it still appropriate to speak of *stage manager* or *stage director*? Craig is very clear on this point. These terms are suitable to the craftsmen of theatre as it is practiced today and as it should begin to be practiced tomorrow. But once theatre has stepped over the threshold of artistic self-awareness these definitions will need to change. Craig speaks of an ‘artist of the theatre of the future’, that is different from the *stage director*, even though the craft of the *stage director* is his fundamental starting point. In other words, just as *The Art of the Theatre* is an essay on the categorical repositioning of theatre as art, it is also a text on the transfiguration of the *stage director* from a cogwheel of the theatrical system into a creative figure. The construction of the argument, within a framework of theoretical definitions that subsumes the emancipation process of the *stage director*, is the geometrical form that permanently merges the two aspects of the argument.

### **Writing Attempts**

Craig wrote *The Art of the Theatre* between 22 April and 4 May 1905 the day on which, he says in the *Index*, he read it to Isadora Duncan.<sup>46</sup> A little more than ten days then – Craig claims it was actually only seven – the result of a single burst of creativity. In fact, the actual beginning of Craig’s work on this project must be dated back a few months. While there is no reason not to believe in this week of “blessed writing”, the discovery at the ‘Fonds Edward Gordon Craig’ of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris of the two manuscripts mentioned at the start of the present article raises doubts on the actual speed with which the overall project was carried out. It seems at least that the final *Art of the Theatre* was the result of a series of experiments that can be reasonably dated to the months leading up to the spring of 1905. It is true, on the other hand, that both manuscripts seem autonomous works more than preparatory drafts. While bearing the same title and sharing many of the topics of the final text, they differ significantly both in terms of the organization of the discourse and in terms of their theoretical approach. One must consider them as independent texts, albeit as tentative efforts in the direction of a book that was yet to be written. On the other hand, an actual draft manuscript of *The Art of the Theatre* in the traditional sense of the term does exist and is also found at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. It is a notebook with a black cover, the type habitually employed by Craig, containing the full version of the text, neatly arranged, with only a few variants. The latter are of philological more than theoretical interest, since they provide only slight stylistic variations and do not affect the substance of the text. The manuscripts we are considering, instead, are much less polished from a formal perspective – to the point that they seem rough and in many ways still very “private” drafts for a future essay on the art of theatre. Furthermore, the arguments are arranged in ways that are quite different from that of *The Art of the Theatre*, even if they contain many of the topics that will be more systematically and effectively developed later on.

Having said this, what I would like to do is to reconstruct the writing process that ties the manuscripts to the final work. My first concern will be to try to reasonably determine the period in which they were produced. For the sake of clarity, I will distinguish between a Manuscript A, which is a longer and complete text and a

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<sup>46</sup> See E. Gordon Craig, *Index to the Story of my Days*, p. 271 and p. 274.

Manuscript B, which is instead incomplete, while reserving the title *The Art of the Theatre* only for the published version.<sup>47</sup> In the case of the Manuscript A it is possible to advance something more than an hypothesis. In the text, Craig mentions an article by Brander Matthews, saying that it had come out in the same year. At first in fact Craig had even inserted a date, 1904, which he later erased. Matthews's article was titled 'The Art of the Stage Manager' and had been published in the *North American Review* (178, no. 567, February 1904). Manuscript A was therefore necessarily written after that date. A second clue allows us to date it even more precisely to the second semester of 1904.

Count Harry Kessler, in the introduction to the catalog of the exhibit held by Craig in Berlin in December 1904 (an essay that was almost integrally used as the introduction to the German edition of *The Art of the Theatre*) writes: 'Craig wants to be one of these artists of the art of the stage. And, in a short essay, of which I have the manuscript in front of me, he sketches out his idea of this artist'.<sup>48</sup> Marotti, in his book on Gordon Craig, notes this statement (and is the only one who does it), wondering what the essay could be. He is unable, however, to offer an answer because, at this stage, it could not be *The Art of the Theatre*, which is subsequent, but neither the German edition of 'On Stage Scenery' – one of the articles published by Craig in the *Morning Post* in 1903 and translated with the title 'Über Bühnenausstattung' in the journal *Kunst und Künstler* (no. 3, 1904) – because, he writes, this 'cannot be considered a theoretical essay'.<sup>49</sup> More than Marotti's considerations, it is possible in my view to exclude 'On Stage Scenery' for much more concrete reasons. It is unclear, first of all, why Kessler should be reading a manuscript since at the end of 1904 the text had already been published. In the second place, Kessler's comments do not seem to correspond to the content of the article. On the contrary, they resemble closely the ones found in the manuscript we are dealing with, for which reason it seems likely that this was the short essay cited by Kessler, who, given his close relation with Craig, might have had the possibility of seeing it. Manuscript A, in conclusion, can be tentatively dated to the autumn of 1904 or at the most, to a few weeks earlier.

Manuscript B instead offers no specific internal clues to its date of production. However, there are some general indications that it was subsequent to the previous one, a sort of second draft on the same topic. Unlike *The Art of the Theatre*, neither of the two manuscripts is in the form of a dialogue. However, a dialogical aspect is present in Manuscript B. Under the title, which is also *The Art of the Theatre*, we find the subtitle *One or two Questions answered*. It would seem, therefore, that Craig was already thinking of discussing the question of the art of theatre through a game of question and answer. This would be a first step towards the dialogue between the stage director and his interlocutor of *The Art of the Theatre* (the expression 'one or

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<sup>47</sup> Both the manuscripts, with the same title *The Art of the Theatre*, are at the 'Fonds Edward Gordon Craig' of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (The Art MS 146). The second one has a subtitle that identifies it: *One or two Questions answered*. I call them Manuscript A and Manuscript B to distinguish better one from another.

<sup>48</sup> H. Kessler, 'Edward Gordon Craig's Entwürfe für Theatre-Dekorationen und Kostüme', *Katalog über verschied. Entwürfe für Scenen und Kostüme für das Theatre und einige Zeichnungen englischer Landscenen von Edward Gordon Craig*, Berlin, December 1904. Also as *Vorwort* in E. Gordon Craig, *Die Kunst des Theaters*, Berlin and Leipzig, Seemann, 1905, p. 4, from which I quote it.

<sup>49</sup> F. Marotti, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 65.

two' should be read as a rhetorical understatement). But there is more. Under the title and subtitle there is the underlined statement (underlines are highly significant in Craig's manuscripts) 'rewrite this as dialogue'.<sup>50</sup> This is a note of the author to himself: the possibility of a dialogue has popped into his mind and Craig has taken note of it. He is no longer going to write answers, but a dialogue with questions and answers. Underneath, Craig indicates the scene in which this future dialog is to be set: 'In the theatre – at a rehearsal' almost a stage direction, which also summarizes what the stage director will say:<sup>51</sup>

You have been over the theatre with me, and have seen its general construction, together with the stage, the machinery for manipulating the scenes, the apparatus for lighting, and the hundred other things, and have also hear what I have had to say of the theatre as a machine, let us rest here in the auditorium, and talk a while of the theatre and of its art.<sup>52</sup>

There are, in other words, a series of elements that suggest that Manuscript B was written immediately before the final version of the *The Art of the Theatre* and, therefore, after Manuscript A. It is, at present, impossible to date it precisely, but if we adopt Kessler's introduction to the Berlin exhibit of December 1904 as a chronological watershed, we reach the conclusion that Manuscript B was written between the autumn of 1904 and the first months of 1905, shortly before the fateful April 1905. But could not Kessler have been reading this manuscript instead of Manuscript A? I do not think so. The text of Manuscript B is incomplete. In the midst of his argument, while looking for an example in contemporary theatre that could be used as a model, Craig interrupts himself abruptly, crosses out the page with an angry pencil line and adds the comment: 'Art does not exist. Actually does not exist'.<sup>53</sup> It is difficult to think that Craig would have asked his friend Kessler to read this incomplete manuscript. Furthermore, while Manuscript A seems the final result of an author who is satisfied with his work, in Manuscript B, one perceives the creative ferment of an excited mind, which is abandoning its certainties and looking for new ideas.

### ***Manuscript A***

Manuscript A is made up of 28 unbounded pages written in ink. The first page bears the title *The Art of the Theatre* and the last page is signed. The impression one receives is that, though Craig still intended to develop it, he was treating it as a finished work. The main theoretical motif is the autonomous and specific nature of theatre, its being 'self-reliant'. This motif is associated with the search for a professional figure capable of becoming the master of the art of the stage.

We are in many ways already within the thematic horizon of *The Art of the Theatre* but the argumentative structure is not as assertive. Craig, in other words, has not adopted yet the apodictic style used to present his theoretical statements of *The Art of*

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<sup>50</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 7.

*the Theatre*. However, the presence of an explicit theoretical intention in the manuscript is undeniable.

The text is presented as a single continuous argument; however, for the purpose of our analysis, it is useful to subdivide it into three sections that correspond to three different subtopics. The first subtopic is the qualities that identify theatre as an art; the second is how to dramaturgically and scenically create a theatrical work of art (and who is capable of creating it); the third is the relation between the necessary to innovate and the reaction of the public.

The opening is very forceful, similar in terms of the impact on the reader, to that of *The Art of the Theatre* although the rhetorical formula is different: 'I believe that the art of the theatre is still undreamt of by the majority and three quarters of the minority, of people'.<sup>54</sup> It is the less understood of all arts, he adds, the one whose intrinsic value and especially authentic identity is less clear. Based on this premise, Craig proceeds to reject the most common ideas on the artistic nature of the theatre, using an argument that is practically identical to that of *The Art of the Theatre*: 'The art of the theatre, whether it is practiced today or not, is neither the Play, the acting of a play, the scenery and costume, the art of one great actor or a fine company of actors'.<sup>55</sup> What is profoundly different, instead, is the conclusion of the argument, the positive part that follows upon the negative one. While at the end of *The Art of the Theatre* Craig describes the theatre as a synthesis of different languages, here the conclusion of his argument is very different. Having rejected the definition of theatre as dependent on drama, acting or scenery, Craig proceeds to define it as 'the expression of Life', a sort of model of absolute Life, the capital letter being used to underline the importance of the term: not life as the sum of everyday experiences, but Life as a metaphysical unit of measure of existence. Immediately after, however, almost to provide a more technical support to this suggestive metaphor, Craig argument suddenly and unexpectedly veers towards the *stage manager*, introduced as a reflection – similar, therefore, but not identical to the original – of an unspecified original creator, something akin to the 'first dramatist', or, even more, 'the father of the dramatist' found in *The Art of the Theatre*.

There is somewhat of a logical leap in the argument. Craig on the one hand denies that the theatre can be identified with the singular components that compose it (and with the associated crafts); on the other hand, however, he does not describe an alternative theatrical language as he was to do in *The Art of the Theatre* (the 'authentic' language of theatre). Instead he speaks of two apparently different things: he declares the theatre's mission to be the representation of life and he identifies the professional figure capable of carrying out this mission. In other words, he mixes a spiritualist tension of symbolist origin (which on the other hand remains a constant in his poetics) with an attention towards the concrete practice of theatre, the actual conditions in which theatre is materially produced. These two aspects resurface, as we have seen, in *The Art of the Theatre*, but much better integrated in the overall discourse than in Manuscript A.

It is as if Craig was not yet speaking in terms of two alternative systems of languages (specifically, literature, acting, etc. in opposition to the synthesis of various

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<sup>54</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

elements) but of an opposition between crafts: writer and actor on the one hand, *stage manager* on the other. 'It is the stage manager who is the master of the theatre and it is the stage manager who should be the master of the art'.<sup>56</sup> In Manuscript A, in other words, the mission of the theatre is metaphysical; the instrument that serves to achieve that mission is not an alternative language but more simply a specific craft.

Before proceeding in our analysis, however, there is a terminological aspect that needs to be clarified. To identify the role, the function, and even the value of the *stage manager*, Craig uses the expression 'master', a term that conveys a number of references. The word can refer to a master of arts, but also to a master of a craft. It is a term that connotes mastery, technical and practical skills, but also creative talent in its various forms. In the word 'master', which Craig uses very often in Manuscript A, we hear the echo of two voices: the voice of art and the voice of craft. Finally, it is interesting to note how, in this first effort to summarize his ideas on the art of theatre, Craig adopts the term 'master', if necessary specifying it as 'master of the art of the theatre', rather than 'artist' as he was to do in *The Art of the Theatre*. A question of words, certainly, but also a question of concepts and their position within Craig's theory.

Let us return, however, to the main argument. The stage manager, says Craig, is the figure of choice because he knows the craft of the theatre and because his role can correspond to the most authentic mission of the theatre: the representation of true Life. On the meaning of 'craft' we will have a chance to return later on. For now let us focus on the more elusive question of the relation between theatre and Life. In the *Introduction* to *The Art of the Theatre*, Craig deals more extensively with this topic when, in speaking of the role of the artists of the theatre, he writes: 'By the means of this medium such men should be able to show us life in all its beautiful forms', adding that theatre 'should be a place in which the entire beauty of the life can be unfolded, and not only the external beauty of the world, but the inner beauty and meaning of life'.<sup>57</sup> Craig's statement is clear: reality and life are endowed with a secret mysterious internal force and it is the theatre's mission to evoke this force through the language of the stage. Manuscript A is more cursory and probably less precise, but the theoretical scenario is the same.

However, the theoretical discourse seems to remain suspended veering abruptly towards a more operative dimension. The focus switches to the *stage manager*, 'who should be the creator of examples of theatrical art'.<sup>58</sup> To him Craig attributes the leading role in the process of ideation, creation and realization of the theatrical work of art, a role that is habitually – and arbitrarily – played by other figures: the playwright, the actor, the scene-painter. The most serious fault is that of the playwright to whom in most cases the leading role in the theatrical creation is delegated. Craig attributes this state of things more than to the choice of one artistic language over the other – the word as the supreme medium of poetry and art, the permanence of the literary text contrasted with the ephemeral nature of the performance – to a sort of psychological conditioning of theatre professionals. The artists of the theatre, writes Craig, meaning all those that are artistically involved in the theatre (without any further specification offered) feel the need for leadership,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 2.

the need to creatively entrust themselves to someone else. They are afraid of exercising their rights, afraid that playwrights and stage designers will abandon them to fend for themselves, they are dismayed by this possibility rather than enthusiastic as they should be. The problem of the expressive primacy within the theatre – whether it should be “autoctonous”, as Craig believes, or imported from literature, as commonly maintained – is not treated in Manuscript A as a question of artistic languages but as a reaction to a sort of metaphorical coup by the playwright, who has created a power system that forces the other artists of the theatre into a state of subjection. This false balance must be overturned, even though the possibility dismays the craftsmen of the theatre. The latter must convince themselves that ‘their art is able to stand alone, and in fact only exists when self-reliant’.<sup>59</sup> This is where Craig introduces a crucial term, destined to become the keystone of the *Introduction to The Art of the Theatre*: self-reliant.

For Craig, one must understand that theatre is an autonomous art and not ‘another name for the playwright or the actor’.<sup>60</sup> In his statement, Craig juxtaposes arts and professions: the theatre is not the dramatist. The problem, as posed by Craig, does not lie so much with the arts, with literature and scenery aspiring to dominate over other arts, but with the people: it is the playwright and the stage designer that seek to take control of the theatre. It is necessary to subvert this system of relations. To explain his position, Craig adopts an unusual analogy. Playwrights, actors and stage designers are for theatre what priests, organists and sextons are for the Church.

Churches are the homes of Religions and the men who created those religions. The priests are servants, Mahomet, Buddha there are the masters. So it is with the theatre. The people who officiate are the servants the man who creates the art performed within the precincts of the theatre is the master. This man is not the playwright but the stage manager’.<sup>61</sup>

Aside from the reference to the Church, which will resurface in different form in the *Introduction* and the use Craig once again makes of a metaphorical image to refer to something that would probably be best described in artistic if not technical terms, it is interesting to note the ambitious conceptual leap that has been made in the description of the *stage manager* that is now qualified as the ideal director of the creative process in the theatre.

Of course, adds Craig, this leading role could be performed also by playwrights provided their were adequately educated in the art of the theatre. But this possibility is unlikely because, Craig writes, when a playwright has written his text and published it, he feels the goal of his art has been achieved and is satisfied with that. In *The Art of the Theatre*, Craig expanded on this notion, specifying that a work can be aesthetically referred only to a single art and therefore, if the dramatic text originates with a literary spirit and vocation, it is destined to remain literary and, for this very reason, cannot hope to become theatre.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., fol. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., fol. 4.



‘Great plays are not written to be acted they are written to be read’,<sup>62</sup> he writes, adding that no one can deny that *King Lear* is much grander when it is read than when it is acted.<sup>63</sup>

As one can see, the slippery conceptual distinction between words to be spoken and words to be read is therefore already present in Manuscript A. Indeed, it is clearer than in *The Art of the Theatre*, confirming what I previous said in discussing the latter text. It is not a problem of the intrinsic quality of the words, but of their collocation within a text that can be literary, and there the word is born to be read, or spectacular/theatrical, and in this case on the contrary the word acquires meaning only when it is spoken. There does not exist, in other words, a word that has a separate literary existence, there is no page – neither in the traditional sense, nor metaphorically, a page as a whole endowed with meaning – that may hold it other than the page of the stage.

Literary dramas, therefore, are unsuited to the stage. This is the case in *The Art of the Theatre*, this is already the case in Manuscript A. In the latter, however, the argument is less radical compared to the sharp assertiveness that Craig displays in *The Art of the Theatre*. While in *The Art of the Theatre* the staging of *Hamlet* is seen as a necessary, but absolutely transitory step towards the development of the expressive autonomy of theatre, the attitude in Manuscript A seems more open. ‘When faultlessly interpreted (uncut and dealt honorably with by the manager) it still retains much of its beauty but its whole majesty only reaches you when you hold the work in your hands and read to yourself in silence’.<sup>64</sup> In Manuscript A, thus, even if the ultimate goal is to have theatre stand on its own feet, without the prop of literature, the staging of a text, especially of one of Shakespeare’s masterpieces, is still a valuable operation. In *The Art of the Theatre* this aspect is addressed in the context of the long discussion on the craft of the stage director, in which Craig speaks also of the relation between stage and text.

Craig continues the first part of Manuscript A by focusing on the need for theatre to achieve its independence. This independence however is not yet presented in terms of an autonomous language but in more practical terms, having to do with who controls the production. More specifically, it consists in the liberation from the dominion of the playwright and the rise of the *stage manager*. In this period of his theoretical elaboration, Craig still tends to mix his tentative definition of the artistic nature of theatre with his analysis of how theatre is practically done, or rather should be done. These two aspects remain very evident also in *The Art of the Theatre*, but as if assigned to two distinct spheres (the ‘what is theatre’ is a theoretical question that is distinct from the ‘how theatre is done’ which concerns the craft). In Manuscript A, instead, the two levels tend to contaminate one another.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., fol. 5.

<sup>63</sup> This Shakespearean example is found also in *The Art of the Theatre* but, aside from the replacement of *King Lear* with *Hamlet*, the tone of the argument is much more peremptory: ‘*Hamlet* and the other plays of Shakespeare have so vast and so complete a form when read, that they can but lose heavily when presented to us after having undergone stage treatment [...] Had the plays been made to be seen, we should find them incomplete when we read them’ (*The Art of the Theatre*, p. 22). It is interesting that in the copy at the ‘Fonds Edward Gordon Craig’ of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Craig had corrected in ink ‘seen’ into ‘acted’, returning to some extent to the formula used in Manuscript A.

<sup>64</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 5 (underline Craig’s).

Having declared the need for the theatre to gain an expressive autonomy, Craig moves on to the second part of his discussion: how is this liberated theatrical work of art made? The master of the theatre, that is, the *stage manager*, enters the theatre with nothing in his hands other than the creative intention of showing what the ‘Life’ wants to express and his knowledge of the various expressive means, the tools of his craft, that he will use. Exactly, Craig points out, like other artists. No literary text, therefore, no masterpieces of literature but only a pure and original “writing” for the theatre. It is evident how, with a sudden theoretical leap, the *stage manager* has become an actual author. On the other hand, Craig adds, ‘remember I am talking of a master of theatrical art and not of a modern director of stage machinery’.<sup>65</sup> In this case too there are evident anticipations of *The Art of the Theatre*. There too Craig establishes the relation between artistic creation and the theatrical machinery (which evidently, has its function, even though it is foreign to art). Indeed, *The Art of the Theatre* begins precisely with a visit in which the stage machinery is examined. Later on, in speaking of the gaining of an awareness of the true artistic nature of the theatrical language, Craig will closely relate this awareness to the technical/technological dimension of the stage. The ‘Renaissance’ of the theatre, he writes, will be tied to the ‘reform of the theatre as an instrument’ and this reform will be realized ‘when the theatre has become a masterpiece of mechanism’.<sup>66</sup> Paraphrasing a famous expression by Craig, practice first and then theory, we could say: first technique then language. Once again, the close relation on a thematic level with Manuscript A is evident, but equally evident is the distance in the structure of the argument: the “first” and “after” that in Manuscript A connects technique and art, becomes instead a distinction in *The Art of the Theatre*: the *stage manager* is not the master of the technique but of the art. I think one can say that, in Manuscript A, Craig still feels the need to argue for the creative specificity of the *stage manager* while distancing himself somewhat from his present day practice, whereas in *The Art of the Theatre* he takes this creative role for granted, and openly declares the importance of the technical aspects of his craft.

We are now dealing therefore with the actual practice of the *stage manager*.

Once inside the theatre, having something to express, he looks around for the material which he is to work with, and the tools of his craft. He finds these in action, sound, colour, line and pantomimists (pantomime is the only form of pure acting remember). All these things are in his hands ready to be molded into whatever form his inspiration dictates.<sup>67</sup>

With an astounding argumentative leap, Craig treats the elements that in *The Art of the Theatre* will define the theoretical boundaries of the art of theatre as attributes of the *stage manager*’s craft. The distance between Manuscript A and *The Art of the Theatre* seems in this case immense.

In *The Art of the Theatre*, action, word, line, colour, rhythm, serve to clearly define the nature of the theatre, which is something very distinguished from the *stage director*’s craft. The latter is described as the ability to correctly interpret on stage a literary text using one’s mastery of the right tools, which are the scenery, the

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., fol. 7.

<sup>66</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 8 (double underline Craig’s. Next to ‘inspiration’, Craig added a small question mark, evidently dissatisfied with the term).

costumes, the lights and the movements of the actors. Nothing, or at least, little to do with action, word, etc. In Manuscript A things are addressed in a completely different fashion. First of all, not all the terms coincide. We find line, colour and action. The word, instead, is present only in association with sound, in a way, therefore, that evidently limits its expressive specificity. There is, more important, the reference to dumbshow which will be completely abandoned in the published work. Craig is evidently searching for something that will inspire him, something that will correspond to his idea of theatre. The dumbshow, insofar as it is based on pure stage action, on a visual and theatrical form of writing and narrating, even more than on an absolute gesture, seems to Craig a credible model. This notion is not as strange as could seem if taken in the context of the English tradition. Dumbshows, especially Christmas ones, were a staple of English theatres throughout the nineteenth century. They were incredibly rich in terms of visual and spectacular effects and were the reign of *stage managers* as well as one of the most important sources of revenues for theatres. Craig was therefore familiar with dumbshows and had in fact planned a kind of 'dumb project' in the years preceding *The Art of the Theatre*.

In Manuscript A, therefore, the dumbshow is treated as one of the possible solutions offered by the various crafts of the theatre, whereas the problem, at least in terms of language, of the true artistic identity of the theatre is not yet explicitly addressed. If the reference to the dumbshow as one of the expressive elements of the new art of the theatre is a clear indication of Craig's approach to the matter, even more explicit is the role attributed to the elements that concur to the expressive synthesis of theatrical language. In Manuscript A, contrary to *The Art of the Theatre*, these elements do not serve to define the artistic boundaries of theatre, but they are mentioned as part of its technical heritage, as the tools of the *stage manager*. What is the difference? Is not the ideal stage manager the one who will be able to use them synthesizing them around Action, Scene and Voice? Certainly, but he will not do it because those are the tools of his craft, but because they are constitutive elements of the new art of the theatre, which coincide with those that he, given his profession, is a master of. It seems to me that we are once again confronted with arguments that are similar but distinct, a fact which shows how Craig had yet to elaborate the distinction between "being" and "doing", between the art of the theatre as it is or should be and how it is or should be done.

On the other hand, in Manuscript A there is already a evident intention to theoretically underline the artistic dimension of theatre, which is clearly voiced in the long digression that occurs at this point. 'Have I made it already sufficiently clear that I look upon the art of the theatre as a creative art', Craig writes, adding, to make his point clearer, a fundamental distinction between staging as a craft and the artistic dimension of the true theatrical creation.<sup>68</sup> As in the later *The Art of the Theatre*, the first is said to coincide with the interpretation of a pre-existing literary text, the second instead is done by someone who creates referring only to himself and the tools of his craft. Craig pays his respects to craftsmen, but the problem, he says, is another one: "The deeper question is that of the creative art of the theatre and the master of that art, the so called stage manager".<sup>69</sup> Craig however does more than repeating what he had already said. He develops instead a parallel between the *stage*

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., fol. 10.

*manager* and the orchestra conductor, saying that the one stands to the drama and the actors as the other stands to the execution of a symphony and the orchestra. It is here that Craig, to support his argument, uses the Brander Matthews's citation that allowed us to hypothesize a date of composition of the manuscript.<sup>70</sup>

Matthews – a professor of theatre at Columbia University of New York who is considered one of the founding fathers of theatre studies in the US – had published, in a 1904 issue of the *North American Review*, an interesting article on the stage manager, in which the figure was discussed from a modern critical perspective. Craig cites one of the initial passages, where Matthews compares the stage manager to the conductor of the orchestra:

What the conductor is to a performance of orchestral music; the stage manager is to the performance of a play in the theatre. His art is as special, as necessary, as novel, and as difficult; and, if it is as yet scarcely recognized and rarely appreciated, this is due in part to the conditions under which his work must be done.<sup>71</sup>

It seems almost verbatim what Craig had written on the *Morning Post* and surely this is what caught his attention: a theatre scholar who was saying almost exactly the same things he was. The very title of Matthews's article 'The Art of the Stage Manager', stressed the artistic function of the role. In citing Matthews, however, Craig curiously omits a detail. Immediately after having referred to the *stage manager*, Matthews had specified: 'And in this paper the term "stage manager" is to be understood as meaning the "producer" of a drama', a specification that Craig ignored.<sup>72</sup> We can only speculate on why Craig did this. The first hypothesis, the most banal one, is that Craig rejected the term *producer* because, since the time of the Purcell Operatic Society and of the company of the Imperial Theatre in which he had collaborated with his mother Ellen Terry, Craig was accustomed to defining himself a *stage director*, though he never uses the expression in Manuscript A. Perhaps the term *producer* reminded too much of that of *manager* which he despised so much. A second reason is that Craig is not so much interested in introducing a new term as much as associating the role of theatrical author that he has begun reflecting on to something already present in contemporary theatre and therefore more easily recognizable. It would be imprudent to speculate beyond this. The fact remains that, in Matthews's citation, Craig cuts precisely the part in which Matthews underlines, even on a terminological level, the novelty of the role of the *stage manager*.

Matthews's citation, while on the one had allowing Craig to offer an authoritative support to an idea he had already elaborated, on the other hand offers him the opportunity to introduce a number of distinctions. Craig points out that

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<sup>70</sup> It would be incorrect, however, to infer that Craig had taken the comparison from Matthews, also because he had already used it in 'On Stage Scenery', *Morning Post*, 13 October 1903. Rather Craig was providing an academic backing to his statement to make it more authoritative, reminding the reader that he 'wrote something about him in the early part of 1903' (ibid.).

<sup>71</sup> B. Matthews, 'The Art of the Stage Manager', *North American Review*, 178, no. 567 (February, 1904). Also found in B. Matthews, *Inquiries and opinions*, New York, C. Scribners' Sons, 1907, pp. 284-285, from which I cite. It is interesting that the article in the book is dated 1903, either a misprint or a reference to the year in which it was actually written. Craig in any case read it in the *North American Review* version of 1904.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 284.

it is difficult to know what particular stage manager Mr. Matthews has in his mind's eye. Maybe he is thinking of Goethe as stage manager in Weimar, perhaps of Wagner. At any rate he cannot be thinking of one of our modern manipulators of machinery and he was by no means considering the stage manager in the light I am now placing him in.<sup>73</sup>

This statement is an extraordinarily important and rich in suggestions. Not so much for his judgment on Matthews, which seems rather cavalier, but for the ideas that it implies. It is not entirely true, in fact, as we shall see, that Matthews failed to mention real-life examples of the modern *stage manager*. It is certainly true, however, that what he speaks of is not perfectly defined on a theoretical level, and certainly does not coincide with what Craig maintained.

Matthews speaks of the *stage manager* as the great harmonizer of the entire show, the one to whom is entrusted the extremely difficult role of making visible on scene what the writer has written on the page. But while the conductor has the help of the precise indications of the musical score, the *stage manager* must make do with the few indications he can glean from the literary text. He therefore is an essential collaborator of the dramatist.<sup>74</sup> The difficulty of his profession is aggravated by the fact that – contrary to the conductor – he is invisible to the public, which instinctively attributes only to the actors, to the artists it materially perceives, the responsibility of what it sees on stage, whereas it should be attributed almost entirely to the *stage manager*.

This lack of indications in the text and the scarce visibility of his role are therefore the aspects that characterize the craft of the *stage manager*. His function is at present still ill-defined and his fundamental role in creating, directing and harmonizing the performance is still not acknowledged. But in reality it is the stage manager who controls acting, the scene, costumes, props, lights and music as a harmonic whole, as elements that are not to be perceived separately but together and simultaneously. It is he, in other words, who constructs the visible world that allows the spectator to appreciate and fully understand the work of the writer. It is he who knows that, and here it is almost as if Craig himself was speaking, 'actions speak louder than words'.<sup>75</sup> All these things together make the stage manager both a traditional figure tied to the old habits of the theatre, and a modern one, because autonomous and specialized. The definition of *stage manager*, the *producer*, in terms of the specialization of functions typical of the modern world (Matthews cites the example of engineers) is one of the most original and interesting aspects of Matthew's article. In Craig, on the contrary, as I have already noted, the focus is not so much on the modernity of the *stage manager's* role, as on its correspondence to an original and, in some ways, meta-historical artistic essence of the theatre, albeit characterized by some innovative aspects, in contrast with the degenerations of the profession.

Matthews continues in his article addressing a series of questions ranging from the influence of the proscenium arch in defining the *stage manager's* approach to the play compared to the Elizabethan projecting stage, to the ability of *stage managers* to inherit and re-elaborate traditional models to scenically realize specific scenes of the great

<sup>73</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 11.

<sup>74</sup> It is interesting that Matthews reconstructs the historical development of the orchestra conductor, which became prominent in the nineteenth century and is therefore a modern figure.

<sup>75</sup> B. Matthews, 'The Art of the Stage Manager', p. 299.

classics, to examples of stage inventions (not attributed to any specific *stage manager*), such as the use of the stage as a chessboard or the employment of toy theatres to plan the performance. He also mentions a number of figures who have been influential in this process of modernization, including Meininger, Irving, Belasco, Sardou, and James A. Herne (a writer, director and collaborator of Belasco). It is a rather heterogeneous list, which, while corresponding to a shared knowledge of the protagonists of the late nineteenth-century reform of the theatre, seems rather incoherent, out of date (Antoine is missing to name one) and in general much less innovative than the positions expressed in the article. In other words, they are examples that can help the reader understand the subject of the article but, though Matthews was not intent on producing a systematic survey, they do not adequately illustrate his argument. One understands then Craig's impression that Matthews had insufficiently explained his position and had failed to offer concrete examples of what he had in mind. It is curious, however, that, in order to hypothetically reconstruct Matthews's possible references, Craig mentions two names that Matthews had not cited: Goethe – as director of the court theatre at Weimar, on whom Craig was well informed – and Wagner. Goethe might have been suggested by Matthews's reference to an unspecified director who treated the stage like a chessboard, an idea found in Goethe's *Regeln für Schauspieler* (1803). It is difficult to say instead what could have led Craig to find in Matthews's article a reference to Wagner. One would think that it was rather Craig who had begun reflecting on Wagner and appropriating some of his ideas, a process that in the space of a few months was to lead him to offer his definition of theatre in openly post-Wagnerian terms.

Having said that, the relation between Craig and Matthews can be said to revolve on the common reference to the orchestra conductor and the notion of an harmonious whole, and in the idea that it was important 'to achieve a harmony of tone and to create an intangible atmosphere, in which the spirit of the play shall be revealed'.<sup>76</sup> The reference to Matthews could therefore be interpreted as a rhetorical gesture, functional to Craig's own argument, a reference destined to be almost naturally dropped out, as indeed was the case, from future versions of *The Art of the Theatre*. It is my impression, however, that the influence of Matthews's 'The Art of the Stage Manager' goes beyond this. The bare title chosen by Matthews must have functioned as a stimulus and, in some ways, a comfort for Craig, to the extent that it explicitly (and, I would say, programmatically) acknowledged the artistic role of the stage manager's profession. The fact that this was done on the basis of different criteria did not limit the appeal of the title.

But there is a second element in the article that I believe must have provided an important stimulus. Matthews, as already noted, had listed the stage functions of which the stage manager is responsible: acting, scene, costumes, objects, lights and music. When Craig in turn lists the tools of the stage manager's craft – action, sound, colour, line and dumbshow – his list seems almost a response to Matthews's. While Craig agreed with the harmonizing and leading function of the stage manager, he has a different view of his tools: those cited by Matthews are still tied to the current practice, while Craig's list is already oriented towards an alternative perspective, in

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 300-301.

which the act of materially constructing a performance is transformed into the expression of an artistic language. Our hypothesis is that Craig's inclusion in the functions of the stage manager of a series of elements taken from various artistic languages, all oriented in a specific aesthetic direction, is determined, at least partly, by Craig's need to respond to Matthews's article by staking out a distinct and autonomous theoretical space, different from that of the American scholar, which he did not fully satisfy him, if at all.

Once finished this digression – which actually is much briefer than it would seem from the time I have spent on it – Craig once again returns to where he had left the stage manager: 'By the dumbshow of his regiment of craftsmen and by the manipulation of sound, colour, line, light and darkness he can on the stage of a theatre suggest all the things which go to make up our Life'.<sup>77</sup> He can, in fact, do more than that. He can materialize what was locked up in the theatre of his mind.

At this point, however, with a rhetorical solution that he will frequently use in the years to come, Craig says that it is best for the time being to focus on something simple and concrete and postpone for now the discussion of the purest – and therefore the most difficult – form of theatre. Let us see then, he says, how a stage manager works when he has to stage something that has already been expressed in words by someone else. Note that Craig deliberately avoids terms such as dramatic text or drama, choosing instead a more complex, and possibly convoluted, locution, in order to express more precisely what he has in mind. The reason is that the problem he is about to address is different from that of staging a literary text. It concerns instead the visualization, through the sensory media of the stage, of a world that has been already expressed through words (narrative words, one could say, different from the dialogic words of drama).

As an example, Craig imagines the case of a stage manager who has to stage the French Revolution. What should he refer to? What texts should he consider? The choice of the subject might seem surprising if not downright extravagant, and it is not easy to imagine why Craig chooses this example when he could have found an easier one. It is true, however, that the topic of the French Revolution was more common, in the drama of the time, than one might imagine. Indeed, Craig quickly rules out a number of dramas, like *Thermidor*, *Robespierre*, *Charlotte Corday*, which, in Craig's opinion, while apparently corresponding to the topic at hand, are not effective representations of the Revolution.<sup>78</sup> Rather, they are literarily shoddy pieces from which actors can extract one or two passions at most. On the contrary, an extraordinary account of the revolutionary events is found in Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution. A History*.<sup>79</sup> There instead, writes Craig, we find an actual *tranche-de-vie*.

As usual Craig argument needs to be interpreted and clarified where possible. For Craig, if the theme is the French Revolution, it is necessary to identify a text whose words reconstruct that world as if it were a living thing. Carlyle's book is the perfect answer to this requirement. When we read it, says Craig, we hear the crowd shout under the palace window during the insurrection; we see the distracted faces of the

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<sup>77</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 12.

<sup>78</sup> The text cited by Craig are classics of the French sentimental historical drama: *Thermidor* and *Robespierre* are by Victorien Sardou and *Charlotte Corday* by François Ponsard.

<sup>79</sup> Carlyle's book had been published in London by Chapman & Hall in 1837.

king and queen, the looks of the servants, the fearful attitude of the nobility and finally the terrible clatter of the wagon carrying the prisoners to the guillotine. It is an extraordinarily effective verbal representation, which shows, as is often the case, Craig's fine literary verve. What Craig likes of Carlyle's presentation is his extraordinary communicative effectiveness, his capacity to make visible, to the eye of the mind, the world of the Revolution in all its excitement. A world made of images, characters, sound, a world alive in its variety and richness. Nothing to do with those writers – first and foremost Sardou – who reduce the richness of reality to a few sentimental, phony, stereotypical, and amorphous events. A consequence of the lack of talent in the authors, of course, but even more of dramaturgical conventions, that forces one to constrict the variety of the world in the rigid grid of formal rules and dialogue.

The choice of the French Revolution and Carlyle's book, which might have seemed puzzling at first, appears now in a different light. It is most likely that its main reason was Craig's fascination with *The French Revolution*, with its anti-conventional and anti-academic approach to history, presented more as something experienced (and re-presented) in first person, than as a faithful documentary reconstruction. However, there is more. It was also a chance to polemicize directly against historical melodramas, which appeared to Craig unbearably artificial, suited, at most, to providing an excuse for the virtuoso performance of a great actor. When, in 1930, Craig wrote about the life of Irving, which he had seen so many times acting precisely in melodramas, he adopted a far different attitude, nostalgically reminiscing about the theatre of the past, whose richness contrasted with the shoddiness of the present one, a theatre that still had all the fascination of the ancient trade. But this was Craig in his maturity; the young man of 1904 saw the *mélo* only as an adversary, the quintessence of all that he despised.

On the contrary, the example of Carlyle gave him the opportunity to relate the stage to a text that is neither a drama nor a novel. Something, an historical essay, that, notwithstanding the vivacity of its style, could hardly aspire to being staged. The role of theatre, in this case, is completely different: to present on stage the same *tranche-de-vie* that emerges from the book. But this cannot be done using the conventional tools of the theatre, because in it the words are not arranged as dialogues, which is the conventional starting point for a *mise-en-scène*. Nor should one try to rewrite them as dialogues, because otherwise one would end up in the same dead-end of the authors of melodramas. The *stage manager*, the master of the theatre, must instead extract from Carlyle's account the spirit of the days of the revolution, which in the text is expressed in words, and give it a new sensory form, adequate to the world of the stage. How? Craig reaffirms his view for the third time: using movement, sound, colour, line, light and shade (and, under sound, he specifies speech).

What Craig is proposing is a sort of modern dumbshow, capable of presenting on stage the flow of life with the same vividness achieved by Carlyle. It is evident that we are not dealing with a conventional relation between word and performance, in which the visual representation has the role of scenically bringing to life the dramatic word, but with something profoundly different. There is a theme, the French Revolution. There is a book, Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, which has succeeded in perfectly conveying its vital ferment through words and narrative. There must be a theatre which, while drawing inspiration from the effectiveness of that narrative, is



capable of creating its own. An equivalent on stage of a verbal world, not a receptacle, on stage, of words, to be impoverished through the conventionalism of the dialogue and dramatic form.

The problem, in other words, is not the staging of a drama. Rather, Craig is suggesting a different type of dramatic performance. A performance that is entirely and only scenic. Not a translation of literature into theatre, but an autonomous and original creation. This raises a dramaturgical question.

I have suggested that besides dumbshow in individual action and collective movement the master may use sound, either in speech or in its other forms (for life is expressed to us by what we see and hear) but I have also said that speech may not be necessary.<sup>80</sup>

Craig on the one hand is saying that speech may be necessary for the performance but, on other hand, he seems to be inviting theatre to do without it. Let us try to further articulate this statement and explain this apparent contradiction. The speech one can do without is the theatrical speech, that is the dialogic system typical of the Western tradition. The type of word that is necessary, instead, is a sound act, which is directed towards the senses more than the intellect, as shown by the fact that it is included in the sounds of the performance (Stanislavski would never had said the crickets, the bells, the songs of the birds in *The Seagull* were the equivalent of words). In his ideal dumbshow – which could resemble in Craig’s intention the ‘non perverted pantomime’ of which Antonin Artaud was to speak a few years after – there is room, therefore, for words, because the representation of life cannot be mute or silent, but there is no room for a verbal text. Craig dwells at length on this aspect of the problem (which he seems to be particularly interested in), possibly for the very reason that he has difficulty clarifying it. He writes that in theatre speech ‘should be handled in the same way and to the same extent as on the creation of the world the maker of the world handled anyone of the different parts’.<sup>81</sup> Here Craig had resorted again to a metaphor, a religious one, to say what he means, but this time he seems unsatisfied with it. The phrase is erased and in its place Craig writes: ‘I wish to express that that speech should not be incessant, that it should take its place and keep it, should not over balance actions (the main support of T[heatrical] Art as it is the main reason and instinct in life)’.<sup>82</sup> Both arguments are interesting. The first version underlines the horizontal placement of speech in the hierarchy of the elements that compose theatrical language, which was to become typical of twentieth-century theatre. Speech is no longer the apex of a pyramid below which comes the rest of the *mise-en-scène* (actors, scenery, music, costumes, lights) but is on the same level as all these elements. To say this in 1904 is a sign of extraordinary modernity. Craig’s second version, however, is even more interesting, precisely because animated by Craig’s desire to better explicate his position. The question of the horizontal position of speech in regards to the other elements of the stage acquires, in this case, an almost technical import. Speech, writes Craig, underlining it, should not be incessant. In other words, it must not always be there. This “not always be there” must not be conceived in purely quantitative terms. Speech, in other words, must not be a continuous presence which, precisely because it is continuous,

<sup>80</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fols. 15-16.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 16.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

absorbs the entire dramatic form and becomes self-sufficient. It must instead, Craig says, reaffirming and explaining what in the erased sentence probably seemed to him too vague, have a precise collocation: this and nothing else.

I have previously tried to explain in detail how Craig, in addressing the problem of speech in *The Art of the Theatre*, uses statements that could be obscure, especially when he theorizes the difference between words that are born to be spoken and words that are born to be read. It seemed then that it was not a question of the internal quality of the verbal and literary written word, but of the fundamental difference between the verbal text of the Western tradition and the words used in the context of a performance, in which the performance itself became a form of “writing” in the authorial sense of the term. Once again, as already noted elsewhere, the comparison with Manuscript A helps understand the difficulty of interpreting the published text, almost as if the latter was the arrival point of a discourse that had matured along the way, erasing as it went along the arguments that seemed obvious or obsolete. The fact that the objection is directed against the Western dramatic text and not speech in itself, and that in fact Craig believes words to be as necessary as images to construct the dramaturgy of the stage should be now clear, thanks to the confirmation found in Manuscript A. Furthermore, as already noted, speech is associated to the universe of sounds and to hearing. At the end of *The Art of the Theatre*, significantly, speech is assimilated to voice, which becomes one of the essential components of the language of the future, along with scene and action. Voice: that is, the word that becomes sound, but also, as contemporary theatre has taught us, the word that becomes body and scene. Craig does not say all this, or at least does not say it explicitly or intentionally, but his words are impregnated with these future developments.

One last important detail. Craig maintains that speech must not dominate over actions and that the latter are the center, the core of the art of the theatre. There is an evident correspondence with Matthews’s statement that actions are more eloquent than words, but it is also true that Craig, after the experience with the Purcell Operatic Society and after all the plans, some realized and some not, for Masques, had no need to be told by someone else that action is the foundation of theatre. It is also true, however, that Craig is gradually developing a theoretical awareness of his idea of theatre, so that, if on the one hand all, or at least, many of its elements are already present in his first directing experiences, it is also probable that Craig needed a sedimentation phase made of reflections, readings, meetings, and writing attempts that eventually resulted in the argumentative balance and perspectival opening of *The Art of the Theatre*. If, therefore, actions (in the sense of dramaturgical actions) abound in the English performances directed by Craig, the theoretical awareness of their centrality emerges with great force only in Manuscript A, where actions become the privileged driving force in the pantomime, for which Craig prefers the term ‘dumbshow’ with a deliberate reference to the mute scenes that introduce Elizabethan tragedies, of which we have an excellent example in *Hamlet*. Theatre is therefore action, writes Craig in Manuscript A, and life itself is action. In *The Art of the Theatre* actions becomes the very origin of the theatre:

In one respect, perhaps, action is the most valuable part. Action bears the same relation to the Art of the Theatre as drawing does to painting, and melody does to music. The Art of the Theatre has sprung from action – movement – dance.<sup>83</sup>

To arrive at this extreme and explicit clarity another step is necessary. In Manuscript A, Craig had not expressed himself in these terms and if we insisted on finding this meaning by forcing the interpretation of his words, we would lose the dynamic sense of the genesis of his theory of theatre. In Manuscript A, actions are indeed the main fundament of the art of the theatre, but they are not its origin. The difference is slight but is there and its importance must be acknowledged.

Craig concludes this part of his discussion by reaffirming how, given the centrality of action and the horizontal collocation of speech, the expressive problem faced by theatre is not one of transferring a literary work to the stage but that of constructing a visual equivalent of the word: ‘it is possible to suggest the words by means of action, sounds, colour, line, and all the things which make their appeal to the senses’.<sup>84</sup> Again the list repeatedly mentioned by Craig. This time, however, and this had already partially occurred in the previous mention, the list does not concern the tools of the stage master, but rather the means through which the imaginary world of the words can be made physically sensible. Sensible in the sense that it concerns the senses. Craig is pinpointing a concept whose trace is found also in the *Introduction*: the theatre is made for the senses and is therefore different from literature, which addresses instead the intellect. Craig is not simply speaking of the way theatre is experienced but of something that deeply involves its expressive qualities. These qualities are similar to those of the visual arts, not only because theatre is made to be seen but because it communicates on a different level from speech, a level which cannot be easily translated into concepts and explicit meanings because the eye perceives and “thinks” differently from the mind. Sights are not words.

This conception of theatrical communications is central to Craig’s thought. Moving theatre from the category of the verbal to that of the visual is more than a linguistic choice, it is dictated by a philosophical criterion. It will be no longer possible to ask theatre to say things that it cannot and should not say, and, vice versa, theatre will say new things, things which go against the parameters of tradition. It will say its own things using its own language. In Manuscript A, Craig’s theory becomes firmly oriented in this direction. This direction that can be inferred from his words but is not worded in the explicit terms I have used, neither here nor elsewhere. This is not due to indecision on Craig’s part or the fear of a negative reaction by his readers. More simply, I believe Craig could not, for historical and cultural reasons, be fully aware of what he himself was writing. The reason that we are thinking this interpretation of Craig’s words to be evident, while it is not, is that the twentieth-century introduced by *The Art of the Theatre* is already behind us.

We arrive thus at the conclusion of this second part of Manuscript A. The master of the theatre, in creating his art using the tools of his craft, becomes like other artists. He too is now an artist, one who finds in himself, in his language and in nothing else, all that he needs for his creation. But is a public used to the old

<sup>83</sup> *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 18. In ink, in the copy of the book at the ‘Fonds Edward Gordon Craig’ of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, Craig notes after ‘dance’: ‘it is interesting to note that the Indian equivalent for Drama = δράμα = action, is nataka, froma nata, to dance’.

<sup>84</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 17.

conventions capable of accepting this innovation? Craig addresses the problem taking into consideration two commonplaces about the public: the first is that the public does not appreciate art; the second is that it will take forever – two-hundred years, writes Craig – for the theatre to be born again.

As for the first objection, it is Craig's belief that not only the public – which significantly he know calls the people – loves and needs art, but that the arts are the best custodians of a nation and of its values, even more than a good government or a wise king. It is a statement that must be read ethically more than socially. Craig is not thinking of social usefulness but of the capacity of art to nourish the founding values of human beings and to keep them alive. Art has almost a sacred function. Saying that the people do not love art is blasphemy to him. What the public does not like is only bad art.

The second argument follows from the first. There is a profound relation between art and the people and it is absurd to think one must wait so long to regenerate it. Now is the moment. Craig then discusses the question of how this process can be started. One must, he writes, put a stop to the empty talk of false experts that is poisoning the theatre. It is the masters who must speak, the only ones capable of affirming with certainty and knowledge what theatre is. On the other hand, he adds, the question is not the way theatre should be done. Being an art, theatre is, was, and shall be what it is and nothing else, from the first wild pantomime to the end of time. On this question there can be no two respectable opinions. There is only truth versus falsity. It must be for theatre as it is for literature: one can like or dislike a particular poem, but no one would dream of questioning the nature of poetry itself as an expressive form.

Aside from the general argument, there are two considerations to be made on Craig's statement. The first, already in Craig's time the notion that poetry is a stable form was highly questionable, given the radical transformations it was already undergoing around the turn of the century. The dissolution of the very foundations of the form by the avant-gardes was yet to come, but signs of this tendency were already visible in the symbolist movement. Certainly, these signs were not always radically obvious and one can understand Craig's comment. More in general, Craig's position in regards to the great twentieth-century innovations in the languages of the arts was usually more moderate than one would expect. The second consideration considers theatre specifically. Craig maintains that theatre is and has always been the art of the stage and that what he is theorizing is only a rediscovery of this origin. As already noted, Craig's views certainly corresponds to an original aspect of the theatrical language that is physiologically embedded in its nature of art of the stage, but the translation of this original aspect into an aesthetics and into an art is certainly an innovation which, while on the one hand restates the scenic foundation of the theatre, on the other hand, does it in the context of a new aesthetic model. "New" and "original" are two concepts whose vivid dialectic relation is becoming progressively clearer. On the basis of this, also the second commonplace is confuted: the process of realigning the theatre and the public can begin immediately, provided theatre is returned to its original artistic matrix.

Having said this, Craig moves on to the last topic of Manuscript A. If the moment for refreshing the withered tree of art is now, he says, we must look around to see if there are already signs of this regeneration. "Today the nearest approach to the art of

the theatre is what we call Ballet and Pantomime. But it is more than either, it is Pantomime raising itself to the heights of Poetry'.<sup>85</sup> This is an important statement. What previously could just be inferred is here fully articulated, as Craig openly declares himself in favor of spectacular forms based on movement. Ballet and pantomime are not specific "genres", nor are they relatives, whether distant or not, of the theatre. They are in fact *the* theatre, in the sense that they are a possible model for the new theatre because they are independent of literature and structured around their personal and purely scenic artistic languages.

Here, Manuscript A is clearly anticipating *The Art of the Theatre* where it states that movement is the central element of theatrical language and the dancer is the father of the dramatist. Movement and dancer on the one hand, ballet and pantomime on the other. In this case too, there is a important conceptual break. In Manuscript A, Craig takes into considerations the arts of movement as he knows them; arts that, especially in the case of ballet, are codified and rigidly formalized. In *The Art of the Theatre* things are expressed in very different terms: movement expresses the action of the body as an autonomous and non-formalized means of expression and the dancer is the artist who adopts this type of movement has his own personal form of expression. In one case, therefore, Craig looks for confirmation to his ideas among current practices, in the other he hypothesizes a different form of art. The theoretical link is found in the second part of the sentence. For Craig, ballet and pantomime are close to the art of the theatre but do not coincide with it. For this to happen, pantomime (it is significant that at this point Craig omits ballet, probably because too schematized to be a conceptually useful model) must free itself and become poetry. One has indeed the impression of reading Artaud's pages on the 'non perverted pantomime' and on the poetry of space in contrast with the poetry of words. In the chronological gap that separates Craig's reflection on ballet and pantomime (in their present condition) from that on poetic pantomime (as it should be), we find the fundamental meeting with Isadora Duncan, in December 1904, which was crucial to the definition of this aspect of Craig's thought. But this is a very broad and complex question; let us stay, for now, with Manuscript A. In its final section, two important topics are addressed: on the one hand, the definition of the art of theatre as an art of movement, on the other hand, the effort to find in the present some examples that would prefigure what the art of the theatre is to become in the more or less near future.

In the transition to *The Art of the Theatre* it is this aspect that undergoes the greatest changes. In 1904, Craig is still convinced that the problem of the theatre is a problem of practices, of the theatrical system, of the languages used within the horizon of the theatrical world around him, which he is uncomfortable with, but is still reluctant to abandon completely. The future is not absent, in other words, from Craig's aesthetic perspective, but it is intimately contaminated by the present. In *The Art of the Theatre*, the dialectic between present and future is still active – and it will remain so in Craig's thought – but the distinction between the two is more clear-cut. The present is the theatre as craft, the future is theatre as art. As it is known, in publishing *On the Art of the Theatre* in 1911, Craig added that he would have preferred the title *The Art of the Theatre of Tomorrow*, an indication of his conviction that the idea of theatre as an art based on its own type of language, communication and expression, was something

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., fol. 26.

that could not be found in the present. This theatre of the future could only be reached by navigating through the theatre of the *mise-en-scène*, the director's theatre, but remained completely different from it. In Manuscript A, instead, Craig is still looking for examples in the theatre around him, and the same thing, as we shall see, happens in Manuscript B. In fact, it is precisely the problem with this aspect of his argument that led him to abruptly interrupt this second effort to write *The Art of the Theatre*.

### **Manuscript B**

Decidedly shorter than Manuscript A (seven loose sheets written in ink with pencil corrections), Manuscript B, more than representing a transformation or evolution of Manuscript A, appears as the result of an effort to produce a different text and, even more, a different theoretical analysis. After the title, as already mentioned, we found the subtitle *One or two Questions answered*, and a pencilled addition 'rewrite this as a dialogue', both signs that tie Manuscript B to the *The Art of the Theatre*, though the latter is the result of a more general systematization of the theoretical work done up to that moment and non simply a re-elaboration of Manuscript B.

The first impression one has is that, compared to Manuscript A, Craig has decided to 'desiccate' his argument, so to speak, to essentialize it. The shortness of the text is not solely due to its incompleteness but also to its much more synthetic and direct form. More than an explicative discourse, what we have here is a series of statements, of programmatic enunciations that are very different from the narrative style of Manuscript A. Also gone are all the metaphors – the church, the significant reference to theatre as the representation of Life – replaced by more strictly artistical rhetorical motifs (such as the extremely interesting comparison between theatre and architecture) or more compact and logic and less visionary and evocative arguments. There is, therefore, evidence of a greater theoretical awareness, and the confidence of constructing a more explicitly assertive discourse.

Certainly we find strong and explicit theoretical elements already in Manuscript A, which I hope to have evidenced in my analysis. In Manuscript A, however, the opposition between dramatist and the art of the theatre, around which the argument revolves, suggests that Craig is theoretically focusing on "how theatre is done". This is also suggested by the way in which Craig focuses on the expressive and professional means through which the *stage manager* can dramatically, as opposed to literarily, compose a theatrical work of art. Craig is elaborating, in other words, an idea of a theatrical art based on the study of the crafts of the theatre. In Manuscript B, instead, his attention becomes more firmly fixed on the "what theatre is". He is focusing, in other words, on the categorial arrangement that defines the borders and the area of competence of the art of the theatre based on an idea of an artistic language, which arises directly from the observation of theatrical practices, but distances itself from it on a theatrical level. It is necessary to define first of all what theatre is in itself and only after verify this "being" in relation to its productive, professional and artistic modalities.

The difference between the two texts is evident from the initial argument. In Manuscript A, after having distinguished the art of the theatre from drama (as a

literary text), from acting, and from scenery, Craig places the emphasis on the “occupation” of the artistic space of theatre by the dramatist and on the need to put an end to this occupation, delivering creative power in the hands of the *stage manager* and thus transforming him in the master of the theatre. This organization of the discourse is evidence of an effort to define the categoric and aesthetic boundaries of what we call theatre. After this, however, the discussion veers decidedly towards the question of the working methods of the master/*stage manager* so that the synthesis of the various languages, rather than being what it was to become in *The Art of the Theatre*, namely the foundation of the entire theoretical structure of the argument, takes the much less effective form of a survey of the instruments used by the *stage manager* to perform his task. It is a way of discussing the theatre in which the idea of art, as an archetypal value independent of all historical contingency, is still intimately contaminated by the concrete observation of stage practices.

In the Manuscript B, as besides in *The Art of the Theatre*, Craig does not lose touch with the reality of the stage, but the operative solutions proposed in the context of the “how theatre is done” become part of a different, more radical and more complex discourse. The object of this discourse is the intrinsic qualities of the theatre, perceived in what they are (and what they should be) on the level of an actual ontology of theatre’s artistic language. The result is that when Craig tries to propose, as he had done in Manuscript A, examples and solutions taken from current theatre, his argument gets stumped. At this point, Craig presumably decided to give up on Manuscript B and started thinking instead – at least this is my impression – of a new and final version of the argument, the one he eventually published, namely *The Art of the Theatre*.

The fact that Manuscript B is the last step towards *The Art of the Theatre* is shown, in the first place, by the decision to tackle the theoretical issues through a play of questions and answers. There are no characters and therefore the text is not yet a dialog. But it does not take much to think it as such, as suggested by Craig’s marginal pencilled addition ‘rewrite as dialogue’. Another difference is that the questions, which in *The Art of the Theatre* are part of a maieutic exchange, in Manuscript B are clearly presented as the objections of the old theatre to the new proposals.<sup>86</sup> They represent the reluctance induced by habit, and suggest a prejudiced rejection more than an effort to understand, an effort which on the contrary is characteristic of the spectator in *The Art of the Theatre*.

The work-in-progress aspect of Manuscript B, its being, much more than Manuscript A, a testimony to a process of mental elaboration more than a finished object, is attested, besides by its brevity and incompleteness, by a particularly abundant series of corrections and changes. While Manuscript A seems the *result* of a process of theoretical elaboration, Manuscript B is the *trace* of a process of theoretical elaboration, a text destined to be translated into something different in the final printed dialog. This does not mean that Manuscript B resembles *The Art of the Theatre* more than Manuscript A – even though it contains some interesting textual

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<sup>86</sup> This is shown by the fact that the questions and answers are introduced by the following passage: ‘And these 2 parties [the two parties that fail to grasp the true nature of the theatre] when their mistake is pointed out to them invariably ask questions. We will answer some of them immediately’. *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 3.

anticipations – but rather that it represents the last effort to write it according to a formula and modalities that Craig definitely left behind in the final version.

Let us move on, now, to the actual text of Manuscript B. After having declared that what he is about to say, while recognizable by the people of the theatre remains unclear to most of them, Craig moves on to his first topic: the division of the theatre into two areas: creative art and interpretative art. The distinction is not new in Craig, but the approach is different. Indeed, it was already present in Manuscript A, but as a sort of aside. In describing the master of the theatre at work, Craig had said: ‘have I made it already sufficiently clear that I look upon the art of the theatre as a creative art’, almost to underline in passing the significance of what he was already saying.<sup>87</sup> In Manuscript B, instead, the formula is different: ‘There are two main divisions of the theatre work, the creative art and the interpretative arts which we may call the crafts’.<sup>88</sup> In the first version of text, later corrected by pencil, in place of ‘and the interpretative arts’ there was a blunter ‘and the crafts’ and, before that, ‘craft’ was singular, with the ‘s’ of the plural pencilled in later. This succession of corrections is highly indicative of Craig’s gradual refining of his idea. The creative aspect of theatre is juxtaposed in sequence with three *almost* identical things: a generic and totalizing ‘craft’; a collection of different ‘crafts’; and finally, the ‘interpretative arts’, with which the crafts are made to coincide. What is then the conceptual shift that misaligns these three apparently similar if not identical notions? The idea of a craft of the theatre as opposed to an art of the theatre, expresses a desire to clearly distinguish between the artistic and professional aspect of the theatre, between the idea of an art of the stage and an actual practice, summarily described as ‘the craft’. Art and craft are two different if not opposite things.

When *craft* is used in the plural the distinction becomes more nuanced. Art is one thing, Craig is saying, and crafts, the professions of the theatre, are something else. What is eliminated is the distinction between art and theatrical practice, since while on the one hand we continue to find art firmly rooted in its place (as an ideal), on the other hand we find many practices that concur to produce the final result, but are not artistic in themselves. Art is one thing, in short, and another thing are the specific skills in each professional sector of the theatre, which serve to generate the performance, but not yet to transform it into a work of art. The juxtaposition of these two worlds is replaced by the image of an evolutionary process: from crafts to art.

The step towards the third version of this concept is logical: the crafts become the practice of staging, which is not anti-artistic but is the bearer of a different type of art, an art that concerns interpretation, that is, the creative elaboration of something that is already present as an art object, such as in this case a literary text. It is obvious that for Craig, the theatre, in its most authentic artistic form, is always and solely a creative art, but it is equally obvious that, even when it is not a creative art, Craig no longer considers it as a negation or limitation of art, but only as a different form of art. That this form of art, however, is inferior to the creative art is shown by Craig’s wording. Creative art is singular and unique, and indeed in Craig’s conception there can only be one true art; on the contrary, interpretation produces plural forms of art

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<sup>87</sup> *The Art of the Theatre* (Manuscript A), fol. 8.

<sup>88</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 1.



that corresponds to multiple crafts that act separately and are dependent on something other than themselves. They are “art forms” but, using an image that will return later on, they are forms of *applied art* which, as such, do not correspond to a single idea but to a plurality of practices.

To better understand the above it might be useful to recall an argument that in later years various critics will use to illustrate the idea of directing as an activity applied to the staging of a literary text and deny its status as an autonomous art. The Italian critic Silvio d’Amico, to cite only one example, argued that there is no “single” form of directing but as many forms of directing as the dramatic works to which the directing is applied.<sup>89</sup> Directing in other words is an externally guided practice, lacking its own identity. This opposition seems to me to be already present in Craig, with the fundamental difference that the hierarchy is radically inverted.

Having made this distinction, Craig is quick to add that the art of theatre can be properly called art only when it is creative, though he does not yet say to what this creative aspect corresponds on a practical or theoretical level. On the contrary he is very explicit in regards to the interpretative arts and their function: their purpose is to illustrate the art of literature. ‘When the interpretation of a play is asked for, the craft of the theatre acts, and should act, as servant to the art of literature’.<sup>90</sup> Craig’s position is very clear: in the moment it renounces its autonomy, theatre must consciously and willingly accept its mediating function, adopting as its mission the staging, in the best and most faithful possible manner, of the dramatic intention of the author (as already stated in Manuscript A). On this subject, however, Craig must have had some second thoughts because he later pencils the comment: ‘Literature is out of place in T.[heater]’.<sup>91</sup>

The fact remains, however, that this addition does not so much negate what Craig had previously said but rather restate (for Craig even more than for the reader) the fact that interpretative arts are not central to his idea of theatre.<sup>92</sup> However, it is on this type of theatre that Craig dwells in the following pages, in which he lists the various crafts and craftsmen that contribute to the interpretative work. The first is the *stage manager*, which he significantly calls *régisseur* (adding the English term in parenthesis to clarify what he is referring to), then the actors, the stage designer (which he calls the *scene painter*), and then the costume designer, or rather the figure responsible for choosing and renting the costumes (*costumier*). Nothing new in this list, other than the use of the term *régisseur* which never appears elsewhere in Craig’s works. Why the term then? Perhaps Craig was thinking of internationalizing his vocabulary, adopting a French term that had had great fortune and diffusion? It is possible. After all, in Manuscript B there are no specific references to the English theatre. This however was already the case in Manuscript A where Craig had not replaced *stage manager* with another term.

It is possible to advance a second hypothesis, namely that Craig was using *régisseur* because this was the term used in Germany for directors. This would support the idea that Craig was at work on the manuscripts for the future *The Art of the Theatre*, and especially on Manuscript B, during his stay in Germany, perhaps at the beginning

<sup>89</sup> Silvio d’Amico, ‘Quello che mette in scena’, *Comoedia*, no. 4 (20 April, 1926).

<sup>90</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fols. 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 1.

<sup>92</sup> The pencilled comments have all a decidedly anti-literary orientation and seem evidence of Craig’s later dissatisfaction with the excessively moderate approach of his text.

of his difficult relation with Otto Brahm, which was to lead to a collaboration on a project that was never accomplished and ended up in a violent public polemic. We could also hazard the guess that in speaking of interpretative art, Craig had in mind the work of directors like Brahm, but also like Reinhardt, of whom Count Kessler was a great admirer. If this hypothesis were correct, then the opposition between creative art and interpretative arts would take on an additional significance, suggesting a possible dialectic between Craig's notion of theatre and the more advanced directing experiences in Europe found in Germany, which would replace contemporary English theatre as a dialectic counterpoint, a theatre, the English one, that was certainly more conservative and less involved in the birth of the modern director's theatre. However, what we have suggested remains simply a possibility and must be treated as such, without burdening it with excessive implications.

Let us continue, instead, examining Craig's argument in Manuscript B. To describe the procedure that characterizes the interpretative arts of the theatre, Craig begins by describing the role of the *régisseur*:

The work of the *régisseur* is to invent the actions, scenes and costumes in short all which appeals to the eye and through it to the whole intelligence of the audience, also to tell or, if need be, show his assistants how to bring the scene inventions before the audience.<sup>93</sup>

Compared to Manuscript A, the description of the interpretative director's role is more detailed. In Manuscript A, Craig had limited himself to saying that the director must interpret faithfully, that is, without any cuts, the work of the writer. Here instead Craig clearly specifies the area that pertains to the director, namely, the visual aspects of the performance. Craig has never been so explicit: the director is the one responsible for all that appeals to the eye of the audience. It is a crucial step in the direction of *The Art of the Theatre*, in which the eye and the sight are identified as the foundation of the art of the theatre.<sup>94</sup> Here, this is not yet the case but the direction has been indicated; even the disposition of the topics, with actions placed at the center of Craig's discourse, indicates that actions are the most intimate and authentic nature of the theatrical language. The visual aspect, in other words, does not concern only the decorative aspects with which it is normally associated, that is scenes and costumes. These are included of course but only to the extent they are associated with actions. We begin to perceive in Manuscript B, what Craig was to explicitly affirm in *The Art of the Theatre*, namely, that theatre is a visual art because it is based on action (which in *The Art of the Theatre* is more precisely described as movement).

But the visual nature of the scene takes on, in Craig's formulation, an ulterior value, going beyond the illustrative function and becoming an interpretative tool that appeals also to the intellect of the audience and not only to its sensibility.

Sight becomes thus an instrument for knowing. Craig enters, with this simple aside, into new and entirely original conceptual territories. The shifting of the center of the theatre from word to image is not solely a technical or expressive element, but

<sup>93</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 2.

<sup>94</sup> 'He knew [the first dramatist] that when he and his fellows appeared in front of them the audience would be more eager to *see* what he would *do* than to *bear* what he might *say*. He knew that the eye is more swiftly and powerfully appealed to than any other sense; that it is without question the keenest sense of the body of man'. *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 20.

also, and above all, a cognitive one. The images of the performance, as images that interpret the text, have their own intellectual dimension. Not even Wagner, who had given so much importance and dignity to the pictorial and scenographic image, had been able to say, and to think, as much.

The *régisseur*, in other words, offers a contribution not only to the scenic realization of the drama, which is obvious, but also, and more important, to its understanding. In *The Art of the Theatre* this concept will be further extended, specifically in the section where Craig describes the “crafts” through which the text is staged. When Craig states that the director’s impression of the text must correspond, in the first place, to the way in which he sees it on scene, it is evident that the designing of the scene and the work done on lights and costumes (because this is what Craig has in mind) do not simply correspond to a scenographic hypothesis but are the result of the director’s decisions and therefore correspond to interpretative choices. The image is the interpretation of the word. If this is, as I believe, what Craig had in mind, it becomes obvious why Craig was so upset when Brahm first and Reinhardt later, asked him to design scenes for productions that they were going to direct themselves. This was unthinkable for Craig because the “directing” was already included in the design of the scene.

A few years after the publication of *The Art of the Theatre*, Craig was even more explicit. In *The Artists of the Theatre of the Future*, to illustrate the way one should approach a text and define its visual rendition, Craig uses the example of *Macbeth*. Craig says that it is pointless to reconstruct an hypothetical castle. Rather one must seek to find a number of forceful signs that will be able to represent the opposite forces at play in the tragedy: the fog, on the one hand, as an image of the supernatural, and the cliff, on the other hand, as the emblem of a rough and warlike people.<sup>95</sup> The scene becomes thus the sensible form of the drama and not its setting, as indeed was the case when Orson Welles, following in the wake of Craig, directed his magnificent movie version of *Macbeth*.

In Manuscript B, we find the premises of these arguments, which represent the arrival point of a process that had already begun in Manuscript A, in the passage where Craig had spoken of the need for an impeccable staging of the dramatic text. In Manuscript B, the argument takes a step forward, evidencing once again the text’s function as a bridge towards the final version of Craig’s argument.

As a craftsman, the *régisseur* is therefore the king of the *mise-en-scène* and his kingdom is that of sight. Of the actors, instead, Craig says little. He limits himself to saying that their duty is to faithfully follow the indications of the *régisseur*, who, on the other hand, must in turn follow those of the author. Something any other European director could have said. Craig strikes a more personal note when he specifies what he means by the ‘indications of the author’. This was done through a later pencilled comment, perhaps because he doubted that the apparent banality of the statement could lead to a misunderstanding: ‘These indications are to be read in his poetry not in his stage directions – for the greatest authors never attempt to tell the theatre what it has to do only what it has to say’.<sup>96</sup> A point Craig will forcefully restate in *The Art of*

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<sup>95</sup> ‘I see two things. I see a lofty and steep rock, and I see the moist cloud which envelops the head of this rock. That is to say, a place for fierce and warlike men to inhabit, a place for phantoms to nest it’. E. Gordon Craig, *The Artists of the Theatre of the Future*, p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 2.

*the Theatre*: the director uses the “word text” of the drama and not the phoney “scene text” represented by stage directions. After all, the purpose of his visual instruments is not to adequately convey the setting of the action but to interpretatively penetrate the dramatic movements of the drama.

Craig reaches thus a first conclusion: when theatre functions as an interpretative art, all crafts must be in the service of literature. But this was not always the case and in the future things will have to be different. In the beginning, the crafts of the theatre were in the service of an independent art, the art of the theatre. We must therefore return to a clear-cut separation between the spheres of dramatic poetry and of the artist of literature, on the one hand, and the art of the theatre, with its own artist, on the other hand.

Here, Craig is beginning to outline the notion of two different models of theatre. He develops the argument addressing first the question of “how theatre is” currently done – meaning the best theatre, not the vulgar one. In this theatre, there is an author of a text and an author of the *mise-en-scène*: an author of the words and an author of the images. This juxtaposition leads to two opposite opinions: “The one party is of the opinion that the play is the whole art of the theatre, the other that the presentation is the whole art of the theatre”.<sup>97</sup> This is an important statement. Craig is introducing a new notion: there are people for whom the artistic import of the theatre resides in its presentation, in the *mise-en-scène*. Is he one of those? In fact, he is not and clarifies this immediately: “Both parties are mistaken”.<sup>98</sup> Therefore the art of theatre, as he conceives it, does not coincide with the presentation of a text, a term which clearly suggests a subaltern role, from which theatre seeks to free itself by emphasizing the importance of the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>99</sup> To the point of attributing a central role to it, as indeed had already been the case in the nineteenth century, when the “actor’s theatre” was to some extent opposed to the “theatre of dramatic text”. Now, however, the dialectic is between the dramatic author and the scenic one. Both aspire to the main role in the art of the theatre.

In this case, too, I think we can detect behind Craig’s notion of the author of scene, or, more precisely, the author of the scenic presentation, a reference to the German scene. It was in Germany that figures like Brahm and Reinhardt had become successful to the point of making possible a debate on whether words or the scene were more important in theatre, a debate that was to accompany the development of the director’s theatre for all the 1920s. Craig acutely grasps how the notion theatre the way “it is done” cannot be simply reduced to the centrality of the literary text, but must be understood in a broader sense, of which, until he had remained confined in England, he had not been able to grasp the full extent. He is now aware of it and has a firm grasp of all the points, the problems, and the arguments, and is now read to start a debate which, even now that the twentieth century is over, has still not come to an end.

Directing, then, as the art of interpretation and of presentation, is legitimately included, in Manuscript B, in the institutional notion of theatre. But while

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., fol. 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> It is interesting that Jerzy Grotowski, distinguished between two phases in his career, one he called ‘art of presentation’, more tied to the production of shows, and a second one he called ‘art as vehicle’, in which his research focused on areas outside the performative practice.

appreciating its virtues, Craig cannot fully include it in theatre as a creative art. It is necessary, instead, to follow a third way, different from the ones followed till now. This third way, is the only one capable of showing theatre “as it is”, overcoming the limitations of the various crafts. The third way is the way proposed by Craig, which will be forcefully presented in the conclusion of *The Art of the Theatre*. In Manuscript B, instead, the subject is addressed in a more oblique fashion.<sup>100</sup> Rather than explicitly stating what this third way is, Craig constructs a long argumentative route that circumvents the core of the problem. He starts by firmly distinguishing between theatre and literature. He adds that against this distinction a number of objections are usually raised that he will now proceed to respond to. These objections are translated into as many questions. Manuscript B here becomes thus structured around a rhetorical play of questions and answers which prefigures the later dialog of *The Art of the Theatre*. But the structure of the argument is not yet a Platonic one based on a maieutic dialectic that gradually brings the problem into focus, as will be the case in *The Art of the Theatre*. Here the questions sound more like prejudiced attacks on the thesis Craig intends to demonstrate.<sup>101</sup>

The first question concerns directly the previous statement: ‘In what does the art of the theatre differ from the art of literature and how can the two be separate?’.<sup>102</sup> Craig responds with another question, which will find its way in *The Art of the Theatre*: ‘How can one art be another art?’, pencilling the remark, ‘The art of literature should be looked for between the covers of books – not in a theatre. It is out of place in a theatre’.<sup>103</sup> Though only implicit, the answer is obvious and evidently expresses Craig’s belief: if theatre is an art, which it is, its specific nature must necessarily belong only to it, it cannot be shared or confused with that of other arts.

One could wonder, however, if theatre is an entirely autonomous art, a doubt that is entrusted to the second question. In this case, however, Craig’s answer is a much more explicit. He states once again that theatre is an art (or rather, *has* an art, the wording significantly chosen in the question) and proceeds to describe it. He starts by offering the list of expressive elements we have already found before, a list that was to become the starting point of *The Art of the Theatre*. Theatre is undoubtedly an art ‘for it is able to create by means of speech, sounds, colour, line and actions something which contains beauty and which appears to contain life and which I hold is a work of art’.<sup>104</sup> The position of this statement within the overall discourse is different from the one occupied on previous occasions. In Manuscript A, it was used to describe the technical and expressive tools of the *stage manager* in the moment in which he becomes the artist of the theatre. In Manuscript B, it is already used to indicate the distinctive and founding traits of the art of the theatre. The Wagnerian ascription of each sign to a specific artistic sector and the systematicity that characterize the theoretical organization of *The Art of the Theatre* are not yet present,

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<sup>100</sup> One could hypothesize that Craig intended to deal with the subject further on in the text but interrupted his writing before getting to it.

<sup>101</sup> The Platonic matrix of rhetorical game of questions and answers is further suggested by the way the *stage manager*, in *The Art of the Theatre*, especially at the start and end of the text, uses the questions to displace the subject of the discussion in the new directions favoured by Craig.

<sup>102</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 4.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* I would like to stress once more how the pencilled comments in Manuscript B are mostly characterized by an anti-literary orientation.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

but the road that Craig has taken is decidedly the same. The list of expressive elements – which for the above reasons, I would hesitate to call yet a synthesis – is no longer presented as the tools of a craft that is artistically connoted, but as an idea of art that corresponds to a particular operative modality and therefore to a craft.

Craig continues with the questions: is not the poet (meaning the dramatic poet) who is responsible for combining all these elements? My impression is that Craig is thinking of the changes in nineteenth-century drama, with the exponential growth of stage directions, which result in an actual virtual scene (and often a virtual *mise-en-scène*). The poet Craig is thinking of, therefore, does not correspond to a vague rhetorical function, but is an actual historical category, an author that takes on the director's role through his writing.<sup>105</sup> This type of actor, however, even if involved in theatrical questions, is not, for Craig, suitable to this role, because he believes his authentic expressive material to be words, whereas the rest concerns only presentation, 'whereas the artist of the theatre uses five separate elements mingling these together into a single design'.<sup>106</sup> The answers to the second and third questions introduce two important concepts: the concept of theatrical language as a homogeneous fusion of different signs and the concept of the artist of the theatre. Craig had already abundantly discussed this figure in Manuscript A, where, however, it corresponded to a sort of ideal *stage manager*. Here, instead, it is the result, on a theoretical level, of the adoption of a new and specific language. If the language corresponds to an art, there must be an artist. This artist is the person who masters the craft but even more the grammar of the new language. His role is theoretically even more than professionally justified. The distinction could seem pedantic, but in my view it is significant insofar as it indicates the path that Craig was following towards a new theory of the theatre.

At this point Craig responds to another question, which seems to derive from the first: if this artist of the theatre uses also the word, is he not a literary artist? The answer is predictably negative; what is interesting is the fact that it reintroduces the distinction between the 'word written to be spoken' and 'word written to be read', already discussed above. The artist of the theatre is not a literary artist, Craig writes 'for the word written to be read and the word written to be spoken are or should be two totally separate and different things'.<sup>107</sup> In Manuscript B, this statement is not left open to the interpretation of the reader, as is the case in *The Art of the Theatre*. Instead it is explained in detail in a passage which it is worth quoting in full:

And where as in the case of literature words stand by themselves and are the only material an author may use, in the case of theatre not only words but sounds, colours,

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<sup>105</sup> It is a central passage in the history of modern theatre and the birth of modern directing. Not only does the author place himself once again at the centre of the production of the performance by using texts conceived for the stage, but he often directly controls the staging process. On this subject, see R. Alonge, *Il teatro dei registi*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2006.

<sup>106</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 4. The term 'elements' besides being underlined twice with a pencil is connect with a pencilled line to the comment 'wrong word'. Notwithstanding his reservations on the term, however, Craig adopted it in the final version of the text.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 5. The term 'separate' was pencilled in later.

lines, actions, play important parts in the composition and action is the most important of these.<sup>108</sup>

The distinction between the two types of words is clearer here than elsewhere and supports the my previously made hypothesis. It concerns what we could call the conceptual collocation of the word. While in Manuscript A, Craig had expressed his feelings on the subject with the phrase ‘the word must keep to its place’, an abrupt statement to say the least, here, in Manuscript B, the question of the ‘place’ is presented in a different, non-polemic and more authentic fashion. It is a question of operating on a theoretical level a clear-cut distinction between words that are themselves the text, as in the case of literature, and theatrical words, which are only a part of a spectacular or theatrical text.

Even in Manuscript B, as he had done previously, Craig resorts to a metaphor to better illustrate his argument and in this case too the difference between the two texts is highly significant. As the reader will remember, Craig had previously used a poetical religious parallel (which however he must not have been very pleased with since he had erased it).<sup>109</sup> This time instead he adopts a more convincing and precise parallel taken from the visual arts: the distinction and relation between sculpture and architecture. The sculptor is like the dramatic poet, he uses only one material, marble, for his creation. ‘The architect also uses marble but also makes use of wood, iron, colour and craftsmen’, and therefore resembles the artist of the theatre, the ‘perfect *régisseur*’ he adds by pencil.<sup>110</sup> There are therefore two types of artists who, while working in similar and to some extent overlapping areas, have different technical expertise, which correspond to different artistic languages. Both create in space and through space, but their methods are different. From a contemporary perspective, Craig’s parallel may seem unconvincing. Architects and sculptors appear to us two entirely distinct artistic and professional figures. But Craig is looking back to the origin of architecture, which was originally almost a branch of plastic arts, to the point that to illustrate his idea he uses the example of Michelangelo. Michelangelo and other great sculptors who have also practiced architecture have limited their function to planning, entrusting the realization of their work to specialized technicians and craftsmen and above all have not sought to submit architecture to sculpture as a subgenre of their art. Things went differently with theatre, where the introduction of literature ended up deforming its artistic nature, forcing theatre to fight for its freedom.

This passage of Manuscript B presents a number of elements of great interest. The first concerns the structure of the argument. The need for a reform in the direction of a correct aesthetic of theatre is attributed directly to theatre, with a sort of anthropomorphization of the art that makes it independent of the people who practice it. It is theatre itself that yearns to redeem itself, it is not the people of the theatre that wish to redeem their profession. Indeed, the latter, of which in Manuscript A Craig had saved a handful, as selected as Napoleon’s old guard, in Manuscript B are collectively damned to the circle of sloppy craftsmen, because they

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Another anti-literary comment is pencilled: ‘words the least important’.

<sup>109</sup> The role of words among the various media of the theatre had been compared to that of an element among others in the divine creation of the world. Precisely to correct this statement Craig had specified that what he meant was the word had to keep its place.

<sup>110</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 5.

entrust themselves blindly to the primacy of literature rather than seeking to rediscover the art of the theatre. It is theatre itself, therefore, as if endowed with its own personality and intention, that must pursue this goal.

The second element of interest is Craig's parallel between architecture and theatre. It is interesting because, in the twentieth century, architecture and theatre were both driving forces in the trend towards the unification of the arts. Both were "arts of the arts", that is, both served as a meeting ground for different expressive media (more diversified in the case of the theatre, more homogeneous in the case of architecture). Given their special artistic nature they both offer, albeit in different ways, the possibility of realizing a total work of art. In the theatre, this tendency manifests itself first in Wagnerian and then in post-Wagnerian terms (a trend of which Craig represents one of the foremost examples). In architecture, while motivations are similar, the results are profoundly different. The most accomplished example of this process is the Bauhaus, the architecture school founded and directed by Walter Gropius, located in Weimar from 1919 to 1925, in Dessau up to 1932, and then briefly in Berlin (the school was shut down by the Nazi in 1933). At the Bauhaus, a didactic model based on the dialogue between different arts was adopted. Architecture, as conceived by Gropius, went beyond the technical aspects of the general project. Therefore along with architects specialized in architectural planning, the teachers included painters like Kandinski, Klee, Itten who directed the introductory course, Moholy-Nagy who directed the metal workshop, and Schlemmer who directed the theatrical one. Architecture, in short, was conceived at the Bauhaus as something that aimed at an organic creation. It had cultural, aesthetic and even philosophical characteristics that made it suitable to a study whose goal was a total work of art, capable of responding to the different needs of human nature. An aesthetic-philosophical synthesis, therefore, besides a technical one, whose slogan, *from the spoon to the city*, cogently synthesized its utopian aspiration. Spoon and city as the two extremes of a form of art that had to address the very small and the very big, the material and the spiritual, for the purpose of creating a better world, characterized at last by harmony and balance.<sup>111</sup> A rational world. While its approach was formally and conceptually different from Wagner's, the Bauhaus came close to the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* for a profound reason: for them, the unity of art, at the level of language, corresponded to the unity of human experience. While the Bauhaus was certainly the most advanced and accomplished experience in this direction, it was not the only one. Experiences like the Deutscher Werkbund, though less open to the contamination between different arts, went in the same direction.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, there was a general cultural attitude, with political overtones, whose origins was the variegated and important experience known as the Arts and Crafts movement. Behind the idea of artistic practice ranging from architectural projects to

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<sup>111</sup> How much Gropius cared about this aspect is witnessed by the fact that all students had to attend a propedeutic course that was not technical in nature and served instead to define the mental and in a sense spiritual characteristics of artistic creativity. For many years, the course was taught by Johannes Itten, a painter with a strong spiritualist tendency.

<sup>112</sup> The Deutscher Werkbund was an association of architects and craftsmen founded by the architect Muthesius to establish a collaboration between architectural planning and industrial production. It was one of the first European experiments in applied art, and the archetypal matrix of modern design. The movement, which drew inspiration from the English Art and Craft movement included some of the most important architects of the time, such as Behrens, van de Velde, Olbrich, Hoffmann.



the design of practical and decorative objects there was the desire to improve society in all its aspects. Starting from the production of commodities itself, which was conceived as an organic and unitary process to which various types of knowledge concurred, both artistic, intellectual, artisanal and technical.

Craig had many ties to the Arts and Crafts movement, starting from his relations with Ruskin, who was never officially part of the movement but certainly a great source of inspiration for it, with Robert Morris, the utopian English architect who was the founder and soul of the movement, but especially with his own father, Edward William Godwin, an architect with an interesting theatrical background. Craig spent very little time with his father, because the latter had separated almost immediately from Craig's mother Ellen Terry and had died in 1886, when Craig was still a boy, but nevertheless he remained a crucial reference.<sup>113</sup> The relation with the Arts and Crafts movement, which had already had its impact on Craig's education, was refreshed when Craig arrived in Germany. The reason was that one of the columns of count Keller's "new Weimar" was Henry van de Velde, the Belgian architect with whom Craig had become close friends. Van de Velde was one of the central figures of the Arts and Crafts movement. Van de Velde was interested in the development of applied arts and in a fusion of craftsmanship and art, based on the study of artisanal techniques and on a manual approach, thanks to which the final work became a human as well as technical accomplishment. Van de Velde later collaborated with the Deutscher Werkbund of which he embodied the more artisanal aspect, whereas Muthesius, one of the leading architects of the early twentieth century, embodied the more industrial one. Craig's meeting with van de Velde in 1904, when van de Velde was at the height of his Weimar adventure, certainly refreshed Craig's interest in architecture and in the Arts and Crafts movement in particular, allowing him to bring into focus the relation between theatre and architecture that he was going to explore at length later on, a process of which a first sign was the above mentioned passage in Manuscript B.

Theatre is, therefore, an art of the arts like architecture. But is it possible to say what a theatrical work of art actually is? This is the fourth question in the manuscript.<sup>114</sup> Craig's answer is surprisingly 'no'. And it would be the same, says Craig, if one were talking about literature, architecture, music or painting. One can name, he explains, the materials with which a work of art is made, but he cannot say what it is. This can be understood only by experiencing it directly. Craig's argument is not very clear as it is and needs to be investigated further to understand its underlying reasons. Why can we not say what a work of art is? Because we lack the correct instruments to describe it rationally. When we are looking at a work of art, Craig seems to be saying, we intuitively grasp not only how it is made, but also its

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<sup>113</sup> Godwin had had various experiences as a stage designer and stager of plays, among which an important staging of the *Merchant of Venice* for the Bancroft company, with Ellen Terry in 1875, and an interesting *Helena in Troas* by the Irish playwright John Todhunter, in 1886, set in a curious "Greek" décor at the Hengler Circus in London. The importance placed by Craig of his father's theatrical experience in particular is suggested by the fact that he edited a series of articles by his father on scenery (or, in Godwin's expression, on the 'architecture' of the stage) and costumes in Shakespeare's plays.

<sup>114</sup> It is here that one perceives most evidently the play of questions and answers that was to evolve in the dialogue of the final text. The topic is not introduced indirectly but through a direct question: 'Can you tell me what a piece of theatrical art is?'. *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 7.

most authentic nature. However, if we try to offer a definition in response to a question such as “what is painting?”, we are doomed to fail. One could object that when we “grasp”, without being able to explain it, what art is, we are already using precisely the cultural instruments necessary to understand its identity. This is true up to a point. Thanks to a process of cultural sedimentation, those cultural instruments have become instinctive so that we are fully able to understand what we are incapable of describing in rational terms. Craig says that when confronted with Velasquez’s painting of Philip II, Giotto’s steeple, Beethoven’s *Eroica*, or Dante’s *Inferno*, we are perfectly aware of what painting, architecture, music and poetry are, and have no need for explanations. Art is present, in those masterpieces, so evidently that it makes any conceptual clarification superfluous. These works of art, these masterpieces, are what shows us, without explicitly stating it, what art is. If we consider theatre, instead, the situation becomes more confused because, as Craig writes in response to the question whether a theatrical work of art exists, there are no similar examples in which the artistic nature of the theatre is evident even in purely intuitive terms.<sup>115</sup>

Let us try to further clarify. Craig is distinguishing between two aspects of the question: the analysis of the material and expressive components of an art and the work that is that art’s final result. The work of art is produced when the artistic language that characterizes a particular medium is expressed in its most complete form; when painting, poetry, etc., use their specific languages in the best possible way. Therefore, for Craig, the work of art is the result of the language when it achieves perfection. But this perfection cannot be defined other than in terms of the material aspects of the language that has generated it. Let me clarify. The fact that Dante’s *Inferno* is perfect cannot be demonstrated but only perceived. If we wish to analyze the reason, instead, we must necessarily refer to the expressive material that has generated it, and study its use of the word as a creative instrument. In other words, the *Inferno* is the absolute demonstration of the effectiveness of poetry, but we can talk about the nature of poetry only in reference to its concrete aspects. Using a more modern language than the one available to Craig in 1904, we could say that when dealing with poetry we can only define its structural outline and linguistic elements.

And what about theatre? This is the last question. The same is true of theatre, says Craig. We can say what it is made of – meaning the spectacular text made of action, word, sound, line, colour – but as for the actual nature of the work of art, we can only show an example of the work, same as for other arts. The problem then becomes the absence of works that fully correspond to the ideal model of the theatre, since, unlike other arts, theatre has abandoned the right path a long time ago and has betrayed its artistic vocation. There are however a few partial examples that come closer to the ideal. At this point, Craig chooses a rather puzzling example. While the art of the theatre is still missing, writes Craig, ‘incomplete examples of the theatrical art exist in the Music Hall’.<sup>116</sup> Once again, Craig has surprised the reader. Though he has declared above that the theatre is seeking to reform itself in spite of those who actually practice it, Craig is actually still trying to find, in the absence of a

<sup>115</sup> ‘Can you also point to such and such a work which exists or has existed and say that is a piece of theatrical art?’. Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

model, at least a stimulus around him that might serve as a temporary example. In Manuscript A, Craig had cited Ballet and especially Pantomime, but here the scenario is completely different. The Music Hall is neither a theatrical form based on movement (like Ballet and Pantomime), nor is it something different and outside the official theatre. It is a spectacle centered on entertainment, on the here and now of the stage, on the charisma of the performers. This “low” form of spectacle, very distant from theatre as a cultivated high-brow form of art, seems to Craig the bearer of a novelty, a departure from the centrality of the literary text that characterizes the Western tradition, the distorted tradition against which theatre must rebel in order to find itself. ‘The Music Hall’, writes Craig, ‘contains men who at times invent the piece of art they wish to exhibit’ and this makes it ‘the most promising part of the theatrical art today’.<sup>117</sup>

Craig therefore is interested in a more specific and less obvious aspect of the Music Hall, beyond the appearance that would deny it the status of art, namely, the fact that it is an autonomous form, directly created on stage and by the artists of the stage. Craig, at the time, knew little of the *commedia dell’arte*, which he later became so interested in, and therefore does not mention it, but the way he describes the Music Hall is in line with his later appreciative description of the work of Italian seventeenth-century comedians.

After all, it is a fact that the Music Hall (or Variety Theatre) was to have in the years to come a great influence on European theatrical culture, becoming a sort of shared metaphor of alternative possibility for modern theatre, centered on action and scene rather than the literary text. This was particularly true in Russia, with Meyerhold and Eisenstein (but Block had already introduced the theme), in France with the Dada movement, and above all in Italy, where Marinetti, in the famous Manifesto of 1913, proclaimed the Variety show to be the supreme form of theatre. However, when Craig was writing Manuscript B, there was still no sign of the sudden burst of popularity of the Variety Theatre among the more important artists of the time, and the reference to the Music Hall is therefore one of Craig’s great innovations. The Music Hall is therefore chosen by Craig as the example, indeed the only current example, of a theatre that comes close to its ideal model.

Craig’s intuition was born of a personal experience. When he was still in London, in 1903, Craig had been a keen spectator of the Variety shows of the Chelsea Palace of Varieties. Reconstructing the bohemien life-style of his father at the time he was working on *The Vikings*, the son Edward Craig wrote:

Across the road [from a tavern he used to go to with his painter friends Pryde and Nicholson] was the Chelsea Palace of Varieties, where, for a shilling, one could enjoy the performances of “naughty” Marie Lloyd and Chevalier’s superb cockney songs, mixed with juggling, *tableaux vivants*, Chinese acrobats, and all that made the old time Music Hall such wonderful entertainment.<sup>118</sup>

Matilda Alice Victoria Wood, known as Marie Lloyd, was for her time an extraordinarily transgressive singer. Her scandalous songs, full of sexual innuendos and double meanings, had made her the talk of early twentieth-century London. As for Albert Chevalier, after having made his debut with the Bancroft company, he had

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> E. Craig, *Gordon Craig, The Story of His Life*, p. 169.

specialized in skits, which he alternated with singing numbers. Craig was therefore a frequent and keen spectator of their spectacular exhibitions at the Chelsea Palace. At the time, Craig was not attracted by the Music Hall as a potential model of theatre, but more simply because it was part of the lively and transgressive lifestyle of the artist neighborhood to which he had moved. In Manuscript B, instead, his interest resurfaces with an entirely different significance. The English Music Hall is cited as that which come closest to the art of the theatre, because it is based on the autonomy of the spectacular movement. Craig mentions also a few examples, including that of Albert Chevalier whom he describes as a “creative artist”. Other “creators” mentioned by Craig include the Martinetti, a group of brothers who were famous as acrobats and contortionists, an example that shows how wide-ranging was Craig’s idea of the Variety show. But the first person to be mentioned and on which Craig dwells the most is Yvette Guilbert. A star of the shows of the Moulin Rouge, Emma Laure Esther Guilbert was one of the main figures of the theatrical and variety scene in late nineteenth-century Paris and the early decades of the twentieth century. Toulouse-Lautrec did several portraits of her and George Bernard Shaw appreciated her modernity. William Rothenstein has left us the following vivid portrait of her. Rothenstein tells how one night Toulouse-Lautrec had rushed to the studio he shared at the time in Paris with other young painters to invite them all to the debut of a very young singer at the Moulin Rouge.

We went a young girl appeared, of virginal aspect, slender, pale, without rouge. Her songs were not virginal – on the contrary; but the frequenters of the Moulin were not easily frightened; they stared bewildered at this novel association of innocence with Xanrof’s horrific double entente; stared, stayed and broke into delighted applause. Her success was immediate; crowds came nightly to the Moulin to hear her, and the name of Yvette Guilbert became famous in a week.<sup>119</sup>

Thanks to the crashing debut witnessed by Rothenstein, Yvett Guilbert quickly became an icon of a new artistic fashion. A great innovator, she was fond of appearing on stage in a yellow dress, wearing long gloves that covered her hands and arms, which she gestured with while the rest of her body remained still for. Her singing too was very original and was based on an almost spoken delivery.

She was a star of the Variety show and successfully toured many European capitals including London. We have no way of knowing whether Craig actually ever saw her on stage, but it is likely that Rothenstein spoke about her, and in any case Guilbert was well known for the modernity of her style. Thus in Manuscript B she is chosen as the foremost example of the instances in which the Music Hall comes close to the art of the theatre. Craig writes: ‘Yvette Guilbert is a theatrical artist. She uses speech, sound, colour, line, actions, but she puts them to the lesser rather than to the greater use’.<sup>120</sup> Unbelievable! The list of elements that in Manuscript B defined the ideal borders of the language of the theatre are here introduced to indicate the artistic techniques used by a Variety show singer. Craig however adds a specification.

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<sup>119</sup> W. Rothenstein, *Men and memories. A History of Arts 1872-1922*, New York, Tudor, 1937, pp. 65-66. Léon Alfred Fourneau, nicknamed Xanrof, singer, composer, author of short stories, and plays was the author of many of Yvette Guilbert’s song. The most evident characteristic of his lyrics is their transgressive liveliness.

<sup>120</sup> *The Art of the Theatre. One or two Questions answered* (Manuscript B), fol. 7.

It is true that Guilbert uses all the creative media of the stage as an artist, but she does it at a low level. For purely spectacular purposes, one could add, rather than artistic ones. She allows us to glimpse, in other words, how a theatrical work of art could be realized, but she does not express it completely; for this to happen it is necessary to use word, colour, etc. in their highest form. At the level where matter and technique become one with the idea.

Why then, given these reservations, did Craig resort to the example of the Music Hall? Evidently, Craig was anxious to find, in the theatre around him, the one people actually go to, a sign, or at least the trace of a sign of the theatre as it should be. The manuscripts that lead to the *The Art of the Theatre* have shown us, however, how these signs are found by Craig in “eccentric” areas of the theatrical scene, in spectacular forms that are extraneous to the dramaturgical literary tradition and based instead on action and movement. In Manuscript A, Craig is still looking for examples at home, at spectacular genres like pantomime or ballet which belonged to the repertoire of all respectable English theatres. In Manuscript B, instead, he turns to the Music Hall, outrageously adopting it as the closest example of an ideal model of theatre. In Manuscript B, it seems, Craig felt the need for a more clear-cut break with the theatrical tradition. He seems to believe that by rejecting altogether the theatre, other than its most eccentric and marginal areas, it is possible to shock that world into action. But it is not simply a superficial desire to *épater le bourgeois* that animates him, as much as a much more deeper and radical desire to place the theatre back on the right tract, to return it to its authentic nature.

But the way he had organized his argument evidently did not satisfy him. This desire for radical change which had led to an enthusiastic and probably excessive appreciation for the Music Hall needed other ways to express itself. The entire last page of Manuscript B is crossed out by a nervous zigzagging pencil line. The Musical Hall literally disappears from Craig’s pages. ‘Art does not exist’ – he adds – ‘Actually does not exist’.<sup>121</sup> These are the final words of Manuscript B, the ones with which Craig puts an end to his second writing effort. As a close, even if it not meant as a close, it is of great importance for understanding the mental development that characterized the theoretical workshop that was to produce *The Art of the Theatre*.

To me, it seems that the effort to include the Music Hall in his argument was a last ditch effort to find in the present an example of the future art of the theatre, an effort that proved ultimately unsatisfactory. That *actually* is the key term, which underlines and synthesizes Craig’s problem. It is pointless to look for art in theatre the way “it is done”, because that theatre, having hopelessly betrayed and watered down the “should be” of its art, can no longer provide any useful stimulus. The following step is to distinguish between the theatre of today, with all its anti-artistic limitations, and the theatre of tomorrow. Craig does not write this in Manuscript B and on the other hand had no reason to do it, but we are authorized to think that, having exhausted all other possibilities, this was the theoretical threshold he was about to cross. It is exactly what we find in the final version of *The Art of the Theatre*, where the ideal definition of theatre stands independently as its own example, in the absence of any example in the real world. The ideal theatre – the only one that deserves to be called theatre – is a purely hypothetical theatre, not because it cannot be done, but because it is not done. After all, it is a theatre whose existence is

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

revealed and materialized – as Craig had written in Manuscript B – in the moment in which one declares its materials, one evidences its language. Insofar as it is a theatre of the stage, in Craig’s theory, it is also a theatre of paper; what counts is for it to be said, nominated and proclaimed in the context of a theory. And significantly it is to theory that Craig entrusts himself in this important moment of his theatrical experience; a “pure” theory, in the sense that it does not look for support or motivation for what it is experimenting with and striving to achieve in the materiality of the present, but rather it is an absolute idea, an idea that does not compromise itself with anything other than itself.

The problem of the relation between praxis and theory, in this phase, is thus resolved in the break between the two worlds, whose rhythm and modes of operation cannot be reconciled. Thinking must not necessarily correspond to thinking how to do things. On the other hand, however, the use of the stage, the experimentation with theatrical techniques and languages is not something that is foreign to the ideal notion of theatre. However, it cannot be the place in which one tries to achieve what is only possible at the level of analytic thought; rather it can be its premise, the place in which the concrete, operative, practical language of the stage – the one available in theatre and with theatre – is tested, thus evidencing the profound aspiration, the artistic need, that is latent in that language and in that praxis. The theatre, conceived as the production of works or even the experimentation of scenic solutions, is an alchemic melting pot in which the various elements of the *mise-en-scène* ferment and mature. The director – the prefiguration of the future artist of the theatre – should not use these elements to develop his own personal view of the art, but rather to allow himself to be struck, enlightened, almost mystically, by a truth that was always right in front of his eyes (or even better in his hands), but that only in this moment, thanks to the epiphany generated by the action of doing theatre, becomes clear, precise, and luminous. If this epiphany does not arrive there is no point in trying to explain to him what theatre is and how it should be done. It is useless.

Thus on the hand, theatre must be conceived as a pure and absolute ideal, on the other it must be practiced in its material consistency. The ideal belongs to a utopian tomorrow that can only be translated into the here and now of the present if one obstinately continues to practice with rigor and method the craft of the *mise-en-scène*. It is a condition similar to that of an athlete that trains every day doing exercises that are different from the task he will be eventually called upon to perform. He does not run, but exercises his body to prepare it for running. A closer comparison is with mystical practices. The wise man repeats his rites and practices every day because he knows the day will come when what he does will be transformed into something else. The zen masters of archery do not train by trying to hit a target but by trying to perfectly repeat the correct gesture. The target is reached when the gesture is perfect. The art is achieved when the language is perfectly constructed.

The abrupt interruption of Manuscript B suggests a similar theatrical scenario, the one that will be fully articulated in *The Art of the Theatre*, but while it is possible to offer a mystical comparison of the process through which art is to be achieved, Craig’s theory is voiced in very concrete and specific terms. It seems almost an anticipation of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: one must remain silent on

that of which it is impossible to speak. Not in the sense that the idea must not be mentioned, but in the sense that one must not vainly strive to embody it in the present. It is an idea and its value lies in its being an idea, a profound understanding of the most authentic nature of the theatre.

Then, there is the theatre of the present, which is still not the idea, and of this concrete examples can be found. In the manuscripts that lead up to the *The Art of the Theatre*, Craig looks for those examples away from himself, almost as if he was a detached observer and not himself a man of the theatre. In *The Art of the Theatre* instead – the final version of his text, which seems now more and more the final version of his argument, the arrival point of his theatrical development – he finally does what would have been logical even in his previous texts: he speaks of his own way of conceiving and practicing theatre. His craft as a director, so analytically described in *The Art of the Theatre* to the point that it could be repeated almost exactly, corresponds, as critics have noted, to the staging practice he did in his English productions. His directing is the practice of the present, his art belongs to the future. His own directing practice is used by Craig almost as a bridge between the present and the future. It seems to Craig a way to use the instruments of the language of the theatre in such a way as to create the premises for an entirely autonomous and self-referential artistic practice, firmly based on a theatrical language independent of any literary conditioning. After having spent so much time looking around him, it seems as if Craig has reached the firm conclusion that the best one can choose is what he himself had done and what he was capable of doing if given a chance. But even what he himself had realized on stage does not coincide with the new art of the theatre. His idea of theatre is something else from the practice of the stage, which is practical, a craft, a concrete operative premise that creates a space where that idea will one day be able to be embodied into a work of art. This work of art, Craig seems to be saying, is absent today and could in no way be present because the path leading to it has yet to be followed and the theory that will guide those who make the journey has yet to be assimilated.

Thus, one of the most relevant results to which Craig arrives in *The Art of the Theatre* is the displacement of the art of the theatre into the future. A future that one could call utopian but which, in the light of the development of theatre in the twentieth century, appears in a different light. What Craig perceived and could only perceive in his imagination and intellect, the spectators of the twentieth century will be increasingly able to see on stage. In many ways, one can apply to Craig what Eluard said in an imaginary posthumous letter to Breton after having seen Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance*: 'I was finally able to see the realization of what at the time we had only been able to imagine'. Without in any way trying to attribute Messianic roles to Craig, or to any of the other great reformers of the early twentieth-century stage, nor to suggest in any way that the path followed by the modern theatre has been simply the actualization of their theatrical theories, I think that Craig's theoretical experiments do anticipate in many ways the theoretical experiments of the twentieth century. His mind and his writings are one of the places in which, with great profundity and clarity, a vision of theatre developed which the more it strove to adhere to the most intimate and archetypal origin of the theatrical art, the more it became modern and innovative. A theoretical space, the child of a considerable effort to think and elaborate in new ways. What we have seen here is proof that the notions of the autonomy, specificity and so on, that in the twentieth century were

attributed to theatre and are now considered as obvious, were in fact the result of a long, complex and difficult process of theatrical elaboration.