



A Dialogue on the Banks of the Ganges: Gordon Craig and Ananda Coomaraswamy

Almir Ribeiro

University of São Paulo, USP – São Paulo/SP, Brazil

ABSTRACT – A Dialogue on the Banks of the Ganges: Gordon Craig and Ananda Coomaraswamy – This paper analyzes the dialogue between Edward Gordon Craig and Ananda Coomaraswamy, a historian of Indian art, as the launching point of the investigative universe known as intercultural theatre, and the consequences of this dialogue in the thought of the British director, challenging his creation of the *Über-marionette*. From this dialogue, the text presents Gordon Craig's cautious stance on trade between cultural traditions. Those inherent idiosyncrasies in these *exchanges*, which populated the research throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, are problematized in this article. The debate's cyclical aspect is exemplified, recovering the clash between Rustom Bharucha, severe critic of Western attempts to Interculturalism, and Richard Schechner, one of the mentors of intercultural theatre.

Keywords: **Edward Gordon Craig. Über-marionette. Interculturalism. Theatre. Eastern Theatre.**

RÉSUMÉ – Un Dialogue sur les Rives du Gange: Gordon Craig et Ananda Coomaraswamy – L'article examine le dialogue entre Edward Gordon Craig et Ananda Coomaraswamy, historien de l'art indien, comme point de départ de l'univers d'investigation connu sous le nom de théâtre interculturel et les conséquences de ce dialogue dans la pensée du metteur en scène anglais, contestant sa création de la sur-marionnette. A partir de ce dialogue, le texte présente la position prudente de Gordon Craig concernant les échanges entre traditions culturelles. Sont interrogées les idiosyncrasies inhérentes à ces *échanges*, qui ont peuplé la recherche tout au long du XX^e siècle et au début du XXI^e. L'aspect cyclique du débat est illustré par la confrontation entre Rustom Bharucha, critique sévère des tentatives occidentales d'interculturalisme, et Richard Schechner, l'un des mentors du théâtre interculturel.

Mots-clés: **Edward Gordon Craig. Sur-marionnette. Interculturalisme. Théâtre. Théâtre Oriental.**

RESUMO – Um Diálogo às Margens do Ganges: Gordon Craig e Ananda Coomaraswamy – O artigo analisa o diálogo entre Edward Gordon Craig e Ananda Coomaraswamy, historiador de arte indiana, como ponto inaugural do universo investigativo conhecido como teatro intercultural e as consequências desse diálogo no pensamento do diretor inglês, desafiando sua criação do *Über-marionette*. A partir desse diálogo, o texto apresenta a postura precavida de Gordon Craig sobre as trocas entre tradições culturais. Problematiza-se as idiosincrasias inerentes a estes *intercâmbios*, que povoaram as pesquisas ao longo do século XX e início do XXI. Exemplifica-se o aspecto cíclico do debate, resgatando o embate entre Rustom Bharucha, crítico severo das tentativas de interculturalismo ocidental, e Richard Schechner, um dos mentores do teatro intercultural. Palavras-chave: **Edward Gordon Craig. Über-marionette. Interculturalismo. Teatro. Teatro Oriental.**

Edward Gordon Craig published in 1913, in the volume VI, number 2 of his Florentine journal *The Mask* the article *Notes on Indian Dramatic Techniques*, by Ananda Coomaraswamy, a prominent historian of Indian art. In this article, Coomaraswamy claims that “Had Mr. Craig been enabled to study the Indian actors, and not merely those of the modern theatre, he might not have thought it so necessary to reject the bodies of men and women as the material of dramatic art” (Coomaraswamy, 1913, p.123). Gordon Craig, when creating the *Über-marionette* in his article *The Actor and the Über-marionette*, intended to criticize the performance of the actors of his time, claiming that the work of the actor could not be named as art:

Acting is not an art. It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist. For accident is an enemy of the artist. Art is the exact antithesis of pandemonium, and pandemonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents. Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials (Craig, 1908, p. 4).

When declaring a death sentence against the actor, Gordon Craig concluded that only by means of the exclusion of the human being of the theatrical scene and his replacement by dolls, by puppets, it would be possible to make the theatre reborn: “The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the *Über-marionette* we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name” (Craig, 1908, p. 11). However, Coomaraswamy, in his article, insisted on making a challenging parallel between the traditional Indian actors and Gordon Craig’s suggestion:

The movement of a single finger, the elevation of an eyebrow, the directions of a glance... all these are determined in the books of technical instructions, or by a constant tradition handed on to papillary succession. Moreover, nearly the same gestures are employed all over India, to express the same ideas, and many, perhaps all of these, were already in use two thousand years ago. [...] Many of these gestures... called *mudra*... have hieratic significance: equally in a painting, an image, a puppet, or a living dancer or danseuse, or in personal worship, they express the intentions of the soul in conventional language (Coomaraswamy, 1913, p. 123).

With this challenge, Coomaraswamy inadvertently began one of the first debates on the interchange between east and west in the

theatre scope. In fact, Coomaraswamy did not intend to criticize Gordon Craig, as in fact he agreed with his allegorical creation. And he admired the intellectual Gordon Craig. His intention, theoretically, was to introduce the English scholar, who demonstrated so much intellectual interest for the Indian culture, in this little known universe in Europe. In practice, Coomaraswamy inaugurated, besides a historical debate, a movement of deep reflection of Gordon Craig over his most emblematic creation: the *Über-marionette*. In his *Notes on Indian Dramatic Techniques*, Coomaraswamy describes the rigor and the severe discipline that are indispensable for the learning of theatre art in India. And he reports the degree of excellence that its artists reach after long years of training. Craig's first reaction was of admiration and incredulity, as he would say some years later:

When I heard of this I was astounded, pleurably astounded. I was told that this race of actors was so noble, sparing themselves, that all the weaknesses of the flesh were eradicated, and nothing remained but the perfect man (Craig, 1919, p. 40).

This dialogue between the British Gordon Craig and the Singhalese Coomaraswamy could be described as a symbolic confrontation between a western acting technical proposal (of Gordon Craig) and an eastern classic tradition (introduced by Coomaraswamy). But Gordon Craig, with his demolishing ideas, was not an idoneous representative of the tradition of the European theatre. He was more a critic to it. The clash of traditions reflected in the dialogue between Gordon Craig and Ananda Coomaraswamy would become universal. It would become, yet, more diverse and deeper. And, finally, it would inaugurate a theatrical investigative universe, presently called intercultural theatre. This investigative interface between east and west, of huge comprehensiveness and difficult delimitation, would disclose rich discoveries and many idiosyncrasies.

The Subtle Banks of the Ganges

Craig always showed his great enchantment and erudition on the Asian theatres and did not hesitate in visiting these universes theoretically, when it was convenient to him, to sediment his ideas. He made his *Über-marionette* to be born “[...] on the banks of the

Ganges” (Craig, 1908, p. 14) to assign a mystical aura to it. He joined it to other archetypal iconic figures, either in the figure of the man “[...] hanging upon the cross” or “[...] of him in some temple in the far east, enacting a more serene drama – seated before incense – hands folded – very calm” (Craig, 1912, p. 96), to breathe eternity to it. But, in fact, Craig had very limited information not only about India, but on the Asian theatre in general. He can’t be blamed for that. The Asian theatre was almost completely unknown in Europe during the first decade of the 20th century, even in the most *refined* intellectual circles. One of the first descriptive technical reports edited in Europe was exactly Coomaraswamy’s texts published by Gordon Craig in *The Mask*. The performing experiments previously performed that searched for this mix between Asian and European theatrical elements were basically characterized by an instauration over the scene of an aura of idealized, exotic, and fetishized mysticism. Gordon Craig gave in to this enchantment as well. According to Rustom Barucha, if we think theatrically, only with Grotowski it will be possible “[...] to demystify the sacrosanct associations of Indian theatre mythologized by Craig” (Bharucha, 1984, p. 8). In the beginning of the 20th century:

[...] the eastern universe substantially modified the language of the European theatre, but it must also be pointed that this occurs in an environment that admitted and, better, favored great confusions, and the mere reproduction of exteriorities took inevitably to mannerisms and misapprehensions (Savarese, 2009, p. 375).

At that time, the information derived from these cultures, besides being seldom, were frequently *reformatted* to the European appreciation.

Gordon Craig replied to Coomaraswamy’s article with a letter. In a contradictory mix of feelings, Craig demonstrated, in some points of this letter, a vivid interest for the tradition presented by Coomaraswamy: “If there are books of technical instructions, tell me, I ask you. The day may come when I could afford to have one or two translated for my own private study and assistance” (Craig apud Coomaraswamy, 1917, p. I). Other times, an unexpected reticence about the possibility of interchange: “You know how I reverence and love with all my best the miracles of your land, but I dread for my men lest they go blind suddenly attempting to see God’s face”

(Craig apud Coomaraswamy, 1917, p. 1). Coomaraswamy will publish parts of this letter sent by Craig in his book *The Mirror of Gesture* (1917) and will add with a tip of haughtiness: “Mr. Gordon Craig, who understands so well the noble artificiality of Indian dramatic technique, has frequently asked me for more detailed information than is yet available in this too long neglected field” (Coomaraswamy, 1917, p. 1).

The relationship between Coomaraswamy and Craig has a dual aspect, since it simultaneously answered to the yearnings of Craig for reliable information concerning this theatrical reality, but, at the same time, it disclosed a deficiency in the intellectual construction elaborated by Craig in his *Über-marionette*. A deficiency that, obviously, Gordon Craig would hate to show. Coomaraswamy claims, in an indirect way, that Craig was unable to clearly identify the essential aspects of the Indian theatrical culture, in spite of all his readings. And that, for this reason, he was not able to gather subsidies for the development of his *Über-marionette* thesis. Coomaraswamy suggests to Gordon Craig, who believed that himself was the utmost authority on the subject, his *The Mirror of Gesture* as an *introduction* to the universe of the Indian theatrical art. Obviously there was, in Coomaraswamy’s claims, a subtle repudiation to the characteristically British and colonizer pretentiousness.

In fact, the approximations and conclusions of Gordon Craig on the cultural universe of India are based on a fragile methodology and an “excessive resourcefulness” (Savarese, 1992, p. 393). Craig never had any contact with any form of theatre from India, didn’t even visit the country. All his information had been acquired through books. However, this universe had a huge impact in his thought, being possible to define the *Über-marionette* as a direct result of its fascination for this culture. The groping and idealized progress of Gordon Craig on the theatrical milieus of the Asian countries (India, Japan, Cambodia, Indonesia, and China) led him to some conclusions that, if not mistaken, are at least incomplete.

Moreover, Craig always possessed a tendency to adapt any knowledge to the purposes that were more convenient to him. “Craig reviews all his [Coomaraswamy’s] books very favorably, but when he deals with matters in which Craig considers himself to be the authority the problems begin” (Taxidou, 1998, p. 91). In his

reply to Coomaraswamy, Craig demonstrated an unexpected and predictable parsimony on the contribution that the Asian theatres could offer to the renaissance of the theatre as dreamed by him. *Unexpected* because Gordon Craig was a renown *enthusiast* of the Asian theatre. And *predictable* for an unspeakable reason: perhaps Craig did not possess, in fact, enough knowledge to keep a dialogue with an authority in the subject and maybe did not know how to deal with this intellectual disadvantage that was both so evident as unheard-of in his life. It is clear that Coomaraswamy's arguments not only affected his intellectual vanity, but, in fact, put him in front of an uncomfortable task of reevaluating his *Über-marionette*:

In the preface to companion volume to this 'dance of Shiva', Dr. Coomaraswamy spoke of me as one 'who understand so well the noble artificiality of Indian dramatic technique', and mentioned, quoting part of a letter that I had written to him, that I had 'frequently asked for more detailed information' on the subject. This must not be misunderstood by those few good workers along my path. And so that their attention shall be in no way attracted away from the work we have in hand I have thought it time to turn to India and say a thing I have for long wanted to say. You must not be too critical with me, for I admit that for me, and I will add for you, the subject is strange (Craig, 1918, p. 31).

In his *the Living Theatre* (1919), Gordon Craig, demonstrating undeniable boredom, would send a biased message to Coomaraswamy:

I have been told – since I wrote of the *Über-marionette* – of a race of actors that existed (and a few today preserve the tradition) who were fitted to be part of the most durable theatre it is possible to conceive. [...] This race was not English or American, but Indian. [...] If a western actor can become what I am told the eastern actor was and is, I withdraw all that I have written in my essay *On the actor and the Über-marionette* (Craig, 1919, p. 40).

The dialogue between the two of them seems to be empty after this point. But the reflections of Gordon Craig on the *Über-marionette* seem to have taken a new direction along that time. In 1924, in a preface for a new edition of his *On the Art of Theatre*, he will write that his *Über-marionette* would be, in fact, an actor, just an actor, but "[...] it is the actor plus fire, minus egoism" (Craig, 2009, p. XXII). The proposal to redimension the actor, symbolized in the inert figure of the marionette and interpreted by many as a utopia

slowly moderates his acidity. His model moves little by little from the inert substance and, modestly, incarnates.

Ananda Coomaraswamy and the Mirror of India

Born in 1877 in the old Ceylon, presently Sri Lanka, the son of an Indian father and a British mother, Ananda Coomaraswamy considered India as his true motherland. In spite of his education in Geology, he diligently dedicated himself to the study of ancient Indian art, not only of its artistic aspects, but also religious, mythological, and philosophical. After the second decade of the 20th century, the great European civilizing disenchantment made the eyes of the intellectuality of the time to turn to the east, and Coomaraswamy became internationally recognized as the main authority and source of information on the Indian culture. “The writings of Coomaraswamy, with a considerable philological basis, were internationally appreciated, and in the period between the two wars they became the primary source for the understanding of the Indian history and culture” (Savarese, 2009, p. 393). After the World War I, Coomaraswamy became the director of the Asian sector of the *Boston Museum of Fine Arts*, where he worked until its death, in 1947.

Gordon Craig recognized in Coomaraswamy a deep expert of the Indian theatre tradition. And Coomaraswamy admired the thought of Craig and respected his reputation. However, according to the historian, many of the questionings that the *Über-marionette* Craig brought had already been resolved within the Indian theatre tradition, some of which for almost two thousand years. The question of the chance in the work of art, for example, central point in the elaboration of the *Über-marionette*, is present in the reflections that found the Indian theatre tradition:

When the curtain rises, indeed, it is too late to begin the making of a new work of art. Precisely as the text of the play remains the same whoever the actor may be, precisely as the score of a musical composition is not varied by whomsoever it may be performed, so there is no reason why an accepted gesture-language should be varied with a view to set off advantageously the actor's personality. It is the action, not the actor, which is essential to dramatic art. Under this condition, of course, there is no room for any amateur upon the stage; in fact, the amateur does not exist in oriental art (Coomaraswamy, 1917, p. 3).

Even though he identified the probable pertinence of Coomaraswamy's arguments, Gordon Craig resisted in agreeing tacitly with him and admitting his own theoretical lack of adequacy. In his reticence, the recognition of the magnitude of what was disclosed now to him was implicit. And maybe Craig has carried through, in his soul, the serious problem of the approximation and the appropriation of elements proceeding from other cultures:

The disastrous effect the Chinese porcelain and the Japanese print has had on us in painting we must try to avoid in this theatre art. You know how I reverence and love with all my best the miracles of your land, but I dread for my men lest they go blind suddenly attempting to see God's face (Craig apud Coomaraswamy, 1917, p. 2).

Craig, now by his own experience, seems to be aware of these distances: "I would have you all pause before you are attracted from the work you have joined me in, to listen to the exquisite fluting of the great and lovely Krishna, for his sweet sad notes are but the prelude of the mighty coils of music which will be flung around all those who listen too long" (Craig, 1918, p. 32). With its implicit wealth and limits:

Despite this adulation of the East, however, Craig was not entirely cynical about his own heritage. On the contrary, he was aware of what Western theatre was capable of doing. And he was convinced that it was not by borrowing rituals and theatrical conventions from the East (a phenomenon we are so familiar with today) that Western theatre could grow. [...] Unlike some of our contemporary theatre scholars and anthropologists (who search too eagerly for universal structures in disparate cultural experiences), Craig respects the differences that exist between cultures. In this context, it is interesting to note that even though he was obsessed with an image of himself – modesty was not one of Craig's virtues – he could acknowledge the 'superiority' of artists from other cultures (Bharucha, 1984, p. 7).

It must be underlined that the major part of the dialogue between the two of them happens during the process of suspension of the activities of Gordon Craig's School for the Art of the Theatre in Florence and among the somber tribulations of the war. That is, in a terrible historical situation that caused enormous dispiritedness in Gordon Craig not only for the interruption of his pedagogical project, but also for the deaths of several of his closest collaborators when fighting. Therefore, we must say in favor of Gordon Craig that,

given his known and chronic difficulties related to relationships, he, in the position of editor of *The Mask*, and in such an adverse circumstance, could simply have excused himself from publishing a text that clearly would place him in a difficult position. But he did not do it.

Gordon Craig published Coomaraswamy's *Notes on Indian Dramatic Techniques* in *The Mask* in 1913, with a subchapter entitled *The Human Actors*. In October of 1918 and April of 1919 Gordon Craig published, yet, two articles with commentaries on *The Mirror of Gesture*; and in May of 1915 another article on another publication of Coomaraswamy, *The Arts and Crafts of Ceylon and India*. This frequency of appearances in *The Mask* proves the strong impression that Coomaraswamy had caused in Gordon Craig: "But even as there is no returning for a true lover, be the pains the pains of hell itself, so is there no returning from India" (Craig, 1918, p. 32).

In 1915, Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote to Craig announcing the conclusion of a translation of his of an important text on the Indian performing traditions, *Abhinaya Darpana*, a manual for actors written in the 13th Century whose authorship is accredited to Nandikesvara. Coomaraswamy claims his intention in publishing it under the title of *The Mirror of Gesture*, a free translation to English of his original title in Sanskrit. Coomaraswamy planned, with this publication, to prove to Craig his report on the rigorous tradition of Indian actors' formation, described in his *Notes on Indian Dramatic Techniques*, deepening and detailing this tradition. In a note in his *The Mirror of Gesture*, Coomaraswamy explains the qualities predicted for an actor-dancer: "The actor is not to be swayed by impulse, but perfectly self-possessed, master of a studied art, in accordance with the Telugu saying 'as if pulling the string of a puppet'" (Coomaraswamy, 1917, p. 16). Gordon Craig seems, in fact, to be the engine behind Coomaraswamy's editorial endeavor.

The letter sent by Craig as a reply and quoted by Coomaraswamy in the introduction of his *The Mirror of Gesture* was published in *The Mask* (1918), under the title of *Asia America Europe*. As we already saw, Gordon Craig kept a reticent position, claiming to fear that the irresistible allure of the east took the theatre to a possible loss of identity, since "[...] India is dangerous to the powerless and the ignorant [...] Even as there is no returning for a true lover, be the

pains the pains of hell itself, so is there no returning from India” (Craig, 1918, p. 31). It can be observed that Craig avoids to technically approach the question of the actor, which he obviously did not dominate, and preferred to reject, in an almost naïve way, India as a whole. Coomaraswamy, in opposition to all critics of Craig, did not disagree with the proposal of the *Über-marionette*, but only with the intellectual procedure of its engendering. But Coomaraswamy had another strong motivation for the publication of *The Mirror of Gesture*.

At this time, India was fighting its battle for independence. Religious and cultural customs and values were being banished, discriminated by the British rulers; among them, all the forms of traditional dance and theatre, mainly the feminine ones. The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, in 1917, after having won the Nobel Prize of Literature, felt that he could, by means of his prestige, challenge the British rulers and the pro-British Indian elite, recovering these traditional forms of art. Tagore created a school in the outskirts of Kolkata (old Calcutta) with an innovative pedagogical proposal: besides the basic disciplines, the pupils would have lessons of Indian art: painting, music, and, mainly, dance, all of them according to the Indian traditional standard. This school did not have as an objective to educate dancers, but only to prove the importance of the strengthening of the traditional Indian culture. In this context of recovery and challenge to the British domain, Coomaraswamy makes arrive to the west the first information on this millenary tradition that little by little searched for its revitalization. The publication of Gordon Craig in *The Mask* represented an important opportunity to Coomaraswamy to make his contribution for this recovery:

I have only one objection to meet. When I told Mr. Craig of this conventional Indian art of acting, he said he thought it was wrong for human beings to submit to such severe discipline. But apart from their acting, these Indian actors are as humans as any others. That their acting should be so severely disciplined is not more painful than the observance of Form in any other art. The musician at least requires an equally arduous training. The truth is that the modern theatre has so accustomed us to a form of acting that is not an art, that we have begun to think it is too much to demand of the actor that he should become once more an artist. The Hindus do not regard the religious, aesthetic, and scientific standpoints as necessarily conflicting, and in

all their finest work, whether musical, literary, or plastic, these points of view, nowadays so sharply distinguished, are inseparably united (Coomaraswamy, 1913, p. 127-128).

Coomaraswamy was born and was intellectually educated in a society absorbed by a cultural and religious attitude where the Hindu tale rituals and allegories play an essential role. As a background for his argument, Coomaraswamy has, impregnated in his rhetoric, a deep experience of the enormous and complex cultural and mythological structuring that is the Hinduism¹: “The Hindus do not regard the religious, aesthetic, and scientific standpoints as necessarily conflicting, and in all their finest work, whether musical, literary, or plastic, these points of view, nowadays so sharply distinguished, are inseparably united” (Coomaraswamy, 1915, p. 274).

The Hindu religion celebrates the artistic event as conducted and blessed by the gods. This fact justifies and explains, in part, the enormous stylizing and technical improvement of the arts in general and the theatre in particular developed under its influence. It is possible that the very impulse of Coomaraswamy in establishing a dialogue with Gordon Craig is explained by the declared symbolic aspect of the *Über-marionette*, so similar to the allegorical process of creation of the fantastic pantheon of Hindu deities. Coomaraswamy may have identified, in Gordon Craig’s *Über-marionette*, an intellectual construction that is similar to the eastern one: essentially synthetic. The analytical procedure is more common for the west. Synthesis is an operation that is strange to the western thought. Analysis is the basis of the science and all the investigative procedures (including this one), starting from the parts to understand the whole. The eastern way starts from the whole, from the indissoluble one to understand its parts.

In a foolhardy attempt to exemplify this, we could say that, in the western thought procedure, in order to know a rabbit, it is necessary to open this rabbit. In the eastern one, if you open the rabbit, the rabbit does not exist anymore. Coomaraswamy may have identified the difficult simplification procedure that the *Über-marionette* represented and all its countless reach. He may also have sensed that Gordon Craig, with his *Über-marionette*, was inviting us to learn to simply follow the rabbit.

Coomaraswamy’s argument is supported on the substratum of the long cultural and artistic tradition that is the foundation of

the Indian theatre formalization. This formalization has, as a core characteristic, the obedience to stylistic standards established almost two millennia ago in one book only: *Natya Shastra*. In this book, it can be found the rigid stylistic and pedagogical standards that will back the status of classic art for all the performing languages of India. This book, in spite of being almost two thousand years-old, continues to serve as a basis for all study on the classic theatre of India, and Coomaraswamy was an expert on it.

When Coomaraswamy claims that Gordon Craig might have known the Indian actors, he certainly has in mind the artificial aspect that the eastern tradition expects from its actors. Being the stylizing the foundation of all the structuring of the theatre of India, the *natural*, as it is seen in the west, was never an applicable ingredient in the Indian theatre equation. For many centuries, the performing art of India recognizes that *life* in scene is necessarily opposing to the one out of the stage. “The gestures used on stage must never be taken to be the gestures used in everyday life or in a drama or in film acting. *Abhinaya* is as far removed from acting as poetry is from prose” (Guhan, 1991, p. 15). Since he works basically with the conscience that he finds himself in a theatrical act, therefore artificially constructed, the actor who tries to be *natural* in scene establishes the absurd. It is for this reason that the search of *naturalness* is strange to the Indian classical theatre, where *artificiality* is a basic and essential principle. “Exacting demand for realism will cut at the very root of theatrical performances of aesthetic value” (Natya Shastra, 1989, p. XVII).

Natya Shastra composes an essential enclosure for Coomaraswamy’s argument and his dialogue with Gordon Craig. However, as it is known, the good sense of one can be the exotic one of the other. From this dialogue it also emerges the very human difficulty, to define what the *other* is. The dialogue with Coomaraswamy put Gordon Craig in the position of the *other* in relation to India, in an opposing bank of the Ganges. The intercultural dialogue revisits the enormous and perpetual, too human difficulty in dialoguing with the *other*.

Gordon Craig was an example of the Eurocentric vision (effective still today) not only of the arts as of the world. Geographically, for example, it was conventioned for the entire world that Europe

occupies, invariably, the center of all the maps. In this case, and only in this case, when moving towards the east one would arrive to Asia. Thus, Asia became the east. Obviously, this same convention would be possible for the Asians too, what would place, then, Europe in the east. Believing that he was in the heart of the world culture, Craig always dealt with the east as geographically peripheral and culturally strange. And, as a British, he considered himself in an even more special place in this cultural heart. He possessed the failure, not so anachronistic still today, of not having asked himself *how to define spatially what is peripheral? This periphery is defined as periphery for whom? And what is, in fact, in essence, the strange, the exotic? Something is exotic for whom? Just like the lizard found by Alice, when walking through the Wonderland, who tells her to eat a piece of the mushroom that is on the other side so that she starts growing back again: "A side of what? The other side of what? Alice thought" (Carroll, 1980, p. 72). And she is embarrassed because, being the mushroom round, it will always be in this side and never in the other side.*

The Cyclical Aspect of a Difficult Dialectics

Gordon Craig's hesitating and cautious duality on the subject inaugurates, in the figure of the *Über-marionette*, the paradoxes and contradictions of the investigative universe called intercultural theatre, which would solidify throughout the 20th century. This intercultural dialogue, that had Gordon Craig and Coomaraswamy as precursory (and first critics), happened again in 1984, this time between two theatre researchers and thinkers, the Indian Rustom Bharucha and the North-American Richard Schechner. This intellectual dispute leads, in a straight way, to the dialogue between Gordon Craig and Coomaraswamy, also for having Craig himself as one of the axis of the debate.

Bharucha had published the article *The Collision of Cultures: some western interpretations of the Indian theatre* in the *Asian Theatre Journal*, in which, speaking on the intercultural context, he criticized what he called "cultural imperialism" (Bharucha, 1984, p. 1). Avoiding generalizing, Bharucha partially acquits Jerzy Grotowski when claiming that he is aware, throughout its research, that "[...] incorporating Indian techniques within his own

performance tradition was futile” (Bharucha, 1984, p. 2) and extends his acquittal to Gordon Craig as well, who, according to him, “[...] could acknowledge the “superiority” of artists from other cultures” (Bharucha, 1984, p. 7).

But Bharucha attacks Schechner with severity, claiming that, amongst all who were dedicated to this interface, Schechner was “[...] the only western who, to my mind, is irresponsible in his attitude to eastern theatrical traditions” (Bharucha, 1984, p. 2). He accuses Schechner of being the representative of the imperialist position, for not taking the due care when approaching the different theatre cultures and of forcing a reading of these different cultures so that they adjust themselves to the theoretical intention that is convenient to him. A criticism, by the way, that is present in Coomaraswamy’s argument on Craig’s approach and that is repeated to all those who, at least at some moment, had searched for this type of research, as, for example, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine etc. Schechner replied in a rough way in the article *A Reply to the Rustom Bharucha*, published in the *Asian Theatre Journal*, striking the criticisms made not only to him, but also to Craig and Grotowski:

Rustom Bharucha’s article *A Collision of Cultures: some western interpretations of the Indian theatre* (1984), is so reductive, incomplete, and inaccurate concerning my work and thought that I shudder to think what Bharucha has done to Gordon Craig, who isn’t alive to defend himself, and to Jerzy Grotowski, who might not care to do so (Schechner, 1984, p. 245).

Schechner firmly advocates for the interchange between the theatrical cultures, the base of the intercultural theatre, as an irreversible and characteristic movement of the modern world, and describes a list of his productions and writings in this investigative field carried through in the United States, India, and several Asian countries, as extremely successful projects, according to him. For Schechner, Bharucha failed in the data collection for his article: “[...] about my work, Bharucha is similarly misinformed. He has simply not researched much of what I did before 1980, and nothing I have written or done since” (Schechner, 1984, p. 245). Bharucha replied with a rejoinder in the article *A Reply to Richard Schechner*, published in the same *Asian Theatre Journal*:

If my article *A Collision of Cultures: some western interpretations of the Indian theatre* (Bharucha, 1984) were

so 'reductive, incomplete, and inaccurate' as Schechner claims, I fail to see why he should respond to it with so much passion and rancor. A few lines would have been sufficient to dismiss the apparent ignorance of my piece (Bharucha, 1984, p. 254).

Bharucha mentions as an example Jerzy Grotowski, who, in contrast to Gordon Craig, who never visited India, visited that country in 1956 to base his research and staging and, for this reason, "[...] to demystify the sacrosanct associations of Indian theatre mythologized by Craig" (Bharucha, 1984, p. 7). Bharucha claims, however, to be a great mistake to define the use of the Indian theatre made by Grotowski: "[...] a genuine use of ritual cross-culturally" (Schechner apud Bharucha, 1984, p. 10), as the North-American does.

Schechner stands as Grotowski's defender and replies to Bharucha's claim saying that:

Grotowski did not make his first trip to India until 1968. I confirmed this in a conversation with Grotowski on February 7, 1984. [...] But neither Barba nor Grotowski actually did the Kathakali training – both observed it. And Bharucha's claim that *Shakuntala* was influenced by Grotowski's visits to India is absurd: *Shakuntala* was done in 1960 – eight years before Grotowski's first trip (and three years before Barba's) (Schechner, 1984, p. 245).

And then the surprising emerges: Bharucha claims that his source of information on Grotowski's work was Schechner's work:

Schechner points out my one 'decisive error of facts' concerning Grotowski's visit to the Kalamandalam. Ironically, Schechner himself was the source of my information. In his essay *From Ritual to Theatre and Back*, He specifies that 'Grotowski has visited India on several occasions, the first in 1956-57, when he also travelled to China and Japan' (Schechner 1977, 84). In his reply to my essay, Schechner 'confirms' that Grotowski did not visit India until 1968. I am confused by this conflicting information (Bharucha, 1984, p. 254).

The debate between the two of them is very significant, more for the symbolism than for its content, and ends up tangling in points that are very fragile, since they are dependent on a subjective vision on the subject. And they don't even seem to characterize themselves as excluding, formalizing, in its unveiling, the body itself, with its limits and possibilities, of this complex investigative field.

A dialogue that defines itself in the end as an allegory of itself, as “[...] a cautionary tale regarding ‘influences’ from East to West and vice versa” (Schechner, 1984, p. 254). The debate between Rustom Bharucha and Richard Schechner, as well as the other one between Gordon Craig and Ananda Coomaraswamy, in spite of the evident crackle of the intellectual vanities that quite often overshadows the fineness, solidarity, and compassion that must follow the look to the Other, points exactly to the difficulty of a recognition in the other of another valid *one*.

Coomaraswamy doesn't seem to have analyzed very well Craig's proposal, otherwise he would have perceived that Craig did not really speak of a doll and perhaps was not really discarding the human presence on stage. Craig, when advancing on the theatrical universe of India, did not try to understand it enough. The lack of precise information on the Other and on what the Other really means seems to mark both dialogues. However, in this case, more important than listening to the other, it seems to have been the urge to make his own voice listened. This, in my opinion, is very clear in the dialogue between Bharucha and Schechner.

Maybe this little example insinuates the existence of several other micro-dialogues like these around the planet throughout the decades. And it suggests, in its cyclicity, the perpetual character of these dialogues. Perhaps for simultaneously pointing to its arduous aspect, to its irresistible enchantment of human adventure, symbolized in the movement of discovery and meeting with the Other. This Other that is so similar and so opposite to the one who searches.

A Conclusion in Movement

Whenever you see an Indian work of art, tighten the strings of your helmet. Admire it... venerate it... but for your own sake don't absorb it. [...] Don't wish to capture a single trick of its technique... don't ape it. [...] They over there are wonderful, and we can know it, admit it, admire it, and goodnight (Craig, 1918, p. 32).

Gordon Craig had identified, in a perspicacious and genial way, the technical (more than aesthetic) potential that the theatre forms from the east present. And he did it with great merit, without

any previous considerable reference. Craig criticized with precision the random mixtures among distinct theatre cultures, as in the case of the dancer Sada Yacco, who made great success in Europe with her mix of traditional Japanese and European theatre. “No one in Europe thinks that she and her type of performer in any faintest way reflect the art of the theatre of the East. She does not represent Japan” (Craig, 1914, p. 240). Craig showed himself concerned with the passive approximation to these traditions and the mimetic or kleptomaniac trends of the west in relation to the exotic originated from the east. He seemed to clearly see all the *nos* of this dialogue. He lacked the *yes*. However, his essentially romantic approach of the subject chained him to an idyllic vision of this artistic universe and it did not allow him to extract from it the necessary instrumental to appropriate it and to deepen his investigations. His approximation to India (but to Java and Japan as well), locating the birth of his *Über-marionette* in the banks of the Ganges, was extremely daring e, in a certain way, groundless. In spite of his disciplined studies, Gordon Craig had a limited familiarity with the culture of India and the other countries that he liked to mention. But the native country of his *Über-marionette* remained forever as a distant land, covered with mysticism and idealizations.

The exchange of correspondence between Gordon Craig and Ananda Coomaraswamy displayed a gap in the proposal of the *Über-marionette*. Certainly Coomaraswamy did not intend to question Craig’s work, whom he admired. But it is a fact that this interchange with Coomaraswamy happens in parallel to a redimensioning of Gordon Craig’s *Über-marionette*. Coomaraswamy’s arguments seem to demonstrate that the only possible way of having developed his proposal of the *Über-marionette* would be the most obvious one: the practice, the methodological. The Arena Goldoni school would have been his great opportunity. But the war hindered him. Or perhaps this is only his great alibi.

I don’t believe that Coomaraswamy had the intention to act as a plaintiff, but he ended up determining an interesting and critical dialogue on the so-called Interculturalism, from a comparative argument between Gordon Craig’s *Über-marionette* and the technique and education of the actor of India. We are able, then, to make a quick analysis of Gordon Craig’s east that emerges from this dialogue. Or

at least of the main elements that participated in the construction of this clearly idealized east. Coomaraswamy was not suggesting that Gordon Craig adopted the Indian system in his theatrical practices. Coomaraswamy seems, more wisely, to propose an inspiration and not a methodology. An inspiration from the concrete example of a tradition grounded throughout centuries of empirical experiences of uncountable generations of actors who built the building of the classic theatre of India. Coomaraswamy did not seem to suggest practices, adaptations, but he suggested some processes. And maybe there lies a perennial lesson.

Coomaraswamy did not intend to propose to Gordon Craig a model to be copied, this is quite clear. He does not seem to have intended more than to divulge the Indian artistic tradition, to which he dedicated his studies. He added there a touch of the characteristic Indian arrogance, proud as they are of the longevity of their cultural history, admirable in fact. Coomaraswamy appreciated Craig's intelligence and perhaps he was interested in keeping a dialogue with a British intellectual. His intention could not be, therefore, to challenge Craig's proposal, but rather to contribute to it. As a counterpart, the definitive proof of the impact of Coomaraswamy's claims to Gordon Craig is exactly the importance that the latter gave not only to the arguments, but to the authority of the historian, dedicating a great space for the publication of his writings in *The Mask*. Gordon Craig seems to be convinced that the solution for his dream of renaissance of the theatre would not come from an external model. And this is clear in his writing: "[...] If a *western* actor can become what I am told the *eastern* actor was and is, I withdraw all that I have written in my essay *On the actor and the Über-marionette*" (Craig, 1919, p. 40, highlighted by the author). In the end, Gordon Craig's aphorism seems to have the eternity of the marionettes: "[...] Enlightenment will come from the Stones we are breaking as we sit hammering in our own jolly or dusty path" (Craig, 1918, p. 32).

The exuberant exoticism of the formalization of the Asian theatres inspired several research and scenic workmanships in which elements of its powerful visuality and expressiveness were *combined* with the western language. This mix, sometimes indiscriminate, of cultural elements of distinct origins to create a performing product revealed itself to be well accepted by the western critic and public.

Based on western theatre parameters, the *interchange* with the eastern theatres gained an appearance of aesthetic style and theoretical foundation with a terminology like interculturalism, internationalism, transculturalism etc. This interchange not only with the theatres of Asia, but also from other parts of the world: Africa, Brazil etc. was (and still is) object of controversies and debates. One of the crucial axes of this controversy is to minimally establish where the dialectic research dialectic between distinct linguistic styles finishes and where the mere and indiscriminate appropriation of exotic elements starts: visual and/or sound.

Some advocates of the intercultural theatre argue that exchanges of this kind have always been accomplished by the human beings and always with beneficial results, in one way or another, with important developments both for the people and for their theatre. But we know that the historical moments and its characters define the characteristic and the quality of these exchanges. Rustom Bharucha (2005) points as one of the idiosyncrasies of the intercultural theatre that what should be, by definition, an exchange, an interchange process, is transformed into a by-product of the *philosophy* and the *ethics* of the globalization, creating only an endorsement – a kind of a moral *white letter* – for the unashamed advance of the richer economy over the poorer economy:

I think it should be acknowledge that the implications of interculturalism are very different for people in impoverished, ‘developing’ countries like India, and for their counterparts in technologically advanced, capitalist societies like America, where interculturalism has been more strongly promoted both as a philosophy and a business (Bharucha, 2005, p. 1).

In any way, the depth of Gordon Craig’ knowledge on the Asian theatre traditions and the accuracy of his perception on its composing elements is undeniable. All these factors have formatted an increasingly hesitating Craig as the years passed by referring to the approximation between Europe and the Asian theatre. “Saying that the task could not be accomplished in a situation like that western one, Craig had analyzed it correctly. The one who won without the necessary weapons there where Craig wanted to be able to win shall throw the first stone. The one who saw him correct shall throw the first flower” (Decroux, 2003, p. 35). The intercultural universe,

as well as everything under the sun, has its pros and cons. The parameters of this complex dialogue, identified by Gordon Craig in the faraway year of 1915, continue firmly valid still today. By the way, which points, which aspects of the vast creative and intellectual universe of Gordon Craig that still today do not show a terrifying present time?

Perhaps the proposal of Gordon Craig's *Über-marionette* continues pulsating because it resists to a definition. Any framing, any fixed reply to this proposal would imply, inevitably, in a fatal reduction. And its potential is perpetuated, after so much water under the bridge, perhaps for being bizarre, for its impossibility, for being absurdly superlative. When getting closer to this *murderous monster of actors*, we find a Gordon Craig who, throughout his life, unfolds himself and little by little understands his own creature. Craig himself, also in a process of discovery of all its possibilities. Enchanted by the mystic of the east, Gordon Craig initially lies the birth of his *Über-marionette* on the banks of a sacred India river and has covers it with an idealized mysticism. Later, confronted with the objective reality of the theatre of India, he perceives that he really did not know the substratum that he had used. "This reality of the Indian actor was, however, so surprising and, at the same time, so distant from the western concept of actor that the same Craig couldn't believe in its existence in some other part of the world" (Savarese, 1992, p. 392).

Gordon Craig left Florence after the closure of the activities of the School for the Art of the Theatre. He moved to Rome in 1916 and later to Rapallo and Genoa. After a terrible war, without the least perspective of retaking his school, without any plans for other performing works, Gordon Craig decides, from 1932 on, to be reclusive in the south of France, where he would spend his last thirty years of life, dedicating almost exclusively to the theoretical research. The *Über-marionette* that was born as an axis of reflection on the theatrical language and the question of the technique of the actor is developed, at the same time, in a universal and a timeless symbol of the difficulties, the complexities, and the extreme perplexities inlaid in the intercultural dialogue.



Note

¹ Hinduism, rigorously, is not a religion, but a “[...] bundle of related religions” (Lemaitre, 1958, p. 7). This gathering of religious practices is only identified as united when seen under the point of view of its common foundations established in the books called *Vedas*, written around the 15th Century B.C. A true myriad of religious practices identified as Hinduism has, however, as a common axis, a philosophical tripod on the concepts of *Dharma*, *Karma*, and *Reincarnation*. And, as the ultimate goal, the liberation (*Moksha*) from the painful cycle of incarnations and the final meeting with the Whole.

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Almir Ribeiro is a PhD and a Post-doctoral student in Performing Arts by the University of São Paulo (USP), has a MSc in Visual Arts (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ), is a pedagogue, researcher of India classical theatre, teacher, and theatre director.

E-mail: almir.ribeiro.usp@gmail.com

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