Actor or Puppet: The Body in the Theatres of the Avant-Garde

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In 1921 Oscar Schlemmer, the Bauhaus artist, wrote about the function of the human form in the theatre in an essay entitled “Man and Art Figure”:

The history of the theatre is the history of the transformation of the human form. It is the history of man as the actor of physical and spiritual events, ranging from naivete to reflection, from naturalness to artifice. (Schlemmer 1961: 17)

Indeed, writing in the 1920s Schlemmer is already referring to a well-established tradition of experimentation within the European theatres of the avant-garde. This project involves radically reconfiguring the art of acting. Is the human form the appropriate material for art, can it ever free itself from verisimilitude and psychological expressivism, can abstraction be ever fully rendered through the use of the human form? These and many more were some of the questions being tackled within a historical context that also saw the appearance of the figure of the director. The avant-garde helped to create, probably for the first time in history of the theatre, specific schools of acting, that almost always, however, were also creating the role of the director. One cannot really be read without the other. This debate about the best way to present the human form in the
theatre might be schematically drawn as the famous “man or marionette” debate.

And, of course, it is not a particularly modernist debate; it is at least as old as Plato, and is often read as a reconfiguration of his attack on the theatre. The stage is held to create a double fantasy, a world twice removed from the ideal by the operation of mimesis, and the process of acting itself is seen as corrupting both the actor and the audience (through empathy). Mimesis, particularly when it involves enactment and the human body is seen as arousing the most basic of human emotions, i.e. pity and fear. In turn this emphasis that theatre places on enactment and physicality is viewed with suspicion, as it distracts from reason and philosophical thinking. In other words the physicality of acting, its reliance on the human body ushers in a type of “bad” philosophy: a philosophy that celebrates emotion, physicality and in short elides the body-mind divide. Far from expressing the pure reason of philosophy, mimesis as expressed through the agency of the human body relocates that “reason” within the physical, the civic and the political, as theatre also relies on an audience. Interestingly enough, the only type of actors that Plato approved of were indeed puppets, the neurospasta, which were probably used in the Eleusinian mysteries. Within modernism this debate acquires a new urgency as it is inflected by the heated political discourses of the time, the discussions surrounding the impact of technology and the desire to differentiate “performance” from the literary dimension of theatre. For the purposes of this paper I would like to concentrate on two significant moments in this debate about the representational efficacy of the human form: the work of Edward Gordon Craig, probably the only instance of an English theatre theorist of the avant-garde, and on the work of the Russian/Soviet theatre visionary, Vsevolod Meyerhold.1 The choice might seem somewhat arbitrary, but I believe there are parallels in these projects.

The work of Edward Gordon Craig occupies an ambivalent position within both British modernism and the European avant-garde. The son of Helen Terry and the architect E.W. Godwin, Craig first worked in the theatre as an actor with Henry Irving’s company at the Lyceum. By 1909, having directed several operas, he was ready to abandon England and indeed one of its great theatrical families and settle in Italy for the rest of his life,2 turning himself into an exile