

Maiya Murphy

Edward Gordon Craig's Continuity of Life, Mind, and Spirit: a Cognitive View

In this article Maiya Murphy uses the enactive paradigm of cognition to take a fresh look at Edward Gordon Craig's experiments in the theatre. By focusing on his obsession with movement, Maiya Murphy argues that an autopoietic conception of life can recategorize his problems with, ideas about, and experiments in the theatre as a coherent but multi-faceted effort to create a very particular kind of cognitive engagement. She explores how enaction's concept of the continuity of life and mind can map out a meaningful logic embedded in Craig's intuitions about the connections between cognition, aesthetic experience, epistemology, and ontology. She also considers how the many media in which he worked and his interest in Asian arts – along with his major concepts such as the über-marionette and the kinetic stage – can be seen as attempts to think through theatre as an embodied and emergent event that is at once concrete, aesthetic, cognitive, and metaphysical. Finally, she traces the philosophical heritages that gave Craig his frameworks for understanding movement, arguing that his limitations and frustrations were fundamentally philosophical. Maiya Murphy is an Assistant Professor in the Theatre Programme at the National University of Singapore and makes theatre with her movement-based collective, Autopoetics. She is author of *Enacting Lecoq: Movement in Theatre, Cognition, and Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), and of essays in *Theatre Survey* and *The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq*, among others.

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EDWARD GORDON CRAIG's bold and often cantankerous experiments in remaking the theatre have roused practitioners, spectators, critics, and historians alike since he appeared on the scene in the late nineteenth century.¹ An enactive scientific understanding of movement is well suited to uncover the cognitive aspects of his vision for a new theatre. As a polyvocal but unique approach to understanding mind and cognition, enaction provides a way to think about movement as constitutive of cognition itself.

Following in the footsteps of scholars who have stressed how movement is key to Craig's vision, I propose that delving into his convictions about movement reveals a desire for a very specific kind of cognitive engagement within his ideal theatre experience.² Addressing this cognitive aspect of Craig's vision, along with its aesthetic and metaphysical reverberations, can offer a new richness to our understanding of his work and legacy. By tracing the ways in which he approaches

and retreats from the concept of 'autopoiesis', Craig's obsessions with the problem of the actor, Asian theatrical forms, issues of representation, and metaphysical calls to 'life' and 'belief' coalesce as a series of strategies through which to manifest theatre as a particular kind of cognitive encounter.

What might seem like paradoxes, contradictions, and disparate obsessions are shown to be a multi-fronted but unified effort to engender an autopoietic theatrical experience on the biological, cognitive, and metaphysical levels. By zeroing in on movement as the link between Craig's experiments and cognition, I suggest that his frustrated attempts to realize this vision on the stage can be more precisely understood as an inability to shake certain aspects of his own philosophical heritage, despite contact with alternative notions of the body, mind, and movement.

Craig's problems with the theatre were personal, professional, and existential. As son of the famous British actress Ellen Terry

and the architect and designer Edward Godwin, he was bound to the theatre from an early age. He was also influenced heavily by his mother's long-time collaborator Henry Irving, and began working as an actor before becoming a critic, designer, director, and theorist. Indeed, he made some of his most bold and enduring interventions through his designs and writings, collected in his journals, including *The Page* (1898–1901), *The Mask* (1908–1929), and *The Marionette* (1918), and such books as *On the Art of the Theatre* (1911).

Caught between Mechanism and Vitalism

Craig's most infamous frustration with contemporary theatre was the state and function of the actor, including questions of actor training, acting in performance, and the actor in relation to the larger *mise-en-scène*. His central criticism was that humans were fundamentally slaves to their mercurial emotions and the temptation to glorify their individual personalities.³ Because of this, actors could not be trusted to manage their own emotions, much less be capable of deliberately wielding the aesthetic affect of the theatre.⁴

Joseph R. Roach understands this perspective to be an outgrowth of the longer-standing scientific embattlement between mechanist and vitalist world views and its bearing on acting.⁵ This leads to a conundrum – most famously articulated by Denis Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1830) – regarding whether technique or spontaneity should guide the actor's process. Craig's complaint thus echoes a host of pre-existing arguments including what 'body', 'mind', 'emotion', and 'unconsciousness' are, where they come from, and how they work in the actor. He proclaims definitively:

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.⁶

This assertion zeroes in on another aspect of Craig's prescription, namely that the actor had to be able to exert total control over the theatrical process in order to be considered an artist of the theatre. While his problems with the actor were practical issues true of any craft that placed the artist in the precarious position of using his/her body-mind in performance, they also raised questions about what a person on the stage should be doing and for what purpose.

Such questions were, in turn, emblematic and symptomatic of Craig's larger problem with representation in the theatre. What, Craig asked, should theatre as a whole do? Should it represent life, as the naturalist and realist movements sought, and if so, in what *way* should this be done? Or, should theatre be doing something else altogether?

A dissatisfaction with representation is not unique to Craig, but, as Olga Taxidou has pointed out, sits squarely within the tradition of modernism.⁷ For Craig, imitation was the worst kind of theatrical sin.⁸ By contrast, he aligns himself repeatedly with Symbolism: 'Symbolism is really quite proper; it is sane, orderly, and it is universally employed.'⁹ He likewise attacked his contemporary playwrights and managers, whom he accused of being mere scavengers, borrowing and copying instead of inventing.¹⁰ As Arnold Rood concludes:

What was it that Craig wanted in art, in theatre, in dance? A return to the natural, to nature. Not a slavish imitation of nature but to make use of nature as an inspiration for art rather than an arbitrary adoption of mannered artificiality.¹¹

Thus, Craig sought a unity inspired by nature, but which had nothing to do with realism or naturalism.¹² Considering 'nature' as a manifestation of Craig's interest in 'life', his categorization of death as a phase of life is telling. He wrote that, for the artist, death was a generative point of existence where 'an entirely new conception of life becomes necessary'.¹³ Paola Degli Esposti suggests that this imperative also applies to understanding Craig's famous *über-marionette* correctly, but I would go further and argue that it is applicable to all Craig's work. To

understand Craig's call to unity and nature, we need an entirely new conception of 'life', as outlined below.

Craig's solutions were just as provocative as his critiques. The über-marionette (partly mythical, partly historical, partly inspired by actual puppet theatre traditions around the world) solved the problem of the actor precisely because it was not human:

The applause may thunder or dribble, their hearts beat no faster, no slower, their signals do not grow hurried or confused; and, though drenched in a torrent of bouquets and love, the face of the leading lady remains as solemn, as beautiful, and as remote as ever. There is something more than a flash of genius in the marionette, and there is something in him more than the flashiness of displayed personality. The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization.¹⁴

Craig's conception of the puppet evacuated the performing figure of all of those qualities that he thought hindered humans.

In proposing a 'super-puppet', as Roach translates it, Craig followed in the footsteps of Heinrich von Kleist, Maurice Maeterlinck, Alfred Jarry, and other artists who were generally fascinated with puppets and advocated the marionette as a model for the human actor.¹⁵ Scholars have debated whether Craig intended for the puppets to replace humans or whether it was a rhetorical strategy calling for the renewal of human acting training, style, and performance.¹⁶

Scholars also acknowledge that Craig saw certain individuals as models for the ideal performer, including Irving, Isadora Duncan, and the actors of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, as exceptions to the rule. The performers Craig heralded as ideal models exhibit the virtues of both mechanist puppets and vitalist people. At first glance, Irving stands in for the ideal mechanism, while Duncan stands in for the ideal vitalism: a binary of human models where success lay at extreme ends of the spectrum.

Craig lauded Irving as an actor who had total control over his instrument, a triumph of technique: 'the very nearest approach that has ever been to the ideal actor, with his brain commanding his nature, has been

Henry Irving.'¹⁷ Duncan, a pioneer of modern dance who explicitly rebelled against the codification of ballet, was often characterized as close to nature, ritualist, and animated by pure inspiration.¹⁸ Craig acknowledged this aspect of her work and called her 'full of natural genius'.¹⁹

In both of these ideals, however, Craig identified the simultaneous existence of the opposite force at work. While he believed that an ideal actor must 'command' his nature, he also noted that this nature must be 'rich', a clear nod to such organic and dynamic internal qualities as imagination, inspiration, and emotion. As he concluded,

the ideal actor will be the man who possesses both a rich nature and a powerful brain. Of his nature we need not speak. It will contain everything. Of his brain we can say that the finer the quality the less liberty it will allow itself.²⁰

For Craig, Irving was gifted at using his intellect to command his rich nature; the latter was not absent altogether.

Likewise, Taxidou notes that in Duncan's 'spontaneous' and 'inspired' dance, often categorized as 'techniqueless', Craig identified a sophisticated pragmatic philosophy of dance anchored in images and the language of motors.²¹ This 'system' was in no way like ballet technique, but it still pointed towards a deliberate and dynamic process of putting forces into play in specific ways to create her style of dance: 'Emotion works like a motor. It must be warmed up to run well.'²²

Here one of the most typically vitalist performers finds theoretical grounding in mechanist principles. Instead of two divergent models, Craig saw two ideals that were differently but still finely tuned models of a robust interaction between mechanism and vitalism.

Commedia dell'arte exhibited similar mechanist and vitalist qualities. While scholars have identified the form's mechanist tendencies that attracted the technique-obsessed Craig, including its physically based form- and actor-centred virtuosic generativity, Taxidou points out that the 'fluidity' of its central improvisations may seem 'utterly conflicting' to Craig's ideals.²³ However, she

explains how a correct understanding of the rigorous training involved in such improvisations can resolve the apparent conflict, emphasizing the mechanist efforts needed to master improvisation.²⁴

While I agree entirely that the complexities of improvisation in *commedia dell'arte* are far from a simple release of an uncultivated, spontaneous inspiration, I would add that we do not need to resolve the conflict between the mechanist and vitalist qualities within the form. In fact, to acknowledge that these two distinct qualities also animate *commedia dell'arte* is to see another way in which the co-existence of these apparently opposite forces are essential components of Craig's ideal performer. The problem of having to reconcile them may be ours, not Craig's; for mechanism and vitalism seem to have to co-exist.

Another of Craig's solutions was to look to the East and take Asian forms as exemplary models. Taxidou shows how Craig sat firmly within the orientalist gaze, using the 'East' as a 'screen' for his own desires.²⁵ However, Craig was unique among his contemporaries in that he was more informed about Asian theatre histories and practices. Through intensive research and engaging in dialogue with prominent Asian artists and practitioners, Craig developed an interest in the reality of Asian forms as cultural practices within their own contexts and laden with their own value structures outside of the orientalist constructs of comprehension and control.²⁶

Along with encountering the famed western tours of Japanese performers such as the Kawakami troupe and dancer Hanako at the turn of the century, Craig met Mei Lanfang in 1935 and most likely spent at least an hour in conversation with him.²⁷ More directly, he exchanged letters with Japanese theatre critic Shikō Tsubouchi and engaged in a long-standing dialogue with the Sri Lankan Tamil philosopher of art, Ananda Coomaraswamy.²⁸ In Almir Ribeiro's view, Coomaraswamy's English writings became the authoritative western source for understanding Indian history and culture at the time, and Craig published his material in *The Mask*, reviewed

his books, and exchanged personal letters.²⁹ He also published articles and book reviews about Asian forms in *The Mask* and *The Marionette*, and amassed a large collection of theatrical artifacts such as masks, puppets, and prints of Asian theatre.³⁰

Craig's recognition that such forms might exist outside the optics of the orientalist West was rare among western admirers of Asia at the time. His rigorous research and contact with Coomaraswamy could have laid the groundwork for genuine intercultural contacts, negotiations, and experimentations, or, at the very least, suggest not only 'an admirable exotic theatre of the past, but . . . a form of theatrical discourse that could have helped him re-write his own medium'.³¹

Yet, this deeper understanding of the forms also served his orientalist stance. By recognizing they could not be dislodged from local histories, contexts, and cultures, Craig further solidified his conviction to keep these traditions at arm's length.³² This distance, like the distance between a light source and a projection screen, allowed him to manipulate the shapes and shadows of Asian practices for his own end, thus reproducing typical orientalist tactics.

Taxidou catalogues the many features in Asian practices that attracted Craig:

Craig's attraction to and fascination with Oriental theatre is more than obvious. Theatre as religious ritual; stylized acting; the prominence of puppets and of the puppet master; the wearing of masks: all these are ideas which seem very Craigian indeed. And the total aspect of this type of theatre seems to require a unifying force, an artist who will create a synaesthetic effect.³³

While the fact that the mechanist qualities of highly codified forms requires rigorous training is obvious, the religious and spiritual context of these forms provides a space for vitalist-like qualities – inspiration, creativity, and spontaneity – where humans are connected to larger dimensions of existence in a spiritualized cosmos. In the context of Craig's complex orientalist and sometimes well-informed gaze, he is again drawn to practices that encompass both mechanism and vitalism, recurring western theatrical

preoccupations, which, Roach reminds us, stem from nineteenth-century science.³⁴

Craig also sought to solve the problem of the contemporary theatre by recuperating it as a metaphysical act. He envisioned an ideal theatre that embodied 'the first and final belief of the world'.³⁵ 'Belief,' a recurring term for Craig's broad metaphysicality, carries Christian overtones, but is neither strictly Christian nor dogmatic. Again, this focus on 'belief' provides a clear reason for Craig's enduring attraction to Asian performance practices that overtly include a spiritual or religious aspect.

However, as Irène Eynat-Confino and Patrick Le Boeuf observe, Craig's writings on the metaphysical aspect of the theatre have been dismissed as a sign of his pretension at best, and, at worst, evidence of his incomprehensibility.³⁶ Craig was aware of this danger, which further encouraged him to communicate such issues in cryptic, self-censored, or poetic ways.³⁷ Both Eynat-Confino and Le Boeuf account for his tendency towards metaphysics as an essential and entirely coherent component of his theory and practice. They also characterize his work as evolutionary: his material experiments in and theorizations about the theatre led him further and inexorably into the transcendental.³⁸ The logical end of this journey for Craig, they argue, is his apotheosis to prophet, where his new theatre would offer the most immediate and direct access to the transcendental.

In such an evolutionary view there is an implicit hierarchy of the primitive and the advanced that parallels the hierarchy of the material and the spiritual. This view chimes with others which suggest how Craig's work in the theatre was only ever provisional and not the space in which his vision could be truly realized. This is one way to conceptualize the gap between Craig's ideals and his ability to enact them: his ideals never needed to be realized in theatre as such; his work in the theatre proper was just a path towards an overall transcendental vision.

In earlier Craig scholarship this gap has been taken as evidence of his fundamental theatrical failure, while the notion of Craig-

as-failure was later challenged on a variety of fronts.³⁹ For the most part, these arguments still suggest that Craig's theatre experiments were experiences through which he needed to pass in order to achieve his goals in different realms, whether in other media or through the work of other artists. In this sense Craig's 'belief', even when taken seriously as an essential component of his vision, only solved the problem of the theatre by moving spectators away from his own theatre work.

'All Things Spring from Movement'

By identifying movement as the ultimate source, Craig positions it as the foundation of theatre, all arts, and more. Rood and Eynat-Confino have convincingly argued that all Craig's strategies to revolutionize the theatre of his day were ultimately attempts at harnessing the potentials of movement. Craig's problems with the theatre, frustrations with the actor, dissatisfaction with representation, and his proposed solutions can all be linked through his experiments with and thoughts on movement. The vitalist/mechanist tension identified by Roach can be similarly understood as oscillations between conceiving of movement as either organic or mechanistic. Even Craig's interest in forging a path to 'belief' suggests a conviction that the spiritual can be reached through a dynamic process of moving from the material into the abstract.

In movement Craig sensed universal laws that might be ascertained and which were always accompanied by a spiritual dimension: 'I like to suppose that this art which shall spring from movement will be the first and final belief of the world.'⁴⁰ He believed that tapping into these laws would do nothing less than remake the theatre. His interest in both dance and Irving's acting technique can be seen as a hunt for examples where ideal movement was made visible. Likewise, Craig rendered movement visible in his own work. He approached directing work like choreography, where he charted movements by rendering his blocking like a sports coach and often incorporated a sense



Design showing the storm in *King Lear* by Edward Gordon Craig, 1920. Here Craig envisions one of western theatre history's quintessential moments of resonance between nature, psycho-physical states, and the spiritual cosmos. In this still image, highly evocative of movement as a whole, human and environmental shapes echo one another. © The Edward Gordon Craig Estate/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

of motion into his scene sketches themselves. Craig also investigated non-human aspects of movement on the stage, including creating costumes with moving elements, such as in his production of *Acis and Galatea* for the Purcell Operatic Society in 1902.

This also included his plans for a kinetic stage of moveable screens and boxes, where, importantly, the scenery would be a central attraction, rather than merely a backdrop for the actors, and would engender a direct affective relationship between the stage space, materials, and the audience.⁴¹ The plan was for the set of large vertical boxes – they were to be the width of two humans and the height of six and, like stalactites, would be both ‘grounded’ and ‘suspended’ – to move throughout the stage space.⁴²

Another form of kinetic theatre was the proposed moveable screens, which famously fell down during rehearsals for his production of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre and which debuted at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1911. Movement was, again, key,

and the monochrome screens – foldable and hinged – were easily manipulated to create a variety of spatial relationships between the screens, the light, and the actors.⁴³ The über-marionette is, of course, another pertinent example, demonstrating how movement was central to even Craig's most potentially anti-human proposals.

While Craig saw the potential of movement in re-envisioning the theatre, several convictions guided his experiments. Just as he found most humans unsuitable for acting, he found them equally unable to wield the potential of movement successfully. He admired some dancers, most notably Duncan, of course, but she – like Irving – was an exception to the rule. For Craig, abstract movement was the core of movement itself and this is what he sought to harness and wield: ‘We have to banish from our mind all thought of the use of a human form as the instrument which we are to use to translate what we call *Movement*.’⁴⁴ Furthermore, he often linked movement with life intimately:

'movement was viewed as a metaphysical power, the essence of life itself'.⁴⁵

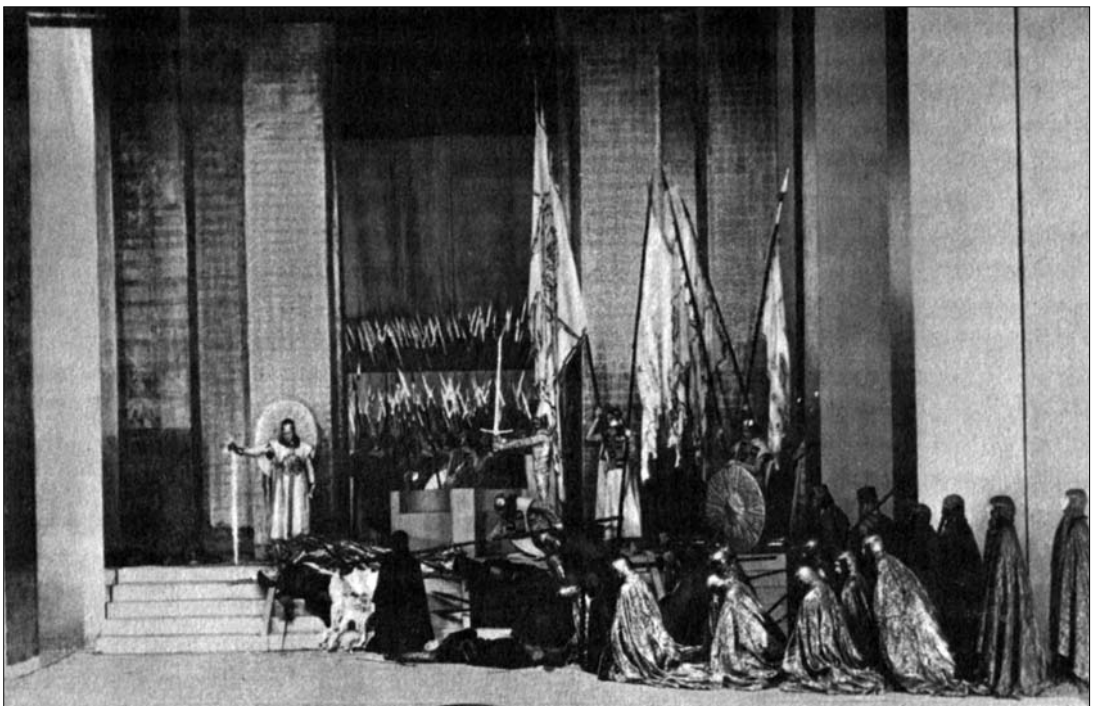
Craig pondered over the exact relationship between life and movement, believing that understanding movement was the key to understanding life itself.⁴⁶ Again, the 'life' to which he referred was not that of naturalism or realism, but was, rather, a kind of animating force that had its roots in his own orientalist gaze.⁴⁷ By investigating such forms as Nō, Kathakali, puppetry traditions and more, he dived into practices that are more physically and gesturally codified than most western traditions.

Yet while Craig held up such movement-focused forms as ideals, he also made a typical retreat from their corporeal realities. In fact, he objected to the physical rigour required to successfully enact such forms and, as his work developed, he became more centred on abstraction.⁴⁸ Having said this, his 'main innovations' regarding movement were made while working with humans on the Moscow Art Theatre's *Hamlet*, which was a notoriously frustrating process for Craig, Stanislavsky, and all the actors involved. Despite the fact that the production was well

received, the actor-centred way of working developed by Stanislavsky and his associates clashed with Craig's dictatorial and director-centred approach.⁴⁹

Le Boeuf argues that such apparent contradictions can be resolved by understanding Craig's work as a centre-periphery structure grounded in practicality.⁵⁰ In this view, Craig was ultimately a seasoned and pragmatic artist who held his ideals at the centre of his work, kept working towards realizing them, but naturally saw various efforts landing closer or further from this central point. Rather than seeing a particular project as failing to hit the 'target', Le Boeuf reads it as an enduring pragmatic strategy to art making.

This kind of conceptualization resonates with my own view, but there are now other compelling ways to account for the dynamism of Craig's work. I am not suggesting that these contradictions can or need to be resolved. Rather, I propose that seeing these contradictions as a result of his investigations into something dynamic – movement – not only highlights the vast reach of what he thought movement might achieve, but also



The screens in the final scene of the Moscow Art Theatre *Hamlet*, 1911.

reveals the way that his own philosophical-epistemological heritages and commitments were ill-equipped to conceive such dynamism.

Understanding movement through enaction can provide a holistic account of Craig's work as a dynamic, multifarious, and yet consistent oeuvre. By utilizing a paradigm that directly traces cognition from movement, it is possible to identify the link between Craig's interest in movement and the cognitive aspect of his vision. Moreover, because this conception of cognition is inherently linked to biological definitions of life, Craig's calls to 'life' lose their perplexing, ungraspable qualities and point towards something very specific about meaning-making in the theatre.

Movement in Enactive Cognition

The enactive approach understands cognition as a dynamically emergent phenomenon that occurs in the interaction between an embodied entity and its environment. It is a ground-breaking way to think through cognition that challenges earlier conceptualizations of cognition modelled after the computer, where the mind-as-hard-drive directs the body to carry out its commands. While scholars in the cognitive sciences and related fields continue to develop enaction in different directions, my definition of the term draws on the work of Ezequiel Di Paolo, Marieke Rodhe, and Hanne De Jaegher, who identify five major tenets of enaction: embodiment, autonomy, experience, sense-making, and emergence.⁵¹

An enactive view sees cognition as a necessarily embodied affair – 'mind' and 'body' being neither discrete nor separate. Cognition is 'autonomous' because the entire embodied entity, always embedded in its environment, brings forth and maintains its own cognition. Since the entity's only point of reference and end goal is itself, everything in the environment carries potential valences (or meanings) relative to the entity's constitution and maintenance.

In this way, the cognitive process is constituted by and through 'sense-making' or meaning-making – nothing is ever neutral or

valence free. Further, the autonomous and sense-making aspects of cognition, according to enaction, are constantly developed, guided, and maintained through the entity's own experiences of emergence. Finally, key to enaction is that cognition exists neither in the entity itself to be mined (for example, in the brain) nor in the environment to be decoded (for example, the external world). 'Emergence' highlights the dynamic, processual, and interactional quality of cognition.

These five key terms go a long way to emphasize how enaction interprets cognition as fundamentally dynamic. Scholars have gone on to clarify that since movement is the physical manifestation and vehicle of dynamism it can be characterized as a constituent condition of cognition, an argument that reveals the importance of biology.⁵² While enaction is an interdisciplinary endeavour, the biological work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco J. Varela has shaped its contours significantly, particularly in its early stages. In their quest to find a definition for life, Maturana and Varela proposed the concept of 'autopoiesis'.⁵³ The term refers to the process of self-creation, whereby cells incessantly constitute and maintain themselves through incorporating certain environment elements, but also constitutes its own membrane between itself and the environment. Paradoxically, the cell uses the environment to construct its very distinction from it.⁵⁴

Maturana and Varela extrapolated the process of autopoiesis from biology to cognition, and other scholars have extrapolated it further to social cognition and even to the development of the 'self'.⁵⁵ In other words, these scholars suggest that the organizational process that engenders this basic logical function is the very same, on a more complex scale, that occurs in cognition, social life, and perhaps even ontology. Scientists and philosophers have dubbed this 'the continuity of life and mind'.⁵⁶ Evan Thompson explains:

life and mind share a set of basic organizational properties, and the organizational properties distinctive of mind are an enriched version of those fundamental to life. Mind is life-like and life is mind-like.⁵⁷

Thompson goes on to acknowledge that some thinkers go further in admitting an existential continuity, to which I also subscribe.⁵⁸ In this view, more abstract human realms such as the experience of 'selfhood' are outgrowths of the concrete biological process of autopoiesis. They function because of it – a human being biologically exists through autopoiesis – and then reiterate it in the abstracted realm: a sense of selfhood exists through an incessant emergent person-environment interaction. Autopoiesis is a constitutive process of life that starts in the concrete and biological but scales outward into abstraction.

If we follow the continuity of life and mind, movement as a constitutive quality of biological life is also seen as a constitutive condition of mind. At the cellular level, things pass through or are repelled from the cell membrane during its incessant autopoietic process, which is how movement can be understood as the most prominent vehicle for the development of life and cognition. This further points to the question whether humans can wield movement, actively shaping its fundamental dynamism, to morph the autopoietic resonances along the continuity of life and mind. According to this enactive logic, any sustained focus on movement such as Craig's would naturally include resonances along this broad continuity between physical action and cognition, and even beyond.

Within the enactive framework, autopoiesis is a model for how life arises, how cognition develops, and how abstract human realms hijack our basic process of biological living. The autopoietic process has been a very attractive tool (both literally and conceptually) for thinking through various kinds of systems such as artificial intelligence, organizational systems, and the theatre. Theatre scholars have used autopoiesis as a way to look at a host of phenomena, including actor training, the theatrical engagement between spectators and performers, and intermedial performance. Autonomy, here, refers to a state of self-constitution while autopoiesis refers to a specific process of the accomplishment of autonomy. Therefore,

'autopoiesis' places the emphasis on dynamism, agency, emergence, and the manner of self-distinction.⁵⁹

I propose that cleaving closely to the structure and process of a Maturanian and Varelian autopoiesis is to emphasize a future-focused dynamism where the agent is a perspective that is in a constant state of constitution. Just as Maturana and Varela used autopoiesis to define life, the principle of the continuity of life and mind suggests that abstracting autopoiesis beyond the biological might allow one to understand how a certain kind of 'vivification' can exist in a social, ontological, or aesthetic situation.

Here, 'life' is defined by a specific organizational process. Autopoiesis is both an epistemology and an ontology. Movement thus becomes both life's animating force and its expression, where it characterizes autopoiesis even in abstracted realms of the arts and metaphysics. For artists like Craig, then, movement holds the key to accessing and engendering 'life' in both the concrete and abstract realms.

Craig's Vision as Autopoietic Conception

An enactive view of Craig's conundrums allows them to coalesce into a coherent project aimed at tapping into a continuity of life and mind in the theatre. Seen in this way, Craig's work becomes an intuitively led attempt to create a lasting approach for making theatre a vital encounter. The parallel between movement as central to Craig and movement as central to enaction shows his instinctive understanding of it as the animating force of life, including the biological, cognitive, and metaphysical realms. Craig sensed that movement was the way into dynamism in the theatre, which explains his diverse range of experiments with über-marionettes, scenography, masks, kinetic stages, drawings and writings.

It was a multi-fronted effort. His journal publications and etchings, for example, were animated through movement, while his use of pseudonyms in *The Mask* allowed him to write the majority of articles in a playful dynamism of authorship that continues to

keep readers guessing whether an article was by Craig or an outside author. This authorial dynamism functions in addition to the genuine circulation of dialogue that occurred with contributing writers such as Coomaraswamy. Similarly, Buckley argues that Craig's woodcut-illustrated *Hamlet* demands an interactive readerly participation as she looks back and forth from the play text to the engravings. In this version of Shakespeare's text, the spectator's gaze must literally move.

An enactive perspective accounts for Craig's obsession with accessing 'life', yet his rejection of the 'life' of the realists and naturalists. The 'entirely new conception of life' that is necessary to understand his work is the same as Maturana and Varela's, namely, autopoiesis. Within his own cultural context Craig's only avenue for a different way of thinking about life was Symbolism, but his work demonstrates an intuitive autopoiesis that becomes increasingly abstract. By identifying movement as the key, his perspective looks much like that of Renaud Barbaras, who suggests that 'movement is the very substance of life'.⁶⁰ Craig's intuition towards autopoiesis also supports his stance against mimetic representation. He was interested in theatre artists and mechanisms able to engender a process rather than represent anything.⁶¹

Further, by approaching Craig's gaze towards Asia enactively, his historically grounded orientalist attitude becomes more complex. Looking eastward gave him exposure to more visibly autopoietic forms of theatre that demand active spectator participation and more continuity between literal performance-making and metaphysical meaning-making. In the more codified Asian forms that he studied, the spectator must either have or develop knowledge about how the codes work. In classical Indian performance forms, for example, when the spectator is educated in the conventions of the form, often involving *mudras* and other bodily movements, she is not experiencing communication from or impersonation by the performers but is participating in 'a flow of intersubjectivity'.⁶²

This conception of the relationship between performers and spectators is far from representational – it constitutes joint identity through joint experience. Traditional explanations of *rasa* theory, foundation for many of the classical Indian performance forms that Craig studied, liken the experience of theatrical performance to the sensorial enjoyment of a meal.

Mee draws connections between the ancient aesthetic treatise *The Nāṭyashāstra* and contemporary affect science to suggest that enactive explanations of *rasa* can better account for the full scope of the phenomenon.⁶³ She claims that it is best understood as a form of participatory sense-making, a version of enaction's tenet of sense-making in more complex circumstances.⁶⁴

Thus, through Indian classical aesthetics, among other forms, Craig made contact with an entirely different conception of what theatre can do: a practically articulated overt vision for the continuity of embodied action, meaning-making, and ontology. In addition, he was encountering an approach demanding the active participation and investment of the performer *and* the spectator.

Craig's interest in puppets from around the world similarly betrays an interest in an autopoietic performer–spectator relationship. On the surface, his well-known reasons for the efficacies of puppets point back to his desire to have control over movement and to sidestep problematic human qualities like emotion and ego. However, as Melissa Tringham has argued, puppets require an enhanced spectatorial investment, and not just an operator, to make 'the puppet "do"'.⁶⁵ As the puppet spectator and animator (whether present or proxied by some sort of puppet animation system) interact, this forms a process that could more likely engender an autopoietic emergence of the theatre event.

Craig's many experiments with form and movement resonate with the perhaps counter-intuitive implication of autopoiesis whereby form engenders content. Autopoietic form determines content because, in biology, content is always refreshed to maintain the form. In a complex living organism

such as a human, the person's skin cells are always dying and being replaced by new ones. Yet, that person's body is still her body despite the fact that, biologically speaking, it is not the same body as it was last month.

The relationship between the entity and its environment is what remains throughout the organism's existence. The form is always the form until it no longer exists, and it is always participating in the process of auto-poiesis: its matter constantly changes. For Craig, to work obsessively through forms and structures that can give rise to movement is his way of tapping into this idea that form is not a result of something, but, rather, has the potential to be the agent of a processual event.

In the light of enaction, Craig's interest in and writings on metaphysics become less an erratic proclivity and more of a grounded exploration of the potentials of movement's trajectory from the concrete to the abstract. Here, metaphysics – as abstraction to the hilt – becomes the ultimate destination of Craig's work not due to specific religious investment or delusions of grandeur, but because it is where the furthest resonance of life itself can be experienced by humans. In this way, Craig's vision for the theatre event is not just aesthetic, pragmatic, metaphysical, or even evolutionary. It is, rather, an emergent phenomenon that provides a simultaneous passage to all of those realms by using movement to harness the dynamic organizational processes of life.

Conclusion

An enactive reading of Craig's work shows it to be deeply cognitive – a collection of explorations of how to think in, through, and with the theatre. This includes how artists and spectators may make meaning that resonates with their own dynamic constitutions as vital organisms. Yet Craig's work is also cognitive in an enactive sense where 'thinking' and 'meaning-making' are not just in the head; they are embodied, biological, affective, epistemological, and ontological.

In the light of enaction, Craig's frustrations with and moves away from the theatre

take on another hue. He intuitively groped toward realizing his vision, but he struggled with how to conceptualize, communicate, and manifest it as a dynamic process, simultaneously concrete and abstract. Craig's attraction to total theatre and the absolute authority of a director can be easily understood as a way to take control of and shape the theatrical process. Yet, theatre created by an authoritarian director would most likely lend itself to being a kind of heteronomous system controlled from the outside rather than an emergent, self-organized autopoietic process.

Had Craig created or accessed frameworks similar to auto-poiesis, he might have been able to work from a process that could more frequently and consistently harness agency, identity, epistemology, all the way into metaphysics. This lack of a conceptual framework may also point toward why, after his long-term dedication to movement, Craig ended up conceiving of the sun and light as more superior reference points.⁶⁶ Movement gave him process and dynamism and helped him make great strides in thinking and making. Unfortunately, he could not live conceptually in the dynamism that movement proposes: it is too mercurial, too complex, too hard to pin down – which, is, of course, also its power.

His resistance to experimenting with biological movement – with humans as either performers or spectators, for example – limited his ability to work *through* the continuity of life and mind, not just as a goal but also as a process. The potentials for spectator participation, and, of course, actors-as-performers, were completely underexplored in Craig's work, who, as was seen in the case of the Moscow Art Theatre, limited his contact with the actors.⁶⁷ If puppets cognitively induce spectators to animate them, as Tringham suggests, then Craig's fascination with marionettes is an example of how the participatory potential of spectators haunts his experiments.

Craig's framework problems arise out of the limits of his philosophical heritage. Working in the context of western Cartesian dualism made it difficult to conceive of the

dynamism and agency of the body and movement. Placing himself in the awkward tension between mechanism and vitalism, Craig made many strides in bringing movement and dynamism to the fore in such a philosophical climate, but living in that tension kept him and his work in a constant state of frustration.

As I have shown, enaction can provide a middle way between mechanism and vitalism where form and structure (important to mechanism) engender an organic emergence (important to vitalism). The term 'middle way' is a nod to enaction's heritage in eastern thought, particularly Buddhism.⁶⁸ A middle-way perspective on mechanism and vitalism suggests that qualities from both may co-exist, emerging together in a dynamic unity.

Yasuo Yuasa proposes another feature of Asian thought and practice – the accomplishment of the unity of body and mind.⁶⁹ In this way the alternative framework implicit in Asian practices could have been a very attractive philosophical force for Craig. These practices, in their own ways and own contexts, embrace non-dualist conceptions of the performing body and movement that more efficiently render the performing body mind-full. A mindful body is a starting point for harnessing movement's potential in a dynamic autopoietic theatrical event because it endows the body and movement with the cognitive agency.

Craig's desire for a theatre of the future was thus so bold that it outstripped his own philosophical heritage's ability to fully conceive of it. Through his artistic impulse, he sensed the potential of autopoiesis and its resonances in the human meaning-making process. If there is any fundamental failure in his work, it is the failure of his philosophical context to provide the conceptual tools he needed. An enactive perspective, however, can provide a fresh window into what Craig was indeed able to accomplish: the realization of a vast oeuvre of experimentation, conceptually ahead of its time, that logically and coherently conceived of the theatre as a portal into the dynamic resonances of life and mind.

Notes and References

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reader for the insightful comments and the archivist staff at the British Institute of Florence, Archivio Contemporaneo 'A. Bosanti', and the Houghton Library at Harvard University for their research assistance.

2. See, for example, Olga Taxidou, *The Mask: a Periodical Performance by Edward Gordon Craig* (London: Routledge, 2013), and Patrick Le Boeuf, 'On the Nature of Edward Gordon Craig's Über-Marionette', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXVI, No. 2 (May 2010), p. 102–14.

3. Craig thought that actors were ultimately freedom-oriented creatures, utterly vain, and therefore completely unable to serve another person's vision in the theatre. Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 30. Charles R. Lyons notes that another major factor for him was the lack of an appropriate acting discipline to properly train the actor out of his terrible disposition. Charles R. Lyons, 'Gordon Craig's Concept of the Actor', *Educational Theatre Journal*, XVI, No. 3 (October 1964), p. 263.

4. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 28.

5. Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 161.

6. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 28.

7. See Taxidou, *The Mask*.

8. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 31.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 145–6.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 49–58.

11. Arnold Rood, ed., *Gordon Craig on Movement and Dance* (London: Dance Books, 1978), p. xxi.

12. In Craig's words, 'to invent with the aid of nature'. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 31.

13. Paola Degli Esposti, 'The Fire of Demons and the Steam of Mortality: Edward Gordon Craig and the Ideal Performer', *Theatre Survey*, LVI, No. 1 (January 2015), p. 22. Esposti is quoting Craig from his 'Day-Book' in 1909.

14. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 39.

15. See Roach, p. 161–4, and Taxidou, *The Mask*, p. 141–72.

16. For an overview of verdicts on whether the über-marionette was meant to be a real puppet or inspiration for humans, see Esposti, p. 1–27; Lyons, p. 258–69.

17. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 6.

18. To be clear, I am connecting such a biologically inflected 'vitalism' to related notions of the organic, as in the biological force unique to vitalism as a vehicle for dynamic, inexplicable, and spontaneous forces that are often a part of or connected to nature. Most significantly, these forces function in an opposite manner to mechanism.

19. Rood, *Gordon Craig on Movement and Dance*, p. 248. Taxidou suggests that Duncan's saw a 'vitalist organicism' in her understanding of the Greeks, and that organicism animated the dancer's work. Olga Taxidou, 'The Dancer and the Übermarionette', *Mime Journal*, XXVI, Art. 3 (February 2017), p. 9.

20. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 5.

21. Taxidou, 'The Dancer and the Übermarionette', p. 12–14.

22. Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928), p. 99.

23. Taxidou, *The Mask*, p. 112–25, 126. Also see Irène Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask: Gordon Craig, Movement, and the Actor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 168.

24. Taxisidou, *The Mask*, p. 126.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 79–109; Rood, *Gordon Craig on Movement and Dance*, p. 195, 206–9; and Almir Ribeiro, 'A Dialogue on the Banks of the Ganges: Gordon Craig and Ananda Coomaraswamy', *Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies*, IV, No. 3 (September–December 2014), p. 463–85.
27. Sang-Kyong Lee, 'Edward Gordon Craig and Japanese Theater', *Asian Theatre Journal*, XVII, No. 2 (Fall 2000), p. 215–35; Min Tian, 'Gordon Craig, Mei Lanfang and the Chinese Theatre', XXXII, No. 2 (2007), p. 161–77.
28. Yoko Yamaguchi, 'Shikō Tsubouchi's Unpublished Letters to Edward Gordon Craig with an Introduction about Their Intercultural Context', *Forum Modernes Theater*, XXVIII, No. 2 (2013), p. 193–203; Ribeiro, 'A Dialogue on the Banks of the Ganges'.
29. Ribeiro, 'A Dialogue on the Banks of the Ganges'.
30. Taxisidou, *The Mask*, p. 79–82; Lee, 'Edward Gordon Craig and Japanese Theater', p. 225; Yamaguchi, 'Shikō Tsubouchi's Unpublished Letters', p. 193.
31. Taxisidou, *The Mask*, p. 85.
32. Rood, *Gordon Craig on Movement and Dance*, p. 192–6.
33. Taxisidou, *The Mask*, p. 85.
34. Roach, *The Player's Passion*, p. 160–2.
35. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 4.
36. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 126; Patrick Le Boeuf, 'Gordon Craig's Self-Contradictions', *Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies*, IV, No. 3 (September–December 2014), p. 401–24.
37. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 126. Le Boeuf, 'Gordon Craig's Self-Contradictions', p. 417.
38. Eynat-Confino, p. 126–44, 175–9. Also note Eynat-Confino's discussion of how Craig saw the necessary 'evolution' of the actor and the theatre as a whole as moving from interpretive, to creative, to revelatory on p. 58–60, 72, 87. Le Boeuf understands Craig's mysticism as evolutionary in a literal sense, claiming that he saw himself as a force to speed up the human evolutionary process so that we may pass through our baser human consciousness and become 'a spiritually enlightened species'. Le Boeuf, 'Gordon Craig's Self-Contradictions', p. 419.
39. For a discussion of this with particular attention to Craig's *Scene* project, see Luiz Fernando Ramos, 'Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a History Open to Revision', *Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies*, IV, No. 3 (September–December 2014), p. 443–62. In addition to Ramos, Dennis Bablet identifies Craig's design ideas in subsequent directors and scenographers: Dennis Bablet, *The Theatre of Edward Gordon Craig* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 198–200. Christopher Innes proposes that Craig's theatrical vision has been realized by artists such as Robert Wilson in *Edward Gordon Craig: a Vision of Theatre* (Singapore: Harwood, 1998), p. 215–21. Taxisidou suggests that Craig's publication of *The Mask* was a crystallization of his vision of performance: Taxisidou, *The Mask*. Jennifer Buckley argues that Craig's wood engravings for *Hamlet* were a realization of his vision for wordless drama: Jennifer Buckley, "'Symbols in Silence": Edward Gordon Craig and the Engraving of Wordless Drama', *Theatre Survey*, LIV, No.2 (May 2013), p. 207–30.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 24, 34. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 79–80.
41. According to Buckley, Craig did not use the term 'kinetic stage' and it was, rather, attributed to his work by Eynat-Confino and Maria Ines Aliverti. See Buckley, "Symbols in Silence", p. 208, 211, 227. For more information on the kinetic stage as a space to engender change, see Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 112–15.
42. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 112–13.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 152. For a discussion on the relationship between Craig's *Scene* project, the kinetic stage, and his screens, see Ramos, 'Gordon Craig's *Scene* project', p. 444–62. For various commentaries about Craig's *Scene* project and his screens in practice and in relationship to other issues in scenography, see the collection of multi-authored articles in *The Mask*, VII, No. 2 (May 1915), p. 139–67. This includes Craig's famous section 'Screens: the Thousand Scenes in One Scene' p. 139–58. Also see, Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 141–50, 273–87; Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 152; and Buckley, 'Symbols in Silence', p. 210–13, 215–16, 221, 226.
44. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 23.
45. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 72.
46. Craig conceived of movement and life as necessarily co-existing phenomena, sometimes envisioning movement as engendering life, indicative of life, or always apparent alongside it. Even as his thinking about the relationship between movement and life changed, one still often signalled the existence of the other. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 72, 94, 176.
47. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 16, 41.
48. Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Notes on Indian Dramatic Technique', *The Mask*, VI, No.2 (October 1913), p. 127–8.
49. Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig: the Story of His Life* (London: Gollancz, 1968), p. 249–75. For more details on the Moscow Art Theatre *Hamlet* production, see Laurence Senelick, 'Moscow and Mono-drama: the Meaning of the Craig-Stanislawsky *Hamlet*', *Theatre Research International*, VI, No. 2 (1981) p. 109–24; and *Gordon Craig's Moscow 'Hamlet': a Reconstruction* (Westport: Greenwood, 1982).
50. Le Boeuf, 'Gordon Craig's Self-Contradictions'.
51. Ezequiel A. Di Paolo, Marieke Rodhe, and Hanne De Jaeger, 'Horizons for the Enactive Mind: Values, Social Interaction, and Play', in John Stewart, Olivier Gapenne, and Ezequiel A. Di Paolo ed., *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), p. 37. An important earlier touchstone for the advent of the enaction was the publication of Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch's *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
52. See, for example, Renaud Barbaras, 'Life and Exteriority: the Problem of Metabolism', in John Stewart, Olivier Gapenne, and Ezequiel A. Di Paolo ed., *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), p. 89–122. In relation to theatre, see Maiya Murphy, *Enacting Lecoq: Movement in Theatre, Cognition, and Life* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 126–53, 194. For related discussions on the importance of movement in spectatorship from a cognitive perspective, see Stanton B. Garner Jr, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre: Phenomenology, Cognition, Movement* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
53. Maturana, Humbert R. and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: the Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980).
54. Some enactivists explain this relationship by referring to Hans Jonas' notion of 'needful freedom'. See Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of the Mind* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), p. 149–52.
55. Miriam Kyselo, 'The Body Social: An Enactive

Approach to the Self', *Frontiers in Psychology*, V, Art. 986 (September 2014), p. 1–16.

56. Thompson, *Mind in Life*, p. 128–65.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 128–9, 157–62.

59. Erika Fischer-Lichte expresses the process of autopoiesis in the theatrical event as a 'feedback loop' in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance: a New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p. 37–73. I prefer enaction's emphasis on an incessant forward motion captured by the term 'emergence' to the retrograde motion inherent in the concept of a feedback loop.

60. Barbaras, 'Life and Exteriority', p. 109.

61. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 73. See also Craig's articulation of his ideal three stages: impersonation, representation, revelation. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 22.

62. Erin Mee, 'Relishing Performance: Rasa as Participatory Sense-making', in Rick Kemp and Bruce McConachie, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Theatre, Performance, and Cognitive Science* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), p. 238.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. Melissa Trimingham, 'How to Think a Puppet', *Forum Modernes Theater*, XXVI, No. 1 (2014), p. 122.

66. Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, p. 177–9.

67. Craig does have things to say about the audience, but works from the assumption that the spectator is a passive, visually centred participant whose duty is to receive a well-crafted visual scene delivered by theatre artists. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 75. Exploring *how* the spectator might participate in the theatrical experience was not of great concern to him.

68. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, revised ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), p. lxi–lxvi. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch's point of departure is that the cognitive sciences had previously fallen short in their ability to bridge the gap between science and experience. The authors argue that science must be able to work with longstanding philosophies and practices that have been developed to investigate consciousness, including meditative practices. The Buddhist concept of the middle way rejects dualism and expresses the possibility of the co-existence and coparticipation of what seem to be opposites.

69. Yuasa argues that the accomplishment of the unity of body and mind can be found across Asian martial, meditative, and aesthetic practices due to the widespread impact of Buddhist philosophy across Asia. Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, ed. T. P. Kasulis, trans. Nagatomo Shigenori and T. P. Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).