

Actor and ubermarrionette



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The Actor and the Uber-Marionette Edward Gordon Craig did not think of acting as an art-form; he considers it incorrect to speak as though actors are artists. He started out as an actor, but became more interested in art and he ended his acting career for theatrical design. He asserted that the director was the true artist of the theatre and viewed actors of little importance and even declared that they were very replaceable. Throughout his career in theatre production, he was viewed as extremely difficult to work with and he refused to produce anything that he did not have complete artistic control over.

His ideals about the theatre and how it should be run were written in his most famous and rather controversial essay, "The Actor and the Uber-Marionette." In this article, he seems to suggest that the stage has no place for actors and they should be banished and be replaced by super-marionettes. His analysis of the human actor compared to that of the marionette seems to be inferior. He believed that art can only come by creation; he believed what actors were doing was imitation. He believed that true artists capture the spirit of things and the actor was only mere pretending to capture the true essence of art.

It is obvious in his language that Gordon Craig was very passionate of the theatre and he saw the commercialization of the stage as the destruction of theatre. He seems to think that actors were the root cause of the degradation of the art of the theatre, but he seems to have an underlying intention to urge actors to reform their acting and create for themselves a new form of acting. Gordon Craig believed that "Art arrives only by design."

(Craig, p. 55) This means that acting was not considered art by this definition because he saw actors as only being able to imitate and impersonate.

He believed that the only way to make art was through creation and “ 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, p. 55) He believed that art can only be created by “ materials” and those actors using their own bodies as materials for their art-form were considered an “ accidental nature. ” He claimed that the actor was controlled by his emotions and therefore unreliable and untrustworthy, “ But with the actor, emotion possesses him; it seizes upon his limbs, moving them wither it ill. ” (Craig, p. 56) He saw the human body, which the actors use as their material, as easily manipulated by emotions. Human emotion is so strong that it dictates every aspect of the actor such as his facial expressions and the sounds of his voice. He argued that the human emotion could work against the actor at any given moment and betray him. Gordon Craig liked having control of every aspect of the production and he did not like the idea of not having complete control of the actor’s voice and movements.

He likely believed that with marionette, he would have a way to control the unpredictability of the actor and express a wide range of emotions. This is similar to how Jim Henson could express a distinguishable range of emotions using only the eyes of the Muppet. The placement of the eyes for a Muppet was the key to success for the character. In *The Muppet Movie* (1979), Miss Piggy is able to convey anger and even aggression through the puppeteer’s

use of her eyes. This can be seen during the scene where Miss Piggy fights off Doc Hopper and his henchmen in the barn.

Another example would be when Miss Piggy first gazes eyes on Kermit the Frog at the fair; her infatuation with Kermit is made obvious through usage of her eyes. Jim Henson also frequently says that Kermit the Frog was much bolder than himself and " He can say things I hold back. " (Seligmann, J. ; Leonard, E. (May 28, 1990). " Jim Henson: 1936-1990". Newsweek.) In " The Actor and the Uber-Marionette," Gordan Carig seemingly wants to do away with actor and have him replace by the uber-marionette.

He says that even if the actor were to have original ideas of his own, " his nature would still be in servitude; his body would have to become the slave of his mind. " (Craig, p. 61) He goes on to say that the body of man is " utterly useless as a material for an art. " (Craig, p. 61) The only way actors can escape from this predicament is to reform their way of acting, " Today they impersonate and interpret; to-morrow they must represent and interpret; and the third day they must create. "(Craig, p. 61) This is the only solution to bringing back the essence of the theatre.

The actors must learn to create and only then they can have freedom of creation and having something you can call your own. Gordan Craig thinks that actors are only able to imitate art, but cannot recreate it. He thinks of them as fakes who only do impersonations and never offering any contribution to the art. The actors masquerade as artists and they rarely think about creating art. They are copies and are incapable of " capturing the spirit and essence of idea to an audience. " (Craig, p. 63) Gordan Carig wants

the actors to redeem themselves and help revive what is failing in the theatre.

This importance of creation is predominant in Muppets and Sesame Street characters. Each Muppet has their own individual identity and their own unique aspects that define them. The puppeteer has freedom over the control of the Muppet and can decide to portray the Muppet in whatever way is desired. This is where Gordon Craig's ideals differ with Muppets because some Muppets are based upon real people. That is not to say they are exact imitations, but they certain qualities resemble their real counterparts. Although they are their own characters, some Muppets do have a level of impersonation.

For example, Animal is said to be based on Keith Moon, the drummer for The Who. Carroll Spinney who performs Oscar the Grouch on Sesame Street said he based Oscar's cranky voice on a New York cab driver that he once had the pleasure of riding with. The marionette has evolved from its predecessors; Gordon Craig has even said that it is " a rather degenerate form of a god. " (Craig, p. 82) Clearly, he holds the marionettes of higher value than the actor. He wants people to acknowledge how special the marionettes are and he is disappointed that puppets are regarded " low comedians. (Craig, p. 82) To him, the marionettes are " the last echo of some noble and beautiful art which has passed civilization. " (Craig, p. 82) He hates how modern puppets are being used and he feels they are being utilized incorrectly. He longs for the day in which puppets are used again as medium for the intelligent thoughts of the artist. The ideal situation was by

creating the uber-marionette; we can rid the theatre of the weakness that is the actor who is under the influence of his emotions.

He saw the uber-marionette medium as perfect, pure and completely able to express the artist's intentions because the marionette would be made in the artist's image. Craig Gordan's vision was similar to the situation in which Jim Henson was in where he was afraid that his company would be type casted as purely children's entertainment. He wanted to break out in to the adult audience. American networks initially rejected his idea because they thought that Muppets only appealed to children and that adults would not be interested. Eventually he was able to get "The Muppet Show" financing through a British network.

He was able to prove that the Muppets appealed to a variety of audiences, both young and old. It was no doubt that Muppets appealed very easily to children and this theory is very evident in Sesame Street. The usage of Muppets helped propagate the idea that "Sesame Street was built around a single, breakthrough insight: that if you can hold the attention of children, you can educate them". (Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* p. 100) Muppets were good teaching tools because children can easily recognize them and they capture their attention.

Edward Gordan Craig's intentions through "The Actor and the Uber-Marionette" were to influence a revival of theatre art. He wanted actors to reform their way of acting and reacted strongly against the actor's dominance in theatre. The creation of something by the artist was closer to true art and actors were merely imitating this. Actors were impersonators and were not intellectual and could not capture the spirit or essence of the

art. The actor's own emotions and personal beauty ruined the director's vision. He truly believed that theatre should banish the actor and be replaced by the uber-marionette.

The marionette was much more reliable and trustworthy and the director could have full control over it. The puppet had a long history and was linked to many past great works of art. In his closing statements he tells us his desire, " I pray earnestly for the return of the image—the Uber-marionette to the Theatre; and when he comes again . . . , he will be loved so well that once more it will be possible for people to return to their ancient joy in ceremonies—once more will Creation be celebrated—homage rendered to existence and divine and happy intercession made to death. " (Craig, p. 94)