Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision

Luiz Fernando Ramos
University of São Paulo – USP, São Paulo/SP, Brazil

ABSTRACT – Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision – The article proposes a review of Gordon Craig's *Scene* project, an invention patented in 1910 and developed until 1922. Craig himself kept an ambiguous position whether it was an unfulfilled project or not. His son and biographer Edward Craig sustained that Craig's original aims were never achieved because of technical limitation, and most of the scholars who examined the matter followed this position. Departing from the actual screen models saved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Craig's original notebooks, and a short film from 1963, I defend that the patented project and the essay published in 1923 mean, indeed, the materialisation of the dreamed device of the *thousand scenes in one scene*.
Keywords: **Screens. Scene. Models. Stagecraft. History.**

RÉSUMÉ – Le Projet *Scene* de Gordon Craig: une histoire ouverte à révision – L'article a pour but de faire une révision du projet *Scene*, de Gordon Craig, une invention brevetée en 1910 et développée jusqu'en 1922. Craig lui-même a soutenu une position ambiguë s'il s'agissait ou non d'un projet irréalisé. Son fils et biographe, Edward Craig a défendu que les aspirations originales de Craig n'aient jamais été atteintes à cause des limitations techniques et la plupart des chercheurs qui ont examiné la question ont suivi cette position. Je pars des écrans modèles gardés à la Bibliothèque Nationale de France, des cahiers d'annotations originaux de Craig et d'un court métrage datant de 1963, pour défendre que le projet breveté et l'essai publié en 1923 représentent la vraie concrétisation du dispositif rêvé des *milles scènes en une scène*.
Mots-clés: **Écrans. Scène. Modèles. Techniques de Scénographie. Histoire.**

RESUMO – O Projeto *Scene* de Gordon Craig: uma história aberta à revisão – O artigo propõe uma revisão do projeto *Scene*, de Gordon Craig, uma invenção patenteada em 1910 e desenvolvida até 1922. O próprio Craig manteve uma posição ambígua sobre se foi ou não um projeto irrealizado. Seu filho e biógrafo Edward Craig sustentou que as aspirações originais de Craig nunca foram alcançadas devido a limitações técnicas, e a maioria dos estudiosos que examinaram o assunto seguiram essa posição. Partindo das telas modelos guardadas na Biblioteca Nacional da França, dos cadernos de anotação originais de Craig e de um curta-metragem de 1963, eu defendo que o projeto patenteado e o ensaio publicado em 1923 representam, de fato, a concretização do sonhado dispositivo das *mil cenas em uma cena*.
Palavras-chave: **Telas. Cena. Modelos. Cenotécnica. História.**

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

443

In a very special black and white short film made by André Venstein in 1963, we can see and hear the old Gordon Craig, 91 at that time, demonstrating the functioning and the possibilities of his screens[1]. What strikes us the most in these particular frames of the film is the strength of his arguing, suddenly emerging from a deep silence to enthusiastically defend his invention, patented in 1910, and not concealing his impatience with the theatre world that, apparently, had misunderstood his proposal of a *thousand scenes in one scene*. This paper intends to re-examine this much-studied, but never really cleared out chapter of Craig's work, in order to understand which actually the role of the screens was in the whole project called *Scene*, and whether a supposed degradation actually happened between its first aims and its actual achievements. There is a consensus built by various scholars that, indeed, there is a great difference between the 1907's first Craig's called *Scene* plans for the new *art of movement*, and the final *Scene* project, patented in 1910 and conceptually presented in a final form in 1922. This would be a consequence of the gap between Craig's visions, expressed in early drawings and texts, and the practical reality, the main difficulty being the lack of technical means to acquire the automatic mobility initially dreamed. My aim is to relativize this assertion, not denying the evidence of this gap, but arguing that, actually, there are two phases of one same project, and that their distinction is not provoked by external reasons, rather being a result of different moments reflecting distinct Craig's point of views on the same matter. They probably reflect an inner tension, latent in all Craig's work, between the metaphysical goals and the pragmatic disposition to produce achievements. Anyway, I came to suggest that Craig did, essentially, realize the idea of the *thousand scenes in one scene*. In order to do that I consulted Craig's original notebooks on the *Scene* project, considered his *plan of use* for managing the screens in printed patterned notebooks, and have examined each of the model screens with which he worked his whole life experimenting and making demonstrations, as he did in the mentioned short film. All these materials are available at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's (BNF) Craig's collection, in Paris. So, after working with these documents, I have contrasted them with the narratives on the matter established by Craig's scholars and with those made by Craig himself and his son. What follows is what was found from this scrutiny.

The History of an Inglorious Journey

How could the so-called Craig's screens be presented? Would it be just the visual bricks of a concept crystallized in the label *Scene*, which was definitely posed by him in his 1922's essay, one that argues in favour of his invention as having meant the creation of a *fifth* period in the theatre history[2] (Craig, 1923)? To answer these questions we need to come back to Craig's notebooks, drawings, and documents. Although having written a lot about this *Scene* project, he has always left a gaze of mystery over it, always worried for having his invention robbed and he was, indeed, the first one to suggest that there was something that wasn't totally fulfilled in a statement made in 1922[3] (Craig, 1923, p. 111-112). But there is also some material produced by his biographers and by the scholars who faced the matter. Actually, due to Craig's strategy of providing false clues and contradictory perspectives, it was them who produced the most current narratives about the screens and the whole *Scene* project.

Denis Bablet was the first one to shed light on the subject. Being the first scholar to deal with Craig's personal archive, acquired by the BNF in 1957, he offered a chapter of his 1962 book on Craig to the *Scene* project and its screens (Bablet, 1981). Bablet pioneered in pointing out how, even just in a conceptual form, Craig had anticipated most of the developments of modern staging, both in aesthetical and technological terms. He was also the first one to pose that there was a gap between the series of fifteen etchings made by Craig in 1907 and 1908 – "[...] in which, by the interplay of forms and distribution of shadows and oblique shafts of light, he conveyed the impression of fleeting movement and evanescent atmosphere caught in passing [...]" – and his "[...] scene for the poetic drama [...]", that would be "[...] a by-product of his ideal conception of an art of movement [...] derived from his 'discovery' [...] making something that would be comparatively easy to achieve" (Bablet, 1962, p. 119). Although making this distinction, probably following Craig's own hints, Bablet doesn't explore the fact that, seen like that, it would imply the existence of two different projects, or a failure of the later faced with the original one. At the end, minimizing this point, Bablet causes the impression that he is indeed talking about one only and same project, what collaborates to maintain the issue unexplained.

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

445

After that, it was Craig's son, Edward Craig, who, from the authoritative position of having assisted his father in part of that project, and counting on the most precious internal sources (personal day books, letters, and remained models), drew the main lines of the narrative that became consensual and was then systematically reproduced without much criticism. Making shorter a not so long, but shadowed, story Edward Craig tells us, in his book on his father's life and work, first, of the idea of the "kinetic stage", enunciated early in 1905 – "[...] a synthesis of form, light, scene, figures, and sound [...] movement" (Craig, 1968, p. 199). Then he returns to the subject ahead, speaking about the experiments made by Craig with some models in Arena Goldoni, from 1907, and stressing the importance of two books – Serlio's *Five Books Architecture* (1619) and the fourth volume of Manfred Semper's *Hanbuch der Architectur* (1904) – on the development of his father's ideas. The former, in its second volume, had a woodcut "[...] that fired his imagination" showing "[...] a floor divided into squares from which there seemed to emerge a simplified architectural structure"; the latter revealed to Craig "[...] the 'Asphaleia System' of hydraulic lifts, already installed in many German theatres" (Craig, 1968, p. 233). Finally, Edward Craig takes up the theme further on in his book and presents the failure of the project as linked to technological and emotional reasons. Reporting about his experience as a direct assistant of Craig at that time, he suggests that he was the one who solved the big problems of the automatic movement and the lighting of the screens, but his father, due to paranoia of losing control of his invention, would have preferred to forget about it (Craig, 1968, p. 311-316).

Arnold Rood, a collector and scholar who gathered one of the most valuable private collections on Craig[4] has followed without much criticism the path established by Edward Craig to tell the story of the *Scene* project. Making the point that Craig has built in his many writings a real "theory of movement," he expanded his conclusions beyond the screens subject: "[...] his concept of motion involved more than just the use of movable screens[5]" (Rood, 1971, p. 6). He adheres to the thesis that the failure of the project was due to the inexistence of an automatic system that could make the screens seem to move by themselves – "I imagine what we could have done if he had had electronic control available" (Rood, 1971, p. 10). Rood

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

446

quotes the text of the patent Craig granted in four countries in 1910 (England, German, France, and the United States) under the label *Scene*. However, even commenting on the clarity of the proposal and recognizing its simplicity, which actually implies the screens being moved explicitly by men's hands, Rood follows Edward Craig reading of it as a completely distinct thing from the first *Scene* project, and sustains the thesis that Craig's aims were never in fact reached because of technical impossibilities of his time.

Irène Eynat-Confino has also focused her study on "[...] the nature and development of Craig's concept of movement" (Eynat-Confino, 1987, p. X), however with much more consistence than Rood, since she explored Craig's original notebooks more deeply. Even though worried with the movement as a central issue in Craig's writings, she overestimated the first phase of development of the *kinetic stage*, believing more in what the 1907's etchings visually suggest – "[...] a space that was itself generating movement accompanied by light and sound" – than in the "[...] more practical form of the screens", that are treated in her book separately, in a different chapter called *Experiments*. In fact, the problem here is that Eynat-Confino differentiates what she called "cubes" – the geometrical volumes which autonomous movement would mean the "instrument" of the "new art" – from the screens, "[...] destined to serve the *mise-en-scène* of poetic drama" (Eynat-Confino, 1987, p. 114-115). She didn't realize that the screens, as developed in the patented project, could be articulated and form cubes of any dimension, as it was done in the Moscow Art Theatre *Hamlet* production of 1911. Still, stating that Craig would have found a solution for the *kinetic stage* in 1923, based on Edward Craig's narrative, she contributes to reinforce the point about the *Scene* project being a degraded version of the early developments caused by technical limitations.

Christopher Innes was the scholar who went deeper in the *Scene* case analysis, trying to see the development of the first 1907 etchings, and its central focus in finding a movement of abstract forms for the stage, as a step towards the screens patents and as a unique project[6]. He did mention the contradictions between the abstract new art searched and the concrete steps that the patented screens represented but, focusing on the Moscow Art Theatre *Hamlet* screen's performance, actually unsuccessful, and minimizing Yeats'

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

447

Abbey Theatre well succeeded use of the screens, he stresses more the impossibilities to reach what was originally searched than the consistency that was already achieved. Innes also explored Edward Craig's personal story in which Craig's son would have discovered, in the late 1920's, a way of making the screens to move automatically as his father had aimed for. Having consulted Edward Craig about the episode, Innes received back a letter with more information about it. What Craig's son would have achieved then was made with the use of "simple pulleys" and "[…] just to show what effects could be achieved when they were properly lighted from different angles" (Innes, 1998, p. 181). Even having made the most up-to-date report of the whole *Scene* case, Innes reinforces, at the end, the idea that it was an unfulfilled project which basic problem was the lack of the right technical means.

This is basically the story that has been reproduced in the last decades and which leaves the issue enmeshed in a fog of mystery and disinterest, or as something not apprehensible since it wasn't really accomplished. I depart from Craig's own declarations in the mentioned short film, and on other primary sources in his BNF archive to suggest that this canonical narrative misses the point of the *scene* project and provides only a partial view, overshadowing its very concrete and pragmatic features, that can be followed not just in the texts of the patented process, but in many other side texts and drawings that Craig produced at the time he was trying to *sell* his invention. In opposition to his *Über-marionette* project, which indeed was a kind of strong metaphorical tool without actual flesh and blood to sustain it, the *Scene* project had a very evident materiality that can be traced and in fact apprehended. More than that, with all its simplicity and practicality, the actual *Scene* project patented, with its actual screens model, can be seen as the visible side of one same organism, which dark side is in the shadows of Craig's imaginary. One doesn't exist without the other, as if they were linked dialectically and operating in a constant contradiction between distinct theoretical visions: some more metaphysical and others more oriented to practical work alternatives. Le Boeuf has offered an ingenious explanatory solution for these contradictions in the whole of Craig's oeuvre[7]. I suggest that these disparities have to do with the never solved tensions between his spiritual aims and his practical needs as a theatre producer.

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

448

Screens as an Instrument for the *Scene*

Craig's screens, or what have remained of them, are very well kept in the archives of BNF, in Paris. In fact, what can be seen there are the remnants of some models with which Gordon Craig had experienced between 1907 and the early 1920s[8]. Folded in boxes, they can be unfolded and tested in a normal table with wonderful results in terms of sustainability and potentiality to produce visual results, since it doesn't take too long for them to establish possible real *places*, as his inventor liked to say. Framed and pictured, they can quickly suggest a certain staging, and with slight changes of their parts, opening or closing the angles of their folds, it is possible to have as many scenes as it could be wishful to have, in the sense that the contemporary theatre understands staging as a building of materiality in the emptiness of the stage's space/time. We could say that, immediately, and without any artificial means (light or any props), these small cartoon screens, the same ones that Craig appears manipulating in the short film, present themselves as a very interesting tool for projecting future scenes, one that any stage director would love to have at home, whether to stage traditional dramas or for suggesting stage moods in a more abstract way. The good question would be why, despite all this evident practicality, they were enclosed, cloacked in secrecy, involved in a misty of vagueness and minimized by Craig's historiography? Perhaps, it was just because they didn't have the recognition of the market at that time, and Craig and his son would have preferred to avoid stressing this commercial failure aspect. Anyhow, afar from the general and vague homages that were made to their inventor, they were never really recognized as the serious contribution for the theatre of his time that they actually were, being always seen, only, as a flopped project, or, at most, as a seminal element for a future revolution.

It is possible, though, to show through some documents found in Craig's BNF collection how, more than a vaguely built idea, as Craig's own son and many of the scholarship on him have strived to make it believable, the screens and the staging they could support constitute a very workable thing, no matter the almost religious mood that Craig's earlier designs under the label *Scene* could potentially suggest and leave a sense of nostalgia[9]. I defend that the commercial failure of what he has made, eventually, is much more due to the

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

449

way he dealt with it, overestimating the screens and being too much jealous of them than to any other reason. Perhaps this non-accomplishment reflects the inner tension in Craig himself, between his religious intuitions and his practical skills, which were acquired during the experiences he had at Henry Irving's Lyceum and in his first London performances[10] (1900-1902). In a certain way the screens case is a perfect example of these tensions since they were, as we intend to show here, at the same time an *instrument* (as Craig himself put it) to make the staging cheaper, quicker, and clearer and a poetical device to create *the new art of the theatre*. This new art, enrooted in the movement and projected as an architecture as fluent as music, looks for transcendence, but needs to materialize itself with the screens, the disposable tools for getting there.

An Insight towards *Scene*

An important step towards the screens and the *Scene* came from the insights Craig had when, already living out of England, had established himself in Florence, Italy[11]. He got to know the renaissance staging traditions, as well as the contributions of painters and thinkers like Leonardo da Vinci and scenographers like Bibiena and Serlio. The idea of the movement of nature that his theatre tries to grasp is totally founded in da Vinci (Craig, 1969). This is mainly clear when the matter is a new sense for light designing, which could capture the subtleties of the sun's light in his daily journey. As Lindsay Newman has pointed out, in 1906 Craig used to quote Leonardo's advice – "[...] see the light and consider its beauty" (Newman, 1974, p. 16), and started seeing the movement as the cause of all art manifestations. He equated it with creation, since only change could express life. According to Lindsay, because art:

> [...] could be seen in the motion of persons (dance, pantomime) and things (light, and shadows, and sceneries), [...] he was preoccupied by things which apparently moved by their own volition, the play of light upon water or leaves trembling in a breeze (Newman, 1974, p. 16).

But it is Craig himself who, in the mentioned interview of the 1963's short movie, gives the clue of how to relate his aesthetic ambition towards the screens – even in its supposed degraded version, the one that was patented and which needed to be moved by men's hands – and the movements of nature:

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

450

If you make in the open air, fifty yards of circle, quite flat, really flat, made of concrete, then you use to stand up it (*the screen*) and nothing will knock or move it down. Then, on there, are these things to move (*small rolls*). With the sun, or the moon, or whatever light of a day. I don't want a theatre. I don't want a closed place. I want open air. There you will have it. That is my stage[12].

Still looking to the 16th century inspirational source to Craig's screens project, we can't ignore the influence of English 19th century aestheticians as John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Arthur Symons (this one his contemporary), all them linked with the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetical programme, and their tribute to Renascence, on Craig. It is from there too that Serlio's book is originated, dealing with perspective and showing how the theatrical architectonic volumes can be traced in patterned floors. It is in that reference that I could find the central clue of the puzzle we are trying to match here, one that not just serves perfectly to reinforce my point about the practicability of Craig's invention, as well as explains the misunderstanding of Edward Craig and other scholars about the screens and its failed effectiveness. That image shows a square pattern floor resembling a chessboard and we suspect that it was in the reading of how it has collaborated with Craig's screens project that rests the failure of the prevailed interpretations on the matter. For Edward Craig, the problem that was never solved was how to have the screens, and the cubic volumes they could form together, moved up and down in that squared floor. That's why the mentioned *Asphaleia System*, from the new German theatres, would be crucial, so the screens could reach the vertical automatic fluidity that one can imagine seeing the *Scene* etchings, or the later Bach's *St Mathew Passion* drawing plans, where the screens are projected to flow as the music sounds.

It seems to me that Edward Craig's conjectures play a role bigger than they deserve, since we can find Craig himself not just in Venstein's film, but also in many other texts he produced to make his invention public, saying that his screen would not be suspended in ropes by any means, having always to be moved by men's strength, pushed slowly on the stage to form the different and multiple shapes that a stage director could wish for. Let's read what Craig himself says about it:

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight (*turning and shaping their folds*); with that you have everything that you want. But this is not

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

451

in order to make just one thing like that (*showing a static position*); it is to pass from one to another, and to another, and to another. So it has no end, you see? Instead of screens I speak of a place. It is a place. That place is like the world, changing, and changing, and changing. But instead of having a lot of curtains pulled up and down, it stands on itself, [...] it stands like a feet, like that (*with two fingers on the table*). See what I mean, not hanging. [...] We can stand on two legs and they can stand on theirs, but it must be perfectly flat. The three or four men will work one screen, and if there are two screens, then six or eight men will work them[13].

One could say that the one who is talking is an old man, close to the senility, but what is impressive is that this description fits perfectly with some that we can find in one of the main, amongst many, Craig's notebooks under the label *Scene*. There we have all the four texts of the patents he made in different languages, lots of diagrams showing how the screens movements can be planned, technical designs of the castors with rubber added to the screens feet for fixing the rolls that will permit them to move, and a detailed text describing the *Scene* invention, organized in topics as *artistic values*, *practical values*, and other very specific and pragmatic orientations. For example, in a topic called *Time*, which deals directly with the screens manipulation, he writes:

> It saves the manipulator's time as, the screens being easy to move from one position to another, one full set can changes to another full set in less than thirty seconds. The maximum wait between the acts need not to exceed seven minutes at most, and it can even be less if desired. Eighteen men can strike the largest set and leave the stage empty in twenty seconds. A smaller change can be effected in four to ten seconds by fewer men. It is greatly thanks to the fact of each screen being self-supporting that this becomes possible (Craig, 1910, p. 45).

Undoubtedly, we see here a craftsman speaking in a very direct and clear way about the functioning of his instrument, which doesn't appear to need anything more, technologically or artistically speaking, to be considered done and ready to be used by any stage director. But there is another strong proof of the point I am making about the concrete and practical effectiveness of that invention. It is the large notebooks with printed pages, in which a print squared pattern allows the stage director to plan all the movements he intends to make with his screens, tracing previously their disposition and

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

452

fixing them in numerical coordinates, to be later transposed to the real stage with the correspondence of an inch for a foot. One of these notebooks called *Scene, Plans for its Use In*, from 1910, can be found almost untouched, with only the first two sheets of paper with something designed in it. We can deduce that Craig printed these notebooks as an indispensable tool to accompany the screens system, or the *Scene* models. Serlio's chessboard reappears here not as a source for the automatic vertical movement, but as a basic and a workable support for preparing and planning the screens horizontal movements.

Moving forward in the aim of demystifying the *Scene* issue from the shades left on it, it is worth quoting another text, this time from a supposed reporter of the London Times, actually published at September 23, 1911. The title of the report is: *Mr. Gordon Craig's Invention for a Thousand Scenes in One Scene*. It mentions the exhibition that opened on September 7th at the Leicester Galleries, with designs and models for stage scenery and the fact that Craig had taken out patents for his invention[14]:

> The device is extremely simple. It consists of folding screens, which will stand of themselves without being fastened either to the stage or to ropes, rollers, or beams in the 'flies'. The screens can be made of any size required. They may be 30 feet high or only 8 feet. They may have three folds or a dozen, and each fold may be one foot wide or 6 feet. Three men in three minutes could move or remove a whole scene and, folded flat, each screen would take up very little space. [...] To change a scene would no longer be to roll up or down great canvases, to screw and unscrew bolts, to adjust and fasten ropes, to remove entirely an elaborate built up set, and put another one in its place. A complete change of scene can be obtained merely by rearranging a few screens. [...] But the question most likely to occur to the public, first of all, is what kind of scenery these screens provide. Not, of course, the scenery of detail, archaeology, the scenery of crowded fact and 'realisation of a period'. But hours experimenting with Mr Craig's model stage revealed a very wide variety of suggestions, moods, stings, properly so called, for drama. The model screens exhibited were all in monochrome, which was practically the 'self-colour' of the material of which the models were made: but indoor and outdoor scenes alike were made, each in a few seconds and in two or three movements, and the purport of each was unmistakable. Quite extraordinary effects of space and spirit were obtained: and in this the lighting played a very important part. For one advantage of these screens is

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

453

that the light can be directed from almost any point, and a change of lights makes a change of mood, or even of place (Craig, 1910, n.p.).

The directness of the journalistic approach towards Craig's invention, which actually follows Craig's own description of it, turns it in a product that should be bought and adopted for economic and very practical reasons. Actually, it sounds more as an advertisement of a very promising product that would become a true commercial success. And probably Craig thought like that, so seriously he had invested in the process of patenting it. It is worthwhile to underline Craig's disposition in these texts in offering for the commercial theatre of his time concrete alternatives to produce traditional dramas, which means considering the possibilities of interaction between the screens and more figurative props, as tables, doors, windows, and stairs, although always under his own supervision:

> Sometimes certain additions may be made to this scene, such as a flight of steps, a window, and, of course, the necessary furniture, though great care and reserve must be exercised in making these additions and these extra pieces are only to be added by arrangement with the inventor (Craig, 1910, p. 35).

These are clear evidences that Craig, despite his own reserves with his dear invention, was really conscious and optimistic that it could actually tempt the theatre producers. Indeed, more than the conceptual revolution which brought ahead the *art of the theatre* and that future times would confirm, the screens could also have represented, if adopted in the scale dreamed by Craig, a big economic change in the budget level of the productions. In the end, it didn't work like that and curiously, or ironically, despite the fact that, in spirit, most of the modern and contemporary theatre is indebted to Craig's ideas, they were so clear and, we could say, blew so easily in the wind that nobody worried about paying him a penny for them. Anyway, when we get inside the whole story and get closer to Craig's archives, we can find that, although in general most of his ideas were really flying around, there were some details that only a few got in touch with. It is looking at them that we will be able to observe better, viewing the matter in a specific case, why the screens legacy has flew away.

One of the artists who was deeply interested in knowing better Craig's invention and who obviously took a lot at it was W. B. Yeats.

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

454

It is observing their relationship that we can make it clearer how, and in which way, Yeats benefited from Craig's screens, and, in doing so, attested for posterity about their practicality. The other historical use of the screens, which happened in the Moscow Art Theatre *Hamlet*'s staging, is not a good example, since there the screens didn't prevail in the whole production and the system wasn't really tested. Due to an incident before the opening, the screens didn't move during the performance with the curtains open, and the whole idea of the *thousand scenes in one scene*, or of the *kinetic stage* wasn't really fulfilled (Senelick, 1982, p. 152).

Craig's Screens in the Abbey Theatre: a crucial move for Yeats

W. B. Yeats saw in 1901, for the first time, the staging of Gordon Craig. It was the production of a Purcell operas double bill, *Dido & Aeneas* and *Masque of Love*. Yeats had written several times about the deep impression that seeing that performance left in him. He was so impressed that he watched from the wings, with Craig's sister, Edith, the staging that Craig did in the same year of Lawrence Housman's Christmas nativity *Bethlehem*. At the time Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory:

> I have learned a great deal about the staging of plays from 'the nativity', indeed I have learned more than Craig likes. His sister has helped me, bringing me to where I could see the way the lights were worked. He was indignant – there was quite an amusing scene. I have seen all costumes too (Dorn, 1984. p. 15).

Edith Craig tries to make Yeats and Craig working together after that, but it was only eight years later that this aimed partnership really happened. And this collaboration interests us a lot, because it started through the mutual interest of the two artists towards the *screens*: Craig, as its inventor, offering them to someone who, in proving and approving them, could help to make them succeed; Yeats, searching for new ways for his theatre and betting in the staging talent he had recognized earlier.

What is important to underline is the fact that Yeats took a great advantage from it indeed, although this meant to Craig neither the monetary retribution he expected nor the artistic consecration he aimed. The three years between 1910 and 1913 in which Yeats

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

455

and Craig were deeply involved, exchanging letters and ideas, were enough for Yeats to learn the structural principle of the *screens* functioning, using it effectively in two productions and borrowing from it whatever he wanted. Even though debt-free towards Craig, he incorporated that precious lesson in his future projects, as, for example, the *dance plays*, developed from the work with Ezra Pound, when this latter was editing the Japanese plays (Dorn, 1984, p. 33). Craig, on his side, was firstly enchanted with Yeats curiosity and praise for his invention, then extremely generous, sending to the Irish poet a model of the screens and the notebooks with squared maps for his practice and learning, and, yet, designing masks and costumes for the Abbey Theatre productions. Finally, he became careful enough to prohibit Yeats of travelling out of Ireland with the productions he made using his screens without paying royalties for them. What I would like to stress is that the whole episode reflects, in a concrete and specific way, the general pattern of reception that the 20th century theatre had offered towards Craig's screens. Theatre makers, without having to follow the very precise specifications of Craig's patents, but at the same time recognizing the strength of that idea of a new pattern of stage building up, felt free to follow that path that the *Scene* – that *place* flexible to an endlessly changeable scenes – had opened without paying any tribute. In the case of Yeats, since there was a friendship and a mutual artistic respect, the recognition of the importance of the source from which Yeats departed was explicit. We were able to read several texts of letters or even published articles in which Yeats assures the debt he had. Actually, there are some drawings made by him in his notebook during the period he was experiencing with Craig's model for the production of *The Hour Glass* in January 1911 showing how deeply he borrowed from Craig's original ideas and proceedings[15].

Karen Dorn, who wrote a chapter about the theatrical collaboration between Craig and W. B. Yeats in her book about the theatre of the Irish poet, quotes the Abbey's architect, Joseph Holloway's, ironical explanation of what he had seen when he met Yeats handling with Craig's screens in 1910:

> The entire setting struck me as peas, only in a big scale, of the blocks I as child built houses of. As Yeats never played with blocks in his youth, Gordon Craig's childish ideas give him keen pleasure now (Dorn, 1984, p. 102).

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

456

Yeats seems very grateful for the enjoyment he obtained playing with Craig's screens. As he writes in the preface of *Plays for an Irish Theatre*:

> All summer I have been playing with a little model where there is a scene capable of endless transformation, of the expression of every mood that does not require a photographic reality. Mr Craig – who has invented all this – has permitted me to set up upon the stage of the Abbey another scene that corresponds to this in the scale of a foot for an inch, and henceforth (Yeats, 1911, p. XIII).

Craig himself, in the most detailed text he wrote about the screens in 1910, to sustain the patent process and argue in favour of its practicality, stressed the playfulness of his invention:

> The art of using this scene to the best advantage is a delicate one, but acquired with practice. The aim of the arranger is to place his screens in such a position that by moving the minimum number of leaves he may produce the desired amount of variety [...] I would advise anyone to avoid if possible the feeling that there is something very, very difficult about the manipulation of it. I would suggest to them that there is something in this scene akin to a box of child's bricks. In a way it is something to be played with, and if played with in the right spirit it will yield very good results (Craig, 1910, p. 35).

It happens that, in the end that great idea from which he hoped to get rich with, had spread around and was slightly assimilated during the following decades. We could say that it was only in the sixties and seventies, with its artistic fulfilments in the field of theatre and performance, like the ones Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Robert Wilson or Tadeusz Kantor offered, we would be able to see the spirit of the idea of a *fifth scene* accomplished in various ways, more or less inspired by Craig's *Scene* project. Particularly close to the best of Craig's dreams, mainly in the role the lights would play in that ideal scene, serving as a scripture mean for the stage director, is the work made in the last forty years by Wilson, who brought to lighting in staging the status of a great art. It is also inevitable to mention, referring to Craig's original idea of the *thousand scenes in one scene*, the recent Robert Lepage's *Ring's Cycle* production for the Metropolitan Opera House of New York. Lepage staged the four operas of Wagner masterpiece with a scenery that was only one big, multiple, and flexible screen – actually a structure with a

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

457

big horizontal axis in which the moveable rectangles of one single surface were articulated.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, making such projections implies a risk of losing the actual freshness and simplicity of Craig's screens game that is being underlined[16]. To retake the point made to challenge the canonical version of the *Scene* project, built by the mentioned scholars but strongly based on Edward Craig version of the matter, it is important to recall a single episode that he narrates in his father's biography. It happened when, late in the 1920's, the manager of the famous Scala Theatre of Milan, in Italy, invited Craig to produce an opera. According to his son:

> Craig had been terrified by what he saw of the stage machinery at the Scala – machinery which one might be tempted to use, which in fact, the management would want one to use in order to show the world how up-to-date that theatre was – and he felt sure that any artist who worked there would eventually become subordinate to this machinery (Craig, 1968, p. 316).

It seems a very clear counterargument against the thesis that the *Scene* project has failed due to technological reasons. The machinery was never really Craig's problem. There was a lot of complex staging craftsmanship in the screens functioning and Craig worked it hard in order to have it patented to become workable. The central idea of a *kinetic stage*, and the developments he made departing from it under the label *Scene*, have been accomplished and got a historical concreteness, even though its original conceptual shape, and the metaphysical features implicit in it, weren't fully developed and had to wait the theatre that came after to be eventually realised. Craig, in fact, established with this powerful *instrument* a real new grammar for the stage, upon which the modern theatre was built and to which the contemporary scene is still indebted.

We can, thus, conclude that the label of pioneer fits Craig mainly because of his *Scene* invention in which, by means of the so-called *screens*, he opened up a new trend of architectonic possibilities for the theatrical space, whether for a totally abstract scene or for a more conventional and dramatic one. Against a kind of mystification of the *Scene* project, I stressed that Craig effectively did it in quite

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

458

a concrete way, despite the veils with which he himself has shaded that achievement, probably related to his inner tensions between spiritual aims and practical ambitions. Indeed, we can finally say that this internal division has strongly contributed to uncover the actual fulfilment of that project, and that he was the master of its depreciation.

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

459

Notes

[1] *Edward Gordon Craig* (1963), directed by P. Guilbert and A. Venstein.

[2] In 1913, after having already worked hard with models and screen samplers for a long time, the book *Towards a New Theatre*, with forty images – some recently carved, others etchings made in 1907 –, already drafted the idea of a historical evolution of stage patterns, one that will be fully developed in the final version of the text called *Scene* from the 1920s. Basically, there he will definitely affirm that his invention, the one patented in 1910, means a fifth period for the theatre history – the first one was the Greek theatre; the second one was the Christian medieval theatre; the third one was the *commedia dell'arte*; and the fourth one was the post-renascence theatre, played inside buildings, and which, according to Craig, seized theatricality with the burden of realistic representations.

[3] "So then I would have given you the thing itself, no its likeness, had I been employed after having shown what I could do. But even in spite of all this indifference I have been able to take the work a step forward towards reality by taking a step back. In this way, these etchings we can call the parent work from which another has sprung. This other is smaller – aims to do less – ask less – and in some ways resembles its parent. It was a by-product of the twenty designs at the end of the book. This lesser scene, 'The Thousand Scenes in one scene', I have used once in a Theatre in Moscow for a performance of 'Hamlet', and it has been used by W. B. Yeats, to whom I was proud to give it, in some performances in his old Abbey Theatre. But even though it has been used in all, I suppose, for about five hundred performances, it has never been used as I intended it to be used, except on two large models stages which I built in Florence. On these stages I allowed it to live and it behaved well. In Moscow and Dublin it was not quite free to be itself and I cannot think it did well" (Craig, 1923, p. 19-20).

[4] The collection of Arnold Rood was donated by him, before his death, in 1985, to the Victoria & Albert Museum, from London, England, and can be researched at the reading room in the Blythe House, a building of that institution in Kensington Olympia.

[5] Arnold Rood, following Edward Craig's suggestion, magnifies the role played over Craig's *Scene* project by Isadora Duncan and her free style dance practices.

[6] He published the illustrations with the patent specifications and some of Craig's stage layouts for some of the productions Craig devised graphically.

[7] To follow Le Boeuf's point about the deep contradictions in Craig's theoretical production, see his article *Gordon Craig's Self-Contradictions* in this same issue of the Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies.

[8] The models were very similar to puppet theatres, with a stage box structure where the screens could be handled and lit up.

[9] The series of etchings labelled *Scene* was produced in 1907 and published in *Towards a New Theatre* (1913).

[10] Eynat-Confino has made a detailed description of the productions of the Purcell Operatic Society: *Dido & Aeneas* (1900), *Masque of Love* (1901), and *Acis & Galatea* (1902) (Eynat-Confino, 1987, p. 34-41).

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

460

[11] Since *Dido & Aeneas*, from 1900, Craig was indeed making an important move towards the idea of a *scene*, this new *place* that historically would mark a new conception of the theatrical space. Two other outstanding stagings made in the following two years would be accomplished: *Masque of Love*, in 1901 (of Purcell *Dioclecian* and presented in the Coronet Theatre, in Nothing Hill in a double bill with *Dido and Aeneas*); and *Acis and Galatea*, in 1902, (from Haendel, and presented in the Great Queen Theatre in a double bill with *Masque of Love*). In the same Venstein's short film already mentioned, Craig remembers these past performances very clearly and says that they were the best things he actually did in theatre.

[12] Transcription of Craig's speech in *Edward Gordon Craig* (1963).

[13] Transcription of Craig's speech in *Edward Gordon Craig* (1963).

[14] The text was republished, authorized by The Times, in the catalogue of another exhibition of the Craig's sceneries and models, realized in 1912 in Manchester City: *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Drawings and Models for Hamlet, Macbeth, the Vikings and Other Plays* (Craig, 1912).

[15] Karen Dorn details how Yeats, working with Craig's screens, changed completely the first staging of *The Hour Glass*, from 1905, in the staging made in 1911, and, even, the dramatic version in the second staging with the screens, in 1912 (Dorn, 1984, p. 23-33).

[16] In November 2013 I proposed to the students of Dr. Hugh Denard, Assistant Professor in Digital Arts and Humanities, Trinity College Dublin, the development of a virtual *Screens Game*, made of Craig's patent specification of the *Scene* project. They actually developed a virtual simulation of the screens' use Yeats has done in the Abbey Theatre staging of *The Hour Glass*, in 1911. See in: <http://craigscreens.blog.oldabbeytheatre.net/>.

References

BABLET, Denis. **The Theatre of Edward Gordon Craig**. London: Eyre Methuen, 1981.

CRAIG, Edward Gordon. **Scene (Notebook)**. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1910. (Microfilm Craig's Collection.)

CRAIG, Edward Gordon. **Model A** – scale of measurements. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1910. (Microfilm Craig's Collection.)

CRAIG, Edward Gordon. **Scene**. London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1923.

CRAIG, Edward Gordon. **Catalogue of an Exhibition of Drawings and Models for Hamlet, Macbeth, the Vikings and Other Plays**. Manchester: Manchester Art Gallery, 1912.

CRAIG, Edward Gordon. A Word of Recognition. In: CRAIG, Edward Gordon. **Toward a New Theatre** – forty designs for stage scenes with critical notes by the inventor Edward Gordon Craig. New York: Benjamin Blon Inc., 1969.

CRAIG, Edward. **Gordon Craig**: the story of his life. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968.

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

461

DORN, Karen. Dialogue into Movement: W. B Yeats's theatre collaboration with Gordon Craig. In: DORN, Karen. **Players and Painted Stage**: the theatre of W. B. Yeats. Sussex/New Jersey: The Harvest Press/Barnes and Nobles, 1984.

EDWARD Gordon Craig. Direção: P. Guilbert e A. Venstein. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1963. 16mm, son., black and white. (Gordon Craig Collection.)

EYNAT-CONFINO, Irène. **Beyond the Mask**: Gordon Craig, movement, and the actor. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

INNES, Christopher. **Edward Gordon Craig**: a vision of theatre. London/New York: Routledge, 1998.

NEWMAN, L. M. Resources for the Future Study of Edward Gordon Craig: the seventh annual Gordon Craig memorial lecture, Venice. In: NEWMAN, L. M. **Gordon Craig Archive**: international survey. London: Malkin Press, 1974.

ROOD, Arnold. **After the Practice, the Theory**: Gordon Craig and the movement. Typescript of the 3rd Annual Gordon Craig Lecture, prepared for publication in Theatre Research, with some additional material. New York: 1970 [Como diz a referência é um typescript não publicado, localizável na Arnold Rood Collection, Department of Theatre and Performance, Victoria & Albert Museum, Rood, Roo, Pamplhet],

ROOD, Arnold. After the Practice, the Theory: Gordon Craig and the movement. **Theatre Research**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, v. II, n. 2-3, p. 81-101, 1971.

SENELICK, Lawrence. **Gordon Craig's Moscow Hamlet**. Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 1982.

SYMONS, Arthur. A New Art of the Stage. In: SYMONS, Arthur. **Studies in Seven Arts**. New York: E.P. Duton and Co., 1907.

YEATS, William Butler. **Plays for an Irish Theatre**. London/Stratford-Upon-Avon: A. H. Bullen, 1911.

Luiz Fernando Ramos is associate professor at the School of Communication and Art of the University of São Paulo. He obtained his PhD in the Department of Brazilian Literature in the Faculty of Philosophy, Literature, and Human Sciences from the University of São Paulo and teaches History and Theory of Theatre since 1998 in the Department of Performing Arts of the University of São Paulo.
E-mail: lfr@usp.br

Luiz Fernando Ramos - Gordon Craig's *Scene* Project: a history open to revision
Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies, Porto Alegre, v. 4, n. 3, p. 443-462, Sept./Dec. 2014.
Available at: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca>

462