"'I'd like to shoot the brutes who worked against me in the way Hitler shot German conspirators": Edward Gordon Craig's Violent War Against the British Theatre'

Philippa Burt

On Friday 7 February 2025, US rapper and producer Kanye West took to X (formerly Twitter) and delivered the latest instalment of what has become a semi-regular tirade of hate speech. During a 12-hour rant that included a barrage of anti-Semitic and misogynistic statements and which culminated in him putting t-shirts with swastikas on sale on his website, West restated that he identifies as a Nazi, accused Elon Musk of stealing his 'Nazi swag' (in reference to Musk's own use of the Fascist salute at the recent Presidential inauguration), and declared (all in caps): 'I LOVE HITLER.....NOW WHAT BITCHES'.

It may seem strange to start a paper about an early twentieth-century avant-garde theatre director-designer known for his rejection of commercialism with reference to one of the biggest selling artists of the twenty-first century.¹ Yet, while I'm not trying to suggest here that the two cases should be considered as direct parallels of each other – indeed, there are a number of key and obvious differences that can't be discounted – or that they are the only cases of artists vocalising their support for Fascism, the example of Kanye West may offer us an interesting way into thinking about Edward Gordon Craig and how his own political views shaped his behaviour and artistic practice in the early 1900s. Craig is commonly seen to be one of the most significant and influential British theatre directors of the early twentieth century. Yet, Craig, like West – matching both his

¹ Kanye West was voted Number 7 in *Billboard*'s 'Greatest Pop Starts of the 21st Century', *Billboard* (24 October 2024), <u>https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/kanye-west-greatest-pop-stars-21st-century-1235810642/</u> (last accessed 24 June 2025).

narcissism and penchant for self-mythologising – saw himself to be an outsider in the field, someone whose ideas were too advanced for the mainstream and so was continually (and wilfully) misunderstood and misrepresented; an unrecognized and unappreciated genius. Feeling excluded and overlooked, he adopted the position of 'prophet-in-the-wilderness' and used the pages of his journal *The Mask*, as well as his numerous notebooks, diaries and letters, to rail against the theatre and set out his plans for an alternative.² Also like West, Craig tapped into the culture wars of his time and, in particular, turned to Fascism and fascist discourse as a means of vocalising his frustration, anger and bitter sense of betrayal, asserting his power over others and waging a violent war against what he saw to be a failed and failing society.

Craig's invocation of Fascist beliefs and tropes is a key focus of this paper. In particular, I am interested in how he used Fascistic language to reinforce and legitimise his ongoing assault on the British theatre and British society, both of which he saw to be bloated, artistically bankrupt and in a state of decay. In 1925, for example, he set out his plans to reform the theatre upon disciplinarian lines so as to 'rid Theatre of defective beings'.³ Perhaps more importantly, though, I am examining *why* he adopted this language and felt an affinity to Fascism. He did not, after all, develop such views only after his encounters with Mussolini and Hitler. Rather, as I show here, both offered him a

² Jennifer Buckley and Annie Holt, 'Action, Scene, and Voice: 21st Century Dialogues with Edward Gordon Craig', *Mime Journal*, Vol. 26 (2017), p. 1. In 2014, West declared that he was a prophet who was on a mission from God, while his record *Yeezus*, released the previous year, included a tracked titled 'I Am A God'. Ella Alexander, 'Kanye West takes self-delusion to new heights: "I'm on a mission from God", *The Independent*, 23 June 2014, <u>https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/kanye-west-takes-selfdelusion-to-new-heights-i-m-on-a-mission-from-god-9557084.html</u>.

³ Edward Gordon Craig, 'The Reform of the Theatre', 1925, Unpublished Manuscript, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, p. 2.

particular lexicon and touchstone – albeit a temporary one – through which to articulate and channel the artistic, social and political views that he had held for over two decades, including an intense misogyny and commitment to authoritarianism, and to voice his frustration and disdain.

Such views informed and shaped his work in the theatre, including, most notably, his plans to create his own School, which he eventually realised in Florence in 1913. This School can be seen as a microcosm of the type of theatre and the type of society that Craig wanted to create, which was one founded on the principles of loyal and unquestioning obedience and a strict patriarchal hierarchy that placed him at the top. When the School ultimately failed, an increasingly frustrated, angry and bitter Craig found solace and hope in the rhetoric of Mussolini and Hitler. Thus, while the majority of scholarly discourse on Craig tends to treat him as an a-political iconoclast and provocateur, I am calling for a reassessment of him and his legacy that places his politics at the centre.

Wake Up Mr Craig

As the son of Ellen Terry, a leading actress of the late Victorian period, Craig was born into an acting dynasty that continued to dominate the British theatre well into the twentieth century and which gave him direct access to the London theatre scene from a young age. This heritage instilled in him a sense of superiority, with him declaring: 'I belonged to theatre from the moment I was born – I had not to learn it.'⁴ At the same

⁴ Craig, 'Untitled', Annotated Typescript, no date, Victoria and Albert Archive at Blythe House, London, p. 18.

time, he and his sister, the feminist theatre director and designer Edith Craig, were the result of Terry's relationship with the progressive architect-designer Edwin William Goodwin while she was still legally married, which caused something of a scandal at the time. Craig's very existence thus broke the accepted moral codes of the time, and his bohemian upbringing coupled with his theatrical pedigree meant that he continually experienced the tension of being both inside and outside of the British theatre and wider British society.

Craig joined the Lyceum Theatre in 1889 as an apprentice actor at the age of 17, where he worked under the guidance of Henry Irving, who became a father figure to him and was a lasting influence on his life.⁵ By 1900, he had decided to forego acting in order to focus on directing and developing what he called the 'Art of the Theatre', that is, a form where each element of the theatre was given equal importance. Between 1900 and 1904, he staged six productions in London, including three at the amateur Hampsteadbased Purcell Operatic Society that he led with friend and composer Martin Fallas Shaw, and two for his mother Ellen Terry's company at the Imperial Theatre, both of which were artistic and commercial failures.

Frustrated by the lack of opportunities or support in Britain, he migrated to continental Europe in 1904 but continued to struggle to secure engagements. Planned productions at Max Reinhardt's Theater Deutsches fell through due to disputes around artistic control and salary, and he worked on only three further productions, the last being the

⁵ In an essay titled 'The Artists of the Theatre of the Future', Craig declared that 'the very nearest approach that has ever been to the ideal actor, with his brain commanding his nature, has been Henry Irving'. Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, (London: Heinemann, 1911), p. 12.

notorious *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911, which he 'co-directed' with Konstantin Stanislavsky (although this is quite a generous description of his contribution to the production).

Thus, as a director and designer, Craig actually staged very little during his lifetime, leading his critics to dub him ['the man who did nothing'].⁶ Indeed, he was accused of being too experimental, too self-indulgent and unwilling to compromise, too abstract and unrealistic in terms of both his artistic ideas and the demands he placed on others.

Blame Game

For his own part, Craig believed that his lack of productivity was due to the British theatre system itself, most notably, its intense commercialism, which led to artistic stagnation and an inability to recognise his genius and support his work. He was vocal in his condemnation of it in various articles and letters, including in a 1908 essay in

which he derided the

hopeless inactivity of England and its stage, the hopeless vanity and folly of its stage, the utter stupidity of everyone connected with the Arts in England, the death-like complaisancy [sic] with which London thinks it is active and intelligent about these matters, the idiocy of that section of the Press which calls every courageous attempt to revive life and art "eccentric", that lack of comradeship in London, that lust for *twopence* at all costs.⁷

He went further three years later and drew an important link between the deficiencies of the British theatre and the deficiencies of British society. In particular, he believed them to be symptomatic of a deeper moral weakness and decay that had taken root in the

⁶ The Times, 30 July 1966

⁷ Craig, 'The Theatre in Russia, Germany and England' [1908] in *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 134; original emphasis.

country, leading to cowardice and an unwillingness to commit or take risks. As he explained in 1911,

it is the English habit of being over-cautious that blights so many, many spirited ideas which only need the right support to bring them into the plane of actuality. And it is not only in withholding monetary support that Englishmen are over-cautious; it is their moral support which is so often absent, which implies that in such matters they are sometimes very much lacking in moral courage.⁸

This sense of over-cautiousness that Craig observed was no doubt rooted in what Eric Hobsbawm has described as an 'era of profound identity crisis' that Britain was experiencing at the time.⁹ This was, after all, a time when Britain's economic, industrial and supposed moral supremacy in the world was being questioned, as it faced growing competition from the United States and Germany. The near disastrous events surrounding the Second Boer War of 1899-1902 also saw a loss of national selfconfidence. On the one hand, the conflict exposed major military weaknesses and come with a high price tag in terms of economic capital and casualties. But Emily Hobhouse's sustained activism also brought to light the 'methods of barbarism' employed by Britain against the Boer, including its 'Scorched Earth' policy and the use of large-scale concentration camps, thus shattering the country's claims of moral superiority.¹⁰ The resulting sense that Britain had lost its place in the world and was fast becoming a decadent country added fuel to calls for reform.

⁸ Craig, 'The Art of the Theatre (Second Dialogue)', p. 220.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (London: Abacus, 1994), p. 10

¹⁰ Hobhouse's campaigning included submitting detailed reports to Henry Campbell-Bannerman (then leader of the opposition) to be raised in Parliament, authoring the book *The Brunt of War, and Where It Fell* (London: Methuen and Co., 1902) and publishing numerous articles in the *Manchester Guardian* between 1902 and 1906. See, for example, 'The Home-Coming of the Boers. More Extracts from their Letters', *Manchester Guardian*, 3 November 1902, p. 8.

For Craig, this lack of moral courage – both in and out of the theatre – manifested as a lack of discipline. Having been trained under the strict iron will of Irving, this was a particular source of frustration for Craig, which he believed led to a lack of respect for the director. In his 1905 manifesto, he argued that 'until discipline is understood in a theatre to be willing and reliant obedience to the manager or captain no supreme achievement can be accomplished'.¹¹

He had experienced this lack of discipline when working on the production of Ibsen's *The Vikings at Helgeland* at the Imperial Theatre in 1904. While Craig had tried to stage the play as a piece of Symbolist theatre that emphasised atmosphere and visual unity over 'star' performances, the actors, led by Terry herself, rejected this approach and challenged him at every turn. Two weeks before the production's premiere, Craig issued an oblique attack on the cast in the pages of *The Morning Post*, declaring that the British theatre was being devastated by the 'star' system and that only when actors learnt to work together like an orchestra, with 'each man being nothing alone – everything when united... and obeying the command of the baton held by the master' would they be 'able to give us perfection'.¹²

Yet, he faced similar frustrations and power struggles when working in Europe, with him complaining that he did not possess 'the means for making the arrogant and obstinate managers of the different theatres of Europe fit in with and assist me in my plans'.¹³ It was for this reason that he wanted to start his own School, where he could train

¹¹ Craig, 'The Art of the Theatre (The First Dialogue)' [1905] in ibid., p. 171-2

¹² Craig, 'Of Theatres and Actors', *The Morning Post*, 1 April 1903, p. 7.

¹³ Craig, Daybook Entry, 21 January 1909, Daybook 1, p. 63; original emphasis.

students in his methods and so create a group of dedicated and unquestioning followers.

Late Registration

Craig made numerous attempts to open a School of his own, including in London in 1903 (the London School of Theatrical Art) and Paris in 1910, before eventually opening the School for the Art of the Theatre at the Arena Goldoni in Florence in 1913. The latter was set up to train students in creating total theatre, so the aim was for them to take classes in a wide range of subjects ranging from lighting, movement and scene design to lectures on theatre history. In terms of structure, it was organised with a clear hierarchy that placed Craig at the top in the role of Director or 'Chief'.

Having seen first-hand the tendency of the commercial theatre to eat away at the spirit of the artist and 'weave around them ever so gently', until, eventually, 'activity becomes passivity and the mesmerism is complete', Craig was adamant that his students should be kept separate from the professional stage.¹⁴ As such, he placed a lot of emphasis on creating clear boundaries between the School and the outside world, which he reinforced in a number of important ways.

A clear example of a physical boundary was the decision to open the School in Florence. There was certainly a financial motivation behind this choice, but it also offered an important physical distance from the distractions of cities like London and

¹⁴ Dorothy Nevile Lees in Craig, *A Living Theatre.*, p. 12.

Paris and – perhaps more significantly – from the friends and families of the students. The School opened with approximately 10 students, all of whom came from Britain or North America and travelled to Florence in order to study under Craig. With their only contacts being people in the School, this helped to create a strong sense of insularity.

The building of the Arena Goldoni, where the School was based, was also key in creating a clear distinction between it and the surrounding city. As a former monastery, its architecture helped to create an atmosphere of cloistral seclusion and privacy. Posing as a student called John Nicholson, Craig observed in the School's manifesto thatthe 'whole work that is going on is shut off from the outside world, the beautiful curves of the Arena not only serving the purpose of "existing beautifully", but practically shutting out all the sound, and enfolding us in a semi-circle of quietude'.¹⁵

Craig also established a robust and extensive set of rules for students in the School – literally having to sing their name to them – which worked as a symbolic boundary around the School.¹⁶ Of particular significance is the sub-section titled 'Discretion', which focused on creating a monastic silence about the work taking place and to protect it at all times from prying outsiders.

As part of these rules, students were ordered to 'mind his business and be discreet, not to babble outside the School of what work is going on inside the School, not to express any "opinion" concerning that work'.¹⁷ To reinforce this, students were told not to talk

¹⁵ John Nicholson in ibid,, p. 48.

¹⁶ Rules. School for the Art of the Theatre', 1913, Edward Gordon Craig Papers, UCLA, p. 11. ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

about the School when outside of it and to '*wear a mask of ignorance*. He will not prove the School a good one by chattering about it to outsiders, or even to friends and relations'. This included a ban on writing to anyone outside the School with information about it. Underpinning these rules was the impression that the 'outside world' was something to be feared, suspected and avoided. Even the very existence of the rules was to be secret from those outside the community.

Such rules also worked to build a personality cult around Craig and to position him as the ultimate authority in the School with unquestioned control over the people working in it. Students were told repeatedly that their opinions were not wanted and that *'CRITICISM OF THE SCHOOL OR ITS MEMBERS IS NOT ALLOWED'*.¹⁸ Elsewhere, the rules banned students from joining any other school 'no matter when or for what reason he should leave this one'. Thus, the aim was for Craig's control to extend beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of the School.

While not written down formally on his list of rules, Craig also banned women from attending the School, a decision that was rooted in his need for total control and his misogynistic world view. A key issue was what he believed to women's innate lack of discipline. He declared that 'ambition spoils a woman. A woman ought to have no personal ambition'.¹⁹ If they were admitted, he anticipated that he would soon find that

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 6; original emphasis.

 ¹⁹ Art for Art's Sake. Mr Gordon Craig Says "Ambition Spoils a Woman", *Daily News*, 5 September 1913, p.
5.

'they have chattered about each other, and have behaved like cats – or have spoiled the men – or have failed to understand what is needful'.²⁰

Elsewhere he argued that progress in society 'is only possible when woman retains her place, acting as passive communicator of the laws of man'.²¹ Here, Craig makes clear his belief that the woman's place was to serve, obey and bolster up the superior man, which not only reflected the patriarchal society of the time but was also how Craig lived his own life. He depended continually on the women around him for financial and emotional support, starting with his mother and his sister Edith and including his longsuffering partner Elena Meo and numerous lovers, most notably Isadora Duncan and Nevile Lees. The fact that he refused to acknowledge his debt to these women shows that he believed this support should be expected and was part of the 'natural' order of things.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he was deeply critical of the growing female suffrage movement. For example, in January 1909 he complained that it was encouraging women to forget their rightful place in society:

What is she doing in the street?...She should not come out of the house into the muddy streets and scramble in the gutters... In the active world woman should not enter... She is perfect when passive. She is then Beautiful physically and psychically and her Beauty inspires man. Man has had this source of inspiration for centuries and now he is losing it.²²

²⁰ Craig quoted in Rood, 'E. Gordon Craig', p. 15-6.

²¹ Craig, Daybook Entry, February 1909, Daybook 1, p. 84.

²² Craig, Daybook Entry, 16 January 1909 in ibid., p. 45; original emphasis.

He expressed such views with increasing violence during the 1920s, accusing feminism of being weaponised to blame men for the previous sexual indiscretions of so-called 'fallen women' (oh for the moral superiority of Craig!) and seemingly inciting violence against 'active' women in suggesting that they would 'only [submit] to positive force'.²³

Bearing such attitudes in mind, we can see that Craig created in the School an idealised society for himself, where he had complete control as the unquestioned authority without interference for the outside, and where the few women who were connected to it remained firmly on the margins serving the men. Yet, it was not to last and it was forced to close down prematurely after just one year.

All Falls Down

The School for the Art of the Theatre closed on 5 August 1914. The outbreak of the First World War was, of course, a key cause of the closure. As much as Craig had tried to separate and shut his students off from the outside world, many had felt the moral obligation to fight for the their countries, so had already left Florence to enlist. The majority of these men were killed in action.

There was also an important financial issue. The School was only able to operate following a donation of £5,000 from Thomas Scott-Ellis, 8th Baron Howard de Walden, a British landowner and prolific patron of the arts whose inherited wealth came largely

 ²³ Craig, Daybook Entry, October 1926, Daybook 4, 1920-1929, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p.
82.

from the Transatlantic slave trade. Directly after the announcement of war, de Walden withdrew his funding, explaining: 'I have no money myself... I will endeavour to do what I can to help you, but Heaven knows how destitute we shall be if this little troubles continues for some years'.²⁴ Craig was left devastated and angry, chastising Scott-Ellis repeatedly for having 'ungenerously took away all help and left me with Arena rent on my hands... £400 a year to me could not have hurt him'.²⁵ In his eyes, it was yet another example of rejection at the hands of the British, as well as the cautious, penny-pinching and cowardly behaviour that he had come to despise. When his various attempts to convince Scott-Ellis to change his mind or to find an alternative backer failed, he lost both the School and the Arena Goldoni.

Craig's frustration with Britain and it's cautious approach became more and more acute in the aftermath of World War One and the failure of his School. When asked to comment on the role that theatre could play in shaping the 'new civilization' in Britian in 1919, he was at a loss: he argued that there was no moral fibre left and that there was no master ready to step up and lead the country into a new era 'because the whole idea of master and servant had gone out of fashion'. By way of a damning conclusion, Craig argued that the whole question was undermined by the fact that people in the country were 'too Britishly timid' to enact real change.²⁶

²⁴ de Walden cited in Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig*, p. 295

²⁵ Craig, Undated Annotation to Daybook Entry, Daybook 3, p. 75.

²⁶ Craig, 'The Theatre and the New Civilization', *Theatre Arts Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1919), p. 3-4.

His sense of bitterness at being personally rejected also grew, and this anger and resentment manifested as a deep mistrust of people, an intense paranoia and sharp feelings of jealousy. As his son Edward Anthony Craig explained, he was 'strangely jealous... and frightened!!'.²⁷

Given this context, it is perhaps not surprising that Craig was one of many artists who were drawn to Adolf Hitler and, in particular, Benito Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s. He was living in Italy during the latter's ascension to power and so was subject to the propaganda of the Fascist Party. Its use of strict discipline and a hierarchical structure, where a single 'superman' ruled over the masses, resonated closely with his approach to theatre making. Likewise, he celebrated the force with which it stood up to its enemies and its assertiveness in dealing with so-called 'problems' (his euphemism for the poor, the Jewish community and women).ⁱ

Craig's diaries and letters of the period are filled with praise for Mussolini and Hitler. In the days after the latter's March on Rome, Craig declared excitedly: 'Mussolini in power.... Mussolini [has] brought order to Italy'.ⁱⁱ Twelve years later he was still praising the dictator and celebrating

all that [he] did to free Italy from the vermin....enchanted me – astonished me too. Day after day at each new announcement in the papers I felt greatly moved and very gay – happ[iness] in great doses came to me from his acts.²⁸

²⁷ Edward Anthony Craig letter to Lee Freeson, 4 February 1961, Edward Carrick Papers, UCLA.

²⁸ EGC Daybook 8, 3 September 1934

Likewise, he saw an affinity with the experience of both dictators and wished that he could replicate their actions to punish those who had wronged him. In July 1934, for example, he wrote in his diary that he would like to 'shoot the brutes who worked against him in the British theatre in the way Hitler shot German conspirators', before reflecting that 'I should have thought that it was preferable to exterminate mean men – rats – than anything else'.²⁹

In this sense, he believed that Fascism would bring the sense of discipline, fight and order to Britain and wrote emphatically to his son about the need for fascism in the country, yet he had no faith that it would rise to the challenge: 'There are 100,000 toads in London – that is why Fascism is needed, but young Englishmen are not shrewd like young Italian Fascisti so we can't get a big enough group to destroy these 100,000 toads'.^{III} This pessimism was only increased following his meetings with a representative of the British Union of Fascists, who was 'unable to say or do much...rather sad for so young a fellow'.^{IVI}

Fade

Craig's affinity with Mussolini – like all his affinities – didn't last. He had hoped that the discipline he saw Mussolini enforcing on Italian society would bring with in a more disciplined theatre system and, also, support for his own projects, including a future school in Italy. To this end, he met with Mussolini in 1934 to share his revolutionary theories and plans. However, he was left bitterly disappointed by the meeting. Not only

²⁹ Daybook entry, 6 July 1934

did Mussolini not have 'the faintest notion of who this white-haired Englishman is' nor show any interest in the theatre, but he also failed to live up to expectations. Craig had 'expected Mussolini to tower above all else' when, in reality, he appeared 'rather small' and lacking authority.^v 'He turned the pages of this book', Craig observed, ' like one who doesn't know which turning to take and doesn't want to ask a policeman... he looks ill – tired – all fire is gone out of him – the way he holds this book and turns the pages has no life in it'.^{vi}

Within a year, Craig started to distance himself from Mussolini and fascism. For him, it was another failed project. My personal hunch is that this distancing was more to do with him feeling rejected by Mussolini than anything to do with politics.

So, how do we deal with this aspect of Craig's life and work? (And I'm thinking very much of Margaret's paper from this morning here) As I mentioned at the outset, he is still seen as one of the most influential directors in the British theatre of the early twentieth century, and his politics – if mentioned at all – is left almost as a side note in the sense of him going through his right-wing era. As I've shown, the politics go deeper than that and beyond the time he latched onto Hitler and Mussolini. If we go back to Kanye West, at present, he has (rightly) lost a lucrative collaboration deal with Adidas, been blocked from Twitter (which, let's face it, is no mean feat), had videos taken down from YouTube and been widely condemned by the broader public. But who knows how long that will last and remain. So I'm not calling for a wholesale cancellation, but, rather, to recognise the political views that he brought to his work and his theories and

16

bring them to the forefront, where we might also see how have helped to prop up certain

views and attitudes that have run throughout the British theatre.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 3-4.

¹ For one of many examples of Craig's anti-Semitism, see Daybook Entry, 5 May 1933, Daybook 6, February-November 1933, HRC, p. 38.

ⁱⁱ Craig, Daybook Entry, 30 October 1922, Daybook 4, p. 51.

^{III} Craig letter to Edward Anthony Craig, 30 July 1927, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC.

^{iv} Craig, Daybook Entry, 23 April 1934, Daybook 7, 1933-1935, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 38.

^v Craig, 'Meeting with Mussolini', Unpublished Manuscript, 1934, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 2.