

## Dimitris Tsatsoulis

### Loci of gaze – Lamentation in silence

#### The poem *Jennine* of Etel Adnan –The performance of theatre Attis\*

The poem *Jennine* of the Lebanese Etel Adnan<sup>1</sup> was published in French, in 2004. It is a text that poetically chronicles the recurring devastating attacks of the Israelis against the city of Jenin. The invasion lasts for 21 days, during April 2002, when the Israeli army after retreating returns to tear down and annihilate whatever is left from houses, substructures and people.<sup>2</sup>

*Il s'est créé à Jennine un mal d'un ordre nouveau.*<sup>3</sup>

The poetic text, a requiem about subjugation, blood, pain and the trauma of the survivors, was only staged for a few days as an art and theatre performance by Theodoros Terzopoulos in seven images - steps, in March 2006 at the Attis theatre. Maria Maragou was the art curator of the event.

My article will focus on a parallel reading of the poem and the performance following the seven steps of silence - active images as suggested by Terzopoulos. The link between the stage and visual images - whose

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<sup>1</sup> \* First published in Greek in Proceedings «Francophonie et Multiculturalisme», Grigoris ed., Athens: 2013.

Etel Adnan was born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon. Her father, born in Damascus, Syria, was a high ranking Ottoman officer, and her mother a Greek from Smyrna. She grows up in a multilingual cosmopolitan environment and attended French schooling. She wins a scholarship and continues her studies at the Sorbonne where she studies philosophy and attends lessons on Aesthetics by Etienne Souriau. In 1955 she pursues postgraduate studies on Philosophy in the USA, at the University of California at Berkeley, and at Harvard University. She decides to settle in California where she teaches Philosophy and Humanities. She begins painting. After participating in the movement of the Poets Against the Vietnam War she starts writing poetry. In 1972 she returns to Beirut where she works as a cultural editor for two daily newspapers. In 1973, *Jebu*, her first poetry collection is published, then *L' Express Beyrouth-enfer* follows, a visionary text for the civil war in Lebanon. For Adnan the destruction of Palestine and Lebanon can only be seen as a wider destruction that concerns the entire Arab world. In 1977 she goes back to the USA and since then she divides her time in Paris and California. She is considered as one of the most important writers of the Arab Diaspora. She has won many awards and prizes. Her works - poetry and drama - have been translated in many European languages, Arabic, Turkish and many others. Her poetry has been put to music by renowned composers and presented in New York, Paris, Amsterdam and many others.

<sup>2</sup> For example see the reference of Rita Giacaman & Abdullatif Husseini, "Life and Health during the Israeli Invasion of the West Bank. The Town of Jenin, Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, 22 May 2002. From the webpage: [icph.birzeit.edu/uploads/File/monographs/2002\\_Jenin\\_invasion\\_2002.pdf](http://icph.birzeit.edu/uploads/File/monographs/2002_Jenin_invasion_2002.pdf) [Last visited on: 24/3/2013].

<sup>3</sup> The extracts from the poem are from the edition: Etel Adnan, *Jennine*, illustrations: Rachid Koraïchi, Paris, Al Manar/Combats, 2004.

representative examples I include in my text<sup>4</sup> - and the inserted extracts from the poem that accompany them, is mine. This link, although to a certain degree arbitrary, does not have an illustrative intention.

The performance constitutes an inter-artistic approach where sculpture, video-projection and video installation converse with the actors and non-actors within theatrical or non-theatrical spaces. All these are clearly elements that refer to the form of contemporary art performance and question the concept of theatricality. To make it clear, they promote the notion of liminality<sup>5</sup> where the unprepared spectators are asked to maintain their balance.

The limit, the threshold as a concept distinguishes firstly fiction from reality, secondly the inside of the theatrical space from the outside of the actual world, and, finally, the phenomenal person from the dramatic character-role. Alterity is inherent in theatricality; theatricality results from the gaze of the spectator on the Other, from an outside position, and this gaze irreversible. Gaze constructs the space<sup>6</sup> within which the Other is placed as an object for observation, a spectacle: the actor on the scene and, in a similar way, the foreigner, the refugee, the immigrant in the social space. In this specific performance the two qualities, those of the actor and of the refugee/immigrant, are confused, trying to balance themselves on the threshold.

How can destruction be theatrically represented? How can we narrativise war horror, traumatic experience, torture and escape, physical and mental trauma? How can experience turn into fiction, change into a semiosis following rhetorical conventions and predetermined structures that theatricality requires? On the contrary, the logic of performance, of the performative action, does not narrate, does not imitate something, it rather rejects the symbolic organisation of space and escapes all illusion and representation. It only occurs, rendering the stage into a living place for the action.<sup>7</sup>

For Allan Kaprow, an artist and theoretician of art performance, art is a participatory experience: "the aesthetic consciousness is grounded in the raw materials of everyday life" whereas the interconnection between the aesthetic experience and life requires "the excavation of the sources of art" from everyday human experience itself.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The photographic material comes from the archives of Attis Theatre and is published under the permission of Theodoros Terzopoulos.

<sup>5</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre", *Theatre Research International* 33.1 (2008)88.

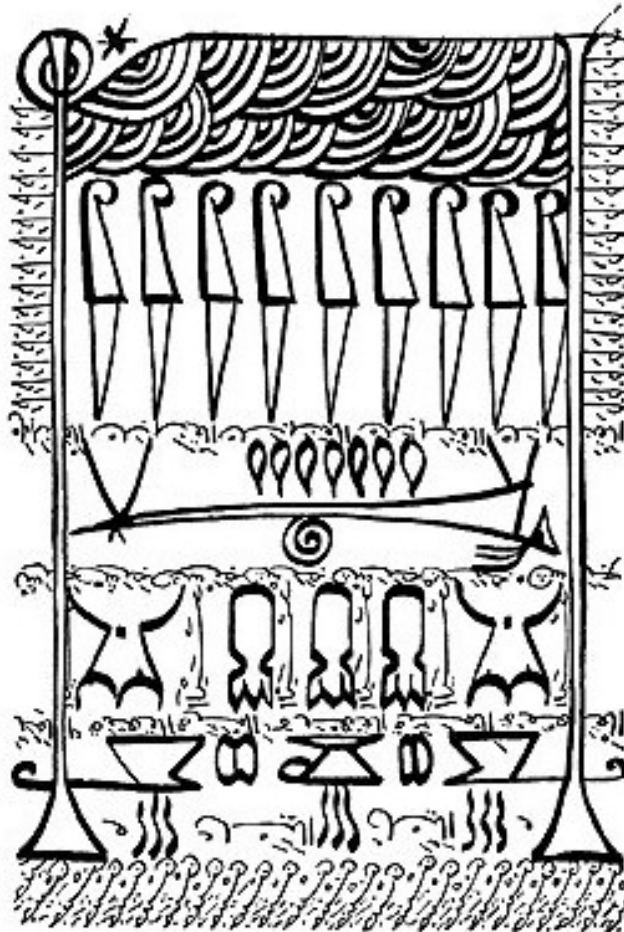
<sup>6</sup> Josette Féral, "La théâtralité. Recherche sur la spécificité du langage théâtral", *Poétique* 75 (1988)350

<sup>7</sup> Josette Féral, "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified", *Modern Drama* 25.1 (1982) 177, 176.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Kelley, "Introduction", in Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, U of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London. 1993, p. XVIII

## First Step: The Cafe

*...et la nuit, après la fermeture des cafés amers et à l'heure où les bordels devaient recevoir leurs clients...*



Waiting outside the theatre, because its foyer is closed, in a blighted dangerous area and watching the bordels getting ready to accept their customers, the limited audience, a total of twenty, is encouraged to sit in the adjacent Arab cafe until they are called to the performance. Their entrance in a place filled with Arab immigrant men, let alone sitting at a table, embarrasses everyone. Such an act means entering a space of alterity. It is a reality unfamiliar to the spectators' daily routine with which they are unable to associate and so they remain insecure opposite the foreign gazing of the cafe's daily Arab goers. An entrance to the unfamiliar.

Any performance, as Josette Féral claims, remains necessarily inscribed in theatricality, otherwise it couldn't give the possibility to the spectator to perceive it as a meaningful process linked to signs, codes, references".<sup>9</sup> However, in the case of the Arab cafe, the space and the people are

<sup>9</sup> Josette Féral, "Foreword", *SubStance* 31.2, 3 (2002) 5.

distinguished by a non theatrical alterity, especially since their alterity is simply inscribed on an unfamiliar to the spectator reality. Apparently, there isn't any kind of duality between reality and fiction<sup>10</sup>, they are no actors or a semiosis. On the contrary, the spectators feel that they themselves are the spectacle of the cafe goers while, they are secretly glancing at them, too afraid to become indiscreet, observing their everyday attitudes, gestures, and vocalisations in an unknown language. They are gradually trying to become conventionally friendly and as such accepted by the Other.

When in hindsight, they comprehend (or guess) that the whole process is part of the performance event they have come to watch, they realise that without their intention they have become involved in an "invisible theatre", in a pre staged performance of double direction,<sup>11</sup> as it was conceived by the person who designed it.<sup>12</sup>

However, at the same time they have a liminal experience: the daily life of the Other, the immigrant who lives during a period of peace and safety in another country, as if in an island - a simulated space of his home country. His life before his uprooting, as a projection to the future and a reminiscence of the past, although it does not exist anymore, is here. Two liminal worlds. Theatre and reality on the borderline, on the crack of time and space.

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<sup>10</sup> Josette Féral, *ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Josette Féral has used specific examples to analyse this *a posteriori* realisation of the spectators of the fact that what happens is an "invisible theatre" in the line of Augusto Boal as well as the fact that is the gaze of the subject looking at the "object" that has turned this "object" into an object of vision. See, Josette Féral, "La théâtralité. Recherche sur la spécificité du langage théâtral", *op. cit.*, p. 348-350 for relevant examples.

<sup>12</sup> Josette Féral has clarified that, "Cet espace est le résultat d'un acte conscient qui peut partir soit du performeur lui-même (performeur au sens le plus large du terme: acteur, metteur en scène, scénographe, éclairagiste, mais aussi architecte) [...] soit du spectateur dont le regard crée un clivage spatial où peut émerger l'illusion". It is important here to identify the person responsible for the deliberate act of creating the otherness of space: it is apparent that it must be the director or someone else from the production who may not actively participate in the action within this space. See, "La théâtralité. Recherche sur la spécificité du langage théâtral", *op. cit.*, p. 350. The same author, in another article, she focuses in the gaze of the spectator as the unique creator of the "other" space. See, Josette Féral, "Foreword", *op. cit.*, p. 10, where she mentions: "[...] the spectator's gaze cuts the observed event or object away from its everyday surroundings. Thus he isolates the event from its environment, and in so doing, makes it into a representation" in another part while discussing Elizabeth Burns' views, she notes: "The originality of Burn's approach was in [...] saying that theatricality is widespread in social life, and resides mainly in the eye of the beholder" (p. 6).

## Second Step: Immigrants

*Nous nous sommes rendus étrangers à ce que fut notre quotidien.*



The twenty spectators climb the theatre staircase silently. During their entrance in the long narrow theatre foyer the first silent action unfolds, a silence charged with awkwardness. Along the side of one of the foyer's walls about 20 Kurds wearing their casual clothes, immigrants from the neighbourhood, are standing still, their backs on the wall, just breathing. They are exhibited as a living painting to the eyes of the embarrassed spectators who are also standing aligned opposite them at a distance of half a meter. After this awkward positioning of the spectators in a line everything is silent and still, only a face to face confrontation of lowered eyes, in an effort to decode at first the others' face and then their gazes. Then these gazes, also lowered, initially uneasy, then inquiring and daring, are scanning the spectators' faces. The audience soon realises that they are unintentionally involved in an interaction where they are not the ones who have the choice and power to look, they have become a spectacle themselves, the object of the "other's" gaze, the foreigner's, the immigrant's: the gaze has been reversed, and so has the relationship. The spectators find themselves facing the Other, in a inter-corporal relation, opposing not a semiotic-fictional body of a character but a real one. The Kurd immigrants do not act, they are Kurds. As long as this exchange of gazes lasts, this equal coexistence of local and foreign people, a cultural dialogue is accomplished, hesitant and phobic at the beginning, ending for both parties in a fundamental experience of oneself. Once the positions become equal, then they become interchangeable. The Other could be me, it is me.

*Le silence, lui, est descendu, et comme tout escalier avait disparu, il est tombé de tout son poids, il est devenu de plomb.*

However, silence is deafening, no point in waiting for any verbal communication. Terzopoulos has confessed that when he approached these illegal Kurd immigrants - uprooted refugees that have known wars, disasters, the daily threat of death, victimized both by Saddam Hussein and the Americans, all he intended to do was to make them talk to him, tell and share with him their personal and life stories. What he was faced with was total silence.<sup>13</sup> This silence is what this image represents.

People, who survive any kind of violent acts in a war or other conflict, should be "victimised" in order to be eligible for state help. Their distressing stories will acquire the value of a symbolic capital that they will exchange for natural resources and will attribute them the identity of a political refugee. These traumatic stories the survivors tell, based on real events, are used by health officials so as to transcribe the social experience in medical terms. The victims are seen as unable to represent themselves, they have to be represented by others, and as such they acquire the identity of a patient. They have to be transformed, from being a person who has undergone a political or military terrorism and violence into one who ails and suffers from the so-called post-traumatic stress disorder. In other words, uttering speech for the trauma leads the social individual to self-cancellation. Silence on the contrary, protects one's integrity.

On the other hand, if women are characterised by a speech exaggeration during a lamenting process,<sup>14</sup> conversely, men, who possess the verbal dominance in daily life, remain silent when faced with the event of death, loss, and disaster.<sup>15</sup> The traumatic experience remains untouched and integral, and as such unable to be represented,<sup>16</sup> to be redeemed. Male lamentation is silent and because of that the spectator is little prepared for the experience of disaster.

For the theatre researcher though, this poses many questions. Is there theatricality without actors? To what extent do these people, facing the audience with eloquent silence-bereavement, finally represent something different to what they are? Is their displacement from daily space able to render them even minimal fragments of theatricality? To what extent does not the phenomenal body contradict to and competes with the semiotic body of the theatrical

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<sup>13</sup> Natascha Siouzouli, "Silent Spaces. An Interview with Theodoros Terzopoulos", *Textures - Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Cultures* at Freie Universität, Berlin. [www.textures-platform.com/?p=1275](http://www.textures-platform.com/?p=1275), March, 21, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word. Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, especially in chapter 6: "The Ethics of Antiphony", p. 98 ff. See also: Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices. Women's Laments and Greek Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992 ("Gender and Lament", p. 20 ff.). Also, Antonius C. G. M. Robben (ed.), *Death, Mourning, and Burial. A Cross-Cultural Reader*, Malden, Oxford, Victoria, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Veena Das, "Language and the Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain", *Daedalus* 125 (1997), 81 - Athena Athanasiou, "Deliberations on the politics of grief: towards anti-nationalistic feminist politics during the period of imperialism", in *Life on the borderline. Essays on the body, gender and biopolitics*, Athens, Ekkremes, 2007, p. 231.

<sup>16</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex. Performing Public Memories*, New York, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 5.

performance?<sup>17</sup> To what extent these bodies do not convey hybridity? These are some of the questions that emerge from the endless and unfathomable breach between theatre and art performance over which the spectators have to suspend themselves realising that this fragile limit places them also in a state of liminality concerning their own life: the world of the Other invades their own, and they, partakers in the space between the two worlds, are destabilized. Loaded with emotions, in order to assist their understanding of where they are, they insist for a direct exit from that space. What follows though, leads to a definite otherness, to a bare world.

*Dans le camp, il y avait un camp, car les degrés de l'Enfer s'emboîtent.*

The ushers direct the spectators towards the innermost dark areas of the theatre, where now, symbolic images of disaster, operating as boxed spaces, alternate. Everything in silence. However, when the spectators leave the theatre foyer and cross the narrow door that leads to the semi-lit space of the main theatre hall, they literally and figuratively cross a threshold. Passing through the door constitutes a spatial and time stage, a limit that divides the henceforth here we have just observed of the refugees, from the antecedent there they have abandoned. We are entering another spaceless and timeless area.

The spectators follow the images as if in a museum. Still, the traditional museum is nothing more than a narrative machinery moving, through its chronologically placed exhibits, in a straight linear development. The museum embodies ideologies of progress which are displayed for the benefit of its visitors, in pre-designed routes.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, entering Attis theatre, although there seems to be a pre-specified route for its spectator, does not hold a linear narrative structure because the viewing of the disaster lacks a specific direction for speech or gaze. Disaster can provide only ruins, fragments, and parts of the body from the city and the citizens. The spectators' reception becomes then eccentric, dispersed and pointless.

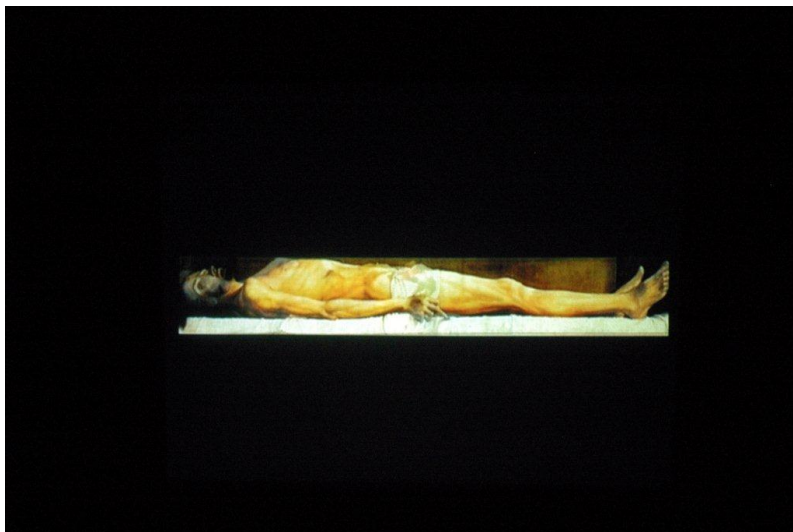
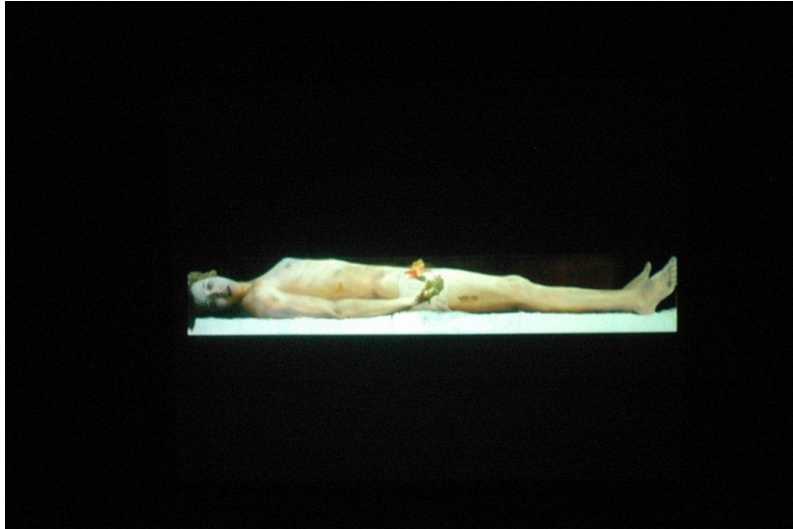
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<sup>17</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre", *Theatre Research International* 33.1 (2008)84-85

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 91

### Third Step: Emergency Exit 2004.

*Ils ont appelé leurs mères à leur secours, mais celles-ci dormaient dans la pièce à côté, avec leur tête tranchée posée sur le coussin.*



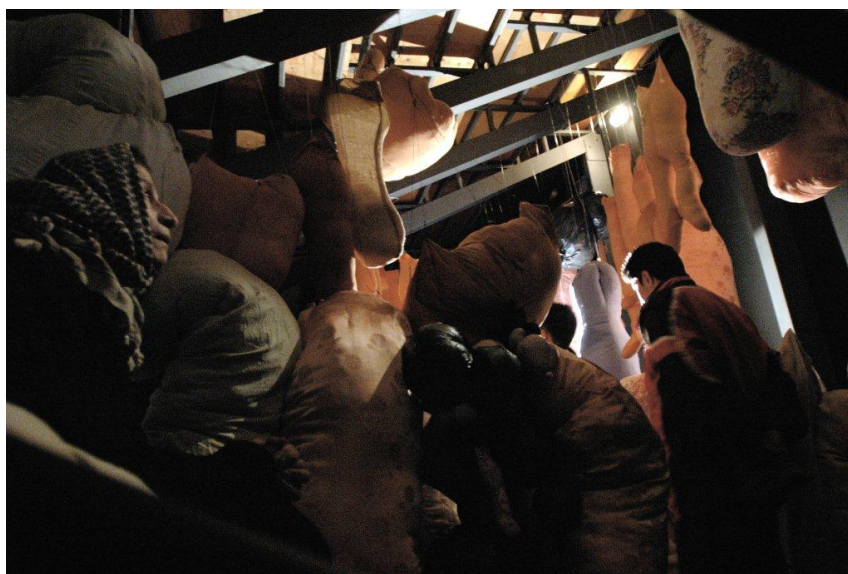
Opposite the narrow entrance and under the seatings of where normally the auditorium is, the video-installation of Despina Meimaroglou is on display. A body in decomposition - in constant transformation. A lying body, indefinite because of its gender fluidity, dead-alive, is being altered and degraded. Some spectators can even discern in one of its transformation stages the body of Jesus inside the Holy Sepulchre. A reference to Him that was crucified in the same place two thousand years ago? Is this a canonisation of the dead and their equation with the holy martyrs or destruction kills even the city gods?

*Car dans notre désastre final nous allons entraîner Dieu lui-même à sa perte.*



#### Fourth Step: The missing

*puis quand toute chose qu'on vient d'énumérer avait disparu, ils ont jeté pêle-mêle enfants, vieillards, et nouveaux-mariés, morts ou à moitié morts, dans la fosse commune, et ont tout enfoui, et tout cela pour dire au monde des demi-vivants qu'on n'existait pas, qu'on n'avait jamais existé, et que donc, ainsi, ils avaient raison...de nous exterminer.*



The spectators cross the semi-lit narrow space, one behind the other in a row, surrounded or exposed to suspended dismembered bodies, bundles, unspecified bulks, wrecks of bodies and objects in absolute clutter, an installation of Maria Loizidou. The destroyed, lacerated body becomes something specific and exposed as an unclaimed object. All the spectators have to do now is to compare it with the living bodies of the refugees who they have previously faced while standing in front of them and reflect on how these two alternate. Then they might stop seeing them as refugees.

However these two are similar in something. These dead people do not have any identity, they do not even have intact bodies, their graves won't be named, they are placed out of borders, they have become "naked life", as Giorgio Agamben<sup>19</sup> would have said: it is them who are not worthy of grief, as if they did not exist even when they were alive. The enemy separates the ones who have rights, they are the ones who have their own life and as such they

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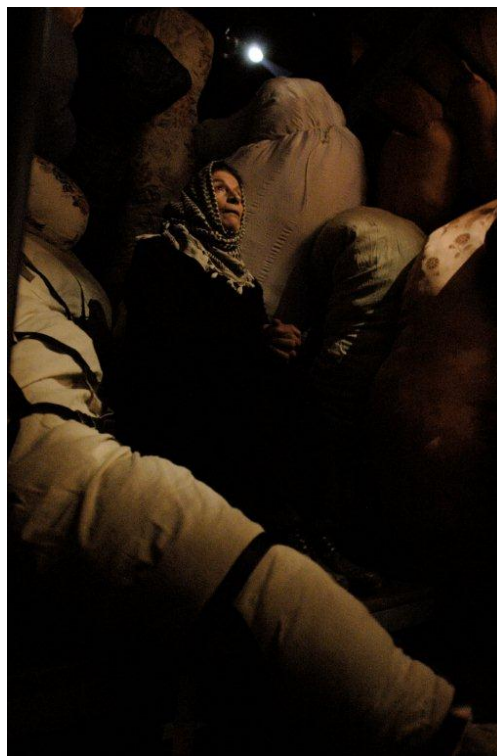
<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer*, Turin, Einaudi, 1995, p. 203. The tern "naked life" is a literal translation of the Italian expression "vita nuda".

deserve a death and lamentation, from the ones without rights, with a naked life,<sup>20</sup> for whom grief would have been an unfair action.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the Kurds illegal refugees are equally 'people without life', as they experience life possessing only the bare necessities for surviving: crossing the borders, they crossed the limit between life and 'naked life'. The immigrants without papers can find themselves enclosed in a camp, moved to the borders or become unclaimed dead.<sup>22</sup>

### **Fifth Step: The observer**

*...et la misère s'est habillée en femme mais personne ne s'est arrêté car tout ce qui était vivant était mort.*



Among the wrecks and the indistinguishable bulks of objects and bodies the silent, expressionless figure of the actress Sofia Mihopoulou, wearing a headscarf appears in the distance. A personification of desolation, the woman-observer who forcefully tightens her mouth, does not lament: the silent death,

<sup>20</sup> Antonis Liakos, *Πώς στοχάστηκαν το έθνος αυτοί που ήθελαν να αλλάξουν τον κόσμο; (How the ones who wanted to change the world address the notion of nation?)*, Athens, Polis, 2005, p. 116, where the new ascribing of the term is found while Agamben's thinking is analysed in relation to the concept of "bare life".

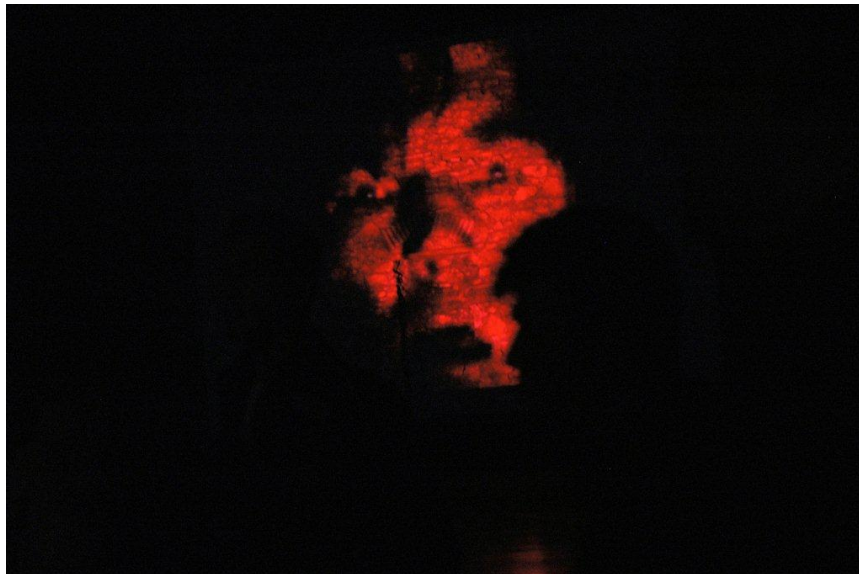
<sup>21</sup> Athena Athanasiou, *Ζωή στο όριο. Δοκίμια για το σώμα, το φύλο και τη βιοπολιτική (Life in border)*, Athens, Ekkremes, 2007, p. 228, 230.

<sup>22</sup> Antonis Liakos, *op. cit.*, 117.

the one without lamentation is considered a "naked death".<sup>23</sup> The language of silent grief brings in the limelight the historical untold of the silenced loss.<sup>24</sup> The "women in black", a contemporary activist feminist movement, follows a similar approach to silent grief by claiming: "We refuse to be added to the cacophony of empty statements".<sup>25</sup> "Destruction ruins, devastates language. [...] their 'visible silence' functions as an obstacle for the representation of the massive human pain". It is, in essence, the "embodiment of the charged silence of survivors"<sup>26</sup> of Jenin.

### Sixth Step: The spectator

*...et nous avons vu l'éclair se mélanger aux nuages grossis de sang et de larmes...*



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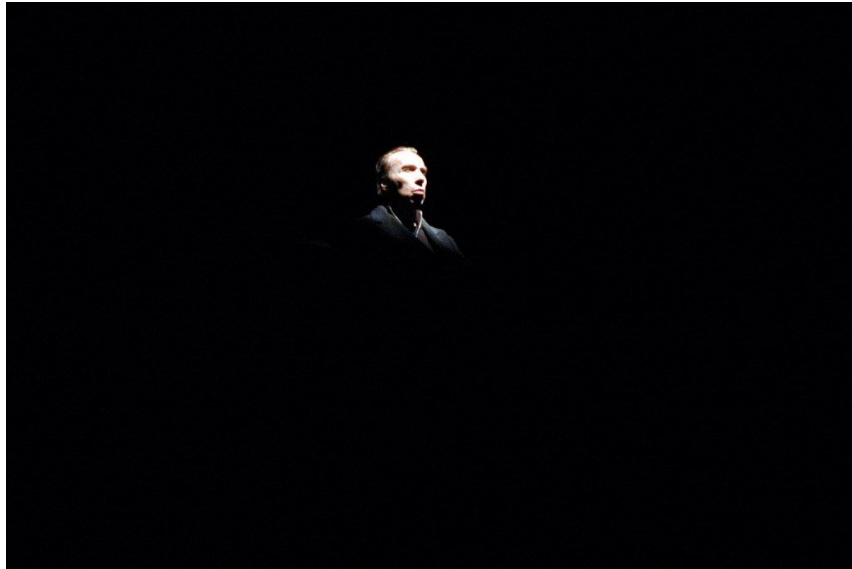
<sup>23</sup> C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word*. ό.π., σ. 76 ("The Silent and Naked Death").

<sup>24</sup> Athena Athanasiou, op. cit., p.235

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 235.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 235-236.

*...et les peuples, eux, n'avaient plus de voix...*



We enter the main hall of the theatre from the side the actors use to go backstage. In the centre of the totally dark auditorium, alone, standing still, having only one third of his face lit diagonally, the actor Tasos Dimas, pretending to be a spectator, playing between the phenomenal and the fictional body, watches at the bottom of the stage the video-projection of Popi Krouska establishing a silent dialogue with it. On the screen a repetitive red explosion composes various shapes. A metonymy of the bombings where every consistence among people and places is absent. Similar to the gaze of a distant spectator, of an outsider.

What we can see on the silent spectator's face are only the slightly moving lips, softly opening and closing: voicelessness facing destruction, the concentration of physical energy in the mouth where a scream, a verbal explosion that will never happen, loiters. Total alalia. As a witness facing the unspeakable. A replication of the verses of Adnan's poem and an identification of the outside with the inside: the voicelessness of the bombarded absent (historically belonging there and then) is reflected on the present observer/spectator (attending the performance here and now).

## Seventh Step: The reader

*...quand les lampes ont brûlé leurs mèches*



We are led to the emergency exit of the theatre. Next to it, in a vault, Theodoros Terzopoulos is reading in a low tone, under the dim light of a lamp, extracts of Etel Adnan's poem *Jennine*. Once more speech is being heard as an

aftermath of what these scattered images have tried to show. Speech-sound, whisper, a speech ashamed to be heard. A speech that neither illustrates the performance, nor it narrativises it in retrospect. A speech functioning alone, as a performative vocal act that claims its own place in the visualisation of destruction. Since destruction has eliminated for good the usefulness of great narratives that design contemporary world and its History.

## Exit

*C'est qu'il y a quelque chose de plus réduit que la mort, c'est ce qu'on a effacé avec la gomme des enfants, sur le tableau noir de l'Histoire, l' Histoire, notre dernière illusion.*

Exit, as the sign above the director shows. Exit from the History of the citizens of this Palestinian city. As we leave, the words of Carlos Fuentes come to mind: "How long does the imposed grief by historical violence last? Where does my personal responsibility for the crimes I haven't committed begin?"

The spectator on the threshold between the experience of the real and the experience of the performative, and undoubtedly without catharsis.



## RÉSUMÉ

Lieux du regard - Lamentation silencieuse.  
Le poème *Jennine* d'Etel Adnan - La performance du Théâtre Attis

L'article propose une lecture de la performance silencieuse de Theodoros Terzopoulos et de Maria Maragou inspiré du poème *Jennine* d'Etel Adnan consacré au désastre que la ville palestinienne et ses habitants ont subi par les bombardements israéliens. Le spectateur n'entend les vers qu'un peu avant la fin de son itinéraire dans une exposition qui, sous la logique d'anti-musée, le conduit en sept étapes-images à communiquer avec la catastrophe absolue, la douleur de la perte, la lamentation muette comme expression de deuil et de résistance. L' article essaie de conjuguer les vers du poème avec la suite d' images et les participants muets qu' on rencontre dans ce trajet liminal qui amène le spectateur à pénétrer dans l' image, à dialoguer avec l' altérité en participant dans une performance d' un théâtre presque «invisible».