

Amorous dust: memory, oblivion and impermanence in Tamara Saulwick's Endings

The fire: what one cannot extinguish in this trace among others that is a cinder. Memory or oblivion, as you wish, but of the fire, trait that still relates to the burning. No doubt the fire has withdrawn, the conflagration has been subdued, but if cinder there is, it is because the fire remains in retreat. By its retreat it still feigns having abandoned the terrain. It still camouflages, it disguises itself, beneath the multiplicity, the dust, the makeup powder, the insistent pharmakon of a plural body that no longer belongs to itself- not to remain nearby itself not to belong to itself, there is the essence of the cinder, its cinder itself.¹

There is still a stage in this performance, a space where the actions take place. And yet, from the very beginning of the play, something claims its extraneousness from this stage, or rather its liminality. Tamara Saulwick's *Endings* is an epiphany of what is disappearing, of what is infinitely finished, a meditation about the chance of theatre to whisper inside its very own ear². Taped voices, records, traces of interviews, vinyl (1.1): the relation between those devices and the memory that they are supposed to safeguard is perpetually threatened by the phantom of their effacement. In his last essay, Jean

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

² "But there was lacking an ear for it, the ear of Epictetus. – So, did he say it into his own ear?" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human all too human*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Baudrillard writes:

Is it, in fact, the real we worship, or its disappearance?³

1.1



This question is perhaps the core of *Endings*, a work where the awareness of the impermanence of every system of representation incessantly affects the mise-en-scène. For example, what are the out of sync acting and the playback in this play (1.2)? We can say, before everything else: the moments when the voice no longer depicts a signified but

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared*, (The university of Chicago Press, 2009).

instead engages a hand-to-hand combat with itself, i.e., an attempt to make the actor “a foreigner in his own language.”⁴ This extraneousness is not to be confused with the feeling of being alienated from what is happening on the stage.⁵ Instead, this disengagement makes the voice sounds like a musical-score, a portion of a space produced from within itself.

The Italian director Carmelo Bene studied for a long time the performative use of the phonè, i.e., of the voice as an event, a flatulence of the Being⁶. Although his out of sync acting is more virtuosic, it resembles the play of Tamara Saulwick and her effort to expose the effacement of the speech while is uttered. In this transvaluation of the theatre, not only the ear hears but also the eye: either the lightning or the gestures are part of the score, of what Bene called "writing on the scene"⁷.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Kafka, Toward A Minor Literature*, (University of Minnesota, 1986).

⁵ “Alienation only consecrates, with didactic insistence and systematic heaviness, the nonparticipation of spectators (and even of directors and actors) in the creative art, in the irruptive force fissuring the space of the stage.” Jacques Derrida, *The Theatre Of Cruelty And The Closure of Representation*, in *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁶ Carmelo Bene, *Opere*, (Bompiani, 1995).

⁷ Ibidem.

1.2



Often during the play, the main actress speaks over her own recorded voice.

1.3



In *Endings*, a thick darkness fills the stage. What happens in this darkness appears always to take place in the interstices between an illuminated spot and another (1.3): this pattern, this visibility of the blackness is manifested from the opening of the performance when a human shape emerges through the space. One can argue: is it not always like that in the theatre when a play starts? Indeed. And yet, *Endings* underlines the phantasmatic nature of every representation and every act, which consists of being present and absent at the same time. The contracting of the darkness allows for an empty space where the performance can happen. In the *Lurianic Kabbalah* this constriction is called "Tzimtzum":

Prior to Creation, there was only the infinite Or Ein Sof filling all existence. When it arose in G-d's Will to create worlds and emanate the emanated ... He contracted Himself in the point at the centre, in the very centre of His light. He restricted that light, distancing it to the sides surrounding the central point, so that there remained a void, a hollow empty space, away from the central point ... After this tzimtzum ... He drew down from the Or Ein Sof a single straight line [of light] from His light surrounding [the void] from above to below [into the void], and it chained down descending into that void. ... In the space of that void He emanated, created, formed and made all the worlds⁸.

Does *Endings* have a start? A multiplicity of beginnings, openings, overlays and conclusions seem to pertain to this work (which defers an origin): this scale of variations

⁸ Etz Chaim, Arizal, Heichal A"K, anaf 2.

is written on the surface of the vinyl and of the magnetic tapes with which the actors engage an intertwined dialogue (1.4). By doing this, they are forced to react not only to the alterity of the recorded voices, but also to the fading of those voices. In 2002, William Basinski released an album called *The Disintegration Loops I* (1.5), a collection of music fragments played in tape loops that slowly deteriorate; Basinski used this material as the sound-track of a video depicting the smoke originated from the collapsing of the Twin Towers. Hence, the music becomes one with this falling: the act of composing is, at the same time, the act of erasing. The elegiac power of *The Disintegration Loops*, as well as of *Endings*, is precisely this attempt to fix, or rather to present the impermanence, the inexorable vanishing of the things. Another emblematic example could be *Numb*, a film made by Anders Weberg after the death of his son, where the cinders/powder dispersed on the screen (1.6) are the still burning traces of a fire which is the holocaust of the memory:

The final shadow that will close my eyes
will in its darkness take me from white day
and instantly untie the soul from lies
and flattery of death, and find its way,
and yet my soul won't leave its memory
of love there on the shore where it has burned:
my flame can swim cold water and has learned
to lose respect for laws' severity.

My soul, whom a God made his prison of,
my veins, which a liquid humor fed to fire,
my marrows, which have gloriously flamed,
will leave their body, never their desire;

they will be ash but ash in feeling framed;

they will be dust but will be dust in love⁹.

1.4



⁹ Francisco de Quevedo, *Love Constant Beyond Death*, from *America's Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology* (W.W. Norton, 2002).

1.5

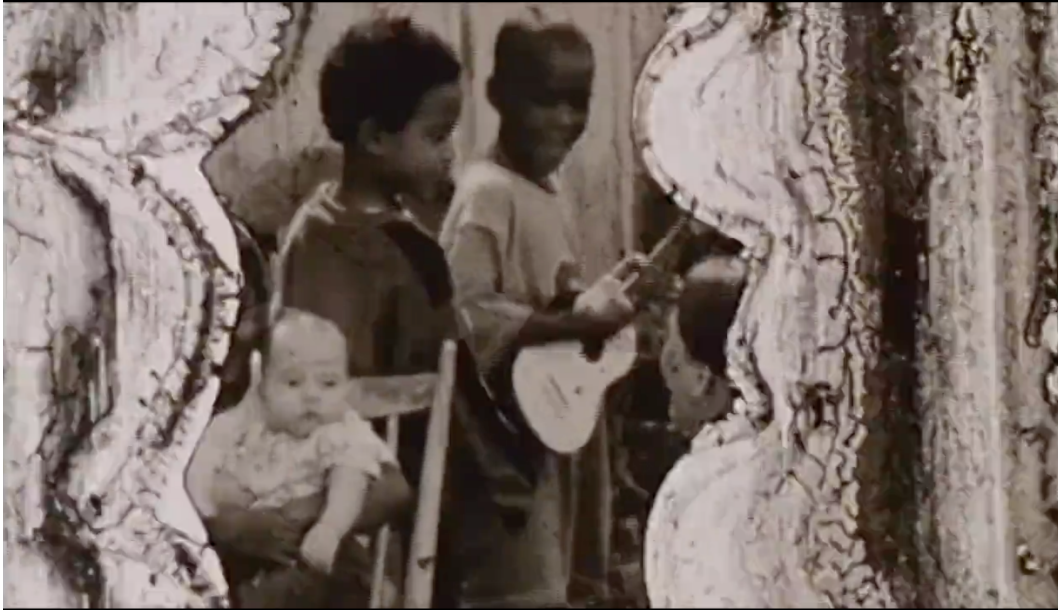


1.6



Tamara Saulwick images death as a trail in the sand, as an open conversation that cannot be concluded: she does not feign a restitution because she is aware of the fictive nature of this theatrical reparation. And yet, she places her theatre in the most liminal zone, always forcing the bodies and the voices to run into their limits, to become ceaselessly something else through a line of shifts and through the use of the analogue prosthesis. Thus, the stage appears as an atlas of fragments overcoming the distinction between life and death: instead of reproducing some memories on stage, the actor's body becomes the place of a struggle, where the energy of those memories contributes to creating a new reality. The phantom is no longer just a negative threat but a force that produces affirmation, that allows not to die in dying.

One last example: in 2007, the filmmaker Helen Hill was murdered in a home invasion in New Orleans. She was working on a new project called *The Florestine Collection*, a film about the discovery of almost 100 handmade dresses in a trash pile. The Hurricane Katrina had already damaged the film footage before Helen's death, changing the film into something else: a trace of traces, the remains of the flood (1.7). The film was unfinished: it could not be concluded. Aware of the impossibility of a resurrection, her husband Paul stitched the pieces of *The Florestine Collection* together and released the film: "with love, for you, for her."



Both *Endings* and *The Florestine Colletion* are gifts that do not demand a restitution. The gist of the true theatre (or cinema) is precisely this gratuitousness that cannot be returned, that cannot be compensated. Following this gratuitousness, Tamara Saulwick created a place where the death is stripped of its negative power, and where the audience have to embrace a pure blindness and a pure oblivion to discover the utter darkness that emanates the light:

For there is a boundary to looking

And the world that is looked at so deeply

wants to flourish in love¹⁰.

¹⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Turning Point*, from *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Random House, 1982).

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