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Haunting Spectres and Spectating Ghosts
A conversation about *Necropolis*

LIVIA ANDREA PIAZZA AND ARKADI ZAIDES

This conversation originated within the framework of the course 'Replicas and Resurrections' proposed by Livia Andrea Piazza at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen, where Arkadi Zaides was invited to contribute. Piazza's current research focuses on narratives of coming back from the dead and artistic strategies reframing the notion of resurrection. In his practice-based doctoral research, Zaides investigates the concept of documentary choreography, exploring how embodied practices, through the use of documents, can engage with social and political contexts. In Giessen, the students invited Zaides to explore with them the question, 'How to perform a document?'

Zaides' project *Necropolis* (2018, ongoing) takes as a starting point a document containing information on people who lost their lives on migratory routes to Europe, and whose deaths are mostly unacknowledged. Since 1993 and up to the present day, the list has been compiled by UNITED for Intercultural Action, a network of anti-racist organizations across Europe. *Necropolis* is an artistic and activist project aimed at locating the graves, and, when possible, at finding missing information about the deceased. The performance is composed of two parts in juxtaposition. In the first, the audience enters the city of the dead guided by a voice (that of the dramaturg Igor Dobričić), and two performers on stage (Emma Gioia and Arkadi Zaides), who take them on a journey through it. The audience sees the two performers from their back as silhouettes against the map, a Google Earth projection on a large screen, where the graves are marked. They are seated at an extended table, half of which is for the technical equipment, which they use to navigate into Necropolis; the other half is empty. Overlooking the map, the spectators hover above the graves. Sometimes archival information, including the exact geographical coordinates of the grave, the name, age and country of origin of the deceased (if known) and the cause of death, appears on the screen. Other times, spectators visit the graves through the video made by the ones who located them following a fixed cartographic and choreographic protocol. At the end of the journey into Necropolis, in the second part of the performance, Gioia and Zaides simulate a forensic ritual with sculptures resembling human remains, and the audience sees a figure – a composite body – rising and gazing at them from the same screen.

This article is a conversation in two voices about this figure, investigating the specific spectrality it performs from the perspective of the maker and that of the spectator.

Necropolis by Arkadi Zaides, 12 February 2023. Navigation through Google Earth.
Photo Eike Walkenhorst

Livia Andrea Piazza: I find it interesting that we are writing about *Necropolis* for the issue *On Ghosts*, but we are not focusing on the first part of the show, which is full of ghosts. Perhaps we should address them first.

Arkadi Zaides: Indeed, the first part of the performance is in the presence of countless ghosts because 99 per cent of the individuals on the list by UNITED are mentioned without identifying details, neither dead nor alive.[1] This, I would argue, traps them in a ghostly state. The trap appears when one observes the ways

[1] The last updated version issued in June 2024 lists 60,620 victims who have died at the borders of Europe since 1993.

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individuals die systematically and disappear at all the stages of their attempted journeys into the European continent. Also, once in Europe, individuals are dying as a result of police persecution, lack of access to healthcare or suicide, among other causes. This growing community of people subjected to traumatic deaths of various kinds are a ghostly collective whose spirit should be haunting the European continent. The list compiled by UNITED is incomplete, primarily gathering data through news clippings that often focus only on the incident of death – like a shipwreck carrying hundreds of people, for example. Some of the identifications emerge long after the death itself, and forensic investigations are often not carried out properly, leaving many in a state of anonymity. Our field research seeks to locate the graves of these individuals and, where possible, uncover details about their death. Moreover, people surviving the journey risk becoming like the 'living dead' in the analysis of Achille Mbembe (Mbembe and Mitsch 2003: 1). This condition has been described to us by people who are now residing in Europe without papers. While working together on a related project at Ghent University, they have testified that they feel like they are dead while being alive.[2] Consequently, people who die at the European borders could be perceived as 'deader than dead', to quote the title of one of the works by choreographer Ligia Lewis. The bodies of those who perish – whether their deaths are ignored, erased or rendered invisible – continue to live in a state of absence, denied both recognition and the ability to haunt.

LAP: This aspect raises a question: what conditions are necessary to make haunting possible in the frame of the theatre? The deep-mapping practice of the first part of *Necropolis* (Stalpaert *et al.* 2021) makes the deceased and their burial grounds visible, so that the audience realizes that they are – or that we all are – living among these dead. Notwithstanding this, we cannot encounter them, because we are living. This aspect is well analysed in a thesis I read recently, which uses 'Of other spaces' by Foucault (1984 [1967]) to analyse *Necropolis*: the cemetery, according to Foucault, as a public space is freely accessible, but as visitors, we – the living – will always be excluded from it, because its temporal dimension belongs to the dead. The spectators of *Necropolis* seem to be invited into a similar gap, also finding themselves in a cemetery as living visitors (Gao-Lenders 2024).

AZ: Generally, as Foucault described, the trajectory of Western culture has been to gradually move the cemetery from the city centre towards the periphery (Foucault 1984 [1967]: 6), pushing its own dead out of sight, and in a way also depriving us of proximity with them. The deaths of people on migratory routes are even more marginalized and made less noticeable. As a society, we are complicit in their marginalization, and we must confront our collective responsibility in making the dead disappear from our sight and our memory. So, 'what it needs to get done' – in Lewis's words – 'is to set up another relation to these communities of the dead'.[3] The challenge is not only to mourn them, as Lewis points out, but to actively engage in re-establishing a relationship with them, ensuring that their suffering does not remain confined to the periphery, but demands presence and acknowledgement in the heart of our shared humanity.

LAP: How do you set up the relation with the dead in *Necropolis*? And what kind of relation is possible, in the theatre, with this specific community of the dead?

AZ: Ghosts are figures of the undead. In Avery Gordon's understanding, they 'appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view' (1997: 16). In the first part of the performance, their presence emerges vividly, as Christel Stalpaert describes in her article 'Choreographic gestures of resurgence and repair' (2021). She highlights how the process of uncovering graves – continuously obscured by the familiar landscapes of Google Earth – creates a ruptured space where the unacknowledged is brought to light. In the second part of *Necropolis*, the undead find a material form, brought on stage as a disassembled corpse. On the empty part of the table, sculptures recalling human

[2] The Necropolis United research project (2022–6) stems from the stage project *Necropolis*. It is conducted within Ghent University as part of Zaides' PhD trajectory. Funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) the project brings together concerned actors to develop an integrated, sustainable, open-source virtual memorial commemorating migrant people's deaths in Europe. Necropolis United critically assesses technology's role, often used for surveillance and impacting the lives (and deaths) of those it intends to support. Consequently, it seeks to be a nexus for communities of knowledge, allowing diverse groups to influence both the methodology and outcomes of the forthcoming virtual platform. The term 'living dead' was proposed by members of La Voix des Sans Papiers de Bruxelles, who, while honouring those who have died or disappeared during migration, emphasized the need to acknowledge the 'living dead' (petite-mort and mort-vivant) experienced by individuals trapped in states of precarity.

[3] *Choreographies of the Archipelago: Artists in conversation*, a conversation with Ligia Lewis and Arkadi Zaides, Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP) at Wesleyan University, 5 December 2020.

remains are meticulously placed, to be subsequently projected onto the large screen behind.[4] This is our way to perform a forensic ritual, a homage to the many migrant people who died at Europe's borders and never received such rites. This figure – conjuring the cadaver and the spectre – sets a very particular state of being in relative proximity with the dead. This is also a radical dramaturgical shift to break with the cold navigation through the digital landscapes of Google Earth.

LAP: May I describe this moment from the point of view of someone sitting in the audience? The last graveyard the audience is brought to is a mass grave in Sicily, where numerous buried individuals are marked with small – and sometimes missing – paper sheets. On the screen, the city of the dead fades out on this image. You stand up and leave the stage to re-enter, bringing in a chart containing body parts, and put the first piece – resembling a knee – on the empty part of the table. This object is doubled on the screen, where it is projected in four different perspectives. Emma Gioia joins, and both of you move the rest of the body parts, one by one, from the chart to the table. The pieces present different shapes, sizes and consistencies; some appear to have gone through fire and some to have been in sea water for a long time. There is moss, plastic, flesh, bones, tissue, hair and algae. Both of you are very focused and handle the pieces with care. From the outside, you seem to be following the logic of an archive: each piece is laid on the table to be observed and received, before thinking about what it might be and what its position would be in a human body. In this way, you and Gioia seem to act coherently with the forensic representation offered for every body part on the screen, yet your gaze does something different: it appears to be bearing witness to the remains you handle.

In the 'Afterthought' to his book *Singularities*, André Lepecki reflects on Eyal Weizman's observations about forensic aesthetics replacing the centrality of the witness' position; and convenes on the fact that the two terms are 'essentially incompatible' as the affective detachment inherent to forensics can only coincide with the demise of the figure of the witness – 'it is less an aesthetics than an anaesthetics', writes Lepecki (2016: 171). I think, in *Necropolis*, the figure of the witness finds a body in the two performers making a hole, so to speak, in the aesthetics of forensics. How you assemble the remains of the body, staying silent, looking at every piece, never looking at each other or the audience: You look to remember.

Necropolis by Arkadi Zaides, 12 February 2023. Piecing together the body parts.
Photo Eike Walkenhorst

AZ: We simulate the process of scanning the body parts but, as opposed to what forensic experts do as part of their investigation, we touch them with our bare hands. In this choice, there is a break from classical forensics and a transition from the representation of such investigation towards theatricalization. For the artists and researchers at Forensic Architecture, counter-forensics represents a civic practice (www.ica.art/counter-forensics). It aims at reversing the institutionalized forensic gaze, enabling individuals and organizations to take control of evidence production. However, with forensic architecture's methodologies, when presented in the visual arts context, spectators – I would argue – fall into the illusion of becoming masters of the data, and, as such, they can hardly be haunted by it. In the first part of *Necropolis*, this illusion is interrupted by the walks, which we film in every cemetery and then project on the screen on stage. The embodied aspect of filming from a first-person perspective, holding the smartphone at chest level and walking towards the graves, breaks the detached spectatorship usually proposed by forensic architecture installations, and forces the audience to virtually visit those graves most of them would never visit otherwise, and to do it collectively. Moreover, we navigate Google

[4] The sculptures of *Necropolis* are crafted by performance artist and sculptor Moran Senderovich. See https://bit.ly/3Mo4KAi.

Earth in a way by which one literally loses the north. Spectators testify that this type of navigation creates a slight feeling of nausea. Then we collectively land into this body, into this flesh, touching and moving it. In this way, the detachment from the data is disrupted, and the analytical gaze is collapsed into a visceral experience.

In her article 'Information overload', Claire Bishop emphasizes the necessity of processing information through the body of the maker, thereby enabling its questioning and recontextualization through embodiment. She writes: 'the richest possibilities for research-based installation emerge when pre-existing information is not simply cut and pasted, aggregated, and dropped in a vitrine but metabolized by an idiosyncratic thinker who feels their way through the world' (Bishop 2023). We move slowly and reorganize the sculpted parts, gradually assembling something that could look like a body. Through this body, I can think together with the notion of spectral infrastructure, a term coined by the freethought collective, as a complementary lens to forensics.[5] If the aesthetics of forensics is about making visible, so visible that the one who watches has an overview, in the aesthetics of a spectral infrastructure the spectator is no longer positioned in the comfort of the analysis; rather they might be unsettled. If we follow the temporary definition by Irit Rogoff, it has to do with 'how to follow the less visible', an infrastructure 'so invisible, intangible, and at the same time, having a haunting presence one cannot get away from' (Mollona and Rogoff 2021: min 18:54:41).

[5] freethought collective is composed of Irit Rogoff, Stefano Harney, Adrian Heathfield, Massimiliano Mollona, Louis Moreno and Nora Sternfeld. See https://bit.ly/4nKTMSF.

LAP: As you attend to the body parts, I see you 'following the less visible' and, by doing so, you are establishing a form of address, which differs from the one reserved for the ghosts of the first part of *Necropolis* and seems to be enabled by the corpse being composed on stage. In 'Arriving too late for resurrection', Jalal Toufic writes about addressing the dead in a scene of *Death Sentence* by Maurice Blanchot, where a cadaver is being called. In the novel, the reader sees the cadaver through the perspective of the narrator, who, having arrived too late at the deathbed of J., utters her name. In Toufic's imagination, the call of the narrator interrupts J.'s indefinite fall, which is inherent in the notion of cadaver: '"From *cadere*, to fall, die" – this fall is the dead's grave (felicitously, the French *tombe* means grave but is also the indicative present tense of the verb *tomber*, to fall)' (1993: 218). Unlike the living, who are called implicitly when their name is uttered – for instance, by mentioning them – in Toufic's perspective, the dead can only be called explicitly. He pictures the scene from the perspective of the cadaver being called: 'How strange, wonderful to be called again, to be treated other than an object' (ibid.). Toufic understands this form of addressing the dead as a possibility of encountering them: J. will shortly be resurrected by the narrator in the novel by Blanchot, because he can look into the eyes of the corpse, not shutting them immediately 'in dread of the reflection of the undeath realm in them' (221). Yet, in *Necropolis*, you cannot call most of the dead, you cannot utter the name of someone whose identity is not determined. So, I wonder if what you and Gioia perform – what is left for you to perform with regards to these dead – has to do with answering 'the impersonal call of both the event and of those who will have not been there' (Lepecki 2016: 175) as transitory ears and mouths, in Lepecki's understanding of witnessing.

AZ: It is a body made of bodies, and this has something to do with the impersonal: it is distorted, deformed, and no clear features can be seen, but still it is perceived as a human body. As such, it also evokes the state of uncanniness, of something familiar and similar to us but not exactly us. Then, the falling cadaver stands up. When we finish assembling the body on the table, the latter is translated digitally and, through avatar technology, appears to be moving on the screen. At first, the audience sees a close-up and the perspective zooms out, so that the assembled body is seen in its entirety. At the same time, Igor Dobričić's voice comes back to guide the audience towards the end of their journey in the city of the dead and says: 'Let me assume you stayed to meet them' (*Necropolis* 2018–). Frédéric Pouillaude describes this scene through a quote by Tatsumi Hijikata: 'a corpse

standing up at the risk of its own life' (2023). Hijikata was describing butoh, and Pouillaude sees in the movement quality of the figure rising at the end of *Necropolis* something recalling it. On the screen, the hands and the feet move slightly, the figure turns to lie on its side and then onwards until it slowly gets up. It's not immediately a successful attempt. There is a lot of stumbling and dangling; it needs to use an arm as leverage, and these precarious balances might remind of butoh. Then the figure rises up from its back to stand, turns and looks at the audience. Dobričić speaks his last line just before the figure disappears from the screen: 'They brought you to this barren land depression at its very heart, to ask you a question: how did we end up here?'

Necropolis by Arkadi Zaides, 12 February 2023. Piecing together the body parts.
Photo Eike Walkenhorst

In a way, over the course of *Necropolis*, we travel from the notion of ghost to that of spectre by assembling this corpse. In the first part, the undead populating Necropolis are spirits rather than bodies. They are ghosts whose presence is suggested by graves, which usually mark an absence. The cadaver brings to the stage a different materiality, shifting the focus to the spectre as a figure of appearance, linked to vision and perception. This is the form through which the audience meets the inhabitants of Necropolis in the theatre, as a spectre who, at the end, takes upon itself to raise 'at the risk of its own life' and to gaze at the audience from its empty eye sockets.

LAP: As in 'spectre' coming from *spectrum*, from the Latin *specĕre*, 'to look', whose root is also in *spectāre*, at the origin of 'spectator'. The spectre can look back, actively establishing a relationship with the audience. I remember the look from the empty eye sockets: as spectators, we cannot simply look back into the spectre's eyes. When I did, my gaze plunged into them. Moreover, it's interesting to think about this figure through the lens of butoh, because I perceived the figure as an aggregate striving to compose itself in a form and resisting it at the same time. While I was watching it stumble and rise, it was difficult for me to ascribe a definite meaning to it, and this created an interruption, especially considering that, until that moment, these dead are a ghostly presence, and this is the first body connected to the *topos* of the stranger that appears in the performance. This suspension of meaning is powerful, when juxtaposed with the public debates constructing the migrant as a figure: In *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed remarked that no matter whether right-wing or liberal, these narratives always 'take for granted the stranger's status as a figure that contains or has meaning' (2000: 4). And if we focus on the current European news, this meaning is quite specific: the stranger is made visible either 'as a threat or as a tragedy' (Peeren 2018: 90).

AZ: This figure is essential to push us out of the domain of cerebral analysis and to enable a place of haunting. It embodies all those bodies that are still to be found, all the identities that are still to be determined. It is disjointed and fractured, and, as such, it offers a space for many to look at the audience. In this sense, the corpse shifts the representation from the individual ghosts to a spectre made of many.

LAP: In *Necropolis*, you decided to represent the victim through this impersonal form. This gesture differs from the way you worked in *Archive*, where violence is represented only through the actions of the perpetrators, as you archive them in your body.[6] In that performance, only the violent actions of the settlers in the West Bank are represented on stage, not their effect on the Palestinian population.

AZ: In *Archive*, my focus of investigation is on the perpetrators – Israeli settlers and soldiers – and their daily management of the occupation. In her article 'Palestine as symptom, Palestine

[6] *Archive* (2014) is a performance by Arkadi Zaides in which he examines the everyday mechanism of Israeli occupation by embodying gestures of settlers and soldiers, extracted from the video archives of B'Tselem – The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

as hope: Revising human rights discourse', Ariella Aicha Azoulay analyses a series of visual campaigns that accompanied the declaration of human rights, designed to 'educate' the public on how to recognize these rights. Emphasizing how photography and visual archives are deeply entwined with histories of imperial violence, Azoulay critiques the narrow framing of rights violations and proposes broadening the scope. She argues that we should include not only the rights of victims but also the rights of perpetrators not to be indoctrinated into committing these violations, as well as the rights of onlookers to understand and witness these events without the selective filters imposed by those in power.

In *Necropolis*, the focus shifts primarily to the victims and spectators (including the audience in the theatre, myself and Gioia) to forge a relationship between these two groups. First, by unearthing the victims who should haunt our collective consciousness, and then by constructing the composite body of the dead. This extends the unearthing effort into a choreographic gesture, enabling a new kind of relationship with the spectators, and this encounter transforms the theatre into a space of haunting.

LAP: This moment is marked by a temporal shift, which supports the conditions for this encounter. In the first part of the performance, the audience is presented with events that have already happened, it is always an after-the-fact spectatorship. The actions you and Gioia do, such as navigating the map or assembling the corpse, are all related to past events. When the spectre rises, the audience witnesses something happening before their eyes, in the theatre where they are and in the present time.

As the living, we are still and will always be excluded from Necropolis. Yet, the representation of Necropolis as a rising spectre opens up a temporality to imagine a relation with the dead. In a reflection on the necessary conditions for haunting, Peeren writes that 'the *hantise* is not something every spectre performs on their own, it is something fundamentally relational' (Peeren 2018: 84, translation Piazza). I like to think of the empty eye sockets and loosely jointed body parts of the spectre in *Necropolis* calling for more than one relation as the root for the specific kind of haunting it might perform.

■ *Necropolis* by Arkadi Zaides, 12 February 2023. While the body is being examined, its scan – rendered through avatar technology – appears on the screen behind. *Photo Eike Walkenhorst*

AZ: The process of composing this collective body resonates with the ancient legend of the Golem and the modern tale of Frankenstein – stories that grapple with humanity's overreach in attempting to create life-like figures. Yet, as in both the Golem and Frankenstein narratives, the act of creation carries an inherent tension: the figure ultimately surpasses and confronts its creators. Similarly, in *Necropolis*, it is this no-body, this body of countless bodies made dead and disappeared that we strive to animate.

LAP: And because it is made of the bodies of those who died on their journey to Europe, this gesture in *Necropolis* has two irreconcilable effects. Because the spectre is impersonal, as spectators, we cannot fall into any sentimentality trap as that described by Laurent Berlant (2001), in which emotions take the place of responsibility. At the same time, because it is an assemblage of decomposing body parts, we cannot not perceive its affect.

AZ: In his lecture *A Choreographic Move towards Visceral Realism*, Frederic Pouillaude speculates on the possible meaning of the term ''visceral realism' introduced by Roberto Bolaño in his novel *The Savage Detectives*. Pouillaude reflects on the uncomfortable conjunction of fact and emotion it suggests – an oxymoron that evokes a longing for an impossible fusion. He proposes that 'the artistic desire for an accurate representation of certain facts never separated from the presentation of the guts that receive

them … the factual, always appears melted with the swarming blur of our interiorities, thoughts, possibilities and moves' (2023).

By constructing the dismembered, decomposed body and allowing it to rise from its continuous fall to gaze back at the audience, we confront spectators with the raw interiority of the body itself, forcing this ongoing catastrophe to land directly in their guts.

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