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Abstract

In December 2016, the United States abstained on a vote over a UN Security Council resolution demanding an end to Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory. It was the first time in 40 years that the United States was not defending Israel and its inhuman settlement policy. Unfortunately this historic step forward for human rights was ruined a few weeks ago when the new president of the USA moved in the White House and thus Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, approved the construction of nearly six hundreds of new homes in three settlements in East Jerusalem. Since I strongly believe that the settlements are one of the most dreadful violations of human rights in "our modern world", and since this theme has been discussed through many artistic means from a Palestinian point of view, I propose to explore it from an Israeli perspective, the one of the artist Arkadi Zaidés, who I interviewed after his performance in Lisbon, in November 2016, on the occasion of the festival Temps d'Images. After analyzing Zaidés' work, and reflecting about the concept of Julia Kristeva's *abject*, I will then demonstrate in a second part how the settlements are affecting the identity of all the Israeli citizens, and how the Occupation is shaping the domestic policies of the country. I will then conclude, showing how Zaidés, embodying in a certain way the *abject*, is trying both to sensitize and to raise awareness, and claiming that the settler's influence on Israeli policies is mining the democratic nature of the Israeli State itself.

Arkadi Zaidés: embodying the *abject*

Arkadi Zaidés is an Israeli choreographer, born in Belorussia, from a Jewish family in 1979, he moved to Israel at the age of 11. In order to integrate into the new community he had begun to be part of, Zaidés started to take Israeli folklore dance classes at the age of 13, before moving to contemporary dance at the age of 16. He later joined the Batsheva Dance Company, founded by Martha Graham, before starting his solo career as a choreographer. "I wanted to belong. It could be achieved in many different ways. I chose to do it through folklore dancing, which has a special place

in the Israeli narrative. I then moved to contemporary dance and tried to challenge that same narrative”. Arkadi Zaides was in Lisbon on the 16th of November 2016, on the occasion of the festival Temps d’Images, to present his video installation *Capture Practice*, which is, together with his performance *Archive*, one of the causes for reflection of this brief essay.

Both *Archive* and *Capture Practice* are focused on the relation between the Israeli settlers and the Palestinians, including the impact that the settlement policy and, broadly, the religious attitude in the legislative apparatus, have in the everyday life of the Israeli society. The performance *Archive* was premiered at Festival d’Avignon in 2014. In 2007, B’Tselem started a program, named *Camera Project*, which consisted of the distribution of video cameras to Palestinians living in the West Bank in order to film and document the daily human rights violation committed by the settlers. Zaides selected some of the filmed material, and during the performance, the artist displays the footage on the stage. In the first ten minutes, the choreographer stands in front of the screen, watching carefully the actions made by the settlers. Suddenly he starts to move and dance, embodying their “choreography” of violence, transforming himself into a living brutal archive. In my opinion, one of the most curious aspects of the project is that the moving images which Zaides chose to show are not the most violent. The footage he uses, according to the artist, exposes another kind of violence, which is more daily and subtle, this is violence which in a way becomes part of the ordinary life. The video installation *Capture Practice* was commissioned by the Petach Tikva Museum of Art in 2014. The installation consists of a two-channel video loop, projected on two screens: on one channel is projected the B’Tselem footage, and on the other the performer is dancing in a studio, mimicking the violence committed by the settlers.

During the interview, Zaides explained that his path to *Archive* and *Capture Practice* had been a long journey through a series of works in which he questions the situation between Israel and Palestine. *Archive* and *Capture Practice* are actually the first attempt to gaze more specifically at the West Bank since previously he worked with Palestinian artists within Israel. Zaides, with the use of the B’Tselem footage, is observing, through the Palestinian eye, the settlers community, and through the imitation of their movements, the artist expresses what their violence reveals about himself, in a microcosmic level, and about the Israeli community in a macrocosmic level. In *Archive* and *Culture Practice*, the artist wants to explore and present how the circumstances in West Bank are affecting Israel in a multitude of aspects, which are not strictly related to the economic and political sphere, but also to emotion and culture.

“The policy in the occupied territories, in my opinion, is what is shaping Israeli society at the moment. There are Ministries who are coming from the settlements. Laws are changed in order to adjust the legal system to the demand of the settlers, and there are continuous shifts in cultural and educational policies, all to fit the narrative which the settlers are trying to impose. For all these reasons I said to myself that if this is the narrative that influences my country, and consequently me, I need to see how fellow Israelis in this territory behave, move, act. And this is how *Archive* and *Capture Practice* started.”

Quoting Ruthie Abeliovich, author of the article *Choreographing Violence in Arkadi Zaides' Archive*: “Zaides takes a clear stand regarding the human rights violations he screens on stage by positioning himself in the place of the aggressors, thus raising issues of accountability and responsibility” (Abeliovich, 10). Indeed, Zaides’ projects extremely deal with responsibility. As I personally noticed while visiting Israel, a greater number of citizens are not aware of the brutality of the Settlements, or to be more precise, as Zaides claims in his interview, they prefer to be unaware.

“The behavior of the settlers is overlooked. I believe that all Israelis are familiar with the reality in the West Bank but they choose to ignore it. What is happening there is a result of a silent agreement between the Jewish Israeli citizens and the state institutions. Many of the Israeli soldiers served to the West Bank during their military service, but they remain silent and prefer to forget their experiences. This is the silence that I try to break. I claim that the settlers are an integral part of our social fabric and that they shape the country’s policies more than ever.”

In his interview, the choreographer recalls the concept of “Abjection” by Julia Kristeva. In her work *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva is writing about the *abject* as the human reaction of rejection provoked by what the human body generates and expels, for instance, excrements and vomit. Basically, the human being rejects, therefore does not want to see what is expelled from his body, even though the *abject* is produced by her/his body itself. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva goes further, writing that “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture, in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalization, which were imagined as representative of sex and murder” (Kristeva, 12-13). The

concept presented by Kristeva could be applied in this case to the Israeli society (and perhaps to all societies in general). The Israeli community does not want to see the horrors coming from it, perhaps because they do not want to accept that the society itself created this horror, and for this reason, it is no accident that Zaides' work had many problems with law, censorship and the right-wing part of the Israeli community. When the video installation *Capture Practice* was presented in Jerusalem, more than 50 right-wing protesters tried to stop the event and the demonstration started to be so violent that three of them had been arrested. The Israeli Minister of Culture Limor Livnat and her successor Miri Regev threatened to stop the economic support in Zaides' activity. He also faced attempts to cease his performances to surpass the Jewish State borders. Before the premiere of *Archive* in Festival d'Avignon, Ayelet Shaked, representative of the right-wing party "Jewish Home" in Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, wrote to the French Ambassador in Tel Aviv to cancel the event. She stated that Zaides' work "shows terrorists as victims and IDF soldiers defending Israeli citizens with their bodies as criminals" (Shaked in "Haaretz").

The State of Israel was born on the 14th of May of 1948, and since its creation, the nature of the country was a tough dilemma. Before the XIX century, the significance of Zion, intended as the whole "Promised Land", was an important religious image but the majority of the Jewish community, which at that time was spread over the world, did not hope to actually resettle the Land of Israel. The "Return to the Land" was not representing a basic element of Jewish life and identity. When Theodor Herzl created the Zionist Movement in 1897, he wanted to merge his inspiration for enlightenment, liberalism, and nationalism with a response to the emerging anti-Semitism in Europe. For this reason, originally the movement had a secular character, consequently, various orthodox groups rejected Zionism, which was perceived almost as a heresy, since according to the Torah the Jewish people should wait for the Messiah to be able to return to the "Promised Land". But the situation has reversed after the Holocaust and after the abundant migratory flow caused by the Shoah. As mentioned above, the question of the nature of the State (secular or religious) came to life in 1948: if it were to be a Jewish State, then religious Jews expected the state to be governed by religious law, while if it were to be a state for Jews the most important element was a "Jewishness" as an ethnic badge, rather than a religious identity. The result of the dilemma was a compromise, ideated by Ben Gurion, the founder of the State of Israel and the first Israeli Prime Minister. The pact between the secular and the religious Jews consisted in accepting the secular law as the basis of the legislative apparatus and making agreements in order to give legal status to part of the religious

norms. Religious Jews were granted to have a voice in some domestic decisions but they were kept from engaging in foreign policy. Consequently, Israel was marked by its creation on the basis of religious identity (Agdemir, 43), as it resulted in numerous manners, such as the use of Jewish symbols to identify the new-born state, as the Star of David on the Israeli flag, the language and the rabbinical authority over marriage and divorce. In essence, the central political institutions of the new state were rooted as democratic, including a representative parliament, named Knesset, with periodic elections and a relatively free media, but in the course of the years, a series of incremental laws enshrined the religious character of the State, regarding areas such as citizenship, communication, and education.

After the Six Days War in 1967, the territories considered as the core of the biblically promised lands were added to Israel, and the religious groups gave religious meaning to the conquest of the West Bank, starting to shape the conquered lands. For this reason, tens of thousands of religious Jews began to settle in those areas, arguing that the settlements would accelerate the arrival of the messianic age. As Oren Yftachel writes in his essay “Ethnocracy: the Policy of Judaizing Israel/Palestine”: “they are constructing a historical narrative that proclaims the dominant ethno-nation as the rightful owner of the territory in question” (Yftachel, 5). Furthermore, the settlers’ beliefs cause friction between different levels of Israeli society, and they carry weight in Israeli politics since they occupy key positions in military and government bureaucracy, affecting the decision-making process in government circles.

The majority of these religious groups are represented in the Knesset, such as the UTJ (United Torah Judaism) party which is controlled by senior Rabbis who demand more inclusion of the Jewish law and believe that the divine code should supersede the State law. In addition, during the years, religious parties gained support and started to be in an advantageous position during coalition formation so they can blackmail the big parties. This is not just an obstacle to the peace-making processes, but also an attempt to the democratic character of the Israeli State. In 1977, Likud, the right-wing party, won the elections. Its leaders started an immense project of building settlements, which are built with the money coming from the taxes paid by Israeli citizens. The year 1999 was marked by the electoral rise of the religious parties which obtained 31 of the Knesset seats. Today, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Minister and Chairman of the Likud Party, is ruling the country with a religious-nationalist coalition. As Oren Yftachel claims, the growing influence of orthodox Jewish groups on Israeli politics is leading the country towards the theocratic rule. As he points out,

the religious character of the state is already anchored in a variety of areas: Jewish Sabbath is the official Israeli day of rest; public institutions only serve Kosher food; no import pork is allowed; all personal laws are governed with the national rabbinate (which prohibits civil marriage); most archeological digs need approval from religious authorities (Yiftachel, 15).

As mentioned in the first paragraph, the majority of the Israeli citizens are unaware of the situation in Judea and Samaria (the Jewish name for the West Bank). An investigation conducted by the Israeli Democracy Institute, named “The Peace Index” in 2016, shows that Israel inhabitants are uninformed about the number of settlers living in West Bank. Almost the 70% of the interviewed during the survey believes that the colonizers are less than 750.000, while in the reality the numbers of settlers are around 800.000 (in 2015) and more than half of the population does not recognize Israel’s control of the territories as “an occupation” (71,5%). Moreover, the Settlements are most of the time represented as heavenly places, as shown in the advertisements of the luxury settlers’ houses on sale presented in the Israeli Television. In the advertisement, the illegal Jewish villages in West Bank are compared to an oasis in the desert, peaceful areas that are perfect to raise your children.

The situation of brutal and daily violence in the Occupied Territories remains obscure, also due to the media, which mostly omit the violent incidents committed by the settlers, while denouncing explicitly the rebellion attempts of the Palestinians. This extremely large lack of information is reflected in the psychological shock felt by many young soldiers, who after finishing high school, are required to execute military service in the IDF (Israeli Defense Force). The documentary *Flipping Out* by Yoav Shamir is remarkably emblematic inasmuch it documents young Israelis who at the end of their military service, are traveling in Asia, mainly to India, using narcotic drugs in order to escape from the horrors experienced during their conscription. Many of them suffer from PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and ‘flip out’, becoming harmful to society.

In conclusion, the growing religious ascendancy in the Israeli policy is changing the State not exclusively in a political matter, but also socially. The attitude of the governments, recalling Oren Yiftachel, is bringing to a religious ethnocracy, which undermines the democratic nature at the basis of the state of Israel itself. The issue of the settlement, their existence, and the violent attitude of their inhabitants is a current problem that needs to be solved immediately since it has a dramatic impact. Instead, the “dark” aspect of the settlers, even though is a result of the society itself, is put

out of sight, occulted as Kristeva's *abject*. This is shown also by the perpetual censorship of the associations which are trying to end the silence, and of Zaides' work (Ravid, in *Haaretz*).

Arkadi Zaides, through his works, is able to denounce, simply revealing and identifying himself in a reality that is actually part of the community to which he belongs. It could be stated that the performer embodies the *abject*, annexing to his individuality what is refused by the Israeli society. Zaides annihilates his identity as a choreographer, becoming a mirror of the Horror. His activity leads to two results on the audience. When Zaides performs in Israel, *Archive* and *Capture Practice* are an invitation to take responsibility and realize the abomination of the actions made by a community to which the spectator is part of. While the performances showed abroad have the intention to denounce this hidden aspect of Israel.

There is a tendency for uninvolved segments of Israeli society to belittle or ignore human rights violations occurring daily in the occupied territories. "Zaides' performance challenges this position by embodying the Israeli violence in the videos and presenting it to his audience (...) Israeli spectators sense the somatic impact of such actions and are asked to consider the corporal resonance of this ongoing violence happening in close proximity". (Abeliovich, 2-3)

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