

Genet in Gaza

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Wonderful Evil

As I was watching, on the morning of 8 October 2023, video footage recorded the previous day in the areas surrounding Gaza, I thought of an astonishing scene from Jean Genet's play *The Screens* (1961). The scene does not provide a solution to the violence, offer an appropriate lesson, or indicate a path forward. Instead, it looks violence straight in the eye.

Scene 12. While dying, Kadidja, an elderly Arab woman, howls a stunning prayer. She first addresses the protagonists of the play—Saïd, the poorest youth in the village, and his bride Leila, the ugliest girl around:

So, Death, I'll fight it out with you! Saïd, Leila, my loved ones! You, too, in the evening related the day's evil to each other. You realized that in evil lay the only hope. Evil, wonderful evil, you who remain when all goes to pot, miraculous evil, you're going to help us. I beg of you, evil, and I beg you standing upright, impregnate my people. And let them not be idle! ([1961] 1962:97)

A ghostly roll call follows, in which Kadidja beckons the rebels, who briefly describe their crimes against colonists in words and draw them on blank screens positioned upstage. Kaddur draws the pistols he used to kill two settlers. M'barek sketches disemboweled cows in a nearby farm. Lahusseïn states in a "violent but muted tone": "Under the orange trees, I raped one of their girls, I bring you the bloodstain" (98). It gets worse, much worse. Murder, robbery, arson, mutilation... Kadidja entreats her men to "use color" and "not be ashamed." "Merit the world's contempt. Slit throats, my sons..." (101).

What can theatre tell us about the unspeakable violence that has been happening in and around Gaza? How can it illuminate the conflict that has been going on for decades, which is every time overshadowed by the most recent escalation? These questions have been on my mind since that fateful day in October, and on many similar occasions in the recent past. Although not addressing this particular crisis, Genet's play provides a framework for thinking about the world that has Gaza at its center. It has a unique capacity to bring some clarity to the events that have been defined by their opacity.

As of 1 September 2024, there is still no clear statement from the leaders of Hamas or any other group active in Gaza about the strategic and political goals of their actions on 7 October. All that came in the follow-up of that horrific day was the immensely multiplied violence from the invading Israel Defense Forces. Let me be clear: I am not supporting violence that happened in Israel at and near its border with Gaza on 7 October, and I strongly condemn the disproportional retaliation

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TDR 68:4 (T264) 2024 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204324000388>

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by the IDF that followed, and that is still ongoing. In invoking Genet's play, I am not trying to justify the atrocities that took place on that day and in the days that followed. I believe that in *The Screens* Genet was not trying to do that, either, even in the historical circumstances in which the goals of the opposing sides were clearly stated. What he said in his preface to *The Balcony* (1956) applies even more directly to *The Screens*:

No problem set out in the theatre should be resolved on the imaginary plane, especially where the dramatic resolution urges us towards a perfected social order. On the contrary, let evil explode onstage, let it show us naked, leave us haggard if it can, and with no other recourse than to ourselves. The function of the artist, or poet, is not to find practical solutions to the problem of evil. Let them accept damnation. (in Bradby 1997:158)

Major Communication

While *The Screens* takes place in an unnamed Arab country, it is abundantly clear that Genet was addressing the struggle in the Algerian war of independence. He began working on the play in late 1956, as the guerilla war in Algiers, which started in 1954, escalated in intensity and brutality. *The Screens* was published 1961, a year before the war ended with the signing of the Évian Accords (March 1962). Roger Blin, who directed the French premiere of *The Screens—Les Paravents*—tried to arrange an opening as early as 1959. As Carl Lavery shows in his excellently researched work on Genet's political theatre, this coincided with the beginning of an exceptionally tense period, during which Paris felt besieged by the threat of an all-out civil war (Lavery 2013:173).¹ Even in 1966, four years after the accords and the end of the “siege” of Paris, Genet's play was incendiary to the French Right.

While it happened during the most intense crisis in French post-WWII history, Genet's work on *The Screens* also came at a pivotal moment in his writing career. In 1951, Gallimard, the premier French publishing house, started publishing the collected works (*Œuvres complètes*) of the then 41-year-old author who spent most of his life in and out of prisons on charges that ranged from petty robbery to truancy to prostitution. Genet's *Œuvres complètes* were introduced by the leading French philosopher of that era, Jean-Paul Sartre. The “introduction” was actually a stand-alone volume that ran close to 600 pages, entitled *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. Genet's biographer Edmund White notes that the publication of Sartre's literary biography was an enormous honor, but it also had a paralyzing effect on its subject. Genet struggled to write prose, then gave up and turned to drama (White 1993:446, 458). In the aftermath of *Saint Genet*, he wrote his major plays *The Balcony* (from 1955 to 1957) and *The Blacks* (from 1955 to 1959) (1993:475). *The Screens* was his last major literary work of the first, most productive period of his career. It was followed by a hiatus of over two decades, which came to an end with the publication of his book inspired by Palestine, *The Prisoner of Love*, in 1986.

No less significant than Sartre's *Saint Genet* was Georges Bataille's critique of Sartre's book, first published in 1952 and then included in his *Literature and Evil* (1957), in which he paints a harsh picture of Genet as a writer who is not interested in or capable of communication. And here, Bataille is not talking about chitchat, but about “powerful communication,” which he considers to be primary, “a simple ‘given,’ the supreme appearance of existence, which reveals itself to us in the multiplicity of consciousnesses and in their communicability” ([1957] 1973:172). He asserts that “major communication can only take place on one condition—that we resort to Evil, that is to say, to violation of the law” (173). Bataille charges that, while Genet relishes in transgressing all kinds of taboos, he “refuses to communicate” (173). This critique was also a challenge: if, according to Bataille, “the privileged moments of powerful communication” are based on “the emotions of sensuality, festivity, drama, love, separation and death,” then it is hard not to see that all of Genet's major plays of the late 1950s, and *The Screens* most of all, are dark ceremonies structured around representations of sensuality, festivity, drama, love, separation, and death.

1. Before the French premiere, the play was performed in Berlin in 1961, in Vienna two years later, and Peter Brook directed a workshop production in London in 1964.



Figure 1. Right-wing demonstrators and student counterprotestors face off at the steps of the Odéon.
(From *La bataille des Paravents: Théâtre de l'Odéon 1966*, edited by Lynda Bellity Peskine and Albert Dichy)

Stage Assembly

The Screens was Genet's last and, by far, most ambitious play. It consists of 17 scenes that vary in length, from a few pages in the opening sections of the play, to the final scene, a full-length play-within-the-play divided into eight subsections. This play that runs over 200 printed pages features almost 100 named characters (97, to be precise), plus extras. In the French premiere of the play in the famed Odéon-Théâtre de L'Europe, Roger Blin used 62 actors. It was not just an ensemble, but an assembly

in its own right. This assembly of actors was expanded by an assembly in the packed auditorium, and by counterassemblies in front of the theatre.

The Screens opened on 6 April 1966 to an audience sharply divided between the Leftist supporters of the play and its opponents on the Right.² On 30 April, a group of over 30 veterans from colonial military forces and militants from the right-wing movement, Occident, interrupted the performance by throwing smoke bombs and glass bottles onstage, and then attacked the cast, who fought back with chairs and other props (Lavery 2013:169). On 7 May, the Occident group tried to set



Figure 2. Protest at the Odéon in response to Roger Blin's production of Genet's *Les Paravents*. (From *La bataille des Paravents: Théâtre de l'Odéon 1966*, edited by Lynda Bellity Peskine et Albert Dichy)

the theatre on fire (169). That attempt was preceded a few days prior by a large protest march through the streets of Paris from the Panthéon to the theatre, where the right-wing demonstrators were met by counterprotestors organized by the Union Nationale des Étudiants de France, an encounter that resulted in a pitched battle at the steps of the Odéon (169). This led some commentators to recognize in the events in and around the theatre a precursor of much larger gatherings that took place in these same neighborhoods two years later, in May and June of 1968. However, the "battles" that accompanied the French premiere of *The Screens* turned out to be much more significant for the emergence of the French New Right than they were for the brief glory of the New Left. One of the organizers of the right-wing march on 4 May was Jean-Marie Le Pen. After years in political obscurity, in 1972 he was elected as the leader of the newly formed party National Front. As I write this, the French hard Right led by his daughter Marine Le Pen, has made a strong run in European and French elections, and gained the largest number of representatives ever in both cases.³ In the immediate aftermath of the French elections, the Right made it clear that it is positioning itself for the presidential elections in 2027. They are not far off.

A Counter-Caucasian Tale

In the 1950s, the Berliner Ensemble was all the rage in Paris. Brecht's theatre first visited the French capital in 1954 with *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and returned the following year with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and then again in 1957 with *Life of Galileo* and *Mother Courage* (Bradby and Delgado 2002:5). That puts *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Brecht's theatrical parable about an ownership dispute between two kolkhoz collectives, in which the land goes to the settler farmers at the expense of native goatherds, right at the time when Genet started his epic play about the struggle for decolonization. While there is no evidence

2. In its Summer issue of 1967 (11:4), *TDR* featured a small section dedicated to this production of *The Screens*: Bettina Knapp's interview with Amidou, the actor who played the main character, Saïd; her interview with Roger Blin; and another interview with Blin, conducted by Paul Gray.

3. In its analysis of the French snap elections in June-July of 2024, Matthias Matthijs, writing for *The Council on Foreign Relations*, holds that "the far right made its strongest ever electoral showing this time around" (Matthijs 2024).

that Genet saw the performance of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Screens* appears to be a point-by-point rebuttal of Brecht's theatrical parable.

Genet insisted on his opposition to “committed” theatre, which was dominant both on French stages (in the work of the directors Jean Vilar, Roger Planchon, Antoine Vitez, and Blin himself) and in theatre scholarship (Roland Barthes, Bernard Dort). Blin reports that, as they were gearing up for the production of *The Screens*, Genet demanded, “whatever you do, don’t make my play the agent of the Left” (in Taylor-Batty 2007:160). He was particularly critical of Brecht. A decade after *The Screens* affair, in a long interview with the German journalist and writer Hubert Fichte, he was dismissive not only of Brecht’s didactic plays, but also of his late works, such as *Life of Galileo*. Asked about the reasons for his dislike of this work, he retorted: “Because what Brecht says is nothing but garbage; because Galileo Galilei cites the obvious; it tells me things that I would have discovered without Brecht” (Genet [1976] 2004:122).

Yet, Genet does not hesitate to borrow (he might have preferred the word “steal”) certain formal properties from Brecht, such as the episodic structure characteristic of epic theatre. In his letters to Blin, he almost explicitly cites Brecht’s well-known compositional principle: “Each scene, and each section within a scene, must be perfected and played as rigorously and with as much discipline as if it were a short play, complete in itself” ([1966] 1969:29). Also, it is hard not to see in the character of Cadi from *The Screens* a parody of Brecht’s Azdak. Further, in the course of his work on the play, Genet went through a series of working titles: *Saïd*, *It’s Still Moving*, which could be seen as an ironic reference to Brecht’s *Galileo*, and even more to the point, *The Mother* and *The Mothers*, a clear reference to and a reversal of Brecht’s portrayal of mothers in his plays, from Pelagea Vlassova in *The Mother*, to Anna Frieling in *Mother Courage*, to Grusha in *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. While all these references to Brecht are oblique, Genet gets more direct in his critique of Brecht’s understanding of the right to land ownership. In scene 10 of *The Screens*, he puts a clear reference to Brecht in the mouth of the colonialist Mr. Blankensee: “In a German operetta, I forget which, a character says: ‘Things belong to those who’ve known how to improve them...’” ([1961] 1962:74). The unmistakable question of Genet’s play, and not only in the reference to the “German operetta,” is: how is it possible that Brecht, who was known as being everything but naïve, could buy into arguments about settlers’ claim on the land that does not belong to them? Wasn’t he aware that he was setting his play at the southern borders of a contiguous empire, which had been expanding, in both tsarist and Soviet times, at the expense of its neighbors (a tendency that has not ceased to this very day)? Could he hear in his own words the echoes of colonialist myth of land without people for people without land?

The Obscene

It is significant that Genet did not name his play after leading characters or events, but after the most prominent stage device used in it. In his introductory remarks, he specified that the entire set should be made of screens, “each about ten feet high, on which objects and landscapes will be painted” ([1961] 1962:9). He also demands that the screens should be mounted on rubber-lined wheels, so that they move in complete silence. The screens move and act but are also acted upon. They never cease being the space of inscription, that is, of illusion. Genet drives this point home by insisting that “near the screen there must always be at least one real object [...], the function of which is to establish a contrast between its own reality and the objects that are drawn” (10). It is on these lightweight, mobile screens that the colonialists depict their roses and orchards, and it is on those same screens that the rebels inscribe the litany of their evil deeds.

As Genet’s original title, the French word *paravent* designates a partition or a false wall that can be easily moved or folded. Placed onstage, a divider of that kind repeats the foundational operations of theatre: concealing and revealing. It introduces a division into the scene of visibility, and institutes its other, the ob-scene: the obverse of the visible, that which is kept out of view, the repressed. In English translation, the title of the play loses some of its specificity. This expansion of the title’s semantic range is not detrimental to the meaning of the play. Conversely, it introduces the separation of space far beyond the stage. The screens are no longer in the theatre, or even in a movie

house. They structure the everyday life of the contemporary subject in the most fundamental and intrusive ways. They determine not only what can and cannot be seen, but what can and cannot be thought and imagined. That is because the screen is not just the place of the projection of images, but primarily of their formation.

In his article “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” Hal Foster expands the psychoanalytic understanding of the screen to visual culture more generally, as a “cultural reserve of which every image is one instance. Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen mediates the object-gaze of the subject” (1996:109). By turning the foundational theatrical convention into his play’s protagonist, Genet is calling attention not only to that which is presented to the gaze onstage, but even more to that which is hidden from view. Constituted in this way, the obscene, as Foster argues,

does not mean “against the scene,” but it suggests an attack on the scene of representation, on the image-screen. As such it also suggests a way to understand the aggression against the visual so evident in contemporary art and alternative culture—as an imagined rupture of the image-screen, an impossible opening onto the real. (114)

While often provocative and shocking, the stage images in Genet’s play do not reveal much. Accessing the obscene, the scene of trauma and immeasurable loss demands a much more complex operation, which can be done only in theatre.

On 7 October, the screens were ablaze with violence. Then the violence turned in the opposite direction and increased by tenfold, a hundredfold. The genocidal violence of the destruction of Gaza, for the most part, remains off-screen, vigorously regulated. Video recordings of the scenes of violence that took place on 7 October were widely circulated by Israeli and international media. Once the IDF offensive started, Israel imposed strict controls on the media coverage of the conflict, asking for military escorts for international journalists and requiring pre-broadcast reviews of video footage made in Gaza.⁴ All of this amounts to a reconstitution of the obscene. Who needs it? What does it serve?

A Fart in the Face of Public Taste

In Genet’s play, the screens don’t just separate the visible and the invisible, existence and its other, life and death, but serve as a passage between them. When the characters die, they burst through the screens, to the other side. This entrance into the ob-scene is always accompanied by obscenities. Kadidja explains to the French Sergeant that “everybody—once he’s dead—has to recover from the crossing of the odd-leafed forest...then one drains oneself. Of oneself” (169). He admits, smiling, that he “died shitting...squatting in the foliage” (169). The prostitute Warda chimes in that she died the same way. The critics of *The Screens* objected to its unabashed scatology.⁵ More specifically, the new right protesters found the most offensive the death scene of a French legionnaire, with his comrades comforting him by farting at his face to bring him the whiff of his homeland, deposited in their guts ([1961] 1962:150).⁶ Mark Taylor-Batty reports that Le Pen’s phalanxes found this scene particularly offensive. Really? What if the play was performed in Algiers? How would the Arabs respond to the portrayal of atrocities committed by the rebels?

4. The censorship of media by the Israeli military has been widely reported. See, for example, Edith Olmsted, “Why Are CNN, ABC, and NBC Reporters Embedding With the Israeli Military?” (2023). In January 2024, the strict control of foreign media reporting from Gaza was upheld by the Supreme Court of Israel. See *The Times of Israel*, “Israel top court rejects foreign media appeal for journalists’ access to Gaza.”

5. Carl Lavery cites French conservative critic Gabriel Marcel, who described the play’s language as “the most systematically excremental [...] he had ever seen on the French stage”; and Jean-Jacques Gautier, who wrote that “everything in me revolted and reared up [...] at this heap of filth” (2013:185).

6. In Genet’s play, this scene takes place in the wings. To make things worse, Blin moved it center stage (Taylor-Batty 2007:181).

In *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961; *The Wretched of the Earth* 1963), published in French as Genet was working on *The Screens*, Frantz Fanon emphasized the violent nature of colonization and resistance to it: “The violence of the colonial regime and the counterviolence of the colonized balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity” ([1963] 2004:46). Not only is that balance absent from Genet’s play, but it is also skewed against the colonized. While Genet presents the violence committed by Arabs in word, deed, and image, the portrayal of the violence committed by the colonizers is confined to appearances: Sir Harold’s oversized pigskin glove, which guards his palmetto field (33) and Mr. Blankensee’s padded butt and belly, which, he believes, enhance his prestige (73). With the colonizers everything is “artificial” and “doctored” (72, 73), but that does not make it less vicious.

Unlike Brecht, Genet does not use episodic form to stage a parable and present a learning play. There is nothing to be learned in his theatre. His drama is not invested in that kind of symbolic economy. In Genet’s play, the screens underscore the play of oppositions and reflections. In his preface to *The Balcony*, he states that the theatrical event should be “the glorification of the Image and the Reflection,” an idea that applies to all of his theatre, and to *The Screens* in particular (in Taylor-Batty 2007:159). And in his letters to Blin, he emphasized that “life and the stage are opposites,” and that extends to the opposition between the colonizers and the colonized, Europeans and Arabs ([1966] 1969:12). The violence of the former is relegated to offstage, allowed to be glimpsed only through its mirroring in the actions of the rebels. David Bradby points out that Genet “was facing the dark side of the Europeans’ attitude: those aspects of their *imagination* that they were not prepared to face” (1997:168). If he portrayed the Arabs exactly as the Europeans wanted to see them, that was because that was the only way to show the latter their own violence, which they refused to see. The violence presented onstage is a reflection of the violence concealed behind the screens. That is the only way to get behind the obscene.

As if to make sure that we get this point, Genet makes a single direct reference to the violence of the colonialists in a two-liner delivered by the Missionary: “What *can* be said with a certain amount of justice is that we were a pretext for their revolting. If not for us, if not—let’s not be afraid to say so—for our cruelty and injustice, they’d have gone under” (179). This violence is cold and cruel. It cannot be depicted with the drawings on screens of guns, flames, murdered men, and disemboweled animals. It is the arrogant malice of the audience, watching from surrounding hillsides, comfortable in their folding chairs, drinks and snacks in their hands, as they take in the spectacle of Israeli Armed Forces in its operation of “cutting the grass” in Gaza.⁷

Gaza in Your Backyard

Gaza is a planetary event. From the moment Hamas and other Palestinian groups broke through the fences surrounding Gaza, cracks quickly expanded along fault lines across the globe. On Sunday 12 May 2024, one of the aftershocks hit the university where I work: it became the scene of one of the demonstrations and counterdemonstrations that were rocking campuses across the US. I was surprised when a couple of protesters in the pro-Palestinian section of the plaza unfurled a large banner condemning the president of India Narendra Modi. At one point, I walked past the security guards to the other side of the square: behind the improvised stage, there were flags of Israel and India fluttering in the wind. When I expressed my incredulity to one of my colleagues, she mentioned the arms trade partnership between these two countries.

7. The phrase “cutting the grass” was used by the Israeli military in reference to its periodical bombardment and intrusions into the Gaza strip. There were multiple reports of the Israeli civilians observing the bloody military operations from the hilltops surrounding Gaza, reclining in lawn chairs. See, for example, Harriet Sherwood’s article published in *The Guardian* on 20 July 2014 “Israelis gather on hillsides to watch and cheer as military drops bombs on Gaza.”



Figure 3: Stanford People's University stands strong against "interfascist forces." Stanford University, 14 May 2024. (Photo by Encampment Report)

The "battle of *The Screens*," as the events surrounding the French premiere of the play came to be referred to, took place close to the end of the process of decolonization, which opened the way to the equally brutal process of recolonization.⁸ Today, Genet's play can serve as a reflective surface that captures similarities between colonized Algiers and Palestine: an Arab land captured and absorbed by a foreign power (unlike other French colonies, Algiers was administratively a district of France), decades of domination, racism, and apartheid supported by massive military and police force. And it goes from there. This process becomes visible at certain points of inflection in different parts of the world, often marked by separations and cruelties reminiscent of Genet's play. The Separation Barrier in the West Bank, the wall along the US southern border, and the charred bodies of Blackwater "contractors" suspended from the bridge in Fallujah, Iraq: while these sites are scattered across the world, the imagery is strikingly reminiscent of *The Screens*. The breakdown of partitions surrounding the Gaza camp made many jump from their lawn chairs.

On 9 May, one of the Stanford faculty members in the humanities who is also a fellow at the Hoover Institution, a right-wing think tank, published on the conservative platform *TELOSscope* the opinion piece "Higher Education after October 7: Drain the Swamp." He exceeded himself when he warned of the possibility of "an October 7–style assault along the southern border" of the United States (Berman 2024). This serves as a reminder that the conservatives in the US don't support Israel out of excess of empathy for the suffering of Jewish people in WWII. After all, only a few years ago, they remained silent and blind to the anti-Semitic chants of alt-right thugs in Charlottesville, NC. They are aware that their way of life is built upon injustices they are inflicting at home, and that these injustices have eerie similarities with the geopolitical morphology of Palestine. Occasionally,

8. See the book *La Bataille des Paravents*, edited by Lynda Bellity Peskine and Albert Dichy (1991).



Figure 4: Battle of the flags. Stanford University, 14 May 2024. (Photo by Encampment Report)

the more zealous among them let that awareness slip into the open. The main ideological takeaway of the Gaza assault is the same as the ideological message that crystalized during the long backlash to the summer of 2020 in the US: in order to remain in power, a hegemonic formation—be it class, ethnic group, or caste—first needs to learn how to tolerate its own cruelty. Their words and actions are stating their credo loud and clear: my *lifestyle* is more important than your *life*.

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