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## From ritual to performance: Ta'zieh in Iran today

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### Abstract

As a practice and experience, *ta'zieh* lies at the crossroads between ritual and performance, collective lament and recollection, literature, and folklore. Focusing on the experience of the spectator, this paper discusses *ta'zieh*'s liminal status and diverse functions in Iran today. This study is based on observations gathered during fieldwork in the fall of 2017 in Tehran (Grand Bazaar), Isfahan (Falāvarjān), and Kashan (Nushābād). By way of comparison, we further reflect on a video installation by Abbas Kiarostami presented at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 2003, which challenges common assumptions about the aesthetic and religious effectiveness of *ta'zieh*. The contrast allows us to elucidate how, by renovating ancient narrative forms, contemporary Iranian performing arts partake in the shaping of individual affects as well as communal emotions.

**Keywords:** *ta'zieh*; narrative; performance; Kiarostami; drama; arts and media

### Introduction

Mourning ceremonies and *ta'zieh* performances have been held annually in Iran since the sixteenth century, when Shia commemorations of the martyrdom of Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib—Imam Hossein—became a political instrument of national identity.<sup>1</sup> Associated with religious as much as popular beliefs, *ta'zieh* and mourning ceremonies are still used to this day to showcase values suited to the official discourse of the Islamic Republic.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, such events are also an occasion for the regime to reinstate religious-national identity, as was apparent in its propagandist promotion of mobilization among the youth during the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the story of Hossein and his martyrdom became powerful symbols of political resistance, characterized as sacred. Though primarily focused on the historical martyrdom of Hossein on October 10, 680 in Karbala, Iraq, the character of *ta'zieh* as an annual, self-sustained, popular organization has also contributed over the centuries to creating a space for gathering,

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\* The initial draft of this paper was conceived and elaborated in close dialogue with Christian Biet, whose friendship and mentorship has contributed in many ways to shaping my own work throughout the years. After he passed away in July 2020, it was no easy task to take up the pen and finalize this article on my own. Despite some minor differences in views, Christian Biet's ideas and insights on *ta'zieh* remain essential to this piece, yet I take full responsibility for any changes in the final version.

<sup>1</sup> Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama*. For annual performances of *ta'zieh* since the sixteenth century, see Anderson, "A Deluge of Tears: The Conflux of Persian Shi'i Literature, Ritual, and Identity in Martyrdom Narratives."

<sup>2</sup> Hegland, "Two Images of Husein: Accommodation and revolution in an Iranian village."

<sup>3</sup> Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala*.

debate, and public exchange.<sup>4</sup> While other gatherings are strictly regulated or downright forbidden in the current political circumstances, these ceremonies provide a space for ephemeral collectivities to emerge, partaking in the shaping and tightening of the social fabric. Throughout a period of about ten days, these events engage individuals in the creation of social connections and exchanges without the need for special approval and with the authorities' full agreement. As such, the sacred dimension of these events functions as a shield covering all manner of secular exchanges and interactions happening outside the official subject of the gathering: on such occasions, the sacred protects the profane.<sup>5</sup>

With its symbolic aesthetics and coded theatrical language, *ta'zieh* leaves an important space for audience participation, to the extent that people regularly propose technical and artistic innovations for the performance.<sup>6</sup> Even as spectators, they may spontaneously intervene in the show, be it to offer water to the actors or to stand and speak in defense of the Imam, in a strong identification process. As in other traditional forms of performance, socio-political circumstances play an important role in the very conception and experience of *ta'zieh*; in this regard, society intervenes to modify the ritual act, gearing the event towards a form of social and performative drama.<sup>7</sup> Based on these considerations, and inspired by several recent studies on such ceremonies, our contribution offers an anthropological view of *ta'zieh* from a performance studies' perspective.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, we consider *ta'zieh* in its theatrical dimension—comparable to some extent to its Arabic counterpart, *masrah*—as much as its performative qualities in Ashura ceremonies in a broader sense, including the various ways in which audience participation is involved.

Much like medieval European mystery plays and other religious dramatic forms, Ashura ceremonies and *ta'zieh* are deeply rooted in the urban space.<sup>9</sup> Based on a single, eminent religious narrative and diversely performed according to local traditions, it constitutes a major, living component of Shia Muslim heritage across—and beyond—Iran.<sup>10</sup> *Ta'zieh* relies on a series of narrative sequences brought together to compose a spectacular show, variously sumptuous and elaborate depending on the location and resources available. It is grounded in well-established conventions determining relations between the social and religious spheres, as well as the fluid interactions between the actors (typically, non-professionals) and audience, whose emotional, if codified, response can be considered integral to the show.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, and due to the fact that performances typically take place in open spaces accessible to all, the specific embodiment of the narrative in *ta'zieh* appears to reflect a particular kind of “popular” ritual.<sup>12</sup> To this day, the staging of this special type of performance remains a key event in the religious calendar, as well as in traditional urban celebrations, whereby a city reinstates and memorializes its own identity and traditions.<sup>13</sup>

Numerous studies have established the characteristics of *ta'zieh*, both in its historical context and current condition.<sup>14</sup> While drawing on this wide body of scholarship, our paper

<sup>4</sup> Biet, “Du Ta'zieh à Shirin, cérémonie, pathos et performance des regards.” For the historical martyrdom of Hussein, see Chelkowski, “Ta'zieh, the Total Drama.”

<sup>5</sup> Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane*.

<sup>6</sup> For *ta'zieh*'s symbolic aesthetics, see Ansary Petty, “The Ta'ziyeh of the Martyrdom of Hussein.” For its coded theatrical language, see Esmaili, “Les éléments scéniques du Ta'ziye : statut et sens.”

<sup>7</sup> See Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and anti-structure*; Schechner and Schuman, *Ritual, Play, and Performance*.

<sup>8</sup> Recent studies include Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*; Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala*; and Dabashi, “Ta'zieh as Theater of Protest.”

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Mamnoon, “Ta'ziyeh from the Viewpoint of Western Theatre,” 154–166.

<sup>10</sup> On *ta'zieh* outside Iran, see, e.g., Jafri, “Muharram Ceremonies in India,” 222–227.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Dayani's remarkable analysis in “Ta'ziyeh and Social Jouissance: ‘Beyond the Pleasure’ of Pain in Islamic Passion Play and Muharram Ceremonies.”

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Calmard, “Popular Shi'ī Mourning Rituals.”

<sup>13</sup> For the staging of this type of performance, see Schechner and Schuman. *Ritual, Play, and Performance: Readings in the Social Sciences / Theatre*.

<sup>14</sup> Classic studies include Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Irān*; Calmard, “Le culte de l'Imām Husayn: étude sur la commémoration du drame de Karbalā dans l'Iran pré-safavide”; and Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*.

focuses more specifically on the phenomenology of reception. Based on fieldwork observations carried out in three cities in Iran in the fall of 2017 (1396 h.q.), we center the audience experience to trace the particular kind of gaze elicited by *ta'zieh* performance, which aims to arouse emotions in the spectator unique to this genre. What kind of affects does this art evoke in the public, and to what end? More specifically, how does the staging and embodiment of an ancestral religious narrative consistently succeed in generating, even in contemporary, urban audiences, such a strong sense of community? As our inquiry suggests, *ta'zieh*'s lasting efficiency resides as much in the ritualistic components of its setup as the remarkable versatility of its forms, which are amenable to new technologies and secularized responses.

### **Ta'zieh as “social drama”**

Some rituals take the form of a fictional game. In this regard, modern rituals are often said to stand in a kind of in-between or liminal position, whereby the attitudes, gestures, and postures involved in the performance display some degree of ambivalence with respect to the system of signifiers to which they relate.<sup>15</sup> Owing to their dramatic and symbolic power, modern rituals retain the ability to restore and stabilize the community, yet rely on a characteristic split consciousness with regard to their own enactment: an awareness that the signifiers presented are indeed a performance. Of particular relevance is Victor Turner's notion of “social drama,” which accounts for the paradox constituting modern rituals as outwardly smooth, seamless performances when, in fact, they are the product of complex, conflicting discontinuities within the social fabric.<sup>16</sup> In the case of *ta'zieh*, the oscillation between belief and disbelief, adhesion and estrangement, determines the reception of the ritual itself in an audience at times so large it can amount to several thousands of people.

Participants in social drama perform in a ritualized manner, in a way that also makes it apparent to the public that they are performing. Thus, their actions take on a reflexive dimension, “where interaction is as immediate and spontaneous” with social consequence for the audience, simultaneously a gathering of individuals and a community of citizens.<sup>17</sup> From this standpoint, we can think of such social drama in terms of “social interactions” capable of uniting a particular community around a ritual, aesthetic, or social proposition.<sup>18</sup> Offering a performance to the community means bringing people together and allowing value judgements in the religious, aesthetic, or political sphere to be expressed. There ensues a strong sense of solidarity in the community, which at once offers and receives recognition, while comforting and validating its communal values. For the same reason, however, such rituals are also always at risk of creating divisions, confirming breaches already present in society by bringing them to the fore. In this paper, we record the processes of social integration and the effects of distancing, disruption, and adjustment inseparable from ritual-artistic performances in their reception by spectator-participants.

Modern rituals pose the question of the tensions between religious and secular mediums of performance. In *ta'zieh*, ritual is integral to the social sphere. It partakes in a social and

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Among more recent studies, see Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama*; Darmagnac, “Le Tazieh”; Babak Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*; Biet, “Du Tazieh à Shirin”; and Khajehi and Najand, “Le *ta'zieh*: à la croisée de l'histoire, de la religion et du théâtre.”

<sup>15</sup> In Europe, mysteries and passion plays were proscribed by the Church in the mid-sixteenth century, which led the genre to die out, at least in its original, liturgic function.

<sup>16</sup> Turner defines performance as a type of activity, mentioning the term's structuralist definition before reducing it to its most basic, etymological definition: the accomplishment of a “deed or act” considered from the point of view of process, which underlines the primordial importance of the temporal dimension of the action. See Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and anti-structure*.

<sup>17</sup> Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> The notion of “social interactions” was coined by Goffman in *The presentation of self in everyday life*. See also his chapter “On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction.”

aesthetic process immediately directed by its religious component, and from its very foundations. As long suspected but only recently demonstrated by Paul Anderson in his thoroughly researched dissertation, *ta'zieh's* strong Islamic framework also draws on ancient paradigms derived from Zoroastrian myths: this reminiscence, grounded in what Anderson calls “memory relics,” coalesces for viewers into a strong sense of community.<sup>19</sup> Bahram Beyzai references the visual evidence of a pre-Islamic mourning ceremony in a fresco near Samarkand dating from the third century BCE, mentioned in Alexandre Mongait's *Archéologie en URSS*.<sup>20</sup> The fresco depicts men and women mourning a deceased, who can be seen in the background, beating their chests and heads as a sign of grief. It is believed the scene may depict a mourning ceremony for Siavash—the mythical hero known chiefly from Zoroastrian texts, yet likely of earlier origin—known to have been held annually in early spring. If its antiquity was to be confirmed, this ritual's structuring function in collective memory and social imagination might even be established on a far wider scale.<sup>21</sup>

In *ta'zieh*, the ritual, understood in its social function as the embodied reenactment of one decisive mythical-religious event, is meant to trigger collective responses of mourning, compassion, and recognition in the audience. In this respect, one could go so far as to say that *ta'zieh* functions like a collective performance by the audience itself. Yet, the ritual is performed much like a theater play. While affecting the participants as a ritual does, it also allows for an altogether theatrical—even playful—distancing to take place, much like a secular performance. In other words, *ta'zieh* is as much a ritual as it is a form of social entertainment, as it involves a complex set of social interactions between the spectator and the performance, the spectators in the audience and those partaking in the ritual, and among the spectators themselves. During the *ta'zieh*, people in attendance observe one another, exchange with one another, and at times flirt or police one another while the performance is taking place. From this standpoint, *ta'zieh* presents a special case of “theater” as truly “liminal,” in other words: specific to cultural performance. As the reenactment of an original crisis, which tells the story of defeat, sacrifice, mourning, and exile, *ta'zieh* belongs to the realm of the ritual. Yet, at the same time, it is also a cultural and artistic event. *Ta'zieh's* “liminal” nature lies precisely in its oscillation between the “serious” framework of social ritual and the “playfulness” of artistic experimentation.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to medieval European mysteries and passion plays, *ta'zieh* finds its starting point as a religious narrative that unfolds in consecutive scenes. Identified after Szondy as *Stationendrama*, the passion of Christ was narrated in a series of discrete units in which each “station” corresponds to a moment in Christ's agony.<sup>23</sup> These sequences in the religious narrative also appear with distinctive figurative features in premodern Christian art and architecture, whether depicted in the murals or stained glass of the churches or translated as a sequence of movements on the linear scores of sacred music. In much the same way, *ta'zieh* presents a case of translation from the narrative to the figurative, from *diegesis* to *mimesis*, while still retaining an overarching narrative structure. In this regard, *ta'zieh* can be described as a passion play based on the martyrdom narratives of its holy characters,

<sup>19</sup> See Anderson, “A Deluge of Tears: The Conflux of Persian Shi'i Literature, Ritual, and Identity in Martyrdom Narratives.” The cult of Siavash, a mythical Zoroastrian hero and a martyr, developed in pre-Islamic times as a ritual collective mourning ceremony featuring good and evil as two opposite cosmological poles. The myth was, to a large extent, repurposed in Shia Islam in the representation of the battle of Karbala, with the forces of good embodied by Siavash/Hossein and identified by green costumes (the color of Islam), and the evil forces of Yazid draped in red. The color black is a figure of mourning, while also reminiscent of Siavash's black horse.

<sup>20</sup> Mongait, *Archéologie en URSS*.

<sup>21</sup> This hypothesis deserves in-depth attention and, as such, is at the heart of our ongoing project, which traces the circulation of ancient theatrical traditions across the Greek and Persian worlds and their legacy in the early modern Middle Eastern scene.

<sup>22</sup> See Dartiguenave, “Rituel et liminarité.”

<sup>23</sup> See Szondy, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*.

whose fate arouses intense emotions and a sense of mourning in the community. While comic *ta'zieh*, or *ta'zieh* ridiculing the Imam's enemies, are historically attested, the genre clearly evolved towards a more serious, even solemn register, akin to the Arabic *maqtal* (martyrdom narrative).<sup>24</sup> Out of the (roughly) two hundred different topics dealt with in *ta'zieh*, including the many versions brought to performance by anonymous authors, most relate to the family of Prophet Muhammad or that of his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. Today, however, *ta'zieh* is predominantly known as the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hossein.

As such, *ta'zieh* is a complex phenomenon to study. On the one hand, *ta'zieh* is the result of a transfer from religious narrative to the figurative representation of an embodied experience divided into sequences with a beginning, middle, epic acme (the battle), and end (death, defeat, and exile). In this regard, the transition from a ritualized religious ceremony to a sung, ornate, and declamatory performance is remarkable, as it maintains the various stages of what performance anthropology identifies as the "liminal" character of such transitions from ritual to performance. Finally, *ta'zieh* representations are framed by a series of concomitant events such as parades, processions, gift exchanges, celebrations, or even speeches commemorating local religious figures or respected families to which the ceremony is dedicated. Through such events, the community comes together with a fervor at once ritualized and spectacularized. In Falāvārjān, we observed that the narrative sequences of *ta'zieh* were interrupted by local trade processions as a mark of reverence for Hossein. These interventions are not a part of the *ta'zieh* as such, but they consistently escort and introduce it, and at times even disrupt it. The accretion of moving parts is a good reminder that *ta'zieh* cannot be fully understood through even the most careful, meticulous description of the many generic, stylistic, social, and even political dimensions it involves. The scholar cannot dispense a mindful assessment, in every instance, of the context in which *ta'zieh* is performed. Indeed, although the representation of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein lies at the center and acme of the ritualized performance, any serious discussion of the event must also consider the busy months of preparation preceding the performance, together with its parades, marketing of souvenir artefacts, ceremonies in the mosques and streets, or the many votive teas and meals served in public squares. Similarly, the performance is often followed by commemorative gatherings and meals, and later by the sale or donation of DVD video montages of what the cameras and drones captured of the show. It is as though the narrative spilled out and extended beyond the frame, as though to mirror its own effects.

The dramatic potential of the Karbala events in *ta'zieh* is, of course, grounded in their very nature, which is based on action, just like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the stories of which likely contributed to the birth of such traditional Iranian dramatic forms as *naqqali* or *pardeh-khani*. The epic dimension of *ta'zieh*—itself likely influenced by the *Shahnameh* and the mythical lore it draws upon—also brings elements of theatricality to the ceremony, reaching its peaks when pathos, nurtured by religious fervor, takes center stage. As such, the initial religious narrative becomes a matrix producing dramatic twists and turns, and through which the audience experiences a set of intense emotions. In addition to the reference-text of *ta'zieh* ceremonies—i.e., Hossein Vā'ez-e Kāshefi's *Rowzat ol-shohadā*, composed in the sixteenth century—the major historical and dramatic elements of the narrative are found in Arabic accounts such as the eighth-century *Maqtal al-Husayn* by Abu Mikhnaf and later records describing and documenting the battle of Karbala.<sup>25</sup> Such accounts provide a background of the events and include vivid details of the battle, in addition to recreating dialogue between the protagonist and imagining a setup evocative of "stage directions." For instance, in the section on the eve of Ashura, one finds a description of the Imam's famous nocturnal

<sup>24</sup> See Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Irān*; Rezvani, *Le théâtre et la danse en Iran*.

<sup>25</sup> This paper does not address the debates surrounding the authenticity of these narratives; it focuses on their dramatic characteristics instead.

gathering: “[...] Hossein gathered his friends together and said [...] ‘Know that we know our fate tomorrow, I release you from your oath, the night stretches its veil, you can ride a horse and go.’”<sup>26</sup> In this passage, Hossein predicts his army’s bloody defeat and addresses each of his friends by the glorious name of martyr, *shahid*.<sup>27</sup> Just like its Greek counterpart, *martyros*, the word *shahid* in Arabic also carries the meaning of “witness.” There are several interpretations of this appellation in the literary and religious fields: he who, by dying for his faith, bears witness to the existence of God; he who is seen by God and his angels; or he who is eternally alive, and bears witness to history on behalf of God.

In the context of *ta’zieh* and its theatricality, however, the mention of “witness” activates yet another connotation: the *shahid* is at once he who “observes” the martyrdom of the champions of faith in the name of God and he who “watches” the event. Ultimately, the martyr is he who both watches and is watched simultaneously. In this sense, the ceremony is a performance by both the “actors” and the spectators, who stand witness to one another’s emotions and, in a sense, help one another to engage emotionally with the collective performance. Thus, though the actors are primarily in the service of the sacred narrative they reenact, and identified with their role, they are also considered the skilled artisans of the performance, with distinct qualities as actors, singers, horsemen, and so on. Ultimately, the performance of *ta’zieh* actors cannot unfold outside an active interplay with the audience.

### Three fields of study: Tehran, Isfahan, and Kashan

As we have seen, the movements and transitions of *ta’zieh* are many: from narrative to figuration, from ritual to performance, from the time of performance to the framing of the show by other social events, and from the event itself to its filming and the heuristic device of the installation. These movements are organized along a linear temporal axis that includes the month of Moharram, the day(s) of the performance, the unfolding of the *ta’zieh* itself, and the political, artistic, and even commercial consequences of the event. Ultimately, these factors determine an act of observation that concerns not only the performance of a religious narrative, but a series of social, aesthetic, political, and religious phenomena.

In our endeavor to study this complex, multi-faceted object, we chose to focus on three types of *ta’zieh* performed in Iran in the latter part of Moharram in 2017. The first took place outside the main entrance of the Grand Bazaar in Tehran: it was performed under a tent and presented over several days, as the representation covers the full story of Hossein’s martyrdom. The second was located in Isfahan and Falāvārjān, a locality of Isfahan. Working on this particular field allowed us to understand how *ta’zieh* unfold in districts observant of traditional ceremonies, offerings, and religious gatherings. It also allowed for the differences with instances of non-professional, if ritualized, amateur *ta’zieh* to become apparent, as such are regularly performed every year, over the course of one day, from dawn to sunset. The third example, by contrast, is highly professional, set on the outskirts of Kashan, in Nushābād. Also performed over the course of a single day, it involved a large audience of several thousand spectators. The event was filmed in its entirety and then burned onto DVD and distributed as the film of a show.

The art of *ta’zieh* in its present form, akin to a type of passion or mystery performance, dates back to the early sixteenth century. It is a ritual, a popular and sacred ceremony specific to Shia Islam. During the month of Moharram—reminiscent for Shiites of the battle of Karbala, the killing of Hossein and his companions, and the imprisonment of his wives—Iran is in mourning: processions take over the streets, penitents beat themselves till bloody, and sounds of lament arise from everywhere. At the heart of this collective moment of

<sup>26</sup> Abū Mikhnaḥ, *Maqāt al-Husayn*, 64.

<sup>27</sup> See also Azin Mohammadali’s doctoral dissertation, “Martyrs, victimes, témoins: la violence guerrière dans le théâtre iranien depuis la révolution de 1979.”



remembrance and grief is a performance of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein. This performance is embodied by actors, often amateurs—craftsmen, shopkeepers, workers—who, after much prior rehearsal, play their part in front of a fervent and at times frantic audience, often for over four hours, before parting until the next year. The texts recited are typically in rhymed couplets, and are passed from generation to generation. In some cases, depending on the region and local traditions, the texts have been collected, often by anonymous authors, and transcribed and collected into volumes.

### **Ta'zieh, between religious ceremony, political gathering, and performance**

Iranian history, just like arts and entertainment, is thus marked by both the commemoration of a story of martyrdom and the collective emotional, ritual, and aesthetic experience it implies. History as recorded in Shia Islam is the ground that structures this spectacular “passion.” It holds that ‘Ubayd-allāh, who led the Umayyad army, met Hossein’s troops in Kerbala and demanded the Prophet’s grandson take an [oath of allegiance](#) to Yazid. Hossein was granted a grace period of one day before giving his answer. Over the course of that day, he prepared himself for battle, knowing full well that his end was near. During the battle, as his men fell one after another by the enemy’s arrows and swords, and after his horse was wounded, Hossein sat on the ground. Yet, the enemy soldiers dared not kill him, fearing responsibility for the death of Mohammed’s grandson. There, a series of pathetic sequences begin to unfold, as recounted by Shaykh Saduq (Ibn Babuyeh Qomi, tenth century), in a manner so intense that the emotion often causes the *ta'zieh* spectators to moan in chorus. The sequence culminates in the scene of the martyr’s death, which involves the intervention of a group of men reluctant to kill the Prophet’s grandson but surrounding him, until Shemr (Shimr ibn Dhil-Jawshan) at last beheads Imam Hossein.

It is based on this episode, which is central to Iranian Shia culture, that *ta'zieh* takes its shape as a ritualized theatrical genre capable of unifying the community, most often in urban centers, around a religious narrative, a bloody sacrifice, and a major event in every respect. This scene, which is one of extreme grief and suffering in the narrative, is distinguished from the other sequences by its ostensible theatricality. While the assassination of Hossein is represented, it can hardly be seen directly: the actor who plays the Imam is surrounded by a group of men, concealing him from view, each of whom partakes in the killing in a kind of collective crime. This scenic and symbolic purification leaves an important part to the spectator’s imagination. It preserves the story’s sacred dimension, abiding by the rule in Shia culture that forbids the representation of the Imam’s face and respectfully hiding his bodily suffering to preserve his honor in the eyes of the audience.

During this ritual/performance, the participants—both spectators and actors—are thus able to experience the meaning of the word *ta'zieh*, which literally means “condolence,” “consolation,” or “relief”—in particular that special kind of relief involved in visiting the bereaved after they have lost a loved one—and denotes a “commemoration of mourning.” The annual performance of this theatrical passion, which is produced for and by the city, therefore allows “relief” for the faithful, the citizens, and the actors, at least in principle. Perhaps one could speak here of a kind of religious catharsis that one joins in order to mourn, watch, commemorate, and celebrate mourning. This performance, however, does not only feature as a central episode for the religious community; indeed, year after year, it also contributes to community-building by bringing citizens together in an occasion of shared theatrical emotion. Like other urban, ancient, or medieval Iranian or European theatrical ceremonies, *ta'zieh* is therefore a passion play that brings people together, uniting them around a major historical and/or religious episode, which a certain number of “actors” represent and reenact every year. Furthermore, this narrative performance of an assassination has become something of a “classic trope” in contemporary Iranian secular theater: we can cite, for example, the treatment of the scene of the assassination of Alfred III by the inhabitants of Güllen in two recent Iranian productions of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s play

*The Visit*.<sup>28</sup> While, in the text, the inhabitants form a line to commit the murder, the Iranian directors opt for a circular configuration inspired by the staging of Hossein's assassination in *ta'zieh*.

Finally, any serious discussion of *ta'zieh* must also consider issues of space and staging, together with their framing devices, which, in our view, are part of the performance ceremony in their own right. Issues of space and staging in *ta'zieh* are indeed premised on a series of specific devices, which must be accounted for to understand and analyze the phenomenon as a whole. These specific framing devices are spatially and theoretically actualized in what is called *tekyieh*: the locus of and "scene" in which the *ta'zieh* takes place, be it a permanent space or an ephemeral structure set up in a street or courtyard. Thus, what happens both in and around the *tekyieh* is what constitutes the event, adding to the meaning and significance of the *ta'zieh* itself. After the performance has ended, the "framing" consists of a series of speeches—held, written, narrated, or filmed—celebrating the event in one way or another. As such, the media come to handle the aftermath of the event, with narratives in words or images, assessment of the actors' performance, and documenting religious and social phenomena.

Around the Grand Bazaar in Tehran in the month of Muharram, drapers and clothing shops give way to sellers of ritual objects such as: whips made of gold, silver, leather, or other materials used in penitent processions; blood-red banners inscribed with the name of Hossein to hang on a balcony or stick on the back of a car; tiny cradles containing a bloody doll with its throat pierced by an arrow, symbolizing the character of Ali Asghar; and wide leather belts to support the *'alam*—a massive iron structure that requires several people to carry and upon which votive figurines are set, representing the martyrs—in the parades. From that moment, everyone can begin to do their shopping in preparation for the event. As one enters the bazaar, the iron curtains close and one sees an *'alam* ready for its procession. In the dark streets, in the distance, groups of men (women are not allowed in the bazaar during those days) can be seen beating their chests, chanting and crying. In the center, a *noheh-khān* is chanting the story of Hossein's martyrdom in a plaintive voice, so that all can engage in one effusive and tearful ceremony. On the streets, at the crossroads, stalls are set up, decorated with blood-red banners, and tea is offered to passersby: one need only stop to get a cup. Sometimes food is offered, with or without meat, depending on the affluence of the given group. Throughout the latter part of the month, one can still see, in the religious districts of Isfahan for instance, parades of singers and instrumentalists in the mosques, singing and chanting the martyrdom of Hossein. There too, food is distributed as an offering outside. In Isfahan, among these displays of power and wealth, one can see a side street all draped in black, taken over by a crowd invited by a rich local merchant, who offers music, food, and prayers to all while also filming the event time (the man sells video equipment). Along the streets, one comes across wooden *'alams*, the figurines of which have been replaced by fire torches (*mash'al gardāni*), carried by a man alone, spinning in the middle of the crowd.

At this point, we emphasize the urban landscape of mourning in order to make clear that the performance space is not limited to the theatrical scene of the *ta'zieh*, as the audience is already engaged in this immense immersive scenography several days before the performance. Every part of the city has already been involved in mourning through spectacular demonstrations. While chanting Hossein's name, people look at one another, gauge one another, show off their strength and virtuosity, and compete, with the men showcasing their musculature in their tight black T-shirts, to the great delight of onlookers, both male and female. While the *ta'zieh* remains the centerpiece of and pretext for this set of mourning ceremonies, its theatrical and spectacular dimension rests on the countless narratives recited throughout this period in every corner of the city. With all the pathetic

<sup>28</sup> We are thinking in particular of Hamid Samandarian's 2008 version and Parsa Pirouzfar's 2019 version, both of whom are famous directors in Iran.



effects, invocations, effusions, indignations, and prayers that punctuate the narratives, together with songs accompanied by instrumental music, all participants contribute to the grand performance of a choreographed, religious narrative.

During the *ta'zieh* we attended in Falāvārjān, we noticed a first parade leading to the performance location: an open-air space in the middle of a cemetery. The parade included the *ta'zieh* actors, all in costume with their horses and camels, being whipped on the shoulders by a crowd of men. The procession was punctuated by the ritualized slaughtering of a few sheep, to the delight of the children. As form of popular theater as much as a cohesive, unifying enterprise prepared throughout the month of mourning, *ta'zieh* is a performance that brings the city together. Although its culmination comes only on the last day ('Ashura), the preparatory sequences are unfolding in the preceding ten days, and are themselves surrounded by a series of collective, religious, or plainly civic events. A ritualized continuity unfurls in this way through the discontinuous sequence of events all geared in the same direction, bringing the many discrete occurrences of the last ten days together to compose a one and the same, if double-sided, story: on the one hand, that of the death of Hossein and his followers at Karbala; and on the other, that of its collective celebration in the form of offerings, prayers, feasts, parades, and the reenactment that is *ta'zieh* proper.

By contrast, the great *ta'zieh* of Nushābād near Kashan appeared to depart quite starkly from the ritual, ceremonial, and celebratory representations in the city. Instead, it was a spectacular, well-planned, staged event that took place outside of the city. This highly theatrical and spectacular *ta'zieh* takes place every year, with much advertisement and publicity. The performance lasts for an entire day and is filmed both from the ground and above by a drone. It includes a large number of extras (about a hundred) and a variety of sets: among other sequences, we see fighting on horseback, archers shooting arrows, the burning of the martyr's camp, and the departure of the faithful eastward into exile on foot and camelback. On the day of 'Ashura, the key events of the battle of Karbala are performed until nightfall for an audience of a thousand people seated on bleachers on the sloping ground surrounding an area as large as a football field. Though far larger in scale than the aforementioned *ta'zieh* in Tehran and Isfahan, the sequence of events is, of course, maintained. In this case, however, running commentary is provided through loudspeakers throughout the show, which is introduced by an explicitly pro-regime discourse of propaganda—indeed, a few government officials can be spotted in the bleachers. Thus, we are told that the infidels draped in red are similar to the barbarians of today—Daesh—and Shia Islam will be victorious in the end. The authorized, politicized reading of the show is set up in a straightforward, didactic way, leaving no room for alternative interpretation. Yet, even in this framework, the threefold dimension of the performance/ceremony continues to operate within the same theatrical and emotional frame.

### **Text, religious narrative, epic, and representation**

The main text of the performance is composed in mixed verse drawn from heterogeneous poetic forms, testifying to the combination of genres and tones in which the epic alternates with the tragic and the lyrical alternates with the grotesque. The actors in Hossein's camp sing, following the inflections of traditional music, while the actors on the side of the "enemies" do not sing at all. Instead, they recite rhythmically, sounding war cries in high-pitched tones to challenge, provoke, insult, and curse the champions of the true faith. The male actors are equipped with a microphone for all three shows, even on horseback. One actor may play one or more characters. Performers are divided into two groups depending on whether they side with Imam Hossein or the Umayyads: the former are identified as the "oppressed" and the latter as the "adversaries." The former sing and attack their enemies from the front; the latter recite and attack from the back. The characters aligned with Hossein are most often clad in green (the color of Islam), in black, or in white (the color of martyrdom) after they are killed; while the "adversaries" are dressed in red or bright

colors. Horr, the Umayyad soldier who hovers before finally changing sides, appears in yellow (in Isfahan, he was dressed in blue, but we were told that this was because no yellow costume was available). The actors impersonating the “adversaries” typically wear extravagant costumes: Shemr, the cruel murderer of Imam Hossein, for instance, may be dressed in red from head to toe with his sleeves rolled up, as though ready to commit a violent act at any moment.<sup>29</sup>

The mix of genres, the stylization of characters, the symbolic play of colors, and even the use of trick props—such as the sword used to smash the skulls of the adversaries—are the rule. The sets are typically very basic (in Falāvarjān, a decorated box indicates Mecca, while in Nushābād, the camp of the faithful is identified by large tents), at times even non-existent, and the props usually serve a minimal emblematic or symbolic function, identifying a place or situation: a basin filled with water can symbolize the Euphrates; a handful of green branches can be an oasis; a piece of straw can represent the sand of the desert; and cotton sprinkled with sheep’s blood—or sometimes cuts of meat—can be the bloody body of the martyrs.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the dramatic codes used are typical of *ta’zieh*: a character turning on themselves means the action has changed place; circling around the stage indicates that one is traveling long distances; and one strong slap on one’s thigh denotes amazement or anger, etc.

The *ta’zieh* script is adapted from the original story by the “master” or “helper of tears” (*mo’in al-boka*), who is, in fact, the show’s director and he who converts the narrative into drama. He combines the functions of what would be referred to in Western dramatic conventions as the director, the dramatist, and the playwright. The show unfolds as the sequence of epic and religious episodes follow one another, martyrdom after martyrdom. In some instances, as we have seen, the narrative can be performed in its entirety; in this case, it is divided into ten sections and distributed over the span of ten days, culminating on the day of ‘Ashura. In other instances, however, a shorter version can be performed in one go, as was the case in Isfahan. Each performance can offer its own combination of episodes selected from the religious narrative. It is a question of devising a show by choosing the proper structure to be represented in the allotted time and with the resources available. The full narrative comprises a total of seventy-two episodes corresponding to the seventy-two martyrs, the last being the most important. However, in a conversation with a Master of Tears near Isfahan, we learned that, because it was October and the sun was setting early, there would not be enough time to represent the death of Hossein, due to the lack of light. The Master of Tears—whose presence and interventions remain essential at every stage of the *ta’zieh* he organizes, writes, and supervises—encouraged us to come again the following year or so, when the days would be longer.

These shows, which are based on a shared knowledge of religious history, typically do not strive or even aspire to replay the story in full or produce a reenactment faithful to the canonical narrative. Similarly, there is nothing realistic about them and nothing “dramatic,” according to the sense of the word in contemporary Western drama. In particular, there is no such thing as a “fourth wall.” People from the audience may walk onto the stage to take photos, film, give the actors a drink, or provide them with props, a microphone, or a chair, etc. The Master of Tears and his assistants often come on stage to prompt the performers on this or that song, to hand them a paper to read or sing from, or to ask them to rush through a section to get to the end more quickly. Yet, with all this distancing and visible intervention, the down times and music breaks, or the appearance of the beverage seller (not to mention the sprinkling of water on the audience with a hose to counter the summer heat), the spectators are still perfectly aware of what time they should cry, beat their chests, and express their emotions; in fact, they still engage with the emotional dimension of *ta’zieh*

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the actor who plays the devil, when included, is often clad in red, feminine clothes and, while performing actions of great violence, treated as a grotesque character intended to make the spectators laugh.

<sup>30</sup> Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Irān*.

most genuinely. Seen from a functional point of view, it could be said that the audience not only anticipates the proper moment to express their emotions, they also know how to get themselves into the proper state to be moved to tears, beating their chests in a cadence as one of the driving gestures. In this way, they come to produce, together as a group, a ceremony of tears elicited by the focus on death and martyrdom. The event of the *ta'zieh*, in this regard, is nothing other than the continuation of the month of mourning, brought to completion as a group, in the sharing of tears.

As such, *ta'zieh* may indiscriminately resort to professional actors or simple citizens, whether restricted to a small audience or performed in the open air in front of thirty thousand people assembled in a dedicated space—the *tekyieh*, the set up for the ceremonies of the month of Muharram in most Iranian towns and villages—or in mosques, open spaces, or even the courtyards of private houses or old caravanserais. In all such configurations, however, *ta'zieh* remains subject to the same general arrangement. From the foundational epic-religious narrative of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein, the text continues to evolve through the process of rewriting undertaken by the Master of Tears into the script of the show and, from there, to the performance of the actors and the spectators. From a set of episodes known to all, the practitioners select a chosen series of martyrs to be represented within the framework of a non-dramatic, non-realistic system that, nevertheless, produces a genuine emotional response in the audience, itself assisted by an almost automated desire to cry based on a mix of gestures, auto-suggestion, crying techniques, and more. Considered from the point of view of Western aesthetic categories, *ta'zieh* may be said to oscillate between the tragic and the pathetic, the epic and the lyrical, the comical and the burlesque. In fact, it is simultaneously proto-dramatic, in the sense that it functions as a ritualized reenactment with no attempt to hide its own conventions; candidly emotive, as it engages the spectators in an array of strong, shared emotions; and has all the characteristics of a performance. For this reason, beyond the divide between popular theater and ritualized passion, the aesthetics of *ta'zieh* as a genre can be thought of in terms of a secularization process by which the performative ritual tends towards contemporary theatrical performance to varying degrees.

In many ways, *ta'zieh* is an invitation to look back to the past; a past that is at once historical, religious, and imaginary. The recollection of this past is intended to unite present circumstances and lived experience around a shared memory, common grief, and certain notion of the sacrificial identity of the Iranian people. At that very juncture between nostalgia and battle forward, there may emerge a certain pleasure, the pleasure of the spectacle, of bodily representation—a pleasure nurtured perhaps with particular attention in Shia culture.

### **“A work of art does not exist outside the perception of the audience”: Abbas Kiarostami<sup>31</sup>**

For the above reasons, *ta'zieh* has gradually tended to become a show rather than a ceremony, although without necessarily losing its original character. It is now over fifty years since *ta'zieh* was first characterized as an “artistic form” or “traditional Iranian theater.” By way of conclusion, we now turn to an artistic piece by Abbas Kiarostami that both bears witness to and helps us conceptualize how a work of art can be at the heart of a ritual while still retaining its double function as lived experience and object of contemplation, as the beholder and the object seen.

As early as the 1970s, *ta'zieh* took on considerable importance for European directors such as Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook.<sup>32</sup> However, *ta'zieh* only really gave rise to a different type

<sup>31</sup> Kiarostami, as quoted in Jaggi, “A life in cinema: Abbas Kiarostami.”

<sup>32</sup> Such performances found their way to the Festival d'Avignon in 1991 (Peter Sellars was in attendance and his staging of *The Persians* was inspired by it) and to La Villette in 2000, where one was filmed by Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. The latter commented on it in his book *Le Diable, c'est l'ennui*, and further explored it when he became

of art through the Iranian director and visual artist Abbas Kiarostami. As is well known, Kiarostami enjoyed filming outdoors, mainly faces and individual perspectives of places and events. It is less known that he filmed a *ta'zieh* performance by focusing his lens on the audience rather than the performers. When he produced an installation on *ta'zieh* in 2003, it was no doubt intended not only to provide an account of the ritual itself, but also to consider and question it from a distance by reinvesting it with the notion of installation and performance characteristic of the aesthetics of Western avant-garde.

Kiarostami's work on photography and the illusory and illusionistic presence of reality is well known, alongside his experimentation in varied perspectives and viewpoints, the audience's diffraction based on its homogeneity and heterogeneity, and his questioning of the role of the audience in relation to image, sound, imagination, history, and fable. Kiarostami's piece, *Looking at tazieh*, was first presented at the India Theatre in Italy in 2003 in a front-facing installation with screens situated above the spectators.<sup>33</sup> It was later shown in Paris at the Théâtre de la Bastille in 2006, then at Beaubourg in 2007, together with the exhibition *Correspondances* set up in collaboration with Victor Erice.

Kiarostami had a clear taste for reflexive devices that stage and question the relationship between fiction and reality within the framework of the medium employed, be it cinema, installation, or photography. Thus, using giant screens located on either side of a small video console broadcasting the recording of a *ta'zieh* performance, he was able to shift the audience's gaze from the ceremony itself to the immense crowd of spectators in attendance. In so doing, he was interrogating the performance's cathartic, or at least emotional, dimension by means of a cinematographic device. The images of the faces are in black and white, while the *ta'zieh* performance is captured in color. The sound, however, corresponds to the recording of the full event, and thus, mainly, of the show.

The installation works in the following way: the European spectators face a central console (small, with image and sound) through which they often discover art previously unknown to them. The small console is surrounded by two giant screens showing the reactions of the female spectators (to the left) and the male spectators (to the right) during the *ta'zieh* performance. The spectators, in this case Parisians, are thus watching a filmed story of the performance: the Persian audience settles down chatting, as they begin to watch and take interest in the performance, until they gradually allow themselves to give in to the emotion. Throughout the course of the filmed narrative, we watch the Persian spectators come to feel the strength of their own gaze before the power of the performance, to the point where the entire audience, now united as one, bursts into tears in what has become a ceremony of mourning, commemoration, and, owing to the tears, relief and compassion. Thus, the pathos emerges from the relationship between the onlookers' gaze and the actors' performance, but also from among the spectators watching themselves and their own emotions. In this regard, Kiarostami's installation offers an efficient rendering of the complex theatrical event that gives rise to such a ceremony of tears. While it may be argued that some cathartic effect underlies the process of crying and grieving while watching, it becomes impossible to consider the event as a whole as a mere purging of passions. Quite to the contrary, in fact, the installation reveals how the *ta'zieh* setup is meant to excite and express passions, making them infinitely visible in their sheer multiplication.

The sobbing thus becomes a matter of contamination rather than purgation, in the sense that emotions and their outward expression are made to circulate and spread, physically and mechanically. They even cross the divide between men and women, the divide made apparent in the installation through the separation of screens—the men being shown on the left while the women appear on the right. Bridging the distance between the two screens, these

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interested in Iranian poetry and plays (see his 1979 staging of Farid al-Din 'Attār's *Conference of the Birds* in Avignon, as well as his 1970 staging of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Stratford-upon-Avon). See Brook, Carasso and Lallias, *Le Diable, c'est l'ennui. Propos sur le théâtre*.

<sup>33</sup> See also Rahimi, "The question of audience in Abbas Kiarostami's *A Look to Ta'zieh*."

emotions end up reuniting the spectators in the same outpour. It is as though, beyond the screens' division, the filmed sequences' discontinuity, and the audience's fragmentation into distinct, moving faces, a new continuity and cohesion could appear. In this setup, the installation spectators are summoned to participate. Even from a distance, they come to reflect on the fact that *ta'zieh*—thus filmed, cut out, and reunited in the ceremony of tears—can indeed become an instrument of religious and social cohesion. In so doing, Kiarostami's installation poses the following questions: What is at stake in this cohesion of tearful effusion, this exacerbated concentration of feelings produced by a performance that, to all appearances, is conventional and unprofessional? Where do these tears draw their power from? Why are these people, gathered to attend a performance ceremony, crying? To address these questions requires the audience to take distance from the commemoration itself in order to shift their attention to the spectators in the ritual gathering and the incipient emotion perceptible in their gaze.

At this moment, the ritual is aestheticized and problematized based on the gaze cast on the show, and the film operator's focus on this gaze. It is as though the ecclesial ritual, after its mission is accomplished (gathering the people of the city around a religious and political representation, potentially in the service of a particular religious and political agenda), is re-divided into discrete instances and emotions appreciable with some critical, analytic distance. At the same time, the installation spectator, caught up in the mechanism of observation, may well become fascinated and moved in turn. Yet, the mere physical and cultural distance of the Parisian spectator—so far removed from the original event, which they consider from the perspective of their own circumstances (from abroad, in a theater or museum) and through the medium of the installation—allows them to be both touched by the emotions on the screen and see them as an aesthetic event. At the Théâtre de la Bastille or Beaubourg, Kiarostami's work is, after all, labeled a “contemporary installation.” What is at stake, therefore, is an artistic moment based on a shift in evaluation and perception. In other words, a shift from a civic, religious, and political event to an artistic one; one mindful of the original civic event only to displace it in a way such that it can be observed and appreciated for its own sake. It is a similar movement that allowed *ta'zieh* to be considered in Iran, prior to the 1979 Revolution, as a popular and fervent performance and, at the same time, a form of aesthetic avant-garde. It is only from such a distance that one may appreciate the performance together with its reception, the communion together with the emotional contamination, and be able to evaluate them in aesthetic and even artistic terms. Only then does it become possible to scrutinize the reactions, the looks, the faces, and the emotions displayed as signs and responses removed from any added religious and political message. Thus tears, the most communicative and visible of emotions, become analyzable, thinkable, and moving all at once.

So long as it fulfills its role as a civic and cohesive ceremony, *ta'zieh* has nothing to fear today, as it can be said to cohere with current Iranian politics. Yet, no performance can ever be entirely disciplined. The emotions *ta'zieh* provokes are manifested and expressed physically. They may at any moment overflow the ceremony's religious and political basis. In that moment, tears are nothing other than pure emotion: ultimately, that may well be what Kiarostami's installation best demonstrates. Framed or unframed, controlled or overflowing, on veiled faces or unveiling glances, emotions are expressed. Some hope can be seen in this shared emotion, the deep feelings inscribed on everyone's face and overflowing glances, at least in the way that it is filmed, framed and unframed, edited and dismantled through the eyes of the artist filming, and who all these faces point to.

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