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Aesthetic Witnessing: Mazen Kerbaj's *Starry Night*

*night of the 15th to the 16th
recording session*

mazen kerbaj / trumpet vs the israeli government / bombs¹

With these words, musician and cartoonist Mazen Kerbaj posts online a track recorded during the Israeli bombing of Lebanon in July 2006. Sitting on his balcony in Sin el-Fil, a suburb in the northeast part of Beirut, Kerbaj responds to the detonation sounds of the airstrikes with a free improvisation on his prepared trumpet. The acoustic backdrop of the action is the soundscape of Beirut at night, featuring nocturnal insects as well as sounds following in the wake of the explosions: car alarms, ambulance sirens, and the barking of dogs. The posting – an excerpt from a 40-minute session recorded that night – is a 6.31-minute track titled *Starry Night*. Posted on the website of a friend, it is addressed to everyone out there and widely circulated right away².

In the following discussion of Kerbaj's piece, I will show how the piece's being a certain distinctive kind of action, an aesthetic action, facilitates a communication that serves the specific political aim of witnessing the war. An action is aesthetic if, rather than fulfilling the determinate concept of this or that, as non-aesthetic or historical action does, it fulfills the concept of an indeterminacy. An indeterminacy is achieved by per-

¹ <http://warkerblog.blogspot.co.uk>. The full announcement on July 20, 2006 reads: "*Starry Night (excerpt) / A minimalist improvisation by: / Mazen Kerbaj/trumpet / The Israeli Air Force/bombs / Recorded by Mazen Kerbaj on the balcony of his flat in Beirut, / On the night of the 15th to the 16th of July 2006*".

² The intention was to circulate the piece as widely as possible across the internet, as with other entries and drawings from that time. Today, the posting next to some audience responses is found on Kerbaj's original blog: <http://mazenkerblog.blogspot.com/2006/07/other-websites.html>. A drawing associated with the recording – a player whose nose is a trumpet, on a balcony, against a night sky and large explosions that figure as stars – references Van Gogh's painting *Starry Night*.

forming the action under more than one first-personal description – the conceptual articulation that lies in the performer’s intention – at once, so that the overall action remains unresolved; the concepts or descriptions are not parts that together contribute to the overall action but its aspects, competing renderings of the action as a whole. The ambiguity between them presents an aspectual irresolution, of which the action’s overall indeterminacy consists. Because nothing in the concept of an aesthetic indeterminacy determines the way the indeterminacy is brought about, each such action is a logical singularity, which means that its conceptual articulation is not available independently of its execution.

On this conception, an action generally is the actualization of the human form, of that which Marx calls our “genus-being” (*Gattungswesen*). Instead of actualizing the human form determinately, as non-aesthetic or historical action would, aesthetic action actualizes the form as an indeterminacy. Because an indeterminacy is an actualization of the human form that (due to its aspectual makeup) cannot be resolved, such action does not rely on the form as a given the way historical action does, but instead, as I put this, it presents the form as a question. And if historical action unites its bearers in recognitive relations of a determinate sort (doing this or that together) aesthetic action does something altogether different: it joins its performers in a bond without terms, renders them indeterminate for one another, and therein forces them to wonder and figure out anew what it might mean to be the bearers of such a form³.

Kerbaj’s Piece as an Aesthetic Action

In Kerbaj’s piece, importantly, the aesthetic action is not primarily the piece performed during the session – as one might think following the convention of recording a concert or jam session – but the act of publishing the track online. The communication between trumpet and bombs is a staged exchange that, posted as a track, makes up Kerbaj’s communication with his audience. That is, we consider playing in response to the bombs, making the recording, and posting the track as a single unified act of communication.

We see why this is so when we locate the aspectual irresolution that constitutes the action as aesthetic: the sounds are of bombing and trumpet playing that are related once in their historical actuality (aspect one),

³ I present this conception in *Aesthetic Action*, forthcoming from Stanford University Press. The present discussion of Kerbaj’s *Starry Night* is a slightly expanded version of the discussion of the piece offered in that book.

and once in their aesthetic actuality (aspect two), a jam session that in turn features its own, sublevel aspectual irresolution.

The main aspectual irresolution runs from the action of sounding the trumpet while Beirut is being bombed (the historical situation that joins pilots and trumpeter) to putting both actions together in a piece where they relate differently, sound differently (the staged session that joins pilots and trumpeter as partners in improvisation). Kerbaj uses the pilots' actions as readymades taken from their historical context and redeployed in an aesthetic one, and this operation of redeployment marks the aesthetic distinction of his action⁴. The historical sounds are transformed, and the recording makes us hear both in an aspectual side-by-side: We cannot let go of hearing the bombs as bombs, but neither can we refuse to hear what the jam session with the trumpet makes of them. And we hear both the trumpet in the nonstaged historical situation of the bombing, and the staged interaction that renders trumpet and detonations as one piece⁵.

When we next look at the staged interaction that makes up the aesthetic aspect of that side-by-side, we note that it consists of a sublevel aspectual irresolution that constitutes the interaction as aesthetic: Kerbaj's playing the trumpet and recasting the bombs as interlocutors in a jam session goes into the overall aesthetic action as a sublevel aesthetic action. Here, in the piece audible on the track to which trumpet and bombing sounds contribute equally as material, the constitutive aspectual irresolution may run, say, between rendering sounds or rendering silence, making now one, now the other the primary material of the performance, such that the latter is either sound interrupted by silence, or silence interrupted by sound: neither of the ways of hearing the piece can be either dismissed or subsumed to the other⁶.

Putting both communications together, we consider the resulting communication about this jam session the main aesthetic action that is shared with the audience as the track. The constitutive aspectual irresolution, again, is between Kerbaj's action in the staged aesthetic encounter with the pilots and his action in the nonstaged historical encounter with the pilots. The irresolution is between historical action and aesthetic action.

⁴ We call the jam session *staged*, not *fictional*, to point to the fact that the bombing sound figures as a readymade – even as the *reciprocity* between player and pilot that is implied in a jam session is fictional.

⁵ As Kerbaj says, his fellow players in Berlin and Amsterdam produce some of the same sounds, but no one hears the sound of helicopters or bombs in them. This is not simply because he is in Beirut, but because he unifies these things in aesthetic action. In interview with Petr Slabý of Agosto Foundation, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/191117628>.

⁶ For an account of the track as a piece of music, see J. Solheim, *The Performance of Listening in Postcolonial Francophone Culture*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2018.

Juxtaposing both indeterminately, *Starry Night* not only unsettles our form and presents it as a question, but it also exhibits the aesthetic distinction as such.

The Two Aspects of the Piece

In aspectually juxtaposing historical and aesthetic action, that is, Kerbaj uses the overall form of an aesthetic action to make explicit the difference between both. Still, the aesthetic distinction is not as such the aim of this communication, but it is instrumental in bringing about the aim, which is political and thus shows how an aesthetic action is put to use in action at large. As Kerbaj's blog of the time leaves no doubt, the aim of his action is to witness the war⁷. Clearly, Kerbaj's sort of witnessing doesn't represent historical actuality, but it transforms that actuality into an aesthetic actuality based in aspectual irresolution. How then is witnessing the war facilitated by the aspectual irresolution between Kerbaj's historical and Kerbaj's aesthetic action?

As for the historical aspect, nothing about this encounter is common, for it involves a violent threat to the life of the performer, a threat of physical annihilation, in his exposure to the air strikes, standing on his Beirut balcony on the night of June 15th, 2006⁸. The trumpeter's body does not stand for life under the war, refer to life under the war, but it *is* this life in its unmitigated exposure to the threat. Kerbaj's balcony is hardly analogous to the situations in which artists must commonly be assumed to make their work. In fact, the reason we don't know anything about those situations is that they are not conceptually relevant to their pieces. But the trumpeter's physical exposure belongs conceptually to what his action is; it is a constitutive part of the witnessing, and as such is included in the communication by way of the inscription posted along with the track that was our opening quotation.

As for the aesthetic aspect, Kerbaj's witnessing also involves a transformation of the power to act – more precisely, a transformation of his exposure to the threat into aesthetic empowerment. By replacing, as part of the aspectual synthesis, historical with aesthetic action, the passivity of being acted upon by the bombing is countered by the activity of turning on the pilots by casting them in a readymade: You can bomb me, and

⁷ This is the overall project outlined on Kerbaj's blog of the time, under which the blog's diverse engagements can be summarized.

⁸ "Some bombs were really close," Kerbaj writes; see R. El Kadi, *Satirical Illustrations and Militant Improvisations: A Multimodal Social-Semiotic Analysis of Mazen Kerbaj's War-time Art*, in "Popular Music and Society", vol. 40, n. 2, 2017, p. 9.

there is nothing I can do about this⁹, but you cannot determine how I will respond. In fact, let me respond by turning your bombing into something else¹⁰. The historical actuality of being bombed without having any power to act in effective response is transformed into the aesthetic actuality of responding to the bombs, and the bombs' taking part in one's play, and recovering a power to act that is transformative. It transforms being-acted-upon into acting.

This is how the aspects each contribute to Kerbaj's witnessing, and there is a sense in which they remain in raw juxtaposition – mutually irreconcilable accounts of the actuality of the war that could not outside of this aesthetic action be joined in a single account. We must now see how witnessing, through the work of the aspects, is manifested on the level of Kerbaj's action as a whole.

Witnessing the War

When we ask what sort of politics informs Kerbaj's action as that for the sake of which it is undertaken, we may find that a politics of difference offers itself in a variety of ways¹¹ – in particular, the situation could be framed as a postcolonial one – but we also note the distance free improvisation keeps from any action that treats determinate identities as politically relevant and explicitly builds from them¹². If, conversely,

⁹ "I can do nothing to even protect myself" reads a blog entry for July 20, 2006, recorded in Kerbaj's, *Beirut Won't Cry: Lebanon's July War: A Visual Diary*, Fantagraphics Underground, Seattle 2019. The entry "Before the war, it was the war. After the war, it is still the war" was used as title of a sound installation at Bundesallee Berlin, in the context of Maerzmusik, Berlin 2016.

¹⁰ David McNeill notes that *Starry Night* "plays on the notion of 'collaboration' so dear to improvising musicians. The Israeli pilots were unwitting partners in the production of a cultural artifact that bears witness to the indomitable nature of Lebanese culture, thereby inverting the more common understanding of the term 'collaborator' as one who conspires against his or her own people. Here, it is the Israeli pilots that betray their masters by assisting Lebanese resistance to their own attempts at intimidation" (David McNeill in his catalog essay for the Mazen Kerbaj and Khaled Sabsabi exhibition titled "of middle eastern appearance"; compare R. El Kadi, *Satirical Illustrations*, cit., p. 17).

¹¹ Some examples of such ways are found in J. Solheim, *op. cit.*; Y. Nachabe Taan, *Blogging in Times of War: The July 2006 War in Lebanon and Mazen Kerbaj Imaging the Unimaginable*, in T. Prorokova, N. Tal (ed.), *Cultures of War in Graphic Novels: Violence, Trauma, and Memory*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2018; R. El Kadi, *Free Improvised Music in Postwar Beirut: Differential Sounds, Intersectarian Collaborations, and Critical Collective Memory*, in *Playing for Keeps: Improvisation in the Aftermath*, ed. by D. Fischlin, E. Porter, Duke University Press, Durham 2020.

¹² "The good thing about [free improvised music] is you can take it wherever you want in the world and totally make it your own. It has zero identity. Its identity is your identity as an *individual*, not even as a Lebanese" (Kerbaj in interview from August 15, 2008); see

we try to frame Kerbaj's piece in terms of a genus politics that concerns the planetary perspective of humanity as a whole, we note that while such a perspective indeed plays a certain role for the piece (as we will see in a moment), access to the bond of humanity would mean that an encounter between performers according to its basic possibility can be assumed, whereas Kerbaj's action, quite in a different register where no such presuppositions can be made, appeals to the bond in order to solicit an encounter.

We might thus say that Kerbaj's *Starry Night* manifests a politics of life *as such*: concerned neither with our genus as a whole nor with our determinate differences, but with the activity of life considered by itself – a bond without terms between the performers that manifests a shared actualization of our form as an indeterminacy; a singular instantiation of the activity of life that is otherwise instantiated in the historical concepts of doing this or that together, and that here is manifested free of any such determination. While all aesthetic action manifests our humanity through a bond without terms, Kerbaj's action specifically emphasizes the fact that the bond between performers may or may not in fact successfully be brought about – and, in doing so, attends to the fundamental precarity of the human form. His piece makes a point of drawing on this feature of the action explicitly.

How does *Starry Night* attend to the precarity of our form explicitly? Kerbaj's witnessing is not concerned with whether an established cognitive bond is politically transformed, or in what ways the action relates to systemic oppression; the point is whether there can be, whether there is actually going to be a cognitive bond *at all*. Simply put, the question of belonging and non-belonging in humanity defines the stakes of his witnessing. Kerbaj's politics of life as such is all about belonging to our form at all – and therein its way of putting to work our form's universality and precarity is specifically aesthetic. The universality of the form is manifested in the aesthetic action in the fact that an appeal to the bond of shared humanity is possible even though there is no one yet to respond to it. The precarity marks the place from which Kerbaj's communication is cast.

The pilots' bombing manifests the violent threat to the performer's life, and therein he is denied recognition, is denied inclusion in humanity. For this denial to occur, one must not be killed – the denial lies in being thrown back onto one's biological life through the loss of cognitive status. The performer's life is put on the spot, and he is denied recognition, in a way that is conceptually central to the piece. It is this place of denied membership in humanity from which Kerbaj casts his communication toward his audience.

also R. El Kadi, *Free Improvised Music*, cit., p. 140. If Kerbaj's blog repeatedly distances itself from politics, politics there is understood as a struggle between groups.

As the performer's life is thrown back onto his physical existence, the aesthetic action must launch itself from this very place: the body of the performer. For this is what witnessing means: to communicate firstpersonally from where one is. The action's aspectual irresolution is given unity by the performer's playing which actualizes two concepts at once – renderings of the action as a whole that converge without touching on one another. The sound of playing (historically) under the bombs and the sound of playing (aesthetically) with the bombs are logically and materially independent of one another, there is no similarity between them. This holds for the sounds we hear on the track, and this holds for the trumpeter's body that for us is manifested in those sounds. Through the aspectual irresolution that renders the body once as historical once as aesthetic, the body of the performer is put to the use of witnessing in a way that could not be achieved by non-aesthetic communication, because the latter has no resources to exhibit the performer's materiality through the concept of the action.

Precisely as the performer's body is placed at the core of the action in this way, its status as a witness is initiated and, together with it, the return from mere biological life to the life of the performer of this aesthetic action. If we say that this action reclaims inclusion in humanity, we think of this – to be the performer of this aesthetic action – as a claim to communication. It refers itself to this audience as a call as yet unanswered, but that still transforms a situation of non-communication into one of communication. The impossibility of a recognitive bond with the pilots is transformed into the possibility of a bond with an audience. The aesthetic action that is the track communicates about the non-communication with the pilots (belonging to historical action: the scene as a balcony being flown over and bombed) to an audience through staging a communication with the pilots (belonging to aesthetic action: the scene as a jam session between bombs and trumpet) – and what it communicates is the aspectual irresolution between both: while both render the same actuality, there is no way to get from one to the other.

This, at its simplest, is what Kerbaj's aesthetic action is about: responding to a denial of one's inclusion in humanity – the attempt at one's reduction to mere biological life – by an action that puts all its work into reclaiming that inclusion. The action reclaims such inclusion by casting itself toward its audience, which is the open addressee of humanity as such, a truly universal addressee, mediated through particular audience members who are instructed to circulate the communication widely. (No number of actual recipients, Kerbaj says, is enough¹³). In doing so, the

¹³ "IT IS NOT ENOUGH!" entry for August 3, 2006, in Kerbaj, *Beirut Won't Cry*, cit.. To facilitate maximum distribution, Kerbaj initially revokes copyright to his posted ma-

aesthetic action doesn't eradicate or suppress the precarity that lies in being denied one's belonging in humanity, but it exposes and highlights that precarity and, in fully making it one's own, turns that very precarity into the basis on which that belonging in humanity is reclaimed.

The Role of Improvisation

Starry Night does this by placing free improvisation at its core – “a minimalist improvisation,” as Kerbaj's description says¹⁴ – a highly specific kind of interaction in which performers come up with the conceptual articulation of playing together as they play together. The piece invokes the characteristic features of improvisation in its staging of the jam session between trumpeter and bombs, in order to project these features into the communicative bond in which the artist refers himself to his audience.

The action that is improvisation is by definition fragile and precarious in that no shared terms are presupposed on which performers can rely in their interaction, and it is by definition robust and inclusive in that playing together *as such* is presupposed; performers' participation cannot easily be challenged by anything they do. Indeed, free improvisation seems to literalize the makeup of a bond without terms in aesthetic action: nothing is taken for granted in such improvisation except the fact of playing together. But as it literalizes the material makeup of all aesthetic action, it is not like all aesthetic action, but it is doing something much more extreme.

Unlike other aesthetic action which, even in its logical singularity, can be manifested in multiple executions, the content of free improvisation is not dispositionally available at all; it is not just actuality, but, as it were, that part of actuality which is most irreducibly located in the present. In this irreducible immediacy of a present in which performance, while it occurs, outruns terms in a way that is extreme even for aesthetic action, we must locate the work of improvisation¹⁵.

What perhaps is most striking about such immediacy is how in it, utter fragility and utter robustness of performance coincide – and how it therefore offers itself to bring about an interaction that reclaims inclusion from a place of precarity. The immediacy manifests utter fragility in that

materials, reclaiming it only after the war. See also N. Taan, *Bloggng in Times of War*, cit., p. 219.

¹⁴ <http://warkerblog.blogspot.co.uk>, July 20, 2006.

¹⁵ See the description of free improvisation in G. E. Lewis, *Improvvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives*, in “Black Music Research Journal”, vol. 16, n. 1, 1996, p. 108.

nothing seems more exposed and vulnerable than a performance that is not conceptually secured in any way – the action is not only not predictable according to its conceptual makeup (the feature of singularity that it shares with all of aesthetic action), but it is also not repeatable (which it shares only with other one-off actualizations) – and that therein appears to foreground the fact that it could just as well not exist. And the same immediacy manifests utter robustness in that nothing can challenge or deny a bond between performers that is not based in terms, a bond that is incontestable as it instantiates the activity of life as such.

The centrality of improvisation for Kerbaj's *Starry Night* reflects the immediacy of such life, which in this particular aesthetic action concerns not only the part of the action that stages improvisation, but also the communication as a whole – a universal address in which the performer's belonging in humanity is reclaimed, in an aesthetic manifestation of a politics of life as such¹⁶. Here is how Kerbaj himself attaches the political stakes of his action to the irreducible immediacy of free improvisation – with an agitation that betrays the violence of the threat that echoes in this immediacy: “I try to be a fucking witness. To show a little bit of what's happening here. In my own way. [...] I cannot stop saying after a bomb: ‘Yeah, that one was huge. I'll leave a long silence then make a small sound to balance the track’”¹⁷.

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¹⁶ All of the political ambition of Kerbaj's communication goes through the aesthetic distinction, as commentators have noted: “The political dimension does not have to eliminate the aesthetic dimension; in fact, the political dimension can actually *be* the aesthetic dimension” (N. Taan, *Blogging in Times of War*, cit., p. 221).

¹⁷ M. Kerbaj, *Beirut Won't Cry*, entry for July 18, 2006.

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Testimonianza estetica: *Starry Night* di Mazen Kerbaj

Il saggio analizza *Starry Night* di Mazen Kerbaj – registrazione di un'improvvisazione alla tromba eseguita in risposta ai bombardamenti israeliani su Beirut nel luglio 2006 – come esempio di testimonianza estetica. L'opera, più che rappresentare un evento storico, lo trasforma attraverso un'azione estetica: l'atto di registrare e condividere *online* il brano costituisce un gesto unitario la cui tensione irrisolta tra azione storica e azione estetica ne definisce la natura.

Attraverso questa ambiguità, la *performance* di Kerbaj converte l'esposizione alla violenza in una forma di potenziamento, riconquistando un margine di azione là dove sembrava impossibile. L'azione estetica ridefinisce la relazione tra *performer* e aggressore, trasformando la non-comunicazione in comunicazione e riaffermando l'appartenenza dell'artista all'umanità. In tal modo, *Starry Night* articola una politica della vita in quanto tale – una politica fondata non sull'identità determinata o sulla differenza collettiva, ma sull'attività universale e precaria della vita che l'azione estetica rende visibile in modo unico.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Azione estetica, Testimonianza, Improvvisazione, Politica della vita, Indeterminatezza, Mazen Kerbaj.

Aesthetic Witnessing: Mazen Kerbaj's *Starry Night*

This essay investigates Mazen Kerbaj's *Starry Night* – a recording of a trumpet improvisation performed in response to Israeli airstrikes on Beirut in July 2006 – as an instance of aesthetic witnessing. I argue that the piece, rather than representing historical actuality, transforms it by means of aesthetic action: the act of recording and posting the track online constitutes a unified gesture whose aspectual irresolution between historical and aesthetic action is its defining feature. Through this irresolution, Kerbaj's performance turns exposure to violence into a form of empowerment, reclaiming agency where none seems possible. The aesthetic action reconfigures the relation between performer and aggressor, transforming non-communication into communication, and reinstating the performer's belonging in humanity. In doing so, *Starry Night* articulates a politics of life as such – a politics grounded not in determinate identity or collective difference, but in the universal and precarious activity of life that aesthetic action uniquely makes manifest.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic Action, Witnessing, Improvisation, Politics of Life, Indeterminacy.