

Robin Vanbesien's *Gravidade*, or the Lure of Gravity's Floating Part-Bodies

*"The notion of murder often brought to mind the notion of sea and sailors.*

*Sea and sailors did not, at first, appear as a definite image.*

*It was rather that 'murder' started up a feeling of waves..."*

(*Gravidade*, 2015, HD, color, stereo, 23'; cited from Jean Genet, *Querelle*, transl. Anselm Hollo, Grove Press, 1974, p. 3)

These words mark the beginning of a monody, a stream of alternating voices whose solemnly slow and somewhat heavy-hearted Portuguese paces out a poem into an exhibition space, also rhythmically punctuated and circumscribed by a series of paintings. The voices stem from a video, titled *Gravidade*, which, not unlike an eighth image in the same series—a painting that speaks from the center of the space—dramatizes a script of fictional scenes in a visual form. Two men appear as figures fixated in a gray, sunless and desolate harbor, the shore of the river Tejo as we are led to believe from the opening verse ("This landscape looks exactly what the shores of the Tejo river look like outside this film"). They are recounting to themselves a story in images, whose origin is as ambiguous as the status of the narrating "I," shifting to a third man with downcast eyes, estranged and isolated from the scene of the two men at the shore. In the mouth of this third face, the imagistic narration finds its restrained subject, "a son," he says, who had collected "the image I had of my dad (...) from the force and infinity and excess of my seeing, volition, and feeling."

Before entering the mazelike corridors of a phantasied account, my gaze makes a quick touch base between the video and the paintings (*Untitled (Gravidade)*). It finds testicles, hanging like strange fruit in sketchy landscapes and penises emerging like a regroupement of lines ex nihilo, gestures of a hand placed on a shoulder, a head of a male whose profile cuts out the profile of another male head into which it buries its desirous tongue, a masked face in the convoluted pose of physical rapture. The figurability of these part-objects, part-bodies, composed as enlarged vantage points framing a view into an abstract landscape, is concealed in glaring colors and hurried brushstrokes, while they resonate with the words in the space. "The cargo ship heavily laden with the testicles of my dad had made its way... He did not see the entire posture of his own body or the expression on his own face. He did not see the clear blue sky against the background of which his outward image was delineated... Because he's alone, a sailor's always telling himself who he is. My dad would not arise in this world of men and objects until he was shaped as a completely abstract 'I'."

The object of the story in *Gravidade*, or the events and scenes that it unfolds, shares the same quality of elusiveness, partiality and detachment with the de-figured bodies in the paintings. A homoerotic story about a sailor who picks up another "young, beautiful and complete" body, called Miguel, to fornicate with. An obscure story about a murder in the underworld of docks. A recollection of a transgressive act—of a father in homosexual intercourse on a ship "where man could do whatever he

wanted, even murder”—or a daydream of a son who displaces his own phantasy in a kind of mise en abyme onto his father’s reverie (“All my life I’ve dreamt dreams which, after the initial dreaming, stayed with me and kept telling me how to perceive and consider all that happens to me ... I don’t think that this space which I was now in, was my body any longer”). A repertoire of psychoanalytic delicacies evokes vague references to Jean Genet’s *Querelle de Brest*, or, moreover, Fassbinder’s cinematic version of it, albeit in theatrical style, or perhaps even Kathy Acker’s association of desire with sailors at sea whose waves enwrap and dissolve the body in the rhythm of sex.

Although Vanbesien notes his cues from Acker and Genet, the references offer no genealogy for interpretation. Instead, one is lured to invest a psychoanalytic reading *prima facie*, in which the figure of the father appears as an imago, the composite of remote, obscure, exotic, worn-out, phantasmagoric and perilous images that the subject construes as both an ideal and a faulty father, or, as one voice describes, “a being less and less human, crystalline, around whom elements of music swirl, that were based on the opposite of harmony.” In such a first-degree psychoanalytic cast of roles, the subject would then be the son, who excites himself in his distorted phantasy of the primal scene in which he finds his father with a man called Miguel (in lieu of his mother). However, we are misled to trust that it is the quest for the absent father, lacking as a total and knowable object that flees and escapes like a sailor, that sexuates the desire to figure and disfigure, name and unname the proliferation of painted or spoken images. What the lure of psychoanalytic terms stages here is a theater of another scenery of problems. It shows that all signification is phallic, not because phallus bears the function of symbolic law, but because it portrays the object of searching as a detachable and transformable part-object, as a part-body. By “part-objects” I refer to anoedipal desiring production (as in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*), a nonpersonal continuous flow from which part-objects or part-bodies are drawn as fragmentary, nonrepresentative agents. What makes them agents are the connections, conjunctions and disjunctions in which they partake. This production of part-bodies is necessarily autoerotic, as a desire without recourse to an object, which needs to demonstrate that there is no straightforward or ready-made path to carry the subject, both the artist and the spectator, towards a figurative embodiment of his or her desire to see or feel or relate. “Let all that matters be sex, anywhere, whenever it is glowing.” Fusing homoerotic and autoerotic desire, sex becomes a trope of an intensified scopophilic relation between the gazing subject and the object of imaging, as one of son and father. When the third character in the video says “I, *all* of me, was laid out before him in the exhaustive completeness as a thing among other things *in* the world external to him, without exceeding in any way the bounds of that world, and without in any way violating its visible, tangible plastic-pictorial unity,” the rapport between the seer, supposed to be a subject, and the object of his vision is reversed. Because his vision is disjunctive, dissociating everything in an oceanic intensity of partitioning and re-coupling, the seer must give up the agency of his bounded and complete self and insert his gaze, like an alien objectile, into a series of

proliferating part-bodies. The gaze of the seer then slides on a half-twisted surface structured like a Moebius band, imperceptibly moving between the inside and the outside of this visual journey.

So we step out of the gravity of this theoretical fiction, which mixes narrative memory and abstract desire, to literally approach the images from behind or outside of the glass walls of the exhibition at Lumiar Cité. Another thought looms light and transparent. Words, shapes, colors and lines begin to float in an allegory about painting: if it is eyes and not hands that paint, as Vanbesien told me, then their view must extend into time-images, gestures, and words that “cut into the different parts of the body.” *Gravidade* is a work conceived as an exhibition, whose part-objects stage the investment of a theatricalized time-intensive gaze. After a good portion of looking, the visitor might reiterate the last lines in the video, as they mark a suspension, a temporary abrupt end with indeterminate questions: “Is it good? Is it time?”

Bojana Cvejić