

ГРОБЉА:  
*Књижевно-културна  
материјализација смрти*

**ГРОБЉА:**

*Књижевно-културна материјализација смрти*

**Уредник**

Проф. др Драган Бошковић

**Уредништво**

Проф. др Драган Бошковић (Крагујевац, Србија)

Проф. др Часлав Николић (Крагујевац, Србија)

Проф. др Никола Бубања (Крагујевац, Србија)

Доц. др Марија Лојаница (Крагујевац, Србија)

Др Лидија Делић, виша научна сарадница (Београд, Србија)

Проф. др Драгана Вукићевић (Београд, Србија)

Проф. др Александар Јерков (Београд, Србија)

Проф. др. Александар Петровић (Београд, Србија)

Проф. др Роберт Ходел (Хамбург, Немачка)

Проф. др Персида Лазаревић Ди Ђакомо (Пескара, Италија)

Проф. др Ала Татаренко (Лавов, Украјина)

Проф. др Богуслав Зјелински (Познањ, Пољска)

**Рецензенти**

Проф. др Никола Бубања

Проф. др Часлав Николић

Проф. др Александар Петровић

Проф. др Александар Јерков

Проф. др Слободан Владушић

**ГРОБЉА:**  
*Књижевно-културна  
материјализација смрти*

Уредник  
**Драган Бошковић**

Филолошко-уметнички факултет  
Крагујевац, 2019.

Jovana S. PAVIĆEVIĆ<sup>1</sup>

University of Kragujevac  
Faculty of Philology and Arts  
Department of English Language and Literature

## EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD THROUGH JEAN GENET'S MACABRE THEATRE<sup>2</sup>

The paper takes theatre as its optic to help expand and illuminate extant perceptions about corpses, burials, and cemeteries. The first part of the paper is dedicated to the methods of and purposes for burying the corpse in the context of theories expounded by Sigmund Freud, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Julia Kristeva. Throughout the paper, cemeteries are regarded not only as formal and religious places where the remains of the dead are interred but also as sites of action and observation – the sites where the veiling and unveiling of the remains take place. The arguments are further examined through the work of French playwright Jean Genet, especially in the light of his play *The Screens* and his essay “That Strange Word...”, which can be regarded either as Genet’s site-specific plan for staging *The Screens* or as his reflection on the significance of theatre in general.

Key words: corpse, burial, cemetery, boundary, ambivalence, abjection, Jean Genet, *The Screens*, “That Strange Word”, macabre theatre

*I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal space that virtually opens  
up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of  
shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to see myself  
there where I am absent.*

Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”

*In the earliest gathering about a grave or a painted symbol, a great stone  
or a sacred grove, one has the beginning of a succession of civic institu-  
tions that range from the temple to the astronomical observatory, from the  
theatre to the university.*

Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*

---

1 jovanapavicevic@yahoo.com

2 The paper is the result of research conducted within the project *Social Crises and Contemporary Serbian Literature and Culture: National, Regional, European and Global Framework*, supported and funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Republic of Serbia, project number 178018.

## Introduction: The Burial of the Dead

Burial always leaves a trace of what it is supposed to hide. Such a conception of burial, prompted by etymological considerations<sup>3</sup>, serves a twofold purpose. On the surface, it suggests some clues for examining cemeteries as sites of action and observation. Throughout this paper, cemeteries are regarded not only as formal and religious places where the remains of the dead are interred but also as sites where the veiling and unveiling of the remains take place. On a deeper level, such a paradoxical conception of burial indicates the complex dynamics of exploring the terrain of death and experiencing cemeteries as (land) marks of individual, social, cultural, and environmental circumstances.

The reasons why and the manners in which people have disposed of their dead seem to have sprung from the ambivalence created by intimate contact with the corpse and death. This ambivalence is best summarized by the collocation 'holy dread' which Freud (Freud 2001: 22) used to illuminate the essence of *taboo*, a concept associated with practices of so-called primitive cultures that modern societies find remote and unintelligible<sup>4</sup>. The corpse, being the taboo object, works as a *field* charged with sacredness and uncanniness: it is "the seat of a tremendous power" (24) that tempts a strong inclination existing in the unconscious. Julia Kristeva follows in a similar vein: for her, the corpse is simultaneously an excess and want, something familiar, yet strange. With this in mind, we come to regard the corpse as the *trace* which performs a double-edged play on the subject. On the one hand, it leads the subject towards the relational other on which it relied for support in the evolution of the sense of self. A precondition to this evolution is an ambiguous perception of the other as the source of both pleasure and pain, fascination and fear (Kristeva 1948: 60). Due to the discomfort caused by the ambiguity, the one revolts against the other and rejects it<sup>5</sup>. Out of this rejection comes a distinction between the self and the other, the subject and the object, the inside and the outside (10). The process of separation, however, is not a clear-cut demarcation but rather a heterogeneous flow: the one rejects the other just enough to establish oneself as the subject, but it does not part from the other completely. Instead, by retaining the Other as the object that opposes and threatens the subject, it keeps the defensive position that enables its existence. The corpse, on the other hand, not being the object that once enabled the subject to feel detached and autonomous, blurs the boundaries between the subject and the object, the inside and the outside, thus leading the subject away from the primal differentiation and into the "place

3 If we look at the etymology of the verb *bury*, we will find that it is derived from Old English *byrgan* that means 'to protect, cover' (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*), but its root can be traced back to the Proto-Indo European *bhergh*, meaning 'to hide' (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*). The process of burial indicates some form of hiding that encompasses both putting out of sight and concealing for protection.

4 As Freud explains in his essay on the uncanny (Freud 2003: 154), our primitive ancestors regarded those practices as real possibilities, but we, having surmounted such modes of thought, no longer believe in them. Discarded beliefs, nonetheless, remain as residual traces, meaning that they may be restored but not so fully as to allow their original stimuli to be recognizable.

5 This 'other' that is rejected is what Kristeva calls the 'abject', while the process of separation is referred to as 'primal' repression (Kristeva 1982: 10).

where meaning collapses” (2). Confronting the corpse, therefore, becomes an event of basic disorientation of self<sup>6</sup>, since it betrays how fragile and unstable the body’s boundaries and materiality are. Having once been a guarantee of the subject’s existence, or, as Freud puts it in regard to the phenomenon of the ‘double’, an assurance against the extinction of the subject (Freud 2001: 142), the corpse, which is no longer a correlative, neither the object of desire nor the jettisoned object (Kristeva 1982: 1), becomes “the uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud 2001: 142), that is to say the harbinger of the subject’s own mortality. For this reason, it poses a threat to the subject who, in turn, resorts to abjection, the feeling of horror and revolt, as a means to protect itself (Kristeva 1982: 2). As a result, the corpse, “the acme of the uncanny” (Freud 2001: 148) and “the utmost of abjection”<sup>7</sup> (Kristeva 1982: 4), has to be *radically* excluded, *permanently* thrust aside (3), so that the subject can live.

Abjection – the subject’s reaction of horror and loathing, or “a twisted braid of affects and thoughts” as Kristeva (1982: 1) characterizes it so as to conjure up an overwhelming and almost distorted sensation caused by the overlapping and interlocking of different emotional responses – reveals that there is a memory of undifferentiated unity, a ‘pre-objectal relationship’ (10), and of separation, the violence of breaking away from another<sup>8</sup>. Being the “*land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered” (8), a poetical rendering of Freud’s formulation of the uncanny as something that was long familiar to the psyche but estranged through repression (Freud 2001: 148), abjection awakens the conflict of ambivalence between fusion and division, fondness and hostility, desire and aversion. Not only does Freud find this ambivalence to be an inherent disposition of everyone (Freud 2001: 70, 182), but he also takes this inborn conflict – the “eternal struggle between love and death” (Freud 1962: 80) – as a feature of cultural development and a source of many social and cultural institutions, such as religion, morals, and art<sup>9</sup>. Building on Freud’s view that the origins of subjectivity, society, and culture can be traced back to the same fantasies, fears, prohibitions, and renunciations<sup>10</sup>, Kristeva, coming at the end (in a strictly chronological sense) of a long line of inquirers into the matters of individual minds and collective consciousness, sums up different routes by claiming that abjection confronts us with both our personal archaeology and the “states where man strays on the ter-

6 “It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled” (Kristeva 1982: 3–4).

7 This abjection is referred to as the ‘secondary’ repression. The abject (the corpse) is the pseudo-object of the primal repression that “appears only within the gaps of secondary repression” (Kristeva 1982: 11–12).

8 The jettisoned object is never truly abolished but only banished into the unconscious, where it continues to lure the subject.

9 The ambivalence denotes the attitude towards both the mother and the father (figures), but as we learn from *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud 1961: 24), Freud considers the ambivalent attitude towards the father to be deeply imprinted in every religion. He regards God as a father figure and thus finds religion to be a response to individuals’ feeling of helplessness and need for protection (23).

10 Freud deals with this idea in many of his writings, beginning with *Totem and Taboo*. The idea is further advanced in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, *The Future of an Illusion*, and *Civilization and its Discontents*. His view proved to be particularly significant because it provided a link not only between earlier and subsequent considerations of the origin of civilisation but also between psychiatry and other branches of knowledge, such as “Social Anthropology, the Study of Religion, and Literary History” (Freud, as cited in Smadja 2015: xi).

ritories of *animal*” (Kristeva 1982: 12). From this point of view, abjection may be interpreted as a catalyst for setting the boundaries between animalism and civilization (13). Since civilization demands humans sacrifice their instincts and destructive trends and was established by way of exclusion and prohibition, it is further defended by measures of coercion and other means that are to make up for the loss that ensued from the prohibition (Freud 1961: 10). Those other means Freud (12) further specifies as the mental assets of civilization, such as ideals, artistic creations, and religion.

Death rituals and religious ceremonies are, as Freud and Malinowski elaborate, a response to the above-mentioned emotional conflicts. Acts and observances related to the treatment of the corpse, the methods of burial, and the commemoration of the dead reflect simultaneous expression of both currents, the love of the person who is dead and fear and loathing of the corpse (Malinowski 1948: 30). Both the affectionate and the hostile tendencies are manifested during the process of mourning: an unconscious current of hostility is subdued by an “excessive intensification of the affection” (Freud 2001: 57). The latter is reflected in the pious<sup>11</sup> acts of washing, dressing, anointing, and adorning the dead, but the former simultaneously finds its expression in the fact that those very acts are deemed dangerous and contagious<sup>12</sup> (26)<sup>13</sup>. The survivors relieve the pressure from internal perception by projecting it onto something external against which they must protect themselves with the help of the ceremonial. The usual forms of disposal – inhumation, exposure, and cremation – should not be regarded as mere accidents of belief (Malinowski 1948: 31); they rather evince, on the one hand, a human tendency to “preserve the body”, and on the other “to put it out of the way, to annihilate it completely” (31). The tendency to preserve the body comes from one’s wish to retain the object of love and to prolong the strong attachment to it, while the other comes from the urge to break the bond with the object that undergoes a transformation through death (32). Hence, burial is a mode which gives form and offers resolution to contradictory human desires; it is a means of purification (Kristeva 1982: 109) in the way that it, to all outward appearances, re-establishes the boundary between the subject and that which disturbs the identity.

While dying is essentially a private act of an individual that affects only those closely attending to the dying, the corpse brings the members of the larger community to face social implications of death for the individual, family,

11 See also Freud’s *The Uncanny* (2003: 28), where he explains how the conflicting attitude of the living towards the dead has been transformed into an unambiguous feeling of piety.

12 Freud opens the section on the taboo upon the dead by stating that the dead are powerful rulers, but they are treated as enemies (Freud 2001: 60).

13 It is by means of this explication that Freud offered a reinterpretation of Wilhelm Wundt’s thesis that taboo, in its primitive beginnings, was solely an “objectified fear of the ‘demonic’ power” (Freud 2001: 28). Demonic power refers to a fear of “the dead man’s soul which has become a demon” (Wundt, as cited in Freud 2001: 67). Accordingly, the essence of taboo, in its beginnings, was a fear of demons. By seeking to reconstruct the origin of the taboo through the analysis of the obsessional prohibitions of neurotics, Freud reached a conclusion that the fear of demons is nothing but a projection of hostile feelings “harboured by the survivors against the dead” (Freud 2001: 72). Like Freud, Malinowski developed his own theory on the origin of religion by challenging Wundt’s view that horror at the corpse and fear of the ghost were two dominant feelings of the mourners.

and community. If individuals allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by horror, they would give in to their instincts of self-preservation and abandon the corpse, which would have a disintegrating effect upon the community (Malinowski 1948: 34). By sacrificing their instinct to abandon the body, humans managed to detach themselves from the circumstances of their feral condition. It is for this reason that Giambattista Vico (Vico 1948: 87) takes burial as one of the great principles of humanity on which “all nations still preserve themselves” (86). Apart from being held as a universal principle that contributes to the taming of instincts, burial is said to distance one from the corpse and its decomposition, to compel man to overcome the repugnance and fear (Malinowski 1948: 32), to strengthen group cohesion and bonding, to reflect collective realities (Durkheim 1995: 9), and even, at least when it comes to devout believers, to protect one from developing a personal neurosis<sup>14</sup> (Freud 1961: 44). But, above all, it rivets the mourners to the place of burial (Malinowski 1948: 35). The fact that individuals periodically return to that assumed boundary may well suggest that the exclusion has never been nor never will be fully reached and that the ambivalence is resolved only through perpetual banishment.

Echoing, perhaps, Vico’s claim that humans left off their wandering and founded their first settlements through marriage and burial (Vico 1948: 8), and Durkheim’s conclusion that burial rites were the first rites and tombs the first altars (Durkheim 1995: 49), Lewis Mumford notes that

the dead were the first to have a permanent dwelling: a cavern, a mound marked by a cairn, a collective barrow. These were landmarks to which the living probably returned at intervals, to commune with or placate the ancestral spirits (Mumford 1961: 7).

What is useful about Mumford’s explanation is that it indicates not only the features that may be particular to graves and urban cemeteries today but also the widely held beliefs as to their meaning and purpose. A grave is often viewed as a home, a place inhabited by the dead. To be a permanent one, a place of final rest, it should remain undisturbed, unchanged (at least if we consider only those cultures which find the re-use of graves unacceptable), even though the surrounding landscape could change. For that purpose, it has to bear certain markers: from simple arrangements of earth and stones, wooden posts, and flat plaques to more or less elaborate monuments. However, those markers are not only meant for the purpose of guarding the graves, as the ancient Greeks used to believe (Vico 1948: 165); they also serve as posts which enable the living to locate the exact place of burial and its perimeter. The perimeter, we may say, is both a vestige of the material traces – bones, shards and ashes – which it encapsulates and an assumed boundary between the living and the dead. Burial sites, therefore, reveal themselves to the living only through concealment. Trying to manage this presence of absence, or vice versa, which is

14 Advancing his view previously mentioned that the origins of subjectivity and civilisation share the same fascinations and fears, in *The Future of an Illusion* (1961: 44) Freud posits that religion is the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity and that religious teachings are neurotic relics which protect devout believers from developing a personal neurosis.



laid between the regular and yet changing path of the Sun<sup>15</sup>, the living may feel stretched between the past and the present, appearance and reality, memory and oblivion, fear and hope, time and space, here and nowhere. Accordingly, places of burial may summon the living not only to mourn, revisit, and remember but also to relive and to rethink both the literal and the figurative boundaries. An individual's refusal to involve oneself in such reconsideration may be, in the words of Jean Genet, France's "Black Prince of Letters", equated with reconciliation that he or she is alive just enough to be forgotten. The lives of such individuals come down to crossing the same "boundary" and entering that "calm shore" (Genet 2003: 43), the place from which they will finally recognize the summons. Bearing this in mind, Genet sets himself to task of devising an art that is "gifted with the strange power to penetrate that realm of death" (46).

### Jean Genet's Macabre Theatre

In the "Letter to Leonor Fini", Jean Genet (Genet 2003: 8–15) reveals, almost unintentionally, his obsession with *death and decay*, and his devotion to all those ambivalent and liminal phenomena such as the living dead and the dead. Urging this surrealist painter to let herself be carried away by savagery so as to invent a profusion of new forms and transmit them in the form of a celebration (13), Genet simultaneously jots down the elements of the theatre he pursues: silence, crime, death, smells, venom, church, cenotaph, reptile, anxiety (2). This kind of theatre, which should be, like any artwork, offered to the "innumerable populace of the dead" (43) rests on Genet's aims to rediscover the idea of infinite misery (27) and to disclose the anguish the writer seeks to hide (17). It comes as no surprise that he welcomes all sorts of abject identities and spaces, and in-between conditions, into his novels, poems, plays, and essays; his works feature, in addition to various transgressors and places of deviation, the bodies and places that disrupt spatio-temporal continuities, such as corpses, cemeteries, and theatres. Although he addresses the relation between theatre and death on numerous occasions, nowhere does he celebrate the link between those two more than in his play *The Screens*<sup>16</sup> and in his essay "That Strange Word...", which can be regarded either as Genet's site-specific plan for staging *The Screens* (Finburgh et. al 2006: 13) or as his reflection on the significance of theatre in general.<sup>17</sup>

15 Since the paper draws mainly on Western traditions and rituals, this refers to the west-east orientation of graves.

16 According to the chronological outline written by Albert Dichy (White 1993: xxi–xlii), Genet had been working on the play over a period of about six years: from its first drafts in November 1955 to its first publication in 1961. But he continued to revise the play even after its first publication. The play was directed by Roger Blin and staged at the *Odéon* Theatre in Paris in April 1966.

17 The essay in French was first published in *Tel Quel* in April 1967. The current literature does not provide any information on exactly when Genet wrote it. According to Carl Lavery, the essay is, in fact, one of the letters written to Roger Blin, the director of the first staging of *The Screens* in Paris (Lavery 2006: 104). For that reason, it should be viewed as a piece of Genet's writing that is important for the play *The Screens*. While Samuel Weber also recognizes the similarities in style between this essay and Genet's letters to Blin (Weber 2004: 301), he is more keen to accept the essay as Genet's vision on theatre in general.

*The Screens*, the first play in a cycle of seven Genet intended to write for his grandiose project entitled *Death*<sup>18</sup> (White 1993: 446), opens with the images of a palm tree and an Arab grave. The images are painted on a four-panel screen and set against the real objects, a pile of rocks and a milestone, the latter indicating both a point of departure for two protagonists, Saïd and Mother, and a distance to their destination – the house of Leila, Saïd’s wife-to-be. Their journey will, however, go beyond that destination and will turn itself into a lengthy ordeal, encompassing revolution and transition, bitter degradation and glorified evil, and ending with yet another milestone, on which, this time, nothing can be read (Genet 1962: 64). Their gradual descent into total abjection, intersected by ninety-five other characters, most of them representing types, even archetypes, spans over seventeen scenes, carefully orchestrated by means of screens, layers, and platforms. *The Screens* is, as Edward Said properly describes it, a “gigantic and iconoclastic drama about French colonialism and the Algerian resistance”<sup>19</sup>: the play seeks to overthrow the Western ideas of theatre and time as much as it aims to attack established beliefs of the French about the Algerian war (Said 2005: 227)<sup>20</sup>.

With *The Screens*, Genet creates a plethora of historical motifs and aesthetic interventions. The overall effect is the one of excess, as many critics did observe, where everything is multiplied to the extremes and brought to the point of paroxysm: a throng of characters, all highly made-up and equipped with false noses, false chins, and wigs, and a vast diversity of fragments, shards, and objects, whether drawn, real, or non-existent, are arranged across several stages and platforms within one stage. The characters’ clothes appear to be in stark contrast with the minimalistic set: they add bold splashes of green, red, mauve, pink, violet, and yellow. Both the lighting and violent colors almost pierce through the desolate areas: the desert, the rocks, the public dump, the rotten boards and corrugated tin, poor and dark interiors, prisons and cemeteries. Still, it is through the visual prominence of the screens, panels varying in number and size, and through the way they manipulate the action that Genet manages to animate aspects of theatre and visual arts so as to produce an uncontrollable outburst, which, at the very end, yields up the wound.

At the beginning, the screens seem to serve as mere décor, but their function increases as the play unfolds – they come to represent not only a “complex network of planes and lines” (Finburgh 2004: 210) but a truly animated border between reality and appearance, the living and the dead. In the first

18 The project was supposed to be composed of two parts, *Death I* and *Death II*. The cycle of seven plays, inspired by the Greek tragedies (Dichy in White 1993: xxxii), was to form the second part of the project, but Genet never managed to finish it. He did finish *The Screens*, which acquired an independent existence.

19 The letters and commentaries Genet wrote for the purpose of staging the play betray his equivocal attitude towards the play’s subject matter: at one point, he advises Roger Blin not to concern himself over the historical reality of the play, while at another, in 1970, he claims that the play is “nothing but a long meditation on the Algerian war” (White 1993: 491).

20 The Paris audience at first seemed indifferent to the play’s subject matter, but this indifference, White (1993: 492) notes, soon developed into a furor, and the whole production provoked violent demonstrations both on the streets and in the theatre.

half of the play, the screens are a backdrop to the play's action<sup>21</sup>, but from the ninth scene on, as the pace of the action gains speed and the level of tension increases, they acquire more complex roles. The characters use screens to keep the reality at bay, as in the scene with Leila and the stolen clock that is not a real one but recreated through her drawing (Genet 1962: 39–40). Taking the painted clock, which is an imitation of the marble one, for the real object, Leila moulds a multi-layered reality, a conundrum that shades her worthlessness and unsightliness. In other words, the screens evoke, as David Bradby puts it, “an assemblage of realities and people whose contours and definitions are being constantly displaced, challenged or altered” (Bradby 2006: 38). In Scene 10, the Arabs, including Saïd, who have memories of only poverty and humiliation, but who defied abjection according to the Missionary (Genet 1962: 104) and, thus, made themselves unconquerable, use the canvases<sup>22</sup> to mount their revolt against the French. At the end of the play there is multi-tiered set composed of screens representing the realms of the dead and the living. The dead traverse a series of transparent, white paper screens to enter the world of the dead, from which they observe how the living adorn the bodies for funerals, as in Warda's case, how the dead are hesitating to cross the border, or how some of them, like Leila and Saïd, banish themselves even from the land of the dead. The screens are materialized through actions of painting, piercing, and breaking – they are at the same time a shade, a porous border, and a portal to an immeasurable space and time. Upon entering the world of the dead, each character bursts into laughter and pronounces the same line: “And they make such a fuss about it!” Death, in Genet's interpretation, comes down to an easy transition, even to a celebration and deliverance. At the very end, the stage is gradually dismantled as the dead wander off and take the frames with them, leaving the space emptied of all signs of confusion, repletion, and dilution.

From the play's text, especially from Genet's notes that precede and follow the dialogue, the reader is able to grasp that each character hides a wound (White 1993: 487). Images and screens serve both ends, to reveal and conceal (Genet, as cited in Finburgh 2004: 215), so the wound becomes accessible to the spectators in its disguised form. In addition to this interplay of veiling and unveiling, the frames constantly reorganize, alter, and negotiate the space between excess and want, familiar and strange. As soon as the spectators catch a glimpse of a recognizable theatrical framework, that same framework becomes altered, twisted, even distorted. The structure of the play, which is rambling and polyphonic (White 1993: 486), disorients the spectators to the extent that the overall outcome is like facing a monster, as Jean-Baptiste Sastre, a French director who staged the play in 2004, describes it (Finburgh, Sastre 2006: 193). *The Screens* itself is an ambiguous creation, one that produces the same effect as the corpse. Early critics tended to dismiss the significance of the play's content and form on the pretext of condemning its foul language and disturbing

21 They mostly point a setting, such as the desert, the interior of Saïd's house, the fields of palmettos and the orange groves, the square of an Arab village, a prison, and a cemetery.

22 By drawing a yellow flame at the foot of each orange tree, they set the whole grove to fire (Genet 1962: 44).

images; some critics even went so far as to suggest that the play reflected the “filth and stupidity of an author [Genet]” (White 1993: 492). Others, however, especially scholars who have undertaken the task to revalorize Genet’s work, recognize that the absence of a structuring principle transforms an “abyss of absurdity into a fertile potential for image renewal” (Finburgh 2004: 218). This interpretation certainly complies with the attitude of other scholars who see Genet’s theatre as a place for representing “death and ritual resuscitation” (White 1993: 303). Genet’s urge to destroy the traditional theatrical structure leads to another, more unusual phenomenon, one at odds with his allegedly destructive tendencies. Once the theatrical frame is disturbed, in its fissures the wound bursts open. This wound, sometimes associated with a feeling of emptiness, at other times with a loss and a gap in continuity, but above all with solitude, which is simultaneously a ‘profound incommunicability’ and an “obscure knowledge of an unassailable singularity” (Genet 2003: 72), rips itself free (107) and exhorts the spectators to appreciate its presence.

Genet bypasses conventionalized theatrical forms and opts for those which reflect disunity, asymmetry, and illogic, and in doing so, he manages to recast stage writing. The coarse and “scatological language”, both verbal and non-verbal, is, in Botho Strauss’ view, a powerful tool used by the “filthy third world” to oppose the violence of “the clean world” (Strauss, as cited in White 1993: 497). As the author himself observes, expressing his sceptical attitudes towards the imposed moral limits, whether social, individual, religious, or artistic ones: “If my theatre stinks, it’s because the other kind smells nice” (Genet 2003: 107). Being an outsider himself, but also a rebel who uncompromisingly criticizes the society which rejected him, he does not have to imagine the logic of the object. Moreover, by embracing the state of abjection, he speaks from within its own logic, the logic that incorporates the knowledge of language governed by prohibition and law only to violate and pervert that knowledge. In other words, he recreates and transforms abjection; he “utters and by the same token purifies it” (Kristeva 1982: 26). Genet reaches for the extreme, for the chaotic accumulation that renders the action of the play evasive – but not vague, he is careful to note – so as to *leave the spectators confronted with themselves alone* (Genet, as cited in White 1993: 433), with their own illusions and evasions. Apart from trying to enlighten the spectators, Genet creates a piece of work that could offer what Freud termed substitutive satisfaction. The play that dwells on ambiguity and ambivalence – desire and hostility, Eros and Thanatos – may act as a compensation for all those “deeply felt cultural renunciations” (Freud 1961: 14). The spectators could, therefore, detect the existence of the nebulous forces, and even heighten their feelings of identification. Even if these feelings may last only a brief period of time, the play, like other artistic works, as Freud (14) believes, will at least provide an occasion for the spectators to share highly valued emotional experiences.

As many scholars have argued (Finburgh et al. 2006: 4), Genet had an inclination for an affective theatre, the one proposed by Antonin Artaud and elaborated in a collection of his essays, *The Theatre and Its Double*. Like Artaud, Genet used every opportunity to criticize the Western idea of theatre that

“too exactly reflects the visible world” (Genet 2003: 37), that is, a theatre reduced to a mere inert replica of everyday reality. Their mutual concern for the affective, physical side of theatrical language was to provide an alternative to the rationalized, discursive, verbalized, and strictly defined version of reality. Following Artaud, Genet strives for a theatre that would evoke an air of ceremony, a theatre that

would be a profound labyrinth of active symbols, able to speak to the public a language in which nothing would be said, but everything felt (Genet 2003: 36).

The profound labyrinth of active symbols is nothing else than Artaud's Double or Kristeva's spectral aspect of the semiotic language. Accordingly, the aim of that theatrical language would be to awaken the higher form of reality, an archetypal and dangerous one, or, in other words, to stir the memory of undifferentiated unity and libidinal chaos. If that aim were to be achieved, the theatre would become an experiential field where actors and spectators alike could safely explore and confront their own demonic shadows (Pavićević 2016: 1156–1157). Recreating the theatrical language also meant reinventing the architecture of a theatre, to one that would provide an appropriate setting for the ceremony to take place. While Artaud only suggests that new theatres should be constructed in line with the principles of holy places, Genet goes a step further. Besides striving to bring danger back to the theatre, he dares to bring theatre closer to the source of danger, plague, and ambivalence.

In his essay “That Strange Word...”<sup>23</sup>, Genet further develops his concept of a clandestine theatre in the catacombs, which he proposed earlier in the “Letter to Jean-Jacques Pauvert” (Genet 2003: 39). Now, more than a decade later (the letter to Pauvert was written in 1954), Genet moves this yet-to-be-discovered theatre to the centre of a cemetery, hoping to incite the spectators to interact with their environment and social and cultural circumstances. By highlighting at the very beginning that “urbanism”, the strange word from the title, “will maybe no longer be concerned with the dead” and that the living “will get rid of their corpses (...) as one rids oneself of a shameful thought” (103), Genet demonstrates his eagerness to engage himself with some new ideas<sup>24</sup> discussed at the time, namely those related to the obsession with space and relations of propinquity (Foucault 2008: 15), to the shifting perspectives on disease and contagion, and to the exclusion of the dead and of death. What is more important, he makes his own contribution to the subject matter by addressing the same issues but from a perspective of someone who knows the importance of the theatre and who trusts its power (Genet 2003: 104).

One may note that Genet is quick to pick up on the tendency of both town planners and urban dwellers to relegate the dead to the outlying areas of the city and of the consciousness. He is careful in pointing out that the fact the

<sup>23</sup> The essay in French was published under the title “L'Étrange Mot D'...”.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault gave a radio lecture entitled “Les Hétérotopies” on December 7, 1966. The text “Of Other Spaces” (“Des espaces autres”) was a lecture he presented to the Circle of Architectural Studies in March the following year (Foucault 2008: 25).

living will *hurry* to dispose of their dead is more troubling than the fact they will get rid of them in a sly manner. Like a shameful thought, the corpse is a nuisance, a disturbance, a revolting thing that should be banished as quickly as possible – treated by “professionals”, kept within the confines of the morgue, and then of the burial place. What could follow from this hurried disposal is the obliteration of the distinctive social and cultural patterns typical for cities and civil society: the urbanized world, Genet continues, will “rid itself of a great theatrical aid and perhaps of theatre itself” (2003: 103). From this we may infer that Genet perceives the process of burying the corpse as a mode of exchange which perpetuates the existence of theatre. This is further supported when he urges the urban planners to restore cemeteries to the town centers and to erect theatres among their tombs, which would prove beneficial for *both the cemetery and the theatre* (108).

The cemetery where theatre could finally reach its full effect has to be a live one, where corpses are incessantly buried and cremated (Genet 2003: 108). Genet visualizes the burial as a theatrical ceremony: the corpse is brought centre stage where a funeral mime could be performed in front of the friends, enemies, and onlookers so as to “make the dead man alive and die again” (111). As was customary for Roman aristocratic and imperial funerals, so would this performance entail an actor impersonating the dead man – he would imitate and mock the dead man’s most prominent traits (Sumi 2002: 559) and perform his life cycle. Drama, as well as tragedy, is not played out but lived through. When it comes to the theatre in the cemetery, Genet conceives it as a challenge to the increasingly prevalent opinion that *it is not normal to be dead* or that “to be dead is an unthinkable anomaly” (Baudrillard 2017: 147). The cemetery, as a site occupied by specific traces and reserved for death-related events, allows the theatrical event to exploit the aura of its uncanniness. Carl Lavery regards the kind of theatrical event set in the cemetery as a site-specific performance which enables the spectators to perceive the cemetery anew and to lessen the anguish caused by the denial of death (Lavery 2006: 98). The spectators, at least those who would dare to venture to the theatre in the cemetery at night, would be confronted with mystery (Genet 2003: 109), which should be enough to change their habitual way of thinking. Deeply convinced of the power of such theatre, Genet continues: “Neither the conversations nor the silence would be the same as at the exit of a Parisian theatre. Death should be at once closer and lighter, the theatre more serious” (Genet 2003: 108). We may notice that the process of creating this theatre among the tombs reflects the same process an individual has to go through in the process of self-differentiation: his theatre exists in opposition to the Parisian mainstream theatres. Mocking their frivolity, stale conventions, and “cleanliness”, he requires the writers and spectators alike to be more daring, more serious, and more open to the “omens of insanity” (109).

The monumental quality of the theatre in the cemetery resides, above all, in the function it performs. Its main function is to offer a kind of spatio-temporal discontinuity which would have a liberating effect on the spectators. While the performance animates and estranges the environment, as we have already

explained, the environment affects the atmosphere of the performance, thus enriching the way the spectators experience the action. On the other hand, the theatre in general allows the spectators to escape time (Genet 2003: 104). The theatrical event dissolves the historical, or in Genet's words, theological time – the idea of time determined by a hypothetical, mythical, controversial event called the Advent and imposed by the West on the rest of the world. By offering another one, a dramatic time that has neither beginning nor end, the theatrical event overturns the historical and social conventions (108). Taken together, all these elements transform the theatre in the cemetery into a site where the impossible meets the possible, in terms of both space and time, and where the inner landscape meets the outer one.

For this theatre to be recognized as responsible, its architecture has to be fixed (Genet 2003: 105). The process of erecting the theatre building in such a place, described in detail, discloses what Genet finds to be the essence of the cemetery. Once again, he unleashes his indignation against visible appearances by emphasizing that “the architect of this theatre will not be able to tolerate the inane constructions where families enclose their dead. Demolish the mausoleums. Maybe preserve a few ruins” (Genet 2003:108). Tombs, in his opinion, enclose nothing (Genet 2003: 26)<sup>25</sup>, but the fact they have been built reveals their pretext: a corpse (26). Since death, that final and supreme crisis in human life (Malinowski 1948: 29)<sup>26</sup> and the element which “mock[s] at all human control” (Freud 1961: 15), is present only in the Other, according to Levinas (2007: 179), the corpse could be a reminder of how unreceptive our unconscious is to “the idea of our own mortality” (Freud 2003: 148). The action of looking at and looking away from the corpse could result, if we borrow Foucault's mirror metaphor, in reconstituting ourselves there where we are not and there where we are. In Genet's view, the cemetery has its function, just like the theatre, only as long as it is a place simultaneously of action and observation.

By placing the theatre into the centre of the cemetery, and the cemetery at the core of the city life, Genet theoretically manages to return *agon*, crisis, but above all the dialogue, to the centre of everyday life. The second epigraph of this paper is illustrative of such a reading of Genet's aesthetic vision. According to Lewis Mumford, the earliest gatherings about a grave gave rise to a series of civic institutions ranging from the temple to the astronomical observatory, from the theatre to the university. Both the theatrical event and the burial depend on people gathered for the specific occasion; they are not isolated events, but rather complex social networks of expectations and obligations (Schechner 1968: 42), enabling the interaction even between highly contradictory

---

25 The same view we find in his final book, *The Prisoner of Love*, which was published posthumously: “What was to become of you after the storms of fire and steel? What were you to do? Burn, shriek, turn into a brand, blacken, turn to ashes, let yourself be slowly covered first with dust and then with earth, seeds, moss, leaving behind nothing but your jawbone and teeth, and finally becoming a little funeral mound with flowers growing on it and nothing inside” (Genet, as cited in Said 2005: 231).

26 According to Malinowski (1948: 29), religion gives body and form to the beliefs in immortality, and immortality is nothing but a denial of death that enables a man to handle his fear of annihilation symbolized in the corpse.

elements. And as long as the interaction exists, the transformation could follow. Genet did imagine his theatre as an all-encompassing institution:

Monumental theatre (...) must have as much importance as the Palace of Justice, as the monuments to the dead, as the cathedral, as the Chamber of Deputies, as the War College, as government headquarters, as the clandestine venues of the black market or for drugs, as the Observatory – and its function must be all those at once... (Genet 2003: 108)

Genet's theatre–cemetery should be a place of trials and legal actions, a juncture of state and illicit affairs, and a site that provides discussions, debates, drills, and extensive views of, or even insights into, the cosmic laws.

## Conclusion

Jean Genet's idea of the theatre in the cemetery has never been realized. Even his play *The Screens* has never been performed in the way he envisioned it. However, his notes to Roger Blin serve as a constant reminder that the play should not be ripped out of its context – the cemetery<sup>27</sup>. The essence of the play lies in the possibility of its engendering a sense of actual encounter with the environment. Through this encounter there is a possibility for the living space to be organized around a separation from the dead and its correlative, contact with the dead (Weber 2004: 325). Genet's play and his essay create a synergy of death, transformation and change and for that reason present a challenge to notions of "fixed" locations and times, as well as to the assumed boundaries between the self and the other, the life and the death, the reality and the appearance. His aim to exploit the ambivalence and ambiguity led him to rethink both the space in which the event takes place and the place in which the individual is positioned. In this way, Genet managed to transform the theatrical event into "a new festivity" (Genet, as cited in Finburgh 2004: 224) that brought together the realms of the living and the dead.

## List of references

- Barber 2004: Stephen Barber, *Jean Genet*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Baudrillard 2017: Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, revised edition, translated by Ian Hamilton Grant, London: Sage in association with Theory, Culture & Society, University of London.
- Bradby 2006: D. Bradby, "From Theatricality to Performance Theory: *The Screens*", in: *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics*, edited by C. Finburgh, C. Lavery, M. Shevtsova Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 34–43.
- Durkheim 1995: Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields, New York: The Free Press.

27 One of the notes to Roger Blin, included in *Les Paravents (The Screens)* published by Gallimard in 1989, says: "But the reader of these notes must not forget that the theatre where this work will be staged is constructed in a cemetery" (Barber 2004: 77).



- Finburgh 2004: Clare Finburgh, "Unveiling the Void: The Presence of Absence in the Scenography of Jean Genet's "The Screens", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 205–224.
- Finburgh et al. 2006: Clare Finburgh, Carl Lavery, Maria Shevtsova, "Introduction", in: *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics*, edited by C. Finburgh, C. Lavery, M. Shevtsova Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–20.
- Finburgh, Sastre 2006: C. Finburgh, Jean-Baptiste Sastre, "An Interview with Jean-Baptiste Sastre", in: *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics*, edited by C. Finburgh, C. Lavery, M. Shevtsova Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 193–198.
- Foucault 2008: Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces (1967)", translated by Lieven De Cauter and Michiel Dehaene, in: *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, ed. by M. Dehaene and L. De Cauter, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 13–29.
- Freud 1961: Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated and edited by James Strachey, New York: W.W. Norton.
- Freud 1962: S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated by James Strachey, New York: W.W. Norton.
- Freud 2001: Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, authorized translation by James Strachey, London and New York: Routledge.
- Freud 2003: Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, translated by David McLintoc, London: Penguin Books.
- Genet 1962: Jean Genet, *The Screens*, translated by Bernard Frechtman, New York: Grove Press.
- Genet 2003: Jean Genet, *Fragments of the Artwork*, translated by Charlotte Mandell, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kristeva 1982: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lavery 2006: Carl Lavery, "Theatre in a Graveyard: Site-based Performance and the Revolution of Everyday Life", in: *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics*, edited by C. Finburgh, C. Lavery, M. Shevtsova Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 95–105.
- Levinas 2007: Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Malinowski 1948: Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth, science and Religion", in: *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, selected, and with an Introduction by Robert Redfield, Glencoe: The Free Press, pp. 1–71.
- Mumford 1961: Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Pavićević 2016: J. Pavićević, "Artoovo pozorište surovosti i njegovo nasleđe", *Etnoantropološki problemi* 11, no. 4, Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, pp. 1153–1167.
- Said 2005: Edward Said, "On Jean Genet's Late Works", in: *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. by J. Ellen Gainor, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 225–236.
- Schechner 1968: Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre", *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1968, pp. 41–64. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1144353](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144353).
- Smadja 2015: Eric Smadja, *Freud and Culture*, London: Karnac Books.
- Sumi 2002: Geoffrey S. Sumi, "Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals", in: *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 123, no. 4, pp. 559–585. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1561967](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561967).

Vico 1948: Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, translated from the third edition (1744) by T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Weber 2004: Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, New York: Fordham University Press.

White 1993: Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography*, with a chronology by Albert Dichy, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

### Internet references

“Bury, v.”, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/25160>> 15 June 2019.

“Burial, n.”, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, <<https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/indoeurop.html>>, 15 June 2019.

## ИСПИТИВАЊЕ ГРАНИЦА ИЗМЕЂУ ЖИВИХ И МРТВИХ КРОЗ ЖАНЕОВО САБЛАСНО ПОЗОРИШТЕ

### Резиме

Рад има за циљ да кроз Женеову визију позоришне уметности прошири и расветли начине на које се доживљавају лешеве, сахране и гробља. Први део рада је посвећен методама и сврхама сахрањивања у складу са теоријама које су изнели Сигмунд Фројд, Бронислав Малиновски и Јулиа Кристева. Гробља се у раду не посматрају само као места формалних и религиозних обележја, већ и као места делања и посматрања, тачније као места где се посмртни остаци непрестано прикривају и откривају. Теоријска гледишта, представљена у првом делу рада, даље се испитују кроз дела француског драмског писца Жана Женеа, посебно у светлу његове драме *Паравани* и његовог есеја „Та чудна реч ...”, који се може посматрати или као Женеов план за инсценацију *Паравана* или као његово размишљање о значају позоришта уопште.

*Кључне речи:* леш, сахрана, гробље, граница, амбивалентност, зазорност, Жан Жене, *Паравани*, „Та чудна реч...”, сабласно позориште

*Јована С. Павићевућ*

**ГРОБЉА:**  
*Књижевно-културна материјализација смрти*

**Уредник**  
Драган Бошковић

**Лектура и коректура текстова на српском**  
Александра Матић

**Лектура и коректура текстова на енглеском**  
Марија Лојаница

**Ликовно-графички и технички уредник**  
Стефан Секулић

**Издавач**  
Филолошко-уметнички факултет  
Јована Цвијића б.б.  
34000 Крагујевац

**За издавача**  
Мр Зоран Комадина, редовни професор, декан

**Штампа**  
Филолошко-уметнички факултет  
Крагујевац

**Тираж**  
150

**ИСБН**  
978-86-80796-49-9