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Hegemony. Sostenuto, ma non troppo.

On Sherko Abbas' "Music of the Bush Era"

When German poet Johan Wolfgang von Goethe approached Ludwig van Beethoven to write for his theatrical piece titled "Egmont", the composer was delighted to be a part of the project dedicated to heroism of this XVI century Dutch nobleman. Lamoraal Count of Egmont, a war hero and the opponent of the introduction of Inquisition to the country in the Spanish Netherlands, was beheaded in on the Grand Place of Brussels for heresy but perhaps the real reason was his role in the Dutch revolt against the Spaniards. Civil unrest after his execution lead to the national uprising and resulted with future independence of The Netherlands. Beethoven's political views were revolutionary and attuned to democratic demands of his European contemporaries. The history of Egmont was exemplary for heroism for sake of national liberation. Beethoven was clearly supporting the democratic republic and for that reason some years earlier famously removed the name of the Napoleon from his script of "Eroica", to whom the work was originally dedicated, when Bonaparte crowned himself an emperor. The composer was also deeply disgusted with Napoleon's imperial greed of land resulting in conquering countries in Europe and other continents. For Beethoven, his music was a carrier of the political message of freedom. Today, we would probably say, he was an engaged artist. But the history of playing Beethoven music teaches us, that his clear political views were not taken into account when different regimes, many of them oppressive, celebrated his talent in concert halls throughout two centuries as we know i.e. from Zizek's account on the use of IX Symphony in various forms of celebration of power. The meaning of music was externally given by certain forms of political celebrations and interpretations of hegemonic powers.

Nearly two hundred years after Beethoven wrote his "Egmont Overture", a young Kurdish cello player Khabat Abbas was invited by Iraqi Philharmonic Orchestra to join for the rehearsals. The moment was very special. It was 2003 and Saddam's rule over Iraq just ended as a result of American invasion. The Baghdad philharmonics were quite unexpectedly invited to Washington and give a concert at the Kennedy Center along with American National Philharmonic Orchestra. Special attention was put into bringing musicians representing diverse ethnicities od Iraq, even if they weren't actual members of this orchestra. Thus, Khabat packed her belongings and moved to Baghdad, carrying not only her cello but also a H8 camera.

In the capital city, Khabat spent one month with her new colleagues on preparations under the director Mohammad Amin Ezzat. She was often taking her camera out, documenting their work, also giving a camera to others. After a month, the group is taken aboard of US Army aerial transporter to Amman for a visa paperwork. Then, they fly away by a passenger liner to JFK in NYC and from there to Washington to spent a week on sightseeing and rehearsals. During this trip, they remain mostly confined in transitory spaces – planes, terminals, hotels, concert hall, under discreet yet present supervision. Finally, they spent one day with famous cello virtuoso Yo Yo Mo and American philharmonics under Leonard Slatkin, preparing for a gig. On November 9, the concert is played including monumental and full of pathos "Egmont Overture", mourning the death of Lamoraal, in front of George

W. and Laura Bush, Condoleezza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld. Collin Powell gives a speech about democracy and peace before the concert. Two orchestras meet on the stage to give an impression of human unity and musicians of two nations that just clashed in the war play together. This is the moment of celebration of political hegemony when it is already externally decided when and under which circumstance Iraq would become democratic and capitalist society and their carefully selected members arrive as a promise of peace.

Semiotics bore once the term *empty signifier* – as a concept originating in the thought of Claude Levi-Strauss. It is a signifier that may carry an unknown number of significations for different interpreters but by itself is void of meaning. It is like an empty screen for which any meaning can be projected. Ernesto Laclau developed this idea, reading empty signifier through the web of relations and social interactions. In his eyes, empty signifier is a representative of the amassment of various unfulfilled demands. There is no one meaning but various associations that a constructed via differentiating logic. These unsatisfied demands create the unrealized totality in which one signifier subordinates the other in result of hegemonic process. The meaning is controlled via this hegemonic process of signifying.

Classical music, hijacked to create and celebrate an illusion of unity in this sense becomes an empty signifier, deprived of its intention and history because it has been subjected by hegemonic powers giving it particular meaning – for example: humanity, peace, freedom, democracy and so forth. It is a decorative function executed on demand of power, where exploitation of talents to construct the feeling of humanity unified by making music together is completed. It also exploits in this case Otherness, like Iraqi folk music also played during Washington concert, as wanted whilst the Other is accepted only to the certain limit. Skillful Other, the musician, can unite with other musicians without even talking to one another and create an impression that they are one – the body of music, of humanity and harmony.

The concert is over and the group returns to Iraq soon after. However, under later occasions many musicians being with orchestra abroad, run away seeking refuge in the West. Khabat Abbas also left for Europe and nobody knew where is the footage from her trip. She thought that it is long lost, and so as the family. It is only recently when her brother Sherko Abbas found the long-lost material in the family archive and the footage become a base of his new work “Music of the Bush Era”. In the work, he combines no two parallel screens the archival footage from his sister’s tape and contemporary recordings, to tell the story of the unlikely trip she has undertaken, including the perspective of the female cameraperson to the propaganda operation. It is not the first time when female counterpart is a key one in the work of Sherko Abbas. This could be seen in his earlier video “What Julie is doing” with the female performer at a gym lifting weights on her braid as well as in “When the wild instruments sing” where Khabat is involved in the music performance constructed around sonic sphere of the war.

Sherko Abbas then takes on both private memory, culture and its resources to approach matters of the false image of Iraq and the sonic sphere of power relations in the war zone. For this reason, he goes back to find out about art and culture in the archival material. His interest is personal not general. Family is a key element here, it is still first and foremost a personal experience of Khabat, involved in showing the perspectives on the data coming from the country where heritage is destroyed and possibility of safety is limited.

Numbers does not make you feel real says Sherko Abbas. Indeed, the numbers of casualties, mass graves, destroyed buildings, lost heritage, looted works, lost talents or pollution of natural environment are awkwardly dry and abstract. *But your own and very private story makes other understand it differently, through emotion that transform abstract into real.*

In the last frames in the video we can see Khabat playing her cello alone in her Berlin apartment. She completed her musical studies in Sweden and now plays contemporary experimental music in Europe.