

III.

Visual Representations:
Ritual, the Arts and New Media

Performing a Massacre

Murder and Martyrdom in *ta'zīyih*

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Fig. 1: *Hurr¹ Ta'zīyih*, Hurr's army entering *takyīh* (the *ta'zīyih* space), Gaz, 2010.

Ta'zīyih has been performed in Iran for nearly 400 years as a ritualistic theatre form, rooted in the Islamic Shi'ite religion; however, it has developed to a level where it needs to be considered as more than a mere religious ritual. At first it was performed only in Iran, followed later in almost all Shi'ite countries such as Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain; nonetheless, the most developed theatrical form is still performed in central Iran. It is a performance involving dozens of actors and children as well as featuring both manmade and real animals.

With the Shi'ite Ṣafawīd dynasty (1501-1722), the historical story of Ḥusayn's oppositional movement and the tragic outcome of his rebellion against the ruling caliph of the time, *Yazīd*, developed into a self-reflecting, powerful source

¹ Al-Hurr was a high-ranking general in the army of Yazid (Ḥusayn's enemy) who switched sides in favour of Ḥusayn and became a martyr on his side.

that connected all oppositional movements in the Shiite community against all kinds of tyranny.²

The conflict that ends with the massacre of Husayn, his family and his companions had a tremendous impact. The mourning over their catastrophic demise was readily adopted into older forms of mourning rituals already existent in every region. During the 18th century these gently gave birth to a form of theatre structured around the polarisations of Husayn's story and the definitions of *mukhālif khawānī* (antagonist) and *muwāfiq khawānī* (protagonist).

It is necessary to differentiate between the *ta'ziyih* or other mourning-sacrificial rituals and the processions during the mourning months of *Muharram* and *Safar*. This necessity rises from the vague discussion of different phenomena in studies neglecting the characteristics defining each medium. This essay will focus particularly on the ritualised theatrical performance – the *ta'ziyih* – which takes place at particular places at particular times as a happening, in short as an “event that takes place”.³

Mourning, as it happens in *ta'ziyih*, is the code turning the spectators into interactive players, resulting in a “bodily co-presence of actors and spectators”.⁴ The grief over the *murder* is not in response to the murder of a single individual; rather, the life line of an entire community is interrupted. It is about a *mass murder*.

But performing a historical massacre is a challenge when considering everyday life. It is not only a historical narration but a fictive happening lasting hours on end. Free from the unity of place and time, it welcomes the use of modern technology. Microphones have been integrated into the *ta'ziyih* as a means to solve practical problems without any fear of compromising authenticity.⁵ “Man and woman alive” and their “ongoing developing and declining processes of interpersonal and intergroup behaviour in communities and network”,⁶ turn the sacred figures and their death on the stage of the *ta'ziyih* into a theatrical system that adapts itself to fit into the present.

What a *ta'ziyih* narrates is the murder of Husayn – the grandson of Muhammad, the Islamic Prophet – with his family and followers at Karbalā' at the hands of the army of the Sunnite caliph, a battle lasting just one day that ended up in a massacre of all men, including Husayn and even children. A *ta'ziyih* concentrates on this paramount moment in Shiite history. It is performed over several days with different storylines, all of which revolve around the Karbalā' massacre. Every theatre performance ends with the martyrdom of one of the famous characters

² For more detail, see Hamid Dabashi, “Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest”, in *The Drama Review*, 49 (2005), 91-99.

³ Max Hermann, “Das theatalische Raumerlebnis”, in: *Raumtheorie - Grundlagenexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. by J. Dünne et al., Frankfurt 2006, 153.

⁴ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt 2004, 45.

⁵ It is customary nowadays for every *ta'ziyih* participant to use a microphone, held in one hand as a fixed accessory.

⁶ Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, New York 1987, 21.

connected to Husayn; it is therefore named after the main protagonist to be killed last on stage.

Similar to the Greek tragedies, the *ta'ziyih* audience is familiar with the stories. The spectators can distinguish the *antagonists* from the *protagonists* by the colours of their costumes and the music. The protagonists sing their texts from a small notebook, which they carry in their hand, while the antagonists declaim. The colours of the male protagonists are green, white and orange, while the females wear black and the antagonists are dressed in red, gold, etc.

I. Husayn and Siyāwush

Ta'ziyih as a theatrical form has its roots in ritual.⁷ Later it was established as a theatre form, similar to its present-day manifestation.⁸ Linked to the mourning rituals of a God sacrificed in winter and reborn in spring, *ta'ziyih* protagonists are deeply connected to Siyāwush, the Persian prince of the mythical Kiyāniyān dynasty and the mourning rituals associated with his sacrificial death.⁹

The figure of Siyāwush, in a textual and performative context, has been transformed in many basic elements of a *ta'ziyih*: black functions as the colour of mourning;¹⁰ horses, as totemic symbols, are always present beside the protagonists and the antagonists in the vengeful actions consequent to the murders of

⁷ For further studies about the origin of theatre: Jane Ellen Harrison, *A Study of the Social Origin of Greek Religion*, Cambridge 1912.

⁸ Cf. 'Ali Huşūrī, *Siyāwushān*, Tehran 2000, and Ehsan Yarshater, "Development of Persian Drama in the Context of Cultural Confrontation in Iran", in: *Iran: Continuity and Variety*, ed. by Peter Chelkowski, New York 1971.

⁹ Siyāwush's story in Firdawsi, Shāhnāmih, Tehran 2005. Rustam, the mythical Persian hero, raises him and brings him – a young noble man eligible to become king – to the royal court of his father, Kāwūs. Südābih, the queen and wife of Kāwūs, ignites a passion for Siyāwush and repeatedly approaches him, to no avail. Having been rejected and now vengeful, Südābih goes to Kāwūs and falsely accuses Siyāwush of rape and assault. To prove Siyāwush innocent he is tested with fire (a ritual indicating sacredness of fire in ancient Iran; the accused had to walk cross the fire and the innocent would not burn), and he has to cross through the fire on his black horse. Once proven innocent, Siyāwush asks his father to forgive Südābih and goes into self-imposed exile to fight the Tūrāniyāns and eventually retreats to Tūrān. Siyāwush is popular even in the land of his enemies. He marries Farangīs, daughter of Afrāsiyāb, and establishes a pristine and heavenly town in Tūrān. But the popularity of this stranger is costly. Provoked by his men, especially his brother, Afrāsiyāb orders Siyāwush to be beheaded. The period of peace ends and, as Siyāwush had predicted, an age of revenge begins. Siyāwush is one of the most important sacrificed figures in Central Asia where a disposition to demigods is evident.

¹⁰ The colour black is originally more an Iranian symbol for mourning and not so prevalent in the Arab world and the Islamic tradition. 'Ali Huşūrī, *Siyāwushān*, 89. Both figures, Husayn and Siyāwush have mythical horses. *Dhu'l-Janāḥ*, which means Pegasus, is Husayn's horse and *Shabrang*, which means black horse as symbol for a male horse (totem), belongs to Siyāwush.

both Husayn and Siyāwush;¹¹ and most importantly, the mourning rituals performed for the sacrifice of the holy demigod/God.¹² Narshākhī in *History of Bu-khārā* states: “There are special songs of the people about the killing of Siyāwush. The musicians called these *Kīn-i Siyāwush...* from now (332/943) it was three thousand years ago.”¹³

This is one of the oldest pieces of evidence of *Siyāwush-Khawānī*, the annual mourning tradition played out to mark Siyāwush’s death, as a ritual. *The History of Bu-khārā*, a reliable source on the subject of mourning and elegy recitation rituals, describes in detail all significant issues with regards to the history of this ritual.

But what is the sense of performativity that these protagonists share in ritual to theatre?¹⁴ What is the process through which historic-mythic-cultural figures transform into performative characters of a collective memory?

1. Husayn

In a *ta’zīyih* interpretation Husayn is mostly a father figure, a man with his children or simply a man with his brother and sisters. Even as a husband, his role is reduced to that of a family head, a shepherd defending his flock. Husayn is accompanied by a large number of people on the stage. He bears responsibility for all. He is always present, even if he is not the main protagonist or even if his story is absent, as is in fact the case in some important *ta’zīyihs*. He remains the fundamental element of cultural memory in the *ta’zīyih*.¹⁵

Like Husayn, *ta’zīyih* protagonists exist on two different levels: that of the *ta’zīyih* text and the actual performance. The so-called protagonists – the *ta’zīyih* martyrs – are presented in both *textual* and *performative* discourses. Here I will focus here on *ta’zīyih* protagonists, specifically Husayn – also famous as the *Lord of Martyrs* –, in terms of how they portray the character in their performance, leaving aside the literary representation. In other words here we will discuss the *martyrdom in its performative context*.¹⁶ The mourning rituals revolving around both figures are connected. Siyāwush, as an earlier martyr figure, is still strongly con-

¹¹ Post-Karbalā’ movements like the rebellions of Mukhtār and Tawwābūn. The whole Shāh-nāmih (977) after the death of Siyāwush is more or less about the revenge and the following war.

¹² According to Husūrī in *Siyāwushān*, 25-53, Siyāwushān turns to be a totem in Central Asia, but also the narration of his story in later versions all point out his demigod existence and his holiness.

¹³ Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ja’far Narshākhī, *Tārīkh-i Bu-khārā* [332/943], trans. by Abū Naṣr Qubādī (Persian), Tehran 2009, 59. Translation by the author.

¹⁴ As far as the protagonists concerned, in a *ta’zīyih* Husayn is only one of thousands. Scores of historical and fictive figures are involved in a *ta’zīyih*.

¹⁵ There are many *ta’zīyih* stories with no direct connection to Karbalā’ however; in these *ta’zīyihs* Husayn and his fate are also mentioned implicitly or explicitly.

¹⁶ See Erika Fischer Lichte, *Theater als Modell für eine performative Kultur*, Universitätsreden, Saarbrücken 2000, 46.

nected with nature: it is from his blood, which drops to the earth while he is murdered, that plants grow.¹⁷ The mourning ritual devoted to him thus replaces the spring festivities.

This refers in turn to another mythical figure: Tammūz, the Sumerian God of Vegetation. These two early figures – Siyāwush and Tammūz – come from different traditions: the Siyāwush myth is originally from Transoxiana while Tammūz, who also seems to be an older counterpart, is based in Mesopotamian culture. With their central theme of the sacrificed god, the mourning rituals connected to them and last but not least, their strong performative and literary backgrounds, they furnish sufficient evidence that a cultural transmission took place which brings Mesopotamian and Transoxianan traditions together in the *ta'ziyih*.

All three characters are based on the principle of *duality*.¹⁸ As far as the myth of Tammūz is concerned, these two poles are represented in Tammūz and his spouse Inanna. While Inanna kills Tammūz so as to survive, soon after she starts to mourn the loss of Tammūz and this continues until he returns to earth.¹⁹

If we follow the thesis of William Robertson Smith, who argued that “the myth was derived from the ritual and not the ritual from the myth”,²⁰ then the basic action can be traced back to the act of sacrifice in all these myths. The main difference between the newer (Husayn and Siyāwush) and the older version (Tammūz) is how the mourners and murderers are separated into two groups. In the oldest version these two characteristic features belong to the same figure: in the Tammūz-Inanna myth, Inanna is the one who kills Tammūz and is, at the same time, the one who mourns him; in the later versions however, the murders and the mourners are separated from each other. It is out of this very separation into antagonists (as murderers) and spectators (as mourners), witnessing the emergence of a theatre-ritual out of a mourning ritual, that the *ta'ziyih* originates.

The main question that arises here is the identification between the antagonists and the spectators, between the *mourners* and the *murderers*. Robertson Smith's thesis shows that the oldest counterpart of our myth, rooted in a ritual, had given its antagonist both *mourner* and *murderer* roles. Although in a *ta'ziyih*

¹⁷ The plant is called *Par-i Siyāwushān*.

¹⁸ Duality here may be defined as *moral duality*.

¹⁹ The other important aspect is rebirth. Mehrdād Bahār has written on this: “The presence of *Kay-Khusraw* as the son of Siyāwush in fact represents the resurrection and rebirth of the martyred god. If we accept that Siyāwush is the Iranian example of *Dumūzī* (Tammūz) of Mesopotamia, in that case the death of Siyāwush equals the descendent of Dumūzī or Tammūz to the netherworld. But Dumūzī/Tammūz returns to life whereas this part is missing in the story of Siyāwush. The escape of *Kay-Khusraw* from *Tūrān* to Iran in fact is the return of Dumūzī to the world and his kingdom represents the renewed godliness of this vegetation deity and fertilization.” *Sukhanī čand dar bārib-yi shāhnāmīh*, ed. by Katāyūn Mazdāpūr, Tehran 1979, 226.

²⁰ William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, ed. by Adam and Charles Black, London Elibron [1894] 2005, 18.

both roles are specifically separated and clearly contoured, the older counterpart seems to have no problem with an undefined state as to the *mourners*.

At the same time, the spectators see themselves reflected in the protagonists who, having gone through the transformation the holy family into an elementary *social icon* – the family –, in turn moves the mourners to identify with the protagonists. The whole aforementioned complex creates an enormous sense of ambivalence in the theatre space. We need to explore this issue in more detail.

II. Antagonists in the ta'ziyah: Evil on the Stage

In the *ta'ziyah* we are dealing with evilness on two levels: firstly, there is evil as an act of malice, or in the words of Paul Ricoeur: “when one experiences himself as a victim of the evilness of others”;²¹ secondly, we are faced with discovering evil in one's own self (as a spectator). These two aspects of experiencing the phenomenon of the *evil* are circularly connected with each other in the *ta'ziyah*. Hence, the first interaction is not the empathic dialogue with the *good* – the protagonists – but with the *evil*, the antagonists.

It is the discovery of passiveness in the spectator as an experience of one's own fate when facing injustice: the experience of watching on – and only being able to watch – while others are murdering someone fully incapable of defending themselves and engaging in a fair fight (much like a child), of being condemned to the position of a mere spectator when the situation actually demands intervention. This is the result of the limits imposed by the stage, what we may term ‘the theatrical dictatorship’. Moreover, witnessing murder more or less implicates the viewer in the deed committed, turning them into an accomplice, if not indeed making them (partly) guilty. The situation causes a perception of suffering when *the others* are suffering,²² und the most extreme examples of this experience are scenes of child murder in some of the important *ta'ziyih*s.

The key to discovering this evil dimension are the antagonists. They are alone, unaccompanied by women, children and families. The antagonists are also unmusical, i.e. they are not given a musical theme. While the protagonists sing and proudly show off their highly-qualified voices, the antagonists shout and unleash their voices as loud as they can, for antagonists are rulers and represent authority. They are the manifestation of sovereignty on the *takyib*, the *ta'ziyah* space. Here, under this aspect, *mourners* and *murderers* become *masses* and *sovereigns*, respectively.

Takyib as the *ta'ziyah* space consists of three concentric circles (see the figure below). The central circular space belongs to the protagonists. Most of the action takes place in this space, the space afforded Husayn and his family. All this centres around a family (*masses*), the holy family of Husayn, which represents the

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Das Böse*, Zürich 1986, 19.

²² Ibid., 18.

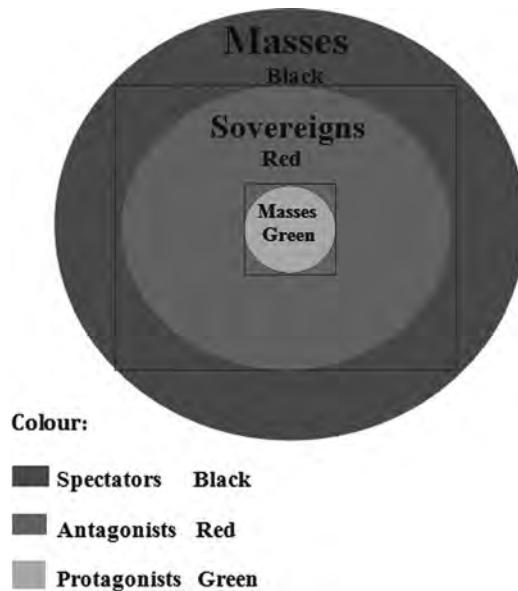


Fig. 2: The territories of the *takyih* stage

society. The masses in the outer space are thus watching a mirroring of their own fate in the inner space of the stage (protagonists' space).

The second or middle circle belongs to the antagonists. The antagonists never leave this space, except for the murder scenes. Finally, the largest space is afforded to the spectators. This system enables the masses to observe their *sovereigns*, a situation impossible outside this theatrical space. If we leave the *takyih* we are entering the territorial domain of the sovereign or the authorities.

III. A Collective and Its Shadows

These circles are the key to understanding this unique system. How every internal circle reflects on the outer circle, the relationship between the different circles and, more importantly, the dominant circle, which belongs to the spectators and holds both circles within itself – these elements together construct what we may call a performative system. We are dealing with a society that is facing its protagonists on stage. The most significant protagonists are undergoing the process of becoming a martyr. The antagonists are those who enable this process of metamorphoses from mere protagonist to martyr.

Majlis is a title indicating a specific performance of the *ta'ziyib*: *majlis-i shahādat-i imām ḥusayn* is one of the thousands of performances and it can be translated as *The Performance of the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn*. While literature is confined to seeing martyrdom as a predefined phenomenon, the figuration of martyrdom in a *ta'ziyib* creates a completely different case. In literature the process of becoming a

martyr is already completed when it reaches and is received by the reader, whereas in a *ta'ziyih* performance, presenting the process of becoming a martyr, it is the spectators who define and declare the moment and the figure of martyrdom.²³ Spectators are the rulers over the rhythm of the whole *ta'ziyih*. Their interest and attention decides, indirectly, the best time for arranging the climaxes and how much effort needs to be put into it.

Martyr figures, as a part of cultural memory, transcend all expected norms in the act of becoming a martyr. In the *ta'ziyih* we cannot ignore the dominant interactive presence of the spectators. They are free to stay or leave anytime they want, the auditorium is never darkened but always remains light, and they are allowed to drink and eat as they wish. The spectators' reactions are essential to first establishing and then changing the rhythm of the *ta'ziyih*. Almost every scene – expositions, rising actions, climax, falling actions and dénouements – depend on the spectators' reactions, for instance their crying or expression of appreciation. Here the spectators rule and by exercising this rule they reclaim the cultural memory in the name of an *interactive cultural memory*.

On the performative level the martyr is tied up in “the materiality of theatre, that is, from the semiotics of movement, tones, silences, costumes, and spatial arrangements onstage, as well as from the reactions of spectators in the auditorium.”²⁴ In this case, the martyr and his sovereign act, facing the limitations and dictatorship of the theatrical space, turns into the sacrificial death of the innocent, becoming the victim of a collective murder which in the case of a *ta'ziyih* renders them as the victim of both spectators and antagonists.

Husayn and the other protagonists straddle two different layers; naturally enough they are manifestly present as protagonists in a *ta'ziyih*; but they are also represent, on the other side as it were, the collective memory of the spectators.

1. The *ta'ziyih*'s manifestation of the protagonists

In a *ta'ziyih* the manifestation of the protagonists is based on a paradox: the character structure of each figure is established independently of the historical holy figures. The figuration of the protagonists, especially Husayn, takes place without any specification of age and bodily appearance; while it is a norm to cover the faces of holy figures in all other art mediums, here no veils are employed to cover faces.

Furthermore, everything on the stage defines itself autonomously in the process of the unfolding events. Faces and voices are what glimpsed first and these fascinate the spectators. A protagonist with a perfect singing voice and a young,

²³ Max Hermann, “Das theatralische Raumerlebnis”, 502.

²⁴ Sandra L. Richards, “Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature”, in: *Performativity and Performance*, ed. by Andres Parker et al., New York et al. 1995, 72.

charming face is the key to success of the whole *ta'ziyih* troop. The ambivalence of performing a holy figure with a face which could belong to anyone is an important characteristic of the *ta'ziyih*, and it has always raised a number of challenges. The paradox comes into existence the very moment when the holiness vanishes behind the ordinary face of an actor, who shifts between being and not being the protagonist, a feature that also applies to the antagonists.

2. The cultural memory of the spectator

To understand the cultural memory affiliated to the *ta'ziyih* protagonists, we need to keep in mind that the *ta'ziyih* originated in a culture where the performative and textual maintained a close and strong connection with each other. In this cultural background the most intricate subjects of the humanities and philosophy were (and still are) part of the everyday lives of ordinary people.²⁵ Among these are the mystic interpretations of the religious concept of *shahīd* (martyr) and the mystic concept of *'ishq* (love), which taken together create the concept of the *martyr of love*, *shahīd-i 'ishq*, a key concept among the mystics.

The two following poems by two famous mystic poets encapsulate the problem of war, love and martyrdom:

The warrior strives in the way of becoming a martyr,
Ignorant that the martyr of love stands higher than him
On judgment day, how can one compare the two
One is killed by the enemy and the other by his (her) lover.²⁶

The butterfly said to the candle: Your festivity is joyful.
Sacrifice me, while dissolving in you is my pleasure
All your promises and rewards are dear to me
You are my witness and I am your martyr.²⁷

Shahīd-i 'ishq is a model for a clear and deliberate decision for death; however, it is not to be compared with a decision for suicide. On the eve of the murder of his family and friends Husayn says that everybody should leave him, for it is not a battle that awaits them but a brutal and cruel death.

On the performative level however, the question arises whether somebody would come to help him. At the same time though, in the *Performance of Husayn's Martyrdom (majlis)* he refuses – so as to avoid any interference – to accept the help of the armies of ghosts, angels, animals, prophets and demons. He refuses any help for he fears being charged with creating an unjust war. He thus saves innocence, but this innocence itself will be destroyed along with him.

²⁵ For example the books of Hāfiẓ and Firdawsi, two very important cultural figures, are firmly embedded in the normal life of Iranians.

²⁶ Abū Sa'īd Abū al-Khayr, *Ruba'iyāt*, [C4/5th - C9/10th], Hamadān 1998, 19. Translation by the author.

²⁷ Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, *Mukhtār nāmīb*, [C6/7th - C12/13th], Tehran 2007, 232. Translation by the author.



Fig. 3: Husayn *Ta'zīyih*, The dead and the ghosts rise up to help Husayn, Khulanjān, 2010.

Husayn redefines himself as being a winner and not a loser of war when, after hours of the supernatural army's march, he then refuses their help. Through this position ("He could win if he wanted but he doesn't") his character gravitates even closer to the definition of a martyr of love. He has not been killed by his enemy but he has decided to die. As a result, Husayn's actions and his death in a *ta'zīyih* challenge the spectator even more.

The spectator looks at the evilness in two main ways. Every event on the stage is already known to him. In other words, there is no surprise on the levels of text and cultural memory, but the excess of the performative act is for him – the spectator – an immensely shocking fright, a vital shudder.

The performative murder, the massacre, draws the border between spectators and actors (antagonists and protagonists). Up to this time they play together the role of the spectator. Up to the point of the murder, the *ta'zīyih* actors (antagonists and protagonists) dissociate themselves from their roles in different ways: openly holding the text, they act freely and impromptu, suddenly engaging in private conversations with spectators and other actors, drinking tea or delivering direct comments such as: "I am myself one of you! Only a humble follower of Husayn!"

And then the constructive act of violence by the evil person in a *ta'zīyih*: the act of murder which leads to martyrdom on the performative level. *The act of murdering* separates the actors (antagonists and protagonists) from the spectators.

Murder and martyrdom – the order seems to set up quite literally the construction. Is in a *ta'zīyih* *murder* the *ritual* and, at the same time, *martyrdom* the

theatre? Is in a *ta'ziyih* the act of murder definable as the ritualistic part, and at the same time its result, the declaration of martyrdom on stage, the theatrical dimension? Does it make sense at all to try to analyse rituality and theatricality as two distinct spheres in the *ta'ziyih*? Erika Fischer-Lichte has discussed the same question regarding spiritual plays of the Middle Ages:

“A systematic distinction between theatre and ritual, which can be applied to ritual and theatre of all cultures and times, seems [...] to be neither possible nor meaningful. If a distinction is to be made, then it should be drawn on the basis of the historical background, whereby the question is: what specific functions has a particular culture assigned to theatre and ritual at a particular time, and what differences has it identified between them.”²⁸

In the *ta'ziyih* the shift from the sacrifice-ritual to a *theatre of martyrdom* should be considered an essential function. It is not the difference between theatre and ritual that is important, but how they co-exist and how they restructure and intervene in each other. The martyrdom, as it is identified in the Shiite context, supports the separation of theatre from ritual as a theatrical necessity.

Furthermore, the double role of the spectators as participants in a sacrificial ritual and as passive killers supports the same detachment. The spectators, confirming the role of the antagonists – as figures of the tyrant on the stage, maintain their function when their role as a ritual participant is transferred into a co-existing presence with the actors in a theatrical space.

If the discussion is limited to sacrificial ritual, the roles would be reduced to victims and murderers. But here we are also concerned with a *mourning-sacrificial ritual*. The grief, the act of weeping, is stressed by the religious participants as *thawāb*: who cries for the martyrs is recompensed by his God. This statement however is a dissimulation of what the origin of the grief was.

How can it come about that we have *mourning* as an *act*, integrated in a theatrical space and not just as a *sympathetic reaction*, or a sort of reaction which would stay only in the individual spaces? If there were no guilt feelings, why is there such a strong collective process of regret and remorse? Our key to understanding the concepts of innocence, evil, martyrdom and murdering has always revolved around the constant presence of a feeling of guilt, or the constant absence of a concept (guilt) which has been present already while we have argued its counterpart (innocence).

The murder/sacrifice scene still remains, as a part of the ritual, forceful and shuddering. The participants experience an extreme case of cruelty, a fundamental crime, in the infanticide scenes that a child, almost like a sacrificial animal, is to be decapitated with a knife by an antagonist.

²⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Theater und Fest, Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Theatralität und Ritualität in den geistlichen Spielen des Mittelalters”, in: *Transformationen des Religiösen*, ed. by Ingrid Kasten et al., Berlin 2007, 8.



Fig. 4: *Husayn ta'ziyih*, Shimr killing 'Abdullāh, Khulanjān, 2010.

Apart from any connection to Husayn's history or religious references, child murder fundamentally shakes society. Interestingly, in *the performance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn* the murder of his nephew 'Abdullāh – the climax which induces the participants to cry – is shown earlier than the murder of Husayn. Therefore, the martyrdom of Husayn loses its performative significance and necessity, and his martyrdom is disguised and symbolised by releasing pigeons.

The innocence of Husayn and his family, as well as of all the other martyr figures in a *ta'ziyih*, lies at the heart of the feelings of guilt, the feelings of *mass guilt* in the participants of this sacrificial ritual. Theatricality generates a martyr from the body of the ritualised victim. The result of this consideration of the *ta'ziyih* as a theatrical ritual is a recognition that the *ta'ziyih* is a projection screen for the *collective guilt* associated with the martyr.