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Archival Diffractions

A Response to Le Nemesiache's Call

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ABSTRACT: In the reactivation of the feminist collective of artists Le Nemesiache, this paper looks at the tension between rhetoric and translation in relation to the dislocation of archival materials from their situatedness in place (Naples) and time (1970 to the present). Translation emerges as the conveyor of the conditions from which the addresser started, as well as the ones of the addressees, as a potential that takes place in the moment of enunciation through a plurality of subjects. Considering the epistemological tension between history and fiction, as well as the mediation that happens through the body and the different subjectivities triggered by intra-action, this essay will engage with the following question: if the archive is the memory, can dramaturgy and reenactment from the archive become the message of a prophecy?

KEYWORDS: Le Nemesiache; feminism; translation; archive; performance

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In the following text, I will outline three scenes read through a psycho-analytical and theatrical lens. After a short introduction, I will use these scenes to suggest that scripting and diffractive writing can be innovative methodologies of archival enquiry. Each scene will be a way to succeed or 'come after' work of the feminist collective Le Nemesiache from Naples, responding to 'their call' to continue their legacy. Each scene will be described through an image, a sound, or a gesture. This presentation is part of my research project and broader practice focusing on feminist epistemologies and archival diffractions.¹ I borrow the concept of diffraction from Donna Haraway to define the methodology used in my work on Le Nemesiache's archive. In the context of her epistemological project of 'situated knowledges', Haraway defined diffraction as an optical metaphor that:

[records] the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals. Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere, in more or less distorted form,

1 I am completing a PhD funded by the AHRC at Goldsmiths University in London, with the working title *Porous Places, Eruptive Bodies: The Feminist Group Le Nemesiache in 1970s and 1980s Naples* (2020).

thereby giving rise to industries of [story-making about origins and truths]. Rather, diffraction can be a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness.²

Diffraction can account for the intricate relationship between past and present, alongside the complex desires of different generations of feminists that are triggered in a researcher's consideration of an archive. Going against the idea of the authenticity of the archive and its authority as expressed by Jacques Derrida, among others, diffraction speaks of the material, metaphorical, and embodied effects of encountering an archive as a meaning-making tool in itself.³ My desire is not to 'give voice' to Le Nemesiache's nearly forgotten actions, but to show how these can be active co-creators of feminist epistemologies. My research, at once theoretical and embodied, displaces Le Nemesiache's archival material to encourage innovative associations and disassociations, while simultaneously reinforcing some of the nuances of their work. This displacement happens by retelling and re-siting Le Nemesiache's archival traces in the present in different languages and locations.

Le Nemesiache are a group of women who have been part of the feminist struggle in Italy since 1970.⁴ In that year, this separatist group was initiated by the artist and philosopher Lina Mangiacapre in her hometown, the city of Naples. Although its composition has varied throughout the decades, the collective has been said to have been animated by up to twelve women at times, the core of the group consisting of at least five people. From the late 1980s onward, the collective transformed into a loose association called 'Le tre ghinee' (The Three Guineas), which preserves the legacy of Le Nemesiache's ideas and

2 Donna Haraway, *Modest—Witness@Second—Millennium.FemaleMan—Meets—OncoMouse* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 273, quoted by Karen Barad in Rick Dophijn and Iris van der Tuin, 'Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers: Interview with Karen Barad', in Dophijn, van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp. 48–70 (p. 51) <<https://dx.doi.org/10.3998/ohp.11515701.0001.001>>.

3 Jacques Derrida describes the archive principle as a 'paternal and patriarchic principle [that] only posited itself to repeat itself and returned to re-posit itself only in the parricide'. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 95.

4 The following information is the result of my PhD research and ongoing work on Le Nemesiache's archive, which started in 2013. See first note.

actions. After the premature death of Lina Mangiacapre in 2002, their meetings and presence have been reduced. Le Nemesiache's women have dedicated themselves to the arts and in particular to cinema and theatre. Their feminist stance lies in their belief that women's liberation can only be achieved through women's creative self-determination. In 1977, the collective wrote the 'Manifesto for the Appropriation of Our Creativity', in which they reaffirmed the intention behind their practice. In a cyclostyled leaflet dotted with the signatures of the women, they claimed: 'Creativity is political, it is life, routine, erotic, in harmony with nature and the cosmos.'⁵

Cycles, nature, and the cosmos introduce another aspect of Le Nemesiache's preoccupation: their passionate use of mythology to overturn men's patriarchal rationality. Lina Mangiacapre adopted the mythological name 'Nemesis' after the Greek goddess of justice against hubris: excessive arrogance as conceived by the Greeks. The Neapolitan group considered hubris to be a quality inherent in men's behaviour. The collective Le Nemesiache, followers of Nemesis, strained against patriarchal arrogance. Other members were inspired by the legendary nymphs, such as the naiads of the fresh water, the dryads of the trees, and the oreads of the mountains. Medea, Helen of Troy, Niobe, and Cassandra were among the mythological figures with which the group identified.

Following their desire to rethink women's subjectivities through art, Le Nemesiache worked on theatre performances, films, poetry happenings, video art, music, and paintings, but they also staged protests and occupations of buildings to trigger a new conception of their location, Naples, and of the spaces for women's creativity that the city might offer. As a collective, they produced five performances, three films, four music concerts, and seven video works. In 1976, they initiated one of the first feminist film festivals in Europe, called *Rassegna del Cinema Femminista*. It ran in Sorrento until 1994.

5 Le Nemesiache, 'Manifesto per la riappropriazione della nostra creatività' (Manifesto for the Appropriation of our Creativity), trans. by Giulia Damiani (2020), available in the pamphlet from the exhibition *From the Volcano to the Sea: The Feminist Group Le Nemesiache in the 1970s and 1980s Naples*, Rongwrong, Amsterdam (2020).

SETTING UP A SCENE FROM THE ARCHIVE

‘The scene is the principal form of reminiscence: a kind of memory cut off from its origins and access routes, isolated and fixed, and reduced to a trace.’⁶ In this quote, theorist Jane Rendell reflects on what psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche conceived as a scene. Laplanche believed the scene to be the primary fragmented and repeated trace of the process of translation-repression happening between conscious and unconscious. I am interested in appropriating this notion of scene as it expresses the encounter between several boundaries: past and present, original and trace, and self and other, where ‘other’ can be a being or an object. Laplanche defined the unconscious as an ‘internal foreign body’, and even as one put inside the self by an alien.⁷ These scenes are traces of aliens; better still, they are ghosts appearing on the frontier between translation and feminine repression, inner and outer worlds, and past and present enactment. They are fleeting sites of encounter with Le Nemesiache’s practice reduced to a trace, or ‘glimpses’. In the writing of the philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, glimpses are apparitions whose traces last longer than the apparition itself.⁸ Glimpses are beings half-seen and already loved. They require a form of investment.

Although scenes are glimpses without a visible origin, the origin of the term ‘scene’ reinforces the ideas of encounter and displacement of the trace. From the Greek *skene*, the word ‘scene’ originally indicated a tent or booth, something that gives shade or a shadow.⁹ Scenes mark the shadows of sites of encounter, stretching over into the present and future through their trace. In this sense, the scene points to its own excess, to what exists beyond it — the event projecting the shadow. In

6 Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), p. 117.

7 Jean Laplanche, ‘The Unfinished Copernican Revolution’, in Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, ed. by John Fletcher, trans. by Luke Thurston, Leslie Hill, and Philip Slotkin (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 53–86 (p. 65).

8 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Glimpses*, online video recording of a public open lecture for the students of the Division of Philosophy, Art & Critical Thought at the European Graduate School EGS, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, 26 May 2015 <<https://egs.edu/lecture/georges-didi-huberman-glimpses-2015/>> [accessed 25 February 2018].

9 John Oswald, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Philadelphia, PA: Key & Biddle, 1836), p. 385.



Figure 1. Screenshot from the film *Didone non è morta* (Dido Is Not Dead), dir. by Lina Mangiacapre (1987). Courtesy of Le Nemesiache.

this case, it is the encounter with a past feminist struggle; however, this can only be experienced differently, through retelling and re-siting — through the trace of the shadow itself. The scene is transformed into a new site for analysis calling for a response: for new incisions. According to Rebecca Schneider, this is what happens to an original event when it is narrated through a trace: the retelling and re-siting become the event itself.¹⁰ The origin is lost. But the scene is also a theatrical event, both spatial when intended as the setting of the scene and temporal when the scene is a moment in a longer narrative. The scene is located in front of an audience. Audience members' shadows are marked on the scene throughout this process.

WRITING SCENE-SITES: SCENE NUMBER ONE IS AN IMAGE SHOT
AT CAMPI FLEGREI, THE PHLEGREAN FIELDS

Shadows grow in the encounter with Le Nemesiache's artistic work. In the 1970s, their experience began overlapping with their environment — the natural volcanic phenomena present in the region of Naples

10 Rebecca Schneider, 'Solo Solo Solo', in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. by Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 23–47.

(such as the sulphur fumes from the crater in this image) with the ancient myths that were located there. Their site was one of many repetitions: retranslations of something atavistic and repressed. Although I, the viewer, recognize this feeling, I cannot name it.

The black frame around the image indicates that it was filmed on a Super 8mm camera. This format was widely used by amateur filmmakers throughout the 80s. It is a frame from another time and from a longer feature, a still of something already in movement. In this shot, one woman is following another. The viewer participates in this chase. I understand this scene as a message of the desire to come after, to follow someone else's steps. The two characters are Dido, the legendary queen of Carthage, and her sister Anna. Dido is the oldest and the most celebrated in the family because of her tragic suicide. Anna walks behind her, ready to accompany Dido in her fate, but her final trajectory will be different. In this 'coming after', one after the other, their image will never coincide. A fracture can be expressed through an image still. We are following their steps; we come after. We can rewind and repeat. In telling this story, what is my position in this repetitive structure? Am I acting out something unconscious through the repetition of this trace-scene?

Laplanche's term 'afterwardsness' can be lifted from his psycho-analytic theory to become something different here.¹¹ Afterwardsness indicates a deferred action — a repetition with difference — that provokes the release of repressed ideas. This occurs through the relation with something from the past that is retranslated in the present. It can be a conscious process but not necessarily a knowing one.¹² Can this scene be the site of a personal and collective feminist investment? Retelling, displacing this trace onto other countless sites to begin again, to grasp something anew?

NUMBER TWO IS A SCENE OF 'VULCANIZATION'

The rumble of the volcano (see fig. 2) reverberates in the recording. Volcanoes are objects of scientific studies, subjects of paintings and

11 Jean Laplanche, 'Notes on Afterwardsness', in Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, pp. 264–69.

12 Rendell, *Site-Writing*, p. 63.



Figure 2. A recording of the rumble of the Vesuvius is available from 'Vesuvius in Eruption', filmed by British Movietone News on 29 July 1929 <<https://youtu.be/-7W6BAV0wmw>> [accessed 21 November 2020].

poems, and background phenomena in contemporary art installations. Philosophers such as Didi-Huberman describe volcanoes as 'nothing but nature' when they exist outside of human intervention. They are certainly present, but they are not yet sites.¹³ Le Nemesiache possessed the rumble of Mount Vesuvius, the renowned volcano near Naples. The volcano infiltrates their practice, which can be said to, in a metaphorical sense, cannibalize the potentially destructive but also generative force of Mount Vesuvius. For Le Nemesiache, women's stories were present in the lava. Throughout the 1970s, they said that history was written in their blood, the blood of women. They waited for the explosion of their veins. They would walk in the world splashing their story like lava. 'Lava, vulcani e sangue' ('Lava, Volcanos, and Blood') was the title of an article by Mangiacapre, published posthumously in the magazine *Il paese delle donne* in 2004.¹⁴ In an almost mystical language, Mangiacapre discussed how a conception of humanity based on the individuality of the single man as a fundamental basis has produced a

13 Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Man Who Walked in Color*, trans. by Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2017), p. 73.

14 Lina Mangiacapre, 'Lava, vulcani e sangue' ('Lava, Volcanos and Blood'), *Il Paese delle donne*, May 2004.

society that celebrates straight lines, rigidity, and phallogentric towers. Lava, volcanoes, and blood would make the world start from naught again; naught was intended as a necessary destruction to achieve a new harmony with the cosmos, a new unity with the natural elements, with the volcanoes. This destruction would be led by women. The blood of women, of past witches, and the lava of the volcano are thus interpreted as prophetic actors coalescing the historical suffering of women into the promise of a future regeneration.

The volcano is revealed as a site of investment. The group's actions did not aim at depicting or altering the functioning volcano. Their intention was, rather, to bring the volcano away from being a separate place and into the city — to recognize the lava in themselves and to see how the alien-ness of the volcano finds a shadow in the self. Thus the volcano has the potential to actualize unconscious structures but also material and patriarchal relationships: for example, in the ruins from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which authors such as Freud and Derrida have used.¹⁵

Embracing artist Andrea Fraser's definition of enactment as that which brings into focus 'the structures of relationships that are produced and reproduced in all forms of activity', can the volcano be exploded into a performance of such conscious and unconscious structures?¹⁶

In doing so, the performance is made into a volcanic bomb, which is the moment when volcanic lava turns into rocks of different shapes. By leaving the volcano and changing temperature, lava is shaped in flight and can land several kilometres away from its point of origin. Claiming again the power to imagine women's action as a burning prophecy, we are left with an unforeseeable promise of eruption descending from the rims of Mount Vesuvius.

15 The ruins of Pompeii became a model for Sigmund Freud's analogy between archeology and psychoanalysis, the ruins representing what is repressed and preserved in the unconscious. The relief of a female figure *Gradiva* is famously used by Freud to analyse memory and repression. On this subject, see Griselda Pollock, 'The Image in Psychoanalysis and the Archeological Metaphor', in *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 1–29.

16 Andrea Fraser, 'Performance or Enactment', in *Performing the Sentence: Research and Teaching in Performative Fine Arts*, ed. by Carola Dertnig and Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), pp. 122–27.



Figure 3. *How to Sing a Prophecy*, scripted and dir. by Giulia Damiani, with performer Helena Rice (2017).

NUMBER THREE IS THE SCENE OF A PROPHETIC GESTURE

Can we recognize this prophecy now? The root *phēmi* belongs to the Greek word for prophecy, *prophēteia*. *Phēmi*, in its proto-Indo-European origin, is cognate with *fabula*, meaning story or fable.¹⁷ The other component of *prophēteias* is the prefix ‘pro’, meaning ‘before’; in this case, moving one’s hands forward. Prophecy is the putting forward of a fable, held in arms and pushed ahead. It is fabulation from other times carried into sites that are always different. Constantly displaced, it can only be noticed by shifting the gaze, in a glimpse.

17 *Chamber’s Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. by James Donald (Edinburgh: William Chambers, 1868), p. 403.

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