

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Adrian Paci Shows Us How We Mourn the Death of Dictators

A meditation on the theater of state funerals for dictators, artist Adrian Paci removes the focus on grief to focus on the mourners.

Hrag Vartanian | October 12, 2017



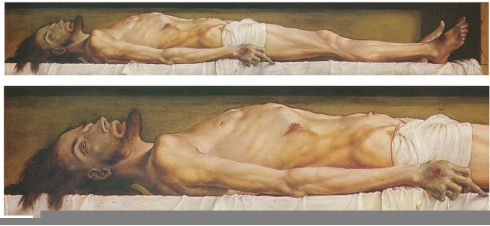
Adrian Paci's "Interregnum" (2017) on view at Protocinema's Beyoglu space (all images by the author for Hyperallergic)

ISTANBUL — None of the footage in Adrian Paci's new film "Interregnum" (2017) is of the autocrats themselves, instead the Albanian-born artist focuses on footage of crowds that come together to publicly mourn the dictators of the 20th century. The clips are meditative, mostly drawn from official state documentation, but they leave you with a sense of confusion

since the subject of the adoration is never seen. When the camera focuses on individuals, they serve as emotional stand-ins, proxies for something else — that mystery is part of the appeal.

When German artist [Hans Holbein the Younger](#) painted "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" (1520–22) he shocked viewers by placing the dead Jesus Christ figure front and center. There were no mourners, just a stark human form robbed of the vitality of life. Feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva spends a lot of time discussing this painting in her book *Black Sun*, and she points out 19th-century Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky mentioned the painting in his 1869 novel *The*

Idiot when the character Prince Myshkin exclaims: “At that painting! A man could even lose his faith from that painting!’ ‘Lose it he does,’ [merchant Parfyon Semyonovich] Rogozhin agreed unexpectedly.”



Hans Holbein the Younger's "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" (1520–22) (and detail, lower) 30.5 cm × 200 cm, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel (image via [Wikipedia](#))

In other versions of the same subject, mourners were inserted.

Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna painted "[Lamentation over the Dead Christ](#)" (1470–1474) a few decades before the German-Swiss artist and positioned the crying figures at the edge — they're proxies for our mourning. In the case of Holbein's version the subject is isolated. It is a stark reality, one that a faithful

Christian might be shocked to see. Why is it that the son of God would be left alone, so human, so vulnerable, practically forgotten?



A small scene from "Interregnum" looped (gif by the author for Hyperallergic)

Inserting mourners creates a sense of catharsis for the viewer, but Paci reverses that to turn our attention to the choreographed crowds themselves. The figures are still in their grief, or one figure, often a woman in the Eastern European scenes, wipes away a tear — she is our emotional surrogate, and in many cultures older women are often seen as vessels of “pure” grief. I use that term specifically, since grief was often reserved for the most elite.

In a study of 19th- century, working-class autobiographies, [David Vincent](#) observed that pure grief was uncommon among mourners since they were burdened by debts and other societal realities. Here, we're left with the purest form of mourning, one that freezes citizens in the countryside and urbanites who would normally slow down for little else. They've been stopped in their tracks, gripped by the news that their leader has died. Dictators can be afforded the luxury of pure grief, while few others are given this privilege.



A small scene from "Interregnum" looped (gif by the author for Hyperallergic)

When the lens doesn't zoom in on individuals we're shown the scale of loss as lines wind through carless streets. The message is that the event is memorable since it disrupts the everyday.

But Paci isn't naive, he's fully cognizant of the theater at play. Figures are proxies but they aren't automatons, so the camera stops at their eyes and we are forced to imagine their real grief, or could it be elation and relief?

The artist quotes "[The Iliad or the Poem of Force](#)" by Simone Weil in a text that accompanies the exhibition, and it reads:

When one of those suffers or dies who have made him lose everything, who have sacked his town, massacred his people before his eyes, only then does the slave weep. Naturally, for only then are tears permitted him, even required of him. But in slavery, are not tears ready to flow as soon as they may do so with impunity?

The master dies and the slave weeps. It's a reminder that we can only let go when the threat disappears, like children fearful of an abusive parent, the processing and healing can only take place somewhere else, when the trauma subsides.

Showing a work like this in present-day Turkey is provocative. The country is currently in the grips of its [own dictator-like leader who has been criticized for overreach](#), particularly since the [2016 coup](#). One wonders if the work will resonate here in its time and place, or maybe it's a reminder that this too shall pass.

Adrian Paci's [Interregnum](#) continues at Protocinema (Hamursuz Fırını, Şair Ziya Paşa Cd. No:13, near Galata Tower, Bereketzade Mahallesi, 34421 Beyoğlu/İstanbul) until October 14. Some of the author's travel expenses were paid for by Protocinema.