

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis
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Nalini Malani's *The Rebellion of the Dead* Dialectical Images in a Dialectical Exhibition

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Abstract Between 2017 and 2019 a major retrospective was dedicated to Nalini Malani (Karachi, 1946) "artiste pionnière de la performance, de l'art vidéo et de l'installation en Inde"; such exhibition was held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and at the Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. Focusing on the Italian venue, this short essay questions the possibility of reading the exhibition through the lens of Walter Benjamin's concept of dialectical image. In order to do so, the main references are Mieke Bal's and Livia Monnet's essays in the Italian catalogue and unpublished documents preserved in the current archives of the Castello di Rivoli.

Keywords Nalini Malani. Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. Centre Pompidou. Dialectical image. Allegorical-palimpsest. Schizo-image.

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1 The Retrospective

I'm really looking forward to this project and I am confident that in this format we can really do something exceptional. (Malani, *Letter to Christov-Bakargiev*, 2017¹)

If one should identify an official date marking the beginning of this chapter in the history of exhibitions, titled *The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018*, it would be 31 March 2016. On this date, Bernard Blistène, who was the director of the National Museum of Modern Art - Centre Pompidou at the time, in a letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, then director of the Castello di Rivoli - Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, presented a project for a significant retrospective dedicated to the work of Nalini Malani,² and proposed

¹ This e-mail is preserved in the current archive of the Castello di Rivoli - Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. It is necessary to thank Federica Lamedica and Sofia Biondi who made it possible to consult these unpublished documents.

² Nalini Malani was born in Karachi in 1946, her mother was Sikh and her father Theosophist. She lived during a tormented period when millions of people were forced to migrate, because they suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the border after Partition, that in 1947 divided new India and Pakistan. "The trauma of those events and, above all, the acts of violence against women, indelibly marked Malani's artistic imaginary"; "her early life was marked by those times to the degree that her imaginary surfaces as the return of repressed psychic material or appears to be vomited up from the depths of a subconscious filled with horrors and trauma" (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 32). Such violence, which has been a central theme in Nalini's fifty-year artistic practice, is that of postcolonial history of India, of discrimination against women, and also of the continued exploitation of natural resources. Cf. *Nalini Malani - The Rebellion of the Dead*, Exhibition Brochure 2018. After travelling on a regular basis to Europe in 1973 she decided to return to India, refusing a "diasporic life in the West" (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 32). In order to account for the complex figure and oeuvre of Nalini Malani, it may be useful to turn to the word that Blistène addresses to Christov-Bakargiev: "Tu connais bien le travail de Nalini Malani, artiste pionnière de l'art vidéo et de la performance dans le monde indien. Cette figure de transition entre l'art moderne et l'art contemporain de son pays nous intéresse tout particulièrement pour son travail critique de la situation politique indienne, nourri d'une iconographie propre à la culture du sous-continent, mais qui s'appuie également sur une tradition artistique et littéraire occidentale" (cf. Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016). As stated by Blistène, Malani's art is deeply political and inspired not only by the archetypes of oriental culture, but also by the myths of ancient Greece and the contemporary theatre and literature she has encountered during her travels in Europe and the United States. Proof of this is the centrality of figures as Medea or Cassandra in her work, and the latest both in the version of the Greek myth and in Christa Wolf's reinterpretation and the fact that Malani derives the very title of this retrospective from a sentence pronounced by Sasportas, a character of 1979 Heiner Müller's play *Der Auftrag: Erinnerung an eine Revolution*. Christov-Bakargiev recognizes in Malani's multifaceted language the desire to oppose fluidity to the definiteness of a single technique; and it is for this reason that her discourse ranges from painting and drawing to photography, experimental theatre and 'video plays'. Another technique that recurs in Malani's work is projection, which she approaches in a very characteristic way, extending its boundaries to create immersive environments and true 'shadow plays'. To do this she uses painted rotating Mylar cylinders (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 38). In fact, according to Blistène it was of paramount importance to

a collaboration "Afin de faire connaître une artiste majeure de la scene indienne [au] public".³ The reason behind this proposal was "l'important travail de recherche mené per [le] musée [français] dans le cadre de [l'] exposition" *The Rebellion of the Dead*, which led to propose the "projet à une autre institution, dont l'artiste comme le Mnam, appréc[ait] la programmation".⁴ This laid the foundation for a major retrospective, Malani's first exhibition in France and Italy, to be held in two different museums, showcasing two different, complementary, selections of works, spanning fifty years of her career (Beccaria 2018, 42).⁵

Despite the profound differences between the two venues, which add to the specificity of this case, the artistic discourse that Malani interweaves is similar.⁶ As an illustration, it is noteworthy to mention the way Malani dealt with the ceilings of the two galleries: "the famous

also show the public "la façon dont son art utilise de manière très novatrice les nouveaux médias, et plus généralement, son travail d'expansion de la surface picturale dans l'espace" (Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016).

3 Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016. It may also be useful to note that the two directors are likely to have discussed this possibility in person during a previous Blistène's visit to Turin.

4 Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016. The French part of the retrospective, curated by Sophie Duplaix, was held at the Centre Pompidou from 10 October 2017 to 8 January 2018. In occasion of the exhibitions, both Institutions hosted conversations and lectures. The French museum organized the symposium *Memory: Record/Erase* that included Mieke Bal, Claudia Benthien, Andreas Huyssen and Jyotsna Saksena. The talks presented by the Italian venue, discussing violence against women and sponsored by Nicoletta Fiorucci, featured: Mieke Bal, *How to Change the World with Pigment* (17 September, exhibition opening), Coco Fusco, *The Fact of Violence and its Fictional Renderings* (11 November), Cauleen Smith (28 November), Milovan Farronato, *Tra verità e menzogna: le muse 'inquietanti' di Chiara Fumai - Christov-Bakargiev Su Medea, le madri e la crudeltà* (12 December). Cf. Nalini Malani - *The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018*, *Press release* 2017; *On Violence Against Woman, Public Program Press Release* 2018.

5 The uniqueness of this exhibition is described by the artist as follows: "I appreciate it very much that this retrospective is not conventionally static, but when it travelled it had the chance and capacity to change significantly. These changes depended on the history I have with curators, the different political vantage points chosen, the specific architectural setting of both museums, and of course my work in their collection" (Beccaria 2018, 42). The role of the curator is also highlighted by Mieke Bal, who, in the catalogue of the Italian exhibition, emphasizes the crucial responsibility of the curator to ensure the political efficacy of the works on display. This is achieved through the relationships that the curator facilitates between the individual works and between them and the viewers. Bal posits that these relationships are what constitute the essence of the art event (2018, 62). The curator of the second part of the retrospective was Marcella Beccaria who worked along the lines discussed with Christov-Bakargiev and the artist herself, in collaboration with the project manager Chiara Bertola.

6 Interviewed by Beccaria, Malani also explains: "For me the setting has to be immersive, all-encompassing. In both cases the inner walls of the exhibition galleries were like the usual white cube that 'attacked' by painting the majority of them black, grey, or ochre, to set the stage for my works which I see very much in the line of theatre" (Beccaria 2018, 44).

exposed skelton of the bright coloured tube architecture” in Paris, and “the third floor of the Castello building, with its imposing dark brown roof and massive chimney”. The artist, in fact, opted to leave them visible, enabling a dialogue with the works on display.⁷ In this sense, the unique ceiling of the third floor of the Castello di Rivoli, takes on a particular significance in relation to the meaning of the exhibition, since it “feels like a gigantic upside down stranded wooden ship. A refuge for telling stories while waiting for the deluge to stop” (Beccaria 2018, 44).

The main theme of the Italian part of the exhibition is the revolution of the twenty-first century, which should have “a profoundly feminine character” since, to quote Malani herself, “to overcome these dark times of orthodox masculine world-dominance, we have to learn to listen to the women who have lived before us” (58). The possibility that Malani presents is that a new justice might be achievable.⁸ Her point of view is that in order to put an end to such violence – which is, it is worth clarifying, cyclical –⁹ and in order to redeem ‘the rebellion of the dead’, we should think about a new approach to life, bearing in mind Hannah Arendt’s words: “To be alive means to live in a world that preceded one’s own arrival and will survive one’s own departure” (Arendt 1978, 20).

The *leitmotif* of this whole second part is the figure of Cassandra, to the extent that the Castello became “a haunted space – haunted by the figure, the words, the screams, of the woman who set linear history on its head” (Bal 2018, 64). For Malani, Cassandra represents the positive intuitions of humanity that are set aside in the pursuit of violence, destruction, and death; she embodies everything that has been denied to women throughout history, personifying the unrealized feminine revolution. The artist is in fact convinced that there is a Cassandra in all of us since she is not actually endowed with supernatural powers: “she observes with attention, she memorizes, and this becomes a thought. Thought gives insights. And the insights give the prophecy” (Malani 2018). The artist works on this myth not only because it denies the truth, but also because it testifies to the fact that if we had listened to the women who came before us throughout history, as Hannah Arendt contended, we might have achieved what we commonly call progress (Malani 2018).

7 Furthermore, in an e-mail to Christov-Bakargiev dated 2 February 2017, Malani wrote “The selection of works fit very well in the rooms on the third floor of Castello di Rivoli. The spaces, with the giant roof beams and chimney, give it a very special theatrical feeling in which I think my art works fit very well”. Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Marcella Beccaria and Chiara Bertola*, 2018.

8 Christov-Bakargiev links Malani’s vision with that of Karen Barad, a philosopher and quantum physicist, who imagines a new social, ecological and cosmic justice possible on the basis of the interconnected nature of the universe (2018, 31).

9 As cyclical as the violence suffered by women during the 1947 Partition and the 2002 Gujarat genocide. (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 36).

2 A Linea Perplexa

It is therefore not surprising that a distinctive aspect of this exhibition is its non-linear approach to the conventional retrospective journey: a strict chronological sequence is avoided in order to emphasize the recurrent themes and narratives that emerge across the artist's oeuvre, completely subverting the meaning traditionally attributed to the word 'retrospective'.¹⁰ Chronology is indeed a fundamental concern of all historical disciplines, and art history is no exception. However, in this particular case the sense of perplexity is prioritized so that the visitors are left to their own devices, "perhaps confused, but also, and more significantly, empowered", assuming the role of an active agent in constructing their own experience and enhancing their own sense of personal responsibility (Bal 2018, 64). The non-linear character of this exhibition was also reflected in its itinerary, which both in Paris and Rivoli was circular and didn't follow a straight line: visitors could in fact start their visit either to the left or to the right.¹¹ The significance of such a decision lies once

10 Furthermore, *The Rebellion of the Dead* represents a unique retrospective because Malani created new works for both venues, including the 'erasure performance' *City of Desire - Global Parasites* (1992-2018). Cf. *Premessa - Draft* 2017. This is a wall drawing on which Malani's first stop-motion animation film *Dream Houses* (1969), part of the collections of the MoMA in New York since 2018, is projected. Prepared over the course of a week in late spring 2018, it was destroyed on 17 January 2019 with a public erasure performance using peacock feathers, involving young people aged between eight and eighteen, assisted by two young performers (Cavalli 2018-19, 162-5). Throughout the duration of the erasure performance, the declamation of a fifteenth century poem in which Kabir compares a "low cast weaver" to "God [...] the master weaver". Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Marcella Beccaria*, 2018a. Malani wrote further information on the erasure performance in another e-mail addressed to Beccaria. "Six children can be asked to erase as there are six characters in the wall drawing. The taller children will be able to reach the top of the drawing and the younger ones can work on the lower part. The music is about 9 minutes. From the time the music starts the audience can be requested to be silent and the children can slowly start to erase. Please can you explain to the children the music of Kabir, this *Dalit* composer and the significance of understanding the meaning of *Dalit*". Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Marcella Beccaria*, 2018b. Malani's emphasis on sound is evidenced by what she writes in another e-mail about *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*: "The ideal position of the viewer/listener is indicated [...] in relation to the speakers. Sound is a very essential part of this artwork and I have worked on this in detail [...] for hours". Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Marcella Beccaria e Chiara Bertola*, 2018. The word 'retrospective' takes on added meaning also when one considers that one of Malani's preferred techniques is to paint on the reverse side of translucent backgrounds, a traditional Indian technique that she has appropriated and modified. This art, first used to reproduce erotic scenes and later to depict sacred pictures, was originally imported from China. This method allows not only the superimposition of different images, typical of Malani's new iconographies, but also the possibility for the viewer to reflect on them. Bal also uses such term as an adjective to refer to a characteristic of Malani herself, who remains "acutely retrospective so that cultural amnesia doesn't have a chance to set in" (Bal 2018, 92).

11 In Paris, the central concept was that of a pivoted circularity, staged around the central axis constituted by the work entitled *Remembering Mad Meg* (2007-17), and starting

again in Malani's political view of the recurrence of violence in history. The risk of constructing a straight chronological line is that one might be tempted to relegate these events to the past, thinking that the world has become a better place over time. The convoluted line resulting from this argument is what Bal calls a *Linea Perplexa*, a Latin term which evokes notions of the English word "perplexed" (64).

Indeed, even according to the Bergsonian reading conducted by Bal in the analysis of different works by Malani,¹² the spectator's active involvement in the work serves as the driving force behind its 'creative evolution'. In fact, as Henri Bergson asserted, without comprehension, there can be no change and art cannot be political; it is clear, thus, that if Malani leaves the viewers perplexed, it is because she wants them to be more permeable.¹³ This is also the reason why in her exhibition presentation speech, Bal offered visitors advice on how to engage with the works on display, encouraging them "to give the work the time it deserves", and predicting that by the time they left the exhibition, they would undergo a transformation, becoming "a somewhat different" person, since: "time, including the turbulent entanglement of different times in a refusal of chronological simplicity, is a strong element in the way Malani makes paint, pigment, charcoal, moves us into trying to change the world".¹⁴

from the wall drawing *Traces*, which would later be the subject of an erasure performance.

12 In Malani's works, not only the language of narration is identifiable, but also that of the archive. The central theme of multi-temporality – or heterochrony, as Bal calls it – is once again evident. Indeed, while Malani's combination of diverse literary and iconographic sources is inherently narrative, the resulting coherence is lacking. In fact, none of this many figures despite being "appealing to our desire for narrative, [...] satisf[ies] it entirely" (Bal 2018, 98). In other words, these works become "archives of narratives" themselves (98). It is the responsibility of the visitor to give a personal order to these images, otherwise the archive remains dead. Nevertheless, Bal specifies that the work does not constitute an archive itself, but rather "it 'does', it *performs* the archival mode" (98; italics in the original). It is worth mentioning, albeit necessarily superficially, that Bal notes that, according to Ernst Van Alphen (2014), the use of the archive can be read as a reappropriation of a tool long used by colonialism, gaining nowadays a further artistic insight due to the advent of digital technologies.

13 Bal recalls that, according to the theory of the image developed by Henri Bergson, perception is both a physical "act of the body and *for* the body" (Bal 2018, 80; italics in the original). Furthermore, although being inextricably linked to the present, nevertheless perception is also necessarily woven with memory images and Malani's paintings, which exemplify the stylistic possibilities of multi-temporal images, can be considered an authentic exemplification of this principle. In the already mentioned presentation speech, Bal quoted Bergson (1991, 218-19), who stated that "our consciousness [...] prolongs a plurality of moments into each other, contracting them into a single intuition". The verb 'prolongs' introduces the theme of duration, which also recurs in Malani's artistic practice: in fact, as the images rotate, they evoke a quasi-cinematic sense of movement. In order to provide further support for her reading, Bal also refers to Gilles Deleuze, who posits that Bergsonian duration is not so much a matter of succession, but rather a state of *coexistence* (Deleuze 1988).

14 Cf. Bal, *How to Change the World with Pigment* 2018.

3 Making Visible the Invisible

As already stated, Malani is the author of an original language;¹⁵ her work “concerns making visible the invisible,¹⁶ foregrounding the shadows, blending the documentary and the urgent with the mythical and universal” (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 32). To achieve this, she creates new iconographic gaps. In works such as *In Search of the Vanished Blood* (2012), for example, blood and the color red are completely absent. The blood, which has been forgotten by the passage of time, comes back in the narrative rather than in mere form, in fact: “the signs are able to muster the meaning of blood, precisely because they are not it but tie themselves to it” (Bal 2018, 104). The engine of this operation is time, which, by reiterating the narrative and prolonging the duration of the artistic experience, symbolically transfigures the materiality of blood. However, this is not to say that materiality is relegated to the background, quite the contrary, as all of the artist’s research actually tends to that direction: it follows that blood becomes “both metaphor and the real thing” (106). But being both “comparant and compared” (106), it ends up undermining the intrinsic laws of metaphor.¹⁷ This is thus where Malani’s personal solution to the dilemma of depicting evil and violence begins: when they are shown and, in a sense, repeated, they can become the object of voyeurism and gain new power, while when they are censored, art can lose its purpose. The resistance to evil must certainly begin with art, but the artist cannot be alone in this endeavor. As a work of art is only activated when it is seen, the role of the viewer is fundamental, and in Malani’s case, not as an observer, but as a co-protagonist of the work. To her, in fact, “the audience finally makes the work and gives it a new meaning” and even if the responses can be very personal and different, “the experiences [...] still remain somewhere in a compendium of memory that we share in our cultural heritage” (Beccaria 2018, 54).¹⁸ This is evident, for example, with the work *The Tables Have Turned* (2008):¹⁹ a

¹⁵ Cf. *Loan request to Arario Museum* 2018.

¹⁶ Malani probably derives this inclination from the fact that she began her artistic practice, at the suggestion of her biology professor, as an illustrator of medical drawings showing anatomical parts and their functioning (Guy 2007).

¹⁷ Bal also states that in Malani’s work painting is the sister of blood (2018, 106).

¹⁸ Beccaria identifies an “archaeological approach” (2018, 54) in this aspect of Malani’s work, since everyone can be reflected in the transparent acrylic surfaces she paints. In her interview Malani confirms this intuition. The artist explains that one of the ideas underlying her poetics is that the world is made up of different layers and that humanity is “living in layered Memory Time, where the montages of memory give new configurations and subsequential meanings” (54). This is the reason why Nalini Malani considers herself “as an artist who is an architect of thoughts” (54).

¹⁹ *The Tables have Turned* also demonstrates Malani’s aforementioned use of characters from Greek mythology and their interpretations. The title is inspired by Christa

shadow play, now in the Castello di Rivoli collection, that acts as the reverse of a camera obscura, in which the spectators also move, contributing to the work. The result is a “temporary togetherness” (Bal 2018, 72) in which the images painted on the rotating cylinders, their shadows and the shadows of the spectators coexist, to further generate an avoidance of the individualising sensation one usually feels in front of a work of art.²⁰ As a result, the viewers are “visually involved and politically implicated, gathering images to revitalise their own past in the present act of looking” (92). In addition, this work also shows that vision is actually dialogical, as observer and observed object mutually assume the status of both subject and object (74).

4 Materialising the Absence

Another theoretical insight into Malani's work comes from Livia Monnet, who dedicates her essay in the catalogue of the Italian part of the retrospective *“My Flight is my Rebellion” - History, Ghosting and Representing in Nalini Malani's Video Installations* to the analysis of two works: *Unity in Diversity* (2003) and *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005). The point of her essay is to highlight once again the artist's ability to enact “a radical aesthetic of materialising absence”, which Monnet calls “representing” (2018, 112). It is the “wondering female ghosts and other allegorical figures” to make all this effective, in fact, they

render visible ideological processes, subjectivities, social groups and representations that have been forgotten, erased, repressed, silenced or covered over in India, as well as the discourses and practices that produced their invisibility. In Malani's video installations, female ghosts haunt the hollow chambers of time and the archives of history, extracting its thoughts, movements, and processes. Through their haunting, they drag what is dark out into the light, representing, reembodying, and reenacting the horrors of the past in order to render those horrors visible and palpable. (112)

In order to materialize absence, Malani uses two strategies: “allegorical critique and a feminist subaltern critique”, and there are two types of images that can enable these two strategies, namely “the

Wolf's novel *Cassandra*. Like the heroine, the voice of the present is not heard, so that only the language of the past is left to describe what is happening in the world, as Cassandra states: “the language of the future has only one sentence left for me: Today I will be killed” (Wolf 1984, 14). Cf. *Draft for the Tables Have Turned* 2018.

²⁰ Bal, *How to Change the World with Pigment* 2018.

allegorical-palimpsest-image and the schizo-image" (Monnet 2018, 112): two variations of the Deleuzian 'time-image'. Therefore, according to Monnet, *Unity in Diversity* epitomizes the allegorical-palimpsest and *Mother India* represents the schizo-image.

*Unity in Diversity*²¹ is an installation, where a single channel video is shown in the reconstruction of a typical Indian middle-class living room. The first image presented is the allegorical painting *Galaxy of Musicians* by Raja Ravi Varma's, dated c. 1884, that soon is violently covered by different layers of white and black paint, and later overlaid with crude footage of an abortion procedure. However, if this work can really be defined as a palimpsest, in the etymological sense of the word, the primary role played by sound cannot be overlooked. In fact, throughout the video, the testimonies in Hindi of the most violent episodes of the Gujarat massacre of 2002, as well as a child's voice reciting the role of the Angel of Despair, a character from the play *Der Auftrag: Erinnerung an eine Revolution*, by Heiner Müller²² are played. According to Monnet, allegory has a significance for Malani similar to that theorized by Walter Benjamin, who posited that the "allegory evokes ruin, decay and the total subversion of hierarchies" (Monnet 2018, 114).²³ *Unity in diversity*

is a dialectical image; a shocking flash that not only condenses disparate fragments of the past, present, and future but also has the capacity to shatter and conserve at the same time. (114)

It follows that the images in Malani's video installations, as dialectical images, are capable of bringing "historic discursive processes

21 *Unity in Diversity* was not shown in Castello di Rivoli.

22 "I am the knife with which the dead man cracks open his coffin. I am the one who will be. My flight is the rebellion my sky the abyss of tomorrow" says the Mülleran Angel. It is worth noting that in this case, Malani recasts "the Child Angel as a feminist Angel of History and a visionary Angel of Revolution" (Monnet 2018, 116), indeed such a figure cannot but evoke Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. In Malani's work, one of the musicians, who exits from Varma's painting and reaches Gujarat, becomes herself an Angel of History. Knowing evil and suffering and experiencing the subordinate fate of women, she finally takes on the role of a shaman "voicing the narratives of the dead" (Monnet 2018, 120). Nevertheless, according to Monnet, there is a difference between Malani's angel and Benjamin's, because the former's mission is not redemption but rebellion. That's why, while showing us horrific acts of violence, the film leaves open the possibility of a new future. "As unlikely as it may seem [...], *Unity* is a work that speaks of hope - the possibility of a sweeping revolution and a planetary uprising that may either provoke total destruction [...] or the dawn of new era. *Unity's* vision of the future evokes an all-encompassing revolution that will obtain justice for exploited subalterns and change the conditions of life itself" (Monnet 2018, 122).

23 See Benjamin [1928] 2009. Monnet also mentions Craig Owens (1980), Michelle Langford (2006) and Bliss Cua Lim (2009) who also analyzed the relationship between allegory and palimpsest.

and practices into view" (114). Furthermore, by using "both virtual and historical assemblages" (114) what is materialized are the historical processes that would otherwise have been forgotten (112).

Instead, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*²⁴ is a schizophrenic image, presenting pictures from very different contexts. Films celebrating India's independence and images of the mass migration imposed by Partition alternate on the screens with Gandhi's archival footage and scenes either inspired by Bollywood or created by the artist herself. The photograph of Gandhi's corpse is cyclically overlaid with portraits of women and photos of the anti-Muslim massacre in Gujarat, while a woman's voice laments that she is dead "at the border of the new nations, carrying a bloody rag as [her] flag" (124).²⁵ The subject of the work is the burden of violence and pain inherited as a consequence of Partition, which particularly affected women. Malani appropriates the words of Indian anthropologist Veena Das, who argues that the Indian nationalist project was actually based on the appropriation of women's bodies. According to Monnet, *Mother India*, with its various references, "can also be read as a paradigmatic allegorical-palimpsest-image", since "Malani presents India [...] both as a literal palimpsest [...] and a metaphorical palimpsest" (124). The professor focuses on what image "does" (Monnet 2018, 128; italics in the original), in particular mediating and enabling "a dismantling of subjectivating machines [...], allowing for the tracing of a line of light" (128). Despite the fact that these machines, which constitute identitary subjectivities, are instruments of oppression, nevertheless they "provide crucial clues and routes for the eventual realization of universal history and the permanent revolution" (128). Thus, this work can indeed be recognized as having revolutionary potential, because "in spite of its gloomy atmosphere [...] it anticipates the advent of a 'new earth' and

²⁴ This work, that was first exhibited in 2005 at a collateral event of the 51st Biennale di Venezia, in the exhibition *iCON: India Contemporary*, curated by Julie Evans, Gordon Knox and Peter Nagy in the refectory of the former Convent SS. Cosma and Damiano in Giudecca, is a five-channel audiovisual installation. Cf. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/42020/icon-india-contemporary/>. However, for the first time since the work was created, in Rivoli it was projected on a single continuous wall 25 meters long (Cavalli 2018-19, 174).

²⁵ This figure is again a phantasmal image, embodying the "unmourned and wandering ghost" of an oppressed, so that the work highlights the links between nationalism and sexuality in colonial and post-colonial India and "articulates a subversive, allegorical genealogy" (128). It becomes a metaphor for the double death suffered by women victims of violence on the borders of the new nations that Veena Das also discussed: the 'living death' of the violations and the 'social death' of no longer being accepted by their kin due to such violations. The title of Malani's work itself echoes Das's essay *Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (1997).

'the people to come'" (130).²⁶ This can occur thanks to a whole new "topology of the shared pain", in fact "here, pain is shared through the 'body' of the image and effectively felt in our/the viewers' bodies" (132). It follows that once again this work, far from being a mere political and social critique, is "indicative of how art can and must change the world" (134). This is also the reason why Bal argues that what this image encourage is not an "overwhelming immersion", but rather an "*acriating*" one (2018, 90; italics in the original).

5 Conclusions

To conclude this brief contribution, it may be useful to refer to the words of Malani herself, who, when asked by Beccaria about the possibility of realising WOMANTIME,²⁷ replied:

I am an artist, so what I can do is make art and as such I believe in the strength of progressive art and culture. [...] I am not a doomsday oracle, nor am I like what Müller famously once said: [...] "a *dope* dealer nor a *hope* dealer." But in the very negativism of my art there is [...] arguably both humanism and hope for the future. (Beccaria 2018, 58; italics in the original)

Malani is not a doomsday oracle. Malani - as Beccaria says - is like Cassandra, because through her painful images she opens up the possibility of a different, better future.²⁸ This analogy takes on a whole new meaning when one considers Malani's own comments on the great work done to organize this second part of her 'retrospective', when she wrote:

I am sure that [...] we should be very pleased with what we have achieved. The contents of the catalogue will have a long academic life and the exhibition looks monumental.²⁹

²⁶ Here Monnet refers to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2009) and derives these last concepts from Deleuze.

²⁷ WOMANTIME is a concept Malani developed and explored on the occasion of her solo exhibition in Bombay in 2014. The concept does not refer to the feminine *tout court* but imagines a new way of living and organizing life in an "ecological sense" (Beccaria 2018, 59; Malani, Doshi 2013; capital letters are the artist's expression).

²⁸ Cf. Nalini Malani - *The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018*, Press release 2017.

²⁹ Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Marcella Beccaria e Chiara Bertola*, 2018.

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