



Art

Logic of the Birds

Union Chapel, London

2 / 5

**Adrian Searle**

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Still from Logic of the Birds

In 1998 the Iranian-born, US based artist Shirin Neshat made an astonishing double-screen film debut, *Turbulent*. Working with singer Sussan Deyhim, cinematographer Ghasem Ebrahimian and writer Shoja Azari, Neshat went on to establish her art-world reputation with a number of films that have had a strange and elusive relationship to Islam, Iranian culture and religion. Neshat's collaborators now have equal billing in their latest work, *Logic of the Birds*, based of the 12th-century Persian poem *The Conference of the Birds*, by Farid al-Din 'Attar. The stage presentation, which has now been brought to London by Artangel, mixes live action, triple-screen film projection and recorded sound.

What *Logic of the Birds* has to do with Attar's poem is hard to tell, except that both involve an allegorical journey. The black-clad travellers make their way over an indeterminate, dessicated landscape, both on screen and across the stage. They go in search of who knows what? God? Enlightenment? Freedom? This great imponderable is the floating metaphor of so many of Neshat's previous works. The wandering crowds come and go. Sometimes they move to the balconies above the stage. When the on-screen heroine decides to walk into the lake, disappearing under the limpid surface, the soundtrack gurgles, and Deyhim, at front of stage, gurgles with it. Her on-screen self

emerges through mud and walks through fire (the tarry, apocalyptic land might be a reference to burning oil-fields), and she sings at us in a variety of overblown outfits.

It is Deyhim who has to hold the production together. She is possessed of a phenomenal voice and a great presence. It is often hard to tell whether it really is her screaming, keening ululations we hear, or the synthesised music machines over on the mixing desk. It is her all right, and she doesn't need all the reverbs and the aural metaphysics to keep us interested. She convinces us that something extreme is going on, but whatever the intention, and even with that voice, her performance kept reminding me of the ghostly Enya, or Kate Bush in full Wuthering Heights mode.

No amount of dry ice or great singing can save Logic of the Birds. This is allegory reduced to the condition of pop video. The manoeuvres of the chorus are stilted, the relation between live presence and film action relatively undeveloped. Neshat has said that her work has become more overtly politicised since September 11. Here, it is hard to see how, or to what end, or what the relation between the collaborators really is - let alone who is ultimately responsible for this deeply disappointing event.

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