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# READING CLASSICAL DRAMA ON FILM

EDWIN HEES

My starting point is that filming ancient Greek tragedy is simply a continuation of a process that has been occurring over centuries, even millennia (cf. Allen: 101-108), and as such represents the phenomenon of cultural transmission. In this article my focus will be on perceptions of the meanings of these ancient texts, and – like any other texts – these texts may be thought of as sign systems that move through history, acquiring and shedding meanings as they go along. So it's clear that I do not subscribe to any idea of the autonomy of texts, universality of meaning or authenticity of representation, but I am interested rather in the processes of signification – the social and cultural factors that engender the meanings of texts in their contexts – recalling the Derridean notion that texts are context bound, but contexts are boundless. In this highly unstable sphere I take some small comfort from TS Eliot's famous dictum on Shakespearean scholarship: »About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong« (Eliot: 126).

The four films I want to comment on as representative examples to conclude this paper are: MEDEA (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1970), MEDEA (Lars von Trier, 1988), ELECTRA (Michael Cacoyannis, 1961) and ELECTREIA (also known as ELECTRA, MY LOVE) (Miklós Jancsó, 1975). Before considering the four films themselves within this semiotic framework, I want first to describe very briefly two instances of this process of cultural transmission that will (I hope) crystallise a number of points I want to raise about appropriation, authenticity and cultural memory. The one takes us back to the 1590s and the other to the 1780s. And the key issue here one might sum up as being that of ›authenticity of representation‹, often a sticking point for sceptical commentators for whom the very medium of film has a relatively low cultural status – perhaps because the commercial imperatives driving it are so strong. Let me present a short quotation on this woolly-sounding notion of ›cultural memory‹, and then I want to glance at Monteverdi and Mozart before moving on to the movies.

»The term *cultural memory* signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one ... [in cultural studies] it has displaced and subsumed the discourses of individual (psychological) memory and of social memory ... The interaction between present and past that is the stuff of cultural memory is, however, the product of collective agency rather than the result of psychic or historical accident« (Bal et al.: vii).

In this understanding, adaptations and appropriations are not wilful *substitutions* for, or even worse, *violations* of, the classical texts, but more a matter of constant and *unavoidable* assimilation and regeneration within given cultural contexts (and

all the complexity that that implies). In the field of literary studies, even the most cursory glance at the stage histories of Shakespeare's plays, for example, make it abundantly evident how aspects of their meanings have changed over the past 400 years – a post-Freudian kind of reading of HAMLET would probably have seemed wilfully obtuse and eccentrically reductive in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, which had a very different conception of personal identity. This phenomenon of multiple meanings manifesting themselves over the course of time is not simply a question of »multiplicity of meaning« (Roman Jakobson in Lloyd-Jones: 45) which may be inferred from a text (e.g. one's understanding of Hamlet in his pursuit of revenge could simultaneously encompass a range of quite contradictory responses – so could one's responses to Medea murdering her children be profoundly ambivalent). These multiple meanings generated over the course of time are more a matter of constantly *changing representation* – or more precisely *resignification* – of these figures in a way that engages a contemporary audience. Example would include Hamlet as disaffected punk teenager in New York in 2000, as played by Ethan Hawke in Michael Almereyda's 2000 film; Electra as a revolutionary Hungarian heroine in Jancsó's film; Medea as a feminist victim in Lars von Trier's film. The chance invention of opera provides a familiar but instructive example of just how unpredictable the process of cultural reconstruction can be. So, a bit of a detour into the world of opera – which is widely acknowledged as a performance mode that has been highly creative in keeping Greek tragedy ›alive‹ in Western civilisation.

I like David Wiles' very direct approach to the idea of cultural memory in *his Greek Theatre Performance* (179):

»We can only understand what Greek theatre was like in the past by looking through the eyes of the present [...]. An objective view of the ancient world is impossible. However, by seeing how different generations have reinterpreted Greek tragedy, we can gain some sort of perspective on the complex relationship of past and present [...]. What seems authentic to one generation seems stilted and irrelevant to the next [...] the past is constantly being rediscovered.«

He points out that the first Greek tragedy to be performed in modern translation (Sophocles' OEDIPUS, Aristotle's »ideal« tragedy) was presented in northern Italy in 1585 – the aim of those involved was fidelity to the original, but their endeavours had entirely unexpected and unintended consequences. Two aspects of the production deserve special notice in terms of this discussion. The first was an issue raised immediately by a contemporary critique – the nature of the translation, which was regarded as most unsatisfactory. The second issue was the decision not to use masks – and the reason is interesting: because masks were widely worn in Italy at this time by the gentry seeking anonymity at carnival time, and by mountebanks and comic actors, they could not be reconciled with the spirit of tragedy. So the whole notion of an ›authentic‹ performance of a Greek tragedy is undermined the very first time it was tried in Western Europe.

But this production was only part of wider attempts to revive ›authentic‹ Greek tragedy that were underway in Italy at about this time (1590s). These efforts arose out of the very detailed debates on the nature of the declamatory style of Greek drama, contemporary understanding of vocal harmony, and the conflicting claims of counterpoint and monody – often with detailed reference to Plato and Aristotle (see Donington: 22 *passim*). The whole enterprise was driven by an attempt to

ascertain the relative status of music and words as they were used in classical Greek choruses.

The first such ›Greek tragedy‹ of which we have the music complete is Peri's EURIDICE (Florence 1600) and within only half a dozen years of that appeared the first indisputable masterpiece of what we now call »opera« – Monteverdi's ORFEO (Mantua, 1607). But it would be quite wrong to think of Monteverdi as a self-conscious revolutionary innovator (Dent: 32) – he was simply developing well-established attempts to appropriate the ›authentic‹ principles of classical drama into modern performance modes – specifically, the idea was to revive the musical declamation of ancient Greek tragedy (as they understood it) and almost inadvertently Monteverdi and his fellow dramatists/composers created an extremely powerful new musical form of expression, namely opera, which we would distinguish quite clearly from Greek drama. The issue here is not one of categorisation, but very specifically one that revolves around the inescapable processes of appropriation and signification.

To remain with opera for a moment, Mozart's first mature opera IDOMENEO (1781) offers a particularly interesting instance of culture-specific appropriation that quite cavalierly (and brilliantly) disregards any preoccupation with ›authenticity‹. In the first part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century German writers were (also) advocating a revival of Greek drama through opera as part of a wider reform of German culture, encouraging German composers in the task of creating a modern Euripidian drama (cf. Till: 62-63).

The plot briefly is this: Idomeneo is on his way home from the Trojan war – to secure safe passage he makes a vow that he will sacrifice the first person he meets to Neptune (an almost archetypal recipe for tragedy). This person (surprise!) turns out to be his son, Idamante. But what is interesting in our context is that there are two women who love Idamante, namely Ilia (a captured Trojan princess) and – most strangely – Electra. Her presence in the IDOMENEO story has no legendary precedent and the character of Electra first appears in an opera libretto on IDOMENEO just a few years before Mozart embarked on his own opera. But why Electra specifically? She has no driving function in the plot – *everybody* ignores her and *anybody* could have served as a deranged foil to Ilia as Idamante's lover.

Her significance is that her very presence in the story is a strong signifier that functions in a specific way in the Enlightenment context of the opera. Primarily she exists to bring with her into the story all the associations of sacrifice and retribution which haunt the family of Agamemnon – the alternation between reason (Ilia) and unreason (Electra). Electra is unable to overcome her passions and so is destroyed by them (Till: 73). Nicholas Till points out in his wonderful study *Mozart and the Enlightenment* that sacrifice is such a dominant theme in 18<sup>th</sup>-century opera and literature – think of Gluck's and Goethe's preoccupation with story of Iphigenia – precisely because it enables artists to contrast in a very dramatic way the outmoded pieties about submission to the gods and the new emphasis on natural law. Perhaps, then, Electra's dramatic function in IDOMENEO is to go mad precisely because she can neither submit gracefully to the process whereby Neptune ultimately endorses natural law (by saving Idamante from being sacrificed by his father Idomeneo and granting him Ilia, the Trojan princess, as his queen), nor can she ultimately escape the furies that have been pursuing her and her brother Orestes since their murder of Clytemnestra. She is the archetypal doomed antagonist. Till's explanation of her insanity is convincing in the Enlightenment context – the values of reunion, regeneration, fusion and harmony had to be ›officially‹ endorsed in the opera. She

has therefore been appropriated from another, loosely related story (Agamemnon and the Trojan Wars – see Mann: 253-288, for a full account) in order to give what she represents dramatic weight as a kind of counter in the cultural negotiations of the Enlightenment.

Now may be a good time to fix the focus more specifically on the concept of ›appropriation‹ – by means of a rather long quotation from a detailed study on appropriations of Shakespeare’s play into, among other things, the medium of film:

»To appropriate: to take possession of for one’s own; to take to one’s self. Associated with abduction, adoption and theft, appropriation’s central tenet is the desire for possession. It comprehends both the commandeering of the desired object and the process of making this object one’s own, controlling it by possessing it. Appropriation is neither dispassionate nor disinterested; it has connotations of usurpation, of seizure for one’s own uses. In the world of literary studies, the process is both necessary and unavoidable. As Hans Robert Jauss writes: ›A literary event can continue to have an effect only if those who come after it still or once again respond to it – if there are readers who again appropriate the past or authors who want imitate, outdo, or refute it. ... Scrutinised dispassionately, every act of interpretation can be seen as an act of appropriation – making sense of a literary artefact by fitting it within our own parameters« (Marsden: 1).

So: *every* act of interpretation is an act of appropriation; the process of appropriation is both necessary and inevitable. In other words, this process is not an alternative to some other process which guarantees greater authenticity or the truth. Greek tragedy was appropriated into the medium of film because the vast social, cultural and technological networks of twentieth-century communication (each one with its own specific history) made possible a specific way of engaging with past experience that was considered viable and valuable – but it was an *inevitably mediated* process. In the few sketchy comments that follow I just want to hint at the way that the medium of film mediates meaning.

## ELECTRA

Cacoyannis’s *ELECTRA* (1961) is the one of these four films that was probably intended as the most direct ›translation‹ of Euripides’ tragedy. But it’s *inevitable* implication in the signifying systems of the film medium – to say nothing of Cacoyannis’s understanding of Euripides and his assessment of what would work as tragedy on the screen – means that it generates meanings that could not even have been conceived by Euripides. Like the other three films, this one makes striking use of the enormously expressive capacity of the medium to use landscape as a powerful metaphor to communicate (among many other things) Electra’s sense of isolation, while camera angles and editing can suggest relative power relationships and degrees of distance and intimacy that are not possible on the stage.

But it is Cacoyannis’s decision to shoot the film in black and white that has particularly interesting consequences (i.e. regardless of what was or was not possible with his budget). It places the film within a very specific and highly influential tradition of post-war filmmaking, namely that of Italian Neorealism, which was counter-hegemonic in relation to commercial cinema in at least one crucial way: it conveys a sense of harsh realism that at least one commentator feels has the effect

of making the film more tragic than Euripides' play (MacKinnon: 77) by eliminating some of the more deliberately mundane qualities, and the ambiguities and alienating effects in Euripides' depiction of the action. Also, the removal of the play's *dei ex machina* at the end of the film (another consequence of the Neorealist mode) means that Electra and Orestes simply drift off into a guilt-ridden exile by wandering into an utterly barren and dark landscape – they quite literally become diminished figures in this landscape. This works ›against‹ contemporary readings of Euripides as a much more sardonic, even anti-tragic, dramatist.

In contrast, Miklós Jancsó's *ELECTRA, MY LOVE* (1975) (based on a popular Hungarian play which was in turn based on Euripides) is far more explicitly and self-consciously a politicised ›rewriting‹ of the Electra story both advocating and celebrating the need for another Hungarian ›revolution‹ (the play apparently makes the allusion to the 1956 uprising more explicit – the playwright also wrote the screenplay). Much of the visual imagery – including a recurring image of the herd of horses circling the protagonists on the open plains, where the story is worked out in terms of oblique references to the overthrow of dictators, and the ›death‹ and revival of Electra and Orestes – draws attention to this circular pattern. The film's *mise en scene* sometimes suggests a medieval or seventeenth-century setting in places, but at the end Elektra and Orestes are whirled off victorious in a bright red helicopter, while we hear the story of the phoenix in voice-over as a parable about social justice. As is fitting in a film about a successful revolution (even as a kind of fantasy), there is something upbeat and uplifting about the ending.

## MEDEA

What is of particular significance about the two *MEDEA* films is their highly distinctive visual styles – ›cinematically‹ distinctive, that is (even though Von Trier's film was made for television). Although they may depart more radically than Cacoyannis's version of Electra from the source text, they have (I think) more successfully preserved the tensions, ambiguities and even contradictions which Euripides has built into his narrative – even though Pasolini interrogates what are quite contemporary cultural conflicts (he was making his *NOTES FOR AN AFRICAN ORESTEIA* at the same time), while feminist discourses inform Von Trier's film.

Pasolini opens the film with a lengthy sequence of highly evocative images; for example, at the beginning of the film we see a number of shots of Medea as high priestess or sorceress in Colchis. And as someone with an appreciation of the principles of semiotics, Pasolini constructs these scenes visually so that two sets of signified are possible for each signifier. The sacrifice of the young man and subsequent distribution of his blood is both an ›othered‹ barbaric ceremony (in which blood and holy water are conflated) and also a fertility ritual accorded great and detailed respect by Pasolini. Medea throws herself on the flames outside of the temple housing the golden fleece and is simultaneously hurt and purified. The dismemberment of her brother is filmed with an unsensationalised objectivity which bears testimony to Medea's ruthlessness and her intense love for Jason. And, of course, Maria Callas brings to the film her strong associations with Cherubini's opera and yet she remains a virtually silent and often rather wooden presence on the screen. In two perceptive readings of this film Ian Christie (2000) and Kenneth MacKinnon (1986) offer interpretations with slightly different emphases, but they concur that visually the film strikingly evokes two contrasting worlds held in an

ambivalent and ambiguous tension – precisely what Euripides does at the end of his play. Ian Christie places Von Trier’s *MEDEA* quite explicitly (and quite correctly, in my view) within the context of late-twentieth-century filmic conventions when he notes that Von Trier’s style »points to the possibility of a form of visual drama which is less dependent on ›linear‹ narration than on the accumulation of meaning within and between images, in a developed form of Eisensteinian ›montage‹« (Christie: 159). Dialogue is minimal – an austerity that may derive from the script originally written by Carl Theodore Dreyer – but the highly expressionistic use of colour, focus and lighting convey an oppressive sense of doom in what is a very quiet and dramatically understated film. »Von Trier has responded to the challenge of classical tragedy by forging a novel visual language to accommodate the essential absence of narrative causality in *MEDEA*« (Christie: 159). For example, at the end of the film he breaks all the rules of classic frame composition to indicate Jason’s total, paralysing disorientation after he discovers his sons’ bodies – Jason drifts randomly in and out of the frame, which is sometimes just left ›empty‹; for long moments (cinematically speaking) we see – in an extremely high-angle shot – only the empty field of wild grass and hear only the wind. Parallel editing shows us Medea sitting absolutely still and apparently disconsolate on Aegeus’ boat, waiting to be transported away, but because the focus is so intensely on the visual, when she suddenly undoes her hair and lets it fall to her shoulders, we cannot help but read that as a kind of release, if not vindication. Von Trier has used a technology and a medium that Euripides could not even have dreamt of in order to capture a very Euripidean moment – summed up recently as one in which »heroism is dead« (McDonald/Walton: xvi).

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