

**THE UNAPOLOGETIC SEDUCTION OF FORM:
TEXTS AS PRETEXTS IN POSTMODERN VERSIONS OF(F)
GREEK TRAGEDY**

Avra Sidiropoulou

This paper explores the ways in which contemporary directors-adapters of Greek tragedy have confronted the ancient text, tracing a propensity for an ambivalent – if nonchalant – attitude towards the past and its infiltration into today’s sensibilities. It points out the need for both artists and spectators to look deeper into the classical work in order to develop a critical stance vis-à-vis the assumed textual significance, understood as the impact of the source play to its original audience. Indeed, the notions of stature, communion, and transcendence, inherent in the “Classics” are often buried or rendered irrelevant in various productions of strong formalist foundations and markedly visual emphasis, which end up deflating, depoliticizing, and ultimately devaluing the plays’ dialectic as well as affective nature. Laying out the premises whereby the application of form can bring fascinating results in performances of Greek tragedy, in the end, the paper argues that the dangers embedded in the overly aestheticized mindset of avant-garde directors should also be viewed and investigated within the framework of a broader unease towards the modern relevance and adapt-ability of the ancient text.



In the ever-revised crisis of civilization, it is becoming imperative to regain our autonomy of feeling. Contact with the ultimate archetypes of the human condition, embedded in myth, can safeguard such autonomy. Nietzsche had long ago maintained that without myth every culture forfeits its healthy, creative natural power: “only a horizon encompassed by myths locks an entire movement of culture into a unity” (23). Fundamental and primordial, ancient myths occasion a cataclysmic cancellation of most dividing lines and lend themselves to guilt-free ownership and/or appropriation. Particularly with respect to Greek tragedy, the issue of the classical works’ relevance in our ferociously mediatized times keeps resurfacing

Γράμμα / Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism 22 (2014)
© 2014 by Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

whenever a new production comes to contemporize what is fundamentally timeless. “Why do we latch on to a theatrical world of dystopia which relentlessly confronts us with the spilling of kindred blood and the breaking of just about any taboo imaginable within the human realm?” (Revermann 104). Surely, there is something to be said about the allure of an art form simultaneously foreign/intangible and comfortingly familiar.¹ This enticing complementarity is rare. In point of fact, Greek tragedy’s humanist perspective provides a highly intellectual sort of *homecoming*, without any trace of contempt that could unhappily ensue in the process of its transposition to a thoroughly new social and cultural milieu. Perhaps the key to the viewing of myth and—by extension—of tragedy as a cultural bridge lies in the understanding, acceptance, and use of this contradiction; myth as a cultural product as well as a universal property. In a global community, myth soothes our anguish of un-rootedness: the violent confrontation of self and the world and the ultimate restoration of the natural and civic order, the *hubris* of stepping outside of ourselves to “play God” and the speculative wisdom of knowing one’s limitations, together with the harrowing truism that history can still teach us lessons, are all inherent in Greek thought, recurrent patterns of classical drama. By turning politics and religion into dramatic conflict, tragedy forces us to consider our own position in society and also come to terms with our mortality. While the ubiquity of hyphenated forms threatens to undermine or displace emphasis on story and intelligible linguistic codification, myth can function as an anchor of identity—encapsulating “underlying, inarticulate assumptions about the world and human existence” (Baeten 25). Within tragedy, the perennial and yet modern fascination with myth has been translated into an interrogation of the larger-than-life conditions of existential, metaphysical, and communal conflict, the unflinching addressing of extreme moral and emotional exigencies. More than ever before, we need myth to reinstate belief in what is beyond human comprehension or scope, to give shape, face, and voice to the anxiety of dispersal, fragmentation, and lack of closure, which haunt any attempt for self-definition.

Theatre broadens and deepens the essence of myth. In the context of a play, history becomes domesticized, penetrating our faculties with its immediacy and pertinence. As a concentrated form of universal story-telling, myth has existed in a pre-language form. Notwithstanding the powerful resonance of the poetry, quite obviously the impact of ritual—endemic in both myth and theatre—has made Greek drama viable in all geographical contexts and quite susceptible to multifarious staging experiments in various degrees of success. No longer are plays considered sacrosanct; instead, they are updated

1. Quite appropriately, Martin Revermann discusses the junction of tragedy’s sense of “rootedness” with its innate “otherness” in terms of an “ideal shortcut, a liberating format which helps the artist, and the political activist, to circumvent, legitimately and with playful ease, centuries of cultural baggage” (108).

at will, re-framed through different performance, cultural, and conceptual lenses, with the very notion of a center, of a point of origin guaranteeing meaning and coherence, constantly at stake in all such undertakings. That being the case, many directorial revisions of the classics have been ambivalent in their intended reception of the theatre event; even in the most radical productions, the ways of reframing the source text have often echoed a broader disquiet regarding the treatment of the “great narratives,” no doubt sheltering the insecurities that Roland Barthes had been suggesting in his 1979 discussion of Greek drama:

[w]e never manage to free ourselves from a dilemma: are the Greek plays to be performed as of their own time or as of ours? Should we reconstruct or transpose? Emphasize resemblances or differences? We always vacillate without ever deciding, well-intentioned and blundering, now eager to reinvigorate the spectacle by an inopportune fidelity to some “archaeological” requirement, now to sublimate it by modern esthetic effects appropriate, we assume, to the “eternal” quality of this theatre. (59)

On some level, what Hutcheon calls “postmodern paradox,” a simultaneous “enshrining” and “questioning” of the past (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 126), is something most directors-adapters need to address. Characteristically, American postmodern playwright Charles Mee—whose inspired adaptations of the Greeks include *The Trojan Women: A Love Story*, *Orestes 2.0*, and *Big Love* (a surrealist take on *The Suppliant Women*)—argues, that because these “old narrative structures are in some fundamental way authoritarian ... part of the struggle in the arts is to figure out a way for a person sitting alone in a room to come up with a structure that allows other people to take part in the making of the experience” (189).

Evidently, the nature of the desired experience relates to how each artist handles for the spectator this confrontation of the past and the present. For established visionary artists like Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, and Andrei Serban, for example, the director is a spiritual leader who guides the audience to a shared human adventure through the appreciation of culture-specific myths. More than anything, the ability to influence and to move resides in transposing the magnitude of the mythical themes and conceits into meaningful metaphors. In such performances’ most stirring manifestations, the legacy of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, with the emphasis on a universal (physical) language, a poetry-in-space and a bringing together of the stage and the auditorium, is especially pronounced. Such unity of actor and spectator was a constitutive element in Serban’s 1974 trilogy *Fragments* (*Electra*, *Medea*, and *Trojan Women*), as was in Schechner’s *Dionysus in 69* (1968), the notorious reworking of Euripides’ *Bacchae*: decidedly *Dionysian* in conception, featuring the ritualized integration of the audience into the spectacle, these productions caused a shift in the viewing of Greek tragedy: from a “strangely convenient and reassuringly comfortable cultural commodity of

the educated elite” to something “deeply unfamiliar, profoundly unsettling and, at least in its conception, decidedly egalitarian” (Revermann 104).

Directors’ desire to awaken our dormant anarchic spirits could be viewed in terms of the ambition to immerse the audience into an understanding and enjoyment of the classics, whereby a kind of communion with those absolute, universal truths can ultimately be achieved. At the other end of the spectrum, contemporary productions with decidedly formalist foundations² may hold less promise for generating a sense of transcendence, that unique state of perturbation we find ourselves in when exposed to the stature and levels of motivation intrinsic to the Greek texts. Since about the nineteen eighties, the function of the stage director as *auteur*, author of the performance text, has been instrumental in the reconsideration of notions of authority and trust in the text. A regular sacrificial victim at the altar of experimentation, the classical work has borne the brunt of directors’ zealous rethinking of tragedy. Standard adaptation fare includes—but is not limited to—re-contextualizing the temporal and spatial aspects of the play, omitting lines, adding characters, restructuring scenes, and interpolating *found* material. Hutcheon’s observation that “adaptation has run amok” (*A Theory of Adaptation* xi) is indeed a reflection of the derivativeness embedded in its practice. What is worth noting, however, is that in most visually-informed (that is, *formalist*) ventures, the overriding concern has been to denarrativize the performance. With many postmodern refigurations decrying discursive language in favor of an exclusively kinetic and plastic discourse, the audience is almost always struck with a sense of loss. On occasion, these renderings fashion demystified, convenient, and emotionally dehydrated “art forms,” which, rather than reveal the aspects of myth that can move and invite critical understanding, flatten out the work to the level of fanciful directorial jests. In this respect, far from embarking on an experiential journey through *pity and fear*, today’s spectators are immersed in the anesthetizing coercion of form. Herbert Golder is right to insist that “formal restraint, checked (or choked) passions, columnar choruses, and overly esthetized choreography will not come close” to rendering the dynamism of Greek tragedy, and argues that the ways in which revisionist directors have “stylized, cerebralized, intellectualized, conventionalized, orientalized, multiculturalized the guts out of Greek tragedy” (186) are part of a general tendency to appropriate these ancient texts by inventing a new set of conventions which ultimately “classicize” them, rather than render them fresh:

2. See the work of Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, Peter Sellars, Tadashi Suzuki, to name but some of the most prominent artists, who have over the years tackled the Greeks. Arianne Mnouchkine should not be omitted from this list, however, her own sense of ritual takes her one step further: combined with a decidedly Eastern sensibility, her formalism seems also infused with Artaudian principles of reacquainting the spectator with primordial visceral energies and layering performance with Oriental imagery.

The ways we nowadays appropriate the Greeks: we have imposed our contemporary concerns on them and correspondingly oversimplified their complexity; or closeted them in a skeleton of conventions, turning them into a beautiful and bizarre spectacle from another land, over-decorated with tapestries from the orient, woven in exotic patterns we have all now seen too many times before ... [The Greeks] have been deconstructed and postmodernized, stripped of their comprehensive ordering power and their potentially more spacious vision of our own experience. (185)

The self-reflexive nature of form has not remained unscathed by criticism. Notably, Susan Sontag rejects formalist theatre's "pathology of solipsism," arguing that "a theatre whose principal subject is, in a word, 'consciousness,' the thinking process and modes of perception, [expresses a] failure to make truth claims" (Sontag 29). If we accept that Greek drama is in fact all about truth claims, then its condemnation to mere pattern is quite *tragic* indeed. Ordinarily, in discussing contemporary performance, one is instantly struck by the pressing need to reconcile this phenomenal chasm between content and form, the conflict between the dramatic text and its aesthetic packaging. Particularly in relation to the classics, form facilitates what Patrice Pavis terms "dusting" of the text, evoking an "idealist assumption according to which, correcting classical language is all one needs to do to reach the level of fictional world and of the ideologemes reduced to an *objet fixe*, a mixture of ancient and modern times" (5). What Pavis seems to suggest is that, rather than conceal it, directors ought to expose the remoteness of the classical work, celebrate the formal distance that separates us from the time of its birth and so startle us with new insights, which are as a rule uncomfortably placed between the past of the work's conception and the present of its reception. In this sense,

[i]f the *mise-en-scène* can, in a new concretization of the text, suggest new zones of indeterminacy, organize possible trajectories of meaning between them, the classical dramatic text may recapture the glow tarnished by the passage of time and by banal interpretations. This phenomenon of recycling grants the classical text a perennial life by founding this life, not on permanent and unchanging significance, but on change and adaptation. (Pavis 7)

To a degree, this observation also implies that stage adaptations of the classics³ cannot or should not be reduced to an approximation of neo-realist aesthetics, no less because the emotional involvement in Greek drama is not achieved through an intimate relationship of the audience to the stage, but rather, by the invocation of archetypal responses within the spectator. The

3. I'm using the term *adaptation* quite freely to refer to stage renegotiations of the original play's context and spirit, and hence differentiate these readings from more or less straightforward renderings, much though I am aware of how abstract and arbitrary this categorical evaluation ultimately can be.

peremptory attempt to “psycho-analyze” the characters in order to modernize them, will almost always hit against the very structure of tragedy, which does not accommodate empathy, at least not in the manner in which theatre after Ibsen has known it. After all, the leveling of tragic stature to facile door-to-door metaphor is another face of mannerism.

By way of example: British director Deborah Warner’s interpretation of *Medea* (2002) conveys the kind of insecurity that many directors face when confronted with the fundamental unnaturalness of having lofty (and often supernatural) heroes embody human sentiments. This is why the focus is to have spectators “identify with weakness” (Mendelson 2003), as Fiona Shaw, who performed a modern housewife type of “very normal” Medea, argued. In Warner’s production, the depiction of Medea as “the happy housewife of Corinth” altogether obliterated Euripides’ portrayal of the character as a “female reincarnation of one of the most anguished, outsized, titanic dramatic heroes in the ancient canon” (Mendelson 2003). By and by, the performance’s intended psychologization deprived the audience of that extraordinary impression of the “other” that gives the play its power. Granted, it may not be fully fitting to relate to the tragic heroes’ “emotional range”—the term anxiously discarded by staunch formalists as an irksome spinoff of psychological Realism; yet, the sheer force and energy that epitomize the classical frame no doubt hold a different type of affect. Theodoros Terzopoulos’ condemnation of the current directorial trend to bend tragedy’s structure and stature in order to create “plausible” characters⁴ is worth noting. His conviction that ancient theatre cannot be turned into chamber drama is grounded on an awareness of tragedy as an “open form”:

[Tragedy] has several levels, which are extremely dense. We can only interpret part few of them, but the greater part remains unexplored, adjusting itself to new social, political and human conditions. We can adjust the timelessness of wars, modernise it, transfer it to human situation, to the city, and other contemporary matters, such as the environment, to the issues of love and death, even to cloning; but we can never transcend certain principles that have to do with self-concentration, the grand stature, the grand energy ... because we can never whisper those issues by adapting them to the new circumstances. (Karali 2008)

Similarly renouncing the psychological premise of tragedy, but not quite in tune with the need to explore the intensity of tragic rhythm or the manifestations of a collective and universal ritual, certain proponents of formal-

4. Peter Campbell considers the process whereby each of these adaptations creates “analogous and unified representational worlds and modern, psychological characters,” in an attempt to make the Greek story fit into a modern setting; he also elaborates on the fact that the dramatic and mythological resonance of the Greek material is used to “help strengthen a specific modern parable” (58).

ism, including Anne Bogart, Robert Wilson, and Peter Sellars, view form as cardinal in the adaptation of classical drama, no less because it can provide a “container in which the actor can find endless variations and interpretive freedom” (Bogart 46). Bogart observes that limitations invite performers to meet them, disturb them, transcend them. However, she ultimately recognizes that the shapes and forms that actors and directors seek in the process of rehearsal should produce currents of “vital life-force, emotional vicissitudes and connection” (46). Against all good intentions, formalizing tragedy, albeit a safe enough narrative strategy, can eventually leave a bitter aftertaste in the spectators, who have been over-satiated with images so filling as to numb them to any emotional or intellectual mental action.

It must be pointed out that during their relentless pursuit of imagery and metaphor, avant-garde directors may become oblivious to the social or political aspects of the text that might jeopardize their work’s deliberate, if hazy, abstraction, and thus verge on cultural appropriation and/or a-historicity. In such context-free performances, any desire to revive the universal elements of the story seems detached from the discourse of social and political theatre. Both Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine, for example, have been repeatedly critiqued for their mix-and-match approach to myth,⁵ as well as for (ab)using classical themes and stories, turning them into vehicles suitable – by virtue of their sheer remoteness – for experimenting with genre and style.⁶ Should theatre claim absolution from memory and history? What are the repercussions of such “divorce,” especially in the treatment of tragedy, a genre, which is by definition bound by them? Locked in the imagistic arrogance of postmodernism, *anaesthetization* seems to be a one-way road, with the audience sitting back comfortably to extract maximum pleasure from an aestheticized but at the same time fundamentally soporific spectacle. Robert Wilson’s work on Euripides’ *Alceste* may help illustrate the point: a paradigm of visual verve, Wilson’s study remains, predictably, an exercise in lush theatrics, which fails to register the grotesque absurdity of the text. Writing for the *New York Times*, Mel Gussow relates the director’s ambition “to move beyond Euripides and to transmogrify the play into a performance piece of broader geographic universality, one that encompasses Egyptology as well as Oriental arts” (1986). The critic registers Wilson’s extravagant staging, making a vitriolic comparison:

When the play reaches a point of sacrifice, it seems to swerve into another landscape. A goat-like figure is eviscerated and its “blood” is used to paint the characters; a laser beam shoots from the back of the theater and carves

5. See Mnouchkine’s *Les Atrides* (1992) and Brook’s *Orghast* (1972).

6. Once again, Golder’s argument that, in applying Oriental stylized forms to her treatment of the classics, Mnouchkine has resorted to “conventional stock-in-trade” is telling: “while the spectacles generated are undeniably brilliant, theirs is a cold, hard beauty, in part because their provenance is so remote, like alien masks into which we cannot penetrate” (183).

a hole in the mountain. At this moment, one unavoidably thinks not of Mr. Wilson but of Steven Spielberg, wondering if the Temple of Apollo had not been somehow confused with the Temple of Doom. (Gussow 1986)

There is something to be said here about directors' lack of commitment (to text, to context, to intention) dressed up as taste, metaphor, and relevance; stylish and gentle, the work of American director Joanne Akalaitis displays similar patterns of mannered distancing. Her recent take on Euripides' *The Bacchae* (2009) is strangely suggestive of a light operetta, with the elemental savagery of the text altogether eliminated. The production's energetic soundscape is a constant accompaniment to Akalaitis' "hip" chorus, embodied by "a dozen actresses clad in outfits that suggest Abba gone Indonesian" (Brantley 2009, C5). Production reviews reveal that the emotional impact of the performance was in fact extremely lukewarm. Ben Brantley attacked the production's "toothless" outlook during the play's most climactic point: "As Pentheus' tragically deluded mother, [the actress] Joan MacIntosh speaks of blood-letting revels with the prosaic satisfaction of someone fresh from a cutthroat sale at Bergdorf's" (2009). No doubt, a portion of the audience will always marvel at such attempts to contemporize and render "amusing" texts which in and of themselves are not instantly classifiable as "entertaining." Form, in this respect, provides the means to be frivolous and nonchalant, while seemingly sophisticated.

Paradoxically, the social, civil, and religious import of the Greek plays harbors a strong emotive value, the very texture of drama being intertwined in their cultural specificity. Depoliticizing them by means of aesthetic filters divests them of a perspective at once historical and timeless. It also diminishes their ability to move; a fixation on the perceptual form of the performance's frame—expressed in a multitude of extra-textual signifiers—causes an obliteration of dramaturgical specificity, an erasure of metaphysical viewpoint; in effect, an undermining of experience as a critical re-evaluation of memory. Pavis' semiotic reading of directors' troubled engagement with the world of the text is quite telling:

The classical—shown—text has been emptied of meaning, or at least of any immediate mimetic meaning, of a signified already there, readily expressed on the stage... . The text is maintained as an object of questioning, the workings of codes, rather than a series of situations and allusions to a subtext which the spectator ought to feel. The text is received as a series of meanings which contradict and answer one another and which decline to annihilate themselves in a final global meaning... . The plurality of signifieds is maintained by multiplication of theatrical enunciators (actors, music, rhythm of presentation, etc); rejection of hierarchy in stage systems; refusal to partition the latter into major and minor systems, to reduce them to a fundamental signified; and finally, refusal to interpret. (10)

It could be then, that the true modern—and the postmodern artist alike—



*The ghost of Darius in Theodoros Terzopoulos' production of The Persians (1990).
Photo: Johanna Weber*

must have “the ‘historical’ sense, which involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”⁷ (Eliot 44). T.S. Eliot’s words are comforting in so far as they suggest a convergence instead of a divide in the viewing of tradition and the re-contextualization of its constituent properties. It might be useful to start considering form as a kind of umbilical cord that can nourish the relationship between past and present, functioning as “emotion directed and defined” (Read 8), as opposed to a corrective for the audience’s instinct and visceral response to texts, the appreciation and enjoyment of which lie beyond mere pattern and style.

*Assistant Professor
Open University of Cyprus
Cyprus*

7. In his seminal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot contends that what makes a writer traditional is the historical sense, “a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together” (44). At the same time, Eliot thinks, this is “what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity” (44). While the past is being modified by the present, the awareness of an order of tradition should be informed by the writer’s understanding and exposure to literary history.

Works Cited

- Baeten, Elizabeth M. *The Magic Mirror: Myth's Abiding Power*. Albany: State U of New York P., 1996. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. "Putting on the Greeks." *Critical Essays*. Trans. Richard Howard. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1979. Print.
- Bogart, Anne. *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art in Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Brantley, Ben. "The Bacchae: God vs. Man in an Open-Air Fight." *New York Times* 25 Aug. 2009: C5. Print.
- Campbell, Peter. "Postdramatic Greek Tragedy." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 25 (Fall 2010): 55-74. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. *The Sacred Wood*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921. Print.
- Golder, Herbert. "Geek Tragedy?: Or, Why I'd Rather Go to the Movies." *Arion, Third Series* 4.1 (1996): 174-209. Print.
- Gussow, Mel. "THEATER: ALCESTIS." *New York Times* 21 Mar. 1986. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- . *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Marranca, Bonnie, and Gautam Dasgupta, eds. *Conversations on Art and Performance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. Print.
- Mee, Charles. "The Theatre of History." *Conversations on Art and Performance*. Ed. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. 182-93. Print.
- Mendelson, Daniel. "The Bad Boy of Athens." *The New York Review of Books* 13 Feb. 2003: 24-29. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Trans. Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Pavis, Patrice. "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre." Trans. Loren Kruger. *Modern Drama* 29.1 (1986): 1-22. Print.
- Read, Herbert. *The Meaning of Art*. London: Faber and Faber, 1931. Print.
- Revermann, Martin. "The Appeal of Dystopia: Latching onto Greek Drama in the Twentieth Century." *Arion, Third Series* 16.1 (2008): 97-118. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. "On Art and Consciousness." *Performing Arts Journal* 2.2 (1977): 25-32. Print.
- Terzopoulos, Theodoros. Interview by Antigoni Karali. "Tragedy Needs Stature" ["Θέλει παράστημα η τραγωδία"]. *Ethnos* 29 June 2008. Print.