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Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

Edited by Rosy Colombo

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Milan Kroulík*

"What is expected has not been accomplished". A Historical Materialist Approach to Attic Tragedy

Abstract

In this essay I propose a materialist approach to interpreting and contextualizing tragedies that draws on a materialist strand of anthropological theory. A close analysis of seemingly disparate readings of Greek tragedies allows me to articulate the following unconscious proposition shared by these interpretations: encounters with a tragedy are modelled on the basis of a silent, contemplative, reflexive reading that presupposes the cultural formation of the Transcendental subject. I then proceed to show that the *Bacchae* offers both a criticism of a rationalist formulation of a detached viewing of any event, and key images to perceive tragic encounters in a material-sensual manner. In order to theorize this, I use Michael Taussig's theory of mimesis, which is an idiosyncratic development of Walter Benjamin's concept of the mimetic faculty. This enables me to see Pentheus as a double of post-Enlightenment interpreters and Dionysus as the mimetic, sensorial force that enables and destabilizes rationalist certainties. I then interpret the encounter between Pentheus and the Bacchants on Mount Kithairon as an imageric *ur*-scene that is repeated in the act of viewing a tragedy and in a further displacement of a scholarly approach to a tragedy. This enables me to enact in these events the always already present necessity to demystify the disinterested, intellectualizing and objectifying gaze. Any engagement in this world is an interplay of at least two dimensions – ideational and sensorial – that cannot be untangled to such a degree as to become stable. This understanding of humans as mimetically adept subsequently leads to the de-centering of a de-historicized subject placing him/her on the same level as the engaged material.

Keywords: Bacchants; Euripides; materialism; mimesis; Walter Benjamin; Michael Taussig

> The magic of mimesis lies in the transformation
> wrought on reality by rendering its image.
>
> Taussig 1991: 134

Transformations

Reading through the vast literature dealing with ancient Athenian tragedy, one is not only often struck by its sophistication, but also by its disre-

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gard for the sensual dimensions of life. The physiological situation an ancient Greek spectator might have found himself (or seemingly more rarely herself) in while attending the annual festival in the honour of Dionysus receives fleeting attention at best. One might be tempted to claim that such considerations are inaccessible or even irrelevant, and I concede that for creative interpretations of tragedies as literature any inquiry into modes of sensual perception might be considered marginal. Nonetheless for an alleged understanding of tragedy not as a written play akin to literature, but as a living tradition staged for sensual apprehension with social impact and significance, posing such questions is indispensable.

Our own cultural conventions and unquestioned assumptions about thinking both the world and tragic encounters reveal themselves above all in works about the social and ideological dimension of tragedy.[1] To put it in other words, what I am after is replacing an (unconscious) image of thought based on solitary reading, which organizes even accounts that engage with the staging of tragedies, with an image of thought sourced from participative presence in the performance of tragedy. A central aim of this article is to introduce a different image of thought into the discourse on Attic tragedy, which furthermore can be proved to have been present in ancient Athenian imagination, at the very least in Euripides' *Bacchae*. For the purposes of this paper, I take the writings of Richard Buxton and Rainer Friedrich as representative of many of these common fallacies. Buxton's (2013) questioning of the ideology of tragedy consists of close readings of tragic texts, while ignoring the context within which tragedies could and would have been perceived. By quite evidently modelling his view of a spectator on the Transcendental subject, he fails to take into account the possible effects ideological dimensions of the tragic texts might at all attain. Summarizing others before him, Buxton follows the narrative and the character types present in tragic texts to uncover their subtexts. He begins his argument with the (assumed) "uncontentious assumption that tragedies often echo ideological assumptions embedded in the life of the *polis*" (152). Yet it seems that the relationship between the ideology in life as lived and life as (re)presented[2] is more than an echoing. For example, in claiming, without any further contextualization, that those slaves who appear in tragedies "do not themselves experience a tragic reversal of fortune, or commit suicide – that is reserved for the free and noble" (153), he seems to argue that those attending tragedies may identify merely with their own represented social roles, while this identification is as smooth as it is total. The author does not feel the need to explain how different social roles within and outside of the tragedy align. Audience response is not one that can contest, explicitly or implicitly, what is (re)presented. Again, an image of thought which takes the material conditions as simply transparent delineates the limits of how ideology and its echoing are being employed in analysis. The audience's participation is not thought as one of fleeting and varied attention. The ideological ramifications of a tragic narrative appear as a duplicate, a photocopy of the life narratives of humans making up Athenian society. These in turn seem to be a direct impression of such tragic narratives. Yet, for all we can know, the tragedies enacted at the Great Dionysia were attended to by a varied crowd. Perhaps then a more diversified understanding of the audience and thus of the workings of ideology is needed. When Buxton contends that "any talk of a tragedy's straightforwardly 'confirming' or 'subverting' the ideology of the *polis* is likely to be wildly simplistic" (156), he presents the example of Apollo's speech in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, which has at least two differing interpretations in scholarly literature. Differing interpretations are not interpreted as the result of both an openness of the text and a varied reception, but only as the former. A shift towards integrating studies in reception is never achieved.

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[1] In this paper I am drawing mostly on work by Buxton 2013, Friedrich 1996, Goldhill 1986 and Segal 1985. While it is above all Goldhill who manages to verbally (re)create a vivid sense of the audience in ancient Athens and attempts to rethink ways of how to read tragedy, he nevertheless – according to my reading of him – never goes as far as to question residual aesthetic assumptions in post-Enlightenment thought about the act of viewing tragedy. The same holds, for that matter, for Seaford's critique of Friedrich (1996), which retains a 'contemplative' imagination of ritual and tragedy, i.e. the tensions between myth, ritual, tragedy and the Dionysiac are argued for conceptually-narratively, without taking into account the material conditions for the effectivity of whatever a scholar is considering.

Ideology here can only be questioned 'narratively' in order for it to be undermined.[3] The only locus of criticism and thus of plurality is the text itself in its closed narrative totality. The enraptured spectator among an enormous crowd is nowhere to be seen. Neither are the scores of academics offering various interpretations. Buxton concludes his analysis keeping the ramifications of this paradigm in stating that "ideology in tragedy . . . is fluid, subtle, informing the drama in numerous ways and at numerous levels" (160). Ideology then is in tragedy, not in the interaction between the creators, the text of the performance, the spectators, and the culturally conditioned horizon of interpretation. What readings such as these do not consider is the significant intellectual effort that goes into all such interpretations of a text. To demonstrate how a text questions its own premises, or even bluntly offers a textual performance of social criticism is after all no small feat even for academics, less so for a spectator at a messy event.

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[2] I write (re)presentation here, for a representation is always also a presentation. And I am much more concerned with the presentation, its material-aesthetic effects than with representation as something that stands in for something else, which is the apparently uninterrogated assumption behind even the most recent interventions on thinking tragedy (cf. Lämmle and Scheidegger Lämmle 2012-13).

[3] While the examples may change with every academic interpreter, there is one that is and seemingly always has been considered as paradigmatic: *Medea*. In this 'feminist' tragedy ". . . any preconceived ideas about the automatic rightness of Greek husband against barbarian wife are rendered highly problematic by the play" (Buxton 2013: 153).

Approaches that attempt to incorporate the spectator can be found among those that criticize deconstructive readings such as the above. Rainer Friedrich, for example, works with an anthropological model that should activate the spectator (1996). After demonstrating that deconstructive readings are inappropriate, because anything can be deconstructed and shown to be "subversive of *polis*-ethics" (267), he goes on to state that (at least Sophoclean) tragedy expresses "how the concern for the *oikos* can become the vehicle for the assertion of an independent individuality against the totalizing claims of the *polis*" (277). Greek tragedy then is shaped exclusively within civic discourse and "articulates, and reflects upon, the tenets and presuppositions of the ethical life of the *polis*" (264). For Friedrich, the ancient Athenian discursive space is dominated by the unsolvable contradiction between individual freedom and civic duty. Such concerns find their expression in tragedies. This liberal notion of a rational encounter within a civic discourse imagines those constituting it as rational and free agents who remain outside the discursive formation they perform. Such individuals apprehend clearly and level-headedly the narrative of a performance in its intricacies, while abstracting from imageric specificities in order to reflect upon the dramatizations of their own conflicts. Rainer Friedrich's anthropology creates its individual as free as he (for hardly can a she remain a she in this type of discourse) is identical to all others, for all of Athens is obsessed with the dilemma of a very specific understanding of freedom and duty.[4] A type of freedom and duty that to a surprising degree resembles current articulations of the individual in relation to public space.

Now, I do not desire to entirely discount such readings of tragic texts. After all, these readings are based on the textual material. Why then could such interpretations not have been possible (as some among many) in ancient Athens? My intention is rather to present an alternative model for thinking about ancient Athenian tragedy so as to destabilize the all too common assumption of a very rational, intellectually sophisticated, yet nevertheless passive spectator that unites the above-mentioned interpretations, one that surprisingly resembles all too closely the image of a disinterested researcher gazing at the world from an ivory tower. The memory of Cartesian dualism thus seems to haunt several attempts at grasping other realities – even those claiming to be cautious of "the possibility of projecting our modern constructions onto ancient phenomena" (257). For being cautious of such a possibility still implies a hanging onto the basic anthropological model that performs a seemingly ahistorical subject. One merely tainted by history, but not historical. This dehistoricized Transcendental subject is intimately tied up with the basic metaphor of contemplative, socially isolated reading. It is this situation that is projected onto ancient spectators (readers!) whose reactions can then be safely discarded and who, because constructed ahistorically, are identical themselves and in relation to us.[5] This unifying and decontextualizing basic orientation is hardly self-evident, legitimate or even probable in a situation characterized "by the substantial size and mixed character of Athenian audiences, the attested explicitness of their reactions (both positive and negative) to performances of tragedy" (Halliwell 2002: 100).

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[4] Indeed, the Platonic anti-mimetic legacy shows itself in its most naked form. Halliwell (2002: 114) reminds his readers that Plato wanted to keep at bay "the inevitability of 'infection' between our imaginative responses to tragic characters and the place of emotion in our own lives, there is an explicit appreciation that such responses represent no ordinary frame of mind but a heightened receptiveness, commensurate with the idea of 'surrender' (*Resp.* 10.605d3), to the dramatic projection of feeling (*Resp.* 10.606a7-b8)". While Plato, as a quasi-Pentheus, consciously formulated his anti-mimetic/anti-representational stance, post-Enlightenment authors only rarely show any awareness of the infectious power of representation.

Michael Taussig, drawing on Walter Benjamin's essay on the mimetic faculty, wherein the latter theorizes a sensual encounter between historically situated humans and a mimetic apprehension of their world, offers an alternative basis for a philosophical anthropology, an alternative image of thought which enables to organize knowledge differently. And I would like to stress here that it is the 'mimetic faculty' I am concerned with and not simply 'mimesis'.[6] This materialist theory enables the integration of both ideational and sensual components of human existence. To be clear, the conception of materiality I work with here is a performative one, in that it is both constructed and constructive: it has effects. It is not just the subject, identity, language and gender to act performatively (Butler 1990), but all materiality. Typical performative approaches, such as that in Bierl (2013), are limited in that they are not concerned with how any performance would be a concrete, materially limited one, where difference is produced through the need to solve very concrete problems and varying economies of attention. They still rely, ever so slightly, on an image drawn on the contemplative reader who easily accesses content. Consider, for instance, the following statement: "On the stage this manifestation is necessarily achieved by theatrical and performative means, that is, by ritual equipment, paraphernalia, and props, which distinguish the group on the visual level, and moreover by music, noise, and rhythm as well as by ecstatic movement" (215). All of this is fine and well, but it is a very abstract, idealist description, which says very little about the whole situation apart from generalities. The aim would be to fill or rather combine these generalities with concrete imagery, as if 'from below' these general concepts, whether self-consciously drawn from ancient sources or not.

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[5] Consider this felicitous slip of tongue by the post-structuralist Goldhill: "The self-reflexive theatrical devices of Euripidean drama also function to challenge the reader's awareness of his self" (Goldhill 1986: 264).

[6] It is not that the (reconstructed) changing of meanings of the term 'mimesis' from the archaic to the classical period, as argued by Nagy (1996) does not play a role. It is rather that reenactment and imitation both draw on the human (and non-human animal) mimetic faculty of sensing and producing similarity, which in a genetic account precedes them. This holds true for all of Nagy's work, probably because of the lack of experience with ethnographic fieldwork by classics scholars, which is precisely the constitutive experience that opens up the space where Taussig locates his research as well as the necessity to come up with different images of thought in order to relate varied human activities within a received intellectual tradition.

The materialist background from which I write is based on an ontology where the separation between human and non-human, between where a human (in whatever way it may be constituted) ends and the non-human begins is never simply given (Haraway 1991).[7] This is not incompatible with performative approaches, as Bierl (2013: 218) notes: "[m]ankind and the surrounding space merge in the execution of *choreia*, whose ecstatic, performative form becomes the determining feature of this song and the entire play". Dionysus, a figure I work with extensively here, is explicitly linked to the chorus. Thus, such work does not only support the part of my thesis which claims that a performative historical materialist approach can be formulated with images in the *Bacchae*, but it also differs only in that such enfolding continues to be an outside to performative subjectivity, while what I propose is an image of a human of which such openness is always already a part. This difference is noticeable in that "the chorus supplied by the polis collectively represents the actual citizens who, in the here and now, worship Dionysos in the Athenian theater of Dionysos" (212), while this collective representation is just taken to work miraculously, much like in the case of the authors discussed above. And yet, we are sentient beings and sensual (pre-intellectual) apprehension of our surroundings is constitutive of our being in the world and is as such folded into our constitution. It is also the tragic life of Pentheus that offers images to help us break free of the strictures of the (post-)Kantian Transcendental subject dominantly forming our post-Enlightenment conventions, (intellectual) habits, minds and senses. While "Kant is clear that the judging, independent human ultimately overcomes this [sensual] experience and stands over and against the awesome powers of nature" (Plate 2005: 21), he may have been less clear on this particular point had he engaged in massively socialized activities. Pentheus too thought his rationality so natural that he did not see the aesthetic pull of performative reality. It is the same Pentheus, who, after all, is a descendant of a (probably not particularly rationalist) dragon. The image of the king as the ideal passive spectator up on Mount Kithairon being pulled into the chaotic activity of the world is an imageric *ur*-scene repeated in tragic performances. By thinking both in terms of the modern formulation of the mimetic faculty and alongside Euripides' *Bacchae*, I want to offer a different basic metaphorical image of such this-worldly encounters. By performing an interpretation not of tragedy, but 'through' tragedy – *dia tragoidion* – I propose an approach that differs from common academic studies of tragedies, for the Greeks too knew two or three things about (not only) their way of appropriating reality. Such a procedure also draws on the by now common ethnographic practices of letting the objects of study speak for themselves together with the researcher, allowing for the re-emergence of a previously suppressed subjectivity of people, animals, plants, and objects. The ancient Greeks, as emerges from contemporary discourses, compared the power of images and of the visual arts to those of poetry and rhetoric, ascribing great importance to the sensual dimensions of existence. After all, "visual art, like poetry, engaged in *mimesis*, 'representation'; the poet and painter were equally *eikonopoioi*, 'makers of images'" (Castriota 1992: 10). Studying tragedy should also tell us something about our own conventions, for those are the ones with which we are acquainted and which we reproduce, unknowingly. What we might know about tragedies depends as much on narratives and images from the ancient world as from our own.

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[7] For a discussion of materialist performativity, especially as developed within science studies, see e.g. Barad 2003. Furthermore, first-generation Frankfurt School materialism was always already performative insofar as it presupposed concepts having an effect on the world, which can often be noticed in the anything but analytical writing styles of Benjamin and Adorno (for a discussion on the performativity of writing, see Jakešová 2019); for an explicit discussion, see Daddario et Gritzner (2014)..

The *Bacchae* as Tragedy of Mimesis

> πρέπεις δὲ Κάδμου θυγατέρων μορφὴν μιᾷ
> [Thy shape, methinks, is like to one / Of Cadmus' royal maids!]
> Euripides, *Bacchae* 917 (Translation Buckley 1850)

The arrival of Dionysus, he who "changed shape from god to man" (Eur. *Ba.* 4-5), in the city of Thebes is the start of an epidemic. Those that come into contact with him imitate his strange behaviour in their own ways and leave the structured world of the city for nature. For the city, with all its walls and binding (354-6), with the tradition of male-dominated hierarchies, is associated with Pentheus. Dionysus meanwhile is less than enthusiastic about the ways by which such conventions are upheld (200-9). Up high in these woods of Mount Kithairon, where the Bacchae perform their inversions and changes, away from the familiar shapes of the castle of Thebes, is where Pentheus was compelled to follow Dionysus. Here, mid-play, is where the barriers of habitual appropriation begin breaking down, where the followers of Dionysus shed their seemingly clear identities and dance the frenzied dance of the god of wine. It is a (non-)space that "lies *beyond* familiar limits, the limits of civic space, social norms, the familiar boundaries, personality, energy, perception" (Segal 1997: 12). But this is not merely a geographical, objective space as our habits of appropriation lead us to think about reality. Here, humans face an ever-shifting space in which the god's frenzy becomes reified in the sensual uncertainty of the woods. In these woods the economy of performance among sentient beings knows no cultural boundaries. It is an alchemical kitchen of the mimetic, of the "nature that culture uses to make second nature" (Taussig 1993: xiii). A sensual space, where the certainty of the cultured symbolic system collapses. Any stability becomes perceivably transient, as "in a moment this scene will disperse and everything will recombine in a new and very different formation" (Wohl 2005: 149). After all, "*Bakhai* is dominated by changes of form, and many of these concern the god himself" (Buxton 2013: 229). Dionysus' realm is one where even perception is changed. Segal too stresses that "the play, along with Dionysus in the play, diffuses our sense of self" (1997: 346), though he does not describe how this happens, as he moves in symbolic and conceptual realms, as is evident in his formulation of reality, "that system of logical correspondences through which we find, or make, coherence in our world and in our ever-changing selves." (ibid.). However, in the approach I work with here, the point is that there is no simple correspondence between concepts and the world, the former being somehow fully immaterial and transparent. Thus, reading a tragedy is a fundamentally different thing from attending one, each performance will also differ, especially through time and space, as social conventions and materiality itself change. Here, there is no nature before culture, as both are always already enmeshed (Buck-Morss 1977). Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics* (1973), demonstrates how the two can never unite into anything coherent. The image of thought he works with is a displaced inverse of researchers like Segal; it is not merely one that begins in materiality (understood of course as already constituted conceptually, and as such already conditioned by this gap), but also one that never adds up to this stability mentioned above. Stability, coherence is already a fiction. The sensual is this realm in between, where perception and materiality meet, without ever fully coinciding. Perception is sensual, it is not an intellectual reflection of symbolic structures, it co-constitutes and accompanies them, even as it is formed by them. Dionysus' power is much more radical than symbolic inversions, it deals with *aisthesis*, the sensual.

But Dionysus is after all a god and a mimic, who can continue to become other, while remaining Dionysus. Indeed his birth is a series of transformations, both physiological (birth, thunderbolt) and social (from Athena to Zeus, perfected by the Fates) (Eur. *Ba.* 90-105). He, "like all of us, has a double origin, born somehow from both a father and a mother" (Wohl 2005: 148). For we humans too are both physiological and social copies of our forebears, originating from two, resembling both and none at the same time. Epistemic uncertainty is further figurally associated with Dionysus via the *thyrsos*, formed by inserting a bunch of ivy leaves in the hollow tip of a fennel rod, and used as missile (Eur. *Ba.* 762, 1099). It is thus a copy of an idea made up of two separate material parts, while both parts and the whole have unstable functional existences. Representation however is not a mere standing in for something else, it is becoming something else. The act of representing renders changes onto reality. For the people up on the mountain come not only to represent animals, they become animals. Such representation is not a sign of falseness. Dionysus not only mimes the appearance of a youth from the East, he becomes this youth. But Dionysus can intentionally change form. His appearance is mimicking the expectations of locals about how somebody associated with Bacchic ecstasy and the barbaric East could look like. The blond youth arriving in Thebes is a copy of the city-dwellers' expectations. These expectations are themselves copies of his possible appearances. Appearance here is everything, it sutures the unstable material basis of existence. Pentheus cannot understand or acknowledge this. He forcefully clings to stability, yet is easily betrayed by his rationalist apprehension of sense-perception: "Where is he? He is not visible to my eyes" (501). Pentheus cannot see Dionysus despite literally staring at and conversing with him. It is Dionysus who is in (touch with) his senses here (504). Meanwhile Pentheus cannot even imagine the acts of the Bacchants beyond his own safely structured conventions. His imagination is a copy of his conventions. The sensual encounter with the 'real' Bacchants then presents him with bodies, acts, images, and sounds that press close to him and make him enact these too. He has to change his appearance by miming what comes from Dionysus in order to even arrive at Kithairon (823), finding himself in unfathomable nature without any structures to support his masculine subjugation of the world. Now, considering that Pentheus' actions are reported by a messenger, what I do here is to think with the images he vividly presents verbally.

The king becomes other even before arriving at this transgressive Space of Change. Yet there, on the mountain, he encounters even more radical sensualities and modes of behaviour. Indeed he is compelled to engage in the activity, pressed out of his position of the curious, yet passive onlooker. He becomes part of the scene and changes profoundly. Still, he remains part of nature, of spaces, objects, and forms.[8] In the closing passages Dionysus decrees to those that leave the Space of Change in their previous figural integrity what they will do. While the uncontrolled whirlwind of unstructured mimetic activity has been subdued after leaving the mountain, these sobered minds will nevertheless visibly change yet again (1330-50). But what of Pentheus? He was joined into the mimetic dance of the othered Bacchae to such a degree that he is taken outside himself so far that he cannot return. For our conventional physiognomic categories he has indeed become a 'total other'. It is only for Dionysus to become almost entirely other over and over again. In the tragedy this becomes evident "as the action unfolds, changes in the god's perceived form multiply" (Buxton 2013: 229). For a human individual, this total crisis in conventional representation is as final as the total negation of one's own mimetic adeptness, since "the reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 44). Still, in his representation within the play, Pentheus lingers on. He is as present there, as is the god Dionysus.[9] Thus in figural forms Pentheus too multiplies, both literally and metaphorically. He is multiplied by being torn apart and by being (repeatedly) represented. It is precisely here that transgression shows itself to be a generative force relating to both death and life.

For Michael Taussig, these issues of copy and contact are common to all life and representations. If one proceeds to imagine only a performed tragedy's surface, questions of mimesis come to the fore immediately. Imagine sitting in an audience of 10,000 viewers, who are drunk, loud, and tired. Imagine sitting there day after day for three whole days (Goldhill 1986: 75-6). The staging of the event is furthermore, as life in general, I want to add, multisensory, and ritual and mythical forms become blurred (Bierl 2013:

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[8] Walter Benjamin noticed the following: "Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic codes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill or a train" (Benjamin 1999: 720).

[9] I believe the play supports interest in questions of representation and presence due to the fact that it is exceptional in the narrative presence and importance of a god. For, in a sense, the copy takes on the power of the represented. Dionysus the performed character in a concrete instantiated tragic performance takes his power from the 'real' Dionysus.

212).[10] Of course, such slippage between spheres is, as I will show, common in research too, and one begins to ponder when, if ever, it is that anybody encounters myth and ritual separately. Thinking about categories as always already multimodal might be more efficacious.[11] This, and I deliberately exaggerate, is clearly not a place for peaceful and lonely contemplation upon the meaning of an enacted narrative. Its intellectual meanings might come forth in discussions, but what one will likely perceive then and there are the surface appearances, the wit of the actors and their (in)ability to perform (that is, adhere to conventionalized forms of tragic behaviour). But appearances can have many effects on an audience, just like Dionysus' many appearances transform those that come into contact with him in differing ways. (Re)presentations may indeed be read as types unworthy of emulation, but at the same time by virtue of being performed these types enable the very modes of behaviour they ought to criticize. They are representations and presentations at the same time. The bodily presence of actors is non-neutral, it does not merely signify and efface itself in the process. Presentation, which in a performance presents modes of behaviour, is always already a part of representation, or better yet, its prerequisite. Pentheus could but imagine very tame and chauvinistic visions of the Bacchae, yet once he arrived at the scene to spy on their acts, he was drawn into whirl of changing appearances, unable to clearly separate from them. He had forgotten about the present(ational) dimension of any performance. For a conceptual reiteration of tragedy this vision of Pentheus on Mount Kithairon might prove to be a useful metaphor.

The Comedy of Becoming Other

> Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.
>
> Benjamin 1999: 720

This mimetic faculty is "the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore differences, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power" (Taussig 1993: xiii). One of the important points being that the difference between original and copy is destabilized to such a degree that it becomes moot. Any original is just an arbitrary cut in chains of transformations, which for our situation here include, among others, my own work on and with the tragedy. A Dionysus on-stage draws his power from the purported original Dionysus performing his transgressive mischief. Dionysus as born at the crossroads of essence (nature and physiology) and construction (culture and society). Such copying, drawing on the power of the original is a process realized by and through the senses, that is through sensual contact. It cuts through established cultural categories and boundaries, as it presupposes sense perception, not intellect. And it is at such crossroads that "the mimetic faculty comes most forcefully into play. It sutures nature to artifice and bringing sensuousness to sense by means of what was once called sympathetic magic, granting the copy the character and power of the original, the representation the power of the represented" (Taussig 1993: xvii). The epistemic (non-)places stitched together by mimesis have something Dionysiac to them, as "the strange thing about this silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made-up is that it appears to be where most of us spend most of our time as epistemically correct, socially created, and occasionally creative beings. We dissimulate. We act and have to act as if mischief were not afoot in the kingdom of the real and that all around the ground lay firm" (Taussig 1993: xvii). The lines between categories lose their clarity and appear muddled, uncertain. In places where hermeneutic certainties decompose it might even happen that a mother perceives what would be her son differently. Her common sense is destabilized and revealed as mere habit. Where nature and culture interact freely, the senses go hog-wild, for they too are cultured. They are the "second nature" created by culture. Sentient beings produce similarities, (re)presentations. It is what we do. The Space of Change on Mount Kithairon is dominated by Dionysus, where the stable similarities produced within common culture tip into a different realm from that of convention. Through the senses we apprehend seemingly stable "outer forms" of phenomena, yet in the Dionysiac Space, the workings of senses are laid bare in their constructedness. For what is mimetically apprehended goes far beyond convention and entails radical change.

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[10] I want to stress that the space I try to open up pertains to what I see as the implicit, unquestioned expectation of an immediate convertibility of myth to ritual, or vice versa, as the way rituals or tragedies, or recitations for that matter, are performed, conditions what can be apprehended.

[11] Thus, what Mitchell (2005) writes about visual media, namely that they are never pure, pertains to myth and ritual too.

The realm of the sensual, of the "outer forms", is where academics too are playing. For is writing not in a sense an attempt to press close to an object, transforming itself by translation of the object into words? For Walter Benjamin it surely was (Taussig 1993: 2). Words are thus not mere symbols standing in for something else in an unending line of deferred meanings. They also have a surface, i.e. aesthetic materiality, as has by now been a longterm topic in media studies. The reason we can use words, despite their apparent meaninglessness is because (conventionally) they appear to mimic the objects they refer to. This is what habit does to us. In studying words that give themselves to the reader seemingly directly one must not forget their sensual dimensions. When we read, we follow forms which have for us acquired such a close connection to meanings they seemingly refer to so as to appear transparent. But it is in reading too that a subject encounters at first an outer form that is then ideationally imitated[12] so as to grasp its non-material meaning. Even the spoken word is in a sense material form insofar as sounds are waves being carried by air only to impress themselves onto our senses. And images, perhaps more straightforwardly for people of our times, where the "individual finds the *abstract form ready made*" (Taussig 1993: 45), are encountered and understood through their sensual component.[13] This understanding takes us outside ourselves, only to be returned again. We are the same, yet changed. We are similar. For Walter Benjamin, imagining the locus of the sensual as located in a body's outer ends, for example where sense-perception appears to happen, the sense of being taken outside ourselves is even stronger (Taussig 1993: 38). It is the whole enterprise of ethnography (of writing the ethnos) that is in a sense 'making a model to capture the original'. "In other words, can't we say that to give *an example, to instantiate, to be concrete*, are all examples of the magic of mimesis wherein the replication, the copy, acquires the power of the represented?" (Taussig 1993: 16). Both writing and reading are closely tied to vision, perception and imagery. In a sense they are a type of magic: "I want to . . . puzzle over the capacity of the imagination to be lifted through representational media, such as marks on a page, into other worlds" (ibid.). A textual encounter with tragedy is not of necessity an essentially different experience from a theatrical or ritual encounter. Neither is it and can it be identical. The material, sensual quality of a performance affects sentient beings more strongly than a textual encounter. An interplay between aesthetic surface and immaterial imagination play a role in all encounters, what will differ is the specific mix of these elements and the imagery through which the aesthetic, which points beyond itself towards the ideational, will be apprehended. A further difference lies in the intellectual narratives that dialectically shape us, our world and our ways of being in the world. Hence, even if it were possible to stage an 'exact copy in the same space with the same paraphernalia and body techniques' of the *Bacchae*, it would still be something different in general and among each participant, as we are formed differently. This is one of the reasons for which it is difficult for us to perceive the mimetic aspects of ideational worlds. One of the reasons for the mis-perception of certain modes of writing as neutral or objective.

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[12] Taussig, following Freud, calls our tendency to lose ourselves in our environment "ideational mimetics". Here "even ideational activity, not only perception, involves . . . embodying" (Taussig 1993: 46).

[13] For a useful discussion of the modern "ready-made" reality and its Platonic character, see e.g. Boon 2010: 18-24. The specific way our reality is constructed nourishes certain naive tacit assumptions that draw on post-Enlightenment rationalist thought, supported up by a material organization of reality that make these assumptions cogent.

The mimetic faculty then is crucial in that it involves a two-layered notion of mimesis – a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived" (Taussig 1993: 21). Dionysus does not bring alterity from a distance, his travels take him to come into contact with Pentheus. The alterity involved in mimesis is "a lot more performative and physical, a lot more realist yet fanciful, than implied in the way 'othering' is alluded to in discussions today" (33). What indeed could be more performative and physical, more realist yet fanciful than the activities up on Mount Kithairon! This is central to the mimetic work of tragedy as (re)presentational performance. This was not lost on the Greeks, as "from an early stage, when applied to poetry, visual art, music, dance, and the like, mimesis amounts to a concept (or family of concepts) of representation, which in this context can be broadly construed as the use of an artistic medium (words, sounds, physical images) to signify and communicate certain hypothesized realities. But because *hypothesized realities are imagined possibilities of experience* [my emphasis], the Greek tradition, both before and after Plato, is greatly interested in the effects of mimetic artworks on their viewers or hearers, and repeatedly attempts to characterize the kinds of recognition, understanding, emotional response, and evaluation that such artworks can or should elicit in their audiences" (Halliwell 2002: 16).[14] One goes to tragedy and becomes other. Transformed, yet same. Similar.

Mimetic power, like Dionysus, is ambiguous. In the power to represent the world lies also the power to falsify, mask and pose. "The two powers are inseparable" (Taussig 1993: 43). Ethnography testifies to "an almost drug-like addiction to mime, to merge, to become other – a process in which not only images chase images in a vast, perhaps infinitely extended chain of images, but one also becomes a marrer" (43). Rey Chow in trying to go beyond the structuralist intellectual heritage notes the "programmatic rejection of the mimetic as such" (2002: 101). A rejection that stems from Plato's distrust of the mimetic. For him "the consideration of mimesis was bound up with an implicit visuality – with the image it produces" (ibid.). The problem for him is the duplicitous nature of the act of copying, for it confuses reality and falsehood. The Western philosophical tradition mistrusts the objectified image, but Rey Chow stresses that this iconophobia is "subordinate to the phobia about imitation itself" (ibid.). The act of copying is the problem, for it unsettles boundaries, truths, and power relations. While the mimetic faculty is always present[15] in sentient beings, as cultural beings we are habitualized into reified boundaries of the world we inhabit, constructed by our forebears. So it is with Pentheus and his stubborn refusal to acknowledge the arbitrariness of rationality. Performing (re)presentation means the performance of an identity that is always already undermined by the mimetic act of representation.

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[14] Importantly, I am concerned with Platonism, and not Plato, whose specific writings are at best marginally relevant for the tragic context, given they came later. What I term Platonism is the implicit models of thought that have become culturalized within the general unconscious and appear as historical and not ontological only through critical interaction with a cultural 'other', noticeable especially in anthropological discourse.

(Re)presentation contains both identity and difference. The Western Platonic tradition sought to establish philosophy as primary representation and art as secondary. It established a never actual, yet still potent rupture between truth and representation. "In the broadest terms, Plato's legacy to the history of mimeticism can be described as a combination of philosophical gravitas (mimesis cannot be divorced from the biggest, most serious problems that confront philosophy) with the disquieting, though inconclusive, suggestion that philosophy and art may be somehow at odds with one another and even perhaps ultimately irreconcilable. It would be hard to overstate the consequences of this legacy" (Halliwell 2002: 37-8). It is on the suppression of the sensual, aesthetic aspect of mimesis that the majority of Western thought rests, right down to the implicit imaginings of the socio-aesthetic encounter with tragedy. Pentheus, ever the proto-Kantian, was eager to imagine himself as beyond the ambiguous power of mimesis too. He forgot that his seemingly stable world is built on provisional suppression of the impossibility of identity and essential stability.

A copy cannot be more than a partial, because cultured imitation of an original (which in itself is always non-original, that is a copy), therein lies its fidelity and illusion. Behind this lies the material impossibility of identity. Identity as such is merely a metaphor. A (re)presentation, created by way of contact and copy, does more than just represent, it opens up new possibilities, for it is similar (without being similar to) but also different. This is essential to interpreting Athenian tragedy in its context. Those present at all the unique stagings of tragedies would see and hear the surface of the performance, as well as presumably an outline of the plot. While the plot may carry a clear ideological message (as well as its deconstruction), it must nevertheless be enacted, performed. While many plots are demonstrations of where inadequate behaviour leads, the artistic performance of these builds on a depiction of such behaviour. This sensual performance exceeds any directly intended narrative and ideological ramifications, by virtue of the ambiguity of the mimetic. A physical performance may have many meanings on a connotative symbolic level, however on a sensual level it enables, perhaps even ratifies the exact same behaviour it purports to criticize. What more, any plot, story, image, performance is already a copy of what was known to a culture as implicit social knowledge. Tragedies, even in their textual dimension, are made up of images and forms too. "We can see such images are created by the author but are also already formed, or half-formed, so to speak, latent in the world of the popular imagination" (Taussig 1991: 370). Dionysus, perhaps as sort of "dialectical imagician", wields the images inherent in a society to act upon that same society. He keeps changing his image for he is aware that he, even as a (re)maker of images, his control over images diminishes once they (re-)enter society. For that he does not cling to figural forms. He draws from society's half-conscious imageric wealth to sneak past its purported outer boundaries. Yet as evidenced by the differing reactions to his multiple forms by Agaué, Pentheus, Kadmus, and others, the forms he appropriates are anything but unambiguous. Dionysus 'knows' he is both subject (acting upon society via his image) and object (being perceived through his image by society). And if I never define what Dionysus is, then it is precisely because of the figure's relational multivalence that I want to keep, as any attempt at a clear definition would perform not the alternative I propose but the image of thought I seek to evade.

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[15] Or, according to the Frankfurt School, it is resurfacing in capitalist modernity, after its suppression by the Enlightenment. "Capitalist man" could nevertheless be characterized as accustomed to severely less penetrable boundaries than ancient Greeks.

This sort of uncertain being in the world is what the tragedy of Pentheus presents. And what I present is not a "metatragedy", in that it thematizes the staging of tragedy itself, as critically analyzed by Radke (2003: 256ff.). Indeed, Radke (270) critiques approaches that look at the 'surface' of the tragedy, at the expense of the 'content', which is precisely what I seek to affirm, but pointing out that the conditions of staging tragedy in Athens would have made a thorough narrative engagement impossible. Radke's exhaustingly argued book follows precisely, if unconsciously, the image of thought implicit in post-Enlightenment thought I want to present an alternative to, for he seeks to drive a wedge between content and surface, while wanting to magically access the content prior to any surface. This is possible for armchair academics within a capitalist empire, where the fiction of the rationally apprehending solitary individual is to a large extent made fact. Yet, in Ancient times reality was different, there was not the extensive system of global exploitation necessary to create the conditions of armchair researchers: the overrational ruler who attempts to contain the mimetic powers of Dionysus cannot resist its power. He misperceives himself as being in control of appearances, even as he too is being changed by them. Encountering the world is always a sensual, aesthetic encountering. Studying tragedy based on the metaphor of textual, contemplative encounter is making the mistake of projecting a historically highly specific (self-)image onto a historical situation. The concept of aesthetic as an autonomous and "disinterested" realm of experience "came into being partly as a secularized derivative of much older (originally Platonic, later Christian) ideas of the disinterested contemplation of transcendent (that is, divine) beauty and goodness. Although Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which sharply distinguishes the judgments of 'taste' from the operations of both pure (intellectual) and practical (ethical) reason, was a powerful landmark in the codification of this trend of thought, a doctrine of autonomy and self-sufficiency of 'the aesthetic' had grown steadily over the preceding decades" (Halliwell 2002: 9). Pentheus too expects the aesthetic to be autonomous, for in his desire to voyeuristically engage in Bacchic orgies lies his oblivion to the impossibility of a clear subject-object distinction. He even has to rely on the mimetic faculty so that he can realize his rationalist utopia. At the very least, he has to mimic conventions and appearances of the world he deems stable. Any tragedy aiming at a unified ideological effect entails the enactment of what is to be criticized.

Whither Thou, Tragedy?

πολλαὶ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων,
πολλὰ δ᾽ ἀέλπτως κραίνουσι θεοί·
καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ᾽ οὐκ ἐτελέσθη,
τῶν δ᾽ ἀδοκήτων πόρον ηὗρε θεός.
τοιόνδ᾽ ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα.

[Many are the forms of divine things, and the gods bring to pass many things unexpectedly; what is expected has not been accomplished, but the god has found out a means for doing things unthought of.]

Euripides, *Bacchae* 1388-92 (Translation Buckley 1850)

Tragedy, even in a textual encounter, will not merely be a passive object whose meaning is extracted by a (Transcendental) subject. Tragedy speaks back to us. Not in its totality, but in the chaos of repeated images it performatively evokes. We are changed by engaging with them. Even if, due to the legacy of bodily repression, our mimetic faculty may have receded – by becoming accustomed to 'dead objects' we have forgotten that we yield to them (Taussig 1993: 46) – reading a tragedy continues to be an existential-sensorial encounter, the effect of which one would have to consciously work against to overcome. Still, the historical encounter with tragedy of an individual in Ancient Athens differs in many ways from the silent (re)reading of a text in offices or homes.[16] But it is a question of degree not essence. Dionysus in his mimetic dance thus wreaks not only havoc on the ideological intentions of the Athenian *polis*, he becomes present in our times as well. He opens up new possibilities, while retaining parts of the old. He works upon similarities. Pentheus' ignorant attempt at repression of the mimetic leads both to his (physiological) demise and his continuing representational existence.[17] He deems his rational world in which seemingly given ideas are realized in materiality to be anchored in stability. But even hypothesized realities based in the realms of ideas are structured according to the imageric possibilities of their culture and are in effect a copy (with its always inherent variations) of existent conventions. Mimetic/representational work is persuasively vivid. "It involves the creation of something that, through its sense of life, can affect the viewer or hearer emotionally too: in the case of the hymn, it is a matter of the power to 'bewitch' and 'enchant' (*thelgein*), a metaphor (if it is one) well embedded in the Homeric epic[s] . . ." (Halliwell 2002: 21).

This is not to say that ideology is not communicable. Tragedy (much like other narratives, be they explicitly mythological or other) is efficacious in transforming those attending. What I intend to question with this mimetic theorization is the possibility of total dominance of any structure, as is tacitly presumed in many readings such as those analyzed at the beginning of this text. In these analyses images of rational encounters between active subjects and passive objects continue to be employed uncritically, and they thus retain too strong a fixation on a dichotomy between structure (and dominance) and anti-structure (subversion). What gets lost are the translational processes of reception, or at the very least their historical conditioning. The tragic encounter can serve both integration and destabilization, as my materialist reading demonstrates. To study tragedy (or anything else, really) not as (post-Enlightenment) text, but as a lived tradition drawing on deeply embedded, yet historically contingent imagery and conventions in the quotidian sensualist encounter probably far removed from rationalist textual reiterations, implies the need to yield to a different subconsciously effective imagery than a modern academic subject might be used to. This imagery is partly embedded in the engaged textual sources, wherefore it is important to think with a text and not about it. To do so however needs thorough work in reconstructing the life-worlds within which tragedies are received, be that in ancient Athens, in today's academia or anywhere else.

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[16] A fitting existential-sensorial metaphor could be the attendance to a festival in popular music through which to think an encounter with tragedy in its Golden Age.

[17] It is of central importance to note that approaches to death are culturally variable. Following Foucault, Chow (2002) demonstrates the post-Enlightenment obsession with life and the deathly havoc it often wreaks on those that are other. Pentheus' symbolic and physiological death should thus not be easily equated with death as we are accustomed to perceiving it today.

For both text and those encountering it exist historically and in a material world. Only by destabilizing one's own ontological and perceptual certainties may fallacious imaginings be elided. As I tried to present on the previous pages, the *Bacchae* shows today's interpreter the pitfalls of ignoring the power of the sensual and the mimetic. By taking such 'dead texts' as if they were alive and looking for what they can tell us about ourselves, we may perhaps even come closer to what they may have been to their various contemporaries. Even if my concern here lies more with implicit images of thought in contemporary research practices than with whatever might have been. For any account of an 'other' is at least a two-way street: the construction of the other through which one constructs one's own world.

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