

N°6 | 2017

*Violence tragique et guerres antiques
au miroir du théâtre et du cinéma
(XVII^e-XXI^e siècles)*

sous la direction de
Tiphaine Karsenti & Lucie Thévenet

<http://atlantide.univ-nantes.fr>
Université de Nantes

Atlantide

Table des matières



- *Avant-propos* – CHRISTIAN BIET & FIONA MACINTOSH..... 3
- *Introduction* – TIPHAINE KARSENTI & LUCIE THÉVENET..... 5

Le théâtre grec : un modèle ambigu

- TIPHAINE KARSENTI..... 10
Ancient Tragedy Violence in the French Translations of Greek Tragedies (1692-1785)
- GÉRALDINE PRÉVOT..... 21
The Socalled “Vogue” for Outdoor Theatre around the Time of the First World War: Meanings and Political Ambiguities of the Reference to Greek Theatre

La violence contemporaine en question

- CHARITINI TSIKOURA..... 32
Aeschylus’ Persians to Denounce Modern Greek Politics
- CLAIRE LECHEVALIER..... 42
Ancient Drama and Contemporary Wars: the City Laid Waste?
- SOFIA FRADE..... 50
War, Revolution and Drama: Staging Greek Tragedy in Contemporary Portugal

Logiques de l’analogie

- ESTELLE BAUDOU..... 61
To Tell the Trojan War Today: Contemporary Performances of Agamemnon
- ANNE-VIOLAINE HOUCKE..... 72
Filmic Analogies: the Trojan War in the Present (Notes toward an African Oresteia, Pier Paolo Pasolini; Troy, Wolfgang Petersen)

Aux limites du tragique

- CRISTINA DE SIMONE..... 83
The Obscenity of Violence, the Obscenity of Theatre: the Dramaturgy of Carmelo Bene’s Last Performance-Disconcertment
- LUCIE THÉVENET..... 91
Kleist’s Penthesilea: a Warrior Caught up by Tragedy

TO TELL THE TROJAN WAR TODAY:
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCES OF *AGAMEMNON*

Estelle Baudou

Université Paris-Nanterre
Équipe Histoire des Arts et des Représentations
(HAR - EA 4414)



Résumé : Cet article compare la réception de la guerre de Troie dans plusieurs mises en scène contemporaines de l'*Agamemnon* d'Eschyle. En s'appuyant sur l'opposition traditionnelle du mythe et de l'Histoire, nous proposons une analyse de la représentation de la guerre dans ces spectacles. Pour faire référence à la guerre, les metteurs en scène s'appuient principalement sur des processus d'analogie, dont l'analyse et la catégorisation contribuent à définir les différents usages que le théâtre contemporain fait du mythe.

Mots-clés : mythe, guerre, *Agamemnon* d'Eschyle, mise en scène de tragédie grecque, Peter Stein, Ariane Mnouchkine, Olivier Py, Katie Mitchell, Peter Hall.

Abstract: *This paper compares the reception of the Trojan War in several contemporary performances of Agamemnon by Aeschylus. Using the traditional opposition between myth and history, I propose an analysis of the depiction of the war in these productions. The stage directors are principally relying on analogical processes to create an idea of the war, allowing this paper to contribute to highlight how contemporary theatre deals with ancient myths.*

Keywords: Myth, War, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Greek tragedy in performance, Peter Stein, Ariane Mnouchkine, Olivier Py, Katie Mitchell, Peter Hall.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* begins with the announcement of Greek victory. Consequently, the whole action takes place after the Trojan War and the conflict itself is already a memory. As expected, there are epic narratives about the war that has just ended by those who have come back from the battlefield: the messenger (v. 551-593) and then, *Agamemnon* (v. 810-854) both evoke the war in poetic and non-personal ways. However, before that, there are narratives by Clytemnestra (v. 320-350) and the chorus (first *stasimon*), which are prophetic narratives since they occur before anyone has come back from Troy. These two kinds of epic narratives underline the specificity of the ancient concept of memory: in Ancient Greece, memories belonged to poets and oracles¹. It is interesting to note that ancient poets – tragic and epic – who used to tell the myths, were also considered as some kind of diviner. No one could deny that, in the text of *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus and particularly in the epic narratives, the Trojan War is told as a myth in poetic and prophetic ways. We are very far from the contemporary concept of memory: today, memory and particularly the memory of war is about history. So, the reception of the Trojan War in modern-day performances of *The Oresteia* necessarily deals with the traditional opposition between myth and history.

This opposition becomes very obvious on stage because it is not only a matter of telling the Trojan War, but of showing it as well. As a matter of fact, theatre cannot avoid concrete and visual elements evoking the war: the directors have to think about the costumes of the messenger and Agamemnon arriving from the battlefield, the chariot of the Greek chief along with other elements such as weapons and soldiers. These elements appear generally on stage in a system of references that creates an analogy between the Trojan War and another war – be that war real or fictive. Nowadays, could we avoid historical references when we are staging war memories? What becomes myth for a contemporary audience when there are props and costumes evoking certain historical events? What kind of analogy is able to give the idea of a mythical war to a contemporary audience?

Here I propose a comparison of several famous contemporary performances of *Agamemnon* in Western Europe from the 1980s until the end of the first decade of the 21st century. I focus on the narratives about the Trojan War and also on the concrete and visual elements evoking the war in the whole performance. How do the different processes of analogy used on stage work? What idea of the war are directors able to give to the audience? How do they concretely create an idea of war? Firstly, we will focus on the performances in which the Trojan War is shown as a specific historical event. Then we will study the productions that create an ahistorical context conducive to telling a myth. Finally, we will try to develop a third way, where the process of analogy escapes the traditional opposition between myth and history to describe the war as a present possibility.

¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs : études de psychologie historique* [Librairie François Maspero, 1965], Paris, La Découverte/Poche, 1996, p. 109 et 112.

HISTORICAL ANALOGY – TO TELL THE TROJAN WAR AS A HISTORICAL EVENT

This first section deals with a performance in which the visual elements create a historical analogy. The Trojan War is shown as a specific historical event: the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001). How does this kind of analogy work? What do the narratives telling the myth become?

Katie Mitchell, *The Oresteia*, Royal National Theatre, London, First part: 24/09/1999; Second part: 18/11/1999

Staged by Katie Mitchell, the *Oresteia* is not ritualistic nor grandiose. The use of digital technologies (live video and projections of archival images) creates a link with modern history and present times. In this sober bi-frontal performance, the spectators are strongly intellectually involved: the characters, staring at the public at the beginning and at the end of the performance, seem to ask them answers about the contemporary world.

Here, the chorus of *Agamemnon* consists of old men in wheelchairs. They are often described, because of their costumes, as veterans of the Second World War². As a consequence, Agamemnon (Michael Gould), who belongs to the next generation, looks like a European general from the end of the 20th century³. Moreover, his return is celebrated with Balkan songs setting the action in the context of the Yugoslav Wars. Of course, there is no historical authenticity and the visual elements – the costumes and props⁴ – are just reminding the audience of those wars. The system of references plays with the audience's idea of these wars and creates a clear analogy between the Trojan War and the Yugoslav Wars. As a matter of fact, the Kosovo War had just ended in 1999 when Katie Mitchell staged the *Oresteia*, and as such the audience had many historical facts and images in their mind.

The process of analogy relies here on a logical and chronological conception of history: history seems to be a series of causes and consequences, hence why the Yugoslav Wars appear in this play as an indirect and delayed consequence of the Second World War. Even if the Trojan War is staged in analogy with a contemporary war, we can still name it a historical analogy because it treats immediate history⁵. The analogy leads us to consider history as an active process in the present time and presupposes the timelessness of Greek tragedy. The myth becomes a pretext or even rather a preferred way to speak about immediate history on stage.

The contemporary war is evoked through historical visual elements and we could ask how this would fit with the narratives of the Aeschylean text that describe the war as a myth in a very poetic way. In other words, is the myth transformed by the historical

² See a complete description in Erica Kylander-Clark, "The *Oresteia* by Aeschylus; Ted Hughes", *Theatre Journal*, vol. 52, n° 4, december 2000, p. 561-563.

³ The rehearsal notes, searchable in the RTN archive, include details about the costumes. The one of the messenger is described as "vaguely late 20th century".

⁴ Vicki Mortimer was the designer of the production.

⁵ There is a strong will to understand the present time as in the studies of "immediate history" carried out by historians. See for example: Patrick Garcia, « Essor et enjeux de l'histoire du temps présent au CNRS », *La Revue pour l'histoire du CNRS*, n° 9, november 2003, <http://histoire-cnrs.revues.org/562> [08/26/2015, 10:24:15].

analogy? Could the historical elements be seen as mythical? In Katie Mitchell's *Oresteia*, there are video projections during the four narratives⁶. The images are mainly archival, showing the wars of the 20th century, but sometimes they are live close-ups of the speaker shot by another actor. The effect of alienation is at work here: myth and history are put side by side in order to relativize each other. On the one hand, the projected images of historical wars (that is to say the images of reality) remind the audience that the myth told on stage is only a fiction. On the other hand, paradoxically, the performance offers a new view on historical events: the montage of images and the epic narratives seem to transform the historical events into a mythical fiction. Consequently, the myth becomes a way not only to perform but also to question history and contemporary wars.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Katie Mitchell uses live video because this fits very well with the process of analogy at work in her production. Indeed, using live video in theatre transforms the relationship of the audience with time. The digital turns the medium of video into something immediate. Whereas in the case of a film we can oppose the moment when it was filmed in the past and the present moment when the audience sees the images, when a live video is filmed on stage the audience simultaneously sees the filmed images projected onto the set as they are filmed. The past is included in the present time of the performance. This immediate medium is the metaphor of the use of Greek tragedy in the performance: the ancient myth is shown as a contemporary event. The historical analogy, because it refers to contemporary wars, as we have already said, suggests paradoxically the timelessness of ancient theatre and myth.

AHISTORICAL ANALOGY – TO TELL THE TROJAN WAR AS A MYTH

Our example of historical analogy makes reference to a contemporary war. There are of course other performances where the visual elements showing the Trojan War are inspired from older wars that the audience has not directly experienced even through media coverage. However, in those cases, the analogy does not set the action in a specific historical context: the historical references are not precise enough to create an analogy between the Trojan War and the precise historical event. The analogy becomes ahistorical. Is it enough to show and to tell the Trojan War as a myth? Is an ahistorical context a mythical one?

Peter Hall, The Oresteia, Royal National Theatre, London, 20/11/1981

Many analyses have been written about this ritualistic and masked performance with an all-male cast⁷. We will focus here on the visual elements used to give the audience an idea of the Trojan War. The messenger, topped with a laurel wreath, wears a brown and humble tunic dress. Agamemnon comes back from Troy sporting a big bronze helmet, armour with geometric patterns over black clothes and a long red stole. Moreover, a shining sword is attached to his waist. A few soldiers with helmets, bronze shields and

⁶ The video designer was Chris Pleydell.

⁷ See for example: R. B. Parker, "The National Theatre's *Oresteia*, 1981-82", in Martin Cropp, Elaine Fantham, S.E. Scully, *Greek Tragedy and Its Legacy: Essays presented to D.J. Conacher*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1986, p. 337-357.

spears are dragging his chariot and Cassandra's cage on stage. Everything tells us that we are in Ancient Greece. The Trojan War is shown as an ancient Greek war. However, even if Peter Hall creates an aesthetic inspired from archaeological elements, there is no precise analogy with any ancient historical war and no desire to speak about Ancient Greece's history. However, we could say that these elements evoke the idea that the audience already has of war in Ancient Greece. Indeed, this idea comes from history books but also from some knowledge of ancient myths and from peplums, novels, or paintings, amongst other sources. This idea is ahistorical and manages to fuse myth and history. For the general audience, there is no difference between Agamemnon and an Athenian warrior of the Peloponnesian war⁸. In other words, the analogy relies on an ahistorical inter-subjective idea of war in Ancient Greece. According to ethno-sociological approaches, this idea has all the qualities required to turn itself into a myth⁹ and theatre seems to manage this transformation. Therefore, there is an analogy between the myth of the Trojan War and another myth made of distorted elements taken from ancient history and myths, that is to say the modern myth of war in Ancient Greece.

This fusion of myth and history is part of a larger process here: the (re)construction of ancient Greek tragedy that is not exactly a historical and archaeological reconstruction. I borrow the term of construction from psychoanalytic vocabulary. Sigmund Freud described an inter-subjective process implying that all memories are incomplete¹⁰. The constructions are created by the analyst and validated – or not – by the patient in order to fill the blanks. However the constructions do not have to be true to the past reality but to the idea the patient has of this past reality. This is exactly what Peter Hall was doing: he wanted to reconstruct the experience of Ancient Athenian theatre. He had looked at the remains of Greek tragedy and created what is missing. That is what he did for example with the chorus: he found a way to stage a group moving in a harmonious manner and speaking collectively to a musical rhythm. In doing this, he abides by the general idea of an ancient chorus that of ritualistic masked actors in long dresses. The same process was at work with the visual elements evoking the Trojan War. Finally, the production proposes a construction of the war in Ancient Greece and to be true to the idea that its audience has already about it: as explained above, the construction needs to be part mythical and part historical. It is interesting to note that this fusion of myth and history that theatre manages to achieve is needed for this process of (re)construction.

Olivier Py, *L'Orestie*, Odéon – Théâtre de l'Europe, Paris, 15/05/2008

Olivier Py deals with the *Oresteia* as a great and spectacular opera: the acting is lyrical and the chorus sings in an operatic way with a string quartet¹¹. As Peter Hall, he creates

⁸ This is not so far from the ancient Greek conception of the relationship between epic myths and history.

⁹ The ethno-sociological approach considers the myth as some paradoxical sociological phenomenon: it is a narrative received and accepted as true by all the members of the group but completely ahistorical and mostly improbable for any foreign observer. For a precise definition, see: Pierre Smith, « La nature des mythes », in Edgar Morin et Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini, *L'unité de l'homme : invariants biologiques et universaux culturels*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1974, p. 715-729.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *L'analyse finie et l'analyse infinie*, suivi de *Constructions dans l'analyse*, translation by Janine Altounian, Pierre Cotet and Jean Laplanche, Paris, PUF, 2012, p. 51.

¹¹ Stéphane Leach wrote the music. Damien Bigourdan, Christophe Le Hazif, Mary Saint-Palais and Sandrine Sutter sang the chorus parts with the Quatuor Léonis.

an ahistorical setting. But the analogy is larger here: we are not in Ancient Greece anymore but in Western Europe. If there is a (re)construction at work here, it is not about the historical form of Greek tragedy but rather about its supposed ritualistic and transcendental strength¹². The performance does not particularly focus on the war but evokes it inevitably throughout visual elements¹³ that all remind us of a historical war in Western Europe. The costume of the messenger could be the uniform of a soldier during the First World War and Agamemnon (Philippe Girard) looks like a Nazi general from the Second World War. However, in both cases the costume does not fit exactly with any historical uniform. Moreover, a DS-Citroën car, which was the official car of the General de Gaulle when he was the President of the French Republic, replaces the chariot of Agamemnon. There is of course a play on the word “DS” (*déesse* meaning goddess in French) and also a reference to Roland Barthes¹⁴, but the interesting point here is that this car contributes to make the analogy ahistorical. The anachronistic and imprecise system of references suggests the idea of war in Western Europe to the modern audience. As in Peter Hall’s production, theatre creates a myth from an ahistorical and inter-subjective idea of war composed of historical elements. However, here the analogy does not need a fusion of myth and history, rather it results in a sublimation of history into myth. Indeed, Olivier Py also integrates ancient elements: for example, Agamemnon wears a laurel wreath instead of war medals. In other words, the idea of war in Western Europe staged by Olivier Py as a myth includes war in Ancient Greece. The process of analogy underlines that *The Oresteia* is staged in a humanistic perspective: the Trojan War is a pretext to sublimate European history into a mythical (and maybe artificial) cultural unity. Greek tragedy is idealised here, taken as the best support to celebrate a common humanistic culture – paradoxically specifically linked to Western European history.

Ariane Mnouchkine, *Les Atrides, La Cartoucherie, Paris, 1990-1992* (Agamemnon’s opening venue: 24/11/1990)¹⁵

Ariane Mnouchkine additionally generated an ahistorical context for the war when she staged *Les Atrides* (*Iphigenia at Aulis* followed by *The Oresteia*) but the action is no longer set in Europe and the analogy is even larger and less precise. In this production, Ariane Mnouchkine develops her interest for Asiatic theatrical forms without setting the action in Asia. Indeed, we are in an undefined world since the aesthetic mixes many exotic references. Whereas the dance is inspired from Indian Kathakali, the colours of the props

¹² Olivier Py says that he wants to re-create the ritualistic strength and the transcendence of ancient theatre. *Pièce (dé)montée* n° 45, SCEREN-CRDP, 2008, « Annexe 1 : Entretien avec le metteur en scène : Olivier Py », p. 28, <http://crdp.ac-paris.fr>, [19/08/2015, 17:13:15].

¹³ Pierre-André Weitz designed the costumes, the set and the make-up.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1957, p. 169-171.

¹⁵ About this performance, see: Béatrice Picon-Vallin, « Une œuvre d’art commune, rencontre avec le Théâtre du Soleil », (entretien avec Ariane Mnouchkine, Jean-Jacques Lemètre, Catherine Schaub, Guy-Claude François, Simon Abkarian), *Théâtre/Public*, n° 124-125, juillet-octobre 1995, p. 74-83; Évelyne Ertel, « *Les Atrides* au Théâtre du Soleil, chercher l’étranger le plus proche possible », *Études Théâtrales*, n° 21, (« Tragédie grecque. Défi de la scène contemporaine », dir. Georges Banu), 2001, p. 95-102; Pierre Judet de La Combe, « Ariane Mnouchkine and the French Agamemnon », Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall, Oliver Taplin, *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 273-289.

and costumes¹⁶ are partly taken from Minoan paintings and the make-up¹⁷ and dresses remind those of Noh and Kathakali actors. The historical references are so distorted and disparate that they are not easily recognisable. However several elements of the performance remind Asiatic wars with no time or space unity.

Firstly, the costumes of the messenger and Agamemnon recall Japanese Samurais. Furthermore, we can analyse the chorus of *Agamemnon* as a group of former warriors. Before entering the space where the performance takes place, the spectator has to go through some excavations where the statues are nor Greek nor Chinese but remind necessarily the terracotta warriors discovered in the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang.¹⁸ The sculptures designed by Erhard Stiefel are just like the members of the chorus in *Agamemnon*. With their big and heavy red skirts, they are not dressed to go to war; yet, we could say that they act as former warriors. Their dance¹⁹ looks like a very well organised military parade and they welcome Agamemnon (Simon Abkarian) with a cry that sounds as a war cry. Then, the coryphaeus (Catherine Schaub) guides the dance with very little cries: this technique is taken from Kathakali, an art partly inspired from martial arts. The behaviour of the chorus fits well with the occidental fantasised idea of ancient Asian people seen as a warrior people. The process of analogy seems to play here on our occidental clichés about war in Asia. In this case, the analogy would rely once again on an inter-subjective and ahistorical idea of war that theatre turns into myth.

The process of analogy here underlines that Greek tragedy is shown to the contemporary audience as an exotic and foreign thing. Ariane Mnouchkine wanted the audience to experience the mystery of Greek tragedy and this is probably demonstrated by the use of Asiatic theatre's codes. As a result, even if the performance cannot avoid making any references, it gets rid of history²⁰. The general Western audience does not know much about the history of Asia; that is why the performance could play on the idea of war in a fantasised Ancient Asia. Moreover all the direct references to Ancient Greek history are thus avoided. There is finally an assimilation of history by the myth created in the theatre.

In these three examples, the process of analogy permits the telling and the portrayal of the Trojan War as a myth on stage. The analogy is ahistorical because it never refers to a specific historical event. However, it is strongly cultural since it relies on the idea that the audience has of the war in a specific cultural area (Ancient Greece, Western Europe, Asia). It is interesting to note that these three performances all use a very stylised aesthetic with a strong codification of acting: Peter Hall chose the masks, Olivier Py opted for the declamation and Ariane Mnouchkine picked the dance. These aesthetic choices fit very well with the epic narratives of the play that describe the Trojan War in a poetic way. In

¹⁶ Nathalie Thomas and Marie-Hélène Bouvet designed the costumes using the ideas of the actors.

¹⁷ The make-up designer was Catherine Schaub.

¹⁸ About the reference to Orient in general and to the terracotta warriors in particular, see: Françoise Quillet, *L'Orient au Théâtre du Soleil*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999, p. 97.

¹⁹ The chorus didn't sing but it danced on music by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre. A coryphaeus said the all *stasima*.

²⁰ This is not far from the Nietzschean criticism of our modern relationship to history here. See the second *Untimely Meditation*: Friedrich Nietzsche, « De l'utilité et des inconvénients de l'histoire pour la vie » [1874], *Considérations inactuelles I et II*, edition by G. Colli and M. Montinari, translation by Pierre Rusch, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 91-169.

other words, the aesthetic choices are strongly linked with the processes of analogy and the relationships between myth and history chosen by each stage director.

NO ANALOGY – TO TELL THE TROJAN WAR AS A PRESENT POSSIBILITY

The ahistorical analogy can be even larger if the director tries to suggest the idea of war in general. In this case, we could say that there is no analogy anymore and the relationship of myth and history is totally shaken. What do the epic narratives telling the Trojan War as a myth become? Are the visual elements showing the war on stage avoiding historical references?

*Peter Stein, Antikenprojekt II: Die Orestie des Aischylos, Schaubühne, Berlin, 18/10/1980*²¹

In this performance the set²² (a long and narrow stage surmounted by a big dark wall) evokes the space of Greek theatre. The chorus stays at the same level as the spectators, sometimes in the middle of them, sometimes around a big wooden table. As in Ancient Greece, the chorus establishes a link with the public and remains all the time at the centre of the performance. Despite these choices, the costumes²³ are mainly contemporary: the member of the chorus, for example, wear black suits, black hats and carry a stick. However, the Trojan War is evoked nor as an ancient war nor as a specific war of the twentieth century.

Indeed, the chariot and the costume of Agamemnon are clearly not those of contemporary soldiers. Agamemnon wears a white shirt and black trousers but carries a big sword in his back. Peter Stein's production portrays a general idea of war: it is not set to any specific context. Yet, the general idea of war shown on stage cannot be totally out of touch with the context of reception and that is why we can spot references to ancient and modern worlds²⁴. However we could say that this performance does not rely on any preconceived idea of war: owing to the common experience of the performance, the audience progressively and simultaneously constructs an inter-subjective ahistorical idea of the war and its corresponding myth in its ethno-sociological sense.

On the other hand, Peter Stein has found a way to transform the epic narratives. The repartition of the lines between the members of the chorus, the translation and the acting create an aesthetic that gives the impression of a quotidian dialogue. This performance tells the myth as a theatrical reality as if the audience should consider all the issues of the myth as present possibilities. Consequently, Peter Stein reveals the spectator anguish of a war in the “here and now”. It is well known that the German director knew Jean-Pierre

²¹ About this production, see: Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Thinking about the Origins of Theatre in the 1970s”, in Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall, Oliver Taplin, *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 344-350.

²² Karl-Ernst Herrmann designed the set.

²³ Moidele Bickel designed the costumes.

²⁴ Anton Bierl for example underlines the neutrality and the timelessness of the performance but adds that the references remain mainly modern. Anton Bierl, “The Chorus of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in Modern Stage Productions: Towards the ‘Performative Turn’”, in Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall, Oliver Taplin, *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 291.

Vernant's work²⁵ and it is not surprising that he proposes a structuralist reception of the Greek tragedy at the crossroads of myth and history. In this production, the approach of the Trojan War is both anthropological and psychoanalytical.

Katie Mitchell, *Women of Troy*, Royal National Theatre, London, 21/11/2007

The last example is not a performance of *Agamemnon* but of *Women of Troy* by Euripides. It is significant because it proposes another way to show war as a present possibility.

Women of Troy is the third Greek tragedy staged by Katie Mitchell at the Royal National Theatre dealing with the Trojan War (after *The Oresteia* in 1999 and *Iphigenia at Aulis* in 2004). In this play, the war is not a memory as it is in *The Oresteia*: Troy has only just fallen. We are on the threshold of the conflict allowing for a greater opportunity to present war as a psychological crisis. However this example is interesting in comparison because Katie Mitchell has also found a way to avoid any analogy. She no longer needs historical references since the scene is set in 2050 in an empty warehouse belonging to the dock of a ruined city²⁶. We could potentially speak of a futuristic analogy. However, this future is too close to play with a fantasised idea of war in future and Katie Mitchell is not interested in science fiction²⁷: the electronic gates and the sad concrete walls remind the industrial buildings we can see today; the costumes are banally modern (elegant evening dresses for the chorus and black coats for the Greeks)²⁸; and the dances of the chorus seem to be couple-dances of the 1940's in slow motion²⁹. It is impossible to date those elements³⁰. There is no analogy here: this is possibly our world in a few years' time. Moreover, there is no alienation effect as in *The Oresteia* and the acting is more psychological. Even the aesthetic dances of the chorus in slow motion during the *stasima* could be interpreted as a metaphor of the internal state of the characters³¹. It is possible to argue that this performance shows a psychoanalytical idea of war. So, as in Peter Stein's production, the war is told as an immediate possibility and reveals the spectator's fear of it.

When Menelas comes in to speak to the Trojan women, before anything else, he takes his phone and only says "here, now". This moment, which is of course not in Euripides' text, seems to seal the fate of the women and encapsulates the threatening "here and

²⁵ The dramaturgic material, kept in the archive of the Schaubühne at the ADK in Berlin, quote Jean-Pierre Vernant's book several times. Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne I*, Paris, Editions François Maspero, « Textes à l'appui », 1972.

²⁶ The set designer was Bunny Christie.

²⁷ The rehearsal notes, searchable in the RTN archive in London, include details about the original chronology of the events from the birth of Priam in 1994 and the end of the Trojan War in 2050.

²⁸ The costume designer was Vicki Mortimer.

²⁹ Leslie Struan directed the movements and choreography.

³⁰ Several critics confirm that. "It's as if the women of Weimar had been relocated in an Iraqi house of horrors." Benedict Naghtingale, "Too heavy on the aesthetics, too light on howls of anguish", *The Times*, 30th of november 2007. See also: John Peter, "The Women of Troy", *The Sunday Times*, 9th of december 2007.

³¹ In the rehearsal notes kept in the archive of the RNT, we can read that the moments in slow motion should mime "the decline of moral order" in order to find the truth of the internal experience.

now” of the war performed in this production. Greek tragedy is neither historical, nor timeless: its issues become immediate, “here and now”.

In Peter Stein’s *Oresteia* as in Katie Mitchell’s *Women of Troy*, the performance tells and shows the threat of war in general. It is possible to say that because Katie Mitchell sets the action in the close future, she manages to renew the performance of the anthropological and psychoanalytical fear of the war. Yet she has also renewed the performance of ancient myth: the myth is not a pretext anymore to speak by analogy about history or about a contemporary idea of something. The myth is immediate, included in the present time of the performance because, paradoxically, the action is set in the close future.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to contrast once again and more conceptually the analogical approaches and the non-analogical approaches I have described³² trying to widen our analysis to famous scientific approaches of Ancient Greece. The different processes of analogy reveal a desire to interpret and understand not only the Trojan War but also Greek tragedy. This could be named a hermeneutical approach. This calls Jean Bollack’s conception of philology as a critical hermeneutic. In contrast to this, the non-analogical approach could be named a heuristic approach since it relies on the progressive invention of an idea of war. This is more fitting to Jean-Pierre Vernant anthropological approach of Greek tragedy in particular, and of history in general.

The opposition between myth and history is valuable to understand the reception of the Trojan War in contemporary performances. As we can see, it is very difficult to avoid any historical references when theatre speaks about war. Indeed, even *Les Atrides* by Ariane Mnouchkine, *Die Orestie* by Peter Stein and Katie Mitchell’s *Women of Troy* cannot totally avoid them. Conversely, and despite the historical references, the myth of Trojan War is an excellent way to tell or create a contemporary myth. In all the processes of analogy that have been described the historical elements seem to inspire and call for a contemporary myth. With the historical analogy, theatre turns an event of contemporary history into a myth giving the audience a critical perspective on it. With the ahistorical analogy, a general idea or a *cliché* is transformed into myth by the performance in the hope of finding the right way to stage Greek tragedy today. When there is no analogy at all, the performance does not create another myth but performing the ancient one renews it and makes it exist in the actuality of the performance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARTHES Roland, *Mythologies*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957.
 BIERL Anton, “The Chorus of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in Modern Stage Productions: Towards the ‘Performative Turn’”, in Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin, *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

³² I am grateful here to Christian Biet for his constructive response to this paper at the 2015 APGRD/HAR conference.

- ERTEL Évelyne, « *Les Atrides au Théâtre du Soleil, chercher l'étranger le plus proche possible* », in *Études Théâtrales*, n° 21, (Tragédie grecque. Défi de la scène contemporaine), Georges Banu (dir.), 2001.
- FISCHER-LICHTE Erika, "Thinking about the Origins of Theatre in the 1970s", in Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin, *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- FREUD Sigmund, *L'analyse finie et l'analyse infinie*, suivi de *Constructions dans l'analyse*, translation by Janine Altounian, Pierre Cotet and Jean Laplanche, Paris, PUF, 2012.
- GARCIA Patrick, « Essor et enjeux de l'histoire du temps présent au CNRS », *La Revue pour l'histoire du CNRS*, n° 9, november 2003, <http://histoire-cnrs.revues.org/562> [08/26/2015, 10:24:15].
- JUDET DE LA COMBE Pierre, "Ariane Mnouchkine and the French *Agamemnon*", in Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin, *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- KYLANDER-CLARK Erica, "The *Oresteia* by Aeschylus; Ted Hughes", *Theatre Journal*, vol. 52, n° 4, december 2000, p. 561-563.
- NAGHTINGALE Benedict, "Too heavy on the aesthetics, too light on howls of anguish", *The Times*, 30th of november 2007.
- NIETZSCHE Friedrich, *Considérations inactuelles I et II*, edition by G. Colli and M. Montinari, translation by Pierre Rusch, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.
- PARKER R. B., "The National Theatre's *Oresteia*, 1981-82", in Martin Cropp, Elaine Fantham and S. E. Scully, *Greek Tragedy and Its Legacy: Essays presented to D.J. Conacher*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1986, p. 337-357.
- PETER John, "The Women of Troy", *The Sunday Times*, 9th of december 2007.
- PICON-VALLIN Béatrice, « Une œuvre d'art commune, rencontre avec le Théâtre du Soleil », (entretien avec Ariane Mnouchkine, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, Catherine Schaub, Guy-Claude François, Simon Abkarian), *Théâtre/Public*, n°124-125, juillet-octobre 1995.
- Pièce (dé)montée* n°45, SCEREN-CRDP, 2008: <http://crdp.ac-paris.fr>, [19/08/2015, 17:13:15].
- QUILLET Françoise, *L'Orient au Théâtre du Soleil*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999.
- SMITH Pierre, « La nature des mythes », in Edgar Morin and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini, *L'unité de l'homme : invariants biologiques et universaux culturels*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1974, p. 715-729.
- VERNANT Jean-Pierre and VIDAL-NAQUET Pierre, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne I*, Paris, Éditions François Maspero, « Textes à l'appui », 1972.
- VERNANT Jean-Pierre, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs : études de psychologie historique* [Librairie François Maspero, 1965], Paris, La Découverte/Poche, 1996.

Pour citer cet article : Estelle Baudou, « To Tell the Trojan War Today: Contemporary Performances of Agamemnon », *Violence tragique et guerres antiques au miroir du théâtre et du cinéma (XVII^e-XXI^e siècles)*, Tiphaine Karsenti et Lucie Thévenet (dir.), *Atlantide*, n° 6, 2017, p. 61-71, <http://atlantide.univ-nantes.fr>

ISSN 2276-3457





Atlantide est une revue numérique en accès libre, destinée à accueillir des travaux académiques de haut niveau dans le domaine des études littéraires, sans restriction de période ni d'aire culturelle. *Atlantide* reflète la diversité des travaux du laboratoire L'AMo (« L'Antique, le Moderne », Équipe d'Accueil EA-4276 de l'Université de Nantes) et de ses partenaires, qui œuvrent à la compréhension de notre histoire littéraire et culturelle.

Sous le double patronage de Platon et Jules Verne – l'aventure de la modernité cherchant son origine dans le mythe immémorial – elle a pour ambition de redécouvrir et d'explorer les continents perdus des Lettres, au-delà du *présentisme* contemporain (François Hartog).

Les articles sont regroupés dans des numéros thématiques. Toutefois, certains articles, hors numéros thématiques, pourront être publiés dans une rubrique de « Varia ».

Les travaux adressés pour publication à la revue sont soumis de manière systématique, sous la forme d'un double anonymat (principe du *double blind peer review*) à évaluation par deux spécialistes, dont l'un au moins extérieur au comité scientifique ou éditorial.

La revue *Atlantide* est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution. Utilisation Commerciale Interdite.

Comité de direction

Eugenio Amato (PR, Université de Nantes et IUF)

Nicolas Correard (MCF, Université de Nantes)

Chantal Pierre (MCF, Université de Nantes)

ISSN 2276-3457

<http://atlantide.univ-nantes.fr>

