

# Ancient Worlds in Film and Television

# Metaforms

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# Ancient Worlds in Film and Television

Gender and Politics

*Edited by*

Almut-Barbara Renger and Jon Solomon



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BETWEEN MYTHICAL AND RATIONAL WORLDS:  
*MEDEA* BY PIER PAOLO PASOLINI<sup>1</sup>

Lada Stevanović

The subject of this chapter is Pier Paolo Pasolini's film adaptation of one of the most shocking and intriguing plays from Greek antiquity, Euripides' *Medea*. This is a text that continues to inspire generations of artists – mostly playwrights, but also writers and film directors – who approach it in many different ways, dealing with the issues of an oppressed foreign woman, who, in the Euripidean account, brutally killed her children.<sup>2</sup> Copious research in the reception of ancient tragedies has shown that adaptations of dramas, interpretations, and translations have always depended on particular contexts in which recognized social and political needs of the moment were addressed according to cultural variations, sensitivity of the artist, personal style, creativeness, and affinities. Before I turn my attention to Pasolini's *Medea*, however, I will offer my interpretation of the essence of the Euripidean play that Pasolini adopted in its original context – ancient Athens, where it was written and produced late in the fifth century BC. After doing so, I will offer my interpretation of Pasolini's film, especially as regards his attitude toward and relation to Euripides' text, and regarding certain specificities that he developed as a consequence of a new context – the 1960s – in a dimension we might say intersected with Pasolini's reading of Euripides' drama and this ancient tragedy.

I turn first to Euripides' drama in the ancient context in which it appeared and discuss briefly the meaning of theater in Athenian public life. Ancient tragedy explored mechanisms that lead to the destruction of the individual, dealing with all the contradictory powers that can influence any culture and any individual in the conflicted society.<sup>3</sup> As one of the institutions of Athenian democracy, the theater was also a venue in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was commenced during the postdoctoral research project "Ancient Drama in Contemporary Theater, Cinema and Literature" at the Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Edinburgh and finished in Belgrade in the project "Cultural Heritage and Identity" No. 177026, financed by the Serbian Ministry of Science.

<sup>2</sup> This drama has a rich history of adaptations that has been (as much as it is possible) reviewed, analyzed, and presented in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Oliver Taplin, eds., *Medea in Performance 1500–2000* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mit i tragedija u antičkoj Grčkoj* (Beograd: n.p., 1995) 103–104.



which audiences were forced to confront many questions, especially those that were too complicated or sensitive to be raised in the assembly and discussed in the general public.<sup>4</sup> This institutionalized “control” aspect of the assembly opened a space for subversiveness, which Froma Zeitlin identifies as female because it confronted the community with the domain that was considered to be feminine, and in a way that was feminine. That is, although the theater was a homosocial institution, it functioned in the feminine way through the transgressions and the display of the (male) actor’s body, through the confrontation with pain and loss, and through the multiplication of identities. In that way theater was the arena for challenging the dominant ideas and concepts of identity.<sup>5</sup> The subversiveness of the Athenian theater in general and of Euripides’ *Medea* in particular is precisely one of the most important links and issues that I would like to address in discussing Pasolini’s film.

That the main character of Euripides’ play and of Pasolini’s film is a mother who kills her children leaves no doubt that this drama is dealing with the issue of power and the problem of the Other. This is demonstrated through Medea’s status as a woman and a foreigner, which has been the aspect of this drama most frequently identified and exploited in adaptations.<sup>6</sup> A very important aspect of the representation of Medea’s womanhood is that she, though a barbarian, is at the same time represented as a Greek mother and wife.<sup>7</sup> The radical act of Medea’s infanticide may be understood as the only way in which she could overcome the

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<sup>4</sup> Nicole Loraux, *The Mourning Voice, An Essay on Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) 15: “But theater, tragic theater at least, was also – and perhaps best – equipped to deal with issues that the citizens of Athens preferred to reject or ignore.”

<sup>5</sup> Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 362–364.

<sup>6</sup> Edith Hall stresses the point that one of the important issues that Greek tragedy (in particular *Medea* and *Heracles*) problematizes, and that is so little recognized in today’s world, is the problem of children’s rights. Until today, only one of the adaptations has addressed this, Peter Sellars’s *The Children of Heracles*. In order to emphasize the political dimension of the play, the director invited “real-life” children, Kurdish asylum-seekers, to sit on the stage silently throughout the play; in Ondine Corinne Pache, ed., *Baby and Child Heroes in Ancient Greece* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 9. Another un-researched domain that the Medea myth opens is the problem recognized by Pache, who argues that this myth (regardless of version) embodies a mythical representation of parents’ darkest fear – direct and indirect responsibility for their children’s life and, even more important, death. This conclusion is the result of the systematic and profound research on myths (and the Medea myth is one of these) and cult practice in honor of dead children.

<sup>7</sup> According to William Allan, *Euripides: Medea* (London: Duckworth, 2002) 67, this very contradictory representation (of barbarian and of Greek as barbarian) is one of Euripides’ ways to confront his audience with prevailing stereotypes about barbarians and to call them into question.

situation in which she found herself. With the act of killing her own children, Medea – as a woman and as a wife – confronted the power of her husband and – as a foreigner – the power of the king. Medea's attack on her children and Jason's future bride Glauce, King Creon's daughter, was an act in which she utilized the only advantage that a woman had over men – the ability to give birth.<sup>8</sup> However, the main contradiction around which the plot of the tragedy is actually woven is that Medea's only advantage is simultaneously her greatest disadvantage. I am thinking here about the reduction of Medea to a mother function, one who has already fulfilled her destined role and become useless and despised. It is this which impels her to reject the prescribed role and to reestablish herself in relation to Jason and the dominant society in the only way that was available to her. The shocking and horrible act of infanticide was so painful and harmful for Medea that nobody expected that she would ever do it. However, she reacted in the *only* way in which she could reestablish herself socially – in the only way in which she could become a real oppositional force, noticed and heard, which was otherwise impossible.<sup>9</sup>

In my view, therefore, Euripides' choice to radicalize the myth (since in most of the earlier versions, it is not Medea but the Corinthians who kill Medea's children in order to punish her) and make it even more shocking was aimed at disturbing the Athenian audience and confronting them with these problems – the issue of power and the problem of the Other. Although there are scholars who argue that Euripides' *Medea* is driven only by passionate and irrational motivations, we should not forget that in line 1079 Medea emphasizes that her ultimate devotion to her principles does not mean that she is irrational.<sup>10</sup>

And I know well what pain I am about to undergo,  
but my wrath (*thumos*) overbears my calculation (*boulematôn*).

<sup>8</sup> Even Jason in Euripides' play (573–575) complains about men's dependence on women regarding childbirth. "Mortals ought, you know, to beget children from some other source, and there should be no female sex."

<sup>9</sup> In the text of Ruth Hazel's "Electra: A Fragmented Woman," in L. Hardwick, ed., *Theatre Ancient and Modern* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 2000) 82–90, Hazel points to the deconstruction of numerous female characters in Greek dramas (Electra, Hecuba, Medea, Antigone, Jocasta), who, "stripped of the social roles which had previously defined them (queen, wife, mother, daughter), are de-constructed as social entities and reduced to their essentials: their psychological make-up and their physical attributes of age and gender."

<sup>10</sup> και μανθάνω μὲν οἶα τολμήσω κακά, θυμὸς δὲ κρείστων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων.

Or, to put it in words of Rush Rehm:<sup>11</sup>

When Medea is saying that her *thumos* is stronger than her *boulematôn*, she does not mean that her passion is stronger than her reason, but that her commitment to her principles [namely to take vengeance on enemies and avoid their mockery] is stronger than any competing claims.<sup>12</sup>

According to Froma Zeitlin, Medea actually adopts the male, heroic mode of behavior, claiming that she would rather fight in a battle than give birth again, and identifies therefore with men as her model and anti-model destroyer. Medea is courageous, energetic, and loyal, and as any other hero, she chooses to act, and to kill, unlike the many other women in tragedies who decide to commit suicide, traditionally a woman's way of confronting problems. In the view of Nicole Loraux, it is often that women die in tragedy by their own hand because, doomed to fateful circumstances with no choice or option to behave actively and independently, their only opportunity for confrontation and rebellion takes place in their nuptial bed, identified by Loraux as a woman's battlefield.<sup>13</sup> Although Medea longs for her own death: (227)

I am undone, I have resigned all joy in life, and I want to die –

she decides to perform a more radical act. She is one of the rare women who accepts this heroic model, who dares to be angry at her oppressors and seek vengeance.

Pasolini problematized as well the issue of the social unacceptability of women's aggression and active confrontation with those who have power

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<sup>11</sup> Rush Rehm, *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 147. This verse is part of one of the most frequently discussed and variously understood verses in Medea's monologue (1056–80). It is not rare for scholars investigating the play to focus on this monologue and particularly verses 1078–1080, interpreting them as revealing Medea's inner conflict between reason and passion. Helene P. Foley, "Tragic Wives: Medea's Divided Self," in *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 244–248, warns about the danger of taking an anachronistic approach to this issue and imposing modern ideas on this passage, emphasizing that it was precisely a simplified reading of Medea's conflict as a struggle between reason and passion that would lead to understanding the drama as merely a story about passion and jealousy.

<sup>12</sup> This nuance points to Euripides' awareness of women's position and related stereotypes, especially when we keep in mind that the dominant discourse in antiquity aligned men with reason and women with emotion. For the ancient trope that the open display of emotions was considered as "effeminate," see, for example, Plato, *Laws*, 732c, *Republic* 387b–d; and 606c. For Euripides' awareness of women's subordinate position, see Allan, *Euripides: Medea*, 230–252.

<sup>13</sup> Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

in the double enactment of Glauce's death. In the first enactment, which Medea imagines, Glauce dies shortly after she puts on her new dress – a wedding present from Medea – and it bursts into flames. In the second, which is the “real” enactment, Glauce receives the present and then leaps from the castle walls. So now she commits suicide, as if wearing this dress were for Glauce the same as being “in Medea's shoes.” The argument in favor of such an interpretation is that even Creon, when talking to Medea about her exile, says that his main reason for forcing her into exile is that he is worried for his daughter, who sympathises with Medea. Creon may claim that these worries are his only motivation for Medea's exile, but he ultimately confirms that his reasons for banishing Medea lie in his disdain of her barbaric origins. At the end of the Euripidean exchange between Medea and Creon (270–356), Pasolini (who wrote and directed the film) appends the following lines:

In truth, I am not banishing you because of hate . . . , or suspicion, because you are different, a barbarian, who came here with the markings of another race upon you . . . , but rather out of love for my daughter, who feels remorse for you. She knows what you are suffering, and she suffers too.

Although he claims the contrary, Creon's statement actually confirms his racist position. He makes the type of discriminatory statement which usually begins with a denial of being a chauvinist, nationalist, or racist, after which follows the discriminative argumentation for rejecting the Other, which, according to the speaker, derives from the real facts. Although he uses only one such statement, Pasolini raises a question that would be of great importance in any chauvinist discourse.

Another significant aspect of the film is the mythical one. But before examining Pasolini's approach to myth, I will turn once more to Euripides' drama. It is precisely because the issue of myth is so important and operative in Pasolini's version that I need to address briefly Euripides' plot and the plots of ancient tragedies in general. These plots were usually mythical stories or events from the distant past. In the words of Nicole Loraux:<sup>14</sup>

Tragedy represents the grief of the Other, not the Self. The Other must be distanced from the Self, whether in time (hence the appropriateness of myth in general) or in space (hence of the appropriateness of Persia in Aeschylus's *Persians*).

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<sup>14</sup> Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) xi.

One of the most important reasons for this can be traced to the Athenian city-state's ban on adapting recent events for tragic plots. The Athenians introduced a law aimed at controlling the plots of tragedies and their emotional impact after the 493 BC performance of Phrynichus's drama *The Capture of Miletus*. The plot of this play was related to the tragic Persian siege of Miletus. The Athenians felt such sympathy for the Ionians who experienced this horrible event and suffered such turmoil themselves that they enacted this ban.<sup>15</sup> Although it did not seem so at first, the ban on this particular play influenced the whole tragic genre.<sup>16</sup> From that time on, plots could be based only on the mythical stories or something that happened long before.

In addition, Athenian playwrights employed and created many different variants of Greek myths in their dramas, which was an important factor in making them so suitable for problematizing different issues. By reusing old myths with which the audience was familiar but then adapting them to address a variety of issues, they did not have to focus on the original story so much as the way in which they wanted to retell and reshape it.

Pasolini had innovative reasons for devising a mythical theme for his *Medea*. This film belongs to a period in the 1960s during which Pasolini wrote and directed a group of films with mythic themes closely related to not the ancient canon but his extreme leftist ideas – the rejection of modern Western society and the critique of power in the Foucauldian sense.<sup>17</sup> The mythical world that Pasolini devised for *Medea*, her relationship with gods and nature, is a world that he sets in opposition to the modern rational world of linear historical progress. We can interpret this through Julia Kristeva's notion of masculine and feminine time. That is, the masculine time is linear and oriented towards progress – Jason belongs to this time – while the woman's time is cyclical and repetitive but also monumental, and does not fit into the aforementioned historical time-

<sup>15</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, 6.21.

<sup>16</sup> Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, 85–86.

<sup>17</sup> In his November 1, 1975 interview with Furio Colombo, his last [*We are all in danger, online at <http://www.leftcurve.org/LC30WebPages/Pasolini's%20Last%20Interview.html>], Pasolini said: "Power is an educational system that divides us into subjects and subjected. Nevertheless, it is an educational system that forms us all, from the so-called ruling class all the way down to the poorest of us. That's why everyone wants the same things and everyone acts in the same way. If I have access to an administrative council or a Stock Market manoeuvre, that's what I use. Otherwise I use a crowbar. And when I use a crowbar, I'll use whatever means to get what I want. Why do I want it? Because I've been told that it is a virtue to have it. I am merely exercising my virtue-rights. I am a murderer but I am a good person."*

frame.<sup>18</sup> According to Kristeva, the beginning of the feminist movement can be characterized by the fight of suffragettes and existential feminists for gaining the right to vote, which aimed at bringing women into and including them within the projects of history, and, as Kristeva defines it, into the linear time progression. On the other hand, Kristeva claims that during the second phase, after 1968, feminists rejected linear time and turned to the searching of those aspects of women's identity (intrasubjective and corporeal experiences) that cannot be reduced to and identified with those of men. This identity is multiplied and so impossible to define, and it is related with the archaic and mythical memory. The third phase is a combination of these two as an effort to insert women into history while rejecting the limitations of the historical time and its subjectivity. This phase shortly precedes the time when Kristeva wrote this article in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Pasolini's film reflects the feminist attitude of the time when he filmed *Medea* in 1969, criticizing and rejecting linear historical time and progress, and showing in his film that the acceptance of this dominant historical model and an effort of the Other to be included in it, may have disastrous consequences.<sup>20</sup> In one interview Pasolini himself confirmed this with the following words:<sup>21</sup>

I don't believe in this history and this progress... what is required is total criticism, desperate and useless denunciation.

In this sense Pasolini creates in *Medea* a product of the clash between non-historical/non-progressive and historical time. He recognizes the repression and unrecognized status of the domain/time to which *Medea* originally belongs, especially when it is merged into and swallowed by the dominant masculine one. However, *Medea's* rebellious reaction also belongs, as I have already stated, to the domain of rational entrance into historical linearity, because it was her only option to be noticed and respected. It is therefore possible to claim that Pasolini's political orientation, standing up for the non-European, postcolonial Other and all those

<sup>18</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 191–193.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, "Women's Time," 193–195.

<sup>20</sup> As I have already said, *Medea* actually adopts the male, heroic way of behavior. *Medea* was initially released in Italy in December, 1969.

<sup>21</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1976 *Lettere Luterane*, Torino, Einaudi Editore, 115 from Ana Grgić, *Salo o le 120 giornate di sodomia*, 10, accessed November 29, 2011, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/14430537/Pier-Paolo-Pasolini-Salo-or-120-Days-of-Sodom>.

people who are socially endangered in the twentieth century,<sup>22</sup> served as his reason for choosing a myth about the infanticidal mother Medea, revealing that repression and lack of space in which the Other can react or speak may lead to a very radical reaction and catastrophic events after which “nothing is possible anymore,” as Medea says at the end of the film.<sup>23</sup> Such powerful artistry and expression in *Medea* Ian Christie describes as an “act of artistic terrorism.”<sup>24</sup>

Although Pasolini did not alter the main line of the plot, he did not adhere firmly to Euripides’ text. Pasolini himself is on record stating that themes that appear in his *Medea* are the same that can be found in his other films, while Euripides’ play was only a source of some quotations.<sup>25</sup> From the very beginning of the film, the first half of his narrative does not belong at all to Euripides drama. He uses this footage to capture images of Colchis, the arrival of the Argonauts, the taking of the fleece, the encounter with Pelias and his daughters, and so on. However, in my view, despite these numerous variances and still subsequent inconsistencies in regard to Euripides’ text (as we saw with the appendix to Creon’s speech discussed above), Euripides’ drama is not reduced in scope. Pasolini used such other film tools as picture, tone, costume, text, silence, frame, and montage to express everything that exists in Euripides’ *Medea*, and, most importantly, to focus on the issues of power, political subversiveness, and the reaction of the oppressed. For example, his eclectic use of costumes, music, and ambience corresponds to the dominant problem of the film – exclusion of the Other, and Pasolini playfully includes and mixes elements of different cultures, challenging the dominant ideas that devalue eclecticism and thereby questioning the concepts of nation and national cultures that are

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<sup>22</sup> Pasolini especially refers to contact of Africa with Western civilization and to the poor working class of Italy. See more in Kenneth MacKinnon, *Greek Tragedy into Film* (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986) 148. He also says “There is a key idea held in common by everyone, sincerely or not: the idea that the worst evil in the world is poverty and that therefore the culture of the poorest classes must be replaced with the culture of the dominant class. In other words, our guilt as fathers is constituted by this fact: *believing that history is nothing other and can be nothing other than bourgeois history.*” Cf. Sam Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) 168.

<sup>23</sup> An irrefutable fact of which Pasolini must have been aware is that the time of rationality and progress opened a space for women and other oppressed groups to start conquering space to speak and react.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Christie, “Between Magic and Realism: Medea on Film,” in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Oliver Taplin, eds., *Medea in Performance 1500–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 154–155. Two other examples are the films *Pigsty* and *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Dufлот, *Entretiens avec Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1970) 111.



always dependent upon the process of homogenization that stigmatizes the Other.<sup>26</sup>

*Medea* begins with the scene of mythical past that precedes Euripides' drama: on his fifth birthday Jason is with the (unnamed) Centaur who, according to the myth, brought him up. The naked boy, riding on the back of the equine portion of the centaur, is listening to the story of the Golden Fleece. His four-footed teacher talks to him about nature and tells him that everything that he sees is just a phantasm, that god is hidden everywhere, and that everything is sacred – but that “holiness is also a curse.” This should be understood in the light of the ancient meaning of “sacred,” that is, pertaining to any religious understanding of cosmic totality, as opposed to the rationalistic worldview. That is, if we analyse some Greek and Latin roots and terms that denote “sacred” and “holy” (Greek *παναγιω-*, *αγιω-* and Latin *sacer*), which at the same time denoted “accursed” and “execrable,” we may understand that these two concepts and two aspects of the same sacred reality are actually impossible to separate.<sup>27</sup> So, what is also necessary to understand regarding the traditional religious worldviews is that gods, belief systems, cults, and the sacred in general are rarely related to something that is exclusively “good” or exclusively “bad,” or, as the centaur says in the film:

The gods that love can also hate.

This is similar to the concept of taboo that always concerns danger (especially when not treated according to the religious rules), which at the same time contains strength, potential protection, and power.<sup>28</sup>

This episode and the centaur's explanation of the sacred might also reflect Pasolini's attitude towards religion. Although he claimed that he was an atheist, answering a question at a 1966 press conference about his atheism and dealing with religious themes, he answered:<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> MacKinnon, *Greek Tragedy into Film*, 147–148, reports that the costumes represent a mixture of Andalusian and Mexican motives, and that the music and instruments are Japanese, Arabic, Bulgarian, and Tibetan, while the film was shot in Cappadocia, Syria (Aleppo), but also “a large fortress in Pisa.” The fortress is in Aleppo. Explaining the eclecticism of another film, *Oedipus Rex*, Pasolini himself said that his intention was to represent the myth as a dream, and that the only way was that of aestheticization. Cf. MacKinnon, 144.

<sup>27</sup> Veselin Čajkanović, *Studije iz srpske religije i folklor* (Beograd: SKZ BIGZ, 1994) 2, 250.

<sup>28</sup> Much influence on his work made ethnological research and anthropological theory especially works by Mircea Eliade, Lévi Bruhl, and James George Frazer. Cf. Dufлот, *Entretiens avec Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> <http://users.hal-pc.org/~questers/pasolini.html>.



If you know that I'm an unbeliever, than you know me better than I do myself. I may be an unbeliever, but I am an unbeliever who has a nostalgia for a belief.

In another interview he said:<sup>30</sup>

I suffer from the nostalgia of a peasant-type religion, and that is why I am on the side of the servant... But I do not believe in a metaphysical god. I am religious because I have a natural identification between reality and God. Reality is divine. That is why my films are never naturalistic. The motivation that unites all of my films is to give back to reality its original sacred significance.

Sacredness for Pasolini lies in reality, which for him is *divine*, and this should be understood as the rejection of any mystification on the account of respect towards *reality* and *life*, or towards *bare life* as it is defined by Giorgio Agamben. Pasolini rejects Christianity, he rejects the institution of the religion, and in the same way he rejects the political institutions pointing to the delicate and fragile spot in modern democracies, which claim that life has the highest value, at the same time endangering it.<sup>31</sup>

Let me turn now to the third segment of the initial centaur episode, in which the centaur now addresses the adult Jason, saying:

In the ancient world myths and rituals are living reality. Part of man's everyday life. For him reality is such a perfect entity that the emotion he experiences at the sight of a tranquil sky... equals the most profound professional experience of modern man.

After that centaur predicts the future for Jason, telling him that he will go to Colchis to take power from his uncle, and that he will find there a world different from the one he knows. In this world mythical beings are real, real beings are mythical, and life is real as well. The centaur also tells Jason that through the act of cultivating land people discovered the most important truth, and that is the "final lesson – The Resurrection." In addition, he foretells that Jason will make many mistakes and that everything that will happen to him will be related and determined by divine will. Already this introductory scene contains the core of the problem that reverberates throughout the film, and that is the conflict between two worlds: one mythical and religious, the other real, political, and rational. The paradox

<sup>30</sup> Guy Flatley, "One Man's God, Another Man's Devil," *The New York Times* (April 20, 1969) D15; cf. <http://www.moviecrazed.com/outpast/pasolini.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) 13: "Today politics knows no value (and consequently no nonvalue) other than life, and until the contradictions that this fact implies are dissolved, Nazism and fascism – which transformed the decision on bare life into the supreme political principle will remain stubbornly with us."

is, of course, that Jason belongs to both of these worlds. All the same, although Medea originates in the religious and mythical domain, with no other outlet for her to react and confront Jason, she transgresses into the world of reality, politics, and rational confrontation.

The film immediately moves to the setting in Colchis, beginning with the scene that deals with the secret of life, the one that was mentioned by the centaur: the cyclic nature of life. A fertility ritual is performed, and a young man, with a smile on his face, is sacrificed to gods. Pasolini pays a great amount of attention to the details, including the smile of the victim in the ritual sacrifice that symbolizes consent, a necessary component for the successful ritual. The sacrifice episode concludes with the sequence in which Medea, who as a priestess that turns the wheel (a symbol of life-cycle), says:

Give life to the seed and be reborn with the seed.

On her way to Greece, Medea is utterly horrified at the disrespect the Argonauts display towards the gods, and through the rest of the film (except for the love scene between Medea and Jason in Corinth), the clash between Medea's world of the sacred and religiousness and Jason's world of reality and rationality will dominate. The tension between these two worlds is visually represented in the scene with two centaurs. One of them is the one who nurtured and educated Jason, and he belongs to the world of the irrational and sacred. The other belongs to the rational world.

There is no doubt that two centaurs appear because Jason's destiny is interlaced with both worlds. But another possible interpretation of the presence of the two centaurs might posit that the first centaur personifies Greek pagan tradition and the religious principles of Greek Others (women, barbarians, children) according to which the majority of the people in ancient Greece lived, while the other represents the Platonic tradition of rationality that corresponds to the dominant and elite ideas of Greek identity. In spite of the great esteem in which rationality was held by Plato and his followers in particular, it is impossible to claim that this was the single or the prevailing principle in antiquity. However, the European elite, especially that of the nineteenth century, decided to disregard the traditional ancient Greek religious belief system and favored instead the tradition of Platonism as the only relevant system, comparing it to their own Christian values.<sup>32</sup> Pasolini's awareness of this problem

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<sup>32</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 3: "This gradual erosion of Earth in European metaphysic scope is probably due to the growth and influence of the Platonic-Christian tradition."

actually represents his criticism of colonization, this time the European colonization of the ancient Greek past, in which Europe was inclined to cherish and emphasize exactly and only those values that corresponded to its own ideology. In these terms it is possible to claim that Pasolini's film corresponds with the studies of antiquity of his period, because it was precisely during the 1960s that representatives of the French anthropological school of antiquity began to study the colonization and idealization of the ancient past.

After ten years, Jason has fallen out of love with Medea. In their palace, Medea finds out from her nurse that the people of Corinth are afraid of her. Struggling in her helplessness, with the support of the chorus of women, Medea realizes that she is the same as she used to be, "a vessel for a wisdom that comes from outside myself." This means that she belongs completely to the gods, and this corresponds to Greek ideas about prophets and poets, who did not consider themselves responsible for what they spoke or created. The gods and muses worked through them in order to establish a satisfactory level of divine balance and justice. Pasolini visualizes the divine support Medea is given by her grandfather, the sun-god Helios, to kill her sons and Glauce by framing the sun and then showing Medea looking towards the sky.

Medea also asks for the help and support of her nurse, who questions Medea about the pain that she will impose on herself. In the dialogue in which Pasolini paraphrases Euripides, Medea's ultimate response to the nurse is that she, being a woman, should understand her.

Nurse: Now that you have told us of your intentions, we want to be of help to you, but at the same time, respectful of the most sacred human laws.

Medea: It's too late to take any other course. You cannot assent to what I am about to do, because you have not suffered the wrongs I have!

Nurse: How will you find the courage to do what you plan?

Medea: I will find the courage when I think how great will be his suffering.

Nurse: But yours will be no less, poor desperate woman that you are!

Medea: That's enough, Nurse! It is time to act. . . . You love me, and you are a woman.

This puts Medea's problem into a wider context and questions the position of any Greek woman. By doing so, Pasolini indirectly suggests that Medea's religious belief in the world beyond belongs not only to irrational barbarians but also any (Greek) woman.

The scene in which Medea prepares to kill her sons resembles a religious sacrifice with the ritual washing of the victim that often precedes it and the climax of fire. Medea bathes the boys in a stone tub-altar that

has the symbolic shape of a circle, as does the room in which the tub is placed. Pasolini does not show us the act of killing, and he replaces Helios' chariots that in Euripides' version come to take Medea and boys away with the final scene that takes place outdoors in the sunlight.

Pasolini created a contemporary adaptation of Euripides' drama on film. Although he did not follow Euripides' text literally and omitted much of the dialogue, his film does not reduce Euripides' tragedy. Pasolini created myth on film and by visualizing a mythical language adapted for the contemporary spectator to replace the perspective of the ancient spectator. To achieve this effect, for example, he replaced Helios' chariots flying across the sky with Medea looking at the Sun. Similarly, the initial sequence between Jason and the centaur was used to introduce the modern spectator to the mythical reality to which Medea belongs and which, in the Greek world, belongs above all to women, children, and foreigners – to the Other. Pasolini succeeded in problematizing the issue of myth and Greek attitudes towards mythical reality, which is a dimension necessary for understanding this ancient drama. On the one hand, there is a myth about Medea that raises the question about the position of women and foreigners in a patriarchal society. Pasolini also puts into focus the cyclical concept of nature in which people express themselves through the ritual, perceiving themselves as a part of the natural and the cosmic totality. This is exactly the component used by Pasolini to introduce the problem of the modern European attitude towards the Other, above all in the wider social context – toward anyone who is not oriented to the progression of linear time and whose values therefore differ from those who dominate.

Although the film belongs to the mass media, Pasolini's *Medea* cannot be defined as a product of a popular culture, above all because people are not yet ready to face the problem of the Other. In that context I would like to mention the observation by Judith Butler that it is precisely the people excluded from society (women, foreigners, children) who make possible the existence of public space, from which they are, paradoxically, excluded. The problem of Otherness is raised in this drama by the act of violation of tabooed social norms, which are, according to Butler, closely related to and dependant on the state:<sup>33</sup>

Not only does the state presuppose kinship and kinship presuppose the state but “acts” that are performed in the name of the one principle take

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 11–12.

place in the idiom of the other, confounding the distinction between two at a rhetorical level and thus bringing into crisis the stability of the conceptual distinction between them.

It is possible that the collective unreadiness to confront the existing family or state value system is a reason that this (as well as other contemporary adaptations of *Medea*) are part of the high culture. The plot of *Medea* is too shocking, and it does not offer stereotypes that popular culture might use. Apart from that, this drama directly confronts the audience with violence and murder, making obvious that there are murders that are, on the one hand, socially acceptable and justified (like those in wars), and, on the other, those that are hypocritically judged – as if every violent death were not always about the death of someone's children and someone's closest kin.

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