

**The Reception of Ancient Greek Tragedy in Late Modernity:  
From the Citizen Viewer of the City-State to the Consumer Viewer of  
the Global Cosmopolis**

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Ancient Drama constitutes a unique cultural synthesis of elements focusing on the Athenian democracy of the fifth century BC. Its recipient, the Citizen–Spectator of the City–State, was receiving and interpreting the stage spectacle against a background of relatively homogeneous state narratives. Today, however, this relative consensus is very much weakened. The contemporary recipient is more of a Spectator–Consumer, rather than a traditional “spectator”. S/he is a consumer with totally different world philosophy and sociopolitical background and certainly a different memory bank, a bank now enriched by numerous spectacles of ancient drama throughout the world, which, altogether have created dissimilar expectations and demands. And it is at this point that the role of the director gains additional importance and becomes an indispensable mediator between the contemporary spectator and the revisited classical text.

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**A**ncient Greek drama, a product of unique composition comprising various and, sometimes, conflicting parameters (mythical time and objective space, philosophical rationalism and mythical consciousness, religious background and festive traditions, ritual and social entertainment, educational resource and

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political awareness), remains a living spectacle and represents, in all its timelessness, the concept of “classical,” probably better than any other form of art and culture (literature, sculpture, painting, etc.).

It is undeniable that watching an ancient tragedy or comedy performance, the classical philologist, the “informed,” or even the “innocent” viewer, often observe that there is great distance between what they have expected to see on stage, and what eventually occurs in front of them as a living spectacle. Understandably, objections and questions are heard, such as “Well, where does the author say that?” or “There’s nothing like that in the text!” or, finally, “What is the relationship between the drama as a reading text and the performance as its stage interpretation?”

The thus established gap between the existing textual stimuli and the objectively existing conditions of reception, that is, the distance between the expectations and interests of the “inscribed” viewer, on the one hand, and the expectations and skills of the “actual” viewer, on the other, will be examined in the pages that follow. Our focus will shift from the playwright as producer of meaning and the text as field of expression to the viewer and the perception of the play as performance; therefore from the field of literature to that of communication and sociology.

As it is known, drama constitutes the third literary genre in ancient Greek literature, the first and second being epic and lyric poetry respectively. Its main objective is the stage performance as a live spectacle, addressing viewers rather

than readers as the other two do. This is how its specificity, both literary and theatrical, arises. This is, also, where its structural elements, those that make up its performative potential (dialogue, action, plot, conflict, twists, characters) and its aesthetics—wonderfully described by Aristotle as the “quantitative” and “qualitative” features of tragedy—stem from. Consequently, in “reading” and analyzing the texts of ancient drama, in particular and drama at large, the scholar has to utilize suitable methodological schemes and interpretation models, in order to demonstrate its particular values and innate characteristics, which might be absent or differentiated in other poetic and narrative texts.

Receiver and final critic of the dramatic works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and other, less known, dramatic poets of antiquity, was not the reader—Athenian citizen at the Agora (market place), the Academy, or the Lyceum (Aristotle’s school), but the viewer—Athenian citizen or not—at the theatre of Aexoni or Vravron and, particularly, at the theatre of Dionysus at the foot of the sacred hill of Acropolis (Moretti 100-20). And since the interests and the real world of that spectator was what the spoken word of tragedy and comedy catered to, the spectator’s perceptive capabilities, attitudes, and expectations were of primary importance for the playwright of antiquity (Meier 19-25). This given led playwrights to the creation of plays which, directly or indirectly, drew on some kind of mythological material, which, as we know, had no value in itself, since drama was not about the pursuit of truth, but plausibility; it was not about the

objectivity of the narrative, but the consequences of stage action on the conscience of the viewers participating in the spectacle.

Still, any claim about the physiognomy of the viewer in the theatre of Dionysus or any other ancient Greek theatre of the fifth and fourth century BC, is extremely problematic. Judging from the findings of contemporary research, to support any single view, let alone, any homogenizing view, is precarious and effacing. Therefore, we can no longer talk about the viewer of ancient drama in general, but, rather, about the audience in a particular locale and time, with specific expectations, social conditions, and cultural stimuli. Projecting modern interpretive data onto the world of antiquity and trying to interpret the aesthetic response of the audience in those times based on current audience response is definitely a mistake. At the same time, the dogma of the homogenized perception of ancient drama by the audience of, at least, the classical period of the ancient Greek world is equally scientifically untrue.

What we claim here is that ancient drama, from the first moment of its appearance, was connected with the religious and public life of the city, the interests and concerns of Athenian citizens, and contributed to the constitution of a single cultural identity at a time immediately after the Persian wars (Storey and Allan 61-71). This is what brings forth the reconciliation of an archaic way of thinking, long ago adopted by the average viewer, with the rationalism introduced by the sophists and Socratic philosophy, as well as the coexistence of a popular tradition and a mythological interpretation of the world, usually represented by the

chorus, with an artful creation of a new type, organized on rhetoric and dialectic, on the argumentative principle at the *Ecclesia* (Citizens' assembly) at the Pnyx and the Agora (Thompson 1996; Gaster 1993)

The messages that viewers received from plays had a substantial formative-educational value, without being intensely didactic, corresponding to the aesthetic form and requirements of drama. Their reception, understanding, and interpretation, which set moral standards and the social basis for giving meaning to each viewer's individual condition, but also to the city as a whole, was fully compatible with the general worldview, mentality, and culture that the Athenian democracy provided to its citizens in the fifth century BC (Goldhill, "The Audience of Athenian Tragedy" 54-68).

This widely instructive nature of the theatre as a collective, cultural phenomenon, apart from its purely aesthetic and artistic content, had also a social role, constituting the active connective tissue of the newly acquired consciousness of the Athenian "citizen-viewer;" a timeless point of reference for all subsequent scholars involved in theatre studies; a baseline value of universal acceptance and a constant focal point of comparison for any modernist or other type of interpretation (Croally 55-70). A prerequisite for this *a posteriori* interpretation of drama is the exact description of the audience to which tragedy was addressed and the psycho-spiritual portrait of the citizen-spectators who watched the drama contests during the Dionysian festivals in Attica and, later, elsewhere in Greece (Cartledge 16-22). This was a relatively homogeneous audience with, more or less,

similar cultural experiences, interests, and goals, as these had been formed within the living conditions of the “city-state.”

The mythical narrative as a canvas for tragedy, well-known to spectators from their previous theatrical, literary, religious, and social education, is the mere pretext that allows the creative consciousness of dramatic poets to be activated and enables viewers to experience the transcendence from the “here and now” of their own presence to the “there and then” of its mythological version. In the process of illusion, which operates during the performance, each spectator-citizen finds their personal grounds that, stimulated by the respective textual and stage data, offer them *catharsis* as a final goal with multiple philosophical, existential, psychoanalytic, and sociological layers. This viewer is able to understand, decode, and derive meaning from the messages originating from the stage relatively easily. It is this viewer that Aristophanes addressed through the *paravasis* in his plays, aiming at making them reflect on and develop awareness through mocking familiar situations and satirizing historical figures. It is the same viewer that Aeschylus addressed with the *Persians*, stressing their national morale and rewarding their stance during the recent Persian wars; and with the *Eumenides*, where the Pnyx becomes the dramatic space for the affirmation of institutions and the constitution of the Athenian democracy, on a secondary, imaginary level, exactly as it was on the literal, actual level (Winkler and Zeitlin 1990). In this manner, stage aesthetics and content match perfectly, responding in the best of ways to the concept of “classical,” as the correlation of form and content,

symmetry and balance, whereby the timelessness and universality of the ancient drama is ensured.

Although we have to agree with the view which recognizes universal cultural features responding over time to many aspects of the psycho-mental response of the viewers to scenic stimuli, we have to equally accept that “our personal filters do not always coincide with those of the fifth century BC Athenians” (Lada-Richards 453). But how is it possible, then, to reconstitute the audience (especially that of the Athenian “golden age”) attending performances of tragedies and comedies during the drama contests (especially the Great Dionysia) and make assumptions today about their nature, their characteristics, their aspirations and cultural reactions, with some degree of certainty about the correctness of our conclusions? How can we, scholars of today, and viewers of ancient drama, communicate with the plays, understand their content, and formulate views if we do not know their natural recipients, the viewers of the comic and tragic poets of antiquity? In other words, is it possible to reconstruct, in an “archaeological manner,” the collective conscience of the viewers of those times and describe with clarity their emotional and intellectual response to the messages derived from the stage spectacle?

The answer is negative, or at least rather negative, since no theatre audience, at any given time, has ever been one-dimensional, with “the same educational and intellectual infrastructure,[...] the same aesthetic and cultural codes [...] the same interpretive strategies” (Lada-Richards 456). This means that

we need to talk about the same concept in the plural (audiences), or, better still, replace it with its equivalent “viewer”/“viewers,” which moves the centre of attention from the faceless mass unit to the personal and particular individual existence, with its specific psycho-spiritual characteristics and experiences. In this sense the viewer of ancient drama is differentiated and determined by a variety of traits that operate simultaneously: the viewer is not only the Athenian citizen, the foreigner or the immigrant (or even the slave or the woman), but also the farmer from Acharnes, or the student of Socrates and the Sophists. The viewer can also be the anonymous man of low-class origin, the prominent state official, the state officer, the teacher, the young viewer, the elderly person, the conservative person of aristocratic origin, or the deeply democratic citizen. All these people coexist as viewers watching the same performance, at the same place, but, most certainly, they do not form a homogeneous crowd. Each one carries his/her own characteristics that guarantee a relatively distinct position from one another. This heterogeneity is also reflected in the way the playwright presents characters and situations, actions and ideas, conflicts and choices. The play’s microcosm corresponds to various aspects of the audience’s reality, sometimes satisfying the interests and expectations of the young or the old, the aristocratic or the democratic, the uneducated or the educated (Lada-Richards 466-86). However, to realize all this, what is also required is an organized space, like the theatre of Dionysus, built at the foot of the Acropolis, close to the places of assembly of the Athenian citizens (Pnyx, Agora), located almost at the center of the urban design



of the city (Croally 84-85). The number of viewers, who watched the performances, and the constitution of the audience are still matters of scientific controversy, since there are no clear, widely shared facts. This particular theatre, rebuilt from wood to stone by Lycurgus in 338-330 BC, is estimated to have had a maximum capacity of fourteen to seventeen thousand spectators (Storey and Allan 30-31). The greatest part of that audience was made up of adult men, Athenian citizens, while, with near certainty, we can maintain that among them there were also foreigners (non-Athenians), who, for various reasons, were present in the city during the period of the drama contests and participated in them (mainly in the Great Dionysia). There were, also, immigrants (foreign residents of Athens) who would watch the spectacle. Problematic and controversial is the presence of women, children (Albini 212-16), and slaves, although the latter are assumed to have participated in small numbers (Goldhill, "Representing Democracy" 347-69). Apart from ordinary viewers, members of the official political, military, and religious authorities, as well as honored youth and other citizens of prominent position and role also watched the plays, seated at special seats (Winkler and Zeitlin 1990).

Research has shown that the reactions of these viewers were not always uniform or controlled. Sometimes the spectacle was met with general euphoria and excitement, while, at other times, there were heavy boos and statements of disapproval, expressed not only verbally but also with gestures and the hurling of objects. It is also known that viewers used to take the part of one of the competing

poets and that they would shout trying to influence the judges in favor of the person they supported, thus creating uproar and necessitating the violent crackdown of their reactions by the vergers (Albini 208-11).

Finally, it is also accepted by scholars that the theatrical performance functioned not only as a social, but also as a purely secular event (as has always been the case with the theatre), involving the showcasing of certain public figures and efforts for social recognition on the part of others, on account of their particularly privileged position at the theatre or their general appearance. Despite all the differences and, sometimes, the contradictions identified among viewers of the Great Dionysia, there were many unifying elements that reinforced the feeling of collectivity and unity.

### **The Physiognomy of the Modern Viewer**

What is the reality today for a modern viewer who attends the stage revival or appropriation or relocation of the passions of Oedipus and Philoctetes, Hecuba and Medea at the ancient theatres of Epidaurus, Philippi, Dodona, or Kourion in Cyprus? What does this viewer have in common with the viewer of two and a half millennia ago, who was sitting at the same or similar stands and was watching the same or a similar play? What thoughts and feelings are provoked in the multinational audiences of a contemporary summer festival of ancient drama by *Prometheus Bound* or *Trachiniae*? How can *catharsis* occur for the heterogeneous

and differentiated audience of multicultural societies like ours and how does this particular communication resemble or differ from that of the viewers of the fifth and fourth century BC? Is the concept of the word “tragic” perceived and experienced by the modern consumer-viewer of the globalised cosmopolis the same way it was perceived and experienced by the Athenian citizen in a performance of the “Urban Dionysian Festival” (Lada-Richards 452-60)?

It goes without saying that it is not possible for this heterogeneous audience of different ethno-racial, cultural, and social origins and different aesthetic-artistic experiences to receive and assess the messages coming across to them from the stage in the same way as the Athenian audience of the golden age, or even, as the gradually differentiated audience of the Hellenistic era did.

A first major difference is the one that relates to the nature, location, and purpose of theatre in society. In ancient Greece, theatre was part of a broader religious and ritual context with no commodity value whatsoever (Albini 183). Today, theatre (as performance) is a cultural good, aimed primarily at viewers-consumers, and forms part of the broader context of the various functions in the contemporary society of the spectacle. The viewer of ancient theatre was witnessing a spectacle whose story, values, and aesthetics were familiar. This awareness of what was going on was, in fact, the motivating force to experience *catharsis*. The contemporary viewer is unaware of the myth and, even if informed in advance about it, s/he receives it as a fairy tale-like narrative or as symbolic

recording; thus, the experience of the myth is undermined, since the viewer is prepared to watch a dramatic or comic story without being able to comprehend its deepest content. In this way, the essential aim of ancient drama is never realized, since the contemporary viewer remains, at best, a mere observer and critic of the stage spectacle from which s/he expects to derive mainly aesthetic pleasure rather than any psycho-spiritual stimuli. This is because the viewer in ancient Greece was relying on the play and its subject matter in order to comprehend concepts and values related to the spiritual world of his/her time. Contemporary viewers, unaware or incapable of understanding the philosophical and sociocultural background of the play, limit their expectations mainly to the spectacle's *opsis* and to whatever the particular performance offers.

Other factors related to the actual artistic event, such as the stage performance of ancient drama, should also be taken into account. The spoken word, which once constituted the unique and sole principle upon which the spectacle was based, has nowadays completely lost its primary importance and energy. The visualization of speech has become the speech of the image, which, more often than not, reduces the theatre to mere spectacle, supposedly in the name of a better stage/audience communication and engagement. This, inevitably, brings radical changes to the poetic and literary virtues of the text which disappear with the conversion of the text to an often spacious articulation of a "performatized" speech. And while the ancient viewer had a direct personal contact with the text,

the contemporary viewer communicates with it only indirectly, through the decisive presence of the director, who often turns into a co-creator of the play.

When we refer to the difference between the “citizen-viewer” and the “consumer-viewer,” we should take into consideration, in addition to the cultural, educational, and social conditions, the function of memory and the factors that shape it: namely, space, acting codes, and values, among others. This observation indicates that the memory of the contemporary viewer-consumer is determined and established by a plurality of conflicting and disparate experiences and data, which are directly related to the contemporary cultural environment in which memory is formed (Fisher-Lichte 2008; Maklin<sup>2</sup>). The memory of the viewer in the amphitheatre of Dionysus existed and functioned as cerebral activity and as a direct or indirect inscription of all the aesthetic-artistic and socio-cultural experiences associated with the performance (Kott 1992; Samuel 1994). However, both the quality and the extent of this “theatrical memory” do not have much in common with that of the modern viewer. When compared to what is happening today (Carlson 2003), the style of the performance, the channels of communication and reception, as well as the general cultural memory of those times were extremely limited and pretty much preconditioned. In this way, the final outcome of the successive and consecutive participation of the Athenians in performances of tragedy and comedy was minimally influenced and altered, in accordance to the general mnemonic indexes determining the collective

experience and the dominant opinion about the theatre. On the contrary, the multicultural and multiethnic society of the modern post-industrial era, with the globalization not only of knowledge and information, but also of the aesthetic and artistic experience, brings about substantial changes in the ways ancient drama and tragedy are initially perceived by artists and subsequently made available to the consumer-viewers. Tragedy is thus freed of all its historical context, which means it is de-historicized and converted into a “post-modern” creation, in accord to the expectations of the modern viewers, who are not facing the performance with awe anymore, as the highest artistic event, but as a cultural good to be consumed and to which they rightfully have access as long as they qualify for its “acquisition,” having paid for admission, as is the case with any other product of postmodern consumer society (Grammatas, “Mythic Consciousness” 57).

Nowadays, for the viewer of the global city, names and precise facts are not the essence of tragedy; characters and their qualities have only symbolic value. The focus of attention is on the quality, intensity, and consequences of the conflicts and the dramatic situations that shape the characters on stage, not always in accordance with the requirements of the text itself, but in accordance with the aspirations of the director, who has now been converted from mediator to co-creator of the message. It is his/her responsibility to find ways to communicate with the audience. A difficult task, no doubt, for the audience’s vastly different ethno-racial origins, social status, educational background, and aesthetic

experiences block the way towards any form of unity/homogeneity (Grammatas, “Ancient Drama as Living Spectacle” 110-11). What remains, ultimately, as common denominator among viewers, is the fact that they have paid the—often expensive—ticket, so that they can reap the benefit of a unique experiential contact with a cultural good, which, even today, remains the emblematic expression of what is considered “classical.”

The director, within the context of his/her personal artistic choices and ideological views on tragedy and ancient drama, tries to present a spectacle compatible with his/her own positions and one that, at the same time, can be easily accessed and liked by a large audience eager to fulfill their own utopian desire for personal contact with a masterpiece of world civilization. In this way, in the name of the ideal “average,” conditions of reception are necessarily downgraded, communication difficulties are assuaged, and the psycho-intellectual parameters of ancient drama are circumscribed (Freshwater 62-76).

The audience, having formed a “cultural memory” (Halbwachs 1992; Fentress and Wickham 1992) through the oversupply, wide variety, and frequency of performances of ancient drama offered for “consumption” all around the world, has, consciously or not, already configured the received performances and delimited their receptive horizon, in a way completely different from that of the audience of the same spectacle in antiquity. Thus, through this “function of memory” of both artists (directors, actors, and other contributors to the

performance who recall previous performances, with which they are in constant dialogue, consciously or not) and consumers (viewers who remember previous theatrical experiences they had, to which they refer and with which they compare the present one), tragedy's past is contemporized in such a way so that the specific performance's present potentially comprises the ensemble of similar past performances.

The larger the market of the spectacle is, that is, the greater the offer of stage interpretations of ancient Greek tragedy, the broader the theatrical memory becomes, and, therefore, the more opportunities and choices of the cultural good there are for the “buyer-viewer” within the framework of the modern globalized society of abundance. If we, also, take into account current trends in aesthetics and art, with the establishment of postmodernism and the possibilities resulting from it (deconstruction of the text, intertextuality, devised theatre, metatheatre, performance), then it is understood that the contemporary stage handling of tragedy—and ancient drama, in general—is far more different from what used to be called “classical performance.” This, however, does not mean that the concept of “classical” has ceased to exist; that ancient Greek tragedy has lost its quality and its value as a stage event and has turned into some sort of dramatic story; or that Attic comedy has become a variety show, supposedly in the name of box office success and facilitation of consumption by a wide audience. Despite the undeniable and unavoidable differentiations that have arisen in the course of time,



we can rightfully claim that ancient drama still means a lot to the viewers of our era, as it meant for the viewers of the ancient city-state and of the multicultural society of the big cities of the Hellenistic era. The contemporary viewers-consumers are, against all odds, still capable of perceiving the timelessness and universal value of ancient drama. Of course, this does not necessarily mean there is only one possible interpretation of ancient drama. To have a living theatre you must have many points of view. This multiplicity is what keeps ancient theatre alive today. By being constantly updated and re-interpreted ancient drama continues its timeless journey, just like Dionysus. Local and global at the same time.

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