

Philosophical Theatricality: Castellucci's staging of Hölderlin's *Oedipus the Tyrant*

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ABSTRACT

In 2015, the Italian director Romeo Castellucci staged *Oedipus the Tyrant* at Schaubühne in Berlin. The staging was based on the German poet-philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin's translation, which is known for its peculiar linguistic, philosophical, and theatrical approaches to Greek tragedy. The article examines how Castellucci in continuation of Hölderlin's translation and commentaries to the tragedy, staged *Oedipus* as a theatrical – and philosophical – confrontation between religious and rational approaches to knowledge. The staging was seemingly simple, showing a group of nuns performing *Oedipus* in a monastery. However, the nuns' Christian and feminine performance of the pagan and masculine tragedy formed the base of a metatheatrical and philosophical complexity in and between different approaches to knowledge. The philosophical complexity of the staging was reinforced through other metatheatrical elements, as for example a film projection showing Romeo Castellucci getting tear gas sprayed in his eyes, which made the relation between physical reality and fictional representation an issue.

KEYWORDS

Romeo Castellucci, Friedrich Hölderlin, tragedy, *Oedipus the Tyrant*, caesura as theatrical device, agon, Christianity, feminine mysteries

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INTRODUCTION: THEATRE AND PHILOSOPHY

In 2015, the Italian director Romeo Castellucci staged *Oedipus the Tyrant* at Schaubühne in Berlin. The text utilized was the German poet-philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin's translation *Ödipus der Tyrann* from 1804 of Sophocles' *Oidipus Tyrannos*, more commonly known as *Oedipus the King*. Within the theatrical context of Castellucci's staging, Hölderlin's translation was performed recognizing its unique textual qualities. Thus, Castellucci's staging was both theatrical and textual, preparing for a double, theatrical and philosophical exploration of tragedy as medium of knowledge.

Castellucci uses metatheatrical devices to expose theatricality as a way of achieving knowledge. A main dramaturgical structure in the staging was "theatre within the theatre", as the classical tragedy of *Oedipus* was performed by nuns within the setting of a monastery. This not only made the staging a confrontation between Christianity and paganism, but also a metatheatrical investigation of how theatrical representation can work in procedures of knowledge and truth. In addition, several other metatheatrical elements in the staging contributed to the teatro-philosophical exploration; e.g. a film projection showing Romeo Castellucci getting tear gas sprayed in his eyes, the revelation of the actors' female corporeality, and the way the text was present in the performance.

As a theoretical response to the theatrical, textual and philosophical complexity of the staging, I will suggest "philosophical theatricality" as a general concept for theatre as a philosophical medium and specifically for a philosophical reading of Castellucci's staging of *Oedipus*. This concept encompasses the resemblance between how corporeality and representation interact in cognition like in theatre.

I have not found the concept of "philosophical theatricality" developed and formulated by others, neither in relation to Castellucci, nor theoretically in ot-

her relations. I am, however, convinced that several aesthetic thinkers – and practitioners – have had considerations and expressed themselves in the direction I suggest with the concept. Much of the French philosopher Alain Badiou’s thinking on theatre is concerned with theatre as a philosophical medium. He uses the concept of “philosophical theatricality” briefly in a note to a discussion of the relation between philosophy and poesis, where he, as a comment to Deleuze and Guattari writes: “For me, philosophical theatricality designates that the essence of philosophy [--] is an act.”¹ However, Badiou not only identifies theatricality in philosophical reflection, he also sees philosophical thinking in the theatre.² In “Theses on Theatre”, he writes about how “theatre thinks” by means of “theatre-ideas”, which can only “arise in and by the performance, through the act of theatrical representation.”³ In *The Century*, he talks about theatre directors in the twentieth century as “thinkers of representation as such, who carries out a very complex investigation into the relationship between text, acting, space and the public [--]”⁴ And in an interview from 2014 Badiou underlined representation as a key element in the relation between theatre and philosophy: “According to Kant the configuration of the world by representation is constitutive of our experience, and there is no sense in saying that we must escape it. And there is the current that considers illusion as a significant feature of experience. But that can also mean a dialectical current that says that illusion or representation are all the more necessary because they are a mediation, a moment, a dialectical time of knowledge itself.”⁵ From this it becomes evident, that Badiou recognizes representation as an intrinsic element of theatricality, which can be associated with how representation works in cognition and in philosophy.

Badiou is of course not the only later and contemporary philosopher occupied with the relation between theatre and philosophy. He and many others have been occupied with the close and ambiguous relation between philosophy and theatre dating back to Plato and Aristotle. Several later and contemporary philosophers like Diderot, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Deleuze, Rancière, Lacoue-Labarthe and Badiou have been engaged in the relation between philosophy and theatre. And the increasing interest in the relation between theatre and philosophy among theatre scholars

1. Badiou 2008, 292.

2. Puchner 2009, 256–66.

3. Badiou 2005, 73.

4. Badiou, *The Century*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007, 40.

5. An interview with Alain Badiou. Warren 2014.

<http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1697-an-interview-with-alain-badiou-theatre-and-philosophy-an-antagonistic-and-complementary-old-couple>, accessed 1 June 2016.

during the last decade can, maybe, be perceived as a philosophical turn (at least among some scholars) within theatre studies. Examples of this are recent studies on the subject matter by Martin Puchner, Freddie Rokem, Laura Cull, and the manifestation of this in the scholarly network of “performance philosophy”.⁶

My concept of “philosophical theatricality” differs from the concept of “performance philosophy” as it emphasizes theatricality as a specific mode of performativity. What in my mind distinguishes theatricality from the broader concept of performativity is the element of representation and fiction inherent in theatre and theatricality: *Theatrical fiction is simultaneously performative presence and fictional representation*. Fictional representation, together with – and interacting with – physical presence and performance, is what makes theatre unique as an artistic and philosophical medium.

CASTELLUCCI’S PRE-TRAGIC APPROACH TO TRAGEDY

Romeo Castellucci has had a comprehensive theatrical career with the theatre company Societàs Raffaello Sanzio (SRS), which he established in 1981 together with his sister Claudia Castellucci and the siblings Chiara and Paolo Guidi.

It is not possible for me here to expand greatly on SRS’s and Castellucci’s work as a whole.⁷ It is, however, necessary to point out some characteristics of their work in order to understand Castellucci’s approach to classical tragedy as it appears in his *Oedipus*-staging. After an initial period in the 1980s with performative and rhetorical experiments, SRS became more determined to create theatre with point of departure in old myths. Productions from this period include *La discesa di Inanna* (1989), *Gilgamesh* (1990), *Iside e Osiride* (1990) and *Ahura Mazda* (1991). Simultaneously, they began using animals and actors cast for their physical properties rather than for their actorial skills. This led to an engagement in the relation between body and rhetoric, which Castellucci, from around 1990, began to refer to as “pre-tragic”.⁸ This pre-tragic approach also came to be important in the company’s work with classical tragedies like *Hamlet* in *Amleto. La veemente esterioresità della morte di un*

6. *Performance Philosophy: a Network for the field of Performance Philosophy*: <http://performancephilosophy.ning.com/>, Rokem 2010, Puchner 2010, Puchner 2013.

7. For broader introductions to the work of Societàs Raffaello Sanzio, see for example: The Theatre Archive of Societàs Raffaello Sanzio: <http://www.arch-srs.com>, Giannachi & Kaye 2002, Decreus, 2008, Castellucci et.al., 2007, Papalexioiu 2011.

8. Giannachi & Kaye 2002, 151–52; Papalexioiu 2011.

mollusco (1992), *The Oresteia*, named *Oresteia (Una commedia organica?)* (1995, restaged 2015), and *Giulio Cesare* (1997, restaged 2013). SRS's engagement with tragedy from a pre-tragic view point reached a climax with the cycle *Tragedia Endogonia*, performed 2002–04, in various transformations in eleven European cities.⁹ Here, they investigated the possibility of creating tragic theatre today without recourse to classical tragedy.

SRS's initial rhetorical strategy was to attack and deconstruct conventional representation in theatre: "Our first concern was to destroy what already existed, not for the need of empty space, but rather for need to break with the representation of the world as it had been presented to us", Jose Sanchez quotes Claudia and Romeo Castellucci.¹⁰ In this deconstructive approach there was an obvious relation to Artaud and his attack on conventional theatrical language and his desire for a new physical theatrical language.¹¹ Corporeality was emphasized in Raffaello Sanzio's work through the introduction of animals on the stage. Castellucci has explained his estimation of the animal as ideal for acting in the article "The Animal being on Stage": "The animal teaches me that technique is not necessary [--] From the very first look, the body finds in risk the perfect rhetoric of its own happening."¹² Such animalistic corporeal acting is, according to Castellucci, also feminine,¹³ which is a deep-rooted principle in Castellucci's work and his perception of a pre-tragic theatre as he states it in the referred article: "The pre-tragic western theatre tradition has been completely forgotten, cancelled, erased. It has been erased because it involves a theatre connected to matter and to that which matter generates. It is linked to a presence with feminine dynamics. It is important to understand that the feminine (residing in the mystery that governs life and guards the dead) concerns the dynamics of an artistic expression which re-discovers a relationship with real life – from birth to burial – and which operates beyond the linguistic sphere. Since its beginnings, theatre has contained a theological problem: the problem of God's presence, a presence which moves through theatre. For westerners, theatre was born as God died. It is clear that the animal plays a fundamental role in the relationship between theatre and

9. See Castellucci 2007; Hillaert & Crombez, 2005.

10. Sanchez 2014, 57. Sanchez quotes from an interview from 2001 with Claudia and Romeo Castellucci, *Conversazione di FAM with Emanuela Caldirola*. Ufficio Stampa dei Teatridithalia, January 2001.

11. SRS's and Castellucci's relation to Artaud is documented in several interviews and publications. See for example Valentini 1997, Giannachi & Kaye 2002, 140ff., "Interview, Romeo Castellucci" in Bleeker et.al. (ed.) 2002.

12. Castellucci 2000, 26.

13. Giannachi & Kaye 2002, 153-54.

God's death. In the moment that the animal disappeared from the scene, tragedy was born."¹⁴

In his work, Castellucci opposes the rhetoric of the voice and text with the rhetoric of the body, perceived as respectively masculine and feminine. This dialectic is, according to Castellucci, generally at stake in theatre and emblematically represented in classical tragedy. In 1995, SRS staged Aeschylus' tragic trilogy *The Oresteia* under the oxymoron title *Oresteia (Una commedia organica?)*. This production was taken up again in 2015/16. Castellucci staged the tragic trilogy as a war between feminine and masculine forces.

Since 2006, the members of SRS have created individual artistic works and Romeo Castellucci has staged several productions; mainly opera and tragic texts at different European theatres. In addition, SRS has continued to create their own productions like the *Parthenon Metope* (2015), the revivals of *Oresteia* and *Giulio Cesare*, and *The Four season restaurant* from 2012, based on Hölderlin's unfinished tragedy *The Death of Empedocles* from around 1800. Castellucci is fascinated by Hölderlin and has, till now, made three different stagings based on his texts. In addition to *The four season restaurant*, he has produced two other stagings of Hölderlin-texts at Schaubühne in Berlin: *Hyperion. Letters of a Terrorist* (2013) and *Oedipus the Tyrant* (2015). Castellucci's perception of tragedy seems very much in concordance with Hölderlin's. Hölderlin's texts seem to have enabled him to give more emphasis to the textual rhetoric in the performance without necessarily deconstructing or distorting it in favor of corporeality. This might be due to the inherent estrangement effect and femininity Castellucci identifies in Hölderlin's texts. In the program for the *Oedipus*-production, he said:

"Hölderlin's language withdraws from the power of communication; it creates an asymmetry enabling a freedom from language in itself. This happens through a paradoxical technique, whereby the words achieve a kind of radioactive power. Hölderlin fascinates me by his untimeliness, which simultaneously makes him a contemporary."¹⁵ Furthermore, in a video interview, he stated his perception of Hölderlin's *Oedipus*-translation as "feminine": "I think the language of Hölderlin is feminine. I am not able to hear a male voice speaking it, maybe because of the nocturnal forces within it[--]"¹⁶

14. Castellucci 2000, 23–24.

15. Programme from Schaubühne for *Ödipus der Tyrann*, 62. Translation, K.H.

16. *Kulturstruktur*: interviews: 'Romeo Castellucci interview/Oedipus Tyrann', www.kulturstruktur.com accessed 19 February 2016. Translation, K.H.



FIGURE 1. *The space of tragedy. The prioress (Angela Winkler) sitting on the bed reading Oedipus the Tyrant. A nun (Ursina Lardi) in the niche in the background is being dressed as Oedipus. Photo: Arno Declair/Schaubühne.*

THE PERFORMANCE

Oedipus the Tyrant premiered at Schaubühne in Berlin, 6 March 2015. The following description and analysis is based on my experience of the performance on 5 May and 18 September 2015.

In his staging, Castellucci situates the Greek Oedipus-myth in a Christian and female context in the form of a nunnery. The performance starts with a succession of scenes or tableaux from the life within the nunnery, performed in small dark rooms behind a transparent veil. Most of the front curtain is down, leaving the spectators a narrow insight into the dimmed inner world of the monastery. The color scheme of the set-design matches the nun's black and/or white habits. The nuns fill the rooms with strict regulated monastic activities and simultaneously act as stagehands, flowingly rearranging the setting into new rooms: the refectory, the garden, the chapel, the cell etc. No words are spoken. The soundscape consists of Gregorian chant and sounds from the nun's work, dining and caring for a sick nun, whose coughing is getting worse and worse. The sick nun dies and we get a glimpse of the funeral rite. The last scene from this monastic world is in the cell of the deceased

nun, visited by the prioress. She arranges the bed with a black cloth decorated with a white cross and proceeds to sit down on the bed. While seated she discovers an old book under one of the legs of the bed. She picks up the book, which makes the bed tilt (a small comic effect, reoccurring throughout the whole performance as the bed stays on the stage). She opens the book and starts reading the first lines of *Oedipus the Tyrant*. At this moment, the narrow space opens up into a large, completely white and illuminated space. The space is simply decorated with both Classical and Christian elements. The back wall has an elevated niche. Here, Oedipus will appear (embodied by one of the nuns). Within the walls, some dysfunctional stairways, too narrow for normal human use, create an odd architectural element. In the centre of the room, there is an altar in front of the niche.

The enactment of the text (of which the prioress reads the first lines) starts when the nun (Ursina Lardi), who is going to perform Oedipus, appears in the niche. With help from a fellow nun, she takes off her veil and rearranges her Carmelite habit into a pagan-like dress, which reveals one of her breasts for a moment (focusing our attention on the fact that she is a woman performing King Oedipus). In front of her hangs Jesus' sacred heart in gold. Throughout the staging, pagan and Christian attributes and references are linked and mixed together.



FIGURE 2. Ursina Lardi as Oedipus with Jesus' golden heart hanging in front of her. Photo: Holger Jacobs/ kultur24.berlin.

Standing in the elevated niche, the nun performs the first part of Oedipus' role with controlled declamatory voice and selected rhetorical gestures. The other roles and the chorus act on the floor in the vast room in a similar solemn and declamatory manner. Later, when Oedipus becomes more concerned with his search for the truth, he/she will appear on the floor with the others.

The first antagonist to enter is Oedipus' brother-in-law Creon (performed by Jule Böwe). Creon brings a message from the oracle of Delphi concerning the plague that ravages the city. During the dialogue between Creon and Oedipus, the message becomes linked to the murder of the departed King Laios. Creon is biblically dressed as St. Peter with a large key in his right hand. Creon exits and the prophet Tiresias is called for by Oedipus. Tiresias, performed by Bernard Arias Porras – the only male actor in the otherwise female cast – enters iconically dressed as Saint John the Baptist with a sheepskin as loincloth and naked whitewashed upper body. He holds a simple pilgrim's staff with a crucifix on top and carries a living lamb. The blind Tiresias acts exalted and physically uncontrolled. During his performance, noisy sounds are heard. The confrontation between him and Oedipus comes to a head when Tiresias – forced by Oedipus – speaks out that he is the murderer of the man whose murderer he is seeking. This upsets Oedipus and he commands Tiresias to leave.

The chorus (performed by nuns) enters for the first time. The prioress acts as chorus leader. She performs a ritual in which she dresses in the bedclothes of the deceased nun. When turning her back to the audience, we see the cross upside down on her back.

Creon returns and performs a ritual at the altar with the chorus as congregation. In the ritual, he takes an oblate from a chalice and places it in his mouth. He then places himself beside the altar, now with the oblate in his left hand resting on the altar. Blood starts running from the hand, which he leaves severed on the altar.

Now, Oedipus appears on stage and a new confrontation between him and Creon unfolds. During their dispute, Oedipus, supported by the chorus, performs rituals involving objects like a sword, shield, banner and a bowl with liquid gold. Among other things she/he dips her hand in the gold and spreads this on her forehead. The dispute is interrupted by the entrance of Jocasta (Iris Becher).

Jocasta is dressed like the Virgin Mary carrying a Madonna lily. She sits down on the tilting bed. The chorus arrange themselves around her and the chorus leader (the prioress) kneels devotionally to her. Jocasta reprimands



*FIGURE 3. Bernardo Arias Porras as Tiresias / St. John the Baptist.
Photo: Arno Declair/Schaubühne.*

Oedipus and Creon for quarrelling. She endeavours to calm Oedipus by telling him about how she and her previous husband, King Laios, left their new born son out to die in order to avoid the fulfilment of an oracle, which prophesied that the son would come to kill his father and marry his mother. This by no means calms Oedipus; on the contrary this reinforces his anxiety about his true identity. Much of this dialogue and Oedipus' succeeding interrogations of a testimony was omitted in the performance. Instead, the dialogue between Oedipus and Jocasta quickly reaches a point of frightful recognition that Oedipus is the one who – unknowingly – has killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus then leaves the stage; Jocasta throws the lily on the floor, treads on it and collapses on the bed.

Most of the nuns leave the stage, but some stay along the sides with Jocasta lying collapsed on the bed. A huge film projection appears on the back wall. First, a description (chemical formula and biological effect) of tear gas is shown. Then Romeo Castellucci's worried face appears and after a while a hand sprays tear gas in his eyes. We witness the immediate pain of this, how he rubs his eyes and stumbles around searching for relief. This lasts for a — painfully — long time until a paramedic appears and helps him wash his eyes. During the film, a Gregorian chant can be heard and the nuns come crawling up the strange and narrow stairs in the back wall. Ursina Lardi (Oedipus), now dressed as a nun, appears in the niche from where the crawling nuns carry her down the stairway, head first, and place her on the floor.

When the film ends, all the nuns enter the stage. After a while, they all remove their headdresses and reveal their natural heads and hair as actors. The nun playing Oedipus has a final encounter with the nun performing Jocasta/Virgin Mary. They embrace compassionately. The nun performing Oedipus joins the group of nuns in moving the altar to the left and dismantling it. Simultaneously, the actress performing Jocasta/Virgin Mary puts on a modern rubber mask with an expression like a classical Greek tragic mask with eyes and mouth wide open in a terror-stricken expression. The whole group of actors then gather at the middle of the stage, facing the audience, whereupon they silently exit. Left on stage are three flesh-like amorphous bodies, breat-



FIGURE 4. Film projection of Romeo Castellucci being sprayed with tear gas. Photo: Holger Jacobs/ kultur24.berlin.

hing, puffing and farting and attempting – in vain – to formulate something. The performance ends with this image.

HÖLDERLIN'S TEXT

Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles' *Oidipus Tyrannos* was published along with his translation of *Antigone* in 1804. This was a period in Hölderlin's life where he was on his way into mental derangement. Because of his escalating madness he was locked up in an asylum in 1805/06. Thereafter, he lived the rest of his life mentally ill and in need of care. He did, however, continue to write, mainly poetry, until he died at the age of 73 in 1843. The translations of the two tragedies and the accompanying commentary texts have, in great parts, been judged and rejected as expressions of Hölderlin's escalating madness. Walter Benjamin was one of the first to begin a re-evaluation (and appreciation) of Hölderlin's translation work. Since then, the interest in and the amount of analysis and literary commentary on Hölderlin's writing and his translations have increased immensely.¹⁷

From early youth, Hölderlin was enthusiastic about ancient Greece and the idea of a revival of Greek spirit in contemporary German culture. This interest increased through his acquaintance with Hegel and Schelling, his fellow students at the university in Tübingen. Through his theological education, Hölderlin acquired a good knowledge of Latin and Greek. His understanding of the Greek language and spirit was probably strengthened through private studies of classical Greek texts together with Hegel and Schelling. Several translations from Hölderlin's hand exist, but *Oedipus* and *Antigone* were the only ones to be published during his lifetime.¹⁸

Oedipus and *Antigone* were published with many linguistic errors and misprints, which aroused criticism, especially from contemporary Greek philologists. Furthermore, his friends, Schelling and Hegel, were critical and perceived the translations as an expression of Hölderlin's increasing mental illness.¹⁹ Several later classical philologists have pointed out the large number of linguistic and Greek syntactical misinterpretations in Hölderlin's translations.²⁰ However, Hölderlin does not seem to have aspired to philological cor-

17. For introductions to Hölderlin, his writings and translations, see: Dilthey 1906; Benjamin 1972(1923); Glaubrecht 1972, 322–332; Kreuzer 2002; Lacoue-Labarthe 2001; Billings 2014; Tambling 2014; Kimeswenger 2014.

18. Dilthey 1906, 353–61; Kreuzer 2002, 58; 270–89; see also Tambling 2014.

19. Hölderlin 1946–1977, "Rezensionen der Trauerspiel des Sophokles" vol. 7. 95–109. Kimeswenger 2014, 6–7; Bernofsky 2005, 95; Krell 2005, 264.

20. Kreuzer 2002, 289; Krell 2005, 262.

rectness in his translations; his aim rather seems to have been a poetic re-emergence of the Greek tragic spirit.²¹ Characteristic of his translations is a strange literalness, especially in the sound and the rhythmic feeling drawn from the ancient Greek language, which he combined with an effort to make Greek mythology understandable to a modern mind, for example, by altering names and characteristics of the divinities.²²

In the two commentary texts, “Anmerkungen zum Ödipus” and “Anmerkungen zur Antigone”, published along with the translations, Hölderlin explained his understanding of Greek tragedy.²³ These texts have, during the last decades, received much attention and are now recognized as important aesthetic-philosophical texts about tragedy. The French philosopher, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940-2007), founded much of his aesthetic thinking on Hölderlin’s writing. In opposition to Heidegger’s influential Hölderlin-interpretations favouring the poetry and mytho-poetic perspectives, Lacoue-Labarthe attempted to make a theatrical reading of the tragedy-texts.²⁴ He saw Hölderlin’s translations or rewritings of *Oedipus* and *Antigone* in light of the poets failed attempt to write a modern tragedy with *Empedocles*. After this failure, Hölderlin turned to the roots of western theatre: the Greek tragedies. In Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Oedipus*, he found and reworked (translated) what he considered ideal models for a tragic theatre. Hölderlin’s theatrical viewpoint on tragedy comes to expression in the introductory remarks on *Oedipus*, where he distinguishes the specificity of tragic poesis. In poetry and narratives, “ideas, sensations and reasoning appear in various successions yet always according to a law which is certain,” whereas “in tragedy [they exists] more as a state of balance than as mere succession.”²⁵ This dialectical and seemingly non-Aristotelian view on tragic dramaturgy is, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, a statement of Hölderlin’s theatrical viewpoint corresponding to his recurrent talk of *Darstellung* (performance) in and of tragedy.²⁶

Rather than fate, Hölderlin emphasizes the hubris of the hero, which he

21. Kimeswenger 2014, 7; Schmidt 2001, 150.

22. Bernofsky 2005, 94.

23. Hölderlin 1946–1977, “Anmerkungen zum Ödipus” and “Anmerkungen zur Antigone” vol. 5, 195–202; 265–72.

24. Lacoue-Labarthe 2001, 8–10; van Peperstaten 2008; Krell 2005, 276.

25. Hölderlin, “Anmerkungen zum Ödipus” 196. Translation K.H.

26. The German word *Darstellung* can be translated in multiple ways, as for example: mimesis, depiction, presentation, representation etc. The semantic ambiguity of *Darstellung* resembles the polysemy of “representation”. Lacoue-Labarthe clearly reads Hölderlin’s use of *Darstellung* here as theatrical performance. See Lacoue-Labarthe 2000, 125.

conceptualizes as “nefas”. In *Antigone* and *Oedipus*, this consists of an unrestrained self-affirmation moving into self-divinization, which Hölderlin characterized as a “monstrous coupling between God and man.”²⁷ There are, however, fundamental differences in how *Antigone* and *Oedipus* couple with God. *Antigone*’s divine madness is evidenced by her equalling herself to a divinity (Zeus) and acting with divine authority in the confrontation with King Creon. Such divine identification is incompatible with human living. Creon commands that she be killed, but before the execution takes place, she has taken her own life.²⁸ Where *Antigone* exemplifies a political-religious conflict characteristic for Greek society in the fifth century, *Oedipus*’ tragic destiny is more individualized and less societal, which makes *Oedipus* a more modern (western) tragedy according to Lacoue-Labarthe’s interpretation of Hölderlin.²⁹ *Oedipus* does not identify himself with God, but “adopts the posture of a priest-king; he ‘interprets the oracle too literally’ (where, in coded language, the oracle suggests simply ‘establishing a severe and precise justice’ and ‘maintaining a good civil order’, he takes things according to the letter and enters into sacrificial logic: he seeks an expiatory victim),” Lacoue-Labarthe writes with a quote from Hölderlin.³⁰ In Hölderlin’s view, *Oedipus* is a modern tragedy because it corresponds with the separation between the human and the divine in modern western knowledge. *Oedipus* will not die as a result of his hubris. Instead, he will suffer a “slow death” after a prolonged wandering in blindness without the company of any God (which is the plot of Sophokles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* written after *Oedipus the Tyrant*). Understood this way, *Oedipus* is a modern tragedy with an individualized metaphysical theme without the deadly consequences characteristic of the old Greek tragedy. The

27. Hölderlin 1946—1977, “Anmerkungen zum *Ödipus*” 197; 201.

28. Lacoue-Labarthe 2000, 123; Hölderlin, “Anmerkungen zur *Antigone*” 269—70.

29. Lacoue-Labarthe 2000, 116. There are controversies about how to interpret Hölderlin’s view on *Antigone* and *Oedipus* and which of them he considered models for modern or Greek tragedy. The contradictory viewpoints seem to depend on the perspective from where you interpret the tragedy and Hölderlin’s commentaries. Joshua Billings understands *Antigone* as a model for modern political tragedy, although he finds that Hölderlin “is at pain to distinguish between their differing models of the tragic.” (Billings 2014, 11). In an article where he relates Hölderlin to Hegel, Billings writes: “*Antigone* depicts the transition into a politically and theologically egalitarian world in the opposition of *Antigone* and *Creon*” (Billings 2013, 324). I do, however, agree with Lacoue-Labarthe in the understanding of *Oedipus* as a model for modern tragedy. See also Lacoue-Labarthe 2001, 21—30; Lacoue-Labarthe 2000, 116; 123.

30. Lacoue-Labarthe 2001, 123.

“tragic word” (Hölderlin’s expression) grasped by Oedipus has a murderous effect on the spirit without necessarily immediately striking the body.

An important element in Hölderlin’s understanding of the tragedy is expressed in the concept of the “caesura”. In the “Anmerkungen”, he extracts the idea of the caesura from the poetic meter (prosody) and explains it to be the crucial pivot in the overall dramaturgy as well as the ideal content of tragedy. “In both plays it is the speeches of Tiresias that constitute the caesura. He enters the course of fate as supervisor of the natural power, which tragically transports the inner being from the sphere of life into the eccentric sphere of death.”³¹ The natural power is to be perceived as the divine force working in nature and destiny, which, as we shall see later, Castellucci identifies as feminine. The tragic fate of the hero arises from the confrontation with this nature-divine power.

A caesura is a rhythmic rupture or reversal in the flow of a theatrical performance. According to Hölderlin, it creates a break in the tragedy between what is there in the beginning and what follows after. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, named the turning point in the tragic plot “*peripeteia*”, which, in light of the emphasis Aristotle put on coherence in the plot, works as a combining agent of the parts. Hölderlin defines the main turning point in the tragedy as a caesura, making a categorical break between what was there to begin with to what follows after. Thus, the caesura can be perceived as a dramaturgical and theatrical device enabling something new – a new perception and new insight – to appear to the protagonist and/or the spectator. There is a certain similarity between Hölderlin’s notion of the caesura and the ideas of theatrical alienation and interruption developed by Brecht, Benjamin and others in the twentieth century. As theatrical device a caesura can appear in many different forms and modes. It works as a break, a reversal, or distancing effect. The tone, appearance, perspective and meaning of a performance can be altered and reversed through a caesura, opening for new perceptions and insights.

31. Hölderlin, “Anmerkungen zum *Ödipus*” 197. Translation K.H.



FIGURE 5. Angela Winkler as Prioress/Chorus leader, Iris Becher as Jokasta/Virgin Mary and the chorus of nuns in the background. Photo: Holger Jacobs/kultur24.berlin.

CAESURA AS THEATRICAL DEVICE

In Castellucci's staging, the linear narrative traditionally attached to a dramatic text like *Oedipus the Tyrant* is underplayed. Instead of a linear plot, the focus is on agonistic confrontations and metatheatrical transgressions. The staging establishes theatrical contexts around dialogues performed as "agones" between Oedipus and his antagonists, representing different approaches to knowledge. Thus, the agones can be perceived as platonic dialogues concerned with questions about knowledge, ignorance and the possibilities of knowledge. (For a definition of agon, see note 37)

As a demonstrative re-contextualization, the performance begins by giving insight into a genuinely Christian world, a convent. A suite of tableaux from a convent presents us with Christian virtues and sacraments with the sincerity and commitment characteristic of monastic life. This gives the main theatrical context for our perception of the performance of *Oedipus*. In a second dramaturgical step, the convent disappears and the stage opens up into a large illuminated white space. Here, the nuns perform *Oedipus* with Christian attributes and emphasis. This contributes to a de-stabilization of the linear

narrative and the principle of consistent characters. Who is who? Why does Tiresias appear as St. John the Baptist, Jocasta look like Virgin Mary and Jesus sacred heart hang in front of Oedipus, etc.? This paralleling or mixture of pagan and Christian references disturbs the immediate perception of what is going on; it works as an estrangement effect on the spectators' perception. However, the consequent mixture of Christian and pagan references opens up a wide spectrum of historical and philosophical perspectives, more in accordance with a contextual perception than linear narration.

All the roles are performed by women (nuns), except for one, the prophet Tiresias performed by the only man in the cast. This erratic gender-related casting disturbs a smooth perception of the narrative and creates an estrangement effect, as we are not always sure when they perform as nuns, in the roles of *Oedipus*, or even themselves as actors.

On a more detailed level, several dramaturgical breaks and disturbances can be pointed out. The several ritual actions, for example, create breaks or caesuras in the action. Oedipus, Creon and the chorus leader perform different rituals, including dressing and undressing in ritualistic manners, ritualistic gestures, kneeling, sacrificing at the altar etc. Also Tiresias' appearance and confrontation with Oedipus marks a transgression beyond the linear dramatic logic. This confrontation, or agon, between Oedipus and Tiresias, Hölderlin pointed out as the decisive caesura in the play.³² I think Castellucci maintains this viewpoint in his staging. Much emphasis is put on Tiresias' physical apparition and exalted performance. His skinny, half naked body is whitewashed, and he enters carrying a living lamb, which, in addition to its Christian symbolism, accentuates the bodily realm from where Tiresias speaks. With his excessive behaviour and prophetic statements he creates a strange "space" beyond the linear plot, which is reinforced by a boisterous soundscape. This situation, Tiresias' ecstasy in the confrontation with Oedipus, constitutes a climax and a caesura in the staging. Oedipus thereafter enters a new state of mind. As if infected by Tiresias he begins a frenetic search for truth.

Another element that makes an obvious caesura in the staging is the film projection showing Romeo Castellucci getting tear gas sprayed in his eyes. This film sequence can be interpreted in different ways. It can be seen as a representation of, or comment on the story about Oedipus' stabbing of his own eyes, which is never mentioned or exhibited otherwise in the performance. It can, however, also be seen as a reference to one of Castellucci's previous stagings, *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*

32. Hölderlin, "Anmerkungen zum *Ödipus*" 197.



FIGURE 6. *Tiresias ecstatic*. Photo: Holger Jacobs/ kultur24.berlin.

from 2010. When this was shown at Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, October 2011, it provoked demonstrations by Christian fundamentalists. They interrupted the performance, while outside the theatre it came to confrontations with the police, who used tear gas against the demonstrators.³³ Shortly after, Castellucci “forgave” the protesters in a statement where he paraphrased Christ: “I forgive them for they know not what they do [--]” He underlined their ignorance and explained the performance as “spiritual and Christic.”³⁴

Another interpretation of the film, which I will stress in relation to my analysis, is to see it as a caesura and metatheatrical comment on the performance as such. As a film, it marks an absolute break with the performance as real physical presence. None of the actors participate in the film, it shows Castellucci’s own performance, and it is real (paradoxically as a film in opposition to

33. The protests against *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* is documented in a video: “Des jeunes du Renouveau Français interrompent Castellucci”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuPCF238ejl> accessed 5 October 2016. For a description and discussion of this event see D’Urso 2013, 34-46.

34. “Romeo Castellucci: adresse au agresseurs”, <http://blog.lefigaro.fr/theatre/2011/10/romeo-castellucci-adresse-aux.html> (retrieved 6 October 2016) See also “Romeo Castellucci ‘forgives’ Christian protesters for interrupting play”, *The Guardian* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/oct/25/romeo-castelluci-christian-protesters-play> accessed 6 October 2016.

the “real” performance on the stage). It is obvious that Castellucci is actually being sprayed with tear gas and experiences the pain of that. This reality is in opposition to the theatrical performance as something fictitious. An absolute and necessary caesura exists between theatrical fiction and the real world, like, according to Hölderlin, there is an absolute caesura between the divine and the human, causing the tragic and the tragedy as art form to arise. Hence, the film in context of the performance can be “read” as a metatheatrical reflection on the theatre and theatricality in relation to the real world and the core motive in the tragedy: the absolute break between the human and the divine.

PHILOSOPHICAL THEATRICALITY

In Castellucci’s *Oedipus*-staging, the opposition between religious search for truth and a rational epistemology is thematized. Further, the question of knowledge is amplified by metatheatrical perspectives mainly with regard to gender perspectives and the function of theatricality in relation to knowledge.

The advent of Greek philosophy in fifth century BC implied a departure from mythology as the grounds for understanding and explanation, and initiated human reason and empiricism as the main faculties for achieving knowledge. Thus, a divergence between mythological-mystical and rational-philosophical ways to knowledge and truth developed in Greece in the classical fifth and fourth century, which, among others, brought about the theatre, tragedy and philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.³⁵ *Oidipus Tyrannos*, written by Sophocles around 429 BC, can be perceived as a theatrical/dramatic adaption of this opposition in the ways to knowledge.³⁶

Castellucci’s staging is complex and has multiple references to Greek mythology and philosophy, to medieval theology as well as to early romantic philosophy regarding the question of truth in relation to science, religion and art. The remoteness of the represented historical contexts triggers us as spectators to reflect on the relevance of the represented questions about knowledge and truth today.

As earlier pointed out, the agones between Oedipus and his antagonists constitute the main dramatic substance in the staging. *Agon* is a Greek word referring to a performance of two contesting or struggling parts. The Greek tragedians used the *agon* as a model for dramatic dialogues and Plato used it

35. Jaspers 1971; Nichol 2009.

36. The concept of *Wissen* (knowledge) is essential in Hölderlin’s “Anmerkungen zum *Ödipus*”. See Lacoue-Labarthe 2000, 123; Jaspers 1971; Champlin 1969.

for philosophical purposes in his Socratic dialogues.³⁷

In Hölderlin's adaption and Castellucci's staging of *Oedipus*, four main *agones* can be distinguished as representations of different approaches to knowledge and truth. The first scene between Creon and Oedipus makes up the first *agon*. Creon brings the message from the Oracle in Delphi about what must be done to free the city from the plague. He conveys the divine words literally and with traditional religious sincerity. Oedipus, on his side, begins to ask questions, not as responsible leader (king) of the city in order to find out what should be done to free the city from the plague, but in what Hölderlin describes as a "priestly manner" aiming at an individual metaphysical interpretation.³⁸ The relation between Creon and Oedipus is, to begin with, relatively harmonious, but Oedipus' inquisitiveness and hubris is triggered through the dialogue. This first *agon* has a metalevel as it is also performed as a dialogue between St. Peter (the mythological founder of the Christian church and dogmas) and Jesus, whom Oedipus is being paralleled with in the nuns' performance and staging (e.g. the heart of Jesus hanging in front of Oedipus in the niche). Oedipus acknowledges the authority of the Oracle conveyed by Creon, like the relation between Jesus and St. Peter is acknowledged in Catholic theology and the institution of the church. This gives the *agon* a soundboard of religion and reason linked together by dogmatism as well as questioning.

The second *agon* in the staging is the one between Oedipus and Tiresias, which, according to Hölderlin, is the main *agon* – and caesura – in the play. It quickly escalates into a harsh confrontation between Oedipus' rational way of thinking and Tiresias' obscure words coming from an irrational realm beyond Oedipus' comprehension. In prophetic ecstasy, provoked by Oedipus' inquisitiveness, Tiresias reveals unbearable truths to Oedipus. Castellucci has described this *agon* as a confrontation between the "light of rationalism" and "nocturnal mysticism": "The guilt of Oedipus is his reason [--] Oedipus' search for enlightenment is the disease. Because Oedipus has renounced the inte-

37. Originally, *agon* designated contests in sport, rhetoric, poetic and theatrical performances. See "Agon" in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/art/agon-theatre> accessed 8 August 2016. See also Spariosu 1991, 4.

38. Hölderlin sees this as the decisive triggering moment in the tragedy. According to his interpretation, it is Oedipus who relates the oracle to the murder of King Laios and indirectly to himself, and thereby begins his frenetic metaphysical process of "knowing thyself" instead of initiating political-juridical steps as chief of the city. Hölderlin, "Anmerkungen zum *Ödipus*" 197-98; Lacoue-Labarthe 2000; 123, Kocziszky, 36.

riority which Tiresias represents, there is a fight, a counterbalance between Oedipus and Tiresias' dark and nocturnal words. So the guilt of Oedipus is first of all the fact that there is no night in his worldview. This is the disease that has contaminated the city."³⁹ A meta-level to this confrontation is constituted by the appearance of Tiresias as St. John the Baptist, the mysterious Jewish prophet who preached for a spiritual turn around and expectations of the Messiah. John the Baptist, according to the Gospel of John, pointed out Jesus as "Lamb of Good" and the Messiah when they met.⁴⁰ This brings about an ironic doubling of Tiresias' pointing at Oedipus' previous misdeeds as cause of the plague. Furthermore, this opens for a reflection and meditation on the diversities of Pagan and Christian views on the relation between man and God, truth, guilt, sacrifice, scapegoating, etc.

The third *agon* is the dialogue between Oedipus and Creon following Oedipus' exasperated dialogue with Tiresias. Oedipus accuses Creon of attempting to take over the kingdom of the city and threatens him with exile and death. Creon, on the other hand, swears his goodwill by sacrificing his left



FIGURE 7. Oedipus and Creon performing "rituals against rituals".
Photo: Dominique Ecken.

39. *Kulturstruktur* op. cit.

40. John 1: 29-30.

hand on the altar. Again we have the parallel of Christian and Pagan references with the Creon-St. Peter-doubling opposed to Oedipus-Jesus. From the *Bible* we know that St. Peter, when confronted with Jesus as prisoner of the Romans, swore that he did not know him after previously having being named by Jesus as the rock whereupon his church shall be built.⁴¹ Oedipus also performs rituals supported by the chorus of nuns. Thus, the confrontation between Oedipus and Creon unfolds as an *agon* of rituals against rituals.

The fourth *agon* comes about when Jokasta enters and interrupts the fierce confrontation between Creon and Oedipus. She tries to calm Oedipus by telling him about her and King Laios' son who was put out to die because of the oracles prophecy that he would come to kill his father. However, Laios was killed by a street robber, which, according to Jokasta, proves the oracle was mistaken. This does not reassure Oedipus; it rather reinforces his anxiety and leads him on the track to realization of the horrifying truth about himself. Jokasta is not occupied with the truth. She has a motherly approach, trying to calm and comfort Oedipus. Performed as Virgin Mary she represents a main object of adoration and identification for the nuns. She is mother of Jesus, who, as Christ the saviour – according to medieval theology – will be the spiritual “bridegroom” for each individual (female or male) “bride” in the Christian community, symbolically represented by the Virgin Mary. Theologically, the Virgin Mary therefore can appear paradoxically as both the mother and the bride of Christ; which is an interesting and thought provoking parallel to the relation between Oedipus and Jokasta.⁴² The agones and the metatheatrical contexts, juxtaposing and confronting Christianity with paganism, femininity with masculinity, and theatrical representation with cognition, prepares for a complex teatro-philosophical representation, including several paradoxes and open-ended questions. The Christian-pagan dialectic has already been commented on. The dialectic between the feminine and the masculine is, as earlier pointed out, a prevalent motif in Castellucci's work, permeating his understanding of theatre, his approach to texts and his way of making theatre.⁴³ In interviews in connection with *Oedipus*, Castellucci stated his perception of Hölderlin's translation as feminine and connects this to female mysteries in Greece, especially in pre-classical times: “I think the language of Hölderlin is

41. Matthew 16:18, 26:74.

42. In her dissertation about the advent of the concept of “Bride of Christ” in medieval Christianity, Rabia Gregory explains “that the phrase ‘bride of Christ’ most commonly meant the Church, the Virgin Mary, a nun, or a virtuous Christian soul”. Gregory 2007, 6.

43. Giannachi & Kaye 2002, 153.

feminine. I am not able to hear a male voice speaking it, maybe because of the nocturnal forces within it [--] I think Hölderlin is very close to the Greek mystery experience, to the mysteriosophy you can say, hence, to the pre-Hellenic night side of Greek culture. This is closely connected to woman as I imagine the matriarchy as described in *Das Mutterrecht* by Bachofen, who uncovered the feminine night side of the pre-philosophical thinking in Greece.”⁴⁴

All roles in Castellucci’s *Oedipus*-staging are performed by women, except for one man, who, paradoxically present in the nunnery, performs Tiresias (and a nun in other scenes). This not only creates an estrangement effect, it also accentuates the femininity of the mystical-intuitive knowledge represented by Tiresias. According to Greek mythology, Tiresias was transformed into a woman by the Goddess Hera, whom she/he then served for seven years until she/he was transformed back to manhood. Further, Castellucci refers to the Eleusian’ and Samotraccian’ mystery cults, which were intimately related to female divinities and Dionysian mysteries as pre-philosophical sources of knowledge and that he sees this knowledge represented by Tiresias: “It is Tiresias’ truth – the truth of someone who has been both man and woman, and of the forces to which Oedipus is blind.” This “nocturnal” knowledge is “feminine” – in opposition to Oedipus rational “masculine” knowledge.⁴⁵

According to Castellucci, the corporeal aspect, or the corporeal rhetoric of theatre is feminine as opposed to masculine linguistic rhetoric.⁴⁶ In the *Oedipus*-staging, we see a community of women regulated by the patriarchal rules of Christianity, who give their female bodies to the performance of a pagan patriarchal text. Through this they discover the corporeal force of the feminine, which Tiresias is the mysterious spokesman of. The feminine corporeal “truth” is exposed in the final scene when the nuns unveil themselves as the actors, human and bodies they actually are. They are, however, not exposed in pure corporeality; in the concluding tableau they silently gather with unveiled heads, whereon they silently leave, revealing, on the stage, three living amorphous bodies.

Complementary to the revelation of corporeality as precondition of knowledge, the staging also discloses representation as an essential dialectical force

44. Kulturstruktur, op. cit. Translation K.H. *Das Mutterrecht* is an extensive examination of matriarchal traditions and religion in and beyond the classical Greek culture, published by Johann Jakob Bachofen in 1861, accessible from the *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/Bachofen-Johann-Mutterrecht>.

45. Pearson 2015.

46. Giannachi & Kaye 2002, 153–54.

in human knowledge and self-cognition. Through their theatrical representation of Oedipus and his antagonists, the nuns realize the limitation and failure of rational knowledge. However, simultaneously, this also disrupts their own belief in religious truth, which becomes apparent through their dismantling of the alter and their silent and serious gazing towards the audience.

The three living amorphous bodies in the final scene can be perceived as a symbolic representation of pure corporeality. However, this concluding image with these bodies is ambiguous. It can, and I am sure it did by several spectators who laughed at this point, also be perceived as an ironic punctuation of the tragic seriousness. Simultaneously, it is a metatheatrical paradox, that these pure bodies are a (theatrical) representation.

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