
Unveiling the Invisible Wound

The Relevance of Tragedy in the Public Sphere

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I, Michael Alejandro Delacruz, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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The Suicide of Ajax the Great. Etrurian red-figured calyx-krater, ca. 400–350 BCE

Abstract

Through theoretical and practical engagement with the *Ajax* of Sophocles, this investigation seeks to identify an operative model by which works of art can influence the public sphere outside a discourse-dependent concept of aesthetic reason. It is proposed that Attic tragedy can serve as an archetype for art's civic function that moves beyond the boundaries of a linguistically-mediated act of communication to incorporate notions of intuitive experience, the 'dramatic', or 'the tragic', and clarify how works of art can constructively support the development of civic consciousness. The function of art in public life and the capacity of the aesthetic to influence the formulation of ethical norms have been largely viewed from a discourse-theoretical perspective where aesthetic experience serves primarily as the motivator for second-order conceptual judgments that become the subject of discussion or debate. To the extent that Attic tragedy may have generated a profoundly *non-discursive* experience as much as a discursive or didactic one that shaped the conditions for participatory democracy in Periclean Athens, tragedy may provide an alternative model of the aesthetic as a type of an inherently critical 'limit experience' that sheds light on the world through its conceptual indeterminacy – an experience that raises questions rather than answers them. In addition to examining the use of tragedy as a key aesthetic category in post-Enlightenment metaphysical design and its potential re-application in a discourse theoretical framework, this project incorporates a complementary program of practical experimentation with specific attention given to the development of non-objective pictorial strategies employed in American post-war painting substantially influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. As an example of the process of *intermedial transposition*, the practice component endeavours to refract themes prevalent in Sophocles' *Ajax*, centered on the individual and collective cost of war, through the lens of our own recent, globally-expansive and ideologically-driven military enterprises and into works of visual art.

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Foreword

Notwithstanding my position as writer, researcher, and artist, Sophocles' treatment of the fallen warrior, Ajax, touches upon a broader range of my personal experiences in military, civil, and diplomatic service. This has included military service in Iraq and Afghanistan, additional assignments as defense attaché in Palestine and Jordan, and service as a Washington-based policy officer with the Office of the Secretary of Defense. These experiences have invariably played a role in the development of my art practice. I approach the issues addressed herein from the vantage point of an artist who also over the course of the last decade and a half has borne direct witness to and been actively involved in *the War* (and there are those not-so-few of us of who speak of it as that). These experiences are then, at the risk of appearing immodest, worthwhile to acknowledge. In this regard I find it necessary to clarify that though I have been a participant in several of the major theatre-level operations in the Middle East and Central Asia over the last ten years and am no stranger to war's violent face, I would make no claim to compare my experiences with those comrades-in-arms who slogged it out through the mountains of eastern Afghanistan or suffered endless days in the empty, scorching deserts of western Iraq, in direct contact with the enemy on a day-to-day basis. My individual experience was of a more 'political-military' nature, tactical as it could often be, as it often involved engaging local political leadership, or influencing tactical operations to strategic effect. This is an important qualification, as any discussion of a reflective expression of these experiences as they may take shape either in my work or in the theoretical concerns that emerge here, has less to do with invoking the 'horror' of war, but rather with the desensitising if not dehumanising nature of the political-military systemic machine. This effort is a reflection upon this extensive apparatus that, as I later describe, has been constructed to orchestrate, inform, and direct human activity to coldly quiet, but nonetheless horrific effect.

Michael Alejandro Delacruz
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SECTION ONE

Introduction: From the Shadows of Reason



Figure 1-1 Michael Delacruz. Video still from *Dolours of the Vanquished*, 2013

1.1 From Darkness into Light

*Now then, the great fearful
Ajax of untamed might lies
stricken by a storm that darkens the soul*

Αἴας θολερῶ
κεῖται χειμῶνι νοσήσας
νῦν γὰρ ὁ δεινὸς μέγας ὠμοκρατῆς

(*Ajax*, 205-207)¹

These are the words Sophocles uses to describe the state of mind which afflicts the great hero of the Trojan War – Ajax the Great, Son of Telamon, *strategos* of the Salaminians. His spirit is broken; his rational hold on the world lost, for in his mind he has been betrayed by his own brothers-in-arms who have bestowed the honour of greatest living warrior amongst the Greeks not to him but to his rival Odysseus. It is Odysseus, known for his cunning and guile, who has emerged the victor in the

¹ All translations are edited after those of Sir R.C. Jebb, *Ajax* of Sophocles (Oxford: 1893), unless otherwise noted.

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hoplon krisis – the contest for the arms of the fallen Achilles – and relegated Ajax, who earned his name through bullish strength, ferocity, and bravery on the battlefield, to second position. After considering the merits of both men, the award has been determined by a vote amongst their fellow Argive warriors. Subject perhaps to the subterfuge of the Laecedemonian kings, Agamemnon and Menelaus, or perhaps even the goddess Athena herself, it is nonetheless a judgement that the great warrior cannot abide. The assumptions that have ordered his existence have instantaneously crumbled, and his ability to think clearly, to make sense of the world, has been obscured by the ‘turbid storm’ (θολερῶ χεῖμῶνι, 206-207) which now plagues his inner being. This upending of the world, of his framework of understanding that girded the ethos of the heroic warrior, has thrown him into darkness, and into an occlusion of sense and reason that has given way to delusion and madness. In this blindness, he has directed his fury and vengeance upon the army’s livestock, spoils from the conflict, hacking and slaughtering the sheep and cattle throughout the night in an orgy of blood and gore, reveling in the mistaken belief that his victims are the Greeks themselves. Indeed he has reserved special retribution for a single captured beast who in his state he identifies as Odysseus himself, bound to a pillar awaiting the further torture and ‘crimsoning by the scourge’. Gradually, he ‘regains his reason’ (ἔμψρων καθίσταται, 306) and upon awakening from his hallucinations the mentally disfigured Ajax finds himself amidst the bloody evidence of his work only to realise that the agony of his perceived betrayal is now compounded by the shame of his own unravelling. Now considered a traitor amongst the other Greek contingents, not only has he been dishonoured by others, he has dishonoured himself. All the valour obtained over years on the battlefields of Ilium has ended in nought. For Ajax there shall be no more glory, no redemption either in victory or in a valiant death on the battlefield.

 From the Shadows of Reason

ἰὼ
 πόροι ἀλίρροθοι
 πάραλά τ' ἄντρα καὶ νέμος ἐπάκτιον,
 πολὺν πολὺν με δαρὸν τε δῆ
 κατείχεται ἄμφι Τροίαν χρόνον: ἀλλ' οὐκέτι μ', οὐκ
 ἔτ' ἀμπνοᾶς ἔχοντα:
 τοῦτό τις φρονῶν ἴστω.

O'
by these ways of crashing sea
of the trees that shade and places to hide
for so long, so long
you held me at Troy. Yet no longer
will you know my breath:
Of this, let them understand.
 (Ajax 412-416)

With these words of resignation the Ajax of Sophocles commits himself to his fate. Once proud hero of the Trojan War, he finds no other solution than to choose death by his own hand, an act otherwise unthinkable to the heroic warrior.

The behavior and fate of Ajax has been often interpreted as the just consequence of an overreaching *hybris* and arrogance toward the divine order of the gods.¹ The outcome of the *hoplon krisis* in favor of Odysseus has likewise been thought to represent the increasing obsolescence of a heroic code that would find less relevance in the emergence of a more reasoned social order of the fifth-century Athenian city state. Ajax is of the 'old school' and Odysseus of the new. Yet a more sensitive reading suggests that his ultimate suicide is as much an emancipatory act. Faced with an irrevocable exclusion from the warrior caste to which he was once intimately bound, Ajax, worn by the ravages of a ten-year conflict, chooses death in a final gesture of liberation from the subjectively alienating strictures of martial culture that, despite his deeds of courage, have failed him. His suicide is an act by which the integrity of his self is restored in defiance of the social order that has

¹ In Sophocles' telling, Athena strongly implies this: "*see that your lips never utter arrogant words to the gods... for the sensible are friends of the gods, and the evil are abhorred.*" {...εἰσορῶν ὑπέρκοπον μηδὲν ποτ' εἴπησ' αὐτὸς εἰς θεοὺς ἔπος, ... τοὺς δὲ σώφρονας θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακοὺς. 127-133} Here, at the very onset of the play 'reason' or 'sensible-thinking' is equated with goodness, what will be a recurrent theme in the *Ajax*.

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disfigured it. For Ajax himself, this is an act of imbued with *reasoned* meaning: “...let them understand...” As such, the darkness of death, becomes, paradoxically, the light of liberation to make his life once again sensible. “*O’ Darkness, my Light...*”[ὦ σκότος, ἐμὸν φάος,] he implores as he reconciles himself to the underworld, “...take me to dwell with you.” [ἔλεσθέ μ’ οἰκήτορα, 394-397]

This association of Ajax with this counterintuitive inversion of the complementarities of darkness and light, death and life, and madness and reason, is not bespoke to Sophocles nor to Attic tragedy. We find its earliest existing expression in epic poetry, where, in Book XVII of the *Iliad*, amidst the miraculous darkness and resulting confusion in which the Argives find themselves while battling to recover the body of the fallen Patroclus, Ajax cries out a prayer to the Supreme God of Thunder:

Ζεῦ πάτερ ἀλλὰ σὺ ῥῦσαι ὑπ’ ἠέρος υἷας Ἀχαιῶν,
ποιήσον δ’ αἴθρην, δὸς δ’ ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδέσθαι:
ἐν δὲ φάει καὶ ὄλεσσον, ἐπεὶ νύ τοι εὖαδεν οὕτως.

*Father Zeus, deliver the sons of the Achaeans from under the dark mist.
Restore the brightness of day, grant sight to our eyes.
Slay us at least in the light, since your pleasure, it seems, is to slay us.*

[*Iliad*, 17.645-647]²

As Longinus notes in *De Sublimitate*, in this passage, Ajax’s seemingly paradoxical appeal for deliverance from the darkness, to be ‘slain in the light’, is a prayer specific to the heroic warrior.³ In the dark mist, a contrivance of the gods to aid the Trojans in battle, the Achaeans find themselves impotent and devoid of any possibility to demonstrate valour in combat. The fundamental architecture of the warrior ethos is suspended in the darkness, and deliverance is sought in the illumination of noble death. That this conceptual inversion particular to the man-of-arms is played out in the dramatization of Ajax’s suicide in Sophocles’ rendering some three centuries after its articulation in epic poetry suggests a continuing

² Translation by W.B. Stanford, “Light and Darkness in Sophocles’ *Ajax*” 1978, 189-197. Stanford opens his essay citing Longinus’ reference of this passage in *De Sublimitate*.

³ *Ibid.*, 189.

relevance in the evocation of the warrior's internal disfiguration – not only in Classical Athens but perhaps even now.

As a recent example, the 2009 production of *Ajax* by the London-based *Love and Madness* ensemble steadfastly embraced such a sympathetic, introspective reading of the hero, transposing the historical setting of the play from the encampments along the shores of Ilium to a front-line battlefield hospital during the Great War. Amidst the atmospheric backdrop of exploding shells and the wails of the wounded, the shift in place and time imbued the dramatic language of Sophocles with a tangibility and plausibility that resonated with contemporary sensibilities. The context of conflict no longer a mytho-historical abstraction, the plight of the hero is witnessed through the refractive lens of industrialized carnage, shellshock, and tenuous regimental loyalties, where Ajax becomes not simply the victim of his own self-image, but a victim of the horror and absurdity of circumstance. Through this insightful transposition, the interior struggle of Ajax becomes more accessible to the modern spectator, and the narrative becomes less an issue of some 'tragic flaw' of the ill-fated hero and more a window to the relationship between the individual and the subjectively distorting conditions of collective regulation and the disintegration of martial order.

What was so compelling about the *Love and Madness* interpretation of *Ajax* was how the shift of time and place gave the drama the character of cultural critique, albeit one that would perhaps have had greater resonance in 1917. The Great War however, is still a relatively proximate waypoint in the development of our collective consciousness, moral self-awareness, and geopolitical circumstance. In transposing the locus of action to the not-so-distant past, the production offered greater possibility to see ourselves in the thoughts and motivations of Odysseus, or Teucer, or Tecmessa. As such the experience of the *Ajax*, and his appeal for a redemption in darkness, alternatively presented amidst the traumatic distress and exhaustion of prolonged trench warfare, gave pause to reflect on the historically recurrent question of whether tragedy has critical relevance to us in the present day.

In the context of practice-related fine art research, this inverted employment of

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darkness and light provides an effective visual and conceptual hermeneutic from which to explore the question of tragedy's continued relevance in terms of contemporary visual art and to address the following questions: to what extent can a painting, sculpture, or visual installation – mediums that subordinate or otherwise encapsulate the narrative continuum of their dramatic sources – function as tragedy? And to what practical or critical effect can these invocations have for a contemporary viewing public? This is to suggest an expanded view of tragedy, typically thought of as a literary or dramatic genre, to include other non-literary forms of artistic expression. This also involves examining the degree to which tragedy itself, as a mode of aesthetic experience, can be said to still have critical relevance in a time where the concerns of modernity (much less antiquity) are often claimed to be outmoded or superseded. From the standpoint of aesthetics in general, there is a long-standing precedent for these questions, most notably the explicit interest in tragedy as a pivotal category in post-Enlightenment philosophy and in particular German speculative idealism. Likewise, the appropriation of themes or subjects from tragedy, or an appeal to a tragic sensibility, appears recurrently in the in history of literature, theatre, and music and indeed in the history of visual art from antiquity to modernity culminating with its reception by the Abstract Expressionists through Nietzsche's particular formulation of it in *The Birth of Tragedy*. More recently the emergent discipline of classical reception studies addresses the interpretation and appropriation of classical antiquity in subsequent eras and in many areas of human enterprise to identify the instrumental value of the past and highlight the concerns of the time in which it is employed.

From this expanded application of tragedy, the complementarity of light and darkness also finds itself an analogue in the dialectic of human enlightenment and its negation in the philosophies of consciousness and of history. Its traumatic expression within the *Ajax* is particularly apt in the critical re-appraisal of enlightenment and the disfiguring tendencies of instrumental reason that characterized the post-Idealist theoretical investigations of the twentieth century and which fuel a continuing critique of culture and society in the present day. In its

immediate post-Enlightenment manifestation, the use of tragedy as an aspect of metaphysical design in philosophy was centered on its affirmative role in problematizing the fundamental issue of human freedom and the progressive role of reason in its attainment. What is worthy of consideration, and the inversion of darkness into light in Sophocles' *Ajax* to be particularly useful here, is how tragedy might serve to articulate the acutely disfiguring tendencies of reason and model our constructive response to them not least through a transgressive unveiling of their wounding effects.

1.2 The Ethical Life and the Dark Side of Reason

That these disfigurements attributed to reason are inherently detrimental to the progressive development of the structures that frame and govern our collective existence, the consideration of tragedy as a potential antidote to this and other social pathologies relies upon (1) a teleological model of mankind's ethical development and (2) on the negative, dialectical relationship between rational progress and the corollary afflictions that are inimical to it. As such, this investigation of tragedy's continued relevance in art is supported by (but not necessarily centered on) these two ideas found respectively in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Horkeimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These texts lay out a concern not only for the role of reason in the development of the 'ethical life' (in the case of Hegel) but also, as with the *Dialectic*, an awareness of reason's dark side and the gravity of its costs. They book-end a trajectory of philosophical inquiry that intimates the potential of the aesthetic to cultivate man's political-ethical development and as a possible corrective to the darker shades of instrumental reason. This reexamination of tragedy as a form of aesthetic expression with tangible agency in political life is therefore situated within a context of German philosophical thought initially laid out in Hegel's onto-epistemologic teleology (with great debt to both Kant and Schelling) and punctuated by the subsequent critique of reason spearheaded by Horkeimer and Adorno and their colleagues at the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, more commonly known as the Frankfurt School. It is worth

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provisionally examining the notion of reason as a progressive force in history and its subsequent critique to frame the manner in which tragedy will be applied throughout this text.

Hegel elevated the philosophy of consciousness to the level of Absolute Spirit's journey toward self-reconciliation,⁴ a journey which unfolds in the process of humanity's (i.e., individuated spirit's) socio-political evolution. In doing so, he was able to move beyond the summative practical ethics of Kant based on the reasoned self-regulation of individuals and posit an objective ethical totality that is characterized by progressive moments in the development of Spirit itself. In the context of his tripartite system, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) emerges as the result of a reconciliation of the universal and the particular in the evolution of Spirit's self-consciousness whereby "the implicit unity of itself [*i.e.*, *Spirit*] and substance, now becomes that unity explicitly and unites the universal essence and its individualized reality. The latter it raises to the former and acts *ethically*, the former it brings down to the latter and realizes its End, the substance which had an existence only in thought."⁵ For Hegel, 'substance' corresponds to the overarching structures which order the collective life of human beings e.g., 'the Polis' or 'the Nation'. Correspondingly, 'consciousness' is embodied in the collection of individuals, or citizens, who transform thought into action to realise those structures.⁶ The ethical life comes into being through the course of man's socio-political development where the 'Idea' of political freedom is actualised. As Hegel would later clarify in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ethical life is "the concept of freedom which has become the existing world."⁷ In the course of this developmental process there occur specific (ethical) moments or problematisations which Spirit works through

⁴ Spirit (*Geist*) is the category Hegel uses to define the ultimate reality which moves through stages of awareness based upon a model of subjective Consciousness that comes to realise itself (in Self Consciousness) and be reconciled with itself (Absolute Knowing, i.e., 'Spirit that knows itself as Spirit.' PS 808). This universal particularises itself in the natural world and moves through these stages of awareness through the development of man in history. In elevating the Kantian model of subjectivity to a meta-ontology he is able to escape the delimitations of a subject-centred ethics and posit an ethical totality that is no longer atomistic, i.e., based on the principle of natural rights afforded the individual.

⁵ G.W.F Hegel. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. 266.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 189.

and subsequently overcomes. These ‘negative instances of freedom’ are critical junctures where the strictures of custom or law are transgressed at a moment where it is revealed that they are not consonant with the realization of the Idea (of freedom).

It is important here to note, at least provisionally, that tragedy provides a key illustrative example for Hegel as an instance of this transgressive operation in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. In his discussion of ‘Ethical Action’ where the tensions between human and divine law are problematised, Antigone’s defiance of the established political order, represented by Creon, functions as an instance where what is superficially deemed ethical is only considered so “merely by accident” or caprice and the law is transgressed knowingly. Antigone’s crime and subsequent guilt is the requisite opposition required of Spirit to acknowledge its opposite as its own actuality and ultimately assimilate and overcome this particular inhibiting moment enroute to the actualisation of the ethical life in its absolute sufficiency. While Hegel references the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology* only in passing reference, one suspects that the *Antigone* and tragedy more generally informs a model of transgressive resistance which structures the internal dialectical process of man’s ethical development. Although, as will be further discussed, Hegel’s thinking on tragedy throughout the breadth of his work is multivalent and takes on alternative characters, this suspicion is largely borne out near the close of the *Phenomenology* where the ‘Religion in the Form of Art’ is discussed to describe culminating movements in the development of Spirit towards Absolute Knowing. Tragedy is concretely described as a mechanism of resistance or opposition to established ethical accretions through the agonistic juxtaposition of competing forms of legislation played out on stage, at least in those critical moments of development specific to the Greek *polis*.⁸ The implicit possibilities were not lost on the young

⁸ Op. cit., 443-444. Following the discussion of tragedy, Hegel goes on to describe comedy and subsequently the ‘Revealed Religion’ of Christianity as higher moments in Spirit’s development, culminating in the actualised systematic philosophical wisdom of Absolute Knowing. Given the linear, teleological structure of the *Phenomenology*, one can readily assume that his comments on tragedy refer exclusively to that form of dramatic expression specific to Greek antiquity. Nietzsche, however, despite his vociferous disavowal of all things Hegelian, did not fail to exploit the

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Nietzsche who would later see tragedy as a viable model for a transgressive and transformational aesthetics to be applicable to his own time in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Already in Hegel then, we see the role of tragedy either in actual application or as suggestive metaphor take on a transgressive role in identifying the impediments in the progressive attainment of the ethical life; but it is of a distinctly affirmative and constructive function with respect to the idea of *reason* itself. In the specific stream in critical theory explicitly concerned with the critique of reason's emancipatory potential, the categorical progressivism inherent in Hegel's 'pursuit of the ethical life' (and later transmuted in Marx's historical-materialist project) has been challenged by a much dimmer view of Enlightenment progress. After the horrors of industrialized genocide had been revealed to the world, Horkeimer and Adorno levied the indictment that Enlightenment is the radicalization of the very mythologically-driven impulses toward the domination of nature that reason had purportedly transcended.

In searching for a model upon which to launch the radical critique of the Enlightenment, Horkeimer and Adorno discover it within Hegel himself. It is in the struggle between faith and Enlightenment in Hegel's section on Culture in the *Phenomenology* that they find a dialectical model which they can turn upon the progressive idea of reason itself.⁹ In Spirit's path to Self-consciousness, the assertions of faith, viewed positively as unadulterated, unmediated expressions of religious truth, remain in recurrent (violent) conflict with reason, which attempts to subvert the pronouncements of faith through reasoned proposition and argumentation. In their diametric opposition, the categorical difference of their very nature, one never vanquishes the other and they interact like boxers fighting each other's shadow. They both serve to support the journey of Spirit towards self-recognition and reconciliation amidst this constant interplay of conflicting aspects of its personality. Horkeimer and Adorno adopt this construct, recasting the struggle between faith and reason as one between myth and enlightenment and

possibilities for an aesthetic of transgression that Hegel's construct opens. Cf. Section 2.b below.

⁹ Ibid. 329ff. On Horkeimer and Adorno's appropriation of Hegel cf. James Schmidt, "Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*", 26ff.

abandoning the teleological drive of Spirit's progressive development. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers no resolution to this dynamic, and it was largely left to the subsequent generations of the Frankfurt School to resurrect the affirmative aspect of the Enlightenment project largely through the deliberative aspects of public discourse.

Within the last fifteen years or so, critical theorists such as Albrecht Wellmer, Axel Honneth, Martin Seel, and Christophe Menke, have turned to the aesthetic as a possible corrective to the mechanisms of discursive interaction that frame the practical decisions of political life. This has opened up opportunities to conceptualize how art functions as an operator within or with respect to the public sphere. While these investigations have tended to focus on the consciousness-raising and redemptive characteristics of the aesthetic in order to address the aporias of reason believed to be insufficiently addressed in speculative philosophy, they have addressed the issue of tragedy only sparingly. This project endeavors to reengage Attic tragedy as an archetype for a socially transformative aesthetics and in so doing re-appropriate some of the principal features of this long standing tradition, which began with the challenges to Kant's epistemology, through the philosophical systems of Schelling and Hegel, and ultimately culminating with Nietzsche's radical reformulation of the question in the *Birth of Tragedy*. (Indeed it could be argued that Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* prefigured some of the later insights of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.) This instrumental re-appropriation of tragedy from the speculative tradition is applied here on three fronts:

- (1) from a theoretical perspective, tragedy is employed as a metaphor to address the antinomy between subjective freedom and objective necessity and the grounding of human agency in the world,
- (2) from ethical or practical perspective, tragedy is presented as a model for the way the aesthetic dimension engages with non-aesthetic discourse as a transgressive yet corrective mechanism within the contemporary public

sphere that has the potential to shape public life,

- (3) from an aesthetic perspective, the mythical narratives of Attic tragedy, transposed in context and form, are maintained to have an enduring aesthetic and hermeneutic viability that harbours the potential toward substantive cultural critique.

In applying this multivalent model of tragedy as a transgressive mechanism in the public sphere (and one with the potential to address the persistent effects of the protracted armed conflict specific to our time) its development and manifestation at each level will be considered in kind.

1.3 The Three Faces of Tragedy

The requirement to approach tragedy in comprehensive if explicitly trifurcated fashion is attributable to the post-Marxist critique of modernity that describes a fragmentation of modern rationality into three principal domains of theoretical, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive reason, a construct arguably Neo-Kantian in perspective as it aligns to the division of Kant's three critiques into cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic realms. It was Max Weber who initially grounded this demarcation in sociological terms, describing a process of increased specialisation and systemisation of various domains of human knowledge to include the intellectual, political-economic, and the aesthetic. In Weber's eyes, this progressive specialisation is hardly benign as it is a largely deleterious result of increasing rationalisation and mediation of modern life by competing and increasingly instrumental forms of knowledge that have replaced the more integrated, normative fabric of existence governed by tradition, custom, and belief where now "what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another".¹⁰ This disintegrative and destabilising view of modern rationality, fraught with conflict, would prove highly influential for later efforts in the 'critique of reason'

¹⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p 26.

quintessentially assuming form in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As Jurgen Habermas would later seek to revive the Enlightenment project through his concept of communicative reason, he identified within this historically pessimistic line of thought (targeting Marx, Weber, and Horkheimer and Adorno) the somewhat paradoxical appeal, over and against the linking of societal rationalisation with an expansion of instrumental reason, to a “vague notion of a [more] encompassing societal rationality” - whether in the concept of an association of free producers, in the historical model an ethically rational conduct of life, or in the idea of fraternal relations with a resurrected nature.”¹¹ In a re-integrative manoeuvre, Habermas would in turn recast these Weberian divisions as the ‘differentiated spheres of validity’ of propositional truth, normative rightness, and expressive sincerity which provide ground for alternative if not altogether competing validity claims which are re-constitutively harmonised through the process of communicative action and deliberative argumentation.

Section Two more specifically traces the rise and fall of tragedy’s fortunes as a philosophical instrument in post-Enlightenment thought and more specifically in relation to the critique of reason. But this provisional discussion of differentiated validity spheres is required up-front as it is the effectively underwriting construct of this investigation by which the concept of tragedy as aesthetic phenomenon (and a specifically visual one) serves as an archetype for the way in which expressive avowals from within the aesthetic dimension can serve to permeate the boundaries of cognitive and practical domains of reason. Working firmly within the spirit of his times, in the attempt to take further the insights of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, Schelling rather impassively assumed the validity of his claim that tragedy serves as the paragon for the aesthetic to address profound theoretical and ethical questions, and a similar assurance governs the holistic integration of the aesthetic (and tragedy in particular) at work in the Hegelian system. As a concept which has gained

¹¹ Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol I.*, p. 144. For a discussion between the relation between Weber’s and Habermas’ relationship in the development of the concept of ‘differentiation of spheres, see Austin Harrington, “Value Spheres or ‘Validity Spheres’?: Weber, Habermas, and Modernity”.

currency in contemporary philosophy, the differentiation of validity spheres has now rendered such philosophical self-possession a rather dubious position to assume.

Although, Nietzsche's defence of Wagner in *The Birth of Tragedy* is indebted to this singularly integrative mindset, he effectively foreshadowed acute divisions between cognitive, ethical and aesthetic realms and posited tragedy, both originally and in his day, as a re-integrative mechanism to trespass the boundaries that separate the spheres of human understanding and experience. This implied capacity for tragedy to operate in each of those three realms is provisionally represented in Figure 1-2.

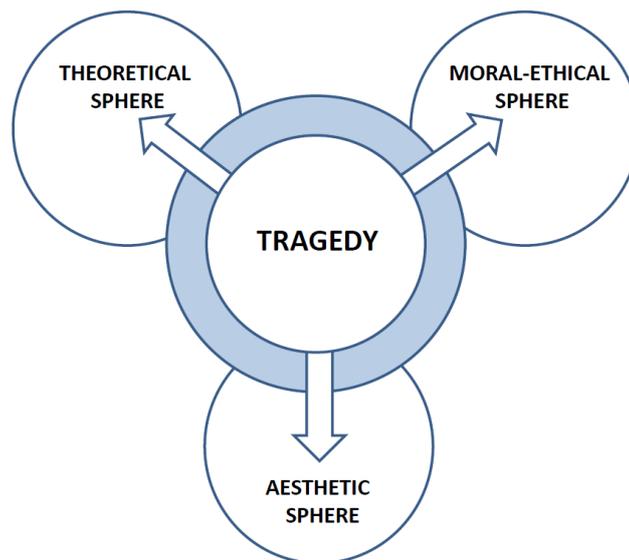


Figure 1-2, Tragedy's engagement with the three spheres of knowledge

This investigation will attempt to make a similar claim that visual art harbours the potential to substantively address theoretical and ethical concerns through the phenomenological power of aesthetic experience, but in so doing capitalise on certain conceptual mechanisms that remain active in *The Birth of Tragedy*. At the onset however, it is necessary, given the way they appear as terms recurrently employed throughout this text, to describe these mechanisms through which an exploded concept of tragedy can simultaneously operate within and through

theoretical, moral-ethical, and aesthetic spheres. These are, correspondingly, *abstraction*, *transgression*, and *the sublime*. Additionally, Nietzsche's ideas on tragedy are both a known historical influence on the development of Abstract Expressionism in the mid-twentieth century and an effective theoretical lens through which to view them and Section Three shall substantively explore these connections. However, I will offer brief remarks here on how these mechanisms operate in pictorial terms as residual forms of signification activated by this appropriated understanding of tragedy within the work of New York School to initially suggest potential of these attributes to traverse boundaries between aesthetic and non-aesthetic domains through the works of art.

A. Abstraction in the Theoretical Sphere

In the early writings of Nietzsche, abstraction plays a significant role in his explicit critique of theoretical reason, against which, along with the ethical domain, he positions tragedy as a corrective antidote. In the most basic philosophical terms, abstraction typically denotes the mental process of concept formation where specific subordinate concepts or empirical phenomena are cognitively synthesised to form a more generalised concept. To the extent that the resulting concept itself is immaterial or non-corporeal, this cognitive product can be said to be 'an abstraction'. Within the Hegelian system, the abstraction of a universal (which connotes a metaphysical existent outside the mind of the knowing subject) from a set of particulars provides a special case in point, as the positing of the universal in its corresponding determinateness, and specifically as a *notion* which has an actuality as a determinate concept, can have the paradoxical effect of rendering the abstracted universal *concrete*.¹² A 'concrete universal' inheres in its particulars as

¹² Despite the connotation of ambiguity, in both the *Science of Logic* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel uses the term 'notion' to refer to concrete universals. "[T]he universal of the notion is not a mere sum of features common to several things, confronted by a particular which enjoys an existence of its own. It is, on the contrary, self-particularising or self-specifying.. For the sake both of cognition and of our practical conduct, it is of the utmost importance that the real universal should not be confused with what is merely held in common [i.e. the abstract general]. *Science of Logic*, §163.

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their essential determination, rather than serve as a mere cognitive reference to their commonalities. (The concept of ‘Freedom’ for example, obtains its actuality qua concept, through the articulation of its individual instances.) The ontological specificity associated with the concrete universal, that is its character as a knowable existent, is of no small significance to the early Nietzsche as it suggests, through the process of conceptual abstraction which in turn yields a concrete notion, a direct access to ‘truth’ through the *cognitive* faculties. One of Nietzsche’s principal aims in the *Birth of Tragedy* is to take issue with the ontological pretensions of this claim and propose tragedy, as a profoundly aesthetic experience, as a counter to this illusory monopoly on truth. In setting up this contest, he sketches out the figure of the ‘theoretical man’ [*theoretische Mensch*], for whom Socrates provides the archetype, who suffers from a “profound delusion... namely the imperturbable belief that thought, as it follows the thread of causality, reaches down to the deepest abysses of being, and it is capable of not simply of understanding existence, but even of correcting it.”¹³

To recognise the degree to which Nietzsche has set his gunsights on abstract concept formation it is useful to refer to his essay “On Truth and Lies in the Non-moral Sense”, written the year following the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work that is perhaps most notable for its critique of the conceptual limitations of language and discursivity. Language itself becomes the initial, imperfect container for the formation of concepts, to eventually be followed by the particular rules governing the construction of specialised forms of knowledge typified by the sciences. Built on such an imperfect edifice, language could never gain access to, in thoroughly Kantian terminology, the thing-in-itself (i.e. pure truth). Here he stages a more explicit agon between the ‘man of reason’ and the ‘man of intuition’, where “the latter is as unreasonable as the former is unartistic”, and expresses in more incisive, phenomenological terms the redemptive primacy of sensuous expression over rational cognition:

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 73

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Whereas the man who is guided by concepts and abstractions only succeeds thereby in warding off misfortune, is unable to compel the abstractions themselves to yield him happiness, and strives merely to be as far as possible from pain, the man of intuition, standing in the midst of a culture, reaps directly from his intuitions not just protection from harm but also a constant stream of brightness, a lightening of spirit, redemption, and release.¹⁴

Looking back at it retroactively, it becomes even clearer the onto-epistemological concerns (that extend from a deeply rooted anxiety with Hegelian metaphysics) that are in play in Nietzsche's formulation of tragedy. Extending his assessment of the demise of tragedy to the culture of reason in ancient Greece, he writes of an 'eternal struggle' between theoretical and tragic world views. He forebodes of a "catastrophe slumbering in the womb of theoretical culture" involving the recognition "that all understanding by its very nature is limited and conditional" ultimately rejecting the claim to the universal validity, and concrete determinateness, of our cognitive abstractions. But it is not the indictment of theoretical reason and of abstract concept formation that is compelling in itself but rather Nietzsche's response to it. The hollow promise of theoretical reason is countered through tragedy by the experience of the Dionysian, of an intuitive encounter with the essence of reality itself, activated however, by the *spirit of music*.

While the nature of the Apollonian/Dionysian dualism will be discussed more extensively in Section Three, in the context of Nietzsche's framing of the conflict between the universal validity of conceptual abstractions and tragic experience, it is critical to note his appeal to the *non-mimetic* nature of music as the 'myth-making' catalyst for the an experience of the Dionysian. Eschewing what he considered to be the degenerate, quasi-mimetic 'tone-poems' of later Attic dithyramb, Nietzsche postulates a form of 'true Dionysian music' which accompanied tragedy and its originating ritual forms that activated an indeterminate experience of the mythical "felt keenly as an example of something universal and true which gazes out into infinity."¹⁵ Subsequently referring to this form of musical expression as a reflection of the world-Will [*Wille*], we see his debt to the aesthetic insights of Schopenhauer,

¹⁴ Friederich Nietzsche "On Truth and Lying in the Non-Moral Sense" in Geuss and Speirs eds. p. 153

¹⁵ The Birth of Tragedy, p. 83.

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for whom the Will represents the timeless, boundless ground of all existence. In *The World as Will and Representation*, in a comparative discussion of differing forms art he says of music:

In it we do not recognize the copy, the repetition, of any Idea of the inner nature of the world. Yet...its effect on man's innermost nature is so powerful, and it is so completely and profoundly understood by him in his innermost being as a universal language, whose distinctiveness surpasses even the world of perception itself.¹⁶

In the broader context of his aesthetics, Schopenhauer essentially privileges music with the ability to present the otherwise unrepresentable.¹⁷ In adopting this construct to support his formulation of Dionysian music which catalyses an experience of the unrepresentable and shatters the fictions of cognitive abstraction, he does so by offering up, in aesthetic terms, a non-mimetic *counter-abstraction* that purports to grant access to a competing universality. Clearly this schema of abstraction/counter-abstraction conflates two alternative logics specific to their respective domains: the cognitive and the aesthetic. But what matters here is not the difference in their domain-specific architectures but their interrelation in offering up competing claims to universal validity. Nietzsche describes this confrontation in varying terms, which are discussed in subsequent sections. However, one can argue that in the most general sense, the experience of the Dionysian in tragedy operates as an aesthetically provoked, indeterminate negation of the conceptually understood universal in the theoretical domain.

That the stand-off has been poised opens the possibility, some two centuries after Schopenhauer's insights, of a similar, non-mimetic intervention to 'present the unrepresentable' on visual and perhaps more concrete terms. Not unselfconsciously, the movement towards non-objectivity in the work of the New York School was a similarly motivated effort to create the "self-evident image of revelation".¹⁸ Unlike the immaterial, 'indeterminate' quality of non-mimetic music, in the context of visual art this effort manifests itself in a more determinate way. The New York

¹⁶ Friederich Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, §52

¹⁷ Nuno Nabais, *Nietzsche and the Metaphysics of the Tragic*, p. 28

¹⁸ Barnett Newman, "The Abstract Sublime", Vol 1. No 6, December 1948, p. 51-53.

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School artists endeavoured to evoke the competing universal through a highly individuated and concrete expression (i.e., the painting) which asserts a being-unto-itself (Figure 1-3). Although commensurate with it at that time, it would be erroneous to conflate non-objectivity or non-representation with the idea of aesthetic counter-abstraction¹⁹; it is the staging of the universal validity claim through the work of art that is essential. Adorno captures this essence when he declares:

The dialectical postulate that the particular is the universal has its model in art...[R]eason functions in aesthetics as total, identity-positing reason. Itself purely a product,... the work of art ultimately knows nothing of the non-identical.²⁰

B. Transgression in the Ethical Sphere

In our previous discussion of Hegel's reference to the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* we have observed how tragedy functions as a representation of transgressive resistance to illustrate the obstacles in the ethical dimension that Spirit must endure and overcome on its path to Absolute Freedom. This model is hard-wired into the Hegelian system. During the Jena period in the years prior to the development of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel explored a more organic, social-developmental model of the ethical life. Specifically in *System of Ethical Life*, and largely taking aim at the Hobbesian concept of natural right expressed in the *Leviathan* by positing an ethical totality on the basis of an abstract concept of subjective freedom, Hegel describes the central role of 'crime' or 'transgression' [*Verbrechen*] as negative acts of freedom that have the potentially constructive role of challenging and problematising obstacles to the ethical integration of society that have ossified in the normative architectures of custom and law.²¹ The criminal act then serves to stress the

¹⁹ Cf. A. Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*, p 31., who suggests that the ontological force of abstraction in painting is not in the elimination of the literal, but in the continuing effort to resolve the issues that arise from pictorial abstraction itself, "[A]bstraction seems to be the pure presence of the yet-to-be-resolved,... pure becoming".

²⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 102. What Adorno appears to be declaring here is that the work of art in its universality is unself-conscious of its own particularity, and vice versa.

²¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life*, Section II "The Negative of Freedom or Transgression", 129ff.

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boundary conditions of subjective freedom, and as such “subjects make destructive use of the fact that, as the bearer of rights to liberty, they are integrated only negatively into the collective life of society.”²² In *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel appears to be describing an evident sociological dynamic in the development of the ethical life rather than an immanent impulse, avoiding any substantive analysis of the motivations for criminality, yet one is left with the sense that it arises principally from an inadequate framework for governing collective existence. In the *Phenomenology* this dynamic of transgression makes its way into Hegel's abstract system of socio-historical development of Spirit in its own absolute process of self-recognition and reconciliation. The transgressive expression of negative freedom to problematise the obstacles to ethical life (and overcome them) is transmuted into the corrective response of the 'ethical consciousness' against its own capriciousness, and against the divide between what is ethical and what is actual. Transgression is the act of violent resistance against the existing normative structures necessitated by the recognition of this divide and its unacceptability, that is, one motivated by guilt. As we have noted earlier in the introduction, Hegel finds an illustrative example in the *Antigone*:

[The] ethical consciousness is more complete, its guilt more inexcusable if it knows beforehand the law and power which it opposes, and knows it to be ethical merely by accident, and like Antigone, knowingly commits the crime [*das Verbrechen begeht*]... The ethical consciousness must on account of this actuality and on account of its deed, acknowledge its opposite as its own actuality, must acknowledge its guilt.²³

'We suffer because we know we have erred.'

Within the dynamic of Spirit's ethical development, the actions of Antigone serve as an example of its own subjective recognition of the inadequacy of its normative objectifications. In his subsequent reflections on “Religion in the Form of Art”, this diremptive operation of transgressive resistance against inadequate ethical

Written in Jena in 1802-03, it is the first complete, discernible expression of Hegel's philosophic system.

²² Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 20.

²³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.284. Quoting *Antigone* 926.

accretions manifests itself as a progressive development in art and becomes essential to tragedy itself.

On this point it should be noted that while the word *Verbrechen* which Hegel uses in the *System of Ethical Life* and the *Phenomenology* to define the violation of normative systems of law that delimit the practical conditions of human freedom is often translated as ‘transgression’, it is also synonymous with ‘crime’ or ‘offense’. Its root component [*-brechen*, ‘to break’] is perhaps more aggressive in tone than its Latin-derived correspondent [*transgressus*, ‘to have crossed over’] which suggests having *traversed a boundary*. Yet in Hegel’s employment he is clearly utilising the term to describe specific moments which negatively challenge the boundary conditions of ethical action and that carry with them a phenomenologically diremptive character with the violent realisation that what is actual is not ethical. This carries with it a certain redemptive function, as the necessity for the actual to be ethical is affirmed through a momentary reconciliation of the universal and the particular. The transgression...

...directly expresses the unity of actuality and substance; it declares that actuality is not an accident of essence, but that, in union with essence, it is not granted to right which is not true right.²⁴

Despite his anxieties, and seemingly disavowing the systemic architecture of the Hegelian system, the early Nietzsche betrays a profound influence by the ideas which shape it. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (though the word *Verbrechen* does not appear except in specific idiomatic instances, e.g. ‘crime against nature’), a similar notion of a ‘breaking of boundaries’ is at work that carries with it a negative challenge to the fabric of norms and morality through a momentary collapsing of the divide between the universal and the particular. In articulating the operation of Dionysian in tragedy, Nietzsche adopts Schopenhauer’s principle of individuation – *the principium individuationis* – where empirical objects can only be individuated given the cognitive grounds of ‘sufficient reason’ within the mind of the thinking subject. As

²⁴ Ibid. p. 284.

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artifacts of mind, they are effectively mere appearances [*Erscheinungen*] conditioned by our existence in the phenomenal world and merely limited, partial representations of the essential Will, or universal ground of all existence. For Nietzsche the affective capacity of tragedy as art is in its dual nature whereby the elegantly individuated forms of Apollonian semblance [*Schein*], which he associates with the discursive character of intelligible concepts and imbue art with its seductive quality, violently give way to the Dionysian shattering or ‘breaking-apart’ of the *principium individuationis* through the aesthetic counter-abstraction activated through the spirit of music in the tragic chorus.

This insight leads us to understand Greek tragedy as a Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again in an Apollinian world of images... [As] the objectification of a Dionysian state, the vision represents not Apolline redemption in semblance, but a rather a breaking-asunder (shattering) of the individual and its becoming one with the primal being itself. [...*sondern im Gegenteil das Zerbrechen des Individuums und sein Einswerden mit dem Ursein darstellt*]²⁵

The likening of this dissolution of the individuating principle to a violent breaking apart [*Zerbrechen*, or alternatively *Zerspringen*] figures recurrently throughout the text, linked as it is to subsequent moment of an intuitive apprehension, if but fleeting, of ultimate reality, “the unvarnished expression of truth.”²⁶ Here, Nietzsche’s ‘anti-moral’ disposition becomes quite evident.²⁷ Unlike a Schillerian interpretation which characterises tragedy as an experience which reinforces or edifies the moral view of the world²⁸, the Dionysian component of tragedy, gives rise to an experience which reveals the limitation of any such view. The counter-abstraction of Dionysian music, which negates the legitimacy of cognitive abstraction has its correlate in the ethical dimension as the negation of

²⁵ F. Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 41.

²⁷ Cf. Section Four below, and Nicole Loreaux’s discussion of tragedy’s ‘anti-political’ character.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 106. Nietzsche, citing Schiller, acknowledges that for many the redeeming quality of tragedy is its ability to inspire “by good and noble principles when we see the hero sacrificed in the name of a moral view of the world”, but holds this as a particularly limited and anaesthetic appreciation, likened to the discursive acknowledgement of ‘poetic justice’ or perhaps more colloquially, ‘the moral of the story.’ Though it must be said that Nietzsche is still substantially indebted to Schiller’s views on the role of the aesthetic as a corrective or balancing force in man’s collective existence.

normative, cultural or even political constructions. Affirming this association between ‘the state-founding Apollo’ and the *principium individuationis*, he insists that “the state and the homeland cannot survive without the affirmation of the individual personality.”²⁹ The momentary collapse of the individuating principle and exposure to the universal world-Will inspires the spectator to “cast off the deceitful finery of the so-called cultured man,” confronted as he is with the “contrast between the genuine truth of nature and the cultural lie which pretends to be the only reality.”³⁰ Nietzsche often describes, with both sides, this agon between the aesthetic spheres and theoretical/ethical (or non-aesthetic) sphere as an almost invasive effort of one to penetrate [*dringen*] and negate the claims of the other,³¹ so that the nature of transgression in *The Birth of Tragedy* takes on the character of a type of ‘metaphysical breaking-and-entering’. In the case of the aesthetic experience of tragedy, this penetration assumes a particularly visual quality as if the shattering of semblance and individuation induced by the Dionysian allows one to gaze upon the unrepresentable vision of the universal. In this particular manifestation of tragedy, the spectator...

... is elevated to a kind of omniscience as if the visual power of his eyes were not merely a power to attend to surfaces but as if it were capable of penetrating [*dringen*] to the interior, as if, with the help of music he were now able to see before him, in sensuously visible form, so to speak, the undulations of the Will.³²

One can at least imagine what effect a passage like this might have had on artists of the New York School in their attempt in visual terms to fashion the ultimate redemptive image. By symbolic extension we can interpret the tendency towards environmental scale and non-objectivity or indeterminate form, or even the assertion of two-dimensionality, as pictorial devices to potentially explore the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 98.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 41.

³¹ In one instance of note, Nietzsche speaks of the ‘formal barbarism’ (i.e, instrumental rationalisation) which had corrupted Germanic culture to the detriment of its aesthetic sensibilities as if an ‘invading force’ [*eindringende Mächte*], to which he attributes the influence of Latin civilisation. *Ibid.*, p. 95

³² *Ibid.*, p104.

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painted canvas not as representation of the unrepresentable, but rather a catalyst for a more penetrating vision to an inner, otherwise invisible reality. The move to titanic proportions is intended to envelop and subsume the viewer into the visual experience, and arguably an attempted effacement of the individual. The undelimited borders we often see in the work of Pollock or Newman (Figure 1-4), or the vaguely-defined presences in Rothko or Gottlieb (Figure 1-5) potentially represent alternative strategies of disconcertion and domination intended as well to arrest the viewer within an indeterminate sphere of reflection and contemplation. As we shall explore further in Section Three, this deliberate strategy of destabilisation, clearly intended to move beyond a self-referential exercise in the qualities of non-representational art and harbouring metaphysical pretensions, as if a breaking through the limitations of the visual art object itself – a shattering of semblance – that facilitates a transgressive revelation of the ethical disfigurements of the phenomenal world.

C. Sublimity in the Aesthetic Sphere

It is important to bear in mind that in Nietzsche's configuration the net effect of tragedy that results from the interplay of *both* the Apollonian and Dionysian is restorative. Though the Dionysian smashes the veneer of Apollonian semblance to catalyse a destabilising engagement with a countervailing universal fraught with the terror of indeterminacy, the dynamic is yet incomplete. It is the Apollonian that steps in again to recollect, heal, and restore the individual within the safety and security of the world of appearance. It is in the context of this restoration that Nietzsche invokes the character of the sublime (*Erhabenheit*) as a phenomenon distinctly reserved for the aesthetic sphere. In referring to the "sublime and exalted art of Attic tragedy" [*das erhabene und hochgepriesene Kunstwerk der attischen Tragödie*] he does so while describing it as the offspring of the 'mysterious marriage' of Apollo and Dionysos; that for all the destructive, delegitimising, and destabilising consequences the penetrating effect of the Dionysian wreaks within the theoretical

and ethical spheres, which one might be inclined to see as a manifestation of the sublime itself, sublimity is associated with the net effect of the restored individual in his redemption and release, through Apollonian semblance in the aesthetic sphere, from the transfixion wrought by Dionysian revelation. In a rather allusive metaphorical inversion, Nietzsche likens the effect of such revelation to the temporary blindness that occurs after gazing directly at the sun. As we turn away the figures of Apollonian appearance are like the...

...dark, coloured patches before our eyes, as if their purpose were to heal them; conversely those appearances of the Sophoclean hero in images of light, the Apolline quality of the mask, are the necessary result of gazing into the terrible, inner depths of nature – radiant patches, as it were, to heal a gaze seared by gruesome night.³³

It is Nietzsche's unique contribution to the theory of the sublime in *The Birth of Tragedy* to associate it not with the diremptive experience in the shattering of individuality (or its converse in the horrific assertion of one's finitude) but with the synthetic potential of art to encapsulate and tame the insufferable reality of existence through beautiful semblance [*schoener Schein*]. In the wake of the spectator's confrontation with the terrible and repulsive nature of underlying reality – the world-Will – “art approaches as the sorceress with the saving power to heal.” He is unequivocal in stating that these representations which restore the individual after such a confrontation through their pleasurable receptivity *are* the sublime [*diese sind das Erhabene*].³⁴

To be sure, Nietzsche is indebted to an idealist trajectory of ideas on the sublime, beginning with Kant's articulation of it in the *Critique of Judgement* as a rational supercession of the unrepresentable that results in an intuitive ‘negative representation’ through the faculty of reason to conceptualise that which cannot be apprehended in its totality through the senses. For Kant this transcendence into the realm of the supra-sensible is the catalyst for moral reflection, and ultimately on the conditions which frame subjective freedom. It is Schopenhauer's adoption of this

³³ *Ibid.*, p.46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.40.

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concept of negative representation as the ability of the intuition to ascertain an existence beyond the representable that in turn annuls the individual and ones sense of finitude in a momentary unity with that existence that had its most direct impact in Nietzsche's early thoughts on the sublime.³⁵ Not the least reason for which was the jettisoning of Kant's moral dimension in the instrumental function of aesthetic judgement.

In Schopenhauer, the sublime does not heighten, it only annuls – it annihilates aesthetic consciousness... [T]he abyss of representation, the scuttling of forms of sensibility does not lead to the supra-sensible. The sublime leads to insensibility before the colossal, before the infinitely large and terrible.³⁶

But it is Nietzsche's signature move in *The Birth of Tragedy* to move beyond this nihilistic suspension in anaesthetic insensibility and to associate the sublime in tragedy with the return and redemption of the individual from this suspended state through the restorative capacity of the beautiful Apollonian image. What we witness is a dynamic wherein the enchanting power of Apollonian semblance projects the spectator into a space of enhanced receptivity to the disclosive experience of the Dionysian, activated by a mythical presentation of the world through the indeterminacy of music, and opens the individual up to an un-anchoring encounter with the universal. This window to primordial essence is then foreclosed, as the beautiful semblance represented by Apollo restores a sense of order, safety, and security in the firm grounding of phenomenal appearance. Clearly, in his view of the origin and phenomenological nature of tragedy, Nietzsche is interpolating what was then understood of the Dionysian Mysteries and Aristotle's commentary in the *Poetics* on the emergence of tragedy as an improvisational development of the dithyramb, and he draws a parallel between the orgiastic ecstasy associated with archaic ritual practice in honour of Dionysos with a momentary transcendental

³⁵ In Section 37 in the 1844 edition of the *World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer privileges tragedy as the highest form of sublime expression in this regard, obviously a pivotal influence on Nietzsche's own ideas on tragedy. For a full treatment of this theme see Nuno Nabais, *Nietzsche and the Metaphysics of Tragedy*, p. 24ff.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28

intuition that he attributes to the ‘Dionysian’.³⁷ But unlike Schopenhauer and Kant before him, it is not the transcendental intuition itself that is associated with sublimity,³⁸ but rather its encapsulation and resolution within the aesthetic realm of appearances, the redemptive re-grounding of the individual through the image in the wake of temporary annihilation.

In describing this reconstitutive process, Nietzsche surprisingly applies the religious term *Erlösung*, meaning deliverance, redemption, or salvation, applying it specifically to the sublime power of the Apollonian to bracket the Dionysian both through the staging and incitement of its diremptive vision and the subsequent re-situating of the dislocated individual through the transfiguring power of semblance. In a telling passage Nietzsche evokes his signature brand of the sublime as the redemptive capacity of Apollonian semblance to both tame the horror of the Dionysian and invoke a restorative moment of assimilation and reflection, he likewise appropriates more conventional imagery associated with an experience of the sublime in nature.

[W]e encounter Apollo as the deification of the *principium individuationis* in which alone the eternally attainable goal of primordial unity, its release and redemption through semblance [*Erlösung durch den Schein*], comes about; with sublime gestures [*erhabenen Gebärden*] he shows us that the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the individual to generate this redemptive vision [*erlösenden Vision*] and then, lost in contemplation of that vision, to sit calmly in his rocking boat in the midst of the sea.³⁹

This image of the individual floating adrift in the vastness of the ocean recalls of course one of the quintessential visual themes of the Romantic sublime in art, of a man amidst the seemingly indeterminate expanse of his natural environment. But it is not Burkeian terror that is evoked, but rather an image of the individual in seemingly resigned if not peaceful reflection upon a glimpse of the universal that

³⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics* 40. In identifying him as the archetype of the ‘tragic hero’, Nietzsche describes ‘the Dionysos of the Mysteries’ as the emblem of dis-individuation and suffering specifically referencing the myth of his dismemberment and reconstitution that is found in various Hellenistic sources. This myth cannot be firmly attested in any earlier sources. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 52, n76. .

³⁸ Cf. note 16 above.

³⁹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 26

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has been afforded through the experience of tragedy.

Well before Robert Rosenblum would associate the post-war American ‘field painters’ (namely Rothko, Still, Newman, and Pollock) with the romantic fascination with the sublimity in the now famous essay of 1960, “The Abstract Sublime”, the manifestation of this concern was already apparent in the artists statements in the late 1940’s co-incident with the large scale, non-objective canvases associated with the emergence of their mature styles. Barnett Newman, in “The Sublime is Now” speaks of the effort to effect a new, transfigurative sublime, not dependent upon the effort to represent sublime content or to express it in the formalisms of European abstraction, but rather in the “self-evident image of revelation” that is “devoid of the props and the crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images” and addresses “our relationship to the absolute emotions”.⁴⁰ Similarly in “The Romantics were Prompted”, Rothko speaks of pictures that must be “a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.”⁴¹ This language of revelation, resolution, and of addressing absolute emotions, speaks of a concept of sublimity that carries with it a similarly redemptive aspiration expressed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* and perhaps has a further corollary in the shamanistic allusions we see in the work of Pollock, Pousette-Dart, and Gottlieb, particularly during the war years, through their appropriation of themes and imagery evoking Native American spirituality and healing culture (Figures 1-6, 1-7).⁴² It is Rothko, however, whose exposure to the writings of Nietzsche is well attested, that explicitly utilised this concept of the Apollonian as a carrier and catalyst for an experience of the Dionysian, as a way to work through, pictorially, a redemptive form of visual tragedy. In a note discovered amongst his papers from the 1950’s Rothko writes:

⁴⁰ Barnett Newman “The Sublime is Now”, p 51-53.

⁴¹ Mark Rothko, “The Romantics were Prompted”, *Possibilities*, No 1. Winter, 1947-48.

⁴² On Native American influences in the New York School see W. Jackson Rushing, “Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism” p. 273ff.

From the Shadows of Reason

Apollo may be the God of Sculpture. But in the extreme he is also the God of Light and in a burst of splendor not only is all illumined but as it gains in intensity all is also wiped out. That is the secret I use to contain the Dionisian [sic] in a burst of light.⁴³

This short passage gives us insight into the intentions behind the luminosity that is at work in Rothko's pictures from this period, and perhaps from a more encompassing view, how pictorial analogues in the work of his contemporaries are perhaps similarly intended to function.

D. The Role of Tragedy in the Restoration of Balance Among Spheres

Looking upon the construct the he presents in *The Birth of Tragedy* through a specifically Habermasian lens, what Nietzsche effectively offers up in his agon between the theoretical and tragic world views and the role of tragedy in that conflict is a model for the re-balancing of the respective influence between the aesthetic sphere and non-aesthetic spheres [*ausseraesthetischen Sphären*] within the cultural life of humanity.⁴⁴ Although he does not adopt the Neo-Kantian construct of three explicit domains of knowledge which emerges from Weber's sociological critique of rationality and Habermas later concretely specifies in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, implicit within Nietzsche's critique of the theoretical world view and the 'spirit of science' which he associates with Socratic rationalism is the assumption that the moral-ethical manifestations of law, politics, and social order are an extension of the theoretical mindset. The distinctions between pure and practical reason are not of critical importance to him here, and one could likewise argue that, in his disparaging reference to those that hold the 'morally sublime' as the object of tragedy, that in his view, elements of Kant's aesthetics of judgement

⁴³ Mark Rothko, *Writings*, ed. Lopez-Remiro p. 144.

⁴⁴ *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.106. Nietzsche uses of the term 'sphere' [*Sphär*] frequently in the text, almost exclusively to refer to domains of knowledge or activity e.g. moral [*moralische Sphär*], political-social [*politisch-soziale Sphär*]. With respect to the aesthetic, he tends to the more specific, e.g. 'sphere of beauty' [*Sphär der Schönheit*] or 'sphere of Apollonian art' [*apollinischen Kunstsphäre*]. This figurative usage of the term, particularly in philosophical contexts, was well established in the Germanic languages by the late-18th century.

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fall within the realm of the theoretical.⁴⁵ What is of greatest relevance to Nietzsche from the Kantian system is the fundamental axiom that *reason has its limits* – that the phenomenal world is but a manifold of appearances and theoretical knowledge is merely a cognitive artefact of that limited space. As we will examine in Section Three, Schopenhauer would take issue with Kant’s assertion that what lies beyond phenomenal appearance is inaccessible. This post-Kantian affirmation that the faculty of intuition could afford a form of noumenal access provided Nietzsche with the ammunition he required, charged as it were through the explosive vehicle of the Apollonian-Dionysian construct, to take aim at the universalistic elevation of Reason exemplified in the Hegelian system. It is with no small degree of irony that the apparatus from which he launches his assault is itself thoroughly suffused in Hegelian understanding. The fundamental epistemological claim that tragedy, through the indeterminate quality of Dionysian music, can challenge and negate the validity of abstract theoretical constructions is anchored in a hostile but nonetheless affirmative appraisal of the concrete universal. The transgressive character of tragedy to break the boundaries of normative moral and political constructions has its model in the example tragedy serves for Hegel in the progressive attainment of the Ethical Life. Finally, the foundational assumption at the core of *The Birth of Tragedy* that “only through aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified”⁴⁶ and the role of the aesthetic as the catalyst for *Erlösung* has as its archetype in the resolution of Spirit’s thinly-veiled Theogony in the form of ‘Abstract Art’ with which the *Phenomenology of Spirit* initially culminates.

Of course, Nietzsche would never admit to such dependencies, and would openly disavow even his borrowings from Kant and Schopenhauer in the introduction to the second edition.⁴⁷ But as the text stands, it represents not a call for the triumph of the tragic over the theoretical world view, but rather a reconciliation of the two. Referencing a passage in Plato’s *Phaedo* [60d-61c] where Socrates, at the end of his life, describes his thwarted calling to make music, the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 10 in “An Attempt at Self Criticism”, Section 6, published in 1886, fourteen years after the first edition.

figure of the ‘music-making Socrates’ [*musiktreibender Sokrates*] becomes the emblem for this reconciliation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic domains. In the ability for tragedy to negate the claim toward universal validity in the cognitive dimension through the demonstration of the limits of discursive reason we witness how, like Socrates before his execution, the “insatiable greed of optimistic knowledge” retreats upon itself and expresses a need for art.⁴⁸ But the aesthetic does not supplant the theoretical. The appeal to the *musiktreibender Sokrates* calls for the ideal of the philosopher who can “compose myths and not speeches” [ποιεῖν μύθους ἀλλ’ οὐ λόγους, *Phaedo* 61b] which Socrates lamentably admitted he could not do. As Raymond Geuss postulates,

[t]he image of the *musiktreibender Sokrates*...might be taken as suggesting that the new tragic world view will not just turn its back completely on the existing ‘theoretical culture’, but will pass through it, assimilate it completely, and emerge, as it were beyond the other side of it.⁴⁹

In this integrative resolution, we witness a complex interaction between the cognitive forms of reasoning he associates with the theoretical, or more loosely the ‘Socratic’, and this bimodal form of aesthetic experience exemplified in the experience of tragic art. The bimodal character of tragedy was earlier described as a form of disclosure whereby the revelation of primordial essence catalysed by the Dionysian is bracketed by an initial seduction and subsequently a sublime encapsulation by Apollonian semblance at both ends. There is however a greater disclosure at play. At the front end, this seduction of Apollonian forms draws the individual, conditioned by all the objective knowledge and moral-ethical presuppositions carried in tow, into a Dionysian unravelling with this attendant theoretical baggage. The redemptive experience of beautiful semblance that restores the individual in the wake of the Dionysian spectacle is, as if an indelible

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii, in Raymond Geuss’ introduction to the *Birth of Tragedy*. Again, we see through these intimations of *Aufhebung* [sublation] the insistent resonances of Hegel woven into the fabric of Nietzsche’s metaphorical language.

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scar or persistent reverberation, again transcended by the revealed limitations of and compromised assurance in the propositionally justified claims to validity that one entered with at the beginning of the process. Beyond the healing sublimity of the Apollonian, “[i]n the total effect of tragedy the Dionysiac once more gains the upper hand...Apolline drama is finally revealed for what it is: a persistent veiling... [I]t finally drives the Apolline drama into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysiac wisdom and where it negates itself” and leads the world of appearances to its limits.⁵⁰ The Apollonian then, serves as an ‘aesthetic bridge’ between the realms of theoretical and moral-ethical reasoning both prior to and following the experience of tragedy. As such it functions as a transmitter of the negative representations that emerge from the revelations of Dionysiac wisdom and by extension provoke a re-evaluation of the propositional constructs that preceded the experience of tragedy.

If allowed to concede that the realm of symbolic mediation in Apollonian semblance has this extensive effect in the propositional domains of theoretical and moral-ethical knowledge it could be said that this occurs within a span of *hermeneutic integration*. One can characterise this span as facilitating a dissolutive or destabilising function of tragedy in relation to the non-aesthetic spheres, and an alternatively re-integrative function with relation to the aesthetic. This set of two-way relations represents a conceptual framework, latent within Nietzsche’s formulation of tragedy, for the way the aesthetic engages constructively, through negative representations, with non-aesthetic spheres of knowledge, that is, as a form of *aesthetic negativity*. If we map this implicit framework and its operation through the mechanisms of (counter)-abstraction, transgression, and the sublime against the three spheres of knowledge – the theoretical, moral-ethical, and the aesthetic – we can graphically represent this construct as in Figure 1-3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104-5

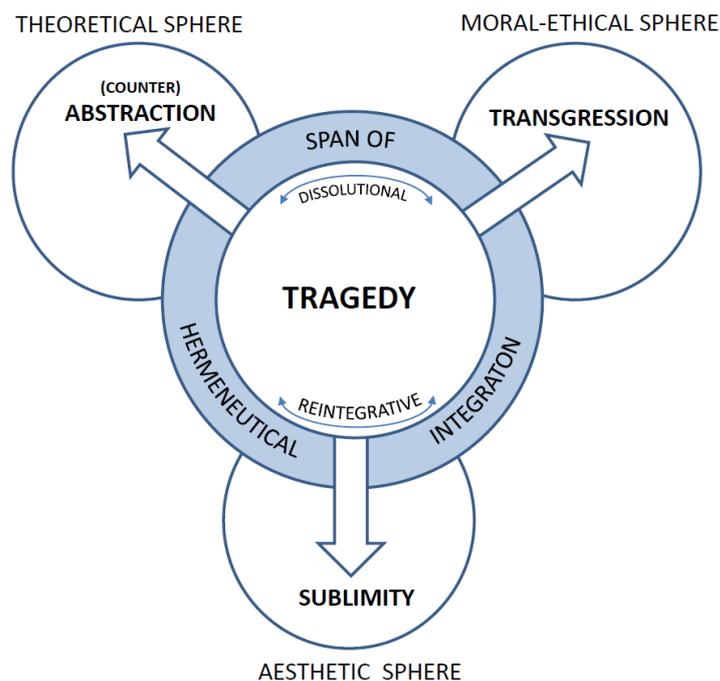


Figure 1-3 The Re-integrative Function of Tragedy

This construct suggests that the hermeneutical dimension is not the exclusive privilege of the propositional and the cognitively understood, and provides a framework for conceptualising if not their reunification a mediated integration of aesthetic and non-aesthetic spheres. *The Birth of Tragedy* represents the apotheosis of a trajectory in the German philosophical tradition, beginning with the Weimar Classicism of Goethe and Schiller, finding concrete philosophical expression in Schelling, and reaching its apex in the integrative function of tragedy in Hegel and Nietzsche, where tragedy functions as the archetype for the power of the aesthetic to counter the increasing fragmentation and alienating instrumentalisation of modern existence. Nietzsche clearly internalised the Hegelian insight of contradiction and negation as a critical operation in the process of understanding and becoming, and what he accomplishes in *The Birth of Tragedy* is to articulate in phenomenological terms how a particular form of aesthetic expression can catalyse a profound experience of this negation. The disclosive Apollonian-Dionysian construct allows him to address this idea in both transcendental and likewise structural terms: transcendental insofar as the abstract, musical character of the Dionysian provokes

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an intuitive yet potentially violent confrontation with the existence that underlies all appearance and structural in that its reverberative effect on conscious understanding is symbolically-mediated through a particular set of representations associated with *myth*.

[T]he art of Dionysos customarily exerts two kinds of influence on the Apollonian capacity for art: music stimulates us to contemplate symbolically Dionysian universality, and it causes the symbolic image to emerge with the highest degree of significance... [m]usic is able to give birth to myth.⁵¹

That the realm of myth functions as a sort hermeneutical interzone, through which the gap between an intuitive experience of noumenal essence and the cognitive assimilation of the effects of negation are bridged, was a concept not lost on the pioneering artists of the New York School. Their direct and indirect appropriation of this construct, specifically in the developmental years during and immediately after World War Two (and one must bear in mind that *The Birth of Tragedy* was no less historically proximate an influence in the early 1940s than the *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains to us today) affords an example of how, with varying degrees of self-awareness and effectiveness, might be actioned in the enterprise of art. Moreover, due notice should be taken of the way this model prefigures the idea of aesthetic negativity as an antidote to the disintegrative effects of instrumental rationality and of the critical function of art to, over and against discourse in the public sphere, destabilise the fabric of normative presuppositions that underwrites propositional argumentation. Finally, the examination of Attic tragedy as a model for such an operation opens up an opportunity to reengage with the substance of myth, in this case the myth of Ajax as an emblem for the broken warrior, and to examine the continued hermeneutic viability of these symbolic representations in the realm of art. Though *The Birth of Tragedy* remains problematic as a work of classical scholarship, rooted as it is in speculative assumptions about the origins of tragedy that are as yet unprovable, it remains a profound and prescient work of philosophical aesthetics. While on the one hand we can see foreshadowed in the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

anti-rational, anti-moral positioning of his argument the insistent, foundational nihilism upon which the banner of counter-Enlightenment is often raised, on the other, in his residual indebtedness to the preoccupations of Idealism manifested in the way that, integratively, the mechanisms of abstraction, transgression, and the sublime serve to liberate society from its own debilitating ossifications, we see how this once-young intellectual conceptualised a universal notion of tragedy, Kantian in origin yet Hegelian in spirit, and offered an avenue of understanding – so central to the continuing project of the Enlightenment – into the role of the aesthetic in the mechanics of emancipation.

1.4 The Argument in Brief

To start the conversation as to whether contemporary works of art can and do function as a form of *visual tragedy* initially requires an assessment of the way tragedy emerged as key aesthetic category in modern philosophical thought for tackling the issue of man's subjective freedom as an abstract philosophical concept. The subsequent section (Section Two) opens then with an account of this development, beginning with the seminal insights of Kant which launch this philosophical trajectory. It is the Kantian epistemological distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal and its relation to the concept of subjective freedom that motivates the subsequent use of tragedy as an ideal form of aesthetic experience in German philosophy after Kant to address the problem between freedom and necessity. The concept of *aesthetic rationality* as a mode of knowing through artistic self-representation that was distinct from other spheres of knowledge, namely, theoretical reason, embodied by science and technology, and practical reason, embodied by law and morality, was prefigured in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Though Kant does not fully take forward the potential role of art in affirming human agency, it was the subsequent speculative projects represented in their most ornate form by Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* and Hegel's *Phenomenology* that would take Kant's speculations on the ethical role of the aesthetic further and embrace tragedy as a foundational example.

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But this trajectory proves only half the story. The distinctions of theoretical, practical, and aesthetic reason, aligned with the three Kantian critiques of Pure Reason, Practical Reason, and Judgment, were re-appropriated by Max Weber in his sociological analysis of the increasing bureaucratization of society and differentiation of spheres of specialized knowledge. As mentioned, amidst the trauma of the Second World War, this critique of instrumental reason and of the Enlightenment itself found its most radical evocation in Horkeimer and Adorno's *Dialectic*. Reason itself, they argue, regresses into the 'myth of progress' and instrumental reason is employed to horrifically distorting effect. In a moment of profound philosophical pessimism they describe how the purposiveness of rational systems empties out the genuine content of life and, among other distortions, replaces our constructive experience of art and the aesthetic dimension with the hollow gratification of cultural commodities. In this indictment, tragedy is explicitly declared ineffectual. This dim appraisal prompted Jurgen Habermas to usher the linguistic turn in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School to rescue the Enlightenment project and has largely remained dominant over the past four decades. While the aesthetic has re-emerged as an area of interest in critical theory, the phenomenological aspect of tragedy's impact that served to make it such a useful model in Idealist thought has remained effectively in exile. It from this vantage point that the reassessment of tragedy's utility as an effective aesthetic model must begin.

It is of no insignificant coincidence that at the time of the *Dialectic's* initial drafting in 1941 that tragedy makes its appearance in the milieu of modern art and namely in the work of the artists of the New York School typically associated with Abstract Expressionism as a specific historical development similarly grappling with the experience of World War. Section Three centers on the localised resurrection of tragedy in the work of American abstract artists under the unique conditions of its development apart from those that governed the emergence of modern art movements in Europe. The transcendental leanings of the New York School were informed (among other sources) by the ideas in Nietzsche's *Birth of*

Tragedy. It is in this early work that navigates an odd interzone between classical philology and a polemic on aesthetics that Nietzsche describes Greek tragedy as a genre which had a revelational capability to transport its audiences across the divide between the representations of aesthetic semblance and a primordial chaos that underlies existence. In considering the quasi-mystical statements of the artists at the time, it is not difficult to see a general affinity for these ideas by the New York School.

On closer examination, however, the dependence of Nietzsche's aesthetic model on a the critique of Kant's claim (initially made by Schopenhauer) of the unbridgeability between the phenomenal and noumenal realms is what opens the door for postulating a more universal notion of the 'tragic' as a synaptic moment where the artifice of representation is betrayed by its mimetic limitations and these limitations are transcended to apprehend an essential (though perhaps terrifying) reality. For Nietzsche, this collapse of representation and consequential bridging of the divide had a redemptive capacity that could serve a constructive, though transgressive, healing function within society. It was the unique conditions of development in the years before and after World War Two that lent themselves to a more studied appropriation of these concepts in American high modernism than is often acknowledged. Their employment of non-objective abstraction on an epic, environmental scale coupled with their language of cultural redemption through the aesthetic reveals a provocative congruence between the evolution of modernism in America and fundamental epistemological questions that are testament to a model for the tragic indebted to German speculative philosophy. Though this specific phenomenon was short-lived, the reception of tragedy in Abstract Expressionism provides a comparatively recent model for the potential shaping function of the aesthetic, and tragedy more specifically, in the public sphere.

The Birth of Tragedy is representative of a long standing trend in the history German idealism (against which Nietzsche would self-consciously position himself against), to channel philosophical concerns through the lens of classical antiquity, represented by what is loosely termed the 'Weimar Classicism' of Friederich

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Schiller and Johann Wolfgang Goethe. This is largely represented in the ‘culture constructive’ character attributed to the art of the ancient Greeks and to the genre of tragedy in particular. Setting the stage for the systematic insights of Schelling and Hegel, Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, also engages with Kant’s critical distinction between phenomenal and noumenal realms to articulate his idea of ‘aesthetic education’ and describe the role of the aesthetic in addressing the dichotomy of freedom and necessity and in turn balancing and harmonizing the state-individual relationship. Section Four begins with a look to Schiller’s concept as a means to simultaneously mitigate the competing tendencies toward barbarism by self-interested individuals and (with almost Weberian prescience) a soul-destroying objectification of social existence by the state for its own end. Though more affirmative than transgressive in approach, Schiller’s reference to the ancient Greeks as a formative example of the integration of the aesthetic in collective life prefigures Nietzsche’s identification of tragedy as having a similarly socially edifying function.

The aesthetic-educational model based on the idea of the tragic as an aesthetic moment where the chasm between appearance and essence is bridged, can be applied to the notion of the public sphere as a space for collective discourse and opinion formation. Looking explicitly at Jurgen Habermas’ critique of bourgeois ideology and spotlighting the potential gap between the *res publica phenomenon* (the State as it represents itself to itself) and *res publica noumenon* (the State in actuality), the possibility for the aesthetic to shape political discourse through a radical demonstration of those divergences is considered. Largely in response to the pessimistic indictment of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas closely investigated the development and demise of the public sphere as a milieu of deliberation and discussion within the body politic, where the open exchange of ideas between citizens served to define the public interest. There remains an insistent, open issue as to the potentialities for aesthetic engagement in the public sphere and the manner in which the aesthetic can shape or frame discourse. All of this suggests that the aesthetic, and particularly in the form of tragedy, has a

potentially transgressive yet nonetheless constructive function within the public sphere.

Taking into account various historicist perspectives of the genre, Section Four ultimately examines how Attic tragedy has been postulated as having had such a role and looks more closely at the epistemological dynamics unique to the aesthetic that underwrite such a capability to disrupt normative presuppositions. Nicole Loraux, for example, in a neo-Nietzschean fashion, uses the term *anti-political* to describe tragedy's transgressive function, 'anti'-political suggesting not a disengagement with the political but the assumption of a position that challenges the normative structures that support the prevailing political wisdom. More speculatively, a case will be made for the function of tragedy as a form of *aesthetic negativity*, that is, an epistemological process by which normative presuppositions are debased at a sub-hermeneutic level. Here, critical theory again moves front and center. The notion of artistic expression as a form of immanent contradiction betrays a debt to Adorno, and more specifically to Christophe Menke's more recent examination of the concept as explored in the *Sovereignty of Art*. It is in this light that Nietzsche's description of the tragic can be recast as a disruption of the fabric of semiotic connections which ground our normative understanding and ultimately effect and shape the ethical, practical domain.

Having addressed (a) the development of tragedy and its relation to the ethical life in the tradition of speculative idealism and its subsequent exile in the wake of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (b) the reception of tragedy via Nietzsche in American high modernism as a proximate example of visual tragedy, and (c) a transgressive model of aesthetic education in the public sphere that disrupts the fabric of normative presuppositions that shape ethical understanding, the space is now opened up in Section Five to examine how Sophocles' *Ajax* has a particular relevance in unveiling what I have termed the *Invisible Wound*. In an acute manifestation of the 'crisis of the individual' with respect to an alternative authority that can be said to typify Sophoclean tragedy, the *Ajax* puts into extreme focus the existential struggle of the heroic warrior when the fabric of the military ethos

unravels. By way of comparison to the *Antigone* on three specific accounts, the fractured subjectivity of the hero is examined resulting from his inconsolable sense of betrayal by his comrades-in-arms. The argument will be made that the suicide of Ajax serves as an analogy for the universal longing for an unrequited redemption that can perhaps be recognized in our own contemporary context and shed light on a continued disenchantment with the world.

Placing the Ajax in its political-historical context, however, reaffirms the transgressive role that the tragic genre may have had in its own day as the storm clouds of impending war with Sparta and the consequences of hegemonic expansionism began to cast their dark shadow upon Athens. This perhaps provides a timely cause for reflection on our own condition as the continuing struggle against the threat of trans-national terrorism in some measure can be attributed to the similarly hegemonic posturings of the 'West' in relation to the rest of the world. As the set of interpersonal relations within the *Ajax* may have been emblematic of geopolitical tensions with the Peloponnese, the internal struggle within the ill-fated character of Ajax himself may be emblematic of the individual cost of these present circumstances. Equipped with a multidimensional model of tragedy that transcends the cultural specificity of the Attic genre, yet embracing the original narrative themes that still resonate in our current context, the mechanics of transposition from narrative to image can now be considered to lay out a general concept of tragedy which once again carries that content through the language of visual spectacle.

1.5 Conceptualising Visual Tragedy

Tragedy, as a reenactment of myth, has been from its inception a visual expression in addition to being a narrative or literary one. It emerged arguably from the vestiges of ritual narration of mythical events as a form of performative expression, to be viewed on a stage before a large audience of spectators, within the context of the religious and civic festival sponsored and celebrated by the fifth-century Athenian city state in honour of the god Dionysos. It likewise emerged during a

time of significant development in the visual and plastic arts and a corresponding sophistication in visuality at large in ancient Greek culture. Themes from myth and tragedy concurrently made their way into painting and sculpture and have continued to do so through antiquity to the present day. Although suspending the temporal continuum of the reenactment, these visual encapsulations of tragic narrative are often able in tableau to reveal much about the broader cultural conditions and challenges from which they were hewn. Section Five describes this process of *intermedial transposition* and how it has served over the centuries to establish the ever-recurrent interest in these narrative themes and the extent their filtered representation refracts the specific concerns and conditions of their time. This speaks to the potential for the visual encapsulation of tragedy to effect the normative fabric that legitimises a broader course of activity taken in the name of the public interest and for visual art to function as a form of critical-theoretical lens. The intention of this investigation is to propose a framework for art practice to function as such a lens, so elevating the role of art or aesthetics from an object of critical discourse to that of an active, critical-theoretical agent itself. This engagement with the dramatic form of Greek tragedy in the context of contemporary art practice affords perhaps a new avenue to address the dialectical inversion between myth and enlightenment.

The practice-based research efforts of the project, a series of art works documented in the Appendix, explore in material terms this concept of intermedial transposition through alternatively discursive and less-discursive pictorial approaches. What has become of central interest in the practice element of this project is the nature of these transpositions and what they reveal in the process of intermediation. The implicit proposition in the use of the optical metaphors of 'lens' and 'refraction', as if the process of translating narrative content were an alteration or distortion of light, is that these alterations and distortions, in contrast to the convergences, that occur in the process of intermedial transposition experienced through art are a vibrant location of critical potential. In the spirit of

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what Adorno captures in his use of the term 'dissonance',⁵² certain incongruities in aesthetic experience while initially unnatural or counterintuitive, become disclosive in-and-of-themselves as new conceptual connections arise. These aesthetic transpositions can potentially operate as dialectical moments which recast narrative content into alternative visual, conceptual, or textual terms with the capacity to shed light, in a transgressive (or *negative*) way, on the social and cultural distortions that accompany our most highly-reasoned intentions. The practice element has specifically focused on themes appropriated from ancient Greek lyric poetry and tragedy, culminating in a multi-work installation revolving around Sophocles' particular interpretation of the Ajax story. The *Ajax* has a particular capacity to remain relevant to our own geopolitical circumstance, as demonstrated in the *Love and Madness* interpretation of 2009, in that it addresses the issue of the 'broken warrior' and the transgression of the norms of martial culture. In the corpus of existing tragedy Sophocles' *Ajax* (as well as his *Philoctetes*) is notable in its *recognition* of the warfighter's injured state of being, an issue that was surely a very real and widespread concern on both personal and collective levels during a time of recurrent conflict and political upheaval. It is even more notable in that Sophocles explores this theme in the context of the hero's criminal or treasonous act against the Greeks.

In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Axel Honneth notes that in his work of the Jena period prior to the articulation of the ethical life as it appears in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel conceptualises the emergence of an ethical unity in society through the struggle for recognition of individuals and groups amidst the development of the normative and legislative apparatus of the state (here again modeled after the idealised ancient Greek city-state).⁵³ In examining the insistent implications of the root cause of crime in 'System of an Ethical Life' (as described above in Section 1.3), Honneth convincingly argues that Hegel principally attributes it to the sense of

⁵² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 15.

⁵³ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*. Specifically, Part I. 2, "Crime and Ethical Life: Hegel's Intersubjectivist Innovation", 11ff.

‘incomplete *recognition*’ of the individual.⁵⁴ As discussed, Hegel abandons this granular inter-subjectivist analysis in the *Phenomenology* in favor of the more universal, abstract experience of Spirit’s socio-historical development. Yet the transgressive character of this negative aspect of freedom as a function of resistance and recognition still finds its place in the system, transmuted as it were in the aesthetic, most explicitly described in his passing reference to the *Antigone* and in his reflections on “Religion in the Form of Art”. That is, it finds itself expressed in *tragedy*.

As we evidently find ourselves in a generational armed conflict with Islamic extremism, the dynamic of incomplete recognition and resistance specific to the *Ajax* is an appropriate prism through which to examine contemporary concerns, the drama itself being highly metaphorical of the impending threat of Sparta to Athens in the mid-5th century BCE. At the time of this writing, it is more than thirteen years since the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, and America has effectively considered herself in a state of war from that time. It has resulted in the prosecution of two major theatre-level campaigns, Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*, both involving the wholesale invasion, occupation, and attempted reconstruction of foreign nation-states, motivated a global-level expansion of military and diplomatic activity in an attempt to preempt further conflagration and stabilise other ‘at-risk’ regions, and compelled an unprecedented militarisation and hyper-rationalisation of domestic security efforts forcing compromises of a once-cherished ethos of civil liberty. Sophocles’ treatment of Ajax’s inner experience speaks to a vast range of individual experiences among the warriors, statesmen, government servants and other sponsored agents who have made enormous personal sacrifices in the service of a far-ranging political-military apparatus not seen to such violent and coercive power since the Second World War. With the unique character of our radically technologised modes of warfare, however, we have

⁵⁴ Ibid, 20. “Natural annihilation’, for instance, is said to be directed against the ‘abstraction of the cultured’, and Hegel speaks elsewhere of crime in general as an ‘opposition to opposition’. If one pulls such formulations together... one begins to suspect that Hegel traces the emergence of crime to conditions of incomplete recognition.”

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given rise to alternative shades of trauma for those who are charged with operationalizing it and are subject to an increasingly desensitising if not dehumanising nature of the political-military systemic machine. This effort is as much a reflection on the subjective and objective consequences of war's violence as it is upon the extensive and equally disfiguring apparatus that has been constructed to orchestrate, inform, and direct human activity to sublimely powerful or coldly quiet but nonetheless horrific effect.

It is aphoristic to remind ourselves that humankind has employed its greatest capacities for instrumental reason in the advancement of military science, from the catapult to the supersonic fighter jet, to the A-Bomb (which Andreas Huyssen once noted is the 'signifier of the ultimate sublime'). What has now proved challenging to reconcile on subjective/collective, and moral/ethical levels is the way technology and rational systems have collapsed time and space to the extent that the tactical is understood to have potential strategic effect, and the strategic bears directive observation and reach into the realm of the tactical through the creation of a new digital, 'collective subjectivity'. In the age of surveillance satellites, *Predator* drone strikes, and global geo-positioning systems, the individual soldier becomes an extension of the remote command and control apparatus that functions almost as a consciousness unto itself, one that roams free as an entity across the globe spanning a broad geopolitical swath with an unprecedented level of freedom and ease. We have only begun to understand what the deleterious effects have been for those who have served extended periods as agents of this vast corporate entity of civilisational defense. While this apparatus and its system of internal justification, as in the days of Ajax, is still draped in the regalia and pride of an honorific martial culture that leverages the bonds of association to stake claim to a 'brotherhood of arms' and underpins what one could term a warrior ethic, so then the tragedy of Ajax becomes for us a metaphor of another type of diremption specific to our age, an alternative form of alienation of the individual, specific to the contemporary hyper-rationalised warrior class, from a society that sublates the agency of these individuals to an instrumentalised capacity, and moreover, disengages its own cognizance of this

capacity to effect violence and suffering on others far removed from one's own existence.

It was also during the Jena period that Hegel began to develop his universalizing framework of Absolute Spirit, one which has embedded within its core the dynamic of subjective alienation. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* of 1805-06, Hegel describes Spirit's own particularization and objectification of itself as the *Image*, taking form in humanity, and comprised of an infinite wealth of representations that are everpresent but never fully disclosed; this is, as Hegel terms it, the *Night*.⁵⁵ As beings in the world, we as individuals experience this night in the recognition of the Other, as an acknowledgement of the manifold of other subjective representations that are not our own, an experience of profound unfamiliarity and the expanse of the unknown that is terrifying. Perhaps it is characteristic of the experience of tragedy to view the spectacle of another's struggles and suffering and recognise it as possibly akin to our own – to confront the darkness and terror that is the Night and to remind ourselves of its intimate closeness. May we ask then: Have we sufficiently internalised the continual premium placed upon those subjectivities functioning as agents of a globally expansive apparatus that have been called upon to serve at the farthest reaches of the planet for the declared sake of our defense and interest?⁵⁶ Have we considered the resulting cost upon us all?

Certainly these questions are in order. Our recent military enterprises have taken their formidable toll in lives, physical and emotional trauma, as well as a range of economic and other societal costs. Though current circumstances are qualitatively different from those of 1945, as the so called 'Global War on Terror' lurches into its second decade, we have borne witness for the capacity of instrumentalised reason to recast mythical fear for the sake of preserving our enlightened, democratic, free-market values. To provoke the question of whether

⁵⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, Section I of the Jena Lectures in *Hegel and the Human Spirit*,

⁵⁶ In the the Jena lectures, to describe the 're-internalisation' of the image by Spirit (and of the individual subject) Hegel uses the verb '*errinern*' which can be similarly translated as 'remind' or 'remember'.

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all these costs are worth bearing is potentially timely and fertile ground for artistic investigation. Though channeling the mournful voice of Attic tragedy through the dystopian aesthetic of U.S. Defense Department machine-speak (Figure 1-9) and decaying pastiche of European constructivism (or any other visual tactic employed along the way) is necessarily disclosive in some metaphysically world-shattering way, the re-visualisation of tragic narratives from antiquity may project into relief some of the specific distortions of our own time that we owe to our hyper-rationalised machinery of violence.⁵⁷

Perhaps not unlike Athens in the mid-5th century BCE, we are also in a state of incipient crisis with respect to the implicit assumptions that justify our hegemonic endeavors. On an aesthetic level, I surmise that these somewhat incongruent transpositions of tragedy, of pathos-laden narrative with visual references to the desensitising collapse of time, space, and consequence symptomatic of our time, highlight a critical agency peculiar to the aesthetic itself. These incongruences are revealing of undercurrents: undercurrents of despair and malaise that many of us who have been placed *in harm's way* know all too well run beneath those headstrong systems of belief – the faith in rationality, in the myth of Enlightenment progress – that fuel the forbearance of all our broken yesterdays, the will to immeasurable sacrifice, and the deliberate suspension of our humanity.

The idealistic fable of the ruse of reason which extenuates the horrors of the past by pointing to the good ends they served, actually babbles out the truth: that blood and misery stick to the triumphs of society. The rest is ideology.

- Max Horkeimer⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See the Appendix of this volume for a review of selected works from the practice component of this investigation.

⁵⁸ Max Horkeimer, *The Critique of Instrumental Reason*, 67.

PLATES



1-4 Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948



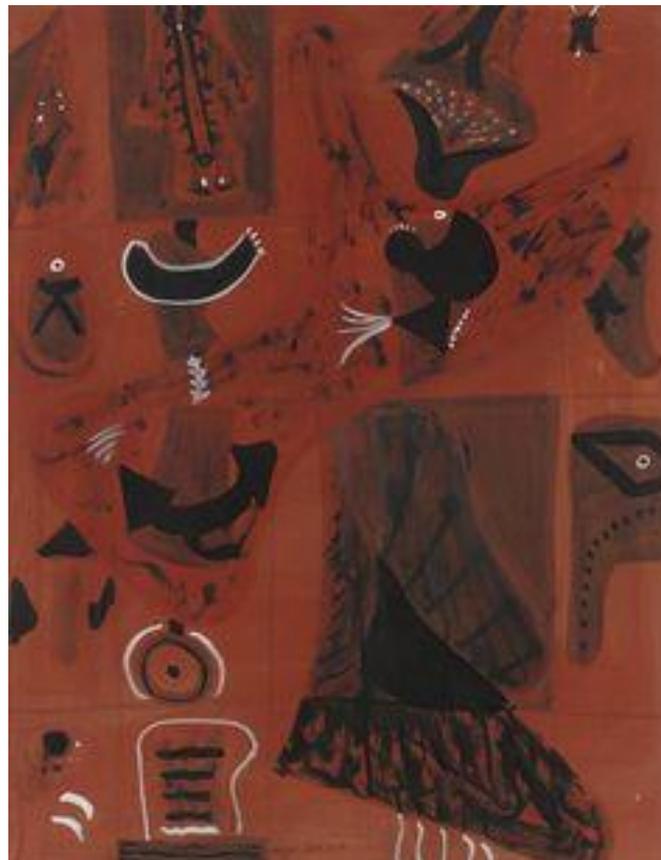
1-5 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950



1-6 Mark Rothko, *Red on Maroon*, 1959



1-7 Richard Pousette D'Art, *Undulation*, 1943



1-8 Adolph Gottlieb, *Untitled Pictograph*, 1945

From the Shadows of Reason

(U)WARNING: (U) THIS IS AN INFORMATION REPORT, NOT FINALLY EVALUATED INTELLIGENCE.
REPORT CLASSIFIED SECRET NOFORN

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

REQS: (S//NF) C-IA3-5678-06-95.SOURCE: (S//NF) //OTS 569 24 3546//MID-LEVEL ACHAEAN
DIPLOMATIC OFFICIAL. CONTEXT STATEMENT - INFORMATION OBTAINED VIA ELECTRONIC
COLLECTION. SOURCE WAS UNAWARE THE REPORTED INFORMATION WOULD REACH U.S. OFFICIALS.
SUMMARY: (S//NF) TRANSCRIPTION OF PW57 INTERCEPT WITH ACCOUNT OF ACHAEAN DELEGATION TO
TROY REQUESTING RETURN OF HELEN, WIFE OF MENELAUS, KING OF SPARTA. TEXT: 1. (S//NF)
WHAT FOLLOWS IS A TRANSCRIPTION OF PW57 INTERCEPT DTG 130955FEB31 FROM LPVF98
//GEOCOORD:15467N/984567W//.

2. (S//NF) RO ASSESSES THIS TO BE A MID-LEVEL ACHAEAN OFFICIAL RECOUNTING EVENTS
DURING SENIOR ACHAEAN DELEGATION TO TROY ON OR ABOUT 11 FEBRUARY REQUESTING THE RETURN
OF HELEN TO SPARTA. (CITE GF-3879879, 112235FEB31).

----- BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION (S//NF) -----

//BEGIN RX 0954:55//GODLIKE ((ANTENOR|S)) WIFE THE PRIESTESS OF ((ATHENA)) //RX
UNINTELLIGIBLE TIMEOUT 0954:57//
//RX TIMEIN 0954:59// OF BATTLE ROUSING PALLAS //RX UNINTELLIGIBLE TIMEOUT 0955:02//
//RX INTERRUPT 0955:07//I LIKE THE WAY YOUR SPARKLING
//RX RESUME 0955:09// GOLDEN //RX UNINTELLIGIBLE TIMEOUT 0955:13//
//RX TIMEIN 0955:17// TO THE TWO ENVOYS OF THE GREEKS ((ODYSSEUS)) SON OF ((LAERTES))
AND KING ((MENELAUS)) SON OF ((ATREUS))
//RX INTERRUPT 0955:22//EARRINGS LAY AGAINST YOUR
//RX RESUME 0955:29//SLIM WAISTED ((THEANO)) ADDRESSED THEM (BEGIN QUOTE) WELL BUILT
CITY OF TROY
//RX INTERRUPT 0955:31//SKIN SO BROWN AND I WANT TO
//RX RESUME 0955:36//HAVING OBTAINED WITH THE HELP OF THE GODS //RX UNINTELLIGIBLE

1-9 Michael Delacruz, video still from *Midnight the Heart (Easy Feeling)* 2009

SECTION TWO

Defining Aesthetic Rationality: Toward a Concept of Visual Tragedy



2-1. Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Painting*, 1990

The sympathetic reading of Ajax's suicide as an act of reaffirmation and defiance against the 'established order' is consistent with a view of Attic tragedy as a form of public art that served a politically edifying function. It had done so by providing its original Athenian audiences with an unvarnished view of their challenging and

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paradoxical circumstance – that of a fledgling and imperfect democracy whose self-identity was likewise shaped by a hegemonic expansionism and subjugation of her client city states throughout the Aegean. It appears the preoccupations of tragedy shifted with that of Athens' fortunes. Aeschylus, from whom we have the earliest existing examples of the genre, centered on the emergence of human structures of law and civic obligation and their divergence from the traditional morality of divine prescription – 'the law of the gods'. His *Oresteia* trilogy (458 BCE) can be said to be affirmative (though not without its tragic consequences) in its attitude towards human institutions and, in its portrayal of the trial of Orestes, of the Athenian political system. With Sophocles, we see a more critical eye turned toward such institutions, perhaps reflective of an ambivalence or discomfort towards such insistently affirmative messaging, given developing tensions within Athenian politics rising from increasingly assertive expeditionary policies and a growing threat from the Peloponnesian city states. The Theban plays, most notably the *Antigone*, as well as the *Ajax* and other works of the mid-century period explore the friction between the subjective will of the 'tragic hero' and the obligations to the state, often taking shape in an act of defiance. It is these alternatively affirmative and transgressive aspects of Greek tragedy and its conjectural role in framing a space for public self-examination that lent itself to use as a conceptual model with thinkers after Kant for the reconciliatory function of the aesthetic in the socio-cultural and political development of humankind and the pursuit of the ethical life.¹ This section outlines the development of tragedy as a philosophical concept and as an example of aesthetic reason in the intellectual developments following Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. It shall also examine how this concept fades from view with the critique of Enlightenment reason after Marx's materialist turn and the ensuing loss-of-faith of the Frankfurt School theorists in the promise of reason itself.

¹ It is this role in public edification that ironically appears to have turned upon itself even during the 5th-century BCE and led to what some commentators at the time viewed as Euripides' later decadent intellectualism and tendency to expository rhetoric, rather than elevated poetic language. Nietzsche, in the *Birth of Tragedy* would repeat this indictment, lamenting the devolution of tragedy from its more archaic ritual foundations to its corruption in Euripides by Socratic rationalism. Cf. *The Birth of Tragedy*, 60ff.

Exploring this trend in modern German philosophical thought brings into relief the concern of its subsequent counter-trend of discourse ethics which sought to provide an antidote to the stark indictments expressed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and allows us to consider how tragedy might once again operate as a productive force within public life. To conceive of tragedy as having potential social consequence one must ask whether it is a viable instrument for public edification, and perhaps in a manner which could be likened to that of ancient Athens. The deliberative character of discourse ethics provides a framework from which to postulate such an aesthetic engagement that gives rise to an enlightened public existence, though not within such a framework but as a counterpoint to it.

In his analysis of *Lehrstück* drama, Andreas Huyssen asks of Bethold Brecht's *The Measures Taken*, "How is it that a work where a naïve young revolutionary must be executed is not a tragedy?" Huyssen asks this question when assessing the degree to which the tragic dimension is or is not central to the political didacticism of the play where an overzealous, young communist is persuaded by his party colleagues to submit to assisted suicide in order not to compromise a covert mission to 'educate' Chinese revolutionaries.² In similar measure we can ask the same question in strictly visual terms of Gerhard Richter's more recent treatment of the Baader-Meinhof Group in his painting series *Oktober 17, 1978* which deals with the apparent suicides of these leftist dissidents. It is of no meagre coincidence that in the wake of post-war philosophical discontent which permeates the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the wave of radicalism associated with the New Left emerged. The belief that the eclipse of reason as imaged in the *Dialectic* had invalidated pro-forma politics as an agent for change substantiated the impulse towards more aggressive, iconoclastic forms of political expression targeted at the established order of Western capitalist structures and the governments that supported it. This 'legitimation crisis' as Jurgen Habermas figuratively termed it³, fueled a retreat to violent nihilism typified

² Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*. 83.

³ Jurgen Habermas' *Legitimation Crisis* could partially be seen as a response to the violent revolutionary activity of the preceding years. While on the one hand identifying the administrative ossification, policy incoherence, and a lack of public confidence in modern systems of governance, Habermas suggests an alternative ethics based on communicative deliberation as an antidote to

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by the revolutionary extremist groups that emerged in the late 1960's and 1970's, to include the Baader Meinhof Group, the Italian Red Brigades, the Weather Underground, the Japanese Red Army, among others. It could be argued that an undercurrent of malaise and discomfort still resonates like a hangover in contemporary Western society, where the cultural memory of these violent challenges to the legitimacy of our political systems still carries with it a sense of being unresolved, particularly as the military campaigns initiated by the Western powers to contain the spread of revolutionary Islam continue to prove globally divisive. Indeed Al-Qaeda, has been referred to as the present day "quintessence of active nihilism" with the revolutionary aim no longer a classless society but the 'theocratisation' of politics.⁴

The residual sensitivity towards the Baader Meinhof Group, from which emerged the Red Army Fraction (RAF), demonstrates this continuing resonance as they remain a controversial and polarizing issue in German society and beyond. This is evidenced by the reaction to the *Oktober 17, 1978* painting series upon its release in 1988, its subsequent acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art in 1995, and re-exhibition in the United States in 2002 where it also incited substantial controversy.⁵ The series itself is comprised of eight monochromatic paintings based on press photographs all centering on the deaths of the principal members of the RAF, responsible for at least twenty politically motivated killings of politicians and industrialists and collateral innocents in the 1970s. Within popular culture, the RAF were alternatively characterized as terrorists or earnest albeit misguided youth radicals employing violence as a means to challenge the corruptions of post-war

these trends. In so doing he initiates his career-long effort to revive the emancipatory potential of Reason and expresses his initial response to the pessimism expressed by Heidegger and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁴ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, 3-13. The resilience of active nihilism now on a truly global scale is representative of what Critchley terms a 'motivational deficit' with respect to liberal democratic society, where the normative fabric which underwrites our systems of governance may be objectively binding but are no longer subjectively motivating – in essence, echoing Habermas' crisis of legitimation forty years prior.

⁵ See in particular Hilton Kramer, "Telling Stories, denying style: Reflections on MOMA 2000" *New Criterion*, January 2001. Vol 32, No. 1. This criticism became particularly acute with the exhibition of the series in the 2002 Gerhard Richter retrospective at MOMA following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.

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European capitalist society. They indeed became role models for similar movements throughout the continent.⁶

Richter's series is noteworthy not only for the broad level response and public debate that it instigated, but also for the unique optic it assumed in treating the subject. A certain ambiguity characterizes his choice of source imagery and subsequent translation to the canvas, and in the end it produces a set of images that vacillates between hazy translation of events and a sentimental memorialization of the persons that lie behind these figures of cultural and public memory. *Beerdiung* (Funeral, Fig. 2-1), the largest and centrepiece work of the series, represents the funeral procession before Dornhalden Cemetery, Stuttgart for RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Esslin, and Jan Karl Raspe, following their reported suicides on 17 October 1977. Their three draped coffins and the thousands of bystanders and supporters in attendance remain hazily visible as one stands from a distance, the image seemingly dissolved by a horizontal blur. Simultaneously, the image plays upon the funeral procession as an honorific event, a subject well established in the genre of historical illustration, but simultaneously calls into question painting as a testimonial instrument through a deliberate obscuration of the scene.

In a similar manner, *Erhangte* (Hanged, Fig. 2-4) offers up a phantasmagoric testament to the suicide of Gudrun Esslin. Taken from a documentary photograph (Fig. 2-3) of her body suspended from a rope in her prison cell at Stuttgart-Stammheim as she was reported to have been found, the blurring of the image, in this instance with a more evident subtlety in its more gentle obscuration, transforms her lifeless figure as if into a resonant phantom, as a shadow of the past. The clarity of the image compromised, the painting's function as a record of an event is quite literally dissolved, at once calling into question the role of painting as historical document but moreover casting into ambiguity any presupposed ideological perspective in its treatment of the subject.

⁶ Sarah Brockhoff, Tim Krieger and Daniel Meierrieks, "Looking Back on Anger: Explaining the Social Origins of Left-Wing and Nationalist Separatist Terrorism in Western Europe" (2012), American Political Science Association (APSA) 2012 Meeting Paper.

What lends to this ambiguity is the peculiar nature of the Baader-Meinhof Complex itself – by-and-large young, educated, politically aspirational, if not drawn to political violence one could imagine these individuals as having most promising futures. There is an insistent feeling that they are, despite their choices, *still one of us*. Richter's assiduous choice of images, are remarkable for their 'matter of factness', for their banal quality. Images such as *Plattenspieler* (Record Player, Fig. 2-5), taken from an image of the phonographic record player left in Andreas Baader's cell, underscore the normality of these individuals and in so doing call upon the viewer to consider, despite the actions that have made them infamous and objectified them as radicals or terrorists, their essential humanity.

That these works ignited rather public controversy both in Germany and in the United States provides a particular case-in-point of how visual art may contribute to the shaping of perceptions and ideas within the public sphere. It likewise serves as a useful launching point for a more general discussion of the potential for a 'visual' form of tragedy to make a tangible, instrumental difference in public discourse. To take this question on requires the following basic, underlying assumptions about the function of the aesthetic:

- (1) The aesthetic affords a way of communicating and shaping understanding in a way that is qualitatively different from other forms of practical discourse associated with verbal, propositional argumentation or debate.

- (2) The "language" of visual forms as encountered through aesthetic experience outside the bounds of practical discourse can nonetheless have a demonstrable effect within the practical domain of ethical and political debate.

The first assumption speaks to what has been historically referred to as art's *autonomy*, its essential distinctiveness and separateness from practical discourses,

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while the second refers to its effective capacity or, as Christophe Menke terms it, art's *sovereignty*, the ability of the aesthetic to shape, influence, or redirect those modes of discourse ostensibly apart from it.⁷ Finally, addressing the civic function of tragedy in visual art as such rests on a third assumption:

- (3) There exists a space of collective interaction (which can be denoted as 'the public sphere') where matters of public interest are raised, engaged with, and debated that is sufficiently inclusive so as to substantively contribute to the formation of, if not determine, public opinion.

From the artist's perspective, the visceral capacity of form to convey intelligible content, that is to say for art's relation to collectively accepted meaning, is an issue that arises inherently as a practical concern. Yet the framing of this issue, with respect to the qualitative uniqueness of the aesthetic from other forms of valuation and knowledge and its interrelation with them grounds this discussion firmly within recent debates in critical theory. Indeed, re-engaging with the concept of tragedy as it served as a model for aesthetic operation in speculative idealism, as a metaphor for a limit experience that traverses the boundary between the apperent and the ideal, provokes a confrontation with the more practical, discursively-oriented paradigms in critical theory that emerged in the wake of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In specific, the project of Jurgen Habermas, beginning in the mid-1960's, to explore the constructive capacity of discursive deliberation in shaping public consensus and restore the potential for the ethical life endeavored to revalidate the utility of practical reason in the wake of Horkeimer and Adorno's dark indictment of instrumental rationality. The effort here is to reexamine this agonistic tension between the transcendental pretensions which underlie a philosophical employment of tragedy (from Schelling to Nietzsche) and the resolutely discursive, linguistically-centred turn represented in Habermas' *Theory of*

⁷ Christophe Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Derrida and Adorno*, vii-viii. Menke's distinction between aesthetic autonomy and sovereignty, particularly in relation to tragedy, will be explored in Section 4.

Communicative Action against which current discussions of aesthetics in the Frankfurt School orbit still largely position themselves. In staging this confrontation, it is worth delineating the principal features in this transcendentalist history of ideas that employed tragedy as a key philosophical category and the critical responses by the Frankfurt School theorists that have ultimately placed this question of the aesthetic's relation to theoretical and practical reason, that is, the concept of *aesthetic rationality*, on center stage.

2.1 Tragedy as Transcendental Concept

The story of how the tragic comes to the fore in the context of the ethical life begins with Kant, as it is the Kantian distinction defined in the *Critique of Pure Reason* between things-in-themselves (*Dingen an sich* - objects in actuality, which we can conceive of but not truly know) and things-in-appearance (*Erscheinungen* - objects as we apprehend them in our subjective awareness through the senses) that lies at the heart of this post-Enlightenment question. This differentiation defines the 'transcendental condition' where the realm of essential reality unconditioned by time and space - the *noumenal* realm - can be understood by us only abstractly and thus lies beyond our ability to comprehensively ascertain it in the same way we do sensible appearances in the *phenomenal* realm. This construct is at the heart of the subsequent use of tragedy as a pivotal concept in German Idealism and ultimately Nietzsche's formulation of it in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This demarcation of the subject-object divide establishes the limits of our subjective reason to know the world in which we exist had significant implications for Kant's practical philosophy and problematised the idea of individual freedom upon which a moral-ethical framework could be devised. In the First Critique, the distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal realms afforded Kant the latitude to posit, amidst the evident determinism of the sensible world, the notion of *transcendental freedom* - of the existence of spontaneous 'uncaused causes' outside of time and space which are requisite postulates (in the Kantian formulation) for autonomous acts of free will.

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Transcendental freedom then is the essential condition for *practical freedom* as it underwrites the autonomous agency of the subject and is thus foundational for a morality based on the free choice to act according to universal moral imperatives upon which Kant would ground his theory of ethics and right in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.⁸

While on the one hand the revolutionary implications of this epistemological construct served in large part to undermine onto-theological claims that justified pre-Enlightenment thought, it also sparked a series of challenges and reinterpretations that thereafter characterised the philosophy of consciousness and alternative conceptions of right. In having set the preconditions, the door was opened for a concerted reassessment of the supposed unbridgeability between appearance and existence and the subsequent philosophic systems dependent on such a challenge of Schelling and Hegel that, while still holding fast to the primacy of reason, provided holistic, universalist constructions encapsulating subjective and objective worlds. It was however, Kant's aesthetic turn in the *Critique of Judgment* that was the catalyst for setting this train in motion. By intimating the power of aesthetic experience to transcend the limits of reason, as a way out of the opposing conditions of causality and spontaneity, he recast the concepts of freedom and of the Ethical Life as *aesthetic* questions as much as they were theoretical and practical ones.

Kant recognized that the concept of transcendental freedom and its correlation with practical freedom presented a logical conundrum. The apparent paradox of the individual operating within the continuum of causal regularities of the phenomenal realm who is also wholly free as a timeless thing-in-itself within the noumenal realm is not so readily resolvable. This is what Kant identifies as the (Third) Antimony of Reason, the contradiction between the necessity of the sensuous world and transcendental freedom. Rather unsatisfactorily, he attempts to reconcile this issue in a recursive way by simulatenously asserting the immanent existence of transcendental freedom through the empirical necessity of free actions

⁸ Stephen Priest, *Kant's Concept of Freedom in the Critique Of Pure Reason*. 3ff.

to exist (and thus be critically engaged with) in the practical domain. In his analysis of aesthetic experience of the Third Critique, Kant attempts to mediate, if only suggestively, this bipolar character of philosophy where the practical dimension of observable nature and the theoretical dimension of intelligible concepts from which the notion of freedom arises remain effectively divided. In describing the rational process of discrimination, or of judgment, during subjective encounters with the beautiful and the sublime in particular, an image emerges of the aesthetic as a potential ‘limit experience’⁹ where an engagement with nature gives rise to an apprehension of a concept which supercedes the sensuous experience that triggered it. Though he intimates this quasi-reconciliation between phenomenal existence and transcendental essence as an aesthetic experience in nature and thus imbue the aesthetic with a potentially morally edifying capacity, Kant himself did not fully run these insights to ground. He did however position aesthetic experience as a cognate to theoretical and practical reason – thus intimating a form of aesthetic rationality – and launched a trajectory of thought that looked to Greek tragedy as an art form, and the tragic as a philosophical construct, to conceptualise a reconciliation between individual contingency and the unconditioned universal.¹⁰

Though Kant himself did not comment significantly on Greek tragedy, his philosophical investigations influenced a concurrent trend in German thought that looked to classical antiquity as a model for the role of the aesthetic in man’s ethical development. The engagement with classical antiquity of Goethe, Schiller and Herder, loosely referred to as Weimar Classicism, turned an idealizing eye to the political and artistic culture of ancient Greece as an example of humanity’s fleeting discovery of a harmony between individual and collective existence and prefigured the more concerted appropriation of Greek tragedy as a philosophical instrument in speculative idealism. Taking on board the *noumenal-phenomenal* construct and indebted to the insights of Kant’s third critique, Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic*

⁹ ‘Limit experience’ is here not used in the strict sense of Bataille’s *expérience limitée*, but rather as a more general experience of exceeding the boundaries of routine existence to encounter an ‘other’ in a manner which results in a form of subjective diremption or abjection.

¹⁰ On Kant’s role in the development of tragedy as a philosophical concept, cf. Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks: Tragedy and the Ethical Life*, 73 ff.

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Education of Man simultaneously centre on the aesthetic and political implications of Kantian ideas of subjective freedom and the emancipatory potential of the aesthetic. The *Letters* emphasize the importance of the aesthetic experience not only for individual edification but also in tempering the objectifying and alienating tendency of the modern state and so advocate the role of art in the collective, political life of Man.¹¹ Schiller's proposition that art harbors this reconciliatory capacity prefigures the central role of art in the systems of Schelling and Hegel and remains a compelling vision for the integration of the aesthetic dimension in public life. Although Schiller further explores the characteristics of tragedy in a series of reflections on the nature of 'tragic art' they are more formal in nature focusing on the unique evocative capacity of the genre.¹² It is with the employment of tragedy in the systemic efforts of the speculative idealists to resolve the transcendental dilemma between freedom and necessity that instrumental role as a philosophical idea would take shape.

In his oft quoted introductory passage from his *Essay on the Tragic*, Peter Szondi notes that "[o]nly since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic". Prior to this, he points out, there had been an emphasis on the *poetics of tragedy* with a concentration on (as in the case of Schiller) the affective capacity of the genre in a formal, literary sense.¹³ With Schelling the focus definitively shifts to the function of tragedy as a meta-phenomenon that bridges the divide between the sensuous and transcendental, correspondingly providing a new avenue from which to address the problematic of human freedom initially expressed by Kant as a fundamentally aesthetic issue. In his *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* of 1795, Schelling takes up the idea of 'tragic art' as a vehicle for elucidating the contradiction between freedom and necessity and asserting that aesthetic experience, with tragedy as the operative model, can overcome the limitations of reason to subjectively reconcile such contradiction. Using the literary format of the letter (as did Schiller) he adopts

¹¹ These ideas would have a clear influence on the early Nietzsche and his ideas on tragedy, which will further discussed in Section Three.

¹² Specifically, Schiller's essays "On the Nature of Tragic Art" and "On the Cause of the Pleasure we Derive from Tragic Subjects."

¹³ Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, 15.

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a less formal, less philosophically rigid tone and approaches the issue of subjective freedom in a more familiar, intimate voice. Speaking to an objectifying tendency in philosophy, he laments the “objective power which threatens to annihilate our freedom” thus imploring the reader to “fight against this power... to offer against it one’s entire freedom, and thus collapse” as if in an act of total sacrifice to resist the potential foreclosure of reason in Man’s ethical development. When the imperative to preserve such promise in the face of objective necessity becomes “invisible to the light of reason...,” Schelling contends “...this possibility must be preserved for art – the highest in art.”¹⁴ By this he ultimately means the tragic, and it becomes clear as he later describes the manner in which this spirit of resistance and sacrifice for the sake of human freedom is manifest in the genre of Attic tragedy itself.

For Schelling, the conflict between necessity and freedom plays out in tragedy as the simultaneous submission to fate and act of resistance in the confrontation with that fate enacted by the tragic figure. By example, Schelling identifies Oedipus as the tragic individual who “struggling against fate” resists the dreadful pronouncement of the oracle but is “frightfully punished for a transgression that is the actually the work of fate.” Extending this view, Antigone, in her defiance of Creon who represents the institutional power of the political order, fully realizes the implications of her actions and the grim road of fate she is choosing to take. In so taking it, in so accepting this fate and choosing to take the path of resistance in the face of it, she asserts her subjective freedom and enacts this in the context of the stage. More acutely, Ajax, having surrendered himself to the consequences of his assumed betrayal at the hands of his brothers in arms, usurps fate by taking it into his own hands, not only accepting it but *effecting* it in the ultimate act of subjective assertion. In this way for the audience of ancient Athens, the drama of tragedy addressed the “conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world, a conflict in which the mortal necessarily had to succumb when that power was a superior power – a *fatum*; and yet since he (or she) did not succumb without a

¹⁴ Friderich Schelling in the *Tenth Letter on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795), cited in Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks*. 85.

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struggle, he had to be punished for this very defeat. ...It was by allowing tragedy to struggle against the superior power of fate that Greek tragedy honoured freedom.” It was the defiance of Oedipus against the Oracle, of Antigone against Creon, the subjective assertion of Ajax to take his own life in the face of imminent sanction, this spirit of resistance in confrontation with fate, that characterizes the contribution of tragedy to ethical development and the defence of our subjective autonomy. That this defence occurs in the context of aesthetic experience (and a public one at that) becomes a driving theme in Schelling’s more comprehensive project *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1801) where art becomes the ultimate vehicle for man’s reconciliation with the human condition, one which surpasses even philosophy, and philosophy itself recognises that tragedy, as the ‘highest form of art’, outstrips the achievements of theoretical and practical reason.¹⁵ Schelling then, takes up the promise afforded in the *Critique of Judgment* by explicitly mirroring the problem of freedom as an *aesthetic* one, and moving beyond Kant’s intimation of the power of the sublime to overreach the limitations of the human capacity for rational discrimination and places it front-and-center as the fundamental operative which anchors the progressive development of thought in History.

Hegel, Schelling’s close colleague and kindred intellectual spirit, would build upon these ideas to even further integrate the tragedy as a key operator within his own speculative system.¹⁶ Tragedy first makes an appearance in his thinking as a way to illustrate, in a dichotomy paralleling that of Schiller’s in the *Aesthetic Education*, the reconciliation of two opposing ethical powers, that of the objective necessity codified in the laws of the State and that of the individualised subjective sphere of familial life and private existence. In his essay on “Natural Right” (1802),¹⁷ Hegel employs Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy as an illustration of the manner in which this opposition plays out. In the trial of Orestes, the Athenian delegates neither side with Orestes, who in having exacted vengeance upon his mother –

¹⁵ Friderich Schelling, trans. Heath, Peter. *System of Transcendental Idealism*. particularly Section 6.2.

¹⁶ For a further examination of Hegel’s multifaceted employment of tragedy, cf. Miguel de Beistegui, “Hegel: or the tragedy of thinking” in *Philosophy and Tragedy* 11-37; Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks: Tragedy and the Ethical Life*; and Szondi *An Essay on the Tragic* 15- 22.

¹⁷ G.W.F. Hegel. trans. T.M Knox. *Early Theological Writings*, 148 ff.

Clytemnestra – for the murder of his father represents the objective order of institutional justice, nor with the Furies, correspondingly representing natural law in their demand for ‘divine’ justice for the retributational killing of Clytemnestra. For Hegel, that Athena arbitrates the dispute by elevating the Furies (as the Eumenides) into an honoured place in the Athenian pantheon while allowing Orestes to avoid sanction is representative of a self-conscious objectification of the subjective life where a ‘divine and inalienable’ existence is afforded within the State, while the State nonetheless remains free from any hold by it. This recognition and assimilation within the sphere of the ethical of that which is in opposition to it, and that Hegel views as characteristic of tragedy in the specifically Greek sense, becomes a preliminary model, for the dialectical sublation of the *negative* that underwrites his philosophical system.¹⁸ While Schelling, who similarly employed the tragic to describe the tension between subjective and objective existence saw the engagement with the negative as an immanent process of resistance to objective fate, Hegel alternatively viewed this as a contradictory act of positing through the assimilation of its wholly other.

Published four years after Schelling’s *Transcendental Idealism*, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1805) engages with tragedy on a multiplicity of levels. Here, Hegel takes the very dilemma of subjectivity and transforms this dynamic into the essence of an absolute metaphysical architecture where the progressive development of the ethical life, is a constituent process of the self evolution of Spirit (*Geist*) understood as the unfolding in space and time of self-and-absolute knowing Reason. Spirit becomes the all encapsulating category where, as the example of subjectivity *par excellence*, the ontological character of the universe is described as a kindred struggle of individual self-understanding. Retracting somewhat from the use of tragedy in his earlier work, and the *Oresteia* in particular, as a metaphor for the broader conflict within the ethical realm between freedom and necessity and its reconciliation within the context of affirmative negation, tragedy makes its initial entry on the scene in the *Phenomenology* in his occasional references to the *Antigone*.

¹⁸ de Beistegui, 13-15.

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Representing a particular moment in the development of the ethical life, where, in its comparative naiveté the *Greek spirit*, as expressed in Sophocles' drama, is confronted with the diremptive opposition between the realm of objective, institutional law of the *polis* and the inner-worldly legislation of the divine, natural realm, epitomized by the confrontation-to-death between Antigone and Creon.¹⁹ Hegel abandons the 'affirmative' aspect of tragedy represented by the *Oresteia*, for the 'transgressive' one, alternatively represented in the *Antigone*. He makes this shift in order to identify what he considered to be the unresolved dilemma, though first acknowledged and articulated in Classical Greece, that still confronted Modernity – the urge to reconcile these opposing thrusts in the ethical existence of humankind.

As tragedy is initially particularized in the *Phenomenology* as a specific cultural and artistic evocation of the time (e.g., the *Antigone*) which illustrates a continuing ethical dilemma, it is not so readily evident that tragedy takes up an even more central place in Hegel's thinking. Firstly, within the onto-epistemological framework wherein Spirit finds itself in a progressive journey towards its own self-reconciliation, Hegel characterizes the higher moments of this progression as an aesthetic phenomenon where this process of realization, a bridging of Spirit in its universality with the particularity of its individuated manifestations in History, is facilitated by art – of which tragedy as a genre figures most prominent.²⁰ (He would later elaborate on this theme more specifically in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*.) Beyond this, however, The notion of the tragic is embedded in the architecture of the *Phenomenology* itself. While Schelling first characterized the tragic as an intrinsic spirit of resistance associated with Kant's antimony of reason, in Hegel's system this becomes a more integrated theme where the tragic condition denotes the diremptive struggle between objectification and subjective determination made immanent within the onto-epistemological system itself. As we are but an individuated reflection of Spirit and Spirit in its totality is the cumulative reflection of us, the root contradiction of our own subjectivity – the requirement for recurrent reconciliation through the tragic to resolve the conflict between objective necessity

¹⁹ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 261, 284.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 422.

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and subjective freedom – becomes the constant transcendental condition of Absolute ethical resolution. With Hegel, the tragic is recast as a specific embodiment of thought in Spirit, through the recurrent dialectical (and inherently destructive) process of assimilation and negation of objectified consciousness into a reformed subjective presence. Thus tragedy takes on three forms in Hegel,²¹ (1) as a representation (as in Greek tragedy itself) of the ethical struggle of humankind between objective necessity and subjective freedom; (2) as an aesthetic phenomenon more generally that facilitates Spirit's process of self-realisation; and (3) through an elevation of the ethical struggle into the fundamental ontological process of dialectical transformation that underlies the development of Spirit itself.

Tragedy as a focal concept and even the aesthetic in general were only incidental to the post-Hegelian developments in philosophy materialist project of the Young Hegelians.²² The employment of tragedy as a model for art's ethical function in society would resurface and reaches an apotheosis in Nietzsche's apology for Wagner, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872). Though published nearly a century after Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*, it is patently indebted to the legacy of Weimar Classicism in its concern with the nature of truth in relation to semblance, the redemptive (and educational) power of the aesthetic experience, and an idealisation of Hellenic forms of expression – lyric poetry and tragedy in particular - as a model for that engagement.²³ At once a work of classical scholarship and speculative aesthetics without being specifically either, Nietzsche describes the experience of tragedy as a diremptive tension between ordered Apollonian semblance, represented in the formal aspects of theatrical presentation, and Dionysian chaos, a vision of an ineffable, essential reality, where the former gives way to a transgressive and transfigurative exposure to the latter. Tragedy

²¹ de Beistegui, 20.

²² Though Marx makes a reference to the Prometheus in the preface to his doctoral dissertation, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* it functions more as a call to a revolutionary spirit in philosophy, cf. Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, 60. Otherwise any meaningful references to tragedy in his work are scarce.

²³ For Nietzsche's indebtedness to the tradition of Weimar Classicism cf. Paul Bishop and R.H Stevenson, *Friederich Nietzsche and Weimar Classicism* and Paul Bishop ed. *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition*.

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maintains a liberating, redemptive quality in its ability to shatter the illusions of everyday life and reveal the “genuine truth of nature”.²⁴ As Nietzsche takes an antagonistic position with respect to Hegel’s speculative system and the degree to which tragedy is instrumentalised as a manifestation of Spirit’s socio-political development, he takes an avowedly apolitical view of tragedy’s role in society (though not discounting the transformative effect it might have indirectly). Nonetheless, his metaphorical association of semblance with Apollo and primordial chaos with Dionysos, is rooted in the same philosophical concern with the relationship between discursive, cognitive modes of understanding and intuitive, aesthetic experience. Ultimately, Nietzsche’s anti-Hegelian posturing belies the manner in which *The Birth of Tragedy* takes up a position similar to Hegel’s, though in more polemical fashion. He does this firstly by claiming that (specifically Aeschylean and Sophoclean) tragedy as aesthetic presentation had a socially edifying function in ancient Athenian society by reconciling one’s inner existence with the increasingly objectifying demands of the polis. Secondly, in his objective to hail the work of Wagner as tragedy reborn, he elevates it to a meta-genre with universal implications. Lastly, the transcendental pretensions behind his description of the Dionysian as a revelatory experience describe a quasi-ontological function to facilitate an encounter with the Absolute, particularly when one acknowledges its indebtedness to Schopenhauer’s critique of the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal divide.²⁵

Nietzsche’s *critical* engagement with antiquity was the forebear of modern classical reception and the eventual breadth of its influence in multiple disciplines expansive, however the influence of *The Birth of Tragedy* in post-Hegelian/Marxian discussions of the ethical life and subjective freedom would only become residually evident decades later through the aesthetic investigations of German critical theory in the years just prior and during World War II. *The Birth of Tragedy* would also prove a formative influence on the key figures of American Post-war painting in its description of tragedy as a ‘shattering of semblance’ and a gateway to an otherwise

²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 41.

²⁵ These three features will be discussed further in the following section.

inaccessible confrontation with the truth of existence. Nietzsche's formulation of tragedy would belatedly serve as a point of convergence between a critical tradition centered on the relationship between cognitive understanding and intuitive, aesthetic apprehension of existence, the significance of this relationship to political emancipation, and the transcendental concerns of post-war abstraction. In so doing, the legacy of *The Birth of Tragedy* was to provide a *phenomenological* model for the transfigurative experience of the tragedy that was merely articulated as concept by those that preceded him. It would require, however, a radical critique of Enlightenment reason, while tragedy waited on the sidelines, for this convergence to occur.

2.2 Tragedy in Exile

Recognising the eventual importance of Nietzsche's concept of tragedy on the development of Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, and other later trends in continental thought, the relative importance of tragedy and the aesthetic in discussions of right, freedom, and the ethical life diminished with the Left Hegelian critiques after Hegel's death in 1831. While embracing the notion of historical-dialectical progress in history towards an emancipated subjectivity reconciled with collective existence, the Left Hegelians took aim at what was perceived as a latent religio-political conservatism in Hegel's work oriented towards a justification of the Prussian state and the contemporary status quo.²⁶ This critique found its most resonant voice in the work of Engels and Marx who centered their attention on the objectifying character of advanced capitalism as the principal impediment to emancipation. In so doing they radically changed the conversation that would follow. As the structural analysis of modern society became more central to the debate, the reparative function of the aesthetic in the development of the ethical life consequently waned. It would eventually reemerge, however, within the context of post-Marxist insights into the nature of Reason and the role of the

²⁶ Emmanuel Renault, "The Early Marx and Hegel: Young Hegelian Mediation."

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aesthetic within and against it. This change in the conversation and the effective dismissal of tragedy from it set the stage for the 'Critique of Enlightenment Reason' that would eventually posit the aesthetic, as opposed to other forms of practical or theoretical reason, as a distinct sphere of rationally-mediated communication that nonetheless contributes to the process of individual self-determination and progressive development of society. So, while this materialist, post-metaphysical turn in German thought has been beneficial in identifying the need for structural adjustments to our increasingly rationalized political and economic systems, and while the aesthetic reemerges as a potential agent in that process of adjustment, tragedy, once a central feature of the debate, had until relatively recently been largely absent from the scene. The following paragraphs are an attempt to describe the way that the aesthetic is recast as an adjunct phenomenon in the critique of rationality and how this development potentially sets the conditions for recovering a practically meaningful concept of the tragic instrumental to continuing emancipatory struggle.

The critique of reason as such generated initial momentum in Marx's analysis of Hegel. As with his Young Hegelian contemporaries, Marx adopted the dialectical mechanics of progress in History but found fault with Hegel in his seeming belief that the existing conditions of market capitalism and the state architectures that supported it were actually representative of, or even conducive to, the development of the ethical life and the broader philosophical reconciliation of the universal and the particular. Hegel, in his view, only articulated the possibility of such a reconciliation and eschewed the practical requirements to actually achieve it. As such, the consequence of the *Phenomenology* was to achieve understanding of the Ethical Life as a postulate of philosophical thought. In defining the *process* of emancipation as an internal unravelling of the capitalist paradigm, the elimination of private property, and the emergence of a classless society, Marx specifically took aim at the reasoned justifications of the political-economic system and effectively declared Hegel's supposed reconciliation of the universal and the particular – a foundational concept of Enlightenment reason for which tragedy provided an

experiential if not metaphysical model – as an ideologically compromised concept employed to justify the universalisation of capitalist modes of exchange.

Not unproblematically (as Albrecht Wellmer notes), in his critique of alienation Marx conflates the economic exploitation and subjugation of the working class associated with advanced capitalism with the increasing specialisation and complexity of the administrative systems required to support it.²⁷ In presenting a progressively emergent communist alternative as the dialectical negation of the dehumanizing character of the capitalist system, Marx sidestepped the issue of the deleterious and objectifying effects of increased bureaucratization and systemization that are the apparent conditions of modern life *in any case*. Moreover, he fails to address the otherwise productive role that systemisation and specialisation could play in regulating and ensuring equitable social interaction in complex societies through systems of law, governance, and more efficient, regulated administration. These potential aspects of administered social existence of even a communist society, both constructive and destructive, were assumed away through a conjectural and ambiguous process of rational mediation between liberated subjects, a “withering away of the state” as Lenin would phrase it, free as they would be from subjugation under capitalist modes of production (an assumption now arguably invalidated after the failure of the Soviet project). Ironically, his attempt to employ the dialectic to negate the alienating systemisation of the market economy through the emergence of an empowered proletariat becomes in itself an affirmation of reason’s capacity to self-correct and is itself a *positive* application of reason, albeit with a more progressive, revolutionary character. In a dialectical sleight-of-hand, Marx somewhat dubiously uses Hegel against Hegel, theorising a dissolution of objective, rational structures as a yet-to-come, inherent consequence of an emancipated proletariat, the result of which is a latent immanentism in Marxist discourse. At once, Marx identifies the problem that Enlightenment reason has generated for the modern world but simultaneously buries it in his own

²⁷ Albrecht Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment” in *Habermas and Modernity*, 40ff.

materialist (and positivist) appropriation of dialectical reasoning. In so doing, the function of the aesthetic to establish the conditions of an emancipated society so central to the discussion before Marx (and for which tragedy played such a key role) falls by the wayside, and the substantive critique of reason that he foreshadows is aborted before it has begun.²⁸

It is with Max Weber's analysis of the rationalization of society that the critique of reason truly finds its feet and as a consequence where the question of aesthetic rationality as something distinct and identifiable with respect to other non-aesthetic modes of reason also has its origin. For Weber 'rationalisation' is a broader phenomenon where human enterprise is progressively governed less by traditional, religious, or customary norms, and more through empirically derived processes oriented towards coherence, replicability, consistency with scientific knowledge, and results-orientation encapsulated in the term 'instrumental reason' (*Zweckensrationalitaet*). This phenomenon applies not only to the capitalist economic system, but in the development of institutional bureaucracy, law, and the systems of objective knowledge generation and validation. In his effort to achieve a more objective methodology in 'social science', Weber initiated a critical examination and decomposition of the increasing specialisation and systemization of human knowledge and activity, a trend which Hegel clearly saw as an immanent manifestation of Spirit coming into being in the modern State and that Marx, from his Left Hegelian vantage point, subsequently viewed as inimical to a truly liberated society. In his essay "Intermediate Reflection on the Economic Ethics of the World Religions", Weber articulates this emergence of differentiated spheres of knowledge, 'rational life orders' as he terms them – which can be delineated as political-economic, aesthetic, and intellectual – as they emerge in tension with a religious world view that is overcome in a process of sublimation of that religious impulse. His inclusion of the aesthetic as a distinct sphere is noteworthy and consequential. As he describes how religiously derived ethics are aborted in favor of more rationalized systems of political-economic (practical) governance and

²⁸ Ibid., 43.

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theoretical knowledge acquisition, Weber concurrently describes a more nuanced transformation in the way the aesthetic sphere, emptied of its explicitly religious content, assumes a *redemptive* function that was once the exclusive purview of religion itself:

Art now constitutes itself as a cosmos of ever more consciously grasped, free-standing, autonomous values. It takes over the function of an innerworldly redemption (no matter how this is conceived) in the face of the everyday and above all the increasing pressure of theoretical and practical rationalism.²⁹

In this formulation Weber not only establishes the basis for a further analysis of instrumental rationality and its impact but also opens up the possibility for the discussion of art's redemptive capacity as an antidote to the negative effects of an increasingly rationalized society, creating a space once again that had largely been foreclosed by Marx.³⁰ Both of these lines of inquiry were taken up by the theorists of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, more loosely known as the 'Frankfurt School', who together launched a comprehensive investigation of the complexities of rationalised social systems and, while maintaining a perspective sympathetic to Marx's critique of market capitalism and Weber's critique of rationality more generally, likewise explored to a greater or lesser degree the role of the aesthetic in shaping or attenuating collective existence.

Weber's position towards instrumental rationality is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he describes the rationalisation of society as the inexorable but somewhat beneficial result of a continuing desacralisation of the world. On the other, he likewise associates this process with a growing 'disenchantment' with that world, as rationalized systems become increasingly ossified and embedded conditions of social life and through their aut systemic operation empty that life of

²⁹ Max Weber, "Intermediate Reflection on the Economic Ethics of the World Religions" in *The Essential Weber*, 350.

³⁰ Weber in an appendix to *Economy and Society* included the essay the "The Rational and Social Foundations of Music" (1911, pub. 1921) where he interprets certain developments in Western music, such as polyphony and notational systems, as a process akin to rationalisation in other spheres. This pioneering attempt to explicitly consider the aesthetic as having a rational character had a formative impact on Adorno's own notions of aesthetic rationality. Cf. Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 138.

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substantive moral and ethical content. Weber's follower, Georg Lukacs, would associate this phenomenon with that of *reification*, a specific form of alienation initially described by Marx, whereby the more direct and meaningful subjective relationship between man and the world is usurped, objectified, and largely replaced by an increasingly structured regulatory and bureaucratic framework.³¹ Having recognised this to be a relatively accurate description of modern capitalist conditions, much of the work during the first decade of the *Institut* (1923-33), and specifically that of Horkeimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, was largely driven by an attempt to reconcile these two somewhat divergent responses to the Hegelian paradigm: Weber's "negative dialectic of reification" which took a rather pessimistic view of modern society's ongoing trajectory with the more progressive vision of Marx's "positive dialectic of liberation," still seen as something to be aspired to.

Informed as it was by the rise of National Socialism in Germany and Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during the initial period of the *Institut's* ten-year exile at Columbia University in New York, takes a pronounced turn towards this negative Weberian view. Taking this position to an extreme against the institutionalisation of state capitalism, the 'culture industry' (where mass media takes on particularly insidious role), and other reified aspects of collective existence, Horkeimer and Adorno no longer saw a revolutionary emergence of more emancipatory social structures as a given. The dialectic of Enlightenment takes form in the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, a summary inversion to mythically-conditioned irrationality which found tangible form in the horrors of Auschwitz and the Gulag. Though very much a product of its moment and widely criticized for a myopic preoccupation with the corrosive and distorting effects of instrumental reason (foreclosing on reason's potential to constructively frame and mediate social interaction) the *Dialectic* is a pivotal moment in the intellectual heritage of the Frankfurt School and to continental thought more generally. Firstly, it represents the beginning of Adorno's intensive exploration of art's redemptive potential over and against the forms of domination having arisen in the wake of the

³¹ Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 93ff.

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progressive rationalisation. Secondly, the apparent foreclosure on reason's promise proved fertile ground for the next generation of critical theorists (represented in the first instance by Jurgen Habermas) who sought alternative paradigms to reexamine and reenergize the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment. Both these aspects afford the conversation begun by Schelling and Hegel regarding the relevance of tragedy to be reopened.

The opening chapter of the *Dialectic*, "Concept of the Enlightenment", radicalizes the concept of historical dialectic (and that of the Enlightenment itself) in describing it as Enlightenment Reason's regressive, inward turn back to myth where the ultimate consequence of Weberian rationalization is the industrialised genocide of Auschwitz, justified and reinforced by the mythology of the fascist state and the will-distorting function of propaganda and mass media. Though its explicitly Marxist language was self-consciously muted (successive edits of the manuscript between 1941 to its published version in 1947 were thoroughly cleansed of its initially historical-materialist jargon), the underwriting indictment of the *Dialectic* is that the process of rationalization and reification of man's relationship with the world had shut out the possibility of a classless society. Somewhat incongruously, what subsequently emerges from this indictment in the subsequent chapter is not a call to engage the structural malformations of the political-economic system, but a further, examination of the 'culture industry' and the way it unabatedly serves the continuing reification of society. Mass media and the commodification of cultural products are representative of the broader effect of the dialectical inversion of Enlightenment where our aesthetic engagement of the world, which for Horkeimer and Adorno seems to have still held a primary role in attaining an emancipated life, is deadened by the conspicuous consumption of cultural products which far from attuning awareness of progressive alienation simply pacify society through the easy pleasure of entertainment. Advertising, film, popular music and print media, saturate the environment with vacuous content that dulls any motivation to engage the world critically, thus reinforcing the structures of advanced capitalism and economic coercion. In one of the few vestigial passages in

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the *Dialectic* that refer to tragedy and the tragic,³² Horkeimer and Adorno describe how mass media has the effect of absorbing and nullifying tragedy's function by transplanting its negatively affirmational diremption between individual and the world (which implicitly fuels the "revolutionary instinct") with a soulless resignation to the fate of reified existence. It accomplishes this through the absorption of tragic content into mass cultural products such as films and popular novels to provide a veneer of authenticity and a "surrogate for a long abolished depth" where the subjective confrontation with the 'truth of existence' (to use Nietzsche's phrase) is replaced by its representation and resolution in the insipid last gasps of a sad Hollywood ending, and the impulse to resist is replaced by a passive sense of its futility.

The unbroken surface of existence, in the duplication of which ideology consists solely today, appears all the more splendid, glorious and imposing the more it is imbued with the necessary fate of suffering. It takes on the aspect of fate. Tragedy is leveled down to the threat to destroy anyone who does not conform, where its paradoxical meaning once lay in hopeless resistance to mythical threat. Tragic fate becomes the just punishment into which bourgeois aesthetics has always longed to transform it... Even the worst outcome, which once had better intentions, still confirms the established order and corrupts tragedy.³³

With a knowing eye to Schelling, so culminates in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the role of tragedy in the development of the ethical life after the materialist turn in German philosophy, at least where the 'first generation' of the Frankfurt School is concerned. Horkeimer and Adorno's description of tragedy's exhaustion as an edifying force in society and its assimilation as an instrument of bourgeois capitalist ideology is consistent with observations of his colleagues within the *Institut* orbit during the pre-war period. Marcuse, who like Adorno would later look to aesthetics as holding the promise of cultural redemption, similarly observed the objectifying, 'affirmative' character of culture which through an ideological transformation of the

³² Earlier drafts of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* had more extensive references to tragedy, and the *Antigone* in particular.

³³ Horkeimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 122-23.

cultural domain transforms the beautiful and the sublime into an apparition of unity and freedom that conceals the reality of antagonistic and oppressive social conditions.³⁴ In *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, one of the other few reflections on tragedy that occur within the Frankfurt School circle during this time, Walter Benjamin presages the *Dialectic* by renouncing the status of the tragic as ‘timeless dialectical concept’ but one which is historically conditioned by the circumstances to which it is applied, undermining its traditional function in the Idealist tradition as a philosophical model for reconciling the universal and the particular.³⁵ These two ideas converge, albeit briefly, in “The Culture Industry” and this convergence underscores the way in which the *Dialectic* absorbs preoccupations that arose in the critique of Enlightenment Reason and re-manifest themselves in a reversal of Hegelian idealism. Horkeimer and Adorno never articulated the positive concept of the enlightenment that they foreshadowed in the introduction to the *Dialectic*. Their starkly sobering view, represented in part by the devaluation of tragedy, had two significant but arguably oppositional trajectories in the subsequent work of the *Institut*. Firstly, it would set the stage for the first generation’s more concerted exploration into the emancipatory potential of the aesthetic, and secondly it predicated the decisive orientation towards discursive rationality taken on by Jurgen Habermas and the second generation in the wake of the *Dialectic* in order to frame their efforts to reenergise the “unfinished project of the Enlightenment.”

2.3 Tragedy after Discourse Ethics?

It remains an open question whether Horkeimer and Adorno actually intended a follow up to the *Dialectic* to propose any potential corrective measures to their bleak indictment of Enlightenment reason, and though no such direct address to the questions raised by the book ever appeared, it subsequently allowed Adorno the opportunity to explore questions of ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics outside the

³⁴ Herbert Marcuse, “On the Affirmative Character of Art” (1935), 201ff.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, “On the Origin of German Tragic Drama.”

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traditionally more practical program of the Institute. Beginning with his exploration of an alternative ethics in *Minimalia Moralia*, and the mechanics of contradiction in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno further developed the concept of the autonomous work of art as a remedial antidote to the reifying tendencies of cultural commodification and economic coercion to fracture the ‘social cement’ of the culture industry.³⁶ First in a series of less ambitious aesthetic investigations and finally culminating in the work that would remain unfinished at his death, *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno offered many speculative insights into the potential of autonomous art to speak truth to domination and to disclose global structures of alienation and reification.³⁷ He would ultimately turn to art as the corrective response to instrumental rationality and would conceptualise through the application of his ‘dialectics of contradiction, what has come to be termed ‘aesthetic rationality’.

In his later investigations, the ability for art to shape the realm of that which is outside it would become Adorno’s central concern with a more acute emphasis on the antinomies inherent in the work of art. With *Aesthetic Theory* he sought to clarify, through an insistently difficult but alternatively illuminating paratactical approach, the coexistence of multiple polar relationships in operation within the work of art and in aesthetic experience more generally. The relation of semblance to authentic expression (leading to meaning or truth in some form) and the relation of the aesthetic to the non-aesthetic figure prominently in this work, highlighting the problematic of art’s simultaneous autonomy and sovereignty which he arguably leaves unresolved. Insofar as he characterizes (but not quite clarifies) art’s manifest social function as a *negative* one – that is, affirmational in the non-aesthetic domain through a determinate negation of practical suppositions – Adorno leaves open the door for potentially reconciling this apparent contradistinction. As Pieter Duvenage describes:

³⁶ Pieter Duvenage, *Habermas and Aesthetics, The Limits of Communicative Reason*, 40-45.

³⁷ For a more comprehensive collection of Adorno’s work regarding the culture industry and of the corrective potential of Modernist art that preceded *Aesthetic Theory*, c.f Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M Bernstein.

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The artwork serves for Adorno as the model of non-objectified thinking and a paradigm for a non-oppressive integration or reconciliation...[T]he artwork reveals through its structures the irrational false and instrumental character of the existing world, and by way of aesthetic synthesis it anticipates a possible reconciled order. This is what Adorno means by aesthetic rationality – a transfiguration of the elements of empirical reality so that a reality can emerge in the light of a reconciliation that is not of this world.³⁸

Aesthetic rationality becomes an alternative to the purposive, instrumental aspects of theoretical and practical reason and the ‘rational idea’ is no longer the exclusive property of discursive thinking. This argument for the reconciliatory potential for the non-discursive, non-objectified nature of the aesthetic ultimately breathes life into the first two presuppositions that underpin this discussion and identified in the beginning of this section – a fundamental uniqueness of the aesthetic with respect to other discursively-oriented forms of rationality and the capacity of the aesthetic, despite this uniqueness, to influence or shape the domain of discursive engagement.

Concurrent with the publication of *Aesthetic Theory*, and the promise it held for the non-discursive, transfigurative character of art, was the beginning of a profound and countervailing shift in the emphasis of the Frankfurt School and specifically associated with the incipient development of discourse theory in the work of Jürgen Habermas. While Adorno (and Marcuse) would attempt to deal with the problem of re-grounding the Idealist relation between reason and freedom through the aesthetic, Habermas would take a decidedly different tack by redressing the philosophical foundations of historical materialism through the medium of linguistic argumentation, or discourse. Confronted with the malaise and disenchantment with the practical effectiveness of our rational social architectures, Habermas first sought to unpack the constitutive elements of reason and their relation to ideology and human interests. In so doing, he shifts the emphasis of rational inquiry from the determination of absolute truth content to one of *normative validation* between linguistic subjects, where through a process of argumentation a consensus is reached among interested individuals regarding the validity of the

³⁸Duvenage, *Habermas and Aesthetics*, 43.

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truth claim.³⁹ Looking to Weber's critique of rationality through a distinctly neo-Kantian lens, Habermas saw an alignment between Kant's foundational delineation of pure, practical, and expressive-reflective reason embodied in the Three Critiques and what Weber termed the 'differentiation of value spheres' – the increasing specialization of particular domains of production and value. The result is his nominal identification of three domains of reason in the modern world: theoretical reason, embodied in science and technology and concerned with the validation of a hypothetical propositions; practical reason, embodied in law and morality and concerned with the validation of ethical norms; and aesthetic-expressive reason, embodied in art and self-presentation concerned with – somewhat more tenuously – the affirmation of cultural identity.⁴⁰ While the older generation of critical theorists addressed the challenges to the Enlightenment project which emerged after Marx and Weber by exploring the aesthetic as a vehicle for emancipation, opening the door perhaps to a reengagement of tragedy as model for this experience, Habermas would tackle this crisis of legitimation, by assuming a theoretical-practical orientation rooted in propositional argumentation and consensus. The domain of aesthetic-expressive reason – presumably referring to those modes of aesthetically-mediated communication that provoke or are subject to a process of normative validation – would remain relatively untouched throughout his lifelong project.

Commensurate with the dominance of poststructuralist thought in France, Habermas' 'linguistic turn' contributed to the effective change in the nature of continental intellectual debate after 1960, fulfilling his self-affirming claim that "today the problem of language has replaced the traditional problem of consciousness."⁴¹ Unlike his poststructuralist sparring partners who employed the

³⁹ Habermas would ultimately term this alternative formulation of rationality *intersubjective* or *communicative* reason, posing it in contrast to *subject-centered* reason, which had dominated post-Enlightenment epistemology since Descartes. Fixated as it is on the subject-object distinction and subject-centrism could not substantively address the importance of consensus in making truth determinations. His formulation is most comprehensively articulated in his magnum opus *The Theory of Communicative Action*. An extended discussion of this major philosophical contribution is not possible here, but it nonetheless lays the theoretical foundations for his later work on practical discourse ethics.

⁴⁰ Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

⁴¹ Jurgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, 220.

variability and relativity of semiotic constructions to challenge the integrity of rational social ordering, what lay at the root of Habermas' preoccupation with language and discourse is the role it serves in mediating consensus between participants in politically relevant debate. Discourse then becomes the essential medium for releasing the emancipatory potential of our political architectures. This concern, which governs his theoretical work and commentary in politics, justice, and civil society to this day takes a prominent position in his earliest effort in diagnosing the collapse of the realm of discursive civic interaction, or, as it has been termed, the public sphere. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, his *Habilitationschrift* of 1962, Habermas provides a foundational demarcation of the public sphere as a discursive space where private individuals give concrete form to their positions on issues of the public interest. In this inaugural effort, he intimates the importance of *inter*-subjective communication, particularly with regard to participatory democracy. Herein lies the rudimentary foundations of discourse ethics, a theory of justice and political representation delimited by the constraints on open discourse by potential participants. *Structural Transformation* is unique in Habermas' formative work as it affords meticulous attention not only to the philosophical-ideological frameworks which governed the development of public spaces for discursive engagement, but also to the specific historical and socio-cultural conditions of their development.

In considering how a concept of tragedy might function in the public sphere it should be recognized that the aesthetic does indeed assume a place in *Structural Transformation*. Habermas identifies the emergence of the *literary public sphere* (which includes critical discussions and debate about art and music as well as poetry and literature) as a pivotal factor in the formation of a discursively-oriented political culture in liberal bourgeois society. However, conspicuous in its absence is any discussion about the effect of aesthetic experience itself – apart from being the subject of debate in the literary sphere – to the development of civic consciousness. The ambiguity with respect to how, in Habermas' formulation, the public sphere can potentially overcome its inherent tendency towards self-collapse and open itself

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to the question of the communicative nature of aesthetic experience leaves open the somewhat antithetical possibility initially posed by Adorno that the aesthetic can influence or shape the public sphere (presumably driven by discourse) through alternative, non-propositional means. Habermas' seemingly self-conscious reticence to address this question head-on beckons a closer look at other communicative models of aesthetic engagement particular to the modern period that describe aesthetic experience as disclosive, revelational, or transgressive in nature. In recent years, within the orbit of the Frankfurt School there have been efforts to expand the semiologically-oriented parameters of discourse ethics or to drill deeper into the non-discursive character of the aesthetic, as in the recent work of Albrecht Wellmer, Christophe Menke, and Martin Seel, that suggest a possible intersection of phenomenological or onto-hermeneutic approaches with discourse theory.⁴² Accordingly, the Kantian distinction between the *intuitiv* and *diskursiv* (as explored in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) becomes relevant when exploring the relationship between the aesthetic and the political respectively and how they relate to the presumably oppositional categories of *discursive* and *non-discursive* used to denote those modes of expression which do or do not, in semiological terms, rely on a discrete system of signification and reference.

It is the divergent trajectories taken by those in the Frankfurt School orbit in the wake of the the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* pessimistic indictment of reason that encapsulate what is at issue when we pose the question of the *relevance of tragedy* in the contemporary public sphere. On the one hand, after initially declaring the capacity of tragedy to be dead, undone as it were by the culture industry, Adorno and Marcuse rally around models of aesthetic experience which had lost their currency after historical materialism as the antidote to the aporias of instrumental reason, ultimately relying on the inner world of an intuitive engagement with the work of art. Through this engagement the falsity of the oppressive, over-rationalized structures of the modern world is revealed, not through propositional argumentation, but in the negative capacity of the artwork to throw those

⁴² Cf. Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, Christophe Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*, and Martin Seel, *The Aesthetics of Appearing*.

falsehoods into sharp relief. Alternatively, Habermas attempts to salvage the promise of the Enlightenment project by prioritising the role of linguistically-mediated discursive interaction between willing participants within the public space. The role of the inner world of engagement with art (and specifically literature) was manifested in the ‘literary public sphere’ of early bourgeois capitalism (typified for example by the emergence of salon culture in the late eighteenth century), but Habermas is at pains to describe it as a bygone anachronism, eventually undone by the undermining effects of the culture industry. As the concept of the public sphere has been initially defined in *Structural Transformation*, this divide between inner and communal life only widens. Habermas reveals his indebtedness to the intellectual heritage of the *Institut* by holding fast to Adorno’s critique of the culture industry and the way it compromises the validity of aesthetic experience. Concomitantly, his concentration on linguistically-mediated argumentation sidesteps the possibilities that the aesthetic dimension, as an alternative to discursive rationality, might afford. Though one bears witness in *Structural Transformation* to the concerns that would characterise Habermas’ lifelong project to delineate the function of communicative reason and of discourse ethics, insofar as he describes the need for a *critical publicity*, one that mediates and identifies viable truth content in the formal and informal public opinions that emerge in organic forms of public conversation, he provides a suggestive insight, in a manner which his later work seems to almost deliberately avoid, of how the aesthetic might contribute to the shaping of perspectives in civic life.

2.4 Remarks on a Concept of Visual Tragedy

So the question emerges before us: can the a concept of a public sphere structured as it is on discursive engagement between interested citizens, be reconciled with the idea of a reconciliatory and emancipatory model of aesthetic experience, particularly one that breathes new life into the idea of tragedy as an archetype for such a model? To unpack this question has required at least a cursory review of the

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development of tragedy as an element of metaphysical design in the 18th and 19th century and yet invites even further investigation of the epistemological distinction between discursive cognition and sensuous intuition as initially articulated by Kant. The role of the aesthetic in the pursuit of Absolute Freedom and the Ethical Life that arose from this distinction was viewed through the prism of tragedy precisely because it served as a model for the bridge between the intuitive and cognitive dimensions. What remains at issue is whether, in the wake of the linguistic turn in and the primacy of discourse ethics, and specifically tragedy recast as visual art, has any relevance to our current political condition. The problematic relation between art's autonomy and sovereignty, linked as it is to the intrinsic separateness between discourse and the intuitive, aesthetic dimension invites another view through the prism of Attic tragedy to see if it might provide an alternative to normatively grounded, practical discourse and specifically through the medium of visual art.

In addition to these developments in critical theory, various contemporary strands of philological research, particularly with regard to the influence of Attic tragedy on the political developments in Athens during the 5th-century BCE, provide potential insights into the manner in which artistic expression might operate in a contemporary civic context. The intent here is to engage with these trajectories in largely visual or pictorial terms. To give practical substance to these ideas – to give them ‘form’ – I have engaged with original ancient texts. As explained at the outset, this investigation will be oriented around the *Ajax* of Sophocles, whose theme of a fractured subjectivity brought into conflict with military order were highly charged in their original context but speak as well, as a potential translational device, to our own contemporary experience of warfare, martial culture, and the invariable social and personal toll associated with it. What is of insistent, if metaphorical, importance to this study is how the sensational and performative dimension of (Attic) tragedy can be translated into visual, effectively non- or less-discursive terms. This challenge provides the theoretical linkage to the practice-based element of the project. In the process of art-making as a constituent part of research, it is a self-conscious exercise in the reception and transference of

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both the thematic content of a particular tragic play and of Attic tragedy as an abstract methodological construct in general, an exercise I hope may afford an complementary view of the process of reception itself and to the way art can speak to us in the Modern world.

Perhaps we can initially entertain this question by returning again to the case of Gerhard Richter and the *Oktober 17, 1978* series on the Baader-Meinhof dissidents, and asking ourselves: *Is there tragedy here?* Richter, on some level, admits to such an impulse in his treatment of the series, confessing to “a sorrow for the people who died so young, so crazy, for nothing...” and a “certain sympathy...for their desperate desire for change. I can understand very well if one cannot find this world acceptable at all.”⁴³ Although Richter would go on to express the hope for ‘less sentimental’ and ‘more realistic’ corrective in a world after radical socialism, he is at pains to distance himself and these works from discrete ideological positions for fear of “narrow(ing) them down through interpretation.” It is of no coincidence then that the work immediately following the series moves toward a greater degree of shielding or ambiguity with respect to direct referencing. In *Decke* (Blanket 2-6), Richter takes the ghostly vision of Gudrun Esslin’s hung body from *Erhangte*, and amplifies the process of obfuscation that characterizes the *Oktober* series at large through its characteristic blurring and further occludes it by applying a layers of scraped paint over the greater part of the image. The title itself refers to the blanket of the original image which appears to have been pulled back to reveal the scene. Alternatively, while *Decke* seems initially to be speaking on its own terms, it remains loaded with its content by allowing just enough of the original to remain so as to provide a discernible reference to the subject.

One is invited to ask: is this foreclosure or ‘covering’ an act of sympathetic decency for the dead? Is this a humanising gesture that perhaps betrays an emotional if not ideological sympathy for these young dissidents who found their fate relatively early in life? Richter seemingly plays with the tension between disclosure and its reversal through a process of painterly abstraction, such that

⁴³ Gerhard Richter, Interview with Sabine Shutz, *Journal Of Contemporary Art*, 15 January 1990.

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abstraction itself becomes a vehicle for the deliberate assimilation of the referential content of the source image, as if the subject of Esslin's suicide is absorbed into the "subjectless" expression in paint. It is this distancing or ambiguous tension that, in the case of *Decke*, is so provocative at a conceptual level.

Richter's work moves further in this direction in the ensuing years. *Eis 3* (1989), for example, part of a series of similar works from 1988-89, takes the initial tendency from *Decke* and transits to complete non-objectivity or non-referentiality yet seems to carry with it through its consistent adoption of a similar aesthetic and implicit referencing the conceptual issues explored in the *17 Oktober* series. Taken in the context of Richter's broader trajectory, the visual affinities of this later work to the progressive abstraction from *Erhangte* to *Decke*, one could make the claim that images like *Eis 3* (Ice 3, Fig. 2-7) operate as a sublated metaphor for the normative tensions regarding violent political resistance that accompanied engagement with the subject of the Baader-Meinhof legacy.

At face value, this claim is rather tenuous as it presupposes a discernible conceptual relationship between the discursive content of the *Oktober 17* series, and the potentially unrelated, wholly abstracted image on the canvas. But it is difficult to deny that when engaging with images like *Eis 3* that there is something rather uneasy and unsettling, yet nonetheless captivating about them. There is something of the effect of being *provocatively destabilised* when experiencing it. It is for this reason, given the identifiable progression from the representational content of the works that preceded it in the context of Richter's development, that the term 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*) could be applied to denote an absorption and elevation of the provocatively destabilizing character manifested in the *Oktober 17* series into a less discursively referential but nonetheless analogous aesthetic experience through the process of pictorial abstraction. What this is meant to suggest is that less objective, less-discursive forms of expression, and in particular pictorial or conceptual abstraction to greater or lesser degrees, can harbor the potential to subvert the normative status quo in a manner that has been historically associated, in its development as a feature of metaphysical design in the German intellectual

tradition, with the experience of tragic. This development in Richter's oeuvre is a specific phenomenological case-in-point of the potential for abstract art to operate as tragedy, however the proposition itself is not a new one. In the years during and immediately following World War II, the New York School in their move towards monumental abstraction self-consciously looked to classical antiquity, and tragedy in particular, in thematising the Abstract Expressionist project, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* providing a powerful model for aesthetic experience in this regard. Though this aspect in the development of Abstract Expressionism is widely acknowledged, the more complex relationship between the artistic development of American post-war abstraction and the role tragedy played in the tradition of transcendental metaphysics has not been extensively examined and deserves a more careful look.

PLATES



2-2 Gerhard Richter, *Beerdigung*, (Funeral), 1988



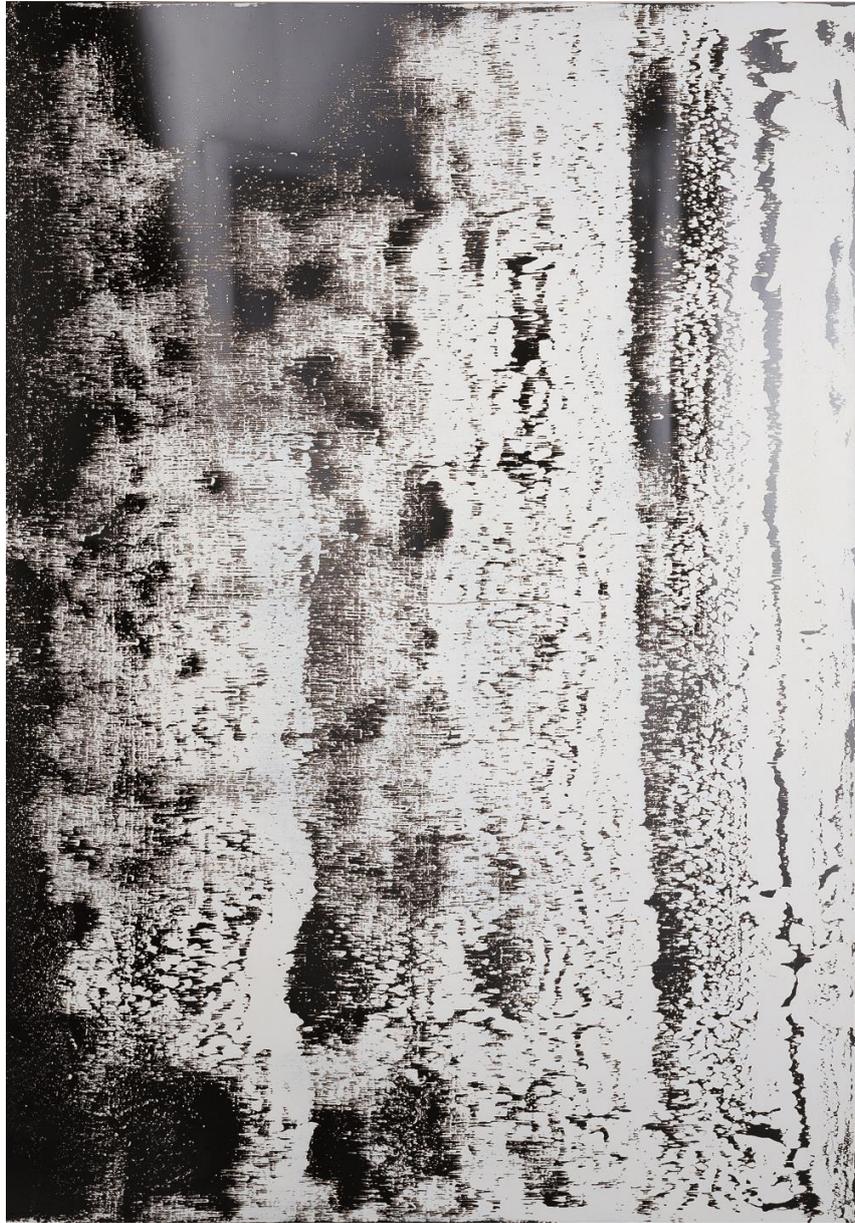
2-3 Newspaper photograph of Gudrun Eslin, 1978



2-4 Gerhard Richter, *Erhangte* (Hanged), 1988



2-5 Gerhard Richter, *Plattenspieler* (Record Player), 1988



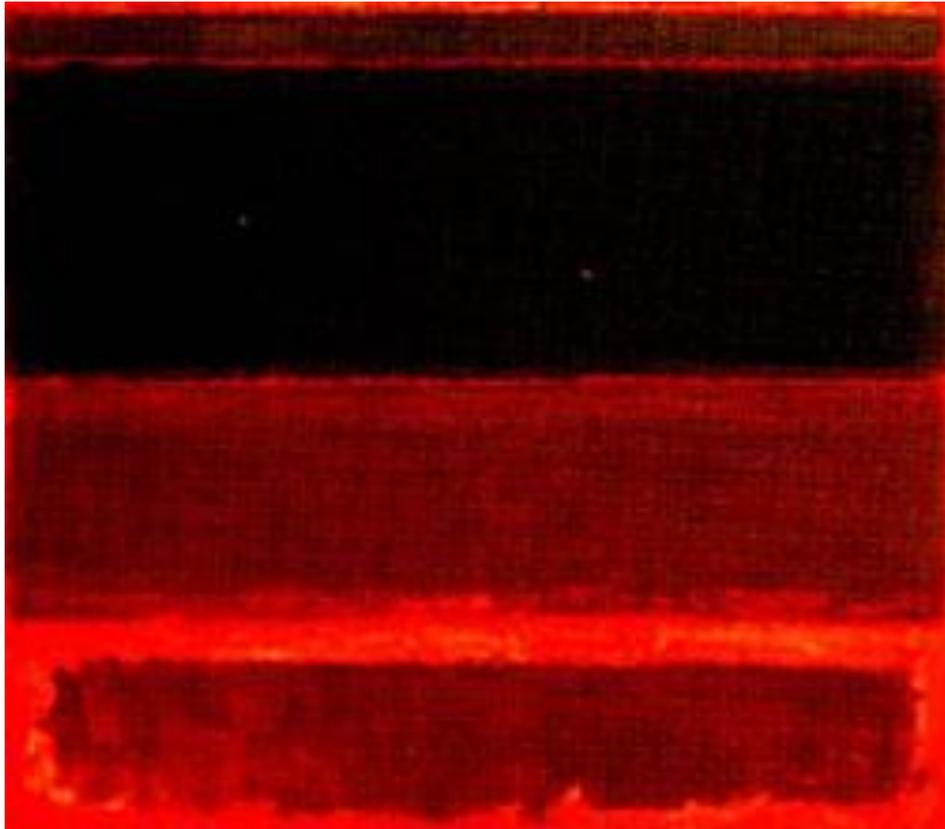
2-6 Gerhard Richter, *Decke (Blanket)*, 1988



2-7 Gerhard Richter *Eis 3, (Ice 3)*

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The Shattering of Semblance: The Reception of Tragedy in American Post-war Painting



3-1 Mark Rothko *Four Darks on Red*, 1958

Is there tragedy in this? The history of twentieth-century pictorial modernism gives us at least one specific case where a generation of artists looked to tragedy as a lens through which to frame their visual explorations. Armed with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* as a form of conceptual guidebook, the artists of the New York School took by extension a concept of tragedy linked to the philosophical effort to address contradictions in idealist ethics, enroute to a form of 'transcendental' abstraction we

now associate with Abstract Expressionism. In a manner similar to the example of Richter's pictorial sublation of politically unsettling content into increasingly non-objective images, the Abstract Expressionists from the early 1940's, set against the backdrop of erupting world war, initiated a process of progressive removing of narrative content with the aim of harnessing the effect of tragedy devoid of explicit semiotic reference. With this intent, Nietzsche's idea that tragedy was born out of the spirit of music accorded well with the drive toward abstraction and the liberation of the narrative.

Tragedy, as it is most readily understood, is a literary or dramatic genre, rooted in the narrative. If we look back to the models espoused by Schelling and Hegel, the component attributes of plot, character, and theme, suffused with suffering, grief, and loss, are orchestrated to provoke an engagement with the internal struggle between universality and contingency. This engagement, whether it occurs in the mind's eye of the reader or the actual eye of the spectator, is triggered by an enactment of events in sequence so as to witness – as a being in time – the psychic excoriation of others. Through our vicarious natures we are then compelled consider the frightful implications of our own individual calvaries and it is this profoundly empathetic, intersubjective dimension that Aristotle alludes to in the *Poetics* when he describes the *katharsis* of tragedy as the product of its component emotions of pity and fear.¹ That the more iconic, non-narrative qualities of visual art could supplant the temporally conditioned mimesis of an enacted narrative is then the matter at hand when considering whether tragedy can be considered in visual terms.

Visual representations of tragic subjects have long been a feature of Western art. They stood as their own form of genre painting and sculpture in Roman antiquity, later witnessing a re-emergence in the High Renaissance and Baroque,

¹ Aristotle *Poetics*, Chapter 6, 1449b., 21-28. The exact scope of Aristotle's meaning of the term is still subject to debate. The point here however is that whatever experience catharsis denotes it is triggered by a viscerally empathetic reaction by the spectator while witnessing the enactment of events on the stage. Cf. D.W. Lucas, "Appendix – Pity, Fear and Catharsis" in *Aristotle: Poetics*, 276-279.

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and thereafter leaving a continued signature on subsequent stylistic developments in painting and sculpture. While the appropriation of the subject matter of tragedy offers substantial testament to the ability of representational art to transpose selected elements of the drama and revisualise the *mise en scène* in meaningful ways², it remains at issue whether the tableau of the suspended narrative, for all its ability to sentimentalise the tragic circumstance, retains capacity to provoke an emancipatory confrontation with the conflict between freedom and necessity. It was under the fortuitous conditions of convergence in New York in the early 1940's that the potential to address this question head-on, where the displaced European champions of early modernism's defining movements of geometric abstraction and surrealism found refuge in the company of a self-selected group of mid-career American artists seeking to reconcile a new, violently-imposed global awareness. Equipping themselves with the tools developed by Europe's vanguard, the first generation of American Post-war abstractionists adopted an informed, metaphysical view of tragedy, steeped in the tradition of speculative idealism, and strove to imbue their work with the dramatic power of the Theatre of Dionysus. This section explores that reception and appropriation of tragedy by the Abstract Expressionists through the lens of that speculative, metaphysical tradition to establish their own brand of visual tragedy.

3.1 Defining the Transcendental Image

*I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures as performers. They have been created from the need of a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and to execute gestures without shame.*³

These words from Mark Rothko's 1947 essay "The Romantic Were Prompted", evoke images of a subjectivity once constrained and unable to assert itself that is now set free, as if actors on a stage had been somehow straight-jacketed, their

² The concept of intermedial transposition will be discussed in Section Five.

³ Mark Rothko. "The Romantic Were Prompted"

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expression restricted by the narrative representations – the ‘script’ – which governed their action. They suggest a liberation. Rothko’s essay appears during a critical period of transition during which he shed his last lingering elements of representation, typified by a suggestive, mythic figuration, and broke out into his non-objective, abstract ‘multiforms’. These would soon give rise to the expansive colour-field paintings for which he is best known. Collectively, the usual suspects of the New York School, including Barnett Newman, Adolf Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, among others, underwent similar transformations. In these years during and immediately following World War II, they shared a concerted interest in primitive symbolic imagery, myth, and ritual. Out of this traumatic historical context of global war, which saw American war deaths number over 400,000 and whose impact on American society cannot be underestimated, a vanguard few artists armed with the transplanted ideas of pictorial abstraction and surrealism from Europe turned to self-consciously archaising and primitive models of symbolic expression, invoking the power of myth to address what could be termed an inner desire for resolution in the face of the inconceivable destruction and violence. “If we profess kinship to the art of primitive men,” Gottlieb would say in 1943,

it is because the feelings they expressed have a particular pertinence today. In times of violence, personal predilections of the niceties of colour and form seem irrelevant. All primitive expression reveals a the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of the [natural] world as well as the eternal insecurity of life.⁴

The self-conscious regression towards a more primeval quasi-religious engagement with the art object where the symbol, even a largely abstracted or ambiguously referential one, would give rise to reflective experience was a shared stratagem of these artists during most of the 1940’s. Ultimately by 1947-1948, we would see a collective turn from more pictographical approaches towards pure abstraction, but

⁴ Interview with Adolf Gottlieb and Mark Rothko 1943

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one that was fuelled by the mythically-oriented underpinnings of the preceding years, and the concern with a symbolically-driven reconciliatory experience through the art object. In the images (and words) that followed, the New York School, and in particular the ‘field’ painters Rothko, Newman, Still, and Pollock,⁵ staked a claim for the transcendental, redemptive capacity of abstract painting with a self-conscious sense of mission that had yet been witnessed.

In the midst of this transitional period, Rothko, employs the metaphor of ‘pictures as dramas’ in a way that suggests a desire to break free from the pictographical conventions that had defined the work of the New York School though the decade. As evidenced in the artist’s statements and exhibition essays from 1943 onward, the idea of drama was largely understood as a vestigial form of ritual performance, and served as a metaphor for the experience of painting as a profound confrontation with a symbolic object.⁶ In “Romantics” however we see voiced the desire to unchain the work of art from the narrative association of symbol and myth and to capture the dramatic spirit of ritual expression in a non-narrative context and so transcend one of the principal characteristics of ritual expression itself - the appropriation, disassembly, and reconstruction of a mythical and remembered past. The intimate relationship between dramatic expression and the foundational backdrop of myth was ultimately seen as a constraint. Rothko plaintively asserted that “without monsters or gods we cannot enact our drama –

⁵ I am here adopting a distinction initially demarcated by Irving Sandler in *Triumph of American Painting* of the principal mature trends in Abstract Expressionism after 1949: the ‘field’ painters including Rothko, Newman, Still, and latterly Pollock, and the ‘gesture’ painters De Kooning, Kline, Motherwell, Gorky, and Gottlieb. The main formal differentiation between the two is the abandonment of the brush and the trace of the ‘human touch’ in the former, and the converse emphasis of the painters mark-making in the latter. This distinction paralleled the favoured strains of American post-war painting championed by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg respectively during the heyday of the 1950’s. In recent years, Sandler has come to place Pollock in the field camp, given his ‘hands off’ technique, environmental scope, and affinity for the transcendent that he more closely associates field painting. Of course, diversity of approach rather than uniformity characterised the artists of this period, but the categories are useful in identifying similarities or differences between them, particularly in philosophical outlook.

⁶*Op Cit.* In the same interview with Gottlieb in 1943, Rothko refers to the ‘human drama’ which unfolds in painting and describes how for the archaic Greek this drama takes place through the “inner visions they had with their gods.” Contrasting the representational portrait of an individual, in seeking to find a more universal “ideal which embraces all of human drama” the artist is “no longer constrained by the limitation that all of man’s existence is expressed by his outward appearance.”

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art's most profound moments express this frustration." As a result of this frustration, the journey to effect drama through painting would become an effort to escape the confinement and isolation of representational structures, to liberate drama and thus ourselves from the delimitations of narrative association. This was the American post-war painters' signature provocation embodied in their eventual move to pure abstraction.

This belief in the power of myth, ritual, and the dramatic was, at least in part, inspired and informed by Nietzsche's unique views on tragedy. Tragedy, for Nietzsche, emerged from the ritualistic performance of an ancient form of choral lyric sung in honour of the god Dionysos, the dithyramb, and hence, as the initial (1872) title suggests out of the spirit of music. The later, dramatic form of tragedy is born from this rhapsodic evocation of the "doctrine of the Mysteries," of the myth of Dionysos' tearing apart and suffering,⁷ which is at its essence, according to Nietzsche, a redemptive encounter with the eternal agony between the universal and particular: "the fundamental recognition that everything which exists is a unity; the view that individuation is the primal source of all evil; and art is the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, a premonition that unity restored."⁸ Clearly indebted to the intellectual tradition that saw the tragedy as a phenomenon that could tackle issues raised in speculative metaphysics, Nietzsche's emphasis on the simultaneously diremptive and unifying power of myth evoked in ritualistic forms of aesthetic expression was his signature insight. "In tragedy, myth attains to its most profound content and most expressive form, it raises itself up once more, and all its excess of strength, together with the wise calm of the dying, burns in its eyes with a last mighty gleam."⁹ It is this phenomenological orientation and the centrality of the aesthetic expression of myth to tragedy that was to prove so influential and palpably evident in the work of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly with Rothko. William Seitz makes an authoritative reference of Rothko's 'early reading' of the book in his 1955 dissertation based on first hand

⁷Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-53

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54

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engagements with several painters of the time.¹⁰ It is a near orthodoxy in Abstract Expressionist scholarship to refer to the employment of Nietzsche's concept of the 'Dionysian' as a foundational conceptual construct and that Rothko's recurrent engagement with the text and the correspondence between his aspirations to create the transcendent image and the Apollonian/Dionysian dualism has been insistently argued.¹¹ James Breslin attests to an unfinished essay Rothko had written in the mid-1950s on *The Birth of Tragedy* which would account for the continued importance of the text well into the development of his mature style.¹²

Though the *The Birth of Tragedy* was never explicitly referenced in the artist's statements of the time, from the earliest writings associated with the New York School references to tragedy and the tragic abound, and during the 'mythmaking' period of the early to mid-1940's their titles were often appropriated from tragedy or Greek mythology. In 1943, in what could be seen as the earliest attempt to stake out a conceptual position for the nascent New York School, Rothko and Gottlieb (presumably with the assistance of Newman) reference the centrality of tragic in their use of abstracted mythical subject matter, which had come under question by New York Times art critic Edward Jewell.¹³ In defence of their paintings *The Rape of Persephone* (Gottlieb) and *The Syrian Bull* (Rothko), they would claim to be presenting a "poetic expression of the essence of myth...with all its brutal implications" and "a new interpretation of the archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions." Insisting that "the significant rendition of symbol... has as full validity today as the

¹⁰ William Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 8. Originally Seitz's theretofore unpublished 1955 Princeton doctoral thesis, based largely upon direct conversations/interviews with the artists at the time, it circulated unpublished in scholarly circles until it was published by Harvard University Press in 1983 on behalf of the National Gallery in Washington.

¹¹ Cf. James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, 174; and Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko, Subjects in Abstraction*, 91ff.

¹² Cited in Glenn Phillips, Thomas E. Crow, eds. *Seeing Rothko*. 37 n10.

¹³ Jewell had seen their paintings at the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors exhibition at Widenstein Gallery, New York in June 1943 where he evidently he told the artists that he found their work 'befuddling'. Rothko and Gottlieb's written reply, which has now taken on legendary significance, was published in Jewell's column "The Realm of Art: A New Platform; 'Globalism' Pops into View" in the *New York Times* on 13 June 1943 where he referred to the burgeoning trend, given their evident distaste of Amercian regionalism which had dominated the pre-war scene, with the rather pejorative moniker of 'Globalism'. The column is reprinted in full in Ellen G. Landau, ed. *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, 146-150.

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archaic symbol had then” they declared that “only that subject matter is valid that is tragic and timeless.” Although it has been suggested that Barnett Newman, for all his preoccupation with antiquity and tragic subjects, viewed Nietzsche and his invocation of dreamlike states and primordial chaos as excessively sentimental, his writings, even more-so than his peers, bear strong conceptual parallels to Nietzsche’s experiential description of tragedy.¹⁴ In 1945 Newman would write, “it is a religious art which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life, which is its sense of tragedy”, likening the experience of the creative act and of the art object as a confrontation with the unknown of primordial chaos. Throughout the 1940’s Rothko, Newman, Gottlieb, and Pollock, to name at least a few pivotal figures of the New York School, looked concertedly to ideas and themes related to ancient Greece; Nietzsche’s early ideas about myth, ritual, and tragedy establish a critical linkage between Abstract Expressionism and Romanticism, speculative idealism, and the sublime. That *The Birth of Tragedy* marked the apotheosis of tragedy as a metaphor for the reconciliation of subjective freedom and objective necessity in the German philosophical and philhellenist tradition, its appropriation by the New York School in a time of such significant cultural upheaval indicates their reliance on a much deeper and extensive intellectual legacy about the emancipatory potential of the aesthetic than is generally acknowledged.

It is difficult to deny that the best examples of Abstract Expressionist painting harbour within them significant phenomenological power. The opaque, diffused rectangles of Rothko’s *Four Darks in Red* hovering like individuated resonances before a warm, sanguine glow of red seem to invite a quiet state of reflection if not transfixion. The impulse to languidly dwell in front of these immutable forms gives pause to reflect on the either the passage or suspension of time. The expansive, environmental quality of these works encourages the viewer to abandon any effort to cognise the subject of the painting and to allow oneself to engage its ‘objectness’

¹⁴ W. Jackson Rushing, “The Impact of Nietzsche and Northwest Coast Indian Art on Barnett Newman's Idea of Redemption in the Abstract Sublime”. This essay was originally given at the College of Art Association. Cf. also the contentious exchange between Annalee Newman (the artist’s wife) and Rushing the following year in *Art Journal* 48/3 (Autumn 1989), 269-271.

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and be carried by the very nature of what it is. Allowing oneself to be operated upon in this way, it is possible to understand why Rothko likened his shapes as performers, how his 'darks' were the dramatis personae in some iconic passion play without script, beginning, or end. In very similar terms, Rothko would once describe the work of fellow painter Clifford Still in his solo exhibition in 1946 at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery in 1946, who had, though working in comparative isolation on the West Coast, preceded his New York contemporaries in the move to pure abstraction. Referring to the manner in which Still "expresses the tragic-religious drama which is generic to all Myths at all times" he describes how within the work "every shape becomes an organic entity inviting a multiplicity of associations inherent in all living things" that collectively "form a theogony of the most elementary consciousness."¹⁵ In the year following Still's exhibition, Rothko, Newman, and Pollock would decisively abandon the dwindling vestiges of biomorphic symbolism and associative figuration and move to the enveloping environmental abstraction for which they are best known.¹⁶ Though the phenomenological impact illicit from works like *Four Darks on Red* is dependent on a formally reductive pictorial vocabulary, they are highly modulated and orchestrated, laden with a deliberate enigmatic quality and animated in a manner that belies the empty attribution of such an effect to the works specifically formal qualities. These paintings are insistently formal in execution but avowedly conceptual in origin.

Although the motivations and influences that shaped Abstract Expressionist interest in the ritual, myth, and the 'spiritual' have been widely examined, their reception of these themes has largely been viewed through a generally limited reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*, if any reading at all. Comparatively little consideration has been given to the conceptual heritage of Nietzsche's text itself

¹⁵ Mark Rothko, *Clifford Still* cited in Alloway, "Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism" 318-319.

¹⁶ Gottlieb, for his part retained the pictographical (a term which he explicitly used with respect to his work from the 40's onward and could broadly applied to the work of his contemporaries in this period) as an inherent part of his visual vocabulary, yet he was still much aligned with the 'redemptive' aspirations of the field painters. His 'burst' paintings of the late 50's, for which he most recognized, could also be likened to the color-field approaches of Rothko and Newman.

and its indebtedness to the philosophical concerns of subjective resistance and emancipation that characterised the central ethical issues of post-Kantian transcendental idealism. The New York School's common interest in this archetype of drama – Attic tragedy – carries with it resonances of this emancipatory concern, one that is acutely relevant in the post-war context in which it arose. With this in mind, exploring the epistemological underpinnings of Nietzsche's view of tragedy – its transcendental dimension – and the way that shapes his argument for the phenomenological potency of its drama, provides greater insight into the emancipatory tone of their artistic strategies. Clarifying this dynamic may also open up new avenues with which to consider the agency of art more broadly as a catalyst for social-political transformation.

3.2 Bridging the Phenomenal/ Noumenal Divide: The *Birth of Tragedy* and the Critique of Kantian Epistemology

In considering the New York School's reception of the *Birth of Tragedy* it is important to recognise that the genealogy of ideas that support the Nietzsche's argument is a complex and integrated one. It is a work soundly in the tradition of German post-Enlightenment philhellenism since Winckelmann but is manifestly unorthodox as a work of classical scholarship (at least for its day). Its hostile reception in 1872 is due in large part to its polemical character that, in the spirit of late Romanticism, fetishised Greek antiquity to champion a new German national aesthetic as tragedy reborn.¹⁷ The young Nietzsche envisions an evolution in reverse from what he considers a deliverance from the barabie excesses of an indulgent 'Alexandrianism' where in the retrograde development "we feel that the [re]birth of the tragic age means a return to the German spirit to itself a blissful reunion with its own being."¹⁸ This Romantic character is largely indebted to Wagner's reflections on the relationship between music and drama and his

¹⁷ On the immediate reception of the book, and in particular Ulrich von Willamowitz-Moellendorfs' reaction to Nietzsche's attempt to transform philology into a form of philosophy or art, cf. Raymond Geuss' introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, xxviii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* xxviii

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aspirations for a new mythology and to Schopenhauer's metaphysical aesthetics.¹⁹ Both these influences underwrite Nietzsche's unique take on the signature Romantic theme of a 'return to nature' where tragedy, born anew, functions as a conduit to the timeless essence of the German mythical spirit and "existence and the world is eternally justified".²⁰ It is in this somewhat sentimentalised light, that the Abstract Expressionist's early appropriation of Nietzsche and tragedy is often viewed, as an invocation to a return to myth and to a redemptive encounter with one's primal or natural condition.²¹ This view belies the equally integral thread that is indebted to the critique of the epistemological framework laid out by Kant (and further aestheticised by Schiller). In the Apollonian-Dionysian dualism central to *The Birth of Tragedy*, the god of light, of plastic form and individuation, is placed in mythical opposition to the god of music and ecstasy. Through the experience tragedy, phenomenal illusion and semblance (*Schein*) is shattered and gives way to an encounter with the metaphysical encounter with the "innermost ground of the world."²² This operationalising of the universal/particular distinction in aesthetic terms places Nietzsche directly in line with the philosophical investigations launched from the critique of Kantian metaphysics. This particularly Kantian foundation ultimately lay at the heart of the aesthetic paradigm that governed the New York School's move to pure abstraction and is genuinely representative of their appropriation of Nietzsche's concept of tragedy. In further examining how these concepts are foundational to Nietzsche's aesthetics and ultimately frame an implicit aesthetic logic at work in the development of Abstract Expressionism, it is worth wading briefly into the limitations Kant places on our faculty of 'knowing' against which his successors, particularly Schopenhauer, positioned themselves.

The Apollinian/Dionysian formulation is rooted in the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, between things-in-appearance,

¹⁹ Cf. Richard Wagner, *Beethoven* and Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Nietzsche makes reference to Wagner's treatise on Beethoven in his dedication of the first edition, cf. *The Birth of Tragedy*, 13.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 33. On Nietzsche's Romantic perspective of re-naturalisation cf. Peter Murphy, David Roberts, *The Dialectic of Romanticism*, 58ff.

²¹ Cf. Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko*, 79ff.

²² Peter Murphy, David Roberts, *The Dialectic of Romanticism*, 62.

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which are knowable to us through the senses, and things-in-themselves, which are not (though the former give rise to the latter.) Noumenal reality exists in a realm beyond the *a priori* intuitions of space and time which are corollary artifacts of our own objectified temporal existence and condition our subsequent processing of these appearances and further generation of concepts. As such, noumenal reality, which is not conditioned by space and time, is unknowable in its non-contingency. What we do apprehend and are the source of our knowledge are the phenomenal forms that ‘appear’ before us in the manifold of sensation. The object of appearance that ‘presents itself’ in space-time to the apprehending subject bears a contingent relation to the noumenon that exists in its non-contingent essentiality. The terms ‘intuitive’ and ‘discursive’ respectively refer to the immediate apprehension of phenomenon and the process of cognitive deliberation to in turn understand the nature of those objects. ‘Sensible intuition’ is an immediate form of grasping through the senses the presence of an object of appearance. Unlike the discursive generation of concepts, it is not a form of knowing as such (in terms of understanding in a rational sense). Intuitions allow one to perceive relations between appearances which in turn form the basis for cognitive judgments and so function as a precursor to understanding. Intuitions are not simply limited to empirical sensations. For Kant, intuition has alternative valences, namely aesthetic (or sensory) and spatio-temporal intuitions we could term ‘mathematical’. In the latter, certain intuitions enter into ‘sense’, such as the nature of geometrical relationships between phenomenal objects, and provide the ground for subsequent judgments and the development of mathematical concepts.²³ Alternatively, in Kant’s formulation, discursive understanding refers to the operations of the intellect that order and categorize that stream intuitions to in turn associate it with definitive concepts. This is the underlying architecture of rational thought. As Kant states in

²³ For Kant generation and manipulation of geometric and algebraic symbols in symbolic construction cannot itself serve, as does ostensive construction, to establish any genuine mathematical cognition. Nonetheless, this constructive process posits a mode of intuition that is abstract but as *constructive* also suggestively propositional, opening the way for Schopenhauer’s later suggestion that intuition itself is also a form of knowing. See Lisa Schabel, “Kants Philosophy of Mathematics”.

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the onset of the “Analytic of Concepts”, the “knowledge yielded by understanding, or at least by the human understanding, must... be by means of concepts, and so is not intuitive, but discursive.”^{24,25} Neither discursive cognition nor sensible or abstract intuitions, can provide access to things-in-themselves. For Kant, the transcendental realm of the noumenal is not directly accessible and can be cognised only speculatively (and non-comprehensively). For Kant, these constructions serve his central intent to identify the limits of our knowledge through Reason. In a rational, discursive process of engagement we can come to an objective understanding of things as they present themselves through the manifold of our sensory experiences, but this discursive engagement does not allow us to truly comprehend these things in-and-of-themselves. Ultimate reality is unavailable to us.

In effect, this foreclosure on the possibility of direct experience of the noumenal that becomes the principal focus of Schopenhauer’s critique in *The World as Will and Representation* and which Nietzsche effectively adopts in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Schopenhauer’s indebtedness to Kant is evident in his translation of the noumenal and phenomenal realms into his corresponding categories of ‘Will’ and ‘representation’. The ultimate reality that exists behind the manifold of sensory experience is the Will (*Wille*), a primordial, all-encompassing drive toward life of which an individuated human will is but a singular objectification. The world of representation (*Vorstellung*) is the phenomenal presentation of this Will. Unlike Kant’s noumenal realm, however, the Will can be experienced intuitively in a moment of affinity with one’s ‘individuated will’ mediated through the powerful forces of sensuous desire and the individual will to exist. Though this construct is avowedly Kantian in its epistemological foundation, Schopenhauer takes specific aim at the premise that noumenal reality is inaccessible. In his appendix to the first

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, [A31/B47]

²⁵ Etymologically, “discursive” has its roots in the Latin word *discursus* meaning ‘a running about’, which suggests in Kant’s application of the term a process of iterative circumscription to structure sensory impressions by which conceptual associations become progressively definitive. By extension, this circumscriptive dynamic lends itself to the idea of an ordering of concepts through language (as this is our principal means of communicating concepts *inter*-subjectively) giving rise to the meaning of discourse. This is a non-trivial linkage as the idea of ‘discursive thought’ as a Kantian epistemological operation can be used to categorise those forms on ‘non-aesthetic’ reason, i.e., with formal modes of propositional argumentation often specific to specialized disciplines of knowledge.

volume of the *World as Will and Representation* entitled “Critique of the Kantian Philosophy” he refutes the idea that there is an intermediary object that exists between the thing-in-itself and an appearance, namely an ‘object of appearance’ which provokes our sensible intuition of phenomenon. In this implicit tripartite construction such an object is in effect the thing-in-itself manifested spatio-temporally. Arguing against Kant’s contention that an object does not exist without a subject and that space and time are themselves *a priori* conditions for both our intuition and understanding, Schopenhauer asserts that the ‘object of appearance’ as an intermediate existent wholly divorced from the thing-in-itself is an implausible construction which violates the fundamental principle of causality central to the Kantian categories. This critique in effect opens up the possibility of intuition as a form of grasping or apprehending a direct, sensuous experience of the noumenal. Schopenhauer maintains a distance between the real and ideal by asserting that it is only through intuition that one comes to a transcendental awareness of the truth of things for which our discursive processes of cognition are inadequate – we may intuit ultimate reality but we cannot understand it. Yet in his effort to identify an inconsistency in Kant’s epistemology he offered up a potential conduit for direct access to the noumenal.

It is this tactical adjustment of the Kantian model which Nietzsche adopts in the construction of the Apollonian-Dionysian duality, and Nietzsche openly acknowledges the influence of both Kant and Schopenhauer in providing the epistemological framework with which he attempts to address the profound questions of aesthetics and ethics, consonant with Schelling and Hegel, through his exposition on tragedy. “Kant and Schopenhauer made it possible for the spirit of German philosophy... to destroy scientific Socratism’s contented pleasure in existence by demonstrating its limits... [T]his demonstration ushered in an incomparably deeper and more serious consideration of ethical questions and art.”²⁶ What is not so readily evident is the measure to which the noumenal-phenomenal division, albeit influenced by Schopenhauer’s critique of it, remains key to the

²⁶ Friederich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 95.

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alternatively constitutive and destructive dynamic Nietzsche defines as operating in tragedy between the Apollinian and Dionysian, between semblance and truth. Nietzsche holds fast to the Kantian claim that appearances as such will never allow access to the truth of things and artistic semblance, no matter its seductive beauty or harrowing sublimity, remains a deception.

However vividly we may move a figure, enliven it and illuminate it from within, it always remains a mere appearance, from which no bridge could lead across into true reality, the heart of the world...[O]ur aestheticians...have not learned...anything about the opposition between appearance and thing-in-itself.²⁷

Similarly, Nietzsche acknowledges that access to the Will is not given through aesthetic representation but is ‘stimulated’ by aesthetic experience, and most specifically by music which allows one to “contemplate symbolically Dionysiac universality,” thus suggesting some form of disclosive, onto-hermeneutic experience that is elicited as a second order effect.²⁸ Nietzsche sees this elicitation as the consequence of a deconstructive shattering of appearances, of semblance. So while maintaining Schopenhauer’s claim that the will is accessible, he likewise holds up a Kantian division between phenomenal and noumenal realms by suggesting the timeless universal is accessed through the aesthetic evocation of myth that dissolves the illusion of appearances through a form of hermeneutical subversion.

This is unique adaptation of both Schopenhauer and Kant. In Nietzsche’s preface to the second edition *The Birth of Tragedy* of 1886, “An Attempt at Self Criticism,” he acknowledges that his aesthetic model on tragedy is incongruent with Schopenhauer’s views on the same topic. In a passage quoted by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer describes the aesthetic experience of tragedy as a “characteristic tendency to the sublime” that leads to a resignation that the representations of the phenomenal world lead to no satisfaction or redemption.²⁹ Alternatively, while the dissolution of appearances has certain similarities to Kant’s notion in the *Critique of*

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 103

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol II, 495. cited in *The Birth of Tragedy*, 10. The sublime was a key aesthetic category for Schopenhauer, cf. *The World as Will and Representation* Vol I. 200ff.

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Judgement on momentary supercession of rational limits in the category of the sublime, as Martin Seel points out, a significant conceptual differentiation emerges:

[i]n the aesthetic experience described by Kant, Nietzsche says, another experience can become evident: that of the disappearance of shapes and thus the experience of a “dread” that arises in a loss of the determinacy of reality. This shock cannot and does not have to be transformed into pleasurable experience by reflective effort, as Kant envisions in the sublime; it can, Nietzsche thinks be affirmed as such – as liberation from the precepts of autonomy, as a shattering of semblance of fundamental cultural orientations. The “Apollonian” construction contains and invitation to “Dionysian” destruction.³⁰

The transgressive aesthetic that Nietzsche presents, is qualitatively different from prevailing notions of the sublime that privileged a certain ‘illimitability’ or effort to ‘reach beyond’ our cognitive determinations.³¹ Redemption is not effected through semblance but rather through a “breaking asunder of the individual and its becoming one with the primal being itself.” The *principium individuationis* through which the undifferentiated becomes individuated or where differentiated components become integrated into stable whole, is subverted. The “breaking asunder of the individual” refers not only to the unification of the individual spectator with the universal, but also to this shattering of semblances into a totality where individuated representations yield to the ‘dreadful’ experience of Dionysian. The objective, Apollonian qualities of drama itself “parade us with images of life” and stimulate us through these formal relationships to try and comprehend the core of the life presented to us. But these representations are inadequate. It is the Dionysian, elicited through musical element of tragedy that through its inherent abstractness, is inimical to representation itself (as the appearance of Will), that breaks, as if shattering through a window, the deceptions of artistic semblance, and gives tragedy its redemptive (*Ersoelung*) power.

Unlike Schiller who in the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* imbued the arts of the Ancient Greeks with a politically edifying function and one explicitly affirmational of the civic values associated with an idealised Athenian demos,

³⁰ Martin Seel, *The Aesthetics of Appearing*, 140.

³¹ Cf. n28 above and Richard Wagner, *Beethoven*, 54.

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Nietzsche's idea of tragedy was avowedly apolitical. Tragedy, as a transgressive aesthetic phenomenon, bore sovereignty over the "cultural lie" of the socio-political realm by conveying the "genuine truth of nature" and explicitly placed tragedy in an antagonistic relationship to the purported artifice of public discourse.³² In this opposition, tragedy provided, as Nietzsche terms it, a "prophylactic healing energy" that ultimately served a function of socio-cultural consolidation by balancing what he terms the "political impulses" of a society, which he loosely associates with the Apollonian drive towards illusory constructions, and the deeply rooted need to "come to terms with life" in Dionysian ecstasy.

[W]hat healing substance made it possible for the Greeks...to avoid exhausting themselves either in ecstatic brooding or in a debilitating chase for worldly power and honor, but instead to achieve that magnificent blend, like that of a noble wine, which both fires the spirit and induces a mood of contemplation [?]... We will never understand the supreme value of tragedy until, like the Greeks, we experience it like the essence of all prophylactic healing energies, as a mediator between the strongest and inherently most fateful qualities of a people.³³

What Nietzsche encapsulates in this agonistic relationship between discursive forms of social mediation and intuitively driven (or non-discursive) modes of expression and experience is a model for a new tragic consciousness (for which he hails Wagner as its exemplar) that has the potential, through this indeterminate process of hermeneutical subversion prompted by the abstract invocation of tragic myth, for socio-cultural renewal. Although the 'sublime' functioned as an important category for the New York School,³⁴ it is the broader implications of a transgressive aesthetic of tragedy presented by Nietzsche (quite distinct from Romantic notions of the sublime) that I contend the New York School, and most specifically Rothko, Newman, and Gottlieb in the early 1940's, would have had the strongest affinity. The pursuit of the transcendental image was rooted in the belief in its own inadequacy, in a loss of determinateness, in the shattering of semblance, rather than any effort to supercede the illusory reality of which it is a part.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 41.

³³ *Ibid.*, 99

³⁴ Cf. Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now" and Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime."

3.3 Setting the Stage for Visual Tragedy: The American Adoption of Aesthetic Modernism

This transgressive aesthetic outlined in the *Birth of Tragedy*, the dissolution or falling away of semblance that opens the way to a the experience of a the primordial inner ground (*Untergrund*) of all appearance is what lay at the heart of the New York School's reception of tragedy. At the outset, Nietzsche likens the two gods Apollo and Dionysos to the qualities of dream and intoxication respectively. Dream he associates with the fashioned images or illusions of the artist which give rise through symbolic representation to a 'true' experience of the universal in a state of rapturous intoxication. Despite this highly metaphorical language these concepts are firmly rooted in the Kantian epistemology. Yet it is this metaphorical description that likely prompted the ready adoption of these ideas in the early 1940's as the transcendental impulse of American post-war painting was already at work within pre-war abstraction and the movement toward increasingly abstract pictorial strategies served both to lay the philosophical groundwork for abstract painting in America and also served to direct American artists in the 1940's toward subjectively-oriented approaches in a more abstracted, quasi-surrealist idiom. The Abstract Expressionist's receptivity to Nietzsche's Apollinian-Dionysian construct is consistent with a line of artistic investigation beginning with the pictorial explorations of the late nineteenth century revolving upon the tension between representation and the real and through a trend towards increasing abstraction in early Modernism. Yet these pivotal developments in the European *avant-garde* from the turn of the century onwards were assimilated in a distinctly American way.

The narrative of aesthetic modernism's early development is well established, but in the context of tragedy's later reception in American art it is worth examining how the epistemological concerns essential to this reception were latent in earlier pictorial developments. At the onset of this trajectory, Cezanne, subsumed in a process of painterly experimentation still rooted in the *plein air* tradition of the post-naturalist period, found himself at this acute point of tension between the sensational power of the forms and colour he could orchestrate on canvas and the

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imperative for representation which still governed the logic of picture-making at the time. Amidst this friction, he was able to convey a more tangible empirical richness in his increasingly architectonic forms, where the materiality of paint in its rigid application shifted the balance of emphasis from the representational image to the constructive character of the rendering itself (Fig. 3-4). In describing the primacy of duplicating experiential sensation before nature, Cezanne would write “whatever our temperament or power in the presence of nature may be, we must render the image of what we see, forgetting everything that existed before us... the sensations of colour, which give light are reasons for the abstractions which prevent me from either covering my canvas or continuing the delimitation of objects when their points of contact are fine or delicate; from which it results that my image or picture is incomplete.”³⁵ His words, written to Emile Breton in 1905 on the virtual eve of the cubist revolution that would follow, reveal a shift in emphasis from the imperatives of pictorial verisimilitude. In this, Cezanne articulates this epistemological concern at the heart of the early modernist pictorial innovations. There is a certain palpability, a sensational dimension, to these proto-cubist works that works that supplement his tactical departures from strict representation. The material essentiality of the work which is the causal essence for the delivery of sensations in the viewer, rather than the two dimensional logic of the image, is the primary vehicle for its apprehension.

This stress upon the governing representational paradigm to the point of rupture opened the door for more radical explorations of early analytic cubism shortly thereafter. Cueing off Cezanne, by 1910 both Braque and Picasso had converged on a path towards a progressive reduction of image to a conglomeration of basic geometrical forms, aiming it would seem to capture an essentiality of the object from differing vantage points of space and time (Fig. 3-5). This attempted portrayal of the ‘fourth dimension’ was explicit and evidenced by the reading of various treatises at the time on the subject of multi-dimensionality and non-Euclidean space by the champions of abstraction, to include Picasso, Metzinger,

³⁵ Paul Cezanne, Letter to Emile Bernard, Aix, 23 October 1905, cited Herschel Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, 22.

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Apollinaire, among others.³⁶ The attempt to work through the contingency of space-time so as to get at the ‘truth of things’ in abstract art provided the avenue from which to explore art’s potential to engage the transcendental.³⁷ This is not to suggest that analytic cubism was a deliberate effort to address specific Kantian concerns, but there is clearly a confluence with fundamental questions of Kant’s philosophy of consciousness and the cubist interest in the relationship between the appearance in sensation and the ‘absolute’ nature of the object. As we have seen, this very issue is at the source of the defining tension between semblance and truth and the Apollinian-Dionysian dualism in Nietzsche’s concept of tragedy.

This specific preoccupation between semblance and truth of the early European *avant-garde*, in addition to stylistic advancements, made a profound impact on the future New York School despite the limited opportunities for engagement which delayed the assimilation of these aesthetic ideas in America until the 1920’s and 30’s. The mix of socio-political conditions during that time combined to create a rather eclectic climate for their reception. The Brooklyn Museum staged an exhibition of French painting in 1921, *Paintings of the Modern*

³⁶ Picasso and others in the Parisian *avant-garde* circles had been familiar with the work of Henri Poincaré (contemporaneous with that of Einstein’s work on Special Relativity) during the late 1900s. Apollinaire makes reference to Non-Euclidean geometry in his 1913 essay “The Cubist Painters”. For a definitive treatment of the subject cf. Linda Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*.

³⁷ A note on Kant’s notion of space and time as *a priori* intuitions should be made here in light of the importance of non-Euclidean geometry and multidimensionality in the emergence of modern art and their relation to the insights of the General Theory of Relativity. Kant’s fundamental insight is that the spatio-temporal condition of the knowing subject requires that the subject perceive phenomena in relation to these intuitively perceived attributes (space and time), but the actual ‘thing-in-itself’ is an existent that is not conditioned by either and is thus *transcendental*. Prior to the publication of Einstein’s *General Relativity*, Kant’s reference to the ‘general concepts’ of space and time (in addition to his reference to them as *a priori* intuitions) had been largely interpreted as positing a universal character to these concepts and by extension an anchoring of his epistemology within absolute concepts of Euclidean space and time that would be at odds with the insights of relativity. Subsequent efforts would then be made by Neo-Kantian theorists to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Cf. Bollert, K *Einstein’s Relativitätstheorie und ihre Stellung im System der Gesamterfahrung* and Ernst Cassirer, *Zur Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie*. In these cases it is argued that for Kant, space and time are not objective absolutes, but requisite framing mechanisms for ascertaining physical knowledge, and are thus in line with Einstein’s principle of general co-variance. According to Cassirer, the Theory of Relativity then becomes “the most determinate application and carrying through within empirical science of the standpoint of critical idealism”(71). For a more recent discussion on space (and time) as *a priori* intuitions cf. L. Schabel “Reflections on Kant’s concept (and intuition) of space”.

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French Masters in which Cezanne and Picasso were well represented, immediately followed by a like-minded show at the Metropolitan.³⁸ First hand encounters with these paintings had a profound influence on at least one seminal Abstract Expressionist, Arshile Gorky who would declare to his future dealer, Julien Levy that he was ‘with Cezanne’ and ‘with Picasso’.³⁹ Gorky, who would harbour a comparatively advanced pictorial style to many of his future protagonists of the New York School in the pre-war decades would be a prominent figure in the New York art scene during the challenging years preceding and during the Great Depression. Along with other like-minded American abstractionists such as Stuart Davis, he would eventually adopt the European idiom of synthetic cubism and non-objective abstraction during this period but with a proletarian sensibility peculiar to the increasingly politically galvanised community of artists in New York.

The unique conditions of transatlantic isolation served to delay the internalisation of European models so as to coincide with the Great Depression. As a result, the most dominant trend in American abstraction during the pre-war years leaned heavily on the pictorial and theoretical ideas of Neoplasticism and Constructivism, with their hard-line geometries and utopian, socially progressive aspirations. In this convergence, American artists were particularly attuned, if in a hybrid way, to the implications raised by ‘utopian abstraction’ and the theoretical relationship between the formal issues of pure abstraction and socio-cultural renewal. Again, this relationship has a strong resonance with Nietzsche’s belief (as with Schopenhauer’s before him) in the abstract quality of music to provide a ‘healing energy’ to society. In Europe, as if to heal deep wounds, the progressive deconstruction of the representational image moved resolutely forward in the constructivist projects in Holland, Germany, and Russia that emerged in the immediate wake of the First World War. The reduction of pictorial forms to essential elements and the employment of these non-objective strategies served, in almost totemic fashion, to further revolutionary political agendas or utopian ideals.

³⁸ *Paintings of the Modern French Masters, Representing The Post Impressionists and their Predecessors*, Brooklyn Museum, March 16 – April 1921, and *Loan Exhibition of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Paintings*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 3 – September 15, 1921.

³⁹ Conversation between Gorky and Levy cited in Dore, *The New York School*, 89

With the Suprematist assertions of Malevich and El-Lissitzky to reinforce the promise of a new Bolshevik order and the theosophical overtones harkening a full integration of art into life of the De Stijl, the function of the image made a profound shift to an articulation of concept rather than a representation of an object in the natural world.

The early development of Mondrian illustrates this broader trend. We witness in his work from the turn of the nineteenth century onward a self-conscious assimilation of the pictorial developments of post-naturalism and early cubism (Fig. 3-6). By 1919, struggling with the suggestive hold of the represented image, a painful divorce finally occurs leaving behind it the underlying, inner skeleton which governs the framing of our perceptions. What is finally left is the hard-line pictorial orthodoxy of Neoplasticism, characterised by the use of the right angle delineated in hard black lines and framing rectangles of white, black and primary colours (Fig. 3-7). This reduced pictorial vocabulary which he defines as the ‘new plastic image’ is an attempt to distil the transcendental – the space-time suspending breach of the natural, contingent world of appearance into the realm of the noumenal – into a set of abstract formal precepts.

The new Plastic idea cannot therefore take the form of natural or concrete representation... This new plastic idea will ignore the particulars of appearance, that is to say, natural form and colour. On the contrary it should find its expression in the abstraction of form and colour, that is to say, in the straight line and the clearly defined primary colour...The picture can be a pure reflection of life in its deepest essence.⁴⁰

In this move to non-objectivity as a “reflection of life in its deepest essence” we see an alignment with the way Schopenhauer and Nietzsche attributed to music the ability to function as a metaphor for the absolute which elicits a confrontation with it. Within the constructivist projects in the interwar period we see a concerted effort to work out the pictorial mechanics of a transcendental aesthetic that was prefigured in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

⁴⁰ Piet Mondrian, “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality”, in *De Stijl* (Amsterdam) I. cited Chipp p. 321.

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As if a “restorative draught,” to use another of Nietzsche’s phrases⁴¹, this transcendental capacity of the plastic art object was anticipated to deliver a constructive value to society. Mondrian and the Neoplasticists, in a similar vein to the concurrent trends in Russian Suprematism and other constructivist movements, endeavoured to propagate their aesthetic principles into day-to-day life to create a utopian habitat where geometric abstract principles would serve to inform and direct the human spirit to a greater harmony within society and between fellow human beings. While in Europe, these organically grown, national variants of constructivism had time to develop and percolate within their own specific milieu, in the specific conditions that governed their reception in America, the adoption of Neoplastic and other constructivist idioms in pre-war American abstraction incited a debate between the merits of art’s progressive social function (aesthetic radicalism) and a more formal, internally-oriented purpose, (art for art’s sake) within the ranks of the American vanguard.

The governing circumstances for the importation of the European abstract movements (and the Americans’ particular take on them) were rarified and largely limited to New York during the Depression era. In 1920, the Society Anonyme was opened by Katherine Dreier with the participation of Marcel Duchamp and Wassily Kandinsky, establishing a collection of geometric abstraction which included works by Mondrian, El Lissitsky, Gabo and Moholy Nagy, and in 1926 Dreier curated an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum highlighting the trends of European Abstraction. In 1927, A.E. Gallatin established the Gallery of Living Art, which by the early-thirties had a well representative and focused collection which traced the developments of European modernism from Cezanne, through cubism to constructivist abstraction. In conjunction with Alfred Barr’s increasing willingness to showcase contemporary art at the Museum of Modern Art culminating in the highly influential 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, these venues provided a discrete but limited set of engagement points with which to absorb the images and ideas from abroad. The result was a highly derivative but nonetheless innovative

⁴¹ Friderich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 98.

brand of American geometric abstraction that betrayed a rigorous absorption of continental influences. By the early to mid-thirties, artists like Burgoyne Diller, Fritz Glarner, Ilya Bolotowsky, Balcolm Greene, Irene Pereira, among others had thoroughly assimilated the pictorial strategies of Mondrian, El Lissitsky, Malevich and the other champions of continental geometric abstraction (Figs. 3-8, 3-9).

The precedent that abstract art could harbour the 'healing energies' of a relatively a-political yet socially significant intervention was shaped during the formative years of these early American abstractionists prior to and during the Great Depression. Many had established an informal collective identity as active participants of the Public Works of Arts Project and their successor projects, federally funded programmes administered by the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) as part of the New Deal effort to address the situation of artists during these dark economic times. The projects, in providing subsistence-level compensation for artist contributions to society through teaching, public installations, mural paintings and other projects, cultivated a sense of solidarity to the some 15,000 artists said to be living in America at the time (half of which were claimed to be residing in New York) and raising the question of artists relevance to society at large. Although it was primarily through the public mural commissions, with Burgoyne Diller having been selected as administrator of the division, that abstract artists were able to take advantage of these opportunities (and to a lesser but still important extent the teaching opportunities of the Project), that this developing identity as socially active artists took root. As the Federal projects would end by the close of the decade, the abstract vanguard carried with them this loose sense of unity but also of social relevance and responsibility. In 1936, the American Abstract Artists (AAA) was chartered in New York largely out of shared sense that abstract painting and sculpture in America had been not been critically engaged with and was underrepresented in the principal art institutions of the time (most specifically the Museum of Modern Art). Beginning with their inaugural group show at the Squibb Building on in 1937, which exhibited nearly every principal abstract artist on the scene at the time, the AAA produced an annual publication

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and group shows over the next seven years (the last being in 1944) which commanded high levels of attendance and also received the support and participation of luminaries such as Mondrian, Leger, and Moholy Nagy after their respective arrivals during the war years.

Critical to the development of the future New York School and their future reception of tragedy as a model for a redemptive aesthetic, the AAA, though encompassing a formidable diversity in the pictorial approaches of its members, was largely operating in a post-cubist framework of hard-line abstraction coloured by an overtly 'object-oriented' sensibility, suggesting that the artist was the creator of 'new objective realities' as opposed to vehicles or containers for representations or impressions. Although this was still roughly congruent with Mondrian's 'New Plastic Idea' and other similar utopian constructivist models, the American manifestation of these ideals was largely devoid of the spiritual and theosophical overtones of the Europeans. Represented in the American hard-line abstraction of the period, which relentlessly sought to validate its own derivative yet distinctly American brand of modernism in the interwar years, is a self-aware collection of artists who championed the social relevance of abstract art in a deeply ingrained but essentially pragmatic way. Central to the debates in the circles during the interwar period was the social function of abstract art (in contrast to the what was perceived to be the social-realist didacticism of American regionalist art) forged in large measure by the broad 'hands-on' participation in the Federal arts projects of the Depression era. That these ideas took on a particularly material and practical character, and eschewed the loftier utopian aspirations that could be associated with European utopianism, does not diminish the way in which this generation harboured the sensibility, still palpable at the beginning of the Second World War, that art had a viable social function. Moreover, this generation had created the environment for the broader critical and public acceptance of modern art in the post-war period for succeeding generations of artists. With an equally peculiar take on surrealism to shape the parameters of the 'subjective turn' in American mid-

century abstraction, the conditions would soon be set for a new form of visual tragedy.

Given the centrality that ‘dream’ as an archetypal metaphor for semblance in the *Birth of Tragedy* it would seem natural that there would be an equal interest in the visual strategies of surrealism. But the opportunities for the American vanguard to assimilate the ideas of surrealism were even more limited than those of geometric abstraction, and interest was largely specific to the later developments of the so-called ‘second-generation’ surrealists after their arrival to North America following the outbreak of war. Prior to the Museum of Modern Art’s 1936 exhibition ‘Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism’, exhibitions of these European developments in New York were limited to a handful of shows at private galleries and received virtually no exposure outside the city other than in reproductions from foreign journals.⁴² Though these shows were invariably attended by the dedicated few and surely provoked conversation amongst the New York artists, these works were far from ever-present. Secondly, surrealism being a literary and theoretical phenomenon as much as one of the visual arts, there had been almost no description or translation of surrealist theory in English prior to its sampling in MoMA’s exhibition catalogue and the publication of Julien Levy’s book *Surrealism*, both appearing in 1936.⁴³ Finally, the temperament of the American vanguard, being as it was in the mid-1930’s planted in self-opposition to Europe and with a more pragmatic and utilitarian character, tended to respond to the intellectual and philosophical trappings of surrealism, to the extent they could be encountered, with suspicion or at best ambivalence. It could be said that the polemical if not ideological tone of surrealist theory ran counter to the American artistic sensibility which, prior to the emergence of Abstract Expressionism, had an arguably anti-theoretical, anti-programmatic bent, stemming largely from the perceived excesses of American Social Realism and Regionalism against which they had battled and

⁴² There were a series of shows organised by Julien Levy: Man Ray and Max Ernst (1932), Dali (1933), and Tanguy and Magritte (1936); and at Pierre Matisse: Miro (1933), Masson (1934), and de Chirico (1936). Dore Asheton, *The New York School*, 94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

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had amounted in their eyes to thinly veiled propaganda. These conditions governed the reception of Surrealism after the pivotal year of the MoMA exhibition and Levy's book.

By the time of the arrival of several key surrealist figures at the outbreak of the war (Matta in 1938, Tanguy in 1939, Dali and Masson in 1940, Breton, Chagall, and Ernst in 1941, among others), surrealist ideas were most certainly in the mix and augmented by a widespread, pre-existing interest in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis and theories of the unconscious which had been prevalent in the New York intellectual scene for several years.⁴⁴ What coloured the particular way in which the emerging Abstract Expressionists would recast this transplanted heritage were the divisions that had been forming within the surrealist movement itself. Breton, the intellectual founder of the movement, had arrived with the hope of re-energising it with 'First Papers of Surrealism' exhibition at the Reid Mansion in New York in 1942 and the serial publication *VVV* which printed three editions from 1942-1944 and remains a critical record for the surrealist diaspora at the time. In the first issue of *VVV*, in his "Prolegomena for a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not", Breton sets himself up as a protector of the faith chartered with placing the movement back on course. In a passage directly referencing Salvador Dali's fascist leanings, he writes:

The evils that are the price of favour lie in wait even for Surrealism, even though it has been in existence for twenty years. The precautions taken to safeguard the movement – which are generally regarded as much too severe – have not precluded the raving false witness of an Aragon, nor the picaresque sort of imposture of the Neo-Falangist bedside table Avida Dollars...What is being done in any given direction bears little resemblance to what was wanted.⁴⁵

Though giving a nod to Roberto Matta as an exemplar of the movement's possible future, further in the text he identifies whom he evidently considers the

⁴⁴ Ibid.,122ff. Ashton writes, citing Laura Fermi, "Freud and Jung had lectured in America before World War I, and during the late twenties and early thirties several of Freud's inner circle...settled in New York. [...] The Freudian doctrine was augmented by numerous other viewpoints, including that of Jung, who found a more ready climate than Freud for his esthetic (sic) views in the United States, where there was a puritanical reluctance to grant the libido total creative monopoly."

⁴⁵ Andre Breton, "Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not" in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, 282ff.

luminaries of surrealist picture making, de Chirico, Picasso, Ernst, Masson, Miro, and Tanguy, all of whom, with the exception perhaps of Masson and Miro, were still indicative of a more literal, figurative style of dream representation (Fig. 3-10), a sensibility he outlined in the “First Surrealist Manifesto” of 1924 centred on the “[d]ictation of thought, in the absence of all control by reason and all aesthetic and moral preoccupations... based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association hitherto neglected, in the omnipotence of dreams...”^{46,47} There is a sense to which Breton articulated a more discursive, orthodox, and academic brand of surrealism which found a less favourable reception by the emerging New York School than that of the ‘second generation’ of abstract surrealists represented by Matta and Wolfgang Paalen who both had recently arrived in North America.⁴⁸ Matta had arrived in New York in 1939 after encountering Breton and the leading figures of surrealism in Paris in the preceding years and contributing drawings and illustrations for the journal *Minotaure*. He proceeded to have an immediate impact on the New York scene by promoting workshops on ‘automatism’, a practice that had fallen by the wayside in surrealist practice and for which there had already been a residing interest amongst the New York painters for its tendency toward abstraction and biomorphism.⁴⁹ What was also of acute interest was Matta’s apparent rejection of conventional articulations of space (to include multiple vanishing points evident in, for example, di Chirico) in favour of a more non-Euclidean paradigm championed in Kandinsky’s non-objective approach, one which could take into account the contingency and variability of any attempted objectification⁵⁰ and “disrupt the visual architecture of the perspectival system.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Andre Breton, “The Manifesto of Surrealism” in *The Autobiography of Surrealism*, 123.

⁴⁷ On the academic or ‘classicising’ aspect of surrealism cf, Robert Hobbs. “Early Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism” in *Art Journal*. Vol 45, No 4, 299-302.

⁴⁸ Irving Sandler points out that Breton of course “assented to a degree of abstraction” as depictions of “inner states of mind” tended in that direction and consequently “admired the works of Miro, Masson, Arp, Matta, and Gorky.” His predisposition to more figurative approaches, however, remains clear. Irving Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 34.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 36 -41. Motherwell, Gorky, Pollock and Baziotes, had all reportedly experimented with the technique most probably before their encounters with Matta. Matta may have been trying to vie for the mantle of surrealist leadership at that time.

⁵⁰ Ashton, *The New York School*, 124

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Matta's inclination to embrace a more relativistic tack in rendering his 'morphologies' in concert with his revival of automatism afforded New York artists in the early war years a way to appropriate surrealist vocabularies that moved beyond a Bretonian representation of dream states, yet still capture the elements of the unconscious in a manner that was more direct and immediately expressive (Fig 3-11).

Similarly, Wolfgang Paalen, an Austrian with a broad background having studied under Hans Hoffman in Germany and a respected member of the Abstraction Creation group before entering the surrealist circle in Paris, had decamped to Mexico in 1939 with the intention of forming his own movement, later to be joined by the Briton Gordon Onslow-Ford (also a close friend of Matta). The following year, in collaboration with Peruvian surrealist Cesar Moro, he organised the *Exposicion Internacional del Surrealismo*, and initiated plans for the publication of *Dyn*, an alternative journal to *VVV*. Shortly after his arrival in Mexico, Paalen, who had won praise from Breton along with Matta in the final issue of *Minotaure* in 1939, had already voiced his misgivings about surrealist orthodoxy and his desire to separate from the movement.⁵² In the first issue of *Dyn* in 1942 he actively renounced it in the essay "Farewell au surrealisme" sending shockwaves throughout the ranks of the surrealist diaspora. Paalen's issues appeared to stem from the movement's Marxist leanings and in particular the employment of dialectical materialism as a methodological construct that, as if an end unto itself, impeded a genuine integration of art, philosophy and modern science. *Dyn* subsequently became a platform from which Paalen and his collaborators could explore an eclectic intersection of abstract art, scientific metaphors, and anthropology (Figs. 3-12, 3-13).

It was in the pages of this journal that Paalen would juxtapose essays and images of Mesoamerican and Amerindian 'primitive' art, references to the discoveries of quantum mechanics, and reproductions of his so-called 'oscillator'

⁵¹ Gavin Parkinson, "Surrealism and Quantum Mechanics", 557ff.

⁵² Dawn Ades, Introduction to *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn Circle in Mexico* citing a letter from Cesar Moro to Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, 2 May 1941, Westphalen Papers, Getty Research Institute.

paintings intended to suggestively merge pre-Columbian imagery with wave dynamics. Paalen's work at the time is characterised by multiple 'ring' formations which give these works a vibrational feel indicative of his attempt to create work that would not necessarily 'integrate' developments from modern physics but convey similar insights into the intrinsic dynamism of nature through the medium of painting.⁵³ Although seemingly less accomplished than his 'morphological' work (similar to that of Matta's) both before and after the *Dyn* period, his paintings at this time and of the other contributors from the Mexico circle are representative of this experimental fusion of scientific abstraction and primitive symbolic imagery. This combination would prove hugely influential to the New York School in the early 1940's. Despite being ensconced in Mexico, his work was well known and thoroughly digested in New York. Julien Levy had provided him a solo exhibition in New York in 1940 and at the time he became acquainted with several of the emergent New York School artists; he remained a recurrent visitor to the City during the *Dyn* period. Robert Motherwell, perhaps the most intellectually energetic of the New York painters during this time, visited Paalen (along with Matta) in Mexico in 1941, remaining for several months. He would subsequently make several contributions to *Dyn*, most notably the essay "The Modern Painter's World" in *Dyn* No. 6 (1944). He was largely responsible for ensuring the publication's dissemination in New York and continuing discussion of Paalen's ideas.⁵⁴ In a roundabout way we see a critical convergence in this post-Bretonian approach to subjectivity in painting, largely through the these interventions of Matta and Paalen, in the dissolution of the representational image and an interest in 'non-Euclidean' space (which has its genesis in analytic cubism and the further explorations Kandinsky) as a way to articulate 'inner states' (that was a central preoccupation of surrealism). By the early 1940s this hybrid approach had

⁵³ On Paalen's appropriation of ideas from modern physics see Annette Leddy, "The Painting Aesthetic of *Dyn*" in *Farewell to Surrealism*, 9-34, and Gavin Parkinson, "Surrealism and Quantum Mechanics: Dispersal and Fragmentation in Art, Life, and Physics." *Science in Context*, 557-577. Parkinson also addresses similar developments in Matta's work.

⁵⁴ D. Ashton, *New York School*, 124 -126. See also Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist, Theorist, and Practitioner of the Avante Garde*, 109.

established a working vocabulary for the emerging New York School to address the ‘world of dreams’ in an effectively non-literal way, and in cueing off a general interest in primitive iconography such as that of the *Dyn* group, also allowed exploration into the expression of myth, all key components to Nietzsche’s signature formulation of tragedy.

3.4 From Retreat into Myth to the Transcendental Image of Redemption: Visual Tragedy in Abstract Expressionism

It was into this diverse mix of conditions – the progressive sense of mission associated with American geometric abstraction fostered during the difficult years under the WPA project, the exodus to America of the key figures of Europe’s *avant-garde* shifting the art world’s centre of gravity from Paris to New York, and the circulation of post-surrealist ideas on non-Euclidean space, expressive automatism, and primitive symbolism – that Nietzsche’s views on tragedy would find fertile ground as a catalytic influence. Yet all these aforementioned circumstances do not of themselves account for the weighty preponderance of the tragic in the formative years of the New York School in the early 1940’s. Looking in hindsight after victories in both European and Pacific theatres, the spirit of post-war triumphalism, and the cultural renewal in America in the decade that followed, it is difficult to re-imagine the deep sense of unease and fear that accompanied the onset of global war and would generate a desire to address, as Gottlieb said in 1943, the “brutality and eternal insecurity of existence”. Barnett Newman described these years immediately following the outbreak of hostilities as a situation of near futility as an artmaker. “In 1940, some of us woke up find ourselves without hope – to find that painting did not really exist...”⁵⁵ In similar terms, Gottlieb described it as a situation of “absolute desperation”.⁵⁶ Irving Sandler, who has relected upon this particular moment in art history encapsulates the mood of the times:

⁵⁵ *Art News*, April 1967. Quoted in the Pollock Symposium

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The Reception of Tragedy in American Post-War Painting

The revelation of the Holocaust intensified the awareness of the human capacity for both barbarism and suffering. The bad dream of recent history pervaded the artists' studios. Thomas Hess recalled that Abstract Expressionism was "founded on despair and glimpses . . . of hopelessness." In a 1943 letter to the *New York Times*, Rothko wrote that "only that subject matter which is tragic and timeless is valid." Newman agreed, "The basic truth of life . . . is its sense of tragedy." Elsewhere he said that he wanted his paintings to make "contact [with] the hard, black chaos that is death, or the grayer, softer chaos that is tragedy."⁵⁷

In the context of this profound disenchantment, the utopian pretensions of geometric abstraction and the academic dogmatism of Bretonian surrealism appeared stale and inadequate to address the scope of cultural failure evidenced by what was transpiring on the world stage. In the desperate search for a practical approach to address this circumstance, the New York School during the war years recast the latent potentialities of abstraction and post-surrealism and turned to a mode of quasi-primitive symbolism, a form of abstract 'mythmaking' to develop a hybrid idiom.⁵⁸ Nietzsche's particular formulation of tragedy appears to have provided a highly congruent aesthetic framework within which to articulate their motivations. Myth and symbolism figure highly in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the work reaches beyond its Kantian foundations to take on, as I have termed it above, an onto-hermeneutical character. Apollo as the "interpreter of dreams" prefigures the "Dionysiac condition by means of symbolic appearance" and aided by the abstract quality of music (which Nietzsche sees as the reciprocal contribution of the Dionysian sensibility to art) allows the Dionysian to be triggered through its symbolical representation "with the highest degree of significance"; in so doing, art "is able to give birth to myth...and in particular tragic myth, myth which speaks to the Dionysiac knowledge of symbols."⁵⁹ Nietzsche's model is hermeneutic in that it relies on the semiotic engagement and interpretation at a symbolic level, but ontological in that it gives rise to an experience which affords a fundamental experience with being-in-the-world. On the one hand the Apollinian contributes to

⁵⁷ Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*. 80ff.

⁵⁸ Mark Rothko coined the term "mythmakers" in his exhibition essay for Clyfford Still, Art of this Century Gallery, 1946.

⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 79-80.

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the “metaphysical delight” of tragedy by translating “unconscious Dionysiac wisdom into the language of images” and on the other the Dionysian insists –

...we are to seek this delight not in appearances, but behind them. We are to recognise that everything that comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction; we are forced to gaze into the terrors of individual existence – yet we are not to freeze in horror: its metaphysical solace tears us momentarily out of the turmoil.⁶⁰

Despite the redemptive possibility alluded to in the integrative relationship with the Apollinian, it is this darker side to Nietzsche’s model of tragedy that was appealed to during the mythmaking period. In some cases, as with Rothko’s Oresteia-based paintings or Gottlieb’s engagement with the Oedipus narrative (Fig. 3-11), they were explicitly referential to tragic narratives. Increasingly, however, the imagery would take on a more ambiguous and ‘universal’ character, as in Pollock’s *Guardian of the Secret* (Fig. 3-12) or Newman’s *Pagan Void* (Fig. 3-13). We can surmise that during this period Nietzsche’s ideas on the Dionysian component of tragic art in *The Birth of Tragedy* gained currency as a way to describe how art could serve as a vehicle to at least address, if not reconcile, the ‘terror of existence’. The circumstances of victory itself could not ameliorate these dark preoccupations. As Newman would write in the year following the surrender of Japan, “We now know the terror to expect. Hiroshima showed it to us ... The terror has now become as real as life” The atom bomb had become the ultimate manifestation of the Dionysian.⁶¹

In the cataclysmic struggle of World War II, framed as it had been as one between the forces of good and evil, the immediate outcome had proven less a triumph of the former than a dreadful revelation at our own capacity for failure and self-destruction. For the New York vanguard during this period, the war had made Nietzsche’s ‘cultural lie’ all too concrete and had engendered an unsettling distrust of modernity and an affinity for primitive expression and myth. As Paul Ricoeur

⁶⁰ Ibid., 80-81.

⁶¹ Barnett Newman “The New Sense of Fate”, in *Selected Writings*, 146. Irving Sandler, in his most recent book *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: a Reevaluation* acknowledges that much of the scholarship about the mythmaking period during the war years (including his own), was far too ‘optimistic’ in its reading of the work and attempt to speak of its ‘redemptive’ aspirations. He acknowledges that these aspirations really did not emerge until the post-war period.

would later articulate it two decades later in the *Symbolism of Evil*, tragic theology bespeaks an inevitability of human failure (often with the malicious intervention of the gods) and of a moral calculus rooted less in personal accountability than in an unyielding fate.⁶² In the end, (in Ricouer's view) this theology is unavowable, as it forecloses on the possibility of redemption, yet the representation of tragic myths as spectacle forces a confrontation with the issue of individual will (freedom) in the face of this purported inevitability and serves as a catalyst for inner moral reflection.⁶³ The images of the mythmaker period have as their motivation an analogous culture-critical impulse. As similarly reflected by Horkeimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which was written and published during the same period, in operation here is a profound disappointment and philosophical pessimism, and the turn towards abstract symbolism and tragic themes is, as Gottlieb described, a gesture borne of absolute desperation.

In the 1886 reissue of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche subtitled the book "Hellenism and Pessimism" intending to re-characterise in more accessible terms (at least in the title and new introduction) the dichotomy between ordered Apollinian semblance and primordial Dionysian chaos as opposing philosophical views. In so doing, he challenges at the outset the idealisation of Hellenic culture as a proto-Enlightenment exemplar and emphasises the integral role of pessimism, where the essence of existence is unknowable and uncontrollable, in structuring Greek thought in the classical period.⁶⁴ But it is the reciprocal balancing of the Hellenic and pessimistic impulses that carries the reconciliatory potential of tragic art. It was not until the subsequent move toward pure abstraction occurring throughout 1946 and 1947 that the categorical pessimism of the mythmaking

⁶² Paul Ricouer, *The Symbolism of Evil*. 173ff. In an evolutionary process of mythological consciousness, Ricouer views the tragic (with Attic tragedy the fundamental archetype) as an 'intermediate' mythology that lies between the myth of creation and the myth of man's fall and salvation.

⁶³ C.f. Schelling, "Letters on Dogmatism". Ricouer does see redemptive potential in tragedy, perhaps looking to Nietzsche, in the "aesthetic deliverance issuing from the tragic spectacle itself, internalized in the depths of existence and converted into pity with respect to oneself." *Op cit.*, 173.

⁶⁴ On the relation between *The Birth of Tragedy* and philosophical pessimism see Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche" in *Rethinking Tragedy*, 104ff.

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period would be sublimated by an “Apollinian” counterbalance. Across the board, the primary figures that would be come to be known as the Abstract Expressionists jettisoned the vestiges of suggestive figuration and shift decidedly in the direction of non-objectivity. Rothko moves to his large scale rectangular colour washes, Newman towards his increasingly expansive zip paintings, Pollock to the infamous drip canvases, and Gottlieb to his enigmatic abstract ‘presences’. At the time, abetted by the critical appraisal of Clement Greenburg and the formalist interpretation of pictorial modernism, this evolution was characterised as the logical end to a process of reduction to the essential formal elements of painting.⁶⁵ By the 1950’s where the signature styles of the New York School had become the widely recognised features of a new international art phenomenon, this formalist reading had largely obscured their deeply reflective, culture-critical motivations forged during the Great Depression and the Second World War.

In some sense, the statements of the artists appeared to support this view. In 1948, Newman would write, “we are freeing ourselves from the impediments of memory, nostalgia, legend, myth...”⁶⁶ Yet the story is far more nuanced. In the next line he writes, “the image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation,” and what we see is less the abandonment of signification than its absorption into more formally assertive visual statements. The concern for the universal symbol remains internalised within the methodology of the creative enterprise. The work, though not ‘representing’ a symbol as such, operates as a pointer in-and-of-itself to the fundamental signifiers of human gesture and the creative act, the universal and the particular, sublimity and transcendence, revelation and renewal.⁶⁷ It was during this period from 1946-1948 when the New York school painters developed their mature styles that the dark concerns of the war years, emblematised in their biomorphic, abstract symbolism, were redressed through the formal potential of the medium

⁶⁵ As described in by Greenberg in “The New Laocoon”, *Partisan Review* (July-August, 1940), “[T] he picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas; where they lie side by side or interlocked or transparently imposed upon each other.” He would go on to champion ‘Post Painterly Abstraction’ in the 1960’s.

⁶⁶ Barnett Newman “The Sublime is Now”

⁶⁷ Lawrence Alloway, “Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism”

itself. The epistemological concerns of abstract art, the destruction of fictive, three-dimensional space, the suggestive possibilities of post-surrealist interest in automatism and multi-dimensionality, were assimilated into an alternative form of subjective expression – one which sought not to recreate or transpose the artist’s ‘vision’ but rather to create a vehicle for the spectator’s intuitive, transcendental access to that which is not discursively mediated and operates *prima facie* through the physical properties of the art object. It is here that the Apollinian counterbalance of the *schoener Schein* would take hold to address the pessimism of the early 1940s. In what Irving Sandler would call the move “from the terrible Sublime to the exalted sublime”, they adopted and put into operation the language of redemption and reconciliation. Through the mature-period paintings such as Newman’s *Cathedra*, and Rothko’s *Blue-Green* (Figs. 3-14, 3-15) this generation of artists endeavoured to create contemplative objects which could provoke and mediate an encounter with the inexpressible that would perhaps provide momentary resolution of the ever-present conflicts and contradictions inherent to the human condition. Here again, Nietzsche may provide a model in *The Birth of Tragedy* for that capacity for redemption (a word which appears multiple times in the work despite its religious connotations). His notion of redemption is a characteristically transgressive one, where the momentary experience of Dionysian clears the way for a more profound understanding of life clear of all ‘excesses’.

For brief moments we are truly the primordial being itself and we feel its unbounded greed and lust for being; the struggle, the agony, the destruction for appearances given the uncountable excess forms of existence thrusting and pushing themselves into life.⁶⁸

It is this experience of the noumenal, of the Will, of the Dionysian, that we achieve a moment of clarity and shed the false concerns which plague our temporal existence and, at least for a moment, “heal the eternal wound of existence”.⁶⁹ Here we can see how the abstract, non-objective, and non-discursive qualities that Nietzsche attributes to music serve as an analogue for the abstract visual

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 81.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

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vocabularies of the New York School. In exploiting the phenomenological capacity of their increasingly assertive pictorial strategies (aided by their sheer environmental scale, and pictorial reductiveness) hoped to emulate a similar constructive or healing capacity through stimulating a diremptive experience where the image falls away to cast a sobering light on discursively mediated, normatively conditioned existence.

This aspiration to yield the transcendental image, one which rises above the discursive contingencies of circumstance, normativity, ideology, and systems of belief, was clearly an open target for critique. While failing to conjure a grand cultural renewal, the immediate legacy of Abstract Expressionism, viewed as hyperbole, was to institutionalise art's tendency toward self-referentiality and inward fixation. In not saying anything about anything, painting would eventually become a parody of itself, and de-legitimised any claim for art's sovereign capacity to say much of anything about anything. As Harold Rosenberg observed, the rapid assimilation of American Post War painting by the burgeoning culture industry and international art-market of the late 1950's initiated a trend towards decorative aestheticism. The transcendental image would be debased into "apocalyptic wallpaper" (Fig. 3-16).⁷⁰ Whether or not Abstract Expressionism can or should be seen as a failed enterprise – and indeed critiques made in the name of the 'postmodern' often view their transcendental aspirations as naïve and anachronistic – their appropriation of Nietzsche's view of tragedy, indebted as it is to its employment in speculative idealism, raises the question of whether tragedy has any relevance to contemporary artistic praxis. The effort of the New York School to create the transcendental image and address the "eternally familiar need" was convergent with the broader historical progression towards non-representation associated with a teleological, formalist view of pictorial modernism. This convergence is inextricably woven into our understanding of their enterprise. As such, the interplay between discursive and intuitive (or non-discursive) modes of understanding (which remains fundamental to the Apollonian/Dionysian construct)

⁷⁰ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" *Art News* 51/8, (Dec. 1952), 22.

and their relation to formal means of artistic expression has yet to be explored in a more self-conscious and explicit way. More specifically it remains an open issue to what degree alternative modes of aesthetic expression can serve to shape collective understanding in the way Attic tragedy is presupposed to have done. In this regard, the connection between *The Birth of Tragedy* and American post-war painting provides a point of departure, by means of a similar transposition of tragedy as an epistemological model of art's potential effect in the public sphere, for a more thorough investigation along these lines.

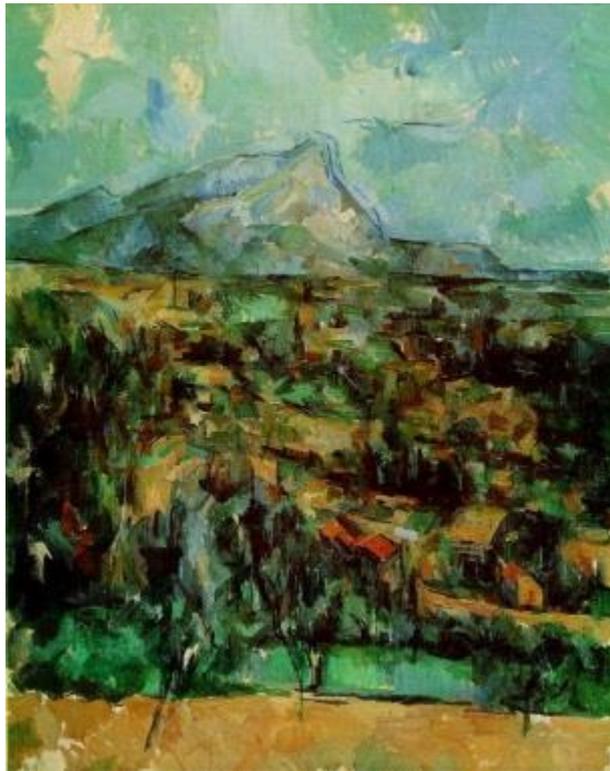
PLATES



3-2. Mark Rothko, *No. 9*, 1948



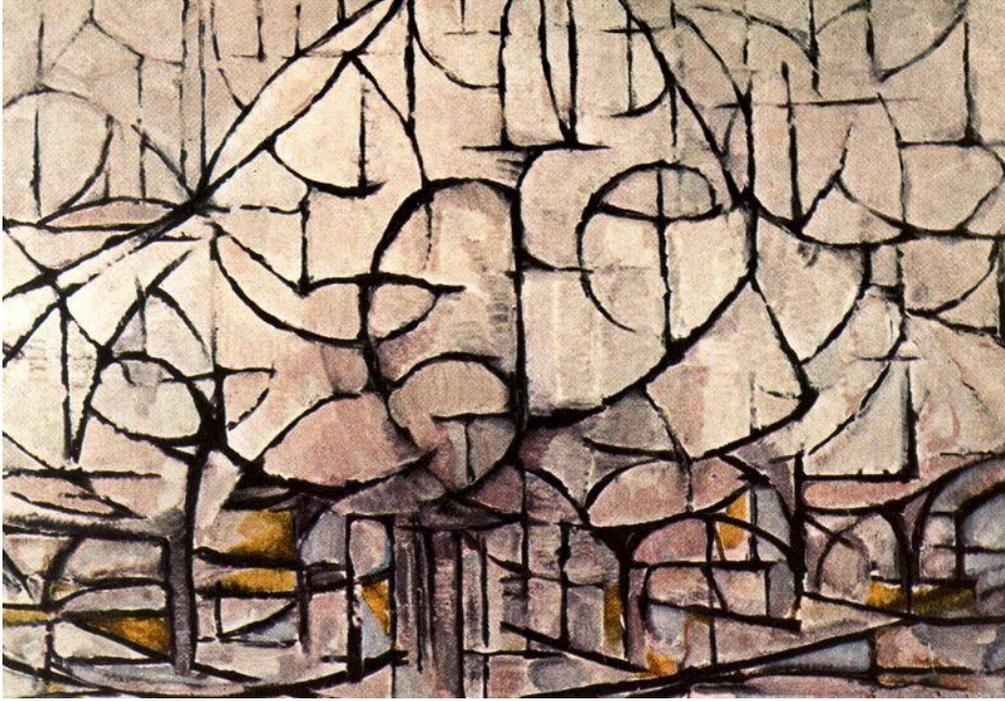
3-3. Mark Rothko, *No. 15*, 1949



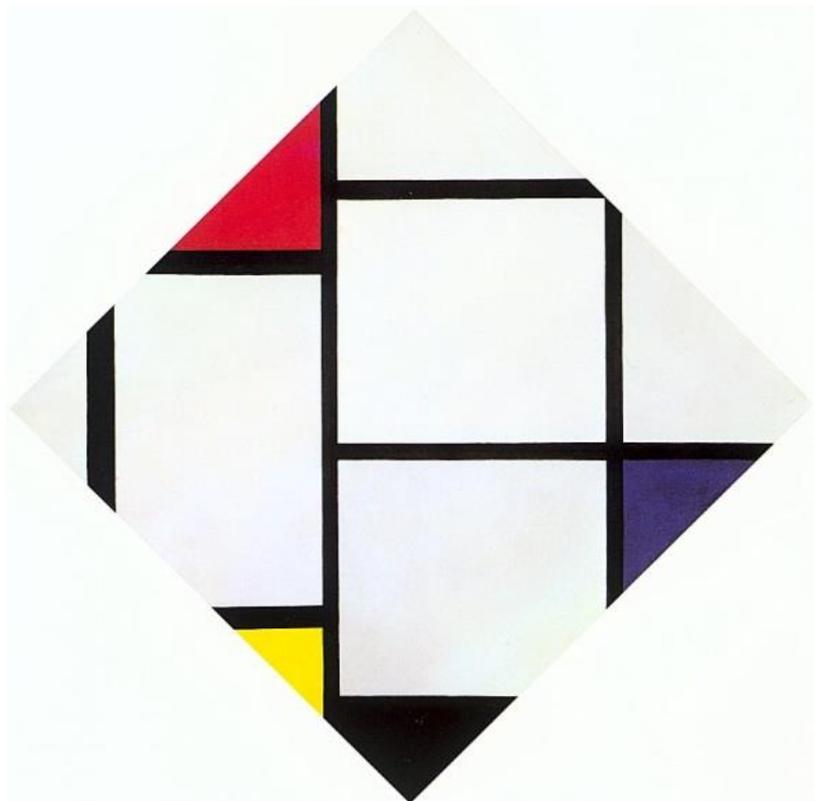
3-4 Paul Cezanne, *Mont Saint Victoire* 1902 Oil on canvas, 83.8 x 65 cm



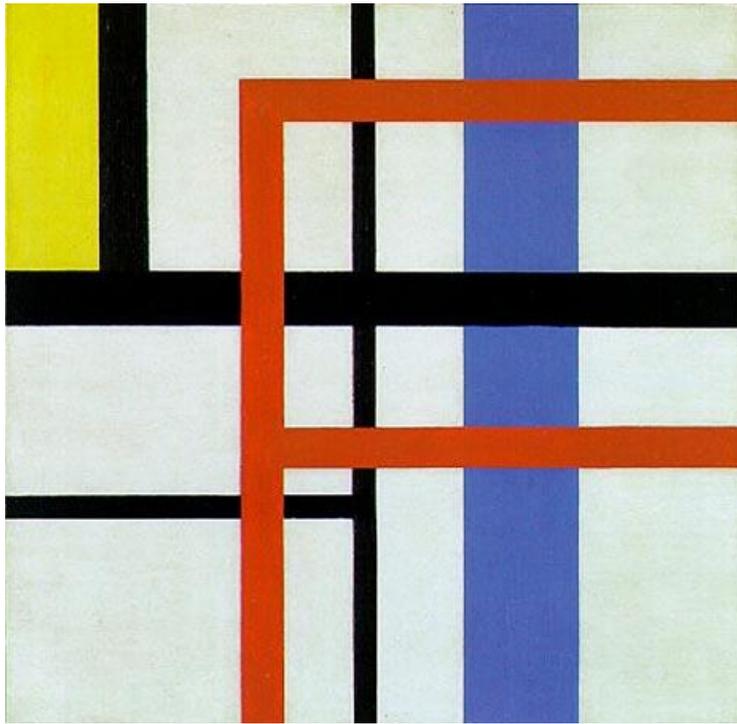
3-5 Georges Braque *Violin and Candlestick*, 1910 Oil on canvas 61 × 50.2 cm



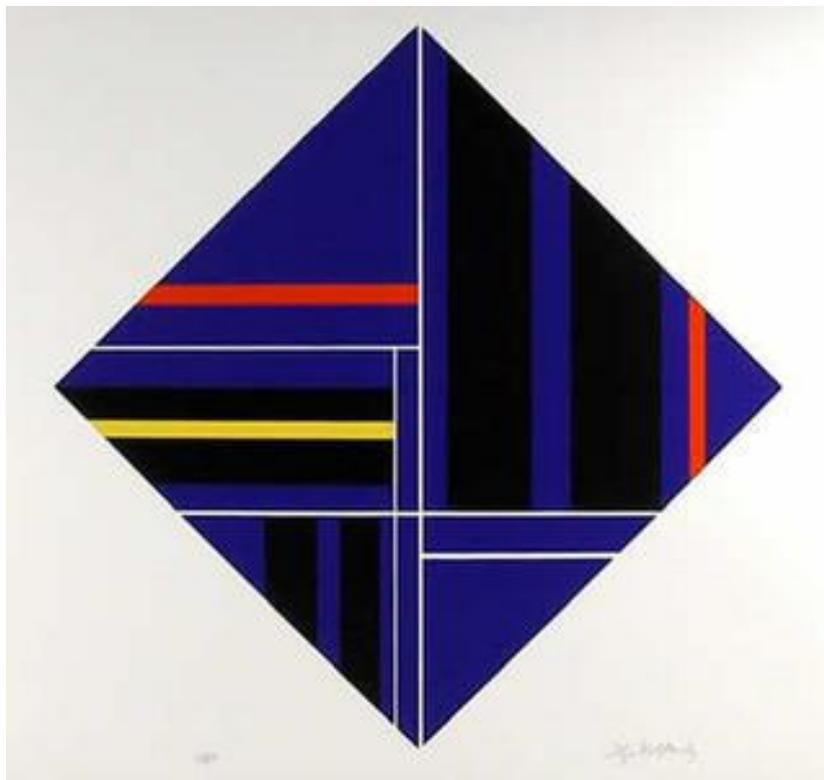
3-6 Piet Mondrian, *Trees in Bloom*, 1912



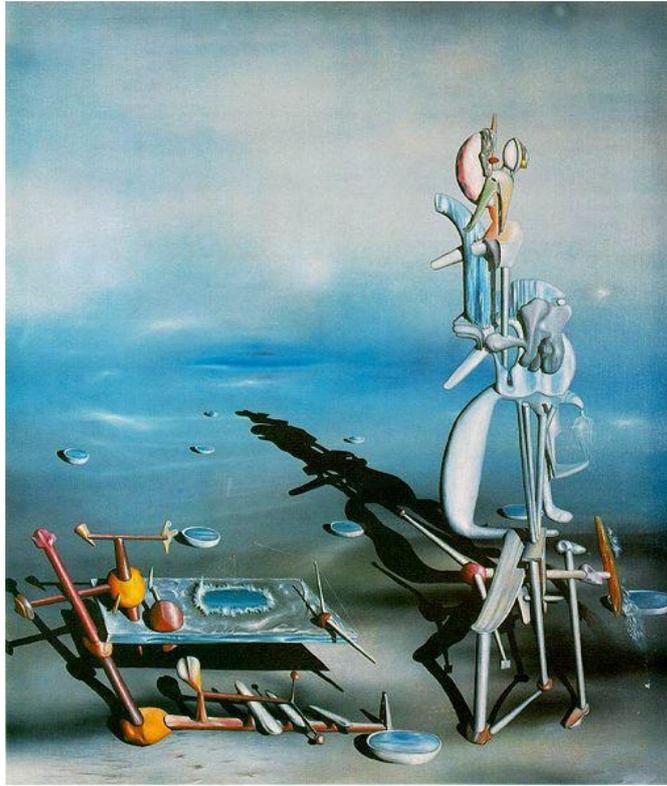
3-7 Piet Mondrian *Lozenge Composition with Red Yellow Blue Grey and Black*, 1925



3-8 Burgoyne Diller, *Second Theme*, 1937



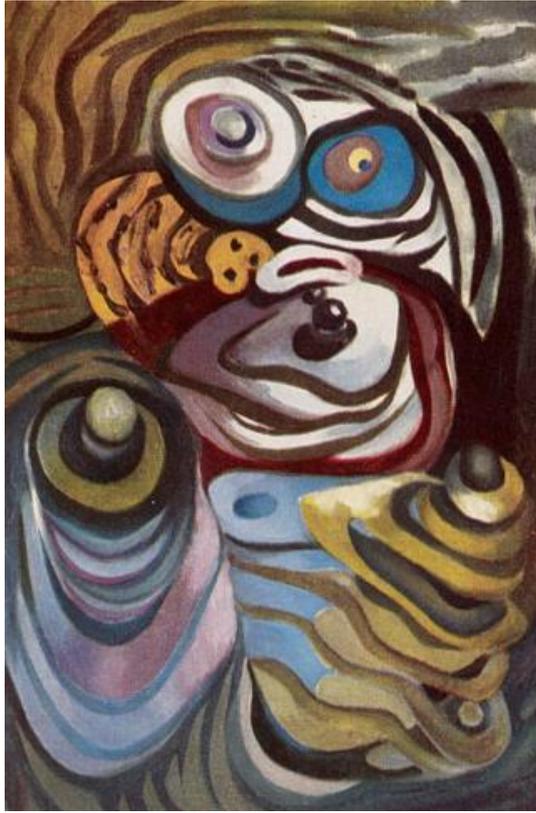
3-9 Ilya Bolotowsky, *Picture III*, 1939



3-10 Yves Tanguy, *Indefinite Divisibility*, 1942



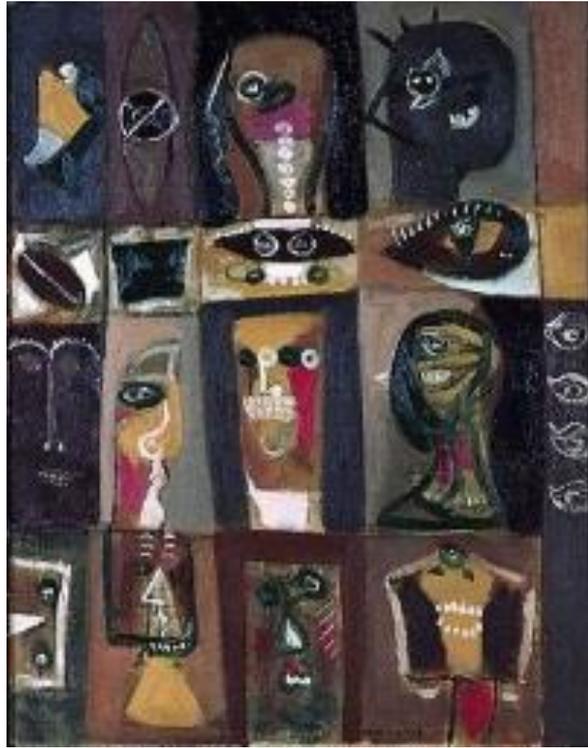
3-11 Roberto Matta, *Morphologie Psychologique*, 1939



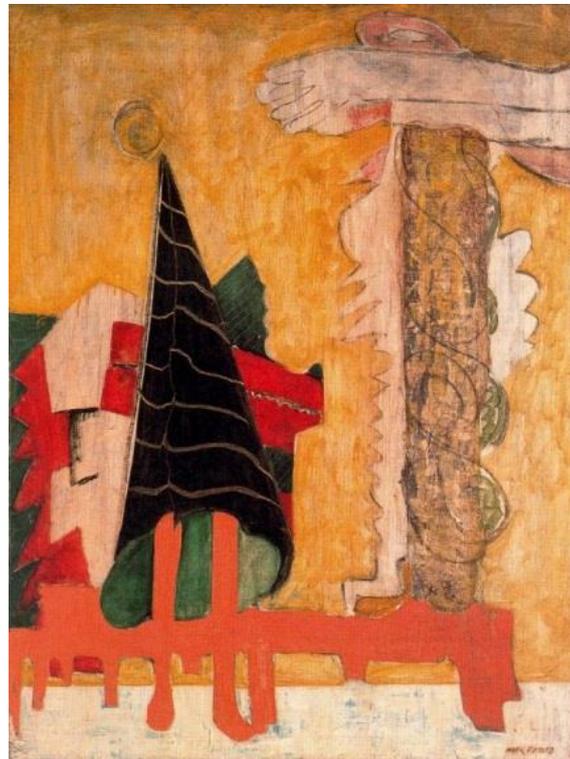
3-12 Wolfgang Paalen, *Personage Spatiale*, 1941



3-13 Gordon Onslow Ford, *The Marriage*, 1944



3-14 Adolph Gottlieb, *Eyes of Oedipus*, 1945



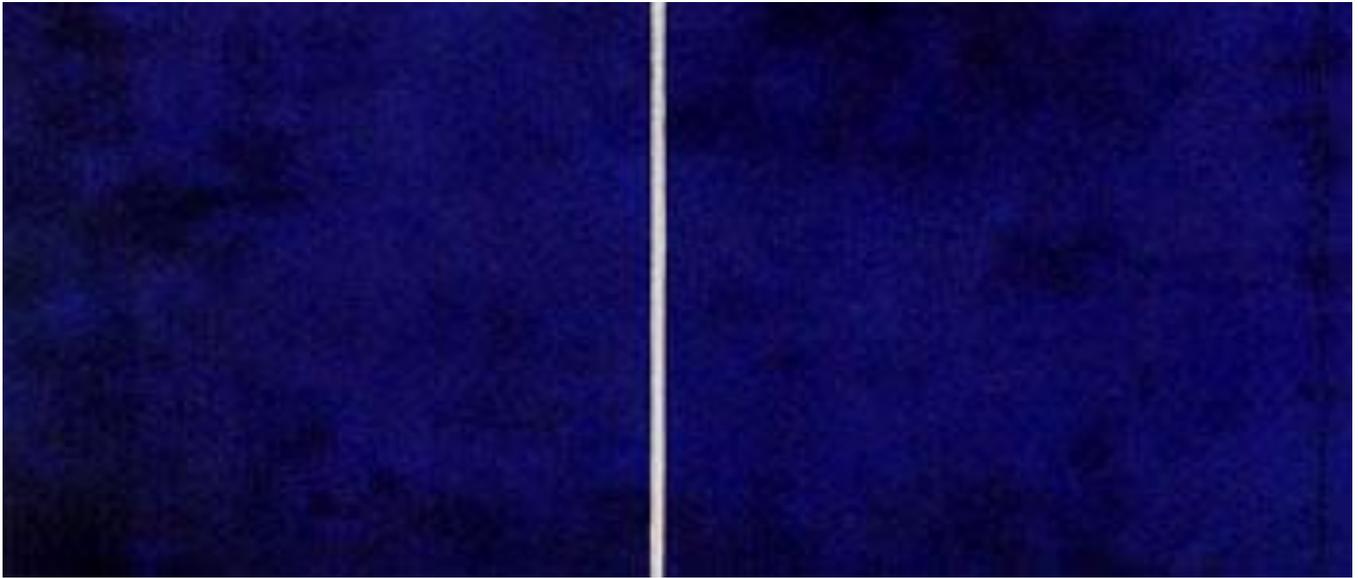
3-15 Mark Rothko, *Sacrifice of Iphigeneia*, 1942



3-16 Jackson Pollock, *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943



3-17 Barnett Newman, *Pagan Void*, 1945



3-18 Barnett Newman, *Cathedra*, 1961



3-19 Mark Rothko, *Blue Green*, 1951



3-20 Louise Lawlor, *Pollock and Tureen*, 1984

SECTION FOUR

Towards a Transgressive Model of Aesthetic Education: Tragedy as Critical Publicity

κλύοιτ' ἄν ἤδη θεσμόν, Ἀττικὸς λαός,
πρώτας δίκας κρίνοντες αἵματος χυτοῦ.
ἔσται δὲ καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν Αἰγέως στρατῶ
αἰεὶ δικαστῶν τοῦτο βουλευτήριον.

*O men of Athens, those who first do judge
the law of bloodshed, hear me now ordain...
Here for all time shall stand
this court of sworn judges.*

(Athena in the *Eumenides*, 681-684)

Given the traumatic impact both during and after the Second World War and the hegemonic ascendancy and influence of America during the first years of the Cold War, if there is any alignment between the New York School's appeal to tragedy and Attic tragedy itself it is the way in both cases they were self-consciously addressing the insistent contradictions apparent within socio-political life. Looking back to the conceptual framework they inherited and the circumstances that inspired its adaptation, one might ask to what degree the conflict between subjective freedom and objective necessity was being played out in this modern appropriation of tragedy and whether it bears similarity to the way the genre was used in its original context. In making some observations on the role of tragedy in fifth-century Athens, this section shall attempt to lay out a conceptual framework for the potential public function of tragedy, looking specifically at the broader

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problem already nascent in the employment of the tragic in the German philosophical tradition regarding the role of the aesthetic over and against non-aesthetic discourse and bring us back to the question put forth from the onset – can art, and specifically tragedy, have a tangible impact on public life?

Athena's words above in Aeschylus' final play in the *Oresteia* trilogy are perhaps illustrative of one of Attic tragedy's more assertive moments in addressing concerns confronting the fledgling Athenian demos at a time of revolutionary change in their structures of power, civic administration, and governance. The 'court of sworn judges' which Athena establishes 'for all time' refers to the Areopagus Council, an oligarchic, aristocratic governing body functioning since the seventh-century BCE whose wide swath of executive decision-making and judicial powers were subject to the radical reforms of Ephialtes in the late 460s BCE that effectively reduced the council's authority to the adjudication of homicide. By 458, the year of the *Oresteia*'s performance at the Civic Dionysia, Athenian society had undergone a traumatic overhaul of its political system, resulting in the final, decisive shift in the balance of power (which had been incrementally occurring since Solon in the early sixth century) from the conservative aristocratic faction to the broader democratic majority of citizens. The Areopagus Council had been at the center of this contest, having been subject to the accusations under Ephialtes and the reformers (probably justified) of self-interested abuses of authority. Outwardly, this disruption resulted in the assassination of Ephialtes, presumably at the hands of conservative sympathisers, and the mobilisation of a potential Spartan intervention on behalf of aristocratic interests which foreshadowed the existential threat that Sparta would soon represent to Athens.¹

The inward strain to the general social fabric of Athenian society, however, should not be underestimated as it was invariably a divisive and discomfiting issue on many levels, one that not only placed into question the practicality of a long-standing, traditional forms of governance but also of a fundamental social order that had been based on tribal blood affiliations and religio-mythical justifications.

¹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, (I. 107. 4).

Athena's establishment of the Areopagus Council in the *Eumenides* in order to try the case of Orestes' matricide of Clytemnestra could be seen as an act of foundational mythologizing of the Areopagus and an attempted recalibration of the existing mythical narratives surrounding Orestes' transgressions (and the curse of the House of Atreus more broadly) to address these internal tensions.² It is representative of the rather nuanced manner Aeschylus is navigating possibly controversial terrain. That the *Oresteia* is commonly viewed as an illustrative reconciliation of two competing orders, traditional and civic, does not sufficiently emphasise the readily conceivable inclination to justify the new order in terms of the restoration and refurbishment of the old. While Athena charts the Areopagus Council eternally to 'judge the law of bloodshed', and the trial of Orestes proving the prototypical case in asserting its importance in preserving the social order, her subsequent invocation of democratic structures is provided in turn –

τὸ μήτ' ἄναρχον μήτε δεσποτούμενον
ἀστοῖς περιστέλλουσι βουλευώ σέβειν

*The rule 'neither ungoverned nor governed despotically'
I advise the citizens to maintain and revere.*

(*Eumenides*, 696-697)

Yet, while stressing the requirement of ethical conduct of the council she emphasizes the role as the ultimate protector of the city-state –

κερδῶν ἄθικτον τοῦτο βουλευτήριον,
αἰδοῖον, ὀξύθυμον, εὐδόκτων ὕπερ
ἐγρηγορὸς φρούρημα γῆς καθίσταμαι

*This council-court, pure and unsullied by the lust of gain
Sacred and swift to vengeance, wakeful ever
To champion men who sleep, the country's guard.*

(*Eumenides*, 703-705)

² Cf. John Kenyon-Davies, *Democracy in Ancient Greece* on the foundation myth of the Areopagus in the *Eumenides*, 73-75.

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Although at face value this may be read as an effort to ameliorate the conservative faction and the Areopagus itself – that it remains relevant despite its diminution of powers – Athena’s reference to the council as the ‘saving bulwark of the state and land’ (that is, as noted by Kenyon-Davies, uncannily similar to Aristotle’s notion of ‘Guardian of the Constitution’), Aeschylus ascribes a potentially more far-reaching role to this long-standing institution.³ There is here an attempt to redress the trauma of fundamental change in resoundingly traditional and conservative terms to consequently address internal tensions within the body politic and broader social fabric. To be sure, the resolution in the *Eumenides* is hardly solid as stone. The judgment in favour of Orestes is secured not by a majority of Athenian mortals but by the tie-breaking vote of Athena. Moreover, it remains unclear the degree to which the Eumenides, the Furies re-designated and chartered now to protect and represent the traditional system of values, actually bear influence (at least metaphorically) in the affairs of state. If anything, the resolution that Aeschylus presents merely underscores the tenuous balance between opposing positions that was likely the state of affairs in Athenian politics in the mid 5th Century and brings to light these tensions in a manner more ambivalent than conclusive.⁴ Most certainly, by 458 BCE the reforms of Ephialtes had taken hold, with Athens on clear trajectory towards democratic governance and the *Oresteia*, through Athena’s intervention, evidently advocates this direction. However the trilogy is as much about what has been lost as well as what has been gained along this course, and it is not hard to imagine the unease and potential social instability that accompanied a systemic revolution of this scale. In a more complete sense the ‘tragedy’ of the *Oresteia* revolves around the violence effected along this inexorable path of transformation to a more reasoned system of governing: *the dark side of progress*.

We are of course not unfamiliar with reason’s dark side and nowhere in recent memory, as Horkeimer and Adorno made clear in the *Dialectic*, has this been more evident than in the wake of the cataclysmic global conflicts of the 20th century. As

³ *Ibid.*, 75

⁴ On the ambiguity of the resolution in the *Eumenidies*, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*. p. 23, note 3., also Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment*, 140, note 12.

we have seen, the New York School employed its tragic sensibility in response to the fundamental contradiction between the myth of progress and the reality of the horrific sublime. In our contemporary context, where the dialectic of enlightenment has been more deeply sublated into our day-to-day existence, we are constantly confronted with the failures and disappointments that accompany the increasingly complex systems that govern our world, the relentless pace of existence that these systems demand, and our sensitivity to their integrated, uninterrupted function. As a consequence of this universal systemisation, when the junctions of anticipated outputs and inputs break down and introduce dysfunction into these architectures, it warps our sense of fulfilment with the conditions of the social contract. (The failure of mechanisms for oversight and control of transnational financial markets that precipitated our recent global financial crisis and legacy of broken lives comes readily to mind.) When these failed expectations become chronic and a characteristic of the system originally intended to improve our lives, we are effectively confronted with the dystopic state of the world we have created, a condition symptomatic of the endemic distortions that belie the rational intent of our social systems. That this might well be a corollary phenomenon to utopian intention, speaks to the idea that a dystopia is a world we have aspired to live in but one we should otherwise try to avoid. What this suggests is the insistent and ever-present necessity to address the disfiguring and objectifying tendencies of these endemic failures so that we are not undone by our own aspirations.⁵

In the 21st century we confidently assume that the recognition of this irony is a facet of our contemporary consciousness, that the belief in utopia and the visual vocabularies associated with it are a vestigial anachronism of historical modernity. Yet the requirement to self-assess and to address the distortional side-effects of progress was well understood in classical antiquity and enshrined in the public institution of the Civic Dionysia. As the reading of the *Oresteia* evidently attests,

⁵ Michael Delacruz, "Dystopia, Tragedy, and the Address of Failure" in *Signal Failure: Variations on Dystopic Space*. 3-6. This discussion of the dystopic and its relation to progress and tragedy took original form in an exhibition catalogue essay. The exhibition explored the 'multi-tonal' character of dystopia.

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Attic tragedy took on a very self-conscious civic function of revealing or placing on display, if metaphorically, the problematic contradictions faced by a city state transforming its systems of self-management and in turn expanding in wealth, political, and cultural influence. As with Athens' nascent democratic form of governance, the civic function of theatre as a distinctly *aesthetic* effort to address the stresses and contortions of socio-political and economic progress was itself a prescient development. We have seen in Section Two that the relevance of tragedy as a model for aesthetic reconciliation between aspirations of Enlightenment Reason and its countervailing, dystopic side effects was not lost on post-Enlightenment thinkers, from Schelling to Nietzsche to Adorno. Subsequently, the belief in the redemptive character of tragedy served to shape the perspective of the American Post-war abstractionists coloured as it was by the impulse to find a corrective to the experiences and consequences of progress in the immediate wake of catastrophic world war: the new possibility of atomic Armageddon and bloodletting on a scale hardly imaginable – a natural reaction to the blind, ill-fated faith in instrumental reason (which as Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out is in itself a form of primitive mythologizing). In the evolution of tragedy from its hypothetical origins in ritualized choral lyric, tragedy emerged in a space between a mythical past and a new world of values represented by the nascent democratic structures of the Athenian city state, a space where myth still carried weight but was subject to its aesthetic reconfiguration in this new form of artistic expression.⁶ It was in the theatre, before the spectacle of tragedy, that the 5th century Athenian audience could find a unique location within which to confront the complex and conflicted issues largely revolving around the individual's relationship and obligations to the state and, by extension, one's position with respect to the broader community of humankind through its rechanneling in mythical narrative. While it

⁶ In the preface to the *Tragedy and Myth*, vii, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet write that tragedy emerges “at the moment when the language of myth ceases to have a hold on the political realities of the city. The tragic universe lies between two worlds for at this date myth was seen as belonging both to a past age – but one still present in men's minds – and to the new values developed so rapidly by the city state...” For a foundational discussion of this socio-anthropological interpretation of Attic tragedy see Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Tensions and ambiguities of Greek tragedy”, in *Tragedy and Myth*, 6-27.

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is important to recognize that the association of subjective freedom, of the individual will, and its relation to the collective manifestations of tradition and the state is largely a projection of the modern era upon the genre of Attic tragedy,⁷ it is not without validity. We are arguably able to see modern concerns played out in classical narratives or in some reinterpretation of the tragic sensibility. If we accept this interpolative conception of tragedy as an aesthetic experience (with all the sombre features that we associate with the tragic) that provokes a liberating confrontation with the paradox of subjective freedom and objective contingency, the question that confronts us here is whether tragedy remains relevant in our contemporary condition. Ultimately, this question is not only about tragedy's affective capacity as an aesthetic phenomenon, but a question about the structures that support the collective engagement with and response to the tragic as publically relevant – as *an aesthetic form of critical publicity*.

The term “critical publicity” is borrowed from Jurgen Habermas, who defines publicity or the *public sphere* (*Offentlichkeit*) as a realm of interactive public communication where matters of public import are debated and considered as an integral process of democratic, collective will formation. The term so defined is the subject of his investigation in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* where he traces the development of this sphere from antiquity, through its zenith as an impetus for the democratic political revolutions of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and ultimately to its distortion and cooption by the state, mass media, and the culture industry of the present day. This distortion appears in the balkanisation of the public sphere into disaggregated and interested nodes of mediated interaction that compromise the unifying, civic function it once had. *Critical* publicity is invoked as an overarching form of integrative communication that recaptures this public function and can take aim at the dystopic distortions and disfigurations entrenched within our socio-political and economic systems. In this initial demarcation, what this form of publicity actually looks like is rather undefined and presumed to be some manner of ‘discourse’, yet his forensic analysis

⁷ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Intimations of the will in Greek tragedy,” *Tragedy and Myth*, 28-62.

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of the public sphere opens up for us a hypothetical space wherein we can consider the contemporary relevance of tragic art. This does however presume that *art* can and does take on such a function – that non- or less-discursive modes of aesthetic communication contribute to the process of collective will formation or at least contribute to the shaping of public consciousness with respect to issues of collective import. In this regard, it will be useful to briefly reengage with Schiller’s concept of *aesthetic education* that, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, he employs to describe the capacity of the aesthetic to address the conflict between subjective freedom and objective necessity as a broader-level socio-political concern. As we have seen in the preceding sections, this concern underwrites an entire intellectual tradition revolving around the function of tragedy through to Nietzsche, and it remains a tangible influence in the work of the New York School. Finally, in exploring how the epistemological and phenomenological character of the tragic, steeped as it is in the psychology and emotion of mourning and despair, the unique way in which tragedy can shape civic consciousness can be conjectured. The objectives of this section will be to:

- (1) Consider, with an eye to the civic nature of Attic tragedy, Schiller’s concept of aesthetic education and its effort to address the conflict between freedom and necessity on a public level;
- (2) Examine the concept of critical publicity as it emerges in Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and its potential relationship to the aesthetic; and
- (3) Propose how tragedy, as a uniquely transgressive experience operates through a process of ‘hermeneutic destabilisation’ to constructively challenge normative presuppositions that may underwrite collective existence.

The aim here is not to transpose a hypothetical framework onto the specific historical situation of Attic tragedy in the 5th century – to propose a construct for

‘how things actually were’ – but to lay out a conceptual space to situate a concept of tragedy open to forms of artistic expression outside a literary or dramatic genre that may be continually and actually relevant, as a regulative model, in what may be referred to as the contemporary public sphere. Insofar as Attic tragedy is to serve as an archetype for such an endeavour, it is still predicated on the belief that tragedy, as a specific phenomenon of that time, had a deliberate civic or public function.

4.1 On the Civic Role of Tragedy: Reconsidering ‘Aesthetic Education’

Given the enormous wealth of disciplined investigation into this matter (on such few remnants of history that have been afforded to us) there is still substantial evidence to suggest that these theatrical performances had, to some degree, a public function. Attic tragedy as we know it was a fairly codified genre by the late 6th century BCE and formal competitions of literary and dramatic performances were integrated into the highly organized multi-day religious festivals in and around Athens.⁸ These festivals were genuinely community events that served to reinforce a sense of solidarity among the citizens and inhabitants of the greater city state if not the broader sphere of Athenian influence. The organization and administration of the Great Dionysia was largely a civic affair, managed by the *archon eponymos* and scrutinized by the Assembly.⁹ Participation in the dramatic contests was along individual tribal lines and organized by *choregei*, representing each tribal group, and chartered with recruiting and funding the poets, actors, and choral members that would comprise the tribal entry. The dramatic contests were accompanied by a number of rituals and processions that in addition to paying homage to Dionysos also reinforced the growing preeminence of Athens throughout the Greek world.

⁸ We speak specifically here about the Anthesterian and Nemean festivals and of the Rural and Civic (i.e., ‘Greater’ Dionysia). To the extent that we can reconstruct them, the more ancient of the festivals had a limited dramatic component, but it was clearly integral to both the Rural and Civic Dionysia. The long standing resource for our present understanding of this is Sir Pickard-Cambridge’s *Dramatic Festivals of Athens*. More contemporary investigations of these festivals still lean heavily upon his wide-ranging, encyclopedic efforts.

⁹ It is worth noting that the festival was under the authority of the *archon eponymos*, the chief executive magistrate of the *polis* and not the *archon basileus*, whose title was a vestige of Athenian kingship from days past, who was otherwise responsible for religious affairs.

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During the Dionysia, tributes from allies of the Delian League, mandatory contributions to the Athenian treasury, were presented at a public event in the theatre, as well as other such ritual events that underscored the collective identity of the city state.¹⁰ As Pickard-Cambridge notes, “(the) importance of the festival was derived not only from the performances of dramatic and lyric poetry but from the fact that it was open to the whole Hellenic world and was an effective advertisement of the wealth and power of Athens...”¹¹

It was not always the case that these celebrations were a decidedly ‘public’ event. Before the Civic Dionysia in particular took on this ideological tone, they emerged from proceedings that were more cultic and religious in character. Though evidently the worship of Dionysos was imported from outside Attica, and likely from outside Greece, Dionysian religious festivals had taken firm root in the cultural life of Athens by the 7th Century BCE. From what we can reconstruct of the so called ‘lesser festivals’, the *Antheateria* and the *Nemea*, Dionysos represented a diverse set of character traits mirrored by the multiplicity of differing ritual events and had, as a cultural import, potentially addressed a gap in Attic religious life by facilitating engagement with more ‘primal’ emotions represented by the ecstatic or orgiastic rites of female celebrants known as *maenads* and associated with viticulture and the intoxicating effects of wine, which until Dionysos arrived on the scene had no known patron amongst the resident gods of continental Greece.¹² Apart Aristotle’s discussion of the subject some two hundred years after the fact,¹³ and Nietzsche’s extrapolations two millennia later in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the evidence that exists does lend itself to the theory that ‘drama’ as we know it as an Occidental phenomenon ultimately evolved from pre-Classical ecstatic or celebratory religious practices of Dionysian worship associated with a self-abandonment to sensual

¹⁰ Cf. Arthur W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dramatic Festivals*, 57-104 for an authoritative description of the level of community participation, and of proper civic involvement in the conduct and administration of the Civic Dionysia, as well as the inclusion of other commemorative or public events during the festival which could only have served to bolster the ideology of the city state. Also, cf. Simon Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology” in *Nothing to Do With Dionysos?*. 97-129.

¹¹ Arthur W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dramatic Festivals*, 58

¹² *Ibid.*, 49. For a discussion of the lesser festivals, cf. 10-42.

¹³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 49a10, 20.

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experience. It is well attested that the dithyramb, a form of Greek choral lyric poetry also closely linked to the Dionysian festivals, likely emerged from ‘pre-literary’ forms of ritual activity that had a dramatic and decidedly narrative character.¹⁴ From this, we can conjecture dramatic reenactments that begin to approximate what we would call the theatrical possibly evolved.

Reflecting upon this development we are left with the compelling question as to what necessitated the ‘civic turn’ in Dionysian worship which appears to have roughly coincided with the shift from communal ritual participation to the institutionalised performative spectacle in the dramatic contests.¹⁵ The dynamic of the city-state and the cultural life of Athens changed radically in the years immediately preceding and during the Persian Wars. After two decades of existential struggle which required the support, cooperation and participation of urban and rural populations alike, the picture eventually emerges that by the time of the Persians’ strategic defeat at Salamis in 478, the socio-political dynamic was substantially transformed.¹⁶ The long standing conflict had served to consolidate the outlying subsistence-level agrarian population, otherwise caught in the seasonal cycle of basic survival, and drew them into a vortex of cultural identity and pride represented by the Athenian city state. It codified through the nascent and formative system of ‘democracy’ an internal willingness to cede desperately pressing individual concerns to one which was ‘higher’. In “The Theater of the *Polis*”, Oddone Longo asserts that the early Attic theatrical contests served as a decidedly

¹⁴ Louis Gernet, “Dionysus and the Dionysiac Religion – Inherited Elements and Original Features” in *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, 48-70, which is an extended commentary on H. Jeanmaire’s *Dionysos: Histoire du culte de Bacchos* (1951). Pickard-Cambridge’s *Dithyramb, Tragedy, and Comedy* serves also as a fundamental reference on the nature of the dithyramb and speculated origins of tragedy.

¹⁵ If we are allow ourselves to infer from Diogenes Laertius (*Lives*, Bk iii, 56) and the epigraphic evidence (*Parian Marble* FGH 239 A 43), tragedy as a theatrical genre emerges from choral lyric in the latter half of the 6th Century BCE, possibly under the tyrant Peisistratos, by which time the Persian menace was well at work in Ionia and representing an imminent threat to Athenian interests, particularly with respect to the uninterrupted supply of grain through the Bosphoros upon which her survival depended.

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that the only extant tragedy we have from the classical period that directly addresses recent historical events of the time is Aeschylus’ *Persians* which deals with the psychological aftermath at the Persian court following their defeat at Salamis, a narrative subject which afforded an opportunity for the viewing Athenian public to contrast and compare their own civic identity.

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civic vehicle for strengthening social cohesion particularly during a time of pluralisation and urbanization of the city state when Athenian society had become increasingly stratified across social-economic lines of class.¹⁷ To the extent it can be re-imagined, the very construct of theatre in ancient Athens was emblematic of a new communitarian dynamic that reciprocally supported a deliberative form of participatory governance: democracy. Irrespective of the ideological content that might be projected upon the works themselves, as not-so-distant vestiges of Dionysian ritual these performances were conducted amidst a range of other ritual-festive events to reinforce the collective bonds of civic unity. If we are to take Nietzsche's view on the possible ritual origins of tragedy, the distinction between spectator and performer was blurred as it was largely a participatory event of communal song and dance presumably revolving upon specific mythic/narrative content related to the god.¹⁸ As that content, fused as it was with its enrapturing method of musical delivery, became increasingly instrumental as a regularized mechanism for social bonding, the exercise became ever more 'theatrical' in nature, where the participatory element was eventually displaced by the representative role of the chorus, relegating those not directly involved to the role of observer or witness. It is of no small coincidence that the semicircular arrangement of the amphitheatre, employed to focus the community onto the event at hand, became the model for our legislative *camera* in modern political life. The theatre was a specifically designed construction to improve upon the initial performance during the pre-Classical period of dramatic festivals on an *orkhestra* within the *agora*, the customary site for deliberative discourse and the center of the *bios politikos*.¹⁹ In

¹⁷ Oddone Longo, "Theatre and the Polis" in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos*, 12-19.

¹⁸ It should be acknowledged that much of Nietzsche's views on the origins of tragedy are still widely considered largely speculative, and the degree to which music was integral to the performance of early tragedy is nearly entirely so. Cf. Michael Silk and J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, 239ff.

¹⁹ It should be noted that more recent archaeological evidence points to a much smaller and intimate theatre complex, more rectangular in configuration, during the classical period facilitating somewhere in the range of seven thousand spectators. The current complex which is evident from what remains at the Theatre of Dionysos appears to have been constructed in the mid-4th Century, well after the dramatic contents had acquired their 'civic' nature. What is important here is the decisive move of the festival from the agora to the site of the Theatre of Dionysos. See Hans Rupprecht Goette, "The Men who Built the Theatres: Archeological Appendix" in *The Greek Theatre and Festivals*.

effect, Longo argues, tragedy was a deliberately engineered mechanism for the consolidation of civil society.

In looking to Attic tragedy in search for a normative model of the tragic which might maintain a relevant public voice in our times, it is not difficult to identify an explicitly civic, if not latently ideological, agenda in the work of the *Oresteia*, and in the work of Aeschylus in general, which I earlier termed 'affirmative'. But even in the plays of Sophocles, which take on a more 'existential' or even transgressional character, the themes around which the narratives revolve and indeed the specific language he employs attest to an embedded concern with the emergent legal and political concepts that Athenian society was confronting.²⁰ Longo describes the experience of Attic tragedy as a deeply immersive one which operates on two levels. In the first instance, it occurs on an individual level where the spectator identifies with the fictitious individual, the tragic hero, and assumes the struggles and contradictions of the protagonist and experiences the psychological effects of submission and *katharsis*. As a parallel but converse operation, a collective identification with the gathered members of the community likewise takes place, a recognition that 'we are all in this together' that places a check on the spectator's introversion but likewise thrusts his individual concerns into tension with those of the civic community. Similarly for Nietzsche the power of the tragedy, rooted as it was in Dionysian rites where the dissolution of the *principium individuationis* (as appropriated from Schopenhauer) finds its initial expression as art, is in this ability to challenge the normative constructions which frame the collective support for the potentially distortional, objective structures of governance and social order (Nietzsche's 'cultural lie') over and against an individual's isolated 'oneness' with the world. In invoking the *principium individuationis* and associating it with Apollonian semblance, Nietzsche describes a position of relative safety where the individual can situate himself, through ordered semblances within the objective world of

²⁰ Louis Gernet, "Law and Pre-Law in Ancient Greece" in *Anthropology of Ancient Greece*. In the introduction to their highly influential *Tragedy and Myth*, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet credit the philological and archaeo-legal analyses of Gernet as the inspiration for their own socio-anthropological approach to the study of Attic tragedy.

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phenomenon. Nietzsche then characterizes a retreat into the Dionysian as a loss of faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world and a dissolution of the epistemological security in appearance. This dissolution removes the “veil of maya”²¹, and discloses the realm beyond semblance, that of an ultimate, noumenal reality. The Apollonian, the realm beautiful semblance, sets the stage for this sudden disclosure and subsequent abandonment to the Dionysian and the redemptive character of tragedy is reliant on this interchange. Tragedy is a thoroughly diremptive experience, exposing as it does the falsehoods of objectified, social existence (which are appearances themselves) through the terrifying experience of totality. Thus, Nietzsche posits tragedy as a socially reconstitutive aesthetic model in this regard, one which avoids deliberate political engagement.

Despite this avowedly ‘antipolitical’ character,²² this position is rooted in a tradition of Weimar Classicism, and Schiller in particular, that viewed artistic expression of the Ancient Greeks as a model for the constructive role of the aesthetic in society more broadly. Let us turn back to Schiller’s concept of *aesthetic education* as the foundational socio-political model for the aesthetic reconciliation of the ideal and phenomenal worlds. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, he lays out a vision for an embedding of aesthetic experience in the social life of man that balances the human necessity to engage both sensuous and rational faculties. His vision takes on an explicitly socio-political dimension in that the aesthetic, exemplified in particular by the quality of ‘beauty’, opens the possibility for individual subjectivity, man’s inner life, to be harmoniously integrated in the collective existence as citizen of the state. Beauty for Schiller is “Freedom in appearance”,²³ and while Schiller’s framework for aesthetic education – in the sense of edification or strengthening - may appear to be at odds with Nietzsche’s later,

²¹ A Hindu religious concept appropriated by Schopenhauer and later by Nietzsche to connote the illusion of appearances behind which the noumenal or the Will resides. Cf. *The Birth of Tragedy* 16-17 including n26.

²² A term borrowed from Nicole Loraux’s *The Mourning Voice*, which will be discussed further later in this section.

²³ F. Schiller, *Kallias Letters*, Letter to Koerner, 8 February 1783: “Beauty is nothing less than Freedom in appearance.” Cited in Eva Scharper, “Towards the Aesthetic: A Journey with Friederich Schiller,” 157.

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subversive formulation of tragedy, it foreshadows it in emphasizing the integrated relationship between intuitive and cognitive domains. That the liberational experience of Freedom, which in Kant's framework is a noumenal, transcendental category and thereby inaccessible directly,²⁴ can be triggered by the phenomenal experience of the aesthetic, anticipates Schopenhauer's critique of Kantian epistemology. By extension, it lays the foundation for the aesthetic model in the *Birth of Tragedy* by asserting the redemptive potential of reconciling the appositional 'drives' (*Trieben*): the 'formal drive' (*Formtrieb*) and 'sensuous drive' (*Stofftrieb*). For Schiller, these drives represent two aspects of human nature, the former which is cognitively oriented towards the concrete objectifications and individuated forms of the phenomenal world and is the root of our civilizing impulse towards organized society and the latter more sensuously-driven, inner motivation toward the 'essence' of things which he describes as an innate, intuitively-oriented, primal and self-centered impulse. The inheritance from Kant is clearly evident as is the legacy he leaves for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.²⁵ Schiller departs from Kant in his assertion that through aesthetic experience, through an experience of the Beautiful,²⁶ these seemingly opposed drives come into harmony,²⁷ and in so doing provides an alternative model from which to posit some access to or reconciliation with, via the aesthetic, to the innermost being of the world. In tracing the conceptual lineage from Kant to Schiller to (via Schopenhauer) to Nietzsche we can delineate a set of congruent appositional relationships aligned along the worlds of appearance and of essence and our respective mental faculties we use to access them:

²⁴ Cf. Section Two, 2.2 above on Kant's notion of transcendental freedom and its problematic relationship with the idea of practical freedom.

²⁵ Paul Bishop and Stephenson, Roger H. Stephenson. *Friderich Nietzsche and Weimar Classicism*, 2.

²⁶ In considering Schiller's notion of Beauty, it takes on a quality not unlike with Kant of an alignment of appearance with ethical judgment.

²⁷ Even in his aesthetic explorations in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant did not posit such a reconciliation or 'merging' of the phenomenal and noumenal dimensions. (Though it has been argued that he understood, as a matter of common sense, that they implicitly *are*.) In the "Analytic of the Sublime", nature could only trigger a profound ideation of noumenality through a confrontation with the inadequacy of its appearance.

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Cognition : Intuition
 Phenomenon : Noumenon
Formtrieb : Stofftrieb
 Apollonian (*Vorstellung*) : Dionysian (*Wille*)

The concept of the Apollonian as the realm of beautiful artifice and appearances can be directly attributed to Schiller's concept of *schoener Schein*,²⁸ as can the reconstitutive character of the Apollonian (which should not be underemphasized) to bring the individual back from the chaos of the Dionysian to the safety of the objective world - It is also to Schiller that Nietzsche is indebted for the character of the aesthetic to reconcile both the intuitive and cognitive dimensions of man's engagement with the world and to reconcile the individual sensuously predisposed to be at one with nature of all things with the architectures which enforce his individuated place in an objectively ordered social existence. This tension is defined initially in the *Letters* and has tangible presence in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Though Nietzsche appears ambivalent at best to the realm of politics and public affairs he affirms, somewhat reluctantly, the role of the Apollonian in the reconstitution of the individual in political life: While the Dionysian "always makes it felt, first and foremost, in the dwindling of the political instinct... it is equally true that the state-founding Apollo is the genius of the *principium individuationis* and that the state and the sense of homeland cannot exist without the affirmation of the individual."²⁹

In this light the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* is as much a political treatise as it is an aesthetic one. "[T]hat most perfect of all the works to be achieved by the art of man: the construction of political freedom" he writes in the Second Letter. On the one hand Schiller acknowledges that it is within individual human nature to lean towards the 'barbarism' of sensuously-driven existence, and this is what drives the impulse to create our social architectures in order to balance it. On the other, as Max Weber would more specifically articulate more than a century

²⁸ A term appropriated by Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy* from Schiller. Cf. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Introduction to the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, cxl.

²⁹ Friderich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 98.

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and a half later, Schiller also identifies the debilitating trend of an increasing bureaucratization of society and the specialization of disciplines, a trend that would serve to compromise the inner life of man and devolve it from the communal existence of the body politic.³⁰ Schiller maintained an idealistic notion of Ancient Greek society as a model from which to cultivate an existence where one's life as a subjective individual and as an objective citizen remained integrated, through an institutionalization of aesthetic practice as an essential element of public life. However the objectifying impulses of modern existence have compromised that lost ideal:

That zoophyte character of the Greek states, where every individual enjoyed an independent life and when need arose could become whole within himself, now [gives] place to an ingenious piece of machinery out of which in a botching together a vast number of lifeless parts a mechanical life results. State and Church, law and customs, [are] now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward.³¹

Though Schiller does not make entirely clear what institutional characteristics 'aesthetic education' would take on, he attributes the alleviation of this dirempted condition of humanity to a general process of artistic creation and appreciation rooted in a third drive of aesthetic play (*Spieltrieb*), a luxuriation in aesthetic possibility that can "annul all contingency, annul all constraint too, and set men free both physically and morally."³²

Such is the function that Schiller envisioned in the *Letters* and to which Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* implicitly speaks. Though Nietzsche appears to sidestep a specifically civic context in which Attic tragedy was performed and held that the effect of tragedy transcended the contingency of political concerns, his redemptive model of aesthetic experience, predicated on a dualistic interrelation of the

³⁰ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell. Sixth Letter, 39. Schiller's prefiguration of the alienating and reifying character of modern society described in the post-Marxist critique of rationality is uncanny: "As enlarged experience and more precise speculation made necessary a shaper division of the sciences on the one hand and on the other the more intricate machinery of the States made necessary more rigorous dissociation of ranks and occupations, the essential bond of humanity was lost."

³¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³² *Ibid.*, Fifteenth Letter, 75ff.

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Apollonian and Dionysian, is firmly aligned along the same conceptual trajectory. In a passage directly referencing the insight of Schiller's earlier views on tragic poetry Nietzsche affirms the worldly relevance of the aesthetic dimension:

The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world, like some fantastical impossibility contrived in the poets head; poetry aims to be the very opposite, the unvarnished expression of truth, and for this very reason it must cast off the deceitful finery of the so called reality of the cultured man.³³

Despite Nietzsche's avowedly anti-political perspective, his formulation of tragedy *has* a political character by operating in a manner that subverts the "deceitful finery" to the cultural, i.e., normative, presuppositions which ultimately structure social and political life. So it is that in the search for a normatively-oriented conceptual framework from which to consider tragedy's function in a public context, Schiller's concept of aesthetic education is a useful retroactive lens through which look back upon Nietzsche's transgressive model of tragedy's socially redemptive potential.

Whether or not, on a phenomenological level, Attic tragedy functioned in precisely such a way is a matter of speculation, yet there can be no dismissing that these performances occurred in a markedly civic context. As observed in the *Oresteia*, Attic tragedy could occasionally directly address current matters of public or political interest. But even in tragic narratives where the political context seems less readily apparent, the language of political authority abounds. Moreover, particularly in the less affirmative tragedies of Sophocles, we see represented a struggle between the individual subjectivity and an external, objective authority whether human or divine.

ἅπανθ' ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος
 φύει τ' ἄδηλα καὶ φανέντα κρύπτεται:
 κοῦκ ἔστ' ἄελλτον οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἀλίσκεται
 χῶ δεινὸς ὄρκος χαί περισκελεῖς φρένες.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 41.

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*All things the long and countless years
 first draw from darkness into light,
 and then buries them again, and there is nothing
 which man should not expect:
 the dread power of oath is conquered
 as is unyielding will...*

(*Ajax*, 644-649)

With these words, Ajax opens his so called 'renunciation speech', to comfort a fearful Tecmessa and assure her that he has once again found his sense of reason and abandoned his rebellious posturing against the kingly authority of the Atreidae. His words however, are fated to deceive her and his chorus of followers as he soon exits the scene to take his own life. This gesture of submission proves only a thinly disguised veil of his intention to abandon the objectified world of which he has found himself a forsaken instrument. Ajax is unbearably constrained by an existence that has forcibly delimited his sense of self-worth and he chooses to liberate himself and find rest and peace in the nether world of shades. We see enacted a pained relationship between individual and objectified authority (perhaps representative of the governing structures of the *polis*), and a personal diremption – a tearing apart of self - triggered by a sense of betrayal and humiliation at being denied the arms of Achilles. Ajax can no longer situate himself in the hierarchical order. Suicide, his willful departure from the 'world of appearance', is his liberation, an act which positions himself in opposition to what could be construed as the 'civic order'.

Yet his words of resignation to the communal order that soon follow seem to carry with it the not-so-faint resonances of a profound collective reflection that both citizen and *polis*, whatever their manifestations of power, must yield (ὕπεικει) to an authority (τιμᾶϊς)³⁴ greater than both –

³⁴ Though referencing the provinces given to the seasons and forces of nature, the use of *timais* is metaphorically suggestive of the authority passed on to civic magistrates. See R. Brock, *Greek Political Imagery from Homer to Aristotle*, 9.

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καὶ γὰρ τὰ δεινὰ καὶ τὰ καρτερώτατα
 τιμαῖς ὑπέικει: τοῦτο μὲν νιφοστιβεῖς
 χειμῶνες ἐκχωροῦσιν εὐκάρπῳ θέρει:
 ἐξίσταται δὲ νυκτὸς αἰανῆς κύκλος
 τῇ λευκοπώλῳ φέγγος ἡμέρα φλέγειν:
 δεινῶν τ' ἄημα πνευμάτων ἐκοίμισε
 στένοντα πόντον

*Things of awe and might submit to authority.
 So it is that winter with its snow covered paths
 gives place to fruitful summer;
 nights dark orbit makes room for day
 with her white horses to kindle her radiance;
 the blast of dreadful winds allows the groaning sea to rest*

(*Ajax*, 668-674)

Ultimately, Ajax's 'submission' is filled with a dreadful irony. One can only imagine what witnessing the enactment of his suicide would have conveyed to its original audience in the context of the aggressively expanding political hegemony of the Athenian city state and to what degree it may stoked a reevaluation of the normative (and perhaps fragile) assumptions that governed the order of civic life in 5th century Athens. Indeed the fractured subjectivity of Ajax, torn apart as it is by the irreconcilable demands of communal obligation, so painfully on display with Sophocles' portrayal (and, as with Antigone and Philoctetes, with Sophoclean protagonists in general), suggest an enactment of this incipient tension.³⁵ This potentially transgressive quality of tragedy, opens the door for a range of aesthetic questions that were clearly at the center of Nietzsche's thinking in *The Birth of Tragedy* but would also become central to Adorno seventy years later following the publication of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. His subsequent investigations into the social function of an art that is both sovereign over yet autonomous in relation to practical, non-aesthetic discourses lends itself to a reevaluation of tragedy as a unique example of critical public engagement. In searching for a viable framework

³⁵ On the philosophical perspective of Sophocles, H.D. Kitto's views on the matter are quite informative. See *Greek Tragedy*, (London, 1939) 145-150.

for public engagement within which we can apply this transgressive model of tragedy we shall look to Habermas who in the closing moments of *Structural Transformation* calls for a form of publicity that rises above divisions of economic class and social status to speak with equal force to an entire community of citizens. His communication-based model of civic interaction provides a conceptual platform for potential aesthetic interventions in the collective effort of a body politic to achieve the ideal of egalitarian self-management that Kant once termed the *res publica noumenon*.³⁶

4.2 Evolution of the Public Sphere and the Appeal for Critical Publicity

In considering the aesthetic relevance of tragedy in public life, I have reflected upon the civic character of Attic tragedy in its socio-historical context and to Schiller's concept of aesthetic education as a model for how the aesthetic could be employed to reconcile the individual-collective relationship. Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* is deeply indebted to this concept in the underlying epistemological framework of the Apollonian/Dionysian construct. By extension, as discussed Section Three, the reception of tragedy in the New York School *in visual terms* also carries with it the resonances of this conceptual trajectory, only belatedly acknowledged with any seriousness, at a moment in history when the force of tragedy had been declared exhausted.³⁷ In the realm of critical theory we saw two alternative threads emerge amidst the post-war malaise represented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In what could be characterized as a retreat of sorts, Adorno, along with Marcuse, took a distinctly aesthetic turn away from the more constructive critiques of socio-economic systems that had largely characterized the work of the Frankfurt School prior to the war. Moving down the other fork in the road, Habermas and his colleagues of the so-called 'second generation' took a predominantly discursive turn in an effort to rekindle post-Enlightenment optimism and explore the possibilities of more deliberative and participatory forms of political and social interaction. This

³⁶ On Kant's use of this term, cf. n46 below.

³⁷ In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Cf. Section Two, above and George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*.

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bifurcation of approaches presents a challenge if we are to genuinely consider visual tragedy as a viable form of ‘aesthetic education’ context, and the apparent incompatibility, or at least friction, between aesthetics and the discourse ethics. Avoiding this would be to appeal to an ambiguous sphere of influence attributed to the aesthetic over and against the otherwise separate world of discursive debate and argumentation.

In order to describe the civic milieu in which a contemporary evocation of the visual tragedy might operate, appropriating the concept of the public sphere as it has been initially demarcated in *Structural Transformation*, is hardly unproblematic. In delineating the concept as a participatory discursive space, we witness the initial expression of concerns that would characterize Habermas' lifelong project to define the emancipatory potential of communicative reason and of discourse ethics. Given the work's simultaneously quasi-historical and speculative character (with the residual lack of clarity one is left with regarding the actual nature of a ‘post-bourgeois capitalist’ public sphere), it is ambiguous whether he is describing an actual historical phenomenon or a regulative ideal from which to inspire and direct further inquiry and action.³⁸ For Habermas, the public sphere as a participatory, civic space was a distinctly liberal bourgeois phenomenon that found its fullest manifestation in the literary culture associated with the emergent middle class of early capitalism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Despite the absence of any specific solutions to the problems associated with its status as an artifact of bourgeois ideology, it is worthwhile to examine in some detail his argument for its development, given the way, as a historiographical construct, it

³⁸ Nancy Fraser “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 109-142. In questioning this ambiguity she writes, “Should we conclude that the very concept of the public sphere is a piece of bourgeois, masculine ideology?...Or should we conclude rather that the public sphere was a good idea that unfortunately was not realized in practice but retains some emancipatory force? In short, is the idea of the public sphere an instrument of domination or a utopian ideal?”(118). Criticism of *Structural Transformation* has centered primarily on the implicit exclusivity that the bourgeois pedigree of the concept inherently carries, as well as the increasingly anachronistic character of its observations regarding mass media. I will not address these issues here on the position, which I believe Habermas took, that the public sphere serves as a regulative ideal that has imperfect but potentially improving manifestations in empirical reality. Cf. n46 below regarding Kant's concept of the *res publica noumenon*, which underwrites the entire argument of *Structural Transformation*.

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delimits the emancipatory potential of the public discourse and colours the overall intent to situate the argument for the relevance of tragedy within it.

Perhaps suggestive of the difficulty in reconstructing what 'publicity' really meant in classical antiquity or his view of the public sphere as a distinctly liberal bourgeois category, Habermas is very sparse in his analysis of its early development.³⁹ The notion of 'public', he observes, finds initial expression in the *bios politikos* of the ancient Greek city state manifested in the communal exchange of ideas and opinions in the *agora* – the market place – as well as the civic debates which took place in the eventual emergence of the *demos*. In contrast to the *oikodespostes* or master-of-the-household who held complete dominion over the veiled space of private family existence and although the classification of citizenship itself was associated with household ownership (or of substantial movable wealth which served as a surrogate), the political life of the citizen was as an 'equal among equals'. As a citizen one was obliged to act in accordance with the normative expectations of civic participation and engagement. This distinction of a sphere of public engagement carried over into the taxonomy of political life in the Roman Republic as the *res publica*, the 'domain of public affairs' or 'civic constitution',⁴⁰ finding its fullest manifestation in the representative governing body of the Senate despite its eventual distortion in the subsequent *imperium*. Following these manifestations in the Greek and Roman world, the sphere of participatory public engagement and interaction would subsequently atrophy. Although, the nominal differentiation between *publicus* and *privatus*, would be retained in the post-Roman world through the middle ages, we nonetheless find a categorically different meaning of 'public.' Here publicity is defined not in a sense of a shared, participatory civic existence, but through the 'lordly' character of the feudal landowner as a *representation* of a communal state of affairs, separate as it was from the actual day to day existence of the serfs over which he held dominion. This 'representative publicity' was characteristic of the absolutist forms of governance onward through the sixteenth

³⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "Preliminary Demarcation" in *Structural Transformation*, 1-26.

⁴⁰ The term *res publica* is highly valent, as it was so even in antiquity, ranging in meaning from 'republic' to a 'matter of public concern'.

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and seventeenth centuries. Habermas' contends that the modern conception of a truly participatory public sphere effective in shaping and articulating the collective will of the body politic, could not find expression until the usurpation of the feudal system by the mercantilist drive and development of early capitalism.

With the rise of global trade and requirement for increased stability in the systems of exchange, Habermas attributes the initial emergence of the 'bourgeois public sphere' with the appearance of printed journals for the widespread exchange of information regarding the day-to-day events related to commodity markets. The informational requirements to support the transfer of goods and capital across ever increasing spans of territory brought with it a corresponding appetite for reporting on current events. This combination of spreading awareness beyond the parochial confines of the village or city with the convergence of economic interests between private merchants and sovereign authority (corresponding to the general conglomeration of interests into nation states) a new space of interaction centered on the sharing of ideas and opinions between private persons emerged. As private interests increasingly took on public significance and, conversely, the actions of the state now had significant private economic impact, this space for dialogue and the formulation of collective views regarding matters of state once considered the domain of the sovereign became a primary motivator for political liberalization. In the coffee houses and salons of Amsterdam and Paris, the collective opinions of the propertied or moneyed classes finding expression in the proliferation of printed journals of professional and literary nature would have an increasingly public character which the ruling aristocracy would gradually be compelled to take into account. This requirement for *public accountability* generated by this space of information transfer and the tangible formation of *public opinion* among a collective of interested individuals was a critical impetus, he argues, for the revolutionary transformations in Europe and America.⁴¹ It is at this stage of cultural development

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, "Political Functions of the Public Sphere", 57-88. Here he argues that in the transformed political conditions of representative democracy as they found form in the years which spanned the English Civil War, the American and French Revolutions, and the gradual awakening of liberal political ideas in Germany, the public sphere, insofar as it was genuinely representative of the considered interest of citizens, then served as an indispensable guarantor of the participatory

that we find a genuinely effective form of interactive publicity for a brief period of time, prior to its eventual distortion through the reifying tendencies of mass industrial capitalism.

Habermas contends in *Structural Transformation* that the fundamental aporia of the public sphere as a specific category of bourgeois liberal ideology is the inherent pretense that it is genuinely inclusive. In the convergence of liberal ethical ideals and free capitalist interest there is a problematic conflation of the effort to “preserve the rights of all men” and the apparatus of governance engineered to support the protection of property and capital exchange. In this regard, the system of domination which characterised the feudal system was eventually replaced by a more obscure one as the market capitalist system became increasingly more complex and expansive. In its initial form, the notion of the public sphere as an accessible space to express a private opinion from which the public one emerged was ideologically supported by the classical economic presuppositions which underwrote the existing model of exchange and its presumed inclusivity.⁴² In this way, ‘every man’ as such had equal opportunity to attain the status of ‘citizen’, ostensibly defined as a man of property and education. In the mid-nineteenth century, these presuppositions were still vaguely aligned with the existing state of affairs of political and economic life as market dynamics remained largely mediated by tenuous compromises of individual state interests (and a person’s chances for social advancement defined within those constraints). Moreover, a culture of critical engagement with the literary, or aesthetic world, still nominally essential to the limited realm of public debate so defined, had not yet been overtaken by the seductive onslaught of mechanically reproduced words and images soon to be widely available to a populace at large. In due course, however, these assumptions

character of parliamentary forms of governance. In this regard the nature of the public sphere would correspond more distinctly with the *bios politikos* of its classical antecedent.

⁴²These being: (1) The constitutional state would guarantee free economic competition; (2) The means of production would remain a mosaic of petty commodity producers widely and evenly distributed, and; (3) The equilibrium of supply and demand would be ensured through the mobility of producers, products, and capital.

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would be compromised by post-industrial cultural developments most associated with the pervasive influence of mass media, the culture industry, and the emergence of an information-driven society. In its overtaking by events, the pretensions which had underwritten the notion of a public sphere as a place from which the *volunte generale* could find expression, exposed itself under a critical lens as an *ideological* fiction. Under scrutiny, it was readily apparent that in the bourgeois constitutional state ‘every man’ was represented in the political order by, in more cases than not, individuals from a socio-economic class into which the ‘every man’ had increasingly limited chances of entering.⁴³ For Habermas, this distortion of Reason for specific economic aims *defines* ideology:

If ideologies are not only manifestations of socially necessary consciousness in essential falsity, if there is an aspect to them that can lay claim to truth inasmuch as it transcends the status quo in utopian fashion, even if only for the purposes of justification, then ideology only exists from this period on. Its origin would be with the identification of the ‘property owner’ with ‘human being as such’ in the role accruing to private people as members of the public in the political public sphere of the bourgeois constitutional state, that is in the identification of the public sphere in the realm with that in the world of letters... in which the interest of class, via critical public debate, could assume the *appearance* (emphasis added) of the general interest, that is, in the identification of domination with its dissolution into pure reason.⁴⁴

Therein lies Habermas’ principal critique of the *Structural Transformation* - that the “fiction of a justice immanent in free commerce” was a self-serving instrument of the propertied classes and in effect a form of domination of another kind.⁴⁵ The potential for the public sphere to be genuinely open to the concerns of all citizens and poised to voice the disfiguring tendencies of the dominant ideology was ultimately compromised.

At its core, it is the Kantian articulation of the problem that underwrites Habermas’ effort to diagnose the impotence of the post-bourgeois public sphere. In his philosophy of right, Kant placed a high premium on the constitutive significance

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89ff.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 117-140. This sets off, according to Habermas, a series of efforts in political philosophy to efforts to reconcile this contradiction. This begins with Kant’s effort to characterize politics as an evolving if imperfect mechanism for creating the social conditions of Absolute Freedom, Hegel’s subsequent scepticism of the validity of the public sphere and corresponding justification of the estate system, Marx’s radical critique of the bourgeois value system as a whole, and finally the praxis-oriented, “ambivalent” views of Mill and de Tocqueville.

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of public agreement on matters pertaining to the rights of others (the political) as their conformance with law and morality can only be determined through their subjection to publicity.⁴⁶ This normative qualification is a litmus test to determine universal validity of political decisions and an essential function in the eventual attainment of perpetual peace. Politics then, conditioned by the operative of a critical public consciousness, is the agent for moral progress on the social level towards the realization of pure Reason in our communal state of affairs, and thus serves as a form of intelligible transcendental vectoring towards this ideal. The empirical/transcendental distinction articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* finds its application in the practical affairs of public life as the *res publica phenomenon*, the civic constitution in empirical existence, in a continual process of actualizing the *res publica noumenon*, the civic constitution in its ideal state.⁴⁷ Kant was acutely aware of the exclusionary nature of citizenship in his day that in practice was limited to those who were owners of property (or having specialized marketable trade or skill) as opposed to those who were subject to the vagaries of the free wage labor market. The conditions for testing the normative validity of political propositions were thus imperfect. That the union of empirical consciousnesses essential to the movement toward the transcendental ideal was impeded by an exclusion of a large proportion of the body politic enforced upon Kant's political philosophy a competing if not seemingly contradictory internal requirement: while the rule of law was preserved through an active publicity the state must simultaneously endeavour to establish the juridical conditions for the inclusiveness of the public sphere.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace*.

⁴⁷ I. Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 162-164 "The Idea of a constitution in harmony with the natural right of man, one namely in which the citizens obedient to the law, besides being united, ought also to be legislative, lies at the basis of all political forms; and the body politic which, conceived in conformity to it by virtue of pure concepts of reason, signifies a Platonic Ideal (*res publica noumenon*), is not an empty chimera, but rather the eternal norm for all civil organization in general, and averts all war. A civil society organized conformably to this ideal is the representation of it in agreement with the laws of freedom by means of an example in our experience (*res publica phaenomenon*) and can only be painfully acquired after multifarious hostilities and wars; but its constitution, once won on a large scale, is qualified as the best among all others to banish war, the destroyer of everything good."

⁴⁸ Habermas argues that the necessity for continual systemic self-improvement for the very agent that purportedly facilitates the realization of Reason prompted Hegel to call into question the utility of the public sphere other than as an instrumental means for public information. Marx, in turn,

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Echoing the concerns voiced in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for Habermas, the problem becomes more severe in contemporary circumstance as cultural critique in the world of letters is marginalized and disaggregated by commodity fetishism and the conspicuous consumption of culture. This ‘balkanization’ of the public sphere further divorces the individual from a participatory milieu whereby a genuinely shared perspective should emerge. Yet he remains a believer, and in his implicit advocacy of a noumenal ideal of civil society, indeed of the public sphere itself as a primary emancipatory instrument, he looks toward post-Marxist aspirations through a neo-Kantian lens. In the closing section “A Sociological Attempt at Clarification”, he posits the role of critical publicity as a decisively applied form of engagement for developing shared perspectives between segments of the body politic that otherwise would remain isolated from each other.⁴⁹ In this call for a critical publicity, Habermas hails for more effective, if undefined mechanisms of civic debate and critique. As his philosophical project would bear out, he would move on to develop his epistemological theory of communicative action as the fabric for such engagements that rely on establishing the mutually acceptable conditions for normative validity through reasoned argumentation.⁵⁰ In this scheme, normative consensus is principally attained through the propositional and assertoric use of language and it is implicitly understood, that communal interaction in the public sphere is mediated discursively. The aesthetic, however, does play a role in *Structural Transformation*, albeit indirectly. His discussion of the ‘literary public sphere’ (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*) a feature of the public sphere at its most effective, proposes at least that the exchange of ideas that revolved around intellectual, reflective, and aesthetic experience was integral to its emancipatory capacity – that the “critical absorption of philosophy, literature, and art”, by facilitating a deeper understanding of fundamental human concerns, was an

jettisoned the fundamental presuppositions of bourgeois ideology altogether, identifying the systemic exclusion of the working class with a fundamental alienation of man’s species being and calling for a revolutionary overhaul of the capitalist political-economic system.

⁴⁹ *Structural Transformation*, 240-244.

⁵⁰ After laying out his socio-epistemological framework in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas’ most comprehensive treatment of ‘normative consensus’ as the foundation for a moral-ethical framework and a system of justice is *Between Facts and Norms*.

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enabler for more substantive political engagement by a debating public.⁵¹ Indeed, with resonances of Adorno, in these final passages he takes specific aim at the reifying character of the culture industry in a manner metaphorically suggestive, if we so allow ourselves this conceptual association, of the ossified traditions that were an impediment to the revolutionary political transformations in ancient Athens, thematised in the *Oresteia*, discussed earlier:

Just as those things that are taken for granted in a culture may be called subliterary, so those generated by the culture industry have reached a post-literary stage, as it were. The contents of opinion managed by the culture industry thematise a wide field intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships first opened up psychologically by the subjectivity which during the eighteenth century...required a public and could reflect itself through literature... [The] public use of reason remained tied to literature. In contrast the integration culture delivers the canned goods of degenerate, psychologically-oriented literature as a public service for private consumption – and something to be commented on within the group’s exchange of opinions. Such a group is as little a “public” as were those formations of pre-bourgeois society in which ancient opinions were formed, secure in their traditions, and circulated unpolemically with the effect of ‘laws of opinion’.⁵²

This ‘post-literary integration’ promulgated by the culture industry subsumes the interiority of considered personal reflection, of which the summative contribution into the collective sphere of communication is inherently essential to shaping the perspective of a genuine public, into a decoupled process of culture consumption. At the end of *Structural Transformation* we are left with an appeal for a critical publicity that could reconnect this reflective interior life of the individual with what is now an artificial publicity largely controlled by particular empowered interests. Though we are given little else to suggest what this might look like, it remains, nonetheless, a significant provocation. What is of such great value here is that he methodically articulates the specific conditions that govern our constructive civic interaction and, linked as they are to the social, economic, and cultural phenomena

⁵¹ *Structural Transformation*, 29ff. “The humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm.” (56).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 246.

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that have come to define our modern condition, the particular forms of alienation and disenfranchisement that underwrite it. Despite its discursive orientation, Habermas affirms the relevance of aesthetic engagement in restoring the equity stake of the individual in public life, and as we turn to look again at a model of tragedy for such an engagement, he reminds us of those conditions that are so far different from those of antiquity and of the cross we bear that is so uniquely our own.

4.3 Tragedy as Hermeneutic Destabilisation

With this weight in mind, let us consider again Attic tragedy's conjectural role in shaping the political discourse of the Athenian polis and its possible hermeneutic and phenomenological characteristics. I would provisionally propose that these dramatic performances, well integrated into the public context of the Civic Dionysia, served this function largely through the effect of discrete rhetorical operations:

- (1) a process of collective recollection of a heavily textured tapestry of myth,
- (2) an underlying culture-critical dynamic which often addressed the contradictions of the human condition (usually without clear resolution),
and
- (3) an appeal to an intrinsic longing for a reconciliation between individual and collective existence.⁵³

Through these mechanisms, tragedy could be seen to have operated within and against a realm of *pre-discursive* inclinations or judgments that precede and implicitly substantiate the objective, discursive articulation of a norm. This space can be described as an underlying set of 'metasocial guarantees', a fabric of sub-suppositions upon which discretely identifiable societal norms rest, that affords a society a sense of when things just feel right or wrong, correct or incorrect, 'in-line'

⁵³ These 'rhetorical operations' as I have termed them here, are largely redacted from Christopher Rocco's *Tragedy and Enlightenment*. In his case, he attempts to draw operative parallels between tragedy as a politically instrumental genre and Horkeimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a critique of modern rationality.

or ‘out-of-line’, and that ultimately confers validity.⁵⁴ The nature of these aesthetic operations are *transgressive* insofar as this pre-discursive space would be shaped not through argumentation – through a discrete positing of alternative ‘claims’ – but by throwing these sub-suppositions into relief and, through an intuitive process of discrimination, revealing where they may be weak or inadequate, where they may falter or fail. In this subversive or transgressive quality the aesthetic power of Athenian drama possibly shaped, in an indirect yet paradoxically foundational way, the political discourse of the time. Although this proposition is admittedly speculative and philosophically motivated, in the context of the wider question of the aesthetic’s public function, to cast Attic tragedy as an explicitly destabilizing, negative form of immanent critique, one which operated largely within the aesthetic dimension but with apparent practical effect, gives shape to a model for how a visual form of tragedy may operate in our present context. Moreover, it might also serve as a template by which these works of the past are received, translated and in turn refracted into our own lifeworld.⁵⁵

What is of specific interest here is the emphasis on this transgressive, disruptive aspect ascribed to such a model, and the manner in which those disruptions occur. In postulating, however tendentiously, that tragedy functioned as a form of institutionalized *aesthetic negativity* and in examining the possible destabilising effects upon non-aesthetic, practical modes of understanding these performances might have had as *works of art*, they become both instance and exemplar. The aesthetics of negation provides a potential alternative framework for the reception of tragedy, one which moves beyond a hermeneutical engagement of the work as a text or as a discrete system of signifiers, beyond a polysemic synthesis of variegated, historically contextualized interpretations, and towards a model that characterizes the experience of tragedy as principally an aesthetic one. To explicitly define this

⁵⁴ The term ‘metasocial guarantees’ is borrowed from Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms – Contributions to Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 68ff. I see here also a congruence with Christian Meier’s concept of ‘nomological’ knowledge as described in *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*.

⁵⁵ *Lebenswelt* – in the sociological sense, denotes a realm of informal, culturally-grounded understandings and mutual accommodations, as described in Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2.

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experience as aesthetic is to highlight its relative autonomy with respect to non-aesthetic discourse and to draw to attention its relative sovereignty in influencing other, practical spheres of understanding (as opposed to being subservient to it).

The transgressional or negative character of the aesthetic is prefigured in Schiller's liberational concept of the aesthetic, and made increasingly explicit in a line of inquiry extending through Hegel's systemization of determinate negation and Nietzsche's subsequent effort to transcend such a system but retain the dynamic of subversion and sublation. Ultimately, a specific aesthetics of negation finds concrete expression in the work of Adorno, namely in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, as an intersection of two lifelong concerns – the function of artworks and the operative nature of reason. The recursive dynamic of *Aesthetic Theory* largely revolves around the work of art as an 'alternative subjectivity', one that is in constant tension with our reception of artworks as a form of fixed objective positivity. This tension or discordance runs throughout the text, structured as it is in discussion of several appositional relationships such as those between form and content, whole and part, coherence and meaning, semblance and expression, and the universal and particular. Adorno employs these categories to illustrate the way in which the inner life of a work of art manifests the ability shape our individual understanding through a conveyance of truth that is dialectical, disclosive, and non-propositional. This culminates in a discussion of art's broader relation to society and it is in this discussion that art's specifically negative character is described.

In the description of the function of art in society, and by virtue of that function art's comparative relation to practical, or non-aesthetic discourses, Adorno emphasizes what can be described as art's essential antinomy, that is, art's simultaneous autonomy from other modes of discourse yet sovereignty in relation to them in the ability to shape or influence them non-propositionally.⁵⁶ The very nature of art, by its essential negative character, is to stand in relative opposition to the normative status quo that binds societal relationships.

⁵⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 225ff.

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[A]rt becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful,” it criticizes society by merely existing...Art’s asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.⁵⁷

The autonomy of art ultimately defends it against usurpation by specific political or ideological agendas as the specific nature of the existing set of social relations colors expression in art in any case. Art that attempts to be deliberately propositional or ideological debases itself and belies its true potential. Works of art shape the non-aesthetic domain not by forwarding counter-claims but in revealing the essential truths of our existence that draw the underpinnings of our normative structures into question.

Social structures and the relations of classes are imprinted in the structures of artworks, by contrast, the political opinions deliberately adopted by artworks are epiphenomena and usually impinge upon the elaboration of works and thus, ultimately, on their social truth content. Political opinions count for little.⁵⁸

Interestingly for this discussion, Adorno continues this train of thought by referencing Attic tragedy as an example of this simultaneous distancing from and internalization of critical social issues. In the very structure of its aesthetic form, tragedy embodied the existential challenges confronting Athenian society rather than addressing them discretely and identifiably. That tragedy was an aesthetic phenomenon afforded it its unique voice and relevance.

It is possible whether to argue over how much Attic tragedy, including those of Euripides, took part in the violent social conflicts of the epoch; however the basic tendency of the tragic form...bears witness as much to social emancipation from feudal-familial ties as, in the collision between mythical law and subjectivity, to the antagonism between fateful domination and a humanity awakening to maturity. That this antagonism became an *a priori* of form rather than being treated simply as thematic material, endowed tragedy with its social substantiality: Society appears in it all the more authentically the less it is the intended object.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 225-226

⁵⁸ Ibid., 232

⁵⁹ Ibid., 232

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But the aporia of art's concurrent autonomy and sovereignty seems to not be fully resolved in *Aesthetic Theory*. If art is potentially purposive as an instrument that shapes the tenor of practical discourse, it "delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo". Alternatively if art operates in its own independent, isolated sphere it is integrated as "one harmless domain among others." The implicit power of art to transcend the delimitations of practical discourse and through a disclosive process open up alternative meanings is suggested in his discussion on the enigmatic quality of artworks.⁶⁰ But the paratactical structure of the text, reliant as it is on inherent contradiction, eschews resolution. One gets the 'sense' of art's ability to effect its sovereignty, but a coherent explication proves evasive. This open question of art's unresolved antinomy, is on the one hand what gives the *Aesthetic Theory* its own enigmatic character as a critical text but on the other beckons for a rigorous engagement with the provocative tensions inherent within it that remain.

Christophe Menke, in *The Sovereignty of Art* attempts to resolve this issue by describing the process of *aesthetic deferral*.⁶¹ Menke takes head-on the inherent discrepancy between autonomy and sovereignty by forwarding a notion of aesthetic experience that subverts the process of the semiotic resolution associated with non-aesthetic modes of understanding. All understanding is based on a process of signifier identification and the ascription of meaning. In non-aesthetic experience this process of signifier recognition is largely automatic, conditioned by the normative constructs and firm contextual assumptions reinforced or shaped day-to-day which define the basis for our practical understanding and provide a fabric of *hermeneutic stability*. Semiotic resolution is on firm ground in this instance. Aesthetic experience is unique in that whilst setting up a process of signifier identification (Menke refers to signifier formation in the context of aesthetic experience) the act of meaning ascription is subverted through a disassociation from those firmly grounded normative and contextual assumptions. It is the unique domain of the aesthetic to offer in overwhelming abundance of alternative contextualisations and potential ascriptions of meaning that would otherwise be automatic. Art has an

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 118ff.

⁶¹ Christophe Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*, 29 ff.

inherent richness which proffers a wealth of potential readings the experience of which arrests one in an “interminable hesitation between the two poles of superabundant material and comprehensible meaning.”⁶² Meaning ascription is held in suspense, an operation Menke equates with what Adorno calls the experience of 'estrangement' in art.⁶³ But this experience of estrangement is also disclosive through its constant challenging of the predicates of automatic understanding. Subversion is a process of revelation:

It is only by self-subverting signifier formation that the aesthetic enactment of understanding achieves a dissociation or distancing of contextual assumptions. It is for this reason that the aesthetic object (this “place without location” that artworks make accessible by violating the boundaries of our world of automatic understanding), which creates its estrangement in the deferral of signifier formation, also achieves its deictic (showing) character. The dissociation of contextual assumptions not only negates, but also reveals.⁶⁴

In this concept of deferral Menke claims to resolve the apparent contradiction in art's simultaneous autonomy and sovereignty. In the case of the former, the fundamental nature of art to subvert the process of automatic signifier recognition, affirms its qualitative separateness from other forms of practical, non-aesthetic discourse, and thereby satisfies the conditions of autonomy. By the same token, the transgressional ability of art to challenge the normative contextualizations which govern our day-to-day understanding asserts a sovereignty of the aesthetic vis-a-vis non-aesthetic discourses.

In a sideways manner, Simon Goldhill and Chrisitan Meier, who take rather historically reconstructionist positions to make their cases for the civic impact of tragedy in its original context also speak to this transgressive character.⁶⁵ Meier, in the *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, employs the category of 'nomological' knowledge to refer to the fabric of societal norms that structures a collective expectation and sense of acceptability upon which tragedy operated to reshape the

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 73

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 59

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60

⁶⁵ Namely, Goldhill's “The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology” in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (Vol 107, 1987) and Meier's *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*.

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public domain. Similarly, through his particular reconstruction of the Civic Dionysia itself, Goldhill places the dramatic festivals into an institutionalized framework whereby the poetic nature of tragic narrative functions in this deliberate context as an alternative civic discourse. While these positions, to my mind, are both complementary and compelling in illustrating how tragedy likely called into question the status quo, they remain anchored in a highly structural, philological emphasis on tragedy's discursive, rhetorical aspect. The living, sensational quality of a performance as drama qua *drama* seems to fade from the screen. It is rather easy to forget, focused as one can be as a contemporary reader on an engagement with the text, that tragedy was experienced as dramatic spectacle –infused with song and dance – with its possible roots (however vestigial) in performative ritual practice and not simply a discursive illocution. As Nietzsche originally asserted, tragedy was more than a linguistically-articulated representation of idea (the Apollonian) but also harbored the potential for a transformative assault on the senses, operating in the before or beyond of our rational faculties (the Dionysian).

Looking back to Nietzsche's ambivalence to any explicit civic function in tragedy, it is along similar lines that Nicole Loraux, in *The Mourning Voice*, challenges the qualification of tragedy as a political form of expression and likewise emphasizes its phenomenological nature as a profoundly moving expression of grief and mourning. By focusing attention on the sensational, evocative nature of voice (*phone*), emotion, and dramatic expression, she characterizes tragedy – in its principal mode of operation – not as an alternative form of political discourse but as a distinctly *antipolitical* genre. Taking up the idea of tragedy's subversive character even more aggressively, the antipolitical, she argues, is “any behavior that diverts, rejects, or threatens, consciously or not, the obligations and prohibitions constituting the ideology of the city state.”⁶⁶ Tragedy challenged the established ideology by revealing its relative temporality in contrast to the timelessness of mourning's cry. In a broadly illustrative way, the meaning of 'always' (*aei*) is, through an almost onomatopoeic collapse, overtaken by the repetitive, resounding

⁶⁶ Nicole Loraux, *The Mourning Voice*, 26.

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expression of lament (*ai!*) in tragedy. Through a sensitive, semantic analysis of consistent lexical patterns in the tragic form, she asserts that it is this *phone* of lamentation, the expression or exorcism of grief that rattles the contingent foundations of the prevailing ideological order.

In focusing on the specific voice of mourning Loraux recasts Nietzsche's intuition that tragedy unmask the pretense to permanence of our ideological fictions through a reengagement with the inescapable, seemingly eternal realities of conflict, discord, and loss woven into the very condition of our humanity and mortality. The discursive, explicitly referential nature of tragedy exists, of course, but, as in Nietzsche's interplay between Apollonian and Dionysian, the discursive aspect of tragedy remains in constant tension with its insistent expression of lamentation.

[With] discordance and complementarity between what is in discursive mode (dialogue and narrative) and what results from a coupling of dance and song...[and] the simultaneous presence of marked political reference and of the staging of behaviors that can be described as antipolitical...there is a connection, at once conflictual and constitutive, between *logos* and *phone*.⁶⁷

Indeed the *logos* of discursive illocution calls upon the citizen to submit to a false sense of permanence and to forget the traumas closeted away in suppressed history, yet the performative display of tragic action before one's eyes and the *phone* of mourning, captured in lyric, regenerates the memory of losses held in store. In contrast to Goldhill, who places tragedy as a form of institutionalized critique in an almost hermetically orchestrated context (the Civic Dionysia) where the idea of citizen and spectator are effectively conflated, tragedy for Loraux is a more radical appeal to a sense of community that transcends that of the city-state – that of mortals (*thnetogenes*), of humankind. Through the expression of mourning for past loss the spectator is liberated from the relative contingencies of civic life in order to “transcend his membership in the civic community and to comprehend his even more essential membership.”⁶⁸ What is described here ultimately is a process of

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 93

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subversion through recollection, a revealing of transcendent affiliation with our own mortal nature, and ultimately an appeal to our “eternally familiar need” for healing and redemption. Above, I provisionally qualified these operations as 'rhetorical'. What Loraux affirms here is that these operations are catalyzed not by rhetoric, but by the aesthetic evocation of grief. Her reading of tragedy's emotive dimension, I believe, provides us insight into how the dark and painful emotions that we associate with the tragic imbue the genre with a unique power to destabilize the potentially debilitating comfort we find in our entrenched world views.

This description of tragedy's antipolitical function through its resoundingly *non-discursive* dimension is, to my mind, an exemplary case in point of what Adorno terms art's 'asociality', that is, its “determinate negation of a determinate society.” That tragedy could have the ability to upset the grounding of our metasocial guarantees, to sound a dissonant chord that disrupts and destabilises our hermeneutic predispositions and conventional ascriptions of meaning, suggests that tragedy, set as it was within the context of the Great Dionysia, may well indeed have functioned as an institutionalized form of aesthetic negativity and hermeneutic destabilisation. Turning back then to Habermas' diagnosis of the public sphere and the pathologies of inequality, exclusivity, and non-recognition that are uniquely modern, perhaps we can consider the function of a tragic art to assail the normative foundations, entrenched as they are by the logic of ideology, that perpetuate these distortions. Can the *phone* of mourning and grief give voice to the disfigurements of modern alienation? Can they be evoked through the visual emanations of the abstract image? And can these evocations upset the complacent or unwitting acceptance of these pathologies and serve to educate the body politic through the power of the aesthetic? With a transgressive model of aesthetic education, underwritten by the concept of hermeneutic destabilisation, we can now postulate the effective employment of tragedy within the public sphere as a *critical* intervention set apart from practical, rhetorical discourse yet manifesting a simultaneously subversive and transcendent sovereignty in relation to it that is self-conscious, deliberate, and ultimately transformative.

SECTION FIVE

Unveiling the Invisible Wound: On The Visual Transposition of Tragedy

Increasingly unable to create for itself a relevant body of myth, the modern imagination will ransack the treasure house of the classic.¹

– George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*

In looking to Attic tragedy as a model for this hermeneutically destabilising function through the evocation of grief, this final section will examine the *Ajax* of Sophocles as a case-in-point of tragedy's continued *relevance* to us particularly in addressing issues of the collective and individual cost of armed conflict and institutionally sanctioned violence as a matter of hegemonic policy. At the outset the broader question of Attic tragedy's relevance to contemporary issues of armed conflict will first be addressed with the help of Paul Ricoeur's appeal to the special function of symbol and the role of collective or public grieving plays in delimiting political identity. This will then open a discussion of the themes of military kinship, dishonour, and fractured subjectivity unique in Attic tragedy to the *Ajax* (and the *Philoctetes*) by virtue of comparison to the *Antigone*. The process of transposing thematic content from narrative to image will then be taken up with some historical examples of how tragedy has been encapsulated in visual art from antiquity to Abstract Expressionism. Finally the notion of aesthetic deferral and hermeneutic destabilisation will be revisited to address how the mechanics of intermedial

¹ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, 228.

transposition can encapsulate the *Ajax's* themes of interior trauma in ways that are meaningful to a contemporary body politic. The intention is to present the internal logic that has governed the practically-led aspect of this project to produce art objects that might support idea of visual tragedy and its relevance in the public sphere.

5.1 Is Tragedy Relevant?

Before we turn specific attention to the the *Ajax*, as a specific instance of Greek tragedy, let us consider the issue of Attic tragedy's relevance to our contemporary condition more broadly. Though the affective power of tragedy lies largely in its ability to reproduce those moments of severe dislocation by producing an empathetic reaction in bearing witness to the potential effects of violence and death, it is insufficient to simply say that the evocation of grief, of mourning, and of loss is *constructively* destabilising. I have attempted to make a case in support of the long standing contention that tragedy is an aesthetic provocation that brings to the fore the fundamental Kantian tension between subjective freedom and objective necessity. This formulation is a historically post-Enlightenment construction thoroughly indebted to the German intellectual tradition, one which through the early twentieth century arguably hit a dead end until its subsequent, forensic reengagement by Szondi, Steiner and others. Steiner in particular in the *Death of Tragedy* emphasises how the genre in its original form is still so tightly bound to the original cultural conditions of fifth century Athens and a world view that carries with it all the accretions of symbolic reference and mythical narrative that had developed over the centuries preceding the classical period. The pressures of modernity would ultimately work to undermine the viability of tragedy as dramatic genre, certainly one which would carry the same affective potency that it did with its original audiences, not the least of which being the foreclosure of a world where the struggle between gods and men lie at the heart of a tragic world view.² In direct response, Raymond Williams would then attempt in *Modern Tragedy* to forge a new

² *Ibid.*, 221ff.

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tragic vision that would suit a resolutely historical materialist agenda, where the ability of man to reshape the conditions of his own existence still begets tragedy in its failure to deliver on revolutionary promise.³ This line of thinking generally supports the idea of tragedy as a genre continuing to transform or be re-characterised to suit the emergent literature of the time. (Steiner for example still seeing merit in the work of Racine and Shakespeare, and Williams – in contrast – focussing on particularly modern, 20th century dramatists.) Even Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is initially intended as an apology for the 'new tragedy' of Wagner. How then, does it make sense to still speak in the same breath of tragedy's relevance from the specific vantage point of its original, Attic form?

Paul Ricoeur argues that Attic tragedy still manifests, in an unadulterated way, the essence of the tragic itself. "To understand the tragic" he writes in the *Symbolism of Evil*, "is to relive in oneself the Greek experience of the tragic, not as a particular case of tragedy but as the origin of tragedy – that is to say both its beginning and its authentic emergence... [I]t is by grasping the essence of its Greek phenomenon we can understand all other tragedy."⁴ In support of this claim Ricoeur argues that tragedy performs a critical hermeneutic function, that is to lay bare through its reengineering of mythical narrative the "insupportable (sic) revelation" that man is blinded to the nefarious caprice of a divine order which leads him to his own destruction.⁵ This sensibility is well at work in Homeric epic, where the actions of heroic mortals are so readily governed by the whims of the Olympians. Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* epitomises this confrontation with the 'theology of blindness', symbolising the resistance to an often malevolent divine order which holds human autonomy in check.

Ricoeur does not appeal to rational discourse as a counter to this world view but rather describes tragedy as an aesthetic confrontation with the insufferableness of this theology. It is in reframing the association of tragedy with the contradiction between freedom and necessity in this way – the conflict between individual will

³ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, "Tragedy and Revolution", 87ff .

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 211.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

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and fate – that Ricoeur seemingly reclaims ground ceded by Vernant in the latter’s insistence that the specific historical conditions of fifth-century Athens precluded an actualised political subjectivity and sense of individual agency that we associate with a post-Enlightenment concept of freedom.⁶ Or perhaps by invoking the timelessness of tragedy in its ‘original’ form, Ricoeur is able to account for its continued relevance, irrespective of the individual conditions that constrained the understanding of the self in ancient Athens. The genre remains effective despite the shifts in the character of agency over time, because the aesthetic confrontation with the theology of blindness retains the potential to address a profound metaphysical dislocation. As spectacle, tragedy aims neither to instruct nor foster a reasoned resolution but rather to draw the spectators into a situation, typically through a re-enactment of a mythical narrative,⁷ where they must acknowledge the untenable contradiction between the sense of responsibility for one’s choices and the ‘violent hold’ of the divine on human action that takes place *before their eyes*. It stokes a radical defiance against the *Moirai*, the Erinyes, the enforcers of the inevitable.⁸ That the core narratives of ancient tragedy have managed to retain this phenomenological capacity is attested in its recurrent restaging and resonant appeal with audiences in centuries that have followed.

In “The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought”,⁹ Ricoeur implicitly extends the promise of tragedy’s continued relevance by arguing that while in our modern context myths may lose the character of truth or explanation and no longer serve to reinforce systems of pre-rational belief, as carriers of *symbols* they give rise to thought through our effort to *interpret* them in new and meaningful ways. He defines symbols as a special class of signifier where “a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and

⁶ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Tragedy and Myth*, 136.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* 157. Ricoeur defines myth as a “traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in his world.” (5).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 215, n7, citing William C. Greene, *Moirai: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 347ff. This is the concluding essay of the book.

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figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.”¹⁰ The first level of signification serves as a gateway to a deeper layer of secondary, latent reference and gives symbols a certain level of *variability and opacity*. They function as a sort of puzzle forcing the interpreting intelligence to decipher, not without difficulty, hidden meaning, and gives symbols what Ricoeur describes as their ‘enigmatic’ quality. This hermeneutical approach posits a form of interpretation that “respects the original enigma of the symbols, that lets itself be taught by them, but that, beginning from there, promotes the meaning, forms the meaning in the full responsibility of autonomous thought”.¹¹ In this full autonomy of thought, hermeneutic engagement with symbol takes on the function of rational critique, but in respecting and learning from the enigma of symbols it still appropriates them in their original form. This suggests a restorative function for modern hermeneutics whereby the pre-rational function of ‘myth as explanation’ is dissolved as the necessary way to restore the ‘myth as symbol’.¹² [It may seem here that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic position is at odds with the concept of aesthetic deferral and hermeneutic destabilisation. But unlike determinate meaning ascription that underwrites constructive interpretation of most signifiers, the concept of symbol carries with it an implicit indeterminacy which is inherently destabilising. These concepts are congruent, at least in effect.]

Even in its original context in fifth-century Athens under the unique conditions of socio-political transformation of the developing *polis* we can postulate that during its aesthetic reconfiguration in tragedy the language of myth no longer held the same epistemic immediacy it did in earlier times.¹³ It is the recalibration and adjustment of those narratives to place them in a situation of uncertainty with respect to the primacy of the divine over human agency that gives tragedy its power. It speaks to loss and to failure, and to the possibility thereof. Even the best of times

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 12.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 349-50.

¹² *Ibid.*, 350. This does not imply going back to a ‘primitive naivete’. Ricoeur is insistent that “[i]n every way something has been lost, irredeemably lost: immediacy of belief.”

¹³ C.f. Section IV, n6.

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were uncertain in Periclean Athens and the *Pentecontaetia* was characterised by recurrent expeditionary conflicts which despite the rise of Athens as the predominant hegemonic power exacted their toll upon the citizenry that manned the triremes and filled the hoplite ranks.¹⁴ Before the fateful war with Sparta was definitively imminent, given the burgeoning complexity of managing state affairs, the emergent threats to Athens' geographically expanding sphere of interest, and the corresponding stresses upon the social fabric subjected to such a rapid pace of transformation both in the governance and foreign affairs, it is not difficult to imagine what resonance these tactical alterations to traditional myths would have had with Athenian audiences. Through the aesthetic dimension, through an agitation of a most fundamental religious and ethical tension, it performed a function of critical publicity. Present day circumstance, I believe, is not terribly different with respect to the potential affective capacity of classical tragic narratives.

At the time of time of writing, the United States has considered itself in a state of war for over thirteen years since the destruction of the World Trade Centre in 2001. Those events set the United States and its coalition allies on a seemingly inexorable course of persistent armed conflict that has taken its toll thousands of American and coalition lives and trillions of dollars in public expenditure to prosecute the theatre campaigns of Iraq, Afghanistan and places elsewhere around the globe. The ostensible reason for these efforts was to address the threat of radical Islam (or 'terrorism' more broadly) and to protect not only our (inter)national interest in a particular sense but likewise our broader value system which we characterise through our use of terms such as 'freedom,' 'liberty,' and 'democracy.' Couched in those terms, this response took on an acutely ideological character that coupled with a sense of moral imperative supported a proactive, hegemonic aggression intent on re-forming these countries into facsimiles of ourselves to expand and secure a prevailing geopolitical order.

With the inevitable drawdown of our military presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the limited but hard-won successes to establish democratic forms of

¹⁴ *Pentecontaetia* – used by Thucydides (Bk I.118.2) to refer to the period between the defeat of the Persians at Plataea in 478 and the collapse of the Thirty Years Peace in 431.

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governance in these faraway and culturally very different lands seem on the verge of collapse. In addition to our own sacrifices, potentially hundreds of thousands of adversary combatant and non-combatant lives have been lost both in the initial invasions and in the sectarian upheavals that have ensued. The withdrawal of coalition combat forces and the transition of security responsibility to the shaky, indigenous security forces have led to widespread political instability and persistent inter-sectarian violence. With the *de facto* establishment of a murderously radical Islamic state, what was seen as an incipient threat at the beginning of this conflict has essentially been abetted by our own interventions. We are doubtlessly confronted with a perceived failure of an enterprise undertaken in the name of our highest socio-political values and underwritten by a belief in the justness of our cause. It has to some degree, challenged certain foundational suppositions that buttress our sense of legitimacy as a global leader. What effect has this had on us?

I believe what this emerging sense of failure has brought into more acute focus is a sense of loss. There is, of course, the quite recognisable loss of lives, treasure, national pride, and geopolitical interest, but has this hegemonic enterprise also served to compromise us on a more fundamental, normative level both collectively and as individuals? It is quite possible that Attic tragedy emerged to address questions such as these precisely by putting into view the trauma of loss and the consequences of violence in a manner that provokes a profound reassessment of these normative assumptions. In its symbolic representation of the cost of violence and the grief and mourning associated with it, it is uniquely designed to address these circumstances. We observed how Nicole Loraux has argued for the antipolitical character of the mourning voice in tragedy to call the spectator to consider, over and above their parochial association with the polis as citizen or constituent (*demotes*), their association with the larger community of humankind as *thnetos*. Through witnessing the expression of grief we as spectators engage with the fabric of base emotions that are fundamental to our nature as a species and through

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this expression we recognise that we are the Other and the Other is us.¹⁵ This universalising, communitarian function of tragedy is analogous to Nietzsche's appeal to the terror of 'Dionysian wisdom' to shatter the artifice of social constructions (the cultural lie) and closely resembles Adorno's concept of asociality, or determinate negation of objective social structures, in art and thus has the converse function of highlighting the shortcomings of the prevailing social order.¹⁶ The tearing asunder of the *principium individuationis* – of the particular – is but temporary and we are left with our societal objectifications cast in more definitive relief.

It is this phenomenon that Judith Butler highlights in her critique of post-9/11 normative exclusivity, "Violence, Mourning, Politics", when she asserts that the act of public mourning ultimately calls into mind for whom we can mourn and *for whom we cannot*.¹⁷ It provokes an acknowledgement of the normative justifications for politically sanctioned violence and our complicity in it. Though she does not exclusively address the dramatization of public mourning in tragedy, it is not far from her thinking.¹⁸ The traumatic events of September 11, 2001 unseated a blind faith in 'First World truths' and exposed a theretofore suppressed vulnerability of our perceived way-of-life to a profound dislocation and dispossession. Clearly, the tremendous loss of life on that day triggered an outpouring of collective grief and rage that ultimately fuelled, if not precipitated, more than a decade of expeditionary military campaigning. It unleashed a trajectory of instrumental, programmatic violence directed at those who were 'against us' if not for reasons touched with a spirit of vengeance then for a demand for justice for those responsible for this grievous loss. Though this collective grief may be expressed publically, it is experienced in an utterly individual way, one that highlights the

¹⁵ Loraux (2002) pp. 50-51. She cites the interesting case in Aeschylus' *Persae* where the use of *andres*, generally denoting an Athenian or friendly Greek combatant, is used also to denote a Persian adversary. The *Persae* in any case is notable for its focus on the perspective and grief of the vanquished, which though engendering sympathy for the adversary, still proves a useful vehicle to contrast the political systems of Athens and of Persia from a distinctly Athenian point of view.

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 296.

¹⁷ Judith Butler *Prekarious Life*, 19-49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36. Cf. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*.

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relation of our individuality and physical corporeality to the body politic. The highly personal experience of loss and grief brings into focus the degree to which that experience is as much our own (and by extension inalienable to all and universal) as it is defined by the *demos* in delimiting for whom we may grieve and also brings into focus the limits of our autonomy and agency within the political community.

This ‘differential allocation of grief’ raises the question, as Butler astutely observes, whether “the prohibition on certain forms of public grieving itself constitutes the public sphere on the basis of such a prohibition.”¹⁹ The publicity that surrounds the loss of our own war dead in contrast to its attenuation with respect to the lost lives of our nameless, faceless enemies and the collateral non-combatants that altogether far outnumber our own, serve to define for us, through conditions normatively established by political action, whom we can consider not simply a fellow *demotes* but also who we can acknowledge as a member of the *thnetogenes*. It is from here that I would launch an appeal for the continued relevance of ‘original’ tragedy which I believe is uniquely engineered to address the consequences of violence and loss and ultimately the question (again borrowing from Butler): “Who have I become?” From the broader perspective of *aesthetic education*, the even more potent question is: “Who have *we* become?” While Loraux’s concept of the antipolitical in tragedy as a mourning call to universal affiliation is compelling, a sharp, reflexive turn is further required to clearly identify the norms of recognition and differentiation that govern collective or political action, ultimately leaving them open to challenge. In this way tragedy maintains a transformative quality that has the potential to reshape the sense of political community, perhaps in a way that could be considered aspirational.

5.2. Ajax and the Fractured Subjectivity of the Dishonoured Warrior

From our earliest existing examples of the genre, original tragedy is suffused with

¹⁹ Judith Butler *Precarious Life*, 37.

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and activated by these themes of loss, grief, and recognition,²⁰ and it is in the earliest plays of Sophocles, that provide us with the most acute example of these operations in effect. I will turn attention then to the drama upon which this investigation revolves, the *Ajax*, to examine to whether the heroic narrative of the fallen warrior still resonates with contemporary concerns and carries with it, to again bring to mind Ricoeur's appeal to modern hermeneutics, an engagement with symbols that gives rise to thought and critical reflection. On a personal level, the *Ajax* of Sophocles speaks most forcefully to me and to my own contemporary experience as a soldier and military officer during this continuing period of global conflict, and the *Ajax* is uniquely compelling in the canon of original tragedy in its focus on warrior culture, the martial system of values, and the tension and subjective turbulence that resides therein. Although the *Ajax* is specifically centred on the trauma of a disgraced and dishonoured warrior-hero and his own interior struggles, it shares many of the same preoccupations of Sophoclean tragedy more broadly and specifically of the *Antigone* the other of Sophocles' two earliest extant works.²¹ Both appear to have been staged at a time of hegemonic consolidation of the Athenian state in the 440's BC that was largely characterised by acute expeditionary engagements with Sparta and her allies until the Thirty Years Peace in 445 – a transition from furtive instability to stability. Thereafter, Athens focussed on the strengthening of the Delian League and the internal development of its

²⁰ Cf. n15 above. Aeschylus' *Persians*, our earliest extant example of tragedy (ca.472 BCE) tackles the issues of the 'Other' head-on and is unique in that it is the only surviving example of tragedy that deals with a historical subject. It was however, not unique in its day. Phrynicus had produced the *Capture of Miletus* in 495 BCE, regarding the fall of the city of the Athenian colony in Ionia to the Persians for which many held Athens to account for withdrawing military support. It had proven controversial enough for the dramatist to be fined and any subsequent performance banned for many years (*Herodotus* 6.21.2). He subsequently staged a treatment of the Greco-Persian wars from a Persian perspective ca. 476 BCE, which was the precedent for Aeschylus' later treatment (*Hypoth. Persae*). We have no evidence for a 'historical tragedy' after the *Persians*.

²¹ The dating of the *Antigone* in 441 is based on an anecdote that Sophocles' generalship in the Ionian campaign in 440 was based on his success with the play at the Great Dionysia presumably the previous year. However this is hardly conclusive. The dating of the *Ajax* to the 440s was initially made by R.C. Jebb (Cf. Introduction to the *Ajax* of Sophocles, lii-liii) on stylistic grounds and has been widely accepted although a compelling case can be made given the highly nuanced and 'cautionary' nature of the play and the unfavourable portrayal of the Atreidae as a thinly veiled reference to Sparta that it can be dated after the collapse of the Thirty Years Peace. Given its structural congruence with the *Antigone*, and its Aeschylean, 'theological' overtones, I am persuaded by the earlier dating.

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systems of government and administration. At face value, both plays manifest as primary themes the tensions between individual and ‘the state’, human and divine law (particularly with respect to burial rites), and between reasoned and unreasoned action. These congruences seem to fit nicely with the image of the Athenian demos coming to terms with itself during a period of relative stability and ascendancy. The two plays appear to have a shared internal logic and programmatic intent (insofar as Sophocles had one) and have evident structural similarities –

- (a) there is the aggrieved protagonist that finds him/herself in defiance of existing hierarchical authority;
- (b) the protagonist justifies this defiance through a claim to an even higher authority (*nomoi theon*) and ultimately finds resolution of his/her aggrieved subjectivity through suicide;
- (c) the adjudication of these competing claims is framed by the issue of the (burial) rights of the ‘transgressor’.

Despite these congruences, it is the divergences that draw into relief the unique contours that define Ajax’s subjective experience and the particular way the *Ajax* addresses these shared concerns. Let us examine these further:

1. Although both plays address the issue of kinship in their shared focus on burial rights, they are distinctly different forms of kinship that suggest altogether different sets of rules. In the case of *Antigone*, it is a kinship in a strict familial sense which she defends resolutely to her own end by insisting that her brother, Polyneices, receive a proper burial, despite his having sided against Thebes.²² She ultimately defies Creon, who represents the interests of the ‘State’, and buries him herself, thus sealing her own tragic fate. Likewise, Teucer, the brother of Ajax, assiduously defends Ajax’s right to a proper burial. The Atreidae, brother kings and leaders of the Greek campaign against the Trojans (who again represent state

²² Though the issue of what constitutes familial kinship is itself a quite nuanced one, certainly our own contemporary context. Cf. Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*.

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authority), refuse to allow the burial given Ajax's traitorous affront in having attacked the Greek camp. Arrested in a fit of madness caused by his profound sense of dishonour at having lost the contest of arms of Achilles to Odysseus, he has slaughtered their livestock, haplessly assuming in his disorientation that he was effecting his wrath upon the Greeks themselves. His profound sense of betrayal, dishonour, and shame compel him to take his own life. In the former case, Antigone's resistance is predicated on an appeal to a higher order of social relations that rises above that of the state – that of blood and family. The treason of Polyneices is understood *prima facie* and is effectively unquestioned in the narrative structure. From the onset it is a struggle between two competing ethical claims of universal relevance. In contrast, Ajax's transgression is the result of his overwhelming sense of betrayal, in the award of arms to Odysseus, which in Ajax's mind compromises the very specific system of martial values anchored upon a respect for valour. That the Atreidae finally yield at the behest of his rival for the arms demonstrates the degree to which Ajax's actions strained the presuppositions that support the kinship between fighting men. It is a focused reflection on the *stability of the warrior ethos*.

2. Both plays deal with the contrasting interplay of 'madness' (*mania*) and 'being sensible' (*sophrosyne*), but to whom those qualities are attributed amongst the characters betrays a substantive difference in the way the protagonists' subjective disposition is characterized.²³ While Antigone is often described as more measured in comparison to the irrationality of Creon, the critical tendency in the context of the *Ajax* has been to label the behaviour of Ajax as *hybris*, a self-defeating arrogance or inflated sense of self (particularly with respect to the divine), that is set in opposition to the supposedly more rational, institutional positions of Agamemnon and Menelaus, and more acutely with the thoughtful craftiness of Odysseus. This characterization fails to capture the additional valences in operation in the *Ajax*. It is plainly suggested that the award of the arms of Achilleus to Odysseus, which was

²³ See Rosanna Lauriola "Sophocles *Ajax*: Foolishness and Good Sense – A Comparison with the Antigone." Lauriola examines the comparative usage of these categories in a quite sensitive lexical analysis, although she fails to capture, in categorically associating Ajax's behaviour with *hybris*, the complexity of Ajax's internal dilemma.

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done by vote, was perhaps due to some subterfuge at the hands of the Atreidae. From the onset of the play, when Ajax regains his composure and begins to lament his situation, he inveighs against the Atreidae that they have ‘conveyed’ the arms to Odysseus (*phrenas epraksan*, 446).²⁴ Following Ajax’s suicide, when Teucer confronts Menelaus to secure a proper burial from Ajax he flatly declares that he had been ‘discovered’ tampering with the voting in order to ‘steal’ them from Ajax (*kleptes gar autou psephopoios e’urethes*, 1335).²⁵ Although Menelaus denies the accusation, it is clear there had been long-standing enmity towards Ajax. Sophocles decidedly amplifies what had only been a minor variation of the traditional Ajax narrative and places it the centre of his version of the story.²⁶ In any case, with this perceived dishonour Ajax loses composure and is ‘stricken with a storm that darkens the soul’ because of an acute sense of betrayal at the hands of his brothers-in-arms. The *sophrosyne* associated with Antigone’s claim to a higher order of justice is starkly set against Creon’s inflexible sense of his inviolable political authority. In contrast, Ajax’s sense gives way to *mania* because his honour as a warrior has been violated, and an implicit compact between the state and soldier has been broken. For Ajax this violation is insufferable. The concern here is with the dynamics of *disgrace and dishonour*.

3. The defiance and ultimate suicide of Ajax and Antigone suggest alternative representations of an aggrieved consciousness.²⁷ Antigone argues that Polyneices’ clearly traitorous behaviour does not obviate his right to a proper burial, and her

²⁴ R.C. Jebb (*Ajax*, 77) notes that the root verb for *epraksan* (= *prassein* inf.) suggests intrigue. It has the connotation of an illicit transaction.

²⁵ The word *psephopoios* explicitly denotes a falsification of voting.

²⁶ The *Little Iliad* evidently has Athena subverting the award process. (*Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 52.) However, in the post-Epic tradition, namely in Pindar, while the idea of voting amongst the Greeks is introduced, there is no mention of any falsification of the voting. *Nemean 8* (7) indicates the vote was conducted in secret (*kryphiaisi gar en psaphois*) but does not suggest the vote was dishonest. There is insufficient evidence to conclusively reconstruct how Aeschylus treated the contest in his Ajax trilogy. For a thorough treatment of the contest both in the tradition and in the *Ajax* itself, see David Fitzpatrick “The contest for Achilles’ arms in Sophocles’ *Ajax*,” *First Post-Graduate Conference in Ancient Classics*, University College Cork, 13 March 1999, Online Proceedings, <http://www.ucc.ie/archive/1999/fitzpatrick.html>.

²⁷ Cf. Sarah Nooter, “The Uncontainable Consciousness of Sophocles’ Ajax.” Nooter explores the manner in which the suicide of Ajax is a transcending and escaping of the imposed set of subjective constraints of duty and expectation in martial culture.

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actions frame her as a martyr to civil disobedience against an oppressive State. Alternatively the *Ajax* speaks to an inner trauma, unique to the warrior, of the metaphysical displacement that stems from an unfulfilled recognition in the wake of armed conflict's subjectively destructive tendency.²⁸ It is not an ordinary experience, or at least not an intuitively natural one, to be placed or to place oneself in harm's way. It is an act inseparable from a sense of expectation, duty, or obligation, at stark odds with feelings of one's mortality, fear of death, and desire for self-preservation. The voluntary or involuntary compulsion to potentially sacrifice one's very being for a greater, collective objective involves a forced compartmentalization of competing dispositions, a 'tearing apart' of self. War is an inherently diremptive experience. The *Ajax* speaks to a vulnerability and sensitivity to the bonds of brotherhood and commitment to a warrior ethos invested in ideas of respect, honour, and valour that keep such a tearing apart at bay. With that compact broken in the award of arms to another, Ajax is compelled to claim his own life. It was left to his brother Teucer and his rival Odysseus to rise in his defence and rehabilitate him in the face of the Atreidae's intransigence. While the suicides of Antigone and Ajax can be seen as final 'acts of resistance' they are quite different in character. In the case of Antigone it is acquiescence to fate, she takes her life knowing that it is the consequence of fulfilling her duty. Polyneices has received burial rites. Ajax, on the other hand, remains broken, and chooses to depart mortal life as the only option to repair an aggrieved consciousness. His act is an attempt to redeem a *fractured subjectivity*.

Since the publication of R.C. Jebb's edition of the *Ajax* in 1896, there has been a strong tendency in critical interpretation to view the play as representative of a fundamental Sophoclean tension between divine order and a defiant human agency which generally falls into one of two categories – those interpretations which emphasise the primacy of divine justice and those which seek to justify the actions of the hero.²⁹ Until relatively recently, most traditional readings of the play have

²⁸ There are several images from classical era vase painting which carry with them a certain pathos that seem to convey a certain sympathy for Ajax's aggrieved consciousness. Cf. Figures 5-2 and 5-3.

²⁹ R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, 14. Here he characterises these camps as the

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largely fallen into the former category and characterised Ajax's madness and subsequent suicide as a manifestation of Ajax's *hybris*, of overweening arrogance and pride that portends the obsolescence of the heroic world view in favour of the more reasoned world of deliberation and thoughtfulness represented by Odysseus. Historicising critiques suggest this is potentially reflective of an emerging 'post-heroic' sensibility in classical Athens.³⁰ This one-dimensional view fails to take into account the subtle dynamics that are in operation and peculiar not simply to an anachronistic notion of the heroic but to martial culture more generally and one still in operation in the fifth century. To reiterate, the principal emotional trigger for Ajax's fateful onslaught against the Greeks is his defeat in the contest of arms (*hoplon krisis*) to the rival Odysseus. The decision to award the arms of the fallen Achilles to Odysseus and herald him as 'second amongst the Greeks' is perceived in the mind of the Ajax as an unbearable affront and the ultimate betrayal. It is not unlikely that Ajax's plight would have been met with sympathy with its Athenian audience. Within the epic tradition, its reflection in the lyric works of Pindar as well as tragedy, and evidenced by the active cult worship of the hero well into the Hellenistic period, the stature of Ajax's prowess as first warrior after Achilles is consistently attested. Within the *Iliad* there are strong resonances of a special kinship between Achilles and Ajax, as there are overtones of suspicion and distaste directed towards the cunning of Odysseus.³¹ This kinship between Achilles and Ajax also finds its way into the iconography of Attic vase painting well into the classical period (Figures 5-3 and 5-4).³²

'pietists' and the 'hero-worshippers'. Though for more contextual reasons relating to Sophocles' indebtedness to the 'theological' concerns of Aeschylus, Winnington-Ingram can be said to be amongst the ranks of the pietists as he does not hesitate to emphasise the supposed monstrosity of Ajax's defiance of the gods and transgression against the Greeks.

³⁰ In his introduction to Jebb's 2004 edition, Peter Wilson notes that the turn in more recent scholarship has been less polarised and centred on the propensity of the genre to draw out the complexities in making moral-ethical judgements rather than endeavouring to present resolute answers. R.C. Jebb, *Ajax* of Sophocles, 35.

³¹ Cf. *Iliad* Bk. IX, and the appeal of Odysseus and Ajax for Achilles to return to battle and his response to them respectively.

³² The *Iliad* does not recount the death of Achilles. The reference of Ajax's recovery of the body of Achilles appears in a fragment from *Little Iliad* (possibly 7C BCE, attributed to Lesches of Mitylene), 'For Aias took up and carried out of the strife the hero, Peleus' son: this great Odysseus cared not to

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As was noted previously, Sophocles introduces the possibility that the determination of the contest had been steered in Odysseus' favour, and that Ajax had been wronged.³³ This alters the dynamics of any reading as Ajax's outrage and subsequent *mania* then appears to be not just a matter of overwrought, heroic pride, but a response to a genuine injustice. It is no longer sufficient to dismiss Ajax as the product of a bygone ethos, but rather one is called to consider whether, given his trials on the battlefields of Troy, Ajax's reaction may be *sensibly understood*. In this regard the *Ajax* of Sophocles becomes the story of a wounded subjectivity. He ceases to be an anachronism but now becomes a figure with whom one can empathise. Early in the drama, as Ajax comes again to his senses and laments his actions, he foretells his death before the shores of Ilium and makes the appeal – *touto tis phronon isto* (“that this may stand sensibly to them all”). The appeal is to examine him and his plight beyond the dishonoured mockery that will be made of him at the hands of the Atreidae. With this, despite this focus on the unique sufferings of the dishonoured warrior, the *Ajax* nonetheless carries with it themes of subjective dislocation and resistance identifiable to all. If there is a case to be made for the obsolescence of the heroic in the *Ajax*, it cannot be made on the basis of a reductive tension between *sophrosyne* and *hybris*. It must be made on the adjusted terms that Sophocles has imposed on the traditional Ajax narrative – the stability of the warrior ethos, the dynamics of disgrace and dishonour, and the redemption of a fractured subjectivity.

do.' cited by Proclus, *Chrestomathia*, ii as well as the much later *Aethiopsis* (ca. 4C AD) attributed by Proclus to Arctius of Miletus. Its presence on Attic vase painting confirms this to have been firmly established in the narrative tradition in the Classical period. On the iconography of Ajax and Achilles in Attic vase painting cf. Susan Woodford and Margot Loudon, “Two Trojan Themes: The Iconography of Ajax Carrying the Body of Achilles and of Aeneas Carrying Anchises in Black Figure Vase Painting”, 25-40. and S. Woodford. *The Trojan War in Ancient Art*.

³³ It is worth noting that Lesches in the *Little Iliad* evidently states that Odysseus obtains the arms of Achilles ‘by the contriving of Athena’, (Proclus, *Chresto.*, ii). Though this differs from Sophocles implication that the Atreidae had swayed the voting, it suggests that within the epic tradition there had been some element of subterfuge in the contest of arms at work well before its representation in tragedy. Additional visual evidence from Attic vase images also represent Athena as central to the contest indicating that Sophocles had a traditional precedent in representing the Athena as the divine spoiler of Ajax's fate. C.f. Paul Ricouer, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 314ff, and the discussion of the theology of the ‘wicked god’. On representations of Athena in the contest cf. David Fitzpatrick, (2002) and Susan Woodard, *Op cit.*, 27ff..

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On a collective level, in the arguments that are put forward and against the burial of Ajax following his suicide (which occupies more the entire latter half of the drama), a playing out of the very dynamic which Butler allies with respect to the public act of mourning and the de-realisation of the Other. In attempting to prevent the burial of Ajax, the Atreidae are effectively attempting to ‘de-realise’ Ajax and his memory as a valiant warrior for the Greeks. Insofar as consider see his act of madness (the slaughter of the livestock) as treasonous they view him as no longer ‘with us’ and therefore no longer a member of the broader community. Despite his valour demonstrated on behalf of the Greeks, Agamemnon and Menelaus, represent an emergent order which places a higher premium on obedience to the sovereign authority (i.e., the state). It is left to Odysseus, his rival to effectively restore him through a recognition for his efforts. Central to debate however, is how the public act of mourning is so tightly bound to the concept of burial rites and the act of public mourning. Teucer, Ajax’s half-brother, and to whom it is left to defend the honour of Ajax, challenges the integrity of the Atreidae’s position, reminding them that Ajax, in his own right, was leader of the Salaminians who were not subject to the authority of Lacedaemonians (1095-1104) and were there collectively of their own volition. Moreover, Teucer questions the purpose of the entire campaign, namely to secure the return of Menelaus’ bride, Helen. If one wishes to view the Greek army as a thinly veiled representation of the Athenian polis, these debates mirror not only the probable tensions that occurred within the composite multi-tribal polity of the nascent Athenian democratic system, but issues that were also at the heart of the Athenian warrior classes who in the context of this composite polity were faced with new question regarding the overall moral-normative framework which governed the willingness to fight and die for the city state: the legitimacy of leadership and the legitimacy of purpose.³⁴

In “Historicizing Sophocles’ Ajax”, Peter Rose touches upon these issues: the special kinship of warriors, the relationship between the leader (*strategos*) and men, the fragility of alliances, the subjective toll of war, and the shifting ground upon

³⁴ Jason Crowley, *The Psychology of the Athenian Hoplite: The Culture of Combat in Classical Athens*, X.

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which determinations of 'right thinking' are made.³⁵ These thematic concerns have for him quite specific political-ideological functions.³⁶ In associating Ajax and the Salaminians with Athens, and Menelaus, King of Lacedaemonia, with the 'Spartan Menace', Rose makes the case that the *Ajax*, in the protagonist's defiance of the Atreidae and subsequent rehabilitation, was an affirmation of a threatened Athenian political hegemony and a purposive vilification of Sparta as a potential existential threat. In an acute contemporary analogy, Ajax functioned, Rose suggests, as Antiquity's version of a 'John Wayne' or 'Clint Eastwood'. While this argument is plausible, these associations, if they explicitly operated as such, are most likely a case of what Adorno describes as the *de facto* imprint of social relations on the structures of artworks.³⁷

Regardless of what political agenda may have been lurking in the words of Sophocles in the 5th Century BCE, that timeless resonance speaks to an even greater collective concern, the object of intended refraction, is the unconstrained consciousness of Ajax's aggrieved spirit. In the act of suicide, by 'giving himself over to the gods', Ajax reasserts the value of his own self-worth and transcends the temporal, ideologically-brokered order of the warrior ethos which ultimately failed him. As politically referential as Rose argues the narrative structure of the play to be, the key dramatic action, the suicide of Ajax, emblemizes the subversive, antipolitical character of tragedy's form. It is only through death that Ajax can find redemption and satisfaction. That the second half of the play, moving well after Ajax has departed the scene, is centred on his subsequent rehabilitation among the living and opens up, in a manner I find rather unique in the surviving examples of the tragic genre, the possibility of the spectator to identify with Ajax. The preceding

³⁵ Peter Rose, "Historicizing Sophocles' Ajax," 69ff.

³⁶ In addition to the textual evidence Rose highlights to affirm the Athenian identification with Ajax and the Salaminians, the importance of the hero cult of Ajax within Athens is supported in the by archaeological, epigraphic and primary literary sources as well. Cf. Emily Kearns, *Heroes of Athens* who describes the absorption of Ajax into the revered heroes of Athens after the political re-organisation under Cleisthenes. Pausanias, speaks of the cultic practices to Ajax and Euryaces well into the 2nd Century CE. Cf., Yannis Lolos, *Salamis I*, who has been excavating a 12th century BCE Mycenaean citadel on Salamis Island with evidence of later cthonic hero-worship practices possibly to Telemonian Ajax during the Classical period.

³⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 232.

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temporal order shall fail us all. We share with the hero that hidden, ever-present trauma: the inescapable suspicion that we shall only be redeemed in death. In thrusting himself upon the sword – the sword of his enemy, Hector – Ajax reveals to us the futility of our temporal fictions and the cross we unceasingly bear. He unveils the Invisible Wound.

5.3 Intermedial Transposition: From Tragic Narrative to Visual Tragedy

In exploring the relevance of tragedy the intent here is to expand the idea of tragedy as a strictly theatrical or literary genre but also as a visual or pictorial one, as in the end, this investigation is about the *praxis* of contemporary art-making. The broader objective here is to explore, through visual artistic practice, using the *Ajax* as a lens, the metaphysical displacement associated with warfare and hegemonic state policy experienced on both individual and social levels. The preceding sections regarding tragedy as an aesthetic/philosophical construct related to the idea of individual agency and objective necessity, the reception of tragedy by the Abstract Expressionists during the 1940's, and the continued relevance of the *Ajax* and tragedy in general to address issues of conflict that we contend with today, provides context for the following observations on the expressive possibilities afforded by *intermedial transposition* – the transposition of symbolic content from one medium of art to another. Since antiquity, the term *ekphrasis* has generally referred to a rhetorical device where a (usually literary) description attempts to capture or translate a (usually visual) phenomenon such as painting, sculpture or an event. This meaning is captured in Horace's oft-referenced phrase *ut pictura poesis* – essentially denoting 'a verbal representation of a visual object'. However, it has had since Plato broader philosophical implications with respect to extracting or evoking the essence of an object³⁸ More recent work on relations between alternative representational systems has expanded the use of the term to describe musical, cinematographic, or painterly ekphrasis, that is, the transposition of content of one

³⁸ Plato, *Republic* Book X, 605.

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medium into the representational system of another.³⁹

Froma Zeitlin reminds us that in the very nature of theatre itself, and quite acutely in its antique genesis in tragedy, the words of the dramatist are transposed into a new, dynamic visual milieu. Ekphrasis is in operation inherently on the theatre *skene* translating what is essentially literary raw material into the spectator's field of perception as a 'framed space'.⁴⁰ She points out that the evolution of theatre as an increasingly sophisticated dramaturgical enterprise is concurrent with the accelerated development of the plastic, visual arts in ancient Greece and bears a parallel interest in optical phenomenon. These shared concerns are the building blocks of visual representation: colour and value, light and shade, depth and proximity, perspective, compositional relationships, etc. We can surmise that the progressive enhancement of visual culture was accompanied by a general transformation in the way in which the populace of Athens became more sophisticated viewers in how they processed visual information and 'saw the world'. More compelling the enactment of drama on stage and the presentation of narrative events within the frame of the *skene* itself ushers a new epistemological challenge whereby a cognitive tension emerges between what is being viewed by the viewer and what the viewer imagines seeing and experiencing through the characters on stage. Indeed drama becomes the location of quite complex visual inter-referentiality often incorporating ekphrastic devices to create images 'in the mind's eye' that cannot otherwise be represented. Zeitlin offers the Pythia's first time encounter with the Erinys at Delphi as a case in point. She describes aloud mythic entities neither she nor the spectators have seen before.

³⁹ Siglind Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis, Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting*, 8. Bruhn offers a quite expansive notion of ekphrasis: "Representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text represented in another medium."

⁴⁰ Froma Zeitlin "The artful eye: vision ekphrasis and the culture of viewing in the Hellenistic World." 139-140.

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οὔτοι γυναῖκας, ἀλλὰ Γοργόνας λέγω,
 οὐδ' αὖτε Γοργείοισιν εἰκάσω τύποις.
 50εἶδόν ποτ' ἤδη Φινέως γεγραμμένας
 δεῖπνον φερούσας: ἄπτεροί γε μὴν ἰδεῖν
 αὐται, μέλαιναι δ' ἐς τὸ πᾶν βδελύκτροποι:
 ῥέγκουσι δ' οὐ πλατοῖσι φυσιάμασιν:
 ἐκ δ' ὀμμάτων λείβουσι δυσφιλῆ λίβα

*I think I call them rather gorgons, only
 not gorgons either, since their shape is not the same.
 I saw some creatures painted in a picture once,
 Who tore the food from Phineus, only these had no
 Wings that could be seen; they were black and utterly
 Repulsive, and they snore with breath that drives one back.
 From their eyes drips a foul ooze...*

(Eumenides 48-51)

The audience must *imagine* these creatures through the proverbial ‘eyes’ of the Pythia which is facilitated by her verbal description and even a secondary visual reference (a painting of the Harpies). This notable example illustrates the complex cognitive architectures at work. The empathetic and associative reaction to the tragic performer central to many a theory of tragedy (or of drama in general) is dependent upon this cognitive relocation triggered by the very visuality of the presentation itself and extends to these internal ekphrastic transpositions within the presentational frame. Zeitlin posits this dual epistemological perspective, a tension between the associative viewpoint internal to the action and the spectators ‘actual’ point of view as external witness to a performance, as the site of ‘tragic irony’. It suggests perhaps, that the power of the tragic presentation is in the quasi-ritualistic ability of the spectator to move beyond the illusory character of the engaging image (*schoener Schein*) and project oneself into the⁴¹ alternative reality of the enacted events in unadulterated, phenomenological terms.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

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Acknowledging that original tragedy already manifests an inherent visuality within the makeup of the theatrical genre itself, Jas Elsner also makes the case that there were sophisticated processes of visual and iconographical interpretation in the *reception* of tragedy in classical antiquity⁴². In describing the ekphrastic technique of Philostratus (the Elder) in in the *Imagines*, Elsner is able to demonstrate the movement beyond ekphrasis as a rhetorical device in tragedy to describe how painting can depict what cannot be represented on the stage through intermedial transposition where “the diachronic flow of the dramatic narrative is caught in the single synchronic frame of the panel picture.”⁴³ Through this process of ‘visual ekphrasis there is an ‘encapsulation’ of the narrative and thematic content of the source medium (tragic drama) into the static, visual work of art. The *Imagines* is a remarkable work, insofar as it is a written account of presumably real works of art which are in turn meant to describe or elaborate on a particular narrative episode in tragedy (or other literary sources), so that what emerges is a sort of ‘double transmutation’. The dynamic of this exercise elucidates the limitations of both the source medium and that of the target. In the former case, Philostratus often chooses for the particular narrative moments of his ekphrases those which are the subject of verbal ekphrases within the tragic narrative themselves or are not in the strict narrative canon and are elaborations on the existing texts. The presumption is that the painted image is somehow superior or more capable of capturing the essence of that particular moment. In the latter case, in the subsequent process of ekphrastic description of the narrative scene, one becomes acutely aware of the process of economisation and simplification that the pictorial representation requires in order to frame the image in a static, synchronic moment. At times this tension becomes

⁴² ‘Reception’ or ‘classical reception’ refers to the increasingly formal discipline of examining how the classical world is interpreted and translated in subsequent periods (including, as in the case of Philostratus, within antiquity itself) with a particular interest in the way such interpretations diverge or depart from canonically accepted ones. Reception as a field of study has its roots in the interpretive hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and reader-response theory of Hans Robert Jauss which explore the reader’s role in the formulation of meaning. Though these foundations clearly have a literary emphasis, the importance of images and visual culture in the dynamic of expression, interpretation, and reception have grown in significance in this continually and rapidly evolving area of inquiry.

⁴³ Jas Elsner, “Philostratus Visualises the Tragic,” 310.

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severe and one wonders the degree to which Philostratus is taking rhetorical license or fictionalizing his account as to create a sort of meta-narrative to imbue his description with a greater impact. In his description of the murder of Agamemnon, for example, as Clytemnestra bears down with the fatal blow, Cassandra hurls her body upon that of Agamemnon and utters ‘so pathetic a cry’ that he “pities her, hearing her cry; for he will recount it to Odysseus in Hades at the concourse of souls.” As this episode is not attested in the existing literature of Agamemnon’s demise, the ekphrasis seems to move beyond the register of the visual to that of sound and engages, by combining references from both the *Oresteia* and the *Odyssey* in a sort of intertextual bridging to complete the picture between synthetically conjoined components of Aeschylus’ drama and Homer’s epic.⁴⁴

This tendency towards a meta-level of representation within Philostratus could be attributed to philosophic concerns of the Second Sophistic regarding the qualitative attributes (and differences) of text and image and their respective relation to truth (*aletheia*) and wisdom (*sophia*).⁴⁵ I believe it says as much if not more with respect to the hermeneutical abundance of the raw material that Philostratus is engaging with and the multivalent potentialities of interpretation to be found in the proces⁴⁶s of intermedial transposition. “Whoever scorns painting is unjust to truth and he is unjust to all the wisdom that has been bestowed upon the poets – for poets and painters make equal contribution to our knowledge of the deeds and looks of heroes.” So opens the *Imagines*, and this affirmation of equivalence is a call to acknowledge the hermeneutic capacity of both the word (*logos*) and image (*technē*) both of themselves and in the interplay of transmutation between them which is at the heart of Philostratus’ enterprise. This interpretive open-endedness is captured in an allusive manner, according to Elsner, in the first ekphrastic episode of Book II which speaks of the *ainigma*, the quiet mystery, intimated in the smile of singers offering their honorific hymns to Aphrodite. It is the ‘enigma of interpretation’: for

⁴⁴ Ibid., 330.

⁴⁵ Jas Elsner, “Making Myth Visual: The Horae of Philostratus and the Dance of the Text”, 258 and “Philostratus”, 336.

⁴⁶ Philostratus, *Imagines* (Bk I, proem).

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“which way should the viewer look – to the narrative from which the picture starts or to the story which it sparks in the spectator’s mind?” With this inherent ambivalence we have a strong resonance with Ricoeur and his appeal to the ‘enigma’ of symbol as a gateway to critical reflection and what I believe emerges here is the proposition that the material of myth afforded a level of indeterminacy, a richness, even in the relative proximity of the early Imperial period that afforded sophisticated modes of reading and reception that crossed the boundaries of media. However, the *Imagines* is likewise an exercise in identifying the limits to naturalistic representation both verbally and visually. Elsner argues (as in the case of Cassandra and Agamemnon) that Philostratus’ ekphrases replace the catharsis of tragedy with “erotic identification and pathetic fallacy” turning “tragic immediacy to iconographic convention rephrased as scintillating rhetorical erudition.”⁴⁷ *Mimesis* only goes so far in capturing the spectacle of the Theatre of Dionysos, the immediacy that is the unique quality of tragedy and imbues it with the power to confront the viewer with the unavowable conflict between human agency and divine intention. We lose perhaps the dual epistemological perspective which affords the spectator the ability to see both conflicting trajectories simultaneously.

In pursuit of more proximate examples of such ekphrastic transpositions, post-antiquity has afforded us inexhaustible material to examine the reception and retranslation of classical narrative in literary, dramatic, visual, musical and architectural contexts. These instances say as much about the stylistic developments of the times as they do about the reigning interpretive assumptions about the character of antiquity of itself. A cursory comparison of two visual interpretations of the Ajax provides an opportunity to examine this phenomenon. Antonio Zanchi’s, *Death of Ajax* (1660, Fig. 5-5), a comparatively uncommon depiction of a classical subject during this period is a characteristic example of Baroque tenebrism, a highly dramatised representational style typically employed to render religious subject matter with visceral emotional intensity and stimulate reflective piety. Here, significant departures occur from the traditional narrative. Ajax, embroiled in

⁴⁷ Elsner, “Philostratus Visualises the Tragic”, 338.

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physical and emotional agony, has stabbed himself in the throat (rather than hurling himself upon the blade as he is commonly depicted), Hector's sword rendered as a dagger in hand. Ajax takes his life not on the solitude of the seaside; rather the dying hero writhes and contorts himself in the disturbed presence of his attendants, perhaps metaphorically reflecting the dismay to be imbued in the viewer. Here, all the tribulations of Ajax's fellow Salaminians, which take place in Sophocles play largely apart from the hero's presence, are now co-represented within the picture plane. The trademark naturalism and 'spotlight chiaroscuro' of tenebrism are orchestrated to magnify the image's power as an object of reflexive empathy encouraging an experience of shared agony. In a veritable Counter-reformatory spirit shared with other treatments mythical subjects of the period such as Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (1637, Figure 5-7), the suicide of Ajax is refashioned into a secular allegory of human weakness, mortality, and divine justice, reflecting not only the general theological preoccupations which governed image-making under Catholic, ecclesiastical influence, but also the manner in which classical narratives were appropriated to augment these objectives.

Alternatively, we observe in Asmus Jacob Carstens' a treatment of Ajax which typifies the sensibilities of late 18th Century European Neoclassicism. In the *Sorrow of Ajax* (1791), an unfinished gouache intended as a study for an unrealized, monumental work, the hero is depicted with wife and son, Tecmessa and Eurysaces, in a moment of reflective sadness, the circular shield of the great warrior positioned behind them. The trio of characters ostensibly corresponds to the only scene in Sophocles' rendering where all three of these characters are on stage simultaneously. In the play, Ajax demands to see his son and bids him words of caution and farewell (545-583) expressing a desire for him of a fate better than his own and bequeathing to him his shield.⁴⁸ The emotional tenor of Carsten's depiction is, however, quite different from that of Sophocles' text. Ajax is seen less in the state of intense psychological disrepair that we witness in the tragic drama

⁴⁸ Emily Kearns, "Heroes of Attica." Iconographically, Eurysaces would be associated with the shield, and his cult was well established in Athens by the 5th Century at the Eurysakeion (Temenos of Ajax), where cultic worship of Ajax also took place.

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but is rather in the repose of contemplative melancholia. As an innocent looking Eurysaces watches on, Tecmessa bears an expression of deep concern, perhaps uttering words of solace, in contrast to the impassioned pleadings of their exchanges in the play. This attenuation of emotion is a signature feature of Neoclassicism, emblematic of the idealisation of antiquity and the attempt to recast it as congruent with Enlightenment ideas of rationality and civility. What is rendered as psychic disfigurement in Sophocles now takes form as ‘noble reserve’ in Carsten’s transposition. This tone is reinforced by a retrograde movement from Baroque compositional multivalence to the flattened, architectonic, and tableau-like compositions of the High Renaissance.⁴⁹ This restrained ‘tragic’ sensibility continued to find favor to almost insipidly soporific effect in the Victorian era with the Flaxman-inspired revivalism of Frederic Leighton and William Blake Richmond (Fig. 5-8).

What these alternative representations of the Ajax narrative illustrate is the manner in which visual transpositions can be substantially inflected with an overriding moral-ethical perspective. One is here tempted to see Nietzsche’s competing dualism of pre-Socratic Dionysian expression and post-Socratic Apollinian rationality played out in a pre- and post-Enlightenment context. Nevertheless, these more proximate examples of visual ekphrasis are still vulnerable to Elsner’s indictment that the visual medium, particularly as a ‘literal’ inter-*semiotic* transposition, has an incipient tendency towards “erotic identification and pathetic fallacy.” One cannot help but to acknowledge a somewhat indulgent carnality in the Counter-reformatory aesthetic or to read Neoclassical expression as rather passionless melodrama. We have observed that the prevailing tendencies of geometric abstraction and surrealism in early aesthetic modernism sought to achieve a new level of immediacy or directness, either on a phenomenological or psychological level respectively, through the progressive deporting of narrative representation. This did not, however, altogether extinguish a residual interest in

⁴⁹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. Wölfflin labelled this compositional distinction between the Renaissance and the Baroque as ‘planar’ vs. ‘recessional’.

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myth and classical subjects in early modernism, particularly along the loose trajectory between late-19th century symbolism and surrealism; examples occur in the work of Duchamp, Di Chirico, and Dali, typically reflecting upon classical references in broad, more thematic and metaphorical terms.⁵⁰ It is however not an unfair observation, conditioned most probably on the overriding drive towards more iconic, abstract forms of expression and the overthrow of prevailing systems of iconographic reference that characterized aesthetic modernism more generally, that the interest in ‘tragedy’ specifically as an instrument for addressing post-Enlightenment concerns, substantially faded.⁵¹

It was in the particular conditions of New York during the war years that afforded the opportunity for the would-be Abstract Expressionists to reexamine the insights of pictorial modernism and reengage with the concept of tragedy and overturn the conventional semiotic operations of the art object by embedding semiotic referencing within the formal aspects of the work itself.⁵² In the wake of the subjective turn and appropriation of Abstract Surrealist strategies, the intermedial transposition of symbolic content into increasingly abstract forms, took on a peculiarly non-analytic, and immersive character. As described in Section Four, by the late 1930’s the future New York School artists had begun to view the highly aestheticized universalist pretensions of European abstraction as increasingly empty, as a pastiche of the Absolute. In equal measure, Surrealism came to be viewed as an academic and over-intellectualised enterprise. The contrasting impulses were not without their influence however. The mythmaker period of the war years, where the early Abstract Expressionist references to tragedy and myth forcefully emerge, reveals a renewed preoccupation with the meta-themes referring to a subjectivity in crisis in rather metaphysical terms. During this time, the artists

⁵⁰ See Silvia Loretto, “*Modern Narcissus: the lingering reflections of myth in modern art*”. *Papers of Surrealism*, 9. pp. 1-29. ISSN 1750-1954 (2011) and “*A timely call: modern representation awakened by antiquity. De Chirico, Picasso and the classical vision*”. *Modern antiquity : Picasso, De Chirico, Léger, Picabia*. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, pp. 17-30. (2011) for recent scholarship in this area.

⁵¹ It is interesting to note that the preponderance of works exhibited at the 2010 MoMA exhibition, *The Modern Myth: Drawing Mythologies in Modern Times* are from after 1940.

⁵² Donald Kuspit, “Symbolic Presence in Mark Rothko and Clifford Still”, 120-121.

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attempted to contextualise their totemic, quasi-figurative images in such phrases as ‘life’s mysteries’, an ‘unknown world’, and the ‘impact of elemental truth’.⁵³ While these concerns have much in common with the absolutist claims of the European constructivists or the Surrealist explorations of the interiority of the subconscious, however their subsequent move toward non-objectivity eschews semiotic translation as a form of abstracted re-representation (whether as pure or ideal aesthetic principle or within non-Euclidean space) in favor of a ‘corporeal’ transmutation into an alternative physical form. As Lawrence Alloway astutely described in his 1973 essay in *Artforum International*, “Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism” the formal qualities of the work, particularly of the field painters, during the post-war years insistently emphasised their ‘objectness’ and phenomenological character motivated not by a single-minded Greenbergian puritanism but with underlying semiotic intent.⁵⁴ The environmental scale of the canvases and the frequent absence of delimited spaces or pictorial elements (such as Newman’s zips or Pollocks drips) evoke the boundlessness of the absolute; the absence of narrative figuration and contextual relationships between figures speak to an absence of time as a condition; the provocative use of colour (as in Rothko and Newman), or (as in the case of Pollock) its dissolution and perpetual agitation in an interwoven matrix of seemingly infinite complexity, in creating fictive ‘emanations’ is suggestive of a revelation or illumination, as dark as this revelation may be. It is not difficult to postulate that these transmutations are informed by a peculiarly Nietzschean view of the tragic whereby the ‘illusion of the beautiful image’ (*schoener Schein*) proves a fragile veil of contingency that crumbles away to usher, in revelatory fashion a confrontation with the darker ‘truth’ of Dionysian chaos. As Irving Sandler writes:

Disorder, chaos, disintegration, violence, and darkness—the manifestations of a tragic sense—are embodied in the most expressive of Field and Gesture Painting of the late 1940s. This work speaks graphically of the human predicament during World War II and the early years of the Cold War—“the crisis,” as Rosenberg termed it—and perhaps too of the universal human condition. The world at the time seemed to be descending into a chronic state of uncertainty, confusion, and madness—

⁵³ Cf. Rothko and Gottlieb response to Edward Jewell, cited *New York Times*, June 1943.

⁵⁴ Lawrence Alloway, “Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism.” 318ff.

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”the night of the world,” to borrow a phrase from Hegel.⁵⁵

Despite this dark vision it is important to recall that that for Hegel ‘The Night of the World’ refers itself to the unboundlessness of human experience and the chaotic, terrifying and ‘unending wealth of illusions and images’ that threaten to overwhelm us.⁵⁶ It is the effort to radically encapsulate the essence of this experience in the art object, to harness the power of the Apollinian and the *principium individuationis* to make the Dionysian bearable, that qualifies the particular transposition of the tragedy in Abstract Expressionism. It carries with it as such an implicitly redemptive character.

The brushed black field grounded by the loosely rendered band of white at the bottom in Newman’s *Prometheus Bound* is not an effort to illustrate or re-represent the message of resistance which characterises Aeschylus’ tragic narrative, that is, *inter-semiotically*, between one system of reference to another (though one can attempt to read it that way). Rather the art object serves to encapsulate the internal struggle between objective contingency and the Night we see ‘in the eyes of one another’ as aesthetic experience and as such afford a degree of comprehensibility wherein may be found some temporary solace. Ultimately this an attempt to reverse the ekphrastic condition we find illustrated in Philostratus, where iconographic convention, and its tendency to devolve into pathetic fallacy, is rejected in order to recover the original power of tragic immediacy. Perhaps it is this return that should be borne in mind when considering Rothko’s description of his pictures as ‘dramas’.

5.4 Unveiling the Invisible Wound

⁵⁵ Irving Sandler, “Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience.” 94.

⁵⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, “Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit”, 82. “The human being is this Night, this empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity – a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occur to it directly, and none of which are not present... We see this Night when we look a human being in the eye, looking into a Night which turns terrifying. [For from his eyes] the night of the world hangs out toward us.” This powerful and allusive passage no doubt informs Schopenhauer’s characterisation later of the Will in the *World as Will and Representation* which is the underwriting model for Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, “Why is Wagner Worth Saving.”, 18ff.

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The discussion of original tragedy's relevance, of the concerns laid out in Sophocles' *Ajax* and on the visual transposition of tragedy all set the parameters for the parallel effort in this project to employ artistic praxis as a mode of enquiry into the function of the tragedy in the public sphere. The process of intermedial transposition highlights the receptive, interpretive, and translational decisions involved in recasting classical narrative in ways that serve as a destabilising aesthetic provocation relevant to present conditions. It opens up a broader interdisciplinary research methodology that is as much dependent upon the employment of various forms of visual/textual expression as it is on renegotiating the 'tragic' as way for art to make its contribution to the attainment of the Ethical Life. The underlying proposition is that the reformation of tragic narratives can take on the role of a *visual thesis* – that intermedial transpositions of tragedy into alternative aesthetic terms can function dialectically to shed light on the social and cultural distortions that accompany our most highly-reasoned intentions and parallel the aims of critical theory as social engagement. This critical process of reception, interpretation, and transference of narrative content is 'refractive' and is thereby not a direct reflection or pass-through but a modulation that alters or redirects. As such, these refractions serve to engage or effect other modes of human activity and serve as an impetus for constructive reflection and response.

At an epistemological level, Menke's concept of aesthetic deferral as a specific form of determinate negation in aesthetic experience which challenges and destabilises the underlying contextual assumptions that govern understanding is central to this process of dialectical refraction. Through aesthetic deferral art maintains its sovereign relation with respect to the domain of the practical and it empowers it to influence and inform non-aesthetic discourses yet remain distinctly apart from it. This relationship is not an interactive one, but one of 'interminable crisis'.⁵⁷ In this assertion deliberate aim is taken at the aesthetics implied in Habermas' theory of communicative action where the aesthetic-expressive sphere of rational activity engages and interacts with other spheres of reason (theoretical and

⁵⁷ Christophe Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*. 254

moral-practical) on equally discursive terms, suggesting a certain discourse-based mediation that take place. Menke argues, that the aesthetic functions most resolutely in the subversive disruption of the presuppositions that underwrite discursive propositions and argumentation, a process that destabilises the normative fabric which allows certain hermeneutic processes to occur automatically. In this disruption, the art object harbours the potential to provoke a constructive reevaluation of those presuppositions or pre-interpretive grounding.

This represents a conjoining of two parallel trajectories in critical theory regarding the nature of ‘aesthetic rationality’ identified at the outset: the first, via Adorno, of an aesthetics of negation that takes on the character of an aesthetics of resistance and privileges the autonomy of art, and the second, via Habermas, which privileges discursive argumentation and thus subsuming the contributive role of art (so far as Habermas actually addresses the issue) into the response and reactions in literary discourse it incites. What Menke proposes is a synthetic model of aesthetic rationality that rescues art from its estranged relation to discursive thought in Adorno, while articulating how, as a domain separate from practical discourse, art nonetheless impacts rational cognition in the context of Habermas’ discourse theory. Menke’s formulation proves particularly useful in that he appropriates a transgressive epistemological framework to address the issues raised by both critical theorists (and also Derrida⁵⁸) that suggests a critical potentiality of art that we have only so far alluded to. Habermas’ appeals at the close of *Structural Transformation* for a form of critical publicity which counteracts the reifying effects of a public sphere characterised by an increasingly balkanized, interested, and exclusive collection of empowered ‘publics’ which serve to fracture and disenfranchise significant constituencies within the greater body politic. Though he describes this form of publicity as a “critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it”,⁵⁹ he falls short of describing what this form of

⁵⁸ With respect to the concept of decentrifcation and the inherent instability of the signifier this suggests. Although for this discussion, Adorno is more specifically relevant. Cf. *Sovereignty of Art*. “Deconstruction and Difference” 182ff.

⁵⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 232.

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communication could actually be, and given the decisively linguistic turn his work would take it is natural to assume he means a form of practical or interpretive literary discourse. In the spirit of Schiller's *Letters*, the transgressive formulation of art's critical potential suggests that art may function as a corrective, intermediary form of communication that can be "brought to life within intra-organizational public spheres" and further the process of democratization of our civil institutions, the inclusivity of our society, and our aspirations towards the Ethical Life. The principal contention here is that *tragedy* is the ideal manifestation of this potential to constructively and correctively shape the public sphere in its ability to, through the sonority of wailing and grief, confront the inalienable metaphysical tension between the conflicting intuitions of individual agency and the futility of existence.

Indeed Menke himself would later go on to expand this agonistic concept between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic dimensions into a contemporary aesthetics of tragedy.⁶⁰ In his general framework, the power of tragedy resides in the ability of the dramatic genre to suspend tragic action within the realm of the aesthetic. Tragic action remains in the realm of the practical, as an act which bestows undeserved or unforeseen suffering and misfortune upon the one who acts. The performance of tragic action in tragedy, allows the spectator to view this action in an aesthetic context, encapsulated in the spectacle, but in tension with an abhorrence of tragic act itself and its consequences. In an effort to revive the viability of tragedy for our times, he differentiates between the 'classical' model of tragedy which suspends the tragic action within the beauty of the observed representation and a 'modern' model where the suspension lies in the "theatrical play of the performance whose differences and ironies we put into effect through

⁶⁰ Christophe Menke, "Toward an Aesthetics of Tragedy," *Tragic Play*, 86ff. When I began to explore the concept of aesthetic deferral and of tragedy as models for art's contribution in the public sphere in the spring of 2007, Menke's work on tragedy had yet to be published in English translation. So the publication of *Tragic Play* was an unexpected albeit fortuitous event. In describing the 'expansion' of Menke's agonistic framework between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic, I do not mean to suggest that his aesthetics of tragedy are a direct 'scaling-up' of the concept of aesthetic deferral. However in the tension between art and non-art, and in the cognitive variability and unease associated with the notion of tragic 'play' there remain strong conceptual parallels that can hardly be coincidental.

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collusion and reflection.”⁶¹ Menke’s interest lies specifically in the performative aspects of tragic drama (in its evolution from Sophocles to the modern tragedians of Beckett, Mueller and Strauss) which give rise to the variance and provocative instability with which we in turn reflect and respond to the enactment of the tragic. This notion of play relies on the idea that tragic irony, the unforeseen (by the actor) futility or destructiveness of the tragic act, is externally ascertainable by the spectator while a vicarious empathy for the tragic actor is still maintained in the occurrence of his fate; this differential space, akin to Zeitlin’s ‘dual epistemological perspective’, becomes the targeted site for provocative interpretive variance which revives tragedy for the modern spectator. This emphasis on the performative narrows, of course, the consideration of tragedy to the process of narrative enactment and attenuates the locus of the tragic within the causal parameters of an action. Moreover, Menke does not address, except in the most general ethical terms, the promise that tragedy holds for a secondary effect on and in public life. Nonetheless, the agonistic yet negatively constructive relationship between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic, between art and non-art both in his concepts of aesthetic deferral and his later aesthetics of tragedy lays out a dynamic for tragedy, assuming a multiplicity of shapes, to alter and adjust public perspectives on issues of collective concern.

To think of tragedy in this way is to extend the scope of its embodiment from dramatic performance, through the process of intermedial transposition, into a variety of other forms where the ‘tragic action’, conventionally thought of in terms of temporally conditioned narrative, is encapsulated in alternative, even non-temporal or non-narrative, representations. This is in effect is what the New York School, carrying with them the tools of European geometric and surrealist abstraction and armed with the aesthetic model of tragedy informed by Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian formulation, endeavored to accomplish in the move from biomorphic/pictographic symbolism to a radically reduced pictorial vocabulary that carried semiotic weight through more general associations and

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

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phenomenological impact. Lawrence Alloway characterizes this as the “significant magnitude of their austerities”.⁶² In this synthesized abstract vocabulary of impact and association, the function of irony in the experience of the tragic, bound as it is within the enactment of narrative, is supplanted by a more immediate (visual) experience of the condition which Ricoeur uses to describe the essential nature of the original tragedy – confrontation with the untenable and faltering relationship between gods and men. Referring again to Rothko’s contribution to Clifford Still’s 1946 exhibition:

Still’s pictorial dramas are an extension of the Greek Persephone Myth. As he himself expressed it his paintings are “of the Earth, the Damned, the Recreated.”... Every shape becomes an organic entity, inviting the multiplicity of associations inherent in all living things. To me they form a theogony of the most elementary consciousness, hardly aware of itself before the will to live...⁶³

Rothko’s reference to Persephone is illuminating, representing as she does the not only man’s linkage to the souls of the underworld but as the harbinger of the seasons and of the bounty of the earth on which man depends. As a ‘theogony of the most elementary consciousness’ Rothko here collapses the distinction between the origin of the gods and man’s emerging awareness of his own agency. Equally telling is the assertion that ‘shapes’ give rise to a ‘multiplicity of associations’; it suggests that abstract imagery, such as that in the work of Still, provokes a highly variant but potentially unstable stream of hermeneutic referencing that Menke had associated with narrative irony and the aesthetics of negativity. What strikes me as the most significant legacy of the ‘triumph of American painting’ is the aspiration and demonstrated potential they laid out for this reduced but revolutionary pictorial language in modern art to address such profound concerns, to capture the resonant *phone* of profound metaphysical displacement, and to assert an idea of tragedy, as a concept linked to Absolute Freedom and the redemption of humanity, that was once again relevant.

Although explicit narrative references, from antiquity or otherwise, typically in the titles of works significantly diminished after 1947, some among New York

⁶² Lawrence Alloway, *Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism*, 318.

⁶³ Rothko quoted in Alloway. *Ibid.*, 317-318.

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School (Newman and Motherwell come to mind) retained the practice. In so juxtaposing their ‘significant austerities’ with a narrative theme they forecasted the possibilities at large for an enhanced semiotic interplay between visual vocabularies and textual referencing. In so doing it allows for further consideration of the original tragedy’s viability as a point of reference for contemporary visual expression. Turning attention once again to the themes of the *Ajax*, which have a specifically martial orientation, let us consider how such themes can be recast in visual terms to disclose the internal disfigurement that burdens the tragic hero – the Invisible Wound. In the imagery within the play itself, the evocation of this internal breakdown of heroic warrior has an acutely sanguine tenor established from its onset. Athena opens the play with images of the massacred livestock slaughtered at the hands of the maddened Ajax. In an ekphrastic passage that serves to describe Ajax’s harrowing acts as much as his psychological disturbance, she describes the carnage the Hero inflicts upon the livestock throughout the night believing them to be, in his blinding rage, his Greek comrades in arms and the Atreidae themselves.

ἐγὼ σφ’ ἀπείργω, δυσφόρους ἐπ’ ὄμμασι
 γνώμας βαλοῦσα τῆς ἀνηκέστου χαρᾶς,
 καὶ πρὸς τε ποιίμνας ἐκτρέπω σύμμικτά τε
 λείας ἄδαστα βουκόλων φρουρήματα:
 55 ἔνθ’ εἰσπεσῶν ἔκειρε πολύκερων φόνον
 κύκλῳ ῥαχίζων: κἀδόκει μὲν ἔσθ’ ὅτε
 δισσοῦς Ἀτρείδας αὐτόχειρ κτείνειν ἔχων

*I threw before his eyes obsessive notions, thoughts of insane joy
 To fall upon the mingled droves of captured livestock
 The undistributed loot the herdsmen had in charge.
 He hit them, hewed out a weltering shambles of horned beasts,
 Cleaving them down in a circle all around him
 Sometimes he thought he held the sons of Atreus
 In his grip to kill them*

(*Ajax*, 50-57)

At the pinnacle of dramatic action, Ajax in his despair, impales himself upon the sword of Hector. These images of bloodletting serve to represent an inconsolable injury. They represent an interior state of mind and emotion in much the same way that similar imagery operates in the work of Soutine or Bacon (Figures 5-10 and 5-11). How different in spirit these images are from Van Carstens representation of the hero's restrained melancholy! As they stand however, these modern images remain dislocated from any specific content and speak of a general state of inner disturbance. In Sophocles language, with the discrete linkage between mythic narrative and the socio-ideological associations that resided in the Athenian context the tragic poet carries alongside these visceral images the psychological backdrop of relations between the leaders and men of battle. The work calls into question the resilience and stability of that intersubjective, normative framework that defines the warrior ethos. The spilling of blood references a fractured subjectivity, laden with broken expectation, unacknowledged sacrifice, forsaken honor, and sense of betrayal. For all the contextual associations that may have served to affirm or valorize the ideology of the Athenian city-state, I imagine that the performance of the *Ajax* at the Civic Dionysia, through the dramatic presentation of the hero's interior trauma, deferred those automatic contextual, ideologically conditioned ascriptions and proved transcendent in its evocation of War's metaphysical cost.

In "Sorrows of the Savage Warrior", Pierre Clastres speaks of the unique form of alienation suffered by the warrior class in primitive societies⁶⁴. Operating under a different set of incentives from the rest of the tribe, the warrior is insistently concerned with his prestige, a prestige earned only through one's performance in battle and the vanquishing of the enemy. For the warrior, there is no 'end state' that terminates the recurrent and ever-present requirement to demonstrate one's valour. The warrior's relationship to society is based upon this marginalisation established by a entirely separate set of values from others in the community, to which there is no exit or relief except in his own demise, whether that be in victory or defeat.

⁶⁴ Paul Clastres *The Archaeology of Violence*. 279 ff.

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Here then on all sides this tragic proximity between warrior and death becomes clear. Victorious he must immediately leave again for war in order to assure his glory with an even greater feat. But in ceaselessly testing the limits of the risk confronted and forging ahead for prestige he invariably meets this end: solitary death in the face of enemies. Vanquished, that is captured, he ceases through this itself to exist socially in the eyes of his own people...There is no alternative for the warrior: a single outcome for him, death... The warrior is, in his being, a being-for-death.⁶⁵

What this represents however, is a unique form of sequestration vital to the preservation of the community. In their monopoly on violence, the warrior class represents an ever-present, potential threat to the remainder of the society. It is through the bestowing of prestige, the constant expectation for continued performance in battle, that society mitigates the internal and constant threat that the warrior class could impose its will upon the rest by preserving and reinforcing the ethic that keeps the warrior within the closed cycle of mortal validation and trapped in his own vocation. "Ahead of time," writes Clastres, "the warrior is condemned to death by society: no joy for the savage warrior, only sorrow."⁶⁶ The alternative is to risk a greater sorrow for the community at large should the warrior class emerge as its own locus of power and introduce division into society. The practical and metaphysical sequestration of the warrior class is essential to the survivability and sustainability of the whole. This is the tragic destiny of the savage warrior, imposed by the broader community of which he is a part and that catalyses his persistent sense of injury– the irremediable state of being-for-death.

One can readily align this incentive for prestige with the destructive and fateful *hybris* of the tragic hero in the *Ajax* emphasised in many 'pietist' readings of the play. No doubt, the Ajax of Sophocles views the loss in the *hoplon krisis* as an insufferable loss of glory, an outcome which to him is the equivalent of death. But what Clastres' ethnographic analysis of the savage warrior reveals is the tense psychological landscape that underwrites a broader relationship between society and the warrior in primitive society which depends on this very incentive for glory,

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.

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a relationship whose terms were invariably in effect during the political consolidation of the tribes into the Athenian city state during the sixth and fifth centuries to a greater or lesser degree. What we see articulated in the *Ajax* are the consequent effects resulting from a collision of this order with the realities of cooperative political development and democratic consolidation, hegemonic expansionism, and coalition dynamics that were emerging during the archonship of Pericles. The madness and suicide of Ajax take up only the first half of the play, the remainder of the drama is largely a reflection on the implications of that act by the leadership of the Greek coalition. Sophocles not only provides an inner portrait of the heroic warrior's disintegration, sorrow and reconstitution in death, he also portrays the transformation in the relationship between society (or state) and the warrior. The subsequent debate regarding the burial of Ajax between Teucer, the *strategos* of the Salaminians following the death of Ajax, and the rather thuggish and arrogant Atreidae revolves around the issue of (dis)loyalty to sovereign political authority and Ajax's worthiness as a combatant. While on one level, this conflict between Teucer and the Atreidae is symbolically representative of the emerging tensions between Athens and Sparta (most explicitly evoked in Teucer's rejection of their claims of sovereignty)⁶⁷, it is likely also suggestive of the tensions internal to the composite political arrangement of the city state itself and a shift in the overriding ethic that governed military obligation and the implicit contract between the warrior and the polis.⁶⁸ For the Atreidae, who view Ajax's act of madness as treason, the society-warrior contract is based on the primacy of and submission to political authority; for Teucer, Ajax's slaughter of the livestock notwithstanding, the heroic warrior has kept his end of the bargain through his exploits on the field of battle. As observed previously, what is at issue is the moral-normative fabric that governs the compliance of the warrior class.

In the end it is Odysseus, his rival in the *hoplon krisis*, that successfully petitions for his rehabilitation and at face value it seems that the old order prevails. However,

⁶⁷ Peter Rose, "Historicizing Sophocles' *Ajax*", 72.

⁶⁸ On the symbolic correspondence of the Greek coalition to the polis in the *Ajax*, cf. Christian Meier, *Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 200.

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there is a sense of futility at the integrity and viability of that ethic: Ajax is still dead, Tecmessa widowed, Eurysaces orphaned, and his Salaminian followers left in precarious relation to their allies. The resonances of Ajax's mania, psychological trauma, and suicide remain imprinted in memory despite the acquiescence of Agamemnon and Menelaus to bury him and weak rapprochement between Teucer and Odysseus. It is therefore not a question of an obsolete 'heroic' order, driven as it is by the recurrent pursuit of glory or prestige in competition with the new 'statist' order that predicates duty and service to the political motivations of the sovereign. Rather one comes away with a sense that the individual and social consequences of armed conflict are effectively still the same either way. While, as in the *Oresteia*, there seems to be an effort to restore the archaic order amidst the new, the resolution of the Ajax is disturbingly ambivalent. The necessity for acts of valour on the field of battle exist in any case, whether driven by prestige or by duty, as do the sorrows and disfigurements that accompany those exploits. This is the insight of Johnathan Shay in his influential analysis *Achilles in Vietnam*, which compares the psychological states of the Greek's greatest warrior as described in the *Iliad* to the manifestations of post-traumatic stress experienced by returning soldiers from the combat zones of the Vietnam conflict.⁶⁹ He is able to draw strong parallels in these acute and troubling states of mind, particularly in the sense of meaninglessness of one's efforts, self-imposed isolation, and a suicidal impulse. All of these symptoms of injury, are clearly evident in Sophocles' portrayal of Ajax and indeed Shay goes so far as to suggest that the transgressive nature of tragedy emerged in primary measure to ensure the successful reintegration of combatants into the community of citizens of ancient Athens in a time of consistent and protracted conflict.⁷⁰ As radical and admittedly reductive this assertion is, it nonetheless underscores the

⁶⁹ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, 45.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Shay, "The Birth of Tragedy – Out of the Needs of Democracy" (on-line e-text). Shay writes, "Athenian theater was created and performed by combat veterans for an audience of combat veterans; they did this to enable returning soldiers to function together in a *democratic* polity... The ancient Athenians had a distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration of returning soldiers that was undertaken as a whole political community. Theater was this community's primary means of reintegrating the returning veteran into the social sphere as Citizen."

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degree to which issues of warfare's justification and human cost were to the Athenian polity and the degree to which tragedy had the potential to speak.

I believe the aesthetic, and specifically visual, engagement with these tragic themes, irrespective of the historically specific, normative conditions that govern the relationship between society and the warrior class, is equally valid in our present-day context. It is the sovereign domain of the aesthetic, its antipolitical or supra-ideological character that casts normative presuppositions into harsh relief and effects a 'rethink'. I would argue that such rethinking is in order in our current circumstance which from an American, post-Enlightenment perspective is not altogether dissimilar from the perspective of an Athenian *demos* increasingly aware of the fragility of its own cultural/political hegemony and the costs in blood and treasure required to maintain it.⁷¹ We are perhaps given a wider span with which to address such issues given the revolutionary developments in pictorial expression of the past century. The history of pictorial modernism is no stranger to evocations of war and its costs, and on an emotive level artistic responses to the First World War (Figures 5-12 and 5-13) were fundamental to the development of an insistently culture-critical perspective in Europe (Dada and Surrealist provocation) as well as those culture constructive approaches which through their utopian aspirations sought an antidote to the perceived cultural degeneration evidenced by the conflict (De Stijl, Suprematism, the Bauhaus).

A case could be made that the legacy and memory of the Great War suffused the development of art in the intervening two decades before the onset of National Socialist aggression in Western Europe. It is of no small significance that Pablo Picasso was commissioned by the Spanish Republican Government to showcase the plight of the Spanish people under German/fascist aggression in the 20th century's war painting *par excellence*, Picasso's *Guernica* (Fig. 5-14). It is also of no

⁷¹ Athina Karazogianni, "From Innovative Democracy to Warfare State: Ancient Athens as a model of hegemonic decline". Athina Karazogianni argues that the rise of Athens' predominance in the 5th Century was due largely to its innovative mechanisms and networks for knowledge sharing and the flexibility and adaptability of its democratic institutions. A growing hubristic, aggressive attitude towards other city states and a corresponding decline in innovative practices ultimately led to decline. She suggests a comparison with global post-Cold War geopolitical conditions.

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small significance that the painting following its exhibition at the 1937 *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* was subsequently transported to America in late 1939 under the safekeeping of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and travelled extensively throughout North America for the following decade. The work proved seminaly influential to the New York School not only for its epic scale and its synthesis of cubist and surrealist languages – tending to biomorphist abstraction – but in its application of these vocabularies to address the horror of war which was by then spreading across both Western and Eastern Europe. (At the time of *Guernica*'s arrival in New York, Germany had annexed Austria and the Sudetenland and had invaded Poland; Britain and France had declared war.)

By 1940, from an American perspective, Picasso's statement on the Spanish Civil War had taken on the character of a more general indictment about the conflict more broadly.⁷² Perhaps by virtue of America's effective detachment from the emerging cataclysm of Europe, the artists of the New York School sought to address in universal terms the horrific nature of the embattled world aided, via Nietzsche, through the lens of tragedy and primordial myth. These concerns have hardly waned since 1945, and there should be little doubt that the content of original tragedy still resonates with the modern warrior. In 2009, the United States Department of Defense sponsored a unique public-health programme, *Theatre of War*, for veterans of the recent Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts and their families and friends, which consisted of readings from professional actors of both Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* as a launching point for further therapeutic discussion on the effects Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).⁷³ Anecdotally, there appears to be a strong sense of identification between the veterans of recent conflict and the sufferings of the tragic protagonists in Sophocles. In the words of one veteran non-commissioned officer who took part in the programme, "I've been Ajax... I've spoken

⁷² Dore Ashton, *The New York School*, 102-103. Cf. also Maria Dolores Jimenez-Blanco "Guenica de Picasso y la Escuela de Nueva York (1939-1947)."

⁷³ Patrick Healy, "The Anguish of War for Today's Soldiers, Explored by Sophocles," *New York Times*, 12 November 2009.

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to Ajax”⁷⁴

This legacy of pictorial expression directed at addressing or evoking this condition of internal trauma – the Invisible Wound – speaks to the possibility of bringing tragedy, as image, back into life. The corollary effort in this research effort has been to explore formal vocabularies – visual, structural, aural – that could, through intermedial transposition, function as an iconic form of visual tragedy. This effort is fully documented in the appendix to this volume. It is however worthwhile to address the principal movements of that investigation. The investigation endeavored to explore:

- (1) The qualities of the abstract sublime in the non-objective image and their effective relation to references from antiquity,
- (2) The interplay and contrast between image and language to support or intensify the evocation of mourning or grief, and
- (3) The intersection of elements referencing contemporary, American martial culture and the aesthetics of high technology and benign dystopia.

The practice element of this research effort began with an examination of the intersection between destruction and violence and the sublime, that perhaps could be likened to similar explorations like those of J. M. W. Turner during the great fire which destroyed the Palace of Westminster in 1864 (Fig. 5-15). The painting *Ploiesti*, (2008, Figure 5-16) developed for the 2009 exhibition *The View from Here* whose theme was the process of “transmission, translation, and transmutation” of experience to art and between works of art. It was an explicit effort to investigate such transference and to capture the sensations of the experience of routine helicopter overflights of the industrial district of Dora in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004-2008. The intersection of the expansive nighttime urban landscape, the plumes of fire shooting skyward from the refineries below, the

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Sergeant First Class Anthony Gonzales, U.S. Army, quoted in the *New York Times*, 12 November 2012.

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deafening roar of aircraft engines were paralleled with the now famed allied bombing missions of Ploiesti during *Operation Tidal Wave* in 1943 (Fig. 5-17). Irrespective of any ideological positions with respect to the war itself, the intent was to translate the sensational aspect of this vista. The emergent abstract vocabulary was then applied to more distantly resonant themes from antiquity in an effort to refract the dark emotions of loss and grief associated with classical mythic or historical narratives which have likewise been the subject of pictorial transpositions throughout the history of art (Fig. 5-18). This took form in a series of paintings which included *Death of Hephaestion* (2009, Fig. 5-19).

The turn towards the interplay between image and language, not dissimilar in intent to Titian's mythological paintings (referred to as the *Poesie*) for Phillip II of Spain, resulted in a series of installations (Figs. 20 and 22). The 2011 installation *All these Worlds are Yours* referenced Europa as a subject of unsatisfied longing or desire nested within a U.S. Department of Defense electronic cable transmission. The text of the transmission incorporates an adaptation of a Latin American love lament:

*All that I ever wanted, more than I could ever have
And all the Night passes gasping for her love*

In the installation, Europa becomes a signifier for a desired utopian redemption. Zeus' desire for Europa takes on political significance as it is transposed into the digital language of political military control.

The association with sacrifice with redemption could be seen as almost proto-comedic within the appropriated paradigm of Attic drama. That the desire for utopia is a 'love story' perhaps finds its initial form in what can be reconstructed from the fragments we have of the lost dramatic treatment of Sophocles and Euripides lost tragedies of the *Andromeda*. The installation *Tears for Andromeda* was an attempt to revisualise this longing for redemption or rescue that characterises the Andromeda story and an example of this process of inter-semiotic transposition, highlighting the interpretive, translational decisions involved in recasting an

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ancient narrative. The process of developing *Tears for Andromeda* was representative of a broader interdisciplinary research methodology that posits the transposition of a foundational narrative as a *visual thesis* to demonstrate the potential for art to function as social critique.

These representative examples of the practice-based effort were developed and created in London during a period of intermittent military service in Afghanistan, advisory activities for the Interior Ministries of both Iraq and Afghanistan, and civilian service with the Department of Defense in Washington DC at a time of active hostilities (to include, bureaucratically speaking at least, Washington). The artworks that were produced are informed by the areas of theoretical interest that have been laid out here but are also informed by these 'real-world' experiences that perhaps provide the requisite modulation for a meaningful refraction of tragic content. Aeschylus, it should be noted, took up arms at the Battle of Marathon, as did Sophocles when he assumed a generalship during the Ionian campaigns of 440; yet it should also be remembered that the experience of war is not limited to combatants alone nor is the suffering, loss and grief of those who remain in the wake of conflict. In the highly compressed and dynamic existence of the Athenian city state of the fifth-century, at times ascendant and confident at times beleaguered, there is an element of tragedy, despite the re-articulation of canonical myths which predate it by centuries, that functions as testament. It is a quality of the great tragedians that they are still able to speak to grief and internal suffering with such a degree of empathy and inner knowledge.

When I reflect on the epic tales of the Trojan War and the poetry of the great tragedians, I often wonder whether the subjective experiences of warriors who shed and let blood on the fields of Ilium or at Marathon were really that much different from those of us who have taken up arms in the fields of battle today. Short of death, the subsequent reconstitution of the self in the wake of that experience, as the experience of soldiers having returned from armed conflicts in recent history attest, is hardly foregone, often fraught with tumult, and highly sensitive to the specific and general conditions that govern a reintegration into a peaceable society.

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In the American experience, the treatment of veterans of the Vietnam War, viewed in retrospect as a collective abandonment or betrayal due in large part to the widespread divisions regarding the justification for war, has resulted in a more acute awareness in American society toward the difficulties encountered by veterans of our present engagements during the process of reintegration. America is still haunted by the memories of the lost and broken souls wandering mentally ill and homeless in the downtown streets of our great cities. For far too many returning warriors of the Vietnam conflict the trauma of war itself was compounded and amplified by the subsequent trauma that stemmed from a lack of recognition, from a failure to acknowledge the conditions of self-sacrifice they were compelled to endure. Despite our greater, present-day awareness of the challenges involved, an increasingly palpable sense of alienation from a civilian population inured to the decade-long sacrifices of the warrior class, may prove to be equally unforgiving for our returning men- and women-at-arms.

As Axel Honneth has described, Hegel's conception of the ethical life was initially rooted in the progressive struggle for recognition⁷⁵, in the successive conflicts between individuated selves and their desire for subjective freedom amidst increasingly objectifying and artificial structures of social control. These transgressions, borne out in struggle and resistance to the effects of social order, are at the root of what he would eventually term the Unhappy Consciousness, the state of un-fulfillment where the will to the ethical life is acutely felt but alienated from any genuine embodiment in the actual state of affairs. While Hegel saw this as a passing stage of human development, as light gives way to the dark of night in the dialectic of Enlightenment we are all too aware that this unhappiness returns in the wake of our defects and the retreat to a mythology that legitimates the ideologies of exclusion and conceit.

The Invisible Wound is at once something shared by all but is also, in the case of its evocation in the *Ajax*, felt in a quite particular sense by the warrior class, who as a caste of citizens are called upon to make the sacrifices required at the behest of

⁷⁵ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 11ff.

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the *demos* but with little recognition of the internal disfigurement that is inherent to the being-unto-death. So it is that I have chosen here to focus my refractive lens on the *Ajax* given the resonance with my own experience and the potential timeliness and timelessness of its choruses to stake a claim for an iconic form of visual tragedy that can address, perhaps with a similar penetrating, evocative quality, to the Invisible Wound that never heals. I have proposed that tragedy can function as a transgressive form of aesthetic education, one that does not attempt to posit alternative arguments in the realm of public discourse but, in the *phone* of mourning and despair, in the act of grieving that both individuates us and binds us together, destabilise normative thinking to trigger alternative ways of looking at the world and see us through our shortcomings. For tragedy to find true relevance in our pursuit of the ethical life we must move beyond a discursive engagement of narratives framed against a system of well-ascribed signifiers and *hear* tragedy's signature voice.

As Edmund Burke reminds us,⁷⁶ there is majesty in darkness – for it is from the darkness, the unhappiness of alienated consciousness, that light emerges most forcefully. The light of the ethical life is hailed by a voice whose cry penetrates the Night and will deliver us from barbarism. Amidst the smouldering wasteland of countless spectres and shadows – the terror that is the Night – we are compelled to respond, as if to a far-away siren, to that sonorous truth of distant wailing, the cry which signals our redemption.

ὦ
 σκότος, ἔμὸν φᾶος,
 ἔρεβος ᾧ φαεινότερον, ὡς ἐμοί,
 ἔλυσθ' ἔλυσθέ μ' οἰκήτορα

O'
 darkness, my only light,
 Darkness, who shines most bright for me,
 Take... take me to dwell with you.

⁷⁶ Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and the Beautiful*., quoting Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 2.

(Ajax, 395-399)

PLATES



Figure 5-1. *Ajax prepares for his suicide.* c. 530-525 BCE. Exekias. Attic Black-figure amphora, Musée Communal, Boulogne-sur-Mer.

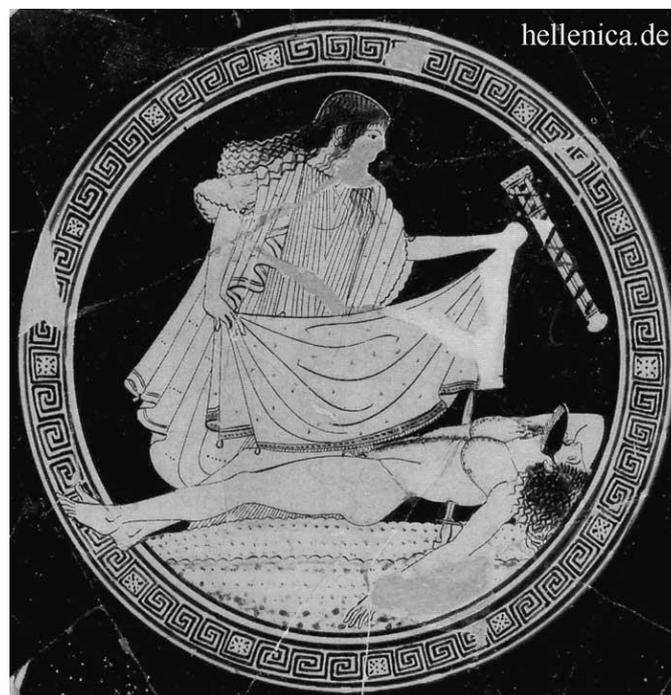


Figure 5-2. *Tecmessa covers the body of the dead Ajax.* c. 490 BC Brygos Painter, Red-figure kylix. Getty Villa, Los Angeles



5-3. *Ajax and Achilles playing draughts*. c. 540-535 BCE. Exekias. Attic Black-figure amphora, Vatican Museums.



5-4. *Ajax carrying the body of Achilles*. c. 6th century BCE. Ergotimos and Cleitias, François Vase – detail. Archaeological Museum - Florence



5-5. Antonio Zanchi, *Death of Ajax*, 1660, Oil on canvas



5-6. José de Ribera, *Apollo and Marsyas*, 1637, Oil on canvas



5-7. Asmus Jacob Carstens, *Sorrow of Ajax*, 1791, Goache on Paper



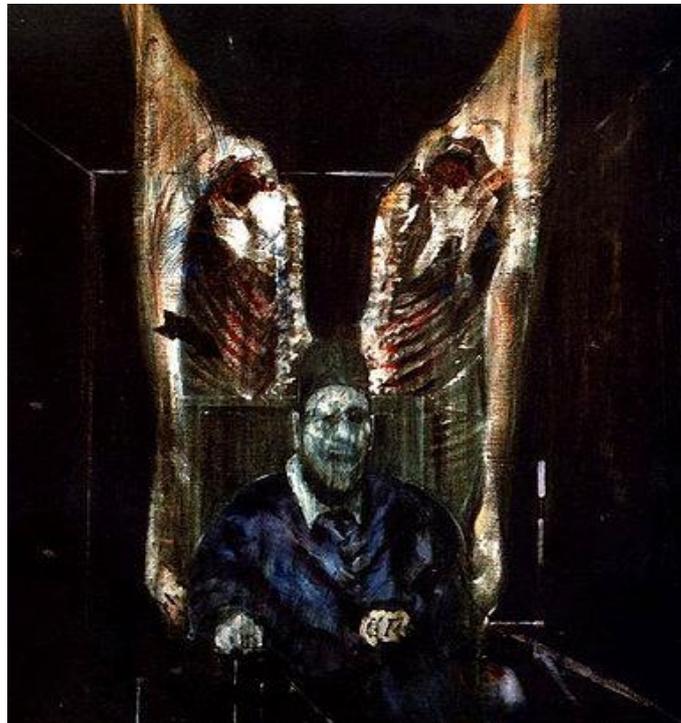
5-8. William Blake Richmond, *Electra Mourning at the Tomb of Agamemnon*



5-9. Barnett Newman, *Prometheus Bound*, 1952



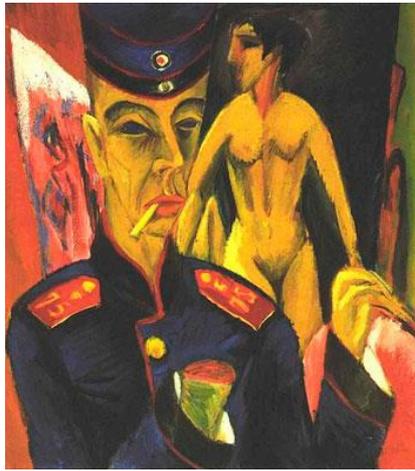
5-10. Chaim Soutine, *Piece de Boeuf*, 1923



5-11. Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat*, 1954



5-12. George Grosz, *Explosion*, 1917



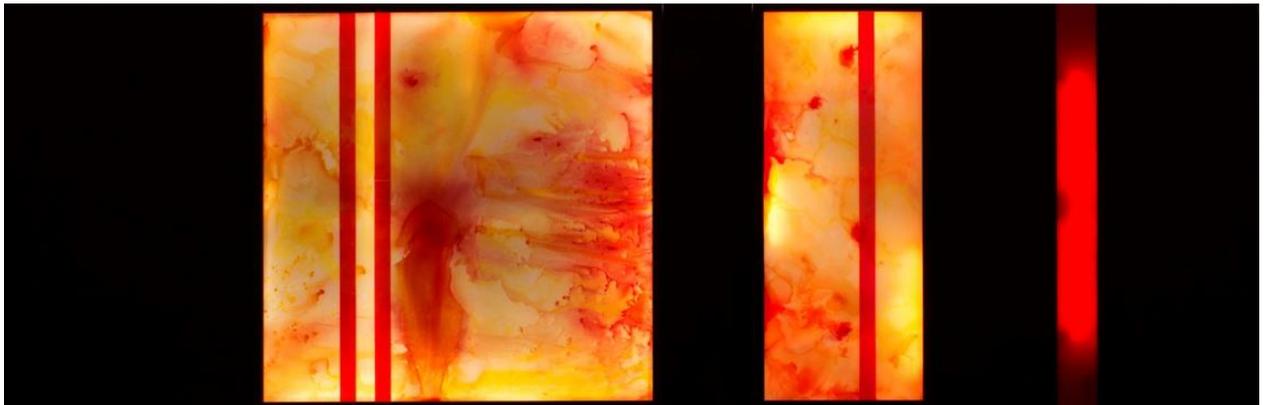
5-13. Ernst Kirchner, *Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915



5-14. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937



5-15. J. M. W. Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, 1865



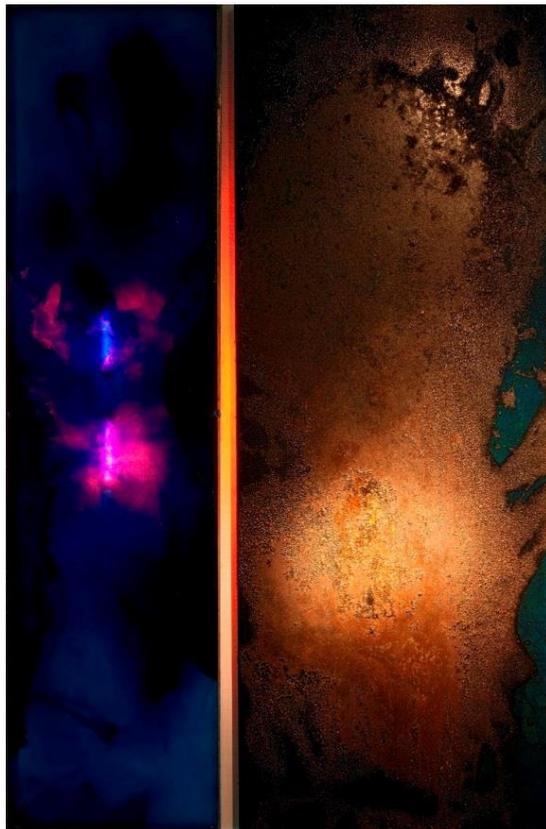
5-16. Michael Delacruz, *Ploiesti*, Steel and Illuminated Lucite, 150 x 450cm, 2008



5-17 *B-24 Liberator over Ploiesti*, 1943



5-18. Gavin Hamilton, *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus*, 1763, Oil on Canvas, Scottish National Gallery

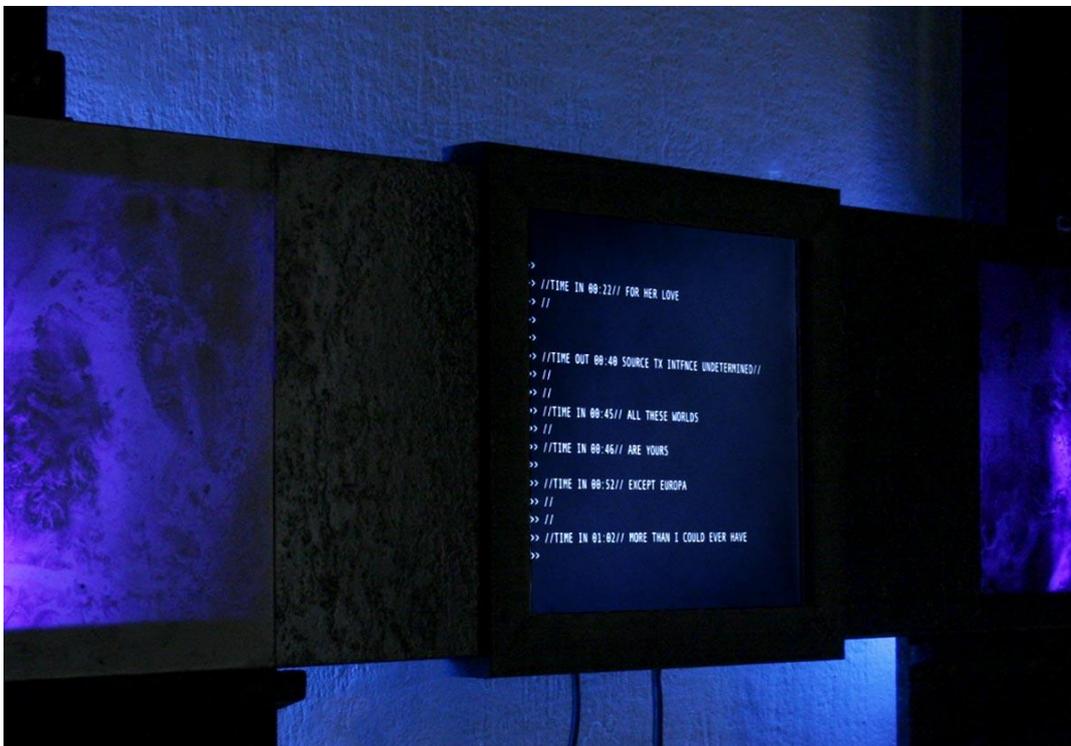


5-19. Michael Delacruz, *Death of Hephaestion*, Oil on Illuminated Plexiglass and Steel, 244 x 130 cm, 2009

On the Visual Transposition of Tragedy



5-20. Titian, *Rape of Europa* 1559-62. Oil on canvas, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston



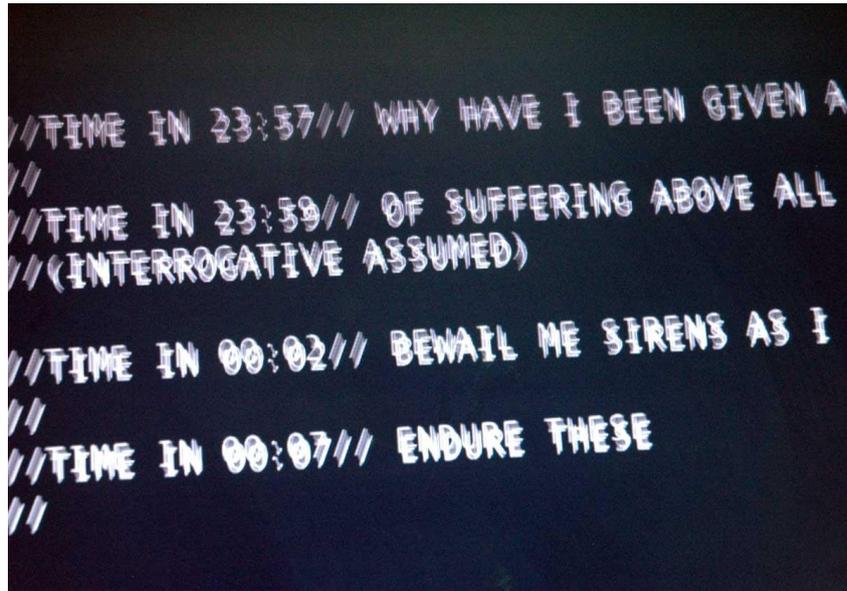
5-21. Michael Delacruz, *All these Worlds are Yours*, Oil on steel and lucite, video monitor, 2011



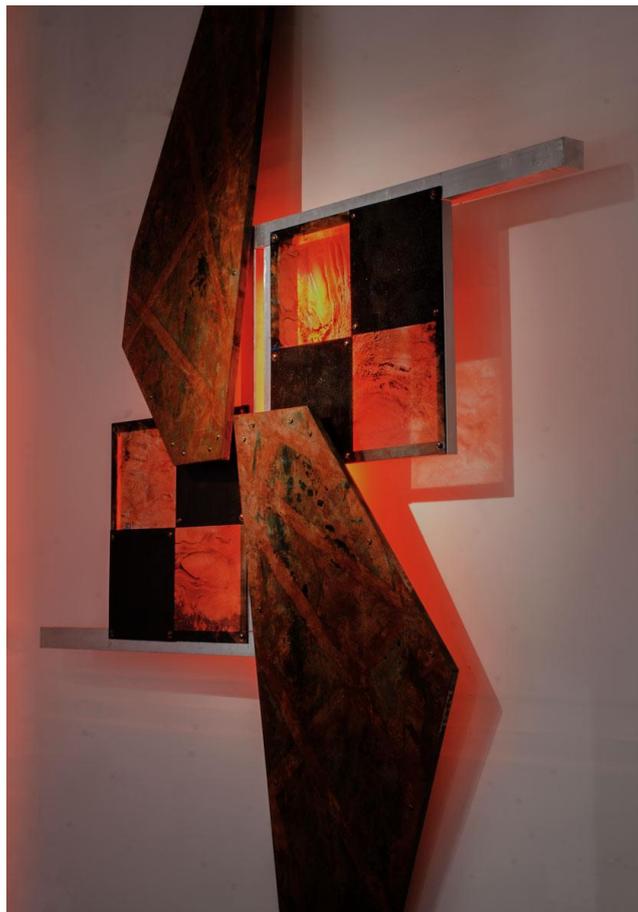
5-22. Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1554-56, Oil on canvas, Wallace Collection, London



5-23. Michael Delacruz, *Tears for Andromeda (Detail)*, Oil on steel and lucite, video monitor, 2012



5-24. Michael Delacruz, *Tears for Andromeda* (Detail of video text stream), 2012



5-25. Michael Delacruz, *The Address of Failure*, Oil on Steel, Aluminum and Lucite, 2013

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APPENDIX

Selected Works from the Practice Component

The original proposal at the onset of the programme centered on the examination of operative modalities of aesthetic reason and pictorial strategies for conveying 'ideological' content along two threads:

- (1) Use of images that have concrete, identifiable references (i.e. symbolically-mediated)
- (2) Employment of visual vocabularies that deliberately redact or sublimate identifiable references (non-discursive)

In the year preceding the research effort at the Slade School of Fine Art (2007-2008) development involved the use or suggestive exploitation of military iconography such as the emblem, insignia, or ribbon. In the course of a reawakened interest in subjects from classical antiquity, themes from classical literature or art (typically through the use of titles or appropriated images) were merged with martial imagery. These works would eventually set the stage for the visual research efforts conducted at the Slade to identify effective formal vocabularies (visual, structural, aural...) that can communicate, through a receiving, interpretation and transferral of thematic material (appropriated through a conscious process of reception) that would have potential relevance to issues of significance in the public sphere. As the research effort gained momentum, more definitive research objectives emerged. The investigation endeavored to explore:

- (4) The qualities of the abstract sublime in the non-objective image and their effective relation to references from antiquity,
- (5) The interplay and contrast between image and language to support or intensify the evocation of mourning or grief, and
- (6) The intersection of elements referencing contemporary, American martial culture and the aesthetics of high technology and benign dystopia.

The selected images in this appendix are representative of these explorations.



Pro Victoria Tacita, 2007

Oil and acrylic on canvas; diptych, 244 x 180 cm

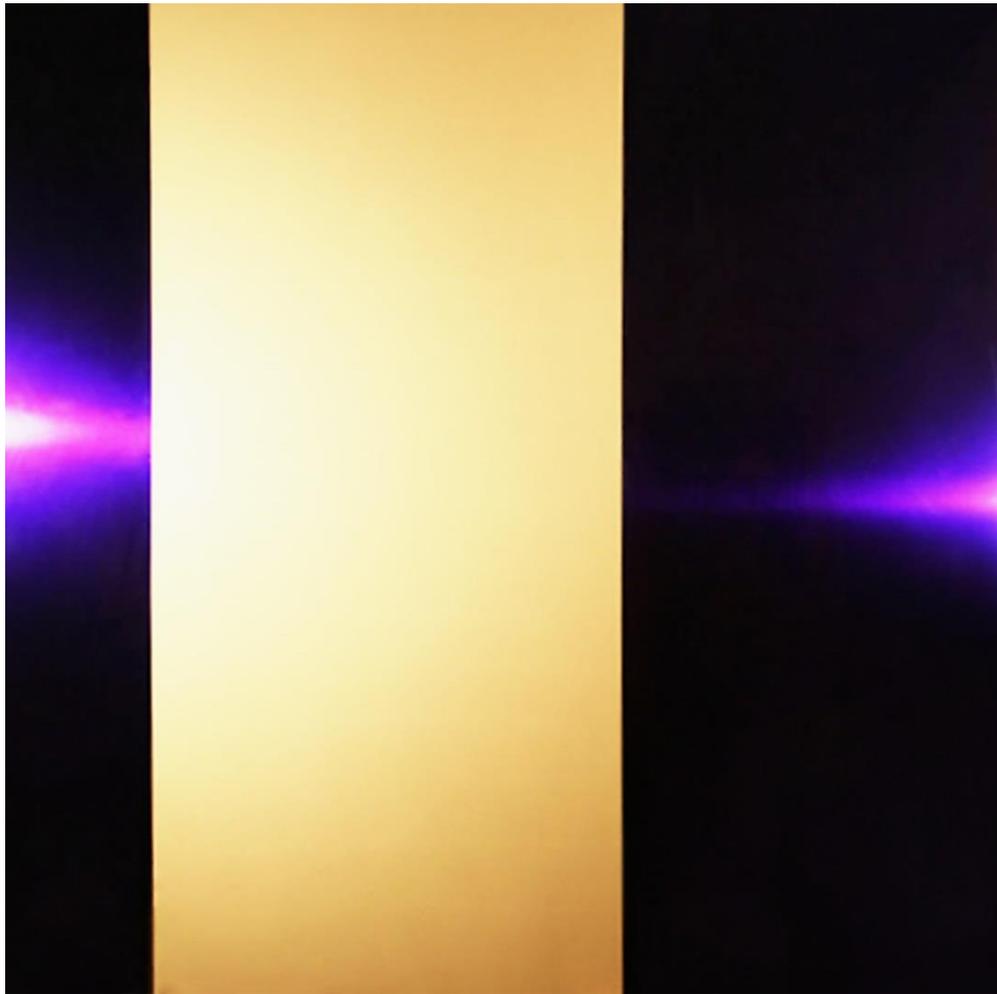
The diptych *Pro Victoria Tacita* (For the Quiet Victory - 2007) is representative of the 'symbolically mediated' approach, appropriating a digitally pixelated representation of the *Nike of Samothrace*, a Hellenistic sculptural representation of Victory, coupled with vertical bands whose scheme is adapted from the Joint Service Commendation Medal, a U.S. military decoration, and a random reference to the 'Jack of Spades' from a deck of playing cards. The combination of these references is not intended to deliver a specific, decodable meaning. They were envisioned to provide a complementary but nonetheless ambiguous concatenation of signifiers that could elucidate a sense of conceptual intent but remain indeterminate, opening what Kant would refer to as an 'interplay between the imagination and understanding'



National Defense, 2007

Oil and acrylic on canvas; 244 x 732 cm

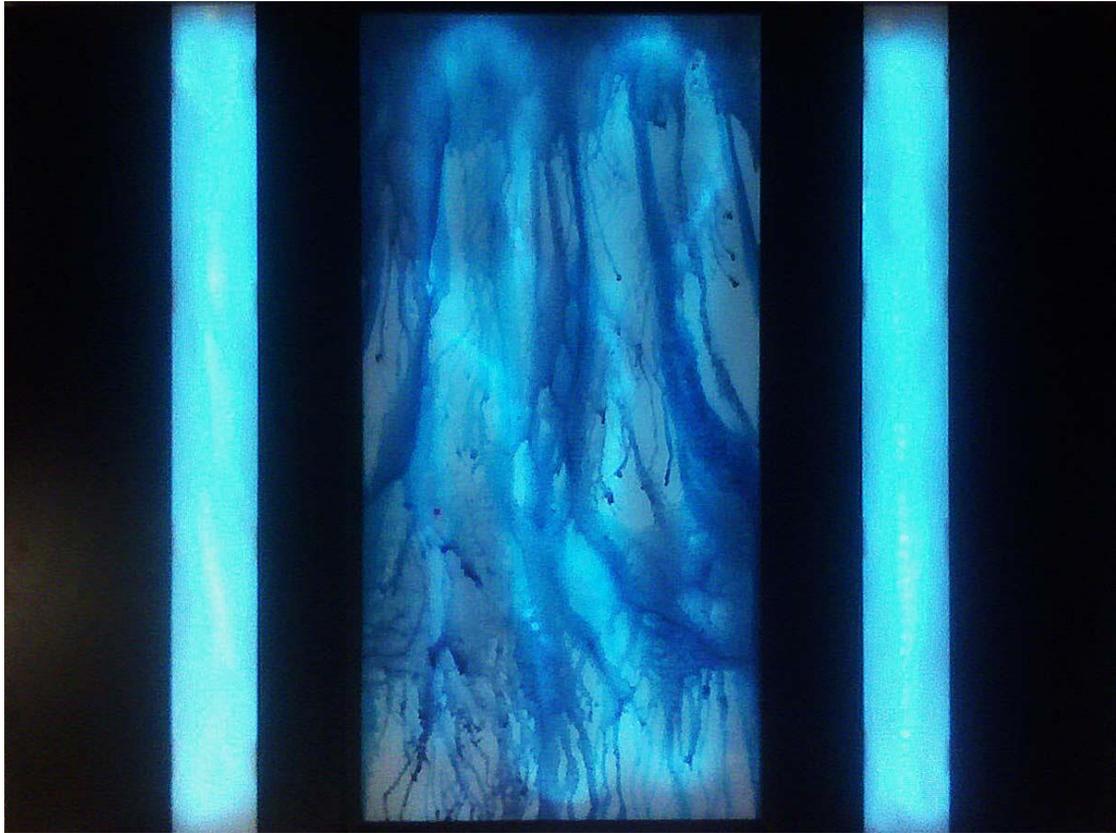
As an example of the less discursively oriented approach, *National Defense* (2007) a large-scale representation of the ribbon of the 'National Defense Service Medal' executed in acrylic and oil-based paint at approximately three by eight meters in dimension. The 'NDSM', as it is referred to on service records, is a U.S. medal awarded for serving in the military during periods of significant national-level operations. Its grand, oversized execution and its somewhat ominous title 'National Defense' created an image that potentially carries with it a certain degree of authority. This work represents a potential conflation between a discrete aesthetic strategy of utopian signification (the ordered bands of colour that bear vague reference back to the utopian aspirations of European constructivism following the Great War) with the notion of martial or even nation-state power. Placed on an epic scale, as a formidably confrontational object it effectively harkens back to the transcendental pretensions of New York School Painting, the Abstract Expressionists, and in particular the work of Barnett Newman, with a distinctly American heritage.



Navy Cross, 2007

Acrylic polymer on aluminium, oil on linen; triptych, 244 x 244 cm

The painting *Navy Cross (2007)* was an attempt to redact and amplify America's second highest maritime military award with the religious associations of its title (military and political organisational emblems are often symbolised by a 'cross') to perhaps create an object of contemplative nature that suggests both unthinkable sacrifice and honour. During a discussion of this work in 2009, a fellow colleague at the Slade referred to it as a "bandage upon an invisible wound..." This description prompted a re-direction of concern with the individual and social cost of armed conflict and led directly to the study of Sophocles' *Ajax* as contextual and thematic source. This work initiated a trend toward the use of industrial materials in image making practice.



Apollo! Apollo! Why Have You Destroyed Me a Second Time?, 2008
Acrylic on illuminated lucite, formica; triptych, 150 x 200 cm,

Taking its title from the Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and the lamentation of Cassandra upon arriving to the house of Agamemnon in the bonds of slavery, this pre-Slade work was representative of the introduction of references from classical literature and Attic tragedy in specific. Although utilising the visual vocabularies and references to European Constructivism and Abstract Expressionism evident in *National Defense* and *Navy Cross*, *Apollo! Apollo!* endeavoured to apply 'the abstract sublime' with explicit classical referencing and in some manner translate the themes of subjective pain and dislocation suggested in the title. In this case, Cassandra mourns not only the destruction of her home city of Troy (her first destruction), but now her fate as an enslaved concubine in Agamemnon's household. The use of formica, lucite and coloured lighting also represented further developments in the application of non-standard materials and illumination that would be further explored at the Slade.

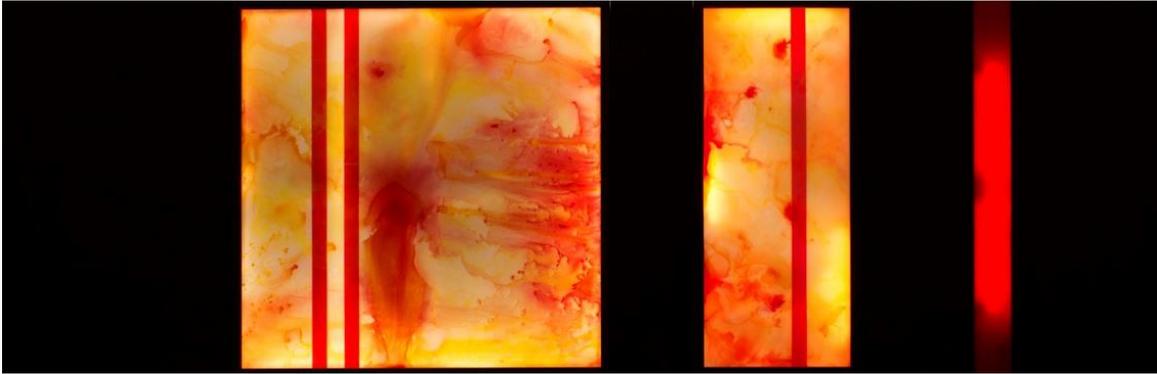


Ploiesti, 2008 : 2014

Steel and Illuminated Lucite, 150 x 450cm

As the opening effort upon matriculation at the Slade, this image, part of series of works called *Ploiesti* from 2008-09, was occasioned by the Slade/BBC exhibition, *The View from Here* whose theme was the process of “transmission, translation, and transmutation” of experience between artworks and mediums. It was an explicit effort to investigate such transference on a very personal level (though employing pictorial strategies utilized in *Apollo! Apollo!*). As stated in the exhibition catalog -

The painting... is an attempt to capture the sensations of my experiences during routine helicopter overflights of the industrial district of Dora in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004-2008. The intersection of the expansive nighttime urban landscape, the plumes of fire shooting skyward from the refineries below, the deafening roar of aircraft engines – a sublime juxtaposition of constructive and destructive power – is to me evocative of the now famed allied bombing missions of Ploiesti during *Operation Tidal Wave* in 1943. Irrespective of ideological concerns, the sensational aspect of this majestic vista has a power all its own.

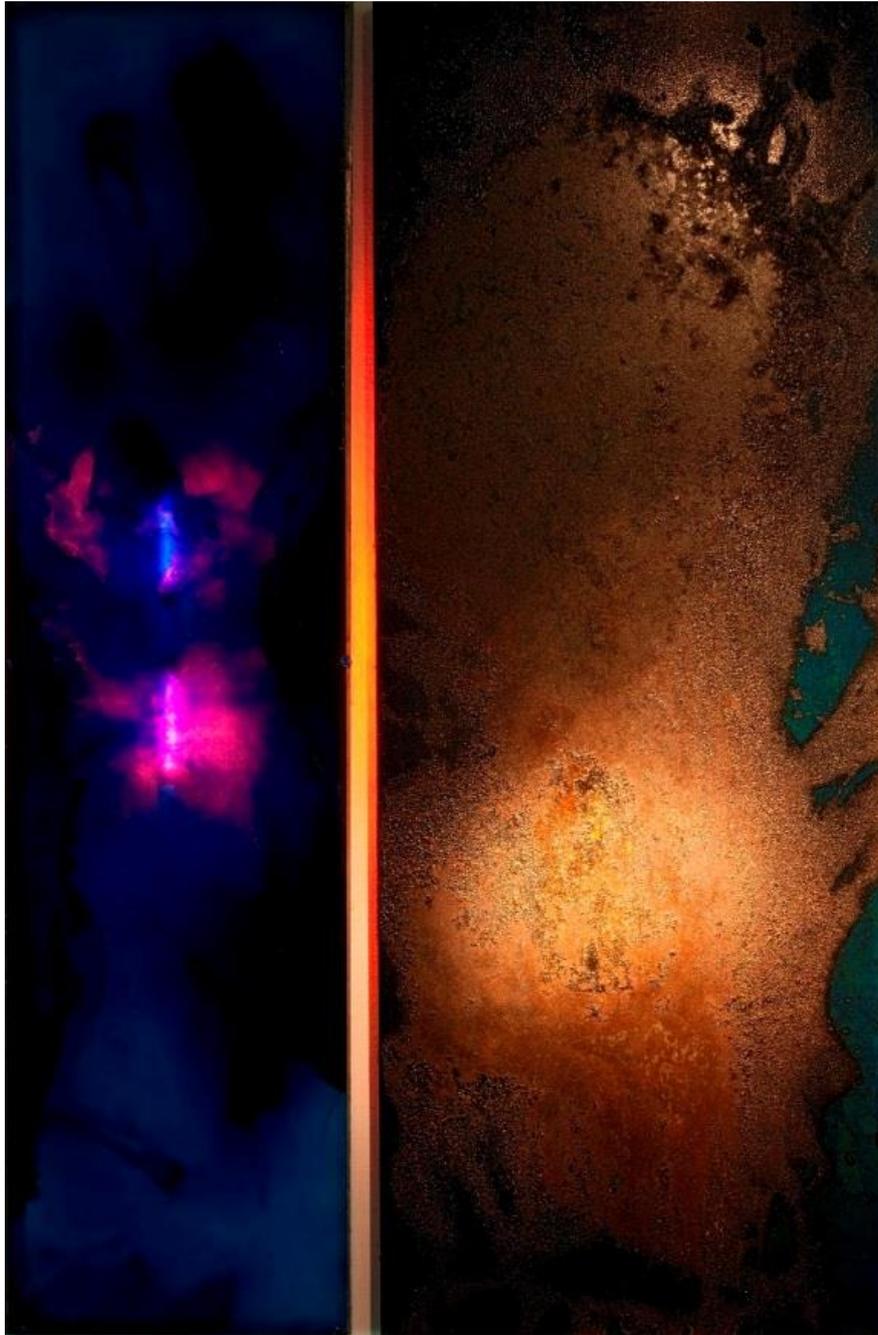


The conceptual framework of the exhibition sought to take a specific time and place and through successive interpretations by different artists and transmute that locational reference. Although the title of the work bears reference to the daring bombing raids of Axis oilfields in Romania of *Operation Tidal Wave* it is in effect a revisualisation of my own experiences of the flaming refineries in Iraq during the Second Gulf War. Interestingly the successive reinterpretation of the work was a series of photographs by Katherine Bash, a PhD candidate at the Bartlett School of Architecture, of the rotted remnants of former prisoner of war ships in the Yorkshire estuary at Bedlams Bottom.



Katherine Bash. Series print from *Bedlams Bottom*, 2009 C-print, 90 x 60cm

After the partial exhibition of *Ploiesti* (only three of five composite panels) in 2009, the work was exhibited in full at the Slade PhD Symposium, *Immaterial*, at the Woburn Research Centre in 2014



Death of Hephaeston, 2009

Oil on Illuminated Plexiglass and Steel; Diptych

Shifting attention to how more distantly resonant themes from antiquity could in turn be refracted to similar effect, an exploration ensued in a series of small and large-scale paintings in steel and illuminated plexiglass of how abstract pictorial

Appendix

vocabularies (and other formal attributes) could be employed with purposive effect. These vocabularies were applied in conjunction with more distantly resonant themes from antiquity in an effort to refract the dark emotions of loss and grief associated with classical mythic or historical narratives. *Death of Hephaeston* (2009) and *Lamentation for Icarus* (2009) were two larger scale works from this period which were later exhibited as part of the installation *Refractions of Isthmia II* held at the Woburn Research Centre, London in 2011.

(U)WARNING: (U) THIS IS AN INFORMATION REPORT, NOT FINALLY EVALUATED INTELLIGENCE.
REPORT CLASSIFIED SECRET NOFORN

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

REQS: (S//NF) C-IA3-5678-06-95.SOURCE: (S//NF) //OTS 569 24 3546//MID-LEVEL ACHAEAN
DIPLOMATIC OFFICIAL. CONTEXT STATEMENT - INFORMATION OBTAINED VIA ELECTRONIC
COLLECTION. SOURCE WAS UNAWARE THE REPORTED INFORMATION WOULD REACH U.S. OFFICIALS.
SUMMARY: (S//NF) TRANSCRIPTION OF PW57 INTERCEPT WITH ACCOUNT OF ACHAEAN DELEGATION TO
TROY REQUESTING RETURN OF HELEN, WIFE OF MENELAUS, KING OF SPARTA. TEXT: 1. (S//NF)
WHAT FOLLOWS IS A TRANSCRIPTION OF PW57 INTERCEPT DTG 130955FEB31 FROM LRVF98
//GEOCOORD:15467N/984567W//.

2. (S//NF) RO ASSESSES THIS TO BE A MID-LEVEL ACHAEAN OFFICIAL RECOUNTING EVENTS
DURING SENIOR ACHAEAN DELEGATION TO TROY ON OR ABOUT 11 FEBRUARY REQUESTING THE RETURN
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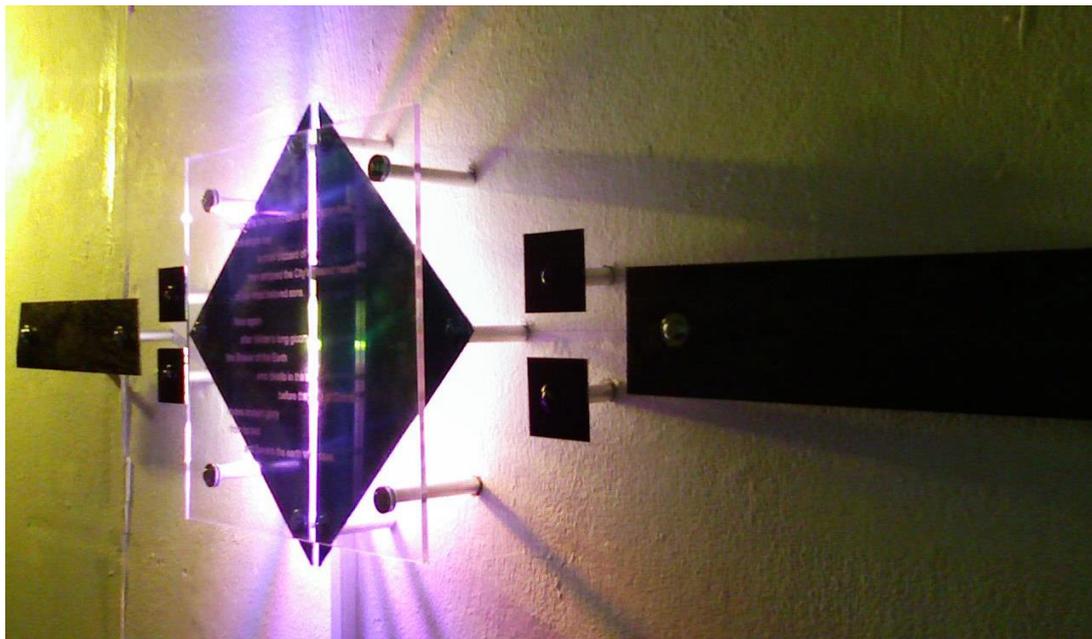
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UNINTELLIGIBLE TIMEOUT 0954:57//
//RX TIMEIN 0954:59// OF BATTLE ROUSING PALLAS //RX UNINTELLIGIBLE TIMEOUT 0955:02//
//RX INTERRUPT 0955:07//I LIKE THE WAY YOUR SPARKLING
//RX RESUME 0955:09// GOLDEN //RX UNINTELLIGIBLE TIMEOUT 0955:13//
//RX TIMEIN 0955:17// TO THE TWO ENVOYS OF THE GREEKS ((ODYSSEUS)) SON OF ((LAERTES))
AND KING ((MENELAUS)) SON OF ((ATREUS))
//RX INTERRUPT 0955:22//EARRINGS LAY AGAINST YOUR
//RX RESUME 0955:29//SLIM WAISTED ((THEANO)) ADDRESSED THEM (BEGIN QUOTE) WELL BUILT
CITY OF TROY
//RX INTERRUPT 0955:31//SKIN SO BROWN AND I WANT TO
//RX RESUME 0955:36//HAVING OBTAINED WITH THE HELP OF THE GODS //RX UNINTELLIGIBLE

Midnight the Heart (Easy Feeling), 2009

Digital audio/video (3:59)

In support of a group video and performance work for the *Making Sense* colloquium centered on the ideas Jean Luc Nancy held at Cambridge University in October 2010, this inaugural digital video work incorporated a translation of a Bacchylides poem, into a fictitious U.S. Department of Defense intelligence cable transmission. As an exploration of the poetic form of the dithyramb, purported to be a form of choral lyric that preceded Attic tragedy, the intent was to explore explicitly language based strategies which merged an element of the mythic with ambiguous or incongruous systems of reference. In this case the running cable transmission is punctuated with phrases from the contemporary folk-rock song 'Peaceful Easy Feeling' by the popular music group *The Eagles*.



Refractions of Isthmia I, 2010

Oil on steel and aluminum, and illuminated plexiglass.

Created as a contribution to a Slade Research Week in the Winter 2010 term centered on the theme of ‘Water’, the original intent was to create an abstract votive space metaphorically referencing the ancient *Sanctuary of Poseidon* at Isthmia. This archaeological site, not far from the ancient city of Corinth, was the location of the Isthmian Games held in honor of the Greek deity of water and was an active location of devotional activities throughout the Archaic and Classical periods. Because of various time constraints this proposal could not be realized until the Spring of 2011 with the installation of *Refractions of Isthmia II*. Alternatively, a simple composition (notionally conceived of as a ‘cursor along a timeline’) developed but never executed for the ‘Now and Then’ exercise for Slade postgraduate students that was never executed. Inspired by a poetic reflection that

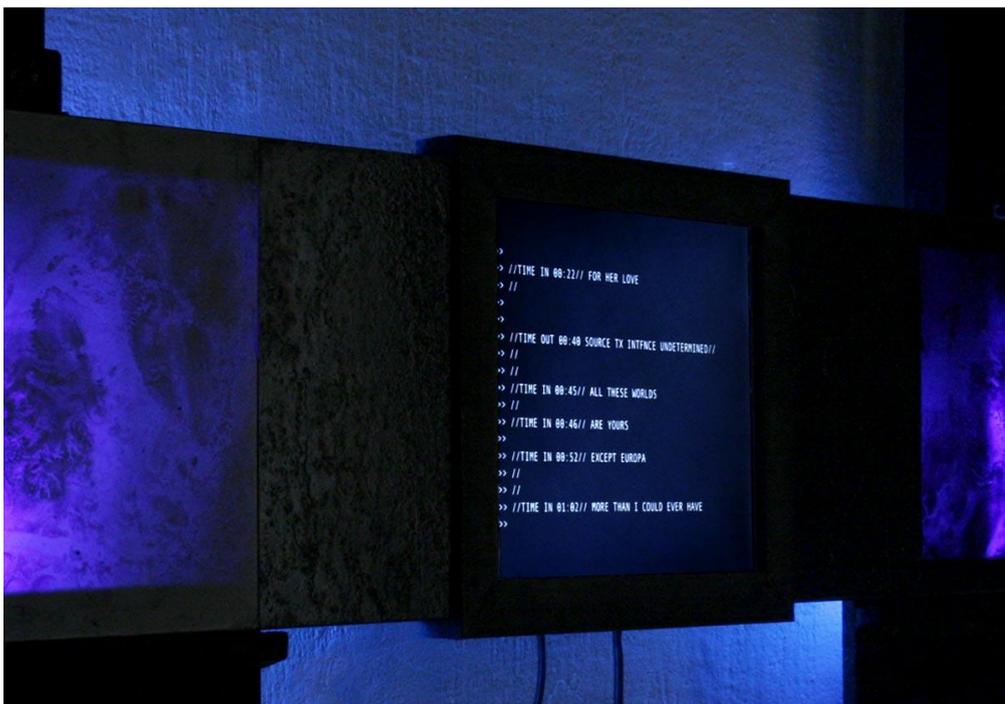
then
is both the past
and future
of now

The composition was intended to suggest a timeline interrupted by the “arresting punctuations of life” that fade away as soon as they appear. The ‘then’ of tomorrow becomes the ‘then’ of yesterday. This idea was reengineered for ‘Water’ exercise by

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intersecting it with some observations on the devotional practices of the cult of Poseidon on the Isthmian peninsula. Although Poseidon, the 'Wielder of the Trident', is most commonly associated with the power and might of the sea, he was also associated more generally, particularly for followers residing in more inland locations, with the power of water as a force of nature in its own right. Again exploring the expressive potential of language, the engraved text of the work is a liberal adaptation from Pindar's Isthmian 4, a victory ode written in honor of Melissus of Thebes for his victory in the pancration (a multi-event competition) in the Isthmian games. In the original text, Pindar attributes to Poseidon a Spring-like restoration, through Melissus' victory, of the grievous losses that had befallen the clan of Melissus in the past. In the adapted excerpt, this loss and restoration is more broadly ascribed to Corinth, as a collectivity. As the cold snow of Winter gives way to the fresh rains of Spring and back again, the destructive and restorative power of water is invoked to describe the cyclical nature of time and of the dark storms and recurrent blossoming of our own lives.





All These Worlds Are Yours, 2011

Oil on steel and wood, illuminated plexiglass, video monitor.

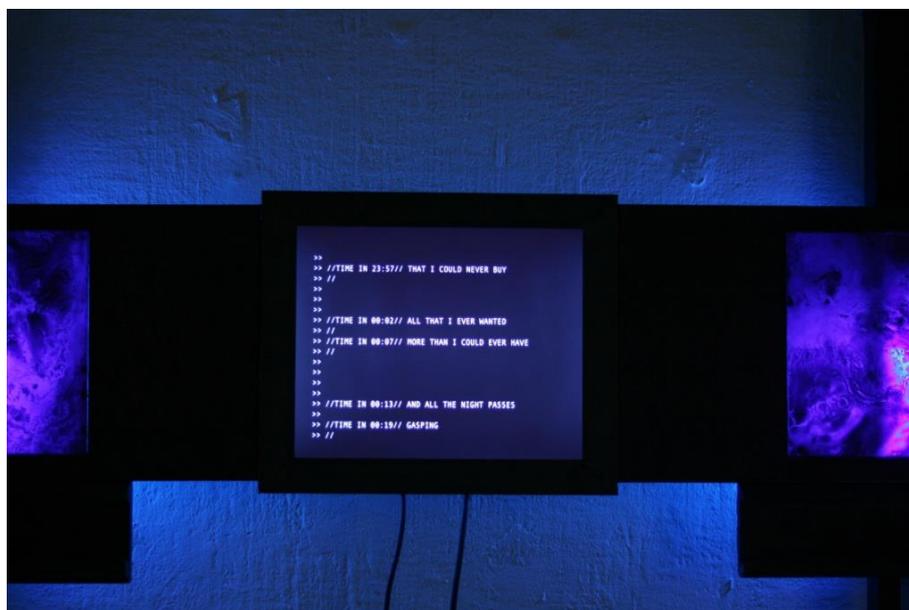
The work *All These Worlds are Yours*, developed from 2009-2011, and installed at the PhD Symposium *Surplus to Requirements* in Spring 2011, was an effort to merge some

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of the less-discursive pictorial strategies of earlier efforts with the more text based strategies employed in *Midnight the Heart (Easy Feeling)* and *Refraction of Isthmia I*. In addition to the panelled elements of painted steel and illuminated plexiglass, the installation included a computer monitor running a fictitious U.S. Department of Defense electronic cable transmission. The text of the transmission incorporates an adaptation of a Latin American love lament:

*All that I ever wanted,
more than I could ever have
And all the Night passes
gasping for her love*

The text additionally referenced Europa as a subject of unsatisfied longing or desire (appropriated from Arthur C. Clarke's *2010*). In the installation, Europa becomes a signifier for a desired utopian redemption. Zeus' desire for Europa takes on political significance as it is transposed into the digital language of political military control. This results in a rather dystopian, 'ghost-in-the-machine' sensibility, one that draws attention to the residual shadows of our failed utopian pretensions that still follow us.





Refractions of Isthmia II, 2011

Multimedia installation with sound and dance performance.

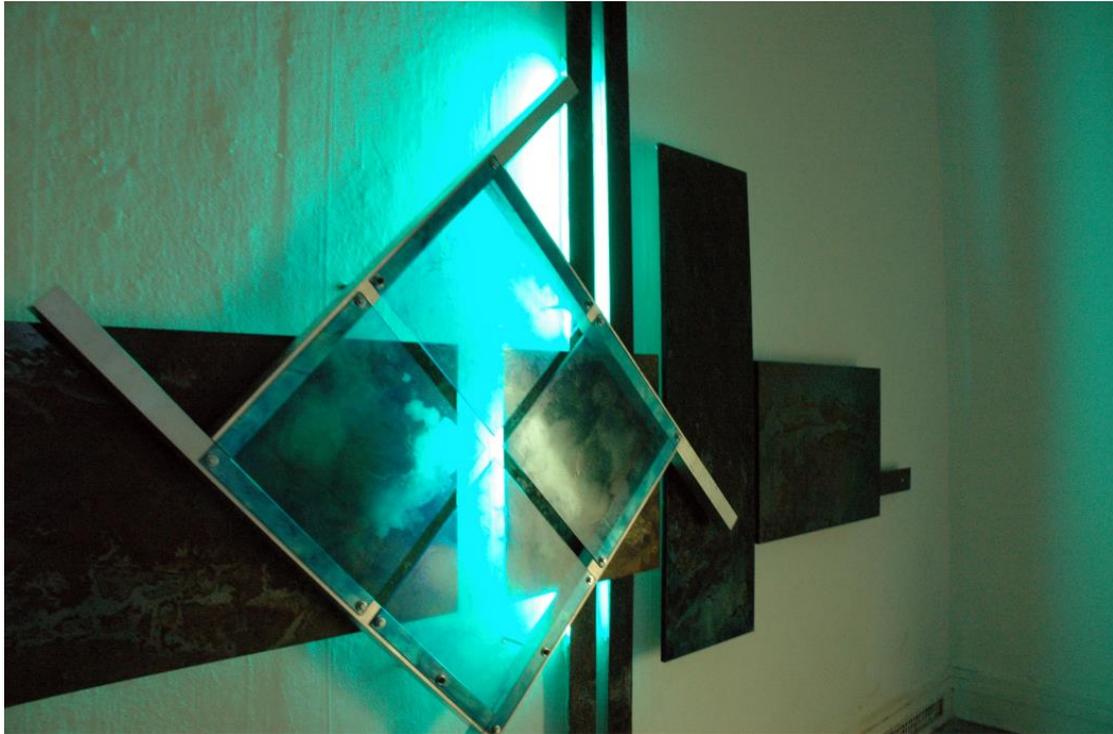
Selected Works

Refractions of Isthmia II was a collaborative effort by Michael Delacruz, Wayne Binitie, Áine O'Dwyer, and Robert Phillips to 'refract' perceptions of Ancient Hellenic votive practice in a contemporary visual, sonic, and performative context. Realizing the original intention of *Refraction of Isthmia I*, the purpose was to abstract a votive or sacral space metaphorically referencing the ancient *Sanctuary of Poseidon* at Isthmia. This archaeological site, not far from the ancient city of Corinth, was the location of the Isthmian Games held in honor of the Greek deity of water and was an active location of devotional activities throughout the Archaic and Classical periods. In addition to paintings and sculpture, a sound piece was created, centered on a vocal and a harp instrumental recorded at a Neoclassical-style bathhouse located at Kenwood House, Hampstead Heath to recreate a reverential sonic environment, for which a contemporary dance performance was choreographed and performed. The lyrical text employed is a redaction and adaptation of Pindar's *Isthmian 4* used in the inscription for *Refractions of Isthmia I*.

*Though She had found favor
with brazen Ares
a cruel blizzard of war
then stripped the City's blessed hearth
of her most beloved sons
After Winter's long gloom
the Shaker of the Earth
who dwells in the Sea
before the walls of Corinth
rouses ancient glory
from its bed
and flowers the earth with roses*



Computer reconstruction of the Sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia, c. 500 BCE
(University of Chicago)



//TIME IN 23:57// WHY HAVE I BEEN GIVEN A
//
//TIME IN 23:59// OF SUFFERING ABOVE ALL
// (INTERROGATIVE ASSUMED)
//
//TIME IN 00:02// BEWAIL ME SIRENS AS I
//
//TIME IN 00:07// ENDURE THESE
//

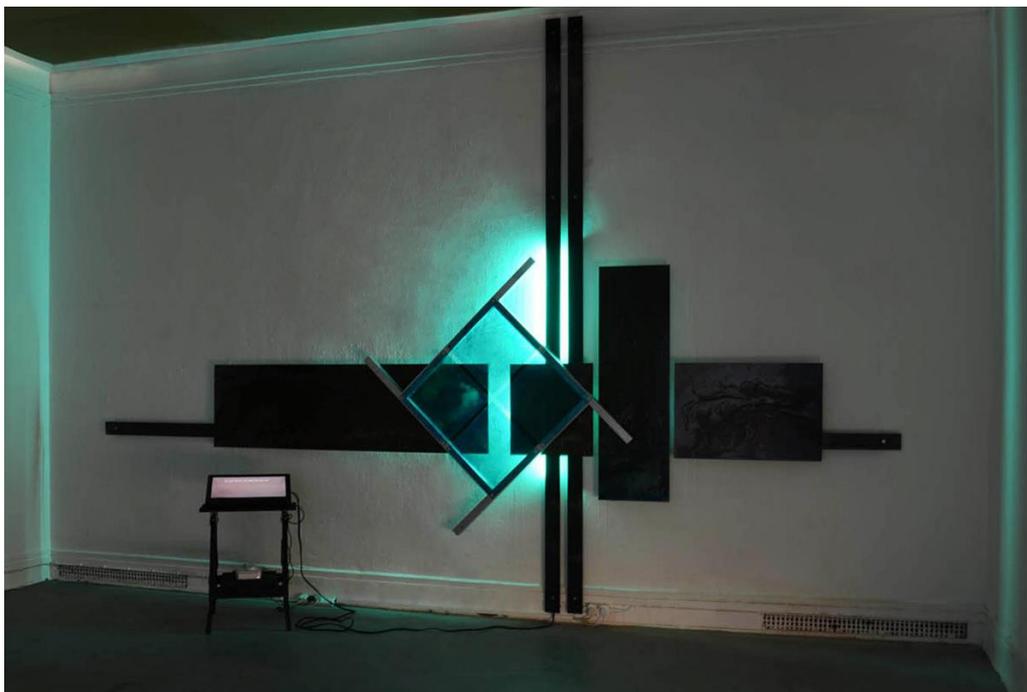
Tears for Andromeda, 2012

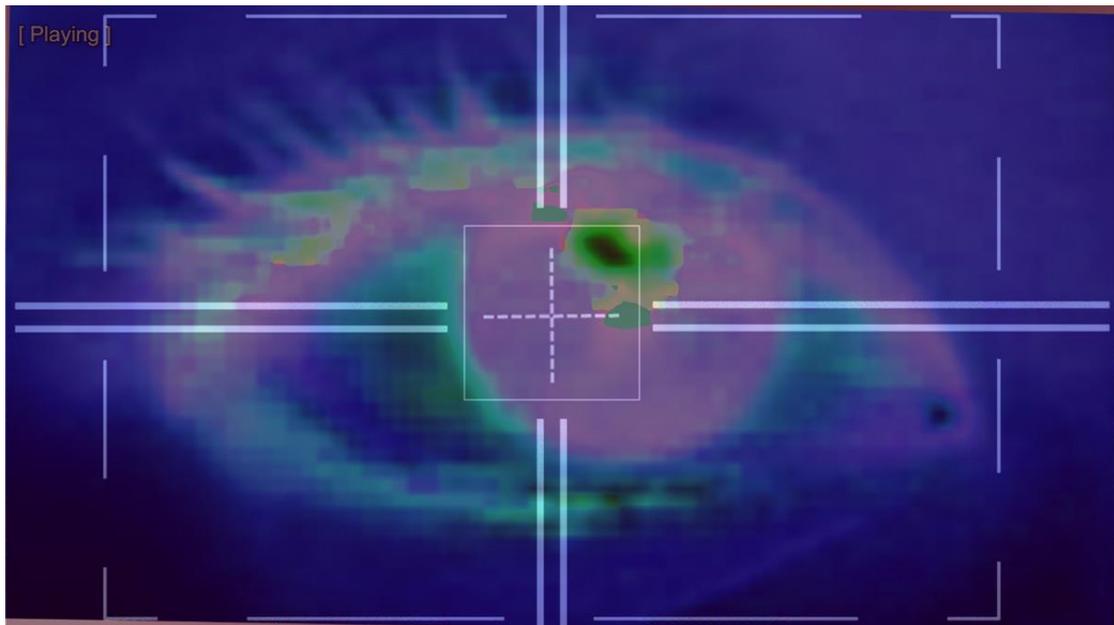
Oil on steel and aluminum, illuminated lucite, video monitor.

The association with sacrifice with redemption could be seen as almost proto-comedic within the appropriated paradigm of Attic drama. That the desire for

utopia is a 'love story' perhaps finds its initial form in what can be reconstructed from the fragments we have of the lost dramatic treatment of Sophocles' and Euripides' lost tragedies of the *Andromeda*. The installation *Tears for Andromeda* was an attempt to revisualise this longing for redemption or rescue that characterises the Andromeda story and an example of this process of inter-semiotic transposition, highlighting the interpretive, translational decisions involved in recasting an ancient narrative. The process of developing *Tears for Andromeda* was representative of a broader interdisciplinary research methodology that posits the transposition of a foundational narrative as a *visual thesis* to demonstrate the potential for art to function as social critique.

Unlike *All These Worlds Are Yours*, the text elements are not integrated into the wall-mounted construction but rather function as a sort of 'disembodied readout' connected to the central physical structure only by a (totally non-functional) set of cables. The text itself, again relayed as a Defense Department transmission is an adaptation of various surviving fragments of Euripides' late tragedy, where she laments her fate, chained against the sea-battered rocks as a sacrificial victim to save her fellow citizens. Her pleas to the Sirens, who she implores to mourn for her, is selectively punctuated with the words of Perseus, her eventual rescuer, as he mistakes Andromeda at first for a statue made of glistening marble, a work of art, and is transfixed by her beauty.





Excuse of the Nightingale, 2012

Digital video (15:03)

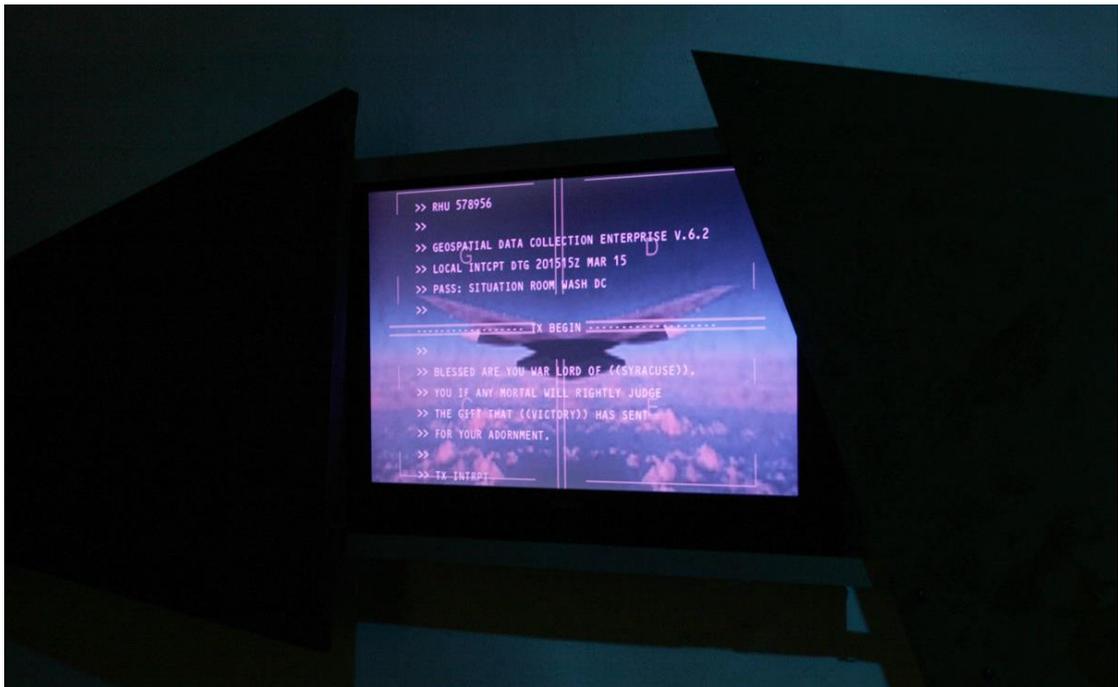
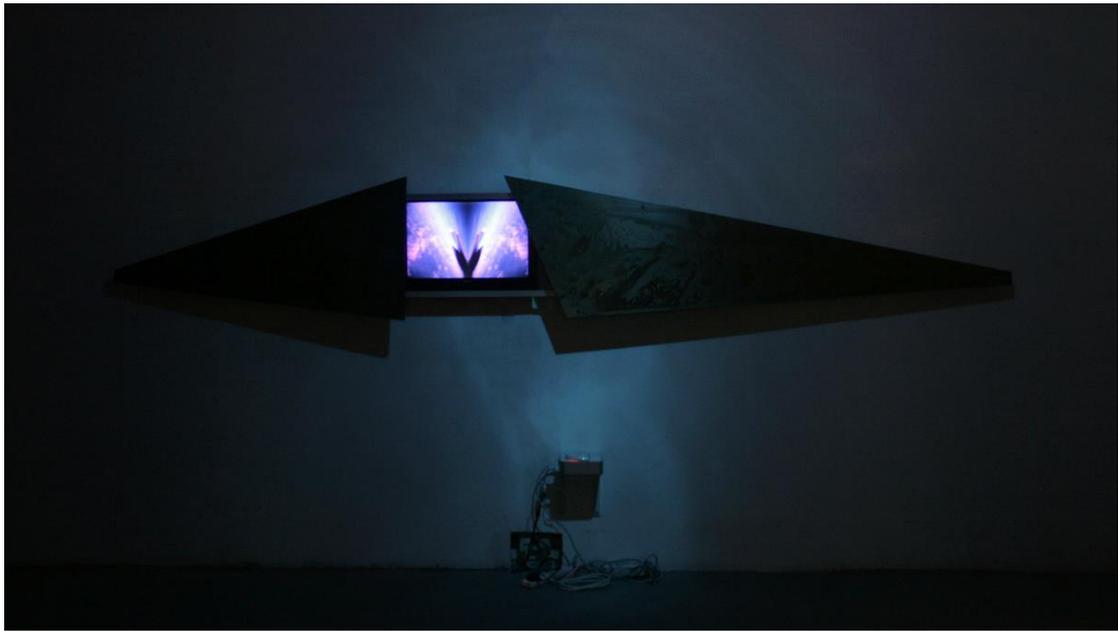
Digital audio/video with production editing and cinematography by Afghan filmmakers Samiullah Nabizadah and Siyar Noorzad as part of an installation *The Situation Room*, recreating a notional 'crisis action centre' in Kabul Afghanistan, July 2012. The film incorporates narrative adaptations from the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab in the 10th century epic poem the *Shahnameh* and from the poem *The Conference of the Birds* by 12th century Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar. In the

intersection of narratives, where a mother (implied in the film to be Rostam's abandoned wife, Tahmina) relays to her son (presumably Sohrab) the story of the 'nightingale's excuse' from Attar's poem as an allegory of the futility of earthly love. This is interspersed with images of the wandering, war-weary Rostam expressing his desire to be reunited with his family and his exhaustion after a lifetime of conflict. The film is also situated within the context of a notional surveillance mechanism termed the 'Geospatial Data Collection Enterprise' (utilised in *Tears for Andromeda*) suggesting to the viewer that the film is the output of some type of remote monitoring or observation.

With the agreement of the Ministry of Interior of Afghanistan the installation was viewed collectively by senior staff of the Ministry to include the Deputy Minister of Interior for Strategy and Policy and several general officers in July 2012. Participants catalogued their observations in provided computer workstations. Following the screening of the film, the observations were reviewed and a discussion held with Ministry officers about their interpretations. Many of the participants expressed the view that the film was symbolic of the country's fatigue with conflict and the need for a greater collective enlightenment. The discussion also raised issues of the Ministry's role in securing the space for such an awakening as well as the role of the arts, and the Persian literary tradition, in facilitating socio-political renewal.

The film was Re-screened at the *Making Sense IV* symposium presentation "Through the Eyes of the Other - Developing *The Situation Room*", Cite Universitaire, Paris and for the European Arts Research Network (EARN) colloquia, dOCUMENTA(13), Kassel, Germany 2012.





Victory No. Five, 2013

Oil on steel and aluminum, video monitor.

Multimedia installation with integrated video incorporating text adapted from Pindar's *Victory Ode No. 5*. Installed at Slade Woburn Research Centre, London, PhD Open Studios, 2013

```
>>
>> BLESSED IS THE MAN
>> TO WHOM THE GODS HAVE GRANTED
>> GREAT ACHIEVEMENT AND ENVIABLE
>> FORTUNE AS NO MORTAL
>> IS FORTUNATE IN ALL THINGS.
>>
>> TX INTRPT
>> TX RESUME
>>
>> FOR HARD HEARTED ((ARES)) DOES NOT DISTINGUISH
>> A FRIEND IN BATTLE AND BRINGS DEATH
>> FOR WHOM IT IS
>> THE WILL OF THE GODS.
```



Dolours of the Vanquished, 2013

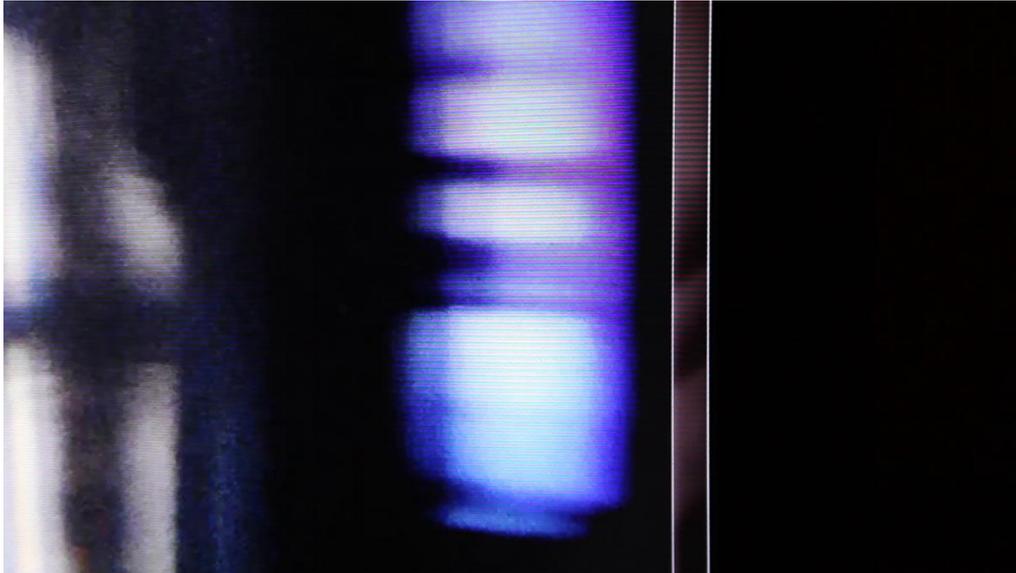
Digital audio/video (13:12)

Digital audio/video and performative interpretation of Aeschylus' *Persae* with footage shot in Athens and Bactria (Balkh Province, Afghanistan) in collaboration with Áine O'Dwyer and SYREN Modern Dance, New York. Production editing by Marianna Simnett and additional cinematography from Samiullah Nabizadah and Janne Malmros. Screened/performed at the *Making Sense V* Symposium, Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, July 2013.

The principal motivation in adapting the content of Aeschylus' the *Persae* is its unique position in the extant canon of Attic Tragedy in exploring the socio-cultural experience of 'the tragic' through the eyes of the 'historical Other'. While, as Froma Zeitlin has brought to light, 'Thebes' could take on a similar role for transmitting Athenian projections of otherness in the mythical dimension (as in *Seven against Thebes* or the Oedipus trilogy), *Persae* directly engages with the historical subject of the Persians defeat at Salamis in 480BCE, an actual event which turned the tide of the Persian wars and secured the Greek city states' victory over the existential threat the oriental invaders posed.

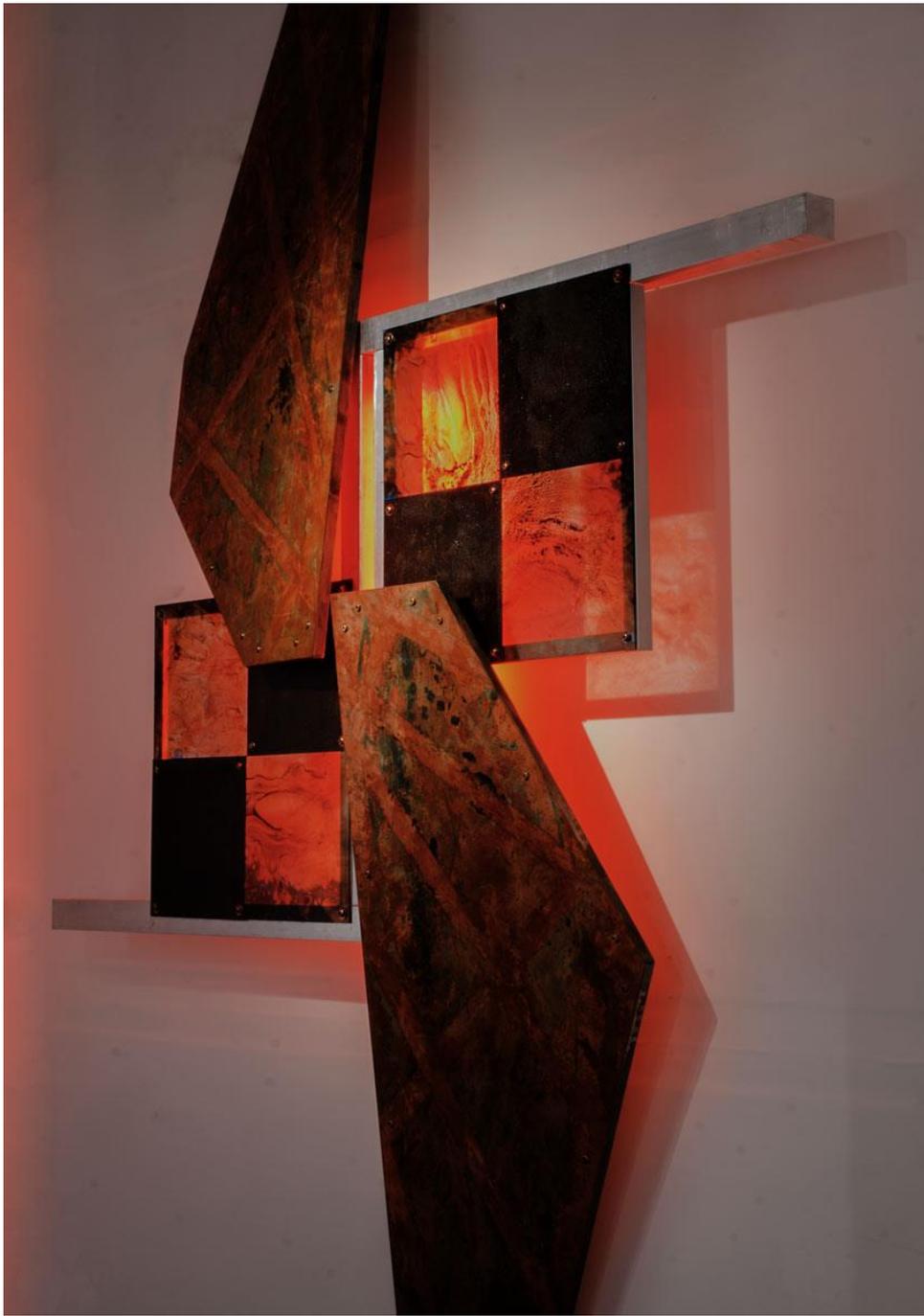
While Aeschylus, with Queen Atossa being the figure around which the chorus and other principal characters engage, creates an optic through which we can view the tragedy of defeat through Persian eyes, it would be inaccurate to say the portrait is entirely sympathetic. The *Persae* carries with it the prejudices and stereotypes

which represented the Greek view of the Persian barbarian as predisposed to uncontrolled emotions, excessively decadent, and representative of undemocratic governance. *Persae* carried with it an ideological agenda by presenting their defeat as a result of these cultural failings. To a significant degree the drama is one of the earliest expressions of prejudicial distinctions that still take shape in our present day.



In the context of the internal social struggles which are taking place within the contemporary sphere of 'Persian' influence (to include Iran and Afghanistan) those features which place the 'oriental' consciousness in sharp relief that of the West have also become the source of interior reflection in Persian speaking lands themselves as movements towards greater democratic consolidation and political self-determination emerge. So despite the cultural myopia of its specifically Athenian perspective, the *Persae* provides an interesting springboard from which to explore thematic territory that may speak to a contemporary soul searching which, ironically, may be of a more universal character.

Atossa as the central figure of the Queen brings a distinctly feminine character to the proceedings, and her lamentations over her fallen subjects bring to mind the despair of a mother grieving for lost children, and by extension a sense of love lost. That failed love can be used as a metaphor for failed political aspiration is a theme that *Dolours of the Vanquished* attempted to explore, coupled with the spectre of death as a vehicle for reconciliation. By similar extension, the conflation of these themes of failed promise and love can represent the current struggle in the Eastern tradition with the issues of individual self-determination and modernity.



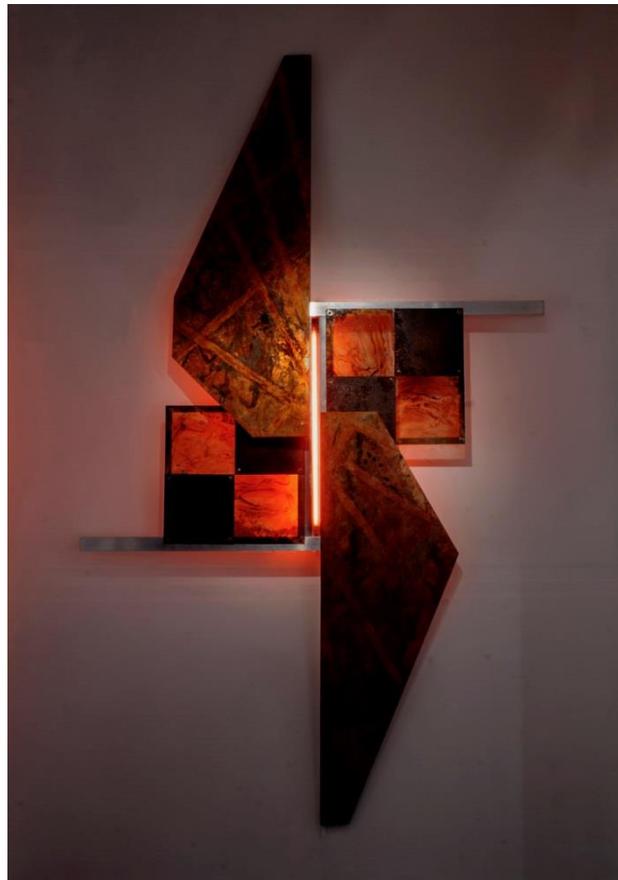
The Address of Failure, 2013

Oil on steel, aluminum and copper. 290 x 150cm

Installed at the group exhibition *signal::failure - Variations on Dystopic Space*, curated by Michael Delacruz, Legion TV, London, 2013. The exhibition explored alternative visual representations of 'affirmative' or 'benign' dystopia and the relevance of tragedy as a model for aesthetic reconciliation between utopian aspiration and its countervailing, dystopic side effects. The exhibiting artists examined the

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multifaceted nature of *dystopic space* through a range of visual vocabularies - representational, metaphorical, and abstract. It was an exploratory exercise in the relationship between the modalities of disenchantment or systemic distortion associated with the myth of progress and the creative approaches used to engage with them. The Address of Failure was largely formalist effort to apply the industrial materials and techniques developed over the preceding years in conjunction with a sharply constructivist composition to evoke the duality between progress and failure. The exhibition was accompanied by a corresponding publication.





Loud Love, 2014

Oil on canvas, panel and copper. 200 x 295 cm

Loud Love represents a deliberate return to ‘flat panel’, two-dimensional painting, as well as to the ‘symbolically-mediated’ approach of the pre-Slade work, and also incorporating classical references principally from statuary. Exhibited in 2014 in *Loud Love: Recent Reflections on Antiquity* which also included concept studies for the large-scale work in addition to work developed from an artistic and academic research residency at the British School at Athens in July 2014.



East Pediment (Concept Study for Loud Love), 2012 - 2014

Oil, encaustic, and polyurethane on wood panel and copper; Triptych, 40 x 60 cm



Installation view of *Loud Love* and *East Pediment*, 2014



The Lamentation of Ajax, 2015

Oil on copper, aluminium and steel and illuminated plexiglass.
295 x 450 cm

Lamentation of Ajax, coupled with the small companion piece *Death of Pentheus* were installed at the North Lodge, University College London in June of 2015 on the occasion of the Slade MA/MFA/MPhil/PhD 2016 Degree Show. It represented the culmination of the ‘visual thesis’ component of the research project entitled *Unveiling the Invisible Wound – The Relevance of Tragedy in the Public Sphere* conducted under the PhD programme at the Slade School of Fine Art, London from 2008 – 2015 with co-supervision by the UCL Department of Greek and Latin.

As a whole, the project explored the transposition of tragic narrative from early Attic drama into the realm of contemporary art, particularly in addressing issues of armed conflict and its cost at individual and collective levels. *Lamentation* evokes the psychological state of Ajax the Greater, hero of the Trojan War, prior to his suicide and in the wake of his dishonour at the loss of the contest for the arms of Achilles and subsequent mental breakdown. Incorporating adapted verses from Sophocles’ play *Ajax*, it transposes these lyricised sentiments from antiquity into a pastiche of U.S. military ‘message speak’ suggesting a potential relation between the classical past and present day concerns. It is largely a reflection on the timeless condition of

the warrior as, in the words of anthropologist Pierre Clastres, a 'being-unto-death'.



Installation views of *Lamentation of Ajax*, 2015

The smaller work, *Death of Pentheus* (2015), references the fate of the mythical

Appendix

Theban king who, in Euripides' telling in the *Bacchae*, is torn apart by his mother and her sisters, having angered the god Dionysos. It is representative of recent efforts to employ themes from Attic tragedy often with oblique appropriations of figurative statuary from the classical period.



Death of Pentheus, 2015

Oil, acrylic, and polyurethane on wood panel and copper; Triptych, 40 x 80 cm