

Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aeschylus

Edited by

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Contents

Acknowledgements	IX
List of Figures	x
List of Abbreviations	XII
Author Biographies	XIII

Introduction: The Reception of Aeschylus	1
<i>Rebecca Futo Kennedy</i>	

PART 1

Pre-Modern Receptions

1 The Reception of Aeschylus in Sicily	9
<i>David G. Smith</i>	
2 The Comedians' Aeschylus	54
<i>David Rosenbloom</i>	
3 Aristotle's Reception of Aeschylus: Reserved Without Malice	88
<i>Dana LaCourse Munteanu</i>	
4 Aeschylus in the Hellenistic Period	109
<i>Sebastiana Nervegna</i>	
5 Aeschylus in the Roman Empire	129
<i>George W. M. Harrison</i>	
6 Aeschylus in Byzantium	179
<i>Christos Simelidis</i>	

PART 2

Modern Receptions

7 Aeschylus and Opera	205
<i>Michael Ewans</i>	
8 Aeschylus in Germany	225
<i>Theodore Ziolkowski</i>	

- 9 **Inglorious Barbarians: Court Intrigue and Military Disaster Strike Xerxes, “The Sick Man of Europe”** 243
Gonda Van Steen
- 10 **Transtextual Transformations of *Prometheus Bound* in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*: Prometheus’ Gifts to Humankind** 270
Fabien Desset
- 11 **Aeschylus and *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley** 292
Ana González-Rivas Fernández
- 12 **An Aeschylean Waterloo: Responding to War from the *Oresteia* to *Vanity Fair*** 323
Barbara Witucki
- 13 **Form and Money in Wagner’s *Ring* and Aeschylean Tragedy** 348
Richard Seaford
- 14 ***Eumenides* and *Newmenides*: Academic Furies in Edwardian Cambridge** 362
Patrick J. Murphy and Fredrick Porcheddu
- 15 **The Broadhead Hypothesis: Did Aeschylus Perform Word Repetition in *Persians*?** 381
Stratos E. Constantinidis
- 16 ***Persians* On French Television: An Opera-Oratorio Echoing the Algerian War** 408
Gabriel Sevilla
- 17 **Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* on British Television** 430
Amanda Wrigley
- 18 **Orestes On Trial in Africa: Pasolini’s *Appunti per un’ Orestiade Africana* and Sissako’s *Bamako*** 455
Tom Hawkins
- 19 **Reception of the Plays of Aeschylus in South Africa** 474
Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.

- 20 **In Search of Prometheus: Aeschylean Wanderings in Latin America** 488
Jacques A. Bromberg
- 21 **Avatars of Aeschylus: O'Neill to Herzog/Golder** 509
Marianne McDonald
- 22 **The Overlooked οἰκονομία of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*** 528
Geoffrey Bakewell
- 23 **"Now Harkonnen Shall Kill Harkonnen": Aeschylus, Dynastic Violence, and Twofold Tragedies in Frank Herbert's *Dune*** 553
Brett M. Rogers
- 24 **"Save Our City": The Curious Absence of Aeschylus in Modern Political Thought** 582
Arlene W. Saxonhouse
- 25 **Political Theory in Aeschylean Drama: Ancient Themes and their Contemporary Reception** 603
Larissa Atkison and Ryan K. Balot
- Index** 625

Orestes on Trial in Africa: Pasolini's *Appunti per un' Orestiade Africana* and Sissako's *Bamako*

Tom Hawkins

Introduction

Africaisntacountry.com and africaisacountry.com, despite the apparent contradiction in their names, are both websites dedicated to challenging the lingering colonial habit of referring to Africa as if it were a unified whole rather than a diverse assemblage of nations. Such homogenizing language creates a variety of problems, among the worst of which is the effective denial of the independence movements that transferred political control of African countries away from European colonial powers throughout the 20th century.¹ The question of continent vs. nations seems to present an ethical crux rooted in recognizing or denying the cultural uniqueness of African sub-groups, yet both continents and national borders are human constructs. Other geographical features may provide more natural, objective organizing principles (such as the Mediterranean basin, the Pacific Rim, sub-Saharan Africa, or the American West) or super-structures (such as the Eurasian landmass that spans two continents and a sub-continent or the Thermohaline Circulation system of the oceans). The emphasis on national identities and boundaries not only derives from a specific political framework, but also privileges the political organization of Africa that was established primarily by European colonial powers. In some cases, the ill-fit between national boundaries and tribal, ethnic, or religious fault-lines has added to the complexities of navigating post-colonial independence.

In this chapter I analyze two films that perpetuate the image of Africa as a unified whole, though they do this, I suggest, in ways that do not fit the simple model of persistent colonial habits decried by the websites mentioned above. Both films also adapt Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, with a particular emphasis on the

1 Excepting Liberia, which was newly established as an independent country in 1847, the majority of African countries gained independence between 1910 and 1980 when South Africa and Zimbabwe, respectively, gained their independence from Britain. Namibia and Eritrea gained their independence from other African nations (South Africa and Ethiopia) in the 1990s

themes of *Eumenides*. Pier Palo Pasolini's *Appunti per un' Orestiade africana* ("Notes on an African *Oresteia*") is a thorough-going Aeschylean project, though by presenting itself as a series of notes (*appunti*), it also frustrates expectations that it might be an adaptation in any straightforward way. In addition to moving from the medium of theater to that of film, Pasolini's title declares a generic shift toward a disjointed, un-unified, and un-finalized style of presentation. Abderrhamane Sissako's *Bamako*, on the other hand, makes no open declaration of any reliance on Aeschylus—and I readily admit that the reception of Aeschylus may be a matter of my understanding of the film rather than any directorial intention—, but its overlay of a simple story of a family's disintegration with a surreal courtroom drama brings the motifs of the *Oresteia*'s first two episodes into closer engagement with the trilogy's conclusion than could be imagined on the ancient Athenian stage.²

My argument is that both Pasolini and Sissako use the image of a unified Africa as a means of resisting the history of the Western-style nation-state in hopes of reframing "The African Question" not so much as a matter of various states striving to attain the stability and legitimacy of the former colonial powers, but rather of seeing the entire region as engaged in a process (perhaps as a series of parallel processes) in which globalization seems to hold out the promise of allowing Africa to move into a wholly new era of political history.³ Whereas Pasolini is bullish and projects an optimism that the colonial period of African history can give way to a de-colonialized, democratic neo-capitalism, Sissako clearly laments that assurances of post-colonial amelioration have slouched into fiscal neo-colonialism from which Africa (*tout court*) can expect no help from the West. In both films, the Aeschylean trial of Orestes looms large. Pasolini sees in it the model of an anthropological paradigm shift that brought ancient Athens out of primitivism and into a modernity of its own shaping—a wholesale transformation of society that parallels the social

2 Harrow 2013, 195 describes the trial "as a kind of dream that permits the unheard voices and unseen events of the past crimes to be evoked ..."

3 The African Question, as it is articulated by African intellectuals, is the challenge of bringing African nations to a new level of prosperity and stability. This is often discussed in terms of narrative control. Thabo Mbeki, in a lecture delivered at the University of South Africa in 2013, put it this way, in reference to pre-election propaganda in Zimbabwe earlier that year that pre-emptively lamented the possibility of electoral corruption: "this is very worrying because what it means is that we, as Africans, don't know enough about ourselves and continue to be enslaved by a narrative about ourselves [African corruption that leads to electoral unreliability] told by other people." Mbeki's lecture is reprinted in the online journal *New Africa* (Sept. 18, 2013). Chinua Achebe, in an interview in the *Paris Review* (Winter 1994, no. 133) made a similar point in more evocative terms: "... until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

upheaval of newly independent African nations—a transformation that these nations can navigate well or badly. For Sissako, however, such empowered readings of Orestes' trial have no place on African soil, and his adaptation of these Aeschylean themes leads to a debunking of the rhetoric and mythology of Western-style global prosperity.⁴

Pasolini's Decolonialized Neocapitalism

In 1969, Pasolini spent several weeks filming in Tanzania and Uganda, which had gained their independence from Britain in 1961 and 1962, respectively. His *Appunti*, released in 1970, but not publicly screened until 1973, presents the viewer with a strange experience that may most closely resemble a documentary, though Pasolini himself resists this label.⁵ In the opening shot, we hear Pasolini's voice and see his reflection as he stands outside the window of a bookstore. He says: "I chose, for Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, an African nation which seemed typical to me.⁶ A socialist nation with pro-Chinese tendencies, as you can see. But this choice is not yet definitive, because as well as the attraction to China, there is another, no less fascinating attraction: America. Or, to put it better, neocapitalism."⁷ His camera reiterates this contrast as it focuses first on a man offering pamphlets about China and featuring a picture of Mao and then cuts to a shot of the sign outside the African American Institute followed

4 Pasolini's grand and sweeping reading of the *Oresteia* is also out of step with some trends in contemporary classical scholarship. For a quick overview of the pitfalls of understanding *Eumenides* as a triumphalist hymn to Athenian democracy and progress, see Goldhill 1997, 137–9; Decreus 2000 surveys critiques of Eurocentrism in scholarship on the trilogy.

5 As Pasolini takes up the genre of the production in his narration of the opening scene, he says: "I have come to film, but to film what? Not a documentary or a film. I have come to film notes for a film. This film would be the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, filmed in the Africa of today, in modern Africa." (Pasolini 2001, 1177: "Sono venuto evidentemente a girare, ma a girare che cosa? Non un documentario, non un film, sono venuto a girare degli appunti per un film: questo film sarebbe l'*Orestide* di Eschilo, da girarsi nell' Africa di oggi, nell' Africa moderna"). For quotations from the film, I have lightly adapted the published English subtitles (e.g. replacing the awkward "philo-Chinese" with "pro-Chinese"). The Italian screenplay can be found in Pasolini 2001, 1177–204.

6 He does not make it clear at this point that we are in Dar es Salaam.

7 Pasolini 2001, 1177: "Ho scelto per l'*Orestide* di Eschilo una nazione Africana che mi sembra tipica, una nazione socialista a tendenze, come vedete, filo-cinesi, ma la cui scelta non è ancora evidentemente definitiva, perché accanto all'attrattiva cinese c'è un'altra attrattiva non meno affascinante: l'americana, o per meglio dire neocapitalista."

by images of household appliances lined up and displayed for sale. This initial sequence soon fades as Pasolini leads us in new directions, but it provides the modern point of reference upon which his entire understanding of Aeschylus and his own cinematographic project depends: namely Pasolini's vision of the opportunity for African nations, at the moment of leaving behind their "primitive" and "tribal" past, to embrace socialism and reject what he sees as the soulless consumerism of capitalism.

After this brief opening, the first extended sequence meanders through various locations—arable fields, the markets and schools in Kigoma, and a factory in Dar es Salaam—while Pasolini comments on the people, social spaces, and natural vistas he encounters. He lingers on faces and comments on the viability of casting the people he meets in the roles of Aeschylus' plays.⁸ He intersperses readings from his own translation of Aeschylus' trilogy and musings on anthropology and politics. Although he does not seem to have had any intention of directing a straight-forward Aeschylean adaptation in Africa, "he auditions the continent for a non-professional cast and location for his would-be production."⁹ This is made most obvious in his aspirations to have the people of Africa play the part of a protagonist-chorus. His Marxist interest in workers and students seems at times to deemphasize the individuals whom he encounters in favor of the overwhelming ambiance of his travels: he finds several Agamemnons, each of whom would do well enough; Orestes can be found in virtually any young male student in modern attire; there are no Electras whatsoever, since African women are simply too blithe, and "it seems as if they don't know how to do anything but laugh,"¹⁰ which thus disqualifies them from fulfilling this angry and obsessive role; and at one point, captivated by the very landscape itself, he suggests that a stand of trees could take on the role of the Furies.

Having thus dealt with matters of casting, the scene next shifts to Rome, where Pasolini (now in front of the camera moderating a discussion, rather than behind it) interviews a group of African students studying at the University of Rome. He begins by explaining his reasons for undertaking his Aeschylean project:

8 In several cases, we can clearly see that Pasolini is filming people speak, but he never allows their voices to be heard. This strong directorial control effectively silences his 'cast' and ensures that we only hear his voice, his version of what Aeschylus' narrative can mean in an African context.

9 Usher 2014, 113. Pasolini's murder in 1975 cut his career short, leaving it at least conceivable that these *Notes* were truly a precursor to another project.

10 Pasolini 2001, 1178: "Pare che non sappiano fare altro che ridere ..."

The profound essential reason is this: I feel I can recognize some analogies between the situation of the *Oresteia* and the situation of Africa today, especially concerning the transformation of the Furies, the Erinyes, into the Eumenides. In other words, I mean that the tribal civilization seems to me to resemble archaic Greek civilization, and Orestes' discovery of democracy, carrying it then into his country, which could be Argos in the tragedy and Africa in my film, is in a sense the discovery of democracy that Africa has also made in these last few years.¹¹

This preamble prompts his first question for the students: whether his project should be set in contemporary Africa (of the late 60s) or if it would be better suited to the 1950s. It is completely appropriate for a director to be concerned with such matters, but in light of how he introduced the conversation, it is hard not to suspect that Pasolini believes he has pinpointed an epoch-changing shift and is trying to determine as accurately as possible the precise moment when primitive tribal Africa gave way to its modern and democratic offspring. The first student to respond engages directly with Pasolini's question, but the second, an Ethiopian-speaking Italian and wearing a pale turtleneck, resists the director's claim to be speaking about all of Africa: "Africa is not a nation; it is a continent."¹² And the third student, who speaks in French and who turns Pasolini's formula around by reminding him that no one would speak of Italy as a unified whole in a discussion involving only the people of Cagliari, warns about the pitfalls of focusing too much on African tribalism, and he asserts the heuristic value of looking at race rather than tribes. Pasolini responds by reasserting the importance of his tribal focus, since the borders of African nations were drawn by the "European masters."¹³ It is at this point that he puts

11 Pasolini 2001, 1181: "La ragione essenziale, profonda, è questa: che mi sembra di riconoscere delle analogie fra la situazione dell'*Orestide* e quella dell'Africa di oggi, soprattutto dal punto di vista della trasformazione delle Erinni in Eumenidi. Cioè, mi sembra che la civiltà tribale Africana assomigli alla civiltà arcaica greca. E la scoperta che fa Oreste della democrazia, portandola poi nel suo paese, che sarebbe Argos nella tragedia e l'Africa nel mio film, è, in un certo senso—diciamo così—, la scoperta della democrazia che ha fatto l'Africa in questi ultimi anni." Pasolini's reading of Aeschylus here closely parallels that of Thompson 1941, who comments that *Eumenides* depicts Athena "leading mankind from barbarism to civilization" (264) and "the growth of law through successive stages of social evolution" (269). Such an interpretation may not fit current scholarly trends among classicists, but Usher 2014 has demonstrated how influential Thompson's book and his progressivist perspective was on Pasolini.

12 Pasolini 2001, 1181: "L'Africa ... non è una nazione, ma è un continente."

13 Pasolini 2001, 1182: "padroni europei."

forward his notion of “formal democracy,”¹⁴ which is symbolized in ancient Athens at the trial of Orestes by the first ever court of humans and which has become the reality for African nations due to the process of de-colonialization. This formal democracy now needs to be infused with some real political substance—the choice between Chinese socialism and American neo-capitalism he had set out in the opening sequence. This panel of the film closes with two students expressing their doubts about the validity of Pasolini’s project. Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* just doesn’t seem to have much to do with the realities of modern Africa, they claim.¹⁵ It is a strange and wonderful twist that Pasolini chose to keep the footage from this interview, since the majority of it is strikingly critical.¹⁶

Pasolini next presents the general contours of the *Oresteia* in a series of differently styled “notes.” He sets the scene by finding someone to play the part of the Watchman who opens *Agamemnon* and by reading the Aeschylean description of the signal fires announcing the fall of Troy while his camera focuses on burning fields. Next comes a flashback to the Trojan War itself, where newsreel footage of the Biafran War represents the events around Troy (surprisingly with Thersites in charge of training the Greek troops).¹⁷ These “searingly direct images”¹⁸ are sparsely narrated and present a graphic and moving expression of the human cost of war. Pasolini justifies the aesthetically discordant juxtaposition of Greek mythological narratives and modern war footage with the claim that “suffering, death, mourning, tragedy are eternal,”¹⁹ and this synchronic perspective allows him to see the situation of contemporary Africa as repeating a timeless moment of cultural development that parallels the alleged anthropological importance of Aeschylus’ tale. He then interrupts this

14 Pasolini 2001, 1183: “la democrazia formale” as opposed to “la reale democrazia” (original emphasis).

15 Wetmore 2003, 32 makes a similar point: “In seeking to construct the *Oresteia* in terms of Africa, he [Pasolini] ultimately constructs Africa in terms of the *Oresteia*.”

16 Greene 2012, 221 notes several formal aspects of this scene, such as Pasolini’s body being only partially visible, that suggest a deliberate awkwardness: “This interview method not only places both Pasolini and the students in a physically estranged position in relation to each other, but the interview amounts to the author attempting to place into quotations the comments of the African students.”

17 The Biafran War (1967–1970) was a Nigerian civil war precipitated by the attempted secession of the Biafran region of southern Nigeria. The war, infamous for the Igbo genocide, ended with Nigerian forces, with strong British support, suppressing the Biafran rebels.

18 Pasolini 2001, 1185: “immagini brucianti di attualità ...”

19 Pasolini 2001, 1185: “... il dolore, la morte, il lutto, la tragedia, sono elementi eterni ...”

train of thought with “a sudden idea”²⁰ of presenting the *Oresteia* through the idiom of free jazz. With brief introduction, he sets up Cassandra’s scene, which plays out as a wild and improvisational musical experiment that captures the mad prophetess’ ecstatic incomprehensibility beautifully, particularly in the atonal interactions between the vocal lines and Gato Barbieri’s wailing saxophone. The long shot of the musicians playing in an otherwise deserted club eventually fades and we watch more news footage of a man, blindfolded and tied to a tree, being executed by firing squad—a grim and understated moment that stands for the killing of Agamemnon.

The next “note,” with the jazz still lingering in the background, shows how Pasolini would depict Electra’s arrival at her father’s grave, as he gets a family to show how they bring offerings to the grave of a relative. Without any stark visual transition (although the jazz begins anew), Pasolini announces that the next ‘note’ (which seems to be a continuation of what precedes) is shot “as if it were the real scene of my film”²¹ and depicts Orestes’ arrival at Agamemnon’s grave. Interestingly, no “note” represents the killing of Clytemnestra, and we jump to Orestes being hounded by the Furies, shown as a tempestuous wind among the trees and a fevered pitch of jazz abstraction.

With the *Libation Bearers* so quickly concluded, Orestes approaches the University of Dar es Salaam, which serves as the Delphic Temple of Apollo.²² This turn to *Eumenides* also brings back the themes of the film’s opening moments. Pasolini describes the university as indicative of the contradictions of modern African nations. A plaque outside the bookstore reads: “This building was built with a grant from the people and the government of the People’s Republic of China,” but the books on display show “the neocapitalist Anglo-Saxon alternative”²³ (including a close-up of Julius Nyerere’s Swahili translation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*). This alternative is universalized as part of the African experience through Pasolini’s decision to represent the Athens of *Eumenides* with a *mélange* of shots from Kampala, Kigoma, and Dar es Salaam. He sets up the trial scene at the courthouse of Dar es Salaam, with Soviet workers’ songs now playing behind his narration, as a specific moment with “the first lessons of history ... imaginatively depicted by the first lessons

20 Pasolini 2001, 1185: “un’improvvisa idea.”

21 Pasolini 2001, 1188: “come se fosse la scena reale del mio film.”

22 I briefly address Pasolini’s elision of the maternal role in the concluding section of this chapter.

23 Pasolini 2001, 1190: “l’alternativa ... neocapitalista e anglo-sassone.”

of independent Africa.”²⁴ Again, his perception of synchronic sympathies between archaic Greece and decolonized Africa allows him to imagine a tectonic cultural shift undertaken by all African nations that can lead to a great new era of African history.

Literalizing this general historical principle, the film cuts back to the students in Rome, as Pasolini asks them if they each perceive themselves to be an Orestes figure. Again, some accept the parallel, while others resist the premise of the question. Undeterred, Pasolini asserts the grandest expression of the hopes he takes from *Eumenides*. It is not simply that Africa repeats the transition of ancient Athens, but that these modern manifestations of Orestes can live up to the greatness of their ancient counterpart by eschewing the pitfalls of capitalism and ushering in a new and better era for all of Africa. Perhaps, he suggests, “the way to keep from being alienated in the consumer civilization of the modern West might also be given him [Orestes] by the very fact that he *is* African. He could thus oppose to the Western way of knowledge an original spirit of his own which would keep the things he learns from being mere notions for consumption and make them real personal ideas.”²⁵ With this hope in mind, Pasolini takes us back to Africa one last time, where he claims that the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides can be found in the persistence of “ancient,” “magical” practices into this new era of rationality.²⁶ A Wagogo dance that he claims had been celebrated with seriousness and “precise meaning” in the past is now enacted with gay exuberance;²⁷ and a wedding celebration in Dodoma features traditional roles, garb, and songs while also including contemporary, virtually European elements as well.²⁸ As the Furies

24 Pasolini 2001, 191: “Le prime elezioni della storia ... rappresentate fantasticamente dalle prime elezioni dell’Africa indipendente.”

25 Pasolini 2001, 193: “... il modo di non lasciarsi alienare nella civiltà dei consumi della civiltà occidentale moderna potrebbe essergli anche fornito dal fatto di essere, appunto, africano, cioè di opporre al modo di conoscenza occidentale un suo animo originale che fa sì che le cose che egli apprende non diventino nozioni consumistiche, ma siano nozioni personali, reali.” Pasolini’s vision here contains a paradox in that he essentially hopes that Africa’s primitive spirit will help it avoid the shortcomings of Western capitalism, yet he also sees the process of decolonization as a move toward rationality that undermines any such primitive spirit (a point also made by Greene 2012, 220). His understanding of the power of the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides, therefore, rests on a razor’s edge.

26 Pasolini 2001, 195: “magico” ... “antico.”

27 Pasolini 2001, 194: “significati precisi.”

28 It is “a party similar to those in Europe.” Pasolini 2001, 196: “... una festa simile a quelle europee.”

transformed find a home in the new Athens where judicial deliberation has replaced cycles of revenge, so too does the ancient magic of Africa endure in the form of tradition in the independent, decolonized African nations.

“But how to conclude? Well, the ultimate conclusion doesn’t exist, it’s suspended.”²⁹ Pasolini knows that his film will be dated, that the future emerges seamlessly from an inchoate present, yet his optimism in this project is virtually boundless. His understanding of the *Oresteia* as reflective of an anthropological progression in human culture that can be exported to the juncture of African independence suggests a bright future for the emerging African nations. His Marxist frustrations with the consumerism of the capitalist West lead him to hope that with the corrective influence of Africa’s recent, “primitive,” anti-capitalist past, the “formal democracy” afforded by independence can propel Africa to new heights of cultural achievement that will eclipse European models.

Sissako’s Capitalist Neocolonialism

Abderrehamane Sissako was born in 1961 in Mauritania, though he spent much of his early life in Mali before training as a director in Moscow. His *Bamako* (2006) is set in Mali’s capital and, more specifically, in the courtyard of the very home where he lived for many years in downtown Bamako. Like Pasolini’s *Appunti*, this film defies easy categorization, though, whereas Pasolini directly controls his film through his omnipresent narratorial voice, Sissako presents a more collaborative project, in which he gave his actors (a mixed cast of activists, amateurs, and professional actors) only general guidance and encouraged them to research and develop their speaking parts as they saw fit. Overall, the film can perhaps best be described as the simultaneous overlay of two stories. One is an understated family melodrama, which follows the disintegration of the relationship between Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré, who has a PhD in transportation engineering and formerly served as the secretary of the Mali railway workers union) and Melé (Aïssa Maïga, a professional actor), who live together with their daughter, Ina, in the film’s central home. The other is a surreal trial, enacted in the courtyard, in which Africa, as a unified continent, sues the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization for their fiscal policies involving Africa. Melé, who works as a nightclub singer, never shows any sign of noticing the bustling trial taking place in front of her home, though Chaka pays careful attention to these legal

29 Pasolini 2001, 1196: “Ma come concludere? Ebbene, la conclusion ultima non c’è, è sospesa.”

proceedings throughout. This leads me to suspect that the trial is the mental projection of Chaka's personal anguish over the dissolution of his family. And, although Sissako gives no overt indication of a direct debt to either Pasolini's *Appunti* or Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, I take Sissako's trial as a critical re-evaluation of Pasolini's optimistic reading of *Eumenides*.³⁰

The film opens with Chaka walking through the outskirts of the city at twilight in a long bluish-grey robe. As we follow him, he pauses to look at a dead or languishing dog lying on the floor of a phone booth. Immediately, we cut away to an image of Melé donning a brightly colored dress as the courtyard fills with black-robed lawyers, a crowd of witnesses, a guard at the courtyard gate, a police officer who oversees the trial itself, an impressively attired judge in a bright red, fur-lined robe, and countless stacks of files crammed with documents relating to the trial. The initial image of Chaka seems random and disconnected from what is going on at the house, but it ties together with the pivotal moment, a few minutes before the end of the film and just after the trial has concluded, when Chaka, dressed in the same long robe and at the same intermediate time of day, kills himself. A dog, apparently the same one that had been in the phone booth, sniffs his body and wanders away. The courtroom drama that interrupts Chaka's walk toward death seems, in retrospect, to expand upon or to represent in a different generic mode his personal deliberation and ultimate decision to turn to suicide.

We can make sense of Sissako's film as it relates to the Aeschylean trial of *Eumenides* by starting from this personal narrative and working outward. Chaka is an Orestes figure—not a matricide, to be sure, nor even a criminal, but someone whose life has come to a critical juncture as his romantic relationship and financial prospects fall apart. The trial that takes up the bulk of the film represents his personal crisis but also offers us a way to see both stories at once. *Bamako* is equally about one person's heart-wrenching decision to kill himself and the post-colonial situation of African nations that are hobbled by cycles of debt and structural readjustments that are, in turn, controlled by

30 In articles about Sissako and various published interviews, I have found no indication that he had any particular regard for Pasolini. Given their shared interest in Africa and their generally Marxist politics, however, it would be shocking if Sissako did not know Pasolini's *Appunti*. Furthermore, I know of no comments about Aeschylus from Sissako. In *Bamako* the white, male, prosecuting lawyer describes one witness as an "Antigone" and he later calls Western fiscal policies toward Africa a "Trojan Horse." Another classical connection can be found in the staging of *Antigone* at the opening of the Mandenka Theater in Bamako in 1999, where Djénéba Koné, who plays Chaka's sister in *Bamako*, played the lead Sophoclean role. My arguments, however, do not depend on any direct or intentional connection.

Western fiscal institutions. A litany of witnesses present a damning critique of the economic plight of Mali, which parallels that of so many African countries.³¹ We hear from lawyers, an impassioned activist, an unemployed school teacher who cannot bring himself to utter a single word, a young man who recounts his desperate efforts to escape the economic situation in Mali by crossing the Sahara only to be turned back at the Moroccan border, and, most powerfully, a griot named Zegué Bamba who chants his grievances in a dialect from southern Mali that is left untranslated in the film.³²

Yet, the critical Aeschylean connection has little to do with the internal workings of the court. Rather, it emerges from its own surreal theatricality. Aeschylus had Orestes flee the stage at the end of *Libation Bearers*, hounded by the Furies, and the Areopagite court that Athena establishes to try his case in *Eumenides* was (mythically speaking) an *ad hoc* legal body. The goddess affirms the role of the court and ratifies its authority for the future, which amounts to a historical engagement with Ephialtes' reforms that had recently reduced the jurisdiction of the Areopagus to covering only homicide cases.³³ As with the trial in *Bamako*, Aeschylus uses the case of an individual to comment upon the broader judicial situation.³⁴ Although Aeschylus' trial surely had almost none of the trappings of a real Athenian court (with a small number of silent jurors brought on stage to cast their votes under the guidance of a theatrical version of the patron divinity of the city), it can be read (and clearly was thus read by

31 Christopher Udry, an economics professor at Yale, has suggested that although the central economic assertions of *Bamako* are generally correct, the film goes too far in portraying the IMF and WB as coldly disinterested in the conditions on the ground in Africa. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/movies/11denn.html>.

32 Bamba's amazing song exemplifies the freedom that Sissako gave his cast in this film. Supposedly, no one on the set knew in advance what Bamba had planned and virtually no one understood the dialect in which he was singing. The decision to leave his words untranslated in the film reflects the experience of those on the set who were moved by his performance despite not being able to understand the literal meaning of his words. Although the griot's words are left untranslated, the lawyer who makes the closing arguments on behalf of Africa renders the gist of his song into French: "When I sow, why don't I reap? When I reap, why don't I eat?"

33 The Areopagus was a tribunal made up of former archons (annually elected officials). For much of the first half of the fifth-century BCE, it was extremely powerful and was closely associated with the influence of Cimon. In the 460s Ephialtes proposed reforms of this court that stripped it of much of its power. Ephialtes was killed in 461, just a few years before Aeschylus staged his *Oresteia* in 458.

34 Kennedy 2006 reads Aeschylus' trial scene as a mapping of imperial power through the use of courts, a thesis that effectively excavates the tensions between Athenian *dēmokratia* and its imperialist aspirations.

Pasolini) as an etiological myth for all Western democracy and jurisprudence. *Bamako* by contrast, presents something of the opposite, inasmuch as its trial includes all the sartorial and procedural pomp of a European court even as the panel of judges is denied any direct efficacy. Located in the courtyard of a private home in Mali, the court looks ridiculously out of place, particularly when a toddler with squeaking shoes wobbles among the lawyers and witnesses or when a wedding party turns its celebratory parade through the trial. But most important of all is the fact that this court never renders a verdict. The last two speakers—both advocating for Africa, first a white man, then a black woman—refer to and seek to shape an impending pronouncement from the tribunal, and the penultimate speaker even does so in glowing terms of a coming utopia: “The utopia is, in a way, the African ram that comes to rub against and rip the pants of reasons of state and the market! Utopia, tomorrow, to avoid what is under way in the suburbs of Accra, Abidjan and Cairo where children drunk on deprivation could turn into balls of fire tomorrow.” Realistically, however, this Francophone tribunal holding court outside a home in Bamako could never bring a binding judgment upon the IMF or the World Bank, and the lawyer’s emphasis on utopia (he says the word several times in his closing arguments) may anticipate this impossibility. Any theatrical flourish on Sissako’s part of fabricating an image of progressive judicial closure would propel the film into the world of escapist fantasy (much as the trial in *Eumenides* would have resolved nothing without the intervention of Athena, who convinces the Furies to drop their “case” and accept a new role in the Athenian pantheon). Surely, part of his point is that this case never could have been held in any venue that would have permitted a binding verdict and that Africa’s only chance to say “j’accuse” (without expecting a response in kind) would be in this theatrical fiction of a real court.³⁵ To conclude his film, Sissako underlines the impossibility of Africa ever receiving justice from these transnational fiscal institutions, and he eschews the ridiculous inefficacy of a mock-court in this Malian home rendering a symbolic verdict. As the final speaker falls silent, therefore, the trial simply ends without any statement whatsoever from the judge.³⁶

35 Aeschylus’ theatrical court may have looked less “real” than Sissako’s, but Athenian dramas were staged in close proximity to the major spaces of political and judicial deliberation. In classical Athens, the deliberative experiences of competitive theater, court cases, and political debate all overlapped.

36 Euripides similarly explored the short-comings of the trial in *Eumenides* in his *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, in which Orestes must fulfill one more task in order to appease the Furies. As Kennedy 2009, 80, puts it: “... the play is premised on the faultiness of Athena’s

Instead, we return to the family melodrama. Melé sings over an image of Chaka putting Ina to bed for the last time. He blows up a balloon for her; we see Melé on stage singing through tears; Chaka positions a fan by Ina's bed, over which a wedding picture of Chaka and Melé hangs; he turns out the light as Melé's voice fades into silence; a long and still shot focuses on Ina, now asleep and alone; and, an instant before the camera leaves that tranquil image, we hear the shot ring out from Chaka's gun. The camera arrives a split second too late, and Chaka's body is already falling to the ground, while a car screeches to a halt—the driver obviously fearing that the noise he had heard was a blown tire. The dog from the opening scene sniffs Chaka's body and walks away. The film ends with Chaka's funeral, held in the same courtyard where the trial had been staged. As his corpse is carried out of that space on a bier followed by a procession of those who had attended the ceremony, the gate to the courtyard, monitored throughout the trial by a firm but bribe-able guard, is now left open. The screen goes black, and a line of Aimé Césaire concludes the experience: "L'oreille collée au sol, j'entendis passer demain" ("My ear to the ground, I heard tomorrow pass by;" the closing lines of Césaire's poem "Les pur-sang")—a nihilistic twist on the lawyers' final, impassioned descriptions of what tomorrow *could be*.

Orestes on Trial in Africa

Pasolini's idea to restage the trial of Orestes at the courthouse in Dar es Salaam encapsulates his perhaps naïve optimism for an African future. That optimism was an outgrowth of both his frustration with European, and especially American, consumerism and the lack of historical distance that prevented him from perceiving the lasting trauma of the colonial era and the process of decolonization. His interpretation of the *Oresteia* stresses the important continuity of the divinities who are transformed from Furies into Eumenides, and he reads this into his formulation of an African future in which tradition (now devoid of its ritualized magic) coexists with reason and formal democracy.³⁷

justice, but also calls into question vengeance as justice. In effect, the plot of the play is a direct question of what justice is in the terms delineated in *Eumenides* ..."

37 In the appendix that provides general comments on his *Appunti*, Pasolini states that "The entire *Oresteia* is a long preparation for the final catharsis ... The catharsis consists of the creation of the Areopagus, dedicated to the Goddess of Reason: That is, in other words, the transformation of a savage city into a civilized one, in which the dark tyranny dominated by the ancient Gods, is replaced by democratic institutions, guided by new Gods."

What is missing in this, however, is an awareness of the continuing influence of the colonial experience, which Pasolini seems simply to think away by positing a precise point of contact between the primitive and the modern. Or, perhaps, the failure was in not appreciating the close historical connection between the end of the colonial era and the rise of globalization, a juxtaposition that immediately necessitated new kinds of intimate relationships among the former colonies and former colonizers now framed around Cold War politics and economics.

We can also attempt to isolate shortcomings (by today's standards) in Pasolini's interpretation of Aeschylus, which relied heavily on the theories of the Cambridge Ritualists (especially, in this case, Cornford) and Thomson's anti-totalitarian *Aeschylus and Athens* that was first published in 1941 and re-issued in Italian in 1949.³⁸ In the notes to his own translation of the *Oresteia* (published in 1960), Pasolini asserts: "The significance of the tragedy of Orestes is solely, exclusively political."³⁹ But this political interpretation is not the limited historical contextualization that some today might see in the trilogy's opaque commentary on Ephialtes' reforms but, rather, the articulation of a timeless truth, effected in the transformation of the Furies, about human progress and the passage from forms of primitivism connected with the feminine ("working under the hysterical sign of the mother") into the modern age of masculine reason.⁴⁰

This interpretation not only sets up the feminine as a primal force to be gotten past, it also ignores the ethical claims of female characters—Iphigeneia, sacrificed by her father in the name of war; the Furies, who demand Orestes' matricidal blood; and, above all, Clytemnestra, murdered by her son for her own killing of Agamemnon.⁴¹ The positive transformation that is effected around the figure of Orestes, whose killing of his mother is never in doubt, is predicated on the suspension of cycles of retributive violence through a new

("Tutta l'*Orestide* è una lunga preparazione alla 'catarsi' finale ... La 'catarsi' consiste nell'istituzione dell'Areopago, dovuto alla Dea della Ragione: ossia, in parole povere, la trasformazione di una città 'selvaggia' in una città 'civile', in cui la cupa tirannia dominata da Dèi arcaici, viene sostituita dalle istituzioni democratiche, guidate da Dèi nuovi," 199).

38 For an excellent evaluation of Pasolini's study of Aeschylus, see Fusillo 2005 and Usher 2014.

39 Pasolini 1960, 176: "Il significato delle tragedie di Oreste è solo, esclusivamente, politico."

40 Pasolini 1960, 177: "... operanti sotto il segno uterino della madre." The Italian *uterino*, like the English word hysterical, implies both a bodily structure and a psycho-emotional state.

41 Spivak 2009, 622 suggests that *Bamako* too may have a gender problem. She notes that there are no white women in the film, "no global feminist solidarity."

form of justice that can only be instituted by Athena (a move that is paralleled, incidentally, in her role at the end of the *Odyssey* in suppressing vendettas on Ithaca). As Simon Critchley puts it, in the *Oresteia*:

... the condition of possibility for Athena's institution of justice in Athenian democracy is the violent act that decides against the Furies and in favour of Orestes for the simple reason that Athena honours the male principle in all things, having sprung directly from the head of Zeus without the mediation of the womb. The lesson of the *Oresteia* and Greek tragedy more generally is that the traumatic cycle of revenge and family violence in the house of Atreus and elsewhere can only be suspended by Athena's violent institution of justice. Tragedy is mythic violence that attempts to break the repetitive cycle of family slaughter.⁴²

Taking a cue from Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, Critchley claims that the mythical violence in the house of Atreus and the ancient rights of the Furies can only be stamped out by the divine violence of Athena. Yet this process is not perfectly tidy, and the valid claims of Clytemnestra must be left aside for democratic judicial law to take firm root. Much like the violence perpetrated against Thersites in the *Iliad*, which is acceptable because of his hideous appearance and obstreperous ways, and the conclusion of the *Odyssey*, in which a violent imposition of forgetfulness (planned by Zeus and carried out by Athena) forestalls further bloodshed, the *Oresteia* shows that something must be given up to provide a new model of social stability.

Although we must be careful to deal with Aeschylus' story as a mythical narrative, we can recognize that what is left aside in the *Oresteia* ultimately is the position of Clytemnestra. In terms of Agamben's formulation of biopolitical theory, we can go so far as to say that she, although now a shade, has been reduced to a condition of "bare life" (*zoê*, as opposed to the more fulsome *bios*), that state of exception in which individual rights are attenuated in precise contradistinction to those of the rest of society.⁴³ By not focusing on this minor theme that lurks in the background of the triumphalist acquittal of

42 Critchley 2011, 66–7.

43 Agamben's biopolitical theory (built largely upon Foucault's discussions of biopower) claims that sovereign power establishes, maintains and justifies itself through the creation of states of exception in which certain individuals are deprived of their rights. He grounds his ideas in the Roman figure of the *homo sacer*, who is defined by the law as someone existing outside the law. His theories are most fully set out in Agamben 1998 and 2005. Agamben was a friend of Pasolini and even played Phillip in *The Gospel According to*

Orestes, Pasolini's reading of the *Oresteia* and his extension of that reading to the situation of an Africa newly freed from European colonial control permits an unbounded optimism that anticipates a socialist utopia that avoids both the terrors of primitivism and the pitfalls of American neocapitalism.

Sissako rejects this optimism for the very blunt reason that he sees the colonial era of direct European territorial control of Africa replayed today in a deterritorialized fiscal neocolonialism that has prevented African nations from having any real opportunity to gain the stability and prosperity promised by decolonization; his trial essentially overturns or rejects the implications of Aeschylean judicial success. Aeschylus' similarly surreal trial, which claims the authority of any fully empowered trial, uses the law as a basis for organizing and affirming the structures of society by isolating and quarantining (and, in some cases, nominally rehabilitating) individuals whom the majority deem to be deserving of nothing more than "bare life."

In *Bamako* we see a theatrical simulacrum of such a process. All the structures are in place—a panel of judges, lawyers, witnesses, security agents, and even the formally delimited and regulated judicial space. Those inside the court go through the motions of moving the judicial narrative toward the expected conclusion, while those outside the court, on the streets of Bamako, play the part of the excluded, whose exclusion gives meaning to the privileged space of the trial. Yet the formalized space of this trial is merely the courtyard of a private home; the defendants are absent corporate entities that exist beyond the physical and legal reach of these proceedings; and no real verdict is possible. Instead, the point of the trial is to show that it is all of Africa that has been forced into the condition of "bare life" by the fiscal policies of the World Bank and its ilk.⁴⁴ This recognition explains several key elements in the film. Africa is treated as a unified whole, because the entire continent serves as a space of exception against which the "global north" can define and assert its own privilege. This situation is not based on any 'guilt' or objective reality

St. Matthew. For a scathing critique of Agamben's use of Aristotle as the foundation of his political theorizing, see Finlayson 2010.

- 44 Sissako does not completely exonerate Africa from sharing some of the blame for this situation, a point made through a strange film-inside-a-film within *Bamako* and called "Shootout in Timbuktu," a cowboy shoot-em-up Western starring Danny Glover and a cast of black cowboys. Sissako has said that this mis-en-scene is intended to show that Africans too contribute to the continent's problems. This theme has now been expanded in Sissako's *Timbuktu* (2014), which was nominated for the Palm d'Or at Cannes and an Oscar for "best foreign film" and which depicts the infiltration of native African Islamic extremism in Timbuktu. Interestingly, as with the dog in *Bamako*, *Timbuktu* begins and ends with a highly symbolic role for an animal (in this case, an antelope).

about conditions in Africa but, rather, has been developed by an historical process that *Bamako* lays bare. This point is made powerfully by the first witness (played by Aminata Traoré, a Malian activist, author, and politician), who asserts that Africa not be seen as a victim of its poverty but, rather, of its riches. The fiction of African poverty is the biopolitical script promoted by the West to justify the reduction of Africa to the condition of “bare life.” The wall that separates the privileged space of the trial from those who are excluded turns out to symbolize the collective exclusion of all Africa, which is why that barrier can be left open at the end of the film. The fiction of any spatial differentiation has been concluded and unmasked, and the gate loses its symbolic value.

Finally, we can see how the trial and Chaka’s story reiterate one another. The trial provides Sissako with the forum in which to discuss the relationship between Africa and the West. But, as I claimed above, the trial also represents the thought process of Chaka as he walks toward his self-inflicted death. The condition of Africa—the poverty, the unemployment, the corruption—leaves Chaka no hope of improving his situation for himself or his daughter, but his desolation also personalizes the African condition. As Harrow puts it, Chaka “doesn’t die under the sign of tragedy, but of a biopolitical order.”⁴⁵ Importantly, his death goes unnoticed by the driver (surely symbolizing Western affluence), who fears only that his car has been damaged. The only creature to acknowledge Chaka’s suicide is the dog who, in the opening scene, had lain, apparently lifeless, on the floor of a phone booth. Chaka has symbolically exchanged places with the dog (the one who was upright and mobile has now become supine and motionless), and such animalization is the ultimate statement of the dehumanizing condition of “bare life,” the biopolitical mechanism by which the attenuation of existence for some permits the thriving of those who live outside the space of exception.⁴⁶

As receptions of Aeschylus, Pasolini’s *Appunti* and Sissako’s *Bamako* stake antithetical claims. Pasolini universalizes the message of the *Oresteia* in a

45 Harrow 2013, 199.

46 Agamben 2004 deals with the connection between humans and animals. In this work he describes an “anthropological machine,” which is a political exercise carried out by the sovereign to distinguish certain human figures (slaves, barbarians, Jews under the Nazi regime) as sub-human and bestial. We can contrast the symbolism of Sissako’s dog with the analysis of animals in the *Oresteia* by Heath 2005, 216: “By the end of the three plays, the bestial, human, and divine elements have been separated and channeled into their proper places in the *polis*, an institution that not only represents this proper arrangement, but also makes such an essential differentiation possible.” For Heath, the *Oresteia* moves from category chaos among animals, humans and divinities toward the ordered world of the *polis*, a productive ordering that Sissako’s film suggests is absent from Africa.

way that allows him to fold decolonized Africa into its narrative of progress. Sissako, by contrast, and perhaps without any direct and intentional engagement with either Pasolini or Aeschylus, rejects the idea that Western-style judicial judgments can ameliorate the situation in Africa. Orestes, guilty of killing his mother but declared innocent by a regime that sets aside Clytemnestra's demands for justice in the name of progress, contrasts sharply with Chaka, who is completely innocent and yet is forced into the role of Agamben's *homo sacer*. Chaka stands for both the personal cost of our global financial system and the shared experience of the African continent. If Aeschylus' *Eumenides* can be read etiologically as the establishment of a new era of Western justice and democracy, Pasolini's *Appunti* aims to extend that narrative to include Africa as well. Sissako's *Bamako*, however, bemoans the limits of current trends in economic globalization and shows that the victorious acquittal of Orestes does not extend to the economic plight of Africa, which continues to endure a debilitating exclusion enforced by the corporate gods who control the global economic system.⁴⁷

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