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Susan Joseph, Marguerite Johnson

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"AN ORCHID IN THE LAND OF TECHNOLOGY": NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION IN LARS VON TRIER'S *MEDEA*

SUSAN JOSEPH AND MARGUERITE JOHNSON

By applying theories articulated by Walter Benjamin in his essay, "Art in the Time of Mechanical Reproduction,"[1] this paper[2] attempts to bring together two apparently disparate artworks that present the story of Medea: Euripides' fifth-century tragedy and Lars von Trier's 1988 made-for-television film.[3] Our thesis is that von Trier's film is a true development of the Medea plot presented by Euripides.[4]

In his essay, Walter Benjamin explains how a carefully made film—and, we would add, even one by a notorious renegade like von Trier—might substitute for what is lost: the uniqueness or iconic status of an artwork like Euripides' tragedy or of an individual performance. In Benjamin's view, a carefully made film can present an analysis that may substitute for what the Athenian audience experienced at a performance. According to Benjamin, much of Euripides *Medea* remains beyond our intellectual grasp simply because we cannot know what it was like to be

1 All references to Walter Benjamin are to his *Illuminations*.

2 Our work has been revised from our two independent papers presented at "Marriage Problems: Mythical Wives on Screen," at the 2004 Southwest Texas Popular Culture Association Meeting in San Antonio, Texas. We are thankful to the *Arethusa* referees for advice on this combined version.

3 Dialogue from the film is published in Italian in Rubino 2000. Scene numbers are taken from Rubino's scenario.

4 Christie 2002 takes the position that there cannot be a film that is a true development of the Euripidean *Medea.* This is so, according to Christie, because films cannot be separated from their times.

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part of that Athenian audience. Von Trier uses the technique of cinematic montage, a selection and ordering of images that gives his audience the sense of being alive. This lifelike succession of often contradictory images enables the audience to experience something similar to the flow of time.[5] Furthermore, montage may present Medea's dreams and reveries, as well as a multi-perspectival view of the character as she carries out her inexplicable acts of double murder, filicide, and escape with impunity. Thus, because more of her behavior is visible on film, more may be apprehended and analyzed in a film than in a performance or a reading.

For Benjamin, the multi-perspectival possibilities of film were the obverse of Freud's discoveries concerning unconscious behavior: both film and psychoanalysis unlock secrets by examining what is either so ordinary or so extraordinary that it escapes notice. Relying on Benjamin, we will argue that von Trier's *Medea* offers viewers a moving portrait that adds to our understanding of the playwright's themes concerning what befalls a woman forced to live on the fringes of society. Our technical introduction reveals the structure of von Trier's system of visual symbols to give a close "reading" of how he uses montage to illustrate the inevitability of Medea's horrendous acts. The last segment of our paper builds on this mechanical framework to speculate on why this is so.

Euripides' tragedy most likely appealed to von Trier because Medea is a character divided against herself. Critics have explored and attempted to explain Medea's divided self. Pietro Pucci, for example, writes: "As Medea forces herself to murder her children, she reveals a painful split in her consciousness that appears to be a new form of conflict in Greek theater and that the Romantic imagination is quick to appreciate" (1980.131). Likewise, in her influential article, "Tragic Wives: Medea's Divided Self" (2001), Helene Foley identifies the split in Medea's personality as double: private and public. Medea is divided between maternal and heroic codes of behavior; when her conflict moves from the privacy of her home to the public sphere of the polis, she is trapped into imitating the destructive behavior of her oppressors, Creon and Jason. And, for Anne Pippin Burnett, Medea "is not a jealous woman but a unique female avenger ruled by a masculine impulse to recover a personal honor of her own" (1998.194). Although von Trier may not have known any of these interpretations, his representation of Medea nevertheless reveals her divided self.

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5 For an explanation of montage, cf. Eisenstein 1977.45–47.

Von Trier follows Euripides' story of Medea's inner conflict and the revenge that ensues after Jason abandons her for the princess of Corinth. Within this inherited plot structure, von Trier uses a variety of cinematic techniques that link his film with the tragedy of Euripides. Most obviously, there are references to the Argonautic cycle, to a number of other myths, and to Carl Theodor Dreyer's unrealized 1962 scenario for *Medea*. What we see and hear is similar to what is available in an open-air performance. Through consistent use of black and white costuming, the actors become visual symbols. Nature, as in fifth-century performances of Greek tragedies, is a protagonist: the mise-en-scène and sound score replicate the sights and sounds of an open-air performance. Finally, in the post-production phase, von Trier increased the distancing effects of his *Medea* by dubbing the dialogue after filming the action and by manipulating the film so that the words and images appear to be far away. The technical term for von Trier's idiosyncratic process is degradation, which results from a series of transferences. Von Trier first shot the film on video tape, then readjusted color and light, transferred it to film, and finally copied it again to video tape.[6] The final step was laying on the dialogue, which he did after filming. Von Trier also distances Medea from the male characters in the film: when Aegeus, Creon, and Jason encounter Medea, they are always seen arriving from a distance.

Each of these works of art is novel, and yet each is recast from old material. While Euripides created a new play out of a welter of traditional legends (cf. Graf 1997.21–43), von Trier made his own version of Carl Theodor Dreyer's unrealized Medea scenario and Euripides' text.[7] According to Jack Stevenson (2002), when von Trier was working on *Medea*, he even claimed, most likely in his typical ironic tone, to be in telepathic communication with his idol Dreyer. Nevertheless, von Trier was intent on making his own artwork: before the Prologue, in the intertext, on a placard that resembles that used to connect or explain scenes in silent films, he writes that his film is an homage to Dreyer, but not a Dreyer film. Von Trier departs significantly from Dreyer's scenario, and his *Medea* does not reproduce the claustrophobic, nineteenth-century realist tradition of Scandinavian theatre

6 As Jack Stevenson writes (2002.23): "The result of the laborious experimental process was a train of images that seemed on the verge of dissolving in murk and graininess."

7 Similarly, Elvira Notari's silent 1919 film of Francesco Mastriani's novel *Medea of Porta Medina* would have been known to Dreyer.

as Dreyer's did.[8] Instead, von Trier exploits the elemental sounds and sights of the rough landscape of Denmark's northern coast.[9] Von Trier's soundtrack reproduces the same sounds that the Athenian audience would have heard at a performance of *Medea* in an open-air theatre overlooking a busy harbor: waves break, birds chirp, the wind rustles, a boat's cables creak, sails flap, a child sobs, dogs bark, lambs bleat, and horses bay. Natural sounds have more importance than the voices of characters; hence falling rain, the noise of birds, concentrated breathing, and the murmurings of children become part of a wordless exchange that reflects emotional and psychological states. This is exemplified in the Prologue in which the natural sounds slowly become quieter as we listen to the lapping of waves, a single birdcall, and, ultimately, Medea's loud gasp for air as she emerges from the sea. Such features signal that von Trier, like an ancient tragedian, is working at an elemental level—albeit with cinematic artifice—in regard to matter and performance (Rehm 2003.23).

The barrenness of the setting further recalls the starkness of the ancient theater, augmenting the audience's focus on dialogue, limited action, and characterization. Incidental sound and natural locations are both features of von Trier's naturalistic, elemental, and minimalist style. Moreover, the bleakness and dampness of southern Jutland, with its windswept landscape and sense of cold, bring to mind old Nordic tales of revenge and taboo. In one such tale, the Sigurd legend, Gudrun, Sigurd's widow, killed her second husband Atli and the children born to him in order to avenge the murder of her brothers. Thus like the poets of antiquity, von Trier demonstrates the power of allusion to embolden narrative meaning.

Von Trier's *skene* is Creon's towering castle perched on a hill, overlooking the sea. Entrance to the castle appears to be from the beach itself via a series of tunnels that seem to function as both stables and docks. In visual terms, then, von Trier has grafted Creon's castle onto the seafaring theme of the Argonautic cycle, a frequent reference point in the Euripidean version (cf. Blaiklock 1955.233–37). As we will see, von Trier also refers to the Argonautic cycle by showing the Golden Fleece. The ominous subterranean world[10] of Creon also symbolizes fatality and is exploited as such

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8 See Aitken's discussion of the realist tradition in Scandinavian cinema (2001.211–12).

9 Von Trier has commented on the natural landscape of Southern Jutland: "It's totally flat there, and there are coastal areas where the water is very shallow" (interview by Marie Berthelius and Roger Narbonne, 1987, in Lumholdt 2003.48).

10 Similar settings characterize both von Trier's *Zentropa* (1991) and *The Kingdom* (1994 and 1997).

in the film when his death is dramatized by an agonizing journey through the tunnels and juxtaposed to the funeral procession of his daughter, represented as an eerie voyage on water.

But von Trier alters the sequence of events and gives prominence to Medea's children and to Jason's new wife, here called Glauce. The story almost seems to be told in flashback as Medea's recollection of the events leading up to her fateful decision to murder her children. Von Trier omits the Nurse's Prologue and begins with Medea lying on a tidal flat. Thus from the beginning, Medea occupies, like Creon's castle, a liminal point where land and sea meet. While lying on the tidal flat, Medea must make a decision: to respond actively to Jason's betrayal or to allow herself to be submerged by it. As the water threatens to cover her, to take her breath away permanently, with one strong intake of air she regains herself, emerges from the sea, and her story begins. Defying death, she decides to respond to her predicament. It is evident from her position in this natural backdrop that von Trier's Medea is, like her ancient predecessor, in Rush Rehm's words, "an essential participant in a social and political community, one that must find its proper place within the constraints of the natural world" (2003.33).

Just as the natural setting expresses Medea's inner world, it is also the source of her threat to Creon. When first Creon and then Jason come looking for her (scene 9), Medea confronts them on her own boggy turf. She frightens Creon, who has difficulty finding her in her swamp, having come to tell her that she and her children must go into exile (scene 10). Medea is already in the bog collecting the snails that she will crush into a poisonous salve to smear on the wedding crown to kill Creon and Glauce. After she has made her poison, Medea tosses her mortar into the water, and there ensue more than sixty seconds of mysterious bubbles (scene 11).

These and other changes from Euripides provide the viewer a closer look at Medea's conflicted personality and her agonized decision to murder her children. There is no singing and dancing chorus of women as in Dreyer's scenario. Yet in at least two senses there is a chorus: an impersonal one created by the images of nature and sound score, and a personal one in the attendants of all the other major characters. Serving girls bathe and dress Jason's new wife and play at dice with her; Creon is surrounded by henchmen and lifted and lowered by carriers; and Jason has shipbuilders to direct and dogs following him. A howling chorus follows the funeral procession of Creon and his child. The support that the other characters receive from their retinues underscores the desperate loneliness of Medea, making her abandonment seem all the more bitter.

Although von Trier preserves the basic story told by Euripides, he

uses montage to accelerate the action, point up causal connections in Euripides' plot, and add more depth to characters. For example, flashbacks and intercutting explain how Jason became a prominent and powerful man in Corinth. Von Trier inserts a series of new scenes (2–5), crosscutting Jason and Glauce's bridal chamber with Creon's subterranean council chamber. These new scenes illustrate Jason's appetites for sexual love and power, while exposing him as physically depleted and therefore unlikely to succeed in his plan to insert himself among the powerful of Corinth. We see signs of his frustration and future defeat in a scene with Jason washing himself crosscut by a flashback of Creon's announcement that Jason will succeed him, which is followed by Jason's acceptance. When it looks as if Jason is about to make love with his new bride, the couple is instead about to visit Creon's council chamber. Jason's Golden Fleece becomes his dowry, a marriage bed for Glauce (scene 7). Jason's thwarted attempt to enter Glauce's bed (scene 7) is matched to Medea lamenting her lonely bed (scene 8). Medea's contemplation of revenge (she is shown half in light and half in shadow, with a rear projection of her children making the tender noises of sleep) then blends directly into the nightmare that awakens Jason.

Von Trier's montage, choice of location, and reordering of the story all work together to portray Medea's mysterious ability to withstand having been abandoned by Jason. At the beginning of the film, the camera focuses on Medea lying on her back on the sand. She breathes in and grasps the sand with her fingers, and then her image starts to spin. To the sounds of singing birds and low, repeated augmented fourths (in Western music from Baroque cantatas to Disney cartoons, a time-worn metaphor for the devil), the tide comes in to cover her. Medea is under the water for more than sixty seconds of screen time. When she arises, she sees Aegeus's ship approaching and hears his voice calling her name. He asks how things stand between Jason and her, and she immediately asks for his help. Von Trier's altering of the order of Euripides' story signals here that Medea knows from the beginning what she needs from Aegeus—and Aegeus's part in her plot is accentuated by having him guarantee a means of escape in addition to refuge in Athens, which alone had been promised in Euripides' play.

Indeed, von Trier's montage connects Medea's filicide with her escape. In the Prologue, as Medea rises from the water to better observe Aegeus's arrival, von Trier matches the upward cruciform shape of the mast of Aegeus's ship with a dramatic cut to the film's logo. The latter is simply Medea's name with the central "D" forming the hanging tree, with the children's two pod-like bodies barely visible (see www.imdb.com/title/

tt0095607). Von Trier's montage thus joins Medea's supine body, with its ability to stay under the water, her apparent recognition of Aegeus before she can see or hear him, her knowing exactly what she will ask from Aegeus, and the hanging tree.

Such matching of images suggests that Euripides' story is being told in flashback as Medea's recollections of her acts of vengeance. The story of Medea's vengeance actually begins in scene 15. There, after they have "made love," Jason suddenly hits her and calls her a whore, and Medea is lying in the sand in the same position she is at the beginning of the film. The matching of these two images of Medea in a supine position creates the suggestion that Jason's brutal behavior aroused Medea's horrific desire for revenge.

If the story is being told from Medea's point of view, from a mother's nightmarish recollection of her planned murder of her own children, then the two most obvious of von Trier's other changes also make sense. These are, most notably, the larger role for Jason's new wife, Glauce, and the change from killing the children off-stage with a sword to a slow-motion murder-cum-suicide by hanging in blindingly bright natural light that is arguably as painful for their mother as it was for the children.

Like the changes involving the children, Glauce's large role is part of the visual patterning and pacing of the film. Glauce, whose name, Jason says, means "nymph" (for tragic authors it meant "gleaming," "bluish green," or "gray"), occupies so much space in the film because Medea is obsessed with her. In Medea's mind, Glauce becomes a visual counterpart to, and a virginal version of, herself. We first see this negative to positive doubling when Medea's complaints to Aegeus about how Jason abandoned her, forsaking his pledge (Prologue), are matched to the nude image of the beautiful Glauce admiring herself in a glass (scene 2). The same matching is again visible in the final scene: Medea's hair, up to this time, has been covered tightly in a black cap—now her long auburn mane is released so that the newly childless Medea resembles the nymph-like Glauce. Deborah Boedeker comments on such assimilations between Medea and "several human characters in her myth" in Euripides' drama, noting: "Creon's daughter, for one, bears many points of resemblance to the protagonist—at least as she was at an earlier stage in her life" (1997.143).

Yet von Trier's montage is dialectical. For Glauce is not only the positive, younger Medea, she is also the visualization of Medea's prediction that Jason's marriage will end as a dirge. Glauce's first glance in her mirror (scene 2) matches her last (scene 18), where she admires herself wearing the

poisoned crown. The tableau of Glauce and her attendants on her wedding night (scene 7) recalls the famous classical relief, the Ludovisi "Throne," which illustrates the proximity of love and death. The Greek relief shows either Aphrodite, the goddess of love, or Persephone, the wife of Hades. The young female on the sculpture, like Glauce, is either being dressed for her wedding or prepared for her descent into the Underworld. This confusion between marriage and death recurs when Medea poisons her own marriage crown. Dreyer's influence is also in the background here. Medea's poisoned crown recalls the wicked wire crown that Maria Falconetti wore in Dreyer's 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*; Medea's crown becomes Glauce's crown of death. Jason's smudge on Glauce's chin (scene 7) is matched with the mortal wound of the horse whose death agony substitutes for Glauce's (scene 18). The wound Medea kissed on her little son's knee (scene 13) becomes a bitter reminder of the uselessness of her care after his death (scene 23), which will be further addressed below.

By including scenes with the princess, von Trier's film marks a radical departure from Euripides' play, which kept Glauce off-stage. Yet von Trier's princess recalls the ancient Greeks' stereotyped view of "woman": "woman" may be beautiful on the outside but conniving, possibly evil, on the inside. Glauce withholds sexual pleasure from Jason on their wedding night, adamant that "Medea and Glauce cannot both remain here" (scene 7). Her apparently innate knowledge of sexual weaponry undermines her appearance of child-like innocence: "Give me proof that Glauce is the one you love." She continues to speak as she wards off Jason's attempts to consummate their marriage: "No, Jason. Not until my father exiles Medea tomorrow." Such an ambiguous depiction of the princess may explain von Trier's decision to feature Euripides' unseen character, but Glauce's conniving and teasing only enhance empathy for Medea. Indeed, Glauce's ethereal quality serves to underline her sinister representation, just as Medea's association with water recalls and underlines Medea's role as Jason's helpmeet during their adventures on the Argo.

Von Trier also uses technical means to draw attention to and subvert the *mechane.* In Euripides' tragedy, Medea's two dead children were displayed on a piece of stage machinery, the *mechane,* for Jason and the audience to see before Medea escaped with them from the roof of the stage building. In the film, as noted above, the machinery for killing and displaying the dead children is part of the logo that appears after the Prologue. The film's logo thereby telegraphs that Medea's name is her *mythos*, her plot of filicide. The deus ex machina in Euripides' tragedy is Medea's grand-

father Helios, who sends down his chariot to carry away Medea and her children. Here the differences may be greater than the similarities; for if in tragedy Medea is associated with the Sun, in von Trier's film, Medea's loyalty is to water.

In a more obvious visual symbol, von Trier uses black and white to distinguish Medea from Glauce. Medea wears black, not necessarily the black commonly associated with the witch, but a black symbolic of her melancholy and desolation. We never see her body; it is covered by a long, tight-fitting black costume, almost like the skin of a sea mammal, suggesting once again her affinity with water and perhaps pointing to Nordic allusions to the mythical selkie (creatures that can transform themselves from seals to humans). A black skullcap covers her head, preventing the viewer from seeing her hair, so often associated with sexuality and desirability. When Medea has completed her final act, the murder of her sons, she sits silently in Aegeus's boat and removes her head covering to reveal a shock of long, fiery auburn hair, a symbol of defiance, newly acquired freedom, and, perhaps, a well-chosen conceit that recalls her relationship to Euripides' deus ex machina: Medea's paternal grandfather and his chariot.

Thus rather than as simply a character destroyed by the conflicting codes of maternity and valor, von Trier also shows Medea as a fish out of water. In von Trier's version of the Corinthian episode, Medea looks and acts amphibian, more comfortable in the water than any other character; she is a shining, transcendent figure for whom dry land is inimical. More than that, as we have seen, Medea's nefarious power comes from the water. In the original play, when Medea refuses to listen to the advice of her female friends,[11] the Nurse comments: "[She] listens to her friends as they give advice no more than if she were a rock or a wave of the sea" (28–29). The chorus sings of Medea's sorrow as a "gift" from Zeus, evoking sea imagery as a metaphor for her emotional predicament: "For the god has brought you, Medea, to an overwhelming sea of woes" (361–62). Jason, too, states: "I must, it seems, be no poor speaker, but escape the wearisome storm of your words, lady, like the trusty helmsman of a ship using the topmost edges of his sail" (522–25; cf. Blaiklock 1955).

In contrast, Glauce is all lightness—all silvery white. We see her body in and out of clothing, signaling her youthful innocence and desirability.

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11 *Philai*: close (female) companions; one assumes the reference is to the members of the chorus. All references to the play are from Page 1978 and Morwood 1998.

Her hair hangs long and free—she is the epitome of the virgin, the young nymph every man in such stories wishes to marry. Glauce, as differentiated from Medea, is defined by ethereal elements, in accordance with the meaning of her name. It becomes, therefore, a cruel irony that the corpse of Glauce, the shimmering, gray-green virgin, is returned to the deep in scene 20.[12]

While exploiting the natural landscape, von Trier creates a surrealist landscape by using superimposition to vary and heighten the scant dialogue and otherwise hidden thought processes. As Medea first considers vengeance (scene 8), her sleeping children float in a rear projection behind her that pulsates like amniotic fluid seen via sonography. As Medea speaks of Jason's betrayal, stating: "I want revenge," the image of the children becomes larger, looming behind their mother, consuming the frame, but with Medea, in focus, in front of them. The implication is clear: her revenge will involve them. Further, in her attempt to deceive Jason on the beach by seduction (scene 15), Medea is separated from the blue-lit sand dunes: she sits in front of them, superimposed; likewise, Jason is superimposed in front of the sea, lost in his own thoughts. We hear his breathing, as we had previously heard Creon's as he searched for Medea in the marshes.

This elemental conflict between land and sea obsesses von Trier throughout the film. When Jason goes to find her, von Trier introduces a painterly image of Medea at an outdoor loom in the rain (figure 1). At first, the sky is lit with a rainbow, a sign for hope at least since Biblical times (scene 12). Unlike Jason, who is soaked through, Medea sits before her loom apparently in harmony with nature. The composition of this scene recalls the harmonious depiction of the allegory of hearing in the Cluny Museum's famous Flemish tapestries (484–1500) of the Lady and the Unicorn (figure 2). On the tapestry, the handmaiden stands across from her Lady in the same position as Jason, but Jason hardly has the same function as the docile handmaiden; as Medea and Jason quarrel, Jason pushes his hand through the warp, angrily undoing the symbolic fabric of their family. It may not be too much to suggest that the rope with which Medea hangs her children comes from the violence Jason has done to the family Medea had been trying to weave together. And not only is Medea impervious to the water, she also gains knowledge from it. After she has seduced Jason and he has pushed her down and called her a whore, Medea looks into the

12 Jason dresses in gray, a combination of the black and the white of the two women—one of whom he must choose.

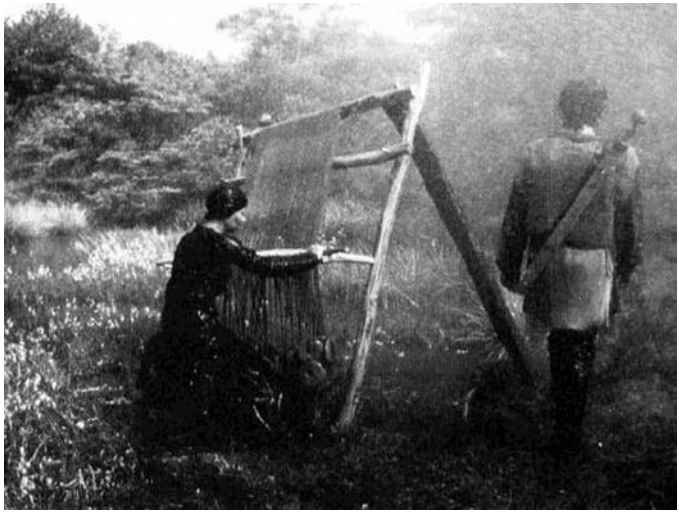

Figure 1. Medea at her loom. *Medea*, copyright 1988 Danmarks Radio, dir. Lars von Trier.

water whence she seems to derive power. Looking at her own image in the water, she says she begins to understand Jason (scene 15).

Because she has been presented as a water figure, when Medea escapes from Corinth on Aegeus's ship, it seems as if she has made the tide come in. In a theatrical gesture recalling the final drop of a curtain, a sail covers Medea. When the sail goes up, as in a theatrical encore, she reappears; for the first time, her hair is loose and she is once again a nymph, a play on the multiple meanings of nymph as unmarried woman, water creature, and mournful presence.[13] Symbolically, Medea has regained her virginity: iconically, Medea has forced Glauce to trade places with her.

Looking back at the film we can also see that for the water-borne Medea, tragedy seems to have grown perversely like the hanging tree and her own two children out of the land of Corinth. Von Trier's sympathetic renderings of her sufferings on land begin to culminate when Medea is remade as the widely disseminated emblem of the Christian virtue of Patience

13 "Mourning nymphs long continued to be a favorite theme in an epic context . . . Glaukos' body was borne to Lykia, where nymphs caused a stream to gush from the rock under which he was entombed, and Paris was mourned by the nymphs of Ide" (Larson 2001.55).

Figure 2. Haviland plate reproducing the image of the allegory of hearing from the Lady and the Unicorn series of tapestries at the Cluny Museum, Paris. Von Trier's image of Medea at the outdoor loom (figure 1) recalls the Lady sitting at her portable organ with all the beasts listening to her peacefully; in the same position as the Lady's handmaiden, Jason turns away from Medea, destroying a moment of harmony with nature. Collection of Susan Joseph; photograph by Daniel Joseph.

under the Yoke as found in a 1709 English edition of Cesar Ripa's handbook *Iconologia* (figure 3). Hitched to a wooden cart, Medea drags her sleeping children across a wheat field (scene 19). On the horizon is the tree where she will hang them, as predicted by the logo of the film. The older child is her accomplice. He catches his little brother and helps his mother kill him, and then offers her the rope for himself. What more compelling image of the fertile earth gone wrong?

Figure 3. The widely disseminated female personification of Patience may have appeared for the first time in Cesar Ripa's 1602 *Iconologia*. In a 1709 English translation by P. Tempest, this moral emblem is described as "A woman of mature Age, sitting upon a stone; wringing her Hands; her naked Feet upon thorns; a heavy Yoak on her Shoulders. The Yoak and Thorns declare this *invincible* Virtue to endure the *Pains* of the Body, and a *wounded Spirit*, express'd by her hands; Patience suffers *Adversity* with a constant and quiet Mind . . . declar'd in supporting the Troubles of *Body* and *Mind,* represented by the Thorns." <http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/Ripa/Images/ripa059a.htm> The image of Patience under the yoke was also used by Dario Fo and Franca Rame in the monologue *Medea* (in *Tutta casa letto e chiesa* [Verona, 1977]).

There is no final dialogue, or even a confrontation, as in Euripides' tragedy, between Jason and Medea. Instead, images of Jason running back and forth, first on horseback, then on foot, until he collapses in the grain field are crosscut with images of the tide coming in to bear Medea away from Corinth. Watery nature prevails in the final sounds of the ship's creaking

cables, rising wind, and lapping waves before the music comes on for the film's terrible logo, written text of Euripides' final chorus, and the credits.

As noted previously, the way von Trier visualizes Medea's caring relationship with her children is an innovative aspect of the film.[14] Von Trier stresses Medea's role as the mother, the one who loves and cares for her children, and by accentuating this role—by *showing* it to his audience—he leads us to an almost unbearable death scene for the two boys at the hands of their mother. This emphasis on Medea as the loving mother is dramatized in the domestic scenes, such as the ones in her cottage, and the more poignant scene in which Medea comforts her younger son after he falls and scrapes his knee, which comes back to haunt the viewer when cinematographer Sejr Brockmann's lens returns to the injury as the dead child hangs loosely from the tree. Unlike the Prologue in Euripides where the Nurse states: "Medea hates[15] her sons" (36), there is no hint of hatred in the film. This, then, leads us to the manner of the filicide, the major departure from the Euripidean text.

In Euripides, Medea stabs her sons. The audience does not witness this directly; it happens off-stage, and we hear the cries of the children. Von Trier, instead, has Medea hang her sons in a slow-motion sequence lasting approximately ten minutes.[16] Unlike the audience of Euripides, we witness all and so are left to consider the implications not only from a moral perspective but a dramatic one. Why does von Trier show something, something so graphic, that the Greeks of the classical age regarded as unnecessary and contrary to convention?[17] Why does he transform the act from stabbing to hanging? The answers may be found by shifting away from interpreting the film from a symbolic perspective, which hitherto has served well in the exegesis of von Trier's self-conscious use of natural imagery, towards a theory of allegory as Benjamin defines it (cf. p. 17).

Dreyer had intended that Medea give the children poison on the pretence that she was administering medicine. Von Trier's vision is more ghastly than this. From a dramatic point of view, the hanging is a directo-

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14 Wilson 2003 devotes most of her chapter "Dogme Ghosts" to von Trier because he has, since his earliest films, "been interested in the representation of missing and traumatized children" (126). Cf., for example, *Element of Crime* (1984).

15 *Stugein*: to hate, to fear.

16 Compare with the execution of Selma in *Dancer in the Dark.*

17 On the Greek rejection of death on stage, cf. Christie 2002.145, who contrasts the Greeks' refusal to enact such taboos with "cinema's imperative to show rather than tell."

rial choice that brings Medea's act into realization, forcing the audience to grasp fully what she has done. Stabbing works well in ancient drama: it is fast and occurs off-stage. But in film, stabbing is too quick; it does not emphasize the gravity of the motivations, emotions, and psychology behind it, particularly to a modern audience somewhat immune to cinematic violence who tend to associate the act of stabbing with the mandatory gore of the horror genre. The story of Medea builds relentlessly to this final act. Knowing what the outcome must be, we wait for it. When the climax comes, von Trier aims his searchlight onto the psyche of Medea, onto the long and agonizing decision that has led her to this point, and onto the anguish and inner turmoil that rage within her as she kills her children. The act of hanging thereby forces the viewer to "experience" directly the double murder. Von Trier stresses Medea's travails even more through the scene in which she drags her sons in a wooden cart attached to her shoulders[18] to the hanging tree. She does this amid superimposed images of the dungeon of Creon's palace, Creon screaming in agony as Medea's poison destroys him, and the funeral of Glauce. The dragging of her sons shows the burden of her decision, the reality that the decision to take their lives is one fraught with utter pain—fraught with the burden of parental love gone wrong. If Jason must suffer, so must she.

In keeping with von Trier's explicit choice of organic elements to tell his story, the representation of the death of the boys is seen predominantly through the lens of nature. The bird cry, which virtually opens the film as it ironically serenades Medea's desperation as she prostrates herself on the tidal flat, becomes incessant as she hangs her younger son and then agonizes over taking the life of his brother. Medea all but loses her voice during the hangings. The unrelenting cry of the bird, which comes close to a nerve-wracking experience for the audience, conjures up the equally nerve-wracking thoughts of betrayal, fantasies of revenge and of death that have gradually overtaken and obsessed her as the film has unfolded.

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18 This is also an ironic reference to Patience's association with the ox as on the façade of the central porch of Notre Dame, where the twelve "Virtues sit, peaceful and self-sufficient, below the Apostles as though they sought to embody in a large, harmonious company the purity and tranquility of the soul" (Katzenellenbogen 1939.75). The same ironic reference to the yoked Patience is found in Fo and Rame 1977.39. In this performance piece, Medea exclaims: "And I was thinking that the worst infamy is that you imprison us women in a cage and hang children round our necks to keep us quiet . . . the way you hang a wooden collar on a cow!"

The only words she utters are in response to her younger son's question concerning what it is his mother is hanging in the tree (a reference to the empty noose), to which she replies: "Something I love." The hanging tree stands on a hillock; it is leafless and also cruciform in shape. This awkward metaphoric clash of the pagan (Greek mythology) and the Christian (the tree/cross as site of execution/sacrifice) raises the allegorical question of whether or not the filicide is intended to be recognized as a discourse on something spiritual, something akin to transcendence.

From the perspective of Benjamin's theory, the viewer must make the intellectual move from a purely symbolic reception of the scene towards an interpretation that prejudices allegory as, according to Bainard Cowen, "pre-eminently a kind of experience." Cowen continues: "A paraphrase of his [Benjamin's] exposition might begin by stating that allegory arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being: a sense of transitoriness, an intimation of mortality, or a conviction, as in Dickinson, that 'this world is not conclusion'" (Cowen 1981.110–22).

The pagan notion that a human being may be transformed into a god explains not only the behavior of Medea as an avenging divinity in the Euripidean version but also the treatment or interpretation of the filicide as pagan "sacrifice" (1054).[19] In von Trier's revisionist *Medea*, the sacrifice of Medea's children has Christian overtones. During the prolonged murder scene, Medea, after hanging her first son, kneels at the base of the tree while the older child gazes up at his dead brother. The imagery turns upside down the iconography of the *mater dolorosa*, the Virgin Mary, who occupies the space at the base of the Cross on Calvary. Afterwards, the camera focuses on the child's wounded knee that is transformed into a metaphor of Christ's stigmata. Von Trier's allegorical representation of death, which gives the viewer freedom to interpret his visual text, complements Euripides' challenge to dramatic closure. This horrific sequence is a form of allegorical experience, as Catherine Russell defines it in relation to the cinematic dramatization of death: "Melodramatic death creates a void that, when filled, effects closure. Allegorical death is cruel because the void remains empty" (1995.121). Further witness to the power of allegory to represent multiple truths, so applicable to a story of a murderous mother, is Ian Christie's argu-

19 Medea refers to the murder as *thuma* (that which is slain or offered as a sacrifice).

ment that the death scene is a mimetic signifier not of the crucifixion but "more directly the traditional setting for witches' executions."[20]

What of von Trier's other mysteries within this scene? Why does the older boy help his mother to hang both his little brother and himself? Why does he take his baby brother to Medea who waits with the noose? Why does this older child place the noose round his own neck? Is it to ease our recrimination of Medea? Is it to reduce our incredulity at a story of a mother who takes the lives of her children to punish her husband? Is it part of von Trier's standard mystique, the right of the filmmaker to add to his narrative what he likes without the compulsion to explain?

The possible solution to such narrative conundrums is not to be found in the Euripidean text with its exploration of Medea as more goddess than housewife. Whereas Euripides' heroine reasserts her divine heritage[21] in a final act that accentuates the classical view of the gods as beings whose understanding of justice is harsh, uncompromising, and something that must be endured by mere mortals such as Jason, von Trier's Medea is flesh and blood. She is a mortal mother who makes the monumental decision to take the lives of her children to hurt the man she loves and to regain her integrity. The story is one a modern audience knows all too well.[22] As Thomas Beltzer remarks: "Von Trier repeatedly discovers that it is impossible to address evil without perpetuating it, a sin he maliciously passes on to the viewer" (cf. Beltzer nd). The role of the elder son as complicit in the murder of his younger brother and his own murder-cum-suicide must therefore be interpreted as a determining aspect of the portrait of his mother and the human scenario that von Trier creates. Beltzer interprets the child's assistance "in his own brutal hanging" as "a key autobiographical theme . . . namely that children are being sacrificed for the selfish desires of adults," recalling the filmmaker's problematic childhood with "radical, nudist Communist parents"

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20 Christie 2002.157. Further interpretive possibilities include the Wicker Man or John Barleycorn ritual, which involved the sacrifice of a human being in order for the agricultural cycle to continue. Interestingly, in such rituals, the sacrificed should ideally be a willing victim, as is the older boy in von Trier's version.

21 Cf. Knox 1979.304, Pucci 1980, and Hatzichronoglou 1993.

22 Foley notes: "Greek tragedy permits a political response to irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical" (2001.3). In the story of Medea, one of the ancient tragic themes, that of the murderous mother, is communicated to the modern audience with a stark familiarity that evokes seemingly endless media accounts of modern equivalents.

(Lucia Bozzola in Beltzer nd). Beltzer quotes von Trier: "According to me, I was too free, as it is such a cause of anxieties . . . I missed the love an authority with definite parameters can bring, because that is a form of love." This reading is persuasive, particularly when one considers the filmmaker's comment in the Prologue: "[it is] a *personal* interpretation and homage to the master" (emphasis added).

Such an analysis may well explain the tyranny of parents, but it does not satisfactorily explain *why* Medea's boy *decides* to assist her. It does not explicate the inner motivations of the child. Ian Christie, however, helpfully suggests that the older son "realizes that he and his brother must die in order to complete her revenge on their faithless father" (2002.157). The child's active share in familial guilt still implies his passive acceptance of irreconcilable parental conflict. The deliberate yoking, subtle but not unfathomable, of "fratricide and suicide" (Christie 2002.157) may be explained by something approximating the combined views of both Christie and Beltzer. The child's complicity is the visual representation of his secondary meaning in the life of a parent: Medea loves her sons, yes, but they are not the loves of her life. Medea's children are ultimately expendable, and it may well be this realization, not vocalized but enacted in the older boy's capture of his brother, his leading of his brother to the hanging tree, and, finally, his placement of the noose over his own head, that dramatizes this scene of recognition and its resultant murderous and suicidal response in the child. Such a reading reconciles Beltzer's theme of the sacrifice of children at the hands of selfish adults with Christie's view that the boy takes on a role in his mother's revenge. According to O. G. Brockett: "The [Euripidean] drama is organized around the question: What does man prize most? and two opposed answers provide the conflict. One answer is: one's children and the promise of futurity; the second is: oneself" (Brockett 1958.26). As we said: Medea's sons are not the loves of her life. Her frustrated love for Jason drives Medea to replace love with revenge; this scorned love has a higher value in Medea's emotional hierarchy, but is, as Brockett suggests, only a form of self-love, manifested in her obsession with vengeance. Medea's obsession with her dignity, with preventing her enemies from laughing at her, culminates in her terrible murders. It may well be that this insight, prophetically heightened by the threat of his own imminent death, inspires her child to assist his mother.

The foregoing discussion has attempted to reveal how von Trier used mechanical means to reassemble an idiosyncratic yet Euripidean *Medea*. His film, "an orchid in the land of technology" (Benjamin 1968.233), presents

a mother who most painfully rejects maternity for vengeance. Von Trier's montage recreates the Euripidean plot as a natural opposition between the mortal earth of Corinth and Medea's sadly triumphant native element of water. This opposition is put forth as an explanation for the narrative representation of Medea's murder of her children, her destruction of the power structure of Corinth, and her escape unscathed during which she is sadly restored to her virginal state. And what of Euripides' dragon chariot? Von Trier replaces it with Aegeus's ship (complete with the clever conceit of a medieval dragon motif)[23]—for after the filicide, we see Medea composed, still, calm in the ship that will take her away just as her dragon chariot did some two thousand years before. Like the heroines of von Trier's later masterpiece, The Golden Heart Trilogy,[24] Medea attempts to solve the moral dilemmas of the human condition, in her case an unfaithful partner, through an anarchic act of personally defined purity to achieve catharsis through suffering.

Catholic University of America
University of Newcastle, Australia

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23 Our thanks to Aaron Chu for bringing this to our attention.

24 *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *Idioterne* (1998), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

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