

Heterogenesis and the Tragic Offstage

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Abstract

The offstage of a realistic (or *mimetic*) play is a space oddly indeterminate with respect to truth. This offstage world is key to understanding how the tragic stage *has always been* a space of *differential heterogenesis*. The offstage provided 5th century Athenians with an alternative to the binary logic that had implicitly been affirmed through the introduction of metal coinage. An information theory perspective suggests that, in his tragedies, Aeschylus created an archaic, psycho-affective computational software to run on the newly reconfigured spatial hardware of the stage. The crucial feature was his placement of the *skênê* with its central door, its “anti-logic gate.” In the offstage, the coinage-driven “logic of sense” that delivers unity is being problematized and then challenged by a “logic of sensation” in which pre-subjective affects claim their primacy over cognition and ratiocination.

J.P. Vernant (1988) roots the irony of Classical tragedy in the symmetry of Heraclitus’ dictum “Ethos anthropoi daimon:” man’s character (*ethos*) is his fate (*daimon*).¹ The Greek tragedians, Vernant maintains, composed their plays in order to highlight the way this saying works equally well in both directions: Oedipus’ character is his destiny, but clearly his destiny—that which he spends all his energies avoiding—is also his character. At one and the same time, Oedipus is both completely innocent—*ethos* drives him to fearlessly seek the truth—and completely guilty—in seeking truth he completes the prophesy he has been running from his whole life.²

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¹ “All that the hero feels, says and does springs from his character, his *ethos*...But at the same time these feelings, pronouncements, and actions also appear as the expression of a religious power, a *daimon* operating through them” (Vernant 1988: 37). If character (*ethos*) shapes fate, Vernant points out, fate (*daimon*) equally shapes character. And, he writes, “...the logic of tragedy consists in ‘operating on both planes,’ in shifting from one meaning to the other, always—to be sure—conscious of the opposition between them but never rejecting either” (*Ibid.*).

² This reading of tragedy is the opposite of the case Aristotle advances, in his *Rhetoric* and in his *Poetics*—that the art form exists to convey the intelligibility of cosmic order. But “when Aristotle in the fourth century set out, in his *Poetics*, to establish the theory of tragedy,” according to Vernant, “he no longer understood tragic man who had, so to speak, become a stranger” (Vernant 1988: 67). Greek tragic drama was instead an art form devoted to a double vision in which *ethos* and *daimon* are mutually exclusive but equally valid explanations of an action which are to be held in mind at the same time. This “ambiguous logic,” between the individual character (*ethos*) and a “power from the beyond” (*daimon*) according to Vernant, makes tragic man into a riddle “whose double meaning can never be pinned down or exhausted” (3)

But it is not just the dramatic or mythic narratives deployed by the Classical tragedians that announces their deep commitment to contradiction and paradox. The tragic stage, for example, also conveys this paradoxical doubling in *spatial* terms, through the innovation of the *skênê*, a long façade spanning the width of the stage structured around a central door. In the Greek tragedies the protagonist moves from the representational space of the stage through the *skênê* door into the virtual, present-absence of the offstage for the climactic moments—the slaughter of Agamemnon in his bath, or Oedipus blinding himself with mama’s hairpins.³

The offstage of a realistic (or *mimetic*) play—and this is as true today as it was in the Classical era—is a space oddly indeterminate with respect to truth. When Oedipus walks through the doors of the *skênê* into the offstage, we are no longer watching a representation we can judge to be false. Nothing is being *represented* anymore. The figure of Oedipus walks off stage and we hear him scream—there is no way for us to know for certain whether the actor is standing there pretending to have gouged out his two eyes, or if some psychotic stagehand has leapt on him, and done the deed for real with a sharp stick. This offstage world, I argue, is key to understanding how the tragic stage *has always been* a space of *differential heterogenesis*.

The differential heterogenesis of the tragic offstage outlined above provided an alternative to the binary logic that had implicitly been affirmed through the introduction of metal coinage. An information theory perspective suggests that, in his tragedies, Aeschylus created an archaic, psycho-affective computational software to run on the newly reconfigured spatial hardware of the stage. The crucial feature was his placement of the *skênê* with its central door, its “anti-logic gate,” opening into the exterior-interior to reveal the murdered hero. The binary of the *skênê* doors—open or closed—resonates with the poison-cure binarism of the *pharmakon*. The tragic stage space, with its present-absent offstage element behind the doors, also inherently challenges the law of non-contradiction on which Aristotelian logic would later be based; on the tragic stage, Agamemnon is, in a way, both mortal and immortal, complicating the classic Aristotelian syllogism with respect to Socrates (is he dead, not dead, or how about both at once?) It is as if Aeschylean tragedy enacts a culturally dynamic *logic of contradiction* Aristotle was later to commandeer, repurposing it to serve unity rather than multiplicity. This adds weight to Simondon’s call for the development of a “theory of being as it exists previous to any logic” (*Genesis* 317). Simondon goes on to table the startling notion that “if many types of individuation existed, similarly there ought to be many types of logic, each one corresponding to a definite type of individuation.”

³ Prometheus is an interesting exception here. An account of how the image of the door evolved in tragic drama might begin with Aeschylus’ *Prometheus, Bound*. Shackled to his cliff, Prometheus is held aloft in his suffering, his dismemberment enacted daily by the visiting eagle in nightmarish iteration. We are denied entry to the inner space of the *skênê*; our imaginations are punished by the perpetual return. Day breaks. The eagle arrives to consume the liver – the punishment is the looping, mechanical regularity of this sequence. *Prometheus* prefigures Christ: “I am the *true* door.”

The configuration of the Greek stage is not strictly an historical matter, but pertains, I argue, to the situation we find ourselves in today with respect to the derangements of financial capital. This is because tragic drama arose in response to the derangements of an earlier financial innovation—metal coinage, which had emerged in the 6th century to trigger a fundamental cultural transformation.⁴ The virtual offstage through the central doors of the *skênê*, I argue, provided the Athenians with a space in which it was possible to say no to the money form, and to the analogical mode of thought that money promotes.

From the start, metal coinage had been directly linked to the new social type of the tyrant, and to the invisible powers with which the tyrants were suddenly able, in city-states across the Greek world, to seize and hold power.⁵ The door of the *skênê* thus performed a valuable service, enabling tragic drama to inoculate the social body against the insidious strategems of would-be tyrants, and the analogical modes of thought by which money and tyranny propagate.

Before looking in greater depth at the doubling, paradoxical nature of the tragic vision, it is worth noting that the present-absence behind the *skênê* was located in the exact spot where, all day long during the festival period, oxen and other livestock would have been slaughtered and offered to the gods on high. Metal coinage too originated here—the word *drachma*, according to Richard Seaford, first referred to the spits used to burn offerings of meat for the transcendent deities.⁶ Stamped with the face of the sovereign on one side, and with the multiplicity of the market on the other, these bits of metal perhaps retained, as did the tragic offstage, a connection both to the material and to the abstract, transcendent realms.

Coins and doors, it turns out, are intimately related—they both have two sides, they connect as well as separate, they are linked to logical operations, and they mediate between public and private regimes of value. George Simmel, in his essay *Bridge and Door*, sheds light on the alignment between these Attic innovations: *skênê* and coin. To Simmel, a door amplifies the separation inaugurated by a wall, and it does so by creating in the wall an exception:

⁴ Metal coinage emerged independently in three places on the globe at around the same time—in the Greek portions of Lydia on the Anatolian peninsula, in the small city-states of the Ganges River Valley in Northern India, and in Western China. From the start metal coinage was directly linked to a new social type, the tyrant. Marc Shell writes: “those states in which money was not introduced (Sparta and Thessaly, for example) did not develop tyrannies” (1993: 13). And Seaford: “the impersonal, unitary, abstract, transcendent, seemingly self-sufficient power of money...underlies the unprecedented individualism of the extreme man of money, the tyrant at the centre of tragedy...” (2004: 15).

⁵ The transportability of the coin was as important as the sovereign’s guarantee of its value because coins were minted to pay soldiers, and soldiers like to move around. This is not to suggest a causal sequence of coins leading to warfare so much as a co-emergence explaining why coinage “predominates above all in periods of generalized violence” (Graeber 2014: 213) giving rise, for example, to the expansive coinage-slavery-warfare cycle soon after expressed via the Macedonian empire. They want to be sure that the silver they are paid in, say, Athens, Georgia is going to buy them a bag of Cheetos in Kandahar.

⁶ “The Greeks themselves were aware ... that ‘drachma’ meant originally a handful of (six) spits” Seaford 2004: 102).

Precisely because [a door] can also be opened, its closure provides the feeling of a stronger isolation against everything outside this space than the mere unstructured wall. The latter is mute, but the door speaks. It is absolutely essential for humanity that it set itself a boundary, but with freedom, that is, in such a way that it can also remove this boundary again, that it can place itself outside it. (Simmel 1997: 172)

The exceptional nature of the door points toward Agamben's definition of sovereignty as an exception to the rule of law it inaugurates. The Greek tyrants used money to mint a new body of law—the distributed sovereignty of exchange and the marketplace—from which they were exempted through their ownership of mines and mints: the State.

The stakes are high on the Aeschylean stage: a de-individuation is taking place. Tyrannical sovereignty is being de-computed. The coinage-driven "logic of sense" that delivers unity is being problematized and then challenged by a "logic of sensation" in which pre-subjective affects claim their primacy over cognition and ratiocination. The Aristotelian law of identity is being pre-empted in a becoming-collective through an amplification of "awe, pity and terror."

Implicit in Simmel's analysis is the notion that separateness (reason) and connection (knowing) are irreconcilable, but always equally viable, modes of truth. Simmel's argument also provides a way to connect the door—that which "represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act" (Simmel 1997: 172)—with the two-sided object of the coin: finite and infinite, actual and virtual, the coin materializing our confusion about how these two modes might relate to each other. It is as if the Kantian split in our ability to know the world were being shifted, so that instead of hovering above the human mind it now hovers above the world itself.

Coins are diametrically opposed to doors as a mode of superimposing connection and separation, which become accumulation and alienation. Coins exist to conceal, via abstraction, what the tragic doorway exists to reveal, and the opposition between the two draws our gaze toward the politics of domination and the invisible mechanisms by which tyrants seize and hold on to power. As Marc Shell notes, a chief method "of gaining tyrannical sway is for the tyrant to make himself invisible to the people. They are thus unable to see his true nature..." (Shell 1993: 31). The placement of the *skênê* door at center stage emphasized the occluded nature of the tyrant, rendering it in spatial terms as a present-absence. The door of the *skênê*, then, anchors these links between coinage, tyrants and tragic drama with something material and concrete, a spatial antinomy of the coin.

If the idea of a simple object like a coin triggering a cascade of world transforming ideation sounds like magical thinking, so should the Deleuzian notion that truth might be something *differential*, something other than an underlying simplicity we can never quite arrive at because our minds are, *qua* Augustine, just too sinful or, *qua* Kant, too inherently limited. Deleuze's conceptual framework based on difference clashes with particular force against analogical thinking. From the perspective of difference, the seductions of analogy derive

“from a philosophical will to unify generic and specific difference in a single coherent, ‘organic,’ representable whole of being” (Ramey 2012: 133). A coin is a good vehicle for this because, lying at the hinge or fold between interior and exterior, private and public, abstract and concrete—a coin is an analogic machine. Efficiently mediating between the entire range of objects and actions in a way that unifies them, coins *eliminate difference* as a root force, while also allowing transactional values to remain responsive and mobile. With its two sides, the coin offers a false choice between analogy-as-series (the market/tails side of the coin) and analogy-as-structure (the sovereign/heads side of the coin) in which difference is banished to an outer dark, becoming a secondary rather than a primary quality. In the grip of the mistaken presupposition that our choice is limited to these two forms of analogy, we select between them, turning away from immanence, which then returns in the form of tragic irony.

Tragedy, and the paradoxes of tragic irony, emerged, this analysis suggests, to counteract or “cure” the analogical effects of the tyrant and his commonsense *doxa*. The tragic machine, its stage configuration very much included, was designed to break the spell of analogic reason and return us to an originary aporia of differential heterogenesis (which, we note in passing, is a servicable definition of Dionysus, the diety of difference who is “perpetually Other.”) Tragic drama can thus be viewed as an attempt to mechanize incommensurability in a social (and hence political) mode in response to the mechanization of *doxa* centered in the coin.

Opposed to the analogical are the “blocks of becoming” Deleuze and Guattari identify as the *anomalous* manner in which difference operates in the world *as difference*. The figure of the sorcerer, who had seemed so unusual when first reintroduced by Deleuze and Guattari in the 1980s, is the anomalous persona Deleuze and Guattari deploy to challenge the analogic status quo. One benefit of embracing sorcery as an interpretive framework is how it augments ideology, material self-interest and class consciousness in our understanding of political entrainment and motivation. We perceive the world the way we do not just because we selfishly seek profit, are formed by class consciousness, or by the perception-altering force of ideology, but also because we are under spells rooted deeply in complex self-organizing processes within our affective and ontological materiality. As a concept, sorcery thus encourages us to look more deeply into the forces of subject formation that underlie political action. We can see how money might reinforce analogical modes of thinking, helping to create subjects who will tend to see the world in certain linear, recursive and reductive ways, and to relate to experience along firmly encoded, self-perpetuating lines of development. The contrasting mode of the anomalous, the mode of sorcery, provides a vantage point from which to examine this set of predispositions constraining responsiveness and the free play of capacities, whose self-organizing dynamics cannot be understood from within an analogical frame of mind.

With this understanding of sorcery and the coin we begin to see how the *skênê* embodies issues of ontology that were latent in theater to begin with—namely, theater’s relationship to the real. Returning to Oedipus, and the moment of the superposition of the

daimon/anomalous and the *ethos/analogical* as he steps through the door into view as a false actuality, we begin to sense the anomalous symmetry between the double presence, the *material ephemerality* of Oedipus in that moment, and the *ephemeral materiality* of the coin. The door of the *skênê* becomes the inverse of the false binary of the coin, offering us the between Oedipus as a mythic force, and Oedipus as a conventional representation, concealing the fundamental “lie” of *mimesis*—that which Plato inveighed against in *The Republic*. The subversive danger implicit in *mimesis*, in other words, is its capacity to seduce us away from the analogical toward the “witch’s flight” of the anomalous—toward thought as a form of sorcery.

The tragic moment, fittingly, arises not from the nature of truth, but rather from Oedipus’s embrace of normative judgment, another form of *doxa*. Menke writes:

One reason for the continued validity of the tragic experience lies with the normativity of our practice: with the fact that we continue to make judgments and with the kinds of judgments that we make—just as Oedipus secured his fate when he passed judgments on himself and, indeed, because he passed judgment on himself. Oedipus failed to transform his judgment into an act over which he had power, instead, his judgment acquired power over him. As he judged, so we judge. And for as long as we judge in this way, we live with the contemporaneousness of tragedy. (Menke 2009: x)

The *aporia* Oedipus is delivered to (and, thus, the audience as well) when the *dialetheistic* nature of his situation is revealed to him, i.e. the impossible superimposition of the conventional with the absolute, the separate and the connected.⁷ Truths in the play everywhere double up, canceling each other out across the two strata—Oedipus is both guilty and innocent, his fate is both the result of autonomous causation, and also fully pre-determined—and this doubling short-circuits the linear, normative mind. Logical dialetheism, it is important to emphasize, does not assert that all truths are valid; only that the law of non-contradiction is *invalid*. The central issue is the way normative judgment collapses truth to one pole or the other, as if to provide the basis for a unitary, decisive action based on common sense, *doxa* and analogical modes of judgment. Such thought and action are, unfortunately, by definition no more than partial, and thus, ultimately, false. They inaugurate complex chains of nonlinear but nevertheless inexorable causality, chains that include feedback loops propagating across the doorway into interior experience, where they shape our perceptions of the world.

The entraining, spell-like capacity of *doxa* has itself to do with the way the analogic mode of thought the coin gives rise to is blind to difference. Coinage delivers a mode of reasoning

⁷ Graham Priest has explored alternative modes of logic, the paraconsistent and dialetheic, that are fully compatible with the incommensurability suggested by tragic irony. Based on “true contradictions” dialetheic logic holds that some statements can be both true and false at the same time. In direct conflict with Aristotle’s second law, a statement can be true while its negation is also true. As for the consistency of *doxa*, Priest says, “If someone has never found that their beliefs were inconsistent, this probably means that they just have not thought about them long enough” (2006: 96).

and cognition (i.e. the analogical) that renders its own true anomalous nature invisible. This is what makes coins into *self-cloaking objects*. “Visibility and invisibility,” Shell writes, “are associated by some Greek thinkers with something at times believed to be more insidious than tyranny—namely, money” (Shell 1993: 31). This self-cloaking capacity was formalized in Aristotle’s law of noncontradiction, in which the anomalous was banished into the nether regions of paradox. Anchoring absolute to relative, money materializes the excluded third of Aristotelian logic; coins neutralize differential heterogenesis by *materializing* it. The coin can be understood as an object cloaking its own “sorcery.” Intoxicated by analogical certainty, the tragic scapegoats forcefully enact their own demise. The feedback loop acts like a kind of ratchet, drawing the noose of fate tighter and tighter around them. In our era, where the Bayesian logics and algorithmic uncertainty of speculative finance choke off all possible futures, the star-crossed Greek agonists continue to deliver awe, pity and terror.

The virtuality of the tragic offstage is the site of differential heterogenesis, a space for the genesis of the real, thereby providing the necessary precondition for any act of judgment according to the normativity of true and false, and also the normativity of market exchange. The virtual offstage is the place of ontological productivity, linked to both the visible and the invisible: we can only see objects when they are determined, while what remains invisible is the process of determination. This process involves a choice that produces something without respecting, necessarily, the normativity of given, commonsense or doxastic judgment.

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