

## **Catastrophe survived? The failure of the tragic in Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes***

**Angie Voela,**

Failure in the present paper concerns an act that did not take place and a person that did not fulfil her 'ancient' destiny. This is Antigone in Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes* (2010). The play is an adaptation of Sophocles' tragedy.<sup>1</sup> It is set in a ruined city, days after the end of a civil war. The women of Thebes, with Eurydice as their president elect, try to rebuild their city, but have to rely on the financial assistance of king Theseus of Athens. Like Creon, her ancient counterpart, Eurydice forbids the burial of Antigone's brother, Polynices, and threatens to punish anyone who disobeys with death. Soon Theseus and his entourage arrive and seem to sympathise with the women's plight. However, the visit comes to an abrupt end when a boy-soldier is killed by Theseus's bodyguards. As the Athenians prepare for a hasty retreat, the women's hopes to resurrect their city dwindle. In the general commotion Antigone is caught by the guards in the act of burying her brother and is brought before Eurydice. Weary of death, Eurydice retracts the death sentence and orders Antigone to live. Antigone agrees.

Two failures stand out in comparison with the Sophoclean play: Antigone's failure to 'be' Antigone, and the collapse of the social order of the *polis*, which creates a vacuum of values and principles. Lacan claims that *Antigone's* appeal stems from her 'No' to Creon. At the same time, her suicidal determination to adhere to her duty to bury her brother puts her beyond human measure. The 'splendour of Antigone', which arises most distinctly with her final soliloquy, veils her inhuman character and mediates the spectator's encounter with the death drive she embodies (Lacan 1992: 263). The two failures in the new play alter the fabric of the tragedy, transposing it in the realm of the lesser genre of *tragedy of mixed reversals*, or 'catastrophe survived' (Burnett, 1970). *Welcome to Thebes* can therefore be read as it is, a contemporary play in its own right, and as it is not, ever-failing (deliberate) attempt to reach its ancient other.

For Lacan the difference between classical and modern tragedy lies in the fact that the ancient hero has no choice but to act in the way she does. She is 'guilty' before her act, that is, bound to the necessity of repaying a debt she did not herself contract. In modernity guilt and debt are taken from us and 'destiny no longer applies' (Lacan in Zupančič, 2000: 172). The rupture between the old and the new tragedy is therefore subtended by a shift in the structure of desire, which, in psychoanalytic terms, always concerns the subject's knowledge of the status of the Other. The Other in Lacanian psychoanalysis encompasses a range of meanings: the Mother, as first and lost object of love; the Father as representative of the separation from the mother after the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and as traditional figure of authority; language as the system of mediation and representation in which desire is spoken; difference; the social order (see Lemaire, 1991). Lacan regularly avoids specifying which particular aspect of the Other he employs, letting context and the resonances of the term determine the meaning. Below I will mostly be talking about the erosion of the Other in terms of authority, social order and system of differences.

Lacan traces a line of such shifts from Oedipus, to Hamlet, to Claudel's *Sygne de Coûfontaine*: Oedipus finds himself in a situation defined by lack of knowledge and follows a trajectory which leads to knowledge. In *Hamlet* the Other (the Father) knows (that he is dead) and lets the subject (Hamlet) know. The challenge for Hamlet is how to act or not act on that knowledge. *Sygne*, on the other hand, knows that the Other is dead but 'finds herself in a situation where she must make the decision to act despite her knowledge' (Zupančič, 2000: 175). By the same token, *Welcome to Thebes* registers a contemporary subjective position, an attitude towards knowledge and the Other, which determine the scope of the success or failure of one's acts.

The reception of the play could be understood along similar lines. The Athenian spectators were *expected* to experience pity and fear during a performance and catharsis in the end. These emotions arose on the background of solid civic values which could absorb the shock of the events unfolding on stage. Thus, by the end of the play, the threat to the polis – for instance, the pollution from Oedipus's *hamartia* – was removed and order returned. But the contemporary *Welcome to Thebes* may not give rise to strong emotions. This is not simply because it is a 'catastrophe survived' but because, as Baudrillard suggests, we might have lost the capacity for such strong emotions.

Baudrillard claims that contemporary culture might have entered a state of simulation, in which opposites collapse and difference gives way to similarity. He attributes this situation to a process of relentless metaphorisation, a mad sliding of meaning which stops at nothing. This is fuelled by the drive to eliminate death. The resulting life-affirmative attitude is deeply narcissistic and erodes notions of free will, choice, destiny and self-determination. Rather than being characterised by more freedom, more responsibility and more knowledge, our era is marked by a renunciation of all the above. Thus, Baudrillard argues, we may have entered a stage of *cold epilepsy* of history (2001: 73), in which we are no longer able to see, think and feel in depth but only in a very superficial manner. As a result, a potential failure to respond to *Welcome to Thebes*, or to see it as anything but the triumph of life over death, belies a third kind of failure, a potential failure of contemporary subjectivity and culture.

In this paper I will consider the three failures as interrelated and dependent upon one another. First, I will focus on the structural shifts and the ontological conditions that the new play illuminates with its deliberate departure from the ancient drama. I do not consider theatre as mere sociological evidence or as a 'faithful' representation of contemporary subjectivity. I take it as capable of mobilising critical thought, opening up a potential realm in which (our) distance from the past meets the potentialities of the future. More important, I consider it as the realm in which the very possibility of critical thought is put to the test, to the extent that it is not just an inherent capacity but a function related to the prevailing mode of reflexivity in late modernity (see Žižek, 1999). My reading of *Welcome to Thebes* and of the possible reaction of the audience are therefore characterised by the desire to highlight potentialities. Inversely, it is characterised by a failure: a deliberate failure to reach 'useful' generalisations for the contemporary human condition. This epistemological decision is supported by the theoretical insights of Lacan and Baudrillard, who focus on the conditions of subjectivity as individuality, knowledge, seeing, thought and action, rather than on their value as 'solutions' for contemporary situations.

Below I discuss the convergence of Lacan and Baudrillard, starting with on the notion of the Other and the emergence of the nothing/impossible exchange. I also propose a convergence based on the operation of seeing and vision which is particularly relevant to theatre. The theoretical part is followed by a discussion of *Welcome to Thebes* and an illustration of failure qua failure of individuality (Antigone) and the Other (the collective city of Thebes). Finally, I consider the extent to which failure to feel anxiety at the outcome of the play might indeed be taken as evidence of apathy or the Baudrillarian cold epilepsy.

Failure figures in both theories. Lacan considers the unconscious to be a failure (Lacan, 1991: 25), to the extent that it accommodates the aetiology of a symptom, the latter being an indication that something *is out of place*. The relationship between the subject and the Other is also marked by failure. For Lacan, entry to language and separation from the mother imply that the subject has no choice but to seek the satisfaction of their desire in the field of the Other. The pursuit of love objects or culturally validated objects normally serves that purpose. Thus, the subject usually finds its place in the Other without questioning the Other's status. This means that the subject usually perceives the Other as capable of accommodating or fulfilling their desire; or is convinced that the Other 'knows' and hold the key to their desire; or that she herself has a special gift which is indispensable for the Other's existence. In certain occasions, however, this 'peaceful' phantasmatic coexistence cannot be maintained. Then the subject must discover the limitations of the Other, its structural, inherent failure. Every act of knowledge and, inversely, every gesture of ignorance pivots on that truth.

As indicated in the introduction, Lacanians claim that contemporary culture is marked by the erosion of the Name of the Father (Other) as the traditional guarantor of law and order. One therefore needs to come to terms with the *contingency* of the Other, that is, the inherent inconsistency and openness of the social and symbolic system. This is an essential condition of subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, Lacanians would claim that we all live in Thebes, finding our way in the ruins of the old world and trying to build a new one out of the leftover materials. A modicum of subjectivity and Otherness is always maintained. Lacan does not contemplate the total failure of subjectivity and Otherness, which would lead to psychosis. The significant moment for an individual is therefore the moment of coming to terms with *the inconsistency of the Other* which is both liberating, because no one 'rules' over the subject, and devastating, as one loses the safety net of a robust set of ideals. Reaching this point is often described as *symbolic destitution* (Žižek, 199: 59), a zero point of subjectivity and knowledge that interests us today.

Baudrillard is also interested in the failure of the Other but as erosion of difference. As indicated above, he attributes it to the collective desire to evade death and secure one's everlasting presence. Erosion of difference, in that sense, involves the irreparable destabilization of discreet opposites like 'life' and 'death'. However, Baudrillard does not

advocate a mere return to difference or a restitution of the Other. Instead of that, he invites us to think *radically differently*, along the lines of a reversal of causality: ‘it is the object that thinks us; it is the effect which causes us; it is language which speaks us; it is death which lies in wait for us’ (2001: 89). This radical way of thinking is pursued by challenging meaning via a *direct attack on linking* (Levin 1996: 26), undermining causal relations, dismantling consequence, upending order, and prioritising the object over the subject (Baudrillard 2001: 88-9). Baudrillard, notes Levin, questions the Hegelian subject-object dialectic ‘in which the outcome of the history of Spirit is no longer conceived as the triumph of the concrete universal, but as the *squalid failure* of transcendence and collapse into the abstract particular’ (1996: 26, emphasis added).

For the individual the challenge is to understand the conditions of the erosion of meaning, reaching a point where the absurdity of the system becomes self-evident. For Baudrillard the problem starts with the social order. As the latter becomes more virtual and less dependent upon external reference, like a self-contained and perfect Other, we find it increasingly difficult to *judge the truth of appearances*. No external reference point can be established. Many traditional disciplines, like law, economics or humanism face up to the impossibility of external reference or grounding, what is also known as **the impossible exchange**. Likewise, individuals are faced with an impossible exchange when encountering the demise of higher values as a referent for their acts and decisions. Unable to ground their existence in anything else, they ‘turn in on themselves, demanding the right to be themselves, which according to Baudrillard, is the end of the self, the point at which the subject is lost’ (Heggarty 2004: 86).

It is this narcissistic or self-referential turn that Baudrillard seeks to challenge via a process of knowing and seeing based on illuminating ‘the nothing’ and the ‘impossible exchange’ which prove the absurdity of the metaphorical sliding of meaning. This is a process of self-knowledge: ‘We do not know ourselves distinctly and clearly until the day we see ourselves from the outside as another’ (Baudrillard in Levin 1996: 32). This, of course, does not call for a naïve identification with the other, or adopting the other’s perspective as vantage point of view. It rather concerns the surprise of finding ourselves in the place of the other, or under similar limit conditions. Thus, stepping outside oneself constitutes a critical activity which not only brings ideology and culture/Other under scrutiny but challenges the ‘I’ as the centre of thought and certainty. Heggarty notes that the point of view is not external to the subject: ‘Baudrillard has moved on from having this as a privileged ‘outside’, to a

position where *the ontological question of Being as presence (as) opposed to absence is being posed*' (2004: 45, emphasis added). For the subject, encountering the *nothing* and the *impossible exchange* has similar effects to facing one's own relationship to the Other's inconsistency. This convergence is explained below.

In Lacan ([1953-54] 1988:124) we find a visual schema with mirrors that encompasses the complexity of how one sees oneself in the world, that is, in the field of the Other. Lacan proposes an arrangement in which an eye looks at a bouquet of flowers placed at some distance from a vase which is hidden inside a box. The insertion of a mirror creates the illusion that they are one item. In this visual metaphor the eye stands for the Cartesian cogito and the vase and flowers for the unified perception of real object and virtual ideas. The problem is that the eye cannot occupy the position of the ideal observer and is likely to appear among the flowers, as part of what the mirror reflects. The insertion of a second mirror, however, opens up a virtual space in which one can see the coherence and unity of the picture from a vantage point. Zupančič comments:

what happens with the intervention of the second mirror is precisely what Kant describes as a 'dialectical illusion'.... The 'I' as a pure form of transcendental apperception transforms itself – via the notion of personality implied by this configuration – into an identity which appears *as if* it really held in the realm of what is... [the subject] cannot – if we pursue the visual metaphor – see himself seeing. The possibility of such a perspective opens up only with the concept of the regulative idea that constitutes precisely the virtual point of view with which the subject identifies in order to perceive this 'unity' (2000: 74).

Lacan contends that the emergence of the coherent and convincing image for the eye depends on the inclination of the mirror, which in turn depends on *the symbolic connection* between human beings (1988: 140, emphasis added). It follows, therefore, that we can envisage a situation in which symbolic connections fail, transcendental ideas fail, the mirror shifts and the inclination changes so much that it reflects *nothing*. I find the concept of the inclination of the mirror relevant to Baudrillard's critical position. Too much inclination of the mirror – too much virtuality, for instance, or instability in human relations – frustrates the eye and exposes the virtuality of transcendental ideas and the certainty of the ego. The eye, which could have appeared as sovereign and external to the visual arrangement, is drawn into the scene. By the same token, the disruption of the scopic activity by the removal of the objects creates a sort of blindness, showing to the subject that it is only ever part of the arrangement. In that sense, Lacan seems to converge with Baudrillard who claims that the object and the world 'thinks' the subject rather than the other way round, casting serious doubt on the privileged exteriority of the thinking-observing-knowing subject.

Baudrillard further comments on the function of seeing and knowing, drawing on the visual arts. In 'Impossible Exchange' (2001) he discusses the 'Pigsty Installation' in which the spectators look at a group of pigs while seeing themselves in a mirror doing that. Then, moving on, they reach 'a two-way mirror through which they can once again see the pigs, but at the same time also see the spectators opposite looking at the pigs – spectators unaware, or at least pretending to be unaware, that they are being observed' (2001: 107). This self- and other- scopic activity disrupts the illusion that one can observe unnoticed. At the same time, the experience of moving through the installation undermines the spectator's uniqueness and, as in Lacan's schema, shows that the sovereignty of the subject is only an effect of what is constituted 'as scene' (and seen) via a 'dialectical illusion'.

The full potential of this progressive movement of seeing is found in later Lacan. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan sums up the essential operation of drive as a tri-partite movement: to see, to be seen and to give oneself to be seen. With this movement, Lacan notes, a new subject appears (1991: 178). The Lacanian drive, a constant force which supports desire but remains partly outside the Other, reveals its radical potential to the extent that it is not subservient to culture. It engenders a subject which is not caught in the excitement of its own scopic capacity but capable of encountering what it means to reveal itself to its own and the other's gaze, taking into account that it (subject) is just another element of a complex scene. This property of the drive, I argue, is conceptually very close to the contemplation of presence and absence as fundamental difference and the pursuit of the impossible exchange (see Voela, 2012). Both tend towards the limits of self-presence and the meaning of absence; both involve the realisation that the scene holds *me* in its gaze as much as I hold 'it' in my gaze. Failure to notice, to grasp the terms of the subject's implication in its own world, is a failure of critical thought.

The Ancient Greek language does not have a word for *free will*, at least in the sense of 'choice made with deliberation or an action accomplished of one's own volition' (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 59). This is because the motivation of human acts lies in the hands of gods, in *ate* (fate), or is the consequences of deeds committed in the past and haunting the present. In *Welcome to Thebes* life-affirmative free will appears to prevail. Yet, it remains problematic, caught, as it is, in the mesh of destruction. This is signified by various erosions

of meaning that undermine the frame of reference in which 'life' and 'death' are normally perceived as different.

The first erosion occurs at the level of the collective social Other. In Ancient Greek drama the death of the hero marks the return to normality. In *Welcome to Thebes*, the city as symbolic order disintegrates. The women's failure to secure Theseus' help entails that the social fabric unravels. An opposing faction tries to woo Theseus and start a new civil war. When they fail, they approach Theseus' enemy for help. The death of the young soldier by Theseus' bodyguards goes unpunished, demonstrating the violence of power. When the delegation leaves, Ismene, Antigone's sister, tries to flee Thebes reneging on family values. Thus, the Other as system of symbolic values and unassailable laws appears bankrupt and failing. Faced with an ever unpredictable turn of events the Other re-acts, shifts and changes haphazardly, caught in a perpetual state of emergency and failing to ground itself in its own authority (Žižek 1999: 368).

In Baudrillard's terms, this Other implodes upon the dissolution of discreet values. The important point here is not to determine who might be responsible for that, but to see that the collapsing Other can no longer be the valid frame of reference for any person's acts. In that sense, Antigone and others are free to do as they like in a vacuum of Otherness. The Other, already decimated and unstable, is *indifferent to her act*, sliding towards an internal logic of *in-difference* and *deferral* in the face of more pressing matters arising all the time. Thus, in-difference becomes the general context in which life and death substitute one another, the background of their (impossible) *exchange*.

This is further shown when logos (speech) subsides. Language and authority are inextricably linked in psychoanalysis and classical thought, allowing subjectivity to come into being in one's own words. In *Welcome to Thebes* logos withers. There is no *agon* (verbal contestation) between Eurydice and Antigone, as between Creon and Antigone. Instead of that, there is admission of defeat, pardon, solidarity and renunciation of the 'heroic' ethos. Eurydice sounds almost maternal in her admonitions:

E: You see, the opposite to suffering, the opposite of great heroic destiny is a quiet ordinary life: to love. You've done enough for death, Antigone, you can retire from service I would say; Tiresias, please tell her she is free. (Buffini 2010: 88)



There are a lot of references to blindness and seeing in the play. Eurydice can see her enemies scheming behind their back, while the mighty Theseus cannot see that calamity – his wife’s suicide – will soon befall his own house. One of the main characters is the blind seer Tiresias, who welcomes everyone ‘to the country of the blind’, exhorting people to see clearly. Haemon, Eurydice’s son, has lost his eyes during the war. He is in love with Antigone: ‘my images of you are now stuck in the past. I doubt I will see your face again, though I imagine it. Are you still there?’ (Buffini, 2010: 45). Ismene incites Antigone to see that if she buries their brother she will be helping Eurydice’s political opponents: ‘Can’t you see something more important going on?’, she asks, indicating that allegiance to the emerging democracy is the only duty. But Antigone is afraid of the dead who ‘see everything we do’ (2010: 30). At the same time, according to the women of Thebes, ‘dark matter’, a cosmic equivalent of blindness, threatens to envelop the world (2010: 55).

In such circumstances Antigone feels the pressure of fate: ‘I lead the blind’ she says, alluding to escorting her father Oedipus into exile, ‘I bury the dead, I follow the path, I am Antigone’ (2010: 62). When Haemon asks her to marry him, Antigone feels the pressure of duty: ‘It’s coming, my destiny, swooping through the air, atoms heavy with intention’. But when she thinks that her act is turned against Eurydice, and is associated with the death of the young soldier, she thinks:

A: I am fighting with the gods of death, they are above the ground, I’m trying to appease, to do as they require... I’ve fought with them, and begged, and now, they’re feeding on that boy. This is not, is not my destiny (2010: 80).

And when confronted by Eurydice about the political implications of her act:

A: Ismene thinks about the future all the time, and Haemon too. I’ve never understood their lack of fear. My future’s always been the desolate track I walked with my father, leading on ahead past rotting corpses and bloated dogs, through burning villages, through war. Oedipus saved the sight, But I saw my destiny, my destination, Death (2010:87).

But then she hesitates she asks: ‘What’s to be done?’, to which Eurydice replies: ‘There’s no such thing as destiny, there’s only change’ (2010: 88). Soon afterwards, Antigone seems to grasp the entire picture: the hopeless future of Thebes, the machinations of the opposition, the violence inherent in human nature, but also Haemon’s love and Eurydice’s commitment to democracy: ‘Ismene said: “Can you not see?”. I want to see what life is like, to live’ (2010: 96).

The life affirmative choice arises as the only possible choice in a world saturated with death. A temporal dislocation is at work: it is not the past and the present that determine the subject but the future which comes their way with the force of an imminent disaster. Thus, the new tragic predicament is not how to deal with the burden of the past but how to be prepared for what is yet to be-come. It is this potentiality that marks the shift from the old to the new play.

Formal similarities normally invite us to seek equivalences: although the new Antigone is but an ordinary girl, she has the same name, is in the same predicament and acts in the same manner as her ancient counterpart. But what is the criterion of being Antigone? Is it her act (burial-defiance-death) or does uniqueness lie elsewhere? Inevitably, comparison leads to the concept of 'individuality' and 'free will', for which there is little room in the old play. But reading *Antigone* with Baudrillard in mind shows how stretching 'similarities' to absurdity problematizes identity and difference as the bedrock of modern thought (Baudrillard 2001: 52). Opposites are undermined: life exchanged for death, seeing for blindness, and adherence to the laws of the dead for political allegiance. What is unclear, however, is whether we can *legitimately* equate literal living with metaphorical dying, taking the view that life in a destroyed city equals death. For Baudrillard this exchange proves the power of the unstoppable symbolic and metaphorical equivalences to which we might feel inclined to subscribe. At that point we are compelled to consider the influence of our own life-affirmative disposition which makes us *see* the point in erasing Antigone-the-inhuman by reintroducing her in a (metaphorical) circuit of a meaningful and justifiable desire to live.

The emphasis on seeing and blindness highlights the subject's attempt to see herself in the bigger scheme of things, contemplating her own presence and absence in the failing Other. It resonates, of course, with Oedipus's blindness, and the latter becomes an important point of reference for the new play. However, freedom, choice, destiny and the ability 'to see' are not to be understood with reference to the burden Oedipus bequeathes his children, but with reference to his act and his process of knowing. This is explained below.

In psychoanalytic terms the notion of freedom involves a paradigmatic shift from the pathological to the ethical. The latter concerns the disengagement from the desire of the Other and a 'correction' of the subject's attitude towards it. Freedom does not mean feeling suddenly independent or indifferent towards the Other. It strikes a balance between the lack of options, the fact that 'I couldn't do anything else', and the fact that 'I was carried along' by

the stream of natural necessity. Paradoxically, it is at the very moment, when the subject is conscious of being carried along by the stream of natural necessity, that she also becomes aware of her freedom (Zupančič 2000: 27). Thus, when an obligation is given up as 'not worth it', it becomes an ethical act only if the subject has already passed through and abandoned the lack of the Other, appreciating the importance of causal determination but not falling victim to it. This is what the new Antigone does, when she recognises her obligation towards her family but also the fact that she does not need to die for that cause. This is how she is carried by the tide of necessity, which Eurydice aptly calls change. Therefore, her act is not an act of passive compliance with destiny but an act of freedom to the extent that it subscribes neither to the foretold destiny of death, nor to the idea of propping up the collapsing order of Thebes (contingent Other). At that moment the subject *is* her own *cause*. Thus, the statement 'this is not my fate', implies that she cannot see herself either in the old or the new order. This rather impossible and lonely position of subjective destitution, chimes with the Baudrillardian perspective of seeing from a perspective that allows the subject to contemplate their presence and absence. At that crucial moment, the subject encounters both her own and the Other's presence or absence, their individual and collective blindness and demise.

Psychoanalysis elaborates on this point: from that ex-centric perspective, the subject rediscovers *the possibility of choice*. This 'empty place', from which one speaks – again resonating with Baudrillard's seeing as other – shows that behind this choice there is *nothing*, no 'meta-foundation' of freedom' (Zupančič, 2000: 37). The relation to the Other is therefore altered and the ethical act is made possible: 'the subject of freedom is indeed the effect of the Other, but not in the sense of being an effect of some cause that exists in the Other. Instead, the subject is the effect of the fact that there is a cause which will never be discovered in the Other' (Zupančič, 2000: 41), that is, she is the *failure* of cause.

The difference between the classical heroes Oedipus and Antigone is relevant at this point: Oedipus starts from a position of ignorance and initiates the pursuit of truth by committing to it verbally. One's word therefore is the little 'something' in *exchange* of which the subject enters the game of truth without yet knowing its consequences (Zupančič, 2000: 203). By the end of the play Oedipus arrives at (self)knowledge, finding himself to be the object of his inquiry. Unlike Oedipus, who does not know, Antigone already knows the law and power she opposes and her act stems from knowledge. Moreover, it is an act of fidelity to the family ate which repeats and settles the past. In *Welcome to Thebes* the new Antigone

moves from knowledge (of destiny) to not knowing (being unable to see herself in the world), comparable to Oedipal ignorance. This knowledge allows her not only to separate herself from her past but to commit verbally to the future ('I want to see what life is like, to live'). *Choice* from that perspective, as commitment to future truth and knowledge, evokes both the act of her ancient counterpart, who *repeats* the paternal past, and that of Oedipus. It is therefore caught between two replications/repetitions: *seeing* like the other (Antigone) and failing to see like the other (Oedipus). But her uniqueness is her *difference*: it lies in being or becoming neither, embodying the impossible choice between life and death, knowledge and non-knowledge, past and present. The new Antigone therefore hovers in the realm of the impossible exchange, having seen as other and having seen *nothing*. There is perhaps another contemporary shift that we need to take into account, the interminable *oscillation* between opposites, which is neither the collapse of difference, nor its proper recuperation in a new meaning. In that sense, the failure of both points towards a universe full of Baudrillardian irony: countless reversals, seductive similarities, in-determinations and im-possibilities which contribute to an incessant migration of ignorance and the rise of nothing.

Below I will consider the spectators' engagement with the play in terms of meaning and affect. I will focus on the ending and the gradual emptying of the scene. This rather conventional theatrical device takes on special significance in the context of the two failures discussed above. The departure of the Athenians, the exit of the women of Thebes, the departure of the soldiers and the symbolic departure of Antigone at the start of a new life, create the impression that 'nothing happened', where *something* ought to have taken place.

Borrowing the mirror arrangement of seeing and transcendental ideas from Lacan and the movement through the *Pigsty Installation* from Baudrillard, we can argue that the spectator of *Welcome to Thebes* undergoes a similar scopic experience: from seeing and observing the unfolding action, to witnessing the advent of *nothing*, the 'emptying' of the scene. The conditions for an impossible exchange arises at this point: a demand for a final settlement which seeks to exchange the '*nothing*' for '*something*', to make sense and recoup some value for the vacuity in front of us.

Let us dwell on the moment in terms of meaning and affect. Meaning may be established if one thinks backwards, in retrospect, and in a manner similar to the psychoanalytic interpretation of the past: what we were seeing was nothing – the gradual

collapse of the social and subjectivity. What we were looking at was objects gradually moving out of sight. In that sense, the nothing we encounter clearly at the end of the play is but a repetition, the advent of our (the individual's) deceptive distance and vanishing from the (social) scene, the delay of which enabled us to catch a glimpse of ourselves as proper individuals for a while. A new kind of knowledge arises at that point as one considers one's place in the scene: I am the drive, a *nothing* supporting desire, catching a glimpse of my displacement in the trajectory of events, being dis-located in *a scene* (not a screen) appearing before my eyes as that which implicates and contains me in its structure. If the world around me collapses, I cannot be watching unaffected. I am therefore forced to contemplate my own elision alongside the contingency of the Other, my presence and absence, my life and death, my success and failure.

These thoughts may give rise to anxiety. In psychoanalytic terms, anxiety is the affective equivalent of meaning being annihilated<sup>3</sup> (Verhaeghe 2001), as *nothing* appears in its place. *Anxiety* therefore emerges as the new possible tragic affect. The reverse, failure to feel, would mean that we are probably already locked in an endless circulation of images, in a metaphorical pigsty of stagnant, repeated significations. Failure to feel means that we are content to reach a happy ending, and a blindness concerning our own presence and absence in a spectacle which we refuse to consider as anything but an object of enjoyment.

In Lacanian terms one would have to ask: is there another hope or another choice at that very moment, when it becomes obvious that the tragic feeling of the play relies heavily on the movement of the drive which can sustain/deny the endless circulation of meaning? Are we supposed to revel in our condition, affirming our elision, lack or aphanisis, and turning to a being-for death, like the ancient Antigone? Or do we catch ourselves thinking that a death is required – Antigone's new death – to restored order and good sense to the world? Are we nostalgic for a death that justifies and supports order? Choice at this point would call for *separation* in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, the necessity of reintroducing some symbolic difference and some binary opposition – a modicum of Otherness. For Baudrillard it is perhaps enough to have reached the point of impossible exchange, and with it the anxiety of presence/absence. Ultimately, therefore, the question of success or failure rest on whether subjects can still experience the impossible exchange and, with it, their own 'death' before the automatic 'reflex' of life disrupts the process. Failure to do so means that we have already passed into a state of cold epilepsy, into an affectless indifference to 'life' and 'death' as significant opposites.

For those who seek to attribute meaning to the *nothing* in front of their eyes, the secret according to Baudrillard is not to seek to explain it but to see *differently*: to come to terms with the object and the world, not simply as failing Other but as that which thinks and contains me in its complex arrangements. Theatre lends itself to this operation as play of forms which still evoke traditional opposites and may successfully hold on to the last important obstacle to total simulation: the impossible exchange between ‘nothing’ and ‘something’:

Duality no longer has a credible content for us, except in art, entertainment and the politics of race and gender, which are remnants of traditional morality in the modern age... [dualism] has been almost entirely reduced to the abstract, formal or diacritical differences between on off, true false, public private, present absent... the actual content of culture has been reduced to an endless continuum of equivalent(s). (Levin 1996, p. 91)

If theatre still maintains that formal property, then the juxtaposition of old and new forms of tragedy might be producing enough dissonance and dislocation to enable us to think the future and the present. In Lacanian terms, the anxiety-provoking knowledge arising at this point suggests that the permissible point of view is one of failure and renunciation of mastery: knowing nothing, staying stupid, as Nobus and Quinn (2005) put it, regarding the essence of the psychoanalytic epistemology. In that sense, a certain failure is always required for things to start and success should never be measures in terms of gain but by the disruptive effectiveness of the entire experience. Ultimately therefore, it is the impossibility of exchanging affect (anxiety) or the *nothing* for a secure and life-enhancing knowledge that differentiates both the Lacanian and Baudrillarian endeavour from the pursuit of commodified enjoyment.

But is this good enough? Baudrillard, for whom radical thought is important, remains ambivalent. Perhaps we are still capable of radical thought; perhaps we have simply developed a tragic vision which always returns us to the same old predicament: it cannot be exchanged for anything, least of all for a different or better life. We therefore find ourselves in the same position as the new Antigone: intellectually alive in an indifferent, disintegrating universe. Yet, the possibility of such a *useless* mode of thought imbues Baudrillard’s thought (see 2001:40-44) and allows a last hope, a positive *failure* which should spread in every

direction, a viable radical alternative to the compromised postmodern reflexivity which has produced narcissistic and self-centred individualism.

Theatre can play an important role in this endeavour, provided that it avoids the endless proliferation of meaningless meanings, demonstrating that there is no logical resolution, 'only a logical exacerbation and a catastrophic resolution' (2004: 84). This, notes Baudrillard, is the appropriate strategy: returning to the system its own logic by doubling it, reflecting it, '*like a mirror without absorbing it*' (2004: 85, emphasis added), a mirror, we might propose, which reflects nothing. Failure to be Antigone, failure of the Other, failure to exchange nothing for something; hovering at the edge of failure, always repeating it in abject, tragic clarity.

### References

Baudrillard, Jean ([1999] 2001), *The Impossible Exchange*, London: Verso Press.

Baudrillard, Jean ([1981] 2004), *Simulation and Simulacra*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Buffini, Moira (2010), *Welcome to Thebes*, London: Faber and Faber.

Burnett, Ann (1985), *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal*, Oxford: Clarendon Oxford Press.

Butler, Rex (1999), *Jean Baudrillard, The Defence of the Real*, London: Sage Press.

Fink, Bruce (1997), *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Heggarty, Paul (2004), *Jean Baudrillard, Live Theory*, London: Continuum Press.

Kellner, Douglas (1989), *Jean Baudrillard, From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lacan, Jacques (1992), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, edited by J A Miller, Book 7, transl. by D Potter, London: Routledge.

Lacan, Jacques (1991), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, London: Penguin Press.

Lacan, Jacques (1988), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan 1953-54, Freud's Papers on Technique*, transl. by John Forrester, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lemaire, Annika (1991), *Jacques Lacan*, London: Routledge.

Levin, Charles (1996), *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Cultural Metaphysics*, London: Prentice Hall-Harvester Wheatsheaf Press.

Nobus, David and Malcolm Quinn (2005), *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid*, London: Routledge.

Sophocles, (1974), *The Theban Plays*, trsl by E F Watling, London: Penguin Books.

Verhaeghe, P. (2001), *Beyond Gender, From Subject to Drive*. New York: Other Press.

Vernant, Jean Pierre and Vidal-Naquet, Pierre (1990), *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, New York: Zone Books.

Voela, A (2012), Antigone and her Double: Baudrillard and Lacan on Contemporary Subjectivity, *Journal for Cultural Research*, DOI: <https://uel-mail1.uel.ac.uk/exchweb/bin/redirect.asp?URL=http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14797585.2012.733604>, accessed 28-11-12.

Žižek, Slavoj (1992), *Enjoy Your Symptom, Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, London: Routledge.

Žižek, Slavoj (1999), *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London: Verso Press.

Zupančič, Alenka (2000), *Ethics of the Real*, London: Verso Press.

---

1. In Sophocles' *Antigone* action takes place at the end of the civil war in Thebes. Antigone's brothers Polynices marched against Thebes which was defended by his sibling Eteocles. Both were killed at the battle but while the latter was buried as a hero, the former was left to decay by decree of king Creon. Creon also decreed that whoever buried Polynices would be put to death. Young Antigone defies the ban and is caught in the act of burying her brother. The play's most famous scene is the verbal contest, *agon*, between Creon and Antigone (Sophocles, (1974), *The Theban Plays*, trsl by E F Watling, London: Penguin Books).

2. See Žižek, 1999: 368 for the effect of the disintegration of paternal authority.



---

3. In psychoanalysis the process of symbolic interpretation is often accompanied by a feeling of anxiety, due to the dissolution of the symptomatic formations that held the subject and the unconscious-Other together. This may also be a liberating moment in which the Other 'meets its limits' (Verhaeghe, 2001:101) and the subject is finally set free from the symptom.