

Reconnecting and Recovering

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The values of democracy and the politics of adaptation: remaking Sophocles' Antigone in a contemporary political and media landscape

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The Athens Epidaurus Festival as a VAST partner

- The **Athens Epidaurus Festival** is Greece's leading cultural institution and one of the oldest continuously running festivals in Europe, spanning 67 years. It has hosted some of the greatest music, dance, and theatre artists of the international and the local scene at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus, the Little Theatre of Ancient Epidaurus, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus and the Peiraios 260 halls.
- **VAST (Values Across Space & Time)** is a research and digitization project funded by EU's research and innovation programme Horizon 2020. It studies the values of the European cultural heritage in relation to ancient Greek drama, the Scientific Revolution texts of the 17th century, and European fairytales. VAST is an international collaboration between eight partners from five countries: the National Centre of Scientific Research "Demokritos" (Greece), Università degli Studi di Milano (Italy), the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece), Universidade NOVA de Lisboa – NOVA (Portugal), the Fairytale Museum (Cyprus), Semantika (Slovenia), Museo Galileo – IMSS (Italy), and the Athens Epidaurus Festival (Greece).

Understanding the political liabilities of values

- The idea of Western Civilization as a singular and universalistic condition with a capital 'C' has been mostly refuted. Such developments have been linked to **reconsiderations of the ontological assumptions of the values** on which civilizations are supposed to be based. It is becoming increasingly difficult to see these values as primordial or as given.
- The political Left since the 1980s has attacked the very idea of civilization, which has generally been seen as a legitimation of colonialism. Postmodernism, which emerged out of this Left discourse, and post-colonial thought declared not only the obsolescence of modernity but also the civilization that modernity was based on. The idea of a 'western canon', based on the core texts of 'Western Civilization' came increasingly under fire since the late 1970s.
- As a result of the **discrediting of a universalistic idea European civilization, the idea of culture moved into the fore** and with this has come a concern with identity. These shifts have also opened up a space for a reinterpretation of the notion of civilization beyond the grand narratives of the rise of the West as well as beyond simple claims to identity (my emphasis)

Delanty, G. (2010) The European Heritage from a Critical Cosmopolitan Perspective, *LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series*, Paper No. 19, p. 98

A corrective of the older 'Grand Narratives'

- Recent developments in historical scholarship and social science on Europe have stressed the **historical variability of Europe as contextualised in time and place**.
- There is a **striking departure from the older assumptions about the cultural foundations** of Europe as self-defining Grand Narratives
- The new approaches have been enormously influenced by developments in **social and cultural theory** which have introduced a degree of relativism into accounts of European identity and have generally invited **scepticism of the possibility of any kind of an objective interpretation of a European order of values** or a foundation for the construction of political community.

Delanty, G. (2009) *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory*, New York, Cambridge University Press, pp. 47-48

Critical perspectives and normative content beyond universalist / essentialist assumptions

[T]he notion of critical cosmopolitanism is used here as a wider framework to approach the complexity of the European heritage and the limits of the notion of Eurocentrism. This is **not a question of seeking the universal validity of European values and culture**. It is a position that seeks to **retrieve the normative content of the European heritage from a point within it**.

Delanty, G. (2009) *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p. 82

A case study in adaptation: Antigone by Sophocles (dir. A. Raptotasios)
Commissioned for VAST, performed during the Athens Epidaurus Festival
2022 programme (5, 6 and 7 July 2022)



Televising the government?

The shredding the separation of estates
and the interpolation of political and media power



Points of departure Creon reinstated

Tiresias and the exercise of power in a mediatized environment



Research design

Proposing and staging Antigone so as to implement VAST's research objectives:

- The play's connection with the project's special emphasis on seven core values, considered fundamental for the formation of European culture: freedom, democracy, equality, tolerance, dialogue, human dignity, rule of law
- The performance's connection, as a contemporary adaptation of ancient drama, with the project's research focus on the present of values

Three key sets of research questions:

- How are values represented in the context of the critique of power through the adaptation of ancient drama? (discursive, visual, performative representation)
- How are values perceived and communicated by the theatre artists? (value communicators)
- How are values perceived and potentially redefined by the audience? (value recipients)

Understanding the representation and communication of values

- Endorsing the critical and interdisciplinary standard in the humanities after the cultural turn and addressing the values of the European cultural heritage by engaging with the respective fields of cultural theory, theory of representation and audience studies
- Incorporating the critical reading of European culture and tradition stemming from contemporary heritage studies, irrespective of essentialist or universalist approaches
- Incorporating the critical reading of democracy and the media stemming from contemporary media and communication studies
- Incorporating the interdisciplinary scholarship on the political and social significations of Antigone and the scholarship on democracy and tragedy in theatre studies

Methodology: a mixed methods approach
Researching value communicators
Qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews

- Three sets of research questions on the communication of values, the representation of power and the politics of adaptation
- 8 semi-structured interviews conducted with theatre artists:
 - Director, Dramaturgist* (conceptual approach)
 - Set and lighting designer, Costume designer* (visual implementation)
 - Four *actors* on the key roles of *Creon, Antigone, Tiresias, Chorus – Coryphaeus* (performative interpretation)

Methodology: a mixed methods approach

Researching value recipients

Qualitative and quantitative methods:
audience questionnaire and focus groups

- Two focus groups

Value recipients: audience members

Value communicators and value recipients: audience members and the director

- Quantitative audience study: questionnaire structured on the basis of 33 variables in three parts: demographics, the perception of values, the perception of ancient drama adaptations
- Random sampling: printed questionnaire / QR code distributed to the audience during the three days of the Antigone performance
- Representativeness: a total of 176 questionnaires (sample) were completed out of a total of 1168 spectators (population), achieving a response rate of 15.06%
- Multivariate analysis: the significance of the variables of age and relation to theatre (professional and/or educational) in the perception of values and ancient drama adaptations

Understanding the politics of adaptation

Adaptation and appropriation are “**frequently, if not inevitably, political acts**”

- Making texts ‘relevant’ or easily comprehensible to new audiences through proximation and updating
- The intention here is to examine in detail the specific impulses and ideologies, personal and historical, that are at play in various acts of adaptation and appropriation
- [W]hat is often inescapable is the fact that **a political or ethical commitment** shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text (my emphasis)

Sanders, J. (2006) *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London: Routledge, pp. 2, 97

Adaptation and / as radical revival

Three key features:

- [C]onvergences between pre-existing sources (many of which are **classics in the sense of works to be rediscovered over and over again**) and **current aesthetic trends** are at the foundation of theatre making, together with the impact of **ongoing cultural, economic and sociopolitical concerns** (my emphasis)

Radical adaptation: reconceptualization of meaning | transgression of boundaries

- Artistic experimentation is closely intertwined with **sociopolitical consciousness**
- **Addressing the present through a prompt from the past**

Komporaly, J. (2017) *Radical Revival and Adaptation: Theatre, Politics, Society*, London: Palgrave Macmillan (pp. 1, 4)

Adaptation as a process and a product: a shared discourse?

Whether an adapted story is told, shown, or interacted with, it always happens in a **particular time and space** in a society (my emphasis)

The adapter's voice:

- Decisions made in a creative as well as an interpretive context that is ideological, social, historical, cultural, personal, and aesthetic

The knowing audience:

- Familiarity with texts, as well as with contexts in cultural, social, intellectual, and aesthetic terms

Hutcheon, L. (2006) *A Theory of Adaptation*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 108, 123, 144

Semi-structured interview excerpts: Alexandros Raptotasios, director

Adaptation as updating: transcending time

- The change [in the performance concerns] perception, nothing else, [its] perception by the audience. There is another form [employed] [...] so as to be perceived by an audience **in the present**, this is the goal. To **translate** a power relation [...], [a] gender [relation], political or state relations, from [the way it was] **then** to [the way it is] **now** (my emphasis)
- The square in front of the palace, which is a public space and [what is said there] is heard outside [the palace], is **translated** into the **contemporary** public space, which is [...] the television channel (my emphasis)

Semi-structured interview excerpt: Orr Benezra Segal, Dramaturgist

Adaptation as an analogy: transcending space

*On representing Creon
as a “puppet of the deep state,” or “the establishment / regime”*

It's a representation of a politician and politics [...] I am very aware of [the] deep state, of puppets in the hands of the state, or [an] institution, or whatever you want to call it, old politics, power, abuse of power, whatever you want to call it, corruption etc. Unfortunately, this play fits [...], [it] will work [out] well in **Greece**, and in **Israel**, and in **Turkey**, but it will work [just] as well in **America** [he means the U.S.A], and in **England** [he means the U.K.], and in **France** [...] For me personally, analogy is a good [term] to use (my emphasis)

First focus group with members of the audience
List of subjects addressed in the performance,
in the order they were acknowledged up by the spectators

- Concentration of power [the shredding of the separation of estates]
- A need for [social/political] change
- The handling of the pandemic
- The handling of public opinion through television
- Censorship and the role of the media
- Propaganda
- The 'phony' [the difference between reality and its representation in the media, the construction of a fake and/or comforting reality]

First focus group with members of the audience

Communicating the value of democracy: the audience as a political body

- [When [the director] turns [the cameras] to us [the audience], it is as if we go on stage as well, which means for us to participate as well, to participate in decision making, in any way we can.

Quantitative audience study: communicating values through ancient drama I

How do you evaluate performances which adjust/adapt the original ancient drama texts so as to become more accessible to contemporary audiences?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Very negatively	1	0.6	0.6
Negatively	7	4.0	4.2
Neutral	29	16.5	17.4
Positively	77	43.8	46.1
Very positively	53	30.1	31.7
Total	167	94.9	100.0
Missing	9	5.1	
Total	176	100.0	

Quantitative audience study: communicating values through ancient drama II

Contemporary performances of ancient drama
may update its content and messages

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Absolutely disagree	1	0.6	0.6
Disagree	6	3.4	3.5
Neutral	15	8.5	8.8
Agree	92	52.3	54.1
Absolutely agree	56	31.8	32.9
Total	170	96.6	100.0
Missing	6	3.4	
Total	176	100.0	

Quantitative audience study: communicating values through ancient drama III

Contemporary performances of ancient drama
may alter its values and meaning

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Absolutely disagree	18	10.2	10.7
Disagree	63	35.8	37.3
Neutral	44	25.0	26.0
Agree	39	22.2	23.1
Absolutely agree	5	2.8	3.0
Total	169	96.0	100.0
Missing	7	4.0	
Total	176	100.0	

Quantitative audience study: communicating values through ancient drama IV

Contemporary performances of ancient drama
may transform and expand its content

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Absolutely disagree	1	0.6	0.6
Disagree	6	3.4	3.5
Neutral	15	8.5	8.8
Agree	92	52.3	54.1
Absolutely agree	56	31.8	32.9
Total	170	96.6	100.0
Missing	6	3.4	
Total	176	100.0	

Rethinking the communication of values through the adaptation of ancient drama

- The adapter's voice as a political critique in the present through the (performative) updating of the original text
- The knowing audience's acknowledgement of adaptation as a political critique through a process of updating
- Adaptation as a shared discourse between artists and audiences and the precondition of the knowing audience
- Key feature: the perception of content by the audience as final co-authors of meaning, and the concomitant importance of critical thinking and dialogue as a resilient feature of ancient drama

Understanding the politics of the European cultural heritage between the past and the present

Certain aspects of the European civilizational heritage such as the **constitutional and democratic state, human rights** and the **integrity of the human person, social solidarities, civil society** and the **critical reason** associated with modern thought represent a **legacy** that is of continued importance for the **present**.

These are **products of the European political and cultural heritage** and have become of universal significance in what is now a globally connected world, albeit one in which Europe is only a small part. Although these are values that are no longer specifically European, they have had their **origin in the great social struggles and movements in the European past**.

As a learning process, then, history also contains **the possibility for societies to transcend the given and inherited**. In the present day such considerations are of the utmost importance as the European Union has for the first time established a political framework that embraces much of the European continent (my emphasis)

Delanty, G. (2010) The European Heritage from a Critical Cosmopolitan Perspective, *LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series*, Paper No. 19, p. 9

Thank you for your attention

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