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Socialist Electra and Democratic Antigone

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF JANCÓS'S *SZERELMEM*, *ELEKTRA* AND DERASPE'S *ANTIGONE*

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1 Introduction

In this essay, I will compare Miklós Jancsó's *Szerelmem, Elektra* (1974) and Sophie Deraspe's *Antigone* (2019). I argue that the juxtaposition of these two films should remind us that the principles of liberal democracy "are a long way from being implemented even in those societies that lay a claim to them" (Mouffe 1995, 1). Both movies question the legitimacy of a certain 'law of man' which on the one hand – in Jancsó's piece – equates to tyranny. In Deraspe's rendering, on the other hand, Western liberal democracy. While *Szerelmem, Elektra* is a dreamy longing for the principles of equality, freedom and justice, *Antigone*¹ makes sure that the viewer understands: there is still a "wide gap" between those ideals and their reality (Mouffe 1995, 1). The exercise of contrasting these movies may prompt the reader to recall Chantal Mouffe's "radical and plural democracy" project. In doing so, not only can we take issue with the "tragic experience of Soviet-style socialism," but also face the alarming shortcomings of liberal democratic capitalism (Mouffe 1995, 1–2).

First, the essay will comment briefly on the films' relationship with the tragic material at hand and offer a brief summary of the plot. Following that, the discussion will carve out some of the formal choices of the directors. This selective comparison of the artistic decisions offered by Jancsó and Deraspe should serve as the basis of the overarching philosophical argument outlined above. Here, the essay also exposes the social backgrounds of each movie. The essay concludes by a discussion on how the comparison of these movies bring the reader closer to an understanding of unity that is based not on rational consensus but the radical appreciation of multiplicity.

2 Tragedies across millennia

To begin the analysis of the movies, it is appropriate to consider the extent to which the films abstract from their tragic inspiration. This question of translation is twofold. First, the directors were confronted with the challenge of translating something that was written for the stage which, contrary to the screen, is submitted to very different laws of space and time (MacKinnon 2013, 11–20). Secondly, they needed to deal with material that was intended as a quasi-religious representation for audiences over a millennia ago (MacKinnon 2013, 22–24). According to MacKinnon's classification

¹ For simplicity, only the two examined movie titles will be written in italics. Hence, when I refer to the Ancient Greek tragedy, I will make it explicit using different means.

Jancsó's film is a "filmic" reworking of the myth, meaning that it "[takes] certain elements of the myth and [uses] these in a new manner" (2013, 97). I should argue that it is equally true for Deraspe's *Antigone*, as it shall become clear shortly.

Miklós Jancsó's *Szerelmem, Elektra* strips the "Electra-myth to its most conceptual, most abstract level" (Szöllősi 2019, 29, author's translation). It is not that surprising for two reasons: first, Jancsó was working not from any ancient text, but from a re-writing of the story by László Gyurkó. Second, his *oeuvre* consists of "revolutionary" films, rejecting traditional story-led filmmaking (Hames 2003). Similarly to the work of a poet – according to Aristotle (1932, 35) – Jancsó does not show what happened, but by "abusing" historical realities, he aims at uncovering general and perpetual truths (Gelencsér 2001).

In contrast, Deraspe's *Antigone* modernised the Ancient tragedy in such a way that Sophocles' core narrative remains intact (de Mancelos 2025, 601). Borrowing the classification from Geoffrey Wagner (1975), João de Mancelos (2025, 600) argues that Deraspe displays a commentary to the Sophoclean text. This classification can only be understood in relation to two other classes, on the two ends of the spectrum of adaptation. Transposition would take a text and only minimally modify it so that it fits on screen, like it happened in the case of *Antigone* from Huillet and Straub (1992). An analogy, possibly like that of Jancsó, would take a text only as a point of departure and create a wholly new piece of art (Wagner 1975; as quoted by de Mancelos 2025, 600–601). While both movies depart – to a varying extent – from their respective originals, it is now that I introduce briefly the relationship between the tragic material and the plot of the movies.

2.1 Jancsó's *Szerelmem, Elektra* and Euripides' *Electra*

Jancsó's film starts from fifteen years after the death of Agamemnon, Elektra's father. She seems to be the only remaining believer, who thinks that his brother Orestes will return to avenge his father's murder. Aegisthus, the tyrant, who is responsible for the death of Agamemnon, orders the people to celebrate 'Justice' to mark the death of his brother. Orestes is announced dead, yet the body is not his, according to Elektra. A messenger arrives, who is bringing the news about his actual death. Elektra, in turn kills him in cold blood. Following this, Elektra is ordered to be killed as a punishment for the murder. The messenger comes back resurrected, revealing himself as Orestes. The people revolt against the tyrant with the inspiration from the siblings. Orestes

murders Aegisthus' chiefs and then the tyrant himself. The siblings recognise that their role is constant death and rebirth, just like it is the role of the red phoenix which Elektra's voice identifies with revolution.

While almost only the core of the story – the need for revenge – is preserved, I would point out one interesting similarity. Compared to Aeschylus' and Sophocles' works on the Electra myth, Euripides removes the play from the royal court (Luschnig 2013, 380). The peculiar placement of the play in Euripides can be understood as a commentary on the socio-economic inequalities present in the Athenian citizen body (Chiasson 2013, 207). Similarly, there is a commentary in the placement of Jancsó's film as well. The Hungarian plain conventionally signifies freedom with its endlessness, yet here gives space to a story about oppression (Hancsók 2014). Hence, both the tragedy and the film offer a note on their respective social reality, solely by means of spatial organisation. In Jancsó's case, however, this is only one of the symbols that are directed towards questioning the legitimacy of tyranny. Some others will be dealt with later on.

2.2 Deraspe's *Antigone* and Sophocles' *Antigone*

Deraspe's *Antigone* takes place in nowadays Montreal where she and her family took asylum from the war in Algeria. Her parents got killed in this war, so she migrated with her grandmother (Méni) and her siblings Ismène, Eteocle and Polynices. She is a well-integrated, straight-A student whose whole life gets turned upside down when the police arrests Polynices who assaulted a police officer, after a police shooting which resulted in the killing of Eteocle. In lieu of an investigation of the shooting, Polynices faces deportation, as the family could not secure citizenship status. To help her brother, Antigone dresses up as him, to help him escape from prison. She is soon discovered and brought to a youth detention centre. His boyfriend, Hémon, organises a protest movement which successfully disturbs one of the hearings of Antigone at court. Yet, her sacrifice and the possibility of a reduced sentence go up in flames, as the police successfully capture Polynices. Antigone gives up her life as a Canadian citizen – which would have been possible through the offer from local politician Christian, Hémon's father – and will be deported to Algeria with Méni and Polynices.

Compared to Jancsó's adaptation, in this case, much less of the original tragedy's elements are abstracted. This, of course, does not mean that it would be a more realistic theatrical adaptation. It is just as filmic (MacKinnon 2013) as Jancsó's, yet

definitely not an analogy (Wagner 1975; de Mancelos 2025), for it preserves much more of the original text's narrative structure. Here, one significant similarity between the tragedy and the film has to be the appeal to unwritten, moral laws – “*mon coeur me dit*” (Deraspe 2019, 1:06:34-1:06:37) – in opposition to human decrees. The political statement in both Sophocles and Deraspe, in contrast to the spatial organisation of Euripides and Jancsó, is much more explicit.

If we accept Nicole Loraux' (2002) idea of the “antipolitical²,” then we can see how these movies succeeded in capturing at least one key feature of the original tragedies. I argue that while cinema never claimed unity based on consensus, both social contexts, in which the movies were made, did. In one of Aegisthos' speeches, Jancsó explicitly showcases the consensus that János Kádár³ established in the socialist regime after the revolution in 1956: “blood brings order, government is based on the mutual fear of ruler and ruled, the law is a reminder of permanent guilt. As a result, the people are happy” (Hames 2003). Similarly, in Deraspe's film the viewer is confronted with the consensus established in Western democracies: the law works a certain way, court proceeding needs to be respected, and so on. Arguably, both directors reject – or at least strongly question – the unity based on these kinds of consensuses. In the next section, it will become apparent what formal tools were used to achieve this.

3 Soviet socialism and Western democracy

I argue that both directors – using different strategies – seem to suggest that the viewer (us) is partly responsible for allowing the consensus described above. And by comparing these formal choices, the reader should understand that the movies call for a rejection of the obligations of the ideology they are responding to. For this discussion, I choose three formal categories⁴ for comparison: 1) signification through *mis en scène* and camera, 2) editing and choreography, and 3) costumes and colours.

² Antipolitical can be called “any behaviour that diverts, rejects, or threatens, consciously or not, the obligations and prohibitions constituting the ideology of the city-state” (Loraux 2002, 26).

³ Communist leader of Hungary post-1956, responsible for establishing the „Hungarian model” in which oppression was based on mutual agreement that this is the best possible system available (Romsics 2016, 105–8).

⁴ For the sake of simplicity, I have grouped formal aspects of the films based on the extent to which they are used similarly in signification.

While both films merit a lengthier discussion, the analysis below should be sufficient for the sake of my argument.

3.1 Mis en scène and camera

Mis en scène refers to the “complex analytical term⁵” dealing with the arrangement of visual elements on the screen (Giannetti 1999, 43). The arrangements of framing, setting, photography, and so on help translating the three dimensional space in front of the camera into two dimensions of the screen (Giannetti 1999, 54). As such, it deals with how things appear in front of the camera which is conventionally what the viewer identifies themselves with (Giannetti 1999, 13).

In Jancsó’s *Szerelmem, Elektra*, just like in many other movies of his, the director’s emphasis lies in “the physicality of different appearances inside the frame” (Valkola 2018, 145). As noted above, the film is set in the Hungarian plain whose endlessness is often associated with freedom. But it is juxtaposed to the “eerily transparent” tyranny of Aegisthos, represented by the ‘palace building’ (Szöllősi 2019, 28). Using the interactions between landscape and the masses on screen, and the viewers’ observations through “perceptual” (Valkola 2018, 156) camera movements, he pushes verbal narrativity to the background (Gelencsér 2001). Through the perfectly organised mass-landscape choreographies, symbolic objects and the composition of images, the viewer is confronted with the social knowledge and value-systems of Hungary, during the Kádárist consolidation era (Gelencsér 2001; Valkola 2018).

In contrast, Deraspe casts her film where the camera and the setting assume a wholly different role. With many close up shots on Antigone’s (Nahéma Ricci) “penetrating gaze” (Santoro 2020, 229), and the relative closedness of the physical spaces around her (e.g. prison cell, interview rooms), the viewer is pulled into a perpetual feeling of anxiety. Even more interestingly, the director chooses to operate significantly with camera angles that suggest the viewer’s identification with the people around Antigone. For example, she tells the story of her migration to Canada in front of a class, where the camera slowly skews up on her from the point of view of the classmates (Deraspe 2019, 0:04:18). It would be hard to deny that here identification is with

⁵ “Mise en scene is a complex analytical term, encompassing four distinct formal elements: (1) the staging of the action, (2) the physical setting and decor, (3) the manner in which these materials are framed, and (4) the manner in which they are photographed”(Giannetti 1999, 43).

Western audiences: “you, from the comfort of the cinema chair, who heard many stories like that of Antigone and did nothing.”

The choices regarding *mis en scène* and photography, I think, works directly with the emotional registers of the viewer. If someone watched *Szerelmem, Elektra* in 1970s Hungary, and heard the verbal hints regarding the king’s death, the people’s contentment they surely associated to the Kádarian socialism and Imre Nagy’s death⁶ (Teller et al. 2023). Seeing on screen the plain of freedom, with the masses confined by the horsemen, could have evoked a feeling of sorrow. For many, it could have been seen easy to run off to the horizon from the oppression of the tyrant. Yet, it could never be achieved, just as the end of the socialist oppression could not have been imagined. Similarly, *Antigone*’s anxiety inducing close-ups play with the viewers’ emotions. However, instead of prompting imagination and sorrow, it forces the viewer to feel punished for not standing up against injustices.

3.2 Choreography and editing

The word for cinema and for choreography can be traced back to the same Ancient Greek roots. The stylistic toolbox of the “kinetic arts” can also be seen in movies (Giannetti 1999, 92). The inherent signification in certain types of movements is exploited by the filmmaker as well, suggesting ideas or feelings (Giannetti 1999, 103). However, the complexity of the film choreography is infinitely broader. Especially, if we think of editing as a choreography⁷ of ‘dance’ between scenes. Editing is the grammatical language of films, connecting different shots, allowing the director to connect the association of ideas with the manipulation of time and space or dramatic intensity (Giannetti 1999, 131–35).

The question of editing is quite simple in the case of Jancsó: “I used long takes because I wanted films without cuts. I’m simply inept at cutting. I always hated flashbacks, empty passages and cuts (Hames 2003 citing from one of Jancsó’s interviews).” Instead, he operates with only 12 shots with meticulously choreographed masses of people who occasionally break into dancing (Hames 2003). We find in his film more obvious ‘movement-signals’, like the horsemen and guards using their whips to move

⁶ Former Prime Minister of Hungary, Imre Nagy was a reform communist leader who was sentenced to death for his role in the 1956 revolution (Romsics 2016, 103).

⁷ “From Ancient Greek *χορεία* (*khoreía*, “dance”) + *-γραφία* (*-graphiā*, «written form (of a word, etc.), spelling») (Wiktionary 2026, “choreography”)

(and control) the masses. But also, *Szerelmem, Elektra* arguably portrays a “revolutionary crowd” (Teller et al. 2023). It is perhaps the easiest to see in two instances: Aegisthos is captured by his own men when his regime collapses, and the now freed crowd makes him their plaything balancing on a ball (Jancsó 1974, 0:41:25 and 0:53:10). The absence of editing and the film’s ritual like features makes this piece require the viewer to engage with whatever is on screen similarly to theatrical plays, subverting the line between cinema and theatre.

On the other hand, Deraspe makes excessive use of editing when creating *Antigone*. Especially, it is worth noting how she transposes the idea of the choir to the modern day. While Aristotle (1932, 71) viewed the chorus as just a character in the play, Loraux (2002) argues that it was actually the driving antipolitical⁸ force in tragedies through the reappropriation of mourning and the representation of marginalised identities. In disagreement with Loraux, Deraspe’s chorus still represents a collective. The chorus becomes a rapidly changing, “polyphonic aggregation” (Kilbourn 2025, 140) of social media entries, underground music, and animation. I should argue that it has two main functions. Firstly, similarly to the camerawork that I mentioned above, contemporary (Western) audiences are being identified in these social media entries. Secondly, it offers a commentary on the double-edged nature of social networks – from spreading hatred against marginalised communities to allowing for the fast spread of social movements (Berardelli 2022; Kilbourn 2025).

If the emotional pressures were not enough, the directors also make sure that the viewer is actively engaging with the movies. In Jancsó’s case, this is through the sometimes surprising, but nonetheless relevant rituals performed by the crowds. As the viewer’s eye is overloaded with symbolism, they need to take certain decisions and process whatever they see and hear. Deraspe’s editing, especially the ‘social media choir,’ almost prompts the viewer to reach for their phones. The urge to be always up to date and present is inherently questioned by the movie theatre. This is what Deraspe takes a step further: the viewer will watch whatever they could watch on their phone. This is especially true from our times of police brutality and immigration raids across the Global North.

⁸ Contrary to other readings which claimed the chorus is the representation of the civic body (Loraux 2002).

3.3 Costumes and colours

The last formal category in my discussion is about costumes and colours. Costumes are not merely decorations pleasing the eye, but they act as a symbolic system telling the viewer about the character at hand (Giannetti 1999, 314). Colour, on the other hand, functions as a “subconscious element” (Giannetti 1999, 24) in films with its expressive and atmospherical nature.

In *Szerelmem, Elektra* the key symbolic tool that Jancsó deploys is the nude female body. It suggests vulnerability in face of the tyrannical power. If we take it even further, the absence of Clytemnestra (Szöllősi 2019, 25), Jancsó exposes the patriarchal rule: under this tyranny no women can lead, as they are at the hands of the tyrant and his court without the possibility of self-determination. This is in strong contrast with the strength of Mari Törőcsik’s acting, or the naked women balancing Aegisthus on a dirt ball. Jancsó seems to comment on his contemporary gender inequality, while claiming that only through true equality – the perpetual death and rebirth of both male and female revolutionaries – can we achieve justice.

Similarly to Jancsó’s much debated anachronistic red helicopter (Petrie 1975), Deraspe is also taking a stance with the colour red. In much of the movie, Antigone is wearing the colour red (a revolutionary colour, maybe), while her surroundings are rather unsaturated cold colours. Even upon her entry to the prison, when she is dressed up as Polynices, we see her glaring red backpack (Deraspe 2019, 0:33:41). The curse of Oedipus – neatly hinted at with a bus advertisement – is represented by men in Antigone’s family. In the family scenes, the colours of black and orange seem to offset the red-white-blue colours of Antigone’s palette, which for some could signify the principles of the French revolution (Kilbourn 2025, 139–40). It is, however, through a change in costume (which for her includes modifications on her body) that the director takes the Sophoclean defiance of Antigone to a new level. Antigone does not only oppose the written laws of Canada⁹ but the expectations towards male and female.

While the question of the female – both in the films and in the tragedies – would warrant further discussion, it is here that I would connect the directors’ strategies, the films’ social context and their message. Through emotional manipulation and forced

⁹ Creon’s character is embodied by not only Christian but also the police, the judiciary, etc.

engagement, both movies open paths for reflections on a certain “law of man.” As much as patriarchy is constructed – and questioned through the formal choices of both – both Soviet socialism and contemporary democracies are also legitimised by (un)written rules and expectations. However, these are, as the two movies showed, not necessarily just. Hence, I claim that both filmmakers can be called “politically committed,” as they seem to “sow the seeds of justice in the form of images” (Brenez 2012; as quoted by Evrard 2021, 536).

4 Films for a radical and plural democracy

It is here, then, that I turn to my overarching philosophical argument about the juxtaposition of the two films, and conclude the essay. The unity, that is necessary for the legitimacy of the ideological systems at hand, is derived from an assumption of consensus. Simply, the argument would sound like this: the consensus is a) that people are content with their unfreedom (under Hungary’s socialism) and b) that an immigrant will accept the possibility of citizenship, when offered with one (in Western democracies). If people’s interpretation of the shared principles of equality, justice, liberty, etc. cannot be reconciled under consensus-seeking assumptions, then we need to design social systems that can accommodate this plurality (Mouffe 1995). This requires the acknowledgements that the contrast between the directors’ pieces provided. The emotional tools they used can offer an imprint of the social psychology present at a given time, telling the reader about the multiplicity of possible injustices across time. The tactic of forced engagement reminds the reader that in such multiplicity of social logics a constant renegotiation of identity and equivalence is needed. Hence, the reader might subscribe to a notion of democracy, in which it is acknowledged that “radical democracy also means the radical impossibility of a fully achieved democracy” (Mouffe 1995, 14).

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