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ELECTRA'S THREE PERFORMANCES BY ANTOINE VITEZ

LES TROIS *ELECTRE* D'ANTOINE VITEZ

Cet article se propose d'étudier la relation particulière qu'Antoine Vitez entretient avec l'*Électre* de Sophocle. À trois reprises, en 1966, en 1971 et en 1986, il traduisit et mit en scène cette pièce différemment. Ces trois mises en scène se nourrissent et se conditionnent mutuellement pour n'en former qu'une seule, une même expérience sans cesse revivifiée. Vitez distingue dans l'œuvre de Sophocle deux niveaux de lecture, celle du fait divers, la pauvre fille, pleurant sur son père assassiné et appelant son frère à la vengeance contre leur mère et son amant, et sa valeur allégorique, l'insoumission face à l'usurpation, la résistance à la tyrannie. Cette double réception d'Électre définit pour Vitez le « théâtre des idées ». Ces trois performances matérialisent les tensions qui fondent l'art théâtral de Vitez, un espace où s'entremêlent de multiples polarités, le singulier et l'universel, le passé et le présent, la distance et l'implication, l'illusion et la vérité. C'est dans l'écart créé par cet ensemble de contradictions que le théâtre met en scène sa propre réflexion critique.

Vitez has a special relationship with the *Electra* of Sophocles. This relationship dates back to his adolescence, when he was studying the play in high school and discovered what he called the "theatre of ideas". According to Vitez, this play displays two levels of understanding the theatrical situation and its allegory, the idea that the character represents. Electra is a poor girl mourning for her father who was murdered by his wife and her lover and calling her brother to take revenge against the murderers, as she embodies the rebelliousness, the resistance to tyranny. Since beginning of the 20th Century, this political interpretation of Sophocles' *Electra* has been quite common in France. The intellectual and artist circles have been largely involved in political and ideological conflicts. Influenced by materialist dialectic, and mainly by Brecht's dramatic theory and practice, the French theatre is mostly

militant. Theatrical practice is perceived as a tool for knowledge, historical as political. According to Vitez, "the theatre helps to clear up the confusion of the world[1]". In compliance with a common reception of Greek theatre at that time, he uses the tragic performance as a tool for critical reflection about civic and political life.

Vitez translated and directed Sophocles' *Electra* on three occasions: in 1966, 1971 and 1986. The three productions are intrinsically linked. Each play goes back to the previous version and announces the following production. Vitez's character of Electra has always been played by the same actress, Évelyne Istria. As Vitez said about his staging, he based all his work on the actor. This longevity of Évelyne Istria is a tribute to the timelessness of the play. Confronted with the immediacy of the theatrical performance, Évelyne Istria embodies the passing of time beyond the time of performance:

> "The permanence of the actress, similar and transformed, same voice, same body, is the permanence of the figure in Time[2]".

His fascination for this play aims precisely for the tragedy of Electra, its narrative content, which therefore gives its moral, social and political meaning. He distinguishes in this play two levels of reading: a psychological drama of the Atreidae family that constitutes the narrative content of a trivial event, like in the news in brief; and a second level, a political reading of the murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra as usurpers of royal power. Orestes is no longer just the son, but becomes the representative of legitimate authority. However, according to Vitez, by murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Electra and Orestes create a new imbalance that calls for a response. Thus, "from one step to another, from an imbalance to another [the play stages] the endless and hopeless march of history of mankind"[3]. Vitez perceived the dramatic action, the chain of violence, as a "theorem[4]". Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the *Seagull* by Chekhov rise from the same "theorem". But, through this word we understand more the mythical narrative, i.e. the plot (μῦθος), than the singularity of the play itself. This theorem is used as a transcendent form without any historical reference. This interpretation of the play is influenced by the structural analysis of the myth, especially the one developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*. The myth forms a permanent structure, which, at the same time, belongs to the past, the present and the future.

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[1] Translation mine. Anoine Vitez "Électre, l'histoire de l'humanité", CD Audio (montage INA), *Antoine Vitez : Trois fois Électre*, coffret livre, CD et DVD. La Maison d'à Côté, IMEC et INA (France), 2011.
[2] Translation mine. Antoine Vitez, "*Électre*. Les vingt ans d'Évelyne", *Le Théâtre des idées*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 56.
[3] Translation mine. Antoine Vitez, "Électre, l'histoire de l'humanité", 2011.
[4] Antoine Vitez, Préface d'*Électre*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1986, p. 7.

Vitez was more interested in the political dimension of Sophocles' plays than the religious aspect of Aeschylus' plays. Thus, if we easily understand what attracted Vitez in the Sophocles' play, in particular the importance of the debate of ideas, it is surprising that Vitez has chosen precisely one of the three ancient tragedies recounting the Electra's drama, which stages a matricide with no glory and no defilement. Unlike Aeschylus' *Oresteia* or Euripides' *Electra*, the end of Sophocles'play marks the end of the "infinite and hopeless march" that embodies the curse. Matricide generates neither expiation nor crime. Therefore, we can ask why Sophocles, and not Aeschylus or Euripides. Vitez replies that Sophocles' *Electra* reveals a "balance more perfect than the two others between family and social life, political life, between microcosm and macrocosm". As Anne Ubersfeld remarks about this quote, "by defining this play, we could believe that Vitez defines its own art[5]," or at least, that he reads it from the perspective of its own aesthetic. Vitez was conscious of this specificity of Sophocles' *Electra*, but he regards this "happy ending" as a variation from the original myth, an illusion of the playwright in order to present an ideal image of the resolution of historical conflicts. Vitez regards this utopia as an artefact; the public knows that it is an illusion and that the conflict can't be solved by a murder.

If Vitez has chosen the *Electra* of Sophocles, the two other plays have remained present to his mind. In his reading, he superimposes and unifies through his staging several versions of the myth. In the performance of 1971, the extracts from Ritsos' poems scattered in the text of Sophocles reflect the depths of the tradition of the Atreidae myth. Similarly, in 1986, the performance of the recognition scene of Electra and Orestes ends with a recollection of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*. Electra takes off her shoes and puts her bare foot next to her brother's, also bare, to mark their resemblance and their common identity. Euripides has already repeated this scene in his Electra to laugh Aeschylus' unlikelihood. Thus, in keeping with the tragic poets, Vitez takes an active part in this theatrical tradition. Furthermore, the physical degradation of the last Electra and the contrast with her mother is more in accordance with Euripides' drama than Sophocles'. Such superposition recalls again the Lévi-Strauss' definition of the myth as the sum of its variations. Thus, it is tempting to draw a parallel between the three dramas written about the same mythical narrative and the three *Electra*'s performances staged by Vitez. Beyond the different variations that distinguish the three ancient dramas of Electra, Vitez seems to reach always closer to the myth.

Vitez is lucid about the distance that separates us from the production of Sophocles. He refuses the idea that there is a continuity between ancient Greece and us.

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[5]   Translation mine. Anne Ubersfeld, *Antoine Vitez, metteur en scène et poète*, Paris, éditions des Quatre-Vents, 1994, p. 98.

The meaning and the interpretation have been altered over the centuries. It is impossible to resurrect the exact signification of the play. His reading is more the result of imagination than of philological or archaeological research.

> "The works of the past are broken architectures, engulfed galleons, and we bring them back to light by pieces without ever reconstructing them, because anyway their use is lost, but by constructing with pieces another thing. [...] Dust removal is restoration. Our work, on the contrary, is to show the fracturing of time"[6].

This work manifests itself both through translating and the staging. The play is a mystery to which we must try to answer, but the answer can only be hypothetical, historical and subjective. Languages evolve and change fairly quickly while the original text does not change. Translation as staging results from the same process, the reading of the text, in its hermeneutic meaning, and the research through imagination of a possible equivalence. As Meschonnic says, "according to Vitez, translating is staging". The text takes precedence over the stage directions; actually it includes the scenic actions. This practice plays a main part in Antoine Vitez's work, almost obsessive, given the great number of translated works (including Chekhov, Mayakovsky, Sholokhov, Sophocles and Ritsos). But this practice arises from an aporia:

> "We cannot translate and yet we have to. [...] It's almost a political and moral duty, which links to a necessity to translate the works. [...] All the texts of humanity are one, big, same text written in languages infinitely various, and all belong to us and everything must be translated".

We have to admit that Antoine Vitez had a penchant for contradiction and impossible ventures. Through this unified perception of a world literature, we recognize the influence of Goethe and the notion of *Weltliteratur*[7]. The translation is then considered as the cornerstone upon which international cultural exchanges are based on. Only the generalized translation may allow the setting up of a world literature.

In order to translate the text of Sophocles, Vitez based his work on several French translations[8], but he used no philological comments. In his "notes[9]" for the performance of 1966, Vitez discusses the translation of Sophocles by comparing his choices with those of other translators. About the verse 144 (τί μοι τῶν δυσφόρων

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[6]   Translation mine. Antoine Vitez, "Des classiques (I)", *Le Théâtre des idées*, 1991, p. 188.

[7]   I refer here to Antoine Berman's chapter "Goethe: traduction et littérature mondiale" devoted to this issue in his book *L'Epreuve de l'étranger, Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique* (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1984, p. 89–107).

[8]   *Théâtre de Sophocle*, trad. nouvelle avec introd. et notes par Robert Pignarre, Paris, Garnier frères, 1934. *Sophocle. Électre. Traduction, notices et notes, par R. Nicolle, Paris, A. Hatier, 1938. *Sophocle. Tome II. Ajax. Œdipe Roi. Électre*. Texte établi par Alphonse Dain et traduit par Paul Mazon, Paris, Société d'édition les Belles lettres, 1958.

[9]   Antoine Vitez, *Écrits sur le théâtre 2. La scène, 1954–1975*, POL, Paris, 1995, p. 135–136.

ἐφίη;) Vitez admits that he copied the imperative "*dis*" added by Pignarre to preserve the phonetic expression of τί and refuses to start the verse with a heavy term like "*pourquoi*". "A recollection of post-synchronization" says Vitez, but also of his dubbing activity to which he devoted much time in his youth. His writing is not only based on literary or theatrical principles, but also on cinematographic techniques. According to Vitez, theatre has to be "a laboratory for gestures and for language of society", and "at the same time conservative to ancient forms of expression and opponent to the traditions[10]". He is concerned about finding a coincidence with the sound of the words regardless of their meaning or the syntactic movement of the sentence. The equivalence that he has researched does not depend only on the semantic level, but also on the sound and visual similarity of the movement of the lips, the gesture that produces the sound. The writing does not seek accuracy of meaning. The primacy given to the text does not mean a sacralisation, a religious respect toward a so-called meaning of the text, conveyed by traditions. Through a constant "hierarchy of signs", i.e. the choices made by the translator, the writing attempts to find a balance to combine the letter with the voice. The translator refuses the dualistic tradition of writing and speaking with on the one hand the fixed text and on the other hand the living voice. This concern, quite unusual for a translator, demonstrates the willingness of Vitez to appeal to the unconscious significance of language, his corporal expression, beyond the tongue in which it is transposed, in order to create a universal language.

In 1965, Jo Trehard, the director of the *Theatre-Maison de la Culture de Caen* invited Vitez, then thirty-five years old, to stage his first play. If Vitez became interested in the theatre very young, until then he only dealt with the parts of the actor and the translator. Vitez chooses Sophocles' *Electra*. By association of ideas, he thinks of Algeria and the war for independence[11].

In "*à propos d'Électre*[12]" Vitez resumes the contradictory dilemma raised by Roland Barthes[13] for the performance of Greek tragedy: reconstitution or actualization. But Vitez sweeps away this dilemma. Electra will not be a reconstitution – in every way impossible because the Greek tragedy is too far from our modern

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[10]   Translation mine. Antoine Vitez, "Le devoir de traduire", *Théâtre des idées*, 1991, p. 294.

[11]   Just after his military service, Vitez was called as a reservist in Morocco in 1953 to participate in the coup d'état carried out by the French Government to remove the Sultan. He keeps a painful memory of this experience: "I felt the colonial repression as a rape situation". After Caen and a tour in France, the performance toured in Algeria.

[12]   Antoine Vitez, *Écrits sur le théâtre 2. La scène, 1954–1975*, 1995, p. 137–149.

[13]   Barthes' reflection responds in a harsh critic to the performance of the *Oresteia* directed by Jean-Louis Barrault at the *Théâtre Marigny* in 1955. "Comment représenter l'Antique ?" (1955) in: Roland Barthes, *Écrits sur le théâtre*, textes réunis et présentés par Jean-Loup Rivière, Éditions du Seuil, collection Points / Essais, Paris, 2002, p. 147–155.

theatre – nor an actualization that would remove the distance between the audience and the play. He wanted to find "something else" and this attempt finds fulfilment through the research of a new language invented through the act of translation. This new language must reflect the "fracturing of time", the discontinuity of linguistic and cultural traditions between the time of Sophocles and ours. Vitez refuses to create false effects that would mislead the audience, for instance, by transposing the Cossack dialect used in the *Quiet Don* by Sholokhov into a French dialect or Ritsos' mistakes into simple mistakes in French. Writing should not seek equivalence by annihilating the distance that separates the translation from the original; this distance has to be "staged" in the text, in order to make it conspicuous. In the performance of 1966, this discontinuity appears through several tensions and contrasts, especially by the distancing effect of the *mise-en-scène* – scenography, actors' gestures and movements – and the proximity of the translation, its concrete and actual texture, its orality. In the staging, influenced by Brechtian theories, Vitez refuses any effect of realism, both in scenography and acting:

"All the protagonists were standing still, even when they were not supposed to be on stage"[14].

The scenography is minimalistic and geometric in order to recreate an "aesthetic of eternity"[15].

"The decor of Claude Engelbach is primarily a playground consisting of stairs extending along the entire length of the stage and of a circle – these two elements are linked together with an inclined plane – and a screen behind which the crimes are committed. [...] Electra, cut off from the living world around her, never leaves the circle and the inclined plane"[16].

All the costumes are made of the same grey fabric which gives the characters a unity, a common identity. The acting is static, stylized, often devoid of emotion, except for Electra, i.e. Évelyne Istria. This contrast draws the audience's attention on Electra as if she were the only one alive. The chorus is composed of three women standing still on the downstage left, facing the audience, "relay between the actors and the audience". In his commentary on the play, Vitez says that the chorus is represented, but not played: "I indicate the function of the chorus". But this function has to be truncated because Vitez gives up the song to preserve the understanding. The meaning of the speech takes precedence over the tragic form. However, he chooses to convey the formal distinction by a particular diction, neu-

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14 Translation mine. Évelyne Ertel, "Comment Jouer le chœur ? Entretien avec Jacques Lacarrière et Antoine Vitez" *Théâtre/Public*, n°88–89, juillet-octobre 1989, p. 52.

15 Antoine Vitez, "Entretien d'Athènes", *L'art du théâtre*, automne 86, n°5, p. 82.

16 Translation mine. Antoine Vitez, "Programme d'*Électre*", *Théâtre des idées*, 1991, p. 456.

tral and close to the liturgical recitation, similar to Claudel's perception of the chorus in his *Oresteia*[17].

A scene is particularly dear to Vitez, the second *agôn* between Electra and Chrysothemis, after the death of Orestes, since it displays the quintessence of his reflections about the allegorical meaning of the performance. The two interventions of the coryphaeus (v.. 990–991 and 1015–1016) are removed to focus the attention on the two sisters. In the lively dialogue that closes this scene, delivered largely in the form of stichomythies, the two sisters stand still and impassive in the downstage, face to the audience. The bodies and voices of both actresses are tense, locked in their position; they give a concrete expression to the tension of this scene. Through this particular acting Vitez stages what he calls the "theatre of ideas," the clash of two allegorical figures, "Lady Justice and Lady Submission[18]". But, far from pouring into the abstraction of language, Vitez transposes the antagonism between these two figures in a common language, very concise to accentuate the brutality and the realism of this dialogue. Their voices and their bodies are supported by their speech. The text gives to the protagonists their scenic consistency. As the three women represent the chorus, both Electra and Chrysothemis embody an idea. In this dialogue, the actresses seem more to recite the text in a kind of public statement, than to act it. Close to the "epic theatre" of Brecht, Vitez aims at representing the idea, not acting it. This break in the scenic action creates a distancing effect and arouses the audience's attention.

In 1967, just after the first staging of *Electra*, Vitez gets acquainted with the Greek poetry of Yannis Ritsos through Chrysa Prokopaki. At that time, Ritsos has just been deported to the islands of Leros and Yaros[19], like many leftist intellectuals following the coup d'état led by the Colonels. Antoine Vitez, seduced by Ritsos' poetry filled with by ancient myths, translates with Chrysa Prokopaki several poems that have been published later[20]. This poetic discovery leads to the second

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[17] Vitez was a great admirer of Claudel who translated the three plays of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Claudel's chorus was influenced by the cantors in religious service reading their sacred text.

[18] Translation mine. Antoine Vitez, Préface d'*Électre*, 1986, p. 5.

[19] The name of these islands is repeated by the Chrysa Prokopaki's voice off several times during this second performance, creating a link between Ritsos and Electra by their common condition when Chrysothemis said to Electra that she is going to be exiled and locked, if she does not stop her complaints (v. 379–382).

[20] *Pierres ; Répétitions ; Barreaux*, poèmes de Yannis Ritsos traduits du grec par Chrysa Prokopaki, Antoine Vitez, Gérard Pierrat ; préface de Louis Aragon, Paris, Gallimard, 1971. *Gestes et autres poèmes*, poèmes de Yannis Ritsos, traduits du grec par Chrysa Prokopaki et Antoine Vitez, Éd. bilingue, Paris, les Éditeurs français réunis, 1974. *Graganda ; Le Clocher ; Vue aérienne*, poèmes de Yannis Ritsos traduit du grec par Chrysa Prokopaki et Antoine Vitez, Paris, Gallimard, 1981.

performance of *Electra* in 1971. Vitez wants to superimpose his initial reading of the play with Ritsos' reading of the myth of Electra in his poems. He inserted in his translation of Sophocles some extracts from the poems by Ritsos on the myth of Atreus, *Oreste*, *La maison morte* and *Sous l'ombre de la montagne* and excerpts from poems that Ristos wrote during his deportation extracted from *Pierres; Répétitions; Barreaux*[21]. Vitez called this poetic collage "parenthesis":

> "These parenthesis shed light on our own reading of the myth through Ritsos' reading – not by expanding, universalizing the myth, but rather by making it more useful for the understanding of contemporary history and of our personal history"[22].

This poetic collage, this superposition of ancient and modern poetry, leads to the creation of two separate acting areas on stage: tragedy and its digression. In the scenography by Yannis Kokkos, this dual space is materialized by a lane arranged crosswise, "symbol of the crossroad of the two texts, Sophocles and Ritsos, dialogue between the everyday life and the myth"[23]. The stage is undecorated and the actors' faces are completely covered with copper makeup, this "face […] luminous tinged with gold powder"[24], mentioned in Ritsos' poetry during the performance, both symbol of the theatrical mask and of the golden mask of Agamemnon discovered in Mycenae . This minimalist setting and the "masks" remind the "aesthetic of eternity" of the first performance. The simplicity of the scenography enabled to stage the play outside the theatre in a covered playground, town halls or gymnasiums[25]. On both sides of the cross, tiers of seats are arranged very close to the stage. This proximity of the public with the scenic action reinforces the tragic tension. When the actors are not acting, they are seated at the ends of the stage, in full view of the audience. Then they rise and slowly approach to come on stage. In opposition to this process of distancing that Vitez has already used in the *Electra* of 1966, he adds another stage entrance. Some actors come on stage emerging suddenly from behind the audience, thus involving them into the stage action[26]. The process of a critical reflection the performance should create rises from the ten-

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[21] *Électre* de Sophocle. Parenthèses de Yannis Ritsos, traduction du grec et montage par Antoine Vitez, Paris, les Éditeurs français réunis, 1971.

[22] Translation mine. Antoine Vitez, "Notes de travail", *Le Théâtre des Idées*, 1991, p. 338.

[23] Translation mine. Georges Banu, Yannis Kokkos, *Le scénographe et le héron*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1989, p. 93.

[24] Translation mine. *Électre* de Sophocle. Parenthèses de Yannis Ritsos, 1971, p. 68.

[25] This production of the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre was performed for the first time in the covered playground of the School of Voltaire in Nanterre. This itinerant theatre foresees the Théâtre des Quartiers d'Ivry founded and directed by Vitez in 1972 to stage performances outside the theatre.

[26] Denise Biscos, *Antoine Vitez : un nouvel usage des classiques*. Thesis, University of Paris III, 1978, p. 249.

sion between the two contradictory relationships, detachment and involvement, of the audience to the dramatic action.

On the vertical floor, Electra draws with a piece of chalk a circle in which she locks herself, a memory of the staging of 1966. This circle symbolizes Electra's temporality in which time is frozen in mourning. The chorus has been removed and his speech is distributed among the protagonists in a diction and monotonous neutral, in order to hear the difference between the voices of each protagonist and the collective voice outside the drama. Vitez preserves the recitative tone of his first *Electra* and thus, he changes the role of the protagonist, both actor and narrator. In this *Electra*, as in the following performance, Vitez plays the part of the Tutor and he takes responsibility for most of the chorus' speech. With regard to his teaching duties, both at school[27] and in the actor's direction, Vitez plays his own part.

The insertion of Ritsos' poems is sometimes materialized by Chrysa Prokopaki's voice-over sometimes by the characters themselves following the text of Sophocles. The dramatic text often breaks up abruptly in the middle of a sentence, as in the prologue, in order to hear the poetic commentary by Ritsos, creating thus a "translation" in the translation. The digression introduced by Ritsos' parenthesis is parallel to the change of diction of the protagonist when he becomes the chorus voice with neutral speech. To the ancient digression a contemporary one is added. Sometimes the shift from one text to another occurs with the use of a word that helps to cross from one universe to another, as the imperative "*écoute*" in the first speech of Electra. For the reader, this insertion is conspicuous by the use of italics, but for the audience, the distinction is more confused. Only the poetic difference or the anachronism can help them identify the collage. This insertion creates a link with contemporary Greece as a mediation with mythical Greece. The poetry of Ritsos transposes this mythical Greece in everyday life:

> "D'autres se sont approchés, qui étaient descendus d'un autocar d'excursion tout neuf, ils l'ont enveloppé d'un tapis pourpre usé et l'ont jeté dans une tombe de fortune"[28].

> [Others approached, who came out of a brand new tour bus, they wrapped him in a worn and purple carpet and threw him in a makeshift grave. (Translation mine)]

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[27]   We must remind that Vitez has always accompanied his work as a stage director with teaching experiences at the University of Théâtre des Nations, the School of Theatre and Mime Jacques Lecoq, the School of Théâtre des Amandiers, the Conservatoire d'Ivry and finally to the École de Chaillot.

[28]   *Électre* de Sophocle. Parenthèses de Yannis Ritsos, 1971, p. 19.

In the same sentence, Ritsos linkes contemporary Greece and its tourist buses which come to admire the ancient ruins, to the purple carpet on which Clytemnestra makes Agamemnon walk down in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, a symbol of his impending death and the mound under which he is buried. From the contrast of the wear of the carpet with the new appearance of the bus rises the discontinuity of time, the break that makes the dramatic re-enactment of ancient dramas impossible. This "purple carpet" also announces the purple curtain held by the Tutor and Chrysothemis to hide the murder of Clytemnestra[29], a symbol itself of the purple curtain of the theatre. Vitez enjoys letting himself get a free association of ideas as a thread to unroll. Like the purple carpet, the costumes chosen by Yannis Kokkos are old and worn. As Vitez, Ritsos does not aim at "modernizing" ancient poetry; on the contrary, he stages the time that separates us from the myth. Its poetic aesthetic is based on this temporal rupture. All the staging aims at displaying this discontinuity, this fragmentation of time, but in the meantime, the distance is removed through the poetic creation of a timeless Greece which merges past with present.

The third performance is different from the previous versions by the sake of realism that occurs in all the element of the performance, the scenography, the costumes, the actors' gestures and movements. This production breaks with Brechtian aesthetics, henceforth seen as dogmatic. This rupture reflects the disillusion with the Stalinism and the collapse of Communist ideology – Vitez leaves the French Communist Party in 1979. The psychological analysis takes precedence over the ideological and political reception and focuses more on individual drama than on collective one. This last performance transposes Sophocles' Electra to our daily life, thus reminding us the "culture of everyday life" defined by Baudrillard as a feature of "Modernity". Now Greek tragedy emerges from our daily present. This new reception requires to go back to the original text with more accuracy in order to heighten the distance with the scene. The aim is no longer to show what is said but precisely what is not said. Theatrical practice becomes significant and increases the possibilities of meaning. The scenography, still by Yannis Kokkos, represents the inside of a poor flat in Athens located in front of the port of Piraeus. Outside, one can hear the crickets, the cockcrow and, far away, the horns of the ships entering into the port. The backdrop shows the wall of the building with three doors that open onto a terrace a reminder of the three doors of the *skene* in ancient theatre. All the drama is staged inside, "in the kitchen", as

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[29]   The crime committed thus on stage remains visible for one part of the audience. Therefore, the conventions of ancient theatre may not be completely fulfilled.

Vitez says; only the murders are committed outside on the terrace. Thus the relationship between the outside and the inside is reversed compared to the ancient tragedy. This inversion transforms the theatrical conventions of Greek tragedy and focuses on the domestic drama. On the stage right, in the kitchen, a table is arranged with some chairs around. On the table coffee cups and glasses are placed with a bottle of Ouzo, "a space for the house's sociability [30]". A radio is put on the table and broadcasts the text of Sophocles in ancient Greek recited with modern pronunciation by Chrysa Prokopaki, a superposition of ancient and modern as in the previous performance. On the stage left, Electra's bed is arranged in the middle with a dressing table on the down-stage which is Clytemnestra's place. In a contradictory way – as its name (*a-lektra*) means "the girl without a bed" – the bed is the space devoted to Electra, both a symbol of the marriage that is refused to her and of the adultery of Clytemnestra. One of the protagonists who probably reflects this realist aesthetic the best, on the verge of sordidness, is Aegisthus. On several occasions during the performance, Aegisthus comes and goes across the stage in silence, he takes out the cash from under the bed mattress, pours himself a drink of Ouzo and puts the money back into the drawer of the dressing table. Vitez played with the cliché of the crook, disagreeable and dressed in a dark suit with white leather shoes. In this last performance, we recognize the sake of details in the decor and the setting influenced by Stanislavski's realism as a medium to recreate reality. Everything on stage translates contemporary Greece, therefore, Vitez no longer needs Ritsos' poetry as a form of mediation to the present time:

> "The total anachronism of the setting and characters is a reference to the poetry of Yannis Ritsos, which embeds classical Greece in the heart of present-day Greece. Thus, although Ritsos' parentheses are removed in the present version, it is even more *'ritsienne'*[31]"

However, the realist aesthetic is not the purpose in itself, it is just an illusion. Each element is a metaphorical transposition of reality. Far from the stylized acting of the previous productions, actors alternate between everyday actions and heightened attitudes. Again we meet Évelyne Istria in the role of Electra. But, by feeling despair and hatred, Electra became old and now, she looks older than her mother, the beautiful and luscious Clytemnestra. Electra's voice sounds mad with rage; she oscillates between speech, singing and crying without transition from one extreme to another or without finding balance. The theatre is a space of contradiction, of the impossible, and through staging the impossible makes sense.

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[30]   Patricia Vasseur-Legangneux, *Les tragédies grecques sur la scène moderne : une utopie théâtrale*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2004, p. 146.

[31]   Translation mine. "Électre vingt ans après", *Acteurs*, n° 36, mai 86, p. 8.

Vitez refuses the obviousness in acting, the artificial identification of the actor. The resistance of the role allows the actor a greater freedom to invent, thus, to construct his own character. Electra multiplies physical contacts with the other characters; she exchanges affectionate and intimate gestures with his sister Chrysothemis, with the chorus composed by three women (like in the first performance) or with her brother Orestes. Like Euripides' Electra, the physical degradation of Electra, wearing a shapeless black dress and dragging her feet, contrasts with the dressing of Clytemnestra who wears a red dress with a neckline, high heels, and lots of make-up to hide her age. The *agôn* between mother and daughter leads to an emotional escalation of excessive gestures of extreme violence. They start by exchanging affectionate gestures and strokes, as we would expect of a maternal relationship. But suddenly, when Electra reminds Clytemnestra of her crime, she grabs her by pressing her hands on her mother's buttocks, underlining her obscene depravation. Then, Electra chases her mother across the whole stage and pins her to the ground, then to the bed in a hand-to-hand fight, a symbol of her impending death on the same bed. This corporal outburst of obscene brutality emphasizes the violence of words. The violence is stylized in a choreography that displays the theatricality of this unleashed *agôn*.

In this production, the chorus' issue has been dealt a little differently. Certainly, Vitez retains the three women to represent the chorus, three neighbours who are successively speaking. However, unlike the previous performances, they move across the stage individually, especially around Electra in an accomplice intimacy. Vitez also adds a coryphaeus, a blind man whose head is crowned with a laurel wreath, a mythical character, intermediate between the prophet and the bard, "the unconscious of the public opinion"[32]. The attribution of the verses between the chorus and the coryphaeus is changed[33]. Vitez breaks the formal distinction between song and speech[34] and replaces it by another distinction that, on the one hand, I would call "everyday speech" used by the chorus, on the other, "oracular speech" used by the coryphaeus. This distinction, which arises from the narrative content of the text, displays in the tonality of the diction. The fast and expressive speech of the chorus contrasts with the slow, monotonous and detached tone of the coryphaeus. For the *parodos* dialogue in which the chorus reproaches

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[32]   Translation mine. Evelyne Ertel, "Comment Jouer le chœur ? Entretien avec Jacques Lacarrière et Antoine Vitez" *Théâtre/Public*, n° 88–89, juillet-octobre 1989, p. 54.

[33]   I remind that in Greek tragedy the sung parts are designed for the chorus including the coryphaeus, but the latter is an intermediary character because, on behalf of the chorus, he also dialogues with the protagonists.

[34]   Like in the previous performances, Vitez doesn't want to use the song in order to keep a clear understanding.

Electra for her endless moaning, Vitez stages a feminine talk in an intimate relationship. But the first *stasimon* that evokes a prophetic vision, the advent of Justice and the curse, is entirely delivered by the coryphaeus. In the same view, the speeches of the coryphaeus in Sophocles' text are distributed between the chorus and the coryphaeus according to their content. Vitez adapts the conventions of Greek tragedy and hijacks them to create his own code with a new meaning. The theatre becomes a space of critical reflection on its own conventions. The polarity embodied by the chorus and the coryphaeus responds to the polarity created by Vitez at the heart of his *mise-en-scène*, the denotative value and the allegorical one, in a tension combining immediacy and transcendence, a principle defining the "theatre of ideas".

The plural understanding of Sophocles' *Electra* leads Vitez to stage it several times to explore all its sides and to experience the plurality of his own staging. It seems impossible to understand these performances in a single way that each performance enriches and determines each other. As Jean-Loup Rivière says, Vitez invents a "perpetual staging" [35], the same experience endlessly repeated, against the immediacy of the performance, its ephemeral dimension. These variations on the same play draw a way to reach always closer to the myth, to display the "theorem" in order to spark off the active audience reflections. The theatre is a space devoted to the impossible, a union of opposites through various polarities, singularity and universality, past and present, detachment and involvement, illusion and truth. Through this cluster of contradictions the theatre stages its own critical reflections.

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[35] Jean-Loup Rivière, "Électre, le temps retrouvé" *Antoine Vitez : Trois fois Électre*, coffret livre, CD et DVD. La Maison d'à Côté, IMEC et INA (France), 2011, p. 9.