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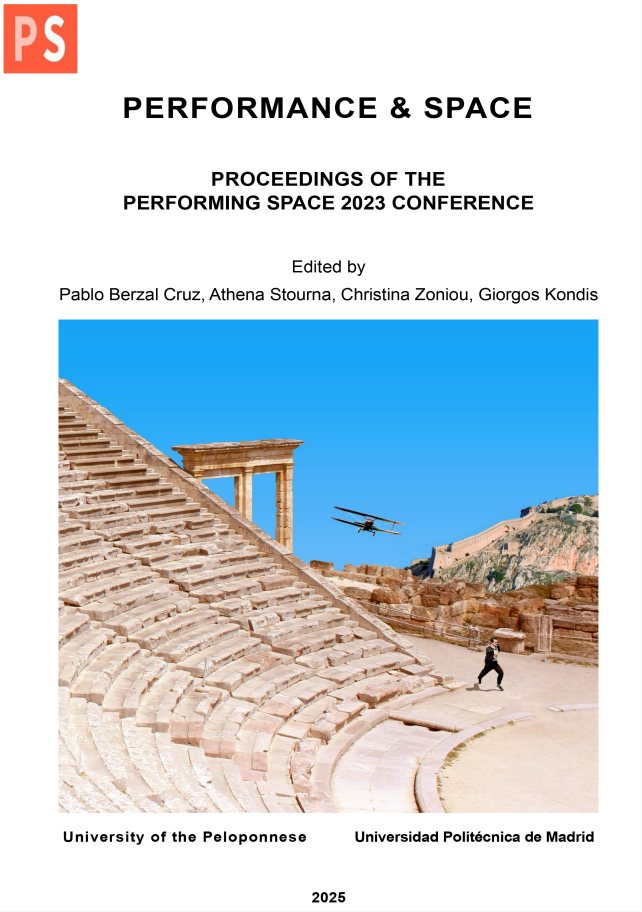

Tragic Space in Site-Specific Productions of Aeschylean Tragedies

Ilias Sapountzakis

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Tragic Space in Site-Specific Productions of Aeschylean Tragedies: *Prometheus Bound* (2010) by Terzopoulos and *The Persians* (2010) by Pearson

Ilias Sapountzakis
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Abstract

Our aim is to analyze the notion of tragic space, using as examples two site-specific performances based on Aeschylean tragedies, both staged in 2010: Mike Pearson's *The Persians*, and Theodoros Terzopoulos' *Prometheus Bound*. In both cases, the tragedy was chosen in the context of highlighting specific historical sites. We will examine these performing spaces and the extent to which they are used to highlight, in turn, the textual tragic spaces. To better understand how the notion of a tragic space can intermingle with the dramatic and theatrical space, we look into the groundbreaking works of Foucault, Wiles, etc. Moreover, our method's tools are the recent studies on the branches of the theatre space and theatre topology, as well as site-specific theory. One of the most important site-specific principles, also used for our selection of the Aeschylean productions, is the differentiation of Transforming and Augmenting Found Space (Bowditch, 2018). More specifically, we have two main types of space: those that are transformed for the sake of the staging idea and those spaces that are utilised in order to preserve their image as it is, which include spaces that are similar to the one in which the action of the play is set, e.g. an Elizabethan palace for a presentation of a Shakespearean play. In our chosen productions, even these barriers are turned down, showing the spiral of tragic space.

Keywords: Aeschylus, Mike Pearson, Site-specific, Theodoros Terzopoulos, Theory of Tragedy, Tragic, Tragic Space.

In Search of Tragic Space

Reader, can we project Disney movies onto the walls of Auschwitz? I ask you right off the bat so that we can clarify the concept of tragic space. Do you think we can? If your answer is no, then you already know in you what tragic space is. While the other elements of the tragic fade away, the tragic space remains. Such a space, charged with the notion of suffering and chaos, is Auschwitz, and perhaps the ultimate tragic space of modern times, with the traces of the people who passed through it preserving it as such forever. Even if we considered the neo-Nazis, it symbolises the end of their empire. It is, therefore, universally recognised as tragic.

The first to deal with *Space in Performance* and introduce us to these concerns was Gay McAuley (1991), according to whom all spaces have their own significance, among them, for example, even the rehearsal space. His work was presumably inspired by the projects of Richard Schechner and his contemporaries during the period when the avant-garde theatre flourished in the post-Grotowskian era. After all, Schechner (2003) mentions the lack of study of unobserved spaces as spectators enter and exit a theatrical space. We should not, however, exclude formal theatres because they, too are capable of mental associations with the surrounding area and all history. In other words, it is of particular importance whether these are codes of socio-cultural influence on theatre and, conversely, codes of theatre's influence on the community (Fischer-Lichte, 2013).That being said, the reception of the theatrical phenomenon should not be confined to the given theatrical space. The spark of this thought was ignited by Michel Foucault and his famous lecture “Of Other spaces” (1967), in which he speaks of a tripartite formation in the history of space: emplacement - *res extensa* - site. It revolves around the position of the building in space, which, on the one hand, we have the extension of space since the localisation of the position is differentiated by the introduction of the concept of infinity, and, on the other hand, the relationship of the building with the surrounding space. The last phase of history to study a site, according to Foucault, opens up spaces, re-creates others, which brings us closer to the concept he introduced, that of heterotopia.

Although Carlson will bring Aristotle into the discussion of *Places of Performance* (1989), we already notice in Foucault an Aristotelian tone, if we take as an example the "division of cities" that the Greek philosopher identifies in the urban planning of Miletus by Hippodamus in his *Politics* (1267b-1269a). The Hippodamian distance (and union) of sacred, public and private space (changing here the Foucaultian order to *res extensa* - emplacement - site) is of catalytic importance in the history of urban planning and also of the theatrical super code which, according to Walter Puchner (1985), can also encompass all cultural systems of meaning production.

Having grasped the importance of the Foucaultian triptych of space, we can see its usefulness in theatre as well. David Wiles (2003) was the first to transfer it to the analysis of theatrical space, by relating it to the notion of the location of the place where performances take place and the surrounding buildings that are special places of worship for the audience-followers of Dionysus. He even proceeded to expand space in the sense of the infinite through the analysis of places where people gather. In this regard, he argued that they were set in convenient locations for people to gather, and that the theatre buildings were erected according to the laws of perspective.

Hence, we see the evolution of theatrical staging as a constant attempt to convey better and better a sense of continuity, invisible to the spectator, and therefore capable of being a passage to infinity. Finally, the chosen site is linked to the dramatic space or distinguished from the space of the theatrical act. As a result, nowadays we are seeing an explosion of site-specific performances, whose local sites are more open to interpretation, while the dramatic space is treated more and more as the "pending space" (Pefanis, 2012, p.513) that it is in its core.And so, we turn our gaze from Foucault and Wiles to George Pefanis (2012) and his analysis of *Theatre and Symbols*. He states:

> Space as symbol is placed between the world and chaos, organisation and disorder, since it represents at the same time a) the type of possibilities, b) the place of the fulfillments of these possibilities, and c) the synthesis of the two previous places in a symbolic field of impermanence and perspective[1] (p.513).

This triptych of space is crucial to the perception of theatrical space and any potentially tragic space.Clearly, it is more difficult to select details of the *mise en scène* to confirm or refute a proposed interpretation, as Patrice Pavis (1982) rightly points out. According to him, the interaction of textuality and iconisation in a theatrical product, but not their perfect blending, allows their elements to remain not exactly autonomous, but not compositional, but parts of a "continuous interaction."

For the interaction of signs, we will turn this time in more detail to spatial signs, which concern *where* an actor A plays a character X in front of someone S (Fischer-Lichte, 1992). Consequently, spatial signs determine the relationship between A-X-S, and each of them individually, based on the place where their connection develops. Therefore, we have to be very observant of the stories the theatrically used buildings can tell us about the individuals in them and even the society as a whole, since these buildings are a part of it. As she points out: In such cases, I am understanding space not as a sign for the practical function that can be

[1]Translated from the Greek by the author.

fulfilled in it, but rather as a sign of symbolic functions which have in one way or another been performed there" (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p.94).

Designating a Tragic Space through Site-Specific Productions

Inspired by the above scholars, we chose to turn to two site specific performances, both staged in 2010, by a Greek and a non-Greek director, in order to place more emphasis than usual on the chosen site of a tragedy, which may be *a priori* tragic. Such spaces, thanks to the theories of site-specific theatre, are increasingly used and the whispers of their walls are included in the performance and by extension contribute to the perception of the tragic nature of the scene.But before we move on to the performances under consideration, we should mention that each site can appear as tragic depending on our experiences. It will be recognised as such in the process if a tragic event penetrates the collective unconscious and becomes a common experience, bringing back within us the essence of *amor fati*. Returning to Immanuel Kant (2008) and his definition of *a priori* knowledge that is, knowledge that is independent of all experience, we could say that every place is tragic from the outset if there is the knowledge of the futility of everything as we step only on a surface that separates us from the chaos of existence.From this perspective, his position that man is gestating his death, or that his very existence represents its end, coincides with the philosophical thought of Martin Heidegger (2008), who saw man as a "being-towards-death", of Albert Camus (2018), of Aristotle, but also can be traced in the work of George Steiner (1996), the author of *The Death of Tragedy*.

For Steiner, of course, the end of tragic consciousness has come with the death of tragedy, after the unbearable burden of the presence of God has been lost. Also, the tragic element of tragic heroes and language are gone insofar as in the present age heroes are presented as expendable with decisions being made by power blocks (Lehmann, 2006), and as the ability of language to convey intact messages is not strong anymore (Ficher-Lichte& Riley, 1997). The irreplaceability of death does not, however, stop the knowledge of the absurd freedom of the individual to create regardless that brings us closer to death (Camus, 2018) and to never stop pursuing the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (bliss[2]).

The ability to "live tragically" is present in all historical transitions of the tragic, as Christos Malevitsis (1992) states. For him, as of any of Steiner's followers, "the place where the tragic event took place is the field where the ultimate cosmic battle occurred, and where the human was crushed" (p. 86). This place will be recognised as tragic just after the crushing of the individual. There the viewer will be able to recognise that place, ultimately defines everything. Time, simply, reveals it.

[2] For a closer look on the Aristotelian term of "*eudaimonia*", see Ross, W.D. (1993, pp.271-272).

In this regard, to carry the thought of Jean-Marie Domenach (1976), who, it should be noted, is at the opposite end of the Steineric “death of tragedy”. He believes that in the 20th century we experienced “the rebirth of tragedy” through the violence and atrocities of the two World Wars, which brought a shift of the tragic from the theatre to that of everyday experience and history. It becomes clear to us when our very culture has become a source of misery.

This source is starting to overflow, if we recall Sigmund Freud (2010), because of man's irrational need to create a psychic past, filling for example, as he points out, an ancient space with meanings to find answers to his psychic quirks, unable to reject, despite of the psychoanalyst's suggestions, the *double* filling. Given this, space as such is more than enough to take us beyond mythical spaces and to function, already since the Theatre of (chthonic) Dionysus, as a channel of the other world.

By analyzing the tragic nature of the scene in the study of two illustrative performances that follow, we hope to inspire an aspiring director to bring such a space to the theatrical forefront and to rejoice over the Dionysian marriage of disorder and order. A marriage that Aeschylus knew too well, linking the Apollonian text and the staging of the *monstrous*.

Mike Pearson's *The Persians:* Highlighting a Modern Tragic Space

Let's start with Mike Pearson's *Persians* (2010) in a mock-village at Brecon Beacons. This is the first tragedy to be staged by the National Theatre of Wales, and was selected as part of a project of ‘theatre mapping' in Wales. Coupled with this, given that Xerxes appears here in a Scottish kilt (or resembling Saddam Hussein in Peter Sellars' 1993 version), we could be discussing a political targeting that was already present in the first reproduction of the *Persians* at Syracuse (470BCE).

More extensively, the reproduction was used to show the connection with a mythological past and the common victory against the barbarians, Persians - Carthaginians (see Eratosthenes, *First Pythian*), with the result that Himera is embedded in Salamis as the site of this “victory,” which is a euphemism, for the enlightened viewer, for shared defeat. Rightly, then, in Pearson's view this tragedy can function as a “work of reportage,” which was utilised multiple times in its staging with constant coverage of the events of the war being carried by the Messenger as a correspondent in the battle or the intrusive close-ups of Atossa by a small camera on the hand of a Chorus’ member as she learns of the disaster. The director's note also clarifies that the tragedy is well suited for the age of 24-hour media, which presents faraway places and nameless people in a context of constant invasion.

What is more essential in this performance is the place itself, which ultimately tarnishes the history of the “winners”. The fake German village, which is rarely seen by citizens, was built to deal with the aftermath of WWII and to this day there are still military exercises by the British

army, during which there have been deaths due to the harsh conditions. More specifically, it is a site that functions as a battlefield, which, however, is constantly changing its name and becoming a different part of the world. And the presence of those who have passed through there “haunts” the place. This modern conflict space is essentially a constructed village that looks half-built or long decayed. A village in which there are no traces of women and children, except, perhaps, in the half-destroyed church that dominated the village that existed in the area before the inhabitants were driven out to set up the military unit. At the same time, the viewer, who takes a tour of the site from the outset, with loudspeakers playing war marches mounted on side tanks, sounds intermingled with the orders of soldiers drilling behind barbed wire, inside a fake tunnel or cemetery in which the tombstones have no names (Rees, 2010).

The place where military tests and exercises on battle scenarios are carried out, in short, in a performance space, was considered the appropriate place to present the tragedy. It is a place where the anxiety and fear that someone will attempt to kill you is apparent everywhere. And the presence of military personnel in the constructed village validates these fears in that it creates a “siege mentality”, to recall Turner's term in *The Forest of Symbols* (1970). At the same time, it is crucial that the place is constantly giving birth to other places and we are transported from Salamis, to Nazi Germany, to Afghanistan and wherever else expansionist policies have left their marks forever visible. For the director, however, the show does not attempt “to function as a mirror of contemporary events but to highlight the timeless issue of human arrogance through the conflict between ancient and modern, in the friction between drama and site.” (Pearson, 2010, p.6).

Here, Pearson revisits the question he addressed, together with Michael Shanks, in their book *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001). They argue that the exposure of structures of the past and the reconstruction of performances that inhabited, reshaped or challenged those structures’ symbolisation, is controversial because it shatters the line of continuity *by exposing history of conflict*. In this respect, his influence of the architect Bernard Tschumi's (1994) theory in relation to site and performance can be seen. The union of site and performance can result in either conflict or indifference. The ambivalence of performance to emphasise the importance of the chosen site or to disengage from it can be equally and mutually revealing.

Thus, we move into the final space of the performance in a building, like an unopened, perishable doll's house that will mentally transport us back to the Persian palace, whose glory will vanish after the outcome of the war. The existing building of the designated performing space is called a host by its team and the one constructed for the performance is called a ghost. It may also be that these two types coexist without a relationship to each other and function autonomously, bringing the site and the drama into further ramifications of the tragic.

Moreover, we notice another important spatial sign, if we turn to the wooden seats-benches of the spectators, placed on a hill opposite the host building, which take us to the first

performance of *Persians* opposite the ruins of the Acropolis hill and the possibility that the wooden seats of the spectators came from the wrecked ships.

In conclusion, this site-specific performance, or site-based to be exact, seems to enrich the history of tragic staging with new meanings through the choice of that specific site, for which its architecture and natural environment play an essential role. And when the site, in general, is inherently tragic and connects or extends the tragic background of the scene, then we can speak of osmosis of the tragic sites.

Terzopoulos' *Prometheiade*: Absorbing the History of a Tragic Space

And let us now turn to our second example of tragic space used in performance, that of Theodore Terzopoulos' *Prometheiade*, staged in Elefsina, the city where Aeschylus was born, and in two of the three European Capitals of Culture 2010[3], Istanbul and Essen. In such places or their equivalents, in a world without gods or their imitations, the director wonders whether, after all, "the world [is] a prison" (Terzopoulos, 2000, p. 81).

All three spaces are indeed reminiscent of a prison yard:

a) The Eleusinian Olive Factory takes us back to the recent past, during one of the biggest economic crises that Europe and especially Greece have experienced. This was the place where the Orwellian God could be targeted and his modern helpers, derivatives of Capitalism and Technology as they distanced themselves from the fate of common mortals. The Chorus' revolutionary call for change did not seem to be heard even so many years after the performance. In addition, to recall the theatrical supercode, we are in the poet's birthplace and the place of the (Eleusinian) Mysteries, which transport us to a past that is inevitably compared to the current decline. A decadence that starts from the Greek Civil War, when the building of the Oil and Soap Factory was in the making, and goes all the way to the economic crisis, when the cracks of the "Greek dream" became visible. During the production, the ships from the port outside the theatrical space could be heard and smokes from the nearby working factories could be seen, as if Hephaestus was playing tricks on us.

b) The Rumelihisari Castle takes us back to the Asia Minor Catastrophe, which will be discussed further below. But let us mention here the significance of the name of the castle, recalling the name given to a province of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and a large part of occupied Greece. Furthermore, the castle in question was built a year before the Fall of Constantinople for that exact purpose, intercepting aid to the Byzantine Empire from the sea. From the millennial Hellenism of Turkey, broken glass remains behind, which awakens chaos within the production's Io and begins the dirge (v. 566- 575).

[3] The third European Capital of Culture for 2010 was Pecs, Hungary.

c) Lastly, the Zollverein Coal in Essen mine takes us back to the *ghetto-isation* of innumerable people under the supervision of the Nazi machine, as it was a stop for the trains leading to the extermination camps.

Having briefly talked about the found spaces of *Prometheiade*, let us convey here the director's words about his “anti-Prometheus”, the hero whose gifts were abused by the people, as the selected, unconventional theatrical spaces of Prometheus prove:

> Prometheus seems current by all that promise that was made and contained everything and contains science, poetry, art, medicine. All this light that was misused to get us where we are. Fire burns, medicine poisons, science disorients. Where is the real knowledge? And what is above all the need. That is the most important definition in this tragedy[4] (Rigoutsou, 2010).

We see how the tragic space is used as an element of cruelty, without the existence of at least one such element at the base of any spectacle, theatre is not viable. To recall Antonin Artaud’s theory in *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938)[5], the degeneration of everything prevails, and to bring metaphysics back into our minds, we must tap into our senses.

Let us turn to the variations that were made in the stage realisation of *Prometheiade* in its three theatrical spaces. First of all, the specificity of the performance in Elefsina also results from the ruins of the olive mill, on which hang a thousand stones, like masks, like severed heads, like rocks to be used at chores imposed by the Nazis on the prisoners. For others, it has the feel of a biblical landscape. In conclusion, some ropes with stones that were part of Jannis Kounellis' stage installation[6] were placed on the side wall of the staircase leading to the audience seats in the Attis Theatre. The spectators pass them by to find their seats, just as, presumably, they passed the statue of Atlas outside Shakespeare's Globe, ignoring the symbols that testify that we too, with a slip, will find ourselves in chaos again. Terzopoulos, of course, offers his own interpretation of the symbolism of the installation: “(it is) a thousand stones like the Caucasus to stone Zeus, the infinite or the spectators” (Loverdou, 2010).

With these words in mind, we will move on to the next stop, Istanbul. There we will find a different stage installation by Kounellis with up to 60,000 eyeglasses on the round stage of the site-specific theatre, and the actors will step on them as another dangerous barefoot-walking

[4]Translated from the Greek by the author.

[5]Artaud’s book was first published in 1938 by Gallimard, and translated into English 20 years later.

[6]Kounellis (1936-2017) was an important artist and frequent collaborator of Theodoros Terzopoulos at his Attis Theatre. Associated with Arte Povera, in the early 1960s he started to introduce found objects and other unconventional material into his artworks. Combining paintings, sculptures and unusual materials like a street lamp or a piece of a newspaper to paint on, he wanted to reflect on the experience of living. From 1980s onwards, the element of performance was never missing from his exhibitions, at times giving a meaning to the space of the exhibition, the gallery itself.

ritual of the Anastenarides.[7] However, the aggressive and chthonic atmosphere of the previous staging, here progresses into a fear for the actor's body as well. The horrific atmosphere is felt by the spectators as the gates of the castle close behind them and war sirens and gunshots are heard. In the war soundscape, which Pearson also utilised, sounds of the city and the Bosporus may signal life again, or still.

And so, we arrive in Essen and the open theatre of the old mine complex, where the spectators were confronted with the decadent technology of a bygone era, defeated by a newer version of it. Analogically, Prometheus represents the mine itself, as symbolised by the Olive Factory, with the olive branches now rotting.

In that Coal Mine we see the retired old trains behind the actors, and like the previous stops of the tour, their clothes are filled with smoke marks, while the lead creates on stage a black void on his belly with charcoal – yet, the meaning of charcoal here becomes darker than before. There is even meat hanging from the trains. The whole picture gives us the horror of a Nazi event, to which we have to witness till the end. In addition, this installation takes us back to the ropes and hanging stones that lined the entire façade of the disintegrating Oil Mill. That atmosphere of anguish and captivity, present in the Istanbul performance as well, ends in an atmosphere of panic. Symbolically, we might say, the stones of the ancient past, the broken glass of the more recent past, and the charcoal with meat of the even more recent past are a sequence, historically linear. The charcoal, moreover, and the raw meat show that this is a recent change of matter, whose decay is not yet complete.

Each installation, guided by the specificity of each performance space, activates a part of memory that evokes human pain. Stones and Civil War, glasses and Uprooting, charcoal and Holocaust. In the meantime, the members of the Chorus of Oceanides are the defeated ones, corpses of the sea.

Conclusion: Marking the Tragic Space

The tragic space, as we have seen, presents itself when we discover within ourselves the inner chaos, which tries to harmonise with that of the universe. Let us remind you here a fitting aphorism from Friedrich Nietzsche (1974): “he who looks into himself as into a vast space and bears galaxies within also knows how irregular galaxies are; they lead into the chaos and labyrinth of existence” (p. 238). Categorisations, like in this paper, and differentiations between spaces serve the ones who are trying to find order in this world, even if we are all within the spiral of the tragic.

[7] *Anastenarides* are people initiated into the ritual of passing through fire and stepping on coals. This custom originates from Eastern Thrace and the initiation may take years till someone is chosen to do the ritual. This society is known for its deep faith, which possesses them during the *Anastenaria* and its members, the “sighers” seem to be at that very moment in trance.

In conclusion, space exists as a container for the production of meaning and as a nest of memory. The use of e.g. an outdoor space in a performance aims at another reflection, that of historical continuity, with the authenticity of the space benefiting the seamless presentation of plays (Fischer-Lichte, 2013). Space, ultimately and unlike the tragic figure, is not simply given but gives the new decisions of fate, representing tragic truth (Lehmann,2006). Consequently, the tragic nature of space in such site-based performances is revealed - or, more correctly, reveals the chaos that lies only one step beyond.

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