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MEDEA BY THEO VAN GOGH

On November 2nd, 2004 being in Amsterdam, I witnessed the storm-wise shock the whole country was affected by, due to the murder of Theo van Gogh.

The end of the happy chaos

Theo van Gogh – a prominent Dutch journalist, writer, TV celebrity, film director was murdered by a Muslim extremist due to his negative stance on Islam, reflected with his usual cynicism in his documentary film *Submission*. The Dutch press wrote that the strangled throat of Theo van Gogh became the symbol of expression of free will, free speech and so called ‘The end of the happy chaos’. After the trauma caused by the death of the popular film director the traditionally tolerant and free nation limited entry of immigrants into the country.

Wrongly understood idealism

In the words of van Gogh, we are living in a nightmare, called the wrongly understood idealism, or ‘the happy chaos’.

The criticism of the film director – cynicism-tainted free speech toward the Dutch press, actors, film directors, writers and all the people who were part of the Dutch ‘establishment’ was reflected in the controversial articles, books and film of van Gogh. He was often involved in debates with various politicians. Due to his cynical style he was often seeking refuge on his website under the ironic nickname of *The Healthy Smoker*, with reference to his smoking habits as opposed to the ‘political incorrect’ attitude of the public towards the smoking.

Politicians were often the primary targets of his cynicism. After the political motivated murder of Pim Fortuyn (the unconventional politician the "divine bold man" as van Gogh commonly referred to, 2002), he filmed the

films 6th *May* and *Medea* (in 6 series, 300 minutes in total) where he continues his severe ideological crusade against the established political elite.

Avro Television, a Dutch media-project creates an initiative aimed at staging of the Greek tragedies. Remarkably, it is Theo van Gogh who initiates the first project by producing *Medea*. Theo van Gogh usually refused funding from the film industry preferring to fund his films by his own or friends' funds and with the help of his loyal sister (script director and composer) to produce controversial films without financial or ideological sponsor attached to them.

My interest towards Theo van Gogh's life and production increased when I learned about the existence of his *Medea*; it was of my particular interest to learn his reasons for choosing this very tragedy and whom he wanted to confront thereby; what did he want to say by filming this well-known tragedy.

Theo van Gogh's Medea

The Theodor Holman's script, created with co-authorship of van Gogh, is based on Euripides's *Medea* but deployed place on the contemporary Dutch political scenery.

It is difficult to discuss Euripides without considering the democratic, liberal and intellectual values of his times. By the same token, it is difficult to speak of Theo van Gogh's oeuvres without taking into consideration the democratic politics, 'political correctness' and 'political idealism' of his times, that this self-made film director often confronted (Theo van Gogh was even joking often ironically that if he inherited his predecessor's – a famous painter's heritage (that his family gifted to the Dutch state) he would willingly invest it in the ideological battle that takes place in his movies.) For the film director, this modern form of dramaturgy was a powerful medium to confront the society immersed in 'political correctness' and 'wrongly understood idealism'.

It is by staging Euripides's *Medea*, by describing psychologically tense relations of Medea and Jason that he tries to depict the real state of 'idyllic politics in an idyllic country' with his typical cynicism: politicians with their intrigues, dirty games and interests, and ever-prominent mass-media, to which van Gogh assigns a task of a sort of 'choir'.

It is remarkable how skilful the script writers are in expressing the context of Euripides's work, key elements, characters, psychological sphere and at the same time adjusting this all to the modern reality: depicting contemporary politicians and normal citizens, making them real, convincing, tragic and ironic, applying van Gogh's irony and cynicism.

Medea – the name of the film – and two main characters: Jason and Medea, are the only two names taken from the antique work. Aietes's,

Medea's father's prototype is represented as Mr. Moyra, i.e. Mr. Destiny, because in the modern Dutch political reality the politician who often utters the words like 'people', 'for the people', 'in coram publico' etc. are doomed for failure, falling prey to the political intrigues. Van Gogh sympathizes to Moyra, the 'escape goat' as we see him in the film, by naming him (albeit once) by the first name – Theo. Similarly, the film director applies the tool often used in dramaturgy – characterizing each of the characters accompanied by the dramatic-lyrical music, semantics, and the symbolism of color of clothes they are wearing.

At the funeral of mother Moyra, the daughter of the Prime Minister (Moyra) meets a man that intrigues her: Jason is a young, attractive, ambitious real estate tycoon. Also, we learn that Mr. Moyra has a problem of political nature. Medea reveals that he is a suspect in a corruption scandal. Jason offers Medea a helping hand but Jason's shaken image, connections with the real estate mobs could potentially create more problems for Moyra. Medea and Jason, nevertheless, become allies.

The film develops further around Jason's character: the film director shows Jason's path of becoming a modern Dutch politician.

Jason is a character without any family ties – even on his credit card both first and last names are written as 'Jason'. Despite his financial affluence he has even higher ambitions – to enter politics. The scandal around Moyra is an ideal opportunity for Jason to enter the political arena. Mr. Moyra is his political idol. Medea's mother is an aspirator to enter the politics and Medea Moyra the desired mother of his future children. The family harmony that Jason lacked and sees at the Moyra's, become fatal for him.

The family complex inspires Jason's monologues that we witness in the beginning of each of the series; when preparing for the election speeches; reference to his non-existing ideal family and children; Jason is obsessed by the thought of running the country as a family! At a certain point we see, symbolically, that four months are left before him becoming the Prime Minister and the birth of his children. Four months before he can run the country as family and create the reality where he wants his children to grow up. For Jason there is no boundary dividing the family and the politics; For him it is important to have family to run the country and run the country for his children to live in the ideal reality. This is the key political alibi that is meant to justify his later betrayal of Medea and more importantly betrayal of his political principles.

Owing to Medea, who takes charge of the political campaign, Jason becomes more and more popular day by day. The TV talk shows are the medium for Jason to convince the people that he will stand for their interest. People, according to his words, applaud him in the streets of the Hague and

the mass-media names him ‘the people’s choice’ or ‘the king of the people’. As in Euripides’s *Medea*, in van Gogh’s work we do not see any genuine interest on Jason’s behalf toward the people. The virtual people whom we never see in the film are one more cynical reminder of the film director of idleness of the people and obsolescence of the ‘people’s choice’ ‘plastic politician’.

Creon and Creusa – Minister Medelinck and his daughter Anna – friends of the Moyra family that actually caused the death of Moyra are themselves active participants in the corruption case. Betrayal of Medea and Jason, and political intrigues are the chosen tactics of the two for reaching out to the Prime Minister seat. Unfortunately, from Medea Moyra they get hold of the corruption-related materials and if revealed Jason is doomed for politically death. The People’s ‘King’ or ‘Slave’ – the question that Jason asks himself when he has to ask her rival to marry his daughter in order to achieve the dream.

Jason cancel his political marriage but still witnesses the death of Medea and his children. Like the tragic ending of the Euripides’s tragedy, the future of characters and that of the country left without a Prime Minister remains equally unclear in Theo van Gogh’s *Medea*. Each of the characters goes through the painful road with the tragic ending because, in Theo van Gogh’s words the pain incurred upon to a human (in a ruthless-cynical way) is the only way to wake him up to ‘the pseudo idealism’ and ‘the wrongly understood idealism.’

Euripides’s work *Medea* is often perceived as the criticism of his contemporary lifestyle and culture. Likewise, Theo van Gogh wrapped the modern political reality into the Euripide’s tragic story and presented to the public as the soap film series. This is perhaps the easiest way to convey the message to the modern society and to show the reality that the modern film director made tragic and cynical at the same time: ‘the nightmare named the wrongly understood idealism.’