

## THE ARGONAUTICA AND CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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### THE PHENOMENON OF RITUAL IN PIER PAOLO PASOLINI'S *MEDEA* AND LARS VON TRIER'S *MEDEA*

Ritual is a very mystical, old, diverse and mysterious phenomenon. We can hardly imagine any historical period, individual or public life, the space of time, of being or country which ritual has not penetrated in some form or other. And it is absolutely impossible to perceive, conceptualize and interpret the age of mythology without comprehending ritual. It is relevant to the scope of any field of the humanities. Ritual dissolves local and chronological boundaries between the spaces.

My immediate goal to consider ritual phenomenon in the films with the same name *Medea* directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Lars von Trier is motivated by several factors:

It is impossible to imagine Medea, the niece of sorceress Circe, and the priestess of Hecate, without ritual;

Contemporary studies tend to look for the cases of ritual not only in various tales and legends, but first of all in myths, religions and literary works. And Medea is a mythological, literary and religious character at the same time.

Cinematic presentation of ritual seems particularly interesting as cinema originated from theatre. And according to widely admitted theories, the latter is rooted in rituals long lost and subjected to modification and evolution along with the changes in consciousness and the development of human artistic vision.

The more remote is the period in chronological terms, the more difficult it is to perceive the magic and moral implications, the meaning, the form, the functional logic, ethnic connotation, world outlook, and specific properties of

the corresponding ritual. And in these circumstances, one may yield to the temptation to perceive ancient rituals through the interpretation, imagination and horizon of great masters of the cinematic art.

Lars von Trier's *Medea* starts with an impressive scene: Medea, lying on the ground, is washed over several times by the sea-water. At first, the viewer has the impression that the scene renders the despair of an ill-fated and exhausted woman, but Medea's movements, expression and the words that follow compel to perceive the scene as an intentional behavior of a sorceress. Soon afterwards appears the daughter of Creon, the King of Corinth. Maids are washing the would-be-bride, i.e. the ritual of pre-bridal washing is being performed. After this, the viewer will interpret the preceding scene with Medea as water-based abluion, which the sorceress performs prior to an important decision or action. The emotion is intensified by the perception that the abluion of the bride is performed by hosts of maids, while the abandoned woman is assisted by nature itself. The director most skillfully makes a soft allusion that Medea is washed off by the waves produced by a passing ship – and, the vessel belongs to Aegeus, whom Medea is to heal from childlessness.

The tragism conveyed through the juxtaposition of these scenes is echoed in the words of Pasolini's *Medea*: 'Chastity is also a curse. Gods love and at the same time hate.' Pasolini also presents the scene of abluion twice: the first scene features purification by the fire, while the second one – by water. The first scene of abluion is set in Colchis: 'Put dresses on me. I must pray in the temple', Medea orders. The servants quickly array the daughter of Aeetes, set the fire, and the sorceress walks through it before entering the temple. The second scene of abluion presents the children, doomed to be slaughtered, as there are being washed and dressed in white.

None of the above-mentioned abluion rituals are described in Euripides' *Medea*, which in fact is the primary source for both films. However, owing to the marvelous mythopoetic design of both directors, all the four scenes fully correspond to the forms of mysteries connected with ancient Greek traditions and described in literature. I will recall several examples: 'Thee I will hallow in the ocean waves',<sup>1</sup> says Iphigenia. On another occasion, Orestes reminds Iphigenia of the following: 'For Aulis did thy mother bathe thy limbs?'<sup>2</sup>

Greek literature illustrates the purifying power of fire as well: the episode when Odysseus cleans his home with fire and sulphur is certainly

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<sup>1</sup> *Iphigenia in Tauris*, translated by R. Potter, The Plays of Euripides, Everyman's Library, vol. I, 1906, 1932, 362.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

unforgettable.<sup>3</sup> And putting on white normally follows the ritual of purification and indicates its completion.<sup>4</sup>

Lars von Trier skillfully uses the third option of purification as well – roaming – when an ousted person leaves their sins on the way and is cleaned. This scene effectively accentuates the wavelike motion of colors, which shows how gradually the earth and the air take the burden of Medea's sins. Contrary to this, I will recall the scene from Pasolini's *Medea*, where the earth is covered all over with cracks, and the woman, who has betrayed her father and fatherland, shrieks in despair: 'I touch the earth with my feet, but do not feel it, I watch the sun with my eyes, but do not recognize it!'

To produce a sharp sensation of tragism, Euripides has the daughter of Creon killed in the bridal attire: 'Their charm and heavenly gleam will entice her to put on the gown and the circlet of the fashioned gold. But the bridal bed she lies in will be with the dead.'<sup>5</sup>

The mythical connection of wedding and death is fulfilled through putting on the bridal gift sent by Medea: 'Already the crown is on her head and the royal bride is perishing in the robe ...'<sup>6</sup> In their cinematic versions, both Pier Paolo Pasolini and Lars von Trier increase the number of characters taking part in the scene and present a real ritual of dressing up a bride. Pasolini goes even farther: he presents the scene when, upon Medea's arrival in Corinth, the locals put on her Corinthian clothes instead of her Colchian garment in the same mysterious way as they will later dress up Creon's daughter.

Pasolini's *Medea* includes another highly impressive ritual: the scene is set in Colchis, where a human sacrifice is performed. The Colchians dismember a lad of distinguished appearance, adorned with the wreath of ears. The offering ritual is attended by the royal family as well. The participants of the ritual dip their hands in the blood of the sacrificed lad and then put the blood on the trees and leaves. The event is undoubtedly related to fertility. The Colchians softly tap each other with the twigs of the trees covered with leaves. The ceremony grows into dancing and games and closely resembles the ceremonies at Dionysian festivals or Georgian folk fertility celebrations. Medea, the daughter of the King, recites the main phrase, the phrase of the supreme order: 'You gave life to the seed and the sun rised from the seed.'

This is the first scene of Pasolini's *Medea*. Now let us recall the last one: Medea does not allow her unfaithful husband to perform the ritual of burying

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<sup>3</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, translated from Greek into Georgian by P. Beradze, Tbilisi, 1979, 490-495.

<sup>4</sup> Ratiiani N., *The Reflection of Ritual in Ancient Greek Literature*, Tbilisi, 2001, 123.

<sup>5</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, The Loeb Classical Library, 1994, 2001, Stasimon IV, Antistrophe 1, 373.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1994, 2001, 381.

and mourning their slaughtered children, sacrificed for the revenge. The same is described in Euripides' tragedy: Medea categorically turned down Jason's request: 'Allow me to bury these dead children and to mourn them.'<sup>7</sup> 'But with all the strength I have, I make my lament and adjure the gods, calling the heavenly powers to witness that you killed my sons and now forbid me to touch them or bury their bodies',<sup>8</sup> utters Jason.

The first and the final scenes of Pasolini's film make up a circle: they both picture human sacrifice. In the first case, the offering is made for the sake of fertility, while the sacrifice in the final scene brings about childlessness. The fulfillment of the mystery is the final touch of the tragedy. If in the beginning Medea is the guarantee for the accomplishment of the ritual, for the observance of moral rite and custom, in the end she becomes the prohibitor of ritual. Medea's performance of ritual in the beginning of the film suggests regular progress of life, while its prohibition indicates the greatest tragedy. In this way, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Lars von Trier attempt to intensify the sensation of tragism and dramatism, and make it perceptible for contemporary viewers through reviving the remotest past.

Owing to the performance of rituals, dictated by social morality and traditions, the world has been following a more or less regular path of life from ancient times till nowadays.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 413.