

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in Modern Film

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By

N. Woodbridge

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Introduction

The tragedies of 5th century BC Athens have seen a revival in the last two centuries they are now a common occurrence in many theatre repertoires and have even made their way into films.¹ Many writers and directors choose to adapt the original plays to convey their own interpretations and ideas, or just to make tragedy more appealing to modern audiences. The influence of Greek tragedy can be felt in a wide range of different works throughout all mediums.

The following dissertation will look at two films influenced by Greek tragedy, and by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in particular. The first of these, *Oedipus Rex* directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, is a modern adaptation of the Oedipus myth. The second, *Oldboy*, directed by Park Chan-wook, is not directly based on Sophocles' play, but shares many features in common with *Oedipus Rex* and with Greek tragedy in general.

The interpretation of Greek tragedy in modern productions is a topic of much debate. Some, such as Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin believe that authenticity to the original can be very effective.² Others, including Peter Burian, Kenneth Mackinnon and David Wilson, advocate a freer interpretation, hoping to affect modern audiences more by a production that is more familiar and relevant.³

The following study will firstly look at the general problems which arise in attempts to produce a modern tragedy based on the Greek model. This will lead to an investigation into how the chosen modern directors interpret Greek tragedy, how it is adapted to suit a modern audience, and in what ways Sophocles' influence can be seen.

¹ Burian, P. 'Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present' in Easterling 1997: 228

² Macintosh, F. 'Tragedy in performance: nineteenth- and twentieth-century productions' in Easterling 1997: 305; Taplin as cited in Mackinnon 1986: 29

³ Burian, P. 'Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present' in Easterling 1997: 228-283; Mackinnon 1986; Wilson as cited in Mackinnon 1986: 24

Chapter 1

Challenges in the adaptation of Greek tragedy into film.

Greek tragedy was originally written in a society very different from our own, presented at a religious festival to the entire community, and with a set of theatrical conventions which are completely unfamiliar to a modern audience. This inevitably creates challenges in creating modern tragic drama based on the Greek model. Some even go so far as to claim that tragedy as a genre is long dead and impossible to recreate in the conditions of modern society.⁴ However, directors continue to face these challenges and deal with them in a variety of ways.

The Challenges

Greek tragedies were based upon stories taken from Greek myth, and as such were well-known to the audience. These stories were not considered in the way we usually understand myth today, instead being thought of as based on real events from the distant past.⁵ They were frequently adapted by the tragedians, suggesting that the accurate details were not by this time considered important. However, most did not doubt the basic truth of the stories, as is demonstrated by Thucydides, who although usually a sceptical historian did not doubt the basic truth of the Trojan War for example.⁶

Tragedians rarely attempted to produce plays not based on these myths. There are instances of plays being based on recent historical events such as Aeschylus' *Persians*, or on invented stories such as Agathon's *Antheus*, mentioned by Aristotle, but such experiments were rare and were generally considered less successful than traditional tragedies.⁷

Modern conceptions of Greek myths generally assume them to be entirely fictional. It is often thought that they had been invented either to explain things which were not yet understood, or to teach morals to society. Many myths have been interpreted as symbols of philosophical ideas, as symbols of natural processes such as the changing seasons, or as aspects of human psychology.⁸

This difference between modern and ancient perceptions of myth means that any modern production based on a Greek myth will be interpreted very differently now than it was

⁴ Mackinnon 1986: 32

⁵ Ayles 1964: 32

⁶ Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War*: 1.3

⁷ Burian, P. 'Myth into *muthos*: the shaping of the tragic plot' in *Easterling* 1997: 185-6

⁸ Hight 1959: 520-4

by the Athenians. Modern audiences have not grown up knowing the myths as the Athenians would have, making them more likely to question the plot. Even in 5th century BC Athens, the myths were adapted to make them more appropriate to the contemporary audience, so it follows that in modern times more adaptation may be needed as the myths are now even further removed from the experience of the audience.⁹

Furthermore, modern writers have much more to work with than just the mythical traditions on which the Greek tragedians based their plays. They have not only the Greek plays themselves, but also over 2000 years worth of interpretations and literary criticism of the plays and myths, from Aristotle down to Freud. A modern production based on Greek tragedy is bound to have been influenced, even if unintentionally, by something of this huge body of material so it will inevitably produce a final product vastly different from the original plays.

Another major obstacle in the production of Greek tragedy today is the huge cultural difference between classical Athens and modern Western society. As mentioned earlier, Greek tragedy was originally performed at a religious festival and before an audience of the whole community of Athens. These connections with religion and community are difficult to reproduce in the conditions of modern society, where religion is more dogmatic and a sense of community is less significant.

All of the extant Greek tragedies were written for the Dionysia, a festival in honour of Dionysus, which was celebrated by four full days of theatrical performance of tragedies, satyr plays and comedies.¹⁰ This means that the plays had a specific religious purpose: to celebrate and worship the god Dionysus. The poet was often seen as a “teacher of the people”¹¹ and the success of a Greek tragedy was judged based on the poet’s success in fulfilling his role as religious teacher. This means that common themes found in extant Greek tragedies are usually religious or moral, such as the relationship between gods and mortals, divine justice and the power of the gods. The tragedians taught by negative example, showing how societies or individuals could go wrong, and warning the audience against similar actions by showing their tragic consequences.¹²

It is also important to note that the religious ideas the poets were teaching were very different from those found in the majority of modern religions. Greek religion was not organised around an authoritative dogma, but was based around a set of traditions and ideas that grew up out of primitive cults and myths.¹³ In general, things outside of human control

⁹ Mackinnon 1986: 132

¹⁰ Easterling, P. E. ‘A show for Dionysus’ in Easterling 1997: 37

¹¹ Goldhill, S. ‘The audience of Athenian tragedy’ in Easterling 1997: 67

¹² Ayles 1964: 148

¹³ Ayles 1964: 15-17

were believed to be under the control of the gods, who consisted of several different deities; both personal, such as the main Olympian gods and impersonal, such as Chance and Necessity. The extant tragedies show a sense of dread before the gods and their divine justice. For example, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon's fate of losing his wife and son is portrayed as the result of divine punishment for his action of ignoring the gods' laws. At the end of the play the chorus stress the role of divine justice in the play: "reverence towards the gods must be safeguarded. The mighty words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate, and at long last those blows will teach us wisdom."¹⁴ The gods can simply underlie the action of the plays in this way, but often they play a part in the action more directly as well. The action is often initiated by both human and divine characters simultaneously, in an effect known as "double determination"¹⁵ and in some plays gods even appear on stage. The plays lose much of their religious significance when transferred to the modern stage or screen as the audience do not feel the same awe and fear of the gods which many of the tragedies may have originally inspired.

In *Oedipus Rex* the prophecies of Apollo are of central importance, but compared to many other Greek tragedies this play is one of the most secular, possibly making it more appropriate for transferral to the modern stage. The motivations behind the action of the play are related to human passions rather than divine intervention, there are no supernatural events in the course of the play and no gods or supernatural beings appear on stage.

Aside from its religious importance, the Dionysia was also central to the civic and political life of the city.¹⁶ The Athenians were particularly proud of their democratic political system and the idea of the individual's participation in the community which this involved. The festival was seen as an important part of the democratic participation of the citizens, reinforcing the sense of Athens as a political community. Attendance at the theatre was probably higher than at the democratic Assembly itself, Paul Cartledge estimates that around 50% of the 30,000 Athenian citizens would have attended, compared to 25% at the Assembly.¹⁷ The 'dole' that was set up to enable poor citizens to attend also suggests the importance attached to participation in this communal and democratic festival.¹⁸

These democratic ideals are reflected in many of the plays themselves where the original myths, set in old monarchical times, are adapted to include democratic ideas in order to represent an ideal society. For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus' initial motivations for

¹⁴ Sophocles, *Antigone*; 1467-70

¹⁵ Aylen 1964: 149

¹⁶ Cartledge, P. "Deep plays' : theatre as process in Greek civic life' in Easterling 1997: 9

¹⁷ Cartledge, P. "Deep plays' : theatre as process in Greek civic life' in Easterling 1997: 17

¹⁸ Cartledge, P. "Deep plays' : theatre as process in Greek civic life' in Easterling 1997: 9

beginning the inquiry into the murder of Laius are to help his community, who are suffering from plague.¹⁹

This idea of community is also reflected in the chorus, who often represent the citizens in the play. The chorus seem to have been of central importance to the plays judging by the sheer volume of text spoken by them and the positioning of the choral odes in important places in the script, often introducing and concluding the action. One of the most important functions of the chorus is to reinforce the communal aspects of the experience. They appear as an 'audience' within the play, witnessing and responding to the action but not directly taking part. This helps the audience to feel a part of the action on stage, and helps them to understand the main issues of the play, providing them with cues as to the appropriate reactions and emotions.²⁰ Some have even suggested that the chorus had a more important role than the characters themselves.²¹

However, it is precisely this feature of Greek tragedy which can cause the most problems for directors hoping to produce modern versions of the plays. It is a concept which is completely unfamiliar to a modern audience and thus the inclusion of a chorus in modern plays often seems exotic and overly ritualistic. The complete exclusion of the chorus from the play can be the best option and is one that many modern directors are forced to choose. This step may not detract from the overall effect of the production as the chorus had possibly become nothing more than a convention by the time of Sophocles. Mackinnon argues that although important for the religious festival because of the traditions associated with it, the chorus are not important for the play as a whole as they do not even take part directly in the dramatic action. He backs up his argument by referring to Aristotle and other ancient critics, who concentrate their attention more on the dialogue of the characters than on the choral odes.²²

Characters of Greek tragedy tend to be a less important part of the overall production than characters in modern drama. Aristotle seems to suggest that characterisation was often subordinated to the plot and representation of the issues and ideas of the play. In his analysis of the six component parts of tragedy he prioritises plot-structure over character, explaining that: "without action you would not have tragedy, but one without character would be feasible."²³ Creating believable and detailed characters was not a priority of the Greek tragedian and characters often conformed to general types rather than having individual personalities. For example, the character of Oedipus can be seen as a prototype Athenian, as

¹⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 1-105

²⁰ Easterling, 'Weeping, Witnessing and the Tragic Audience' in Silk 1996: 177-178

²¹ Ayleson 1964: 156

²² Mackinnon 1986: 24-25

²³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 6

described for example in Pericles' speeches in Thucydides.²⁴ He is a man of action but also a man of rational thought and intelligence and he shows a great sense of public spirit and dedication to the needs of his city.²⁵

Some conventions of Greek tragedy cause so many difficulties to the modern audience that they are usually omitted by modern directors. The chorus occasionally appears in some form, but the traditional masks are almost always omitted from modern productions. An exception to this can be seen in Tyrone Guthrie's film *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*, where all of the characters wear stylised and larger than life masks.²⁶ However, this just heightens the ritualistic and unfamiliar aspects of the plays, distancing them from the audience as well as preventing the actors from using facial expressions to heighten tragic effect.

The messenger is typically also omitted or adapted for modern productions. The main function of the messenger was to report the action which occurred off-stage. However, modern audiences, especially cinema audiences, are accustomed to seeing all of the action and so, long messenger speeches can often just appear boring. Modern audiences tend to be averse to listening to long speeches and generally expect to be constantly entertained by the action of theatre and film.

Responses to the challenges

Directors deal with these difficulties in a variety of ways. Although some choose to attempt authenticity to the original, complete authenticity is not feasible because of the cultural differences in the audiences then and now. The specific characteristics of tragedy and the period in which it was performed make it impossible for such a production to achieve a similar effect on its audience as the original would have had on its Athenian audience. Another problem with this approach is the deficiency of knowledge about Greek tragedy and how it was performed, particularly concerning the chorus. This is perhaps shown in Tyrone Guthrie's film version of *Oedipus Rex*, where the austerity of the scenery and the highly-stylised acting and masks are more exaggerated than they probably would have been in the ancient Greek theatre.²⁷ Such productions can be academically useful in attempts to recreate the experience of the 5th century Athenians, but tend to have less effect on a modern audience than freer adaptations.

²⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*: 2.35-46

²⁵ Knox 'Introduction' in Sophocles 1984: 133

²⁶ Guthrie 1957

²⁷ Mackinnon 1986: 51-55

Most directors choose to make at least some adaptations to the originals in order to make them more appropriate to today's society. While this means that some of the meaning of the original may be lost, the end result could be more effective because of the omission of those elements which are unfamiliar to a modern audience. This however gives the director more scope to add his own interpretation of the play, which could distort the originally intended meanings and effects. Although much of the original script is preserved in Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex*, for example, many changes are made which alter the original meaning and add meanings which are particular to Pasolini's own experiences.²⁸

An alternative way of creating modern tragedy is to disregard the plots and myths of the original plays and concentrate instead on the overall effect they would have produced. Peter Burian points out that "there may be a deeper inner connection to Greek tragedy in plays that are not direct translations or adaptations than in those that claim to be."²⁹ Aylen argues that rather than using Greek myths it would be more analogous to use our own myths, such as historical stories with relevant moral, religious or political issues. The problem with this method, however, is that the plays would have a significant effect only on the members of society who identify themselves with the religion, or ideology which the myth illustrates, and so a communal effect on the same scale as Greek Tragedy would be almost impossible to achieve.³⁰

Another major choice facing the director is whether to produce modern tragedy in the medium of the theatre or of film. Theatre is often considered more conducive to Greek tragedy as it was the original medium used. Film can be thought to be incompatible with Greek tragedy as there are obvious difficulties in transferring plays which have existed for 2500 years into a medium that has only existed in the last century.³¹ The stress on the verbal may make the theatre a more appropriate place for displaying ideas: it is much easier for an audience to listen to long speeches on stage where their eyes can wander over the entire scene, than in the cinema where the camera's focus on one character becomes tiresome for an audience who are impatient for visual entertainment.³² Also, the cinema is more associated with dependence on box-office ratings and commercial success so it can be considered a less appropriate medium for the presentation of something unfamiliar to the audience, of a production which aims to teach rather than entertain.

There are however, some advantages in using film as the medium for producing modern tragedy. The most important of these being that it is a much more popular medium

²⁸ Pasolini 1967

²⁹ Burian, P. 'Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present' in Easterling 1997: 229

³⁰ Aylen 1964: 343

³¹ Mackinnon 1986: 1

³² Aylen 1964: 189

than that of modern theatre. This is significant in reaching a communal audience more closely analogous to the Athenian audience of Greek tragedy. Aside from this, cinema is more flexible with time and space than theatre and can satisfy audiences by allowing them to see everything on screen, without the need for messenger speeches, which may seem inappropriate to a modern audience.

Conclusions

The vast differences between the conditions in which Greek tragedy was performed and the conditions of modern society make it very difficult to produce modern versions of the plays, which can produce similar effects to the originals. Some believe that tragedy as a genre is no longer viable in modern society due to developments in science and the increase of atheism, which has led to the lack of a unified audience with a common religion.³³ However, Aylen argues that tragedy may still be useful in modern society to help people come to terms with death and with the uncertainties of human life.³⁴

Greek tragedies are well-known for their treatment of timeless issues and so they can still make useful models in the production of modern tragedies. *Oedipus Rex* has been a particularly popular choice for modern directors because the main issues dealt with in the play, such as the theme of the limitations of human knowledge, are particularly relevant in a society which relies heavily on science and technology. However, in order to put these issues across to a modern audience, there are several challenges the writer or director must face. These are dealt with in completely different ways by Italian writer and film director, Pier Paolo Pasolini and by popular Korean director Park Chan-wook.

³³ Mackinnon 1986: 35-8

³⁴ Aylen 1964: 179

Chapter 2

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex*

Italian writer and poet, Pier Paolo Pasolini came to film-making after a successful literary career with no previous technical knowledge. His films were very different from mainstream cinema and were known for their controversial representations of sexuality and of the Third World.³⁵ Pasolini was interested in myth to pose questions about contemporary and eternal issues through metaphor and this naturally led him to look at subject matter from the classical canon, particularly Greek tragedy.³⁶ His 1967 production of *Oedipus Rex* was the first of two films based on extant Greek tragedies. It was followed by a production of Euripides' *Medea* and a planned version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* that was to be set in Africa. His *Oedipus Rex* is based on Sophocles' play by the same name, but his interpretation of it has many other influences, including various modern interpretations of the play, and his own biography. In fact, despite the apparent distance of the subject matter, *Oedipus Rex* is considered to be the most autobiographical of all his films.³⁷

Adaptations

Setting and Style

The film is not set in classical Greece; it is split into four sections, the 'prologue' and 'epilogue' are set in Italy in the 1930s and 60s respectively and the two main sections are set in an indefinite mythical time and place, which seems beyond or before history. Filmed in Morocco and including costumes and music from all over the world and from various eras, the main sections of the film assume a dream-like quality.

³⁵ Viano 1993: ix-x

³⁶ Viano 1993: 63

³⁷ Viano 1993: 2



Fig 1: Setting in Morocco. (Pasolini 1967)

Taking the myth away from its setting in ancient Greece may have helped prevent the film from appearing overly specific or irrelevant and means that it can appeal to more than just historians and classicists. However, the film did not aim to reach a very wide audience, and Pasolini himself referred to it as “aristocratic” or “unpopular” cinema, appealing mainly to intellectual audiences with no attempt at pleasing the general public.³⁸ The majority of the film contains very little dialogue; the first, second and fourth sections are almost silent, while the third section, the part which follows Sophocles’ text, keeps many of the long speeches of the original. Along with the highly metaphorical style, this immediately sets it apart from mainstream cinema. The limited appeal of the film brings it into direct contrast with Sophocles’ version of the play, which was of great civic importance and reached a wide audience of ordinary Athenians, as discussed in Chapter 1. The importance of the community is stressed in the content of the original play itself. Oedipus’ search for the truth is fuelled by his desire to save his community from plague, and he stresses his love for the city right from the start of the play, when he says: “my spirit grieves for the city, for myself and all of you.”³⁹ Despite his exceptional circumstances, Sophocles portrays Oedipus as ‘everyman’, both in his achievements and his limitations. The play could be intended as a warning and reminder to the audience that despite all of their scientific, technological and political achievements, they should remain aware of the limitations of mankind, who ultimately remain at the mercy of the gods. It is Oedipus’ ignorance of his own identity, and of his position as a mortal, which leads to his downfall. Pasolini’s version, due to the art-house style of the film, has proven less effective in conveying these messages to the public.

The Moroccan setting also brings the story away from the intellectual and civilised associations of Greece, which were so important for the original. Although based on very old legends, the characters and civilisations of Greek tragedy often came to resemble Athens,

³⁸ Viano 1993: 174

³⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 75-76

particularly the democratic qualities of which the Athenians were so proud. The character of Oedipus himself may symbolise the ideal Athenian, with his qualities of courage, intelligence and dedication to the city. In setting the story away from Greece, Pasolini hoped to bring it back to its origins in heroic myth and make it a-historical, rather than reproducing the 5th century interpretation of the myth by Sophocles.⁴⁰ This could help prevent the audience from basing their interpretation of the film on preconceived ideas of ancient Greece.

Plot

Unlike Sophocles' play, the plot of Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* covers almost Oedipus' entire story, from his birth to his downfall and exile, including parts which do not occur in Sophocles' original, yet it still closely follows Sophocles' version of the myth. The parts outside the action of Sophocles' play are mainly based on the background information provided by Sophocles himself in *Oedipus Rex* and the 'epilogue' in which the blind Oedipus is travelling with his guide, is loosely based on Sophocles' later play *Oedipus at Colonus*. In the third section of the film, which covers the action of Sophocles' play, the original text is closely followed. The extended scope of the story however, could have various impacts upon the overall effect on the audience. Its advantage is that it gives the audience knowledge of the whole myth, putting them on an equal footing with the original audience and allowing them to better appreciate the tragic irony of the third section. However, the wider scope may also lead to questioning of why certain decisions were taken and how the tragedy could have been avoided. This would not have been an issue for the original audience, because by the start of Sophocles' play, Oedipus has already committed the crimes and only has to discover them. The use of a story with such scope is completely alien to Greek tragedy, which tended to focus on one action within a particular cycle. This made it easier to portray on stage, and allowed the poet to show his creative skills in his choice of which part of the action was displayed.

The Sphinx

Some events from Sophocles' version were adapted by Pasolini in his retelling of the story; the most noticeable of these occurs in the Sphinx scene, which he vastly altered. The appearance of the Sphinx itself is very different from its traditional representations, usually of a winged-lion with a woman's head. In Pasolini's film it is instead represented by a figure wearing a tribal mask.

⁴⁰ Mackinnon 1986: 139



Fig 2: The Sphinx (Pasolini 1967)

One problem with this portrayal is that the Sphinx seems relatively unthreatening. Oedipus defeats her with such ease that the plot becomes implausible, raising questions as to why the Thebans were so afraid of it and why no one before Oedipus had managed to defeat it. This problem is somewhat avoided in Sophocles by his decision not to show any supernatural events or creatures on the stage.

In Sophocles' version, Oedipus defeats the Sphinx by using his superior intelligence and solving her riddle, and because of this he is seen by the chorus and other characters as the saviour of Thebes. In Pasolini's version, there is no riddle at all, Oedipus defeats the Sphinx with his physical strength, simply by pushing her into the abyss. Before condemning Pasolini for his lack of authenticity, it has to be remembered that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is only one relatively late version of the legend. Earlier representations of the Sphinx also include no riddle, for example some vase paintings show Oedipus defeating the Sphinx with a sword or spear.⁴¹ The idea of the Sphinx being defeated intellectually was a later addition to the myth, created in an age when intelligence was considered more important than brawn. Intelligent heroes such as Odysseus and this version of Oedipus were therefore more appropriate than physically strong heroes such as Hercules or the earlier Oedipus. This alteration by Pasolini can be explained by his desire to go back to the origins of the myth; it is not inconsistent with Greek tragedy as adaptations to the plot to fit the author's own aims were commonly employed.

Oedipus' Character

In Pasolini's film, prior to Oedipus' defeat of the Sphinx, the Sphinx confronts and angers Oedipus by asking him a question about himself: "There is an enigma in your life –

⁴¹ Wilson 2006

what is it?”⁴² In some ways this question follows and adds to one of Sophocles’ own themes of self-knowledge, which centres on Oedipus’ ignorance of his identity. However, it makes the Sphinx seem less like a mythical monster and more like a psychoanalyst.⁴³ Oedipus’ reply to this question illustrates one of the most significant differences between Sophocles’ and Pasolini’s interpretations of the myth. He simply says: “I don’t want to know it.”⁴⁴ and, angered at the question takes out his sword and pushes the Sphinx back into the abyss. This shows Oedipus as a man who is trying to avoid knowledge and self awareness, in contrast with Sophocles’ Oedipus who’s greatest virtue and possibly greatest flaw, is his determined search for the truth. He is seen as a saviour by the chorus in the play for his skill in defeating the Sphinx and he refers to his intelligence himself, in regard to this achievement when he says: “I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds, the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.”⁴⁵ The purpose of the inclusion of the Sphinx and her riddle by Sophocles, although this part of the myth is not a part of the action, may have been to provide proof for Oedipus’ intelligence right from the beginning of the play. His intelligence leads to his eventual downfall, caused by his logical reasoning and methods of inquiry in his search. For many this is one of the main lessons in Sophocles’ play.⁴⁶ The fact that Oedipus remains ignorant of his own identity in spite of his great intelligence is a warning to the audience not to value intellect over self-knowledge. Despite vastly differing views on the meanings of the play most still think that “the play insists that Oedipus has intelligence and reasoning power”.⁴⁷ However, Pasolini sees Oedipus as essentially ignorant and as a man who does not want to look into things at all. In Pasolini’s version the tragedy lies in Oedipus’ complete innocence and ignorance, which is demonstrated by his actions in the film. His choices are made randomly, and not rationally as in Sophocles. For example, on his way from Delphi to Thebes, Pasolini uses the repeated motif of Oedipus spinning around at a crossroads in order to choose his direction at random. His lack of common sense is also emphasised in the scene in which he kills Laius, even though he knows he must be a king. Oedipus later appears wearing the same crown as Laius had been wearing when he was killed, and yet still does not realise that he is the murderer.

⁴² Pasolini 1967

⁴³ Mackinnon 1986: 136

⁴⁴ Pasolini 1967

⁴⁵ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 452-3

⁴⁶ Aylen 1964: 93; Knox 1984: 150; Vellacott 1971: 112; Dodds, E. R. ‘On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex’ in O’Brien 1968: 23; Plutarch as quoted in O’Brien 1968: 99; Thass-Theinemann, T. as quoted in O’Brien 1968: 110

⁴⁷ Vellacott 1971; 110



Fig 3: Laius wearing a crown.
(Pasolini 1967)

Fig 4: Oedipus wearing the same crown.
(Pasolini 1967)

Similar problems can be detected in Sophocles' plot. When looked at closely questions arise calling Oedipus' intelligence into doubt; such as why he did not realise that the man he killed was a king or why he left Corinth to avoid his parents when he already had reason to believe that Polybus and Merope were not his legitimate parents. However the action does not include aspects such as these, but shows Oedipus' intelligent and rational search for the truth. In Pasolini's film there is a sense that had Oedipus been an intellectual he might have been able to alter the course of events. This demonstrates one of Pasolini's main ideas in the film; that crime is caused by lack of understanding. In Sophocles' play however, there is no question that the crimes could have been prevented, as the oracle predicting them was unconditional.

Pasolini does however, like Sophocles, exploit the motif of knowledge and sight. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is full of verbal ironies and puns on this theme, making an analogy between Oedipus' physical sight and his blindness to his own identity. This is carried through to the reversal at the end, when he gains insight but becomes physically blind. There are many instances of such plays on words during Oedipus' conversation with Tiresias the blind prophet. For example Tiresias' first words are: "How terrible – to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees!"⁴⁸ These themes of blindness and insight can also be seen in Pasolini's film. For example he uses close-up shots of the characters' eyes and images of partial vision, such as Oedipus' eyes covered by the brim of a hat or by a helmet.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 359-60

⁴⁹ Viano 1993; 184



Fig 5: Oedipus choosing his direction at random and covering his eyes with his hands.
(Pasolini 1967)

Incest and Parricide

Despite, being the central action of the Oedipus legend, Sophocles and Pasolini deal with the themes of incest and parricide in quite different ways. In Pasolini's version a lot more emphasis is given to the parricide than in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, where it is an event outside of the action and is not described in detail. In contrast, Pasolini presents it as part of a drawn out, physical fight between Oedipus and Laius and his entourage. On the other hand, Oedipus' relationship with Jocasta is represented less powerfully by Pasolini than by Sophocles. In Sophocles' original, Jocasta and Oedipus generally appear as a strong couple, it is clear that they respect each other, and this is explicitly stated by Oedipus when he says: "I will tell you. I respect you Jocasta."⁵⁰ It is also clear that Jocasta cares deeply for Oedipus and wants to protect him from the truth. The strong relationship between them intensifies the pity the audience feels for Oedipus and makes the situation more tragic. In Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex*, the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta is not given as much emphasis as the parricide. Any illustration of love between the two of them is avoided although this could have made the film more powerful, and the reason for their marriage is explicitly shown as not being for love; instead Jocasta is given to Oedipus as a prize for his defeat of the Sphinx.

⁵⁰ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 770



Fig 6: Jocasta is presented to Oedipus after he defeats the Sphinx. (Pasolini 1967)

Influences

Freud

Pasolini's portrayal of the Oedipus myth is given a modern, Freudian interpretation, which affects his portrayal of the incest and parricide themes.⁵¹ Freud's 'Oedipus complex' which is possibly more well known than the play itself, is based on an interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy, which suggests that the reason that the play is so successful and moving is because of its relevance to every male's unconscious. According to Freud:

“His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that it is so.”⁵²

Freud's view was that the unconscious represented a part of us that we are generally unaware of and could be accessed only through dreams. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, there is in fact a reference to dreams made by Jocasta: “Many a man before you, in his dreams has shared his mother's bed.”⁵³ However, there is no evidence that Sophocles was trying to make the same point as Freud made since Oedipus remains ignorant of his actions right up until the final discovery. In Pasolini's version though, there is a suggestion that Oedipus knows their true relationship and yet continues committing incest with Jocasta, suggesting a Freudian wish to possess his mother.⁵⁴

The Freudian influence on the film is particularly obvious in the prologue, which is set in Italy of the 1930s. Again the focus is on the relationship between the baby and his father,

⁵¹ Stack 1969: 120-9; Mackinnon 1986: 135

⁵² Freud, “Interpretation of Dreams” (trans. J. Strachey) as quoted in Knox 1984; 132

⁵³ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 1074-1075

⁵⁴ Mackinnon 1986: 133

rather than his mother. It is made clear that the father resents the baby and is jealous of him. Pasolini explicitly states the father's thoughts on looking at the baby: "You are here to take my place..." and "She will be the first thing you rob from me, she, the woman I love."⁵⁵ The baby's attitude to the father is also shown by his gesture of covering his eyes when his father is looking at him and when he sees his mother and father kiss. According to Pasolini himself, the film tells the story of his own Oedipus complex.⁵⁶ Again this is particularly evident in the prologue, set around the time that Pasolini himself was born. Oedipus' parents are based on Pasolini's own mother and father; as his father was an army officer, the father in the film is represented as wearing a military uniform.⁵⁷ The repeated image of the white curtain is also a reference to Pasolini's own biography as it was one of his earliest memories.⁵⁸

Pasolini thought of his life in Freudian terms, his love for his mother was particularly tender and there was always a tension between him and his father, who resented the special bond between his wife and son, and as a fascist was also opposed to Pasolini's Marxism and to his homosexuality.⁵⁹ Mackinnon suggests that the idea of destiny felt in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, is replaced by Pasolini with Freudian analysis and the unavoidable psychological development of Oedipus as a baby.⁶⁰ In Sophocles the inescapability of Oedipus' situation is due to the prophecies surrounding the story, which are unconditional and outside of Oedipus' control. At the point in the play where Oedipus begins to believe that he has avoided the prophecies, he is proved wrong by the devastating truth of his identity. One of Sophocles' messages then, is about the powerlessness of humans and the necessity to respect the gods and believe in prophecies. Pasolini's message about human impotency is similar but is focused around the idea of the psychological development of a child determining his actions as an adult.

Homosexuality

Part of the appeal of Freud to Pasolini was that it offered him a 'scientific' theory of homosexuality as a "faulty resolution of the Oedipus complex".⁶¹ This is seen by Viano to be the main reason that he chose to represent this particular myth.⁶² It is also another way in which he introduced autobiographical, and un-Sophoclean elements into his film. In the second section of the film, when Oedipus meets a group of men in the desert who lead him to

⁵⁵ Pasolini 1967

⁵⁶ Viano 1993: 117

⁵⁷ Mackinnon 1986: 140

⁵⁸ Viano 1993: 183

⁵⁹ Viano 1993: 10-11

⁶⁰ Mackinnon 1986: 139

⁶¹ Viano 1993: 11

⁶² Viano 1993: 178

a naked woman, his face shows anxiety, which has sometimes been attributed to his wish to avoid fulfilling the prophecy by avoiding women.⁶³ However, others think it is an expression of Pasolini's own "nightmare of forced heterosexuality" in a society which generally thought of homosexuality as a 'perversion'.⁶⁴ The relative importance of the messenger Anghelos, in comparison with the roles of messengers in Sophocles' version, can also be seen as influenced by Pasolini's homosexuality and the way he perceived it. Anghelos is an almost constant presence in the third section of the film, and it is he and not Antigone who leaves Thebes with Oedipus at the end. Viano interprets Oedipus and Anghelos as representing the two contrasting aspects of homosexuality as Pasolini saw it.⁶⁵ Anghelos as an innocent, handsome, young boy represents its pleasures; while Oedipus represents the inescapability of the situation. Pasolini would have felt this to be a particularly negative aspect due to his father's views and his Catholic background, both of which influenced him to think of his homosexuality in terms of guilt and sin.



Fig 7: Oedipus leaves Thebes led by Anghelos. (Pasolini 1967)

Marxism

Pasolini was also influenced by Marxism, which like Catholicism formed part of his culture and identity. He became emotionally attached to Marxism after taking part in a peasant struggle, and remained close to the communist party ever since.⁶⁶ His interest in Marxism can usually be seen in his films through his portrayals of the Roman proletariat or developing countries. In this case the film may have been set in Morocco for these reasons. The film also seems to contain a message about the importance of progress, a central part of Marxist doctrine. Pasolini seems to suggest that if Oedipus had been more enlightened and lived in a different society, he may have been able to avert his fate.

⁶³ Mackinnon 1986: 139

⁶⁴ Viano 1993: 182

⁶⁵ Viano 1993: 180

⁶⁶ Siciliano 1987

In the epilogue of the film, again set in Italy, all of the autobiographical metaphors come together. Oedipus is shown playing his flute at various locations, symbolising Pasolini's role as a poet. Firstly he is outside a cathedral in Bologna, associated with Pasolini's university years and his Catholic roots. Then he plays his flute outside a factory, playing a Russian revolutionary tune to symbolise Pasolini's Marxism. Finally he returns to the meadow of his childhood, to the origins of his plight according to Freudian psychoanalysis.⁶⁷

Conclusions

Pasolini's film version of the Oedipus myth remains faithful to Sophocles in the main events and ideas, but it is clearly Pasolini's own interpretation of the story and many significant alterations are made. However, complete accuracy to the original may not be the best way to create a successful modern tragedy. Sophocles himself adapted the original myth to fit in with his contemporary society and Pasolini could be seen to be attempting a similar task in his adaptation.⁶⁸ The increase in the scope of the events covered helps to fill in modern audiences on the back-story and Pasolini takes account of post-Sophoclean interpretations and ideas, such as Freudianism and Marxism. In the course of the film, he confronts several relevant issues. Some of Sophocles' original lessons are still there, such as the idea that Oedipus' fate was unavoidable. However, Pasolini recognises that destiny based on Apolline prophecies is not going to have the same impact on a modern audience as it did on an Athenian audience, and so Oedipus' destiny seems to be based more on his Freudian Oedipus-complex, which develops within his unconscious in his childhood, shown in the prologue of the film. Pasolini's representation of Oedipus as unintelligent turns some of Sophocles' ideas around. Both Sophocles and Pasolini stress the importance of knowing your own identity. Sophocles contrasts this with the way Oedipus, and his audience, shun this type of knowledge in favour of intellectual knowledge. Pasolini on the other hand, seems to be suggesting that Oedipus could have avoided his fate if he had been more intelligent, and thus stresses the importance of knowledge in general, both intellectual understanding and self awareness. Despite these differences in the lessons, Pasolini, in a similar way to Sophocles and other Greek tragedians, was aiming to be both poet and teacher to his audience.

The autobiographical elements in Pasolini's film are possibly less in keeping with tragedy, as they are very personal to Pasolini. This goes against one of the key elements to a

⁶⁷ Viano 1993: 2; Mackinnon 1986: 145

⁶⁸ Mackinnon 1986: 132

tragedy; that it has relevance to the whole audience and conveys general, eternal problems and suggestions as to how to solve these, through negative example. Another problem is the art-house style of the film, which alienates it from a large portion of the general public, limiting the audience to a small group of film-lovers and intellectuals. The unfamiliarity of the intellectual style and in particular the stylised and ritual elements in the film makes it less accessible to audiences. This could make it less likely to achieve one of the most important aims of tragedy, as set out by Aristotle; to inspire in the audience the feelings of fear and pity, which made the original so powerful.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 6

Chapter 3

Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*

Oldboy, a 2003 film directed by Park Chan-wook, is an example of the 'new wave' of Korean cinema, which is becoming increasingly popular both domestically and in the West. Park Chan-wook's films tend to be extremely original, but often controversial because of their vivid depictions of violence and taboo themes. Chan-wook, a former philosophy student from Sogang University in Seoul, also focuses on issues of morality and human nature, leaving him with a similar approach to that of the Greek tragedians, aiming to teach moral lessons to his audiences.

Oldboy is the second instalment in a trilogy of films about revenge, which have unconnected story-lines but share a common main theme. The story of *Oldboy* is based on a Japanese manga by the same name, written by Minegishi Nobuaki and Tsuchiya Garon.⁷⁰ The main events in the film follow the stories from the original manga, but during the process of writing the screen-play, much of Chan-wook's own ideas on the theme came to the fore. Among other influences on the film is the French novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, which is also based on the revenge theme.⁷¹ The film has also been recognised for its similarity to Greek tragedy by some film critics. Sanjuro claims that the film contains dramatic irony of a kind "not seen since the days of Greek tragedy", and Mapes compares the main character to tragic heroes such as Oedipus and King Lear.⁷²

Plot

The film is set in modern Seoul, where the protagonist, Oh Dae-su, has been incarcerated in a private prison facility by persons unknown, and is then released after 15 years of solitary confinement. The main action focuses on Oh Dae-su's search for the truth; his investigations to find out why he was imprisoned and who was responsible, motivated chiefly by his desire for revenge. During the course of this search he meets a young girl, Mi-do, seemingly by chance, and the two fall in love. However, in the climactic scene in which Oh Dae-su finally meets the man responsible for his imprisonment, it is revealed to him that Mi-do is his own daughter. The general plot similarities between this film and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* are clear, with both stories involving unintentional incest between the main

⁷⁰ Tartan Exclusive Director Interview by Mark Salisbury from Chan-wook 2003

⁷¹ Mapes 2005

⁷² Sanjuro 2005; Mapes 2005

protagonists, which is revealed through the investigation into a seemingly unconnected crime. Both focus particularly on the process of gradual discovery of the truth, cumulating in the final revelation towards the end.

Themes

Knowledge

According to many interpretations of *Oedipus Rex* it is Oedipus' intelligence and desire to know the truth that leads to his eventual downfall.⁷³ The crimes had already been committed before the action of the play began and were unavoidable according to Apollo's prophecy, but it is Oedipus' investigation into the murder of Laius, conducted of his own free will, which leads to the discovery of them. It is the discovery and not the crimes themselves that are focused on, and it is also this discovery which leads to Oedipus' ruin. Throughout the play Oedipus is warned by various minor characters not to continue his investigations. Tiresias is unwilling to reveal what he knows, and Jocasta's emphatically pleads with him to: "Stop – in the name of god, if you love your own life, call off this search!"⁷⁴ There is a parallel to this about within *Oldboy*, when Oh Dae-su has the chance to kill the man responsible for his suffering, but is persuaded not to because of his desire to find out the truth. Standing with Oh Dae-su's knife to his throat, the antagonist Lee Woo-jin calmly says: "But you will never find out why if you go through with this. You have been curious for 15 years..."⁷⁵ Oh Dae-su chooses to continue his search for the truth, rather than exacting a quick revenge and ending the threats against Mi-do's life. In this way his downfall is caused just as much by his desire to know the truth, as by the crimes themselves.

The theme of knowledge plays a similar role in *Oldboy* as it does in *Oedipus Rex*, with the emphasis in both on the importance of self-knowledge. In Sophocles' play, Oedipus' search for the murderer of Laius slowly becomes an investigation into his own identity and his past. Similarly in *Oldboy*, Oh Dae-su's search takes him back to his school days, when he witnessed an incestuous sexual encounter between Woo-jin and his sister, Soo-ah. Unknown to Oh Dae-su who left the school soon after, a careless remark of his to a friend turned into a fatal rumour, which eventually resulted in Soo-ah's suicide. The director uses the setting of Sangnok High School to signify Oh Dae-su's metaphorical return to school, as it is here that

⁷³ Ayleen 1964: 93; Knox 1984: 150; Vellacott 1971: 112; Dodds, E. R. 'On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex' in O'Brien 1968: 23; Plutarch as quoted in O'Brien 1968: 99; Thass-Theinemann, T. as quoted in O'Brien 1968: 110

⁷⁴ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 1162-1163

⁷⁵ Chan-wook 2003

Oh Dae-su is given the opportunity to learn an important lesson about himself and about his own guilt.⁷⁶ The revelation that Mi-do is his own daughter also teaches him something unknown about his own identity: his punishment for spreading the rumours did not end on his release after 15 years imprisonment, but continued with this carefully orchestrated plot. This results in a neatly organised, yet complex plot of double revenge and double incest, but despite the unusual circumstances, the situation is at the same time generalised, warning the audience about the general lack of self-knowledge in modern society.

Character

When looked at more closely, the tragic irony of the situation can be seen in the character of Oh Dae-su. Although portrayed as a very self-absorbed man, he does not know these basic facts about who he is, and about the pain he has caused unwittingly to other people. Use of irony of this sort is also common in Greek tragedy and a similar example of it can be seen in *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus, does not know his own identity despite possessing great knowledge and reasoning power. In *Oedipus Rex* the lesson which can be inferred by this is that scientific and technical knowledge should not be put above knowledge of self. On the other hand, the lesson in *Oldboy* is rather that selfishness can lead to lack of self-knowledge, with potentially devastating consequences.

Oh Dae-su's selfishness is made clear right from the beginning of the film. The first man Oh Dae-su meets on release from the prison is about to commit suicide. He persuades the man to delay his suicide just so that he can tell his story, then refusing to hear the man's story in return he leaves the building. As he crosses the street, the suicidal man can be seen falling from the roof in the background, but Oh Dae-su shows no appropriate emotion.



Fig 8: Oh Dae-su is unconcerned as the 'suicide-man' falls from the roof. (Chan-wook 2003)

⁷⁶ Trbic 2004

A similar indifference can be detected in several other scenes. For example, on being warmly embraced by an old school friend Oh Dae-su's face shows no emotion at all. This character trait is Oh Dae-su's greatest flaw, which ultimately leads to his own ruin. It is his selfishness that provokes his single-minded determination to find the truth and to exact revenge on the man who imprisoned him, and it is his also his selfishness that causes him to put the woman he loves in danger in the process. There are similar selfish and arrogant characteristics to Sophocles' Oedipus, who can be seen as too proud of his own intelligence and insistent on his self-reliance.⁷⁷ His unfounded suspicions of Creon also suggest self-obsession as they are based on no real evidence, motivated purely by paranoia and an arrogant assumption that Creon wants to take his place.⁷⁸ However, Oedipus' motivations for the search are selfless, related to his devotion to the city, while Oh Dae-su's actions are motivated entirely by his own desire for revenge. This could illustrate the differences between the societies in which the two tragedies were written. In Athenian society the community was considered more important than the individual, so Oedipus' devotion to the people represents the ideals of the time. On the other hand, modern society is increasingly individualistic, so a tragedy teaching about the importance of duty to society as a whole may not have such an effective impact on a modern audience.

The use of a flaw in the character leading to his downfall is common in Greek tragedy. A tragic character flaw has been stated as one of the main principles of tragedy, by many critics beginning with Aristotle, who stipulated that the hero of a tragedy should be: "one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility."⁷⁹ *Harmartia*, the word used by Aristotle here is usually translated as 'fallibility' or 'error', and can be interpreted to mean a moral character flaw.⁸⁰ In this case, the selfishness of Oh Dae-su can be seen as his error.

However, some believe that Aristotle's *harmartia* is not an inbuilt character flaw, but rather a mistake committed in ignorance, such as Oedipus' murder of his father and marriage to his mother.⁸¹ This can be backed up by tragedies, in which the protagonist has no major character flaw to cause his suffering, particularly *Oedipus Rex*. Attempts have been made to find fault with his pride or his doubt over the truth of Apollo's prophecies, but in general he is portrayed as a good man and well-liked and respected by the other characters.⁸² In fact it is his good qualities that lead to his discovery of the truth: "what causes his ruin is his own

⁷⁷ Kirkwood, G. M. 'Two Questions of Dramatic Form in the 'Oedipus Tyrannus'' in O'Brien 1968: 69

⁷⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 638-705

⁷⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 13

⁸⁰ Dodds, E. R. 'On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex' in O'Brien 1968: 18-19

⁸¹ Dodds, E. R. 'On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex' in O'Brien 1968: 19

⁸² Dodds, E. R. 'On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex' in O'Brien 1968: 19

strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes and his loyalty to the truth.”⁸³ The fate of the hero of *Oldboy* is also set off by such an ‘error’ as Oh Dae-su starts the initial fatal rumour due to his ignorance of the relationship between Woo-jin and Soo-ah and he also makes the mistake of committing incest himself due to his ignorance of Mi-do’s true identity.

Despite Oh Dae-su’s flaws, he is still able to evoke pity in the audience. In Greek tragedy this is achieved by the portrayal of a hero who is essentially a superior man to the members of the audience, a man of noble birth with exceptional wisdom and courage. In fact, Aristotle claims that the hero should: “belong to the class of those who enjoy great esteem and prosperity, such as Oedipus, Thyestes, and outstanding men from such families.”⁸⁴ In *Oldboy* the empathy of the audience towards the main protagonist, is achieved instead by his being an ordinary man. His ordinariness is shown in the very first scene, where he is pictured in a police station, having been picked up for being drunk and disorderly. Even the meaning of his name indicates his ordinariness, in the first scene he says: “My name, Oh Dae-su, means... getting through one day at a time.”⁸⁵



Fig 9: Oh Dae-su (second from left) at the police station. (Chan-wook 2003)

The portrayal of the hero as an ordinary man makes the film more appropriate for a modern audience who respond better to characters with whom they can identify. Oh Dae-su is transformed by the 15 years he spends in prison, becoming much less ordinary than he was when first presented yet to some extent retaining his ordinariness in the audience’s perception of him. His behaviour changes again when he discovers his guilt, both for spreading the rumours about Woo-jin and for committing incest himself, and his former selfishness and arrogant behaviour is modified. He is eager to protect Mi-do from discovering the truth, not wanting her to suffer as he has, and he pleads with his antagonist not to reveal the truth to her.

⁸³ Dodds, E. R. *On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex*, from O’Brien 1968: 23

⁸⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 13

⁸⁵ Chan-wook 2003

This could show that he fully accepts his guilt, has learnt from his mistakes and is desperate to limit their effects.

Recognition and Reversal

Oh Dae-su's realisation of the truth and of his own guilt has much in common with the corresponding scenes of *Oedipus Rex* and could be seen as an example of the tragic recognition and reversal mentioned by Aristotle. According to Aristotle, the best tragedies contain both of these characteristics together, where a complete change in the direction of the action occurs in connection with the recognition of guilt.⁸⁶ In *Oedipus Rex* this occurs when Oedipus recognises that the prophecies have come true, just after he was given reason to hope that they had been proved wrong, as Polybus, the man he believed to be his natural father, had died.⁸⁷ In Park Chan-wook's film, Oh Dae-su realises the truth about his relationship with Mi-do at the point when he thinks he has succeeded in his challenge to find out why he was imprisoned, and thus hopes that according to Woo-jin's promise Mi-do will be spared and Woo-jin will kill himself instead. The complete reversal in the situation of the two heroes is very similar as they are both reduced to nothing by the truth of their guilt. In fact, both react by inflicting yet more suffering upon themselves; Oedipus by stabbing out his eyes and Oh Dae-su by cutting out his tongue. One of many possible interpretations of this is that the actions of both heroes punish the offending organ; Oedipus' eyes did not see the truth, and Oh Dae-su's tongue caused the original crime of starting the rumour.

The most important aspect of the reversal is the emotional reaction it provokes in the audience, which, according to Aristotle should be one of fear and pity for the main protagonists.⁸⁸ The recognition scene of *Oldboy* is very emotionally charged, and the actor, Choi Min-sik portrays the complete reversal of Oh Dae-su's fortune and his emotional suffering most vividly. Oh Dae-su is completely crushed in the scene, begging forgiveness from the man he has hated up until now, and appears to be losing his sanity through his suffering.

⁸⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 11

⁸⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 1047-1310

⁸⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 6



Fig 10: Oh Dae-su's tragic reversal. (Chan-wook 2003)

Predetermination

In both *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy*, the events are in some way predetermined before the action begins. In *Oedipus Rex* this is done by the prophecies of Apollo, which predicted that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. Many critics have seen *Oedipus* as a tragedy of fate because of the inevitability of Oedipus' suffering. Others see this as an erroneous viewpoint because the Athenians had not yet fully formulated the idea of fate, and in the play Oedipus acts as a free agent despite the prophecies.⁸⁹ However, in *Oedipus* there is certainly an element of inevitability in the inclusion of unconditional prophecies of the gods. In *Oldboy* there is a similar sense of inevitability, despite the fact that Oh Dae-su acts of his own free-will throughout. In this case, the action is not determined by the gods but by the antagonist Lee Woo-jin. Since his imprisonment 15 years previously, Woo-jin has been controlling both Oh Dae-su and Mi-do through hypnosis. His elaborate plot for revenge ensures the sequence of events that leads to the two falling in love, ensuring that Oh Dae-su can be suitably punished for revealing the incest between Woo-jin and his sister. Thus in *Oldboy*, the hypnosis takes the place of the prophecies in *Oedipus Rex*. Park Chan-wook believes that life is not based on free-will alone, and in his films he attempts to show this in a way that can be related to by all members of the audience.⁹⁰ His chosen method of demonstrating this is particularly appropriate to modern audiences who do not share a common religion as the Athenians did. "According to the audience member's beliefs, you could call it the will of God or social systems or fate; but in the end what I'm trying to say is the same. And that is 'Life doesn't go your own way.'"⁹¹ In this way the lessons of Greek tragedy can still have an impact on modern audiences, without the problems of cultural and

⁸⁹ Dodds, E. R., 'On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex' in O'Brien 1968: 22

⁹⁰ Chan-wook as quoted on www.imdb.com/name/nm0661791/bio

⁹¹ Chan-wook as quoted on www.imdb.com/name/nm0661791/bio

religious differences, which often remain in other modern versions of Greek tragedies. Boris Trbic noticed a major theme in *Oldboy* of:

“an omnipresent contrast between the relentless attempts of the heroes to identify, formulate and transform the fundamental patterns of their unsatisfactory human condition, and the painful, paralysing acknowledgement that, limited by the totality of power relations, they are not in a position to determine or understand the nature of their experiences and to control and articulate their actions.”⁹²

In other words, Park Chan-wook is using his film to say something about the nature of the human condition. By the end of the film his hero comes to the realisation that his life for the last 15 years has been to a great extent controlled by external forces and as such, he realises the impotency of mankind in general. Similarly, by the end of *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus has realised his powerlessness in the face of the gods and he and the chorus “reach a new understanding of human impotency as well as of human achievement”.⁹³ As in Greek tragedy, Park Chan-wook, the former philosophy student, is using tragedy to teach philosophical lessons. His message is similar to that of Sophocles, and by avoiding the basis in ancient Greek religion he gets his message across to a modern audience more successfully than a direct translation of an ancient play may have done.

Time motif

Connected with the theme of the powerlessness of mortals, is the theme of time and the ways in which the past influences the present. The time motif is portrayed visually throughout the film, even from the very opening credits where the Korean letters move around like the hands of a clock and the Latin letters move like the figures on a digital clock.⁹⁴ As a direct example, Oh Dae-su finds himself in a clock repair shop in the course of his search for the truth:

⁹² Trbic 2004

⁹³ Easterling, P. E. *Weeping, Witnessing, and the Tragic Audience*, from Silk 1996: 178

⁹⁴ Director Commentary from Chan-wook 2003



Fig 11: The clock repair shop: visual portrayal of the time motif. (Chan-wook 2003)

The time motif is very important during Oh Dae-su's 15 year imprisonment, during which the passage of time is demonstrated by news reports shown on the television in the confinement room. It is just as important after Oh Dae-su's release when he is challenged by Woo-jin to find out the truth within 5 days. As the story progresses the relevance of time becomes clearer, as it was Oh Dae-su's actions in the past which led to his imprisonment and downfall. This theme is also present in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and is another eternal philosophical issue presented in a similar style to Greek tragedy. However, its prominence in *Oldboy* has its roots in Korean history and contemporary Korean culture. Rick Curnutte notes that this fascination with time and "with how the past has shaped the present" occurs in many modern Korean films.⁹⁵ Curnutte argues that this motif can be linked with the history of the Korean film industry itself and the way modern Korean directors have been influenced by the initial problems of the industry during the Korean War and the Japanese occupation.

Revenge

Park Chan-wook's treatment of the central theme of revenge is also compatible with the moral aims of Greek tragedies. The theme is not present in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, but is generally quite common in ancient myth and tragedy. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is perhaps the best example of a revenge trilogy. Agamemnon is first murdered by his wife in revenge for his sacrifice of Iphigenia, and then, in *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes avenges his father's murder by killing his own mother.⁹⁶ The director of *Oldboy* is himself aware of the origins of this theme in ancient myth, pointing out that: "from the ancient myths to modern stories, revenge is the most popular subject matter for writers."⁹⁷ It follows that this is a theme which interested Chan-wook because of the universal and eternal nature of the issue.

⁹⁵ Curnutte 2002

⁹⁶ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*

⁹⁷ Chan-wook as quoted by Sullivan, C. on DVD sleeve.

Revenge is portrayed as a complex moral issue by Chan-wook; the film is a study of the psychology behind revenge. Through the course of the film Chan-wook shows that not only the victim of revenge, but also the tormentor are destroyed by the act of vengeance.⁹⁸ During the process of revenging, the tormentor forgets his injuries, as Woo-jin himself points out: “Seeking revenge is the best cure for someone who’s been hurt.”⁹⁹ However, once the act of vengeance is complete, all of the initial pain returns to the tormentor and he no longer has any reason to live: “What happens after you’ve had your revenge? I bet that hidden pain probably emerges again.”¹⁰⁰ Woo-jin realises this before-hand, but continues on his path of vengeance, which eventually leads to his suicide. According to the director he was particularly interested in exploring this side of vengeance, what he refers to as: “the irony and the tragic limitation of revenge”.¹⁰¹ That is, the impossibility of achieving complete satisfaction through revenge because the injury has already been done. Like the Greek tragedians, he aims to teach a moral lesson to his audience about the limitations of revenge by displaying the negative consequences through example.

Non-Sophoclean elements

Despite these similarities with Greek tragedy and with *Oedipus Rex* in particular, there are some aspects of the film which are not comparable to tragedy. These include the extreme and graphic violence shown throughout, and the inclusion of a sex scene between Oh Dae-su and Mi-do. In some respects this suggests the dependence of modern directors on the box office, which means that entertainment is often put above any loftier aims of posing important questions in the film. The general popularity of violent action films and the audience demand for increasingly extreme and shocking cinema has resulted in such scenes as the infamous ‘corridor scene’ in which Oh Dae-su fights off several armed men at the private prison.

⁹⁸ Tartan Exclusive Director Interview by Mark Salisbury from Chan-wook 2003

⁹⁹ Chan-wook 2003

¹⁰⁰ Woo-jin in Chan-wook 2003

¹⁰¹ Chan-wook in an interview with Mark Salisbury, from Chan-wook 2003



Fig 12: The 'corridor scene'. (Chan-wook 2003)

However, the descriptions of off-stage violence in Greek tragedies are often very vivid in themselves and the lack of violence on stage could be partly due to the difficulties of showing such scenes with any realism in the theatre, without the help of special effects and pre-recording. Unlike many directors of action films, Park Chan-wook's portrayal of violence has higher aims than just entertainment; of the 'corridor scene' for example he claims that he wanted "to portray the meaninglessness of the fight and the loneliness of the fighter".¹⁰² The sex scene is likewise not added just to attract audiences, but is an integral part of the story. A recording of their love-making is played back to Oh Dae-su at the end by Woo-jin, to dramatically heighten his torment and the audience's emotional response after just finding out that Mi-do is his daughter.

Another major difference between this film and Greek tragedy is that the story is generally unknown to the audience, or at least to all but the minority who have read the original story in its Japanese manga form. This means that plot twists, such as Woo-jin's orchestration of events and the identity of Mi-do as Dae-su's daughter come as a complete surprise and add an element of shock to the emotional responses, which is not present in Greek tragedy. The problem with this is that audience are overwhelmed by the unfolding of a complex plot and the shock of the final twist so they may be unable to immediately appreciate the film at a more intellectual level and to understand the philosophical and moral issues which the director presents.

¹⁰² Chan-wook as quoted by Sullivan, C. on DVD sleeve.

Conclusions

Oldboy is a very different film from Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* and in many ways it is also very different from Sophocles' tragedy. It is a film with a wider appeal to the general public than Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex*. This can be disadvantageous because it means that the commercial success is likely to have been taken into account more by Chan-wook than by Pasolini. However, it also means that the film is likely to be seen by wider audience, and thus the important messages contained will be heard by more people. In this respect Chan-wook's film has similar aims to those of Greek tragedy. It puts the director into the role of teacher, giving moral lessons about revenge, human impotency, self-knowledge, and selfishness which are taught through negative example. The director also attempts to make the idea of predetermination relevant to the whole audience, despite a lack of a common religion between them. On top of this the film includes characteristics often attributed to tragedy, such as a tragic character flaw, and a tragic recognition and reversal scene. The most important tragic aspect in his film is the arousal of strong emotions from the audience, who are able to relate to the protagonist despite his unusual situation, feeling emotions of shock, fear, uneasiness and pity. It is true that the story used and the way it is portrayed is in many ways more akin to a modern thriller or action movie, than a Greek tragedy. However, this aspect helps the film to appeal to a modern audience, and Park Chan-wook is able to create a relevant and modern tragic experience.

Conclusion

The two films studied are both very different from Sophocles' play and from each other in form and content; however each contains influences from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In Pasolini's film these influences can be seen more clearly since he closely follows Sophocles' play in plot construction. Most of the events in his film are taken from Sophocles' version of the myth, and the third section of the film is almost directly taken from Sophocles' play. However, in the adaptations Pasolini makes, he attempts to bring the story back to its origins in ancient myth. In doing this the film loses a lot of the qualities associated with 5th century Athens and with Greek tragedy. For example, the defining feature of Oedipus' character as depicted in Pasolini is his ignorance, as he represents man from pre-rational society, while in Sophocles his defining feature is his intelligence and knowledge, as he symbolises enlightened and democratic Athens. Much in the film also contains influences from Pasolini's own life experiences and biography. This is incompatible with Greek tragedy, which usually portrays themes of universal relevance.

Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, unlike Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex*, is not directly based on Sophocles' play but nevertheless has many plot similarities. It is based around a story of unintentional incest, discovered through the investigation into a seemingly unrelated crime. However, the setting of the story is thoroughly modernised; the gods are replaced by a man, the prophecies with hypnosis, and Oh Dae-su's search for the truth is surrounded by the conventions of modern action films, rather than those of Greek tragedy. This inevitably creates vast differences between this film and Sophocles' play, removing much of Sophocles' intended points about the power of the gods. However, these issues are no longer regarded as relevant today, and the changes made allow Chan-wook to make similar points about human impotency more effectively.

Both films are consistent with Greek tragedy in that they pass on moral and philosophical messages to the audience and deal with themes of universal relevance, with many of Sophocles' themes occurring throughout. For example, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, both Pasolini and Chan-wook show the importance of self-knowledge. However, they each add a slightly different emphasis to the theme. Pasolini shows the negative consequences of Oedipus' lack of understanding, not only of himself but also of the world around him, while Chan-wook points out in particular that selfishness can lead to a fatal lack of self-knowledge. Park Chan-wook's main theme of revenge is not present in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, but is a commonly used theme in other tragedies, such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

and Euripides' *Electra*.¹⁰³ It is dealt with here in a similar way to the portrayal of revenge and other themes in Greek tragedy, resulting in a much more complex treatment than in many other modern revenge thrillers; the aim being to show the negative consequences of acting out revenge.

In *Oldboy* these messages are made universal by the mass appeal of the film as popular cinema, and by the lack of a particular religious or ideological stance which could alienate parts of the audience. However, the film suffers from the modern desire to please and shock audiences over and above teaching them. Although the film is very emotionally effective, particularly in conveying the tragic reversal of Oh Dae-su, the action and plot twists leave the audience overwhelmed with feelings of shock and unease. These are emotions not necessarily associated with Greek tragedy and could render the audience less capable of appreciating intellectually the moral and philosophical lessons in the film.

Pasolini's film, unlike *Oldboy*, does not have this mass appeal, being aimed towards an intellectual, 'art-house' audience. Many of the messages within it are veiled in metaphor, making them less accessible to the general public and also making the film less emotionally effective.

Pasolini then, although basing his *Oedipus Rex* on Sophocles, adapts the original to portray his own ideas and his personal life experiences creating an end result very different from that of Sophocles' and not analogous to Greek tragedy. Chan-wook's *Oldboy* is very different from Greek tragedy in its form, but is possibly more analogous to Sophocles in its effect. It successfully uses modern cinematic techniques to satisfy the audience and at the same time has an emotional impact on them and gets across messages of universal moral significance.

The directors of both films have faced the challenges posed by adapting Greek tragedy to a modern audience in very different ways. There are inherent merits and drawbacks in each of the routes taken, with authenticity to the original Sophocles play in opposition with authenticity to the effect it would have. But in conclusion, the most defining aspect of Greek tragedy is the combination of the intellectual and emotional impressions it left on the audience, and in this regard, Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* more closely realises these aims.

¹⁰³ Aeschylus, *Oresteia*; Euripides, *Medea and other plays*.

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