Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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“Toothless intellectuals,” “the misery of the poor,” “poetry after Auschwitz,” and the White, Middle-class Audience: the Moral Perils of Kosky and Wright’s *The Women of Troy*(or, how do we regard the pain of others?)

Marguerite Johnson
The University of Newcastle

In one of her meditations on the photographs of war in her 2002 article for *The New Yorker*, ‘Looking at War: Photography’s view of devastation and death,’ Susan Sontag refers to, by way of example, a picture of a World War I veteran “whose face has been shot away” (Sontag 2002, 89) and compares it to a work of fine art, Hendrick Goltzius’ etching entitled ‘The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus’ (1588). Sontag states that “One horror has its place in a complex subject—figures in a landscape—that displays the artist’s skill of eye and hand. The other is a camera’s record, from very near, of a real person’s unspeakably awful mutilation; that and nothing else” (Sontag 2002, 89). She comments that “there is shame as well as shock in looking at the closeup of real horror” (Sontag 2002, 89) and, further:

Plate 5: Left to right: Chorus member (Queenie van de Zandt), Hecuba (Robyn Nevin), Cassandra (Melita Jurisic) from Kosky and Wright’s **The Women of Troy** *(STC 2008).*
(Photo: ©Tracey Schramm)

> Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it—say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken—or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether we like it or not. (Sontag 2002, 89)

While the photograph of which she writes is not included in the essay, she provides several pointers to its identification: (i) she discusses conscientious objector, Ernst Friedrich, who included the photograph in his *Krieg dem Kriege* (*War Against War*, 1924), with the caption “Die ‘Badekur” der Proleten: Fast das ganze Gesicht weggeschossen” (“The ‘health resort’ of the proletarian. Almost the whole face blown away”); (ii) she echoes part of Friedrich’s subtitle, “Almost the whole face blown away,” with “whose face has been shot away”; and (iii) she refers to “the military hospital where the photograph was taken” (Plate 1).[1]

Plate 1: “Die ‘Badekur’ der Proleten: Fast das ganze Gesicht weggeschossen” (“The “health resort” of the proletarian: Almost the whole face blown away”) in Krieg dem Kriege, 217. (Photo: http://www.zintzen.org/2007/09/08/shooting-war-casualties

In the juxtaposition of photograph and etching (not included, but named), Sontag’s position regarding the power of photography over the “skill of eye and hand” is persuasively, and painfully, conveyed. The modern viewer gazes in wonder at Goltzius’ dying figure (Plate 2), head half-consumed and body struggling in a vainglorious attempt to stave off death,

but the same viewer gazes in shame—or, perhaps more so, in agonising, visceral empathy, at the photograph. It is the photograph that presents the ethical challenges inherent in *both* the acts of looking *and* turning away, (perchance) making a case for the latter being the lesser of the two evils. Such complexities associated with gazing at certain photographs, expressly war photographs, are further teased out by Sontag:

> The first idea is that public attention is steered by the attention of the media...When there are photographs, a war becomes "real." Thus, the protest against the Vietnam War was mobilized by images. ... The second idea ... is that in a world saturated, even hypersaturated, with images, those which should matter to us have a diminishing effect: we become callous. (Sontag 2002, 96)

Plate 2: 'The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus' (line engraving, 25.1 x 31.5 cm) (Photo: http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=48529;type=101.)

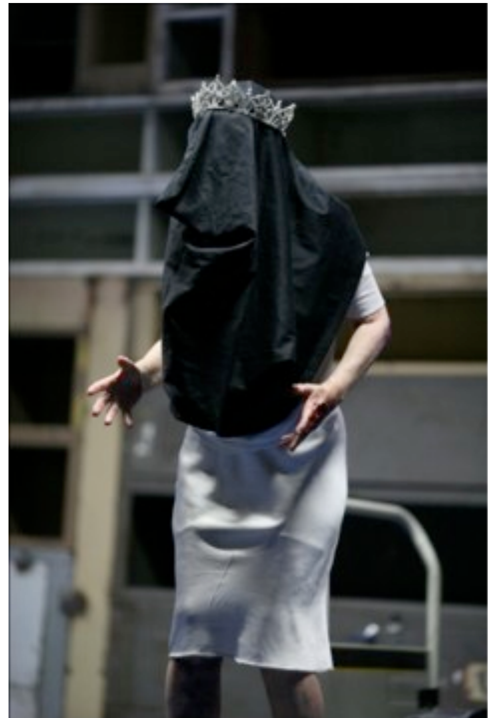

Plate 3a: Hecuba (Robyn Nevin) from Kosky and Wright's The Women of Troy (STC 2008). (Photo: ©Tracey Schramm)

We become callous, but we are also curious—voyeuristic—as the photography of misery and deformity compels us to gaze, to look and to look away, to open and to shut and to open again the proverbial shocking page in the proverbial book (the "ethical content of photographs is fragile," Sontag 1977, 20–21).

Sontag's contemplations on the photographic image , from her groundbreaking work, *On Photography* (1977), to her last monograph, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), clearly and intimately reflect her view of the world and her activism in particular. By living an intellectual life that regarded the pain of others, particularly those living with war, it is clear that Sontag's controversial decision to direct Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo in 1993 was a manifestation of personal and political agendas, a response to a personal (and, natura lly for Sontag as a writer, public) involvement in war and its photographic record. At the time of the staging, Sarajevo was under siege by Serb forces, the theatre was in ruins owing to previous mortar attacks, and the audience attended at its peril. Accordingly, the production represented a new paradigm concerning the role of, and moral imperatives associated with, the audience. On the one hand, Sontag's production disallowed audience members to participate merely as audience members, merely as viewers, because of the dangers involved in attending the play. In a sense, then, she created a living war photograph in the guise of theatre and subsequently challenged the viewer to engage with the primeval empathy and shame associated with gazing at a photograph such as "The 'health resort' of the proletarian." In this sense, it could be argued that through her philosophies on photography she (inadvertently?) reminded the theatrical world of the embedded reality of its craft and the enactment of it. Nevertheless, this Sarajevo sojourn was denigrated by various members of the western intellectual elite, including Jean Baudrillard:

> She [Sontag] is ... fashionably emblematic of what has now become a widespread situation, in which harmless, powerless intelle ctuals trade their woes with the wretched, each supporting the

other in a kind of perverse contract ... (Baudrillard 47)

Plate 3b: Abu Ghraib photograph of Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh; originally published in The New Yorker, May 6th, 2004; taken on November 4th, 2003. (Photo: historycommons.org)

Plate 4: Left to right: Chorus member (Natalie Gamsu), Hecuba (Robyn Nevin), Chorus members (Jennifer Vuletic and Queenie van de Zandt) from Kosky and Wright's The Women of Troy (STC 2008). (Photo: ©Tracey Schramm)

Baudrillard's statement is, of course, right. But it is also (and more so), clearly wrong. His truthfully casual comment on the "powerless intellectuals" is a beautifully unadorned statement of fact. It is also problematically unencumbered by the imperative to confront the mess of modern politics and ethics and the role of the arts therein.

It is Baudrillard's concept of "toothless intellectuals" (47) grappling with "the misery of the poor" (47), colliding with Sontag's questions concerning how to regard the pain of others and her efforts to do so, that form the major dialectic on which Barrie Kosky and Tom Wright's *The Women of Troy* is critically explored. Furthermore, Theodor Adorno's views on art after the Holocaust, it is suggested herein, can be seen to be in alignment with the views of Sontag under examination as both Kosky (in particular, in his role as director) and Wright draw on photography for realism or relevance while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations in a reverential nod to artistic integrity.

While Kosky and Wright do not nod to Sontag's philosophies on photography nor her version of *Waiting for Godot*, her experiences and the plethora of her opinions, so widely disseminated, underpin so much of contemporary art and political / cultural theory that they lend themselves to the following explication. This interpretive position is particularly tenable because of Kosky's decision as director to situate the tragedy within an Abu Ghraib setting, utilising the photographic record of American torture at the prison, a topic on which Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* has had widespread interpretive impact. As Louis Kaplan writes: "The book took on an even greater resonance in the spring of 2004 with the release of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs in Iraq and against the backdrop of revelations of the harsh treatment of prisoners (or so-called 'enemy combatants') in Guantanamo Bay" (unpaged). Kaplan further notes the importance of not underestimating "Sontag's influence in contemporary debates in post 9/11 visual culture regarding images of war and terror" (unpaged), citing "recent texts by important voices that have encountered (and countered) Sontag in scholarly journals," (unpaged) including Judith Butler, Karen Beckman, Manisha Basu, and Herta Wolf. Finally, Sontag's article, 'Regarding the Torture of Others,' published in *The New York Times* in 2004 is dedicated to the photographs in question.

The reconstruction of the imagery of Abu Ghraib by Kosky took Euripides' play to another level, a level of postmodern anxiety and relevance. The tragedy opened with the recreation or re-enactment of an Abu Ghraib photograph (Plate 3b) by presenting Hecuba as a modern Iraqi prisoner (Plate 3a). As she stood, or teetered, on her box, Kosky ensured the audience was 'breathless' with anticipation as the queen gradually 'came to life'—panting and panicking under her hood. Through Kosky's direction, she became a photograph that metamorphosed into a moving image; she was the newspaper 'shot' transformed on stage into television footage (that may disturb some viewers). Without prior audience knowledge of the direction the Sydney Theatre Company's staging would take, the familiar images of Abu Ghraib seemingly caused initial shock and then increasing unease in the minds of some audience members who

were most likely replaying (like myself) the photographic documentation.[2] In a spectacle similar to, but (clearly) different from Sontag's *Waiting for Godot*, Kosky and Wright's audience was, in a way, transported through the artistry and trickery of theatre into the middle of the mess that Abu Ghraib came to signify in the collective consciousness of the west (whether one was repulsed by it or cheered it on).

It is not naive to posit that any piece of theatre that intends to contemporise, politicise, or otherwise a canonical text, such as Euripides' *Troades*, will inevita bly run into obstacles and criticism. And despite the detractors of Sontag's 1993 production, her views on both photographic realism and political theatre had a resonance for me personally as a witness to *The Women of Troy*. They did so because, like photographic images of war, the production aimed to confront its audience with more than a safe simulacrum of "the pain of others" and, like a play staged *in situ* in the manner of *Waiting for Godot*, it captured the conjoint tension between art and life, creating "a perverse contract" as Baudrillard would have it. In this sense it captured an Euripidean authenticity by re-visioning yet remaining faithful to the original *Troades* as a work of art composed in the middle of the Peloponnesian War, a work produced one year after the Athenian capture of Melos—a military victory for the democratic state that involved the slaughter of the island's surviving men and the enslavement of its women and children. So too, as the propaganda machine of the United States proclaimed the supremacy of democracy over despotism, and paraded patriotism on home soil while its military power moved towards shaping yet another part of the world to its mould, its resemblance to Euripides' vision of both the Classical Athenians and the Mycenaean Greeks in his tragedy of 415 BCE was not lost on Kosky and Wright. In this sense, the production did more than present us with a work of art; it created and then occupied a place within a vertical hierarchy of representational reality or mimesis.

Plate 6: Left to right: Chorus members: Jennifer Vuletic, Natalie Gamsu, and Queenie van de Zandt from Kosky and Wright's The Women of Troy (STC 2008). (Photo: ©Tracey Schramm)

Plate 7a: Left to right: Chorus members (Queenie van de Zandt, Natalie Gamsu and Jennifer Vuletic) and Hecuba (Robyn Nevin) from Kosky and Wright's The Women of Troy (STC 2008). (Photo: ©Tracey Schramm)

In order to further explicate the ethical issues involved in a piece of theatre such as *The Women of Troy*, particularly from the perspective of the audience, I have developed two hierarchies of representational reality/mimesis and located the production within each one. After the title 'Real Combat,' the cells descend in order to designate the degrees of mimesis. My first system of analysis (Chart 1) places photography and moving images in a privileged position in keeping with the tenets of Sontag, who writes: "By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative" (Sontag 2003, 27). In an alternative system (Chart 2), I have moved the production to the position above photography,

arguing that this work achieves authenticity by showing humanity and its degradation and humiliation in a far more powerful way than many photographs.

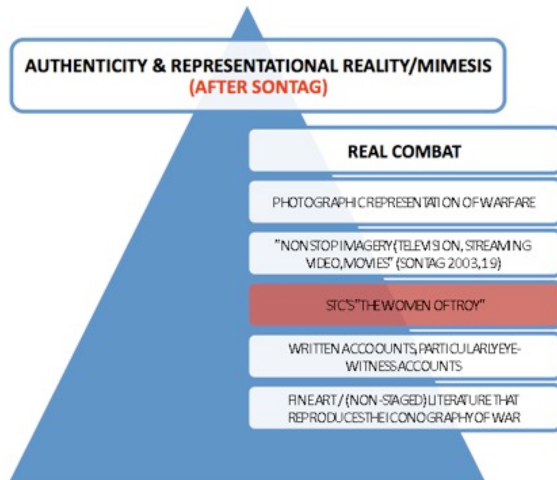

Chart 1: Authenticity & Representational Reality/Mimesis (After Sontag)

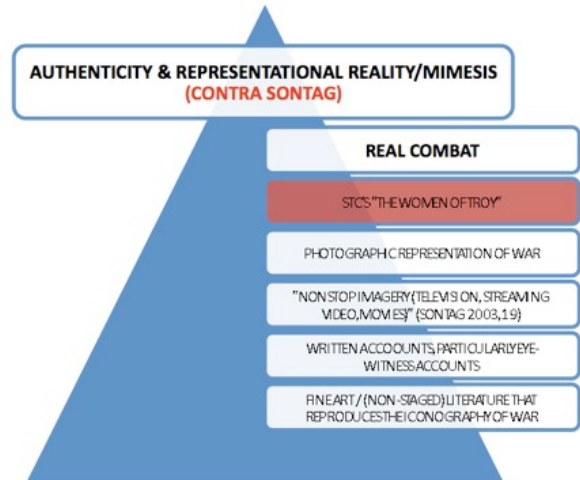

Chart 2: Authenticity & Representational Reality/Mimesis (Contra Sontag)

By adopting the second hierarchy, *The Women of Troy* (like Sontag's *Godot*) can be interpreted as embodying "the pain of others" because, while it is art and thereby artifice, it confronts the audience with a visceral presence—humanity in pain in the form of people—close to you, the spectator—close enough to some to be smelt and observed perspiring. Yes, it is all make-up and smoke and mirrors—and no, the actors are not fainting through lack of food and sleep like Sontag's cast, but the set, after all is radically different; the ideas may coalesce but the backdrop is not the same. Wendy S. Hesford, influenced by the tenets of trauma theory, writes of such "correspondence between the documentary spectacles of war and theatre" (Hesford 32), and the concept inherent in her phrase seems close to the uneasy, representational reality/mimesis evoked by Kosky and Wright. For example, while the audience is aware of their surroundings and the artificiality of the theatre, they also hear gun shots, see bodies rendered ugly and ravaged (see Plates 4, 5, 7a, and 7b), and see lifelike body fluids, namely blood and vomit, emit from wounded arms, legs, and the breaking of a hymen (as Wright's script fulfils the threats of Cassandra's defloration in the original text). Just as the world gazed at the dehumanised prisoners of Abu Ghraib, we gaze at the women of Troy. We, the audience, are the subjects observing these women, who through continual return to the photographic positions of the Abu Ghraib prisoners, are objectified by our gaze. However, their physical presence and proximity means the spectator cannot ignore their humanity.

Plate 7b: Left to right: Hecuba (Robyn Nevin) and Chorus member (Jennifer Vuletic) from Kosky and Wright's The Women of Troy (STC 2008). (Photo: ©Tracey Schramm)

The stills from the production illustrate the way in which the mind or, more specifically, the memory can be stimulated into combining a previously established image with a new one that evokes the former by means of visual intertextuality. Images of the collective group, the women of Troy, show the boxes, the hoods, the cables and the dehumanisation of the photograph of the prisoner from Abu Ghraib whose covered face, ragged garment, outstretched arms, bare feet and wired hands shocked the world in 2004 (Plate 3b). The power inherent in the use of this photo graph emanates predominantly from its innate

ability to evoke a cultural intertextuality, a universal and collective history of the sites of suffering that Sontag was quick to detect in her comparison of the photographs from Abu Ghraib to American lynching pictures (Sontag 2004, 27).[3] So too, Henry A. Giroux highlights the universality of suffering instigated by one's viewing of the Abu Ghraib photographs:

> At one level, the image of the faceless, hooded detainee, arms outstretched and wired, conjured up images of the Spanish Inquisition, the French brutalization of Algerians and the slaughter of innocent people at My Lai during the Viet Nam war. (Giroux 4–5).

Via Euripides, Kosky and Wright add a much earlier history of human pain, recalling the Trojans and the Melians, whose sufferings at the hands of the collective Greeks and Athenians respectively, align the superpowers of antiquity to "the heavily damaged rhetoric of American democracy ... [giving way] to the more realistic discourse of empire, colonization, and militarization" (Giroux 5).

The combination of the materialisation of the visceral potential of theatre with the presence of war photography—photography that has been animated in a way, made to come alive—elevates *The Women of Troy* to this high position of reality (Chart 2). The 'look' of the production also generated a realism that afforded a prevailing sense of integrity: its showcasing of a sublime horror in the form of its mutilated, blood-smeared, raped and murdered heroines ensured that it achieved a more valid sense of the pain of others than a prettier rendition ever could. Perhaps one could contrast it to the visually beautiful film version by Michael Cacoyannis (1971) or the 2007 production by the National Theatre in London. But to negate the versions by Cacoyannis and the National Theatre is somewhat unfair—they are very pretty, yes—but, unlike the Sydney Theatre Company's version, neither set out to overtly politicise the play or realistically address the pain of others, even though Euripides' original play was highly political and empathetic.

In an essay entitled 'An Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society,' Adorno states: "... to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric ..." (Adorno 1967; 1983, 34). Of course the dictum, so often quoted and blithely misunderstood, does not articulate an abandonment of the artistic process but acknowledges the inherent barbarism of its ongoing existence. In his observant critique of Adorno, Josh Cohen quotes Adorno's related but often neglected pronouncement: "In its disproportion ... to the horror that has transpired and threatens, it [poetry / or, more generally, art] is condemned to cynicism; even where it directly faces the horror, it diverts attention from it." (Cohen 64; Adorno 1970; 1997, 234).[4] In creating literary or visual commentaries on extreme experiences the artist may well fail to effectively regard the pain of others—to the extent of mishandling trauma and/or diverting attention from it, as Cohen conjectures. And indeed, such mediums risk the erasure of reality: there is no real battlefield, no real mutilated or dead bodies, there is no photographic documentation of such, and unless the art is placed *in situ,* there is the risk of contextual absence. In relation to the Sydney Theatre Company's production, part of the realism or authenticity of the play is its conflation of theatricality and photographic imagery.

Kosky and Wright's women are no cherub-like companions of Cadmus being voluptuously gorged on by a whiskered, albeit taloned, dragon. And it is in the light of these ideas concerning the production that Adorno and Sontag's theories may also be aligned to further disentangle what Kosky and Wright were aiming at, namely to draw on the power of the war photograph, but to subvert and to subject it to an almost pop-culture and /or queer art status, and to accept, even celebrate, its "necessary failure" (Cohen 64).[5] Mimesis is about "necessary failure," and I note in relation to this the pop-culture and, in particular, the queer art status of the production in acknowledgement of the construct of mimesis and failure. Indeed the production deliberately lacked an earnest verisimilitude, which some audience members may have found alienating, but in so doing it paid honest deference to the interplay between truth and illusion / reality and mimesis that furnished a (possibly unintentional) footnote to Adorno's explicit dilemmas concerning poetry after Auschwitz. This is another reason for situating the production at the top of the

scale in Chart 2, for it was the impression of self-conscious direction concerning the disjuncture and nexus between truth and illusion that resulted in a mimetic production with so much force. We can never, as Adorno makes explicit, reproduce true and moral art after Auschwitz, but we can be reminded of its horror through art that is self-reflexive. This line of argument in relation to the production may also service a specific interpretation of a specific or discreet component of *The Women of Troy*, namely Kosky's collaboration with costume designer Alice Babidge and actor Jennifer Vuletic, whose shaved head, costume and make-up remind us of the prisoners-of-war of the Nazi regime (Plates 7a and 7b).

John McCallum, in his public address, 'Putting It Back Together and Getting It on the Road: Australian Theatre in the 21st Century' (Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture, 2010), discusses the effects of the complex mimesis of Kosky's vision, noting especially its emotional and cathartic effects:

> Barrie Kosky's production of Euripides' *The Women of Troy* at the STC in 2008 was one of the most harrowing nights in the theatre that I have ever spent. It was too harrowing for many—some people I love and respect refused to see it and there were apparently many walkouts every night. We're talking about a show with no interval, so walking out is a big statement. ... And so here is another point, for all the theatre-makers here. If you challenge and confront your audience in the visceral space of live theatre, if you refuse to pander to their desire to be merely entertained, then some won't come, and some will walk out, but some—*the ones you want*—will be changed forever. (unpaged).

McCallum's response to the play reflects the hierarchy suggested in Chart 2, which privileges the production partly because of its power to cause an audience member—in this case McCallum himself—to "feel it first in your nerves, bones and flesh" (unpaged). To be well and truly "theatre fucked" as McCallum puts it, the audience must be implicated in the action, and this is what I experienced as I entered the arena of Kosky and experienced the mimesis he engineered. The likely possibility of the angst-ridden effects on the audience (after all, it is Kosky) do not concern McCallum—

> If you don't like it then visit the 'uplifting' museum theatre of clever Pulitzer Prize-winning lounge-room comedies about people having trouble with their relationships; sit bereft at home on a Saturday night lamenting the passing of *The Bill*; get a Gold Ticket to Hoyts and sink into a plush chair with the 3D glasses and the popcorn; or float down in merry laughter, as the great transgressive American comedian Bill Hicks said just before he died, onto the comfy soft scrotum cushion of Dick-Joke Island. (unpaged).[6]

—for surely they are mandatory for audience purging and self-realisation.

As previously noted, Baudrillard, among others, have criticised Sontag in Sarajevo. Likewise, Friedrich was criticised for his *War on War*, and Kosky is a recurrent whipping-boy of the conservative scribe (see Connor, whose anxious review of *The Women of Troy* includes a statement reminiscent of Baudrillard on Sontag: "Kosky plays for educated philistines who, with babbling and erudite appreciation, applaud the maiming of beauty," 69).[7] In his essay devoted to Sontag's production, Baudrillard—who would no doubt have hated Kosky's work, too—deliberates further on her motivations, specifically in relation to the western reformulation of reality in artistic mediums:

Our reality: that is the problem. We only have one reality, and it has to be rescued. And rescued even with the worst of slogans: 'We have to do something. We can't just do nothing.' But doing something just because you cannot not do it has never amounted to a principle of action or freedom. Merely a form of absolution from your own importance and compassion for your own fate. (Baudrillard 48)

By the term "our reality," Baudrillard, in addition to an obvious reference to his theory of the

simulacrum, alludes to the concept of victimhood—the star motif of the new world order in the west—or, more precisely, victimhood and its companion, suffering. In this one statement, Baudrillard negates any relevance of a hierarchy of reality in the arts that springs from a monstrous event—in this instance, combat. Sontag responded: "Baudrillard is a political idiot. Maybe a moral idiot too. … I don't think I would call him nihilistic, I think he's ignorant and cynical" (Sontag speaking with Chan, unpaged).

Baudrillard's stance and Sontag's response raise critical issues in relation to how or where an audience is situated ethically and even extends to who should be allowed to be in the audience. Baudrillard further states that "[w]hen fighting against anything whatever, we have to start out from the evil to be combated, never from the misfortune produced" (Baudrillard 48), but if the victims of war engendered empathy in Euripides' *Troades* 2400 years ago and the photographs of Abu Ghraib turned the eyes of the world to the citizens of Iraq, clearly there is a morally-charged symbiotic relationship between subject (spectator) and object (performers) that Baudrillard has missed in this instance. Baudrillard would perhaps view the strained positioning between reality, photography, and theatre in *The Women of Troy* as an example of western fascination with grief, suffering, and victimhood—a glib performance of pain without an examination of the evil that caused it. He would perhaps deny cathartic knowledge in this theatrical instance if not *in toto.*

The Sydney Theatre Company's production of *The Women of Troy* links the play and these images, thereby evoking a multilayered and intertextual response to the piece that resonates during and long after the performance. But, have we learned anything from the experience as Sontag advises we should if we are to be deemed worthy viewers of graphic images? I would argue yes. The visceral nature of the production, its links to a real-life situation and its photographic documentation, its evocation of a reality within an environment of mimesis are all in keeping with tragedy's moral imperative to educate the audience, to enlarge sensibilities, to remind us of our humanity, to take us from the position of voyeur to "moral witness" (Hesford 32),[8] to provoke catharsis.

Sontag knew of such things. Kosky plays with them. Adorno is still subject to misunderstanding. And Baudrillard watched Sarajevo from his lounge-room.

footnotes

[1]Thank you to the two anonymous referees for their generous response to an earlier version of this essay and to Leni Johnson for discussing Sontag with me. I am also grateful to have been invited to the colloquium, 'Classical Tradition and the Epic Impulse in Australian Theatre: The Lost Echo and The Women of Troy,' where I first presented these ideas; thank you to Elizabeth Hale for organising it.

[2]This was particularly so on opening night, the first time I saw the production, when reviews, of course, had yet to be published.

[3]A comparison also made by other commentators; see, for example, Apel, Delevante, and Hesford.

[4]Interestingly, Adorno, in his formulation of the new means by which to regard the Holocaust, regarded the plays of Beckett as possessing more truthfulness than any other work of art; see Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (especially: "Today the primacy of the object and aesthetic realism are almost absolutely opposed to each other, and indeed when measured by the standard of realism: Beckett is more realistic than the socialist realists who counterfeit reality by their very principle," 406); also Negative Dialectics (380–381); see also Harding.

[5]See Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 2.

[6]See also McCallum and Hillard: "The visceral shock that this creates in the theatre is not an Aristotelian

catharsis of pity and terror but more a Meyerholdian, even Artaudian, catharsis of psychic trauma and bodily emissions, provoking a kind of horrified ecstasy" (132).

[7]See also McQueen-Thomson on Kosky's direction of the Bell Shakespeare Company's 1998 production of King Lear. Among the criticisms, which tend to become personal in relation to Kosky, McQueen-Thomson writes: "This cult of the individual over the work makes for easy media publicity, but militates against genuine discussion of cultural substance in theatre, music, literature and other similar fields. It also validates and encourages the public narcissism and self·display of Kosky and his kind" (15).

[8]Hesford uses this phrase in relation to "the use of the camera as an instrument of dominance and the use of the camera as moral witness" (32).

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