

**THE (NOT SO) CLASSICAL PRODUCTIONS OF PETER SELLARS: *AJAX*, *PERSIANS*
AND *CHILDREN OF HERACLES***

by

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Abstract

Peter Sellars' reperformances of the plays belonging to the ancient Greek canon have always been controversial. His radical choices regarding the performance elements, affected by and directly referencing the sociopolitical context of the time when they were staged, provide important evidence for both understanding the afterlife of classical texts on the modern stage, but also the development of Sellars as a director. More specifically, in the productions of Sophocles' *Ajax* (1986), Aeschylus' *Persians* (1993) and Euripides' *Children of Herakles* (2003), Sellars explores how the ancient Greek tragedies can be staged in such a way as to open channels of communication and how the theatrical space can become an arena of debate, in hopes of creating an active audience, similar to that of fifth century BC Athens, where societal issues could be discussed through performative means. Drawing on reception and performance theories, reviews of the performances, interviews with Sellars and an overview of the sociopolitical context of when the three tragedies were staged, both in antiquity and the contemporary world, this thesis will explore these productions through different methodological lenses, arguing that by applying multiple methodologies we can better understand the productions and their audience reception, as well as the larger theatrical and cultural context in which they were produced. By exploring Sellars' directorial choices, I will argue that it is not simply about how ancient plays are being reused and restaged, but also what information they can provide us regarding significant trends in contemporary American theatre during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

Lay Summary

The reperformances of the ancient Greek dramas have always been faced with issues of fidelity to the original. Peter Sellars' controversial productions of plays belonging to the ancient Greek canon—Sophocles' *Ajax* (1986), Aeschylus' *Persians* (1993), and Euripides' *Children of Herakles* (2003)—provide important evidence for both understanding the afterlife of the theatrical texts on the modern stage, as well as the development of Sellars as a director. By examining Sellars' directorial choices and his view of the ancient Greek theatre as a political arena with a politically active audience, I will provide evidence not only about how the ancient plays can be reused and restaged in different contexts, but also how Sellars' work reflects the significant theatrical trends of the time.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Marios Kallos

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Dedication

To my chosen family

Chapter 1: Introduction

*Our task as artists is to put something
on stage that reflects the society.*

Peter Sellars¹

Theatre or *θέατρον*, from the verb *θεάομαι-ᾶμαι*, in ancient Greek carries meanings both of viewing but also reflecting or contemplating.² Director Peter Sellars' conception of the role of theatre, as summarized in the epigraph above, carries with it something of this ancient Greek definition of the theatre and what the space was for, as he argues that the audience should see something in the theatre which reflects their own society and encourages contemplation. While this is important for understanding Sellars' directorial mandate, its significance is not limited to that; it represents not only how Sellars verbalizes his role as a director, but also the agenda which lies behind the production process from beginning to end. Sellars explicitly says that he is putting "something"—a something he leaves undefined—on stage that is in immediate relationship with a current historic-political reality and through which theatre can reclaim its role as a "force of political and social responsibility and understanding and of the need to rise above the literal."³ It is in this vision of the theatre that Sellars' interest in the classical originates.

This thesis seeks to explore Peter Sellars' engagement with classical Greek theatre, arguing that in these productions we can on one level identify specific features of Sellars' theatrical craft and ideology as a director, but on a larger level we can use his work to explore trends in the reception of classical plays in the modern world, including interculturalism and changing representations of bodies and voices on stage. Even though this thesis is concerned

¹ Delgado and Heritage (1996) 225.

² Contemplate, see clearly, view as spectator, see entry in *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*.

³ Delgado (1999) 204.

with the appeal of the plays of the ancient Greek canon to Sellars, his theatrical career and his engagement with art in general is as multifaceted as his productions. His directing style has been shaped through an array of different art forms, whether traditional, such as his engagement with opera and puppet theatre, or more mainstream forms, such as his direction of video clips like Hancock's *Hard Rock* and his acting appearances in popular tv shows like *Miami Vice*, as well as more avant garde sources such as Godard's *King Lear*.⁴ Furthermore his artistic direction of large scale theatre festivals, such as those of Los Angeles and Adelaide, brought him in contact with a variety of different cultures and marginalized ethnic groups within larger communities.⁵ Each of those influences left an imprint on his directorial style, either in the form of finding ways to engage the audience, as in the puppet theatre and the media related pop culture references, or the mixture of different cultural elements and the creation of a public space where people can engage directly with the meanings of the production. Looking at the three plays from the ancient Greek tradition—Sophocles' *Ajax*, Aeschylus' *Persians*, Euripides' *Children of Heracles*—I will try to illustrate not only how those productions reflect the various influences that he was exposed to during the course of his artistic career, but also how he implemented them in “re-patriating the European classical art-works to his native land, America”⁶ and decommodifying the theatre by returning it to its ancient Greek functions as a site of political debate.

Sellars was born on September 27, 1957, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At an early age he became fascinated by the art of theatre, and when he was ten, he started apprenticing for The Lovelace Marionette Theatre, continuing his training there until 1971.⁷ The puppet work from

⁴ Delgado (1999) 204.

⁵ Delgado (1999) 204; Fricker (2014) 214.

⁶ Suttcliffe (2014) 199.

⁷ Jenkins (1986) 47; Delgado (1999) 205.

this period of his life had a lasting effect on his later career, instilling in him a belief in the importance of topicality, musicality, and an intellectually present as well as participatory audience. During his apprenticeship, his involvement with the puppet play *Jack and the Beanstalk* taught him that unless the words connect in a certain way so as to create a lyrical aspect, you have nothing more than words that just state the obvious, failing to have an emotional impact on the the audience.⁸ The need to capture the audience's attention through the lyricism of the words made him realize that, "you need to have something that is larger than what it says it is," which explains his fascination with the recognizable archetypes found in the classical plays.⁹ It was yet another puppet script, this time from the British puppet tradition of Punch and Judy, which itself was derived from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, that taught him "how to improvise and where the topical references come from."¹⁰ The violence associated with Punch and Judy plays must have given him the first insight into exaggeration as a method for distancing the audience from the stage action and preventing any sense of realism.¹¹ Lovelace Marionette Theatre's experimental programs introduced Sellars to the theatre traditions of Cocteau, Giraudoux, and Molière, and the theatre also provided his first interaction with Asian

⁸ It is characteristic of Sellars' view of the relation between texts and audience response when he says, "there were certain bits and you knew that if the audience was going well then you moved on to the next bit". See Jenkins (1986) 47.

⁹ Jenkins (1986) 47.

¹⁰ Jenkins (1986) 47. The character of Punch was derived from the Pulcinella mask of *commedia dell'arte* and, like his *commedia* counterpart, Punch carries a slapstick with which he beats other characters, especially his wife, at every opportunity. The first script for a Punch and Judy play was published in the early 1800s, but like the *commedia* tradition from which it had developed, it would seem that most performances were unscripted, building on stock characters, pre-established scenarios, and recyclable jokes and schticks, with each performance developing in response to the audience reaction. For further information on the Punch and Judy tradition and its importance in the English tradition, see Crone (2006) 1055-1082.

¹¹ Crone, (2006) 1065, observes the importance of the puppets' wooden faces in evoking comedy in scenes of violence. She notes, "In performance the exaggerated features of Punch and Judy, as well as the inability of their wooden faces to express emotion or pain, are crucial as the audience is distanced from the violence and the characters themselves become difficult to identify with."

performance traditions, introducing him to Japanese bunraku and Javanese shadow puppets.¹²

Despite of, or perhaps because of, his youth, the Lovelace Marionette Theatre, a travelling company that performed for both adults and children, had a lasting impression on Sellars own theatre practice, deeply affecting his style and the ways in which he engages with classical texts.¹³

Following his high school graduation from the Phillips Academy in 1975, Sellars spent a year in Paris, where he came in contact with Giorgio Strehler, the Bread and Puppet Theatre—an American based company, which at the time was touring Europe—and Andrei Serban.¹⁴ All three had a tremendous effect on Sellars’ approach towards theatre in general, but especially the classics. In addition to Strehler’s lyrical realism and his reworking of plays from the classical canon, such as the Shakespearean tradition or contemporary classics like Brecht, Sellars came in contact with Strehler’s idea about the collaborative notion of the production which held the audience at its center.¹⁵ The Bread and Puppet Theatre, founded by Peter Schumann in New York in the 1960s, also had a similar affinity towards the audience. Unlike Strehler’s tradition which was rooted in the theatrical canon, they were much more oriented towards street-entertainment, drawing on folklore traditions, passion plays, and storytelling. This was a tradition that Sellars would have found familiar from his time with the Lovelace Marionette Theatre.

¹² Delgado (1999) 205. Bunraku is a Japanese puppet theatre developed between the 17th to mid-19th century (Tokugawa era). The three elements of bunraku tradition are the chanter, a stringed instrument, and the puppets. For a detailed description of this performance tradition, see Gerstle (2010). The Javanese shadow puppet theatre, *Wayang kulit purwa*, is a traditional form of theatre in South Asia, Java and Bali, the central elements of which are the puppet master (*dalang*) who through the use of puppets, masks or people narrates a story. For more details, see Foley (2003). Another important element is the continuous music produced by a gamelan orchestra, a folk musical ensemble mostly consisting of gongs and slabs. On the gamelan orchestra, see Susilo (2003).

¹³ Conner (2007) 174; on the history and the activities of the company, see the ULS Archives & Special Collections of the University of Pittsburgh.

¹⁴ On his high school education, see Delgado (1999) 205; on his time in Paris, see Shewey (1991) 263.

¹⁵ Farrell (2010).

Perhaps the most important aspect of the troupe, in terms of its influence on Sellars, was its political character. The company had taken part in the protest movement against the Vietnam War, and they engaged with local politics, staging performances in the poorest neighborhoods of New York where, in collaboration with the residents, they addressed urban political and social issues.¹⁶ The affinity between these performances and what Sellars would later attempt to do with his performances of classical plays (as I will set out later in this thesis), suggests that the company exerted a major influence on Sellars' vision of what the theatre can and should do.¹⁷

The most direct point of contact, however, between what Sellars encountered in the theatre in Paris in 1975/6 and the classical work that he himself would go on to direct, was Andrei Serban's production of *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy*, a monumental production built out of rewritings of Euripides' *Medea*, *Trojan Women*, and *Electra*. His first innovation was in terms of the text. In all three tragedies he stripped them of the canonized recognizable element which was the translated text, and instead he chose to use Greek and Latin language, which while it made them incomprehensible to the audience, they closely "echoed the shape of the original plots" sustaining the main body of the plays, which we see can see traces of in Sellars technique of reworking canonical texts, which made him both famous and notorious.¹⁸ Serban's performance tried to revitalize the ancient Greek chorus, by having the actors emerge through a choral group and return back to it, evoking the historical progression of the actor's evolution

¹⁶ Bread and Puppet website: <<http://breadandpuppet.org/about-b-ps-50-year-history>>. Notable is their 1965 play *Fire* which "presented six days in a Vietnamese community, followed by a bombing raid and ending with a self-immolation. For further info on the performance and video footage, see *Internet Archive* <<https://archive.org/details/BP1510fire>>.

¹⁷ Jenkins (1986) 49.

¹⁸ Foley (2012) 96.

from the choral group of the dithyramb in the ancient Greek tradition.¹⁹ Serban's second innovation was in terms of performance space. He created a generic open space detached from any spatial indicators by discarding the use of proscenium setting, which either invited the audience into the play itself or challenged its relation to it.²⁰ Sellars' uses a similar technique in his later career—though unlike Serban he uses topological markers recognizable to the audience, such as the back entrance of the Pentagon in Sophocles' *Ajax*—to create a similarly intimate relationship in the performance space between the audience and the play. A third innovation in *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy* from which Sellars draw inspiration, is closely related to what Sellars calls musicality, and involved the actors using “every possible human body cavity as resonator to discover what enables actors to project and produce intense communication with an audience and its gods in a huge open space.”²¹ A final innovation in Serban's work involved the use of different techniques from the Asian tradition, which had in common their affinity for ritualistic elements. Serban tried to invoke the “energy” of the actors that would give meaning to the texts by using a set of vocal, physical, and movement techniques from Noh, Kathakali, Kabuki, and Balinese theatre.²² Given the number of points of contact between Serban's *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy* and techniques used by Sellars in his own productions of classical plays (rewriting texts, manipulating the audience through the playing space, considering lyricism in musicality as a means of moving and engaging the audience, and drawing on Asian

¹⁹ Foley (2012) 96.

²⁰ Foley (2012) 97.

²¹ Foley (2012) 97.

²² Foley (2012) 97.

performance traditions), this play must have had a profound impact on Sellars and his development as a director.²³

Following his time in Paris, in 1976 Sellars enrolled in Harvard University, from which he would graduate in 1980.²⁴ While Harvard would have a significant impact on his development as an artist, he launched his career while still an undergraduate, directing a number of radical stagings of canonical plays imbued with unfettered eclecticism.²⁵ While his productions included works by Chekhov, Stein, Ibsen, Mayakovsky and Sukhovo-Kobylin, amongst others, it was his Shakespeare productions which garnered him widespread recognition during his student years. It is here that we can see the roots of his habit of imbuing all his reworkings of the classics with anachronisms, challenging the canon while at the same time performing the canon.²⁶ To Sellars' mind anachronisms in a production do not diminish a play's canonicity, but on the contrary give the play a timeless feeling, where the sense of a strict timeline is shattered with past, present and future coexisting at the same time. Sellars' point is that, even if we don't realize it, cultural references are a major element of how we contextualize and make sense of the world around us.²⁷

There were two particularly significant events that contributed to Sellars' artistic development during his Harvard years. Sellars wrote his thesis paper on Meyerhold's production of Gogol's *Inspector General* while he was preparing his own production of the play for the

²³ Foley (2012) 97.

²⁴ Delgado (1999) 204.

²⁵ Delgado (1999) 205.

²⁶ Delgado, (1999) 205, notes of his Shakesperean performances that the two most radical were *King Lear*, in which he had Lear entering the stage in a Lincoln automobile, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, which he staged in Harvard's swimming pool.

²⁷ Delgado (1999) 205.

American Repertory Theatre, which premiered in 1980.²⁸ In Meyerhold's realization that in turbulent times culture has to be more than decorative, Sellars found a resonance with the American reality of the 1980s, which he believed—through capitalism—reduced everything to personal psychology, preventing people from realizing their role as parts of a community and as active citizens.²⁹ Meyerhold's attempt to leave aside the personal psychology and to address systematic societal problems in order to spark a conversation between the audience regarding the basic aspects that affect their lives triggered Sellars' realization that he had to reject the American tradition of constructed happy endings and avoidance of real issues.³⁰ Meyerhold's death—shot at Stalin's command—also helped to idealize him in young Sellars' mind, making him seek a “theatre as dangerous politically as that.”³¹ Meyerhold's influence on Sellars' work also draws on what Meyerhold branded as “musical realism”, a method of viewing performance as a way for theatre to “represent the multiple levels of reality that are in people's lives.”³² Sellars understood musical realism as being Meyerhold's way of talking about theatre as a spiritual experience.³³ Meyerhold's influence can be seen in Sellars' work, especially the later productions and in his reworkings of the classics, when he uses multiple methods, from music and sound to the descendants of shamans and pre-performance rituals to invoke a unifying context for all spectators, a connection with the spiritual realm, which is timeless and a common

²⁸ Bates (1998) 87.

²⁹ Bates (1998) 89.

³⁰ Bates (1998) 89.

³¹ Under Stalin's political rule, Meyerhold's theatrical experimentation was deemed dangerous. In 1938 Stalin ordered Meyerhold's theatre to close down and Meyerhold was briefly employed by Stanislavsky's company. A couple of months after Stanislavsky's death in 1938, Meyerhold was arrested, tortured, and finally murdered in 1940. See Sutcliffe (1996) 200.

³² Bates (1998) 89.

³³ Bates (1998) 89.

factor in all cultures.³⁴ During his time at Harvard he also received the Sheldon Travelling Scholarship which allowed him to travel in India, China, Japan, where he came in contact with Asian cultures and with their far more ritualistic and stylistic traditions, which had a significant imprint on his later directorial thought and practice.³⁵

While Sellars had been working in the theatre actively since his early teens, his first production at the American Repertory Theatre in Boston in 1981, at the age of 24, marked the beginning of his professional career in which he would incorporate all the significant theatrical influences that he had encountered over the previous fifteen years. In the years to come, Sellars would produce some of the most interesting and debated performances in American theatre, characterized by astute experimentation in diverse cultural contexts. His extensive use of modern technology, his minimalistic setting, his multi-cultural casting, and the political overtones of his productions are only a few of Sellars' choices that created the polarized critical response to his work; his innovations could perhaps be best described as directly challenging the canonized theatrical tradition. Characteristic examples are his production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in 1987, where he decided to move the plot from Seville to the street-tough Spanish Harlem of the 1980s,³⁶ or his 1994 production of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, where he cast a black actor as Shylock, a Chinese-American as Portia, and Latino actors for the roles of Antonio and

³⁴ Sellars points out that in Russia after the revolution any religious practice and discussion was prohibited, so Meyerhold invented the phrase "musical realism" as an alias to disguise the spiritual aspect of his theatre. Bates (1998) 90.

³⁵ Delgado (1999) 205. The impact of those travels can be seen immediately after Sellars return to the United States, where in 1981 he directed the National Theatre of the Deaf's production of *The Ghost of Chastity Past, or the incident at Shashimi Junction*. The play was written by Shanny Mow and it was a "western spoof in Kabuki Style." It was set in a western town with gunfights but the actors were wearing Japanese costumes. See Baldwin (1964) 60.

³⁶ The press talked about Sellars "operating under the assumption that this 200-year-old work cannot speak to a modern audience unless it is trashed, trivialized and sensationalized" and turning it "into a depressing parade of easy jokes and vaudeville turns." Henchan (1987).

Bassanio.³⁷ While many of these innovation drew on the theatrical experiences that had influenced him directly, he was also part of a shift in American theatre culture which saw a great deal of experimentation with text and performance, forming an avant-garde wave of theatre artists, which included artists such as Robert Wilson and the Wooster Group.

In the 1970s the idea of the *auteur*-director—in which the director was a fully rounded theatre artist who not only directed, but often wrote their own pieces, designed and acted in them—began developing in the United States.³⁸ The canonical tradition was being challenged by the ideas of artists such as the Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte, whom Sellars greatly admired,³⁹ and her views that the text does not have a specific meaning but is filled “with ambiguities and ambivalence.”⁴⁰ Recalling Barthes' writings about the death of the Author, LeCompte saw multiple interpretations depending on the multiplicity of signs.⁴¹ Along with LeCompte, other artists also saw the canonical texts as a half-filled canvas where the final image would be created through the collaboration of all the participants in the creative process, including the audience. Examples of other directors working in this tradition and engaging with classical texts include, Lee Breuer and his highly acclaimed *Gospel at Colonus* (1983), a musical interpretation of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Robert Wilson's staging of Euripides' *Alcestis* (1984).⁴² Despite the influence these artists had on Sellars, he quickly shifted from work

³⁷ Delgado, (1999) 206, observes that the references to the multicultural Los Angeles in Sellars' production capture the multicultural urban landscape of the Venice of Shakespeare, and that Sellars' production pointed out the “economic roots of racism.” As for the immediate critical response to the production, David Richards (1994), writing in the *New York Times*, commented that Sellars' interpretation of the scenes was so “Idiosyncratic that he might as well be rewriting the text.”

³⁸ Solomon (1991) 236.

³⁹ Jenkins (1986) 49.

⁴⁰ Greene (1991) 120.

⁴¹ Greene (1991) 120.

⁴² Shewey (1991) 271.

that might be considered part of the the avant-garde movement in American theatre, characterized by innovation challenging the bourgeois theatre, and instead moved towards a more post-modern perspective, where he applied those innovations to the “canon of the theatrical tradition” prompting his audience to realise the different layers of reality and to come to a deeper understanding of themselves.⁴³ Sellars approached the text with a critical eye, stripping it down to only what he deemed to be necessary and rebuilding it with topicalities and contemporary references. The primary aspect of his work, however, that differentiated him from his peers, was his belief that every “interpretive choice has a political resonance.”⁴⁴

It was the political nature of ancient Greek tragedy, or at least his understanding of it as I will discuss in chapter 2, that drew Sellars’ interest. Sellars imagines the ancient Greek theatrical structure as a “giant ear”⁴⁵ acting as a listening space where all the minority voices that otherwise would be ignored could be expressed. As he notes “every Greek play is about women, children, and foreigners”⁴⁶, and he believes that the theatre and the range of views and voices expressed therein played a pivotal role into establishing the ancient Greek audience as members of a democratic political system.⁴⁷ Through his productions, Sellars attempts to recreate a theatrical landscape not defined by dominant ideologies, but filled with a multiplicity of voices, speaking to contemporary issues through ancient works. Sellars sees the need for these voices as a crucial element in the decommodification of theatre, opening an arena of political debate that genuinely

⁴³ Shewey (1991) 264.

⁴⁴ Shewey (1991) 271,

⁴⁵ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 37.

⁴⁶ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 37

⁴⁷ This relationship, as expressed by Sellars, is highly idealized and shaped so as to serve his directorial mandate. See chapter 1 for further discussion.

reflects every aspect of society and its issues, regardless of how unpleasant they may be, and through their exploration in the theatre, genuine communication opening up between groups.

Despite the impact ancient Greek theatre had on Sellars' thought, he has only directed three tragedies: Sophocles' *Ajax*, Aeschylus' *Persians*, and Euripides' *Children of Herakles*.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, while his interaction with the ancient Greek theatre might seem disproportionately limited within the larger body of his directorial work, the influence of tragedy runs throughout his career. The notion of creating a contemporary audience, similar to the ancient one, which "begins to recognize itself as a community and begins to hear its own voice and to realize that we are not spectators in the world; we are in fact participants"⁴⁹ is one of Sellars' main—if not the main—goals, regardless of what play he stages. In a contemporary theatre still governed by the conventions⁵⁰ shaped by a bourgeois nineteenth-century European audience and crystallized by the introduction of naturalism, which established the stage as a space where we see an illusion of reality, Sellars believes that the audience members have been turned into consumers who are more concerned with judging what is on stage instead of interacting with it.⁵¹ Sellars attempts to break that habit by defamiliarizing and dislocating the audience through a barrage of anachronisms and contemporary political references, which has often been the primary source of polarization around his work, and led in his early career to his being branded as an *enfant terrible*⁵² or "the destroyer of the classics."⁵³

⁴⁸ Sellars was prolific in his early career, and in the ten years following the beginning of his professional career as a director in 1980, he worked on approximately sixty productions in a range of different media. See Delgado (1999) 204.

⁴⁹ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 38.

⁵⁰ Canonized behaviors that have endured to our days, such as the dictum that we have to be quiet from the moment that the house lights go down, signaling the beginning of the performance, until they come up again.

⁵¹ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 38.

⁵² Delgado and Heritage (1996) 221.

⁵³ Mikotowicz (1991) 87.

Sellars' production of Sophocles' *Ajax* in 1986, marked his first attempt to revitalize an ancient Greek tragedy. His reworking of Sophocles' play is filled with all the theatrical traditions and influences with which he engaged in his early adult life. He relocates Sophocles' tragedy from its ancient Greek context to a contemporary one, requiring *Ajax* to be set in a war other than its original Trojan War setting. Starting with the text, he attempted making it more contemporary, by employing the production elements, such as contemporary adaptation, costumes and set. He cast a deaf actor who used sign language, as a mean of translating the hero's inability to communicate with his fellow Achaeans (Greeks). Additionally, he redistributed the text, with the chorus translating Ajax's signing. A third major change in his production was the topological references to modern American landmarks. In Sellars' production, the tragedy was set in proximity to the Pentagon, and spoke to American policies after the Vietnam War in conjunction with President Regan's policies of the late 1980s. Sellars' eclectic directorial choices created a performance which alienated the audience and was poorly received.⁵⁴ Sellars' would not engage with another Greek tragedy until almost a decade later, when the political commentary would be even stronger than before.

In 1993 Sellars' production of Aeschylus' *Persians* opened in the Mark Taper Forum, in Los Angeles and his second attempt to engage with an ancient Greek tragedy met with a reception similar to the first. As with *Ajax*, he attempted to create a production which resonated with the contemporary world, especially contemporary politics. Sellars shifted the action from the aftermath of the naval battle of Salamis to the aftermath of the First Gulf War, engaging in a

⁵⁴ David Richards (1986) noted in *The Washington Post*, "Those who have heretofore been dismayed by the eclecticism of his productions will be positively flummoxed this time. When public faith in the American National Theater is running low and Sellars sorely needs to prove that he is not merely the intelligentsia's darling, *Ajax* can only further alienate the popular audience he desperately needs to stay in business."

sort of political manifesto through which he aspired to open a dialogue regarding US military policy and the censored nature of that particular war. Starting with the text, he completely stripped it of Aeschylus' language, keeping only the core of the play. Along with his collaborator, Robert Auletta, they rebuilt the text into a modern adaptation imbued with a highly militarized language of modern warfare and pop culture references, such as Rambo, leading some critics to condemn the translation as "verbose, banal and muddy".⁵⁵ In *Persians*, Sellars also employed a rather grotesque and graphic language to illustrate the effects of the aftermath of war for the Iraqis, which was not covered by the western mainstream media. Another of his innovations was the use of modern technology to create a claustrophobic feeling for the audience, evocative of the stress that people in war zones feel. Despite Sellars' directorial choices, which raised questions about how we construct our idea of the "Other," as well as what is our responsibility as citizens of a government that commits atrocities, reviews accused him of a "misplaced self-flagellation."⁵⁶

Even though the production generated a second round of hostile reviews for his staging of a Greek tragedy, a decade later he staged a third play from the ancient Greek canon, the 2003 production of Euripides' *Children of Herakles*, which was much better received. At the core of the production was the post-millennium refugee crisis and, as with the previous productions, Sellars attempted to contextualize the performance of an ancient play within contemporary culture. Sellars' major innovation in this particular production had to do with the representation of the children of Herakles, who after his death go to Athens as asylum seekers, for which he

⁵⁵ Massie (1993).

⁵⁶ Drake (1993).

used actual refugees instead of actors. *Children of Herakles* was praised and reviews referred to Sellars as a “visionary polemicist who mines old texts for messages addressed to today’s society.”⁵⁷ It is unclear if this praise was due to his decision not to adapt the original text to the same degree that he had for his two previous productions of Greek tragedies, or because the performance ideologically was more humanitarian than political. Additionally, Sellars tried to recontextualize the whole performance in an entirely different way by presenting his own version of a trilogy. Prior to the performance, refugee organizations, government officials connected to the refugee crisis and the refugees themselves would lead a discussion, followed by the performance, and after the performance he screened films addressing the post-millennium refugee crisis and the experience of the refugees’ everyday lives. *Children of Herakles* concluded Sellars’ triptych on the ancient Greek tragedies; his later career would mostly focus on opera.

There are many narratives that can be created around Sellars’ productions of classical plays, ranging from being emblematic of the arc of his career, with *Ajax* casting him out of the American cultural establishment almost as soon as he entered it, but *Children of Herakles* lifting him again to a director of international renown working in the international arts festival circuit. On the other hand, it could also be used to shape a narrative around the shifting nature of theatre in American culture and its openness to theatre as critique of American policy. And of course, they can be fit into a narrative of how ancient Greek tragedy was being used throughout western theatre in this period. This thesis seeks to tell something of all of these narratives, exploring Sellars’ three productions of ancient Greek tragedies—Sophocles’ *Ajax* (1986), Aeschylus’ *Persians* (1991) and Euripides’ *Children of Herakles* (2003)—and how he sought to give them

⁵⁷ Kinzer (2003).

new life through his own theatrical ideology and practice. I will argue that these productions are important in terms of both understanding the afterlife of classical texts on the modern stage, but also the development of Sellars as a director. Using these three productions of Greek tragedies as case studies, this thesis will explore these productions through different methodological lenses, arguing that by applying multiple methodologies we can better understand the productions and their audience reception, as well as the larger theatrical and cultural context in which they were produced. It is not simply about how ancient plays are being reused and restaged, but what those productions can tell us regarding significant trends in contemporary American theatre from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s.

Chapter Two: This thesis, at its core, is built around the three classical plays produced by Peter Sellars—Sophocles' *Ajax*, Aeschylus' *Persians* and Euripides' *Children of Herakles*—and as such the first chapter will seek to provide a foundation for the subsequent chapters. The chapter will focus on classical reception, providing information about the plays and their original performance context, while at the same time examining how Sellars came to stage these plays and the relationship of his productions to the plays as artifacts of classical Athens. Building on the theories of Lorna Hardwick on reception and translation, I will raise questions regarding the canonization and the periodization of the classical texts, as well as issues of authenticity. Additionally, by drawing on the scholarly work on Greek drama and cultural history, such as *Theorising Performance* (ed. Edith Hall and Stephen Harrop), and on the performance history of the ancient Greek plays, such as *Dionysus since 69* (ed. Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley), and Helene P. Foley's *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*, I will explore how performance theory and history intertwines with the literary canonical tradition affecting the staging of ancient Greek drama in contemporary times. Examining Sellars' work

through the lens of performance will give us insight into one of the major battles in Western theatre, between a canonized tradition heavily dependent on text, and rooted in the performance conventions of realism, and a more modern tradition that sees ancient Greek drama as scaffolding, where we can build upon new theatrical works out of the building blocks of ancient theatre which are imbued with our own cultural experiences. By exploring Sellars' practice of deconstructing the classical text and then reconstructing it for his own production, while at the same time retaining its original character, as well as his attempt to create a shared context for all the audience members, I will argue that Sellars is using not just the texts themselves but also larger ideas about the nature of the ancient Greek theatre in order to create theatre that is more inclusive and which has a role to play as a site of social change.

Chapter Three: As established in chapter two, these plays originate in a specific time and place and therefore a specific cultural context. This chapter focuses on Sellars as a director and the production choices he made in order to bring the ancient Greek texts in a contemporary context, re-examining in the process the audience's role in regards to the production itself. By drawing on primary sources such as recording of the 1986 production of *Ajax*, the adaptations/translations of the three productions and Sellars' interviews, as well as secondary sources such as the reviews from the press, I will attempt to build on existing scholarly research such as *Performance, Politics and Activism* (Peter Lichtenfels) and explore how Sellars reframes the context of the performances as to be socially and politically relevant to contemporary times. Furthermore, by exploring three aspects of his productions—text, visual elements and soundscape—I will explore how previous directorial traditions, such as that of Brecht and Meyerhold, influenced Sellars techniques and how he uses them in order to dislocate his audience, through the use of anachronisms, colloquial language and a mixture of multi-ethnic

references, challenging their preconceptions and expectations. The research will attempt to see how Sellars, using such techniques, opposed the established bourgeois tradition of passive spectatorship, shaped through the rise of film and media, causing a shift in the role of the audience and reinventing them as active participants both theatrically and socially, thus reframing their role in a context similar to that of the ancient Greek audience.

Chapter 2: When Sellars met the Classics

The milieu which surrounds a theatre is always ideologically encoded and the presence of a theatre can be measured as typical or incongruous within it.

Susan Bennett⁵⁸

2.1 Introduction

In the epigraph above, Susan Bennett notes an essential element of the theatrical tradition; the irrevocable connection between cultural products—for my purpose performance texts—and the space, both physical and contextual, for which they were created. But while plays have historically been written for a specific space within a particular social/cultural context, plays that enter the literary and performance canon continue to be staged in new spaces, both physical and cultural. And in these situations, not only has the context for performance changed, but the relationship between the audience and the play has also changed. With plays that form part of the western literary canon, such as the ancient Greek tragedians and Shakespeare, the general public often comes to the theatre with preconceived notions, rooted in an understanding of the play in its original context, which they expect to see materialized on stage in some fashion. Yet the reality is that the physical space of performance has changed (even when it is being performed in the ruins of an ancient theatre), the cultural context of production has changed, and even the text itself has changed, both through translation and performance conventions, but also the cultural capital that the text has accrued over time. So, for example, when someone goes to see Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, they bring with them all sorts of possible cultural associations, from the play being an artifact of the Golden Age of democracy in fifth-century Athens, to

⁵⁸ Bennett (1997) 126.

Aristotle's estimation of it as an ideal tragedy,⁵⁹ to Freudian ideas about Oedipus and the parent/child relationship. What no one comes to the play with is a blank mind, and whatever associations might be important to their engagement with the play, they are fundamentally different than the associations of the original audience, even when the same terms are at play. Democracy means something fundamentally different now than it did in fifth-century Athens, as does tragedy, and Freudian ideas of the mind would be completely alien to an ancient audience.⁶⁰ Reception Studies seeks to explore how and why texts from earlier periods are reused and reperformed, and how the intersection of past and present combine to give new life to an ancient work. This chapter uses the framework of Reception Studies to examine Peter Sellars' engagement with fifth-century Athenian tragedy, exploring why he might have chosen those three specific plays (Sophocles' *Ajax*, Aeschylus' *Persians* and Euripides' *Children of Heracles*), with specific reference to: (1) the original context in which the plays were written/produced and Sellars' desire for a politically resonant and engaged contemporary theatre; (2) the original performance space and its relationship with the audience and Sellars' attempts to use space to facilitate audience engagement.

2.2 Shifting minds and shaping the present

In the theatrical tradition of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one of the main problems when dealing with any aspect of the performance tradition of Greek antiquity is its

⁵⁹ See Aristotle's *Poetics* (1452b28-1454a15) on the structural elements of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* which renders it, according to Aristotle's views, as one of the finest examples of how tragedy should function.

⁶⁰ Aristotle's *Poetics* is dated to 335 BC, while Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is dated almost a century earlier, around 429 BC. See Albin Lesky (1987) 363-366 for a more detailed description on the debate and the different scholarly work around the play's dating.

association with a certain kind of nostalgia—an idealization of Greek tragedy and its social function—which is commonly bestowed on canonical texts. And despite his frequent characterization as something of an iconoclast, Peter Sellars does not escape the canon—in fact, I would argue, his work is deeply rooted in the western canon—and idealized views of the ancient Greek theatre still exert a significant impact on his directorial vision. In his understanding of Greek tragedy, Sellars sees the manifestation of his aspiration of how theatre should function. He views Greek tragedies not just as cultural products shaped by their poets through an array of interpretive choices with robust political resonances, but as a “a way for democracy to organise itself.”⁶¹

Sellars’ view of Greek tragedy is reflected in the plays that he has chosen to stage—though at the same time the plays serve to reinforce his interpretation of the function of Greek tragedy. There are two elements which seem to be common to Sellars’ choice of tragedy: (1) who the play is about, and (2) narratives focussed on war and its impact. All three plays put their focus on the community more than the *dramatis personae*. The protagonist as the tragic hero does not dominate the play in the same way it does in some of the other—more popular—tragedies. There is no Orestes, no Oedipus, no Medea; even Ajax, who arguably can be viewed as the protagonist, is dead by the middle of the play (line 865), and the other Achaean generals dominate the rest of the plot. *Persians*, our only historical tragedy, does not have heroic characters, but even its central character, the Persian king Xerxes, does not appear in the play until near the end (line 908). In the *Children of Heracles*, the protagonist is not an individual, but rather a group of suppliant children. This absence of the stereotypical tragic hero, as defined by Aristotle’s *Poetics*

⁶¹ Delgado (1999) 207.

(1453a), highlights Sellars' view that theatre is not about the individual.⁶² Sellars' interest does not lie in staging another tragic hero/heroine who will move the audience through their suffering and provide a star role for an actor.⁶³ He is interested in working with ensembles; groups of people who together will open a dialogue and work through the action of the play.⁶⁴

As for the second element common to all three of the plays, each of the tragedies offers a different view on the theme of war, militaristic policies, and violent conflicts in general. *Persians* tells the story of the Persian Empire's defeat at the hands of the Greeks in the Battle of Salamis near the end of the second Persian War.⁶⁵ Narrated through the accounts of a decimated and humiliated enemy, the play provides a commentary on the outcome of the war for both sides. Set during the Trojan War, *Ajax* takes place in the Achaean military camp after the death of Achilles. With Achilles' death Ajax is the best Greek warrior in Troy, and as such he believes that he should inherit the armor of Achilles, which had been made by the god Hephaestus (*Iliad* 18.137).⁶⁶ Agamemnon and Menelaus, the leaders of Greek forces, instead give the armor to Odysseus. In Sophocles' tragedy *Ajax*, having vowed to kill all the Achaeans (lines 41-45),⁶⁷

⁶² Delgado and Heritage (2002) 226.

⁶³ According to the records of the Oxford-based Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD), in the United States, from 1900 to 1986, when Sellars staged his first tragedy *Ajax*, Euripides' *Medea* was staged, both in theatres and colleges, more than a hundred times and *Oedipus Tyrannus* more than eighty. *Ajax* had only been staged eight times, *Persians* four, and *Children of Heracles* had never been staged. See the *Archive of Performances of Greek & Roman Drama* <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/research-collections/performance-database/productions> (accessed at 07/06/2018).

⁶⁴ Delgado and Heritage (2002) 226.

⁶⁵ For further information on the Persian Wars, see Green (1996).

⁶⁶ The armor mentioned in Sophocles' *Ajax* was made for Achilles by Hephaestus at the request of Achilles' mother, Thetis, after his first armor was lost when he gave it to Patroclus to lead the Achaeans into battle against Hector and the Trojan army (*Iliad* 16.128-129). After Patroclus' death, the armor was stripped off his corpse and taken as a trophy by Hector (*Iliad* 18.20-21). Achilles' new armor was unparalleled in its beauty. Homer dedicates 130 lines to describing Achilles' new shield (*Iliad* 18.478-608) and he describes the rest of his armor as a "corselet brighter than the blaze of fire", a helmet "elaborately worked with a crest of gold" and greaves made out of "pliant tin" (*Iliad* 18.610-614).

⁶⁷ Athena, in her discussion with Odysseus, reveals the cause of Ajax's anger.

experiences about of delusional madness, caused by the goddess Athena, which results in him slaughtering all of the Greeks' animals believing them to be the Greeks he vowed to kill (lines 51-65). The first part of the play focuses on Ajax's shame when he comes to his senses and realizes what he has done, and his resulting suicide (line 865). The second part of the play deals with the theme of the proper burial rites, which is required if one's soul is to go to Hades, and whether Ajax is deserving of them, pitting factions of the community against one another.⁶⁸ The tragedy provides a narrative of the internecine damage that can be done by internal conflicts even among a victorious army, and the danger to the larger community when power balances are disrupted by arrogance and personal ambition, pointing to issues of communal strife and a shift in political structures. And finally, *Children of Heracles*, tells the story of Heracles' children who, pursued by his mortal enemy Eurystheus, King of Argos, seek asylum in Athens.⁶⁹ The pursuit results from Eurystheus' fear that the children of Heracles will seek vengeance for the labours he inflicted upon their father, as well as the possibility that they will demand their rightful place as rulers of Argos. Having been chased all around Greece with Eurystheus threatening war with any city that attempts to offer refuge, the tragedy begins with the arrival of the children in Attica (the geographic area that constitutes the *polis* or city-state of Athens),

⁶⁸ For further information in antiquity and more specifically the themes arising in Ajax's burial, see Davidson (1985) 16-29; March (1993) 1-36.

⁶⁹ The myth of the enmity between Heracles and Eurystheus starts with the impregnation of Alcmene by Zeus. When the baby was due to be born, Zeus declared that the son who would be born next in the line of the Perseids would become king of Mycenae. Hera, furious with her husband's adultery, used Zeus declaration against him. Hera persuaded Ilithyias, goddess of birth, to delay Alcmene's labour while also accelerating that of Nicippe, wife of the current king of Mycenae. Thus, Heracles became the second born of the two babies, and Eurystheus became heir to the Mycenaean throne. Hera's vendetta against Heracles did not stop with his birth, however. Hera would later drive him mad, causing him to murder his wife, children and nephews. In order to atone for these violent murders, the Delphic oracle sent him into service in Eurystheus' court, where, in an effort to kill him, Eurystheus ordered him to complete the twelve labors. (Euripides, in his tragedy *Heracles*, places the madness and murders after the completion of the twelve labors.) Apollodorus, in his *Library* (4.5-5.12), gives a detailed account of Heracles' myth including other events resulting from the rivalry between him and Eurystheus.

asking for sanctuary. One of the themes of the play is the effect a power conflict can have on the non-combatant victims, those who have no agency in the conflict but are forced to suffer the consequences. At the same time the play, in its first few opening lines (lines 1-5), makes a political statement juxtaposing the human who is just by nature and as such beneficial to his community with the human whose heart is driven by gain and personal benefit.⁷⁰ Despite the range of war narratives presented in these three tragedies and their different concerns, they share themes of the communal insecurity caused by war and violence.

Persians was the second tragedy Sellars staged but, for the sake of contextualizing these three tragedies in their original time and place, I will follow the timeline of their production in Athens in the fifth-century.⁷¹ The earliest of our extant tragedies, *Persians* was staged in 472 B.C., and it is the only surviving tragedy to take its plot from a historical event—the defeat of the Persian fleet at the naval battle of Salamis in 480 B.C, where Themistocles and the Athenians, along with the allied Greek city-states, held back the Persian invasion of the Greek mainland.⁷² The Persian threat was not just a military threat, but was also an ideological war rooted in culture and politics. As Edith Hall puts it, “For over twenty years, the Athenians had been preoccupied with Persian imperialism,” leading not only to a series of real wars, but also to a cultural war.⁷³ In terms of politics, Athens had become a democracy in 508 BC casting aside tyrannical rule.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Lesky (2003) 133.

⁷¹ Sellars first staged Sophocles’ *Ajax* in 1986, followed by Aeschylus’ *Persians* in 1993, and Euripides’ *Children of Heracles* in 2003. Their order of production in fifth-century Athens, however, is Aeschylus’ *Persians* (472 B.C.), Sophocles’ *Ajax* (c. 440s-431), and Euripides’ *Children of Heracles* (c. 430-427). On the dating of *Ajax* see, Lesky (1987) 303 and Storey and Allan (2005) 115. On the dating of *Children of Heracles*, see Lesky (2003) 133.

⁷² Aeschylus’ *Persians* is the first and only extant tragedy from the 5th century B.C. with a historical theme. It was not unique in antiquity, however, as we know of at least one other historical tragedy from the same period, Phrynichus’ *Sack of Miletus*, a tragedy dealing with the destruction of Miletus by the Persian Empire. See Hall (1989) 63. For further details on Phrynichus’ play, see Favorini (2003) 102-103; Rehm (2017) 24-25.

⁷³ Hall (1989) 74.

⁷⁴ Thorley (2005) 12.

The Persian Empire was a monarchy in which the rulers were revered as divine. Having so recently moved away from hereditary rule by the aristocratic class, Athenians saw the possibility of rule by Persian monarchs as an existential threat to their political experiment of radical democracy. Not only were there political and ideological differences, but there were also profound cultural differences with the Athenians seeing the Persians as being effeminate and prone to indulging in luxury (a bad thing in the eyes of the Greeks). This perception of the Persians tendency to luxury is evident in *Persians* when at line 79-80 Aeschylus refers to them as being “born from gold”, and in parodos alone he mentions three more times the word gold in relation to their lifestyle (lines 3, 45, 53).⁷⁵ Athens saw in the Persian Empire a threat against which it had to prevail if it was to maintain its own identity in terms of politics, culture, and religion.⁷⁶ As a result, fifth-century Athens created a propagandistic ideology which cast the Persians as the “Other”⁷⁷ while reinforcing Athenian culture and values and casting them as inherently superior.

This was the historical context which underpinned the play in its original performance context, but equally important for understanding the reception of the play in antiquity is the audience for whom it was performed. The events of the Greco-Persian Wars were a communal memory for the Athenians which had left an imprint not only on people’s minds, but also on the

⁷⁵ Hall (1989) 80.

⁷⁶ Thompson, (1973) 214, illustrates the Athenian resentment towards Persia, when he notes that even after defeating them twice as they attempted to subjugate mainland Greece (at Marathon in the first Persian War and Salamis in the second Persian War), the Athenians still viewed Persia as the enemy, neglecting the new threat of the anti-democratic Sparta. This need for Athens to prevail against a different culture is clearly illustrated in the Messenger’s speech where he describes the song of the Athenians as they launched their attack on the Persian fleet (lines 402-405): “Come on, sons of the Greeks, for the freedom of your homeland, for the freedom of your children, your wives, the temples of your father’s gods, and the tombs of your ancestors! Now all is at stake!”

⁷⁷ For the construction of the concept of the Orient as the Other, see Said (2003).

physical fabric of the city, as the Persians had captured and sacked the city in 480 BC.⁷⁸ *Persians* presented a defining event in Greek, especially Athenian, history, and it was performed before an audience who were, for the most part, Athenian citizens.⁷⁹ A significant portion of these citizens would have been veterans of the Persian Wars, as was the poet Aeschylus, carrying their own memories of the enemy.⁸⁰ Unlike the other two tragedies that this thesis examines, which are set in the mythic world of the Age of Heroes,⁸¹ this tragedy is rooted in a very specific historical moment in which most of its intended audience had been active participants. As such it is an ideal example of how a play can, and must, transcend its original performance context if it is to make meaning in a new cultural context.

Persians is also an excellent example of how performance texts rapidly change based on the cultural context in which they are performed. For the ancient Greek audience sitting at the

⁷⁸ Herodotus describes the sacking of the Acropolis by the Persians, who upon entering the temple of Athena killed the suppliants and burned the temple to the ground (*Histories* 8.53). The ruins of the buildings on the Acropolis, situated on a hill at the centre of the city and visible from all directions, would have remained visible reminders of the Persian invasion until Pericles decided to rebuild the Acropolis in the 450s BC. However, in addition to the evidence of Athens' sacking by the Persians, the Athenians would also see evidence from their victories, as spoils from the Greek victories were displayed in Athens, see Hall (1989) 74, and on the Acropolis, there was a bronze statue of Athena Promachos made out of the spoils of the victory in Marathon. For more details, see Ferrari (2002) 25.

⁷⁹ The Athenian male citizens were only one part of the audience. Another significant demographic group were the Metics (resident aliens), who while not citizens, they were granted certain privileges. Furthermore, visiting delegations from other cities would be part of the audience, as well as slaves, who would attend the theatre either as personal attendants or public servants. A fourth possible demographic were women, both of Athenian citizenship but also women of lower class, who would be able to move more freely. For more info on the composition of the Greek audience, see Roselli (2011) 63-86 and Ashby (2009) 1-14. The attendance of women in ancient Greek theatre is a highly debated issue in the scholarly world; see Goldhill (1994) 352, 354-355; Roselli (2011) 165; Case (1985) 318-319.

⁸⁰ Not only did Aeschylus fight against the Persians, but he also lost a brother in the Persian wars. See Lesky (1987) 119.

⁸¹ Hesiod in *Works and Days* divides human existence into five ages (lines 143-201). First the Golden, when human and gods were living together and humans did not have to work. Then came the Silver Age; an age worse than the Golden, when humans would live a hundred years like babies and only a short amount of time as adults, which they would spend quarreling with each other. Third was the Bronze Age; strong and terrible caring only about war. In the fourth age, the Age of Heroes, belong most of the heroes in the tragedies. It was the age of demigods, which were destroyed by battle and war. The fifth and final age is our age, the Iron Age, governed by good and evil things alike.

theatre of Dionysus in 472 B.C., *Persians* was a play about the very recent past. When Sellars staged *Persians*, almost two millennia after its original performance, the play carried no more historical weight for the audience than would a tragedy set in the mythic Age of Heroes. In this, Sellars' production of *Persians* came to function for his audience in much the same way that mythic tragedies functioned for their ancient Greek audiences, discussing the issues of the present through the veil of the distant past. As Lorna Hardwick aptly puts it, "theatre provided a bridge between a mythical past and the cultural present of Athens."⁸² Sellars' production in 1993 used Aeschylus' frame of the Greco-Persian War to talk about a current military conflict between the West and the East, the First Gulf War between the United States and Iraq. Although, Sellars' audience did not have the same experience of war that the ancient Greek audience had, Sellars used the framework of Aeschylus' play to talk about the consequences of US military policies for the Iraqis and challenged the audiences' perception of the enemy, which had been massively influenced by the media.⁸³

Among our extant Greek tragedies, the most prominent example of tragedy talking about current political events through the veil of myth is Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, particularly the third part of the trilogy, *Eumenides*. The *Oresteia*, over the course of the three plays, tells the story of the return of King Agamemnon from Troy and his death at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra (*Agamemnon*), the return of his son Orestes from hiding to avenge his father's death by killing his mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus (*Libation Bearers*), and the pursuit of Orestes by the Furies—chthonic deities who avenge blood crimes—for this act of matricide, and finally

⁸² Hardwick (2013) 327.

⁸³ For info regarding the role of the media in the First Gulf War, see Taylor (1992).

resolution of the cycle of family violence via a homicide trial on the Areopagus in Athens, presided over by the goddess Athena (*Eumenides*). Over the course of the three plays we see a shift from a system of cyclical violence driven by a *lex talonis*—an eye for an eye—system of justice to civic system of justice presided over by jury of peers, with a clear suggestion that Athenians originated this new system of justice by holding the first murder trial for Orestes. It is in the specific location of the trial (the Areopagus) and the legal innovation staged that we see clear engagement with contemporary events. Three years prior to the *Oresteia*'s staging in 458 B.C., Ephialtes instigated political reform in the court of Areopagus, an elite governmental body responsible for political decisions.⁸⁴ The changes reduced the power of the Areopagus by dividing many of the powers that it previously held among other civic bodies, such as the Boule and Ekklesia, leaving it only responsible for adjudicating murder trials and some religious matters.⁸⁵ There is no doubt that Aeschylus is using the myths around the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra to engage with the Ephialtic reforms, though as with other tragedies that we can tie to specific events and issues, it is impossible to determine what position Aeschylus might have been advocating for due to the loss of contextualizing information from the same period.⁸⁶ At the same time, however, this seems to have been part of the appeal of using mythic stories for

⁸⁴ The changes limited Areopagus jurisdiction to murder cases and religious crimes, with the decisions for political issues transferred to the popular courts and the Council. See Goldhill (1986) 11.

⁸⁵ For the specifics of the Ephialtic reforms, see Goldhill (1986) 11; for an in-depth analysis on the themes of the trilogy, see pages 20-84. See also Goldhill (1992).

⁸⁶ Athena, in a magnificent monologue, establishes the new court's responsibilities (lines 681-710) which accorded with the responsibilities of Areopagus after the reforms. The image of the patron goddess of the city establishing the new court and thus legitimizing its function, must have had a profound ideological effect on the audience.

the Greek tragedians—it allowed them to engage their audience in discussions of current events, but through the veil of myth which allowed for greater emotional distance.⁸⁷

Sophocles' *Ajax*, second in the Athenian chronology but the first Greek tragedy staged by Sellars in 1986, comes from the tradition of tragedies set in the Age of Heroes, and in this case during the Trojan War. While the date of the play is uncertain,⁸⁸ it is certain that the Athenian audience would have been extremely familiar with the story of Ajax.⁸⁹ As Garvie notes, certain aspects of the story must have been popularized quite early, as we have an artistic representation of the judgment of Achilles' arms and Ajax's suicide from approximately 700 B.C.⁹⁰ Furthermore, for the fifth-century Athenian audience, Ajax was not a foreigner but an Athenian. While in the original myths of the Trojan War he came from Salamis, the island had belonged to Athens since the 6th century B.C, and, as indicated in the discussion of *Persians*, it was a site of one of the most important battles in Athenian history.⁹¹ And with Cleisthenes' reforms of the Athenian constitution after 508 B.C., Salamis became one of the ten tribes of Athens and Ajax's statue, as the eponymous hero of that tribe, stood in the agora.⁹² Not only was the myth of Ajax

⁸⁷ Phrynichus' tragedy *The Fall of Miletus* (mentioned in note 13 above) did not use the distancing mechanism of myth and Herodotus tells us that the audience was so upset at witnessing the suffering of their fellow Greeks on stage that the playwright was fined and the play banned from further production (*Histories*, 6.21).

⁸⁸ Beer (2004) 49-50; Garvie (1998) 6-8; Lesky (1987) 302.

⁸⁹ Hardwick (2013) 327.

⁹⁰ Garvie, (1998) 3, gives information on the archaeological evidence supporting the widespread knowledge of the myth in the notes, accompanied by a list of where the archaeological sources can be found. Garvie, (1998) 4, also presents as evidence of the wide appeal the myth, the (lost) Aeschylean trilogy (*Judgment of the Arms. Thracian Women, Women of Salamis*) which revolved around the story of Ajax from which we only have few fragments.

⁹¹ Garvie (1998) 5.

⁹² Garvie, (1998) 5, offers more evidence from Athenian history proving the close bonds between Ajax and the Athenians. His importance is also noted by Herodotus in *The Histories* where he mentions that when Cleisthenes reformed the tribes from four into ten, he gave the tribes new names discarding the old names which had been associated with the progenitor heroes. The new name for each of the ten tribes were from new heroes, all native to Athens except Ajax. Cleisthenes introduced him because he was "a neighbor and an ally" (5.66). For more information on Cleisthenes' reforms in Athens, see Thompson (1973) 192-198 and Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* (21-22.1).

known to Sophocles' audience, but some would have belonged to the Aiantis tribe (the tribe of Ajax).

We do not have evidence for the reception of *Ajax* in antiquity or to which political events the tragedy might have referred,⁹³ but one of its major themes which seems to have prompted Sellars to stage the play is the conflict between a man rooted in old political ideas of individualistic heroism, defined by honor and a sense of friendship associated with notion of fairness and competition,⁹⁴ and a man rooted in new political ideas, which are characterized by adaptability. Sellars presents an Ajax who is very similar to the hero found in Sophocles' plays; he is a warrior whose identity is defined by his physical power and military prowess, but more importantly by his pride. In Sophocles' tragedy, the hero is insolent and refuses Athena's help (lines 774-775); in Sellars' version he goes so far as to rape her. Ajax is contrasted with Odysseus, a hero who does not depend on force or violence but rather the power of his words, and he is cunning, inventive and versatile. Odysseus' pride is not enough to make him forget the "unwritten laws," and even when the other Achaean generals attempt to desecrate Ajax's body, Odysseus convinces them otherwise by appealing to their bonds of friendship (1330-1331). Sellars' Odysseus is different from the Odysseus of Sophocles, but he still retains his political aptitude; he understands the importance of public opinion and realizes that the battles can be won only that way.⁹⁵

For the ancient Greek audience, Ajax and Odysseus would have represented two different cultural contexts, an old one where heroic behavior was rooted in bonds of kinship and physical

⁹³ For some theories on political events or people the tragedy might have been related to, see Beer (2004) 49-50.

⁹⁴ Zanker (1992) 20-21.

⁹⁵ McDonald (1992) 84.

military prowess, and a new one where heroic behavior is rooted in excellence of rhetorical ability. As such Ajax's hostility towards the Achaean generals would have been in immediate contrast with Odysseus conciliatory behavior.⁹⁶ Ajax's behavior, like that of Achilles, presents a certain kind of isolation that comes from *arestia* (*Iliad* 6.208), being preeminent above all and the need to have one's preeminence acknowledged, which results in his inability to compromise even when it comes to his death.⁹⁷ This particular theme transcends Sophocles' time and is presented as far back as the Homeric epics; in the *Iliad*, we learn that the tents of Ajax and Achilles were situated at the two edges of the Greek camp, as they were the most dangerous points (11.7-8). Knox associates Achilles with the aristocratic values that prized being the best amongst men in the context of fair play, and Ajax's similarities with Achilles would suggest that he held similar values. Against those aristocratic values, Knox positions Odysseus as representative of the democratic viewpoint,⁹⁸ which albeit diplomatic, intellectually curious and versatile, is also concerned with glory,⁹⁹ but political glory, demonstrating a different kind of heroic independence; "for whom am I likely to work if not for myself?" says Odysseus (line 1367). The opposed values of Ajax and Odysseus must have carried a deep ethical and social

⁹⁶ Meier (1993) 174.

⁹⁷ The death of both Achilles and Ajax is a conscious decision by the hero. Achilles when he decided to fight in the Trojan War, despite knowing that he would meet his death if he did (*Iliad* 9.499-505) and Ajax when he decided to commit suicide to atone for his shame.

⁹⁸ Odysseus' democratic viewpoint also is in contrast with the authoritarian values expressed by Menelaus (lines 1071-1072), which, for the fifth-century Athenian, likely was associated with the Spartan threat and their anti-democratic society. Menelaus' words to Teucer (lines 1067-1069) illustrate that his authoritarian tendencies extend even beyond death: "Why, if we could not rule him while he was alive, at least we shall rule him now that he is dead, even if you do not wish it, controlling with our hands". Menelaus presents fear as a method of control and in Ajax's insolence he appears equally insolent (lines 1030, 1031), ready to disregard the unwritten laws around burial on account of personal feelings. Even Agamemnon's granting of permission for Ajax's burial does not derive from respect for the laws of the gods, but as a result of his friendly feeling towards Odysseus (lines 1330-1331, 1370-1371).

⁹⁹ Knox (1983) 122.

significance for the Athenian audience,¹⁰⁰ which inspired Sellars to address similar issues regarding the people who actively engage in wars for personal gain, either military or political.

As Meier notes, the Athenians would have seen in *Ajax* a representation of Athens, which held the importance of independence highly and in its foreign relationships were hardly cooperative.¹⁰¹ In a period when Athens, as leaders of the Delian League, was becoming an empire, there must have been some of the internal communal tensions represented in the play at work in Athens. Sophocles seems to be arguing that democracy was not enough to solve the internal tensions, as they would arise even in a new order¹⁰², but the final reconciliation that comes with *Ajax*'s burial seem to reflect an idea that a reconciliation between the traditional norms and ideas could be achieved with a new ideology, through diplomacy and the avoidance of conflict.

Sellars' 1986 production of *Ajax*, which is rooted in the American politics of the 1980s, seems to promote a similar idea. Inspired by the recent events of the American bombing of Libya in April of the same year, the troops the United States sent to Nicaragua along with the intervention in its politics in the early 1980s, and the general repression of discussion and censorship during the Reagan presidency, the production raised issues about the imperialistic politics of a superpower, as well as the role of contemporary politicians. In Sellars' production, *Ajax* and the rest of the military generals represent authority through the deployment of force. Odysseus is the new politician, the cunning one, who takes advantage of his opponents' (and

¹⁰⁰ Knox (1983) 122.

¹⁰¹ Meier (1993) 184.

¹⁰² Meier (1993) 185-186.

friends') ambition, who offers favors in return for favors and manipulates facts to recreate history and affect public perception.¹⁰³

Sellers' third production of a tragedy in 2003, was Euripides' *Children of Heracles* which chronologically was also the last tragedy of the three to be staged in fifth-century Athens.¹⁰⁴ Euripides' *Children of Heracles*, like *Ajax*, recounts events connected with a figure from the Age of Heroes and which were popularized in ancient Greek culture.¹⁰⁵ Euripides' play, however, does not deal directly with the hero of its title but instead tells of the events that followed Heracles' death and its consequences for his descendants. Many scholars base their claims for the political resonance of the play on the way Euripides chose to end it—with Eurystheus, who is to die at the hands of Alcmene, providing an etiological prophecy that his tomb will offer protection to the Athenians, but will continue, even after death, to promulgate his hostility towards the children of Heracles and their descendants (who are the Spartans and Athens' enemy in the Peloponnesian War)—and view the play as Euripides' attempt to encourage an alliance

¹⁰³ McDonald (1992) 84. Sellers' *Ajax* used Robert Auletta's adaptation which made several changes to the text and modernized the language. In Auletta's adaptation, towards the end of the play when Teucer asks Menelaus how he is going to explain Ajax's disappearance if they leave the body to rot, Menelaus says that he'll think of something and "as far as America is concerned this night never happened." A few lines later when Odysseus tries to convince Agamemnon to bury Ajax, he tells him that leaving the body to rot would be a great mistake as it will harm him politically and burying him "would be the real shit, the essence", as that way he can spin the news of his death in a way that would benefit him politically. See Auletta (1986) 31-35.

¹⁰⁴ The dating of the play is quite ambiguous, although the events seem to be in response to the start of the Peloponnesian War. See Allan (2001) 43. On the dating of the play and how it might have been connected with historical events, see pages 54-56; Lesky (2003) 132-133; and Zuntz (1963) 81-87.

¹⁰⁵ Evidence for the literary tradition preceding Euripides' play indicate that the events of the play were part of the mythic tradition as early as the beginning of the fifth century. Aeschylus also wrote a tragedy with the same name but we do not have any evidence for the play's narrative or how it might have related to the events depicted in Euripides' play. See Allan (2001) 2-26.

between Argos and Athens against the Spartans.¹⁰⁶ Whatever its specific political resonances were at time of its original production, what appealed to Sellars was the play's concern with issues such as the treatment of prisoners of war, the pursuit of self-interest and revenge before justice, as well as the theme of piety to the gods and the protection of suppliants.¹⁰⁷ The latter provided Sellars with a theatrical space to foster a discussion about contemporary issues in the western society, drawing an equivalency between the story of the children of Heracles' dislocation from their ancestral home by a hostile regime and the nascent refugee crisis in the post millennium world.¹⁰⁸

One of the major themes of the play in Sellars' staging, which would also have been a significant source of debate for the ancient Greek audience, is the responsibility of free and democratic institutions to protect the "weak".¹⁰⁹ *Children of Heracles* was a product of the Athenian democratic system and as such it helped to construct Athenian civic identity through negative models.¹¹⁰ Euripides creates a dipole dominated by the idea that Athens is everything

¹⁰⁶ Allan (2001) 43-44. At the end of the play, after Eurystheus has been captured, Alcmene expects him to be killed for his crimes (lines 959-960). Following the Athenians refusal to kill him, as their law protected prisoners of war from death, Alcmene offers to kill him and give the body to the Argives (lines 1022-1025). That way she could take her revenge and the Athenians could obey their laws, as the killing of Eurystheus would not be by Athenian hands. Eurystheus, accepting his death, declares his tomb will serve as protection for Athens in the future, but a source of hostility to the descendants of Heracles' children (lines 1026-1044), who, according to myth, were the Spartans. Allan disagrees with the view that the play is promoting an alliance between Athens and Argos given that aggressor of the play is an Argive.

¹⁰⁷ Allan (2001) 45.

¹⁰⁸ Lichtenfels (2013) 229. Unlike Sellars' previous productions of *Persians* and *Ajax*, *Children of Heracles* was not tied to specifically to American politics. The performance was staged in a number of countries, including France and Germany, and in each country Sellars used local refugee groups as part of the staging to raise issues on how western societies treat refugees in general.

¹⁰⁹ This though should be viewed with a little scepticism. As proven by Thucydides' *Melian Dialogue* it was not given that the Athenians would protect the weak. When Athens sent a delegation to Melos in the summer of 416 B.C., during the sixteenth year of the Peloponnesian War, they demanded the allegiance of Melos, which up until then was neutral in the war, offering the options of submission or destruction (5.93). When the Melians refused to ally themselves with the Athenians, the Athenians slaughtered the men and male teenagers and enslaved the women and children.

¹¹⁰ Mendelsohn (2002) 52.

that Argos is not and, in the play, Athens' differentiation from the other cities is established quite early, when it offers asylum to Heracles' children who have been turned away by every other city-state where they have sought refuge (236-249).¹¹¹ As Mendelsohn notes, "this sense of being different was, in fact, a key element of Athenian civic ideology,"¹¹² which in the play is rooted in its approach to justice and law (line 51), while the actions of the Argives are presented as barbaric (lines 51, 131) and undemocratic. Eurystheus' decision to pursue the Heracleidae (the children of Heracles) was a result of personal interest, while Demophon's decision to protect the suppliants, comes after both sides have made their case (134-178, 181-231).¹¹³ The interrelationship between democracy and the importance of upholding certain values, such as offering refuge to supplicants, is a core theme in Euripides' play and Sellars, in his production, used it to provoke a discussion among his audience members as to what the modern responsibilities of a democratic citizen should be, especially in terms of their obligations to refugees fleeing violence.

As demonstrated so far, the tragedies from the ancient Greek canon, were plays dealing with deep moral questions and, through the use of cultural references deriving from myth and historical events of importance to the citizens of Athens, they addressed ideological changes or internal conflicts within Athenian society. They were constructed in such a way that they would not offer one opinion, but two opposing ones, resembling everyday experiences in the *agora* and the courts—as I will describe in the next subchapter—allowing the audience to engage with their

¹¹¹ The herald, in his discussion with Demophon, relates how all the previous cities where Heracles' children sought help succumbed to Eurystheus threats (144-146).

¹¹² Mendelsohn (2002) 53.

¹¹³ On Eurystheus' decision to pursue the children of Heracles, see Tzanetou (2012) 82, and on the debate between the herald and Iolaus, see Tzanetou (2012) 83-84.

meanings and think of themselves and their society in relation to the questions put down by those plays. Sellars in those plays saw an opportunity to raise questions within his own community similar moral questions connected with how the government was exerting its authority—as I will discuss in chapter three—but more importantly raising issues regarding the audience’s political role and what was their share of responsibility. Sellars saw those plays, as expressions of the democratic feeling of fifth century B.C. which, in conjunction with the performance space, transformed theatre into an extension of the governmental processes; an alternative democratic institution.

2.3 Reflecting Society (?): The theatrical space in fifth-century Athens

It would be impossible to explore Sellars’ engagement with the ancient Greek tradition without paying attention to space itself. The appeal of the Classics for Sellars does not derive simply from the political context and content of the tragedies. Of equal importance is the degree to which he is inspired by the interaction of art and audience in a particular space. Theatrical spaces over the centuries have given rise to many variations, and the diversity of modern theatrical spaces, ranging from traditional theatrical buildings with an Italian stage to smaller black boxes and unconventional spaces, could lead one to think that there are no physical commonalities in what can be deemed a theatrical space.¹¹⁴ However, one of the characteristics of theatrical space that has not changed, even if the majority of the audience fails to realize it, is its role as an ideological marker. As Susan Bennett suggests, theatrical buildings are cultural institutions and as such are physical representations of a society’s ideological milieu which are

¹¹⁴ For further discussion on the evolution of theatrical space, see Wiles (2003).

shaped by the art expressed in them.¹¹⁵ Certainly Sellars views the ancient Greek theatrical space as a physical manifestation of fifth-century B.C. Athens, describing it as a giant ear reflecting the democratic ideals which developed during that century.¹¹⁶

In focusing on the ancient Athenian theatre as a democratic space, Sellars tends to focus on the fact that the plays performed there gave voice to those who otherwise did not have a voice in Athens, such as women, foreigners, and slaves.¹¹⁷ This is an idealized view of both Athenian democracy and Athenian drama.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, for the purpose of understanding how and why Sellars engages with ancient Greek tragedy, what is important is that Sellars deems what he sees as the inclusive function of the theatre as a cornerstone of democracy. He does not consider it as an entertainment medium, but as part of the government; an alternative institution which offered citizens opinions that they otherwise would not hear before they voted on civic matters.¹¹⁹ This association is perhaps supported by the similarities between the physical structure of the ancient Greek theatre and that of the Assembly, but also by the activities that took place in those structures.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Bennett (1997) 128.

¹¹⁶ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 37.

¹¹⁷ It is generally accepted that Cleisthenes' reforms in 508 BC established democracy, but Solon's reforms in 593 B.C. provided the foundation the democratic system. On the nature of Cleisthenes' reforms see, Thorley (2005) 21-48; Evans (2010) 12-34; on the nature of Solon's reforms, see Thorley (2005) 5-20. Despite Cleisthenes' reforms though, the main political decisions were made by the elite group which formed Areopagus. Only after Ephialtes' reforms in the late 460s B.C., when he redistributed Areopagus' power to the Council, Boule and the popular courts, do we see the fully-fledged system of radical Athenian democracy, but this democracy was still exclusionary, limiting participation to males whose parents were also Athenian.

¹¹⁸ For more info on how the democratic system in fifth century Athens functioned see Thompson (1973) 187-204; Thorley (2005) 49-72; Loraux (1986) 172-220. On drama see Case (1985) 317-327; Winkler and Zeitlin (1990) 63-96.

¹¹⁹ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 37.

¹²⁰ The shape of the political assembly was a gently sloping embankment from which the *bema*, an elevated platform where the orator would speak, was visible. See Ley (1991) 50, which also includes a diagram of how the two spaces resembled each other.

Being involved in the issues of the city and debating what actions should be taken was an integral aspect of Athenian (male) citizenship and examining how the three main governmental bodies, the Boule, Assembly, and public courts functioned can give us a better insight, on why Sellars viewed theatre as a similar institution to those. The Boule consisted of five hundred members—fifty from each tribe—and membership lasted a year and no one could serve as a member more than twice.¹²¹ Members of the Boule would meet every day at the agora, and their responsibilities involved readying the Assembly's agenda, the organization of public work, financial services, and the implementation of policy.¹²² The second central governmental body, the Assembly, was open to every citizen above the age of twenty, and it is thought that in the early fifth century around 30 000 citizens were eligible to attend the meetings.¹²³ The Assembly would meet around every nine days and during these meetings any member could go on the *bema* and address an item that was up for discussion.¹²⁴ The third governmental structure, the public courts, allowed citizens to bring their case before a jury of several hundred—selected out of a pool of 6 000 citizens which changed annually—of their fellow Athenians if they thought they had been wronged and the defendant had to appear, otherwise automatically they would lose the case.¹²⁵ Both parties would appear in front of the *archon*, the director of a public office, and each of them would plead their case, following which the jury would cast their votes.¹²⁶ Given this governmental structure, with its expectation of both listening and active engagement, it is

¹²¹ Thorley (2005) 27.

¹²² I Thorley (2005) 28. The *thetes* (the lower class) was excluded from participation, as they did not provide *hoplites* and it was argued that the members of the *Boule* should be people who had financial interest in the orderly function of the government.

¹²³ Thorley (2005) 30.

¹²⁴ Thorley (2005) 30.

¹²⁵ Thorley (2005) 32.

¹²⁶ Thorley (2005) 33.

clear that the average Athenian audience member would not only have been intimately familiar with the issues of the city-state, but would have also seen in the structure of certain parts of the tragedies, such as the debate between Iolaus and the herald in *Children of Heracles*, a reflection of the practices of Athenian democracy.

Another element of the ancient Greek theatrical space, which Sellars sees as significant, is its role as a public space. As Arnott notes, “Greek society was, primarily, an open-air society.”¹²⁷ All aspects concerning the state’s affairs were public; from the meetings of the Assembly to court cases to religious practices (except Mystery religions). According to Thucydides, when the politician Cleon criticized the Assembly, he did so by drawing parallels between it and the judges of the theatrical games, the festival officials, and the spectators (3.38.4-5). This negative model of the Assembly, as Roselli describes it, provides us with an image where theatre and politics connect.¹²⁸ This all suggests a theatre audience who saw attending plays not simply as entertainment, but as part of a larger habit of civic engagement, and which had strong parallels to formal political structures that were at the heart of Athenian democracy. While Sellars is not trying to recreate this space, he is trying to draw/push/propel his audiences in to some sort of response that is at least a pale imitation of the ancient Greek audience model.

Sellars’ productions of the ancient tragedies are framed in such a way as to remind audience members of their own responsibility as members of a civic body, and to realize that they too have to make a decision at the end of the play. This drive to merge the past and present are part of why his productions are full of contemporary references. In *Persians* Sellars’

¹²⁷ Arnott (1989) 133.

¹²⁸ Roselli (2011) 55.

audience was not watching a play about a distant past but a modern war raging in Middle-East. Aeschylus' language of war with its references to "anvils of spear, and javelin-men" (lines 51-52) was changed to a contemporary one full of references to modern war technologies, such as "laser swords" and "bristling missiles".¹²⁹ The distance between the events of the play and the world in which the audience lived was elided and the audience was forced to consider the military policies of the United States during the First Gulf War.¹³⁰ Similarly, in Sellars' version of *Ajax*, the action was not taking place outside the walls of Troy, but instead behind the Pentagon; Ajax was not Greek, but Native American; and the Greek generals became part of the military hierarchy of Washington.¹³¹ Again the elision of an ancient story with identifiable modern spaces and figures challenged his audience to think about the role of politics and political spin in modern US warfare.¹³² In *Children of Heracles*, Sellars recast the mythical figures of the suppliant children to modern refugees living in the audiences' own communities, provoking the audience to think about their obligation to the dislocated and disenfranchised.¹³³ Sellars' goal in reframing ancient plays, is to engage his audiences with questions rooted in the modern world and prompt his audience into dialogue. As noted earlier, Sellars selected tragedies that focus on community and not the individual, and for his audience who exist in a world dominated by media that is to be passively consumed, he attempts to use the model and framework of Greek tragedy to engage his audience in a way that requires listening, thinking, and responding.

¹²⁹ Auletta (1993) 13.

¹³⁰ Foley (2012) 141.

¹³¹ Lichtenfels (2013) 222; Auletta (1986) 25.

¹³² Lichtenfels (2013) 222.

¹³³ Foley (2012) 152-153.

Not only was the ancient Athenian theatre a space of listening and engagement, it was also a space of worship. The theatre of Dionysus, situated in the south slope of Acropolis, was part of the sanctuary of the god Dionysus Eleuthereus, and the theatrical performances held in it were part of an annual religious festival held in his honour.¹³⁴ The festival of the City Dionysia or the Great Dionysia took place in middle to late March, and was a week long event.¹³⁵ The timing of the festival coincided with the opening of the sailing season, and it must have attracted a diverse group of people from all over the Greek world, especially after the first quarter of the fifth century when Athens became the head of the Delian League.¹³⁶ Besides its religious aspect, the festival of the City Dionysia also held great civic importance for the city of Athens. As Wiles notes, “Athenian theatre was designed for a complete community. Men would walk in from the countryside to see twenty dithyrambic dances and seventeen plays in the space of some five days.”¹³⁷ The festival also involved an array of other events which emphasized the religious nature of the festival, while also highlighting the civic and military structures of Athens. After the end of the *pompe* (procession) which brought the cult figure of Dionysus Eleuthereus back to his sanctuary, but before the beginning of the festival proper, a piglet was sacrificed by the ten

¹³⁴ The original performances took place in the hub of the city, the *agora* and it was not until 499 B.C. after the collapse of the bleachers in the *agora*, that the performance space moved to the slope under the Acropolis. Ashby (2009) 5; Rehm (2017) 34.

¹³⁵ Rehm (2017) 16. It was held during the Athenian month of *Elaphebolion* which roughly approximates our late March. Rehm also gives further details on the cult of the god and how it moved in Athens.

¹³⁶ Ashby (2009) 5.

¹³⁷ Wiles (2011) 93. In the main body of the audience which also had priority to the seating area, were the cavalry and infantry classes. *Thetes*, the lower class, usually employed to pull the oars in the triremes, could also claim a seat and also had Athenian citizenship. Following the first two social groups, would have been the *metics*, foreign citizens with limited civil responsibilities compared to Athenian citizens and visiting delegations, see Ashby (2009) 4. Nevertheless, we should note that Wiles’ claim should be looked with some reservation especially when he defines the “complete community” as consisting of men. Although there is a great deal of debate on the matter, there are claims that women might have been part of the audience. Roselli (2011) 158-194. For details on the opposing views see, Goldhill (1994) 347-370; Pelling (2000) 197; Katz (1998) 107-108. For details on the dithyrambic dances see Pickard-Cambridge (1968) 74-79; on the tragic contests 79-81; on the comic contest 82-83.

military commanders to purify the space.¹³⁸ This was followed by the display of the tribute (financial contributions to the Delian league) from allied city-states, in the middle of the orchestra.¹³⁹ This functioned to both highlight the wealth, power, and reach of the Delian League, which Athens controlled, and it was also an annual reminder of Athens' crucial role in the repulsion of the Persians at Salamis and Plataea.¹⁴⁰ A third pre-performance event was the awarding of armour to young Athenian men who were coming of age whose fathers had died in battle, serving to both honour and remember the war dead, but also to display Athens' military power and the dedication of its citizens to the defense of other city-states.¹⁴¹ So while the theatre was part of a religious sanctuary, and the performances held there were part of the worship of the god whose sanctuary it was, it is clear that unlike Sellars' audience who expect a separation of church and state, no such separation existed in Athens. Part of worshipping the gods of Athens, was displaying Athens in all of its glory, including its civic and political, military, and cultural accomplishments.

This aspect of the ancient Greek theatre, existing simultaneously within a religious context as well as a political one, appeals to Sellars but in a slightly different way. In modern culture, he sees an absence of the dimension of the sacred, due to the materialistic and consumeristic character of our society, which has turned us into self-absorbed individuals.¹⁴² Sellars sees theatre as the space where somebody can come in contact with his spiritual side, regardless of

¹³⁸ Rehm (2017) 18; Pickard-Cambridge (1968) 67. A similar ritual happened before the meetings of the Assembly and the *Boule*, as well as for openings of temples, public buildings and shipyards. For further information on the ancient Greek ritual and purification, see Burkert (2013) 54-118.

¹³⁹ For further information on the tribute, see Rehm (2017) 18.

¹⁴⁰ Pickard-Cambridge (1968) 67; also see note 11 in Rehm (2017) 21.

¹⁴¹ Pickard-Cambridge (1968) 67; for further pre-performance events, see Rehm (2017) 18.

¹⁴² Sellars and Marranca (2005) 44.

religion, by evoking the spirits of our ancestors and allowing them to talk through us, sharing the wisdom of human experience.¹⁴³ Sellars here evokes the idea of the mutability of human life within the context of higher moral questions independent from the constrict of materiality. This view is reflected mostly in *Children of Heracles*, where the Kazakhi singer Ulzahan Baibussynova, who is descended from a long line of Shamans, through her songs, evoked their spirits, allowing the ancestors to speak through her about the history of conflict in the world since the beginning of time.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, in *Persians* the Javanese dancer Miroto, invokes the spirits of dead soldiers to relive through his body their last moments and thus rest their soul. As with any modern festival, the Great Dionysia involved many other activities and the tragic competition did not start until the third day.¹⁴⁵ That means that up to that point the audience would have participated in the procession of Dionysus' idol to the temple, watched the tributes from other states, watched the dithyrambs performed by Athenian men and boys, as well as the usual festival activities of drinking, eating, and engaging in conversation.¹⁴⁶

As part of the religious festival, there were scheduled events, but like all festivals the celebrations spilled beyond the formal boundaries. Greek tragedies were not self-contained performances, but part of a much larger experience, both as part of tetralogies, but also as part of a major festival that was part of the annual calendar of events for the Athenians. While not relevant for *Persians* or *Ajax*, for his 2003 production of *Children of Heracles* Sellars tried to recreate something of the theatrical experience spilling out beyond the performance itself.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 44.

¹⁴⁴ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 44.

¹⁴⁵ Wiles (2000) 31.

¹⁴⁶ Ashby (2009) 5; Roselli (2011) 27.

¹⁴⁷ Shewey (2003) 59.

Public discussion with members from non-governmental organizations dealing with the refugee crisis took place before the performance and the audience could participate,¹⁴⁸ followed by a post-performance communal bread-breaking where the audience could sit and interact with the refugees and taste their culinary traditions.¹⁴⁹ Sellars' goal was to make the audience realise that they are not simply spectators in the world but active participants, with the ancient Greek theatre providing inspiration for theatre as an active participant in the political structure.¹⁵⁰

The ancient Greek theatre need not fully resemble Sellars' view of it. Some people almost certainly attended solely to watch the plays (some at the Dionysia were not Athenian citizens or even residents of Attica and had no stake in Athenian politics).¹⁵¹ Athenian democracy and citizenship almost certainly did not measure up to Sellars' idealized version of it. At the same time, Sellars is absolutely right that the citizen body was deeply involved with and engaged in the production of Greek tragedies in ways that extended beyond the immediate theatrical experience. Based on what I have outlined in terms of the ancient Greek theatrical tradition and Sellars' engagement with it, I would argue that Sellars, at least to a certain extent, managed to recreate a space similar to that of the ancient Greek theatre, not so much spatially as ideologically. He is a radical deconstructionist who shattered and freed the ancient Greek plays from the display cases of the literary canon—which have reduced them into precious artefacts of a nostalgic past—looking underneath the poetry of the words and discovering the poetry of a

¹⁴⁸ Lichtenfels (2013) 229.

¹⁴⁹ Shewey (2003) 59.

¹⁵⁰ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 38.

¹⁵¹ Roselli (2011) 27. Furthermore, the information we have about the structure of the theatre of Dionysus does not allow us to know how big it was. Previous scholarship supported a number closer to that of the later stone theatre of Lycurgus, around 15,000 but contemporary research has suggested a far limited number of around 3,700-6,000, *Ibid.* 64-65. This capacity would have been less than 10% of the number of people—the estimated number is approximately 53,500-54,000—who had seating priority during fifth century, see Ashby (2009) 5.

whole cultural mindset, which nevertheless was more contemporary than ever.¹⁵² Sellars understood that cultural images and events such as that of the Persians Wars, Ajax or Eurystheus which would have had an impact on the ancient audience, could not have the same impact on a modern audience; they did not carry the cultural connotations and as a result they could not create the same conversation. Instead he consciously chose to use modern cultural images that were heavily mediated and that he believed his audience would respond to; images familiar, constantly referenced, and relevant to their lives.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Delgado, Heritage (1996) 221.

¹⁵³ Delgado, Heritage (1996) 227.

Chapter 3: Creating a total theatrical experience

The arts bring a metaphor that allows people to poetically reshape a given reality and reimagine their own roles in it. For me that's the actual gift of theatre

Peter Sellars¹⁵⁴

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined how Peter Sellars engaged with the classical tradition through his three productions of ancient Greek tragedies—Aeschylus' *Persians*, Sophocles' *Ajax*, and Euripides' *Children of Heracles*—while also providing a framework for the plays in their original context against which we can read Sellars' work. In this chapter I seek to shift my focus from understanding the plays, the theatrical tradition from which they derive, and the appeal of both to Sellars, and to instead focus on Sellars as a director in relation to these plays, asking how he chooses to represent (or not represent) something of the original text and performance tradition in his own productions through his own directorial vision. As such, this chapter will explore Sellars directorial choices by focusing on three aspects of production: 1) the text; 2) the visual elements; and, 3) the soundscape. As with the first chapter, for the sake of contextualizing these three tragedies in the time and place of their reperformances, my discussion will follow the timeline of Sellars' productions.

3.2 To thine own self be true: A text for its audience

One of the prominent characteristics of Sellars' work is the radical way in which he approaches classical texts as vantage points, creating new pieces of work, which through his

¹⁵⁴ Fricker (2014) 215.

directorial choices are transformed into plays which explicitly speak to the present. Sellars' approach, however, especially in the case of classical texts, often encounters problems which are largely associated with the audience expectations.¹⁵⁵ In the case of ancient Greek plays (though it is also true to a lesser extent for the plays of Shakespeare) audience expectations are often, unwittingly, intertwined with the dominant ideology of classical scholarship which demands fidelity to the original text; while translation necessitates a degree of deviation from the original—prose for verse, for example—there remains the idea that both text and production should represent the ancient author's intent rather than the artistic whims of the modern director.¹⁵⁶ Sellars, in both his productions of Sophocles' *Ajax* and Aeschylus' *Persians*, challenged that idea of canonical fidelity by using Robert Auletta's adaptation of the texts, which modernized the texts and filled them with topical references to modern America and its pop culture. These were not texts that sought to represent the ancient tragedians' plays faithfully for a modern American audience, but which rather sought to remake them as modern texts rooted simultaneously in an ancient play and the experiences of the modern audience. Even in Euripides' *Children of Heracles* where he used an existing translation—Ralph Gladstone's 1955 translation—it was filled with colloquial language which was described perjoratively by a reviewer when it was first published as, “uncompromisingly, so knowingly up to date and slangy.”¹⁵⁷ Sellars' approach to all three versions evoked Savory's idea that the translations of the texts should not be viewed merely as linguistic practise¹⁵⁸, and Sellars sought out versions

¹⁵⁵ Bennett (1997) 111-112.

¹⁵⁶ See Walton (2006) 5.

¹⁵⁷ Coxe (1955) 304.

¹⁵⁸ Savory (1957) 60.

that focused more on the content of the plays than any sense of faithful representation of some ideal of the original canonical text.¹⁵⁹

The bias of classical scholarship towards the text was particularly apparent in the critical reception of Auletta's versions, with his version of *Ajax* being described as difficult to understand¹⁶⁰, and *Persians* as "verbose, banal and muddy".¹⁶¹ Most telling, however, was the criticism that his version of *Persians* was cultural appropriation, and that it failed to serve the original given that "ancient Greek tragedy is just language."¹⁶² As outlined in the previous chapter, ancient Greek tragedy was far more than "just language", both in terms of its embodiment on stage and its place in the larger context of Athenian culture. Rather than reducing these plays to mere language, Sellars attempted to do what Fisher-Lichte describes as "*sparagmos* and *omophageia*", internalizing the text and giving birth to something new which, while it retains the presence of the original, can at the same time stand as separate.¹⁶³ Sellars works with texts that strip the original to its essentials, seeking to find the essence of the text in order to build cultural equivalents, and thus resonate for an audience with different points of reference and experiences, rather than translations which privilege the original language.¹⁶⁴

Sophocles' *Ajax* (1986) premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C, home of the American National Theatre, before the production transferred to San Diego's La Jolla

¹⁵⁹ Bartow (1993) 273.

¹⁶⁰ Sullivan (1986b).

¹⁶¹ Massie (1993) 19.

¹⁶² Bayley (1993) 10; Massie (1993) 19.

¹⁶³ Fischer-Lichte (2010) 35. Sellars' work belongs to the first model, the sacrificial ritual, which Fischer-Lichte has developed to describe what happens to texts in performance. Play, the second model, deliberately collides the text with other materials seemingly with no relationship to each other in an attempt for new meanings to emerge through that process. Her third model, resonance, applies to all productions where only fragments of the text are used and the rest resonate with movements, actions and other production elements which are not included in the spoken elements, being more like a collage.

¹⁶⁴ Walton (2011) 156.

Playhouse.¹⁶⁵ While the United States at the time was not actively engaged in a war, the scars of the past wars were recent.¹⁶⁶ Regan's proclamations associating the country's optimism with its military prowess and self-confidence, leaving in the past the self-doubt and dark days of the previous war,¹⁶⁷ were soon replaced by a presidency characterized by a tendency to repress discussion,¹⁶⁸ and a leader's action which hinted at an imperial presidency exceeding the constitutional limits;¹⁶⁹ for example, the bombing of Libya by the US military in response to the 1986 bombing of the disco *La Belle*, which was a popular venue for American soldiers stationed in Berlin.¹⁷⁰ Inspired by this climate, Sellars' wanted his production of *Ajax* to talk about military power run amok, and Auletta's adaptation of *Ajax* helped to set the foundation for a production which would do just that.¹⁷¹ As Auletta writes in his notes on the adaptation of the play, he could see the parallels between the ancient warriors and the American generals parading around in their military uniforms; people like us, with the same mindset, but different technology.¹⁷² The challenge for both Auletta and Sellars was how to situate that mindset in a contemporary reality

¹⁶⁵ Foley (2012) 147. A year later the production was performed in multiple European countries, including Brussels, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Stuttgart, North Rhine-Westphalia and Vienna.

¹⁶⁶ Lichtenfels (2013) 221. The end of the Vietnam War was only a decade away and the Vietnam Veteran's War Memorial had only been established in 1982.

¹⁶⁷ Auletta (1996) 28.

¹⁶⁸ Lichtenfels (2013) 222; Foley (2012) 147; Sellars (1992) 89. During Reagan's presidency there were around four press conferences on average per year and all the questions were prearranged. He had the least conferences in the history of modern America, than any of his predecessors or those who followed, see *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/newsconferences.php> (accessed at 18/08/2018)

¹⁶⁹ See Schlesinger (1973) for a description on the evolution of the American Presidency and the fears that has gone out of control.

¹⁷⁰ For the events, see Malinarich (2001). The bombing was Reagan's decision and did not go through Congress, suggesting his independence from the rest of the government, see Sellars (1992) 90.

¹⁷¹ Fricker (2014) 213. Sellars asked Auletta to adapt *Ajax* after he read Auletta's play *Rundown*, which was performed at the American Repertory Theatre in 1983, which was about two Vietnam veterans getting drunk and fighting, which Sellars found poetic.

¹⁷² Auletta (1986) 16.

recognizable to the audience, while at the same time keeping in touch with the poetry of the original and the cruelty of the actions depicted.¹⁷³

In Auletta's adaptation the major events creating the conflict were still intact—Ajax's madness, the awarding of Achilles' armor to Odysseus, and the deliberation over Ajax's body¹⁷⁴—however, this version also had a lot of additions and alterations which Sellars employed to play with the audiences' reference system and their expectations. As with his earlier productions of Shakespeare, he used the novelty created by anachronisms to surprise his audience, forcing them to engage differently with the play than they would if it were to remain firmly and exclusively rooted in the past. The first significant innovation in Auletta's adaptation is the setting of the play. As Sellars notes, when the Greeks "wanted to think of themselves heroically, they thought of the past, the mythology."¹⁷⁵ Modern America's mythology, however, according to Sellars views, is not situated in the past but the future, and is shaped by the imagery of science fiction films, such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Space Odyssey*, which played a significant role in American pop culture in the last quarter of the twentieth century.¹⁷⁶ Accordingly Auletta transported the text into an undefinable and yet imminent future, when America has won a war against the leftists of Latin America.¹⁷⁷ This gave the opportunity for Sellars to create an equivalent between myth and social reality similar to the ancient, but at the same time constructed for the context of the United States in the 1980s.

¹⁷³ Auletta (1986) 17.

¹⁷⁴ Fricker (2014) 214. Sellars' noticed a line in Sophocles' text which mentioned that Ajax's hot blood was still spouting (lines 1411-1413.) This led him to the idea that Ajax was still alive, listening to all the discussion over the fate of his dead body.

¹⁷⁵ Sullivan (1986a).

¹⁷⁶ Sullivan (1986a); Sellars (1992) 93.

¹⁷⁷ Auletta (1986) 20. He defines the time as "the very near future."

A second characteristic of Auletta's adaptation is the text's colloquial language, filled with references to modern technological advancements such as the telephone (24), cars (24, 31) and military equipment like cartridges and rifles (23, 24). Most striking is the language of the generals—Menelaus, Agamemnon and Odysseus—language which helps to establish the political undertones of the play. Menelaus' solution for Ajax's body is to designate the area where the body lies as "a total security area—off limits to everyone" (31), and to construct a fake story about radiation contamination. Agamemnon, on the other hand, is presented as a politician only interested in a governmental position that will give him more power. Odysseus uses this political ambition, reminding him that Ajax has too many friends to simply disappear, and that trying to make him disappear could potentially pose a threat to Agamemnon's political ascendance.¹⁷⁸ Auletta's crude vocabulary, infused with words like "slut" and "bullshit" or phrases like "piss on the dead," (29, 31, 35) fully resonated with Sellars' idea of a text deprived of every decorative element, providing a platform where he could focus the attention on the subject matter; the contemporary political implications associated with Reagan's presidency.¹⁷⁹ Auletta's text lacked anything of the grandiose language often associated with the ancient Greek tradition and in its straightforwardness it served as something of an entrapment device where "nobody can leave the room until they confront what people are saying."¹⁸⁰

Sellars' decision to use such a "raw in your face text" should also be viewed in terms of how it functioned in relation to the audience composition of the venues. In Washington D.C., where *Ajax* first opened, it was performed across from the Pentagon in the Eisenhower Theatre,

¹⁷⁸ McDonald (1992) 83. In Auletta's adapted text as found in *Theater* (1986) there are two missing pages (33-34) and parts of the content are illustrated by McDonald.

¹⁷⁹ Bartow (1993) 276.

¹⁸⁰ Bartow (1993) 276.

where most productions of the Kennedy Centre are held, with a significant portion of the audience being military personnel.¹⁸¹ San Diego is similarly characterized by a significant military presence, and is the US city with the largest percentage of retired military personnel in the United States.¹⁸² Sellars saw it as his responsibility, and the responsibility of theatre, to discuss uncomfortable societal issues directly in response to that particular audience.¹⁸³ His goal was not to attack a certain group of people or policies, but rather to provoke meaningful discussion about politics and policy, engaging an audience who had first hand experience of the military politics and for whom the debates in the play might be particularly resonate.¹⁸⁴ Sellars' goal of generating debate was realized, though that came at the expense of the box office, with one particular performance filling only 18 out of the 1100 seats in the theatre.¹⁸⁵ In San Diego the audience response was completely polarized, with a portion of the audience calling the play an abuse of the classical texts, and another portion calling for other audience members to calm down and listen.¹⁸⁶ Sellars did not view these responses as failure.¹⁸⁷ On the contrary he saw the resistance with which the average American confronted the material, and the scandal it caused, as a success; the production resulted in something difficult to swallow, which audiences had to deal with even after the performance.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ Fricker (2014) 213.

¹⁸² Lichtenfels (2013) 224.

¹⁸³ Sellars (1992) 91-92.

¹⁸⁴ Fricker (2014) 212.

¹⁸⁵ Mikotowicz (1991) 89.

¹⁸⁶ Lichtenfels (2013) 224.

¹⁸⁷ Although the Kennedy Chairman at the time Steven Rogers said that "economics was not a factor in his decision and that no pressure was brought on Sellars to leave" the low attendance that led *Ajax* and *Henry IV, Part I* to close early indicates that Sellars' failing to attract the audiences to his productions, must have played some part on his sabbatical which eventually led to his removal from the American National Theatre.

¹⁸⁸ Fricker (2014) 214.

While many of the changes Auletta made contemporized the plot while keeping the content the same, as discussed above, where he deviates from the original content is in the depiction of Athena's relationship to Odysseus and Ajax. Auletta creates between the three of them a love triangle and sexual tension, evident from the beginning of the play.¹⁸⁹ When Athena appears to Odysseus he exclaims, "I've always loved you. You know you've always been foremost in my mind" (20). Later on, Athena calls to Ajax, "is this the way you treat your date, stand her up like this? You should be ashamed" (21), with her words carrying ironic and comical undertones. In the stichomythia that follows, Auletta plays with phallic symbolism and a sexual subtext when Athena asks Ajax, "is your sword well greased with the blood of your enemies?", to which Ajax answers "it's still smoking hot." Their relationship escalates when the Messenger describes the past of Ajax and Athena: "one day [Ajax] decides to use her as a woman...as a soldier would use his slut" (29). Despite Athena's pleas to treat her like his soulmate, and her bribing offer to teach him the secret of war and victory (29), Ajax maniacally attacks her and rapes her (29). In this alteration of the story, Sellars creates a conflict not present in Sophocles, and one which exceeds that of the generals; a conflict between the sexes.¹⁹⁰ This story also serves to recast the characters to be fundamentally different from who/what they are in Sophocles' play. In this version Ajax's *hamartia* is not his pride but rather his violence, an innate "evil" which, as Auletta writes, he is unable to recognize for what it is (29); the violence normalized in war, at which Ajax excels, is a monstrous version of manhood outside that context.

¹⁸⁹ Such a characterization would have been unthinkable for an ancient audience as in Antiquity, Athena was a virgin goddess. See Goldhill (1996) 121.

¹⁹⁰ McDonald (1992) 85. She also provided more examples from the play illustrating that conflict.

In Auletta's version Athena appears one final time, and in doing so represents a significant change in content. After Ajax commits suicide, Athena appears above his body, saying how she wanted him and loved him and that Ajax's arrogance in rejecting the goddess led to his death (30). This new scene creates is an intertextual engagement with the only extant Greek tragic trilogy, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, particularly the third play *Eumenides*. In the following subchapter on the visual aspects of these productions, I will discuss in greater detail Sellars' use of the court, but here I would point out that the addition of this element to the play serves as a mechanism to recall the importance of voting.¹⁹¹ As I noted in the previous chapter, Sellars saw in the ancient Greek tragic tradition a serious engagement with the democratic mechanisms developed in the fifth century Athens, and here Sellars is trying to evoke similar parallels between the theatre and democratic institutions for his audience. In invoking a jury trial, Sellars is trying to remind his audience that they have to listen each side's argument and decide whether not only what they are hearing is the truth or lie, but also if the case is just or not. That is to say that he is demanding a degree of active participation which entails the burden of responsibility to participate within a democracy.¹⁹²

Auletta's version of *Ajax* and Sellars' treatment of that text in production were harshly criticized, but ironically they did have much in common with the ancient Greek tragic tradition. Even in our limited examples from the handful of plays that have survived, we can see that intertextuality was an essential part of the tragic tradition, as was the practice of making changes to canonized myths in order to serve the theme of the play. In terms of intertextuality, Aeschylus'

¹⁹¹ Sellars (1992) 93.

¹⁹² Sellars (1992) 93.

Persians was modeled after Phrynichus' *Phoenician Women*¹⁹³, and Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* plays are clearly engaging with Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* and each other, even if the order of the two later plays is unclear.¹⁹⁴ Mythological innovations in our extant plays include, Aeschylus' invention of Agamemnon's killing in the bath scene at the hands of Clytemnestra in service of the theme of *dike* or justice,¹⁹⁵ and Euripides' apparent invention of Medea's infanticide, perhaps pointing to a theme of citizenship and disenfranchisement.¹⁹⁶ Sellars used Auletta's adaptation in an effort to revivify ancient tragedy, while keeping the spirit of tragedy, making the audience present and participatory.

This effort continued seven years later when Sellars collaborated with Auletta again in his 1993 production of Aeschylus' *Persians*. The production opened in Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum two and a half years after the end of the First Gulf War. Whereas *Ajax* was more focused on how modern politicians functioned, *Persians* focused on how the media mediates or withholds information shaping people's opinions, and how our dependence on the mainstream media has transformed us into passive spectators. As Sellars notes in the prologue of the play, the First Gulf War was dominated by an extreme censorship, carefully controlled by the government to the extent that images of the enemy were completely absent from the public view.¹⁹⁷ Continuing in his belief that the ancient theatre served to educate its audience to multiple points of view and thus to actively engage in the democratic systems, Sellars saw in theatre "an alternative

¹⁹³ Lesky (1987) 148.

¹⁹⁴ Lesky (2003) 222-225.

¹⁹⁵ Seaford (1984) 248.

¹⁹⁶ Scullion (1999-2000) 224.

¹⁹⁷ Auletta (1993) 3. The only published photo from the events of the Gulf War, belongs to Ken Jarecke, who at the time worked for *Time* magazine and it was published by the *Observer* in London. It was immediately deemed antipatriotic by the U.S government and censored. See Bogart (2012) 39.

public information system that is able partially to humanize the denatured results of our vaunted and costly objectivity,” and he sought to bring this to bear on the First Gulf War.¹⁹⁸ As with his *Ajax* adaptation, Auletta retained the content of *Persians*, but changed the way it was presented by using language that was much more graphic and militarized than that of Aeschylus, and which elided the worlds of the ancient heroes and that of modern warfare. The first choral song which includes Aeschylus’ description of the Persian army mounted on horsebacks, boarding ships, and the marching infantry (lines 19-20) was transformed into a description of modern warfare, with references to contemporary war technology of Scorpion Battalions, Cobra Squadrons, and mechanized landing monsters, which are burning the earth in armored chariots, bristling with missiles and rockets, and every known weapon (13,14), while spreading terror and death. Sellars’ found in that vocabulary a cultural anchor for his audience, which created feelings of uneasiness eliminating any distance between myth and reality; *Persians* was transformed into a play imbued with “first-hand eye witness documentary material.”¹⁹⁹

Some of the most shocking moments in Auletta’s text are found in the messenger’s dialogue with queen Atossa and the description of the Persian annihilation. Auletta composed a tribute to the fallen Iraqi victims of the war—those victims who were never shown on tv—so graphic that could easily compete with the most gruesome images of a Hollywood splatter movie. Clearly written with the “Highway of Death” in mind,²⁰⁰ Auletta describes the “putrid human junk, embedded in the remains of our once invisible armor” (36), and many more soldiers

¹⁹⁸ . See Bogart (2012) 39.

¹⁹⁹ Auletta (1993) 1.

²⁰⁰ Lichtenfels (2013) 226. The “Highway of Death” refers to one of the deadliest hits on the Iraqi forces by the Americans, where the Iraqis were obliterated with a number of vehicles between 1800-2700 totally destroyed and an undefined number of casualties.

“slaughtered, hammered and blasted by shrapnel; incinerated by fire” (38), with the chorus exclaiming, “you speak of human beings! Of those we loved” (36). In using this text, Sellars was attempting to turn the “American propaganda on itself,”²⁰¹ creating a complex moral discussion amongst audience members²⁰² by challenging them to question their false collective memory of the events, which had been shaped by the media, and which lent itself to a false historicization of the war itself; a war described by Gerbner as the “first global media crisis orchestration.”²⁰³

Sellars once again used Auletta’s text as a vantage point to create a discussion amongst his audience regarding the militaristic and imperialistic policies of the U.S. along with the role it played in the Gulf War, by presenting the Athenians, here represented as modern America, as terrorists. This Athens/America is a nation which always employs force to achieve what it wants; not just physical force, but also foul play by cutting its enemy trade lines and forcing them into submission (33). Sellars uses the text to force the audience to see the Athenians/Americans through the gaze of the “Other”, with the goal of forcing reflection in his audience.²⁰⁴ At the same time however, Auletta’s version did not absolve the Iraqis, especially their leader, of responsibility for the conflict. In the conclusion, which is the part of the text which underwent the greatest change compared to Aeschylus’ text,²⁰⁵ Xerxes was presented as “a vain, proud, battle-fatigued, Saddam-like figure, significantly unloved by his father,” resembling a sociopath who “enjoyed slaughtering his own people;”²⁰⁶ a figure throwing a tantrum, whose sole purpose

²⁰¹ Hall (2007) 192.

²⁰² Auletta (1993) 1.

²⁰³ Patton (1995) 3.

²⁰⁴ Auletta (1993) 1.

²⁰⁵ Hall (2005) 179.

²⁰⁶ Billington (1993) 4.

was defying the U.S.²⁰⁷ Sellars' use of Auletta's text made a clear distinction between the authoritarian, psychotic figure of Xerxes and the rest of the Iraqi population. In Sellars' telling most Iraqis were collateral damage in a war instigated by an opportunist, whose personal ambition and arrogance were promoted at the expense of a whole nation being led to its demise.

Sellars reflected Bourdieu's idea that the media play a pivotal role in the depoliticization of the public,²⁰⁸ and with his production of *Persians* he attempted to undo something of the media's work and re-establish the audience's political role. Auletta's text functioned as a springboard which, through the humanization of the enemy, allowed Sellars to take a narrative that the audience thought they knew through media accounts and defamiliarize it. Sellars challenged the audience to step back from passive tv consumption and consider also the historical events of the recent past from the point of view of those who suffered on the other side of the conflict. In doing so Sellars used the theatre to render his audience as active participants with moral judgements to make, and transformed *Persians* from a historic narrative of wars fought long ago into a manifesto about the menace of modern warfare, and its impact on civilian populations.

Compared to *Ajax* and *Persians*, Sellars' third production of an ancient Greek tragedy, Euripides' *Children of Heracles*, moved the focus from the immediate theme of warfare to a more humanitarian theme, dealing with the contemporary refugee crisis.²⁰⁹ While the events following 9/11 constituted the initial impetus for the production,²¹⁰ the European Union's

²⁰⁷ In his discussion with Atossa, although he is defeated and his army is annihilated, he says that he has never been as happy and fulfilled boasting, "I defied the United States of America" (88).

²⁰⁸ Bourdieu (1998) 73.

²⁰⁹ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 38.

²¹⁰ Ibid. Sellars, explaining the factors which led him to choose Euripides' play, mentions how much he was moved when he first read it, five years prior to the production, and how a discussion few months after 9/11 with Diane

decision to close its borders to people from non-EU countries,²¹¹ prompted Sellars to create a discussion not limited to American society, but concerned with how people from Western economically privileged countries treat people from less privileged ones. *Children of Heracles* had its U.S. premier in 2003 at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts.²¹² and the reception was far more sympathetic than that of *Persians* and *Ajax*, with reviewers describing the play as having “sufficient intellectual, emotional and theatrical interest.”²¹³ Unlike his two previous productions of Greek tragedy, this time Sellars did not commission Auletta to produce a new modernized and Americanized version of the play. Instead he used an existing translation—Ralph Gladstone’s 1955 translation—which still had what Sellars described as “hard edge Americanism”, but which was not created with specific, contemporary politics in mind.²¹⁴

Gladstone’s translation is faithful both to the text and the content of the original. Except for some minor alterations, such as the substitution of “President” for “king” and “Allah” for “Zeus”, the play has largely been left intact, albeit through the lens of a contemporary English translation.²¹⁵ However, Sellars intervened with the choral odes and instead of using them as translated by Gladstone, he replaced them with ones of his own creation and gave them a more spiritual character. Sung by the Kazakhstani epic singer Ulzhan Baibussynova, only few of these

Malecki, his producer of 20 years, in which she told him that they should do something “that responds to what’s going on in America right now”, provided the perfect opportunity.

²¹¹ Lichtenfels (2013) 229. The countries that were the primary targets of this anti-migratory policy were primarily former Soviet Socialist Republics and countries from the far and near East.

²¹² Jenkins (2002). The play opened at the Ruhr Triennale Festival in Bottrop, Germany in September 2002 and after touring Italy and France it was presented in the United States in January 2003. The performance also had a second run in 2004 during which it toured Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria.

²¹³ Markland (2003).

²¹⁴ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 42.

²¹⁵ Gener (2002) 27.

new odes had any relation to the plot of the play, commenting on the previous scenes.²¹⁶ The new choral songs are about light and wisdom; messages from God to various religious figures such as Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham and Mohammed and how they end up lost in a circle of violence.²¹⁷ Gladstone's translation and Sellars' non-contemporary additions do not mean that the production lacked of the modern topical and cultural references that he had so heavily used in his previous productions of Greek tragedy as means of engaging the audience in an active participatory experience. As is always the case, the translation (or any theatrical text for that matter) was only a starting point for the production. In the case of Sellars' *Children of Heracles* the theatrical experience consisted of three parts: a public discussion about the plays and the issues that it sought to address prior to the production proper, the staging of the play, and then the screening of a series of documentaries related to the refugee crisis.²¹⁸

The pre-show discussions were constructed in such a way as to raise awareness about contemporary immigration policies and refugee issues.²¹⁹ Every night it would start with an approximately 45-minute public discussion, where a moderator and three panelists discussed an immigration related topic.²²⁰ The discussion had the format of a round table with the panelists changing from production to production, having been drawn from the community of the city in which the play was currently being performed.²²¹ In the Paris production at the Bobigny theatre, the moderator was a French journalist and the panelists for one of the productions were: an

²¹⁶ Svendsen (2004).

²¹⁷ Stehle (2004).

²¹⁸ Lichtenfels (2013) 229. On the admission ticket what was indicated as the starting time of the production was the beginning of the public discussion, thus legitimizing it as an integral component of the theatrical experience of the *Children of Heracles* and not an optional activity.

²¹⁹ Dunkelberg (2003) 538.

²²⁰ McCarter (2003) 14.

²²¹ Lichtenfels (2013) 231.

Algerian journalist living in exile in Paris, a French woman who had married an Algerian, and a judge whose jurisdiction included the Charles de Gaulle airport.²²² For the U.S. production at the American Repertory Theatre, the moderator was Boston journalist Christopher Lydon, and during the productions 23 day run "fifty-six speakers gave a total picture of the state of immigration and refugee issues in the United States."²²³

Sellars by making these discussions part of the production created an intertextual relationship between them and Gladstone's text, where the issues raised through the discussions generated a background context for the audience which was integral to how they would weigh the actions of the play, and which they could continuously refer back to while watching the production.²²⁴ That intertextual quality as created through the experience of attending the panels, provided the play with an extreme localness where Sellars, instead of presenting a theme through a US perspective as he had with the *Persians* and *Ajax*, tried to create an experience tailored to each country's and city's societal issues and cultural references, in an attempt to create an open dialogue amongst audience members. Furthermore, the discussions challenged the audience's perception of their spectator status; it disrupted their idea of themselves as consumers preparing to enjoy their evening out at the theatre.²²⁵ Sellars has expressed his opinion that the audience's self-perception of themselves as consumers has significantly limited their experience of a theatrical event to the concept of individual pleasure.²²⁶ With his production of *Children of Heracles*, he attempted to disrupt that perspective by depriving them of the option of defining

²²² Lichtenfels (2013) 230.

²²³ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 41. For further information about the participants and some of the stories they shared, see Lichtenfels (2013) 229-234 and Dunkelberg (2003) 538.

²²⁴ Dunkelberg (2003) 538.

²²⁵ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 37.

²²⁶ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 38.

their theatrical experience simply by aesthetic standards, with the pre-show discussions framing it as an event that forced them to consider their citizenship status and the privileges that it conferred in contrast to those deemed to be illegal and existing in precarious circumstances.²²⁷

In all three of his productions of Greek tragedies, Sellars' first mechanism of dislocating his audience is by implementing within the text localities, such as the use of a contemporary vocabulary or in the case of *Children of Heracles* having public figures speak the text, bringing the text closer to the cultural context of his audience. Understanding that performance texts are alive and that their meaning can change depending on the cultural context in which they are presented, Sellars decided to use two adaptations and a modern translation to help ensure that his audiences connected these ancient works with events in the contemporary world.²²⁸ In all three productions Sellars played with the concept of audience participation, in both the theatre and society more broadly, and the realization that participation had consequences, resembling what Brecht's called the *Verfremdungseffekt* where the concept of pleasure disappeared and was substituted with thought.²²⁹

3.3 Reli(e)ving the Present: Shock and Modern Cultural Images in *Ajax*, *Persians* and *Children of Heracles*

As important as the contemporary nature of the text was in creating a theatrical experience that sought to engage the audience as participants, equally important were the visual images Sellars created on stage. These images are primarily informed by Sellars' view of the role of

²²⁷ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 38.

²²⁸ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 39.

²²⁹ See Brecht (1964); Brooker (2017) 62-90.

images in the impact of technology in shaping perceptions in modern societies, and therefore shaping spectators' perceptions as well.²³⁰ Sellars produced his plays in an era when the news media was becoming fractured (Fox News was established in 1996, for example) and people's perception of the world was increasingly shaped by what they saw on television (all of Sellars productions were staged before the internet and cellphones were commonplace). Sellars, by employing production elements such as setting, costumes, casting, lighting—as I will describe in the following paragraphs—tried to create grandiose images on stage which would on one hand be familiar to his audience, while on the other hand prompting them to think critically about how much of the information about the world in which they live is first hand or mediated through some other, perhaps biased, source.²³¹ As part of his goal of creating a socially engaged audience as outlined earlier in this thesis, Sellars sought to goad his audience into critiquing the society in which they live, as well as themselves, by creating on stage a corporeality which would generate within the theatrical space a sense of collective memory, “which is group generated, multivocal, and responsive to a social framework.”²³² This collective memory he hoped would function as a counterpoint to a world view formed by media generated preconceptions, with audience members leaving with a sense of shared experience.

Sellars' use of set design has different functions in each of the three productions. In *Ajax* one of the main purposes of the set design was to enhance the topicality of the text by representing the Pentagon. The image used, however, was not the one the audience would expect—the immediately recognizable front side of the Pentagon—instead the action took place

²³⁰ Delgado, Heritage (1996) 227.

²³¹ Delgado, Heritage (1996) 227-228.

²³² Favorini (2003) 100.

on its back side; the “refuse” where, as Sellars notes, “they take out the garbage.”²³³ For the performance at the Kennedy Centre, the set acted as spatial mirror to the physical building being represented, which was right across from the theatre, separated only by the Potomac river. The set, designed by George Tsypin, resembled a garage door located at the back wall of the stage, a general’s desk centre stage, and behind it a large covered aquarium.²³⁴ Sellars wanted to create an image of the Pentagon which implied the context of a senate hearing, in which Ajax would testify before the jury, which consisted of the audience members and Athena as the supreme judge.²³⁵ When the play toured in Europe, knowing that the image of the Pentagon was neither as familiar an image nor freighted with the same cultural connotations, Sellars changed the set to create a courtroom context that would be more familiar to his audiences there. Lichtenfels, describing his experience of the Amsterdam performance, writes:

A bare room, monumental in size, cold in feeling. Very tall and narrow windows, blinds partly open, the light source limited and angled downwards. The stage felt dark. People entered by stooping through the low doorway. The room dwarfed them. This cavernous space was at once a courtroom, congressional hearing room and a cold temple of worship.²³⁶

The way Sellars adapts the set to fit the different cultural contexts, demonstrates that it was an integral part in the experience of the audience and the way Sellars wanted to frame the reception of the play.

²³³ Sellars (1992) 94.

²³⁴ Hartigan (1995) 120.

²³⁵ Hall (2005) 182; Sellars (1992) 94; Mikotowicz (1991) 89.

²³⁶ Lichtenfels (2013) 222.

In both cases the influence the ancient Greek theatre had on Sellars, and his view of it as public space, is quite evident.²³⁷ In antiquity the theatrical space consisted of the space where the audience sat (*koilon*), the orchestra which was approximately 20 meters in diameter, which on occasion might have accommodated large stage objects, like altars and statues; and behind the orchestra the stage building (*skene*).²³⁸ The set Sellars used had similar qualities; its minimalistic character, with little dressing, stressed the importance of the actions of the heroes. Furthermore the openness of the stage, was achieved through the use of lights which during the performance were brought up,²³⁹ creating a continuum where the world of the stage invaded the world of the spectators, stressing the audience's role as part of the performance, and making each aware of the presence of the other, serving Sellars' views as to how public speech is policed and how the theatrical space, should function as an arena of debate.²⁴⁰ The set, at least in Washington, also had a stainless steel floor which was steep and slanted, which Sellar hoped would remind audiences of a slaughter house when Ajax walked across it trailing blood—an image which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. Similar to before, Sellars wanted the set design, along with the other aspects of the production—which I will discuss in later paragraphs—to provoke the audience to thought and draw parallels between Ajax's killing of the cattle within the world of the play (hence the slaughter house), and the blood shed by US military actions in the world of the audience, and the extent to which evidence those actions, like the slaughtering of cattle, are

²³⁷ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 37.

²³⁸ The *skene* was probably made out of wood, had a length of approximately twelve metres, four metres high and at the centre of it there was a double-leaved door. It was decorated with painting. See Taplin (2002).

²³⁹ King (1991) 273.

²⁴⁰ Foley (2012) 148; Hall (2005) 182.

erased by the washing away of the blood that has been shed, only for it all to be repeated the next day²⁴¹

Sellars also intended for the aggression which characterized Ajax's image in the first half of the play to remind his audience of another cultural image with which they were familiar; that of manhood going berserk.²⁴² Sellars here evoked the impact of film in pop culture and how the "fifty foot wide screen" has created a new mythological tradition in which, instead of heroes, the lead is taken by marginalized people, who might be deemed failures or menaces to the society, giving rise to the concept of the anti-hero.²⁴³ Sellars' direction seems to have achieved its aim in this respect as some of the reviews compared Seago's appearance within the blood filled tank to the blood splattered finale of *Taxi Driver*.²⁴⁴ As Foley notes that image raised issues regarding what such an ambiguous figure means for a modern audience and why such marginalised characters are so firmly embedded in American culture.²⁴⁵

The production began in pitch darkness with nothing illuminated except the desk at which Odysseus was sitting. A military policeman entered the dark courtroom, pulling off the tarp covering the aquarium, revealing one of the most shocking and grotesque images of the play.²⁴⁶ Within the box lit by fluorescent lights, was Ajax sunk in eight inches of blood, "a sea animal trapped in an aquarium."²⁴⁷ This is one of the clearest examples in *Ajax* of how much the Brechtian idea of *Verfremdungseffek*, had influenced Sellars. Brecht believed that theatre should

²⁴¹ Sellars (1992) 94.

²⁴² Foley (2012) 148.

²⁴³ Sellars (1994) 91. Sellars mentions examples like the characters portrayed by Al Pacino and Robert De Niro in movies such as *Godfather*, *Scarface* and *Goodfellas*.

²⁴⁴ Richards (1986).

²⁴⁵ Foley (2012) 148.

²⁴⁶ King (1986) 9.

²⁴⁷ Sullivan (1986b).

be detached from the voyeuristic qualities of the naturalistic theatre.²⁴⁸ He saw a need for every human interaction on stage to be big and significant, and he sought to achieve it through the distancing effect; a technique which portrayed every social incident on stage as something striking, in need of explanation rather than natural and taken for granted.²⁴⁹ The visual power of Ajax's literal bloodbath was further enhanced by the actor cast in the role. The role was played by Howie Seago, a deaf-mute actor, who had previously worked with Sellars at the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1981²⁵⁰, and whose signing added a new dimension to the meaning of the words express through physical embodiment. The expressiveness of American Sign Language, in conjunction with his "insane, screeching laughter which was muffled by the box", created an eerie picture with every word he was signing painted in blood, splattered on walls of the plexiglass tank.²⁵¹ Sellars further attempted to disrupt the audience's experience and defamiliarize them by dividing their attention between two different things: Seago's signing from within the aquarium and a five-member chorus, with each member representing a different part of the hero's mind, who spoke Ajax's lines with a delay after they had been signed, and over the course of the performance doubled the other male roles of the play.²⁵² Beside the aesthetic effect his choice had, Sellars also wanted to convey the collective nature of the chorus which was an essential part of ancient Greek theatre.²⁵³ Sellars saw in this doubling effect of Ajax and the chorus and the other male roles the idea that nothing is complete, a yin-yang relationship; the

²⁴⁸ Lancaster (2000) 463.

²⁴⁹ Brecht (1964) 70, 125. For more information on how dominant ideologies through the use of images transform social conditions into norms standardizing their quality as natural consequences of life, see Barthes (1972).

²⁵⁰ Sellars directed the performance *The Ghost of Chastity Past, or the Incident at Sashimi Junction* in Kabuki style. See Baldwin (1994) 60.

²⁵¹ King (1986) 9.

²⁵² Lancaster (2000) 464.

²⁵³ Bartow (1993) 281.

people who would argue over his body in the second part of the performance, first had to translate his lines and acknowledge their antagonist's argument.²⁵⁴ Seago's bloody body was the focal point of the first part of the performance. Even his restored sanity, which was signaled by his removal from the tank, still carried the vestiges of his previous actions as blood dripped down his body, forming a pool of blood around his feet which then ran down the stage, while each movement of his hands spread the blood around the whole set.

In *Ajax* Sellars used every aspect of the production to convey images similar to the ones described above and, while not as powerful, through reference to modern American cultural images that the audience would have been familiar with. Athena appeared in a silver lamé gown, evoking the image of a Hollywood star, such as Marilyn Monroe.²⁵⁵ Again this reflects Sellars' view that the modern American gods and heroes—American mythology—are born in the silver screen. Particularly interesting was Sellars' decision to represent the messenger as an angel. Sellars was playing on the Greek word for messenger, *ἄγγελος*, and its English derivative, angel, juxtaposing the popular image of a Christian angel with "Ajax's gospel of serving the spirit of man; not God" (28-29).²⁵⁶ The soldiers in the performance were dressed in military fatigues, representing G.I.s of the American Army, and the Greek leaders were dressed as four-star generals in official attire.²⁵⁷ In the generals' attire Sellars saw another opportunity to talk about how the modern politician must get dirty to achieve their goals; in order to get close to

²⁵⁴ Bartow (1993) 281.

²⁵⁵ Sellars (1992) 91.

²⁵⁶ Foley (2012) 147.

²⁵⁷ Kroll (1986); Fricker (2014) 213.

Ajax's body and discuss how it was to be dealt with, they had to walk into the bloody water with their "shiny shoes" and "fancy uniforms".²⁵⁸

In the second part of the performance, when Ajax moves to the beach to commit suicide, the set was changed in order to create a second image which acted as a commentary on the hero's mental state, while at the same time, in the performance at the Kennedy Centre, allowing the real physical world to intrude in the world of the play. The garage doors opened with a deafening noise, revealing the façade of the Pentagon simply for what it was, a façade.²⁵⁹ After Ajax's suicide, water started pouring along the entire width of the stage, referencing the Potomac river which divided the Kennedy Centre from the Pentagon, and washing away the blood which covered the floor as well as Ajax's body, alluding to the Sophocles' original play where Ajax commits suicide to wash away his shame and to rectify his lost honor.²⁶⁰ However, unlike Sophocles' original where the body of Ajax was unmoving—the rule-of-three-actors requires that the body of the actor playing the dead Ajax somehow be substituted with a dummy²⁶¹—Seago's Ajax was slightly moving, indicating he was responding to what he was hearing, creating an even more haunting image; that of a man unable to act while the hypocrisy of the political leaders was unfolding around him.

One of Sellars' main goals is to have elements in his productions which defy audience expectations, including stereotypes.²⁶² In *Ajax* one of the main mechanisms he used to achieve this goal was casting. Howie Seago who depicted Ajax was coming from a culture, the disability

²⁵⁸ Sellars (1994) 94.

²⁵⁹ Sellars (1994) 94.

²⁶⁰ Sellars (1994) 94.

²⁶¹ Scullion (1994) 95-108.

²⁶² Delgado, Heritage (1996) 226.

culture, which although part of American culture, was not a dominant culture. And while in the early 1980s disability culture had started to be part of the national consciousness, mainly through Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God* which had a successful run on Broadway of more than 800 performances and won a number of Tonys,²⁶³ few would have recognized the existence of deaf culture or thought of deafness as anything other than a disability. Against this background Sellars chose to cast a disabled man as a Greek hero. Not any Greek hero though, but the strongest one after Achilles, the archetype of an able-bodied man. Furthermore, he casted him in an ancient Greek tragedy, which as I have described is generally marked by its use of language. Similarly, all four generals in the play (Odysseus, Teucer, Menelaus, Agamemnon) were portrayed by black actors. By casting black men in roles characterized by power and authority Sellars challenged American stereotypes,²⁶⁴ calling on his audience—a predominantly white one—“to see their[the four generals] actions through black bodies.”²⁶⁵ Once again Sellars' unconventional casting of the Greek generals sought to challenge an audience who, for the most part, thought of heroes as being white, as well as challenging the classical tradition which has a long history of white washing.²⁶⁶ Sellars through his choices not only defied the dominant ideologies which have shaped the western preconceptions of heroes as strong, able bodied and white, but also expectations of the genre of the ancient tragedy.

²⁶³ Spirko (2002) 16. The play focuses on the professional and romantic relationship between a deaf woman and her teacher.

²⁶⁴ It was not until 1989 that Colin Powell became the first black person to hold the highest military position in the Department of Defence, the position of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He held the position from October 1, 1989 to September 30, 1993. In January 2001 he also became the first black person to be appointed to the position of Secretary of State. See *Black History Month: African Americans in Times of War* 12.

²⁶⁵ Lichtenfels (2013) 224.

²⁶⁶ On the influence of the Afroasiatic cultures in the evolution of Greek culture, see Bernal (1987); on how the Athenian tragedies have been used in modern America to explore African American identity and history, see Wetmore (2003).

The casting of black actors, through doubling, created two different images related to American society. As I have mentioned previously, the chorus consisted of five members, which over the course of the play are reduced to a chorus of one, with the other four assuming the roles of the four generals (Agamemnon, Odysseus, Menelaus, Teucer). As members of the chorus, they were members of a minority group like Ajax, raising questions about the “entirely Euro-American military leadership of the U.S.”²⁶⁷ Race was also used in other ways to challenge the audience’s perception of their society. During the debate regarding Ajax’s burial, Agamemnon states that he descends from a family which has been in America for over two hundred years (33-34). This is working on a number of levels. The way in which the claim is framed clearly indicates that he is claiming status based on his ancestors having been early colonists. This, however, is generally a claim made by white Americans, tied to social hierarchies and genealogies, whereas black Americans, who are often descended from slaves, come from an immigration system that has stripped them of their history on a national and individual level. Agamemnon’s claim, voiced by a black man, sits uncomfortably with American national narratives. It raises the question of why when both whites and blacks frequently have equally long ancestries in this country, do only white people use that history as a claim to some sort of right to power and authority? Auletta’s text (25) also marks Ajax as Native American (though the actor playing him is not Native American), thus implicating Agamemnon’s forefathers in Ajax’s ancestors having been stripped of their traditional territories. Through text and casting,

²⁶⁷ Wetmore (2003) 75.

Sellars problematizes audience expectations about the American colonial experience and the roles of different races as participants.”²⁶⁸

Sellars also challenges his audience with the casting of the other roles, especially Athena, who was played by a woman of color. Auletta’s text gave a sexual aspect to the goddess, presenting her as seeking revenge for Ajax’s rejection of her love, and this sexual aspect took on additional meanings through the body of the actress. Kevin Wetmore has argued that she reflects “the representation of woman of color as sexual objects, and perpetuates in some ways the idea of black women as the embodiment of uncontrolled sexuality.”²⁶⁹ In contrast to Athena’s love towards Ajax, wishing only to be his soulmate (29), Ajax—who despite being marked in the text as Native American, was played by a Caucasian actor (Seago)—uses her and treats her like a soldier’s whore (29), and when he has satisfied his sexual needs, he dismisses her and sends her to be Odysseus’ companion, as though she were an object to be traded.²⁷⁰ Sellars uses casting again to not only challenge the audiences preconceptions regarding female black bodies, but to also make a comment about the colonialist perspective of the African American; Athena (in Auletta’s version) could never be the companion of a white man, she exists as a sexual object, serving his needs and when Ajax is done with her he sends her to be the companion (a word associated with affection and intimacy) of Odysseus (portrayed by a black man).

Sellars’ directorial decisions infused Auletta’s text with new meaning creating something that only materialised during the performance and in the context of the physical presence of both actors and spectators. While the text, as discussed earlier, points to issues within the American

²⁶⁸ Wetmore (2003) 74.

²⁶⁹ Wetmore (2003) 74.

²⁷⁰ For more information on issues of ethnicity and race in Sellars’ *Ajax*, see Wetmore (2003).

military and its actions at home and abroad, other production decisions used the visual register, particularly in relation to casting, to speak to even bigger issues in American society, around inclusion and exclusion, those who have a voice and those who don't, and bound up with those issues, questions around race, power, and authority.²⁷¹ Sellars views the generation of a discussion around these themes as crucial for the survival of America, and like Sophocles (at least in his mind) he says, "Sorry these are the facts; It's not attractive; too bad."²⁷² Sellars is arguing that there are moral question at the core of human nature, and when we live in a society that is deeply immoral, none of us can live morally, especially if we are unwilling to face up to the moral crises around us. Sellars sought to raise questions and to generate a discussion amongst his audience about how we can fix the past faults of society in order to return to our moral selves; the core of our human nature.²⁷³

In *Persians*, Sellars used an even more minimalistic set, if it can even be called a set. The performance had no set designer and the only scenic elements on stage were four stones at the center stage creating Darius' tomb, and a Persian rug on the side of the stage where one member of the two-person chorus sat.²⁷⁴ However, as with *Ajax*, he challenged the audience's expectations by creating on stage images evocative of modern American society, used casting and acting techniques to engage with and upend audience stereotypes, and, as we'll see in the next subsection of this chapter, using the soundscape to either transport them into another cultural context, or to emotionally charge them or to create distress.

²⁷¹ Sellars (1994) 91.

²⁷² Sellars (1994) 91-92.

²⁷³ Sellars (1994) 92.

²⁷⁴ Lahr (1993) 105.

Sellars saw in the censorship with which the American government handled the events of the First Gulf War, a falsified reality which represented an abuse of power and an imminent danger to the structure of the American society.²⁷⁵ In the production he attempted to address those concerns by using the Persian household as a model to reflect on problems in American society; Darius' family was turned into a modern American Oedipal family,²⁷⁶ creating an allegory which drew parallels between the "fall of a nation with the dysfunction within a family."²⁷⁷ When she first appears, Atossa resembles an extremely confused and slightly hysterical wife who has left her luxurious life and the book she was writing about her early life with Darius, seeking news of her son following a disturbing dream (19-24). Her concerns are only with herself and her family, however, and she is indifferent to the life outside the palace. Sellars Americanized Atossa in part through her costume—she wore a western-style floral dress²⁷⁸—but also the content of her dream. She describes the dream as a modern fashion show where two models—one in western clothes and the other in traditional clothing—engage in a catfight (25).²⁷⁹ Sellars uses Auletta's adaptation and, replacing the Aeschylean dream of oxen throwing off their yoke with a dream of a fashion show, he mixes images of capitalism, celebrity culture, and violence, raising questions about the impact of commodity culture on modern

²⁷⁵ Auletta (1993) 2.

²⁷⁶ Taylor (1993).

²⁷⁷ Colleran (2012) 68.

²⁷⁸ Bayley (1993) 10.

²⁷⁹ Massie (1993). The image of the fashion show Sellar's creates is the equivalent of Atossa's dream foreshadowing Xerxes defeat (lines 180-199). In the Aeschylean text the two women who are in strife, one dressed in Doric robes, the other in Persian, destroy Xerxes chariot when he attempts to yoke them together.

American society.²⁸⁰ She is also the embodiment of American society, living a comfortable life of consumption which is the product of her willful ignorance of the crimes of her husband.²⁸¹

In representing the Persians, who most would see as the enemy, as Americanized if not Americans, he deprived his audience the expectation that he would equate the ancient Persians and the modern Iraqis. Instead, by playing with cultural expressions of characters on stage through costume, words, and actions, Sellars raised questions about the impact of images in shaping cultural narratives, and the role that stereotypes often play in the construction of those images. The gap between West and East, Iraq and America, was further eroded with the appearance of Darius (the dead Persian king, husband to Atossa and father to Xerxes) when his wife summoned him for “a family conference from beyond the grave.”²⁸² Sellars presented a Darius who directly challenged the media generated image of Muslims as “premodern and irrational.”²⁸³ Instead he was presented as a leader blinded by ambition for power and expansionism, lamenting the current condition of the country for which he fought “a thousand times with a thousand times a thousand men” (63) in order to make it a powerful nation. As with Atossa, he turned Darius into a modern equivalent of the American government, which for the sake of celebrating its military prowess disregarded the impact of their display of military might on the Iraqi population.²⁸⁴ By playing with the ideas of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in this way, Sellars sought to open a discussion within his audience about the military policies of his and their country.

²⁸⁰ Colleran (2012) 70.

²⁸¹ On Atossa’s willful ignorance, see Auletta (1993) 30; on her parallels with American society, see Colleran (2012)70.

²⁸² Bayley (1993) 10.

²⁸³ Colleran (2012) 68.

²⁸⁴ Auletta (1996) 28

Unlike his Americanization of Darius and Atossa, in his depiction of Xerxes, Sellars attempted to raise questions about how the media coverage shaped the idea of a homogenized violent enemy, trying to separate in the eyes of the audience the Iraqi people from the country's leadership.²⁸⁵ In Xerxes, Sellars created a character who suggested a rugged, battle fatigued dressed Saddam Hussein.²⁸⁶ While the Persians at the beginning of the play were presented as being militaristic and despotic (12-14), by the time Xerxes comes on stage they are presented as victims of their rulers imperialistic and egotistic ambitions to defy another nation, America (88). But Sellars also complicates the characterization of Xerxes, suggesting that Xerxes was not inherently violent, but rather a product of his father's, with whom his relationship was characterized by disapproval, hate, and revenge (62-63), neo-imperialistic desire for expansion and power, and his mother's indifference towards his father's actions.²⁸⁷ In this vision, Xerxes is the a product of a dysfunctional family turned into the leader of a dysfunctional society, with the victims of the dysfunction being the civilian population., Sellars cast the non-royal Persians not as the aggressors that the media cast the Iraqis as, but victims both of war and of an inconsiderate ruler.²⁸⁸ By challenging the audience's preconceptions about the enemy, which were primarily shaped by the media,²⁸⁹ Sellars attempted to dislocate the audience and create a channel of communication through which serious issues about American military policy and the role of the media in serving those policies could be discussed.

²⁸⁵ Colleran (2012) 68.

²⁸⁶ Hall (2005) 177; Billington (1993) 4; Bayley (1993) 10.

²⁸⁷ Colleran (2012) 67.

²⁸⁸ Colleran (2012) 68.

²⁸⁹ Bayley (1993) 10.

Sellars not only attempted to bring the Persian royal family into a modern American frame, but he also tried to shift the American audience into closer proximity to the events and experience of the First Gulf War. As Auletta notes, “our news blackout was massive. Most of us had no real idea of what was going on, of what our weapons could do to living people, or how helpless the Iraqi army really was.”²⁹⁰ Sellars in an effort to defy the media generated information created small interludes describing the American weaponry.²⁹¹ During those interludes the action stopped, disrupting the linear experience of the performance, and one of the actors would describe “the different types of bombs that were being tested in war.”²⁹² Sellars employed this technique attempting to inform the American audience about the military actions of the U.S., punctuate the atrocity of those actions carried out by their own nation, and bring the audience closer to the experience of war their enemies lived. For the first time, the audience was receiving information about the American warfare tactics in the First Gulf War. Descriptions about bombs, which when detonated would suck out the victims’ lungs, were employed to reveal the cruel nature of the American government, which was developing and deploying weapons that did not just seek to kill the enemy, but to cause their deaths to be slow and agonizing.²⁹³

The production further tried to recreate the feeling of a war zone through the use of lighting techniques and sound (creating a terrifying soundscape, with violent noises to which I will refer in the next subchapter). The production’s lighting scheme mainly consisted of hand held lights²⁹⁴ and low-lying spot lights,²⁹⁵ constantly disrupting the audiences’ experience, with

²⁹⁰ Auletta (1996) 28.

²⁹¹ Lichtenfels (2013) 227.

²⁹² Bogart (2012) 27.

²⁹³ Bogart (2012) 27.

²⁹⁴ Hilsman (1993).

²⁹⁵ Drake (1993).

reviews mentioning the “shadows of the mic falling on the actors’ face”, and the people sitting on the side of the theatre seats having to hold “the programs in front of their faces to avoid being blinded.”²⁹⁶ This non-conventional lighting was a conscious choice by Sellars as he was seeking to create a “violent” environment for the spectator creating the experience of living in Bagdad after the aerial attacks.²⁹⁷ The reviews reveal that Sellars’ efforts were successful as the audience became part of the world on stage, instead of voyeurs of it. Sellars both techniques aimed at fostering a dialogue in his audience regarding not only his country’s military policies, but also the experience of war in the enemy side. He created an alternative information system, which gave the audience what media has abstained from them; the terror of war as a result of their country’s imperialistic tendencies.

The final directorial technique Sellars used in the *Persians* was gestures as a method of conveying meaning. Sellars views art as a communication mechanism; art can trigger communication even where lines of communication are closed.²⁹⁸ In the *Persians* he attempted to open communication with the audience using both verbal and non-verbal means. *Persians* marked the third collaboration of Sellars with Howie Seago, who in this production was cast as the ghost of Darius. His disability (he is deaf/mute) became a literal mechanism to highlight theatre’s main aim as a place to pursue a “common understanding and the undermining of misrepresentation.”²⁹⁹ Seago appeared from the dead signing, as that was his only way of communicating with the living, while one of the chorus members was speaking his words, his voice emerging from the speakers in the theatre creating the feeling that his words were echoing

²⁹⁶ Drake (1993).

²⁹⁷ Bogart (2012) 27.

²⁹⁸ Delgado, Svich (2002) 136.

²⁹⁹ Hall (2005) 182.

from multiple places.³⁰⁰ Similar to *Ajax*, Sellars disrupted the audience's experience by giving them two different stimuli: one visual and one aural. Seago's body acted as a metaphor where the emotional power of the words had a physical impact on the body, with the audience being able to experience both, thus making them active listeners.³⁰¹

Persians is a story which is dominated by the plight of the enemy. Sellars' used the images conveyed through dance, gesture and language to prompt once again the "Brechtian acts of spectatorship."³⁰² He used the physical body and gesture as a method of making the audience active participants in the messenger's story of the destruction of the Persian, which was associated with the events of "Highway of Death." After the First Gulf War started, Sellars became obsessed with all the images that the media did not present. Sellars got in touch with Ken Jarecke, a photographer who shot photos of the Iraqi devastation at the "Highway of Death" which were never published (with one exception)³⁰³ after America's aerial attack. After Jarecke gave Sellars permission to use his photographs, Sellars realised the images were so powerful that you could not put them on stage; the agony depicted in their scorched bodies was "indescribable and horrifying."³⁰⁴ Instead of using the photos, Sellars opted to work with the Indonesian dancer Marinus Miroto, a Javanese dancer, specialising in spirit possession dance. Sellars' employed Miroto to tell the story of a tragedy that no words or photos could capture. Miroto would set an altar in his dressing room where a different performance took place every night. Prior to each performance he would pray to a photo and ask permission from the dead soldier's spirit to

³⁰⁰ Massie (1993) 19.

³⁰¹ Sellars (1994) 93; Lichtenfels (2013) 227.

³⁰² Colleran (2012) 67.

³⁰³ The photo was published in the British *Observer*. It was the image of a scorched enemy, frozen in time, trying to escape his vehicle with the agony depicted in his corpse.

³⁰⁴ Bogart (2012) 39; Cohen.

dedicate the performance to his soul, providing him with peace.³⁰⁵ When Miroto went on stage he was possessed by the soldier and through the art of Javanese dance he enacted his final moments.³⁰⁶ Sellars found a ceremonial aspect in Miroto's delicate movement which was similar to the way Seago signed; it was not about empty gestures it was about the dedication both of them put in their movements, transforming them into "life-changing experiences."³⁰⁷ Miroto endeavored to embody the carnage and transform it from a spectacle into a communal spiritual experience, even though the audience was not informed of the pre-performance rituals.³⁰⁸ Sellars' decision not to use the photos and use Miroto instead should also be seen with a little bit of suspicion. While he was proclaiming of using theatre as an alternative information system, without a doubt it did not mean that his use of it was objective. Similar to the American government, which chose how to mediate the events of the war, Sellars chose how to mediate the content of the photos; a conscious choice which was not much different than the censorship of his government, attempting to make the unpalatable somehow acceptable. It is also interesting that his decision was affected by an aesthetic criterion immediately connected to his profession as a director. The images were so strong that as he notes "there's nothing you can do on stage with that projected,"³⁰⁹ indicating that in favour of protecting or privileging his artistic vision, he withheld information from the audience, deciding what should and should not be shown. Nevertheless, this directorial choice attempt to contrast the images of war with a highly spiritual experience, the power of prayer; Sellars saw it as an attempt of creating an elevating moment

³⁰⁵ Bogart (2012) 39.

³⁰⁶ Bogart (2012) 40.

³⁰⁷ Bogart (2012) 40.

³⁰⁸ Bogart (2012) 40.

³⁰⁹ Bogart (2012) 39.

where his audience could be elevated from the mutability and materiality of the physical world, leaving behind their ego and for a few moments “bring some justice to the world.”³¹⁰ His audience was constantly reminded of the role that media played; that like Atossa they were living in a willful ignorance, while their government was committing atrocities. Sellars’ performance, whether deemed successful or not, managed to create that alternative information system Sellars was seeking. More importantly it opened a discussion and made his audience morally aware of its actions; Sellars challenged them by offering the “other side of the coin,” thus stripping their passiveness, remind them that even the choice of being indifferent still is a conscious choice.

In the 1993 production of the *Children of Heracles* Sellars used many techniques similar to those he had used in the previous two productions, but he made significant changes to the way in which he tried to engage the audience and, through production elements, encourage them towards participation, both in the theatrical experience and society more broadly. Unlike the previous two plays which were dominated by issues of warfare, *Children of Heracles* focused on the broader impact of war, particularly the refugee crises which almost inevitable accompany war. Instead of using the Brechtian mode—the defamiliarization of the audience from the voyeuristic experience of theatre, as a method of turning them into active spectators causing discussion regarding social issues—Sellars sought to foster discussion through events framing the performance, both before and after.³¹¹ As I have discussed in the previous subchapter, the first part of the production involved a public discussion on a refugee related theme with one moderator and three panelists. Each of the three panelists was interviewed for ten minutes and

³¹⁰ Delgado, Svich (2002) 133.

³¹¹ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 52.

then the audience had approximately twenty minutes to ask questions.³¹² Knowing that the audience came to the theatre with a range of perspectives, instead of trying to directly challenge those perspectives, as he had with *Ajax* and *Persians*, with *Children of Heracles*, Sellars sought to create a new communal perspective, shaped by the pre-discussion and therefore shared by the audience members for each performance. The experience of sitting and listening created a transitional effect for the audience—though not always successfully³¹³—who slowly abandoned their listening mode that had been created up to that point³¹⁴, and started developing a voice, which as more voices joined in the discussion became a communal voice. This fostering of a communal voice through discussion helped the audience recognize itself as members of a common community in which they are not simply spectators but active participants, whose judgment and actions can have an impact. This civic awareness was something that Sellars had tried to foster in *Ajax* and *Persians*, but it is clear that by the time he staged *Children of Heracles* that he had decided that a gentler approach was needed than his earlier techniques for disrupting audience expectations, such as overtly topical references to contemporary events which directly challenged the audience.

The scenic design in *Children of Heracles* was neutral, lacking any details that would position it in a particular locale, and was suggestive of interrogation rooms present in government facilities around the world, bare and impersonal.³¹⁵ At the centre of the stage, Sellars

³¹² Lichtenfels (2013) 230.

³¹³ Lichtenfels (2013) 233-234. The fact that the discussions were depended on a participatory audience does not mean that was always the case. There were performances where the audience was completely non-participatory to the discussions, without asking any questions. However, even that decision through entailed a conscious choice, a decision in response to the event, it still managed the distancing effect which Sellars wished to create with such techniques.

³¹⁴ Bennett (1997) 125.

³¹⁵ Lichtenfels (2013) 231; Stehle (2004).

had a raised platform carrying the remnants of an altar, evoking the altar that may have been present in the theatre of Dionysus during the performances, but draped it with a Bokhara rug, upon which Ulzhan Baibussynova, the Kazakhi singer was sitting.³¹⁶ A square made out of neon lights surrounded the altar and, above it a similar in size gray frame was hanging from the ceiling, coming down close to the floor³¹⁷, and inside the gray frame the chorus of refugee children sat in sleeping bags.³¹⁸ The translation of *Children of Heracles* that Sellars used was also neutral, in contrast to Auletta's adaptations for the two previous productions, as discussed earlier. Rather than trying to use the words of the text to guide audience response, he used this chorus of refugee children to mediate audience response. As in the ancient Greek tradition, the chorus members were chosen from the community of the city,³¹⁹ however, unlike antiquity, Sellars' chorus did not consist of citizens but rather members of the refugee communities living in the cities where the production was staged.³²⁰ In this choice, Sellars attempted to communicate what he articulates as being the spiritual aspect of theatre—the communication between groups of people, who otherwise would not communicate, negotiating moral truths shaped by their life experiences. With this structuring of his production, Sellars sought to foster communication between the community (as formed through the preshow discussions) and the aliens living

³¹⁶ Lichtenfels (2013) 231; Stehle (2004); Svendsen (2004).

³¹⁷ Lichtenfels (2013) 231; Svendsen (2004).

³¹⁸ Lichtenfels (2013) 231.

³¹⁹ Arnott (1991) 23.

³²⁰ In the production in Germany, the chorus was consisted of Kurdish children. In Italy, it was formed by refugees from Albania, Columbia, Yugoslavia, Romania and Rwanda. In Paris they were from Morocco, Algeria, China and Vietnam. In the U.S. performance the refugees were from Cambodia, Nepal, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Somalia, Sudan, and Brazil.

among them (the refugee children onstage who stood for the larger refugee population) about their experiences and their obligations to each other.³²¹

Sellars chose to have the chorus of refugees be silent on stage, resembling their role in Euripides' original, but also echoing the experience of modern refugees. The set was evocative of the detention centers in which many refugees who illegally cross the borders of a country are held, and their silence perhaps a sharp political commentary on the governmental practises which frequently deny refugees access to translation services or legal counsel, thus indirectly depriving them of the right to ask for legal asylum, forcing them to return to the political turmoil or warfare of the countries they fled.³²² Their silence was not the only thing notable about the chorus. Their role was to be silent observers on stage with no direction to act or otherwise perform. The children were at ease, happily watching the events of the play unfold around them.³²³ While this might seem as a failure to convey the dramatic impact of the play, it was perfectly in line with Sellars' techniques which aimed at disrupting the experience of his audience. He strips the audience of any illusion that refugees must be perpetual in grief; they, like the rest of the audience, can enjoy the play. The refugees watching the play from onstage, however, while being the chorus of children of the play's title, also serve to remind the larger audience that the line between spectators and participants is fluid, and the stories we hear, read, and see, even when fictional, are rooted in someone's reality.

Sellars further eroded the boundaries between stage and audience and fiction and reality with two other staging decisions. First, he kept the house lights part-way up for much of the

³²¹ Fricker (2014) 222.

³²² Gener (2002) 29.

³²³ Lichtenfels (2013) 233; Stehle (2004).

performance, thus exposing the audience to the gaze of the refugee chorus on stage and the chorus to the gaze of the audience.³²⁴ This created a metatheatrical effect, where the act of watching was reduplicated and reflected with the audience watching the chorus watch the action onstage, while the chorus was also watching the audience watch them. No audience member could be an individual voyeur anymore, but instead were part of a larger collective body, watching not only the performance but also each other. And second, while for much of the production the chorus was at least physically marked off through the use of the gray frame, when Heracles' children receive asylum from the Athenians, the gray frame was lifted and the children, free at last, walked out into the audience shaking hands and thanking them for accepting them in their countries.³²⁵ This blurring of fiction and reality, audience and performance space completely dislocated the audience with unpredictable results—in the Vienna performance many audience members pulled away and refused to touch the children.³²⁶

In addition to the chorus of silent refugees, there was also a chorus of Athenians. Sellars reimagined Euripides' chorus as a two-person chorus sitting at a conference table off stage and to the right, suggesting a "bureaucratic" atmosphere, resembling "a public hearing or tribunal," with the chorus members wearing "earphones" and "microphones" making remarks in turn.³²⁷ Sellars' intention in the production was to avoid the "emotional sledgehammer" while encouraging a factually based discussion.³²⁸ He associated the chorus of Athenians with the media, which plays a significant role in shaping popular opinion about refugees, too often casting

³²⁴ Stehle (2004).

³²⁵ Shewey (2003) 59.

³²⁶ Fricker (2014) 215.

³²⁷ Foley (2012) 153; Stehle (2004).

³²⁸ Dunkelberg (2003) 538.

them as the other and thus helping to foster prejudices. Sellars connected this chorus with the media through casting, composing it partly with the moderators of the pre-show discussions.³²⁹ This casting choice, combined with the chorus interrupting the actors with questions regarding their actions at particular moments, created the feeling that the performance of Gladstone's translation was an extension of the pre-show discussion.³³⁰ With these choices Sellars tried to engage the audience in a discussion removed from emotion, instead raising questions regarding the moral dilemmas of the play, which I described in the first chapter, such as how a community should treat displaced people.

In creating his visual and auditory scheme for the play, Sellars followed his belief that, "If anything that you are doing is not multi then it's not anything."³³¹ A range of voices were represented on stage, from the silent refugees who in the end spoke of their gratitude to the audience, to the local moderators, to the rest of the cast who were American actors from a variety of places. The costumes were similarly varied: Amrani-type suits for the King and Ioalus, military fatigues for the Herald, ordinary street clothes for the chorus of refugees, and black Muslim shawls for Alcmene.³³² The two costumes that were most distinct in the performance were that of Baibussynova, the epic singer sitting on the altar, who was dressed in a traditional Khazhaki garment that was red with gold thread, and which referenced her ancestry from a family of shamans. The other distinctive costume belonged to Eurysteus, the Argive king, who

³²⁹ Dunkelberg (2003) 538. In the performance in Boston, Massachusetts Christopher Lydon was chosen, a respectable public figure, former TV news anchor and creator of the show *The Connections*, which discussed current-events, arts and culture; the other member was actress Heather Benton, see Markland (2003). For information on the performance in France and how the moderators were used there, see Lichtenfels (2013) 233.

³³⁰ Lichtenfels (2013) 230, 233; Svendsen (2004).

³³¹ Lichtenfels (2013) 228 For the composition of the actors—both professional and not—in France, see Lichtenfels (2013) 231; Delgado, Svich (2002) 127; Sellars and Marranca (2005) 39.

³³² Gener (2002) 28; Svendsen (2004); Stehle (2004).

entered dressed in an orange jumpsuit referencing Guantanamo prison.³³³ Sellars had a number of goals in using this range of costumes and voices. In part it was rooted in his belief that ancient Greek culture was not homogenized, but rather a mix of Asian, African and other influences alongside the Greek.³³⁴ More importantly, however, Sellars wanted to remind audiences of societal prejudices which result in judgements being made about people based on appearance and voice, at times reducing them to preconceived stereotypes and subjecting them to unfair treatment.³³⁵

Sellars, in all three performances, *Ajax*, *Persians* and *Children of Heracles*, echoes Meyerhold's views and uses the visual production elements to transfer his audience into a "state of permanent activity so as to trigger the emergence of their own creativity" and thus "realize his role as an active co-creator of the new meaning."³³⁶ Every moment of the performance aimed at disrupting the audience's voyeuristic experience—whether through a set transporting them in unexpected places like the back of the Pentagon, unconventional casting such as actual refugees and tv personalities ,or images aimed at causing awe, such as that of Ajax in the blood filled tank—breaking the illusion of realism, releasing them from the media generated images which have trapped them into a state of isolation and personal insignificance, reminding them of the immense power for change they carry as human beings.³³⁷

³³³ Foley (2012) 153.

³³⁴ Stehle (2004); Sellars and Marranta (2005) 44; Gener (2002) 28.

³³⁵ Sellars and Marranta (2005) 43.

³³⁶ Fischer-Lichte (2016) 170.

³³⁷ Delgado, Svich (2002) 132-133.

3.4 Soundscapes of a higher self

While this thesis so far has focused on Sellars' body of work regarding the productions of ancient Greek drama, his career also involves a long running engagement with the opera tradition, which has been highly influential in the way he uses sound. At the core of his directorial mandate, stands the dislocation of the audience through image and sound, as an integral part of the theatrical experience in creating an active spectator.³³⁸ Although he borrows from film most of the techniques regarding the manipulation of images,³³⁹ opera provided him with two techniques which could be transported to theatre and be reinterpreted within in its own context. The first one is that "Brechtian acts of spectatorship" are a natural consequence of the operatic process. The limits between actor/singer and role are clear and unlike theatre, mainly due to the singing and the constant music, there is no expectation of what happens on stage is realistic or that the actor is a real character. Additionally, the orchestra is always in the field of view of the spectator and the actors/singers occasionally have to look the conductor, further disrupting the illusion of the stage as the real world.³⁴⁰ The second technique Sellars implements resides in how music and language function. In opera, the words are liberated from their denotative function as signifying systems, as the text is of lesser importance, but through music the language adopts a new function which resonates with an emotional response affecting the physical body of the spectator.³⁴¹ In the way music acts as a freeing mechanism for the solidified meaning of words, Sellars sees a mechanism that will reveal to his audience the multiple layers

³³⁸ Delgado (2010) 382.

³³⁹ Most of the techniques he refers to come from the French New Wave and Jean Luc-Godard's techniques, such as the rejection of illusionary images to challenge their expectations or the use of shock to move the audience out of passivity. See MacCabe and Godard (1980).

³⁴⁰ Trousdell (1991) 67,70.

³⁴¹ Delgado (2010) 391.

of reality which are at work at any given time, reminding them they power of change they carry and that the smallest act has great consequences.³⁴² In his three productions of ancient Greek drama, Sellars transports these two techniques into theatre and through the use of sound—mediated voices through microphones, music or recordings—attempts to recreate a similar experience, where the simultaneous disengagement and engagement of the audience stimulates structured thought towards the artistic product disengaged from expectations of realism, while it triggers an emotional identification.

Sellars in all three of his productions of ancient Greek tragedy uses of microphones extensively, which he sees as a modern equivalent of the function of the ancient Greek mask.³⁴³ While there is no concrete evidence as to how masks functioned in antiquity in terms of sound, Sellars sees in them a double function which he compares with how microphones affect human voice: they “project, distort and cover the human voice offering both a hiding place and instant public exposure”, which Sellars interpreted it as the “sense of ‘truth’ implied by broadcast journalism, and at the same time they provide the intensity of a secret interior monologue.”³⁴⁴ The production of *Ajax* had all the actors speak their lines through microphones further enhancing the feeling of attending a trial which was produced by the set. The microphones created the effect of impersonal testimonial quality, with the actors’ voices devoid of timbre, engaging the audience in a cognitive process where they had to emotionally distance themselves from the product on stage, pay close attention to who was speaking and inquire about the deceptive or not quality of their words, raising questions for the audience about the role of the

³⁴² Sellars (2004).

³⁴³ For more information on masks in antiquity, see Taplin (2002) 10; Rehm (2017) 45-47; Arnott (1991) 166.

³⁴⁴ Auletta (1993) 2.

media in their society and the credibility of the information conveyed by them.³⁴⁵ At the same time the microphones textured the voices with different effects which created a “psycho-acoustic” soundscape, which sometimes made them feel like they were being echoed from the depth of a cave or muffled under the breath, while at other times it intensified the slightest pitch in voice, emotionally charging it with importance.³⁴⁶ Sellars also used the microphones to create an intricate soundscape in regard to Ajax’s character where his inner monologue was spoken through the other chorus members distancing the character from the audience, which could not interpret his gestural language, while at the same time creating a commentary which emotionally charged those same gestures.³⁴⁷ An example of this is the moment of Ajax’s self-realisation that he is “nailed in a circus of blood” (25), a realisation signed with his bloody hands but given voice by somebody else.³⁴⁸

Sellars makes similar use of the microphones as dislocation devices in the other two productions: *Persians* and *Children of Heracles*. Their function in *Persians* was to mediate the voices through speakers, which were placed all the way to the back of the auditorium,³⁴⁹ creating a soundscape where the words were “coming from unexpected directions”³⁵⁰, disengaging the audience from the voyeuristic experience of the production, and instead making them focus on the meaning of the words. This feeling was further intensified by the casting of Darius, who was played by the deaf/mute actor Howie Seago, and the messenger speech about the Iraqi

³⁴⁵ Sellars (1992) 93.

³⁴⁶ King (1986) 10.

³⁴⁷ King (1986) 11.

³⁴⁸ For more examples, see King (1986) 11.

³⁴⁹ Bayley (1993) 10.

³⁵⁰ Massie (1993) 19.

annihilation, danced by the Javanese dancer Mimioto.³⁵¹ Seago's disability along with Miroto's miming were given a symbolical meaning as well as a functional one, where the meaning of the words, mediated through the microphones, had a physical impact on the actors' bodies, creating the conditions for active listening.³⁵² In *Children of Heracles* Sellars positioned the two person chorus along with the microphones so as to evoke the feeling of a public hearing.³⁵³ In addition to the microphones used for the two person chorus at the right of the stage, several other microphones were present on stage, moved from one spot to another, which the actors would formally walk towards and use to speak directly to the audience.³⁵⁴ Sellars' technique once again was used to create the conditions of an active listening spectator, with the microphones evoking political debates and forums, stressing the importance of cognitive participation, with the implication that at the end of the performance a decision had to be made as to which side the audience supported.³⁵⁵

Another soundscape technique heavily deployed by Sellars was using music as a way of emotionally charging the scenes or creating soundscapes evoking different ethnic cultural backgrounds. This technique had the opposite effect to the distancing created by the microphones. In *Ajax*, Sellars used music, to underline certain moments associated with the chorus, which consisted of African American actors, in the form of gospel music, blues and funk music.³⁵⁶ Sellars use of these music genres had two different functions: the first one was to challenge the audience to think about appropriating other cultures orphaned of history as though

³⁵¹ Lichtenfels (2013) 227.

³⁵² Lichtenfels (2013) 227.

³⁵³ Gener (2002) 29.

³⁵⁴ Lichtenfels (2013) 227.

³⁵⁵ Svendsen (2004).

³⁵⁶ Foley (2012) 147; Lichtenfels (2013) 223.

they came from nowhere, reminding them that European culture, and subsequently American culture, are not monolithic, but were formed in response to their interactions with other cultures from both within and without.³⁵⁷ The other purpose was to emotionally engage the audience through the expressiveness residing in that music, which Sellars saw as a liberating act, with the capabilities of lifting them from their modern self-absorbed states, into a higher one, similar to the rites of the communal religious practises residing at the core of every culture.³⁵⁸ Most notably this was presented in the scene where Ajax retreats to the barn after he has taken the decision to kill himself. The chorus at that point engage in a blues lamentation about Ajax's and his fate, wishing that he had died within his madness while he was still happy (27). The song here functions to create an emotionally charged scene about humans, fate, and the ephemerality of happiness and power. Similarly, during Ajax's suicide the messenger/angel sang in a slow blues fashion *Down by the Riverside*, performing a second lamentation that echoed the first, while at the same time evoking America's past, raising moral questions about how once their country fought for the freedom of people yet now enslaves nations.³⁵⁹

In *Persians* Sellars predominantly used music to further disrupt the visual image that he had created onstage of the westernized Persian royal family by creating an Eastern soundscape. The onstage musician, Hamza el Din, created a multi-ethnic music score, a mixture of Arabic and Nubian music with elements of a western conservatory training and Japanese music.³⁶⁰ As with the music in *Ajax*, the music in *Persians* served as a reminder that cultures are interconnected and no culture is monolithic. But the soundscape of *Persians* went beyond music.

³⁵⁷ Delgado (2010) 384.

³⁵⁸ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 45; Sellars (2004).

³⁵⁹ An African-American spiritual song rooted to the era of the American Civil War. See Katz (2004) 155.

³⁶⁰ Hall (2005) 197.

Sellars had every third seat wired with speakers, which he used to create a war zone sound simulation.³⁶¹ By recording New York's traffic through a didgeridoo³⁶², Sellars invented a war sound which encompassed the terror and savagery of the Western civilization as captured in the daily moments of a city. Through that sound, the audience was transferred to modern Baghdad, recalling the American bombings of Iraq in January and February of 1991. For a few moments, the audience was invited to be one of those Iraqis that they never heard about; "the unseen victims, in front of an audience of victors."³⁶³ Sellar's used the sound in the *Persians* to transfer his audience into the reality of the enemy, enhancing the meaning of the text and trying to challenge the media shaped image of the enemy and the experience of war.

In *Children of Heracles* Sellars used the music to create a soundscape with spiritual undertones. The choral songs were sung by the Kazakhi singer, Ulzhan Baibussynova, who is descended from one of the oldest shaman families in central Asia.³⁶⁴ Sitting on top of the altar, accompanied by her two-stringed lute (*dombra*) and surrounded by the refugee kids, she sang stories about God, peace, violence and freedom.³⁶⁵ This traditional Kazakhi music provided Sellars with a sense of cultural continuity, bringing a musical tradition on stage which in his understanding of it runs all the way back to early Indo-European traditions.³⁶⁶ He used that music to infuse the production with "a kind of metaphysics that is not an opera emotion,"³⁶⁷ but the dimension of the sacred that is so absent from the modern materialistic societies.³⁶⁸ At the same

³⁶¹ Lichtenfels (2013) 228.

³⁶² A wind instrument invented by Indigenous Australians.

³⁶³ Favorini (2003) 110.

³⁶⁴ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 44.

³⁶⁵ Foley (2012) 153.

³⁶⁶ Gener (2002) 28.

³⁶⁷ Gener (2002) 28.

³⁶⁸ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 44.

time Sellars saw in Baibussynova's songs an equivalent of the ancient Greek tradition's choral songs; the connection with the voices of the ancestors.³⁶⁹ Through those voices he wanted to create a metaphysical experience for his audience that would elevate them from their self-absorbed selves into a liminal state where they had access to the memories of the humanity; a moment of "clarity and recognition" as he describes it where they could see that all the woe's of the world were a product of a power struggle and imparity.³⁷⁰ With these songs Sellars returned his view of the ancient Greek theatre as the place of democratic practice, and where moral questions were posed by the ancient tragedies, in a spiritual context, where everyone's voices were represented.³⁷¹

Echoing Meyerhold's thinking that theatre, like human life, should be unpredictable, "multifaceted, problematic and surprising,"³⁷² Sellars attempted to create an equally unpredictable theatre for his audience. In all three performances of ancient Greek tragedy, Sellars uses sound and image to challenge the major receptive senses of his audience, which not only shape the way we see the world but ultimately shape our perception of reality. He builds an experience where image and sound can be contradictory and yet work collaboratively to keep the audience constantly active, prompting them to not just look the aesthetic value of the product on stage, but also to engage critically with the text itself. Sellars, through all the means of the production discussed in the previous paragraphs, challenges not only the audience's illusionary sense of reality in the theatre, but their actual sense of reality, creating a platform which aimed to

³⁶⁹ Bogart (2012) 41.

³⁷⁰ Bogart (2012) 41.

³⁷¹ Sellars and Marranca (2005) 44.

³⁷² Pitches (2018) 3.

reform the audience from passive spectators to active participants; a reform he hoped would reflect in society and subsequently turn them into active citizens.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Peter Sellars is one of the most important and controversial figures of contemporary American theatre and his engagement with classical plays, and especially with the tragic genre, not only managed to free them from a theatrical tradition that has often viewed them as artifacts of a past era—fifth century BC Athens where democracy was born—but he engaged with them in a conversation, in the pursuit of exploring their meanings in relation to his own cultural context. Sellars saw those texts within the temporality and spatiality a performance entails³⁷³, where the meaning of the play is still unknown and is being created through a creative collaboration between all participants.³⁷⁴ Despite his radical directorial choices, which at times people swarm out of his productions, as was the case with *Ajax* and *Persians*, Sellars is still a director who is not attempting innovation simply for the sake of creating something new. Instead he is standing with one foot on innovation and with the other on literary cannon, creating an intricate interplay between present and past, canon and mainstream culture, where innovation meets tradition.³⁷⁵ In all three productions what Sellars primarily changed was the way he told the story and not the story itself; *Ajax* still is about the conflict between the hero and Odysseus, *Persians* narrates the annihilation of the enemy, and *Children of Heracles* is still about refugees seeking asylum.

Sellars borrows from the ancient Greek tradition, as much as he gives back. His use of modern technology and imagery, the updates to the texts and the other performance elements, such as the casting, scenic design, lighting and the costumes, brought the plays into a modern

³⁷³ Hardwick (2013) 338.

³⁷⁴ Bartow (1993) 277-278.

³⁷⁵ King (1991) 272.

context, infusing them with new life. At the same time, regardless of how idealistic his view of the ancient Greek theatrical space as an alternative governmental body giving voice to everyone might be, Sellars reframes it and reinterprets it through performance into a contemporary arena of debate. An act of resistance to consumerism and media driven western societies, which deter people from thinking, by providing them with easy answers turning their attention to the result and not the thought process, which led there; transforming them into voyeurs, not only of the theatrical experience but their lives as well.³⁷⁶

Even the explicit political undertones found in Sellars' productions, mostly towards the U.S. policies, cannot be seen as solely political as they were more cautionary tales, concerned with an existential question about the morality of contemporary societies and what is our stance towards the events that do not immediately affect us. Sellar's attempts in his productions to make his audience take a step back and see the actual forest instead of the trees, resemble the behavior of a teenager who slowly comes to adulthood; at first loud full of passions for fights and revolution, but as he grows older learning to listen more and yell less. Accordingly, *Ajax* is verbose, with violent images such as the blood-filled tank, multi-ethnic cast, a scenic design that carries a political metaphor; the Pentagon seen through the back entrance where all the garbage is thrown, and the stage resembling a slaughterhouse, where a debate within American society takes place. *Persians*, while it still has some political references to the U.S. governmental policies and their control over free expression, goes beyond the limits of the American society to encompass that of the enemy as well, drawing parallels between the similarities the two societies, focusing on how the imperialistic tendencies pose a danger for the inner collapse of

³⁷⁶ Sellars (1992) 90-91.

any society. Finally, the *Children of Heracles* engages with a larger humanitarian questions, expressed through extensive discussions, about how the privileged citizens of the Euro-American cultures, treat people, who they view as different, coming from economically weaker and war-torn countries, who ask for help, and what is our moral obligation to those people.

Although two out of the three Sellars' productions—*Ajax* and *Persians*—were deemed failures, in retrospect they seem to have functioned in similar ways to the ancient Greek tragedies; using myth to discuss large societal issues. The way Sellars engaged with these tragedies, despite the fact that they were cultural products belonging to a different cultural context, managed to mediate societal tensions in the U.S. in the last two decades of the 20th century,—such as the trauma of Vietnam War and its imperialistic military policies—suggesting that Sellars was successful in making these works speak to a different time and place. Sellars' work on the plays from the ancient Greek canon proves not only that such translocation is possible, but also that such approach offers the opportunity to explore new meanings in those plays, thus securing their afterlife as something more than mere artifacts.

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