

ORESTES

Director's Note

1. Genre and dramaturgy

This film tells the story of the oldest family drama in European literature. It is the archetypal soap and it is based on Greek mythology. After twenty-five hundred years, the story still is actual, the plot still heart-wrenching. Theater performances, operas, paintings and novels have been based on it. But not films. Why is that?

Film is more probing and true to life than all other media, and burdens the viewer with the protagonist's problems more forcefully than any other art form. For this reason, each and every movie asks for an ending which helps the viewer to deal with and solve the moral questions that have confronted the hero (and thus, the viewer). Unfortunately, the old, original versions of this story offer us little in that respect¹. Herein lies, I think, the answer to the question why this spectacular story has never been filmed integrally. After working on the script for a long time, we came to understand what to do with the plot to be able to make a compelling film. To hand the viewer something that has a faint whiff of a happy end.

The plot of the story is clear and simple. A royal family destroys itself: driven by ambition, Father kills eldest Daughter, Mother butchers him for this reason and in turn is murdered by youngest Son. A saga about revenge and conscience, rage and desperation, about the struggle between character and fate. In literature and theater, such themes usually lead to deep reflection, with the moments of action not seen. In traditional art, the emphasis is more often than not on psychological and moral issues and not on the actions themselves. In that sense, film is usually both more banal and more probing, true to life. When the hero, bloody sword in his hand, looks at his mother's corpse, we don't need emphatic reflection. Film can make us emotionally involved in somebody's revenge and how that feels.

This insight helps us create a compelling film story out of the profound original material, not banal but faithful to the essential beauty of its origin. In our script the intellectual exercise is mostly translated into action which makes us live through the devilish dilemmas of the characters. We don't have to explain why the queen butchers her husband so cruelly in his bath, because we also lived through *her* ordeal when she had to watch helplessly as the king sacrificed their child to his military ambitions.

The material of the old trilogy easily takes some seven to eight hours on stage, but we are able to tell it in less than two hours. By reducing the script to the essence of the myth, to our surprise we recognize the structure of such audience favorites as 'Star Wars' and 'Lord of the Rings' which of course are themselves inspired by timeless mythology.

¹ Although Aeschylus does end his trilogy with some sort of redemption for Orestes, his way of dramatizing this is first of all a political message to his fellow Athenians in 458 BC. Needless to say that this approach doesn't work for a modern audience, which forced us to look for a different resolution, while preserving the underlying theme.

Our lonely hero feels the need to leave his safe village, he has to discover who he 'really' is, and for that purpose he embarks on a dangerous journey which will not only tell him about who he is, but also about the obligations his newly found identity brings with it. The existential side, the significance of this voyage, are not defined explicitly, but expressed in situations and elements familiar to us from the genre: fear of the journey itself, the meeting with the mentor who warns the hero and points out the way to him, the unsettling confrontations with strangers he meets on the way and who threaten his life, the crossing of the extremely dangerous border to the realm of the Night, the search for allies, the titanic struggle to survive, and the striving for the true hero's courage to be able to perform his sublime task. And, needless to say, there is also the Great Love who waits for him faithfully, but is threatened by Great Danger when the hero appears to be failing.

2. Theme, urgency & audience

However elementary and empty the world of our story is, the themes emerging from it are no less important. We see the transition from nature to culture, and witness a crucial moment in the history of mankind: primitive blood feud being replaced by judgment by a jury: the basis of our democracy.

But the development of democracy is an unfinished process, and democracy is still a rare blessing. That is why the story of Orestes is as topical now as it was in 458 B.C., when the poet Aeschylus wrote it. The subject is not confined to one location, and the universality of the problem demands a universal film language, literally and figuratively. As a consequence, the film will be English spoken, which gives us the opportunity to work with British actors, who seem to be born with a penchant for the classical repertoire.

Obviously, the characters are not aware of the underlying themes, except the blind seer Tiresias, of course. His wisdom points ahead to a more enlightened and rational world view. What the hero experiences as a blow from fate or punishment by the gods, Tiresias translates into a psychology which seems familiar to us. Naturally he uses words and phrases belonging in those ancient times, but in his comments, often ironic, promise of 'progress' can be heard. Although the laws of Nature may be immutable, there is always room for improvement in our ways of dealing with each other and with those timeless laws. Here I want to make absolutely clear that these themes are not the heart of the movie. Its story is not an illustration of a message.

The film aims at a wide audience, people who know nothing about ancient times other than what they have seen in films such as *TROY* and *GLADIATOR*, or TV series such as *SPARTACUS* and *ROME*. So, what I am looking for is an intense experience, exciting and moving. Sometimes I want to achieve this through horrifying images, other times through tender, intimate scenes. In some scenes these extremes can be brought together in a blood-curdling way: the queen manages to seduce her king with an irresistible demonstration of affection, then, when he is consumed by passion, ruthlessly plunges her dagger into him.

3. Design, style, looks

Someone who wants to make a film of the Oresteian Trilogy, is undoubtedly aware of the fact that there is a short but impressive list of Greek tragedy's turned into film. As a director you

simply have to take earlier productions into account, such as those by Kakoyannis and Pasolini; and as far as I am concerned, Kurosawa belongs on that list too, albeit less directly. But what does a contemporary audience care about tradition? Generally very little. What they want is to be taken by surprise, astonished even, swept along completely – preferably without being bothered about things such as the culture of antiquity. Question is, how do I follow tradition with *ORESTES SON OF BLOOD* without it ending up as an art house film, but also without making Aeschylus banal?

What I envision is combining an adventurous approach with a certain degree of subtlety that will appeal to the taste of a public that *is* familiar with tradition. This vision needs to be given shape in concrete ideas about design and style. Below follow my points of departure for production design, costumes, photography, tempo/rhythm and music.

[i] *ORESTES SON OF BLOOD* is a film in which the landscape plays a dramatic part, almost that of a main character. In Arcadia this happens in a tender fashion, but most of the time the arena is a hostile environment for our hero. The emptiness of the savanna and the barrenness of the plateau not only symbolize the emptiness of nature yet to be civilized, but also reflect Orestes' crisis. The locations of his voyage from shepherd boy to royal prince should not just be beautiful but also serve as a visual expression of his transformation from youthful innocence to being a murderer in spite of himself.

[ii] As far as architecture is concerned, virtually every structure is witness to the need for primary safety and shelter. Huts and houses are part of the natural environment, their colors and materials spring from the landscape. In this, Pasolini's *EDIPO RE* is always a clear reference, not literally but as a principle.

With the exception of the palace, power and status obviously are of minor importance in the buildings. But even with the palace, the extravagance is relative. It absolutely should not radiate an oriental type of luxury. The power of Agamemnon's royal family home is mostly tangible in the scale of the rooms, with as sublime apotheosis the subterranean baths. On the outside, the palace should have a hermetic and inhospitable feel.

[iii] The original myth takes place during the Trojan war, three thousand years ago. A tribal war. I see the Greek army as a mixed lot of at most a few hundred warriors. But a reconstruction on an archaeological basis is not what I envision at all. However, for costumes and props the Mycenaean/Cretan culture does function as a marvelous source of inspiration that cannot be equaled by any fantasy. Hair and make-up will be allowed to be extravagant, especially at the palace. Here, also, I feel that expression and expressiveness are more important than being faithful to scholarly knowledge.

[iv] Photography and rhythm. It is a mistake to assume that fast, impatient editing is the recipe for enticing a young movie audience. An epic story like ours demands large totals (the landscape as a dramatic character), and such wide totals only work when the viewer gets the time to explore the image, to *scan* it. Needless to say, it is important that the story does not lag during such an extensive slow shot, that it does not deteriorate into self-indulgent *Schönfilmerei*. In other words: one should always feel the drama in the slowness, the development, suspense, or perhaps a surprising twist. Joel and Ethan Coen are masters of this (*NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*).

Contrast effect will keep the viewer sharp, because there is a continuous rhythmical shifting and linking. Whenever Orestes is involved in a hectic action scene, and that is quite often,

the dolly shot is replaced by steadycam and hand-held shots. Wherever possible, the wide-angle lens will make tangible the environment and the situations our hero is confronting. Esthetically, the use of very long tele-lenses is often attractive, but it should always be adjusted to the requirements of the story.

[v] In terms of the light, the point of departure will be to use natural sources of light as much as is possible, and turn to artificial light for dramatic accents that strengthen expressiveness. In regard to the use of color, I again opt for intensification, as I did before with *TIRZA* (2010). Fierce contrasts, heavy blacks, emphasizing certain colors and eliminating others completely. Nothing simply natural to life, no folklore.

[vi] A brief remark about music. Traditional symphonic film music would not work at all in this film and runs the risk of creating a misplaced Hollywood kind of experience. I like the idiom of ethnic music better, as long as it does not spring from the setting. It absolutely should not sound like source music. The music should be an autonomous design tool, interpretative and manipulative. In this respect also, Pasolini has proven to be a master, by using Japanese music for *EDIPPO RE*.

4. *A project's history*

In 1988 I started working on this project. Since reading Homer in grammar school I have been under the spell of these stories, and of this culture in general. Making this film means to me an almost magical way of living the culture of antiquity from within. Even more than the thematic urgency of Aeschylus' *ORESTEIAN TRILOGY* it was its vital simple story with that huge cinematographic potential which helped me keeping this project alive for almost twenty-five years.

Rudolf van den Berg