

# The tragic matter of life: a wound

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**Abstract** | Taking the wound on Philoctetes' foot as a starting point, the article seeks a first approach to an interference in the scenic landscape by means of tensions and clashes between elements (sound, light, props etc.) revealing other ways of looking at matter. It works with the hypothesis that creating a wound in the scenic landscape can favor a deeper apprehension of the materiality of life.

**KEYWORDS:** Tragic. Theatricality. Materiality.

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## A trágica matéria da vida: uma ferida

**Resumo** | Tomando a ferida no pé de Filoctetes como ponto de partida, o artigo procura uma primeira abordagem de uma interferência na paisagem da cena por meio de tensões e choques entre elementos (som, luz, adereços etc.) revelando outras formas de olhar a matéria. Trabalha-se com a hipótese de que criar uma ferida na paisagem cênica pode favorecer uma apreensão mais profunda da materialidade da vidaa deeper apprehension of the materiality of life.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:**  
Trágico. Teatralidade. Materialidade.

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## El trágico asunto de la vida: una herida

**Resumen** | Tomando como punto de partida la herida del pie de Filoctetes, el artículo busca una primera aproximación a una interferencia en el paisaje de la escena a través de tensiones y choques entre elementos (sonido, luz, atrezzo, etc.) revelando otras formas de mirar la escena. Trabaja con la hipótesis de que crear una herida en el paisaje escénico puede favorecer una comprensión más profunda de la materialidad de la vida.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Trágico. Teatro. Materialidad.

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With an open wound that won't heal and excruciating pain, Philoctetes, hero, not hero enough, is unable to control his pain: he screams in the ship bound for Troy. One day when he sleeps in the sand, inventing dreams, passages beyond pain, his companions decide to abandon him. Alone on the sand of an island, he wakes a hero with his wound and his pain. On the ship to Troy, Philoctetes, terrifyingly composed, reasoned with flesh, was an unbearable spectacle. Philoctetes was not a closed scar, a mark of victory over flesh, but an open wound. But perhaps this wound helps us to think about the incessant presence of matter that is sometimes seen inside out. The matter of which the human being is just another possible configuration.

The terrible spectacle of Philoctetes' wound on the ship bound for Troy is a first image so that in this short article I can question whether (1) the tragic elements of the scene (*opsis*) in their (2) emotional impact on the audience (*psychagogia*) can reveal (3) a renewed sensitivity to the vitality of matter. What I intend to present in this short article are some concerns about a newly initiated research. The starting point was to question whether the material of the scene has in itself qualities of a tragic theatricality.

### **The tragic elements of the scene (*opsis*) (1)**

Aristotle is the first theorist to divide the elements of the tragic into its fabular and scenic capacity. Nevertheless, he has been constantly accused of abandoning the scenic elements due to his often sensationalist expressiveness. In recent decades, however, a more affirmative position has been established in relation to the way in which the scene (*opsis*) is treated in *On Poetics*. It is true that Aristotle states that "the potential of tragedy exists without public performance and actors" (SIFAKIS, 2013, p. 58). But, as Sifakis points out, saying that the potential exists is very different from saying that the tragedy exists outside of the performance. Furthermore, from the first lines of *On Poetics*, Aristotle makes it evident that his main concern is "how stories should be put together if the poesis is to be beautiful" (ARISTOTLE, 2002, p. 1). We can, of course, assume that Aristotle knew that authors of the classical period were called *didaskaloi* (and *tragōido didaskaloi* or *kōmōido didaskaloi*, respectively) in relation to the role they played as producers (or stage directors) of their own plays. (SIFAKIS, 2013). However, Sifakis (2013) also points out that this was not a *technē* developed in antiquity, but an *architektonikē* ("architecture", art or science that employs other subsidiary arts to achieve its purpose). This *architektonikē* lacked a framework of organized principles and rules to provide guidance for creation, but instead used "a host of supplementary arts, including poetry, music, acting, and a variety of visual arts and crafts, to achieve its end" (SIFAKIS, 2013, p. 53). Aristotle, therefore, cannot be accused of not formulating a *technē* for staging, a principle that would take more than two thousand years to define as an operation independent of the text

Aristotle's position with regard to the scene can be considered, at many times, ambiguous. In chapter 14 of *On Poetics*, Aristotle mentions spurious theatrical effects imagined by those who took care of the visual elements of

tragedy. But, in the same chapter, he recognizes an emotional efficacy in the visual dimension of theater when he states that terror and mercy (taking the standard translation for this term) can be produced through the scenic elements, which are referred to with the transliterated term as *opsis*. It is, however, towards the end of Chapter 6 that Aristotle will bring up an important concept that values the power of the scene to affect the audience's perception. Aristotle applies the adjective *psychagogicon* to the possible impact of visual presentation (*opsis*) on tragic theater.

## Emotional impact on the audience (*psychagogia*) (2)

Halliwell's understanding of the term *psychagogia*, from which the adjective *psychagogicon* derives, allows us to positivize the elements of the scene in a disturbing way. Halliwell points out how Aristotle possibly knew that in dealing with the scene through the adjective related to *psychagogia*, he was applying the intensity of a word that, although in the 4th and 5th centuries B.C. had primarily a sense of enchantment, controlling the mind of the public through poetry and rhetoric; it still retained the metaphorical force of magic, through the summoning of the dead. According to Taylor:

*ψυχαγωγείν* [*psychagogein*] is to call up spirits' and the literal sense should not be watered down [ ....] and the *ψυχαγωγός* [*psychagogos*] is the professional ghost-raiser. The performer worked, sometimes at any rate with an actual wand which attracted or repelled ghosts. (TAYLOR, 1928, p. 510).

From this understanding, when we are faced with the exact moment in The On Poetics in which Aristotle states that "the *opsis*, although it has the ability to guide the soul, is the most naive and least proper to poetics", it is disturbing to think that, despite working with a specific focus on dramaturgical poetics, which justifies saying that the scene is less suited to his poetics; Aristotle cannot fail to recognize that in his opinion the scene (*opsis*) is capable of guiding the soul. (*psychagogicon*). This ability he refers to can be understood both in terms of enchanting the intellectual faculties of those who observe, and of guiding their souls... Where? There is a magical meaning to the term that seems to elude us.

The term *psychagogy* appears only twice in Aristotle's works, perhaps revealing the specificity that the author attributed to it. In fact this is a rare concept in all literary criticism that emerges in the 4th century BC. Another important moment in which the term *psychagogy* is used to designate the visual qualities of a work of art (*opsis*), is when Socrates, in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, questions the sculptor Cleiton: "But how do you work on your statues, what especially attracts the souls [*psychagogia*] of human beings through the sense of sight, that is, the appearance of being alive?" (XENOPHON, 1994, p. 99).

The question I ask myself is whether the idea of *psychagogy*, (allowing the sculpture to be taken as having the appearance of being alive), when applied to the composition of the scene (as Aristotle suggests) would be able to promote the apprehension of the very life of matter, working as if in the act of fruition we could

bring inorganic matter back from the realm of the dead. It is in this sense that the research moves to its third topic in the question posed by Jane Bennett: “What would happen to our thinking about nature if we experienced materialities as actants [...]?” (BENNET, 2010, p. 62).

### **A renewed sensitivity to the vitality of matter (3)**

In 2020, (a few months before the beginning of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV2 virus in Brazil), the skies of São Paulo darkened during the day due to smoke from the flames of the largest arson fire ever recorded in the Pantanal, aiming at the opening of more pastures for cattle inside the forest. When we look at those terrible images, we are almost led to believe that it is a storm, but it is soot brought by the moving air masses, from an area almost two thousand kilometers away from São Paulo. At that time, the tragic words of the choir of Thyestes, uttered shortly after the terrible act perpetrated against his brother and nephews, unfortunately seem to reflect the tragic spectacle of nature:

Why, Lord of Earth and Sky?  
Why is all beauty gone, why is dark night  
risen at noon?  
Why this change of yours,  
why destroy day in the middle of  
day? (SÊNECA, 2010, 203)

The tragic imagery in the skies of São Paulo, a wound made of soot, worthy of the solar inversions of Seneca's plays, makes it impossible to imagine how the human being could be analyzed without taking into account a new relationship with the matter of life. The sky was the harbinger of other images that we would continue to see in the sad relationship between human beings and organic or inorganic matter. Soon after, at the beginning of the pandemic, the shocking images of coffins left on the sidewalk, due to the death at home of people without medical care in Ecuador, composed a tragic picture with the hundreds of graves dug in Manaus shortly after, in the heart of the Amazon rainforest. When we see the aerial images of the rips in the lands opened to receive the bodies, we perceive some of the wounds in the soil of our Latin America. The bodies wrapped in plastic in the streets of Ecuador and the ditches are not just a questioning of the afterlife, or the void that contemplates us, but the tragic appearance of the matter of life seen inside out.

My research on the materiality of the stage is closely related to my bodily perception of matter and life, as I have been dealing for many years with important changes in my own perception. At a very young age, after a year of intense pain, I was diagnosed with an advanced stage tumor of the sciatic nerve. One day, during my treatment, I noticed the way in which the steam from the shower gently touched the tile, forming droplets on its surface that suddenly ran down. This strange spectacle of everyday life made me miss that tile running in the steam of water and that I could lose if the treatment did not progress in the best way. I felt a deep love for the matter of life in this simple encounter between

steam and tile.

Later, in my PhD, the objective of the research was to learn exactly how to compose such encounters, generating sensations that could be arranged in the temporal enjoyment of the show. Also, as a result of the operation on my nerve, I have developed neuropathic pain ever since. Maybe that is why I fell in love with some ideas that Antonin Artaud developed and that were analyzed by Susan Sontag (1980) when recognizing in Artaud's theatricality a cognitive and not a moral cruelty. Artaud was one of the artists who best drew the relationship between the scene, the pain and the abscesses. My encounter with authors such as Deleuze, Guattari and Lyotard was based, among other issues, on the importance of reading the text Antonin Artaud and the Closure of Representation, by Derrida (1978). At that moment I tried to work on the relationship that some of these French philosophers proposed between Artaud's writings on the body/materiality, theatricality and perception. I was impressed then, and still am deeply moved, by Derrida's proposal to understand Artaud's representation as an original representation, a space in which no spectator could be unharmed, just as Philoctetes' wound did not allow his companions to fall asleep on the way to Troy.

The cruel representation must permeate me. And non-representation is, therefore, original representation, if representation also means the unfolding of a volume, a multidimensional medium, an experience that produces its own space. I mean spacing. (DERRIDA, 2009, p. 299)

The idea of representation as spacing brought by Derrida is important to my research, as it enhances the understanding of the *opsis* elements not as the visual aspects, but as the three-dimensional totality of the event, including some kind of enveloping atmosphere. The materiality of the scene discussed here needs to be understood with this spatial depth, this insertion into reality, like the wound itself that is a deep cut or even the cave where Philoctetes is sheltered.

Years later, I was able to experience again an unusual relationship with matter when I was asked to recognize the body of my father who had died at home and not in a hospital. When they lifted the sheet, I was taken by many affective temporalities that transposed me into a loop of images, memories and emotions. But suddenly these sensations ceased when I noticed that my father's ear was already strangely changing color. This matter which was no longer my father and which strangely seemed full of life, brought again a reassessment of my understanding of the matter. It no longer seemed to make sense to approach the way in which the self arrives at the object; which, in a way, was still within my grasp of the sublime. It was necessary to investigate the way in which this object and its materiality come to me and act on me. The idea of working with the concept of psychagogy arises in this sense, with the aim of making the matter of life more active, powerful to the point of evoking my soul.

The power of this living matter of which the human being is a part, which is in my father's ear, already half person, half thing, is an experience that I carry in my body. As a result of my radiotherapy treatment, I developed a wound that took five years to heal. In fact, it is a wound that still opens in moments of great tension.

The years of living with this wound made me understand that it was strangely me and at the same time another one that I am in the process of being in my own body. In fact, diseases in general create a strange ecosystem, amalgamating made up of different bodies.

If these pluralities of wounds have been presented so far, it is so that I can think whether the wound can favor the way we perceive reality or the matter of life itself, in this relationship between the matter of which we are made in its possibility of corresponding to the matter of reality. In the poem *Tulips*, Sylvia Plath (2007) describes how the flowers she received at the hospital changed her entire perception of the environment. She says:

Tulips are too red at first, they hurt me. Even through the  
cellophane I hear them breathing  
Lightly, through white bands, like a terrible baby. Their  
redness speaks to my wound, they match.  
(PLATH, 2007, p.55).

The perception of matter through wounds is also addressed by artist and activist Mel Baggs, who explains on her blog *Ballastexitenz* how her skin perceived reality during the 20 years she experienced severe pain without even knowing it, due to a late diagnosis of neuropathy. When she was finally on the correct medication, Mel Baggs reported: "I didn't know it was a strong pain, I thought it was just another feature of the world. Trees have bark and my skin burns, the sun shines and my skin burns, the sky is blue and my skin burns." (BAGGS, 2021, online).

Here we can see the similarity between the way the environment touches Mel Baggs' skin and the way the redness of the tulips corresponds to Silvia Plath's wound. There is a perception of reality through the wound that awakens the power of matter to affect us. Perhaps by creating wounds in the materiality of the scene, these wounds can correspond to ours and reveal the vitality of the matter. In this sense, the idea of a wound applied to the scene brings the possibility of evoking (in the sense of *psychagogy*) the interior life of matter by artistically emulating some of the tensions carried by the wound (the fissure in the form, the clash of forces, the decay etc.), enabling the public to contemplate materiality.

I would like to share a final image that connects the materiality of the body and the environment that surrounds it, an image that is established between a tragic and an optimistic point of view. A painting found in southern Italy in a tomb dating from 470 BC and known today as *The Tomb of the Diver*, brings death in the simple image of a man plunging into materiality. This painting shows us the vivid interrelationship between the human body and matter. And maybe that's what the hero Philoctetes, or more precisely, Philoctetes' wound, could teach us. After nine years of abandonment, the Greek warriors returned to seek Philoctetes, because according to an omen, it was revealed to them that only with him by their side could the Greeks win the war.

Now the comrades who had abandoned Philoctetes had to deal with his screams, his images, his pains. They needed to deal with the terrifying spectacle of that wound, just as we need to deal with the wounds of matter right now.

Philoctetes' wound seems to bring to life the stuff that Philoctetes himself is made of. Or rather, it is matter itself that becomes visible in Philoctetes' wound (psychagogia).

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