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"VITA ACTIVA" AND AUGMENTED REALITY

THE CASE STUDY PROVIDED BY AESCHYLUS' *PERSIANS* IN 472 BCE

ABSTRACT: This paper examines how classical tragedy can inform modern pedagogy, guided by Hannah Arendt's concept of *vita activa* and the immersive potential of augmented reality. Far from being mere fiction or escapism, theatre is a dynamic space where collective memory and myth confront the present. It reinterprets the past —whether mythic or historical— not to evoke nostalgia but to engage today's audiences in meaningful reflection. Diverging from the didactic model propounded in antiquity in philosophical and religious milieus, we argue that theatre fosters experiential learning: a space for shared emotion, *catharsis*, and moral insight. Aeschylus' *Persians* illustrates this power vividly. Staged only seven years after Salamis, it centered not on Greek victory but on the Persian enemy's suffering. The backdrop was a city still marked by war, yet the audience —many of them veterans— was invited to feel compassion for their former foes. This reversal underscores tragedy's civic function: to unify, humanize, and provoke reflection rather than glorify conquest. In this sense, tragedy belongs to the *vita activa*, namely the realm of public life and civic participation. The spectator is not merely a passive observer but an engaged citizen, emotionally and intellectually involved. Tragedy thus becomes both aesthetic and political: a vital space where the *polis* imagines itself anew through shared, transformative experience.

One of the themes of this conference is the educational potential of the works of ancient theatre. It is widely believed that fifth century Athenian theatre had an ethical educational function and a pedagogical role in the cultural and political formation of citizens. This is a somewhat banal view, based on an idea of 'state' education that is incoherent and anachronistic, since the very idea of the 'state' is entirely modern and alien to Greek political thought. Greek culture had invented and promoted the idea of the *polis* and the *politeia*, the specific constitution of each city, but not the

idea of the 'state,' which is a modern concept, (except in the utopian design philosophically sketched out by Plato in his *Politeia* or parodied by Aristophanes in *Birds*).[1]

On the contrary, it should be remembered that a line of censure against the not-very-pedagogical, and indeed *anti*-pedagogical influence of the theatre goes back to the theatre's first origins. In particular, it is worth recalling the already ancient criticism of the theatre precisely because of its anti-pedagogical effect. We are not thinking of the Christian censorship of the theatre[2] that was directed against plays that probably had nothing to do with the tragedies and comedies of Athens in the fifth century BCE. Instead, we are referring to the attacks of Solon (through Plutarch) and, above all, Plato — attacks that were formulated at the same time as the invention and culmination of the theatre itself. My hypothesis is that, paradoxically, the critics of ancient theatre were somewhat right; but Greek theatre, and tragedy in particular, did not have an educational function in the current (and very banal) sense, but Greek theatre, and tragedy in particular, did function to promote and train an aesthetic and cultural intelligence in the political community of citizens.

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1. For a definition of *politeia* in relation to modern definitions of 'state' and 'constitution', see Centanni (2009) and Centanni (2024), with Bibliography.
2. The main reference text for the first Christian censorship of theatrical performances is Tertullian's *De spectaculis*. Of particular interest is the passage in which Tertullian asserts that the introduction of theatre construction in Rome was made possible by Pompeius the Great, with an escamotage both religious and architectural: *Itaque Pompeius Magnus solo theatro suo minor cum illam arcem omnium turpitudinum extruxisset, veritus quandoque memoriae suae censoriam animadversionem veneris aedem superposuit et ad dedicationem edicto populum vocans non theatrum, sed veneris templum nuncupavit, cui subiecimus, inquit, gradus spectaculorum. Ita damnatum et damnandum opus templi titulo praetexit et disciplinam superstitione delusit. Sed veneri et Libero convenit. Duo ista daemonia conspirata et coniurata inter se sunt ebrietatis et libidinis. Itaque theatrum veneris Liberi quoque domus est. De Spect*. X, ed. M.Turcan (1986); transl. T. R. Glover (*Tertullian, Minucius Felix*, Cambridge, MA 1931, Loeb Classical Library): "So when Pompey the Great —and there was nothing greater than himself except his theatre— had built this citadel of all impurity, he feared that the censors might one day condemn his memory. So, he built a chapel to Venus on top of it, and when he summoned the people to its dedication by edict, he called it not a theatre but a temple dedicated to Venus 'under which' he said 'we have placed seats to watch the performances.' So, a structure condemned, and deservedly condemned, he screened with the title of a temple, and humiliated morality with superstition. But Venus and Bacchus go very well together, demons of drunkenness and lust, two yoke devils sworn to either's purpose. So, the theatre of Venus is also the house of Liber. Liber and Venus are the patrons of the arts of the stage."

   On the spread of theatrical performances within the culture of the Roman Empire, which was to become the terrain of medieval "diffuse theatricality", see Allegri (1988) 7 ff.; for a summary of Tertullian's arguments against the theatre, see Menghi (1992).

The case study to which I will apply the coordinates of my hypothesis is found in 472 BCE, when Aeschylus staged *Persians* and chose to place the battle of Salamis at the centre of his tragedy. Doing so raised a crucial challenge: the victory at Salamis is in fact a 'middle point' in the Persian wars: neither the first, epic battle of Marathon, nor the last, decisive victory on the field of Plataea, after which came the final defeat of the mighty invaders and their retreat to Asia. For his *mythos*,[3] Aeschylus chose the Athenian victory at Salamis, around which he constructed the dramatic structure of his play. As the drama unfolds, a plot is woven where the time of the on-stage events —the announcement of the Persian defeat at Salamis— is linked by flashbacks and flash-forwards to the (relative) past and (relative) future of the other phases of the Persian wars (the battle of Marathon, fought in 490 BCE; the battle of Plataea, fought in 479 BCE).[4] In this way, Aeschylus includes in his plot the possibility of having a "prophecy of the past"[5] sounded on the stage through the mouth of the ghost of Darius recalling Marathon, and a "prophecy of the future," with which the ghost announces Plataea. For the Panhellenic audience attending the play during the Great Dionysia, Athens and its naval battle are presented as the decisive victory, in which the first and last meaning of the hoped-for but unexpected final victory of the Greeks, due to their courage and strategy against the immense forces of the enemy army, is concentrated.

The *choregia* of the *Persians* was the first public act of the young Pericles. Only four years earlier, in 476 BCE, Themistocles had been the official sponsor of the *Phoenissae*, the tragedy composed by Phrynichus about the battle of Salamis. In Aeschylus' *Persians*, the architect of the Athenian naval victory is not named; however, according to a prominent reading of the play and its political undertones, Aeschylus may have staged the *Persians* in part to glorify Themistocles' role in the battle's strategy and, above all, to rehabilitate the Athenian leader who, at that very moment —despite his immense success and popular support— had fallen into disgrace and

3. According to the definition in Aristotle's *Poetics*, 1450a10–1450b1, the *mythos* / plot is the first element in the construction of tragedy.

4. For the commentary of *Persians* by Aeschylus, see Hall (1996); Centanni (2003), in part. 707–762; Garvie (2009). The reference edition for the text of Aeschylus is West (1998).

5. I adopt the term "prophecy of the past" in relation to Darius' evocation of the battle of Marathon (which precedes the subsequent "prophecy of the future" of the battle of Plataea). The notion of the "prophecy of the past", based on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 1418a 23–25, is elaborated by Santo Mazzarino in his study of the political use of historical narrative; see Mazzarino (1990) I, 29 ff.

may already have been exiled from Athens.[6] In particular, the Messenger recounts in straightforward form the short, uplifting speech that the leader of the naval armada (anonymous in the tragic text) is said to have delivered to the Greek fleet before the battle, which even the barbarians would have heard because it was delivered in a loud voice; the text of the appeal echoes the words that Herodotus attributes to Themistocles in the speech he is said to have delivered to the assembled fleet at dawn before the attack.[7]

Leaving aside the undeniable link between Aeschylus' drama and Themistocles' activities, what is most important in this context is the inversion of the figure of the ship in the imaginative and rhetorical repertoire evoked by the tragedy. In the mouth of the enemy, who recounts his disastrous and bloody defeat, the ship, the Greek trireme, becomes the first instrument of death. Thus, it appears in the chorus's repeated apostrophes to the agile triremes, presented and evoked on stage as "vehicles of ruin":

> […] *κυανώπιδες*
> *νᾶες μὲν ἄγαγον, ποποῖ,*
> *νᾶες δ' ἀπώλεσαν, τοτοῖ,*
> *νᾶες πανωλέθροισιν ἐμβολαῖς,*
> *διὰ δ' Ἰαόνων χέρας.*[8]

6. Aeschylus's intention to rehabilitate Themistocles and exonerate him from the charge of collaborating with the enemy, and more generally the pro-Themistocles spirit of the *Persians*, is now almost unanimously accepted by critics. On the relationship between Aeschylus' *Persians* and Themistocles, see Centanni (2020) 289 ff.

7. Aesch. *Pers.* 402–405: *ὦ παῖδες Ἑλλήνων ἴτε, / ἐλευθεροῦτε πατρίδ', ἐλευθεροῦτε δέ / παῖδας γυναῖκας, θεῶν τέ πατρῴων ἕδη, / θήκας τε προγόνων· νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀγών.* "Come on, sons of the Greeks! / Free your fatherland, and free your children, / your wives, the temples of your paternal gods, / and the tombs of your ancestors! Now the struggle is for all!". Cf. Herodotus VIII, 83: *προηγόρευε εὖ ἔχοντα μὲν ἐκ πάντων Θεμιστοκλέης, τὰ δὲ ἔπεα ἦν πάντα κρέσσω τοῖσι ἥσσοσι ἀντιτιθέμενα, ὅσα δὴ ἐν ἀνθρώπου φύσι καὶ καταστάσι ἐγγίνεται· παραινέσας δὲ τούτων τὰ κρέσσω αἱρέεσθαι καὶ καταπλέξας τὴν ῥῆσιν, ἐσβαίνειν ἐκέλευε ἐς τὰς νέας. καὶ οὕτοι μὲν δὴ ἐσέβαινον, καὶ ἦκε ἡ ἀπ' Αἰγίνης τριήρης, ἣ κατὰ τοὺς Αἰακίδας ἀπεδήμησε*. Trans. A. D. Godley (*Herodotus, The Persian Wars*, vol. IV, Cambridge, MA 1925, Loeb Classical Library): "[in the assembly of the fighting men] Themistocles made an harangue in which he excelled all others; the tenor of his words was to array all the good in man's nature and estate against the evil; and having exhorted them to choose the better, he made an end of speaking and bade them embark. Even as they so did, came the trireme from Aegina which had been sent away for the Sons of Aeacus."

8. Aesch. *Pers.* 559–562.

Flaxen wings, dark eyes on the sea
The ships —ah— led them,
The ships —ah— destroyed them
The ships with their deadly attacks,
We, destroyed by Ionian hands.[9]

The triremes are animated creatures, ominous beings looking out to sea from the "eyes of the ships" — the painted *μάτια* that were also hawseholes in the bow through which the anchor chains passed.[10] Meanwhile, if the Athenian triremes are machines of destruction, the great Persian ships, thanks to a particularly successful lexical choice, are presented as "funeral ships":

νῦν γὰρ δὴ πρόπασα μὲν στένει
γαῖ' Ἄσις ἐκκενουμένα.
Ξέρξης μὲν ἄγαγεν, ποποῖ,
Ξέρξης δ' ἀπώλεσεν, τοτοῖ,
Ξέρξης δὲ πάντ' ἐπέσπε δυσφρόνως
βαρίδεσσι ποντίαις.[11]

The whole land groans
The land of Asia was emptied.
Xerxes had led it (woe!),
Xerxes had ruined it (woe!)
Xerxes decided it all recklessly
with these funeral ships.

βάρις is a type of Egyptian ship[12] and according to Diodorus, "the boat that carries corpses is called *βάρις*".[13] The term *βάρις* thus evokes the image of both an exotic vessel and a funerary vehicle. A funereal image is also found in the finale of the second stasimon of the *Persians*: it is an unprecedented

9. All translations are by the Author of this text.
10. Aesch. *Pers.* 559: the same figure, more explicit, is found in the *Suppliant Women*, line 716 (with reference to the threatening ships of the sons of Egypt). In the text, the image is strongly emphasised by the anaphora (ll. 560–562).
11. Aesch. *Pers.* 548–557.
12. *βάριδες* are the ships of the Egyptians in Aesch. *Supp.* 836, 873, 883.
13. Diod. I, 96: *τὸ μὲν γὰρ διακομίζον τὰ σώματα πλοῖον βᾶριν καλεῖσθα. βάρις* is also called Charon's boat in the *Palatine Anthology* VII, 67, 635.

rhetorical figure, *νᾶες ἄναες*,[14] which speaks of the latest, most recent misfortune; but it is also, almost, an onomatopoeia of lament.

At the end of the tragedy, when Xerxes enters the scene, alone, naked, and deprived of his entire army, he thus seals the victory of Athens over the Persian navy:

> *ἰὼ ἰώ μοί μοι*
> *τὰς ὠγυγίους κατιδόντες*
> *στυγνὰς Ἀθάνας πάντες ἑνὶ πιτύλῳ,*
> *ἐὴ ἐή, τλάμονες ἀσπαίρουσι χέρσῳ.*[15]
>
> Woe, woe
> they saw ancient
> cruel Athens! A stroke of the oar and all of them
> —woe, woe— wretched men, like fish on the shore, to die of convulsions.

The funereal strokes of the oar also reappear in the final exodus led by the King, as a metaphor for the gestures of mourning, instructions to the chorus for the funeral procession:

> *— ἔρεσσ᾽ ἔρεσσε καὶ στέναζ᾽ ἐμὴν χάριν.*
> *— διαίνομαι γοεδνὸς ὤν.*[16]
>
> XERXES: Beat upon beat, like the beat of an oar: beat, weep for me!
> CHORUS: I weep! I am all lamentation!

Finally, the image of the trireme appears in Xerxes' last words to the mourning chorus:

> *ἠὴ ἠή, τρισκάλμοισιν,*
> *ἠὴ ἠή, βάρισιν ὀλόμενοι.*[17]
>
> Ah, for the triremes …
> Ah, for those fatal ships, they died!

14. Aesch. *Pers*. 680.
15. Aesch. *Pers*. 974–977.
16. Aesch. *Pers*. 1046–1047.
17. Aesch. *Pers*. 1074–1075.

In the words and images of the defeated enemy, the Athenian trireme, the victorious weapon of the Greek people against the barbarians, is an icon transformed into a figure of death. *Νᾶες ἄναες*: the unprecedented rhetorical figures that Aeschylus places on the stage of the *Persians* are projections of powerful mental images, but the high semantic frequency and poetic quality of Aeschylus' text must not cause us to forget that what we are reading are only the words that eloquently accompany, as 'captions', what the spectators have already seen with their eyes and physically touched with their bodies.

In fact, the emotion generated by the text is added to the effect generated by the scenic elements of the performance setting. In this sense, if we pay attention to the implicit stage directions included in the text of the *Persians*, the first element that emerges is the possibility of recognising the presence of a three-dimensional set representing the palace of Susa.[18] Its function could have been to semanticise the theatrical space by recalling the model of the Achaemenid palaces, for the construction of which Darius and Xerxes had called on Greek architects and workers;[19] but the set may also have played a practical role in facilitating the entrances and exits of the actors.[20]

A punctual reference to a *σκηνή* can be found in the Exodus of the *Persians*, when the chorus expresses disbelief at seeing Xerxes alone and unaccompanied, without his escort, "behind the *σκηνή* drawn on wheels."[21] The description must be intended as an implicit stage direction and may refer to a small theatrical machine pulled by Xerxes, representing the King's 'tent'. An important lexical fact should be recalled at this point: this, at l. 1000 of the *Persians*, is the first ever occurrence of the term *σκηνή* in the Greek language. In Homeric texts the Achaean field tent is commonly referred to as *κλισίη*, whereas the term *σκηνή* "may have had an exotic, and specifically Persian connotation."[22]

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18. A three-dimensional reconstruction of the *Persians' σκηνή*, including the central practicable door for entries and exits, is proposed in Bakola (2014) 10.
19. Seaford (2012) 208: "The numerous kinds of contact, from the sixth century onwards, between Greeks and Persians included Greeks working on the construction of the complexes at Susa and Persepolis, and some of the experience of Greek visitors and craftsmen surely reached Greece. Aeschylus does show some knowledge of Persian royal institutions" (with Bibliographical References).
20. Seaford (2012) 206–214; Bakola (2014) 1 ff.
21. Aesch. *Pers.* 1000–1001: *οὐκ ἀμφὶ σκηναῖς | τροχηλάτοισιν ὄπιθεν δ'ἑπομένους.*
22. The lexical datum, and the fact that in the Homeric texts the Achaean field tent is called *κλισίη*, while the term *σκηνή* may have had "a specifically Persian connotation", is emphasised by Broneer (1944) 309.

According to Herodotus, the spoils plundered from the Persians at Plataea in 479 included the precious royal *σκηνή* —the wooden palace on wheels that accompanied the Persian King on long military campaigns— which Xerxes had entrusted to Mardonius in his hasty retreat after the defeat at Salamis.[23] According to a hypothesis originally proposed by Oscar Broneer in 1944[24] (and recently revived with new arguments),[25] this very trophy —extremely important not only for the value of the artefact and its furnishings, but above all for its symbolic meaning— transported to Athens and installed in the Theatre of Dionysus, may have provided not only the ideal model and name, but also the material structure for the theatrical 'set' that constituted its prototype. The real *σκηνή* of Xerxes, then, in its material-architectural substance and with its exceptional symbolic value, would have been the first 'scene', perhaps, of Phrynichus's *Phoenissae* (staged with Themistocles' *choregia* in 476) and then of Aeschylus' *Persians* (staged with Pericles's *choregia* in 472).

A confirmation of the presence of Xerxes' real *σκηνή* among the scenic elements can be found in Plutarch's account of the Odeion[26] later built by Pericles for the new musical competitions he introduced, but which was also used for other functions, such as a place of assembly, a courtroom, and even a rehearsal hall for performances.[27] Plutarch states that the architectural form that Pericles wanted for his new building for musical performances was designed in the image and imitation of the Persian royal tent: *εἰκόνα*

23. The source of the conquest of the *σκηνή* by Mardonius after the battle of Plataea is Hdt. 9, 70. In Plutarch we find a description of the *σκηνή* of Darius III, which the king left on the field after the battle of Issus: *ὕψει τε καί μεγέθει καί τῷ περὶ τὴν στρωμνὴν καί τραπέζας καί τὸ δεῖπνον αὐτοῦ κόσμῳ θαύματος ἀξίαν* (*Alex.* 20, 8). See also the description in Diodorus 17, 35, 1 with the image of the Macedonians engaged in plundering the royal tent *διὰ τὸ πλῆθος πολυτελείας*.

24. Broneer (1944); the hypothesis has been challenged by Miller (1997) 235–236, and by Mosconi (2000) 257, who doubts the very presence of Xerxes' tent in Athens after the Persian wars. The hypothesis is taken up by Nielsen (1994) 49: "It would have been very appropriate, for example, when Aeschylus' *Persae* was performed, since the tragedy took place in the palace of the Persian king".

25. Kenner (1986–1987) 56–63; Seaford (2012) 210; Trainor (2016) 28–31; Centanni (2022) 70–72.

26. Plut. *Per.* 13.5.

27. A gloss by Hesychius defines the Odeion as the place where "rhapsodes and citharodes competed [trained] before the theatre was built" (*ᾠδεῖον τόπος ἐν ᾧ πρὶν τὸ θέατρον κατασκευασθῆναι οἱ ῥαψῳδοὶ καὶ οἱ κιθαρῳδοὶ ἠγωνίζοντο*) is already mentioned by Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1886) 601–602.

[…] *καὶ μίμημα τῆς βασιλέως σκηνῆς*.[28] Even if, as Mosconi has argued, the meaning of this "imitation" could be understood in a symbolic sense[29] —as a reprise of the trophy image of the victory over the barbarians— the allusion to "imitation" can also be seen as an important clue to the fact that the original trophy of Plataea must have been —or was— visible and, in any case, available to the Periclean architects as an inspirational model, imitated and reproduced in the new construction. Thus Aeschylus, and perhaps even Phrynichus in his earlier *Phoenissae*, may have envisaged for the *Persians* a staging involving the real *σκηνή* of Xerxes, brought into the drama to represent the Palace of Susa. In this project, the small *σκηνή* that, according to the text of the tragedy, marches behind Xerxes, is to be imagined as a miniature replica of the real Persian *σκηνή*, the trophy of Plataea, physically present in the performance space.[30] The hypothesis that a *μηχανή* (representing the *σκηνή* that the King had in fact abandoned after Salamis) appeared on stage behind Xerxes, could also provide an explanation for an inconsistency that is qualitatively different from other inconsistencies that are compatible with dramaturgical fiction. The spectators of the performance staged in 472 were well aware that the *σκηνή* had been captured by the Greeks and was the most valuable piece of Plataea's booty, and for this reason Xerxes' arrival in Susa with his 'tragic toy' creates a kind of multi-reflective mirror effect. The "*σκηνή* on wheels" that Xerxes drags behind him duplicates in miniature the *σκηνή* of Plataea's spoils, which in its materiality is the backdrop against which the tragic scene is set; this in turn represents, on a smaller scale, the facade of the Palace of Susa. It is a psychological game between Aeschylus and the audience that is at once cruel and moving, as the complex allusion to a second —if not a third— level stimulates the spectators' imagination, provoking a multiplication of alienation while simultaneously intensifying the proximity of the Other.

Another element of the theatrical staging is very important for reconstructing the psychological effect of the staging on the spectators. According to Vitruvius, Themistocles salvaged and reused wood from the wrecks of

28. Plut. *Per.* 13, 5: *τὸ δ' Ὠιδεῖον, τῇ μὲν ἐντὸς διαθέσει πολύεδρον καὶ πολύστυλον, τῇ δ' ἐρέψει περικλινὲς καὶ κάταντες ἐκ μιᾶς κορυφῆς πεποιημένον, εἰκόνα λέγουσι γενέσθαι καὶ μίμημα τῆς βασιλέως σκηνῆς, ἐπιστατοῦντος καὶ τούτῳ Περικλέους*. Paus. I, 20,4 repeats the idea that the Odeion was built *τῆς σκηνῆς … ἐς μίμησιν τῆς Ξέρξου*.

29. Mosconi (2000) 246–257

30. Broneer (1952) 172: "There would have been no reason for copying an object long since lost and all but forgotten in the time of Pericles"; cf. also Broneer (1944) 311.

Persian ships destroyed at the battle of Salamis to construct the roof of a theatre building in Athens, which he identifies in *De architectura* as the "odeum":

> *Odeum* […] *Themistocles* […] *navium malis et antemnis ex spoliis Persicis pertexit*.[31]

In his precious report, Vitruvius probably confuses three different things. First, the concrete reuse of wood from Persian ships, starting with the recovery of the huge amount of wreckage after the battle of Salamis; second, the presence, near the Theatre of Dionysus, of the Persian *σκηνή*, the trophy from Plataea; and third, the architectural form of the Odeion designed and built by Pericles "in the image and imitation of the Persian tent". However, it is highly unlikely that the large quantity of wood retrieved from the 1207 Persian ships destroyed at Salamis had been stored for more than thirty years, waiting to be recycled.[32] Instead, as has recently been argued, it is highly likely that the wood was repurposed immediately. Implicit but compelling evidence is provided by the economic and functional data regarding the availability of the conspicuous wrecks of the destroyed fleet in the years immediately following the Persian Wars.[33] It is therefore highly probable

31. Vitr. V, 9. However, as is well known, Vitruvius' information poses a problem of chronological congruence. In fact, Themistocles, having reached the zenith of his political fortunes after the Persian wars and in particular the battle of Salamis (which had been his reckless but successful strategic masterpiece), fled into exile from Athens around 471 BCE, on a route that would later take him to Persia, exiled to the court of the Great King. Pericles's Odeion, however, was built many decades later, after 440 BCE. Vitruvius' error in dating the Odeion early and in attributing its construction not to Pericles, but to the leader to whom the victory at Salamis was due, depends on the formal relationship of Pericles's Odeion to the Persian *σκηνή* but also on the ideological continuity that Pericles traces between his work and that of the previous generation. As we know from Thucydides, even decades after the Persian wars, the war against the Medes was "one of the arguments that is constantly repeated" (Thuc. I, 73,2: *τὰ δὲ Μηδικὰ καὶ ὅσα αὐτοὶ ξύνιστε, εἰ καὶ δι' ὄχλου μᾶλλον ἔσται αἰεὶ προβαλλομένοις*) as one of the refrains in Pericles's rhetorical repertoire. This is the short–circuit that Pericles himself generates in the construction of his propaganda, between his own figure and that of Themistocles, who de facto also inherits the legacy of the victory over the Persians (Trainor 2016, 35: "As the actual veterans of Salamis began to disappear from public life, Pericles may even have usurped in the public imagination the heroic credit belonging to the admiral Themistocles. Thus, Pericles might have made himself, retroactively, into the hero of the Persian War who emerged victorious over Xerxes.").
32. Trainor (2016) 21–22, 34–35; Centanni (2022) 70–72.
33. On the reuse —whether material or indirect, through the monetisation of booty— of Persian spolia for the construction of monuments in Athens in the fifth century BCE, see Mosconi (2000) 259, 263.

that this material was reused, not for the Odeion (to which Vitruvius inaccurately refers), but for the Theatre of Dionysus itself, particularly to create the wooden seats temporarily erected on the slopes of the Acropolis during the theatre festivals.[34] The remains of Xerxes' ships became the very real stage — the building material for the scenario of the tragedy.

According to the hypotheses that we have recalled here, Aeschylus would have used the symbolic icon of triumph over the enemy —Xerxes' tent looted at Plataea— as the *σκηνή* for the staging of his *Persians* in 472, while at the same time using materials salvaged from the battle of Salamis for the scaffolding, the stage and, in general, for the wooden structures of the theatre and the seats themselves. Within this framework, the *Persians* must be re-read with special attention to the relationship between the text —the words spoken on stage— the elements of the set, and the very wood of the seats upon which the spectators sit.

Aeschylus, the veteran of Marathon and Salamis, makes the drama of the war unfold in front of his fellow citizens, who themselves had experienced the same war, but each in their own intimate, individual and personal way: he returns to the city and the Panhellenic community a 'true' representation of the war, and in particular of the battle of Salamis, making what had not yet been consigned to historical narrative (Herodotus would write about it twenty years later) 'happen' theatrically. The evacuation of Athens, the seemingly impossible gamble of Themistocles, the hoped-for but unexpected victory, became 'real' shared facts for which the citizens no longer had to rely on their personal memories or the more or less mythologised tales that circulated. All that the war had been only seven years earlier —its horrors and the joy of liberating the city from barbarian occupation— became 'real' because it was played out in the Theatre of Dionysus, with the Acropolis and its temples desecrated and destroyed by the Persians in the background. The enemy palace, Darius's own *σκηνή*, left by the Persians on the field of Plataea, was exhibited as a trophy and as a 'scene', making it 'real'. Even the seats themselves were made from the very wood of the Persian ships wrecked at Salamis. If this is accurate, imagine what it must have

34. Thus O'Neill (1942) 425–426, in relation to Phrynichus' *Phoenissae* and Aeschylus' *Persians*: "We may suppose that Themistocles was largely responsible for the restoration of the theatre, that the use of Persian ship timbers for the *ikria* was his idea and served as a memorial to Salamis, his greatest achievement […] Under these circumstances it was natural that Themistocles should have borne the expense of producing Phrynichus' play. Four years later Aeschylus produced his *Persae*."

been like for the spectators on that March day in 472 BCE. Eugene O'Neill, writing during the Second World War, described it thus:

> "More important […] is the extraordinary impression that the *Persae* (and presumably the *Phoenissae* also) must have made on the spectators […] the play must have deeply thrilled them. […] The performance of the *Persae* must have been a splendid experience indeed for that fortunate audience. But if the seats on which they sat were constructed of timbers from the very ships they had defeated at Salamis, the play must have come even closer home to them, with an immediacy that greatly fires the imagination even at these late days. Our effort in reading the *Persae*, more than any other Greek play, should be to transport ourselves to its performance, which was a very special sort of experience for those privileged to be present. We should, therefore, try to react to the *Persae*, so far as we can, as the Athenian did in 472. If the *ikria* at that time were such as Professor Allen suppose, we have an additional imaginative effort to make; every reader of the *Persae* should keep in mind the clear possibility that if he had attended the performance, he would have been sitting on seats made from Persian ship timber."[35]

Having entered the realm conjured by the theatre —built on signifiers and evocative relics of war, and thus blurring the boundary between artifice and reality, reconstruction and presence— the spectators must have found themselves immersed in a climate of intense emotional temperature. This would have excited the double pathos to which Aristotle gives the aesthetic names of *phobos* and *eleos*, and which are released by the theatrical experience. Aristotle's reference to the relationship between the visual dimension and *catharsis* is important: "It is possible that what moves fear and pity is produced by the effect of sight."[36]

We see *phobos*, first and foremost, in the spectators, who are made to echo the temperament of the days of the city's evacuation. The luxury of Xerxes' tent, at once seductive and terrifying in its splendour, inaccessible to the Greeks, must have made a considerable impression: a terror so strong that it was attractive, not least because of the seduction that the exoticism of the barbarians exerted on the Greeks.[37] Equally terrifying is the necromantic

35. O'Neill (1942) 426.

36 Arist. *Po.* 1453b 1–14.

37. On the Persian as a figure of Otherness, see Hall (1989), especially pp. 76–98; and more recently, on the seduction of Persian exoticism, Giordano (2019), with an annotated bibliography that also emphasises the Homeric key in the Aeschylean representation of the Enemy.

rite: the appearance of the shadow of Darius must have reified the apparent power of the Great King of the Barbarians, over and above the simply impressive effect of the Phantom appearing on the stage. *Eleos* then brings total immersion in the mental landscape of war, as pointedly evoked in the choral songs. But it is not only the war that devastates the land of the enemy. It is the climate of war, universal and cruel in every latitude, that plunges us back into the temperament that dominated Attica at the time of the invasion: the cities emptied of young people; the "mismatched" brides in the nuptial beds;[38] the aged parents forced to bury their children, against all the laws of nature. Finally, the vision, brought to the stage by the words of the messenger, of the spectacle of the day after the battle: the sea off Salamis littered with wrecks and corpses.[39]

Hatred of the enemy who invaded the city and destroyed the Acropolis is mixed with the attraction of the dimension of otherness —cultural, social, aesthetic and political— that the Persians embody. Aeschylus supports these mixed feelings of hatred and attraction with real substance and material, especially through the use of scenery and spectacular staging. These include the *σκηνή*, the majestic entrance of the Queen at her first appearance (and the exotic and magnificent robes), the ghost, and Xerxes' dress, which, despite its tattered state, is made of precious fabric.[40] The work evokes two ambiguous, double-edged emotions: on the one hand, a sense of pride and relief at having escaped danger and emerged victorious from the ordeal; on the other, a desire to forget the terrible images that characterise any theatre of war and remain indelibly etched in the memories of the survivors.

All these elements —words, images, the very situation of the performance— evoke the memories of the spectators who were warriors at Salamis and fire their imagination: it excites and moves them, but can the experience of the tragedy even 'educate' them in any way? In fact, what the audience is stimulated to do is to "weep and rejoice together"[41] — to see the enemy on the stage, to weep over him, but also to weep with him and for him. To

38. Aesch. *Pers.* 133–139: *λέκτρα δ' ἀνδρῶν πόθῳ | πίμπλαται δακρύμασιν·| Περσίδες δ' ἀβροπενθεῖς ἑκάστα | πόθῳ φιλάνορι | τὸν αἰχμάεντα θοῦρον εὐνατῆρ' ἀποπεμψαμένα | λείπεται μονόζυξ.*

39. Aesch. *Pers.* 419–421: *θάλασσα δ' οὐκέτ' ἦν ἰδεῖν, | ναναγίων πλήθουσα καὶ φόνου βροτῶν. | ἀκταὶ δὲ νεκρῶν χοιράδες τ' ἐπλήθυον.*

40. Aesch. *Pers.* 835–836: *λακίδες … ποικίλων ἐσθημάτων.*

41. This is a quotation from another verse of Aeschylus, from *Seven against Thebes*; thus says the Messenger to the chorus of Theban maidens, announcing the double fratricide of Eteocles and Polynices, and at the same time the salvation of the city: *τοιαῦτα χαίρειν καὶ δακρύεσθαι πάρα* (Aesch. *Sept.* 814).

weep and rejoice together over the horrors of war but even rejoice together in being liberated from war. The spectators-citizens experience the effect of theatrical *catharsis* on their nerves, on their emotional chords. This is not a pedagogical effect; it is the dangerously pedagogical effect of tragedy — the very effect Plato stigmatized in the *Philebus*:

ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ: *ἔτι τοίνυν ἡμῖν τῶν μείξεων λύπης τε καὶ ἡδονῆς λοιπὴ μία.*
ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΟΣ: *ποία, φῄς;*
ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ: *ἣν αὐτὴν τὴν ψυχὴν αὑτῇ πολλάκις λαμβάνειν σύγκρασιν ἔφαμεν.*
ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΟΣ: *πῶς οὖν δὴ τοῦτ᾽ αὐτὸ λέγομεν;*
ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ: *ὀργὴν καὶ φόβον καὶ πόθον καὶ θρῆνον καὶ ἔρωτα καὶ ζῆλον καὶ φθόνον καὶ ὅσα τοιαῦτα, ἆρ᾽ οὐκ αὐτῆς τῆς ψυχῆς τίθεσαι ταύτας λύπας τινάς;*
ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΟΣ: *ἔγωγε.*
ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ: *οὐκοῦν αὐτὰς ἡδονῶν μεστὰς εὑρήσομεν ἀμηχάνων;* […] *καὶ τὰς ἐν τοῖς θρήνοις καὶ πόθοις ἡδονὰς ἐν λύπαις οὔσας ἀναμεμειγμένας;* […] *καὶ μὴν καὶ τάς γε τραγικὰς θεωρήσεις, ὅταν ἅμα χαίροντες κλάωσι, μέμνησαι;*
ΠΡΩΤΑΡΧΟΣ: *τί δ᾽ οὔ;*[42]

SOCRATES: One further mixture of pain and pleasure is left.
PROTARCHUS: What is that?
SOCRATES: That mixture of one's own feelings which we said the soul often experiences.
PROTARCHUS: And what do we call this?
SOCRATES: Do you not regard anger, fear, yearning, mourning, love, jealousy, envy, and the like as pains of the soul and of the soul alone?
PROTARCHUS: I do.
SOCRATES: And shall we not find them full of inexpressible joys? […] and of those joys mixed with pains which we find in sorrow and longing? […] And do you not recall the tragic spectacles when one cries and at the same time feels pleasure?
PROTARCHUS: It's true.

The analysis of the effects of this mixture of emotions on the spectator leads Plato to stigmatise the dangerousness of dramatic art, especially tragic art, inasmuch as it is capable of inducing in the souls of its participants a state of excitement of the passions, which can vent itself in an uncontrollable frenzy.

42. Plat. *Phileb.* 47c–48a.

Moreover, for Plato, the practice of citizens attending the theatre is harmful because it puts everyone on the same level, democratically blurring the distinction between those who teach and those who learn.[43] The *demos* is no longer a passive recipient of clear and linear pedagogical lessons, but is instead called upon to participate actively in what happens on stage: all citizens are invited to judge, to engage their passions. According to Plato, this is 'theatrocracy' — the mother and original matrix of democracy.

On a slightly different line, but still in the sense of censuring the theatre for its anti-pedagogical effect, is an account by Solon that is referred to by Plutarch: Solon, in his old age, had already warned against the "deceptive" aspect of the theatre, which confuses the true with the false.

> *ἀρχομένων δὲ τῶν περὶ Θέσπιν ἤδη τὴν τραγῳδίαν κινεῖν, καὶ διὰ τὴν καινότητα τοὺς πολλοὺς ἄγοντος τοῦ πράγματος, οὔπω δ› εἰς ἅμιλλαν ἐναγώνιον ἐξηγμένου, φύσει φιλήκοος ὢν καὶ φιλομαθὴς ὁ Σόλων, ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐν γήρᾳ σχολῇ καὶ παιδιᾷ καὶ νὴ Δία πότοις καὶ μουσικῇ παραπέμπων ἑαυτόν, ἐθεάσατο τὸν Θέσπιν αὐτὸν ὑποκρινόμενον, ὥσπερ ἔθος ἦν τοῖς παλαιοῖς. μετὰ δὲ τὴν θέαν προσαγορεύσας αὐτὸν ἠρώτησεν εἰ τοσούτων ἐναντίον οὐκ αἰσχύνεται τηλικαῦτα ψευδόμενος. φήσαντος δὲ τοῦ Θέσπιδος μὴ δεινὸν εἶναι τὸ μετὰ παιδιᾶς λέγειν τὰ τοιαῦτα καὶ πράσσειν, σφόδρα τῇ βακτηρίᾳ τὴν γῆν ὁ Σόλων πατάξας· — "ταχὺ μέντοι τὴν παιδιάν", ἔφη, "ταύτην ἐπαινοῦντες οὕτω καὶ τιμῶντες εὑρήσομεν ἐν τοῖς συμβολαίοις".*[44]

> At that time Thespis and his circle were beginning to develop tragedy, and his style attracted most people because of its novelty, even though theatrical plays were not yet in competition at the festivals. So Solon, who by nature loved to hear and learn new things, and who in his old age indulged more than ever in leisurely amusements, wine and song, (and for Zeus because he was devoted to drink and music), went to see Thespis act in his own play, as

43. Plat. *Laws* 701: *θέατρα ἐξ ἀφώνων φωνήεντ' ἐγένοντο, ὡς ἐπαΐοντα ἐν μούσαις τό τε καλὸν καὶ μή, καὶ ἀντὶ ἀριστοκρατίας ἐν αὐτῇ θεατροκρατία τις πονηρὰ γέγονεν. εἰ γὰρ δὴ καὶ δημοκρατία ἐν αὐτῇ τις μόνον ἐγένετο ἐλευθέρων ἀνδρῶν, οὐδὲν ἂν πάνυ γε δεινὸν ἦν τὸ γεγονός: νῦν δὲ ἦρξε μὲν ἡμῖν ἐκ μουσικῆς ἡ πάντων εἰς πάντα σοφίας δόξα καὶ παρανομία, συνεφέσπετο δὲ ἐλευθερία. ἄφοβοι γὰρ ἐγίγνοντο ὡς εἰδότες, ἡ δὲ ἄδεια ἀναισχυντίαν ἐνέτεκεν*. "Thus the theatres, instead of being silent, became filled with deafening shouts, as if the people were capable of understanding what is beautiful and what is not. Thus, in place of the aristocracy of art, there arose a bad form of theatrocracy. And if at least a democracy of free men had grown out of this theatrocracy, it would not have been so bad: instead, from such an attitude to art, we [the Athenians] developed the conviction that we knew everything about everything, arrogance and unbridled freedom."

44. Plut. *Solon* 29, 7.

> was the custom of the ancient poets. After the performance, he approached Thespis and asked him if he was not ashamed to tell such lies in the presence of so many people. Thespis replied that there was no harm in speaking and acting like that because it was a play. Then Solon struck the ground with his staff and said: — But if we encourage and praise this kind of jest, the same jest in relations and exchanges (public acts, treaties and political pacts).

This is not the moralistic attack on the lascivious and corrupt aspect of (Roman) theatrical performances that was to become the cornerstone of Christian criticism (for example by Tertullian). Solon and Plato's attack and censure is much deeper and more insidious. In short, theatre *miseducates* citizens by deceiving them with fiction, as well as by means of the fictional complicity between audience and stage (Solon *apud* Plutarch); by mixing different passions, such as joy and sorrow, and thus "confusing" people's souls (Plato, *Philebus*); and by producing phenomena of democratic engagement with the spectacle and thus with "theatrocracy", which is a prelude to democracy (Plato, *Laws*).

The first argument about the danger of the theatre is answered by Gorgias, who argues that:

> *ἡ τραγῳδία* […] *ἀπάτην* […] *ἣν ὅ τ' ἀπατήσας δικαιότερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατήσαντος, καὶ ὁ ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατηθέντος.*[45]
>
> Tragedy is a deception in which the deceiver is more just than he who does not deceive, and the one who is deceived is more wise than the one who is not deceived.

Tragedy, and more generally Dionysian wisdom, is the profound insight into the Double, into the irreducible ambiguity of reality.

Aristotle responds to the second argument —the danger of confusing the passions— with his theory of *catharsis*, found not only in the well-known synthetic phrase in the *Poetics*,[46] but also in a passage from the *Politics*. There, he explicitly polemicizes against "those philosophers" (almost certainly referring to Plato), who draw distinctions between "ethical melodies", "action melodies", and "enthusiastic melodies". He critiques those who fail

45. Gorgias DK 76 B 23 (= Plut. *De glor. Ath.* 5, 348c).
46. Arist. *Po.* 1449b 24.

to appreciate the contradictory emotions —and consequently the *catharsis*— that passionate melodies evoke, especially in tragic performances:

> *ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν διαίρεσιν ἀποδεχόμεθα τῶν μελῶν ὡς διαιροῦσί τινες τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ, τὰ μὲν ἠθικὰ τὰ δὲ πρακτικὰ τὰ δ' ἐνθουσιαστικὰ τιθέντες, καὶ τῶν ἁρμονιῶν τὴν φύσιν τὴν πρὸς ἕκαστα τούτων οἰκείαν, ἄλλην πρὸς ἄλλο μέρος, τιθέασι, φαμὲν δ' οὐ μιᾶς ἕνεκεν ὠφελείας τῇ μουσικῇ χρῆσθαι δεῖν ἀλλὰ καὶ πλειόνων χάριν καὶ γὰρ παιδείας ἕνεκεν καὶ καθάρσεως —τί δὲ λέγομεν τὴν κάθαρσιν, νῦν μὲν ἁπλῶς, πάλιν δ' ἐν τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆς ἐροῦμεν σαφέστερον— τρίτον δὲ πρὸς διαγωγὴν πρὸς ἄνεσίν τε καὶ πρὸς τὴν τῆς συντονίας ἀνάπαυσιν, φανερὸν ὅτι χρηστέον μὲν πάσαις ταῖς ἁρμονίαις, οὐ τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον πάσαις χρηστέον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς μὲν τὴν παιδείαν ταῖς ἠθικωτάταις, πρὸς δὲ ἀκρόασιν ἑτέρων χειρουργούντων καὶ ταῖς πρακτικαῖς καὶ ταῖς ἐνθουσιαστικαῖς.* […] *ταὐτὸ δὴ τοῦτο ἀναγκαῖον πάσχειν καὶ τοὺς ἐλεήμονας καὶ τοὺς φοβητικοὺς καὶ τοὺς ὅλως παθητικούς, τοὺς ἄλλους καθ' ὅσον ἐπιβάλλει τῶν τοιούτων ἑκάστῳ, καὶ πᾶσι γίγνεσθαί τινα κάθαρσιν καὶ κουφίζεσθαι μεθ' ἡδονῆς.*[47]
>
> With reference to the distinction made by some philosophers between ethical, action, and passionate melodies, and the distribution of the various harmonies among these classes, as being in their nature akin to one or the other, we say that music should be used not on account of one benefit which it confers, but on account of several for it serves both for education and for *catharsis* (the term '*catharsis*' is used for the present without explanation, but we shall return to its meaning more explicitly in our treatise on *Poetics*), and thirdly, for amusement, which serves to relieve our tensions and give us rest from them. It is clear that we should use all harmonies, but not all in the same way, using the most ethical for education and the most active and passionate for those who attend performances […]. The same experience has a greater effect on those who are more prone to pity or fear, and who are generally more prone to pathos: these emotions, such as pity, fear and enthusiasm, each to the extent that they affect their souls, but for all they provide a cathartic lightness along with pleasure.

Aristotle agrees with Plato insofar as he too argues that the emotional agitation provoked by pathetic melodies, which occurs to the highest degree in tragedy, does not have a restraining effect on the passions, and therefore does not have an educational or pedagogical effect in a constricting or repressive

47. Arist. *Pol.* 1341b 32–1342a 16.

sense. But Aristotle defends the contradictory emotional storm that tragedy provokes because, through *phobos* and *eleos* —that is, through the movement of identification and repulsion in relation to what unfolds on stage— it brings about the release of these very passions. In this way, tragedy elicits a powerful aesthetic response and achieves, for all, the beneficial effect of *catharsis*: the purification and liberation of the soul from its own passions through those enacted on stage.

The controversy about the beneficial or aesthetic effects of the emotional storm caused by tragedy lasted for many centuries in the debate between the Platonic and Aristotelian schools. Olympiodorus, writing in the 6th century CE, testifies to the duration of the polemic on tragic art:

> *ἰστέον δὲ ὅτι τὴν τραγῳδίαν καὶ τὴν κωμωδίαν ἐξέφερεν τῆς ἑαυτοῦ πολιτείας ὁ Πλάτων διὰ τί μὲν οὖν κωμωδίαν δῆλον* […]*, τὴν δὲ τραγῳδίαν, ἐπειδὴ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ἡμῶν ἐκκαλεῖται καὶ τὸ λυπηρὸν τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν αὔξει. οἱ δὲ θέλοντες εἰσφέρεσθαι, πρῶτον μὲν ἐπειδὴ ἡρωικὰ πράγματα μιμεῖται, ἔπειτα ἐπειδὴ οὐκ ἐᾷ ἐν ἡμῖν μένειν τὰ πάθη φλεγμαίνοντα ἀλλὰ προκαλεῖται αὐτὰ καὶ ἐκβάλλει.*[48]
>
> It must be known that Plato banished tragedy and comedy from his city: as for comedy, the reason is clear […]. But as for tragedy, he banished it because it provokes our passions and increases the feeling of pain that is already in us. On the other hand, those who want to admit tragedy defend it by saying that it must be accepted, first of all, because it is a mimesis of heroic acts; and then because it does not allow the passions to burn within us, but, by exciting them, attracts them and then expels them.

Tragedy, through the double movement of *phobos* and *eleos* it evokes in the spectator, produces *catharsis* precisely because, by arousing the passions, it enables their release — passions that would otherwise burn within us.[49]

In this sophisticated aesthetic theory, achieving the cathartic effect requires that between the spectator and the event lies not the immediacy of reality, but the filter of fiction, which serves two seemingly opposite functions. First, it provides the necessary barrier of psychological detachment, allowing the spectator to gain distance and recognize rationally what is happening

48. Olymp. *In Platonis Gorgiam* I, 172.
49. I have discussed this topic and compared the relevant passages from Plato and Aristotle in Centanni (1995) 75–88.

on stage as *fictum* (but, according to Gorgias, both the tragedian and spectator become wiser and more just as a result). Second, this distance enables the dual movement of *phobos* and *eleos* and, consequently, the free and full release of subjective emotions that would otherwise burn within us. It is precisely this action of detachment and mimetic activation —which Aristotle notes in an implicit polemic with Plato— that allows these passions to be identified with those represented, and those who experience the tragic performance to vent their own passions and free themselves from them. The spectators thus emerge from the tragic experience having rediscovered the harmony of the soul and the proper "temperance" of the humours and intellect: vented, rebalanced, and ultimately "saved" from their own passions. The invention of theatre, then, is the creation of a space and time in which such a process can unfold.

Plato, in contrast to the actual practices of Greek culture and life, emphasizes in various passages the educational function that all public activities, especially artistic ones, must fulfill. However, the cultural and political life of fifth-century Athens had a very peculiar character. It is important to note that the political dimension of life was essentially invented in fifth-century Athens, where the citizen's duty extended beyond managing domestic, administrative, legislative, and governmental affairs. It also encompassed participation in shared public and artistic activities,[50] which we might anachronistically call 'recreational' or 'leisure' activities. Theatrical form is a uniquely Greek invention — an assertion that must be strongly affirmed and distinguished from the concept of 'theatricality', which is shared by various forms of cultural and religious expression both in ancient Greece and in other cultures.

In fact, in order to understand how theatre functioned in the sensibility and culture of the spectator (both in ancient Greece and in our own time), we must consider two concepts in addition to the direct and immediate 'educational' function of the theatre. First, theatre is not a form of 'distraction' from reality, nor a form of 'false' fiction. In the theatre, stories and events that belong to the repertoire of shared legends and myths enter —indeed, break into— the present. Even in the case of ancient myths, and even more so when recent events are staged, the goal is not to evoke legends and heroic figures from the past, but to update names, characters, and stories in a

50. On the "political art" of Greek tragedy, see Meier (1988); on the revolution implied in the participation of citizens in public life, see Meier and Veyne (1988). For a recapitulation of the theme of the political dimension of Athenian life in the context of the invention of the Democracy, see Centanni (2024) 7–25 (with Bibliography).

contemporary, current context. Second, tragedy has a beneficial effect not because it 'teaches' or 'educates' the citizen (as the Platonic totalitarian state would like and impose), but because it is the spatio-temporal dimension in which events —the ancient stories of myth and even very recent history— take place in a dimension of augmented reality, in which it is possible to suffer and rejoice together and to vent one's passions. Theatre produces both the individual catharsis of each citizen and, at the same time, the collective catharsis of the *polis*.

The tragedy of Aeschylus re-enacts the battle of Salamis seven years after the event, in front of an audience of Greeks who had fought there and lost friends and brothers in the battle (as had Aeschylus himself). Behind the spectators stands the Acropolis, burned by the invading barbarians. Yet, on stage, the protagonist is the enemy, weeping his grief and defeat, and inviting the audience to weep with him.

Theatre is a mode of the *vita activa* of the citizen: the spectators are not passive subjects, but bring into play their knowledge, feelings, passions, pity, and fears. Theatre, especially tragedy, is an aesthetic experience that shapes and transforms the spectator's soul and mind. Theatre educates, but in a very special way: what was once a purely intimate and individual experience, or even a completely fragmented and unshared historical experience (such as the battle of Salamis), becomes common knowledge and feeling. Theatre is an artistic-poetic creation: it is the most human mode in which, through fiction, things 'really happen'.

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