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Publication details, including open access policy and instructions for contributors:
https://imaginationsjournal.ca

Open Issue
Editors: Brent Bellamy, Margot Mellet

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To cite this article:
Barcaro, Andrea. "From Apotheosis to Reverse Conversion: A Posthuman Reading of Euripides' and Pasolini's Medea." *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* vol. 15, no. 1, 2024, pp. 89-118, doi: https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE29684.

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE29684

FROM APOTHEOSIS TO REVERSE CONVERSION: A POSTHUMAN READING OF EURIPIDES' AND PASOLINI'S MEDEA

ANDREA BARCARO

Medea is an ancient mythical figure who has caught the imagination of artists and authors across the centuries. In this essay, I focus on Euripides' 5th-century BC eponymous tragedy and Pasolini's 1969 cinematic adaptation. Through a posthuman reading of Medea, I propose that in Euripides the heroine sheds her humanity and embraces divinity in her final apotheosis. In Pasolini's film, on the other hand, we witness a reverse conversion, a journey towards a loss of the sacred and a spiritual catastrophe. In my analysis, I explore how posthuman forms of subjectivity embrace monstrosity to emphasise the divine power of alterity. I propose that, by deactivating normative discourses and making possible resistance to norms, posthuman subjec-

Médée est un ancien personnage de la mythologie qui fascine artistes et auteurs depuis des siècles. Dans cet essai, je me concentre sur la tragédie éponyme d'Euripide au Ve siècle av. J.-C. et sur son adaptation cinématographique de Pasolini en 1969. Grâce à une lecture post-humaine de Médée, j'avance que chez Euripide, l'héroïne abandonne son humanité afin d'adopter la divinité dans son apothéose finale. Dans le film de Pasolini, au contraire, on observe une conversion inverse, commençant par la perte du sacré et aboutissant à une catastrophe spirituelle. Dans mon analyse, j'examine comment les formes post-humaines de subjectivité adoptent la monstrosité afin de souligner le pouvoir divin de l'altérité. Je suggère qu'en déactivant le discours normatif et en permettant la résistance aux normes, les subjectivités post-humaines

tivities can be a powerful tool to break the spell of the present and create productive alternatives to the seemingly timeless dominance of global capitalism.

peuvent constituer un outil puissant pour briser l'emprise du présent et créer des alternatives productives à la domination apparemment éternelle du capitalisme global.

A house is burning in flames. A man approaches. A woman stands on the rooftop screaming: "Nothing is possible anymore!" A still image of the sun rising over the horizon appears on the screen. End credits roll in. Such is the closing scene of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1969 film *Medea*, starring Maria Callas in what

Figure 1: "Medea", image created by the author on Midjourney

was to be the only cinematic role of her career. A symbolically charged scene that could be interpreted as the bitter end of an era, perhaps even as the start of a new one. But is this a clean new slate, or an ominous beginning?

Medea is an ancient mythical figure whose human and divine entanglements have provoked inspiration, awe, and disquiet in authors and audiences alike. She's enigmatic and mysterious. An infanticidal mother. Yet, although she appears in myriads of poems, plays, and films, to say nothing of being painted on vases, canvases, and murals, we have no account of her death in any of the ancient Greek and Roman classics (Hall 145). This may attest to her divine status or perhaps hint that her spirit still lingers with us, ready to make yet another disconcerting appearance. Like many people over the centuries, I could not help being fascinated by such a complex figure, and what caught my imagination was Medea's divine monstrosity, her venom and vulnerability, and most of all, her unwillingness to be written off, laughed about, or forgotten in the tales of humans and gods. On a deeper level, Medea asks us to reflect on the very basis of our humanity. As a barbarian, a sorceress, and a woman, Medea was herself hardly considered a human in her days in ancient Greece. One could argue that she may not even qualify as "human" in our apparently liberal world of today. And the question of what it actually means to be human is at the centre of this essay; it is driven by my interest in posthumanism, not as much in its speculative, technology-obsessed form, but rather the more philosophical type of posthumanism, emphasizing that we already are posthuman, or perhaps, as Katherine Hayles once said, we always were (291).

What follows is largely divided into four parts. I start by engaging with posthumanist discourse, drawing connections with antiquity through some of the key concepts used in its radical deconstruction of the human, and locating the mythical character of Medea within this framework. In the second part of the essay, I approach Euripides' *Medea* focusing on the concept of apotheosis. Here, I examine how Medea, during the course of the tragedy, dwells deeply in her humanity to then embrace her divine side and go beyond the human. The third part of the essay is a reading of Pasolini's 1969 film *Medea* based

on the concept of reverse conversion. Rather than a leap from the human to the posthuman, in Pasolini's adaptation we see the opposite take place. A sorceress and ancient mythical figure, Medea abandons her homeland on the shores of the Black Sea to follow Jason and the Argonauts to Greece. For Pasolini, this journey represents a loss of the sacred and the cause of Medea's spiritual catastrophe, the erosion of her divine nature that will lead to her final demise. In the fourth and final part, I search for answers to the core question of this essay: are the monstrous and the divine inherent dimensions of humanity? If they are, what can Medea tell us about our current human condition? Following Giulia Maria Chesi and Francesca Spiegel's concept of the "heterogeneous self," I explore how posthuman subjectivity embraces monstrosity and divinity to bring human knowledge to its limits (18). Highlighting the sacred dimension of alterity, posthuman subjectivity explores the monstrous and the divine to deactivate normative discourses, in an attempt to break with the present and create new temporalities, thereby freeing us from the ahistoricity of our lives under the reign of global capitalism. I propose that Pasolini's depiction of Medea's spiritual catastrophe can thus be seen as a warning: it is only by breaking the spell of the present that we can start to imagine a different future.

1. THE HUMAN, THE POSTHUMAN, AND THE DIVINE

Michel Foucault famously penned the final words of *The Order of Things* by comparing the human to a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea, being washed away by the waves of history (422). No one better than Foucault could have highlighted how our awareness of a concept already embodies a sense of crisis, the idea that this category may have lost its lustre and appeal. Indeed, when we nowadays think of the human, we think of the Man of the Enlightenment—white, male, heterosexual, wealthy, propertied, and the list goes on. The human category, that is to say, is formed and maintained through practices of exclusion. But this is nothing new, and it happens today as much as it did 2,500 years ago in ancient Greece. Interestingly, Foucault wrote these words just a few years before the release of Pasolini's *Medea*, which indicates a

shared sense of crisis pushing various authors, artists, and intellectuals to question the legacy of the Enlightenment in late 20th-century Europe, at a time when empires were crumbling, and the continent was split into a booming capitalist west and an authoritative and repressive east.

"Much of what we know today as posthumanism was developed at the crossroads of poststructuralism, feminism, and postmodernism, and took shape in the 1990s, developing into what Rosi Braidotti calls a "convergence" rather than a cohesive philosophical movement (*Posthuman Knowledge*, 18). Posthumanism is therefore transdisciplinary in nature and branches out of academia to include contributions from various areas such as art and design, science and technology, and popular culture. In order to facilitate my reading of Medea, I will mainly focus on Francesca Ferrando's theoretical framework, as outlined in her 2019 book *Philosophical Posthumanism*.

The concept of posthumanism can be a slippery one, as it indicates an overall framework of theory, but is also at the same time an ontology and a praxis (Ferrando 44). Starting from the broader theoretical frame, it is worth emphasizing its differences from another current of thought known as transhumanism. Transhumanism develops in fact within the framework of the Enlightenment. It is a form of ultra-humanism with the ultimate goal of human enhancement (3). For transhumanists, the posthuman is the next phase of human evolution, which can only be achieved through the application of technology to the human body (27). Posthumanism, on the other hand, is non-technocentric and emphasizes a symbolic move beyond the human, by acknowledging various aspects of the human within a post-anthropocentric approach (27). This means "we can already be posthuman now, by fully embracing the consequences of the historical and material deconstruction of the notion of the human" (28). In the following paragraphs, I engage with a series of concepts rooted in ancient Greece to elucidate some of philosophical posthumanism's key principles.

1.1 TECHNĒ, POIĒSIS, EPISTĒME

In her discussion of philosophical posthumanism's relation to technology, Ferrando tells us how Heidegger looked back at ancient Greek literature and philosophy, finding that the term *technē* (meaning handcrafts and arts) was necessarily associated with *poiēsis* (the creative process) and *epistēme* (the domain of knowledge) (40-41). According to Heidegger, the ancient Greeks saw the creative process as something sacred, related to divinity (40-41). However, modern societies have lost their understanding of *technē* as *poiēsis*, making technology utilitarian rather than creative (41). While technological utilitarianism is closely associated with transhumanism, philosophical posthumanism "follows on Heidegger's reflection that technology cannot be reduced to a mere means, nor to a reification, and thus cannot be 'mastered'" (42). From a posthuman perspective, we may be entangled with technology due to how it has entered our everyday life—think of pacemakers, prosthetic limbs, or plastic surgery as examples—but we don't see it as a means to an end, rather as something to engage with critically.

1.2 BIO, ZOE

If our relationship with technology shows how humans have become incredibly hybridized, awareness of our complex relations to the environment, geological forces, and other living species indicates that we can no longer imagine ourselves as the centre of the universe. In her analysis of the posthuman condition, Braidotti adds complexity to our understanding of "life" by highlighting the distinction between *bio* and *zoe*. She explains that, traditionally, while the former represents the human and its social organization, the latter stands for the non-human and is largely unprotected and vulnerable (*Posthuman Knowledge*, 10). Braidotti writes: "Where *bio* is anthropocentric, *zoe* is non-anthropocentric and non-anthropomorphic. Moreover, in the posthuman convergence, *zoe* embraces geologically and technologically bound egalitarianism, acknowledging that thinking and the capacity to produce knowledge is not the exclusive prerogative of humans alone, but distributed across all living matter and through-

out self-organizing technological networks" (115). By placing the human within the realm of *zoe*, therefore, we effectively decentre it and acknowledge its shared agency with technology and the natural world. This is not only a necessary step we need to take in facing the challenges of the Anthropocene, but also empowering as it recognises our vulnerability and stresses the importance of promoting sustainable ways of life.

1.3 ANTHROPOS, POLIS, LOGOS, PAIDEIA

Our current-day word "human" derives from the Latin term *humanus*. According to Ferrando, this is an adjective cognate to *humus*, meaning ground, soil, and pointing to the notion that humans are earthly beings whose realm was defined in opposition to gods, animals, or barbarians (89). The word *humanus*, however, emerged in Rome allegedly among the so-called Scipionic Circle, a group of intellectuals of the Republican age who had a strong interest in Greek culture (89). This points to the relation of *humanus* to the Greek term *anthropos*, which is at the basis of our current understanding of the human.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle famously defined the human (*anthropos*) as a political animal (*zoon politikon*) that is wholly connected to the *polis*, which means the city and represents civilization (Ferrando 90). Here, it is vital to point out that "this 'political man' is placed in a hierarchical scale through not only its external, and explicit, 'citiless' people, but also its internal, and implicit, others: in Athens, for instance, women, slaves, and resident aliens were excluded from the political life" (90). What is more, Aristotle characterized the human through *logos* (meaning speech, language, and reason), effectively placing Greek-speaking people above barbarians, such as the Persians, the Egyptians, and the Phoenicians, who in reality had their own remarkable civilizations (90). According to Chesi and Spiegel, in ancient Greece, the faculty of *logos* is what defined humans as autonomous and free, and losing one's *logos* would amount to a loss of identity, symbolizing the ultimate loss of humanity (6).

The Aristotelian primacy of *logos*, Ferrando tells us, connects reason to ethical standing, and it is the privilege of belonging to the city that gives access to *paideia'*—the formal education of its recognized members—and also to the informal shared culture promoting the identification of the individual with the political ethos (90-91). As it happens, *humanitas* is the Roman revisitation of the Greek notion of *paideia,* showing us how the human category as we know it today is historically connected to classical notions of "culture," "reason," and "civilization" (90-91).

1.4 MEDEA AS A POSTHUMAN HEROINE?

Having looked at the classical roots of some recurring concepts in philosophical post-humanism, I now establish a methodological framework to discuss whether Medea can be read as a posthuman heroine. According to Ferrando, philosophical posthumanism is defined through three analytical frames: posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism (22).

Post-humanism is a radical deconstruction of established traditional concepts of the human (Ferrando 3). Being a woman, a sorceress, and a barbarian, it is quite clear that Medea lives within the margins of what was considered human in ancient Greece. While her birth and upbringing outside the sphere of Greek civilization place her as an outsider to the Corinthian society where her drama unfolds, her *logos* and high emotional intelligence have the effect of allowing her to integrate. As we will see in Euripides' play, Medea has no trouble winning over the chorus of Corinthian women, who give full support to her revenge against Jason, right until they learn about her infanticidal plan. Thus, from a post-humanist perspective, Medea embodies the liminal subjectivity of a woman and a barbarian, someone who understands all too well the exclusionary practices performed by society against those who are judged as inferior to human status.

Post-anthropocentrism aims to decentre the human by placing it side by side with non-human others in a non-hierarchical fashion (Ferrando 54). These non-human others can be understood as pertaining to the animal, geological, technological, and divine realms. From this

point of view, Medea's ontology places her at the border between the human and the divine. We know from Hesiod's seventh-century BC poem *Theogony* that her father Aeëtes and his sister Circe were children of the sun god Helios and that her mother Idya was the daughter of the titan Oceanus (McCallum-Barry 24). Moreover, Medea's familiarity with herbs and magic, and her ability to engage with gods make her a shaman of sorts. According to Ferrando, shamans are "trans-specific beings" that "can transcend their species-specific cognitive organization and perceive consciousness beyond a particular bodily appearance or manifestation" (156). Her ontology and subjectivity, therefore, can be seen as going beyond the human toward embracing a certain post-anthropocentric, semi-divine status.

Post-dualism is the final deconstruction of the underlying dualist logic of western philosophy, whereby thought is arranged according to dichotomies that are essentially hierarchical, such as male/female, human/non-human, citizen/foreigner, able/non-able, white/black, et cetera. This is an important analytical frame in philosophical posthumanism, because "[w]e, as a society, may eventually overcome racism, sexism, and even anthropocentrism, but if we do not address the rigid form of dualistic mindset that allows for hierarchical sociopolitical constructions, new forms of discrimination will emerge" (Ferrando 60). Here, Medea's blurring of gender roles, her markedly masculine heroic attitude, and her emphasis on honour present her as challenging the conventional male/female dualism. Also, her ambiguous identity as a semi-divine figure places her character firmly outside dualistic models of subjectivity.

In light of all this, I propose that we understand Medea as an ancient posthuman heroine. Someone whose subjectivity can be defined as nomadic, that is to say multiple, complex, and multilayered (Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 77). Travelling across the border between the human and the divine, and finding repeated incarnations in the history of literature, theatre and film, her spirit continues to inspire us and terrorize us. In the next part of this essay, I will engage with Euripides' play, focusing on Medea's apotheotic leap from the human to the posthuman.

2. APOTHEOSIS: FROM HUMAN TO POSTHUMAN

It was 431 BC when Euripides' *Medea* premiered at Athens's Dionysian Festival. The city was at the height of its power, yet war with Corinth and its Peloponnesian allies was in the air. Pericles was promising the Athenians a relatively easy victory, but many knew that once conflict is unleashed, there is no easy way of knowing the impact it will have on people's lives. That year, Euripides presented three tragedies: *Medea*, *Philoctetes*, and *Dictys*, and perhaps the satirical play *Reapers*, all of which approached themes of otherness and exile (Stuttard 3), possibly hinting at a certain anxiety and a pensive attitude towards war.

In this part of the essay, I start by placing Medea in the context of her mythical origins to pose the question of how her 431 BC Athenian audience may have reacted to the play. I then go on to analyze Medea's character as a woman, a sorceress, and a barbarian, highlighting her human side, before engaging with her metamorphosis into a demigoddess who commits a terrible act of infanticide and makes a final apotheotic exit, unscathed and unpunished. I interpret Medea's apotheosis as the shedding of her humanity to embrace divinity in an authentic—if tragic—leap to the posthuman.

2.1 MEDEA: MYTHICAL ORIGINS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE AUDIENCE

Medea is one of the most famous surviving Greek tragedies from the fifth century BC, but the mythical character herself was already known in Greek literature since at least the eighth or seventh century. According to Carmel McCallum-Barry, Medea's first appearance was in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where the author traces divine genealogies including her lineage (24). Her relation to Corinth was first approached in the seventh century by Eumelus in a poem called *Corinthiaca*, where Medea was invited by the Corinthians to be their queen and was unintentionally responsible for her children's death (24). However, we can infer that in literature from the Archaic period, there must have been at least one more tradition concerning

the death of Medea's children, namely that they were murdered by the Corinthians (24-25). In the fifth century, Medea appeared in a poem by Pindar called *Pythian 4*, where she is portrayed as foretelling the events leading to the founding of Cyrene, a city on the African Mediterranean coast (25). Pindar also makes one of the earliest mentions of Medea's involvement in the death of Pelias, Jason's uncle who sent him to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Euripides himself attributes to Medea a role in the death of the tyrant in his play *Daughters of Pelias* (455 BC), where he portrays her as inducing Pelias' daughters to kill their father by unwittingly boiling him alive inside a cauldron, in an attempt to rejuvenate him with magic herbs (26). Around the same period, we also encounter the heroine in plays by Sophocles and Euripides focusing on the Athenian king Aegeus, where we learn that after her escape to Athens, she tries to poison his illegitimate son, the mythical hero Theseus (26). Aside from these literary appearances, Medea is also often represented in vase paintings from the early fifth century onwards, focusing on scenes from both her mythical past and from her life in Corinth as portrayed in Euripides' eponymous play (26-27).

In light of what we know of Medea's mythical past, we can attempt to imagine how the 431 BC Athenian audience may have responded to the play. It is likely that they were "familiar with Medea as a foreign princess, from a faraway land, a descendant of Helios, the sun god. She was known as the helper of Jason in seizing the Golden Fleece from Colchis and then escaping with him and the Argonauts" (27). However, we can also assume that she was not recognized as a child murderess (Griffin 20). Thus, as they entered the Theatre of Dionysus, the audience was probably wondering which parts of her story Euripides would include in the play and where he would innovate. They were clearly in for some surprises.

2.2. WOMAN, SORCERESS, BARBARIAN

One of Euripides' great qualities was his ability to portray women with a complexity superior to that of his contemporaries. Thematically, "his plays seem especially concerned with questions of gender,

of women's lives, of their relation to men and their role in society" (Bondell et al. 80). However, we should stop short of viewing him as a "proto-feminist," as his interest in transgressive women has sometimes been seen as evidence of misogyny (80). Nevertheless, it could be argued that Euripides gives an excellent portrayal of Medea, and he does that by playing down her mythical past and focusing on her humanity. According to McCallum-Barry, "Euripides builds on her past rather than retells it" (29), and in the present, we see Medea in her full complexity as a woman and a victim of betrayal.

Within the context of Athens' dominance of the Greek world in the 5th century BC, it may be tempting to speculate that it was the scene of numerous foreign erotic entanglements (Griffin 19). It is likely that many Athenian men, both soldiers and merchants, brought back foreign women to Athens from their travels across the Aegean and beyond. Still, "we are not well informed about their *vie passionelle*" (19) and may just have to assume that ethnically mixed couples such as Medea and Jason were not a rare occurrence. These entanglements, just like the well-documented Periclean laws of 450 BC restricting citizenship rights to children whose parents were both of Athenian descent, must have been playing in the minds of the mostly male audience as they watched *Medea* being performed on stage.

In a world where women had a lower social status and were mostly confined to the home, Medea comes through as an extremely intelligent character. Although of foreign origin, she has adapted well to Greek society, and her skillful use of *logos* allows her to win the support of Greek women. This is why "the chorus of local women in Corinth are puzzlingly sympathetic towards the foreign barbarian. They can feel for her because all (married) women are foreigners, strangers in their husbands' household, frequently regarded with suspicion as outsiders; Medea's situation is an exaggerated example of the common female experience" (McCallum-Barry 31).

Men, on the other hand, are often uneasy about Medea and her skills in drugs and magic. Medea plans her revenge against Jason by plotting to poison Glauce, the woman he is about to marry; meanwhile, Creon, Glauce's father and king of Corinth, senses this ominous

possibility and decides to expel Medea from the land. According to William Allan, "[w]hen Creon comes to announce his decree of banishment, the first reason that he gives is his fear of Medea's skills in drugs and magic" (74). Interestingly, in early Greek myth, Jason was also connected to drugs and their healing powers as medicine, but this knowledge was "transferred to Medea as part of the myth's articulation of fundamental ethnic (and gender) differences" (74). What is more, McCallum-Barry points out that the theme of drugs and magic makes a recurrent appearance in various Greek dramas, and "shows that strange potions were not unknown to Greek women" (32). This explains how Medea's identity as a woman and a barbarian interacts with generalized perceptions that the mostly male audience of the time might have had of women. That is to say, Medea's feminine and barbarian identity triggered anxieties in the psyche of her male audience: "what is going on, back home, in my house, while I am away, out at work, or on business, or in the army, or on my travels?" (Griffin 20). Euripides exploits all these anxieties in the second part of the play, where Medea decides to act on her terrible plan of revenge.

2.3. METAMORPHOSIS

There is a moment in the play where we start to feel Medea's wrath arise as she elaborates on her plan. Just after Creon's visit to banish her and her sons from Corinth, she engages in a monologue, part of which I quote below:

> I'll push my daring to its violent end,
> For, by the mistress I revere above all, fellow worker,
> Hecate, who has her place in the recesses of my hearth,
> Not one of them shall rack my heart with pain
> And get away with it.
> I shall make sure this match of theirs is turned
> To bitter anguish; bitter also that man's
> Marriage arrangements and attempt to exile me.
> So down to work, Medea,
> Don't relax one jolt of all your expertise
> In schemes and in contrivances.
> On the dreadful test; now's the time to try your mettle.

> You see what your position is: you must not become
> A laughingstock because of Jason's union with this Sisyphean dynasty.
> You're from a noble father and a descendant from the Sun.
> You have the expertise. What's more, we are born women.
> It may be we're unqualified for deeds of virtue:
> Yet as the architects of every kind of mischief,
> We're supremely skilled.
>
> (Translation by Oliver Taplin, in Grene and Lattimore 145)

While at this point Medea hasn't yet revealed her full plan, we seem to experience a buildup of emotions in which she channels her fury toward Jason and Creon's dynasty. Medea refers to herself as a woman, but at the same time invokes her protector deity Hecate, who was associated with female witchcraft and sexual desire (Hall 143-144), and reminds herself of her divine lineage originating from Helios, the ancient sun god. These divine references in Medea's speech appear to strengthen her delivery, and when she tells herself "You see what your position is: you must not become / A laughing-stock because of Jason's union with this Sisyphean dynasty," we see her full determination to act heroically in a way that borders the masculine, if not the divine.

Quite interestingly, the chorus' immediate response to her monologue seems to emphasise the divine nature of her wrath:

> Pure rivers are running their currents upstream,
> Order and everything's turned upside down,
> The dogmas of men are exposed as a mere sham,
> Oaths by the gods prove no longer firm ground.
> The stories of women shall be about-turned,
> So that my life shall achieve proper glory,
> New value is coming for our female kind,
> No longer shall slander pollute our story.
>
> (Translation by Oliver Taplin, in Grene and Lattimore 146)

Singing of chaos and rivers running their currents upstream, the chorus appears here not only to support Medea's plight but also to call on her intervention as if she were a hero, or even a god. While Medea still refers to herself in human terms, it is my opinion that these passages mark the beginning of Medea's metamorphosis from a human to a demigoddess. This is then followed by a passionate *agon* between Medea and Jason, Medea's encounter with King Aegeus, and the full revelation of her ominous plan.

2.4. FROM INFANTICIDE TO APOTHEOSIS

Infanticide is Euripides' main innovation to the story of Medea. According to Jasper Griffin, in fact, "Medea was a magician, but she was not (it appears) a child-murderess. That Medea, the Medea who would fascinate and eventually monopolize the minds of posterity, was the creation of Euripides, in this play" (20). Hence, we can infer the sense of shock in the audience upon witnessing Medea's infamous act. In order to better understand this, I propose we look at how the final scene of the play may have been staged.

Rosie Wyles points out that Euripides' "choice to make Medea the murderer of her children offers dramatic potential for new levels of *pathos*" (58). This is achieved through stage mechanics and an interplay of onstage and offstage action, and Euripides makes full use of these dramatic devices to build tension in the audience. In Greek tragedy, we find two types of stage mechanics that are often used in scenes of murder and apotheosis, the *ekkuklēma*, also known as the rolling-out machine, and the *mēchanē*, or stage crane (Rutherford 89-90). The *ekkuklēma* was frequently deployed when the plot required the revelation of corpses or unconscious characters, while the *mēchanē* was used to represent a character in flight or descending from Olympus (89-90). Following this logic, we could infer that the audience may have expected the infanticide scene to end with a rolling out of Medea's children's corpses on the *ekkuklēma*, however, the playwright takes a different approach. He builds suspense when Medea takes her children offstage and into the house to murder them; the audience cannot see what happens inside but hears the

children's cries for help. In an unconventional move, Euripides has the children cry and break into a choral ode, forcing the chorus into shockingly direct contact with the murder, the victims responding to what the chorus says (Wyles 58). As their cries abate, we expect the house doors to open, climaxing with a reveal of the corpses on the *ekkuklēma* at centre stage. But this is not what happens. The author opts for using the *mēchanē*, showcasing a menacing and victorious Medea suspended above the stage, holding the corpses of her children while riding the Chariot of the Sun.

Medea's apotheotic appearance is of great significance on two levels: first, it shocks the audience into believing that her infanticidal act received divine approval; secondly, it shows Medea as a semi-divine figure—a demigoddess. According to McCallum-Barry, infanticide takes Medea's character to its limits and beyond humanity, and her escape seems to imply the backing of the gods (33). "Medea's divine ancestry has not been emphasized during the play" (33), but in the final scene we see the gods coming to her rescue. Apparently, this was disquieting to the Athenian audience to the point that Medea's infanticide and apotheosis do not appear on Attic vase paintings of the time, "as if the events were too disturbing for public taste" (33). By contrast, these same scenes appeared to be widely popular in southern Italy, where painters recreated them with artistic flair (33). This traumatic response could be related to the appalling nature of the murder or could be interpreted as unease with a certain prophetic image of Medea that Euripides created in his tragedy (Stuttard 10). The audience may in fact have been aware of how Medea would bring trouble to Athens by attempting the murder of Aegeus' son Theseus. While no reliable visual representation of this final scene survives, there is a chance that the Chariot of the Sun was drawn by serpents (Wyles 60). This would have been particularly shocking to the audience as "[s]erpents played a central part in Athenian ideology and were essential to the city's identity" (61). Be that as it may, one thing is certain: Medea's exit in the direction of Athens cast a dark omen on the minds of the audience.

But was this a real apotheosis? Richard Rutherford raises an objection, saying that Medea is no goddess. She "remains a wronged wife

and a murderess; she lacks the detachment as well as the power of a god," and her apotheosis is no such thing (93). "She must return to earth, and resume human existence which will include the pain and grief that she here thrusts aside and treats as secondary to revenge" (96). Indeed, it is fair to say that Medea is not a fully-fledged goddess, nevertheless, she has left her humanity behind and embraced her divine side. Therefore, I propose we describe her as a demigoddess, a semi-divine figure who inhabits both the human and the heavenly realms. Her semi-divine status is supported in Euripides' play by her prophetic speech where she proclaims that a cult will be set up to atone for her children's death at the temple of Hera Akraia. According to Edith Hall, such a cult centre existed just across the Corinthian gulf at Perachora, where various votive objects such as amulets worn by pregnant women have been found by archaeologists, showing that it was visited by individuals anxious about the health of babies and young children (143). "The killing of Medea's children was therefore presented by the tragedy as the 'charter' or 'foundation' myth for a specific set of cult practices in the Corinthian area" (143).

What strikes me about Euripides' *Medea* is exactly this strange interaction between the human and the divine. Here, we see fiction and reality interconnect in ways that confuse those who approach the play. If Medea was just a woman, how did she manage her triumphant escape to Athens? How did such a fictional character interact with the actual creation of a cult in ancient Greece? And how did it inspire so many artists and authors over its long history? To me, this speaks for the power that stories have on our human psyche. As Hall tells us, "when we approach Euripides' play, it always needs to be remembered, that it is the awesome, unknowable religious element, the metaphysical power embodied in the mysterious figure of Medea, which ultimately underlies all these interpretations" (154). Thus, I conclude that Medea is a posthuman heroine from the ancient world who retains her power to enthral audiences throughout the centuries and up to the present. While she's depicted by Euripides in her full humanity as a woman, a sorceress, and a barbarian, the author shocks the audience in the second part of the play, when Medea quickly develops her evil plan and metamorphoses into a tri-

umphant demigoddess. In the next part of this essay, I will look at a contemporary reincarnation of this mythical figure, Pasolini's cinematic rendition of Medea, exploring how an ancient myth serves as an ideological tool to describe the present.

3. REVERSE CONVERSION: MEDEA'S SPIRITUAL CATASTROPHE

Pier Paolo Pasolini was a man of immense contradictions. He was a catholic and a communist, he loved the subproletariat but maintained a heavily bourgeois lifestyle, and he was an "out" homosexual but did not support the gay movement (Calabretta-Sajder 14). He was also a poet, writer, intellectual, and filmmaker who was fascinated with the idea of ancient Greece as the site of an unresolved dialectic between classical reason and barbaric myth, between knowledge and instincts (Rossetti 176). This is what drew him to Medea, and he chose to adapt her myth through the universal language of cinema due to his distrust of *logos,* and in favour of a language focusing on gestures, rituals, and dream fantasies (Barberà 92).

Pasolini's 1969 film *Medea* is one of many adaptations of Euripides' classic, which, as Walter Zidaric notes, has the tendency to come back in times of crisis (208). Major examples of this go from Cherubini's eponymous opera premiered in the years of the French Revolution to Pasolini's 1960s Italy, where the crisis of Catholic values was met by incipient capitalism and the outset of political terrorism (208). On the other hand, Hall shows us that Medea often returns to her audience to challenge dominant narratives. Examples of this are the 1907 production by Harley Ganville-Barker in connection with the suffragette movement in the United Kingdom (148-149), and Chico Buarque and Paolo Pontes' 1985 play *Gota d'Agua* (Drop of Water), with its reinterpretation of Medea's magic and religion as a symbol of the suppressed African origins and identity of large portions of the Brazilian population (152).

In this essay, I have decided to focus on Pasolini's adaptation as it gives a fascinating reading of Medea undergoing a reverse conversion, leaving behind her identity as an ancient mythical creature to become an ordinary woman, faced with the complexity of human

emotions. In my analysis, I read this as the abandonment of her posthuman status to embrace humanity. I start by presenting Pasolini's concept of the loss of the sacred as narrated by the Centaur, one of the film's most enigmatic characters, and then move on to a reading of scenes related to Medea's arrival in the Greek world, her sexual awakening and spiritual catastrophe, leading to her final demise.

3.1. THE CENTAUR

Pasolini's *Medea* starts with scenes from Jason's childhood in Iolcus. We see him together with the Centaur, an ancient mythical figure who is half man and half horse. The Centaur tells Jason that he has looked after him but is not his father, and narrates the story of his lineage, the myth of the Golden Fleece, and how his uncle Pelias usurped the throne of Iolcus. In the next scene, Jason is already an adolescent and the Centaur shares with him his wisdom about nature and the sacred:

> Everything's sacred, everything's sacred, everything's sacred. Nothing is natural in nature, my lad, remember that! The day nature seems natural to you, it means the end, and the beginning of something else. Farewell sky, farewell sea! What a beautiful sky! What silence! How luminous! Doesn't it seem that a small piece of that sky is quite unnatural and possessed by a god? And so is the sea, on this thirteenth birthday of yours when you can fish barefoot in the warm water. Look behind you! What do you see? Something natural perhaps? No, all that you see behind you is an apparition, like clouds reflected in the calm, still water at three in the afternoon! Look at that dark streak on the sea, lucid and pink as oil. The shadows of those trees and the reeds. Wherever your eyes wander, a God is hidden! And, if by chance he's not there, he left hints of his sacred presence, the silence, or the smell of grass or the freshness of the cool water... Yes, everything's sacred, but the sacred is also a curse. While the gods love, they also hate. (Pasolini, *Medea* 00:04:43-00:06:23)

Everything is sacred, without origins, without cause, without any creative principle. Everything prevails and lives as a result of divine power, and nothing—including human beings—is hierarchically distant from the rest (Barberà 96). Pasolini here chooses to give voice to his own views on the sacred nature of reality through a hybrid figure combining human and animal characteristics. From a posthuman perspective, the presentation of such a "humananimal" figure has the function of decentring the human by conceptualizing it as interconnected in inextricable entanglements (Chesi and Spiegel 10). The Centaur is at the intersection of nature and myth, and his narration showing the non-separateness of nature and the sacred brings to the fore Pasolini's views that God is everywhere and is the bearer of both human happiness and misfortune (Barberà 97). Quite surprisingly, in the next scene he loses his animal element. Jason is now an adult, and the Centaur appears in full human form. He says:

> Maybe you think that, besides being a liar, I am also too poetic. But, you see, for ancient man, all myths and rituals are concrete experiences which are a part of his bodily and daily existence. For him, reality is such a perfect unity that the emotion he feels in the silence of a summer sky equals the most intimate experiences of modern man. You will go to your uncle, the usurper of your throne, to reclaim your rights and, in order to get rid of you, he will need an excuse, that is, he'll send you on a quest. To retrieve, for example, the golden fleece. And so you'll go to a distant land beyond the sea. There you'll find a world whose use of reason is very different from our own. Their life is very realistic, as you'll see, because only those who are mythical are realistic and only those who are realistic are mythical. (Pasolini, *Medea* 00:06:40-00:07:41)

Here, the Centaur hints at the mission that Jason will be sent on by his uncle Pelias. The fact that the Centaur has already lost his mythical form and appears as a human seems to point to Pasolini's desire "to denounce a true anthropological change in the human race" (Barberà 98). The loss of the sacred in our present-day humanity is the result of greed for power, and the desire for accumulating material possessions. As a word of warning, the Centaur, who has been con-

taminated by modernity, tells Jason that his journey to Colchis will put him in touch with the ancient wisdom that comes from myth. He who is mythical is realistic and understands that nature is not natural, but divine. But throughout these scenes, Jason appears passive and uninterested in the words of the Centaur. He represents *logos,* the reason and greed of the man of modernity and the First World. For Pasolini, this world is intrinsically anthropocentric, and nothing can be sacred anymore because only man is worthy of being worshipped. There are no gods, and humans have never been so great, yet never have they been so alone (Barberà 99).

Following these scenes, Pasolini takes us to Colchis, where we first meet Medea, portrayed through a long shot sequence free from montage, that sees her immersed in her life of ritual sacrifices and magic. After stealing the Golden Fleece, Medea kills her brother to slow the Colchians' pursuit of her and Jason and sets sail with the Argonauts on her way to Greece.

3.2. ACROSS THE WATERS

Medea's life in Colchis was dominated by the sacred, regulated by and dedicated to ritual. But when she reaches the Greek shores, Medea faces a hard landing. Nothing is sacred, rituals have lost their meaning, and she will have to abandon her mythical identity to embrace a human world dominated by *logos*. She will forsake her posthuman condition, on a one-way journey marked by the impossibility of returning to her land, which she has betrayed under the spell of her attraction for Jason.

Pasolini presents the scene of Medea's landing on the Greek shores as a moment of shock. The hard realization of a loss of identity. As the boat approaches the shore, Medea starts shouting:

> This place will sink because it has no foundation. You are not praying to God that he bless your tents! You are not repeating the first act of God! You are not seeking the centre, you are not marking the centre. No, look for a tree, a post, a stone! Speak to me, Earth! Let me hear your voice! I can no longer re-

> member your voice. Speak to me, Sun. Where must I go to hear your voice? Speak to me, Earth! Speak to me, Sun! Are you losing your way, perhaps never to return again. I can no longer hear what you are saying Grass, speak to me! Stone, speak to me! Earth, where is your meaning? Where can I find you again? Where is the bond that linked you to the sun? I touch the earth with my feet but I do not recognise it! I look at the sun with my eyes, but I do not recognise it! (Pasolini, *Medea*, 00:48:28-00:50:16)

Medea walks away from the Argonauts, feeling lost as she can no longer communicate with her grandfather, the sun god Helios. Everything around her is foreign and deserted. Meanwhile, the Argonauts sit around a fire and eat a meal, looking at Medea with amused eyes. According to Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, the use of long shots in this scene effectively places her in the new setting. But, unlike when we see Medea performing rituals in Colchis, this long shot sequence does not connote communion with, and immersion in, that world. Rather, it suggests disorientation, discomfort, and lack of belonging to this foreign land (69). Thus, in this scene, Pasolini presents us with an important step in Medea's loss of her posthuman, semi-divine status. Here, on Greek soil, her reverse conversion takes shape and will be completed once Medea experiences the full force of *eros* in her union with Jason.

3.3. SEXUAL AWAKENING AND SPIRITUAL CATASTROPHE

Medea's love for Jason gives her the comfort she needs after the initial moment of disorientation upon arrival in Greece. Jason leads her to their tent and makes love to her. She utterly surrenders, once again finding herself and her sacred link with the world. But while for Medea love and the loss of her virginity are conversion, for Jason, *eros* is simply a domination technique (Tellini 216). Medea wholeheartedly submits herself to Jason's desire, losing her ability to exercise control over his psyche. Nevertheless, she will eventually eliminate his ability to control his own future (Ryan-Scheutz 72), as we will see in the final part of the film.

After arriving in Corinth, Jason has another encounter with the Centaur, or rather with a double version of him, the ancient "humananimal" appearing next to its anthropomorphic alter ego. The ancient Centaur is present as a remnant of its posthuman past, and his human-like version acts as a medium for communicating with Jason. The Centaur tells Jason that he loves Medea, and noticing Jason's surprise, he says:

> Yes. And you also pity her. You understand her spiritual catastrophe, her disorientation as a woman of an ancient world, in a new world which ignores her own values. The poor woman has experienced a reverse conversion, and has never recovered. (Pasolini, *Medea*, 01:00-01:02)

The Centaur's words confuse Jason, but he nevertheless goes ahead with his plan to marry Glauce, the daughter of King Creon. Meanwhile, Medea has a dream in which she connects again with her grandfather, the sun god Helios. Although having experienced a loss of the sacred, part of her still clings to her ancient semi-divine self. In her dream, Medea has a vision where she sends a poisoned robe to Glauce, who after wearing it is set on fire and dies an excruciating death. This dream becomes the inspiration to act on her vengeful plan, but when in a later scene we see Glauce wearing the dress, she does not burn but rather runs away and kills herself by jumping from a high wall, confusing the viewer with two different versions of the events. It would appear that Medea is clinging to her posthuman self, but her magic powers are waning as the result of her reverse conversion.

Thus, after her arrival on the Greek shores and the realization of her love for Jason, Medea experiences the loss of her posthuman status as a semi-divine figure. The Centaur's double-form appearance tells us that there are remnants of the past in the present, but there is no way of reconciling these two worlds, and this is shown in Medea's weakening ability to perform magic spells. All is lost, and it's just a matter of time before the full-scale tragedy unfolds.

3.4. *EROS* AND ITS FINAL DEMISE

Medea's reverse conversion is at the core of Pasolini's message to his audience. He emphasizes the indomitable power of *eros*, thus rationalizing Medea's betrayal of her own people and of herself, that is, rationalizing her spiritual catastrophe (Barberà 103).

Eros is a natural sign of what is sacred. It is the source of pleasure but also of the greatest personal errors, and Pasolini portrays Medea as a mythical figure whose life is dominated by ritual, while Jason is shown as the bearer of masculine *logos*. In this sense, her encounter with Jason would appear to represent an unresolved dialectic between *eros* and *logos*. The ancient world she represents inhabits its own temporality and works according to its own logic, but when it meets the exploitative universe of modernity—in this case represented by Jason and the Greek world—it loses its identity and embarks on a self-destructive process. According to Barberà, Pasolini uses his portrayal of Medea as a sign of his own times, whereby the Third World's betrayal of itself can only be explained by its fascination for the First World (104). Therefore, modernity and capitalism cause a loss of identity in the developing world by tempting it with an erotic form of development, that is, capable of generating desire (104).

It is important to mention that Pasolini's critique is not only related to a generalized non-western developing world but also to the working classes of western capitalist societies. As Viola Brisolin points out, Pasolini talks of a radical anthropological antagonism encompassing class conflict, whereby classes and subclasses do not only belong to the social sphere but also have their own distinctive anthropological dimensions (47). Hence, Pasolini shows a tendency to associate the non-western developing world and the working classes of capitalist societies with his longing for mythical places and people "outside history," untouched by bourgeois institutions (47). Problematic as this may be, it sheds light on his anthropologically oriented, non-Hegelian view of dialectics, whereby there is no resolvable duality within the human, which must be treated instead with the eye of a geologist, an expert in stratigraphy (Barberà 109). That is to say, humans are made of strata and substrata accumulated through histo-

ry, and here Pasolini is selectively interested in the most recent anthropological change, from peasant to industrial society and leading to irrational consumerism (109).

In its primordial form, *eros* is entangled with the sacred nature of reality, and Pasolini represents it as "an essential and ungovernable power that has always caused great disasters and always will" (Barberà 104). Its creative potential is associated with a great risk of personal catastrophe, and when it meets the *logos* of the modern capitalist class, it can easily become "a tool of submission, injuring those who still believe in love as an end rather than a means" (Tellini 222). Medea, after betraying her people and escaping to Greece with Jason, must face the consequences of her loss of the sacred. Her semi-divine self, dominated by a primordial form of *eros*, must face the *logos* embedded in Jason's opportunism and the reality she encounters in the Greek world. Her sacred essence remains buried inside the deeper strata of her self, but it loses its power and fails to rescue her from personal catastrophe. Still, she chooses to go ahead with her vengeance, poisoning Glauce, causing the death of Creon, and murdering her own children. Nevertheless, at the end of the film, she stands on the roof of a house in flames, uttering her last words: "Nothing is possible anymore!" Her life is over, and so is Jason's. There is no reconciliation between *eros* and *logos*. Medea has forsaken her semi-divine essence and is now a mere human, left to burn in flames, the same flames that once represented her connection to the ancient sun god Helios.

EPILOGUE: THE MONSTROUS AND DIVINE POWER OF ALTERITY

> There's honey in the hollows
> And the contours of the body
> A sluggish golden river
> A sickly golden trickle
> A golden, sticky trickle
> You can hear the bones humming
> You can hear the bones humming
> And the car reverses over

> The body in the basin
> In the shallow sea-plane basin

Such are the opening verses of a song by British experimental band Coil titled *Ostia (The Death of Pasolini)*.[1] On 2 November 1975, Pier Paolo Pasolini was brutally murdered on "the bloodstained coast of Ostia," as it is poetically portrayed in Coil's song. His body was found on the beach, in a terrible state, apparently run over multiple times by a car, multiple bones broken, and his testicles crushed by what appeared to be a metal bar. In the official narrative, his killer was a young prostitute. In reality, there are good reasons to believe that organized crime was behind the killing. But of course, for the conservative Italian society of the time, the former version was the logical demise of a depraved intellectual. Yet another human face drawn in the sand, washed away by the waves of history.

Some questions come to mind. Where do we find the real monstrosity of it all? Does it live in human prejudice and in the violence it generates? Or is it a divine manifestation of alterity? Perhaps Pasolini and Medea were not too unlike one another. Just like Medea, Pasolini had forsaken himself in adoration of a young man named Ninetto, whom he loved intensely until the day Ninetto left him to get married to a woman. In a 1971 letter to a friend, Pasolini writes: "I am almost mad with grief. Ninetto is over. After nine years Ninetto is gone. I lost the meaning of life" (qtd. in Tellini 221). "Pasolini and Medea suffered abandonment by Ninetto and Jason, but their suffering is made more acute by their awareness of the fact that it is their way of being and loving that has caused it" (Tellini 221). They lost themselves and surrendered to the Other until tragedy hit. A very human story. But here, loss of identity is not the Aristotelian loss of *logos*, it is rather the very encounter of the primordial power of *eros* with a more rational and calculative *logos*. It is the moment of reckoning of a lover who chooses power—as in Jason's case, and assimilation into society—as Ninetto probably did. And I would like to believe that in human tragedy, prejudice and violence do not merit being associated with monstrosity. I propose we instead see monstrosity as a manifestation of the divine power of alterity.

Chesi and Spiegel, in the introduction to their edited volume *Classical Literature and Posthumanism*, introduce the concept of the heterogeneous self. They come from the perspective of rejecting the ideas of flat ontologies, a stream of thought found within posthumanism that emphasizes an ontology "made exclusively of unique singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status" (DeLanda, qtd. in Chesi and Spiegel 2). To them, this type of approach amounts to a process of "saming alterity," whereby divine and natural forces, among other forms of existence, are reduced to a particular kind of personified entity. Difference is crucially relevant, as assimilating it to a generalised "same" always conceals a strategy of domination over weaker subjects. The concept of the heterogeneous self, on the other hand, is "an ontology of the human as inhabited by difference and a subjectivity that embodies its alterity." Within this understanding, difference is not in opposition to but in continuity with identity, and this is extremely important, as difference without identity erases diversity (2).

The heterogeneous self is a non-cannibalistic form of subjectivity, in the sense that it does not require the sacrifice or loss of identity in the face of alterity (18). On an epistemological and political level, it embodies the monstrous within, and monstrosity brings human knowledge to its limits, deactivating its normative discourses and making possible resistance to norms (18). Therefore, monstrosity as a divine manifestation of alterity dissolves the borders between normal and abnormal, actually working against human prejudice and the violence it brings to this world.

In the final analysis, what Medea can show us through the eyes of Euripides and Pasolini is that monstrosity is intrinsic to human nature. Just like the primordial power of *eros*, it can open our minds, but also lead us to great errors. However, it is not this inner essence that wreaks havoc on our lives, but rather its unresolved dialectic with the calculating rationality of *logos*, and its manifestations in our world, dominated as it is by greed for status and power. Perhaps, what is needed is a new posthuman horizon for our subjectivity: a fresh view of the self as the Other within, rejecting the duality that pits *eros* against *logos*, allowing us to explore the deeper metaphysi-

cal strata of our monstrosity, and a conscious determination to create new temporalities that challenge the lack of alternatives, in the apparently timeless dominance of capitalism. In this way, and in constant dialogue with one another, we may be finally able to imagine a different and better future for humanity.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: "Medea", image created by the author on Midjourney (https://cdn.midjourney.com/aa3e6bc5-9756-491c-bd93-aa590ff45da0/0_0.png).

NOTES

1. Source: https://open.spotify.com/track/6BJIxnku7keldgmaN6vhkV?si=a66f10aa948e4702↩