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# How Badly Do You Want to Kill Your Father?

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Gardzienice, a renowned theatre company based in eastern Poland, has produced a new version of Euripides' *Elektra*, which I investigate in relation to Lacanian psychoanalytic paradigms. The director of the company, Włodzimierz Staniewski, has invented a new character for Euripides' play. Staniewski's creation, christened the Author, is intended to be both the traditional Athenian director-playwright *and* Staniewski's alter-ego; he observes and manipulates the action of *Elektra*. I argue that the Author turns the actors into hysterics in his role as Žižek's notion of 'real father': a post-Oedipal construct of the late-capitalist subject who has lost symbolic paternal prohibitive authority, i.e. the subject whose enjoyment is no longer enjoined but enforced. In this sense, Staniewski's Author properly represents the 'Third Father', the amalgam of the Ego-Ideal and the superego, with whom the capitalist subject must compete rather than obey or aspire to become. As a result, the assassination of the Author by the actors can be juxtaposed to Elektra and Orestes' revenge murder of Clytemnestra in the classical text. The latter is constitutive of the Law, while the former is a proper Lacanian *act*, in which the subject must withdraw from his/her symbolic network *qua* their disavowal of the big Other: the ultimate transgressive move of the late-capitalist subject.

### Staniewski's Choice

Let us first recall the chain of events that led to the action of Euripides's play. The prompt of course was Helen, who had fallen in love with Paris. Once she had departed for Troy, Menelaus, her husband, decided to bring her back with the help of the Greeks. Agamemnon, being his brother, joined the cause. They assembled in Auris, but Artemis would not bring favorable winds for the voyage without the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Through means of trickery, Agamemnon had

Clytemnestra bring their eldest daughter and she is dutifully murdered. While Agamemnon is in Troy attempting to rescue Helen, Clytemnestra, still outraged by the death of Iphigenia, has an *affaire* with Aegisthus (son of Thyestes – Agamemnon's uncle). The pair successfully murder Agamemnon on his return from Troy, exile Orestes and humiliate Elektra by marrying her off to a lumpen farmer and take over the rule of Argos. It is immediately clear from this timeline that power in the House of Atreus is managed primarily through murder.

Staniewski's version of this tragedy was originally titled *Scenes from Elektra*, which indicated the break from Gardzienice's usual pattern of employing disparate texts and remolding them into a (unified) whole. Roman Pawłowski referred to this production of *Elektra* in the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* as 'a tragedy in which a traditional myth was approached in a brave and innovative way' (19.05.2004). This claim is based on the premise that Staniewski has re-awakened the ancient Greek 'spirit' in his use of gesture taken from Greek statues and vases. Pawłowski implies Gardzienice's role as a 'spiritual centre' in the company's ability to conjure up the Greek soul that still lives in the modern Polish subject (here we have the Jungian sense of the collective unconscious *qua* 'inherited identity') when he writes: 'At a time when we make reference to the culture, Staniewski and his company make us realize that along with the beauty of its architecture, sculpture and poetry we also inherited the dark side of that (Ancient Greek) culture...' (ibid) This kind of neo-obscurantist Jungian writing is what we have come to expect from so many critics when writing about Staniewski's work. Andrzej Stasiuk further confirms the 'universal' notion that Gardzienice properly represent the Polish *Zeitgeist* when he writes in *Didaskalia*: 'Gardzienice have no mercy. Watching their productions is like reading a great text in the perpetual present' (61/62, 2004). And in that same issue of *Didaskalia*, Grzegorz Niziołek furthers this notion: 'The story is not told but created: here and now, in front of our very eyes. It is not a plot, but theatre-experience, and not only sign. It activates all dimensions and planes of time' (ibid). And, significantly, Teresa Dras in the *Kurier Lubelski* points out, '*Elektra* is the first production in the history of the Centre for Theatre Practices to use a literary text in its entirety' (05.09.2004).

Staniewski's choice of text is already symptomatic of change in identity for the company, which originally relied on a process called 'gatherings' to collect material from local indigenous people in Eastern Poland and the Ukraine, as well as traditional Polish Romantic texts, such as Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady*. Post-1990, Staniewski begins to look at international texts, which 'activate all dimensions and planes of time'. This is an example of the Staniewski's own shift towards the modern abstract individualist who, according to Žižek, 'relates to his particular "way of life" as to something with which he is not directly identified' (2000: 314). Staniewski has chosen international selections of performative texts in the 1990's; *Carmina Burana* (based on Tristan and Isolde), *Metamorphoses* (Apulieus), and *Elektra* (Euripides); as opposed the local material collated in his 'gatherings' of the 1980's. Indeed, logging onto the Gardzienice website, one sees that each performance is divided up by what area in the world it is derived from. This is a far cry from the man who developed work in Communist times in the process of gathering authentic local material. As Ali Hodges describes it:

For the first twenty years the basis of the ensemble's research was the expedition, in which members of the company traveled to remote rural villages in eastern Poland... Traveling on foot, the group spent a few days in each village, meeting with the local musicians and artists, exchanging songs and stories. Staniewski glimpsed in these communities what he later called a 'new natural environment for theatre'. The Gardzienice actors began to gather material orally from the villagers, while presenting their own songs and fragments of performance in return. This process of what Staniewski termed 'naturalization' enabled the ensemble to develop the material amidst those who had originally inspired them, and whose own critical responses tested the integrity and the impact of the evolving work. (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 4)

This last sentence insinuates the presence of some prohibition. Elements of the performance deemed unsuitable by the judgment of the visitors (from whom much of the 'work' sprung) were discarded. We then witness the following change (note the date): 'In many ways Staniewski's fourth performance, *Carmina Burana*, marked a new phase in the ensemble's practice. First presented in 1990, it responded to the monumental social and political changes in central and eastern Europe brought about by the collapse of Communism' (ibid: 11). The response was also to the 'disjointed' subjectivity of capitalism, in which, as Žižek points out, subjects can no longer locate themselves in their indigenous surroundings. Can we see it as pure coincidence that Staniewski turned to European literature at the demise of Polish Communism – that it should be in 1990 that he renounces the songs and traditions of his native land?<sup>1</sup> Is there not a clear connection between this 'looking abroad' of the emerging individualist and the shift in Oedipus, wherein the 'fundamental experience that the particularities of my birth and social status (sex, religion, wealth, etc.) do not determine me fully, do not concern my innermost identity' (Žižek 2000: 314)?

In making these selections, to combat the loss of values marked by the end of Communism, Staniewski attempts to create a new set of rules rather than accept the need for *phronesis*: 'that is, with the insight, formulated by Aristotle, into how direct application of universal norms to concrete situations is not possible' (Žižek 2006: 333). Staniewski believes in the positive content of the universal, which results in his New Age/Jungian notions of our 'inherited identity' of the Greek 'spirit'. With the loss of a primary text with which to constitute a set of values (e.g. in Poland's recent history: Marx's *Capital* for Communists, The New Testament for Catholics, etc), there is no longer the ability to re-interpret an accepted 'authority' text for the needs of the current generation. Instead there is a scramble for a new definitive text. In the theatre, one sees this in the perpetual staging of Shakespeare, Polish Romantic plays, contemporary British drama (Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Caryl Churchill, etc.). Staniewski has identified Ancient Greek thought as the authoritative culture (which endures through all of us throughout the ages – a 'spirit' that can be accessed by music and gesture) from which we can find the universal in the particular, or 'what Hegel called *Substance*, the "objective Spirit"' (Žižek 2006: 334). What Žižek asks us to bear in mind is that these 're-invented rules *supplant the lack of a fundamental Law/Prohibition*: they endeavor to provide the viable frame of interaction for narcissistic post-Oedipal subjects' (ibid). It is in Classical texts that Staniewski ultimately hopes to solve this deadlock.

## The Author

As I have mentioned, Staniewski adds a new character to his production of Euripides' *Elektra*, The Author, or the Third Father, the perceived amalgam of the Ego-Ideal and the prohibitive superego in a 'real father'. It is this very addition of the Author which facilitates Elektra's realization that *jouissance* is not stripped from us by an Other. Žižek feels this recognition is not only a necessary step in psychoanalytic treatment but also in the critique of ideology, for it is in our acceptance that *jouissance* never belonged to us that we finally face the Real (of our desire).

In the programme notes Staniewski wrote to accompany *Elektra* at the Barbican Centre in February 2006, he goes to great length to detail the role of the Classical Greek playwright. Euripides, Staniewski explains, not only played around with the plot of each of the myths he wrote into plays, he would compose, choreograph and direct his own texts. In Ancient Greece, Staniewski continues, '(a) playwright taught and instructed. Just like Brecht, he would express his opinions confidently and launch into a tirade about his views which would have nothing in common with the play. He would be lively and would intervene, make associations, use allusions, prompt and cite others. His rehearsal would have been a *theatrical essay*' (Program Notes from Barbican Performance of *Elektra*, 02/2006). Euripides, we are told, was allowed to rehearse for months at a time – rather like Staniewski's company, Centre for Theatre Practice, Gardzienice. And also like Gardzienice, these rehearsals took place not only in the theatre but in private houses or gymnasiums. It is in these circumstances that we encounter this enigmatic character of the Author, the power position, the symbiotic Other, what Staniewski refers to as 'the alter ego of the playwright and director'. This so-called alter ego 'intervenes numerous times during the rehearsal and demonstrates how to play and utter some parts (the Farmer's, the Chorus', Orestes', Elektra's), he butts into the duo and trio, he is the motivation' (ibid.). In other words, Staniewski's Author functions like Other for whose gaze we all perform and whose words we utter. It is in this role as playwright-director that the Author functions as ego-Ideal (the actors wish to emulate him) and superego (for whom nothing the actors do is exactly the 'right thing', e.g. the Author constantly criticizes and intervenes because their words are not spoken in the proper way or their gestures are not precise enough to evoke the Greek 'spirit', etc.).

Our primary question is: how can the symbolic universe be embodied by this reified agent (the Author)? The answer is: precisely because the big Other functions as the 'God' who watches over us from beyond. The big Other watches over all individuals, [it is] the Cause that involves me (Freedom, Communism, Nation) for which I am ready to give my life' (Žižek 2006: 9). The difference here is in this change in Oedipus, that is to say the Father who is not murdered, but survives, and with whom, as a result, we must compete rather than obey. It is only in the original patricide that the Law is constituted via the Name-of-the-Father. When the Father lives we lose the letter of the Law, that which bans incest, and are left with the amalgamation of Ego-Ideal and superego in one body.

The big Other operates purely at the symbolic level: 'When we speak (or listen, for that

matter), we never merely interact with others; our speech activity is grounded on our accepting and relying on a complex network of rules and other kinds of presuppositions' (ibid.). This is one of the basic linguistic premises, language does not come from me but is learned, and, as a mediator of my relationships, it is the ultimate Other. Is the function of the Author not the same – *qua* the alter ego of the playwright (*whose words I speak*) and of the director (*who tells me how to speak them*)? The Author act as a yardstick against which the actors measure themselves in their symbolic network. And just as I can never simply be a 'small other' interacting with a multitude of other 'small others' without the presence of the big Other, the actors in Staniewski's 'Theatrical Essay' cannot perform without the presence of the Author. In short, without the Author (Staniewski) there is no performance.<sup>ii</sup>

So how does the Author convert the actors into hysterics – who are hysterics in so far as they act as 'suspects' of the Author's interrogation? For the same reason that the big Other has this effect on the subject. Staniewski narrates the role of the Author in his characteristically obfuscating mode. He describes the rehearsal process as momentarily suspended by news of a murder<sup>iii</sup> that 'is bound to shatter the order of life both on and off the stage'. As a result of the crime there must be an investigation. The rehearsal itself becomes this investigation. Finally, Staniewski announces: 'The Author becomes an investigator and his characters become suspects'. In order to understand the point here we must remember Lacan's notion that 'desire is ultimately the Other's desire: the question-enigma of desire is ultimately not "What do I really want?", but "What does the Other really want from me? What, as an object, am I myself for the Other" – I myself (the subject), as the object-cause of the Other's desire, am the object whose overproximity triggers anxiety' (Žižek 2000: 363-364). So the actors become 'suspects' of the big Other when they are 'reduced to the object exchanged or used by the Other' (ibid), in this case, the Author.

Bearing this in mind, the actors *qua* 'suspects' are left with the question '*Che vuoi?*' ('What does the Other want from me?'), which signals the role of the hysteric: to constantly question his/her position in relation to the big Other. What we can further claim, in this role, is that the Author appears to act as the Ego-Ideal. This is a term often confused with its obverse, the ideal ego. For Lacan, the ideal ego is simply the image I would like to present to the world of myself – how I wish to be seen. It is therefore considered part of the Imaginary. The Ego-Ideal, on the other hand, is the 'agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image' (Žižek 2006: 80). In this case it is the Author who the actors perform for; it is his ideal-artistic vision – which is impossible to distinguish beforehand in so far as *it is unknowable even to the Author himself until he has already witnessed it* – that they wish to actualize. However, if my claim were to stop there it would miss the role of the superego: that which makes us suppress our 'sinful strivings'; namely, that which turns actors into 'suspects'. Although the Author's desires may appear senseless he should not be confused with the God of the Old Testament (Yahweh), who is full of tautologies 'I am what I am' or irrational commandments; '[i]n short, this God is the God of pure Will, of the capricious abyss that lies beyond any global rational order of logos, a God who does not have to account for anything he does' (Žižek 2000: 318). The Author may indeed not account for any of his desires, he may

appear irrational and unfairly demanding, but he does not assume the role of 'this God' in so far he does not constitute the Law. Our fantasy circulates around a wish for Law to be instilled, but this fantasy is denied the subject of the 'real father'.

Why, however, do the actors wish to be treated as suspects? Let us take an example from Žižek. Eva Hoffman, who grew up in Communist Poland, describes in her memoir her return to her native country in 1990, at which point the drab grayness of the apartment blocks suddenly appears in even more morose than they had in her childhood:

I know this grayness; I even used to love it, as part of the mood and weather with which one grows up here, and which sank into the bones with a comforting melancholy. Why, then, does it seem so much more desolate than before? I guess I'm looking at it with different antennae, without the protective filters of the system, which was the justification, the explanation for so much: even for the gray. Indeed, the drabness was partly Their doing, a matter not only of economics but of deliberate puritanism...now this neighborhood is just what it is, bareness stripped of significance. (Hoffman 1993: Quoted in Žižek 2000: 340)

Žižek believes this is the example *par excellence* of the function of real Socialism. The grayness is not ours but Theirs: They create it as part of their restrictive society that bars our enjoyment. But none the less we accept it because it precludes us from facing the inherent void of the universal, of political ontology. Why else do we search for such a domineering agent? Why else do the actors perform for the Author except that there is no other 'global mechanism' which accounts for their acts, some Other place to which we can make a comparison and locate ourselves? This is not only the proper topic for Staniewski, but also for psychoanalysis. Žižek believes it is a grave misconception that the ultimate topic of psychoanalysis is the prohibitive father who says *No!* to enjoyment. Rather it is the 'obscene father who enjoins you to enjoy, and thus renders you impotent or frigid much more effectively' (2000: 345).

Let us consider the role of Elektra and Orestes. They are possessed by a 'mad' drive to kill their mother and her lover because the couple murdered their father. There is much to be said on the death of the Father (Agamemnon) in *Elektra* in relation to Poland's shifting cultural identity since 1989. One could say it is the inevitable result of the lost Oedipus in late liberal democracy. Whereas enjoyment (certainly as a political factor, but also as a sexual factor in religious terms) was prohibited in Communist times by the Master-Politician, it was precisely the transgression of prohibitive law that lead to *real* enjoyment (just consider the real enjoyment of subversive alternative theatre: why Polish theatre is considered banal in the 1990's when compared to its sexy transgressive role of the 1980's). In modern-day Polish capitalism, in which 'anything goes', in which subjects are compelled to enjoy, one could say there is comparatively little *real* enjoyment for a theatre-maker like Staniewski who's artistic reputation was founded upon his subversive material (transgressive in so far as it was taken from indigenous peasant communities).

## Elektra's Symptom

In Euripides's *Elektra*, the crux of this performance rests on whether or not the siblings, Elektra and Orestes, succeed in murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. It is their 'desire' to do so – but will they 'give way' to their desire? Real desire is unconscious, performs on a level we can only encounter as a symptom (the symptom itself is not intended for us but the for the big Other, whom we wish to impress and from whom we take our cue). The desire to murder Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is therefore a symptom.

What can be said about this symptom: Elektra and Orestes' desire to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus? The siblings fantasize about this for the majority of the play (indeed they fantasize right up until and even during the act – the fantasy ends, of course, with its own fulfillment; and so begins the horror of *objet petit a*). But what we must not forget is that fantasy is not the transgression of the law. It is not because Elektra wishes to bring about the end of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus's reign that she fantasizes about their murders. 'The fundamental stuff of fantasy', as I mentioned earlier, is, on the contrary, about the constitution of the Law. As Žižek so often recounts: fantasy is the screen on which ideology is played. Is Elektra not actually fantasizing about paternal Law, i.e. prohibition, the end of this period of the chaotic Mother (Clytemnestra) rule, in which their subjective identities are out of joint (Orestes as an exile; Elektra as the wife of a farmer)? It is through the fantasy of Agamemnon's vengeance (and Orestes as his replacement *qua* Name-of-the-Father) that they see themselves restored to their 'rightful place' (in the Law).

Is this not also why Staniewski promotes the incestuous element of Elektra and Orestes' relationship (in which we see Orestes suckle on Elektra's breast)? Not only do we witness their subjectivity through sexual difference, but we also witness the sexualisation of fantasy itself. And, finally, we see the outcome of the 'lawless' society in which there is no symbolic paternal prohibition: namely, incest. Normally, Oedipus is associated with the Mother – but is Elektra not herself sublimated by Orestes to this role – just as Orestes is sublimated by Elektra into the role of Father *qua* his Name? We can see this sublimation clearly in the scene between Elektra and Clytemnestra in which both women sit on thrones. Clytemnestra wears a grotesque mask of make-up, and her melodramatic manner allows us to see her for what she is: a fraud (in the place of the Father), the female incarnation of the Monstrous. The important point to be made is that in the incestual link between Elektra and Orestes we see the social imperative to *enjoy!* in the absence of symbolic paternal prohibition. What would be forbidden under Agamemnon's rule is normalized under Clytemnestra's.

What we also have here is a perfect example of Lacan's notion that there is no sexual relationship. This claim, rather like 'woman as symptom of man', is often misinterpreted and, as a result, disregarded. When Lacan says there is no sexual relationship he actually means there is no sexual relationship between two people, there is always the *imagined* third; this third is often a fantasy. In the case of the Author, the third is real. We can see the presence of the Author in the *jouissance* of Elektra and Orestes; this is what makes their relationship somehow holy – that is to

say, what would be banned under the Name-of-the-Father is consummated, or sanctified, under the gaze of the 'real father'. Without His presence, the relationship between Elektra and Orestes would merely remain obscene.

The realization of Elektra and Orestes' desire, the murder of Clytemnestra – an unconscious wish for the return of the Father, a return of prohibition of enjoyment – becomes, as a result of this Third witness, forestalled. Their murder signals a return to the authority figures that prohibit *jouissance*. It is only when we believe that an Other is prohibiting our enjoyment, *actively stopping us from enjoying*, that we don't have to face the fact that enjoyment doesn't belong to us. This is the basic thesis of the *objet petit a*. The paradox of desire, which is never satisfactorily achieved, means that 'no matter how close I get to the object of desire, its cause remains at a distance, elusive' (Žižek 2006: 77), which is why 'sometimes the shortest way to reach a desire is to bypass its object-goal, make a detour, postpone its encounter' (ibid). As long as Elektra and Orestes don't fulfill their fantasy of murdering Clytemnestra, they can continue to enjoy vis-à-vis the postponement of their fantasy. Just recall their halcyon days of plotting the murder (which includes the sibling's incestual sexual relationship in Staniewski's version) in contrast to the horror of the satisfaction of that desire, i.e. the bloody corpse of Clytemnestra.

### **Killing the Author**

Now we can understand why the Author himself must be killed once Elektra's fantasy is played out. With the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Orestes must take up the place of the King, and in this position the incest taboo must be reinstated. In order for this to happen, the silent witness that legitimizes the incestuous relations between Orestes and Elektra must be murdered in turn.

At the concluding moment of the performance, we see the Author in a black robe to which a mask representing each of his characters is affixed. The characters then appear as 'demons' (Staniewski's programme notes) and 'rip off the masks of the characters created by the Author. The characters drift up and their creator remains naked and abandoned. The Author, this investigator, the one who has been stripped of his rights by his characters, finally has his life taken away' (ibid).

It is tempting to view this as a death of the symbiotic Other, as a revelational moment wherein the political void is revealed, the point at which the actors 'tarry with the negative'. In Euripides' version, after the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Orestes goes to Athens to take sanctuary in the temple of Athena; there he is purged of his guilt and a trial is held in which he is exonerated. In Staniewski's version, the 'real father' is murdered.

Is this as subversive as it appears? Just recall how the big Other functions: it only holds itself up as long as we choose to interact with it. As Žižek's puts it: 'In spite of all its grounding power, the big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly *virtual*, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subject *acts as if it exists*... yet the only thing that really exists are these individuals and their activity, so this substance is actual in so far as



individuals believe in it and act accordingly' (Žižek 2006: 10). If the characters destroy the masks the Author has created (in effect, they destroy their ideal egos) then they refuse to look to him (the big Other/the Ego Ideal/ the superego: yes, he's all in one! This is the problem for the modern subject in liberal capitalism: s/he recognizes this fact! The subject in totalitarian times was allowed to repress this) for their identity. The ending is appropriately ambiguous, that is to say we are not left with Orestes and his *passage à l'acte* into King, but the naked Father at the moment of his death. In other the words, the absence of a (dead) symbolic prohibitive paternal authority. Staniewski's production of *Elektra* is ultimately a comment on one of Žižek's primary theses: that politics is ubiquitous and inescapable (as a series of power relations: as the organizing factor of the Symbolic) and that political ontology is inherently a void. The Author is a positive semblance of a negative space, the lack in subjectivity. It is this positive embodiment of the lack which makes the actors hysterics in the first phase. What's more, He only remains the Author if the actors treat Him as such. When the actors refuse to identify with the masks He provides for them *it is the Author who ceases to exist* rather than the actors.

And secondly, perhaps more importantly, we come to Žižek's notion of the 'The Three Fathers' embodied in Staniewski's Author: in whom exists the marriage of the Ego-Ideal (the one we wish to impress and emulate, whose gaze we desire) and the superego (the 'ferocious' agent of 'cruel' prohibition). For the standard Oedipus, these two must appear to be separate (Ego-Ideal and superego: that which we long to become and that which suppresses our enjoyment). The problem with capitalism, as Lacan specified, is that it is no longer possible to keep these separate in a society that is structured around individualist competitiveness (Žižek 2000: 314). Capitalism relies, in fact, precisely on 'the unification of the two sides of paternal authority (Ego Ideal and prohibitive superego) in one and the same person of the "real father"' (ibid.). It is not the murdered Agamemnon who supports paternal prohibition through his death<sup>iv</sup> any longer, because we are instead left with the 'real father' who does not prohibit but commands Elektra and Orestes to *enjoy* (their incestuous relationship).

In the death of the Author, we shouldn't fail to recognize the distinction between the gap that separates the 'real' father from the 'symbolic' father and the general decline in symbolic paternal authority that is a feature of late liberal capitalism. The actors strip the Author of his mask not only because he, as a 'real' father rather than a 'dead' symbolic one, always fails to be good enough, to fulfill the symbolic mandate required of him, but also because the Author loses his status of Ego-Ideal and, by the end of performance, is transferred to a mere *ideal ego*. This is the genius stroke of Staniewski's performance. When the Author fails to adequately prohibit (when he fails to evoke the Law) his actors, He becomes their 'imaginary competitor, their *ideal ego*, and they act as disobedient adolescents, as so-called 'demons', competing with their father rather than obeying him.

## But is it an *act*?

Ultimately, this restructuring of *Elektra*, qua the invention (and subsequent death) of the Author, portrays the Lacanian *act* in a mode that was not possible with the version that ends with the murder of Clytemnestra. In other words, Elektra must not stop short of the murder of the Author. By removing their symbolic masks from the robe of the Author the actors/characters are momentarily suspending the symbolic order. In refusing to place their desire as the desire of the Author (how the Author chooses to see them; the masks he creates for them – *which is their exchange value* for him) they enact the *act* by positing themselves as their own cause. As Žižek points out, '[w]henver a subject is active (especially when he is driven into frenetic activity)' – there is no better adjective for Gardzienice's performances than 'frenetic' – 'the question to be asked is: what is the underlying fantasy sustaining this activity?' (2000: 374) The *act* is the removal of the frenetic activity of the hysterical subject. Just recall the hysteric in psychotherapy who talks round and round the actual problem in such an entertaining mode that the therapist never has a chance to ask *the* question that addresses the issue. The actors, rightfully, are removed from the stage and the Author is left alone for his death scene. Is this not the essential passive withdrawal? The actors appear as 'demons' in black, which renders them individually unrecognizable (even as male or female). These 'demons' are not the divided subjects of Euripides' tragedy, because the act 'as real is an event which occurs *ex nihilo*, without any phantasmic support', in which the subject cannot be subjectivized or 'assume it as 'his own', posit himself as its author-agent' (ibid).

This is why the murder of Clytemnestra can be juxtaposed to the proper *act qua* the death of the Author. The former is active, while the latter is properly passive. These 'demons' in black are like automatons. Of course there is the paradox here for the actors, who no longer perform *for* the Author, in that (unlike in the murder of Clytemnestra) their freedom is an act of utter passivity. And the audience is left not with the trauma of Clytemnestra's bloody murder, as they would in most productions of *Elektra*, but rather with the traumatic knowledge that '*there are acts, that they do occur, and that we have to come to terms with them*' (Žižek 2000: 375). If the audience leave the theatre with a feeling of some confusion concerning the death they witnessed at the conclusion, if they think to themselves: But that isn't what's supposed to happen! - then the performance is successful. This is the classic response to the *act*.

This is the crucial point – if we look at the whole bloody family tree of Atreus then we can see a number of murders that are not proper acts, which is why they function so well as foils to the death of the Author. And perhaps this can be best understood by placing a distinction between an act which is for the recognition of the big Other (as is the case for Elektra and Orestes who require recognition for the murder of Clytemnestra – they do it *for* Agamemnon), and the proper *act* which is an end-in-itself. Agamemnon identifies himself as the instrument of the big Other in sacrificing Iphigenia in so much as he acted on behalf of Athena, *whom he wishes to please*. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus murder Agamemnon in order to assume royal control, in this way they are

instruments of the big Other in so far as the big Other stands for the progress of History. Orestes murders Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in order to avenge his father and to stop the curse on the family line (which has plagued them since Orestes' grandfather Pelops murdered his own co-conspirator Myrtilus). In other words, Orestes' murders guarantee that no other such murders will be necessary. And this is not a proper *act* because 'an act is, by definition, 'authorized only by itself', it precludes any self-instrumentalization' (Žižek 2000: 380) in which one posits oneself as the instrument of the big Other. And, perhaps most importantly, an *act* does not find any justification of itself through a reference to any form of the big Other (ibid). This is the case only in the death of the Author – which happens to be the moment, incidentally, at which Staniewski breaks with Euripides.

So why is the *act* so important? It breaks the Gordian knot that binds us to the totalitarian-utopian ideal of Good, which, as Staniewski knows, becomes Monstrous (rather than Sublime) the closer one comes to attaining it. When asked about the future of Polish theatre in democracy Staniewski is generally pessimistic. He fears there will no longer be any '*human acts that surprise us, that shake our emotions or imagination*' (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 142). Staniewski's fear is that 'democracy will mutate into a totalitarian system and we will have *total democracy*' (ibid.) in which everything will be controlled. This is the relevance of the *act*. If Poland is indeed entering a 'brave new world' where 'everything is commodified, i.e. judged on whether it is 'useful' or not' (ibid.), then there is the fear of a return to a totalitarian system within liberal democracy that distinguishes clearly between Good and Evil in relation to a definable usefulness or non-usefulness (to the market). Žižek asks us to remember the old adage: evil is in the eye of the beholder. What we have here is a system that perceives Evil in relation to itself, 'of Evil reflectively residing in the very eye of the beholder who perceives it' (Žižek 2000: 382). And the only way to end the inevitable (at least what is 'inevitable' in Staniewski's mind) deadlock of *total democracy* is to 'enforce a disjunction between the Good and the domain of the ethical *act*' (ibid.). What Lacan means is that the ethical *act* – which will prevent the totalitarian deadlock of so-called *total democracy* – has to be between Good and the *act* itself, not between Good and Evil; in other words, it can not be located in the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, or indeed any of the murders that manage power in the House of Atreus. In this, Staniewski has outdone Euripides.

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## Endnotes:

- i In *Avvakum* Staniewski used a Russian text on Archbishop Avvakum. This, however, dealt with the subject of the USSR's political occupation of Poland and cannot be put in the same category.
- ii Is there not proof enough of this in the fact that the company *never* perform in Staniewski's absence? He is *always* present, even for their foreign engagements, where most directors would 'let go' of the production. Staniewski's presence attests not to the fact that the actors couldn't physically perform without him, but that the performance would lose its symbolic value if he failed to witness it.
- iii Which murder is this: Iphigenia by Agamemnon? Agamemnon by Clytemnestra? Clytemnestra by Orestes and Elektra? - in the viewer's enforced role as hysteric, Staniewski never lets us know of course!
- iv Let us not forget it is through the death of the Father that we have the installation of the Law; in other words, his murder is crucial to that installation, otherwise we end up the Author, the 'real father'.