

THE INFINITE TRAGEDY

I – Introduction

If one considers a modern 'tragedy' (such as 9/11), our understanding of such an event usually refers to our experiential relationship to it. This event occurs at a given time, place, under specific conditions. The 'tragedy of the Second World War' could effectively be understood as a notable event that will be remembered in history, but important to highlight is that some participated in the war directly, and others might have witnessed it 50 years after the fact via texts, images, movies, stories - the heart of the matter is that for both groups this event constitutes a tragedy.

This linguistic use contrasts the idea of Ancient Greek Tragedy, which enabled a particular mode of representation, a specific recollection of past events deemed “tragic”, a mirror of reality. It was of the highest arts to create a scenario of rigorous credibility where the aim was to replicate “real life situations” as closely as possible by staging probable stories, often emulating an unfortunate turn of events. This dual meaning of the term has survived ancient times, as it can still today refer to written style, to theater play, but also to “actual” events. Indeed, this dichotomous dualism seems to illustrate all too well the problem of dissociating real-time events, their representational counterparts and the ensuing understanding we form of them.

While it seems the effect of tragedies (invented or real) has been instrumental in shaping collective consciousness of Western civilization, its modes of representation have morphed dramatically since the original Greek Tragedy. This has conversely altered our relationship to pain and suffering, and contributed to expand the field of representation itself. Therefore, I ask the following question : how does the tragic event unfold within contemporary digital culture? Furthermore, how can its rigid structure hold together given the fluid, asynchronous, decentralized properties of digital mediums? And how is the experience of pain witnessed differently through replication, retaliation, repetition and simulation? As I address these issues, it will be clear that the role and impact of tragedies have shifted, especially as the computer revolution steamrolled into the last few decades. In dissecting the many parts that define them, I am hoping to also shed light on the importance of memory, amnesia and mourning in relation to pain and suffering.

II – The Ancient Greek Tragedy

In his analysis of the Greek Tragedy, *Poetics*, Aristotle delineates didactically the boundaries of what constitutes the different gradients of a successful Tragedies from a structural standpoint. His work reads like a handbook for Tragic Recipes, teasing apart one by one the elements which should be wished for, and should be avoided in such type of work. In his view, Poetry (which includes Tragedy and Comedy) can only be an imitation of men, who can either be represented as better or worse than in real life ***, the former with Tragedy, the latter with Comedy. This binary view is consistent with the rest of his affirmations, laying out strict guidelines to follow in regards to the plot construction, characters, language used (and in what proportion), the inclusion of supernatural events and the emotions that each Tragedy should evoke in it's audiences' hearts. According to Aristotle, these ingredients are vital to any great Tragedy, as they

ensure such a high level of likeness that it could be mistaken for truth. The significance of designing a 'successful imitation' is highlighted by the following statement :

*“Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; [...]. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'”****

The correlation here between “realness”, pleasure and pain, is the act learning. Witnessing someone else's pain fosters understanding, creates knowledge, and in turn generates pleasure. It also enables the destruction of our own fears as “Tragedy [...] is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; [...] through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.” ***. To achieve this effect convincingly, the "poet" must construct masterfully a plot, which is the “soul” if any Tragedy ***. Contained within this plot is the “reversal of fortune”, the moment when the virtuous man suddenly finds himself in a situation where (ideally) everything goes down the drain. As much as possible, the Tragedy's architect should render this transformation seamlessly as a natural evolution of the plot : “The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design.” ***

The entire *Poetics* is more or less of this flavor throughout, Aristotle being rather unequivocal about his claims (“A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction.”***), trying to build a rigorous anthology of best practices for the construction of this art. Eventually, he makes an interesting distinction between Tragedy and Epic Poetry (a poem, usually in written form)*** towards the end of the work, which will be useful in our scrutiny of contemporary representational devices and mediums later :

*“Epic Poetry has one great advantage over the tragedy : it can carry many actions at once, which is not possible on the stage of a tragedy. [...] in Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem. The Epic has here an advantage, and one that conduces to grandeur of effect, to diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story with varying episodes.”****

Fast forward nearly two thousand years ahead, Nietzsche tried to comprehend why the Greeks felt compelled to create such a thing as a Tragedy and how it has materialized into such an important art for them. He believed it was an embodiment of the Apollonian and Dionysian duality, representing visual arts and music, dream and intoxication. These two spheres merging into Tragedy was, according to him, a way for the Greeks to deal with the uneasing fact that life had an ecstatic, illusory aspect to it, but also a deeply tragic and painful counterpart - both of which were intrinsic to the experience of being. He continues by stating :

*“How else could a people [the Greeks] so emotionally sensitive, so spontaneously desiring, so singularly capable of suffering, have been able to endure their existence, unless the same qualities, with a loftier glory flowing round them, manifested themselves in their gods [Apollo and Dionysus]”.****

He holds the Greeks in great esteem for the creation of the Tragedy and does not speculate they are trying to evade either Apollonian or Dionysian influence, but rather attempting to find the most fitting model for

comprehending the difficulty to grasp life's meaning, the nothingness that results from the world's contradictory forces colliding at once, the complexity of a relational world perhaps beyond our understanding.***

Nietzsche employs the word “illusion” to describe this feeling, which he believed to be inherent to all of us. Somehow, we are compelled to experience this illusion, and it constantly attempts to redeem itself through appearances for its ever-suffering and entirely contradictory nature.***

He details :

"But if we momentarily look away from our own reality, if we grasp our empirical existence and the world in general as an idea of the primordial oneness created in every moment, then we must now consider our dream as the illusion of an illusion, as well as an even higher fulfilment of the original hunger for illusion."

I believe Nietzsche was precise when describing the difficulty for Greeks to apprehend the wholeness of their world, as it entails certain ethical considerations and a more entangled position to defend, as I will explain in the the following part on Pain, Suffering and Mourning.

III – Pain, suffering, mourning

In Aristotle's Tragedy, the most important part of the play in respect to creating a truthful narrative was the plot. As it evolved, it would eventually lead to the “reversal of fortune”, the downward spiral. This event was to be the “natural progression” of a sequential story, usually caused by a flaw in the principal character rather than by some Deus Ex Machina.

Interestingly enough, the narrative conception of a contemporary tragedy usually starts immediately with the tragic event, not the contextual frame of reference which led to it. If one was asked to describe the 9/11 tragedy today, it would be expected that the narrator starts the tale around the hijacking of planes, or their explosion as they hit the towers - not a deep analysis of biographical elements pertaining to the hijacker's early lives, or the ripple effects of US imperialism. This structural discrepancy which mirrors our consideration of an event results in the “tragic moment” being pushed to the front of a story, following with the consequences emaning of this act. From a distance, this ideation appears slightly hypocritical and perhaps amnesiac unless we accept that consequential actions following a tragedy are unrelated to the causes of perhaps another one, if not many others.

Human pain and suffering constitutes such a fundamentally personal experience that dissociating it from our first-person view seems a difficult feat. In this respect, Judith Butler would argue that “isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events”*** She militates for a much more comprehensive, contextual, global approach to understanding acts of violence and sees an immense opportunity in victims of violence to redefine themselves as part of a greater whole.

I will now take the opportunity to contextualize and elaborate my thoughts in the use of the terms “victims of violence”. Pain and suffering is unfortunately impossible to avoid, if only because we cannot control the constellation of circumstances that dictate its distribution. However, there are radically different stratifications of wealth, power and control in our world, which enables particular groups to precisely

define who are the victims and the perpetrators of violent acts. An example could be linguistic determination, or to the ability of states to create ambiguous terms under which to consider detained prisoners, hence stripping them of all protection from international treaties and conventions (i.e. 'unlawful combatants'). Also under this category falls the use of terms to justify political and military retaliation in some context (i.e. "slaughter"), but refusing to admit its equivalence in similar situations when employed by other groups.

Because wealthier, more powerful states can afford to carry out action towards whoever they have deemed "the others", a slanted view of who deserves to live and die, who should be commemorated and who shouldn't - as well as which death is tragic and which one is not - forms the very definition of what the successful present-day tragic plot should consist of. Why is 9/11 a tragedy, and why is the invasion in Iraq, or Afghanistan not? Could the mechanisms of choosing who is worthy to die and who is not, the selective contextual amnesia and the imposable dominant grammar have anything to do with understanding the contemporary sequel to Aristotle's Tragic handbook?

Even before the bombs of our world's superpowers rip through foreign land, the lives that are to be taken have already been cast as unworthy - the bombings wouldn't occur if it wasn't the case. Often we hear that these occupied countries have either "deserved" or "asked for it", as this is retaliation for a tragedy like 9/11 - although somehow the subsequent bombings are not a tragedy themselves. A simple demonstration of this unbalanced distribution of visibility can be observed by considering the inversely proportional amount of media coverage for deaths of American and European soldiers in relation to the casualties these same soldiers are responsible for.

If it is true that these lives do not deserve to be tragic, then it follows that we have no reason to remember them either, at which point the importance of mourning comes into light. Albeit my reticence to certain claims made by Aristotle in *Poetics*, he offers a potent conception of grief that somewhat aligns with Butler's idea of a successful mourning : Aristotle suggested that the 'realness' of the tragic and pain gave rise to knowledge and understanding. Butler offered in *Precarious Life* that "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation".*** It seems both authors agree on the transcendent quality of one's loss' impact on us. The necessity for mourning lies both in the recognition of the person that has been lost, but also in our capacity to reflect and act upon the changes we wish to operate in accordance with the acquisition of this newfound knowledge.

How then can we grieve, let alone mourn people that are deemed unworthy of remembrance, who are unrecognizable? If we cannot express our sadness for them, nor allow ourselves to be repositioned after our loss, how can the cycle ever be completed, how is moving forward even possible when faceless people are killed, and their ghosts cannot be mourned?*** Military interference can be useful, even necessary under certain circumstances, but I find unreasonable to think that countries which are currently under political, economical and military pressure from "first-world countries"*** in the name of grief caused by suspected citizens of those said countries would ever drop their weapons unless at very least, the occupants show greater moral responsibility towards the lives that are taken.

*"We have to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving, how they sometimes operate in tandem with a prohibition on the public grieving of others' lives, and how this differential allocation of grief serves the derealizing aims of military violence."****

IV – The infinite tragedy

In this final section I wish to divert slightly from the previous sections' style and offer my observations in respect to my past analysis in the context of new media and the Internet, since it is after all, this subject in which I might be most well-versed. How are tragedies crystallized on the Internet? How is pain, grief and mourning affected by the digital nature of its representation, and the malleability of its form?

Firstly, I can very well imagine Aristotle turning rather violently in his grave, seeing what the Internet has done to his painstakingly precise cookbook for the perfect Tragedy. Given the Web's general openness to whoever can access its infrastructure, its power to create non-linear narratives, its many layers of media encapsulation, its highly interactive nature, its diverse community and most of all, the hyperlinking between different social, economical and political geographies, it is even hard to conceive any possibility for rigid architecture under these conditions. Even worse, the plastic quality of content on the Internet makes it possible for the "reversal of fortune" to wander within different provinces of the tragic plot, changing and even disappearing depending on the current state of its reception.

There is often no real beginning, and no clear end to a tragedy reported on the Internet. By way of hyperlinks within a news article, for example, collateral data is easily accessible to frame what is being read. Next to the article one might find some "related news", supplementing with extra context. Comments are posted. Responses are posted to the comments, adding more meat to the bone, changing the story. The very act of navigating through a Web browser, to a particular news Website, into a discreet section of that Website, and to the story from there - are all subjective prehistorical elements which help preempt or augment the frame of reference within which to consider this report. And where does it end? This question seems equally hard to answer as for one, it will never disappear but more likely will be duplicated many times over and disseminated into the digital universe for all to consume. More importantly, new content cropping up from the Web might reference this article in some way or another, hypothetically changing the perception of the tragedy's meaning itself depending, once again, on the context within which this link is inscribed.

The seemingly disorganized horizontal structure appears to provide the ideal locus for what Butler asks for : "that histories must be recounted in their complexity", using a truly relational and global approach to understanding events. But what happens to pain, suffering, mourning and grief when tragic stories are constantly changed, multiplied, reappropriated? Aren't the mechanisms of multiplication and repetition desensitizing us to the horror of war and violence? I am not sure.

What I do believe on the other hand, is that this type of platform breaks down, at least partly, the logic supporting the distribution of grief and the power to determine who's lives are grievable and who's are not. Public obituaries can now be set up for the world to see without asking permission; names and faces can be published by whoever can access this rhizomic network, people can be remembered, grieved and mourned. This is a great step towards erasing the process of selective visibility, yet it would be hypocritical to believe that the Internet does not have its own power structures, censorship agendas and social capital hierarchies. At least, these agendas are much more difficult to realize than by way of traditional media, allowing for leveling to a certain degree.

So what does this all mean for contemporary tragedies? Perhaps that the nature of the tragedy itself is shifting, perhaps the anchor points which held its foundations in place are moving - perhaps the discussion and the context informing a story will prevail over the tragic moment as the catharsis for the person experiencing it. Given the delicacy required to deal with tragedies when a state is at war, I

understand how the logic of heavy censorship is carried out by governments of "first-world" countries (the public opinion - votes - depends on it) in regards to the lives worth remembering and not. I believe this is where the power of the Internet can be leveraged at its best. The power to question dominant discourse, the power to ask questions to a diverse audience, the power to reposition ourselves and learn from the experience of pain and injury.