

## The Atomic Bomb as *Dea Ex Machinâ*: Heiner Müller's Medea

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...in the century of Orestes and Electra that is upon us, Oedipus will seem a comedy.

- Heiner Müller

The *deus ex machinâ* has a bad reputation: in terms of the aesthetics of narrative form, it is routinely dismissed as a 'weak' ending. As is well known, Aristotle criticised the ending of Euripides' *Medea* for what he saw as its patent inconsequentiality; for him, the dénouement in which Medea transforms into a goddess-like figure in the Chariot of Helios was too disconnected to the rest of the play. While Aristotle's criticism haunts certain modern interpretations, opinions regarding the final scene of *Medea* remain mixed. The early twentieth century classicist Gilbert Murray, in alignment with his sexual politics and championing of the Women's Suffrage movement, made a point of gendering it, describing the final scene as a *dea ex machinâ*, the feminine form of *deus ex machinâ* (Murray xi). Others have articulated its significance in existentialist terms (Sale 32), or as a return of the repressed (Rabinowitz 136); and recently I have compared it to Pier Paolo Pasolini's refusal of the cinema of objectification in his 1969 *Medea* film starring Maria Callas (see Kvistad).

While the verdict on Euripides' ending may be subject to changing trends in its critical reception, it is clear that it has enjoyed, and will continue to enjoy, imaginative and provocative recreation in its modern productions and incarnations. Perhaps one of the most stunning and quintessentially modern of these is Heiner Müller's sequence of Medea plays: the 'Medeaplay' of 1974 and the text 'Despoiled Shore/ Medeamaterial/ Landscape with Argonauts' of 1983 (hereinafter 'The Medea sequence'). As they are thematically connected, they are published and often produced together. If Aristotle had issues with the liberties Euripides took with narrative form, then – if he were alive today - his aesthetic judgement of Müller's Medea sequence would have been damning to the point of being comical: of course, as avant-garde theatre, Müller's text deliberately refuses classical ideals of dramatic narrative form. Indeed, insofar as it is non-linear and fragmentary, the text also signals a departure from what some describe as the linear epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht, Müller's illustrious mentor (see Ebrahimian 33). A refusal of Aristotelian and certain modern, Brechtian forms of narrative is precisely in the nature of Müller's aesthetic for his Medea plays. Instead of narrative coherence and an even paced development, the Medea sequence is composed in terms of Müller's particular dramaturgical vision, 'the theatre of images,' the 'Medeaplay' being Müller's first experiment along these lines. While the 'Medeaplay' takes the form of a short, poetic vignette of the myth – it is merely one paragraph long - like his more famous work *Hamletmachine*, it enjoys a density of poetics that compensates for its apparent brevity. 'Despoiled Shore/ Medeamaterial/ Landscape with Argonauts,' in contrast, offers a more sustained meditation on episodes of the Medea myth, particularly as relayed so powerfully by Euripides' play. Together with the 'Medeaplay,' 'Despoiled Shore' constructs a provocative, politicising vision of modernity, informed by a plethora of compacted allusions and parallels to the Medea narratives of antiquity.

Müller's Medea sequence is presented in the best – but possibly for some, the most bourgeois and decadent - tradition of twentieth century avant-garde theatre. But if the *dea ex machinâ* constitutes the climax of Euripides' play, its counterpart in Müller's Medea sequence is, structurally as well as thematically, the explosion of what seems to be an atomic bomb. And it is, curiously, also open to the same criticism of Euripides' dénouement; Müller's climax might be thought of in terms of a formal dramatic weakness: an easy, predictable or even lazy way to end a play. This is a point that at least one - retired - theatre director has pointed out to me. But while it certainly may be open to the charge of seeming banal or clichéd – and perhaps the antithesis of the avant-garde - Müller's ending, like that of Euripides, is not necessarily or inevitably a formal narrative weakness. Indeed, in terms of the poetics and the narrative context of Müller's play, the ending operates effectively as a summary of its primary concern: modern atrocity. If Euripides' dénouement amounts to a majestic yet disturbing vindication of Medea's subjectivity, Müller's ending amounts to an indictment of the advances of technology and the dehumanising effects of an advanced capitalist and industrialised world. Indeed, as we will see, the bomb explosion that ends Müller's play is the logical climax of a narrative sequence that is thematically preoccupied with various political problems of modernity: alienation, practices of environmental degradation, consumer capitalism, mass production, technological over-development, the ironies of advanced capitalism and liberal democracy, and so on. Through an intricate web that links the figure of Medea to modernity in all its destructive glory,

Müller's Medea sequence transforms and adapts its Euripidean prototype to further a particular – and what I will argue is an ultimately neo-humanist – agenda, an agenda that only seems to be at odds with Müller's radicalising project.

### **The Environment, the Subject and the Bomb**

The first scene of 'Despoiled Shore' constructs a representation of the modern world as a cesspit of pollution and invites a meditation on modernity's propensity for environmental devastation. Its opening sequence constructs a cacophony of impressions:

A lake near Straussberg Despoiled shore Tracks  
Of flatheaded Argonauts  
Reeds Dead Branches  
THIS TREE WILL NOT OUTGROW ME Dead fish  
Gleam in the mud Cookie boxes Feces FROMMS ACT CASINO  
The Torn menstrual napkins The blood  
Of the women of Colchis  
BUT YOU MUST BE CAREFUL YES  
YES YES YES YES  
MUDCUNT I SAY TO HER THAT'S MY MAN  
SCREW ME COME SWEETIE  
Until the Argo crashes his skull the useless ship  
That hangs in the tree Hangar and place for the dung of vultures in wait (Müller 127).

Chaotic though these impressions may seem, they foreground the main subject of the Medea sequence: modernity as a wasteland and spoiled place. The representation is not entirely surprising, recalling, in name at least, T.S. Eliot's post WW1 poem 'The Waste Land,' the most iconic and influential literary representation of modernity. But if the social criticism of that poem remains somewhat ambiguous, upon the landscape of Müller's modern wasteland there is a sustained political commitment to and commentary on a catalogue of problems, the most obvious being environmental degradation from consumer capitalism. The fact that this scene is of a lake polluted by commodities – cookie boxes, 'Casino' cigarettes, 'Fromms Act' condoms and menstrual napkins – suggests the impact of mass consumerism on the environment. And if the reference to Straussberg (Strasbourg) is to a modern, industrialised city that is known, amongst other things, for its petroleum refineries and manufacturing of electronic equipment, the reference to the 'dead fish' in this passage alludes to a now paradigmatic narrative regarding the impact of industrial waste: a narrative that, while clichéd, remains only too familiar as a modern reality.

Significantly, the vision of modernity here uses the symbolism of human bodily waste to represent it as a subject of abjection, pollution and contamination. The direct references to menstrual blood and faeces, and the indirect allusion to semen (via the reference to the Fromms Act condom manufacturer), constitute a series of taboo or symbolically charged bodily fluids. The passage underscores the fact that the pollution is human made, and this is as literal as it is symbolic. The reference to the bloodied napkins of 'the women of Colchis,' for example, exploits the apparently universal taboo of menstrual blood and menstruating women. And it recalls at least two threads of Euripidean narrative: Medea's characterisation in Euripides' play as 'pollution' on the polis of Corinth, a characterisation realised in her systematic devastation of the Royal House of Corinth - the murder of the king and the betrothed princess - and Jason's description of her as pollution after her acts of infanticide, at least in one translation (e.g. see Luschnig line 1370; Most 23-4). The reference to 'the women of Corinth' also recalls Medea's opening address to these women in Euripides' play, an address which, significantly, foregrounds Medea's self-consciousness as an alienated subject in terms of her cultural and sexual difference. Of course, this is a type of social alienation that is a pre-condition for her heroic characterisation – a type of characterisation that has become paradigmatic in the narratives of modernity, a point recalling Euripides' reputation as the 'most modern' of the Athenian tragedians, as well as the popularity of the *Medea* narrative in the modern world.

If her opening speech to 'the women of Corinth' in Euripides' play signals Medea's social alienation, the reference to the bloodied menstrual napkins of the women of Corinth in Müller's play signals the horrors of modernity through a misogynist but culturally ingrained link between female sexuality, abject body fluids and gendered paradigms of horror. Feminist and feminist oriented criticism has, rightly, exposed and closely scrutinised the link between female sexuality and constructions of monstrosity across various cultural institutions (see, for example, Creed; Kristeva; Ussher). But if the allusion to menstrual blood in the Medea sequence facilitates Müller's characterisation of modernity as monstrous, the shifting identity of the subject problematises any charge of misogyny: as explained by Müller in his 'Author's Note,' the 'I' of the text is collective (Müller 126). The Medea sequence links pollution and modernity to Medea, and the three become, dizzily and confusingly, interchangeable. The waste of mass consumerism, the by-products and used products of advanced capitalism, pollute the environment of modernity; and

Medea, in the end, will become this polluted landscape in a way that the fragmented speaking subject of the opening passage only hints at. If Medea represents pollution to the Corinthian establishment in Euripides' play, in Müller's play she will come to embody it: she will become both the victim and the producer of pollution, as well as the object and perpetrator of violence.

The play's representation of Medea's signature act, infanticide, articulates the symbiotic relationship between Medea and modernity. Medea's popular characterisation as a 'monster mother,' a reputation earned through her acts of murder – and especially her child murder – is reiterated in the sequence, but contextualised in a way that invites a reading that undercuts and goes beyond, for example, the charges of misogyny and a simplistic demonisation of her as the cultural and sexual Other. In the scene of her infanticide in the 'Medeaplay,' she viscerally rips up her child and throws it at Jason. The text states that she '...takes off her face, rips up the child, and hurls the parts in the direction of the man. Debris, limbs, intestines fall from the flies on the man' (47). While this representation is a caricature of Medea and her signature act – indeed, a caricature of maternal rage and an inversion of the maternal ideal – a condemnation of Medea's infanticide also, ultimately, requires a condemnation of modernity itself: it soon becomes revealed that modernity's practices of advanced capitalism also render it to be, in effect, a perpetrator of infanticidal and 'inhuman' acts.

To dramatise the catastrophe and the inhumanity of the modern industrialised world, the text depicts industry mass-producing infant subjects and making them live under the threat of contamination and death. Human subjects in 'Despoiled Shore' become, paradoxically, both the products and the by-products of the wheels of industry whose factory 'Waste pipes/ [are] Ejecting Babies in batches against the advance of maggots' (127). Here are two contradictory meanings that are both pertinent: humans as products, and humans as waste. Modernity becomes signified by a society that routinely and factory-like mass-produces or manufactures human subjects ('in batches') – but to a future that is inevitably doomed ('against the advance of maggots'). In effect, Müller's play transposes the infanticide theme of Euripides' text: instead of using it to suggest, solely or specifically, Medea's radicality and renegade status, Müller's 'Despoiled Shore' exploits the representation of babies under threat to suggest the inhumanity of modernity and its 'machinery' of social reproduction in an age of capitalism. The narrative warns of an inevitable and disastrous fate, which, it insists, awaits us all: life in modernity becomes a life in hell, a Boschian nightmare transposed into the landscape of the hyper-industrialised twentieth century. And it is a nightmare precisely because it is dehumanising and the value of human life is uncertain. Thus, Creon's violent threats on Medea's children in Euripides' play finds an analogue in the practices of corporeal and symbolic violence that characterise Müller's modernity; if Medea is perverse for her vengeful infanticide, in Müller's play she is merely a symptom of an equally perverse establishment that is guilty of the same, inhuman crime.

The dual significance of this fragment – 'manufacturing' the human subject on the one hand and discarding it on the other – exploits a primary anxiety of modernity regarding the integrity of 'the human' as a meaningful category when it is both sentimentalised and yet devalued. The text here reflects a key contradiction of secular liberal democracy and advanced capitalism in which 'human rights' are championed in some contexts only to become undermined in others. In terms of the representation of manufacturing babies in batches, Müller's modernity becomes, like Dr Frankenstein's monster, an expression of an anxiety about what it means to be human in an age of technology. Müller's factory-produced human, infant subjects recall the twentieth century reception of *Frankenstein*, which imagines modernity as an age of the automaton where the distinction between the human and the machine becomes blurred (see Bann 2). And if the fundamental anxiety of *Frankenstein* is of science and technology 'going too far,' the mass production of babies in the Medea sequence engenders a similar ethic: the babies are commodified in a way that recalls, for example, recent controversies and moral panics about 'designer babies' (for contrasting perspectives, see Fukuyama and Pinker).

The representation of the babies as a type of industrial waste also underscores the undermining of the figure of the human in an age of capitalism. Here, the human subject becomes a secondary subject and a useless by-product of capitalist industry: a polemical suggestion that capital is always more valuable than the abstraction of 'humanity.' Similarly, the threat of the advancing maggots can only be read as the result of mismanagement, of values in the 'wrong' place: this is a society that manages to maximise production but that is not so successful in protecting the human subject. So, the 'despoiled shore' here is one that is not just physically desolate but one that is bereft of human values – that is, in this dystopian world, there is no value in the idea of the human. Pivotal here is the symbolism of the batches of 'babies' as a representation of a collective humanity and the abstract idea of the singular, human subject. While conceptions of the infant subject as a specifically human subject have shifted across culture and time, in modernity it occupies a particular, privileged and symbolically charged space: witness, for example, the exploitation of the figure of the child in numerous, popular foreign aid campaigns, such as the Save the Children Fund or the Christian Children's Fund. The infant here signifies more than the foreign subject: it signifies the human subject itself. And Müller's Medea sequence follows that type of humanist appeal, an appeal that is as sentimental as it is necessary if liberal ideals regarding human rights and equality are to be realised.

In effect, the inhuman machine of Müller's modernity is like Milan Kundera's definition of what he terms 'infantocracy' in *The Art of the Novel*: 'the face of the technological era.... the ideal of childhood imposed on all of humanity' (Kundera 132). That is, the infant of our technocratic modernity is a privileged sign of the human subject, a sign that is meant to represent a universal 'us,' but that is, nonetheless merely a sign, an abstraction like the idea of humanity, an idea that may cover up certain hypocrisies. And so, in the context of Müller's play, we live as subjects living in a technocratic and bureaucratic world that, by its very nature, dehumanises those that it routinely deems to serve: humanity. The liberal democratic idea of humanity, here, becomes a ruse to cover-up inhuman practices; that is, it becomes politicised as an ideology. If Euripides' *Medea* highlights the ways in which the state constructs 'rights-bearing subjectivity,' for example through Medea's stirring opening speech, whose basic point resembles that modernist parable *Animal Farm* – 'some animals are more equal than others' – Müller's *Medea* sequence alludes to the contradictions of modernity in terms of the definitions of humanity and the human subject. The lament is a familiar if clichéd one: for all the supposed advancement of the modern world – both technological and ethical – where does 'the human' stand? Moreover, where can it stand and who gets to say?

That Müller's *Medea* sequence is concerned precisely with the human subject is reiterated by the climax, the bomb explosion that closes the play. *Medea* describes it as:

What my grandmother used to call God  
The airblast swept the corpses off the plateau  
And shots crackled at my reeling flight  
I felt MY blood come out of MY veins  
And turn MY body into the landscape  
Of MY death (Müller 135).

Following the tragic tradition in which the gods punish those who are guilty of hubris, in Müller's narrative, the modern world is itself punished because of its unchecked, technological development; and the perpetrator and subject of this destruction is itself. If the *Medea* sequence is primarily concerned with modernity's self-destructive and self-defeating potential, it finds in the technology of war an appropriate and logical ending to an ever-increasingly developed, industrialised, dehumanising world. The logic may be Manichean, and possibly Luddite, but the political point remains clear.

With this ending, Müller's text transposes the Euripidean *dea ex machinâ* into a bomb explosion. Its final representation recalls the sublime through the comparison to God and perhaps its modern, secular analogue: the creation narrative of 'the Big Bang.' But, more importantly, it recalls *the* most sublime image of modern technology: the explosion of an atomic bomb. Instead of the Euripidean narrative of *Medea*'s salvation and symbolic vindication in the chariot of Helios, there is death, dismemberment and fractured subjectivity. The bomb, in a god-like act, transforms *Medea* into the desolate landscape itself; she becomes the landscape of her death as well as the landscape of modernity (for a discussion, see Birringer 107-8 and Turner 214). If Müller preferred showing to telling, then the representation of the bomb in the final scene is symbolically and politically charged, recalling the use of the Atomic bomb by the United States in its assaults on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. And, by extension, it recalls the war photography of its immediate after-effect which, like the representations of Agent Orange in Vietnam, remain profoundly disturbing for their apocalyptic depictions of human frailty amongst the brutal conflicts of international war. Such representations place humanity and modernity in conflict and they engender their power from their particularity, their concreteness, the graphic nature of the sheer horror they document. With a reference like this, the charge of a narrative formal weakness in Müller's use of the bomb to end the narrative sequence falls flat: not only is the ending logically consequent, it is a depiction of an event whose representation remains integral to a moral project that remains as pressing today as it was when the bombs were dropped.

Today, the events of 11 September 2001 dominate the representation of 'the war against terror,' and yet while they remain shocking, the events that occurred in Japan in 1945 remain more shocking still, at least in terms of the sheer numbers of their immediate after-effect. While 9/11 is said to have resulted in 3000 deaths, Hiroshima suffered from 237 000, Nagasaki from 135 000. There is a point to be made here, perhaps, about the politics of cultural memory: that is, who gets to say what is significant, to whom, as well as when and in what context and how often. A diverse range of texts inform the narratives that populate and ultimately dominate the cultural imagination when it comes to atrocity. And while historical discourses carry the burden of being officiating accounts, other texts also inform the cultural imaginary in ways that keep the atrocity 'alive' out of respect for those who have died and with the hope that such events will not happen again. But in an age of erasure and alienation, there is a risk that such an ethics of care will become ephemeral and lost – a loss that the chaos of Müller's text embodies in its fragmented form, and which it warns us of.

### ***The Positivity of Catastrophism***

While it would be overstating the point to claim that a relatively obscure text like Müller's Medea sequence realises an ethical project that keeps the particular atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki alive in the cultural imagination – and after all, it can only do so implicitly by its very obliqueness - it nonetheless contributes to the project of warning against the manufacture and use of nuclear weapons. Müller's preface itself suggests this when he argues that mankind is working towards a catastrophic end, and that only theatre can contribute to the prevention of a teleological disaster by representing it (Müller 126) - a point echoing Jan Kott's argument about the only hope in a hopeless and cruel life is 'to know that it is hopeless' (see Innes 154). Indeed, Müller's catastrophism itself is a symptom of modernity and a final reminder of the text's engagement with, and commitment to, a humanist politics. As Slavoj Žižek observes in relation to Müller's oeuvre:

The fact that the situation appears catastrophic is thus in itself a positive sign, a sign of (some kind of) progress: we are today much more sensitive to the things which were going on also in the previous epochs (Žižek 2).

What Žižek characterises as Müller's consistent yielding to the 'temptation' of catastrophism, in this regard, renders a narrative like the Medea sequence 'positive' and complicit with discourses of 'human progress' precisely because it represents the catastrophic. Müller famously once said, 'I am neither a dope dealer nor a hope-dealer' (see Martin 3); but Müller's very negativism is arguably both humanist and hopeful: if nothing else, these elements signal a notable tension in his Medea plays – a tension worthy of what Žižek describes as a 'theoretico-political analysis' (Žižek 1). I would argue that such a tension also underscores much contemporary literary criticism, which could usefully unravel its ambivalence towards the discourses of humanism. Literary criticism has had a tendency to avoid a direct confrontation with the political and ethical importance of humanism: partly because liberal notions are construed as lame platitudes and partly because humanism is dismissed as a discourse that is too traditional, universalising and totalising (for a discussion of this, see Said 8-16). However, more than ever, humanism is a discourse that requires serious engagement rather than dismissal as a naïve, unsophisticated or otherwise retrograde ideology of some merely nascent Enlightened or modern world. It is, on the contrary, formative and pervasive, even to discourses that seem to deny it. The apparently repressed debt of modern feminism to the emancipatory discourses of Enlightenment humanism and liberation theory springs to mind (see Curthoys and Stormer), a point that surely has analogues in the implicitly ethical and emancipatory projects of postcolonialism, marxism and even 'queer theory.'

Like these critical paradigms, Müller's play engages with what can usefully be construed as an ethical project, one that places the human subject at its centre. Müller's Medea cycle transforms the spaces of Euripidean theatre to politicise a gamut of failures that it identifies with modernity: social alienation, political corruption and hypocrisy, imperialism, sexual inequality and environmental degradation (not all of which I have been able to canvass here). All of these problems are cited because of the destructive ways in which they affect the positioning and integrity of the human subject in the contemporary world. In this regard, Müller's texts are certainly open to the charge of embodying retro-humanist 'political correctness' and liberal platitudes: a 'save the world and recognise humanity' ethic that renders it a gothic, avant-garde inversion of the pop song 'We are the World.' However, such an interpretative closure does not, ultimately, do justice to it: its ethical project remains real and relevant - and, it is this which comprises its dénouement, its tying up of a rather fragmented narrative, and its final resolution to the catalogue of political problems that it so earnestly cites. The *dea ex machinâ* of the text is, ultimately, not so much a bomb explosion as what this explosion signifies: a final vindication of a humanist ethics, the hope that such a catastrophe will not happen again. Whether it is deemed avant-garde theatre - or, conversely, 'pseudo-radical chic' and the work of a 'quasi-dissident' or eccentric artist (see Žižek 1ff.) - Müller's Medea implores us to examine 'the human' as a political construct, flagging the ethical importance of this formation to the modern world, and reminding us of the dangers of ethical bankruptcy when 'the human element' becomes jettisoned.

If, as Müller contends, we live in the age of Orestes or Electra (see Innes 153), we might like to add Medea to the list. By this I mean Müller's Medea: Medea the *dea ex machinâ* who signifies two, inter-related things - Medea-the-bomb; and Medea-the-narrative, the call for a more human(e) way of being. I, for one - despite my whimsical love of avant-garde pretension and radicalising critical theory (which, by the way, I can only read, at times, as shameless articulations of bourgeois decadence) - am hoping for an unembarrassed, critical engagement with humanist paradigms, one that recognises intellectual debts as well as weaknesses. This will not, however, stop the dropping of the bomb that may finally realise the apocalypse that haunts so many visions of modernity. But, as Žižek might answer, my negativity here may be, in fact, the very symptom of my hope for the future.

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