

GERHARD POPPENBERG

The Antinomy of the Law

The Myth
of Orestes
in Antiquity
and Modernity



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UMSCHLAGBILD

Das Titelbild zeigt die Szene vor dem Muttermord des Orest in Peter Steins Inszenierung der *Orestie* des Aischylos an der Berliner Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz im Jahr 1980 mit Udo Samel in der Rolle des Orest und Edith Clever in der Rolle der Klytaimestra.
Photo: © ruth walz

Halt ein, o Sohn! Und hege Scheu vor ihr, mein Kind,
Der Brust, an der du oft ja schlummernd lagst zugleich
Zahnlosen Mündchens saugtest süßernährende Milch!
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La folie ne fait pas droit
Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Du contrat social*

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1 Mythos

*But what if the City were a growing neoplasm,
across the centuries, always changing
to meet exactly the changing shape
of its very worst, secret fears?*
Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

With the epic and the drama, ancient Greek civilization developed a symbolic form with a long-term effect that continues up to the present day: literature. With the drama this form showed its power in the public space of the *polis* to the highest degree. Greek drama put the histories of individual families on the stage. Since the families in question are those of the rulers, these family-dramas are at the same time also political dramas. For this reason, the dramatically represented stories of the families – the myths of the tragedies – are also elements of the political constitution of society. The myths function to articulate the order of both the private and domestic sphere and the public and political sphere – above all, because violence is elementary and constitutive in both domains. In the myths the violence of the family is configured with the violence of the community. Violence governs the relations within families and between families. These agonistic relations form a nexus of violence which is the origin of the community formed around such family bonds.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the mythical articulation of *oikos* and *polis*, familial and social order in the medium of *pathos*. The drama politicizes and socializes the economy of individual feeling. The drives and affects of the individual are configured by the myths with a view to the element of universality that governs the polis. The elementary political significance of the mythic narratives is to be located at this point. They give the community and its political order a constitution for the affects, and in this way, they shape the affect-structure of the political. They represent social relations such as they exist at a given moment, and provide them with a symbolic expression: as such, they have a performative aspect, in that they also create and shape this existing order. The myths are a configuration of the economy of the affects: they give an expression to feelings, but they also shape and form them. They furnish the elements of a political pathology, making possible a description and a study of the general state of the feelings.

Sigmund Freud understood the correspondence of *pathos* and *mythos* as a fundamental element of psychoanalysis. In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess (12.12.1897), he reports his discovery that the “endopsychic myths” of the drive-structure are “projected outwards” in the form of mythic configurations: he names this “psychomythology”.¹ In

¹ Sigmund Freud: *The Origins of Psychoanalysis. Letters to Wilhelm Fliess. Drafts and Notes 1887-1902*. translated by Eric Mosbacher and James Strachey. London: Imago, 1954, p. 237.