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Soyinka's *Bacchae*, African Gods, and Postmodern Mirrors

Written by
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Characterizing our current postmodern era, Fredric Jameson has described the hollow nostalgia of cultural pastiche: "we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach".¹ As we seek to reach a lost past and to find our cultural identity through the pastiche of pop images, we merely touch the "simulacrum" (as Baudrillard calls it) of mass-mediated reality. Along with the loss of history, always already screened by the hypertheatre of media images, both self and community seem reflectively out of reach. The only identities that count anymore are those on the TV or film screen, which we in the mass audience use as mirrors to see ourselves. But that ritual of recognition in front of the TV set or cinema wall exacerbates the hollowness of postmodern identity: one's desire is the desire of the Other even more through the screen's virtual realities. The loss of self (a Lacanian axiom of being human) becomes more apparent through the pseudo-community of electronic theatre, in the multiplex desires and split subjectivities of a mass audience without mass, as the flickering ghosts that we call "stars" whimsically orient our cathartic sympathies and fears. And yet, an uncanny sense of ritual sacrifice and choral identity returns through the Platonic caves of television, cinema, and live theatre today. As modern autonomous individualism shifts toward postmodern schizoid

¹ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983) 118. Jameson ties this "pathological symptom" of postmodern nostalgia and artistic "pastiche" to the "end of individualism"; yet he also finds that current cultural production "has been driven back inside the mind, within the monadic subject," where reality becomes merely "mental images of the world," as in the theatre of Plato's cave (114-18).

characters, open-ended plots, and the "death of the Author,"² a new potential for audience co-creativity and transcendent deception is born.

Postcolonial cultures feel the loss of the past communal self--and its uncanny return--in a more specific way, caught between the postmodern lures of global capitalism, the modernist inscription of national identities, and the premodern heritage of tribal communities. This postcolonial "betweenness" (to use Homi Bhabha's term)³ has been explored by Wole Soyinka, through his revision of violence in ancient Greek drama. In his play, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*, Soyinka returns to the roots of both European and African (Yoruba) theatre, combining Dionysian and Ogunian rites of communal passage, to involve a postmodern, postcolonial audience in the ancient sacrificial offering. The play was commissioned and performed by London's National Theatre in 1973, while Soyinka was in exile from his native Nigeria, after being imprisoned there (the second time, for over two years) due to his political activities.⁴ While Soyinka takes his audience back in time to ancient Greece, he gives his *Bacchae* the premodern communal space of Yoruba ritual theatre--connecting the African and European, as well as the past and present, the popular and elite, within each tradition.⁵

² See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill 1977) and Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" 1969, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

³ See Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1977) 132.

⁴ Soyinka was imprisoned in 1965 "for protesting a corrupt election," and again, for 27 months, mostly in solitary confinement, from 1967 to 1969 (Gates). On Soyinka's political activities, imprisonment, and writings during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), see Chidi Amuta, "From Myth to Ideology: The Socio-political content of Soyinka's War Writings," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23:1 (1988): 116-129. He describes the "contradiction inherent in Soyinka's utopian conception of revolution . . . in his attempt to elevate myth into a vehicle for ideology and polity" (126), which also relates to his subsequent writing of *The Bacchae* (not mentioned by Amuta).

⁵ Cf. Thomas R. Whitaker, *Mirrors of Our Playing: Paradigms and Presences in Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) 212-14. He sees Soyinka's earlier play, written while he was in prison, *Madmen and Specialists*, as an "anticipatory, more successful satyr play" in relation to Soyinka's *Bacchae* as an "expansive but reductive version of Euripides' tragedy" (214).

Bipolar Nostalgia

In the European tradition, the two modern theorists who most influenced the reinvention of ritual in spiritual and political directions are Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. In the 1930s Artaud envisioned the actor as a transcendent scapegoat--as a victim "burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames"--for the sake of audience communion and catharsis.⁶ Thus, the fragmentation of the modern alienated self (and of the hollow, schizoid, postmodern subject) might be cured homeopathically: by a sharing of pain, of the "violence of the thought"⁷, between actor and audience in Artaud's theatre of cruelty. This theory echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's psychohistorical view of the "birth of tragedy" in ancient Greece and his desire for ritual theatre's modern rebirth (in the late 1800s). Using Aristotle's evidence of Greek theatre emerging from dithyrambic ritual, Nietzsche saw a passionate Dionysian chorus singing and dancing in the orchestra, drawing spectators spiritually and emotionally into that choral "womb," where the shattering of their individual egos led to the rebirth of mythic identification on the Apollonian mask of the actor onstage.⁸

Brecht, on the other hand, saw a great communal danger in the lingering ritual temptation of Aristotelian mimesis--not only from the ancient to the modern stage, but also in the social theatre of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Brecht developed his epic theatre to counter

⁶ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958) 13.

⁷ Artaud 82.

⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random, 1967) 36, 66, 82, and 104, where he describes: (1) the Dionysian "collapse of the *principium individuationis*," (2) the Dionysian rapture of the chorus (and audience) producing the Apollonian vision onstage, (3) the Dionysian as the "womb of music," and (4) the Dionysian as the "primordial mother." See also 64-65.

the loss of individuality in traditional mimetic identification: to stop the spectators of Sophocles' *Oedipus* (in Brecht's own example) from becoming an audience of "little Oedipuses".⁹ Yet, there is also a tragic flaw in Brecht's desire for distanced, critically thinking spectators. The more they become individuated by his alienation effects, the less likely they are to come together for collective social change, which was the ultimate goal of his Marxist theatre and its anti-Aristotelian rituals.

These bipolar, Artaudian versus Brechtian, spiritually introverted or politically extroverted, communally cathartic or individually alienated ideals of modern theatre can be understood in a new light through the postcolonial views of Wole Soyinka. In his Cambridge lectures of 1973, Soyinka developed his theory of African folk theatre's ritual space. Through Nietzsche, Soyinka relates the current Yoruba tradition to "European antiquity . . . [where] man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon".¹⁰ But that chthonic connection in ancient European theatre was lost, says Soyinka, through the Judeo-Christian "transference of the underworld to a new locale up in the sky, a purgatorial suburb under the direct supervision of the sky deities".¹¹ Soyinka adds that a similar loss of chthonic theatre can be seen in modern Africa: "in the drama of the gods in

⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill, 1964) 87.

¹⁰ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 3. Soyinka was also influenced in this view by his teacher at the University of Leeds, G. Wilson Knight. Cf. the use of Nietzsche in G. Wilson Knight, *The Golden Labyrinth: A Study of British Drama* (New York: Norton, 1962) 6-8. See also Ann B. Davis, "Dramatic Theory of Wole Soyinka," in *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, ed. James Gibbs (Washington D.C.: Three Continents, 1980) 147-157, and Whitaker 210.

¹¹ Soyinka, *Myth* 4. Cf. Ulli Beier's view of modern, monotheistic Nigeria: "In order to become a Christian (or a Muslim for that matter) you must publicly denounce every aspect of your forefathers' culture and wisdom and religion. In the old days this even involved public burning of images" (Femi Abodunrin, *Iconography of Order and Disorder: Conversation with Ulli Beier* (Bayreuth, Germany: Iwalewa Haus, 1996) 28).

contemporary Christian-influenced societies of the African world".¹² Soyinka relates this historical loss of the earth gods grounding ritual drama, in premodern Europe and modern Africa, not only to theological colonialism, but also to a "profound transformation [that] has therefore taken place within the human psyche".¹³ Here Soyinka suggests both an Artaudian desire (in Nietzschean terms) to unearth the lost psychic horizon of ritual theatre and a Brechtian concern with the political dominance of thought, self, and audience by an imperial, mimetic ideology.¹⁴ In fact, in the 1970s when these theories were articulated, Soyinka not only adapted *The Bacchae* in an Artaudian/Nietzschean vein (in 1973), he also rewrote Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* as *Opera Wonyosi* to cast a critical, gestic depiction of African leadership (in 1977).¹⁵

While Soyinka's theory of ritual theatre parallels Nietzsche's and his plays combine the spiritual and political ideals of Artaud and Brecht, the Nigerian dramatist has carefully distinguished himself from these European paradigms. Soyinka said early in his career (1962)

¹² Soyinka, *Myth* 5. Soyinka himself grew up in a very Christian family, but was also influenced by his Yoruba grandfather. See Soyinka's autobiography, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (New York: Random, 1981) 140, where he tells his grandfather what he has learned in his Christian home about Ogun: "the pagans' devil who kills people and fights everybody." See also Oyin Ogunba, "Ake as Background to Soyinka's Creative Writings," in *Soyinka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ogunba (Ibadan: Syndicated Communications, 1994).

¹³ Soyinka, *Myth* 4.

¹⁴ Cf. Derek Wright, "Ritual and Revolution: Soyinka's Dramatic Theory," *Ariel* 23.1 (Jan. 1992) 50, where he briefly suggests the combination of Artaud and Brecht in Soyinka's theory of ritual theatre--but as a problem, "a basic uncertainty." See also Ketu H. Katrak, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy* (New York: Greenwood, 1986) 52-55, for a more positive view of Brecht's influence upon Soyinka's work. And see Adebayo Williams, "The Mythic Imagination and Social Theories: Soyinka and Euripides as Political Thinkers," *Okike* 20 (1982): 36-44 for a Brechtian critique of Soyinka's *The Bacchae*, as "mythicizing" rather than historicizing.

¹⁵ On Soyinka's revision of Brecht's play, see Sander L. Gilman, "Wole Soyinka and Brecht: Creating the Other Within the World of Words", in *Wahlverwandtschaften: Elective Affinities*, ed. Willfried F. Feuser, Marion Pape, and Elias O. Dunu (Bayreuth, Germany: Boomerang Press, 1993) 41-56. See also Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 9-11.

that he admired the "liveliness and freedom" of Brecht's theatre, but disagreed with its "didacticism".¹⁶ In his 1973 Cambridge lectures, Soyinka mentions Brecht just briefly, praising his "regenerative social goal".¹⁷ While not citing Artaud directly, Soyinka does mention various European and American theatre artists influenced by Artaud: Jerzy Grotowski, Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Brook, the Living Theater, and the Performance Group with their *Dionysus in 69*.¹⁸ But Soyinka refers to these artists somewhat disdainfully as "the current white avant-garde . . . groping towards the ritual experience (alas, only too often comically misguided)."¹⁹ Regarding Nietzsche, Soyinka makes an elaborate bridge between the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of theatre's ancient Greek parturition and his own view of the Yoruba gods (orisas), Ogun and Obatala, as the mythic sources and continuing, dialectical energies of African

¹⁶ Soyinka, "Interview," in *African Writers Talking*, eds. Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden (New York: Africana, 1972) 172-173. For a Brechtian critique of Soyinka, see Andrew Gurr, "Third World Drama: Soyinka and Tragedy," in *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, ed. James Gibbs (Washington D.C.: Three Continents, 1980) 144-45. Cf. Akaeke Onwueme, "Visions of Myth in Nigerian Drama," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25.1 (1991): 58-69, on the more Brechtian dramatist Femi Osofisan, in his differences from (and with) Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and the Nigerian Theatre," in *Theatre in Africa*, ed. Oyin Ogunba (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978) 151-176. See also Sandra Richards, *Ancient Songs Set Ablaze: The Theatre of Femi Osofisan* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996) 17-27, 72-74 and "'Wasn't Brecht an African Writer?': Parallels with Contemporary Nigerian Drama," *Brecht Yearbook* 14 (1989): 168-183; plus Femi Osofisan, "Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos," *Okike* 22 (1982): 74-75. For Soyinka's response to Osofisan's Brechtian critique of his theory of ritual theatre, see *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (New York: Pantheon, 1993) 69-70. For Osofisan's earlier, more positive view of the elder playwright, see "Tiger." On the debate between the two dramatists and the subsequent revaluating of Soyinka by African Marxists in the 1980s, see Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 62-66.

¹⁷ Soyinka, *Myth* 63.

¹⁸ Soyinka, *Myth* 6-7. Cf. Whitaker 212-13. When asked in personal conversation (by a colleague of mine, Nefertiti Burton, on 3 Feb. 1999), Soyinka said that Artaud bore no influence on him.

¹⁹ See also Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal," in *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka at the University of Washington*, ed. Karen L. Morell (Seattle: University of Washington, 1975) 78-83 for a further critique of "audience participation" in avant-garde experiments and of "self-indulgent monasticism" in Grotowski's poor theatre.

ritual theatre.²⁰ However, while noting "Apollo's resemblance to the serene art of Obatala," Soyinka distinguishes the two: "Obatala the sculptural god is not the artist of Apollonian illusion but of inner essence".²¹ And Soyinka's Ogun is not just Dionysian; he is "a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues".²² Soyinka thus describes his gods of theatre as parallel to, yet distinct from Nietzsche's:²³ "Obatala is the placid essence of creation; Ogun the creative urge and instinct, essence of creativity." Soyinka even calls Ogun the "elder brother to Dionysus," in a note at the beginning of his version of *The Bacchae*.²⁴

If the African god Ogun is a more ancient source of theatre than the Greek god, why does Soyinka rewrite a drama about Dionysus, calling his version: *The Bacchae of Euripides*? Who appears in Soyinka's play, is it Dionysus or Ogun, Euripides' characters or Soyinka's? Are they Greek or African? Who is sacrificed through the masks of Soyinka's Pentheus and Agave? I believe that Soyinka's revision of this drama and his contemporaneous theory of ritual theatre not only connect a modern Nigerian in exile to his European hosts and audiences. His work not only relates ancient Greek theatre to older African gods. It also speaks to the hollow nostalgia of the postmodern subject, whose loss of autonomous individuality marks the potential return of ritual spirits and communal identities in both the Euro-American and African theatre

²⁰ This connection is most explicit in Soyinka's earlier (1969) essay, "The Fourth Stage," which appears as an appendix to the published version of his Cambridge lectures, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. See also Katrak 47-51.

²¹ Soyinka, *Myth* 140-141.

²² Soyinka, *Myth* 141.

²³ See also Olaniyan 52, on Soyinka's disagreement with Nietzsche's "separation of music and language." See chapter 2 of Wiveca Sotto, *The Rounded Rite* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1985), for a further comparison of Soyinka's and Nietzsche's distinct views of Dionysus. And see Sotto 175 on Soyinka's sympathy for the masses in his *Bacchae* as opposed to Nietzsche's contempt for slaves (and for Euripides' play) in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

²⁴ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (London: Methuen, 1973) xiv. Cf. Sotto, chapter 3, for a detailed comparison of Dionysus and Ogun, as "twin" brothers, regarding Soyinka's play.

traditions.

Although Soyinka's dramatic and theoretical revisions of ancient Greek sacrifice were written a quarter of a century ago, near the beginning of our current postmodern era, he has recently shown (in a talk given in February 1999) his continued interest in diagnosing the collective "neurosis" of American society. As a foreign spectator, Soyinka laments the compulsive fads, self-exhibitionism, and masochism of Americans "stripping themselves bare for the entertainment of others"--for which he prescribes, especially for African Americans, the traditional healing of African ritual, such as the Yoruba Egungun festival, where dead ancestors appear through actors' masks to counsel the living toward "social reconciliation," through a therapeutic "interpenetration of vitality" between the various planes of existence (the worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn).²⁵ These are the same cosmic stages that Soyinka articulated in his earlier (1967) theory of ritual theatre, where he added the "fourth stage" of the transitional abyss between the other three, crossed by the god Ogun--a living tradition in Yorubaland (and in much of Latin America),²⁶ unlike the loss of Greek gods and rituals in Europe.

In the Euro-American tradition of theatre, Nietzsche, Artaud, and Brecht exemplify specific modes of struggle with modern alienation and the loss of communal identity. But the psychoanalytic insights of Jacques Lacan can be used to extend those modern theories toward the postmodern condition of our collective neurosis (and its perverse or schizoid traits)--in

²⁵ Cf. Oyin Ogunba, "Traditional African Festival Drama," in *Theatre in Africa*, ed. Ogunba (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978) 16-18, for a description of dramatic performance in the Egungun festival. See also Susanne Wenger, *The Sacred Groves of Oshobo* (Vienna: Kontrapunkt, 1991) 65-66.

²⁶ See Edward Bruce Bynum, *The African Unconscious: Roots of Ancient Mysticism and Modern Psychology* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999) and Jim Wafer, *The Taste of Blood: Spirit Possession on Brazilian Candomblé* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), on the various diasporic, Yoruba-related religions, especially Vodun in Haiti, Santaria in Cuba, and Candomblé in Brazil.

which the "desire of the Other" structures the illusion of ego that masks our "lacking being," in a mass-mediated, consumerist society. In this social drama (to also use Turner's anthropological terms), a cosmic, liminal, "anti-secular" dimension is neared even in the most secular rituals of breach, crisis, and redress²⁷ --such as the ordinary buttressing of mass audience identity through the worship of film and TV stars, as they act out social horrors and identity crises. In the pages that follow, I want to suggest how the Afro-European stage drama of Soyinka's *The Bacchae* relates to the Euro-American social drama of the postmodern loss of self as autonomous ego, and yet also shows the potential return of communal, chthonic, and cosmic identity through a new theatrical awareness.

A Space for the Other Bacchae

Soyinka's title, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, suggests the influence of ancient Greek desire in his playwriting: the other dramatist's prescription of Soyinka's bridge between the African and European traditions. But Soyinka also subverts the dominance of the European tradition in postcolonial Africa with the note of mimicry²⁸ in this title: his play is obviously not *The Bacchae* of Euripides. Although Soyinka cites two English translations of the Greek play (Arrowsmith and Murray), from which he has admittedly "borrow[ed] phrases and even lines" in creating his own version, he also notes that he has borrowed lines from his own "passion poem" (*Idanre*) about the Yoruba god Ogun, whom Soyinka then calls the "elder brother of Dionysos".²⁹ In his

²⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 80-81.

²⁸ Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 125-133. See also Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997) 120-21.

²⁹ Wole Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (London: Methuen, 1973) xiv. On the parts of Soyinka's *Bacchae* that refer to *Idanre*, see Sotto 76-100.

Bacchae Soyinka articulates the spirits of various Yoruba gods behind the mask of Euripides' (and Nietzsche's) Dionysus. Soyinka manifests the shifting desires of a trickster figure, of the Yoruba god Esu, as Dionysus manipulates his human worshipers and his nemesis Pentheus toward a sacrificial rite of revenge.³⁰ Soyinka also shows the Nietzschean characteristics of Apollonian serenity and Dionysian violence, of both Obatala and Ogun, in his Dionysus--who first appears: "Relaxed, as becomes divine self-assurance but equally tensed as if for action, an arrow drawn in readiness for flight".³¹ Most significantly, in relation to the postmodern Lacanian subject and Soyinka's own ritual theory, he alters Euripides' revenge plot to show the erotic/death drive of Ogun crossing the fourth stage abyss between living, dead, and unborn worlds--driving through the human characters' tragic actions, which benefit the entire, choral community in the play's new, tragicomic ending.³²

Building this extended sense of community from the beginning of the play, Soyinka adds a second chorus of slaves to the *Bacchae* of Euripides' drama. This community of slaves is first seen at work in the play's opening images and eventually becomes a chorus of Dionysus' worshipers. It is also reflected in a related community of the dead, according to Soyinka's initial stage directions. The background is "lined by the bodies of crucified slaves mostly in the

³⁰ On Esu as the satirical source of African and African-American drama, see Femi Euba, *Archetypes, Imprecators, and Victims of Fate: Origins and Developments of Black Drama* (New York: Greenwood, 1989). His theory of ritual theatre, unlike Soyinka's (with Ogun), is "concerned less with the communicant-community, actor-audience participation . . . than with the 'epidemic' factor," in relation to Nietzsche and Artaud, as well as Esu (9-10).

³¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 1.

³² Cf. James Booth, "Human Sacrifice in Literature: The Case of Wole Soyinka," *Ariel* 23.1 (Jan. 1992) 7-24, who sees "a very modern (even 'postmodernist') unpredictability" in Soyinka's *The Bacchae*, but is critical of the play's revolutionary Dionysus: "the 'new order' which he provides is a matter of purified consciousness and transcendence, rather than coherent social reorganization" (19-20).

skeletal stage".³³ In the foreground "dim figures of slaves" (the eventual chorus) labor upon a threshing-floor against the palace wall, in a "cloud of chaff . . . flailing and treading . . . [with the] smell and sweat of harvest," as Dionysus emerges from the tomb of his mother, Semele, to speak of revenge. Dionysus thus arises, like the Nietzschean actor, out of the womb of earth and death. This creates a double "space of becoming," in Kristeva's sense of the abject, semiotic, maternal *chora*. The threshing-floor with its chaff cloud reflects the historical origin of Greek theatre's Dionysian orchestra in the threshing-floor of the *agora* (market place).³⁴ But Soyinka shows the original ritual space of his added chorus in the working area of slaves, juxtaposed against the Apollonian palace of Pentheus and the abject bodies of dead slaves, left as semiotic warnings against rebellion.³⁵

Soyinka includes Euripides' mythic setting for the start of *The Bacchae*: the choral space of Semele's tomb, representing her cosmic abjection.³⁶ (She was consumed by lightning when her lover Zeus appeared to her in divine form, although this story of her death, and of her son's divinity, was not believed by most of her human family.)³⁷ It is out of this maternal *chora* that

³³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 1.

³⁴ Cf. the mime dance in the "market clearing" of Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), celebrating the (supposed) impotence of the village Chief.

³⁵ Cf. Katrak 80: "Soyinka portrays the socio-political dimension of Dionysian worship in the set itself." See also B.M. Ibitokun, *African Drama and the Yoruba World-View* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1995) 119-21. He relates the Yoruba gods Obatala and Ogun (whose powers, in Soyinka's theory, parallel Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian) to Kristeva's theory of the symbolic, patriarchal order and the semiotic, maternal *chora*. Ibitokun also relates this dialectic to Lacan's symbolic and imaginary orders, but neglects the Real there (119).

³⁶ In lines from Euripides' prologue that Soyinka does not use, Dionysus says: "There by the palace is my mother's monument, / my poor mother, blasted in a bolt of light!" (Euripides, *The Bacchae* in *Three Plays of Euripides: Alcestis, Medea, The Bacchae*, trans. Paul Roche (New York: Norton, 1974) 79).

³⁷ Dionysus makes reference to this family history in his opening speech of Euripides' (but not Soyinka's) *The Bacchae*: "Semele's sisters . . . mocked my birth, nor deemed / That Dionysus sprang from Dian seed. / My mother sinned, said they; and in her need, / With Cadmus plotting, cloaked her human shame / With the dread name of Zeus; for that the flame / From heaven consumed her, seeing she lied to God" (Euripides, *The*

Dionysus first appears, returning to Thebes as the spirit of revolution and familial revenge. But Soyinka's additional layers of death and abjection--through the scenic *chora* of crucified and laboring slaves, as well as Semele's tomb--reframes the high drama of gods and mythic heroes to remind the audience of the mundane suffering of the lower classes (as in in Brecht's revision of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*). The opening scene of Soyinka's *The Bacchae* thus shows both Artaudian and Brechtian techniques, through a specific African sense of flexible ritual space³⁸ (which Artaud also desired) and the gestic performance of colonial slave labor (à la Brecht). Both of these dramatic choices serve to set up the cosmic, yet political theatre of Ogun's drive to cross the abyss between the dead and the living--as that orisa comes in the figure of Dionysus to possess both his followers and his enemies, especially Pentheus and his mother.

Coincidentally, at the same time that the exiled Soyinka presented his version of Euripides' ancient Greek drama in London, Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian immigrant in Paris, was using Lacanian psychoanalysis to revise Plato's ancient Greek philosophy of the *chora*, an enclosed mythic space for the becoming of ideas, objects, and art (in his *Timaeus*). Kristeva redefined the *chora* as a revolutionary, maternal space of preverbal language and emotion within literature, culture, and the mind, repressed (or "abjected") by the patriarchal, symbolic order--yet providing the foundation for that order and disrupting it in uncanny ways. Kristeva based her revision of Plato's myth on Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage": the human infant's loss of preverbal symbiosis and "semiotic motility" with the (m)Other, as mirror of ego identity,

Bacchae, trans. Gilbert Murray (London: Allen and Unwin, 1904) 8). Cf. W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston: Beacon, 1955) 166-74, on this and related myths about "resistance" to the Dionysus cult in various localities.

³⁸ See *Myth 40*, where Soyinka discusses the contraction of European theatre space, from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages, as opposed to the "fluid approach of African ritual space." Cf. Artaud, *Theater* 86 and 124.

through the intervention of the paternal symbolic, the Name and No of the Father.³⁹ Rather than emphasize the Oedipal desire to return to the lost maternal body through patricidal rebellion, Kristeva stresses the power of that choral space of loss, mourning, and abjection--a lingering womb and tomb within each subject's mind and in human society, which bears the potential for violent rebirth. "In 'artistic' practices the semiotic--the precondition of the symbolic--is revealed as that which also destroys the symbolic . . . [as] the semiotic *chora* within the signifying device of language".⁴⁰

Soyinka's artistic revision of *The Bacchae*--in just its opening stage directions--shows a striking example of Kristeva's theory. His Afro-European depiction of choral space and ritual, of slave death and labor, along with the tomb of Semele, the mother, signifying her death and prior labor, reveal a semiotic, abject, maternal *chora* in the background of Dionysus' drama, as he returns to Thebes to destroy the symbolic order of Pentheus. But Soyinka also does some deconstructing of orders here, through creative re(at)tribution. He recalls a deeper origin of European ritual theatre (and of the Christian crucifix) in his initial scenery for this drama "of Euripides." He unearths the fluid choral space of abject slaves and mother earth goddesses⁴¹--that was encrypted by ancient Greek civilization, its sky-gods, and its fixed orchestral space (where all choral odes were performed by young male soldiers). Soyinka's African view thus offers a postcolonial vision of ancient European theatre space that parallels Kristeva's postmodern view of the maternal *chora* in art, language, and the theatre of the mind.⁴² Soyinka

³⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 25-26, 46-47.

⁴⁰ Kristeva, *Revolution* 50.

⁴¹ Near the end of his prologue, Euripides' Dionysus says to his bacchae: "Raise up the native music of your home: / the timbrels Great Mother Rhea and I invented" (in Roche translation, 81).

⁴² Cf. William S. Haney II, "Soyinka's Ritual Drama: Unity, Postmodernism, and the Mistake of the Intellect," *Research in African Literatures* 21.4 (Winter 1990): 33-53. While analyzing Soyinka's ritual theory and A

does not just repeat Greek theatre architecture with his revision of Euripide's drama. Instead of placing the orchestra as a circle for the bacchic chorus, between heroic characters and audience (as in Nietzsche's nostalgic vision), Soyinka recenters the revolutionary *chora* in chthonic stage space. He shows its semiotic motility between the background line of slave skeletons on crosses, the foreground threshing-floor of slave labor, and the tomb of Semele out of which the dithyrambic (twice-born) Dionysus emerges to begin the play.

Kristeva's first book mentions, if only briefly, the liminal edge in ritual theatre, where "the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches the semiotic *chora*"--crossing a border that sacrifice re-presents onstage.⁴³ This "reenacting of the signifying path" opens the stage and subject "to the motility where all meaning is erased".⁴⁴ Here Kristeva refers to African rituals (of the Dinkas in Sudan) and to the ancient origins of European theatre. "The Dionysian festivals in Greece are the most striking example of this deluge of the signifier, which so inundates the symbolic order that it portends the latter's dissolution in a dancing, singing, and poetic animality." One can see in the opening moments of Soyinka's *The Bacchae*, even before Dionysus speaks, a Dionysian and African deluge of visual, acoustic, and olfactory signifiers (including the "smell" of the harvest). This eventually threatens to subvert the Olympian and Christian symbolic orders--to release the colonized *chora* of the mother (goddess), through her son's sacrificial revenge and the play's choral dancing, singing, and bacchic animality. In Kristeva's terms: "art takes from ritual space what theology conceals: trans-symbolic jouissance, the irruption of the motility threatening the unity of the social realm

Dance of the Forests, Haney finds that his drama "provides an experience of the preverbal ground of language." But Haney relates this to the postmodern theories of Derrida and to the ancient Indian aesthetics of the *Natyashastra*, rather than to Kristeva's *chora*.

⁴³ Kristeva, *Revolution* 79.

⁴⁴ Kristeva, *Revolution* 79.

and the subject".⁴⁵

Shards of Oneness

Through further changes in Euripides' drama, Soyinka expresses the revolutionary power of the abject *chora* within certain characters and their orisa aspects, as well as in the scenery and stage space. He shows the potential evocation of a choral space--or in his terms, of a "fourth stage," as transitional abyss between the living, dead, and unborn. Thus, the "Communion Rite," Soyinka's subtitle for his *Bacchae*, takes place not only in the altered tragicomic ending of the drama, but ideally between actors onstage, spectators offstage, and their lost ancestors and future progeny in the psychic community of performance. This may happen even in a secular context, although the play's premiere by London's National Theatre received very negative reviews.⁴⁶ The animist sense of theatrical ritual (articulated in Soyinka's essays) involves an intermixing of temporal worlds and spiritual identities that recasts the

⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Revolution* 80.

⁴⁶ Cf. Albert Hunt, "Amateurs in Horror," *Critical Perspectives* 5 (1980): 113-115, who values the communal horror and rebirth in Soyinka's script of *The Bacchae*, but describes its premiere by the National Theatre (at the Old Vic) as showing: "the unyielding amateurism of British professional theatre. The company that presents Soyinka's play contains a drummer who can't drum, dancers who can't dance, and actors whose only concept of narrative acting is to begin every speech in the flat clipped tones that used to characterise British war movies, and then to rise in a gradual crescendo towards uncontrolled emotional wallowing" (114-15). See also Lahr's negative review, which blames the director more than the actors: "every ritual is empty of passion and purpose. The production is slick but silly" (John Lahr, Rev. of *The Bacchae* by Wole Soyinka, dir. Roland Joffé. National Theatre. Old Vic., London, *Plays and Players* 21.1 (Oct. 1973): 59). Lahr also blames Soyinka's adaptation, as turning tragedy "into tract." And see Robert Baker-White, "The Politics of Ritual in Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*," *Comparative Drama* 27.3 (Fall 1993): 377-398, who critiques the communion rite of blood turned to wine through a May pole dance at the end of Soyinka's script: "This unity cannot actually include the theater audience and cannot even approximate their inclusion as actively as the previous appropriations of gospel and music hall have done" (393). Cf. Whitaker 213-14.

drama in a distinctive African light,⁴⁷ especially as the ancient Greek characters appear to embody certain aspects of Yoruba orisas. Yet, here again the insights of Soyinka's intercultural ritual theory, through his retelling of Yoruba myth, can shed light not only upon his stage drama, or upon Brechtian alienation and Artaudian violence, but also on the social drama of lacking being between postmodern subjects.

In his "Fourth Stage" and Cambridge essays (of 1967 and 1973), Soyinka draws on Yoruba mythology, as well as Nietzsche's view of the Greeks, to craft a theory of ritual theatre concerning the purpose of sacrificial violence onstage. Soyinka finds the "origin of Yoruba tragedy" in the mysteries of the gods (orisas) Ogun and Obatala⁴⁸; but he also uses the Yoruba genesis myth of Orisa-nla. "Once, there was only the solitary being, the primogenitor of god and man, attended only by his slave, Atunda. . . . However, the slave rebelled. For reasons best known to himself he rolled a huge boulder on to the god as he tended his garden on a hillside, sent him hurtling into the abyss in a thousand and one fragments".⁴⁹ Soyinka himself analyzes this cosmic myth in terms of individual psychology: "the experience of birth and the disintegration of consciousness in death"--which he then relates to ritual and "the god's tragic drama," especially that of Ogun.⁵⁰ But I would like to extend his argument toward postmodern, psychoanalytic theory as well. In Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," the infant at the age of 6

⁴⁷ Cf. Ogunba, "Traditional," on the animist beliefs of African ritual drama: "a hill or a tree is not just an object; it has a spirit, and true knowledge, it is believed, lies in not only knowing such a spirit, but in being able to communicate with it or control it. . . . [Thus] the drama is spirit oriented . . . to reflect the spirit behind things" (11-12). See also Soyinka, *Myth* 10: "Traditional [Yoruba] thought operates not [in] a linear concept of time but a cyclic reality," which he relates to the worlds of the living, dead, and unborn as being both older and younger than one another, paradoxically. And see 145: "Continuity for the Yoruba operates both through the cyclic concept of time and the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness."

⁴⁸ Soyinka, *Myth* 140.

⁴⁹ Soyinka, *Myth* 27.

⁵⁰ Soyinka, *Myth* 28.

to 18 months experiences a traumatic loss of its symbiotic oneness with the mother's body. This leads to a substitute illusion of its own whole ego in the mirror of the (m)Other's eyes and desires. Yet, the infant also experiences its uncoordinated body and unfocused libido as fantasies of a fragmented body (*corps morcelé*) contradicting the illusory wholeness of ego or of lost maternal oneness.

Soyinka's version of Yoruba genesis, regarding ritual theatre and tragic violence, might thus inform the common postmodern notion of split subjectivity. The subject in postmodern art and life is split by the desires of the Other, while rebelling against such desires--in others and in oneself--to create the illusory mask of an independent ego. In the Yoruba myth, the primal Being of Orisa-nla reflects the lost oneness of infant-mother symbiosis in psychoanalytic theory and the loss of, yet lure to recover, a shared, communal identity or an ideal, whole ego in the postmodern. According to the myth, the primal oneness of Orisa-nla shatters due to the rebellious spirit of the slave, Atunda (or, in other versions of the myth, the trickster god, Esu). In the parallel Lacanian parable, the infant experiences both the joyful wholeness and terrifying fragmentation of itself in the mirror of the (m)Other's desire, setting the stage for split subjectivity throughout life. This imaginary contradiction, covering the Real abjection of the child's initial alienation in lacking being, is reconfigured as separation from the mother's body by the symbolic order of language and law, the Name and No of the Father. As the rebelling ego becomes further alienated from its (m)Other and mirror image, it gains a momentary ecstasy of separate wholeness. But through words and prohibitions, it also experiences a terrifying fragmentation--as if Atunda smashed his own image in the mirror of Oneness, in smashing the primal god Orisa-nla. Thus, both humans and gods in Yoruba mythology, like the ego and the Other in Lacanian theory, are lacking being.

As Soyinka puts it: "The shard of original Oneness which contained the creative flint

appears to have passed into the being of Ogun," as did other shards into other orisas.⁵¹ "Yet none of them, not even Ogun, was complete in himself. There had to be a journey across the void to drink at the fount of mortality. . . . But the void had become impenetrable." For this void between the divine and human worlds was also the "abyss" of lacking being, the "disintegration of consciousness," where Orisa-nla was originally shattered. Ogun, however, "with an instrument which he had forged from the ore of mountain-wombs, . . . cleared the primordial jungle, plunged through the abyss and called on the others [the various orisas] to follow".⁵² Ogun thus becomes the source, for Soyinka, of ritual theatre--of the tragic-heroic drive to sacrifice oneself for communal benefit, as he plunges into the transitional abyss between worlds, reenacting the alienation, lack, and fragmentation of being, to reconnect the divine and human shards of primal Oneness (corresponding to the Other *jouissance* of the "subject as drive" in Lacanian theory).⁵³

Although the other deities did follow, Soyinka says: "Only Ogun experienced the process of being literally torn asunder in cosmic winds or rescuing himself from the precarious edge of total dissolution by harnessing the untouched part of himself, the will".⁵⁴ Soyinka directly relates this mythic act of Ogun, his individual sacrifice for the "strengthening of the communal psyche," to the reenactment of birth and death, oneness and fragmentation in theatre.

⁵¹ Soyinka, *Myth* 28.

⁵² Soyinka, *Myth* 28-29. One might say--using Kristeva, Nietzsche, and Lacan--that Ogun plunges into and emerges from the semiotic chaos of the *chora*, armed with the maternal phallus as Dionysian thyrsus, thus reconnecting the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders of human and divine worlds. See also Soyinka, *Myth* 158-59, on parallels between Ogun's *opa* and Dionysus' thyrsus.

⁵³ See Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 107, 120, and *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 213-14. Fink describes the goal of Lacanian treatment, "beyond neurosis," as the patient ultimately "sacrific[ing] his or her castration to the Other's *jouissance*" (Lacan, *Écrits* 323; qtd. in Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 72).

⁵⁴ Soyinka, *Myth* 30.

The actor in ritual drama operates in the same way. He prepares mentally and physically for his disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin, experiences the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and being. Such an actor in the role of protagonist becomes the unresisting mouthpiece of the god, uttering sounds which he barely comprehends but which are reflections of the awesome glimpse of that transitional gulf, the seething cauldron of the dark world-will and psyche. Tragic feeling in Yoruba drama stems from sympathetic knowledge of the protagonist's foray into this psychic abyss of the re-creative energies.⁵⁵

Soyinka's description of divine possession in Yoruba ritual theatre might be regarded by postmodernists as specific to that culture and his reference to the "universal" might be rejected as modernist essentialism (or primitivism). But I hope to demonstrate that Soyinka's argument, from a quarter century ago, serves as a vital connection between European poststructuralist psychology, modern Nietzschean and Artaudian desires, and the premodern wisdom of African ritual performance.

Alienated, Psychic Communities

Soyinka's postcolonial revision of ancient myths and ritual sacrifices reveals a blind spot in postmodern theories of theatre that celebrate audience co-creativity through the "psychic polyphony" of spectator experiences and cultural diversities.⁵⁶ His sense of a potential cosmic theatre of divine and human figures--of living, dead, and unborn stages, with the transitional abyss between them of psychological alienation, lacking being, fragmentation, and rebirth--is

⁵⁵ Soyinka, *Myth* 30-31. Cf. Whitaker 211: "Soyinka himself, as an actor and director, has gained some reputation for an ability to unlock the subliminal, and, even when his plays use not African but Greek, Brechtian, or absurdist masks, they remain close to a theater grounded in trance."

⁵⁶ On "psychic polyphony" see Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 95-109. See also Fortier 90-91.

missing in the antimetaphysical secularism of most postmodern theories. But there is, in current performance, a parallel yearning for communal wholeness as a ritual effect, especially through the theatrical lure of ego identification with the alienated hero onstage or onscreen. In the popular theatre of film and television, this paradoxical phenomenon becomes even more apparent. Mass-audience desires cling to the star actor, who promises each fan a mirror-stage illusion of transcendent individuality--through collective imitation.

Postmodern media stars offer a cosmological theatre of mythic personas, masking the loss of traditional relations with the dead and the unborn. We may be "condemned," as Jameson puts it, to perceive past and future--or, more intimately, our dead and unborn relatives--through the cultural pastiche of pop imagery and stereotypes. But the dead and the unborn still exist, at least as unconscious relations, shards of memories and dreams at the edges of our present living world.⁵⁷ Sometimes they affect us more directly, crossing the abyss of lacking being in the Real--like Soyinka's heroic orisas and ritual actors--to appear through the imaginary and symbolic theatre of pop imagery and stereotypes. Like rhythmic, preverbal drives from the abject, semiotic *chora*, our past and future relations may interrupt the symbolic order of language or patriarchy with violent, revolutionary meanings.

Often in the mass media, there are melodramatic projections of good against evil violence (a paranoid-schizoid "splitting" in the Kleinian, object-relations sense). But Soyinka's Ogun, like Nietzsche's Dionysus, evokes a more tragic awareness of evil and violence within oneself. Ogun is not simply a Christ-like, Promethean martyr. He is not a just purely benevolent victim of violence for the love of man. He is also the Yoruba god of metal and

⁵⁷ Cf. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia, 1988) 4-5, on the "shards" of historiography that come back "on the edges of discourse"--along with the "presence of the dead that has organized (or organizes) entire civilizations."

warfare.⁵⁸ One of the traditional praise-chants (*oriki*) for Ogun is translated by Soyinka in his theory of theatrical sacrifice: "Salutations O lone being, who bathes in rivers of blood".⁵⁹ Soyinka also recounts a Yoruba myth about Ogun's drunken violence while leading his people in war: "during a lull in the battle, our old friend Esu the trickster god left a gourd of palm wine for the thirsty deity. Ogun found it exceptionally delicious and drained the gourd to the dregs".⁶⁰ When the battle resumed, "the carnage was greater than ever before. But by now, to the drunken god, friend and foe had become confused; he turned on his men and slaughtered them. This was the possibility that had haunted him from the beginning and made him shrink from the role of king over men." The Yoruba gods are not perfect like the Christian God,⁶¹ nor whimsically abusive like the ancient Greek gods. The orisas are divine agents and helpers to humans, but they also make mistakes. They are not simply melodramatic heroes or villains; they are tragic figures of human psychology and African culture (mixing with Catholic saints in the postcolonial diaspora).⁶²

The fragmentation of both Orisa-nla and Ogun in the transitional abyss between worlds,

⁵⁸ Cf. Migene González-Wippler, *Tales of the Orishas* (New York: Original Publications, 1985) 16, on Ogun: "he is said to be responsible for car and railroad accidents where blood is shed." See also Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random, 1983) 52-53.

⁵⁹ Soyinka, *Myth* 27.

⁶⁰ Soyinka, *Myth* 29.

⁶¹ See Ulli Beier on Obatala's drunken mistakes in forming human beings: "he takes full responsibility for all his creatures; unlike the Biblical god who is perfect. To explain imperfection and evil in the world Christianity had to invent the devil" (Abodunrin 43).

⁶² Soyinka relates Ogun's originary fragmentation and heroic passage through the transitional abyss (where Orisa-nla was shattered) to both human psychology and the African diaspora. "It is this experience that the modern tragic dramatist recreates through the medium of physical contemporary action, reflecting emotions of the first active battle of the will through the abyss of dissolution" (149). In a footnote, Soyinka adds: "Or again the collective memory of dispersion and re-assemblage in racial coming-into-being. All these, and of course the recurring experience of birth and death, are psycho-historic motifs for the tragic experience: the essence of transition." See also Olaniyan 44-45. For a chart of the names of Yoruba gods in various Latin American countries, corresponding to certain Catholic saints, see Bynum 326-27.

which Soyinka describes as Ogun's own double trauma,⁶³ parallels the infant's alienation and separation from the (m)Other, according to Lacanian theory. These two rites of passage produce psychotic and perverse traits in all neurotics, and create the fatal structure of psychosis and perversion if each stage is not completed well.⁶⁴ Thus, all human beings are tragically flawed with schizoid and violent symptoms--although this *hamartia* is often masked through the melodramatic projections of postmodern mass culture.

The "will" to pass through violent fragmentation and rebirth, which Soyinka describes as the essence of Ogun and the spirit of tragic theatre, can also be related to Lacan's version of the Freudian erotic and death drives as being one drive toward the suffering and joy of ecstatic *jouissance*. But the painful, overwhelming joy of the drive's direct aim is usually avoided by the subject's meandering desires⁶⁵--sometimes represented in Yoruba myth by the trickster god Esu. For Esu not only diverts Ogun's will with palm wine, he (or the wine itself)⁶⁶ performs that trick also upon the creative god, Obatala--another name, Soyinka tells us, for the primal oneness that was once Orisa-nla.⁶⁷ While the creator, Obatala, was "moulding human beings," says Soyinka, he drank too much palm wine.⁶⁸ "His craftsman's fingers slipped badly and he moulded cripples, albinos and the blind." From a postmodern, Lacanian view, this Yoruba myth not only explains the imperfection of certain human bodies. It also relates to the

⁶³ Soyinka, *Myth* 153: "the first time, as part of the original Orisa-nla Oneness."

⁶⁴ Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 194-195.

⁶⁵ See Fink, *Clinical* 211, 241.

⁶⁶ Soyinka only refers to the wine, but see Euba 8, on the potential role of Esu in this myth.

⁶⁷ Soyinka, *Myth* 16, 152.

⁶⁸ Soyinka, *Myth* 15.

misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) that all human minds experience in the mirror-stage formation of the ego and later in life through the desires of the Other. The mask of ego slips on the subject's face, in the theatre of everyday life, like the disabled body slipping in Obatala's creative, yet drunken fingers--as the postmodern subject is formed, yet misrecognized by others whose views and desires still determine the actor's identity.

Each Yoruba god that Soyinka mentions in his mythic theory of ritual drama corresponds to a specific aspect of Lacanian subjectivity, and thus points to the potential of theatre as homeopathic remedy for the violence within human minds and societies. (1) Orisa-nla's shattering in the void shows the fragmentation and lacking being of the subject in the mirror of the (m)Other as lost, primordial Oneness. (2) Obatala's drunken errors, while moulding new human bodies, illustrate the misrecognition of the subject in the mask of ego formed by the Other's desires. (3) Esu's tricks with palm wine reveal the diversions of desire between subject and Other, producing painful symptoms to avoid the ecstasy of the drive. (4) Ogun's willful disintegration and rebirth, through the abyss between the worlds of the living, dead, and unborn, depicts the violent *jouissance* of the drive in the subject's ultimate, tragicomic submission to the cycles of life.⁶⁹ Soyinka bridges the Yoruba tradition of ritual theatre to various modern European visions: to Nietzschean sacrifice (beyond good and evil), to Artaudian totemism (as individual transformation), and to Brechtian alienation (for social change). But Soyinka also shows a potential for tragicomic communion through revolutionary stage violence--in the Yoruba spirit of Orisa-nla, Obatala, Esu, and Ogun--rather than the simple, good and evil projections of melodramatic vengeance. This involves, even for a postmodern audience, the choral communities of the living, the dead, and the unborn: the desires of the

⁶⁹ Cf. Ulli Beier's statement: "In Yoruba life tragedy and comedy are not separated. Look at Sango--the most tragic of orisa is also the greatest joker" (Abodunrin 54).

Other through which each ego is shattered and reborn many times in a person's life.⁷⁰

Tragicomic Twists

In his version of *The Bacchae*, Soyinka changes Dionysus' opening monologue to reveal an Ogunian spirit, thereby twisting Euripides' melodramatic revenge plot to stress the initial, tragic abjection of the protagonist.⁷¹ "Thebes taints me with bastardy. I am turned into an alien, some foreign outgrowth of her habitual tyranny".⁷² Here Soyinka may be expressing, through his Dionysus, an exile's bitterness against Nigeria's tyrannous military leaders, who had jailed him for two years, shortly before his writing of *The Bacchae*. (Euripides also wrote his *Bacchae* in exile.)⁷³ Soyinka may also be showing, with the added slave scenery and chorus, a postcolonial rage against Europe's habitual tyranny and slave trading in Africa. Yet, Soyinka reveals an Ogunian will to transcend the melodramatic rage of the vengeful Dionysus, by embracing divine alienation and fragmentation--as in the Greek myth of Dionysus Zagreus, the dismembered Dionysus.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ The paradigm for this, in African ritual theatre, includes both communal participation and individual spectatorship. See Ogunba, "Traditional" 15-16.

⁷¹ Cf. Katrak 49, on the Yoruba and Greek myths in Soyinka's ritual theory (but not specifically about his *Bacchae*): "Both gods, Ogun and Dionysus, entered the human community as outsiders and had difficulty being accepted."

⁷² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 1. Cf. the direct announcement of symbolic identity in the two translations that Soyinka used (changed to semiotic abjection in his own version). Murray translates Euripides opening lines: "Behold, God's son is come unto this land / Of Thebes, even I, Dionysus . . ." (7). Arrowsmith renders this with even more patriarchal certitude: "I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus, come back to Thebes, this land where I was born" (161).

⁷³ On this and other historical parallels, see Lefevere who mentions that both plays were written against the background of colonial wars, invading gods, and a dispossessed populace, André Lefevere, "Translation: Changing the Code: Soyinka's Ironic Aetiology," in *The Languages of Theatre*, ed. Ortrun Zuber (Oxford: Pergamon, 1980) 133-134.

⁷⁴ See Joseph Kaster, *Putnam's Concise Mythological Dictionary* (New York: Putnam, 1963) 178: "in the Orphic recension of the Mysteries of Dionysus, Zagreus is the child of Zeus and Persephone. Through the jealousy of

The Zagreus myth, of Dionysus torn apart by other vengeful gods, is mentioned by Soyinka in his ritual theory⁷⁵--and by Tiresias, the bacchantes, and the slave leader in his *Bacchae*.⁷⁶ But it is Pentheus, not Dionysus, who is physically dismembered, as in Euripides' original.⁷⁷ The ancient Greek rite of *sparagmos*, the tearing apart of a live human or animal body, is manifested in both plays through the offstage dismemberment of Pentheus by his mother, Agave, while she and the Theban women (as another chorus of bacchae) are possessed by the vengeful spirit of Dionysus. And yet, Soyinka shows Dionysus, from the beginning of the play, as fragmented in character--a tragic hero, rather than a simple, melodramatic force of revenge.⁷⁸ Although Dionysus does bring vengeance, through "the blood and breasts" of his "wild-haired" bacchantes, he first appears as a character torn between his divine and human, native and foreign aspects, when he emerges from his abject mother's tomb in the opening scene.⁷⁹ Thus, Soyinka focuses on the Ogunian element of the Dionysus myth: not only the dismembering, but also the transformative passage between worlds by both Dionysus and Pentheus, for the sake of communal rejuvenation.

Hera, the child Zagreus was beguiled by the Titans, who tore him to pieces and proceeded to devour him. Zeus then appeared on the scene, and blasted the Titans with his thunderbolts. He succeeded in saving the heart of Zagreus, and gave it to Semele to eat, and from her and Zeus the divine child was reborn as Dionysus." See also Guthrie 44-46, on the name Zagreus as connecting Dionysus to an earlier form of the god Zeus in Crete, with similar rites of *omophagia* (eating raw).

⁷⁵ Soyinka, *Myth* 158.

⁷⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 11, 14, 15.

⁷⁷ Cf. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977) 250-51, regarding Dionysus' role as "executioner" in Euripides' play, yet as "victim" (or scapegoat) of the *sparagmos* at other moments in his career.

⁷⁸ Cf. Victor Castellani, "Everything to do with Dionysus: *Urdrama*, Euripidean Melodrama, and Tragedy," in *Melodrama*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 2, on Euripides' *Bacchae* as "melodramatic" from Dionysus' view and "that of his aunts and his nymph-allies." See also Ira Hauptman, "Defending Melodrama," in *Melodrama* 284.

⁷⁹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 1-2.

Soyinka's Dionysus arrives in Thebes already dis-membered: alienated from his membership ties to homeland and human family, "a scapegoat of a god," as he calls himself⁸⁰ -- rather than as Euripides' triumphant avenger. Instead of threatening Thebes, the African writer's Dionysus expresses his *jouissance* calmly, to the modern postcolonial audience, through a paradoxical, all-inclusive logic. "I am the gentle, jealous joy. Vengeful and kind. An essence that will not exclude nor be excluded. If you are Man or Woman, I am Dionysos. Accept." He then describes his Dionysian spirit as an objective force, detached from any personal motive of revenge. Instead of explaining his mythic family drama, as in Euripides' play, this Dionysus tells the story of an erotic/death-drive "it" (or Freudian id, *das Es*) as chthonic seed. (Some of the place names he uses have a particular resonance for us in the twenty-first century.)

A seed of Zeus was sown in Semele my mother earth, here on this spot. It has burgeoned through the cragged rocks of far Afghanistan, burst the banks of fertile Tmolus, sprung oases through the red-eyed sands of Arabia, flowered in hill and gorge of dark Ethiopia. It pounds in the blood and breasts of my wild-haired women . . . through Phrygia and the isles of Crete. It beats on the walls of Thebes, bringing vengeance on all who deny my holy origin and call my mother--slut".⁸¹

The motive of Soyinka's Dionysus is not the simple revenge of a melodramatic family feud, but a complex, tragic drive, like that of Ogun. He will sacrifice himself, accepting the role of scapegoat, not only to turn the tables on Pentheus, but also to reconnect the psychic worlds of living, dead, and unborn (or of symbolic, Real, and imaginary, in a Lacanian sense). As Soyinka's plot proceeds, Dionysus will unite the abject spirits of the dead and living slaves in the

⁸⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 1.

⁸¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 2.

opening scene--while returning his diasporic, postcolonial cult of bacchae⁸² to their mythic motherland and unborn fate.

After his prologue, this Dionysus stays onstage (unlike Euripides' who exits). Standing "still, statuesque," he then becomes invisible to other characters who enter in Soyinka's added scenes of ritual procession and revolutionary desire.⁸³ First, a herdsman enters and talks with the slave leader (from the group at labor), remarking on the distant, approaching sounds of Eleusian priests and vestal virgins, chanting in procession. But as the leader and other slaves drink from a jug of wine brought by the herdsman, they also talk about overthrowing that ritual order, which uses slaves as scapegoats, as whipping boys.⁸⁴ The herdsman explains that the scapegoat's blood must be shed to "cleanse the new year of the rot of the old or the world will die".⁸⁵ But the slave leader complains that this is class abuse:⁸⁶ "the rites bring us nothing! Let those to whom the profits go bear the burden of the old year dying." The herdsman replies by pointing to the crucified skeletons as signifying the fate of "rebellious slaves."

The statuesque figure of Dionysus onstage, watching invisibly like the theatre audience, becomes an imaginary / symbolic lens to reflect and refocus the abject suffering of living and dead slaves, their ritual submission as scapegoats, and their rebellious energies.⁸⁷ When the

⁸² Cf. Soyinka, *Bacchae* vii, on the historical spread of ancient Dionysian cults "in the wake of the wars of Greek colonialism."

⁸³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 2.

⁸⁴ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 3.

⁸⁵ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 4.

⁸⁶ See also Soyinka, *Bacchae* x: "What the class-conscious myths of Dionysos achieved was to shift the privilege for the supply of scapegoats to the classes which had already monopolised all other privileges."

⁸⁷ In his analysis of Euripides' *Bacchae* (in the introduction to his own), Soyinka also sees that ancient prototype as representing a slave and urban working class revolt: "the message is clearly subversive. For *The Bacchae* is not a play of accommodation but of group challenge and conflict" (ix). Yet, Soyinka makes that aspect much more explicit in his version through the added slave chorus and its leader.

Eleusian procession arrives, however, another catalytic figure appears in the role of scapegoat. The priests and vestals are followed by an "Old Man" being whipped by others in procession.⁸⁸ He turns out to be the blind seer, Tiresias, and he collapses to his knees as the procession approaches the slave group. Dionysus saves Tiresias from further lashes, by revealing himself then in a lightning flash. After the priests flee and the vestals and slaves convert to Dionysian enthusiasm, Tiresias reprimands the ritual floggers for their overly enthusiastic participation in the onstage violence. "Blind, stupid, bloody brutes! Can you see how you've covered me in weals? Can't you bastards ever tell the difference between ritual and reality. . . . Symbolic flogging, that is what I keep trying to drum into your thick heads".⁸⁹

By adding this ritual and its violent, yet comic twists (plus a subsequent dialogue between Tiresias and Dionysus), Soyinka draws out the symbolic, imaginary, and Real strands of sacrifice connecting dead and living slaves, foreign and local bacchae (including the vestals), and the main characters in the drama, in their subsequent sacrificial drive. The slave leader uses Ogun's iron (c)ore symbolism to express his will to join the *chora* of Dionysian revolt, even if it means the shattering of familiar ritual orders: "not with / The scapegoat bogey of a slave uprising / But with a new remorseless order, forces / Unpredictable as molten fire in mountain wombs".⁹⁰ Tiresias then shows the symbolic and imaginary conceits of his role as scapegoat in the ritual procession. Not only does he insist on "symbolic flogging," but he also confesses to Dionysus that he wears a fawn-skin under his clothes to protect his own skin from the lashes.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 5.

⁸⁹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 9.

⁹⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 8.

⁹¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 10.

And yet, when pressed by Dionysus as to why he chose the scapegoat role, Tiresias gives two reasons that reveal the Real, social and personal dimensions beyond such theatrical tricks. The terms he uses also echo today's postcolonial conflicts in Africa and the perverse turns of postmodern culture. First, Tiresias says he wanted to save Kadmos and Thebes from a real revolution by taking the slave's place as scapegoat: "the situation is touch and go. If one more slave had been killed at the cleansing rites, or sacrificed to that insatiable altar of nation-building . . ." ⁹² But next, Tiresias admits that he wanted the real experience of pain: "I have longed to know what flesh is made of. What suffering is. Feel the taste of blood instead of merely foreseeing it. Taste the ecstasy of rejuvenation after long organising its ritual".⁹³ Dionysus promises Tiresias that "Thebes will have its full sacrifice," hinting at the Ogunian plunge of Pentheus by the end of the play. But the old priest already begins to sense the symbolic, imaginary, and Real convergence--through "a small crack in the dead crust of the soul." At the distant sound of the bacchic *chora*, his "veins race," and at the prompting of Dionysus, the old blind man joins in the dance.

After Dionysus leaves, the bacchae arrive, enthusiastically seeking him. But in Soyinka's version the slave chorus also returns and the two choruses converse, through their leaders, sharing their Theban abjection and Dionysian ecstasy. "Fellow aliens," says the slave leader to the foreign women, "let me ask you--do you know Bromius?"⁹⁴ This question, from the local slave chorus to the bacchae who have arrived in Thebes with Dionysus (Bromius), suggests that "knowledge" of the god has an internal source: the *chora* of alienation experienced by each of these subcultures, whether in diasporic wandering or colonial enslavement. Soyinka's double

⁹² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 11.

⁹³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 12.

⁹⁴ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 15.

chorus then chants an "old hymn to godhead" that involves an explicit tie to African culture and cosmology.⁹⁵ "Tribute to the holy hills of Ethiopia / Caves of unborn, and the dark ancestral spirits. / Home of primal drums round which the dead and living / Dance".⁹⁶ Not only are the worlds of living, dead, and unborn evoked here, but a reference is also made to Ethiopia (as in Dionysus' prologue) where ancient Yoruba culture may have begun, according to legend, before migrating to west Africa.

Soyinka then relates the ecstatic song and dance of his double Dionysian chorus across time as well as place, to our own century. Their music, according to his stage directions, is like "the theme-song of *Zorba the Greek*--with its strange mixture of nostalgia, violence, and death".⁹⁷ The slave leader turns into a rock star in "the emotional colour and temperature of a European pop scene." More specifically, he has "the lilt and energy of the black hot gospellers." He and the chorus both become "physically possessed . . . as would be seen in a teenage pop audience." Soyinka thus joins the ancient to the postmodern, and the European to the African *chora* of revolutionary ecstasy. But this added scene of Dionysian violence also foreshadows the ultimate, offstage *sparagmos* of Pentheus. The chorus of women and slaves rush at their leader and tear his clothes. Then "a sudden human wave engulfs him and he is completely submerged under screaming, 'possessed' lungs and bodies." By adding this ecstatic musical scene of "self-release",⁹⁸ Soyinka offers his audience a prior, symbolic and imaginary experience to apply during the play's final Ogunian sacrifice, kept offstage as in Euripides' original--to make that

⁹⁵ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 16.

⁹⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 17-18.

⁹⁷ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 18.

⁹⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 19.

mortal offering Real, through the spectators' own imaginations, participating communally, as another chorus.

However, just after this tragic preview, Soyinka twists his plot into a comic scene of vaudevillian slapstick, vulgar jokes, and prophetic wisdom, with Tiresias and Kadmos, who have come out of hiding, after witnessing (like the theatre audience) the violent choral passion and the slave leader's narrow escape. With the mad Dionysian chorus now gone, but their energy still lingering, the old men show their "new vitality".⁹⁹ While preening in their fawn-skin costumes and ivy-wreath crowns, they joke about whether Dionysus is circumcised, and (with Judeo-Christian, postcolonial irony) about how many slaves' foreskins it would take "to make a Bacchic smock".¹⁰⁰ They also compare their new imaginary and symbolic egos, in the mirror of Dionysian choral ecstasy, with the resistant ego of Kadmos' grandson, King Pentheus. "If you held out the mirror of longing to him, he will utterly fail to recognize his own image or else he'll smash the mirror in anger".¹⁰¹ The grammatical shift in this sentence spoken by Tiresias, from subjunctive to future tense, shows that he is not just posing a hypothetical event ("if you held"), but prophesying actual events in the play ("he will"). Pentheus will fail to recognize his own image in Dionysus *and* he will try to smash that mirror in anger. (Later, his mother, Agave, will also misrecognize him, as he spies on her and the other bacchae; then smash him like a mirror while he wears their Dionysian costume.) Through the terms of Tiresias' oracle, Soyinka makes the violence of the play more a matter of tragicomic fate, rather than melodramatic revenge, especially in relation to Yoruba myth and Lacanian theory.

The old men in this scene, as comic characters embracing Dionysian vitality, are the

⁹⁹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 23.

¹⁰⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 22.

¹⁰¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 24.

mirror images of their young king's fierce repression of that same power, yet eventual submission to it and its costuming, in subsequent scenes. Like the infant in Lacan's mirror stage, the comic *jouissance* of the old men, as egos reborn through the desire of the Dionysian Other, also reflects the erotic/death drive at the cutting edge of their joyful mirror. The drive's alienation and fragmentation, masked by their jokes, will be acted out through the sacrifice of Thebe's phallic leader, well beyond circumcision and castration. En route to that fatal meeting with bacchic violence, Pentheus will "fail to recognize his own image." He will dress in a fawn-skin, thinking that it is his own armor, while drunk with the wine of Dionysus.

The terms of Tiresias' prophesy relate to both postmodern theory and Yoruba myth: to Lacanian *méconnaissance* (ego misrecognition) in the Other's desire and to Obatala's drunken creativity in misshaping human forms. Prior to wearing the costume, Pentheus will rage against the Dionysus cult, as a "mirror of longing" held out to him, fulfilling Tiresias' prophesy that "he'll smash the mirror in anger." Yet this again speaks to the abject rage of the schizoid, postmodern subject, whose Real terror of fragmentation--behind the multiple masks of imaginary egos and symbolic superegos--erupts as aggressive id, in fantasy or reality. Likewise, in the Yoruba tradition advocated by Soyinka, the originary smashing of Orisa-nla, as mirror of primal Oneness, must be ritually reenacted by the Ogunian actor, crossing the transitional abyss between worlds, becoming dismembered and reborn for the sake of the communal audience. And this is precisely how Soyinka recrafts his Pentheus, through the mirror of Dionysus as Ogunian Other. Soyinka's Pentheus is not just a victim of vengeful tricks; he converts to the Dionysian spirit with his will to see, and thus becomes, the sacrifice. In the same mirror that he has smashed and misrecognized himself, he finds his ultimate, sacrificial identity (or Lacanian *sinthome*) as both spectator and actor who is shattered.

Before that second arc of the tragicomic plot begins, Soyinka concludes its initial arc (of Dionysus' entry into Thebes and plague-like infection of chorus, slaves, and elders) with symbolic slapstick. Like the satyr play as dessert to ancient Greek tragedy, but with a modern, Brechtian gest, Soyinka shows a comic perversion of the prior *sparagmos* of the slave leader and the future dismembering of Pentheus in the "music-hall" scene of Kadmos' farcical castration.¹⁰² The retired king tries to magnify his reborn Dionysian ego through a new invention: a telescopic thyrsus as walking stick. But when he demonstrates this phallic prop of his upper-class stylishness, before the blind Tiresias as his audience, the stick collapses and Kadmos falls to the ground. Of course, when he straightens it out and tries again, it collapses again. And again, a third time. Then Tiresias tells him to put it back in his trousers.¹⁰³ Beyond the slapstick joke, Tiresias offers some more prophetic advice, relating to both Kadmos and his grandson, Pentheus. "When you step into the dance you'll lose all your silly notions. You accept, and that's the real stature of man." Thus, the satyr scene of Kadmos' trick phallus foreshadows further plot twists, through the Esu-like magic of Dionysus.¹⁰⁴ These eventually lead to Pentheus' acceptance of an Ogunian role and its sacrificial climax: his tragic fall from the phallic pine tree into the transitional abyss (offstage), to be torn apart by his mother and other bacchae. Yet in Soyinka's revised, tragicomic ending, the dead Pentheus finds new life onstage, through the "real stature" of his decapitated head on the bacchic May-pole, in the final step of the communal dance.

¹⁰² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 25.

¹⁰³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 26.

¹⁰⁴ The walking stick joke, putting Kadmos on all fours yet giving him a Dionysian rebirth, might also recall the Sphinx's riddle that Oedipus solves. Soyinka shows the old man in all three stages of life, with two legs, then three, and four--and two again as he joins Tiresias in the dance.

The Villain's Will to Sacrifice

King Pentheus arrives, enforcing phallogocentric order, right after the phallic slapstick scene. Soon, he accuses Tiresias of fomenting rebellion (as Oedipus does to the same character in Sophocles' play). In his Cambridge lectures, Soyinka mentions this moment in his own version of *The Bacchae* and describes Pentheus as "properly opposed to the presence and activities of the god Dionysus in his kingdom".¹⁰⁵ Why properly? Because Soyinka has added the initial ritual procession with Tiresias as false scapegoat. This lends a greater validity to the subsequent critique of the priest by Pentheus (though he has similar lines in Euripides' version):¹⁰⁶ "Another god revealed is a new way opened / Into men's pockets, profits from offerings. / Power over private lives--and state affairs".¹⁰⁷ Despite such accusations, Tiresias eventually expresses a tragic sympathy and fear for the young king, as in Aristotle's formula for audience catharsis. "I pity Pentheus / His terrible madness. There is no cure . . ."¹⁰⁸ No cure from his madness, that is. But there is a Lacanian cure for Pentheus *through* his madness, through embracing his *sinthome* (fundamental symptom)--shown in Soyinka's play by the Ogunian conversion of Pentheus in later scenes. His self-sacrifice, as personal cure, might then create a vicarious, communal cure for the watching audience, in Aristotle's sense of catharsis, to the degree that spectators have pitied and feared his fate, following the lead of the prophetic analyst, Tiresias.

Pentheus already demonstrates a symptomatic projection--and avoidance--of the self-

¹⁰⁵ Soyinka, *Myth* 12.

¹⁰⁶ See Murray's translation: "Yes, you want still another god revealed to men / so you can pocket the profits from burnt offerings / and bird-watching" (165).

¹⁰⁷ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 29.

¹⁰⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 34.

sacrificial drive within him, through his fears of slave revolution, of bacchic madness, and of the blind Tiresias gaining power "over state affairs." These threats give him the ostensible right, as with similar dictators throughout history (in Europe, Africa, and elsewhere) to extend the violent repression, as social superego, against "the rot and creeping / Poison in the body of the state".¹⁰⁹ When Kadmos reminds him of the terrifying *sparagmos* of his cousin Actaeon,¹¹⁰ the king again displaces any fearful awareness of his own drive and similar fate, by desiring the same for Dionysus: "I thank you for suggesting a most / Befitting fate for that sorcerer when we find him".¹¹¹ This reaction by Pentheus is not given in Euripides' play (although his Kadmos also mentions Actaeon). Soyinka twists the irony even further to foreshadow Pentheus' own path toward a tragic fate, in his violent judgment for Dionysus, whom he misrecognizes as a mere "sorcerer." Pentheus is not just a melodramatic villain, or a simple antagonist to Dionysus. He becomes a tragic hero--falling into sacrifice due to the *hamartia* of his hubris (the error in his judgment through pride). Yet along with this Brechtian side of the Aristotelian model, showing the ruler's tragic flaw and fate as mistaken social choice, Soyinka also shows the rightness in the misstep. As the Artaudian "plague" of Dionysus spreads throughout Pentheus' kingdom,¹¹² he will be transformed by his own errors in repressing it, becoming infected with its Ogunian drive, through the bacchic elders (Kadmos and Tiresias) and through the maternal *chora* of Agave, converted virgins, foreign maenads, and slaves.

¹⁰⁹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 27.

¹¹⁰ Kadmos says to Pentheus: "remember / That dreadful death your cousin Actaeon died / When those man-eating hounds reared / By his own hands savaged him, tore him / Limb from limb for boasting that his prowess / In the hunt surpassed the skill of Artemis. Do not let his fate be yours" (Soyinka, *Bacchae* 34).

¹¹¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 34. A little later, Pentheus clarifies that he plans to stone Dionysus, as the "nearest fate I can devise to Actaeon's / Piecemeal death at the jaws of his hunting hounds" (Soyinka, *Bacchae* 35).

¹¹² Cf. Artaud's essay, "The Theater and the Plague" (*Theater and Its Double* 15-32).

This is not easy to see in Euripides' version. But Soyinka's tragicomic, Afro-European twists position the voyeuristic desires of the theatre audience, watching the Dionysian rites throughout the play, as pointing to the offstage climax of Pentheus' violent fate, when he watches the bacchae from the pine tree, and then becomes their sacrificial victim. The abyss between divine and human worlds, crossed by Ogun in the Yoruba myth and by the Ogunian actor in Soyinka's theory, thus finds its parallel in the choral abyss at the edge of the stage, at various points in the play. As already mentioned, Soyinka's slave chorus and leader offer the audience a voyeuristic preview of Pentheus' Ogunian fate. Although the slave leader moves his community in the opposite direction from Pentheus' choice for his city, toward embracing rather than repressing the Dionysian cult, they both become sacrificial scapegoats, through the bacchic goat-song (*tragodoi*). But Soyinka shows the *sparagmos* of the slave leader onstage, putting the theatre spectators, a priori, into Pentheus' ultimate offstage position as phallic (tree seat) voyeur of the violent, ritual *chora*. At some level the audience shares Pentheus' contradictory character--his repressive superego (not wanting to allow too much ecstasy of those others onstage) and his voyeuristic id (wanting to see more of the others' passionate rites)--even before his heroic ego appears onstage in Soyinka's drama. The wisdom of Tiresias' joking prophesy and the comic relief of Kadmos' phallic thyrsus also set up the entry of Pentheus, as superego voyeur, mirroring the audience in his trip through Dionysian hallucinations to the Real fate of his drive--with a final, tragicomic vision added by Soyinka, which may show each spectator's fatal drive as well.

Pentheus is still a villain in Soyinka's drama, willing the sacrifice of others, until his Ogunian conversion to sacrificing himself for the sake of the community. In another added scene, after the slave leader's *sparagmos* and the elders' slapstick routine, Pentheus not only

rejects the warnings of Kadmos and Tiresias (as in Euripides), he also slaps an old slave so hard that he "knocks him flat".¹¹³ This sudden response of explicit, onstage violence to the old man's timid questioning of the king's order--about whether he really wants to destroy "the hut of the holy man" (Dionysus)--evokes the sympathy of the audience for the slave as victim, and fear of Pentheus as villainous. Yet, it also previews Pentheus' own tragic fall, through his self-destructive drive, and the audience's complicity in willing that eventual sacrifice.

That future fall of Pentheus to the choral power of the bacchae (offstage) is also foreshadowed in the surprising, bacchic power of the slave chorus, extending the old slave's questioning of Pentheus into outright defiance (onstage). "We are strangers but we know the meaning of madness / To hit an old servant / With frost on his head . . ."¹¹⁴ The slave leader goes even further than his chorus, becoming possessed with the god, as in his earlier scene of being like a "black hot gospeller".¹¹⁵ Here his chant moves from "Dionysos shall avenge this profanity" to "I have drunk the stars. . . . And yielded to the power of life, the god in me," and even further to speak in the god's voice: "I am Dionysos".¹¹⁶ The chorus of other slaves intones with him (until his final movement of personal identification): "repeating each line after him, as if this is a practised liturgy. Pentheus's face registers horror and disbelief as he recognizes the implications of this".¹¹⁷ One implication is of a potential slave rebellion. But another may be the dawning recognition by Pentheus of the god within him as well, of the Ogunian life and death drive that Dionysus personifies and the slave leader then describes. "I am the life that's trodden

¹¹³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 36.

¹¹⁴ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 37.

¹¹⁵ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 18.

¹¹⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 38-39.

¹¹⁷ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 38.

by the dance of joy / My flesh, my death, my re-birth is the song / That rises from men's lips, they know not how. / But also, / The wild blood of the predator. . . ." In the mirror of the slave leader's choral communion with the god, Pentheus might see his own subsequent transformation from being the vengeful predator of Dionysus to becoming the prey itself, as vessel of the god's death, dismemberment, and rebirth. In the larger ritual of the play's performance, Soyinka's Ogunian actors might also lead the audience in a transformation from vengeance and voyeurism to tragicomic awareness of split-subjectivity, as predators and prey of the sacrificial spirits in our mass media.¹¹⁸

Spectators' Desires

According to Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink, "The pervert seems to be cognizant, at some level, of the fact that there is always some *jouissance* related to the enunciation of the moral law. The neurotic would prefer not to see it, since it strikes him or her as indecent, obscene".¹¹⁹ Soyinka's *Bacchae* evokes a greater awareness of perverse desires and *jouissance* in both the moral law and its theatrical enunciation, even for neurotics who might prefer not to see. Through additional scenes of choral violence onstage, his *Bacchae* summons the cruel, voyeuristic desires of the theatre audience, creating an Artaudian vortex at the stage edge. But then, in a Brechtian twist, the play also distances the audience, through the sadistic morality and voyeuristic foolishness of Pentheus (introduced by the comical prophesies of his elders). These

¹¹⁸ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute -- or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000) 43-44, on the "passage from *tragique* to *moque-comique*" in the postmodern: "there is a horror so deep that it can no longer be 'sublimated' into tragic dignity, and is for that reason approachable only through an eerie parodic imitation/doubling of parody itself." Cf. Jacques-Alain Miller, "The Desire of Lacan and His Complex Relation to Freud," *Lacanian Ink* 14 (Spring 1999): 19, on the passage from Freudian tragedy to Lacanian comedy.

¹¹⁹ Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 190.

gests reveal the spectators' own contradictory desires while watching the play: to morally repress and yet voyeuristically glimpse the obscene, bacchic rites offstage.

At the slave leader's identification with the god's voice ("I am Dionysos") and the chorus's desire to join him ("Lead us--!"), Pentheus interrupts their revolutionary fervor with a quick, castrative threat: "I'll cut out the tongue of the next man to utter that name Bromius or Dionysos!".¹²⁰ Then the abject figure of repressed choral power appears again onstage, this time as a captive, bound and surrounded by soldiers. But he immediately defies Pentheus' command himself: "Who calls on Dionysos!" Not only does Soyinka add to Euripides' drama the slave chorus, their leader's identification with the god, Pentheus' verbal threat, and Dionysus' own violation; the Nigerian dramatist also puts a Brechtian twist to this rebellious scene. The stage direction reads: "There is a dead freeze of several moments."¹²¹ This semiotic freeze--showing a tableau of Dionysus and his followers, bound by, yet defiant against Pentheus--interrupts the momentum and introduces a shift in the character of the orisa-like god. Rather than rage against his repressive captor, as the slave chorus had begun to do, Dionysus will put on a serene, Apollonian mask. He will lead Pentheus and the theatre audience towards further tableaux and pantomime dreams (added by Soyinka), setting up historical parallels from ancient Greece to tribal Africa to New Testament Palestine, thus involving the postmodern lures of cinematic and televisual voyeurism--through this initial still shot, which suspends the action and increases the desire to see more.

After the freeze Pentheus inspects his prisoner, as his officer reports the "miracle" of how

¹²⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 39.

¹²¹ When including *The Bacchae* in his *Collected Plays*, Soyinka added: "Hold for between thirty and forty-five seconds, sixty if possible" (Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) 265). He also removed a footnote about a possible "Interval" (intermission) at this point (*Bacchae* 39).

the offstage, imprisoned bacchae have "shed their chains".¹²² As in Euripides' version, Pentheus continues to misrecognize Dionysus as merely a priest or sorcerer of the cult. Dionysus, now an Esu-like trickster god (similar to Euripides' character), plays along with many double entendres, such as: "The god himself / Initiated me." This also begins his Obatala-effect on Pentheus, luring the ruler into Apollonian dreams, through Dionysian drunkenness, which will ultimately lead to his own malformation in deadly, choral rebirth. Even now, Dionysus initiates Pentheus by invoking the king's curiosity about the cult,¹²³ then reacting critically: "Will you reduce it all to a court / Of inquiry? A fact-finding commission such as / One might set up to decide the cause / Of a revolt in your salt-mines, or a slave uprising?".¹²⁴ Soyinka thus connects the ancient Greek ruler, in his voyeuristic desire for judicial control, to the postmodern spectator--through this implicit reference to the governmental commissions and juridical news media of today's Europe, Africa, and United States. But Soyinka will also show his theatre audience more of the ancient ritual sacrifice, to answer Pentheus' question: "You say you saw the god? What form / Did he assume?".¹²⁵ Unlike most of today's theatre, film, and TV, this play will take its audience into the Real, obscene drive of choral sacrifice, beyond the formal tricks of voyeuristic desire and superego repression.

Before Pentheus gives a castrative cut to the "girlish curls" of the god,¹²⁶ as in Euripides' drama, Soyinka adds a verbal image of the bacchic cult's mountain rituals. His Dionysus offers

¹²² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 39-40.

¹²³ Pentheus says to Dionysus: "Your answers are designed / To make me curious" (*Bacchae* 42).

¹²⁴ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 41.

¹²⁵ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 43. Soyinka's wording here is taken verbatim from Murray's translation of Euripides (174), although the rhythm of the line break changes.

¹²⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 44.

this as a metaphor for the theatre of the mind, being revealed to the king and the postmodern audience through onstage and offstage rites. "Think of a dark mountain / Pierced by myriads of tiny flames, then see / The human mind as that dark mountain whose caves / Are filled with self-inflicted fears. Dionysos / Is the flame that puts such fears to flight, a flame / That must be gently lit, or else consume you." Thus, the onstage cutting of each lock of the god's hair gains a new meaning, especially since the cutting is done directly by the king in Soyinka's version.¹²⁷ It symbolizes the self-inflicted wounds of fear and abject rage that Pentheus already suffers within his own mind--and will suffer further at the hands of his bacchic mother and chorus on the mountain offstage.

For now, Pentheus has projected the fear of his own *jouissance* upon the evil Other and he seems to be gaining power over the foreign god in the castrative gestures of cutting Dionysus' hair and taking away his phallic thyrsus. But the ruler's vengeful rage toward moral order will become--through his own acts of voyeurism and transvestism--a self-immolating drive. Eventually, his own ecstatic, choral flame will put to flight the myriad fires of perverse fears within Pentheus' mind, as he becomes more and more consumed by the intoxicating visions, wine, and role-playing that Dionysus will offer to him--and through him to the theatre audience. Hopefully, however, those spectators will experience a "gently lit" and beneficial sweep of the Dionysian flame, in the ritual catharsis of their "self-inflicting fears," through the Ogunian sacrifice of Pentheus and of the actor playing him. If so, Pentheus will not merely be sacrificed in some offstage fictional space, but also in the Real of the audience, in the dark mountain of its human minds, as communal *chora*.

Of course, the way the cathartic flame plays through the audience depends a great deal

¹²⁷ This is similar to Arrowsmith's translation (175-76), but different from Murray's, where "soldiers cut off the tress" (30).

on the performance of the drama and its co-creation in different spectators' minds. Some may watch in a more Brechtian, critically distanced way, and be only singed into self and social reflection. Others may become more fully inflamed with Artaudian cruelty, leaping Ogun-like into the fourth stage abyss of their own lacking being, between living, dead, and unborn worlds. But Soyinka increases the likelihood of that collective flame as a communion rite, by reshaping the abject *chora* of the next choral ode. "As Dionysos is chained, his Bacchantes begin a noise, a kind of ululating which is found among some African and Oriental peoples and signifies great distress, warning, or agitation".¹²⁸ This non-verbal echolalia¹²⁹ increases and spreads from the foreign female chorus to Soyinka's additional slave chorus, "swelling into deafening proportions."

Instead of Euripides' single chorus of female maenads, calling for the mythic Dionysus to descend from Olympus and take vengeance on Pentheus, Soyinka creates a choral dialogue between bacchantes and slaves, beginning with their infectious, pre-verbal, ululating cries. Although Euripides' chorus describes the "male womb" of Zeus through which Dionysus was born,¹³⁰ Soyinka's double chorus of males and females becomes the dithyrambic (twofold) *chora*, as their abject ululations shift into chthonic birth pains. First, their semiotic breathing resonates with the thundrous earthquake that precedes the god's reappearance.¹³¹ Then they give birth, as collective womb, through the choral chant that Soyinka adds between the lead

¹²⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 46.

¹²⁹ See Julia Kristeva, "Within the Microcosm of the Talking Cure," in *Interpreting Lacan*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 37-38: "in echolalias, intonations, irrecuperable ellipses, asyntactical and alogical constructions--in all of these divergences from codified discourse . . . the semiotic *chora* appears. . . ."

¹³⁰ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. by William Arrowsmith, in *Euripides V* (New York: University of Chicago, 1959) 178.

¹³¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 51.

bacchante, repeating the word "earth," and the group's one-word responses: "Earth . . . Swell . . . Earth . . . Grow . . . Earth . . . Move . . . Earth . . . Strain . . . Earth . . . Groan . . . Earth . . . Clutch . . . Earth . . . Thrust . . . Earth . . . Burst . . . Earth . . . TAKE!"¹³²

Dionysus returns through this choral thunder and earthquake--appearing, as at the beginning of the play, in the *chora* of his dead mother's tomb (but this time with flames around his feet). Euripides' Dionysus returns with a violent, raging voice: "Let the earthquake come! Shatter the floor of the world!"¹³³ However, Soyinka's Dionysus resurrects calmly, in contrast to the terror of his chorus: "Why do you tremble? / Look up. Look at me . . . All is well".¹³⁴ Rather than a vengeful Dionysus, in fierce command of the lightning: "Consume with flame the palace of Pentheus!";¹³⁵ this Dionysus presents an Apollonian, Obatala-like serenity, explaining to his chorus how he escaped imprisonment and fooled Pentheus: "With ease. No effort was required".¹³⁶ And yet, Dionysus also reveals his Esu aspect to the chorus, telling how he tricked Pentheus, by evoking the king's rage and destructiveness. "I made the sick desires / Of his mind his goal, and he pursued them. / He fed on the vapors of his own malignant hate, pursued and roped mirages in the stable . . ." ¹³⁷ Then Dionysus describes his own actions as a separate persona (like the orisas Ogun and Sango), destroying Pentheus' palace through earthquake and lightning. "That moment came Dionysos. / He shook the roof of the palace of

¹³² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 52-53. In Soyinka's script, the first bacchante repeats the word "earth" and the chorus responds with each active verb.

¹³³ Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 180.

¹³⁴ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 54.

¹³⁵ Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 180.

¹³⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 54.

¹³⁷ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 55.

Pentheus. . . . Razed the palace to the ground, reduced it / To utter ruins." This exposition by Dionysus is very similar to Euripides' version. But Soyinka's *Bacchae* will show more onstage of the Esu-like trickery of his Dionysus, bringing out further Obatalan delusions through a drunken Pentheus, which will focus the Ogun-like death drive of the king toward his ultimate offstage sacrifice. In this way the play also warns the audience about its sacrificial drives in the mirages of today's Dionysian screens.

Signifying Chains and Imaginary Mirrors

After Pentheus returns to the stage, a herdsman gives another foreshadowing of the king's fate (as in Euripides), describing the *sparagmos* of cows offstage by the Dionysian bacchae, including Agave.¹³⁸ This spurs Pentheus' desire to see the women in their wild state--first as a warrior, then as a transvestite and peeping Tom, under the spell of Dionysus. But Soyinka adds several mime scenes, delaying the cross-dressing of Pentheus, and further teasing out the voyeurism of the theatre audience. Soyinka also changes how Dionysus casts his spell on the king, showing a mirror-stage magic and symbolic logic to the god's semiotic, choral power. Rather than simply convincing Pentheus to wear a women's dress and the bacchic ornaments as a disguise, Dionysus first warns his Lacanian subject of the signifying chains that structure his unconscious desires, and then shows him the hypnotic, therapeutic imagery that "loosens" such chains.¹³⁹

"You Pentheus . . . are a man of chains. . . . You breathe chains, talk chains, eat chains, dream chains, think chains . . . molten iron issuing from the furnace of your so-called kingly

¹³⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 60-61.

¹³⁹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 66. Cf. Segal 287, on Euripides' Dionysus, whose "play on and with words . . . creates a mirror for language that reflects the hidden [Lacanian] Other."

will".¹⁴⁰ This iron chain metaphor relates not only to the Ogunian aspect of Soyinka's Dionysus, and its sacrificial force in Pentheus, but also to the signifying chains issuing from the unconscious furnace of every human mind, producing particular, characteristic symptoms, according to Lacanian theory. The chain issues, too, from the *chora* of maternal loss (in Kristeva's theory), as indicated by Dionysus' subsequent words and gestures: "It has replaced your umbilical cord and issues from this point".¹⁴¹ Dionysus touches Pentheus on the navel and turns him gently around and around. "[It] winds about you all the way back into the throat where it issues forth again in one unending cycle." This imaginary chain may symbolize the moral restrictiveness and violent rage of Pentheus' ruling character. Yet it also illustrates the chain of specific signifiers structuring each human character onstage, and each person in the audience, giving meaning and symptomatic repetition to the choral lack of being in their breathing, talking, eating, dreaming, and thinking.

Dionysus then uses his hand in a different gesture, which offers Pentheus (and similar Lacanian subjects in the theatre audience) a mirror stage revelation, pointing to the Real behind the ego image and its perverse reflections, toward the navel of the dream or signifying chain. According to Soyinka's stage direction, Dionysus "holds his hand before Pentheus' eyes, like a mirror".¹⁴² Here the Other's gesture not only captures the king's ego in a mirror stage trance; it also shows Pentheus his own perverse image and the Real lack of being behind it. "Look well in the mirror, Pentheus. What beast is this? Do you recognise it? Have you ever seen the like? In all your wanderings have your eyes ever been affronted by a creature so gross, so unnatural, so obscene?" Then Pentheus "shakes off his hypnotic state, [and] tries to snatch the 'mirror' but

¹⁴⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 65.

¹⁴¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 66.

¹⁴² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 66.

clutches at nothing." The god has shown him that the grotesque immorality of others, which he has struggled so violently to repress, is actually his own beastliness as he fears it--the desire of the Other in the king. Yet this obscene desire of gross, Dionysian creatures, whether expressed by the bacchae or repressed within Pentheus, is merely a mirage of phallic *jouissance*, repeating the moral chains of signification in a perverse way. Dionysus thus gives Pentheus a glimpse of the nothingness that drives him toward sacrifice--toward an Other *jouissance* of the body and of other Yoruba worlds. But this glimpse of Real lack behind the mirage may also be cathartic for postmodern Euro-American spectators, even those raised in the mass media's virtual realities.

Between Lacanian and Yoruba Worlds

In his theory of ritual theatre, Soyinka refers to the three Yoruba worlds of the living, dead, and unborn, adding the "fourth stage" of cosmic/ritual passage as the transitional abyss between them, which theatre (re)presents. While working with individual patients in a very different cultural tradition, the Lacanian analyst also focuses on the dead and unborn worlds within living human minds. Psychoanalytic treatment evokes the transitional abyss between such worlds (also in Winnicott's sense of a transitional space and object, substituting for the maternal relation). Like Dionysus turning Pentheus to face his own fearful, perverse desires, and then to play out the sacrificial drive within him, the Lacanian analyst effects a ritual passage of the patient across a fundamental fantasy, to experience subjective destitution and identify with a primary symptom (*sinthome*) as the ultimate cure.¹⁴³ In Soyinka's ritual theory and *The Bacchae*, the Ogunian actor--whether playing Dionysus, the slave leader, Pentheus, or Agave--crosses the abyss of psychic dismemberment and rebirth, to effect a communal rite of passage

¹⁴³ See Jacques-Alain Miller, "On the Semblance in the Relation Between the Sexes," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 26.

as well. The actor's character onstage becomes like the patient's ego in analysis, put into play to be dismembered and reformed. Spectators may also risk a radical transformation of their egos, to the degree that they empathize with, yet think critically through the cruel communion rite of *The Bacchae*, especially in Soyinka's Artaudian and Brechtian revisions of the ancient cathartic drama.

Dionysus' gestures and words, about an invisible iron chain that binds Pentheus, suggest not only the signifying chains of particular symptoms in sympathetic spectators, but also the "furnace" of the Real where such symbolic production begins and ends. That alpha and omega point can be discovered through the wordplay of free association between analyst and patient, as Paul Verhaeghe describes. "During analytic treatment, free association is governed by an underlying determination, resulting in a kind of automatic memory. Clinical practice demonstrates that this process of remembrance succeeds only to a given point, after which the chain stalls and stops".¹⁴⁴ Verhaeghe explains how such a stalling point is actually the aim of Lacanian analysis: "this 'full stop' of the symbolic, the point of causality 'where it doesn't work' concerns the not-realised, the un-born in the chain of signifiers. . . . The point where the chain stalls is the very point where the Real makes its appearance".¹⁴⁵ Yoruba cosmology views the human psyche at death as passing from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors, where it eventually disintegrates, and then reforms in the world of the unborn, out of the same and yet other spiritual material, picking a specific "head" (personality) for its return to the living

¹⁴⁴ Paul Verhaeghe, "Subject and Body: Lacan's Struggle with the Real," *The Letter: Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis* 17 (Autumn 1999): 93.

¹⁴⁵ Verhaeghe, "Subject and Body" 93-94.

world as a new child.¹⁴⁶ A similar process of disintegration and rebirth is performed by the Ogunian actor, according to Soyinka, for the sake of audience rebirth in the microcosm of ritual theatre. A similar process also occurs, with the help of the analyst, in the microcosm of the analysand's mind. Ego identity and the signifying chain, i.e., imaginary and symbolic orders, melt away at the "point of causality" in the Real. Yet that point is not only the edge of death and disintegration within the psyche; it is also the edge of the "un-born"¹⁴⁷ (or, in Kristeva's terms, of the semiotic *chora*).

Verhaeghe further explains that the endpoint of signification and imaginary desire (in the phallic order of *jouissance*) touches upon the terrifying Other *jouissance* of the body--of the loss of living ego identity in the body's death drive. Yet the drive of the individual towards dissolution is also a return to the eternal life of the body's materials, prior to human birth and its signifying chains. "The Real of the organism functions as cause, in that . . . it contains a primordial loss, which precedes the loss in the chain of signifiers. Which loss? The loss of eternal life, which paradoxically enough is lost at the moment of birth, i.e. birth as a sexed being".¹⁴⁸ The un-born in the chain of signifiers, traced within the patient's mind through psychoanalytic interpretation, parallels the Real point of loss within the patient's organism--the primordial loss of eternal life in the birth of an individual, sexed being. But the "subjective

¹⁴⁶ See Ulli Beier's account: "before you enter this world, you are led into a 'garden of heads'. You are made to pick your own head, your inner head (*ori inu*), that is your destiny" (Abodunrin 46). Cf. Anthony C. Buckley, "The Secret--An Idea in Yoruba Medicinal Thought," in *Social Anthropology and Medicine*, ed. J.B. Loudon (London: Academic, 1976) 411-12.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts* 23: "the unconscious is manifested to us as something that holds itself in suspense in the area, I would say, of the *unborn*." See also Paul Verhaeghe, "Causation and Destitution of a Pre-ontological Non-entity: On the Lacanian Subject," in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (London: Rebus, 1998) 169-70, on Lacan's theory of the unconscious as being of the order of the "unborn," of limbo, of the "not-realised," as a process "always situated at the border"--in contrast to the romantic ("Gothic") concept of the unconscious as "the basement of the psyche."

¹⁴⁸ Verhaeghe, "Subject and Body" 99. See also Paul Verhaeghe, "The Collapse of the Function of the Father and Its Effect on Gender Roles," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 147.

destitution" of the Lacanian cure also parallels the dissolution of ego identity at death, at the climax of the body's death-drive *jouissance*. Although Lacanian theory, as a basis for various postmodern theories of subjectivity, does not involve any definite realms of existence beyond human life (and challenges the metaphysics of the Cartesian ego); it does render a cyclical model of life and death, within the mind and human organism, similar in some ways to Yoruba cosmology and to Soyinka's theory of ritual theatre. In all three philosophies, the patient, god, or actor has suffered a primordial loss of eternal life (of endless potentiality) in crossing from the unborn to the living world--as sexed being, orisa, or character onstage. But he or she ultimately crosses a fundamental fantasy of identity, into the transitional, "fourth stage" abyss, experiencing the terror of choral *sparagmos* between living, dead (eternal), and unborn worlds--as therapeutic, communal, or theatrical sacrifice.¹⁴⁹

Tele-Visions

Soyinka's *The Bacchae* shows an Ogunian and Dionysian, ancient and postmodern, crossing of the fundamental fantasy and transitional abyss: from the individual egotism, voyeuristic desire, and partial phallic *jouissance* of Pentheus--along with that of other characters, the choruses, and the audience--to his/their Other (god-like) ecstasy and full *jouissance*, in his death-drive destiny offstage and his return as disembodied head, reborn through choral communion.¹⁵⁰ Soyinka's Dionysus prepares Pentheus for this sacrificial passage between

¹⁴⁹ See Soyinka, *Myth* 158, where he refers to the "pessimism" of Nietzsche's Silenus: "it is an act of hubris to be born. It is a challenge to the jealous chthonic powers, to *be*. The answer of the Yoruba to this is just as clear: it is no less an act of hubris to *die*. And the whirlpool of transition requires both hubristic complements as catalyst to its continuous regeneration."

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Verhaeghe, "Subject" 114: "With the other enjoyment, the subject disappears into a larger whole, . . . the eternal life, the *Zoe* of the classical Greeks. The subject itself is, as a subject, dead in this 'eternal life.'"

living, dead, and reborn worlds through two added visions, performed as dream-like mime scenes. After showing Pentheus the obscene mirror of his hypnotic hand, and the lack of being behind it, the god invites the king to see "the past and future legends of Dionysos".¹⁵¹ The first mime shows a bridal procession in masks, with libations poured at the altar of Aphrodite and dancers entertaining the wedding party.¹⁵² But when the groom sees the face of his bride, a mask of "horrendous, irredeemable ugliness," he (Hippoclidides) performs a grotesque dance, in Dionysian fawn-skin, shocking the bride's father and dancing his wife away.¹⁵³ The bust of Aphrodite also changes to "the mocking face of Dionysus." The second mime shows another wedding, the biblical feast where Jesus changes water into wine, but Soyinka notes in his stage directions that Christ's "halo is an ambiguous thorn-ivy-crown of Dionysos".¹⁵⁴ Soyinka also specifies that the miracle is in response to the anger of a woman who sees another woman (Mary Magdelene?) anointing Jesus' feet. As the mime ends, Dionysus offers the same wine, from Christ's first miracle, to Pentheus.¹⁵⁵

Feminist readers or spectators might be appalled at the use of these ugly and angry female characters to catalyze the magic of Dionysus, in Greek and Christian contexts.¹⁵⁶

With the phallic enjoyment, the end product is always separation, the preceding symbiosis is broken through, dies, but the subject acquires the *Bios*, his or her reduced existence."

¹⁵¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 66.

¹⁵² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 67.

¹⁵³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 67-68. Cf. Senanu, who mentions that this story is taken from "Herodotus" (110).

¹⁵⁴ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 68.

¹⁵⁵ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 69.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Davies, for a critical view of female characters in Soyinka's plays, not including *The Bacchae*. But see also Elizabeth Hale Winkler, "Three Versions of *The Bacchae*," in *Madness in Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 226. In comparing Soyinka's *Bacchae* with two feminist versions of Euripides' play (*Rites*, by Maureen Duffy, and *A Mouthful of Birds*, by Caryl Churchill and David Lan), Winkler praises Soyinka's drama for being more emphatic about political rebellion.

Christian audiences might also be shocked at the ties between Dionysus and the miraculous wine of Jesus. But these tele-visions exemplify Soyinka's Brechtian revision of Euripides, transporting the play beyond its original time period to connect with a postmodern audience, through sympathy and shock. And yet, such historicifications also show the modernist aspect in Soyinka's work. They recall the mime scenes in his first play, *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959), which illustrate the struggle between traditional patriarchal values in African village life and European colonial influences. Even more like *The Bacchae*, Soyinka's later play about ritual sacrifice in the struggle of African and colonial patriarchies, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1976), shows men on each side putting women back in a subordinate place, after they have risen to a position of influence. The ruler Elesin manipulates Iyaloja, mother of the marketplace, to change his sacrificial rite, despite her warnings, so that he can first wed a beautiful girl already betrothed to her son. In the end he acknowledges that the girl influenced his hesitation to die, yet denies that she had any power over him. His son, Olunde, ultimately rejects the influence of the colonial administrator's wife, Mrs. Pilkings, although she had previously helped him to leave Africa and seek a European education. Her husband rejects her advice, too, in the end, as does Chief Elesin. However, in all three Soyinka dramas, groups of women working together show a feminine, if not feminist, power--a *chora* of rebellion, repressed yet returning with even greater force,¹⁵⁷ as in the mime scene dances of the bacchae-like choruses of African women in *Lion* and *Death*, mocking the illusory powers of men.

Soyinka purposely risks offending parts of his *Bacchae* audience with the mime scene revision of Christ's first miracle. The mime rebels against colonial repressions of African

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Ogunba, "Ake" 8-10, on the Egba women's uprising of 1946 as an event in Soyinka's childhood that influenced his own personality and later writings. See also the final chapters of Soyinka's autobiography, *Aké* 177-230.

religions and performance practices, by tying a Christian story to the Greek god of orgies and theatre. But Soyinka also makes explicit his provocation of postmodern feminists, when he describes the rage of the second woman in the mime: "Her angry gestures include the feminine logic (*pace* Fem. Lib.) that the wine shortage is related to the idle foot-anointer".¹⁵⁸ Thus, he may be evoking (beyond *pace*) the raging *chora* of women in his audience--as well as showing rage in this female and in the bacchae onstage. Even though Soyinka subordinates the original, female chorus by featuring a second, slave chorus and their leader, the playwright still finds ways to point, like and beyond Euripides, to the revolutionary choral power at the edges of the patriarchal sacrifice.

Soyinka's mime scenes return the postmodern spectator to a premodern tradition of dance drama, mostly repressed in the Euro-American literary theatre, but continuing in African (and Asian) ritual theatre with its more explicit sacrifices. The mime scenes in *The Bacchae* also express a postmodern excessiveness and incompleteness, leaping out of history and plot.¹⁵⁹ They bear very little cause-and-effect connection to the rest of the play, except through the figure of Dionysus (in Aphrodite and Jesus)--and the motif of his wine, which appears in both scenes, and then is given to Pentheus by the god. Like the changing channels on a TV screen, these anachronistic scenes offer a shared, rememorative "free association," between the hypnotic televisions of Pentheus, under Dionysian treatment, and the metonymic viewpoints of the postmodern audience. Although the spectators might not be drinking Dionysian wine, they are probably lured, through the mime scenes, into desiring more theatricality, as Pentheus says:

¹⁵⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 68-69.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Biodun Jeyifo, Introduction: "Wole Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation," in Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) xv-xvi, on the poststructuralism of Soyinka's essays about the African world. "Even Soyinka's choice of Ogun as Muse and tutelary spirit goes to the heart of his 'post-Negritude' break with 'classical' Senghorian synthesis without conflict or contradiction, for Ogun is the very embodiment of paradox, conflict and contradiction."

"Can I see some more?"¹⁶⁰ Dionysus warns him: "Don't take shadows too seriously. Reality / Is your only safety." But then he adds: "reality / Awaits you on the mountains." That reality, of course, is the ironic opposite to safety: the rending apart of Pentheus body by his mother and other bacchae. The Real violence of that transitional abyss, or "fourth stage," occurs offstage from the play. But the *chora* that already fuels the mime scenes is located in the characters and players onstage, in the Real within their minds--and in the Real of the audience, at the fourth wall of the stage edge, co-creating the play's imaginary and symbolic "shadows." At those edges premodern African and Greek spirits commune with the postmodern Western psyches playing and watching. For, as Lacan says, "The gods belong to the field of the real"¹⁶¹ --lost, impossible, and yet still influential.

Dionysus then offers Pentheus a view denied the theatre audience, for which the king will pay with his life. "Come with me to the mountains. See for yourself. / Watch the Maenads, unseen. There are risks / A king must take for his own people".¹⁶² Pentheus agrees: "Yes, yes, this is true." As K. E. Senanu has argued, these added lines (about risks a king must take) mark a crucial change from Euripides' text.¹⁶³ Pentheus dies in the mountains not only through the Dionysian lures of intoxication and voyeurism, which stimulate his wish to watch the bacchae unseen. Pentheus also shows the kingly will to take that risk for his people, and thus to be sacrificed. This makes more sense of the play as a "communion rite" (its subtitle), because

¹⁶⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 69,

¹⁶¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978) 45.

¹⁶² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 69.

¹⁶³ K.E. Senanu, "The Exigencies of Adaptation: The Case of Soyinka's *Bacchae*" *Critical Perspectives* 5 (1980): 111. Cf. Euripides 195 (lines 912-16).

Pentheus is not simply fooled into becoming a scapegoat.¹⁶⁴ An Ogunian, sacrificial drive within the king is evoked by an Esu-like Dionysus, through the tele-visions, the wine, and Pentheus' own voyeuristic desires. He may not know he is going to the mountains to meet his death, but he is willing to take that fatal risk for the sake of his people--to observe the cult in its deadly rite of *sparagmos*, instead of destroying them in war. Like the Ogunian actor leading others to cross the abyss between worlds, he and Dionysus¹⁶⁵ lead the theatre audience from the partial *jouissance* of voyeurism, to the Other *jouissance* of the body's death drive and the play's final rite of communion, when Pentheus' disembodied head spurts a blood that turns into wine.

When Dionysus offers Pentheus the chance to see the bacchae offstage, the king passionately replies: "I long / To see them at their revels".¹⁶⁶ Here again Soyinka's revision, while still set in ancient Greece, might connect with the postmodern spectator's desire to see more and more revels, especially of sex and violence, in today's hypertheatres of film, TV, and the internet. Dionysus gives Pentheus, through his magic wine and various tele-visions, the illusion of god-like omniscience--like the hyperreal hallucinations of postmodern viewers who spend many hours each day at media screens. Yet, the play also reveals such divine *trompe l'oeil* at the stage or screen edge, as masking the Other's choral *jouissance*, a sacrificial death drive within the body. Today's mass media spectators (and not just those who watch tele-evangelists) are lured into worshiping at the film/TV/computer screen, to see the revels of the Other. The mass audience thus becomes a pseudo-community, a chorus of partial *jouissance*,

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Senanu 111: "it is such an acceptance that makes meaningful the transformation of the end of the play into a celebratory rite of communion, symbolizing rejuvenation instead of the threnos for irretrievable loss we have in Euripides."

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Dennis Duerden, *The Invisible Present: African Art and Literature* (New York: Harper, 1975) 97-104, on parallels between Ogun and Dionysus--with Pentheus as a "carrier" for community evils (even in the original myth), like Tiresias at the start of Soyinka's *Bacchae*.

¹⁶⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 70.

avoiding a full awareness of the death drive already at work within the body, sacrificing much of a lifetime to dramatic entertainment and commercial detours, until it is too late--as for Pentheus atop the pine tree. But Soyinka's Pentheus, through the Ogunian spirit of Dionysus, might lead a media saturated, postmodern spectator to another kind of tele-vision, with a tragicomic, cathartic ecstasy (or Other *jouissance*) at the stage's edge.

Soyinka also changes the cross-dressing of Pentheus to an onstage act. Instead of appearing from the *skene* of his palace in a bacchic woman's costume and wig, as Euripides has it, the king is transformed before the eyes of the audience at the hands of the god. Rather than wearing the fawn-skin and wig as a disguise, Pentheus sees these as his armor and helmet.¹⁶⁷ Although he remarks that the metal feels unusually soft and light, Dionysus explains this as the effect of the wine he is drinking. Unlike Euripides' Dionysus, who takes Pentheus offstage for the costume change with vengeful glee, Soyinka's god nurses the illusion with onstage kindness, as well as with wine. As in the Yoruba myth of Esu's palm wine helping Obatala to create misshapen human forms, this Dionysus gently shapes the king's grotesque transfiguration.

Again, a parallel might be drawn not only to Yoruba myth, but also to postmodern media spectatorship. The film or TV viewer "sutures" the illusion of a complete diegetic world, closing the gaps between editing cuts (or channel changes) by imagining the full fiction offscreen.¹⁶⁸ The film/TV spectator identifies in complex ways with various characters, male and female, cross-dressing as it were, by imaginatively entering and filling out the flat figures

¹⁶⁷ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 73.

¹⁶⁸ For a summary of Lacanian film theories of the "suture," and its application to Hitchcock's *Psycho*, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 200-23.

onscreen.¹⁶⁹ In showing the transvestism of Pentheus onstage, Soyinka reflects to the audience their own ritual inhabiting of film or TV scenes and stars. Dionysus fastens the bacchic costume on Pentheus as if it were armor, like the media audience suturing their own illusion of prophylactic voyeurism. But this comic gest also reveals the edges of terror and sacrifice in Pentheus' body--akin to the lacking being and bodily *jouissance* of today's mass audience.

As Dionysus, "his mouth full of pins and clips," finishes the onstage dressing of Pentheus for sacrifice, the king hallucinates two suns, two Thebes, and the god with a bull's head.¹⁷⁰ This Artaudian double vision is close to that described in Euripides' original text,¹⁷¹ but Soyinka adds a further conversation between the slaves in the chorus, which bears postmodern meanings as well. Like Lacan who relates "the gods" to his concept of the Real, and Kristeva who connects repressed mother goddesses to her sense of the *chora*, the slaves discuss certain psychic "forces not ruled by us".¹⁷² The old slave calls them: "Dionysos? Or--Nothing. / Not even a word for these forces. / They lack a name." But the slaves, in chorus, attempt further potential terms: spirits, gods, principles, elements, currents, laws, eternal causes. These terms suggest the Lacanian paradox of the symbolic and imaginary orders producing (and structured/subverted by) the Real, although the Real is inaccessible to imaginary and symbolic representation. Kristeva also finds a signifying process in the semiotic, maternal *chora*, prior to and repressed by

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 192, on "psychic bisexuality in film spectatorship"; Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 5, on male viewers identifying with screen females; and Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992) 152-56, on the fluidity of feminine spectatorship. See also Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) 80-84.

¹⁷⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 76.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 195-96 (lines 918-23).

¹⁷² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 77.

symbolic, patriarchal law.

Soyinka's slaves struggle to describe such choral powers: "they are born in the blood / Unarguable, observed and preserved before time . . . It is knotted in the blood, a covenant from birth".¹⁷³ Lacan describes the Real, imaginary, and symbolic orders as tied in a Borromean knot of interlocking rings.¹⁷⁴ With regard to personal symptoms, Lacan also defines a fourth order, as the knotting of the other three.¹⁷⁵ This is the *sinthome*, a fundamental symptom structuring the subject's desires and drives (the "they" of the chorus as an "it")--through particular intertwinings of symbolic law and sacrifice, imaginary perceptions and fantasies, and Real losses.¹⁷⁶ The Lacanian cure involves an identification with the *sinthome*,¹⁷⁷ which can also be seen in Soyinka's play as the slave chorus transforms its view (and perhaps the audience's) of Pentheus in the care of Dionysus. Of course, the blood-*cum*-wine of the king and god will become even more significant in the final scene, providing a tragicomic climax to the sharing of voyeuristic desires, superego repressions, and sacrificial drives throughout the drama--between the various characters, the choruses, and the audience.

But already Pentheus' hallucination of Dionysus as a bull, while he is being cross-dressed

¹⁷³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 77.

¹⁷⁴ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge (Encore), 1972-73*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998) 123-126, and François Regnault, "The Name of the Father," *Reading Seminar XI*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 72.

¹⁷⁵ See Ragland, *Essays* 146.

¹⁷⁶ See Zizek, *Sublime* 75: "Symptom as *sinthome* is a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment: it is a signifier as a bearer of *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense. . . . [It] is literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject."

¹⁷⁷ See Anne Dunand, "The End of Analysis (I)" and "The End of Analysis (II)," *Reading Seminar XI*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Find, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 243-249 and 251-256. See also Zizek, *Sublime* 75: "The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being."

by the god and drinking his wine, recalls the king's earlier, offstage attempt to kill the imprisoned god, as he says himself. "Inside, I went this way with my head / Then, that way--back, forward--back. It was / Almost a kind of trance. I dreamed I stabbed / A bull. A minotaur. Was that you?"¹⁷⁸ Dionysus responds, "I am whole." Yet the king's past attempt to dismember the imprisoned god, remembered now as Pentheus is dressed for his own sacrificial dismemberment, also relates to the infant's mirror-stage illusions of both ego wholeness and fragmentation (and to the Yoruba myths of Orisa-nla and Ogun). As a therapeutic re(dis)membering, it parallels the subjective destitution of the Lacanian patient, who crosses a fundamental fantasy to find his or her particular lacking being in the *sinthome*.¹⁷⁹ In Soyinka's Yoruba vision, that crossing of a psychic abyss would involve the forces knotted in the blood of the audience--in the Real *jouissance* of the death drive, circulating throughout their bodies as well as in the synaptic patterns of their unconscious minds. The structuring of that "blood" and nervous energy (or libido) is also socially constructed, and thus shared to some degree by actors and audience in the blood/wine communion at the play's end.

Blood Thirst

Early in his cross-dressing, Pentheus confesses to Dionysus that he has a "great thirst" for the wine and its illusions.¹⁸⁰ After he drinks more wine and becomes fully dressed in bacchic costume and wig, at the conclusion of the slave chorus's discussion of forces knotted in the blood, Pentheus has another vision. "I feel superhuman. I could hoist the whole of Kithairon /

¹⁷⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 76.

¹⁷⁹ See Zizek, *Sublime* 124: "'beyond fantasy' we find only [death] drive, its pulsation around the *sinthome*. 'Going-through-the-fantasy' is therefore strictly correlative to identification with a *sinthome*."

¹⁸⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 73.

On one shoulder--with valleys full of women / Despite their dancing and madness . . . yes?"¹⁸¹

Similar lines appear in Euripides' text, but there Pentheus sees his current feminine costume. He even asks Dionysus if he looks like his mother, Agave.¹⁸² In Soyinka's version, Pentheus hallucinates that he wears armor on his body and that his Dionysian thyrsus is a "sword." Pentheus' *sinthome* thus becomes manifest to the audience, if not yet to himself: through his vision of the god as a bull (that he had tried to sacrifice offstage), in his hallucination of himself wearing armor (though he wears a bacchic dress), and with his fantasy that he will lift a mountain valley, full of mad, dancing women. The king's symptomatic violence against the alien cult, even as he wears its costume and thirsts for Dionysian wine, shows the death-drive thirst within Pentheus' own blood that the god turns toward self-sacrifice, rather than the slaughter of others.

Dionysus then repeats the Ogunian casting of Pentheus: "Yes, you alone / Make sacrifices for your people, you alone. / The role belongs to a king. Like those gods, who yearly / Must be rent to spring anew, that also / Is the fate of heroes".¹⁸³ This is much more explicit than what Dionysus says to Pentheus in Euripides.¹⁸⁴ Soyinka's Pentheus is given more deceptive visions, yet also a more direct oracle of his sacrificial fate. He thus becomes more Oedipus-like in his complex hubris. It drives him into the very Dionysian dress, madness, and dancing that he tried to repress in his city. In fact, the scene ends (in another addition to Euripides' original) with Pentheus teaching Dionysus the bacchic dance--taught to him, he says, as a "new march" for his

¹⁸¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 78.

¹⁸² See Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 196-97 (lines 925-26 and 945-46).

¹⁸³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 78.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 198: "You and you alone will suffer for your city. / A great ordeal awaits you. But you are worthy / of your fate" (lines 963-64).

troops, by a "famed drill-master" that he has already "imported." Soyinka's stage directions specify that the dance repeats the earlier moves in the comical Tiresias scene.¹⁸⁵ But it also may recall the ancient Greek chorus of young soldiers (*ephebes*) trained in military marching. Likewise, Pentheus leaves the stage as a dancing soldier in bacchic costume. He yells: "Death to the Bacchae!"--showing the audience the death-drive dance in the blood of the king, costumed for the sacrifice. Yet this reflects, too, the choral dance in the blood of the audience, the *jouissance* of the Other beneath their clothes and skins. Like Pentheus, theatre spectators enjoy superhuman illusions, as invisible voyeurs at the stage edge. And they share with him a rage for sacrifice, turned against others or into the Ogunian will for one's own death to have meaning.

As Pentheus' voice "dies off in the distance," Dionysus remains briefly onstage to show that his "is not entirely a noble victory".¹⁸⁶ This Dionysus, as in Euripides, exults in his turning of Pentheus' vengeful spirit toward sacrificial *sparagmos*. Yet Soyinka's translation of the god's final lines, invoking his spirit in the offstage Agave, gives a further Lacanian twist: "Agave, open your mothering arms-- / Take him. Mother him. Smother him with joy."¹⁸⁷ Pentheus will experience the smothering *jouissance* of the pre-Oedipal mother, as he travels from neurotic despotism (against the cult), through perverse voyeurism (in the pine tree), to the psychotic terror of overwhelming, disintegrating symbiosis within the *chora* (when his mother and the other bacchae tear him apart). But like Ogun crossing the transitional abyss between worlds, and like Soyinka's ritual actor sacrificed for the communal audience, Agave will give birth to a

¹⁸⁵ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 79.

¹⁸⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 79.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 199: "Agave and you daughters of Cadmus, / reach out your hands! I bring this young man / to a great ordeal" (lines 973-74).

new Pentheus, through this dismemberment--turning the tragedy into a divine comedy for those who, at least partly, believe.

At the exit of Pentheus and Dionysus, "part of the Chorus of Slaves set up a dog-howl, a wail of death," added by Soyinka to accompany the choral ode of the combined choruses.¹⁸⁸ During the howling and the ode, some of the female bacchae show the audience a "mime of the hunt".¹⁸⁹ Through this additional African dance drama, prior to the report of the sacrifice in the Greek text,¹⁹⁰ Soyinka allows the audience to participate more visually, through onstage mime, with the offstage ritual and maternal *chora*.¹⁹¹ The rite is then repeated, from the choral mime to the officer's report, as from the offstage fiction to the Real within the audience's imaginings. In the report of the offstage violence (as in Euripides' version), the fir tree where Pentheus had been hiding is symbolically castrated from the earth, uplifted and torn down, with "the wrench of roots / From their long bed of earth and rocks".¹⁹² Pentheus met a similar fate, according to the messenger, at the hands of his mother, Agave. "She seized the waving arms by the wrist, then / Planted her foot upon his chest and pulled, / Tore the arm clean off the shoulder".¹⁹³ Other limbs and body parts were then divided by the other bacchae, who playfully tossed "lumps of flesh," strewing "fragments" of Pentheus' body across the mountain valley that he had

¹⁸⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 79. The ode, in both Soyinka and Euripides, refers to the offstage bacchae as "hounds of madness." See Soyinka, *Bacchae* 80, and Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 199 (line 978).

¹⁸⁹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 80.

¹⁹⁰ Soyinka (*Bacchae* 84-86) copies parts of the report verbatim from Arrowsmith's translation (202-205), but the reporter's name is changed from Messenger to Officer.

¹⁹¹ The ode of Soyinka's bacchae (81), like Euripides' (in Arrowsmith 199, line 999), refers to Pentheus' spying as "profaning the rites of the mother of god."

¹⁹² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 85.

¹⁹³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 85-86.

envisioned as uprooting himself.¹⁹⁴ Soyinka thus gives a vivid account, like Euripides, of the ego illusions of Pentheus, his superhuman strength and voyeurism, being turned upside-down and inside-out, by the (s)mothering passion of the bacchae. But Soyinka takes that *chora* further than Euripides, connecting it with the joyful ego illusions and terrifying lack of being in his postmodern audience, through another communion rite.¹⁹⁵

When Agave enters, she carries the head of her son on a thyrsus, as in Euripides' version, but the head is covered, according to Soyinka's stage directions, with gold ribbons.¹⁹⁶ In response to her joyful delusion, that she has hunted and dismembered a lion, and her praise to Dionysus for the inspiration, an old slave adds: "Yes, he is a great hunter. He knows / The way to a death-hunt of the self".¹⁹⁷ These lines, added by Soyinka,¹⁹⁸ express the death-drive knowledge and Other *jouissance* that Pentheus has now fully experienced, and that his mother is about to see, along with the theatre audience. But the way that the audience sees is also changed by Soyinka. He creates a dance around the disembodied head, as obscene Thing (in Lacan's sense of *das Ding*),¹⁹⁹ by first hiding it under golden ribbons and then turning it into a

¹⁹⁴ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 86. Soyinka's lines are very similar to the translation in Arrowsmith 204, but the voice of Pentheus, pleading for recognition from his mother, within the Messenger's account, is omitted.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 188n46, on the "possibility" of ritual omophagy--the eating of Pentheus by his mother and the other bacchae--in Euripides' play. Segal also states that Agave's isolation and tragic awakening at the end of the play "symbolizes" the separation of drama from ritual (263). If so, then Soyinka's play returns this drama to a ritual *chora* with its final, added "communion rite."

¹⁹⁶ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 87.

¹⁹⁷ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 89.

¹⁹⁸ In Euripides the chorus responds, "Our king is a hunter," stressing the irony of the hunting trophy that Agave holds on her thyrsus (Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 207, line 1193).

¹⁹⁹ See Zizek, *Sublime* 71. He defines the Thing, in Lacan's revision of Freud's *das Ding*, as "the material leftover, the materialization of terrifying, impossible *jouissance*" (with reference to the wreck of the Titanic). See also 79, where Zizek defines the "maternal Thing which then functions as a symptom--the Real of enjoyment" (referring to the monster in the film, *Alien*). For a critique of Zizek and Lacan's Real

fetish prop at the center of a May-pole dance.²⁰⁰ As Agave turns the thyrsus, the bacchae dance around the unveiled head, chasing and catching "the ribbons as they unfurl and float outwards." (This dance of unfurling ribbons might also relate to the twirling costumes of Yoruba Egungun performers, as they incarnate the spirits of the dead.) Agave continues to be deceived, yet reveals more, at the center of this dance, to the audience. For her body is also a Thing, bearing an obscene *jouissance*, not yet fully revealed.

Kadmos, in extreme grief, then offers another Lacanian/Kristevan insight (added by Soyinka): "She should have known him!"²⁰¹ Here the audience may share, in a more and more Artaudian sense, the cruelty within both Agave's delusion and Kadmos' clear sight--the horror of a maternal *chora* that creates and destroys, through misrecognition.²⁰² But here there might also be a Brechtian twist, distancing the audience into social reflection: Kadmos "should have known him" better, too, before giving the rule of Thebes to his tyrannical, anti-Dionysian grandson. The violent repression of the Dionysian *chora* in Thebes--from the alienation of Semele (by Agave and her sisters), to Pentheus' fear of the alien cult, to his imprisonment of the god--became symptomatic of the tragic flaw in the city's patriarchy, despite Kadmos' and Agave's conversion to the cult. And the return of that repressed *chora* led to the final tragic sacrifice. The play in performance may challenge its audience with both an intimate Artaudian cruelty and a distancing Brechtian gest. For Kadmos then says of Pentheus' head, on the

Thing, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) chapter 7. She is unwilling to accept the fundamental paradox of the Real as both lack and substance (198-99).

²⁰⁰ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 90.

²⁰¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 92.

²⁰² Agave also boasts, while holding the head she thinks is a lion's, caught by herself and the other women: "Tell me / Do you know of any greater than the power / Of our creative wombs?" (Soyinka, *Bacchae* 90-91).

thyrsus held by his mother, "I don't want to see!"--and the blind Tiresias asks, "What is it Kadmos?" Theatre spectators could be positioned to see more of the tragic horror, like Tiresias, through sympathy with the pain of Kadmos and Agave, yet also to look more critically at their hypocrisy, delusion, and willful blindness.

What is on that thyrsus changes a great deal from Euripides' to Soyinka's *Bacchae*. Kadmos takes it as the glaring sign of a cruel paradox (in lines added by Soyinka): "Dionysos is just. But he is not fair! / Though he had right on his side, he lacks / Compassion, the deeper justice".²⁰³ Here Soyinka offers a more critical, Brechtian view--even of Dionysus, who does not reappear at the end of this play as he does in the original. Euripides' Dionysus returns to give a vengeful moral against Pentheus and Kadmos. But Soyinka's god remains absent from the stage. Kadmos thus expresses a more postmodern, existentialist despair at the lack in the Other--lacking fairness, compassion, a deeper sense of justice, and a responsible presence. In Euripides' play, Dionysus returns to explain the violence represented by Pentheus' decapitated head and the remaining body parts brought onstage by Kadmos. "This man has found the death which he deserved . . ." ²⁰⁴ Dionysus also puts the blame on Kadmos, and predicts further suffering for him and his wife, Harmonia, as they both will be turned into snakes, yet will eventually "live among the blest".²⁰⁵ They are also put into exile from Thebes at the play's end. In Soyinka's version, however, a more Brechtian and Lacanian view is offered to the postmodern audience. According to cultural theorist Slavoj Zizek, the final stage of Lacanian psychoanalysis involves "subjective destitution." The subject experiences "the *nonexistence* of the

²⁰³ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 93. Cf. Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 210 (lines 1249-51): "Justly--too, too justly--has lord Bromius, / this god of our own blood, destroyed us all, / every one."

²⁰⁴ Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 216.

²⁰⁵ Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 217.

big Other; he accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy; he keeps open the gap between the Real and its symbolization".²⁰⁶ Kadmos' bitter statement about the lack of compassion in Dionysus, plus the god's absence at the end, opens this gap between the Real event offstage in its meaningless violence and the symbolization onstage of a meaningful rite of spring, through the bacchic dance around Pentheus' head on the May-pole. Through the subjective destitution of Kadmos, and the lack of Dionysus, the audience may also see this gap and experience a Brechtian alienation effect, a distancing awareness of symbolic and Real.

Soyinka's Dionysus is lacking as a god, like the Yoruba orisas, especially Ogun. That orisa sacrificed himself for others by crossing the abyss between worlds; but he also slaughtered his human subjects in a drunken rage after they made him king. Dionysus, like Ogun, loses his compassion and lacks any balance in his sacrificial rage, according to the alienated Kadmos, a former follower of the god. But when Kadmos takes his daughter out of her Dionysian trance, to be alienated by the horror of her own brutality, a further, Artaudian twist is added to this Brechtian questioning of the god's cruelty. Agave's acceptance of the *chora's* destructiveness leads to a final creative moment, as the Ogunian presence of Dionysus returns to the stage, through the shards of her son's body.

Like a Brechtian director, Kadmos separates Agave from her trance and character hallucinations. He tells her to look at the sky and asks if her view has changed. She replies that it seems clearer and brighter, with a "red glow of sunset, a colour of blood".²⁰⁷ He then asks what she feels inside. She says, "a sense of changing. The world / No longer heaves as if within

²⁰⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 230-231. Cf. Dunand, who describes the subject's destitution, in the Lacanian cure, as a realization that "the Other is barred . . . entailing a loss of fundamental references" (255). See also Fink, *Clinical* 208-9, on the "headless subject" as the aim of Lacanian treatment.

²⁰⁷ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 93-94.

my womb." Kadmos has helped his daughter to detach herself from spirit possession and communion with the Dionysian *chora*: from her former, superhuman strength (like Pentheus' delusion), her destructive creativity, and her feeling that the entire world outside her was inside her womb. Then Kadmos requests that she look closely at the head on the thyrsus. At first, she insists it is still a lion; next, she sees a slave.²⁰⁸ At last, she finds her son--in the head on the thyrsus and in the other pieces on the bier, as Kadmos tells her how Pentheus died. Tiresias tries to provide her with consolation in the belief that "our life-sustaining earth" demanded such sacrificial bloodshed "for her own needful renewal".²⁰⁹ While this relates to the logic of patriarchal sacrifice in many cultures,²¹⁰ as with the Aztecs who fed both the sun and the earth with human hearts and blood, it also makes sense regarding the maternal *chora*, as Agave experienced it: the blood-thirsty world (and blood-red sky) heaving within her own womb. Tiresias then describes the Artaudian space of choral cruelty that he and Kadmos found offstage, on the sacrificial mountain, relating also to the Real within the audience's imagination: "blood that streamed out endlessly to soak / Our land. Remember when I said, Kadmos, we seem to be upon / Sheer rockface, yet moisture oozes up at every step? Blood, you replied, blood. His blood / Is everywhere".²¹¹ But Kadmos repeats his Brechtian questioning of such sacrificial logic and fate: "Why us?" Then Agave gives an Artaudian response, placing her hands on the grotesque death mask of her son: "Why not?"

At this moment the theatre itself is transformed into a bacchic choral space. "The theme

²⁰⁸ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 94-95.

²⁰⁹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 96.

²¹⁰ Cf. Soyinka's introduction to his *Bacchae*: "The Dionysiac is present, of course, in varied degrees of spiritual intensity in all religions" (vii).

²¹¹ Soyinka, *Bacchae* 97.

music of Dionysos begins, welling up and filling the stage with the god's presence".²¹² Here Soyinka brings onstage the experience of the *chora* that remains offstage in Euripides' version, offering the audience a vision from within the heaving womb that Agave had described. First, a "powerful red glow" illuminates Pentheus' head and bathes the stage; then "from every orifice of the impaled head spring red jets." Agave, who had been holding the head, screams and clutches the ladder beneath it. In this bloody show of light and scenery, the world Agave had earlier perceived as heaving within her womb is now displayed, through the pieta of her body and her son's decapitated head. The blind Tiresias asks again, as when he first had a sense of the head onstage: "What is it Kadmos?" Kadmos replies, still in Brechtian detachment: "Again blood Tiresias. Nothing but blood." Yet Tiresias finds more, as with the bloody rocks on the sacrificial mountain, where he found a "life-sustaining earth." Tiresias touches the red fluid, sniffs and tastes it, and says, "No. It's wine." All the characters then drink from the jets of blood as wine, participating in the Artaudian dream, as Agave "tilts her head backwards to let a jet flush full in her face and flush her mouth."

The audience or reader might choose, of course, not to take the tragicomic drink, even vicariously. The spectator could experience Brechtian detachment at this scene, seeing it as obviously rigged through the ladder and head props--so not a true Dionysian miracle. (However, those spectators expecting Euripides' tragic finale could also experience the uncanny A-effect of the familiar made strange.) A gestic feminist might critique the bloody scene as reveling in the patriarchal fear and oppression of women, through the addition of onstage cannibalism (as *omophagia*) to the offstage *sparagmos*. A Christian critic may be repulsed, seeing a sacrilegious parallel to the Last Supper, where Jesus gave wine to his followers to drink as his holy blood. A Lacanian might sense the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy. Other spectators

²¹² Soyinka, *Bacchae* 97.

could reject the scene itself as idiotic. Soyinka takes the risk of offering his audience a "communion rite" that is postmodern and premodern, Brechtian and Artaudian, Lacanian and Kristevan--Greek, Christian, and Yoruba. In doing so, he may touch upon the political power of the dead and unborn worlds even in mass-mediated psyches. For today's mass audience involves not only millions of minds put into a ritual trance before film and TV screens, but also split and multiple subjectivities in each of those minds, with the desires of Other gods and ancestors flashing in the synapses--and the Other's death-drive *jouissance* pulsing in the blood. Ultimately, the Other, as God or gods, may not exist for many in the Lacanian postmodern. But the desires, drives, choral cruelty, and violence--within and between lacking human beings--certainly do. That Dionysus still demands a theatre of sacrifice, in the Real as well as on the stage or screen.

The antistructural *communitas*²¹³ at the end of Soyinka's *Bacchae* leaves many questions open for a postmodern, postcolonial audience. If the sacrifices of Pentheus, Agave, and Kadmos are cathartic in a Yoruba sense, through Ogunian actors "strengthening the communal psyche",²¹⁴ then how will that new community and its psyche(s) be restructured? How will the theatre audience not only participate in the communion rite, but also extend it beyond the theatre's walls? Communal psyches are capable of great violence toward individuals and toward other communities, as Europeans, Africans, and Americans have demonstrated throughout history and in recent decades. Yet physical acts of violence also begin in the cruelty and alienation suffered by individual minds--in the self-pity and fear that can lead to a more destructive catharsis beyond stage and screen rituals (as in "ethnic cleansing," for example).

²¹³ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982) 45.

²¹⁴ Soyinka, *Myth* 30.

Aristotle, Artaud, and Brecht all offer the hope that drama, written and performed with the right homeopathic dose of violence, in the proper form of sacrifice, would cure the communal psyche from its tragic repetitions. But they developed their theories in a European tradition, from ancient to modern, that stressed the individual freedom of certain souls to act. Current postmodern and postcolonial theories question that classical, Cartesian, Enlightenment, imperialist legacy. On the other hand, traditional African cultures view each person as having multiple souls or psyches²¹⁵--a view with some affinities to postmodern, anti-Cartesian theories of subjectivity, especially those influenced by Lacan's revision of Freud.²¹⁶ Thus, Soyinka's revision of ancient violence in *The Bacchae* offers valuable sacrificial connections, not only between vastly different cultures, or to the past worlds of the dead within them, but also to the Other of the living in the present theatre of the communal psyche--and to the unborn in the global village of the future. But that present and future communal theatre is being shaped more and more by the global mass media, with screen edges, creases, and monsters touching upon the Real as sacrificial *chora*. How do certain violent fantasies onscreen perpetuate or alleviate the aggressivity of real life: demanding fetishistic submission to the sacrificial apparatus of the media marketplace and provoking mimetic acts of aggression--or providing a sacrifice of such melodramatic habits of thought (reconstructing the fantasies that we live by) through a more tragic kind of catharsis? This will be the crucial issue in the chapters ahead, with direct examples of screen mirages, choral edges, and Dionysian/Ogunian drives in film and television-

²¹⁵ See Duerden 66, on the four souls in African psychology (summarizing the work of Parrinder, Talbot, and Durkheim): the "oversoul" of language and state belonging, akin to the Freudian superego; the partrilinear soul of clan lineage; the matrilinear soul of "body essence"; and the existential or spiritual soul. See also Bynum 192 and G. Parrinder, *West African Psychology: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Religious Thought* (London: Lutterworth, 1951) 40, 54, 77, 123.

²¹⁶ See Duerden 69-70, where he describes the schizoid subjectivity of traditional African identity, in contrast to the modern Western ego, though without proposing a parallel to the postmodern: "in these [African]

-involving the mass audience as Pentheus-like predators and prey in melodramatic or tragic ways.

societies there is no need for the 'integrated personality' of Western society. A man can have a multiple personality with each separate personality adapting itself to the time and circumstances."
