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Underground or images of nowhere

SINCE THE TURN of the century, *underground* has been used, exploited and recycled in the exhibition apparatus together with other cognates of subaltern notions. The modernist avant-garde stories are retold in a retro fashion inspired by early Soho or Berlin in the mid 70's. In this essay, the contemporary need for a cultural and artistic underground is questioned and reflected upon from the point of view of a simple juxtaposition, that which refers to the blatant irrelevance of a reality once surrounding the following phrase uttered by an RAF member "I was forced to go underground". The phrase no longer conveys any palpable reality, underground in its contemporary usage is not and could not be a matter of life and death. Refurbishing notions such as underground or revolution ("Join the Revolution", as the motto goes in both Neoconservative discourse and commercial ads) are not merely new layers of added meaning through cyclic movements of fashion, as it was studied and explained by Roland Barthes. Contemporary reintegration of these notions through staging indicates a historical shift. This essay is an attempt to touch upon certain aspects of the historical shift insofar as it provides us with an account of how terms, such as underground, are reintegrated in the contemporary flow of images and why staging has become a central operation in contemporary culture.

As the contemporary travesty of underground is a calculated, but unarticulated, manipulation of the term as a metaphor, the first task is to unpack different layers of meaning connected to it. A further understanding of the term in its contemporary usage requires that one reaches a minimal representation that runs across each of its layers of meaning. A minimal representation is considered here — not merely as a structural system — but rather as a narrative force that assumes varying degrees of strength and operates upon the reality of societal dialectics. Such a minimal representation is discussed through Greek tragedy, more precisely in the narrative functioning of a peculiar tragic figure, namely Antigone in Sophoclean drama with the same name. As we shall see, the operational component in contemporary images of underground is variations of a *mise-en-scène* of a fallen tragic hero. The figure of the fallen tragic hero, as one of impossibility of resistance, is subsequently discussed through the German political underground movement in the 1970's. The contemporary staging is informed and analysed through a detour to a reading of Greek Tragedy since a common point, the historical inevitability of the tragic mode of subjectivity, is at stake in both sequences. While the *Antigone* is the case of a mythological staging in the Greek Polis, a contemporary historic sequence, Germany in the 1970's and the case of Ulrike Meinhof, is a stance of a closure, a stepping down of the scene, in which the notion of underground loses its historical significance.

The semantics of Underground

The point of departure could be clusters of semantic occurrences of the notion, notable at the level of phenomenological observation. To begin with; underground is an attribute recognizable in expressions such as “underground movements”, in other words a grammatical function that qualifies movements, figures and forces. The qualification expresses existence of illegal individuals, activities or organized individuals in different historical situations. Secondly, the notion denotes a certain anonymity or rupture with the societal definition of lawfulness and eligibility. In expressions such as “Underground culture”, the declaration of opposition to hegemonic culture is often associated with varying degrees of subversive intentions. The counter-hegemonic culture has ever since modernism been a part of a conscious radical strategy. Zines and Samizdads have been instances of such a counter-hegemonic culture. As a part of the same denotation, the notion tends to function as a generic determination of the mode of aesthetica expression, usually with short-lived historical accuracy, such as in “Underground Rock”, a label for a musical expression practiced in the former socialist countries. Underground connotes a historical, invisible, illicit mobility. This is instantiated in the anonymous expressions that wander about in the modern metropolis; from dark alleys of an industrial, capitalist London in the 19th century to apocalyptic undergrounds of a future world as depicted in science fiction works, from a Dickensian universe to the underground tunnels in Chris Marker’s *La jetée* from 1962.

Twofoldness of the Notion

The grammatical, connotative, generic occurrences listed above all share, as their condition of possibility, a central visual metaphoric operation. The notion unites and disjoins the visible and invisible, the mapped and recognized surface and its unknown reverse. Underground thus implicates depth and expansion of the domain of existence, on the condition that existence is connected to expressivity. Often, an extensive existence like this is conceived as irrupting in unsettled forms and unmoulded shapes: Voices, anonymous communiqués, shadows of strange figures in the shady streets of new cities. The extension evoked by the term underground is a doubling of existence, a world of non-worlds and the reverse of the laws of the upper world, as in Alice’s wonderful adventures. Wonders and shadows of strangeness belongs to a modern time in which the reproduction of voice detaches it from human breathing.¹

The visual metaphoric both depends upon and gives rise to a series of dichotomies: surface and depth, structure and movement, explicit text and latent message. The layered visual field evokes, or perhaps echoes, the acts nourished by desire, hence the urge for disclosing and the lure of

1. The metamorphose of voice by mechanical reproduction has been noticed early by both poets such as Edgar Allan Poe and theoreticians, among whom the most well-known is Walter Benjamin in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

concealment, fascination of gaze and the horror of witnessing, all ramifications and connections which pertain to the metaphoric, expanded space. Underground both conjoins the lawful and the illicit and opposes obscure paths of desire and edifices of morality. It is this single moment of conjunction and apposition that we should pay more attention to, since it is not only an internal linguistic function that takes place in the metaphoric space, the conjunction of appositions is the organizational locality for the introduction of subjectivity into the semantic field.

Mythem, a term coined by Claude Lévi-Straus, provides us with a simple key for an understanding of such an organizational locality. A mythem is a minimum of narrative organization around series of appositions.² I employ the mythem in a slightly different sense than its strictly structural linguistic conception. The mythem is a distribution of elements pertaining to a given historic situation, around the point of incommensurability inherent to that situation.

Nowhere else than in Greek tragedy, conceived as a representation of the destiny of the epic subject in Greek Polis, is the mythemic function of underground so efficiently depicted. In this respect, *Antigone* is a classical stance. Firstly, because of its specific position between *Oedipus Rex*, *The Seven Against Thebe* and *Oedipus at the Columns*, a series of plays that conjure up the mode of representation specific to the operational function of mythemic with its visual metaphors of underground clearly linked to the still new notion of law in Greek Polis. Secondly, *Antigone* is the single tragedy that has received much attention since the 18th century and onwards. Later and during the last century, the piece has still been central to a wide range of theoreticians. *Antigone* has been to a great extent the focus of various critical studies in the English-speaking world, partly due to the forceful assertion of Gender Studies and partly because of Lacan's comments on the play in the 1950's.³

The schematic arrangement presented here requires a detour into psychoanalytical theory. This seems inevitable since the Unconscious (*Das Unbewusste*), since its invention by Freud, has generally been conceived as being hidden forces of desire roaming beneath the threshold of consciousness, or as a treasure hidden in a labyrinthine cave under the surface of self-awareness. The 19th century romantic tradition and its indirect but nevertheless decisive influence on modernist traditions, such as surrealism, largely contributed to the spatial representation of the Freudian term.⁴ Doubtlessly, Lacan and his pupils in the mid 50's were completely right in pinpointing the unfounded nature of such an understanding of Freudian term. They quite accurately explained the dangers of a reduction of Freudian invention to the idea of a mythical cellar of wishes and passions. Surely, the Freudian term has hardly anything to do with what was called the subliminal in

2. Claude Lévi-Straus, "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Structural Anthropology*, pp. 202–212, Basic Books, 1963.

3. In this context, one may mention particularly Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim, Kinship between Life and Death*, Columbia University Press, 2000.

4. Despite André Breton's great disappointment after having met Freud in person, Surrealists continued to see in Freudian discovery a solid ground and a widened field for poetical exploration of delusional state of mind as a source of poetical creativity.

the late 19th century literature, still and despite of all this, the critique misses the real significance of the confusion involved in the history of the Freudian Unconscious.

The central question is why such an image continues to be a source of fascination in a variety of cultural fields. Incongruity of imaginary spatialisation of the unconscious is itself an ideologically effective element that unites late romanticism with modernist avant-garde and develops this unity into contemporary foliage of imagery. In other words, the “misconception” is to be treated as a productive confusion or *embrouillage* of distinct categories such as space and structure, subliminal and the unconscious, reverie and hysteria. These are instances of crossing over boundaries, a mixture of what is elevated and what is base. The case is more blatant in its manifestations in culturally poor situations. The destiny of the unconscious in popular culture reveals the force that lies behind the visual metaphor and the mythemic organization of the metaphoric of underground.

Antigone

Goethe finds this tragic figure, Antigone and her words, particularly her defence of her suicidal action, as shocking and nonsensical. As late as in the 1940's, the editor of the play for *Les Belles lettres* edition of Sophocles tragedies, Paul Masqueray, while stressing upon the beauty of her character in the tragedy, felt obliged to give an apologetic explanation for Antigone's words.⁵

This may seem strange because the plot is surprisingly clear. How could we mistake what is at stake in this tragedy? Antigone's law is not the stately sanctioned laws, her claims which are those of the world beneath, do not appeal to any conceivable group of citizens of the city. Against her, there is a ruling class for whom the king is synonymous to tyranny.

The play begins where *Seven Against Thebes* had ended. Two brothers, *Eteocles* and *Polynices*, sons of Oedipus, have fallen at one of the gates of Thebes. King Creon allows Eteocles to be buried, but he orders a herald to forbid any funeral rites or burial of the corpse of Polynices. Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, living in King Creon's household, informs her sister of what she has resolved to do:

In spite of the orders, I shall give my brother burial, whether thou, Ismene, wilt join with me or not.

We twain are left alone, and if we brave the king's decree, an unhappy death awaits us. Weak women such as we cannot strive with men; rather were it seemly to bow to those that are stronger than ourselves. The dead, who lie below, will deal leniently with us, as forced to yield.

5. He writes: “Il est bien plus simple de voir les choses comme elles sont, en d'autres termes, de constater que si Antigone en raisonnant comme elle le fait, se met subitement à déraisonner, c'est parce que Sophocle ne le fait parler, mais un autre. Cet autre, c'est Hérodote.” in *Antigone*, Les belles lettres, Paris, p.75. Enigmatic claim that barely shed any light on the issue and only adds a erudite reference to an allegedly epic story.

The response of Antigone is interesting. The perspective is clearly that of the dead:

Gladly will I meet death in my sacred duty to the dead. Longer time have I to spend with them than with those who live upon the earth. Seek not to argue with me; nothing so terrible can come to me but that an honoured death remains.⁶

After passages in which Creon, the ruler of Thebes, explains his act and the chorus' expression of certain cautiousness about the decree, the news is brought by guards placed at the corps of Polynices that the body has been covered by earth whereupon Creon orders the guilty one to be arrested. In the next scene, Antigone is brought to the palace by guards. The exchange between Creon and Antigone that takes place in the middle part of the drama is the most important part and the much commented on.

Yes, for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation, nor was it Justice [*Dike*] who lives with the gods below that established such laws among men, nor did I think your proclamations strong enough to have power to overrule, mortal as they were, the unwritten and unfailing ordinances [*nomima*] of the gods. For these have life, not simply today and yesterday, but forever, and no one knows how long ago they were revealed. For this I did not intend to pay the penalty among the gods for fear of any man's pride. I knew that I would die, of course I knew, even if you had made no proclamation. But if I die before my time, I account that a gain. For does not whoever lives among many troubles, as I do, gain by death? So it is in no way painful for me to meet with death; if I had endured that the son of my own mother should die and remain unburied, that would have given me pain, but this gives me none. And if you think my actions foolish, that amounts of folly by a fool.⁷

Both Antigone and Creon refer to the Greek notion of *nomos* signifying law, a term that evokes a sense of honour as linked to the proper name. Phrased in Hegelian terms, *nomos* is imbued by a sense of ethical obligation in the domain of family life (*Sittlichkeit*). This is seemingly what Antigone's argument is based on. She claims the superiority of "unwritten laws" over the laws of the city and thereby presents a juxtaposition of terms that runs through the tragedy. The point has been pivotal to Hegel's well-known analyses of the play in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in a more developed version in *Philosophy of right*. The Antigone for Hegel is essentially the expression of the transition between the domain of ethics (*sittlichkeit*) and the higher level of universal law. Accordingly, Hegel perceives the tragedy as an expression of an antagonism between the ethics of the family and the public law. He writes:

6. All citations are from Loeb's Classic Edition, Harvard University Press, 1994–1996.

7. *Antigone*, verses 450–470.

family piety is expounded in Sophocles' *Antigone*—one of the most sublime presentations of this virtue—as principally the law of woman, and as the law of a substantiality at once subjective and on the plane of feeling, the law of the inward life, a life which has not yet attained its full actualization; as the law of ancient gods, 'the gods of the underworld' as 'an everlasting law, and no man knows at what time it was first put forth'. This law is there displayed as a law opposed to public law, the law of the land. This is the supreme opposition in ethics and therefore in tragedy; and it is individualized in the same play in the opposing natures of man and woman.⁸

Antigone stands for the outer limit that both separates and unites family, the immediate ethical moment, and state constitution, the highest instance of actualized substantiality in and for itself. Tragedy in Hegel's view is the explanation of a natural right with obscure roots. This right remains obscure insofar as it is an ephemeral, particular moment awaiting its subjective accomplishment in the public right. The critical point is that for Hegel, the ethical right precedes all articulations of jurisprudence and is always already present in consciousness. Furthermore, Hegel regards moral law a mythical force. It is not only tautological but also the tautological core of all rational or faith-based explanations. The dialectical Hegelian moment presented in this passage points out the self-grounding function of the unwritten laws, which means that it is not only devoid of any need for an external grounding instance but also that it actively determines its own ground. Hegel regards the unwritten laws Antigone refers to⁹ as being such a natural system of rights or ethics. At this point in his reading, Hegel attempts to introduce the notion of guilt and crime into his argumentation. The crime and guilt are rooted in the antithetical rapport between what is for Hegel "The divine right of essential Being" at one extreme end and the articulated and public right on the other. All actions are susceptible to breaks at either end of such an ethical rapport. Subsequently, a Hegelian reading should find both antagonists of the play, Creon and Antigone, as violating the other part's rights. The first violates the divine and mythical natural right and the second violates the laws of the city. However, Hegel develops his argument in another and more intriguing direction. He first endorses the comprehensive nature of Creon's decree by the following argument:

But the government, the restored unitary self of the community, will punish him who already proclaimed its devastation on the walls of the city, by depriving him of the last honour. He who wantonly attacked the Spirit's highest form of consciousness, the Spirit of the community, must be stripped of the honour of his entire and finished being ...¹⁰

8. *Philosophy of Right*, § 166, p. 114f.

9. This is what Hegel develops in § 437 in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 261.

10. § 473, *ibid.*, p. 286.

The unitary self of the community is not opposed in Hegelian dialectic to being, it is rather the real expression of its unfolding. The corpse in the play lying outside the walls of Thebe, is the left-over of such a historical process. That is why the guilt is conceived to be on the side of Antigone's action:

It can be that the right which lays in wait is not present in its own proper shape to the *consciousness* of the doer, but it is present *implicitly* in the inner guilt of the resolve and the action. But the ethical consciousness is more complete, its guilt more inexcusable, if it knows *beforehand* the law and the power which it opposes, if it takes them to be violence and wrong, to be ethical merely by accident, and, like Antigone knowingly commits the crime.¹¹

The crime is defined here as the defiance against the unitary self of the state power and the defiance is made possible by a regression to the family right. Such a rebellion against the higher state of morality expressed by the state power is then doomed to fail since it expresses a pure particularity as opposed to the universal organization of societal rights actualized in the state formation:

Being the law of weakness and darkness it therefore at first succumbs to the powerful law of the upper world, for the power of the former is effective in the underworld, not on earth.¹²

Hegel conceives here the existence of state confronted with its own mythical and surpassed substance actualized by Antigone's action. The tragic moment is subsequently a *mistake* committed by the higher unitary power to misrecognize its own ground: "But the outwardly actual which has taken away from the inner world its honour and power has in so doing consumed its own essence."¹³ The cannibalism of the state to exhaust its own ground is the core of the inevitable mistake or error of the state, expressed in Creon's treatment of Antigone. Hence, Hegel presents an intriguing definition of an Aristotelian term, namely *Harmatia*, the mistake.¹⁴ What Creon disavows and exposes is the irrational but essential ground, which because it is being surpassed by the constitution, is the real guarantee of the social order and functionality of the law.

The Hegelian thesis of the antagonism between the particular right inherent in the family, represented by woman, and the universal constitution, represented by the state (the sovereign), has been critical for studies of the play and hardly surpassed. The subtle dialectical turn that operates through Hegel's comments is not always taken into account, however. The dialectical conception of tragedy is to be found in these lines: "The publicly manifest Spirit has the root of its

11. § 470, *ibid.*, p. 284.

12. § 474, p. 286f.

13. §474.

14. *Harmatia* means literally missing the mark in a reference to the art of archery.

power in the nether world. The self-certainty and self-assurance of a nation possesses the *truth* of its oath, which binds all into one, solely in the mute unconscious substance of all, in the waters of forgetfulness. Thus it is that the fulfilment of the Spirit of the upper world is transformed into its opposite, and it learns that its supreme right is a supreme wrong, that its victory is rather its own downfall.”¹⁵ Hegel is referring to lines such as these in the tragedy:

Creon: But he was trying to destroy this country, and the other stood against him to protect it.

Antigone: Nonetheless, Hades demands these laws.

Creon: But the noble man has not equal claim to honour with the evil.

Antigone: Who knows if this action is free from blame in the world below?

Creon: An enemy is never a friend, even when he is dead.

Antigone: I have no enemy by birth, but I have friends by birth.

Creon: Then go below and love those friends, if you must love them! But while I live a woman shall not rule.¹⁶

It is “the water of forgetfulness” out of which Antigone’s figure emerges, qua a piece of substance that has overthrown its own expression, that is the constitution, it turns them into their opposite. Antigone in such a reading is viewed as the extension of the reign of death in the underworld, a metonymy for the corpse of Polynices: “The dead, whose right is denied, knows therefore how to find instruments of vengeance, which are equally effective and powerful as the power which injured it.”¹⁷

Yet, Hegel’s dialectical exposition remains inconsistent at some crucial moments. Even though, Hegel’s stand on the foundations of rights acclaimed by Antigone may be considered as accurate, still, there is a difference between such claims and the decision of defying Creon’s edict. She may be taking sides with the dead but if so, this is not the same thing as being the fatal hand of death, the complete identification with the corpse of her fallen brother.¹⁸ In the first lines of the play, this is made clear: “Gladly will I meet death in my sacred duty to the dead. Longer time have I to spend with them than with those who live upon the earth.” It is not her ascending from the underworld that lends her character the fascinating beauty mentioned by many of the comments, but rather her tragic heroism, the act of sacrifice guided by a destiny written in a space outside the walls of the play itself, that renders her an exceptional status. Contrary to what Hegel claims,

15. Hegel, §474, p. 287f.

16. Verses 520–525.

17. Hegel, §474.

18. On Hegel’s theory about brother and sister relation as mutual recognition in the natural relation between sexes and its importance for Hegel’s reading of the Antigone, see Patricia Jagentowicz Mill’s essay, “Hegel’s Antigone” in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, Pennsylvania University Press, 1996, p. 64–67.

she has consciously assumed her own death regardless of the grounds on which such a sacrifice is founded. Precisely this point seems to cause a flaw in the Hegelian schema. How could Antigone, the representation of family ethics act in such a resolute and self-conscious manner, while Creon, the representation of the state and a higher degree of dialectical unfolding of the spirit, acts blindly and hesitantly to the extent that his action brings forth the tragic end of his own ruling family? Moreover, what is exactly the mistake committed by Creon from a Hegelian standpoint? Certainly, in the context of the *Philosophy of Rights* Hegel makes an example of Antigone as to illustrate the consequences of the conflation of the private sphere and the public law in Greek polis. However, the illustration itself is constructed according to a dialectical schema of antithetic positions: the particular versus the universal, forces of underground against the supreme spirit realized in societal institutions. The question is whether such a schema has any significant bearing for an understanding of the tragic effect produced by Antigone's act and its consequences. Creon exercises power according to the proposition "All enemies of state are exempted from being honoured by ceremonial burial.", in other words, the universality of law asserts that there may not be a single person who has insulted the state power and who at the same time would be allowed a last honour. Creon is neither questioning or ignoring power of the gods. In fact, he is only maintaining the separating line, the river of forgetfulness, between those forces and the affairs of the city. Against the committed violation of the edict, Creon maintains the boundaries of the state power in regard to divine forces.

In effect, there is no error involved in the play itself as it could be said of Oedipus's mistake in *Oedipus Rex*. Instead, there is a point of excess, that is sank into oblivion, namely the excess of patricide and incest committed by Oedipus which shook the constitution of Thebes, and caused disarray and scandal in the elite of the society. Even according to the internal logic of Sophoclean plays, Oedipus' fall is the direct reason why Polynices carried out his assault along the walls of Thebes. The chorus, the ruling establishment of the city has not forgotten the event:

Chorus: I see that the ancient sorrows of the house of the Labdacids are heaped upon the sorrows of the dead. Each generation does not set its race free, but some god hurls it down and the race has no release. For now that dazzling ray of hope that had been spread over the last roots in the house of Oedipus — that hope, in its turn, the blood-stained dust of the gods infernal and mindlessness in speech and frenzy at the mind cuts down.¹⁹

From such a perspective the positions are recast radically. It is doubtful if the moral of family and the constitution could be held apart in a dialectical schema. Oedipus' crime was precisely a crime that connects the public and the private. Its private nature was such that it could impossibly be

19. Verses 593–604.

separated from the state affairs. The drama in *Antigone* relates the same aporeia: How to understand the universality of the law when confronted with the pure contingency of prohibitions that cross through all registers of life? The attention should therefore be turned towards what we may call the introduction of an irreducible split, a disseminating power coextensive to the introduction of universal articulation of law as an unconditional principle. It is the historical deployment of such a universality that in each encounter with its ultimate lack of coherence, it projects its claim of unconditionality on a mythical past that never could have existed. *Antigone's* defiance in this respect reveals the effects of such a split whose trace is set since *Oedipus's* inevitable and inadvertent crime.

The main problem in Hegelian dialectic is that it is unable to allocate any conceptual operability to the category of singularity. The tragedy is encompassed by a conflict between the particular and the universal and such a framework is obviously prone to inconsistency when confronted with both *Creon's* tyrannical rule and *Antigone's* uncompromising self-consciousness. The singularity of her act is obvious and in sharp contrast to her sister's conduct, which is a more typical and historically plausible option. From the point of view of the social order, her behaviour remains devoid of sense, it's a pure traumatic moment. Hegelian dialectic fails to take into account the split that precedes the structures of an antagonistic system because the dialectical movement is supposed to unfold itself through the occurrence of incompatibility between the universal and one of the particular instances. This logic falls short since it is unable to measure the incommensurability and non-opposition in the relation between the singular and the universal. Such shortcomings are inherent to any schema that postulates a subjective self-identity as the posterior synthetic substance of the whole chain of mediations.

In his Seminar VII in 1959, Lacan who points that *Creon* is acting as the law, in other words for the best of everyone (*le bien de tous*), and that the issue is not that public law interferes in the private sphere but that the law is exerted unconditionally and for the best of all and everyone. It is exactly such an unconditionality, inherent to law in its formal structure that brings forth disaster consequences of the tyrannical edict.²⁰ The edict, as Lacan points out, means the punishment of the dead. The cruelty of the edict aims not at *Polyniceis* as a person, i.e. a subject in the network of historical relations, but at his corpse as the materialization of pure being. *Creon* is not simply the representation of the social order as Hegel wants it, he is the voice of a law that crosses the border and aims into the realm of pure being at the moment it claims its unconditional universality. Up to this point, Lacan's comment could be considered as a Hegelian reading that corrects some of the flaws in Hegel, but the distance between the two theoretical frameworks is to be found in each

20. In the framework of Lacan's theories, such an unconditionality is inherent to the functioning of superego. The importance of the play for Lacan is not limited to a merely historical survey, but rather dependent on a search for a transhistoric structure revealed by the tragedy and organized around a central mythem, which ultimately is that of *Oedipus Rex*.

starting point. While in Hegel, the movement of the spirit paves its way across incompatibility of particular instances, the point of departure in Lacan is the constant return of the singular at any given articulation of a logic that encompasses the All and the One at the same time. The singularity in question in Seminar VII is explained as incommensurability of desire and enjoyment.

Here, our purpose is not to discuss the details of Lacanian theories. The main point is that Antigone, contrary to what the antagonistic schema implies, is not an incarnation of the laws of the underworld in form of a counter-discourse. Only from the point of view of the law she could be conceived as the acting part of the dead body of Polyneices, because this is the only possible way for the societal order to grasp “her senseless and bewildered nature”.

The Mythem of Antigone

Antigone’s public declaration of defiance is met by Creon’s decision to sentence her to death. The passage that precedes the execution of her punishment contains a puzzling and oft-cited passage in the play. Antigone’s words connect the idea of underground forces to the tragic fate of her entire family. First, it is Creon that explains the peculiar form of punishment.

Creon: Do you not know that dirges and wailing before death would never be given up, if it were allowed to make them freely? Take her away —now! And when you have enshrouded her, as I proclaimed, in her covered tomb, leave her alone, deserted—let her decide whether she wishes to die or to live entombed in such a home. It makes no difference, since our hands are clean so far as regards this girl. But no matter what, she will be stripped of her home here above.

Creon pursues in these lines the line of argument that Antigone already belongs to the world of beneath, the realm of the dead and therefore sending her to the tomb is merely an act of returning her to the place where she belongs.

Antigone: Tomb, bridal-chamber, deep-dug eternal prison where I go to find my own, whom in the greatest numbers destruction has seized and Persephone has welcomed among the dead! Last of them all and in by far the most shameful circumstances, I will descend, even before the fated term of my life is spent. But I cherish strong hopes that I will arrive welcome to my father, and pleasant to you, Mother, and welcome, dear brother, to you. For, when each of you died, with my own hands I washed and dressed you and poured drink-offerings at your graves. But now, Polyneices, it is for tending your corpse that I win such reward as this. [And yet I honoured you rightly, as the wise understand. Never, if I had been a mother of children, or if a husband had been rotting after death, would I have taken that burden upon myself in violation of the citizens’ will. For the sake of what law, you ask, do I say that? A husband lost, another might have been found, and if bereft of a child, there could be a second from some other

man. But when father and mother are hidden in Hades, no brother could ever bloom for me again. Such was the law whereby I held you first in honour, but for that Creon judged me guilty of wrongdoing and of dreadful outrage, dear brother! And now he leads me thus in his hands' strong grasp, when I have enjoyed no marriage bed or bridal song and have not received any portion of marriage or the nurture of children. But deserted by friends, in misery I go living to the hollow graves of the dead.] What law of the gods have I transgressed? Why should I look to the gods anymore? What ally should I call out to, when by my reverence I have earned a name for irreverence? Well, then, if these events please the gods, once I have suffered my doom I will come to know my guilt. But if the guilt lies with my judges, I could wish for them no greater evils than they inflict unjustly on me.²¹

Antigone's arguments as to why she is prepared to sacrifice her life for a brother but not for a child or husband has appeared to many as devoid of sense and in contrast to her previous arguments. It is noticeable that there is a change of tone ever since the chorus addresses her with the word "child" in verse 855. Her argumentation is in an almost infantile way both sincere and cruel. The passage has been important to many contemporary commentators and among them Lacan, perhaps not only because of its obvious connection to kinship structure and gender relations but also because the passage connects to the central mythem in *Oedipus Rex*. We have to return to Lévi-Strauss' analysis of mythem in order to fully develop this connection.

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous (see, for instance, Pausanias, VIII, xxix, 4: plants provide a model for humans), to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem—born from one or born from two?—to the derivative problem: born from different or born from same? By a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true.²²

We are not interested in the apparatus of structuralist analysis per se. It suffices to notice that for Lévi-Strauss, the mythem both reveals and at the same time fictionalizes a constitutive impossibility inherent to the social order. *Autochthonic* versus *chthonic*, which mean respectively self-generated

21. Verses 885–926.

22. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Structural Anthropology*.

and gendered from without (*Chthonos* originally means stemming from underground), is the specific structural articulation of the impossibility.

The tautology of the law, that it says what it says, corresponds in Greek city to autochthonic fantasy, which also is a disavowal of the female position, like Oedipus who emerged from nowhere and stepped into a Thebes in the grasp of the Sphinx. The Antigone depicts also the riddle of the origin that ran through the *Oedipus Rex*: either the One or the Twoness as the ground of multiplicity inside the boundaries of the polis. The operability of the law based upon its tautological, self-generating inner logic presupposes the disavowal of significance of being born—as Antigone in the plays put it—“from the same mother” in order to guarantee the societal unitary regime. The impossible position of the *tyrannos*, being father of himself and son of no mother but purely spirit of unity, the absolute oneness of the law, is the mythemic core of the *Oedipus Rex*. This ontological impossibility that pertains to the constitution of the polis is exposed in the tragic consequences of the disclosed incestuous desire.

In *Antigone*, Against the sameness of the One as the synthetic unity of all, Antigone’s act represents the singularity of the exception, of that which is out of reach of the tautological law and always an emergence out of the void in the Other. But what does this mean to the tragic dimension of the play? More than fate, which is evoked in the play by its mythical name *Até*, the tragedy concerns the mode of subjective existence in presence of the law: Antigone’s tragedy is expressed in the same lines where she states her loyalty to the dead parents as being superior and prior to all future and possible loyalties of the subject. The only conceivable stand for her, as the chain of actions unfolds to the inevitable collapse of the sovereign, is succumbing to the question of guilt, accepting its validity and hence, descending to the underground. Antigone becomes the reverse of the excesses of the law itself. Underground in this configuration of structural positions is tantamount to the absence of new names for forces that might have been distinguishable in such a sequence of events that exposes the excessive nature of the law. Certainly, her act touches upon the frontier of transgression in regard to the law but the transgression, insofar as it remains a pure transgression to the nothingness, appeases the social unrest caused in the wake of her defiance of sovereign power. On the same foot as the dead and deities, delivering senseless explanations of blood ties with her parents, she becomes the effect of the law in its unmediated exercise: the guilt. Hence, her transgression becomes ever more reassuring since it proves once again before the law that all transgression ultimately expresses a guilt for which there will not be any conceivable reconciliation other than the tragic fall.

Moreover, Antigone’s words lead to the same fantasy of unity and Oneness as that of the law. Her position becomes the reverse of that of Oedipus. If Oedipus insists upon knowing the truth, against which the whole social order had warned him, a knowledge about being born from the same womb as his children, to such a terrifying fantasy, both for the male position of the sovereign and for the order of the kinship relations, Antigone presents its counterpart, by affirming

the maternal original void, the underground from which her existence stems. The horror lingers on, the guilt is transmitted to a young generation and the actions are brought before the law. The tragedy of Antigone exposes a trans-historical configuration in which the visual metaphoric of the underground forces connects to the truth of a constitutive mythem, and this connectivity is such that the emerged possibility of a new name, at the moment of disintegration of a social order, when encountered with the impossibility of unitary fantasy, is disavowed or suppressed.

Antigone is a specific mode of connectivity that encompasses the visual metaphoric of the underground and the mythemic substitution of the socially impossibility. The transcending potential of rebellion is transformed into the destiny of the doomed epic hero: the tragic figure appears as the mode of subjective existence in the city.

German Tragedy

It is this tragic mode of subjectivity that is at stake in events which follow in the wake of failure of modernist projects of the Twentieth century. Whether it was the Party—as Alain Badiou proposes²³—as the historical subject of a future society, or the project of demise of the political power after emancipation of social forces, the modernist project was in its closure phase when radical student movements emerged on the scene in the 1960's. Indeed, it was mainly a response to both the crisis of communist parties in carrying out the anti-capitalist revolution and the increasing integration of the proletariat—the agent of historical transformation—in capitalist society at least in Western Europe and North America. In Post-war Germany, still marked by its recent national-socialist past, the suppression of the workers' movement and the fantasy of pure race, parts of the young-leftist movement turned its historical position of being the last avant-garde of the century into a tragic heroism. In 1967, a demonstration against another ancient symbol of tyrannical power, the Shah of Iran, was held during his visit to West Berlin on an initiative from the Confederation of Iranian Students, a leftist formation. The demonstration was attended by a majority of leftist student groups at the time. During clashes with the police, a young student, Benno Ohnesong, was shot and killed by the West German police. No policeman was held responsible for the killing. The incident was the onset of a radicalization of student movements which is expressed in the following lines, written by Gudrun Ensslin, one of the future founders of *Rote Armee Fraktion*:

They'll kill us all. You know what kind of pigs we're up against. This is the Auschwitz generation we've got against us. You can't argue with the people who made Auschwitz. They have weapons and we haven't. We must arm ourselves.²⁴

23. *Le siècle*, Seuil, 2005.

24. Quoted in *RAF, collection of communiqués*, AK Books, London, reprinted 1990.

“We” here is a subject opposed to the society as a whole, an avant-garde that will bring down the regime of “the One Dimensional Man”. The subtle point is however that such a position represents a historical shift: “We” becomes inadvertently the very agent of a historical rupture between the social and the political. In 1970, the RAF’s statement after the operation of release of Andreas Baader from prison resounded the objective position of their armed struggle: “Did they believe that we would talk about the development of the class struggle and the re-organization of the proletariat without arming ourselves at the same time? ... Those who don’t defend themselves die. Those who don’t die are buried alive in prisons, in reform schools, in the slums of worker’s districts, in the stone coffins of the new housing developments, in the crowded kindergartens and schools, in the brand new kitchens and bedrooms filled with fancy furniture bought on credit.”²⁵ The new misery of suburban life of post-war Germany in the final lines, with all its social pathos, is paradoxically the mark of a rupture with the social forces in their organized forms. They are imprisoned or already dead in the new consumer society of late capitalism. In such a pseudo-guerilla language borrowed from anti-colonial movements and the Latin American left, the Marxian thesis of “class struggle qua political struggle” is de facto cancelled. All the founding members of RAF (and other groups such as J2M) were arrested by the end of 1972, through equally violent measures of surveillance and policing by the state. The rest of the organization gradually reduced the political radicalism of the early years into the pure rhetoric. Preoccupied with survival in extremely difficult underground conditions, the remains of the organisation carried out armed attacks mainly in order to defend and restore the organization.

The underground armed struggle of RAF and other groups highlights the emergence of the media in an unexpected way, as the imagery of the late capitalist society. The *Springer Verlag* publishing group and its tabloid newspaper *Bild-Zeitung* actively exploited the actions carried out by militant groups, either for the sake of instilling horror or encouraging more security measures. Members of the RAF such as Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, though portrayed as monsters and villains, became the front page icons in an orgy of violence and consumption, need of security and erotic excitement. Nevertheless, the state of emergency and the image produced by the media scarcely corresponded to the real extent of a few and parse operations that were carried out by a handful members of leftist groups.²⁶

In his article, “Like the Echo of A Collective Melancholia”, written after the death of founding members of RAF, Félix Guattari delivers a critique of RAF and the Italian Red Army Brigade:

While the secret war conducted by the industrial powers along the north-south axis to keep the Third World in tow is indeed the main issue, it should not make us forget that there is another north-south axis, which encircles the globe and along which conflicts

25. Published in the journal *AGIT*, No 833, 1970.

26. Jillian Becker, *Hitler’s Children: The story of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang*, Lippincott, 1977.

of an equally essential nature are played out, involving the powers of the State and oppressed nationalities, immigrant workers, the unemployed, the “marginals”, the “non-guaranteed” and the “standardized” wage-earners, the people of cities (cités) and of the barrios, of the favellas, the ghettos, the shanty-towns, engaging the opposition of mental control over this whole everyday, desiring world, capitalism mobilizes tremendous forces. To ignore this kind of opposition or to consider it of secondary importance is to condemn all other forms of social struggle led by the traditional Workers’ Movement to impotence or re-appropriation. Like it or not, in today’s world, violence and the media work hand in glove. And when a revolutionary group plays the game of the most reactionary media, the game of collective guilt, then it has been mistaken: mistaken in its target, mistaken in its method, mistaken in its strategy, mistaken in its theory, mistaken in its dreams ...²⁷

Amid the trace of emerging new conditions of social resistance, Guattari’s article touches also upon the imagery of the underground as the reflection of the fantasy of a collective guilt. From our reading of *Antigone*, it is clear that the moment of sacrifice in the case of RAF’s founding members, could be seen as a price paid for the crimes of the father in Auschwitz. It is not only clear but too obvious and this is why the armed actions, along with their reading, serve to obscure the relation between politics and the social field.

The figure of Ulrike Meinhof, one of the leading members of RAF, her life and destiny, stands out as a clear example of the fantasy in question. When in 1970, she accepted to help Andreas Baader’s friends to attack the prison guards and liberate Baader, she was already a well-known and recognized radical personality who had written extensively on the social situation of unprivileged groups in the society in general and the situation of woman workers in particular. She had also been highly active in various social projects in Berlin and made a TV production (which was never shown because she joined the RAF at approximately the same time) and several radio broadcasts about the inhumane conditions in juvenile institutions. After the escape operation, she was obliged to go underground together with Baader, leaving two daughters and her occupation as a journalist. Meinhof soon became a recognizable and fascinating face both for the *Bild-Zeitung*-type of propaganda but also for a whole generation of radical women in Germany. For example, Erich Fried, the German author qualified her in an article from the period as “the most important woman in German politics since Rosa Luxemburg.”²⁸ Her own words soon after the release of Baader relates sentiments and arguments of the time:

But that’s who we are, that’s where we’re from: The blood of the processes of destruc-

27. Reprinted in *Semiotexte*, Nr 2, New York, 1982.

28. In *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, quoted in “Ulrike Meinhof, An Emancipated terrorist?”, David Kramer, *European Women on the Left*, edited by Jane Slaughter and Robert Kern, Greenwood Press, 1981.

tion and degradation in metropolitan society, the war of everyone against everyone, the competition of everyone against everyone, the system, the law of fear, the pressure to succeed, all of this is what rules over us, for the one at the cost of the many, the division of people into men and women, young and old, healthy and unhealthy, foreigners and Germans, the struggles for prestige. And that's where we're from: The isolation of the terraced houses, the concrete jungles in the suburbs, the prison cells, the asylums and the clinics. From the brainwashing by the media, consumption, punishment through beatings, the ideology of non-violence; from depression, sickness, and the declassifying, insulting, and degrading of people, all exploited peoples under imperialism. Until we have satisfied the needs of each one of us and the necessity of liberation from imperialism, there is nothing to lose in this system of destruction, and there is everything to gain in the armed struggle: collective liberation, life, humanity, identity. That the concerns of the people, the masses, the assembly line workers, the lumpen, the prisoners, the students, the lowest class of people here and the liberation movements of the Third World are our concerns, too. Our concern: armed, anti-imperialist struggle is the concern of the masses, and vice versa—even when it's a long, slow process at first, the guerrilla's military-political offensive can become a real people's war. It can become real.²⁹

Meinhof, and other founders of RAF, soon after a few guerrilla operations, were arrested in 1972. Four years later, on May 9th 1976, she was found dead in her cell. The police declared her death as suicide. The following autumn, Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader and Jan Carl Raspe were also found dead in their cells in the top security prison of *Stammheims*. The news created a wave of protest and the funeral ceremonies in West Berlin were turned into political manifestations, defying the state. Meinhof and other founders of the group became the martyrs of German avant-garde.

The period of armed struggle, the kidnappings, the ruthless violence of the state of emergency, the blind and failed actions carried out by the RAF, evoked once again, the conflict was between those who put themselves above the law and those who act in its name. The density of this sequence of German modernism is founded upon numerous factors: the student radicalism of the 1960's, the revolutionary events in Paris in May 68, Germany's Nazi history and the existence of two opposing projects of modernism: free capitalism and state socialism both in the name of Germany, finally the new social landscape created by the welfare state in the post-war period. The events left their undeniable traces on a whole generation of writers and artists. Authors such as Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll and intellectuals outside Germany among whom one finds Jean-Paul Sartre, artists and filmmakers such as Gerhard Richter, Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner

29. Published in the journal *AGIT*, No 833, 1970.

Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff are some of those whose works are clearly and explicitly related to the events. *Germany in Autumn*, a collective film from 1978, was a major artistic manifestation of the period that recapitulated the both difficult and at the same time close relationship between intellectuals and artists and the political situation in Germany.

One of the segments of the film, directed by Schlöndorff and written by Heinrich Boll, tells the story of a national TV broadcast of the play *Antigone* that would be eventually cancelled due to political considerations. The episode shows a meeting of the executives of the state television during which concerns about whether or not *Antigone* would be associated with the fate of founders of RAF are discussed. The episode is interrupted by documentary footage from funeral ceremonies which alludes to the parallels between the content of the play and the situation in Germany in the autumn of 1976. Thomas Elsaesser, in an essay from 1997, explains the symbolic significance of the *Antigone* in *Germany in Autumn*:

... primed by the Sophoclean Ur-text and its Hölderlin-Hegel-Brecht hermeneutic, other aspects of the political crisis depicted in *Germany in Autumn* begin to reverberate in the symbolic-theatrical space that the film sets up to echo down the years of recent German history. For instance, the trope “State Funeral and Suicide” returns in *Germany in Autumn* when we learn that the Mayor of Stuttgart, the site of the double funeral, happens to be Manfred Rommel, son of Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, better known as the Desert Fox. In a WW2 newsreel included in the film, the young Manfred can be seen standing beside the coffin of his father, who after the defeat of El-Alamein had been ordered by the Nazis to commit suicide, so that Hitler could give him a State Funeral and celebrate a National Hero. Now Rommel Junior in 1977 found himself in the part of the benevolent counter-Creon, for it is he who as Mayor orders “a quick decision and clean choice”, he calls it in the film— that the three terrorists should have a dignified funeral in one of the city’s more prestigious cemeteries, rather than be handed to the Stuttgart vox pop, who had demanded that the bodies be disposed of “down the sewers”.³⁰

However, the analogy between the tragic poetics and RAF in their spectacular actions in the midst of a prosperous capitalist Germany is not only problematic, it leaves also out the contradictions of contemporary German society which RAF attempted to answer. Elsaesser reminds us that the whole question of members’ behaviour, fast cars, communication and technical skills and staging of violent scenes on the streets, have an ambiguous aesthetic and political dimension. Instead, he considers that the analogy concerns the act of self-positioning outside the law. An act that

30. “Antigone Agonistes: Urban Guerrilla or Guerrilla Urbanism?” in *Giving Ground: The Politics of Propinquity*, edited by Joan Copjec and Michael Sorkin, Verso, 1999.

takes place inevitably and as a result of a lack in collective forms of struggle. Thus, he writes “But the possibility that the specifically German dilemma of saying ‘we’ should also bring us back to Antigone has to do with the further step of seeing the RAF as ‘desiring’, whose actions were also designed to secure a subject position for them, from which they could speak, in this case the objectively impossible, negative but ‘justified’ position of the ‘we’. Just as Antigone, by speaking from a position not above the law but outside the law, could become the ‘ethical’ subject par excellence for Western political thought, because the place outside the law is a non-place for any mortal ...”³¹

While, Elsaesser delivers a nuanced critique of a too hasty hermeneutical reading that would reduce the political event to a historical blueprint of a drama, his analysis encounters a problem when it comes to the precise sense of “the possibility of a position of enunciation outside the law”. This position of enunciation is entirely representational. Elsaesser’s tacitly unquestioned assumption is that aesthetical representation and articulation of societal inconsistency would coincide at an ethical moment, materialized in a decision to leave the field of law, but he misses that the tragedy involves a doubling of representation. Antigone, as a persona represents the impossibility of a representation (a non-space, an *atopia*). To use a more familiar terminology, it is a negation of negation, though the dialectic lacks any positive end result. This means more concretely that RAF and their action only affirm that a “we” is untenable and it is why the RAF objectively reproduces what the order already knows: there is nothing outside the order. This means concretely that the RAF functions as the screen that covers up the split in the law itself at a critical historical point.

Shrines of Spectacle

The notion of underground in both these sequences, the Sophoclean tragedy and the historical act of sacrifice, is a visual metaphor, operative since the emergence of the state as the sovereign power based upon the universal law. And it is precisely such an operability that comes into an end on the cover of *Stern* magazine in late 70’s Germany. The German autumn exposes a radical shift as the visual metaphor of the underground is no longer connected to the truth, even in its mythemic version, but rather staged as a relic. This relic is what we initially called the fallen tragic hero.

If there has not been any place for tragedy in modern times, it was less so because of the allegedly increasing fear of death of modern man, and more so because the only tragic effect to be produced was intertwined with the epic action in the social arena of modernity. However, the figure of Meinhof signals the end of such a configuration of forces. As such, namely as representation, figures of underground pass over and into the visual plethora of a society that ceases to exist outside the spectacles that it produces. Underground in this sense is the image of impossibility, an administered and calculated exposing of an image, which guarantees its eventual circulation in the trade

31. Ibid.

of common ideas. The sublime apex of contemporary ideology is a piece of farce-like repetition instead: the most striking visibility shines in all its glory and the ground for all action is sundered in pieces: There are walls in Jericho and shrines of relics in Iraq that bear witness to this.