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**Considerations on Multimedia  
Installation based on the Sophocles'  
Tereus: Appropriations on  
Cultural Memory**

**Celina Figueiredo Lage  
Professor  
Guignard School  
Minas Gerais State University  
Brazil**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr  
URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)

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## **Considerations on Multimedia Installation based on the Sophocles' Tereus: Appropriations on Cultural Memory**

**Celina Figueiredo Lage**  
**Professor**  
**Guignard School**  
**Minas Gerais State University**  
**Brazil**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I describe some aspects of a multimedia installation designed and conceived by myself, inspired on the Sophocles' Tereus. The aim of the multimedia installation is to research images and sounds and relate them with the fragments of Sophocles' Tereus. The result intends to invoke the cultural memory about violence against women and children through images and sounds. This research includes aspects related to emotions, actions, animals, memory and narrative, intending to establish links with some ancient images, sensations and the fragmentary text of this Sophocles' play. Another point is the relationship that we can establish between past and present, observing the visual and literary tradition and the way how we can relate ourselves with them, updating these ancient themes.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, visual arts, Sophocles

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The fragments of a Sophocles' tragedy, known as *Tereus*, come to us through ancient testimonies, sparse and different quotes, which constitute the remaining pieces of the play. Reading these fragments was the starting point for designing a multimedia installation, which gathers the cultural memory of ancient Greece, reviving it and translating it in an intersemiotic way. The proposal came from an invitation of Professor Dr. Tereza Virgínia Ribeiro Barbosa (UFMG/Brazil), which translated, staged and analyzed the fragments in question.

It is believed that the plot of the myth is about the couple Tereus, king of Thrace, and Procne, which had a son named Ictys. Procne asks her husband to escort her sister Philomena and bring her to a trip to Thrace. During the trip, Tereus rapes her wife's sister and cuts her tongue, so she could not testify the fact. Philomena, prevented from speaking, weaves a tapestry chronicling the crime and sends it to her sister. Procne understands the fact, kills her own son, cooks him and serves him as a meal to her husband. At the end of the play, the gods metamorphose the main characters into birds - Procne in nightingale, Philomena in swallow, and Tereus in hoopoe.

The issues outlined in this play expose violence against women and against children. Philomena is raped and mutilated. The child Ictys is victim of murder and cannibalism. Since the Antiquity, such acts against children and women are present in our cultural memory, as explained Barbosa (2013). In the context of a cultural heritage, in which social structure defines the role of women as submissive to men and the child's role as submissive to parents, acts of violence against women and against children have a long history, an extensive literature and still cause many questions.

When designing a multimedia installation inspired by fragments of the tragedy *Tereus*, I centered myself in some points that caught my attention since the first reading. First, the fragmentary nature of the text, which I linked to the act of anthropophagy. The fact that the Sophocles' text has been destroyed in the passage of centuries, reveals a historical intention of silencing, obscuring, exterminating it. The choice of what should be preserved or not (in this particular case, the written text before the arrival of the printing press), copied or not, to be played or not, is undoubtedly an ideological act, which shows the values of the dominant group. It is not surprising that a play about the issue of violence against women and against children, was deleted in the context of a phallographic culture. When composing the multimedia installation, this aspect of the text led me immediately to the creation of discontinuous images and sounds, fragmented, and mutilated.

The second important point for me was the violence against children. The first image that came to my mind was a classical painting of a vase in red figures, usually identified as Medea killing her son, from the Louvre Museum collection (K300). Regarding this act, certainly someone could identify similarities with the play *Medea* by Euripides, and there is some discussion among experts regarding who had influenced whom or which play had been written first - the Sophocles' *Tereus* or Euripides' *Medea*. I wonder if this painting could also be identified as Procne killing Ictys, since there are not any

captions or names on the vessel that could ensure its interpretation, plus in Sophocles Medea, the killed children are two and not one. Another image that came to my mind was the Peter Grennaway's film "The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and The Lover" (1989), where there is a scene of cannibalism. More specifically I recalled some specific images in close-up of the fork and of the act of eating the cooked human body.

The third point that interested me was the muteness of Philomena and her narrative through embroidered images. The embroidery and loom are arts traditionally attributed to women, whose universe was restricted to the realm of the home and housework. For many centuries, women's art had little recognition or visibility, precisely because it was restricted to the scope of the house (oikos). The change in the status of women's art and its display in public places came in the twentieth century, and ever since we can speak of a female art inserted in the history of art, in the way it is commonly narrated.

In this sense, I ponder women historically have been restricted to an area of limited visibility. For centuries, it was forbidden to them to participate as citizens to the decisions of the city and express their opinions; their narratives and poetic had a restricted circulation, and probably embroidered narratives and myths were in this context the most widely used way of artistic expression, thus forming a space where speech often silenced, took the form of images. This way, the muteness of Philomena and her silent poetic act represent womanhood and its cultural forms of expression. In this respect, the mutilation of the language was interpreted by me as a metaphor for women's political and social position. For the composition of the installation, an image of an archaic vase black figures, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection (31.11.10) was related to this aspect: in this painting we can see two women embroidering, showing the communication and cooperation among women in their poetic act. Besides the archaic image, another image I rescued in this context was the silent film of the early 20th century by Manákis brothers, the first Greek filmmakers, where women appear looming. This short film was inserted by Theodoros Angelopoulos in the opening scene of his film "Ulisses' Gaze" (2004).

The fourth aspect is the metamorphosis of the three characters into birds, at the end of the play. This divine act, able to resolve conflicts, is called *deus ex machina*, which means that the god arises suddenly and intervenes in the development of the action. Here, I consider the act of metamorphosis as an act of appeasement, which ceases acts of extreme tragedy, suggesting images of different birds - the nightingale, swallow, and saves. A reference of the cinema was associated with this act, this time the movie "The Birds" by Alfred Hitchcock. The fact that some birds may be associated with a fragile and poetic feeling due to its delicate song, and also the possibility of rescuing a violent and terrifying feeling connected to them, instigated me. As a result, there are no pictures of birds in the installation, but only the sounds of birds, some melodic and other sharp and shrill, which I used as an emotional counterpoint in two distinct moments of the installation.

All those four aspects I mentioned above (the fragmented aspect of sounds and images, the violence against children, the act of storytelling through images, and the metamorphosis into birds), were put together and are the key points that I bolded in the composition of the multimedia installation. The choice of multimedia language, i.e. the sound associated with the picture, was tactical in providing the viewer / listener with some sensations and rescue some images that belong to the domain of our cultural memory and our visual and auditive culture. The result aims to appropriate some aspects of the fragmentary text of the tragedy of Sophocles reframing it, according to a personal reading that rescues western cultural memories.

I finally conclude that the exercise of intersemiotic translation enables the redemption of elements not only similar, but also distinct, which are placed in contact by comparison, face to face, to bring up a particular reading that rescues elements of a certain tradition, either literary, visual or sound. The intersemiotic translation constitutes therefore an action that enables updating, reading, remembering and quoting, where the result is not intended to repeat the work in its original form, but to bold the consequences of its appropriation in contemporary times.

In this respect, I would like to quote the thesis 6 of Walter Benjamin (1986), published in his "On the Concept of History", where he states: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to know it 'in the way it really was'; it means to appropriate reminiscences as it flashes in a moment of danger". In my view, the intersemiotic translation operated in this multimedia installation, incorporates many cultural reminiscences, appropriating works of the past to make them be seen again trough different flashes on different gazes.

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