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Electra Constrictor

How Bodies Matter in Peter Verhelst's and Luk Perceval's *Aars!*

by Maarten De Pourcq

Aars! : *Oresteia*

I

As a counterpart to the marathon performance *Ten Oorlog* [1] (1997-1999) – an adaptation of Shakespeare's *History of Kings* –, the Flemish director Luk Perceval has joined forces with poet Peter Verhelst to stage another drama classic: Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. For Perceval, the *Oresteia* seemed appropriate to encounter his wishes for putting up a matriarchal piece after a distinctly patriarchal one.

Although their collaboration already commenced in 1994, it took until 2000 before its result – entitled *Aars!* [2] – was staged. During this period, Verhelst wrote several versions of the text, which at every turn was revised by Perceval, so that in the end a radical rewriting remained, with several references to the events of the intermediate six years, such as the numerous paedophilia affairs in Belgium and the Sarajevo War.

The subtitle *An Anatomical Study of the Oresteia* qualifies the adaptation as a revision of the ancient trilogy in terms of horizontalization, foregrounding the body in its relation to textuality.



Plate 1

To begin with, the text of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* can be considered as a *corpus* that has been studied in the dissecting room. The initial design of the trilogy and the generic characteristics of Greek tragedy are largely left behind for the sake of a rewriting in more or less psychoanalytical terms. Consequently, Verhelst's text stages the bodies of a family (Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Orestes, and Electra) in their archetypal roles and with their primary drives. Not the becoming of the democratic city-state (*polis*) but the interrelations within this nuclear family (*oikos*) are elaborated in a bare and rather short four-part poetic text. Although Verhelst's elliptic and suggestive style remains far from an easy task for the actors, Perceval's contribution to the genesis of the text can be noticed in the way the piece is cut down to the size of a contemporary theatre practice with only four characters and without any *stasima*.

To Verhelst's poetry Perceval's *mise-en-scène* opposes a sober scenography as well as a sound scape that continually underlies the actions. This score is performed live by DJ

Eavesdropper, in whom one might see a *choregos* après-la-lettre or even the chorus itself. Evidently, this chorus does not interrupt the dialogical action by analysing the passed events or by elaborating mythological parallels, but if one likes to connect the pure musical score to a particular choral conception, one could say that it disrupts and instigates the dramatic actions in a primary manner as the young Nietzsche might have imagined it: a dionysian flux that seems to arise from the beyond and might rip up speech and actions. For the actor's voices are often absorbed by the score's drones and breakbeats, or they have to yell against it. The scenography has a similar impact: the whole piece is performed in a round water basin, a kind of arena around which the audience is seated. Here, the actor's body is directly threatened by the ice-cold water; this – together with the sound-scape – not merely disrupts speech but also stresses the articulation of the body's material presence through the discursive.



Plate 2

Therefore, one might interpret the function of sound and water – both to a certain extent shapeless and fluid but manifest to the senses – as an external staging of (some of the startling effects of) the bodily ‘space’ which in contemporary theory is called *chôra*. Although the term is derived from Plato's *Timaeus*, here it has to be understood in accordance with its conceptualisation by Julia Kristeva. For Plato, *chôra* operates as a medium between the ideal world and the physical world that enables phenomena to take a material shape (for their form is always connected to the Ideas). Unlike Luce Irigaray, Kristeva agrees with Plato attributing a motherlike quality to this space. In her appropriation of the term for the sake of her theory of the subject, Kristeva links it to the mother's lap to which the infant's pulsing body once was deeply connected and of which the subject has retained some material particularities (like timbre or rhythm). After the infant has become a subject by entering into the realm of speech and the (paternal) norms (‘forms’) intertwined with it (Kristeva calls this the *symbolic*), *chôra* remains at work in the body through the operations of signification it continuously performs. For instance, in modern poetry – a medium that pays particular attention to the materiality of signifiers –, the presence of *chôra* can be traced in the way it semiotically disrupts the linguistic order (e.g. grammar rules). From this perspective, the *semiotic* – as it arises out of *chôra* and consequently is opposed to the symbolic – can be compared to the Dionysian, as Nietzsche saw it arising, through tragedy, from the mother-like lap of the Primordial Unity (*Ur-Eine*), threatening and rendering the Apollinian principle of individuation.^[3] Since the latter process is regulated by measure and standardization, it can be equated to the symbolic.

II

A summary of the text will soon reveal the further impact of the idea of horizontalization on the way the *Oresteia* is rewritten by Verhelst.

Aars! consists of nine fragments and is subtitled *A Parlour Game for the Whole Family*. The pieces of the game are (the bodies of) the four family members, who through their speech

enter into incestuous relations with each other. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra alternately instruct Orestes and Electra on sexual differences from the perspective of their own decayed relationship. Clytemnestra teaches Electra that her body does not belong to herself but to the man who loves her – which in this case means: her father. Agamemnon teaches Orestes that they are rulers, so they have a duty to fulfil and therefore it is forbidden to pronounce the syllable ‘ma’, referring to the invocation ‘mama’. By imposing their own view, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra seem to be outlining the rules of the (parlour) game, set up by the omnipresence of a so-called ‘hunger’. At the same time, the game is acted out: the hunger of the parents – which can no longer be alleviated by each other – takes, through their speech, possession of the children, who are suggestively ordered to “give their hands”. At the close of *Aars1!* Electra causes her father to have an orgasm.

The subtitle of *Aars2!* – *Monologue of Man Being Drained Dry (Solo for Baritone)* – refers primarily to Agamemnon’s orgasm. During this draining he recounts with diminishing strengths his war memories, as if his body is experiencing them at the very moment. Thus he expresses the physical experiences of being rooted in the ground and shooting a machine gun. Moreover, he remembers scenes of castrated men and anally raped women. Agamemnon’s ‘little death’ at the end of *Aars1!* leads ultimately to his real death at the end of his monologue, while he recalls the tension he felt during his wartime between the desire for his wife and the duty of his rulership. The last words he whispers are: “All I want/is for something to lie down on me/something to carry me through the black at night./Something to press me to a breast/And give me to drink from that black.” His wish is fulfilled by Clytemnestra, who squats down on his mouth and stops his monologue, lying on top of him like a tombstone.

In *Aars3!* Orestes kills his exhausted mother on the instigation of Electra. Orestes defends his act upon his refusal to fill up the hole in his mother’s body, which was her continual desire. Simultaneously, he ties off his own member, as if it were an umbilical cord, and bleeds to death, while Electra is holding his bloody tied off member in her hand. Electra, ending up with three corpses, concludes: “No more father./No more mother./I’ve sewn up everything down there/with my brother’s flesh./Nothing left./No more father./No more mother./No more children./No more words. (ELECTRA, WITH/EARS SEALED/EYES CLOSED/MOUTH SEWN SHUT/PUSSY PLUGGED//SMILING)”.

In *Aars4!* (*Iphigenia – Solo for Inaudible Whistle*) Iphigenia (who did not appear in the foregoing parts) finds herself in a sort of dissecting room where she is interrogated, prostituted and violated. This fourth part was omitted from the actual performance and staged separately in 2002.

III

Aars! can be related to two main intertexts: Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, evidently, and Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a text that long before Verhelst centered around the *oikos* and laid stress on its incestuous features.

One of the most significant intertextual elements is the imagery of animals, as it prevails in Aeschylus’ trilogy (Heath; Rabinowitz; Saayman; Whallon). The characters in *Aars!* denominate each other as *pets* (in Dutch: ‘huisdieren’, ‘house-animals’) instead of housemates, a statement that neatly summarizes the manifest amount of frequent comparisons to animals (dog, snake, spider, chicken, cow), albeit not solely domestic ones. Therefore, the

translation 'pet' does not do justice to the tension at stake here, since through the use of the word 'huisdier' the *oikos* – primarily in the sense of family – surfaces as an uncanny space, with both pulsional and bestial features. In this, Verhelst's rewriting accords with the contemporary inclination for the (post-)freudian notion of the un-homely (*das Unheimliche*)^[4], which is very unlike the bourgeois conception of the family but which is conform to the house as it is displayed in the *Agamemnon*, where Clytemnestra compares it to a sea (958-962) (cf. Perceval's scenography).

The border zone between the bestial and the human can be staged through animal-like mythical figures like Nietzsche's satyr or Aeschylus' Furies; but in *Aars!* this zone is solely manifested through discourse. The discursive means by which the characters repeatedly have to deal with the qualification of the bestial (mostly of a particular species), involves them in a constant process of fashioning themselves and the selves of the others. On the one hand, this process – with its reiterative character and thus the possibility for displacement – destabilizes the fixity of such identifications, but on the other hand the question as such remains and influences the character's inner life: where and to what extent is there an animal in me, which animal would that be and what (ontological) kind of animal am I? For instance, in *Aars!* Orestes, due to his father, is haunted by the question whether he smells and looks like a dog. Both Clytemnestra and Electra answer his questions by referring to his 'snake', which he is capable to 'wag' for his mother but not for his sister. In the *Oresteia* the snake is particularly known from Clytemnestra's dream in which she gives the breast to a snake, whereby the milk becomes fused with blood (*Cho.* 527-33). The figure of the snake also appears in several snakewomen, like Medusa, Scylla or the Furies.

In her 1981 article on the cosmogonic structure of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz connects the snake as well as the water to the sphere of chaos, that is: to the precreative phase of a cosmogony. In widespread mythical traditions, as Rabinowitz argues, defeating a dragon marks the founding of a cosmos, for instance the structure of a *polis*. Hence, since the *Oresteia* concludes with the founding of a polis court, Clytemnestra and the Furies might be interpreted as such dragonish creatures (Rabinowitz 165, 179). In *Aars!*, however, the Furies have disappeared, as well as the aeschylean characters of Apollo and Athena, who both mark the triumph of patriarchy on the chthonic powers of the – so the well-known claim goes – matriarchal world. In O'Neill's trilogy the Fury has disappeared as well, but only to a certain extent, as it has become inherent to the psychology of the characters, for O'Neill's Electra has become her own Fury (Decreas 9). After everybody has been murdered or has committed suicide, she ends up alone, entombing herself in the family house, exactly like Verhelst's Electra encloses her body amid the three corpses. The displacement, however, is significant, since the *oikos* as locus of social interaction in *Mourning Becomes Electra* turns out to be the body in *Aars!*.

Although the social locus of the *polis* seems quite absent in all this, the politics of lust in the *oikos* makes it reappear. For the contemporary idea of the welfare state, with its emphasis on satisfying desires, joins neatly the individual *manque*, which is staged in *Aars!* as a hunger that can only be satisfied by pulling one's lips all over one's body and thus by eating oneself and one's own hunger (10). This idea is prefigured in the opening paratext, which picks up the imagery of the snake: "After the boa has devoured everything/He sucks himself into himself,/Lays himself down to sleep in his own belly/After which digestion commences./Why the boa sucks himself to himself?/It is the only thing about the solitary boa that makes sense" (3).

Aars! : Arse

IV

On the cover of the text book one finds a painting by the Flemish artist Wim Delvoye. At first sight, it looks like a lipstick kiss, but in fact it is the red coloured imprint of an arse. The equalization of mouth and arse – as holes that both swallow and discharge – stages the problematic status of discourse, since speech always implies the expulsion of what does not fit in its symbolic order. Moreover, linked as it is to the imagery of the boa, this polarisation is refigured by the enclosed Electra, who at the end of the play suggests that she is a boa herself (52). These figurations open up a multi-layered functioning of the snake.

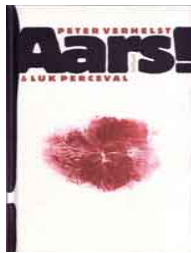


Plate 3 Cover of the publishing script.
Painted by Wim Delvoye.

On the one hand, the ambiguous imagery of the boa interrelates with the *amphisbaina*: the snake that moves in both directions, to which Clytemnestra is compared in the *Agamemnon* (1233). According to some sources, the *amphisbaina* had a head at the end of her tail (Lucan. 9.719; Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, 8.85; Dante, *Inf.*, 24.87). On the other hand, this boa more closely resembles the *ourèboros*: the snake that devours (*borân*) its own tail (*oura*) and figures in very different traditions as the symbol of the cyclic (day/night, male/female, life/death) and consequently of the mostly holistic interplay of oppositions.



Plate 4 Imagery of the Boa

Yet Electra's refiguration of the boa both stages and attempts to negate this interplay. First, as the bipolarity of gender dominates the play, the body is violated by the omnipresent hunger which urges the parents to impose on their children a particular normative view on life and sex. For this reason, Orestes and Electra choose to negate on a physical level the locus of this dominant difference. In the discursive materialization of their body and their sex, a process in which the heterosexual imperative manifestly rules (Butler 2), [5] they attempt as two *wild children* (Bey) to subvert patriarchal history. Although they both repeatedly cite the gendered ideas imposed by their parents, moments of subversive laughter and slight queerness (Orestes

who quickly puts on and off his sister's dress) pick up that which is abjected by the power that regulates their parents' discourse. Thus, Electra, by closing off her genitals, no longer wishes to be a "vessel" (Zeitlin 108) for the phallographic history, as it is portrayed in the *Oresteia*. In *Aars4!* its impact is staged in the way Iphigenia serves the male gaze, bears a child without being really aware of it, and is finally beaten to death. In *Aars1!* Electra's story of the dream in which she saw herself being robbed of her organs (17), once again puts up the visceral body as it is defeated by the discursive body.

V

It is exactly the return of this *real* (diseased, damaged, traumatized) body that takes a central position in contemporary art (Foster 166). This return of the 'real' marks an outside always present within discourse, for the outside is continuously abjected by discourse during its constitution. Therefore, one can understand this 'real' as opposed to 'reality', since the latter points to the way we define and try to deal with the world. In Lacanian words, the 'real' is what escapes the symbolic and imaginary levels of the discursive and therefore keeps haunting it or is haunted by it.

In Verhelst's play one might find returning with increased force that which represents the outside of the *Oresteia*'s cosmogony: the snake, the female, the water. The patriarchal evolution displayed in this ancient cosmogony has its discursive implications as well (McClure 111; Goldhill), which makes that one might compare the aeschylean *cosmogony* to the contemporary idea of *materialization*, as it is staged and questioned by Verhelst's text. Among with Perceval's *mise-en-scène*, with its attempts to disrupt the discursive body, the so-called 'matriarchal' character of *Aars!* can be understood as countering the discursive in its patriarchal symbolic features by the way its outside is stressed and tentatively represented on the level of the body and the semiotic. On the other hand, the body itself seems to be negated.

Aars! : Ars

VI

Correction: it is chiefly the discursive body that is negated. At the end of *Aars3!* the holes in Electra's body that are closed off, are explicitly denominated: not the nose nor the arse, but the eyes (which might refer to the (male) gaze; to the realm of the Imaginary, associated with the images, as opposed to the realm of the Real, that which escapes or defies all representation; and to the phallogracy of vision in western culture (Jay)), the ears and the mouth (the gates of speech), and the genitals (gender). So the negation is very specific and seems to imply the utopy of a new kind of body.

In his 1998 manifesto for theatre Verhelst wrote: "A woman is standing on the stage, her arms and legs spread wide. Like a five-pointed star. Like an AIDS virus. She is naked. Look closer, and you will see she is no longer a woman. Perhaps she was once a man. Perhaps that's why the breasts are composed only of muscle. But no nipples. And there, lower down, no sex, just smooth skin. The perfect body. It is sufficient unto itself. It is an end unto itself. This sexless body (...) is the word NO clad in muscle, sinew and skin. (...) No: the *via negativa*." (165-7). The word 'no' aims primarily at the 'hunger' that would not exist in the *hortus conclusus* of the autarkic body. Despite the horizontalization as it occurs in Verhelst's so-called 'anatomy' of the *Oresteia*, deprived as it is of its divine order, the religious remains to a certain degree at work under a more individualistic guise, that is: through the mystic idea of a *via negativa*

(using a language that aims at a divine presence which in reality seems to be absent) and the formation of a new body (instead of a political organ, as the Olympian gods founded it in the *Oresteia*) that “make[s] use of metaphors, words that are so private, so personal, that they tell us all about the world” (Verhelst:1998 163). According to Verhelst, “[t]here must be words that do not originate in the spirit, but in the body itself” (165). The mere fact that even these bodily words can easily be recycled by the gregarious symbolic order and will soon deviate from the (impossible) personal realm, necessitates the author to engage his oeuvre (poetry, prose and drama) in a process of re- and overwriting, annihilation and self-destruction. For in Verhelst’s opinion, words have to be decomposing their own organism, as bodies do, and receive their useless beauty from this process of self-digestion. One might regard this beauty as a tragic one, since – as one might put in the wake of Aristotle – the horror of this desintegrating seems to create a particular pleasure, most likely involving a sort of incognizable knowledge, proper to the (semiotic) body.

Not coincidentally, the swallowing boa appears more than once in Verhelst’s work. The imagery of the self-digesting boa, in the sense of the *ourèboros*, inclines to a certain infiniteness in its ‘finiting’ and, therefore, as Bart Vervaeck argues, this figure designates the utopian of his poetics: “La littérature ne pourra jamais avoir l’immédiateté d’un morceau de musique, d’une danse ou d’un orgasme. Elle devrait se renier elle-même pour atteindre cette sorte d’extase. Et ceci explique l’ambition la plus singulière de la littérature de Verhelst: produire des textes qui s’autodétruisent afin de transmettre de façon directe ce qui ne peut être transmis par le langage” (14). At the end of *Aars!*, Electra, after having closed off her body, keeps silent and is smiling like all dead people do in Verhelst’s oeuvre, as if she incarnates what Verhelst once claimed: “If theatre has any sense, it is as the ecstasy of reality.” (Verhelst:1998 169). Through their smiling, dead people in Verhelst’s work always seem to radiate. Accordingly, Verhelst’s Electra resembles some of Euripides’ female protagonists, like Medea or Hecuba, who through their horrific deeds transgress reality and are transformed into new (mythical) beings. In *Aars!*, however, such a rebirth is merely suggested: a transformation as such has not taken place, only a smiling prothetic body incarnates Electra’s tragic ‘beauty’ and hints at an inner level within her body.

Aars! (An Anatomical Study of the Oresteia)

Written by Peter Verhelst and Luk Perceval

Director: Luk Perceval

Decors: Katrin Brack

Costumes: Ilse Vandenbussche

Lighting: Enrico Bagnoli, Luk Perceval and Mark Van Denesse

Music: Eavesdroppe

Dramaturgy: Kurt Melens

With Diane Belmans, Eavesdropper, Katrien Meganck, Wim Opbrouck, Stefan Perceval

Foot notes

[1] In English: *At War*. The piece was also performed in Germany, entitled *Schlachten!*.

[2] In English: *Arse!*. The play has been performed in Flanders, the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, and it was adapted by Marthinus Basson in South-Africa. It also has been translated in English and French.

[3] In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* Nietzsche postulates that Greek tragedy has its origins in a chorus of satyrs, which would give expression to the (musical) drive of the Dionysian: “Jene Chorpartien, mit denen die Tragödie durchflochten ist, sind also gewissermassen der Mutterschoss des ganzen sogenannten Dialogs, d.h. der gesamten Bühnenwelt, des eigentlichen Dramas. In mehreren aufeinanderfolgenden Entladungen strahlt dieser Urgrund der Tragödie jene Vision des Dramas aus: die durchaus Traumerscheinung und insofern Epischer Natur ist, andererseits aber, als Objektivation eines dionysischen Zustandes, nicht die apollinische Erlösung im Scheine, sondern im Gegenteil das Zerbrechen des Individuums und sein Einswerden mit dem Ursein darstellt.” (87). For the Dionysian is the vital and the excessive that startles the normalized individual, which is individuated by the Apollonian principle of measure.

[4] Cf. the forthcoming article by Anneleen Masschelein for a critical overview of the way the (un)concept of ‘das Unheimliche’ is used in twentieth-century aesthetics.

[5] In her 1993 book *Bodies Do Matter* Judith Butler elaborates a theory of ‘sex’ that relates it to the regulatory practice at work in the discursive: “[Sex] is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (...) “Sex” is not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the “one” becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.” (Butler 1-2).

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