CHAPTER TWO

THE URN: SOPHOKLES, *ELEKTRA*

The shield scene in Aiskhylos’ *Seven Against Thebes* has provided an example of a dramatic character whom the dramatist represents as using to some extent the cognitive functions of imagery—its comparisons and anticipations—to facilitate his reasoning about a problem that is novel and involves cognitive conflict. My discussion of the urn image in Sophokles’ *Elektra*, on the other hand, has as its primary focus, the spectators’ response to the reconstrual of image shape, the possible comparisons that they may make, and the anticipation to which those comparisons may lead them, and which may affect their understanding of the play.

Oliver Taplin writes that “a performed work should wear its meaning in view”.¹ I am proposing that the dominant prop, the urn, is one way in which Sophokles’ *Elektra* may make its meaning visible. As in the shield scene of the Aiskhylean play Sophokles reconstrues the image of a prop. His reconstrual, however, is more radical than the example from Aiskhylos who makes mental mappings between similar objects: eye and eye, fire and fire, hoplite and hoplite. Sophokles constructs spatial reconstruals not only verbally and through mental imagery, but visibly, and between objects that are dissimilar: the funerary urn, the beloved head of Orestes and the mask of Klytaimnestra. I shall also argue that the urn maps onto an image which overshadows the entire play and may be seen to unify it—that is, the tomb.

Before examining the image of the urn in the context of the spectators’ prior experience and the play itself, I shall recall some aspects of visual perception and mental imagery which apply to the urn. This is necessary in order to avoid any misunderstanding relating to my use of theories which apply on the whole to mental imagery. The urn is introduced as a visible object late in the *Elektra*, so that in discussing it there is an overlap between its visually perceived and mental representations. The superimposing of one image upon another, of course,

¹ Taplin (1977) 18.
has to be imagined. On the appropriateness of applying theories on mental imagery to visually perceived images we find first of all that research into the relationship between the two suggests that there is a strong resemblance between them.\(^2\) The object that we imagine can correspond closely to the object that we see,\(^3\) the imagined object, the analog of the physical object which it represents.\(^4\) Secondly, what is perceived and what is imagined can act as a retrieval cue to memory.\(^5\) Thirdly, mental imagery and visual perception have a function in reasoning and problem solving.\(^6\)

Another aspect in processing the image of the urn, whether it be perceived or imagined, is in the transformations which that image undergoes. The transformations that concern us, those of superimposition and reconstrual, involve at least two images which relate to one another in an image metaphor. Plates II.i, ii, iii at the end of the chapter are indicative of the reconstruals of the urn shape which I discuss below. The fact that these images are visible in the performance (as are Hitchcock’s ‘cages’ in the film *The Birds*) reinforces their significance. In this case reconstrual occurs at three levels: the visible, the mental and the abstract. In addition to reconstrual, the transformation of the urn image invites a mental superimposing of images as we see at Plate II.v. In an analog system a variety of information can be processed simultaneously.\(^7\) Such superimposition demonstrates something of this simultaneity.

Not only has Sophokles constructed for the spectators a series of superimposed images with abstract reference to death, deceit and revenge, but this matrix of information is itself superimposed on the image of a tomb (Plate II.iv). Just as the reconstrual of the urn shape facilitates the creating of “new interpretations of the original image”,\(^8\) the mapping of the matrix onto the tomb may also lead to new understandings, particularly as this ‘tomb’ finally represents the

\(^4\) Rumelhart and Norman (1988) 511–587; see in particular the section on analogical representations (545–61) and conclusion at 554.
\(^5\) Paivio (1983a) 6–8.
\(^6\) Helstrup and Anderson (1996) 275–93. From four experiments Helstrup and Anderson conclude: “Objects with fixed or variable shapes, presented verbally or visually [my italics], can be used by subjects to make genuine discoveries in imagery” (289–90).
\(^7\) Paivio (1983a) 8–9.
\(^8\) Kaufmann and Helstrup (1993) 142–3.