The subject of this chapter is Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film adaptation of one of the most shocking and intriguing plays from Greek antiquity, Euripides’ Medea. This is a text that continues to inspire generations of artists – mostly playwrights, but also writers and film directors – who approach it in many different ways, dealing with the issues of an oppressed foreign woman, who, in the Euripidean account, brutally killed her children. Copious research in the reception of ancient tragedies has shown that adaptations of dramas, interpretations, and translations have always depended on particular contexts in which recognized social and political needs of the moment were addressed according to cultural variations, sensitivity of the artist, personal style, creativeness, and affinities. Before I turn my attention to Pasolini’s Medea, however, I will offer my interpretation of the essence of the Euripidean play that Pasolini adopted in its original context – ancient Athens, where it was written and produced late in the fifth century BC. After doing so, I will offer my interpretation of Pasolini’s film, especially as regards his attitude toward and relation to Euripides’ text, and regarding certain specificities that he developed as a consequence of a new context – the 1960s – in a dimension we might say intersected with Pasolini’s reading of Euripides’ drama and this ancient tragedy.

I turn first to Euripides’ drama in the ancient context in which it appeared and discuss briefly the meaning of theater in Athenian public life. Ancient tragedy explored mechanisms that lead to the destruction of the individual, dealing with all the contradictory powers that can influence any culture and any individual in the conflicted society. As one of the institutions of Athenian democracy, the theater was also a venue in

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2 This drama has a rich history of adaptations that has been (as much as it is possible) reviewed, analyzed, and presented in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Oliver Taplin, eds., Medea in Performance 1500–2000 (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

which audiences were forced to confront many questions, especially those that were too complicated or sensitive to be raised in the assembly and discussed in the general public.\textsuperscript{4} This institutionalized “control” aspect of the assembly opened a space for subversiveness, which Froma Zeitlin identifies as female because it confronted the community with the domain that was considered to be feminine, and in a way that was feminine. That is, although the theater was a homosocial institution, it functioned in the feminine way through the transgressions and the display of the (male) actor’s body, through the confrontation with pain and loss, and through the multiplication of identities. In that way theater was the arena for challenging the dominant ideas and concepts of identity.\textsuperscript{5} The subversiveness of the Athenian theater in general and of Euripides’ Medea in particular is precisely one of the most important links and issues that I would like to address in discussing Pasolini’s film.

That the main character of Euripides’ play and of Pasolini’s film is a mother who kills her children leaves no doubt that this drama is dealing with the issue of power and the problem of the Other. This is demonstrated through Medea’s status as a woman and a foreigner, which has been the aspect of this drama most frequently identified and exploited in adaptations.\textsuperscript{6} A very important aspect of the representation of Medea’s womanhood is that she, though a barbarian, is at the same time represented as a Greek mother and wife.\textsuperscript{7} The radical act of Medea’s infanticide may be understood as the only way in which she could overcome the

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  \item \textsuperscript{4} Nicole Loraux, \textit{The Mourning Voice, An Essay on Greek Tragedy} (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) 15: “But theater, tragic theater at least, was also – and perhaps best – equipped to deal with issues that the citizens of Athens preferred to reject or ignore.”
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Froma Zeitlin, \textit{Playing the Other} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 362–364.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Edith Hall stresses the point that one of the important issues that Greek tragedy (in particular Medea and Heracles) problematises, and that is so little recognized in today’s world, is the problem of children’s rights. Until today, only one of the adaptations has addressed this, Peter Sellars’s \textit{The Children of Herakles}. In order to emphasize the political dimension of the play, the director invited “real-life” children, Kurdish asylum-seekers, to sit on the stage silently throughout the play; in Ondine Corinne Pache, ed., \textit{Baby and Child Heroes in Ancient Greece} (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 9. Another unsearched domain that the Medea myth opens is the problem recognized by Pache, who argues that this myth (regardless of version) embodies a mythical representation of parents’ darkest fear – direct and indirect responsibility for their children’s life and, even more important, death. This conclusion is the result of the systematic and profound research on myths (and the Medea myth is one of these) and cult practice in honor of dead children.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} According to William Allan, \textit{Euripides: Medea} (London: Duckworth, 2002) 67, this very contradictory representation (of barbarian and of Greek as barbarian) is one of Euripides’ ways to confront his audience with prevailing stereotypes about barbarians and to call them into question.
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