UNDER ATHENA'S GAZE:
AESCHYLUS' EUMENIDES AND THE TOPOGRAPHY OF OPSIS

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The performance space at the Sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus, that we have come to know as the “Theatre of Dionysos,” was situated in the historic and religious heart of the city—a sacred space surrounded by monuments and cult sites of great significance to Athenian cultural identity. I want to demonstrate how reading an ancient play with the physical environment where it was originally staged in mind might open up another dimension of appreciation and understanding of ancient drama. In seeking to place Greek plays within the “scopic regime” in which they functioned my aim is to provide a kind of “visual dramaturgy” that might enhance our comprehension of ancient performance. Opsis (“visuality” rather than the more derogatory “spectacle”) was not confined to the masks, costumes, set, props, and movement bounded by the performance space but was framed by a multi-faceted panorama where dramas set in a mythological past could merge with the landscape of the present. The natural and human-made landscape of Athens provided a visually dynamic setting for the performance of drama and the sights encountered by the bodily eye of the spectator together with the memorized images contained in their mind’s eye greatly affected the meaning of the play being watched.

It is well known that the Greeks called their dramatic playing spaces theatra—“seeing places”—and attended performances as theatai—“spectators,”

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1 The term “Theatre of Dionysos” is not found at all in fifth or fourth centuries except in Thucydides (8.93.1) where there is mention of a “theatron of Dionysos,” but this is at Munychia, a hill in the Piraeus, not the Acropolis in Athens. Theatron can mean any seating area not necessarily a theatre space. Aristophanes uses the phrase “before the theatron” (πρὸς τὸ δέατρον) during the parabasis where the chorus leader directly addresses the spectators (Acharnians 628–629, Peace 733–734 and Knights 508). The theatron in the fifth century was wooden and perhaps semi-temporary. See Csapo (2007) and Moretti (2000).

2 The film theorist Christian Metz (1982) 61, first coined the term “scopic regime” to create a distinction between the theatre and the cinema. Since then the phrase has come to be broadly applied to cultural specific genres of visual culture such as scopic regimes of gender, class, photography and documentary film to examine the cultural underpinnings that operate in the presentation of and comprehension of images.

3 See Zeitlin (1994) 145.
but it should be stated at the outset that although I do believe that visuality was an essential part of ancient drama and one that has often been neglected, it operated in tandem with the aural elements of a play—the music, lyrics and words. Greek drama was not mime. Words delivered in the form of live utterances existing in the moment they are spoken or sung in the ears of the audience were as important as a tilt of the masked head, a gesture of the hand or the steps of a dance. In fact the Greek theatrical experience needed both the aural and the visual to be complete—but there has been much already written about the words of Greek drama and this brief study is an attempt to balance the scales a little by focusing on the visual.

The key to understanding the importance of this “topographical opsis” lies in Greek drama’s close connections to the presentation of performative collective movement such as processions, street revels, parades, dance and choral performance (what I term “symporeusis”\(^4\)) and how they interacted with the landscape they moved through. Symporeutic performance forms had a great deal of influence on fifth-century theatre, the space it was performed in and the nature of the relationship of the visual field available to the spectator. The example we will examine in detail is Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, and how the brand-new colossal bronze statue of Athena by Phidias erected on the Acropolis in the late 460’s / early 450’s BCE had a powerful bearing on the structure and reception of the *Oresteia*. Thus, when Aeschylus brings his Orestes to Athena’s statue in the Athens of *Eumenides* and then has the goddess appear on stage, he is forging a relationship with his spectators’ immediate visual environment and creating a vivid political and social connection between the mythological world of the play and actual events existing in the here and now of the spectators. The Bronze Athena was the first monument to be erected on the ruined Acropolis, more than 20 years after the Persian destruction and at the time of the *Oresteia*’s performance had either just been completed or was in the final stages. According to Pausanias it stood so tall that it could be seen from Cape Sounion some 30 miles away.\(^5\) This great *agalma* (“adornment”) may well have been one of the first major public works undertaken by the new radical democracy and stood as a symbol of Athenian defiance in the face of Persian aggression and Spartan dominance and as a bold new expression of Athenian cultural hegemony.

The spectators at the *theatron* at the Sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus, whether members of the Athenian *demos* or foreign visitors, were engaged

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4 Alan Sommerstein suggested this term to me.

5 Pausanias 1.28.2.