BLOODY (STAGE) BUSINESS: MATTHIAS LANGHOFF’S SPARAGMOS OF EURIPIDES’ BACCHAE (1997)*

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[T]here are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying.

(Linda Hutcheon (2006) 7)

Suffering may well evoke such admirable values as dignity, courage and endurance, but it would be pleasant if one could stumble upon some less excruciating method of exercising them.

(Terry Eagleton (2003) 34)

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I. Moving Target: Re(dis)covering Road Stop Thebes

What is Thebes all about in light of Euripides’ *Bacchae*? For the ancient Athenians, Thebes was the mythical home of the founder Cadmus, his daughter Agave, and his grandson, the young king Pentheus. Thebes was the destination of the god Dionysus, also a grandson to Cadmus (via his daughter Semele), who returned to establish his divinity and to spread his mystery rites. Thebes was therefore a point of departure, too, for the *thiasoi* of Maenads or Bacchae, cult groups of female followers of Dionysus, which set out from the city to nearby mountains to celebrate the ecstatic Dionysiac rituals in close contact with, and in the privacy of, unspoiled nature. Thebes was the familiar stranger, being the theatrical counterpart or mirror of ancient Athens, as Froma Zeitlin has argued (1990). But what is Thebes to the modern visitor? And how does one now even begin to conjure up visual images of Thebes, when so little of the ancient city has been preserved?

Thebes today is rarely a destination per se. The *Blue Guide Greece* describes the town: “there are hardly any visible remains sufficiently important to excite the interest or awaken the enthusiasm of the visitor” (Barber (1990) 406). For tourists whose real destination is Delphi, Thebes is too close to Athens for a first stop, especially when scenic mountain villages, such as Arachova, await. Those headed north on the *Ethnike Odos*, or the National Road, stop at beach resorts with modern facilities. Only the classicist or archaeologist with specialized interests is likely to seek out Thebes in *Thiva*. Everyone else drives on at full speed.

It was precisely that impression of the nondescript provincial town of Thiva that director Matthias Langhoff sought to conjure up. Dreary Thebes became the new protagonist of his 1997 version of Euripides’ *Bacchae*.\(^1\) Thiva was the stamping ground for new tragic characters, who seemed

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\(^1\) The *Bacchae* could not possibly be the same play when set in a different locale. Nonetheless, it is hard to explain how a cityscape might become the protagonist of a play. However, readers who have seen Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* or the 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, directed by Sofia Coppola and set in Tokyo, may see a parallel with the omnipresence of a modern city in the picture. Places with a symbolic or metaphorical value seem to become tantamount to characters (albeit mutae personae) also in some older English-language novels (such as those by the Brontë sisters and by Luisa May Alcott). The poetry of Constantine Cavafy, on the other hand, is haunted by the city of Alexandria (ancient as well as modern), which, again, is much more than an evocative backdrop. Canadian director Ned Dickens conjured up a post-apocalyptic Thebes in a seven-play cycle called *City of Wine* (2009) that was inspired by both Sophocles and Seneca and offered visceral comments on modern social and political ills.