



THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF ANKARA
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TRACING THE TRAGIC THROUGH ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE
AND HOWARD BARKER'S THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE

Master's Thesis

Tuğba ÇANAKÇI

Department of English Language and Literature
Master of Arts in English Language and Literature

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to Bayram Emir ÖZKILINÇ

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ÖZET

ANTİK YUNAN TİYATROSU VE HOWARD BARKER'IN FELAKET TİYATROSU ARACILIĞIYLA TRAGEDYANIN İZİNİ SÜRMEK

Bu tez, Antik Yunan tiyatrosunun kuramsal ve düşünsel temelleri ile Howard Barker'ın Felaket Tiyatrosu arasındaki süreklilikleri incelemektedir. İnceleme, antik ve çağdaş trajedi arasındaki ilişkiyi katastrof, katarsis ve koro olmak üzere üç içkin yapı üzerinden ele almaktadır. Çalışma, öncelikle Dionysos kültüne dayanan ritüellerin trajedinin oluşumuna evrilme sürecini değerlendirmekte, ardından Aiskhylos'un *Agamemnon*'u (MÖ 458), Sofokles'in *Kral Oidipus*'u (yaklaşık MÖ 433) ve Euripides'in *Medea*'sını (MÖ 431), Barker'ın *Blok/Eko* (2011) adlı eseriyle karşılaştırmalı olarak incelemektedir. Tez, Barker'ın tiyatroyu etik ve öğretici bir temel yapı olarak kavramsallaştıran Aristotelesçi kuramsallaştırmaya bilinçli bir direnç geliştirdiğini, bu direncin sanatı, varoluşun estetik bir uzantısı olarak yeniden konumlandığını ileri sürmektedir. Aristotelesçi çerçevede katastrof, katarsis ve koro etik bir oluşum olarak işlevlendirilirken, Barker'ın tiyatrosunda etik yönelimin bilinçli biçimde sonuçsuz bırakıldığı görülmektedir. Yöntemsel olarak çalışma, tiyatral dokunun metinlerarası ve düşünsel çözümlemesine dayanmaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, katastrofun artık anlatıyı sonlandıran bir düğüm olarak değil, süreklilik arz eden bir zarar biçiminde yapılandığını ortaya koymaktadır. İzleyiciyi birleştirici işlev gören arkaik katarsis, yerini izleyiciyi yerinden eden, çözülme ve bozulma deneyimiyle yüzleştiren bir anti-katarsise bırakmıştır. Koro ise kolektif bilinci temsil etmekten uzaklaşarak, parçalı ve düzensiz bireyselliğin yankısına dönüşmüştür. Bu dönüşüm, modern bireyin etik ve varoluşsal yalnızlığına yönelik yapısal bir duruş olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak tez, Barker'ın Felaket Tiyatrosu kuramının trajedinin Dionysosçu temelini yeniden canlandırıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu anlayışta ölçülülük yerini aşırılığa, etik tutarlılık yerini muğlaklığa, uyum ise yerini yalnızlığa bırakmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Barker'ın Aristotelesçi biçime direnci, sanatsal tavrını Nietzscheci bir güçle ilişkilendirmekte ve estetik özerkliği trajik insanın kurucu bir ilkesi olarak ileri sürmektedir. Dolayısıyla trajedi, etik bir telkin alanı olmaktan ziyade, varoluşun içkin tutarsızlığıyla doğrudan bir karşılaşma olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Howard Barker, Trajedi, Katastrof, Katarsis, Koro

ABSTRACT

TRACING THE TRAGIC THROUGH ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE AND HOWARD BARKER'S THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE

In this thesis, the continuities between the institutional and intellectual foundations of Ancient Greek theatre and Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe were examined. The examination considered the continuum between ancient and contemporary tragedy through three intrinsic institutes that are catastrophe, catharsis, and chorus. It first considered the transition of rituals rooted in the Dionysian cult into the formation of tragedy, then conducted a contrastive assessment of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 BCE), Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (c. 433 BCE), and Euripides' *Medea* (431 BCE) with Barker's *Blok/Eko* (2011). The thesis insists that Barker resisted the Aristotelian theorisation of theatre as an ethical and instructional foundational form, which resituated art as an aesthetic extension of existence. In contrast to the Aristotelian theorisation of catastrophe, catharsis, and chorus as an ethical institution, Barker's theatre situates ethical intent inconclusive. Methodologically, the thesis utilised intertextual and intellectual examination of theatrical texture. The outcomes construed that catastrophe no more constituted a denouement but a detriment. The archaic catharsis that consolidated the audience turned to anti-catharsis that confronted the audience with dislocation, dissolution and distortion. The chorus no more represents collective consciousness; instead, it echoes the fragmented and erratic individualism. The transition was assessed as a structural stance to the ethical and existential isolation of the modern individual. In conclusion, the thesis revealed that Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe revived the Dionysian foundation of tragedy. It reversed moderation in favour of excess, ethical coherence in favour of ambiguity, and harmony in favour of solitude. In this sense, Barker's resistance to Aristotelian form associated his artistic attitude with a Nietzschean force. This stance asserted an autonomous aesthetic as a constitution of tragedy construction. Thus, tragedy was conceived not as ethical inculcation but as a confrontation with incoherence within existence.

Keywords: Howard Barker, Tragedy, Catastrophe, Catharsis, Chorus

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Figure 1: Tomas Leipzig. *Dead Doctor's Coat*. 2011, The Northcott Theatre



INTRODUCTION

1.1.Aim

The aim of this thesis is to trace the tragic form from the ancient to the contemporary formulation. The thesis evaluates how the tragic form evolves in intellectual and institutional terms throughout time. The examination first finds its basis in Pindar's view, which offers one of the earliest views of a tragic truth of the world. It then fixes on Aristotle and Nietzsche, two thinkers from different eras whose differences expose a discernible distinction in the theorisation of tragedy. Aristotle defines a structural and ethical framework of tragedy, while Nietzsche denies this framework and defines tragedy as a fracture in the spiritual sphere. The theoretical tension thus forms the theoretical foundation for the examination of three Ancient Greek plays: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Euripides' *Medea*.

The thesis focuses on the three foundational constructs that are catastrophe, catharsis and chorus, the core mechanisms of tragic constitution. The tragic triad stimulates aesthetics with assertion and thus stirs the audience. This triad is not arbitrary; rather, it represents the structural, ethical, and collective dimensions that jointly organise the tragic experience across historical periods. While catastrophe marks the dramatic alteration, catharsis denotes the ethical and emotional assimilation, and the chorus embodies collective articulation. In combination, these elements indicate an evaluative construct that the continuum from ritual to theoretical, and from textual to theatrical, can be identified. While substantial studies construe Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe as a fracture from the ancient theatre, this thesis concludes that it connects with Ancient Greek tragedy. In his theorised theatre, Barker refracts, reframes, and at times reflects the triad of catastrophe, catharsis, and chorus, not to abandon their tragic function but to relocate them within a modern theatrical condition. Through this continuity, the thesis identifies a conceptual continuum extending from ritual to theoretical reflection and from textual form to theatrical embodiment.

1.2.Tracing the Tragedy Theoretically

The intention of this section is to construe the theoretical and aesthetic constitution of tragedy across a historical continuum. Engaging with the theories of Pindar, Aristotle, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Arthur Miller, it traces key transitions in tragic consideration across philosophical, ethical, spiritual, and social constellations. Rather than present a comprehensive history, the section institutes a theoretical basis and installs Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe in relation to earlier structures.

The endeavour to conceive the nature of tragic constitution within its aesthetic and theoretic dimensions has been a continuous concern of intellectual interest since its formative form in the collective consciousness of archaic Greece. Prior to the formation of tragedy as a dramatic form within the festivals of Athens, its initial momentum was moulded through the ethical and musical concerns of Greek *lyric poiesis* (ποίησις) “from the 7th to the mid-5th cent. [BCE]” (Robbins [vol. 8] 21). Pindar (Πίνδαρος; Pindaros), “as a thinker” with “unparalleled brilliance” (Robbins [vol. 11] 270; 269), writes in the fifth century BCE. His poems construct one of the earliest orientations that concentrate on the oscillation of fortune within human inclination and divine interventions. Without a formal formulation of tragic tradition as a dramatic form, his association with humans asserts ethics. Pindar even notes the notion that “Creatures of a day! What is someone? What is he not? / Man is the dream of a shadow” (line 95). Within his treatment, the transience of human trial is illustrated. His stance centres on the strain between human inclination and divine intervention, as he asserts, “Zeus-sent brightness comes / a brilliant light shines upon mankind” (lines 96–97). As such, the visuals of limitation and illumination allude to Pindar's vision of human existence that alternates between the extremes. The reversal between the two reveals a prominent proposition: humans are neither autonomous nor heteronomous. Their existence, as a result, rests between faith and fall. Pindar's moral mode relies on the model that fortune can reverse at all times, and it reveals an ethical foundation for later philosophical principles of tragedy.

While Pindar introduces a tragic worldview, Aristotle (Αριστοτέλης) (384–322 BCE) intends the formal theoretical formulation of tragedy as a dramatic form. In *Poetics* (Περὶ ποιητικῆς; *Peri poietikes*) (c. 335 BCE), he treats tragedy as “a representation of an action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself ... performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear” (1449b25). Aristotle sees the art as more than a trace

of the truth; it serves the human habit. His concentration on *mimesis* (μίμησις) contextualises this art as an imitation of a norm rather than an immaterial notion. On the theoretical basis, Aristotle constructs six core elements: “the story, the moral element, the style, the ideas, the staging, and the music” (1450a10). Within these elements, the story that is the *mythos* (μῦθος) constitutes a core concern, since it “is the foundation ... of this art” (1450a40). Aristotle seeks the tragic excitement not in the material, mental and moral excellence of the hero but in the mechanism with which the audience senses *eleos* (ἔλεος) and *phobos* (φόβος) (1452a5). Tragedy functions in structured strata: from *agnoia* (ἄγνοια) to *anagnorisis* (ἀναγνώρισις) (1452b5), from prosperity to adversity caused by error rather than *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) (1453a5), and through *peripeteia* (περιπέτεια) (1452a20). In combination, these elements constitute the tragic construction that controls the dramatic course. Aristotle articulates the tragic art in emotional and ethical awareness. Hence, he refines a model that later theories of tragedy refashion, reframe, or refuse.

Whereas Aristotle sees the tragic construct as a form with a functional formulation, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) sets it as a spiritual sphere. In *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*) (1872), he conceives tragedy within two counter conditions: “the Apolline and the Dionysiac” (14). The Apollonian connects to the condition of dream. Nietzsche theorises that “every human being is fully an artist when creating the worlds of dream, and the lovely semblance of dream is the precondition of all the arts of image-making” (15). With this thrust, clarification, constitution and creation arise. Nietzsche enables this force with “the *principium individuationis*” (17), which assures individuals to envision the world as bearable. The Dionysian force breaks from this form. As a result, it dismantles the *principium individuationis* and dissolves the sense of “oneness” (19). Within the Dionysian force, the self is forgotten, and thus a sense of oneness forms. This relation bears out a chaotic truth beneath the real. For Nietzsche, tragedy arises from the tension between these two tendencies. Apollonian vision neutralises Dionysian truth. This structure enables the audience to encounter chaos without strain. Tragedy, therefore, does not revise ethics; instead, it reveals a spiritual experience into existence. Nietzsche maintains that tragedy materialises affliction into affirmation. Pain does not attenuate; instead, it attains sense. He asserts this as “the bliss born of pain” (27). Within this situation, tragedy does not cleanse *eleos* and *phobos*, as Aristotle claims. Rather, it intensifies them and initiates them into a form of ecstatic focus. In this theorisation, Nietzsche transforms the function of tragedy. Tragedy exceeds ethical balance but externalises the oneness of beauty and brutality. Art makes

this manifestation of existence accessible and admissible. As Nietzsche enunciates, as a mere aesthetic medium, existence and the world can be endorsed.

While Nietzsche re-sacralises tragedy through the spiritual sphere, Arthur Miller (1915–2005) re-politicises it within the modern mode. In *“Tragedy and the Common Man”* (1949), he holds that “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.” With this claim, he revises the Aristotelian doctrine that tragedy rests on social or political eminence. For Miller, the tragic confrontation does not inhere in noble birth but in an individual’s endeavour to insist on inner entitlement. He indicates the tragic confrontation as the moment when an individual is inclined “to lay down his life ... to secure ... his sense of personal dignity” (“Tragedy”). The *hamartia*, therefore, is not an ethical aberration or spiritual dissociation but the individual’s resistance to remain entrenched when his entitlement is threatened. Miller understands the tragic confrontation in defiance rather than divine defeat and thus universalises tragedy. The form, as a result, becomes accessible to commoners whose lives are accommodated to cultural, institutional, political, and social forces. Tragedy, in these terms, inheres in resistance rather than transcendence. Unlike Aristotle’s ethical premise or Nietzsche’s spiritual perspective, Miller orients tragedy within modern time, where the conflict within the self overthrows the conflict with fate.

Taken as a whole, these theories outline tragedy not as a fixed construction but as a constant flux consideration into human constraint and constitution. Pindar introduces the earliest tragic consciousness through the exposure of the weakness of mortal existence under immortal exaltation. Aristotle institutes this consciousness into a form of formation and formulation. Nietzsche, however, instates that classical tragedy installs the ecstatic conflict of Apollonian and Dionysian forces and insists on its spiritual rather than ethical force. Miller inscribes the tragic into modern time and asserts that the effort to insist on personal dignity within non-elite existence carries the same tragic intensity as ancient aristocratic corrosion. These stances disclose tragedy as a function in flux, distorted in each era by views of the individual, the cosmos, and the forces that bind or break them.

The theoretical tradition constitutes a basis to consider Howard Barker’s recontextualisation of the tragic in the late twentieth century. As will be discussed below, Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe arises as a reaction to and a reorientation of the historical horizon outlined above, with the in Aristotelian doctrine the most dominant. He resists catharsis and refuses ethical resolution. Hence, unlike the Aristotelian theatre, the audience is situated as

a lone witness to limitless excess. The theoretical trace from Pindar to Miller thus broadens the intellectual horizon within which Barker branches out his tragic intuition.

1.3. Howard Barker

Howard Barker was born on 28 June 1946 in Dulwich, London, England—in the wake of World War II. Dulwich was a district that tried to mend the losses, both material and mental; however, it would soon meet gentrification. The transformation from ruin to renewal shaped Barker’s sense of society, where he witnessed the collision of classes that would shape his aesthetics on contrast. Due to the conditions that contrasted the enduring working class with the encroaching middle class, Barker would be induced to indicate that “juxtaposition is everything” (“Puppetry” [2016]). Barker had a childhood in a council house with his factory worker family (The Base 00:01:20). Thanks to the pain his parents took to ensure their income, Barker would later typify those times as “a stable working-class ...—relatively prosperous and socially ambitious” (“Energy” 19). He describes the parental relationship in their home by saying, “I lived my childhood with a mother who was almost entirely instinctual and a father who struggled with the massive consequences of this” (“Wrestling” [2023]). Barker remembers the language of the volatile household as a “living poetry, vivid and violent” (“Education” 175), where anger produced a musicality and an archaic vocabulary, a mixture that would later shape the distinctive texture of his dramatic voice. He especially defines his mother as “impossible to live with ... because ... the instinct would overcome her;” hence, he asserts that “[the word instinct] governs what I [have] written and what I think” (The Base 00:05:45; 00:05:35) as a connection that ties his works and his familial station. Barker’s parents identified themselves with polarised political ideologies; while his mother was a Tory, his father was a Stalinist. Nevertheless, persuaded by the patriarchal patterns within his household, Barker embodied Marxist and Stalinist ideologies and embraced these until his thirties (The Base). Due to their socioeconomic status, he had no opportunities to attend the theatre. As a result, he envisioned his house’s walls as a stage, where shadows fell from familial confrontations. As he highlights, “my parents, in a way, provided me with a theatre in the sense that the house itself was really bizarre, noisy, angry, contradictory, passionate, and actually violent”¹—these interactions

¹ All quotations from The Base retain their original form; punctuation has been added by the author of the thesis.

would, after all, inspire Barker, who would later internalise that “what went on in those little walls actually was... as much theatre as I was later able to ... reinvent for myself” (The Base 00:01:35; 00:01:55).

Barker assesses himself as “[a] solitary child [who] invents friendships and invents his life” and associates his artistic awareness with that solitude—a solitude that he would later subsume throughout his life and substantiate the claim that “[t]o be solitary is to invent” (“Howard Barker” [2012]). For Barker, solitude is the element of creation—the essential state in which invention becomes possible. Barker wrote his initial work as a tween and continued his enthusiasm, stating, “I tended to write very small pieces. And then, ... I started to write three-act plays; ... [s]ince then, I’ve always alternated between very long plays ... and collections of small pieces” (“Things” 148). Throughout his academic years, he held on to the theatrical instinct that he had initiated in his childhood. Barker attended South London Grammar School, a “philistine” (“Energy” 19) association, where violence was assured. There, he had confronted the militarised instructors’ and intimates’ brutal conduct; however, he sustained his distinct distance from such atrocities. His individual disidentification is discerned as Barker asserts, “I understand cruelty. I know what makes people violent, but in myself, I have a deep repulsion for it” (The Base 00:03:17–00:03:27). Despite his compassion for their fortitude, he communicates his withdrawal with his instructors and intimates; hence, his worldview, which matured to manifest itself in his artistic attitude, was influenced. Based on the sardonic tone of the time, Barker added to his theatre an artistic touch by “[improvising] a satirical/surrealist serial” (“Energy” 19) at school. His caustics would later influence his initial authorial attitude. Afterwards, at Sussex University, he specialised in European History—a discipline that, as he dictates, “influences all my thinking all the time” (“Appendix” 219)—and earned both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. Barker, as he realised the realities of Britain, started to stretch himself with the politics, the philosophies, and the partisanship that his father had instilled in him. Barker alluded to his ideational alteration as “a process of withdrawal which made me suspicious of, and ignorant of, the politicization” (“Energy” 20) that constituted the conclusion of parental pressure on his personality. Barker’s confrontation with the political concreteness induced an innovation in his incipient artistic attitude—an evolution he evidenced with his words: “[University] made me refuse the obvious in the political play, made me cautious, even suspicious, especially of crude political solutions. It [has] also given me a profound sense of European suffering ...” (“Energy” 36).

At the time, through the forms that best followed him—play and poetry—he combined comic forces in his first fulfilment, the radio drama *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great* (1970), broadcast by BBC Radio. After this success, he was heartened to transcribe two other radio dramas, *Henry V in Two Parts* (1971) and *Herman, with Millie and Mick* (1972). Barker later identified these three creations as a “clever” (“Energy” 19) trio that indicated the induction of his career as an artist. Meanwhile, Barker constructed these dramas as he confronted an additional artistic medium, theatre, which he would soon manipulate as his main creative avenue. His first theatre experience was watching Edward Bond’s *Saved*² (1965). Barker, rather than inspiration, endured insult due to the distortion of his social stance. Thus, the experience inflamed an inner need to exploit theatre to better broaden this social stratum. “I ... want[ed] to write a play—and, perhaps, write it better,” he lamented later, as he saw “the life of my own class and background could be represented on the stage” (“Articulate” 41). Barker’s critical attitude could be concentrated in his initial performative production, *Cheek* (1970), which he constructed as a correction to *Saved*’s weaknesses. He expresses this experience:

Saved was one of the first plays I ever saw in the theatre—and I ... was not a writer then. ... I do remember feeling that Bond’s representation of the South London working class was abominable and contemptuous. The inarticulacy, the grunting and the monosyllabics, being accepted as a portrayal of working-class people, did offend me and may have inspired me to write *Cheek*, which did lend articulacy to the characters. ...

So it could be seen as a reaction to the sterility of Bond’s language. (“Articulate” 41)

As an additional act of artistic criticism, he wrote *No One Was Saved* (1970) to wrestle with *Saved*, with the title that thoughtfully alludes to Bond’s work. In the artistic avenue he found himself immersed in, Barker paralleled the places he had been born and bred in, and thus these earliest endeavours liberated his trance and left traces in his works. Within his peculiar perspective, he entered an artistic path that enriched him throughout his creative continuation—“the humanist narrative ... the Judaeo-Christian narrative ... the Marxist narrative ... ; and variations such as the technè-oriented ... nation-oriented ... Freudian ... ” (Angel-Perez 38)—indicating intense creation, a process that still stretches to the present.

² *Saved* concentrated on the socio-economic conditions that the working-class youth in South London encounters and constructs a world without hope.

It is easy to see that Barker has combined multiple mediums to express himself—however, it should be noted that his intention is not to explain but to express himself. He states this stance as, “I [do not] have a target, I [do not] have an aim. I just express who I am” (“Appendix” 213). Nevertheless, Barker was able to asseverate his sentiment within the limitations that the British state licensed; it withheld authorisation due to his disinclination to dedicate himself to the state’s initial intention. Whilst the state assumed that art should be beneficial for the nation, Barker asserted that this was not an attainable attitude for an artist and instead accentuated the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ as “[i]t exists in [the artist’s] soul” (“Appendix” 210).

Rooted in the mentioned mean, Barker held that neither the artist nor art had a commitment to communicate a societal statement. Rather, he has testified that “[the responsibility of the artist] is the responsibility to himself ... to express the truth of himself and his imagination” (“Appendix” 210). Barker’s fondness for creativeness is clear, as it is the artistic foundation for him. He states, “the greatest artists are imaginative artists” (“Appendix” 209); hence, for him, artistic achievement is attached to creative awareness; he enunciates the two as intertwined in essence. It can be conceived that Barker sees imagination as an area where artists can be true to themselves, free from external forces. He thus thinks that “the freedom of imagination—its promiscuity—should be a tool for any stage writer” (“Puppetry” 83). Barker is adamant about the articulation of artistic freedom. He, therefore, insists that “the freedom of imagination—its promiscuity—should be a tool for any stage writer” and indicates “the state” as the main threat to artistic freedom (“Appendix” 220). His work in his initial performative phase was introduced through the state-maintained institutions—BBC Radio and Royal Court Theatre—when his works were considered to coordinate with identifiable political or ideological positions. However, Barker later alienates himself from all labels that assess margins on notions, asserting, “I [do not] involve myself in political and ideological issues” (“Howard Barker” [2017]). The state’s societal outlook, which outlined the notion that art should be beneficial for the nation, confronted his conscious countermovement. In such a structure, the utility and functionality of an artwork are used to uncover its worth. Barker resists its intention, relating that “art, is not useful. It has no use” because “[it] is not a product” (“Appendix” 209–210). Granting the cogency of art’s uselessness, he further highlights his opposition to the utilitarian outlook on art and hints, “I repudiate the whole idea of functionality” (“Appendix” 210). Barker asserts that the intellectual permeation of people’s perceptions is his

core concern, as “everything is about ... usefulness [and it] penetrates ... our culture” (“Appendix” 209). Therefore, he opposes the opinion that art has to possess a purpose.

Barker also posits that “theatre is enslaved by the [ideologies]”; however, as he has pointed out earlier, “[t]heatre [should be] a safe place to expose [the artist’s soul]” (“Howard Barker” [2012]), free from the state’s standardisation—if artist and art are enslaved, then their sole saviour is the artist’s creative consciousness (“Appendix” 220). In his artistic attitude, hence, he concentrates on his inner consciousness, where he constrains himself from the state’s dictated doctrines—as he asserts, “I [do not] want to contribute to [society], after all” (“Appendix” 214). Other than the societal standardisations, Barker, as an artist, is “interested in the soul of man” (“Appendix” 214); he is not interested in inward elements that evolve the individuals’ identities as much as in the outward ones. Therefore, the worth of art—and theatre, in particular—weakens to not be simplified to suit these standardisations; after all, “a work of art does not simplify the world, it complicates the world” (“Appendix” 217–218). Barker, whereas most writers work within intentions, introduces human truths within rare realities, neither ethical (““Things”” 147) nor moral (“Appendix” 218). Instead, his art is influenced by his inner instinct, and he indicates: “[I]nstance is vastly more significant in my theatre than ethics, and it might be argued instinct is an ethics in itself” (“Wrestling” [2023]). Thus, Barker prioritises his personal ethical perception over the state’s.

At a time when British theatre was dominated within the influence of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre, Barker resisted this didactic and politic structure. Brecht discussed the directness of this appreciated approach as “[Epic Theatre] at the streetcorner is primitive” (“Model” 436). However, the term “primitive” is not intended to be critical; instead, he indicated that “[its] function is clear” (436). This purposefulness of plainness parallels Brecht’s artistic attitude. That is to say, Brecht aimed for a functional form and attained it. Brecht, to attain the achievement, initiated memorable methods—one of them is the Alienation Effect, or A-Effect (*Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-Effekt*)—which is essential in Epic Theatre. Its aim, as Brecht asserts, “is to make the spectator an active critic of society” (432). Within this aim, A-Effect is intended to destabilise identification and induce deliberate indifference instead of emotional involvement. Brecht chiselled the character of the “demonstrator” (433) to facilitate the A-Effect on theatre. The function of the demonstrator is to reveal rather than to be within epic theatre standards. The character prevents emotional embracement and instead performs the role in the third person, resisting the role. Brecht even applied this approach in rehearsals to stimulate actors to sustain the same critical clearance:

Brecht sometimes asked his actors in rehearsal to perform in the third person, prefacing each speech with ‘he said... she said...’ At other times, he made them highlight particularly important moments by adding ‘instead of responding like this, he responded like that’. At other times he asked them to read the stage directions aloud. (Unwin 54)

Moreover, to attenuate sentimental attachment and authorise the audience, Brecht utilised other strategies, as the chorus and text unified with the scene (“Model” 433). These components removed the realist illusion and retained the audience’s critical interval. Thus, Brecht envisioned a restricted reaction from his audience to respond when the A-Effect was enacted:

The epic theatre’s spectator says: I [would] never have thought it—That [is] not the way—That [is] extraordinary, hardly believable—It [has] got to stop—The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary—That [is] great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (Brecht 7)

The audience’s reactions provide proof of their unbiased involvement in the play. In the performance, the audience perceives a series of sensations: the audience’s initial sense is one of consternation, which then turns into concerns about the societal situation, constraint to act, and an awareness of societal controversies. This is due to Epic Theatre’s aim to disclose and dissect social stratification, rather than to provide passive entertainment. To attain this critical awareness, Brecht aimed to maintain the audience’s interactive involvement both onstage and offstage. One such instrument was illumination—without it, “a half-lit stage and a completely darkened auditorium [would leave] the audience less level-headed” (Brecht 141), unable to receive the reactions of those around them. Brecht preferred the audience to be introspective inspectors in the light and not to internalise issues as individuals in the dark. In essence, Epic Theatre introduces the narrative with a mosaic of scattered scenes in which structure and substance are inconsistent: interventions are induced—text interacts with action; the set is inhibited; music is inserted into the scattered scenes. Thus, an alternate artistic coherence correlates with the aesthetic conflict; Brecht intended to stimulate intellectual independence and induce the audience to stitch together the statement in the text. Epic Theatre, thus, turns into dialectics in action.

Barker hails that Brecht had a vivid visualisation; however, he held that Brecht’s theatrical attitude was tied to his political position as “a socialist, as a communist,” (“Appendix” 214); hence, he found it functional. Barker simplifies Brecht’s studies as “[t]o make the working

class recognise the proletarian nature of the revolution” (“Appendix” 210), thinking that it fosters the audience to form conclusions about the nation. He professes that “[t]he theatre is not a place for literalness,” and unlike those who proceed in line with this process, he proclaims, “I [am] the opposite of writers who enter the theatre to persuade people of their attitudes” (“Howard Barker” [2017]). Barker, as a result, reveals his review: “[Brecht] ... seem[s] false to me” (““Articulate”” 44). Barker surmises that theatre has to have a subtle structure; hence, he alienated himself from the British theatre that was attached to Brechtian theatre and its audited audience. (“Ye Gotta Laugh”). Nevertheless, he continued to conserve his artistic attitude, even without the state's sustenance (“Puppetry” [2016]). Thus, the Theatre of Catastrophe³ was created, which best articulates his own artistic creation.

In conclusion, Barker's existence in confinement and confrontation permeated his artistic persona. For him, theatre that transcended the theatrical realm rendered his internalised inner truth; hence, he resisted all political positions and renounced the faith that his art had to have a function. In the next chapter, Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe will be examined as a framework that exceeds the state's standards and executes a stretch for instinct, indistinctness, and intricateness on stage.

1.4.Theatre of Catastrophe

In contrast to the ‘art for art’s sake’ attitude that Howard Barker asserts, the British theatre has traditionally mediated art as a means of resolution or a strand of solution. Its intention, therefore, has been to instil “enlightenment” (““Slave””) in the audience. The audience learns what is meant to be transmitted and leaves the auditorium with a conscious consideration. However, Howard Barker assesses its artistic attitude as an “impoverishment” (““Slave””) and ascertains this access that he calls Humanist Theatre as a reductive model that demands clarity, unity, and moral reassurance, thereby restricting artistic complexity and reducing theatre to a vehicle of consensus (“Humanist”). In line with his hint, Barker argues that once art is conditioned to conduct structured principles, it stimulates pressure. He indicates this issue with the statement, “[e]very text seems to have an intention to persuade” (“Wrestling” [2023]). For Barker, such conceptualisation constricts the artist and artistic articulations and

³ Barker's term for the theorisation of tragedy “Theatre of Catastrophe” is translated into Turkish as “Felaket Tiyatrosu.”

constructs the theatre with trite attitudes. When the audience internalises the intended idea, it is an artistic failure for the author; hence, he criticises this course as such: “How weak it is to hear an audience was ‘moved’ [and] even weaker to hear how it was ‘informed’” (“Eleven Building Bricks”). It is obvious that Barker contests concessions to the state, the state-funded theatres, and the audience that these institutions influence. Barker, while alienated due to the discord over the state’s boundaries, never ceased to cement himself (“‘Energy’” 26). Nevertheless, with the statement “I’m entitled to be [bitter]” (“Howard Barker” [2017]), he resents that he has been forbidden from the heart of the British theatre. Barker articulates that art owes no commitment to command the nation. Instead, “art is a problem” (“Forty-Nine”), more precisely “a problem of understanding” (“Catastrophic”). Thus, it is instinctive that the fundamental function of art is neither to be comprehended nor to communicate an ideal. When Barker tried to declare his creative consciousness without delimitations, the British nation defined him as an “elitist” (“Appendix” 216). In time, this label led him to be seen as an “artistic sinner” and his art as “the sin of elitism” (“Radical Elitism”). However, despite such critical classification, Barker continued to construct his aesthetic approach, both in theory and in practice, giving rise to his Theatre of Catastrophe, the theatrical form for his transformative artistic attitude.

Theatre of Catastrophe, Barker’s distinctive theorisation of tragedy, is a term that “described the form of tragedy [he had] found for [himself]—and its difference from classical ... forms—perfectly well” (“Wrestling” [2023]). Barker reckons that tragedy is a “revolution” (“Forty-Nine”) that convulses the audience, constrains them to think, and even conducts a transformation. He contrasts this with comedy: “After the carnival, ... you are precisely who you were before. After the tragedy, you are not certain who you are” (“Forty-Nine”). This transformation contributes to pain, and that pain converts to ideology—since, as Barker asserts, “[i]deology is the outcome of pain” (“Forty-Nine”). Therefore, ideology is a profound existential dependence derived from painful experiences. Barker asserts that the Theatre of Catastrophe and the classics are somehow associated. Yet still, he deliberately distances his work as he demonstrates the distinctions of the two approaches. In Theatre of Catastrophe, the didactic intent that is identified in the Aristotelian tragedy is invalid, as he introduces an alternate interpretation of Greek drama—one that furthers the pure futile pain, rather than the ethical education. As he holds that, “I think that transaction that goes on in the Greek theatre is not about telling them to behave” and adds that the experience is purely one of pain—“pain” that is, in fact, “meaningless pain” (The Base 00:47:10–00:47:30). Barker’s themes, thus, are consistent with those of the ancient conventions—through the use of conscious

will, condemnation, contradiction and the convolution of connotations. However, he contradicts himself in the treatment of catharsis, dramatic construction and audience connection. Barker instils his tragic worldview on autonomous will, whereas the classical is tied to the ‘wheel of fortune.’ Both forms avoid solid solutions when Barker’s form advocates more conflict and contradiction. Barker condemns Aristotle, the theorist of the ancient theatre, contesting the theoretical text for theatre, his *Poetics*, for its normative nature (The Base 00:45:30). At the heart of his criticism, Barker states that when Aristotle strove to distil through the tragic ideals, he dismissed the rituals of the theatre, as he asserts that rituals constituted the core of theatre; thus, it can be instinctive, irrational, and intuitive (The Base 00:45:45–00:46:15). To conceive better the theoretical contrast, the chapters will be contextualised as catharsis, catastrophe, and chorus.

Barker’s artistic attitude materialises fully in Theatre of Catastrophe, enabling him to express himself without limitation. When Barker starts to structure a drama, his initial consideration is to concentrate on the title (“Wrestling” [2023]) to construct the skeleton of the text. Its title is instrumental, as it is the earliest element that attracts the audience’s attention—an attainment through the poetic persona of Barker (“A Laboratory” 67). The intention is that the title remains in mind as a memorable merit, as he remarks, “[the title is] meant to lodge in the mind” (“Wrestling” [2023]). Hence, he stimulates the audience to strain even with the title, which stabilises Theatre of Catastrophe’s philosophical phantasm.

As the title constructs the skeleton, the characters concretise its flesh. “[Barker tends] to start ... from an idea about a character rather than an event” (“Energy” 22); thus, the thrust is its characters that can be anyone from anywhere. Barker’s concentration is due to the desire to describe the duress (“Appendix” 213) that consumes the individual inside. Therefore, the concentration is on the character and the external things that badly affect his or her inner self. As with the title, Barker begins creating a character by giving them a name—a name that secretly influences their life—because all the names he chooses are connected to his personal life (“Wrestling” [2023]). It can be said that the only moment Barker decides something about a character is when he chooses the name; after that, he lets the characters be autonomous and says, “I never know where they are going” (“Wrestling” [2023]). As Barker’s typewriter keys move, the character creates their own destiny. This is why Barker claims his characters are real—they are “people at the end of their patience” (“Wrestling” [2023]), just like anyone else. The limit of patience is a key motive in his character creation and is a reaction to the “deeply unsatisfactory world” (“Wrestling” [2023]): “My characters sense the warping, shaping and

distorting effect of society upon themselves and then they struggle against it [therefore, they] define themselves and create themselves in resistance to forces” (“Articulate” 43). Thus, Barker believes his characters are as real as anyone who struggles with the world. With this characterisation, he highlights the societal pressure on the characters. When under such pressure, the characters reject society’s expectations and resist the ethics or morals because their main focus is to escape the situation. Therefore, the character tries anything to find a way out, and if there is none, the character chooses to die (“Wrestling” [2023]). Because of the difficult decisions characters must make, it can be hard for the audience to connect with them. This connection is almost impossible because all decisions belong to the character alone—there are no divine powers involved. Nevertheless, no matter how difficult it is, Barker wants the audience to sympathise with his characters “because it’s hard, they lodge the better” (“Energy” 31). Like with the title and the name, he wants to make a lasting, strong impression in the audience’s mind.

Inside the pile created by the title and the characters, Barker’s structure acts like a vein that carries blood. As mentioned, events are not the most important part of the Theatre of Catastrophe, and the reason is that “[Barker has] always been contemptuous of narrative in the way that one is dismissive about what one can do well” (“Articulate” 45). It should be explained that his attitude is not because he cannot create a narrative, but because he already can. Since Barker “[tries] to avoid a ... cliché,” what he does is to take well-known stories and to focus on their unknown sides. For this, Barker uses myths, legends, and tales that most people know and changes them to show unexpected views of those stories (“Howard Barker” [2017]). This way, he keeps himself original. Besides that, Barker does not deny that he takes “a good deal of pleasure from arranging quite complex plots” (“Energy” 21), but he does not see a conventional plot as necessary. He says, “I have been a great – possibly very great – inventor of plots, entirely original stories with no cultural predecessors,” which shows that complex plots are not difficult for him. However, he adds that “the [conventional] plot’ is a servitude” (“Wrestling” [2023]). Therefore, when showing the character’s tragedy—that is, the painful dilemma and its painful results ending in regret—structure is not very important for Barker.

He identifies himself as “a poet and an artist [that require] language as the primary resource of [his] existence” (“Puppetry” 81). However, since he is also a painter, he cares deeply about how the words that express his thoughts are conveyed. To explain this, he emphasises how important the visual element is when he expresses himself. He enriches his language with visual images and adds emotional textures to it. This does not require

conventional music; even a tone heard through rhythm and rhyme is enough to serve his use of language. Thus, it is clear that for Barker, language holds a deeper meaning. He has made it understandable why he prefers poetic language to express himself. Beyond words, he also sees punctuation marks as tools of language. In this way, Barker allows poetry to flow naturally into the play. The reason he internalises poetry so deeply is that, although logic and language may intertwine, “[it] is not intrinsic to poetry” (“‘Articulate’” 50). Because of this, the play embraces its outcome without being confined to a strict structure, since its result flows through poetic language. While creating the spirit of his plays with poetry, Barker emphasises that poets belong on stage because tragedy should not be told in simple language but in poetic language—“that is dissonance, after all” (“Wrestling” [2023]). Taking all this into account, Barker uses different elements to bring a play to life. First, he firmly builds its skeleton with the title, then gives it flesh through the characters, makes it live with the veins of the narrative, and finally gives it a soul through language.

While freely expressing his artistic identity through theatre, Barker was labelled elitist by British theatre and society, who were used to the didacticism and clarity of Humanist Theatre. According to Barker, this elitist label means “for anything that is not comprehended” (“Wrestling”). He points out that this is “a degeneration of the word into an item of abuse” (“Radical Elitism”). Thus, people who could not situate Barker’s theatre blamed him and his works for the problem. In this way, Barker became an “artistic sinner,” and his works became part of “the sin of elitism” (“Radical Elitism”). In plays shaped by the Theatre of Catastrophe, Barker actually communicates what he wants through subtexts. However, because this knowledge is challenging and unconventional, the audience spends the whole play trying to make sense of it and leaves disappointed and blames Barker for not creating a work open to all understanding (“‘Slave’”). For this reason, his plays never became as popular or funded as mainstream productions supported by British theatre. He could not even earn a proper income from theatre (“Howard Barker” [2017]). Yet, the lack of government funding never made him change his artistic view (“‘Puppetry’”). On the contrary, he defends his work by saying how “valuable” the Theatre of Catastrophe is due to “the language ... the structure ... the staging ...” (“Appendix” 210) and clearly states that it is not necessary to fully understand the play; instead, it is important to embrace the theatrical aesthetic. He clarifies the values that shape his Theatre of Catastrophe as a dramatic mode that embraces ambiguity, discord and interpretive instability, refusing consolatory meaning and insisting on division, disturbance, and the irreducible difficulty of experience (“Catastrophic”). This theoretical distinction becomes even clearer

when Barker's own formulations of the two theatre forms are placed side by side. The juxtaposition below demonstrates the fundamental shift from the consensual clarity of the Humanist Theatre to the divisive ambiguity of the Catastrophic Theatre:

We all really agree.	We only sometimes agree.
When we laugh we are together.	Laughter conceals fear.
Art must be understood.	Art is a problem of understanding.
Wit greases the message.	There is no message.
The actor is a man/woman not unlike the author.	The actor is different in kind.
The production must be clear.	The audience cannot grasp everything; nor did the author.
We celebrate our unity.	We quarrel to love.
The critic is already on our side.	The critic must suffer like everyone else.
The message is important.	The play is important.
The audience is educated and goes home happy or fortified. ("Humanist")	The audience is divided and goes home disturbed or amazed. ("Catastrophic")

As these parallel formulations demonstrate, Barker positions Humanist Theatre and Catastrophic Theatre as fundamentally incompatible modes of artistic production. The former depends on clarity, unity and moral instruction, whereas the latter embraces opacity, conflict and interpretive fracture. It is clear that he established his artistic attitude upon ambiguity that is too hard to comprehend. He is aware that his theatre appeals to all as it is unconventional; however, he resists their criticism in order to preserve his artistic consciousness. In this sense, ambiguity is not a failure of communication but the core of his dramaturgy—an aesthetic principle that demands intellectual labour, emotional risk, and a willingness to confront uncertainty.

Overall, due to the lack of support from both the state and the audience, it was challenging for Barker to inhabit the state's theatre. Nevertheless, recognising the degree to which these institutional constraints restricted his artistic agency, Barker sought to reclaim control over the production, interpretation, and dissemination of his work. Consequently, he undertook the creation of his own theatre company, The Wrestling School, through which he

could stage his plays without compromise and cultivate an audience willing to engage with his uncompromising aesthetics.

1.5. The Wrestling School

The company's intention was incisive: "It is a company for one writer/director" ("Wrestling School" 183), who is Howard Barker himself. He summarises his commitment to this company as follows: "Decisions rest with me, the texts are mine, and the artistic policy is my own" (183). While Barker makes it clear that The Wrestling School is under his sole authority, he is aware of the criticisms such a stance may provoke: "Barker knew well the English prejudice against writers directing their own works ... he did not wish to compound his offence by admitting he was entirely responsible for every visual and audial element as well ..." (Barker/Houth 45). To avoid such criticism, he created the personae he calls "fictional friends," figures with "international credentials" (45) to demonstrate their competence. These personae include Paula Seznou as sound designer, Tomas Leipzig⁴ and Caroline Shentang⁵ as set designers, Billie Kaiser as costume designer, and Eduardo Houth as photographer for The Wrestling School (Smith 97). However, among these fictional identities, the one "most simpatico with Barker's own artistic self" (Smith 110) is Houth. Within Barker's command of the company, he could control his plays fully—he had an innate inclination to instruct the actors as well as the set. As Barker explains, "[t]he author knows best what is occurring, after all;" therefore, he endeavours to make his art as "immaculate" ("Wrestling" [2023]) as possible.

In Barker's vision, to characterise the actors is vital. His artistic attitude is most manifested thanks to their dedication, which was substantial in The Wrestling School's success. The actors involved in Barker's creation of character—as he "write[s] with actors ... in mind" ("Energy" 33) and tries to tie their personalities to the narrative's possibilities—assume responsibilities in the resonance of their roles. Barker exalts language and exerts considerable control to transmit this to the stage. Thus, it is the actors who have to receive and reenact Barker's initiatives and who have to handle his sensory intentions. In relation to this, Barker reveals, "I expect language to be performed in a way that respects the internal rhythms and the rhymes which are inside those lines" ("Things" 141). In relation to the visuals, he insists that

⁴ Tomas Leipzig has designed the sets for all Wrestling School productions from *Ursula* (1998) onwards.

⁵ Caroline Shentang designed the set for the *Gertrude–The Cry* (2002).

the actors have to harmonise the characters' demeanour without hesitation, as "[t]he act[or] suffers for the audience" (146). Through the actors' conscious suffering for the character, the audience confronts the conflict at its most intense. The situation generates the resentment necessary for the realisation of Theatre of Catastrophe, as "an unhappy audience is the one [Barker] aspire[s] to" ("Articulate" 46). Barker conceives a theatre that confounds the audience with existential exhaustion: "[The audience] should leave the auditorium anxious about [their] life, about [the actors'] lives. ... [The audience] must leave tensed from what the actor have suffered for [them]" (146). Barker, therefore, holds hope that audiences abandon their preconceptions to absorb the presence of tragedy on stage. Theatre of Catastrophe defies realism and reason as it exposes existence itself through its occasional occurrences.

Barker carefully arranges everything related to the stage to enhance this impact. Within his personae, he constructs both set and costumes in accordance with The Wrestling School's values ("Wrestling School" 183). Lighting, too, becomes essential to express Barker's artistic attitude, as he seeks the "*chiaroscuro*" ("Things" 138) effect of light and darkness. He achieves the effect using "lighting ... always from the side, at sharp angles [to give] the *chiaroscuro* effects" ("Interview 4" 298), enabling the audience to reach the level of concentration he expects. Barker believes that lighting has a decisive influence over the narrative through the actor, as "the actor [must be] able to move around in that light" ("Things" 138) to provide the audience with the space to experience a private encounter. While the actor endures pain under the lights, the audience watches from darkness, undergoing tension through the very act of looking. Even if the audience does not wish to witness those, they retain the freedom to decide where to look. Another reason Barker directs the lights toward the actors is his focus on the human body, which he sees as an "evocative" ("Puppetry") prop. To make this viable, Barker avoids small performance spaces and instead seeks large, unrestricted areas—not necessarily traditional theatre halls—that allow the self to move freely. This is also rooted in The Wrestling School's rejection of permanence: every play begins from scratch. Spatial choices are therefore made according to the script, theme, and Barker's expectations for the production.

When Barker's essence merges with the devotion to the school, it becomes clear that "his wordscapes and soundscapes [blending with] his scenography" (Sakellaridou) create a "symphony" ("Things" 148). However, British Theatre ignored these achievements. This was largely due to Barker's commitment to 'art for art's sake' and his rejection of ideologies. For him, ideology is not a starting point, but a personal experience acquired through witnessing

events. When Barker submitted his works to both the National Theatre and the Royal Court, he did not even receive rejection letters: “I [do not] get a letter back” (“Howard Barker” [2017]). Moreover, after the government entirely withdrew support from the company, Barker ceased staging his plays in England. He describes his scandalous situation in purely monetary terms: “[The Art Council is] not really interested in art, it [is] interested in sociological benefits.” (“Howard Barker” [2017]). As a result of these tacit bans, Barker “self-exiles” (“Wrestling” [2023]), leaving a nation that did not value him and moving to places where he would be appreciated.

Between 2008 and 2010, The Wrestling School received support from an American who recognised the pleasure within the chaos of Barker’s narrative (“Howard Barker” [2017]). This chaos also attracted European supporters, allowing Barker’s works to be readily accepted in European theatre. Barker interprets this as Europe embracing the mission “to present the best of writing” (“Slave”)—something British theatre failed to do. Thus, Barker found more value abroad than he ever received in his homeland. His works, through which he could express himself freely, reached a discerning audience, were appreciated, were critically examined, and even reached wider communities through translation. For the 21st anniversary of The Wrestling School, an event titled “21 for 21” was organised in October 2009, consisting of synchronised performances of his works across languages and continents. The recognition Barker received demonstrates how profoundly his plays resonated in world theatre.

The Wrestling School, established in 1988 with *The Last Supper* as its first production, sought to animate Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe theory. It has since staged several plays, including well-known productions such as *Seven Lears* (1989), *Hated Nightfall* (1994), *(Uncle) Vanya* (1996), *Scenes from an Execution* (1999), *The Ecstatic Bible* (2000), and *Gertrude—The Cry* (2002). Among Barker’s internationally circulating works, *Blok/Eko* (2011) stands out as the play that most vividly embodies the essence of Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe. The following section will therefore examine this play to explore how Barker’s artistic philosophy achieves its fullest dramatic and visual expression.

1.6. *Blok/Eko*

Blok/Eko, one of the works which resonated with the fusion of Theatre of Catastrophe and The Wrestling School, is respected in Barker’s oeuvre. The play premiered at the Exeter

Northcott Theatre in 2011, thanks to a paramount partnership between the three partners: Exeter University, the Northcott Theatre, and the Wrestling School Theatre Company, which the Arts and Humanities Research Council sponsored (“World Premiere”). *Blok/Eko*, which Barker both devised and directed, is a derivative of his research, “Plethora and Bare Sufficiency: A New Practice for a Tragic Theatre” (“Plethora and Bare Sufficiency”), that concentrated on the contrast between “too much and too little” (“World Premiere”) in the theatre. Barker examined the two theatrical extremes in the examination: “‘Plethora’, an overwhelming with words spoken by many voices, almost an orchestra of human sounds” and “‘Bare Sufficiency’, where the entire scene to be played hangs from a brief concept, or image, or even something banal” (“Plethora and Bare Sufficiency”). Within the constructed contrast, *Blok/Eko* is studied for the ‘plethora’ framework, whereas *Charles V* is scrutinised for the ‘bare sufficiency’ framework. Thus, Barker worked with “8 professional actors and a non-professional chorus of 50” (“Plethora and Bare Sufficiency”) in *Blok/Eko* to wield plethora.

Blok/Eko’s subversive structure with its 104 sections, which “has no place or time” (Programme 5), can be cast as a reflection of an artist who renounces his roots. It is, moreover, metatheatrical in its intent: Barker, as an artist—as a poet—has penned a play about art—about poetry—that probes the artistic process (Roberts 266). The metatheatrical composition, moreover, permeates the performance’s thematic core as well. In *Blok/Eko*, Barker entwines pain with poetry, amplifying the notion of poetic suffering for art’s sake. Thus, it entails that pain is essential to ensure the idealised poem; however, only poetry can ease that pain, for “[p]oetry consoles us for those griefs without which we [would] cease to be human” (Programme 5). Accordingly, *Blok/Eko* commences with Eko’s command to execute all doctors, as she considers poetic cadence a more potent consolation for affliction than medicine.

As an art enthusiast, Eko foresees that the most profound poem flows from the most ponderous portent. Eko’s pursuit of the idealised poem positions the three poets under her rule—Blok, Pindar, and Tot—as instruments of her artistic vision. Her three poets each embody more than poetic identities, as each serves as a representative of distinct traditions. Blok symbolises “the ... Russian symbolist,” shaped by the world that materialises him; Pindar represents “the Greek of classical times,” and—owing to his stature—is most frequently rewarded by Eko. The final poet, Tot, evokes the criminal persona of François Villon while also drawing inspiration from London slang (Programme 5). Recognising Tot’s potential as an unproven yet promising poet, Eko pushes him to his limits in order to produce the ideal poem she demands. Tot, to this end, has to deal with denunciation, derision, and destitution. Through

this unbearable suffering, he ultimately derives the powerful poem she seeks. In the next chapters, a comprehensive examination of *Blok/Eko* will be executed through the tragic triad.

1.7.Ancient Greek Theatre

Ancient Greek theatre can be assessed as the successive transition of sacred tradition into an artistic and aesthetic form of salience. This transition witnesses the intimate interconnection within Ancient Greece, where performance functioned not as mere entertainment but as a means of entwinement in both civic and cultic life. This section traces how Dionysian rituals transitioned into institutionalised dramatic art within the *polis*. It communicates how the civic and the ecstatic, the divine and the human, converge to form the foundations of Western theatre.

Within this, a line “from ritual to drama” (Seaford) consolidates—a line that some scholars construe as a movement “from barbarism to civilization” (Csapo and Miller 4), since social rites conflicted with confirmed social norms. This transformation, however, did not constitute a rupture but rather a “continuum,” as “[i]t is hard to conceive of ritual without some element of drama or drama without some element of ritual” (4). Theatre, therefore, did not constitute in an instant; instead, it consolidated through sacral acts. Throughout this cumulative formation, it retained its cultic foundations while it reconstituted the basis of dramatic art. One of the characteristics of ancient theatre resided in its association with festivals and, in turn, with the actualisation of the *theatron* (θέατρον). The term that attests the “auditorium” (Montanari 928) and attaches to the verb *theaomai* (θεάομαι), that is “to ... observe” (927). It is situated such that “first there was the festival; the theatron built for the festival followed” (“[ö]nce şenlik vardı, şenlik için inşa edilen [t]heatron daha sonra geldi;” my trans.; Latacz 22). This arc construes both the theatrical and theoretical constitution of performance and constructs its evolution from ritual form to theatrical forum.

The roots of these festivals lie in the ritual reverence of Dionysus (Διόνυσος), who was “the god of the most blessed ecstasy and the most enraptured love [but] he was also the persecuted god, the suffering and dying god” (Otto 49). Within archaic narratives, Dionysus transcends the boundaries between the divine and the human. He is born as the sole son of the immortal Zeus (Ζεύς) and the mortal Semele (Σεμέλη) and thus bodies the intersection of immortality and mortality. His experience of death and rebirth further situates him at the

threshold between life and death. Thus, the festivals dedicated to Dionysus did not denote mere celebrations but ritual reenactments of this reiterative passage between formation and deformation. The paradoxical pattern of Dionysus assumes valence across varied ritual rites associated with his cult: chorus, song, dance, masks, and processions all drew to dramatise his variant and varied identities.

In this context, *dithyrambos* (διθύραμβος), *phallikos* (φαλλικός), and *komos* (κῶμος) constituted the rituals held in honour of Dionysus. The *dithyrambos*, characterised as a “rather turbulent manner of recital” (Furley 618), charted Dionysus’ painful birth and rebirth within choral mode and movement. *Phallikos*, on the other hand, instantiated comic and erotic inversion. As Aristotle states, “... [tragedy] began with ... the dithyramb, and [comedy] from ... the phallic singing ...” (*Poetics* 1449a10). *Komos*, moreover, connotes the ritual “procession to the music of the cithara or, especially, the flute” (Graf, “Komos” 93), consorted with wine, material movement, and erotic enactment. These ceremonial celebrations, as an ensemble, enshrined “... the ecstatic characteristic of the Dionysian cult ...” (“... Dionüsos kültünün karakteristiği ...;” my trans.; Latacz 25). As the term itself indicates, *ekstasis* (ἔκστασις) indexes “to be outside of oneself” (Graf, “Ecstasy” 801). Initiates in Dionysian ritual appropriated this state via imitation and immutation and applied the *prosopieion* (προσωπεῖον), the “mask” (Montanari 1835), as a means of metamorphosis. *Komos* thus assumed the form of a rite of embodiment rather than a mere festive entertainment. In this schema, the *dithyrambos* embodies the sacred foundation of tragedy, *phallikos* embeds the ecstatic force of comedy, and *komos* embraces both through bodily ecstasy. Tragedy therefore emanates from Dionysus’ death and rebirth, while comedy emits a joyous, fertile, and mocking aspect—two formal formations of Dionysus.

In the archaic era, celebrations held in honour of Dionysus invited public involvement. These events constituted the *maenads* (μαῖνάδες) and were construed as occasions of disorder within the civic circuit. Initiates attain fracture from social norms for a finite duration to attune *enthousiasmos*, a state conceived via substances that concealed the self. It is thus theorised that “... Dionysus and his cult represents a rupture from norm, law, and order” (“... Dionüsos ve kültü, normalden, kuraldan, düzenden kopuş demektir;” my trans.; Latacz 27). Initial Dionysian celebrations thus unsettle social structure, as the crowd “used ritual to license and myth to legitimize socially transgressive or aberrant ritual behaviour” (Csapo and Miller 19). These festivals functioned as sites of sacred inversion, in which disorder assumed the role of rotal force that assured the commune to assess its connection to constitution. The force of this sacral

strain, however, installed institutional structure, as “... Dionysus ... threatened the established order” (“... Dionüsos ... düzeni tehdit ediyordu;” my trans.; Latacz 33). Even as the state asserted to restrain this threat, the inhabitation of the divine and the human within the cult resisted inhibition and assented alone to institutionalisation within civic constraints. In this sense, Dionysian ritual “... laid the foundation for the formation of theatre” (“... tiyatronun oluşumuna giden yolu döşedi;” my trans.; Latacz 27), as it contained sacred strain into the civic constitution of *agon* (ἀγών), construed as “contest” (Montanari 26), and into the structures of construction.

In the latter half of the sixth century BCE (Latacz 18), the Athenian state restructured the Dionysian cult within the form of official celebrations such as the Lenaia⁶ (Λήναια), the Great Dionysia⁷ (τὰ Μεγάλα Διονύσια; *ta Megala Dionysia*), and the Rural Dionysia⁸ (Διονύσια τὰ κατ’ ἀγρούς; *Dionysia ta kat agrous*), all of which resided in dramatic conduct (28). These festivals restructured cultic devotion with civic commitment and restrained ecstatic containment into a restricted cultural event that tied the god’s salience to the life of the *polis*. Within this stance, the state domesticated sacred disorder, installed it within civic order, and instructed it toward aesthetic orchestration. Individual *enthousiasmos* thus deferred to collective *mimesis*, and ritual ecstasy defined as the form of theatrical force. Thus, the Great Dionysia, for instance,

served the goal of unifying a regionally divided territory, fostered a sense of national identity, presented an image to the state of its own cultural superiority, and all the while made that unity and pride seem utterly conditional on the initiative, influence, and money of its autocratic sponsor. (Csapo and Miller 23)

Ordered civic structures thus brought religious devotion and public life into conjunction within performance. The *choregos* (χορηγός), a wealthy Athenian citizen who “underwrite[d] ... the expenses of the chorus” (Montanari 2369), acted as an intercessor between personal initiative and the *polis* and activated private wealth into public art. Within this system of civic sponsorship, tragedy emerged as a collective cultural investment rather than a solely religious rite. Within this framework, dramatic contests took place under state supervision, and performances unfolded within a purpose-built environment: the *theatron*. This space followed a carefully

⁶ The Lenaia was a winter festival held in honour of Dionysus in *Gamelion* (Γαμηλιών) with comedies.

⁷ The Great Dionysia was the central celebration of Dionysus in *Elaphebolion* (Ελαφηβολιών) with tragedies, comedies, and satyr plays.

⁸ The Rural Dionysia was a rural festival celebrated in *Poseideon* (Ποσειδεών), with archaic Dionysian processions, *phallikos*, and *komos*.

articulated structure, which included the *parodoi*⁹(πάροδοι), the *orkhestra*¹⁰ (ὀρχήστρα) with its central *thymele*¹¹ (θυμέλη), and the *koilon*¹² (κοῖλον). Each of these components preserved traces of ritual practice while assuming a civic function. The *parodoi* retained the memory of processional entrances associated with the Dionysian cult; the *orkhestra* and *thymele* united dance and sacrifice at the centre of performance; and the *koilon* transformed the assembled community into a collective body of citizens who observed and interpreted dramatic action. Within these spatial reconfigurations, the ecstatic worship of Dionysus assumed the form of a shared artistic event. As Kowalzig notes, theatrical performance “involve[s] ... the Athenian demos” (Kowalzig 244), which indicates that theatre operated as a civic space in which the public encountered its own cultural and political identity. Within this integrated environment, the three dramatic genres—tragedy, comedy, and satyr play—assumed distinct yet interrelated forms. Each preserved a different dimension of the Dionysian spirit: tragedy articulated the god’s associations with suffering, fragmentation, and renewal; comedy conveyed festive exuberance and playful irreverence; and the satyr play mediated between these modes within parody, rustic humour, and sacred laughter.

Prior to the rise of individual performers, early ritual expression centred on the *chorós* (χορός), a collective voice that articulated communal emotion rather than the perspective of a single individual. As Kowalzig notes, “Dionysiac ritual and Dionysiac drama ... lie in the chorality that characterized them both” (Kowalzig 226). Thespis is conventionally identified as the first “actor” (*hypokritēs*, ὑποκριτής) (Montanari 2223) to separate himself from the chorus and deliver spoken dialogue. This intervention converted collective chant into individual impersonation and marked a decisive transition from ritual participation to dramatic representation. In this sense, the emergence of the actor signals a fundamental shift within Greek drama, as Seaford observes, “an important strand in the emergence of Greek tragedy out of ritual was the emergence of individual out of collective action” (Seaford 391). By stepping away from the choral voice, Thespis introduced the practice of acting and reconfigured the

⁹ A “side entrance toward the orchestra” (Montanari 1587), used by the chorus for entrance and exit during performance.

¹⁰ The circular performing space where the chorus sang and danced throughout the play, forming the core of dramatic action.

¹¹ An “altar” (Montanari 954) of Dionysus within the orchestra, which also functioned as a raised platform for the chorus leader in moments of address.

¹² The semicircular, tiered seating area for the spectators, literally meaning “hollow,” embodying the civic body gathered to witness the performance.

relationship between individual performer and communal chorus—a structural tension that would remain central to the tragic form.

Building upon Thespis' innovation, Aeschylus (Αἰσχύλος), Sophocles (Σοφοκλής), and Euripides (Εὐριπίδης) buttressed tragedy into a refined art of human reflection. Within this tradition, Aeschylus (c. 525–455 BCE) is deemed to be “the father of Greek tragedy” (McDonald 7), as he extended dramatic form with the addition of a second actor, and externalised the articulation of war and word (Latacz 45). In *The Oresteia*, he embedded *dike* with communal force and embodied the ethical foundations of the *polis*. Within rarefied and ritualised narration, Aeschylus evoked tragedy into a solemn intercession between immortals and mortals, concord and discord, and thus evinced the ethical architecture on which later tragedy would evolve.

Sophocles (c. 496–406 BCE) consolidated the dramatic constitution through the introduction of a third actor and an intensification of psychology (Latacz 45). His tragedies position ethics at their centre and pose both the control and the constraint of human reason. In *Oedipus the King*, intimation and intellection encounter and enact a dilemma in which the truth both illuminates and annihilates. For Sophocles, tragedy acts as an art of self-confrontation, in which sorrow accrues into cognition.

Euripides (c. 485–406 BCE), on the other hand, destabilised heroic ideals and described a reoriented emotional realism to the tragedy. His characters intonate in a human voice—sceptical, passionate, and internally divided. In *Medea*, reason fractures under the force of individual and institutional disorder and frames the dissolution of both individual and institutional structure. Within this, Euripides rearticulated tragedy as an arena for psychological and philosophical considerations and reactivated concerns that later define modern drama. As these transitions maintained, Ancient Greek theatre matured from ritual to reflection, from institutional consciousness to the individual consciousness. Yet throughout this transitions, the spirit of Dionysus enacted foundational, even as ecstatic madness endured the form of artistic attitude.

The thematic constituents of tragedy that Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides attested later attained formal articulation within Aristotle's theoretical formulation. Aristotle does not attribute tragedy, comedy, and satyr play the same status. He elevates tragedy above others and elects it as the most serious and strenuous mode of poetry, while comedy—even as it remains able to retain intellectual involvement—is subordinate. The satyr play, on the other hand,

receives no accordant attention and is attenuated in his account. In *Poetics*, Aristotle evinces that both tragedy and comedy evolve from earlier rituals: tragedy descends from more formal choral traditions, whereas comedy derives from festive chants. Within this distinction arises a stable hierarchical structure in which tragic seriousness asserts status over comic spontaneousness. As a result, “[Aristotle] establishes ... a theatrical binary that juxtaposes tragic/high/serious poetry with comic/low/trivial poetry, creating a system that fails to accommodate the generic complexities of satyr play” (Shawn 2). While constitutive to the Dionysian triad, the satyr play assumes the position of a silent third term—one that eludes Aristotle’s classificatory framework while preserving the primordial convergence of ritual, laughter, and tragedy.

Within this hierarchy, Aristotle approaches tragedy through the framework articulated in the *Poetics*, where he defines it as the most formally organised and intellectually rigorous of the dramatic arts. Tragedy, for Aristotle, does not simply recount events; it operates through a carefully constructed plot that orders emotional experience into intelligible insight. Among the six constituent elements he identifies—plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle—*mythos* assumes primacy, as it governs the sequence of actions and shapes the audience’s response. Structural devices such as *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* regulate this movement and direct the audience toward pity and fear, culminating in *catharsis*, the emotional resolution that restores balance. In this conception, tragedy serves as both a moral and an aesthetic ordering of human experience. Yet Aristotle’s privileging of structure, harmony, and measure also signals a decisive distance from the Dionysian excess that Friedrich Nietzsche later seeks to reinstate at the core of tragic art.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, displaces the roots of drama from Aristotelian imitation and locates them instead in ritual between the Apollonian and the Dionysian—a “duality” he identifies as fundamental to artistic creation (1). Tragedy, within this framework, arises where Apollonian form confronts Dionysian excess, a meeting that produces drama not through representation but through the interplay of dream and intoxication. Nietzsche opposes the “art of the sculptor” to the “art of music” (1) in order to stress that music, which dissolves the boundaries of the self, constitutes the true core of tragic experience. Through this dissolution, the individual encounters what Nietzsche names the “joy in the annihilation of the individual” (16), a joy that discloses an “eternal” affirmation of life beneath the world of appearances (17). Tragedy thus becomes a site where pain and pleasure coexist within an “excess of pulsating life” (20), a condition through which suffering attains aesthetic form. In

this heightened state, the Dionysian “achieves predominance” once more (21), not to negate the world but to justify it, for “existence and the world appear justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon” (24). For Nietzsche, music and myth—“equal expressions of the Dionysian capacity of a people” (25)—fulfil this transformative function by converting anguish into affirmation. Tragedy, therefore, does not merely depict life; it affirms it through a sacred reconciliation of terror and beauty.

From the earliest Dionysian rituals to their philosophical reinterpretations, the history of tragedy reveals a continuous movement between the sacred and the aesthetic. The ecstatic processions, choral songs, and masks of Dionysus gradually evolved into structured civic performance, transforming *ekstasis* into *mimesis* and ritual presence into artistic representation. Through this evolution, theatre became both a mirror of human experience and a vessel for divine expression, capturing the tension between chaos and order that shaped the Ancient Greek worldview. Aristotle sought to systematize this living tradition through the *Poetics*, grounding tragedy in rational structure and moral purpose. Nietzsche, by contrast, returned to its ecstatic origins and restored the dynamic interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Together, their perspectives illuminate tragedy’s enduring power: an art form in which beauty and terror coexist, revealing the deepest truths of human existence.

CHAPTER I: CATASTROPHE

LAMP. The blood pours out /
the light pours in /
Howard Barker, *Blok/Eko*

2.1. Introduction

The aim of the first chapter is to evidence the evolution of catastrophe from its classical foundation to its contemporary reformulation in Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe. In turn, it contrasts the Aristotelian schema with Euripides' *Medea*, in which catastrophe constitutes the structural scenario that constructs the tragic arc. It then confronts it with Barker's *Blok/Eko*, in which catastrophe constitutes the theatrical field as a continuous condition rather than an eventual event. Within this temporal tension, the ethical, existential and aesthetic stances articulated through theatre arise. The chapter, thus, instantiates that catastrophe evolves less as a discrete moment of dissolution than as a continuum of contraction. It internalises the classical structure of denouement into a contemporary structure of detriment.

The word "catastrophe" flows from the Greek term "*katastrophe*" (καταστροφή), formed from *kata* (κατά), which denotes "down," and *strephe* (στρέφω), "to turn;" thus it delineates "a reversal" (Montanari 1084). In ancient theatre, the term is tied to *desis* (δέσις) and *lysis* (λύσις). Aristotle thus assesses catastrophe as a structural stratum, as he asserts in *Poetics*:

Every tragedy has both a complication and an explication. What goes before the opening, and often some of the events inside the play, make up the complication; the rest is the explication. What I call complication is everything from the beginning up to the point that immediately precedes the change to good or bad fortune; everything from the beginning of the change to the end I call explication. (1455b25)

Within this, catastrophe connects to the *lysis*, the tract in which the tragic arc consummates its turn of fortune. Yet the turn must initiate intrinsic, as Aristotle insists: "the explication of a story should issue from the story itself" (1454b5). In essence, catastrophe must be stimulated from

within rather than situated from outside, such as through a “*deus ex machina*” (1454b5). All facets must connect to constitute a factual frame; otherwise, “[anything implausible in the events themselves] ... should be outside the play” (1454b5). Aristotle’s endeavour is therefore to ensure catastrophe functions as an authentic conclusion rather than an automatic contribution. The term thus carries both aesthetic and ethical tendencies. Catastrophe follows the existential turn of the narrative, from deliverance to devastation, or from devastation to deliverance, and it concentrates the essential turning of the tragic narrative.

Nietzsche situates the term within the forfeiture of standard and structure. In contrast to Aristotle’s contextualisation of *lysis* as a structural element, Nietzsche insists that catastrophe is not a didactic conclusion but the dissolution of form itself:

The tragic cannot be derived in any honest way from the nature of art as commonly understood, that is, according to the single category of semblance and beauty; only the spirit of music allows us to understand why we feel joy at the destruction of the individual. (80)

Catastrophe is, within this, an existential confrontation rather than a conclusion, a moment in which the self contests itself. Dionysian art carries a formative force behind individual identities that Nietzsche calls the “Will” behind the “*principium individuationis*” (80); through this force, existence calibrates trauma and transformation from within. Tragedy, therefore, is not a predictable presentation of ruin; instead, it is a route that introduces “instinctive, unconscious Dionysiac wisdom” (80) into an artistic form. Catastrophe thus exceeds the foundation of distortion or dissolution. It is “the struggle, the agony, the destruction of appearances” (81) with which eternal essence is intimated.

For Nietzsche, catastrophe is intrinsic to its spiritual sphere: music. He maintains that tragedy cannot exist without music; with the extinction of “the spirit of music,” it masks its excitement, as “this spirit alone can give birth to tragedy” (76). When the Apollonian form dissolves, the Dionysian chorus discloses humans towards the truths of existence. However, this descent does not culminate in destruction. With the exhaustion, existence is reasserted, as individuals realise themselves as “the primordial being itself” (76). Catastrophe thus marks the moment in which affliction matures into affirmation. This movement is inherent to Nietzsche’s sense of catastrophic series. The aesthetic construct is, he insists, “the wisdom of Dionysus” (105) rendered in the Apollonian realm, and the artist reasserts an aesthetic interest in “the destruction of the visible world” (112). Hence, he holds that existence can be taken as an

“aesthetic phenomenon” (113). Catastrophe materialises a musical mode of tension, marked by “dissonance” (114), with which conflict constitutes a distinct dimension of force. This results in an intensified intuition of existence, so intrinsic that even “the ‘worst of all worlds’” (115) can be reasserted through the force of art. In this sense, catastrophe becomes the transcendent trace of existence, as dissolution acts not as an end, but as the enactment with which existence actualises itself.

Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe, as its name construes, constructs catastrophe at the core of theatrical constitution. However, his treatment of the term reverses its classical position. Unlike the Aristotelian antecedent, Barker’s catastrophe instates detriment rather than denouement, and it institutes the structure of strata. He interlaces world, character, and narrative into an embedded formation, in which each element interrelates with embodied form. Barker’s construal of catastrophe becomes intelligible within a consideration of consciousness. He advocates a theatre that exceeds *mimesis*; hence, he articulates a world that extends the interrelation between the alien and the familiar—an interrelation assessed as a “catastrophic re-imagining of the world” (Reynolds, “Underground” 153). Within this rearticulated realm, detriment installs itself in the social structure, as an ethical deterioration instils itself within it. As Barker remarks, “all breakdowns in collective discipline ... induce catastrophe” (“Art” 193). His theatre therefore confronts a world that conforms to no assurances of assimilated ethics.

Barker’s characters are rendered autonomous on their terms to arbitrate between dilemmas that remain terminal to the same extent. At their core resides *khthonios* (χθόνιος), a “‘dark’ element within the unconscious” that resides as “the potential for wrong action each individual holds within” (Reynolds 160). When social structures constrict, this darkness constrains and consumes the individual. Barker’s characters do not resemble entrenched entities that resist ethics; instead, as the “aftermath of a disaster,” these characters arbitrate dilemmas that are themselves “disastrous” (“Articulate” 44). Barker’s artistic articulation, however, remains far from annihilation. Instead, he envisions the “unexplored, unexposed” dimensions of the self (“Articulate” 44), as individuals endeavour to entrench themselves “phase-by-phase” (“Death” 115) within a world that has entered a form of diminution.

Barker’s characters fluctuate “between control and loss of control” (“Laboratory”) as their endeavour is to endure the moment. As characters are rendered autonomous due to their desire, “[c]atastrophe” within Barker’s world “is willed” (“Idea of Hidden Life” 55). The individual thus illustrates a polar position as both offender and sufferer, an attribution that

illuminates the “absence of authentic victims” (Barker, “Crisis” 128), since each character acts in self-interest. Within this, “ecstasy becomes a ... dominant component” (Groves 131), and crime renders the most rooted route to it. Crime forms from dilemmas and functions not as a means but as a medium that forces the individual into an idealised desire. Each violation accelerates a “vortex of ... crime [in which] the criminal experiences the ecstasy” (Barker, *Death* 71). As desire undermines ethical constraint, denial unloosens. These acts persist as undetected, “at least ... by the collective” (“Idea of Hidden Life” 56), as the collective itself perpetuates detriment. Yet the inconclusive intertwines with obsession and internalises the individual’s obliteration.

Solitude functions as a core condition in Barker’s woeful world and extends as a formative force that extracts each individual’s foremost capacities. Fate endures as autonomous, whether it ends in consecration or condemnation. As social structures constrict, inner solitude consolidates; however, the individual resists resolution. Thus, anti-denouement constitutes the calamitous aesthetic, as Barker construes:

The catastrophic play [does not] resolve, because there is ... no reconciliation, no resolution ... In a frank way, ... very great personal experience only leads to one place, and that is solitude. The catastrophic play always leaves the protagonist in solitude. Whether solitude is of negative value is a matter of choice; it’s an informed solitude. (“Death” 117)

Solitude thus threads toward the terminus of catastrophe. Yet, as Barker asserts, it assumes a destructive form—“a form of suicide” (“Crisis” 128). When a world curtails individuals’ initiative to an anomic extreme, their woe culminates in an existential dilemma of death. Suicide, within this structure, distances itself as the ultimate escape from a world that has dissolved.

In conclusion, Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe reconstitutes tragedy within a continuous condition. While Aristotle contains the term at a distinct moment and Nietzsche contextualises it with the dissolution of form, Barker continues it into a distributed state that distils existence itself. For Barker, catastrophe does not contain consummation; instead, it contaminates the world, social constitution, and individual consciousness. His characters, as inhabitants of catastrophe, inhabit deviation, inherit devotion, and inhere in their end in solitude. Barker’s theatre therefore instates catastrophe without reconciliation, a world in which concretisation persists rather than perishes and solitude is instated as the conclusive truth. This orientation orchestrates the critical criteria to thematise the ways catastrophe intertwines within both *Medea*

and *Blok/Eko* and to theorise how the tragic continuum internalises, from classical dissolution into contemporary dissociation.

2.2. Catastrophe in *Medea*

Medea (Μήδεια) survives as an extant tragedy from Euripides' lost tetralogy that subsumes *Philoctetes* (Φιλοκτήτης), *Dictys* (Δίκτυς), and the satyr play *Theristai* (Θερισταί) (Olson 269). It was contested at the Great Dionysia in 431 BCE (Webster 25) and concluded in third rank. *Medea* renders the contraction of familial and social connections within Jason's renunciation of his wedlock with Medea. She emboldens Jason to obtain the Golden Fleece, defies her homeland, and embarks with him. Jason later discards her, the mother of his children, and diverts to Glauce as a means of political position. Medea conceals her retribution as reconciliation and confers the bride pernicious presents, which consummate the deaths of Princess Glauce and King Creon. Medea then commits filicide, an act that comes to the ethical and existential, familial and individual corrosion at the core of the narrative.

In Euripides' *Medea*, catastrophe arises both as Medea's personal detriment and as the pervasive detriment of kingdom, dynasty, and lineage. Euripides foreshadows this detriment from the initial scene in the Nurse's monologue, where she formalises both Medea's sorrow and the force of foe it revives. Jason's faithlessness denudes Medea as he denies his wife and children to pursue a royal marriage. As a result, Medea's home, family, identity, and every source of meaning dissolves, and the foundations of her existence dissociate.

Jason, once the core of Medea's existence, constitutes the anchor of her ruin and thus consolidates the initial strata of catastrophe. The Nurse notates this collapse when she notes that Medea "surrender[s] her body to her sorrows ..." (line 20). Grief does not function as a fleeting feeling but as a force that furnishes Medea's flesh and thus furthers hardened ire into hatred. This hatred channels outward toward Jason and inward toward the self that once cherishes him. Medea's insisted invocation of death—"May I find rest in death ..." (line 145)—indicates a desire to erase the wounded self that Jason has produced. Even their children, figures of continuity, become bound to faithlessness, as Medea narrates them as "accursed children of a hateful mother ..." (line 111), a declaration that notates the destruction of motherhood.

The Nurse construes the threat this sorrow contains. Her statement, “I am afraid” (line 35), stabilises the moment at which sorrow stands as threat. Her caution—“do not bring them near their mother ...” (line 90)—frames that Medea’s domestic constitution fractures. The mother, once a force of order in the *oikos*, now acts as its threat.

King Creon intensifies Medea’s individual sorrow into an institutional threat. His fear—“I am afraid of you” (line 282)—traces that her constraint transcends the domestic context. His solution lies in exile; however, Medea assails his decree and assures “a single day ...” (line 355) that establishes the temporal span essential for the fall. At this threshold, catastrophe abandons its function as an external commandment and abides as an internal commitment. Medea evolves from wounded wife to wielder of woe, as she evidences, “I shall make three of my enemies corpses, the father, the daughter, and my husband” (lines 370–371). She then contemplates the means of destruction:

Out of the many possible ways I have to kill them, I do not know what will be my first choice, my friends—should I set fire to the bridal house or go silently into the room where their bridal bed is laid and drive a sharpened sword through their hearts? If I am caught ... I shall be killed and give my enemies the last laugh. (lines 375–380)

She then proffers premeditated presents—“a delicate robe and a golden garland” (line 785), items that concretise delectation and conceal death—to Princess Glauce, the bride. When the deaths of King Creon and Princess Glauce are announced, Medea insists on the extent of excruciation (lines 1129–1139); thus, the words themselves instantiate catastrophe.

When Medea attends to her children, the narrative attains its most cruel crisis. She falters for an instant and fancies lenience; however, the hesitation does not remain as she reminds herself of the deed: “I must face the deed” (line 1050). Medea institutes filicide as obviation, as she insists that her deed insulates them from a worse obliteration. Within this thrust, malevolence and motherhood intersect in an atomic act. Medea commits the atrocious act and consummates both dimensions of detriment—individual and institutional annihilation.

In *Medea*, Euripides internalises catastrophe within the individual and intensifies its force across the institutions that intimidate her. Medea’s sorrow exceeds the frame of individual emotion. Within this force of action, inner forfeit transforms into social and political form. Her resolve confers agency yet confines freedom; each act of assertion accentuates alienation. Within this condition of inhibition, insurrection, and invalidation, Euripides illuminates a fatal fracture in the audience. It arises from the arc between retention and retaliation, maternal

instinct and authorial insistence. Thus, *Medea* sites the audience as witnesses to a narrative that silences ethical intuition and situates them with the intersection between retribution and destruction. In her dual duress as an autonomous force, Medea unites ethical, individual, and institutional dimensions of tragedy, and unveils catastrophe not as an external but as an internal occasion.

2.3. Catastrophe in *Blok/Eko*

In *Blok/Eko*, Barker initiates the narrative's decadence within a decree that Eko institutes in the name of national interest. Eko, from the outset, deflects the course of the narrative with command and defers it into a containment that defies the conventional denouement of alienation instead of its alleviation. She asserts that human essence assumes form through the fomentation of alienation, instead of its alleviation. In line with her conviction, she endorses productive internalisation over palliative intervention and enunciates the precedence of "[p]oetry consoles us for those griefs without which we [would] cease to be human" (Programme 5). The aim is not embedded in the inhibition of pain; therefore, it is embodied in its inhabitation: consolation transitions to confrontation.

Eko ascribes this poetic poise to medicine, which she assails for its pursuit of "painlessness" (Programme 5). Her rejection of medical intervention stimulates the reaction that stirs the narrative: detriment commences at the moment she commands the execution of the doctors. On the page, the act asserts itself in the scene, as "[a] *slatted crate containing the bodies of two surgeons descends. The limbs of the surgeons protrude through the slats*" (Barker 7; 5 [sd]). On the stage, however, Barker assembles the catastrophe. The doctors' entreaties forfeit at once (*Blok/Eko* 00:01:45), and the scene formalises a visual intrusion—the *Dead Doctor's Coat* (Figure 1)—which forms (*Blok/Eko* 00:01:55) in direct correlation with Eko's entrance (00:02:00). This constellation structures the constitution of catastrophe and steers the narrative on an irreversible catastrophic course.

In accordance with the aesthetics of the Theatre of Catastrophe, Eko proposes a poetic position that prioritises pain rather than its palliation. Her devotion to poetry, however, fuels further devastation. Tot, "a [poet] of the streets" (Programme 5), offers a poem as an assertion. Eko's stance, as rendered in Quota, resolves the form of a perpetration as predation and resonates as a predestination of opportunism—"a handbag / snatch one /" (Barker 15; 16). At

this point, catastrophe shifts from the institutional to the internal. Eko consolidates control over the populace and constrains them within contexts of vicious violence. Her poetic ideal thus internalises into an authoritarian ethos. The initial coercion therefore functions both as the constitution and as the coordination of the narrative's denouement.

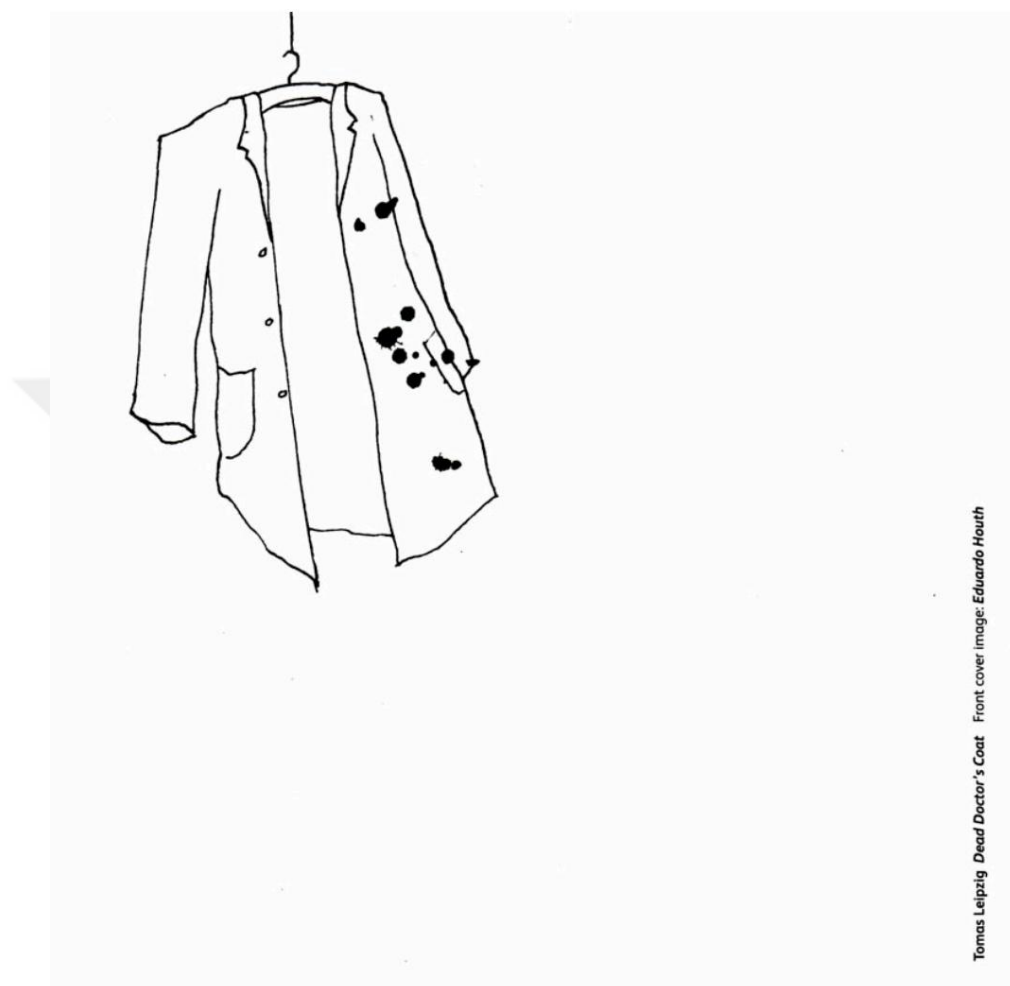


Fig. 1. Tomas Leipzig¹³. *Dead Doctor's Coat*. 2011, The Northcott Theatre.

The obsolescence of institutions soon evolves to an individual internalisation. Whereas Tot recoils at Eko's corruption (16; 16), he in time reconstitutes himself within her decree of desire and deviance. Under the conclusion of confession, he rents a gun for "twenty minutes" (29; 28) and resorts to an atrocious assault:

TOT: ... / mercy / mercy / says the shopman / edging back / don't move / I say / you effing piece of too-stiff ... / I'm mental / mercy / mental / ... / strip the till / strip the wife / ... / ... the missus dragging up her skirt / now it's me who begs for mercy / her

¹³ As mentioned in the introduction, Barker created several personae to embody different facets of his art.

sagging belly / her bulging eyes / mercy / I'll pull the trigger and call it self-defence /
(29; 28)

At this threshold, intrusion enters the character's intellection. The ethical deterioration that Eko sets now settles in Tot, whose dissolute discourse sets in motion a liberation from moral limitation. This attrition is insistent as "*TOT looses off another shot*" (29; 28 [sd]) while the initial attack does not instantiate in enactment. Tot's deterioration therefore thematises the embodied continuum of Eko's catastrophe.

Tot's violence incurs internment rather than interment. This stance entails the destabilisation of his embodiment, as "[t]he arm / a machine ate it / ... / blood / splash / and no doctors /" (55; 53) enacts the destruction of both lung and limb. His material dissolution echoes the ecstasies of monarchical distinction: Tot becomes bound to his mortal form as well as to the moral force of which he is born. Nausicaa proclaims the rationale that anchors this decree when she pronounces, "poetry is not made but crushed / crushed out of extremity /" (56; 54). Pain thus constitutes the core of the poetic *poiesis*. In this situation, Tot realises the relation between poem, poet, and pain for the first time, and this realisation reorients his attention to a cadaver. He translates the undertakers' treatment of the dead: "*He ... jerk[s] the dead man's head. ... He wipes his hand on his decayed garments*" (56–57; 54 [sd]). The performance further accentuates the fulcrum, as Tot assumes a stance over the cadaver (*Blok/Eko* 01:02:45–01:03:05). This act exceeds the script's instruction and excavates the insistence of his moral decadence. The dead no more seem as individuals but as raw material for the idealised poem. Eko's extent thus extends doctrine and decree: the catastrophe she cultivates culminates in Tot's physical and psychological dissolution.

Thereafter, Tot's conflict confronts confinement. When he mourns, "I have one arm / ... / [a]nd one hand /" (Barker 69; 64), the admission attracts a mould from passive exile to a passionate existential awareness that mounts externalisation. Nausicaa assures consolation as she assists his sole hand, "with which to grasp a pen when passion or despair inspires you" (69; 64). Tot, however, perceives not recision but recession, not concern but consciousness. Nausicaa's initiative thus activates a catastrophic initiation. "ONE HAND TO SMACK YOUR FACE WITH," (69; 64) he heckles, and he "*slaps NAUSICAA, sending her sprawling,*" after which "*she suffers a fit*" (70; 64 [sd]). This moment concentrates on the conversion of pain into violence and concludes the convulsion from emotional collapse to catastrophic agency.

With the reconstitution of Eko as absence, catastrophe reconvenes within Tot. The moment condenses personal and political ruin into an intense instant, and Tot conditions a mirror of the institutional order that has conditioned him. Quasidoc—who withstood the doctors’ annihilation but was later offered as a prize to Pindar (23; 21)—approaches Tot with desire. Her disaffection, however, issues in dissatisfaction with both the poet and the poem. She assails him as she asserts, “[t]he ... of a bad poet is no less hard and no less strong than the ... of a good poet; still, you long for the good poet’s ... /” (76; 69). Her obsession advances as she adds, “if you had two arms I would not want you” (76; 69), and thus this eroticisation of his erosion drives the confrontation toward coercion. As tension mounts, Tot’s silence “*tortures her*” (77; 69 [sd]) until forbearance concedes to force: “I’ll have you / my one hand in your belly,” followed with intense intercourse (77; 69). At that moment, “*the public rushes in, partially obscuring TOT / QUASIDOC’s copulation, and crying out with pity or despair*” (77; 70 [sd]). In that instant, cries of rapture and cries of rupture convene; desire and death convert into one.

Violence attains further when Tot attacks Blok. He “*lurches*” him (92; 86 [sd]) and then launches “[*r*]aining kicks on BLOK” (93; 87 [sd]), who “*is ... alive but barely*” (90; 85 [sd]). Tot, convinced that the old man’s “CRIME” will be converted into an “IMMENSE ... POEM” (92; 86), subdues him “*as a dog shakes a doll*” (93; 87 [sd]) until Blok succumbs. He announces indifference to death and announces, “WHO CARES? / WHO CARES?” (93; 87), identified with the position that he now possesses the poem he has idealised. He enunciates,

I / could snap off this head / and like a bottle not quite empty / tip it up / and drain it for
its dregs / a last half-glass before it’s flung away / so with the old man’s brain / there
was half-a-poem in it / half / this half / more beautiful than anything he wrote /. (93; 87)

Death is normalised, to the extent that Tot even feeds Blok’s “poet tongue / poet lip” (102; 94) to animals. Catastrophe increases to its most extreme extent in this instant. Tot’s bond to the idealised poem effaces the bound between constitution and destruction and effects desire with death.

Tot’s callousness persists as he perceives the old woman whose sister has died beside her, and catastrophe harbours a further function. His exhaustion with existence condenses into an exhaled exertion when he “... *presses on her shoulder ...*” (104; 105 [sd]) with a force that converts desolation into domination. The line between allure and assault collapses as Tot seduces the woman with a kiss and secures her with his sole arm. This action posits not affection but a catastrophic affliction to possess. When their bodies “*sink to the ground alongside the*

dead woman” (104; 96 [sd]), the bereaved woman coalesces with her sister. Tot then stands and stares at the woman’s “*curiously still form*” (105; 97 [sd]). He clothes her fallen flesh; hence, he closes a rite he himself has instituted. Within this, desire and death intersect with insistence: the woman assumes the form of an instrument with which Tot asserts institution over both dilemmas. Catastrophe thus concretises less as an event that intervenes than as a continuous condition within which Tot conceives himself.

After Blok’s death, Tot actuates and actualises an existential state, as “the world without Blok / ... was ... / [u]nhabitable” (113; 100). As consummation demands rational continuation, he descends toward the final act with a performative precision that demonstrates his submission to Eko’s decree. The gun, once rented to end someone else, returns to the scene as an instrument with which Tot fulfils the catastrophic arc he has followed. When he “*has thrust ... the gun to his chest*” (115; 101 [sd]), the act is neither impulsive nor moralistic; it is staged with the same deliberateness that has directed his previous violences. The moment “*TOT pulls the trigger,*” “*the sound of the shot expands*” through the audience and dissolves into “*a pure note*” (115; 101 [sd]), a sound that reframes the suicide not as collapse but as a chosen aesthetic culmination. The act, moreover, has been “rehearsed” (117; 103), revealing that the death is not a contraction in the narrative but its consummation. In choosing to annihilate himself with the weapon he once used against another, Tot enacts catastrophe’s ultimate feat: he envisions his death as a final, controlled spectacle, an extension of the violence that has defined the world.

In *Blok/Eko*, catastrophe does not manifest as a single condition of downfall but persists as a sustained condition that defines existence itself. Barker relocates detriment to the structural and philosophical centre of the narrative. Eko’s decree—her rejection of medicine and affirmation of poetic pain—initiates a sequence of destruction that moves from the institutional sphere to the individual. Eko’s conviction that pain reveals human essence resolves into a doctrine that erodes everything it encounters. This corrosion finds material form in Tot, whose physical and psychological collapse sets forth the catastrophic coherence that Eko sets in motion. Catastrophe in *Blok/Eko* therefore functions as both realisation and revelation. It erases the borders between creation and destruction and embodies artistic endeavour into an act of annihilation. Barker institutes catastrophe as the sole condition under which truth becomes perceptible and insists that meaning endures within the ruins of idealism. In the end, both Eko and Tot succumb to the pain they seek to command, and catastrophe remains not as a conclusion but as the enduring condition of Barker’s theatrical world.

2.4. Comparison of the Catastrophe

This section examines catastrophe as a formal externalisation and a foundational extraction across theatrical articulation. While *Medea* frames catastrophe as a coherent progression that orders ethical orientation, *Blok/Eko* fractures the term as a continuous condition that resists ethical resolution. The examination tracks this shift from catastrophic condition to continuation and translates the audience's relation from interpretive assurance to prolonged endurance.

In *Medea*, catastrophe emerges through the collapse of both individual and institutional bonds. Here, the term consists of betrayal, displacement, and the destruction of familial continuity. As Jason abandons Medea, she is alienated from her status as wife and mother and is socially and politically abased. This initial detriment initiates catastrophe as a sequence rather than a one-time occurrence, a formulation that is inconsistent with the Aristotelian form. The narrative constructs catastrophe within an incremental intensification of inner conflict. Medea's sorrow turns into resolution, and resolution into realisation. Even as the outcomes are acute, the most extreme acts remain off-stage. The deaths of Glauce, Creon, and Medea's children are not noted but narrated. This distance does not interfere with their tenor; instead, it intensifies ethical tension as it sensitises the audience to sense the violence rather than see it. Catastrophe in *Medea* is thus both individual and institutional; hence, her inner dissolution annihilates lineage, royal authority, and civic stability. Yet her actions remain coherent within the classical arc of desolation, devastation, and honour. Thus, the audience confronts horror, but not confusion; violence contorts, but vision continues to be bearable. Even as Medea eludes punishment, catastrophe elucidates the cost of betrayal, exile, and identity for the audience.

In *Blok/Eko*, catastrophe serves not as a denouement but as a detriment that sets the term for both narrative progression and human existence. Barker institutes detriment from episodic crisis to structural criterion and thus installs pain at the philosophical core of the theatre. Eko's decisive decree—her elimination of medicine and her elevation of poetic pain—initiates a destructive chain that internalises institutional authority to interiorised subjectivity. This decree recasts ethical correction and reconstitutes violence as an essential mode of creation. Tot constitutes the realm in which the rationale concretises: his physical mutilation, ethical erosion, and aesthetic obsession construe catastrophe as a continuum rather than a condition. As

polarisation dislocates into poetic potential, the distinction between articulation and annihilation dissolves, and artistic aim discloses with bodily ruin. Tot's final act of self-annihilation does not constitute an interruption in the narrative but consummates it and consecrates catastrophe as both form and function. Barker thus instates tragedy outside cathartic denouement, and as a result, insists that truth endure at the threshold. In this theatrical condition, catastrophe does not conclude the narrative; it concretises as the condition within which existence, art, and knowledge are constituted.

When reviewed in relation, *Medea* and *Blok/Eko* reveal two formal formations of catastrophe. In Euripides, catastrophe evolves as a coherent course that evinces individual suffering to institutional collapse and evokes ethics through diffidence and distance. In Barker, catastrophe excludes rectification and resolution; instead, it exists as a continuous condition extended within excess. This situation traces a movement from catastrophic sense to catastrophic subsistence and translates the audience's stance from ethical assurance to unsettled endurance.

CHAPTER II: CATHARSIS

NAUSICAA. [W]hat made it particularly /
painful / was the absurdity /
Howard Barker, *Blok/Eko*

3.1. Introduction

The orientation of the second chapter is to outline the contoured condition of catharsis from its classical articulation to its contemporary rearticulation in Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe. It first asserts catharsis within the philosophical phenomenon of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, where the term assumes ethical, aesthetic, and existential phases. It then contrasts the Aristotelian model structured in *Oedipus the King*, as its catharsis is constituted through the tragic arc of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, with Barker's *Blok/Eko*, as its structure contracts into anti-catharsis. Within this tension between the classic and contemporaneous catharsis, the emotional, ethical, and theatrical differentials of tragedy differentiate. The chapter, thus, substantiates that catharsis serves less as a mechanism of moral moderation than as a stream of strain, as the modern moment of inner incoherence subsumes its classical function of fulfilment.

Catharsis, as a philosophical phenomenon inherited from the Ancient Greek theoretical tradition, includes ethical, existential and aesthetic phases. To elucidate these elements, however, it is tethered to elevate the etymology of the term. The word "catharsis," which has its roots in the ancient Greek term "*katharsis*" (κάθαρσις), can be cast as both "purgation" and "purification" (Montanari 1001), thus "fluctuate[s] between ... functions" (F. Peters 98). For Plato (Πλάτων), catharsis invokes a spiritual sense: "[k]atharsis is a purification of the soul" (98). For Aristotle, later the term intensifies further as he interrelates it with music "in [a] purgative sense" (98) and installs his matrix in the homoeopathic maxim *similia similibus curantur*—"like cures like" (Kuzniar 137). Within the armature conditioned for art, the tragic tendencies of *eleos* and *phobos* can be conceived as a homoeopathic cure. For Plotinus

(Πλωτίνος), in contrast to both prior philosophers, the term is inscribed in *arete* (ἀρετή) and thus is instituted as “a necessary condition to assimilation to God” (F. Peters 99). Therefore, the ethical, aesthetic, and existential strata of catharsis stem in turn from Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Yet, for reasons of focus and foundational coherence, this thesis assumes Aristotle’s conceptualisation as its theoretical tenet.

While Aristotle inherits the Platonic discourse on catharsis and *mimesis* (μίμησις), he innovates the two dimensions in *Poetics*. He insists that imitation is not a realistic reflection of the truth; instead, it is *poiesis* (ποίησις), the “production” that instils “the *energeia* [within] the thing made” (61). Within this, tragedy constitutes a formal form of instantiation whose intention consists not in transmission but in transformation. Aristotle offers an initial but influential account of catharsis in *Poetics* while he outlines tragedy as the actualisation of an action that achieves “the purification of such emotions” (1449b25), such as *eleos* and *phobos*. Catharsis initiates as a mechanism in which mental state is formed and fostered within theatrical form. This principle is further asserted in *Politics*, where Aristotle associates catharsis with music to assist pressure. He thrusts that “music should be pursued ... for ... [*katharsis*]” (1341b30). In combination with these themes, Aristotle states catharsis is at the core of tragedy through the stimulation of *eleos* and *phobos*.

Nietzsche resists the Aristotelian model and restates that tragedy is to enhance emotions, not to ennoble them. For him, the theatrical conflict is more than a moral lesson that installs balance because its core does not lie in concord. Therefore, Nietzsche sees Aristotelian catharsis as a misconstrued mimetic condition. His formulation arises from the Dionysian force. It dissolves the boundaries of the self and dislocates the audience into a stark state. In this state, self-awareness transitions into “self-forgetting” (17). Rather than offer relief, the Dionysian state offers the individual emotional strain. Thus, emotion is neither controlled nor contracted; instead, it intensifies. Moreover, this intensification stimulates the audience to stabilise inconvenience through the Apollonian state. Apollo discards emotion within distance and distinction, and hence he directs didactic endeavour aside. As a result, the audience encounters pain not to evade it, but to evoke it in art. The theatrical form reveals pain as the foundation of the world (26); Apollo, however, renders this pain into a form that the human mind can receive. That is, the Apollonian form does not neutralise the Dionysian force behind it; instead, it necessitates the audience to focus it. Apollo confronts the audience to consider misfortune without control. Aesthetic consolation arises from the correlation of tension and terror. In Dionysian conditions, “all the rigid, hostile barriers ... break asunder” to conduct the individual

into “universal harmony” (18). Nietzsche’s idea thus is not clarification but confrontation, and it interferes with ethics. “Only by myth,” Nietzsche claims, “can ... the [Dionysiac] fantasy and Apolline dream be saved from aimless meandering” (108); otherwise, modern orientation calcifies into an obsession for “roots” (109). Therefore, for Nietzsche, catharsis is not a consolidation but an aesthetic confrontation with a strained state in which pain increases the force of *pathos*.

Howard Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe enacts a distinctive dissidence from the Aristotelian didacticism and enunciates an anti-catharsis. Barker intimates that Aristotle’s notion intends to restrain the consciousness within constitutive conventions (Roberts 262), to the extent that even a character’s “death must be made useful” (*Death* 68). Within this communitarian commitment, “nothing [is] too great that it cannot be annexed in the interests of social order” (68), and the tragic ordeal is instrumentalised as an ethical ordinance. Barker, however, considers Aristotle’s theorisation of catharsis asinine (The Base 00:44:45). He admits, “I have never comprehended catharsis ... I cannot see the point of creating a work of art which enables a public to discharge some anxiety in order to leave the theatre in a healthier condition than when it came in,” and adds, “when art wounds the audience, I want that wound to be experienced continuously, not resolved” (“Art” 195). In resistance to the contention that art functions as a social solution, Barker aligns himself with an ‘art for art’s sake’ conviction, a resonance with his aesthetic accord. His aim is not to conform the audience to balance but to confront each audience as an individual to reveal their inner insecurities. The wound his theatre inflicts hence resists resolution and resides as an anti-catharsis.

This wound is immanent within the thematic outline of the Theatre of Catastrophe and is inherent in the extremes of “desire and death” (Brown 14). Barker’s characters, conceived as autonomous assessors, are thrust between these two extremes and thrown to choose amid strenuous strain. These choices can dictate that the characters “discard their moral attitudes ... or failing this, to choose death” (“Wrestling” [2023]). The dilemma at issue is whether a character “must ... commit suicide” when desire is elusive, an elision Barker asserts has “nothing to do with ... faith” (“Wrestling” [2023]) or ethics. Such a dilemma does not increase reassurance; instead, it incites resonance. As such, Barker stirs rather than stills the audience’s reaction and resists inclination toward cathartic reconciliation. The theatrical act, as asserted earlier, assails the audience with a form of enervation. The exertion of catharsis thus extends into the audience. Its discord ensues within the character’s initiation and ensnares the audience’s innerness, an actualisation that accords with Barker’s account that “[theatre] should be a taxing

experience” (“Howard Barker” [2012]). Theatre, in this sense, does not end but endures within the audience’s consciousness. In essence, Barker asserts his Theatre of Catastrophe as

a theatre ... without obligation to notions of entertainment or enlightenment, neither ‘delightful’ nor instructive, it resolves nothing—on the contrary, resolution is anathema: it is tragedy without catharsis, tragedy in which the audience is implicated in the acts of cruelty it witnesses, and from which there is no relief or refuge in the reiteration of the utilitarian concept of the public good. It is, consequently, a theatre of silence and contemplation. (“Idea of Promiscuity”)

Within this theatrical aesthetic, the audience is confined to obscurity, constrained to inhabit the disorder inherent in the dilemmas of chaotic characters. Catharsis resonates less as a sole condition to be resolved but as a continuum that resides in the characters and, in turn, the audience itself. Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe thus resists consolation, resists consolidation, and restructures contribution as an alteration without alleviation.

In conclusion, Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe reconstitutes catharsis within a continuum of inconclusive incandescence. While Aristotle situates catharsis at a monumental moment that restores balance, and Nietzsche situates it anew as an aesthetic contradiction that intensifies rather than resolves emotion, Barker situates his theatre nearer to Nietzsche’s theorisation, and as a result, condemns catharsis and consolidates the fallen fate as a static state. In Barker’s theatre, catharsis is not a form of confirmation but a confrontation with dissolution itself; the audience inhabits its inner world without reconciliation and resolution. His reorientation alters catharsis from a form of purification to a force of dilation and distortion. This reorientation initiates the contextualisation of catharsis in both *Oedipus the King* and *Blok/Eko* to trace the tragic thrust from Aristotelian realisation as well as resolution toward a Barkerian aesthetic that denies these and demands retention.

3.2. Catharsis in *Oedipus the King*

Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (Οἰδίπους Τύραννος; *Oidípous Týrannos*) centralises Oedipus, the civic King of Thebes, who is the hero of his citizens thanks to his brilliance. He tries to redeem his realm from transience. Thebans perish from a pestilence due to the divine anathema on Thebes: Apollo, with his divine wrath, wants to penalise the perpetrator of King

Laios. With his endeavour to instruct on the issue, he ensures the insidious truth: he is the doer of the doom himself—Oedipus murders his father, King Laios, and marries his mother, Queen Jocasta. As the truth arises, Queen Jocasta commits suicide, and King Oedipus condemns himself to the deserved decree. Hence, his heroic virtue falls as a victim of fatuities between free will and fate.

Oedipus, as a “superior” (*Poetics* 1448a) embodiment, is emblematised as a “[man] ... ought to be” (1460b10). He is the realm’s revered potentate and is renowned for his potential. Hence, he asserts himself as “I, Oedipus, whose fame is known to all the world” (*Oedipus the King* line 5), which assumes his *hubris* (ὕβρις). Oedipus, with his severe hubris, seals his sentence in the succeeding scenes. Tiresias, the prophet that foresees all, counsels him to forsake the truth and counters, “[s]end me back home again / [t]ake my advice—you’ll find it’s easiest / for you to bear your burden and for me to carry mine” (line 320). After the sensational scenes, Oedipus dishonours Tiresias, as “[y]ou have no part in this [truth] / because your ears and brain are just as blind as are your eyes” (lines 370–371), and dismisses the divine revelation. Oedipus’ *hubris* dominates with these two lines, as he doubted the oracle of Apollon. Tiresias enunciates his words with “[e]vents will turn out as they will, / no matter if I cover them with silence” (line 341). He endures the unuttered truth—Oedipus is “the foul pollutant in this land” (line 351). Tiresias forces the truth as a foundation for Oedipus’ trial: “I say you are [King Laius]’ murderer—the one you seek” (line 362). With their agitated *agon*, the truth builds and *peripeteia* bursts. The climactic confrontation intensifies the internal conflict to narrow the narrative to catharsis. Oedipus, with the orientation of the truth, bears the burden he has been bound to—he murdered his father and married his mother, an abomination that hastens *anagnorisis*. Despite the fact that “the terrible deed [is] done in ignorance” (*Poetics* 1453a30), he is incriminated for the parricide of his parents, King Laius and Queen Jocasta, and the nastiness to the nation. Within his predetermined fate, the narrative initiates its peak as his chaotic character rears; the evident events reactivate through the unknown.

With the truth, Oedipus considers himself both the condemned and the condemner: “[Oedipus]’ eyes stabbed out and blood running down his cheeks” (*Oedipus the King* 66 [sd]). He, as an act of atonement for his blunder, blinded himself with the haunted thought, “I cannot think I ever could have looked with seeing eyes / upon my father ... / nor upon my ... mother” (lines 1371–1371). In addition to the self-mortification, Oedipus beseeches to be ostracised: “I beg you, throw me out somewhere, / or kill me off, or hide me deep beneath / the ocean waves, where you’ll not see me ever more” (lines 1410–1411). His endeavour can be cast as an

attempt to ensure that his sense of ethics endures; hence, with his woeful words, *eleos* is issued. Oedipus witnesses his “evil” (line 1270) and wishes to dare himself to the eternal damnation through the spiritual and spatial threshold. Oedipus chooses to live through the shame, as he is destined to endure; however, though he ends his subsistence, he realises “that ... would not be enough” (line 1375) to redress his sin. Thus, he seeks that those he has unintentionally harmed sentence him even to death’s threshold. Oedipus was an honourable hero; however, he weaves himself into the threads of fate—his fate held him fast. With the truth of fate, the audience reflects on their blindness in relation to their fates; thus, the essence of fate escalates *phobos* to root itself in their hearts.

In *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles positions Oedipus as the constitutive axis of ethical and civic order within the *polis*. He exceeds the role of a mere ruler and emerges as an exposed witness whose actions extend private inquiry into collective consequence. This position grants authority while simultaneously binding him to the limits of that authority. Within this tension of command, resistance, and self-contradiction, Sophocles reveals a decisive fracture structured through *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis*, a fracture that implicates the audience through the hero. This fracture arises from the interval between knowledge and action, intention and outcome. As the truth unfolds, *eleos* and *phobos* take form as the audience confronts Oedipus’s fall not as moral failure alone but as tragic necessity. Through Oedipus’s dual status as both agent and object of judgement, the play unites civic responsibility, moral inquiry, and dramatic form into a single tragic configuration.

3.3. Catharsis in *Blok/Eko*

In *Blok/Eko*, the anti-hero illuminates himself as “[a] youth” (Barker, 7; 6 [sd]) named Tot, whose profession as a poet is illustrated later. As the narrative unfolds, however, his societal position becomes clear: Tot is neither a patrician nor a particular poet but no one, an individual whose notion to the nation remains indiscernible. As an autonomous character, Tot endures amid intense mental menace; however, he still endeavours to abandon absence. When Eko commands a poet that can heave a poem to heal her people, Tot commends a poem that he believes will answer her desire. Eko’s decorum declaration that Nausicaa vocalises via dismissive and dissonant: “IN / IN / INCHOATE /” (9; 12). Within Quota’s rendition, Eko instils this innervate with inner concussion and insists that “[s]he cares for you / ... / [g]reater

than her love of you / is her love of poetry,” as she further asserts that “[f]ew ever had / or ever will / possess your talent” (15–16; 16). These contradictions ensnare Tot in increased constraint. He “*suffers*” (16; 16 [sd]) amid this constraint until it assumes the form of an obscene obtestation and assaults Eko herself. Her mere measure—an “*eerie laugh*” (16; 16 [sd])—innervates Tot’s inner turmoil and initiates the initial descent into darkness.

As Eko leads him, through Quota, to “[r]ob a shop” (15; 16), Tot leases a gun and “[shoots] a bald shopkeeper / in Resurrection Street” (35; 32). After the act, he concedes, “was I sorry? / I wasn’t / no” (35; 32), since he conceives that “the gun inspires” (29; 28). To Tot, the act is not assessed as a crime but as a poetic posture that asserts artistic consciousness. Whereas his “[m]urder / ... / [i]s punishable by death /” (38; 37), he contests to the offence—that is, the offence of “a bald man in a post office / stain on his shirt / stains on his tie / and bitten fingernails /” (39; 40)—and construes it as licit. He thus thunders, “DON’T TOP A POET FOR A SHOPKEEPER” (41; 40). At this threshold, ethical breakdown is absolute, as verse commands and commends all other values less; life itself is absorbed.

When such an excess would attract execution, Eko chooses not to kill him, sends him to confinement, and sanctions him to continue. In confinement, Tot accedes to a concussion. He arrives physically and psychologically arid, wan as the man he once was, with “lost ... arm / a lung / and half his brain ... /” (67; 63), however, he waives contestation to this condition (55; 53). Within his dismissal, he discloses, “when Tot was released from prison / there was a lot less Tot than when Tot went in” (55; 53). Trauma now articulates his self, his identity, and arises as the foundation of his artistic seal. Eko, in Quota’s interpretation, instructs him to “[s]ubmit a poem” (56; 53). At this turn, Tot conceives an awareness, concentrated in resentment and Nausicaa’s renouncement, that “the poet therefore / ... / must perish / ... as a consequence of his own /” (56; 54). He commences to combine poetry with death and remarks that “the dead will have to wait for their great interpreter” (57; 54), since “ALL THE BEST / THE THINGS HE NEVER PUT ON PAPER /” (56; 54) remain unwritten. Thus, desire and death are bound in union. Tot seeks the poem that death denotes; however, death itself denies its denouement. The dilemma holds him in a liminal limbo—“[e]xcessively alive / the one-armed man /” (57; 55)—neither alive nor dead. His determination is deterioration itself, and thus Tot comes to be a chaotic character as he commits himself to this.

Tot, in order to attain the ideal, attests another poem to Eko with intense intention, as the prior poem is attacked as “INCHOATE” (67; 63). Yet the assessment turns to “IN / TEMPERATE / SHE SAYS /” since “she did not mean more / she meant deeper /” (67–68; 63).

Defeated once more, he implodes at his limits and implores in “*agony*” (63; 63 [sd]): “CAN I HAVE A PRIZE / PLEASE? / ANY PRIZE /” (68; 83). Eko descends and descants Tot’s poem. This scene seems as an honour to him; however, Tot is seen as an object, not a subject, as “THE QUEEN SINGS TOT / AND TOT / ... / HE’S STARVING /” (69; 63). When Tot’s voice continues unheard, he contends with the burden of his buried self. Nevertheless, the nation, all at once, channels his worth and chants: “THE POET BRINGS US HEALTH / THE POET BRINGS US HEALTH / ... / BY DYING ALL THE TIME / BY DYING / AND COMING BACK AGAIN /” (72; 66). A moment of illusion denotes itself, but Tot denies it and denudes himself further into isolation. Their praise creates a sense of relief; however, Tot’s refusal leads to public acceptance, which breaks this feeling. He has embraced affliction for Eko’s affection; now Eko’s recession recurs across the realm. In the meantime, Quasidoc thirsts for Tot. Once more, the thematic forces of existence—death and desire—form the anti-hero’s main dilemma: “*EKO cries out*” in incision, while “*QUASIDOC, in her ecstasy, cries out*” (79; 71 [sd]) in inclination. Positioned at the core of this correlation, Tot consents to a further annihilation and consolidates as an anti-heroic character.

However, his contortion continues. TOT declares, “I / ONLY HUMAN / ME/ AND HUMANS DIE /” (111; 98), a statement that deconstructs the exhaustion of human existence. As desire asserts, he assails himself from the truth he once disclosed and dismisses himself as a human. Tot, with the words “NO REASON WHY TOT SHOULD SURVIVE INTO THE AGE OF EVERLASTING / NO / NO /,” articulates the extinction of existence and the exhaustion of hope. His last lament—“STICK IT THERE / THERE / THERE /”—resonates as the assertion of assimilation that resides with him. Since the death of Blok, Tot sits distressed within a dilemma that once more situates him between life and death. He theorises that “the world without Blok / already it was beginning to seem / ... / Uninhabitable /” (113; 100). As he concedes Blok’s death in devotion to the idealised poem, Tot consolidates his desolation as an autonomous character. He cannot insist on the onus; thus, the gun that once “inspires” (29; 28) him now institutes the instrument of his demise. Tot presses the barrel against his chest, then pulls the trigger. This suicide rests on intrinsic intent, as Tot has “rehearsed it;” he resorts to the heart rather than the head because “[his] brain’s a palace / a thousand rooms of treasure / [that he does] not desecrate it /” (117; 103). With his suicide, “*a pure note*” (155; 101) is intoned, and the idealised poem intimates itself in a fragmented form:

Immense / piano / dust / in sun / falling / dust falling / biscuit / cracked / the lino /
scrubbed / boots / hand / old hand / so old / the hand / dropped it / the domino / floor /

cat / dirt /wound / scab / five / immensely old / dip it / dip / the biscuit / dip the biscuit
 in the tea / five / dots / five / apron / flowers / stable /Joe / bites never / five dots / the
 domino / kicks never / Joe / nice loaf / kind animal / a nice loaf / please / say please /
 nice / loaf/crust / mother / apron / red light / red light / piano / did she / girl / mother /
 piano / horse / the maiden's prayer / apron / apron /. (115; 102)

As Tot consecrates excellence in the idealised poem, he consents to forms of extermination, consigning the execution of others. Yet once the poem materialises, it contents rather than contains, as its obscureness matures into consolidation rather than consolation. This forfeiture of awareness is encoded in Brady—the one who provided Tot the gun that propelled both his desire and his decay—when he enunciates, “I never understood it / Tot’s poetry /” (116; 102). From an external perspective, Tot appears to have suffered without purpose. Yet the poem’s resistance to understanding may also signal a depth inaccessible to ordinary perception.

Within the formation of Tot, Barker offers his fortitude for anti-catharsis through the anti-hero. Tot’s desire patterns his demise, as this ideal also patents his demarcation of fate. He seeks to be someone, not to be no one; as a result, he resides in both ethical and existential deterioration; however, he resists deterrence. As his character accelerates, it accumulates substance, and as attributed to The Wrestling School, this subsistence attests to the truth. As Tot’s internal collapse intensifies into action, the audience internalises consternation rather than consummation. The narrative stalls rather than stabilises this concussion at its conclusion. This resistance embodies the resolution of Theatre of Catastrophe.

3.4. Comparison of the Catharsis

This section focuses on catharsis as a foundational principle of Ancient Greek theatre and examines its transformation into anti-catharsis within the Theatre of Catastrophe. While Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* centres on Oedipus as a tragic hero through whom catharsis is realised, Barker’s *Blok/Eko* presents Tot as an anti-hero who dismantles this process. The analysis traces how the bond between catharsis and the hero, traditionally unified in the audience, is inverted into anti-catharsis through the figure of the anti-hero.

In *Oedipus the King*, catharsis emerges through the completion of tragic elements and the hero’s gradual recognition of truth. Catharsis is formed through hamartia, peripeteia,

anagnorisis, *eleos*, and *phobos*, which together organise the emotional and ethical experience of the audience. Oedipus enters the tragic process unknowingly. He seeks to save Thebes from plague and restore civic order, yet his investigation leads him to the revelation that he himself is the source of pollution. This structure ensures that action unfolds through cause and effect, guiding both the character and the audience toward understanding. Oedipus's suffering is not arbitrary but necessary. Although his crimes occur in ignorance, he assumes responsibility once the truth is revealed. His self-blinding and exile function as acts of ethical recognition and atonement. Within this process, the audience experiences *eleos* for Oedipus's suffering and *phobos* in recognising the vulnerability of human reason before fate. Catharsis arises when these emotions reach completion and return as ethical clarity. In this strata, the audience is instructed through the hero. Oedipus's fall offers a lesson in limitation, responsibility, and the danger of excessive confidence. Catharsis thus purifies emotion by transforming *eleos* and *phobos* into reflection and ethical insight.

In *Blok/Eko*, catharsis is deliberately dismantled and replaced by anti-catharsis. Rather than presenting a heroic figure who unknowingly enters tragedy, Barker introduces Tot as an anti-hero who actively participates in his own destruction. Anti-catharsis does not depend on the completion of tragic elements; instead, it exposes the character's catastrophic self and sustains ethical rupture throughout the narrative. Tot's actions are guided neither by fate nor by civic duty but by desire, artistic obsession, and submission to authority. He commits violence, accepts punishment, and endures bodily destruction without ethical recognition or remorse. His dilemmas do not lead toward understanding or resolution; rather, they accumulate as unresolved contradictions. Tot's suicide does not restore order or offer moral closure but deepens absence and confusion. Within this structure, the audience is denied emotional release. *Eleos* and *phobos* do not resolve, and no ethical framework contains Tot's suffering. Instead of receiving instruction, the audience confronts persistent ambiguity and remains compelled to question responsibility, value, and meaning without guidance. Anti-catharsis thus places the audience in a condition of discomfort. In place of purification, the experience demands endurance, sustained disturbance and ethical uncertainty. The audience does not depart instructed but unsettled, forced to confront catastrophe without resolution.

Considered together, *Oedipus the King* and *Blok/Eko* articulate two opposing models of catharsis. In Sophocles, catharsis functions as an ordered process that resolves fear and *eleos* and *phobos* into ethical clarity through the figure of the hero. In Barker, this structure is inverted, as anti-catharsis sustains disruption through the anti-hero and denies emotional closure. This

shift marks a transformation in tragic experience, from ethical instruction to confrontation without resolution.



CHAPTER III: CHORUS

TOT. Exquisite / exquisite / not the song / the
singing / the singing of the song / your voice /
if it is a voice / if that parched, cracked, busted
and encrusted thing is voice at all / ... / who
cares what name we give to it / was more
perfect than ... / ... / anything.

Howard Barker, *Blok/Eko*

4.1. Introduction

The aim of the third chapter is to trace the transformation of the chorus from classical to contemporary theatre through the theorisation of Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe. Therefore, it enumerates Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, which is endowed with its choral core, and Barker's *Blok/Eko*, which is enacted through the plethoric chorus. The concentration is on the two contours of choric articulation: the material and the musical constituents. Within this theoretical strata, while the material one concentrates on scenic mode, the musical one concentrates on sonic mode. Due to the strata, the choral construction attests to its potential to attune to the aesthetic, philosophical, societal, and theatrical postulates of the time. The chapter, thus, substantiates that the chorus survives less as a static structure than as a "spectrum" (J. Peters 309) which subsumes its classical roots with its contemporaneous route.

The word "chorus" flows from the Greek term *khōros* (χορός), which functions as "dance" (Montanari 2369). Yet the choral core is a form of "movement" (Kitto, "Greek Chorus" 1) that interrelates somatic and sonic instantiations as a whole. In the classical theatre, the movement intensified into an art founded on the fusion of "a combination of the three arts" (Kitto, "Greek Chorus" 1) that were poetry, song and dance. As a result of their relation, the archaic mosaic movement interwove into an intricate art known as *mousike* (μουσική), "a

seamless complex of instrumental music, poetic word, and coordinated physical movement” (Murray and Wilson). Therefore, the chorus became both an aural and visual fount of enactment. Ancient theatrical rhythms were, as Kitto asserts, “not speech-rhythms at all, but music-rhythms” (“Greek Chorus” 2) with which externalised a stratum with sonic and somatic resonance that extends *mousike* beyond *melos* into motoric movement. The sacred narratives turned into sanctioned rituals through the stimulative structure. Due to that intricate structure, the chorus was intrinsic in the ancient theatre, particularly in the tragedy (National Theatre 01:15). Nevertheless, albeit its form has bent throughout the centuries, a tragedy without the chorus has been inconceivable.

In the archaic theatre, the chorus functioned as a fictional association with the narrative and as a fiducial assessor that intervened in the audience’s intuition. As a coalescent collective, the chorus evoked its musical and material premises to evince its presence. Its characteristics came from the interrelation of somatic and sonic intensities. Instruments, such as *aulos* (αὐλός), *kithara* (κιθάρα), and *krotalon* (κρόταλον) (Silverman 09:30–13:30), were wielded to weave sonic textures within a resonant realm. The mask (πρόσωπον; *prosopon*) (Montanari 1835), which “demands to be seen” (Meineck 187), intensified the aura between the actor and the audience. The same connection extends to the scenic construction with the *orkhestra* (ὀρχήστρα) (Montanari 1491) where the chorus exalted context into a “place of dance” (Kitto, “Greek Chorus” 1) within movement and momentum that excite both aesthetic and associative resonance.

The theoretical foundation of the choral construction can be internalised better with Aristotle’s statements, in which he insists that “[t]he chorus should be treated as one of the actors; it should be part of the whole and should take part in the action” (*Poetics* 1456a25). For him, hence, the chorus is the core of the narrative. Positioned between the lyrical and the narrative, the chorus mediates the transitions from song to speech and from ritual to representation. It carries the voice of myths into the realm of personal stories and, through performance, changes the interplay of people, power and emotion on stage. Thus, it emerged as an integral participant in dramatic construction rather than a mere embellishment.

However, throughout the centuries, Aristotle’s statement on the choric construction has been reformed and reframed. The chorus has extended new intensions and intentions over its foundational form. Therefore, prior to the examination of its changes over the centuries, it is potent to extract the distinct discourses that exist in critical discussions:

One hears ... that the chorus exists to elevate commonplace details into universal verities. One hears that the chorus acts as a buffer between actor and audience ... One hears that the chorus exists to transform the passions of the characters ... One hears that the chorus is an Ideal Audience ... Least, but ... not last, one hears that the chorus functions as a decoration. (Weiner 206.)

These miscellaneous definitions reveal that the function of the chorus resists minimisation to the one definition. It can be evaluated that its purpose and purport have evolved within the temporal tendencies. Thus, the chorus has been seen in numerous nuances—as a sentient or sentimental sentinel to seal the narrative to the audience. These potentialities set the foundation for the further theoretical focalisations of the choric construction within aesthetic fusions. In these thematic reassessments, Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration reveals a deviation from Aristotle.

Nietzsche formulates that the primal presence of the chorus formed the foundation of the Ancient Greek theatre. He insists that “tragedy arose from the tragic chorus” and inserts “nothing but chorus” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 36), as he intensifies that the dramatic act institutes itself later. Thus, “the heart of [the] tragic chorus” (36) is the foundational focus of tragic creation. Nietzsche contests the later classical claims that the chorus constitutes a position of the Athenian populace since it constricts the ritualistic richness of the choric construction. Instead, he theorises that the chorus is more than mere people; it is “the ideal spectator,” who is “the *seer* ... of the visionary world” (42), the threshold with which the audience thinks through its ancient truth. The truth is embodied in the chorus of satyrs, whom Nietzsche emblematises as “first and foremost a vision of the Dionysiac” (42) cohort, the ones that remain near the native nature, in stark contrast to the institutionalised individuals. Thus, the satyrs can be cast “as a self-mirroring of Dionysiac man” (42) that distils at the moment when the boundaries between humans dissolve into ecstatic enmeshment. This dissolution of the self then disperses with “palpable clarity” (39) in the choric construction. Due to the ritualistic truth, the later choric constitution is “the artistic imitation of ... natural phenomenon,” a formation that forms once the audience is “under the spell of Dionysiac” (42) communion. Therefore, the Athenian audience identified itself with the choric construction, and as a result, the restrictive boundaries between actor and audience were idled. For Nietzsche, it can be stated that the chorus stands as the ritualistic rationale of tragedy. The chorus of satyrs, as a Dionysian assortment, breaks individual boundaries and thus becomes the condition for a sensuous scene.

Howard Barker, however, reconsiders the chorus as a constellation that resists the naturalistic coherence and restructures theatrical realism. He characterises the chorus “as a dislocation [that] disclaim[s] naturalism” (“Art” 198); within this discourse, he channels the narrative to disturbance. Within his contextualisation, the chorus centres as a tool that creates a forum for formulation. As a result, it converts into an independent instance that contrasts with the realist narrative. The chorus insulates itself from the idea of fortification and instead interrupts the flow of the narrative to unnerve the audience. Barker formulates its interrelation with the audience through the “form which refuses the audience the opportunity to take its statements for granted” (“Idea of Hidden Life”); hence, he forces the audience to sense complexities rather than seek comfort. Therefore, the choric construction in the Theatre of Catastrophe alienates instead of alludes, confuses instead of conciliates, and thus extends the theatre into a threshold to experience the tension.

Hence, he resituates the ancient choric construction that resonates as one. Unlike the archaic chorus that emblematises ethical order, Barker embodies the chorus in the Theatre of Catastrophe as “without virtue” (“Art” 198) and thus “unreliable” (Rabey, *Ecstasy and Death* 62). Within that, the coherence of the choral construction decreases because Barker deems that the chorus intones as a mixture of peculiar perspectives, each insinuating their own truths. Therefore, the chorus forfeits its relation to ethical rectitude; instead, it falls into a fractured revelation and frames the audience in a dilemma, which forces them to form their discourses.

Barker conceives the chorus as a poetic medium. As Ireland notes, the chorus “can create the atmosphere, and create the landscape,” and thus nourishes Barker “to ... represent large things that [are not] being personified, large ideas, visually and musically” (“Company” 34). Within his horizon, the foundation of the chorus comes into focus. It assumes the form of a poetic force that ascends the theatrical notation into novel form. The choral construction turns ideas into sonic and somatic constitutions, so that the ideas that cannot be cast in an individual form become indicated. Therefore, to structure the poetic chorus, the two essential terms need to be studied: ‘plethora’ and ‘exordium’. Barker ascribes plethora as

the art of excess / ... / [that] is the enemy of taste / not tastelessness / In excess / theatre proclaims ... / ... / Too many narratives / too many digressions / too many themes / The play of plethora / being a poem / cannot be reduced / ... / cannot / be / abbreviated / acknowledged / or / approved / It / is ... / a flood / breaching the dike / of / common experience / and / ... / (society). (“On Plethora”)

Here, ‘plethora’ is outlined as theatrical abundance that overflows the scene. Barker believes that the extrinsic excess instantiates more than chaos. It initiates a thrum that the chorus incarnates through ventilation, phonation, and motion. Moreover, ‘plethora’ illuminates “a potential for musicality” with the chorus and thus illustrates “the dual nature of plethora” (Peters 306). It should be treated as more than an aimless abundance, as it tries to turn poetic rhythm and repetition into a somatic and sonic realm.

With the second term ‘exordium,’ Barker refers to the threshold of formation that he terms “[the] substitute for properly possessing the performance space” (“Crisis” 123). It means that the chorus initiates the scene but never invalidates it with a structured stance; instead, it induces an area for stalemate. To set it stark, the chorus embodies “an action [that] is repetitive but also quite intriguing” (“Things” 143) to emanate “new terms of seeing and hearing” (“Crisis” 126) that are the metric materialisation to transmute reiteration into revelation that transmits anomalous awareness. ‘Exordium’ thus renders the act into a poetic phenomenon that never resolves. Considered as an alliance, these terms ‘plethora’ and ‘exordium’ acts as the two axes of the choral construction: ‘plethora’ evokes incisiveness with overflow while ‘exordium’ evokes initiation with outwardness. It aims to constitute restriction rather than resolution. Thus, the chorus persuades the audience not to percolate into comfort but to perceive through the acts of feeling, hearing, and seeing.

4.2. Chorus in *Agamemnon*

Agamemnon (Ἀγαμέμνων), the initial drama of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (Ὀρέστεια), is the sole extant tragic trilogy from a once-complete tetralogy. The drama premiered at the Great Dionysia in 458 BCE. The drama indicates the doomed fall of the House of Atreus. Since “the *Oresteia* [is] continuous in plot” (Collard v), it initiates an ethical line that continues in *The Libation Bearers* (Χοηφόροι; *Choephoroi*) and concludes in *The Eumenides* (Εὐμενίδες). In the wake of the war, the narrative opens as Agamemnon commences his return to Argos after his command of the Greek forces. Yet this success bears the burden of his former filicide of Iphigenia to conciliate Artemis and conserve the fleet’s subsistence. When he arrives, Clytemnestra commits mariticide, and the familial curse arises. *Agamemnon* thus unites oblation and obliteration to usher the trilogy’s movement from individual to institutional sanction.

In *Agamemnon*, the chorus assumes a structural and ethical status. It functions not as an ornament but as the constitutional conscience of Argos within the Argive Elders, who fulfil a role between immortals and mortals. The chorus articulates the tension between obedience and resistance. It delineates the audience's ethical stance on the catastrophe that delivers *statis*.

The chorus acts as a continuous somatic concreteness on the scene. It enters the *orkhestra* through the *parodos* and endures as a perceptible presence throughout the play. This continuous condition holds a threshold between action and observation and has a ritualistic context. Aeschylus presents the chorus' age as an essential element of this presence. The elders assert themselves as "disabled with our aged bodies, / left behind from the supporting force then, / we are waiting ... upon staffs" (lines 70–75). As "repositories of wisdom and experience" (Lazani 30), the elders possess a normative influence and positions the audience's inference of events. Yet, their age restricts agency. This limitation intensifies a paramount paradox in which the chorus intuits the crisis but cannot intervene (165). The elders attribute eleven lines to themselves, with attention to their condition.

The chorus' dilemma is evident even in its properties, as well as its motion and orientation. Their staffs are not emblematic articles but embodied armatures that attenuate restrained and restricted movement and enforce stooped postures (Lazani 169). The masks and costumes further function as an indicator of their elder's senescent sense of self (Lazani 105). As a result, the chorus' material form formalises the main medium of means. The chorus' scenic position on the *orkhestra* maintains a stance toward the *skene*. When Agamemnon appears through the *parodos* and approaches the Palace of Atreus—assessed as "almost an actor in the drama" (Kitto, *Form* 51)—the chorus hails him with "*chanting*" (Aeschylus 21 [sd]) and hymns, "[c]ome then, my king!" (line 785). This stance announces a hierarchical structure. Yet, due to the stance's ethical as well as communal stature, the elders neither bend nor kneel in front of their king.

The chorus constructs the narrative's collective consciousness and contextualises the outset of the war. Within this, the chorus situates the intervention as the latest instance of alienation and annihilation:

CHORUS: Ten years it is since the great plaintiff against Priam, lord Menelaus with Agamemnon, / honoured by Zeus with their double throne and double sceptre / ... / Their loud and ringing cry was of war ... / ... / ... the mighty Zeus who guards hospitality / sends Atreus' sons against Alexandros / because of a woman with many

husbands / ... / Things are now as they are; they will be fulfilled in what is fated; neither burnt sacrifice nor libation ... / will soothe intense anger away. (lines 40–70)

The chorus in this instance mirrors the text: the choral constellation loosens as intentions refract, then thickens at the threshold, as acute action refuses resolution. The elders are “able to perceive, but unable to act” (Lazani 31), and at the encounter’s end “[t]he Chorus have not moved” (Aeschylus 38 [sd]). At the threshold, the material form formulates their transcendent traits—wisdom without hold, witness without harm. Their permanent presence anchors a continuous somatic conduit. Within this, the tragedy is attended and attested.

The chorus continues a sonic regime that construes cathartic sense within *mousike* as a communal form of recollection and ethical restriction. The Chorus appears on an “almost architectural scale” (Kitto, “Greek Chorus” 3), through which sound furnishes an organising principle: the Parodos unfolds as a designed sequence, “[a] prelude, in anapaest,” followed by “[t]hree long stanzas in ... dactyls,” then “[f]our stanzas in trochees,” and finally “[s]ix stanzas ... in iambics” (Kitto, “Greek Chorus” 3). Such metrical organisation renders the chorus audible as structure rather than ornament. Its entry in “a ... march-rhythm” (Kitto 2) institutes a civic modulation that draws the narrated past into the theatrical present. Choral sound further assumes the form of “a music-dance movement” (Kitto, “Greek Chorus” 3), through which musical continuation carries the audience across scenic transitions while the Chorus sustains communal evaluation as an audible configuration.

In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus embeds the chorus as the constitutive conscience of the *polis*. The Argive Elders extend the force of commentators and externalise witnesses whose presence extends collective remembrance into resonance. Their constitution confers dominance but confines dominion. Within their constraint, contention, and contradiction, Aeschylus illustrates a fateful fault in the audience. It forms from the interval between accretion and action, intuition and interaction. Thus, the chorus channels the audience as considered as an institution but constrained as an individual. In its dual constitution as both moral voice and material construction, the chorus unites cultic, civic and aesthetic thematics of theatre.

4.3. Chorus in *Blok/Eko*

In *Blok/Eko*, Barker reconceives the chorus as a malleable mass. It never ossifies into a static state; instead, it oscillates between fusion and diffusion, excess and diminution, and sound and silence. The chorus normalises neither ethical nor rhetorical norms. It acts as a locus of loss as it bursts, waits, splits, joins again, then fades. The choral constitution's transition traces to two notable notions: material plethora and musical plethora—forces that form an excessive existence on the scene.

Within the formulation of material plethora, a choral scene arises. The crowd chants as one, “[i]nto the stillness” (Barker 30; 29 [sd]). At the outset, it seems one in its somatic and sonic movements. Yet this union soon arcs as some individual indications arise. The crowd resembles a “shoal of fish” (qtd. in J. Peters 308) and reassembles as one; however, it refracts at times. It is stated in the text that the chorus’ accidental accord in “[a] sudden splash of anger” (30; 29 [sd]). This moment casts that emotion, which can cause outbursts. Lamp, as “[o]ne of the Crowd” (5), leaves the collective consciousness. Even in individualisation, his statement holds the resonance of communal resentment when he hollers, “I cut the last of them / ... / me / me /” (30; 29). Rubber, in turn, individualises himself from “the Crowd” (5), not to intone himself, but to intone the communal commitment: “[t]he extermination of the doctors / ... / [i]s a shared obligation / ... / [i]t falls on all men equally” (30; 29). Individuation here never detaches from union; instead, it determines the consciousness. When the crowd exerts restraint to execute the doctor at the Queen’s command, “*Lamp lurches forward to snatch up one of the scalpels*” (30; 29 [sd]). His instant intervention stirs them. Truck, the doomed doctor, tries to state his last words; however, it stimulates the crowd to stir with ambivalence as “*some moved, some sceptical*” (31; 29 [sd]). However, hesitation does not halt the collective consensus. Lamp recounts all the treatments he has sustained, while Plate, an individual in the Crowd (5), recalls her infant as “[a] baby full of forks and skewers ... /” (32; 29). Her individual loss consolidates into a concerted act, and ache constitutes the rationale. Therefore, as “[t]he chant rises” (33; 31 [sd]), the crowd coalesces from forbearance to force. The crowd unites through the initiative of Lamp, “[his] scalpel goes down. ... *LAMP stands away from his victim and tosses the scalpel into the bucket*” (33; 31 [sd]) with a serene and secure motion (*Blok/Eko* 00:32:05–00:32:20). Then, Plate imitates his thunderous thrust, and all the “*individuals race to the victim, inflict wounds, and fling away the implements*” (Barker, 33; 31 [sd]). Within the formation of repetition and replication that bears a parallel pattern, murder becomes ritual. Amid the chants

and motoric movements of the crowd, the execution of the doctor assumes the form of a “*ritualistic*” (33; 32 [sd]) act. The crowd enacts the Queen’s decree that enshrines verse. The conviction incites the crowd; the execution of the doctor is sanctioned through the exaltation of poetry. The scene states the poetic principle since “when pain meets the poem / ... / ... the poem / wash[es] the wound” (35; 32). Within that perspective, the idealised poem becomes both the reason and resolution. It alters distress into an aesthetic attitude and thus aestheticises it. Nevertheless, the crowd turns to “[t]he murderers” (34; 32) due to their “immoral” (qtd. in J. Peters 308) immanence.

A further function of the chorus arises at Eko’s death. The crowd, characterised within their indistinction and individualisation, “*rushes in*” (77; 70 [stage direction]), and “unites into a chorus” (J. Peters 308). While the choral characters’ sorrow consolidates them into one, each individual continues to mourn in their autonomous manner (*Blok/Eko* 1:37:50–1:38:50). In essence, the crowd sounds the same; however, their murmured entreaties sort out their cadence characteristics. As “[t]he mourning ... is like a deep pulse” (Barker 80; 72 [sd]), their sorrow results in a slow and solemn resonance. Silence ensues with the entrance of Eko’s beloved, Blok. The crowd’s silence contains the force of the occurrences, as the text connotes that “[t]he intensity of the silence owes much to the agony that preceded it” (80; 73 [sd]). Since the crowd has assumed the past pain, their silence asserts its force to foster it. Thus, presence turns to absence; liveliness turns to stillness. When the crowd “*departs, discreetly*” (80; 73 [sd]), the scene embodies the “tidal rhythm” (J. Peters 311) as choral arrival to the scene emits architectural articulation. Within the chorus of the crowd, union and disunion alternate in natural waves and allow the chorus to wax.

Barker, in addition to the chorus of the crowd, introduces the second section: the chorus of the doctors. Their union echoes the crowd; however, unlike the crowd, whose unison rests on faith, theirs rises from fear. At the outset, the doctors oscillate in isolation with an anxious axis. However, their individualism dissolves with the threat of mass execution. When the bare-bodied maestra attains the scene, she attracts their attention with the force of her commands. The doctors intone the chant in concord as “*kyrie eleison* [κύριε ἐλέησον]” (*Blok/Eko* 00:00:00–00:01:30), which is “Lord, have mercy” in Koine Greek. The doctors untie their individual identities to unite in a choric call. Their voices intertwine with fear and fervour as the tension interweaves with the threshold of Eko. The doctors issue into death at the same time; however, each choral constituent is executed in their individual manner (*Blok/Eko* 00:01:40–00:02:15). Thus, death acts as an armature that both associates and dissociates.

After Eko's death, the execution sanction loses its salience. The chorus of the crowd and the rest of the medicals meld with their remonstrance, "CONTRA MORTEM, PETIMUS SCIENTIAM /" (*Blok/Eko*, 02:06:30), a Latin maxim that means "IN DEFIANCE OF DEATH / WE DEMAND KNOWLEDGE" (my trans.). The chorus "*swarms in, euphoric*" (Barker 97; 90 [sd]) with the concordant consciousness of survival. As the crowd bears the medical students on their shoulders and the last doctor, Quasidoc, on a stretcher, the scene can be beheld as a de-escalation that initiates the declension with their individual wishes:

LAMP: We murder sickness / And unhappiness / we strangle it /

SHEET: OLD MOTHER / WALK AGAIN /

...

RUBBER: LEGLESS LITTLE BOY / RUN NOW /

...

RUBBER: GO HOME / ALL DONE / (97; 90)

Exultation associates and dissociates them as their concordant consciousness holds them in a harmonious state. Nevertheless, their "*joy falls suddenly silent*" (98; 91 [sd]) with the return of Quasidoc, and thus the crowd reunites in silence. Their silence intermits once more when Quasidoc intones "CONTRA MORTEM PETIMUS SCIENTIAM /" (98; 91), a maxim that stimulates the chorus to chant with her. In short, Barker contextualises the chorus as a constellation whose materialisation convenes itself in a manner that unites and disunites.

Within the formulation of musical plethora, Barker concentrates on the sonic constructs and the textual rhythm. In *Blok/Eko*, the sonic texture is inscribed in the text prior to the performance. Barker insists that "as a writer, my main interest is in language, and the word" ("Howard Barker" [A19] 01:30), a statement that instantiates his continuous concern with the musical texture of the text. In line with his heuristic, Barker uses punctuation not as mere syntax but as sound. The intentional intervention of slash (/) introduces a "non-semantic rhythm" (J. Peters 306); it interrupts the narrative, punctuates breath, and instates a percussive structure independent of propositional process. Each slash intensifies a moment that invites motion, which the actor internalises within breath control, producing a vocal texture. In this sense, the form of the text turns to a map of the actor's respiration, rapid pacing, and compulsive repetition. It acts as a musical schema within the text.

Moreover, according to the poetic traditions, the slash functions as a tool to separate the lines that emphasises the meaning or creates a rhythmic cadence. In this sense, Barker, also as a poet, constructs his dialogues with an explicit sensitivity to sound. In a comparable manner, Barker uses capital letters to heighten the sensational force of an utterance. In Barker's theatre, capitalisation signals not mere loudness but shifts in tone, pitch, or emotional intensity that must be enacted by the actor. Musicality, therefore, depends less on melodic contour than on the textual artefact itself. Through the actor's expression, capitalisation becomes a mechanism that translates written emphasis into audible expression.

Barker's concern for sonic construction extends to the lexical level of the text. Barker consolidates the dramatic flow with the constitution of words; however, his constitution is conditional. He asserts, "I choose the word ... without ... myself knowing the effect [when] ... those two items ... [are] put together," and within his constitution, the actors concretise "a relentless articulation" ("Workshop" 00:04:00; 00:22:35). Hence, the demonstration invalidates the demand for "subtext" as "everything is articulated" (Barker, "Workshop" 00:22:05; 00:22:30). The prose announces plethora—a mass that condenses rather than conceals matter. Barker embraces this constraint and converts it into an intervention of intellection. Barker, instead of resolution within restriction, invites the audience to "select the bits that appeal" ([A19] 00:30:30) to themselves. This stance asserts an individualised indication of assessment, as "the audience itself individually assesses" (00:07:30). Discernment thus moves from the domain of textual intention to the domain of internal intuition; semantics moves at once as sense and sensation.

Yet the stimulation from attention to sensation does not occur in stillness. Characters act as "conduits" (J. Peters 310), who actualise the lexical level into somatic and sonic accords. Actors stretch Barker's intonational palette into an internal pattern structured as inhalation, inflection, and pressure. Musicality, therefore, arises from the intensive intonation of lexis as it surges, contracts, and repeats, and thus articulates a thrum of thrust rather than a melodic line. The intention reconstitutes itself as an instance in the lexical flow of Tot, who recites a poem at Truck's death. Tot's verses use language as an instrument whose sonorous forms collide with sound to create a sensual force:

TOT: Kick your heart over / kick it / the stone / the fence / the load of bricks that is your heart / the butchered bull / the distempered dog / the slippery toad that is your heart / kick it over / kick / ... / but I'm not dead / ... / tread / tread on your heart / ... / am I

being killed or saved / empty now the kicked heart / ... / my heart was not my own / so
kick your heart over / kick / kick /. (Barker 35; 32)

Tot, unable to inhibit communal command, “*issues a stream of language that simultaneously plucks his body*” (35; 32 [sd]). This instance reveals that the manner of instantiation realises Barker’s plethoric plea. In the poetic orchestration, the words abandon their written nature and absorb its narrative. When he construes his poem, some words concentrate on the pose and constitute the actor’s posture. Others, through the use of slash, construct a tonal texture that conditions both vessel and voice. The actor’s intonation, in this interconnection where sound and motion attune, turns lexical excess into an audible and visible extent. Content, therefore, is not served but sensed. The instance illustrates that Barker’s musical plethora illuminates through intonation within the punctuation, capitalisation and lexical dimension. In short, his artistic attitude clarifies his own claim that he is, above all, a writer interested in words in a musical manner. He anchors a musicality embedded not in melody but in the embodied force of formulation.

As the textualised music converts to vocal musicalisation, the concern concentrates on the tension of the voice in the scene. The initial instance occurs when the crowd orchestrates a chorus within collective “*chanting*” (29; 28 [sd]). While the crowd’s somatic transition into a choric mechanism has been examined under material plethora, its sonic dimension belongs to musical plethora, in which the ensemble coheres through repeated vocables and rhythmic pulsations rather than melody. The choric characters interweave with the iteration of utterance; hence, an exordium intensifies—a communal metric that measures their consciousness. This occurrence is instantiated when the chorus of the crowd and the chorus of the doctors consort within their iterative vocalisations construct them (*Blok/Eko* 00:27:00–00:27:20; 2:06:25–2:08:30). Their union is structured not around semantics but around vocal strain. In such scenes, the aim is not propositional prominence but an excess that instils exaltation as chaotic consciousness. Their chant acts as a choric metronome, which accrues individualised bodies into one focal force. Thus, the textualised cadence inscribed within slashes, repetition, and spacing instates itself in the somatic and sonic score. Barker’s musical texture, which is inscribed in the text, instantiates in realisation within reiteration.

As the text externalises from textualised and chanted sounds to full speech, Barker extends musical plethora into vocalisation. This transition forms a “defamiliarizing effect” (J. Peters 309): the chorus of the characters embrace sounds that entail attentive listening, stretching the limits of comprehensibility. Barker’s “excess of language” (310) distances itself

from communicative coherence; instead, it distends communication to its limits. This follows from the Theatre of Catastrophe's framework of "using language without communication" (Barker, "Howard Barker" [A19] 00:35:00). When this oration confronts audiences orientated to "message-based" (00:11:35) theatre, it constitutes a constructive confusion. In the text, as all is externalised, it exceeds the limits of the audience's apprehension. In performance, however, actors accentuate this excess within vocalisation of the textual abundance via tone, stress, and breath. Words turn to rhythm rather than meaning. This stance becomes bare in the poetic contention between the two poets, Pindar and Tot. Their simultaneous verses constrain semantic dominance since the concurrence constructs a flow of multivocal narrative in which each voice contends for sonic dominance. As Pindar evinces his narcissism within Tot's stress, strain evolves (Barker 58–60; 56) and eventuates in "*a cacophony*" (60; 57):

TOT: [*Simultaneous with PINDAR.*] HOWLING AND / SWEATING AND / THE MOON PRESENTS / AN UNWASHED FACE TO YOU / NO STAR IN YOUR PASTEL BEDROOM / ... / MOON SHE / MOON SHE/ ... / SCREAMS LAUGHING / ... / DISCOVER ME / SPREAD / CHEAPLY SPREAD / BENEATH A DINNER TABLE WITH A SICK MENU / A SICK MENU /.

PINDAR: [*Simultaneous with TOT.*] MOTHER / MOTHER / IN BAWLING SHEETS OF STARCH AND BLEACH / AND STEAM / ... / UNDER ANAEMIC LIGHTS OF POVERTY I SEE / I SEE THE MOUTH OF DRUDGERY IS DUMB/ ... / BURN OUR NECKS UNDER THE MURDERED TREES OF NATIONS / ... / RIEN QUE / RIEN QUE JACQUERIE /. (60–61; 57)

In performance (*Blok/Eko* 1:09:40–1:10:40), the verses corrode their semantic structures; instead, their sounds collide and coalesce into noise that consumes the contextual sense. Within their cacophonous contention, the scene flows with fullness of fracture, breath, and tension. Here, musical plethora acts within defamiliarisation that Barker accentuates; it intensifies voice itself, compelling the audience to rely on intuitive, sensory modes of reception. It is within this sonic excess that the catastrophic texture of the narrative exhibits its fullest vocal function.

As the concentration turns to the union of iteration and intonation within the musical plethora, Eko's vocal tunes itself as voluble. Unlike the other characters, she communicates in a construal distinct from the conversational form. Eko, as an instance of that characteristic, never acts in isolation; instead, she enters the scenes with Nausicaa or Quota, whose task is to channel her ideas whenever she chooses to state her notions on mundane matters. Yet when Eko

decides to declare herself, she does not speak; she “sings” (10; 14–13; 14–40; 40–54; 52–68; 63 [sd]). Her vocal mode is musical rather than conversational, and this sonic choice instantiates itself from the former scenes:

[*The old woman sings in a cracked voice.*]

EKO: Examine me / oh my beloved surgeon / let your cold hands run free / ... / my breasts reach for the grave / my thighs / like quicksands are my thighs / tread carefully / or you will drown in me / my lover / how shyly you avert your gaze / shyly / shyly / who would know your secret / only me / only me /. (10; 14)

In this initial instance, Eko wields cadence out of words and witnesses Barker’s traction to withhold information from its inflection. Semantic content is deferred as sound arrives first to shape the audience’s construal within vocal texture before constitution takes form. As Janes Bertish (Eko) states, “until [the audience] get[s] the word, [they] get the sounds” (“Howard Barker” [A19] 00:21:25). Her observation illuminates Barker’s obsession that the audience is forced to follow an interval where language is abstracted from clarity and absorbed into pure sonic pulse. Eko thus constitutes her own form of musical plethora, one with a mercurial, non-metric cadence conditioned in sense state rather than structure. The flow of the form is inscribed in her intonation as the lexical line is insinuated behind the tonal line, and thus content withholds with contour. With her singing, Barker’s text extends into actualisation to externalise how punctuation, iteration, and vocalisation intertwine to instantiate a constellated poetic-musical construct.

In *Blok/Eko*, Barker’s chorus acts as the force of the Theatre of Catastrophe and activates within the twin principles of material plethora and musical plethora. Under material plethora, the chorus coalesces as a mass of bodies that resonate as one but resolve into individuals. Under musical plethora, on the other hand, the text internalises cadence within punctuation, iteration and vocalisation, and thus instates utterance into verbal and sensorial action. Within these, the chorus constructs a scenic articulation that connects sense and sensation into a mode of mobilisation. With this formulation of the chorus, Barker resists to steer the audience; instead, he resituates them to strive for their own stance within a theatre that compromises comprehension. The chorus acts as both a structural and transitional mechanism: it associates and dissociates, expresses and withholds, and continues and interrupts. In Theatre of Catastrophe, the chorus thus demands defamiliarisation and a dedication from the audience with the interaction of plethora and exordium.

4.4. Comparison of the Chorus

This section examines the chorus as a key structural and aesthetic component of tragic theatre. In order to trace its transformation across theatrical traditions, it focuses on two case studies: *Agamemnon* from Ancient Greek theatre and *Blok/Eko* from Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe. The analysis approaches the chorus through its material and musical dimensions, demonstrating how shifts in these dimensions reshape choric form, function, and stability from classical to contemporary theatre.

In *Agamemnon*, the chorus consists of the Argive Elders and appears as a firm communal form. It carries both material and musical qualities, and these qualities sustain order. On the material level, the chorus stands as a fixed presence within the *orchestra*, positioned before the palace. Age shapes its form through visible traits such as staffs, restrained movement, and bent posture, all of which mark distance from political power and direct action. Although the elders cannot intervene, they observe, recall, and assess events. However, their lack of force does not weaken their role; instead, it secures their ethical authority. Material restraint thus forms a stable ethical frame for the audience. On the musical level, sound reinforces this stability. Metre regulates speech and memory, while march rhythm affirms entrance and civic weight. Shifts in rhythm guide reflection and debate. Within *mousike*, voice, form, and space unite into a balanced civic order that sustains continuity. The chorus in *Agamemnon* is thus stable in both form and role, as material and musical elements jointly uphold order.

In *Blok/Eko*, the chorus consists of shifting groups rather than a fixed body. It carries both material and musical qualities, yet these qualities generate instability rather than order. On the material level, the chorus of the crown appears as a zone of change in which crowds assemble, split, and reform under pressure. Individuals step forward, withdraw, or dissolve into the mass. Also, the chorus of the doctors enters under threat. Fear draws them into unity, while death breaks this union and returns each figure to isolation. Later scenes repeat this pattern, as collective form arises from crisis only to dissolve again. Material shape; therefore, remains unstable. On the musical level, sound follows the same logic. Musical force begins as *exordium*, where chant sets a shared beat that initiates action, and then expands through *plethora*. Textual form regulates breath, stress, and pace, while slashes, capital letters, and overlapping voices generate pressure and conflict. Meaning does not rest on clarity alone; rhythm, repetition, and force guide sense. At moments of clash, sound exceeds meaning. Sound does not preserve a

fixed role but creates a role in the moment. In *Blok/Eko*, the chorus is thus unstable in both form and function, as material and musical elements emerge from crisis rather than order.

Taken together, these analyses demonstrate that the chorus undergoes a fundamental transformation from ancient to contemporary tragedy. In *Agamemnon*, material and musical elements stabilise the chorus as a civic and ethical order, whereas in *Blok/Eko*, the same dimensions produce instability and flux. This shift reveals how the chorus moves from a fixed communal authority to a contingent and crisis-driven formation, thereby redefining its structural, ethical, and aesthetic function within tragic theatre.



CONCLUSION

As illustrated in the thesis, the ancient theatre that Aristotle conceived and the Theatre of Catastrophe that Howard Barker coined contaminate around three core concepts contextualised as the tragic triad—catastrophe, catharsis, and chorus. Thus, the thesis read Euripides' *Medea* through catastrophe, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* through catharsis, and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* through chorus, with Barker's *Blok/Eko*, to reveal the persistence of these elements through transformation in the contemporary theatre. In tracing the tragic form from ancient to contemporary theatre, the three chapters in concert corroborated the core claim: Barker enlivened tragic verve as he enlisted the audience to assess realism, assent to confusion, and assume a force in sense formation.

The thesis started with an outline of Barker's autonomic, aesthetic and artistic articulation within Theatre of Catastrophe. He resolved theatre as a free medium that resisted the utilitarian frame in which art functioned as a tool to further the nation. Often labelled elitist due to his theatrical tenets, Barker resisted such criticism and restated the task of an artist was to reserve freedom for art. Scant institutional aid conducted an anomalous hiatus in his work, which in turn concluded in the formation of The Wrestling School as an answer to the critics. His concentration on *mise en scene*, constituted via the interaction between actors and audience, routed his aesthetics as an attunement rooted in intellectual exaltation, examination and exhaustion.

The thesis then estimated the essential characteristics of ancient theatre and established a structure to esteem the tragic triad in ancient and contemporary theatre through the Theatre of Catastrophe. It contended that Barker construed the tragic triad to consolidate its functions. Whereas archaic theatre lean toward intelligibility through unsullied narrative, numinous torment, and an unsundered chorus, Theatre of Catastrophe lead toward indeterminacy. This slide was underlined within unsettled narratives, non-numinous torment, and a chorus that undermines the audience.

The Catastrophe Chapter examined the term 'catastrophe' across modular theatrical modes within *Medea* and *Blok/Eko*. In Aristotle's structure, catastrophe acted as an element that

activated a substantial substitution rooted in the rationale of the causation rather than casualisation; thus, it actuated the narrative toward a denoted denouement. In Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe, on the other hand, catastrophe contaminated the world in the narrative. It continued across the institutional and the individual rather than concluded as an event. His characters confined themselves as autonomous channels within a chaotic forum of dilemmas, and the drama confronted the notion of noetic closure. Instead, catastrophe insisted as an installed force throughout the narrative, inscribed in solitude, where the character was isolated with a formation of *pathei mathos*.

The Catharsis Chapter focused on the term 'catharsis' in a similar manner within *Oedipus the King* and *Blok/Eko*. In Aristotle's theorisation, catharsis is the core of the theatre, as it is instituted to cleanse the audience through *eleos* and *phobos*. In Barker's formulation of the term, however, the narrative prevents the focus of sensational means to cleanse; instead, he presents a tremulous treatment of sensations. Thus, the Theatre of Catastrophe is far from resolution; it induces intensified pain that incites consciousness and considerateness. Within this scenic chaos, sense is not distilled but discerned within the audience amid dilemmas. Barker thus repudiates the term to the extent that it repurposes disaster as an ethical didacticism; instead, it channels an anti-cathartic mode that chases neither convention nor consolation. What is after the scene is not contentedness but seared consciousness—an awareness that attacks and attains. Barker's resistance to catharsis as a critic closure resituates his theatre in resonance with Friedrich Nietzsche's tragic reconstruction, in which tragedy resists ethical reconciliation and resolves as unresolved resolution. Hence, anti-catharsis determines his ethical values, and tragic action dethrones not a cleanse but the endurance of an intuition and inclination on perception and judgement.

The Chorus Chapter concentrated on the term 'chorus' in *Agamemnon* and *Blok/Eko*. In Aristotle's theory, the chorus constituted the orchestra as a material relation and connotes ethical reflection. In Barker's theatre, on the other hand, the choric was not retained as a fixed form but released into a plethoric pattern. Within this, the choric construction united and disunited the theatrical texture, as it alternated between vocalisation and silence, between propulsion and restraint. It opened the scene to breathe and at the same time opposed a closed solution. As a result, the audience could not trust a tuned voice as an avenue for the ethical truth. Instead, the audience attended to sonic structures and silence, then attained force from forked lines. The chorus did not dissolve but instead disseminated as an assertive force rather than an associative one.

As a result, this thesis advanced current research on Howard Barker and restated a firm relation between Ancient Greek theatre and the Theatre of Catastrophe. This relation rested on reconstitution rather than recontextualisation and traced structural survival across eras. The tragic triad—catastrophe, catharsis, and chorus—served as a critical frame that placed contemporary tragedy within a classical line while allowing formal rupture. The study asserted that these elements retained force once detached from closure, solace, and accord. It also proposed clear outcomes for theatre practice. The chorus emerged as a plural presence of voice and form rather than a moral axis. Speech assumed the status of a musical score that shaped pace, breath, and motion. Visual form relied on contrast and concealment to sustain strain. Spectator response demanded patience and tolerance of unrest. These lenses enabled encounters with modern tragic works that resist accord and elude neat scholarly resolve. The final claim remained direct. Barker restored tragic force while refusing ease. Catastrophe extended across self, civic order, and world. Catharsis was endured as strain rather than comfort. The chorus withheld the sole truth. Where classical drama shaped communal accord, Barker formed solitary witnesses who carried what endured. This value sustained the thesis and affirmed the need to assess Ancient Greek theatre and the Theatre of Catastrophe under one analytic frame.

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