

Can't Take My Eyes Off of You:
Stuckness, the Forced Gaze, and the Death Drive in Sophocles' *Ajax*

When I was first introduced to the concept of the death drive, it was explained to me with the terrifyingly mundane example of seeing a car crash on the side of the road. It feels impossible to look away—but it is disturbing, horrifying, and disgusting to us. There exists in human beings a sick fascination, a *jouissance*, or an “unspeakable enjoyment” in looking at such things. At the beginning of Sophocles' *Ajax*, Athena finds Odysseus attempting to spy on the maddened titular character, who has closed himself in his hut, torturing and maiming the livestock he believes to be the Atreidai. She urges Odysseus to watch as she calls Ajax out from the hut and forces her favorite mortal to look upon the madness she has inflicted upon his rival, along with the blood and gore that comes with it. Much ink has been spilled about whether or not Athena herself can be seen at the beginning of the play, but the implications of that which the characters are clearly and forcefully compelled to look at has gone largely undiscussed.

Drawing upon the framework laid out in Mario Telò's book, *Archive Feelings: A Theory of Greek Tragedy*, I identify several examples in the *Ajax* in which characters are forced to look upon something horrifying, and thus are forced to confront, as I argue, the death drive itself. While the audience is reveling in the painful “stuckness” that Telò argues is the source of pleasure that we derive from tragedy (Telò 2020: 7), the play's characters, too, are rendered “stuck” by the will of the god. The primary mechanism for enforcing this stuckness, I argue, is the play's manipulation of the audience's forced gaze. In this paper, I examine a passage in the first scene of the play, in which Athena (arguably unseen herself) urges Odysseus to witness the power she holds over mortals, specifically the madness she has inflicted upon Ajax (Soph. *Aj.* 66-70). After showing him how she has reduced even the once-mighty Ajax to a frantic madman,

Athena emphasizes to Odysseus how helpless mortals truly are in the face of the divine, death-driving power of the gods: “Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the might of the gods?” (ὁρᾷς, Ὀδυσσεῦ, τὴν θεῶν ἰσχὺν ὅση; Soph. *Aj.* 118).

Archive Feelings is a groundbreaking book—especially for those who feel unconvinced by the traditional Aristotelian “catharsis” theory of tragedy—but Telò mentions the *Ajax* in only a single footnote (Telò 2020: 52n28). Although it is hardly novel to examine Greek tragedy through the lens of psychoanalysis, Ajax’s story has gone largely undiscussed, although it plays into many of the archetypes Telò examines (particularly that of the “Archive and the Loop,” discussed in Chapter 2 of Telò’s book). With this paper, I aim to examine the forced gaze, which is the primary mechanism by which the death drive manifests itself in *Ajax*, and the implications thereof, with the hopes that it will begin untangling other manifestations of the death drive present in the play.

Works Cited

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