

Politics and Violence in Jorge Alí Triana's *Edipo Alcalde*

The reception of classical drama in Latin American theater in the modern period has recently attracted much scholarly interest (cf., e.g., Croce 2006; Torrance 2007; Nelli 2009, 2010; Nikoloutsos 2010; Fradinger 2011; cf. also the special issue of *Romance Quarterly* 59 (2012) and the international conference “Greeks and Romans on the Latin American Stage” at University College London in June 2014). This has shed light on a hitherto largely neglected chapter in the afterlife of Greek and Roman tragedy and re-affirmed the broad appeal and continuing relevance of ancient drama in postcolonial societies. The adaptation of classical myth in Latin American cinema, however, has not yet received similar attention, no doubt because many films and TV productions remain relatively unknown in the Anglophone world.

This paper seeks to redress this imbalance by examining Jorge Alí Triana's 1996 film *Edipo Alcalde*, which transposes Sophocles' famous play to 20th-century Colombia. Co-written by the late Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez, the film revolves around a young man who has been appointed mayor of a small town in the Andes and sets out to negotiate a peace deal between the various groups perpetuating the violence in the region: guerilla fighters, paramilitary bands, drug lords, landowners, and the Colombian army. On the way to assume his position, Edipo and his military escort get involved in a nightly shootout, during which he inadvertently kills Layo, a prominent local potentate, who had been kidnapped by opposing forces. In the subsequent criminal investigation, Edipo meets Yocaste, Layo's wife, and falls in love with her. However, their romance is short-lived, as the search for Layo's murderers and Edipo's continuous efforts to mediate between the different factions brings the blood feuds to the surface of the town, with Creonte, Yocaste's brother, furthering the anarchy. Eventually, Edipo discovers that he is the son of Layo and has unwittingly fulfilled the latter's prophetic dream, as

a blind coffin-maker, Tiresias, had predicted from the beginning. After Yocasta has killed herself and the baby she was carrying, he returns to the city, now a blind, shabby beggar in Bogotá instead of a momentary king in the highlands, where violence and political instability persist.

While Triana closely follows the Sophoclean model in terms of plot and narrative structure, I shall demonstrate that he places particular emphasis on the endemic violence in Colombia, which like the Theban plague decimates the population and breaks down the social fabric of the country. Triana uses the myth of Oedipus as a vehicle for illustrating the power and ferocity of political ideologies, the suffering caused by corruption and oppression, and the “cultural cannibalism” (Ruiz 1999) effected by prolonged warfare. I shall argue that the film serves as an allegory for the ingovernability of Colombia due to the relentless civic strife that dominated its history for most of the 20th century. In Triana’s adaptation, the story of Oedipus is not just an individual, but a collective tragedy of a nation whose attempts to end the bloodshed and establish peace only exacerbate the political conflicts and lead to ruin and self-destruction. At the same time, the film bears testimony to the increasing despair and fatalism of the communities, especially the women and children, in light of their leaders’ inability to escape the vicious cycle of violence and retaliation and to protect basic human rights.

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