

## Framing Lars von Trier's *Medea*

Lars von Trier's TV project *Medea* (1988), a daring cinematic adaptation of Euripides' play, is based on Carl Theodor Dreyer's unrealized 1962 script. A "tribute to the master," the film draws upon the purity of Dreyer's oeuvre and his depiction of female heroism through "abstract but nevertheless universal themes such as justice, faith, and the need for love in the quest for a rewarding life" (Bainbridge 2007: 14; cf. Butler 2017). Scholars have studied *Medea* mostly from the point of view of its place in the trajectory of von Trier's work (Forst 2002, Joseph and Johnson 2008), its visual experimentation and debt to Dreyer (Stevenson 2002, Lumholdt 2003, Lucantonio 2005, and the director's theological and existential preoccupations (Björkman 2003, Lasagna 2003, Koch 2007). This paper adopts a narrative optic (Baertschi 2013, Michelakis 2013). By studying the frame's cinematic means (camera angles, visual and audio techniques), I aim to show its contribution to characterization and to von Trier's reworking of the Greek play.

The film's opening sequence (0:30-3:43) has been read as an interpolated first meeting with Aegeus, as he sails to consult the oracle, and Medea's request for a promise of sanctuary. An overhead shot shows Medea lying flat on the beach with eyes closed and arms outstretched. She breathes sharply and digs her fingers into the sand. The tide gradually covers her. After a long silence, Medea emerges from the water gasping for breath. In the distance, Aegeus appears on his boat and asks Medea how things stand between her and Jason. Medea does not answer but asks him to promise that he will offer her refuge in his country. Aegeus assents and vanishes, whereupon Medea sinks into the water. In the ending (1:11:57-1:14:21), an overhead shot shows Jason running on a field

of grass, sword in hand. After a few futile attempts to kill himself, whereby he first throws his sword away and then picks it up again, he lies on the grass, totally still, with eyes closed and sword in his outstretched hand. The field dissolves into a sea, and Aegeus' boat is superimposed, sailing diagonally and over a motionless Jason.

I argue that the frame uses mirroring in order to compare and contrast Medea and Jason. The opening sequence is a mini-prefiguration of the plot: Medea emerges from the water as a newborn agent of revenge, and dives under it, a simulated drowning that anticipates her psychic death after the infanticide. Both actions are direct and purposeful. Aegeus, whose unmotivated appearance and irrelevance for Euripides' *Medea* has been criticized since Aristotle, appears as a *deus ex machina* to offer help without himself requiring any. The ending kills Jason and frees Medea. Most shots present a directionless Jason, his chaotic physical movements in sharp contrast to Medea's stillness in the opening sequence. That he is never shown committing suicide confirms his confusion and cowardice, while the superimposition of Aegeus' boat on his still body seals his death. Medea's escape and Jason's death have not only powerful emotional resonances but also contrasting narrative values: the former creates the expectation of a story after Corinth, whereas the latter arrests narrative development.

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