Desperate Trojan Housewives: Some Reflections on *The Trojan Women*,
A Film by Michael Cacoyannis.

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I am exploring some aspects of the film of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*,
directed by Michael Cacoyannis, based on the poetic translation by Edith Hamilton
and starring Katherine Hepburn as the tragic hero Hecuba, queen of Troy. I would like
to explore an essentially Jungian theory of what loss means, and whether there can be
so much suffering, that it overwhelms the personality. In Jung’s view, which is
essentially the view held by most spiritual disciplines, it is only through suffering that
we become fully human. It is only when we are in touch with our shame, through our
public nakedness, and private anguish, that we can be in touch with our limitations
and our humanness. But as we work with our patients do we not doubt the possibility,
so eloquently put by Aeschylus and misquoted by Robert Kennedy at a famous
speech upon the assassination of Martin Luther King.

RFK’s speech

*In our sleep, pain which cannot forget,*

*falls drop by drop upon the heart,*

*until,*

*in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom*

*through the awful grace of God.*

THE FILM
There is little plot in the Trojan women and almost no action. It is the day after the destruction of Troy, after ten years of siege, and the women are weeping in the ashes of their destroyed city and waiting by the city walls to be transported along with the Trojan treasure to be handed out as slaves. They await their fate, but still look towards their queen, Hecuba, for guidance and security.

The women are huddled in the ashes of their now destroyed city, awaiting transportation by the Greeks. Women and gold are the spoils of war. They all will be dished up as booty. the women’s husbands are dead, their children have been taken from them and they will be shipped off in slavery.

The shore of Troy is the motif of the wilderness, that is repeatedly found in myths, the place where people are cast out for a long time to wait, a place where what is bad gets worse. These are the ashes of their home, their city, their historic roots. As Hecuba, Queen of Troy says to her daughter Cassandra, ‘your sufferings, my child. have never taught you wisdom. You never change.’ Is this Hecuba describing her self.

The women are: Hecuba, played by Katherine Hepburn who was the aged queen of Troy whose husband Priam was slaughtered before her eyes. She, a defeated queen, is to be a slave to the conquerors, to Odysseus. Katherine Hepburn brings a majesty and strength to this role.

There is her daughter, Cassandra, played by Geneve Bujould, a holy virgin, dedicated to the service of the gods, whom Agamemnon commander of the Greek fleet ‘in the dark will force upon his bed’. Although she is a priestess she is seen as mad and no one believes her prophecies.

And Andromache, Hecuba’s daughter in law, played by Vanessa Redgrave, wife of her dearest and most heroic son, Hector, is to belong to the son of Achilles,
the man who killed her husband; and in this play there is also Helen, played by Irene Papas.

Helen, queen of Sparta, who ran away of her own free will from her husband Menelaus to be with Hecuba’s son, prince Paris, in Troy. She is also to be taken to the ships, and is fighting for her life with her husband Menelaus, who has been told to kill her. But it is clear in the film that she will survive.

Helen is seen here in all her manipulative sensuous glory, a stunning beauty, loathed by the Trojan women who blame her for their present situation, even though it is clear from the beginning of the film that the Trojan war was about ‘gold, gold in masses’. Troy’s wealth was legend. Helen was simply the excuse to start the campaign to capture of Troy. Human greed not a husband’s honour.

The chorus is made up of the Trojan women, pitiful creatures, in rags, weeping for their losses, and mourning the loss of everything sweet gone forever.

**The film opens** with a dramatic almost documentary- film like in black and white. There is general darkness, a haunting chant provided by Theodorakis.and as the chant is heard, there is the sound of stumbling, clanking armour, and crying and screaming. The women are pushed brutally, and we hear their piteous cries. The narrator tells us ‘ten years, ten times the seed was sewn before Troy fell, perished beneath Greek spears’.

‘A desert now, where homes were. Blood drips from the holy shrines.’ ‘…..’

The camera moves to the city walls and a heap, which we realise is human, lying in the dust. The narrator says, ‘If ever man would look upon misery, it is here to see. Hecuba lies there, beside the gates. Gone is her husband, gone her sons, all dead’. The film begins at the dawn after Troy has been destroyed.
Hecuba rises slowly and painfully and laments her fate.

‘Up from the ground. O weary head, O breaking neck. This is no longer Troy and we are not the lords of Troy. Endure. The ways of fate are the ways of the wind. Drift with the stream, drift with fate.’ In the play, but not the film, she goes on with this lament: ‘What sorrow is there that is not mine, glory of all my house brought low? And I a slave to whom? Where? How? You old grey woman, YOU BEE WITHOUT A STING. ONLY AN IMAGE OF WHAT WAS ALIVE OR THE GHOST OF ONE DEAD. I WATCH A MASTER’S DOOR. I NURSE HIS CHILDREN. Once I was queen of Troy.’ She is full of exhausted rage and haughty contempt. Katherine Hepburn is Hecuba and has a patrician majesty despite her apparent physical weakness, and tremor. There is venomous contempt for the life of slavery.

**And so the film starts.** The question almost from the beginning is can Hecuba make it through the awful pain, or will she be defeated? As Hecuba, herself, says to her daughter Cassandra, ‘Your sufferings, my child, have never taught you wisdom. You never change’. Is this Hecuba describing her self / Is this what the meaning of slavery is to Hecuba? Unending blackness ,and hopelessness?

When Andromache longs for death, as Hecuba also seems to at the end, she says to her daughter in law, ’Life cannot be what death is child. Death is empty – life has hope’. Is Hecuba deaf to her own message? But can Hecuba live a life that is devoid of hope? Is there some point to her suffering or it is something that we feel must be got rid of as quickly as possible.

The eternal **call** is for Hecuba to lead her people into psychological freedom, through the terrible path of anguish and loss..

Hecuba is being called to find the awful grace of god.
INTERPRETATION

In the ashes, outside the walls of Troy, Hecuba undergoes a series of encounters with aspects of her psyche that could lead to her transformation. However, the film is a portrait of her struggle with the opposites, life, death, unconscious, conscious, hero, victim, vanquished, conquered; anguish and grace.

Troy, the fabled city, was filled with so much, so rich, that it could withstand a siege for ten years. However, all the trappings of Trojan life are symbols of the enslavement of the spirit. This brings us to the crux of things.

DOES SUFFERING ENOBLE OR OBLITERATE THE SPIRIT?

Most spiritual disciplines use the ordinary ness of daily life as a container and way of grounding, the ordinariness of chopping wood or carrying water facilitates the extraordinariness of transformation.

Can Hecuba settle into the ordinariness of her new life as slave, and do the humble daily tasks of life for which she seems to have contempt?

The film encounters.

In the first encounter is between Hecuba and her daughter, Cassandra. A virgin priestess, a prophet, who has been cursed by Apollo for refusing him. Although her visions are true she will be ignored and thought mad. Cassandra is to be handed over to Agamemnon, WHO IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT’WILL FORCE UPON HIS BED.

Hecuba feels shame that the Greeks will see she has a mad daughter. Hecuba cannot hear what her daughter is saying. Cassandra is a prophet, she sees clearly the unconscious. She has a clarity of vision that is beyond the opposites of victim and victor. Hecuba cannot hear the truth, and is in danger of not learning from her
suffering. I know that I am mad, mother I, but now for once I do not rave’….’ One woman they came hunting, one love, Helen, and men by their thousands died. And why no man had moved their landmarks or laid siege to their high walled towns. But those whom war took never saw their children.

No wife with gentle hands shrouded them for their grave. They lie in a strange land, and in their homes are sorrows, to the very same. Lonely women who died, old men who waited for sons that never came, no son left to them to make offering at their graves. That was the glorious victory they won. But we Trojans died to save our people, no glory greater.

And Hector. this is the truth; he died the best, a hero. Because the Greeks came he died thus. Had they stayed home, we never would have known him. The truth stands firm, the wise will fly from war. But if war comes, to die well is to win the victors crown. the only shame is not to die like that.

As Cassandra is carted out she sees the future clearly. ‘O Greek king, with your dreams of grandeur yet to come, vile as you are, so shall your end be, in darkness and all light gone’

But Hecuba is preoccupied with her personal loss of status, and angry at the gods. She ignores her mad daughter and continues to bitterly lament ‘we were kings and a king I married. Sons I bore him many sons. They were the best in all Troy. No woman, Trojan or Greek or stranger, had sons like mine to be proud of. I saw them fell beneath Greek spears…

And now the end-no more can lie beyond- and old grey slave woman I go to Greece’.

The door to shut and open, bowing low- I who bore Hector- meal to grind. What hope is there to hold?
What is demanded of Hecuba, as it is of anyone who undertakes the work of transformation, whether willingly, or unwillingly, is the complete reversal of everything that she thought gave her life meaning. Every thing that she thought mattered has been taken away from her, what is left? So far bitter resentfulness and contempt.

The second encounter is with Andromache Vanessa Redgrave- her favourite son Hector’s widow. Hecuba seems to compete with her daughter in law as to who has worse pain and suffering. Andromache is remoursful that her whole life has been given over to being a perfect wife and mother. She is transported and her tiny child is slaughtered. In her agony, she cannot protect her son.

Hecuba encourages her to get over it and start a new life. Andromache’s desire is for extinction, for the end of suffering.

The third encounter is with Helen. Seen here as the instinctual woman, manipulative, beautiful, dishonest, scheming, sensual vixen bitch, who is contemptuous of the Trojan women and blaming every one else for her troubles; from Hecuba for being Paris’s mother to the Goddess Aphrodite. Helen can be seen as the shadow side of Hecuba. That part of Hecuba that she most reviles and wants killed. But to kill the shadow denies us the opportunity to know that vital part of our selves that part of ourselves that we prefer to keep hidden and only know of its existence through the pain of shame.

The final encounter comes when Hecuba performs the funeral rites for her murdered grandson, Andromache and Hectors’ son. There will be no more genetic traces left of Troy. In a deeply moving scene, Hecuba appears to go inside herself and find out what really matters. There is nothing of the outside left.
‘Now on your body I must lay the raiment, all that is left of the splendour that was Troy’s and the dear shield of Hector, glorious in battle, mother of ten thousand triumphs won, it too shall have its wreath of honour, undying it will lie beside the dead. More honourable by far than all the armour Odysseus won, the wicked and the wise.

I heal your wounds; with linen I bind them, ah in words only, not in truth - a poor physician.

She is burying a little child whom the Greeks feared, and slew, the fear that comes when reason goes away. She realises that all her hopes and dreams for his heroic deeds, his marriage to the princess in the east are over.

I heal your wounds; with linen I bind them. Ah, in words only, not in truth, a poor physician, she realises that the funeral rites are more important for the living than the dead. Hecuba’s transformation does not lead to the bright light of elation or bliss, she is wounded and full of sorrow and grief. But in Hecuba’s face and expression we see great depths. Its not now the picture of grief, but acceptance. Hecuba is drawing from inside.

The child is laid in the grave, and Hecuba says, ‘Go; lay our dead in his poor grave. I think those who are gone care little how they are buried. It is we the living, it is our vanity.’

In the last few moments of the film Troy is burned to the ground.

The women shout ‘We will burn ourselves alive’. Hecuba tries to hurl herself in to the flames. Tythbius drags her away. There are no kings, no princess, no symbols of power and prestige, no outward trapping of comfort and luxury. This is the final trial, will she go back to Troy, chose death and unconsciousness or struggle with her nakedness into life? There is no special ability required, and certainly no cause for
exultation. Perhaps this is why the work is referred to as slavery, no special recognition, no public rewards.

The women shriek their last farewells to the city. Hecuba shouts, ‘Children hear your mother is calling.’ Her knees are stiff but she must kneel and strike the ground. All is chaos, the women are being herded like cattle, and all they feel is pain. The women chant ‘the fall of Troy’, and Hecuba says, as she did at the beginning, ‘Up, up from the ground, trembling body, old weak legs, you must carry me on to the new day of slavery’. Hecuba leads the women slowly and painfully, her face is full of anguish sorrow, and I think dignity.

It seems to me that we have travelled with Hecuba from the grandiosity of the fabled city, with its impermeable walls built by the gods, with her identification of her beauteous children, her royal persona, what we would call the narcissistic ego identification, out into the wilderness - the ashes of the city. We have watched as every single thing and person she valued has been taken away from her, she has been stripped naked, and we have seen her in her shame. In this film, Katherine Hepburn portrays an unbroken spirit. She is no bee without a sting as she takes us into a new day of hope- fully acquainted with sorrow and grief.
References

The Trojan Women 1971
A Joseph Shaftel Production
Starring: Katherine Hepburn, Vanessa Redgrave, Geneve Bujold and Irene Papas
Director Michael Cacoyannis
Producer Michael Cacoyannis and Anis Nohra
Based on the tragedy by Euripides translated by Edith Hamilton
Music Mikis Theodorakis
Photography Alfio Contini
Note.
In the notes that accompany the dvd written by Cacoyannis, he writes:
‘Wherever I can, I like to cast a film before I attack the script. Investing the characters
with an identity gives me a dimension of reality that helps to stimulate my
imagination. In the case of THE TROJAN WOMEN, pre-casting was an artistic
necessity. There was no wavering in my choice of the four actresses. I made it as
much on the basis of their talent as for their very special qualities as human beings,
their outlook, their spirit. The spirit, and especially Katherine Hepburn’s, who was
the first to really and the last to leave the location, not only made this film possible but
radiates through performances in a manner that makes the
difficult art of acting seem as natural as breathing.’

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