ECONOMIES OF TRAGEDY

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MFA THESIS

2010

ABSTRACT

This project investigates the formulation of tragedy over time, its traits and its uses. Particular emphasis is placed on the way in which tragedy becomes symbolized and then used as a tool within Public Relations. Public Relations, as defined within this project, is the process of forming arbitrary associations between an object, narrative, person or idea and another object, narrative, person or idea. Various examples are examined and re-presented through the use of the traditional medium of oil paints to remove them from their original context and function.

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INTRODUCTION

Tragedy is an ancient and persistent concept within Western cultural discourse, which today has spread from its once exclusively central European locality and has become increasingly globalized. The ancient Greeks first constructed the word tragedy and its substance as a cultural entity. The origin of the English word "tragedy" stems from the Greek tragōidia, which is a conjunction of the words tragos, or goat, and ōidē, or song/ode, though the exact reason for which the two particles were fused is subject even now to loose speculation. Tragedies (in the broadest sense possible) are narratives which center around suffering, in its purest form portraying character(s) whom the audience are intended to empathize with, undergoing an existential struggle[1] in which the individual eventually fails. This happens throughout the discourse over a number of events, and usually in its most classical sense, culminating in death. Tragedy may pitch man against morality, deviant morality, nature, the gods, the supernatural, etc - the main prerequisite being that the narrative must fulfill in order to be defined as tragic is that the protagonist(s) must be overcome by their trials in a deliberately explicit way in accordance with predetermined norms of failure.

Tragedy appeals to unpleasant emotions (fear, sadness, despair etc) but simultaneously, continues to manifest itself deliberately and to serve a willing viewership. Numerous writers have attempted to tackle this paradox, generally referred to as the Paradox of Tragedy, as first mentioned by Aristotle in Poetics (c. 335 BCE). Nietzsche, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Faegin, Deleuze (amongst many others) all respond to this paradox directly, the dissection of this paradox is an extremely complicated area of inquiry, its

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[1] Existentialism heavily underpins the theme of tragedy, though that is not to say that tragedy does not exist within religious texts or ideology, the story of Salome for example. Due to the meritocratic nature of religion (good behavior is rewarded, bad behavior receives punishment) religious narratives tend to contain martyrdoms rather than tragedies. Martyrdom is different from tragedy in that it centers around triumph/validation through death, where as if tragedy involves death of its central character(s) it will be mainly concerned with mortal failure.

ongoing discourse testament to the intricacy and diversity of tragedy. For purposes of simplicity, it could be said that the desire for tragedy lies within the purging of emotions caused by the restriction of the individual's agency due to social practicalities of the everyday. Therapeutic purging of emotions are frequently done through many other cultural activities other than tragedy, however it could be tentatively suggested that tragedy has a capacity for a particular kind of catharsis less available in other genres. The purging offered by Chan Wook Park's "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance" (2002) is different from the purging offered by Joel Zwick's "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" (2002) for example. As will be explained, tragedy is a changing and culturally relative concept and this therapeutic paradox of enjoyment gleaned through watching and sympathizing with suffering can be seen in many non-Central European cultures also.

Tragedy normally functions in a number of various specific ways. One of these functions is the expelling of strong, often repressed emotions that can make the audience's experience of a tragic narrative an intensely therapeutic enterprise. The compulsion to re-enact an unpleasurable event is a main focus in Freud's, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1922), where he suggests that the enactment of the unpleasurable is partly in order to achieve a "mastery" over the event, psychically drawing power from the trauma by being able to control the event itself. He gives examples of a child repeatedly re-enacting being abandoned by his mother through objects as well as similar instances of traumatized soldiers from WWI constantly playing out their traumatic experiences internally. Aside from tragedy's well-established therapeutic utility for the individual, the art form also holds value as a social device. Tragedy may be used to unify and identify social groups via an audience finding community in catharsis and consensus in repugnance towards the undesirable failures that inevitably occur in any tragedy.

There are a myriad of different tragedies or representations of tragedies that we are regularly exposed to on a daily basis. Despite the potential power of cathartic tragedy, the vast majority of representations of tragedy commonly consumed are comparatively empty of the intense emotions that characterize this category of art. Hamlet Cigars or Romeo and Juliet girl's tennis backpacks for example bear only vague (if any) relation to

the Shakespearean plays from which their names derive.

The question this project aims to investigate is how the potency of the tragic narrative is used within culture today, how historically these uses have changed, and why many manifestations of tragic art are not cathartic. Tragedy is not only a persistent and functional cultural habit, but also one capable of being used and manipulated for motives besides that of simply purging emotions, as the art form is intertwined within our everyday life and language. This project will attempt to investigate these usages of tragedy, using the medium of painting for a vehicle of discussion and presentation.

DEFINING TRAGEDY

Though tragedy commonly fulfills reasonably self-evident criteria such as the previously mentioned Paradox of Tragedy and its attempt to evoke catharsis/therapeutic purging, It is problematic to suggest that the tragic narrative is a universally self evident cultural object, or a direct materialization of an essential or fundamental need produced by human psychology. Tragedies are entirely culturally generated constructs which rely heavily on pre-conceived ideals of morality, failure and success, the formulation of which are constantly in flux, therefore assisting to blur the edges of what is defined as being tragic. Tragedy is a nebulous entity that has congealed within culture, though it is often perceived to sport the hard lines of objective truth, as Nietzsche suggests in "The Birth of Tragedy"[2] (1872) by idealizing the Dionysian arts and suggesting of a kind of eternal relevance:

"The metaphysical consolation (with which, as I wish to point out, every true tragedy leaves us), that whatever superficial changes may occur, life is at bottom indestructibly powerful and joyful, is given concrete form as a satyr chorus, a chorus of natural beings, living ineradicably behind all civilization, as it were, remaining the same for ever, regardless of the changing generations and the path of history." (p. 39)

As impassioned as Nietzsche was in "The Birth of Tragedy", "metaphysical consolation" could only be subjective and relative to cultural context and personal disposition.

Tragedy is a cultural construct, whether its themes are entirely fictitious, hypothetical, or based on an actual event. It is important that the audience invests sympathy or understanding into the protagonist(s) in order to generate as much emotional connectivity as possible, so It relies on various socially agreed norms and ideals for rapport, and in doing so comes to indicate a certain ideological paradigm of the time. In "Leviathan" (1651), Thomas Hobbes elaborates on how between the individual

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[2] Though Nietzsche does emphasize his view of an "indestructible" and unchanging essential tragedy, he also argues during his advocacy of Greek tragedy that no true tragedy has been created since (and because of) Socrates.

constituent and the group, an unspoken transaction of individual freedom for collective safety takes place.

"That a man be willing, when others are sotoo, as farre-forth, as for Peace, and defence of himselfe he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe." (1651, p. 100)

Hobbes makes clear that society intends and aims for meritocracy, for fairness and for certainty. If this is so, then only by being emblematic of a direct opposition to meritocracy can tragedy fulfill itself as being tragic. Vitally, the tragedy must be a failure of these norms and chosen discourses of an individual or group of characters to achieve some end. At once it is built with the materials of a particular cultural language, yet it assumes the architecture of incongruity and failure. The tragic enforces (and is created by) a community and its ideals, yet paradoxically aims to portray a deconstructed integrity of the promise issued by society's existence.

Tragedy aims to safely air out the unsociable undercurrents of the social individual. It often deals with the sympathizing of social transgressors, and highlights sociological as well as moral flaws, however tragedy is not necessarily critical of the culture from which it was created[3], it is potentially the opposite. By unburdening the viewer of emotional excess brought about through repressions of desires (caused in the effort for social assimilation), the constituent is purged of negative emotions that would potentially prove anti-social if exercised, thus the catharsis of tragedy becomes a kind of emotional "buffer". To be anti-social, or dissentful, operates in direct opposition to consensus and therefore social stability. Tragedy is thematically anti-social, but can serve an ultimately socially normalizing function by exorcizing repressed emotional excess.

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[3] Though many tragedies involve protagonists from an alternate culture from the intended viewing audience, such as protagonists from other classes, time periods, nationalities, etc. This may add to the tragedy's ease of consumption, but can reduce the rapport and therefore empathy with the main characters. There must be a correct amount of distancing in a tragic narrative between the protagonists and the audience otherwise the narrative will become unbearable to the audience and thus unbalance the paradox of tragedy towards the unpleasurable.

Another aspect of tragedy's socially normalizing function could also be described in relation to Sartre's concept of reflective consciousness, which is where an individual or group designates an "Other" to which it realizes itself in relation to, a concept which is elaborated on in "Being and Nothingness" (1943).

"By mere appearance of the Other I am put in position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is an object that I appear to the Other." (p. 246)

This designation of an "Other" is a common occurrence and happens often within tragic discourses, where something or someone else has existential fears projected onto them, hence we view these events or people as being undesirable, therefore affirming what is desirable as a result. The same rule may be applicable for individuals as well as groups, for example the 9/11 tragedy caused a surge in American national ego. Freud remarks in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1961) that masochism (which could be looked at loosely as self inflicted tragedy) is a maintaining mechanism for the ego. Besides tragedy's therapeutic value, it also has strong links to identity creation as well as ego maintenance and preservation.

As the audience, we often identify tragedy (particularly the more archaic tragedies or tragedy from less familiar cultures) as being tragic through consensus. An example may be that one may be completely unaffected by watching a performance of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" (1949) (thus the viewing for the individual was an entirely non-cathartic and therefore un-tragic experience), yet still understand the narrative as being tragic, not through objective self analysis of the story but by being in a cultural context where in which the majority designate "Death of a Salesman" as being tragic theatre. It can be said therefore, that the term tragedy relies more on social consensus than on individual emotive interpretation for a narrative to be, or not to be, tragic. This societal consensus is implicit of a certain range of emotions to be felt by the audience (sorrow, pity, etc.) and therefore contains within it an expectation to feel (or at least enact) these emotions whilst experiencing the narrative, thus implying an obligation to be in

alignment with a certain morality. Even though these tragic emotions are subjective, to feel any other emotions other than the typical emotions associated with a narrative widely held to be a tragedy can potentially be emblematic of deviance; e.g. it would be implicit of a lack of moral fiber for one to claim they felt joy at watching Titus Andronicus – even if it is only a *performance*. It would not be excessive to suggest that part of the pleasure in watching tragedies is the feeling of solidarity one feels in unified and predetermined emotional enactment[4]. In this sense tragedy may be seen to be a site of not only socially acceptable emotive expulsion, but also moral regulation[5]. Furthermore, this suggests that tragedy as a concept can be intertwined with repressive obligations issued by social power structures.

Considering these points, tragedy may be regarded in this context to be an art form that is, in accordance with agreed social definitions, thematically concerned with failure and sustaining Aristotle's Paradox of Tragedy relative to these definitions of failure.

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[4] A type of event perhaps not dissimilar to an international sports game, where in which the enjoyment is gleaned from the actions of the players, but also via the solidarity and identification with the players and the rest of the nation itself.

[5] Susan Faegin elaborates on this concept in "The Pleasures of Tragedy" (1983), which she terms as a "meta-response", i.e. one feels pleasure in the fact they are feeling sorrow because it makes clear they are being a morally responsible individual and therefore agreeable to one's self.

HISTORIC TRAGEDY

Before considering how tragedy has changed over time, the question of what historic tragedy is (or what makes tragedy historic) must be expanded upon. This project will aim to examine tragedy through the lens of what E. H. Carr describes as "history in dialogue" (1961). History as dialogue refers to the idea that one's view of the present is in constant re-negotiation with a perceived past, and that the past may only be understood through the prejudiced lenses of the present. After an idea, narrative, event, person or object becomes "historical" they are relieved of direct active influence. A historical event may be said to continue to affect a contemporary discourse, but it is also in itself perceived to be unchangeable. The historical entity therefore becomes seen as objective and at some level factual. It is at this static point of affairs at which we are free to manipulate and appropriate from. Shortly after Michael Jackson's death, a news website made the comment of "Too Soon?" in response to a sudden outburst of jokes about or concerning the ill fated pop star's death, a comment which may be interpreted as "Not historical enough?" Perhaps the catharsis and tragedy for some is too current to be subverted by the comic yet. This then presents the question of what, according to tragedy, is historical and what is not? It is obvious from the Michael Jackson article that what makes something historical is not universal, and in fact quite subjective, dependent on a person's taste in music or cultural/personal disposition, a joke about Michael Jackson may really be too soon, or well timed. It also presents the notion that what is historical or not is a question to be answered by how strong our emotions are about the event, the more emotion, the more currency the event must have, and the less historic we view it as being.

Following this, the most historic of things are also that which typically cause the least emotional response, however this is obviously not entirely correct. A historic object may generate emotion via association with something contemporary, or in the case or narratives this rule of "less emotive more historical" seems to be disengaged entirely. A narrative, regardless of age, may provoke response from the one viewing/reading/experiencing due to the way in which narrative is re-enacted, for

example actors may re-enact the historical King Lear, or whilst reading Moby Dick the reader is encouraged to imagine what is suggested through the text, therefore remaking the narrative and provoking a current response. In this case are narratives exempt from the ability to become historic? Or due to the different context of reading (a historical narrative in a contemporary setting) is the narrative historical at all, and rather just a representation of something only vaguely similar to the original, loaded with ideas and concepts quite different from the author's intention? Tragedy must therefore occupy a tentative position within the idea of the historic. In a sense, Carr's concept of history as a fluctuating and often vague dialogue is especially present within tragedy.

Tragedy itself is constantly in re-negotiation. As Raymond Williams points out in "Modern Tragedy" (1966), tragedy has undergone numerous changes relative to the philosophical and political landscape in which it is situated; the heroic age, the introduction of Christianity, Mediaeval feudalism, the Industrial Revolution, all have had intensely significant effects on how tragedy is both composed and received. The shifts and traditions of tragedy throughout history have collectively compounded to assemble what tragedy is and how it is used.

MOBY DICK

Initially, a specific "historic" tragedy had been chosen in order to work in a more focused way, that being Moby Dick. Moby Dick has been focused on for a number of reasons:

- It is clearly and commonly agreed to be a tragedy, and displays many of the traits of a more classical rendition of a tragic narrative, hamartia[6] featuring heavily.

- It was written in 1851. Whaling Sperm whales, large sailing ships, the language and style of writing are all clearly and conveniently seen as being part of a bygone era, however Moby Dick also retains resonance as an iconic piece of literature as it was written in a time of nation building in the United States and other colonial countries.

- Its ubiquity in today's culture and many appropriated manifestations.

- The narrative plays out almost entirely on the sea. In Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation" (1819), he states:

  "Just as the boatman sits in his little boat, trusting to his fragile craft in a stormy sea which, boundless in every direction, rises and falls in howling, mountainous waves, so in the midst of a world full of suffering the individual man calmly sits..." (1819 p. 352)

  The sea is an environment that defies identity, particularly national identity. The ocean is not usually a destination in itself, but rather an obstacle and therefore site of suffering.

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[6] Hamartia refers to an error in judgment, usually due to unintended ignorance or moral error. A term introduced by Aristotle in "Poetics" (c. 335 BCE).

The Pequod is occupied by a small multinational community of misfit whalers, most of whom come from colonial countries, eventually coming together to battle against the Moby Dick himself. After getting "dismasted" in the jaws of the white sperm whale some time before the narrative begins, Ahab's fears and disappointments get projected on to Moby Dick. Moby Dick, for Ahab, becomes symbolic of his lost youth and a taunting reminder of his finite existence and general impotence, in short he experiences a kind of existential or "mid-life crisis," the remedy of which being the killing of Moby Dick, since, through defeating Moby Dick, Ahab may prove himself impervious to everything that the White Whale began to stand for. This is a typical example of how existential fears get imposed onto an "Other". The demarcation of Moby Dick as the existential other becomes evident within the crew as a whole, as the crew of the Pequod come to identify themselves as a group in opposition to the whale (an example of Sartre's reflective consciousness.) Ahab eventually and selfishly leads his crew into destruction, failing his small community of whalers and failing to defeat the whale. Moby Dick was, and still is an unorthodox piece of literature with an unusual narrative style and numerous impacted allegories. Many writers have remarked on the book's extremely wide and unusual set of thematic concerns, from faith, to multiculturalism to themes of the occult to homosexuality and it has been used as a kind of historic landmark, to which cultural observations are made in relation to.

The first practical action taken place in relation to Moby Dick was the collection of images and cultural references to the book itself. These images were often drawn, photocopied, painted or saved onto hard drive via the Internet. The majority of the information was broken down into categories such as a section which contained all fragments of images, text, etc. relating to Moby Dick itself as a general title, a section relating to objects, things, images, text and relating to particular objects, and so on. During this collation of information it became obvious that the vast majority of images in particular bore only arbitrary association with the actual themes and narratives of the original text. As this project is concerned with how tragedy functions and is used within surrounding social/political/economic structures, this begins a further inquiry.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

In between the time of Herman Melville's writing of Moby Dick and today, one of the main shifting points by which the interpretation and usage of the narrative changes is the advent of Public Relations. The term "Public Relations" refers to the method of subconscious opinion manipulation via connecting a particular idea, product or person with another often-arbitrary idea product or person. P.R. has always existed in some capacity, however it was Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays who began using it seriously as a commercial and political tool. His general attitude towards P.R. was that it was required in order to maintain control over the irrational and animalistic masses and that propaganda was a fundamental and required part of any effective democracy, which he called "engineering consent" (1947)[7]. After World War I, Bernays saw the unity, nationalism and therefore obedience caused by the catharsis of war (and unity of social identity in opposition to an Other), and attempted to stimulate a similar response in peacetime through a commodity based economy by creating an environment where the masses became consumers, buying that which is desirable and came to represent something other than itself (e.g. danger, freedom, power etc.) thereby channeling repressed, supposedly anti-social desires.

A kind of catharsis was created through a monetary "masochism", since owning a commodity that represents power gives the individual "psychic power." Hence a system was created which was motorized by base fears and desires then steered by advertising. Bernay's most famous example of recoding a product was his marketing of cigarettes (which were deemed inappropriate for women at the time) as symbolic of femininity, freedom and sexuality by describing them as "torches of freedom" thereby referencing the statue of liberty, a trophy of the nation's then recent military success. This constructed association between cigarettes and freedom/power is completely arbitrary. The interest at this point becomes then how has the usage of Moby Dick changed, or been invented post-P.R., considering many of the ways through which we experience the Moby Dick narrative, or images of it, are given to us through the workings of a

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[7] Ahab also "engineers" the consent of his crew.

wider political and/or social and/or commercial mechanism, through which Public Relations as a practice provides at least a few parts.

P.R. was a practical application of Freud's now widely known discovery of the subconscious, a mechanism that he suggested as being a hidden apparatus intrinsic to our identity, underlying all of our motives and desires. After Freud, the general views on human psychology have shifted from a more "essential" view of the individual, to a perception that the mind can be clearly mapped out, in the same way a mechanical device may be, and like a mechanical device its inner workings are often shielded from direct view. The invention of P.R. was perhaps the first practical instance using Freud's concept that the psyche has underlying, unseen and often uncontrollable undercurrents. Though P.R. is commonly used for political and economic ends, it has also become imbedded in everyday interaction, our daily social efforts are pocketed with what would now be, after Bernays, termed as minor acts of public relations.

It is taken for granted today that advertising and P.R. is a common and self evidently intrinsic part of most contemporary capitalist democratic institutions, as well as within comparatively minor domestic interaction. Considering the importance of the tragic narrative in any social power structure, it is a worthwhile topic of inquiry to investigate what tragedy has contributed to the engineering of desire, and how this engendering of desire has augmented tragedy. Examining this quadrant of willful overlap between the tragic and actions taken for private gain immediately suggests a moral predicament.

Historically commerce and the tragic arts have been interpreted as having an irreconcilable chasm between each other; tragic art belonging to a lofty realm of essential truths and metaphysics[8] and commerce belonging to the category of basic and petty practicalities. During approximately the 1570's to 1590's, there was strong debate in England as to whether it was morally correct to operate theatre (the Jacobean theatre of the time predominantly consisted of tragedies) with the intention of generating profit through it. Anthony Munday gives a clear indication of the position

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[8] As emphasized in Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy" (discussed previously).

against commercially run theatre: "Who writeth for reward, neither regardeth virtue nor truth; but runs unto falsehood, because he flattereth for commoditie." (as cited in Hawkes, 1999 p. 257). The concept that intersection between tragedy and commercialism fills wallets and corrupts virtue, though first clearly articulated at the time of the Anti-theatricalist debate of the late 1500s, is not an unfamiliar sentiment, and a debate that continues in various instances today.

Although the Anti-theatricalists did make a clear and decisive point, that the commodification of tragic art being detrimental to its "authenticity", however it is a view that sits isolated from the mechanics of economy and on a pedestal of armchair morality. Art never has been, and never can be, made divorced from material and psychological values or utility. Only those who have neither needs nor desires can make art congruously to the Anti-theatricalist ideology. Artistic production is not a metaphysical occurrence, but an activity grafted into the everyday life of the individual, only discernible from other practical and budgetary pursuits via hazy and arbitrary guidelines. Though a tragic artwork may be described as being one of Deleuze and Guattari's "Bodies without Organs," (1972) it was still generated for a purpose not isolated from social and monetary economics, its outlines often indiscernible from its support structure of desiring and production machines which facilitate its production. The Dionysian arts and the practical economy are integral. Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa" (1819), though admired for its technical brilliance and emotive effectiveness, was no doubt made in accordance with a vast array of social, political, individual and monetary aims. Tragedies for tragedy's sake do not exist as they are always made relative to the context, intentions and values of its producer.

UN-TRAGIC TRAGEDY

As previously mentioned, tragedies are always created towards a purpose, however what happens to the tragedy after its primary aspirations are exhausted or made void? Tragedies are recyclable. The surveying of these "uses" and/or "abuses" of readymade tragic signs offers some potentially interesting habits in the linguistic frameworks of how the tragic is employed within the technologies of desire generation.

Wyler Vetta, *Moby Dick Regulator.* (Retrieved 5/5/09)

The images that have been chosen for replication will be examined in their current state of cathartic intention as opposed to their initial grounding in a highly emotive and tragic narrative. The watch, named "Moby Dick" borrows its name, and in an sense its design aesthetic as the watch is primarily white and silver - the whiteness echoing the whale Moby Dick himself, however, the watch nor its context is tragic, nor particularly emotive in any sense, as it is more or less just a watch. I will acknowledge that depictions of watches can potentially have associations with the memento mori, but considering the image was created in order to serve the watch, and the watch was not made in order to create a photo of a watch, this will be disregarded at this point. In Moby Dick a "gold watch" had been loosely used as a metaphor for the life of the whale,

made in order to create a photo of a watch, this will be disregarded at this point. In Moby Dick a "gold watch" had been loosely used as a metaphor for the life of the whale, and a "silver watch" standing in for the life of a man, however this watch is silver, white and named "Moby Dick", and not "Ahab" or any human characters for that matter, therefore it is doubtful that this particular watch was made and named with this fact in mind. The reasoning for making a watch named after Moby Dick seems at this point a predominantly marketing/public relations decision, arbitrarily connecting the historical importance/grandeur etc of the book with the watch. The watch therefore, is entirely arbitrary in relation to the narrative, bar the name of the watch itself. It is of interest to this project therefore, that many borrowings of tragic narratives have no inherent tragic meaning within themselves, and appear purely as efforts of opinion manipulation. It is this phenomenon of arbitrary emotive association that heavily concerns this discourse considering it arrives at its most exaggerated and pure form in public relations within the area of tragic narrative, as tragedy always strives to be emotionally excessive by definition, yet the P.R. usages of tragedy almost invariably are not.

The drainage of the intense emotions from tragic signifiers when used for the goals of Public Relations, though often bizarre is also often predictable. P.R. intends to appeal to a community, and excessive displays of uncontrolled desire and/or emotion are transgressive and undesirable. P.R. does not aim to recreate these narratives, but rather to evoke or signify them, thereby appropriating their latent power without provoking socially awkward reactions or distracting transgressive emotive excess. By evicting the cathartic, that which becomes associated with tragedy becomes a site for a sort of meta-tragedy, alluding to the power and desire for the cathartic but rarely dispensing it. A site of catharsis for example may be a rock band, such as Moby Dick - a Danish rock group. The public image of Moby Dick (the band) is that of catharsis, rebellion, anti-social individualism etc, though this public image itself does not attempt to provide impassioned release[9], its role is to generate an aura of impassioned release surrounding the band Moby Dick as a site of cultural production.

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[9] Almost all of the publicity photographs of the band showed the band members in static poses, arms crossed, alluding to, but never displaying power, as the moment power is displayed it becomes quantifiable and subject to the viewer's scrutiny.

An object or commodity associated and signifying an existential fear can be used as a kind of prop for the ego, a "power suit". A direct example of this is given to us in Batman. As a child, Bruce Wayne develops an in intense fear/phobia of bats. In his irrational fear of bats, we can see that Wayne has projected an existential fear, disproportionate to the actual existential danger, onto bats. Later on as Wayne takes on his alter ego, he elects to appropriate his greatest fear into his new identity, thereby psychologically taking ownership of that which is symbolic of his mortality, and converting it into a source of mental strength. Though often more wily and complex, this taking ownership over signifiers of existential threat are common within commodity fetishism. It represents a sort of confusion between the signifier, and the signified. Barthes (1957) explains this in Mythologies:

"...what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is the fact that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system." (pg. 131)

An electric guitar that has no relation to any processes or practical themes in relation to mortality becomes symbolic of the existential, similarly a Porsche becomes a medallion of power, a knee-high boot becomes sexualized etc[10]. The possessable entity which comes to represent existential fear/tragedy also could be understood in relation to Freud's previously mentioned concept of Mastery also. Whereas Freud talks about repetition of trauma to achieve power over it, the same thing may be said for the ownership of an object that represents trauma.

This kind of formulation of a meta-existential or meta-tragic entity through arbitrary association is unfulfilling since it does not deliver the catharsis that it symbolizes and

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[10] These are also examples of Marx's "Commodity Fetishism."

therefore helps to manufacture potentially unnecessary desires. This particular kind of assemblage of signs also helps to generate a language of objects, with their own unseen and often strange economy. It is this variable and active valuation of objects symbolizing the tragic, centering and fluctuating in accordance to the associations that the tragic narrative symbolizes.

The process through which the meta-tragic links with an object, person or idea (or whatever it may be) would in Barthes' view, be mythologizing one. Barthes elaborates on the linguistic processes between the sign, signifier and signified, which together collaborate to assemble a mythology. Despite the superficially dubious nature of the Moby Dick watch in relation to its signified myth, Barthes explains that this myth making is not in order to generate a fallacy, but is a kind of linguistic emphasis.

"Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion." (1957, p. 129)

Similar to how tone of voice within vocal communication adds emphasis and association, so does the myth within other semiological operations. It could be said that the meta-tragic serves its purpose as an emphasis or garnish to whatever the signifier may be.

Additionally, the meta-tragedy cannot be current in this tradition. It must be "historic". A current and emotionally pungent tragedy, real or fabricated, is unsuitable for P.R. usage because it still contains within it the cathartic drive that stops it from becoming an effectively inert signifier. A tragedy that is too traumatic (too emotionally excessive) is enticing, but also can be too debilitating for one to re-enact or return to it. Consistently, the tragedies best suited to the purposes of P.R. are ones that we maintain at arms length: recognizable yet restrained. Only tragedies which the audience has simultaneously the least emotive connection with, but retain their label as "tragic" and/or "existential" (or whatever the tragedy functions as a desired signifier for), serve their function effectively. The tragedy employed needs, ideally, to be congruent with the moral and aesthetic propensities of the viewing population. In short the tragic signifier

must be both agreeable and impotent, its emotive power economized to the point of abstraction. The success of the tragic signifier's abstraction is proportional to its value as a fragment of a myth, and therefore finds value in whatever the aspirations of the P.R. practitioner may be.

PAINTING

The images representing tragic narratives will be remade through painting. A painting is usually judged in regards to how accurate an emulation it is of an object, idea or other pre-existing painting, in other words, how successful the painter was at controlling the physical matter of the medium itself. Regardless of how accurately an object is painted it cannot become "real", and likewise due to our cultural understanding of painting, its language and definition, a painting cannot easily be read simply as an object, even though it is. A painter always attempts to portray something, whether it be an object or an idea. Though a painting is incapable of expressing any of these things or ideas in their totality, or with the accuracy intended by the one carrying out the exercise. Despite the difficulties of painting itself as a medium, it is a long established tradition and still can facilitate nuanced conversation. Painting also has a very long history of representing tragic narratives to which the more contemporary incarnations of tragedy may be viewed in relation to. As a medium, painting is very old, and perhaps a bit senile, but certainly not dead or invalid.

Painting these images represents a stand in for a tragic narrative, the stand in which would ordinarily be a device for desire generation and/or persuasion. By representing the tragedy-signifying-object again in a medium employing a style and format which is decidedly non advertorial and non photographic, the myth is taken out from its original context, and placed within a new myth-context. Painting is an entirely imagined space; its artifice is ignored for sake of illusion/fantasy. Like tragedy, painting has an extensive tradition within the West, as well as a sophisticated and complicated linguistic framework for understanding it, thus stylistic considerations are very important, as the history of painting has such a huge cache of cultural connotations. A language may be specifically chosen in part to sustain the feelings of arbitrariness and to demythologize the associations – to present a fantasy space, but simultaneously make it seem incorrect and incongruous. By representing these instances of P.R. myth-making in an oil painting tradition the images become culturally uncanny, however additionally the artifice of the painting itself could also be revealed. By degrading the realism of the painting itself

through displaying more of its materiality and awkward tendencies the painting can result in a slightly grungy and on the whole partially unconvincing rendition of the subject[11], therefore undermining viewer confidence. Though painting is an obviously biased and subjective platform, rarely looked on as a site of fact, painting is not without the inclination to be suggestive of (like tragedy) an "essential truth"[12]. This is a notion which will be dispelled through both the appropriated subject matter and the slightly ham fisted approach of constructing illusory space.

As a static image, painting, or any other static, non-time based medium functions distinctively differently to a film, a play, or a book in regards to delivering narrative. The image allows for a democratized level of contact. One can easily look away from an image (there being no length of time prescribed to look at a particular image) whereas when witnessing a narrative over a period of time, the audience is required to maintain a commitment of attention over the duration for it to be read in its entirety. This means that the tragic image - although still describing or alluding to a set of events - reduces vast amounts of information into a flat two dimensional surface, thereby collapsing narrative into a set of motifs, thus appealing to a code understood through collective knowledge of what painting is supposed to be, and how it is supposed to operate. This makes the tragic image both equally easily dismissible and readable. Though a painting may inspire years of contemplation, or extended periods of viewing, painting can be received immediately. It is through this effortless reception that perhaps contributes to the fundamental pleasure of viewing a painting.

"The painter is condemned to please. By no means can he make a painting an object of aversion. The purpose of a scarecrow is to frighten birds, to keep them away from the field where it stands, but even the most terrifying painting is there to attract visitors." (George Bataille, 1949)

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[11] This has to be done in moderation and only in appropriate instances; for risk of it simply looking like poor painting (thus being danger of seeming didactically ironic) or figurative expressionism.
[12] Ralph Rugoff (1996) suggests painting is a site of contemplation, as opposed to the photograph, which is the site of analytic thinking.

As Bataille states, painting is understood through an inescapable vernacular of pleasure, though this may not mean enjoyment in a conventional sense - one would hardly say that they "enjoyed" looking at Paul Delaroche's "The Execution of Lady Jane Grey" (1833) - but the painting generates a desire to be seen, and providing the facilities through which pleasure may be manufactured. Though Bataille mentions that "even the most terrifying painting is there to attract visitors", perhaps it may be more appropriate to say that *especially* the most terrifying painting is there to attract visitors. "The Execution of Lady Jane Grey" does not so much attract an audience as it does magnetize them.

Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (1833)

In response to these tragic images or mythologies that we are exposed to daily through

the various languages we recycle, ideally the paintings made would be presented in groups. It is impractical and impossible to create and display all usages of tragic signs, so care must be taken in order to crop concise arrangements of works, as they will generate conversations between each other and the viewer. Different tragedies may be alluded to in the same sets, ideally to expand upon the theme of how tragedy is used within the functions of publicly relational visual language today, thus potentially generating additional narrative and to describe the language of tragedy with the suitable level of complexity. It is not the intention of these sets of paintings to provide any empirical data on the use of tragedy within P.R. as a universal whole, but to frame a number of small instances of it in isolation from context.

FAKE SAMPLES

In correct anthropological practice, the anthropologist must give information on him or herself at the beginning of the report. This is done to acknowledge the intentions, prejudices and vignette that the anthropologist conducts their research through. An anthropological study is only ever capable of being a miniscule and highly subjective pinhole on an extensive breadth of a particular culture, or aspect of culture. It should be as much a portrayal of the researcher as the researched.

The method of painting itself provides an indirect admission of artistic bias, of artist presence. So the researcher is accounted for, but not the source. All images have been taken from a variety of sources: books, films, advertisements, (many of them found via the internet) and artist taken photographs. The images have been gleaned from all sources that come to overlap my (the artist's) common every day surroundings. Some efforts have been made to look towards less familiar cultures, though this has not been done with much particular focused effort. The Internet is not universal, nor are all the relevant books, films, or photographs which may contain examples of usages of tragedy equally accessible to the sweep of this investigation. The research breadth of this project is limited to the various conveniences and inconveniences ascribed to the location and culture from which it is conducted.

The works do not provide any referencing to the source, or time from which they were collected - they are named, but provide no bibliography. If the viewer chooses to believe that the scenes depicted contain any signifiers representing tragedy, it is purely through deduction, or presumption in the sincerity and integrity of the artwork and the artist himself to provide a divining rod to a wider truth - that the titles coupled with the paintings are honest. Paradoxically, it is the illegibility of the links between name and images produced which speaks most directly about the function of the tragic signifier, that being the way in which a tragic signifier could be projected onto anything and everything, as well as the way it can reconfigure the meaning of the initial sign. Is not the naming of an un-tragic painting after an arbitrary tragic narrative by an artist equally as

valid (or invalid) as the arbitrary naming of a product via P.R.? Regardless, the shifting qualities of the myths themselves mean that any judgment or categorization is in imminent danger of being made void or incorrect at any time. Though the schematic of this process of collecting, naming and representing bears vague similarities to a documentary or a cultural anthropology exercise, the very nature in which the collection of information is based on an extremely tenuous moment that by its nature is in constant re-negotiation. In other words, like the process of painting itself, this process of selection and representation is an impossible medium to grasp any objective, essential factuality.

In theatre the performer is already understood by all to be playing a role that is false, though this fact is suspended during the performance in order to make an emotional commitment. Even when the performance is finished, the performers will stand in a line of maximum visibility and will once again restate the artificial nature of their enterprise by appearing out of character and in acknowledgment of their audience, often joined by those behind-the-scenes-operators who facilitate the lie, bowing in acknowledgement of the audience as if thanking them also for enabling the entire orchestration in the first place. The puppet masters are obvious in Bunraku puppet theatre, traditional Chinese ink painting and Japanese Sumi painting can be more a record of its own creation than an attempt to recreate a scene. The power of this is that during the narrative implied or played out, the viewer is encouraged to invest themselves within the narrative, however the fact that we understand the narrative as being false - even if only at the end - allows disconnection and closure. The static image in particular can simultaneously reveal and undermine its allusion to, or depiction of, an event other than its own formation, its closure available at any time.

A painting of a performer or performative space, due to its essence of being conveyed through an obviously constructed linguistic code, can suddenly appear dubious. An image of an actor holding a script and gesturing communicatively could either be an actor rehearsing, or simply a depiction of a person communicating in authenticity who happens to be holding a copy of a script. Particular clues may inform the viewer either

way, but no certainty can ever be gleaned purely from the image. This brings the question of whether any space, person, or object in a painting can be authentic - or inauthentic - at all. How can the viewer be sure that a space is not a set, a person is not an actor or an object is not a prop? Or the opposite? It is the ambiguity of painting which harbours potential for the description of Public Relations usages of tragedy, since figurative painting is a confusion or ambivalence of truth and fiction, the mythologies that Public Relations subsists on rely on a confusion or ambivalence between the signifier and the signified.

TRAGEDY AND THE REAL

"On his way up from the Piraeus outside the north wall, he noticed the bodies of some criminals lying on the ground, with the executioner standing by them. He wanted to go and look at them, but at the same time he was disgusted and tried to turn away. He struggled for some time and covered his eyes, but at last the desire was too much for him. Opening his eyes wide, he ran up to the bodies and cried, "There you are, curse you, feast yourselves on this lovely sight." (as cited in Sontag 2003, p. 86)

Though the scene Leontius gravitated towards had more in common with horror than the more general notions of the tragic, this anecdote displays the potency of the individual's gravitation towards pathos is not restricted to operation within culturally constructed tragedy. The origin of a tragic image or narrative may have a directly factual event of origin. Journalistic photographs may portray "real life" tragic events, however unlike the clearly assembled and predominantly imagined offerings of literature, theatre and object based art, the tragic journalistic photograph is commonly thought to attempt to be as objective and true to life as possible. Excessive artistry in the documentary emotive photograph is deemed to be "distasteful", it displays what is perceived to be too obvious a gratuitous aestheticisation of the real suffering of others, hence making clear our voyeurism (and subsequent guilt[13]) of the tragic. Leontius' frustration and annoyance at his own morbid curiosity was inflamed by the sense of power the spectacle had over him, forcing him to override his own disgust of the sight.

A question then arises, why is the application of visual flamboyance and intentional beautification taboo for the tragic documentary image when the myriad forms of art revel in opulence and excess within the formulation of the tragic narrative? It is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss this, however this displays a relevant

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[13] As previously mentioned, one can feel self satisfaction in feeling negative emotions while watching a narrative pre-determined to be tragic, however conversely one is obliged to feel self disgust if they feel as if the view on offer is implicit of the viewers voyeurism.

incongruency[14]. The taboos surrounding the "factual" tragic image is a recent fixture. Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa" (1819) is an extremely theatrical and exaggerated image of an actual event, painted only three years after the tragedy itself, yet it is gratuitously romanticized. This is also similar to examples that Sontag discusses of early war photography and its intentional aesthetic exaggeration, and often even calculated staging.

"… 'The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg' shows in fact a dead Confederate soldier who was moved from where he had fallen on the field to a more photogenic site, a cove formed by several boulders flanking a barricade of rocks, and includes a prop rifle that Gardner leaned against the barricade beside the corpse. (It seems not to have been the special rifle a sharp-shooter would have used, but a common infantryman's rifle; Gardner didn't know this or didn't care.)" (2003 p. 49)

Considering the apparent contemporary inappropriateness of viewing the current tragic event, art still, and perhaps exclusively, retains the rights to create "enjoyable" portrayals of suffering, whereas embellished (or even simply aesthetically considered in an obvious way) documentation of tragedy is deemed intrinsically immoral. Images that highlight our fascination with real life tragedy outside of the long established frameworks of art make us feel awkward. The enjoyment of witnessing the suffering of others is generally socially disagreeable. The more similar the suffering subject is to us, and the more we realize that this person has suffered in actuality due to our neglect (impotence, or perceived neglect), the more a "real" tragedy crosses tracks from being arbitrary and constructed, to being evidence of a moral failing on the behalf of the viewer. Here perhaps is another instance of shift in the way tragedy is constructed, received and used after the writing of Moby Dick: now it is expected that there must be a delineation both in essence and in language between "real" documented tragedy and "fake" constructed

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[14] This is perhaps because of the linguistic criteria of what delineates agreeable cathartic viewing from disagreeable antisocial voyeurism. Though there may be no real practical difference between photographing an aesthetically considered documentary photo of a suffering person and an obviously contextually compromised one, in the case of viewing suffering the audience must be constantly reminded of whether the image they are looking at is agreeable or disagreeable. Just as if a painter wants to create a painting of a actor rehearsing rather than a person talking whilst holding an open book it must be made excessively obvious in order for it to be clear, the agreeability or disagreeability of an image of suffering is imbued within its very set of aesthetics decisions.

tragedy - despite that often a documented "real" tragedy is frequently barely any less constructed than an entirely falsified one.

OTHER ART

The area of inquest - tragedy in P.R. - has had some coverage within Capitalist Realism. Capitalist Realism was started in 1963, as a title of an exhibition by Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Wolf Vostell and Konrad Lueg. Possibly one of the more relevant exponents of Capitalist Realism to this area of research is Sigmar Polke, who devised a distinct technique of painting involving the overlaying of various historic, advertorial and pop culture motifs often onto a single picture plane, literally flattening history and generating direct, though often somewhat delerious, conversation between the different images. Polke also directly emulated the aesthetic of the printing methods of the time, a kind of visual "polka dot" assemblage which were often copied from blown up projections of printed materials (esp. newspapers), hence deliberately referencing the artifice through which the visual information was initially relayed.

The forcing of often apparently disparate and arbitrary visual codes and signs to inhabit the same visual territory is a particularly pertinent aspect of Polke's practice. Though it may be more appropriate for this project to paint each subject individually, and to present as groups, the comparative painting method of each image, such as the way Polke forces together the images employed, may add to a tendency to compare and more easily generate inter-painting conversation. Another point of interest in regards to Polke's aesthetic is, as was previously stated, his use of a falsely constructed evidence of artifice by manually painting oversized mechanized prints and/or painting onto transparent or banal surfaces, literally illustrating the artificiality of the image. Though this is fairly awkward, Polke's admission of the fraudulence within his source images speaks directly to the thin and changeable nature of myth within Capitalism. Though the exposure of the physical ineptitudes/limitations of the image is relevant, rather than display the slippages within the source images, it is more appropriate to display the ineptitudes/limitations of the final painting itself as well as the subject, since the painting - an art object - is often as brittle in mythology as any advertisement.
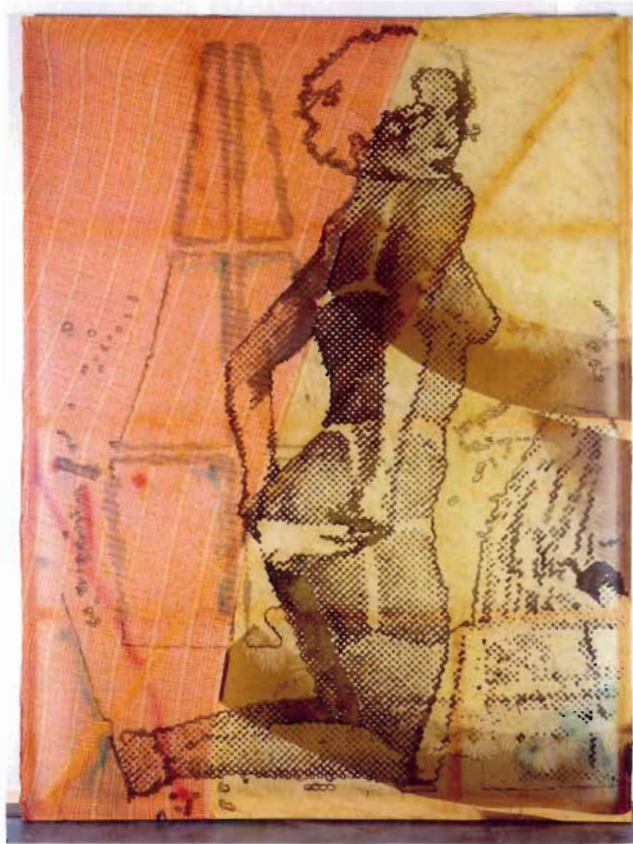
Sigmar Polke, *B-Mode*, (1987)

Sigmar Polke, *Supermarkets*, (1976)

Gerhard Richter's practice has contributed a seminal influence towards contemporary painting. His work speaks directly to languages of visual representation, and like the paintings that comprise this project, also talks to the impossibility of painting itself as a mode of representation. In relation to Richter's practice, the paintings of this project are in general more painterly, and in this regard reveal their lack of integrity as images in a more direct manner. Though having painted personal or politically charged images, such as his spurt of paintings of military planes, or "Uncle Rudi" (1965), his work appears to have a arbitrary quality which is reinforced by the method of painting utilizing blurring/obstruction, which works against creating illusory space. It is this distancing which encourages contemplation of surface, and especially the *language* of the subject as much as subject itself.

A commonality between Richter's work and the paintings of this project is also in the monochromatic tendency of the painting. Like Richter, the origin of the monochromatic tendencies is from the source material from which the paintings were made, that being (generally) photographs. The use of painting in monochrome is that once again it helps to divert the dialogue in the work towards the artifice, rather than directly encouraging the viewer to view the work as an attempt at emulating a window.

Gerhard Richter, *Verwaltungsgebaude* (Administrative Building) (1964)

Gerhard Richter, *Mustang-Staffel* (Mustang Squadron), (1964)

CONCLUSION

As discussed, the concept of tragedy has had over 2500 years of recorded history, with significant clarity and consistency, perhaps the only instance of discontinuity being a relatively short period of time during the Dark Ages. Over this time tragedy has experienced many shifts that have reflected the ideologies of the chronological contexts from which they were produced. The various reincarnations of historic tragedy, for example Akira Kurosawa's "Throne of blood" (1957) (a remake of Shakespeare's Macbeth) illustrate the persistence of even older tragedies to remain valid, as well as sustain emotive value. On the other hand, the vast number of forgotten, discarded or "incorrectly" categorized tragedies indicate the changes in what society deems to be tragic, as well as what defines failure. Despite the various augmentations and variety evident in tragedies of the past, tragedy has always fulfilled a purpose of evoking catharsis, delivering consolidation and providing various means of collective and individual identity maintenance. This delivering of catharsis is central to defining tragedy. Though this experience of catharsis is highly subjective, tragedy is not so much a category demarcated by the individual as it is by the cultural and social context that the individual is situated within. Contained within the implementation of the label of tragedy there is an implication that if tragedy is obvious and clear to all, and is a label constituted of societal consensus, that then the label of tragedy brings a moral obligation for particular emotions to be felt by the viewer. Though tragedy can be used to purge repressed emotion, as a demarcation of a particular quadrant of cultural territory it can also be a vehicle of power and repression.

The numerous examples of the usage of tragic signifiers for purposes of Public Relations, (a small few of which are the subject of the paintings made) indicate the utility of tragedy for various ends, the production of desire and as a vehicle of persuasion. A common effect evident in the use of tragedy in P.R. has been the subtraction of cathartic power, rendering the tragedy used into simply a two dimensional and oblique signifier to associate something or someone with the existential, power, rebellion, or whatever the

mention of a particular narrative evokes (or at least what the P.R. creator thinks would evoke) within an audience.

By making these works, allusions have been made not only to the movements of the vast array of tragic mythologies, but also to the fickleness of language itself. The way in which tragedy is never removed from economy, only tangential to everyday baseness, clashes with the notion of the sacrosanctity of the emotions spurred on by these narratives that often have the aura of being external and impartially descriptive of the human condition - a source of truth through feeling. The way in which P.R. usages of tragedy clearly show that any signifier can be linked to any sign, that any combination of sign and signifier can find a form, and therefore all language is subject to constant deformation through its lack of rigidity. The abilities of language are simply constructed out of a muddle of these signs and signifiers; its articulation is proportional to its own messiness. The mythologies invented by P.R. are, as Barthes mentions, confusions between sign and signifier. It is the confusions of P.R. that the work aims examine and thus make visible, as the absurdities that P.R. allows often operate beyond obvious legibility and transparency. Many advertisements for example are laughable in content and suggestion, yet bypass critical reflex via their inflective nature. Tragedy is a construction to which all constituents of a community contribute some small part, and thus the uses of which may not only manipulate opinion through mythology, but also the values, boundaries, contents and discontents of society as a whole.

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