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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: PLATO'S CHALLENGE

> If the mimetic and dulcet poetry can show any reason for her existence in a well-governed state, we would gladly admit her, since we ourselves are very conscious of her spell . . . And we would allow her advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her cause in prose without meter, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man. And we shall listen benevolently, for it will be clear gain for us if it can be shown that she bestows not only pleasure but benefit. (Plato, [1935] 2006: 467)

> And since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of representation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well represented, even if the object of representation is not pleasant; for it is not this that causes pleasure or the reverse, but *the inference that the representation and the object represented are identical, so the result is that we learn something*. (Aristotle, [1926] 2006: 126 [emphasis added])

For centuries, tragedy has been the source of debate and speculation. To evaluate tragedy's effect on the audience is itself predicated upon beliefs regarding the genre's composition, including by whom, and for what purpose, the tragedy in question is composed. It is a debate regarding the relationship of mimetic art (in this case, poetry in general and tragedy in particular) to knowledge, emotions, and truth—what Socrates described to his interlocutors as an age old "quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (Plato, [1935] 2006: 465). Contemporary vocabularies and academic scholarship tend to reduce tragedy to a literary genre. For the Greeks, however, to

interrogate the value of tragedy was not merely a question of aesthetic pleasure, but whether such representations could benefit the *polis* (city-state) and "all the life of man." To examine the significance of tragedy then is not a topic limited to the realm of literary theory, philosophy, and aesthetics (though these fields are integral to the genre). It is a sociological issue concerning what constitutes a tragedy, how tragedy is constructed, and the consequences of representing tragedy in society.

In the current media age, one is reminded of the salience of interrogating the representation of tragedy in society. Tragedy is an inescapable part of the human condition. Life, as experienced and depicted in the news and popular press, is inundated with tragic stories representing the fall of eminent leaders, athletes, and celebrities, with the journalistic use of tragedy representing events that range from the mundane to the significant. What unites such representations under the rubric of tragedy is reference to an act of unjust suffering; whether injustice takes the form of one wrongly accused, a life cut short, or a collective act of military occupation. In such instances tragedy becomes a moral issue, one which evokes profound feelings of righteous indignation, pity, and fear toward significant others that can result in tangible social consequences. One need only turn to the mainstream media to recognize the capacity for collective representations of tragedy to operate as precursors for claims to truth, justice, and, in some cases, revenge. Here media representations of tragedy are not trivial matters regarding tabloid journalism, but of social import, not least because of the propensity for collective representations of suffering to inform emotion, thought, and action; to manifest into politics, public policy, social movements, and, even, war. But there is also a sense in which despite the profound effects of tragedy, there appears to be something disproportionate and arbitrary about what constitutes social suffering. Why is it, for example, that the untimely death

of a celebrity can rupture the social imagination, yet the genocide of thousands of civilians can leave one unperturbed? How do certain episodes of human suffering become recognized as tragic events when similar incidents remain obscured as historical episodes, neglected from public memory, omitted or explicitly denied? These are salient sociological issues regarding the construction and effects of tragedy with which Plato and Aristotle were deeply concerned. And yet despite the legacy of tragedy, and the ubiquity of the genre as a mediated performance, this crucial connection between the poetics of tragedy and media representations of tragedy as models for moral action remains underexplored in academic scholarship.

CULTURAL PESSIMISM: THE "CRISIS OF MODERNITY"

It is surprising that while sociologists concern themselves with pressing issues of war, trauma, and terror, few explore the social significance of tragedy as a genre that cultivates the self and society. In part, this neglect is emblematic of the historical development of sociology with the discipline's classical founders critiquing what they perceived to be an age of decline and disenchantment spanning early to late modernity, thought to signify the erosion of meaningful sociality. The "crisis of modernity" was attributed to structural processes of industrialization, rationalization, capitalism, and secularization, which classical sociologists corresponded to "a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual," "anxiety" (Weber, 1905: 60), "egoism," "anomie" (Durkheim, [1897] 1952), the "blasé attitude" (Simmel, [1903] 1950), and "alienation" (Marx, [1867] 2007), and which more recently has been considered emblematic of a cultural shift in the modern, Western world toward "individualization" (Beck, 1992), "civil indifference" (Giddens, 1990), a "culture of narcissism" (Lasch, 1979), and "the fall of public man" (Sennett, 1977).

The neglect of tragedy from contemporary academic scholarship is also a corollary of developments in literary criticism with scholars endorsing what George Steiner termed "the death of tragedy" (1961) as a genre. Corroborating with theories of disenchantment—the eclipse of the world of magic forces and spirits—the so-called death of tragedy from high art and culture was premised on modernity's cultural move toward rationalization and scientific progress;[1] the post-Enlightened age of reason considered to be irreconcilable with the genre's original emphasis on the irrational dimensions of myth, religion, ritual, and moral luck. Although Nietzsche had formerly charged Socratic reason with catalyzing "the birth of tragedy" by rationalizing the symbolic dimensions of myth—that is, those irrational, Dionysian forces that should "still remain hidden" after tragedy's "revelation" (a charge he also directed toward the fifth-century Attic tragedian, Euripides); it was the Enlightenment's principles of autonomy, equality, and justice that were held to be the cessation of an already declining genre. By emphasizing the universal right of all humans to mitigate unjust suffering through the social justice system, their capacity to alter conditions of social inequality through technical and civic means (meritocratic institutions, the welfare system, Marxism and Communism, for example), the Enlightenment's vision of a more rational, secular age was perceived to be the antithesis of tragedy's fatalistic ideology. Immune to modern values of reason and social justice, it was argued that classical Greek heroes could not be saved by the age of the Enlightenment: "more pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to Oedipus" (Steiner, 1961: 8).

And yet despite recent suggestions that fifth-century Attic tragedy was itself relatively secularized (Halliwell, 2009: 232–33),[2] for Steiner, the most striking difference between classical Greek and modern Western sensibilities were the religious doctrines upon which these cultures were cultivated. Here, Steiner argued that the death of tragedy as a cultural phenomenon

reflected the Judeo-Christian culture upon which modern Western politics is founded; more specifically, a departure from classical Greek sensibilities. For, whereas Steiner believed the latter to be marked by an unforgiving tragic monotone, Judeo-Christian belief has at its core the notion of hope—one of the seven vital virtues as manifest in the vernacular of faith, resurrection, and redemption—leading Steiner to claim that one cannot have a truly "modern tragedy."[3]

While Steiner considered modernity too optimistic to conform to the genre's fatalistic ideology, this "progressive" move toward enlightened reason in eighteenth-century Europe paradoxically resulted in a profound sense of despair at the supposed decline of meaningful social life. Coinciding with an emotional climate of "cultural pessimism" and disenchantment, the so-called death of tragedy as a literary genre was superseded by the aesthetic of "the tragic" as a mode of existential doubt (Felski, 2008). While the poetics of tragedy, as espoused by Aristotle, refers to the object of tragedy, the philosophy of "the tragic" refers to the idea of tragedy (Szondi, 2002). Resonating with the artistic movement *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Drive), its emphasis on emotional expression and understanding, the idea of the tragic was a reaction against the constraints of the Enlightenment (viz, self-restraint), one associated with German Romanticism as articulated by Schiller, Schlegel, Schelling, Hegel, and Goethe. The Romantic impulse toward "the tragic" was an emergent cultural phenomenon that valued introspection, subjectivity, and passion (Armstrong, 2007), embodied by Goethe's tempestuous, cult hero in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), whose tragedy, his love interest, Lotte, reminds us, may be read more as a story of social alienation—psychologically and socially estranged from his surroundings—than of unrequited love.

Despite their affinities with unjust suffering, this shift from tragedy to the tragic results in substantive differences in content and effect. Whereas tragedy represents the protagonist in

action as the victim of *external* circumstances (an unfortunate sequence of events),[4] the tragic

reveals *consciousness*, representing the protagonist's unfortunate predicament as emblematic of

their *inner*, psychic condition. The result is a certain aesthetic distance that renders the

performance of tragedy more reflective, the narration of the tragic more sentimental (Billings,

2010). With the latter thought to illuminate the perpetual contradictions between the individual

and society, the idea of the tragic in philosophy celebrated the moral ambiguity not of the

archetypal Greek hero—a "great man" of eminent lineage—but of the human condition.

Discourse on the tragic also entered the domain of psychotherapy with the infantile stage

of child sexuality, which Freud termed the "Oedipus Complex," thought to represent the tragedy

of "Everyman." Although Freud considered the child's maturation from a psychological state of

dependency to adult responsibility to be a universal psychic experience marked by conflict and

suffering—a rite of passage that in requiring a symbolic process of death and resurrection

embodied the basic motif of the hero's journey—modern cultures, in particular those marked by

heightened levels of regulation, were believed to exacerbate the neuroses and psychoses that

characterized the tragic dimensions of everyday social life. For Freud (1930), the essence of

tragedy was situated in the psychic conflict between "man's" innate drives and impulses (id), and

those internalized, external forms of authority (super-ego) required to establish and sustain

"civilized" society. It was a conflict model indebted to Plato's allegory of the human soul

(*psuche*)—a charioteer (the rational part of the soul) required to steer two horses: one white (the

spirited element of the soul), the other black (the appetitive part of the soul) in order to live

harmoniously within the *polis'* moral structure (a model that mirrors Plato's tripartite division of

his ideal Republic composed of philosopher kings, auxiliaries, and merchants). In suggesting that

individuals inexorably suffer in their attempts to reconcile the perpetual conflict between id, ego,

and super-ego, these internal components of the psyche, which Freud considered to be both the source of "civilization and its discontents," were thought to parallel archetypal Greek tragedies, in which the protagonist suffers as a consequence of their humanity.[5]

The notion of sovereign "man" as a rational actor, yet tragically accursed in their humanity, was not limited to philosophy and psychotherapy but finds expression in the archetypal Promethean paradigm.[6] In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, the monstrous creature created by Dr Frankenstein, illuminates that in the Enlightenment tragic destruction, is all too often our own creation. It is telling that Shelley's *Frankenstein* (subtitled, *The Modern Prometheus*) was derived from the classical Greek myth of Prometheus, whose tragic fall echoed a series of contemporary mythologies including that of Sisyphus, Tityos, and Tantalus. Shelley's text has particular relevance in an age of technological innovation. When read as a precursor to the Frankfurt School's work on the "dialectic of enlightenment" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947) in "the age of mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin, 1936), it forewarns that the unintended consequences of instrumental rationality, as exemplified by the economic and political organization of advanced capitalist society, are the potential for self-destruction by turning against the "progressive" values of the Enlightenment: reason, freedom, and genuine happiness.

There are then several insights to be obtained from tracing the historical and cultural development of tragedy. First, although the death of tragedy has been repeatedly announced, there remains an elemental concern with understanding how individuals negotiate unjust suffering; one that challenges the tendency to ascribe the "death of tragedy" to modernity or to conflate the genre with fatal resignation. In these mythologies, it is precisely tragedy that gives rise to agency and creation; a primordial story of reincarnation that finds expression in the

Abrahamic religions, as well as Plato's discussion of the myth of Androgyne, where "Original sin" signifies a process of self-constitution from a condition of wholeness into separate gendered selves. This standard cultural motif of "the fall" as facilitating a process of growth and transformation is not, as Steiner suggests, particular to Judeo-Christian theology. Even Freud, renowned for his criticism of religion, regarded the recognition of the ego as separate from the "world outside" to be a process of self-awareness created by "the frequent, multifarious and unavoidable feelings of pain" (2002: 5–6). It would be limited, therefore, to reduce tragedy to nihilism or to suggest that modernity signifies the "death" of the genre. Indeed, these mythologies reveal that it is only by eating the forbidden fruit that "man" becomes an autonomous agent, making the "fall" both destructive and creative, tragic, and enabling. It was a metaphor familiar to the Greek imagination with Dionysus, the God of the theatre, resembling the Hindu God, Siva—a signifier not only of destruction, but of transformation and liberation (as the Theatre of Dionysus, *Eleuthereus* [meaning liberator], indicates). This is not to suggest that such cultures avidly sought tragedy from social life. The point is rather that tragedy signals a liminal process of transition for the individual and society, which cannot be reduced to a sense of fatalism, despair, or resignation.

THE MEDIATION OF TRAGEDY AS DISTANT SUFFERING

A historical comparative approach to tragedy also contextualizes critical attitudes toward the mediation of suffering in relation to the Frankfurt School's critique of mass society. As critics of mass culture and communication, the Frankfurt School conveyed the central role of the media as culture industries in modernity. State capitalism, they argued, engendered new forms of administration, bureaucracy, and domination that undermined individual freedom and democracy. The media played a crucial role in reproducing such ideologies, reducing spectators

to passive, docile consumers of popular culture. The result, they believed, was a mass society marked by homogeneity and conformity that eroded the possibility for critical thought. These critiques built on extant feelings of distrust toward technology, particularly regarding the Holocaust where such mediums were used "to justify political falsehood, massive distortions of history, and the bestialities of the totalitarian state" (Steiner, 1961: 315). But for critical theorists, the media's role in reproducing mass culture was not limited to the fascist regimes of Nazi Germany, the instruments of mass culture and communication (e.g., magazines, film, television, radio) played a similar role inculcating capitalism and democracy in the popular imagination of twentieth-century America. In the twentieth century, the visual arts were regarded as the privileged site of social change with culture and society, aesthetics and politics, bound by the modernist belief that art could provide a symbolic transformation of social content in aesthetic form (Delanty, 2000: 134). But with culture itself a process of mediation, produced and legitimated by state and commercial interests, the problem with this utopian ideal was that art was susceptible to the very culture industries it tried to subvert. It was the failure of critical theory to engender a radically democratic society that resulted in cultural pessimism about the social consequences of media technologies.

The Frankfurt School's disillusionment about the homogenizing and commercial effects of media industries on popular consciousness formed part of a broader trend of cultural pessimism regarding the effects of media representation on society. This legacy finds expression in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), a critical view of media and consumer society as organized around, and reproduced by, the mediation of spectacle in its various forms: commodities, staged events, and, principally, image. Echoing Marxist themes of alienation and domination, Debord's society of the spectacle is one in which "everything that was directly lived

has receded into a representation" (1967: 24), a society where reality can no longer be grasped given that representation is reduced to image. For Debord, the incessant media saturation and commodification of modern life result in tangible social consequences. In creating a society of depoliticized "spectators," who passively conform to the social system, the spectacle is more than a collection of images: "it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (1967: 24). The cultural pessimism that characterized subsequent accounts of technology maintained this emphasis on media representation and image as a form of violence and domination: "the murder of the real by the image" (Baudrillard, 2004). The emphasis here is on the power of state and commercial interests to construct political and social realities, which reduce the effectiveness of the public sphere as a space for debate, plurality, and difference so that "the conversation itself is administered" (Habermas, [1962] 1989: 164).

Contemporary representatives of critical theory have warned that the "new infotainment society" in which media spectacles are represented not only consumes vital moments of everyday life but also reduces meaning to the significatory process of mass consumerism, employing spectacle (e.g., political scandals and tabloid journalism) as a means to increase power and profit (Kellner, 2005). Critiques of this kind suggest that media technologies increasingly pervade human experience (Kellner, 2003), leading to what Paul Virilio (1991) terms a "crisis of representation" by imploding the distinction between object and image, and simulating "the real" with "hyper-reality" (Baudrillard, 1983, 1988, 1995; Jameson, 1990). When applied to media coverage of tragedy, and the suffering engendered by the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11 in particular, it has been suggested that the image consumes the event to such an extent that suffering exists merely as a spectacle on our screens (Baudrillard,

2001). Even those who insist on the "gruesome reality" displayed before the "universal eyewitness of a global public" present mediation as an impoverished substitute of "the real":

> Only there [New York] did I first feel the full magnitude of the event. The terror of this disaster, which literally came bursting out of the blue, the horrible convictions behind this treacherous assault, as well as the stifling depression that set over the city, were a completely different experience there than at home . . . God only knows what my friend and colleague experienced, watching the second airplane explode into the top floors of the World Trade Center only a few blocks away from the roof of his house on Duane Street. No doubt it was something completely different from what I experienced in Germany in front of the television, though we saw the same thing. (Habermas, 2004: 26, 28)

What emerges here, in varying degrees, is a critical view of representation as spectacle, illusion, and artifice, where "the virtual" form of the image is thought to implode "the real." Themes of cultural decline and disenchantment characteristic of such pessimistic accounts reflect the belief that media technologies transform the nature of representation in ways that distort or minimize suffering (Chouliaraki, 2008: 837). The concern then is not merely that "spectacles" increasingly dominate the news, distracting the public from "real" social issues (Kellner, 2005); but that even when representing "gruesome realities" these forms tend to privilege the visual aesthetics of the image at the expense of ethical content, undermining the role of tragedy as a cause for moral action.

Although the late twentieth century witnessed a revival of research on narrative and genre, and more recently suffering as a humanitarian concern, these accounts largely maintain this legacy of cultural pessimism toward mediation. With public audiences increasingly

accustomed to the power of spin, agenda setting, news production, commercialization, censorship. and editorial control, pessimism has transpired into cynicism and scepticism, demonstrative of a "new reflexivity" regarding the element of performance in the media (Alexander, 2011b: 135). Views of this kind typically reveal a negative view of performance as spectacle (Debord, 1967; Kellner, 2003, 2005) or simulation (Baudrillard, 1983, 1988, 1995), which question Aristotle's realist approach to tragedy as the re-presentation of action—the notion that art imitates life. It has been argued, for example, that the appropriation of suffering as commercial news and "infotainment" gives rise to a culture of "promiscuous voyeurism," "the passive bystander effect," and "compassion fatigue" that erodes the possibility for audiences to respond to distant suffering with pity and moral outrage (Cohen, 2001; Ignatieff, 1998; Kleinman & Kleinman, 1997).

From this perspective, the failure of pity to represent adequately the suffering of humanity, which is the emotion's primary moral claim, signifies what Luc Boltanski (1999) terms the "crisis of pity." It is a crisis believed to result in significant moral consequences insofar as the failure of pity to arouse powerful corresponding emotions, or to sustain legitimate claims for public action on suffering without "falling into uncertainty," means that human suffering may be avoided, neglected, or, as Stanley Cohen (2001) contends, individually and collectively denied. In addition to the proliferation of organizations devoted to media comment and analysis, a case in point that exemplifies this more reflexive approach to mediation is the recent Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices, and ethics of the media in Britain.[7] In commenting on the relationship of the press with the public, police, and politicians (some of whom were alleged to be complicit in the scandal), Robert Jay QC, counsel to the inquiry, declared that while informal contact between politicians and the press can form part of a "healthy democracy," the

relationship becomes "less healthy" when the public is misled or "if journalists seek to make the news rather than report it" (Halliday & Plunkett, 2012). It is this concern with the manufacture of news (as constructed by reporters, editors, producers, camera operators, sound recordists, and photographers)—its relation to power and knowledge (e.g., the PR consultants, spin-doctors, lobbyists, and producers who set the agenda)—that raises questions about the reliability of the media that inform our moral view of the world and their capacity to represent reality.

MEANING AND MODERNITY

These overt Platonic concerns revive that perennial quarrel between philosophers and poets introduced in the *Republic*. Such critical approaches toward mediation are understandable, particularly when contextualized in relation to the economic and political industries that dominate contemporary social life. However, although tragedy reveals the moral impact of representation, its relation to power and knowledge, to reduce the phenomenon of tragedy to a mode of social control is problematic. What these views suffer from is a limited view of representation, where representation is thought to entail a false or lesser substitute of the original. But representation exceeds such realist objectives. The process of symbolic signification includes both denotation and connotation, sign and symbol. Representation involves a creative process of interpretation, whereby social actors—that is, those who receive and perform tragedy— appropriate the very object tragedy represents. This, in turn, generates multiple levels of meaning and interpretation. From this perspective meaning is emergent, interdependent, and relational; it must be received, interpreted, and decoded. But meaning is not made in isolation. It forms part of a shared, dialogic activity. To understand social life as meaningful requires a more complex understanding of tragedy than orthodox associations with fatalism imply. Tragedy may operate as a form of social control, it may generate despair, pessimism, or paralysis (Jacobs, 1996;

Smith, 2005; Steiner, 1961), but tragedy can also promote moral responsibility (Alexander, 2002), social reform (Baker, 2010a), hope (Camus, [1942] 1955), and "tragic optimism" (Frankl, [1946] 1962).[8]

Canvassing approaches to tragedy reveals that pessimistic accounts of mediation, together with research on the so-called death of tragedy, are inseparable from broader discussions about the consequences of modernity as a social development (Eagleton, 2003). It is ironic that the very social processes thought to erode the possibility of acquiring meaningful *telos* and, in turn, tragedy as a literary genre were simultaneously held to constitute the tragic predicament of humanity in modernity. The "death of tragedy," however, is neither a consequence of Judeo-Christian virtues nor the Enlightenment's universal quest for reason and social justice. Such views are premised on theories of disenchantment that propose a distinction between premodern societies as sacred and meaningful, their modern counterparts as rational and meaningless.

In contrast to those theories where modernity is thought to be bereft of meaning, this book takes a different approach to modern social life, exploring tragedy as a ritualized performance that orders society through symbolic codes and mythic narratives. Inspired by late Durkheimian understandings of the religious dimensions of secular life, this approach questions the notion that there is a radical epistemological break between premodern and modern societies (Alexander, 2002; Baker, 2010a). In revealing the continued role of narratives to motivate and sustain moral action—the power of myth, ritual, and emotion to bind individuals to society—it *illuminates* Durkheim's ([1912] 2001) recognition that the postenlightened, secular world is not rationalized at the expense of meaningful social life. In so doing, the concept of social tragedy builds on the legacy of work in cultural sociology on social performance, exploring the social

processes by which actors display meaning to others (Alexander, 2004; Alexander, Giesen, & Mast, 2006). It shares with this tradition the imperative to develop a meaning-oriented, culturally pragmatic theory of social performance, which recognizes the role of drama in shaping how individuals collectively experience meaning in contemporary society, to how they imagine and enact social change.

At the same time this model develops earlier analyses of social performance espoused by cultural sociologists and uses of Aristotle in the social sciences. While Aristotelian approaches to tragedy typically define the structural properties of the genre in relation to themes of crisis, the focus tends to be on the archetypal hero as one isolated and estranged from society (Frye, 1957) —those *apolis* (without a *polis*)—which Philoctetes reminds us is the equivalent to being dead. A model of social tragedy, conversely, considers social relations integral to tragic drama—the crisis in question perceived to emanate from social forces external to, rather than conflicts within, the individual. The hero of a social tragedy represents an emergent social order, occupying an ambiguous space on the margins of society—a liminal stage of transition similar to that described by Victor Turner's (1987) concept of social drama, distinguished by its emphasis on social injustice as a precondition of moral outrage. In conceiving of tragic drama as a collective representation of unjust suffering, the argument put forward here challenges theses that reduce the genre to fatalism or maintain the view that media representations of tragedy operate as ideological instruments of social control. These approaches suffer from an impoverished view of action, their critique of mediation echoing Plato's reduction of representation to appearance. The impact of this legacy of cultural pessimism is that in overestimating the power of the media to manufacture meaning, seldom do scholars reflect on how tragedy may be creatively appropriated to constitute meaningful social action.

Toward a Model of Social Tragedy

This book aims to compensate for this neglect by approaching tragedy as a social phenomenon, the construction of which represents salient moral issues as a cause for action. More specifically, I aim to understand how media representations of tragedy are symbolically constructed through claims to Truth, Justice, and Humanity as social realities that need to be recognized and legitimized in the public domain. It is a study concerned with the role of tragedy as a collective experience that structures emotion, thought, and action. In contrast to pessimistic accounts of mediation, where representation is reduced to mere image and domination, this cultural sociological approach will examine how shared experiences of social suffering become collectively meaningful. It will involve developing a model of what is referred to as a "social tragedy" that can be applied across different comparative and historical contexts to assess the implications of mediating historical episodes as tragic events invested with meaning and magnitude. In analyzing how tragedy is collectively recognized as a meaningful social event, I draw on a variety of empirical resources, including newspaper articles, television broadcasts, public opinion polls, YouTube clips, and social media platforms, together with police reports, committees of inquiry, and interviews with those affected by the social tragedies in question. I examine precisely what renders an event tragic, making it collectively recognized and legitimized as such, when similar incidents of suffering remain distant memories, obscured from the public imagination, omitted from history or explicitly denied. I explore, moreover, whether the success of tragedy is contingent on its form (e.g., plot, hero, unities of action, place, and time) or reception (e.g., context, ritual, audience), assessing the emotional and cultural dimensions of mediating suffering through a study of what I term social tragedy.

When applied to meaningful events that rupture the social imagination, the significance of decoding the cultural dimensions of the genre transcends the domain of aesthetics. Though there are various anthologies documenting tragic episodes in history, examining the mediation of distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Ignatieff, 1998; Kleinman & Kleinman, 1997; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 1994, 1999, 2001) and categorizing tragedy as part of a repertoire of narrative genres (Frye, 1957), genre theory has been criticized for applying too rigid a criteria to account for the complexity of social life (White, 1987). My intention is neither to provide an encyclopedic survey of tragedy nor immutable categories through which to define the genre. Rather, I aim to establish a paradigm through which to examine the social construction of tragedy to understand how certain incidents assume meaning and magnitude. This endeavor involves exploring the crucial connection between the poetics of tragedy and its mediation in contemporary society as models through which to recognize suffering collectively as a meaningful precursor to moral action.

One of the most influential proponents of the view that tragedy ought to be a source of philosophical inquiry was Aristotle, who systematically interrogated the aesthetic dimensions of the genre. In the *Poetics* (2005: 53), a manual for constructing poetry, the fourth-century Macedonian philosopher outlined the components required to achieve "poetic excellence" in tragedy. As a "lover of wisdom," the philosopher's appraisal evidently exceeds that of a basic instruction manual for writing poetry, illuminating the ways in which the aesthetic experience of observing tragedy refines the realization of essential values through a process of emotional clarification referred to as *katharsis*.[9] Aristotle proposed that through observing tragedy, spectators affected by the plot's sequence of events (*muthos*) could *recognize* the meaning of the performance: "accomplishing the *katharsis*" of pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*)" in a process

synonymous with feeling-realization. *Mimesis praxeos* (the representation of action) was paramount to *katharsis*. It was precisely by identifying with, and fearing for, the tragic hero (*ethos*) as one "like ourselves" that tragedy invited contemplation on the ethical consequences of action. By integrating his system of virtue ethics with a theory of aesthetics, Aristotle defended the social significance of tragedy as a conduit for practical wisdom (*phronesis*). In cultivating the practically wise citizen (*phronimos*) as an intersubjective component of the body politic, tragedy was thought to facilitate human flourishing (*eudaimonia*).[10]

Indeed, "defend" is the preoperative word essential to understanding the *Poetics*, with Aristotle's text contextualized as a response to Plato's proposal that mimetic poetry should be banned for nourishing the passions and corrupting the rational minds comprising his ideal Republic. Although Aristotle never explicitly refers to his former teacher in the *Poetics*, the text is regarded as a response to Plato's challenge for philosophers to "show that she [poetry] is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man" ([1935] 2006: 467). In this excerpt taken from Book X of the *Republic*, Plato personifies poetry as a beautiful woman (the Greek word for poetry being feminine) with whom he was formerly besotted, but whose charms he has since resisted: "conscious of her spell." He then proceeds to explain that he hopes poetry may return to the Republic: "if it can be shown that she bestows not only pleasure but benefit" ([1935] 2006: 467).[11] Plato's chief concern here is with tragedy's "power to corrupt" the mind by arousing intense emotions that appeal to the inferior part of the soul and bypass rationality, and the genre's capacity to deceive audiences by misrepresenting Truth and Reality. He also questions the credibility of the poets who manufacture tragedy, reporting Homer to have been "a guide in education to men who . . . transmitted to posterity a certain Homeric way of

life," esteemed by his encomiasts as the "educator of Hellas," despite having no public office credited to him (Plato, [1935] 2006: 439, 463).

Although Plato's attitude to poetry is one of ambivalence (enchanted by poetry and formerly expressing his desire to be a playwright himself), rather than complete enmity, if Aristotle were to defend tragedy, he was required to refute these three charges. In this regard, Aristotle sought to demonstrate that the emotions aroused by tragic drama could be ethically and psychologically beneficial. By comparing the respective arguments presented by Plato and Aristotle, it becomes apparent that their distinct points of view resonate with contemporary debates concerning the mediation of tragedy. While Aristotle never intended for the *Poetics* to be applied to real social life, we may employ his theory to ask many of the same questions of the mediation of tragedy as we would of tragic drama. Using these debates as a starting point, this book draws upon Aristotle's theory of tragedy, as outlined in the *Poetics,* to develop a more comprehensive understanding of social tragedy relevant to a series of historical developments, characterizing modern secular democracies.

In developing an Aristotelian model of social tragedy, one must recognize the limitations of applying ancient paradigms to understand contemporary social life. The context in which Attic tragedies were composed and performed was shaped by a mythology and associated conception of divinity that informs how Greek tragedies approach issues of human agency, free will, and responsibility (Williams, 1993). These issues become increasingly evident in light of a series of historical and cultural developments distinguishing the Greek *polis* from modern liberal democracies. It has been argued, for example, that the organization of Greece *polis* was culturally different from modernity (Fromm, 1942: 239–53), modern societies disposed to classify experiences into analytically distinct categories (Wilkinson, 2005), in contrast to the

Greeks who were more inclined "to see things as an organic whole" (Kitto, 1957: 169).

Moreover, the institution of the chorus—its expression through dance and song—so vital to the

performance of Greek tragedy, has no modern equivalent.[12] The representation of tragedy in

ancient Greece also assumed a shared public arena, performing the drama in a common temporal

and spatial locale, which bears little resemblance to the mediation of tragedy in the twenty-first

century's global media ecology.

This series of social developments have made performance increasingly difficult to

achieve, and authenticity more difficult to establish, with the ritualized performance of tragedy in

modern liberal democracies contingent on rhetoric rather than overt force. The difference

between the representation of tragedy in premodern and modern societies then is not that

modernity is bereft of meaning, but rather that the complexity and heterogeneity of modern

social life has altered the context for making meaning (Alexander, 2011b). While it would be

naïve to suggest that ancient civilizations were homogeneous and structured in such a way that

resulted in passive audiences simply accepting universal beliefs, the centralized power relations

and hierarchical sociopolitical structure that characterized Greek, "democratic" city-states (as

manifest in the relative marginalization of those who fell outside the Greek citizenry) meant that

the genre's capacity to fuse audiences through ritual was more attainable in the *polis* than in their

modern counterparts. As societies become more complex, hybrid and fragmented, the capacity

for rituals to bind audiences decreases. In this sense the power of myths and rituals to fuse

audiences arguably assumes greater significance with politicians, organizations, and social actors

employing tragedy as a means to influence emotion, thought, and action. It would be misleading

then to suggest that an Aristotelian conception of tragedy could be transposed to understand

modern social phenomena without substantial modification, namely recognizing the impact of

globalization, secularism, technological innovation, and the emergence of the nation state—structured around democratic principles promoting cultural pluralism rather than the exclusionary dichotomies characteristic of premodern societies (Thompson, 1995)—on the configuration of tragedy in contemporary social life.

While Aristotle was concerned with the ethical repercussions of tragedy as a civic event performed for the Greek *polis*, this book focuses on the moral power of social tragedy as a dramatic performance mediated for public consumption in various domains of politics and popular culture. For Milton ([1645] 1971), tragedy was not a common experience but an idea that attached itself to a specific theatrical form performed on notable occasions. Drama is no longer coextensive with theatre, permeating a range of media dedicated to representing the *theatrum mundi* (theatre of the world) of everyday social life (Goffman, 1959). Whereas the performance of Greek tragedy at the festival of the Great Dionysia was occasional, tragic drama is now habitual with audiences experiencing a qualitative change through regular access to the mediation of distant suffering (Williams, 1966). Tragedy then is not simply a performance, it is performative: enacting cultural models of thinking, feeling and acting toward unjust suffering that may be embodied, experienced and appropriated by living social actors.

This emphasis on the as performative denotes something substantively different to a contrived performance dramatized before an intended audience. A social tragedy is "made" collectively meaningful through the shared symbolic codes that constitute a society's culture. This notion of social tragedy as a culture structure resonates with Aristotle's understanding of *hexis* (a habituated disposition to act); a practice that configures the *ethos* of the individual and, by extension, that of society. A cultural approach to tragedy emphasizes the textuality of social life and the autonomy of cultural forms. By recognizing the autonomy of culture and the

centrality of meaning, a model of social tragedy promotes the view that social actors are informed, but not determined by social structures. Such a view challenges the notion that media representations of tragedy simply reflect an extant social order. The very process of representing tragedy offers proposals to action that may be recognized, contested, modified, or denied.

In chapter 2, I suggest that although the *Poetics* provides a starting point to understand how certain actions become meaningful, Aristotle's theory of tragedy must be developed to remain relevant to the cultural dynamics of modernity. In canvassing the shortcomings of Aristotle's paradigm, I aim to establish what might be called a neo-Aristotelian model of social tragedy that appreciates the contingencies and complexities of contemporary social life. I outline the central components of a social tragedy, including how such events are distinguished from related incidents of trauma and misfortune, and the genre's associates: horror and terror. Contextualizing this model in relation to classical debates regarding the social value of tragedy, the idea is to employ Aristotle's manual on poetic composition to ask many of the questions about the representation of tragedy in the media as one would of the theatre. In providing a framework through which to understand how suffering assumes meaning and magnitude, Aristotle's theory is developed to comprehend the conditions in which tragedy is recognized as a legitimate claim to moral action.

Chapter 3 employs a model of social tragedy to understand the scale of public mourning in Britain ensuing the death of Princess Diana. Analyzing the event a decade after the incident conveys several important insights about the workings of culture and emotions. It has become conventional in academic scholarship to equate the national response to the death of Diana as the moment when Britain lost its "stiff upper lip." While the nation's outpouring of grief coincided with a general trend toward the confessional, examining the country's affective terrain a decade

after the event indicates that the public reaction was little more than a momentary rupture in the nation's emotional climate. The argument put forward here questions the widely held belief that the collective response to Diana's death signified a "new British spirit." Whereas explanations of this kind reduced the significance of the event to a mechanistic understanding of Culture, I approach Diana's emotional appeal as a successful performance, her character constructed in relation to themes of Truth, Justice, and Humanity—on an ethical level, what Aristotle (2005) termed "the good." In establishing the conditions of a successful performance, I conclude by considering the role of social tragedy as a cause for moral action, revealing the power of key players to institutionalize social tragedy as a vehicle for political reform.

Chapter 4 analyzes the representation of Zinédine Zidane's iconic head-butt as a social tragedy in postcolonial France. I explore the ways in which the mythic framed media coverage of the incident, emphasizing how social myths representing Zidane's "migrant" body as a signifier of guilt and blame elevated the incident as a meaningful event. Next, I examine Zidane's recuperation in France. Communicated through evocative symbols that equated Zidane's emblem with French supremacy, I reveal how the political logic of the sacred and profane transformed an historical episode into a tragic event that hindered public contestation of the French footballer's scandalous transgression. There is particular emphasis here on the capacity of state and commercial interests to frame Zidane's head-butt as an "honorable" contest of *colonialist "pollution" and a defence of Republican values* by drawing on emotional memories particular to postcolonial France.

In chapter 5, I focus on the mediation of social tragedy in the new media ecology. My analysis of social tragedy as a mediated performance is situated within the broader resistance movement of political protests that occurred in various locations across the globe from late 2010

and continued throughout much of 2011–12, including Anonymous' defence of WikiLeaks, the "Arab Spring," the 2011 English riots, and the "Occupy" movement. Examining the role of new media on the riots, I employ this model to explore the opportunities and limitations afforded by these novel forms of mediated publicness. There is particular emphasis on the capacity for user-driven content to script the meaning of the drama, and how the interplay between representations communicated through "old" and "new" media contributed to the representation of the social performance, both online and off. Decoding the emotional and cultural dimensions of the riots, I critique assumptions that these various protest movements were meaningless upheavals or reducible to virtual spheres, introducing the notion of the "mediated crowd" as a twenty-first century phenomenon that traverses physical and digital modalities. I suggest that the performative became a key component of the riots in the battle for public space, facilitating the image of a fused public to reveal a broader narrative of social injustice. Here, I argue that the media do not simply represent reality, but constitute it with the mediated crowd emerging as a powerful symbolic and political instrument of social change.

In light of these considerations, chapter 6 explores whether tragedy can teach in modern secular democracies. Canvassing the success of the advocacy campaign, KONY 2012, I examine whether social tragedies—and their accompanying affects—can be considered reliable guides for moral action, exploring the circumstances in which social tragedies operate democratically as models for social reform. I respond to these challenges by invoking Platonic and Aristotelian debates on the benefit of tragedy. Just as Plato and Aristotle debated the civic value of tragedy, I consider what contribution tragedy can make to social and political life. While contemporary sociologists are reticent to explore discourse on morality, I argue for the need to canvass debates on tragedy so as to involve us in fundamental issues of social justice and inequality.

A model of social tragedy demonstrates how certain actions assume meaning and magnitude as preconditions of a successful performance. This is a normative study concerned with the social consequences of tragic praxis, and its effects on social and political life. Representing a painful incident as a social tragedy enables collectives to challenge and redefine the moral boundaries of society. Social tragedies, centred as they are on appeals to Truth, Justice, and Humanity, aim to achieve practical moral action. Narratives of this kind reevaluate past grievances to make sense of present suffering, so as to establish novel norms and values. If we take seriously the potential for social tragedies to inform moral action then there is much at stake in understanding how we communicate and respond to human suffering. Recognizing past grievances as social tragedies can assist in healing cultural traumas by giving meaning to those perceived to suffer unjustly, while energizing individuals to act collectively in response to moral atrocities. This is not to suggest that social tragedies are universally interpreted across cultures or result unequivocally in improving society. Decoding how social tragedies are collectively represented provides a framework through which to understand how recognition operates to legitimize social and political reform.

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[1] A key difference being that Steiner does not consider this move to be a cause for pessimism, but of hope and modern progress.

[2] Halliwell is referring here to Aristotle's displacement of the religious with the secular and to those disposed toward a secular reading of the fifth-century Attic playwright, Euripides.

[3] Steiner is not suggesting that suffering is absent from modernity. His point rather is that as a form of drama, tragedy is particular to the classical Western tradition. He argues, for example, that the death of a Christian hero can be an occasion of sorrow, but not of tragedy because it leads the soul toward justice and resurrection (1961: 332). This move from fatalism toward hope is exemplified by the treatment of tragedy in Dante's *Divine Comedy* where all ends well. Steiner's assertion has been the

cause of much debate, as demonstrated by Raymond Williams's provocative text entitled, *Modern Tragedy* (1966).

[4] This is not to suggest that the hero's decline is simply the result of external forces. The notion of *hamartia*—used here to denote a missing of the mark—is suggestive of the fact that the hero is responsible for their suffering, even if this occurs through ignorance, human blindness, or an error of judgment.

[5] From this perspective, to benefit from the security and perceived advantages of the "social contract," "enlightened" rational individuals were required to submit to a common sovereign power and, in so doing, bridle their passions and renounce the "brutish" appetites that comprised their biological psychic condition—the "State of nature."

[6] The standard cultural motif of the forbidden fruit—the one forbidden thing—also informs the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), as exemplified by their universal concern with the "fall of man" and "Original Sin." Despite their universal reference to a transcendent being, the mythologies that inform these religions are distinct from the idea of the universal in Eastern traditions, such as, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Zen, and Shinto, revealing that cultural differences persist in the religious dimensions of experience. What you get instead is a mythology based on the insight of duality that tends to structure societies around ethics as exemplified by the dualistic relationship between sin and atonement, good and evil, right and wrong (Campbell, 1996), dichotomies that persist even in secular political landscapes (Durkheim, [1912] 2001).

[7] Precipitated by the News International phone-hacking scandal, the Inquiry aimed to ensure the highest ethical standards: Lord Justice Leveson opened the hearings on November 14, 2011, saying: "The press provides an essential check on all aspects of public life. That is why any failure within the media affects all of us. At the heart of this Inquiry, therefore, may be one simple question: who guards the guardians?"

[8] "If there is meaning in life at all," wrote Frankl ([1942] 1962), "then there must be meaning in suffering."

[9] My reason for referring to the original Greek spelling of the term is a deliberate attempt to endorse Aristotle's ethical paradigm. This is in contrast to contemporary lexicons, which tend to conflate "catharsis" with Freud's psychoanalytic theory of emotional repression.

[10] *Eudaimonia* is interpreted as well-being or human flourishing. The Greek terms *eu* and *daimon* translate into the words "good" and "spirit," respectively. This has lead to common equations of the

concept with happiness, although modern notions of happiness as subjective pleasure neglect the ethical foundation of the term.

[11] In Book X of the *Republic,* Plato elucidates his ambivalence toward mimetic poetry: "But if not, my friend, even as men who have fallen in love, if they think that the love is not good for them, hard though it be, nevertheless refrain, so we, owing to the love of this kind of poetry inbred in us by our education in these fine polities of ours, will gladly have the best possible case made out for her goodness and truth, but so long as she is unable to make good her defence we shall chant over to ourselves as we listen the reasons that we have given as a counter-charm to her spell, to preserve us from slipping back into the childish loves of the multitude" ([1935] 2006: 467–49).

[12] The chorus were fundamental to the way in which Greek tragedy was conceptualized in the ancient world, which is to do with individuality versus collectivity, democracy as a shared project and individuals that threaten that project. The chorus dramatize the formation and the collapse of the social collective. To remove the collective is to lose that dynamic of the individual versus society.