

On the Stage Visual Transformation of Tragedy: Taking "Oedipus the King" as an Example

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Abstract. As an abstract art form, tragic literature undergoes transformation and representation in theatrical performances through concrete audiovisual language, while also being influenced by the characteristics of different media. This study takes "Oedipus Rex" as its research subject, employing a comparative methodology of close textual reading and visual stage presentation to explore how it effectively intensifies the emotional atmosphere and the conflictual tension in character relationships through visual means such as lighting changes and scene transitions during its stage presentation. By analyzing the interaction between literary narrative and visual expression, this paper attempts to reveal the mechanisms and significance of the transformation of tragic texts into stage performances. Finally, the study summarizes its main findings and conclusions, demonstrating how tragedy manifests diverse visual effects through varying interpretations of stage direction and directorial vision, and it outlines future methods and boundaries for the recreation of tragedy, offering new perspectives for creators and directors.

Keywords: Oedipus the King, Tragic theatre, Stage visual transformation, Dramatic Re-creation

1. Introduction

Tragedy is the origin of Western dramatic art. It emerged during an era of significant cultural and scientific changes, reflecting the transition from the mythological framework to the emerging scientific paradigm, as well as the specific historical crises of that period [1]. The source of its impact lies not only in the narrative structure of the text and its philosophical connotations, but more importantly, in the process of transforming the literary script into a concrete stage space. The effect of tragedy never depended on epic suspense, on the fascinating uncertainty as to what is to happen now and afterwards, but rather on the great rhetoro-lyric scenes in which the passion and dialectics of the chief hero swelled to a broad and mighty stream [2]. "Oedipus the King" has become an excellent example for studying how tragic texts are transformed into visual forms on stage, and how this transformation affects the narrative presentation effect of the tragic text. The ancient Greek tragedy "Oedipus the King" is Sophocles' masterpiece. The tight plot, the conflict of fate, and the protagonist's continuous self-destruction in pain in the text narrative all provide an inexhaustible

space for interpretation for the adaptation of the drama. These images are not only elements for advancing the plot but also powerful symbols of the cruelty of fate, the limitations of cognition, and ethical dilemmas.

This study seeks to elucidate the mechanisms through which the tragic is transposed from text to stage, examining how visual and spatial logics actively configure meaning. A systematic review of the literature combined with empirical observation reveals that prior scholarship has privileged textual narrative and ideological exegesis while offering only fragmentary accounts of visual dramaturgy and scenic orchestration. Consequently, the research takes the multiply-staged *Oedipus Rex* as its primary case study. Three interlocking questions orient the inquiry: (1) How are the text's dominant images given phenomenally precise embodiment on stage? (2) In what ways do divergent scenographic strategies recalibrate spectators' affective and cognitive engagement with the tragedy's core themes? (3) What function does visual translation perform in re-inscribing the canonical text with contemporary significance? Through comparative analysis of the 1977 Don Taylor production at the Royal National Theatre and the 2015 Robert Icke staging at the Almeida Theatre, the study demonstrates that theatrical praxis possesses a constitutive agency in tragic narration; stage design is not a subsidiary backdrop but a generative force that co-produces meaning, mobilizes emotion, and catalyzes philosophical reflection.

2. The tragic narrative foundation of "Oedipus the King"

2.1. The theme of fate and tragic consciousness

As the consummate achievement of Attic tragedy, "*Oedipus Rex*" derives its enduring power from an uncompromising excavation of the theme of fate and the tragic consciousness it engenders. The motif is inaugurated by the oracular decree of Apollo: before his birth, Oedipus is condemned to patricide and maternal incest. The oracle embodies a cosmic *nomos* that transcends human volition; it is absolute, immutable, and inexorably self-fulfilling, indifferent to every attempt at evasion. Thus is established the axiomatic tonality of the play: the apodictic necessity of fate. The influence of the ancient Greeks' view of fate on this play can mainly be divided into two opposing sides: positive and negative. This gives rise to intense, dramatic conflicts and promotes the further development of the plot. On the one hand, the ancient Greeks believed that fate was bestowed by the gods, possessing mystery and unalterability, and could not be changed through human efforts. Knowing his tragic fate, Oedipus made every effort to escape the divine revelation of the ending, but still committed the heinous crime of killing his father and marrying his mother. This endows the character of Oedipus with the connotation of tragic aesthetics [3].

The tragic force of "*Oedipus Rex*" unfolds through a three-tiered intensification that ascends from the personal to the philosophical plane. First, it exposes the limits of human cognition and the resulting *aporia* of existence. Oedipus's trajectory from *agnoia* to *gnōsis* coincides with the catastrophic unveiling of the tragic truth. The act of self-blinding—at once corporeal refusal to behold a merciless world and spiritual regression into a despairing embrace of ignorance—constitutes the emblematic collapse of epistemic certainty. "What am I now? A thing abhorred, condemned alike by gods and men!"—the knowledge he gains delivers not redemption but the absolute disintegration of being. This reveals the harsh costs that humans may encounter in their pursuit of truth. Secondly, the feeling of having rationality and the helplessness of futile actions. Oedipus' solving of the Sphinx's riddle demonstrated his desire for autonomy over fate, which coincided with Hannah Arendt's tragic theory research. "A person expresses themselves in their words and deeds, and even doesn't understand themselves or cannot consider in advance who they

are going to reveal [4]. "Oedipus' so-called "active choice" was precisely the tool by which fate fulfilled its prophecy. The more he endeavored to change fate through reason and action, the more he accelerated the process of self-destruction. The huge contrast between action and result was also one of the core sources of tragic consciousness. Third, questioning of order and meaning. As Oedipus was a person who strived to be good, pursued justice, and possessed extraordinary wisdom, why did he suffer such an unjust and terrifying fate? The "divine order" represented by the oracle was so cruel. If good deeds do not receive good rewards and reason cannot avoid disasters, then where is the order and meaning of the world? Sophocles, through the destruction of this "most unfortunate person" Oedipus, forced the audience to confront these harsh truths of survival.

2.2. Narrative architecture and the mechanics of plot advancement

Already in antiquity, Aristotle advanced the principle of "unity of action," stipulating that a tragic plot must integrate the agent with the deed in such a way that their connection is presented as logically necessary, thereby driving the narrative forward. Oedipus Rex exemplifies this principle by entering the action at the moment of crisis and then reconstructing the causal chain retrospectively: an inverted, analeptic disclosure that progressively assembles the complete sequence of fate.

Scholar Li Wansui has further argued that Sophocles deploys a binary-oppositional narrative architecture—one in which linguistic binaries generate a structural dialectic that focalizes the antithesis between human agency and destiny [5]. The plot evolves through a rhythm of eruption and confrontation, pivoting on the central contradiction: the irreconcilable opposition between man's desire for autonomy and the absolute necessity of fate. The mechanism of "anagnorisis-peripeteia" (recognition-reversal) engineers a catastrophic collapse of identity, delivering the spectator to the threshold of annihilation. A paradigmatic instance occurs when Oedipus, having learned of the oracle predicting patricide and incest, believes that flight from Corinth will avert the prophecy; yet in his very act of escape, he unknowingly slays an elderly wayfarer who proves to be his biological father. Each intensified attempt at evasion thus propels him closer to the fulfillment of the oracle, converting the protagonist's agency into a counter-final engine of plot acceleration.

3. Strategies and expressions of visual transformation

When Oedipus Rex is transformed from text into a concrete stage performance, a central question of theatrical creation is how visual means can intensify the tension of fate and the collapse of cognition. This section takes Don Taylor and Robert Icke as representative examples, analyzing how their visual strategies—in spatial composition, use of light, and other aspects—serve the expression of the tragic theme.

3.1. The symbolic meaning of stage

In Don Taylor's production, the stage adopts a traditional semi-circular layout, with the palace gate at the center symbolizing both the city's core and the authority of the oracle. Characters move mainly in the front stage area, open to the audience, forming a solemn and ritualized space. Oedipus's placement is always at the very center, emphasizing his condition of being "watched" and "judged" by fate. This structure turns the theater into a space of revelation, highlighting the inescapability of destiny.

By contrast, Robert Icke uses entirely modern stage language, turning the stage into a narrow war-room filled with a large countdown screen, glass walls, and cold-toned metal furniture. The

space is extremely oppressive, with actors moving and speaking within tight confines, creating an atmosphere of suffocation and unease. Oedipus appears as a politician under the spotlight, and the stage space symbolizes the illusion of rational order and the dilemmas of decision-making under modern politics. This composition reinforces the psychological pressure of "truth closing in," making the audience feel that the net of fate is not a divine oracle but the inevitable collapse of self-made logic. As critics noted, the set is a "dry meeting room" full of modern devices, and these "coolly realistic details" perfectly echo the core of the original text's controlling fate, while extending it into 21st-century reflections on "political transparency," "public judgment," and "collective moral anxiety" [6].

3.2. The emotional function of lighting and color

In Taylor's version, lighting mainly imitates natural light, with a focus on cool blue-white beams to mark the descent of oracles and moments of thought. The chorus is bathed in soft light when chanting, while Oedipus, during questioning or collapse, is picked out by a spotlight, creating the image of a dialogue between man and fate. The separation of light and shadow clearly presents the opposition of "oracle/humanity" and "collective/individual," and brings the stage closer to classical tragedy's emphasis on the sense of judgment of fate.

Icke's lighting strategy is more modern and symbolic. He makes heavy use of fluorescent white, red, and strong backlighting to create psychological suggestions. The countdown screen emits a piercing cold light, symbolizing rationality and the control of time. When truth comes closer, the stage suddenly bursts into blinding white light, like an eruption of the spirit. And in the ending, when Oedipus blinds himself, the stage becomes almost entirely dark, with only flashing red lights like an alarm, signaling that disaster has come.

As Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy*, tragedy embodies the tension between Apollonian reason and Dionysian collapse. Icke's contrast between cold light and red light makes this confrontation visible [2]. At the same time, Freud's theory of the "Oedipus complex" suggests that recognizing one's own truth can itself trigger collapse. This is expressed on stage through the play's imagery of light and shadow—"to know is to be destroyed" [7].

3.3. The symbolic function of scenery and props

In Taylor's version, scenery and props are minimal and symbolic. The central door, stone steps, and scepter are the core objects that establish visual order. Oedipus's scepter represents not only royal authority but also the transfer of fate's power. The props barely change throughout, further strengthening the ritual and fated qualities of the stage, and keeping the audience's focus on the symbolic meaning of words and actions.

In Icke's production, however, many props come from modern life: laptops, conference tables, bottled water, press releases, glasses, and so on. These construct a surface of realism. Yet it is precisely these ordinary objects that carry the play's tragic changes: the countdown device is both an election tool and a sign of fate's arrival; scattered papers and spilled coffee symbolize the breakdown of order. The most striking image is Jocasta's act of blinding herself with a high-heeled shoe, which not only materializes the blindness from the original but also adds a contemporary gender metaphor, giving new vitality to classical tragic imagery in a modern context.

Table 1. Stage visuals of Oedipus Rex: classical vs. modern

Dimension	Don Taylor's Version (1977, Classical)	Robert Icke's Version (2015, Modern)	Function of Visual Transformation
Stage Space	Semi-circular theater, palace gate at center (symbol of divine power)	Enclosed war-room, glass walls and countdown screen (metaphor of rational system)	Classical: emphasizes the sacredness of fate; Modern: reveals the fragility of rational arrogance
Lighting	Cool-toned blue-white light (oracle/human opposition)	Fluorescent white + flashing red light (cognitive explosion and collapse)	Classical: highlights the divide between gods and humans; Modern: symbolizes the idea that "truth is destruction"
Props	Scepter, stone steps (royal power and the irreversibility of fate)	Laptops, countdown device (the prison of technological rationality)	Classical: ritual solemnity; Modern: technological alienation and political allegory

As shown in Table 1, the differences in visual strategies between the two versions not only demonstrate innovation in stage practice, but also reveal how the tragic theme is reinterpreted in a contemporary context. Taylor's classical stage, with its semi-circular structure and cool light, presents fate as an absolute force beyond humanity. Icke's modern version, however, transforms the oracle into a rational system on the verge of collapse. This rationalized oracle strips away the mystery and unknowability of classical tragedy, turning it instead into a "cage of rationality"—where humanity, in trying to control fate, becomes trapped in the very system it has created. This design echoes Hannah Arendt's critique of "instrumental rationality" in modern politics, where people gradually lose judgment and responsibility [4].

3.4. Audience experience

Most crucially, the two versions reconstruct the role of the audience in different ways. The classical version's ritual space makes the audience spectators at the "trial of fate." The modern version, however, through glass-wall reflections and sudden flashes of light, creates a mechanism where "the audience is participant," forcing them to confront the metaphor that "Oedipus is ourselves." Critic Cunliffe points out that Icke, by stripping away mystery and linguistic barriers, brings the audience closer to the ancient Greeks' own experience of disaster and moral shock, awakening the emotions of the classic text once again [8]. This shows that stage visuals are not just background, but an active medium for producing the meaning of tragedy. As Melinda Powers argues in *Diversifying Greek Tragedy on the Contemporary US Stage*, contemporary directors increasingly pay attention to how visual strategies reshape the audience's position, moving beyond traditional spectatorship and bringing gender, identity, and political context into visual design, thereby strengthening tragedy's resonance with reality and its ethical force [9].

4. Analysis and reflection on text and stage

4.1. Stage reconstruction and new interpretations of fate

In film, the construction of scenes lays the foundation for expanding narrative space, giving audiences a concrete visual experience [10]. The same applies to theater: contemporary stage artists deconstruct the symbolic system of classical texts and replace it with the language of modern culture, presenting it on stage and transforming literary language into visual form, so that audiences and readers gain a new understanding. Oedipus Rex expresses the eternal paradox of the oracle's

chains and human awakening. On stage, Taylor's 1977 semi-circular theater and palace gate symbolize divine order, while Icke's war-room with glass walls, countdown screens, and metal furniture represents a modern space of political power. This transformation turns "fate" from the oracle's mystery into the collapse of a rational system: the countdown device points to modern anxiety over the loss of control in technological rationality, while also embodying the helplessness of failing to master destiny. On the other hand, *Oedipus Rex* also reflects the modern awakening of free will. In Icke's production, the oracle is replaced by a countdown screen, and Oedipus shifts from "sinner chosen by the gods" to "politician trapped in a cage of logic." Jocasta's self-blinding with high heels transforms "blindness" from divine punishment into an accusation against patriarchal violence. With changes in space and imagery, audiences encounter the scenes and plot of *Oedipus Rex* with fresh perception.

4.2. Re-creation and boundaries in stage visual transformation

In theatrical art, the visual re-creation of the stage is essentially a dynamic negotiation between artistic freedom and textual content. It arises from the interplay of script, directorial vision, the nature of drama itself, and material conditions. In Greek tragedy, such re-creation often takes place through spatial reconstruction and bodily symbols: proscenium stages, thrust stages, environmental theater, and immersive performance, as well as lighting that separates or merges the audience area—all shape the audience's experience. Changes in character background, era, and the contrast between classical and contemporary contexts can also generate new interpretations, with actors becoming vehicles of cross-era cultural critique, guiding audiences into dialogue between past and present.

Yet stage visual re-creation is inevitably constrained by the inherent boundaries of theater. One cannot arbitrarily alter core events, character relationships, or basic settings; creation must remain within the framework and logic of the text. The era, location, and social background set by the play, as well as its overall tragic tone, are important reference points and limits. Designs that stray too far—whether in costumes or settings—may weaken the play's foundation or confuse interpretation. For instance, critic Aleks Sierz points out that some of Icke's textual changes risk diminishing the sense of fate, turning the play closer to a thriller [11]. This perspective helps us better understand the tension between preserving the classical spirit and innovating in modern adaptations.

Visual effects also need to consider the audience's angle, distance, and the lighting environment, ensuring that imagery, lines, and performance reach the audience together, without overwhelming the central dramatic action. In Icke's war-room, for example, the glass wall's reflections constantly remind viewers of the "actor's body under surveillance," making the stage effect both bounded and immersive. Each creator has their own perspective and creative logic, but ultimately, a consensus must be reached. Truly great visual works of theater do not deny boundaries, but instead transform, extend, or meaningfully transcend them on the basis of deep understanding and respect. In limited time and space, they create infinitely rich theatrical imagery and emotional experience. It is this tension between re-creation and boundaries that is the enduring source of stage visual art's power.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the transformation of stage visuals in multiple versions of "*Oedipus the King*", this paper finds that stage visuals are not only an extended tool for literary narrative, but also a dramatic language that actively participates in the construction of meaning. Whether it is the classical semi-circular ritual space constructed by director Don Taylor and the "oracle order" created by cold light, or the metaphor of fate reshaped by director Robert Icke through symbols such as

modern war meeting rooms, countdown devices and high heels, the visual strategies of both closely echo the core themes of the text - fate, cognition and the collapse of reason - and expand new philosophical implications and aesthetic tensions in formal expression.

This observation reminds drama researchers and creators that the value of tragic texts will not be weakened by "visualization", but will instead regain new vitality in the re-creation on the stage. The introduction of visual language not only extends the ideological depth of the text but also injects new cultural vitality and historical connections into classic works through spatial arrangement, light and shadow design, and prop symbolism.

From a broader perspective of theatrical adaptation, stage visual transformation is an aesthetic mechanism that combines limitations and creativity. It requires creators to respond sensitively to the cultural experiences and aesthetic expectations of contemporary audiences while respecting the spirit of the original work. It is precisely in the "boundaries of re creation" that stage art exhibits enduring charm - generating infinite symbols in limited time and space, and evoking new issues of the times in fixed texts.

Looking ahead to the future, further research is needed on the transformation of tragic stages to explore the interactive mechanisms between visual language and narrative structure, character actions, and the relationship between audience perception and acceptance psychology, in order to promote the two-way integration and development of classical drama research and contemporary expression.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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