

**A Review of *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, by Yorgos Lanthimos, 2017
From Ancient Greek justice to Christian unconditional love: creative liberation from the chain of fate¹**

by Patrizia Salvatore

Abstract: Lanthimos' film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, though widely unpopular, can be seen as a profound interpretation of the question of our freedom to choose and how unconditional love leads us to self-responsibility. The film is rich with symbolism which echoes Iphigenia with subtle Christian references, such as the use of Schubert's Jesus Christus and Bach's St. John Passion. Perhaps the film has been poorly received also because of the actors' striking performances which, without seeing the meaning of the story, could be considered wooden. Rather, the coldness of the characters is intentional because it portrays the shirking of responsibility for our actions which turns a person into a lifeless being.

KEYWORDS: Agape, freedom, Greek tragedy, justice, responsibility

Some may find this movie «creepy, dark»² despite some deadpan humour,

¹ On the issue of freedom as liberation in the Christian era related to the Ancient Greek context, Filippo Bartolone gives a fundamental contribution in his works, *Ontologia e liberazione. Opere edite in vita (1948-1978)*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2019. On the relationship between creativity and education, Emanuele Lisi's research is enlightening in *Il problema della creatività, Presupposti ed orizzonti di una teoria dell'educazione alla creatività*, Peloritana ed., Messina 1979. The themes that Bartolone and Lisi explored inspired my personal research and the topic of liberation of the creative potential is at its core. In the last few years I have been choosing to also write in English and this has broadened my horizons with a different cultural perspective which has turned out to be a self-discipline which helps me to be creative as well straightforward. My heartfelt gratitude goes to Clare James for her mindful editing of this review. The following publications of mine on the above mentioned issues are in Italian: Prometeo e Cristo. *Una riflessione politico-simbolica*, ed. Aracne, Roma, 2016; *L'incontro con l'altro ai tempi del terrore. A proposito dell'approccio mitico-simbolico o "mitologico" nell'analisi dei fenomeni politici*, Heliopolis, Culture Civiltà Politica, Anno XIV n. 1/2016 (pp.177-186); *Identità e alterità: dall'inclusione all'integrazione dialettica. Spunti di riflessione teorico-pratica con Felice Balbo*, in XXXIX Congresso nazionale della SFI - "MIGRAZIONI Responsabilità della filosofia e sfide globali", Diogene Multimedia, Bologna, 2017 (pp. 217-225); *Il paradigma della cura. Una riflessione politico-simbolica*, Heliopolis Culture Civiltà Politica Anno XVI n. 2/2018 (pp.189-197); *La dimensione erotico-agapica della politica in Bartolone*, in Atti del convegno *Filippo Bartolone. Parole e memoria La fortuna di avere un maestro (di cui ho curato l'editing)*, Scholè Morcelliana 2019; *Quale eccedenza? Due figure paradigmatiche in Dostoevskij*, in *Frammenti di una fenomenologia dell'eccedenza. Contributi per una riflessione antropologica*, Di Nicolò, ed. Messina 2020; *Destino e libertà in Edipo e Cristo. L'anti-intellettualismo e l'ontologia della liberazione di Bartolone*, Gazzetta del Sud, 4/6/2021.

² R. Daniels, in https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_killing_of_a_sacred_deer.

others that «the substance is often too insurmountable to be accessible»³, others still might call it disappointing because «the dullness of its flatlined tone fails to move minds and elicit palpable responses»⁴. And yet, after an initial baffling confusion about its intended meaning, a questioning which is triggered by the film's complexity and sharpened by the strident soundtrack, you may find this is one of those movies that gives rise to thought in the days to come. Indeed, re-thinking freedom and justice by criticising the fatalist Ancient Greek viewpoint and exploring what would happen to human beings without a Christian sense of life might be Lanthimos' purpose.

Set in our time, while in some ways the film seems extremely realistic, it lacks any sense of familiarity with the current era, because it evokes otherworldly dilemmas. It explores the excruciating crossroads humans have to face, and the challenging power to choose. If Aeschylus saw the film, he would recognise most of the elements from his *Oresteia* trilogy. Not by chance, Martin, the godlike character played by fledgling star Barry Keoghan, who guides the story, at a certain moment questions «do you understand? It's metaphorical. My example, it's a metaphor. I mean, it's symbolic». Indeed, it would be impossible to interpret the multitude of symbols in this movie without Aeschylus's key, shaped by Agamemnon's Iphigenia that the movie's title alludes to.

Heart surgeon Steven Murphy, majestically played by Colin Farrell, lives apparently happily with his wife Anna, an outstanding performance by Nicole Kidman, and their two children, Kim and Bob. After losing a patient, Steven becomes irremediably powerless to prevent Martin's prophecy from being fulfilled, namely that unless he kills a member of his own family he will lose all of them, and this penance is a form of retributive justice, or at least if not “fair”, the only thing Martin «can think of, that's close to justice». Martin is the son of Steven's patient whose death, in a way, Steven is responsible for. At the time, he was an alcoholic, he drank before going into Martin's father's surgery and, even though it is unclear if his state had had a role in his patient's death, he constantly tries to shirk his responsibility by putting the blame firstly on a car accident, then, on the anaesthesiologist: «an anaesthesiologist can kill a patient, a surgeon never can». Later on, his friend, the anaesthesiologist, joins the blame game, reversing Steven's phrase: «a surgeon can kill a patient but an anaesthesiologist never can». Indeed, freedom without responsibility is the focal point of this drama which brings the Ancient Greek tragedy into modern times. The common thread running through the film is Steven's inability to choose and in the final scenes, this is most dramatic when Steven's choice is reduced to the randomness of pointing a gun while blindfolded. He disowns his actions just as he does in the first scene when he removes his blood tainted gloves. Then, this image is reflected when Anna says that she needs to wash her hands, and Steven asks his anaesthesiologist friend to «pull his fish out of the fire», because he doesn't like it “overcooked”. This imagery is also present in our idioms (*lavarsi le mani, togliere le castagne dal fuoco*) and conveys well the underlying message that responsibility is a burden

³ K. Lopez, *ivi*.

⁴ D. Shanahan, *ivi*.

the characters want lifted from their shoulders. The human aspiration for self-fulfilment and fate which thwarts their plans is the substance of Ancient Greek tragedy. Fatalism hounds the characters with Lanthimos' unconventional *all-seeing eye* cameras. As cinematographer Robbie Ryan, who collaborates with Lanthimos in *The favourite*, says «for a film that's shot on very wide angles, it feels even more claustrophobic, because you're seeing the whole location and the whole environment. You want to get out of that house because it's all around you, you can't escape it»⁵. Another detail of the haunting presence of a superior will which determines human actions is when the prophecy, recited by Martin, is like a curse sealing a tragedy, in which there is no real freedom to act. The reiteration of the past is stressed when Martin says he is anxious that he has a hereditary heart disease, as his father did, or when in a powerful scene eating spaghetti he comments, repeating some key words, that he is upset because he found out he lacks any originality

you know, not long after my dad died, someone told me that I eat spaghetti the exact same way he did. They said 'exactly the same way his father did. He sticks his fork in. He twirls it around, around, around, around, around, around. Then he sticks it in his mouth'. At that time, I thought I was the only one who ate spaghetti that way. Me and my dad. Later, of course, I found out that everyone eats spaghetti the exact same way. Exact same way, exact same way. This made me very upset. Very upset. Maybe even more upset than when they told me he was dead. My dad.

Despite the best screenplay award the movie won at Cannes in 2017, critic Michael Sragow judged that «this film reduces its actors to mannequins. It drains all personality away»⁶ and I agree with this to the extent that Lanthimos succeeds in creating these bland characters, but this is clearly his aim, to describe a context in which freedom is absent and love is not conceived as unconditional giving. The characters are constantly bargaining, sometimes even for their life and justice means proportion and reparation. There are a few powerful images by which Lanthimos displays the human unquenchable thirst for regenerative possibilities which tragically seem to be denied with a few exceptions, as soon as they open up. For instance, in the children's room the ceiling fan is constantly on without any apparent reason other than the emotionally stagnant atmosphere, and when the drama is heightened by the awareness that their fate appears to be sealed, Steven proposes to go to their country house to breathe “fresh air”. But this asphyxiating climate poisons every action as Anna highlights when she acknowledges that her husband's hands are beautiful, clean and neat but lacking in life. Everything his hands do, she says, is insignificant because he is «an incompetent man who goes on and on saying stupid things like “Let's do a scan. Let's do an ultrasound. Let's wear brown socks. Let's make mashed

⁵ C. Aguilar, *All-Seeing Eyes: How Director Yorgos Lanthimos and DP Robbie Ryan Defy Period Film Aesthetics in The Favourite* in <https://www.moviemaker.com/yorgos-lanthimos-robbie-ryan-the-favourite/>

⁶ M. Sragow, *Deep focus: The killing of a Sacred Deer*, in <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/deep-focus-killing-sacred-deer/>

potatoes. Let's go to the beach house'' ». And nothing can resuscitate Steven, even making love, because this act is reduced to a performance rather than experienced as a tender exchange of true feelings. Intimacy becomes a passive gesture for Anna, which she calls «general anaesthetic», as she proposes to satisfy her husband's desires by staying absolutely still. Steven wants the lights on, just like in the operating theatre, symbolising the deadness of spirit and at the same time the tragic attempt to be in love. Kim later imitates her mother, offering herself to Martin, in a kind of comatose state resembling death. Indeed, it makes sense to infer from the lifeless bodily state of Steven's wife and daughter that their life is insignificant, no value transcends their empty conversations and bored activities. Ironically, he is a surgeon supposed to repair hearts. For his family, the cure seems to be an invitation to light up and give love to the world when Kim sings *Burn* by Ellie Goulding:

Light it up, like we're the stars of the human race, human race
When the lights turned down, they don't know what they heard (...)
Strike the match, play it loud, giving love to the world
We'll be raising our hands, shining up to the sky
'Cause we got the fire

In contrast with the Ancient Greek sense of frustration around liberty, Anna seems inspired by the Christian sense of freedom through love when she is upset by the knowledge of the prophecy, but she comes to accept their fate and with that finds hope for the future. In order to make things right, she even accepts that she has to sacrifice one of her children and this is motivated not by revenge or to selfishly spare her own life but by making others' lives possible, «*the most logical thing, no matter how harsh this may sound, is to kill a child. Because we can have another child. I still can and you can. I'm sure we can*». This certainty that a future can be possible with a personal sacrifice without expecting anything is confirmed by sentences like «*everything will be alright, you'll see. Trust me*». But the words would not be hopeful if she did not show compassion and love as she does. Anna in an evocative scene washes away Martin's blood, she kisses his feet and then liberates him by showing forgiveness and standing up to her husband who wanted punishment and revenge. How not to see the Christian message of love and service performed by Christ in his Way of the Cross with these caring gestures? There are two details which confirm the interpretation that only this *for-giving* love can save us from nihilism. One is that Anna, unlike her children, does not succumb to paralysis as the prophecy bodes, the other is Lanthimos' choice to use two powerful pieces of music in the first and final scenes to frame the Christian horizon of the movie, *Jesus Christus* from Schubert's *Stabat Mater* in F minor, and Bach's *St. John Passion*.

It seems that Lanthimos' movie is proposing a transplant of a *loving heart* in order to inhabit a creative and responsible life. The classical tragedy which plays out a perpetual cycle of retributive violence, under the aegis of so-called divine justice, brings human beings ever closer to catastrophe. In that context everything is decided by gods depicted as omnipotent human beings. This idea of a god does not reveal what a god is because it assumes a human shape and it does not even

reveal human nature because human beings are unsustainably elevated to gods. Ancient Greek hope is a finite hope with no new outcomes, «*a perpetual recurrence of determined seasons*»⁷ looms on the human horizon. The Christian sense of love amplifies hope even against the most insurmountable obstacle, death, because it is founded on God's unconditional infinite love which illogically sacrifices his own child rather than asking for others' blood. And this generous sacrifice, not inflicted on others but directed towards himself, will make freedom possible for human beings who trust his power and act accordingly. Indeed, it is responsible freedom by which human beings can acknowledge their limits and possibilities while they rely on something absolute beyond themselves, God. A god who scandalously gives up his immortality to show human beings how it is possible to elevate themselves to divine will without *hubris*. By making the ultimate sacrifice for love as a way to interrupt the cycle of vengeance, the human power to choose does not coercively reiterate the past but it reinvigorates human beings' aspirations. This means giving up not merely life but its insignificance. It goes without saying that this process of liberation is deeply tragic: freedom is crucified at the crossroads of choosing to trust God and themselves as his creatures or to deny God by acting as gods with delusional power. It is love, as *Agape*, that reveals its abyssal difference from the Ancient Greek retributive justice and Lanthimos uses his talent to show the limits of that cultural horizon. This movie is a must see for its powerful thought-provoking effect.

⁷ T.S.Eliot, *Opening stanza from The Rock*, in <https://www.poetrynook.com/poems>