Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts 2022, 9: 1-30
https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.X-Y-Z

Iphigeneia Breathes: A Filmic Musing on the Winds, Breathing, Life, and the Imagination

By Andrea Eis[*]

Artistic inspiration drawn from scholarly and experiential research has led me to incorporate a personal approach to classical reception into my art films: in voiceovers and intertitles, I imagine new endings for ancient stories. Imagination becomes a powerfully direct element in my films, when combined with my own experience of Greece, and scholarly research into aspects of Greek myths, plays, and language. This paper traces the evolution of my approach in three of short art films: from an anonymous, but often subjective narrator, implying my authorship;[1] *the clearly subjective perspective of the filmmaker inviting viewers to imagine;*[2] *to my most recent film, a combination of an omniscient, almost neutral narrator with a first-person narrator who also invites imagination.*[3] *While working on Iphigeneia Breathes, its breathing theme became unexpectedly entwined with contemporary events: George Floyd, saying he could not breathe, was murdered; the pandemic stole breath from millions of people; and gatherings of loud, close-packed, chanting crowds as precursors or loci of death became terrifying realities. My process, research, approach to reception and imagination ultimately brought personal and communal contemporary experience into interaction with ancient narrative.*

Introduction

As an art filmmaker with an academic background in ancient Greek, a feminist mind-set, and a stubbornly optimistic view that we can still learn from both the wisdom and the mistakes of the ancient Greeks, my films incorporate my feminist reinterpretations of Greek plays and myths, re-visioned in contemporary images. My films surface from an amalgam of scholarly and experiential research. Core research underlying the development of my films includes studying Greek plays and myths, in translation and in ancient Greek, along with commentaries and criticism that explore them in depth. I focus on key elements in their narratives, focusing in particular on the depictions of female characters. Experientially, I engage my visual and aural senses with eternal aspects of Greek landscape and natural forms, and with the compelling power of ancient sites.

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1. A. Eis, *Penelope's Odyssey* (Toughened Glass Films, 2015).

2 Eis, *Perhaps* (Toughened Glass Films, 2017).

3 Eis, *Iphigeneia Breathes* (Toughened Glass Films, 2021).

Penelope's Odyssey:
A Subjective Narrator Emerges

Most of my films have been "at a remove"— the reinterpretation and re-visioning happens in the third person, my authorship concealed in the voices of the characters. In *Penelope's Odyssey* (2015), however, I began to imply my authorship. The film is divided into segments for different years culled from Penelope's long wait for Odysseus to return from the Trojan War. Intertitle sequences introduce the year segments with an anonymous but deliberately subjective narrator's commentary and quotes from Homer's *Odyssey* (Figures 1 and 2). Typefaces, fonts, and line alignments signal that the source of each intertitle is different: narrator's commentary, specific Homeric lines,[4] and a second commentary that restates, expands, or revises the Homeric quote.

Penelope makes plans to avoid
being forced into another marriage.

Her suitors will be no match for her

Day after day she sat,
weaving
Every torch lit night,
she let her work go.

Odyssey, 2:104-105

Unraveling every row
Reclaiming every day

Figure 1. *Intertitle Sequence for Year Five* in *Penelope's Odyssey*.[5]

4. Translations for Homeric lines for the intertitles are by the author.
5. Eis, *Penelope's Odyssey*, 2015, 1:55-2:15.

Figure 2. *Penelope's Eyes, from Year Five, Penelope's Odyssey. Film still by Andrea Eis*

With two subsequent films, *Perhaps* (2017) and *Iphigeneia Breathes* (2021), I overtly declared my personal reception of the myths and plays: stating rather than implying that it was my perspective, that I was bringing my contemporary experience into interaction with ancient narratives, and imagining different endings. I drew the viewer into my point of view as the filmmaker, not only with visual direction, but also with my open invitations to the films' viewers to imagine along with me.

Perhaps and Clytemnestra: Experimenting with Perspective and Imagination

A Misnamed Tholos Tomb: Power and an Enigmatic Presence

The four-minute film *Perhaps* was an experimental precursor for two techniques that I later intensified in *Iphigeneia Breathes*: inserting my first-person filmmaker's perspective, and using imagination overtly as a spur to content. The catalysts for imagination in *Perhaps* came from an ongoing scholarly and artistic interest in the character of Clytemnestra (most specifically in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*), and from personal experience visiting the archaeological remains at Mycenae, particularly the largest tholos tomb, which is commonly known as the 'Treasury of Atreus,' or 'Tomb of Agamemnon.' Both of these names are widely considered to be incorrect attributions, but are still in common use.

Pausanias, writing in the 2nd century C.E., made a brief assertion about the existence of Agamemnon's grave at Mycenae, but he did not place it in the tholos tomb, which lies well outside the walls of Mycenae: "Agamemnon has his tomb [at Mycenae]…a place within [the wall], where lay Agamemnon himself and

those who were murdered with him."[6]

Heinrich Schliemann, in his description of the tholos tomb, called it 'Treasury of Atreus.' While noting that it is "commonly called in the Argolid the 'Tomb of Agamemnon,'"[7] Schliemann asserted that it was "[not] likely…that the sepulchre of Agamemnon was a monument of any great magnificence."[8] Contrary to popular belief, several sources assert that Heinrich Schliemann never specifically named any of the tombs he excavated at Mycenae as Agamemnon's, with one source repeating a purported Schliemann proclamation to that effect.[9]

The Ministry of Culture of Greece used 'Treasure of Atreus' along with 'so-called Tomb of Agamemnon' throughout its documentation for the site's World Heritage nomination,[10] and uses 'Treasure of Atreus' in its description of the tomb on its website.[11]

Regardless of attribution, the tholos tomb has a powerful physical presence, visually and emotionally. The architecture is impressive and awe-inspiring, with its size (the conical beehive shape of the tomb is 14.50 m in diameter at the base, 13.20 m high) and quality of the stonework.

I savored quiet time in the reverberant space, having been there several times when no other people were in the tholos. The interior of the tholos can seem enigmatic, impassive, almost serene (Figure 3). I filmed without knowing exactly how I would use the footage, or what story I would tell. Eventually in *Perhaps,* I chose to identify the tholos as Agamemnon's tomb, as it produced useful reverberations in connection with Clytemnestra. My voiceover does acknowledge that archaeologists say this is not Agamemnon's tomb.

Over many years, I have created an archive of footage, which I 'rediscovered' as I edited. I also revisited my archive of photographs of the tholos tomb. An image showing the rough, uneven floor (Figure 4), eventually became a catalyst in my rethinking of Clytemnestra's story.

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6. Pausanias, *Description of Greece (*Harvard University Press, 1918), 2.16.6-7.

7. H. Schliemann, *Mycenae: A Narrative of Researches and Discoveries at Mycenae and Tiryns (*John Murray, 1878), 49.

8. Ibid, 48.

9. See G. Grazadio, and E. Pezzi, "Schliemann and the So-called 'Agamemnon's Mask," *Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolicio* 48 (2006): 113-131, for discussion of this, and of the importance of a passage in *Schliemann of Troy*: *Story of a Goldseeker*: "Schliemann's reply to a contemporary scholar is reported there. The scholar had criticized him for the claim to have discovered Agamemnon's corpse. Schliemann retorted that he himself never maintained to have found Agamemnon's tomb." E. Ludwig, *Schliemann of Troy: The Story of a Goldseeker* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 119-120.

10. Ministry of Culture, Greece, Nomination of Ancient Mycenae for Inclusion on the World Heritage List, 1998, *Unesco World Heritage Nomination Documentation 941*. (1999).

11. O. Psychogiou, *Treasure of Atreus: Description* (Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2012).

Figure 3. *Tomb of Agamemnon/Treasury of Atreus. Photograph by Andrea Eis*

Figure 4. *Looking Towards the Door of the Tholos, Showing the Surface of the Floor. Photograph by Andrea Eis*

Descriptions of the tomb rarely mention the floor, which is easy to overlook, considering the intense presence emanating from the rest of the tholos. Earth and debris had been cleared from the dromos and chamber by Panayotis Stamatakes

in 1878.[12] It is highly unlikely, of course, that the current surface of the floor looks as it did Mycenaean times. To me, however, the floor's pitted, rough surface was a compelling stimulant for my imagination, once I started imagining how Clytemnestra might put this space to use.

I also photographed the small side chamber, that had possibly been used for rituals or burials. Schliemann described the inner condition of this small space:

> In this chamber is an accumulation of rubbish, from 3 ½ feet to 4 feet deep, mostly consisting of the detritus of bats' dung. By means of the two trenches, which I dug three years ago in this chamber, I found in the centre a circular depression, in the form of a large washbowl…Near this I found some large wrought calcareous stones, which seem to indicate some monument once existed in this chamber, for otherwise their presence is inexplicable.[13]

Visitors are unable to judge for themselves, as they are not allowed to enter this chamber, increasing the mystery. A sign at the side chamber's entrance used to warn, in Greek and English, to "Keep Out. Danger" (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Entrance to the Side Chamber, Undated. Photograph by Andrea Eis*

12. A. J. B. Wace, "The Date of the Treasury of Atreus," *Journal of Hellenic Studies,* 46, no. 1 (1926): 111.

13. Schliemann, *Mycenae: A Narrative of Researches and Discoveries at Mycenae and Tiryns*, 1878, 45.

In 2022, a new sign warned "No Entry," and a dog guarded against entrance, though it seemed more interested in sleeping (Figure 6). Wisely, no one dared to challenge its ability to fulfill a guard's role.

Figure 6. *Entrance to the Side Chamber, 2022. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

In the *Prologue*, a first-person commentary in voiceover, expresses what I thought Clytemnestra might have planned for Agamemnon's return. I begin my conversational voiceover musing about what it would mean if this was Agamemnon's tomb. His expected burial place would have been a powerful source of interest to Clytemnestra over many years, as she plotted her revenge on the man who had sacrificed their daughter. I focused on simple words, basic actions, using tone of voice to suggest Clytemnestra's malevolent enthusiasm and dramatic intensity.

Archaeologists have determined that this is not the tomb of Agamemnon.
I understand that.
It's not that I don't get it.

But can't you just see Clytemnestra there?
Can't you just imagine her
having them clear the dirt from the path,
having them pull open those doors,
having them push aside the previous king—
who was powerful, as powerful as Agamemnon—
but just a man, and so he died.
She would have had him pushed aside,
and have the floor swept,

and made ready for Agamemnon.[14]

A point-of-view (POV) shot (Figure 7) circles the curved inner wall of this tholos tomb that is not Agamemnon's. I invite the viewer to imagine Clytemnestra there, if this *had* been a tomb to be used for Agamemnon. Using techniques that are repeated throughout the film, the movement of the hand-held camera is unsteady, the image grainy and raw. As with many of the shots in the film, a large black border surrounds the small clip, suggestive of Clytemnestra blocking out much of the world, as she focuses in on what is important to her.

Figure 7. *The POV Walk Inside the Tholos. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

The voiceover here, and at other times throughout the film, includes sections of doubled tracks of alternative readings, set slightly off sync from each other, like warped echoes. The slight differences in the wording of these versions suggests that the past is an unstable reference—even more so in the service of the imagination.

Constructing Clytemnestra's Character

To pair with experiential knowledge, I researched Clytemnestra in more depth. I developed the rest of the script while re-reading Aeschylus's *Agamemnon.* Clytemnestra's actions are almost as hard to accept as Agamemnon's. Despite that, I found myself drawn to this flawed woman as Aeschylus portrayed her: a strong woman, who ruled in a world dominated by men.

For a play named *Agamemnon,* the titular character has ironically few lines:

14. Eis, *Perhaps*, 2017, 0:37-1:14.

only about seventy that he speaks directly, and a short passage in which he is quoted by the Chorus—all this in a play that runs over 1,600 lines in total. Clytemnestra is the core of the play, a character who acts forcefully and unapologetically. Aeschylus created a Clytemnestra with a wildly vengeful heart. She was constant in her grief, and consistent in her determination to punish Agamemnon.

She wields her power over Agamemnon in words and deeds, in ways that are caustic, shrewd, dismissive, calculating, evil, and to her, justified and incredibly satisfying. Repeatedly, Aeschylus has characters point out (in ancient Greek terms) Clytemnestra's 'male' traits, and Clytemnestra claims them for herself as well. She will not give in to the Chorus, or to Agamemnon, or to the audience's emotions. Her strength is there in Aeschylus's play in the Greek, regardless of what translation is referenced. We hear her assert her will, her determined push against men's scorn of and power over women. She spars verbally with men, expressing her intelligence, cleverness, and sardonic wit. The play's audience is pushed between sympathy (her grief and Agamemnon's responsibility are made clear) and horror.

Before Agamemnon appears, Clytemnestra tells the Chorus of his return, but they do not believe her. A verbal match ensues between her and the Leader of the Chorus, who ridicules her, saying she has been visited by a phantom spirit, or is believing rumors to be truth. Clytemnestra details the series of beacons she had devised to signal Agamemnon's return, and finishes with a convincing flourish:

> Clytemnestra *And here*
> *You have it, what a woman has to say.*
> *Let the best win out, clear to see.*
> *A small desire but all that I could want.*
>
> Leader
> *Spoken like a man, my lady, loyal,*
> *Full of self-command. I've heard your sign*
> *and now your vision.*[15]

When Agamemnon does appear, Clytemnestra bends him to her will, insisting that he walk into the palace on luxurious purple tapestries. In the Fagles translation, you can palpably sense the scorn, false praise, and sarcasm underlying Clytemnestra's words, and the confusion, frustration, and begrudging acceptance in Agamemnon's.

> Agamemnon *And where's the woman in all this lust for glory?*

15. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (Penguin Books, 1997), 351-357. I chose the Fagles translation here, as his style best fits my eventual construction of Clytemnestra's character.

Clytemnestra *But the great victor—it becomes him to give way.*
Agamemnon *Victory in this…war of ours, it means so much to you?*
Clytemnestra *Oh give way! The power is yours if you surrender,*
All of your own free will, to me!
Agamemnon *Enough!*
If you are so determined—[16]

Reimagining an Earthquake Changes Everything

The geological history of Mycenae seems to show that earthquakes in the late 13th century B.C.E., caused destruction at the Mycenaean palace. The back wall of the megaron, where the throne would have been placed, crumbled and fell into the Chavos Ravine below. Walls have been partially reconstructed at Mycenae to delineate the rooms of the palace, but a throne is not part of the reconstruction. Column bases and remains of a circular hearth are still visible (Figure 8) though they are currently covered with a protective structure

Figure 8. *The Megaron at Mycenae, Looking Towards the Presumed Location of the Throne Against the Back Wall. Photograph by Andrea Eis*

During a geological survey at Mycenae in 2014, a large worked stone fragment was discovered in the ravine that runs southwest from below the megaron's location, in the dry river bed of the Chavos River. An archaeologist has described the fragment as a portion of the seat of the Mycenaean throne,[17] though that attribution has been disputed.[18]

16. Ibid, 935-940.

17. C. Maggidis, and N. Lianos, "Mycenae–2014 Report," *Journal of Hellenic Studies: Archaeological Reports* (2014).

18. "Stone Fragment May Be Piece of Mycenean Throne,"in *Archaeology*, June 17, 2016. https://www.archaeology.org/news/4582-160617-greece-mycenaean-throne. This website of the Archaeological Institute of America, has a 2016 news story that includes

I knew about the destruction of the back wall of the megaron when working on *Perhaps*, but not about this archaeological find. An actual throne was not necessary for inspiration. For me, the archaeologically and personally disappointing emptiness that I saw in place of that throne spurred another encounter with Clytemnestra for my film.

I began imagining a different story. The central section of the film uses an omniscient narrator to present Clytemnestra's thoughts and feeling, in a doubled voiceover soundtrack with an imprecise echo, as she conjures him up. She knew he would be more interested in coming home to his kingdom, to his power, to his throne in the megaron, than to her. His re-occupation of the throne is a given, except to Clytemnestra.

> *Until [Agamemnon's return], though, this room belonged to her. She had held the power at Mycenae for far too long,*
> *to simply turn it back over to the man*
> *who had so easily served up their daughter to the gods.*[19]

POV images in this section suggest Clytemnestra pacing around Mycenae, peering from behind or over walls looking towards the megaron, a neck-twisting look up at the Lion Gate (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9. *POV Shot Peering Around a Wall Towards the Megaron. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

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a terse statement in opposition to Maggidis' claim that it was part of a throne: "The Greek Ministry of Culture agrees with a study suggesting that the artifact was part of a stone basin."

19. Eis, *Perhaps*, 2017, 2:19-2:38.

Figure 10. *POV Shot Looking up at the Lion Gate. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

My new version would find a way for Clytemnestra, fueled by her inexorable desire for revenge, to unexpectedly seal Agamemnon's fate well before he returned, without actually murdering him herself. According to Aeschylus, Clytemnestra lured Agamemnon into the bath, tangled him in a net and stabbed him to death, in a violent off-stage scene that she later describes in detail to the Chorus, with exultant pleasure, as she displays the bodies of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra:

Clytemnestra *So he goes down, and the life is bursting out of him—*
great sprays of blood, and the murderous shower
wounds me, dyes me black and I, I revel
like the Earth when the spring rains come down,
the blessed gifts of the god, and the new green spear
splits the sheath and rips to birth in glory![20]

While she had proudly admitted to killing Agamemnon (*Here I stand and here I struck…I did it all.*[21]) she also complains to the Chorus that they should have been the ones to hold Agamemnon responsible for Iphigeneia's death:

Clytemnestra *Didn't the law demand you banish him?—*
hunt him from the land for all his guilt?"[22]

20. Aeschylus, 1410-1415. For this passage, the 1926 translation by H. W. Smyth is even more graphic: "Fallen thus, he gasped away his life, and as he breathed forth quick spurts of blood, he struck me down with dark drops of gory dew." 1389-1390.

21. Aeschylus, 1398-1400.

22. Aeschylus, 1445-1446.

To narrate a different version, less bloody but still fatal for Agamemnon, I used my knowledge about the crumbled palace wall to allow Clytemnestra's vengeance to take another path, but first with a detour into film theory.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey, published an essay that became highly influential in film theory, delineating the power and purpose of the male gaze in film:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure.[23]

While this dichotomous approach, along with various other aspects of Mulvey's theory, have been augmented or shifted in the years since that essay,[24] the idea of the male gaze was still useful to me.

The shots that accompany the final voiceover in the film represent Clytemnestra projecting her fantasy, as she stares at the symbols of Agamemnon and his power— the megaron and throne. The POV shots are harsh, grainy, a stare through tall weeds, blowing wildly in the wind. Behind them is a seemingly indestructible Mycenaean wall. Eventually weeds take over the frame before a fade to black (Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11. *POV Shot at Past Weeds at the Wall. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

23. L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinemas, Feminist Film Theory (*Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 62-63.

24. See, for example, C. Manlove, "Visual 'Drive' and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock and Mulvey," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (2007): 83-108, in particular pp. 83-84.

Figure 12. *POV Shot of Weeds Filling the Frame. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

The voiceover shifts between the original first-person filmmaker's perspective, about archaeological details and imagining Clytemnestra's thoughts, to Clytemnestra herself.

> *The south side of the megaron—where archaeologists think*
> *Agamemnon's throne had stood—it all crumbled, fell into the ravine.*
> *The stone seat, the beaten earth floor, that whole side of the megaron.*
>
> *Perhaps Clytemnestra knew that her stare,*
> *after so many years of waiting,*
> *had loosened the supporting wall.*
> *Perhaps Clytemnestra knew that, if she waited,*
> *her act would prove unnecessary.*
>
> *She stared at that mountain, beyond that room,*
> *listening for the rumble of the collapse.*[25]

My journey had eventually led me to absorb archaeological knowledge, archaeologists' suppositions, the power of place, a playwright's approach to character (as well as a translator's approach), and film theory into my imagination, to give Clytemnestra an alternative.

25. Eis, *Perhaps*, 2017.

Iphigeneia Breathes: Experience and Research

My next film also developed out of weaving together many strands into imagining an alternative to an ancient Greek woman's fate: new knowledge (*on pronunciation and breathing)*, experiencing nature (*the physical palimpsests of Greece)*, Greek words and their meanings (*linguistic and textual research: winds)*; nature sounds (*cicada songs: life, death, abundance, and insistence)*, and the body, voice, and story (*embodiment: the fusion of speech and physical action*).

On Pronunciation and Breathing

Iphigeneia Breathes, which I completed at the end of 2021, narrates aspects of Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* (405 B.C.E.), but as with *Perhaps,* I turned the ancient story in a different direction. Inspired by unexpected new knowledge—learning the modern Greek pronunciation of Iphigeneia's name—I imagined an alternate ending to Iphigeneia's story. The film intertwines the human voice, human breathing, and the winds.

In 2019, I accompanied theatre and filmmaking students from Oakland University on a study abroad trip to Greece. Over several weeks, they rehearsed an adaptation of Euripides' *Orestes,* for a performance in a small outdoor amphitheatre on the island of Hydra (Figure 13). The director, Karen Sheridan, who had written the adaptation of *Orestes*[26] that the students performed, asked a Greek actor, Stathis Grapsas, to train the students in the modern Greek pronunciation of the ancient Greek names in the play. Most of their audience would be Greek, and would themselves know and use the modern Greek pronunciations.

26. K. Sheridan, *Orestes* (Unpublished Play Script, 2019).

Figure 13. *PR photo for Orestes. Left to right: Oakland University (Michigan) Students Dryden Zurawski, Connor Rajan, and Mariah Colby. Hydrama Theatre and Arts Centre, Hydra, Greece, June 2019. Photograph by Andrea Eis*

My own experiences with the pronunciation of Greek names became essential to *Iphigeneia Breathes*, and led me to consider inserting my first-person voiceover into the structure. When I was a classics major in undergraduate school, I had learned to say Iphigeneia with a tight, hard pronunciation: *If-i-je-NI-a.*[27] After noting that in the voiceover, I explored it in the context of breathing:

> *I can breathe out before saying it, empty my lungs,*
> *And still get her name said.*
> *If-i-je-NI-a.*[28]

From Grapsas, I learned that in the modern Greek pronunciation, her name is soft and lyrical: *if-ee-YEN-yah*.

> *To say her name in modern Greek, I **have** to breathe.*

27. Phonetic spelling taken from a pronunciation guide in Euripides, *Orestes (*J. Harrison & H. Eckhart, 2012), 110.

28. Eis, *Iphigeneia Breathes*, 2021.

If-ee-YEN-yah.
It is a lyrical name, a musical name.
If-ee-YEN-yah.
A soft exhalation, gliding forward.[29]

The fact that breathing is required to say Iphigeneia's name helped me rethink the path of my film, but I did not sort out how that could change Iphigeneia's story until months later. During that time, I explored the physical palimpsests of Greece, researched Greek words for wind, and delved into stories of the cicadas, while experiencing the relentlessness of their songs as a soundtrack to Greek summers.

Physical Palimpsests of Greece

I have spent a great deal of time in Greece over many years, in cities, at archaeological sites, in rural areas, and on islands. Being in Greece can be like a living in a palimpsest—there are always traces of the past that the present seeks to obliterate, and the past is continually reused for a new purpose in the present.

While the physicality of ancient ruins has activated much of my interest, I have also become engrossed with the way that elements of nature can connect me to Greece's ancient past. The natural world of Greece makes up nearly all of the images in *Iphigeneia Breathes*: the constant yet varied flow of the sea; the fluttering, stilled, and dying flowers; the visual impact of the winds on trees; the intense cicada songs.

The myths of the past inhabit the same place as we do, as do the mountains. Natural elements appear or sound the same as they did in ancient Greece. This film does not have a traditional script or dialogue, so these natural elements serve as objective correlatives suggesting thoughts, emotions, and ideas.

Linguistic and Textual Research: Winds

Linguistic and textual research was also significant to the imagery, construction, and meaning of *Iphigeneia Breathes*. As with *Perhaps,* I read multiple translations of Greek plays and epics, and also made my own translations of a few key passages. I delved into detailed analyses of Greek words that seemed to relate to my ideas; and conversely, I also used the study of specific Greek words to generate ideas. In *Iphigeneia Breathes,* the research at times forms only a latent subtext; at other times it serves as a central element in the meaning of the film.

Experiencing the strong presence of the winds on Greek mountains and islands made 'wind' a generative stimulus. I had long known the story, of the warriors headed for Troy being stalled at Aulis, due to variously explained issues,

29. Eis, *Iphigeneia Breathes*, 2021.

such as the absence of wind or too much wind.[30] Researching various Greek words for wind, I found that there were ten Homeric words for various kinds of winds, from breezes to blasts:

> The semantic range of Homeric wind is broad, ranging from the most neutral and pervasive term, ἄνεμος (wind), to πνοιή (breath, breeze, blast), αὔρη (breeze), οὖρος (favorable wind for sailing), ἀϋτμή/ἀϋτμήν (breath of wind), ῥιπή (rush of wind), ἀήτης (blast), ἀέλλη (whirling or stormy wind), θύελλα (rushing stormwind), λαῖλαψ (storm).[31]

In *Iphigeneia at Aulis,* Agamemnon uses the 'neutral' ἄνεμος when he speaks of lack of winds at Aulis:

> Agamemnon *The birds are still at any rate,*
> *and the sea is calm, hushed are the winds*
> *and silence broods over Euripus.*[32]

A discovery central to *Iphigeneia Breathes* was the myriad uses for πνεῦμα (pneuma), another word for wind that I had looked up in a hefty copy of an unabridged version of the Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon. The word πνεῦμα was used not only for wind, but also for breathing, life, breath, spirit, the air we breathe.[33] This poetic concatenation of meanings, and the linguistic fusion of human qualities with the power of nature, eventually filtered into my film, sometimes foregrounded, and sometimes buried within it.

Cicada Songs: Life, Death, Abundance, and Insistence

Cicadas had become a fascinating aural presence for me in Greece, and I recorded cicada songs on several trips to Greece. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates speaks of "the charm of their Siren voices"[34], an opinion not held by many who currently experience cicadas, but one that was intriguingly close to my own experience.

The origin myth for the cicadas (their name in ancient Greek is the onomatopoetic τέττῑξ – tettix) was that cicadas were originally men who were so

30. A. C. Purves, "Wind and Time in Homeric Epic," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140, no. 2 (2010): 328 and footnote 12.

31. Ibid, 326, footnote 7.

32. Euripides, "Iphigenia in Aulis," in *The Plays of Euripides,* Vol II (George Bell and Sons, 1891), 9-11.

33. H. G. Liddell, and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon Based on the German Work of Francis Passow, with Corrections and Additions by Henry Drisler* (Harper & Bros, 1849), 1198.

34. Plato, "Phaedrus," in *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9* (Harvard University Press, 1925), 259.

enthralled with the singing of the Muses that they forgot to eat or drink, and so they died. The Muses, in turn, brought these men back as cicadas, to enthrall (or annoy) the men still living.

The cicadas' mythic cycles of life and death hint at the life and death stories in *Iphigeneia Breathes*. I used cicada song in opposing patterns in the film, loudly present when the voiceover spoke of silence; completely absent when the voiceover spoke of the abundant, insistent presence of their songs. Their natural music also alternated with the composed musical soundtrack of the film.[35]

Embodiment: The Fusion of Speech and Physical Action

Human speech is always embodied, in the literal sense that the work of the body is necessary to make speech heard; the written word is similarly embodied in the physical actions needed to create letters and words. The power that language has over physical actions, as well as the cascading results of those actions, are abundant in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis.* Calchas' prophecy spurs Agamemnon's duplicitous letter to Clytemnestra, telling her to bring their daughter Iphigeneia to Aulis to marry Achilles, when she actually is to be sacrificed. Iphigeneia pleads with her father for her life, then voices her agreement to be sacrificed.

Human speech is essential to *Iphigeneia Breathes*, and not only because both pronunciations of Iphigeneia's name are explained and used in the film. Saying Iphigeneia's name in modern Greek is what shifts human speech into a literally embodied force of change in the film. It is the breathing required by her name that eventually spurred me to change her story.

The Arc from *Iphigeneia at Aulis* to *Iphigeneia Breathes*

Returning to the Voice of the Filmmaker

As I worked on editing my Iphigeneia film, I began rethinking my original film script, based so heavily in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. Did I really want to just retell the narrative of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* as it was? Did I have another opportunity for imagining something else? Ultimately, I conceived a structure alternating contemporary and ancient storytelling. An anonymous narrator gives a highly condensed and biased version of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*; my first-person filmmaker's commentary is at first experiential, then imaginative. I eventually formed my film by intertwining past and present with the winds, human

35. The music for *Iphigeneia Breathes* was composed and performed by Terry Herald.

breathing, life, the natural world, and the Greek language, ancient and modern. The film's interlaced structure and content reflect the serpentine path of scholarly and experiential research that led me to imagine a new ending. As the imagined possibility surfaces in the film, I make that possibility 'happen.'

Telling the Story: Structure and Content

The film opens with a pan over a Greek and English text of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* (Figure 14) to set the context. A short prologue follows, fading in on the various words that πνεῦμα can express, setting up the pattern of variations throughout the film. A first-person voiceover narrates island experience—the blowing and stilling of winds, the silence and cicadas. Imagery and audio are in opposition (such as trees blowing in the wind while the voiceover talks about the winds being stilled). The oppositions that occur throughout the film imply the fluidity of perception, and a questioning of knowledge and experience, which ultimately opens an aperture for imagination.

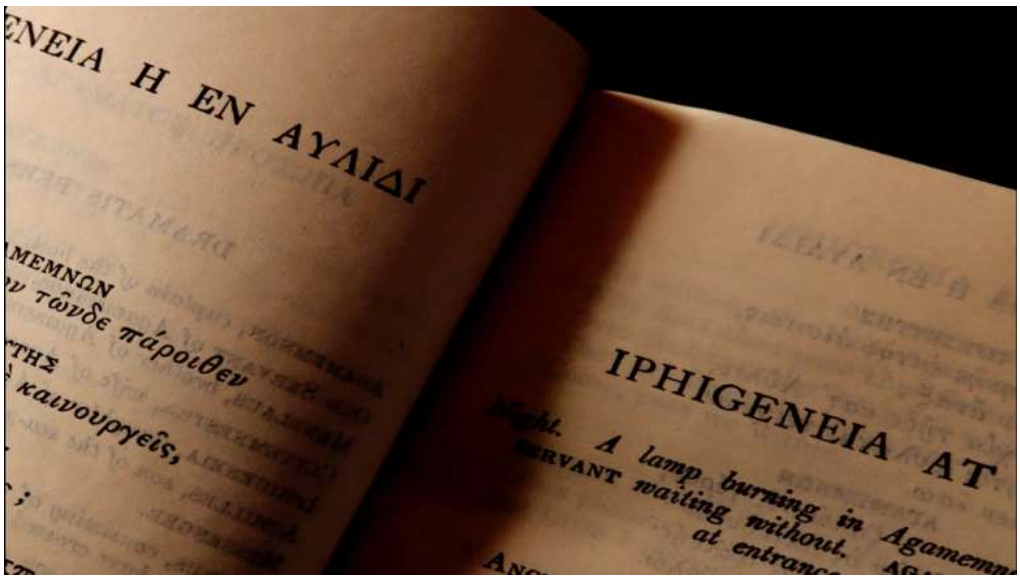

Figure 14. *The Opening Pan of the Greek/English Text of* Iphigeneia at Aulis. *Film Still by Andrea Eis*

An intertitle pulls viewers back thousands of years, leaving the musings of the filmmaker behind. The frame fills with a black sea rolling in hypnotic, slow-motion waves coming straight towards the viewer (Figure 15). An omniscient—though not totally neutral—voiceover narrates a condensed version of the Euripidean story. The voiceover ends speaking of thousands of Greeks and Trojans dying, while the footage ironically lightens to show a blue sea, lit by the sun (Figures 16 and 17).

Figures 15, 16, and 17. *The Dark Waves that Slowly Lighten to a Brighter Sea. 2:10 to 3:51. Film Stills by Andrea Eis*

With a change of vocal tone, the narration moves into first-person. explaining the new knowledge: the modern Greek pronunciation of Iphigeneia's name (*a soft exhalation, gliding forward*), which is contrasted with Iphigeneia first being reluctantly 'propelled' towards sacrifice, and her sudden change of heart[36] when she agrees to be sacrificed:

> [Iphigeneia], *on the other hand, was propelled forward.*
> *Until she takes things into her own hands,*
> *and chooses her death.*
>
> *Heroically.*
> *For Greece.*
> *Supposedly.*[37]

Matched with a close-up of randomly strewn, intensely colored flowers spread across the frame, these lines of the voiceover are punctuated by a reverse series of dissolves, as one by one the flowers disappear, until there are none left by the end. All that remains is the rough stone wall upon which the flowers had been spread (Figures 18 and 19). This slow visual and aural march to death is followed by a defense of Helen, the alleged cause of this need for Iphigeneia's sacrifice. As with Iphigeneia's name, Helen's modern Greek name is softer and more lyrical (*eh-LAY-nee*) than in ancient Greek. Cicadas compete with the voiceover. An assertion follows that neither Iphigeneia nor the warriors are sacrificed for Eleni's sake: *Eleni never asks for any of this.* Helen's lack of culpability takes on even more resonance in a later scene on Agamemnon's motivations and male responsibility for the war.

Figures 18 and 19. *Strewn Flowers and the Dissolve on the Final Flower. Film Stills by Andrea Eis*

We return to the warriors at Aulis, their increasing impatience with the long

36. In *Iphigeneia Changes Her Mind*, Sausone discusses Aristotle "notoriously" averring, in his *Poetics,* that Iphigeneia's tragic character shows inconsistency by changing her mind (D. Sausone, "Iphigeneia Changes Her Mind," *Illinois Classical Studies* 16, no. 1/2 (1991): 161), and other ideas that have been suggested as dramatic motivations for Iphigeneia's decision (Ibid, 161-62).

37. Eis, *Iphigeneia Breathes*, 2021, 4:05-5:19.

wait for the winds, their seething frustration. Nature images again serve as objective correlatives, physical representations for what the warriors are feeling and thinking. A peaceful, almost mythical white horse, wanders through a golden field and stops at the edge of a sunken wall of haphazardly strewn stones. The horse calmly raises its head for a moment (Figure 20), as if responding to a small ruffle of wind, then drops it again to sniff at the ground. (*To the warriors waiting at Aulis, the stilling of the winds was a relief. At first.*[38])

Figure 20. *A Horse Responding to a Breeze. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

Unsettled imagery follows—a tangle of plants, weeds silhouetted against dramatic backlit clouds, and a flower protected by a ring of spiky thorns, shaking anxiously in a saturated, high contrast shot, as if in direct correlation to the warriors' growing anger (Figure 21).

Figure 21. *A Thorn-protected Flower. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

38. Eis, *Iphigeneia Breathes,* 2021, 6:12-6:20.

This passage focusing on the warriors' emotions leads to one speaking of Agamemnon's motives and ambition. Starting small within the frame of a large black field, waves once again roll relentlessly towards the viewer. The image slowly increases in size, to fill the frame, ending with a fade out as the scope of the resulting tragedy unfolds. Agamemnon's ambitions and the desires of Menelaus are to blame.

For Agamemnon,
the sacrifice of
his daughter's life is necessary.

To get those warriors moving.
To give them their reason for being.
To give him his reason for leading.

They rush forward
to what, for many,
is the sacrifice of their lives.

Sacrificed for Agamemnon.

For Menelaus.[39]

In the next segment, the camera first pans across the folds of a crumpled bedsheet. The palpable sound of the cicadas, though not heard on the soundtrack at this point, is referenced in the voiceover as '*a physical weight, a temporal wait*.' Vivid pink flowers suggest the beauty, power, and fragility of life, and the inevitability of death, as they are held, softly crushed, dropped on a white bedspread, set in a line (Figures 22, 23 and 24) during the voiceover.

Figures 22, 23, and 24. *Flower Images. Film Stills by Andrea Eis*

Wait.
For Agamemnon
to sacrifice one woman—
a girl, really—
so a goddess will restore the winds.
So they can sail to Troy.

39. Ibid, 7:05-7:36.

The songs of the cicadas are abundant.
Insistent.[40]

A black frame fills the screen, as a voiceover invites viewers to use their imagination:

Just suppose.
Just imagine.
If it had been different.[41]

And what to imagine? Iphigeneia gives the warriors a different task. She has them say her name over and over, like an incantation—in the modern Greek pronunciation, so that they have to breathe out. With thousands of warriors, and thousands of repetitions of her name, a wind is created that fills the sails.

Embedded in the Present

Imagination Breaks Through a Barrier

> Wind in bodies is called breath, outside bodies it is called air. It is the most powerful of all [bodily nourishments] and it is in all, and it is worthwhile examining its power…[it is] invisible to sight, though visible to reason. For what can take place without it? In what is it not present? What does it not accompany?[42]

Originally, I wrote a script about Agamemnon deciding not to sacrifice Iphigeneia, and then asking her to start an incantation of her name to bring the winds. It was not long before I turned away from the male lead, the male hero, to imagine what a woman could do. At first, I did not go as far with the film's narrative as to imagine Iphigeneia changing the course of history (or myth) when she decides to lead the incantation, other than saving herself from sacrifice. However, this film became embedded in my present in ways that I did not expect. In my mind, the impact of multiple traumas in the world became inextricably connected with my film.

In May of 2020, George Floyd, pleading to the police that he could not breathe, was slowly, painfully, contemptuously murdered. For a long period of time, I had to stop working on *Iphigeneia Breathes.* I did not know how to continue making a film about breathing, after George Floyd had that precious ability viciously stolen from him. The pandemic increased relentlessly, also stealing

40. Ibid, 7:52-8:18.

41. Ibid, 8:20-8:26.

42. Hippocrates, "Breaths," in *Hippocrates, Vol. II* (William Heinemann Ltd, 1923), III.4-16.

people's abilities to breathe, until ventilators were their only hope, and then of no hope. And thousands in closely packed crowds, performing their own intense incantations, became terrifying and dangerous forces.

What brought me back to editing, to finishing the film, was a re-visioning of my re-visioning. Could the assembled warriors, saying Iphigeneia's name repeatedly and with increasing intensity, be led to realize that there was a choice to be made? Could I use the embodied word as a literal breath of life? By shifting the results of breathing to a positive result—the warriors heading home instead of to Troy—I could imagine a past in which war was avoided, people were not sacrificed because of the beliefs of others, because of the ambitions of others, or because people wanted to use their power over others. Perhaps, just perhaps, a new outcome could be the result of the actions of a woman leading. My improbably optimistic but realistically questioning perspective formed the final message.

A Man's Voice, A Woman's Voice, and Hope

The viewer is invited to join with me in imagining the warriors' incantation of Iphigeneia's name, paired with words describing the winds, and flowers floating in slow motion through the frame, and settling to stillness. The *If-ee-YEN-yas* echo, slightly off sync.

Soft If-ee-YEN-yas.
Nearly silent If-ee-YEN-yas.
Great gusts of If-ee-YEN-yas.
A surge of If-ee-YEN-yas.

All of them breathing,
as one.
The sails fill with their voices,
their breathing.
While she,
of the lyrical breathing name,
will herself be able
to continue breathing.[43]

Over a "sea" of thick leaves, oversaturated in color, turning in all directions, elegantly curved but edged with thorns (Figure 25), and with "abundant, insistent" cicadas on the soundtrack, the possibilities emerge:

And maybe, when the embodied winds die down,
If-ee-YEN-ya *says her name again.*

43. Eis, *Iphigeneia Breathes,* 2021, 8:48-9:27.

If a man's voice can send them to war,
perhaps a woman's voice can turn them towards home.
If-ee-YEN-ya *would not die.*
Thousands would not die.[44]

Figure 25. *A "Sea" of Leaves. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

The cicadas fade out, the sounds of waves fade in, there are three more, magic-suggestive repetitions of *if-ee-YEN-ya.* The cicada sound returns, and intertitles appear:

Thousands of years later.

Sitting by the water
on an island in Greece

I imagine

that
Iphigeneia
breathes.[45]

The film ends with sea glass being gathered up and then dropped from my hand in slow motion (Figure 26), palpably visualizing the past in the shards of glass whose edges have been smoothed by water and time. The slow-motion sound of the falling glass, in a rare synchronous audio passage, adds a heightened intensity. The sound continues after the image has faded to black.

44. Ibid, 9:28-10:01.
45. Ibid, 10:37-10:45.

Figure 26. *Dropping Sea Glass. Film Still by Andrea Eis*

Conclusion

The embodiment of Iphigeneia's name in the warriors' breaths changes history, and the Trojan War never happens—because a woman takes steps to change a horrendous fate. Finding the meaning of Iphigeneia's name—strong-born, mighty[46]—had given me the sense that she could be one to change her world. In my telling, embodied language, in a word that is inseparably connected with breathing, living, the wind, and strength, saves Iphigeneia's life, and the lives of thousands of Greeks and Trojans. I found a way to take in and take on the pain that was everywhere in the world around me, by making a film about changing a mythic past. My film, finally finished in December of 2021, serves as an embodiment of my fragile hope for a better future, imagined by one woman and acted upon by another.

My journey as a filmmaker through Iphigeneia's story was accompanied by a complex mix of scholarly, experiential, linguistic, and textual research, but also by unexpected and personal emotional intensity, the contexts of which are not referenced for viewers. As an artist, I know that I cannot control the connotations or associations of my work, and I should not expect to. At best, I construct and frame my own perspective and craft a significance for my images and words with which I can live.

In 1998, Robert Andreach, writing about Ellen McLaughlin's *Iphigeneia and*

46. See C. S. Jerram's Introduction to Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris,* in which he discusses the moon-goddess of early inhabitants of Greece (prior to 12th century B.C.E) who became identified with Artemis. One of her epithets was Iphigeneia: "[meaning] the 'strong-born, that is, the 'mighty.'"

Other Daughters, said that McLaughlin reinvents and re-centers Greek plays. In Andreach's explanation for how McLaughlin changes the perspective of the plays in more than one way, I found a kinship with my film:

> The first is that for history to change, its victims – those excluded from it or sacrificed to it – must act. The second is that they do not have to act with the motivation of the dominant culture…Killing does not have to be the sole reason for wanting to create history.[47]

Acknowledgments

My deep thanks to Professors Steven Rost and Julia Yezbick for their valuable insights and thoughtful comments on rough cuts of *Iphigeneia Breathes*.

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47. R. Andreach, "Ellen McLaughlin's 'Iphigenia and Other Daughters': A Classical Trilogy from a Contemporary Perspective," *Comparative Literature Studies* 35, no. 4 (1998): 391.

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