

Jos de Mul, *Destiny Domesticated: the Rebirth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Technology*, Suny Press, Albany NY 2014; 334 pp.; ISBN 9781438449715

In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner argued that tragedy, both as a literary genre and a specific worldview, is behind us once and for all. On the contrary, the thesis of this book is that «especially in modern technology all elements are present to reawaken tragic awareness» (p. XXI). Our technological control over nature has led to some impressive success, but «[t]aking God's place turned out to be less simple than we had hoped» (p. 19). Such a thesis is defended on the basis of several examples. Firstly, current events of the last decade such as the tragicomic adventures of the politician James Stockdale, the murder of Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh in 2004, and the lawsuit regarding Terri Schiavo. Secondly, de Mul deals with the classical Greek tragedy, with the well-known *Antigone*, *Medea*, and the *Prometheus* trilogy as well as with the lesser known *Oresteia*. Thirdly, the author does not neglect those philosophers who have to some extent reflected on the tragic. Besides the classical thinkers Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Plessner, even Martha Nussbaum and Bruno Latour deserve to be mentioned. From the former, he borrows the idea of the fragility of human happiness; from the latter, de Mul learns to recognize the modern predilection for dichotomies. Finally, the author treats contemporary tragedy writers like W. F. Hermans and Michel Houellebecq. As de Mul himself states in the foreword, this book represents the intersection between three themes that he has discussed separately in earlier works: the human struggle for happiness and harmony, the human mortality and fragility, and the uncontrollable nature of technology.

In the first chapter – *Destiny Domesticated* – de Mul defines tragedy as a specific form of suffering, since «not every form of suffering is tragic [...]. He who chooses to do evil and suffers for the punishment he gets for it is not tragic, just like the innocent victim of an accident or a crime is not tragic» (p. 14). Rather, tragedy arises when necessity and freedom come together in a paradoxical way. According to him, every culture has its own strategies to domesticate the destiny. The tragic attitude toward fate¹ consists in a *heroic acceptance* of it. Christianity can be seen as a *negation* of fate's existence, or at least of its contingent character. Modern man, with the rise of natural sciences and technology, aims at actively *controlling* fate. Finally, in postmodern society it has become clear that «total control over fate was a dangerous illusion» (p. 19).

¹ For the author, there is a strong correlation between the notions of fate, chance, and tragedy. While the concept of fate (*moira* or *heimarmene* in Greek, *fatum* in Latin) expresses the inevitable necessity of that which befalls us, the concept of chance (*tuche* in Greek, *fortuna* in Latin) reveals a partially opposing connotation, since it presupposes human responsibility and freedom. These two attitudes are both present in tragedy.

The second chapter – *Chance Living* – is devoted to the notion of chance. For the author, our happiness is fragile because existence is not only determined by our own actions, but it abounds with events that fall outside our freedom of choice (p. 27). In our risk society, our lives are more and more «out of control». Yet, de Mul affirms that there are several reasons to not only regret this rich source of human tragedy. Happiness, in fact, often enters our life through the door of chance and, moreover, one has to consider that «chance is not something that merely befalls man, but that man himself essentially *is* time and chance» (p. 35).

In the third chapter – *Fatal Politics* – it is argued that Europe is the tragic continent where religion and rationality are still in conflict, and where conflicts arise within each of them. Tragedy, however, is not passivity and resignation, but deals with the capacity to find the right balance between control and surrender. In a multicultural society, for instance, tragedies «do not only point out the catastrophic logic of violence; they also show us some of the *technai* that would advance prudent ways of acting» (p. 53).

In *The birth of tragedy* Nietzsche affirms that classical tragedy has become an entirely incomprehensible phenomenon even before Socrates and Plato, but in the fourth chapter – *The (Non-)reproducibility of the Tragic* – de Mul contends that tragedy can still teach us something today (p. 62). (Post)modern society is characterized by a process of *democratization* and *secularization* of the tragic. Such a process is made through technology and is experienced as overcoming the modern «separative cosmology» (p. 68).²

The fifth chapter – *The art of suffering* – deals with the «paradox of tragedy», which consists in the fact that «we derive pleasure from observing the gruesome truth of our existence in tragedies» (p. 81). The author rejects all moralistic – we feel joy because we share suffering with the other –, egoistic – we feel joy because we are not those who suffer –, and «psychotherapeutic» – tragic catharsis as a «cleansing of mental suffering» – interpretations of the paradox. Rather, he embraces the idea that tragedy is a form of (artistic) sublimation, which is not simply a «defense mechanism» against destructive forces, but also a capacity to qualitatively transform them into a «pleasurable aesthetic guise» (p. 113).

In the sixth chapter – *Awesome Technologies* –, de Mul deals with the main thesis of the book. The *Ode to Man* at the beginning of Sophocles' *Antigone* presents technology, which enables man to be awesome as a force that is not only ambiguous, but also outside his control (p. 130). Similarly, (post)modern technologies are highly ambiguous phenomena and thereby a domain for the tragic. Firstly, because they both have to do with freedom and necessity. Secondly, since (post)modern technologies are ubiquitous, they contribute to the *universaliza-*

² The author calls this phenomenon «pollution», which occurs when the cosmological distinctions of a specific culture are not respected. In this sense, tragedy is all about pollution (p. 84).

tion of the tragic. According to the author, this can be illustrated with reference to medical technologies: the fate of vegetative patients, for instance, is often surrounded by tragic (public) conflicts (p. 137).

The seventh chapter – *Tragic Parenthood* – is largely devoted to Euripide's tragedy *Medea*. Medea, who kills her own children to avenge her husband's betrayal, is not just a victim of a fate that takes place within her. On a closer inspection, in fact, she continually reflects on her actions (p. 160). For this reason, Medea is the paradigm of the tragic hero, who always maintains a certain room for maneuvering. In (post)modernity, it is true that man is thought to be completely autonomous and free. Yet, there is a certain continuity between the conception of tragic and (post)modern man. The great development of science and technologies, in fact, instigates fundamental doubts concerning human autonomy and freedom.

In the last chapter – *Fateful Machines* – the question is to what extent the ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) have an impact on our moral autonomy. Actions with morals charge are delegated more and more to computers, both on the level of means and goals. According to the author, however, there are valid reasons to doubt whether the delegation of moral actions to computers truly undermines the moral agency of human beings (p. 213). For the German philosopher, Helmuth Plessner, man is «artificial by nature», in the sense that all our intimate ideas and motives are technologically mediate. If we tried to regain control of all aspect of morality, then we would fail to appreciate not only the nature of technology, but our own nature: «the challenge for [computer] ethics is to prevent the heterogeneous field of forces of living morality from calcifying into a blinding functioning system» (p. 216).

The long *Exodus* deals with Nietzsche's considerations on tragedy and with Michel Houellebecq's novels. Nietzsche's response to Western nihilism is no less nihilistic, according to the author. The German philosopher, in fact, considers art and music in particular as an escape from reality. On the contrary, de Mul affirms that if we want to find a domain in which tragedy comes to the foreground as *a real, everyday experience*, we have to turn our attention to (post)modern technologies (p. 227). Referring to Houellebecq's novel *The possibility of an island*, he states that «[t]he novel shows us why our finite life full of suffering is worth »drinking till the last drop«. And why the immortal life of our trans-human clones might very well be less pleasant than trans-humanists think» (p. 256).

The most important merit of the book is to propose a convincing definition of man and his relation to technology. With regard to the first aspect, de Mul occupies a middle position between the modern philosophies of the subject and the postmodern philosophies which have deconstructed it. As opposed to the Cartesian transparent and self-evident *cogito*, he argues that there are forces

inside and outside man which make us often act against our own expectations. Unlike the contemporary heirs of the masters of suspicion Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, he does not believe that the subject is a mere illusion. The tragic definition of the subject is halfway between these two exaggerations. The tragic man is at the same time powerful and powerless, autonomous and limited, strong and fragile, and there is a surprising continuity between the ancient Greek man and the contemporary human being. Maybe the truth is that we have always been tragic – we have never been modern – but for a long period we have acted *as if* it was the case. As regards our relation to technology, too, de Mul's position is halfway between two extremes. In contrast to a certain – especially continental – philosophy of technology of the twentieth century, represented by authors like Heidegger, Ellul, and Marcuse, he does not think that technology is intrinsically destructive for man. Yet it does not mean that technology is simply neutral, according to him. The tragic man deals with technology without unjustified fear, but he is aware of its power.

Thanks to this clear perspective, the text can have a relevant role in the contemporary philosophical debate on technology. Although it was originally published in Dutch in 2006, its ideas are current more than ever. Let's consider, for instance, the debate on the automated treatment of the personal data in the domain of ICTs. De Mul's perspective would be extraneous both to the enthusiasts that announced «the end of theory»³ and those who see in this phenomenon the risk of a Foucaultian «algorithmic governmentality».⁴ According to him, the response would not consist into a passive resignation nor into a radical refuse, but in the effort to maintain a room of maneuvering for individuals open. As Latour quoted by de Mul himself says, «[w]herever we want to go fast by establishing tracks so that a goal can race along them whistling like a high-speed train, morality dislocates the tracks and recall to existence all the lost sidings» (p. 216).

However, in addition to these merits, there is also a limit, which consists, to put it paradoxically, in a too optimistic perspective on the tragic. Firstly, insofar as the author insists on concepts like that of tragic irony and tragic wisdom, which seem quite extraneous to the original meaning of the tragic as such. According to him, tragic humor arises when one laughs *despite* the drama (p. 54). But this is never the case of tragedy in a proper sense. Moreover, tragic in itself

³ See Chris Anderson, «The End of Theory: the Data Deluge makes the scientific Methods obsolete», in *Wired* 16.07 (2008), http://archive.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory. Accessed on August 20, 2014.

⁴ See Antoinette Rouvroy, Thomas Berns, «Gouvernementalité algorithmique et perspectives d'émancipation: le disparate comme condition d'individuation par la relation?», in *Réseaux* 31.177 (2013), pp. 163-196.

does not offer any «rational understanding» nor does it call for to «act prudently» (Ibid.). Rather, these are typical philosophical attitudes, according to the Socratic and Platonic model of rational wisdom. Hence, by charging the tragic with such positive and constructive values, de Mul is somehow missing its specificity, which consists in the absolute impossibility to give any account of human suffering. Tragic pain is simply inconsolable and the tragic hero will never accept his destiny. Secondly, one could argue that in our relationship with (post)modern technologies a tragic attitude is not enough. The universalization of the tragic we are assisting is often accompanied by its concealment. If the rebirth of tragedy is evident in the public debates concerning new medical treatments, climate changes, etc., this is not the case for the many technologies which are present everywhere in our daily life. Behind the smart technologies, for instance, there is a tragic dimension that needs to be unveiled.⁵ For this reason, we could say that the rebirth of tragedy out of the spirit of postmodern technology will be possible just on the basis of an ideological and rational criticism.

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⁵ In their «The Like Economy: social Buttons and the Data-intensive Web», appeared on *Media & Society* in 2013, Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond consider the process of decentralization which permits to Facebook to monetize the created data flows and links. Through the Like button, Facebook is not just enabling social interactivity on the Web, but it is also intensifying it beyond its natural borders: «Each like can potentially generate more likes, shares and comments when exposed to a particular social formation of Facebook friends and can therefore be considered as scalable. In this way, the Like button not only enables the materialization and metrification of affective responses – it is designed to intensify them as well».