



COMÉDIE
FRANÇAISE



PATHÉLIVE

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS




RACINE

BRITANNICUS

DIRECTED BY **STÉPHANE BRAUNSCHWEIG**

ACT IV SCENE 2

FROM 1H34'58 TO 1H38'51 (18 SHOTS)



In Act III, Nero had Britannicus arrested and also ordered Burrhus to arrest his mother, whom he believes to be plotting with his political rival, who is also his rival in love. Ignoring Burrhus' advice, Agrippine confronts Nero in a long tirade, in which she reminds him of the lengths she went to in order to put him on the throne, thus simultaneously arguing her own cause and railing against the ingratitude Nero has shown by keeping her at a distance. But this argumentative strategy proves to be ill-judged: the emperor finds his mother's speech "tiring" and he resolves to pursue his murderous plans under the mask of reconciliation.

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I. AVERTED GAZES

In *Britannicus* dialogues primarily take the form of confrontation (the *agon* of classical theatre) and scene 2 of Act IV develops an extended mother/son confrontation where Agrippine uses a barrage of arguments to win back her place of favour with the emperor. The antagonism between them is primarily political: it is based on the question of power – its conquest and exercise. Agrippine reproaches Nero for his “ingratitude”, illustrated by his keeping her at a distance, his exiling of Pallas, Agrippine’s advisor, and his (justified) suspicion that she is supporting Britannicus against him. The staging chooses to accentuate the rivalry between the two characters, particularly in the positioning of their bodies and the divergence of their gazes. In the sequence established by the close-up shot (1), which shows Dominique Blanc in profile, and the two-person shot filmed from an oblique angle to the stage (2), it is striking to see how strongly divergent their gazes remain, despite the fact they are engaged in a discussion. Agrippine is anxiously staring into space, nervously holding her hand to her mouth, while Nero listens to her without looking at her, or only occasionally doing so. As a result, each character seems to be lost in his or her own thoughts and obsessions, with the staging entering into a more psychological dimension. While Agrippine describes Nero (2), evoking his naturally hard character, Laurent Stocker embodies the emperor with a particularly cold and disturbing immobility and stiffness. The framing choices reinforce the simplicity and purity of the staging while underlining the chromatic contrasts: the two figures stand out against a somewhat abstract background, Agrippine’s white shirt against a grey background and Nero

in his black suit against the white rectangle of the door.



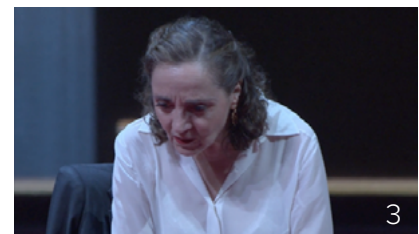
Averted gazes, reverie and confinement: *Gertrud* by Carl Theodor Dreyer, *The Sacrifice* by Andrei Tarkovsky



“You do not deceive me, I see all your plays:



You are ungrateful and have always been so.
From your earliest years, my care and tenderness
Drew no more from you than a feigned caress.
There was no way to your heart, and in your hardness
You sought only to quench my kindness.



How unhappy I am! And by what misfortune
Should all my cares make me unwelcome?
I have only one son....

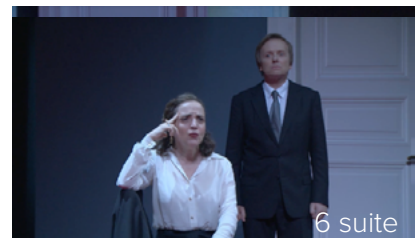
In the third shot, the tight framing shows us Agrippine's spite, clearly legible on her face, which is turned towards the ground, and the movement of her closed fist accompanying the sentence "I have only one son": this is not the loving mother talking but the woman who believed she could rule through her only heir, the woman who has "invested" everything in his advancement and who, despite this strategy, sees herself excluded from power. The political dimension of the relationship between Agrippine and Nero far outweighs the maternal aspect: the distance between the actors and the stiffness of their bodies is diametrically opposed to the effusiveness and bursts of pathos that one would expect from a mother-son relationship, even when antagonistic. In shot 4, Agrippine's speech continues off-camera while the camera frames Nero's face staring into space, as if unmoved by his mother's reminder of the sacrifices she says she made for him. There is a hint of weariness to Agrippine's spite, expressed again by her downturned gaze (shot 6) and then the mention of the possibility of her own death. A panning shot accompanies the actress's movement, seen alone in the frame, with her silhouette standing out against the background of the two doors, which are lit slightly differently. The simplicity of the composition all the more effectively brings out the subtlety of the acting. In her uttering of the line "Take my life too", the actress expresses all at once the acceptance that her political ambitions are no more, the fatigue she feels after her struggles and sacrifices, but also, perhaps more profoundly, the sad awareness of her finite nature.



...O hear me heaven now,
Did I ever utter a prayer that was not for
him alone?



Remorse, fear, danger, nothing stood in my
way;
I overcame his scorn; I looked away
From the misfortunes that were foretold;



I did what needed to be done to see you
reign.
You have taken away my freedom,
take my life too If that is your will.
Provided angry Rome at my demise
Does not reclaim from you the hard-won
prize

II. MUTE VIOLENCE

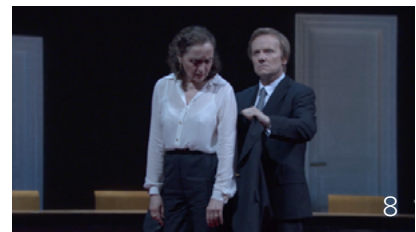
In the centre of the excerpt, during a pause in the dialogue, a brief passage plays out in silence, shown in shots 7, 8, and 9, concentrating all the tension and ambivalence of the scene: Nero walks over to his mother with his head tilted to one side. Now he is looking directly at her and his gaze is heavy with menace (we heard earlier that the emperor's gaze bears the danger of death: in Act III scene 5 Agrippine advises Britannicus "Believe me when I say you should avoid his looks"). In shot 8, in the same silence, we see Nero placing his jacket on his mother's shoulders, however the gesture is emptied of its gallantry by the hardness of Laurent Stocker's expression and the stiffness of his body: far from expressing attentiveness, here Nero cruelly signifies to his mother that she is dismissed. For a moment, one can sense his temptation to kill her: in shot 9, which again uses the composition enabled by the oblique axis (one character in the foreground, one character in the background), we see Nero standing behind his mother with his hands raised, poised to strangle her. As her son lifts her hair, Agrippine's expression suggests she sensed the threat that hovered over her for a moment. The closeness of the bodies thus exacerbates the rivalry between the characters, with Nero's gesture in fact echoing a moment a few lines earlier in scene 2 when Agrippine's hands had been raised to strangle her own son, the temptation of murder therefore being as much on the side of the mother as on that of the son. The resumption of the dialogue ("Well, then! Speak. What would you have me do?") brings momentary relief but the tension persists: the sense of danger can still be read on Agrippine's face for an instant, before the woman of power reasserts control and lists her demands.



Agrippine's hands at the beginning of Act IV, scene 2.



Silence



Silence



NERO: Well, then! Speak. What would you have me do?

AGRIPPINE: Have my accusers punished for their audacity; let Britannicus' anger be appeased; Let Junie choose whom she would wed; Let both of them be free, and let Pallas stay;

III. NERO'S CLEMENCY

A match-action shot (10) shows Agrippine facing Nero, looking at him for the first time: "Allow me to see you at any time of day". This request, reinforced by Dominique Blanc's gesture and which one might easily take for the expression of a mother's possessiveness if one did not know that it is not closeness to her son that she seeks, but to power, receives a comical response in Nero's expression of dismay and then his distance: hunched on his chair, he returns to the same semi-afflicted, semi-infantile posture he already had in the first part of the scene. As Agrippine continues to list her demands, the frame widens to show the entire set and the entrance of Burrhus, who seemed to have been waiting just behind the door (as Nero had been earlier to spy on Junie and Britannicus). But it is all merely a sham: Agrippine, standing, thinks she is regaining the authority that was taken away from her, Nero, sitting with his head tilted, gives the impression that he is submitting to his mother's orders (13), while Burrhus, with his hand placed on his chest, shows his relief at seeing the emperor's merciful attitude (16). But it is just a ploy by Nero, the "nascent monster": he does not in the least intend to "reconcile" with Britannicus, quite the contrary, in the next scene he informs Burrhus that he will execute his rival before the day is out. The shots in this sequence are significantly shorter than earlier in the scene, reinforcing the falseness of this apparent change of direction, which, at this point in the play, deludes both the other characters on stage and the audience. The final shot (18) offers another fine example of the ambivalence of the physical relations in Stéphane Braunschweig's staging (it should also be pointed out that moments of closeness between bodies are so rare in the staging that they stand out strongly, all the more so given that they occur in the centre of an austere set): sighing in relief, Agrippine walks over to Nero as a sign of gratitude believing she is getting her way, but he catches her off guard by kissing her suddenly and there is a touch of fear in her surprise. The ambivalence of this embrace, which acts as a final movement towards the mother before the execution of Britannicus, will be made clear in the next scene when Nero, speaking to Burrhus, utters the famous line: "I embrace my rival, all the better to smother him."



Anne Benoît (Agrippine), Alain Fromager (Nero),
staging by Jean-Louis Martinelli (2012)



Allow me to see you at any time of day;



May this same Burrhus, who joins us now,



No longer dare to stop me at your door.



NERO: My gratitude shall from this day on
Engrave in all men's hearts, madam, your
power,



And I already bless this happy coldness
That rekindles our former friendliness.

QUESTIONS

1. Refining the filming process: Don Kent films the production in a restrained manner, opting to use of shots of a fairly long average duration. To what extent is this approach induced by Stéphane Braunschweig's scenographic choices?
2. Views and dialogues: it is necessary to have characters involved in a dialogue look at each other? What effects can be created when the director chooses to make their gazes diverge? Use examples of theatrical and/or cinematographic productions.
3. Compare this excerpt with Jean-Louis Martinelli's production at the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre in 2012: what do the production choices, particularly concerning the bodies of the actors, tell us about the director's vision of the relationship between Nero and Agrippine?



Whatever Pallas did, it is forgotten,
With Britannicus...



... I shall reconcile,
And as for that love that came between us,



I make you our judge, and you shall
mediate.



KIT EDITOR

Laurence Cousteix, film teacher in literary *classes préparatoires* (Lycée Léon Blum, Créteil) in collaboration with the teams of the Comédie-Française.

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