Combat scenes in classical Greek art as "beautiful objects": the expressive power of visual omission

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Two explanations are proposed for the fact that classical scenes depicting a combat between a Greek warrior and an opponent are composed in a restrained way, in that the actual violence of maiming and killing is not explicitly represented. The first explanation is speculative as a visual parallel with the treatment of violence in classical tragedy, while the second is based on a formal, art historical explanation of a motif derived from Egyptian art. In a concluding section it is pointed out that in Hellenistic art violence becomes explicit in the depictions of war and combat.
Key words: combat scenes, classical Greek art, classical tragedy, Hellenistic art

Afbeeldings van gevegte in klassieke Griekse kuns as "skone objekte":
die ekspressiewe trefkrag van visuele weglating
Twee verklarings word aangebied vir die feit dat klassieke tonele wat 'n geveg tussen 'n Griekse kry-ger en 'n opponent uitbeeld, op 'n beheerste wyse gekomponeer is, in die sin dat die werklike geweld van verwonding en doodslag nie eksplisiet voorgestel word nie. Die eerste verklaring is spekulatief as 'n visuele parallel met die behandeling van geweld in klassieke tragedie, terwyl die tweede gebaseer is op 'n formele, kunshistoriese verklaring van 'n motief wat uit Egiptiese kuns herkomstig is. In die slotgedeelte word aangetoon dat geweld in tonele van oorlog en tweegeveste in Hellenistiese kuns eksplisiet voorgestel word.
Sleutelwoorde: gevegstonele, klassieke Griekse kuns, klassieke tragedie, Hellenistiese kuns

The prestige of the most splendid Athenian or Attic period in the time of Pericles, toward the middle of the fifth century BCE when classical Greek art attained its peak, was raised not only by cultural development, but also by military expansion. This period of splendour was by no means peaceful. It was a time of ceaseless wars and conflicts between different Greek states, while perpetual struggles between classes, factions and leaders added to a state of tension in Greek society, notwithstanding the general feeling of power and national unity.

It therefore comes as no surprise that classical Greek art is replete with combat scenes - mainly sculptural — on which this article focusses. The question raised here is: in what sense may such images be called "beautiful objects"? How should what would commonly be regarded as not good or beautiful — for example the slaying of a victim — be represented in art, so as not to evoke a feeling of horror in the viewer, but to afford him or her the opportunity for aesthetic contemplation? Regarding the representation of violent action in classical art two explanations are offered: the first is speculative as a visual parallel with the treatment of violence in classical tragedy, while the second is based on a formal, art historical explanation of a motif derived from Egyptian art.[1]

The first explanation: the manner in which violent deeds are dealt with in classical Greek tragedy may have had an influence on the visual representation of violence

An analogy with Greek tragedy might throw some light on the classical mentality behind the visual depiction and sculptural representation of close quarter combat which is a violent occupation.

RE. Easterling (1997: 154) explains tragedy as follows:

Tragedy characteristically dealt with "sad stories of the death of kings", but of the surviving plays only four show stage deaths[2] [...] by contrast with the many accounts of off-stage bloodshed given by messengers. [...] Messenger speeches are always very closely linked to what the audience are to see

and hear: exits and entrances, including the return of killers and wounded victims, off-stage cries, and the display of corpses. The intricacy with which the violent events are thus "orchestrated" suggests that in avoiding direct presentation of the moment of killing or violent wounding the dramatists were making creative choices for positive reasons. Inhibitions, if any were felt, may have been related to what both actors and audiences believed to be dangerously ill-omened.

Peter Burian (1997: 199-200) reiterates the idea that

Greek tragedy is essentially a drama of words. Very little "happens" on stage no battles, no Windings as in Shakespeare. Physical action, though sometimes dramatically crucial, is usually limited in scope and relatively static   acts of supplication, gestures of affection or pity or lamentation. Violent events tend to be described by messenger-speeches, a convention that has often been interpreted as a matter of decorum, but more likely stems from the realisation that, within the conventions of the fifth-century theatre, such things can be made far more vivid through narration than through stage presentation. [...] But the threat of physical violence is one of tragedy's important verbal tools, and in general what we may call verbal violence is a regular feature of tragic discourse.

With a leap of the imagination one may interchange the rules of tragedy as a genre with those of the visual portrayal of tragic or violent scenes, such as of combat. Then it is presumed that the artist's task in "staging" visual narrative scenes on vases and in relief on temple friezes or other venues of public display becomes comparable with that of the playwright who narrated to his audience by means of a messenger what had happened in some violent event related to the plot. Like the tragedian, the classical visual artist avoided "direct presentation of the moment of killing or violent wounding" (as phrased by Easterling above).

There is yet another dimension to the expressive quality of the visual omission of violence in combat scenes that more or less corresponds with the heightening of dramatic effect in tragedy. In this regard Easterling (1997: 155) points out that a messenger's speech in which bloodshed is verbally presented, "is arguably more theatrical, as well as more thought-provoking, than an on-stage scuffle [...]; as in *Agamemnon,* the effect is to draw all the attention to the problematic nature of the violent deeds." Maybe the last remark is not pertinent in classical visual art, in which the combat scene may become purely aesthetic, as explained in the next section.

It therefore seems that the basic creative choices of the playwright and the artist regarding violent scenes were more or less similar. The visual scenes showing the immanent violence of a mortal blow aimed at a victim or antagonist are theatrical, but decorum forbade that the outcome of the action be shown. The subjection of a victim or loser in the combat, be it an enemy, a centaur or an Amazon, most probably established his or her credentials as unworthy or evil in the mind of the viewer. In an dispassionate way the final scene — of slaughter and death — in the combat narrative is merely anticipated; the actual scene evokes neither feelings of horror or compassion because of what one may call the visual omission of violence. This is in keeping with Plato's ideal of avoiding the representation of intense emotionality which could be disturbing to the reader or viewer. For the classical Greek artist, extreme passions or explicit violence would deform the beauty of their work

I this regard we are reminded of Aristotle's view in his *Poetics* (fourth century BCE) why a viewer of mimetic works should derive pleasure from viewing scenes which would be painful to behold in reality. He attributes the pleasure derived from artistic representation to human beings' inborn love of learning and naturalistic images enables viewers to recognise reality in the ordered configurations of artistic media. The true pleasure given by a tragedy or a work of visual art flows from its perfection of form. However, Aristotle's notion of *catharsis* — a metaphor taken from the religious and medical worlds, meaning "purification" — may be understood as a direct defence against Plato's prohibitions against harmful emotions which blunts the human reason. While Aristotle applies this term to tragedy which provides a particular pleasure to the spectator, one may infer that in the visual arts the outcome of the viewing of suffering that is

in itself unpleasant in reality is transformed from a psychological experience of "pity and fear" into an aesthetic process.

However, on a moral level one may observe that if "aesthetic violence" could be justified as pleasurable, it could never operate as a critique of violence. What the visual images of fatal combat in Greek art actually show is not really the problematic nature of such action but the graceful manhood of the victor who upholds the moral virtue of his group by eliminating a contestant. In public art the Greek male always triumphs over an enemy and in mythological scenes neither the centaur nor the Amazon — i.e. "the other" — is ever shown as victorious.

The second explanation: the influence of Egyptian representation of the motif of combat scenes on classical Greek art

In the third century CE Plotinus, the Neoplatonist philosopher, captured the spirit of classical art in the following statement:

> What is it that attracts the eyes of those who behold a beautiful object, and calls them, lures them towards it, and fills them with joy at the sight? [...] Almost everyone declares that symmetry of parts towards one another and towards the whole, with besides, a certain charm of colour, constitutes the beauty recognized by the eye, that in visible things, as indeed in all else, universally, the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical, patterned *{Enneads 1,6,* 1. Translated by S. MacKenna, with slight changes).

Even when expressing a violent act classical artists upheld the ideal of creating "a beautiful object". The painters and sculptors who depicted battle scenes in which a Greek warrior (mostly nude) slays his adversary, be it a centaur, an Amazon or any attacker, exemplified the classical ideal by arranging all the parts of the depiction symmetrically.

If goodness, beauty and truth are synonymous in Greek aesthetics, and is recognized by the eye as essentially symmetrical, then an image that is patterned and symmetrical should represent something of beauty, goodness or truth. These virtues, which cannot be articulated in visual art, should then be sought in the formal qualities of the composition if Plotinus' statement van be taken as a norm for evaluating classical Greek art. Visual representations are totally static, so that physical action in sculpture can only be suggested by means of bodily posture, gesture and facial expression.

In this regard the depictions in Assyrian relief sculptures of the suffering and death-throes of a victim after a fatal blow or hit is explicitly shown, especially in the case of the lions hunted by King Ashurbanipal (figure 1). Compositions of the hunt and war glorifying Assyrian kings are replete with severely wounded and dying animal and/or human figures contorted by agony. This is clearly not the iconographic tradition of combat scenes followed by Egyptian and Greek artists, in whose depictions the poses of both the antagonist and protagonist are arrested. Before the dignified Egyptian king strikes his victim the composition seems to suggest a "beautiful thing [which] is essentially symmetrical, patterned" (according to Plotinus quoted above), for example the depiction on King Narmer's slate palette, an early dynastic work (figure 2). It shows on either side at the top of the stone the ancient goddess Bat and the falcon Horus to the right who seem to acclaim the athletic king's triumph over a unattractive and much smaller grovelling victim who merely gestures in a helpless way without expressing undue agony.

Later Egyptian depictions of the victorious Ramses II shows also him in an arrested pose, standing with raised weapon above a suppliant victim. The king's dignity and power is emphasised from which the gory details of the actual slaying would detract. However, violence is implicit in the scene, not explicit as in Sumerian reliefs depicting the bloodshed of the lion hunt and war.
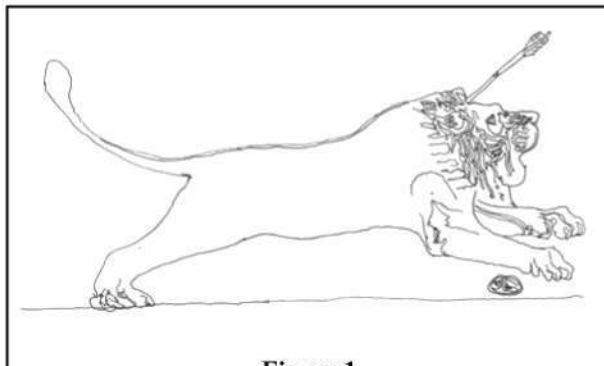
Figure 1
A dying lion. Assyrian relief sculpture from the palace of Ashubanipal,
Nineveh, *circa* 650 BCE. British Museum, London.

Figure 2
King Narmer's slate palette, 3185-3125 BCE,
Thinite Kingdom,
first dynasty, Egypt. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

The Egyptians claimed, according to Diodorus Siculus, the Greek sculptors as their pupils.[3] That is proven by the fact that Plato "admired the Egyptians because they understood that in art order and measure are the most important things, that once the proper measure has been discovered one should abide by it and not search for new forms" (Tartarkiewicz 1970: 127).

Clearly, the classical Greek depiction of the motif closely resembling of the above-mentioned Egyptian representations of the execution of enemies by their rulers remained a more or less fixed for, that will be the subject of the paper, based on the following are examples that, in a more formal analysis, may be measured according to the criterion of compositional *symmetria* and f) xápi? [grace]:

These depictions never show the moment of execution, the victim's suffering, death agony or gory details such as gaping wounds and gushing blood. They show the executioner and the victim composed in a way that they either face each other as seeming equals or with the victim-to-be in a suppliant attitude, fallen to the ground, looking up at his or her superior. The latter figure is elegantly posed according to the norms of *symmetria* and grace while the former figure is more crouched, but clearly not in a grovelling position. In their total composition these images are poignant and restrained.

Classical sculptural compositions, including the examples cited above, should be assessed according to order *(taxis),* measure *(metriotes)* and proportion *(symmetria)* according to the criteria formulated by Plato at the end of the *Philebus* (64 E). Furthermore, one recognises a will to "grace" in these depictions. In short, grace may be described as a mixture of art and nature. Monk (1944: 134) adds the following explanation:

> The term f| *yápiç,* [grace] is somewhat elusive in Greek criticism [...]. Demetrius of Phalerum, discussing, discussing elegance of style, found that elegance include grace and geniality, and that "the very first grace of style is that which results from compression, when a thought which would be spoilt by dwelling on it is made graceful by a light and rapid touch".[5]

Figure 3
Detail from an Athenian black-figure
amphora by Exekias,
showing Achilles slaying the Amazon queen
Penthesilea at Troy, *circa* 540 BCE.
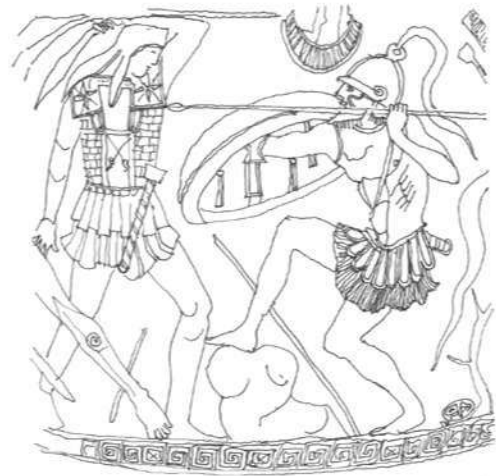British Museum, London.

Figure 4
Detail from a red-figure volute crater by the
Niobid Painter showing Greeks
fighting Amazons, *circa* 460 BCE. National
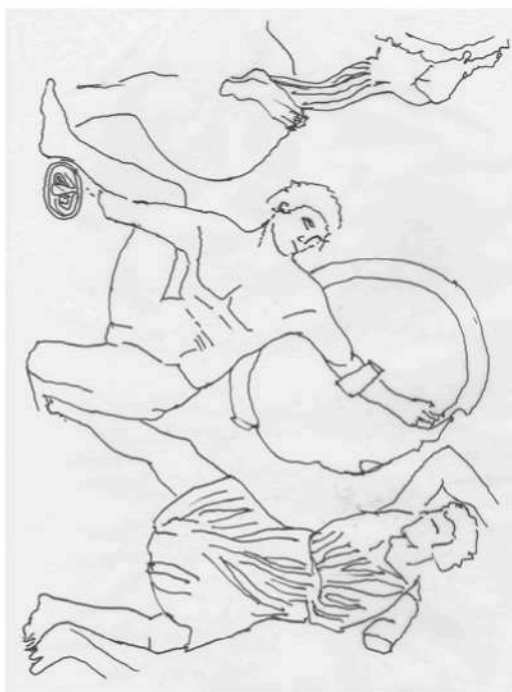Museum, Palermo.

Figure 5
Fight between a Greek and an Amazon.
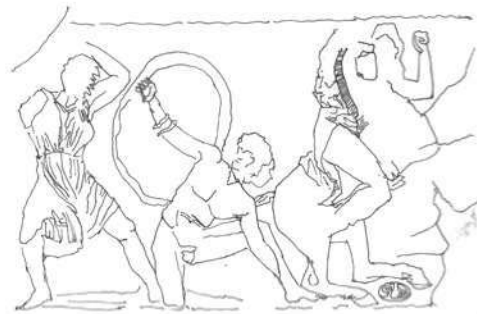Amazon frieze, slab 1013, *circa* 460 BCE.
British Museum, London.

Figure 6
Combat between Greeks and Amazons, from the
Temple of Apollo at Phigaleia,
circa 425-420 BCE. British Museum, London.

Figure 7
Combat between Greeks and Amazons, from the Mausoleum of Halikarnassos, attributed to Skopas, *circa* 355-330 BCE. British Museum, London.

Figure 8
A Greek horseman slaying an enemy, *circa* 430-420 BCE. Villa Albani, Rome.

Figure 9
A Greek horseman slaying an enemy, stele of Dexileos, *circa* 394 BCE. Keramikos Museum, Athens.

Figure 10
A Lapith[4] slaying a Centaur, metope 27 from the Parthenon, Athens. British Museum, London.

This raises the question if classical depictions of violence — as represented by the chosen motif— qualify to be called graceful or even beautiful? If so, it raises the question if there is any clear manner of recognizing evil in a classical depictions of violence? Is this kind of violence - executing a victim — not expressive of evil? "Plato maintained that the sense of beauty, similar to the sense of order, measure, proportion and harmony, specific to man, is an expression of his 'relationship with the gods'" (Tartarkiewicz 1970: 127). Following on the religious implication emphasised by Tartarkiewicz, the final question remains unanswered: are the Greek examples of the depiction of violence removed from the experience of reality and visual naturalism? In this Assyrian art seems to excel and Egyptian and classical Greek art seem to follow a different manner of stylistic and formal expression, whether superior of inferior is another artistic issue altogether.

Figure 11
Bas-reliefs from the Alexander Sarcophagus, *circa* **320-10,**
Archaeological Museum, Istanbul.

The changing of the classical model in Hellenistic art

In Hellenistic times both the theatre and the visual arts changed. Easterling (1997: 222) notes:

> There is plenty of [...] evidence for a more explicit display of violence in Hellenistic and later theatre than in earlier times, which scholars have usually interpreted as sensationalism and therefore as a symptom of artistic decline. But we should allow for the possibility that such changes were perceived as marks of modern sophistication, like ever more ambitious effects in film an television nowadays, like the actor Timotheus of Zacynthus who specialised in the role of Ajax falling on his sword or the athlete-actor from Tegea who was admired for his strong-man parts, might even be evidence for theatrical vitality.

The representation of combat scenes during later centuries in Hellenistic is indeed different from the classical model. The supreme example is the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus, from the royal necropolis at Sidon, *circa* 320-10. It is in the form of a marble temple, 2,12 m. high, 3.18 m. long and 1,67 m. wide. On its two long sides are bas-reliefs depicting Alexander the Great's wars with the Persians (figure 11). All four faces of the sarcophagus are filled with Alexander's bloody battles with the Persian army. One long side depicts Alexander as a young warrior carrying the symbol of kingship; on the other long side he is portrayed on a rearing horse, with a lion skin on his shoulders, preparing to throw a lance at one of the Persians.

While the reliefs on the long sides are masterfully carved and emulates the rhythm of an engagement of two armies, dead bodies and the actual slaughtering is clearly depicted, leaving little to the imagination of the viewer.

The Alexander Sarcophagus is the most treasured "beautiful object" in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Its website (states: "One of the world's unparalleled masterpieces is the Alexander Sarcophagus which has been on exhibit in Istanbul Archaeological Museum for 87 years. It is to Istanbul Archaeological Museum what the Mona Lisa is to the Louvre [...]." The explicit violence depicted on the sarcophagus indicates a change of style from the classical, but, ironically, seems mild in comparison to what the modern media have conditioned viewers to accept, albeit not always as art, but as the reality of the human condition.

Notes

1. See the discussion on "Egypt and Greece" in Tartarkiewicz (1970: 8).

2. These are: Alax's suicide in Sophocles' play, and in Euripides the (non-violent) deaths of Alcestis and Hippolytus and the mysterious suicidal leap of Evadne in *Suppliant Women* (Easterling 1997: 154).

3. See Monk (1944: 134), who quotes his source for this statement as: Denys d'Halicarnasse, *Judgement sur Lysias* (edited and translated by W. Rhys Roberts, London, 1910: pp.119-121).

4. Charles H. Morgan (1928) explains that the draped figure of the Lapith is representative of an ancient motif which may be traced back to seal cylinders produced in the Syro-Hettite style.

5. Monk (1944: 134) quotes his source for his interpretation of the term f| *yápic,* [grace] as: Demetrius, *On Style* (edited by W. Rhys Roberts, Oxford, 1940).

Note concerning the illustrations

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