

Dionysos' Epiphany in Performance.
The God of Ecstatic Cry, Noise, Song, Music, and Choral Dance
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Introduction

Dionysos is a creative, multi-faceted and most transgressive god full of thriving energy and abounding vitality who notoriously resists clear-cut and simple definitions.¹ His dazzling ambiguity fascinates us more than ever in these postmodern times. Like a kaleidoscope he constantly oscillates between manifold manifestations. Therefore it is perhaps most suitable to call him a figure of the Other.² However, it is at the same time problematic to emphasize his dissimilarity in an exaggerated fashion since he shares features of otherness with all the other Greek gods. Yet, as Henk Versnel has argued, Dionysos differs at least in this: he is the first classic god to assume henotheistic traits.³ Already in Euripides' *Bacchae* he is constantly drawn as a god who is unique and claims superiority over the rest of the pantheon. Accordingly, in the Gurob papyrus of early Hellenistic times (*P.Gurob* 1.23 = *OF* 578.23b) he is addressed as εἴς Διόνυσος. Other possible features of difference are according to Susanne Gödde:⁴ 1. He has a mortal mother, Semele; 2. he is born twice. 3. he experiences death and suffering, whereas other gods are typically immortal; 4. he drives his entourage mad and is himself characterized as manic (μαινόμενος); 5. as he is different people meet him with resistance since he allegedly threatens civic order.

In a paradoxical manner he bridges dichotomies.⁵ Thus we can discover already on the Orphic bone tablets of the fifth century BC from Olbia: ΒΙΟΣ ΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ ΒΙΟΣ (“life–death–life”), ΕΙΡΗΝΗ ΠΟΛΕΜΟΣ (“peace–war”), ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑ ΨΕΥΔΟΣ (“truth–lie”) and ΣΩΜΑ ΨΥΧΗ (“body–soul”).⁶ He oscillates between further antitheses: man–woman, god–hero, man–animal, light–darkness, *polis*–countryside, inside–outside, abroad–home, Greek–

¹ On the role of Dionysos in all three dramatic genres, see Bierl 2011a. On the introduction, see *ibid.* 315-316 and Bierl 1991, 13-20. On some basic ideas about Dionysos as the personification of the ecstatic performance, see now Bierl in print and Ford 2011. On Dionysos in tragedy, see Bierl 1991; on the chorus, also often in a Dionysiac context, see Bierl 2001. On Dionysos in general, see Henrichs 1982; 1996a, and as a different god, see now the volume by Schlesier 2011.

² See Vernant 1965, 358; 1981, 18; 1983, 42-43; 1985, 246; 1986, 291-292. See now also Gödde 2011, 85-88.

³ See Versnel 1990; 2011, 40-44.

⁴ See Gödde 2011, 92-103.

⁵ On Dionysos as the god of polar oppositions, see Otto 1933; Henrichs 1982, esp. 158 with 233 nn. 193-196; 1990; Bierl 1991, 14-20 and *passim*.

⁶ *OF* 463-465 Bernabé.

Barbarian, civilization–nature, cosmos–chaos, idyll–violence, happiness–suffering, laughing–lament, order–destruction, tranquility–*mania*, chastity–sexuality, and festivity–ecstasy. Euripides summarizes this tension, marking him δεινότατος, ἀνθρώποισι δ’ ἠπιώτατος (“most terrible, but to the people most gentle and kind”) (*Ba.* 861), and Plutarch (*Ant.* 24) later pins the Dionysiac paradox down to the opposition between his epithets ἀγριώνιος and μελίχιος, later resumed by Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter F. Otto who has defined him as the god of polar oppositions.⁷

Yet Dionysos stands neither for pure and abstract dualism nor for the frequently quoted *coincidentia oppositorum*. Rather both sides, understood as energetic forces in dynamic reciprocation, tend to fuse under his influence. Thus, the dichotomies should not be seen as fixed, structural terms but experienced in the cult and myth of a lived religion. Accordingly, Dionysos is not only a wild, violent and destructive power, but also a central polis-god who stabilizes order in the city. Scenarios of violence tend to occur in myth, while phenomena of group cohesion are mostly situated in cult.

Moreover, Dionysos is a god on the move and in constant change, and he also exposes others to the transformations seen in the above-mentioned range of categorical oppositions. He abounds in vital energy, making everything grow and sprout. Most of all, he always wishes to be present. Thus, we encounter him as arriving from afar or even from the realm of the dead, and he manifests himself in his manifold forms as an epiphanic god par excellence (ἐπιφανέστατος θεός).⁸ His main features and areas of responsibility are: 1. wine and inebriation; 2. wild nature, vegetation and animality; 3. madness and ecstasy; 4. underworld and death; 5. mysteries and afterlife; 6. sex, eros and love; 7. dance, music and performance; 8. mask and costume; 9. fiction, imagination, vision and miracle.⁹

With respect especially to the last three items, Dionysos became the god of theater. The θεά of a procession¹⁰ becomes a θέατρον, where “the coming god” celebrates his arrival and epiphany.¹¹ Dionysos is a θεατής (spectator), actor and even leader of his chorus of female

⁷ See Henrichs 1984, 236-237 n. 88; 1990, 271 n. 57 with the references to Nietzsche.

⁸ See the inscriptions of Antiochia *CIG* III 3979 und *CIG* 1948; on Dionysos’ particular presence and tendency to show himself in an epiphany, see Otto 1933, esp. 70-80; Henrichs 2008, 19; 2011.

⁹ See Henrichs 1982, esp. 139; Henrichs 1996a, esp. 479; Henrichs 2008, esp. 23; Schlesier 1997 (esp. C: “Wirkungsbereich”; Engl.: Dionysus. Brill’s New Pauly. Brill Online, 2013. Reference. Universitaetsbibliothek Basel. 29 January 2013 <<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/dionysus-e320270>>).

¹⁰ See Kavoulaki 1996.

¹¹ See Otto 1933, esp. 74-80; on the “kommende Gott” as a Romantic concept (G. F. Creuzer, F. Hölderlin), see Frank 1982.

maenads and male satyrs who like to sing and dance. Last but not least, his choral *thiasos* is the mythic model of the dramatic χορός whose members appeal to him to assume notional leadership.

The God of Drama in Performance

In this contribution I wish to focus on the epiphanic and performative aspects of Dionysos. It is my contention that – particularly in the theater – the god manifests himself only in performative terms, in wild cries, the music of the *aulos* and ecstatic choral movement. Very often, in a phenomenon of reciprocal *mania*, the maenads or Thyiads, the personifications of ecstatic frenzy, set the god in frantic movement in the same way that he, as their choral leader, is responsible for the choral and multimodal performance of his entourage. This results in the typical fusion and oscillation of perspectives. The god with epithets like Βάκχος, Βακχεύς, Βακχεῖος, Βακχέβακχος, ἀρχεβάκχος, Ἰόβακχος, Εὖιος, Εὐας, Εὐσιος, Ἰακχος, Ἐλελεύς, Ἰήιος, Ἰυγγίης, Σαβάζιος, Σαβός is often envisioned as the personification of the ecstatic and inarticulate cries delivered in short and iterated combinations, such as *bakch-*, *eua-*, *eui-*, *iakch-*, *ie-*, *iy-*.¹² The lack of propositional meaning entails an instantiation of “poetic function” according to Roman Jakobson.¹³ Thus it makes perfect sense that Dionysos, as *Dithyrambos*, becomes the emblem of the lyric frenzy of meaninglessness, i.e. of choral and lyric poetry.

In a recent article, I interpreted the *parodos* of Euripides’ *Bacchae* (64-166) under these performative premises.¹⁴ The epiphanic god’s arrival is acted out and experienced as choral multimediality in an incoming procession (πομπή). Who performs in this fashion is conceived as enthusiastic, full of the god and blessed because the performer’s life fuses with the sacred group, the *thiasos* (θιασεύεται ψυχάν *Ba.* 75).¹⁵ The Lydian worshippers praise him in εὐοῖ-cries, the *Euios*, the, so to say, divine embodiment of the ecstatic shout (*Ba.* 157). The maenads project themselves onto Mount Kithairon in a wildly iterated cry ἴτε βάκχαι, ἴτε βάκχαι (83, 152-153) and simultaneously lead the god “from the Phrygian mountains” (Φρυγίων ἐξ ὀρέων 86) into the city of Thebes, i.e. “into Hellas’ broad streets for dancing” (Ἑλλάδος εἰς εὐ- / ρυχόρους ἀγυιάς 86-87) (85-87).

¹² Cf. Versnel 1970, 16-38, esp. 27-34; on *Iakchos*, see Graf 1974, 51-66. On the entire argument, see Ford 2011, with a reference to the poetic dimension *ibid.* 355.

¹³ Jakobson 1960, esp. 358 [= *Selected Writings* III, 27]. See Tambiah 1985, 165 and Bierl 2001, 287-299, esp. 293 with n. 503, 331-346, esp. 335 with n. 92 (Engl. Bierl 2009, 254-265, esp. 259-260 with n. 503, 296-310, esp. 299 with n. 92). See Bierl *in print*.

¹⁴ See Bierl 2011b and 2013. See also Kavoulaki 1999.

¹⁵ See Schlesier 1998.

In the typical manner of total fusion and reciprocity between performance and space, the territory in which he comes in is often witnessed in a state of frantic dance (αὐτίκα γὰρ πᾶσα χορεύσει *Ba.* 114).¹⁶ I call this phenomenon performative transference to the natural environment.¹⁷ A similar totalizing effect, the projection of chorality onto nature, countryside or polis space, we witness in the paean of Philodamus, 19-20 (*Coll. Alex.*, p. 166): πᾶσα δ' ὕμνοβρύης χόρευ- / ε[ν Δελφῶ]ν ἱερὰ μάκαιρα χώρα (“entirely full of hymns danced the sacred and blessed land of the Delphians”). Once again the group calls on itself to receive Dionysos in a procession in the streets, accompanied by choruses (ἀλλὰ δέχεσθε Βακχιά- / [σταν] Δι[ό]νυσ[ον, ἐν δ' ἀγυι-] / αἴς ἅμα συγ [χοροῖς]ι, *ibid.*, 144-146).

In the famous fifth stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1115-1152) the chorus summons the Dionysiac landscape to send the god once more in a procession to his homeland Thebes.¹⁸ Its patron oversees the streets (ἐπισκοποῦντ' ἀγυιάς 1136) where he himself is about to arrive, while shouts of divine and inarticulate words lacking proposition, emit their *euai*, *euoi*-sound (ἀμβρότων ἐπέων / εὐαζόντων 1134-1135). The acoustic song and speech elements are seen as active instances that do something, i.e they utter *euie*, *euie*.¹⁹ In their enigmatic meaninglessness the words become divine in the same way that the god embodies the cry. After an extended warm-up where possible routes of arrival are imagined, the chorus is called to have an epiphany, dancing with cathartic foot (μολεῖν καθαρσίῳ ποδὶ (1143),²⁰ and finally addressing Dionysos-Iakchos as ἰὼ πῦρ πνεόντων / χοράγ' ἄστρον, νυχίων / φθεγμάτων ἐπίσκοπε (“io, chorus leader of fire breathing stars, overseer of nocturnal cries”, 1146-1148). The choral god is called to appear as chorus leader of both the actual chorus as well as the maenadic-mystic chorus projected simultaneously onto the chorus of stars, as supervisor of the nocturnal voices, particularly of the Iakchos-shouts, which his ecstatic group of Thyiads in Delphi or initiates in Eleusis emit. Thus they call upon Iakchos, the dispenser (τὸν ταμίαν Ἰακχον 1152), who, as controller, becomes the leading figure of the violent movement. And the women, in their madness (μαινόμεναι) and all-night (πάννυχτοι 1149) long cries, set him in choral movement, by themselves dancing (χορεύουσι 1152).

¹⁶ See Bierl 2001, 147-148 (Engl. 2009, 123) on *Ar. Thesm.* 995-1000, then Kowalzig 2007.

¹⁷ After Henrichs 1996b, 61 n. 49, I used “pathetic fallacy” for this phenomenon (Bierl 2013, 218), with reference to Copley 1937.

¹⁸ See Griffith 1999, 313-322; among others Bierl 1989, 50-54; 1991, 127-132; Henrichs 1990, 264-269; Rodighiero 2012, 152-165 (with further literature); on *Ant.* 1146-1152, see Henrichs 1994/95, 77-78; Bierl 2011a, 323-324; Ford 2011, 345, 347-348.

¹⁹ See Griffith 1999, 320 *ad* 1131-1136.

²⁰ See Scullion 1998.

Dionysos is often notionally envisaged as a virtual divine *choregos* or *exarchos*,²¹ the chorus leader of his wild dancing chorus, which projects its performance onto the natural environment. The pattern is crucial for Euripides' *Bacchae*, particularly conspicuous in the *parodos*.²² In line 141 he is called *exarchos*, and numerous passages associate Dionysos with the action of ἄγειν, such as in line 115, or in the choral projections on Mount Olympus (412-413) and on Mount Pieria (566-570) – both are linked with Euios. Dionysos' epiphany in the palace-miracle (576-603) as an earthquake (585-593, also 605-606) is seen through the performative lens just like the destructive violence in *Heracles* (*HF* 867-897). In the latter case, Lyssa, the personification of frenzy, sets Heracles within an ecstatic dance and flute melody, here grotesque and cruel (τάχα σ' ἐγὼ μᾶλλον χορεύσω καὶ καταυλήσω φόβῳ (*HF* 871; cf. 879).²³

Coming back to *Bacchae*, once again the landscape on Mount Kithairon, in a performative transference, is envisaged as frantically dancing in reciprocal interplay between the worshipers and the god: “After the maenads called, together in a joint cry, Bromios as Iakchos, the son of Zeus, all the mountain joined in bacchic frenzy (πᾶν δὲ συνεβάκχευ' ὄρος), and the animals, and nothing that lived was not in bacchic movement through running and dancing” (725-727). Iakchos is again the personified cry that sets the entire environment in performative vibration.

In a similar fashion we encounter the pattern in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae* (985-1000) at the end of a song dedicated solely to chorality (953-1000), a passage I have already interpreted in these terms.²⁴

ἀλλ' εἶα, πάλλ', ἀνάστρεφ' εὐρύθμῳ ποδί, (985)

τόρευε πᾶσαν ᾠδήν·

ἡγοῦ δέ γ' ᾧδ' αὐτὸς σύ,

κισσοφόρε Βακχεῖε

δέσποτ'· ἐγὼ δὲ κώμοις

σε φιλοχόροισι μέλψω (990)

†εὔιον ᾧ Διὸς σὺ

Βρόμει καὶ Σεμέλας παῖ, (991)

²¹ See Bierl 2001, 42, 144 n. 101, 145, 147-148 (Engl. 2009, 29, 120 n. 101, 122-124)

²² See Bierl 2013.

²³ On E. *HF*, see Bierl 1991, 79-89, esp. 85-87, 140-146.

²⁴ See Bierl 2001, 107-150, 287-299, esp. 143-150 (Engl. 2009, 84-125, 254-265, esp. 119-125).

χοροῖς τερπόμενος
κατ' ὄρεα Νυμ-
φᾶν ἐρατοῖς ἐν ὕμνοις,
ὦ Εὐί' Εὐί' εὐοῖ, (994a)
(ἠδόμενος) ἀναχορεύων. (994b)

ἀμφὶ δὲ συγκτυπεῖται (995)
Κιθαιρώνιος ἠχώ,
μελάμφυλλά τ' ὄρη
δάσκια πετρώ-
δεις τε νάπαι βρέμονται·
κύκλω δὲ περὶ σε κισσὸς (1000)
εὐπέταλος ἔλικι θάλλει. (1000)

Now come, leap, whirl with rhythmic foot! Turn the whole song! But you yourself be our leader, ivy-bearing Bacchic lord! And we shall honor you in dance and song in chorus-loving *komoi*. O Euios, Bromios, son of Zeus and Semele, you who delight in choral dances and dance in chorus over the mountains to the lovely hymns of the nymphs, o Euios, Euios, euoi, o Euios! All about you the echo from Kithairon sounds, and the dark-leafed bushy mountains and rocky glens rumble, and spiraling around you in a circle sprouts leafy ivy. (trans. A. Hollmann)

Dionysos is fascinated by the round dance of the “here and now,” while being himself projected onto the Dionysiac landscape of the mountains. After the chorus’ appeal to take over the lead, he dances (ἀναχορεύων 994b) as notional chorus leader among the nymphs, who set him in wild whirling motion with their ecstatic cries of εὔιον εὔιον εὐοῖ, which tend to merge with the god.²⁵ The ecstatic sound effects of voices, *tympana*, and *auloi* resound from the mountains and valleys all around Dionysos (περὶ σε 1000), who thus also becomes the central ἐξάρχων on the acoustic level. In the end (999-1000), the ivy, highlighted through its association with his epithet κισσοφόρος, is projected onto his cyclic dance. Around Dionysos as imaginary *choregos*, this sacred plant, just like his musical group, winds in a

²⁵ This is the transmitted reading for 994a in manuscript R. With Wilson, for reasons of respension, I adopt Hermann’s conjecture ὦ Εὐί’, Εὐί’, εὐοῖ.

circle (κύκλω) and shoots up in spiral form (ἔλικι) as choral performers are notoriously drawn in their whirling motion of a round dance as εἰλίσσοντες.²⁶

Finally let us have a brief look at the *parodos* of the *mystai* with their famous Ἰακχ' ὦ Ἰακχε / Ἰακχ' ὦ Ἰακχε cry in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (316-317).²⁷ Dionysos does not recognize that the allegedly meaningless and inarticulate shout of iterated syllables becomes the god (he is the crystallized personification of it, the divine name understandable only for the initiates), himself, whereas his servant Xanthias solves the enigmatic riddle: τοῦτ' ἔστ' ἐκεῖν', ὦ δέσποθ'· οἱ μεμνημένοι / ἐνταῦθά που παίζουσιν ("This is that, o master, the initiates play and dance somewhere", 318-319).²⁸ Then the song starts again with the Ἰακχε-shout.

Ἰακχ' ὦ πολυτίμητ' ἐν ἔδραις ἐνθάδε ναίων, (323-24)

Ἰακχ' ὦ Ἰακχε, (325)

ἐλθὲ τόνδ' ἀνὰ λειμῶνα χορεύσων

ὀσίους εἰς θιασώτας,

πολύκαρπον μὲν τινάσσω

περὶ κρατὶ σῶ βρῦοντα

στέφανον μύρτων, θρασεῖ δ' ἐγκατακρούων (330)

ποδὶ τὴν ἀκόλαστον

φιλοπαίγμονα τιμήν,

χαρίτων πλεῖστον ἔχουσιν μέρος, ἀγνήν, (333-34)

ἱερὰν ὀσίοις μύσταις χορείαν.

Iakchos, here abiding in temples most reverend, Iakchos, O Iakchos, come to dance in this meadow; to your holy mystic bands shake the leafy crown around your head, brimming with myrtle, boldly stomp your feet in time to the wild fun-loving rite, with full share of the Graces, the holy dance, sacred to your mystics. (trans. M. Dillon)

In the *hymnos kletikos*, the chorus refers one more time to its notional chorus leader Iakchos-Dionysos in a highly self-conscious manner. He is constantly invoked as a dancer

²⁶ On εἰλίσσω as an expression of circular dance, particularly in Euripides, see among others E. *Tro.* 2-3, *El.* 180, 437, *IA* 1055-1057, *HF* 690, *Phoen.* 234-236, 313-316. According to Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1895, vol. 3, 158, it is a "favorite word" ("Lieblingswort") of Euripides'. See also Csapo 1999/2000, 419-422 and Tsolakidou 2012, 39-40.

²⁷ Graf 1974, 40-51, 51-66; Ford 2011.

²⁸ On the initiatory dimension of τοῦτ' ἔστ' ἐκεῖν' in the sense of a "aha' experience" of insight, see Ford 2011, 353, with 348 and 346 (Dikaios' recognition of the mystic nature of the cry in *Hdt.* 8.65).

permanently shifting between “function” in the orchestra and dramatic “character.”²⁹ Shaking his head in wild movements, he beats with his foot, the emblem of choral dance, to the worship that is indecent and fun-loving since playing (παίζειν) goes together with dancing (παίζειν is χορεύειν).³⁰ The last word, as apposition to the rite, in emphatic position is *choreia* (335), the quintessential action of Dionysos. The long *parodos* self-referentially revolves around the choral activity, the chorus, and παῖσαι τε καὶ χορεῦσαι (388, 407).³¹ In Eleusis Demeter serves as his *paredros* to preserve and protect the chorus, but Iakchos as Dionysos is the real master, “deviser of our festal song most sweet (μέλος ἑορτῆς ἡδιστον εὐρών)” (398-399).³² He is invoked as a “lover of the dance” (402, 413) to lead the mystic dancers in a procession – of course also an allusion to the renowned Eleusinian procession – onto the dramatic scene of the mystic underworld meadow and the orchestra in the “here and now” (Ἴακχε φιλοχορευτά, συμπρόπεμπέ με 402, 413; cf. προβάδην ἔξαγ’ 351). In the numerous instances of choral self-reference, the voices of dramatic role merge with the performative function of the chorus and its *choregos*. When the god of drama does this in comedy, dancing will be mixed with poking fun at people (σκώπτειν 492, 417). Once again – just like in Sophocles’ *Antigone* 1146-1148 – Iakchos is also “the light-bringing star of the nocturnal rite” (νυκτέρου τελετῆς φωσφόρος ἀστήρ 342), thus the god is envisaged as leader of a projected astral chorus guiding “the youth that makes the chorus” to the mystic meadow, “the flowering marshy ground” (ἐπ’ ἀνθηρὸν ἔλειον / δάπεδον χοροποιόν, ..., ἦβην 351-352).

Conclusion

Dionysos is the emblem and personification of exuberant energy and raging performance, which, because of the lack of signification, remains enigmatic and meets with resistance. Those who do understand the ecstatic expressions can abandon themselves and merge in their worship with the god. The god of presence and epiphany can manifest himself only by his wild sign production. This is true, in particular, for drama based on multimodal performance of words, music and choral dance where Dionysos is sometimes summoned to have his epiphany through roaring noise, shrill music by *auloi*, violent rhythms by *tympana* and excited dance. We witness a strange whirl of reciprocal interaction between the frantic

²⁹ See Dover 1993, 57-60, and on the fluidity of choral voices, see Bierl 2001, Index, “Chor/Fluktuation (Ambiguität der Instanzen und Rollen)” (Engl. 2009), passim.

³⁰ See Bierl 2001, esp. 86-96 (Engl. 2009, 67-75) and Bierl 2006.

³¹ On choral self-referentiality, see Henrichs 1994/95, who draws on Bierl 1991, e.g. 35-36, 83-84, 99, 106-107, 129, 155, 164, 190-191, 224 und 242-243 (where he associates Dionysos with self-referential and metatheatrical utterances).

³² On the Eleusinian elements of the *parodos*, see Graf 1974, 40-51.

performance of followers and their god. In a strict reciprocal χάρις-relation³³ his chorus attempts to please and seduce Dionysos through performative behavior suited to him while he takes pleasure in the chorus' activity. Often he is called to take over as notional *choregos*, thus driving them even madder. Just as they set him in raging choral motion, so he does with them.

Furthermore, we encounter a strange tendency to project the totalizing feeling onto other mythical choral groups or even onto the cosmos, the stars, onto the entire environment. Under his influence everything fuses. The entirety of nature is envisaged in frenzied motion, the sky, the earth, the land; he stands in the middle and the surrounding objects revolve around him in a circular dance. In the end, Dionysos is nothing more than the underlying substance, the abstraction of ecstatic, inarticulate signs with a lack of proposition that crystallize to strange epikleseis of the god responsible for that extraordinary experience. As a hypostasized expression of ecstatic performance, Dionysos is present for the insider, the initiates – thus his association with mysteries –, whereas for the outsider it is purely insane behavior without any aesthetic meaning.

³³ Bierl 2001, esp. 140-150 (Engl. 116-125).

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