

**Reading “Footloose” Through the Lens of “The Bacchae” and Mimetic Theory: Euripides’ “The Bacchae”, Starring Ren McCormack as Dionysius, Directed by Rene Girard.**

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**Introduction**

“[The Greek Tragedy in New Translations series] is based on the conviction that poets like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and *Euripides can only be properly rendered by translators who are themselves poets*. Scholars may, it is true, produce useful and perceptive versions. But our most urgent present need is for a re-creation of these plays – as though they had been written, freshly and greatly, by masters fully at home in the English of our own times.”

The above quote is attributed to Arrowsmith in Gibbon’s rendition of Bakktai. I do not suggest that there is something to be said regarding the difference in translations between scholars and poets, I propose a different line of reasoning by saying that *The Bacchae* is a cultural artifact. Not a purely aesthetic work of art but one that contains within it aspects of the culture surrounding it. *Footloose* is of a different time but of the same type. Both works speak of the culture without attempting to specifically criticize that culture. Cultural artifacts exist as the sediment of human experience. Art, technology, religion, science, and others all breathe a hidden history which is complicated to unravel, and often times highly speculative, but there nonetheless.

*Footloose* as a film and a cultural artifact embodies a powerful statement about the potentials for violent rivalries, particularly in this Christian enlightened world of ours. This paper

seeks to demonstrate the effects of existing within a Christian culture on the production of art. In particular, Dean Pitchford's "Footloose" is a perfect post-Christian era rendering of Euripides' "The Bacchae". Not only is it an excellent translation to current times, I would go so far as to claim it could only exist after Christianity emerged.

### **Overview of the comparison.**

There is nothing particularly hidden about the comparison between Footloose and The Bacchae. It seems straightforward enough to make some basic relationships. The subtleties emerge when trying to understand not what the two works have in common, but the rare instances where they are different.

Where The Bacchae has Pentheus who refuses the more carnivalistic types of expression, Pastor Shaw has denied the youth drinking and dancing. In the same way, the thrust of The Bacchae revolves around a contested party, consuming the energies of the women and increasingly the men. While Ren doesn't make the explicit claim that he wants to hold a dance until half-way through the film, the Prom that Ren is pushing for is merely the embodiment of the more elusive general act of dancing.

Where The Bacchae has Dionysius emerge as an outsider (with inside connections) who will upset and fundamentally change the order of Thebes, Ren is the nephew of a woman from Bomont and will challenge the system in a way that will overturn the given order.

Pentheus attempt to capture Dionysius but only succeeds in capturing a white bull in the stables. Pastor Shaw attempts to capture the source of immorality but only manages to (partially) imprison drinking and dancing.

Where *The Bacchae* ends in a dramatic murder, *Footloose* ends with the Pentheus character backing down and refusing his mimetic rivalry. Somehow, Pitchford has written a convincing version of *The Bacchae* without relying on the death of Pentheus. How does he do it? What are the differences that lead to that dramatic shift? The rest of this paper attempts to draw out the answers to these questions.

### **A plague in the opening scene.**

Shaw opens the film by preaching about the plague of immorality in the form of rock 'n roll music, drugs, and pornographic books. He describes this as a test, which is simultaneously welcomed and feared by Shaw. Various shots describe the waning influence Shaw has on those most at risk to fall for the temptations he describes. A child (of a later character who is in charge of the book-burning) is sleeping and cannot be woken. Ariel and company are more interested in Ren and nail painting than paying attention. The pharmakon image that Shaw develops by way of demonstrating both the need to accept and to drive out this plague, suggest already a deeper logic at work.

This underground existence of prohibition infractions is dramatically displayed with the Hi-Spot outbreak of music and dancing. One doesn't have to stretch the imagination to see an infection of dancing breaking out in a widening radius from the contraband tape.

### **The existence of tensions already present.**

Immediately following the sermon scene Ariel and company go out for a soda, but end up in a life-threatening situation where Ariel embodies a bridge between the Chuck's truck and Rusty's car while the oncoming tractor trailer truck bears down on them. Even as these acts are dramatic and counter to Shaw's admonitions, they remain in a strict binary relationship to the

rules of the town itself. They are small, secret acts of defiance that will always return to conformity with Bomont law. This is the case until Ren misunderstands this relationship and pushes outside of this structured existence.

These unofficial outbursts and the mode of discussing between participants indicates what Girard would identify as an antifestival. “The rites of sacrificial expulsion are not preceded by a period of frenzied anarchy, but by an extreme austerity and an increased rigor in the observation of all interdicts,” (V&S, 121). Just as Pentheus was unable to shield the citizens of Thebes from the influences of Dionysius, neither can Shaw ward off the seductive nature of the rebellion and irresponsible behavior that comes part and parcel with coming of age.

In the scene immediately after the tractor chicken fight between Ren and Chuck (to be discussed later) Rusty is walking into a restaurant to meet Ariel. On the way in, Rusty mutters, “I don’t believe this town.” What she is referring to is that all the arcade style video games are being carted away. With what we know about the town of Bomont and it’s laws in conjunction with Rusty’s comment, we can conclude that the removal of video games is yet another gesture on the Town Council’s part to identify the source of the moral corruption in Bomont. Once again, they have misidentified the symptoms of that corruption as the cause.

### **A Composite Pentheus and Dionysius**

In order to produce a compelling relationship between Footloose and The Bacchae, Euripides’ versions of Pentheus and Dionysius need to be accurate. When looking at these character profiles within Footloose, one is tempted to make the one to one correlation between Dionysius and Ren, and Pentheus and Shaw. However, doing so leaves out vital elements of the comparison and leaves the relationship open to criticism when a reader notices that to commit to

this specific set of pairs forces the Dionysius and Pentheus characters to shift and move around. As the film progresses, these characters lose their one-to-one status and exist more as transitory subjects and models circling around an object of desire. This problem is overcome through the division of both Pentheus and Dionysius into character traits and observing how these traits are dispersed in the characters of Footloose itself.

Dionysian characteristics are easily put on Ren, but there are inconsistencies. There are points where Ren is not all consumed by his need to have a party. He is always acting within a place of respect towards law and order. While he clearly disagrees with the way things are, he seems unwilling to break those laws. Chuck fills in those gaps, though not enough to replace Ren as the Dionysian figure. However, Chuck's ability and willingness to use violence, drugs, and jealous rivalry to get his way does complete the Dionysian aspects.

If we view Chuck as Dionysius, Shaw would be cast as Pentheus. This pairing depicts a binary system which is stable and actively seeking to remain so. Shaw's sermon in the opening scene makes the overt statement that "the Lord is testing us" and that he welcomes this test. Without it, and the test being portrayed as the presence of the plague of immoral behavior, the townspeople are left weak, defenseless, and devoid of any real meaning. Chuck mocks this claim, but does so because he derives his quasi-outsider status, that of the rebel, by virtue of defying the law. He does this to develop an aura of liminal prestige, yet is careful never to fully overturn the law, for resisting (as opposed to the overturning) the law (as opposed to the overturning) is the source of his cool-ness. Chuck requires Shaw's rules for his very identity. He exists as the rule breaker who always remains within certain limits. He exists as a support for the existing order by relying on those very rules (by way of defiance) for his elevated status. This is in contrast to Ren's defiance of the rules which is oriented around an institutional change.

Though these two characters both embody the standard rebel, only Ren is a structural rebel willing to overturn an entire system. What Ren seeks is analog to the goal of Dionysius. It is not an act, but a mindset or atmosphere of worship.

The tractor chicken scene between Ren and Chuck epitomizes the doubling feature of mimetic rivalry. Two observations reveal how Ren “wins” the duel. First, his unfamiliarity with the tractor’s control cause his raising of the front bucket. This move temporarily blinds him, only furthering the confusion he is undoubtedly going through. Chuck mirrors every action in jest, the victory already assumed. Second, a mark of Ren’s outsider-ness prevents Ren from getting off the tractor. His sneakers, useful in an urban or even suburban area, are useless on the farm. It is the laces, absent on the boots that Chuck and others wear, that bind Ren to his tractor and cause him to “win”.

On the other hand, if we position Ren as Dionysius, the familiar image of Bacchus the party-animal emerges. Shaw is still Pentheus, but without having first recognized that Chuck is simultaneously a Dionysian foil, we might find ourselves criticizing Ren for not being Dionysius enough. Still, where Chuck (as Dionysius) and Shaw form a stable binary, Ren and Shaw have a relationship that is more of a dialectic. Recognizing that Bomont is dominated by a draconian policy of the anti-festival, Ren is interested in moving to a more realistic form of ritual. What Ren is noticeably not interested in is the derivative identity that Chuck is so dependent on. By Ren attempting to legitimate the festival as a form of cultural expression, Ren actually threatens Chuck’s very identity as well as the community’s known order.

As charismatic as Dionysius is, in the comparison between *The Bacchae* and *Footloose* it is Pentheus who holds our interest. The manner in which Dean Pitchford renders Pentheus within

the world of Bomont is similar to the distributed character of Dionysius between Chuck and Ren, but with far greater ramifications. Again we have two characters within Footloose which embody aspects of Pentheus, which, taken as a whole, form a convincing portrayal: Shaw and Chuck. Taken singularly, neither seem to really fill the position Euripides carved out for his tragic protagonist.

The easier connection to make is between Shaw and Pentheus. It is his character that originally inspired the Footloose-Bacchae relationship in the first place. Using Shaw as the reference point, Vi appears to take on the role of Agave. Shaw has been fighting for some five years against the “plague” of rock ‘n roll, drugs, dancing, and any other impure behavior or activity. He was able to capture the spiritual cause of this plague, the spirit of Dionysius himself by outlawing drinking, dancing, and loud music. However, even as it is obvious to the outside observer, these banned activities turn out to be the white bull that Pentheus captures instead of Dionysius himself. Even though there is a steady stream of comments from Bomont citizens, Chuck and Ariel’s stellar example as teenage rebels, and the very presence of the Yearbook, the site of forbidden literature which contradicts the accusation, Ren is the newfound target of Shaw’s campaign against all these “white bulls”. Furthermore, while targeting Ren makes sense from a mimetic theory perspective, it indicates a growing awareness of how ineffective these social policies actually are.

Though Shaw makes for an easily identifiable Pentheus, his age and his lack of fury (outside that of his sermons) strike an odd chord in fully recognizing Dionysius’ rival. Just as Chuck fills in the missing Dionysian aspects of Ren, Chuck complements Shaw as Pentheus. Where Euripides’ paints Pentheus as young, impulsive, and committed to totalitarian governance, Shaw comes up short by only really having the totalitarian aspect. Chuck adds to the

image the youth and the violent impulsiveness that Pentheus is supposed to have. Chuck's identity as cool rebel is threatened by the approach of Ren, as well as his actual submission to the small town structure of Bomont. He is clearly a "prince" of Bomont in that his father sits on the Town Council. Positioning Chuck within the government hierarchy of Bomont makes his loss of Ariel to the Maenads, the girls who are increasingly enamored by Ren, all the more telling of his Pentheus like character.

### **Prom as bacchanal.**

The prom is the ultimate town-sanctioned display of prohibitions possible. Designating it as such instead of other terms such as "rave" or merely "party" suggests a ritualistic distinction already existing between the revelers and the town.

The most prominent connection between the Prom and the Bacchanal is during the Prom scene itself, when Shaw and Vi are seen standing in the field within sight of the location of the Prom itself. Vi suggests they go in for a closer look but Shaw declines and avoids the literal or figurative sparagmos (σπαράγμοσ). On closer inspection of the film however, Shaw was talked into walking into a spontaneous bacchanalia earlier in the film. At the Hi-Spot early in the film, Ariel has produced a contraband music tape and its very presence has provoked everyone to dance nearly out of control. Shaw shows up and hits the eject button on the boom-box as his announcement. The visible tensions skyrocket as Shaw gives his reason in an uncharacteristically mild voice that, "your mother didn't think you had any money on you." Vi sent Shaw directly into the Maenads sphere of influence.

“The same creatures who are at each others’ throats during the course of a sacrificial crisis are fully capable of coexisting, before and after the crisis, in the relative harmony of a ritualistic order,”<sup>1</sup>.

This speaks to the possibility of harmony between Ren and Shaw, despite their difference in value priority. It is most visible in the interaction between the two characters when it is revealed that Ren has appealed to formality and asked Shaw to take Ariel to the prom. Where previously the prom had been an act of defiance and the undermining of social order, it is transformed into the social apparatus by which order and hierarchies can be reinstated. The key is the ritualized implementation of dedifferentiating acts alongside a strict proprietary set of observances by which one participates is one which Girard defines as a mixed ceremony. Both the lack of differentiation of a festival and the obsessive attention to tradition exemplify the structure of any prom. The Bomont prom is just such a festival. Coming of age children act as adults wearing more formal clothing and observing strict interpersonal relationships, while at the same time touching a world of dancing as well as the potential for a more intoxicating mixture of alcohol, drugs, and sex.

There are two possible endings for Prom when viewed with the foresight of Euripides. The first is the victimization of Pastor Shaw. By the structure of Footloose and the parallel characters, I was sure upon first seeing the film that Pastor Shaw would at least be run out of town, if not outright killed. But this assumption was based not in present thinking, but in classical thinking. What was missing was the role of an emergent alternative technology for dealing with mimetically oriented violence: Christianity. If the only real difference between The

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<sup>1</sup> Violence and the Sacred, 137.

Bacchae and Footloose is the non-sacrifice of Pastor Shaw, how can it be accounted for? The answer lies in the previously discussed distributed identity of Pentheus. This brings the second possible, but ultimately unthinkable, ending when seen in the light of The Bacchae.

Shaw and Chuck combined create the expected image of Pentheus. Oddly enough, it is as if Dean Pitchford had the foresight to tease out two distinct visions of Pentheus while retaining enough to leave the whole visible.

When we view Chuck as Pentheus, the violent aspects emerge in strength. The mimetic rivalry is epitomized in the tractor chicken fight. This is a rivalry mediated by increasingly overt and lethal violence. One could even say that the rivalry enacted by Chuck is reminiscent of the old, pre-Christian, sacrificial systems. On account of the violent rivalry, there is little that could be suggested that would stop the progression from the eventual sparagmos of Chuck. We see this when he shows up to the Prom hoping to finally capture and subdue Ren. Where violence had been held in check (i.e. Rusty telling Willard not to fight), suddenly you have everyone oriented around a righteous and just violence. The animals have been identified as such and have been slain. As soon as Chuck and his friends are not only subdued and driven off, but rendered apparently unconscious, Ren and his Maenads can walk into the Prom and announce, "I thought this was a party. Let's dance!" The symbolic death of Chuck was the key to the festival event.

On the other hand, when Shaw is Pentheus, violence exists but it is always in the form of Biblical retorts. While Ren is not a proponent of Christianity at any point in the film, he is always willing to step down before crossing the line into violence unless that violence is physical. As such, Shaw's use (and probable abuse) of the Biblical texts is an act of violence, but when the rivalry between Shaw and Ren is mediated by Christianity, then the attempt to

overcome the other is not one of physical force but of appeal to Christian truth. The central moment in this rivalry can be found in the Town Council meeting, where we find Ren quoting scripture back at Shaw. The violence is one of truth mediated by the Gospel as opposed to subjective prestige. Recognizing that Christianity is a religion that directs its adherents' mimesis upon that of Jesus as opposed to one's neighbor, this type of rivalry prefigures a paradigm shift away from the Euripidean understanding of the resolution. The scene in the field near the Prom, where Shaw and Vi watch from afar, is a natural extension of the type of mimetic rivalry seen between Shaw and Ren. Shaw is even able to withstand the temptation to "go closer and look", displaying his freedom from the escalating violence. This is done even as Shaw wonders if he has done the right thing. The focus has shifted from overcoming one's rival to finding the truth.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that Dean Pitchford himself was not attempting to recreate *The Bacchae*, the parallels are robust. These comparisons are so effective that through *Footloose* one is able to extricate some profound lessons regarding the social conflict that was portrayed in *The Bacchae* and how that conflict has evolved both in process and the possibility for resolution. On one hand, the violent rivalries are still possible and can cause physical violence to break out. However, the role of Christianity in particular proves a potent tool against the violence fatal to a society. At the same time, the film's beginning holds a strongly worded warning that religion may be a tool against violence, but that mimetically guided human hands can turn any tool into a weapon.