

The Different World Views Explored in Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry and Antigone

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Abstract: *Antigone and Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry are two forms of works from drastically different time periods. However, they share a similar subject: that of the individual's rebellion against the state. The following paper considers the two different lenses through which this idea is explored in each work, and what effect each can achieve.*

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1. Introduction

An artist creates a unique world to immerse their audience in; in hopes that when they come out of it, they can find certain similarities in their own world. Sophocles creates a pessimistic world in his famous tragedy, *Antigone*. His work serves as a cautionary tale which makes the audience consider the power of the government in the face of the gods. A similar story of unjust punishment in the present day is presented in Alison Klayman's documentary, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*. In this case, the story is meant to spread a positive message of activism and change.

2. Summary of the two works

Both *Antigone* and *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* are based around the conflict between the individual and the state. The character of Antigone firmly believes in a proper burial and respect for her deceased brother, despite his wrongdoings against the state. The king, Creon, punishes her heavily for challenging his authority. In the end, he realizes his mistake, but only too late. Antigone has died, as well as his son and wife. Similarly, in *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, Ai Weiwei investigates the names of children who died in the Sichuan earthquake to honor their memory. He meets resistance with the Chinese government, which keeps the casualties secret to avoid suspicion of shoddy construction work—the potential cause of unnecessary deaths. In both works, the protagonist firmly defends their values in the face of power, no matter the consequence. The difference lies in the outlook on the world each of these works bring, and by extension, the message carried forth by the artists.

3. Sophocles' Antigone

The ending of *Antigone* is typical of an Ancient Greek tragedy. The man of power and status is humbled by his great demise, brought forth by his own pride and ignorance. At the end of the play, Creon learns of the death of his wife, subsequent to the death of Antigone and Haemon. This traumatic blow makes him finally realize his mistake. As he exits the stage, Sophocles leaves it up to the audience's imagination as to what happens next. Many argue that the devastation would lead Creon to end his own life. Sophocles uses this tragedy to warn people in power against abusing it. As Antigone reasons, Creon's order not to bury Polyneices is only backed by his "mortal force". His decree contradicts the "unwritten, original, God-given laws" (p29) which do not give mortals the right to judge the fate of a person after their death. In the end, Sophocles reveals what happens to those who try to ride above the laws of the gods. Admittedly, Ancient Greek deities no longer have the impact it once had on the play's original intended audience. Even so, when viewing this text from a modern and scientific point of view, it is safe to say that the message is transferable to today's society.

3.1 The Chorus

One unique attribute of Ancient Greek drama is the chorus. In *Antigone*, the chorus represents the perspective of the community of Thebes. It transcends the individual characters in the play, and looks at the events of the play from a relatively objective point of view; almost like the audience, except that they also interact with the characters. After Creon exits at the end, the chorus closes the play with a remark which summarizes the moral of the story. Creon is “brought to grief” as Fate flails him “on its winnowing floor” and teaches him to “always rule by the gods and reverence them.” (p74) Through *Antigone* and Creon’s conflict and the chorus’ lyrics, Sophocles steers the play into a devastating tragedy which reflects a pessimistic and disorderly view of the world. The play influences the audience’s perception of the government as a powerful and righteous leader by pointing out our vulnerability and helplessness as mortals in the face of the gods.

4. Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry

Alison Klayman’s *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* is a documentary of the contemporary artist and political activist, Ai Weiwei’s journey of rebellion against the Chinese government. One of his most notable projects shown in the film is a list of the names of children who died in the Sichuan earthquake. Ai Weiwei does not approve of the government’s decision to cover up the casualties because much like *Antigone*, he believes in respect for the dead. Unlike *Antigone*, however, the film is quite the opposite of a tragedy. Using film techniques including interviews, excerpt clips, music, and cinematography, the director Alison Klayman shapes the documentary into an optimistic perspective that urges the audience to support Ai Weiwei.

4.1 Interviews

The interviews with Ai Weiwei’s supporters, patrons, and family members allow the audience to understand and sympathize with his efforts. The interview with his mother appeals to the audience’s pathos as she bursts into tears worrying about her son’s safety. The interview with television host Hung Huang, journalist Evan Osnos, and many others allow viewers to understand the sacrifices Ai Weiwei makes for his efforts. These are people with recognition that support Ai Weiwei. Throughout the documentary, there is no evidence of the voice of Ai Weiwei’s critics. The documentary is not an objective display of an issue, but rather a means of influence in support of Ai Weiwei’s perspective.

4.2 Ai Weiwei’s world view

American journalist Evan Osnos expresses in an interview in the film that China has “improved drastically over the last generation.” People have much more freedom of speech than they did at the time of the Tiananmen Incident. However, Ai Weiwei says, “That’s not good enough.” He wants more radical change, because he sees many problems in the Chinese government that others do not. Osnos’ opinion is that “you have to have people like that in a society.” Klayman shows Ai Weiwei as someone who speaks out for those who dare not speak. She does not demonstrate the issue as a hopeless situation, but rather an activist who tries to change his country because he believes that it can. Osnos argues that Ai Weiwei is patriotic because he believes that “things will be possible.”

4.3 Montage

Klayman builds a montage to demonstrate the event of the government detaining Ai Weiwei for 81 days. It starts with a news clipping, then builds on to footage of people on the streets protesting for his release. She shows posters, banners, protesting chants and artwork spreading the message. This is followed by videos of people sharing the Tate Modern’s initiative of “Free Ai Weiwei” online. This montage demonstrates the amount of support for Ai Weiwei through various types of media.

4.4 Ai Weiwei’s supporters

The ending of the documentary shows a volunteer explaining the vast number of people supporting Ai Weiwei and his team to work towards their cause to this day, with an insert shot of them receiving donations, and a close-up of a stack of money outside his door. Klayman uses this open ending to express a world of hope and possibility.

5. Conclusion

An artist can influence people's view of the world in many different ways. Sophocles uses the tragedy *Antigone* to convey a pessimistic worldview which highlights our vulnerability and the futility of attempting to play God. Alison Klayman's *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* shows an artist who demands change in a flawed government, because he believes in its future. His story serves to inspire the audience to believe in a world of hope and possibility, even in a country yet to become familiar with free speech.

References

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