Vrasidas Karalis
The University of Sydney

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CINEMATIC REALISM IN
MIHALIS CACOYANNIS' EARLY FILMS (1954-1959)

Probably, there is a dark side in me.
M. Cacoyannis

I

When Mihalis Cacoyannis (1922-2011) went to Athens from England in 1952, he immediately recognised the soft, luminous and still unscathed landscape of the city and its environs as his personal cinematic language. He hadn't been in Athens or in Greece before, as he was born in Cyprus, in a genteel family of colonial officials. The Attic landscape was scarred by the ravages of two wars but not yet deformed by intense industrial development or inordinate urban sprawl. The successful translation of the landscape into a visual idiom which would represent the existential adventure of its inhabitants became one of the most emblematic achievements of Cacoyannis' film-making throughout his life. At the same time the young cinematographer discovered the Greek film industry in a state of fervent reconstruction following the near destruction it had suffered during the previous decade. His immediate contribution can thus be seen both in the context of "film culture" and the "cinema industry" of the country.

With his first feature film *Windfall in Athens* (1954), he attempted something simple and effective; while most directors, especially of the pre-war generation struggled to domesticate their camera within the possibilities and the confines of the studio and so enable themselves to be in command of its effects, he dared to take it out in the open and explore the bustling realities of a society which was struggling to cope with the challenges of the present. Such exodus from the inner spaces of the studio safety to the uncontrolled ambiguities of the open reality established a particular form of realism that has to be examined both formally and

ideologically. This film frames what Andre Bazin discussed as "not certainly the realism of subject matter or realism of expression but that realism of space without which moving pictures do not constitute cinema" (Bazin, 1967:112). From his very first film, Cacoyannis' camera captured the urban skyline in the process of re-building itself, full of optimism, innocence and enthusiasm; the feeling that the director feels a strong curiosity for the exploration of the urban space makes his early films extremely interesting in regards to what they record happening *around* their story and simultaneously significant about the spatial arrangements for filmic representation. Such successful and functional arrangements in his first film led to what Bazin considered "the psychologisation of space," which allowed him to proceed in his next film with the investigation of emotional conflicts between desire and reality.

Cacoyannis' second film *Stella* (1955) not only consolidated the art of narrative cinema in Greece but also established a tradition of cinematic exploration of what constitutes the specificity or peculiarity of "Greek national" cinema. If there could be something called Greek "national" cinema, then it was undoubtedly established by Cacoyannis with his second film in which he fused all of the elements of cinematic grammar that had been elaborated by earlier directors, thereby creating a continuous narrative, devoid of any gaps in storytelling, sequence unity and *mis-en-scène*. Furthermore, his "synthesising camera" developed a new form of representational realism, which was to gain its completeness in his next two films – and as it happened, it exhausted itself with them.

His third film *The Girl in Black* (1956) treated the Greek countryside as the topos of an ongoing conflict between modernity and tradition by exploring the impact that such a conflict had on individual psychology and interpersonal societal engagement. After *Stella*, *The Girl in Black* constructed the most consummate and complete character in Greek cinema, a genuine human individual, denuded of every idealisation or superfluous over-psychologisation. At the same time it established a new form of narrative realism, without the emotional idealisation of his previous films, by foregrounding collective mentalities and depicting implied mental structures about gender or intricate patterns of social interaction regarding class and status. With this film Cacoyannis completed his project of cinematic narrative realism by replicating a given experience of something observed (Grierson, 1979: 70). With both films, he almost returned to the traditions of British

documentary school of John Grierson, deeply assisted of course by the cinematography of the English Walter Lassaly who became his personal visual lens as he moved from the formal realism of his early films to the symbolic and poetic realism of his work in the sixties.

His last film of the fifties, *A Matter of Dignity* (1958), brought realism back to the urban environment and explored the collapsing bourgeois culture of Athens depicting the inability of the traditional elite to maintain its status and authority within the changing realities of a capitalist commodification of values and relations. The film explores the state of bourgeois collapse through a variety of means and in diverse spaces. Manos Hatzidakis' music with its disparate sonic references to jazz, fox trot, popular Greek tunes and classical music underscored the confusion and internal anxiety of the characters as they struggle to leave beyond their means and maintain their old and lost "social distinction." Lassaly's photography "dives" into the depths of each frame while circling with affection and tenderness the bodies of the actors. Elli Lambeti plays her role as the daughter who has to be married out to a wealthy suitor with angst and internalised fear.

With his first four films Cacoyannis established a self-sufficient language of cinematic references based on Soviet realism, neo-realism and poetic realism while infusing his visual language with new techniques, styles and devices borrowed from the Soviet montage tradition, the British documentary film movement and Hollywood strategies of story closure. (In the sixties he moved away from his early realism to a form of stylised poetic symbolism [*Eroica,* 1960] and then to hyper-realism with the ritualistic language of *Electra* [1962] and his other film presentation of Greek tragedy.)

 Such exploration was not a personal quest for a singular style or for the cinematic construction of a mono-dimensional reality through traditional modes of realistic representation. Cinematic realism, in all its varieties, was the original habitus of his camera but not its ultimate destination: starting with the immediate, the palpable and the direct, Cacoyannis entered into the second decade of his development, the sphere of the symbolic, the trans-historical, and the mythic. His transition can be discerned in his exploration of the formal possibilities offered to him by the medium itself as well as in the creative fusion he achieved in the 1960s of the Hollywood tradition and the post-war European cinema of Vittorio de Sica, Ingmar Bergman and Roberto Rosselini.

Indeed, Cacoyannis' development as a director indicates that from the very outset of his career, he had begun to articulate the first complete narrative storyline in Greek cinema, situating it within its historical context and finally extracting from it the aesthetics of "sculptural realism", his central cinematic language and medium in the fifties (but also in his formally under-rated *Zorba* (1964) which consummated his style – and brought it to its expressive finality). At the same time, perhaps more than any other director, Cacoyannis explored the Greek landscape in its entirety (and not simply the Athenian urban space) and in its different forms as the locus where ambiguities and ambivalences emerged, the locus of transitional forms and situations, indeed, of an unimaginable existential flux, conflict and unrest.

Consequently, Cacoyannis' early films precisely because of their historical situatedness can be perceived as cinematic prime-texts; prime-texts which not only created complete visual narratives but also established distinct visual identities for the themes, objects and the faces of Greek cinema, thereby establishing a horizon of expectations and, more importantly, special networks of signification for a distinct Greek cinematic language. After 1960, Cacoyannis "mature" visual idiom embarked in the exploration of complex symbolic narratives from the ancient Greek tradition, namely in his grand trilogy based on tragedies by Euripides *Electra*, *The Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia*. The transition from his early poetic realism to the symbolic pragmatism of his subsequent films transformed his work into an exploration of the limits of realism itself and its potential to represent symbolic states of mind. The limits of realistic representation can be clearly seen in his struggle to transform the camera into an active participant in the exploration of human form based on near neo-classical aesthetics.

Finally, at the heart of such transition we can find the strange "episodic" narrative of *Zorba the Greek* which shows simultaneously the potentialities and the impasses of his visual script. Unfortunately, most of the films he directed after 1975 seem like imitations of his own style, totally derivative and unable to construct a successful plot or articulate a cinematic language with meaningful references.

II

THE CONTEXT OF HIS EARLY WORKS

There is no singular script in my work.
M. Cacoyannis

Cacoyannis was originally from Cyprus and had worked for over ten years in England with the BBC. He also worked in the theatre as an actor and writer; theatre always remained his favourite medium, one could say, and his last interesting work, Anton Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* (1999) was a cinematic rendering of a theatrical classic. The challenges of theatrical performability remained in a state of perpetual tension in his films, especially in those of his early period until 1964.

When Cacoyannis went to Greece in 1952, the urban landscape of Athens was still scarred by the traumas of the German Occupation and the Civil War (1947-1949); at the same time, a strict and intrusive censorship did not allow the indiscreet and revelatory eye of the camera to explore the Athenian landscape as lived experience and cultural memory. The films that were made about the city until the mid 1950s were idealised war dramas, slapstick comedies or bourgeois melodramas. The camera was neither allowed nor allowed *itself* to look around in order to record or unearth the hidden stories of the ordinary citizens who had endured ten years of immense suffering and destruction.

Precisely because of his "otherness", Cacoyannis was able to see the rhythm of lived time and the pattern of its spatial manifestation in a largely urban reality. The German Occupation and the Civil War had left the country in a state of deep "trauma" which the censorship and the oppressive mechanisms of the state precluded from representation and, consequently, objectification. The state of collective psychological "trauma" was present but not represented; it could be seen everywhere in the cityscape, in the behaviour of the people and in the relations between the state's apparatuses and its citizens. It was not, however, conceptualised or even articulated on any level of meaningful communication without the fear of persecution and exile. Every attempt to tell the story of the collapsed buildings, the missing neighbours and the scarred faces was considered an act of

resistance and opposition to the political establishment of the day and, as such, it constituted a dangerous act entailing self-exclusion and marginalisation.

Greek cinema had struggled for over two decades to develop a studio system technologically well-equipped in order to synchronise image and sound. The only good studios of the period were privately owned by Filopomin Finos, the most important producer in the history of Greek cinema. Finos, the Greek Samuel Goldwin, during the German Occupation in 1943, established his own studio facilities whose technical structures gave to many directors the opportunity after the war to make their own films. His contribution gave rise to what has been called the Golden Age of Greek Cinema, which began in the early 1950s and ended after 1967 with the introduction of television and the rise of political films.

The target audience of Finos' productions was the abruptly urbanised masses of villagers who, after the devastations of the previous decade, moved to large cities in search of employment. Finos' productions aimed mostly at providing "entertainment" and avoided controversial issues, although many of the films made by Finos Films caused considerable consternation to censors and the state in general. Finos' achievement must also be understood against the background of the indifference of the Greek state towards the local industry. Heavy taxation was imposed on ticket sales, without any protectionist quotas applying to imported movies, mainly from Hollywood, France and Italy.

At the same time, Greek cinema functioned within an institutional framework, established mostly by the fascist dictator Ioannis Metaxas whose 1937 legislation, revised by the government during the German Occupation in 1943, concerning the control of all public spectacles, remained in place with only minor amendments until the late 1970s. Censorship became more strict and intrusive after the end of the Civil War in 1949, with everything "un-patriotic", such as the resistance against the Germans, being banned from representation.

Most directors after 1949 had to tread very carefully in order to make their films without incurring exile or banning. During the aftermath of the Civil War many actors, directors, screenwriters and cinematographers were sent to remote barren islands for "re-education". What in the 1960s were considered landscapes of authentic Greekness and Mediterranean allure were in reality places of punishment and dread, landscapes of horror and violence and of experiences that

could be expressed only indirectly, through psychological displacement and sometimes opaque symbolism.

Greece had joined NATO in 1952 and in the 1956 elections women voted for the first time throughout the country. The political climate between 1952 and 1956 was extremely tense, with the first releases from the re-education camps of communist or pro-communist exiles taking place in 1954. The new star of the conservative political scene, Constantine Karamanlis, became prime minister under nefarious circumstances after the February 1956 elections, although his party was voted by fewer people than the coalition of Centre Left parties, which had received the majority of votes. Yet the election system was deliberately so complicated and so deceptive that despite the latter's victory, the conservatives managed to win more seats in parliament.

In spite of its professed affinity with a modern liberal democracy of the "western type", the new constitution of 1952 implicitly divided citizens into "nationally minded" advocates and "un-nationally minded" adversaries, transforming the local police station into a fearful centre for interrogations, social stigmatisation and, of course, imprisonment for all suspects. The arbitrary confinement of people on the basis of their beliefs, the confiscation of their passport and the kind of public ridiculing that saw citizens being forced to sign declarations regarding their political convictions as a condition of employment were some of the most common practices implemented by the state. At the same time, unemployment was high and the countryside was depopulated by a mass movement towards the cities. In order to get rid of people it deemed dispensable, the government signed migration treaties with Germany, Belgium, Holland, Canada, USA and Australia. From 1954 an estimated one million people left the country as immigrants. The 1950s were indeed a period of social and political decline in the country and at the same time of intense artistic activity in all forms and genres.

During the period of such social turmoil, cinema became the central medium through which Greek society reflected on this own structure, cultural memory and traumas; and indeed the act of going to the movies contributed more than the educational system, the army or the workplace to the establishment of the public sphere and the consolidation of social cohesion in a fragmented post-war reality. Through cinema it became possible to construct a cohesive metaphor about the "imaginary significations" of the Greek society. Cacoyannis was amongst the first

cinematographers who dealt with the lingering questions by compiling a visual language of semantic correspondences that articulated a complete narrative about the individual and its society *organically*.

III

COMIC RECOGNITION IN MODERN FAIRY TALES

This atmosphere of claustrophobia and oppression, of almost Kafkaesque absurdity, was expressed by another director of the same period, Nikos Koundouros, in his two early films *The Magic City* (1954) and *The Ogre of Athens* (*O Drakos*, 1956), which through the illusionist techniques of German expressionism, and the distorting lens of Carol Reed's *The Third Man*, depicted the daily life of ordinary people in all its insecurity, loneliness and fear. It is, therefore, strange that Cacoyannis' first film was a hilarious and yet provocative comedy which represented Greece at the 1954 Cannes Film Festival. It was called *Windfall in Athens* (*Kiriakatiko Xipnima*) and was a comedy of errors, parallel to French, Italian and British comedies of the period, full of vivid dialogue, sparkling humour and genuine innocence.

Windfall in Athens is about a young girl called Mina whose lottery ticket was stolen as she is swimming. Two children took her bag and sell its contents, together with the ticket on which is recorded the number of her birthday. It is subsequently purchased by Alexis, an aspiring song writer and musician, who spends a life of idleness punctuated by dreams of future success. When Alexis wins millions, Mina launches a public campaign through the media and finally the court system in order to retrieve the money. She is assisted by a famous lawyer who, partly moved by her innocence and partly enchanted by her nascent sexuality, stands by her, being subconsciously sexually attracted, despite the negative reaction of his jealous wife. The court decides in favour of Alexis. However, Alexis likes Mina and offers her one third of the money. She declines but a mutual attraction is gradually born between them and in the end, now in love and inspired by the prospect of marrying, they kiss each other.

The story itself is neither exceptional nor original. It is the whole *mise-en-scène* by Cacoyannis and his approach to the visual material that really makes the

difference. One can even see this film as an experiment with filmic narration and as a precursor to his following film of the same decade. At the same time, the film's story unfolds within a strange and paradoxical context; it has to be situated in this context in order to be understood and for its impact to be relived. Upon its release in 1954, the film was an immediate success, second in ticket sales only to another musical comedy. Twenty two films were produced in that same year, most of them at the Egyptian Studios in Cairo and Alexandria. The camera of Cacoyannis' film belongs to the Egyptian cinematographer Alevize Orfanelli who in the studios of Cairo captured an "authentic" Greek atmosphere through spontaneous movements, "genuine" facial expressions and hilarious vernacular dialogue, probably based on his contact with the then thriving and prosperous Greek community of Egypt.

The main theme of Cacoyannis' comedy is a presumed deception and unfair loss – the notion that an invisible network of operators does things beyond the control of ordinary people. Seen under the light of its structural morphology, the story in the film indicates a pattern of innocence – deception – loss – recognition – wedding. The whole story is about transgression and redemption through the catalytic influence of emotional reciprocation. The main sequence of events is triggered by the mischief and deception of two little thieves; it is also interrupted by the trickery and the deception of the venerable lawyer, whose sexual advances delay the story, creating confusion in the main female character and testing her ability to choose correctly. The appearance of the lawyer's wife also tests the moral limits of Mina's action and transfers her struggle to the level of interior motives.

Both main characters have no fathers – and the lawyer is more of a father figure than a sexual presence. The representation of "parentless" children in this film is interesting since in Cacoyannis' subsequent films parents, especially sexually active parents, become negative catalysts and undermine the psychological stability of their children. This can be seen in *The Girl in Black* (1956) in particular and later on in Cacoyannis' depiction of the matricide of a sexually active mother in the tragedy *Electra* (1962).

The same obstacles are introduced for the male character, Alexis, who has to overcome his childish flirtatious "behaviour", especially towards his flippant landlady, and his opportunistic usage of his sex appeal in order to recognise (*anagnoresis*) the ultimate purpose of his good luck, that is, self-realisation in life

through another person. His victory over external and internal obstacles manifests itself in his denunciation of his good fortune and in his offer to become the "guide" and the "hero" of Mina's life in the context of who he really is, a cultural hero who composes music and songs.

What Vladimir Prop called "narattemes" can be seen here within an urban landscape translated into a modern fairy tale of trial and success, tribulation and love. The film introduces both protagonists immediately and the viewer understands their function in the story, which ultimately is a *bildungsroman*, the fictional rite of passage into adult life as prescribed by modern capitalist society. The symbol of lottery money foregrounds the unpredictable character of modern social mobility, especially after the 1950s when new social forces began to prevail against the background of the lost supremacies of pre-war aristocracies. Money won in the lottery offers the opportunity to break through traditional structures and enables the individual to fulfil his/her dreams and aspirations. Mina belongs to another "order of things"; as her sister says "take the money and do with them what they call… I don't know something like clothes… vestments…" "Investments…" Mina replies… "Yes, that…" her sister agrees.

Formally, the camera always frames couples, two figures together and in juxtaposed dualities. Also, although the camera produces many close ups as a discreet bystander, it generally remains at a distance, framing shots that are reminiscent of the portraits of nineteenth century bourgeois families and depicting through reserved posture and expression the inner discipline of character – a mode of depiction that would dominate Cacoyannis' *A Matter of Dignity* (1958). Having said this, the body is at the same time released from its middle-class reserved respectability and gains an enchanting and graceful movement, something that Cacoyannis explored in his subsequent films with subtlety and sensitivity.

Peter Cowie observes that Cacoyannis was one of the first European directors in the post-war period who "had already shot scenes on location in city streets for his first film *Windfall in Athens*, while the French and British, for example, were still very much confined to the studio environment" (Cowie 2004: 21). Greek film critic Nikos Fenec-Micelidis has also pointed out the direct references by Cacoyannis to Luciano Emmer's *Domenica d'Agosto* (1951) with its neo-realist settings and the documentary style that would make Emer one of the best directors of the genre in Italy (Mikelidis 1997: 23). René Clair's *The Million* (1931) probably provided the

original theme of the lost lottery ticket and must have inspired the musical style of acting; Cowie stresses that "Clair's actors seem to express with their movements the same zest as a singer does in his songs" (Cowie 1977: 87). Elli Lambeti's acting was distinct for its ebullience and enthusiasm; Dimitris Horn also gave an amazing performance, oscillating between the unconventional artist he wanted to be and the respectable bourgeois he aspired to become. As in Clair's film, acting was a celebration of vivid sound and music, through a vivacious choreography of gestures and emotions-elements that Cacoyannis would emphasise in his next work.

In terms of form, Cacoyannis' references to other films, a practice that the director will repeat in most of his mature work, indicates his deep awareness of cinema as a medium with its own history, grammar and patterns of articulation. By adopting frames and scenes from Emmer and Clair, as well as popular Hollywood films, Cacoyannis became the pioneer in Greek cinema of what might be called "*inter-filmic transcriptions*", extracting a specific scene from its original filmscape and placing it into a completely different context in an act of cinematic acculturation. Inter-filmic transcriptions give his work, especially of this period, a latent but not dominant aesthetic and narrative complexity, as he transcribes a shot by inscribing it into a context of different references and somehow of different cultural connotations. This would become the hallmark of the cinematic language he consolidated in his attempt to construct a visual idiom based not on bookish references or literary inventions but on purely cinematic constructions.

Cacoyannis' first film imported a considerable part of European cinematic history into Greek film production; with his next film the great fear of Hollywood would be confronted head on. Cacoyannis' inter-filmic transcriptions need to be studied carefully because they have contributed significantly to the compilation and configuration of a distinctly cinematic grammar of visual perception, something which had until then occurred only infrequently and more or less spasmodically. The visual regimes that dominated Greek film production were founded by his early works, as the most intricate consummation of efforts by other directors especially Yorgos Tzavellas and Maria Plyta.

In this fresh and naive film, Cacoyannis managed to introduce some issues that were extremely risqué for the period, avoiding all forms of melodramatisation save the sense that melodramatic situations underpin the almost comic relief offered as closure at the end. Indeed, the distraction scenes depicting the sexual advances of

a married man insinuate into the main story a theme that would be foregrounded in Cacoyannis' next film *Stella* (1955), a film that sees Cacoyannis turn his camera towards the question of what happens when institutions, social roles and expectations over-determine human choices, but even more importantly, towards a woman's capacity for moral agency within the structures of a patriarchal society.

Windfall in Athens is a moral parable about the illusion of innocence, the discovery of the complexities of the wide world and the disruptive function of modern institutions. And as noted elsewhere, Cacoyannis is "interested in representing complete human characters, with their internal life, dilemmas and follies. The representation of individuals as 'psychological beings' living in an internal reality of the their own soul and making failed or successful attempts to communicate became the dominant theme in his films" (Karalis, 2012: 68). With his first film, Cacoyannis explored the ways in which the young generation was socialised and conditioned to accept pre-determined gender and social roles. Yet one could say that formally Cacoyannis was still trying to find his "voice". He directed a farce, an intelligent satire of the middle class during its ascent to power. Despite its comic sense, characterised by witty dialogue, fast editing and funny situational misunderstandings, the film overall is a rather serious, austere and sombre depiction of a society in a state of intense social mobility. Many social references, such as the role of the press and the judiciary, indicate the contextual tensions that give this film its latent political edge. What is absent from the film is also important. Cacoyannis was cognizant of the fact that certain themes needed to be depicted but without actually being articulated. In other words, they needed to be part of the plot but not of the story and to be presented in a way that allowed them to escape the notice of the censors and to avoid becoming conscious to the mind of the viewers.

Comedies typically ridiculed authority and its servants; in this comedy, indeed across the whole gamut of comedies produced in the 1950s, the police man (and they were only ever men) was either invisible or extremely polite. In most comedies of the 1950s, the police man was a highly sympathetic villager, who struggled to fathom urban complexities and avoid the machinations of his superiors (reflections of the state intervention and surveillance). The question of the invisible authorities, the government, the army and the secret police, was the central theme of Greek cinema in this period – and one could certainly claim that

the invisibility of power in the film was a response to its ubiquitous intrusion in daily life. However, in a spirit of his early humanistic optimism Cacoyannis found a deep sense of justice and fairness not in the legal system and the courts but in the human desire for reciprocation. In his second film, reality took any face – full of conflicting feelings and hostile societal expectations transforming the innocence of his first film into the exploration of the destructive aggression in libidinal drives.

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