

## A GENEALOGY OF SADNESS: A GIRL IN BLACK

(Michael Cacoyannis, 1956)

### I.

"Yes it will be a grace if I die. To exist is pain. Life is no desire of mine anymore."

- Sophocles, *Electra*.

A ship sets sail from the harbor of Piraeus. The opening frames of Michael Cacoyannis' third feature film, *A Girl in Black* – accompanied by the cheerful melodies of well-known Greek folk songs – range from brief glimpses of the urban surroundings of Athens' port to images of the voyage itself: the sun-kissed waters of the Aegean sea embracing – and luring – the audience into a world of endless possibilities and pure sensory indulgence. Anyone familiar with Cacoyannis' debut feature film, *Windfall in Athens* (1954), would have probably expected a breezy romance or a quirky comedy of manners. Instead, the film shares more in common – both thematically and aesthetically – with Cacoyannis' second feature, *Stella* (1955), a devastating story about jealousy, revenge and, ultimately, tragedy. The appearance of the film's title, *A Girl in Black* – implying mourning and death – over the idyllic seascape, betrays Cacoyannis' intentions of misleading the audience and subverting expectations with his vivid and sharp criticism against the mindset of small-town communities. This is one of many contradictions – the idyllic scenery concealing the rotten core of society's standards – on which the filmmaker has structured the narrative threads of his harrowing drama.

Reveling in the wild natural beauty of the Greek landscape, Cacoyannis' carefully constructed shots culminate in unforgettable images of the mountainous island of Hydra. When the imposing and picturesque town

emerges behind the island's steep slopes, one can immediately sense its charming and welcoming atmosphere. Nevertheless, something bizarrely unsettling can be identified in Cacoyannis and director of photography Walter Lassally's compositions – simultaneously painterly and rough – reminiscent of the way the island of Stromboli was depicted in Roberto Rossellini's homonymous masterpiece. This conflict between image (its ambiguity and deception) and subtext runs through each frame of *A Girl in Black*, reinforcing and confirming the film's conceptual boldness and contradictory elements: the illusions caused by a seemingly idyllic carefree lifestyle, and the gradual unfolding of its well-hidden pathology.

In an attempt to escape from the hustle and bustle of the capital city, two Athenian friends, Pavlos (an immensely charismatic and sensitive portrayal by legendary Dimitris Horn) and Antonis (poignant and nuanced work by Notis Peryalis) have decided to visit and Hydra for a couple of weeks. We see the two men disembark from the ship, climb onto a smaller boat and admire the breathtaking view. "*Don't you like these barren rocks? This land... You feel like everything is exposed to the light. Nothing remains hidden*", Pavlos says. Antonis replies solemnly, "*Not even men's sins.*" These early lines are the key to deciphering – and ultimately delving into – the film's fundamental themes of abandonment, mourning, discrimination and hypocrisy.

At the island's tiny port, a local man, Aristides (Nikos Femas), suggests that Pavlos and Antonis stay in a nearby house. Aristides notices Marina, a melancholy unmarried woman in her early thirties. Marina, along with her ridiculed and marginalized mother, Froso, and her temperamental brother, Mitso, are the owners of an old derelict mansion near the town's center. Weary and tight-lipped Marina (Ellie Lambeti in one of her greatest film performances, her deeply expressive eyes full of sadness, longing and empathy), warns them that the house is in poor condition. Nevertheless, the two bourgeois men decide to stay and, therefore, follow her through the small town's labyrinthine cobbled streets. Marina's solemn black-dressed

figure of Doric simplicity in its dignified detachment and isolation stands in striking contrast to the town's sun-drenched whitewashed houses; Cacoyannis and Lassally often return to these images in order to highlight the character's disillusionment.

She regularly turns her eyes to the two men as if to make sure they haven't changed their mind and walked away from her. But her sorrowful eyes quietly reveal more: a certain curiosity and an immediate attraction to Pavlos. Lovers in real life, Lambeti and Horn's on-screen chemistry is instantly felt; the celebrated actors navigate through every emotional beat their confusion and torment; the initial reluctance; the growing friendship; the uncertainty and fear; the burning passion with sophistication, honesty and subtlety.

Upon their arrival at the dilapidated house, Pavlos and Antonis quietly observe the interiors of its dimly lit chambers while Marina is preparing the guests' rooms. There is an unmistakable air of decay and death: the closed shutters, barely allowing the residents to take a look at the outside world; the windows' iron bars, an allegory for physical and emotional confinement; the crumbling walls and timeworn furniture signifying the glory of the past as nothing more than a vague distant memory; all of these convey Marina's constricted life and overwhelming hopelessness.

After the death of the family's patriarch a locally well-known sponge merchant and the irreparable consequences of World War II and the Civil War, Marina, Froso and Mitso barely make ends meet. During a poignant monologue, grief-stricken Froso laments the good old days when the family used to be wealthy. Marina is also haunted by the suicide of her sister, Niki; every detail of Cacoyannis' mise-en-scène is soaked in nostalgia, regret, and neglect.

Pavlos and Antonis admire Marina's beauty and approvingly nod to each other in a way that can be considered, certainly by today's standards, as predatory. Cacoyannis doesn't shy away from criticizing the dominant male

gaze, underlining another important aspect of the narrative's acute social commentary: the structural and ideological position of women in society and its inherent sexism. This is further highlighted by the scene when Marina has to ask for her brother's permission in order to host the Athenians in the family house, as well as by the community's prejudice against her disgraced mother.

Indeed Froso – whose contradictory behavior is subtly explored by the great character actress Eleni Zafiriou – is publicly ridiculed and harassed for her sexual relationship with a local fisherman, Panagos (Stefanos Stratigos). When a group of children arrives outside the family house and taunts Mitso (Anestis Vlahos in a mercurial and moving turn) for his mother's love affair, the proud son explodes in a fit of uncontrollable rage. Local women – mothers and wives – gossip about the widow's unacceptable vulgarity. Some of them appear more caring and compassionate towards Froso, but customs and mores prevent them from publicly expressing their feelings. Froso's walk through the town – photographed in a way that indirectly mirrors the shots of Marina's lonely silhouette, always dressed in black, against the spotless and archaic whitewashed houses – is one of the most disturbing sequences in Greek cinema. The deafening silence and overbearing judgmental looks from the crowd foreshadow the intensity and shock of the next scene: when Froso arrives at the stairs of the family house, Mitso pulls his mother's hair and violently slaps her. The relentless beating is harrowing to watch; the onlookers – mostly women and children – numbly observe the action, unable and unwilling to help. Marina, who has been watching behind the iron bars of her bedroom window, frantically rushes to protect her mother from the physical abuse. She is silently asking for Mitso's forgiveness. Her brother breaks down and weeps. Marina stands next to him, caressing him lovingly.

Later in the film, a similar case of public harassment takes place at the port – echoing Froso's treatment by the passive and indifferent bystanders – but this time round Marina is the victim: the young woman is

being stalked, terrorized and preyed on by vengeful local fisherman, Christos (Yorgos Fountas, appropriately smug and volatile), and his gang. Marina's distorted face is shown in extreme close-ups which highlight the moment's pure psychological horror. The sequence reaches its violent crescendo when Marina, desperately running to escape from her abusers, comes across Mitso, who attempts to murder their mother's lover. The siblings, cursed by the sins of the mother and the downfall of the father, are consumed by guilt and shame.

Pavlos who, like Antonis, is dismissively and mockingly called a "foreigner" by the villagers is witness to the unfathomable tragedies that ensue, incapable of saving Marina from a life of unending sorrow.

These unfortunate events bring Pavlos and Marina closer, and romance blossoms between them. Known as a superficial and impulsive womanizer, Pavlos starts questioning himself and his intense attraction to Marina. Has he fallen for the tragedy and sadness of her life a woman in peril who needs to be saved or are the feelings of intimacy and care for her genuine? "*Don't make her fall for you*", Antonis warns him at some point in the film. Flirting with her only to dump her when it's time to leave for Athens would further damage Marina's already shattered emotional state. Despite being a free-spirited novelist, Pavlos is still dependent on his overprotective bourgeois mother's money. Coming from a bourgeois family and having lived a privileged life, Pavlos lacks the will and determination to make his way in the world. Marina, though, seems to have drastically affected him. During a pivotal scene, Pavlos seems genuinely insistent on starting anew; his endearing concern for Marina's well-being as well as his progressively funnier attempts to make her smile "*You should laugh more often. You're more beautiful when you laugh*", he says during an adorable private moment between the two of them are the first indications of his truthful change. By the end of the film, Pavlos has been transformed into a more mature and selfless version of himself.

## II.

*"Love is joy. "*

*"Not in this house. We are hounded by shame...hatred, death. "*

Marina has willfully isolated herself – both physically and mentally from the rest of the world. One wonders how much pain and grief a person can endure. Afraid of turning out like her mother, she rejects any hint or possibility of romance. Her reluctance, fear and shyness intrigue Pavlos, but tragedy seems to lurk over the family as history is about to repeat itself. The film explores the objectification of women – evidenced by the way men harass and exploit Marina and her mother – as well as repetition: life as psychological and physical torture. There is a moment when Pavlos tries to approach Marina in order to find out what's hiding behind her laconic and enigmatic expressions. She asks simply: *"What's there to say?"* The bewildered man responds, *"Anything about your life; your dreams. You must have dreams."*

*"I've learnt not to."* Marina's words are heartbreaking to hear. She has fully accepted that she cannot escape from her sorrow. Life on the island is presented as monotonous and empty; the purity and wildness of the landscape – the blinding sunlight and the shimmering sea – offer nothing more than an illusion.

Burdened by society's rules, customs and expectations, Marina has to fulfill her duty – as a daughter and as a woman – and preserve the family's honor. It is an unbearably heavy cross to bear, but Marina – diligent, modest and quietly determined – does not allow herself to go astray; a woman's path in life is predetermined and unavoidable and she has to follow it. When she reveals the reason why her sister, Niki, committed suicide, guilt-ridden Marina seems to carry the weight of the world. She is immobilized, trapped in a state of constant mourning. She has become a shadow of

herself, a wandering ghost gradually slipping into non-existence (an act of self-punishment).

She finds comfort in her loneliness. The only time when Marina does not wear black is when she is resting in her bedroom, her white nightgown a symbol of sainthood and kindness. It is during these similar private moments of contemplation and quietness when the façade crumbles and her simmering sensuality and childlike curiosity are revealed. The growing affection between Marina and Pavlos surprises and, ultimately, destabilizes her. It is an unprecedented feeling for Marina and one can finally recognize a faint glimmer of hope in her eyes.

*Rocks and salt.* In order to appropriately express the emotional state of his leading character – her unhealed wounds and all-consuming fears Cacoyannis utilizes (open and closed) space at its most elemental: the relentless landscape mainly consists of barren rocks, shadowy stone streets, and the vastness of the unforgiving sea. Alluding to perpetual danger and fear, the steep and inaccessible landscape suggests something wholly primitive and archaic: humans at the mercy of gods, nature as the perpetual cause of danger and death, and man's fate as inescapable. Cacoyannis enhances the narrative richness of his work with obvious aesthetic references to myths and literary texts of the classical ancient Greek period. The harsh light of the burning sun exposes the community's hypocrisy (*hubris*) and punishes their lack of humanity (*nemesis*); the infinite ocean is presented both as a symbol of salvation and hope, and as an allegory for man's uncertainty, fear and impending doom. Landscape becomes the catalyst for change, (re)defining the characters' decisions. During the devastating climax of the film, unpredictable and untamed nature mercilessly destroys man whose irresponsibility leads to loss and mourning.

Closed spaces, on the other hand, are used in ways that further highlight Marina's grief and disillusionment. More specifically, the interiors of the derelict house – where most of the action takes place – enhance the feeling of suffocation, material and emotional decay and (in)voluntary

imprisonment. The claustrophobic chambers, expressionistically lit and framed during poignant moments of *catharsis* (another reference to ancient Greek drama), become sacred isolated spaces of confession, contemplation and compassion.

*Light and shadow.* Director of photography Walter Lassally vividly explores the dichotomy between light and darkness with his exquisite use of deep expressive shadows and subtle lighting. His compositions achieve a rare form of beauty, blending the raw and realistic elements with a more poetic and abstract dimension, highlighting the subversively melodramatic quality of the narrative. Noirish influences are apparent in the way Lassally and Cacoyannis frame and light the actors (mostly during interior sequences). Mirrors, doorways, shutters, and negative space are expertly used in order to illuminate the fragility and temporality of the image as well as the characters' vulnerability and introspection. Notable examples of this fine achievement: Marina collapsing against the walls of the derelict house after her public humiliation – an apocalyptic vision of despair and death and her lonely wandering outside a monastery, her figure barely lit by the dying sun. Furthermore, the film's subtext is visually explored with the harsher and purer qualities of natural lighting, particularly during daytime scenes; Lassally's attentive and detailed camerawork negotiates the bodily and emotional vulnerability by focusing on the contrast between action/motion (*kinesis*) and inaction/passiveness (*stasis*); faces and bodies are becoming brighter, clearer, and uglier under the inexorable light of the sun. This idyllic location is a living hell. Humiliation, violence and death prevail.

To fully understand the state of the Greek nation during these transitional years of sociopolitical turmoil, historical context should be provided: haunted by national tragedies and acts of political betrayal, Greek society was unable to substantially reconstruct itself. The story takes place in Hydra during the mid-1950s, barely a decade after World War II and its catastrophic consequences (including the Civil War during which the Greeks were divided by ideology and class). The way Cacoyannis observes



behaviors and interactions allows for a more careful look at the refreshingly complex threads underneath the story's deceptively straightforward narrative; *A Girl in Black* operates both as a resonant and thought-provoking reflection on individual anxiety and as an audiovisual deconstruction of an entire nation's uncertainty and instability. Greek society was ruined by death and poverty. Shot with a single camera and a tiny budget, the film was an early example of a newfound artistic movement in Greece: "*amateurisme*". The term alludes to the limited means, lack of financial support and difficult shooting conditions. Post-war Greek cinema found its greatest expression in Cacoyannis' early body of work – also including *A Matter of Dignity* (1958), a caustic commentary on class, discrimination and pride – and, specifically, in this film: the sparseness and simplicity of storytelling, the narrative ellipses, the minimalist style, and the raw uncompromised realism. The director's understanding and affection for his characters – aided by Lambeti and Horn's precision – construct an emotional canvas of unparalleled expressiveness.

The clarity of his directorial vision, along with the screenplay's finesse and authenticity, manage to overcome the limitations of this specific historical period and give a certain timeless quality to the film, which is further reinforced by the heavy influence of classical Greek plays.

### III.

*"I'll stay. And I'll walk down the streets without fear...without shame.  
There is no shame in loving someone."*

Cacoyannis is undoubtedly inspired by Italian neorealism (Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, the early works of Luchino Visconti) navigating through similar themes: the focus on a closed-minded small-town community; the condemnation of its conservatism and prejudices; the naturalistic depiction of daily life (rituals, habits, traditions); the vivid sense

of place; the religious elements (the church as a place of communion, Marina crossing herself and placing candles in a small private shrine, the funeral procession), and the importance of dignity, pride and (family) honor. Fragments of American melodrama can also be found in the film's more personal moments: stage actors Lambeti and Horn adjust their theatrical roots to Cacoyannis' neorealism and its fundamental rawness, achieving a fine balance between heightened emotions and earthy restraint. The results are nothing short of miraculous.

It can be argued that Cacoyannis presents an idealized version of life in the big city (the civilized and open-minded Athenians vs. the boorish islanders), a criticism that I personally find quite reductive and cynical. Cacoyannis isn't interested in presenting the story's men – namely the two “intruders”, Pavlos and Antonis – as Marina's saviors. Pavlos does offer her the chance to get away from her nightmarish reality. But it all comes down to Marina, and Cacoyannis beautifully depicts her choice to stay in Hydra as an act of bravery and nobility. The director exposes the community's regressive and hypocritical position, but his humanist approach and tenderness for the island's people is undeniable: carefree children are seen playing or swimming joyfully; a white-bearded priest is sitting at a table, quietly observing the crowd around him; worried mothers scold their kids for their mischievous behavior; fishermen are shown repairing their fishing nets or singing and playing music in small taverns. The same men whose generosity and daily routine are presented with such love and care (during these scenes, the film is on the verge of being ethnographic) are the ones who cruelly ambush Marina or Pavlos in an attempt to disorient or terrorize them. When the men set a trap to a central character, their careless behavior leads to an unimaginable tragic event that traumatizes the entire community. Similarly, the director explores both sides of the children's behavior: their innocence and their cruelty.

An even more significant source of inspiration is the ancient Greek drama. Cacoyannis would later adapt seminal masterpieces of classical

literature into cinematic works (Euripides' *Electra*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and *The Trojan Women*). He not only applies the structural conventions of the Greek tragedy to the film's narrative, but also enriches its subtext with crucial thematic elements such as the disgraced family, the fury of the gods, the arrogance of man, the heroic stand, and catharsis (that is, salvation).

Marina's steely determination coalesces into a passionate declaration of love in the shattering final scenes of the film which reflect the essence of the tragic play: the sacrifice of oneself. The cowardly local men, including Christos, Stefanos and Aristides, avoid responsibility for the deadly consequences of their foolish "joke". When Marina confronts Christos, she transforms before our eyes. The climactic speech – every word uttered with unyielding passion by Lambeti – turns Marina into a symbol of self-sacrifice and quiet resolve, reminiscent of great tragic heroines such as Electra (the sins of the parents; unconditional love) and Iphigenia (the sacrificial lamb; lost innocence). Inspired by the myth of the Atreides family, Cacoyannis portrays Marina's family as cursed, doomed to eternal misery and social exile. Marina calmly accepts her fate. She cannot disregard God's will. Grief devours the people of Hydra. The world is suspended; senseless and unfair loss has been caused by the cruelty of nature – the duality of the sea – and the cruelty of man; a promise that mustn't be broken; Marina's facial expressions are as enigmatic as ever. It seems that life equates to mourning and death. Happiness cannot be found. Manos Hadjidakis' melancholy score becomes more prominent as the film gets closer to the end. An unexpected last-minute decision seems to upend things. What Cacoyannis achieves with the final scene is remarkable: he successfully avoids the contrivances of a typical romance story, but also suggests the possibility of a better, brighter future. Shot from a distance, the restrained optimism of the last unhurried shot is poetic in its simplicity; it gives us – and, more importantly, Marina – hope. It encapsulates what love is all about: selflessness and transcendence.